

What readers are saying about *Shadow Hunt*...

“Shaping up to intriguing places [...] in this third book in the series Leeth comes to life. She has grown in personality and gained a certain maturity which makes more sense of her actions. She is like a child learning to crawl but wanting to walk and the fluidity of the writing mirrors her emotions well. There is frustration, patience, thoughtfulness, thoughtlessness, wisdom and a now very appealing naivety that lends a vulnerability and has us on side with her as she struggles to make sense of things.”

“Reminiscent of ‘Friday’ by Robert Heinlein. While Friday was an artificial being developed through technology, and Leeth is a result of magic, both undergo similar trials. Regardless, both are excellent and gripping stories.”

“Almost unique. A blend of fascinating tropes. Well written, and with interesting depths. This series continues to be excellent. A strange mixture of urban future tech and poorly understood magic. This is not your normal sci-fi, or even truly a modern fantasy, though it combines elements of both. Reminiscent of the Shadowrun series.”

“[This] feels (and it is) very different from the previous two. The author got quite some flak for the amount of abuse and the sheer volume of gut wrenching terror the main character had to endure in book one and two. Leeth, the main character, seemed to suffer, being abused, imprisoned, suffer more with no light at the end of the tunnel. [...] in book three things start to change for her. It continues seamlessly from the end of book two. And we do see she actually is pretty resourceful, capable and actually strong and powerful in her own right.”

“I’m officially a fan of this series. The first third ‘Free’ is really almost half the book and was an excellent five star read. I think Leeth works best when she is out on her own away from the Department surviving on her own, or with help from Marcie and other young girls. The second third is ok but lost its way a little, but maybe male readers would like all the action and fighting here. The third part is good and it all ended with a great climax. The characters continue to grow and become more complex, the relationship between Marcie and Leeth still feels like the heart of the

book and also of course her relationship with the doctor continues to be messed up, hah. She manages to maintain the upper hand on him throughout this one.”

*(As of October 2017, **Shadow Hunt** averaged 3.75 stars out of 5 on Goodreads, and 4.4 out of 5 on Amazon)*

Shadow Hunt

L. J. Kendall

The Leeth Dossier Vol. 3

**For my mother, Shirley Kendall: the light and
heart of a truly loving family**

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Another special thank you to Mirella de Santana, the artist who designed my cover. You can see more of her wonderful art at www.mirellasantana.com.br.

Thanks also to all the writers who reviewed some of these chapters several years ago, at the *Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror* site, sff.onlinewritingworkshop.com, with a special thanks to my more recent Beta readers, JonM, SandraW, and AndyK.

Thank you, all.

Note: there's a special offer if you're 1st to inform me of errors in the text – see Publishing, 2017 for details.

This book is also available in electronic form from Amazon at <http://bookShow.me/Bo6XVH355Q>

Novels by L. J. Kendall

The Leeth Dossier:

Wild Thing

Harsh Lessons

Shadow Hunt

... (Violent Causes?)

...

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PROLOGUE

Locked in his cell in the Institute for Paranormal Dysfunction, Godsson pondered three things.

He pondered his part in the slaying of the Enemy of Mankind, Melisande d'Artelle, fifteen years earlier. A part more significant than his two companions had ever known.

He pondered Sara – *L'ith* – who had helped him end the threat spawned from d'Artelle's death. The girl was changing in ways even he did not understand.

He shook his head. Did her 'guardian' not see that her name itself echoed that of humanity's ancient enemy? L'ilith the vampyre, the seductress. Mother of daemons. Whore.

And he pondered the nuclear weapon that he knew lay primed, nearby. Their measure of last resort.

He smiled. A pathetic recourse. Yet thanks to it, no one would expect to find human remains within the blast radius. So when next he left the Barriers of this cell, the Dragon would no longer be certain the guillotine would fall.

But fall it would.

Planning the Dragon's demise would be a pleasant way to pass the time. Perhaps the girl, the latest earthly avatar of his Father's first error, could even aid in that destruction – after his construct's human host had hunted her down and bonded to her. *Correcting* her; inverting the anti-Christ. Yes, L'ith epitomized all that was wrong with humanity. How ironic that it made her the ideal key to correct it.

Yes, when next he was freed, he would be ready. And a Perfected L'ith would make an excellent tool.

PART I

Free

CHAPTER 1

Despite the brutal winds, she liked sleeping on the second floor best because it had so many escape routes. She'd painstakingly hauled tonnes of gravel here, strewing it around the wrecked office building so she could hear people coming in plenty of time. Plus the bigger stones made good ammo for her PowerShot.

She sank back into the freshly scavenged plastic bag she'd stuffed full of styrofoam pieces, and hugged herself. *I'm so lucky!* She peered out from inside her nest of kudzu vines. Propped up by a few hardy shrubs, it made a green igloo that provided two kinds of protection.

Yeah, she had a nice home, now: plenty of food, *three* buckets full of fresh water – with lids! – and a steady income, thanks to her hunters' persistence. But best of all, there was nobody telling her she couldn't do stuff.

She sighed, content. Right now, for the first time in over three weeks, she even had an hour when she didn't *need* to be doing anything. It felt weird to just relax and watch the sun sink to the horizon between the shattered high-rises.

She'd come a long way since escaping and making her way here, into the Hunters Point Dumps. That first wintry night in the urban wasteland, she'd spent excited hours exploring shattered tenements. Feeling like she was the last girl on Earth. In some areas she'd had to pick her way over dark, parched wastelands of jumbled cement. In others she'd had to slash a path through lush vines. It'd felt magical, gazing at the moonlit scene. Weird, though, seeing entire stretches of road cocooned. As if they'd been buried under a green wave that lapped against the sides of buildings, washing up walls to crack concrete bones. Digesting them degree by creeping degree.

It was only with the first chill blush of dawn that she'd paused, shivering. Suddenly tired, hungry, and thirsty, and realizing she hadn't actually found a place to sleep, or hide.

As the cold had settled its claws into her, she'd found Teef's shack-slash-shop. Peering into its dim interior she'd seen haphazard shelving packed with everything from legs of bots, to pans and pots.

She'd stood outside with just her weapon, a hundred creds in her cashstick, and the clothes she'd been wearing. Shivering. Staring at the bucket full of water she could see in the unlit interior, tossing up between buying it with creds she really needed to hoard, or waking the ogre to trade sex for it. Or just bursting in, to kill him and take it.

She'd been so thirsty.

And then in the darkness she'd heard the drone above and behind her, hunting her – and all her problems had been solved.

Wriggling deeper into her plastic bag sofa, she smiled, remembering the ogre startling awake at her first rap on the warped door frame. Warily, he'd let her step in, his expression shifting to surprise at what she'd dumped on his counter: a drone, highly prized scav.

She still liked to tell herself it had been one of Nelson's. There'd been a lot of them buzzing around that first week, hunting her. So many that for a while she'd been worried she'd end up being named something awful, like *Droneslayer* or *Drone Girl*. A fate she'd barely avoided.

She hugged herself harder, wondering if she dared try and visit Marcie? But they'd be expecting that. They'd be waiting for her. They probably had spy cameras and all sorts of stuff set up watching her house – and the drama school – hoping she'd try to make contact.

And what about Godsson? She frowned. If only she hadn't given her word to Professor Sanders that she'd obey the law. Couldn't she just...? But she remembered how serious he'd been: 'If you ever break Godsson free again, you will go to jail: for a long, long time.' They'd even shaken hands on her promise.

She hunched in on herself. How on Earth was she supposed to make people see poor Godsson shouldn't be locked up anymore, if she *also* couldn't even tell anyone about the Institute? That wasn't fair!

But if she *did* sneak in, she'd also get a chance to

visit Faith. And if she went in at night, maybe they could even secretly do a patrol of the Institute together? The idea made her smile – and then, tears swelled, unexpectedly. She shook them away, trying not to imagine hugging Faith again, feeling the purr of her turbines against her chest.

