

The Strange Medium Guy with a Bad Haircut

(aka Pearson "Doc" Mui)

Presents

Anime Detective: Curtain Call

I've lived in the city pretty much all my life. You get used to the ins and outs, the comings and goings. The city has a heartbeat and people its lifeblood is the people who go to work or school and come home. You get people in charge who try to be the brains of the city, and sometimes, they actually get things done. Other times, the city rejects them for whatever reason.

I've visited farms and suburbs. In fact, my brother lives in a nice suburb. He's got the full package: Wife, 1 kid and a big, friendly Golden Retriever named Duke. It's a nice place to be for a while, but the city always calls back to me.

Maybe it's because I'm a cop from a long line of cops. The country life wouldn't suit me, though the suburban life is kind of tempting. But my roots are in the city. If nothing else, I can always call my family up and commiserate, having survived another day on the job.

Considering what some people think of the police, it's a minor miracle that there are multiple generations of folks

working in the department. Some people think that we're just another gang, only with badges and authority. They say that we're never around when we need them and always when it's inconvenient.

I can't blame them for thinking that way. There are times when I wish that I didn't have to be there between neighbors Smith and Jones arguing about this and that. Thankfully, I was promoted out of being a beat cop and into my own department. True, it's a small department, but I do what I can.

I'm Andrew Mays, the Anime Detective. In this city, if there's a scuffle between Animates and humans, you'll probably find me there. I'm the thin line between manageable chaos and outright disaster.

It's a tough job, but I've got good people helping me out. I've got the support of the department, and my group is excellent at their jobs. I occasionally have to get someone to focus on the job instead of checking out the girls, though. Hey, being partner to Ryo Saeba isn't easy. For him, great ability comes with great hormones. Despite having to knock some sense into him with a large mallet, Ryo is extremely capable when he's not drooling over a curvy lady.

Then, of course, I was fortunate to be walking side by side with a certain cute redhead. A few years ago, this would have been practically unthinkable. For one thing, I have a rare

condition that makes me borderline intolerant to Animate girls above a certain cuteness level. Unlike folks who are lactose intolerant, I don't have any digestive issues. No, I just have to back away from the girl, maybe twenty or so feet. You know that guy in the cape with the allergy to green rocks? It's kind of like that, along with a nasty case of vertigo.

I've been getting better, in no small part thanks to said cute redhead. Nene has been helping me build up my tolerance to cute things bit by bit. She's the kind of cute girl who's sincere and earnest, something I could get behind. She tries to keep the cutesy antics to a minimum around me.

Of course, she's not just a pretty face on the force. Her computer skills are a force to be reckoned with. She helps with cybersecurity on the force when she's not crashing systems on her own. Hell, she once remotely shut down a guy wearing a derivative hardsuit by crashing the operating system. She did that without any direct wire link.

Meddle not in the affairs of hackers, folks. Your e-mails and social media are a treasure trove of wonderful blackmail material. I'm just glad that we're on the same side.

Not too long ago, on my birthday, I got a glimpse of a different world. It was definitely shades of "It's a Wonderful Life," only without any angels. Did I have a few goddesses, a

time traveler and a mad scientist on my side? Yeah, I did. But I didn't have any angels walking with me.

No, Nene doesn't count as an angel. That's just fine with me. Angels tend to be perfect and untouchable for the most part. Nene can be sweet, a little ditzy at times, but she's definitely more down to earth than people give her credit for.

Let's just say that I've learned to appreciate what I have. Yeah, the job gives me tons of stress. Yeah, I chug Mylanta when the going gets tough. I've probably put Juan Valdez's grandkids through college, given my coffee consumption. But when it comes down to it, life is pretty good.

A rumble of thunder interrupted my train of thought. I sighed and pulled out a full-sized umbrella from my trenchcoat pocket. It's not as impossible as it sounds if you happen to have an interdimensional pocket. Think of it as a classic "bag of holding" in a trenchcoat. It comes in handy, given the variety of odd situations I end up in.

"Ack!" Nene exclaimed. "It wasn't supposed to rain tonight!"

I chuckled quietly. Even after so many weeks of being together, Nene still made me laugh without trying.

"Come on," I said. I opened the umbrella just before it started raining. "We're not that far from your apartment."

She sidled up close and smirked. "You're prepared for just about anything, aren't you?"

I smirked. "Kiddo, I don't think that anyone can be that prepared. I mean, this is the city we're talking about."

A delightful glint of mischief lit those emerald eyes of hers. "So, you're not going to break out in a spontaneous song and dance number?" She pouted. "Too bad."

I arched an eyebrow at her. "I have priorities, Nene. I'd rather keep you warm and dry than channel Gene Kelly." I snorted. "Besides, you know that I'm not that great of a dancer."

She grabbed my arm and snuggled close. "You're good enough for me," she said.

Whoof. I hadn't been this close with a girl in a long time. Honestly, I didn't expect anyone to come into my life like this after my big breakup. Then again, sometimes the best things happen when you least expect it.

I was good enough for Nene. That meant a lot to me, especially since I have the "hard-boiled" shell around me. I wasn't as outright nasty as, say, Mike Hammer, but I did keep some people at a distance.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The cynical part of me wondered if this was a sign to stop pushing my luck. Be happy with what I have right now.

The thing is, I am happy. I'm happier than I've been in a long time. I'm not just content, smiling just a little for the occasion.

I squash down the urge to kiss Nene right then and there. While everyone in the precinct knows that we're an item, it's generally Not Done to start making out on the street. Flirting aside, there are some lines that we've both agreed not to cross until we're ready.

Then again, anybody who's looking could tell we're a couple. The umbrella was only the frosting on the symbolic cake.

The rain stopped just as we got to her apartment building. I put the umbrella back in my trenchcoat pocket and smiled.

"Well, milady is safe, sound and dry," I said. I bowed in that exaggerated way that knights those old corny movies did. The horrible British accent that I used probably didn't help.

Nene rolled her eyes. "You're not Prince Charming," she reminded me.

"Good," I said. I dropped the bad accent and felt a little smug doing so. "Princes are overrated. I'd rather be an average Joe that works hard instead of a fop who's raised in luxury."

Now it was her turn to raise an eyebrow. "`Fop?'" She shook her head. "You could never be a dandy."

"Thank the relevant powers that be that I'm not," I joked. I waved vaguely towards the sky. If I really wanted to point out some celestial powers, I just had to wave in the direction of the temple where Belldandy and her sisters lived. "Could you imagine me in formal wear?"

She eyed me thoughtfully. "I think you'd look dashing in a tuxedo."

"Really?" I asked. "Would milady be in a matching dress?" I joked.

For a long moment, Nene said nothing. Then she flushed so hard that her face almost matched her hair.

"A-anyway," she stammered, "we have work tomorrow. I should probably...clean up and get some sleep."

"Good idea," I agreed. "Besides, I should probably do the same."

You know how some people can smile and you just want to hug them? Nene did that without trying. She's a dangerous lady, able to twist me around her little pinky.

Yeah, we're in love. If there was a breath test for how many little hearts are floating above our heads, we'd get arrested.

Okay, that was a horrible analogy. Give me a break. Rational thought and head-over-heels love don't necessarily go hand in hand with one another.

We shared a quick kiss and she disappeared into her apartment building. I could easily imagine her giggling as soon as she got into her apartment.

I was kind of floaty myself. I didn't remember the walk all the way to my car. All I knew was that life was good and tomorrow was something to look forward to.

That happy mood lasted until I got into my car. I adjusted the rearview mirror and saw two men dressed in white suits. Their outfits matched, right down to the Panama hats. They might have been twins at first glance, but one had a neck beard and the other had a full beard.

I knew those outfits. They may have looked like those old "man from Del Monte" ads, but it was far worse than that.

I'd encountered two men wearing the same outfit in the past. Both men had been trouble.

As one, the "twins" smiled and bowed to me, taking off their hats. Their bald pates shone for a bit before straightened up and replaced said hats. They blinked out of sight moments later.

I'd been giddy as the proverbial school boy just moments ago. That had been replaced by a sinking feeling of dread in the pit of my gut.

I had calls to make before I went to sleep. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get much sleep anyway.

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I had the dream again. I knew that dream well. I dreamt that I hadn't been kicked out of the police academy. I dreamt that I was in charge of a little department trying to keep peace between Animates and humans. I dreamt that I was in love with a cute, redheaded hacker.

What a dream. It would have been nice if it were real.

I peeled my face off my desk and grimaced as I checked the clock. The rain outside had lulled me to sleep and I'd been out for a half hour.

I cracked my neck and looked around. There were little mementoes of past cases, souvenirs from better days. I kept the really personal stuff out of sight, of course. A private eye doesn't advertise the personal stuff to a potential client--or a potential enemy. In my line of work, sometimes the client is the enemy. I've been burned once or twice. As Tolkien once wrote, "the burned hand learns best."

The grey gloom of the weather made my office look even dingier than it really was. I try to keep things fairly neat. After all, you don't get hired if your office looks like a trash heap. The ceiling fan spun listlessly, trying to stir the air up. All it did was remind me that I needed to dust.

I raised an eyebrow as I heard footsteps outside. Women's heels clicked impatiently before they approached my door. A petite, feminine silhouette appeared in the frosted glass and

sighed. Clearly, she wasn't impressed. Then again, given the surroundings, I'd probably feel the same way.

I unlocked the drawer at my desk, the one full of contingency plans. I had plenty of contingencies for the rougher clients, the ones who thought that one sorry private detective was helpless. I even had licenses for most of them.

She knocked on the door. I tried not to tense up.

"Are you Andrew Mays, Private Detective?" she asked. She sounded young, maybe in her early 20's.

"That's me," I confirmed. My finger hovered on the door buzzer lock.

"I have a case for you," she said. "May I come in?"

I buzzed her in. Then I frowned at what I saw.

I was right that she was young. Her short, ash-blond hair curled under that pixie cut of hers. She was dressed modestly, with a tan vest over a blue blouse and an orange skirt. She held her purse in her hands a little too tightly, the clasp undone. Given the neighborhood I live in, she probably had a little "insurance" in that purse.

She was totally dry. In fact, she didn't have a raincoat or umbrella, even though it had been raining outside. What raised the alarms to a higher level were her eyes, though. Those blue eyes of hers were anything but innocent.

Oh, and she was an Animate. I'd seen her before around town, but I couldn't quite place her name.

The back of my mind screamed that she was a troublemaker. I could see that she was no stranger to mischief, malice and mayhem. I had the feeling that she could be impish and fun one moment and a bratty terror the next.

She didn't seem at all impressed with my décor. It was nonsense, without much in the way of pictures. I had my private investigator's certificate right behind my desk, a bookshelf over to my right and the restroom to my left.

"You know, this is probably where you should talk," she remarked. "Maybe something like, 'come in, pretty lady. You said you have a case. What can I do for you?'"

I frowned. Yeah, maybe I need to brush up on my manners a little bit.

I gestured with my left hand. "Have a seat, Miss...?"

She sat down in a well-worn chair that was more comfortable than it looked. After wriggling around a few times, she almost seemed impressed.

"Romanova," she said. Then she held up a finger. "And before you say any wisecracks about me not having a Russian accent or being related to the czar, I've heard them all. Believe me, I get it every day at the office, especially from that big lug—"

She stopped short and cleared her throat. She took a deep breath, presumably to steady herself.

"Anyway, if you're done trying to reach for a weapon in your desk, I have a case for you," she said. Then she smirked. "Unless, of course, you're afraid that a petite little thing like me can beat up a big, strong guy like you."

Yeah, she liked to tease people a lot. I could tell that she didn't do it just for fun, though that was only part of it. She did it to irk people and make them slip up.

"How about a little gesture of goodwill before we get started?" I asked. "A little quid quo pro, if you will?"

She edged slightly away from me. "Look, I'm not that kind of girl—"

"Not remotely what I was thinking," I cut her off. "Now, why don't we put everything on the table—or desk, as you can see? I put what I'm holding in my right hand on my desk so that you see that I'm on the level. That means that you put whatever little discouragement that's in your purse on my desk as well. Then we'll talk about a case."

I gently placed the mallet on my desk. It was an Animate job that hit with the force of a ton and only felt like a hefty thirty pounds. I kept my poker face as the blonde's jaw dropped.

"You were going to use that monster on me?!" she shrieked.
"That thing could turn me into paste!"

I pointed to her purse. "What about you?"

She grimaced as she opened her purse. Reaching in, she reluctantly placed a taser on my desk.

"That's it?" Somehow, I didn't think she'd walk around with just that.

A can of pepper spray joined the taser. Then a miniature air horn was placed on the pile. Several zip-ties were added, along with a pair of police-issue handcuffs. The final straw was a butterfly knife.

"Those last three weren't my idea," she muttered. She didn't meet my gaze and blushed.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. "You know, I have a little problem with your sincerity. I mean, you didn't even add your little bug to the pile."

She blinked. "Bug? What bug?" She tried so hard to sound innocent. On another guy, that might have worked. I've been knocked around too many times to fall for it, though.

"The listening device that's in your purse? You know, for your backup?" I prompted. "In this neighborhood, Miss Romanova, you didn't come alone. I'm guessing that you've got some friends outside, ready to bust in if things aren't...civil between us."

She chuckled nervously. "A girl's got to be careful nowadays." She reached into her purse and took out a small listening device. "Guys, I'm fine. Really."

I sighed once again. Being slightly paranoid saved me more times than I cared to think about.

"So, what brings you to my humble office, Miss Romanova?" I tried to sound professional. It wasn't easy, given the stuff that she seemed willing to pull.

"I need you to find someone," she said. Rummaging around in her purse, she handed me a picture of the cute Animate redhead I've seen in my dreams. "She went missing a couple of weeks ago. No trace of her."

"What is she to you?"

The blonde hesitated. "She's family. Sort of."

Oh, what a surprise. A potential client is being evasive. How would I cope with such duplicity?

"I'm going to need some more details." I got up and strode over to the coffee pot. I needed a shot of joe to clear the cobwebs. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Lots of cream and sugar," she chirped. Then she hesitated as I handed her the steaming cup. "Wait, is there anything funny about this coffee?"

"Do you see me laughing?" I shot back. Then I took a long sip of my midnight-black brew and felt the brain rev up a little. "Fair warning: I like it a little on the strong side."

She took a careful sip. Then her cute little face contorted as if she'd been hit with her own taser. With an effort, she didn't slam the cup on my desk.

"Holy—"

"Language," I warned her. I gestured to the listening device. "We have an audience."

She pouted. "I'm going to feel that for the rest of the day. How can you DRINK that stuff?"

I allowed myself a tiny smirk. I liked seeing her off-balance. "Practice. Now, I'd like some more details about this person I'm supposed to find?"

She gave me a laundry list. The girl in the picture was her "cousin," Nene. Nene had been last seen in the company of three ladies and a young teenage boy. Then she's dropped off the face of the earth and her computer's gone. The prevailing thought was that she bumped into something she shouldn't have and scooted—or was taken.

"Why aren't the cops involved?" I asked. "This seems to be up their alley. Why me?"

The blonde fidgeted in her seat. "Rumor has it that there was a breach in the police network before she vanished. A lot of sensitive information was taken."

There we go. That was specific enough to satisfy most, but vague enough for plausible deniability. No officers were harmed in the making of this alibi.

"Why me?" I repeated. It wasn't as if there was a shortage of private investigators.

The little blonde smirked. She rattled off a list of facts about me, probably ripped from a combination of public and private records. She listed my age, height, known associates, former friends, and the fact that my family was either dead or distant.

"I've done my homework." She was justifiably smug. "You're good at what you do, and you have contacts that the police don't." She paused for, presumably, dramatic effect. "Your finances also aren't looking that great. Take the job and you'll be on solid ground."

"It's not just about the money," I reminded her. "I like to think that I'm better than some random thug." I paused. "There's something else, isn't there? It's something just for me."

She leaned forward. "I have evidence on how you were framed."

I groaned and picked myself off of the floor. It's a good thing that I didn't skimp on the carpeting when I rented this place.

That was a weird dream. I mean, I've had nearly lucid dreams before, but this was on a whole new level. It felt like I was along for the ride in someone else's dream.

Most people would say that it was just a dream, that it meant nothing. Most people haven't been to other dimensions. Most people didn't get the George Bailey treatment and see what the world would be like without them. I have.

Okay, this isn't ego talking. I'm not saying, "oh, look how important I am." No, I've literally seen what life would be like without me trying to be better and it wasn't a pretty sight. Imagine racism against Animates that was just encouraged by the system, along with a wall that divided the city in half. I never want to have that happen here.

I needed coffee. I needed to get the brain cells working before I tried calling anyone about this. Most people would have kept it a secret, but I've learned when to ask for help. It wasn't an easy lesson, but at least I learned it.

One breakfast and morning routine later, I was off to work. I paused at one of those coffee shops that Nene and her friends frequented and grabbed a mocha...something. I think that it was a mocha with an extra vanilla shot and extra whip.

It was one of those complicated orders that took a whole sticky note to memorize. I grabbed an overpriced chocolate pastry and tried not to frown. I guess some people came here for the ambience, but it wasn't for me.

Hey, you make little sacrifices for the people you love. Besides, it's not like I did this every day. Once a week was enough for me.

"Are you ever going to order anything for yourself?" the cashier asked. "You've been coming here every week."

"This place isn't my style," I replied. Maybe I was a little touchy about being noticed like this. "I'm getting this for a friend."

The cashier nodded. "We'll see you next week, then."

I was almost out of earshot when the coffee shop workers started gossiping. They should have waited a few more steps.

"Oh, he's got it bad," one worker whispered. "He's been here every week for the past two months."

"I have a friend at the police station who says that he's a thing with a cute redhead. What was her name? Nina or something?"

I stopped at the door and sighed. I couldn't help the gossip at the precinct one bit. I could at least try to discourage people at this shop from whispering about me.

Turning around, I put on my best "have you had any tickets lately" smile. It was the nicer version of the "hi, I'm a psychotic" smile that was favored by some actors and politicians. It was a smile that never failed to unnerve just about anyone.

Without thinking about it, all the workers took a step back. One barista almost overfilled the cup he was working on.

With slow, deliberate steps, I headed towards the cashier. The smile never left my face.

"Oh, just one more thing," I began. In my head, I could imagine Lieutenant Columbo just shaking his head as I blatantly took his schtick. "I was just wondering..."

"Y-yes, sir?" the cashier stammered. "Did we...do anything wrong?"

I kept up the smile for two seconds longer than was strictly necessary. Then I pointed to a brochure next to the register.

"No, I was just wondering if that was for your rewards program," I said casually. "I think that my friend might be interested. What does that involve?"

The cashier took out a brochure and tried not to shake as she handed it to me. "It's all in here, sir. Get enough points and you can get free food and drinks."

I browsed through the brochure. Some of the offers involved ludicrous amounts of points. Then again, since it was one of Nene's favorite stops...

I pocketed the brochure and nodded. "Thank you very much," I said politely. "I'll make a note of this."

If there was any gossip, at least they were polite enough to wait until I was outside. Saying what I did would have kept them—well, if not scared, then definitely alert the next time I was in.

Yes, I fully admit that was a mean thing to do. But on the other hand, at least I don't flash the badge as a means of free food or drinks. I pay for my own.

The drive to the station was the usual, barely-managed chaos. Thankfully, I didn't have to flash the lights or turn on the siren. I had a pretty good feel for the roads here.

The only odd thing was that I caught a glimpse of someone sweeping the street in front of their bar. Now, this normally wouldn't have been too unusual, but the shop was a bar that shouldn't have been open yet. The owner, as far as I could remember, never left the bar.

Auguste Dupin, proprietor and bartender of Dupin's, gave me a friendly nod as I was stopped. Without another word, he took his broom and went inside, the lights going dark.

Dupin's is a rarity, even in this city. It's a detective's bar that's always on Baker Street in any dimension. You had to be invited in with a set of clues, of course. If you weren't a detective, you couldn't go in.

I debated whether I should have checked out the bar. Auguste wasn't the kind of guy to just go outside without a good reason. Then again, with the lights off, it was a clear sign that he didn't want anybody going in. I suppose that even he had to close shop for a while, get some rest, whatever.

I shelved that thought for the moment. Part of the reason why people call me a good detective is that I don't stop until the case is solved. It's like an irritating mental itch that bugs me until I take care of it. When the case is solved, the itch is gone and I can relax.

I did relax when I got to the precinct garage. I made it just in time to see Nene park her scooter. She saw me, doffed her helmet and waved. She waited until I'd parked the car and got out, my treasures in hand.

"Good morning, kiddo," I greeted her. "Thought you could use these."

Nene's green eyes lit up as she accepted my gifts. "Thank you!" she chirped happily.

"No problem," I replied. "Even got you a brochure for their rewards program." I handed that to her, which got filed into her purse.

As we walked to the entrance, Nene sipped her coffee. She sighed contentedly as we check in, though she didn't munch on the pastry.

"I'll save this for dessert," she said. "Thanks again, Andy."

"I'll see you at lunch?" I tried not to sound too eager. It'd been a long time since I could relax with someone.

"I'll be there," she promised.

I didn't float to the office. I really didn't. I did, however, ignore the little smirks of everyone who happened to cross my path.

My steps were a bit heavier as I headed towards my office. I knew that Ryo would be waiting for me, since I was technically his boss. That meant that I had to keep him from going too wild when the ladies were around.

Some would have said that being partnered with Ryo Saeba was a blessing, given his skills. Others would have said that it was a burden to keep his hormones in check, especially during a case. Still others thought that he should have never been put on the force, what with the possibility of harassment suits.

My partner was a double-edged sword. I respected what he could do, but I was also aware of his character flaws. I trusted the guy with my life, just not with the ladies. I guess he respected me a little, too.

"Yo," he greeted me from his desk. "Did you crazy kids have a good time?"

"We had dinner and I walked her home," I replied. I took off my hat and shrugged out of my trenchcoat. "Nothing too crazy." I checked the stack of paperwork on my desk and nodded. It wasn't too bad of a stack. If the two of us worked at it, the reports would be done in an hour.

"Always the perfect gentleman," Ryo sighed. "Still, you've been pretty happy these last few weeks." He grinned. "It's just so cute, seeing you two dance around each other."

"We're taking our time," I said. "We're not in any rush." I raised an eyebrow. "How's it going with you and Kaori?"

Ryo turned sullen. "Couples therapy sucks. I'm stuck in the same room as Ranma, Akane, Lum and Ataru. The counselor thinks that we have a lot in common."

"It's a start," I reminded him. "Look, I didn't go through all that trouble to get you legally declared alive, just so that you could keep on the same path."

"I had fewer issues when I was legally dead," Ryo muttered. "Now that I'm alive in the eyes of the law, I get taxed like

every schlub. I have to have documentation for every gun I own, otherwise I'm in trouble. I miss my sweeper days," he moaned.

"Those days aren't coming back," I reminded him. "I was just trying to help you move on."

A while back, the city council axed the licenses of just about every private investigator or bounty hunter around. As a result, a lot of skilled and dangerous people had a choice: Work for the law or be hunted down. I was lucky that Ryo chose the law.

Things were quiet as we worked on the paperwork. An hour passed and the phone rang.

"Mays, Anime Detective," I answered.

"Andrew?" the Chief began. "I've got some news that you should hear in my office. Bring Ryo along."

"Can you give me a hint?"

The Chief sighed heavily. "An old buddy from high school is in the news. I can't say more over the line."

I knew that tone of voice from the Chief. He didn't use it often. There were times when, even in this chaotic city, things were a lot more serious than usual. I'm not talking about Godzilla doing urban renewal or an alien invasion. No, that was just par for the course in the city. That tone in the Chief's voice was for when things had seriously gone south.

A while back, when someone had converted author ego energy into cologne and perfume, the Chief had called me in. He gave me something that was the last resort for dealing with reality alterations. It was that serious.

It's weird, but I can't quite remember what I got from him. I knew that I did something, but the details are slippery. I had a feeling that I was probably better off not thinking about it.

The Chief was solemn as Ryo and I entered his office. He had a few newspaper articles on his desk, as well as some other paperwork. One of the articles had an ad for "Hero Automotive," declaring that it was going out of business. A few more articles said something about "recanted" or "cleared." My eyes narrowed as I saw one of the pictures.

"Hey, isn't that--?" Ryo began. Then he stopped as we waited for the Chief to fill us in.

The Chief rubbed his temples and sighed. He looked like he was nursing the mother of all headaches.

"Andrew, an old friend of yours is back in the game, so to speak." He handed me a picture of someone I'd known. The man's thousand-watt smile just beamed off the picture. It was the smile and charm that many ladies had fallen for, to their regret.

I felt the bottom fall out of my stomach. I'd dealt with this guy when we were both in the academy. Everyone was expecting both of us to be the pride of our respective police families.

It didn't happen. After one too many "incidents" with the ladies and a cheating scandal, my "buddy" had been kicked out of the academy. The last time I'd seen him, it was at our 10 year high school reunion. He'd put on weight and sold used cars.

Let me correct that. Technically, that was the last I'd seen of my "buddy" in this dimension. In another dimension, he'd taken over my post and turned the police department into his own personal fiefdom. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Ryo frowned. "Hey, isn't that the guy from that other world? His name was Andy Hero, right?"

I nodded and had a matching frown on my face. "What's going on with him, Chief?"

"Apparently, Mr. Hero has been cleared of all charges in that academy investigation." He sounded like he was angry enough to chew nails and spit out ball bearings. "An 'independent investigation' from some people I've never heard of claims that all the female witnesses have recanted their testimony."

That...was practically impossible. It was true that Hero's family was influential, but I didn't think that they had that

much pull. I remembered that after the first 3 or so women told their story, almost two dozen more followed them. I wondered why they would have changed their story, over ten years after the fact?

"It isn't official yet, but the Hero family is planning a press conference at City Hall for their disgraced son's `exoneration.'" The Chief grimaced. "Rumor has it that one of the movers and shakers of this was Councilman Geoffries."

Whoof. Politics was always a nasty business. I tended to stay away from that as much as possible when I was on the job. I mean, yeah, I voted, but I don't engage in any deep discussions on political positions. My job was to help people and keep things going.

"Are you talking about John Geoffries?" Ryo asked. "He had some initiative that killed my sweeper days."

The Chief nodded. "The Initiative for Societal Justice," he said. It sounded like political doublespeak that had a ring to anyone with a smidgen of sense. Conveniently, it gave no clue as to what it actually stood for. "I suppose that we have Councilman Geoffries to thank for having you on the force."

"It was either behind bars or behind a desk," Ryo admitted. "Some friends convinced me that the desk was a better option."

I had the sudden image of a brawl at the Cat's Eye café. Umibozu would have had Ryo in a headlock while Kaori probably

brought out the heavy-duty blunt instruments. The Nogami sisters had probably been there as well. The whole affair probably ended up with Ryo hog-tied and gagged while they read him the riot act.

I didn't chuckle at the image. Over the years, I've developed a good poker face. Besides, it wasn't the time for joking around.

"Anything else we should know?" I asked. "For example, when's the press conference?"

"Today at 2 PM," he said. "Now, given the history between you and Hero, I wouldn't recommend that you be in the vicinity."

"Well, yeah," I muttered. "I mean, I only just destroyed his image and ruined his life. Kind of stands to reason that he might hold just the teensiest bit of a grudge, Chief."

"I'm worried about you lunging for his throat," the Chief said. "The last thing I want to have to tell your Dad is that you ruined your career over that guy. If push comes to shove, I'll obey the letter of the law."

"So, why am I going to the press conference?" Ryo asked.

Three short knocks interrupted us. Judging by the Chief's lack of reaction, he'd been expecting this.

"It's me," a familiar female voice called. "Can I come in?"

"Come on in," the Chief said.

I smiled as an old friend of mine came in. Tricia McMasters is one of the best reporters in the city. She knew when to ask the right questions. I could easily see her winning awards for her reporting. The most important part was that she had an unshakeable sense of integrity. The fact that she looked great in a business dress and heels was secondary to her investigative skills.

We'd known each other ever since high school. We'd dated for a while, but she gently broke it off. It didn't hurt much now that I thought about it. She didn't want to be married to a guy who might not come home one day.

Ryo's eyes lit up. He probably took stock of her auburn hair, curves and those dark brown eyes of hers. He stood up ramrod straight as he entered what I jokingly called "bodyguard mode."

"Miss McMasters," Ryo began. He was putting a smooth finish on his voice. "Do you require a 100% loyal bodyguard for an occasion?"

Tricia rolled her eyes. "Mr. Saeba, I don't require a bodyguard. Officially, I need a cameraman."

Ryo blinked. "What?"

"A cameraman," she repeated. "For this press conference, I'll require a cameraman who will stick close to me and capture anything that Mr. Hero has to say." She paused. "Of course, if

Mr. Hero tries anything, then it's only natural for me and my crew to defend ourselves."

"You're expecting trouble?" I asked.

Tricia frowned. "I'm trying to figure out Hero's angle." She started to count on her fingers. "Officially, Councilman Geoffries isn't tied with any extremist groups like, say, Natural Order. Officially, every female who stood up against him 10 years ago has recanted their testimony without any duress. And then there's the matter of Andy Hero's new buddies."

"Buddies?" I asked. To quote that old smuggler, I had a bad feeling about this.

She pointed to one of the articles on the Chief's desk. Andy Hero was flanked by two men in white suits.

They were the same men in white who'd tailed me last night, just before they vanished. I also recognized the suit.

The suit was standard-issue P.L.O.T. armor for agents of the DDO. It was attuned to protect the agent from anything that could harm them in their assigned dimension. As one agent found out, the armor didn't work so well if the weapon came from a dimension outside of what they were expecting.

The DDO was the Dynamic Disaster Organization, one who was committed to making sure that stories were "interesting." That meant a lot of conflict, angst, and that the good guys never

truly won. In other words, they were jerks on an interdimensional scale with resources to cause a lot of grief, just because they could. They stuck to the edges and nudged people into doing stupid things for the sake of their idea of "drama."

Tricia didn't know this. Ryo, Nene and the Chief knew, but only because of my past experience with the DDO. The general public didn't need to know. Granted, the public handled co-existence with Animates and kaiju just fine, but there was only so much that they could handle in a day.

