

For the Good...

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For the Good...

by [XmagicalX \(Xparrot\)](#)

Summary

How much would you do for a friend? The Keeper and Hobbes risk everything to save Darien from his worst nightmares.

Notes

Disclaimers:

I love the humor in The Invisible Man. That tongue-in-cheek attitude is one of the most winning features of the show. But I can't write humor, really. So this isn't quite in that spirit. Sorry, guys.

This story was begun way back in January 2001. Despite my best intentions, it pretty much started out as an A/U, and as the series moved along into season 2, it became moreso. Since it is an A/U, for the most part I haven't tried retconning the discrepancies.

Finally, most of these folk belong to the SciFi Channel. The rest are mine, except one, who belongs to, umm, I'm not sure. But not me. I borrowed him briefly 'cuz I thought they would be so well matched. Apologies to certain 'shippers. I jest writes 'em as I sees 'em.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

You know what they say about the good of the many, how it's more important than the good of the one. Well, maybe sometimes that's true. But sometimes, some people...

As a friend of mine would say, it's crap.

There was a room, four walls, a ceiling, a floor, a single door always locked.

There was a man in the room. They rarely allowed him outside for any length of time. When they did, he often forgot those moments. Often, too, he didn't realize he was still in the room. After all, he was insane, most of the time.

When he wasn't, he tried to escape. And he would make himself remember where he was, why he was here, as much as he could recall, as much as he knew.

They had betrayed him. That was what he remembered.

Only somehow he couldn't make himself believe it.

The door opened. A doctor in a white labcoat entered.

Maybe a stranger. He couldn't remember if he had ever seen this one before. It took conscious control not to leap at the man's throat, control he only barely managed, and that an effort so great his hands shook.

"Feeling better today?" the doctor said, blandly, though he knew the danger. "Is it getting any easier?"

"Go to hell."

The doctor didn't respond. They never did. "You've shown admirable discipline. But it would be easier on you if you simply capitulated."

"Go to hell," he repeated.

And this time the doctor looked him straight in the eye, unflinching. "You're already there, you know."

Of course. They had sold him out, handed him over to these soft-spoken devils in their sterile white coats. This was the abyss, fifteen feet square, with padded walls and no windows. There was no escape from here. There was no hope.

But somehow, as painful as it was, he couldn't make himself believe that, either.

She was so engrossed in her work that she nearly didn't hear the doorbell, almost decided not to answer it when she did. But that would be suspicious, when they would know it was too early for her to have gone to bed.

She drew the cover over the table, removed her labcoat, and shut the door to her study. Brushing her hair out of her eyes, she crossed her apartment and opened the door just as knocking began. "Yes, who's—"

And stopped, blinked at the tall man on her stoop. "Eggy? What are you doing here?"

He blinked in turn at her abrupt surprise. "I'm sorry, if this isn't a convenient—"

"No—no! Come in." She took his arm and drew him inside, stood on her toes to brush her lips against his in a more welcoming greeting. "What does bring you here? I don't mean I mind in the least, but you're practically the last person I expected to see—"

"My colleagues and I came to LA on business," he explained, "and since we haven't even conversed on the telephone in over a month, I hoped to see you in person. Perhaps provide a pleasant distraction." He held up a folder of papers. "An associate obtained these. They are a pair of preliminary studies to be published in *Science* later this year; I thought you might appreciate an advance service."

She smiled and accepted the folder with as much eagerness as many women would have for chocolate or flowers, and gave him a longer kiss to show her gratitude. A week ago she would have been thrilled to see him. It had been too long, and she had been lonely of late. But now, when she was so close...

He sensed it. "Claire, if you're busy, I can come again tomorrow, or whenever would be best."

He would probably fly out from New York if she asked it. She had known him for almost a decade, but in ten years they had never done anything to formalize their intimacy. Both scientists, both separated from normal people, normal relationships, by their obsession as much as by their genius, they found in one another a kindred need. Their science and their work came first, and neither took offense at the other's priorities. All the same, what they shared was precious to both.

And she knew she could trust him, as she could trust only a very few others. "No, stay, please," she said. "You might, if you're willing, be able to help me with something."

"Of course," he agreed instantly. "What is it?"

"I'm working on a project. On...my own time." She saw him cock his head and nodded in answer to the unspoken question. "Yes. Without the sanction of my superiors."

"Ah." He passed no judgment, simply waited for her explanation.

She didn't know where to begin. "Here, it'd be simpler to show you." Taking his hand, she lead him to her study.

At one time the room had contained a small television, a desk she rarely used, and shelves of books she had no room for elsewhere. All of this had been relegated to a far corner in order to make space for the lab table, refrigeration unit, and various esoteric equipment, including an electron microscope and several cages of rats.

He examined the displays with interest, adjusted his glasses and poked his long nose into the racks of test-tubes and piles of computer printouts. "So what are you trying to synthesize?"

She sighed. Clapped over her chest, her hands tightened. "A counteragent."

"A counteragent? What is it intended to counter?"

"A mistake." Her eyes fell on the rows of tubes, most of them empty. She wasn't seeing the glass at all, nor the colored liquids within. Before her mind's eye memories flowed by, of needles and pain and stark desperation. She shook her head. "No, not a mistake. A crime."

She could hear his anxious questions, could hear her own pleas later, asking, begging to be allowed to continue her work. To be able to put right what her colleagues had wronged. "A sin."

The touch of his hand against her cheek restored her balance. She leaned her head into his shoulder, grateful for the release, to be able for a moment to drop the barriers she had necessarily erected around herself. His arms wrapped around her, demanding nothing, only giving the comfort of warmth, shelter. It was an illusion, that anything could be put right by a simple hug. But it strengthened her.

"We made a gland, a synthetic organ," she said. "We implanted it in a man. It worked as it was supposed to, but...there was a problem. One of our scientists was a traitor. He sabotaged the project."

"This gland—what does it do?"

"I can't tell you, not what it was designed to do. That's classified. What it's not supposed to do...that's what the original counteragent was for. But it...lost its efficacy. I've been trying to make a variation of that formula, though just lately it occurred to me, what if instead of making another counter, a neutralizing agent, why not design instead an epinephrine inhibitor. Dangerous, but at this point his system has probably been saturated for so long—" She stopped. "I'm sorry, I know you don't understand—"

He smiled. "It's all right. I'm accustomed enough to no one understanding my own discoveries; it makes for a pleasant change not to understand someone else's. Besides, I did follow most of that." Blue eyes went piercing behind the round-framed lenses. "This concerns your project of the last few years, does it not? The one you haven't been able to tell me of?"

"Yes," she said. "And no. Officially, it's no longer my project. He—" She swallowed, continued. "It's no longer under my agency's administration. Officially, it's no longer my responsibility. But it's not a matter of duty. It hasn't been for a long time. Now it's matter of...of..."

"Friendship," he said, and raised an eyebrow at her expression. "Yes? I haven't seen you this worked up about anything since Gloria's recovery." She had told him all the details of that case, once its classified status had been lowered. "You've mentioned him to me before. Daniel Faulkner, isn't it?"

"That's an alias," she said quietly.

"I wouldn't have expected otherwise. I do not need his real name to understand."

"You shouldn't be jealous."

He looked honestly affronted. "Of course I'm not. To begin with, we agreed early in our association that we would not be. I've gone on several dates in the past year; I assume you've done the same. Our work does leave us occasional moments of free time. If you ever were to find someone well suited to you, I would be happy for you. I believe you'd feel the same for me if the situation were reversed. I enjoy all the time we have together, little as it is, and will never regret it. I couldn't. But I understand we lead separate lives."

He embraced her again. "But beside this, nothing you've said has given me any reason for jealousy. You aren't in love with him, any more than you are with me. Less, I think. But he's your friend. Believe me, I know how much friendship is worth." He tilted his head to look down into her face, and his eyes glowed warmly. "I couldn't love you like this if you didn't understand. So, what can I do to help?"

It was a Friday. It was past five o'clock. Enough was enough. After ten minutes of standing in place, useless as a fur coat on a cat, Hobbes cleared his throat. The director looked up from his perusal of the report. He studied the two agents standing silently before his desk, and finally nodded curtly. "Good job."

"Thank you, sir," Lewis got in quickly. "It was nothing we couldn't handle." *Though I could have handled it better alone*, his sideways glance at his partner seemed to suggest.

The director's dark eyes flicked between the two men. "You're dismissed," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Lewis repeated. Hobbes was already heading toward the door.

The elevator took long enough to arrive that the other agent caught up with him. They didn't exchange a word on the ride to the ground floor. When the doors finally slid open, Lewis turned to him. "We'll need to prepare a cover report for the screen office. I'll have it done by Monday. Make sure you're here early to sign it."

Hobbes shrugged. "Yeah, whatever."

Lewis's eyes narrowed. "I'd leave all the paperwork to you, if I thought you'd bother to do it at all. That kind of half-ass bullshit you might be able to manage."

Give it a rest, kid, Hobbes was tempted to say. He'd been writing reports most of his life. This jerk didn't know how easy he had it. Making up false reports for the records of the FDA required less brains than a retarded frog. He'd love to have seen Lewis trying to justify an Agency mission under the auspices of the Department of Fish and Game. Now that had taken some real creativity. All they needed now to write a convincing record was a list of illegal substances.

There were other advantages to the Agency's changed cover. He had a better office in the new building, with a great view of the skyline. And the Agency had profited. Better equipment thanks to the bigger budget. They'd even expanded their operations in several areas.

It didn't make up for what they'd lost. Not by a long shot.

"See you Monday, *partner*," Lewis said as they exited the building. The acidity in the final word was enough to wither the plants on the main desk.

"Have a good weekend," Hobbes replied serenely. "Go shoot yourself on the firing range," he added under his breath.

Lewis might or might not have heard. He didn't respond, only marched to his black BMW and slammed the door shut behind him.

Hobbes climbed into his own car, a silver Taurus like the ones he used to drive way back when still with the Bureau. A couple years old, but dependable and fast. The upgrade was courtesy of the Agency's budget increase.

Lewis was navigating a turn, cautiously to keep from scraping his finish in the narrow lot. For an instant Hobbes considered pulling out immediately, ram the man's precious Beamer and hopefully demolish both cars. The Agency could afford to get them new ones. With a bit of luck they'd both sustain minor injuries, score a couple weeks' sick leave.

Nah, wouldn't be worth the paperwork. He watched the sleek vehicle roll past, gave his partner a sarcastic wave.

Partner. Now there was a joke. He'd had a partner before, a real partner. He knew what it was like, to have backup he wasn't afraid to put his back to, to know that they could handle any job together, and when there wasn't a job could still handle each other. Trust wasn't something that came easy to him by a long shot, but when it was there it was solid, unshakable. There were damn few who deserved it.

Lewis didn't compare. Partner in name only, and not even that within a month, Hobbes guessed. He probably had already filed for the transfer behind his back. That would make five in two years, six if they gave him a new guy. Must be some kind of Agency record.

Why did he stay with them? Two years...he should have given up by now. It was a lost cause, that was becoming obvious. Bobby Hobbes was no quitter. But when the situation was hopeless...even if Claire was holding on...

He clamped down on that train of thought fast. Those tracks led straight to depression. Focus on the bills on his desk. Focus on the rush hour traffic. Focus on his job—on the work he didn't believe in.

He had. For a long time that had been *all* he had believed in. Faith in his duty. Faith in his country.

Good thing he had found more, or he would have had the mother of all breakdowns when the truth came out.

He nearly had, when he was told they had gone through with it, despite all their protests. It had torn him up on so many levels that he had nearly convinced himself he couldn't handle it—locked himself in his house, stopped going to work, stopped going to his shrink, stopped taking his meds. It could've killed him, and he still wasn't sure that hadn't been his intent.

Then Claire had come over and explained things. Not quite that cut and dried. It didn't cover how she'd broken in. How he had nearly physically attacked her, did rip her apart with his words. How she had cried, and then she had pleaded with him, not sounding at all like herself, demeaned herself by shattering her objectivity to shake down his walls, get through to him.

Finally she did. He had gone back to the Agency, even if nothing was the same, there or in him, and accepted the new partner the Official's replacement assigned him. He closed his mind and focused on his duty.

And waited, until he nearly forgot what he waited for, and wondered if anything really mattered as it were.

Entering his apartment, he double checked the door locks and security system, hung his jacket on the hook, locked his gun in the drawer—couldn't keep it accessible for someone breaking in to find, and he couldn't hold it while cooking—and ambled to the refrigerator. Empty. Not that he was hungry tonight, anyway.

After poking around the cabinets, he located a can of soup and emptied it into a bowl. He had just stuck the bowl in the microwave when the phone rang. He picked it up. "Yeah?"

"Hobbes?"

"Kee—uh, Claire?"

"Yes." Clipped, impersonal. A knot of cold dread lodged in the pit of his stomach.

"Has something happened?" He didn't dare ask anything specific. She would know what he meant.

"Only personally," the cool voice on the phone said. "My great aunt Hannah died. It wasn't unexpected, but...I've been thinking about taking a vacation. I don't know where. I've been recalling old acquaintances—would you like to have dinner sometime, Hobbes?"

"Sure..." he managed, though truthfully he hadn't registered anything she had said after "great aunt Hannah died." It was their code phrase, the most important of the few they had worked out together. The signal that all was ready, at last.

Two years. It had been that long? It felt like forever...it felt like no time at all. As if he had gone to sleep and dreamed everything, and now he had woken up. It was time. The words echoed in his ears, an alarm clock ringing in his mind. It was time.

He wanted to shout, to wave his arms, hell, he wanted to dance. More than anything he wanted to ask her if she really meant it. But he didn't dare, on this open line. So all he said was, "Sorry to hear about your aunt. Dinner'd be great. This Wednesday at 6 be good for you? At Bernulli's? They got a great scallops pasta dish, with those little bay scallops that fit in your mouth without taking a really big bite."

"That sounds delicious," she said. "Thank you, Hobbes. I'll see you then."

She hung up.

Hobbes stared at the phone, exhaled a deep breath. He couldn't shout, when there was probably someone outside the window watching, listening in.

It was time.

Dinner? The microwave beeped and shut off. He took out the bowl of soup and began to wolf it down, mumbled a curse when his tongue was burned but kept eating. He was starving.

Suddenly everything was making sense again.

"So the man you're meeting with Wednesday was his partner?"

For the first fifteen minutes of the drive their conversation had stayed to more personal details, the final good-byes for who knows how many more months. But she knew his curiosity couldn't be suppressed forever. Claire glanced over at his tall form folded into the passenger seat, and nodded. "Hobbes is still an agent."

"Why did he stay with this Agency, if he feels about it as you do?"

"For the same reason I did. To have an in, when the time came."

"Waiting for you to perfect the new counteragent formula."

"It's far from perfect," she sighed.

"It's as well as you could make it," he told her, as he had been reassuring her all this week. Late at night, when she had awoken from nightmares more vivid than the usual specters, he had been beside her, a solid, warm presence to wrap her arms around, lulling her back to sleep. He had murmured to her the same solace he repeated now, it being all he had to offer.

"You've done what tests you could. The only real proof will be to use it on the actual subject, and you can't do that until you have him."

"But what if I'm wrong," she whispered. "Or what if I've been wrong—what if I'm too late. Maybe I shouldn't have waited..." She had no way of knowing what might have happened. Perhaps they had already found a replacement counteragent. Perhaps all their patience, all her efforts, had been pointless.

As useless as their objections had been then.

"You can't do this to him!"

She had argued against it, logically, passionately, it hadn't mattered. Darien Fawkes had been given into their hands without protest, at least from anyone who counted. He had fought it, and she had, and Hobbes had, but nothing had come of their efforts. How were they to suppose now would be any different, despite all their plans?

"You're sure there's nothing more I can do?"

The gentle bass of the man beside her cut through her troubled thoughts, momentarily dispersed them. She summoned a smile for him. "You've done enough. More than enough. The counteragent wouldn't be ready now without your help. It's a pity you never became a biochemist—"

He smiled wryly. "I've heard that from scientists of as many different disciplines as have appealed to you. I believe we both found what we were most suited for, however. Though if you ever developed an interest in psychokinetic—"

She almost laughed. "No, thank you. What I do is already far enough out there for me."

"Yes. You'll have to tell me more about it, if you ever have permission." He looked out the window. They were turning into the airport's driveway. The muted longing in his tone echoed her own feelings. "I hope you can come to New York soon, when this is all over."

"We'll have to go somewhere," she murmured.

"If you ever need a place to stay—or to hide—our doors are open," he promised. "We're high-profile enough to offer a good degree of protection, even from the forces you may be facing." He hesitated. "You are sure—"

"I'll be fine. We'll be fine." If she said it enough times, perhaps she could make it true. She pulled up to the curb. "You better get going. You'll miss your plane, and I have an appointment to make."

"This man you're visiting now. He is..?"

"Was. He was my boss. The Official." The designation came naturally to her lips, for all she hadn't spoken it for over a year. Someone else filled that position at the Agency now, but the title had been retired with the man. "He promised to help, when we were ready. I only hope

—" She cut herself off before she lost the last threads of her composure. This farewell was hard enough, on top of everything else.

"I hope he helps you as much as you need," he said, and leaned across the seat. Their lips met, and she closed her eyes, wound her fingers through his thick blond hair, not wanting to let go. At last they parted, reluctant, but driven by a sense of duty. He cradled her cheek in his hand for a moment, softly intoned, "Good luck."

Then he climbed out of the car, took his bag out of the back seat and headed for the terminal. At the double doors he turned, waved. She waved back, then drove away, avoiding a glimpse of his tall figure in the rearview mirror. As she maneuvered through the complex maze of airport ramps and lots, she felt the emotion constricting her chest ease, harden into pure resolve. She had no time for pains of the heart. And she needed to fortify herself for what was next.

By the time she exited the airport, her eyes no longer burned. The road was clear before her under the bright sun. So too were the memories, which she allowed to come. Better to deal with them now than when she met with the man himself, to think back two years to how it had all begun...

He had called them all in at once. That should have been their first clue. The Official wouldn't suffer the three of them together in his office if he could avoid it, on the grounds that he was a government employee, not a kindergarten teacher. Nevertheless, she was summoned along with Fawkes and Hobbes, sat beside them at the conference table and tried to look prim and mature, quite a feat with the two of them next to her jostling and joking like eight-year-olds.

"So what you think, Keep?" Hobbes wanted to know. "Think he could've done it?"

"Ah, give it up, man," Darien protested, "not six parakeets, not in three different bars—"

"They were in different states. I'm telling you, this guy—"

"I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you here," the Official said, with his usual impeccable timing.

"Asked'?" Darien echoed skeptically, under his breath.

The Official ignored the sarcasm. "In the next couple weeks, this Agency is about to go through some changes—big changes."

Hobbes sat up. "Am I getting laid off, sir? Because I think—"

"Hey," Darien also straightened in his chair, "you're not seriously firing Hobbes, are you?"

"--after ten years of working my—"

"--really don't want to deal with a new partner—"

"--honor your decision, but after every—"

"--don't you owe him something—"

"--I mean, the guy goes *insane*, even if usually he's a pretty good—"

"I'm not firing Hobbes," the Official pronounced, loudly enough to override the pair of them. "No one is being fired." He said it with his usual force, but he wouldn't look any of them in the eye. That should have been their second clue; the Official never had trouble facing anyone. But he barely glanced at Fawkes at all then. And Eberts, standing by his shoulder as always, stared fixedly at a point over their heads and offered nary a comment.

"Well, good," Darien said finally. "Uh, why are we here, then?"

"Let the Official get to it," the Keeper suggested.

"Yeah, Fawkes, let the boss get a word in edgewise—"

"The Agency," the Official spoke over them again, "is being assigned a new screen office."

"A new screen?" Darien frowned. "What, like a new slide projector? What's that supposed to mean?"

Hobbes grinned. "It means, my friend, no more chasing monkey smugglers or avenging national symbols of flight. It means we're leaving the Department of Fish & Game and becoming part of—what are we becoming part of, sir?"

"The Food & Drug Administration," Eberts offered, when the Official forbear to reply.

"The FDA? Sweet!" Hobbes whistled.

"Does that mean my research funds allowance will be raised?" Claire inquired eagerly. "Since the lab will be entirely justifiable."

"So we're going to be FDA agents?"

Hobbes nodded. "In name, anyway. We'll see some real action now, partner!"

"No. He won't."

The Official was imitating Eberts' concentration on a point on the wall above their heads. He wouldn't meet any of their suddenly riveted gazes.

"What are you saying?" the Keeper said slowly.

"Whatcha talking about, Fawkes won't?" Hobbes demanded simultaneously.

Darien stood, his height enough that his head intersected the Official's line of sight. "What's going on?" he asked, calmer than the other two. They fell silent, and Fawkes didn't ask again,

only stared steadily at his boss and waited.

"Another outfit has requested your transfer," the Official broke the silence at last. "They say we haven't been 'preserving the advantage of secrecy' in regards to your ability, and we've taken 'inadequate measures for protecting a critical government asset.'"

"Whoa, I'm an asset?"

"Shh!" The Keeper batted his arm.

"I argued against this, of course," the Official continued, "tried to tell them that preserving and protecting you was harder than it sounds—but in the course of the Agency's reorganization, the transfer was approved. You've been reassigned."

"So, who gets him?" Hobbes asked.

The Official's hesitation was so brief it was almost unnoticeable. "The CIA."

Claire nodded. It wasn't hard to deduce; very few government organizations knew of the existence of the I-man project, and given the successful resolutions of the missions the CIA had brought to them, they must have been eager to take out the Agency middleman in order to use Fawkes directly.

"Well, that's a step up the ladder," Hobbes remarked in the pause following. "Congrats, partner."

"Wait a minute," said Darien. "That's it? After everything, you're just—trading me away? Like a baseball card?"

"Think of it more like an all-star player moving up in the league," the Official told him.

"But who says I want to go up?" Darien objected. "What if I want to stay where I am?"

The Official shrugged. "Then I'm sorry, Fawkes. This is the way it goes."

They all protested, of course. But not too much; Hobbes had his job to consider, and the Keeper had her research—which they were assured would be allowed to continue. "It's not like Fawkes is going to be on another planet," the Official reasoned. "He'll be based at the CIA office in LA. You can see him whenever you have to. And they need your research."

Need it they did; they took the formula for the counteragent, and replicated the synthesis equipment. She personally trained two doctors in its use, and Darien got along reasonably well with his new caretakers. If he hadn't volunteered for the transfer, neither was he dragged into it entirely unwillingly. "It's no worse than getting shanghaied into this outfit," he told his Keeper the day before he left, but it was said jokingly, and with a hint of regret.

Hobbes was uncharacteristically quiet, both before and after Darien left. The Official wisely did not assign him a new partner, instead gave him solo assignments, or put him with other agents for single missions. He did his job as competently as ever, but there was a certain spirit lacking. Claire too found herself looking forward to work with less enthusiasm than she

had at one time, despite the move to the new facilities and the wonderfully extensive laboratory. She continued study on Quicksilver along with her other projects, though it seemed less urgent, with a well-funded CIA team paralleling her research.

Darien kept in touch, though they couldn't share many details of their various assignments, and Claire couldn't tell if he was enjoying himself any more or less from what he did say. During one conversation she had the impression he was missing the Agency, the team and the work, but she couldn't tell from where she drew that idea, or whether she was simply projecting her own feelings.

Despite her misgivings, she thought that overall it was going well for him, was even comforted thinking he might have truly found his niche at last, and the Agency had just been a step along the way. Hobbes was less content, but she believed he would get over it, when he realized it was true for Darien.

Perhaps Hobbes had noticed something she hadn't. Perhaps his trained instincts had warned him something was wrong—or maybe his paranoia.

No. He hadn't known, any more than she had. Even with all of her knowledge, even with all Hobbes's paranoia, how could they have guessed?

