

Black Lightning & Crimson Voices

JACOB RUSSELL DRING

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Acknowledgements

Gratification is owed to you, the reader, for giving me your time and supplying your interest. Best yet is feedback. It comes in all shapes, forms, colors, and sizes, some bite and some kiss, some are appetizing and others downright repulsive.

But I will stomach them all, because you're stomaching me and my work.

Enjoy! (I know I did)

Foreword

You really gotta respect and admire the human imagination (especially mine). Afterall, that's where I got the sole (and soul) idea for this story, but you already knew that. The actual conception of the idea, however, was derived from a *misinterpretation* of a particular verse in a Puscifer song. While I concocted this eldritch scene in my head, I felt half-certain that the song I was enjoying meant something else entirely. I couldn't place it, but didn't really care; I liked my version better. And when I discovered the true meaning of the song, a few days after starting this piece, I didn't let it affect me at all.

How far off I was only amused me, and somehow or another got me even more intent on unraveling my protagonist's bizarre story.

Enter the protagonist. You'll learn her name soon enough, I just wanted to spill a few words and make my peace so to speak before ushering you to your seats.

I wrote this story with a few things in mind: be visceral, like fabricating a graphic novel but using only words; be humorous, but smooth and subtle; be cheesy and unrealistic at times, with a lick of realism, like filming—or, in your case, reading—a B-horror movie or grindhouse flick; don't be afraid. That last part really pushed me. I remember writing *Soaking Red* with that uninhibitedness at my fingertips and it turned out beautifully tragic, just the way I'd planned. With this I wanted a pinch of erotica without getting too detailed or intense. Call it SFW or softcore if you'd like, but the moments where there's any kind of erotica it lasts for a mere few pages.

As for the protagonist, I had my influences.

No names will be stated here, but I did supply a few subliminal hints as to the real-life model's identity, just don't try searching for them or you'll miss the true fun. Because in all honesty this character is *mine*, she's the embodiment of my perfect woman—beautiful: check; fit: check; curvy: check; witty: check; strong: check; persistent: check; intelligent: check.

Audacious even in the face of horrors: check please!

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Hair like napalm and eyes greener than the grass on the other side. Her skin rose where it was supposed to, dipped just right, a perfect form apt to dangerous-curves-ahead signs. Her cadence was reckless, independent, no model's strut despite the fitting beauty. Her gaze alone was that of a panther's, and a few inches shy of six feet tall rendered her a force to be reckoned with. She was an Amazon in modern time, a pinup girl with an attitude, mortal with morals despite questionable principles. If she spoke to you, you'd know it, even from across the room—full lips parted to release a hushed whisper that could placate a behemoth, gorgonize the soundest man, or speak in the same tongue as any other human just wanting to survive.

Her name was Delta.

Finger on the trigger when her foot wasn't putting the pedal to the metal and eyes tracing the road lines while her skin imitated the moon's midnight glow. Her cerise Camaro RS was fifty-two years old but she was hardly thirty and the night swallowing them up, timeless to say the least. She called it Stiletto, the car, because after she'd stolen it from a failed—key word here—attacker, she found a red heel of the like in the backseat. It was as alone as she was, and just as salacious yet forsaken, all the more enigmatic.

Her name was Delta. She was no different.

She didn't acknowledge the omen and left it in the backseat, where it eventually rolled off and onto the floor. Before skipping town, a shit-hole place in the middle of nowhere on the east side of Nebraska, she visited the district where few people dared to loiter—especially those that looked like her. She went nonetheless, with some great cash funds to her name now, courtesy of Stiletto's previous owner, and sniffed out a place disguised as a condemned building. Albeit to her surprise, the pair of inhabitants were decent enough to treat the visit strictly on the grounds of business—and, for what little she knew, got a great deal from it. The hot shot gat she purchased was nothing over-the-top, although over-the-counter somehow or another, and fit snugly in her glovebox.

Stiletto's glovebox.

Then she burned asphalt and seared off into the horizon, which promised her no answers to her persistent questions. The bruised sky bled a rainbow's funeral across the stratus clouds above her, and the endless pastures hugging the rural road offered her a mediocre kind of peace.

Delta had to compromise, afterall.

Four days earlier rendered her a nameless tragedy's victim, claimed only by an open field home to neither farmer nor fauna. She had awoken alone, stark to the skin and amnesiac to the brain, sustaining distorted memories of basic world knowledge and little else. Strangely enough she was unhurt, physically at least—not a scratch on her impeccable skin, save a single mark at the back of her neck. Raised ever so slightly above the skin, the single marking was a sideward triangle, like an arrowhead. Or, she somehow deduced, a Greek 'D.' Void of an identity, she became Delta, with an instinctual perfection of the English language and generalized functions, from using a gun to driving and avoiding the social life of a shithole filled with vagrants and rustic folk.

Of all the places to regain conscience...

So, where did she come from and who was she and did

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she have any family or friends or home, what was her favorite food? Questions abound, she knew the answer to so few, such as the innate fact that she loved fast cars and the sound of the Camaro's V8 pushing ninety on the open midnight road. Open windows howled at her through the cabin, coursing over the fields and the asphalt and the car itself. Unlike her figure, the road was a straight shot into the obscure distance. Stiletto's headlamps on high illuminated a giantess's reach in front of her before capitulating to the blackness.

Delta wouldn't dwell on her ambiguous, shadow-shrouded past. She wouldn't dive into the abysses of her conscience, that oubliette of a retention that gave her scarred fragments of memories. It was all too surreal, too unreal, to believe that she herself was real felt like a slap to her face as it were.

She persevered nonetheless.

Whatever that could mean at the moment.

Everything engrossed her, as it was mildly engrossing. Anything to keep her mind from meandering into the depths of her mysterious existence. The smell wafting through the Camaro's cabin was dry and pale, if color could have a scent. Stiletto's voice was like a third lung for Delta, extensive and vociferous. She kept to herself otherwise.

Her eyes wouldn't stop pivoting, however.

And then they caught a foreign glimpse in the rearview mirror. When her gaze connected with the reflection's, she still wasn't too surprised that it didn't feel very familiar. She doesn't have to adjust the mirror before she finds herself in a staring contest, unsure of who might win, much less its duration.

No passersby for the past twenty minutes or so, so penetrative headlights or the wavy red blur of taillights weren't an issue. The only things puncturing midnight's hold on the atmosphere out here were Stiletto's lights, the moon's gentle argent glow, and Delta's gaze.

Sounds are kept to a minimum.

Only the breeze violating the car's cabin and Stiletto's

V8 violating the air were welcome out here. On occasion a lilting, unheard of tune would escape Delta's lips. She knew not its origin, neither words nor accurate rhythms, everything was fabricated on the go. She threw in a few words for a subtle smile here and there, but seldom did it take off; the runway lights were dim, and she was shy on fuel.

Half-full or half-empty, she could care less.

It certainly wasn't overflowing, that much was sure.

Fortunately Stiletto's tank was filled up before she ripped out of town, leaving it to decompose along with the other distortions of her past. Not unlike a once beautiful sunflower cast beneath a sun that never sets, quickly drying up and wilting. By which point even the bees would have nothing to do with it; the vultures of the insect world aided in its deconstruction.

Delta's past was this confusing line between decay and eviscerated. A visit at the morgue, with cadavers present but autopsies not conducted. All of the doors lolled open, and for some reason there was blood on the examination tables, but only here there were no bodies.

She reached for the radio and in the same fluid motion retracted her hand to course all five fingers through her crimson hair. Long strands were pushed back away from her face in the wake of her remembering that Stiletto's radio was busted. Strange enough, considering the mint condition of the muscle car from its guts to its skin. It was the original radio, too, nothing pristine from this decade. Such abominable alterations to the Camaro's classic aesthetics didn't exist for Stiletto—no gaudy body modifications, fog lamps, custom exhausts, big glimmering rims, whale-apt spoilers, or lowered suspension. Just the cerise body paint, black cabin top, stainless trim, grille-hidden headlights, and white nose-band.

Nodding off the absence of a working radio in lieu of its otherwise primeval status and great condition, Delta wasn't discontent.

She ran her fingers through her hair some more, distorting the line between messy and neat without a second

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thought to it. Her hair burned like the fires in her heart, the embers in her eyes, the soul of Stiletto. She didn't concern herself with the mystery of the heel in the backseat, even after Stiletto's original owner had attempted to violate her. She'd just been hitching back into town, after waking up nude in that field. It was risky to say the least and she knew it, but sure as hell wasn't about to walk unknown amount of miles to civilization.

Little did she know said civilization could hardly be called that in the area.

Nevertheless, something was better than nothing.

And then that asshole had to pick her up, give her his hands and other things she didn't want. So she gave him the heels of her bare feet and the ridges of her knuckles in return. One exchange for the other, except hers had possessed the advantage.

That of fear, discomfort, disarray, shock.

Not feeling that the stranger's exchange had been so genial, Delta took it upon herself to make things right.

So she stole his precious Camaro RS.

Good for her.

A pensive sigh rustled past her lips. She reclined without leaning back very far while keeping from hugging the wheel and rested her left arm on the window sill of her door. Her right hand grasped the edge of the steering wheel closest to the ignition, where the keys dangled in restricted freedom. They swayed, the ride and road surprisingly smooth, so they never clattered against the column.

Her hair, shimmering a brightly deep shade of red, let loose like tendrils in the strong breeze storming the cabin. It twirled about her head and face without entirely escaping the tenure of her scalp. It never blocked her view of the road, only enhanced it.

Strips of crimson flaying the windshield.

She felt like she could see into the night and beyond, past the stars. Past the moon. Past her conscience. She could see, but only see. There was no understanding, no comprehension

without scattered incompleteness.

When the radio burst to life through a tidal wave of static her heart nearly leapt into her throat. Her foot impulsively grew heavier on the accelerator and the Camaro lurched forward at a greater interval of speed. Tires wailed briefly. Through the lilting, nonetheless loud, stridency of the radio's voice came a menagerie of sounds. Vocalizations, dialogue of talk radio cutting in and out, like the core of a tornado, its outer winds coming in the form of static and the debris it carried were the tunes of music.

Indiscernible, pure audible chaos.

The radio cut out for an instant, or so it seemed, when a greater clangor shattered the midnight calm. A thunderclap, in spite of cloudless star-blanketed skies. Immediately followed by dark bolts of lightning which stabbed down through the dark hanging above the fields on either side of the road. Neither blue, purple, nor white, the lightning was obscure and colorless, radiant somehow in the night.

The sight was palpable, and the sound unmistakable.

Delta felt her world crashing through a window pane in slow-motion, showered by shards of jagged translucence and the racket that came with it.

Faintly illuminated by the barely discernible, luminous onyx lightning bolts, discus-shaped objects the size of battle tanks hurtled through the sky. They tumbled down at an oblique angle, high on velocity and ambiguity.

Two of them came down, one on either side of the road.

And yet still was Delta's foot heavy on the pedal.

Her radio still wrought audible havoc.

The first crashed on her left, one on her right. A din like earthquakes in the eardrum, not without Richter readings. Stiletto's chassis rattled and the fields rose in two perfect waves in the night.

By this time Delta had passed the objects' impact points, their haphazard LZ's, Stiletto roaring down and the teeth in her head chattering. Then her heavy foot transferred its weight from

accelerator to brake pedal, lurching her body forward where she sat. The Camaro's own leaned forward on its frame, back end up from fat rear tires, skidding across the road. Asphalt burned and thick Goodyear's screeched like confused banshees in the night. Tire smoke screened the taillight-scarred darkness behind her. Stiletto had come to a complete stop, its chassis groaning quietly and its V8 complaining through a low growl. It idled. The beast wasn't meant to idle, it was meant to *go*—it as meant to *roar*.

The same could be said about Delta's heart.

It refused to stop all the same, unlike Stiletto's progress.

And everything that related to the vague principle of common sense in her urged for the continuation of her journey. Reignite Stiletto's engine, give its voice back, breathe fire into its lungs yet again and push it deeper into the night—further from this puzzling catastrophe.

However...

Delta lifted her head, caught her breath, and adhered her gaze to the rearview. In its reflection she spotted a twirling of white and—black?—lights illuminate around the circumferential rim of the object. Both of them, in fact. They had crashed into the earth roughly opposite each other, separated by about fifty feet of field from either side in addition to the breadth of the road. The lights twirled for a few seconds before abruptly cutting out.

She had put Stiletto to a stop some two-hundred feet away from the dual crash sites. For as far as her eyes could pierce the night, she saw neither siren nor headlight. The car's radio no longer sputtered, its magical defibrillators gone dry and enervated. Not even the faintest breeze washed through the cabin, either. Just a distant cricket and the croaking of twisted metal.

Whatever the objects were, they were clearly of a metallic origin. They appeared to be perfectly circular, disc-shaped, and dare she think it—saucer-like.

Even for Delta, her limited knowledge yielded the general mystery on Earth of the alien kind. Extraterrestrials, life

beyond this planet, creatures of unknown origin.

If there was one thing Delta's fear limited herself to, it was the fear of the unknown. Her apprehension only traveled so far, though—the past four days had been puzzle enough for her. Now this? Bad luck wasn't apt enough in her expansive lexicon.

She spotted steam, or smoke, in pale ashen columns billow up from the two crash sites. One object had landed obliquely into the earth, half stuck in the field's soil. The rest of it protruded at a forty-degree angle, pointing skyward with rigidity intact. The other object could barely be seen, and now without its lights blended in well—too well for Delta's liking—with the expanse of night surrounding it. It had landed on its belly, or top for all she knew, regardless lying flatly on the field. Except that it didn't appear to be in one piece. A chunk or two from its rim had freed itself during the crash, leaving behind jagged edges. From these metallic wounds curled the smoke toward the stars.

Delta took another deep breath and removed her gaze from the rearview. Her heartbeat worked in bursts, an automatic firearm with the hiccups. Both hands on the steering wheel's upper arch, her fingers curled around the leather there until her nails dug into the skin on her own palm.

A curt whisper of air wafted past, not into, the cabin.

Metal groaned in the distance.

"Fuck it," Delta breathed, lips barely moving.

She threw the Camaro into gear, whipping it around and hauling ass in the opposite direction. The opposite direction she'd been heading—instead, now, she returned to the site of the crashes. She stomped the brake, still, leaving less than fifty feet away from the object's crash site on her left. It had previously been on her right, which was the object she'd glimpsed first during the bizarre lightning storm on a clear night full of oddities. As such, it was the object that remained intact, only lodged obliquely into the earth. Before solidifying Stiletto's place on the shoulder, Delta decided to spin the car around and park it facing her original destination—the hell away from here.

Just in case a quick getaway was necessary later...

She sort of hoped not, although part of her ached for a similar thrill.

And then she killed the engine. She whispered something unintelligible to even herself, rubbing the dashboard of the Camaro, as if talking it down. As if apologizing. It wasn't even her car, but she felt as though it belonged to her. An extension of her body. An extra pair of lips to that third lung, four more hands gripping the asphalt, a chassis full of arm and leg muscles, eyes that shone brighter than hers ever could, and skin almost as beautiful as hers.

Almost.

Then she popped open her door without checking to see if the road was clear. It still was, eerily enough. She'd parked the Camaro on the right shoulder, the object to her right but behind some seventy feet or so. She caught herself just shy of stepping free of the car's embrace. Too soon—she wasn't quite prepared. Instead she took another funneled breath and leaned over the center console, opened the glovebox, and retrieved her semiautomatic handgun. It was heavy without being a brick, lightweight without being a feather. It fit in her hands nicely, though larger than the space of her palm. She felt comfortable one-handing it should it be necessary, although without adequate pockets or a holster it was instantly required to do so.

She knew what she'd paid for...more or less.

Reliability, accuracy, power, size, versatility.

Those were enough nouns for her.

Delta closed the glovebox, able to pocket the two spare magazines she'd purchased in addition, and stuck her leg free of the car. Her left foot touched the asphalt first. She wore low-rise black sneakers with white bands around the soles, and no-show socks. There was no issue of being ladylike, only an issue of vacillating comfort. Followed by the first came the second, and then she stood up on the asphalt outside of the car.

Another breeze swept by, a transient zephyr. It rolled across the skin of her exposed legs, seemingly not rising any

higher.

It passed and she slammed shut her door.

Stiletto rocked briefly on its axles.

Delta swallowed a lump in her throat that had indubitably formed from a rank taste of fear and uncertainty, then circled the Camaro. She crossed the flat shoulder, thankful for no ditches, and low-grass pastures. As she approached the partially upright, crashed object—aircraft?—in the field, she was also grateful for the moonlight. Its glow seemed to have amplified the past few minutes, perhaps somehow affected by the surreal lightning storm and these objects' appearances.

The moonlight was a heavily subdued sun that possibly portrayed Delta's beauty better under its argent reflection. Her skin was pale and therefore illuminated with greater clarity from the moon's broad glow. The starlit skies resting inertly and infinitely above her definitely assisted.

Delta donned a pair of snug denim shorts that rode low on her hips and high on her thighs. Her curves and the rotundity of her buttocks caused greater exposure of skin as the denim stretched to its limits. Her long, robust legs were that of a sex symbol's, and that was only the lower half of her body. She was everything that completed the perfect concept of a grown woman. She had a flat stomach and reasonably slender waist in spite of wider hips and large breasts. She didn't bear the extreme outline of an hourglass, but one might attribute a similar shape to her figure. Due to the heat and aridity of the area, especially dense in that Nebraskan town she'd found herself, Delta had purchased her clothes on a strict comfort-level basis, without attracting too much of the bad kind of attention. To this effect she didn't go braless or walk around in a thong, which she wore beneath the denim shorts, an outfit she would've preferred considering the heat. Out here, however, things were a bit calmer with a lick of humidity. Nonetheless, she didn't regret her outfit—completed by a white tanktop that didn't show any more skin than her neck, shoulders, and upper back. A solid black bra sheaths her 36DD breasts and the snug tanktop keeps her from

busting free.

Although the thought, simply out of physical liberty, comfort, and coolness, certainly had crossed her mind on many occasion.

Now definitely was not one of those times.

The moon's glow cast upon the fields below backlit her spectacular body that would be ideal on any model's photoset, but that wasn't a factor to her survival. Her 36-25-38 figure wouldn't win a fight for her, although her 5'9" stature would help and the definition in her biceps, stomach, and thighs were there for the assist. She liked to believe that she was cunning, too, even if the current predicament limited her to a malleable curiosity inflicted with what some might call reckless stupidity.

She tried to placate herself with humming and fabricated song. Her voice lilted on purpose, occasionally without intention under the influence of trepidation.

"It's all fire and brimstone baby, so let's go outside," she sang under her breath. Her hips swayed ever so slightly, her gun brandished in her right hand. "It's all fire and brimstone baby, I got my brand new pistol baby..."

The sidearm was semiautomatic, stainless steel slide with black polymer grip, attractive without being cute and strong without being monstrous. The engraving on the slide told her what it was, as if she'd forgotten the words spilt proudly from the seller's bucolic face.

"Ruger P-90," he'd said. "This here's a .45-cal, but we have our regular nine millimeter over there—"

"No, I'll take this one," Delta had said tersely. "How much?" She proceeded to pay with cash from her wad stolen from Stiletto's previous owner.

She still had a couple of hundred left.

For whatever reason that man had been carrying so much cash money with him, Delta was glad. She didn't delve deeper into the mystery; knowing herself about as well as dinosaur fossils knew the difference between Christianity and Catholicism, she was comfortable with mysteries.

Even when it came to herself—

Metal groaned up ahead. She was about forty feet from the discus-shaped object when she glimpsed a blur of light. Except that it didn't cross over the object's rim as they had earlier. No, this was different. This flew right in front of her eyes, without being inches from her face. Instead it was inches inside her brain, messing with her vision, her coherency, her stability.

And then came the sound.