"They haven't given their names yet, but they're with Hero just about everywhere," Tricia said. "I'm not sure if they're bodyguards, advisors or what."

"Yeah, they look like trouble," I agreed. "Of course, they're probably nothing that Ryo couldn't handle, right?"

Ryo eyed me oddly. He knew that I didn't give compliments easily.

"They shouldn't be any trouble," Ryo said. In the back of his mind, he was probably wondering what he was getting into.

Tricia smiled. "Anyway, come over to the station at around 12:30 so that we can get you outfitted."

"Just keep your eyes open," the Chief said. "Don't start anything."

Ryo actually saluted. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Andrew, you'll be on patrol nearby. In case anything goes bad, you'll head to City Hall. Any questions?"

Nobody said anything. The Chief nodded.

"Thank you for coming in, Tricia," he said. "I know that doing a story on Andy Hero was the last thing that you expected. I'm just sorry that he's news."

"Well, people have a right to know." She managed a weak smile. I didn't blame her; while she wasn't one of Andy Hero's "girls," she knew him fairly well. To this day, she was probably sickened by what was under the exterior of the Golden Boy.

The three of us left the office. I slipped Ryo a piece of paper with some numbers that he should call, just in case. That left me to escort Tricia to the front door.

"So, I heard that you and that cute redhead are an item now," she said lightly. "Am I going to hear rumors about you two having a rendezvous in a broom closet?" she joked.

"Broom closet, Trish?" I spread my fingers across my chest with a look of utter innocence. I kept it up as I saw Nene approaching from the side. "How could you ever think that I would demean someone by meeting them in a broom closet?"

"He's right," Nene chirped. "He's not the type of guy to go for a broom closet."

"I stand corrected," Tricia said. "Just don't expect me to print a retraction."

Nene tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Besides, I do have access to the server room. We'll have to be really careful, though."

I did not blush as I buried my face in my palm. I didn't. I may have groaned, but I didn't blush. I looked up when Tricia patted my shoulder.

"Hey," she said. "I'm just kidding. You two look great together."

I was reminded of all those times when we were younger. She'd propped me up back then and she was still doing it now. Some things never changed.

I didn't feel all that comforted when Tricia's brown eyes started sparkling. Her gentle smile turned into something a lot more mischievous.

"By the way..." She edged towards Nene, who suddenly seemed nervous. "Does he kiss you on the forehead, the cheek or are we talking tongue action?"

"Okay, sorry to interrupt," I said. I patted them both on the shoulders. "We've got a busy day ahead of us. We can catch up later."

"Well, I was just wondering—" Tricia began. Then she noticed that every police officer around had taken a sudden

interest in the situation. "Fine, we'll see each other later."
She gently jabbed a finger at my chest. "Just remember: No
hickies where they can show."

"Trish..."

She gave me a quick hug and practically danced off. She
might have been humming to herself.

"I like her," Nene said. "She seems like a lot of fun."

"Oh, she is," I agreed. "Just never doubt that she's
telling the truth or question her integrity. People who've done
that aren't in her good graces anymore."

Nene nodded. Then she turned to me and took a closer look.
"Are you okay? You seem a little...off."

If I were one of those old private eyes, I would have
brushed her off. Maybe I would have ignored her or put up a
macho front.

If there's anything I've learned in life, it was that open
communication was—well, it wasn't easy, but it made things
easier. Nene deserved to know.

As we walked back to my office, I told her about the dream.
She didn't seem happy that her blonde counterpart was involved,
but I expected that. She didn't seem surprised at the Chief's
info on Andy Hero. Knowing her, she was probably the one who
did the digging.

"So, are you going to find out more tonight?" she asked.
"When you go to sleep, I mean."

"I have another option." I gritted my teeth. "It's going to involve the GREATEST scientific GENIUS in the UNIVERSE!"

The dimensional door appeared right next to us. I prepared myself for what had to be done.

Nene squeaked in surprise and hugged me. Well, it was some reassurance.

Washuu Hakubi was not someone that I cared to deal with if I could help it. What I needed involved placing my head in the lion's mouth, so to speak. I had to be her...guinea pig for a short time.

The door opened and the redheaded scientist grinned. "So, what can I possibly do for one of the city's finest?"

I tried not to grimace as she leaned in. That grin of hers looked more fitting on a shark than a person.

"Maybe we should discuss this in my office?" The last thing I wanted was a crowd to gather around. It's not like the station had anything that could take Washuu down, though some cops would be willing to try. I didn't want this place to end up a war zone.

The crab-headed scientist sighed. "Fine, I'll see you in your office." She retreated behind the door and closed it.

Moments later, it disappeared. Ryo was probably going to get a little shock.

Nene had the nervous look of someone about to get audited. I can't say that I blamed her. With Washuu, things got done, but they weren't always done nicely or neatly. Given time, I probably could have found another solution, but this was the quickest thing I could think of.

"Are you sure about calling her?" she asked. "She's probably not going to be as gentle as Belldandy, you know?"

I blinked. Criminally, she was right. I could have just called Belldandy at the temple and it wouldn't have been a problem.

"Well, I didn't think about that," I admitted. "I can't exactly tell her to bug off."

Nene shook her head. "I don't think the station would survive that," she agreed. "Maybe you should run things like that by others before you make a decision?"

"Sorry about that, kiddo," I mumbled. "I'll get this taken care of. It shouldn't take long." Assuming I survived.

"If you're sure." It was obvious that she wasn't confident in Washuu exercising this thing we call "restraint."

I wanted to hug her and give her a peck on the forehead. Unfortunately, that wasn't really an option.

"I'll be okay." I hoped that I sounded reassuring.

She gave me one last, doubting look, but she nodded. "I'll see you at lunch?"

"Count on it."

.....

It took a little while to explain everything to Washuu. To be fair, it wasn't because she couldn't understand what I was saying. I just had a tough time detailing what happened.

She pecked at one of those holographic keyboards and frowned. I dared to hope that she was taking my situation seriously.

"This is the first time you've had that kind of dream?" she asked.

I nodded. "As far as I can remember, yeah."

"I'll have to do a few scans." She held up her index finger to forestall any stupid questions. Of course, what she thought of as stupid was pretty much 99 percent of all questions that she already knew the answers to. "No, these scans do not involve samples."

"Good to know," Ryo remarked. "Is there a reason why you're not doing this in your lab?"

Washuu's eyebrow twitched. Apparently, Ryo had asked a "stupid" question.

"My lab is sealed so that nothing goes in or comes out," she explained. "If there is any crossover or interference

between this reality and the other one, it probably wouldn't occur within the boundaries of my lab. It would be counterproductive to test for something in an environment where it can't happen."

"Then how do you explain Mihoshi? I think she was able to get into your lab a few times," Ryo said. He pointedly ignored my "throat slashing" gesture.

Washuu's eyebrow twitched again. That was not a good sign. You did not make a genius mad scientist angry at you.

"Mihoshi is an aberration that I have yet to decipher," Washuu said. It was a voice that promised horrible things in the immediate future. "Rest assured, I will find out how she can do what she does." She turned towards me. "In the meantime, I think it's time to put you to sleep so that I can make some scans."

"How long am I going to be asleep? And how are you going to put me under?"

"Efficiently," Washuu replied. "There won't be any drugs involved. You'll be under for about 10 minutes."

"You're not going to do a Vulcan nerve pinch on me, are you? Or maybe you'll use one of those sleep-inducing alpha rhythm generators?"

Washuu rolled her eyes in disgust. "I never figured you for a man who was into popular culture."

I cleared my throat and gestured to Ryo, then her. I got my point across.

"That's cute," Washuu remarked. Then she hit a button on her holographic keyboard. "See you in ten minutes."

"What--?" That was the last thing I said before everything went black.

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You know when you're in a situation that can only bring pain, but you have to do it anyway? It's like walking on top of a spiked pit with a plywood board as the only path that you can see. Sooner or later, that board is going to splinter and you go down into the spikes. That was the only path left to me.

Finding the redhead was the job. Finding out how I'd gotten into this situation was my motivation. I knew that what the blonde had promised me was just the carrot dangling on the stick. I knew that this whole situation was rotten and that the blonde was feeding me only what she thought I needed to know. Honestly, there was no guarantee that she'd give me the info I needed, even if I finished the job.

The other me, the police detective, would have had it easy. He would have had the contacts and resources to make short work of a simple case like this. Me, I had to pound the pavement and talk to people who might know for a price.

I wished that I could have talked to Jake, my best friend. Unfortunately, he had a run of bad luck that eventually did him in. The last client he had wasn't satisfied with his efforts and destroyed all his good luck charms and wards. A few hours later, he'd been hit a dozen times by lightning.

A lot of the people I'd known as friend had been convinced to turn away. I didn't have any proof, but it was probably Andy Hero's doing.

I managed to track down something that might have been a lead. It was a hole in the wall restaurant near the border of the city proper and Mechatown.

On the outside, my contact was the epitome of cool. Even in the dim lightning, he wore wraparound mirrored sunglasses. His slicked-back brown hair wasn't as neat as I'd remembered. His finger twitched erratically on the table every so often.

Leon McNichol, formerly of the AD Police, had seen better days. The last I heard, he'd been trying to get himself transferred out.

He saw me and nodded. I took a seat in that dark booth he'd reserved.

We sized each other up. We could trust each other not to mess things up. Other than that, things were on a quid pro quo basis.

"Heard you're looking for a certain redhead." He might have tried to pass it off as a casual drawl, but the words were tight. "Might want to back off of this, Mays. From one pro to another."

"Any reason why?" I asked.

He said nothing for a moment. Then he took off his sunglasses and I saw the bags underneath his eyes. It looked like he hadn't slept in days. As durable as Animates were by their very nature, they still needed rest.

"Just...leave the poor kid alone." His voice was ragged, almost as if he was pleading with me. "She's been through too much. What she's got is the only thing keeping her alive."

That got my attention. Leon was many things, but he wasn't prone to exaggeration. There was something more in those worn eyes of his. This wasn't just a warning. This was personal.

"You know her?"

"Of course I know her," he snapped back. "I've worked with her. She's a good kid and she doesn't deserve what's happening to her." He looked at his drink. "None of us do."

I felt for the guy. I really did. But I still had a job to do.

"Hey," a deep, feminine voice said behind me. I felt a firm grip on my shoulder that wasn't painful, but it was definitely a warning. "Sorry I'm late."

Leon smiled. For a moment, the shadows under his eyes lifted.

"Hey," he returned. "I didn't think you were coming."

"You needed backup, right?" the woman behind me asked.

"Looks like you've both seen better days."

"Priss, be nice," Leon chided her. "Let's do this face to face, okay?"

The pressure on my shoulder eased up. Leon's companion sat down and I recognized her. There weren't many brunettes with red eyes wandering around, even if she was an Animate.

"Priss Asagiri, formerly of the Replicants," I said. "Kind of surprised that you're hanging around Leon. I never figured you for liking cops."

The smile that Priss gave Leon was a tiny, almost intimate one. It was the kind of smile you gave to someone away from others. It was usually followed by hushed words and sweet dreams.

"Sometimes I'm surprised, too," she admitted. There was a little sly look on her face. Then I noticed the sparkler on her ring finger.

"We got married about a month ago." He reached out and gently squeezed her hand. "We got tired of dancing around."

"Life's short, you know?" There was a spark of anger in her eyes. "It's shorter for us, nowadays."

I'd heard about all the crackdowns. The city used to have a lot of mayhem that the cops could barely control. Then, the City Council decided to lay down some new laws for the sake of "societal justice."

Animates are basically on a hit list nowadays. Sure, they did their jobs and they went home. But they could be called out at any time as a "danger to society."

"Can you tell me who put you on this?" Leon was going for the soft touch.

"I'm not sure that I can," I told him. "All I know is that they knew everything about me. They knew what I wanted." I sighed. "I wouldn't call it blackmail, Leon, but they knew exactly where to hit me."

Priss and Leon shared a very worried look. Then Priss gritted her teeth.

"Damn," she muttered. "That little—"

"Easy," Leon said. He took a quick look around. "I don't see the twins around. That's good."

"Twins?" I asked.

"Rex and Taylor Thompson," Leon said. "They don't have any official title with the police, but they're always around Mr. 'everyone's hero.'" He grimaced. "People tend to vanish or change when they get involved."

"Anything else I should know about the Thompson twins?
Other than that, they were an okay band," I added.

Leon managed a strangled chuckle. "You can't miss them in those white suits of theirs. I've seen them walk through gunfights without a scratch. They've been stomped on by giant robots and they just get back up. Hell, they've walked through beam weapons and they weren't even touched."

Criminately. That was exactly what I didn't need: An invincible obstacle. There was a lot more to this than I'd thought.

"You said that they stick around that guy?" I couldn't even bear to say his name. It's one of the reasons why I just can't stand being called "Andy." I never wanted to be confused with that guy in any way.

"I don't know why," Leon said. "It's not like the guy needs bodyguards or anything. He's about as untouchable as the twins. Why do you think he's the top cop in the city?"

"Why do you think I'm so eager to get this done?" I countered. "If I get this done, I can prove—"

"You're being played," Priss said. Well, she never minced words.

Wait. I've never met her in person until now. How did I know that she was always blunt?

"Take it from someone who charged in head-first, Mays," Priss said. "If someone offers you exactly what you want, ask yourself what they're getting in return."

"Well, I don't know what my client is getting out of this. They just told me that it was a missing persons case and that she was a distant cousin."

Leon and Priss both looked very worried. I wasn't going to like what they said next.

"Nene doesn't have any family left," Priss said. There was a gentle sadness in those red eyes of hers. "She never had any cousins and her parents...were whited out."

I felt as if someone had grabbed my spine and shook it. It wasn't just a chill; it was a full-blown shudder.

A while back, there was a "concern" about the Animate population expanding beyond the city's resources. The City Council had declared that Animates that had never appeared in a show were "extraneous" and a drain on the system.

Whiteout bombs were deemed the most efficient and humane way to deal with this "excess" population. The police just knocked on the door, subdued the occupants and tossed in a whiteout bomb. Everyone inside would lose their color, leaving only black and white lines with no greys. Then the lines would lose definition and the Animates inside would just...fade away.

Officially, whiteout bombs were painless. Unofficially, there were rumors from survivors that it was the most agonizing thing they'd ever experienced. It hadn't been just a loss of color; it was also a loss of self. With time, the survivors could heal if people cared about them. Once you were whited out, there was no coming back.

"I'm sorry," I rasped. Even as I said the words, I knew that they were utterly inadequate. The poor kid had to be devastated.

"We all were," Leon said. He took a sip of his drink.

When someone has lost that much, they don't think straight. She looked like the kind of girl who was naïve and believed in truth, justice, law and order. The law had failed her and left her with nothing.

A vague memory tickled its way to the surface. The Knight Sabers all had specialties. What was Nene's, again?

She was a computer expert. She hacked into things for fun.

My eyes must have been wide as saucers as things finally fell into place. I finally figured out what Leon and Priss were trying to tell me without saying anything.

Nene had the goods on Andy Hero. She knew how he'd risen to power and maybe whose palms were greased.

I had theories and suspicions on how I was too late to stop Andy Hero. Nene had the facts. If I could get her to broadcast

everything—if I could find her first—then there might have been a little justice in the future for Andy Hero.

Trish and I weren't exactly on the best terms, but at least she didn't sell me out. She was still one of the best reporters the city had.

I didn't have a plan. I didn't even have a hint of a plan. But maybe with some brainstorming and some help, I might be able to come up with something. I just had to set things in motion.

.....
I peeled my face off of my desk. I wasn't sure what Washuu had hit me with, but it worked fast. I didn't think that someone could start dreaming the moment that they fell asleep.

"How long was I out?" I rasped. I took a slug of cold coffee from my cup and grimaced. It was something to get me going.

"Ten minutes," Washuu reported. "Just like I said."

"It felt longer," I mumbled. "The private eye version of me is trying to set things up. He thinks that the Nene in that dimension has information that Andy Hero would love to keep secret."

"I don't know who this 'Andy Hero' is, but I do know that your dreams aren't just fantasies or mental reorganization," she said. She waved some kind of silver rod with a twirling red tip over my head and it buzzed. There was something vaguely familiar about that. "Your dreams are actually peering into an

alternate reality. Furthermore, your counterpart there has similar dreams about you."

"Great," I grumbled. "Don't tell me that this is some kind of cosmic coincidence. Maybe I've become the new Arthur Dent where the universe hates me?"

Once again, I was buzzed by the silver rod. "This isn't a coincidence. Your dreams have been linked across dimensions. This was engineered."

"Wait, someone rigged these dreams to happen to me and...well, me? Who would do that?"

A diagram popped up on one of the holographic screens. Two parallel lines were drawn and little icons of my face were superimposed on each line. Then there was a line that linked the two of us.

"This was done by someone who was very familiar with cross-dimensional dynamics and—" She sighed as she saw the blank look on my face. "It's kind of like a tunnel between dimensions that works only when one of you is dreaming." She frowned. "By the way, why didn't you tell me that you'd occupied a temporally neutral space on a consistent basis? Do you have any IDEA how rare that is?!"

"Um, are you talking about the bar I go to?" I asked.

"He's one of the lucky few who can go to Dupin's," Ryo said. "I stop by every once in a while."

Now it was Washuu's turn to blink. "Dupin? Do you mean Auguste Dupin?"

"Yeah, he runs a detective's bar," Ryo confirmed. "You get all kinds of detectives from all times."

I could almost swear that Washuu looked...humbled? In awe? She certainly had some of her wind taken out of her sails as soon as Dupin was mentioned.

She shook her head as if she couldn't believe what we'd told her. To her, it was probably like finding the solution to a problem in the cookie jar.

"All that power and he uses it to—" She stopped muttering and straightened up. "Anyway, I don't believe that you can truly influence your other self, nor can he do the same. It appears to only be for observational purposes."

"What if something happens to the other me in the dream?" I didn't want to think that someone could go all Freddy Krueger on me.

"Nothing should happen to you here," she said. "It shouldn't, anyway."

I wasn't reassured. Then I pointed to the rod in her hand. "Hey, is that a sonic—"

Washuu hid the rod behind her and shut down her displays. "Anyway, you're fine!"

Washuu rushed inside the dimensional door and closed it behind her. It vanished, leaving me and Ryo just the tiniest bit confused as to what was going on.

Moments later, with much wheezing and grinding, a blue phone box appeared. I had to sigh and wonder which Doctor was going to pop out.

The door to the TARDIS opened and a man with a long scarf and brown, curly hair popped his head out. He grinned at seeing me.

"Ah, Andrew," he said. "How long has it been? Or have we met yet? It gets a little confusing, you see."

"Doctor." I tried to be nonchalant about it. "You know, one of these days, you're going to trip on that thing."

"Not today," he grinned. "In any case, I don't suppose you happen to know where a certain crab-haired lady would be? I let her borrow my sonic screwdriver for a bit and--"

"You just missed her," Ryo said. He was trying to play the situation off as no big deal. This wasn't the usual city shenanigans, though. The twitching eyebrow gave him away.

"Ah, pity," the Doctor sighed. "Well, I suppose that I could always build another one." He paused to just...look at me.

"Interesting convergence," he murmured. "Fine work, too. Shouldn't be any lasting effects."

"Do I want to know, or would I even understand?" I had that sinking feeling in my gut, like a bad hot dog on a rough night.

The Doctor seemed to think it over. "Hm...no and no, I'm afraid. Someone has taken quite an interest in your possible futures, Andrew."

"Do you have a name with that?" I asked. "And please don't reply in something along the lines of the Magic 8 Ball. I got plenty of that from Sailor Pluto a while back."

Suddenly, that grin seemed to freeze in place. Given how old he probably was, there were a lot of things to sort through. Maybe I'd thrown him a curveball. Then again, I had the feeling that the Doctor and Sailor Pluto had something of an "understanding."

"Yes, on that note, I believe I should be leaving." He paused. "You'll know what to do when the time is right. Well, you will." He pointed to me. "I'm not certain if things will turn out quite so well for the other fellow."

Great. Just what I needed. While it wasn't quite as useless as a rubber crutch, it was enough of a brain-bender to not be immediately useful.

The Doctor patted me on the shoulder before he went back into the TARDIS. With a wheeze and a grind, he was off. Of

course, this came complete with a dramatic wind that scattered the paperwork we had just finished.

I sighed again. It wasn't even noon and it had already been a full day.

"You know the most interesting people," Ryo remarked. There may have been an edge of annoyance in his voice because he was picking up his papers.

"I don't always attract attention from time travelers and aliens, but when I do, they come in waves," I joked. Then a thought occurred to me. "You ever have a feeling that some of the strangest thoughts that occur to us are just proof that we tap into a universal mental pool?"

Ryo looked at me oddly. "I haven't been `tapping' into much of anything lately," he remarked. "I wonder why?"

"You know I do that because we can't afford the lawsuits."

"Back when I was legally dead, I didn't have to worry about lawsuits," he reminded me.

I chuckled. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Ryo. Now get digging."

Ryo shook his head. "Bruce Campbell? Really? You don't have that kind of chin."

"I don't know. I've been certainly taking it there lately."

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To the outside observer, I may have seemed to have been distracted during my lunch with Nene. I didn't say much, nodded when it was appropriate and gave feedback where I could. The kid had a lot to unpack and I was her sounding board.

Ever since that jaunt on my birthday, I've learned to appreciate Nene more. I notice the little pout she does when she draws the short end of the stick at work. I smile at the sparkle in her eyes when she's excited about something, even if it's computer jargon that I can barely make heads or tails of. When I can do so discreetly, I hug her from behind when she's feeling down and top it off with a kiss on the top of her head.

I once asked her what she liked about me. She rattled off a long list of things, which I didn't expect. She topped it off by saying that she'd been looking for someone exciting, but what she needed was someone steady.

I don't think of myself as some ace, hotshot detective. I always considered myself lucky to have had a decent family and good friends. I'm not like Sherlock Holmes, some genius who could devote so much brainpower to tiny little details. I'm kind of like Marlowe, only I actually have some friends where he's a loner. I just pick up a few things that put me ahead of the game.

Nene loves me for not being fancy or edgy. She just loves me, not the outfit or the job I do. And I love how sometimes

she can be sweet and ditzy one moment, then focused like a laser the next.

I listened as she talked about the work she did looking up Andy Hero. I knew most of it already, of course. After all, I'd been there for most of it.

"What I don't get is how someone like that could be so influential," she said. "I mean, yes, his family is rich and he's from a long line of cops. But that can't account for everything." She blinked. "Are you paying attention to me?"

"Absolutely," I reassured her. "Every word."

She paused and took a bite of her lunch. She'd opted for something sensible today. By "sensible," I meant that she'd picked something that didn't have enough sugar to put her in a coma for the next two hours.

"How'd you know he wasn't a good guy?" she asked. "What was your first clue?"

I took a bite of my sandwich and chewed. That gave me time to think it over.

"I think my first clue that Andy Hero wasn't all that great was that he never did anything without a quid pro quo. If he did something, it wasn't out the goodness of his heart. He expected to be paid back."

She grimaced. "I mean, I sometimes do a little extra work for dessert coupons, but that's not a good sign. When did this start?"

"First grade. He only got slicker as time went by. Nobody believed me when I said that he'd been up to no good. They looked at his family and figured that a guy raised by a cop couldn't possibly be bad." I looked at my coffee. "It got worse when we were in high school."

"I can imagine," Nene said. "He was probably one of those smooth talkers who had the girls twisted around his finger, right? He was the big man on campus, right?"

I arched an eyebrow. "I thought you went to a fancy girl's school."

"Hey, I read a lot!" she protested. "And I hear things from people who didn't have rich, controlling parents who are better now, thankfully," she quickly amended.

"Anyway, he had quite a reputation with the girls. There was a lot of, shall we say, locker room talk."

"So, how'd you find out about the girls?"

That was a simple question. Maybe it was a complicated answer. Or maybe it was a simple answer that I didn't like to think about.

I took a deep slug of coffee. I was going to need it.

"Fact is, I wasn't exactly a mover or shaker in high school," I admitted. "I was one of those guys that you could probably pass by in the halls and not really recognize. I was a face in the crowd with a reputation for being a nice guy." I frowned at the memories. "I'm going to be saying things that you might not agree with."

"I think I can take a different opinion," she said. Then that impish smirk appeared on her face. "If I wanted dark, brooding and edgy, I would have looked for someone more like that guy from Lord of the Rings. The scruffy guy?"

I chuckled. It's not often that she admits to knowing about old fantasy stuff like Lord of the Rings. I made a show of feeling my clean-shaven chin.

"Well, I think that Aragorn's appeal was more than just being 'scruffy,'" I pointed out. "There was the whole king thing."

"Yeah, but he was a humble king, right?" she asked. "He wasn't all full of himself. Not like Mr. Hero, anyway."

"No, not like him at all," I agreed. "Anyway, the girls back then declared that I was a 'safe' guy to be around. In high school, if you're 'safe,' you're automatically declared as boring—which explains why I didn't have many dates back then." I shook my head. "Some of the girls would come back from dates

with Andy Hero and they were...scared. I don't think that I need to go into many details, right?"

Nene shuddered. "I can imagine."

"It only got worse as high school went on. Girls kept telling me things but then said not to tell anyone else. Each time, it just got...nastier." I scowled. "Every one of those girls was afraid of him and his family. I mean, who wants to go up against a cop family?"

"But you're from a cop family," Nene reminded me. "Why wouldn't they listen to you?"

"Because everybody decided to pair me and him up as best buddies in their minds. It's because we were from a blue line that they said that we'd be friends. After all, we had so much in common, right?" I scoffed. "They called us the 'dynamic duo of law enforcement' back then. At our ten year reunion, they had the big picture of us from the yearbook all blown up."

"Hello, hello," a very familiar, very British voice said from behind me. "Sorry to interrupt, but I heard a few familiar names being bandied about."

I chuckled and turned around. "Hey, Jake," I greeted him. "How's it going with you and Memory?"

Jake--or Jason Kinnison as most people know him--is good people. He's my best friend. We've known each other since grade school, which was one of the things he had in common with

Andy Hero and Tricia McMasters. Most people thought that with his height and build that he was the mean guy, until they got him to smile. He was big enough back in high school to play football, which he turned down. He was so British that he didn't consider it "proper" football if he didn't make the soccer team—which he did.

Oh, yeah. He's a lawyer. He's a defense attorney who specializes in Animate crime, but he won't defend certain famous criminals. Lupin found that out the hard way.

"Not bad, not bad," he said. "I'm just waiting for her. Things are starting to go my way just a little." He knocked on the table. "I'm just glad that I finally got things squared away. Would you mind if I had a seat?"

Nene's smile was permission enough. I gestured for him to sit down at our table.

A while back, Jake had gone through "karma depletion." Basically, he was a walking jinx, thanks to having survived an encounter with the Dirty--Lovely Angels. Since then, he'd been burning out good luck charms left and right, just to have an "ordinary" day.

I know that I helped take care of that, but I can't quite remember what it was. Oh, well. It's the results that count, right?

"So, you heard about `everyone's hero' being in the spotlight again?" I asked. I grimaced at using that title. I really didn't want to say his name out loud.

"Honestly, I'm more worried about the people behind him. I've heard quite a few things about Councilman Geoffries, few of them good when it comes to Animates. And there are those two odd men in white behind him." He frowned deeply, something he only did when he was really worried. "It's like everyone's attention is drawn to those odd men that they barely pay attention to what's being said."

"It's more complicated than that," I told him. "Remember that weird thing that happened to me on my birthday? And then there was that time you got sprayed with that awful cologne?"

Jake nodded. "Kind of hard to forget. You definitely live in interesting times."

"Well, it's the same outfit. And no, I can't go around arresting them because they're just a little outside of my authority," I sighed. "They're way outside of my authority. I can't even claim `hot pursuit' or anything like that."

"Well, some of the things that Geoffries is saying would set us back years." He snorted. "He's calling it `societal justice,' but it's nothing of the sort. A throwback is more like it."

"We know about some of his ties," Nene said. "How does someone get into a position of power with people like those supporting him?"

"It's a case of quantity over quality, I'm afraid," Jake sighed. "All he needs is a sufficient number of like-minded supporters to vote for him. Of course, people like him always spew the rhetoric that things were always better in the Old Days. Those days were simpler." His voice turned sour. "You knew who you could trust by just looking at them." He pointed to himself, with his olive skin and tight, black curly hair. "I've had plenty of experience with people like him."

"What do you think of Andy Hero?" Nene asked.

Now Jake scowled. "The things I could say about him in polite company are very limited." He glanced at the crowd in the restaurant, all of them apparently focused on their own lives. "If he were assigned to me, I would defend him to the fullest extent of the law." He lowered his voice so that only we could hear him. "And in my heart, if the prosecution failed to do their jobs, I would hope that a higher authority would deal with him before he hurts anyone else."

Nene grimaced. "And this guy's popular?"

"He had the looks, the backing of his family and he has charisma," I told her. "People tend to zip their lips when they encounter a combination like that."

Jake sighed. "He's also deucedly clever when he wants to be. Narcissistic tendencies aside, he might have made a halfway decent detective." He reached inside his jacket out of habit to pull out a good luck ward, then remembered that he didn't need it anymore. "There's quite a bit I could say and very little of it good."

He paused to gather his thoughts. I didn't blame him. We both had to hold back a flood of bad memories and feelings towards Andy Hero. Maybe I had it worse because I knew the potential monster he could become, given the time, resources and support.

Jake smiled in that disarming, sheepish manner of his. "Sorry," he said. "I seem to have brought the mood down."

"If it's any consolation, I don't think the right people are going to be happy after the press conference," I told him. "Sometimes, I wish..."

I didn't finish that sentence. I couldn't. If I weren't a cop, then I would have been Private Eye Andrew Mays. That guy had been carrying around a boatload of resentment and an unhealthy disregard for rules. To him, the system had failed him.

The law's not pretty. It's not perfect. It's made by people who tend to be more pragmatic than just. It's what we've

got, though. I swore an oath to protect, serve and enforce the law, even if I didn't like it.