The Official—no, simply Charles Borden now, Claire reminded herself—lived at the same house he had resided in for ten years that she knew of, and likely much longer than that. It was a modest, nondescript, suburban dwelling, its only feature of note the small but carefully tended flower garden in front. An odd hobby for a former director of a top-secret agency, but there was little about the Official that had been usual. And probably even more she didn't have any idea of, she mused, walking up the pebbled terrace to the front door.

No sooner had she rung the bell than he answered it, looking doddering and amiable in a rumpled suit. "Claire. Come in. Come in. Would you like some tea?"

She allowed him to usher her through the door. Once it closed behind her, he dropped the grandfatherly routine so quickly it could make one's head spin, mild blue eyes going sharp and hard. "So you have a substitute counteragent," he demanded without preamble.

She nodded. Over the phone she had not been able to say anything; now she shortly confirmed the success of her recent experiments. "It's as good as it's going to be. I need the information you promised."

"I made the arrangements as soon as you contacted me. I have what you said you required. You're sure you're ready? And Agent Hobbes?"

"We're ready."

"Good," he said, bluntly. "Very good. I wasn't sure you were going to be in time."

That caught her off guard in spite of herself. "What do you mean, in time?"

Was there sympathy in his sober countenance? Maybe even concern? "I've been keeping tabs on the situation, waiting for you to get it done. You don't know the whole story yet. I didn't know if you could pull it off at all, and I was beginning to have my doubts. As it is, if you'd taken much longer, you might not have had a target to retrieve."

She leaned against the back of the sofa for a moment to brace herself, closed her eyes. When she opened them again Charlie Borden was still watching her steadily. "I'm sorry," he said.

The shock of the apology tipped her delicate balance, impelled her to speak when she would have stayed silent. "After what you did? How can you say that now?" She glared at him, all her suspicions rushing to the forefront of her mind. "Why are you bothering to help us at all? You're the one who told us there was nothing we could do."

"I remember." His eyes stayed on hers, boring into the shadows deep inside. "I made a mistake. I'm counting on you to rectify it. Even if what you're planning barely has a chance, it's the only one I have. Don't disappoint me."

"Fine." She drew herself up. "Give me the information we need, and we won't."

Bernulli's was a classy place. Wednesday evenings, as on most other days, it was full, though not crowded, humming with activity but never unpleasantly loud. Hobbes checked his watch, adjusted his tie, and glanced around surreptitiously at the dining patrons and eager-to-please waiters. No one stuck out obtrusively. If there were spies, they were good. Hopefully not good enough to overhear a conversation amid the rest of the chatter, however.

"Bobby?"

He looked up. His contact had arrived. She wore a long black dress and petite gold earrings, utterly appropriate to the setting, not in the least suspicious.

God, she was gorgeous. Somehow he always managed to forget that. Slender without being skinny, brilliant but not conceited. Elegant all around. He stood, smiled at her, the first real smile he had made in weeks. "Hi, Claire. How you doing?"

He moved hastily to pull her chair out for her before she could do it herself. "You cut your hair," he noted while she sat down. "It, uh, looks nice." He preferred it long, but her face was lovely either way.

She brushed her fingers self-consciously through her cropped locks, gave him a wan smile. "Thank you. It used to get in my eyes when I was working." She studied him for a moment. "You look good. Haven't changed at all."

"And that's a good thing?" He wondered if it were true. She was different. More than the hair. Her makeup couldn't completely hide the shadows under her eyes. She didn't look like she

had been sleeping any better than he had for the past week.

But it wouldn't be gentlemanly to point that out. "So how's work?" he asked. Keep it casual at first. Lull any observers into less close attention. And he didn't know how she was doing, beyond the certain crucial specifics. They still worked for the same Agency, but in different departments, different buildings. Their paths never crossed.

She played along willingly. "Fine. My latest research projects are coming along well. I have a couple papers almost completed. And you?"

"Oh, same old grind. Boss is a bastard, partner's a prick. Good thing these government jobs got nice benefits or we'd all have split years ago."

They continued with the small talk. The waiter appeared, took their orders and left again. Hobbes fooled with a breadstick, nibbling as they spoke. Claire kept her hands folded in her lap, except for sipping occasionally from her water glass.

When the appetizer came she leaned forward to take one of the stuffed mushrooms, and said softly, "I met with Charlie two days ago."

His fist clenched involuntarily. The breadstick snapped in two. "Yeah?" he said, as quietly. "How'd you manage it?"

"He had agreed to give us help."

"I'd rather give him a sock in the jaw."

Claire sighed. "That's why I went alone." She put the mushroom on her plate, gazed down at it with no hunger. "It doesn't matter what you think of him. If we're going to save Dar—" Hobbes motioned to cut her off, but she had already swallowed the words. "If we're going to do this," she restated, "we need the information he's supplying. Even retired, he still has connections we don't."

"What was the point of us sticking where we are, except to have connections?" He waved his hand. "Forget it. So? What'd you get out of him? When is this going down?"

Claire glanced around the restaurant, lowered her voice further, until she was barely more than subvocalizing. "They may be an opportunity soon. On Fridays—"

"Day after tomorrow?" He could barely get a handle on his excitement enough to keep his own voice down.

"It may be safer to wait, at least a week—"

"Screw that," Hobbes whispered fiercely. "Friday? We gotta get moving. It's been too long already. We aren't waiting any longer." His eyes narrowed. "Two more days, buddy. Just two more days."

Claire looked as if she might dispute it, then didn't. He saw understanding, agreement, in her face. She was more rational, the analytical scientist, but she was feeling this urgency as much

as he was. It had been too long, far too long already. Logician or not, she must remember as well as he did a year and a half ago, the last time they had seen Darien Fawkes. And looking into her shadowed eyes, he could see he wasn't the only one haunted by the too-clear memory of what they had had no choice but to abandon him to...

More than two months after Darien was reassigned to the CIA, Hobbes got a call from his ex-partner. Excepting a few e-mails they hadn't really been in contact, and Hobbes was surprised by how naturally they fell back into their old patterns of teasing and retaliation. Like they'd been separated for a long weekend, not weeks. "How's it hanging, Hobbes? Anything wild on the pharmacy front?"

"Nothing I can talk about on an open line. How are you doing, Fawkes? Pissed off your new boss yet?"

"Only a couple times."

"Couple dozen, you mean."

"Enough about me—bet you and the Official and Eberts are getting along great."

"Just dandy. You know you always were the trouble."

"Yeah, but I'm worth it. Did I mention I got a raise?"

"You got promoted from GS 6? You son of a—"

"Hey, none of this was my choice anyway. But Hobbes. Seriously. How's it going?"

"It's going fine. You know I've been in this gig a hell of a lot longer than you have, kid. You sure you're managing without me, though?"

"Without your sane and sensible guidance? Yeah, I'm getting by somehow. Actually it hasn't been difficult. They haven't given me anything serious."

"Really?" That did surprise Hobbes. He had assumed the CIA would be working their new toy for all he was worth. They certainly hadn't had any qualms about using Fawkes while he was with the Agency.

"I guess they're saving me for something special." Fawkes hesitated. "Actually, I've been thinking...at least I felt like I was *doing* something when I was with the Agency. Helping people, playing at being a hero. It was, I dunno, kinda fun."

"Yeah, Fawkes," Hobbes agreed. "It was. Have to admit it, it's not the same without you."

Darien took a moment to reply. "Yeah," he said at last. There was something indefinably altered in his tone. "It's not the same here, either."

Hobbes wondered if Fawkes had ever been told that before. That he made a difference, anywhere, to anyone. He opened his mouth to confirm it.

Darien started talking first. "That's sort of why I called. It's okay here, but I think...I was more useful in the Agency. So I'm going to apply for a transfer back."

"From the CIA? Ask them to put you back here?"

"Yeah. If they'll let me go. I'll tell them I'm more of an asset there than here. And you've got the new FDA funds; there shouldn't be problems 'protecting' me anymore. I thought you'd know the rigmarole for that better than me. Who I should apply to, that stuff."

"Uh—sure! I know who you can ask. They might not approve it, but—" Hobbes was already thinking through the best plan of attack. "The Official can pull some strings, and I got a couple of favors I can call in. If that's what you want—yeah, we can make this happen. I'll e-mail you the details, what forms you'll need, who you'll need to kiss up to—know you hate that, Fawkes, but if you want to get anything through a bureaucracy that's the only way you're gonna do it—"

"Yeah, I'm ready for all that crap." Darien sounded satisfied. Happy, even. "Great. Thanks, Bobby. I'll be in touch."

"See you, buddy." Hobbes hung up. He was surprised by how he felt himself. Not just pleased, but relieved. Like things were back on track. He could practically see the pieces of his life, always a fragmented pile, sliding back into more comfortably positions. Returning to work the next day he was almost startled not to find Fawkes there.

He sent the e-mail he had promised. But Fawkes never replied, and didn't contact him again. When Hobbes tried calling him he got an answering machine. The message he left brought no response.

The Keeper shrugged when Hobbes mentioned he hadn't heard from Darien in a week. "Neither have I. He's busy, I imagine."

So maybe they had finally put him on a real mission. And that must have changed his mind about requesting the transfer, because Fawkes never followed through on it.

Hobbes called a couple more times, at last got hold of Darien. Their conversation was brief, and Fawkes sounded tired, distracted. "Been rough. I can't talk about it. You know how it is, Hobbes."

"I know." They might work for the same government, but their agencies were not privy to the other's secrets. "Don't let it get to you. You can handle it."

"Of course. I'm their super-agent, right?"

"Just keep telling yourself that. You'll do great."

The matter of his transfer never came up. Hobbes didn't bother calling again, and neither did Fawkes. Hobbes put it out of his mind, focused on his job. Wasn't worth getting annoyed

about. Just the way things went. It wasn't like Fawkes had been anything more than his partner for a couple years. In the Bureau he'd been partners with that guy, what was his name—Hawkins. They had been partners for three years, and they never exchanged so much as a holiday card.

Still, he couldn't help but worry a bit—his screwed-up paranoia wouldn't allow it otherwise. The Keeper told him nothing was wrong, and he believed it. Mostly. No reason for it to be otherwise. Nothing suspicious in the silence. Fawkes had just moved on.

So it went. Until the Keeper called him, late one dreary, rainy, Saturday night. "Bobby? Are you free to come to my place? Darien's here."

"Fawkes?" Hobbes rolled his eyes. "So he is okay. That—"

"No." She paused for a heartbeat, and what he heard in that silence was enough to jerk him out his chair. He was standing before she said, "He's not okay. Can you please come quickly?"

They stayed at Bernulli's only long enough to finish their dinners. Not bothering to linger over a desert they had no stomach for, Hobbes and Claire drove directly from the restaurant to Claire's apartment.

Hobbes parked his car in the street and reached the door right behind the Keeper. The first thing he did upon entering was to scan for listening devices, using the detector he had given her last year. It was a state-of-the-art gadget, he had assured her, not available outside of the government and highly restricted within. She never asked how he had managed to obtain it, and used it faithfully once a week. So far she had never found a thing, but one never could be sure.

Hobbes too came up empty. His grunt was not satisfied, however. Prowling around her living room, he closed her blinds, then stalked to the stereo. "Mind if I play something?"

She shook her head. He flipped through her CDs, selected a classical collection and slid it into the machine. The gentle strings of a Vivaldi concerto filled the air.

Only then did Hobbes relax. "Gotta love Baroque tunes," he remarked. "Counterpoint violins are better than shouting for screwing up bugs. Hard to filter." Turning from the stereo to face her, he crossed his arms. "So, what's the plan?"

"First you should hear what the Offi—what Charlie told me." Claire also folded her arms over her chest, unconsciously protective, a guard against what she had to discuss. "Darien is no longer with the CIA. He hasn't been for several months."

"Yeah. We guessed he might not be. So where is he?"

Claire focused her gaze on the biochemistry journal on her coffee table. "A hospital adjunct. In a ward for the criminally insane." She heard Hobbes take a step back, then forward again; she couldn't raise her eyes to his. "He has yet to be charged with a specific crime. They're holding him in some kind of protective custody."

"Those sons of—"

"There's more." Claire kept her eyes on the fine print of the journal's major articles. "He's been placed under a particular program. Some of the details are in the paperwork Charlie gave me. The gist is, it's a study. Medical research."

Hobbes swore again, softly. "They've made him a lab rat again."

"Yes...no. Maybe. Bobby, whatever this program is, it's supposedly government funded, but I haven't found a single listing of it on any official register. And Darien is the only patient in that ward under the program—as far as I can find, he's the only one anywhere. This isn't a coincidence. They aren't just using him for some drug study."

"They know about the gland?"

"I think they have to. But I don't think they're trying to help him.

"Are we ever that lucky? So what else do you have?"

"Charlie's looking for more information. But..." The Keeper bit her bottom lip. "What we suspected then, what they were trying to do. They might've gone through with it. They very well might have. In which case..."

"In which case our problems are that much bigger," Hobbes said resignedly. But he knew as well as she did that either way, it was his former partner who would suffer the most.

Hobbes broke speed limits and most other traffic laws making it to the Keeper's apartment within ten minutes of her call, the night Darien appeared at her door. It was still more than enough time for his imagination to come up with a dozen dire fates which could have befallen Fawkes.

"He's not okay," she had told him. The truth was both better and worse than he expected. Better because physically he was unharmed, except a few scratches where he had run into a bush.

Worse because mentally he was not doing well. Not at all. His eyes were streaked with that terrible red, on the cusp of the full scarlet of quicksilver madness.

Upon reaching Claire's place, Hobbes barged through the door to find Fawkes seated on her sofa, leaning over with his elbows on his knees and his head bowed. At his entrance Darien's head jerked up, his bloodshot gaze taking a moment to focus. "Hobbes..." he murmured after an instant, and it wasn't clear if it was a greeting or a question.

The Keeper appeared, clutching car keys as she shrugged into her coat. "Bobby," she said hurriedly, touching his arm. "Thank you for coming. I have to go to the lab. Fortunately I've been working with the counteragent factors this past week, but it'll take me an hour or so to prepare a dose. It'll be too difficult to argue with the night watch to let him in—you'll need to stay here with him."

"No problem." Hobbes's attention was fixed on Fawkes. "You just hurry."

She nodded and was out the door. Hobbes approached the couch. Darien watched him, eyes narrowed in discomfort. "Stuck babysitting, huh," he said, but the strain it took him to sound casual was obvious.

"Yeah," Hobbes replied, almost as tense. "How you feeling?"

"Peachy. Never bet—" A gasp of pain interrupted the smart retort. Fawkes hunched over, one hand shooting up to the back of his neck.

When the spell passed, he swallowed, lifted his head with effort. "I'm sorry, Bobby."

Hobbes stared at him. "About what?"

"This. Everything. I wanted to call you before, but they—crap!" He winced again, twisting his head as if to turn away from the agony.

Hobbes dropped onto the couch beside him and took hold of his shoulders. "Tell me about it later," he instructed. "For now just hang in there. The Keeper'll be back soon. You're gonna be all right." He waited until he felt Darien relax minutely, let go and sat back. "How close are you, anyway?"

In answer Fawkes raised his arm, wrist toward him to reveal the snake tattoo. All but the head glowed vivid red.

"Oh, great," Hobbes groaned. "You aren't gonna go psycho on me, are you, Fawkes? I mean, it's been a few months, that's a lousy way to catch up on lost time." Never mind how Darien had got here, or why he had come back to them for help. That could be discussed later. Right now the important thing was getting him to stay sane until the Keeper returned. "Hang in there. You can do it, buddy."

"I'm trying." Fawkes exhaled, air hissing through clenched teeth. "Got it covered..." He closed his eyes, slowly inhaled and released the breath, mouthing a measured count. On his knees his fists were clenched tight enough to bleach the knuckles.

After a few breaths he opened his reddened eyes again. "Hobbes, you shouldn't be...if I lose it..."

"You won't. I ain't letting that happen," Hobbes averred. "You want anything? A glass of water? Or maybe watch some TV? The Cascade Jags are playing the Lakers, that should be a game worth—what?"

Darien had straightened up and was looking at him with a sort of wide-eyed bewilderment, comical but for the bloodshot whites. He shook his head at Hobbes's query, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. "Nothing. You do know I'm on the verge of quicksilver madness here, right? You remember that? Me trying to kill you, that kind of thing?"

"Kinda hard thing to forget, Fawkes. I'm advising against it, speaking as your friend. Insanity ain't all it's cracked up to be. So, you want to watch the game?"

Fawkes gaped at him for another second, then flopped back against the couch, closing his eyes. "Not really. Unless you want to. Actually—" His breath caught and his entire body went taut, but he bore the pain, continued, "How about you tell me how it's going at the office. What's not classified. Been...missing the place."

So Hobbes talked. He complained about Eberts, complimented the Official's handling of a matter he wasn't allowed to divulge the details of, and tossed around the names of the various agents he had worked with over the past couple months. Darien listened, to some of it anyway; he drifted in and out, peripherally engaged by Hobbes's gossip, then all his focus shifting inward to wrestle the demon which clawed at his brain, tore at him from the inside with honed talons. It showed itself only in spurts, flashes of agony.

It hadn't been this bad before, Hobbes was positive. Or maybe Darien never had fought it so hard. There almost seemed a shimmer around his eyes, not tears, but as if the crimson cast of madness was pulsing with its own life, and he restraining it with pure force of will. This was an entirely internal battle, one with which Hobbes could do nothing to assist him, nothing except continue to talk calmly and show his support, not turn aside for all that the increasing red of his eyes was damn unnerving.

It was likely the longest hour and a half of his life. Near the end Darien almost lost it. A stab of reaction shot through him painful enough that he cried out. Then, too soon recovered, he stood up, twisted around to face his former partner. Every motion was slow but smoothly controlled. When Hobbes met his eyes they looked filmed in blood, and burned. "I think you should go," Fawkes said, and it wasn't Darien's bass but even deeper, with the utter poise of a stalking predator.

Hobbes shook his head, also getting to his feet. "Not a chance, big guy." He grabbed Fawkes by the arms, felt the tension holding him rigid. "I'm not going anywhere." He steeled himself. "You're gonna get a grip, or you're gonna kill me, because I'm not gonna fight you, and I'm not leaving."

Fawkes jerked, fingers hooked into claws to reach for his throat, and for an instant Hobbes thought it was all over. He stood his ground, stared scarlet-eyed murder in the face without cringing. And Darien made a strangled whimper, like a kicked dog, and tore away, crumpled on the floor with his arms wrapped around himself. Hobbes knelt beside him, gripped his shoulder reassuringly and murmured a steady stream of encouragements, and silently wondered how any man could survive an assault on his soul.

The Keeper returned five minutes later. Hobbes helped Fawkes onto the couch while she prepped the hypodermic, then pushed up his sleeve to inject his arm with swift precision. As

the needle pierced his skin, Darien released a long, shuddering breath, sinking into the cushions.

"There, feeling better?" Hobbes asked.

"You're lucky, mate," Claire remarked, taking hold of Darien's wrist to check the monitor as the segments faded from red to green, one by one. "If I hadn't been planning to synthesize a batch of counteragent for tomorrow's tests—" She frowned. The segments had stopped changing color, leaving half the snake still red. "Darien—"

Fawkes craned his neck to get a look at the tattoo. "Yeah. That's about as good as it gets now." He sounded calmer, in control, though there were still lines of pain etched around his eyes.

"What do you mean?" the Keeper demanded.

Darien stretched, arching his back, then rubbed his neck reflexively. "They've been giving me a lot of counteragent. Even gave me access to own supply. They'd shoot me up when the snake was half full, sometimes less. I asked them about it, but they said they had it covered."

Claire's eyes were wide and intense. "But I warned them about that! Darien, if they aren't careful, that could build your resistance to the counteragent—"

"I know." Darien grimaced. "I told them that. They told me they had it covered. That's what they always said. I don't know why I believed them—hell, I know why. I wanted it to be true. It was so easy, almost like being normal... Geeze, I thought you guys were bad, but at least the Agency was honest about the dangers. Them, they just reassured me, didn't ever actually tell me a damn—" At their expressions he reigned in his mounting panic. "Yeah, I warned them. They didn't care. And then, last month..."

He trailed off, his gaze turning inward again. Hobbes was chary to disturb his focus, especially so soon past his battle with the madness; he was clearly exhausted, pushed to his very limits. But they had to know, now that he was in a position to explain. "What happened, Fawkes?"

Darien drew a deep breath, shoulders lifting, then dropping. "I went in and they told me they were out of counteragent. They said I had to wait."

"Why didn't they come to me?" Claire demanded.

"They told me they had contacted you," Darien said. "They told me you couldn't help, that you weren't working on the I-man project anymore, and you didn't have any suggestions." He looked at Claire. "They didn't contact you, did they?"

She shook her head wordlessly.

Darien shrugged again. "Thought so. But I didn't realize it at the time. So I did without." He rocked forward, his hands clasped tightly before him. "The madness came faster. I swear it did. Only took a day when by my count I had three, and I didn't quicksilver at all. I remember

sitting there, just watching the snake go red... They wouldn't lock me up. I suggested it, in case, but they didn't. They had people watching me, one of the doctors and a guard.

"I don't remember everything, after I snapped. I smashed up the room, attacked the guard, the doc too, I think. Finally they must have tranqed me. I woke up in a padded cell." He smiled with black humor. "Just like home. I thought I was back at the Agency for a second. Then the doctors came in.

"It had been six days. Nearly a week. They told me they'd had 'complications' making the counteragent. I hadn't been sedated for all of it, but I don't remember anything past the first day. Guess quicksilver can make memories vanish, too. They told me I didn't hurt anyone..." His brow furrowed. "That's wrong, though. I remember breaking the guard's arm. I heard it crack. Maybe they meant nothing permanent, I don't know.

"But the counteragent hasn't been working like it should since then. When I suggested they call you about it, that I should come see you myself, they 'advised' against it. Told me—" he chuckled, a wet sound like choking, "--told me they had it covered. I had to get out of there. Made it to you. You can help me. Please..."

He reached out one hand, groping as if he were blind. Claire took it immediately, squeezed. Hobbes patted his shoulder for lack of anything better. "We'll help you, Fawkes," he promised. "Whatever you need, we'll do it."

Darien nodded, his eyes shutting even as he tried to blink them open. Then he exhaled, sagging as if everything had been drained from him, leaving only an empty husk. His slack fingers slipped out of the Keeper's. By his measured breathing he was asleep.

Claire stroked back his sweat-soaked hair in a vain effort to smooth it, left her hand resting against his temple in a brief caress. Darien twitched, then soothed into a deeper repose.

"Whatever you need, buddy," Hobbes quietly repeated. "We'll help you."

The Vivaldi CD ended and restarted again from the opening movement. Hobbes paced the relatively secure confines of Claire's apartment, thinking out loud. "Why'd the CIA let anyone else have him? They were the ones who wanted him so bad to begin with, and we know why. So how come they gave him away?"

"We might be able to answer that better after the fact," Claire replied. "Perhaps we'll find some clue of who we're actually dealing with. Charlie didn't know. Bobby, if he didn't know, then the organization behind this program is of even higher secrecy than the Agency—much higher. I've never heard—"

"I have." Hobbes covered another lap, nine steps right and nine left, the anxious motion of a man who must move or else jump out of his skin. "Only rumors. Nothing but that, I thought. But something so beyond top secret it's barely part of the government. The President

probably doesn't know it exists; maybe one member of his cabinet does. The ultimate guardians of national security."

"What are we talking about here? The men in black?" Claire joked weakly.

"For all I know." Hobbes stopped, stuck his hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched. "In the FBI academy, I knew a guy, a Mulder-style wacko, who insisted that every government building had a secret sub-subbasement. The Omega level. Even I thought he was nuts. When I found out about the Agency, I thought maybe that's where he got it from. But I've heard a few things here and there, over the years. Enough to think that maybe he wasn't crazy after all."

He shook his head. "This is stupid. It doesn't matter. CIA, the Omega Division, same difference. They're bigger than us, more powerful than us, and they're using Fawkes. They don't care what they do to him, as long as they get whatever the hell it is they want. They'll do whatever they want to us, too, if they catch us, but we're the only chance he's got. So, why is Friday the best day for the rescue op?"