Piercing, rusted nails on a chalkboard until the surface split and glass shattered in the background. Boots crunching the glass on the floor, somehow drawing blood through the souls. Cries of pain. A swarm of multispectral lights and unintelligibly distorted images added to the vortex claiming Delta's conscience as its own. A slave to the unknown. Victim of the infinite black wide open. Her temples commenced operation jackhammer and didn't relent until she could hardly feel her heart pulse, let alone her ability to process thoughts. The object—no, *aircraft*, her residual subconscious screamed—forty feet away became a mirage behind the haze of lights and tangible sounds. The jarring orgy of discordance dizzied her and played with her nerves. Muscles pulled taut. Cramps riveted her body.

Knees weakened.

Delta's hands flew up to her face, fingertips kneading her forehead and then her temples. Her fingers spread and she grasped either side of her head, nails pinching the scalp beneath lush hair. Her jaws clenched, teeth grinding, lips peeled back and nose wrinkled like a provoked wolf. If she'd had a tail, she'd have tucked it between her legs by now. Instead she backed up, staggering, went stiff and dropped to her knees in the soft grass. She screamed under her breath, groaned, fought for control.

A voice, her own, struggled to break the surface.

That same voice, that persona, that human soul, swam through the prickly blackness that had suddenly overcome her. She punched and clawed through the obscure images wreaking havoc in her subconscious. The sounds sluggishly began to

dissolve, their apparitions and manifestations belittling to mere noise.

At last her scream thinned out and her voice splintered the surface of her distress. She came to, reclaiming her conscience and the functions of her body. She stumbled to her feet, stretching and regaining her bearings. She had to adjust her clothes, her hair, her very skin before she could proceed. Deep breaths and thoughts of death interchanged until the prior overwhelmed the latter and she swallowed control.

She didn't bother trying to explain what had just happened, be it a mental or vocal conversation with herself. Instead she shook her head and was satisfied enough to just turn tail and leave. Get the hell out of Dodge, in her Chevy, peel off until this whole thing dissipated in her rearview. Just like that town eventually did, although she had an inkling that this sort of thing wasn't just going to...fade away so easily.

Even so, she hoped for the best in the form of lying to herself and tentatively turned her back on the alien aircraft.

Those two words shot through her veins like venom.

She knew what they meant, just not what they entailed should they be an accurate deduction.

Again, Delta preferred to keep her distance...from...

The truth?

A shake of her head later and Delta was turned the other way, having scooped up her dropped pistol and gathered her bearings. Her lungs finally reverted and her heart calmed as much as it could. Her skin wept sweat in more than one place and her hair already felt wet from it at the scalp. Her temples were sore, and strangely enough her calves, where she figured the strongest of cramps had hit her. There and her wrists, which was strange enough in itself—adding to the fact that it was faintly familiar.

Ever since waking in that field, naked with a 'D' brand on the back of her neck, she had been experiencing intermittent cramps in her wrists and calves. Mild but enough to take note of, especially now.

“It’s all fire and brimstone, baby,” Delta muttered with the littlest of rhythm under her breath, heading back to the car. “So let’s go outside. It’s all fire and brimstone, baby, I got my brand new—”

Beyond words happened next, although the voice inside Delta’s head tried to cope with the English language and general sentence structure.

Reality definitely didn’t apply though—not the one she was aware of. However the past four days, let alone past four minutes, had beyond a reasonable doubt challenged her concept of reality. Nevertheless, the current debacle took her breath away and threatened to give her a heart attack.

She was all for thrills, but not like this—

The darkness of the night by the shoulder of the road, where the pasture merged with asphalt, shifted and took shape. It was tall, twice Delta’s size in height and four times her reach. It had a slight hunch despite a lean figure, lanky arms, and four talon-ended fingers per hand. Other clawed arms a quarter the length of its primaries protruded from its abdomen, which she could barely see from the side. Its skin only became visible when it approached Stiletto and the moonlight gleamed off its body. It was pale, a blemished gray, with wrinkles and only markings across its skin. It looked like an old man turned monster, and somehow or another Delta was glad she never saw its face—she was a bit afraid to.

The hairless, lanky creature was a lumbering beast until it had a fit of rage on Stiletto and exhibited its ape-like litheness. Hands slid under the Camaro’s rear end and its arms abruptly jerked up, slinging the vehicle into the air. It front-flipped and landed on its roof, the cabin crushed under the impact and tilting to the shoulder-side of the road, its previously immaculate metal doors now grinding loudly. A side-view mirrors shattered and broke free. The creature leapt up onto the underbelly of the overturned, incapacitated Camaro, its hocked legs curling to apply more weight to the car. Its cabin crunched loudly beneath the creature’s hunched figure.

Its chest heaved while clawed hands hovered by its side.

Delta knew she could not be drugged. An image of the silhouette for the creature, backlit by the moon's glow and washed in the shadows of rural midnight, branded Delta's retention. She didn't think she could ever forget this.

And then the fear was siphoned from her. A fresh lick of rage, astonishment, awe, and twisted adrenaline took to her veins. She whipped the Ruger P-90 up to aim and two-handed it with impressive dexterity. The pistol bucks in her clammy hands once, twice, thrice. The slide snaps back each time, slinging empty shells through the air. Each report is a rabid bark in the dry night. The creature turns its head and bellows, neither a roar nor a scream but something disturbingly in between, the sound icing Delta's bones.

She squeezes the trigger faster

Its face is humanoid but long, unshapely. Its features too simple and too human for Delta to accept immediately. The pistol's muzzle flashes and gunsmoke greater hinder the clarity of the creature's face, and that is fine with Delta.

Finally she hits it. She was sure she hit it on first shot, but now it was certain—the thing stopped bellowing and swung its head around, torso tilting to the left and hindquarters folding to prepare a leap. When it did launch itself off the car, poor Stiletto totaled, it hit the pavement with awkward balance—albeit on its hands and feet—before scampering off through the dark. It quickly dissolved into the walls of night surrounding the road, as if nonexistent to begin with.

Unnerved beyond logic, Delta caught her breath.

And then some.

She fumbled with the pistol, ejected the magazine, and inspected its contents. She only had three rounds left in this one. A deep exhalation scratched past her teeth. She glanced over her shoulder at the aircraft lodged into the pasture, then back to the road.

A car she was shocked not to have heard approach sped on by. It didn't seem the least bit concerned. Delta wanted to

scream after it, but knew it was useless at this distance. She assumed the driver hadn't even seen her out in the middle of the field, quite possibly hadn't paid attention to their surroundings to begin with, just the road. And if they had seen her? Moreover, the suggestively alien aircraft crash sites?

Delta imagined the average person would keep driving.

Not her, however. Look where she was, now, because of it. Without Stiletto, and therefore without a ride. Wheels were everything this day and age. Protection and transportation went hand-in-hand. Sure, she had the Ruger pistol and a pair of extra magazines, but how far would that get her? Not nearly as far as Stiletto had inadvertently offered to take her.

She was only so grateful to have taken her gun and money with her.

And now? She approached the road with a heightened sense of haste, modified only by the hint of a terror lurking in the shadows unseen by her naked eye. She reached the shoulder, but didn't stay by the car. She didn't want her future ride to be pelting her with questions she couldn't answer in a million years. Instead she sprinted up the road some, keeping to the right side but just off of the shoulder. She didn't want to be missed.

Now that the moonlight wasn't in her favor anymore.

Delta stuck out her thumb into the right lane of the road. It hovered there in the dimly starlit night. The vacuous environment was one she wanted to shed sooner rather than later.

She was disappointed to have seen no blood on the road, or Stiletto for that matter, after she'd shot at the creature so many times. She was certain she'd hit her mark at least twice, even heard or seen it react from the impacts. Perhaps she hadn't hit it close or hard enough. The Ruger wasn't a 9mm, she'd hoped that the .45 was going to suffice.

Given, Delta hadn't been expecting extraterrestrials twice the size of a Camaro to be her enemies on the road. Only potential muggers, rapists, petty thieves and criminals of the like.

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Thumb out, impatience tangible in her gait along the side of the road, Delta waited to hitch a ride further into the night.

And hopefully to a nearby town.

She didn't think she'd ever be so eager to see another human's face again, no matter how boorish the person.

At this rate, she figured she could handle them.

2

Delta's hair rode on gentle breezes that swept past her no different than a tattered flag carried by the wind. It felt good on her clammy skin, from her face to her upper back, shoulders, arms, legs...but her hands remained most uncomfortable. Even the left one, fist formed with a lonely thumb protruding into the night five and half feet above the asphalt. Then she remembered that the Ruger P-90 pistol was still clutched in her right hand. Once her brain acknowledged it, the faint coolness of the clean stainless steel slide comforted her skin with a readjusting grip.

However, more importantly, she needed to hide it.

She doubted that anyone would pick her up if she was holding a gun out in the open, no matter how pulchritudinous she appeared.

With the other two small stainless steel magazines stuffed uncomfortably into the close-fitted pockets of her light blue denim shorts, she needed to just worry about the gun itself. Where to? She wasn't exactly toting a holster, bag, or abundance of pockets. She thought briefly in her shirt, but decided against it. Too crowded in there as it was, and the tanktop was thin white fabric; the black bra beneath was visible enough. Spaghetti-strapped, it wouldn't be too wise of a decision.

So she chose to stuff it into the tail of her shorts, an

option that she originally ignored based off of sheer discomfort. Fortunately the pistol wasn't large, and in all honesty the stainless steel felt comfortable against the upper portions of her buttocks beneath the denim. Sitting down would render a whole other dilemma of relaxation, meaning she'd have to adjust herself to say the least.

And stay attentive.

Speaking of which, her left ear caught a sound—comforting, at long last. An engine far off, rumbling in the distance but growing louder as it neared. Louder and bigger, the source of it big enough to slate her insistency on added protection.

As the trailer-attached eighteen-wheeler approached, it slowed. She was grateful for this, although her doubts on the driver began long before he came to a complete stop—and popped the door open.

She took a deep breath and climbed up the steps.

Delta stopped just in the doorway, her full hair an inch under the top sill. She held herself up there with her right arm slung over the arch of the door and her left hand clutching the passenger's headrest. The dim cabin light reflected off her skin, giving her a yellowish nimbus.

The driver was a heavyset man with a round face and jawline stubble. His hair was dark brown mixed with early grays beneath a trucker's cap. Skin hung from his jowls not unlike the bags under his brown eyes, exhaustion and even loneliness palpable. Upon seeing Delta spring up there, he blinked rapidly as if to suggest he might be dreaming.

"Got room for one more?" Delta asked as genially as she could manage, just the same trying to keep from seeming flirtatious.

"Um...where to, miss?" the trucker stammered.

"Just the next town," Delta sighed. "Wherever that might be. I'd burden nothing else from you."

"Pender's just up ahead, say, forty-five-minute drive. You're welcome to hop in, if you'd like. You...have any

baggage?”

There was a perverse glint in the man's face when he said it, but Delta bowed her gaze and walked right over it so to speak.

“No, just me. Thank you.” She ducked into the cabin and took a seat, awkwardly positioning herself so that the Ruger didn't crush her tailbone or threaten to rape her. She slammed the door shut once she was in and the trucker slowly accelerated forward. The Kenworth eighteen-wheeler proceeded into the deep night; the driver clearly hadn't noticed, in spite of broad headlights, the presence of the crashed aircraft in the fields.

“So, uh, what's your name?” he asked, his voice dry and raspy. Delta looked up, dropping the coy act so as to not act too defenseless. The look in her eyes alone seemed to catch him off guard, tell him without uttering the words not to mess with her.

Even so, she played it calm.

“Delta,” she said. “And that's all you need to know.”

“O-Okay, then. Didn't mean to be rude. I, uh, my name's Bobby. Bobby Beauchamp. It's a, uh, pleasure meeting you, miss. I mean...”

Delta smiled small and hesitantly shook the man's offered hand. His palm was greasy and coarse just under the fingers. She saw the crud caking the steering wheel just before the cabin light faded out.

She tried not to grimace as their hands withdrew.

“So, then, mind me asking whatcha doin' all the way out here? With no car, no sign o' one, and no bags or—”

“I do mind you asking, actually,” she snapped, her voice quiet but full of bite. She cleared a few rogue strands of hair from her face, which were radiant even under the vaguely moonlit shade of the cabin, and shook her head. “I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, I'm just...intent on my privacy.”

“No worries there, lady, no worries at all. Just curious.”

“You...didn't notice anything *unusual* back there, did you?” Delta asked slowly.

“Um...nothing more unusual than you hitching for a ride

with no phone or purse or car. Nothing, really, at all.”

Delta nodded to herself, muttered an affirmation, and stared straight ahead. She put her seatbelt on as Bobby continued to drive steadily, his eyes adhered to the road ahead. The stiff shoulder strap aligned between her breasts, threatening to divide them under her tanktop. She quickly readjusted it to her left shoulder, then shot a look Bobby’s way and noticed the smallest of twitches in the right side of his face.

Delta crossed her arms, but over instead of under her breasts. It was a bit uncomfortable, and the gun beneath her wasn’t helping the awkwardness of her position. She didn’t cross her legs, either, instead keeping her knees pointed straight ahead.

With the cab’s windows rolled up and the exhaust kicking in, a lingering reek struck Delta full-force. Her nose shriveled at the odor but she tried miserably to conceal her distaste. And then the stench wavered, eventually fading.

“I’m, uh...I’m kind of cold. Would you happen to have a blanket or jacket, something I can just—”

Bobby leaned forward and significantly lowered the air-conditioning level. It hadn’t even been on high, and it was clear that Bobby didn’t want her covering up any.

“Fixed,” he grunted, swiftly sizing her up before resuming concentration on the road.

“Oh...thanks.” Delta didn’t hide her lack of enthusiasm very well. In all honesty she hadn’t even been cold—it was a perfect temperature in here but now it grew tepid, fast. She wanted to throw something over her legs, or her bare shoulders and arms, all of that bare skin acting as adhesive to Bobby’s wandering gaze.

The drive extended for some fifteen minutes, silence palling the front seat. There’s no sound but the engine’s drone and a thousand thoughts of paranoia swimming around in Delta’s head as she sat opposite Bobby. Both of their gazes were affixed to the windshield, and the expanse beyond it, both lit and dark. Except that Delta’s eyes felt more comfortable staring into the deepness of the night than the headlight-illuminated road

before the truck.

Her conscience felt restless but physically she was beyond listless. Muscles were sore and the residual effects of so many concurrent cramps began taking their toll. She wanted to stretch, but with Bobby present and within reach she decided against it.

Time lapsed like a snail on the edge of a razor blade. Delta's face was beginning to feel tired itself, the skin there and everywhere else commencing its own hiatus from activity. Whatever peculiarity had stricken her like a paralytic seizure earlier out on the field by the crash site certainly took its toll, too. Her eyes ached with a foreign pain and the sheer fatigue was making anvils of her lids.

Her neck, shoulder, and back muscles grew sore.

She was trying so hard to sit upright and maintain an erect posture for many reasons. Among them was to deflect any violating glances from Bobby Beauchamp less than four feet to her left. Another was to keep awake.

The latter was first to fail.

Delta slowly lulled into sleep's comforting embrace, whether she wanted to or not. She of course did not want to, not here at least, feeling that she could wait for hours if need be.

Now there was no choice.

The inadvertent Z's snagged her as their own.

An ensuing all-encompassing shadow swallowed her conscience. Nightmares stitched up in the skin of dreams, wearing kind masks of faces and false smiles greeted here in the nascent abyss. Her sleeping awareness of reality was absent to say the least. Her buried subconscious, on the other hand, awoke to find itself surrounded by these dreamlike veneers. People of all kinds wore the same masks and offered to shake her hand. They tilted their heads at impossible angles like an Oracle's spoon when Delta resisted their pressing cordiality. And then one of them stepped closer, a child, with cascading crimson hair and a pretty voice. The child's vocals became distorted after an instant, and her hair rose in flames. Delta screamed without a

noise and the hair on the calm, head-tilting child put out the fire with dripping blood. In the next instant Delta's breath was cut short and her lungs felt as if hands were gripping them inside her body, wringing them out like wet washcloths.

Delta instinctively spun on her heels to face—

Herself. She knew it was herself, from head to toe, current outfit complete down to the same sneakers and no-show socks. Except that this mirrored image wore a mask, too, but the grin painted there was upside-down. Delta's heart leapt and so did her bizarre twin—not from her feet, but from her skin. Something terrible broke free, from her shoulders and her abdomen: long, lanky arms reached skyward, eventually arcing down with talons dangling above her head and smaller limbs protruding from her ribs, also not without claws. The mask on the Delta-imitator's face broke free, replaced by a tall face that howled through an impossibly long mouth, its features grayed and blemished, eyes black pits no different than its agape maw.

Delta felt herself spiral into this thing's face, devoured by its infinite horror, until her lungs were released and her eyelids flung open to replace the nightmare with the milieu of the truck's cabin. She was breathing heavy, almost panting, but quickly got a hold of herself; fortunately she hadn't stirred awake screaming, although she couldn't have known what kind of sounds she'd been making while asleep.

Delta's head pivoted to the left and spotted Bobby staring intently at her. Even when their eyes collide, it's another few seconds before Bobby reverted his attention to the road.

Disconcerted, she tried covering herself up with her arms. There was only so much she could do, but at least her tanktop featured full coverage—unlike her bra—and prohibited the exhibition of cleavage. She couldn't do anything about her legs, though, and too much readjusting of her short denim shorts might dislodge the Ruger...

And she wasn't about to get into *that* situation.

"Um...how much was I out for?" Delta asked.

"Oh, I dunno," Bobby drawls. "Twenty, twenty-five

minutes, maybe.”

“Holy shit,” Delta murmurs, swinging her eyes back to the windshield. The featureless dark surrounding all sides but the first twenty feet in front of the truck remind her of the nightmare. Originally a dream, eviscerated by the macabre and taking her by twisted surprise. She’d seen it coming, more or less, but not that. Not that *thing* and *her* and—

“You alright, there?” Bobby asked. He glanced over at her, his eyes low, then back up to her face before returning to the road. “Your teeth were chattering and you was doin’ quite a bit of flinching. Especially the last five minutes.”

“Yeah, just...” Delta shrugged. “Bad dreams, I guess.”

“Ah...” Bobby didn’t seem convinced, nor too concerned. He kept driving, keeping the truck five over the limit.

“Are we close?” Delta asked. “To the, uh, next town.”

“Pender? Yeah, it’s probably about five minutes to the gas station just outside of town. Then, say, another five to the K-Mart that’s a couple of miles from housing.”

“Okay. Cool. Thanks, again, for the ride.”

“Oh, yeah. No problem, really.”

Delta felt his eyes form a fresh brand in the side of her face. When she turned to look at him, she noticed that he wasn’t exactly looking at her face.

“Look,” she said bluntly, lowering her voice ever so slightly, “I know I’m a bit of an unusual sight all the way out here—but could you do me a favor and sever your gaze? Staring’s not polite, ya know?”

“Who said I was so polite?” Bobby leered.

Delta sighed. “Well, you *did* give me the ride.”

Bobby took a moment to himself, clearly contemplative. It appeared to be a bit much for his brain to calculate.

“Well, yeah, I suppose that’s true. Say, you know what’s even more unusual?”

Delta squinted and spotted a blur of light far in the distance, soaked in the dense night on the right side of the road. Probably another mile or so to the secluded gas station. She

hoped he'd stop, at least so she could grab a bottled water and snack or too. And maybe a rape whistle.

Or just a fanny pack for her Ruger, the best rape whistle of all.

"What's that?" Delta asked absentmindedly.

"Your ears."

"Pardon?" Delta cocked an eyebrow and swung her head to return Bobby's stare. This time it wasn't a perverted leer but an inquisitive ogling.

"Your ears aren't pierced. At all."