The trouble was, they were probably expecting her to break in *there*, too.

She sighed. It sucked having the Department hunting her. Maybe she should just...?

No.

She wasn't going back to them. Not with Uncle ready to-

The horrid gray confusion swam back in, and she shied away from the thought. She had to crush the urge to scream, her hands clenching in anger that whatever he'd done was *still* affecting her thinking.

Jumping up from her bedding and squeezing through the green curtain of her living doorway, she left her nest and started pacing the cracked and empty floor.

I could try hunting The Breaker again. That'd be fun, *and* doing some good. But he, or it, seemed to have stopped his awful attacks – there'd been no creepy torture-killings since before she'd even got here. *Could he know I'm looking for him, and be hiding?* But that didn't make much sense. Was he waiting for something? But if so, what?

Now that she had spare time, she *could* try again; but honestly, she wasn't quite sure *how* to. Ask people about him?

It'd be nice just to *talk* to someone. Maybe she could visit the Blackberry tribe again? Get more details of that story they'd told, about the guy out in the darkness, screaming death threats and vengeance for 'Marta.' Marta Sanchez, they told her: one of two cops who used to sometimes visit, and actually *help* the people here. But not anymore. Not for a month. Murdered by The Breaker, they'd learned. Possibly, his most recent kill.

She shivered. She'd worked it out: that night had been the night her uncle had betrayed her trust, tricking her into letting him *control* her.

Her fingers itched, death tingling at their tips, and she ground her teeth. With effort, she forced herself to think of something else. *I could Hunt some RedSkulls again.* They were mostly malformed Melt descendants – half-finished ogres and troll-things – living by the law of the jungle. Ugly, vicious rapists and killers, blaming everyone else for the hatred they generated. *This time, I could do it properly.*

Her eyes narrowed, hungry for the challenge. She'd picked this area because it was near their territory, after all. It was one reason so few people dared live here.

She blushed, remembering her initial disastrous 'scouting' expedition the week before. She'd even had to pay a mage to heal her. *Well, not next time!* Next time, she wouldn't underestimate them.

But if she was gonna hunt RedSkulls, she had to figure out how to get the ingredients to make slime. *And if I'm gonna make the 'Skulls think it's some oozing supernatural monster killing them, I should probably work out what to do with the bodies after I kill them, to make them extra scared.* Would it be more terrifying if she made it look like something was *eating* the bodies? She grimaced, trying to work out which bits she'd have to remove, and how to get rid of those parts afterwards.

She had to make it look like something unnatural, or they'd start revenge-killing innocent people nearby, figuring someone had decided enough was enough. And she didn't want to make trouble for the people scraping an existence here in the Dumps.

Besides, by keeping it secret, she should make more money at the FistFest. As well as avoid getting named 'Slime Chick' or something. *That'd be worse than Drone Girl.*

The 'Fest was less than a couple of weeks away now. With the winnings from that, she'd be able to

buy the gear to let her do all the things she wanted.

Sure, it was great fun being here, but there was some bad stuff, too. Like getting sick. She'd never been sick before. Suddenly coughing, and having her nose run, and aching all over.... Briefly, she'd found herself wishing her uncle was there, to tuck her into a warm bed and rub her nose and forehead, that special way he had on the few occasions she'd sniffled or coughed; with those soothing finger wriggles that sent her to sleep so she felt better in the morning.

But that man had gone. His face, in memory, turned cruel. *Still not strong enough to resist me, Leeth? Or do you really want this?*

No. She didn't need her uncle. *No, not my uncle: The Doctor.* Not even if she was dying.

And she *had* thought she was dying. It had been terrifying, coughing up green mucus – she'd stared at it, stunned, not knowing what to think. If she hadn't remembered Crazy Marty getting sick in *Pirates of the Undersea* – filling his cabin with disgustingly-colored used tissues – she would have freaked.

Getting tissues in the Dumps had been expensive. But 'having a cold' without tissues was a special kind of awful.

As was food poisoning. Her mouth turned down. Now *that* was a lesson you only needed to learn once.

And if tissue paper in the Dumps was costly, toilet paper....

She shook her head. Never again.

But she'd wasted enough time, doing nothing more than making a home for herself here. Making herself *safe*. Protecting herself, with a solar panel powering hidden security cams that monitored her den so she'd know if anyone – *the Department* – 'visited' while she was out.

Merely surviving. It was time to start *doing*. Not just wasting time making herself safe, building mage traps and other defenses.

She narrowed her eyes. She'd visit Marcie: maybe, without mentioning Godsson by name, she could see

L. J. Kendall

what *she* thought about how to rescue him without breaking any promises.

And they can just try and capture me!

CHAPTER 2

In the end, though, she decided it'd be a good idea to test how hard it'd be to visit the city undetected. Even after three weeks, the Department would be watching. A spider lurking inside digital webs.

Checking her makeup in the sliver of polished metal, she pursed her lips. *Good enough.*

She'd gone for wild non-geometrical interlocking spikes, along with some subtle mis-shading of her cheekbones and chin. *She* couldn't recognize herself now, so hopefully their face recognition algorithms wouldn't, either. Funny to think that some of Nelson's lessons were actually helping her avoid capture.

She wasn't sure whether to be pleased or annoyed by that, remembering his smug lectures and secretive leers.

She shook herself.

Checking her clothes, she had to grimace at how inappropriate they were for the Dumps. Like colors saying she belonged in the city, not here. They'd attract almost as much attention as going naked.

Almost.

That had sure been a mistake. She'd thought maybe clothes wouldn't matter so much here, outside all the laws and regulations of 'proper society.' Instead, it'd been like rubbing herself down with honey and standing on an ant nest.

Anyway. Skirt, blouse, almost-stylish jacket, and even a matching handbag – to hide her PowerShot. She could hardly wander around shopping areas with the obviously deadly matte black slingshot tucked into her waistband. *Nelson probably has it on file, too, along with my face and gait.*

Which reminded her. Folding her legs under her, she selected two small rocks and carefully tied string around each. Scrubbing the worst of the dirt from her now callused soles, she slipped the stones into the pink joggers before sliding them on and getting gingerly to her feet. She shifted her weight, then took a few steps to check how they made her limp. *Yeah. That'll do.* Easier to manage than super high heels that'd have her tottering through the rubble in danger of falling.

Well. Here goes nothing.

As the sun set she headed to the semi-collapsed fire

stairs that led down into the sewers: the second thing that helped make her new home perfect.

The sky was her enemy.

But the jumbled tunnels of the collapsed Millennium II Towers were her friends. That titanic domino fall from years past meant she could get from the Dumps to the edge of the city while staying mostly under cover.

Ahead lay the Visitacion Slump. After that she only had to cross the predatory jungle of the McLaren New Forest – fun! – and she'd be in sleepy Excelsior.

Nelson must hate these above-ground tunnels! He'd once boasted to her that in the city he was an all-seeing god. If so, in the Dumps and tunnels he was blind: in those areas, any camera surveillance had to be sent in on wings or segmented legs. All of which were easily caught and hungrily transformed by eager locals, for whom 'waster' was about the worst insult there was.

But it wasn't just a matter of shooting drones from the sky. Her *biggest* weapon in her tiny war with the Department was her hearing. They still didn't seem to know about that. *Which means Uncle must not have told them about it.* She frowned, then realized it would've been for selfish reasons. Obviously.

So keeping her hearing secret had become as important as using it to alert her to the whine of a spy drone. They knew she could hear ultrasonics – but that was only a small part of her super hearing.

It was fun shooting drones from the sky. But not near her nest. She'd even had to resist shooting one that had buzzed by one day, and just hidden instead, grinding her teeth.