Claire collected herself with a sharp shake of her head. "I have here the files Charlie gave me. Apparently this program works with Darien primarily on weekends. Friday evenings they sedate him for a weekly physical examination. Then he is either taken elsewhere, or special doctors come to him. I don't have any details, only the regular schedule. But there is a period of time he'll be accessible, and if he's already sedated we should have less difficulty bringing him with us."

"Can we be ready by this Friday?"

She glanced at the file folder on her table, then back to Hobbes. "I need to talk again with Charlie, and it'll be a push—but yes. We should be able to manage it.

"All right." Hobbes checked his watch. "It's past midnight. So we're doing this tomorrow. We get Fawkes out. Or else we go down trying."

Friday invariably was the longest day of the week. This Friday didn't simply drag. Hobbes was convinced his watch went backwards when he wasn't looking.

He couldn't say it was a boring day. A brief car chase led to a longer pursuit on foot before he and his partner finally cornered three small-time crooks with connections to a big-time syndicate. Supposedly the Agency was tracking the commerce of surplus prescription drugs to the black market. The truth was somewhat darker, because medicines were far from the only thing being smuggled. Hobbes didn't know all the details, and didn't care to. Neither did Lewis.

Hobbes couldn't say why that non-curiosity in his partner annoyed him as much as it did. It made him feel almost obliged to ask for more information from their boss. He had to stop himself from so questioning the director when they made their preliminary report that

afternoon. Admittedly it wasn't that difficult to put his curiosity aside, with most of his mind on another matter.

Lewis didn't notice his preoccupation. "You better be on the ball next week," he did condescend to say before they left for the weekend. "I'm not covering your ass if you're late again. Yesterday and today was enough."

"Yeah, whatever." Didn't really matter as it were. Today might well have been his last day at the Agency.

"Hey, Hobbes." Hobbes turned at the difference in his tone. Lewis met his partner's eyes with a small reluctance. "You did good today," he admitted. "If you hadn't shot out their tire we'd have lost the perps."

"Thanks," Hobbes said, surprised. "No sweat."

"So, got any plans this weekend?"

Oh, me and an old friend are breaking into a secure facility to save my ex-partner from a clandestine government organization which is researching his biosynthetic gland for unknown but almost definitely unethical purposes. That is, if we're not too late to help him, and if we can succeed in breaching state-of-the-art defenses with some computer hacks and a lot of luck, and if we can then escape with a man who is probably about one baby step away from being a complete psychopath.

Hobbes shrugged. "Nothing much. What about you? Hot date or did she wise up and dump you?"

Lewis's halfway amicable expression darkened like an oncoming stormfront. "Screw you. Be here Monday before nine or I'm going straight to the director. I don't need to put up with this." He stalked out the doors.

"Guess she did," Hobbes mused, and gave Lewis time to leave before departing himself. Then he drove directly to Claire's place. It was already past five. No time to spare. Borden had promised to have everything they needed, so from here on it was up to the two of them.

The night Fawkes came to them for help, Hobbes and the Keeper were awake until three in the morning, discussing what he had told them. At last, having come to no definite conclusions, Claire retired to her bedroom, and Hobbes sacked out on the futon in her study. Darien spent the night on the couch where he had crashed.

The next morning they spoke with Darien, and with his agreement called the Official at the Agency and explained the situation. Their boss listened patiently. When Hobbes was through, he asked, "Fawkes is there at Claire's house now?"

"Yeah. He says he's feeling okay, but Keeper says he's going to be on the edge within three days, whether or not he quicksilvers. She wants him in the lab for tests and stuff."

"If she thinks it's best, all right. Bring him in."

"Are you sure, sir? Because we don't want to compromise the Agency, but if the CIA guesses he might have come back here, then we'd have to deny it, and I don't—"

"Bring him in," the Official repeated. "What time will you be here?"

Hobbes looked at the others. "An hour sound good to everyone? Okay. We'll be there in an hour."

So the three of them drove to the FDA offices. It wasn't until they were getting out of the car that Darien tensed. "Gland bugging you?" Hobbes muttered anxiously.

Darien shook his head, gaze searching the parking lot. "No...there's something..."

"Agent Fawkes."

Three men materialized from behind a sleek, silver van. All were in suits, two square-jawed and broad-shouldered as football jocks, the third tall but slight. He approached with smooth assurance, flanked by the burly pair.

Darien stared at the central man. "Giles?"

"You have to trust us, Fawkes. As your former colleagues here do." The thin man nodded congenially at Hobbes and the Keeper as he slid forward. Darien took a reflexive step back. Suddenly, with seamlessly quick stealth, Giles reached forward and jabbed a narrow metal tube to Fawkes's chest.

Something hissed. Darien lunged to the side, shimmering and vanishing as a ripple of quicksilver washed over him.

He was too late. One of the other men calculated his feint and grabbed his invisible form, shoving him against Claire's SUV. With a silvery tinkle, quicksilver cascaded down, revealing Fawkes braced against the car door. His brown eyes were wide and fixed on the Keeper, on Hobbes, with unmistakable accusation and a despairing betrayal.

Then he collapsed, eyes closing as his legs gave out. His captor caught him as he sagged.

Everything happened so fast Hobbes barely had time to pull his gun. "What'd you do to him?" he hollered, aiming at the man holding Darien.

"Dr. Giles." So snarling, Claire slapped Giles, hard enough that the man's head snapped back. The instrument dropped from his hands and rolled. She swiftly scooped it up.

"Fawkes?" Hobbes asked. When Darien, slumped against the car hood and supported by the man who had stopped him, made no response, he glanced to Claire. "What the hell is that?"

"A hypospray. High pressure injection. Fast acting." Her face was white as she brandished the silver cylinder at the other doctor. "What was in here? What did you give him?"

"Only a sedative." Giles rubbed his cheek where her blow had landed, then peremptorily snatched the instrument from her hands and pocketed it. "I'm sorry for the dramatics, but given his state of mind we didn't have much choice. If you'll excuse us."

"Hold it," Hobbes said. His gun didn't waver, still pointed at Giles's man. "You're not moving an inch—"

"Let them go, Hobbes."

Claire and Hobbes started and glanced back. The Official had emerged from the FDA building, his face grim and unreadable, Eberts a colorless shade at his side. "You're interfering with another agency's operation."

"Like hell! They just drugged Fawkes—"

"Agent Fawkes is CIA, not Agency," the Official said harshly. His eyes moved to Giles. "Doctor, take your patient and go. I apologize for my agents' transgressions."

"You're CIA?" Hobbes demanded.

"He's one of the doctors I trained in working with the QS gland," Claire said, icy fury sharpening her words. "Have you been deliberately building his resistance to the counteragent, Giles? Do you have any idea the damage you are—"

"The situation is fully under control, Doctor," Giles smoothly declared. "Please put him in the van, agents." He gestured to his men, who eyed Hobbes's gun still aimed in their direction, then shrugged and ignored the implied threat. The man supporting Darien half-carried, half-dragged him to the silver van while the other slid the side door open. They stowed him in the seat in the back, and the first man clambered in after him. They had a brief view of Darien draped over the seat, his head drooping awkwardly. Then the other man closed the door on both of them, went around to take the driver's seat, and started the engine.

"I don't know what Fawkes told you," Giles said, "but you must realize he's not thinking clearly. He's not been well. We're doing everything we can for him. Rest assured, we understand his value." He nodded cordially to the Official. "Thank you for your assistance. I'm sure you can explain everything to your agents; I have a patient to attend." He climbed into the passenger seat, and the van pulled out of the lot.

Hobbes turned and immediately headed for his own vehicle.

"Bobby, get back here now," the Official commanded.

"No time," Hobbes called back over his shoulder. "If we don't move it we're gonna lose 'em. You got them off their guard, we have to take advantage—"

"I'm telling you this only one more time, Agent Hobbes," the Official said. "This is another agency's business. It's not our concern."

Claire's eyes widened. "You set him up." She spoke with soft certainty. "You knew they were here—you told us to bring him so they could get him."

"We can't afford to interfere whenever we want to. They know what they're doing. Agent Fawkes is their business now. This isn't worth losing our careers."

"You fat bastard—"

"Sir," Claire said, still calmly, "do you know what they're doing to him? Regardless of Giles's allegation, Darien was not delusional. I've considered what he told me—"

"It's not our concern, Doctor."

"--if I'm right, the consequences—"

"Listen to me, Claire."

"--I don't know if they have a connection with Luke Lawson, or came up with it independently—"

"It's over," the Official growled, with the force to override her. "You and Hobbes are to put him—it—out of your mind. Whatever happens to Fawkes is no longer Agency business." His eyes flicked to his aide. "You better write up a memo, Eberts."

"Yes, sir." Eberts was staring down at the ground as intently as if the sequel to the book of Revelation were being penned on the lot's asphalt.

"Up yours," Hobbes snarled, savage. "Maybe you don't owe Fawkes nothing, maybe the Agency doesn't, but I do. He was my partner. He saved my life. There's no way I'm letting him go to hell without a fight." Drawing his badge from his pocket, he threw it down to the pavement at the Official's feet, then spun on his heel and stalked to his car.

The Official waited a moment in considering silence, then picked up the badge, handed it to Claire and instructed, "Stop him. He's no good to Fawkes if he can't keep his head." And turning, he walked back inside the building, Eberts trailing behind him.

Claire followed Bobby, understanding as the Official did that after the sleepless night and the shock of Darien's removal, Hobbes needed time to cool down, to release his anger before facing the situation clear-minded. There were other, better ways to handle this that wouldn't get them arrested or destroy their careers. This was a civilized country, where the sovereign rights of an innocent man would not simply be tossed aside. Open battle was not needed here to save him, only the logic and persistence to prove their point to an oblivious bureaucracy. They would manage this without breaking faith with the ideals they had always served.

Neither of them knew then that the brief glimpse through the CIA van's window as it drove away would be the last time they would lay eyes on Darien Fawkes.

Three and a half hours after leaving the Agency, Hobbes was walking into the psychiatric adjunct building of the San Bernardino County Hospital. He strode freely down the halls, following the route he had traced out on the hospital's floor plan. No one so much as glanced at his identification tag until he reached the set of fortified double doors leading to the north wing.

The receptionist behind the glass screen on the right wall was backed by a uniformed guard standing before the doors. Next to him, a black plaque with white block letters labeled the entrance to the Brighton Ward for the Criminally Insane.

The guard nodded once to Hobbes. The receptionist behind the glass looked up from her book. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah." Hobbes stepped up to the window and brandished his badge. "Good evening. I'm a federal agent. I have business here. Need to talk to one of the patients."

One plucked orange eyebrow went up. "Kinda late for an interrogation, isn't it?"

"This can't wait for Monday. The sting's tomorrow and if we don't have these names— anyway, I should be registered."

The receptionist checked her computer, squinted at his badge and nodded. "You're Vecchio? Yeah, you're listed. I'll call one of the doctors. There's a chair over there." She aimed her chin at the plastic seat across the hall and returned to her book.

Hobbes sat down and waited, tapping his fingers and hoping it was just his imagination that the guard was glaring at him. Claire had assured him that this part at least would go smoothly—or had conveyed Charlie Borden's assurances, which wasn't quite the same thing, to Hobbes's mind.

The ex-Official had come through on at least some of the bargain, providing the necessary false ID and making a timely addition to the hospital computer's schedule. The Keeper had given Hobbes the newly minted card last night. His picture was as lousy as the one on his real ID, and the name worse. "Vecchio? Oy, my grandma'll be rolling in her grave."

"There wasn't much choice," Claire said. "He didn't make up the name—rather than try to add an entirely new persona to the authorized database, he, or his hacker, rather, attached your data to another agent's record. Since the real David Vecchio is stationed in Chicago, there's little likelihood of him appearing here."

"So who is the Official's hacker, anyway?" Hobbes thought to ask, but Claire didn't know, and they had other concerns.

"The ID will get you through the door, but once inside he couldn't guarantee you'd be given free reign," she said. "And I can't come with you. I know at least one doctor on the staff personally, and I may have met the others, including those involved with Darien. It's very possible I encountered some of them during my time with the DOD. If they recognized me —"

"I follow. You're pretty well-known in those circles. And I'm a nobody agent."

"That's what they've needed to think," Claire said sharply. "Don't begin believing it yourself. Playing this subterfuge for this long should have proved that to you as much as it proved the lie to everyone else."

"Hell, I've always known how talented I am. Don't need the reminder. Though it's nice to hear it aloud." He grinned at her. "Especially from you."

She smiled back, that frustrating little smile of hers that could be teasing or just as easily be honestly meant, then grew serious again. "Once inside, it's up to you. If this goes wrong—"

"I know. We won't get another chance, once they're on to us." She had told him that, over a year ago, explaining why they so desperately needed to be patient, bide their time until everything was ready. If they failed in the first time, even if they weren't caught, they would never succeed against the increased security which the attempt would effect. This gambit was all or nothing.

It scared the hell out of him. But Bobby Hobbes was no stranger to pressure. Although every nerve in him was strung taut with tension, they sang with exhilaration, not petrified anxiety. One chance meant this had to succeed. He had to succeed. There was no other choice.

"Agent Vecchio?"

He stood up. A man in a white coat had emerged from the locked doors. He extended his hand to Hobbes. "I'm Dr. Lapier. You're here to question a patient?"

"Yeah." They shook. Lapier squeezed briefly and released as fast as was polite.

Hobbes gave the doctor a quick once-over, stifling a chill. He recognized the name from the Official's list. Not hospital staff, but attached to the project studying Fawkes.

Could he suspect? Hobbes dismissed the notion immediately. There probably weren't many doctors here at all on a Friday night. And even if Lapier knew Darien, there was little reason he would recognize Fawkes's former partner on sight. Much less chance that he'd have an inkling of their plans.

Nor was Lapier especially threatening in appearance. He was of medium build and medium height—putting him a couple inches taller than Bobby—with brownish hair thinning but not yet balding. All that saved him from stunning mediocrity were his eyes, which although a nondescript, muddy hazel, were slightly too wide-set, round enough to bulge. They had a disconcerting habit of locking onto objects without wavering or blinking.

Hobbes shrugged off his momentary alarm, quick enough it was unnoticeable. "Let's go, don't have all night." He brushed past the doctor and the guard, striding through the opened doors with brisk professionalism. Lapier had to hurry to catch up.

"Please keep your voice down, Agent," the doctor requested when the doors clapped shut behind them. "It's after curfew, so the patients are asleep."

Hobbes had studied the ward in close detail; he knew exactly where he was going. He headed for the elevator without delay. The sterile gray halls were half-lit, to enforce the perception of night for cells without windows to the outside. Barely visible through wired glass portals in the locked doors, patients slept in dark rooms.

Lapier produced a keycard to operate the elevator. "Third floor," Hobbes told him. At the doctor's askance look, he shrugged casually. "I've been here before, know my way around. Not my choice to disturb you at night, but this is a priority case."

"Ah." The elevator chimed as it came to a stop and opened. Hobbes stepped into the hall, the doctor at his heels inquiring, "Now, Agent, who are you here to see?"

Hobbes checked his watch, as if the late hour were his major concern. "Guy by the name of Fawkes. Darien Fawkes. Before he went bonkers he was a professional thief, and we think he had dealings with an international ring of—"

Lapier, halting in his tracks, cut short the fabrication. "Fawkes isn't available."

Realizing the doctor no longer walked with him, Hobbes also stopped. "What do you mean, he's not available?"

"Mr. Fawkes is in no condition to answer questions at the moment." Lapier offered a thin, unconvincing smile of placation. "If you'd given prior warning, we could have arranged something. Perhaps later this week..."

Hobbes pretended to consider it. "The sting's tomorrow morning; this really can't wait. Can you just show me to his cell? I'll take whatever I can get out of the guy."

"I'm afraid not." The doctor turned back to the elevator. "He's drugged at the moment, but even if he weren't it's unlikely you'd get anything useful out of him. Fawkes is severely schizophrenic. His psychosis is such that he's rarely coherent and often delusional, so you wouldn't be able to trust what answers you got from him. I'd advise you abandon this line of inquiry as unfeasible."

"Sorry to hear that," Hobbes said. As he spoke he scanned the hall, looking and listening for signs of another's presence. No one was in evidence. And they were right out of range of the security camera over the elevator. "I have to try, though. Boss won't listen to excuses unless I've at least seen the guy. Please, I just need a minute."

"I can't allow that, Agent." Lapier's thin smile might have widened in triumph. "Begging won't help. As a doctor, I have a responsibility to my patients, and I don't think your interrogation would benefit Fawkes. We can't risk triggering a violent episode. And he particularly hates anyone connected with the government."

"Gee, I wonder why," Hobbes said, and swung his fist.

He clocked Lapier on the jaw, and followed up with a blow to the back of his head. The doctor dropped like a lead weight, no so much as a whimper escaping his slack lips. Hobbes

massaged his bruised knuckles, muttered, "How come you science-types always got such hard skulls?"

Only a few steps down the hall he had spotted a maintenance closet. He dragged the doctor's unconscious body over to it and stowed him inside, leaning against a mop bucket. A quick frisk relieved Lapier of his keycard and a ring of keys. After a moment's thought, Hobbes removed his white coat as well. The sleeves were a little long but it fit reasonably otherwise. With a roll of packing tape on the closet's shelf he secured the doctor's wrists behind his back.

The corridor was still empty. The guards made their rounds only once an hour, and there were few doctors or orderlies on the night shift. Hobbes closed the closet door and tried keys until he found the match. He slipped it off the ring, locked the door, then gave the key a sharp kick. With a second kick the grip snapped off, leaving the key's shaft embedded in the bolt.

That should hold him long enough. In the labcoat with his borrowed keycard in hand, Hobbes strode purposefully down the hall. If he looked like he belonged here, it was less likely he would be questioned.

The route from the floorplans was burned into his memory. He turned down a hall, used the keycard to pass through a set of double doors, turned another corner, and he was there. The corridor was exactly like the rest, except the doors lining the walls here had no windows, and their steel was reinforced by double locks.

At the end of the hall, the doors were closed but the identification tags were empty, save the final one. Inside its plastic sheath, the medical chart was headed by a typed name: "Fawkes, Darien G."

"What's the 'G', Fawkes?" Hobbes muttered under his breath as one by one he tested the keys in the lock. "Don't see you as a 'Gerald', you were born before Ford. Gary? George? Gingrich? Goofball?—that's it!" The sixth key slid neatly into the tumbler.

He turned the key and it sprang, but the red light on the electronic lock below still blinked. Holding his breath, Hobbes swiped the keycard through the slot. The diode went dark and a steady green light flashed on. With a metallic click the bolt unlocked.

"All right," Hobbes breathed. Setting his fingers on the handle, he pressed down and swung the door outward.

The cell beyond was dark, the dim florescents from the hall casting their murky ambience over the padded walls. In the far left corner, the gray light picked out a cot bolted to the floor, and outlined the figure of the man seated upon it. Clothed in a shapeless white jumpsuit, his dark hair a blot against the uniformly neutral surroundings, he turned his head slowly toward the intrusion. Red eyes reflected like a cat's through the shadows.

Hobbes stared, all his expectations not enough to brace him for the simple shock of seeing his friend, alive. It took a second for him to overcome tongue-tied recognition enough to whisper, "Hey, Fawkes."

Parked in the far corner of the San Bernardino County Hospital's back lot, Claire sat in the rental car, waiting. Hobbes had been inside for less than an hour, but it might as well have been an eternity. Every minute pricked like a pin, needling her with the incessant pressure of time. There was nothing she could do, not until Bobby returned. She didn't dare turn on the radio or the light to read by. She couldn't draw attention to the car, or particularly herself inside. In untouched silence she sat and watched the back wall of the hospital building, the deserted loading docks lit by the single floodlight, the narrow fire-escape like a black spider's web strung down the side wall. Hobbes should be coming out of one of the two doors to the left, either the hospital kitchens or the fire exit. But not yet. Not this soon.

She trusted him. There were few others with whom she would have agreed to this plan, or gone to for assistance at all. Bobby was one of the only, perhaps the only person she would trust this much. He was quick, and very competent, and absolutely loyal. Not to the Agency anymore. But to what mattered...to who mattered. She didn't doubt him. Nervous as she was now, she wouldn't be here at all if she didn't believe in him.

Hobbes had wanted to charge to Darien's rescue immediately, when the time had come that they had finally realized there was no other way. The day after the Official retired, he had concocted a daring but reasonable plan of attack to retrieve his former partner. And she had rejected it flat-out. She had handled the situation terribly, she admitted now, but at the time she had been at the end of her rope, and they were both in a very tight spot, having already crossed the line multiple times in the course of their protests.

But she had come close, too close, to driving away Bobby entirely. It had been difficult to get back on his side. She had to bare her heart to win his trust—and he had earned her trust then, greater than ever before, because he never spoke of that time again, never embarrassed her by bringing it up, even obliquely.

Nevertheless, she still remembered every moment, every whispered plea, every tear. As well as she remembered their conversation afterwards, in the calm which fell when both of them had expended their last emotional reserves. It was then that they had hammered out the plan. She had stated the situation plainly. "We have two choices. First, we can do as they are instructing—forget everything we've seen, continue with our jobs—"

"Like hell!" Hobbes exploded.

She nodded. "My sentiments precisely. Which leaves the second option. Even if we succeed in engineering Darien's escape, we'd still have to handle his quicksilver madness. It would be difficult to hide him in such a condition, and dangerous for all concerned. We need a new counteragent, but I must have access to the labs to have any chance of developing it. We couldn't keep him out of their hands while I do that. The only solution is to continue as we've been doing until we have a new counteragent, then free him. After that, with Darien, we can decide on our next course of action."

"That's it," Hobbes agreed. "That's what we'll do."

"It will take time," she warned. "I don't know how long—to be honest, I don't know if I even *can* create an effective counteragent."

"You will," Hobbes told her, in a tone not to be contradicted. "You do that, and then we get him out."

"It may be years—"

"I get it," Bobby had said, and that was that. They had both done what they needed to do, she continuing her research, Hobbes tenaciously sticking with the Agency in spite of everything, though she knew how rough it had gotten for him in the last year.

And now they were here. She sat in the car Bobby had rented yesterday, using a name she was fairly certain didn't exist outside his imagination and an anonymous, untraceable Agency credit card. She watched the hospital and counted the seconds. They would come soon. Soon, this trial would be over, and everything else would begin.

Until then, she waited.

Darien stared at the man in the doorway, his scarlet eyes glazed, swaying as he sat up on the cot. Muted confusion crossed his face, then, gradually, realization, recognition. Anger, surprise, panicked disbelief flashed in quick succession over his shadowed features, all undercut by drugged lassitude and more jarring despair.

"Fawkes?" Hobbes whispered. It was all he could do to keep his voice from shaking. "It's me, Darien. It's Hobbes. We're getting you out of here."

Fawkes moved as if to stand. Instead he wilted, slowly slipping down until he lay across the bed, one arm draped over the edge so his long fingers crumpled against the floor.

Hobbes was beside him without being aware of moving. He took Fawkes by the shoulders, gave him a hard shake. Darien's head lolled back and forth, his eyes remaining closed. Either the drugs or the shock had felled him; he was completely unconscious. And unlikely to wake soon. Hobbes had been hoping to reach him before the weekly dose of sedatives had fully kicked in; this would have been easier if Fawkes could have walked out under his own power.

But what was done was done, and besides Fawkes might have been harder to handle awake. Hobbes thought fast about the alternatives. Carrying Darien would be the simplest, but he wasn't a lightweight, and if a guard or a doctor spotted them in the halls it would definitely look suspicious. There wasn't much time to spare, however. The project doctors would come for Fawkes within an hour for their weekly tests or whatever they did. Moreover, eventually Dr. Lapier's absence would be noted, or else he would wake up and either break or shout his way out of the janitor's closet.