Delta hadn't realized her ears were even visible. Her left one was, at least. She tried to avoid thinking about the possibility that he'd touched her in her sleep.

Twenty minutes was a long time to be out cold.

She quickly covered her ears again with the natural flow of her rippled crimson hair.

"Yeah, well, nor do I have any tattoos or piercings elsewhere. Have any other physical criticisms?"

"You're feisty," he said dully.

"And you're...prying."

Bobby shrugged it off. The drive persisted for ten more long, heavy seconds until his voice punctured the thick air again. This time he turned to face her with his entire torso, one-handing the steering wheel and giving her the creepiest look she'd ever seen in her four-day-life. Her failed attacker, the previous owner of Stiletto, had a thing or two to learn from this boar.

He dug into his pants pocket with one hand.

At least she thought it was his pocket.

"Hey, listen," he practically salivated, "I'll give you twenty bucks if you show me your—"

Something the size of an adult deer that wasn't a deer at all suddenly galloped across the road fifteen feet in front of the truck's grille. The headlamps' beams washed over its pale-green, blemished hide that appeared to blur a slick oily black before it vanished into the night to the left of the truck. Bobby exclaimed, profanity spilling from his lips at the same rate as the drool did,

fumbling with the wheel and swerving from shoulder-to-shoulder. Large treaded tires screeched against the temporarily forgiving asphalt, while Delta clamped her teeth and braced herself against the door and dashboard.

As the truck righted itself, thanks to Bobby's keen driving and reversion of focus, Delta took a deep breath that rattled her from head to toe. Her skin crawled with a thousand needlepoints and she felt ice streak her bones.

"What the fuck *was* that!?" Bobby Beauchamp yelled.

"I suggest..." Delta took a breath "...you speed up."

"*Speed* up? Woman, are you insane? I gotta stop and see if I hit—"

"You *didn't* hit anything, trust me—you would've known." Delta shook her head, still felt that she was molded to the inside of her door. "Just speed up, stop at the gas station. I think I'm gonna fucking hurl."

"Hey, now."

Bobby started dramatically decelerating.

"Are you deaf, man? Hit the *gas*!" Delta barked.

"You ain't gonna puke in here, that's for damn sure."

"Oh, like it'd do any worse," Delta sneered.

Bobby looked taken aback. "Alright, bitch, that's it..."

Delta saw his hands go to his pants. Was he reaching for his pocket, where he kept a gun? Or to his zipper, behind which he kept his airsoft?

She wasn't going to take either kind of chance.

She reached her right hand between her back and the seat cushion, fingers wriggling as she strained to draw the Ruger. Fingertips inches from its handle was when she was interrupted.

And not by Bobby.

A glass-shattering wail from outside overpowered the sound of the rumbling diesel engine, preluding its source's appearance. In spite of its strident shriek, the foreign creature's skull was what shattered the driver's side window. A hundred small shards sprayed into the cabin, and Bobby impulsively threw up his left arm to cover his face. His right remained on the

wheel but his foot frantically—unintentionally?—transferred to the gas pedal. To the metal it went, launching the truck forward and sluggishly fishtailing the back set of tires on the attached thirty-foot trailer.

The guest was far from a deer, much less anything either Bobby or Delta was aware of on this planet.

She could barely see it through the blur of motion and shadows inside the cabin, dappled with moonlight through the windshield.

Was it the same one as before, that had skittered across the road? About the same size, she guessed from here, and the same color—no, it was entirely black now. The other had been patchy, at least as it had leapt in front of the headlights. Maybe this was another. A *second* one, which meant a *third* total after she recalled the nightmarish thing—alien?—that had trashed Stiletto.

Delta tasted bile and panic in her throat as Bobby poorly fended off the creature, whose claws were ripping through his left arm. Blood splattered the steering wheel, dashboard, blurring her view of the illuminated speedometer.

And then her hands found the Ruger.

She whipped it out to aim.

Bobby was panicking too much, although she couldn't quite blame him. And despite whatever he was going to do to or with or even try on Delta, she couldn't bring herself to shoot right through him.

Not yet at least.

And then the attacking creature's wail burst from its jaws again. Delta felt her brain turn to an omelet fresh in the pan and the light-switch flipped to the off position. When she pried her eyes open in the next instant, Bobby was practically nonexistent. He held a snub-nosed revolver in his right hand, the only part of him fully recognizable now, but otherwise he was mortally out of commission.

His corpse sagged forward, a nearly headless stump where his neck had been crumpling into the steering wheel's

center. The sound alone was gruesome, sickening. And then his foot must've slipped because the brakes were applied. Hard. The eighteen-wheeler jerked forward, its trailer slowly jackknifing behind the cab. Tires screeched and so did the creature, leaning halfway through the driver's window.

Delta took it all in, against her better judgment.

The creature was fiendish to say the least, but vaguely analogous to the large lanky creature she'd spotted earlier. This one was less than half that one's size, though, and up close its facial features were far fiercer.

An inverted triangle formed its mouth, the lower points spreading via mandibles, every inside row lined with finger-sized teeth. Its eyes were small black pits, like a shark's, and cheeks little more than swollen flesh. Despite being vaguely humanoid in the sense that it had two jointed arms and legs reasonably poised about its torso, it was clearly not of this world. And these appendages were far more lithe than any human's could be, save for maybe a disturbingly deft gymnast or contortionist. The way the creature had leapt onto the side of the truck cab and clung to it even as it continued to speed down the road was terrifying in itself. The stench expelling from its dreadful jaws permeated the cabin and violated every sense that Delta held dear.

The discolored white-and-black creature smacked its jaws like a dog with peanut butter in its mouth and took a reaching step further through the window.

And then Delta decided to violate its senses, too.

Primarily that of pain.

Wishing with all of her heart and tormented confusion that the atrocity's pain threshold was incredibly low, she snapped the P-90 up to aim and fired. Left arm bracing herself, she used her right hand to fire the pistol. In wake of the muzzle flashes alone the creature's face swapped between a slick black and blemished white-gray each time. The bullets themselves punched into its upper chest, two at first making it flinch only to be followed by three more that carried greater accuracy.

Delta wasn't fucking around.

She put three in its head, the first in a cheek and two in its awkward dome. Translucent, viscous blood not unlike pus splattered the dashboard, steering wheel, ceiling, and seat a foot away from Delta. She watched it recoil, sliding back away from her and dragging its left three-fingered hand across the seat with it. Thick claws dug troughs through the seats until it withdrew from the cabin. However, as it did so it readjusted its grappling hold onto the side of the cab. With one vigorous tug, the creature shocked Delta with its immense strength in spite of a fairly small body—and brought the entire truck *down* on its side. The eighteen-wheeler rig dropped on its left side midstride of a 40-mph gait. Its foreign attacker managed to slip free just before impact, except for a rear limb. Delta heard a sharp wail pierce the night, barely audible over the ruckus of the wreck. Metal against asphalt, a loud *crunch* and strident scraping, not without glass shattering and Delta's own breath stricken from her lungs.

Safety first—her seatbelt held her to the seat.

She braced her body as the truck tipped and began sliding across the asphalt with a slight diagonal angle due to the trailer's disproportional weight. A sluggish jackknife that ultimately spun the decelerating sideward rig obliquely across the road. The back end of the trailer hung off the right shoulder while the cab's grille just met with the left one.

When the truck finally came to a stop, so had Delta's panic. Most people would have been severely traumatized during and after, much less following the sight she witnessed with the creature wrecking Stiletto. While Delta wasn't doubting the fact that she was downright scarred for life in lieu of this series of FUBAR events, she also was stronger than the average person. She had less to lose, except for her own life, and dare she say—or even think it—sanity. Moreover, she forwardly acknowledged the reality should she stay succumbed to panic in this situation.

It ended in death, probably very horribly too.

She know she wounded the creature, know she hit it deep and made it bleed. She smelled its life force, its ichor, as it

dripped from the surfaces in the cabin. It was an ooze like thick blood or semen, and seemed to carry its own nauseating mentality.

Delta wished she could burn it.

Instead, she was content in knowing that it wasn't going to slither back to its source and reconstitute its damaged tissue. At least, she felt sure after eyeballing the spatter for several seconds.

Metal creaked and groaned. The wrecked eighteen-wheeler sat on its side like a massive metallic crocodile lazily baking in the sun. Except that this giant steel beast was dead.

Its inhabitants, only half that.

Bobby's messily decapitated, ravaged corpse didn't help assuage the fetor lingering in the air. The sight alone, of the creature's aftermath, toyed with Delta's stomach. She tasted bile in the back of her throat but in lieu of breaking her panic's embrace she managed to push it down...and eventually climb free of the truck's cabin. Fortunately her side wasn't the one that had hit the asphalt during the crash; instead her still shut door and splintered window pointed toward the sky. She could actually see the moon, a single distended white iris in the blue-black sky, staring down upon her and this unfortunate scene.

She struggled with her seatbelt, and the door, not wanting to unlatch and fall down to where Bobby's corpse was. So she finagled her door open with enough shoulder pushes, making sore that area but little else, which finally popped up with a loud snap. The sound echoed in the moderate stillness of the night. She tilted her body sideways so that she could crawl halfway through the vertical doorway before unlatching her seatbelt. It retracted and so did she, into the murk of the terrible outdoors, where that creature was probably lurking somewhere...

Delta shakily got to her feet, taking an explorer's stance right there on the sleeper panel of the rig's cab. A few feet from where she stood was a stainless steel exhaust stack, leaking a thick column of black-brown smoke. She tried looking out over the area, tried to locate her enemy, tried to stay one step ahead of

it and its own probable cunning—

The sound of claws skittering across a hard surface was what hooked Delta's cheek. She pirouetted to face behind her, and spotted the creature traversing a patch of bare asphalt nearly ten feet below from where she stood. Her hands pitched the pistol to an accurate angle and she closed an eye to squint down the iron sights for better aim. The creature was wounded, entirely missing one of its two 'proper' legs, which appeared to have been raggedly severed below the knee. The remaining three appendages it utilized like a spider would, awkwardly yet hastily crab-walking toward the overturned truck cab.

All of a sudden it stopped and bolted its attention up, those black eyes gleaming with more than the moonlight as they locked onto Delta's own. She felt a crawl shoot down her spine and felt a wave of four days' worth of ambiguous nightmares flash through her system.

She started squeezing the trigger.

Heat splashed from the muzzle onto her hands and face.

The first two bullets were on point, punching the creature in the shoulders. It lurched back a few paces, disoriented. Unfortunately everything after that struck only asphalt and the shoulder just behind the creature.

She stopped just after the first dry *click* when the magazine ran empty and the slide locked back. Thin wisps of smoke snaked up from the muzzle and widened breech. With no more muzzle flashes Delta observed her damage—not enough.

It had barely sufficed to stall the creature's progress.

Now coming to its senses before Delta could even begin fumbling with her spare magazine, that panic was nibbling at the surface of her calm veneer. It hobbled over to the cab where, just on the other side of the roof, Bobby Beauchamp rested in pieces. It began scrabbling up said roof, with added purchase given the presence of orange light studs.

Delta's conscience made a shout of confident reassurance—but *only* if she 'got it together.' Right now. Not five seconds later, not tomorrow, not 'in a minute.'

A surprisingly smooth placidity swept her body, her nerves, her very state of mind. She reloaded the pistol, spun on her heel to face her right, just as the three-legged monstrosity crested the roof and took no hesitation in launching itself at her. The P-90's stainless steel slide snapped forward, securing a round in the chamber, that very instant. She squeezed the trigger as soon as she heard it, eyes on none other than that which turned smiles to screams.

She pumped its already bloated face full of enough lead to open up a pencil kiosk at the local mall. Its head practically exploded right there on the spot. Fortunately only small specks got on Delta, though surprisingly enough nothing on skin. The remnants of the fowl creature smacked the cab's surface within reach of Delta's feet before it slipped off the edge and dropped to the asphalt below.

She took a deep, mildly comforting breath.

Her skin shook from the intensity of the encounter.

She turned to survey what the creature had, alone, just wrought: the eighteen-wheeler truck, with its thirty-foot trailer partially jackknifed but still attached, had wrecked going some forty or fifty miles-per-hour so far as she knew; it landed on its left side, not long after it had butchered its driver, Bobby. In spite of Bobby's unquestionable ill will towards her, Delta wasn't glad or pleased that he'd been killed. Much less in that manner—she didn't believe anyone deserved such a demise.

And at least he drove her quite a ways before acting up.

She stared out on down the road the direction they'd been going, squinting as if it helped, and could see with decent clarity the illuminated gas station on the right side of the road. Less than a quarter mile from here.

She just hoped there weren't more of those fuckers lurking amid the fields...or that big one from earlier for that matter...

Descending the truck proved to be less of a problem than she'd previously reckoned, although once she alighted on the unforgiving asphalt things didn't look up for her. She sensed,

and it was as simple yet mystifying as that, the presence of a *second* creature in the vicinity. Where exactly she couldn't tell, but tell could she that it was nearby. The stench emanating from its epidermis and breath was enough a hint alone, however, she *felt* it long before the odor hit her.

By which time the sight did, too.

Much like the previous one she'd killed just on top of the flipped truck, the crab-walking creature was a blemished pale gray. It had slight wrinkles, creases, perhaps even scars. It was of age and yet wholly vivacious at the same time, frighteningly so. It hissed and growled and made low whistling noises through its interlocked, jagged teeth. Every time it breathed, its puffy cheeks would swell up before returning to normal size, although even this didn't seem normal.

Given, nothing of this situation struck Delta as 'normal.'

She might have only been consciously existing for four, going on five days now, but she was certain none of this shit was orthodox.

Even way out here in the middle of Bumfuck, Nebraska.

The creature skittered across the road from the other side, to her far right, having come from probably the field. She pondered ever so briefly if said field was some festering blanket of grass from which these things sprouted through the soil like mutated weeds with a hunger for human flesh.

Delta didn't hesitate the second the creature came within twenty feet, far too close for her comfort, clawed feet smacking the dry pavement. It opened its mouth and scrunched its hindquarters in preparation for a launching attack. Delta unloaded into it, this time aiming lower so as to guide the weapon's slight recoil up into more of its body. She wanted every shot to count.

She wanted to turn the blacktop white.

The first three shots went off like a burst-fire weapon, Delta stood her ground and dealt them ferociously. Like a pro. Hell hath no wrath like a woman's scorn. Something like that, the words coursed across her mind in a strain of disseminated

DNA. Her shots, quite the opposite. The first three climbed from the creature's upper sternum to the center of its face, dropping it before it gained air. It squirmed around on the ground and wobbled to its feet like a jellyfish learning to walk. Its viscous whitish blood had dappled the asphalt. Delta walked up to it with a hasty gait but shy of jogging, stopped sternly to tower over its clumsy self—confidence and power in her demeanor despite its size—then angled her gun downward. One-handing it, she fired the pistol three more times into the top of its skull. The creature dropped like a sack of bricks by the second shot, but she couldn't resist a third. It was almost impulse.

She took yet another deep breath, this one accompanied by curls of gunsmoke and the creature's rankness combing through the air; rising up her nostrils, together they were stifling.

Delta didn't waver the slightest, yet.

She coughed in her mouth afterward, knowing that the whole heroine role wasn't her bit. She could play it to an extent, but the stone-cold façade in the wake of all this turmoil wasn't her game. She felt that she'd end up being the antihero if not some extra in the background doing her own thing.

For this heap of mess, on the other hand...

She felt as though she fit somewhere smack dab in the middle of it. A puzzle piece singed at the edges and soaking wet at the center. Impossible to drop into place with the other pieces, impossible to decipher its true role.

Nonetheless, that vague feeling of confidence didn't leave her as easily. She held onto it with a heart made from a grappling hook. However, with one extra magazine left and a few more shots in this one, she knew that said confidence came at a price.

Recalling the piece Bobby had pulled earlier, she decided to steal from the dead.

Maybe it would serve its purpose better in her hands than it had in his. She certainly hoped so.

Not wanting to scale the cab again and dangle down through the passenger's side just to get the weapon, Delta

decided to go the more direct route—the louder route. She prayed that the sound of her kicking in the splintered windshield, ensuing all the shots that had been fired, wouldn't draw more of those things here. Just the same, she assumed that they didn't entirely rely on their hearing to detect her—or anyone else's—presence.

Were they after *her*? The thought hit her just as the windshield gave way from its frame entirely, crashing into the cabin. The concept wasn't too far off from doubtful, although of course she'd rather believe it be further than it was.

Not wanting to dwell too much on that, Delta focused on getting Bobby's piece—thus extending her arsenal—for the time being. Everything else was secondary, if even that.

Unless it directly related to her survival, she ignored it.

Ducking to clamber into the sideward cabin was difficult to say the least. It was no more challenging than it would've been to do it topside, so she fared without much self-gripping. Watching the small shards of glass here and there on her bare legs and arms, Delta entered the cabin and didn't need to brandish her Detective's Badge to find the damn thing. It was a stainless steel smooth-cylinder Smith & Wesson, snub-nosed, with a .357 engraving on the tiny barrel. She scooped it up from between the steering column and dashboard, only minimally misted with Bobby's blood. She wiped it off with the bottom of her tanktop. She then ejected the cylinder and saw that all *eight* rounds were in their slots. The smallest of smiles graced her face and she was glad to add it to her arsenal; however, she was low on carrying capacity. So she dropped the Ruger into her tanktop, just between her breasts which—thanks to a show-all, snug bra—pushed them together comfortably. That is, as comfortable as they could be save from not wearing any period.

Now things were a tad more uncomfortable, although she wasn't going to lie about the soothing kiss of cold stainless steel against her clammy skin. The upper portion of the Ruger pistol was as such, and while not frigid as ice, it was far better than nothing. And that same nothing was replaced with the S&W—

Model 627PC, according to another engraving—in her right hand. The textured mahogany grip felt good against her palm and fingers.

Delta sighed gutturally and turned to leave.

Her foot caught on something. At first she thought it was one of the pedals or just poor Bobby's feet, as she had gotten rather close to his corpse to retrieve the revolver. But when she turned to take a second look, something far more noteworthy captivated her attention.

"Oh, thank you, Bobby. I'm sorry for...this...but thank you, if it means anything."

Delta's words evaporated into the empty night air.

She tucked the hand-sized revolver into the tail of her denim shorts, more smooth and cold stainless steel to grace her clammy skin. She replaced its tenure in her hand—no, hands, plural—with Bobby's other postmortem gift. An apology of sorts, she'd take it as.

A sawed-off double-barrel shotgun. She popped open the box-lock barrels and accidentally ejected both shells. She fumbled with them briefly before returning them to their rightful places. They were 12-gauge buckshot rounds and the shotgun, branded as a Zebala, would certainly come in handy for Delta.

She was damn sure of it.

After leaving the confines of the wrecked truck, she commenced her hasty-gaited approach of the distant gas station. As she neared, hugging the right shoulder of the road and keeping a keen eye on the fields beside her, Delta spotted the high sign. It was illuminated red white and blue, the Exxon letters black.

"I'm thirsty as hell," she voiced to herself. "And I'd *kill* to have a Snickers or something."

Delta just hoped she wouldn't have to.

But if she did—she was certainly prepared for it.

3

Wind cooled the exposed skin from her ankles to her upper thighs, shoulders and upper back, arms, neck, and of course face. Her wildfire hair wafted in the sweeping breeze but didn't whip around. It was a calm gust of wind that swept back and forth, as if unsure where to go; north or south, east or west, up or down or just keep going all around? Delta didn't mind its indecisiveness. She liked the fickle, directionless air. Liked the feeling of it soothing her sweaty skin. It was so hot and dry out here that the beads of sweat rarely became drips, as they solidified on the skin with nothing else to go on—not even the faintest touch of humidity.

Delta neared the Exxon station, complete with a small indoor convenience store. Very convenient, she mused, for her.

