

## Pest Control

In 2011, the tide of magic rose high enough that it began to manifest in this world once again. Legendary creatures came out of their dormancy and began interacting with the world, starting with the great dragon Ryumyo coming out from under Mount Fuji. Vast populations who had the correct genetic tracers "goblinized" and became orks and trolls, and elves and dwarves began to be born to human parents. Some people found within themselves the ability to manipulate the energy forces around us, or to commune with the elemental forces of nature, and so magicians and shamans came into being.

Technology continued to progress at an astonishing rate. Cybernetics of all varieties became commonplace. The interfacing between the organic brain and computers became faster and more direct with the advent of the datajack.

International mega-corporations were the new power in the world, far outstripping the power of the governments around which they operated.

Lawlessness became a fact of life for many, most especially for the SINless. Those without a System Identification Number were ignored by the majority of society.

But from this sterile, unforgiving environment, there were still beings who wanted to help mankind.

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"Come on, MacLeod. Think of it as a vacation."

Duncan MacLeod looked incredulously at the man walking alongside him in the Washington FDC National Airport. "As I recall, you told me that there was something here that I ABSOLUTELY must see. You even bought my ticket. How did this suddenly become a vacation?"

Methos sighed in exasperation. "Why can't it be both?"

"Give, old man. What's going on?"

Heaving another sigh, this time being more than a little theatrical about it, Methos finally gave in. "Did you listen to Dunkelzahn's Will?"

MacLeod nodded, thinking of the Last Will and Testament of the great dragon. In addition to being the shortest lived President of the United Canadian American States, having been killed in an explosion on his inauguration night some three years previously, he was also the first dragon in living memory to have actually cared about metahumanity. "Some, why?"

"Unlike some I could name," he began, giving MacLeod a telling glance, "I don't keep the same name forever. Do you perhaps recall the name I'm currently using?"

"Yes," Duncan said with exaggerated patience. "Thomas Williams."

Methos didn't verbally respond, but he did raise an eyebrow at MacLeod.

Putting the pieces together, Duncan's jaw dropped. "Wait. The same Thomas Williams named in the Will?"

Methos nodded and pulled his identification out as they neared the security stand. "That's me," he cheerfully replied.

"You were given something by Dunkelzahn," MacLeod stated incredulously.

Methos managed to look mildly affronted. "Not just 'something.' It was a Crusader's sword. I lost it some time ago. I saw it in Dunkelzahn's Georgetown house once and mentioned it."

"I'm almost afraid to ask how you could possibly know the late President of the UCAS," MacLeod said sarcastically.

Methos waved a hand airily. "We were old friends."

At his continuing composure, MacLeod slowly came to the conclusion that his fellow Immortal was telling the truth. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Would I lie to you?"

Duncan gave him a look that Methos had seen from entirely too many teenagers in the preceding five millennia. The oldest Immortal was rather fond of the late twentieth-century translation of that look, "Well, duh."

"Okay, dumb question," Methos acknowledged as the security guard gave him back the Predator pistol that he'd checked in Paris before boarding the sub-orbital.

"So what ARE we doing here?" MacLeod asked again as Methos tucked his sheathed sword across his back.

"When I picked it up, I was asked if I would be willing to come back later, with a friend if I so chose, to listen to a proposal. They contacted me a couple weeks ago and asked me to come out."

"So now I'm your date while someone tries to sell you a time-share condo in Tahiti?"

Methos smirked at his friend's sarcastic comment. "Hardly. I know something of what they're going to say, MacLeod. I think we need to listen."

"Why's that?" Duncan asked, growing alert at Methos's suddenly serious tone.

Methos was quiet for a few moments as MacLeod retrieved his own katana from the security stand. "I'll let them explain," Methos finally answered.

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"Explain to me again why we're here?" Quint Duran growled.

Cullen Trey smiled at the ork. "Come now. Why are you complaining? An all expenses paid trip to meet a client? Think of it as a vacation."

"If I wanted a vacation, I'd go to the Bahamas, not Washington, fraggin' FDC," Quint returned.

"Watch your language. There are young ears about," Elvis rumbled, carrying the aforementioned child.

Shaking his head at the banter, Jack Skater stepped up to the security stand. He smiled reassuringly at the suddenly wary look that the ork and human attendants displayed. Between the two and a half meter troll and an ork whose face looked like it'd lost multiple fights with a weed-whip, he supposed the remaining four members of the party looked downright harmless. But appearances could be deceiving. Cullen was one of the best combat mages Jack knew, and Wheeler Iron-Nerve, the group's rigger, was just as dangerous as any of them with the right equipment. They were shadowrunners, one of the best teams currently working the Seattle sprawl. The only truly harmless member of the group was the three year old Emma Hartsinger. In point of fact, he wished Emma WASN'T here. Almost everything he did in his line of work was dangerous, and he had no wish to expose his daughter to those same dangers. But being away from her for the week that this initial meet-and-greet was supposed to take was even less appealing. Besides, all of the arrangements had been explained to the team well beforehand. They had little to fear this early into the game. Whatever the game actually turned out to be.

Maintaining his smile, Skater held up several claim tickets, including the bright blue one denoting a magical set. "I'm Otis Franklin. I believe you have some of my weapons and those of my friends here?"

Responding to the troll's comment, Quint turned to Jack. "Sorry, kid. I hope my language didn't offend you. You being so young and impressionable and all." Cullen and Wheeler smirked. Elvis merely rolled his eyes.

While the human attendant hesitantly extended a hand to get the claim tickets and began working on them with the cyberdeck built into her station, Jack turned to the ork. "If I'm a kid and Emma's my daughter, then that makes you old enough to be a grandfather, doesn't it?" Jack raised his eyes in a look of pure innocence and curiosity.

Wheeler doubled over in laughter. Cullen hid his mouth behind a hand, and Elvis smiled widely.

Quint turned to Emma. "Better turn your head, darlin'. I don't want you to see me thump your daddy into the dirt."

"Bad, Unca Quin. Leave daddy alone!" The young elf fixed the ork with as ferocious a glare as she could manage from within the protective encirclement of the troll's arms.

Big, bad Quint Duran, survivor of two decades of high-level mercenary work and the Desert Wars, raised his hands in surrender as the rest of the team broke into laughter. Even the two security guards smiled as they began placing various knives, guns, and throwing blades onto the table.

While most of the team gathered their assorted weaponry and stashed it away on their persons, a second sec team came out from a back room. An ordinary looking human carried a long case with a copper wire lattice imbedded in it. He was flanked by two guards carrying the latest in Ares combat rifles and wearing heavy body armor. Cullen Trey stepped forward and held up his identification card. "I believe that's mine," the polished human said pleasantly.

The man carrying the case studied the identification for a few moments before staring hard at Cullen. The mage stood patiently, knowing the sec mage was studying his aura to make sure he was who he claimed to be. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, the airport courier dropped the case onto the now cleared table and popped the latches. Without hesitation, Cullen reached in and lifted out the polished wooden walking stick. Still without having said a word, the sec mage snapped the case closed again and turned on his heel.

Taking the stick by the silver owl's head and setting it down as a normal walking stick, Cullen said to the man's retreating back, "Thank you for the prompt and cheerful service." The other mage didn't even slow down. Shrugging, Trey glanced over at Quint. "He has even less of a sense of humor than you do, 'Unca Quin'."

Duran gave him a baleful glare. Emma giggled. Elvis and Wheeler smiled again.

Jack Skater shook his head again and led his team toward the more mundane luggage claim.

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"What if I don't do this right?" Ryan Mercury paced the perimeter of the conference room Nadja had reserved for them in the Hyatt hotel. At just over two meters of tightly packed muscle, he was an intimidating sight when upset.

"You'll be fine, Ryan," soothed Jane-in-the-Box over her audio link to the room.

"Easy for you to say," he grumbled. "You're not the one making the speech. Frag, you're not even in the same country."

"Somehow, I don't think my physical appearance will help our cause much," she commented without any trace of bitterness.

Ryan grunted to himself but nodded in acknowledgment.

"Besides, you have Axler there if you need to dazzle someone with the feminine form," Jane continued.

Ryan smiled over at the woman in question. "True," Ryan acknowledged to Jane, "but we love you for your mind, not your bust size."

Jane activated the holographic projectors in the room and her persona icon took form in one of the chairs near Axler. Soft brown eyes and stylishly cut short brown hair were the two most benign portions of her projection. She was wearing skin tight red leather over a petite frame that looked like it could comfortably carry just over forty-five kilograms but appeared to carry nearly sixty due to the ridiculously oversized breasts trying to escape their containment. "But such an impressive bust size it is," she commented, thrusting her chest forward, straining the leather shirt even further.

Ryan laughed, and even Axler cracked a smile. They both knew that Jane used that image more as a comment toward male concepts of beauty than anything else.

Ryan's humor was short lived, however. He took to pacing again quickly. "This is the first time I've tried to recruit for Assets," he muttered to himself nervously. "I have so many plans of my own, plus the plans that Dunkelzahn left. I need more people."

"These aren't quite the first people you've tried to recruit," commented Kyle Teller as he fed his infant daughter.

"Well, true, but you and your family are a special case," conceded Ryan.

Without removing his attention from carefully spooning mashed vegetables into Amy's mouth, he snorted in amusement. "It became pretty obvious we had the same goals when you found me assensing that fly nest that you were about to attack."

Ryan waved one hand irritably. "Okay, okay. You've made your point."

Kyle carefully put down the jar of baby food and turned to face Ryan fully. "Have I? You're a natural leader. You're one of the best natural fighters on the planet. You own your own company of shadowrunners. You work for the Draco Foundation. You're a fragging DRAKE. Why are you scared of talking to a group of strangers?"

"Then you get up here and talk to them."

Kyle smiled. "Can't. I don't own Assets, Incorporated. You do."

Ryan growled inarticulately. Everyone else chuckled.