Hobbes touched Darien's shoulder. "I'll be right back, Fawkes," he promised, even though the man was too far gone to hear. Still, it took all his will power to get up and walk out of the cell, leave him even for a moment. He had the terrible feeling that Darien would vanish again if he once let him out of his sight.

At the very end of the hall, only a few meters further down, Hobbes found what he sought, an empty gurney parked against the wall. He wheeled it back to the cell and loaded Fawkes onto it. Hefting him wasn't as difficult as it should have been; he weighed far less than was normal for a man of his height. Darien had always been lanky, but now he was gaunt, either starved or consumed by the hyper energy of the madness. Hobbes entertained a few brief but satisfying ideas of what he could do to those responsible for this, should he ever get hold of them. Preferably with his bare hands.

With Fawkes's long body arranged on the stretcher, Hobbes pushed the gurney into the hall. He shut and locked the cell door behind them, hoping that no one would bother to check inside to see that the room was empty. A forlorn hope, since they almost definitely monitored what locks were opened and would investigate once Lapier raised an alert. But he took whatever optimism he could get.

Just walking was difficult; Hobbes felt his legs cramp with the tension of holding himself to a measured, quick but not a suspiciously hurried pace. He wanted to run. He wanted out of here as fast as possible, probably almost as much as Fawkes did.

Everything went smoothly, they moving undisturbed through empty halls, until they reached the back elevator. The gurney fit in fine, and the lift sank smoothly down, but it stopped before reaching the first floor. Hobbes stared at the red diodes blinking the number '2', silently wishing them to change, continue the descent.

Instead the doors slid aside and an orderly in white entered. He nodded to Hobbes, amiably enough, but then gave a hard look at the gurney and its occupant. Dark eyes returned to Hobbes for another, more searching regard. "What are you doing with him?" the man asked.

Keep it cool. "Dr. Lapier's request," Hobbes replied evenly.

The orderly was eyeing him, trying to place him. Hobbes went out on a limb, figuring it better to be on the offensive. "I've never seen you around; who are you?"

It worked; the man shrugged, loosening a little. "I usually work day shift. Filling in for a friend tonight. Name's Mitchell."

"Vecchio," Hobbes introduced himself, extending his hand and willing Mitchell not to examine his ID too closely. The orderly was black, broad-shouldered, and had at least half a foot on him. Unlike Lapier, he wouldn't go down with one punch. If he noticed something was amiss...

He didn't. They shook, and as the elevator descended Mitchell inquired sociably, "So where are you taking Fawkes?"

"You know this guy?" Hobbes couldn't help but ask, his gaze involuntarily shooting to Darien's unconscious form.

"I've talked with him—I know, it's against policy, but it can't hurt to show a little compassion. When he's lucid he's a bright man. I've brought him a couple books; he likes to read. He

doesn't get any visitors—only Lapier and the others, and they don't seem to be doing much for him."

"What's he in for?" Hobbes tried to imitate only passing curiosity, though he doubted he was successfully concealing his interest.

However, the orderly didn't seem to mind; instead he responded to the care in his associate's voice by warming himself. "Don't know. He's been here a few months now, but I don't think it's for a crime. Might be because he presents a danger to himself and others." They had reached the first floor, but Mitchell didn't seem inclined to leave yet. "I don't know exactly what's wrong with him—I'm working toward my psych masters now, but I've never studied a schizophrenia quite like his. Some kind of paranoia...he thinks there's something inside of him, devouring his mind from the inside out."

Hobbes had pushed the gurney out of the elevator and was covertly surveying the hall. The doors to the right should lead to the kitchens, and the service exit. Almost home-free—but Mitchell was still here.

What the orderly was saying suddenly registered with Hobbes. "Paranoia?" God, he knew that feeling too well, on the edge of insanity, too close to back away but far enough distant to clearly see what you were about to fall into. Only the fears weren't only paranoia in this case, and Darien was already falling...

Mitchell mistook his suppressed horror for humor, and frowned. "It might sound funny, but if you heard him talking about it—it's enough to give you nightmares, just what he says. I've seen him when he goes manic; I can't imagine what it's like to live with that hanging over you."

Insightful or no, they didn't have time for this. "Yeah...well, I better getting moving, or the doctor'll have my hide," Hobbes said, adjusting his grip on the gurney. Just a little further, Fawkes, and we'll have you safely out of here...

"Hey, isn't Dr. Lapier's lab in the other direction—"

Suddenly, without warning, red lights snapped on up and down the hall. A muted alarm began wailing.

Hobbes glanced at Darien, then back to Mitchell, and with a sigh reached under his coat for the gun in his shoulder holster.

The orderly watched him with an evaluating frown. Abruptly he turned, and before Hobbes could stop him he had slid his card through the door's lock and was entering a code, fingers flying over the keypad. Hobbes gritted his teeth and took firm hold of Darien's gurney, vowing not to go down without a fight, or at least without a run for it.

The lock clicked, and the door opened.

"The kitchens are right through there," Mitchell said quickly. "The hexagonal key will get you through the side door to the back lot. I'd hurry."

Hobbes only gaped at Mitchell, until the orderly made a sharp gesture toward the exit. Then Hobbes hastily shoved the gurney through the door. "Thanks," he gasped over his shoulder.

Mitchell smiled grimly. "'Do no harm'," he quoted, more to himself than to Hobbes. Then he shut the door on them, re-locking it, and continued down the hall without looking back.

Claire almost stopped breathing when she heard the siren, low but unmistakable. A bright floodlight flashed to life, defining the deserted parking lot in stark white illumination. In the far corner of the lot, her car was barely still concealed.

She deliberated for a moment, then drew her revolver and took careful aim through the open window.

The crack of the gunshot overwhelmed the tinkle of glass as the light shattered. Again cloaked in darkness, safe from a camera's prying lens, she blinked back afterimages and stared at the shadowed hospital wall, wondering if she dared still hope.

An instant later, before she came to any conclusions, the side door banged open, and dark figures barreled out of it into the lot.

She ground the gears shifting as she zoomed over. Hobbes had picked up Darien off the gurney in a fireman's carry. He wrenched open the back door, undelicately wrestled Fawkes's limp body inside, and dove in after, slamming the door behind him. Claire stamped the accelerator, and they roared into motion.

"Not the driveway," Hobbes panted. "They'll be watching the main gates. The shoulder's low to the left. Go over."

Claire nodded and put on the gas. They hurdled the curb and bumped onto the grassy divider, flattened a low hedge and then rolled onto the street.

Hobbes had secured Fawkes. After strapping on his own belt, he leaned forward to touch Claire's shoulder. "Not too fast," he advised. "Last thing we need now is a speeding ticket."

She swallowed a giggle that came more from tension than humor, and risked a glance in the rearview mirror at her passengers. "How is he?"

Hobbes glanced down. Fawkes was stretched across the seat, his head on Hobbes's knee. "Okay, I think. He's way out but his breathing sounds good."

They drove a couple miles, Hobbes watching intently out the back window. "We weren't followed," he determined at last. "We can go to the rendezvous."

Claire took the next turn, easily navigating the city streets to the business district. In a few minutes they reached a vacant street corner. A plain dark vehicle was parked before them. "That's it?" Hobbes asked.

"That's it." Claire took the key out of her pocket. "He left it here this afternoon and took the bus home. No one will think twice about it parking in his driveway, since it belongs there." Hobbes had suggested the switch, but Claire had arranged the details.

After checking again for a tail, they exited the rental car. "Just leave the keys in the ignition," Hobbes instructed. "It'll be gone within an hour."

Darien didn't react as he was moved to the cramped back of the new car. They laid him out on the bench seat. Claire took a moment to check his pulse and thumbed up his eyelids. "They've got him on a heavy sedative," she confirmed.

"But he'll be okay?"

"He should be." She shut the car door and reassumed her position in the driver's seat, pulling onto the street again. "I imagine they've mapped his physiology carefully enough to administer safe dosages. He should awaken within a few hours."

"What about the quicksilver? You got the new counteragent all ready, right?"

"I have it. However, I can't use it until he's conscious and I've fully assessed his condition. His system needs to be clear of whatever they might've given him before I try it, or I don't know what the side-effects might be."

"He has to be totally clean—"

"Except of the quicksilver, yes."

Hobbes twisted to look back at Darien, limp on the seat, his closed eyes sunken. "Doesn't that mean he'll be wacko?"

"If our information is correct," Claire said grimly, "he should be quite accustomed to the madness by now."

They drove mostly in silence, muted by the enormity of what they had done, torn between the surprise of success and the sobering realization that it was only the beginning. Hobbes spent the ride alternating between leaning his head on his hand with his elbow on the window, and looking back at their sleeping passenger. Claire watched the road steadily and only lost control a few times, glancing at the man on the seat behind her while stopped at red lights.

When at last they pulled into the apartment's driveway, Hobbes only said, "This the place?" and Claire simply nodded confirmation. Hoping no one was watching out their window, they carried Darien to the door, which Claire unlocked with another key produced from her pocket.

"The guy's not home?" Hobbes asked.

"He'll be back tonight. He's often out late on Fridays. Driving in at this hour shouldn't seem suspicious."

Once in the silent apartment, Claire located the hall lightswitch, and lead Hobbes down to a white doors. The room inside was bare of all furnishings, except a neatly made bed, two chairs, and a portable cot against the wall. "I asked him to prepare the room for us," Claire explained. "Put Darien on the bed. I have restraints but I'm hoping they won't be necessary."

Hobbes complied, then looked around the empty room. Faded paint marked squares on the walls where pictures had recently been removed, and the floor bore scuff marks of furniture cleared to make a room suitable for their purposes. "Who's place is this? I know you told me the guy can be trusted, but who's going through all this trouble? If he's gonna be back soon anyway, you can tell me now."

"You wouldn't believe me if I did. It's just someone who wanted to help." Claire's faint smile vanished as she bent over Darien and gently examined him. "He shouldn't be out for much longer now. I better take a blood sample." She departed, returned a moment later with a hypodermic, a stethoscope, and a blood pressure cuff.

"You got a Keep set up here, too?" Hobbes inquired. "This your boyfriend's place or something?"

"No, of course not; he lives in New York," Claire said, distracted as she listened to Darien's heartbeat. "I brought most of my equipment here yesterday. I don't know if I'll be able to return to my flat anytime soon, especially if my involvement in this is realized."

"Lives in New York—" Hobbes began to ask.

Then he stopped. When Claire had slid the needle into Darien's arm, he had reacted with a faint groan. Hobbes's attention was instantly on him. "Fawkes? You there?"

"Darien?" Claire said calmly, touching his cheek. His lashes twitched.

Hobbes cocked his head as he heard the apartment door open and footsteps tramp inside. "Sounds like whoever-it-is is back."

"So is Darien," Claire remarked.

Hobbes looked down again in time to see Darien's eyes flutter open, foggy and dazed. In spite of everything, Bobby grinned. "Hey, partner. Glad to have you with us."

Darien's brow wrinkled slightly as he blinked, trying to focus. His lips moved but he wasn't up for speech yet. Hobbes reached down to grip his shoulder supportively.

The footsteps hurried down the hall, and the door was flung open. Hobbes glanced over, then did a double take.

"You're safe, Darien," Claire said reassuringly, as Darien stared at her in half-aware shock.

In a similar state, Hobbes stared at the man in the doorway, and demanded, "Eberts, what the hell are you doing here?"

Hobbes stared at the man in the doorway, and demanded, "Eberts, what the hell are you doing here?"

Eberts sighed. "I live here, Robert."

"But that—you mean—"

Eberts, ignoring Hobbes's dropped jaw, turned to Claire and her patient. "How is he?"

Claire's attention was entirely centered on Darien. She kept her voice pitched low and moderated, the gentle tones one would use to soothe a frightened animal. "Darien, do you know me?" Without looking away from him and in the same mode she answered the question, "He only just awoke; he's drugged and still is dazed."

More than just dazed. The ceiling light was purposely turned low but even through the dimness Hobbes could see Fawkes's wide eyes were too dark, the whites stained scarlet. His gaze jumped from person to person without seeming able to focus, without any recognition.

"But you got him out." Eberts sounded either amazed or flatly disbelieving.

"Obviously, Eberts," Hobbes hissed, his ire automatically rising. He hadn't spoken face to face with the Official's former lackey for months, but nothing had changed between them.

"Boys," the Keeper reprimanded, softly.

Hobbes winced internally. Now was not the time for petty sniping. Eberts was merely a target for the anxiety churning his stomach, as he watched Darien regain consciousness—if it was Darien at all, if anything was left within the madness—

Needing to offer reassurance almost as badly as he needed it himself, he stepped forward to touch Darien's shoulder, lightly, just to call attention to himself. "Fawkes," he said, but that didn't feel right, "Darien...hey, buddy. How—"

He didn't get any further. At the sound of his name Darien blinked and turned those disturbing red eyes onto Hobbes. For an instant there was only confusion in his face; then remembrance struck like a bolt of lightning.

Darien jerked up, his mouth opened, and he screamed. It wasn't with rage or fear, but pain, without any articulation of words. His eyes remained locked on Hobbes as if he could not force them away.

Horrorstruck, Hobbes stared back, rooted in place as Fawkes hollered, until Claire grabbed his arm and forcefully pulled him to the door. "I'm sorry, Bobby, but leave," she plead. "Wait in the hall, we'll try to calm him down..."

He craned his neck to look over her shoulder. Eberts, only momentarily frozen, had been quick to act and had Darien by the shoulders, was blocking his view of Hobbes while trying to quiet him. Before Hobbes could do more than nod agreement, Claire closed the door in his face.

The screams had stopped, at least. Left alone in the hallway, Hobbes leaned against the opposite wall and caught his breath. His heart was pounding like he had run a five minute mile. He felt as if he had been physically attacked; his chest hurt and he had to clench his teeth to keep from gasping. He had expected, he had known it would be bad, had steeled himself for Fawkes to be changed, and of course for him to be angry, if he still believed they had betrayed him. But that reaction...and just to him, because the Keeper and Eberts were with him now and all was quiet.

He could have been angry, but he was only terrified at first. Fury built slowly as he waited, anger at the human monsters who had done this to Fawkes, and at Claire and Eberts for whatever privilege they had that he lacked, and then at himself for whatever part he might have unwillingly played...

It felt like eternity but was in reality closer to a quarter of an hour when Claire emerged from the room. "He's asleep again," she said. "Restlessly but Eberts is watching him. I'm taking the opportunity to test the blood sample and see if there's anything I should be concerned about."

"Claire," Hobbes said urgently, "what was that in there? When he saw me?"

She brushed her bangs back from her forehead, though they were too short to get in her eyes. "I don't know. He's definitely experiencing quicksilver madness, and it may be an advanced state we never saw. I don't mean to be insensitive, Bobby, but we don't have much time; I don't know how long he'll sleep."

Hobbes nodded and stepped out of her way. Then, for lack of anything better and since he didn't dare enter Darien's room, he followed her to the study, where her equipment was spread haphazardly across a desk and a card table. There were still pictures on the walls here, a couple art prints and framed photographs. Eberts was in several.

Hobbes shook his head. "Claire, how'd you get his help?"

"Eberts? He came to me, actually." She sat down at the desk and began prepping a slide of the blood sample for the microscope. "He volunteered his help only a little after you and I began planning."

"Like, a couple years ago? And you agreed? Isn't he still with the Agency?"

"So are we," Claire reminded him.

"Yeah, well, we don't head Accounting."

The Keeper slid the slide under the scope and squinted into the eyepiece. "He has an impeccable reputation. Almost above suspicion. It's unlikely there's anyone watching him or his house. We need that immunity, to keep Darien safe."

"Can we trust him, though?"

"He's already helped us."

"He has?" Hobbes's eyes narrowed. "Wait, *he's* the Official's hacker?"

Claire nodded, then pursed her lips as she siphoned another fraction of the blood sample and dripped it into a testtube. "Bobby, I need to concentrate," she said apologetically.

"Okay. I'm quiet. Won't hear another word out of me." He sealed his lips, leaned back in his chair, and watched her work with all the patience he could muster.

Hobbes hadn't dozed off, precisely, but his eyes were half-mast and he had lost track of time when abruptly he snapped into full alertness. He launched to his feet.

Claire looked up at the retort of the chair legs clattering against the floor. "What?"

He looked at the clock. He had been sitting there for an hour, but the awareness of time wasn't what had awoken him. "I don't know. Did you hear something?"

"I've been concentrating."

"How's it coming?"

"I think it may be safe to try it."

"Good. Great."

"I'm preparing the dose now. It won't be much longer."

Hobbes started for the door. "I'm going to check on him." When Claire opened her mouth he raised his hand. "I'll just sneak a peek inside. Won't even enter the room." But he needed to check. Something wasn't right. He was familiar enough with paranoia to know the difference between psychological crossed wires and genuine concerns, even if it didn't help him handle the former any better.

He knocked on the guestroom door lightly, and when there was no answer, opened it. And swore.

The bed where they had left Darien asleep was empty. Eberts was on the floor by the door. Hobbes crouched and shook his shoulder, not gently.

Eberts groaned and blinked, struggled to sit up. "Wh...what—Robert!"

"Did Fawkes do this?"

"Don't know..." Eberts winced and raised his hand to the back of his head, where a splendid blue bruise was forming. "Thought he was asleep...I was going to check on your progress—"

He left Eberts on the floor and ran the short length of the hall. "Crap. Damn. Shit." Hobbes decided he needed to learn another language. English didn't have enough expletives.

The front door was still locked. He booked it the ten feet back to Claire's makeshift lab. He could have shouted but didn't want to alert Darien. He probably was still in the apartment—he had faked being asleep until Eberts had opened the door, though it hadn't been locked. Maybe he was so used to doors being locked that he no longer tried them. And was screwed up enough in the head not to know what safety meant anymore.

The apartment wasn't big; he shouldn't be able to hide long—unless he went invisible...

"Claire," Hobbes began, "we have a prob—aw, hell."

Claire had found their fugitive. Or rather he had found her.

Darien's hands were around her neck, not quite tightly enough to cut off all air, but the flesh was white where his fingers dug in. She stared up at him, breathing shallowly, her eyes wide with as close to terror as Hobbes had ever seen in her.

But it was nothing next to the absolute fear on Darien's face as he stared down at her, terrible red eyes filmed with liquid tears. "Stop it," he whispered. Hobbes strained to hear the hoarse entreaty. "Stop this. Stop it now."

He jerked up his hands, forcing Claire to her toes to lessen the pressure on her throat. A tiny whimper escaped her, but Hobbes saw her hand behind her back reach down to the desktop, groping for the hypodermic she must have dropped when he attacked.

It was out of reach. Hobbes took a step toward them.

Darien's head whipped around. A shudder rocked him as he saw Hobbes, but he didn't loosen his grip on her.

Hobbes raised his empty hands, placatingly, tried to imitate Claire's soothing tone of before. "Easy. You're safe. You're with friends. Remember us?"

"No. No. It's all a lie. You're here. It's a lie."

"We're real. It's me, Darien. Hobbes, remember? And that's Claire. You don't want to hurt her. We're helping you."

"Stop it." He was shaking. "Stop it. Just stop it."

Eberts was in the doorway behind him, watching in shocked silence.

Claire was choking, beginning to hyperventilate. Hobbes could see her trying to keep calm, could see her failing.

"It's a lie. Stop it. Please. *Stop it!* "

Eberts jerked at his cry. Claire couldn't even whimper now, but her hands gestured desperately.

Hobbes shot forward and crashed into Darien, checking him like a hockey player to knock him back, breaking his grip on Claire. Gasping for breath, she staggered back, leaning heavily on the desk. Darien stumbled into the wall, pushed himself off it, but Hobbes tackled him, wrestling him into a headlock.

Fawkes struggled with the manic violence Hobbes well remembered, but his strength was nothing to that he used to have when taken by the quicksilver madness. Still, Hobbes was scared he would do himself real harm if he kept it up. "Calm down," he told Darien, all but begging. "We're not gonna hurt you, I promise. We'll make it stop. We'll make it better."

"*No!* You can't—you can't be..."

He abruptly went still. Hobbes, suspecting a trick, didn't release his hold. Darien was still conscious, but passive, as if all the hysteria driving him had snapped like a string pulled too taut. Hobbes felt him tremble. "It's a lie, I know...I'm sorry..."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." Darien's voice caught like a sob. "I'm so sorry, Bobby, I don't, I don't remember..."

"Hey—you know it's me?" Hobbes felt a sudden stab of relief so keen it stung. "It's all right, we're here for you, Fawkes. We got you out of there. You're safe now, you hear me? Just let us help you."

"Stop it..." Darien was beyond listening, not just insane but absorbed by a grief Bobby couldn't comprehend. "You're here so it's a lie...stop it..."

"Keep holding him," Claire said quietly, kneeling beside them, a hypodermic of clear fluid in her hand.

Hobbes nodded. Eberts took position on the other side as she raised the needle. He held Darien's head still as Claire brushed the hair back from his neck, then with swift precision injected the compound into the small swelling that marked the location of the quicksilver gland.

Fawkes jerked as the needle penetrated, but Hobbes and Eberts held him firm while she depressed the plunger. By the time she withdrew it he was already sinking down, shadowed scarlet eyes closing. "No..." he whispered, and then with a final tremor he was gone.

Hobbes looked to Claire. "You okay?"

She was rubbing her throat, but at the question she shot him a baffled glance, as if she couldn't imagine why he'd ask. "I'm fine."

They brought Darien back to the bedroom, laid him on the bed in silence. When finally he was settled, Hobbes released the breath it felt like he had been holding for the last hour. "God. They really fucked him up. Will he—is he gonna be all right?"

Claire raised her eyes from Darien to meet his with effort. "I hope so." Unconsciously her hands closed into fists at her sides. "I wish I could say better—I didn't imagine the...extent..." With iron will she reestablished control, her voice flattening into a businesslike tone of exposition. "The new counteragent should be more effective, but it will take his physiology a little time to adjust. Plus, in his current condition—" Her eyes drifted back to Fawkes, then were forced away, mask renewed—"With his stamina this low, he might be out for several days. I expect twenty-four hours at least. I'll set up an IV to replenish his nutrients..."

"But he'll be okay, when he wakes up?"

"Better than he is," the Keeper said evasively.

Eberts glanced to her, then cleared his throat. "What he was saying could indicate—"

"Yeah, what's with that crap?" Hobbes demanded. "He looks at me like he's seeing a ghost."

Eberts and Claire exchanged another look. Then Claire said slowly, "We could be mistaken, but from his reaction...I believe they may have told him that you...that you are dead, Bobby."

She deliberately didn't say more, but Hobbes could put two and two together. He added that hypothesis to Darien's half-coherent apologies and felt sick. "Oh God. They told him he did it. Those sons of bitches."

All too clearly he could see it. Darien alone in that room, and they told him his worst nightmare had come true, that he'd completely lost control—it would have been involuntary homicide, and he wouldn't have had any memory of it. Didn't matter one iota; Hobbes knew the way his partner's mind worked. His conscience would have scarred him and never let the wound heal. And seeing a reminder of that crime, what he was sure was a hallucination, at best a trick, must have hurt worse than the gland's agony. Hobbes scraped his hand across his eyes. "Those bastards..."

Claire and Eberts were waiting in silence while he assimilated it. "Okay," he said finally. "What do we do about it? Prove to him the truth?"

"Hopefully when Darien is able to think clearly, he'll be easier to convince," Claire said.

"I'm going to be here when he wakes up," Hobbes decided. "I'll hammer it into his thick skull whether he wants it or not. You don't get rid of Bobby Hobbes that easily. Fawkes better not have forgotten that."

"I doubt he could have, no matter how he tried," Eberts muttered.

Hobbes glared at him, then saw the slightest hint of a smile on the other man's lips. Not happiness, it wasn't even humor, really. But some things don't change and there was comfort in that. He needed the stability. They all did.

"Don't worry, Eberts, he won't have forgotten you either. You IRS types always stick in the memory. Like root canals do."