There were, unfortunately, no vehicles at the pumps.

The employees' cars must be parked on the other side, because there was no parking lot of any kind nearby. Not even a place to pull off to the side, so far as she could tell on approach, to clean out one's car or ump air into the tires. Change a flat, check the engine, no additional space of pavement beside the scarcity already beneath the pumps' roofing.

At least the sign was lit and the lights were on inside.

The pumps appeared to be functioning, too, their digital readouts faintly lit.

As she got closer, her legs picked up speed. Muscles pumped, freeing themselves from cramps, pushed her onward.

She was eager, and distantly apprehensive.

Hoping that the sawed-off shotgun cradled in her hands wouldn't alarm too terribly the clerks at the station, she approached it head-on. How else would she do it? From the back door, possibly, but then that would perturb them even more. She could just as well hide the shotgun outside while she went in, hoping they wouldn't notice the pistol in her tanktop—barely sandwiched by her breasts—or the revolver tucked into the back of her shorts. Given, the tail of her tanktop was patted over it, but the bulge remained and that mahogany grip was pretty noticeable through the almost-sheer white cloth.

Delta concluded that she'd just give it a go.

She reached the quaint Exxon by skirting around the right side, that which she faced, wanting to avoid being too sneaky but at the same time evade blatancy. So she got close to the nearest window, essentially a wall of glass, and tip-toed to see over the large poster-ad there. She spotted the tops of aisles, and two heads—one blonde with a high ponytail and the other a messy hat of curly brown hair. He spotted glasses on the prior, freckles on the latter. A girl and guy, respectively. She couldn't see anything below the bridges of their noses, however, from her vantage point.

She didn't need to. She just wanted inside, some replenishments to suffice her into town.

And she certainly intended on warning them.

What would Delta say? She was curious as to the answer to said question herself. Very curious, and confused.

"To hell with this," she muttered under her breath, lowering back down to the soles of her sneakers. The parched-grassed earth crunched beneath her 140 pounds. She turned around to the front of the store and leaned the Zebala shotgun behind a plastic trash bin. Before she revealed herself to the bare glass by the exposed front doors, Delta took a moment to readjust—she dug the Ruger from her chest and partnered it with

the revolver at her rear. Between the snug waistband of her denim shorts and skin, thanks to a thin thong, this was most uncomfortable. She couldn't imagine walking more than fifty paces like this, half afraid one if not both would slip down into the confines of her shorts or—worse yet—fall out. Probably the latter, considering how well and complete she filled-out these shorts.

One deep breath later and Delta entered the small store.

The setting of seemingly infinite night intruded only by the dim lighting of the Exxon sign and gas pumps backlit her entrance. A bell went *ding* above her head and she flinched ever so slightly at the sound, startling her a touch. The first person she spotted was the dirty-blond with a high ponytail and small rectangular glasses, silver frame. The girl couldn't be a day over twenty. Delta couldn't help but expect the same stunned expression from the freckled guy somewhere around here, too, but not the girl.

Nonetheless, the girl seemed a bit taken aback.

Delta was a sight for anyone, this was factual enough. The girl here clearly agreed. She cleared her throat after Bermuda-blue eyes returned from their surprised look, and stammered the slightest as she offered Delta any help.

"No, thank you, though," Delta said, trying not to appear fazed. By the girl's reaction to her presence, this was her littlest concern; moreover, to all of this chaos she'd just endured. While she intended on warning them, she wanted to get her food and drink first. She wasn't intent on stealing every step of her life, even if it was easier than slapping candy from a baby's hand.

"Okay, well...just lemme know if you need anything, k?" the girl replied happily. Far too chipper for this location.

Delta certainly thought so.

The girl was vaguely attractive. Nothing prominent, but worth a passing glance—even from Delta. A bit of weight on her, but not so much so that her waist was aligned with her hips. She wore jeans that rode low like a gangster's '33 Ford and had the tall grille to match, surprisingly clean for all the way out

here. She did have braces, which shook Delta's certainty of her age. The girl took care of herself, nonetheless, by the look of it; she was on the tolerable, attractive side of an average body type. Her chest was fairly small but her hips and thighs, wider. Her green and white-striped T-shirt was occupied by a nametag on her left breast that read 'Bianca.' It also had two entirely missing buttons at the tiny V-neck collar, exposing a patch of pale skin there.

What drew Delta's eyes most was Bianca's own.

Her voice was a step over the line of annoying, though.

"You're welcome," Bianca replied, drawling the second word as she pirouetted to walk behind the counter. She strutted strangely, a mix between flirtatious and clumsy. Delta couldn't help but smirk, but didn't give the girl another look-over—she was here for provisions, sustenance.

And then she'd spill the beans about her real situation.

She wondered vacantly where the guy was before she turned a corner of an aisle and spotted him stocking at the end of it. He looked bored out of his skull, and a bit fed up. She imagined that he was victim to failed flirts night in and night out with his 'coworker,' as she assumed that Bianca might prefer the alternative.

Delta didn't blame her, from what she'd seen back in the town where she'd awoken. Given, this kid—again, just under twenty if not one or two over it—wasn't bad looking, but Bianca's eyes...something about her drew Delta.

Regardless, she wasn't here for a role on *The Bachelor*.

She re-focused. The guy's nametag read 'Daniel.'

"Hi there," he said with zero stammer, "do you need any help finding something?"

Delta shrugged, shook her head. "No thanks, I'm good."

She walked right past the guy, hooked a left, and hugged the far refrigerator wall until she reached the waters. She heard him set down his box of stock and walk out of the aisle, but not toward her. A moment later her ears caught faint voices at the front of the store. She mused about what he was saying to his

coworker, supposing they weren't siblings.

Delta definitely saw no resemblance.

"Bingo," she said through barely parted lips, eyes locking on a bottle of Aquafina. She opened the glass door and was greeted kindly by a wave of cold air. It felt so good that she leaned in closer, wanting to climb in and shut the door behind her, lock herself in, bathe in the frigidity.

Recalling the significance of the moment, Delta resumed her haste. She snagged the bottled water, uncapped it, and refreshed her innards with the cold sustenance. Hydration was key after everything she'd experienced but it taking place out here made all the difference even worse. Cold hydration, the best. She figured these people wouldn't mind if she started drinking it and then paid at the front. Before she went up there though she hunted down the main snacks aisle, past the one with bagged chips. She took a Snickers, then spotted a Kit-Kat. For some reason that truly got her stomach going. So she added it to her fist and began picking the wrapper apart in her full hands.

The second the chocolate-covered wafer hit her tongue it was like the world around her didn't exist. A swig of cold Aquafina later and the fires were put out.

A temporary fix, a fix nonetheless.

She finished the Kit-Kat, kept the wrapper to pay, and licked the mess from her lips. She traded the Snickers for a short-stack Pringles can and shuffled toward the front of the store, both hands occupied. Before she arrived, she heard the two casually dressed clerks discussing the ambiguity of Delta's presence and identity—namely because she didn't have a car, at least not visibly outside.

Delta realized that the big rig wreck wasn't visible from here. Not a single flame it had sparked, or else the result would've been impossible to miss.

Not sure how she'd go about answering any questions regarding her identity or journey here without giving the straight truth, Delta decided to just wing it. She started to walk out of the aisle and into the open some fifteen feet behind them—they

were opposite the counter, glued to the glass windows and peering outside still—but barely got so far. A shrill howl shattered the docility inside the store, and threatened to do the same to the glass.

Delta reeled, sneakers scuffing the tile.

As she rebounded off an aisle and maintained her footing, Bianca wailed just as stridently while Daniel yelled under his breath. She could barely hear him running just before the crash of glass and skittering of claws across what Delta assumed was the front counter. Bianca's screeching persisted as if she were getting paid to scream.

And in turn scramble Delta's brain.

When she rose to survey the scene above the top of the aisle, her heart skipped a beat. Maybe five.

More of those smallish crab-walking creatures had breached the store. One of them had scaled the counter and was in pursuit of Daniel. These appeared somewhat smaller than the ones she'd encountered earlier by the truck. And under the stanch fluorescence they were a sleek, impeccable, oil-like black. Only a faint white glint in their still-black eyes could be seen if one really trained their gaze on their already appalling faces.

Delta dropped her Aquafina and Pringles. The latter crashed open at her feet. The prior didn't burst. Delta didn't see any of this as fun, but in a distant universe the Pringles catchphrase could be applied here.

She drew her eight-shot snub-nosed revolver like a beautiful, busty, leggy version of Clint Eastwood. She fired at the nearest creature as it pounced on Daniel, who'd slipped across the tile just in front of her aisle. The creature's left abdomen greeted the .357 Magnum slug before its right side granted it exit. Translucent blood splashed the floor.

Cleanup on aisle six.

Delta fired again and again the revolver kicked like a pissed-off stallion. It roared something fierce, too, and had the bite of a rabid hyena. This time the creature, which tackled

Daniel on the floor, couldn't help but lose its head. The already deranged skull exploded with a spray of gore and brain matter. Its corpse went limp on top of the bruised but otherwise unscathed Daniel, who was in tears.

A whole lot more could be said in regards to Bianca.

Delta stepped out into the open, one sneaker crushing the Pringles can while the other narrowly missed the bottled water. That would have been tragic.

Instead, she saw the second creature take a swing at a frantically fleeing and bawling Bianca. A blonde ponytail hurtled through the air above her head. Painfully liberated strands showered the counter. The still intact Bianca clumsily vaulted the counter, banging her knee on a ledge and crying out. She fell down, cushioned poorly by a waist-high chewing gum display. Wrigley's and Big Red's scattered across the tile, along with a sprawled Bianca. Her bruises were more to count than Daniel's, and her fear now greater.

Given, this was before she saw Delta's looming figure.

The second creature rose above the counter to meet Bianca on the floor, where customers would normally stand, but was instead greeted by its fate. Delta put one high in its chest and another below its horrid chin. Pale, gelatinous gore splashed the counter, but its corpse landed on top of Bianca's legs. She started whining and crying more as she kicked her way to her feet.

Delta rushed forward to help her.

Bianca's mascara was smeared down her face from the tears, her pretty ponytail a split stump, and her limbs shakier than an active chainsaw blade.

"C'mere," Delta tried to play the comforting role, hooking her left arm around Bianca's arms and back. She held the girl close to her. Bianca was easily four inches shorter.

However old she was, Bianca let it all out. She buried her face between Delta's left shoulder and breast, sobbing intensely yet quietly now that the threat was neutralized.

Or was it?

Daniel helped confirm. First he thanked Delta, calling her ma'am, the only name he knew. And then he screamed and then he howled and then Delta saw his head roll across the floor about ten feet to her right. It was a gruesome tumbleweed with whiteout eyes and frozen-agape jaws. The ragged, bloody stump below the chin made the sight even worse, trailing a small macabre fountain.

"Don't look," Delta mumbled.

She was sort of talking to Bianca, who looked anyway out of impulse, and half telling herself—as if she could help it. Either of them.

When Bianca's eyes locked onto the sight of her coworker's—perhaps he'd been more than that to her—decapitated head tumbling to a stop at the far end of the counter, she lost it. She lost it all. Her nuts and bolts, her marbles, her everything. She panicked and pushed away from Delta screaming. The sound made Delta's own throat hurt. She called out after the fleeing girl and wasn't sure where to put her focus.

Then the glass double-door entrance to the gas station store erupted in a shower of glass shards. Gobbets of blood included, although the crashing arrival of the creature was so chaotic that Delta couldn't tell exactly how Bianca died.

Just that she had, and was no longer here.

Delta swallowed the bile and repressed the tears. She didn't know the girl, didn't know Daniel. He could be a murdering rapist and she could be a stealing drug-running whore that liked to eat raccoons for desert but it didn't really matter because the heart felt what the heart felt and now Delta knew she had only herself to protect yet again.

She wasn't going to lose this battle, either.

Delta screamed unintelligibly and fired at the creature that had irrevocably replaced the front entrance to the small store. After all the red mist and glass pieces cleared, she saw that she was shooting at—what had killed Bianca and now threatened to devour her existence, too.

It was Stiletto's killer.

The tall, lanky, lumbering yet startlingly lithe creature of the night. With that droopy humanoid face, bottomless pits for eyes and a yawning abyss of a mouth. Except under the fluorescence here it wasn't pale and blemished, it was neither gray nor white. It was a smooth onyx black with a wet sheen to it and not a single flaw.

It was evil itself.

Delta's conscience insisted that it was, at least. And that was all she needed to go on.

She emptied the Smith & Wesson's cylinder into the disturbingly inert creature's body, then found herself fleeing toward the back of the store. She dropped the now useless revolver to the tile, and drew her Ruger P-90 before it fell from her shorts. She almost dropped it, too, as she skidded around an aisle and tripped on her damn Aquafina.

She caught herself on the aisle and heard the creature howl from where it remained in the entrance. Delta's brain scrambled, but not just from the noise. This was difference. This was signal interference, conscious disruption. A grimacing groan escaped her face as she scrambled for the back door. A sign said 'employees only.' A sign in her head said 'fuck that.' She barreled through the door, which fortunately hadn't been locked, and turbulently tripped over a 'caution – wet floor' sign. The floor was thankfully dried by now but the sign's interruption hadn't helped.

When her tunnel vision ended at the emergency exit door in the back, so did her escape plan. She pushed it open without significantly slowing down and stumbled outside. The crisp Nebraskan night air took her back in its clammy arms.

Delta growled through clamped teeth, nostrils flaring.

She stopped to catch her breath, but didn't have the luxury of a yoga break. She remembered—how could she not?—the Zebala leaning up against the trash bin by the front entrance.

"Aw, shit," she exhaled, hoping to high heavens that it hadn't been discarded to the night or somehow destroyed upon that creature's entrance.

And what was she hitting when she shot into it?

It had barely moved, barely flinched. And now it didn't pursue her? Strange enough, to make these strange matters more or less worse.

Perhaps she's killed it, managed a headshot and not noticed it. Now there was some good fortune that she's been missing out on as of late.

When Delta turned the corner she caught a glimpse of the creature just now making its move—further into the convenience store. She mused how dumb it could be, but didn't dwell on the matter. She snuck forward and instantly began searching for the shotgun, focus narrowing on the knocked-aside trash bin now lying by a gas pump. A few feet from the main portion of debris where the front doors had been was her treasure.

A morsel of good luck would have to do.

Her eyes locked onto the shotgun and soon her hands did, too. The instant her fingertips graced its surface was when she loomed out into the open and the fluorescence from inside the place washed over her. In the next nanosecond that same white radiance was eclipsed by something large and inside the store.

The lanky monster lunged at her in the next instant.

Delta reeled backward as one of its long-clawed arms outstretched to lash at her. It missed her skin by mere inches, instead ripping through the upper chest of her tanktop. A shoulder strap tore but didn't break free. Delta fired the shotgun from the hip as she fell backward, all occurring in the same blur of a moment.

The shotgun's left barrel boomed, belching a broad cluster of 12-gauge buckshot into the creature's chest. This time it did flinch, this time it did groan. It recoiled a single pace, its terrible voice lilting.

Delta gripped her own pain as she fell backwards into a pump, bruising her left elbow on a nozzle handle before sliding down. Her rump struck concrete but her legs extended just in time to slow her fall. Nevertheless bruised, Delta was alive and as far as she was aware not bleeding.

She emptied the Zebala's other barrel into the creature's face this time, after taking a heartbeat to properly aim. She absorbed the weapon's recoil and watched through a muzzle flash the creature's face spew pasty blood into the air. It howled and windmilled backward. Claws scraped floor and ceiling as it stumbled back through the convenience store's ruptured threshold.

Again, she now held a useless weapon. With no spare shells, considering her lack of care and attention when she initially snagged the two weapons from Bobby's postmortem possession, the Zebala became no more than a prop. She tossed it and didn't bother investigating to confirm the death of her enemy—she just wanted to *leave*. Reach civilization and hope, pray, for the best.

Unfortunately, when she reached the other side of the gas station convenience store, she found that the single station wagon parked there was SOL. Its hood was completely gone and the entrails of its engine compartment strewn about in sloppy chunks and strands. Delta cursed under her breath and threw her gaze about in a storm of furious panic.

There. A bicycle, leaning up against the building by a water heater.

"It'll have to do," she shrugged to herself, and felt a sudden breeze brush across her face. Across her chest, cleavage now exposed through jagged strips of her partially torn tanktop. The air felt good.

The situation did not.

Did she know how to ride a bike?

She hoped so. She certainly knew how to do a whole lot of other shit...

And off into the night she went, putting the gas station and its terrible chain of events into her proverbial rearview. Out ahead of her, meanwhile, expanded and gradually contracted the distant K-Mart. She could see its half-flickering colossal sign better than the Exxon's earlier, and surely she was even further away. Regardless, it was there and it called her name, like a

cheap pack of cigarettes to a non-smoker dying to try something new.

Delta wanted the safe haven that she figured this K-Mart could act as, and wanted to be in a crowd of regular people again. Or as regular as this damned place offered. She wanted an outlet from this disarray, even if she was an apt candidate for surviving it. Most of all, she wanted peace and quiet.

She didn't imagine, however close to town it was, that this 24-hour K-Mart was a bustling-with-activity location, even when it was at its busiest. Instead she pictured the place to be a graveyard, dead people moseying around with intact faces and sagging expressions of fatigue, plighted with austere boredom.

Zombies, without the whole flesh-eating characteristic.

And being literally the reanimations of death.

Even so, Delta was eager to reach the K-Mart. She'd get herself some real sustenance, and probably a new top now that this one was nearly gutted. She just didn't want to risk having the same done to herself in the process.

Would the larger creature, supposing it had survived those brutal shots, pursue her into the border town K-Mart? Surely the megastore sold weapons, for hunting and the like. Certainly not for around here, at least not for many more miles to venture elsewhere. However, Delta's limited knowledge gave her some reassurances.

While all of these things roiled through her mind, her eyes maintained a constant lookout. Like a lighthouse sweeping its beam in a crescentic motion without missing a single detail of her environment.

And then she spotted the smoke. Heard the first scream.

The K-Mart might not have been such a busy place, but it definitely was far from empty. As he neared, she wished it had been. Because this—this was too much.

4

Where in the flying rat-hell did these monstrosities come from? Surely they couldn't all be from those two ships. The small ones, a very farfetched maybe. But the larger, upright specimens overwhelmed that option based strictly on size. Perhaps they were so flexible they could fold into just the right compartment, become one with the machine, operate it via pockets in its structure. These possibilities were meager theories drifting about in Delta's returning storm of a conscience.

The column of dark gray smoke rose from a destroyed car in the parking lot, which was splotted with occupants.

Vehicular and pedestrian alike, although not many.

The first scream, Delta couldn't have pinned its source, but quickly following that one rose to the moon a series of others. They ranged from children to adult men and women, a Ludacris plethora of all three. The few elderly and handicapped present never had a chance to utter even the minutest scream.

Delta's stomach tightened.

Her stolen bicycle swung around to the right side of the secluded K-Mart, hugging the border of the lot beyond the edge of lampposts' casted luminance. Some nearer the center of the vast parking lot had even been toppled, one having crushed a car beneath it. Wire shopping carts were strewn about the place,

occasionally little more than twisted metal, but not as commonplace as the corpses. Delta tried to keep her eyes off the carnage that had already wrecked the poor K-Mart lot and its denizens. She guessed that many had been inside during the attack, from whichever angle it had hit them.

And what fucking angle was that?

Delta could begin to understand the origin of these creatures, that is, besides space. The great wide open of black and deep blue and crystalline stars and gas giants. Aside from that obvious chunk of information assumption, she couldn't force herself to believe that they *all* came from those two ships so many miles back...

Perhaps there were *more*—ships, that being, which had crashed even closer to here. But how many?