She'd shot them down from lots of different locations, so they couldn't single out one area as the place she probably lived. Though she'd had to restrict herself to doing it only in the Dumps itself. She'd discovered that surveillance in the city was so pervasive that taking out drones in her distinctive style was a sure

way to attract a lot of heat real fast.

The close calls had been a lesson well learned, if awful. She'd felt betrayed to a whole new level when an *FBI* team had closed in on her; three times in one night. Each time, minutes after she'd taken out a drone on the city's perimeter. And then she'd spied James in the background, watching on, disguised like some kind of dumb Clark Kent, and she'd retreated.

But that they'd involved the FBI meant she'd probably never be allowed to work with Commander Amanda Stone, now.

Another reason to hate her uncle.

But as if thinking about drones had summoned it, she picked up the distinctive angry buzz of a heavy-duty lifter. Which, given she was currently clambering through the now horizontal elevator shaft of Tower 3, meant the drone was either carrying a serious load – weaponry? – or a terahertz imager to see through the meters of earth and concrete between her and it.

Either way, more than annoying. *I wonder, though?* In the semi-darkness, not changing her pace, she tapped the display of the gadget on her wrist. Teef's young son, Barney, had proudly said it detected *everything*. Sure enough, in the abstract swirls of glowing colors, a spiky red blob she'd never seen before now swelled, growing as she moved forward through the dark shaft.

She hoped that meant it *was* a terahertz one out there: the tech needed to see through walls made teras really expensive – *wonderful* scav!

Unlike that weird cheap-ass drone that'd followed her one night early on, buzzing so loud she thought at first it had to be a decoy. She'd kept waiting for the real trap to spring. It'd been so crappy that Barney had laughed, only giving her five creds for it. 'I didn't know they still made cams with *this* low res,' he'd teased her.

She shook herself. *Concentrate, Leeth!* Continuing along until the drone sounded like it was straight outside, she stopped. Ahead, light from the cracked-open

second floor doors illuminated a heavy cable from the elevator. Dust and dirt piled in drifts against its long undulations, a boa constrictor lying in permanent exhaustion on the smooth gray ground.

Outside, the whine changed tone, now keeping pace with her. *Ah ha!* And yeah, the red spiky blob was bigger. Inside the shaft, she closed her eyes, taking a slow breath, then gripped the corroded edge of the lift door and shoved it aside hard, wincing as metal ground on metal. The drone must have seen: it buzzed louder, like it was excited by the show of strength. She pressed her lips tight together, sure now someone from the Department was operating the spy device.

She slipped out through the door, then turned to her left. Stepping along the path she'd earlier cleared of fallen bricks and plaster panels, she headed straight for the unseen drone buzzing away outside the fallen tower. Her jaw clenched at the sound of two more heavy drones zipping hurriedly closer. *I bet they have tasers and tranqs and stuff.* She drew her weapon.

From memory, once through the window ahead, there was pretty good footing to the right.

Okay, let's do this! She dived, rolling, out the window.

The small battle lasted almost twenty seconds.

The annoying thing was, because drones had tracking devices buried deep inside, she was now making her way back into the Dumps with three disabled units instead of going into the city like she'd planned. She'd stuffed them into her specially-lined shopping bag. It wasn't perfect, but Barney said the shielding would screw up digital comms really badly. *And here come two more....*

She jerked, lifting her wrist with Barney's technobabble flashing-lights gizmo, again aiming it toward first one, then the other approaching drone to make out like *it* was her drone detector.

She was fuming by the time she made it back to

Teef's hut, six drones in her bag and her clothes *ruined*. If she hadn't been able to slash the sticky strands of web with her 'claws', she'd have been a helplessly-wriggling cocoon waiting for them to collect her. *Will it be this bad once I actually make it into the city?*

She sighed, thinking about her plans to hunt down The Breaker. Weeks ago, she'd made a map of his known murder sites and hidden it away in her Link, ready for her to investigate. One more thing left behind when she'd escaped the Department.

Like Toby.

At some stage, carving the dolphin shape from the hard wooden block, the small creature had come alive, to her. Patiently waiting to be revealed; not complaining when she made his head a bit lopsided or his tail too thin.

The only thing she'd ever made, really.

No, the map was no great loss. *I'll just make a new one, showing his murders here in the Dumps. It'll give me a chance to talk to people.* But she had to get the Department off her back if she ever wanted to hunt in the city for anything besides dumb-ass drones.

Ahead, heavy male grunts accompanied the humping movement of a shipping container: Teef and several of his friends maneuvering the new annex he'd been telling her about into place. His hut now snaked between three piles of mostly-stripped autos. From inside, Barney's happy humming made her smile.

As she pushed open the rickety door, the young ogre turned from his workbench. He blinked at her through magnifying goggles strapped to his head, his short-cropped blond hair all spiky and askew.

"This is no place for city folk, ma'am," he began, frowning – then his gaze twisted into puzzlement at the globs and ropes of sticky glue draping her clothes, then saw her PowerShot and sniffed the air. His face broke into a large-toothed smile, recognizing her despite her face camo.

"Hey, D.G!" He shook his head, eyeing her ruined

clothes. “More drones, right? Don’t tell me, they had *web-guns* this time?” His eyes lit up at the thought, then widened comically as she ripped the bulging Faraday bag unstuck from her back, and swung it around to her front. Running over behind the counter, he hopped up onto a box to be nearer her eye level and cleared some space.

“Another big haul, eh? More *juicy* drones, I bet? I don’t know how you do it, D.G.” Barney spoke well – his teeth hadn’t begun their adult growth spurt, and his wizardry with electronics was matched only by his hunger for education. Even though he was only eleven, he was one of the most well-spoken people she’d met here. Not that she’d met many, yet.

They got on fine, after she’d got his promise never to tell anyone that ‘D.G’ stood for ‘Drone Girl.’

She emptied out the signal-blocking bag *he’d* sold her, growling when it stuck to her arm so she had to wrench it free.

“Um, you’ll want some acetone, too, yeah?” he asked, then frowned, eyeing her up and down curiously. “How’d you even cut it off? That stuff’ll stick to oiled blades!”

But not to magic. “Uh, I had a, sharp stick...”

Barney was shaking his head, though, and now looked *really* interested. He found the drone with the web gun, and set it to one side. They both stared down at the battered, ball-shaped mess. “Chit, what’d ya do, jump up and down on it? Lucky you didn’t rupture the chem-tanks!”

“I was cross.” She felt her cheeks redden.

“Yeah. I can tell.” He eyed the pattern of severed glue-tentacles on her clothes and skin, frowning. “Where were you? And seriously, how’d you get free? Those things are bad biz – and not cheap.”

She lifted her eyebrows, and it was Barney’s turn to flush.

“*If* the chem-tanks aren’t empty!” he shot back.

But their by-play had given her the time to make up a story about going somewhere, ‘just happening’ to

have a laser-cutter in hand. Implying she'd been trying to break in somewhere. She'd had to abandon the cutter when *it* got glued and she'd had to retreat. Barney looked doubtful, but stopped asking questions.

His eyes lit up when he spied the terahertz unit.

Taking a powered torque wrench from his multi-tier utility belt, he quickly cracked the drone casing and delicately applied his own laser cutter, severing a single connection. Pulling out another device, he scanned, then nodded to himself. "There. That takes care of the tracker. Fancy, too – that one was using spread-spectrum comms! But I'll check the others, just in case. You bring me some weird drones, D.G. No toy ones tonight, eh?" he grinned.

Leeth smiled weakly, watching him dive in to her pile of semi-smashed flying pests.

He was soon happily exclaiming over their mil-spec fit-outs and power cell capacities, frowning every now and then at the device on her wrist – which *he'd* built, and traded to her for five drones at their first meeting. She'd thought the pretty, ever-changing display was some kind of artwork, but the boy had eagerly explained it was a spirit detector he was making. Though he'd looked a little sheepish when he admitted it just detected 'everything,' and showed that on its polished crystal display. He figured if there *was* some way to detect spirits, you'd be able to tell by learning what patterns showed when they were nearby.

