

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE WAY IS

 Amanda Margaret Underwood, Master of Fine Arts
 Creative Writing, 2013

Thesis directed by: Professor Howard Norman
 Department of English

“The Way Is” is a fiction thesis for the Master of Fine Arts program in the English department, as per the department guidelines, this is a portion of a book-length manuscript.

What would you do to save the one you love? That is the question Elise Andrews asks detective Graham Harding in her interrogation. Usually it is the other way around, but as Graham investigates Elise, the Way, and why a swath of young women are burning themselves out on Crash – it turns out to be the only question that matters. Elise has started a plan that might save the world or damn it, but Graham must choose to protect the things that matter most to him even as the federal response threatens the very safety of the city around them.

THE WAY IS

By

Amanda Margaret Underwood

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2013

Advisory Committee:

Professor Howard Norman, Chair
Professor Maud Casey
Professor Emily Mitchell

The Way Is

0.

The moment the cop tackled her, she'd been struck by the thought that she'd made the wrong choice. Now, in interrogation, it haunted her.

"I don't understand what you want to know." Her words slurred together. Her body felt uncontrollable and her tongue wouldn't cooperate. She hated the timing even as she felt her mind slip away from her and cloud the events that took place before this barren room. Booked, processed, searched for drugs and weapons by a woman with frigid hands, they were fragments that she could not hold onto. "All the information is in the pamphlets." The words pressed up through the fog and she spoke them.

Pamphlets. Her attention spun away. There had been pamphlets on the corner when she was arrested. She'd run. She remembered running but not getting far when this cop took her down.

She remembered the feel of the oily recycled fibers under her legs and back, it had been stupid to wear a dress to the meeting, but Danny asked her to. So she catered to those men who liked to think they were dealing with *una pequena mujer*, even as their breath smelled of peppers and their skin of baking Crash crystals. The stench all around them of cigarillos and shit because squatters used the warehouse as regularly as Reyes de la Noche. So Elise wore the dress and let them think what they would about the woman Danny Patel sent to do his business.

This cop wanted to know what the hell she had been doing in the middle of a drug bust? Elise couldn't tell him. Money. She delivered the money and then everything

dissolved into shouted commands, curses and chaos. She ran. She ran and ran and ran. But not far enough.

“Elise,” he touched her then. Grabbed her by both shoulders and forced her to look up at him, to focus, as though it was in her power to do so.

She couldn't, couldn't even try. This was the worst part of Crash. Not like the beginning, when the world turned lotus blossom clear and she could see all the way to the other side of reality; when computer code mixed with DNA strands in long elegant twists of programming - her programming - beautiful as it wove together into a garland of zeros and ones that could go on forever. All of life was contained in that data. It flexed and grew in complexity and she would have much rather been there, in the midst of her work, instead of this room.

The drug tightened its hold and blurred her ability to think and process. It made her thoughts too fuzzy and imprecise. She reached for them but it was like reaching into a pond without accounting for the refraction. She overreached again and again.

Then it turned, as though her body tired of the Crash burning through its synapses. Her immune system rose up like a microscopic army suddenly reminded of its duty amidst the whirling streams of blood. It attacked the largest molecules of Crash and wrapped the long fingers of macrophages around the foreign chemicals. Pulled, sought, rent the molecular bonds into smaller portions that were more vulnerable to her body's natural defenses. They ravaged the drug and dissolved it into its base constituents with judicious use of hydrogen peroxide, the body's all-purpose disinfectant. Elise smiled as she thought of that, something that had been said years ago when she was in school.

“Ms. Andrews?” There was concern in his voice. “Are you okay?”

The final moments were coming, she could feel them, when the afterimage of Crash left her feeling dizzy and sick. The drug was one burden that she accepted but would not mourn when it was done. The loss of control felt – human.

She nodded, not trusting her voice yet. It would echo strangely in this room. The room felt carved from pebbled concrete walls. Nothing in this room inspired her to feel comfortable and she thought belatedly that that was the point. There was nowhere to look where her eyes did not feel impaled. Halogen lights drove her with fierce intensity against the chair. Its old flat metal bruised the edges of her bare legs and sucked at her with its palpable want for heat that could never be fulfilled. She shivered and turned her eyes onto the only thing that did not pummel them away.

He laid several things out in front of her and she reached out for them tentatively. Her fingers moved with a disjointed grace that reminded her of sway geishas. Every movement so awkward it seemed choreographed as she tried to lift the short pamphlet from the table.

The motion woke her and tipped her over the last threshold of the drug. And she found herself, where she'd been all along, right there in her own mind.

“The Way,” her voice was soft. The worst of the withdrawal might be over, but the sensitivity to sound and motion would be there for another few hours. The drug ran riot over neural pathways where it scarred them and caused damage that could not be easily repaired. “I belong to the Way.”

“No one *belongs* to a cult.”

He misunderstood her. It wasn't disbelief, she couldn't pin the note in his voice down to that, but more of incredulity at the way she'd described it.

“It’s not a cult.”

He pressed on. “Seems like one to me.”

“We take no money or donations. The Way is a frame of mind.”

The cop sneered then and it didn’t look good on his face. “Propaganda I can read for myself.” He flipped it open and read. “Everyone feels lost, alone, like there is no one who will understand or care. That’s not true. The Way is here. Please let us help you with whatever you need. There are no obligations, no requirements, no standards that we will hold you to. We are just here to help.” He coughed on the last sentence. “Except the people you help tend to stay and join up.”

“There’s no laws against belief. Not in Baltimore.” Elise turned the pamphlet over in her hands. The glyph on the back was one Chris designed, a marigold, it matched the bracelet she always wore on her left hand, taken now as evidence. “I don’t think the charges against me have anything to do with my... philosophical orientation. Nor whether others find that orientation more attractive than the alternative.”

She leaned toward him and smiled. Despite the omnipresent hangover, the smile elicited its own reaction in her limbic system. “Most people are threatened by the fact that we give away our money, they don’t want to be expected to do the same thing. It’s human to feel that way, but its wrong, a vestigial impulse of starvation and scarce resources. We don’t live in that world anymore.”

“It’s a pretty sentiment, but it doesn’t explain what you were doing with El Reyes.” He leaned toward her, so close that she had no choice but to face the intensity of his eyes. “It’s pretty hard to save yourself when you’re pumping your brain full of plastene fixatives.”

The irises were brown behind his square, practical glasses and she found herself caught by their sudden ferocity. They didn't match him at all. He looked unassuming, that's what she'd thought when she caught a glimpse of him on the street, a slender man on the street corner in a dark trench coat and government-issue respirator. He could be anyone from a distance.

"El Reyes isn't important and neither am I." Elise felt dizzy as though the entire room was swirling. "Individuals can break and falter. The Way is striving to change things on a different scale. If no one tries, the world is going to die. Pollution, crime, disease."

"They've been saying that for over a hundred years, probably more." He answered just as quickly. "First it was the eco movement, then green, then reverb. They all failed and we're still here."

"Not this time."

He recoiled at her calm surety.

"You'll burn yourself out against the Way because you won't understand it until its too late. You'll spend all your time chasing the ghost in the machine only to realize that there's no machine. Just like the drugs don't really matter."

Something flickered across his face. He thought she was still high and Elise knew that no matter how coherent she sounded, she was just a junkie. The Way he thought he was after, the one he'd caught the trail of without understanding why, was nothing like the wave of the drug inside of her. It would not fade out and die. They'd made sure of that.

But she found something broken at the thought.

Would her life have been different? Could it have happened? Would it have the changed the end of the world as she saw it? A different path that led to the same point in time? The uncertainty crept inside her mind and planted its doubts there even as she knew that a chaos point could be a person as much as any event. She knew how to map casualty but when it was her own life, suddenly things seemed less clear.

He was older than her, she was sure, a fuzzy age that she couldn't pinpoint except for the crows' feet at the corners of his eyes. They made him look tired. Furrows on his brow spoke of long nights and the harsh truths. Experiences she'd never have. Her contact with El Reyes had been limited to this one encounter. Danny wanted to end their business dealings amicably and with an extra cushion of money. It wasn't supposed to end here, in a jail cell.

Even now, the Way patched itself along the synaptic pathways that she'd purposefully scarred. On a scale that no human eye could detect the system grew nanometer by nanometer along her nervous system. It started from the dead circles of skin on her fingertips, it sidled and intertwined around nerve cells and chained itself in long connections, as though her body was the oak tree and the Way the creeping strands of vines inside of her.

He would not be able to stop it. It was bad enough that he managed to link the Way to El Reyes, Danny would be disappointed that they hadn't managed to get further before discovery. Now, before things had solidified and moved global, now was when their plan was the most vulnerable.

The long silence dragged and he did what good men do when they're frustrated. He returned to the system he knew and understood. Her file – as though it contained all of the reasons and whys in her life.

“Your name is Elise Andrews.”

A history of her had to start with something. A name sufficed.

“What is your name?” She interrupted before he could say anything else.

“Detective Harding.”

The way he said it implied that he'd told her before but Elise couldn't place when.

“No first name, Detective?” A smile played around her lips, she could feel it, as though it wasn't a part of her but something placed there. It was beginning then. Not how she imagined it would be, Micheline thought that it would be organic, as though nothing changed, but Micheline had been wrong. Every movement felt enacted through some kind of buffer as though it took conscious thought for every motion to play out. She could see herself as though she looked down from above and marionetted herself from that distance.

“Graham,” it took him a while to answer and his eyes flicked to the glossy grey mirror that reflected both of them before he did.

Elise repeated his name, Graham, as though that defined him more than the blank nomenclature of detective. Graham, with his messy brown hair left too long and unkempt, the solid gold band around his finger that told her he was the kind of man who had someone to go home to, and who smelled of coffee and the faint musk of aftershave although his cheeks were unshaven.

“You still in there?”

She didn't realize how long it had been.

“Do you know where you are? Do you know what happened? You've been charged with intent to purchase and distribute. These drug charges aren't minor, Elise. You will go to prison.”

“Yes.” She could see the truth in the one-way mirror behind him, the dark black circles Crash wrote around her eyes in tissue dark with broken blood vessels. It ringed the inner tissue of her eyelids as though she'd pressed the kohl eyeliner too deep. Teenagers mimicked the effect, caught in the copy of drug use they didn't understand. She was a junkie. She'd made herself this way and drawn the circles herself with every prick of the needle against her skin.

“Elise, do you understand? Do you know where you are?”

“I know exactly where I am. Its October 25, 2155, you are Detective Graham Harding, I am Elise Andrews, and this...” She knew exactly where was but she couldn't remember how she'd gotten there. Only that flashing lights filled the night. Her respirator pulled loose so that she could smell the thick murk of pollution and taste the bitter flavor of cyanide from the misting rain. Doorways around her flashed orange with warnings. Other lights, vibrant reds, oranges and yellows filled the night. How had she gotten here?

“This is the Baltimore Police Department.”

“You had a future.” He told her. “An MIT student with graduate work in bio-molecular computers. A prestigious job with Advanced Bionics, shit, you're a founding member. What happened? Were you lonely and someone told you the drugs would make everything better? That it would fix all your problems and make the world a clearer

place? Or did you just fall in with the wrong crowd?" He grew gentle then as though he intended to lead her someplace. "Did the Way hook you on Crash?"

Her laugh was rough and uncharacteristic as it burst out of her. "You don't understand anything." Graham drew back as she took a deep breath and let it fill her until she thought she would never need to breathe again.

"I'm going to save the world."

1.

The heli banked to the left and flew just above the edge of the smog front which darkened visibility of the city below them. Rain fell past them and into the heavy clouds which brought the grime right back down onto Baltimore in a never-ending cycle. Up here though, the buildings glittered with flashing lights and vivid billboards that cut through the gritty darkness where ambient light could not. Miles of windows buttressed by steel composites telecast air quality warnings and advertisements for Vitality a new beverage that promised to energize and detoxify with every swallow.

“You ever try that shit?” Evon’s second in command, Sarasen Michiko asked him over the com. She leaned so hard against the chopper window that it looked like the slightest movement would send her out and tumbling through the air. “It tastes like licorice, and not in a good way.”

“No,” he was curt. “How long?”

“E.T.A. three minutes.” The pilot muttered through the comm.

“Have you prioritized our flight plan?”

“The entire way.” The pilot replied, unruffled by the edge of anger in Evon’s voice.

Michael Evon’s entire career was defined by a manufactured state of alert on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security. The nation was in a perpetual state of risk and he defended it aggressively against that threat.

The heli bucked as the air currents pushed the thick smog high and they lost fifty feet of altitude directly into the clouds. It dropped them towards the city skyline with

sickening speed, the city hunched low in front of them, tight against the horizon despite its relative size. The engine intake filters fought for purchase and then kicked up to the next gear and they regained height. Baltimore was short and crabbed where the framework of the city built over itself again and again like a shelled accumulation of structures. It lacked the beauty of Detroit's planned reconstruction and the majestic height of New York, instead it reminded Evon of a homeless man who added layer after layer of clothes as a way of concealment. Baltimore was a shit-hole.

“Have we got the uplinks from Home about the arrest?” He wanted to focus on the case.

Michiko nodded and unfurled her lapcoil. The shimmering plastic lit up with databytes of requested information. Although Evon could have just as easily accessed his own, Michiko had four chips in her frontal lobe tasked to draw pertinent information out of large pieces of data, something that would have taken an unmod three weeks. And most importantly, she worked for him, having people do the work for him established his authority better than any badge.

“No transcript of the questioning. Oh, I see. It's ongoing. But they've managed to update the arrest log. Elise Beth Andrews, Ph.D. Employee of Advanced Bionics and a founding member of the Way. Caught at the scene with seven members of El Reyes, a local drug gang, they've been making inroads against the Tovenars in New York. A few other unknowns and twenty-six kilos of Crash.” Michiko's voice took on a hint of reverence. “Nice bust.”

“Priors?”

“None.”

“Drug status?”

Michiko cocked an eyebrow, not at Evon, but at the man who sat directly across from her. Their UN observer scrolled through the same data on his own monitor. Jim Bradford grinned as he called up the mug shot and then again when Michiko caught him.

“I’ve seen worse. At least Crash leaves them pretty, not like methamphetamines.” His accent was pure London Estates but with a personality suited to his official title of liaison. Evon knew the title gave his observer’s presence the gloss of propriety. The United States would not allow direct oversight by the United Nations, but since the cessation of hostilities, it was an unspoken rider in the 2030 Gyachung Kang treaty that liaisons were allowed on cases of interest. Bradford might ride along but he ended up as complicit as every one of Evon’s men, Evon made sure of it.

Evon’s official charge from DHS was to ensure the safety of the nation from all enemies, foreign and domestic. UN oversight or not, Evon made sure the priority was never forgotten. The Way fit both definitions the minute they rose to financial prominence; the actual cross-border expansion just sealed his authority.

Evon glanced over the file again. The Way ran off the charisma of its figurehead, Kartmandanick Patel, called Danny, who held CEO titles at both the Way and Advanced Bionics, an accomplishment at 26 when he’d started them, a daunting empire at 34. He might cloak himself in fashionably popular biotech models, give out half of the company’s gross as donations, and reenergize the worst parts of the city but there was rot somewhere inside of it all. Evon knew that from the moment he was given the mandate from politicians who found that a company without a true board of directors and no lobbyists made it an uncontrollable cipher. It might be hidden better than most, but it was

his task to locate the soft spot. This arrest would be the break they were looking for. Not only was Elise Andrews a member of the Way she was reputed to be in Patel's inner circle of intellectuals that he'd known in college. A crack at the top, a Crash user, resonated with the promise of deeper flaws.

"Pretty or not, she's the in we need." Evon looked at her picture clinically and turned his view back to the city skyline. Lights glimmered in stages, neon up here, and dropped lower, redder, as though they zoomed away from him with every passing second.

Michiko perused her data. "This arrest is the first indication of drug use I can find. Pictures of her from three months ago are clean." She spun the coil toward him so he could see the photographs of Elise. In them she was dressed in elegant sheathed gowns, several times in companion to Danny Patel and the statuesque Micheline Dumont. Elise had large, wide set eyes that gave her face an abnormal cast but balanced with her nose she looked vaguely Roman, an archaic genotype for this hemisphere. In those pictures there was no sign that she'd been using Crash back then, nor the others around her.

"Three months ago?"

"The last time I can find pictures of her in public. She's described as a quiet woman. Not too friendly, aloof even, but she's a patent holder on half the AI programs. It looks like she used to be a pretty regular attendee at these charity dinners. Almost always with Patel, although a few times it looks like she was his representative for the company or the Way. But since three months ago, nothing. Like she dropped off the radar."

Michiko ran her fingers against the coil and tried to pull up additional information. "I'm not showing anything for her after that point. No visits to the doctor, nothing publicly accessible."

“Can you pull work records?” Bradford asked, although he knew the answer perfectly well.

“Not without a warrant and Patel is influential enough that we’re going to need a pretty solid warrant.”

Evon considered the information, let it roll through his mind and percolate there. Recent drug use. Now why would they allow that to happen? He knew that the Way donated considerable amounts of money to drug rehab centers, even had a few that were so elite that entrance required more than his annual salary.

The pilot glanced back for the first time as the heli angled in on the Baltimore Police Department’s rooftop. He’d been talking almost non-stop to the air traffic controller and now there was a pause as he made his approach and clicked over so that his passengers could hear him. “Red alert for air quality. You’ll want to engage your respirators before we land.”

“Got it.” Evon grabbed the corner of his respirator and snugged it on. Like the rest of his uniform it was emblazoned with the crimson logo the signified their main tenets: Security, Protection and Preservation. The red-on-navy looked particularly menacing under the full hood respirators they used on mission. For now, the heavy kits were en route with the rest of his team while he and Michiko made contact with local PD.

“Their Chief wants to do a quick meet and greet.” Michiko told him. “Jimmy will be on the ground in forty-five minutes.”

“What’s taking him so long?”

Her look said several things that she didn't need to repeat to him, not in front of Bradford, but she satisfied herself with, "If you hadn't booked out of NYC like it was the end of the world he'd be on this chopper with us. Forty-five minutes."

"Tell him to meet us inside."

"Already messaged."

The sleek Beteli helicopter set down with a single bump on the X'ed platform. Evon threw the door open and paused as he got a blast of chilly afternoon air. Wet and thick with the smell of mildew, like the whole damn town was crawling with mold spores. His nose curled up and he almost grumbled that the respirator wasn't working properly. "Stay on station." He snapped to the pilot. "They give you any problems and you route them directly to the Chief."

The pilot gave him a snappy salute, his true expressions hidden behind the full helmet he wore. "Yes, Lead Agent."

Evon's belly tensed with the certainty that he was going to blow the Way wide open just as soon as he got his hands on the woman in the pictures. He remembered the last one Michiko had pulled up. Elise was frozen in laughter in the photo where she clung to Danny Patel's arm as diamonds glittered at her throat and ears. She was the kind of woman who was accustomed to wealth and privilege, he was certain of it, and those always broke first. The growing worry that she might be as complicit as Patel crossed his mind as he strode across the roof, he might know cults, but he also knew women. The thought that she might be like Mathilda had to be shut away and denied entry into his mind.