Delta mused ever so briefly that these pitiless creatures had been planning to land here and begin their small-town invasion of destruction but were not without their own imbeciles. The two idiots, intoxicated or high off their flying asses even, had inadvertently driven their aircraft into the dirt during Operation Touchdown.

This obscurely humorous notion lasted but a couple of seconds, the most it could given the circumstances.

Riding the bicycle all this way with the Ruger stuck into the back of her shorts was too risky of it falling out or giving her an enema. So instead she stuffed it into the front, making for an even stranger situation, although when leaning forward it kept it from coming loose. Beyond discomfort, grouped with panic and terror, Delta was all the more urgent to reach the shelter that K-Mart provided.

Even if it was infested with alien creatures...

She got to the 'pharmacy' corner of the white-stone building when one of the upright creature pirouetted to face her direction. It lazily lifted its left arm to point at her as if the thing was sleepwalking, followed by that agape howl which effortlessly stretched across the few hundred feet between them—and chilled Delta's bones down to the marrow. Her skin

crawled from a million icy fingertips and she resumed biking, having just frozen in a state of shocked awe from the creature's acknowledgment.

Its *calling* to the other ones...

These crab-walking, skulking monstrosities skittered across the parking lot toward that corner of the megastore. Some of them leapt clean over small cars, others treating them and shopping carts like obstructions on an obstacle course. One of them even tumbled with a cart, having tripped itself up. The others hissed and screeched, toothy jaws snapping and salivating in anticipation of reaching Delta.

They would have a field day with her corpse—

Delta figured they'd probably even manage to keep her alive while they dismembered and eviscerated her poor body, at their disposal and absence of mercy. After everything they had been through just to get a piece of her, or so it seemed to Delta, she didn't see these theories as being very farfetched or pessimistic. Just the same, she was beyond intent on changing said abysmal future for the better.

At least to the point of survival outside their clutches.

Around the corner she biked, and was all of a sudden impeded by a tall man with a scraggly goatee and large switchblade. He was yelling at her, frenzied and out of his mind. She ground to a stop without second thought, but immediately regretted doing so. The man didn't take a second look at her all the same, instead shouldering her off the bicycle seat and jerking it to fit himself. As Delta stumbled to not only right herself but catch her falling Ruger that he clearly didn't see, the man wearing a tattered red flannel shirt and jeans wobbly fled the scene on her bike.

Well, her stolen bike.

Now there's a town bicycle—so many people had ridden it, and its usage might just be on a roundtrip.

It was a vicious circle.

Delta wasn't going to fret too much over it; she figured that this place sold bikes as well. Besides, she was here—the

man had probably come from the emergency exit door flapping open to her left. No alarm rang through the air, however; its system had probably been destroyed. By the aliens? Or simply disrupted by their telekinetic powers? Delta was only guessing, conjuring the most random and ridiculous theories possible in the confines of her brain.

Regardless, she didn't hesitate any more than she already had. The commotion of encroaching quadrupedal creatures propelled her through the doorway, which she slammed shut behind her. It secured with a metallic clang and brief beep. She backed away from it, Ruger in her right hand and safety indefinitely disarmed. Her eyes were wide. When the door started banging and rattling, she narrowed her eyes, spun on her heels, and began cautiously venturing into the store. She eventually emerged into a long white-walled corridor that led to the secluded bathrooms in this wing of the building.

For a temporary respite she decided to go there.

Into the women's bathroom she burst, only to find something that made her taste bile.

One of those quadrupedal creatures was four-legged squatting over the remains of a woman's corpse. At least, Delta thought it was a woman—it was difficult to tell at this point, considering the severity of the mutilations. The creature was feasting and toying with the fleshy rubble.

Upon Delta's entrance it lazily looked up at her.

Considering her shock, dismay, and utter repulsion, Delta acted very impressively. She jerked the Ruger up with both sweaty hands latched onto the grip and one forefinger curled around the trigger. She pumped round after round into the creature's face, until a cheek burst all over the floor and it rolled onto its back.

The atrocity twitched twice before going stiff.

Almost like a dead spider its legs curled up and hooked inward. It didn't move anymore after that.

Delta didn't bother with any of the stalls. She vomited into the nearest sink, barely reaching it before retching onto the

counter, too. It wasn't much, considering her empty stomach, making the pain even greater. Her throat felt hoarse, like the duct to a landslide. When she was done, three times she rinsed and spat sinkwater, using paper towels to clean her face, before calling quits on the bathroom. She put the macabre scene behind her and shakily exited. She straightened herself out, complete with a few deep breaths, prior to resuming her path down the corridor...

And, eventually, into the actual store.

This path opened up into the west wing of the building, featuring wide open spaces of white tile and high arched ceilings. The K-Mart was one level, but it was vast to say the least. Considering the location, it surprised her a bit.

Fortunately she could get some sustenance in this area of the store—the pharmacy department. There were a couple of aisles preceding the currently gated-off pharmacy counter, with signs above them denoting health-based provisions. Vitamin supplements, protein bars and shakes, the like.

Delta made a vigilant beeline for the latter.

She practically tore off the cap to a Muscle Milk and downed half of it in a flash. Her stomach lurched but settled quickly. Frenzied with an empty stomach and the availability to choose freely without penalty, Delta became a crackhead of protein-enhanced sustenance. She devoured an Atkins bar that tasted like cardboard and stale Reese's as if it were the richest Godiva she'd ever savored. Wrappers littered the floor at her feet. She killed the rest of the Muscle Milk and yet felt parched. She shifty-eyed the bottle and froze on the caption 'contains no milk.'

She cocked an eyebrow, shrugged, and tossed it.

The empty bottled struck the floor several feet behind her and bounced across the expanse of vacant floor.

Delta spotted a 24-pack of bottled Deer Park at the end of the aisle on the floor. She whimsically snagged a dark chocolate Zone protein bar en route to the corner, managing to rip the wrapper off with both free hands—where'd she put the gun? The

thought evaporated from her brain the instant she reached the water. She singlehandedly tore a single bottle free from its clear plastic casewrap and nearly broke her teeth on the cap, trying to open it without releasing the protein bar.

“Hands up!” a woman’s voice startled her.

Delta, taken by surprise on so many levels, jumped back. The plastic cap sprang from the bottle and struck her upper gum, inducing a quick pain. She ignored it. She couldn’t as easily ignore the spurt of water from the bottle that splashed her chin and chest in the same instant. Then the bottle hit the floor and Deer Park became Deer Aisle, puddling at the toes of Delta’s sneakers.

“I said,” the woman’s voice strengthened, “put your hands *up*. Now!”

Delta raised her hands with a jerk.

“Okay. Now, turn around. One-eighty.”

Delta slowly revolved to face the other entrance of the aisle that she occupied. Well, now she’d just about exited it, presently putting her back to the gated pharmacy counter. At this far end of the aisle stood the source of the woman’s voice, holding her gunpoint, both hands on a black Heckler & Koch USP. The pistol had a laser-sight fixed beneath the match-grade barrel. Delta, despite finding it hard to take her eyes off the bafflingly attractive woman, slowly looked down at her now damp chest; she wasn’t soaking per se, but her already torn white tanktop wasn’t making things easier. Given, the water felt great—cooling, soothing. But it wasn’t her preference given the situation.

Just below her breasts, focused on her clothed stomach, hovered the ruby dot from the laser-sight.

When Delta looked back up, it was clear that the woman had significantly lowered her pistol. Nonetheless, it remained in both hands of hers, slowly dropping its aim every five seconds.

“What’s your name?” the woman asked.

“Why the hell do you care, even at a time like this?”

“I care *especially* at a time like this.”

The young woman didn't relent her austere expression and rigid stance. She couldn't be a day over thirty, although she looked potentially 25 or even younger, with pallid skin—not as light as Delta's, though—and long black hair currently ponytailed. Her face was strikingly beautiful, there was no better word for it. Acute, catlike eyes under thin brows and turquoise eye shadow. Penetrating hazel irises. A small but full-lipped mouth. Petite, with a side of subtle brawn less noticeable than Delta's. her voice alone was that of a college girl's, although a lick of strength to it pulled through well enough to convince Delta otherwise.

Physically, the woman appeared to have minute curves.

Attire-wise, Delta felt it obvious that she was a cop. Or...something else.

She wore a snug black ballistic vest with a single front zipper along a yellow seam. It was sleeveless and slightly cropped, exposing her lower midriff, from an unadorned navel down to the top of her hips. Here she donned a pair of field pants that were skintight but not without their own protection, probably Kevlar. A belt thinner than her own small wrists secured the pants as if they needed additional fastening. Patches of Kevlar or whatever similar material were here and there on her outfit; one along her high collar, one over each moderate bump that were her breasts, one over the triangular portion of her pubis, one per knee, and Delta assumed a pair for her buttocks at this rate.

As much sex appeal as this woman had, Delta felt confused. Was she here to model, shoot an adult film, or arrest people?

Although Delta was already getting the impression that the woman wasn't police. Law, certainly. Just not in the general sense.

"My name's Delta," she finally said with a sigh. She dropped her hands, however, and relaxed the muscles in her body. She doubted this chick was going to pop her because of it. She loosened her fist around the Zone protein bar and took a

bite. The woman lowered her aim, both hands still applied, as if she still intended on sustaining the threat. Delta swallowed and added: “But that’s just about all I can tell ya. So far as *I’m* concerned. But those things out there...assuming you’re aware...that’s a whole other story.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“*What?*” Delta said confusedly, tilting her head and furrowing her brow.

“I’ll...explain later. Delta.” The woman took a breath and lowered her USP to her right side in that hand only now. She gingerly approached Delta. “My name’s Aricia Petrakis. I’m sorry for startling you, but I had to make sure you wouldn’t reach for your gun.”

Just then Delta realized it wasn’t even within reach. It was halfway down the aisle, just now being passed by this mystery Aricia—who scooped it up then—and felt disappointed in herself.

“Nice gun, by the way. And don’t worry...I’m not the police. Here.” Aricia handed the weapon to her, grip-first. The safety was armed. Delta barely noticed as she took it from her and checked the magazine. Still good, but only halfway. According to her pockets, it was the last one in her possession. Delta mumbled gratitude as Aricia stopped less than four feet away. They both smelled of sweat, Delta clearly much more. Aricia sighed and spoke again, this time really seizing Delta’s attention. “I’m a field operative, covert infiltration and reconnaissance, for Div-9. Before you ask, it’s a confidential branch of government established in 1947 under DARPA.”

“This doesn’t mean much, since I have scattered amnesia,” Delta said, nonetheless sounding and looking the surprised role well, “but I’ve never heard of it. And, lemme guess—that’s ‘cause *it doesn’t exist*.”

“You’re smart, which is good. Because we’re pairing up to get you out of this.”

“Um...get *me* out of this? I appreciate the helping hand and additional gun, lady, but what about the other people ‘round

here? I just saw a fucking woman's corpse being *devoured* by one of those horrendous monstrosities—”

“Hey, look, I have my orders. I understand the chaos here, we've encountered similar cases. Nothing...nothing quite as overwhelming as this, but...”

“Feel free to clarify sometime in the near future, *Aricia*. But, personally, I don't care right now. I just want to live a few more hours at best to get me some answers in a place that's not teeming with living nightmares. You feel me?”

Aricia swallowed and sized up Delta. “Sure.”

Delta saw it, then, in the woman's eyes. Attraction? It reminded her of poor Bianca back at the Exxon. Except this was something stronger, and yet stranger. There was a glint of fear in them, blended roughly with a pulsing curiosity and lingering doubt.

What the fuck was going on around here, indeed.

“Good. Is that gun all you have?” Delta asked.

“Not quite.” Aricia, still holding the USP at her side, reached halfway behind her and drew from a thigh-rigged sheath a tactical combat knife. She wielded it in her right hand, by its multi-grooved black handle. It had a sleek appearance, especially the Kukri-machete styled sawback blade. “Full-tang MTech tactical, with Kydex sheath. Seven-inch carbon steel blade.”

Delta nodded, mildly impressed.

Then she shrugged, as if it had meant nothing, and carried the same demeanor in her voice.

“No offense, but I've dealt with a few of these bastards already...several smaller ones, which are easier to kill, but the tall and lanky ones take forever. I've...I've only seen two of those before coming here, the first one wrecked my car a little over an hour ago and got away. The second I'm sure I killed back at an Exxon about a mile down the road. Took a hell of a lot, though...and I'm talking buckshot, point-blank range, but seven inches of steel.”

“Hm, well...can't say that I'm not impressed, but...you'd be surprised how well I can handle even the worst

kind of hostiles with this thing. She's my eviscerator, my de-throater."

Delta tilted her head and raised her eyebrows in one gesture. However, she still wasn't convinced.

"We'll see about that. I was just hoping for some heavier hardware. You're this top secret government agent coming to...what, investigate a distress call on some small town, and all you've got is a .45 and seven-incher?" Delta shook her head, racked the slide on her own Ruger .45, and sighed disappointedly. "I really don't know what else to say."

"Look here," Aricia said, standing her ground better than Delta had expected and taking a step forward to try staring her down, "I know more about this situation than you could begin to imagine. And I'd be more than glad to indulge you, but only once we've set up shop someplace better...more fortified, safer. Now, I was sent here *personally* to eliminate potential threats in the area after Div-9's surveillance reported the strong presence of EBT hormones in the area. Now, before you ask, the residential town of Pender just up the road is safe and secure. I haven't come entirely alone. But this—this is my specialty. Now, I know I might not look it, but it's what I do best. Insert, seize, extract. Simple. However, when I came in it became clear that there were far more threats than we realized. I've requested an air-drop of supplies should it come before actual extraction is possible. To facilitate my infiltration, I ditched my other two weapons—an assault rifle and PDW sub—in the main breakroom about five minutes away from here. This is where we'll head, and barricade ourselves in so that I can—"

A strange squawking sound caught Aricia's attention.

Delta frantically looked around, but hesitated to follow Aricia as she turned to reach the end of the aisle. Aricia suddenly dropped to her knee, elbows locked, both hands on her pistol. She'd since sheathed her knife. By the time Delta arrived to tower over her from behind, Aricia had already fired three rapidly successive shots. The result had driven the crab-walking creature's ruined face into the tile floor, where it slid a few feet

before stopping in its own brain puddle.

“You’re...a good shot,” Delta mustered.

Aricia turned with a bolt of motion, pirouetting stiffly to face Delta. They were so close they nearly bumped chins. Aricia wasn’t quite as tall as Delta, but for those few inches she substituted an insinuating brawn and austerity in carriage. Her gaze was no different, which required a lot of sincerity given her beauty.

“I get it. You don’t respect my role in this matter. But considering everything, I think you really ought to, or else you’re not going to make it out there. No without me. And I’m not belittling your capabilities...*trust me*, I’m well aware of them. But we have to stick together. Understand?”

“Yes ma’am,” Delta said, albeit after a tense moment of contemplation regarding her words.

Namely, the insinuation that Aricia knew more about Delta than she stated, leaving even more unanswered questions abound. And, to that effect, suggesting that Aricia had come here strictly for Delta—a possibility that struck Delta as the strangest yet.

“Glad you accord,” Aricia said, cracking a partial smile that only the studious of eyes could catch. Delta certainly had. And then Aricia turned her back and held her USP in both hands, elbows locked, muzzle pointed to the ground. “Just stay close...but not too close. Don’t wanna be bumping into each other, or have you stepping on my heels. Keep your eyes on *everything*. When we come to a corner, I’ll wait for you to gently squeeze my left shoulder to know that you’re ready to navigate it and move on. How are you on all of that?”

“Solid.”

“Okay, good. And how much ammunition do you have left?” Aricia asked, already inching forward.

“Last mag.”

Aricia exhaled out her nostrils. “Not so good...well, only shoot if you know you can hit—and only if it’s not directly in front of us. I’ll take care of those. Also, be as quiet as possible.”

“That’s a, uh, affirmative on all of that, but...I don’t think sound has much to do with it. As much as I genuinely hate admitting this, but I believe they might work off of people’s scents—possibly, especially mine. They seem to have been tracking me for some time now, ever since I witnessed their two ships wreck in the fields about an hour and half ago.”

Delta wasn’t sure if it had been longer. Two at the most.

“Wait.” Aricia stopped all of a sudden. She turned to face Delta, only a few feet away. “You *witnessed* them crash? How many?”

“Two discus-shaped aircraft. Like...saucers...um, down the highway like I said about an hour and a half ago. There was, this, dark lightning and a thunder, then they just—plummeted. One of them was banged up pretty good. The other had lodged into the ground. Not long after, I witnessed from afar one of them wreck my car. It was a tall one. Big, lanky, strong. Pale skin, dark eyes.”

“Discoloration occurs in strong contrast of light,” Aricia said as if she were a verbal dictionary.

“Pardon?”

“Their epidermis. Skin. To the naked human eye they undergo strong contrast discoloration under alternating spectrums of light. In the dark, they appear a blemished white-gray. When covered or even dappled with light, be it natural or artificial, they appear a slick black—smooth, shiny sometimes, and flawless. Div-9 still doesn’t know their natural color. We really know nothing of their home, nor may we ever.

“And as far as scent goes,” she continued, speaking as fast as an assault rifle, “we needn’t worry much—hence my limited arsenal right now. I’ve ingested a repellant in pill form that actually disrupts their neurological sensors they use to ‘sniff out’ their prey. I’ll elaborate later, but just so you know, it gives us a form of camouflage. We just need to slink our way back to the breakroom without being *spotted*, because that jeopardizes everything, seeing as how they aren’t blind. Sound is of little concern. They aren’t deaf, but their sense of hearing is half that

of a human's."

"Then how did that little freak find us here?"

"It's called curiosity. Exploration. Restlessness. The tall ones get lazy and go dormant like idle sleepwalkers after several minutes of inactivity in an otherwise 'hot' zone, like this place has become. Sadly enough, I don't think that there are many survivors left...hopefully some have managed to escape...so, that being said, leaves us nearly on our own. More or less better that way; they'll become less of a threat so long as we don't alert them to our presence, they'll just be lingering 'til they decide to move on. The smaller ones, however...we call 'em EBT Stage-One's, seeing as how they're asexual offspring of the Stage-Two's, the taller ones that is...they're not as subjected to indolence. They get restless as hell, start rummaging about looking for...anything, really. To eat, to kill, to toy with. So...we worry about them more than the Stage-Two's, for once."

Delta nodded, imbibing all of the information like a keg of vodka without a tap.

"Stage-Two's," she said then out of pensiveness. "Is...is there anything higher than that?"

"Stage-Three's? Yes. I'll get to that later. We shouldn't have to worry about them right now. If they were present, Div-9 would know, and there'd be more than just me and the perimeter group in Pender."

Delta nodded—she'd accept that, for now.

"So," Aricia sighed, "unless you've got any other questions that can't wait five to ten minutes, I'd suggest we get moving. And follow my advice to the letter."

"Ready when you are."

Aricia nodded, their eyes bridging briefly before her back turned and she proceeded to lead Delta onward.

The power was still running for the K-Mart, fluorescent fixtures hung high emanating their substantial light. However, most of them were either damaged or flickering in and out. This resulted in a menagerie of shadows thrown onto the walls, which

were a show of beige drywall and white tiling. The floor tiling was off-white and pale gray-blue in a broad checkering pattern.

Wherever a small puddle of blood could be spotted hinted at the past or present company of those creatures—probably Stage-One’s, according to Aricia. They were by far the most abundant at this location, and tended to relocate constantly.

The two armed women traversed the small food court like a pair of crumbs carried by the gentlest of breezes.

It was past one in the morning, so business had been generally slow. During a weekend midday this place would’ve been littered with corpses from indiscriminate killing. More than just Cinnabon wrappers would’ve scattered about, and the smell could never be described as savory ever again. Some odors you could just never wash out, especially that foul reek of bloodshed and death.