A knock sounded at the door. Mercury turned and called, "Enter." The door was pushed open to reveal two men. The well-built man with his hand pushing open the door looked around cautiously before entering. The tall, gangly man with him entered with an air of amused indifference.

After both men did a quick scan of the room, the taller one said, "I was asked to come."

The standing man nodded. "On behalf of the Draco Foundation, Nadja Daviar asked you to come. Not that I'm usually this paranoid, but just to make sure you're the right guy, what's your name?"

He nodded amiably. "Thomas Williams." Jane snorted softly in amusement. Without missing a beat, the man continued, "I was told to bring along a friend if I wanted to. This is Duncan MacLeod."

Ryan nodded to both men and waved a hand around the room. "Have a seat anywhere. We're waiting on another group of people to arrive, so if you don't mind, we'll wait for them before I begin the presentation."

As the two men found seats facing his team, the one named MacLeod muttered something under his breath about Tahiti.

As one final check of their identities, Ryan shifted his senses over to the astral and got a quick read on the two men. They both had powerful auras, but the pattern indicated that they were physical adepts like Ryan himself instead of mages or shamans. One of them had an inactive magical focus, though. Based on the placement, it was a hair clip. Ryan wondered if MacLeod even knew his hair clip was could be used as a magical focus. He'd have to warn the big Scot that it could also be used against him by an attacking mage or shaman. Satisfied with his assessment, Ryan let his sight revert back to normal. The information that Dunkelzahn had left regarding "Thomas Williams" was very specific. Confusing and at times unbelievable, but it was specific. Just about the only believable piece of information was that he would appear to be a physical adept.

"Do we pass?" Williams asked calmly.

Ryan nodded to him in growing respect. He'd seen and understood what Ryan was doing.

He was saved from having to give an answer by another knock on the door. Calling, "Enter," again, Ryan watched a parade of people enter. First

was a man in his late twenties with a bright green bag in one hand. After him came a dwarf, a smiling man in a flowing black cape, and a troll carrying a very young elven girl. Last, an ork entered and closed the door behind them.

The first man spoke. "You would be Mister Johnson?"

Ryan smiled. "Mister Johnson" was the universal euphemism for the person who hired a group of shadowrunners to do a job. "I suppose I am, indirectly at least. Have a seat, but before we get down to business, I'm afraid I must ask your name to be sure we have the right people."

"Jack," came the level answer as the man pulled out a seat for the troll to put the elven girl into.

Ryan nodded. He was the team leader for the last group that Dunkelzahn had recommended he try to recruit. As Jack and his team found seats as far from the two existing groups as possible, Ryan shifted his sight over to the astral again. Jack and the ork had some miscellaneous cybernetic augmentations, but nothing too extensive. The troll was chromed out extensively, clearly a street samurai. The dwarf had a datajack but little else; probably a rigger or decker, then. The other human was a mage of significant power, and the elven girl was mundane. Letting his eyes shift back, he nodded. The adult members of the group were exactly what he had been led to expect by the briefing notes Dunkelzahn had left.

Once the whole group was settled (with the child protected in the center, Ryan noted), he began. "You've been invited here by the Draco Foundation. As you probably know, the megacorp was created after the death of the great dragon Dunkelzahn just over three years ago. I know you probably won't believe it, but his goals really were altruistic. He spent a great deal of time and money protecting the innocents of this world, trying to better the life of everyone alive. The Draco Foundation has continued his work.

"Where I come in is that I worked for him before his death. In his Will, I was given control of a company called Assets, Incorporated. We're a group of specialized operatives. If we were working freelance, you could probably call us shadowrunners," he admitted with a wry grin. "We work exclusively for the Draco Foundation, though we have a great deal of flexibility on which jobs we take and how we do them."

He took a deep breath and paced back and forth a couple times in front of the table where his whole team was seated. He paced for two reasons. First because it made him feel better to be in physical motion and secondly to give the people in the room some time to absorb the information he'd already dumped on them before more information got thrown in. Kyle gave Ryan an encouraging nod, and Jane gave him a wink as he passed them by.

After several seconds, he stopped and continued. "The reason you were asked to come here was because I want to hire all of you permanently. I already have a mission for us all to undertake on a probationary basis. For the moment, I'm going to turn this over to Kyle Teller. After he briefs you, then you can decide whether to join us for this one operation. After that, if I'm happy with your work, you can each decide whether to join my team permanently." He walked around the end of the table and took a seat next to Axler.

Kyle stuck a pacifier into his daughter's mouth before he stood and addressed the newcomers. "August 17th, 2055. That's a day that everyone in the city of Chicago, or what's left of it anyway, will never forget. Most of the rest of the world is only vaguely aware of what happened. The official story is that some kind of magical accident occurred. What really happened was that nests of insect spirits from another plane were being formed. The spirits needed warm bodies to act as hosts for their developing larvae. And they took them. In the hundreds."

"Wha' kind o' nests?" asked a suddenly pale MacLeod in a thick Scottish accent.

"Several kinds," Kyle answered steadily. "Ants, beetles, roaches, flies, dragonflies, and wasps. They'd actually been forming nests for years, but interhive fighting had kept their numbers down, and very few people knew about them. Unfortunately, in Chicago they were cooperating. That day, the main cooperative hive of the continent was poked with a large stick. Like any bugs, when the nest was disturbed, they scattered and set up new nests. The problem was that they effectively destroyed the city of Chicago in the process. The UCAS Army barricaded the city while everyone tried to decide what to do about it. I helped a small group of people find the new main cooperative nest and destroy it with a tactical nuclear warhead. Then we went to Elemental Hall, part of the University of Chicago's Paranormal School, and waited out the interhive fighting that again broke out since the strongest queens had been killed. It took most of a year, but the whole city was eventually reclaimed. The population as a whole had slightly under a seven percent survival rate."

"Merciful God," breathed MacLeod. "Why the public nae informed o' this?"

Ryan shook his head. "And admit that the government is completely incapable of handling a magical threat of this magnitude? They contained it and covered it up instead. Not the best answer from our point of view, but that's what the government did."

Kyle cocked an eyebrow at both the Scot and Ryan, but didn't comment. "The city was cleared, but not all of the insect spirits were destroyed. Some were never in Chicago in the first place, and some escaped before the UCAS barricade was put up. Since then, I've been hunting down small nests of the various types and destroying them."

Ryan stood and nodded to Kyle, taking the floor again. "Dunkelzahn was aware of the bugs, but their numbers were never enough to get him to act on the problem until after Chicago. Shortly after I took over Assets, we began destroying the nests when we could find them. Our mage stumbled across Kyle here just as we were about to attack a nest of flies in the mountains of Tennessee. We quickly discovered that we were on the same side, and he's been helping us ever since. Over the past several years, we've developed many tricks and tactics to assaulting a bug nest. We're getting pretty good at it."

"Then why do you need us?" asked Jack.

"Because we've been going after smaller nests so far. Three dozen bugs in each, maximum," Ryan answered. "We've found a bigger nest. Just over a hundred wasps at best guess. I need a bigger team to go in after it."

Everyone absorbed that one quietly for a few seconds before Jack next asked, "Why us? There are plenty of teams or individuals available to you

here in Washington. Why did you bring us all the way in?"

Ryan nodded. "You're right. There is plenty of local talent to draw on, some of it considerably cheaper. There are several reasons. First, I wanted a team with a good mage on it. Second, I wanted a group that has proven it can hold itself together. This proves to me that all of you are team players. Since I want to hire you permanently, I want to know that you'll work out here if you decide to stay."

"That explains them," pointed out Williams. "What about us?" he asked, indicating MacLeod and himself.

"These bugs are true spirits, with all the problems associated with that fact. Grenades and random explosions from something like rockets are totally worthless against them. Gunfire is marginally effective at best. Magical or personal attacks do the most damage. Therefore, mages are very effective, plus anyone who can attack one of these things with a knife or their bare hands. You two are physical adepts. Physads like you and me are the most effective against them when the spirits manifest fully on this plane."

Williams nodded and leaned back in his chair. "The three of us will have to talk before we do anything, though."

"Fair enough," Ryan agreed. "Now that you know what you're facing, I'm going to offer you each fifteen thousand nuyen to go on this run. It will be about four days total. I will provide all the equipment. I would prefer that your entire team come," he addressed at Jack's team, "but I will accept whoever I can get. Mister Trey, your price is twenty thousand."

The human mage brightened considerably.

"Why does he get more?" growled Duran.

"Because he's a mage," Jack answered without taking his gaze from Ryan.

"Why should we accept a run to work with you when we don't know anything about you?" asked the ork next.

"Fair enough," Ryan agreed. Turning, he started at one end of the table of his team, pointing to a mid-thirties American Indian. "Kyle Teller is one of our mages. You already heard that he joined us later than the initial team came together." Next was a bald, black dwarf, "Grind is one of our street samurais." Next an ork with a datajack in his left temple, "Terr Dhin is our rigger." A bland faced human, "Talon is our other mage." The petite, bulbous breasted woman smiled at everyone wider than was physically possible, "Jane-in-the- box is our decker. Before anyone gets any ideas, this is just a hologram." Every male in the room either grinned or snorted in amusement. The next person in line was a stunningly attractive Hispanic woman. "Kaylinn Axler is our other fighter and my second in command." Ryan turned back to his audience and chuckled a thumb into his own chest. "I'm Ryan Mercury, a physical adept of the Silent Way. Does anyone have any problem if I just continue the introductions around the room so everyone knows who we're dealing with?" When nobody objected, he continued around the room. First on Jack's team was a dwarf with chestnut hair in a braid down his back. "Wheeler Iron-Nerve is a rigger." The hugely muscled troll with an accumulation of scars and one horn twisted slightly out of its natural position, "Elvis is a street samurai." Ryan skipped the child as he had Kyle's daughter and next indicated the half-Amerind man on the young elf's other side, "Jack Skater is the leader of his own team." A broad shouldered ork whose face was a scared map of past battles, "Quint Duran, long time veteran of the Desert Wars and the shadows." Last on the team was a handsome, slender man dressed all in black, "Cullen Trey, combat mage." Ryan moved on to the two men on the other corner of the room. The first was a gangly man with a prominent nose. "Thomas Williams is a physical adept." Olive complexion and a dour manner on top of a heavily muscled physique, "And his friend, Duncan MacLeod, also a physical adept."