Jake and I had known what we would grow up to be ever since we were kids. He was always going to be a lawyer and I was always going to be a cop. We made a gentlemen's agreement that if we found ourselves on the opposite side of a case, it would never be personal.

"I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?" a prim, female voice asked. It was a contralto that got men's attention without even trying.

I knew that voice. Of course, judging by the grin on Jake's face, it was obvious. He got up and his face lit up.

It wasn't hard to see why. The Animate lady at our table had an elegance that one didn't expect from her blue-green hair. Maybe it was the glasses; I knew that Jake had a Thing about glasses.

"Hello, Memory, my queen," he greeted her as he stood up. She leaned in and he gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

She blushed a little, which was surprising. Then again, on her series, she wasn't exactly the most expressive of characters. She also didn't any public displays of affection on her show.

"You're the only one who calls me `queen,'" she noted.

"Because you are one," he said quickly. "Not that you're blue blood or royalty. It's just...you're my lady."

"It's a British thing," I explained to Nene. Jake's family is from up north in Runcorn."

We had a nice, pleasant chat before Jake and Memory left for another table. It was obvious that they wanted a little "alone time."

For a few moments, I said nothing. I was worried about the future. Hell, I was worried about our future.

I didn't want to think about the horrible things I'd seen in that other dimension, the one where Andy Hero was the top cop. I didn't want to imagine the pain that man had caused just to satisfy his own ego. I especially didn't want to think about all the poor Animates who had been victims of whiteout bombs and Dip, all in the name of a "just" city.

I must have been staring off into space for a while. The next thing I knew, I felt Nene's warm hand on mine. She gently squeezed, as if she was offering all she could to just lift my spirits.

Folks, I don't deserve her. I've got her anyway. The universe is funny that way.

We finished our lunch and went back to the office. Nene went on her scooter and I went in that red, American beast that I call my car. I have to admit, I was tempted just to swing by

City Hall and wait for the press conference. Maybe I could have done some good if Andy Hero were "accidentally" shoved out of the line of fire from some troublemaker.

I shook my head. I had to play by the rules. Besides, the Chief gave me a direct order to stay in the department during the press conference.

I had no doubts about Ryo's ability to handle himself. I also knew that Tricia was in good hands. Okay, those hands might have wandered a bit when he was in that mindset, but I was counting on Ryo's professional mode to be at the forefront.

On the way back, I saw Auguste outside of his bar once again. He was sweeping the outside walk, even though it was perfectly clean.

Auguste never goes outside of his bar. This is twice today that I've seen him. I had the distinct feeling that he was freaking me out on purpose, just to get a response.

It worked. I decided to park the car on the curb.

I wasn't worried about being late to the precinct. Time works in funny ways in Dupin's bar. I usually come out about five minutes after I've come in. It's really handy for the detectives who've taken a beating and need a place to recover for a bit.

I went inside and it was like every other time I'd been at the bar. You had Sherlock Holmes in a comfortable chair,

playing Sudoku with a pen. At a table in the corner, Philip Marlowe and Miss Marple were playing chess together. Off to the side, there was a separate room, the one dedicated for detectives who were too young to drink.

Not for the first time, I wondered how I qualified to be in this bar. You had some of the best and the brightest detectives who had ever lived. There were some of the meanest and toughest people in this bar who ever took on a case.

"Ook!"

Oh, yeah. And there was an orangutan at the bar. He was my contact for really strong coffee. Not, mind you, that it was condoned for interdimensional trade, but Auguste could have stopped it at any time if he wanted to.

"Why am I here?" I muttered to myself. I knew that I didn't deserve to be in this company.

Mike Hammer looked at me sourly from his seat. He wasn't one for deep self-reflection. Was he one to dispense his brand of justice? Yeah. Was he, like everyone here in the bar, a product of his time? Definitely. But he wasn't one for moping and he didn't tolerate it in others.

"Mays, you're here for a reason," he reminded me. "You wouldn't be walking in here if you didn't. Now quit the sob sister attitude and straighten up."

More than a few women in the bar glared at him. V. I. Warshawski had come close to breaking the "no fighting" rule in Dupin's. I didn't have any doubt that she could give big Mike a run for his money.

"Kid, c'mere," came a gravelly voice. "Have a seat."

I'd known that voice ever since I was a kid. Eddie Valiant wasn't my uncle by blood, but that didn't stop him from being like family to me. He'd been there during some tough times and he showed me a few things about detective work. He was the one who most appreciated what I did for Animates. It reminded him a lot of what he did for Toontown.

"Uncle Eddie," I greeted him with a grin. I took the seat next to him and saw that he was drinking a soda. "How's Aunt Dolores doing?"

"We're fine, kiddo." He gave me a quick once-over and frowned. "You look like you've got a lot on your mind."

"You don't know the half of it," I said. "In fact, per the rules, you really can't know the half of it. We have to keep the talk about our cases down to a minimum here, remember?"

Uncle Eddie frowned. "Yeah, it's part of the price we pay for membership."

I knew the rationale for this rule. Dupin's is a place where detectives can go, unwind, and have a good meal or drink. It wasn't meant to be a resource for enterprising young

detectives and fans of all ages. The last thing that Auguste wanted for his patrons was to have them bombarded by fans, asking questions of all kinds, and generally destroying any chance of relaxation. The fact that Sherlock found this place almost as restful as the Diogenes club spoke volumes about how far Auguste would go to keep his patrons happy.

Speaking of the man in question, he finished a sizable amount of food at the combination bar and grill. He didn't show any strain in taking the entire platter. With practiced ease, he went to the side door that was for the younger patrons.

"Want me to get the door for you?" I asked.

"I appreciate the offer, but it will not be an inconvenience," he said. "Besides, I am certain that they will ask for another helping shortly."

"`They?'" I asked.

The door opened on its own. By that, I don't mean that it opened like those doors at the supermarket. There wasn't any mechanical device or sensor that I could see. The door just opened as Auguste approached it.

On cue, Conan Edogawa (aka Shinichi Kudo—not that I should technically know that) sprinted forth. Before he could cross the threshold, he slammed into an invisible wall of force. It was kind of like watching a bird slam into a glass door, only a lot funnier. Why was it funny? Well, this wasn't the first

time that he'd hoped to barge in and spend some time with the adults—Sherlock, especially.

Auguste sighed. "Young one."

Conan slid down the invisible wall and looked disgusted. He powered up those sneakers of his and tried to kick his way through. All that did was send a nasty bit of recoil from his feet to his head as he kicked the invisible wall.

Nobody at the bar heard a thing. It was nice to have that kind of privacy.

Auguste eyed him sternly. "Shinichi Kudo. You are very close to having your privileges revoked."

The little guy said something. Of course, we couldn't hear it, but judging by his mouth, it was something along the lines of "it's not fair."

I'm kidding. I know exactly what he said because he's bent my ear about it when we weren't in the bar. Unfortunately, it did not make me like him any more. Then again, I'm not crazy about kid detectives.

Before there was any further pouting and "discussion," a brown Great Dane came up behind Shinichi and picked him up with his teeth by the collar. Scooby-doo happily trotted away from the table.

Auguste gave him a gracious nod as he entered. The door closed behind him.

"He never learns," I sighed. "Then again, he's been stuck as a kid for how long?"

"Does he have a Baby Herman thing going on?" Uncle Eddie asked me. "If he does, then he's got it bad."

"It's not exactly like that," I told him. "Sometimes he's sixteen years old. Other times, he's like you see him. It's complicated," I shrugged.

Uncle Eddie decided to change the subject. "So, how's it going with you and that cute redhead?"

"Hey, you know what they say about redheads!" Mike Hammer crowed.

"They represent about 1-2 percent of the world population," came a voice in the rear. It was the favored seat of someone who preferred the shadowy corners. Nobody at the bar ever said his name, even when he wasn't wearing the costume. With or without the outfit, you didn't mess with Bruce Wayne. "Or were you just trying to get Detective Mays worked up?"

Hammer froze. Obviously, he hadn't been expecting Bruce to intervene. He went back to his drink and grumbled.

"Things are going great with me and Nene," I admitted. "I mean, we're taking our time, but...we're happy."

I guess I looked like a lovesick idiot. Then again, Uncle Eddie had seen his share of people who were practically floating on air.

He gently clapped me on the shoulder. "Good to hear, kiddo. You were about due for some happiness."

"I guess so." Maybe I sounded a little uncertain. I've taken my share of knocks in life. "I'm just wondering when the rug's going to be pulled out from under me."

"If you are not careful, sooner than you think," Auguste said from behind me. "Some part of you already knows this."

I wish I could say that I wasn't startled. I'd be lying if I weren't. I didn't even hear Auguste approach from the other room.

"The path that you have seen is not the one you should travel," he said vaguely. It sounded odd coming from a bartender with a slicked moustache and hair. His French accent was there, but it wasn't the typical Maurice Chevalier mangling that TV would have you expect. "It may be the one that is forced upon you if you are not careful."

"You did that?" I frowned. I didn't like people messing with my life, even as whacked out as things got.

"I provided insight," he said. Then he turned towards Uncle Eddie's questioning gaze. "To assist your nephew from being forced into an impossible path. A hint, if you will. Nothing more."

"Why?" I asked.

Now Auguste's smile seemed sad. "Because your story was never meant to be his. His ending should not be yours."

That sent a chill down my spine. By that implication, the other version of me, Private Eye Mays, wasn't going to fare well. Given what he was facing, even knowing it was a trap, he'd soldier on for the truth.

"I regret that I could not arrange a meeting. Sadly, he does not meet one of the primary qualifications for this establishment: He does not seek the truth. He seeks resolution, perhaps validation, but not the truth."

"He's going to die, isn't he?" I asked.

Auguste's face betrayed nothing. "I have every faith in your abilities. Do not be distracted by the attention seekers. They will only grow stronger if you focus on them." He paused and checked some invisible clock that was supposedly at the bar. "I believe you should be going now. Take care."

With that, he made his way to his bar and started polishing mugs. I wasn't going to get any more out of him.

Uncle Eddie patted me on the shoulder. There was nothing but kindness and support in his face.

"You'll make it, kiddo. I know you will."

I smiled back. "Thanks, Uncle Eddie."

I checked my watch as I exited Dupin's. Sure enough, only five minutes had gone by. Now all I had to do was wait at the

precinct house for the press conference—and the other shoe to drop.

It was nearly two hours later when I heard the radio chatter from around City Hall. Ryo had gotten there early and geared up as Tricia's cameraman. There was no disguising that he was an Animate, but at least he changed his voice and mannerisms. He was on the job; he could be focused. Really, he could.

I was in the Chief's office, watching the conference with him. We were watching Tricia's network, of course.

Councilman John Geoffries was a man with an easy smirk, small eyes and an open pocketbook. He didn't quite strut to the podium. Behind him were the men in white, the DDO agents that had tailed me from before. If things held true, they were Rex and Taylor Thompson. They were grinning as if all of the crowd was for them.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. "I've brought you all here today because a great injustice has been redressed. The lies and intimidation of the past have been washed away, clearing the way for a brighter future."

I did not grip the Chief's desk. I just gritted my teeth and waited for the snake to approach the podium.

"For years, unfair and spurious accusations have dogged an innocent man," Geoffries said. "He wanted nothing more than to

serve his city as one of the police. He was denied that by people who were jealous of his talents, his insight, his heritage."

I noted the crowd that Geoffries had attracted as the camera panned over them. More than a few of them were holding signs that said "freedom for Hero" or "justice at last." It wasn't hard to believe that, while some of them truly believed in Geoffries and what he was going to sell, a few of them were instigators and plants.

Look, I've seen a lot, okay? It's a sad fact that some people will do anything for attention. Whether or not the speaker believes in what they're saying is sometimes questionable, at best.

"Almost ten years ago, a man--a hero--was unjustly accused of atrocious acts," Geoffries continued. He was really hamming it up. I don't think that Shatner himself would have been quite this exaggerated. "Twenty women--TWENTY--came and bore witness against the man I'm about to introduce.

"Well, I'm here to tell you that all twenty witnesses have recanted their testimony. A good man is now FREE!"

The Chief and I shared a very worried look. This wasn't so much a civic announcement as it was some sort of spiritual thing. Geoffries would have been at home preaching to his faithful followers.

The cheers rose to, what some would call, a fever pitch. Councilman Geoffries gestured to the man at his right and gestured for him to take the mike.

Andy Hero took the mike as if it were made for him. He was in a lot better shape than when I'd last seen him--at least, the Andy Hero that I knew. Gone was the paunch and the five o'clock shadow. No, he was lean and full of energy, ready to take on anything. He wore a suit that was a lot fancier than what the average used car salesman could afford. His blonde hair was slicked back, a no-nonsense statement. Green eyes raked the crowd as he basked in the wave of support. He nodded with practiced graciousness and held his arms out as if to take it all in. Some of the crowd even interpreted this as him hugging them all for their support.

Say what you will about Andy Hero. He knew how to work a crowd. He'd learned it from his father, a cop that was a mover and shaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. He paused as the crowd started to settle down so he could talk. "Ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you a changed man.

"Of course, I'm sure that many of you know me from my used car business. It's the corner that I was driven to after baseless accusations and character assassination." He paused and tried to look sober and depressed. It didn't quite work.

"I'd been forced from the very steps of the police academy, the duty that my family had been proud to bear."

"Bet you he's going to drop your name in there somewhere," the Chief muttered darkly. "He never forgets people who've crossed him."

"Yeah, I know." I knew all too well.

"I wanted to live up to my name," Hero said. "I wanted to live up to the expectations of my family and you." He gestured broadly to the assembled crowd. "I wanted to be...everyone's hero."

I grimaced. There wasn't a day that went by that he didn't try to use that corny line. The way he said it, though, it got everyone's attention.

"Now, I'm a little old to go back to the police academy," he joked. "And besides, many fine officers have come to the forefront in times of crisis."

He paused and looked directly at the camera. I felt like he was looking directly at me. It was just the tiniest bit unnerving.

"I'm speaking, of course, of the various departments within the police force," Hero continued. "Many of you are aware of the work of Detective Andrew Mays, a man I am very familiar with."

Well, to his credit, at least he didn't try to say that I was a close, personal friend of his. I don't think that even his poker face could stand such an outrageous lie.

"Then, there is Stan Tai, the Sentai Detective, and so on." I'd say that he paused for dramatic effect, but Hero was always dramatic. "But of course, these brave officers are only as good as the resources they use. They are only as effective as the laws they enforce."

"Here we go," the Chief muttered. "Here comes the big bomb."

I couldn't help but agree. Hero had been building up to something big. This was where we found out what he had planned.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to inform you that the system is broken. For too long, we have depended on the current version of the police to patch up our broken system. And for all their efforts, you have people who loudly exclaim that 'all cops are bad.'"

I've heard a rougher version of this phrase tossed at me multiple times. Usually, it's from a within a protest group. There's something about being in a crowd that just encourages people to be their best or worst self. Unfortunately, in my case, it's the latter. They've shouted at me, personally, that all cops were bastards. I've been called a traitor for not outright killing Animates for the slightest infringement.

Working with Animates, they've said, has corrupted my morals due to their inherent indecency.

(I had to wonder how many of these decent, law-abiding citizens had visited Ecchiville. Yes, it's a red light district. "No harm, no foul" is the mindset there. Girls who were ringers for more famous Animates did brisk...business. You couldn't have business without customers, though. I wondered how many of those pure-hearted, righteous protesters had that particular skeleton in their closet.)

"To fix this broken system cannot be accomplished with the same mindset that caused it," Hero declared loudly. "People within the system have tried and failed. There are bureaucratic roadblocks by people who profit from suffering." He looked stern for a moment. "The police have resigned themselves to fighting a losing battle. We are on the razor's edge of CHAOS!"

The crowd roared once again. I tried very hard not to imagine grabbing Andy Hero and smacking some sense into him with my mallet. I really did.

"I can no longer be a police officer," Hero said. "I can no longer follow that dream." He glanced at the crowd. "But what I **can** do for you and future generations is no less important. I can help you follow your dreams without fear of the chaos we face every day! I can do this as your humble servant, as your hero!"

"God, he's laying it on thick." The Chief wiped his face in disgust. He looked like he was going to spit.

The cheering went on for a good thirty seconds before Councilman Geoffries reclaimed the mike. Andy Hero looked just a little bit reluctant to step away from the limelight.

"I've offered Andy Hero a spot on my staff, as liaison to the police force," Geoffries said. "He'll be a neutral party in finding systemic issues and shoring up any weaknesses with our police force. He'll report directly to me and I will pass on his findings directly to the Mayor."

The camera zoomed in and panned across the stage. Geoffries and Hero were there, obviously. Behind them were the twins in their gleaming white outfits. The twins practically glowed as the crowd cheered.

No, they didn't "practically" glow. They glowed, period.

Were they getting stronger or something? I wondered if somehow, their P.L.O.T. armor was getting charged up. I never did figure out how those things worked when I was in that other reality. All I knew was that the armor was attuned to stop anything from their assigned dimension from hurting the wearer.

"There you have it, folks," Tricia said. "The startling development that Councilman John Geoffries is forming an oversight group for the police. It appears that the primary

contact between him and the police will be none other than Andy Hero.

"The Hero family has produced some of the finest police in their history. It's a well-known 'blue line' and every member of that family has served with distinction—until Andy Hero. Allegations of abuse, harassment and assault at the academy brought his career to an end—and here he is!"

"Tricia," Hero's voice was smooth as silk. "A pleasure to meet one of the Fourth Estate, one with unimpeachable integrity. I watch you all the time."

Tricia looked like she was going to make a smart remark. I would have been tempted to do the same.

"Mr. Hero—"

"Andy. You can call me Andy."

"Mr. Hero," Tricia insisted. "What kind of changes can we expect regarding the police? It's odd that while you're an outsider to these matters, yet your family is intimately familiar with the workings of the department. Do you think that counts as a possible conflict of interest?"

If Hero looked annoyed, he didn't show it. "My family was a bulwark of support during my dark times and they remain so now. Their feedback over the years has given me great insight that will allow me to do my job. If you'll excuse me, I have

things to prepare—your cameraman looks oddly familiar. Why hire an Animate cameraman?"

"Equal opportunity," Tricia said briefly. "I think that they deserve to work wherever they want. What do you think?"

"I think...they are an integral part of this community. I'm certain that most of them just want to live their lives in peace. My ideas for reform will help weed out the true troublemakers. If you'll excuse me."

The Chief turned off the TV. He looked about ready to throw the remote.

"An oversight committee?" he asked darkly. "Ha! Knowing Geoffries, he'll probably recommend laws that restrict Animates. Hell, he'll probably make the case that Animates aren't real people and don't deserve equal rights."

"I've seen that, Chief. It wasn't a pretty picture."

He sighed. "I'm not sure how I can stop him. Damn politicians."

I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. I didn't want Hero to take over. Unfortunately, I didn't know what to do, either.

"I'm...going back to my office." I may have sounded just a little unsteady. "I need to unpack this mentally."

The Chief nodded. I headed back and felt guilty about leaving him to shoulder that burden.

Ryo was sober when he got back. There wasn't any trouble on his end and Tricia made it back to the network safe and sound. Of course, I expected no less of him.

There was a knock on the office door. I knew it was Nene.

Well, I was half-right. Nene and Kaori both entered. Their eyes said everything they were worried about.

Ryo and I were drained as we accepted hugs from our significant others. It wasn't even the end of the day, but it had been a full one.

"Dinner?" Nene asked.

"Yeah," I rasped. "Dinner sounds great."

You ever had one of those days where you wish that you hadn't crawled out of bed? While I can't say that this was one of those days, I wouldn't have called it one of my best days, either.

Hugging Nene made things a little better, though. And before anyone says anything about public displays of affection, Ryo and I were in the office and the door was closed. Unless someone walked in, there was plausible deniability.

(Okay, Kaori wasn't part of the police. She was a frequent visitor just in case Ryo "forgot" something like his lunch, his tie, his manners around women--that sort of thing. Let's just say that there was an express check-in at the front desk just for her.)

After a long while, Nene and I separated. Ryo and Kaori did the same. Neither of us was in any rush.

"So, what happens now?" Nene asked. "Do you think they'll shut the department down?"

I shook my head. "I'm not worried about being shut down. I'm more worried about the opposite happening."

"What do you mean?" Kaori asked.

I frowned. "I think that Abraham Lincoln said that if you really wanted to test someone, you give them power. Then you see what they do with it."

"You think that they'll beef up the police?" Ryo asked. "Like in that other dimension?"

He shuddered. I didn't blame him. His counterpart in that hellish world was an empty shell of a man. Yes, he still had the physical abilities and yes, he'd been made Chief of the Animate police. But in every way that counted, a lot of the good in that Ryo had died when his Kaori had been killed by a whiteout bomb.

"I hope not," I said at last. "We're here to enforce the law, not become the personal soldiers of--" I sighed. "Look, I've seen what happens when some people get too full of themselves. They think that because they have the power, they can't do any wrong. I mean, I've never wanted power."

"True, but some people occasionally want to be promoted," Ryo pointed out. "I wouldn't want the top spot, though. I don't want to be manning a desk."

Kaori gently squeezed his hand. She understood where she was coming from. I took that as a sign that their therapy sessions were making progress. Back in the old days, she would have been confused at Ryo being introspective or sincere for any reason. It was a start.

"So, what do we do now?" Nene asked. "Maybe I could do a little digging around and see how all this happened."

"Not a bad idea," I agreed. "Maybe you could look into why all those witnesses recanted their stories. I know a few of them, but not everyone. I'll give you a list of some names." I shrugged. "It'd be nice if we could get testimony from everyone, but that's not likely. When the Hero family settled out of court, the records were sealed."

"Sealed, huh?" Her green eyes glittered with mischief. "Is that a challenge?"

"I'm sure that you'll use all legal and proper procedures that I am aware of in order to obtain this information. After all, just doing a hack, smash and grab wouldn't give us any information that would be admissible in court."

I pointedly did not mention all the illegal and improper procedures that I wasn't aware of. It was my way of giving her plausible deniability.

That cute little smirk on her face spoke volumes. I had the feeling that some archive servers were going to be very unhappy in the morning.

"You want me to keep an eye on things?" Ryo asked. It didn't escape my notice that he was being deliberately vague about what he meant. I suspected that it involved rallying some of his contacts, including the less-than-savory types, into action. Given Ryo's background and the kind of people he knew, he already had a network of people in the streets and those in the cracks of polite society.

"By that, I'm assuming that you want people in the community to keep an eye on each other," I said. "I obviously can't order you to have some people you know spy on Geoffries, Hero and the twins. That would be a violation of privacy."

"No, you didn't order me," Ryo agreed. "The people I know like to keep an eye out and their heads down."

"I didn't hear that," I said. "Now, I'm going to go out on patrol and clear my head. If you need me, you know how to contact me."

"You're not going after Hero, are you?" Ryo looked relaxed, but I could tell he was ready to stop me from doing

anything stupid. "I don't want you to lose it like you did with Mad Bull."

I grimaced. That had been an incident early on, when Ryo and I had just been partnered up. John Estes, also known as "Mad Bull," had gone around the bend. Ryo and I'd been sent to take him in.

I don't like dirty cops. Estes had been dancing on the razor's edge for a while, with well-intentioned mayhem. He'd expected the department to turn a blind eye to some of the operations he'd been running, mostly out of Ecchiville. For a while, people ignored what he did on account of it being for some greater good.

When I saw how he ran his operation, something inside me snapped. Estes was bigger and stronger than me, but I was packing one ton of pain. Ryo had shot the gun from Estes's hands and I'd gone in to pound him into the ground. Three hits to his head later with the mallet and he was down, but not out.

John Estes had disgraced the department. He'd abused the trust of the people. He wasn't worthy of the badge.

It was so tempting, but I didn't save the city the cost of a trial. I didn't hide behind the flimsy excuse of self-defense. I put down the mallet and cuffed Estes, nothing more.

It was from that day on that Ryo knew I was on an even keel. If I'd tried to kill Estes, he would have taken me in.

"That's not happening," I said at last. "I'm just going for a drive, that's all."

Everyone stared hard at me. They had a pretty good idea of what I was going through. Then, almost as if they'd practiced it, they nodded and went to where they were needed.

I did a wide lap around the city. Things were fairly quiet in the wake of the press conference. Most of the crowd had already dispersed peacefully, leaving only the regular traffic to clog the streets.

I rounded the points where the city connected to the Animate communities. Mechatown, Teensborough, Kawaiiville and Ecchiville were active, but not the usual hustle and bustle. It was as if they knew that trouble was on the way. I only prayed that, as overpowered as some Animates were, they wouldn't do anything stupid like, oh, attacking City Hall.

"Trenchcoat One, a large fleet of mecha is headed towards City Hall," the dispatcher said. "Spandex One is enroute and will take priority."

I grabbed the radio. "Dispatch, this is Trenchcoat One. What kind of mecha are we talking about?"

"Zords, mostly," the dispatcher said. "Also, we have a few of the Kamen Riders on bikes. Authorization has been given for force."

"Negative, Dispatch," I said. "Spandex One can handle it. I'll just be there for moral support."

"Say again, Trenchcoat One?" The dispatcher sounded almost panicked. "You don't need backup?"

"I repeat: Spandex One can handle it. Under no circumstances are we to assume an aggressive posture, especially not with that many mecha."

"What's he going to do to stop them? Is he going to have a dance-off or something?"

I smirked, even though I knew the dispatcher couldn't see me. Must have been a new kid.

"You're not that far off, Dispatch. Trenchcoat One out."

By the time I got to City Hall, most of the mechs had been parked. This, of course, had caused no small amount of traffic snarls.

My mood lightened as I got out and strode up the steps. I was amused to find a group in spandex listening to Stan berating them.

"Now look," Stan began. "I know you're upset. I know that you think that the world's going to end. I know that you feel like you're not getting a fair shake."

There was a general murmur of agreement among the crowd. Some of them may have even bumped helmets as they nodded.

"What do you think you'll accomplish by destroying City Hall, huh?" Stan jabbed a finger at the chest of the nearest red spandex-clad person. "You think it's going to be easy to effect change by turning City Hall into a crater? You don't think that'll make people afraid of you?"

"Hey, we're heroes!" another spandex-clad person, this one in blue, said. "We're supposed to take down evil, right?"

Stan pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Look, it's not a hive of scum and villainy." He paused. "Really, it isn't."

"What's to stop us from going back to our mechs and blasting everything?" Another yellow-clad spandex person demanded. "You're just one guy!"

"I'm one guy," Stan agreed. "I'm just the guy you have to work with. It's in the contracts you signed when you agreed to work in this city." He paused and raised an eyebrow, a sure sign that he was getting annoyed. "Or didn't you read the contract?"

I stepped forth. "According to the rules, any disputes you have that are not kaiju-related have to be settled with him, in a challenge of his own choice," I said. "Otherwise, you'll get immediately disconnected from your power source."

Stan nodded. "So, will the leaders step forth to accept the challenge?"

Several spandex-clad fighters made themselves known. The rest of the crowd backed off.

I tried not to smirk. This was going to be good.

"Pose off! FIGHT!" Stan shouted.

Thirty seconds later, all of the sentai leaders were on the ground, groaning in pain. They somehow managed to tie themselves in knots. Stan, however, looked like he'd barely warmed up.

"Chiropractor..." a sentai leader moaned.

"How can he move like that?" another sentai leader asked.

"Ow, my spleen!"

"Why is your foot up my—"

"All right, break it up!" Stan shouted. "I won fair and square. Get your leaders, get back to your bases and think about what you almost did. You're heroes! Act like it!"

"But—"

Stan leaned into the helmeted face and practically snarled. "Get. Going."

There was a flurry of movement as the sentai groups retrieved their fallen leaders. It was hard to tell, but there may have been some looks of genuine admiration.

"A little intense, don't you think?" I asked. "Usually, you'd just pal around with them."

"I was called in after a funeral," Stan replied. "She was an old friend who always had a word of support. Jeannie was good people."

"Yeah, she was," I agreed. I'd met her a couple of times. She'd hung out with a bunch of writers and an artist or two. While she always had a kind word for Stan, she didn't go all fangirl on him.

For a moment, we were thinking of times that weren't so hectic. Yeah, it was kind of trite to think that the past was somehow simpler. I knew that when I was just getting into the academy, things seemed a lot more clear-cut. I didn't have to think about dirty cops like "Mad Bull" Estes or potential disasters like Andy Hero. We were the Good Guys and we were being trained to help.

A slow, sarcastic clap came from the steps leading to the City Hall entrance. We both looked up and Andy Hero strode deliberately down. His attitude was like a king stepping away from his throne.

"Nicely done," he said. "That's just what I expected from two of the top cops in the city."

There wasn't any warmth or real compliment in those words. He was a smooth talker, but when he was sarcastic, you felt dirty just listening to him.

"Just doing our jobs," Stan said. He tried to be neutral about it, but I could tell that he was annoyed. "I'm surprised that you came out. If even one of that group decided to take a potshot, things could have gotten messy."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of very much," Hero said smoothly. He spared me a glance before turning back to Stan. "Unreasoning fear is the enemy of progress. If one is allowed to be seen as fearful, then one can't gain the respect of the people."

I didn't say anything. I remembered when he was being dragged away from the academy after his expulsion hearing. I didn't take any pleasure in turning him in; it just had to be done.

To my dying day, I'll never forget how he finally lost his cool. The façade of the smooth-talking gentleman had been cracked. In his place was a dangerously intelligent, narcissistic man-child who relied on his family's influence and wealth to cover his indiscretions. I remembered how his eyes bulged as he fought the guards, trying to get at me.

I wasn't sorry that I turned him in. I knew that if he'd become a full-fledged cop, he'd only get worse. I was only sorry that I didn't see the signs earlier.

"In any case, your efforts are appreciated. I can only wonder how much more effective the force will be when I start working with the department." He smiled like the proverbial

shark. "It's a pity that I can't be on the inside, but an outside perspective is valuable as well."

"So where are your buddies?" I asked. "You know, the Men from Del Monte?"

Hero actually blinked. I'd caught him off-guard.

"What?"