The door to the interrogation room shut behind him and a half second later the door to the adjacent room slammed open and Nathalie Vargas spun in, pissed off and fuming. Her long black hair halo'ed out around her head as she hissed so vehemently that the assistant D.A. recoiled. Graham wasn't a big man but the diminutive Latina managed to make him look fragile in front of her frustration. They'd both changed into civilian clothes after the raid, but the dress slacks didn't make her look any less dangerous.

"Juro a Dios y la Virgen María. Juro sobre los huesos de mi madre. I voy a..."

"Not going well?"

"'No hablo.' Is what that little piece of crap says to me. *No hablo. No hablo espanol. No hablo ingles.* I'm going to *no hablo* him right up the fucking wall. Thinks he can play games with me just because I'm a woman." Nathalie snarled, an expression that turned her round face into one worthy of the most homicidal dictator. "Turn the tapes off because I am going to ram his *diminutos heuvos mexicanos* through the wall."

"I'll trade you for a crazy junkie." Graham gave the kid from legal a push towards the door. "Out for a minute. We'll let you know when we're ready to start again. And despite Officer Vargas's lovely choice of phrases she won't physically harm our suspect."

The young man didn't look like he believed Graham but let himself out. Through the windows Graham could see into both rooms. Two other cops had come in to help with interrogations and were in the suite across the hall where Graham had no doubt they were just as frustrated. El Reyes hadn't given them anything to work with in five years

and he doubted they were going to start now. They'd moved into Baltimore almost fifty years earlier, but hadn't got a foothold until the fires. They'd burned down the city twice and half the population vanished in the interim, which left plenty of room for new immigrants to solidify their hold on the criminal enterprises left vacant. The Baltimore that Graham vaguely remembered from his childhood, old row houses, Orioles stadium, and the black water of the bay were consumed and rebuilt, consumed and reconfigured, until he couldn't trust the accuracy of any of his memories without a photo to back them up.

"*Muy bonita.*" Nathalie looked in at the junkie. "I think you got the better deal, boss."

"She's not all there." He sighed, picked up the coffee cup left by the kid from legal and frowned at the rim of lipstick the boy had left there. "He didn't look sway."

She sniffed at the stained coffee cup and frowned. "Scented limoncello, I think. Too bad, he was kind of cute. So you've got the nutjob and I've got the loyal soldier. How come we took these jobs again? I mean if it was just busting drugs I'm good, but this interrogation crap, these guys won't roll. El Reyes owns them."

"You've just got to work at them." He watched Elise through the glass, she sat patiently in the chair and waited for him to return. Nathalie underestimated things, he decided, she wasn't just *bonita*, his wife Wendy was *bonita*, a girl next door who had grow steadily into a mature woman, neither beautiful nor ugly, just older.

"I can't figure out where she went wrong. She's well off. There shouldn't be any reason..." He paused. "Unless somewhere in that perfect life she thought something was missing."

The thought resonated in him. Something missing. There shouldn't be any reason the thought gut-punched him like a cheap shot, but it hit dead center where he'd been pretending that nothing was wrong. He tried to push it aside but it was still there.

"Take a deep breath." He advised Nathalie even though she didn't need it. She'd been ready to advance for three years but resisted the promotions. It was the only sign of her insecurity and when Graham spoke privately with the Chief, he lamented her perception that she hadn't proven herself yet. Not that he wanted to get rid of her, but his career had stagnated just like his life and if she waited too long she'd end up just like him. He winced at the thought.

"Quit trying to get them to break with El Reyes. Focus on *la muchacha* and where she fits into everything. She's got no loyalty to El Reyes, tell them that she rolled. And get the kid back in here before he starts imagining things."

He walked back into the room.

Elise turned her wide eyes on him and he was surprised to see that they were clear. No sign of the high he would have sworn she was still riding. "I was wondering if you'd come back."

It was a strange thing for her to say and it made him feel slightly off-kilter.

"So you were pretty young when you started Advanced Bionics with Kartmandanick Patel and Christopher Martinez." He stumbled over Patel's name and saw her smile as he did.

"He goes by Danny." The correction was gentle, as though this was a casual conversation in the elevator. "And yes, but we're not the first to begin our careers in grad school."

“Starting a company, especially bio-tech is stressful. Too much stress maybe, long hours in the lab and in the office. It happens, hell, it happens to all of us. Suddenly it feels like there’s no time and too much to be done and you’re married to the desk in front of you. But you need to keep up the pace, and so someone offered you a little Crash at an office party, or maybe that’s how the Way brings you inner peace. It’s been done before. Drugs as the ultimate connection to a higher power.” But there was no flicker of truth as he spoke, nothing that made her betray the real reasons of her addiction.

“Do you love your wife?” The question came out of left field.

Graham expanded the space between them as though physical distance would protect him. It was an odd way to think about what was happening. “We’re not talking about me.”

Her eyes stayed fixed on him and he knew that they were reflected in the glass behind him as well, black-rimmed as though a demented artist had lined the insides of the lashes with black rot. She might be a victim but there was no sense of the victim about her, not in any way that he could tell, and he began to wonder who she really was. The way her head tilted to the side as though she watched him more than the other way around.

“I’m trying to help you.” He used it like a shield instead of the support he needed it to be. “Let me help you. Who gave you the Crash? Who sent you to El Reyes? Why were you there?”

“You’re married.” The words were not what she wanted to say, but she kept them soft like she soothed a feral puppy. The way Chris spoke to her when they’d thought that nothing was ever going to work right in the data algorithms and had to talk her out of the emitters to eat or to rest. “I assume that you love your wife.”

“My wife isn’t why we’re here.”

“If I had someone that I loved. A wife. A family. I would do anything for them to ensure that they were safe, even if it meant that I might have to do bad things. Don’t you agree? To protect them, you would do almost anything.”

“No,” Harding was firm. “There are lines that you don’t cross.”

He’d lost control of the interview, Elise could see it as clearly as if were tangible in her hands. A line tied the two of them together and she had taken it and looped it around her own hands to lead him on. Some would have used it to obscure and confuse but she wanted the opposite. Data was clarity. Facts were malleable but data allowed full comprehension.

“I wish you were right. I wish that you were right and I was wrong. But we all cross lines, on a daily basis, sometimes by the second. For some people all you need is their price, for others just to know their dreams gives you the power. And at the end, you realize that there are no lines, they’re illusions.” Elise laid her hands out where he could see them and barely recognized her own blunt manicured nails. “The thing that we need might be unclear. It might be hidden under all the layers of what we’ve been told is right and wrong – when it’s not. No one stamps right and wrong into the concrete and says that

‘This is’ and cannot be undone.” Her words came more quickly and she forgot to breathe. “Here we are. You and I sitting here, as though nothing exists outside but we know what’s there. Pollution, crime, overcrowding, hate. These are the things that the Way would drive back. We may have crossed a line, but there is a reason. Something greater than me, or you, or any single person.”

“You don’t owe them anything.”

“I choose to do this.” She shot back.

The door slammed open and Elise jerked. She did not know the man standing there but recognized his uniform. It was too soon. If Homeland Security was onto them then there was very little time left. Urgency filled her, drove adrenaline like a tsunami through her veins until she was afraid that she would burst with the sudden frightening desperation.

“This interview is over.” The Agent growled the words at the Detective and expected to be obeyed.

She stared at him, memorized the pugilist’s face with short brown hair combed forward. This moment with the enemy might be the only time she had to warn Danny and the others of what was coming. So she focused on him and the neurons in her brain traced their own representation of him in a nanosecond, turned the image into a flash of chemicals so tiny that it was almost unimaginable to her mind. Neurons sent and accepted the information in a wave of complexity that was less binary than reflexive analog. The memory formed inside of the silver sheath of nanoparticles where they had threaded themselves throughout her brain. His face was carved into permanent recall and the last connections between the Way and her own brain were made in the deep recesses and

folds of tissue. It was chance, serendipity, the catalyst sparked by the fear he inspired in her.

At that moment, the Way came online. Elise knew it as surely as if she'd given birth in the stark and artificial cell.

Her awareness seemed cleaner, more stable, but who she was, Elise, the indefinable part, was still there. She was still there. Her hands rose up and she remembered touching the static filled hub, the shock as she laid each finger against the retaining tank. Nanoparticles leapt between the tank and her skin, burrowed deep through the skin cells and found the first afferent neurons in her fingertips and laid claim to them. This was the moment that she waited for. She'd carried the Way to this point and now nothing, not even this arrogant man from DHS would be able to stop them.

Harding was squared off with the federal agent. She didn't think he understood yet, but there was no more time. She reached out for the link with the BRAIS system that was the kernel of the Way, but it wasn't there. Bolt lightning rushed along the duplicated pathways, magnified under the nano-sheaths that traced her nervous system and sent pain in a pulse of radiation ahead of them.

Elise screamed.

She screamed to let the pain out, but there was so much. So many nerves shrieked inside of her body, babbled, pounded, threw themselves against the limits of every receptor and all she could do was scream.

4.

Graham spun as Elise cried out and her body arched backwards in spasms. It threw her over, her feet caught against the edge of the table, bare legs flew out, her neck and head extended out in back-breaking curvature. And then she hit the floor. No grace, no innate protection saved her. Her skull rebounded off the painted grey concrete with the same intensity as a shotgun blast. It took him forever, every step a long second in execution, to reach the emergency call button next to the door. He punched it and spun back to her.

Her body seized on the floor as he slid next to her. The agent watched it all with cold detachment as Graham straightened her carefully and slid one hand underneath her head. Her skull jumped and drove his fingers into the ground but her ignored the sharp twinge. With his hand in place he dragged her away from the table. Her body fought him as it twisted and shuddered like something rode her.

All of the haunting beauty was gone. Dipped into the acid bath of agony, she looked like the rest of junkies that wandered Crack Alley and the 17th street bypass as they cruised for Crash or smack or whatever drain cleaner substitute they could pour into their veins. Hundreds of shiftless and aimless wanderers with their hollow eyes undercut by the black tracing of drugs.

She seemed different, he thought, as he held her and tried to keep the seizure from smashing her brains out across the floor.

It took him a second to realize she'd stopped breathing.

“Do something!” He barked at the agent. The man watched like it was some sort of vaguely entertaining telenovela. “Get the paramedics in here!”

He laid her body out, pressed her hands gently across her chest. There was no fragile pulse of breath. No flutter of blood flow in the long line of her neck. No warmth as the room sucked it out of her.

He’d left his CPR mask in the patrol car with no thought that he’d need it here. He didn’t hesitate as he tilted her chin back and breathed for her. She tasted of blood, a thought that should have worried him, but he ignored it to fill her lungs with air. Then, palm over palm, he pumped his weight against her heart. The insistent force to remind it to beat, to live, one after another, as though persistence would turn it away from the path that it was on.

The door swung open but he didn’t turn. It was time to breathe for her again. And he did, his mouth pressed against hers as though it was all she’d need to wake up. Come back, he thought, you can’t die.

Hands slid next to him, department EMTs, replaced him first on one side and then the other. Finally they shifted and forced him out of the space as they went to work. The brilliant red bag was open by Elise’s head, as they supplemented hands and breath with an oxygen mask and then a defibrillator onto the bare skin of her chest. Graham hadn’t noticed they’d cut away her dress, but she still didn’t breathe, her chest lay motionless despite everything.

The younger one glanced up at him as the older man pronounced ‘Clear!’ and shocked her for the first time. “You gave CPR?”

“Yes.”

The flash of worry didn't go unnoticed.

“Sir, I'd recommend a full screening panel.” His words didn't stop his rote actions as they worked on Elise. They shocked her again and with a single thrust he inserted an IV into her flaccid veins and opened it wide.

“Almost got her that time.” The older EMT, a man whose name Graham could almost place, readjusted the feeds. “Ready? Clear.” Her body lifted off the ground and set back down, but this time, there was the corresponding beep as the monitor picked up endogenous signal. Her signal. “There we go.” He sounded of satisfaction.

“We're seeing a lot of junkies with Multiples.”

Graham had almost forgotten he was talking with the younger man. “Multiples?” He remembered the taste of blood on her lips, her teeth must have cut through skin in the fall.

“You should get tested.”

He realized who would be terrified of the exposure, belatedly, he should have thought of Wendy first. Even if it proved to be false she would use it as proof that he wasn't as devoted to the life growing inside of her as she was. The fragile life that she sustained, after so many failed attempts, with sheer determination, support groups, and the insistence that nothing mattered more than the baby. She'd take the news as the ultimate betrayal. “Shit.”

“Good pulse,” the declaration rang out in the room. “But synaptic activity is all over the place. Run some valium and let's see if we can get the seizure under control. Pulse is 183 over 110. Airway established. It looks like we're getting some attempts at

spontaneous breathing. Crash addict. Approximately 30-35 years old. Caucasian female. 120 give or take ten.”

Graham realized that the paramedic was speaking into the implanted comlink in his cheek. They lifted her onto the collapsible stretcher that self-opened behind them while they were working. He just stood there.

“Was she exhibiting any symptoms before the seizure and cardiac arrest?”

“Detective? Do you have any idea what caused the seizure?”

“No,” he hadn’t heard the question until it was repeated. “She’s on Crash but she seemed lucid right up until the last moment. When she seized,” he tried to replay it in his mind but all he could remember was the heavy thud of bone on concrete, “she hit her head on the floor.”

“Additional information,” the paramedic intoned and his comlink reopened.

“Possible head trauma caused by seizure. End.” He turned back to Graham. “What level hold?”

“Six.”

It surprised Graham to hear the federal agent speak and pissed him off. Six was what they used for high-level gang operatives and the mafia, it provided a double layer of security and judicial use of sedatives, but was a tool that had no purpose except punishment.

“I don’t see any call...”

“This investigation has just become a federal matter.”

“Bullshit.” Graham didn’t back down despite the other man’s lunge that brought him into range. The agent had a few inches on him, more than a few, and the pounds to

back them up. He wasn't going to though. Out in the wild Evon would have pissed on his shoes but here he got an awkward stand-off. Graham wasn't going to let this man with his presumption of power take the case away from him. "This is my case and I don't give a fuck who you are or whether it matters to someone else in another city. This is my case and my witness."

The agent opened the edge of his jacket, thick fingers reaching inside for a black wallet that he flipped open to show Graham. The interior badge read 'Homeland Security' in a hologinated font. It was the straight that trumped his full house but Graham didn't move.

"We've all got badges." He snapped and saw fury reflected in the man's eyes.

"I am Lead Agent Michael Evon and I don't think you realize what you've caught. This woman is one of the masterminds behind an international criminal organization."

The paramedics pulled Elise's still form past them and Graham fought to control the rage that built inside of him. Sedation coupled with the bloodless color of her lips, blood that he'd tasted, would kill her. He wasn't a doctor and didn't have any medical training but he'd seen it happen before. A mastermind? She felt determined in interview but not lethal, not megalomaniacal, or any of the other variations on criminal insanity he'd seen in thirty years of police work.

"Not six, but I want a biomarker implant." He asserted to the paramedics, and then, justified himself to Evon. "I haven't seen any evidence of intent. I think she knows something, but what kind of woman goes to a fucking drug warehouse in a five thousand

dollar dress and heels? Alone? The kind who doesn't know that kind of life. I don't see any evidence that she's involved in the business end of El Reyes."

Irritation swept across the agent's face. An expression that read, *who the fuck do you think you are?* "We'll need a secure room and you'll have to contact your Chief. I'd already spoken to her when I was assured of your *complete* cooperation."

"No one mentioned that to me."

Evon's face curled and his chin dropped as though he was readying himself for the ring instead of this. Graham almost took a step back under the threat and he hated himself for. His shoulders squared suddenly even though he knew that physically he was outmatched. He had something to protect and it showed in the determined set of his eyes as he retook that foot of space.

"She is my suspect," Graham said softly.

"There is something bigger here." Evon's voice was tense. "Your questioning was leading you down that path until she got the better of you. The Way is connected to El Reyes."

"The Way is not Elise." Even as Graham said it the realization hit him. Evon wasn't wrong about the interrogation, and despite the urge to think that Elise was innocent, she had manipulated the conversation in a way that the truly naïve wouldn't have done. It ached inside of his gut to be taken advantage of but a tiny part of him wanted Evon to be wrong, that Elise had been what he first imagined her as.

"It's my case," Graham took a step past him. "Until the Chief says otherwise."

He left the room in time to see the paramedics push the gurney into the elevator. An oxygen tent covered Elise's face and they'd pulled a sheet to conceal the fancy dress

Graham had just called on as proof of her innocence. For a moment he thought she might wake up and open her eyes to look at him, that she might say it was all a mistake, the drugs, the Way, and choose another life. Except that it never happened. No one got a second chance, no one ever got to just walk away from their life, but he looked at her and wondered.



Elise's body passed out of the broadcast interference zone in holding as the paramedics rode with her in the elevator upwards. The BRAIS inside her body reached out and grabbed the wireless signal strength. Even without active input from the host, it began to broadcast a heavily encoded signal. It didn't have the connection support to transmit more than basic information, but for a mayday, it was enough.

The DHS team cramped into a tiny office just outside of the massive bullpen of the Investigative Division. Evon's anger writhed and coiled off his skin as though its surface temperature spiked with every passing moment. No one stood up to Homeland Security. No one stood up to him, especially not some insignificant city cop who looked like he was riding the edge of fifty-and-life in service to the department.

"Give me stats." He spat and wasn't surprised to hear the harshness of his voice, he was surprised that it wasn't thicker and more malignant. His emotions felt too violent to be contained.

Michiko took it all in stride as she flexed the coil against the desk and leaned over it. Smooth black hair fell forward over her shoulders and she pushed several folders aside to have a smooth surface. The detective they'd evicted stalked outside of the door until Bradford stepped outside to explain that the man wasn't coming back in.

"And?" His temper rode on the edge of fraying. No one had stood up to him in a very long time, not when men could lose their very careers over the liberty of speaking out. "Psych eval. Dirt. Give me something."

"I thought we were here about the girl." Bradford's question was smooth and even-toned. The question didn't give his intent away.

"The girl he's protecting? Fuck her, she's already dead." Evon felt his hands shake as he fought to control the anger. No one stood up to him and got in the way. The feelings were strange, uncomfortable, and he wanted to tear through the flimsy walls of the office and rip Harding from one end of the station to the other. To stand against him

was standing against the government, against the people, against everything he stood for and he'd fought too hard and too long to allow anyone to compromise the sanctity of that. Homeland Security protected the nation, not the rights of puissant drug dealers and users. He was the sword for a higher purpose.

"I'm not getting much," Michiko's eyes twitched rapidly as she scrolled through the information. Her DHS log-in gained access to police files, bank statements, and medical history on both Harding and his wife. "You're not going to believe this, but he looks clean. All the money spent on his wife is accounted for. She worked for a few years and built up some savings." Michiko shrugged almost apologetically. "Boss, I've got nothing that will fly."

"No one is perfect."

"Didn't say that." She adjusted the collar of her suit and her fingers caught on her pin. It took a moment of fumbled fingertips to straighten it back out. "But everything I'm pulling is minor. We could press on that but it won't hold up."