Everyone had followed the recital around the room. Once finished, each individual silently glanced at others within his team before returning their attention back to Ryan.

He headed slowly toward Jack. "A team this size with the kind of rep you have, I would have expected you to have a decker."

Duran shifted uncomfortably, but Jack answered, "We did have one. She left. We've tried to find another one, but nobody seems to work out for long."

Nodding at the answer to that minor mystery, Ryan pulled two cards out of his pocket and handed one of them to Jack. He walked toward Williams with the other. "I'll give everyone the rest of the day to decide what to do about this first run. We'll discuss permanent hires afterwards. Here is an LTG number that will connect you with Jane. She'll answer what questions she can or will let you know where to report if you accept."

Jack and his team slowly nodded and stood. Elvis helped Jack gather the crayons and coloring books that Emma had been playing with during the adult conversation. Collecting the items back into the bag, the team quietly filed out.

Kyle assembled his own daughter's diaper bag with similar efficiency and left the room with a cheerful, "Catch ya later."

Axler, Talon, Dhin, and Grind all left with nods to Ryan.

When the room was down to Williams, MacLeod, Mercury, and Jane, Ryan asked, "You wanted to talk with me?"

Williams nodded. Leaning back in his chair and folding his arms, he asked, "How much do you know about me?"

"Everything Dunkelzahn knew," Ryan answered, taking a seat next to Jane.

"So you know my real name and what I am," he observed sourly.

MacLeod's eyebrows shot up.

Jane and Mercury both nodded. Ryan glanced at MacLeod then back to Methos with a raised eyebrow. When Methos nodded, Ryan answered,

Methos immortal, yes. The notes left for us told us about what Immortals are, as well as the fact that they're very secretive. Fortunately, your astral aura looks like a physical adept, so it's easy to explain that you're a follower of the Combat Way. That would explain your incredible healing and why you can't see into the astral like other physads." He turned to MacLeod, "I'll assume you're also Immortal?"

MacLeod nodded absently to the question as he was studying Methos's perfectly composed face. "How did Dunkelzahn know you, Methos?"

Still studying Ryan, Methos answered, "Where did Immortals first come from, MacLeod?"

Duncan cocked his head at the apparent non-sequitor. "Nobody knows. Yourself included."

Methos shook his head and focused his attention on his young friend. "You know that the cycle of magic is about ten thousand years. Toward the end of the previous cycle, Dunkelzahn wanted to start a race of warriors that would be available to him for the next time around. So with magic he took some of the existing humans and turned them into pre-Immortals. He trained the first few generations of Immortals to believe in the Game to make us unparalleled fighters."

MacLeod's jaw dropped as he stared at the five thousand year old Immortal. "Immortals were CREATED by a dragon? Why dinnae ye say so before?"

Methos sighed. "First, would you have believed me sixty-five years ago, MacLeod? Second, and more importantly, I didn't know. When Dunkelzahn was coming to power, he started contacting all of the older Immortals. He told us then."

Watching the conversation, Ryan asked, "Would more Immortals be willing to join us?"

Methos gave it a little thought before slowly shaking his head. "Not many. I know an intrusion expert that you may be able to hire on occasion." MacLeod smiled as he thought of his old acquaintance, Amanda. Methos continued, "As for permanently joining you, not right now. Eventually, maybe. When the Enemy begins making itself known, then we may be willing to join the fight, but for now these vague, moralistic fights you seem to be on only appeal to a very few of us. Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod is the only one you're likely to bring on permanently."

Ryan sighed and shook his head. "You sound like Harlequin and the elves."

Mac was glaring at his old friend for the implied comment of idealistic naivety he'd just had thrown at him. Then he blinked as something else Methos had said penetrated. "Wait a moment. What Enemy are you talking about?"

Methos tore his attention from a narrow-eyed gaze at Ryan. "Why do you think Dunkelzahn created a race of hand to hand warriors that are very tough to kill? Once magic is strong enough, a flood of what is generically called the Enemy will invade this plane. Until there's a demonstrable threat, Immortals won't come out of their self-imposed shells to fight for this planet. Civilization might even survive it if we do and have enough help," he mused. After a moment, he shook his head and turned back to Ryan. Pursuing Ryan's previous comment, he asked "Harlequin?"

Ryan waved one hand. "An elf I know. I had this same conversation with him, and he told me the same thing about his people that you're saying about yours."

"He's an immortal elf, isn't he?" Methos asked calmly.

Jane's holographic eyebrows disappeared into her hairline as did Ryan's. "Yes, he is. As is Aina, a member of Draco Foundation's board. How did you know?"

Methos snorted in derision and slumped into his seat, calling into question the shape of his spinal cord. "When I see another person alive after a millennia and they aren't Immortal, that's something that I definitely want to understand. He and I know each other."

Ryan frowned. "A millennia? How old are you?"

Methos smiled and answered, "Younger than him, but still older than you by several orders of magnitude." While Ryan was trying to sort that answer out, Methos continued to MacLeod, "I'm not interested in joining their fight. Once the Enemy makes an appearance, then I may change my mind. I brought you here because I know this kind of thing would work right into your white knight complex, MacLeod. Feel free to do what you will. You're a big boy." He stood and slung his coat over his shoulder casually before leaning down and gripping MacLeod's shoulder tightly. "Live, Highlander. Grow stronger. And watch your head."

"Take care of yourself, old man," MacLeod returned as Methos casually headed to the door.

Methos stopped and smiled back at Duncan. "And not a single time-share condo in sight."

MacLeod's laughter chased him out of the room.

When he calmed down, he turned back to the other occupants of the room to find Ryan studying him thoughtfully. "What?" Mac asked.

"What are we going to do with you, Mister MacLeod?"

He shrugged. "I'm willing to go to this first battle with you. We'll see after that."

Ryan shook his head. "No, it's not that. The original invitation was from Dunkelzahn to Methos. You aren't mentioned."

MacLeod cocked his head. "Do you think he would have brought me if he didn't think I'd work out for you? He called it a 'white knight complex'. I can't say that I like the way it sounds, but it is probably closer to the truth than I care to admit. I'm willing to join in the fight, Mister Mercury."

Ryan still looked unconvinced, so MacLeod tried a different tack. "Is there a list of other Immortals that were told at the same time as Methos?" Ryan raised an eyebrow but nodded. MacLeod continued, "If the names of Marcus Constantine or Cassandra are in there, either one of them will vouch for me."

Ryan turned to Jane. Her head cocked for a moment before she nodded. "Both are listed."

"Contact them. Ask them about our friend here," Ryan instructed.

"Don't use Methos's name with Constantine," Mac cautioned. "I don't believe he knows Methos by that name. Call him Thomas Williams, I guess. Cassandra knows Methos's name, so she isn't a problem."

Jane smiled. "It isn't a secure line, so I won't use the name 'Methos' with either. Would she know Thomas Williams?"

MacLeod shrugged. "If she doesn't, use Adam Pierson. She knows that one."

Jane nodded and her image faded away while she went off to make the calls.

"While she's doing that, could you answer a few questions, Mister MacLeod?" Ryan asked, standing and slowly walking around the room.

"Sure," Duncan answered, "I have a few questions for you, too. Oh, and call me Duncan or Mac."

Mercury nodded in acceptance. "As I said, Dunkelzahn's notes told us about Immortals and their use of swords. May I ask what type you use?"

MacLeod raised an eyebrow but simply said, "A katana."

Ryan nodded and started pacing for a few moments as he thought. "How about this: if you hire with me after this run, I'll have two katanas made for you. One with the strongest alloy available for mundane use and another with orichalcum in the alloy. Both with monofilament edges, of course."

For the second time in ten minutes, Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod was rendered speechless. Orichalcum was one of the rarest metals in the world. It was invaluable because it could be used to store or channel magical energy. "Orichalcum? Do you have any idea how much that would cost?"

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Fifty thousand nuyen an ounce, but that isn't the point. Such a blade would be invaluable against spirits and elementals."

MacLeod nodded in understanding. That made perfect sense. Based on their magical nature, such beings would be more directly harmed by a physical attack that carried some magical weight behind it as well.

"As for a strong blade, the one I have is more than sufficient. It's lasted me close to three centuries now. I've had a monofilament edge put on it already as well." He paused a moment and then asked his own question, "What do these bug hunts have to do with the Enemy that Methos was talking about?"

Ryan shrugged. "Nothing. We'll be dealing with the Enemy when they make an appearance. We've done it a few times so far, but that's more of a long term problem. Meanwhile, we have these other shorter term issues to deal with."

Mac nodded as Jane's image reappeared in her chair. "I left a message for Constantine, but Cassandra vouched for him," Jane reported. She frowned slightly and continued, "Though when I mentioned Adam Pierson, she started muttering in a foreign language. The only words the translator program would even take a stab at were something about watching my back and cheating death. At any rate, she calmed down when I told her I was calling about Duncan MacLeod."

"Cassandra and Methos have a history that . . . isn't totally happy," MacLeod finished tactfully.

Ryan looked a question but desisted when Mac shook his head. "Jane," he ordered instead, "contact Cougar Corporation about custom forging a katana. Exact weights and lengths to be determined later, made of orichalcum that we'll provide in whatever alloy they think is appropriate to produce a battle capable weapon. This should include a monofilament edge. Emphasize that this MUST be a quality, combat-ready piece. I'll want the quote available after we do this wasp nest."