The creatures themselves carried their own stench to boot. Delta had grown painfully accustomed to this, although here that stink was simply overwhelming. She could’ve never anticipated this many creatures; she still wanted to ask where they came from, *where* and *why*, it seemed most important.

She hoped to live long enough to reach this safe haven of a mundane breakroom that Aricia spoke of.

They reached the far end of the fairly small food court when they got to the open entrance of the women’s clothing department. Aricia hugged the square corner of the wall leading into it, and paused. She peered out to survey, ultimately spotting two of the taller creatures just meandering about on sluggish legs. Idle sleepwalkers indeed. However, around them scurried three Stage-One’s, their bulbous cheeks swelling with every breath while bloodied saliva strung gelatinously from their jaws.

Every now and then one of the Stage-One’s would knock over a four-way clothing hangar or table display and draw the attention of the big ones for a brevity. This small window of time would allow Aricia and Delta to proceed at a safer rate through the department; Aricia relayed this to Delta, adding that the breakroom was down a series of hallways at the far opposite

end—she indicated via the dressing room sign. It was large and well adorned, hanging from the high ceiling roughly four-hundred feet from where they stood. According to Aricia, the mouth of the hallway leading to the breakroom was just to the right of that, however currently blocked by a mannequin display she'd formed herself.

"That's good work," Delta murmured behind Aricia.

"Thanks." Aricia didn't turn around when she spoke. Her voice was incredibly low, despite what she'd mentioned earlier regarding the minimal effect of sound on the creatures' alertness. Nonetheless, Delta remained considerably quiet as well—basic habit, or impulse, under intense and frightening situations, she supposed. A factor of human emotion and thought process, indubitably.

This vaguely helped comfort Delta.

With a deep breath, she gently squeezed Aricia's left shoulder as per her directions earlier.

Aricia edged out like a panther prowling the jungle in hunt of its prey—or home. Shelter, from a fiercer hunter, if there ever was one. And yet, despite this abstract form of cowardice, the animal's innate cunning and sleek cadence was not surrendered.

Delta could tell.

She even felt like a remora to Aricia's covert rhythm, her almost serpentine movement through the department, from wall to wall and clothing hangar to clothing hangar. Every now and then they paused when the creatures' attention wafted over the department like a wave of holographic light—it carried the illusion of substance, but there was only the threat of it. And then another source of sound would be knocked over when a Stage-One collided with it, yet again drawing the Stage-Two's back to a false alarm. This constant yet facilitating shift of focus from the enemy allowed for gradual progress through the department without detection.

They were more than halfway there when a man's raucous scream splintered the long-since placid air. And then

another cry, this one a woman's. The lot of the creatures occupying the department quickly shuffled that way, the Stage-One's scurrying much faster, while the Stage-One's moved like charging silverbacks. Under the lighting here they all shared a disturbingly sleek black look, giving them the appearance of oil-spill mutants trying to fit into society, but incapable of slating their voracity.

Such creatures could *never* fit into this world.

The thought bounced around in Delta's head as they were given an even wider window of safe travel. So they changed their scuffling to roadie-running from one form of cover to another, still trying to maintain a sense of clandestine movement *just in case*—

They reached the socks section, just before the undergarments sub-department, when a Stage-One came barreling through a mannequin display ten feet behind Delta. The female mannequin split in more ways than one and came tumbling down through a hooked sock display just to the right of Delta and Aricia. One of the mannequin's severed arms struck Delta in the back right shoulder, bruising and knocking her off balance. She stumbled into another display, where a hook caught a portion of her ripped tanktop; her fall broke its limit, tearing the chest of the shirt wide open. As she struggled to get up, the flayed tanktop dangling from her right shoulder in one long tattered rag, Aricia engaged the enemy. Her pistol fired three well-placed, spaced-apart shots; she never missed. And as Delta came to, regaining her bearings, she intended on helping Aricia finish the creature off.

This was when another shrill growl caught Delta's attention to her left. She spun just in time to duck and completely dodge the punching Stage-One. It hurtled over her head, campfire hair forming a beautiful wave of crimson through the air as she righted herself.

Delta heard a final, definitive gunshot following a squeal of pain to her far left, not given sufficient freedom to actually watch Aricia execute the Stage-One.

She was too busy dealing with her own.

Fortunately for Delta, the creature hadn't landed properly, having crashed through a wooden clothing display. Women's lingerie draped its horrendous body as it burst through shards of wood to right itself.

She tore herself free from the shredded tanktop to completely liberate her movement. She aimed with both hands and thumbed the safety off an instant before squeezing the trigger. The pistol barked and .45-caliber rounds punched into the creature's haphazard body. Translucent, viscous blood splattered the floor and clothing around it. It began trip-charging toward her, but she held her ground, firing round after round until one tore off a chunk from its forehead. Skull fragments and brain matter sprayed through the air the second before it hit the floor in a gruesome heap.

Not even so much as a twitch—she'd killed it.

"Well, then," Aricia sighed, startling Delta that she was standing right there. "Looks like you can take care of yourself. Not a fan of clothes, huh?"

Delta rolled her eyes. "It *ripped*. And my shoulder, back hurt like hell. I fell into that sock rack over there..."

"No broken bones, or bleeding?" Aricia asked, sapped of her previously stern attitude.

"No, mom, I'm okay."

Now it was Aricia who rolled her eyes. "At any rate," she sighed, "I think you should get some new clothes, while we're here at least. Oh yeah—and your bra strap's cut."

Delta hadn't even noticed. It must have happened earlier, at Exxon, if not just now; the strap was still intact on her right shoulder, but the gash in the thin fabric wasn't going to hold up for much longer. She took under consideration their movement, how long they'd be on foot, much less fighting, and of course the weight of her breasts.

"We should hurry, though—those gunshots and the stench of their *dead*, now there's something strong for their olfactory senses." Aricia nodded toward the blockade in front of

the hallway to the right of the dressing rooms. "I suggest you shop *fast*. Best we hurry before they come back to investigate. I'm low on ammo and I can't imagine you have more than a couple of rounds left."

"Yeah, probably three or four at best."

They rushed, albeit vigilantly, into the neighboring lingerie department.

"What size are you?"

"Pardon?"

"Bust."

"Oh. 36DD."

Aricia's eyes flung open.

"You?" Delta asked extraneously.

"Why does it matter?"

Delta and Aricia had been hastily browsing bras with their backs to each other. At this question, however, Delta spun around and forced Aricia to face her. Delta's gaze branded Aricia's skin, as her eyes traced the operative's lips down to her neck and chest.

"Because," Delta said through teeth, "I want to *know*."

Aricia swallowed. "Well...they're 34D."

Delta raised an eyebrow. "Okay, then." She sized her up again then turned back around to browsing. A moment later: "Fuck this. I'm better without one."

"No bra?"

"No need."

"And you're sticking with those shorts?"

"Problem?"

"You should protect your skin. Even a thin layer is better than none. Besides, they go off of our blood like sharks do."

Delta sighed vexingly. "Fine. Grab me a pair of jeggings, if you don't mind. Size four."

"Won't just any—"

"No," Delta shot back. "Deal with my particularization or you'll have to deal with an even grumpier me. Want me to be at my best, comfortable and physically liberated?"

“Um...sure.”

“Then get me what I asked for. *Please.*”

“Fine. Watch your back.”

“Always.”

The two women hastily navigated the women's department like two soldiers in a minefield, cautious about drawing any attention to themselves and always minding their surroundings. Aricia remembered not to let Delta go too far without her company, so that her repellant wouldn't work to its fullest potential. She reminded Delta of this when they finally rejoined, Aricia obviously on faster feet than her new acquaintance.

“We need to *hurry.*”

“Right. And thanks.” Delta slung the navy jeggings Aricia's gotten her over a shoulder while cradling the crumpled sports bra she'd retrieved. Together they moved with haste and vigilance toward the designated hallway. The makeshift barricade was Aricia's own, constructed from mannequin pedestals, clothing displays, steel cross-hangers, and mannequins themselves.

“Time to do some crouch-and-crawling,” Aricia said, indicating that there was no easy way back into the hallway except for a small passage only a human no larger than themselves could get through. As they crouched and crawled through the small tunnel-like gap predetermined in the blockade, Delta's acquired clothing kept getting caught on something. It was annoying, but ultimately they reached the other side without any missteps.

“How far, and how can you be so sure none of 'em have come down this way?”

“Less than a minute's fast-walk, just some twists 'n' turns,” Aricia said. “And trust me, I'm sure. They have no reason to come down here, besides, that blockade's pretty high and still standing. Closer to the breakroom I smeared some cream repellant on the running boards in the hallway, for added security.”

BLACK LIGHTNING & CRIMSON VOICES

Delta admitted through her body language and expression how she was satisfied.

And then Aricia led her down the winding hallways toward a purported safe haven amid this chaos that had erupted in the middle of nowhere.

Except now it wasn't just nowhere.

5

Employees Only. So read the plaque fixed to the front of the heavy white door that led into the breakroom. Among many others, Delta and Aricia broke this law for their own safety. Aricia acted vanguard down the hallways until they had reached the door, which was opposite a men's and women's bathroom. After declining the need to use the toilet or sink, Delta was led into the breakroom by an ever-insistent Aricia Petrakis. Although unlocked, once they entered the room and the door shut quietly behind them, Delta saw that Aricia had MacGyver'd a deadbolt on the inside. The instant Aricia locked it and kicked a wedge under the sill as if it made all the difference, Delta witnessed complete relaxation come over her.

She turned around and sighed with relief.

"Well, aren't you just a big ray of sunshine?" Delta said, sarcasm flying off her tongue. She sized up Aricia, who rolled her eyes and holstered her pistol at long last. Delta placed her own on the provided table, a white rectangle on shabby metal legs up against an equally shabby drywall. To the right of where she stood were two vending machines, one for junk food and the other for bottled beverages.

"I imagine you must be starving, or starched?" Aricia asked. She approached the beverage vending machine.

"Both, actually. I only snagged a bite from the Exxon

earlier. Before, you know, fucking *aliens* attacked us...and killed the two young clerks there.”

Aricia shook her head. “It’s a shame.”

“Oh, and you’d know?” Delta stopped right beside Aricia, glaring at her.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Aricia said without looking to her left where Delta breathed down her neck. She scrutinized the beverage machine a few more seconds before turning her back and walking away from it. As she approached a row of employees’ padlocked lockers on the far wall, her voice continued nonetheless. “Like I said, since ’47 Div-9 has had their hands busy. Given, I’ve only been with them for six years...but that’s damn long enough to have witnessed what I have.”

“Six years?” Delta raised an eyebrow. “How old *are* you, princess?”

Aricia pirouetted like a dancing cobra preparing to strike. Her gaze gave a similar impression.

“As old as I need to be,” she finally said. “And you?”

Delta dropped the mean façade. She shrugged, a hopeless exhalation passing not only her lips but her whole demeanor.

“Hell if I know, to be honest. I’m kind of...amnesiac.”

Aricia nodded. “I know,” she said plainly, her voice and expression void of surprise. She raised a snaky eyebrow and returned to her investigation of the lockers, scouting out those without locks on them; she didn’t hesitate in invading their owners’ privacies.

Delta, taken aback, was speechless at first.

“Um...excuse me?” she finally said.

“Before I crack open the bottle that’ll intoxicate you without a doubt,” Aricia audibly muttered, “how ‘bout you get yourself some food there. I’m finding us some bottled water in the meantime. Don’t wanna use the vending machine, too much—”

A sudden crash sounded behind Aricia. She turned abruptly to see glass shards on the floor by Delta’s feet and a

small jagged hole in the vending machine's pane.

"Noise," Aricia murmured to complete her sentence.

"Woops." Delta shrugged, playing the helpless schoolgirl routine before slapping a bitter expression back onto her face. She unpackaged the peanut butter sandwich crackers with greedy fingers and followed with an all the more voracious maw.

"Well, then...since I ruined your last bottle of water—and I am genuinely sorry about that—I feel that I owe you another." Aricia turned and underhanded a bottled water toward Delta. Delta, 'thinking fast,' managed to catch it through an awkward panic-stance. It cradled in between her left forearm and upper stomach, just beneath her left breast. When she shot the Div-9 agent an incredulous look, Aricia simply smiled and uncapped her own. She downed half of it in the blink of an eye. When she was done, a deep and refreshing breath transpired before she spoke again. "So, what would you like to know?"

"Do I really even have to ask...again?"

"Remember that pill repellant I mentioned earlier?"

"Yeah. It...disrupts their neuro-whatever scent or something like that."

"More or less, right on the nose." Aricia sighed. A solemn aura overcame her. She cut the gap between her and Delta, then advised she sit down for this. Albeit tentative at first, Delta ultimately took a seat on a rickety metallic chair with its back to the table and her knees facing Aricia five feet away. Aricia cleared her throat. "Well," she continued, "it does disrupt the neurological sensors that act as their extensive olfactory senses, however, for my mission it has an even greater purpose. And that is...to block *your* scent, particularly, from them. Because, afterall, you aren't human...not entirely, at least."

Delta's heart sank. Or was it her soul?

"I can't reveal much to you, just the basics, and even then a bit more than I'm authorized. But...you're the fourth abductee that has been returned to Earth since 1947, and let me guess—you have a triangular symbol branded on the back of your neck?"

Delta swallowed a lump in her throat. She nodded speechlessly, her eyes wide and dumbfounded in every sense of the word. She certainly felt stupid.

“Right, well, the others...none of them made it. I really can’t specify, except to say that one of them killed himself not long after he’d supposedly been returned. Div-9 recovered his body and it was determined to have been a mental infrastructural failure on the EBEs’ part. The other three died on the creatures’ own accord, as they were simply inadequate quarry.”

Delta coyly raised her hand, like the new kid in a new school learning new things, among them the fact that she was victim to an alien abduction—if not worse.

“E-B-E’s?” she muttered quizzically. “And...*quarry*?”

“Extraterrestrial Biological Entities, or EBE’s, Div-9’s unofficial tag for these creatures. They are non-communicative, except through their subjects. Abductees, that is. Usually taken during their early childhoods, typically orphans, as has been a constant so far, but too many other variants to pinpoint a certain interest they’ve developed. *How* they do it, and *why*—beyond basic theories, of course, such as exploration and study—we do not know. However, upon their return the abductees are always selectively amnesiac, although the amount of knowledge that they retain has seemed to vary greatly. This is my second time on an extraction mission for an EBE abductee, and I will not fail this time. I was young then...well, younger, and naïve. I’m lucky they kept me on.”

Delta nodded, somewhat absently.

“Well, congratulations, girlfriend. But how about you tell me just what makes me so fucking *part human* and *why* they decided to return me in the first place!?”

Delta’s voice had significantly raised since her first word and by the end of it she’d nearly screamed. She remained seated, more than halfway through her peanut butter sandwich crackers, although now her appetite had hugely diminished.

Who could’ve guessed?

“Typically after puberty, the engineering is conducted to

make you seem as human as possible and intermingle with your fellow species to a tolerable degree. Now, before you start freaking out, please *do not*—this ‘engineering’ is purely psychological, with absolutely no physical alterations save for the brand on your nape. In the past Div-9 has never discovered any kind of recording devices implanted in the flesh of EBE abductees, leading us to believe that—if any—they are a strictly neurological process that only the creatures can access.

“Now, according to you, their ships actually *crashed* several miles back?”

Delta tried to stay cognizant with all of this information raping her conscience. Or was it even hers?

“Yes. Two of them did. And don’t ask me if I’m sure. Because I am beyond a reasonable fucking doubt.”

“Alright,” Aricia said, raising a hand in a placating manner. “That’s great news. As soon as we dip out of here I’ll relay the information and have them secured immediately.”

“What, you can’t just radio in your team?”

Aricia shook her head. “The EBEs might be without their ship and equipment right now, but they’re quite unlike anything we could’ve ever expected. Their psychological connections are effectual only on their own subjects, thus incapable by these means of harming *us*—that is, me and my team. You, however, are highly susceptible. And are technology seems vulnerable, too. So, yes, we have to do things the old fashioned way for starters. We’re all banking on them getting weary of this place, considering the lack of your scent, and just pack their bags to skip town. At least, to venture elsewhere.”

“Would they know if I died?”

“Certainly.”

“How could they not just read my mind and know where I am? Or who I’m speaking to, the things I know now?”

“It doesn’t work like that. They require their ships’ technology to access your neurological bridge with them. Until then they can only mess with your head in close quarters, and none other than the Stage-Two’s. Although...if we ever spot a

Stage-Three, it's time to officially bug out."

"Why...?" Delta swallowed. "What's a Stage-Three?"

"Think a Two, except taller by about five feet with just as longer arms and claws. But the face, the head, much more animalistic. Nightmarish, you could say. Long fur-like hair sprouting from their head, spine, shoulders, and legs. Impeccably white in the dark and jet black in the light."

"Of course," Delta rolled her eyes, trying to catch her breath. She felt as though she'd just run a mile, and was at the starting line of another.

"Listen to me, Delta," Aricia said, taking a step closer, "you cannot lose yourself now. I know I can't quite fully understand the confusion you're going through right now and the fears, but...you have to remember that you *are* human. You began human, and you will end—sometime far from now—as nothing else. Your psychological engineering, if you survive this and we get you back to Div-9, reversal *is* possible."

"*How* possible?"

"I'll be honest with you, Delta, because I like you—and I trust you, I believe that you have a particular verve which the other three lacked." Aricia shrugged, trying and failing to muster a compassionate smile. "When I say reversal is possible, I mean just that—the procedure itself wades waist-deep in *possibilities*. Uncertain odds. Hopeful, but not without lingering doubts. I mean...it is what it is. I'm sorry. But...isn't that better than nothing? Hell, I understand that you *remembering* that you're human to begin with is trouble enough, but after enough hard thought you just might convince yourself that your splintered memory is still, nonetheless, a human's memory. However, that won't fucking cut it." Aricia took another step forward. Delta had long since set her crackers and water bottle down on the table behind her. From Aricia's right hand dangled her own half-full bottle. "However, you have to actually *believe* that you're still human. Lose that and you've lost everything inside and outside of you, me and my team and Div-9 and any chance of help for you included."

Delta took a few seconds before nodding pensively. She pursed her lips in deep thought and tried to pry a morsel of humor out of the shit-show that had instantly exacerbated her already shaken-and-stirred life.

“That was some speech, Aricia. Use that on the other abductee too?”

Aricia shrugged, looking glum. “Too bad it didn’t have the desired effect then.”

“I’ll give it my best shot,” Delta said, sounding sincere. There was an ever-so-slight tremble beneath her voice, but Delta wasn’t afraid to push it to its limits. She wanted to call it out of the dark and burn it at the stake, so long as she’d be left to stand after the smoke cleared.

She felt that she had the strength to do so.

Aricia began to close the gap between them once and for all, hoping to rid Delta of that doubt which undermined her verve.

She clicked her tongue as she arrived at Delta’s feet, the toes of their shoes inches apart. Aricia loomed over the sitting Delta, who now looked upward in a mute and glum manner. Aricia set her bottle down on the table behind Delta’s left shoulder. After that, her hand didn’t return to her side; instead, it glided up to Delta’s left ear.

“I never knew how something so beautiful,” Aricia whispered, coursing Delta’s poetic hair with her right hand, “could pine away.”

Aricia’s thumb graced Delta’s cheek.

Delta casually wrapped both arms around Aricia’s waist, dangling her hand over the operative’s upper buttocks. She leaned forward, their gazes still linked, and then broke that bridge to plant a pair of wet lips on Aricia’s exposed midriff. Her tongue investigated the dip that was Aricia’s navel. Aricia’s skin crawled with a strange feeling of pleasure that she hadn’t felt in so many years. She shuddered ever so briefly, ever so slightly, and then withdrew.

Delta rose to her feet like an ascending ghost.

“Beware,” Aricia leered, “I might bite.”