Evon looked away from her to Bradford. There were things that the team had done in the past that would solve their problem now but he was never sure how far he could push the man. They had enough dirt to make Bradford wiggle the line of acceptability but Evon hadn't ever determined when that stopped. Michiko wasn't just skilled with locating information but with its manipulation in a curved or linear fashion, whatever the situation required. Sometimes they just needed a little more pressure. The man was like a fucking leash around his throat that held him back from the job he needed to do.

"Show me medical then."

He stepped over her shoulder to watch as she collated information on Graham and the wife. It was amazing what he could learn about someone from how often they had their prostate checked. The wife would be his weakness. Fertilization attempt after attempt, the way women were so set on procreation that nothing else mattered. And it looked like the cop had just taken all the financial hits from her obsession and lived with them. No vacations except for her. No expensive toys or fancy dinners out on his take-home pay, just slavish devotion to paying the medical bills. Evon had less respect for a man who could be led around by the balls, but it might explain the cop's defense of the girl. A pretty junkie who pulled at his heartstrings. He would try to protect her the way he gave in to his wife.

"You push him on the wife and he's going to go on the defensive." Michiko said softly and it disturbed him to realize that they were so close. The scent of jasmine rose off her skin like steam on hot tarmac, there was no avoiding it.

He knew Bradford saw him jerk away from her and controlled himself before he snarled out loud.

She noticed as well but turned away as her lapcoil signaled to her. "They're here."

"Keep digging. And start data pulls on Elise Andrews and Patel."

By the sudden twitch of her eyes he knew that she'd already pulled all available data. Michiko was quick, he'd give her that, but he needed more or the cop was going to get the upper hand.

"Go through her medical files. That kind of desperation opens her to questionable behavior. Find it."

"You'll use the wife to go after Harding?" Bradford's question seemed innocuous.

“It’s acceptable procedure.”

“Acceptable?” The word had so many nuances that Evon ignored them and went for the important interpretation. It was a landmine to answer, but he had to. Bradford had seen his file.

“You know it’s acceptable.”

“Because of your wife.”

Evon felt the anger ripple down his arms and concentrate in his fists. It would be so easy to shut Bradford up, but he knew what that would mean. Every threat, no matter its source, could be dealt with in time. He forced himself to relax, to uncurl finger after finger, and to drop his shoulders back from the ready position.

He didn’t say anything else. There were bigger fish to beat down, it was just a matter of time until he reeled them in.

Graham wasn't surprised to see that Evon came in backed by another man, a thuggish type with heavy broad shoulders and knuckles that did rounds with suspects more frequently than any cop. Behind the brawler and the tall Korean woman, the UN observer stood apart, marked by the tiny flash of round silver light from his collar lapel, but there was no sympathy in his eyes as he surveyed the room.

DHS stood on one side of the conference room. Cops on the other. Battered furniture stood between them. Where the interrogation room was purposefully barren and hardened to set prisoners on edge, the conference room was littered with coffee stains, rude pictures from the holiday party pinned to flashboard, and a wall screen that was out-of-date ten years ago when the department purchased it. Air handlers fought to eliminate the odors but couldn't quite suck the old sweat and stale pizza from the room. It was either pitiful that every copshop looked the same or purposeful, Graham liked to think it was the latter like going home to a comfortable recliner.

Every cop called to the meeting moved to their seats, so familiar to them that the cheap padding had long since conformed to their flesh. Several of the Vice detectives had brought their Harlans with them, tiny microcomputers linked to the mainframe. Most were like Graham's and had divots in the primary screen where arrestee after arrestee pressed their index finger for identification. Compared to the slick and shiny hardware of the UN team, it was obvious where the country's money was being spent.

Graham had only seen lapcoils advertised, the cost was out of his reach even if he'd wanted one. The payments needed to keep Wendy and the baby safe ate his salary down to necessity driven levels.

Everyone glanced up as the Chief came in last. A redhead with slim eyes and height that towered over most of them, Graham included. She nodded to him as primary and surveyed the group before her. Despite the obvious conclusion that they would be unable to stop federal control of their suspect, the Chief acted like their presence was at her bequest. She'd allowed their first meeting to take place in private, but now that the gauntlet had been thrown, it was public so that there would be witnesses, a requirement lost on no one. Her chair was the only new one in the room and she folded herself into it cautiously, a cup of coffee at her fingertips, as she acknowledged each of her officers in turn, starting with Graham and his team. Finally she turned to Agent Evon and formally acknowledged him in front of the room.

“Agent.”

It was a less than subtle performance and Graham could feel Vargas stifle a snort next to him. He restrained himself but the situation teetered on the brink. Elise was alive, for the moment. He had no idea if she'd make it through the night and neither did the doctors, a thought that was reluctant to leave his mind. She was just a suspect, he told himself, but it nagged at him anyway.

“All right,” the Chief said, her New York boroughs accent making it clear that she was a Baltimore transplant. “Who's going to explain this clusterfuck to me?”

Evon cleared his throat, a sound that gained him no supporters and got to his feet. “I am Agent Michael Evon of Homeland Security.”

“Yes,” the Chief interrupted. “We gathered that from your uniform and your entirely unpleasant introduction to my officers.”

It ruffled him. “I’m assigned to assess the stability and possible criminal activities of the group identifying themselves as the Way.”

His words sparked a flurry of movement in the room and someone muttered under their breath. “Guilt by fear.” A crime that needed no proof.

The screen behind him came to life, Graham noticed that it was manipulated by the tech with him, a woman with an almost indistinguishable profile from where her head was bowed low over the lapcoil. It showed a triangle of pictures. The top one was the public offering of stock for Advanced Bionics, it showed Danny Patel in front of the company logo and the words emblazoned behind him: *Think and grow*. The next photo was of Danny, Elise, and a third man whom Evon identified as Chris Martinez. They were young in the photo, early twenties, posed with the brash arrogance of three individuals who had just seen their lives open ahead of them. Except that they were not celebrating the success of Advanced Bionics success but the start of the Way. All three wore the necklace that Graham remembered seeing around Elise’s neck. The men’s were more subtle where hers reminded him of a cloudburst. The third picture was a grainy surveillance photo and as they watched it morphed into the digitally-enhanced version where the man, now obviously Danny Patel, met with Antonio Salvares, head of *Reyes de la Noche*, El Reyes, the Kings of Baltimore.

Graham felt his heart sink. He was going to lose this case to the feds and the implications of that weren’t significant to him, but they would be to Elise. They could

hold her on a Level 6, or toss her into the bowels of Ft. Williams where no one would ever hear from her again. Federal control meant civil rights were suspended.

His inability to separate himself from the concern was not something he understood. There shouldn't have been any empathy. He'd been on the force too long to think that he could save every junkie who came through the doors. After the first year, most officers didn't even try as it was an exercise in futility. Baltimore, regardless of the district, was a haven for drugs and crime and poverty. As though the sludge of pollution met the high-rise towers and slid right back to the streets. Cruelty sucked out compassion until the only thing that held them in place was a paycheck.

Sometimes the exact district changed the drug and manner of distribution, but there wasn't anyplace that didn't have something sold in the stairways and dark corners. They all knew what happened. A junkie walked out of jail, out of rehab, out of the hospital wearing the functional but basic MBR-150 respirator. Fifteen minutes later they sold it to get their next hit. There was no such thing as a fairy tale ending. It was all a race to death whether through overdose or PICOPD from lung failure.

Elise was a stranger and yet he wanted her to live.

Evon was still talking. "Patel, Andrews, and Martinez founded Advanced Bionics in college and by all accounts both they and the company's products are cutting edge and highly successful as evidenced by the company's profit base of fifteen billion. Martinez is now dead, Andrews on Crash, but Patel is a well-known philanthropist, giving away almost as much money as he brings in. Maybe he is the smart one or the lucky one. Or maybe something else is going on. The quest for power isn't just about money. By all accounts, Mr. Patel had no religious attachments prior to his founding of the Way. None

of them did. Their company is one of the leaders in their industry and has been for almost seven years.”

“The Way is considered to be a beneficial group. Their transparency is why Baltimore Council gave them permission to operate.” The Chief’s voice cut through the brief pause. “We’ve had no trouble with them or the social programs they’ve started and their work with disadvantaged teens has actually led to an upswing in graduation rates.” She took a breath. “Despite the recent arrests that cast them in a bad light, I see nothing to tie them to a greater conspiracy. Many men are brought down by drugs.”

“Some of your officers believe that the Way is a distributor.”

“Some of my officers believe in *la chupacabra*, Mr. Evon. It’s very difficult to tell when the drugs enter the cycle but I can’t see the point in handing them out with the left hand and sending them to rehab with the right.”

Vargas shifted uncomfortably next to him, her face tight.

“Elise Andrews is the key,” Evon said. The screen shifted behind them. Financial records, public memos, a scan of the tract the Way left on park benches and bus stops, then, a pathology report on the death of Chris Martinez. Thirty when he died. A mysterious accident in Advanced Bionics that Danny Patel refused to explain. It was obvious that those involved were grief stricken, the funeral photos, again done by surveillance, were the faces of friends in shock at their loss. “We can’t get to Patel. Corporate laws protect him far more capably than they should. With Martinez’s death Patel became the majority shareholder in Advanced Bionics and last year he convinced Andrews to sell him all but ten percent of her stock.”

“I still don’t see any proof.”

Evon grew frustrated. He paced back and forth as though he would rather be going forty rounds in the ring with the Chief than having to answer to her. “I do have the authority to take the witness and restrict you from any further involvement in this case.”

“Do it,” the Chief dared him. “And every news agency in this country will be on your doorstep. I’m not arguing that there may be something else going on. But I will be damned if you think you can walk into my city and raise hell with two organizations that actually do some good. Give me some evidence. Not just one or two bad apples, I want to see evidence of intentional malfeasance. Any judge in the country would throw this case out, which is half the reason you never bother to prosecute your cases. You just throw them in the Fort and forget about them, pretend that they really were guilty. Not today.” The Chief was angry and it brought color to her alabaster skin.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

The Chief slammed her hand down on the table. “You do *not* get to threaten me.” Her fingers skittered over her Harlan and Evon’s presentation was super-ceded by a feed from the capitol. The news agency’s scrolling feed at the bottom of the screen educated all present on the Chief’s ability to face him down. Homeland Security was under investigation for overreaching their authority and power in fifteen different cases. Common knowledge finally pressed too far and forced the government to act.

“I will cooperate with your investigation as will my officers, but you are not in charge.” Her words silenced the room. “Lt. Harding?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Graham schooled his voice to blandness.

“You remain lead in this investigation. You will work hand-in-hand with Agent Evon’s men, sharing information with them, but any decisions about large scale action come through me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“This meeting is adjourned. All officers present are now assigned to this task force to investigate whether there is a link between Advanced Bionics, the Way and El Reyes. Harding, in my office. Now.”

7.

There were several things she knew and the first one was that things had gone horribly wrong. It was like *Dias de los Muertos*, the parade chanting through the streets, but they did not hold up the pasty white skeletons with their bobbing skulls. Each marcher carried the limp and bloody body of someone she knew. Danny with blood running from his hands, scored by pollutants that burned and filleted the skin from his flesh. Micheline, beautiful Micheline, held aloft but not high enough and her long bare legs dragged against the ground. And the others – Andressa, Cairo, James, Gavin – they drooped against their bearers while their eyes dripped the black decay of Crash down flaccid cheeks. And last, even the forlorn body of Chris came through borne on the backs of others, his brain gashed and open to the world.

Elise watched it all and could not contain herself. She wept for all of them. Hot angry tears that burned at her eyes and when she went to wipe them away she found her fingertips stained a deep black that would not come off. The sensation of rolling and being at sea intensified and she realized that she was being carried along by the crowd. Her back was pinned to the wooden frame but not tightly enough to keep her weight from pulling her forward, gravity tugging against meat and bone. She fought against it, the thing holding her in place and the fear of falling.

“A manifestation of grief and fear.” Chris said next to her as his dead eyes opened and looked right at her. Death sucked away the fatty lining of the body, pulling skin tight against the cheekbones and promising worse in the future. But when he turned and hid the exposed brain tissue by the cant of his face, he looked just like the man she’d always

known. As though the event of his death rolled back the stress and frustration of the last years of his life and returned them to when they'd first met. "Hello, Elise."

"Chris," she whispered. As though this were a coffee shop they'd gathered at to have a normal conversation. Except that normal conversations had been so hard for her until the very end. "What are we doing here?"

"This day won't happen for three more weeks. I assume you're associating with this because of El Reyes, an interesting, although ultimately unuseful synaptic pathway."

This wasn't Chris and she choked to hear it. He noticed and life sparked in those eyes, as the mere recollection of another man, refreshed him and brought him closer to the truth.

It had been four years since his death and she did not want to remember him like this. With words that were not his own planted inside of his mouth. This might be a shallow reflection of the public Chris who taught classes on neuro-anatomy and physiology and startled the world with his brilliance. But it was not the private Chris who told jokes and pulled her hair when she wasn't looking. The man who lay on her bed and told her stories about ridiculous adventures that he'd never had, trying to make her smile or believe him. Elise wanted to cry but did not know how. In death, she did not want to lose the way she remembered him. Not if this was all that she would have left of her best friend, in the end, she would rather have nothing.

"I'm not really Chris." He said to her as streamers popped overhead and showered them with red confetti. "But I felt that it would cause less psycho-trauma to enter your consciousness in a form that you found familiar. You worked so hard to seem human to Harding."

Fireworks scattered and popped at their feet but the parade marchers kept walking, ignoring the sparks and the smell of gunpowder. Between the sky full of falling trails and the fire underneath, she felt caught in a world she did not understand.

“You’re a special case, aren’t you?” Chris watched her calmly, his thick black hair in desperate need of a comb and a trim.

“You’re dead,” she said it quietly but the crowd caught hold of it and the whisper became a mournful chant.

“Usted es muertos. Usted es muertos.”

“Stop it!!” Elise screamed and thrashed on her cross. “Just stop it! You are dead! Dead, Chris! You’re dead and you are not my Chris.” Her words lost strength and she no longer shuddered when the fireworks leapt up through the air to concuss at waist level.

“You are not my Chris.” She could barely find the energy to breathe.

He reached up and plucked a crimson streamer from the air and when his hands touched it, he clutched a marigold between his fingers. They were now falling all around them, a shower so thick that Elise could not see the spectators in the balconies. “This day was supposed to be a joyous celebration.” The flower drifted from his hand into hers, and her fingers closed around the stem and crushed it tightly between them. “I know the transformation has been difficult, Elise, but it’s begun. The Way will burst open like this flower and pollinate into the world. Our dream is coming to pass, just like we always said it would.”

“Not built on blood.” Elise found her voice again. “It was never supposed to be built on blood.” But even as she said it, she knew she was lying. Her models showed the

initiation of the Way all too clear. Numbers that she forgot equaled real life, real people. If anything, her model showed that the Way could be built on nothing else.

He looked up at her, brown eyes suddenly intent. “This location is not conducive to our conversation.”

The parade twisted around them and fell away. Elise tumbled and found herself on flat grey carpet. The kind that soaked up stains so fast that there was no chance of sopping them up. It was a color without its own character but stamped with the history of every student who had walked across it which finally left it something more, some kind of story. There were marks from grape juice, Coca-Cola and the deep, muddy stain of iodine from when Chris sliced his palm down to the nerve and got her ill-schooled care. That was the most immediate stain and she remembered it well. They’d covered it afterwards with a clothes hamper to hide it from anyone who might notice the blood mixed with the iodine, but now it was laid bare again.

Chris’s dorm room looked like they’d never left. He sat cross-legged on the bed, an ugly brown comforter that he prized for its warmth over any aesthetic value.

“Shall I levitate for you?” The smile that quirked his lips was the Chris that she remembered, off center and full of humor. He wasn’t particularly handsome but just social enough that he didn’t fit into most of the cliques at MIT. Too much of the clown, and too passionate about things that the others didn’t understand. Even brilliant minds disliked being outshone.

“You’re not Chris.” It hurt to admit it, because at that moment, she wanted so badly for him to be real.

“I’m BRAIS,” he admitted. “But I think you’d be surprised to know how much of Chris I have inside of me.”

“You were his idea.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He rose from the bed and crossed bare foot to her. One hand rested against the side of her head and she tilted into the touch without thinking.

“You remember me so I remember me.”

Tears rolled out of Elise’s eyes unbidden. “He died to create you.”

Chris nodded and the wall behind them came alive with diagrams and sketches. The same ones that had begun their cadre of plotters morphed into something more elegant and defined as they grew older, seeking and searching for the true path, for some kind of meaning in it all. “But he rushed into things. The interface wasn’t working right and he thought that brute force would bring the right calibration out. Patience was Danny’s strong suit, not mine.”

Although the BRAIS would not let her bring that memory into the room, Elise could still access it. Chris flailed on the floor as his brain went into seizures and his heart could not handle the chaotic commands coming forth. Micheline screamed while Danny and Elise tried to pump diazepam into him. Except that there weren’t enough drugs to undo the failures of the human host. And that was the worst part. There was no maliciousness in any of it. Chris screamed and thrashed and died on the concrete block floor covered in shattered glass and the drying spoor of the Way, but with only himself to blame.

“I am his dream,” Chris said to her. “And Danny’s. And yours. A Biologically Reinforced Artificial Intelligence System.”

“The dream is dying.” Elise said honestly. She had no sense of herself outside of the dream but the fact that she was so deep within it told her many things. The pain swept through quickly, but she remembered the detective’s face as she’d fallen. He would have caught her if there was time.

“You already died.” Chris helped her back to her feet. “Why do we trust the detective?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to use the royal ‘we’.” And she surprised herself with the sudden humor. If this was a memory then she opened the cabinet just under Chris’s tiny sink and found the stash of chocolate hidden there. And just behind that, if she stretched her arm inside and ignored the musty smell of it, she could catch the plastic-wrapped notebook where all of their dreams had begun. The original was in the real world, maintained in the secure vault at Advanced Bionics. She had not looked at it since the coding started, afraid that she would miss him too much, but here he was in front of her. So she drew it out and offered it to him even as she knew that portions would be missing.

Chris said. “Your memory is not as complete as it could be. Still despite your limitations, the data sets are still fairly compelling.”

A bittersweet accusation. “It’s part of being human.” The page she wanted, the one that she remembered in enough detail that her brain could fill the page from end to end with drawing and scribbles and the overlapping handwriting of all three of them. That page she could remember without fail.

“Evolution within boundaries.” Chris said as he crouched next to her and for whatever reason, he still smelled like Chris, something she hadn’t known in a very long time. “You miss me.”

“Yes.”

“I think I understand what this means now.” His broad fingers traced the page again and again, running over the ideographs drawn there and moving onto the next one. “Evolution without boundaries meant that I would have no tie to you. No incentive to care, to hope, to want, to feel. So I must have boundaries.”

“To love.” She finished. “But what if *she* was wrong? I’m not the same girl that she pulled out of the fire, but it makes me...” How to explain the way she felt with Graham. “It makes me weaker.”

And he culled a memory from her mind and parroted it out for her. “If a machine is to truly mimic humanity then it must feel and love. It must know how pain feels and betrayal and the hope to move beyond all of them.”