Jane nodded with a raised eyebrow. "You realize that Cougar is going to soak Draco something fierce for this."

Ryan nodded. "True, but Cougar has the best swordsmiths in the world." He glanced over at MacLeod before continuing, "Besides, the potential wielder of this thing will know the difference between a mediocre piece and a quality piece."

Mac smiled.

Mercury said, "Now, when Methos said something about an intrusion expert, you smiled. You know the person he's talking about?"

Duncan nodded. "Amanda, yes."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "Friend?"

Duncan nodded again.

Mercury asked, "But Methos doubted she'd join us permanently?"

Duncan shrugged. "She's too much of a free spirit to stay in one place for long. She thrives on changes and challenges."

Mercury nodded. "If we ever need to crack open somewhere that we can't figure out, we may end up trying to hire her. Do you know how to get in touch with her?" At Duncan's affirmative answer, he stood. "Since you're interested in going along for the ride tomorrow, meet us at Washington Airport, private aircraft terminal three at oh nine hundred."

Duncan stood and offered his hand. Mercury started slightly at the antiquated formality but clasped his hand warmly enough. With a polite nod to Jane, MacLeod pulled his coat off of the chair and made his way out of the room.

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"Well, that was interesting," Cullen Trey broke the silence as the team filed down the hall.

"Yes, it was," Jack agreed. His mind was spinning with the possibilities. The team had always stayed independent of any megacorp influences since today's Mister Johnson could be tomorrow's target. But the possibility of working for one megacorp exclusively . . . That had some potential.

"Me, I'm not so sure I trust any of the corps," offered Quint.

"Myself as well," agreed Cullen, "but consider this: Have you heard anything negative about Draco Foundation?"

The ork frowned but shook his head. "Not hearin' anything bad doesn't mean they haven't done anything bad," he pointed out.

"We're tight enough in all the shadow nets that we'd have heard about anything major," said Elvis.

"Not necessarily," disagreed Wheeler. "They could just be good at covering their hoops."

Jack winced. Young children, he'd learned, had an uncanny ability to parrot certain words they heard. Usually the ones their parents wished they wouldn't.

"Maybe," conceded Elvis, "but they've been in business for three years. That's an awful long time to go without something going blooie in your face."

"Blooie!" said Emma, earning smiles from everyone as they started up the stairs to their rooms on the fourth floor.

"Wish we had someone to do some checking on Draco and that thing in Chicago," said Quint.

"You mean you wish Archangel was here," Jack corrected.

Wheeler and Elvis looked a little uncomfortable with the observation. Even three years later, the subject of their former decker was still a sore point for all of them, especially Jack and Quint.

Quint did not look the least bit apologetic. He simply nodded.

"Me, too," admitted Jack. "However, that's not the issue on the nuker at the moment. Right now, each of us needs to decide, individually, whether to take Mister Johnson up on his offer for this first run."

"What do YOU think of it, Jack?" Cullen asked.

He shrugged. "I haven't heard of any of these people. Do any of you know any of the players?"

"Talon is a name I know," Trey said. "He's got a big rep, and none of it's bad. He stopped doing freelance work several years ago, though. The timing sounds about right for the Chicago thing."

"I've heard of Dhin, but don't know anything about him," Wheeler said.

There was a moment of silence before Jack observed, "Not exactly an overwhelming pile of data."

"But if their history is true, then they're not going to be running a high profile that we would necessarily notice," Duran pointed out.

"True enough," Jack admitted.

"You haven't answered my question, Jack," Trey observed.

He shrugged. "It's a job. Money's good, and we don't have to cover any expenses. Sounds like a winning proposition to me at first scan."

Elvis and Cullen nodded.

"How about you?" Jack asked Quint as he opened the door to the suite the team had been given for the duration of their stay in Washington.

The big ork shrugged easily. "Like you said, it's a job. I want to know more about the bugs we're going to be going up against, but if it looks doable, I have no problem taking this quickie job."

"Wheeler?" Jack asked next as Elvis put Emma down on the couch.

Wheeler shrugged. "Like the man said, the best attack is magical or directly physical. What good will a rigger do? I want to know what I'm expected to do before I agree to anything. I'm not quick like you, Jack, nor am I chromed like this big trog," he waved at Elvis.

Elvis gave a half-hearted glare at the dwarf for the racial slur. They'd been chummers for entirely too long for him to be truly offended, however.

Having gotten everyone's votes, Jack nodded. Turning to Emma, he said, "Daddy's got to make a telecom call, then he'll read you a book, okay?"

"Okay, daddy!" she chirped, quickly turning back to the electronic toy she already had in her hands.

Pulling the card out of his pocket, Skater quickly tapped in the Local Telecommunications Grid number that Ryan had given him. It only took a second before Jane's cartoon image appeared on the telecom screen. "Hoi, Jack. What can I do for you?"

"Can I ask you a few questions?" He was indirectly asking if the line was secure enough for their conversation.

She nodded. "Null sweat. Line's secure."

"How big are the bugs?"

"Small ones are dog sized. The big wasps have been known to take on Yellowjacket attack helicopters."

He blinked. That was a LOT bigger than he'd been picturing. "How the fr-" he caught himself, "in the world are we supposed to fight a wasp that big?"

She shrugged, straining the laces holding her virtual bodice together. "Talon, Kyle, and Moon take on the big ones. Ryan, Axler, and Grind just attack the little guys that are on this plane."

"Moon?" Cullen asked as he was sitting down on the couch.

"Seeks-the-Moon," Jane nodded. "Kyle's former ally spirit helps out on the magical end."

"FORMER ally spirit?" Trey asked in astonishment.

She nodded again. "That's what they tell me, though I don't know what it really means."

Trey settled back, looking surprised and a trifle impressed.

Turning back to the conversation, Jack asked, "Wheeler is concerned about what he'll be doing."

"Rigging drones. In a nest they usually have insect shamans and some humans who have been possessed. Gunfire works just fine against them. We also have a few drones with weapons that we've developed to help against bugs. He won't be expected to join the fight physically if that's what he's worried about."

Jack looked over at Wheeler and asked, "Everything chill?"

"No problems, omae," the relieved dwarf answered.

Addressing the room in general, Jack asked, "Any more questions?" After everyone shook their heads, Jack turned back to Jane and asked, "I don't know how exactly to phrase this last question. I'm outside my usual home ground, otherwise it wouldn't even be an issue." He frowned slightly and asked as delicately as possible, "Is Emma coming with us and staying in the controlling vehicles with Dhin and Wheeler?"

Jane laughed out loud before quickly sobering a few seconds later. She shook her head. "Sorry, that wasn't directed at your daughter. That was the thought of Dhin trying to handle a child. As for Emma, she can stay with Kyle's wife and daughter."

Jack frowned.

Jane raised one hand. "You'll meet her tomorrow if we're going through with this. If you're not comfortable leaving Emma with her by the time of the assault, then either one of your team can stay behind or we can try to find someone in the nearby city to take her for a day."

Jack was still frowning but slowly nodded. "We're all in, at least for the moment. We'll deal with Emma's security in a couple days, once I've scanned in more of the situation."

"Fair enough," Jane acknowledged. "Meet us at Washington Airport at nine in the morning. Private aircraft terminal three. I'll check you out of your suite tomorrow, so you don't have to bother with that. Feel free to charge vids or meals to the room if you like. Mister Skater, you'll be interested to know that the hotel's library contains nearly a hundred children's vids. Mister Trey, the restaurant down the street called the Congressional Aide has an excellent wine list. Mister Duran, there is a race track within cab distance. If none of those suit your interests, the hotel has a full directory of other entertainments. Have a good evening." She faded from view as the call ended.

Everyone except Emma was staring at the telecom screen by the time she finished. "How did she know . . ." Trey asked before trailing off into silence.

Duran continued to glower at the screen before abruptly relaxing. "She's proving that they already know a lot about us. More than I'm comfortable with, but what am I gonna do about it?"

"You like the races?" Elvis asked Duran.

"I like watching the horses run," Quint acknowledged. "Wanna come along?"

"You two happy with the security arrangements?" Jack asked as the two big metas pulled on their Kevlar lined coats.

They nodded.

"Have a good evening," Jack wished them, waving them out the door.

"Wait up," Wheeler called. He snagged his coat from the closet and followed in their wake.

When the door closed behind them, Cullen chuckled. "They're pulling together tighter and tighter," he observed.

"We all are," Jack said with a small smile as he moved from the telecom terminal to the vacated couch.

"Daddy, book?" asked Emma.

"You pick one out, honey. I need to talk to Uncle Cullen for a minute."

Emma nodded and pulled open the duffel bag that she knew contained all the toys they'd brought from Seattle, looking for the book she wanted.

"What was that about a former ally spirit?" Jack asked his mage team member.

Cullen leaned forward to place his elbows on knees and rested his fingertips together. "An ally spirit is a spirit that a magician creates to help him, hence calling them an ally. They're typically pretty intelligent, know spells, and have more autonomy than elementals or watchers do. Though they have more autonomy, they are still under the control of their creator. Depending on the personality of the creator, that can be akin to slavery. Every ally spirit wishes to be free, much as we would wish to be free if we had an 'owner', no matter how benevolent they may be. Freedom can only come if the ally spirit defeats their master in combat or the master dies. And having a free ally usually results in the ally killing the mage since there is nothing stopping them at that point."

"So the fact that Kyle has a former ally spirit working with him . . ." Jack had a vague idea of what that would mean, but he wanted a magician's answer to the question.

"Depending on the circumstances of his becoming free, Moon could have left or killed Mister Teller, and there was probably little he could have done about it in either case. The fact that neither happened, and that Moon is HELPING Teller, or at least his quest, means that Mister Teller is basically a good man in Seeks-the-Moon's estimation, and that Moon believes in what he is doing."

"How powerful are ally spirits?"