For Leeth, it made a perfect gadget to wave around to pretend to detect drones. It even kind of did, in a way. Once you learned how to interpret some of the colorful patterns. *Especially when I can hear them coming, anyway.*

But she'd had to think quickly at that first meeting, when she'd arrived to find Teef 'out' and Barney manning his father's store. She'd dumped the pile of eight drones onto the counter, and the too-wise young ogre had looked at her strangely. "How'd you find so many? Were they all hunting *you*?"

She'd lied, making up a story about a weird sound

by the water's edge that the drones had all seemed to be trying to pinpoint. Barney had lapped the story up, but it made her realize it'd be bad if everyone knew she was being hunted so energetically.

She liked Barney, and they chatted for a while. She asked how his micro-manipulator project was coming along, and he proudly showed her his progress on the digit sleeves. He was building the device for when he got older, his fingers grown far too big and clumsy for delicate work.

Yeah, you had to admire Barney.

Soon though, the smell of welding penetrated the shop as Teef, out back, began bonding the new annex, so she said farewell and headed back into the city to try again. *Determined* to get the stuff she needed to make slime.

It took her over an hour to work her way back. *Maybe I should've just bought the Borax and glue from Top Scav, in the Dumps?* But she didn't want to pay ten times what they'd cost at a small store here in Excelsior, and she *did* want to see how hard it'd be to evade detection in the city.

For all she knew, they might've surgically implanted radio beacons inside her somewhere.

Her eyes narrowed. *If they have, I'll just crash a med-center, force them to X-ray me, then cut them out.* But she didn't think they'd done that. If they had, the Department wouldn't've needed to keep trying to spot her with stupid drones.

She forced herself to walk proudly, shoulders back like she belonged here and was just on her way to a club or something for a night out. Her face-camo attracted curious looks from passersby. She tried to ignore them, forcing a sneer to her face, pretending she was somebody special. Thinking how the disguise would probably work better on a Friday or Saturday.

Passing a MacDonalds, the aromas locked her feet in place, even as the subtle cameras she automatically noted, and the too-bright interior, screamed at her to

move on.

Her stomach growled, demanding she go in. On the price board over the wide counter, delicious looking burgers and fries glowed with hypnotic intensity, and she swayed toward the entrance. She wasn't exactly sure what species of rodents and birds she currently had congealing in her stew-pot, but the way her mouth was watering let her know exactly which offering her stomach thought superior. Even though the one time she as Jane had suggested she'd like to try it, Marcie and the other girls had joked about how awful the food there was.

"Try it?" Delta had laughed. "You make it sound like you've never eaten at Maccas!"

She had to tear each foot from the pavement as she turned and walked away, the wonderful smells curling and coiling about her like the arms of invisible seducers.

Stay focused. She wasn't here to stuff herself on fast food, but to get the ingredients to make monster slime for decorating RedSkull corpses.

That thought snapped her back into focus. At the next corner, she checked the street signs. The net had said she wanted the corner of Colby and Sweeney streets, so... yeah. She was sweeping around now toward it, having located the single underground storm-water tunnel entrance, in case she needed to go to ground. She'd found it by studying city maps back in Teef's shop: it was the reason she'd chosen Excelsior for her little test expedition today. In case they came for her, in force. She hadn't studied this area when she'd planned her break-out to save Marcie.

Above and behind her, she heard the familiar high pitched whine of a drone rising up, and adrenaline shocked through her. *Can't they give me a minute's peace?* She faltered, then recovered, fighting the urge to freeze, spin, and whip out her slingshot to knock it from the sky.

I'm in the suburbs. It could just be a kid playing, or a traffic drone. Don't react. Don't jump to conclu-

sions. She didn't turn, though she couldn't get her shoulders to relax. Nor could she seem to loosen her fingers now gripping her red pleather handbag, aching for the weapon hidden inside.

And though the drone moved a little closer, pushing her restraint to the limit, she kept strutting on with her faint limp; kept her face up and her stride assured as the general store finally came into view.

Please let it not be them. Just a few more minutes, and I'll have what I need.

Inside the shop, she kept hearing the drone outside, fading in and out of earshot as it moved around. Like it was scoping the area, or searching for something, the whole time.

Wanting to scream at him to *hurry*, all she could do was bounce on her heels while the elderly shop-keeper scratched his head and tottered between tight-packed shelves. He kept muttering, stopping to smile at her, wondering aloud what kind of party she must be on her way to, for *every single item* on her shopping list!

The instant his register dinged acceptance of the transfer, she snatched her cashstick and bag of supplies and raced for the entrance.

The drone darted to a position across the street as she exited the shop.

She had a bad feeling about this. *I should have shot it down.*

Ahead, a police car turned the corner. Inside, she saw the eyes of two cops fixed on her. She couldn't – quite – hear what the one speaking was saying, but she hardly needed to. Not when it slammed to a stop and the two piled out, drawing tasers while she was still ten meters away.

Looking down at her feet, she started singing, bobbing her head and dancing toward them as if chipped in to a pop tune with a mad beat.

“Miss! Down on the ground, hands behind your head! This is the police. Miss, down on the ground, I said, or we *will* shoot! Miss!”

At five meters away she finally looked up and noticed them. Pretending shock, she turned fully around, putting her back to them, scanning desperately left and right for the threat while backing closer to them for ‘safety.’ The second cop’s reply came as music to her ears.

“She can’t hear us, Capper. And look at her. This has to be some kind of fuck-up!”

Still with her back to them, she mimed surprise at seeing no one behind her, just through body language. *Those acting lessons really had been useful!* Shutting her eyes, the tiny sounds of their clothing and breathing told her exactly where each stood.

She continued backing toward them, the area between her shoulder-blades feeling horribly exposed.

Now.

Ducking and spinning, she exploded into action.

“Dammit!”

Mother half wished *she* was the one clubbing the inept officers who appeared incapable of understanding a simple order like ‘stun on sight.’ It was all over within three seconds.

Six, counting the time it took Leeth to draw from her cheap handbag the sleek weapon that Mother had come to detest. Leeth spun and aimed at the drone, killing the feed, which froze her image. It floated in the air, grinning at them like the Cheshire cat.

Damn the girl! Mother wanted to scream. “Just look at that smirk! She knew we were watching.”

“Well, she’s certainly applying everything we’ve taught her,” Eagle replied, sounding thoroughly unconcerned.

“Are you *enjoying* this?”

“You think I enjoy seeing you fail to recapture an eighteen-year-old girl, Mother? A girl you have assessed as unfit for duty? Why? Do you imagine I see it as a way of making a point?”

“The point is that she’s too unpredictable to be of use!”

Eagle turned to Harmon. “What of your vaunted claims of being able to predict her actions, Doctor? Why did she want plastic containers, brass screws, Borax, matches and water-soluble glue?”

Harmon looked unhappy. “I’m afraid-”

“Stop, Doc,” Nelson giggled. “Like Eagle said, she did pay attention to some of her lessons. She bought a lot of glue and Borax – several containers – but hardly any screws or matches: those last two items were just to confuse any searches.”

Harmon frowned. “And?”

“I just did a search on Borax and glue, alone. Turns out if you add water you can make slime, which sounds like the kinda weird sort of thing she might want to do. How about that?”

Harmon frowned. “Possible. I will need time to consider the implications. In the meantime, let me reiterate the high likelihood that she will visit her friend Marcie. I find it surprising she hasn’t done so already. I also predict she is highly likely to attend the upcoming fighting event: *especially* knowing we will try to recover her then. I expect that will only make her all the more determined to compete.”

“That’s ludicrous, Doctor,” Mother said. “What’s in it for her?”