"Oh, come on," I continued. "You honestly don't remember those commercials? A guy gets flown to a plantation or a farm to sample some produce. It's either pears, peaches, or something else. The workers are eagerly waiting for the approval of this guy so that they can start harvesting at just the right moment." I paused and noted that Hero's eyes were starting to glaze over. Good. I wanted him a little off-balance. "Seriously. How could you forget a guy who's dressed in an all-white suit with a Panama hat? Though, now that I think about it, the commercials had complaints about colonialism or something. The white suit still stuck with me, though."

Now Hero blinked. "Oh. You mean my associates."

"Yeah. They were in the background of your little press conference. They were kind of hard to miss."

Hero gave me a thin smile. "Yes, they do tend to stand out, don't they? The suits are a motif with them. They're my...advisors."

"Is there anything else that they do for you. If you could describe their role without the...dramatic pause, I'd appreciate it."

"Rex and Taylor Thompson are specialists in their field," Hero said. "They're quite capable men. In fact, I'd wager to say that they could easily take on that entire group that was just here."

"Nice of them to offer the assistance," Stan remarked. "That was really something to hold them back."

"Well, I knew that we were in good hands." Hero gave Stan an unnerving smirk. "There was no sense in stealing your moment. I'd rather not offend the expert in the field."

"Besides, we have more important things to do than tussle with robots and spandex. We're not here to fight your fights."

I tried not to flinch. The voice had come from right behind us. The accent sounded like some variation of British, but it certainly wasn't like Jake's northern accent. It almost sounded Australian.

"That's right," another voice from behind agreed. The accent was Midwestern. "We're here as advisors and idea men. Of course, that doesn't mean that we can't make things happen."

Yeah, that wasn't a sinister implication at all. Nope.

"You know, I don't take kindly to not seeing who I'm talking to," I said. "I don't know what they could be doing behind my back."

I didn't dare try to draw my gun or ready my mallet. If these jokers were good enough to get behind Stan and myself, they weren't to be messed with. Besides, I didn't have any information on them other than their names—and what my other self had learned.

Hero gestured and the Thompsons appeared by his side. There wasn't any sparkling or special effects. They just were there.

Teleportation. Criminally, why did it have to be teleportation? It was the same ability that "Dan" from the DDO used to get around.

"Gentlemen, I assure you that we have nothing to hide," Hero lied. "These two offered me support and an opportunity to make the city better." He frowned. "Given my...circumstances...I felt that I deserved a shot at repairing my reputation."

"If I remember right, your reputation wasn't all that great as a car salesman," I reminded him. "Wasn't there a consumer group that found that you sold a large number of lemon cars? And then there was the undercover, in-depth investigation about how you ran your business."

"Yeah, there was hidden video and everything," Stan chimed in. "Something about having your mechanics take shortcuts on repairs?"

Hero's jaw clenched. I knew we'd hit him in a sore spot.

"In any case, we are on the precipice of a brand new, better future. Joke all you want, but the city will be saved from itself. I'll make certain of that."

Both of the Thompsons cleared their throats. They didn't look exactly identical, but they were definitely in sync. The looks in their eyes indicated to me that Hero wasn't entirely in charge of everything.

"Of course, I'll have it done with help," Hero backpedaled. "One man can be the driving force, but many hands get things done."

That was interesting. "Dan" operated alone, as did Joseph Q. Sadamoto. I had the distinct feeling that when push came to shove, the Thompsons could do a lot more harm to Hero than he could do to them.

"In any case, we'll be meeting with your Chief tomorrow," Hero said. "I'm sure that our suggestions will be quite productive." He smirked at me. "Oh, don't worry...`partner.' You'll keep your job. As things stand now, your presence is more helpful than not."

"Thanks." I didn't feel the slightest bit reassured. "So, how are Mommy and Daddy handling your new position?"

Hero's right eye twitched. "They're doing just fine. I'll send them your regards."

With that, he glanced at the Thompsons. The men in white gave me a jaunty wave as they followed Andy Hero back into City Hall.

"Nice guy," Stan deadpanned. "You two have a history?"

"Yeah, and not a good one," I said. "It's complicated." I decided to change the subject. "Are you going to be okay?"

Stan managed a wan smile. "I'll manage," he said. "Jeannie would want me to keep fighting the good fight."

I gently patted him on the shoulder. "That's all we can do."

.....

The rest of the day was a blur. I went through the motions, but everyone could tell that my head wasn't entirely in the game. My mind was full of nightmare scenarios.

I barely remembered eating dinner. I remembered talking to Nene about the encounter with Andy Hero and his "buddies." I'd already told her about my past encounters with DDO agents.

She'd been doing some digging with the witnesses. The results weren't good.

"All of them are claiming that they were forced into confessing," Nene said. "They're not saying that you forced them, but they are claiming that they were coerced."

"Do they all have the same story?" I asked. I barely tasted the food that I was eating.

"Exactly the same," she confirmed. "There should be some variation, but all 20 of them have exactly the same story. I wouldn't say that this keeps you in the clear, but they're not tossing you under the bus."

"No, because that would be way too easy," I grumbled. "He wants to see me squirm."

"Then it's working," she said. "I think you need to get some rest and get focused."

I sighed and nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I can't help anyone if my head's in the clouds." I smiled. "Thanks for reminding me, kiddo."

I walked her to her apartment building and gave her a quick kiss. We both wanted to linger a little, but that wasn't possible.

When I got back to my apartment, I was drained. I got cleaned up and ready for bed. I wasn't sure what kind of situation Private Eye Mays had gotten himself into while I'd gone through my day. I only hoped that he hadn't gotten himself into more trouble.

I didn't even need to count sheep. I was out like a light the moment my head hit the pillow.

I was in trouble. I had the feeling that I'd been played.

The trouble with being a lone wolf was that you could really only count on yourself. You had to trust that your judgment was enough. You couldn't rely on anyone else's feedback.

Police Detective me had a lot of advantages. The big one was that he had people who would tell him to his face if he was wrong. I didn't.

The thing is, there was a time when I hadn't felt alone. I had a family and friends. Somewhere along the line, that was pretty much all taken away from me. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that not many people would miss me if I kicked the bucket today. If anything, it'd certainly be a cheap funeral.

I looked again at the picture I'd been given. The redhead had a face that just about everyone could love. Those were the eyes of a dreamer, someone who had hope and was maybe a little ditzy. I can't say that I was against redheads, but I never dated one. She was the kind of girl that stuck in your mind.

She was a job. She was my way of paying the bills. She...was someone's family, once. She had friends who were willing to step up and defend her.

If she'd run away, even with the support she had, it had to have been bad. Maybe she'd stumbled onto something bigger than she could handle. All I had were suspicions that she'd hit the mother lode as far as Andy Hero went.

I wouldn't know until I found her. This was going to rattle around in my head until I did.

That's what mysteries do to me. I notice something odd, something that isn't right. It rattles in my mind, the incongruency of it and it offends my sense of order. It's the nail that needs to be hammered down if I'm to get any peace, a decent night's rest.

I'm not a genius; I'll be the first to admit that. I can't match wits with the likes of Sherlock Holmes. Poirot? He'd look at me and laugh at how lacking I am in those famous "little grey cells." About the closest thing I have to an equal in a famous detective is Marlowe. We're both loners who try to do the right thing for what seems like an absurdly cheap price. Then again, to some people, life is cheap.

I looked up at the television station. An old...friend was here. She'd gone up in the world, her face plastered on every screen at noon.

To her credit, Tricia McMasters was one of the few people who tried to stand by me when everything went bad. The evidence against me was falsified, the witnesses were bribed and yet she still tried to be there for me.

There was a limit to how much digging she could do. Every time she found a lead, it turned out to be a dead end. In some cases, that had been literal.

She'd been there for me when my brother and his family all died in a car accident. She'd been there when my sister had been committed to a mental institution, only to die there in an "accident." She'd shed tears as my parents had been brutally murdered in what looked like a drive-by shooting.

In the end, all that tragedy didn't break me. It broke her. She couldn't be around a man who just seemed to invite tragedy.

Maybe I should have fought harder. Maybe I could have kept her by my side. Then again, when it feels like the universe decided to dump on you just because, it's hard to justify sticking around.

I went in. The receptionist, Gladys, recognized me and nodded. I always had a better chance of seeing Tricia if Gladys was working. She reached out and called up Tricia.

"Mr. Mays is here to see you, Ms. McMasters," Gladys said.
"Do you have time?"

I heard her sigh. "Send him up."

I nodded my thanks. She pointed in the direction of some donuts and coffee.

"Grab some," she said. "You look like you need it."

I managed something that might have been a smile.

"Thanks."

Tricia's office was spacious, open and bright. Then again, I suppose being the head reporter for the network came with its perks.

She was tapping something into a computer. Judging by how intensely focused she was, it was probably her next story. It took a few moments for her to realize that I was there.

Her chocolate brown eyes focused away from the screen and widened. She yelped in that adorable voice that I'd known for years as she tapped one last button on her computer. I could see the reflection of her screen go dark.

"Damn it, Andrew." She pointed a finger at me. "Don't sneak up on me like that when I'm on a hot story."

"It's not like I'm going to leak it," I told her. "It kind of goes with the territory. You know, there's the thing about the 'private' part of being a private detective?"

A ghost of a smile warmed her features. It'd been a long time.

"So, you're not going to tell me what you're involved in?"

"I didn't say that," I drawled. "I just wondered if this would be worth the attention of the best reporter in the city."

"More like the most stressed reporter in the city," she countered. She ran a hand through her auburn hair, though I did notice a few white streaks. "The boss is pushing me hard to get the facts, but I get stonewalled everywhere I go. I guess that's a perk of being famous."

"Well, it beats being a nobody like me," I joked. "Though today, I'm a nobody who has something interesting."

She gestured for me to have a seat. I took off my trenchcoat and hat and plopped myself into the chair. She closed the blinds.

"I'm listening."

"I'm working on a missing persons case. The person in question may have found information that we both know I've been looking for."

Tricia's eyes narrowed. "The real reason why you were expelled from the academy."

I nodded. Then again, she couldn't have concluded otherwise.

"You know how hard it is to get anyone to listen to what's on the news," I said. "So many people watch TV and immediately declare everything you do or say as being fake. If the

information this person has is just released into the world, it would just get lost in the shuffle. It'd get dismissed."

"I can see that," she agreed. "So, where do I come in?"

"When I find this person, I'd like you to be there. I'd like you to conduct an exclusive interview with this person, legitimizing the information that they've found."

"That's a pretty tall order," she said. "I'd have to run this by my boss."

"Well, this isn't the first time you've gone out on a limb for a story," I reminded her. "Besides, if this all works out, I'd love to see the look on Andy Hero's face when we air this dirty laundry."

Tricia grimaced. "Yeah, not the best image." She changed the subject. "When you find this person, give me a call. You've already got my number. I'll zip on by."

"Thanks, Tricia." I stood up and extended a hand. She took it and we shook on it.

I left the building with a little spring in my step and lightness in my heart. I left with a little bit of hope that maybe things would turn out well.

Then I sobered up. Hope was an addictive thing. If you had too much of it without solid results, you lost it.

I didn't know why, but I drove my heap over to Baker Street. There was something that tickled the back of my mind, some oddity that I needed to confirm.

Sure enough, there was a bar there that I hadn't ever seen before. I'd passed by this area dozens of times and I never thought to look here.

I parked the car and wondered if this was a sign. I walked to the entrance and noted the frosted glass window with a deerstalker hat and a pipe. The name "Dupin's" was in bold, golden letters.

I pushed the door open and went inside. I wasn't sure what to expect.

I didn't expect to find myself in some sort of antechamber. It was luxurious, mostly with accents of oak. There was one couch in the area. The whole deal was larger on the inside than I would have expected.

"I am sorry," a voice called out in a French accent. "I cannot allow you to enter."

"Why not?" I demanded.

There was a sigh. "You do not truly seek the truth. Instead, you merely do as people request."

"Look, I may not be a famous detective, but I'm still a detective," I said to the empty air. "In this case, I'm seeking the truth."

"Then why have you not asked more questions of your client?" the voice asked. "You know you are being manipulated, and yet you continue. Why?"

I wanted to tell him that there were some jobs that had to be done. I wanted to say that I was in the biggest cash crunch of my life. I wanted to say that the itch had settled in and I just couldn't let go until it had been scratched.

All those would have been only partly true. The main reason was...I wanted my life back.

"I know your story," the voice said. It almost sounded sympathetic. "At this bar, I know all the stories. I know all the endings. I know your ending."

I felt a cold chill go down my spine. "Who are you?"

"I am Auguste Dupin, though not the one you are probably familiar with. I have founded this place where seekers of truth can gather. The truth is...the life you have lived was never meant to be your story."

"What?" I couldn't come up with anything wittier.

"You were never meant to live this life, Andrew Mays," Dupin said. "I am afraid that someone has interfered with your life in more ways than you can imagine."

"Who?"

"Seek the truth, wherever it may lead," Dupin said. His voice became fainter. "I am afraid we will not meet again. Good luck, Andrew Mays."

I took another step and found myself outside. I looked back and the bar was gone, a generic storefront in its place.

Yeah, the universe just loves to dump things on me. Thanks a lot, Big Guy.

I went back to my car. I was going to finish this case, one way or another.

.....
Leon and Priss were good as their word. All right, Priss was grumbling about how this was all a big mistake and that I should have left well enough alone. She wasn't happy about having to lead me to Nene, but there wasn't much choice.

The place that they'd led me to was full of twists and turns. It was in the seedier side of town, with ringers for famous Animate girls plying their trade.

The building was dark. I couldn't see anyone living in here, which probably made it a great place to hide. You didn't stay here long without a good reason.

Priss dug out a key and unlocked the door. She then gestured to step exactly where she did. I had the feeling that there were some really nasty traps on the floor.

"Do I want to know what happens if my foot slips?" I asked under my breath. "Do I get shot or something?"

"Among other things," Leon said. "Let's just say that Sylia is very particular about the security. It's about as tough to get into as the old Raven's Garage." He paused and frowned. "Unfortunately, Animate weapons don't do jack on whiteout bombs."

"Pops thought he could hole up in the garage," Priss said. Her expression was grim. "They didn't even bother to go inside. They just breached the outer doors and chucked a couple of bombs inside." She shivered. "I hope it was quick, at least."

Okay, that was a sore point. I kept quiet and followed exactly in their footsteps. After we reached a door, Priss fumbled with a wall panel and pressed a button.

"IDENTIFY YOURSELVES," came a heavily flanged, robotic voice. There wasn't any clue whether the speaker was male or female.

"It's me," Priss said. "I brought along Leon and some detective, Andrew Mays."

I heard gears grinding and servos whining. I didn't have much doubt that there was some heavy duty hardware being moved around.

"STAND BY FOR SCAN," came the robot voice.

A blue light ran across the room horizontally, then vertically. I could hear pinging noises as we were all scanned.

"DETECTIVE, LEAVE ALL YOUR WEAPONS OUTSIDE," the robot voice commanded. Now I knew that Nene had to be talking from the other end. "PRISS, LEON, YOU CAN KEEP YOURS."

A square of light appeared on the floor. I took that as my cue to put my weapons there.

I knelt down and carefully took out my gun. I placed it and a few, miscellaneous bits of insurance with it. Unfortunately, my trenchcoat doesn't have access to that convenient pocket dimension, so I don't have the mallet. A taser, pepper spray, collapsible baton, flash bang grenade and a holdout gun filled the square.

"Damn, Mays," Priss breathed. "Do you always carry that much stuff with you?"

"It's a rough world." I tried to sound flippant, even though I knew that I was being tracked by weapons. "You never know what you might run into."

"ONE MORE SCAN," the robot voice demanded. "JUST TO BE SURE."

This time, a red laser scanned the room. There weren't any pings this time.

"What was that one for?" I asked.

"TRACKING DEVICES. PHONES WON'T WORK IN THIS AREA," the robot voice explained. "SIGNAL JAMMERS ARE SET UP THROUGH THE ENTIRE BLOCK."

I sighed. Well, so much for that interview with Tricia. Maybe Nene had a secure line somewhere. After all, she probably didn't cut herself off from the entire world.

"So, do I pass muster?" I knew that Nene had every reason to be paranoid. I didn't blame her one bit. I still had a job to do, though. What happens afterwards...

I don't know what I'd do. I've been so focused on getting the job done that I never thought about afterwards. I mean, what would my future be like if Andy Hero were taken down? It's not like I could be a cop, not after all this time.

"COME IN," the robot voice said. "TRY NOT TO BE SHOCKED AT WHAT YOU SEE."

The door opened and I heard heavy bolts and locks being undone. I blinked at the bright light that shone. After a few moments, my eyes adjusted.

The door wasn't an entrance to a room, I realized. It was the entrance to an elevator car.

Leon and Priss went inside. I followed them, keeping my hands out of my pockets. I didn't have any equipment, but I wanted to make sure that my hosts didn't get any ideas.

The heavy door closed. I noticed that nobody had pushed a button.

"She's guiding us all the way down," Priss said. "She's a little skittish. She's been that way for a while."

"I get it," I said. "When you've been hurt, you want to hole up and make sure it doesn't happen again." I nodded.

"I've been there. On some level, I think I'm still there."

Priss and Leon shared a questioning look. I guess they didn't figure that a private eye like me could show vulnerability. Most people think that a guy like me has to be drunk for that to happen.

"She has pretty much total control over the building," Priss said. "This is a bunker that Sylia had built back in the day, just in case things went bad. Nobody ever thought that we'd actually use it."

"So, what, she's living off of canned food or something?" I had the image of those post-nuclear war shows where the survivors were holed up.

"You'll see," Leon said. "Just...take it easy on her, okay?"

The door opened after five minutes of travel. The place was brightly lit and clean. It was almost like someone had transplanted an office deep in the ground. I could see a kitchen, restrooms and an exercise room. There were multiple rooms that I guessed were quarters. There was a conspicuously heavy door off to the side, one that probably contained weapons.

Nene was waiting for us. She stood in the doorway before a darkened room, though I saw dim light from behind her. I guessed that it was probably a control room.

She'd had better days. In fact, she'd probably had better years. Her red hair was tied back in a messy ponytail. Her green eyes, once sparkling with energy and life, were now harried and fearful. The bags of her eyes spoke of long, restless nights, wondering if this night was her last before she'd be discovered. Her clothes looked rumpled, as if she'd slept in them for a few days. Her left pinkie twitched, and I noticed that it was somehow...less defined than the rest of her hand.

I realized that she'd probably been exposed to a whiteout bomb. Maybe she'd caught the tail end of it, running in to save her parents. Maybe she'd been visiting, trying to protect her family, only for the bomb to hit. She survived and healed solely by virtue of being popular and well-loved. Her parents weren't so lucky.

They talk about the various kinds of heartache, but only as it applied to what happened to them. I looked at Nene, and even with the bits and fragments I remember from my other self, my heart ached for her. I wanted to hold her close and tell her that it was all going to be okay, that we would beat the bad guys and have a better tomorrow.

I'm not sure if I would have been lying or just plain wrong. At least I would have made the effort. If you had any

empathy, you felt for this girl who believed in something better. All the world had handed her was a boatload of pain.

"I know what you're looking for," she said. Her voice was raspy, as if she hadn't used it in a while. "I'm not sure if it'll do much good."

"It's not doing much good down here, whatever it is," I said. "Do you know who I am? Do you know what happened to me?"

Nene nodded. "I guess...you should really look at this, then."

She beckoned for all of us to enter the control room. I was surrounded by screens and keyboards, with multiple views of the city.

Nene sat down at one terminal. She called up a folder and opened it.

Andy Hero wasn't just a narcissist. He was a sadist. He enjoyed other peoples' pain.

The pictures were of women in pain. They'd been degraded in so many ways that I wanted to kill him.

Someone had once accused me of having this complex, that I had to rescue women. If they saw these pictures, these women, would they have been so flippant?

"I got this off his personal, secure server," Nene said. She pointed to a file. "He kept a diary. This was the entry where he mentions you."

"It's been a while and everything seems to have taken root," Andy Hero's voice said. He sounded smug. "My business partners have successfully restructured reality so that I have what I deserve: Power, money, respect and women. And that poor sap Andy Mays thinks that he's always been this shallow parody of a detective. The Thompson Twins have done their work well."

My heart started pounding. I gripped the side of the chair that Nene was sitting in, my knuckles white with anger.

He did something to me. He got his revenge.

"There's more," Nene said. "There's so much more. But I don't know who to give this to."

I was trying not to hyperventilate. I met those tired green eyes and tried to be strong for her sake.

"Tricia McMasters," I grunted. "Get all of this over to Tricia. Maybe she won't believe the part about the reality restructuring, but the women...that's enough to rattle anyone."

Forget the job. Forget calling the client. This was what was important. Letting Andy Hero walk around free one more day was something I couldn't tolerate.

He stole my life. He's hurt so many people.

"I'll have to set up a secure channel—"

The lights went red. Klaxons rang out through the facility as the words "SECURITY BREACH" flashed on every screen.

"Son of a—we were followed!" Priss yelled. She pulled out a gun.

"How?!" Leon asked. "There weren't any tracers!"

In the room behind us, I saw two men in white appear. They just...appeared with no flashy effects or sounds. They just stood there impassively in their white suits and Panama hats.

"I hate to sound like a stereotypical Australian, but...g'day, mates!" Taylor Thompson grinned. "Beautiful day to bring a story to a close!"

"I was hoping to have a bit more fun picking you apart," Rex Thompson sighed. "Making you into a shallow private detective and forcing you into the dark corners was...satisfying."

Nene hit a switch and heavy doors came down. The compartment where the Thompsons were in was flooded with gas. Another button was pushed and the hardsuits and motoslaves that had been in the weapons area had been remotely activated. They unleashed every bit of firepower against the twins.

Nothing happened. Their suits just allowed them to ignore anything that was thrown their way.

"How--?" I asked. "How did they find us?!"

"I don't know!" Nene's fingers flew across the keyboard.

"I'm hitting them with everything here, but nothing's working!"

The twins decided that they'd had enough. Taylor Thompson snapped his fingers. The gas was sucked into some vents and the

weapons went silent. Rex Thompson waved and the blast doors weren't there anymore. He didn't destroy the doors; they just vanished.

I heard the voice that I'd been dreading for years. He'd been haunting my nightmares.

"Oh, Andrew!" Andy Hero called out. He, too, had appeared out of nowhere. "Time to say goodnight!"

I couldn't believe it. He was there, situated right between the Thompson Twins. His green eyes gleamed with anticipation as he looked at my little group. At his side was the little blonde who'd hired me in the first place. She gave me a jaunty little wave, which led Leon, Priss and Nene to glare at me.

They didn't use the elevator. They didn't break in with some huge mecha. They just appeared out of nowhere.

This didn't make any sense. Leon had said that the Thompsons couldn't be hurt. Since when could they teleport? What else could they do?

"Great job, Mays! You get a gold star!" the blonde chirped happily. Then her expression turned downright nasty as soon as she saw Nene. "Who's the better hacker now?"

"That's a good Toon girl," Andy Hero said. I don't believe that he could have been more patronizing if he'd tried. He

patted her head as if she was a favored pet. "You'll get an extra reward tonight."

Much to most everyone's disgust, the blonde just hummed and leaned up against him. Then she shot a wicked look at me.

Priss and Leon didn't waste any words on the little exchange. Even though they knew it was probably useless, they emptied their guns at Andy Hero and the blonde. Leon had made his choice between the police and his friends.

The bullets didn't even reach them. Instead, they stopped just a few inches away from the invading party and fell down. It just seemed so overdramatic, but that was Andy Hero's style.

In the corner of my eye, I saw Nene's hand fly across the keyboard. I noticed the blonde at Hero's side frown as she took out her phone.

The Thompson Twins waved their hands. Leon and Priss's weapons were wrenched away and they were tossed against a wall. As they slumped down, Nene tapped one last key.

"Hope you like your little diary transmitted across the net!" There was a little smirk of defiance on her cute face.

The blonde smirked back as she held up her phone. "Oh, I'm sorry. Whatever you just transmitted was just returned to the server you stole it from. Nobody got the message." She stuck her tongue out in what was supposed to be a cute manner.

"You're old news, a has-been of a hacker--and why are you smiling?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I fibbed," Nene said. "That was actually my custom cocktail of viruses. You just made your server barf out all its precious information to every news outlet in the world. And this," she tapped another key, "is the footage of every Animate who was whited out, like my parents."

I almost smiled. True, this was a last-ditch thing, but people wouldn't be able to ignore--

Andy Hero laughed. He threw his head back and laughed long and hard.

"Sir?" the blonde asked. "What's so funny?"

Hero calmed down. He leered at his assistant.

"I didn't expect this from a cornered dog," he admitted.

"I was expecting an overwhelming victory."

What was he talking about? Why was he glaring at me like that?

Hero's happy mood evaporated. Now he was clenching his teeth.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why what?" I rasped.

"WHY?! Why won't you BREAK?!" he shouted. "I had them take EVERYTHING away from you!"

The Thompson Twins nodded. They looked rather perturbed at Hero's behavior.

"I hit you with my Deconstruction Ray!" Rex Thompson shouted. "I turned you into that pathetic, stereotypical empty shell of a detective that you are now! You were supposed to be a shallow parody of Marlowe with no friends, no family and no hope!"

"I hit you with my Personality Draining Ray!" Taylor Thompson added. "With the amount I hit you with, you should be an emotionless puppet! Crikey, you should just be going through the motions of being a person!"

I swallowed hard. They took everything?

"The Thompsons and I could have killed you at any time!" Hero continued. "We could have CRUSHED you with as much effort as swatting a fly!"

"How did you find us?" Nene asked. "There weren't any tracers on anyone! Nobody could have followed them!"

Now the Thompson Twins leered in unison. It was a creepy sight.

I wanted to punch those teeth in. I wanted to break them in so many ways. I felt the rage bubbling in my veins as I forced myself not to take that last suicidal lunge.

"See this lovely suit?" Taylor Thompson gestured to his outfit. "This is P.L.O.T. armor. Not only is it stylish, but

among its many features is to detect the most dramatic moment. Teleportation is also one of the standard features."

"We didn't need to follow Mays," Rex Thompson added. "The suit just told us when and where our appearance would be most dramatic. Whether or not it makes sense is irrelevant. I mean, can you imagine the tension of our HEROES in a CRISIS?!"

Keep them talking. Keep them ranting. I heard once that an evil man likes to savor the pain that they give out, like a good cigar. I just needed to poke them in just the right spot.

"I'm not impressed," I heard myself say. "You did this out of some deep-seated need for revenge on something that I can't remember?" I snorted. "I should take a picture of you and the boys right now and send it to the dictionary folks. I'd include a letter that says that this is what a LOSER looks like."

I didn't see him cross the distance between us. All I knew was that his hands were on my throat as he lifted me.

"I. Am not. A LOSER!" he growled. "I'm the top cop in the city! I'm wealthy beyond your imagination! The girls are just lining up to bask in my glory!"

I tried to pry those hands open. It didn't do any good. His grip was fueled by madness and rage.

"After I tricked you into drinking the retcon punch, I could have changed your history into anything!" he shouted. "I could have made you a mindless invalid. But I thought that it

would have been more fun if you KNEW the life of wasted potential! If only you understood the CRUSHING of your SPIRIT in a life marked with ignominious FAILURE!" He spat that last part out. "I wanted you to know that I did this to YOU, just like you RUINED my life!"

He changed my history. He made it so that I never had the chance to report him to the academy. He framed me and had me kicked out.

"And what a fantastically interesting story it's been!" Taylor Thompson shouted. He sounded gleeful. "Oh, the drama that came from the slow oppression of Animates!"

"Don't forget all that wonderful, inspiring suffering!" Rex Thompson added. "In their desperation, their need to impose order over chaos, they turn to everyone's hero!"

"Pity that we can't rewind things again," Taylor Thompson said. "All of these interesting characters and scenarios!"

"So many heroes to deconstruct! So much gritty darkness to wallow in! So many people to fall in despair!"

"It's not just a disaster!" Taylor Thompson shouted as he raised a fist.

"It's a DYNAMIC disaster!" Rex Thompson finished, bumping his twin's fist.

The Thompsons had been getting their jollies out of this quagmire for years. They'd just thought in terms of characters

and plot. They didn't see the world around them as being real; it was just something to be manipulated.

The world started to go dark as I was being throttled. I could barely hear something land next to us before my vision started narrowing.

Then there was nothing but light and thunder. I fell as Hero let go, his hands covering his ears. Blessed air came back to me as I tried to blink away the harsh after-images.

Someone had thrown a stun grenade. I had a pretty good idea who. Priss had been hurt, but that never stopped her from getting back up.

Priss managed a pained smile as she crawled towards Leon. Nene worked furiously on the computer console to do...something. I didn't know what.

I got up to my knees and tried to stand up. Right behind me, Andy Hero lurched upwards, presumably with murder in his eyes.

Nene's eyes widened and she pointed behind me. She mouthed out something I couldn't hear, but it was probably something along the lines of "he's behind you" or something like that.

The ringing in my ears subsided just enough for me to hear shots being fired. Thunder rang in the hallway five times and I fell.

Nene ran towards me. I could see someone else, someone that was blurred just enough. I saw the outline of a trenchcoat and a fedora as things started to go dark.

I knew who it was. I knew he couldn't do anything.

"Don't let him win," I rasped. "Don't...let this happen."

I saw two pairs of eyes on the way out. Nene's green eyes were filled with pain and panic. The other pair were my own eyes, that odd shade of blue and grey. Those eyes were filled with outrage.

That was the last thing I saw. I don't know what comes—

.....

I bolted upright in my bed and gasped. It was still dark outside. Long minutes passed as I tried to stop my heart from doing an imitation of a hummingbird.

The other me was dead. He'd been shot in the back by Andy Hero. I didn't know if his world was any better or worse off after that. Given how powerful the Thompsons were, it was likely that they bent reality just enough to give him trouble, but not enough for him to get off scot-free. It was the more dramatic thing to do, after all.

I glanced at the clock and winced. The unforgiving red digits proclaimed that it was 3 in the morning.

My dream wasn't the product of woolgathering or mental reorganizing. Auguste had deliberately linked us together, presumably as a warning. Washuu had confirmed it.