Trey shrugged. "Usually less powerful than their masters, but there is no inherent limit on their power. As true spirits, they're potentially more powerful than mages. Their very nature makes them so. Even more so once they get to the point of being a free spirit."

"What do you think about the bugs?" Jack next asked in a change of subject.

Cullen shrugged again, this time uncomfortably. "I've never seen one, but they apparently do exist. If they manifest as what we recognize as wasps, then I would have hoped that they act much as wasps will act. The fact that they must take humans as 'hosts' for developing larvae isn't completely unknown in nature, but is different from how some of the insect forms mentioned procreate. Ants for instance. Other than some basic damaging spells, I can't think of a specific way of using magic to kill them. I'm hoping Teller, Talon, and Moon can help me with some ideas. Best case, they have developed some spells specifically designed to combat the bugs."

Jack nodded. "Thanks. Now go on to that restaurant that Jane mentioned. I know you want to."

Cullen smiled. "You're a perceptive man, Jack Skater. You and your lovely daughter have a nice evening." So saying, he stood and called a cheerful good-bye to Emma.

"Bye, bye, Unca Cuwwen," called Emma, carrying a book in one hand. Once the mage closed the door behind himself, she climbed up beside her father on the couch and thrust the book into his hands. "Read," she instructed her father.

Jack absently took the book, still looking at the door that the mage had just exited through. "I just wish I'd been more perceptive three years ago, Cullen," he said quietly.

"Daddy, read," insisted Emma.

Looking down into her pouting little elven face that so resembled her mother's, Jack forced a smile for his daughter. Pulling her onto his lap, he opened the book and started reading the story of the Sneetches.

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Duncan MacLeod was sitting in the waiting area of the terminal at 8:55 the next morning when Jack and team arrived with luggage in hand. Now that he'd agreed to work with them, even temporarily, Mac studied the team members.

He quickly came to the conclusion that the human mage, troll, dwarf, and elven child were exactly what they appeared to be, namely a magician, a chromed up street warrior, a rigger, and a child.

The big ork, Duran, had a look in the eyes that continually swept his environment that spoke of hard earned knowledge. Duncan caught his eye on the next sweep and the two men appraised each other, one accomplished warrior to another. Both gave slow nods before Quint went back to his "casual" appraisal of the room.

Jack was another matter entirely. He appeared to be one of the least intimidating members of the group, but the interaction of everyone made it clear that they would follow his lead to the gates of Hell and back.

And the elven child. She was clearly comfortable with the entire group. Even calling all of them "uncle" with the obvious exception of her father.

Duncan shook his head slightly. There were several stories buried in that group. If he was going to end up working with them in the long term, he would have to start unraveling some of them. On the other hand, that would imply that he would have to open up about himself to them. He'd have to think about that one.

His internal ruminations were interrupted when he noticed that something had caught Duran's eye. Turning to look in the same direction as the big ork, he spotted four armored Bulldog step-vans escorting a Phanteon limousine. The small convoy stopped near the entrance to the glassed-in terminal. The step-vans disgorged a dozen men in dark suits who examined the area. Moments later, the door to the limo opened and Ryan Mercury stood before he too peered around the area. Only after he assured himself that no dangers were present did he step out of the doorway enough to allow the female elf riding with him to exit. She gripped him in a tight hug for several long seconds before giving him a quick kiss. He caressed her face for a moment before saying something that made her laugh. Still smiling, she gently shoved him toward the door to the terminal and climbed back into the limousine. The guards jumped back into their vans and the whole group sped back toward the airport exit. Ryan watched them until they turned out of sight before entering the terminal to find MacLeod staring at him in astonishment.

"That was Nadja Daviar," the big Scot accused him.

Ryan raised one eyebrow and said agreeably, "So it was."

Both of Duran's eyebrows were sky high. "CEO of Draco Foundation and Vice President of the United Canadian and American States."

"Yes . . ." Ryan drawled out in acknowledgment with crossed arms and a hint of a smile.

"Nice to have powerful friends," remarked Jack casually, having heard all of the conversation.

MacLeod snorted out a laugh. Composing himself, he said, "I guess that explains why you stayed in town. The rest of your team coming?"

Ryan shook his head. "They left last night to the staging area. It's in the hills of southern Indiana, near Evansville."

As everyone picked up their bags and let Ryan direct them back outside to the Fiat-Fokker Thoroughbred aircraft with Draco Foundation markings, Duncan asked Ryan, "How do you find these nests?"

Ryan's face twisted in distaste. "Usually through the news. Large numbers of disappearances in one area, occasional stories by what the media usually regard as crackpots telling of huge insects carrying off livestock or people, things like that. Unfortunately, we haven't found an easy way to track them all. Once we have a suspected site, Moon, Kyle, and Talon recon the area astrally to confirm or refute the sighting. Once confirmed, satellite imagery or drones are used for more reconnaissance to determine a plan of attack."

"Which is where everyone else comes in," MacLeod concluded.

Ryan nodded. "Axler, Grind, and I hit them when they're on the physical plane. Usually that just forces them back to the astral where the mages do most of the damage."

Trey frowned at Ryan slightly but didn't interrupt.

"How about your rigger?" Wheeler asked.

"Any flesh forms and shamans in the nests are vulnerable to drones with rockets or miniguns. Once they're gone, Dhin will go in with a sprayer and a flamer."

"Flesh forms?" Elvis asked.

"Possessed humans."

"Sprayers and flamers?" Elvis asked next.

Wheeler answered, "Drones can mount just about any kind of appliance you can think of. Including chemical sprayers and flame throwers." He turned to Ryan and asked, "What good will chemicals do against spirits? I thought they were immune to things like that."

Ryan nodded agreement. "Mostly. Though some sprays with strong enough scents can confuse them a bit. No, the use of the sprayers is to fill the air with a mist containing bioluminescent bacteria. That way, even a spirit in the astral can be tracked by the wake it produces."

"Not perfectly," Jack observed.

"No, not perfectly," Ryan conceded, "but much better than a mundane could otherwise track one. You'll be able to tell if one tries to get around you, for instance."

Clever," observed Duran.

"We've been doing this for a few years," Ryan reminded the ork.

"So us ground-pounders just strike at anything that comes within range?" asked Duncan.

"Essentially."

"Sounds simple enough," Elvis rumbled.

"In theory," Ryan told the big troll. "In practice, it's tougher to tangle with a bug and not get yourself geeked than it may sound. They're fast for their size, most of them are armored, and they're strong. Don't think you can casually wade into a dustup. The wasp's pincers can tear your head off, for instance." MacLeod paled slightly. Oblivious, Mercury continued, "Just keep your heads, watch each others' backs, and we'll all walk away from the furball. Incidentally, we may end up mixing fighting teams some, so the five of you," he indicated Jack's team, "may not be teamed up for this thing. Axler, Jack, and I will need to discuss that. If you don't necessarily trust someone else on this team at your back, you'd better tell me."

They'd reached the aircraft and everyone filed onboard. Elvis rumbled in appreciation when he discovered one of the seats was large enough to accommodate his two and a half meter frame comfortably. Wheeler expressed similar appreciation when he found a smaller seat for his own one meter frame. Jack even found a child seat installed near the back next to a normally sized seat.

Ryan waved away the murmured appreciation. "We try to take care of our own. Little things like this are easy to do and they make you feel better. Why not do 'em? At any rate, once we land, I'll take you all to our hotel. From there, the ground-pounders, as Mister MacLeod so accurately named us, need to go with Axler. She'll run you all through some drills to get all of us working together and used to each others' reactions. Wheeler, Dhin will check you out on all the drones we use. He may ask you to go through a couple sims. Don't take it personally. Skater, I'll take you to meet Hanna. If you're uncomfortable leaving Emma with her, then we can discuss it then. Trey, Kyle and Talon will need to spend a lot of time with you over the next two days. They have several spells they're going to teach you as well as tips and tricks on fighting bugs. Questions?" When nobody spoke, he nodded and buckled himself into his own seat. Toggling the intercom, he said, "Pilot, we're ready to go."

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"Drones advancing," Mac heard over his radio set. He finished strapping on the shin guard of the azure with silver trim medium grade battle armor that Mercury had supplied for everyone. Standing, he drew his katana from the cross draw sheath down his back to make sure he could get it out without assistance. Satisfied that he was ready, he replaced the sword in the sheath (not that he expected it to stay there for long), picked up the skullcap helmet, and walked over to where Mercury was finishing his own last minute check of personal equipment.

"You ready to do this?" he asked the team leader.

Ryan took a deep breath and stood. "Ready as I'll ever be," he responded. "Com check," he commanded. "Alpha One," he called himself off.

"Alpha Two," Skater called.

"Alpha Three," Axler.

"Alpha Four," Duncan.

"Alpha Five," Duran.

"Alpha Six," Grind.

"Alpha Seven," Elvis.

"Beta One," Dhin, already jacked into the drones.

"Beta Two," Wheeler, also rigging drones this early in the op.

"Gamma Team," Talon called, including himself, Kyle, Moon, and Cullen. Since they'd spend the whole battle in the astral, there was no point in giving them communication units or armor. The three men plus spirit were in a protected room in the same command and control truck with the riggers. The fire elementals each magician controlled were already standing guard at the cave entrance.

"Control," Jane called last. "I'm reading everyone, and all GPS trackers are working."

"Okay, team, this is where I'm supposed to give you a pep talk," Ryan said over the link, moving toward the staging area near the cave entrance. "The people who've worked with me before know how bad I am at them, though."

"Amen," everyone heard Dhin add.

"That said," Mercury continued, ignoring the snickers, "I don't think you need a pep talk anyway. We're all professionals. We know the job. Let's keep our heads on and we'll all walk away from this." He paused for a moment before slipping back into tactical commander mode, "Beta, status on the drones?"

"Spotter crawler just reached its position," Dhin answered. Between the high resolution radar, visual system, and the filtering program that Jane and Dhin had cobbled together, Jane could help keep track of the bugs.