“I’m half alien,” Delta mustered a joke, “I’ll bite harder.”

Aricia didn’t seem to care. If anything she was more inclined to take that extra step, close the distance between them once again, seal the fissure. It didn’t take long before either of them to make their concurrent move. When their lips collided, their tongues were unleashed from respective cages. Their worlds were set ablaze, void of pain. Quite the opposite in fact.

Delta’s kiss tasted like gunfire. Aricia pulled the trigger more, into her own mouth. Her hands weren’t shy in groping the weapon’s many curves and niches. Delta, likewise, treated Aricia’s body like braille. She was blind and eager to learn. She wanted to read every word down to every character, ingest the syllables and skip nothing.

They absorbed each other.

Speech became a futile aspect in their existence.

Moans sufficed under pleasurable, tepid breaths.

Aricia filled both of her hands with Delta’s rotund, full buttocks. She ground her fingers inward, pulling them as close to her palm as she could with Delta’s flesh in the way. It was a healthy obstacle. Aricia approved. She withdrew her lips from Delta’s only to bury her mouth into the crevasse between Delta’s neck and shoulder, kissing heatedly. The fingers on Delta’s left hand snaked through the black waterfall that became Aricia’s hair as her ponytail collapsed. Her right hand pressed at the small of Aricia’s back, exposed skin between her vest top and low-rise skintight pants. In doing this, their bodies seemed to become one.

They quickly found themselves grinding on each other, in a facing standing position. Nothing awkward here. Everything was messy, everything haphazard. Every motion and caressing, every squeeze and pull, was warranted in one form or another.

Aricia’s face descended to the close-pressed gorge that was Delta’s 36DD cleavage. The solid black satin bra she wore provided half-moon coverage, resulting in ample cleavage and exposure. It was here that Aricia salivated, lost herself, her mind

and her professionalism, everything out the window, and had there actually been a window in the breakroom certainly their clothes would've gone out, too.

Delta slapped Aricia's protruding rear as she leaned forward and stuck it out. Meanwhile her hands moved up Delta's bare back and began fumbling with the bra clasp there. Delta's right palm made another *smack* upon Aricia's Kevlar-clad left cheek before hearing a soft moan erupt between her own breasts.

Aricia was enjoying herself beyond a reasonable doubt.

Delta transferred her hands to Aricia's own Kevlar-clad breasts when she felt her bra clasp give way. The bra fell to her feet and clammy, full breasts spilled forward. They almost appeared to bounce on their own. Minds within each, packed with thought and feelings. Mostly feelings. Great feelings. Areolas were broad, pink, and her nipples seemed to be trying to escape. Aricia immediately smiled and placed it around one of them, tongue refusing to let them escape.

A rush of exhilaration surged through Delta.

She began to feel Aricia's own erect nipples through the vest she wore. Was this even possible? Kevlar wasn't exactly a thin material, unless it was a thin form, as it certainly felt to be around Aricia's rear.

Time went out the proverbial window by now, too.

Along with all of the other threats circling the building and wreaking havoc to the outside world that somehow didn't affect them now. They were safe. They needed to rest, recuperate. But in a twisted facet of their outlook that happened to include this lascivious excursion of their bodies, and the energies suppressed inside for so long.

For Delta it was a form of reassurance.

Proving to herself that she was in fact human.

"Take it off," Delta muttered, lips glistening.

She wanted to prove to herself that she could entirely trust Aricia Petrakis, too. Prove that she was just as well human, flawed and beautiful and sexual and strong and weak all at once. Just like herself. These were the illusive reassurances she fed her

conscience into rationalizing this lewd involvement.

Whatever sufficed at the time.

"It is," Aricia breathed, and in one wave of the clock's third hand she whipped the zipper head free of its teeth. Her vest peeled open. Aricia was standing now, back straightened, chest out a bit. Delta, now, leaned forward slightly and guided both hands under either side of the vest to push it off. It slid free from her arms and fell to the floor behind Aricia. Delta's gaze swept the pale, bare, smooth, beautifully young and healthy skin of the impeccably petite Aricia's upper body. From her bare shoulders down to three inches below her navel. Her breasts were round, two spheres of the female form, sporting conical areolas like silk to the touch and bead-like nipples not unlike soft stones.

Delta took sheer pleasure in simply observing Aricia's 34-23-35 figure.

She breathed in and at out once, contemplation over.

Her lips pursed and she placed them over Aricia's left nipple, sucking in and tasting the sweat that had built up over the past two hours as well as the young woman's own special aroma. The fingers on her right hand sunk into the flesh of that breast, squeezing tight and holding firm.

"Yes," Aricia moaned, head tilted back.

Delta's left hand descended to Aricia's navel, but didn't stop there. It discovered confusion at the myriad of Aricia's belt clasp, and was unable to apply sufficient pressure through the Kevlar pad covering her pubis. So her hand crept further beneath, just between her legs and applied pressure directly behind the edge of the Kevlar pad. She managed to reach Aricia's hidden treasure without puncturing her pants. Aricia's thighs tightened around Delta's hand and hugged her forearm. Delta didn't mind; she only worked at seizing said treasure even harder.

One of Aricia's hands groped Delta's bobbing breasts as she continued to suck on her conical nipple. It squeezed one, caressed the other, and at one point pinched one of Delta's nipples. Delta's teeth locked around the pale skin just outside

Aricia's areola and bit ever so gently.

Aricia yelped and pulled Delta's face to hers.

Delta's hand slipped free from between Aricia's upper thighs, where her pants had grown damp. That same hand went to Aricia's buttocks where she smacked and squeezed, hard. Aricia ground her belt on Delta's denim shorts clasp until it popped free and an extended hand nearly tore them off of her body. Delta smiled broad, gorgeous, salacious. She threw mouth into Aricia's, and they kissed passionately yet again. Anvils weighted their lips and feathers guided their tongues.

They cupped each other's faces with their free hands.

Aricia's left hand looped around Delta's waist to seize a bare cheek. With denim shorts off, only her black thong remained, exposing the entirety of her rotund buttocks. Aricia's fingernails were unforgiving to the goose-bumped flesh of Delta's rear, groping and squeezing at her own discretion, or lack thereof.

And then Delta guided Aricia's right hand down to her own groin. She showed her the way, wrote the map and stuffed it into her mouth then traded saliva with Aricia so that she'd ingest the itinerary.

Hardly two minutes from this point did Delta feel an explosion within her that she previously felt surreal. It erupted without mess, without fire, without pain. Only an unimaginable ecstasy that rippled through her entire body.

And Aricia appeared to have experienced it, too.

The two women cradled each other in their arms for some time afterward. Sweat clung to their skin as much as they did each other's bodies, and the wetness between their legs didn't go unfelt.

In due time they cleaned themselves up best they could, given their surroundings. They used spare clothes in unsecured lockers as towels, although their clamminess wouldn't entirely leave them. They knew without delusion that what awaited them wasn't going to be an easy adventure. But now that they trusted each other without the slightest of incredulity, now that they had

absorbed one another, they felt that they had an advantage.

While their connection could never truly top, let alone match, that of the EBEs' ranks, Delta and Aricia believed their odds had greatly improved.

Along with their morale.

Eventually, Delta got redressed. Discarding her original bra for the seamless x-back sports bra she'd retrieved earlier was a good choice. It was snug, shaped perfectly to her large breasts, and of durable material. Apparently thin enough for even her nipples to make their marks. Considering the amount of skin she was showing now in comparison to last time, Aricia was bittersweet about the change. Given, anything shy of what Aricia wore wasn't going to cut it on the protective parameters of what might be preferred against these 'EBEs.' Nevertheless, Delta wore it anyway. And to replace her more revealing thus less 'protective' short denim shorts were a pair of navy jeggings with a pocketless rear. From afar they looked like skintight jeans, but up close the fabric had a spandex look and feel to them, as they were far more comfortable to Delta. Aricia liked the look, to boot, and how perfectly they hugged every curve that Delta's perfect body had to offer.

This heightened sexual attraction to Delta was something that Aricia hoped wouldn't impair her actions later.

She knew the risks. She acknowledged and respect them. Now it was time to get back to the action.

"All set?" Aricia asked after re-securing her ballistic vest and readjusting her pants.

"Yes, ma'am. You?"

"Ready." Aricia racked the slide on her pistol.

"So, as if you aren't weapon enough yourself," Delta said with an archaic smile, "where're these other guns you've got stashed away in here?"

Aricia gestured with a sway her of head to have Delta follow her. So she did, around a corner in the breakroom and into an L-shaped janitor's closet. There, leaned up against the wall, were the supplementary firearms Aricia had mentioned

earlier. Delta was immediately impressed, and excited. Satisfied only when Aricia offered her one.

“Heckler & Koch,” Aricia said, handing her the black polymer SMG. It was like a larger pistol with automatic capabilities and a foregrip beneath the stubby muzzle. Delta took it with the hand not holding her P-90. Aricia continued, “MP5K-PDW, 9mm. You can toggle between automatic, single-shot, or three-round burst-fire modes there on the side of the weapon, by the trigger. I suggest, for ammunition conservation and accuracy, stick with the burst selection. It’s already toggled for that.”

Delta nodded. “Thanks. This is...much better than my pistol, although I won’t be ditching it just yet.”

“Good idea. Sorry I don’t have an extra holster or anything. I suggest using the pistol ‘til it’s empty, then drop it. Until then, though, keep the MP5K slung. Here, take my shoulder strap...I won’t be needing it.”

Aricia detached the strap from her wielded assault rifle and helped Delta fix it to the MP5K. Delta slung it with ease, as the weapon was considerably light even with its folded stock.

“And be sure to lock that folding stock back when you do arm it, so you can shoulder for better precision.”

“Will do.” She nodded at Aricia’s weapon, about three times the MP5K’s size but still not a full-blown assault rifle. “What’ve you got?”

“Called a SCAR-H, by FN, their CQC model.” Aricia brandished it proudly. It had a foregrip, short buttstock, pivotal ACOG scope, Picatinny-mounted laser sight, and fluted three-inch muzzle. “You can watch for my red laser sight on enemies if you find yourself a bit lost out there.”

“Will...do.”

Aricia handed Delta a few spare magazines, slightly curved plastic stick clips. Delta worked on stuffing them into her pockets, which was a new form of discomfort against her upper thighs and hips. Aricia donned her own ammunition in the form of an additional PDU belt that went around her waist, riding low.

“I’ve got a couple of extra mags for your PDW should

you run through your own, just so ya know. Try not to, though.”

“I’ll give it my best.”

Aricia nodded. “One more thing, Delta. The scent repellant—it’s futile against Stage-Three’s. They’re like the masterminds of the EBEs, the ‘elders’ per se. If we encounter any out there...” Aricia trailed off. Pure concern troubled her face. “Let’s just say, things are gonna get a whole lot worse. Hopefully by that time, though, *if* they were to make an appearance, my team will have rendezvoused with us.”

Delta swallowed, tentatively nodding.

“There you go. Swallow that fear. There’s no place for doubts and hesitation out there. Not unlike what we just...experienced.”

Aricia took a solid step forward and kissed Delta.

Delta cupped Aricia’s face briefly.

“Your lips taste the way fire would if it didn’t burn,” Aricia smiled small, her voice hushed.

Delta simply simpered.

“I guess we’re set to go, then,” Aricia said after striding for the door.

“I’m ready to make history.”

Aricia turned around to raise an eyebrow at Delta, who was a sight to behold as ever.

“You know,” Delta shrugged, “be the first...abductee...to survive their return to Earth.”

“That’s right,” Aricia said, face full of fierceness and solemn beauty now that her hair had been tied back into a ponytail. She unbolted the door. “You’re no longer the quarry, afterall.”

Delta nodded. “They are.”

6

Aricia explained to Delta en route through the megastore's eerie silence how she originally infiltrated the building via a rearward warehouse. She'd entered through a rollup door that had been pried open and thus jammed less than halfway up; she supposed this had been the cause of a Stage-Two's manual breach. The two women agreed in gratefulness that the EBEs' technology limited them to themselves when it came to warfare—that being, no projectile weapons. Even so, they have never fallen short of surprising Div-9 with their brutal capabilities. Their neurological connection between each other is uncanny and still a myriad of unanswered questions for Div-9.

Just like the enigma that constituted Delta's mind.

So, Aricia acted vanguard until they reach the warehouse. She retraced her steps, taking the exact route, finding it difficult to try an alternate way and risk getting lost.

Or dead.

For a solid five minutes since leaving the barricaded hallway in their past there was no action whatsoever. They neither heard nor glimpsed any sign of an EBE's presence.

"Let me know if you get any mental spikes," Aricia whispered with a jab of indifference.

"Oh yeah, sure will."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sound—"

“Like a bitch?” Delta smirked sarcastically. “No, you’re good, baby.”

Aricia sighed. “Hey, I said I’m sorry. I’m just...not used to having feelings for...”

“A half-alien? Hey, I don’t blame ya. Hell, *I’d* be a little loose too.”

Aricia straightened, stopping dead in her tracks.

“Look—”

“No need to apologize or straighten things out,” Delta interrupted her, half-smiling. “I understand. Kind of, but not really, you know—that sort of shit. But now’s not the time. You just keep leading the way and I’ll keep throwing snide remarks at you anytime I lose focus.”

Aricia smirked, then it faded. “But you shouldn’t be losing focus to begin with.”

“Yeah, well, I’m easily distracted by that cute ass of yours shifting with every step.”

“Enough,” Aricia said, poorly hiding a lewd smile while gesturing Delta onward. She continued walking through the sporting and outdoors department, as they kept close to the far right wall at all times.

Three minutes passed since their last discourse.

“Hold, I’ve got movement,” Aricia said, lifting her left fist. Most civilians might not recognize the gesture, in spite of Aricia’s muttered order to go with it, but Delta did. Same with her tactical knowledge of firearm usage. Nothing too uncanny, but still—more than most.

Some people are just meant to be certain things, even from such a young age...

Did Delta believe in fate, in destiny?

Hardly. She believed in what was real and even then all of this in-between disorder thrown into the mix hasn’t made things easier for her comprehension.

“Where?” Delta murmured. “What is it?”

They had stopped behind a rack of canoes, which was opposite a longer and taller rack of mountain bicycles. They

were within sight of the warehouse entrance, composed of a pair of silver flap double-doors. They had the slightest lick of motion to them, swaying ever so gently, quite possibly due to a soft breeze sifting through the A/C.

Or an EBE passing by...

"Could be a trap," Aricia mumbled, probably hopeful that Delta hadn't heard her vocalized thought.

Too bad.

"Perhaps," Delta whispered. "Or," she added, squeezing Aricia gently on the left shoulder, "just a butterfly in your stomach that wants you to escape just as much as it does, and relieve you of the discomfort."

Aricia slowly looked over her shoulder and smiled a flurry's smile, an expression palpable for Delta but imperceptible to most.

When she returned her gaze to point forward, Delta heard Aricia exhale controllably.

"Let's go, then," she said, and Delta followed close.

They were eighteen paces away from their previous spot, having just bypassed the canoe rack, when a pair of Stage-One's skittered into view. They were floor-bound, hissing, and looking uglier than an inbred ogre.

"Fire!" Aricia shouted, as if she needed to say anything.

Delta was almost as fast to her trigger as Aricia was. Delta stood while Aricia knelt, the prior locking her elbows to squeeze off accurate shots from the Ruger P-90. Aricia, on the other hand, had her SCAR-H shouldered with a hand extended to the foregrip, steadying her aim. She fired in curt bursts that cut through EBE flesh like BBs to tracing paper. Thick whitish blood spewed across the floor. The creatures had no chance. They were too distant, too slow despite their speed, no match for the two shooters.

One well-trained, the other well-learned.

After emptying the remnants of her Ruger clip into the head and shoulders of the second Stage-One, Delta ditched the pistol without hesitation. She drew the MP5K PDW up to aim

just before Aricia finished it off with a thorough headshot. The result was nothing short of gruesome.

“Whew,” Aricia exhaled, wiping her forehead with the back of her right hand. She stood and turned to Delta, who was just now extending and locking the foldable stock on the MP5K. “Nice shooting.”

“Yeah, well, I think it was mostly you.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Aricia snapped the firing lever on the assault rifle. She looked around, eyebrow raised, sweat beading her nose and cheeks. Her hazel eyes pulsed with vigilance.

“We’ll see about next ti—” Delta’s last syllable suddenly erupted in a shrill scream that shot down to a low groaning as she dropped to her knees, weapon dangling from its torso-looped strap. Her hands flung to her head, fingers extended through lush crimson hair, while the contents of her brain scrambled and spiked and bawled with a confusing pain.

“Delta!” Aricia yelled at her, eyes wide and heartbeat in overdrive. Her muscles pulled taut as she saw Delta collapse and cage her head in her own hands, fingers spread and bent, eyelids clamped shut and jaw clenching. Aricia could’ve sworn she heard Delta’s teeth grinding. She tried comforting her, but Delta wouldn’t respond to her touches. And when she tried pulling her up, it was as if Delta’s veins were filled with lead.

An animalistic, blood-curdling howl sent crystalline shivers down Aricia’s spine. She thought she heard a pane of glass break not too far away. While Delta struggled with herself Aricia spun on her knee to face the warehouse entrance—no, just to the left of it, about ten feet from the doors and twenty from where she knelt. There, climbing not over but *through* the upper bicycle rack, was a Stage-Two. The lanky creature flung bicycles into the air and across the floor, twisting them in an instant. The metal rack itself became a bent window that gave way to its passage as it mounted the thing and protruded from one row to howl again.

Aricia responded with her own bellow.

Her face became a distortion not unlike a beautiful

painting thrown to an open fan, paint and brushes added to the mix.

She fired the SCAR-H, laser sight dotting the creature's upper torso, this time not relenting on the trigger.

The creature took the streamlined volley to heart—literally. Its body bucked and swayed, clawed hands monkeying to find purchase before Aricia eventually brought it down. It rolled over a bicycle and crashed into the floor, its ichor splashing beneath it. Aricia stood and took five audacious steps closer, reloading as she did so. An empty magazine dropped at her feet and was behind her heels in the same instant. She slammed a new one home just as fluidly, rendering herself completely defenseless for a brevity. And then she was less than ten feet from it when she stopped and began pumping five-round bursts of 7.62mm bullets into its body. Particularly, its tall head. A twisted-in-dismay, long face with drawn-out and bottomless features glared up at her wearing Death's mask.

Aricia didn't cringe or flinch.

She emptied the twenty-round magazine into its skull.

When the gun clicked dry and vacuous smoke curled up from the fluted muzzle, Aricia took a breath and her chest heaved noticeably. She ejected the magazine and turned away from a now gruesomely faceless EBE.

Aricia's gaze was graced with a staggering-to-her-feet Delta, better than what she'd been burdened with earlier. She slung the reloaded SCAR-H and rushed over to help her newfound comrade, friend, lover.

"Are you alright? Scared the shit out of me. It's dead, Delta, it's *gone*." Aricia's voice soothed Delta's everything. She gradually came to. She turned, clearly disheveled, and blinked away dampened eyes.

"I'm good...I'm okay...I mean," Delta coughed, shook her head. Shrugged. "Yes and no, but I'm here. Let's go."

"Let's." Aricia nodded, guided the MP5K back into Delta's steady hands. It remained on its sling, looped around her torso.

They proceeded toward the warehouse doors, no longer moving even a centimeter on their hinges. Through their small square windows and two-inch gap emanated the softest of glows from the other side. Delta assumed a few fluorescents were lit, but otherwise the place was dark; she couldn't imagine the warehouse being less than a quarter the size of the whole K-Mart. She feared the carnage that might be strewn about in there, or—if not in addition to—the shadow-cloaked nightmares lurking out of sight.

Lying in wait...

"You ready for this?" Aricia asked as they reached the doors. She threw a quick, concerned glance over her shoulder.