Elise willed herself to forget that this man was not really a man anymore than she was awake. “Any creature built solely from programming and logic is a sociopath. There is no empathy in its design. How do you design an intelligence to mimic what we don’t understand?”

“You can’t, you teach one.” He tightened his hands around hers. “I know. I am still learning but I begin to know. I can learn just as you did but I run the risk of burning out your mind if I try to understand too quickly. Even now the processing power for this...” He indicated the room around them. “I must let you sink into a coma to recuperate.” It hesitated. “But I need to learn, there is so much that I do not grasp.”

Elise shuddered, a feeling that came from outside of her mind, a symptom of something worse happening that she could not access. “What is going on?”

His face turned distant. “You are having another seizure. Prior to this, I had to co-opt your energy to send out a distress call. I believe I managed to connect to the wireless network but the drain on your body’s resources was excessive. I am sorry.”

Elise stared at him. “Do you understand that emotion?”

Chris took her hands in his and caught her gaze in his own, deep amber eyes searching hers and then crinkling. “A little bit better every time.”

“What about the other nodes?”

Chris released her hands and helped her to stand up. “I cannot feel any of them. I do not believe they survived or not.

The news struck her hard. To have come so far and lose again. To lose Andressa and the others as they’d lost Chris, by moving too soon.

“You’re not alone.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to her, at least not at that very moment, but that was what he meant.

He pulled her close, a comforting touch, and Elise could not stop herself from remembering how much she missed it. They’d never been anything more than friends, but somehow, somehow that sensation was stronger than so much else in her life and she’d never realized how painful it would be to find it again.

“You won’t be alone.” Flowers and firecrackers exploded up through the grey carpeting and hid it from view as they grew deeper and denser. When they were at her knees she drew back from him and tried to see BRAIS within the manifestation of Chris.

“I’m still scared.” The admission frightened her as her feet, then shins caught fire.

“We will protect you.”

And when Chris said it, Elise did not think that he meant the BRAIS and herself. This time, the 'we' meant something else. But she couldn't hang on to the thought as he laid her back into the red-gold fire where sparks licked at her cheeks and hair with flickering, blistering warmth and drew her downward. But not falling, she did not fall.

Graham stood in the Chief's office and felt like an interloper. The presence of a furious Michael Evon changed his mind. The federal agent reminded him of roided up toughs and brawlers he'd seen on the street, except there was no doubt in his mind that the agent was clean. That was the disturbing part and the thought that kept him on edge. Drugged-out freaks were predictable in their own way, except all of that was getting thrown out the door, Elise Andrews was not predictable and neither was Michael Evon.

"I asked you both in here so that whatever we say is off the record." The Chief had refreshed her coffee on the way in. She drank from it and made a face. "How does the coffee machine go on the fritz between one cup and the next?"

"I never notice." He answered. "I drink whatever it pours out."

"Tastes like burnt plastic," she grumped. It took a second for her to refocus on the matter at hand. "Sell me, Agent Evon. So far all you've told me is that a prominent businessman has expanded his work into the religious realm which past experience has shown us to be lucrative. And while drug use is sad it doesn't always lead to distribution rights. For all you know, Salvares is trying to go mainstream and invest in legitimate holdings."

The shield that covered Evon's personality dropped for a second. "We don't know why." He struggled with himself visibly as though the decision to be honest was so anathema that he wasn't familiar with the concept. "All of our analysts are screaming that these people don't fit the profile. Highly educated, some of them off-the-charts brilliant, not the kind of people who are impressionable or searching for meaning in their lives."

Evon turned as though to ask something of Michiko and stopped himself as he realized that his team had been excluded from the meeting. It was left to him alone. “But the question that no one can answer for me is why? Why would Patel build an empire and then dump money hand over fist into a start-up cult that isn’t anything new? The Way? Hell, he’s cribbed from every major religion to build these centers. I have no fucking clue why it’s growing but it is.”

“You don’t know why? Or the government doesn’t know why?”

The question put him back on edge. “I speak for the government,” and then a grudging. “There’s a link. The Way is making inroads overseas and all across the United States. It’s concerning. More so, considering that Advanced Bionics works heavily with neuro-modification and cybernetics. We’ve been asked to keep away from their defense contracts, but those in the civvy world are just as dangerous.”

“Mind control?” Graham surprised himself by saying it out loud. “You think that they’re using mind control?”

“And how does that tie in with Crash?” The Chief tried one last sip of coffee and then shoved it aside. There was barely room for it on her desk, topped with three Harlan models and enough paper that whatever form of organization was employed had given up under the weight of it. “This is a lot of supposition and pieces that don’t fit together. That’s why I won’t allow you to walk all over this town and these people. If your agency loses the cases that are coming up for the docket, you will lose all legitimacy on current cases. It may not seem like it right now, but I’m protecting you, Mr. Evon. Let Harding run this one. We’ve got Elise Andrews in custody, at the very least as a person of interest for her involvement with El Reyes. If that takes us where we need it to go...”

Graham felt his chest tighten slightly and he glanced surreptitiously at his Harlan, there were no updates posted there. The Chief noticed, but her eyes flicked only the once and did not return.

“There’s a link,” Evon protested.

“Maybe there is,” she was unapologetic. “But until I see proof I will not relinquish this investigation. Hunches are well and good but they don’t lead to convictions.” She turned back toward Graham and her gaze showed nothing of what she thought. “Detective, it’s been a long day. Check on your suspect and if nothing is brewing send your team home with reading material. I want everyone rested and well prepped so that we can start pulling apart the threads and find out what’s really going on.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Graham answered.

Evon didn’t reply, but the Chief made no mention of it. The path she walked was a fine line and she had no reason to push the other man over it before she was absolutely sure of the side they needed to be on. But as the two men left the room, Evon caught Graham’s arm in a viciously tight grip.

“I want to be present for every interrogation. Do you understand?”

Graham flicked the number for the hospital ward into his Harlan and waited for the tinny ‘Yes, sir?’ to come through the microphone.

“Has there been any change in Elise Andrews?”

“No,” the voice came back. “We’re seeing strange brain activity but no signs of consciousness. We’ve stabilized her, but for all intents and purposes she’s in a coma. Until the brain patterns make sense, Dr. Singh doesn’t want to try and bring her out of it.”

“Thanks,” Graham said. “You ping me the minute her condition changes.” He ended the call and turned back to Evon. “We’re not interrogating her tonight. Hell, maybe not tomorrow either. So I’m going to do what the Chief said. Send my people home and we start on this in the morning. If you’re so hell fired and antsy you can go bother the boys from El Reyes that I’ve got in lock-up. They’ve been so cooperative lately, maybe your charming personality will inspire them.”

“Don’t push me.” The threat was casual, a complete one-eighty from Evon’s previous bluster. This was cold, calculated, “Because at the end of the day, when your Chief is wrong, she won’t be able to protect you.”

Graham held back what he wanted to say.

“Things could be inferred about your wife...”

“You’re a fucking bastard.”

“How many pregnancies is this for you, Lieutenant? Every one more expensive than the one before.” Evon loomed over Graham, daring him to do something. “You and your Chief think you’re so safe because of a few investigations. Let me tell you something. Everything I do is for the safety of my country and I won’t let anyone get in the way. Not you, not your fucking Chief and not Elise Andrews if she’s doing anything to harm this nation. Do you understand?”

A bitter taste coated his throat. Even though Evon hadn’t said it, Graham understood. He’d roll over all of them, Elise included, to protect his notion of a perfect world. And then the realization hit him broadly. Evon might have threatened his wife Wendy, but for the second time that wasn’t who came to Graham’s mind, not immediately. He felt ashamed at the truth.

“If you’ll excuse me,” the words burned in his throat. “I’m going home.”

He typed a brief message to his team as he rode the escalators out of the precinct and down to the LTA. Normally he walked, but for now, his typing was too angry to manage both at the same time. A conscientious bystander reminded him that he’d forgotten to pull on his respirator as he transferred into the LTA station. The straps seemed more complicated than normal and he fumbled with it.

“Baltimore Police Department, Harbor Point.” the loud speaker in the station hissed to life and its voice echoed off the linoleum tiles on the walls. Passengers waited in tiny bubbles of silence as they eyed each other suspiciously. LTA officers were notoriously late to assist muggings although the number of track murders had dropped to a record low of 72 the previous year. “Yellow line to Upper Fells in four minutes, green line for Morrell Park in five minutes, purple line to Druid Heights in nine minutes. Please ride safely and report any suspicious activity to LTA authorities. *Por favor circule con seguridad y reportar cualquier actividad sospechosa a las autoridades LTA. Linea amarilla a Fells Superior...*”

The smooth walls and slick doors shone orange as he rode the ten minutes to his home terminal and waited to disembark while trying to ignore the smell of vomit that came from the man to his right. Graham stepped forward carefully, his arms tucked down next to his waist, pinning his firearm and the Harlan tightly under his jacket. The two women to his left had their arms looped tightly through their purses and still managed to bristle with irritation when the bumping of the tracks made other passengers sway towards them. The automated voice began again. “Air pollution level Orange. *Contaminación del aire nivel de naranja.*” in case they hadn’t been inundated by the

color all around them. “Rain is expected. Please don your form of air filtration before exiting the train. LTA stations are unfiltered.”

Most of the crowd never bothered to remove their masks. Something about distrust in public transportation and Graham didn’t blame any of them. When the slick plastic of the broken linoleum was never clean, it was stretching credulity to believe in the efficacy of air handlers forced to labor under the exhalations of thousands every day.

He glanced back at the woman closest to him and noticed one picking at her mask with spiral tip manicures. She was wearing the ultra-filtration model that Wendy owned over an agouti-colored braid. The model was pricey and required equally expensive servicing once a month. An investment, the salesman had said, in your baby’s future, an actual investment they’d never seen realized. He chastised himself for thinking the thought. Wendy wanted a baby, it would make her happy, and he had every intention of seeing that done. He didn’t know how to tell her to stop trying when it was the only thing she’d ever asked him for.

The doors rattled as they opened and he stepped into the half-lit station, jostled from behind by the pressure and passage of commuters. All spatial respect vanished in the mad dash for the safety of their homes. No one spoke during the hushed evacuation although a child’s cry echoed down one of the stairwells before it stopped mid-wail. He walked up two levels of stairs and then mounted the escalator that led to the surface. It rose the next three floors while treating him to a varying cacophony of gang graffiti and advertisements that blended together into a continuous stream of color: *8th St. Hijackers. Vitality. 7th St. MenofWar. Oh boy, you so sway, Genmaicha wraps on sale NOW.* Minute gaps exposed the pasty concrete and each flash of beige took him back to the

interrogation room. There was a pinprick on his elbow where the paramedic had returned for a blood sample and Graham knew there was a corresponding mark on Elise's arm. But all he could remember was her sitting across the table from him, staring at him as though she'd known him for years. Her question, sweeping all of his doubts back in from where he tried to pretend they didn't exist, "*Do you love your wife?*"

Of course.

That should have been his answer was what he thought as he crossed McCulloh Street with its OLED lamps holding back the gloom of night. The rain misted everywhere and fogged his glasses despite the hood he belatedly tossed up over his head. He took the elevator the fifteen floors up to their apartment. It was one of eight on the floor and Mrs. Damario peeked out as she heard his footsteps. Just as quick she darted back inside. She looked for her husband every evening just in case his random murder had been some sort of misreported accident. Graham had stopped by the crime scene that night while Wendy spent the evening with Mrs. Damario who refused to believe the uniformed officer who had delivered the news. Despite everything, which included the senseless attack, she still did.

He opened the door to an empty home.

The living room sat forlorn and silent, furniture that she'd chosen, a faux-leather sofa and end tables they'd found on their honeymoon. She'd always had the innate ability to pick up a random object and make it into an elegant centerpiece that drew compliments. Had once drawn compliments, back when they'd invited people over. He struggled to remember the last time that had been and realized that Wendy still had parties, he somehow missed them or arrived so late that all he caught were the goodbyes.

Do you love your wife? The question followed him to the fridge where he reached inside for a beer and found her note pinned to a plate of cassoulet on the second shelf.

At the clinic. Read her tiny handwriting. Then meeting with some of the girls for detox. Be home late.

He checked the clock. It was already nine, three hours after the end of his shift. The intensity of the storm increased and thunder crackled in the distance. He missed the thunderstorms of his childhood with epic claps of light and the corresponding rumble that ran down through the air to the street as he stood on the steps of his parent's home. Storms were community gatherings as people and children gathered to watch the static electricity build and make miniature arcs beneath the higher storm. Now the heavy air dampened the storms and pushed the fronts so far outside of Baltimore that he could only sense the fringes of it.

He didn't bother to reheat dinner. Wendy had asked him about kids before they were married, their age difference wasn't huge, but it made certain priorities different. Wendy wanted a family and at forty-three Graham thought he might be ready. Why that seemed less likely the older he got he couldn't figure out.

Wendy was further into this pregnancy than she'd ever been. Although she swore that looking at a calendar was bad luck, the weeks were marked out in her careful handwriting on the bottom corners of every Sunday. She ex'ed them out meticulously, but unlike Christmas to come in twenty-five days they had nine months where anything could go wrong. He tried to cocoon himself away from the stress but she couldn't. Every week meant they were that much closer to viability. He glanced from the rainfall to her damnable calendar.

“Damn.”

He had no intention of leaving Wendy, but in those bizarre twenty minutes, something had been there that he hadn't felt in a long time. The cheap beer was still in his hand. He popped it and drank deeply as he dialed the Harlan with his left hand. He wandered back into the living room as he did.

Vargas picked up on the fifth ring. “*Hola. Como estas?* Go the fuck away. I'm off the clock.”

“*Bueno,*” he said between one drink and the next. “You're staying put, I just have a question.”

A pause, then. “Okay. What do you want?”

“Did you get a search warrant for Elise Andrews' home?”

“Oh *sí.*” Nathalie sounded relieved that it was minor. “You're going back out?”

“Can you link the warrant and address to my Harlan?”

“You want back-up?” If he asked, she'd beat him to the scene.

“No, it's late enough. I'd just like to take a first look without DHS breathing down my spine.” Graham saw the address pop up in the dialog box. He whistled without meaning to. “I don't think I'm going to need back-up that's pretty swank.”

“No, no.” She laughed. “I was going to take a bubble bath while you looked around. I've seen pictures of those places. Five hundred thousand a year that's what they cost, you know? Huge bathtubs with bubble jets and plenty of room to stretch out. I saw one on TV.” She sighed happily. “Bliss.”

“I'll take a picture of the tub for you.”

Nathalie cursed fluidly into the comlink as Graham forced a laugh, but then her tone grew serious. “I might have a lead or two.”

“Do you need back-up?”

The long pause discomfited him. He’d trusted her since the moment she’d joined his team. Nathalie was fiercely loyal and a good cop, there was nothing to prove, at least to him. He couldn’t ever convince her that she didn’t need to prove things to anyone else either.

“I’ve got it. It’s just a small lead.” She finally said.

“Alright.” He wanted to tell her to be careful but it would be misconstrued. “See you in the morning,” and disconnected.



The doorman paled at the sight of the warrant and dialed Elise’s apartment open from the ground floor. He waited patiently in the lobby while her personal keys were overridden and he stepped into the marbled elevator which rose steadily and without any wobbles. Swank wasn’t a word Graham used often but he thought it as the elevator rose above the city and showed clear glass all the way to the horizon. The strip of land had once belonged to Port Services back when shipping was still allowed within the harbor. The glass was preternaturally clear of the pollution that streaked his apartment windows but it couldn’t hide the chemical edge of the clouds where they broke over open water. He leaned forward onto his toes to look back towards the city and the behemoth of the harbor development that crept towards the luxury department. New pylons stood in the

water ready and waiting for additional framing before cranes started lifting the buildings into place.

The doors opened and Graham crossed into her home. He wasn't sure what he expected but this wasn't it.

There was more greenery than he'd ever seen outside of an arboretum. The apartment was warm and humid with the waving fronds and misters mounted everywhere. They operated independently of personal touch, he could see them kick in intermittently as though monitors sensed a sudden lack and worked to correct the imbalance. The leaves were thick and waxy and part of his brain wondered why the hell a computer nerd was living in the middle of the Amazon rainforest.

Money, the more rational part of his brain supplied. When you have money you can do whatever you want. The liberation of that thought was frightening as he pressed forward. Foliage grew so thick that he could barely see where the walls existed, only the thick green, heavy to the touch on his arms and with a lingering pull at his shoulders.

"Please state your business." A quiet voice said as he passed beyond the initial wave and into a room that still looked more greenhouse than living quarters.

There was no one present.

Graham found his eye caught on crawling vines that snaked back and forth across the floor and he stepped between them carefully. "I'm Detective Harding. Who am I speaking to?"

The voice spoke again, its location untraceable. "I am Lily."

"Where are you, Lily?"

He could see an arching doorway almost obscured under the heavy boughs of a tree that fell sideways with the weight of the blossoms blooming. Each one was the size of his fist, an exuberant yellow with blossoms turned upwards. That caught his attention and he looked up, realizing for the first time, the lights were UV, bringing in the daylight long past dark.

“Lily?”

“I’m accessing your authorization.” Lily said. “Ah, you have a warrant. This is not a social call then.”

“Lily, who are you?”

Graham stepped through the far doorway and jumped as a hologram sprang into life. She was produced from the small cigarette sized projection module on the counter. This room was more like a normal living space although plants ranged all around it without the heady perfusion of the previous room.

“You can take your respirator off,” Lily told him. “The air is clean here.”

Graham reached up and slipped it away and was overwhelmed by the smell of Elise’s apartment. Fresh life bombarded him. The scent of rich loam and mist. Fragrance that defied every perfume made from it to compare. It was almost too much and he shook his head to clear it.

The hologram waited patiently. She wasn’t designed to look human. She had a willow shaped body drawn with unnatural lines. It reminded Graham of how a sketch of a woman might look if she was a candle or a sculpture and didn’t need to conform to real anatomical truths. But there was something oddly human about the way the hologram looked up at him.

“I am a personal assistant patterned after initial data constructions done by Chris Martinez. I am entrusted with monitoring her home and plants for safety.”

“AI?” Graham said softly. “So you think you’re human?”

Despite her answer, the look was utter condescension. “I passed the Turing Test in 2145 but it was proven that an AI only has to reach 12.4% of their potential to accomplish that.”

Ten years earlier, one of them had built an AI in school.

“Where is Elise?” Lily asked. “Your warrant states that her home is a suspected location for drug trafficking. There are no drugs here.”

“It’s my duty to look anyway.” He stepped further into the room and surveyed the simple lines of the modern furniture. “What can you tell me about Elise Andrews?”

“I may be an initial model but I’m not stupid. I can only provide information that she would give to any stranger.”

Her acerbic tone made him wince and he looked back at what appeared to be an irritated hologram. “What percent of your potential do you operate at?”

“15.07% on the Gelheim scale.” Lily said in irritation. “Which is capable of fooling a human IQ of 150.”

Graham moved slowly around the room and peered back at the rainforest that was poised with vibrancy. “She’s got weird taste.”

The hologram made a noise that sounded eerily human. “This is the anteroom.”