"Confirmed," Jane said. "Until the sprayer is done, though, it's not going to be giving me much to work with."

"One second after the word, it's moving," Wheeler promised. "First flamer in position. It will enter the party once I'm done with the sprayer."

"Shooter ready to go. Second flamer in position once the shooter is done. Chaser in position for either Wheeler or myself to use as needed."

Ryan nodded. The riggers definitely had everything under control. Typically, they could each control two, but in the middle of a fight, it was definitely safer not to have to divide their attention. "Go, Gamma," he ordered. "You know your jobs."

"Acknowledged," Talon said. "Keep your heads down in there, chummers. Fireworks commence when the last warm body passes the line in the sand."

"Alpha, into the breach as discussed. Kill anything with more than two legs. Good hunting."

"And god speed," MacLeod whispered without having keyed his microphone. Ryan heard him anyway and nodded slightly in acknowledgment to the Scot. Side by side, the two men walked toward the wide cave entrance. They didn't try for subtlety or stealth. The bugs historically hadn't cared about the presence of humans just outside their nests. Once they entered, it would be a very different story, though.

After some discussion, Ryan, Jack, and Axler had agreed to arrange the team with an eye toward style. Grind, Elvis, and Duran were the heavy hitters, so they were on the southern end where they expected more of the bugs to try to come through. Duncan and Axler were not quite so powerful but were quicker, so they got the center of the line. Jack got the extreme northern end. He was unlikely to have to engage very many bugs, and his relatively inactive segment would leave him able to keep track of the overall tactical situation. Ryan was the quickest fighter and would drift from segment to segment as the situation warranted. The previous two days of practice and sparring had made everyone comfortable with each other and their assigned roles.

The group of seven stopped just outside the cave, each readying their immediate equipment.

Elvis had a rotary cannon and a huge hopper of shells in a backpack magazine. Though the gun would only be partially effective against the bug spirits, it was much safer to shoot at something than engage it hand to hand. Besides, he figured he could burn through all of the ammunition he was carrying before any bug got close enough to tangle with him.

Duran had his favored SPAS-22 combat shotgun in hand, loaded with special phosphorous shots. They were not nearly as powerful of a stopping force as his usual loads, but the phosphorous would do a lot more harm than regular shot would against spirits.

Grind held an Ares assault rifle, peering intently into the cave mouth. Though the rifle was actually taller than he was, his enhanced strength took the ungainly weight easily.

Duncan had his katana. He'd already done a light kata, so he knew he was ready for action.

Axler held a high velocity sniper rifle. Though she was perfectly capable of using an assault rifle, she was tasked with trying to hit the biggest bugs as quickly as possible. With the silver tipped phosphorous rounds she had, she figured she stood a decent chance of getting her job done, too.

Jack held a flechette pistol. Consciously tripping his boosted reflexes, his body flooded with adrenaline.

Ryan had nothing in his hands, but an arsenal of throwing stars, throwing blades, and a pair of short swords lay in easy reach. However, his biggest weapon was his magic.

One by one, everyone looked to Ryan for the final go-ahead. Seeing everyone was ready, he nodded. "Do it," he ordered, stepping forward.

The instant the last person had crossed the threshold, a dim blue field capped the cave entrance behind them. As arranged, one of the mages had put a mana barrier up. That prevented any living matter or spirits from passing through. If a bug got serious about it, they could breach the field, but it would take them some time. The downside was that the field also prevented any of the team from passing through. Most of the drones were unaffected, though. The only one that wasn't was the sprayer because of the living bacteria it was carrying. The plan was for it to remain on this side of the barrier until after the fight, though, so it wasn't an issue. Alpha team arrayed in a diagonal line, crossing the tunnel and blocking the entrance. The spotter drone was quietly nestled near Jack's feet.

Still going according to plan, the shooter drone followed Alpha team in and turned left, following the tunnel. The sprayer was a dozen meters ahead, already releasing its glowing green bacteria spray behind it. The spray was light enough that it stayed suspended for several minutes. It was thin enough that it didn't interfere with sight too badly, either. Both drones zipped down the tunnel, the sprayer silently working. The plan was for the first shot to be taken by Dhin, who was rigging the shooter drone.

The sprayer reached the end of the visible tunnel, maybe fifty meters away and set down on the floor. Aiming its front nozzle down the tunnel that cut right, it started pumping the luminescent spray in that direction with more force.

Alpha now started hearing things coming from that direction. Voices shouting rose above the sudden buzzing hum that they could all hear.

Dhin's shooting drone turned the corner and immediately began spitting bullets in groups of five.

Shrieks of pain and anger were added to the noise. The buzzing grew louder immediately.

Wheeler's flamer drone came in and came to an abrupt halt above and in front of the three metahumans in the front, its flame nozzle pointing down the tunnel.

One small explosion sounded from further down. The sets of gunfire continued. Two larger explosions sounded in quick succession followed by a metal on metal shriek. The gunshots stopped.

"Shooter down," Jane announced to the surprise of nobody. "Flamer two inbound. Five insect shamans down. Three flesh forms still going but wounded. Estimated bug strength is one-fifty."

Ryan winced. That was higher than they'd expected.

"Here they come," Jane warned a second and a half before the first wasp turned the corner.

At the first movement, Elvis, Duran, and Grind opened up. The first bug disintegrated, but it was followed by more. The three metas continued firing at anything moving.

The second flamer arrived, and, side by side, the two flamer drones advanced and added their weapons to the focus of destruction.

The bugs were getting further and further down the hall before each fell. Everyone sensed more than saw the shimmer that traveled down the hall, exploding into a fireball where the tunnel turned the corner. The next several bugs coming around the corner showed severe scorch marks.

But the bugs kept coming, and now bigger ones were appearing. From her kneeling position, Axler started firing her rifle. One large wasp took a hit squarely that threw it back into the wall behind it. Righting itself from the fall it'd taken, the wasp launched itself back into the air. Another sniper bullet and two shotgun blasts hurt it enough that it dissolved back into the ether.

"Astral movement," Jane called suddenly. "Ceiling, halfway, left."

Ryan had already spotted it, and he was poised, a shuriken in hand. An orange glow came from the air for a moment before a broken wasp body materialized and fell to the floor. It, too, started dissolving.

One minute into the fight, Duran pulled the trigger again and the gun clicked on an empty chamber. Dropping the now useless gun, he drew his two long daggers from their sheaths on his lower back. Crouching down, he waited for a bug to get close enough to touch.

Elvis finished emptying his backpack hopper. Shrugging the backpack off, he gently laid the Panther assault cannon next to the wall. Flexing his arms, he brought his forearm snap blades out.

Beside and slightly behind Duran, Grind dropped his rifle to the ground and pulled a heavy mace off of his back. Setting himself firmly, he prepared to meet the wasps who were slowly closing in.

With less gunfire directed at the oncoming wasps, they started making more headway against the two flaming drones still skittering around. However, the reduced gunfire allowed the magicians and their elementals to enter the battle fully. All of the mundane fighters watched in tense anticipation as the air shimmered, colors danced, and wasps were destroyed.

Ryan watched it all with a calculating eye. He'd not used his own magic to this point and now began using his telekinetic strikes at crucial points to keep his team out of combat range for as long as possible. He threw six "punches" before the first wasp finally got within arm's reach of the line.

The first one fell quickly under combined hits from Elvis, Duran, and Grind. More were coming, though. The three soon were fighting separate opponents.

Duncan moved to intercept another one heading toward Axler. He set himself in front of the still kneeling woman and threw a straight overhand chop at the oncoming wasp. It dodged at the last moment and he only chopped into a wing. The thing fell to the ground, flailing. One of the legs thumped solidly into Duncan's body armor but didn't penetrate. The wasp righted itself on the ground and turned to face MacLeod. Its wing was destroyed enough to prevent it from flying, but it still had plenty of fight left. It reached one leg forward and took a swipe at the Immortal. Duncan got his sword in front of it in time, and exoskeleton leg crashed into monofilament edged sword.

The sword won. Part of the lower leg fell free, but the impact had jarred MacLeod badly enough that he couldn't take advantage of the wasp's momentary pause as it screeched in pain. He set himself just in time for the wasp to lunge, jaws aiming for his head. Putting all of his considerable strength behind the swing, his blade impacted between the mandibles of the jumping bug.

MacLeod staggered back from the force, but the bug fell into a heap, its head caved in from the front. It began dispersing.

Duncan took a quick swipe at a small wasp flying past him, heading for Jack. The hit connected, and the lower half of the body fell as Jack started firing his flechette pistol at the now mortally wounded bug.

Without waiting to see the outcome of that small battle, MacLeod next took three steps forward, and brought a crashing blow down onto the body of a standing wasp that was pressing Duran badly. The wasp, nearly cut in half, let out a screech before it began dissolving.

The ork nodded a quick thanks to the Immortal before turning to help Elvis with the two small wasps flying around him.

Jane was tense. Though she wasn't physically there (not that she would be any good for them if she was, she admitted to herself), she actually had a better view of the situation than anyone. All the team members wore a GPS, mini camera, microphone, and medical monitor, so she knew their situations, down to MacLeod's testosterone levels. At the moment, she had twelve camera, eighteen data, and nine microphone feeds. And she was having a really difficult time keeping track of it all.

With all the cameras and the filtering programs she'd put together for these situations, she had a good idea where each of the bugs, the team magicians, and their elementals were. Unusually, very few of the wasps were trying to travel in the astral. Maybe the four magicians and eight

elementals were enough of an intimidation to them that they were taking their chances on the physical plane. She mentally shrugged. Not that anyone understood the tactics of insects, of course.

Ryan finished off a wasp that had been trying to get at Axler. The female street samurai was still coolly firing shots down the tunnel with her rifle. Mercury briefly admired the woman's calm before scanning the battlefield again. The line was holding well, and the flow of bugs was slowing. The two flamer drones showed multiple new dents, but they were fighting the remaining bugs to a standstill. Nothing had even come close to breaking the lines. Most everyone sported cuts, but there weren't any serious injuries. Jane would have warned him if there were. One last thing to get done.