I'd never imagined Andy Hero to be that much of a monster. Then again, there were some people who would go bad, despite having a good upbringing and environment.

I had the urge to call someone. At 3 in the morning, it was a bad idea.

The shadows somehow seemed starker than usual. That may have been due to justifiable paranoia, given what I'd experienced.

I knew that I had to get some sleep so that I could do my job. If I couldn't think straight, nothing would get done. To beat Andy Hero, I had to think straight.

I laid back and tried to let sleep claim me. I'm not sure how long I lay there, but I did catch some sleep.

I went through my morning routine like a zombie. I was going to need a stash of strong coffee I had at work. That stuff was guaranteed to wake anyone up.

Nene was there, just past the door to the precinct. She'd waited for me with a smile on her face. That smile faded as soon as she got a good look at me.

"Are you okay?" she asked. She tilted her head slightly. "You look like you didn't get much sleep last night."

I guided her to an empty hallway. I didn't want any eavesdroppers. All right, there were bound to be eavesdroppers in the precinct, but I had to at least try, right?

"I had a nightmare," I mumbled. "It was the worst one I've ever had." I filled her in on the rough details and she grew pale. Not that I blame her. It's not every day that you hear about experiencing your own death, even if it was by proxy.

"Can I help somehow?"

I managed a tired smile. "I could really use a hug right now, kiddo."

She looked around smiled back. "I think I can do that."

She stepped forward and hugged me tight. I returned it, not caring if anyone at the precinct saw us. Everyone already knew from the grapevine.

Just a few months ago, this would have been almost unthinkable. It wasn't that I had to be the tough guy. On the contrary, I just didn't think I deserved much.

I gave her a quick peck on the top of her head as we separated. It was worth it to see her blush almost as red as her hair.

"That isn't fair," she pouted. "You've got at least ten inches on me. I have to stand on my tiptoes--or grab you." Now the blush faded and the mischievous spark appeared in her eyes.

"When we're off the clock, Nene," I said. "Right now, I've got a lot on my plate."

She pouted. It was adorable.

"I'll see you at lunch?"

"I'll be there. I just have to get some of my special brew in me."

She flinched. She couldn't stand the smell of my custom blend. With a final wave, she went to her department.

Ryo was in early. He was on his computer, punching some numbers on a spreadsheet. He jumped a little when I stepped inside. I had a pretty good idea of what he was looking at.

"How's the betting going?" I joked. I knew that there was an unofficial pool on whatever Nene and I were doing. I hadn't pinned Ryo on the specifics, but he seemed to be doing well.

"You know, you and Nene should really start doing some heavy necking in the hall." He didn't even take his eyes off the screen. "Of course, the long shot is that you two have some hanky panky in the server room."

Oop. Somebody had heard that. The walls have ears in the precinct.

"People are hoping for a little more than just the occasional bit of PDA," Ryo said. "Not that that's going to happen, given how--whoa, you look like hell."

"Thanks," I mumbled. I hung up my trenchcoat and hat and prepared to brew my custom coffee. "It was a rough night-- nightmare, I mean."

"It must have been," he observed. "You're bringing out the heavy artillery."

I was on automatic pilot as I made the coffee. I ignored Ryo playing "duck and cover" underneath his desk. I mean, sure my coffee was strong, but it hasn't exploded yet. It's blown minds, but it hasn't exploded yet.

"Oh, God! Mays is making his coffee again!" a voice said from outside the hall.

"Isn't that against the Geneva Convention or something? Think we can get workman's comp for being near that stuff?"

"Nope, we can't. That isn't a toxic or controlled substance."

"Let's get out of here before he decides to open the--"

I almost slammed the door open, my coffee in a mug. I was feeling a lot more awake.

"Good MORNING, folks!" I greeted the cops in the hallway. I may have had a manic grin on my face. "Care for a cup?"

The folks in the hallway turned green. A few of them were holding their noses. There was a general chorus of polite refusals as they ran away.

I closed the door and smiled. I noticed the slight breeze in the room. Ryo had opened the window when I was greeting people.

"So, what was the nightmare about?" he asked.

I gave him the rundown. Much like Nene, he looked suitably disturbed.

"So, what's the plan? You have a plan, right?"

I took another long sip of coffee. "I haven't figured one out yet," I admitted. "This stuff needs a minute or two to really kick in."

"Well, here's the simplest idea: Take him out."

"He's not my type, Ryo. I'm sure that the boy's love fangirls would be interested in that image, but I'm not."

Ryo rolled his eyes. "That's not what I meant."

"No, I know what you meant." I shook my head. "I can't say that the thought hasn't crossed my mind, especially after that incident with my birthday."

"And?"

"And we can't do it for two good reasons. First, there's that pesky thing called 'the law,' that thing that we all signed up to enforce. It's something that we really shouldn't be breaking, even if we think we have good reason."

Ryo sighed heavily. Not for the first time, he was probably regretting the fact that he was legally alive. If he

weren't, then he could probably have acted on his own.

Unfortunately for him, most independent Animate investigators had been put out of business by the City Council cracking down on them. That was why he was on the police force in the first place.

"What's the second reason?"

"The Thompsons. The men in white. You know I've encountered them before, right?"

Ryo nodded. "Joseph Q. Sadamoto was one," he said. "He got scared and ran away. Then there was that guy who called himself 'Dan,' though you think that wasn't his real name. Now here come the Thompsons."

"It's obvious that the Thompsons have plans for Hero," I said. "They're sticking to him like glue. Given those suits that they're wearing, I doubt that they'd let anything happen to the guy." I took a sip. "There's also the collateral damage we have to think about."

"So, basically, we're stuck," Ryo summarized. "I can't even call my hypothetical friends to take on this unlikely scenario because of that P.L.O.T. armor that those guys are wearing, right?"

"I've seen it in action. Sort of," I amended. "We wouldn't stand a chance."

"And yet, they're not wrecking the city yet," Ryo pointed out. "Why?"

I frowned and gulped down the rest of my coffee. I ignored Ryo's sigh of relief.

"The Thompsons aren't front-line troops," I realized. "Look, every agent of the DDO I've met was nearly impossible to hurt. They weren't fighters; they're instigators. They're the people who start the fires and stir up trouble, just to make things `interesting.' I just don't know why they wear the white suit."

"Maybe they don't care about attracting attention?" Ryo suggested. "If they can just walk through gunfire, there could be an intimidation factor. It's like saying, `ha, you can't even get my suit dirty.'"

"It could be that." I put down my mug. "It doesn't make sense. If they're instigators that are supposed to work behind the scenes, why wear such obvious clothing? Why wear something that nobody can help but pay attention to?"

"Maybe they need attention," Ryo suggested. "All those crazy things that they can do could be ways that they get attention." He snorted. "This crazy city."

"I think you're onto something." I tapped my desk with my finger. "There's something else, some words that didn't make

sense to me in the dream." I paused. "I'm going to have to call up an expert."

"You're bringing the mad scientist back into this?" Ryo did not look enthused at the prospect.

"No, I have someone else in mind. I just really hate to bother them, though."

"Hey, what's the worst they can do?" Ryo was trying to lighten the mood. It wasn't entirely working.

"Well, you got a taste of it that one Valentine's Day," I reminded him. "I still can't believe that you survived a fall from here."

Now Ryo looked interested. "Well, it's been a while since I've witnessed a truly heavenly body. So, when are you calling her?"

"Right now." I grabbed the phone and punched in some numbers. "Hello, Belldandy? Yes, good morning to you, too. I was just wondering if you could ask Urd could please stop by the office? I just need to ask her a few things." I paused. "Yes, Nene and I are doing just fine. Thanks for asking."

"She's such a nice lady," Ryo commented. "She and that guy make a good match."

"She'll be right over? Thank you. Oh, and please give my best to the rest of the family, all right? Well, I mean the

family down here, not upstairs. I'm not quite ready to meet them. Take care, Belldandy, and thank you."

I hung up the phone and the screen on Ryo's monitor started glowing. A pair of toned, shapely legs emerged—and promptly kicked Ryo in the face.

"OW! Hey, I didn't do anything!" he protested.

Urd emerged from the monitor, wearing something ethereal and flattering. Oh, and her outfit may have been clinging to her by sheer willpower.

"You don't get a free look, Saeba," Urd said. Then she took a good look at him. "Hm. You've grown a little here." She pointed to his heart. "That's a good sign."

"Good morning, Urd," I greeted her. "First of all, I just wanted to thank you for not going too crazy with my wish last Valentine's Day."

"You're welcome." Urd's voice was enough to make many men think very warm and creative thoughts. "I'm glad that you and that little redhead are getting along—oh, my." She blinked as she looked at me. "You really are getting along with her. So, when are you going to give her—"

"Urd. Not the time. There's something I wanted to ask you."

"Like how to spice up things between you and Nene?"

Hoo boy. As tempting as that may have been to know, I had priorities.

"Unfortunately, it's a bit more serious. Have you ever heard the words `retcon punch?'"

Urd's expression turned from playfully sultry to dead serious. Ryo still had her beat when it came to mood changes, though.

"Not another word until I get a privacy spell up," she said. "This is serious."

Judging by Urd's attitude, she wasn't kidding around. For her to react this way, it wasn't the typical "destroy the city" bad. It could have been something that could destroy the world, maybe even worse.

The magic circle solidified and the office was sealed off. I had a feeling that things were bad if she had to resort to this. Urd's purple eyes practically bored into me.

"Okay, Mays. Where did you hear the term `retcon punch?'" Her voice was normally sultry, the kind that got men's attention with a single word. Now, it was hard-edged, like any interrogator.

"I heard it in a dream," I said. "What IS retcon punch, anyway?"

Urd sighed. Ryo tried not to make too much of a fuss in watching.

"You know how there are some things in the world that just shouldn't exist, but they do anyway? Logic says that this should be gone already, but it's still around."

"Like the duck-billed platypus?" I suggested. "I never heard of a mammal that lays eggs."

"It's...exactly not like that, but it's not a bad analogy," Urd allowed. She spared a sidelong glare at Ryo. "You wouldn't last three rounds."

"Is that a challenge?" Ryo asked. He kept his hands on the desk in plain sight, but I could see his fingers flexing. I guess he didn't want to eat lightning. "I was hoping for five rounds, but..." Ryo shrugged. "Goddess or not, there's only so much that the human form can take."

Urd rolled her eyes. "Like you'd cheat on Kaori. Just keep the leering to a minimum, no groping, and I won't let you have it."

"It'd probably bounce off this barrier thing you've sealed us in." Ryo smirked. "Or am I wrong?"

One of Urd's eyebrows twitched. Electricity crackled across her fingertips as she seriously considered divine justice. Then she nodded and her hand returned to normal.

"I didn't think you'd figure that out," Urd admitted. "Magic isn't exactly supposed to be your area of expertise."

"I've had a lot of experience with crazy things. It's one of the benefits of this job--one of the FEW benefits," he sighed.

"Stop grumbling, Ryo," I said. "It's better than the alternative." I managed a little smile. "Besides, aren't things a little healthier between you and Kaori? If nothing else, you're saving yourself a lot of headaches."

He winced. He knew I had a point.

"Anyway, getting back to the matter at hand--what's the deal with retcon punch? Why are you so hush hush about it?"

Urd frowned. "It basically breaks time and space, reforming it into something else. It's like some of my soap operas where the writer decided that situation A didn't really happen, it was situation B. Well, retcon punch basically does that, only in liquid form."

"So, if Sherlock Holmes drank this stuff when he was taking the express trip down at Reichenbach Falls, he would never have taken the tumble. Or, he went over the edge, but didn't die. Which, he didn't. Does that sound about right?" I asked.

"That's close enough," Urd agreed. "By the way, that bar you go to?"

"We go to," Ryo corrected her. "I pop in there once in a while. I'm surprised you know about it."

"Oh, Auguste occasionally stops by when he's on vacation. He's friends with this very handsome, older man who's been everywhere. And I do mean EVERYWHERE." She sighed. "When he's around, he's just so fascinating that you can't help but be drawn to him and his stories."

"That's very fascinating, but...how bad is it to use retcon punch? For that matter, how could someone get ahold of it? Not that I want any," I added quickly. "I just want to know."

"I know you don't want power," Urd said. She had this tiny, satisfied smile that may have been a touch smug. "You've never been the selfish type. Why do you think you were worthy of a wish?"

"Hey, what did you wish for?" Ryo asked. "I always wondered about that."

"I wished that I could make Nene feel better. So, Urd set things up so that we could dance. What else was I going to use my wish on?"

Ryo sighed. Then he turned to Urd. "So, retcon punch is bad," he prompted her.

"It's illegal in at least 50 different universes. Some folks in the Fifth Dimension—don't laugh—made a large batch of it a while back and had a bender. It took millions of time travelers in hundreds of realities, along with other, near-omnipotent beings CENTURIES to straighten out all the snarls and

knots. Even Yggdrasil had to go through a full reboot." She shuddered. "That was a lot of overtime. No pun intended."

"And what would these people do if they found someone with that stuff? How bad would it be for those poor souls?"

"Well..."

I blinked and I had the urge to check the clock. About three minutes had passed since she'd started talking and I hadn't remembered anything specific that Urd had said. I only had this vague sense that anyone caught with retcon punch would regret it for the rest of their lives. I think that the words "eternal torment" and "perpetual scattering and reintegration" were some of the terms that she threw out. A quick glance at Ryo told me that he, too, had blanked out most of what Urd had said—possibly to save our sanity.

"So yes, if I couldn't take them in willingly, I'd have to take stronger measures." She pointed to her earrings, the ones that kept her power down to a manageable level that mere mortals can understand. "I'd have to take off the kid gloves."

"Good to know," I said. I did not squeak. No one outside of the barrier could say that I squeaked out of nerves.

Who am I kidding? For a moment, I channeled Mickey Mouse's falsetto.

"That's pretty much it," Urd said. "It's dangerous stuff and I'm surprised you've heard about it. I do have one question, though: Why me?"

"Well, there are two reasons. First of all, I still owe you one from Valentine's Day."

She nodded. "We're even on that. What's the other reason?"

I clenched my jaw. I wasn't sure how I could voice what was probably unflattering to Belldandy.

"If Belldandy knew about this, would she be tempted to keep the stuff around, just in case?" I asked. "I mean, I don't think poorly or anything of her, but—given a choice between saving the universe and saving Keiichi, who would she choose? And if that stuff could save him by wrecking reality, well—I hope that she never has to make that call."

Urd looked sullen and contemplative. "You've got a pretty good handle on her." She cleared her throat and straightened up. I realized that she'd been sitting on my desk the entire time. "Keep me posted, okay? And if you can, keep that stuff sealed off. Once it's exposed to air, it's going to cause random ripples in space and time."

"I'll do that," I promised. "Is there anyone else who should know about this?"

"I can tell you one person that the Almighty does NOT want involved with this stuff: Washuu. I know she means well, but..." Urd shuddered.

"Got it."

She took one last look around and deactivated the magic circle. My computer monitor glowed as she used it to transport herself back to the temple.

"Well, that wasn't ominous at all," I remarked. "Nope, it's just the possible restructuring of the universe as we know it. What do you think?" I asked Ryo.

"I think that Urd was being very kind when she granted your wish. There are lots of ways to interpret 'make Nene feel better' in the eyes of a goddess of love."

Oh. Yeah. I hadn't actually thought about it when I made that wish.

Before I could answer, the phone rang. The caller ID said that it was the Chief's extension. I picked it up.

"Mays, Anime Detective."

"Andrew, we're having an all-hands meeting outside my office," the Chief said. He sounded tired and annoyed. "The liaisons from the City Council are here."

I gritted my teeth. It was going to be hard to restrain the urge to throttle Andy Hero.

"Understood, Chief. We'll be right there." I hung up with a sigh.

"I know people," Ryo reminded me. "I'm just putting that out there."

"I appreciate the thought, but I can't. And if people ask, you never made that suggestion to me. Understood?"

Ryo offered a sloppy salute. "Roger that."

By the time I got to the Chief's office, the floor was already crowded. Just outside the door were Andy Hero, Councilman John Geoffries and the Thompsons in their white suits. There was a subdued murmur as everyone wondered what was going to happen.

"I know you all have questions," Geoffries said. "Now, let me reassure you that I have nothing but the utmost respect for how you deal with the daily chaos." His eyes swept over the crowd like some bird of prey looking for a mouse in a field. "You've been given an impossible task, but I'm here to make sure that you have the tools you need to impose order."

'Impose order,' he said. Now that's an interesting choice of words.

"I'm sure that you know my associate, Andy Hero," Geoffries continued. "Some of you may have even bought cars from him," he joked.

"I did!" a voice cried out. "That lemon you sold me died five miles before I got home!"

A bunch of cops had a good chuckle at Hero's expense. He tried not to look angry, but there was a twitch in the corner of his eye.

"In any case," Geoffries said, "Andy Hero will be the direct liaison to my office. He has a few things that we plan on implementing, effective immediately."

"Good morning." He straightened out his lapels and cleared his throat. "I'd just like to read off--"

"Will there be jackboots?" someone in the crowd asked.

"Excuse me, what?" Hero looked off-balance.

"Jackboots. You know, since we're 'imposing order' instead of, oh, enforcing the law. Can't impose order without a pair of pointy jackboots, right?"

"I don't see the relevance," Hero said. The tone in his voice was like he was flicking off a fly. "If I may continue--"

"Are you gonna authorize Dip weapons? I mean, they're only outlawed everywhere there are Toons and Animates because they're outright cruel."

"Let me reassure everyone that the tools you will be provided are for necessary force only," Andy Hero said. "These are based off of committee findings--"

"What committee? Where was it recorded?" another face in the crowd demanded.

"It was a matter of public record," Geoffries said. He ignored the glare from Andy Hero. "If you're interested in how the council meeting went, I'll be more than happy to forward you a copy of the minutes."

"Well, guess what? I DO keep an eye on how the council meetings went!" a very British voice exclaimed from the back of the room.

I blinked. "Jake?!"

Jake was wearing a visitor's badge. He wasn't alone. Tricia was with him, along with a cameraman.

"And whom might you be?" Geoffries asked. His lip twitched as if he was trying to restrain himself from sneering.

"My name is Jason Kinnison and I'm an attorney. I've been keeping a close watch on the legislation that you've been putting forth."

I looked around and caught Nene's eye. She winked.

Yes, Nene really is that smart. She can also be sweet and ditzy, but when she has to be cunning, she can do that. She called Jake and Tricia in, which explained the visitor badges.

"The bills you've put forth included one that I think all of us will find disturbing," Jake continued. "You once had a

bill that would declare all Animates as non-sentient and a threat to everyone in the city."

Everyone, Animate or not, glared at Geoffries and his crew. Oddly enough, the Thompsons didn't seem to mind. In fact, they seemed pleased with the attention.

"This...is an exaggeration of the bill." Geoffries put on what the politicians used as a "winning smile." In his case, it was more of a lopsided leer. "The bill was meant to protect people from dangerous, rogue Animates! It empowered good police officers to use any means necessary!"

"Councilman Geoffries!" Tricia called out. "My network has repeatedly asked your office for an interview regarding your ties to anti-Animate groups like Natural Order. At the last election, most of your funding came from groups that are strongly anti-Animate. One advertisement you approved, Councilman, claimed that Animates were only 'figments of our collective imagination' and that it was 'time to wake up.'"

"Ms. McMasters, that was taken out of context!" Geoffries was starting to sweat. "I will NOT have my words twisted to serve as fodder for your ratings!"

Andy Hero clapped a hand on Geoffries. The look on Hero's face was calm, but I knew that he was seething inside. Geoffries committed a sin around Hero: He took the spotlight from him.

"Councilman, I understand your agitation," Hero said. He'd put on the smooth voice. It was the same voice that twenty women had fallen for. "Your zeal to protect the common person is undisputed." He turned to face Jake and Tricia. "The fact is that this is not a public forum. This is no place for you to wave around your law degree or your press pass." Now he was starting to get heated. "That sort of thing should be done within proper procedures, like in a press conference. Otherwise, your unnecessary action is grandstanding at best and demoralizing at worst!"

"That's right," Geoffries agreed. "That's right! You cannot intrude upon a private meeting between a member of the city council and the police and use it to your own ends!" He pointed to a few random police who weren't Animates. "Officers, escort these people out of the precinct house."

Nobody moved. The Chief glared at Geoffries, then Hero. He turned his attention to Jake.

"Mr. Kinnison, were any of the Councilman's bills signed into action?" the Chief asked. He sounded calm, but I could tell that he was about to explode.

"No, sir," Jake replied. "I keep a close watch on any politics that involve Animates. Councilman Geoffries's oversight committee is still going through exploratory meetings and factfinding. To my knowledge, no bills from his committee

have been signed by the mayor." He glared at Geoffries. "Since when do City Council members have the authority to order the police around? Only the mayor has the authority."

"The mayor would approve—"

"`Would' is not nearly the same as `has,' Councilman," Jake said. His voice was probably a few degrees short of absolute zero. "It's a matter of degrees. Unless you are attempting a *fait accompli*, you are gravely overstepping your duties as a City Council member. Without the approval from the mayor, all your pretty, prejudiced talk is nothing but gibberish, word salad for your supporters."

"You don't know anything—" Geoffries protested. He didn't get a chance to continue because Jake decided to rip him a new one.

"I know the LAW, you bloody prat." He gestured to everyone in the room. "The law says that Animates are granted the same rights as regular humans. This is the same law that these men and women have sworn to enforce. This is the same law that is inconveniently keeping you from overreaching your station, as you are doing right now. And if anyone saw this, people would be well within their rights to drag you into a public hearing."

Tricia looked pointedly at Geoffries, then the camera, then back at the councilman. She didn't smile as she said one word.

"Oops."

Andy Hero turned an interesting shade of purple. It's ironic that someone that was so in love with the camera would find it inconvenient.

"Mr. Hero, what made you think that you could order the police around when you have no experience in law enforcement?" Tricia was entering her Hard Hitting Reporter mode. "You've spent the last several years selling used cars. You have no education in law enforcement or even basic law. What makes you think that you know better than officers who risk their lives every day?"

"Ms. McMasters, my family is a long line of cops," he said.

"You WERE a long line!" someone said in the crowd. "You kind of broke the streak, didn't you?"

"Hey, why don't you get your Daddy to bail you out again?" a voice jeered. "It worked out great the last time!"

I saw Andy Hero's knuckles turn white as he clenched his fists. He looked like he was going to wade into the crowd and kill whoever had said that.

"My father is a great man and a better cop than you could ever dream of being." He took a deep breath, but there was murder in those green eyes of his. "You dirty his name. You don't deserve that badge or that uniform."

"I think I've heard enough." That was the Chief.

"Clearly, you came in here, hoping to intimidate me and bully my

people into serving your agenda. You only have a vague plan based upon anti-Animate rhetoric. What you don't have is any approval by the mayor's office." He glared at Geoffries. "Until I get a personal phone call from the mayor regarding any procedural changes, I believe that we should table this."

A few officers stepped forward. They flanked Geoffries, Hero and the Thompsons and escorted them out. Thankfully, there wasn't any ranting and raving from them on the way out.

Tricia ordered the camera cut. The cameraman did so and rolled his shoulders.

"Jake. Tricia." The Chief greeted them. "I'm glad you were here, but Hero was right: This was not a press conference or any kind of public forum. I'm afraid that you can't broadcast the footage."

"I wasn't going to," Tricia said. "I just wanted to rattle that blonde son of a—"

"Which reminds me." I stepped forward and smiled at my friends. "It's good to see you guys. You've been working on this scenario, haven't you?"

"I always wanted to take Hero down a peg or two," Jake admitted. He looked very pleased with himself. That speech had obviously been rehearsed. "I don't think that I can use 'bloody prat' in the courtroom, though."

"Probably not a good idea," I agreed. I've seen Jake when he really got on a tear. He's left people quivering on the stand.

Nene came forward. Thankfully, she didn't hug me in front of everyone. "We didn't win, did we?" she asked. "I mean, it worked out okay."

"I don't think that we're going to get off that easily," I sighed. "Guys like that tend to be really sore losers."

"So, things are going to get worse?" Nene looked worried.

"Unfortunately, that's been my experience. I have this feeling that we're going to see an unusual increase in Animate-related destruction."

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There are times when I hate being right. Later in the afternoon, there was a massive outbreak of incidents involving rogue mecha. It wasn't as if some random pilot had gone off the rails; these were people that I knew.

I had to coordinate an evacuation of people living near the edge of Mechatown. For whatever reason, famous and well-known mechs were going at it. Ordinarily, this wouldn't have been an issue, but they were cutting loose on a level that was just short of being at war.

"Trenchcoat One here," I said to my radio. "Civilians have been evacuated. What's your status?"

"Just great," Leon grumbled. "We had some of the smaller suits contained until Ozaki decided to try running us over."

I blinked. "Say again? She sicced Bonaparte on you?"

"She wouldn't answer the radio," Leon said. "I don't know what's gotten into her."

"We've got bigger issues!" a dispatcher said on my radio. "We're getting reports that Giant Robo has started smashing random buildings. Daisaku is controlling Robo, but there's something off about him!"

"Get Dastun's people and see if they can't intercept Ozaki. As for Giant Robo, see if we can't get Big O to restrain him without hurting Daisaku." I hoped that we could contain the situation.

"Incoming mobile suits!" the dispatcher yelled. "They're attacking—"

I gritted my teeth. This didn't make any sense.

No, this made total sense. It was just so convenient that some of the most well-known mecha in the city would just happen to run amok? The damage itself was visible to anyone, and the anti-Animate groups would have a field day.

What was the common thread? What had happened to the pilots?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an unwelcome sight. The Thompsons were leaning against the side of a building that

hadn't been demolished yet. Their white suits hadn't even been smudged by all the dirt and dust flying around. They had nearly identical smirks on their face as they watched the chaos.

"Clear out!" I yelled at them. "With all that debris flying around, you're going to get hit!"

Rex Thompson snickered. "Do you hear that? He's actually concerned for our well-being."

Taylor Thompson grinned. "Crikey. You'd think that he wasn't aware of what we could do. It's almost insulting, when you think about it."

Rex Thompson nodded. "A lowly police officer worried about the likes of us. How touching. It's not like he's been through a war or anything like that."

Before I could respond, several shards of glass fell from the windows above them. I had no choice but to duck into my car for shelter.

The Thompsons stood still. The rain of deadly glass just sheeted off of them as if they had an invisible umbrella. They dusted off their spotless white outfits. It was probably a safe bet that they weren't even dusty; it was just the dramatic thing to do.

That's right. Their P.L.O.T. armor was attuned to protect them from anything in this dimension. I wasn't sure if it would protect them from, say, celestial power like Urd's, but I wasn't

going to call her in if I could help it. I needed them to think I didn't have enough pieces yet.

I got out of my car and eyed them like I was astonished. I couldn't help but wince at how scratched up my car was from the glass. The auto body place was going to love me for this.

"Do you think he's figured it out yet?" Rex Thompson asked. "After all, he's supposed to be a great detective." He rubbed that beard in what was supposed to be deep thought, but it was more like an insult. "No, we probably need to leave a few more breadcrumbs."

"More?" Taylor Thompson asked. "Surely he can't be that dense."

"You did this?" Yeah, I knew that they did. I just had to figure out how and why.

Rex grinned so wide, I thought that his face was going to split. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"Voila!" Rex exclaimed, gesturing to me. "He CAN be taught!"

Taylor clapped politely, as if he was on the golf course. I wanted to wipe that smug smile off his face.

"Of course we did this," Taylor said. "How do you think you're going to have an exciting time if it's all EASY?"

The rumbling in the ground cut off any response I might have had. Giant footsteps made everything bounce off the road.

I looked up and the Big O was preparing to square off against Giant Robo. At least the former hadn't just popped out of the ground right here. The sinkhole itself would have caused a lot more damage.

I pulled out a pair of binoculars. Daisaku was on Giant Robo's shoulder, as I expected. I could see him mouth out one word: Attack. In fact, that was the only thing he was saying.

What happened to the kid? Was he brainwashed?

I turned my back on the Thompsons as they sniggered. I was more worried about the damage that could happen if those mechs had cut loose. It's probably safe to say that Mechatown would be blown off the map.

I switched channels on my radio. I only hoped that Roger wasn't compromised.

"Roger, this is Andrew Mays!" I shouted into my radio. "Can you get Robo to stand down without blowing us all to kingdom come?"

"Mays, I'm a negotiator," Roger snapped back. "I know when to use minimal force. Besides, the kid doesn't look like he's really in the driver's seat, mentally."

"That's what I'm thinking," I agreed. "Somebody got to him, along with a bunch of other pilots."

"Perfect," Roger grumbled. "I'm going to try to de-escalate this. And no, that doesn't involve any heavy firepower."

Roger cut off the channel and I frowned. There wasn't much I could do but to trust his judgment.

The Big O reached towards Giant Robo. One gigantic arm was held forward, the hand flattened out in the classic "stop" position. The giant piston wasn't retracted.

Giant Robo didn't attack. Instead, he just moved forward until he was stopped by Big O's extended arm.

"Attack. Attack. Attack," Daisaku repeated himself, his voice a monotone. Criminally, the kid was reduced to a machine, only without the character of his mech.

It might have been my imagination, but Giant Robo growled in dissatisfaction. He stopped pushing against the Big O's extended palm and gently picked Daisaku off of his shoulder. The kid was then placed on the ground next to me.

"Attack. Attack. Attack," Daisaku droned. If he was aware that he wasn't on Robo's shoulder anymore, it didn't show. I even did the old standby of waving my hand in front of his face.

"C'mon, Daisaku," I said. "Wake up. Snap out of it."

"Oh, good on you," Taylor said snidely. "That's certainly going to work."

"Here's a clue," Rex added. "It won't work. For the moment, he's too far gone to respond to you."

"You know, personalities can be fun, but they can also be just so inconvenient," Taylor sighed. "I mean, when you want someone to do something that they may personally find objectionable or repugnant, the personality just gets in the way."