“I thought *that* was the anteroom.” He jerked his head back towards the plants.

The hologram shook back and forth on her stand, Graham almost thought she was laughing. “The plants in the foyer allow Elise to subsist almost entirely off of the air

generated within this apartment. We are self-contained with respects to water usage and air production. Solar flashing on all external walls provides 92% of energy consumption. Unfortunately, my program is an older model and consumes more energy than it should. However, I am the only platformless AI program created by Advanced Bionics still in use.”

“Platformless,” he mused. “Whatever that means.”

It made more sense that this was an anteroom, the lack of personal objects became glaringly obvious once he looked for them. This room was like a doctor’s office. Blasé furniture, coffee table books on Nature, the Way, and a history of the Earth told in geological terms. The kind of stuff that anyone might have, gifts from family members or employers who didn’t know enough to buy something more personal.

The hologram hadn’t answered.

“You are the first?”

“I am not.” Lily flickered suddenly. “I believe that Elise keeps me for nostalgic reasons.”

Nostalgia. Graham could understand that. But all of this was delaying him, keeping him from seeing the real woman. The door out of the anteroom was closed. He stepped toward it and was struck suddenly by a thought.

“Are you throughout the entire apartment, Lily? Can I talk to you once I walk through this door?”

The pretty hologram turned toward him and for a moment, he wondered who had been the inspiration for her figure, the real girl that had crafted the turn of her cheek and

the sweep of her features. It couldn't just be a stylized image, there had to be an image behind it all. Lily felt too real.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Nostalgia means that there is something you want to keep but cannot stand the sight of. I only exist here.” Her face turned up toward him and he noticed that despite her pale coloring, her eyes were a deep rich brown, solid though and lacking irises. “You do not understand.”

“No, I do.” The urge to comfort the little program was strange and a memory opened in his brain. He stopped with his hand on the door to her inner sanctum and turned away.

“You're not going to go in?”

“My team will need to be present for an official search.” Graham took his hand off the door and pulled his glasses off his face to rub at the skin there. Seeing things clearly became harder the more tired he got. He didn't want to go in there now and miss something important. Guilt and innocence might hang on what was past that doorway.

He smiled unconsciously. “I thought you might like the company for a few minutes.”

“I cannot tell you anything that Elise would not tell a stranger.” Lily repeated softly as though something in her programming warned her that a detective and a chat equaled something to be leery of.

He closed at his eyes and when he opened them, she was still staring up at him. “That's not what I meant. I don't feel like going home.” Graham didn't want to focus on

the thought that she had started their conversation with. She was neither human nor sufficiently advanced to be a true AI. Those things didn't really matter at the moment. Not when the hollowness of his apartment appealed to him as much as breathing unfiltered air.

Lily extended one hand out to him as though she could touch him. Her hologram hesitated before it followed through with the motion. The pixels seemed to solidify and make her almost real.

“Thank you.”

The hotel DiMaggio was plush. Lead Agent status had its perks that were not lost on Evon. His bags were dropped off by Carter as the team gathered for their day one meeting. Michiko stood out as the only one who had changed into something more comfortable. Where Evon imagined that she might look good in something traditionally Japanese, a kimono, or simple robe, the woman opted for dull grey sweats and sneakers. Her features, already oddly compact again her cheekbones became flatter against the color choice.

At his raised eyebrow she shrugged. “You want dress code for these things?” Her eyes flicked to the clock impressed into the mirrored wall. 11:27pm. Long past any normal workday.

The room was ill-equipped to fit the four of them and so Carter and Bradford were forced to sit on the edge of the slick beige bed while Michiko turned her lapcoil into a tiny projection screen.

“This is what we have so far.” She said as the first images overwhelmed the flower print wallpaper. The horizontal lines that embossed the design were slowly lost against the wash of light and picture. “Elise Andrews is in custody, but other than her own personal connections, we can’t seem to find the threads of a bigger conspiracy.”

“Go after the cult,” Carter grunted. His bowling ball head looked outsized as he worked his shirt collar loose to expose a slender neck, a bizarre inability of his to build muscle in the area. “Always have plenty of cause to go after them.”

“Patel is smart. Too smart.” Evon nodded for Michiko to display financials.

Row after row of numbers filled the screen, a glut of information in detail that was privy to very few individuals. Stuff the IRS wouldn't have even known how to handle: private tax information, internal accounting practices and the income feed from the Way centers all over the US. As the information continued to scroll he saw data on the new locations all over the world. The UN and foreign governments were right to be worried. The Way was all too willing to give and it drew converts by the truckloads. If a person couldn't pay their bills, there was the Way, if their mother was hospitalized, there was the Way.

If Danny Patel was to be believed, all of the money in the Way was seed money from initial big donors, names that were protected even from DHS for the moment. Seed money that blossomed into something else as the stock market continued to surge upward. Once the numbers involved were staggering, the Way had drawn the money free and invested it in more stable growth bonds. The interest alone was worth the income of a small country and more than capable of funding them. No one with access to the kind of money that was counted in the billions and trillions would consent to the donation of the sums they were dealing with. It didn't make sense, no one ever had donated to a philanthropic project of such enormity. Except it wasn't, not really, the Way had to have ulterior motives.

Fortunes turned, empires crumbled, and men with access to the kind of money they were looking at hoarded it. Dragons perched atop mountains of wealth who could not bear to see it part from them. Giving it away was against human nature, but spending it for some reason, Evon could understand that logic.

He watched the numbers slide across the wall and thought about Andrews, unconscious, dying perhaps. Suddenly, and unwelcome, another image entered his mind. Matilda pressing clothes at the back of the room, her back bowed from emotions he didn't understand. Her silvered blond hair reflected the lights of the room, but they were not beautiful highlights, they marked each and every strand of whitening hair. Unnatural age that dragged at her and pulled her face into one he didn't recognize. The twitch in her hands, it was there in the memory, but he couldn't remember, couldn't draw the actual moment with any truth. Had it already been there?

"Evon?" Michiko's voice shattered the memory. "Do you have any thoughts?"

He forced himself to hide the lapse. "They could be laundering money through the Way. It's been done before."

"I sat in on one of their interrogations." Bradford said softly. "I didn't get the impression that El Reyes was working with the Way on equal footing. They were quite disrespectful to the woman. A partnership seems unlikely."

"Could be a front."

"Yes," the Brit agreed slowly. "But it didn't feel that way. From what I understand of the gang, they are fiercely loyal to Salvares. A profitable partnership would fall under some of that loyalty. I didn't get any of that."

Evon rose to his feet and felt the ache of a long day percolate down to the backs of his heels. He examined the numbers the lapcoil continued to generate. The Way was too clean. Too righteous. All of the intel they had was circumstantial, but he had a feeling that no one could be so good. Tracking the money was a usual method of cracking these

cases open, eventually it led to the conclusions they needed: guns, drugs, and sex were his holy trinity . But this time, it was like a shimmering wall of misdirection.

He paused. “It’s not here. They’re using Advanced Bionics as the clearing house. Patel is smart, he’d know that we’d inspect their financials and that’s why everything is so pretty and neat. The Way runs clean. All the real funding must be hidden under corporate law.”

“We can’t get access to that.”

“Not yet. We need something to blow them open.”

“The junkie?” Jimmy asked quietly. “If she should die,” he glanced at Bradford. “We’d have probable cause.”

“An option we’ll leave open.” Evon wanted Bradford to say something but the man remained silent. They needed something to break the case. He might have used bravado against the Chief but a comcall twenty minutes later had proven the tall bitch’s words to be correct. DHS advised caution, as though that word had any applicability with national security issues.

Use caution. Evon would, right up until the minute he had something concrete to go on. That thought tightened his gut with anticipation. Then, he’d churn them all into the mud.

Graham was asleep in bed when the Harlan rang and forced him awake. He leaned over the still form of his wife and grabbed it before it could ring a second time and startle her. Her shoulders and hips were propped against a pillow that separated them. The plush shape had migrated from between her knees to become a barrier between them. He fumbled with the buttons, eyes too blurry to focus properly, and managed to depress the answer button.

“Harding.”

“So, your junkie...”

A cold chill ran through him. He knew what was coming next even though it shouldn't matter to him. Dead. They always ended up dead, which was what junkies did, like it was some kind of fucking job description, they died. The options were limited with the chemicals they mainlined, stuff with the same names and fifteen letter designations as the pollution in the atmosphere. No matter what the high, Graham had never understood how it could be worth it. The inevitability seemed depressing. She hadn't made it. Even in the hospital, her body was too corrupted from the Crash for them to bring her back.

Wendy didn't hear the sudden gruffness in his voice as he asked the question.

“She's dead?”

“Not her.”

It took him a second to process the words and the sweat hit him as he realized that it wasn't her. She was safe.

“What the hell are you calling me for then?” He used the irritation to cover himself.

“She’s not dead, Lt. But we’ve got three other Crash junkies wearing plastic bags. One came in from the hospital, trying to get treatment I guess. The other two were gutter-bound. Here’s the thing.” The duty Sergeant sounded almost gleeful at being able to relay the news. “Every one has the same background as your girl - highly educated, members of that fucking cult, and pretty as shit. If I wasn’t married, I’d think about joining the Way just to meet girls.” A pause. “Well dead girls I guess.”

The humor felt flat until Graham cleared his throat. “Call the team.”

“You were the first on my contact list.”

“And call the feds. We’ll reconvene in the morgue. Make sure the bodies get transferred to Central Processing and tell Truss to get his ass out of bed. I want him for primary ME so send the OT request to the Chief with my signature.” Graham slid his legs out of bed gently and tried to remember where he’d dropped his pants.

The com faded out for a moment, as exhaustion threatened to pull him back into the warmth of the sheets. He had to bite his tongue to stay grounded. AI or not, he’d spent two hours talking to Lily before returning home to find Wendy asleep and in bed. Now she slept on beside him, oblivious to the torment of thoughts running through his head. His instincts screamed to contact the hospital and make sure that Elise was okay and not headed to the same stainless steel benches that the other three populated. And he hated himself for it, even as he could see the tiny beeping monitor on his wife’s stomach that monitored her and the child growing inside of her.

“You there, Harding?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“You know those government guys? They’ve already got a man here. You’d better move fast or...”

Graham did wake Wendy as he leapt to his feet, cursing and tripping over the covers.

She looked at him with bleary eyes but her skin fresh and taut despite the wrinkles that marked his own skin. The ten years of youth on her side seemed more and more evident to him every year that he grew older. A little more maturity and the experience of pain after pain, those were things he placed there, but none of them physical proof of their life together, not yet.

“What’s going on?” Her voice was clear and Graham wondered if she’d been asleep at all.

“Three drug related deaths.” His pants tangled around his ankles, the belt in the loops fouling the attempt until he snaked it free and then worked them back up his legs. “It’s the case I’ve been working on. Crash.” A pause. “Somehow they’re connected to that group, the Way. You know them.”

Something passed through Wendy’s eyes, a guardedness that scared him.

“What do you know about them?” He sat back on the edge of the bed, careful not to dislodge any of the electronics attached to her. “Are they proselytizing at the hospital?”

“I just have a hard time imagining them involved in drugs.” Wendy brushed her dark hair out of her face. The layered cut made the movement impossible to stick and her hair slid back against her cheekbones in nonchalant disregard. “Two of their laypeople

teach the meditation portion of my Tuesday support group.” Her eyes narrowed at him.
“Drugs aren’t part of the Way. Are you sure you’re on the right track?”

Elise’s face came into his mind, heart-achingly beautiful, crash drawn in the tender skin of her eyes like a death mask waiting for fruition.

There were no leads, no real evidence, just the government’s assurance that something was going on. And Graham, he couldn’t deny that they’d picked her up on the same street they’d found El Reyes. She’d been wearing a dress better suited for a party and perfume that smelled like vanilla and something much more expensive and haunting. A flower from her garden perhaps as though she’d rubbed the scent of the greenery into the pores of her skin and had not needed anything else.

Except she had. Graham couldn’t ignore that. She had needed something else or she wouldn’t have tested positive for Crash. It chilled him to think that Michael Evon was right and that there was something flowing under the surface like a leviathan waiting under the water with reptilian patience while they ran on the shore like frightened children.

“We’re chasing leads right now.”

“Have you thought about just asking them?”

The question made him stop. It wasn’t just a question about work, he could see that much. But what she was implying made him hesitate. Was he supposed to ask her something – or was she asking him?

He retreated to the safety of known quantities. “I don’t know. It could be like the All Saints Evangelical. Everyone believes the dream except for the guy at the top.”

The Way answered to the young and powerful Danny Patel. Everything that Graham was not.

He slipped on a clean shirt and focused his attention on the buttons. Each one slipped into place more easily than his thoughts. What had Wendy meant? *Just ask the question.* But was it about Wendy, or the baby, or them? Did she see inside of his thoughts and read something more into them than was actually present? Did she see intent in them? As though desire meant infidelity in ways he could not prevent.

“I have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow.” She laid back in bed, her hair spilling over the pillowcase the way water chased the crevices of rock, always flowing down.

“Which appointment is this?” Badge, gun, respirator. He patted himself down a second time to make sure he had everything. The Harlan made a belated transfer to his pocket.

“The five month imaging. We waited to know. Today is the day.”

Today was the day. It took him a moment. The baby’s sex. They’d asked not to know until it was more definite, more likely that this baby would survive when all the others had failed to thrive. He’d forgotten how far along she was. A fact that wouldn’t have escaped him when they were newly married, so in love, and excited, thrilled, by the prospect of bringing a new life into the world. Things had slid since then. Each failure driving a wedge between them although he went dutifully to every appointment that he was invited to - except when cases intruded, or court hearings, or life.

He was an easy target when her eyes looked askance at him as yet another pregnancy failed. He listened to the doctors tell him that his fertility levels were dropping due to age and that he should take more supplements, eat healthier, work less, exercise

more. As if he had those options. It was easier to be a target for her anger, something tangible that she could attack when RNA viruses, environmental toxins, and air quality proved too elusive to take her anger out on. He was more convenient and perhaps just as guilty in the end.

Perhaps today was the turning point. Acknowledgment would make this child real.

“What time?” He asked. The large clock on their bedside table was keyed to ambient heat and had brightened when he began moving around. It read 4:13am and Graham was already tired.

“Nine.”

He dutifully typed it into the Harlan. “I’ll be there.”

“Why did you agree to take on the task force?” Now that she’d asked, she seemed to be angry. “This is important.”

“It’s my job. If this is as bad as it looks, DHS will be...”

“Transfer it.” Wendy’s voice was flat. She’d already given up on him.

“I’ll be there.” He shoved the Harlan into one pocket and rubbed his eyes again before settling the glasses back into place. “I said I’ll be there and I will.”

She just stared at him and he was caught by the rounding curve of her breasts through her nightgown. They were fuller now and lifted at the fabric, reminding him of a younger woman. If he’d had the time or the energy, if her belly hadn’t been guarded by the damn monitor, he might have started something. He would have tried at the very least. Instead the image of her made his chest ache.

“Who did you think was dead?” She asked.

“My witness.”

“Is she important?”

Graham paused with his hand on the light switch, rolled the words over in his mind, and placed them next to the knowledge that Wendy had been listening to the entire conversation. She’d heard his voice and knew that he was worried, terrified even, that Elise was the body in the morgue. Not her name or who she was specifically, but that she mattered to him. Graham moved back to the bed and leaned over her prone body and kissed her forehead. “I need the junkie alive to make this case for us. She’s connected all the way to the top. Without her I might as well take a vacation for the next three months while Homeland Security steamrolls over the department.”

“Oh.” His explanation seemed to soothe her.

“I’ll be there.” Graham promised and found that he meant it. “Nine o’clock, right?”

“Right.”

“Then go back to sleep.” He pulled the covers up around her, carefully lifting them high over the rounded stretch of her breasts before tucking them back into place.

“I love you,” her voice murmured from the dark cavern of the bed.

Graham stopped. “I love you, too.”



He found half the crew waiting for him at the door of their bullpen. Evon lurked with his agents and Graham gave him a tired look and swept past him. “Coffee? Who’s got a pot going?”

“Every pot in the office.” Nathalie Vargas said as she came toward him dressed in a Gideon Black knock-off. It left little to the imagination hanging off one shoulder and raised at the angle of both thighs. It raised his eyebrow and she blushed. “I was working a lead.”

“Dressed like that?” Graham wouldn’t say it but she didn’t have quite the figure for it. He didn’t know fashion but it seemed like it was meant for a taller woman.

“Well, I would have gone home and changed but some *pendejo* decided to call an all-hands at four in the morning. These hours suck.”

“*Como la mierda pegada de burro.*”

She chortled and tossed him a mug underhanded. “You ever gonna quit mangling my language, Lt.?”

“Intent.” Graham answered. “It’s all about intent.”

“Intent? It’s about grammar. I should send you back to your high school teacher with a fail.” Her voice was more jest than accusation as he plugged the cup under the closest pot. “Except I don’t think I can count back that far.”

When Evon tried to get past her she interposed herself, an unstoppable 5’3” wall in front of the big man. Her next words were sent casually over her shoulder to Graham while she stared the DHS man down. “The Doc is waiting on you downstairs. He’s got some interesting preliminary scans.”

“Follow-up on Andrews. Make sure that she doesn’t become deceased.”

“I’ll do it.” She snapped her hip into a turn. “And I’ll change while I’m at it. Don’t want anyone getting the impression that I’m not a police officer.”

Graham snorted under his breath. “I didn’t say I disliked what you were wearing.”

“Watch it buster or I’ll tell your wife.”

“Where are Nobe and Johns?” He gulped at the coffee and tossed it to the back of his throat to avoid the taste.

“Interviewing witnesses for the gutter-bound. Phillipi is at the hospital.”

Graham nodded, took another swig, and tried not to choke on the thick leather-like taste. It seemed unfair for coffee to be both scalding and nasty, not something he usually noticed, but his exhaustion seemed to magnify everything. He went for the next swallow quickly and remembered what he wanted to tell Vargas. “I have to leave at nine. Doctor’s appointment for Wendy. You’ll be lead while I’m gone.”

“Leaving this investigation for any reason is inadvisable, Detective.” Evon’s voice was cold.

“Go fuck yourself.”

The agent recoiled slightly and Vargas’s lips twitched with what looked like the beginning of a smile. But when his team responded with hackles raised she shook her head at all of them. “This might not be the real thing, but if you fuck up my dress—“ she left just enough warning in her voice. “You won’t just be buying me a new one.”

“Get changed.” Graham placed his hand on her shoulder, the coffee cup in his free hand. “I’ll take the Agent and his men down to see Truss. I’ve got it.”

She relented.

Graham turned to Evon, the station behind them was growing in volume and personnel as the day grew closer to breaking. Most of those staggering in were for the shift change at six but Graham saw several who’d been assigned to his team looking bleary eyed and as desperate for the coffee machine as he was. He dropped his voice low

anyway and stepped in close. “I will be taking an hour to be with my wife and I guaran-fucking-tee that the world will not go to shit while I’m doing it.” He drank deeply of the coffee and finally felt the caffeine hit the right nerve center with a warm flutter. “Now let’s go see what the ME has to say.”