"That's it, I'm going to see to Darien and get to bed," Claire said with a yawn. "Listening to you two always puts me to sleep."

Hobbes and Eberts looked at one another in surprise. "Ouch," Hobbes said. "Score one for the Keeper."

Claire rolled her eyes and headed to her temporary lab, leaving the two of them alone together. Eberts made to follow her, but once they were in the hall Hobbes blocked his way.

"Hold it, Eberts," he said. "I want to know why you're doing this." He folded his arms and narrowed his eyes up at the other man. "You and the Official both. You didn't give a damn before. You threw Fawkes to the dogs like he was a piece of meat, sold him out—"

"Like a slave." The Keeper appeared at the doorway, her face closed.

"Yeah. That's what he always was to you. You never cared before—what happened?"

Eberts shut his eyes with something like genuine pain. "I'm sorry that was your impression. It wasn't true, in either my case, or the Official's."

"I never knew what to think," Claire said quietly. "I had to believe Darien meant more than that—what work I did, I did because I believed in the Agency. I believed that though we did what we needed to get the job done, we hadn't lost our compassion. We worked for the greater good, but we didn't ignore who we might hurt. We did all we could for everyone."

"Fawkes was one of us," Hobbes said. "He was an agent. How was I supposed to believe we can protect the nation, when we don't even protect our own?"

"You're right," Eberts said. "I'm helping you now because you're right."

"Then why didn't you see it sooner? When it really could've meant something? We got Fawkes out, but you saw him." Hobbes jerked his thumb toward the closed bedroom door. "The worst enemy of the state doesn't deserve what we did to him. Fawkes, God... At least Claire and I fought it. You and the Official let it happen. You could've done *something*—"

"You think we didn't try?" Eberts didn't speak loudly, but his voice shook with anger. "I didn't have any influence."

"You, no," Claire agreed. "But the Official—"

"Why do you think he was forced to retire?" Eberts snapped.

"Forced?"

"They couldn't fire him, and they couldn't terminate him, though they'd probably like to. He knows too much about too many people in high places for them to do that. But they made him leave. He pushed too hard. The only reason he stopped protesting when they drove him

out of the Agency directorship was because he knew it would be useless, and because he knew he needed to keep what connections he still had. He knew you'd try this eventually, and he knew you would need his help. He asked me to stay with the Agency for the same reason."

"He asked you to stay?"

"Yes, Robert. He ordered me to stay. Of all of you, I was the only one who hadn't lodged a formal protest. The Official instructed me not to, in the interests of preserving my impeccable reputation. Other than contacting you, I was to forget I had ever known the name Darien Fawkes.

"You know I always have been exemplary at following instructions, but I assure you, that was one of the hardest I have ever been given." Eberts adjusted his tie, almost self-consciously. "I don't ask for your trust. But we have more important concerns now, and it's quite late. If we could see to Darien and then sleep, I'll try to answer whatever interrogation you want to give me in the morning."

Claire only nodded and returned back inside the room. Hobbes again stopped Eberts from following her.

"Hey," he said, awkwardly.

"Yes, Robert?"

"Eberts...uh..." He wiped his forehead. "Look, man, I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," Eberts said stiffly, and made to move by him.

With a noiseless sigh, Hobbes let him pass. "Well, you can't say I didn't try," he muttered to whatever unseen force might be listening, and went to join them in the lab.

With Claire overseeing Hobbes and Eberts, they set up an IV for Darien and a couple other necessities. He was so deeply asleep he didn't stir as the tube slid into his vein, and his reflexes were almost nonexistent. "You sure this is normal?" Hobbes demanded yet again.

"Fairly certain, yes," Claire replied, and repeated her explanation. "The counteragent is acting to negate the effects of the quicksilver. His body has to reacclimatize itself to the lower levels, just as it originally had to adjust to the quicksilver's presence. You know, Darien was in a coma for three weeks when they first implanted the gland."

"He was?" Hobbes frowned down at the still man, torn between astonishment, pity, and anger. They had been putting Fawkes through hell from the very beginning...he hadn't understood that before. Sure, he had known Darien was an unwilling agent; though he enjoyed some of the perks of the job he had always insisted he wanted the gland out and himself free. After a while he had started to come around, look past his own self to responsibility, to duty, to what he could do for his country...

And to repay Darien for everything he'd done, his country cast him into hell.

There was once a time when Hobbes could have accepted this. He could have told himself it was what needed to be done, and if he personally found it morally uncomfortable, well, those who commanded him were made of sterner stuff. In the grand scheme of things, what did one man really matter? Especially a convicted criminal determined to squander whatever gifts he had. So the guy did a couple good deeds and got screwed anyway. Shit happened.

He couldn't do it anymore. Couldn't turn his back and cover his ears. Patriotism wasn't worth the price of his soul. Nothing was.

But if Fawkes were truly lost, he might as well have sold it, because nothing was going to mean anything anymore. If they won—if he'd let them win—

"Bobby!"

Claire's hand on his arm snapped him out of it. He belatedly realized that she had called his name several times, looked to her guiltily. "Yeah?"

"Eberts has brought food. Do you like take-out Thai?"

"Yeah. That'd be great for, uh—"

"Breakfast, actually," the Keeper said, nodding toward the window, where the sky was rosy with dawn.

They ate in the kitchen, a silent repast, each tangled in their own thoughts. When they had stowed the plates in the dishwasher Eberts said, "I have a couple errands to attend to; I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Not gonna go report on us to anyone, are you?" Hobbes asked.

Eberts returned his suspicion with a level gaze. "And of course I would tell you if I were, Robert. But you can come shopping if you'd like, in case you're worried about me pasting coded messages onto soup cans to be scanned by the register at the grocery store."

"Wiseass," Hobbes muttered, as the other man departed. "Okay, he's helpful, but does he have to be so annoying?"

"When dealing with you, apparently it's a requirement," Claire sighed.

Hobbes ignored her and made his way back to the guest room where Darien lay. Claire followed him, advising, "It would be best just to sleep now. Seeing as we didn't last night."

"Thought Eberts got a couple hours in."

"You could have as well. I suggested as much."

Hobbes shrugged as he took the chair by the bed. "Wasn't tired."

"Nevertheless, you need rest."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll catch up tonight. Besides, Fawkes is sleeping enough for both of us."

"That hardly counts." Claire sat down on the cot, angled to keep Darien in her line of sight.

Hobbes eyed her sideways. "It was a long night. You're looking peaked. Maybe you should lie down."

"I will if you will."

"Okay, okay."

He didn't move. Neither did she. After a little while, Hobbes said, quietly, "Dammit...he doesn't look like he's getting any real rest, either." Fawkes was still, except for the measured rise and fall of his chest. But his eyes were cast in deep shadow, ringed in darkness, and his cheeks were hollow. Even unconscious, his brow was drawn up in fine lines of pain, like faint scars. Hobbes grimly wondered if they ever would heal.

If only Fawkes would just open his eyes...and if only they would be clear of any red, clear of the madness...just clear...

When Eberts returned to his apartment that afternoon, all was quiet. Upon entering the guest room, he found all three of them. Darien was still unconscious. Claire was on the cot, sitting up propped against the wall with her legs stretched out and her eyes closed. Hobbes had tilted his chair until the back leaned against the wall; his head was rocked to the side as he snored.

Eberts shook his head disparagingly. After last night of course they were exhausted. They could have laid down and slept comfortably. Darien wouldn't awaken for hours yet, according to Claire's most positive estimate.

Fawkes's breathing hitched for a moment, evened again. Eberts turned his attention to the object of their concerns. Under Darien's closed lids one could perceive his eyes shifting. His body might be in repose but his dreaming mind was active, and troubled. But there was no way to soothe the nightmares; until he awakened he was out of reach of any contact. There was no point in maintaining a vigil...

Eberts took the blanket still folded at the end of the cot and spread it over Claire, and adjusted Hobbes's chair so it tipped at a less precarious angle. Then he pulled the other chair up to Darien's bed and kept watch while the others slept.

There was no pain when he awoke.

He had become accustomed to its constant presence, the quality of his hours measured by the level of agony. Less or more, bearable or beyond his endurance. Everything he was could be defined by it. His intelligence, his sanity, all bound in how much was lost to that inescapable pressure. There were days he would have given anything, done anything for its surcease.

Moments that life was such cruelty that he almost lost his fear of death, that despair of the end to everything seemed more tolerable than continuing.

That was when he held on the hardest, knowing it had to get better, that at the lowest point it could only improve. Until finally he would lose himself in the hurt, until he became it, allowing the madness to win and twist the pain into darker releases, all forgotten when sanity returned.

Unforgivable, and every time he awoke from one of those darkest times, not knowing if it had been a few hours or a few days or more, not knowing what he might have done, what new sins might stain his soul...he swore each time never again, that he would maintain himself, that he would not give in again. The pain always was endurable then, in the time right after, and he could always tell himself he could survive it.

And every time the pain would increase again, until eventually he lost to it.

Now it was gone, and he thought he must be dead. For a while he could feel nothing except the absence.

Gradually he began to be aware of sensations, clearer than they had ever been in his memory, no longer shadowed by the agony. Warmth. Softness beneath him, supporting him as he lay...on a bed? Blankets over his body, a pillow under his head.

He barely dared breathe. He wouldn't open his eyes, for fear it would bring the pain back...a reddish hue to the darkness under his eyelids. Heat against his cheeks. Sunlight?

Experimentally he turned his head. Crisp bedsheets rustled at the motion, the only sound beside his own breathing. No sudden stabs piercing his brain. His skull felt empty, undefined. Wrapped in warmth, cocooned in silence, he reveled in the dearth of perception.

Then the quiet was broken by a creak—wood scraping wood, to his side. Words. "Fawkes? You awake?"

A gruff voice, tight with concern. He knew it. He recognized it all too well, and despaired. So it wasn't real. The dead don't talk. He had not forgotten. He couldn't.

He didn't remember what had happened, though he had tried, for hours at time, tried to force himself to see it. Recall some moment, some brief flash. He never could. In his nightmares it was recreated a thousand times, and every time was different. He didn't know which was reality, if any of the visions were. Sometimes he thought that was the even worse crime. That he had done it at all... But that he couldn't remember it, could not offer any justification, could not even preserve those last moments for an elegy...

He had awoken in a different cell than usual, smaller, the window barred. By then he had become accustomed to the blank gaps of time, where the quicksilver madness had robbed his memory. But the cell was new and he had been confused at first. Then worried, as he realized they must have had a reason.

When finally the doctor entered he sprang to his feet, then held back, wanting to reassure the man of his current sanity, fighting the anxiety eating at him to ask his questions reasonably. "How long was I out?" He always had to ask, even if he wasn't sure he could trust the answer. But whether or not they lied to him, what the doctors told him were the only answers he was going to get. By then he was coming to accept that.

He indicated his new confines. "What happened?"

The doctor had hesitated at first. A new man, but he had seen enough of them by then that he had stopped looking at the faces, saw only the white coats and the calm demeanors. "It's been four days," the new doctor said at last. "You're feeling better?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." He had become used to the pain too, by then. They had given up using the counteragent at all, but the grip of the quicksilver went in cycles. 'Fine' was when it was bearable, when he could read and talk and function. They would let him out, monitoring him closely but allowing a certain semblance of freedom.

The CIA hadn't given him an assignment in a month. For longer than he had expected they had continued his employment, sending him places with other agents guarding him, ready to act when the madness did take him. Sometimes he would have time to handle the missions. Sometimes he would lose control before he accomplished anything, would wake up some indeterminate period later back at headquarters.

Sometimes he would refuse to go, but they sent him anyway. They didn't seem to care if he only sat and waited for the madness to come, without lifting a finger to carry out their instructions.

But the times he could manage, even if willing, had become fewer and fewer, and now they had given up. He had wondered how much longer they would keep him. Eventually they were bound to pass him along, try to send him to some other program for analysis or dissection or another damn purpose. He was prepared to fight it, with all the sanity he could manage, with all the will that remained to him. He still had rights. He might be living on the edge of the abyss and losing his grip a little more with each day passed, but he wouldn't willingly surrender the last of himself. He vowed that.

Maybe the time for that resistance had come. He looked around the new cell and demanded, "When can I get out of here?"

As he had half been expecting, the doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid—"

"Now listen here, you can't keep me locked up. I'm not a criminal; I've—"

He was surprised to see pity in the doctor's face. "Mr. Fawkes, why don't you take a seat," the man said, indicating the cot. When he had done so, the doctor sat in the chair opposite and gently inquired, "Now, how much do you recall of your last... 'episode'?"

"If they've told you anything, you know I don't remember most of what happens when I'm QSM."

What the doctor said next was so outside his expectations that he didn't understand it immediately. "Do you remember anything of your former colleague's visit?"

"What?" He tried to think back. In the cell, raging. He could recall nothing beyond that blackness. A colleague? "Who? A guy from the CIA?" He tried to remember if any of the CIA agents had ever come to see him. Of course not. Most of them didn't even think of him as a person, closer to an animal, a beast to be restrained. Some were afraid of him—they hated him for that. A few pitied him, but not enough to seek him out in the hospital. He had no desire to see any of them again anyway.

"Not the CIA," the doctor told him. "The man's name was Robert Hobbes. I believe he was once your partner."

"Hobbes?" He stared at the doctor. Hobbes had never come before—or they had never mentioned it if he had. He hadn't seen Hobbes in months, not since the CIA had taken him back.

Except in his dreams, occasionally, when his imagination spun elaborate rescue plans that would never happen. Or at least he told himself they wouldn't, because optimism came at a price too dear. Hobbes and the Keeper hadn't betrayed him...he was almost positive of that now. At first he had thought so, and others confirmed it, but after months of consideration he knew they hadn't. Was nearly sure. He trusted his old associates. He had to, because he could not doubt everyone, and there was no one else.

And he remembered when he had been with the Agency, under the Keeper's care, partnered with Hobbes. He would have denied it then, but thinking back on it now, with the perspective of time and distance, he knew that had been the happiest time of his life. Crazy and stressful and disquieting...but he had belonged, fit in a way he never had before. He had had a purpose, even if he had been forced into it. And had found friends, the first true ones he had ever made, something even Kevin hadn't been. People who believed in him, who he believed in.

After all they had been through together...he couldn't doubt them. He knew he was here against their will, and if some part of him doubted, a greater part held the persistent hope that in the end they would save him. That if he were to be freed, it would be by their efforts.

He had long used up any miracles he might have deserved. Faith in people was all he had left.

"Hobbes came here?" he asked, wary, but encouraged against all evidence.

And the doctor looked at him with that undisguised, unmistakable pity. "You don't remember?" he asked quietly.

"I told you, no. What happened? Why'd he come?"

"I want you to stay calm, Mr. Fawkes," the doctor said. "There was...an accident. We are entirely at fault; you must understand that. You cannot be held responsible—"

"Responsible?" He felt the blood drain from his face, felt a hard knot coil in the pit of his stomach. "Responsible for what?"

"Agent Hobbes came to your former facility two days ago. He came to see you, Mr. Fawkes. He was very insistent. They were reluctant to allow him—you had been experiencing the QS side-effects for fifty hours, and though you were calm at the time they were unsure if you were stable. But Agent Hobbes kept demanding a visit until they granted permission." The doctor paused, searching Darien's face for any sign of recollection.

His hands were trembling. He clenched his fists, rested them on his knees as he fought to keep sitting, to stay calm. His head ached with the constant throbbing but he was still sane; he had to prove that. "I don't remember anything. What happened?"

"Mr. Fawkes, it was inexcusable that they could've allowed this to occur. It was their miscalculation, both in evaluating your state, and then in not being prepared when you acted. They must have been aware of your strength and agility when experiencing such an episode, and certainly they understood your mental—"

"What happened?" he repeated, and heard his voice shake. "*What did I do?*"

"Given your condition at the time," the doctor said, "you cannot be considered responsible—"

"Is Bobby—is Hobbes all right? Did I hurt him?"

The doctor hesitated.

"Dammit, how bad was it? Is he in the hospital?"

Still the doctor didn't answer.

He could barely hear his own voice over the pounding of his blood in his ears, over the painful thunder that was the quicksilver always rising within him. "Is he all right?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fawkes," the doctor said.

"*No.*" It tore out of him, not a shout, hardly a whisper, but it hurt his throat as if he had screamed. "I couldn't have, I wouldn't...you're lying. I couldn't. Not Bobby. He can't be—"

"I'm sorry," the doctor said again, all sympathetic sincerity, without a hint of blame. He didn't have to confirm it aloud. The truth was obvious in his face.

"No. I didn't. I wouldn't. No. No..." He was sobbing without tears, each word a dry, racking cough that lacerated his lungs. As if the pain could make the denial true. As if he could redeem himself with any punishment.

As if there were anything at all he could do that would bring his partner, his friend, his victim, back to life.

They waited to tell him the details, allowed him time to adjust before relating the exact circumstances of his murder. He remembered none of it, not how Hobbes had entered the cell, not a syllable of the few words they had exchanged. No hint of what deranged impulse had compelled him to attack, without provocation or warning. No one had been prepared, neither Hobbes nor the guards waiting just outside the room.

By the time they had entered it was too late. He had been that quick—it was a fast death, they had assured him. Painless. He liked suffering when taken by the madness, perhaps had a sadistic bent to inflict on others some fraction of what he experienced himself. But he must have been more intent on the kill for that instant.

He owed it to Hobbes to remember, but he could not recall a single fragment of that time.

Of course they put him in higher security confinement. Even if they told him it was not his fault. He was dangerous. And it was the least he deserved for his crime.

Only now he was here, this new place, strange place. Not a cell. It didn't even smell like a hospital room, but like a home, unfamiliar but warm, not sterile. And he heard a voice that was impossible to hear.

He must be crazy still, though there was no pain, and his mind, his thoughts flowed clear. Hallucinating everything, escape from a reality he would have fled long ago if he had been able. But he had no right...no right to escape. No right to be here where there was no pain, where—

"Fawkes. I know you're awake, I saw you move. C'mon, Darien, you can do it. Just open your eyes."

It haunted him, so vivid, so real—alive, it sounded like a living voice, not imagination. Unable to stop himself, he slit open his eyes. And saw Hobbes, looking exactly as he always had, suit and tie and balding head, and brown eyes dark with worry.

Guilt stung like acid. With a moan he turned his head away from the vision, this new trick of his quicksilver-warped mind.

But someone grabbed his shoulder, warm, solid grasp. "Fawkes," said that too-familiar voice. "Darien, look at me." A gentle shake punctuated the command. "I know what's going on. It isn't true. I'm not dead. You hear me? It was a lie. They were lying to you. I'm not dead."

Hallucination, vision, daydream turned imaginary flesh, telling him exactly what he wanted to hear. Or maybe they were playing with him, forcing this on him. "Stop it," he gasped, forgetting any pride he might once have had. He couldn't bear this. "Please, don't..."

But it didn't end. "We got you out of there," Hobbes—not Hobbes, only his insanity—told him. "God, Fawkes, I'm sorry it took so long—but we did it. You're safe here. And it's all fine. You didn't hurt me. I'm not dead. I swear. Would I be telling you this if I were? Bobby Hobbes wouldn't lie." Hobbes almost might have laughed. "I promise, I ain't dead. Just look at me, okay? Show me you're all right—Fawkes?"

He curled up on his side, under the sheets, his back to the vision and his hands clapped to his ears, trying to block his hearing though the words penetrated through his flesh. All in his head, all in his mind, it sounded real but it could not be. Could not be.

The hand on his shoulder shook him again, roughly. "Fawkes, you gotta look at me. Please." Not angry, but desperate, harsh with anxiety. "They were lying. They were trying to get to

you. You can't let them, Fawkes. You can't let them win. It's what they wanted, for you to give in, but you're too damn stubborn for that. I know you, Fawkes."

"You're dead." He forced it out through numb lips, hands still to his ears. "You can't be here. I killed you. You're dead."

There was a long moment when he heard nothing except his blood rushing in his head. Then Hobbes said, simply, "No, I'm not."

He said nothing else. The hand withdrew from his shoulder. Darien waited until the silence became too heavy, until he had to twist around, look to see if the hallucination might have passed.

Hobbes sat on the edge of the bed, watching him so intently his gaze burned into him like a brand. He flinched, but before he could turn back away Hobbes grabbed his wrist, pressed Darien's hand to his chest, directly over his heart. "Feel that, Fawkes?" he said calmly. "You feel it?"

Under the shirt's fabric he felt warmth, and then a steady rhythm, pulsing distant but unmistakable beneath his fingers. "See?" Hobbes said, and the word vibrated through his chest. "Still beating. I'm alive."

"No..." He couldn't believe it; it hurt too deeply, far too much even to dare to think of it. And yet he wanted to believe so badly he couldn't stop it, a rush of faith and optimism and untempered hope which swept through him, scattering the last remnants of his control. The room was warm and the pain was gone and he was drowning, he was choking on his own breaths.

He was sobbing, and the friend who should be dead was holding him, catching him before he could fall. Hobbes was alive, and this was real, and everything wrong was undone, unmade so that it might never have happened. Even if all of it was only the quicksilver's insanity, it was the kindest madness he had ever known.

Hobbes gripped Fawkes as he shuddered, supported him while he trembled like a leaf lost in a gale. His shoulders were hunched and his bowed head was pressed against Hobbes's shoulder, while his fingers curled around his arms tight enough to hurt, though Hobbes didn't try to break free of his grasp.

Bobby felt a hand on his shoulder, glanced up into Claire's warm face. She nodded encouragement, her eyes telling him this was right, this reaction was to be expected.

Hobbes knew it already. He had witnessed this before. In the army he'd seen men stronger than him, tougher than him, lost to reaction, shattered by what they saw and did and experienced. What Fawkes had been through was enough to break any man.

But no one had ever turned to him for comfort before. Hobbes was unsure how to give it, just held on, not daring to say anything for fear it would come out wrong. He knew of this, but dealing with it was another matter entirely. And he couldn't make a mistake. Not if they were to have any hope of putting the pieces back together again.

Fawkes was calming, gradually relaxing, the tremors subsiding. His face was still buried in Bobby's shoulder, and Hobbes, somewhat hesitantly, rubbed his back, like one would soothe a crying kid.

"Darien?" Claire asked, very soft, barely louder than a whisper.

Fawkes's shoulders stiffened; then his head came up slowly. His eyes were hollow, reddened, but not the unnatural crimson cast of the madness. He blinked, focused slowly. "Claire?" he mouthed, then in a faint rasp, "What..."

She smoothed the tangled dark hair back from his forehead, cupped his cheek in her hand. "We rescued you, Darien," she said. "We developed a new counteragent and we got you out of that hospital. I only wish it could have been sooner. We're so sorry..."

"How...where?"

"You're at my house," Eberts said from his position at the foot of the bed. When Darien squinted at him in confusion, he simplified, "You're safe. Claire and Robert, with my assistance, successfully retrieved you from the, er, facility."

"Who?"

"Me and Claire." Hobbes glanced at Claire, remarked under his breath, "Well, at least he's got his questions down—all he needs is 'why' and 'when' and he can be a reporter."

Darien was fighting heavy exhaustion to assimilate what he had been told. Claire gently pushed him down against the bed. "You're not yet fully recovered," she said. "Go to sleep, and we'll explain everything when you wake up again."

His eyes started to drift shut; then he blinked rapidly in an effort to keep them open. "No," he protested, so hoarse it was only a whisper. "Can't—don't wanna..."

"You won't go mad again, I promise," Claire told him. "But you need rest to heal."

Darien's head turned restlessly against the pillow. "No...gonna wake up...somewhere else."

"You'll wake up right here," Hobbes said firmly. "We aren't moving you."

"Be alone..."

"You won't be. I'll be right here, Darien." Hobbes took his hand, gripped it hard. "We'll be here. We're not going anywhere."

"Not going?"

"You got it. I'm not budging from this spot. You sleep, Fawkes. You get better. Count on us to keep you safe. We're not gonna let you down. Not again. Trust us."