Harmon met Eagle’s eyes – *this again?* – before turning back to Mother. He tiredly counted off each point with a raised finger. “Thumbing her nose at us; making money; testing herself; ‘fun’.”

“But she needs money if she plans to bet on herself: and you claim she won’t be whoring herself.” Mother glared in turn at each of the three older men in the room. “How is she financing herself?”

“My drones,” said Nelson, bitter.

“What?”

“There’s been nothing left at any of the sites she’s shot down a drone.”

“You’re saying *you’re* financing her?” Mother’s lips thinned further.

“Hey! It’s not like I’m trying to! And you’re the

one who okayed me finding her with drones.”

“*Finding* her, Nelson, not giving them to her. Perhaps we should limit your hours playing computer games – they clearly do not ‘improve your reflexes’.”

Nelson bristled. Even gone, Leeth was still humiliating him. And she knew it, too: the number of final captures from his downed drones that were an image of her gloating smile and raised middle finger....

“She can’t be selling them in the city,” Father said.

There was a short silence while they all considered the conflagration they’d set off if they tried to move into the Dumps to catch her selling them.

Harmon watched Mother’s expression sour as she also processed that he had correctly predicted she *would* venture into the city. Though it had occurred a week later than he had expected.

Nelson spoke into the silence. “Preacher told me they end the FistFest with a cheered-for vote for ‘best performance’. Including the amount. Might be five thou – even higher if there’s been a lot of betting, since a percentage goes into a pool. Record’s fourteen.”

“Does Leeth know this?” Mother demanded.

They all exchanged looks.

“You trained her in social interactions, Mother,” Eagle said, “and she *is* there. What do you think?”

“She’ll be determined to break that record, won’t she, Doctor?”

Harmon nodded, paling as he imagined the risks she would take. Not for the money: for the validation.

Mother and Father were frowning, considering how far and how deep she could disappear with that sum of money. She might even leave the country.

Nelson’s expression showed his frustration.

Eagle watched them all. So far the test was proving interesting.

CHAPTER 3

The night she had almost killed him, Marc Disten had converted a tiny portion of capital into coinz. The transfer had completed while the shaking doctor sealed wounds and set bones. Mere hours later, the wisdom of the move had been proven: all financial reserves traceable to Mark Dennis – Disten – had been frozen. Available funds would now support just thirty years of existence at the current meager rate of expenditure.

It should suffice.

But with near-fatal injuries, the need for conscious attention to avoid accidental re-injury, and the necessity to hide from the intense manhunt, Disten's options had been severely limited.

A moldy shack had been found to go to ground in. Hidden beside a submerged jetty on the edge of the West Oakland Dumps, it had been a good place to wait, and heal.

And then, just one week after being thrown from the truck traveling at 100kph, Marc Disten had sensed the resurgence of the Call as the newsment streams went wild. Although, had anyone been watching, they would have seen no sign of each painful tug deep inside. Just seen the tall, unmoving man – watching the live video, internally. In which the girl first tossed the figure from the wheelchair into the rear of the ambulance, then disappeared inside the cabin to eject the driver.

Even before any newsment report identified the young female 'terrorist,' Disten had recognized Jane Baker, her hair now short and blonde.

They were connected. They must join.

When the news feeds lost the ambulance, Disten silenced them and left the shack, still stabbed by the distant girl's emotions. Staring unseeingly across the waters of San Francisco Bay he had stood, planning, as long shadows slid day into night.

He had returned inside to lie down and rest, ignoring each spearing jab of her animalistic impulses. All that night, stabbed by barbed threads that jerked as she danced in mad delight through the collapsed ruins across the Bay.

Crippled, unable to respond, that first night had been torment. Fortunately, it had also been the worst night.

Two days later an attempt had been made to watch her via a drone acquired, laboriously and at great risk, due to the injuries. Only to have her shoot it from the sky.

But drones were not needed to locate her. Not with the constant nagging tug of the Call. Nor did the strange connection need to be understood, to be used.

With a little care, a once-luxurious apartment on the edge of the West Oakland Dumps had been found. Now a vermin-infested, falling down tenement, but it had clear sight lines to her nest across the Bay.

She had been industrious.

But so had this one, carefully acquiring needed equipment. And now, four weeks since the surgeries, healing had progressed to the point that action could soon be considered.

The Link beeped, the medical monitors reminding of the need to move. Back locked solidly in its surgical brace, the signals of pain were assessed. Focusing on the burn of fatigue and the placement of crutches, a path was navigated to the supportive sofa, and the legs in their plaster casts positioned.

To one side, a simple monitoring system connected to a small array of high-powered digital telescopes, each focused on a key exit point around her nest and favored routes. Disten jacked in to the system, shutting eyes to review the activity-flagged recordings from the target area, updating the surveillance charts.

This afternoon's data showed the girl emerge from underground exit five, her face camouflaged and her clothing looking more suited to blending in to the city than the Dumps. The auto-tracking camera followed her until she climbed in through a once upper-floor window of the Millennium II wreckage. She did not reappear at any of her previous exit points.

Her new behavior was considered while the rest of the afternoon's footage was reviewed and annotated. Observing her was a productive use of this enforced period of hiding and recuperation. And as soon as the body had mended fully, the girl would be acquired.

Given her performance at the hospital, it was possible her success in their last encounter had not been by chance. Waiting was logical.

Soon, though, relocation across the Bay into the Hunters Point Dumps would be possible.

Disten's eyes fell on the array of observation and communication equipment. Automation was good: continued physical presence in this vantage point would not be necessary. It would make many things simpler.

Such as collecting test subjects.

And the girl herself.

This time, she would not be underestimated.

CHAPTER 4

Leeth took extra care on her return journey, listening before emerging from each underground passage. She stayed unmoving, watching from cover for whole minutes at a time before darting quickly across each section of open ground.

Crossing the final exposed stretch, though, she stilled. A prickling up her spine had her diving to the side, dropping her precious plastic bag of slime ingredients. Rolling into cover, she moved only her eyes, searching for tell-tale red laser dots.

But there was nothing.

She scanned the scene. To one side, the jumbled slabs of a collapsed multi-story carpark. Next to it, the sideways sprawl of a shattered office building. The rest, a huddle of broken tenements, tangled in vines and crushed together like a circle of silently wailing women.

Nothing moved. Just the slow shifting of cloud shadows across the broken landscape, her abandoned bag a pale flutter in a wind with winter's bite.

I'm just being silly. No one's watching me. I'm just keyed up 'coz they've started using metro cops. She grimaced, wondering what lies they'd told the cops to make them try to arrest her.

She forced her shoulders down, consciously loosening muscles, and stood. Exposed, but hyper-alert, ears straining. *Could I hear an incoming bullet, if it came from far away?* She hoped to never find out.

Fingers tingling, she darted back to her shopping. Grabbing it, she stilled, then jerked to one side, expecting a shot. She turned slowly then, eyes unfocused, scanning a full three-sixty degrees.

Oakland glared back at her across the dark waters of a Bay lit by the late afternoon sun. She shivered, still skewered by the feeling of being watched.

With a last look around, she shook herself and slid to the entrance to the stormwater tunnel. Scrambling inside, her containers of glue and Borax bumping her shoulders, she headed finally toward her office building's sewers. Ducking under occasional tree roots that had bored through the concrete and slashing through others, she grumbled her way along snaking passages.

She changed out of her city-threads on her return. Mixing the water, glue and Borax, she thought about the evening's expedition. *I should've taken out the drone: it must've been Nelson. But how'd they know it was me? I'd even altered my gait.* She considered again the possibility they'd implanted a tracker on her. But Barney's 'spirit detector' registered nothing odd when she used it on herself. Besides, if they knew where she was, they'd surround her, not leave her with escape routes.

She shook her head, exhaling heavily.