"That's why it's so much fun to deprive them of their personalities," Rex added. "For a little while, they can be like robots who do whatever they're told to do. The fun part is when we allow them to recover with their memories intact." He shivered with excitement. "Can you imagine the angst and regret that they have to work through? Can you imagine the sleepless nights that they have to overcome, thus defining them as true heroes?!"

You know, just when I thought I could imagine how low operatives of the DDO could go, the basement floor gets knocked down a few levels. They were ready, willing and able to violate minds just for cheap drama because it's "more heroic" that way.

Not for the first time, I wished that my mallet worked on them. Then again, there was the danger of me pounding them to a paste.

I really hate these sociopaths. Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do about them.

Taylor yawned. "Well, I think we've proved our point. The thrill's worn off for now." He held up his hand and snapped his fingers.

A pulse of energy radiated from his hand. When it hit Daisaku, his eyes cleared and he shook his head.

"What—Detective Mays?" he asked. "I was...on Robo's shoulder. I don't know why, but I just kept telling Robo to attack." He shivered. "What happened to me?"

Taylor clapped his hands excitedly and grinned. "Look at him! He's confused! That's the PERFECT reaction!"

"It was a great idea to go for the pilots instead of the police! We got much more dramatic results! Chalk another one up for your personality erasing ray!" Rex said. He slapped Taylor on the back. "It never fails!"

"It takes a lot of power, but it gets the job done!" Taylor beamed.

"You think they'll be ready for my contribution?" Rex sounded like an eager little kid with a new toy. If what I'd seen was true, he had a weapon that deconstructed people.

"You're under—" I began, but I ran into an invisible wall. I brought out my mallet and tried to force my way through it, but no dice.

"Oh, please," the Thompsons chorused. With a final, mocking wave, they vanished.

For a moment, all was silent in that corner of Mechatown. Then my radio was flooded with reports that the mecha pilots had come to their senses.

Daisaku looked at the destruction. Judging by the look on his face, he remembered every moment of it—as the Thompsons had intended.

He raised his watch to his mouth. The sentence that came out sounded tired and broken.

"Robo, let's go home." Daisaku's voice cracked.

With a growl, Giant Robo gently picked him up and deposited him on the shoulder. Robo shared a look with Big O and the two robots parted ways.

I got in my car and sort of melted into the seat. Things were worse than I'd thought. Tiredly, I grabbed the radio.

"This is Trenchcoat One," I said. "The situation is under control, but there's a complication. I'm calling in a cleanup crew and then heading back to the precinct."

The familiar rumbling in my stomach was just the icing on a very wobbly cake. It'd been a long time since I'd had many stress issues. Friends tended to take the edge off.

I reached into the glove box of my car and pulled out a bottle of Mylanta. I was about to chug it down when I noticed that it had expired.

I sighed as I chucked the bottle into the trash. That was just the capper of the day.

The Chief wasn't going to like this. I know I didn't.

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The Chief looked like he was nursing the mother of all headaches. What hair he still had seemed to have turned white.

"You're telling me," he said in a low voice, "that the Thompsons can basically turn people into mindless automatons and do whatever they want, only to turn them back for kicks? Are you saying that they're motivated to do things as dramatically as possible? Am I getting that right?"

"That's right, Chief," I confirmed. "They didn't seem to care that they were admitting it to my face. As far as they're concerned, we can't touch them—legally or literally. If we put them in jail, they'll just teleport out."

"The Mayor called me," the Chief said. "He wants answers yesterday. He wants solutions the day before that." He shook his head. "The anti-Animate groups are having a field day with this."

"I figured they would," I said. "People are scared because they've seen Animates they love and trust go berserk. Not many people are going to accept the whole 'personality draining beam' explanation, even if it's the truth."

The Chief rubbed the bridge of his nose. "People are calling for my resignation, you know. This was on my watch."

"Chief, this isn't your fault. This is the fault of some sadists with god complexes."

"And we're supposed to be the ones who can stop it," the Chief countered. "The thing is, how do you stop people like that? How do you stop those who don't care if they're caught and laugh at the law?"

"Honestly, it wouldn't be the first time," I said. "They laugh at the law until they get smacked in the face with it." I paused. "On that note, are you sure that the public wouldn't buy the personality draining beam? I mean, we do live in a city full of magicians, mad scientists, martial artists and any number of mind-bendingly crazy things."

"It's still a stretch." He sighed once more. "Have you checked in with Nene regarding the women who recanted their testimony?"

"I'll head there now," I said. "I still can't believe that all 20 of them would back off. I didn't think that Hero's family was that influential."

"Well, his Dad was superintendent for a time—until things went bad," the Chief reminded me. "He took early retirement after that, probably after cashing in a few favors. His son inherited his smooth talking."

I scowled. That just didn't sit right with me. We're the police. We're the ones who enforce the law. Yes, we sometimes get the short end of the stick as far as our public image goes. What the Chief described was little better than being a mobster.

"Maybe I could ask them some questions," I muttered.

"Unless, of course, the Hero estate is going to chase me off."

"I might suggest that...if Hero's parents didn't suffer an oddly simultaneous stroke a week ago." He dug into his desk and handed me a newspaper article. "They're alive, but the stroke robbed them of their ability to speak."

I looked up the article. Then I had a hunch nudging the back of my brain.

"When did the women recant their testimony?" I asked.

"I don't have all the details, but I think it was about a week...ago." He paused. "You think that those incidents are connected?"

I felt the first beginnings of a smirk pull at my lips. It was circumstantial. The puzzle pieces kind of fit together. It was too much of a coincidence otherwise. I just had to get into the mindset of the Thompsons.

"Maybe. The Thompsons have been busy building up Andy Hero. What better way than to give him a touch of suffering and vindication from past sins?"

The Chief frowned. "Why would anyone do that to a person? Andy Hero's no saint, but to give both his parents a stroke? That's sadistic. That's inhuman!"

"It would be...if they considered us people. The way the Thompsons are acting, it's like we're just characters to be manipulated for their own gratification."

The Chief took a slug of his coffee. Suddenly, he looked a lot more tired than usual.

"I'm going to need some time to digest that," he said. "Get over to Electronic Forensics and see what Nene's found about those women." He managed a tiny smile. "And no messing around in the broom closet or the server room for you two."

I groaned as I covered my face with my hand. The precinct really does have ears.

The Electronic Forensics department was a new department. Of course, it didn't describe all that the department did. Not only were the people there good at digging things up, but they were on the cutting edge of computer stuff that I didn't understand.

(No, I'm not computer illiterate. I know what a firewall is, along with some other basic computer terms. When Nene gets into terms like DNS server, zero day threat and worms, I have to ask her to slow down. I think that she gets a kick out of being

the one to teach me. Then again, I don't like pretending to know something in front of the expert.)

I kept getting sly little looks from Naoko and some of the other ladies in the department. Some of the guys at their terminals looked like they were ready to give me a high five.

As tempted as I was, I didn't sneak up behind Nene and hug her from behind. Sorry, but when I'm at work, I have to at least try to be professional. I don't always succeed, but at least I try.

"Hi, Nene," I greeted her. "The Chief says that you found something odd about those witnesses?"

Nene turned around in her seat and smiled, her green eyes bright. "Hey! Well, as it turns out..."

I had this sudden feeling that we were being watched. Everyone in the department had suddenly decided that we were the attraction of the moment. Some of the workers were actually rubbing their hands together with glee. Others were just rubbernecking to see if there was going to be any action.

Nene rolled her eyes. "I'm sure that everyone has OTHER things TO DO?"

Suddenly, the keyboards were being tapped at a louder volume than was actually necessary. Well, it worked, I guess. Then again, given how experienced Nene is with electronic mayhem, it was a wise idea not to get her angry. I remembered

one "secure" e-mail that had gone public with all the lurid details of a relationship. The names were blocked out, but the message was clear: Do not mess with the cute and feisty redhead.

She pulled up the file with the witnesses. The photographer obviously hadn't gotten them on their best day. All the women looked like they were staring a thousand miles away.

"I've been looking into how the women recanted their testimony," Nene said. "I noticed that they are unusually consistent. It's like they were reading off a form letter, only with a few minor changes." She tapped her chin in thought. "They also recanted on the same day."

"Nobody caught that? Nobody thought that it was unusual?"

Nene shook her head. "All 20 of them went to the local station and recanted on the same day. I think that they were even in the same room."

"Either the attending officer used a form letter to take down their testimony or something else is going on." I pointed to the blank-eyed stare on one witness. "Are they all like this?"

Nene nodded. "Recanting testimony after over 10 years is odd. Doing it all at the same time on the same day is even odder."

"Where are they now? Did they all go home or are they in custody somewhere."

Nene tapped a few keys. "They're being held in a secure facility for `protective custody.' I'm not surprised; recanting is a pretty big deal. They could have been arrested for giving false testimony."

I had Nene flip through all the witness' files. Sure enough, every woman had a blank-eyed stare that was far creepier than the typical mug shot.

"Theoretically speaking, could you find this secure facility? I mean, it's just theoretical and a potential invasion of privacy."

Nene gave me a look that screamed "seriously?" I knew that she'd gone the extra mile.

"I may have a live feed," she said. "Did you expect anything less?"

"Nope. So, let's see how life is treating these women."

The footage was pretty grainy; the security cameras were a little outdated. We could see that the women were all sitting in a common room, their expressions blank. When they moved, it was almost robotic.

"Oh ho," I murmured. "The Thompsons have been bad, busy boys."

"Why do you say that?"

"I just spent some time trying to get a bunch of pilots from Mechaville to stop rampaging more than usual. Daisaku was on Giant Robo, as always, but he had that same blank look." I frowned. "Taylor Thompson said something about a personality draining ray. He might have done that to these women." A thought occurred to me. "Have they been consistently robotic since they were placed there?"

Nene hummed and scanned the footage she had. Most of the time, the women were just going through the motions with that blank look on their faces. Then, there was a moment where one, then another woman looked confused. They started getting upset—and then suddenly, their emotions were shut off.

These women had families. They'd screwed up their courage to bring Andy Hero to justice years ago. Now, they were just being used as pawns to build him up. It made my stomach gurgle.

"What was the timestamp on that outburst?" I asked.

"Two days ago," Nene reported. "It took place just around 2:00—which was when there was the big press conference."

"Could you run the press conference and focus the footage on the Thompsons? I remember that there was something odd about their suits."

She pulled up the footage and zoomed in on the Thompsons. As the crowd cheered, I noticed that their suits were practically glowing. It's like they were being recharged by the

crowd's attention. But why would that coincide with the witnesses coming back to themselves for a moment?

"It's not one and done," I murmured.

"What?" Nene asked. "What's not one and done?"

"That personality draining ray I told you about," I said. "I thought that it was a case of zap, you're nobody and then zap, you're back to being yourself. But if this took place during the press conference, then it's not like that."

Nene understood. "They have to maintain it somehow. They said that it costs a lot of power?"

"Power that they get from attention," I realized. "Look, it makes sense. Why would you make a fancy suit of armor look like an obvious white suit? They want the attention. In fact, everything they've done so far, in one way or another, was to get attention to maintain their suit power levels."

"That's a pretty big stretch," Nene said. "Why use peoples' attention as a power source? Why be so visible?"

A cold realization dawned on me. "We're just characters to them. They want to manipulate people as if to say 'look at me, I've made my mark.' They want to create an 'interesting' story, no matter how much it doesn't make sense or how much they hurt people." I shivered.

Nene shuddered. "They just think of us as characters? Like we're just puppets for their amusement and they're pulling the strings? That's...that's..."

"Frightening, isn't it?" I asked. "It doesn't matter to them how outrageously hackneyed their ideas are or how manipulative they are--they just care about making an 'interesting' story." I shook my head in disgust. "I'm not sure whether that qualifies them as sociopaths or psychopaths. In any case, I wouldn't qualify them as good people to work with on a production."

"I mean, it's a lot different if they were just behind a keyboard writing stories. But this is like saying to our faces that we're going to be put through all these horrible things..."

I resisted the urge to give Nene a hug. I could do that later, out of view of the rest of the department. Instead, I gently placed my hand on her shoulder and she calmed down a little.

"Yeah. If it were a live-action show, it'd be like the 'artist' director talking to his actors about the stuff they're going to do. Of course, real actors can protest or hole themselves up in their trailers or something like that."

Nene pouted. "Well, we can't do that. It looks like we're stuck."

"Yeah," I agreed. I wished I had some better news for the kid.

"They can mess with people's minds."

"I've seen proof of that."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you think that Andy Hero knows that he's being used?"

"The Councilman's being used, too. The Thompsons don't care about any `cause,' remember? They're just riding on the wave of controversy."

"So, what do you think will happen if they find out?" she asked. "I mean, you've said it yourself. The Thompsons don't care about doing horrible things as long as it's for attention. Do you think that they'd separate themselves from the Thompsons?"

"That...would involve having an actual conscience," I said. "Remember, Andy Hero had no qualms about messing up those women. If he found out that the Thompsons were maintaining control over those women, he probably wouldn't be so quick to leave them." A thought occurred to me. "Then again, there might be another angle."

"Want to let me know what it is?" she asked.

"I'm still working on it," I said. "I've got to fill in some details so that it might resemble a plan."

I stood up and noticed that a lot of people suddenly sat down in their cubicles. I resisted the urge to pull out the mallet.

I had a lot to think about as I headed back to my office. When I told Nene about my dream, about Private Eye me, I was vague on a few things. I was deliberately vague on what that version of her had found in Andy Hero's digital diary, a record of all his misdeeds. As bad as those twenty women had it, there was a time and place where it had been much worse. That Andy Hero had gone unchecked and unchallenged for years. Nobody had been willing to hold him accountable, not with his connections. A lot of women paid the price in that other timeline.

I wasn't going to let that happen. Somewhere along the line in that timeline, I failed. I wouldn't this time.

The only problem was, there were too many things that I had to fill in. I had no idea where the divergence point was. I didn't know how the Thompsons were going to make me drink the retcon punch. I didn't know how I was even going to dispose of that stuff if it was brought out.

Oh, and did I mention that the mayor was under pressure from the people to make everything stop? It was only the right amount of chaos and uncertainty that made people choose questionable options for the sake of security.

I had to make a few calls. Then I had to stop by Dupin's after work, just to check on a hunch.

I knew something was off when I got to my office. For one thing, it was quiet. Ryo wasn't grumbling about the old days or the paperwork and I didn't hear the computer being used. We weren't due to be off shift for a while and nobody mentioned that he'd gone out.

I opened the door quietly. Maybe I was being a little paranoid in my old age. Then again, I'd spent most of the afternoon trying to keep brainwashed mecha pilots from wrecking the city. A little caution wasn't going to kill me.

I hadn't expected Kaori to be fast asleep while on Ryo's lap. I hadn't seen her in a quiet mood very often. Most times, she was angry at Ryo for chasing a skirt or giving her some attitude. Sometimes she could be thoughtful—until Ryo had said the wrong thing and tripped her off.

Ryo put his index finger to his lips. He wanted to let Kaori sleep a little longer. He pointed to a piece of paper at his desk and nudged it towards me.

I picked it up and read it. It had been typed up on the computer and printed out.

Andrew, it read, you're probably wondering why I'm not having mokkori times with Kaori right now. Well, we're still

trying to get past old habits and work on new ones. It wouldn't be right to do something like that until we were both ready.

The old days were fun, in their own way. We had quite the routine going, didn't we? I'd express admiration for a sexy body and she'd smack me down. I'd imply that she was lacking in femininity or something like that and I'd be seeing stars.

When I was recruited to be your partner, I didn't think it would last. I thought that pretty much all cops had a chip on their shoulder. If you'd done anything other than arrest "Mad Bull" Estes, I would have been right—and I would have quit the force after turning you in. I wouldn't have cared if I was an outlaw again; I was used to it.

I'm never going to say this out loud, but you're a pretty decent boss. Yes, you can have a hair trigger at times, but you...still believe in people. Beneath that grumpy exterior is a man who fights for what he believes in. You did that without having to do...what I had to in the past.

It was during our counseling sessions that I realized a lot of things. I can't just think of myself anymore. I can't just go back to the old ways because they really didn't help anyone in the long run. Kaori...can't go back to the old life that she knew, the one that I gave her for a while. She needs stability more than excitement now.

Don't ask when I'm going to make the next move. I'm still trying to figure it out. She is, too.

I guess what I'm trying to say is "thank you." Despite the poundings and the grumbling, you've been fair with me. I'm glad I'm your partner.

Oh, and Andrew? You'd better shred this letter right after reading it. If asked, I'll deny ever having written this. I just wanted to make things clear between us.

I looked up from the letter and raised an eyebrow at Ryo. He only nodded silently, so that he didn't accidentally wake her up.

They had been through a lot together. They've fought and cried and nearly died so many times. That forms a bond, but maybe not the best ways on how to express that bond. There'd been so many times when Ryo just opened his mouth, only to immediately put his foot in it.

Change. It's a universal constant. Ryo was trying to roll with the punches in his life and I think...he may have found a reason to be more than an outrageously talented investigator.

Love does funny things to a guy. I know.

I flashed my hand, extending the fingers out twice. Then I pointed to the phone on my desk. Kaori could rest up for another 10 minutes, but I had calls to make.

Ryo nodded. Then he pointedly looked at the letter I'd just read.

I sighed. I reluctantly shredded the letter, even though it probably would have made for great blackmail material.

Ten minutes later, I pretended to be engrossed in a boring report on my computer. I pointedly ignored any gentle kisses and soft murmurs I may have heard. I didn't even look up to watch Kaori leave.

"Thanks," Ryo said. "She was exhausted."

"No problem," I said. "Now, I've got to make a call to Urd. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but a contingency wouldn't be too out of hand."

I told Ryo what I was planning. He didn't seem enthusiastic about it.

"You're putting yourself in the middle of the action," he pointed out. "I'm surprised that you're not doing your best to keep out of it and let others handle what you're planning."

"I've always thought of myself as being more of a Captain Kirk than a Captain Picard," I joked. "Besides, I don't think I can let anyone else take center stage for this. Andy Hero hates my guts. It's very personal."

"I think that someone said that personal isn't always the same thing as important. You don't have to be the one to do this."

"It won't have the same effect if someone else tries this," I said. "Besides, if I remember correctly, what's personal to you is the same thing as being important."

I didn't say the name of Ryo's deceased partner aloud. I didn't have to. It hung in the air heavily enough.

Ryo brushed it off. "You've got me there. So, who do you have to call?"

"Urd. I'm going to ask her how to concoct a hangover cure for some punch."

"Anyone else?"

I nodded. "I was going to contact where Andy Hero's parents are and talk to some of the staff. I'd like to know if they'd ever come out of their stroke, even if it was for a little bit."

"I don't think that'll make much of a difference," Ryo sighed. "Even if you get the point across, I've known men like Andy Hero. His ego won't allow him to admit that he did anything wrong. It'll all be on you."

"That's what I'm counting on."

Ryo frowned. "I've been in that situation before. I could get away with it because I have some advantages." He shook his head. "If this goes bad, we're not just talking about it being bad for you. It'll be a mess for everyone in the city."

"I know. But I'm not going in alone." I managed a weak smile. "I've got some great backup."

"So, you need me to head with you to the Hero estate? I somehow don't think you'd be very welcome there."

"Yeah, I could use some help. I'm sure that I could finagle it as a wellness check," I said. "After all, I just want to make sure that Hero's parents aren't dramatically deceased."

I put on my trenchcoat and hat. I felt the twinge in my stomach reminding me that I needed to get some Mylanta. Or I could try to de-stress a little more.

Yeah, I'm laughing, too. Well, as long as I keep seeing the doctor on time and not burning a hole from stress through my gut, I suppose I should be OK.

Ryo put on his jacket and checked his gun. He looked ready for action.

"What if they've suddenly and mysteriously died?" Ryo asked. "Are you going to go after the Thompsons for murder?"

I gave hm a look. "What do you think?"

"I think that you should still get some more people in on this. I know some specialists."

I arched an eyebrow as we headed out. "Are these specialists people that I could legally put in a police report?"

"I'm sure you don't have to worry about that," Ryo said breezily. "You'd have to know they'd been there before you could put them in your report."

I stopped in my tracks. Ryo knew a lot of "specialists" who were stealthy. I wasn't sure if he'd picked the single "expert" or if he'd managed to convince a trio to do something for him.

"Theoretically speaking, they wouldn't be wearing catsuits, now would they? I mean, these stealth specialists probably wouldn't wear anything too ornate."

Ryo shot me a look that was both annoyed and amused. Obviously, I was too much of a straight arrow for the info he had.

"Let's go visit the Hero family," he said. "I'm sure that it'll be an interesting time."

The Hero estate wasn't as ostentatious as a lot of people might have thought. I remembered only bits and pieces of being near the house, but I never had much reason to visit. The superintendent of police usually didn't mingle with the peons like my Dad or his partner. No, they were usually waist-deep with the city council. At best, he was negotiating with the politicians to make sure that the funding wasn't cut, or to find out where police were needed. At worst, it was just a matter of rubbing elbows with the wealthy and powerful.

I had to admit, though. It was a nice place with lots of open space. The gated community the estate was in had good-sized garages and well-kept lawns. The esteemed members of this community were probably paying a pretty penny to keep up the houses.

Being a superintendent meant a good amount of pay to go along with the stress and nonsense. The retirement package must have been pretty generous, too.

I don't think that I could have handled the job. I get a little itchy around sycophants and glad handers.

We didn't get there as quickly as I thought. Every so often, Ryo would have me stop by a pay phone that just happened to ring as we passed. He'd talk for less than a minute, hang up and then return to the car. He didn't say a thing about the conversation, but I honestly didn't expect him to. It was a nice little trick, but not something that he could do in the future. Even though I don't have one myself, everybody was carrying around a cell phone. Unless you had someone capable like Nene to work some technical mojo on the line, cell phone calls could be pretty easily traced.

The house was in a gated community in the nicer part of town. Ryo and I flashed our badges and the gate people got in contact with the Hero household. They had a brief conversation and we were waved through.

I tried not to feel out of place while driving to the house. Everywhere I looked, there were the trappings of luxury and comfort. It might have been almost tempting if I didn't know that some questionable types made their home here.

I parked on the driveway and took a deep breath. I think that the last time I was here, it was at a birthday party. I was the only other kid who was from a family of cops, so of course everyone thought that Hero and I would be partners. They even gave us that stupid nickname that I didn't want to mention. I still had the picture of the two of us forcing a grin. I'd buried that picture somewhere out of sight; it made me ill.

We got out of the car and walked to the door. Even the path to the door gave the impression of luxury, with different-colored stones that showed nary a crack.

I was about to ring the doorbell when someone opened the door. I didn't miss the nearby security camera, but I figured that they would have waited.

I held up my badge to the new arrival, a matronly-looking woman with grey hair. She wore an apron over a dress, one without any frills. She had a no-nonsense attitude, one that I could appreciate.

"Yes, how can I help you gentlemen?" the housekeeper asked. Her voice sounded a lot like Jessica Fletcher's, though without the English accent. I suddenly wondered if Jessica was

going to be working on another novel the next time she was at Dupin's.

We flashed our badges and introduced ourselves. She nodded politely and gestured for us to come in. She closed the door behind us.

"Andrew Mays," the housekeeper said. "You have quite a bit of nerve to come here at this time."

I tried not to flinch. She was using the "scolding Mom" voice that every naughty kid knew. Even Ryo was standing a little straighter.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Berry," I said. "If I didn't have to be here, I wouldn't."

That got her attention. We'd only met once at the party and I remembered her name. Then again, she'd been one of the few adults who wasn't actively trying to make me and Hero into future crimefighting partners.

"Well, at least your memory's good," she grudgingly admitted. "The least I can do is offer you a bit of coffee. How does that sound?"

"I'd appreciate it," I told her.

"Coffee's fine with me, thanks." Ryo said.

A few minutes later, we were seated at the kitchen table. I was nursing a good cup of Joe. It was nice and strong, just the way that almost any cop would have liked it.

"Now, how can I help you gentlemen?"

"We heard about the stroke," Ryo said. "We just dropped by to do a wellness check."

"Mr. Saeba, please don't insult my intelligence." She looked stressed and her temper was probably fraying due to recent events. "I know that you're not here for a wellness check. You're here as part of an investigation." She crossed her arms. "I've worked with the family for as long as you've been alive. You tend to absorb little bits and pieces of police trivia when you work for a former police superintendent."

She was still sharp; I had to give her that. I had to at least try for a plausible excuse, but she saw right through it.

"How are they doing?" I asked. I didn't have to qualify who I meant.

Mrs. Berry gave me, then Ryo a sharp look. Her deep frown lightened a touch as she sighed in resignation.

"They shouldn't be in this state," she said. "I've called the doctor multiple times and each time, they should be physically fine." She shook her head. "They just...can't speak."

"Well, strokes can happen when you least expect them," Ryo said. "Were they healthy before that?"

"Oh yes," she nodded. "Byron and Avery—my employers—always kept themselves active and fit. They would never allow themselves to fall to something like a stroke."

"There's more, isn't there?" I asked. She looked like she was having a difficult time processing something.

"About a week ago, both of them had strokes. They didn't happen one after another. They happened simultaneously." She shivered, even though the house was perfectly comfortable. "One moment, they were out and about and the next, they were on the floor.

"Of course, they were immediately taken to the hospital," she continued. "The doctor said that they were showing the symptoms of a stroke, but they couldn't find the cause. They couldn't find any blood clots or other foreign bodies. And this happened to both of them."

"What does their son think of this?" Ryo picked up the slack. "Has he been around?"

"Only once, immediately after they came back from the hospital. Truthfully, they were a bit surprised to see him at all. He hasn't exactly been in their good graces ever since the incident at the police academy."

"I'm kind of surprised that he didn't visit more often," I said. "I always had the impression that he got along well with his parents."

"Oh, if only that were true." Mrs. Berry looked at a nearby photo of Andy Hero in his high school graduation cap and

gown. "Do you know the reason why so many adults were hoping that you would become partners in the police?"

I shook my head. "No clue. I could barely stand the guy."

"They were hoping that some of your decency would rub off on him," Mrs. Berry said. "I'm not going to say that lack of a strong parental figure was a factor in the incident. I will say that the parents did their best with their busy schedules, but unfortunately, it wasn't enough."

"And he hasn't been back since?" Ryo prodded.

She shook her head. "He barely calls ahead. Mostly, he uses gruff voices when talking to his parents. They can't answer, of course."

I wasn't sure that I was liking where this conversation was going. I'd always had the impression that since he'd been raised in a well-off family, he'd been spoiled rotten. What Mrs. Berry was telling me indicated otherwise.

"He never got along with his parents?" Ryo asked. He made a show of looking around the clean, spacious kitchen. "When I was younger, I would have killed to have had half of what he had."

That's right. Ryo was a child soldier. Sometimes it was easy to forget something like that when he started leering at the ladies. In an environment like this, he might never--

Concentrate on the moment, Mays. Don't think about what might have been. Get the facts.

"Officer Saeba, I believe you," Mrs. Berry said. "It's just that--well, that young man was always ambitious, always asking for more. Nobody realized the extent of his dark streak until--" She looked at me.

"Until I threw a big spotlight on it," I finished. I tried not to scowl. "I don't regret doing that; I just wish I could have stopped him earlier."

"Well, you may as well hear it from me, since my employers can't--"

I held up a finger. "Hold on. This sounds like it'll be privileged information between you and the Hero family. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Mrs. Berry gave me a benign smile. "I am, now. Most policemen wouldn't have bothered to try to stop me. I always did admire that integrity of yours.

"The truth is, Byron and Avery Hero had been in utter denial about their son. I knew that eventually, his arrogance would hurt them. I couldn't do anything about it, though. I'm only 'the help,' as that young man put it. I'm not family." There was a truckload of bitterness in that last sentence. She was expected to provide service, not get emotionally involved.

I'd only seen the trainwreck in motion from the outside. She'd had the inside view for years.

I decided to change the subject. "What about the stroke? Was there anything you found odd about it?"

"Other than having both of them happen simultaneously? Other than having had regular checkups with no hint of illness for years? Other than this happening at a time when young Andy's life had such a dramatic and unlikely reversal of fortune?" She shook her head. "Why no, Detective. I can't imagine anything odd about it." Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

"What did the doctor say?" Ryo asked. "Did he find anything odd?"

"He said that by all rights, they should be up and about. He found the aftereffects of a stroke, but he couldn't find the cause. They should be talking."

"Can we see them?" I had to see them. I had to see for myself the depths that the Thompsons would go for the sake of "drama" and "excitement."

"It'll have to be brief," she said. "Obviously, they can't say anything. It's a good thing that they don't need any medical equipment other than--"

"I get the point," I said. "We're not going to linger."

Mrs. Berry nodded and got up. She went to a panel in the wall and pressed a button.

"Detective Andrew Mays and Ryo Saeba are here," she reported. "Do we have your permission to visit?"

A single beep came through the speaker. Mrs. Berry nodded.

"One means `yes,' two means `no,'" she told us. "It's not that they can't understand anything more complicated; it just that they can't respond."

I nodded. I had to tamp down the urge to make a Star Trek comment about a former captain. It wasn't funny at all.

As we climbed the steps, I tried not to notice that Ryo had had one hand in his pocket. He was probably signaling his "specialist" for some reason.

The bedroom looked comfortable, with tasteful decorations and knickknacks all around. On the dresser was a picture of Byron and Avery Hero on their wedding day.

I didn't see any pictures of their son past his high school graduation. That was a pretty big hint to me that Things Were Amiss.

"Sir? Ma'am?" Mrs. Berry called out. "They're here."

Both parents looked a lot worse than the pictures I'd seen. I knew how old they were, but years had been added in the form of deep lines and crows' feet. Both had silver hair, a far cry from their prime.

They recognized me. Of course, it had been about a decade since the academy. I half-expected them to throw me out, since I ruined their lives.

I stepped forward. It was time to take my medicine.

"I heard about what happened. I'm sorry."

Both parents exchanged a quick look. I could tell that there was a good amount of information going on between them. Byron Hero slowly turned back and nodded.

"I had to call it in, sir. Ma'am." I nodded to Avery Hero, who sat on the bed. "I know that you were hoping that your son could continue the legacy as a good cop. It's just...he had everything except the right attitude."