Hobbes didn't know if Darien understood much of that, fatigue blurring his comprehension, but he closed his eyes at last, his fingers going slack in Bobby's hold. Claire checked his pulse, nodded encouragingly. Hobbes sighed in relief, heard Eberts do the same. Then he settled back in the chair, shifting to find a more comfortable position on the wooden seat while he waited, however long it would take.

Darien awoke with a start, not realizing he had fallen asleep at all. With some disbelief realized he was still in the bed, still in the room, and when he opened his eyes, Hobbes was still right there, leaning forward with the same concern darkening his brown eyes.

"So that wasn't a dream," Darien said, in what sounded to his ears like a normal voice.

It must have been close, at least, because Hobbes's face split in a wide grin. "Feeling better, Fawkes?"

Darien made a quick internal assessment, swallowed astonishment to say, "Yes, actually."

"Great! You hungry?"

Still another surprise. "Starved."

"Claire! Get in here with that dinner!" Hobbes hollered. "Fawkes is up and wants to eat!"

"Dinner?" Darien asked. His eyes went to the window, where golden sunlight glowed through the shades. "What time is it? Uh...what day is it?"

"Guess it could be lunch," Hobbes amended. "It's a little after four, Sunday afternoon. You woke up for the first time a few hours ago but dozed off again." Brown eyes searched him questioningly. "You remember?"

"Kind of." Darien sat up in bed, not as easily as he would have liked, but there was no pain, only stiffness and a fading lassitude. "You were here...right? And I..."

"I've been right here all along. Nothing happened to me. You remember that?"

"Yeah... I thought...what happened? How long have I been here? Uh—where is here? This your pad, Bobby?"

"Actually it's mine."

Darien looked over to the door, smiled at the man hovering there. "Well, if it's your place I guess you can come in." He motioned Eberts across the threshold. "Come on, you were in here before, I remember now."

"So how much do you remember?" Claire had appeared behind Eberts and nudged him through the door in order to enter herself, bearing a tray with a cup and a steaming bowl.

Darien felt his hunger rise at the sight and smell of real food. "What's that?"

"Just soup and juice," Claire said. "You're slightly malnourished and need to take it easy."

"Mmm, is that Campbell's chicken noodle?" Hobbes inquired.

"No, Healthy Choice," Eberts informed him.

"Oh yeah, I can see the veggies. Isn't that the one in those commercials with those two skinny chicks talking—no, wait, that's for Campbell's, it must be the one with—what's wrong, Fawkes?"

At Hobbes's suddenly anxious query Darien realized he was staring at his former partner. He ducked his head, face warm. "Nothin'. Just...been a while."

"Darien, it's okay." Claire's hand on his arm was a welcome assurance, warm and solid, real. "We're all here for you." Her tone lightened. "So, are you ready for some fresh-from-the-can, widely advertised, microwave soup?"

"Bring it on!"

The first mouthful burnt his tongue. He didn't care. This was heaven. He swallowed, gasped, "Wow. They didn't have anything this good..." and trailed off, not sure what stopped him—the rush of confused memory, or their expressions of barely concealed pity. To hide his embarrassment he quickly took another spoonful, asked around it, "So how did you...get me out? You convinced them the Agency needed me?"

"Er...not exactly," Claire said.

"We went through, uh, different channels," Hobbes supplied, and proceeded with a quick recounting of their strategy.

By the time he was done, Darien had finished the soup, which was good because he had trouble keeping his jaw from dropping, the more he heard. "So you busted me out."

"It was the only way." Hobbes's voice and face were dead serious. "Only sorry it took so damn long."

Darien couldn't meet his gaze, focused on the blankets wrinkled in his lap instead. "I thought you...they told me you'd sold me out and I knew it wasn't true, but I thought you'd given up, and then, you were dead..."

"Or not," Hobbes said quickly. "And we never gave up, either. Just took a while for Claire here to come up with a better counteragent."

"Yeah." Darien rubbed the back of his neck, out of habit rather than any residual ache, feeling the lump of the gland under his skin. "Gotta say, you did a bang-up job."

"She always does," Hobbes grinned.

Claire blushed, uncharacteristically. "I wish I could've managed it sooner."

"How long was it?" Darien asked. Claire and Hobbes both turned back to him, and he tried not to duck under the focus of their concentration. God, he should be used to people staring at him—but it wasn't their observation that disturbed him; it was the emotions behind their eyes. He wasn't used to such naked sympathy, compassion—caring, even.

He shrugged off the abashed discomfort, said, "I didn't exactly have a calendar in there, and I've got a lot of...holes in my memory. Blackouts when I was totally out of my head. How long was I in there? A couple months?"

Claire and Bobby exchanged a look he easily interpreted. "Longer? How much?"

"Darien..." Claire awkwardly cleared her throat. "We're not sure ourselves when you were placed in the hospital, but you were originally assigned to the CIA twenty-one months ago."

"Twenty-one...months?" Darien blanched, even though he had thought himself prepared. "Like...almost two years?"

"We said we were sorry," Hobbes mumbled with guilty vexation.

"Two years," Darien repeated, trying to imagine losing that much time. Even with the time with the CIA, even with all the hours he could account for, he had basically been out of the loop—out of the world—for a good year. All those days lost to the madness. So this was what Rip van Winkle felt like.

Through the silence he heard a distant trill. A telephone, he was slow to identify—been a while since he had heard one. A year or so...

"I'll get it," Eberts volunteered, unnecessarily since it was his house, but he seemed grateful for the excuse to leave. Not that his presence barely registered as it were; the man still had that amazing ability to blend in with the walls. That hadn't changed in two years...

How much had changed? Could the world really be that different? He wasn't that much older, and would he be any wiser if he had lived through it? In the grand scheme of things, what had he really missed?

Darien felt his shoulders begin to shake, but it wasn't until Hobbes touched his shoulder in concern that he realized why, and began to laugh out loud.

"Fawkes?" Hobbes asked.

"Darien?" Claire seconded.

Both displayed such open worry that he made a monumental effort and reigned himself in, swallowing the wild chuckles. "Sorry," he said. "Sorry...just occurred to me...that makes three years in a row...that I missed the Superbowl."

"Fawkes?"

"And the thing is, I don't even like football...but man I wish I'd caught the commercials..."

When Fawkes began chortling fit to choke, Hobbes feared he might be cracking up for real. But though his laughter definitely had a tinge of hysteria, when Darien finally spit out what had set him off, Hobbes couldn't help but smile himself. Hell with it, didn't matter if it was that funny, it was a start, a step in the right direction. They were all in need of the release.

And he was sounding like Darien Fawkes, not the quicksilver-possessed psycho, not the tortured patient they had barely saved—the actual Darien Fawkes, his partner, his friend. That in itself was enough to make Hobbes laugh out loud.

Eberts's reappearance in the room quelled his humor. The man nodded apologetically, said, "Claire, it's for you."

Claire raised her eyebrows but left to take the call. Eberts remained in the doorway, watching. "Who called?" Hobbes asked him, but Eberts only shook his head, with a closed expression that as good as shouted, 'not your business.'

Hobbes looked over to see Fawkes giving him a surreptitiously puzzled glance, a silent question he instantly understood. All the familiar gesture, the pattern of their partnership, returning, just like that. Of course anyone could read Fawkes like a book, the guy always did wear his heart on his sleeve...still, somehow Hobbes had almost forgotten how much fun it could be, these covert communications.

Then it clicked who the phonecall had to be from. Only one other person knew Claire was here, and he wouldn't be calling with good news. Hobbes stood. "I, uh, gotta go to the can," he said. No need to alarm Fawkes.

Only Darien did look worried, trying to hide it but he really couldn't keep anything out of his eyes. Now there was stark fear there, a terrified loneliness. Wasn't where Hobbes might be going that disturbed Fawkes; it was him going at all, leaving him alone, even for a moment...and that fright was a fragility that Hobbes found not pitiable but downright scary to witness.

Salvation came from an unlikely source. "Darien," Eberts said cheerfully, stepping forward. "Do you want something to do? I could get the portable TV, or a radio."

Darien grabbed at the offer like a drowning man. "A radio would be good—maybe a newspaper, so I can figure out what's been going on in the world. Some magazines would be great—I bet you subscribe to Times, Newsweek, all of those, huh?"

As conversations go it was about as stimulating as turtle racing, but the mind-numbing normalcy might be just what Fawkes needed. And it meant he had company. Hobbes threw Eberts a look he hoped would be interpreted as grateful, and headed for the kitchen.

Claire's back was to the door, head canted toward the floor, holding the receiver to her ear with one hand while she wrapped her other arm around herself. Every line of her posture screamed of barely leashed tension, and her voice sounded preternaturally calm as she said, "Yes, we'll want all you have. Yes, we're being careful. We'll come to get it within a few days. I see. Thank you. Goodbye."

She hung up, folded both her arms over her chest as if to hold in her heart and stared down at the rust-hued linoleum. Under her breath she muttered, so low he could barely make it out, "Damn it. Goddamn them..."

"Claire?" Hobbes finally ventured.

With a tiny intake of breath she spun around, one hand going up to rub at her eyes. Their blue was brighter than ever with water. "Bobby."

"That was the Official, right?" Hobbes said. "What'd he have to say?"

"Charlie has been investigating," Claire said. "He just obtained reports he's been looking for, concerning Darien's activities with the CIA."

Hobbes felt his stomach tie itself into a granny knot. "Oh. Was it what we..."

Claire nodded.

"Shit," Hobbes said, with feeling. In spite of everything there had always been a part of him hoping they were wrong. Hoping that the country he had once believed in with all his heart and soul, still had some decency, some shred of morality.

When Claire had first told him why she suspected the CIA had wanted Darien, Hobbes had argued against it loud and long. "Fawkes is an American citizen," he had insisted. "He's got rights!"

And Claire had flatly denied it. "That's what you never understood," she had told him. "You never understood what he signed over to us when he joined the Agency. He's not a citizen. He's nothing. When the Agency took him, they erased his prison record—and everything else. His life is the price of the gland, and the counteragent. That's it. That's all that he's worth."

"But he pays taxes. He's got a social security number—"

"Bureaucratic leftovers, that's all. He isn't a citizen—he's got less rights than an illegal alien. The Agency owned him. Now the CIA does. As far as the government is concerned, Darien Fawkes doesn't exist, except as the receptacle of the quicksilver gland. He's nothing but a cog in their bloody machine."

She had been crying when she said that. She was crying now at the confirmation of everything she had known was happening, that they had been unable to prevent. What was Hobbes, what were any of them, but more cogs in the monstrous mechanism of the state?

Not anymore. He was the monkey wrench in the works now. If only it wasn't too late to destroy what they had wrought. Hobbes found himself fighting, not tears, but a rising rage. He forced himself to cool down, ask calmly, "How many people?"

"As far as the Official could ascertain, five," Claire reported with a cold precision to combat her own fiery emotions. "Five confirmed dead."

Five deaths. Five assassinations, at the hand of a man who in his right mind refused to kill—and who had no control the rest of the time.

"They attempted to use him four times," Claire said, her tone still ice. "Three of the missions were...successful, but with one assignment there were two casualties besides than the target. So five total."

It could have been worse. There might have been more casualties. The CIA had been playing with fire, wielding a secret weapon that easily could have blown up in their faces. They must have used Fawkes like a time bomb—set him up in the right place, the right situation, to kill who they wanted when he went off. And agents standing by, waiting to subdue him when the deed was accomplished. A dangerous game. An ill-conceived, stupid, insane stratagem.

Also one of the cruelest and most corrupt he had ever heard of.

"Who were the targets?" Hobbes asked. "And when?"

Claire shook her head. "I don't even know if Charlie has all the information. At any rate he wouldn't give it to me over the phone. But he thought it was important we knew the basic facts as soon as possible."

"Yeah." He couldn't stand still, rapidly paced the short width of the kitchen. "What are we gonna do? Do we tell Fawkes? We don't even know how he did any of it—could've been with a gun, or just as easily with his bare hands. How is he gonna deal with that?"

"I don't want to lie to him," Claire said slowly. "But I doubt he has any memory of the incidents..."

"Incidents. God." Hobbes made to slam his fist into the wall, stopped when it occurred to him that Eberts might not appreciate a dent in his plaster. Then he was annoyed that he bothered to consider what Eberts thought, even if it was the man's house... "Wish we could get our hands on the sons of bitches who used him," he said instead. "Whoever the suits higher up were who dreamed it up. I'd strangle them with their own neckties."

"Or give them a taste of their own medicine," Claire suggested, her face bloodless with white rage. "Even after all the 'projects' I did with the DoD, I still can't believe they did it. We're going to have to tell Darien eventually, and you know what it will do to him..."

"Fawkes is strong," Hobbes said with a confidence he didn't feel. Darien was strong in some ways, definitely; he was stubborn, had a lot of brains, a lot of guts. He was also unpredictably vulnerable. And his scruples could be either assets or hindrances. However unusual it was in a career criminal, his morality was a surprisingly solid thing. Didn't cover as much as some

people's consciences, but when Fawkes did take an ethical stance it was for real, and he would rather break than bend. Hobbes doubted a year in a padded cell had changed that.

He only had to look at what that lie about Hobbes's fate had done to Darien—how absolutely, agonizingly relieved he had been to have it disproved. Now they would have to tell him it wasn't all a lie after all, and hope the truth didn't shatter him.

But not yet. Not until he was strong enough to take it, or else they might drive him over the edge completely. Even Claire's new improved counteragent couldn't nullify the effects of guilt.

His thoughts were hauled violently back to reality by a hoarse shout from the guest room. Hobbes pounded down the hall, Claire crowding behind him to see inside.

Fawkes was sitting straight up, Eberts at the bedside hesitantly putting a placating hand on his back. Darien paid him no heed; all his attention was focused on the back of his own hand, extended before him with the long fingers spread.

Without taking his eyes off his hand, Darien carefully addressed them. "What do you see?"

"Uh, your hand?" Hobbes said. "Five fingers, looks right—"

"What are you seeing, Darien?" asked Claire cautiously.

"The same thing. But I shouldn't." Fawkes's eyes sloughed up to them, the blank emptiness in his gaze more disturbing than the unstrung tremor in his voice. "It's not working. I can't do it. I'm trying but it's not working.

"I can't go invisible."

"I can't go invisible."

Claire was the first to act, passing Eberts to sit on the bed and gently push Fawkes horizontal again. Her fingers automatically curled around his wrist to check his pulse as she said quietly, "It's okay, Darien."

"Did you do it?" He didn't sound accusing, just desperate, as he turned anxious dark eyes onto her. "Is it the new counteragent, screwing it up?"

"It may be," she said. "I've had little opportunity to test the formula on subjects with the actual gland—I was more concerned with balancing the neurotransmitter levels. It's possible it interferes with quicksilver production or action as well."

"Possible." He hadn't missed her stress on that word. "But you don't think that's what it is?"

"No," she admitted. "I think it's more likely that it's you."

"Me?"

Before either anger or recrimination could win out in him, she rubbed his arm to forestall the battle. "It's not your fault, Darien. It's a natural reaction. Your body knows that quicksilver is bad for you—now that you have control again, it's going overboard in exerting that discipline, trying to limit the gland's production as best it can. Your instincts, your subconscious, are overriding your conscious mind."

"You're saying I'm scared to quicksilver."

"Not precisely, because as you know the fear response triggers the gland. I'm saying you're suppressing your ability to go invisible." She continued to knead his shoulder, trying to loosen some of the tension holding him so stiff. It wasn't healthy, not when he was barely recovered. "Give it time, Darien. It will come back to you. I'll run some tests to make sure it isn't the counteragent, and then we can try some of the exercises you used when you first got the gland. You didn't always have much control, remember. You're probably a bit out of practice with your biofeedback technique."

That won a hint of a smile. "Maybe a bit."

Hobbes pushed forward. "You sure it'll be safe and all, Claire? The new counteragent will work as good as the old one?"

"It should work better," Claire said.

"Better?" Hobbes and Fawkes echoed, synchronized.

The Keeper nodded. "If my previous tests were accurate, he should be able to go twice as long between shots, and have even more time when quicksilvered. Perhaps as much as two hours. The new formula doesn't neutralize the effects of the quicksilver; it overrides them, by inhibiting the production of neurotransmitters—" She saw the twin blank stares and stopped. "Never mind. The significant thing is that a single dose is more effective than the original compound. And there may be long-term benefits as well. I'm hoping that a carefully monitored regiment may—slowly—acclimatize you to the quicksilver without any external mitigating factor."

"What do you mean?" Darien asked, in a cautious tone that suggested he understood but didn't dare hope.

"I mean that it may be possible for you to give up the counteragent altogether, eventually. This last year, you never were given any counteragent, but you had periods of lucidity, correct?"

Darien nodded.

"Now, that's directly contrary to our original findings, as well as what Arnaud told us. Stage 5 madness is supposedly irreversible, but as far as I've deduced you only went through it once, and more importantly you came out of it. I believe that some of what we assumed to be

quicksilver madness was actually symptoms of withdrawal from the counteragent itself. Arnaud might have deliberately instilled addictive properties in the formula."

"But your counteragent doesn't have those things, right?" Hobbes pressed.

Claire shook her head. "All my formula does is counter the quicksilver's effects."

"I'll be able to use quicksilver without any counteragent," Darien said, wonderingly, inspecting his hand as if already imagining it invisible for as long as he wanted.

"If you can remember how to use it at all," Hobbes reminded him smartly.

"Bobby!" Claire protested, at Fawkes's chagrined look. Though it was only teasing, Darien's self-esteem was such a fragile thing right now that she dreaded any unmindful lack of tact which might fracture it further.

Then she looked at Hobbes, and saw he hadn't been speaking before thinking at all. His face was serious, gaze fixed unwavering on Fawkes. Darien shrank under that regard, even as he said, unconvincingly, "You heard Claire. I'll be able to relearn how to do it."

"Why?" Bobby asked. Darien looked confused. Claire frowned at the agent, not understanding herself. Pointing at Fawkes for emphasis, Hobbes clarified, "Why do you want to go see-through? That quicksilver's brought you a lotta grief these past couple years. Why are you so all-fire anxious to get it back?"

"Hobbes, why do I have this *thing* in my head if I can't go invisible?"

"There you go," Hobbes said, as if that explained everything. "All the time we were partners, the one thing you wanted more than anything was to get that gland out. To be a normal guy again, instead of a freak. Now, I got my doubts about you being normal again 'cause I don't think you ever were, but I sure understood you wanting your brain to be implant-free. Now, though, you haven't asked Claire once about removing it, and you're pushing to get it working again."

"Bobby," Claire began, warningly.

Darien's eyes flashed, not red, not crazy, but definitely angry. "What the hell is your problem, Hobbes? You scared you're gonna be upstaged again? Or you're just too paranoid to stand having a guy who can go invisible around?"

The agent didn't reply, just continued to stare at him steadily. Before Fawkes could waver, Hobbes quietly requested, "Claire, Eberts. Give us a minute?"

Eberts nodded and slipped out of the room. Claire vacillated, then with a concerned glance at Darien and a warning look to Hobbes, exited as well. When the door closed behind her, Darien's eyes dropped again, not strong enough in body or spirit to maintain his anger. His shoulders were slumped, hunched inward. Trying to pull everything in, fold the fear and the hurt and all the rest of the baggage away inside. Never had been Fawkes's style keep it all

tucked away; he had always been verbal about his concerns, always had everything he felt written all over his face. Too late to start stuffing it away now.

"Fawkes," Hobbes said, "What's this about—why do you need to be invisible? What do you want to hide?"

"Hide from, you mean."

Hobbes shrugged, neither denying nor agreeing with the correction.

Darien hesitated for a long moment. Then he began to speak, picking up momentum as he went along, until the words were spilling out as fast as he could pronounce them. "I had a lot of time to think, in that place. When I wasn't nuts...time to reflect, consider what I am, what I do—what I did. What I could do about it, if I ever got the chance again. Hobbes, what good am I without the gland? I'm no agent. I'm a thief, and a lousy one. I can go invisible, that's the one thing I've got—I'm not much help to you otherwise. Not any help to the Agency. What use was it for you to get me out if I can't even do the one thing everyone wants me for?"

"Whoa! Hold on, Fawkes!" Hobbes rapped out. "That's *not* why we did all this. That's not why we got you out of there. The Agency has *nothing* to do with this. Matter of fact, Claire and I—Eberts too, I guess—are going to be in deep shit with the Agency when...if they find us out."

"Then why—"

"Because you needed help. Because it was our fault, all our fault, everyone in the Agency, that you were stuck in that damn place to begin with. You didn't deserve that, not after everything you did. Someone had to help you, and we were the only ones who would. We had to—I had to. I owed you."

"You don't owe me anything—"

"Yeah, right." Hobbes snorted. "You might think saving my life is no biggie, but I'm kinda fond of breathing, and I wouldn't be if it wasn't for you. And anyway, I told you a while ago. Bobby Hobbes doesn't bail on—"

"I'm not your partner anymore, Bobby."

"Says who? You're back with the Agency—well, not really, but whatever—and you haven't been given another partner, so we're still together. Besides, you can't break up this team. None of the dweebs they've assigned me could hold a candle to us—we had, what's it, *chemistry*. You know. Starsky and Hutch. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid."

"Laverne and Shirley. Abbott and Costello."

"Uh, Siegfried and Roy. Penn and Teller."

"Would you be the short one, or the loud one?"

"Fawkes..." Hobbes growled, mock-threatening, then broke it off. Studied him. "So, you believe me? Buy that we might want you around for more than what magic tricks you can pull? Things a little straighter inside that mixed-up noggin of yours?"

"A little." Darien dared meet his eyes. "How'd you know? How'd you guess..."

"What tracks your thoughts were running along? Give me some credit, Fawkes. I've lived with paranoid insecurity eating at me for most of my life. You think I wouldn't recognize a mother like that chomping on my best friend?"

Fawkes blinked rapidly to keep unwanted moisture from collecting in his eyes. Hobbes stifled a smile, not wanting it to be taken wrong, and patted Darien's shoulder. "You better get some rest, or Claire'll have my hide. She says if you take this downtime seriously you'll be up and around within a couple days—and we need you up."

"Oh?"

"Can't stay here forever, Fawkes. Don't worry, we'll talk about it later. It's nothing serious. Just don't want to make Eberts go postal or something, messing up his neat and tidy domicile. You're gonna be okay, and that's the important thing."

"Okay," Darien mumbled, whether an echo or an answer Hobbes wasn't sure. He obediently settled down on the bed, drawing up the covers as his eyes slid shut.

Only to snap open again as Hobbes switched off the light, casting the room in dim shadows from the twilight behind the closed shade. "Bobby?"

"Right here, buddy."

"Geeze..." Shame weighed heavy in the whisper. "Sorry...God, I feel like a five year old."

"Claire always said we sound like kindergartners when we, uh, talk," Hobbes said, "so I guess that's okay. You want the light?" He turned on the lamp by the bed.

Darien relaxed, then tensed again, hands fisting on the covers, bunching the blankets. "Afraid of the dark...what the hell's wrong with me?"

"You're just jumpy," Hobbes said. "Hell, if I was in your shoes I'd probably be hiding under the bed. Or at least under the covers. You know how you feel safe under the covers, 'cause the monsters can't get you? I never got that—I mean, what's in a quilt that keeps the Bogeyman from tearing it apart? Monster kevlar? But it always worked. Never got my head bitten off once."

"I don't think I'm bad enough to need to hide under them," Darien said. "Besides, my Bogeyman would be under them with me..."

"So you keep the light on. And I'll be here in case any other monsters turn up when your head is all exposed and vulnerable. Ready to clock them with my Glock. Well, actually it's a Smith & Wesson, but it sounds better—"

"Good night, Hobbes."

"Night, partner. And don't worry. No bedbugs will bite with Bobby Hobbes on the job."

When Claire came in half an hour later, Darien was sleeping soundly enough he didn't stir when she took his pulse. Hobbes watched her from where he sat, chair rocked back against the wall. When the doctor was done her examination, she approached him, asked in a whisper, "So, you've worked out whatever was going on between you?"