Had she made any other mistakes? She'd considered finding and smashing the cop-cams, but they recorded to the net, and besides, if they'd been watching through the drone, they already had heaps of vid.

Why had they only used cops, though? Had they really expected I'd be that easy? Why not use real agents, from the main Bureau? She paused, head tilted to one side at a thought. The Department was only a tiny group hidden inside the Bureau for Internal Development – an agency evolved, her lessons had taught her, from the FBI and Homeland Security. But that was basically all she knew about it.

Was that strange? They'd made me a part of it. Shouldn't they have taught me about what the other, less secret, agents did?

Her mixture started to congeal, and she focused back on what her hands were doing. You could learn all sorts of cool stuff from the net. And Teef was good about not looking over her shoulder when she paid for access. Though she didn't rely on that, always clearing her search history like Nelson had taught her.

Later, plastic containers tightly sealed, dressed again in her comfy halter and denim shorts, she sighed, delicately spitting a bone into her rubbish cup. Ladling more stew into her enamel bowl, she paused, the smells of the food in the MacDonald's store returning to her in memory. For some reason, her eyes teared up, and she found herself rocking forward and

back on her haunches.

Stop it! Don't be such a baby. Tears are for weaklings. That was what her uncle had always said.

For some reason, though, that only made the water well more strongly. *Stop it! If he said it, it was probably a lie. Maybe tears make you stronger.*

Though she hadn't felt strong when Marcie had gazed at her in fear at the hospital. She'd had to turn and flee, the look haunting her even as she'd hauled her uncle down endless hospital corridors.

If I do contact Marcie, will she even want to talk to me?

Curling in on herself, ignoring the water welling from tight-closed eyes, she tipped her enamel bowl back into the pot. She knew she had to eat her stew to stay healthy and strong, but right now she just couldn't. Turning off the heating plate and putting the lid back on the pot, she slumped back into her bag-chair, its plastic scrunching as her weight squashed it flat against the floor.

She could try hunting The Breaker – but the trail was pretty cold. Maybe she should try talking to people about it? Just the thought gave her a little lift. *I might even make some new friends.*

Tucking her PowerShot into the rear of her shorts, thinking that she really ought to see if Teef had a holster that'd work, she headed out into the late afternoon. Maybe it was time to start getting known. But not as a fighter: she didn't want to mess up her odds when she entered the FistFest.

The trouble was, none of the reports had bothered to say *where* in the Dumps any of The Breaker's kills had happened. Because normal society didn't care what happened to the CID-less. And it'd probably look suss if she started questioning people about them: they might even think *she* was involved!

She'd just have to be subtle.

Heading south, into the Dumps proper, she decided to start in the Fisher Clan's area. A lot of clans met and mixed there, her studies had said.

Her path twisted through collapsed buildings and over fissured roadways and playing fields, ending at last at a rock shelf that projected above the foreshore. Already, the shadows of the terraces above were stretching out over the wind-swept surface of the Bay. Ahead, and below, came a murmur of conversations – lots of them – all sounding happy. She also scented spices, smoky flavors, and cooked fish. Inhaling deeply, she shut her eyes. Her stomach growled an angry demand, and she licked her lips.

The voices got louder as she moved quietly nearer the edge. A wisp of smoke curled up, wafting unfamiliar but delicious smells around her. But even at the very edge, she couldn't see anyone. *Must be an overhang.* It was only a few meters high. She considered just jumping down and introducing herself.

At the last moment, she hesitated. *Normal people probably don't jump off cliffs, even small ones.* And she had to seem kinda normal here, too. At least for now. So instead, she backed away, following the ledge south, enjoying the smell of the sea and the hiss and slosh of the small waves rolling in along the shore. Set back from the water's edge, she saw a ragged line of scraggly huts.

It made her smile, and she felt her spirits lift. *I could buy some food for a change, she decided. Even talk to people.*

Strangely, the thought brought tears again to her eyes. She wiped them away, shaking her head. *What's the matter with me?*

Rounding the edge of the cliff, the eating area came into view, spread out under an escarpment. As she quietly approached, first one then several of the people seated facing her way noticed her. Circles of stillness radiated out from them as more people turned to watch.

Set back against the small cliff wall sat tubs, tanks, and metal tables with a hodge-podge of cookers. Manning them, a kaleidoscope of people of all breeds and

sizes, from blue Avatarians to ogres to perfectly normal un-Altered humans in their more muted browns and blacks and pinks. All kept cooking, but watched her warily as she advanced.

By the time she started weaving between the makeshift tables, all conversation had stopped. *Do I look weird, or something? Am I dressed wrong?* But she kept a smile on her face, and made out the whispers – “Dunno: stranger.” “Metro peep.” “Forr’nah.”

Oh. It’s just they don’t know me. “Hi! This all smells great – can I buy some food?”

She noticed looks being exchanged, several people nodding, satisfied by her words. But off to her right, a woman hissed under her breath, “I seen her in far; Skulls zone. *Girl Skull?*”

Other voices sucked in breaths, but a second woman’s voice answered the first. “Rapin’ Skulls don’ let ‘gash’ roam.” Leeth turned, to see a black woman spit on the ground, angry eyes meeting her own. “Drown ’em all. We could null ’em, we all band.”

“Yeah, Yasmin? ’N how many die, doin’? ’N who next on ya list, after Skulls?”

While the argument continued, Leeth turned back to the food on offer. Her mouth watered at the sight and smells from a wok of jumbled nuts, bright green vegetables, succulent white fish-pieces, and tiny little baby corns almost too cute to eat. She held up her cashstick. “Can I...?”

The cook, a tall thin Asian man, shook his head in amusement, then nodded sideways. After a rapid exchange between him and the stall-holder beside him – in a musical up-down language she couldn’t make head or tail of – he indicated she should click sticks with the other cook.

“Can I have a big bowl? Like, this much?” she asked, cupping her hands well apart. The men raised their eyebrows, dueled a second time, then he nodded again. “And some water. And a fork.”

Balancing the aged plastic bottle against the red and blue glazed bowl, she made her way carefully to

the table where 'Yasmin' and her neighbors had been arguing. "Can I sit with you?"

They all examined her closely, clearly suspicious, but the black woman nodded. "Sho, chica."

"By all means, young lady," declared an older woman with gray hair and eyebrows, a wicked grin, and a long yellow jacket draping bony shoulders. "We would be delighted if you joined us. My name is Jacqueline Stone. But people here call me Miz J."

The woman who hated the RedSkulls, Yasmin, made room. The third person at the table, the one who'd said she'd seen her in the distance, kept her eyes glued to Leeth's hands, except to dart glances aside every now and then, checking lines of approach. As if she thought Leeth might be a scout or something for the Meltie gang. She was a small blonde woman, but with a narrow waist and large round breasts, and deep frown lines around her eyes and mouth.

"Seen ya, Skull terr'. Yo fil? What heah? Who'it?"

"Uh... what?"

"Luce said she's seen you in the RedSkulls territory," Miz J interpreted, "and wonders if you are affiliated with them in some way; she also wonders what you're doing here, and who you're with?"

"I've found a good place *near* the Skulls' territory, I guess." She scowled at Luce. "But I'm certainly *not* affiliated with them-" *I'm planning to kill them.* She stopped herself from saying that aloud. "I like it here, better than home." She started digging into her food, her eyes closing in bliss at the tangy sauce, the crunch of the hot vegetables, and the *mmm* fish. She paused, bent over her bowl, inhaling the delicious steam before cramming in some of the tiny baby corns, too. "Ohhh."

When she opened her eyes again, she saw all three women looking doubtfully at her, then at one another. Luce snorted. "Run to Dumps wit yo man? Tink he protec yo fum Skulls? Where he now, eh?"