"That's putting it mildly," Ryo remarked. "I may go after women, but I never forced them the way he did."

Avery Hero crossed her arms and looked away. Her husband managed a shaky hand on her shoulder and she relaxed a little.

"Anyway, I just wanted to apologize for what you went through. It was either tell the truth or let it eat me up for years."

Both parents shared another look. Then they nodded.

This was unsettling. I knew that they wanted to preserve what dignity they had by not trying to talk. Then again, it might have been something else.

Hadn't anyone thought to hire a speech therapist for both of them? If they'd been like this for a week, some progress in communicating would have been a lot better than nearly no communication at all.

That train of thought was derailed as the power went out. My hand flew to the pocket that held my mallet, ready to draw it out if I had to. Ryo, of course, had already put his hands on his Colt Python.

"What's going on?" Mrs. Berry's voice was pitched a bit higher than usual. "This shouldn't happen. We have multiple backups for the electricity."

Both parents were looking around in confusion. They reached out to one another and held hands.

There was a THUD from the room next to us. It sounded like something heavy had been dropped.

"That was Master Andy's room," Mrs. Berry said nervously. "Is someone there?"

"I'm checking it out. Ryo, stick here and keep an eye on everyone."

Mrs. Berry dug into her pocket and tossed me a key. "You'll need this!"

I pulled out my mallet and hurried to the room next door. I slipped the key in and unlocked the door. I took a three count, then rushed in—

--only to find it completely empty, the window opened. The nightstand next to Hero's bed had been pushed over.

I leaned outside the window and took a look around. Whoever had been inside when the lights went out, they were long gone.

The lights came back on and I got a good look at the bedroom. It was neat enough, though I suspected that Mrs. Berry had more to do with that than Andy Hero.

There were a lot of trophies and certificates decorating the room. It was almost more of a shrine to the occupant's greatness and accomplishments than someplace where they'd rest. I noticed that there weren't any awards past high school, which made sense.

I didn't have a search warrant, so I couldn't dig around. As tempting as it may have been to "accidentally" stuff some random item from his nightstand, the court would have declared it inadmissible.

There were three pictures that caught my attention. The first was of his birthday party as a kid, where we had a group shot. The second was of me being forced to smile for the yearbook. That one had the caption with the nickname they'd given the two of us, the one I've gotten sick of hearing. The final one was of the senior prom where he was, of course, the

king. He and the queen, Tricia McMasters, were smiling—though in her case, it was a forced one.

I didn't have much time to ponder that when I heard heavy footsteps behind the door. Said door flew open and Andy Hero glared at me, those green eyes of his ablaze.

"What the Hell are you doing in my old room?!" he demanded. "Do you have a warrant?"

"I didn't come here for any funny stuff," I told him. "I came here to check in on your parents, since I heard that they'd both suffered a stroke."

"Get out." He pointed dramatically to the door.

I shoved the mallet back inside my trenchcoat pocket. I kept my hands in his view, just to reassure him that I hadn't done anything improper.

"I didn't hear you open the front door," I told him as I backed out of his room. "Everything was quiet for all of thirty seconds."

"Ever since I got my new friends, traffic hasn't been much of a problem," Hero said in a tone that would have soured milk. "The unconventional entrance was more dramatic, according to them." His expression went dark as my coffee. "If you took anything from my room, I will have you kicked off the force."

"Someone else was in your room," I shot back. "I was trying to see who'd broken in."

"Oh, that's convenient," Hero said. "The security systems should have caught everything."

"There was a power outage. Someone slipped in and targeted your room. Can you think of a reason why?"

Hero clenched his jaw. "No, Detective. I can't think of a thing. Everything here is ancient history."

"Yeah, I saw the pictures. Speaking of seeing, you might want to see how your parents are doing. I bet they'll be glad for the company."

Hero didn't say anything. Instead, he brushed past me, deliberately clipping my shoulder.

Well, it certainly spoke wonders about his priorities. He had one of the Thompsons teleport him straight to the second floor of his old house, only to go directly to his old room. He didn't even spare a thought to his parents until I said so.

I heard someone chuckling within Hero's old room. Rex Thompson was practically rubbing his hands with glee as he looked around the room.

"Oh, this is so much to work with!" he declared. "This is going to be a very fruitful partnership."

"Get out of there," I said. "He's not going to like you digging through his old things."

Rex pretended to plug his ears in. "La la la, not listening to someone's life who will become very interesting. No, not listening."

I shook my head and sighed. I wanted to pound him, but it wouldn't have worked. Instead, I headed back to the master bedroom.

"There was someone here, but they were gone by the time I got there," I reported. "I'm not sure if they took anything." I walked over to Mrs. Berry and returned the key, something that got Hero's attention.

"So much for being the best and brightest," Hero muttered. "Well, everyone here is fine, no thanks to you two. You've paid your due respects to my parents, now get out."

"Wow, I feel so welcome," Ryo commented. "Obviously, your parents are in good hands."

"Might want to contact a speech therapist," I suggested. "It should help them regain some communication."

"Your suggestion is duly noted." Hero's voice could have put a layer of frost on my car. "Get out."

"That was a warm welcome," Ryo observed as we got in the car. "He has the most interesting priorities."

"That's putting it mildly," I said. I buckled up and started up the car. "What kind of man gets teleported straight to home, then checks his room first instead of his parents? I

know that if something happened to my parents, I'd be busting doors trying to make sure they were okay.'''

I headed out and Ryo recognized the route. "You were serious about that punch antidote, weren't you?"

"Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it," I said. "If this retcon punch stuff is as bad as Urd said, I need every edge I can get."

"So, why aren't you asking the three of them to intervene? I'm pretty sure that goddesses aren't covered under their suits."

"I'd rather not take the chance," I said. "We only get one shot at this. I just have to figure out a way to depower their suits."

"Good luck with that." Ryo looked out and frowned. "What about that awful coffee you drink? You think you could get those guys to have a sip?"

"I could, but I'm not sure if that counts as harm. I don't know if the suits would prevent the reality check that Klatchian coffee gives. Knowing their egos, anything that clashes with their world view might qualify as `harm.'" I shook my head. "This is a hell of a tricky thing."

"On the bright side, if you pull this off, it'll be a big deal on your performance review," Ryo joked. "Of course, they'll probably expect you to accomplish the impossible daily."

"Not very likely. I'm not you."

Ryo turned to look at me. "Was that an actual compliment?"

"Yup. I mean, even among a lot of Animates, you've taken a lot of hits and you're still going. I'd call that an impossible thing. Now be good--we're almost to the temple."

We were welcomed to the temple by Banpei. The little mech looked at us oddly before waving us in.

When we got to the sitting room, we heard voices. One of them was Auguste's, the other was someone that sounded Hispanic. We could hear Belldandy, Urd, Skuld and Keiichi laughing.

There was something about that last voice that caught my attention. It was the voice of a man who, as the saying went, did six impossible things before breakfast. The impression I got, even without listening to all the words, was that he was a man of many talents and much experience.

"And when I say `stay thirsty,'" the gentleman said, "I don't mean that in a merely physical aspect. I mean that you must thirst for adventure, for life. I mean that you should live the stories, not just merely regale them. People can tell the life that is only partially lived."

"Although," Auguste said, "a good story, well-told, may very well inspire this thirst. I've always appreciated a good story if it came from a place of truth."

"But stories aren't always true," Skuld said. "Some of them are just made-up stuff."

"So how are you entertained? It is sometimes the presentation, the tightrope between fact or fiction—that is sometimes more of an accomplishment than whether or not something is true," the gentleman said. "For example, I could say that the police often question me not because I have committed a crime, but that they find me that interesting."

And that was my cue. Reluctantly, I knocked on the door.

Belldandy got the door and welcomed us in. We were introduced to the gentleman, who nodded in respect.

"Urd? Auguste? If I could have a word with you, please?" I asked politely.

They nodded and the gentleman at the table continued to regale Skuld, Belldandy and Keiichi with outrageous tales. There wasn't any magic spell or mind control; he just was that interesting. I had to tear myself away from when he started talking about his beard's experience.

I ran through the basics of a plan with them. Urd looked at me skeptically while Auguste frowned.

"It's risky," she said. "Even if I can create an antidote or counter to retcon punch, there will still be things to clean up."

"I'm hoping that the damage will be minimal," I said.

"Hopefully, it won't be anything that Skuld can't debug if she goes upstairs." I turned to Auguste. "What do you think?"

"I'm fairly certain that my friend will be accommodating," he said. "He is, how you say, in it for the thrill."

"Do you have anything else on your mind?" Urd asked. "You seem a little preoccupied."

"Nothing that needs to be dealt with now," I replied. Sometimes Urd had the most unsettling look in those purple eyes of hers. I'm pretty sure that if she wanted to, she could read all of my personal history.

"I suppose that I could, but I'd get into trouble doing that without your permission," she said. "You really have to watch some of those...thoughts..." She turned towards Ryo and gave him a sly little smile. "That's very entertaining, but I think you're just a little off on the logistics."

"Maybe, maybe not," Ryo said with a smirk. Then that smirk faded and was replaced by a purely professional look.

"Tomorrow's the big day. I hope we can count on both of you."

Urd and Auguste nodded. Hopefully, I covered my bases.

I felt drained as we drove back to the precinct house. It had been a long day and I was looking forward to seeing Nene's smile over dinner. Before I got to my office, the Chief called us to his office.

No rest for the weary. Yes, I know that the old quote is "no rest for the wicked," but I don't consider myself to be wicked.

"The mayor's going to hold a press conference tomorrow," the Chief said. He looked like he'd aged 5 years in a few hours. "Due to this afternoon's mess, Geoffries was able to push through his bill. It will involve restriction of movement or voluntary tracking for all Animate mecha pilots."

"Great," I groused. "He managed to push the first domino down the line."

"The mayor is going to announce some changes with how we deal with Animates. It's his opinion that...lethal options be explored for the most extreme cases of Animate violence against humans." He sighed heavily. "I told him that this is a blatant violation of Animate rights, rights that were hard-earned through a lot of pain."

"What did he say to that?" I asked. I had a feeling I already knew the answer.

"He claimed that he had little choice in the matter." The Chief sighed. "He must have been tired because he had this dull look in his eyes. He wasn't as expressive as he usually was."

An icicle just rammed itself down my spine. That...wasn't good.

"Chief? The mayor's being manipulated," I told him.

"Remember what I said about one of the Thompsons having this special ray? Well, I think that the mayor just got hit with it."

The Chief looked at me as if I were some strange oddity. Then he looked like he was replaying the conversation in his head, only he knew what to look for.

"Son of a—"

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Unless you know what signs to look for, it's hard to tell."

"Great, so the mayor's been compromised," Ryo grumbled. "At least before this, he could pretend that nobody was pulling his strings."

"So, why didn't the whole department get zapped with this thing?" the Chief asked. "I mean, that would be the best way to turn public opinion against us. They could make us into mindless, militaristic monsters who'd push elderly people to the sidewalk."

I shook my head. "I don't think that's the point. Remember, the Thompsons and anyone one else in the DDO are suckers for drama. Zapping the personalities of a few, strategic mecha pilots is a lot more effective than zapping the entire police force." I gritted my teeth for a moment. "I'd

hate to think of a day when people would think of us as little more than robots and bullies."

"Maybe there's a limit to how much they can do before they have to recharge?" Ryo suggested. "I think that between those 20 witnesses and maintaining the stroke on Andy Hero's parents, the Australian Thompson has a full plate."

"Well, it's working," the Chief reminded us. "Unless the Thompsons are taken out of the equation, there's not much we can do but try to weather the storm—and know that those two will be giggling all the time."

"I may have an idea about that, Chief."

I told him. He blinked a few times and asked me to clarify a few things.

"That is an insane plan," he declared. "There are so many things that could go wrong."

"I'm open to suggestions, Chief."

He sighed and tapped out an erratic beat on his desk. He wanted to look out for me, not just as an officer, but as his best friend's son. I knew he was in a bind.

"I'll have you in position at the press conference," the Chief said finally. "That's the best I can do."

"That's all I'll need, Chief. Thanks."

A few hours later, I trudged out of the office. As soon as I saw Nene, I just gave her a very long, very tired hug. I

could almost feel the heat from her cheeks as she blushed. Thankfully, I'd steered us into an unoccupied part of the building.

"It was that bad, huh?" she asked after we separated. "Anything I can do to help?"

"You've done more than enough, kiddo," I reassured her. "If it wasn't for your results, I wouldn't have been able to get things set up. It's just that..."

"Yes?"

"If I fail—"

"You won't." Her green eyes were resolute. "Do you know why you won't fail?"

"Why?"

"Because you're doing this for the little guy and girl. You're doing this because you believe in something better. You're not motivated by fame or fortune; you just want to help."

"I'm not exactly a knight in shining armor, kiddo," I reminded her. "Remember how we first met?"

An utterly adorable smirk made its way across her face. "How could I forget? You keyed that guy's car just before I had it towed. I think he had fifty unpaid parking tickets?"

"Yeah, and I bumped into him at The Con. He said he'd have my badge," I sighed. "Then he got taken for a ride with Vampire Hunter D and I haven't seen him since."

Nene shivered. She didn't like a lot of the scary stuff like ghosts or vampires. I think that she started reading this awful vampire romance book, only to return it to the library the next day.

We just stood off to the side for a few moments. Then she sidled in close and leaned against me.

I'm a cop. A peaceful life really isn't in the cards. I knew what I was getting into when I applied for the academy.

That doesn't mean that I can't have peaceful moments. I've learned to cherish them, mainly because they don't last.

"Come on, lovebirds," Stan said as he walked past us. "Take it outside."

Yeah, it's like that. At least he was nice about it.

We went to a restaurant and talked. We were occasionally interrupted by Nene's friends "coincidentally" dropping by for a bit of idle chitchat.

"So," Priss drawled. "When are you two going to...?"

"No huge hurry." I sounded nonchalant about it, mainly because bedroom fun times wasn't the biggest priority. I didn't want to put any pressure on Nene. "So, when are you and Leon going to tie the knot?"

This made Priss flinch. Sylia covered her mouth to stifle a ladylike giggle. Linna leaned in close, those blue eyes of hers bright with excitement.

"So...?" Linna prompted. "Has he asked you? Or do you have to ask him?"

"Oi-Linna, back up," Priss said. She held up her hands to ward off her friend. "I never said anything about—"

"You do have a lot of overnight stays," Sylia said. "I notice that you've taken to packing a bag with you, strapped to your motorcycle." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Haven't you also complained about having to restock something at the drugstore?"

Priss made a small, strangled sound. She started to blush as red as Nene's hair.

"That's-not important!" she exclaimed. "We were talking about Nene—"

"Oi!" came a voice from across the room. "At least your Leon isn't a jerk stalker like mine."

As if on cue, everyone at our table looked at the source. Just a few feet away were the 2040 girls. None of them looked terribly happy.

I guess I could understand why. Some had said that their series had gone off the rails when the new versions of the hardsuits were introduced. At least the old versions, while trim, accounted for basic physics, as well as common sense of how armor was supposed to work. Having a skintight midriff was basically begging for someone to sock you in the gut.

Then there was the matter of the ending. Sure, the new girls got an ending to their story, but it wasn't all that great. There's something to be said about having at least 3 protagonists being left naked, with no hope of rescue.

When these two groups of ladies first met, there may have been some tension. All right, there was a bit of what I call "revision revulsion." The girls from the original series didn't take too well to being replaced for a new series. When things ended, though, the tension generally went down. Nowadays, both groups of ladies were content to just pretend the other didn't exist.

That wasn't the case tonight. Tonight, the 2040 ladies looked like they were ready to toss down the figurative gauntlet.

"Priss, she was actually paying you a compliment," I pointed out. "What do you say that does NOT begin with `f?'"

Priss grumbled something I couldn't quite make out. I gave her the hairy eyeball until she relented.

"Thanks," she muttered. "Your Leon was a real jerk."

That surprised 2040 Priss. "Yeah, he is. Sometimes I want to break his jaw. At least your Leon cares about you, even if he's annoying on how he shows it."

Maybe this was something I could work with. I'd taken some negotiation classes back in the academy. There was a

possibility that I could at least get the two groups to not want to maim each other. After all, people always say that pigs can't fly, but Porco Rosso is around.

"You know, it seems to me that none of you ladies were happy about the new, revised series," I said. I gestured to the group that was with me. "You ladies were angry that you were never given the chance to end your story." I gestured to the women across the room. "You ladies were excited at first, but as things progressed, the story probably wasn't what you had in mind."

"Especially parts of the ending," 2040 Sylia said. "That was..."

"Hey, at least you kept your clothes on," 2040 Priss, Linna and Nene said at once.

Everyone in the restaurant gaped at them. They blushed simultaneously.

"In any case," I continued, "what's done is done and there's no sense lording this or that over the other person who has your name. Now, I'm not saying that you have to go camping and share s'mores around a fire, but...I think it might be a good idea to acknowledge what was different and why, not who was better or worse."

2040 Nene, the blonde, actually seemed a little impressed. "Wow. And here I thought you ran around, swinging your mallet."

I didn't wince as Nene grabbed my arm. She just needed a little moral support.

"Well, I may be capable of knocking someone down, I'd rather that things be settled before they get to that point." I looked between both groups. "Now, I understand that this may be a tough thing to do. Each group was very involved in the production of your shows, but I'm asking you to see things in a more objective light."

Both groups of ladies looked like they were giving it some thought. That was the best I could hope for.

"And hey, you can always share stories about what happened behind the scenes on your show," I joked. "I'm sure that there's a lot of stuff there."

That was when the floodgates opened. Both groups started opening up about this and that. The next thing I knew, all eight of them were eventually at one table, laughing and grousing about the utterly stupid things that happened.

"--and then they wanted me to run out in the street after a shower--" Blonde Nene complained.

"--didn't mind the workout clothes, but I really needed better dialogue--" Linna said.

"--what kind of sadist would give you THAT backstory with Mackie?" Sylia asked.

"Karaoke or jam battle? Loser pays for the winner's drinks." Priss said.

"You'd better hope that I'm not a lush that night." 2040 Priss replied.

"-ending, oh God, the ending-" the 2040 girls chorused.

"Crash sucked," the original Knight Sabers declared in unison.

I sat back and enjoyed the scene. Sometimes, there were days when life tried its very best to break you and sometimes, life gave you a break. I've learned to savor the latter.

It was a little while later that I drove Nene back to her apartment. She was humming something happily, though she was off-key. She'd had a glass or two of wine during dinner and she was in her happy place.

I parked the car on the curb. With some effort, I helped Nene get to the door of her apartment.

"Love you," she whispered. Then she giggled as if she'd been in on some cosmic joke.

"I love you too," I replied. "Come on, keep steady."

"Was I dancing on the table tonight? I'm not sure."

"No, I stopped you at two glasses of wine." I'd seen her drunk before. Right now, she was just pleasantly buzzed.

She wobbled as she patted my arm. "Good man. Good man. You're not some...pervy creep like some other people." She handed me her keys. "Meg's probably wondering where I am."

I opened her door and was immediately greeted by a kitten. Meg rubbed herself against my legs and then Nene's.

"Aw, pretty Meg," Nene slurred. "Mama's gonna get you your food."

"I'd recommend a couple of cups of water in you," I told her gently. "Get some rest, okay?" I gave her a quick peck on the forehead.

"Okay," She sounded younger than she really was.

When I got back to my car, the Thompsons were there. My good mood evaporated.

"Isn't that sweet?" Rex Thompson asked. "Love is such a wonderful thing."

"People who have something to lose are so entertaining to watch," Taylor Thompson declared. "The audience loves to watch them squirm out of a predicament."

"Or maybe fear of loss can be your downfall," Rex Thompson suggested. "How much can I take away from you and still retain your sanity?"

"You're not going to do anything," I said. "Not here, not now, anyway."

"And why not?" Taylor Thompson asked. "I could drain your personality right now, leave you little more than a puppet with me pulling the strings. I could set you loose and see the horror on your friends' faces."

"But nobody will be paying attention," I pointed out. "You like to sign your work. What artist really wants to sign their name as 'anonymous?'"

"He's got a point," Rex Thompson admitted.

"Yes, a very valid point," Taylor Thompson agreed. "I suppose it wouldn't be as much fun now." He smirked and looked at Nene's window. "Perhaps she'll wake up and wonder why she even loves you. Maybe tomorrow, she'll just treat you like any other co-worker."

I kept my face in a carefully neutral, but tired expression. Part of me wanted to rage and try to strangle him for threatening Nene. The rest of me knew that he was just trying to rattle me.

The Thompsons grinned at me for a few seconds too long for comfort. Then they simultaneously doffed their hats in a mock salute and vanished.

I waited until I was in my apartment before I allowed myself to have the shakes. The idea that my relationship with Nene could be blasted away on a whim, like some cosmic reset button—that scared me.

"Bloody Hell, Andy!" Jake shouted in my ear. Ow. "Have you seen that?! Have you seen what nonsense they're trying to pass?!"

"Good morning, Jake," I greeted him. I tried to sound nonchalant, but Jake wasn't having it.

"How can you be so bloody calm?!" he exclaimed. "Do you have any idea how many decades of precedence are being tossed out? I mean, we are talking cases as far back as Fleischer vs. Boop, Paramount vs. Oyl, MGM vs. Droopy! This is a bloody disaster for Animate rights!"

"Jake." I added a bit of the Edge to my voice. "Take a deep breath. In fact, take a few of them."

It was a few moments before he'd calmed down enough to talk without spitting into the phone. That passion was what made him a great lawyer, but at times he just boiled over.

"Sorry," Jake said. "I just can't believe something like this would pass muster."

"There's more going on behind the scenes than you think," I told him. "I can't say it over the line, though."

"Ah." There was a long silence after that. "Well, good luck to you. We should meet up after all this is over."

"I'll let you know. Hang in there, Jake."

"See you on the other side."

I hung up the phone. Hopefully, there would be time when we could laugh over dinner. I just had to survive today.

.....
People were on edge at the precinct house. Now, as impressive as it may have been to say that I deduced that from micro-gestures over the entire precinct, I didn't. Anybody would be on edge, considering the situation.

(Folks, the whole "micro-gesture" or "micro-expression" thing was watered down and taken out of context when it migrated from academia to the general public. In my experience, the twitch of an eyebrow or wrinkle of a nose isn't as important as the hand that's trying to stab me.)

The precinct house itself was stretched pretty thin. Other precincts had been called in to shore up the border areas between the main city and the Animate populations. This, of course, got the Animates tense, seeing a buildup of police activity. This was done by direct order of the mayor.

A lot of the cops knew that this was basically rattling sabers. The more experienced ones had to keep the hotheads in line. All it took was one spark, one incident on either side to get things rolling.

Ryo and I were at City Hall. On the way there, he'd told me that his "specialist" had found something interesting in Andy Hero's nightstand: A false bottom with pictures and a diary. Unfortunately, it wasn't something that I could immediately use.

After all, we still needed a warrant to search the premises. As quick as the courts were, they wouldn't be able to get one to us before the press conference. The judge did agree that there were irregularities with the witnesses who recanted their testimony. That was enough to get the ball rolling, but not fast enough.

Contrary to what people may think, I'm fine with being a leader. Some have said that I get the job done quickly so that I can get other stuff done.

That was true. I didn't want to be the kind of cop who always had to have committee meetings or that kind of thing. I I'd called in the right people for the situation and they were ready to act on my signal.

"This is Trenchcoat One. Check in time," I said to my radio.

One by one, everyone in the group gave the OK. They sounded nervous. I couldn't afford to sound nervous over the line.

The mayor took to the podium almost robotically. There wasn't any light in his eyes. In fact, you could have put a mannequin on stage and it would have gotten the same reaction from the crowd.

I'd actually talked to the mayor a few times before this. He seemed like a decent enough guy. I didn't agree with

everything he said, but he at least heard me out. I didn't get the impression that he was any sort of schemer, though you had to be just a little to make it up the City Hall steps. I just had the impression that, while overwhelmed by the mere fact that Animates exist, he wanted things to be right for as many people as possible.

Now he was just a puppet in the hands of a pair of sadists. He'd do and say whatever they wanted him to and feel nothing—until the strings had been cut. Maybe then everything would rush back.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the mayor began. There was hardly any emotion in his voice. "I have been proud to call this city my home. It is a city with a unique population."

Off to the side of the stage were Councilman Geoffries, Andy Hero and the Thompsons. They were all puffed up and looking smug. As far as they were concerned, their time had come. In fact, the Thompsons were starting to glow again from all the attention that was being focused their way.

"Due to recent events, it has been made clear that the current safety measures are not enough. Councilman Geoffries has pushed through a bill to ensure our city's safety in the face of Animate malcontents. Unfortunately, it is the actions of a very few that force us to act for the greater good."

All right, that was borderline word salad. Who uses "malcontents" in ordinary conversation, anyway? And "greater good?" There weren't a lot of concrete terms being used. This was just a rambling that went from point A to B. In other words, this wasn't one of the mayor's better speeches.

The Thompsons' grins got wider. If they could have gotten away with giggling on live TV, they probably would have done so.

"Andy Hero and his associates will be assisting me in making suggestions for further refinements to Animate law," the mayor continued. "Their service will be invaluable for these trying times."

Sure, their service will probably include, oh, research into lethal anti-Animate weapons. But that's all for the "greater good," right?

Steady, Mays. Keep it together. Resist the urge to jump onto the stage and throttle someone.

Geoffries puffed out his chest and strutted to meet the mayor. In one hand was the bill that was to be signed. The other hand was extended to shake the mayor's hand.

"Auguste?" I whispered into the radio. "Now, please."

Out of nowhere, Auguste's friend had appeared on stage. He beamed a winning smile towards both of them, embracing both the mayor and Councilman Geoffries.

"Tricia," I whispered into the radio. "Focus on the mayor, Geoffries and our new guest. Don't focus on the Thompsons."

I didn't receive an answer. I wasn't expecting one, as she was on the air.

Auguste's friend had escorted them to the table where the bill was to be signed. However, the bill was nowhere to be seen. Instead, they all sat down and, within moments, were surrounded by a group of attractive women.

"Now," the gentleman began, "this is obviously a momentous occasion. During my travels, I have been privileged and honored to be part of many such moments." He gestured to the mayor's personal bodyguards. "Would you be so kind as to get us appropriate beverages?"

The guards practically fell over themselves as they ran to get some drinks. They hurried back with a few bottles.

"What's going on?!" Andy Hero demanded. "What's the meaning of this?"

A quick glance to the right of the stage showed that the Thompsons weren't smirking anymore. That healthy glow with their suits, the ones that made them look like the Man from Del Monte, was fading by the moment. In fact, the Thompsons almost looked...concerned.

"Ah," the gentleman said as he examined the bottle. "I don't always drink this, but I do enjoy it on occasion." That

was a voice that spoke of experience and refinement, someone who knew what they wanted. "I am no stranger to moments like these, especially with Animate characters." He paused. "Forgive me, but would you like to hear about some of my smaller adventures?"

"Nobody's paying attention to us," I heard Taylor Thompson say. "That man's draining us!"

"That's impossible! Everything we do gets attention! There's no way that anyone could be that interesting as to not look at us!" Rex Thompson yelled.

Suddenly, there were fireworks just above the stage. Nobody cared.

A whirlpool containing sharks with lasers on their heads appeared above the stage. They were blown in the direction of the local aquarium.

"Nice one, Urd," I whispered in my radio.

In desperation, the Thompsons pulled out guns and prepared to shoot. The guards just offhandedly disarmed them and shoved them off the stage, tossing the guns to the police guard detail I'd assigned.

"Geoffries!" Rex Thompson screamed. "DO something!"

Councilman Geoffries just waved the Thompsons off dismissively, as if he was telling the servants to take the day off. He was utterly mesmerized by the tales that the gentleman was telling.

"Power levels at-10 percent?!" Taylor Thompson looked like he was sweating. "The ray needs more power for me to maintain- oh no."

"Trenchcoat One, this is Grand Poobah," the Chief said on the radio. There was a note of relish in his voice. "We're getting calls from the witnesses who recanted their testimony. Apparently, they've been illegally detained at a facility for the last week. They also said that they've been coerced to recant."

"Now that's very interesting," I said. "Have we gotten any calls from the Hero family yet, Grand Poobah?"

"Not yet."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if you get a call from them soon," I said. Given that the "personality draining" beam was starting to wear off, there wasn't any reason to expect any other shenanigans the Thompsons have pulled would start reversing themselves. It was kind of like getting that character to say their name backwards--everything eventually resets to normal.

"Who are you?!" Rex Thompson demanded. "How could you do all this?!"

"Did you hear something?" That was Councilman Geoffries. He'd been so intent on listening to the gentleman's stories that

he barely acknowledged the Thompsons--which was all part of the plan.

The gentleman shrugged. "I am but a man who acted upon his passions and picked up a few things along the way. You could say that I had something of a thirst for adventure in my younger days."

"Well, let's see how you like being deconstructed!" Rex Thompson shouted. He raised his fist and energy gathered in a white globe. "You are nothing but restless man, an accidental hero. You found no fulfillment in your home, so you wandered around, trying to fill the emptiness inside of you. You talk a big game, but in the end, you're just a hollow man."

The energy dissipated. It went off much like a balloon deflating.

"NO!" Rex Thompson shouted. "My Deconstructo-Ray is offline! HOW?!"

"With all due respect, Councilman, you may want to work on your hiring standards," the gentleman said. "It appears that some recent additions to your staff are a bit more temperamental than you thought."

The mayor blinked. "Wait, I was about to sign something. It seemed so important at the time."

"Yes, I believe that you were about to sign away the rights and freedoms of Animates," the gentleman said mildly. "I believe that the good Detective Mays has been working on this."

Have you ever felt everyone's attention on you? I don't mean an auditorium's worth when, say, you're about to perform. No, I mean the entire city is suddenly scrutinizing your every move.

"Mr. Mayor, I believe that you may want to check the wording on that bill," I said. "While it initially limits restrictions to just Animate mecha pilots, there are provisions to expand the restrictions based upon the current situation."