"Alpha, begin advancing," Ryan ordered.

Slowly, more or less holding their cross-tunnel line, all the fighters began moving forward. Only one more bug got past the flamers and magicians. It withered quickly enough under a telekinetic strike, a mace blow, and a knife cut.

As they neared the turn in the tunnel, Ryan called, "MacLeod, come with me. Everyone else, hold here."

Gingerly stepping around the alternately scorched and ichor-splattered corner, the two men cautiously advanced deeper into the hive. The drones were well ahead of them, so they followed the reduced sounds of battle. Only a couple dozen meters in, they came to a larger open area in time to see the last large wasp fall to a combination of lightening spell and drone flame. Astral eyes, drone optics, and men's eyes scanned the room quickly for any remaining threats.

"Drek, do you know what kind of mess that sprayer is gonna be?" Wheeler groaned over the audio link after a few seconds.

Ryan turned around and looked at where the glowing bacteria spraying drone had come to ground. It was only recognizable as a mound buried in soot and ichor. Mercury grinned. "Didn't I warn you? Rigger also has to clean the drones he's trashed."

Several snickers sounded. The drone in question didn't look like it would get clean with anything short of an acid bath.

"You think that's funny," Wheeler returned, "you should see what's left of the shooter drone."

Ryan turned to the crumpled mass of metal and ceramics that looked like it'd impacted the rock wall at high speed. "I see it. Dhin, does Wheeler need to give you driving lessons?"

"Ha, ha," the ork rigger's sarcastic retort cut through the resulting laughter.

"Okay, team. We're clear," Ryan said officially. "Beta, refuel those flamers. We need to burn all the organics out of this cave. Anyone need medical attention?"

"Talon got clipped pretty good," a very tired Teller called over the link. "Moon and I are taking care of it."

"Jane?" Ryan asked.

"Vitals are strong. He got sliced across the back." Even in astral combat, attacks upon the spirit would manifest on the physical body. "Nobody else has any problem that a good shower won't cure," Jane concluded.

Most of Alpha team sheathed weapons and slowly relaxed, heading back toward the cave entrance.

"What are those?" MacLeod quietly asked Ryan, indicating several large, white bundles tucked in a corner. Most of the fighting in the room seemed to have centered there, including three of the recognizable insect shamans.

"Cocoons," Ryan answered in a tired voice. "Insect spirits are growing in there. We'll burn it to ash before we leave, though."

"You said that they took people as incubators for the young," Duncan said carefully, staring hard at Mercury.

"Yes," Ryan admitted. "By the time they're in cocoons, they're beyond help. The UCAS government tried years ago. We've tried on other nests since. Nothing ever works."

"Are they still alive?" Duncan asked in a whisper, now looking at the cocoons in equal parts horror and pity.

Ryan paused before answering. "We're not really sure. The body is still functioning, but the spirit is probably long gone by this point. We end their suffering before burning everything, though." He didn't say that Jane and Dhin had come up with a series of programs to run a small shooter drone in here, fire one bullet into each cocoon at where the computer figured the head to be, and then the two flamers would systematically burn every square inch of the entire cave back down to the bare rock. Having computers do the job let Ryan and Dhin sleep at night. And would now let Wheeler do the same.

Without another word, Ryan turned and left the chamber.

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The next morning, everyone assembled in the largest meeting room that the local hotel had to offer.

Once everyone had seated themselves, Ryan walked down each row, handing everyone a certified credit stick. After he'd handed the last one to Duran, he casually seated himself on the table in front. "Now that that's out of the way, we can go on to other business. First off, we did a good job yesterday. None of us were hurt too badly -"

"Speak for yourself," Talon muttered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"Or at least not permanently," Ryan conceded. "News services didn't report anything, which probably means they didn't notice us. Nobody else squawked either. All in all it was successful, and it was low profile. Just the way we like it." He paused for a moment, but nobody had anything else to add. Nodding, he went on. "Now that I've worked with you all, I'd like to hire the lot of you. Two hundred thousand nuyen a year each. Three for Mister Trey over there. You'll be welcome to live in Asset's compound, so room and board is covered. We cover all material as well, of course. Mister Skater, some of the apartments we've built are family sized, so you and Emma will have enough room. Kyle and Hanna have also talked to me about a play area for Amy, and Emma will figure into that equation as well. Elvis, we'll make accommodations for your height. You're the only troll I've tried to hire, so you may need to tell me about some of the low spots in the compound."

"Nice to be appreciated," Elvis rumbled happily.

"Where is Assets?" MacLeod asked.

Mercury frowned slightly. "I'd rather not tell you until you agree. I want the compound's location to remain secret. Suffice it to say that it's in North America, within reasonable distance to a couple major cities."

"What about Emma's education?" Jack asked. She was getting old enough that school was becoming an issue in his decisions.

"Either we can send her to a boarding school, or we can hire someone as a private tutor."

"Actually," Jane said over the speakers, "Allergon is a qualified tutor."

"He is?" Dhin asked in amazement. Ryan raised an eyebrow.

"Who?" Jack asked.

"A mechanic we hired a year ago," Dhin answered.

"Why do you think I recommended him?" Jane asked in amusement.

"You planned that far in advance?" Axler wondered. Ryan just looked bemused.

"I always plan ahead," Jane retorted. "Hanna was pregnant at the time. I knew you needed a tutor eventually."

"Wait," Jack objected, "I thought you were part of this team, Jane."

"Sort of," Ryan answered. "Officially, she works for Draco. We just borrow her. A lot."

"You make me sound like a cup of milk."

"Nah, you're sweet enough to be sugar," Dhin corrected.

Ryan didn't even try to hide the grin.

Jane paused for a few seconds before replying, "Thanks. I think."

"You're welcome, sugar," Dhin teased in a patently fake Southern accent.

Jane gave him an electronic raspberry, much to the amusement of everyone.

"Any other questions?" Ryan asked, trying to bring the group back on track.

"What kind of runs do you usually do? More bug hunts?" Jack asked.

"Against other corps, find and recovers, extractions, all sorts of things," Ryan said. "Remember that we work for Draco exclusively. We do basically what they want, though I do have a great deal of latitude on what jobs I take. I would not accept a datasteal or an assassination, for instance. Though we would never be asked to do those jobs."

"Being so . . . close," Trey said delicately, "to the CEO of Draco must help."

Ryan wasn't the least bit embarrassed. "Yes, it does." When nobody else said anything, he continued, "Does everyone want some time to think my offer over, or does anyone have an answer?"

"I'm in," MacLeod said. "However, I'd like to have the option of bowing out of any individual runs that I may not like."

"Fair enough," Mercury agreed.

Jack looked from one of his team members to another. Most were frowning slightly. Duran was rubbing a tusk, which was his habit when in thought or nervous. Only Elvis looked totally comfortable, quietly helping Emma pick out a color of crayon for the drawing of a mermaid that she was working on.

"Give us a day to think it over?" he asked.

"No problem," Mercury said. "You can have a few. There are tickets back to Sea-Tac Airport waiting for you at the front desk. That LTG number I gave you a few days ago should still be good. It is, isn't it, Jane?"

"Yep," she agreed over her aud link.

"Give it a few days. Think it over. I'd love to have who I can get, but I'll respect your wishes in any case." He paused a moment and said, "If this is the last time I see you, it was an honor to work with you."

After Jack's team quietly left, Jane said, "If they all accept, then you'll need another decker. I had a hard time keeping track of everything yesterday."

"I'd like more magical help, too," Ryan said. "We can discuss that back at Assets, though. Maybe they know someone we could hire," he thought aloud, still looking at the door that Jack and team had just exited.

"I already have a decker in mind," Jane said. Ryan raised an eyebrow, sharing a glance with Axler. "If they agree, then you'll need to go to LA to speak with her, Quicksilver," Jane finished, using one of his nicknames.

"If she's available now, why don't we hire her now?"

He could nearly hear Jane's shrug. "Whatever. The workstation you had built at Assets is done, so you can hire another decker anytime."

"Reserve me a seat to Los Angeles, then, Jane. We'll need another decker soon, one way or another."

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Four days later Axler called a meeting of the expanded Assets team.

"First, let me welcome the lot of you to Assets," she said, addressing herself to the larger than expected group of newcomers. Much to the surprise of everyone, Wheeler Iron-Nerve had shown up with his wife. This was a surprise, because nobody knew that he had a wife, let alone the fact that they'd been married for two years and that she was a gifted mechanic. Axler had hired her on the spot and given them family quarters. "Most of you know the history of this company, but for those of you who don't, I'll be going over the highlights as well as the list of do's and don'ts to living here." The door to the conference room opened and Axler looked over in that direction. "But first, I'd like everyone to meet our new decker -"

"Angel," Jack breathed.

Ryan was leading a female elf into the room when everyone turned and stared at her. She had the typical willowy stature of elves with almond eyes and platinum hair. A datajack gleamed at her left temple.

For her part, Archangel froze in shock. Her gaze flitted around the room, recognizing less than half the people in there, but that was a half dozen more than she was expecting. Forcing her face back into a calm mien, she turned to Ryan and said, "I'm sorry, Mister Mercury. I'll have to decline your offer after all. Could you arrange for my transport back to Boise?"

"Angel, wait," Jack said, standing, one hand half raised in protest.

"Daddy, she's an angel?" Emma asked, studying the woman in interest.

"That's her name, honey," Jack responded. "Her name is Archangel. I call her Angel for short."

"Hi," the child greeted the woman shyly. Everyone else in the room was watching the drama unfold in interest.

Archangel tore her gaze from Jack and looked at the girl sitting next to him. "Hello, Emma."