Leeth swallowed. "I didn't run here *with* anyone. I'm on my own." Then forked in more food, filling her

cheeks. *Mmm, so good!*

The three women weren't moving, she noticed. Miz J spoke first, shaking her head. "My dear, that is most unwise, the RedSkulls—"

"I can loo' a' m'sel." At their blank looks she held up her fork, and swallowed. "Sorry. I can look after myself. I have weapons. The RedSkulls are one thing." She shrugged, then hunched in on herself. "What I *do* worry about is those other attacks I heard about, the ones where people were abducted by the weird robot guy who made them... hurt each other. Before I, um, came here, the newsments said he'd taken people in the Dumps. Sometimes I lie awake at night, wondering if *he's* creeping up on me. Where did he... is he still around? *He* sounds scary."

"Fear Skulls, not Breaker. He gone, tres wiks. Nada. Prob dead."

"I agree with Luce, dear. Whatever it was, it seems to have gone; there have been no attacks now for three weeks. You should be more concerned about the Skulls."

Leeth chewed, then paused in her eating. "Maybe you're right." She reached into a jacket pocket, and unfurled a light cloth. "You guys know Teef?"

They all nodded; even relaxed, slightly.

"Barney printed this map out for me. Maybe you could mark it with helpful places I should know, and where I should avoid?" She drew out a pencil stub, as she loaded her fork up again and wolfed more of the delicious meal down. "*S goo!*"

Leeth hugged her new friends goodbye, shaking hands and sharing kisses, before heading off, feeling well pleased with herself. It hadn't been long before a dozen people had crowded around, offering tips and advice, while also trying to find out why she'd 'run away from home,' how she was coping, and where she was nesting. Miz J even offered to bring her into the Fisher Clan, despite Luce's occasional muttered insults.

She'd also managed to get the locations of The Breaker's *seven* attacks marked on her map. It now held a mass of scrawled annotations.

Seven attacks, though: sixteen people, she'd learned. One found, weeks later, dead by thirst, soiled in her own waste. As if she'd just... stopped.

Only one survivor, a teenage boy. Now, more like a zombie. They took her to him, grimly watching on as she spoke to him. She'd tried to get him to talk, or just *react*, in the field he was making out of rubble.

But he simply kept digging the ground, piling each rock into a bucket; carrying the bucket when full to an awfully large pile by the side of the growing plot. Even when she'd held his head so he had to meet her eyes, there'd been nothing there. Just emptiness. When she'd let him go, he simply went back to work, turning a field of debris into a garden plot one rock at a time.

His mother had come with them, looking on, her face stony and frozen – apart from the tears running down her face.

Leeth had gone to her, and hugged her, crying herself, whispering a promise that if she *could* do anything to help, she would.

She shivered, remembering. The thing was far, far worse than the newsmen had known.

But when she'd said that, they'd mostly shrugged. 'The Breaker isn't all that dangerous,' they'd said, defending the reputation of their home. These Dumps were much safer than places like the West Oakland Dumps. Or even the Rockies, Yasmin had snorted, telling her of a whole orphanage being abducted by the Brethren of the End of Days to become part of their commune, just yesterday. Hadn't she seen the news?

They'd all looked shocked when she'd said she didn't have a Link, and was just buying net access at Teef's. They'd shared knowing looks, and all become a little more... reserved.

She figured she wasn't the first person to come here, on the run from the authorities.

Though they'd happily shared the story of this lat-

est outrage – which did sound awful. The Brethren of the End of Days was a cult who said the world was going to end soon. ‘Shepherd Fox,’ their leader, was a kind of religious guru and survivalist, rapidly building a growing number of followers. Most of them lived like guerrillas – which she knew about, now – in and around the Rockies in places where there were no roads, in very difficult terrain. The worst thing about the orphanage abduction, everyone had agreed, was that the majority of the orphans were girls.

The more snippets of news they shared about Shepherd Fox and his followers, the guiltier Leeth felt. She should be *there*, not here. Apparently there were rumors of spooky mind control about the Brethren, too: they said people who joined never wanted to leave. Leeth felt a weird chill shiver through her.

A chill that twisted inside when Miz J added, “Even the women, who they say all automatically marry the Shepherd.”

And here she was, hardly even able to go into the city, not even really started yet on her hunt of The Breaker.

As she left the area, her stomach pleasantly full for the first time in three weeks, she thought about all the things she *should* be doing. She had The Breaker to hunt, as well as the RedSkulls; and Mark Dennis – or Marc Disten – just in case he came back after Marcie; and now Shepherd Fox. *Maybe I should make a list. It'd be easy to forget someone. Oh. Like Robo: it could still be out there.*

She sighed, feeling kind of mixed up. Happy, from a wonderfully full stomach, and meeting a whole bunch of nice people. But also feeling even lonelier than she had, before she'd met them.

She forced her shoulders back. At least now, she knew the locations where The Breaker had attacked people, in the Dumps. And it was only just dark. Consulting her cloth map, she headed off.

Three hours later, she wove a disappointed path

back to her 'nest.' She'd found nothing at any of the sites of the seven attacks. Just a fair amount of old, dried blood. No clues. And of course, no sign of any police investigation.

It really did seem like The Breaker had gone away.

She wished the weird prickling at her shoulder blades would too, though. She just couldn't shake the feeling she was being watched.

CHAPTER 5

I need to visit Marcie. That thought was in her mind when she woke the next morning, to the cheerful peeping of bird song. She frowned, remembering yesterday's visit to the city and Nelson spotting her via the drone. How had he done that? She'd camo-ed her face. She was sure they hadn't bugged her. She'd even put stones in her shoes to alter her walk! So how had he picked her out from all the tens of thousands of other girls roughly her size, wandering around in the city?

Her uncle? The Department had taught her about magical tracking. If he was using his Clairvoyance spell, in the city there were heaps of landmarks to recognize – including street signs to read. He might even be hovering around in spirit form. But usually she got a tingly sense of *connection* when he used Clairvoyance, or a kind of *presence* if he was nearby. She paused, shutting her eyes, just... *feeling*.

Nothing.

Unless...? A thrill of certainty ran through her, and moments later, she began dressing, and camo-ing her face again.

There: they'd do. A group of girls passed her hiding spot, heading for the mall. Leeth took a last scan of the sky and surroundings – still clear – and moved quickly to intercept them before they reached the front doors.

“Excuse me....”

Almost as one, they turned, eyeing her up and down, drawing back from her garishly-camouflaged face, visibly trying to work out if she was someone famous. Five girls, all about her own height, similarly slim, and dressed in an interesting mix of styles spanning retro-goth to cyber-mod to rock diva.

Rock-diva was a gorgeous Puerto Rican girl with glossy black hair tumbling down her back. She wore a tight T-shirt with an upright screw beside a finger pointing straight at the reader. Her eyes narrowed as she examined the anti face-recog makeup, then shook her head. “Sorry, no hablamos Inglés, no tenemos dinero,” rubbing finger and thumb together and turning away.

Acting time. “I don't want money. I need help. I'm being cyber-stalked. Can I just tag along, walk with

you? That's all."

All but the Puerto Rican rock diva closed ranks, the small blonde shaking her head. "Sofia, no, don't-"

The rock diva, Sofia, looked intrigued. "Stalked by who, chica? How would tagging along with us help?"

The blonde groaned. "Sofia, we can't-"

The glare from her suddenly-determined friend stopped her mid-sentence. Sofia turned back to Leeth. "Stalked by who?"

"A boy. A computer genius. I kissed him, once, and now he's stalking me. He uses drones. Hacks camera networks. And he's got money. He sends people to hassle me." She nodded toward the camera by the glass entry doors. "If I walked past that cam, alone.... He knows I've only got one friend in the city, and I'm sure he's watching her place, too. I've got a hunch his software singles out girls my size, who are on their own, then hijacks drones to check closely."

Another girl, a redhead, snorted. "That's crazy."