He nodded. "Think so. He gonna be up for moving soon?"

"Hopefully. Physically, at least." She hesitated. In this they didn't have much leeway. That they hadn't been caught yet was only a matter of chance. Sooner or later, even with the protection of Eberts's reputation, they were bound to be discovered. And if Darien wasn't yet in a condition to move when they needed to abscond...he had gone through so much already; pushing him too fast might drive him over the final edge, but if there was no choice...

"Hey, it'll be okay, Claire," Hobbes murmured. "He's all right in the head. It's just that place, and the madness and everything. All the lies they fed him. He sort of lost track of everything, since there wasn't anything he could hold onto. I know what it's like, but he'll pull through. Just needs to remember there are some things he can count on. All we gotta do is remind him, when he needs it."

She flashed him a smile, for once unquestioningly warm. "I'm glad you understand, Bobby. This wouldn't be possible without you. I came up with the counteragent replacement, but you'll be the real reason he recovers..."

He heard the unspoken *'if he does'* as she trailed off, shook his head and said, "When, Claire. It's only been a day and he's already mostly there—he'll make the final stretch, no problems. He's going to get through this."

Claire reminded him quietly, "That is, if any of us do."

When Darien awoke that morning, Hobbes was sitting in the chair by the bed, exactly where he had been the night before. He apparently had been waiting for Darien to open his eyes, because Fawkes had barely done so when his former partner clapped his hands together briskly and said, "Great to see you up! How ya feeling?"

"Better," Darien replied, somewhat bemused but honestly. "A lot better." He frowned suspiciously. "You been there the whole night?"

Hobbes shook his head. "Nah, Claire made me sack out on the living room couch. Said she didn't want me to wake you up snoring. 'Course you were sawing wood a lot louder than me

at the time, but as rule I don't argue with women with MDs. So she slept on the cot in here. Now she's putting together breakfast—you awake enough to eat?"

"Sure," Darien agreed.

"Then I'll go get room service. Claire and I were waiting to eat with you."

"Oh." Darien ran one hand through his hair, grimaced when his fingers tangled in the oily strands. He didn't want to think about what the mess on top of his head must look like; it felt bad enough. Definitely in need of some serious, no-holds-barred grooming. "What time is it, anyway?"

"About ten A.M. You got over twelve hours—hope you're feeling rested." Hobbes grinned, but there was a definite hint of concern in his careful study of his former partner. More than just worry for his health, Fawkes suddenly believed. Bobby was stressed, and since Darien was feeling better by the minute, it probably wasn't about him. Hopefully. Unless Claire and Bobby were hiding something from him...

No, they wouldn't. Not about his health, anyway. He wouldn't put it past them to conceal other things...he was an invalid, after all, not to mention a recently-escaped mental patient. Walk on eggshells and all that. And hell, they might be right—by his count he'd freaked out three times yesterday, couldn't be sure he wouldn't lose it again for who knows what reasons. It was just...hard to believe any of this was even real. Waking this morning he'd almost expected to be back in the hospital, everything of the last couple days just a dream. Kept almost expecting a strange doctor to walk through the door and give him something to take away the hallucinations...which he didn't want gone.

Falling asleep last night, he had decided it didn't matter if all this was only in his mind. Screw reality. An escape that was only in his head was better than being in that place another day. And his friends were here...

That convinced him more than anything else. Hobbes, Claire, even Eberts—he doubted he could imagine them so completely. His imagination wasn't that...creative.

Like Hobbes watching him now, with that furrowed-brow glower, like a bulldog might lay on a stranger accompanying its master. Dubious about the immediate situation but with most of his mind on higher concerns.

"Hey, man, I'm fine," Darien said, reassuringly he hoped. "Or at least I'm getting better. Where's that food?"

Hobbes shook himself out of his thoughts, nodded and stood. "Coming up. Will be right back with Claire."

"What about Eberts?"

"It's Monday," Hobbes explained. "He's at work. Agency chief accountant, you know."

"Really?" Darien tried to remember if he had known that or not. Then another issue occurred to him—"Hey, what about you and Claire? Why aren't you in, too?"

"Ah..." Hobbes's shrug was elaborately casual, a little too markedly indifferent for Darien's liking. "I called in sick. Said I'd try to be there this afternoon, if I was feeling better." He grinned at Darien again. "Pissing off the current partner's a hobby of mine, ya know. Skipping class is guaranteed to get his goat. The director doesn't like it either, so that's two birds with one stone. Definitely worth it."

Darien eyed him sharply, picking up at least part of what he was leaving out. "You don't need to babysit me."

"I know, I'm not," Hobbes brushed it off.

"I mean, I'm a grown man."

"Yeah, I know, you're a big guy. You can take care of yourself. I'm not babysitting, I'm just...sticking around."

"Sticking around."

"You know. Staying close. Just 'cause."

"You don't need to."

"I know."

"I'm okay."

"Yeah, I know. You're fine, Fawkes."

"I am."

"I know."

Darien tried not to smile. Failed, even as he sighed, "...Thanks, Bobby."

Hobbes arrived at the Agency building ten minutes before noon, which wasn't the latest he had come in before. Especially not when he had given them warning. He had sick hours to burn. Hell, for all they knew he could have been on his deathbed. His alleged partner Lewis, however, was not a sympathetic soul. The man glared daggers when he walked into their office.

Not that Hobbes could completely blame him; judging by the paper-covered condition of his desk, Lewis had been wrestling with red tape all morning. That chore was enough to make a saint swear like a character in a Tarantino flick. A good part of his anger probably wasn't even directed at Hobbes; Bobby was just a convenient target.

Indeed, Lewis's annoyed flush faded when he got up to fetch a cup of water from the bubbler. On the way back to his desk he stopped to stand over his partner's chair, gazed down at him coolly while Hobbes switched on his computer and checked his e-mail.

"You don't sound sick," the younger agent said dourly.

"Well..." Hobbes leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head and donned his best cat-post-canary smirk. "There's illnesses, and then there's, uh, bugs."

"Bugs."

"You know. Mysterious itches...the kind that need special treatment. Such as from a nurse, mmm, five-eight, long black hair, all the right...medicine." His hands described significant curves in the air.

Lewis snorted. "Sounds like your weekend went better than mine, anyway."

He couldn't resist. "Well, some guys got it..."

But for once, Lewis ignored it. "We both missed some excitement, though," he remarked suddenly, not quite off-hand.

"Oh?" Hobbes felt a twinge, nothing specific, but the hairs on the back of his neck prickled at the odd tone.

"Yeah. Friday night this guy escaped an LA mental hospital. Thing is, they think one of ours might have helped him do it—you know that scientist, right, the woman with the basement lab. You worked with her, the, uh..."

"The Keeper," Hobbes supplied, hoping his mouth didn't sound as dry as it had become.

"Yeah, the Keeper. See, the guy who escaped used to be one of ours, too. An ex-Agent. And the Keeper was his personal doctor. Seems that she's gone—didn't come to work today, and when they checked out her house it had been cleared out—everything was there, except the important stuff. Clothes and her laptop. Ditto with her bank account, closed out electronically over the weekend."

"They checked this out already."

"Hey, we're nothing if not thorough. As soon as the guy went missing, she was the number one suspect, apparently. Never been much of a team player, it sounds like. Far as I know they don't have proof positive she's involved, but it seems likely." Lewis threw him an unreadable glance. "When you called in sick I wondered..."

"What?" Hobbes rolled his eyes and prayed to whatever deity might govern deception that his acting skills had improved since high school drama. "I'd risk losing my job for some nut in the loony bin?"

"Well, apparently, from what I've heard tell, you know this guy," Lewis replied.

"Know him?" Disbelieving curiosity. Oh yeah, this had to be his best performance yet.

"Man by the name of Darien Fawkes."

Hobbes made a show of surprise, not too extreme. He was smart enough to have mostly deduced it already, wasn't he? God, he hated trying to second-guess himself. "Fawkes? Oh yeah, I was his partner for a bit. Ex-con, real screw-up. Forgot he was institutionalized."

"But he and this Keeper might've run off together."

"Fawkes and the Keeper? No way. Keeper's a real class act...she'd never go for the likes of Fawkes."

Lewis cocked his head. "Never heard you mention him before...so you were partners for a while?"

Hobbes really didn't care for the shrewd discernment on the other man's face. "A year or so. Not much to say. He transferred to the CIA and I haven't seen him since."

"Huh." Lewis turned away, returned to his desk and picked up his pen. Put it down again and remarked, "So, Fawkes give you trouble? Did you help get him committed?"

With tremendous effort Hobbes kept his teeth from grating together. "No. Not really. Like I said, he went to the CIA. They're the ones who put him away, I guess."

"Know why?"

Hobbes rubbed his eyes. "Look, you want the truth? I can't tell you. It's classified. The Agency..." He realized his voice was rising, brought it under control again. "Fawkes was a special project. That's how he was connected with the Keeper. Medical stuff. They put me with him because I'm one of the Agency's most trusted agents. Which is why I'm not spilling anything now—he's no longer under the Agency. Not our business anymore—we were told to forget everything about him. So I have. That's it. End of story."

"I see." Lewis grasped his pen again, held it poised over the sheet before him, not writing. "So you really don't know what happened to him."

"Not my business," Hobbes repeated. He watched Lewis's pen hover above the page, raised his eyes to see Lewis's own on him, narrowed thoughtfully. Abruptly impatient with the tension, Hobbes snapped, "If you've got something to say, say it."

Lewis didn't blink. "It's nothing. Just, I've listened to you complain about your partners going back to your time with the Bureau. But I've never even heard Fawkes's name from you."

"Classified, like I said," Hobbes tersely replied.

"Like that's stopped you before." There was something in Lewis's face he didn't quite recognize. A thoughtful look of concentration, as if he were assembling something in his mind, piecing together a puzzle with missing pieces. The man didn't say anything more, however, and Hobbes reluctantly attempted to turn his attention to his e-mail. Spam, spam,

chain letter, something from the boss he couldn't concentrate on well enough to understand, spam...

"Hey, Hobbes," Lewis broke the silence after a couple minutes. "Can you come over here, take a look at this?" He waved a paper in his direction.

Sighing, Hobbes made himself rise from his chair—rather than leaping out of it, and out of his skin while he was at it—and stride nonchalantly across the office to his partner. "Yeah—"

Lewis hunched over his desk, forcing Hobbes to do the same to get a look at the page he was indicating. While he squinted in confusion at the tiny print, Lewis spoke, almost in his ear, tersely, "They know it's someone in the Agency besides the Keeper. They're searching everyone's house, without warning. They searched my place this morning."

Hobbes jerked back, controlling his shock too late to hide his culpability.

Lewis studied him for an instant, nodded to himself, then glanced significantly at the wall clock. "Hobbes, isn't it your lunchtime?"

"What—uh...yeah..." He tried to meet his partner's eyes.

Lewis didn't allow it. "Good luck," the other agent whispered, almost inaudibly, and bent back over his paperwork. As Hobbes opened the door he said, a little louder, "Good-bye, partner."

Slightest stress on the final word—not sarcasm for once, but like he meant it. Hobbes looked back, saw Lewis had lifted his head. "Thanks," Bobby mouthed, hoping his sincerity showed on his face, and then the door closed. Like a rocket Hobbes was off, heading for the cafe across the street, with the payphone hopefully outside of the Agency's surveillance.

What a difference a night of real sleep made. A daring escape, an injection of counteragent, and twelve hours' complete, undisturbed rest, and he was actually feeling human for the first time in too long. And the shower was a great help. Darien braced his arms against the slick tile wall and let the hot water pound down on him, reveling in the simple freedom to stand here as long as he wanted, even after all the soap and shampoo had whirled down the drain. No one timing him, no one watching, no one to turn off the water except for him, when he chose.

The simple freedoms were the most important. All the little things. His standards had definitely fallen. When he had gotten up this morning he had felt pretty good about just walking across the room without relying on the wall for support, and then had been annoyed at himself for feeling good about such a trivial thing. This invalid deal was for the birds.

Claire at least made it tolerable. She didn't offer unwanted help, and her encouragement was professional, medically focused, not degrading to his pride. Her face had lit up when he took

his first steps, but she didn't break into applause or anything humiliating, just smiled and said, "That's an excellent sign. You're well on the way to a complete recovery."

Complete recovery—as if he had been deathly sick or mortally injured, not just victim of a chemical imbalance which put him out of his skull. She had laid it out for him plainly. The weakness and the tremors were from the drugs. Everything else—nightmares, panic attacks, inability to quicksilver—was the aftermath of what had been going on in his head for the last couple years. Physically he was getting over it. The mental stuff would take longer. But she was giving him a chance to adjust at his own pace. Not babying him.

Though he didn't know if he could sleep without someone watching over him...

He finally left the shower, slipped into the clean sweats and t-shirt Claire had provided. As he came out of the bathroom, toweling off his hair and irritated because he couldn't recall the second verse of Kryptonite, he heard the telephone trill. "You gonna get that?" he asked Claire, who was seated on the cot in the guestroom reading a magazine.

She shook her head. "We don't want anyone to know I'm here. It would be detrimental to Eberts's reputation."

"Sure it wouldn't be harder on yours, to be caught hanging out at his place?" Darien joked, as the phone rang again.

Following the third ring the machine picked up. After the tone a familiar voice came on. "Hello? Yeah, I'd like to order a pizza, one with everything, extra cheese, hold the mushrooms—"

Claire ran for the phone the moment she heard the voice, Darien right behind her. She picked up the receiver, answered, "Bobby?" Her tone was as cool as she could manage, stiffly accented. "What's wrong? Does someone suspect us?"

"Yeah, that's right," Hobbes's tinny voice continued through the machine's speaker. "We got a lot of hungry people here. Everyone wants some. If your delivery boys are as good as you say, they should've left already."

"Damn," Claire murmured. "We'll clear out—be careful, Bobby."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll be expecting you." The line cut off.

No sooner had Claire hung up then she had dashed to the homemade lab in the study. Darien leaned against the doorway and watched as she swiftly, carefully stacked her apparatuses in a couple of brown cardboard boxes. "What can I do?" he asked urgently.

Claire deftly wound a sheet of newspaper around a rack of testtubes to keep them from rattling against one another. "You just prepare yourself—we may have to run. I'm sure they've already been to my house, probably Bobby's as well, but we don't dare go to either in case they're under surveillance—"

A sharp rat-tat-tat sounded at the door. Claire jerked up, her eyes wide. Closing the box, she shoved it under the table, already cleared of her other equipment, and threw a haphazard pile of papers down to conceal the suspiciously neat surface. Then she spun around and started for the study door. "We have to—"

"Hide," Darien said, taking her arm and lowering his voice. "If they have the house surrounded..." He stared at the far wall, adding up his limited knowledge of the apartment's architecture and wishing he had some way to pierce the plaster's opacity. X-ray vision would be as useful as invisibility, wonder if anyone was working on that—

Another knock on the door sounded, and a muffled voice called, "Federal agents. If anyone is inside please come to the door. We aren't making any arrests; this is a security matter."

"Yeah, well, I'm real insecure," Darien muttered. If they were giving warning without charging in, they must not have any concrete suspicions. Which wouldn't do any good if they were discovered. He debated going for the backdoor, changed his mind when another set of footsteps clattered on the back porch. Instead he pulled Claire into the guest room, shut the door silently before scanning the chamber. Blank walls, single closet—no, they'd check the closets first.

"The window?" Claire whispered, but Darien shook his head. Both sides of the house would be in full view of anyone on the street or in the back, and there were agents stationed at either position. Nowhere to run.

But if he tried to make a break for it, and Claire stayed inside—they wouldn't bother to search the house thoroughly; he was their target, after all. Being here might get Eberts in trouble, but if he claimed he had broken in...and Claire and Hobbes wouldn't fall under any suspicion—

"No, Darien," Claire whispered harshly, as if he had spoken that train of thought aloud. When had she added mind-reading to her bag of tricks?

He was expecting to hear the front door get kicked down any minute; instead there was only a soft click of a key smoothly turning tumblers. At his expression Claire murmured, "The Agency routinely duplicates all their employees' keys." She squeezed his arm. "Darien, you hide in here. I'm going to go out and try to convince them—"

"No," he said, in the exact same tone she had just tried on him, like berating a disobedient child.

Footsteps in the hallway. No time to argue it out. Darien simply grabbed her arm and hauled her down to the floor, then slid them both under the bed, side by side with his arm still looped under her shoulders. The tip of his nose grazed the box-spring. By carefully turning his head, he positioned one eye to see through the inch gap between the edge of the bedcover and the floorboard.

Within that limited range of sight he watched the door swing open and a pair of black patent leather shoes tramp into the room. Beside him Claire wasn't even breathing, though her body vibrated with suppressed tension. The shoes marched across the floor, out of Darien's vision. He breathed shallowly and silently, listening as the closet hinges squeaked and the door

scraped against the floor. The man thumped the back wall, then withdrew. Black shoes tapped back toward the door to rejoin the others exploring the rest of the house.

Then the pair stopped. Claire shivered once, unable to see but listening intently as the footsteps approached again, halted beside the bed—

Oh God...Darien couldn't breathe, couldn't think. He was sure his heart was pounding so loudly anyone up and down the block could hear it, like that corpse's in Edgar Allen Poe's famous story. If only it would stop, if only he could stay hidden, if only he were...

She'd told him it was all in his mind, she'd said he could relearn the old tricks, if ever he was going to, now was the time—

The man was bending down, crouching to take hold of the bedspread, lift the curtain and reveal them like a magician showing off his skills at prestidigitation.

Darien closed his eyes, imagined the ice chill of quicksilver sweeping over him, over Claire shaking beside him, shielding them. Tried to make the imagination so vivid it became reality. He remembered how to do this, remembered every sensation, every impulse. Wasn't it still triggered by fear? He was willing to admit he was a coward, he was terrified, anything if it would save him, would save Claire...

Please, I don't want to go back, I don't want her punished, please, let this work...

Bobby Hobbes sat in his car, parked on the curb across the street from his apartment, and stared up at the shaded windows.

They had been there already. He had checked with binoculars, verified that the light in the bathroom window he had set to switch off when the door was opened had been triggered. That darkness was proof of their entry, even if the agents since had departed.

He didn't dare go up. He had cased the block twice to be sure and hadn't seen anyone suspicious, no joggers on loops or mysterious parked vans from nonexistent flower shops. So no one watching the outside, but he knew better than to suppose they would leave his apartment uncovered. At the very least they would have a wire, probably a camera, too. If he walked in and started carting stuff out, they would have people over before the elevator brought him back to the ground floor. And that would only be in the event that there wasn't an agent already lying in wait for him right inside the door. They hadn't grabbed him at the Agency, but after visiting his apartment, and learning he had split practically the moment after he had walked into the office this morning, they would definitely be wanting to have a long chat with him. Especially if they happened to sneak a peek at his now-emptied savings account.

Online banking was convenient, he had to admit. Even with all the possibilities it provided hackers, the Internet had its uses. He was thinking of e-mailing his resignation letter to the director. From an anonymous account, of course, one he would close as soon as he hit 'send'.

There wouldn't really be a good reason to do it, but he liked thinking of how it would sting. He could picture the director's face and it would be a beautiful sight to behold, even if he couldn't witness it personally.

This was it. Most of his bridges burning behind him, only a couple more left to apply the torch. He couldn't take his eyes off those beige shades, like he could actually see the figurative fire licking at them.

It wasn't that he had any particular attachment to the place. He had lived in the apartment for the last five years, but it had never really been 'home' in his mind. Just the place where he lived. The last time he'd had a home was the little flat he and Viv had shared, way back when. Days long past. There wasn't anything in that apartment up there he really cared about. Well, the latest high-definition TV, he would miss that. Probably wouldn't be picking up another one of those anytime soon, not at those prices.

The Taurus, too. He would miss his car. She was a good little machine. She had served him well, the last year, and been fun about it. A dependable agent, lot of personality for a recent model.

But no telling where they might have stuck a tracker on her, or what else they could have hidden beneath the seats or under the hood. Couldn't risk it, even if he had had a convenient way to take the auto with him.

"Goodbye," he said, and patted the dashboard before climbing out of the driver's seat. He left the keys under the visor but locked the doors. Sooner or later the Agency would find the car and send someone to pick it up.

In the meantime, Hobbes slung his bag over his shoulder and walked a couple blocks to catch the crosstown bus to their prearranged rendezvous point. Claire and Darien had not yet arrived by the time he finished the necessary preparations, but if all went according to plan, they would turn up within an hour or so.

If not...no, he could cross that bridge when he came to it. Now he waited, bought an iced cappuccino and sat on a bench, sipping the coffee with his sneakers propped on his suitcase, watching the people hurrying by while unseen, unheard, his past became ash behind him.

Claire hadn't had a chance to protest it, nor any logical argument to make even if she'd had the opportunity. She had listened to the footsteps in the hall with a fear so primal she felt as if she were five years old again, quivering in terror of her brother's ghost stories. All but paralyzed—not only by fright, but by the sheer lack of options, the stunning realization that there was no way out of this—

And then Darien had grabbed her and hidden them both under the bed. Didn't he know that this was only a temporary respite, providing only a scant moment of freedom—maybe that was all he wanted.

She wasn't really afraid for herself. The worse they could do was jail her—for kidnapping? Aiding and abetting? They might try to blackmail her into doing more of their dirty work, but she wouldn't be party to that anymore; she would refuse. She had already sacrificed her reputation; there was nothing more they could hold over her.

But Darien...he had lived in nightmares for two years, nightmares he now would be returned to. If she felt anything stronger than fear, it was her grief, that she had failed a friend so completely. Wasn't that the cruelest trick of all, to offer hope only to take it away from him again?

She heard the bedroom door open. Darien beside her had squeezed his eyes shut. She wished she could do something, anything, to comfort him, not even a whispered word, she didn't dare, if she could but touch his arm, assure him somehow...

But there were no second chances. Not in this. She and Bobby had known that from the first.

She wished she could apologize.

The footsteps crossed the room. Out of the far corner of her eye she saw shadows as the man passed by. Across the room again, to the door. Then he stopped, and this was the end.

Then she felt *something* flow over her skin, like liquid nitrogen, so cold it burned against her bare flesh for an instant. It closed over her, as if she had been submerged in ice water. She was freezing, she was drowning—

She was invisible.

And so was Darien beside her. She turned her head, and saw only a scant outline of his form, hazy green-blue, translucent. And behind him—*through* him—in odd shades of shimmering gray, she saw the face of the agent.

She was vaguely surprised that she recognized him—didn't know him nearly well enough to recall his name, but she had seen him in the Agency's halls. So it wasn't just the CIA, but the Agency itself after its own, and one formerly its own. And now an agent, a former coworker, was staring through her, his eyes focusing on the bedspread hanging behind her.

She didn't breathe, wasn't sure if she even could. Quicksilver allowed the transference of air molecules, she reminded herself, and it didn't feel as if she were suffocating, but all the same she could feel its substance around her. No longer cold, insulated against her skin, but slippery smooth.

Darien's arm under her flexed, his hand, unseen, tightening around her shoulder reassuringly.

The bedspread dropped, cutting off her view of the agent. Then the man was marching away, shoes clicking on the hardwood. He left the door open, so they could listen as he proceeded down the hall, met his fellow agent. They exchanged a few words, barely audible, something about grasping at straws if they even were searching *his* place like this.

Both pairs of footsteps continued down the hall, the front door opened and closed, and the screen door rattled as it swung shut.

"Wait," Darien whispered in her ear—how strange, to know him so close, but not feel the warmth of his breath. She lay still, breathing shallowly, listening to the faint sounds of a car engine starting up and driving away. They lay there silent and unmoving for another minute, and then Darien whispered, "Stay here," and slid out from under the bed. Still cloaked in quicksilver, he did a quick round of the apartment, then returned.

"We're okay," he said quietly.