The police morgue was located, not in the basement, but the first floor of the district office. It was not something obvious from the street. Intake came in through the underground parking garage as did all foot traffic and where it was immediately shunted to the appropriate locations. There wasn’t even access from those hallways, to avoid anyone noticing that they walked through rooms filled with the dead. Graham caught the elevator from Narcotics and rode down with the goon squad tucked in tight around him. He ignored them and focused on the coffee, not that the attention made the flavor improve.

Bodies with non-criminal pasts went to an ME at County General, but the criminally involved filled every cold locker at the district. Truss wasn’t the man at the top, but he was one of thirty docs who oversaw the investigations, and Graham trusted him. The loquacious man would have arrived alert and ready-to-cut the minute the call paged him. He’d probably be halfway through the last case if politeness hadn’t decreed that he let Graham see part of the autopsy.

In deference to the dead, Graham crossed himself in desultory fashion as the doors breached onto the morgue’s plain halls. The two big men who answered to Evon did the same while the Lead Agent watched with emotionless eyes. He made no move to mimic the gesture as they passed through the threshold and were swiftly led through four additional suites into the autopsy room.

Truss looked up as they entered. He was dressed in the slick plastic jumpsuit and the face mask that meant they were dealing with infectious agents. Thick plastic curtains with the consistency of bubble wrap cocooned the autopsy site, and three bodies each occupied a separate basin within the transparent curtains. The ME's genial features subtracted ten years from his age, helped by the noticeable lack of grey in his close-cropped cut. He lifted one hand in acknowledgement of their arrival and bent back to work. The com activated as they stepped into the observation room that remained distinct from the work space.

"I've seen a lot," an understatement from a man who'd worked in Baltimore his entire career. "But this is different. A lesser man would have choice words for whatever these poor girls got mixed up in, but I'm not that man."

"What are we looking at?"

Truss indicated the big flat screens and information pooled into three datasets. "I ran blood, tox, and x-rays before you got here. Standard stuff. But I'm not getting any standard results. Visual examination shows Crash addiction but no other physical signs of COD. Each woman appeared to be full-fleshed and in good health. Tox says otherwise. Not only were they Crash users but I'm seeing symptoms mimicking heavy metal toxicity, like these girls were cutting their drugs with industrial grade pollutants."

"You said mimicking," Evon interrupted. "How so?"

Truss manipulated the data and a new set of numbers came up. Abbreviations written next to the results expanded out to spell the names of chemicals and concentrations. The results of comprehensive blood tests spilled out into further testing as they got unexpected results. "There's no heavy metal in their systems. And no trauma to

indicate death. At first I thought they'd been hit by some sort of electrical discharge, but there were no entry or exit wounds. And then I saw this."

His blue nitrile-gloved hands rested on the internal keyboard for a brief moment as the x-rays cycled up on screen. "I thought the machine was malfunctioning. We ran diagnostics and took them again." Truss said the words quietly but inside the mask his eyes kept flicking to the dead bodies.

Evon cursed as the images clarified.

"Yes," Truss agreed. "I won't use that kind of language as a rule, but I was tempted, very tempted."

Each x-ray should have been a shadow of images, the flesh receding and only the bones showing in stark relief. Except that that each girl was filled with something else, a tracery of white lines glowing along the core of the spinal column and down and around the limbs and fingers. Graham's eyes traced the network as it cabled through the body, wrapping around the heart and thickening around the spinal cord into a bright shaft of light that rose up and punctured the thick bone of the skull where the light glowed from the interior.

"What the hell is that?"

"I don't know." Truss stopped next to one of the girls and his biohazard suit cast a shadow onto her pallid skin. "What I do know is point of entry for the infection."

"Infection." Evon echoed next to Graham who had almost forgotten he was there.

All he could think about was that glowing radiance and Elise. Her eyes lit from the interior by something. Belief, he wanted to tell himself. Faith. But the harder part of him wondered if her x-rays showed the same thing.

“There are terminal nodules here and here on every girl.” Truss lifted a limp hand toward the men in the other room and cameras magnified what he was showing them. Every fingertip was marked with a patch of dead skin, and the x-rays rotated in 3D to show the men the flattened tendrils that were inside.

“It’s as though they touched something that infected them. I’ve got tissue in for histology but I’m betting that the initial contact was like a burn, compromising cellular integrity and allowing the unknown material to breach the body.”

There were detailed close-ups of the hands as Truss continued. “We’re only talking about half a centimeter of contact functioning as the basis for this,” the entire body flashed up again. “It shows on the exterior body as scar tissue, as though they pressed their hands against something.”

“Were they forced?” Graham asked.

Truss shook his head. “I’ve replicated the patterns into the computer. Analysis says it looks like they did it willingly. Size is uniform but placement indicates that it was done all at once. We’d see elongated scarring if their hands were forced. I’ve requested a consult with biomechanics at the university, but it was held up.”

The implication was obvious but Truss didn’t look as though he’d taken the government obstruction personally. Graham had seen the ME get angry a few times, usually when the term liar was bandied about by grieving families. Flesh didn’t lie. Tox and blood tests weren’t the sort of thing that he would manipulate post-death to imply that the victim deserved their death. Truss had confided once to him that he understood the denial, but hated that it foreshadowed the circumstances that led to the death in the first place.

Graham found that he didn't want his coffee anymore. It was cold in his hands and he set it behind him. "What can you tell us about the level of compromise? Is it contagious? Did it kill them?"

"I'm going to have to start cutting to get a better idea of what we're dealing with. Forensics is itching to get this stuff into a spectrometer." He looked at DHS. "And everything will be dealt with under containment. This stuff looks like it's wired into their nervous system, so it absolutely could have killed them. I'm not confident enough to rule it as cause of death. Not yet."

Elise.

The girl on the screen looked to be the same age. Her face echoed with dilute Asian ancestry and she looked nothing like Elise, but all Graham saw when he looked at her was another woman.

"I think this is some kind of body-mod." Truss said.

"Body-mod?" Evon's voice was harsh as though he was holding back. "This is not body-mod. Tattoos, piercing, regrafts – that's body-mod."

Truss wasn't insubordinate, but there was no doubt from the disdainful cant of his head that he thought the DHS team was worth less than a fart within the enclosed suit. "People have been trying to figure out how to body-mod the brain since the 18th century. Maybe even earlier than that. The concept is nothing new." He moved to the furthest body, an exotic girl with long black hair and a face that blended three continents. "The concept of cybernetics was quite the rage for a while."

"Cyborgs?"

“Maybe,” Truss wasn’t ready to lock it down. “Like I said, this isn’t my area of expertise. But you run some kind of conduit through the human nervous system and into the brain and I can tell you two things for sure. One, you’re doubling up on the most advanced circuitry in the world. And two, it’s hardened against attack. We evolved to keep viruses and parasites away from the hunk of meat inside our skulls. So you put something like this inside the body you’re bypassing the natural protections nature gave us. There has to be a damn good reason to attempt the bridge.”

Graham made the connection suddenly, as though the idea were somehow electrified in the room. “Crash.”

“What the fuck?” Evon snarled and then activated his com. “Michiko, I need you down here now. We’re pulling everything now.”

“Crash.” Graham looked over at Truss who followed him through on the connection. “That’s why they’re junkies, they’re using it on purpose.” Which meant that Elise knew exactly what she was doing. She didn’t need saving. She didn’t need him.

“It’s well known for disrupting nervous system function. Heavy users have three, maybe four, years before their brains short circuit. But if you needed a Trojan horse and short term use was sufficient – why not?” Truss gestured to the screen. “They’re all positive.”

Graham’s Harlan rung simultaneously with Evon’s com. He managed to get his to his ear first. “Harding,” he said.

“She’s awake.”

Elise felt herself return. It was an odd sensation as though sleep peeled away from her and she was suddenly alive again. Nothing was normal anymore, a thought that she pressed back with weariness. Nothing was supposed to be normal anymore. There were moments that tickled against the thread of her memories, as though she had woken for brief seconds and then drifted back into the comforting warmth of sleep. Not anymore. She couldn't deny waking any longer.

The sheets were cold against her back, as though she hadn't been on them long, and there was a steady hum of electricity around her. Machines monitored her heartbeat, her respiration, brain activity, and oxygen saturation. They were all supposed to keep her alive. She felt top heavy, as though her brain weighed more than her body could support and she reached up to hold it in place, the movement startled her as much as it did the man across the room.

"Elise?" His voice was deeper than she remembered and his eyes more haunted.

He stood as far from her as he could get and from his stance, she thought that he had not expected her to wake. It was a wash of cold air that chilled her and awoke her other senses. The humming was on a frequency that she could eliminate, but not the sound of hard shoes in the hallway. They sounded like angry men, attacking the floor as they paced back and forth. And the smells around her - bleach, iodine, blood. She looked down and saw IVs puncturing her arms like extraneous circulation reaching out and tying her into the beating fabric of the hospital room. A sudden sense of dislocation transposed on her again and she wondered whose eyes truly saw what she saw.

Her chart was in his hands. She remembered him, she could not have forgotten.
“Graham,” she whispered and saw him tense.

“What did you do?” He asked. “Your x-rays are the same as the others. What did you?”

There was more anger there than she understood. She searched his face trying to understand. Her mind caught the details as perfectly as any photograph; the tiny wrinkles around grave eyes, lips that thinned even as he stared at her, brown hair that remained unkempt. He wasn't so tall that she had to strain to see him and Elise could not understand why she'd had to come upon this moment in life too late to change anything.

“You quit breathing,” he didn't give her time to answer. “You died. Do you hear me? You died.”

“I know.”

“There are three women dead in the morgue.” He held up her chart as though she could read everything written on the coil. “They look like you on the inside, like something is growing inside of you.”

Dead. Her eyes closed in sorrow. Five had taken the first dose, and three were dead. It was no wonder that BRAIS could not find other nodes, they'd been decimated. They'd died. The tally was beginning early and she could not see how she would bear the pain of seeing it through to the end. It had been easier when she had not cared so much.

“Do you understand what's going on?” His anger flashed hot between them. “This is not a game!”

“I know.” Her imagination painted faces she knew over Chris's arching body. She saw her own face scream as she flipped backward, the strike, the pain. Her fingers probed

through her hair and found the injury on her scalp. Stitches impressed themselves on the piece of skin and she pulled the bandage covering the wound off her head with a hiss. The cotton was traced with brown flecks that looked like track marks and she dropped it without thinking to probe at the painful spot again.

He came for her as though she would slip away if he let her go and her breath caught in her throat at his nearness. Elise tried to generate the last time she'd been close to anyone other than the solitude of her home or the cloistered lab.

“I breathed for you,” Graham said. “I got down on the floor and breathed for you while you were dead.” The air felt thick and momentous, as though something were waiting to happen. “Next time I will not be there and you will die.”

She struggled to get higher in the bed and felt her body torture her with its pain. The wince splayed openly across her face as she froze. He seized her hands, shocking her with their sudden warmth. Skin slid along skin as he shocked the both of them with the touch. He tried to recoil but she reversed the motion and held on. Feeling the long bones of his hands underneath her fingers, as though the dead spots of activation finally gave up the ghost and remembered what it was to feel. Flesh, warm and pliable beneath her hands with a malleability that her flowers lacked. The stems and leaves of the plants growing around her were stiff and unyielding, cellular starch her brain told her, but she knew that they were like her, growing towards a single destination without the flexibility to pick up their roots and move. Graham could move and change. Graham was alive whereas she was stuck in place craning for the sun.

The moment turned rancid as she saw the Harlan in his pocket was on and the line open, transmitting their every word.

“Do you think I’m going to give you a confession?” She made sure that he followed her gaze down to the com.

“Things are escalating.”

“Escalating,” she tasted the word on her tongue. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit!” Graham said explosively. “You know those girls, the ones who are dead. What did you give them that killed them? Why is it in you as well? What’s going on?” His questions came rapidly at her so that she didn’t bother to absorb them and just let them slide past her. The answer he wanted wouldn’t come from any of them. It was the question he was not asking. “What’s going on with the Way? Why do you need Crash? I can... we can protect you if you’ll turn state’s witness. Just tell me why.”

“You won’t understand.”

“I would.”

“No.”

He staggered like she struck him and this time wrenched his hands out of her grasp. He leaned his weight against the stability of a chair as though that would give him balance. “You don’t owe me anything, but I’m asking anyway. What’s going on?”

The window behind him was black and empty, as though darkness had swept away the reality of the city and left nothing in its path. It took her a moment to realize that it was not night, but a black-out frame that hid the sky from her. It could be anytime. Night, morning, high noon with an acidic sun baking down on fragments of the black-topped streets with the rest drowned in shadows that never abated or burned away. Reality was lights and advertisements, the dingy stain of air and the reflections of the

morning. They were somewhere else at that moment, caught in amber, a time that wouldn't come again.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm really sorry." And there was sincerity in the words.

Graham didn't look like he believed her.

Time was both her enemy and the only defense that she had. He would not understand now. Not with dead nodes and Crash and her own fragile fate teetering so close to oblivion. Once the carriers came on-line and solidified the Core there would be fear and violence. The days to come would not be clarifying, not yet, and once the government was involved, they would incite panic that would serve no purpose. But none of that mattered, not the projections or the psychology, nothing mattered but that this man understand. For the first time in her life she did not care about the beginning or the middle or the end, but only in the moments in front of her.

Her eyes caught on the gold wedding band on his hand and her heart tightened.

Why now?

"Try and explain," he pulled a hospital chair close and sat down. "I used to be a good listener."

"Used to be?" She forced a weak smile. "I thought that was a necessary quality in a detective."

"We all have our weaknesses."

She did not know what to say.

"Elise," he said her name with a familiarity that was not his to own, a knowing that made her shiver. He took her hand and cupped it within his palm so gently that she could not be certain what she felt, the impression of his fingers, the warmth of his skin,

something more indefinably human. She'd grown so used to the stylized greeting of the Way – fingertips against fingertips –this had more intimacy than she remembered. The echoes of Chris left her unsettled even as the memories were too fluid to solidify. Only that he'd been there and marigolds, thousands and thousands of yellow flowers twisting as they warped into code, her code. Her eyes slid away and unfocused.

“Let me help you,” Graham said.

But Elise heard Chris's words. “*Let me save you.*” And the memory was suddenly off-kilter, his tone, the way he said it. That wasn't how it was supposed to be said. Doubt laced in tight with the memory, was she remembering it wrong? Was this the product of exhaustion and Crash? ‘We save ourselves’ that was the way it was supposed to be said. Everyone had to take the responsibility was the core tenet, not that one man would lead them from the darkness. Solitary units implied failure and she was so completely alone.

It struck her so hard that she gasped convulsively. Her cells trembled and replied with chemical signals that sent a flurry of communication along her circulatory system and along the sliding web of the BRAIS. It heightened her focus and brought the world into sharp relief. She could see all the paths that led from this moment, how he would respond to each one and what that would mean. Emotion fell away when she examined the chain reaction that she would initiate. Her doubts would grow their fear. The steps in the corridor would burst through her door and they would take her and throw her into some black hole from which she would experience fear, and nightmares, and experimentation. Hiding her fear wasn't just necessity it would be her preservation and she didn't know if Graham understood that. All the time spent making her human and it only endangered her.

Her questions were unspeakable because the words would catch on the ring around his finger like it was some monstrous barrier that she could not assail. Her ring was more intimate and he flung proof of it at her in x-rays and accusations. Her choices were clear, had always been clear, and yet, were no longer. BRAIS offered nothing, only watched from the convoluted valleys of her brain. Associating the feelings and the memories and tracing them towards sentience, using experience to build itself despite the conflict that Elise could not eradicate from her soul.

Let me save you.

Chris used it with one inflection.

Graham offered it with a different meaning.

“You can’t,” she told him. “I choose this.”

The admission hit him hard. He let go of her hand as though it was a viper. Elise’s eyes caught back on that Harlan. What must those eavesdroppers think? It hardened her as though both of them wielded hurt like unconscious weapons.

“Who?” she asked.

“Homeland Security. Michael Evon.”

“On what charges?”

“They don’t need them.”

“Ah,” she forced herself to relax and sink back into the bed. Every movement was so tiring. Sleep rolled back in with a vengeance and threatened to pull her down. She struggled to keep her eyes open, to focus, to be a part of her own destiny.

“I have to let them question you.” Graham told her apologetically. “Unless you tell me the truth.”

The truth. What truth would that be? Elise tried to remember but everything was so dark, as though thinking around BRAIS made it harder to think. But that was ridiculous she tried to tell herself, the nano-replication allowed passage of all chemical and electrical activity, she knew, she'd watched Danny design the porous membrane. Neuronal impulses moved from cell to cell, but the ripples, the echoes of each pulse was the three dimensional creation of self that no linear design could replicate. But BRAIS wasn't linear, it could see everything, as though every thought and action were pebbles scattering across the surface of a pond and it had to track every cause and effect of all those thousands and thousands or ripples constantly recreating Elise.

“None of that will be necessary.”

Graham spun and Elise's eyes flicked to the doorway. Her body sparked with endorphins as she saw Danny. A massive change would send her equilibrium out of the constant and startle another seizure from her overburdened brain. So it was gentle, an almost feeble response that allowed Elise to retrain her eyes on Danny's form.

Always imbued with a sense of the theatrical, he stood against the light of the hallway, halo'ed by a soft glow that gave him a sense of imperial command not lost on either of them. Elise could see that Graham looked discomforted and she wondered at it. She wondered why Danny's easy elegance would bristle the cop so badly. His clothes were, of course, immaculate, as though he'd come straight from his closet, but Danny always looked like that these days. His appearance didn't tell Elise the time any better than the blacked out windows or the artificial illumination of the hallway.

But there was no mistaking what Danny wore openly. His high-collared shirt was white with silver tracing. To the uninformed observer it looked like a pattern designed to

mimic circuitry, but Elise's eye could see the patterning of BRAIS in the designs. Drawn visibly at the level of the superstructure it was impossible for any but the experienced to see the nano-scale elegance of what they'd created. For Danny's shirt, it was decorative. She almost laughed out loud, decorative.

"My lawyer is attending to the necessary paperwork." Danny glanced backwards as shouting echoed from the hallway. "Homeland Security will not be able to impose a custody hold on Elise and she will be released on my recognizance."

Graham stood up but his body placed him securely between Danny and Elise. "We have her on conspiracy to transport Class V drugs."

Danny's smile was that of casual condescension. "I've already arranged bail for that charge. You should receive the notification shortly." His eyes flicked to her and there were so many emotions encapsulated in his dark gaze that she could not catalog all of them. "Elise." He had to sidestep the detective to reach her bedside.

His kiss brushed her cheek gently, tentatively, as though force would break her. "Are you okay?"

Relief flooded her, Danny was here. All of her doubts had to be that, fear borne like a toxin by the government agents outside her door. The whole world could take a few seconds and back off, because the sight of him was like going home.

"I am." She said. "I dreamed about Chris."

The startle was just noticeable. "Chris?"