The mayor blinked as if he was waking up from a nap. I could see the light return to his eyes as he scrutinized the bill he was about to sign.

"This can't be right," he muttered. "Why would I authorize research into anti-Animate weapons?"

Now, Geoffries started to sweat. "Um, this was all presented beforehand, sir. You had ample time to read it."

The mayor kept reading the bill. The frown on his face got deeper the more he read.

"`Automatic amnesty for any anti-Animate actions if perpetuated by the group Natural Order?' I'm sorry, but this sounds like we're deputizing a group to commit hate crimes." He read further. "`The irrevocable pardon of Andy Hero for any and

all past actions including any claims of abuse.' Well, now I know you got Mr. Hero on your staff," the mayor said sourly.

"Mr. Mayor, I can explain—" Andy Hero started. He was cut off by the mayor's glare.

"No, Mr. Hero, I don't believe that you can." There was enough acid in the mayor's voice to burn through steel. "I don't know where my mind was before, but it's quite clear that I was under some sort of influence."

"`Influence?'" Hero laughed nervously. "What—what do you mean? I can't imagine you being anything less than clear-minded and even-handed in your duties to this city."

"Trenchcoat One, this is Grand Poobah," the Chief said on the radio. "We've got the call."

"Permission to make it public?" I fought like hell to keep a grin off my face.

"Granted," the Chief said. "They're very eager to talk to their son."

I raised my hand. "Mr. Mayor? Councilman Geoffries? Mr. Hero? I have someone on the other end of this line who can clarify this situation to everyone's satisfaction. That's what this is all about, right? We all want to put our cards on the table."

Andy Hero and Councilman Geoffries shared a nervous look. They chanced a glance back where the Thompsons had been, only to

find that the two had vanished. I knew that was the risk we took when we decided to ignore them. They wouldn't be far, though; their pride wouldn't allow them to lose like this.

The crowd practically parted in front of me as I made my way to the podium. I held the radio high, as if it held the answers to everything.

"This is the mayor," he said. We rigged up a connection between the radio and the microphone. "What can I do for you?"

"This is Byron Hero," the voice came back. "My wife and I would like to shed new light on recent events."

Andy Hero made some incoherent, sputtering sounds. Councilman Geoffries wasn't that much better off. That pretty much clinched that the two of them had been working together—and that they'd been aware of some of the shadier stuff.

"Well, I'm glad to hear from you, Mr. Hero, but I thought that you and your wife had been victim to a stroke," the mayor said. "It was in the news. Neither of you were capable of speaking."

"That's right!" Andy Hero exclaimed. "This has to be a trick!" He glared at me. "Your redheaded friend, the computer hacker, she's rigged up some voice disguise thing on the other end! This is something to rattle me! Well, I will not be rattled, Mays."

"Son, I expected a little more gratitude for what I've done for you," Byron Hero said. "But that's not the important thing. What's important is that everyone know that Rex and Taylor Thompson were responsible for our speechless state until just a few moments ago."

"That's quite an accusation," the mayor said. "Do you have proof?"

Byron Hero laughed without any hint of mirth. "Oh, the Thompsons didn't even bother to stop the security cameras when they visited. They obviously didn't care if they got caught. I guess that they figured they could get themselves out of any fix."

"This is a joke," Andy Hero muttered. "It's a PATHETIC JOKE!"

"If it is, son, I'm not laughing," Byron Hero said on the radio. "The thing is, I still love you, son. I called in every favor I could think of to help you out. Your mother and I hoped that you would turn away from the darkness that made you hurt those women—"

Andy Hero grabbed the radio out of my hand. The veins in his neck were bulging. Green eyes flared with rage as he stared down my radio.

"Show me the proof, `Dad,'" he sneered. "Show me the DAMN PROOF!"

"I'll do better than that, son," Byron said. "Our car should be arriving at city hall just about now."

Everyone's saw the sudden flash of the red and blue lights, followed by a brief blare of the siren. The crowd parted as a police car slowly drove towards the steps of city hall.

Byron and Avery Hero stepped out of the car. Nene and Ryo were there with them.

Tricia was quick to rush over to them. She went into full News Flash Mode.

"This is Tricia McMasters on the scene at City Hall with former police superintendent Byron Hero. He and his wife Avery have apparently recovered from their recent stroke." She pointed the microphone at them. "Mr. and Mrs. Hero, what do you have to say?"

"It's a miracle!" Andy Hero exclaimed. He fell to his knees and raised his hands to the heavens. "Thank you! Thank you for this—"

"Enough," Byron Hero said. "Get off your knees and take this like the man I wish you were."

"What?" Andy Hero squeaked. "But I'm just being thankful for—"

"Enough theatrics, son," Avery Hero said. Her voice was laced with scorn and disappointment. "We already know everything."

"Such as...?" the mayor prompted.

"Mr. Mayor, Rex and Taylor Thompson put my wife and I through a simulated stroke. Nothing was physically wrong with us, but we could not communicate. They did it because they claimed that tragedy is the basis for forging a truly great hero." Byron scoffed. "When our son found out, he made only token efforts for our care—no speech therapy or anything else of that nature."

There might have been a bit of moisture at the corner of Avery's eyes. It was hard to tell whether it was a tear or disappointment or anger. It was probably both.

"Our son would talk to us, confessing how much he hated us," Avery said. "He claimed that we pressured him into trying to be a policeman, that we forced him to associate with inferior people like Andrew Mays."

Wow. Was Andy Hero being a little snotty and classist when he said that? Yup.

"Mom, Dad, what are you talking about?" Andy Hero asked. "I love you both! It's—it's obvious that you haven't fully recovered from your ordeal. Here, let me take you back home—" He reached out to his father.

Byron gently, but firmly blocked the gesture. Two pairs of green eyes met each other. One pair was full of fear, the other full of disappointment.

"I expected better from you, son," Byron said. His voice was oddly calm. "I was so proud when you said that you wanted to continue the blue line, to honor those who came before you. If your heart had truly been in it, you would have made a great policeman."

"I can still be great," Andy Hero insisted. "I just never had the chance."

"No, you had all the chances in the world," his mother said. "You had the education and the opportunities. You had the tools and the talent to make yourself great." She shook her head. "It's what you chose that's disappointing."

Andy Hero gaped at his mother, his mouth opening and closing silently. His hands opened and closed reflexively, as if he wanted to grab something.

"Betrayed by my own parents," he whispered. "I guess that's just the fate of a hero. I wish I'd never encountered the Thompsons."

"You are speaking of these two?"

I blinked as the gentleman hefted the Thompsons by the collar, one with each hand. He smiled with satisfaction as he let the Thompsons fall to the ground. To his credit, he didn't dust off his hands theatrically.

"How did you--?" I asked. Then I realized something. The gentleman wasn't from around here.

"I met the most unusual woman while...discussing with these men," the gentleman said. "She had red hair that resembled a crab. I think that we had a meaningful discussion in our short time together."

"You took them down?" Ryo looked impressed. "What about their suits?"

"You give me far too much credit," the gentleman said modestly. "I am more of a lover than a fighter."

Ryo glared at him. "Sure, you are."

"That does not mean that I cannot handle myself," the gentleman said. "This...Washuu examined their suits when they were indisposed and she did something to their attention absorbers. I did not catch all of it, but I believe that they should pose little threat now."

Rex Thompson laughed. It was a ragged thing.

I knew that something bad was going to happen. Guys like the Thompsons always had something up their sleeve, even if they looked like they were down.

"Did you really think that we would go down that easily?" Taylor Thompson asked. I wanted to wipe that grin off his face. "You're just CHARACTERS! You're part of a STORY! You're clay to be molded and shaped as we will, nothing more!"

Does somebody have a god complex here? Who's a little megalomaniac? Yes you are, you are indeed.

Criminately. I'm thinking in baby talk to two very dangerous man babies. I'm not sure if this is a defense mechanism or what.

"All the good you've done, I can lay waste to!" Rex Thompson yelled. "I can make you a mere shadow of your former self! After all, there are NO REAL HEROES!"

Now the air was humming with power. They were probably burning through whatever reserves that P.L.O.T. armor was granting them. I could see the grin on Andy Hero's face as he shoved everyone aside to stand between the Thompsons.

"Are they going to blow up?!" Nene asked. "We have to get out of here!"

"They're not going to blow up. That wouldn't be dramatic enough for them," I said.

Ryo whipped out his Colt Python as fast as I could blink. Unflinchingly, he shot three times, one for each man's shoulder.

The bullets never reached the trio. Instead, they just stopped in mid-air and fell. It was proof that whatever was still powering the P.L.O.T. armor still had enough juice to protect the wearers—as well as anyone they chose.

Everyone's attention was on the Thompsons and Andy Hero. I kept my gaze on the trio, never looking away. If I did, I would have given away my ace in the hole--a small one that was slipped

into my pocket. If anyone else had been paying attention, they might have seen a mini-Urd scampering away in all the confusion.

What was inside was the last line of defense against the nightmare that my life could become. If my dreams were right, I'd be forced to drink retcon punch and become that lost private detective.

"Just toss it on the ground," I heard Urd's voice whisper in my ear. "You'll know what to do."

The world went white as the Thompsons flared like the sun. Everyone around me threw up their hands to protect my eyes. I just closed my eyes and felt for Urd's little gift, shoving it into the sleeve of my trenchcoat.

When I opened my eyes, I wasn't at City Hall anymore. There weren't any crowds or cameras. Wherever I was, it was well-lit. My guess was that I was in some large room, judging by the faint echoing of my footsteps.

I wasn't alone. The Thompsons and Andy Hero were in front of me. The men in white looked drained, but oddly exultant, as if they'd already won.

"Where are we?" I asked. I made to reach for my gun, even though I knew it probably wouldn't have done any good.

"We are in a safe space," Taylor Thompson said.

"Think of it as an in-between space," Rex Thompson continued.

"This is our dimensional fallout shelter. This is our last resort," Taylor Thompson said.

"This is for when things go so badly, we have to get out," Rex Thompson continued. "It's an escape feature built into every P.L.O.T. armor." He paused. "Funny, it looks a little different from what I was expecting."

"So, why'd you bring him?" I nodded to Andy Hero. "He's not part of the DDO. He's just the guy you're using, your patsy." I glared at Andy Hero. "Must be really something, knowing that your benefactors don't think of you as a person, but as a character to be manipulated."

"You know what, Mays? I don't care anymore." He took one step towards me. "I don't care about my reputation. I don't care about those women I played with. Hell, I don't even care about my parents tossing me under the bus." He sneered at me. "All I care about right now is making you suffer."

The Thompsons were on me before I could blink. Each one held an arm in back of me. With their free hands, both Thompsons gestured and a cannister appeared in front of Andy Hero.

"What is this?" Andy Hero asked as he took the cannister. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

"That...is retcon punch," Taylor Thompson said. "It follows the DDO's scorched earth policy if all else fails."

"Supposedly, it's brewed by 5th dimensional beings, but I never bought into that," Rex Thompson added. "Whoever drinks it can reset time around them."

"Technically, we could get in trouble for this," Taylor Thompson admitted. "But given how things have turned out, I believe that the DDO will overlook this."

"Reboot things right and you can have everything you've ever wanted," Rex Thompson said. "Money, power, women—it's all yours for the taking if you drink. You just have to think of that one moment you'd like to change, and it will be so."

"Nobody will know the difference—except us, of course," Taylor Thompson added with a giggle. "What good is being a meddler if you can't appreciate the results?"

"Don't do it," I warned Andy Hero. "That sounds like some nasty stuff."

He opened up the cannister and suddenly the room was filled with afterimages. They were ghosts that never were, whispers that were never said, yet somehow existed in this place that wasn't.

I saw the Thompsons out of their P.L.O.T. armor, pecking away at a computer like ordinary men. I saw Andy Hero as a rookie cop, his teeth glinting as he grinned with anticipation. I saw myself as that broken-down private eye, the one who died trying to get me to make things better.

"I just drink this?" Andy Hero asked the Thompsons.

"Of course," said Rex Thompson.

"It's that simple," added Taylor Thompson.

I struggled as Andy Hero put his lips on the cannister, about to drink. Then he stopped and sneered at me.

"No, it won't be me that resets everything." He took a step towards me. "It'll be you. You'll drink this stuff and never report me to the academy headmaster. You'll have never become a cop because I framed you for this."

"The Hell I will," I snarled. "I'm not drinking that stuff."

The Thompsons exchanged a look. It was disconcerting when they were in sync.

"Do we have enough power?" Rex Thompson asked.

"One last burst," Taylor Thompson confirmed.

In another timeline, I'd been blasted by the Thompsons. I'd been deconstructed and drained of my personality. They poured the punch down my throat as Andy Hero whispered details of the life he'd wanted for me.

Not now. Not ever again.

I'd bet everything on the hope that the P.L.O.T. armor couldn't protect them, drained as they were. I raised my foot and stomped hard on Rex Thompson's immaculate shoes. As he

screamed, he let go just enough for me to drive an elbow into his nose. He screamed, blood streaming from his nose.

Taylor Thompson's eyes flashed with rage, just before I turned and kneed him in the gut. He bent over just enough for me to grab his head and slam it against my knee. I pushed him back and advanced on Andy Hero.

To his credit, Andy Hero didn't make any threats about drinking the punch. He just brought it up to his lips—

--and I tossed Urd's little gamebreaker on the ground. It shattered and the room was filled with the smell of Klatchian coffee.

The ghosts and after-images blurred, then faded. The last one to go was of me as a private eye. Private Eye Andrew Mays gave me a thumbs up before he was gone, never to be.

The retcon punch evaporated in the container, just as Andy Hero was about to drink. His eyes went wide with rage as he tossed the cannister at me. I dodged it easily.

"You've taken EVERYTHING from me!" he screamed.
"EVERYTHING!"

"You had everything," I corrected him. "You just made some really lousy choices along the way." I didn't even bother to cover my mouth at the smell; it wouldn't hurt me. I figured that I'd had enough Klatchian coffee in my life to grant me a little leeway.

The Thompsons and Andy Hero screamed. I guess they saw exactly the kind of people they were, without the benefit of self-delusion. They fell to the ground and writhed as the coffee smell began to fade.

Then the door to Dupin's opened. Auguste daintily waved his hand and Urd's potion bomb had evaporated completely.

"Clever," Auguste commented. "Urd used a derivative of Klatchian coffee, the liquid reality check. That neutralized the retcon punch."

"Where--?" Andy Hero rasped. "How did you--?"

"Mister Hero, this is the waiting room to my establishment," Auguste said. "Regrettably, I cannot say that you or your associates are fit to be my clientele. As such, it is time for you to leave."

The Thompsons said nothing. They were having the reality of who they were shoved down their brainstems. They just sort of curled up and stared at nothing—or, perhaps they were staring at everything.

Auguste snapped his fingers twice. The waiting area was filled with big, burly figures that made football players look scrawny. One of the figures hefted the Thompsons, one in each arm. Another one flicked Andy Hero in the forehead, knocking him unconscious. That figure took him and slung him over the shoulder like a sack of flour.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Every good establishment has bouncers," Auguste said. He turned his attention to the dark figures. "You know where they go. Talk to those who know. They'll take care of things."

The figures nodded. Then they were gone.

"It was clever of Professor Hakubi to sabotage their teleporters," Auguste observed. "They did not suspect that they were being directed to my domain."

"So, it's all over? Just like that?"

Auguste smiled. "This case, yes. Your story was never meant to end the way Andy Hero wanted."

He gestured to the bar door. I followed him.

The bar was empty. Philip Marlowe and Miss Marple weren't playing chess. Sherlock wasn't playing Sudoku in a comfortable chair. Mike Hammer wasn't slugging down the good stuff and making eyes at some of the female detectives. Harry Dresden wasn't relaxing with a good beer and a steak sandwich. Sam Vimes wasn't grumbling about having become a politician. Uncle Eddie Valiant wasn't there to tell me about old Toontown capers. Even that shadowy corner was unoccupied by the guy who knew about shadows.

"Where is everybody?" I asked. "Never seen the place so deserted."

"Believe it or not, even this establishment has a last call," Auguste said mildly. "Every bar has to take care of logistical challenges. I just happen to have a better handle on it than most."

"I guess you do," I said.

"I imagine that you have quite a few questions to ask of me," Auguste said. "After all, you've been through quite a bit."

"Well, I do have one question that leads into a lot more: Why?"

He raised an eyebrow and looked...satisfied? "Fair enough," he said. "You are wondering why you can enter this establishment. You are wondering why I went to so much trouble to help you."

"That's a start, yeah."

He hummed thoughtfully as he reached to clean a glass. I guess it gave his hands something to do.

"You know that I am not from around here, to put it mildly. I am older than you think and more powerful than you've seen. I know beings that would make one shudder with the mere mention of their name."

"I kind of figured that. You used to joke that you have a cousin in Rhode Island who does something similar. He runs a bar for, what, super folks?"

Auguste smiled. "Ah, yes. It's quite an accomplishment, too. If nothing else, the rent's cheap in that dimension," he joked.

I drummed my fingers on the bar. "So, why a detectives' bar?"

Auguste looked thoughtful. "The beings I know, many of them believe they already know what they need to. I wouldn't say that they are not knowledgeable, but they are satisfied with that level of knowledge."

"So, they're almost...complacent, to a certain extent?"

Auguste chuckled. "Do you know how many beings you would have offended by that remark? The thing is, their drive to seek truth is...diminished."

"So, what sparked your interest?" I asked. "Does it have to do with your namesake?"

Auguste smiled. "I was wandering...aimlessly, I suppose. I was crossing dimensions with no more effort than you would use in going down the street. I was dissatisfied—until I encountered that version of me who was the first detective."

"It's a good thing you didn't accidentally squish him," I remarked. "That'd cause a hell of a lot of ripples."

"Indeed, it would," August agreed. "Without C. Auguste Dupin, there would be no Sherlock Holmes. Without Sherlock, the

idea of the detective, the seeker of truth—it may have formed in a far different way.

"It was fascinating, really," he continued. "Knowing the answer already is far different than seeking it. There was effort expended and the satisfaction afterwards. Thus, I came to know his story, as well as many others—yours included."

I shook my head. "Auguste, I'm just a cop. I'm a little more stubborn than most and maybe a hair smarter than some. I'm not a genius like Sherlock. I'm not an overpowering bruiser like Harry Dresden. I'm definitely not a guy with refined tastes like Nero Wolfe. Criminally, I'm not even as outright badass as Sam Vimes or Mike Hammer. So why was I invited to this bar?"

Auguste shrugged. "You are a detective, a seeker of truth. Your determination speaks for itself. You simply will not stop until the case has been solved." He smiled. "Your Uncle Eddie taught you well."

"Yeah, he did." I wondered if I was ever going to see Uncle Eddie again.

"I consider it my privilege and honor to host detectives such as yourself," Auguste said. "Even the young ones are quite fascinating—though I do wish young Mr. Kudo would stop trying to cross into the bar." He shook his head. "You all weave such fascinating stories."

"Is that all we are to you? We're just stories?"

All right, maybe I sounded a little hurt. I'd just helped deal with two men who didn't see me, my friends, or even my entire world as real people. The Thompsons just saw us as characters to be molded as they pleased.

"You are the ones who create the stories," he said.

"Stories can inspire. You and every detective who has entered this bar has left an impression upon humanity. You inspire them to go forth, to seek answers and not be complacent." He paused. "Well, Nero is a bit set in his ways, but he does seek the truth."

He put down the glass and gestured towards the deceptively small library. I stood up and walked there, wondering what was next.

Auguste plucked out a book and handed it to me. The title read "Andrew Mays, Anime Detective."

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered. "This is my story?"

"Oui," Auguste nodded. "Go ahead, open it up."

I did. I breezed through my childhood, with a cop as a father and a nurse as a mother. I zipped through the squabbles I had with my older brother Adam. I flinched as I flipped through the awkward pre-teen years, suddenly becoming a middle child when I was twelve and Alise came along.

I stopped and looked at Auguste. "What happens if I flip to the end? Does this tell me how I die?"

"Try it," Auguste suggested. "Go on."

I went to the end of the book. There were the words "THE END," but the rest of the pages leading up to the end were blank.

"It means whatever you think it means," he said. "It could mean that your life still has yet to be fully documented. Or, I could be preventing you from seeing those last few pages. In general, I am a firm believer in free will."

"This is the way I talk," I said. I gestured to the pages that had been written. "Every last word is how I talk. I even say 'criminatingly' at some times, and that's not a word that many people use."

He held out his hand for the book. I closed the book of my story and gave it to him.

"Ask yourself this, Andrew: Why are many detective stories written in the first person? Why are we, in general, strictly seeing things through one pair of eyes?"

"It's a narrative convention," I said. "It's a way of getting the reader to follow along, in hopes that they spot the clues just as the detective does." I paused. "You're telling me that it might be something else?"

"Perhaps, just perhaps, the detective may be talking to someone. Perhaps they are sharing their story with a confidant, someone who admires and accepts them. That is, after all, part of the duties of a bartender."

I blinked. Auguste knew every detective's story because they told him?

"Wow." I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I intervened because your story was never meant to be that way. Your story is that of a man who isn't nearly as cynical and hard-boiled as he believes." He almost grinned. "This is the story of a man who believes himself to be just an ordinary cop. It's a story of growth, acceptance and opening the heart to friendship and love. Your story was never meant to be a tragedy."

A chill went down my spine when I thought of Private Eye Andrew Mays. At our core, we weren't that different. He'd died trying to save Nene, taking the bullets for her.

"Will the DDO be back?" I didn't want them to come back. Their attitude towards gratuitous manipulation chilled me.

"They could try," Auguste said. "The bouncers have notified...higher powers. I doubt that you'll see the likes of the men in white again." He checked the clock. "Alas, I must prepare to open the bar."

"I need to get back," I said. "How long has it been?"

"Five minutes," Auguste said with a grin. "It is always five minutes. We will meet again." He reached into his pocket and tossed me a little box.

I opened the box. Inside was a voucher to one of the fanciest jewelry shops in town. Auguste had apparently wrangled a deal for one ring of my choice.

"I'll have to let you know how that turns out," I said. I stuffed the voucher into the pocket that led to Who Knows Where. "Thanks, Auguste."

"Take care, Andrew."

I went out into the street and, sure enough, it wasn't even 1 PM. I patted down my pockets as I realized that I didn't have my radio and I don't carry a cell phone.

With a sigh, I plunked down some change into a pay phone. There was some tense conversation, but I reassured everyone that I was alive and well.

Ryo arrived in my car. He grumbled about it not being as agile or as durable as his own. Nene was in the backseat, but she hopped out. She looked jittery, as if she wasn't sure what to expect.

"You just vanished and a few minutes later Andy Hero popped up looking like he'd seen too much and we didn't know where you were until just a few minutes ago!" Nene babbled. "We thought we'd lost you! I thought—"

I hugged her. She didn't respond for a few minutes, but then she hugged back. I could feel her shakes subside.

"I'm not going anywhere, kiddo," I murmured. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Her voice was muffled against my trenchcoat. I could tell she was trying not to cry.

In the driver's seat, Ryo sighed. I gave him a glare, but nothing too intense.

"You'd say the same to Kaori," I told him.

He seemed to think it over. "Probably, yeah." His expression turned more businesslike. "Come on, we've got a lot to explain to the Chief, the mayor and everyone who saw that mess."

Reluctantly, Nene and I separated. I pulled out a handkerchief from Who Knows Where and gave it to her. She dried her eyes.

We got into the car and Ryo drove us back to City Hall. I told them about Washuu sabotaging the Thompsons' P.L.O.T. armor, that near-miss with retcon punch—pretty much everything.

There was going to be a hell of a lot of paperwork when we got back. Things had to be documented and explained to everyone's satisfaction. That was the way the system worked.

I wouldn't have it any other way. That's what I signed up for.

A lot happened in the weeks after that. As it turns out, messing with peoples' heads and improperly detaining them is, well, kind of nasty in the eyes of the law. Those twenty witnesses? Well, as it turns out, there was a provision for coercion in the books. Given how many times people have been brainwashed or otherwise hit with some mental mojo, I probably shouldn't have been surprised.

On a related note, the mecha pilots who had been hit with that mental whammy had been cleared. They brought in some experts in that kind of thing. There were quite a few familiar faces. I made a note to never, ever get them mad at me.

Councilman Geoffries was out. After a hurried Council meeting, it was decided that he should be investigated for the catch-all charge of "improper behavior." During the investigation, his ties to some truly horrible people were revealed. Of course, his supporters (including the Natural Order group) stuck with him until it was obvious that there was no winning this one. So, they did their very best to weasel out of any connection.

The main attraction for the next few weeks was Andy Hero's trial. It's quite a thing to be charged with conspiracy, along with all the other charges from the women he'd wronged. Illegally detaining people with improper procedures accounted for quite a few nails in his figurative coffin.

Over ten years ago, Byron and Avery Hero did what they thought was right. They protected their son to the best of their abilities. As a result, Andy Hero had never really faced the consequences of his indiscretions. In fact, I think that his parents had bailed him out all his life, softening blows that he should have learned to take. It was only when he'd let them stay in that speechless state that they realized how far he'd fallen.

I'd given my testimony. I told the court the truth: Andy Hero had conspired with troublemakers from another dimension. It actually went down well, but then again, this city has a higher tolerance for strangeness.

Thing is, I took no pleasure in helping send Andy Hero to do some time. It was just the right thing to do. As tempted as I had been to save the courts some trouble, it wasn't my call. I swore to protect and serve, not be judge, jury and executioner.

I did a lot of thinking during those weeks. I thought about how both the Thompsons and Auguste saw me as part of a story, but only Auguste treated me like a person. I thought about how much things had changed, ever since I had to investigate a sunken skyscraper. Then, there was Nene to think about.

Look, I get it. She's not perfect, but then again, neither am I. We meshed well at work and off it. Somewhere along the way, she stopped idolizing me and she started caring about the messy person that I am. I'm not sure when I stopped thinking of her as just a cutie and started thinking of her as an intelligent, resourceful woman—who still had her ditzy moments.

I had long talks with my folks, my brother and my sister. I talked to Jake, Tricia and even Ryo about what to do. They all had suggestions, but they didn't push too much.

I tried not to make too big a deal when I slipped her the ring. I didn't try for champagne and roses, a string quartet or even chocolate. It was her night, so we just blew stuff up at the local arcade. When we were done, we stopped by a Chinese restaurant.

It was after dinner that we popped open the obligatory fortune cookies. Nene giggled at her fortune.

"`You will experience great happiness shortly,'" She shook her head. "Could that possibly get more generic?"

"Let's see what I've got." I cracked open my fortune cookie. "`Your commitment will be rewarded-`" I blinked. There was more text on the back. "`P.S., tell her now because I've got \$50 riding on you. Ryo.'" "

I looked up and realized that every seat in the restaurant had someone I knew. Jake and his lady friend Memory were there.

Tricia was nonchalantly sipping at her drink. Stan was smirking as his girlfriend (a gymnast, I think—hey, it made sense) looked on in amusement. I think I spotted Professor Kim from the Kawaii Institute. Hell, even the Chief was grinning.

Right next to us were Ryo and Kaori. Kaori's eyes were wet, mainly because she was showing off her new sparkler. Ryo looked extremely smug. Stranger still, he wasn't trying to hit on any of the women present, which meant—criminally, he'd done it for real. He'd actually committed to Kaori and they were engaged.

I felt several dozen pairs of eyes glaring at me. I almost didn't feel like myself as I dug out the jewelry box and opened it up.

"So...I don't suppose you want to—"

"YES!!!" Nene practically shrieked. "Yesyesyesyesyes!"

I blinked. "You're okay with it? You're okay with me?"

Almost everyone in the restaurant groaned. Then people stood up from their seats.

"Blimey!" Jake exclaimed. "You're proposing to your redheaded little goddess! Can't you be just a LITTLE smoother?!"

"Jake, I'm not a smooth talker," I reminded him.

"That's right, he's not," Tricia agreed readily. "But you can't deny that his heart's in the right place."

I fought the urge to chuckle and turned back to Nene. She was shakily holding out her left hand.

Oh, yeah. I had to make it official.

My hands might have been shaking a little, but the ring stayed firmly in my fingers. I slid the ring on and chased it with a little peck on the back of her hand. Nene turned beet red and started babbling as her fellow Knight Sabers congratulated her.

It took about six months before we finally tied the knot. I was okay with taking our time, but Nene's parents may have pushed a bit. I still had plenty of odd cases. After all, a cop's work is never done. One of the strangest cases happened when the Animate and human population, for the most part, switched. Now that was a lot of fallout.

Ryo and Kaori still have their scraps, but they're more verbal than physical. Usually, it takes them a day to cool off, but then they're back together. Thankfully, Ryo hasn't offered me any "marital advice."

I'd love to describe every detail of the wedding, but that would have taken longer than the actual ceremony itself. We were dressed in our best, said our vows and people cheered us on.

I guess that Auguste was right. This was the end of my story as a grumpy bachelor detective. Not many people seem to

want to read about happily married couples, at least, not for a detective. They claim that marriage saps the conflict out of any story.

Then again, there were some rumblings that I might not be a detective for long. The mayor recognized that I probably needed to expand my department a little, so I may get a promotion. I wouldn't want to be the Chief, though. I like keeping my hair.

I never did encounter anyone from the DDO again. I talked to Washuu and Urd and they hinted that some measures had been taken. I'd never know, and honestly, I'm probably better off.

(On another note, Washuu said that she'd always known about retcon punch. She had no desire to reshape the universe. After all, where was the fun in using science if you'd already laid down the rules?)

I still pop by Dupin's every once in a while. I catch up with Marlowe, with Harry Dresden, with Sam Vimes and that Librarian orangutan. Most of all, I'm just glad that I can chat with Uncle Eddie Valiant, now that we had another thing in common. And while I'm there, I know that I belong.

So, Auguste, if you're reading this, you probably have that little satisfied smile under that moustache of yours. I guess that over my lifetime, I've probably bent your ear a lot. The thing is, if this is the final chapter you read about me, then know that I'm happy. I don't know if there'll be another volume

in my story, but for now, this is a good place and time to go.
Thanks for everything.

Yeah, this is a good time to say those words:

THE END