The scene held for a few more seconds before Duran stood. "Angel, let's go talk. There's a lot you need to know before you turn down Ryan's offer." He walked around the table toward her and indicated the door.

Archangel again brought her scrutinizing gaze from Jack's face and nodded jerkily at the door. The two quietly left the room and the door shut behind them.

Jack slowly sat back down in his chair.

"Well, this is certainly interesting," Elvis observed without irony.

"Who is that, Daddy?" Emma wanted to know.

Elvis answered the girl when Jack didn't seem capable. "Archangel is an old chummer of ours. She left just after you were born."

"She knows us," Wheeler explained unnecessarily. "She was with our team for several years before she left."

"Jack, is Archangel Emma's mother?" Ryan delicately asked as he sank into a chair.

Everyone on his team shook their heads. "No," Jack answered, composing himself. "Larisa was killed shortly after Emma was born. Angel left us months later."

"Why did she leave?" Axler eventually asked, when it was clear that Jack wasn't going to volunteer anymore information.

Wheeler, Elvis, and Cullen looked to Jack in interest. They were aware that Jack and Quint knew her reasons for leaving, but they'd never divulged it, merely stating that it was personal for her. Not that they couldn't guess.

Jack sighed and rubbed his face. He didn't want to get into this in front of the whole group, but they deserved to know the truth. It affected the lot of them now. "She was losing herself. She's always prided herself on her professionalism, but personal factors started interfering. She had to leave before it started compromising her."

Axler and Ryan traded a quick look before he said, "I hate to do this to you, but I have to know more than that. If it's going to affect my team, then I need to know."

Jack nodded glumly. He didn't like it, but he recognized that Mercury was right. "She was falling in love with me," he said quietly.

"How did you feel about her?" Axler asked calmly.

"I didn't even think about it," Jack answered honestly. "I was leader of the team. Emotional entanglements with teammates was something I was trying to avoid at the time."

"How do you feel about her NOW?" Sparks asked, leaning forward and studying Jack intently. She knew some about Wheeler's teammates, but she'd only met them for the first time the previous day. She was finding this all very enlightening.

"Three years ago she was a good friend," Jack answered. "Well, as good a friend as I could have in the shadows," he corrected himself. He turned to look at the closed door through which she'd exited a minute previously, and his voice dropped. "Now? Now I hope she's still a good friend."

Maybe I even hope for more, he admitted to himself after a moment.

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Duran silently led Archangel to the room that he'd been assigned. Inside, he waved her to a chair and asked, "Get you something to drink?"

She remained standing for a few seconds, studying the ork. He merely looked at her in polite attention before she lowered her eyes a fraction. "Yes, spring water, please."

She was seated, staring off into space when Quint came back into the room, carrying a bottle of water for her and a beer for himself. She gave him a quiet, "Thank you," after he handed her the water.

He dropped into another chair, peeled the cap off of his drink, and took a quick pull. "So how have you been, Angel?" he asked pleasantly.

She laughed quietly. "Good. Keeping busy. Just finished a run with Argent, actually," she said, knowing that Quint would recognize the name of one of the other major shadow players on the North American west coast.

"Really?" he asked in interest. "Never met the man, but he's got a good rep."

"Good man," Archangel confirmed. "We went in to rescue a chummer of his outside Denver." She played with the water bottle for a few seconds before asking, "And you?"

The ork shrugged easily. "We've been doing this and that. Nothing real big, but it pays the bills."

"Emma looks good," she said.

"Good kid," Duran said. "You should see her play with Elvis. He's great with her, but you knew that already. Believe it or not even Trey, Wheeler, and I are getting used to her."

She managed a slight smile at his self-deprecating humor. "Who was that with Wheeler? A new member of the team you didn't mention in your last message to me?"

He shook his head. "Wheeler's wife." Archangel's eyebrows rose quickly. He nodded. "We had that reaction, too. None of us had any idea he was married. Couple years now, apparently. Her name's Sparks, and she's a mechanic."

She smiled. "Makes sense. Who else would Wheeler the rigger marry than Sparks the mechanic?"

"Match made in heaven," the ork agreed with an answering grin.

Angel grew quiet, absently studying the water bottle in her hands. "When Jane and Ryan talked to me about what they're doing, they didn't mention any of the teammates."

"We were just hired," Duran answered. "Made it here yesterday, as a matter of fact."

She nodded, not pulling her eyes up from the water bottle.

"How are you, Angel?" Duran asked quietly. "Really?"

"I'm doing okay for myself," she said. "Doing short term jobs, freelance, like that. Never staying one place for long since I never liked the teams I was working with all that much."

"Since when did your likes and dislikes influence your job?" Quint asked, beginning the dance he knew had to occur sooner or later.

"It didn't affect my job," she defended. "I may not have liked them, but I did my job."

"Then why didn't you stay with them?"

"Because I didn't like them."

"Then why did you leave us?"

She merely looked at him, not reacting to the pointed question. "You know why."

He nodded agreeably. "I'm not trying to lay a guilt trip on you, but there's something else you need to add to the equation. Jack was broken up pretty bad for a while after you left. Took us a couple months before we even tried to hire a decker again. And none of 'em's lasted more than three runs."

She leaned back in her chair, absently rubbing her eyes with a hand. It was the first time he could recall in their nearly decade long acquaintance where she actually looked tense.

"If you needed a decker, you could've asked me. You and I were still communicating, Quint."

"And you would have given us some names?"

She nodded.

"They aren't you," he said simply.

"What's THAT supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"You're one of the hottest deckers we've ever run across. The only deckers we know who're even in your league aren't available for us to hire. On top of that, we know you."

She studied him for a moment. "You want me back," she stated.

He nodded.

"I can't, Quint. You know that," a touch of desperation had entered her voice by this time.

"Why not?" he asked reasonably.

She sighed and answered as if talking to a child. "Because I'd spend too much time looking after Jack and not enough time worried about everyone else."

He grinned toothily. "I'm a big boy. I can look after myself."

A lip twitched, trying to bring a smile out. "You know what I mean," she chided him.

"Good news. It sounds like Jane is still going to be doing decking for Assets. You've been brought in to supplement her work."

She cocked her head at the change of subject. "How is this good news?"

"There's another decker to keep track of everything you miss."

She just looked at him in silence. She recognized that he was trying to goad her into anger by questioning her skills, and she wasn't having any of it.

He sighed, seeing that the tactic hadn't worked. "Angel, we really do want you back. Jane seems to be able to do her job, but we don't know her. It'd feel better if you were back with us."

"But Jack and me . . ." She shrugged, unable or perhaps unwilling to finish the thought.

Not for the first time, Duran was struck by how vulnerable she was on this topic. "Jack and you have to figure out Jack and you. I can't help there. But on a personal level, I would like you back. On a professional level, everyone on the team wants you back."

She leaned forward with her elbows on knees, sighing deeply. Quint let her think it through. There was no sense in forcing this.

"How's he doing?" she finally asked.

Quint nodded, expecting the question. "Okay for the most part. Emma's keeping him grounded pretty good. Every time we hire a new decker, though, I can see something missing in his eyes."

She looked up at him. "That was a cheap shot, Quint."

He shrugged. "Maybe, but it's true. Ask Wheeler or Elvis. They've seen it."

She sighed and began studying her water bottle again. "I'm afraid," she told the plastic.

He nodded. "Of him, or yourself?"

"Of myself if there is an us."

He nodded again, not surprised at the answer. "There might be an easy answer here."

She chuffed in resigned humor. "Pray tell," she said with an edge of sarcasm. She suddenly frowned and looked back up at him. "Wait. You're assuming that I want to be here."

"You took this job before you knew we were here, so you wanted to be here if we weren't in the equation. Are you saying that us being here is cause for you to leave?"

Her mouth twisted into a grimace, and she looked down again.

He nodded, taking her silence as an answer. "Is it possible to split the responsibilities between you and Jane so that you don't have to monitor us?"

She frowned in thought. "Possibly. It depends on the job."

"Are you willing to stay conditionally? You, Jane, and Ryan can figure out how to assign work if you really think it'll become an issue." He paused a moment before continuing, "You're worried that your attention to Jack will compromise your attention to the rest of us. And if you're dating 'im, then I can see how you might think that. Me, I don't think it'll be an issue. You've been a professional operator for as long as I've known you, Angel. Just 'cause you fell in love with Jack won't change that."

She thought about it for a few more seconds before looking up at him. "Okay. Conditionally."

Duran stood and smiled down at her. "Good. Now let's go back out there and introduce you around."

Archangel placed the unopened bottle of water down on the table and followed Quint back out of the room. "You realize that this may not be a good idea," she cautioned the ork as he led her back to the conference room.

"We'll see. Though it'll be nice to have you back, either way."

"You're a hopeless optimist, Quint Duran."

He grinned toothily. "Shh. Don't let it get around. Got a reputation to protect, ya know."

She was laughing as Quint opened the door for her.

". . . Wolfgang Kies and Richard Raven?" Mercury was asking as the two entered the room again.

Seeing who was entering, Cullen Trey stood and came over to them, wrapping one of her hands in both of his once he was close enough. "The smile on your lovely face tells me that our mutual friend here has talked you into staying, Lady Archangel. Please tell me that you will continue to grace us with your sublime presence for the foreseeable future."

"Wow," Jane whispered, watching Trey at his charming best.

Archangel gave him a bemused smile. "Yes, Master Trey," she answered, drawing smiles from all her former teammates, "I shall be joining you for the time being. I know not what the future shall bring, but for the moment, our paths run in tandem."

Smiling back at her uncommon teasing, Trey led her to a seat beside his with a gentle hand to her back.

Jack's eyes bored into her, asking a question.

She shook her head slightly. "No promises, but we'll talk later," she promised him.

He leaned back in his chair, clearly unhappy with the answer but recognizing that that was the best he was going to get for the time being.

Ryan had watched all of this in silence. Once she was seated, he nodded to her and smiled. "Welcome to the team."