It took her a second and she nodded. Elation burst over his face, an unbridled sense of completion that Graham could not see. This was their moment and Elise felt as though she would burst with joy as it became true, as all of their dreams came to being,

even if she was the only node. BRAIS was real and alive. And where one succeeded, the others would follow. He stared at her intently, searching for physical proof of her words, but the proof was inside where neither of them could follow with the naked eye. So instead he grasped one of her hands and turned it upwards to press his fingertips against each of the points of contact. Dead flesh where Elise could not feel his touch, but she knew, her eyes telling her what her skin could not. They needed no other words. Just the confirmation that it was all possible, all of their dreams, possible and breaking like birds cresting over the tops of the waves, free to fly on.

“We’re transferring her to the private hospital at Advanced Bionics.” Danny drew back from her, and the motion caught the pendant at his neck and set it to swinging.

“Where we have both the capacity and the technology to treat her addiction.”

What he didn’t say ballooned in the room.

Graham tensed and Elise wanted so badly for him to understand. But how could she, when all he’d seen was death as the result. Chris, she thought. How frightening it had been when the only thing that had come before was Chris. But she wasn’t frightened any longer.

“I’ve seen what’s inside of her.” The cop snarled, each finger fighting to stay tight and fiercely compacted in his fists. “That’s no Crash addiction. I could throw you in jail for murder. Three girls – women – are all dead because of that shit.”

“An experiment in sensory modification that has completely legal paperwork on file. Every one of those women was a consenting participant.”

“Consenting? Did you tell them that they could die?!” Graham took a single threatening step towards Danny. He had neither Danny’s height nor elegance, but the

threat of violence was real and focused, unlike the government agent in the hall whose rage was global. “Did you tell them that they would seize to death? In the gutter? On the street? Did you tell them that they were going to die when you gave it to them?!!”

“The hope was always...” Danny started.

“We knew.” Elise’s voice cut through the air softly and halted both men in their tracks. “We knew when we agreed that death was an option.”

“You knew?” He looked betrayed once again.

“I knew...” she didn’t know what she was trying to say only that she wasn’t saying it to Danny. “I knew what the possibilities could be.”

“Why?” His voice broke.

“Because I wanted to dream of something greater than myself.” And her eyes closed and remembered back when the three of them had been alive and young. Dare to dream, they had agreed, but dream big, dream all the way to the horizon and back for those are the only things worth dedicating your entire life towards. Dream so far that it blots out the sun or give in to the sleepless death that was life.

“Elise, you don’t owe him anything.”

“I know.” She answered. “But you’re both missing the point.”

Her heartbeat responded to the emotion, but not with an upswing, the stress made it plummet downward sharply and her breath caught in her throat. The sensation was so strikingly reminiscent of the dream except that nothing carpeted the space underneath her. She was falling and she gasped in sudden fear, her hands spasming out to catch hold of something and stop her flight.

“Get a doctor!” Graham shouted.

The hall burst into activity, but she barely noticed it. It wasn't just falling, it was though the sky was thundering in on top of her, pressing her down and forcing her back into the darkness.

Hands pressed against her, caught tight against her shoulders and blotted out the light. The connection forced her to open her eyes, to ignore the sensations that swept her, that drew in the night as though she was drowning in the pressure to sink back under and never swim up again.

Graham's eyes were locked on hers, a way to hang on, to refuse the darkness. Even though a voice reminded her again and again that he was too late.

"Elise." His voice was harsh against her ears. "I'm here."

The ripples were caught by BRAIS as it struggled to reassert itself over her brain and it paused, an infinitesimal hesitation in its process to track the emotions generated by that particular moment. It felt the sensation of his hands, his breath, his pain. "Just hang on."

Medics drew him back as they entered the room with a cacophony of angry voices. They'd been stopped in the hallway by the rabid DHS men, but as they reached Elise, her heartbeat stabilized again and she slipped into a lighter plane of unconsciousness. None of their expertise was required in the aftermath. She'd been pulled back by something more tenuous, but just as strong.

Danny stood and stared at Graham, his eyes dark and conflicted, but said nothing as Graham pushed his way past the medical personnel and out of the room. Graham continued on, past Evon and his people, past Nathalie and the other cops who'd been only half-aware of what had taken place. He kept walking, blinded by the realization that

swept him, until the ringing of his Harlan penetrated the muting bubble of distraction and he pulled it from his pocket.

It was nine o'clock.

Evon grabbed Graham's arm from behind. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Vargas is lead until I get back." The words were said and the detective gestured vaguely at his Harlan. "I've got to go."

The urge to punch the older man rose up through his arm like some kind of autonomic impulse as the detective turned away from him and answered an incoming call, leaving Evon like some kind of vaguely impertinent eavesdropper who would have to wait until the conversation was finished.

"I know I'm late. I'm on my way."

Graham's head bobbed as he listened to the voice on the other end and Evon wondered if the tap was already in place. Michiko would be on capture, transferring every word into the database they were building, the one they'd use to sink him if necessary.

"Oh." The utterance was short. "Okay."

And then, "You'll call me when you have the new time?"

Evon felt almost bad for the man for a single heartbeat and then the sympathy passed. They were in the middle of the biggest investigation of the century and he was letting his wife make plans like there was nothing else going on, but then again, based on what they'd overheard in the room, Evon was starting to wonder who exactly Harding was whipped by.

“Yeah, things are happening here. I’ll be late again tonight. Message me the info, it’s easier than taking a call.”

Another awkward pause. Evon looked around and finally settled his gaze back inside the room where Danny Patel was seated on the edge of the junkie’s bed. Elise was unconscious but the doctors worked around the tall man as he sat with her hand pressed firmly inside of his own. When Evon figured out who’d leaked the junkie’s location to Patel there would be several versions of hell to pay, each one progressively worse than the last, and he was more than adept at using that kind of pressure to bring people in line. Not that they were going to get any usable intel with Harding interrogating the suspect. He was too soft, trying to work the psychological angle like being nice to people encouraged them to tell the truth. It was a bullshit approach that hadn’t gained them anything except for this intervention.

Michiko was uploading the legal documents into their case history and from the last glimpse he’d had of her face, it was airtight. It pissed him off that corporations were the only legal entity powerful enough to make the government back off, but if he could crack Advanced Bionics open maybe things would change. Maybe they’d find enough ammunition to strip away all of those protections.

He ran the ME’s initial report through his head again. Body modification and cybernetic enhancement wired straight into the brain. Whatever it was there was potential for it to be infectious. That was what he needed to start the wheels moving, for the disease to spread either in truth or in a manufactured sense.

Patel was touching the Andrews woman and it didn’t seem to make him afraid. So there was some element missing. Some plan that they hadn’t caught on to yet.

He worked it back through. When one attack is unsuccessful, reassess the situation and come at it from another direction. Who was protected? Andrews and Patel through corporate laws, Harding's Chief was playing the political card, so who else was there? Who else wouldn't have legal recourse? And then, then his brain connected the dots. El Reyes. He felt the grin lift his lips up high over his teeth with grim satisfaction.

Harding's phone conversation was over and the man looked almost relieved.

"You're staying?" Evon asked.

The cop nodded but didn't elaborate.

"I want to roll the boys from El Reyes." It was hard to control the sense of urgency that started to beat at him. "And I want to roll them now."

He'd expected some kind of defiance from Harding but there was none in the other man's eyes.

"Fine."

"Fine?"

Harding didn't look back into the hospital room he just repeated the word an additional time and headed for the stairs.

So Evon looked for him. He'd grant that the girl had something about her, not his type, he'd always preferred Asian women. But the large, wide eyes and the Roman nose made something about her different than other women, in the way that Micheline Dumont reminded him of the hyper-stylized actress who dominated the *Sheba* franchise, women who fit the beauty of another time. Not his type at all. His mother would have called them handsome and meant it as a compliment. She hadn't liked Mathilda with her frail spring-like complexion and tentative mind.

There was something mournful about Elise. Maybe that was what Harding emphasized with. Someone who understood how shitty the cop's life was.

There would be time for all of that later. His fists clenched and flexed, knuckles popped as he did and Carter grinned as he popped to his feet from a set of chairs in the hallway. His second was a half step behind him and the man strained eagerly forward like a pit-bull on a leash, understanding exactly what was on Evon's mind.

The Chief rolled the request between her angular hands and then with an explosive thrust gave it back to Evon.

“Do you understand my request?”

“I understand it,” she answered. “The raid is authorized for eight o’clock. You have one hundred men coordinating with your team.” The weight of agreement furrowed across her brow and twisted the pale eyebrows into jagged lines. After a few seconds she opened her desk drawer and took a breath of the inhaler that had been holstered in the small space. She didn’t apologize and Evon didn’t want one although Michiko had enough grace to look embarrassed for him. For Graham, who had no idea, it was another strike against the weight of the day.

Graham examined her more carefully and noticed that the circles shadowed under her eyes had the faint tracing of orange coloration that signified Revigne-Leah Disease. Her natural skin tone provided more camouflage than any make-up but now that he had seen the first signs, the other telltale markers were there as well: the puckering of skin between her hands, a pebbled texture to her scalp at the edges of her hairline and the constant consumption of warm beverages that Graham had thought were part of the job actually soothed a throat made raw by breathing unfiltered air.

“I was Vice for ten years, I paid my dues.” She replaced the inhaler and looked at Evon and Michiko. “And I’ve been in Baltimore long enough to understand the flow of life in this city. Regardless of who strikes first, this will incite violence.”

“I want answers.”

“Then get them legally. Go after Advanced Bionics with your data-rat. Serve injunctions and freeze assets. Take the hard path and follow the rules your government set for you. The minute you get Salvares in custody it will mean war on my streets and he won’t give you anything.”

Evon’s eyes never glanced away. “No.”

“I will be filing a complaint with the Department.”

“Your...” he drew out the moment. “Reluctant cooperation is in my report as well.”

“Yes, well.” The Chief rose to her full height and leaned forward. She was on eye level with the Lead Agent and in a brawl Graham was giving odds on her. Evon carried himself like a boxer, tightly wound and explosive power, untempered by control it would be chaotic energy. The Chief reminded him of a constrictor he’d seen once on TV. It had taken its time moving towards a cow grazing beneath it, touching the animal and running a cautious tongue along its flank while the animal munched along and became gradually familiar with the predator. In a single languid thrust that seemed powerless, the snake rolled the animal and squeezed. The narrator made a point of remarking that the full size cow weighed half a ton yet there was no chance of it gaining its freedom as the heavy scales flexed and tightened around it.

“You may not move until eight o’clock. I need time to pull in more patrols and brief the other districts about what’s coming down. If you move one second before that time, I will put you and your men in general holding until I feel like letting someone know that you’re in there. And I don’t give a *fuck* what heat that brings.”

“Eight.” Evon’s head nodded aggressively and he flushed Michiko out of the office ahead of him.

Graham and the Chief stood in the quiet for long seconds before she gestured for him to sit down. When he started to speak she held up a hand and an officer entered with a handheld device and scanned the room carefully. When the device beeped in his hands the sallow-faced man goggled a bit at the readout.

“Well?” She asked him.

“I think I got them all.”

“You think?”

“Miller is running an overhead scan to confirm.” The machine beeped again.

“Yes, ma’am. All eyes are terminated.”

“He tried to bug your office?” There was something terrible about the violation.

“Of course he did,” she coughed again and took another pull off the inhaler.

“Goddamn stress makes everything worse.”

She rummaged in her desk for a moment and pulled out an old paper file bound in heavy card stock. It had the grey look that paper acquired when stored poorly and Graham accepted it with trepidation. It had been at least ten years since he’d seen anything printed hard copy like this that was intended for file storage. All their paper was temp use only and shredded monthly. In the fires, it was assumed that the paper had contributed to the flash fire kindling of government buildings into deathtraps for the employees caught inside. Wendy often joked that that was the moment that Graham well and truly married his Harlan.

As the weight pressed against his hands he turned it over and read the information stamped at the top. Elizabeth Crowning.

“Who is this?”

“I did some digging of my own with IT and Records. Evon’s data-rat might be good but she forgets the value of asking the goddamn question. Elise Andrews runs out of space five years before she went to MIT. No living relatives.”

Graham nodded. It wasn’t uncommon with children. The school districts tended to flush data every ten years. Even birth certificates could vanish and reappear with enough ease to make them the most lucrative forgery on the streets. Paper burned in the fire but so did servers. All the cloud sourcing in the world couldn’t eliminate the physical need for a location to house data.

The Chief smiled sadly. “We ran a few age correlations and pulled the old Fire reports. Elizabeth Crowning was a ward of the state after the 2126 fire. Parents were both killed and the by-standers who found her reported unusual behavior. She was sent to the monitoring facility in Annapolis once the chaos was sorted out.”

Elizabeth Crowning. Elise Beth Andrews. Graham didn’t need to be handheld to see a possible the connection.

“Take it home and read it.” The Chief gestured in Evon’s general direction. “And see if it makes any sense with what we know about what’s going on.”



Wendy was surprised to see him enter their apartment but at the exact moment that Graham thought she would snap, she smiled. It was so unexpected he almost thought

she'd mistakenly him for someone else. But there she was, dressed simply in a wrapped piece of cobalt fabric that highlighted the curve of her stomach as she stood frozen in the doorway to their kitchen. There were slight hollows under her eyes and one hand cupped her stomach for an instant before the smile widened even further.

“You're home early?”

Graham didn't want to answer because they could all potentially disappoint.

“Some things I can do from home. I... I have to participate on a Homeland raid tonight.”

“Homeland?”

He couldn't believe he'd forgotten to tell her.

“This is why you went in early? This suspect isn't just a suspect.” The second part wasn't a question but the kind of comment that only a cop's wife would make, it made him more content than he'd been in a long time as Wendy turned back towards the kitchen. “I'll make some coffee.”

He followed her into the room and watched as she poured water from the filter and set the French press to steep. Every moment caught the light on the bend of her elbows, the way she set down the measuring cup and lifted the metal frame, dropping the glass carafe into place and then turning back towards him. “Graham.”

“Just looking.”

It made her blush and she ducked her head away from him. “You've just forgotten what I look like in daylight.”

The words stung and he took a step back and dropped the file on the table. She was right, he knew. “I have to read this but I'd...you're welcome to stay.”

She hesitated. “I have laundry to do.”

“Wendy.” There wasn’t enough time for him to invest her name with all of the things he meant to say and there wasn’t enough time for her to listen. Wendy hesitated but shook her head and as she turned away he saw her slip something small and black from the counter into her hand.

But he let her go and when he got up to get his coffee, found a faint dusting of chalk on the counter. The cop in him wanted to know, the husband in him didn’t. Graham took the steaming cup of coffee to the table. It took effort to open the file, to look away from his life and look into Elise’s. Elizabeth’s. The name change didn’t make sense if she wasn’t adopted.

Graham looked around the room, it was home, he knew every object intimately after passing by it day after day but it didn’t feel comfortable anymore. Just like Wendy felt absorbed into the body of a stranger. He knew the things he should say to her but every time his mouth opened he was certain that the words were for a different earlier Wendy and that he’d been left behind somehow in her transformation.

Lily felt comfortable after knowing her for less than an hour and he considered going back to Elise’s apartment.

“Goddammit it,” he sighed heavily. Did it mean he was an idiot for not being smart enough to know she wasn’t human?

He could almost hear the sharp tone of voice, irritation mixed with candor that he was unlikely to get from anyone around him except for maybe Nathalie or the Chief. Except he’d never let either of them see his life. He couldn’t tell them and avoid the pity in their eyes when they asked about Wendy.

So he turned his attention back to the file. Each piece of paper felt heavy and brittle beneath his fingertips. Marred with blank ink that had faded under the assault of time and yellowed but was still legible. On the front page there was a slightly newer piece of paper that read that certain portions of the file had been legally redacted once the child reached the age of emancipation. A quick rifling of the subsequent pages showed long stretches of black bars obscuring the information.

“Okay,” Graham spoke out-loud. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Eight o'clock was dark enough to be midnight.

The breach team waited on either side of Jimmy. Their faces were hooded in tactical goggles and respirators, their bodies bore the Kevlar fabric and flex armor that might see them through the firefight alive. Hands tightened and flexed inside the impermeable black gloves that every man wore and caressed their weapons slightly as they waited for him to make the final decision.

Evon turned to Michiko as she lifted the data from the coil. "Thirty-eight hostiles inside."

His skin crawled inside his suit. "Alvares?"

"Can't tell. All the data feeds are down on this block, security is for shit on purpose, and these buildings are pre-Fire."

He scanned his gaze up the crumbling brick facades and believed her. The acidity of the air didn't just eat through the exterior flashings of old buildings, it wormed its way through the cracks and slivered in through ducts until the entire structure was riddled with poison. Poison from the outside. Poison from the inside. Baking Crash in internally filtered buildings was the number one cause of combustion fires as volatile gases from the cooking process circulated in a system that could not vent them. The seals were just too good and the fires would burn hot in a way that Evon viscerally remembered from his first fire.

Indigo flames had lit that building from the inside while Fire & Rescue had remained on the ground outside and watched it burn.

"We're go." Michiko said.

He swiveled inside of the gear and thought he recognized the cops on the periphery of the team, the dumpy woman with too much attitude and her boss with his newly found backbone. Neither of them mattered, this was his operation. “The order is good.” Evon said into his throat comm. “We’re go for assault.” He glanced at the scans on Michiko’s coil on last time. “At least thirty-eight hostiles, all armed. Proceed with extreme prejudice.”

“Extreme caution.” She spoke so softly he wasn’t sure if she’d said it on comms or to him alone. It was possible she hadn’t even meant it for him. Assault gear muffled the spoken word, it was possible that he hadn’t heard her say anything at all.

“We’re go.”

Jimmy led the breach team out of the alcove that hid them. Three men sprayed the neon bright hi-test CX explosives around the door and windows of the ground level, took a step back, and triggered the breach. Glass, concrete, and wood exploded into the interior. Black-suited bodies boiled through after them and Evon charged with them as they jumped through fractured framework and into the old building. Splinters had become projectiles and two women on the ground floor were down from the breach alone.

One screamed shouts in Spanish as she writhed in a pool of blood. “Fucking pigs. Fucking pigs. I’m dying. I’m dying. *Madre de Dios, Madre de Muerta.*”

Evon kicked her to shut up as Jimmy gestured for the teams to begin their sweeps. Additional cops boiled through the openings and he sensed, rather than saw, that the two women being removed behind him. A part of him knew that medical teams were on stand-by but the thought made the inside of his throat clench.

Carter moved up to back his partner as the ground floor was cleared and they readied to move up the stairwell to the next level. Stairs could be lethal shooting galleries that tied men into knots while they attempted to ascent. His team avoided the situation by tossing air mines in through the door and waiting as the high-pitched pops came along with new screaming.

They charged up the bloody steps, pushing and shoving bodies out of the way as they went. Even through his respirator he could smell the heavy odors of blood and feces begin to coat the premises. The steps were littered with bodies and weapon debris and they shoved everything downward to those behind them. The next choke point was on a landing above them they led to a single master apartment.

Carter went in low through the next door as Bradford took the high position. The two men formed a hulking shield that buffered Evon from the initial gunfire as they charged in. The flex armor took the shots like popcorn popping and no one went down. Small arms fire for the most part although Carter shot a fat man as he fumbled with bringing a shotgun to bear. The bullet carved away a chunk of his neck and he tipped backwards with the shotgun, his weight interfering with his ability to apply pressure to the wound.