Claire crawled out from their hiding place, then shook herself—like shaking off water or snowflakes, and the quicksilver spilled down like shards of a shattered mirror, delicately chiming on the floor. "Wow," she murmured, understanding as she hadn't before why Bobby had never been able to properly explain what it was like to be invisible, why Darien himself had always been so inspecific about the experience. What must it be like to feel that frigid, silken caress pouring from your own skin...

Darien now was casting off his own layer—even as it fell, he sat down heavily on the bed, and medical objectivity reasserted itself over Claire's excitement. Donning her professional care-giver's comportment, she went to her patient. That had been a lot for him to do, more than she would have expected of him. Darien was always surprising her, but he must have pushed himself past his currently limited endurance. "You did well," she told him as she lifted his wrist to take his pulse and check the tattoo. Only two segments turned, and that was after two days and several minutes of continuous quicksilver. Excellent; the new counteragent was as effective as she had hoped. "We're lucky, though," she remarked. "If they had had any infrared equipment they would have spotted us right away—they must assume you no longer can—"

She stopped when she realized that Darien wasn't listening—in fact he didn't seem aware of her at all. His hands, resting on his thighs, were balled into fists, and he stared blankly down at the floor, past her, as if she were still invisible.

"Darien?" she asked gently, laying a hand on his arm. "Can you hear me?" He was trembling minutely under her touch. "Darien?"

"...Claire..." The words came slowly, pulled from him, as he were summoning them from some long unknown place inside himself. "I...I remember..."

"Remember what?" she asked lightly, even as she felt her heart dip in her chest.

"When...the quicksilver fell, and I...I remember...the last mission...oh God!" He flung his arms out, not to push her back, but in a vain effort to keep the memories assaulting him at bay. "I—they made me—I killed a man. I killed a man with my bare hands!" He was visibly shaking now, shuddering, his fists so tightly clenched she saw a spot of blood drip from the palm. "I went—I don't even know where—who—he was screaming at me. He had a gun, I didn't care, I—I was—I was...I went invisible so when he tried to shoot he missed and I snapped his neck, and he fell, like that, he fell. And I was laughing—I was *laughing* at him!"

"It wasn't your fault, Darien," Claire said softly, trying to sound reassuring, not sure if there was any way she could. Not sure if he could believe any consolation. "It was quicksilver madness—"

"It was *me*! My hands! I don't remember—I don't even know who it was! I can't even remember what he looked like—I just remember the sound, that sound, I heard it over my laughing, when it broke—" He was shouting now, pitched high with hysterical reaction.

"It was the CIA," Claire said over him, not as loud but firm. "They could have stopped you—they did, when you'd done what they wanted. He was a dangerous man, Darien, and they wanted him dead. Quicksilver madness was the weapon they used. Not you."

"You knew." Darien stared at her, focusing at last, but the betrayal in his eyes looked more painful than the madness. "You knew..."

"I just found out. Just yesterday. We suspected, but we didn't know—Darien, I'm so sorry..." She was crying. He reached out, touched her damp cheek. Wonderingly, as if he couldn't believe she would ever shed tears for him.

But his voice when he spoke was harsh. "How many, Claire?" Unforgiving, but it wasn't her he couldn't forgive. "How many people?"

"Five," she told him, honestly. She wanted to say more, wanted to tell him they had all been criminals, had all deserved their fate, but she couldn't say that truthfully because she didn't know.

And it wouldn't matter anyway to Darien, now sitting so stock-still he might have been cemented in place. His lips worked without breath for a moment, and when his voice came it sounded damaged, broken. "Five...I killed five—"

"It wasn't you," she said clearly, biting off the end of every word, hoping the force might get his attention. "There's no time to philosophize—you have to accept it wasn't your fault. You couldn't do anything about it. For God's sake, Darien, half an hour ago you didn't even know that you had done it. I don't mean to be unsympathetic, but we don't have time for this." She had to be severe; it was penetrating where her compassion had not. And she was all too aware of the need for urgency. "We have to get out of here. Soon they'll finish searching all the agents' houses, and when that's done they'll go over everything again, more carefully. They'll comb this area from Mexico to LA, and they won't stop turning over stones until they find you."

She took Darien's hands, pulled him to his feet. "That's why we have to get you out of here. Come on. I'll get our bags and then we have to meet Bobby. He should have everything ready."

He blinked at her, the shock still there, but vying with hard-won self-preservation. "Everything'? Ready for what?"

"You'll see," said Claire, and ushered him out of the room.

Darien didn't really pay attention to where they were going. He gazed listlessly out the window as Claire drove, watching the streets flow past. Trying not to think, to react, to feel. Just watching. Trying not to decide what was worse, the blood he remembered staining his hands, or the blood he didn't remember at all.

It wasn't until she was pulling into the parking lot that their destination registered. "Lindbergh Field?" He followed Claire out of the car, looking around at the airport.

"Here," Claire said, handing him a duffel bag from the trunk. "We must find—oh, Bobby, there you are."

Hobbes was hurrying toward them, looking like he was undercover in jeans and a black T-shirt printed with the logo of some obscure heavy metal band. "There *you* are," he said. "I was starting to get worried, thought they might've caught you or something."

Claire nodded. "We had a close call, but Darien saved us—he's regained his...ability," she finished, mindful of the people around them.

"Really? Great!" Hobbes grinned at Darien, only to have the expression turn upside down as he got a good look at Fawkes and noticed more than the expected exhaustion in his face. "Hey, partner, what's wrong?"

"I..." But the words stuck in his throat. Did Bobby even know? What must he think, to know his friend was...

Claire came to the rescue. "He's also...recalled certain other things," she said plainly.

Hobbes got it almost instantly. His brow furrowed with concern while paradoxically his eyes darkened with anger. "Damn it...you know it wasn't your fault, right?"

"Claire said so," Darien mumbled.

"Well, you should listen to your doctor. 'Specially when she's a lot smarter than either of us." Bobby studied him for a moment longer, clearly not liking what he was seeing, then gestured dismissively. "Anyway, I was worried you wouldn't show in time. We better move—plane takes off in an hour."

That got through Darien's self-imposed withdrawal. "Plane?"

In answer Hobbes handed him a ticket. Darien squinted at it dubiously. Flight through LA to—"New York City?"

"What, haven't you always wanted to see the Statue of Liberty?"

"I told you, Darien," Claire said apologetically, "it's not safe for you to stay anywhere around here. They'll be looking for you. Not that they won't mount a nationwide search sooner or

later, but there's ways to hide in a city that size. And it's safer than trying to sneak you out of the country."

"It's the Big Apple or Canada," Hobbes put in, "and I can't see you as a Canuck. Come on, you go check your baggage while I return the rental car. Airline's at the second terminal."

"But..." Darien stared helplessly at the ticket, trying not to sound like a wretched coward. "What'll I do in New York? Where will I go—"

"Our first order of business will be to find an apartment," Claire said. "After that, I have some connections which might find us employment—"

"I've got a few ideas about that myself," Hobbes said, "especially if Fawkes can still...do that thing he does."

"See, Darien? We'll manage," Claire said brightly, patting his arm.

"We?" Darien repeated in doubtful amazement.

Claire and Hobbes exchanged startled glances. "Well, of course, we," Bobby said. "What'd you think, that we were just gonna send you off with a bag and a wave? We've all got tickets, same flight and all."

"Darien, you're not fully recovered," Claire admonished, "and even if you were, I haven't completed my observations of the new counteragent's efficacy. What if there are some unexpected side-effects? Or what if your extended time without any had an adverse effect? Not to mention we're still not sure of the gland's long-term impact on your physiology. I'm sorry, Darien, but you still need a Keeper."

"Besides," Hobbes added, "she might get that thing out of you yet. Don't give up on her, Fawkes. She never gave up on you."

Darien blinked rapidly, scarcely believing any of this. "You're just...leaving everything and coming with me..."

"Not like we have a lot of other options," Bobby remarked. "The Agency's got our numbers too by now—you're not the only wanted man here. Definitely better for us to clear out."

"You—it's because you helped me..." Darien stared at them, shrinking under the weight of the sympathy in their eyes. None of the resentment they must feel showed, though by now they must realize he could do nothing to repay them. "I—I don't—"

"Ah, crap, Fawkes, we don't have time for this," Hobbes groaned. "The plane, remember? Claire, get him there—I'll meet you at the terminal." About to stride away, he paused, turned back. "Darien...just hang in there, okay? And trust us. We know what we're doing. You'll get through this. Everything's gonna be okay. You got Bobby Hobbes's word on that."

"And your doctor advises you to listen to Bobby Hobbes," Claire added with a gentle smile. "In this circumstance, at least. Let's go, Darien. Our plane awaits."

The layover in Los Angeles was only for an hour, and Darien declined to leave the plane, even though Claire and Hobbes both suggested he at least stretch his legs. In the end only Hobbes disembarked, while Claire stayed with Darien and explained how she had several preparations of counteragent with her, and that Eberts would be sending the rest of her equipment via UPS as soon as they had a mailing address.

"What about everything else?" Darien asked. "Everything at your house—your dog—" What was the little pooch's name?

Claire looked down. "I gave Pavlov to a friend," she said quietly. "He'll have a good home. As for the rest...there was nothing I was too attached to. I brought my important mementos to Eberts—he'll send what I didn't take with me. The most important, my journals and such, are in my luggage."

"But—"

"Darien," and Claire leaned forward, lowering her voice in case another passenger might overhear, "I'm sorry we couldn't recover any of your possessions. We did try. Whatever you need, we'll try to obtain for you."

"That's not the point—I never had much stuff anyway—but you—"

"Hey." Hobbes had returned. Darien stood to let him into the middle seat. "Here, Fawkes," Bobby said as he settled himself. "Saw this in the bookstore and thought of you." He handed Fawkes a thick paperback.

"*The Lives and Words of the Great Philosophers*," Darien read off the cover. "From Aristotle to Wittgenstein."

"It's even got that other Hobbes guy in it," Hobbes affirmed, nodding. "And here, Claire. Know it's not your normal reading but they didn't have any magazines with more words than pictures."

"Popular Science and Discover." Claire smiled. "Thanks, Bobby. These will be a relief after I get through Dr. Muraki's latest article. The man's work is impressive but the translations are always far too dense. So what did you buy for yourself?"

Hobbes held up Tom Clancy's latest novel. "Just for laughs. I love to see at how wrong he gets it."

"I thought he did research to write things accurately," Darien remarked.

Hobbes rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sure. But he was talkin' to the wrong people. Think there's ever a mention of the Agency in these? Or Chrysalis? Clancy doesn't know squat. That's what makes it so funny."

They were trying so hard to make it seem like this was ordinary. Just a trip, like they were on vacation. Not as if they had willingly sacrificed most of their lives in one fell swoop. He owed it to them to go along. To pretend this was normal, and not ruin their efforts with his own inconsequential pain. "So how long is the flight to New York?" Darien dug his ticket out of his pocket, scanned the rows of letters and digits for the itinerary.

Then paused, noticing something peculiar enough to make the assumed distraction real. "What's this say here—'Daniel G. Faulkner'?"

"Shh, keep it down!" Hobbes hissed. "Don't act so surprised. That's your name, you know."

"My name—"

"Darien," Claire whispered, leaning over Hobbes to address him equally quietly, "we'd be easy to trace if we kept our real names."

"Yeah," Hobbes said. "So we got new identities, courtesy of a couple friends of mine—"

"--and Eberts," Claire reminded.

"Yeah, and Eberts. I was gonna mention him. We owe the guy big time, I admit that. Maybe we can send him a fruit basket."

"Wait—we all got new identities? You guys too?"

"Yup!" Hobbes grinned and flashed his license, bearing the name 'Robert A. Haber'.

"Daniel Faulkner, Robert Haber—aren't those a little, uh, obvious?" Darien asked.

"Not as much as you might think," Claire said, over the whine of the plane engines starting up. "They're common names, and we want to keep them fairly close—you're going to be using these names, and it will be easier to remember them if they're similar to your originals. And it's easier if initials aren't changed."

"So what's your name?"

She shrugged. "Clara Kepler."

"Kepler?" Darien and Bobby exchanged a look. "So did you keep your initials or not?" Hobbes inquired.

Claire gave them a cheerfully mysterious smile. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Well, it's not like it *matters* now. I mean, what would be the harm in telling us, since you won't be using it anymore as it is..."

"No, Bobby. A girl has to have some secrets."

"You mean, a Keeper does," grumbled Hobbes. "You just like playing with us. So, Faulkner, you gonna be as cagey?"

Darien started at the unfamiliar name, then shook it off. "Cagey about what?"

"I've been wanting to ask since I saw it. What's the 'G' for?"

"Huh?"

"Darien G. Fawkes, right? What's the G?"

"Oh." Darien shifted uncomfortably. Damn airplane seats; they weren't really made to accommodate anyone, but for someone of his height they were uniquely designed torture chambers. Now he wished he had gotten off, at least for a quick walk. "It's nothing."

"Nothing?" Hobbes repeated. "You mean, it's just 'G'?"

"Hey, it worked for Harry S Truman..."

"C'mon, give. What is it, something really embarrassing? Geraldo? Guinevere?"

"*Guinevere*?" Darien shook his head, sighed. "Okay. It's Guy."

"Guy? Darien Guy Fawkes?"

The Keeper made an odd snort.

Hobbes was confused. "That's not too bad. Could be a lot worse—what?"

Claire had apparently been possessed by a fit of quivers; at the question she lost control and giggled aloud. "What an auspicious namesake," she managed. "Your parents must've had high hopes. We must remember to do something special next November..."

At Hobbes's still lost expression, she proceeded to explain Guy Fawkes Day. Darien had cause to regret not stopping her, for once Bobby had been reminded of the British holiday, he had fodder to last him a good couple weeks at least.

At least he pretended to regret it. In truth the ribbing was a return to a normalcy he hadn't even realized he missed as much as he did. Hobbes's jibes and Claire's rolled eyes were a balm on a wound deep inside, soothing if not completely healing. With them he could be himself, as much of that self as he recalled. It felt good, even better than escaping from existence in that hospital. As good as the respite from the madness.

The plane roared through the air, leaving California, San Diego, the Agency, the hospital, everything he had known, behind him. No footprints to mark his way, no records to trace him by. Like death—not death. A rebirth. Probably would even get a new birth certificate, to match the new name. A new identity. But old friends still by his side.

And he began to think, in the deepest places in his mind where hope could still grow, that maybe, finally, he truly was free.

He had cause to doubt it, though.

"Hobbes! Bobby!" The shout was past his lips before he was awake, before he could stop it. Released from the paralysis of the nightmare, his eyes snapped open, staring up at the blank ceiling. Real, was it real—

No blood on his hands, when he stretched them up before his eyes. Not white sheets but dark green covers over him. The walls were not hospital walls but patterned, he could just make out lines of floral prints though the room's dimness. The hotel walls, he had woken to them for three days now...not a dream. Safety. Escape. Freedom. The murder was a dream and this was reality.

No, not a dream, a memory, but the face he had seen, dying—that had been only a figment, hadn't it. A lie. Hobbes was alive, wasn't he—

"I'm right here, Darien."

He blinked as the lamp clicked on, peered through golden splotches in his vision to see Hobbes sitting up in the next bed, also squinting against the light. "Bobby..?"

"Yeah, s'me, I'm not dead. I was dead tired..."

Darien winced. "Sorry..."

"No, don't be." Hobbes made an effort to sit up, rubbing his eyes. "Sorry, Fawkes, I still am half asleep. You okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm sorry."

"What were you dreaming about?"

"It doesn't matter. It's okay. You can go back to sleep." He lay down again, made to close his eyes, expecting the light to switch off.

It didn't. Instead his pillow was roughly yanked out from under his head, rapping his crown against the backboard. "All right, that's it, Fawkes," Hobbes snapped, throwing the pillow across the room and then crossing his arms, sitting up on his bed. "I ain't taking this crap anymore. You're not fine. You look like death warmed over and it's not because you're still sick—Claire says you're pretty much recovered, physically speaking. Except you aren't sleeping more than a couple hours a night without having nightmares so bad you bolt out of bed in a cold sweat." He regarded his friend, lips pressed tightly together in concern. "Darien, man, I know what it's like. Trust me, I've been through it myself. Maybe not the same thing, but I know you can't just get over these things. Not in a week. It takes time, it takes a hell of a lot of time. Fortunately you've got all you need. But it'll go faster if you don't keep it all locked up inside."

"I...don't know how..."

"Start small. That nightmare. Remember it?"

Darien sat up, scrubbed his face. Let the words come. "I...was insane again, and...they put me in a room with a man, and I...attacked him. Tore at him with my bare hands. I smelled the blood. And then it was you, and...I knew what I'd done, and I couldn't change it...Bobby, it was real. Not it being you, but everything else, I remember it happening. I remember it—"

"At least you think you do," Hobbes amended. "Remember, Fawkes, Claire told you, you might be making some of it up. Not on purpose—your mind could be, what'sit, fabricating what might have happened from what you know did happen. Sort of filling in the gaps."

"Does it matter?" Darien slumped back against the backboard. "I did it. I killed..."

He was expecting to be told yet again that it wasn't his fault. Instead Hobbes snapped, "Yeah. You did. And so have I." He stood up abruptly, glaring down at Darien still sitting on his bed. "We've all done things we want to forget. You gotta see past that. You gotta look at what you can do now. Otherwise you're letting them win, you're just putting yourself straight back into that hospital, and after all the work Claire and I did to get you out of there, I'm not standing for it."

Darien felt a lump rise in his throat, swallowed but couldn't dispel it, couldn't stop the tremor in his voice. "I—I'm sorry—you shouldn't have."

"Shouldn't have what?"

"Shouldn't have—everything you gave up—I don't deserve it. I don't deserve—"

"Bull Shit." Hobbes's face was thunderous, his hands balled into fists. "I know you, Fawkes, I've gotten to know you pretty good. You're a good man, a damn good man, forget about your past. The only thing you didn't deserve was getting locked away in that place. We didn't do this just because you're our friend, though you are, or because it was our fault as much as anyone's, though it was. We did it because it was wrong, what was done to you was wrong, and stopping it was the right thing to do."

"But...for me..." Darien stared down at the blankets clenched in his own fists. "I'm only one person—both of you, what you did, it ended up destroying your lives, for just my life."

"I wouldn't say destroyed. More like, moving on." Hobbes shrugged. "But either way, it was our choice. You think Claire didn't think this out, backwards and forwards and upside down? You think I didn't? You know how paranoid I am. I knew exactly what I was getting into. So did she. We chose this, all the way. Planned it from the get-go. And we'd do it again, anytime."

"But—"

"Okay, Fawkes. How about this. I didn't do it for you at all. I did it for what you can do." Hobbes pointed to the back of his neck. "That gland there, that talent you got. It did a lot of people a lot of good. It can again, now that you remember how to use it. Those people that did this to you, you're not their only victim. With you on our side, we got a chance against them. A chance to stop them. So that's why we got you out. For the sake of all those others you can save. Think about them."

"I...I didn't..." Darien shook his head. Stupid, stupid. Even if Hobbes was lying—it was still true. He wasn't the only victim. But he maybe was the only one who could help the others, stop those who did this to him before they did more harm to anyone else. Repay his friend's help—he couldn't compensate them, not personally, but he could help others in turn. It wasn't enough, maybe, but it was something. And it gave him a goal, a purpose to anchor his dissipated existence.

The nightmares would still come, but he had reason to fight them now, reason to get a night's sleep. He had spent his life living for himself, but that wasn't enough now. Wasn't important anymore. Everything he had done, the people he had killed, it mattered, but he could make reparations, and would, now that he realized how.

He had good reason to fear those he would challenge, but for the rest of the night, even though his memories made him shiver, he slept better than he had in the last week, and the nightmares which struck his unconscious mind did not survive his waking.

Hobbes watched Darien sleep, relieved to see it was sounder and less troubled a repose than he had had since their arrival in New York. Even with the constant noise of traffic and crowds outside. The city that never sleeps was certainly not a figure of speech. Apparently its citizens weren't supposed to, either.

Knowing Claire was also having problems with the noise, he crossed the room and tapped on the door connecting their two rooms. The knock was not enough to wake her had she managed to doze off, but in a moment the door opened. She looked at him with a cross of sleepy annoyance and concern. "Yes—is anything wrong?"

"No," Hobbes said. "Actually, I just had a little talk with Fawkes, and I think things are looking up." He entered her room, shut the door on their sleeping friend and then recounted their conversation.

Claire was troubled. "He should know that we don't hold it against him...in all honesty I don't mind that much, the move or anything else. The lack of scientific facilities is annoying at the moment but I believe I can find—"

"I know, I know. That's not the issue." Hobbes shook his head. "Fawkes is just guilted about disrupting our lives. Feels all 'he's not worthy'. It's partly a matter of what he went through—I know a little what it's like. He thought he'd been forgotten for so long that he half managed to convince himself that he didn't deserve to be remembered. With that kind of thinking, it's hard to convince him he needs to get better for his own sake. So I gave him something else to hold onto, until he finds himself again."

Claire just blinked at him for a moment, seeming to have to find her voice. "Bobby," she said at last, "you really do know something about psychology, don't you."

"Yeah, well, I've been through enough shrinks, I should. Maybe that's why I should do, open up my own practice. What d'ya think?"

"Well..." Claire looked to be giving the matter serious consideration. "Actually the man I know around here is close friends with a psychologist..."

"No way! It was just a joke!" Hobbes instantly denied, then narrowed his eyes. "The man you know'--this wouldn't be that boyfriend you mentioned to me way back when?"

"Well..."

"Ah ha! I gotta let Fawkes know about this."

"I'd rather you didn't yet. He's been busy lately, but I'll introduce you both to him soon."

"Uh huh. So how close are you to this guy? He gonna get jealous with you spending most of your time with us? 'Cause Fawkes is still gonna need your help..."

"That depends...are you going to give him reason to be jealous?"

Hobbes gaped at her, until he saw the twinkle in her eyes. Or thought he saw it. Never could quite be sure with Claire. He strengthened his resolve to figure her out eventually, once and for all, and see where things went from there...

But for now he let it be. "Anyway, we gotta find an apartment soon. This roach motel's costing us too much. Got any leads from 'the man you know'?"

"A few," Claire said. "How about your job search?"

"Some possibilities. And a couple ideas." Hobbes sighed. Then said, "You know, I don't mind either."

Claire inclined her head. "No?"

"No. Sure, there's some hassles, but..." He glanced back at the door behind him. "No regrets. I'm glad we did it."

"So am I." She met his eyes, then too looked to the room beyond. "Whatever happens, so am I."

You know what they say about the good of the many, how it's supposed to be more important than the good of the one. You know what? It's not true. We did what we did for the good of one man. But the people responsible, the people we're fighting against, the bureaucrats, the scientists—I figure Fawkes is worth a thousand of them, easy.

I didn't think we'd succeeded, for a while. Thought we might've lost our friend to them after all. We saved a man, but Darien, the man we'd known, the one we did everything for, him I wasn't sure we got back.

Yesterday, though, I came back to the apartment, and Fawkes was reading something as thick as a phone book with a gold-trimmed leather cover. He glanced up, saw me and read to me aloud from the page, "I know but one freedom, and that is the freedom of the mind."

"So said Antoine de Saint-Exupery," he told me. "And it's true." He looked me direct in the eyes, like he hadn't really done since we got him out. "Thank you, Bobby," he said, and then he lowered his head and went back to his words.

And I think I can finally convince myself that eventually, everything is going to be okay.

End Notes

Obviously though the story is done, room remains for a sequel. I have ideas, but whether or not they see the light of day...that remains to be seen. I have quite a few draws on my time (witness how long this story took to reach the epilogue!) But you never know where my muse might go.

Whether or not another occurs, I nevertheless hope you enjoyed this ride. I had much fun writing it, and I hope you had as much reading it! Everyone who wrote me feedback and encouragement, my limitless thanks, from those who wrote me one comment to those who told me to get it in gear after every chapter. Couldn't have made it without you guys! ^_^

love & peace,
XmagicalX

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