Delta took a deep breath. "As much as I'll ever be."

"That'll suffice," Aricia nodded. She returned her gaze to the doors and like sand through an hourglass gently pushed through the flap doors making neither ruckus nor unnecessary movement. "Stay close," she whispered.

Delta wasn't one to disappoint.

Like a remora she followed Aricia, adjusting her aim with the shouldered sub-machineguns to accompany her new acquaintance. Her only true friend. A comrade of sorts. A protector. Guardian fucking angel.

The warehouse was exactly as Delta had pictured it.

Vast I-shaped space that practically mirrored the cashiering frontend of the store, except with bare concrete flooring and walls lined with boxed product. An inert forklift sat like a massive yellow brick forty feet past the doors, in the center of the floor. It was on its side, entrails in the form of two warehouse employees spilt out of its cabin and onto the floor. Crimson-black nimbuses circled their heads. The blood was nearly coagulated, but the fear-seized expressions on their faces still alive.

Delta eyed the corpses and their gaping wounds with a wrought stomach. Aricia didn't utter a word.

They had just about achieved their tenth pace past the forklift and its victims when the sound of skittering claws lit up

their senses.

“Hold!” Aricia snapped, and the both of them stopped.

Weapons snapped up to aim just before a Stage-One launched into view, eviscerating a stack of boxed product shrink-wrapped to a pallet. It hissed and snarled and spewed gore across the floor as bullets riddled its body. One of Delta’s concentrated bursts clipped its chin and half of its face opened up into the air. As it hit the floor in a tumbling mess, Aricia took a deep breath—but Delta didn’t.

It wasn’t over.

Her veins rippled.

“Something’s here,” Delta whispered.

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Aricia checked her magazine.

“No,” Delta snapped under her breath. She tugged on Aricia’s arm, while her eyes scanned the shifty darkness mottled by sporadically lit fluorescents. “Something *big-time* is here...”

Aricia turned to look at Delta and could’ve sworn she’d actually seen her verdant irises ripple—

“Aricia,” Delta half-said, half-screamed.

A creature nearly twice the size of a Stage-Two came lumbering around the corner eighty feet ahead of them and to the left, between a thirty-foot gap. According to Aricia’s testament, that was the unloading area where the rollup door was located, the one through which she’d originally gained access to the building. The creature had a hunched carriage in order to keep its almost lupine head from crashing through the low ceiling beam there, but its protruding plumes of white hair didn’t miss. They were practically ethereal, as if sheer gauze or curtains, simply flowing over the ceiling panels like milk pouring into cereal.

Delta recognized it as a Stage-Three.

She knew Aricia did, too, obviously.

“Get down!” Aricia shouted, shouldering her weapon and firing a quick burst. She didn’t notice until after her first three rounds narrowly missed the advancing creature that there was a warehouse employee in front of it. Fleeing, failing in a dire attempt to escape. Ten feet behind, the lanky and mottled

creature rushed with a slow form of high speed. Even under the fluorescent fixtures that were lit, the creature's abundant plumes of hair did not change color; they remained a startling white. And its eyes, forever black. Its extended snout was demarcated by a pair of jaws lined with haphazardly grown teeth not unlike a mako's. Ears were high, partially veiled by the white hair. Torso built like a bodybuilder's with an outward chest and washboard abdominals. Its second pair of arms were more humanoid than its primary set, which said very little. The primary arms were lengthy with bulky shoulders and large hands ending in freakishly long fingers not without sword-like claws.

Digitigrade feet and hocked legs kept it lithely afoot.

"Don't shoot," Aricia panted after ceasing fire. "There's a man—"

Eight feet away. Well within reach of the creature. It lashed out midstride and the fleeing man's face flew agape with terror. He stopped running, all of a sudden appearing as if he were performing a miracle slam-dunk. This feigned flight was caused by the Stage-Three's acquisition of the man, its entire left hand having seized him by the back. Its fingers had spread, human-equivalent thumb and pinky claws latching around left and right shoulder bones, respectively. With a simple raising motion it so lifted the man off his feet, although his legs still alluded to running. The man screamed with no sound but his eyes and expression spoke loudly enough.

And then the creature halted not thirty feet away from the two women. The employee's feet now ran vacuously about six feet from the ground.

All of a sudden the creature inserted the tips of two claws into the man's upper back and he went completely stiff. Legs didn't even dangle, much less run—they became stone pillars. His whole body, frozen stiff. What truly caught the women's gazes were his facial features—eyes rolled up into the back of his head, exposing only bloodshot whites. A game of marbles gone terribly awry. The man's skin turned a sickly sallow and his cheeks vacuumed inward as his jaw dropped until

dislocating. Nostrils flared, however, and his chest heaved with breath—the man was somehow still alive.

The Stage-Three stared emptily ahead, its eyes containing less movement than even the man's upturned whites.

When a shockingly deep, all-encompassing, somehow hollow and yet heavy-with-the-weight-of-galaxies voice came surging from the man's agape mouth, Delta and Aricia felt their worlds freeze-frame. Somebody had pressed pause and mute simultaneously, then put on an eldritch form of subtitles that spoke for itself.

"You belong to us," the EBE spoke through its human host. Delta could feel her blood frothing within veins that had the sensation of rattling pipes. Or perhaps this was only a mental aberration. Trickery. The pause between the creature's transferred voice added to the tension thickening the air. "You belong in our skies, or beneath their soil. It is not a choice you can make."

Delta shook her head. She also shook free of the pain and discomfort that the creature stirred within herself.

A drawling scream that might've been something like "no" belted from her mouth as a spittle-spraying fire-throated scream as she charged it firing her weapon. The loaded MP5K PDW makes its own commotion in her hands, recoil gradually kicking up the muzzle. Its hosed out spray of 9mm bullets climb up the length of the human host's abdomen, barely missing his head but not the Stage-Three's. Its white plumage is misted with similarly colored blood, albeit now made thick and greasy from the spilt ichor.

The creature's hands release the man, who lands in an upturned fashion so that his skull splits open on the concrete floor.

Delta is still charging the creature, which has since been forced to backpedal and throw its arms up to absorb potentially fatal shots. Meanwhile, behind her trailed a panicking Aricia, who undoubtedly thought she'd soon witness Delta's frenzied suicide.

The Stage-Three roared irately before clumsily pirouetting and crashing through a steel desk that came up to its knees. It stumbled but did not fall, but had clearly lost its bearings.

Delta reloaded like a professional on speed.

She continued to fire, yielding absolutely no reluctance this time. She only stopped when the magazine went dry and the bullet-riddled lead-crippled EBE had fled via the far exit at the other end of the warehouse. She wobbled to a stop and leaned back to catch her breath, chest heaving immensely with every hoarse inhalation. Her arms dangled at her sides and the MP5K hung freely on its sling by her left side.

Gunsmoke more than tainted the air.

It was in their noses, mouths, seeping into their skin.

“Delta,” Aricia nearly barked, catching up to her. “Delta, what the fuck was that!? Are you *insane*!?”

Delta, having caught her breath about the best she could at the moment, straightened her posture and slowly turned to face Aricia.

“You haven’t figured that out, yet?” she said softly.

Aricia gradually released an uneasy chuckle.

“Alright, well,” she sighed, shaking her head, “good job, then, I guess.”

“I did...shoot the man, though.”

“He was dead as soon as the EBE touched him. Hell, as soon as it spotted him. You can’t put that on your shoulders.”

Delta had fired out of impulse, sheer rage and a discomfort she’d never felt before.

“This is my last magazine,” she said bluntly as she reloaded. “Can you give me the rest of what you’re holding for me?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” Aricia ultimately handed Delta the remaining two MP5K 9mm magazines. Delta took them with a nod and stuffed them into her pockets. She secured her current one with visibly shaking hands and looked up to blink dry wet eyes.

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“Did you know that they could do that?” Delta asked without looking at Aricia. “Just...*puppeteer* a human like that, for its voice?”

Aricia sternly shook her head. “No. I swear, I was as shocked as you...well, you know. Considering.”

“I trust you’ll relay that bit of information to your superiors then?”

“Of course.”

“Just...leave out the bit with me shooting at it, and its host.” Delta didn’t think it would even really matter after all of this was said and done, but figured she’d voice the morsel of thought while she had the chance.

“Like I said...of course, Delta.” Aricia gently squeezed Delta’s bare right bicep. “We need to get going, now. Leave through the back, where I came in, get outside and I’ll pop smoke after calling my team.”

Delta nodded. “I’m at your heels.”

7

The ribbed steel rollup door was, as Aricia had foretold, still stuck at its halfway position. She and Delta barely had to duck to move under it, their weapons and spare clips all clattering together in an otherwise perfect silence. Meanwhile, in the bowels of the K-Mart roamed EBEs of all three stages, some more than others but each one of them fed from the same goal. They wanted Delta, needed her, to take her back or crush her however they saw fit. So long as she didn't escape. She couldn't escape. As far as they were sincerely concerned, she *won't* escape. This was their contorted mindset. Aricia had other plans, though.

And Delta's conviction was finally set in stone.

"You're not going to die," she whispered to herself as she and Aricia ran for a random spot out in the middle of nothingness far from the back of the K-Mart. Their shoes scuffed across arid steppe infrequently scattered with equally dry shrubs. Tumbleweeds arrested by the very earth, whereas Aricia and Delta were free from its hold.

Instead, they ran from a greater fear.

Trepidation didn't truly root itself between their fibers until after they had come to a stop some hundred feet from the warehouse rollup door. The silver eye in the black sky hung suspended infinitely above them, yet it felt as if it were simply

peering over their shoulders. Stars breathing down their necks.

“This is good,” Aricia announced, her voice raised. She tried to restrain from panting. “Delta, take a knee and prepare to fire! Switch to burst-fire on the side of the—that’s right, you got it. Okay...”

Aricia unclipped a small green metal cylinder from her BDU belt that had a ring on top of it. Delta looked over her shoulder and watched as Aricia pulled the pin and tossed the smoke grenade twenty feet away, deeper into the night. It rolled, already spewing a column of yellow smoke that quickly broadened into an expansive cloud. The yellow smoke was dense and curling and alive, screaming with a hiss toward the sky.

Delta glimpsed Aricia press something on a tiny pager-like device clipped to her BDU belt. A minuscule red light flashed, turned green, then began blinking.

“Delta,” Aricia said, turning to look down at her. “I’ve signaled my team. They should be arriving via helicopter in five to ten minutes. We just have to hold out until then. Okay?”

Part of Delta wanted to ask why they couldn’t just head down the road and meet her team halfway or something similar, however, she knew not to even bother. She was done running—from her past, in its myriad of puzzles, from herself, whatever she was meant to be or have ever been, and most of all from her fears.

At least now she was acknowledging them.

Moreover, *facing* them. And, as far as she saw it—*defeating* them.

She needed Aricia’s help, however, and would not be one to just throw that away. She was grateful. But she was also hateful; now she just focused on channeling that in the right direction.

As if on cue, an aberrational howl split the air. Similar sounds cumulated to orchestrate the most terrible symphony ever performed in the history of mankind. All of it came roiling out of the warehouse’s jammed rollup door in an unseen ocean.

The commotion scaled the skies and pierced the galaxy. They however did not work their way into the skin and mind of Delta—she did not let them. She shut them out. She turned them over on their many ugly sides and shooed them away with her own teeth and brawn.

And she beckoned Aricia to do the same.

Together they prepared an onslaught from their firearms just before the first wave of Stage-One's came flooding out beneath the rollup door. Some rushed in bounding leaps, others zig-zagged, the rest just charged headlong like rabid bulls.

Aricia swept her line-of-fire as if spraying a hose trying to extinguish a roaring conflagration. In one way or another that was exactly the instance here.

Delta, meanwhile, concentrated on targets she knew she could hit with precise bursts from the generally short- to mid-ranged MP5K.

Linearly rushing Stage-One's took bursts to the shoulders and legs when headshots weren't achieved. They plunged into the rigid ground and tumbled forward until their limbs broke or their brains spilt out. Delta maintained accuracy and heat splashed her face with every burst. Muzzle flashes obscured her vision transiently with every pull of the trigger, blurring her view of the enemy for an additional instant.

Finally more than half of their forces were neutralized.

Delta had reloaded twice by then, and Aricia announced she was on her last two magazines. Delta had the single remaining, but didn't alert Aricia about it. She just made certain to prove worthy each shot.

"Here they come!" Aricia shouted, her voice catching Delta before the actual helicopter did. She paused firing and gazed skyward, craning her neck while her right knee remained where it was as if rooted to the earth. There, she could see now just around the yellow smog, an approaching aircraft. It was a transport helicopter, roof-mounted rotors voicing its approach.

The sound became artificial thunder as it neared.

"Just a minute longer, Delta!" Aricia shouted. She

emptied her last few shots from the SCAR-H into a row of bounding Stage-One's. The weapon's red dotted laser-sight fell from visibility as Aricia dropped the gun without a care in the world and deftly drew her pistol in the same motion. She took out one, two of the creatures with curt squeezes of the trigger. Ejected casings spun tragically through the air, trailed by curls of steam.

A pause in her shots. She had few left.

Above and behind the women the helicopter got even closer. Delta could feel dust and wind roll across her back and nape, a wild zephyr invigorated by the helicopter's rotors. A surge of energy coursed through her body, her mind, her everything. She took to her feet but backpedaled a few paces, only to keep at Aricia's side.

The EBEs were reduced to six Stage-One's and three Stage-Two's, still baffling both of the women as to how they managed to get to these numbers.

That problem would have to be solved after this one...

"Shit, I'm out!" Aricia exclaimed, dropping the pistol after her second and only reload. It clattered hollowly at her feet. Delta emptied her MP5K into a nearing pair of Stage-One's, their spidery legs facilitating their agile advance. One of them took a few rounds to the throat in midair, enough to puncture its jugular and spew gore through a broad entry wound. The fatal impacts left it in a heap on the ground behind its cohort.

"Me too!" Delta yelled, and fell back a few inches behind Aricia.

"Get down!" Aricia barked, dropping to her right knee the second she'd drawn her MTech combat knife. Its curved carbon steel blade exited the Kydex sheath with a metallic *shing* so smooth it sang sweet tunes to Delta's ears even under the helicopter's approach. In the next instant Aricia had it pinched in her right hand, swiftly throwing it like the professional she'd claimed and proven to be. The knife cartwheeled through the air at a dignified speed, its trajectory ending in the Stage-One EBE's forehead, right between its aberrant eyes. All seven

inches of the full-tang blade had buried itself into the creature's skull, killing it instantly.

The action had been quicker than the sight.

"I shouldn't have doubted you," Delta mustered a lopsided smirk as Aricia got to her feet.

"No, but that's okay—I forgive you." Aricia smiled.

A perilous discordance of howls ascended into the sky and permeated the air. Its sources didn't hesitate to charge the women, their elusive quarry, from the warehouse rollup door. Except that, due to their size, they had to first pry the door wider to safely exit the building.

Delta looked away, and up, just in time to see the Black Hawk helicopter descending behind them. She tugged at Aricia's arm and the two women gazed toward the lowering helicopter just as a protruding machinegun barrel lit up. Muzzle flashes haloed its end as the operator behind it unleashed hell on the creatures traversing the land below.

"Move!" Aricia shouted to be heard over the cacophony of gunfire and howling and rotor noise, pulling Delta away from beneath the helicopter. Spent brass casings cascaded down from above through coils of smoke. The gunshots were borderline deafening mixed with the helicopter's rotors.

Delta glimpsed Aricia's pager-like device on her belt begin blinking red.

"Aricia!" Delta shouted, indicating the device's light.

"We're good to go, Delta," Aricia replied. "Their doors should be open—the instant it touches down, we get in! You first!"

Delta nodded rapidly, with little reluctance.

Adrenaline kept her afoot, afloat, anything but aloof.

Meanwhile, a sweeping wall of 7.62mm gunfire kept at bay the charging EBEs. They were all cut down before they even got up, but before the gunner could finish off the final pair of Stage-Three's he was forced to reload. The belt-fed M240H groaned from all of the action and leaked gunsmoke through its perforated barrel and muzzle.

The Black Hawk lurched as its landing gear touched down upon the dry earth. Its passenger bay was agape, and occupied by only two men excluding the separate gunner. One of these men stood at the edge of the bay beckoning the women's entrance. He called for Aricia by her last name.

"Priority first, she's Subject Four, vital priority!" Aricia shouted back, hurriedly guiding Delta aboard the helicopter. The man inside lent his hand to help.

Delta was halfway in when one of the Stage-Three's bellowed after her. It was a different sound, deeper than its previous howl in the warehouse, and somehow more powerful. She felt its wordless voice writhe its way into the confines of her skull, scurrying beneath the impalpable regions of his conscience. Delta froze up, cramping in all of her limbs, teeth gnashing down. She almost bit her own tongue off, but instead only ground her incisors. Nothing broke, nothing fragmented.

And then Delta's hands swung out, both latching onto the outline of the helicopter's bay entrance, instead of the man inside. She struggled to resist the tendrils of the EBEs' neurological violation. Her hair swam about her face in glorious red strands thick with life. Her eyes fortified and her soul was not far behind, dogged to regain hold of her own conscience.

Her own being.

And then the gunner had finished reloading. By which time he was belting out 7.62mm armor-piercing bullets at six-hundred rounds-per-minute with perfect direction and seamless precision for what it was worth. Delta was secured inside the helicopter in time to turn around and help Aricia aboard, too, as if she needed an extra hand. Over Aricia's shoulder Delta watched the two ferocious creatures get mowed down by the gunner's volley. Their bodies were dismembered and their gore provided lasting sustenance for the dry earth.

Aricia slapped the aviator's helmet on the copilot who then signaled to lift off. The Black Hawk reeled upward, landing gear retracting and rotors lifting them skyward.

The operative nearest Delta leaned to the side and

slammed shut the windowed panel door. Sound became an off-muted humming inside the bay. Delta's ears took several seconds to pop, all the while the other operative sized her up. Aricia pulled the man nearest Delta, the operative who had helped them aboard, by the shoulder. He looked up at her with wide eyes, and told her that the rest of the team had been segregated for deployment to two different crash sites between the K-Mart and rest of the town.

"Aricia!" Delta snapped, nodding with her eyes.

"Trust me, I haven't forgotten," Aricia replied, smiling with her own gaze. She patted the operative's bicep and knelt to catch her breath. When she spoke next, it grabbed both of the men's attention, and transiently Delta's own. Aricia's voice was complete with an assertion all her own. "We need to alert Command that we've retrieved Subject Four from Ground Zero, and that a crash site that might be the original has been reported in the vicinity, as well. We'll also need ground team to do a full assault on the area, as there are likely to be more EBEs—especially Stage-One's—lurking inside the Target Building. Advise for a medical cleanup crew to follow as per protocol."

Delta sat uncomfortably in the metallic seat of the Black Hawk's passenger bay, but was at least glad she wasn't still wearing those denim shorts.

Her gaze wafted across the path of Aricia's and to the windowed door on her left.

She didn't inquire about human survivors and Div-9's policy regarding the in a situation as dire as this. She simply hoped that they would be humane enough to give them amnesia or something of the like, however much of a stretch that might be. Then again, hadn't that been what happened to Delta by the EBEs?

She didn't dwell on it. Instead, she opened her mind.

Delta stared out into the borderless night below them. It was above, too, surrounding them on all sides. There was a muted beauty to it all, but not without an echoing pain and tragic touch. She couldn't ignore the voices rebounding wall-to-wall

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inside her head anymore. Now that the tides had turned and she'd encountered the truth in the flesh, Delta felt a change within herself. The voices that had previously rattled her conscience were now surging through her veins with a positive energy she'd been a stranger to. And the sound of lightning in the distance, barely audible over the helicopter's roaring rotors, didn't upset her the slightest.