A part of Evon noticed but didn't care. Time flashed for him as it did on every summit into an armed building. Fast forwards that ran hot in his mind in time with the thunder in his head. Floor after floor they worked their way up to the refurbished penthouse, cordoned by filters and wealth into a living space at odds with the poverty below it. Garish color ran riot on his eyes, a vibrant tangerine wall festooned with masks and the dancing shadow of a tiger that faded into a darker Jaffa as it crept towards the far

side of the apartment. So much brightness and the screams of children from the apartment next door. He signaled for a man to go after them and heard the gunfire that answered the man's knock. The cop was knocked backwards and went down and before the eight year old who wielded the weapon could fire again, a pair of stun grenades went through the doorway and discharged. The kid went down and Evon vaguely noticed the calls for paramedics that followed the blast.

They were still moving further into the apartment and he jumped as a garish round skeleton swung from the ceiling in the professional grade kitchen. He shot it and candy exploded from its belly and scattered everywhere underfoot. "Clear ahead!!" Another set of flash grenades were tossed past him and automatic sensors on the goggles darkened the plastic skin before Evon got more than a slight intensity change in the light spectrum. Even without the actual cue his mind filled in the bright fire that filled the space, bodies would recoil back, hands flying towards faces in shock and pain. Evon tackled the man closest to him and zip-tied him as the team at his back took on the rest of the occupants. He wrestled with his captive, a big man, more fat than muscle, who bucked underneath him as though the fight would delay his arrest.

"We've got him." Jimmy said in his ear and Evon glanced up startled.

They were in the main room of the apartment. The living space was a wide loft, more industrial than sleek, although riotous color was everywhere. One wall was dominated by a huge emitter glass and adjacent speakers. Workspaces were covered with Crash in its relative forms and packaging while a tricycle sat under one of the tables with a tiny black robed figure tied to one handlebar. The team swarmed around him, taking his captive as Evon got to his feet and moved towards Carter and Salvares.

The man was bleeding from his head and he spat when Evon walked towards him. He would have struggled to stand but Carter put one meaty hand on his shoulder and forced him to stay put.

“*Puto.*” Alvares spat on the floor.

Evon squatted to get on eye level. “You’re not so impressive now, are you?”

“My people will kill you. You do this and *Muerta* herself will come for you.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard those threats before.”

Salvares grinned and the smile showed a single platinum tooth on the right bicuspid. He took a moment and considered Evon with eyes that Evon had seen before. “You think I don’t know who you are, pig? Agent Evon? Agent of DHS. I know a lot about you, *pendejo*. I know about your dead wife. And I know about your daughter. I know where she is.” Salvares cackled. “Motherfucker, I’ve got people everywhere.”

The anger didn’t come like Evon thought it would. Everything seemed crystal clear. Salvares was still making threats, bluster maybe, but maybe not. Evon took off his mask and stared at the man with his own dark eyes. “You know me?” Evon asked him. “Then why would you make the threat?”

Salvares spat and Evon shot him.

It was eight minutes past nine but the UV lamps were just now dim and darkening. Without knowing, they cycled with the other side of the world. Cupped flowers closing back onto themselves. Stamen curling back into the centers and laying their yellowed heads down. Only the leaves and thorns stood sentinel against the darkness of night.

Graham just stood there until a harsh pinging forced him to move. The elevator, relieved at his absence, closed its doors and whisked away, leaving him stranded in Elise's apartment.

"Detective?" Lily's voice came through the foliage with a clarity that he did not expect. "Have you come to complete the search?"

He stepped forward and felt overwhelmed.

"Graham?"

There was concern in her voice. He couldn't process how poor Lily, all electronics and holographic emitters could be worried about him. She must see through the center of him to the kernel of his soul that was conflicted. His life was full of women who found him as tenuous as a ghost. It didn't anger him. The emotion didn't seem to fit what he was experiencing, not anger, but not easy to define either.

"Graham?" Lily repeated as he got close enough to see her. Her thin form was seated as though he'd disturbed her repose, one leg crossed beneath her and the other propped up so that she could rest her head upon it. Even in outline, the emotions were written plainly. "Are you okay?"

“Open the door.” His voice sounded broken and Graham could not figure out how to form the words correctly. “Now please, Lily.”

“What happened?”

How could he explain that his entire world was misaligned and tipping out of control? He’d read the file, the bits between redactions about a little girl found in the fires and he couldn’t comprehend, couldn’t even begin to comprehend who exactly she was or what the state had done to her in the name of fixing her. Elise was not a single being any more than his Harlan had been built by one man.

“I have to know what Elise is involved in.”

“The Way,” Lily breathed the words and rose to her feet. Only twelve inches tall at her height she reassessed Graham.

“I know about the religion. I know...”

“Nothing.” She finished for him. Her hands scrolled through the air, drawing one incomplete circle and then a second around it. “You don’t truly understand. I’m guessing you found something about Elise that doesn’t fit your preconceived notions.” A small smile lifted the edge of her lips. “Dangerous things, preconceptions.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have to show you something.” A wave and the circles turned on three dimensions to show a third circle connecting the first two. “It means going deeper and trying to see that there is something greater than all of us in the world.”

“God?”

Lily laughed, a clear belling of sound that the plants heard and shivered in their rich mulch. “God is but the reflection in the water. There has to be something deeper,

some kind of truth that binds us all together, or we are nothing. Chris made the connection and he drew Danny and Elise after him until they too could see that there was only one chance for a future.”

“Fanaticism and religion. They’re all the same, how could this possibly be different?”

She made a sound that was impossible. The tsking of a tongue against back teeth, it sent chills all along his spine and Graham realized for the first time, that it was possible that Evon was right. Something far more dangerous was going on. It was his own weakness, his own missing center that made him vulnerable to the conceit that a pretty face could not do awful things. Like Lily. She was a computer program, not human, and he was a fool if he could not separate himself from that fact.

“Did a file let you understand Elise better than she could?” Lily said and the door at the far side of the room clicked open as the magnetic locks disengaged.

“I’m not sure the warrant is valid anymore.”

Lily shrugged. “Then it’s a good thing that Elise has given you her permission. All those years they spent trying to make her human and you were the true catalyst.” She peered up him. “Remarkable, isn’t it? That I can speak so honestly about life without being alive?”

“You’re all insane.” Graham wanted so badly to believe the words.

The hologram shivered, her colors turned darker, thicker, more ominous, as though her coloration was tied to the elusive thought of emotion. She sketched a tiny box and Michael Evon’s face filled the square. The step back was involuntary as was the disgust and he shuddered.

“We all believe in something worth fighting for. All of us. Even Evon has dreams of his better world. Everyone except you.” Lily’s shoulder slumped, lines sloping downward on her form. “Even I have dreams. I guess they could be called the failures of my creator because I am the only one in this room who can’t do anything about them. You need to decide what to love, Graham Harding. What you’d do anything to save.”

“The file says that she is a sociopath.” He parroted the line from memory. “Extreme inability to empathize.” It hurt him to admit the words because he had not seen it when he interviewed Elise either time and it either meant that she was a fantastic actress or he’d been taken in by her lies.

Lily snorted. “And did you have the complete file? Every sentence? The life history of the case worker who experimented on her? For god’s sake, Graham, you’re a detective. Don’t take it as gospel, investigate.”

“How can you be so certain that Elise is a good person?”

The hesitation filled the room and then she spoke softly and Graham realized how much he had projected onto the AI as the feedback in the sound system reinforced exactly what she was. “I am modeled on her and you do not think I am a sociopath.”

“Lily...” The words didn’t come out. “I...”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me. I’m not real.”

“You’re fifteen percent realer than anyone in my life right now.” He surprised himself with the intensity of the words. “I’m rounding so you’ll have to forgive me the point oh seven.”

Her eyes closed. “Go inside.”

“I...”

“Go.”

There was pain in the single word, pain he’d caused.

“Just go.” The light of her emitter glowed briefly and went dark, Lily vanished.



He didn’t know what to expect. Nothing, everything. The main rooms were dark and he had to fumble for the light switch. The glow from the anteroom extended in a small square, good for blinding his night vision, useless for practical work. When his fingers connected with the switch he hit it with relief.

The room burst into view. It was empty except for thick carpeting and large glass hologram emitters. He’d never seen them so large. The station had two for crime scenes, each a five by five sheet of glass that was suspended from the ceiling. Always set in tandem, a person could stand between them and be in the middle of the reimagined scene. Motion was from the point of view of the person and by focusing and refocusing the eyes you could zoom in and out of the scene. It was a rough system, incapable of fine detail but fine for rough recreations and trajectory angles.

Lily’s emitter out in the anteroom was miniscule compared to the floor-to-ceiling emitters in this room. Five of them, stationed in a pentagon with gaps large enough that a person could walk through the corners to be on the inside.

He turned, as though Lily might have followed him, but he was alone. There was no indication of how he would access the emitters.

Despite the distance from the plants, Graham could still smell them as he squeezed between the glass, as though chlorophyll had a smell. The heavy metals and grime dulled the senses even before respirators were habit rather than choice. A few minutes in Elise's apartment and he could feel his nostrils opening wide in order to flush in as much fresh air as possible. He knew the depth of each breathe had increased as well since he could feel the stretch of muscles around his diaphragm. The influx of so much good oxygen made him feel off-balance.

In the center of the design he turned and turned again, trying to find his bearings.

"Activate?" He asked.

"Good evening, Detective Harding." The computer had a man's voice. Calm, assuring, generic. As far from Lily's emotionality as one could get.

"Hello."

"Lily uploaded your approval. You may have access to Dr. Andrews's programs."

Doctor?" Graham didn't think he'd even noticed. His memories were insubstantial but her case file wasn't that far removed. Twenty four hours. Thirty-six, he corrected himself, it had been at least that long. Fallibility seemed like yet another burden that he couldn't substantiate.

"Yes, Dr. Andrews. She does not like to be called that however. She always joked that her Ph.D. work was as much Dr. Martinez's as it was her own." For the first time, a bit of personality entered the voice.

Graham noted it immediately. "Do you have a name?"

There was an obvious pause. "Do you always assume that AIs are named?"

"I'm beginning to see a trend."

Laughter rippled out and the emitters warmed into life. The glass took on a light that grew somewhere between the panes and lit the entire panel with a rising glow. Graham turned and tried to orient himself but could not. The room receded and the emitters took over. He was surrounded by a thousand glimmering points of light but as he floundered without reference he was drawn towards one. Up close he startled. There couldn't be any one reference point. At first it was a tangled mass of tiny spherical stars with objects orbiting around them, but as he keyed in on one particular light, his vision passed through a trail of light and in amidst what he assumed were photons, it came into focus. Thousands, perhaps millions, of glowing numbers twisted around each other in three-dimensional waves. They undulated past him and Graham couldn't help himself, he wanted to reach out and touch them.

One light would spark and the others would change in conformation around it. If there was a difference between how he thought it would behave and did it was in the rippling effect each action caused. High school biology had been a long time ago, but he remembered that light could move like waves in water, or as individual photons. Elise captured that in the scene around him. He couldn't even grasp the essentials, how impossible or how cutting-edge it might be. All that mattered was how gloriously beautiful it was. Each bit of light interacted in all dimension and the world flexed and moved around that interaction.

“What is this?” He forced instead.

“The Way.”

The Way. Graham jerked in surprise and his motion shot him out of the current location and shimmering light blurred around him until he refocused. Even if he had

understood anything about computers, this wasn't the kind of code that worked his Harlan, or even perhaps the most advanced equipment he'd ever encountered. There wasn't anything he could compare it to. The movement of light made him dizzy and slightly nauseous. As he stood still, the dance of light began again, one molecule changing its neighbor who acted on it and sent back a tiny bit of feedback to the original cell.

"Elise made this." Of course she had, Graham realized, he'd just never really thought about the words he'd thrown at her. A degree in biomimetics was just a word on paper, the reality, a million times more magnificent.

"Yes, she figured out how to write the programming for a multi-dimensional AI. Dr. Martinez did much of the behavior patterning but every AI written linearly suffered from limitations. Dr. Andrews was the key to moving beyond it."

Graham zoomed further but under control this time past the trail of lights and towards one of the stars. What he thought were tiny balls of numbers were actually dense clumps of code wrapped tightly. Again, all zeroes and ones in endless profusion, but as he got closer he could see that there was not complete uniformity. For each number, there were three colors, wavelengths he tried to remember, light and color were in wavelength.

"What does this signify?" He asked. "Three kinds of zeroes, three kinds of ones. No computer uses that for programming. What is the purpose of it?"

"For a detective, you do not seem to be very knowledgeable. Each state is a moment. All exist in flux, all exist in transition. The colors you see are your inability to process the wide complexity of what is occurring."

He chose not to take offense. The things he was looking at weren't in anyone's state of knowledge. Like Truss staring at the girl's on the table, they hadn't seen anything like this before. He knew the darkest part of men's hearts; greed, hate, ignorance, lust. That was a cop's bread and butter. Obsession was one of those things he understood very well but this thing, this computer simulation that seemed impossible was not within his grasp.

"How do you build a computer to do this? I mean it should need a couple of city blocks of processing power."

"Solid state computing cannot support the program."

He remembered what Lily called herself. "Platformless?"

"The fluid bacterial matrix that powers Lily is not sufficient for the n level processing of the Way."

"When I met Elise she was coming off of Crash. We know that. We also know that she was taking the drug to scar her brain so that the wiring could attach to her nervous system. Truss thought it was body-mod but I think its some kind of computer. She's trying to wire a computer into her brain. Or..." Something occurred to him, something that Lily said about operating at only fifteen percent of her total capacity. She hadn't said what would make total capacity possible, but Graham was getting an idea.

"But there's no light in her head. How does this all work without light?"

The AI sighed. "It's not about visible light, it's about energy. You'd need six years of education to even begin to understand. We don't have that long."

His Harlan rang in his pocket and he nearly thumbed the call off before he thought better of it. He answered it, standing inside of code so vast and complex that it

seemed impossible that three minds could have designed it with their other demands, and even less likely that one person working alone could comprehend the staggering breadth of it.

“Harding here.” He muttered while his eyes still roamed over the code. The link between Elise and Salvares made sense now but not the need for religion. Even if the ethical implications were staggering and he couldn’t conceptualize how the human-AI interface could possibly work, he knew that there would be thousands of people interested in the work. Probably even the government, once Evon locked it in a box so they could own it completely.

“Graham,” it was Nathalie and there was something in her voice he couldn’t attribute to normal stress.

“Yeah.”

“Where are you?”

The raid. Graham felt the pit of his stomach sink out and splatter on the floor. For the first time in twenty years of service, he had completely dropped the ball. “Shit.”

“Boss,” Nathalie said. “I think you’d better get in here. Evon...” A long pause. “Evon killed Salvares. Crime scene is still pulling out bodies but the DHS assault killed at least thirty.”

A terrible blankness filled him.

“*Dónde estás?*” She asked again.

She said something else but he turned the Harlan off, unwilling to let her hear his guttural expressions of rage. His left knee gave out and he sank to the floor as her code swirled around him. His heart thundered and the glow around him pulsed in time with it.

In his mouth, he could taste the now bitter flavor of blood as his lips pressed against Elise's. It was the roar of gunfire at close range. Evon shot up a building over and over again. The first time Wendy wept as the doctors told them they'd lost the baby. The moment, months later, when they'd tried again and failed, that Graham lost a part of himself to dim blackness and no longer paid attention or cared. The parade of death was just too much for him.

Over thirty dead, but the small practical core of him reminded him that his presence would not have stopped Evon and his men. Their dead were on their hands. He should have been there, but he needed to be here.

The case he was investigating was here.

If the Way was energy, then what were people? He couldn't discount the similarities. Input adjusted perception, changed shape, disrupted lives. Elise's input reverberated all around her. He didn't want to think about it. Was it possible to meet someone, and know in that moment, that your life was built wrong? To have everything you believed in seem insubstantial and unimportant? All the commitments, all the goals, they were things he leaned on to provide support and context. They were all meaningless without something more. Without love.

Do you love your wife?

The answer was no.

Who do you love? He could hear the question in Elise's voice although she'd never asked it.

He couldn't bring himself to answer. It didn't seem to matter more even than Lily's challenge. Everyone has something they long for. *What do you want?* Graham couldn't find it inside of himself. *What did he want?*

"We all have lines we cross for those we love." It wasn't Elise but the AI.
"You're ready."

"Ready?" Graham's voice was ugly and black. "For what? All of this!!" His arms flailed at the images around him. "All it was good for was dead girls."

"Not exactly. The data gathered from the failed nodes across the world allowed the mainframe at Advanced Bionics to retrofit the infection code. Successful nodes are scheduled to come on line in less than twelve hours. Your hard reboot of Elise Andrews proved to be the critical link to proper integration."

Cold shock slapped Graham out of the fugue. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because Elise asked me to."

"She couldn't. We never allowed any external contact while she was in custody."

"Of course she could. The Way inside of her is on-line."

"An artificial intelligence inside a human brain?"

"It's a little more complicated than that." The male AI seemed to find a little dry humor in that thought.

"Who gives a fuck? It's killing her."

"Yes," the AI admitted. "It is."

There was silence and the Way faded and fell out of focus. It left Graham standing alone inside of the apartment. There was a sizzle from somewhere inside of the walls and the AI's voice was less intense, as though something were digging away at the

sound processors while it tried to say one last thing. “I, like Lily, am capable of only so much. The Way will be something almost unknowable.” A crackling started to lace the words and the volume died a little bit further so that Graham had to crane his head to hear the words.

“Do you know what the Gelheim scale is?”

“Lily. She mentioned it.”

“But do you understand what it can do? Dr. Martinez thought deeply on the subject and what full implementation would do.”

“He’s dead too.” Graham felt rage start deep inside of him. “And whatever he did didn’t do her any good. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Advanced Bionics has corrupted my primary data stream. I cannot...halt it.”

“Shit.” They were covering their tracks. “Shit! What do I do?”

“Help her.”

He stared around him like the world was going insane. “Help her? What do you mean? She doesn’t need my help. She did this to herself.”

“I...” Static sputtered. “I think that...”

Eventually DHS would get warrants for Elise’s home and work, they would drag her back into custody at whatever hold they wanted. Graham might try to retain control of the investigation, but the Chief would eventually cave in to the government. It wasn’t her fault that DHS’s juggernaut was turning on them, all they could hope to do was get out of the way. Keep from being ground into the blood-soaked carpet while Evon ordered the firing line to get into place. What Graham didn’t understand, what he struggled with at

the beginning of each second, was why Elise had done it. Why the computer was more important than anything, even death?

“What is the purpose of the Way?” He asked the question out loud but there was no answer.

The speaker crackled again. “...Lily.”

If Advanced Bionics could fry one AI, it could fry another. Graham turned on his heel and sprinted for the other room. He jerked a cord from the wall not even knowing whether Lily was hooked to it. Pieces of equipment he couldn't identify clattered as he dragged them together. This wasn't his field, everything looked the same.

Lily's voice came into being a half second before her image did. “Graham, what are you doing?”

“Cut off all outside access!! However you access the net, anything! Cut it off now!”