Leeth met her eyes, wringing her hands while hanging her head, trying to look pitiful. She let her voice sink. "No. It's awful." It wasn't hard to let her lips tremble; and, half surprising herself, she felt water well in her eyes. "Please. Can I just pretend to be with you, and feel normal for one afternoon?"

The five girls exchanged glances.

Leeth flinched as a drone buzzed up, then forced a laugh and reached out to the black-haired girl. "Ha! Good one, Sofia! But could we please go inside now?" On her face, she plastered a look of desperate fear, angling her eyes toward the drone that had now paused behind the group.

Several of the girls looked thoughtful, the goth girl giving a finger to the drone, as if it really was looking at them. "Zip off, pervert!" she called, then held up her Link, aiming it at the hovering device. "Okay, Link: report drone for privacy invasion," she ordered.

For several seconds, the drone hovered, and Leeth could tell it was moving forward and back, like its pilot was uncertain, before buzzing off.

“Hey. That’s weird: that fucker ID-ed itself as a carpark security drone. So what was it doing here? Maybe she’s telling the truth?”

Leeth felt certain it *had* been Nelson. The girls made up their minds.

“So, what’s your name, chica?” asked Sofia.

Yes! But instead of showing her glee, she was careful to look timid, and grateful. “Thank you so much. It’s J- Jenny.” *Damn. I almost said Jane. And my hair and eye color haven’t changed back much from when I hijacked the ambulance.*

A frustrating but strangely fun hour later, sitting in the food hall, laden with bags, the conversation continued around her.

She’d spent only a fraction of what the others had, just to fit in, wincing when her hard-won cred balance dropped back below a hundred for the first time in weeks.

But if this exercise let her contact Marcie, it’d be worth it.

She plunged into the *delicious* food. Only as her stomach filled did she come back to herself. Frowning as she chewed, she tried to work out if she could ask these girls the questions she’d planned to ask Marcie. But how to explain she knew a super-powerful mage *secretly* locked up by the government; and then ask how to get him released?

The more she thought about the problem, the more it sounded too weird to ask. She’d probably hit them with enough ‘weird’ for one day....

When at last she couldn’t eat another bite, she leaned back from her container of chicken wings, into a silent circle of girls staring at her with variously stunned and amused faces.

Then she noticed her pile of empty food cartons, and compared it to the others’.

They were all watching her. Sofia, Zoe the goth girl – “but call me Zee” – and Jaz, the blonde. Sky, the redhead, and Mai Lyn, a quiet Asian girl, rounded out the group.

Sky was watching her with eyes far too knowing, but it was Zee who spoke. “Are you gonna go and...?” She opened her mouth, pointing her finger into it.

Leeth stared back, trying to decode the message, but Sky rescued her. “That was the first proper meal you’ve had in a while, Jenny, yeah?”

“No! I had a *delicious* meal just last night! And I’ve got this stew...” She shut up. These girls would never eat rats and birds, she sensed.

Zee snorted. “Man: that. Was. *Abz.*” She aimed her Link’s camera at ‘Jenny’ and her stack of empty containers. “I gotta SoBo this—”

Leeth lunged across the table, slamming Zee’s wrist down and covering the tiny lens.

“Ow! What the *fuck-?*”

Leeth glared at her. “I. Am being. Stalked.” She released Zee and flung herself back into her chair, aware of people suddenly watching with too much interest. Leeth glared at them until they looked away, then turned back to Zee. She took a deep breath, and let it sigh out. “I’m sorry. *Please* don’t share me.”

Zee was rubbing her wrist, face still twisted in pain. “Geez, girl, you almost snapped my bones. That’s some grip.” She held up her arm, the skin showing livid finger marks.

“I’m sorry.”

“O-kay, but at least let me snap the empties. You don’t have to even be in it.” She angled her Link again.

Leeth remembered James’s words, the time he’d stopped her ordering what she’d wanted at the restaurant, saying that people would recognize her just from the amount of food she ate. And then she thought of Nelson and his *algorithms*.

“No! Please don’t. Don’t even chat about it, online. I’m sure he scans texts.”

Sofia was shaking her head, looking suddenly doubtful. But Mai Lyn’s quiet words stopped them all. “It’s worse than you’re telling us, Jenny, isn’t it? Much worse?”

Leeth found herself nodding, slowly. Reluctantly.

“Your name isn’t Jenny, is it?”

The others turned to Mai Lyn, reading something in their friend’s face, then back to Leeth. Breathlessly watching the strange girl.

Leeth shook her head. “No.” She stared at the Asian girl. Was she... *scared*? *Why would she be...?* No. *Oh, no!* “You have cyberware, don’t you? You’ve been... online. Searching. What have you done? I need to go. They may already have the mall surrounded.” She jumped to her feet.

Mai Lyn held out a hand. “It’s okay. I just watched some news footage. That’s all.”

Leeth hesitated, scanning the area: nothing *looked* wrong – but would it?

“Your friend: her name is Marcie, isn’t it?”

Leeth’s jaw dropped open, the question confirming *what* news footage Mai Lyn must have found. The other girls watched the exchange, puzzled but intrigued.

Then Zee swore. “Holy cop-thrashing shit – you’re *Jane Baker*, that hospital terrorist chick!”

But instead of screaming or calling for help, all five just sat, frozen, watching her.

So much for my undercover skills. She sighed. “The only thing I lied to you about was my name.”

A barrage of questions began, but strangely, they were more interested and supportive than hostile. “Did you really force a mage to heal Marcie Dunkirk?” “How’d you knock out those two cops?” “How’d you get away?” “Who was the mage?” “What are mages like?” “How’d you do *that*?”

That was Leeth dragging Dr Ranatunga through a hospital hallway one handed, pushing a floppy-hatted person in a wheelchair while simultaneously knocking down three orderlies who tried to stop her. Mai Lyn had aimed her Link down, playing the scene between the tomato sauce bottle and the Dalek-shaped salt and pepper shakers.

“Shut that off!”

Mai Lyn did so.

“And stop accessing any of that stuff. He probably has ways to check up on everyone who watches it.”

The girl stared down her cute nose at her. “Ah, eighty million SoZone Likes? ‘He’ll’ be a busy boy.”

“Eighty... eighty million...?” Leeth squeezed her eyes shut. *I am so screwed.* She forced the thought aside. Would numbers alone be enough for Nelson to overlook Mai Lyn’s access? “He’ll narrow it to people in this area. Correlate with possible sightings of me. Then with people who’ve crossed paths with those possible matches. Like you guys, outside. The drone? Damn, damn, poop and damn! He’ll send a drone to check.”

They all looked at her like they thought she was mad. But Leeth was certain. She could sense the seconds trickling away.

An idea struck. Looking around, she spotted another girl, sitting with a boy. *She’d do.*

“Come with me. If I *am* right, we’ll find out one way or another real soon.”

In the Ladies, Abigail Spencer frowned doubtfully. “Fifty creds, just to pretend to be you for fifteen minutes out there with your friends?”

“Yeah,” Leeth replied, “my Father’s over-protective, and I think a friend of his spotted me outside, and I’m not s’posed to be here.”

Side by side in the mirror, Leeth compared the girl’s freshly made-up face to hers, the garish patches of color as near to her own as they could manage, and nodded. “We’ll need to swap clothes, too.”

“Ah ha! *That’s* what this scam is! No-”

“No, it’s not. Keep your stupid clothes, then. Just wear mine. I’ll wait inside here and trust you to return them in fifteen.”

The girl wrinkled her nose. “I dunno.”

“Please, Abby. Time’s running out. I can add another, um, twenty three creds,” she said, checking her cashstick’s balance.

Sofia and Sky chimed in. “Please?”

Leeth heard the whine of a drone outside, and Mai Lyn's voice speaking clearly, reporting another privacy invasion. The outer door slammed open and Mai Lyn hurried in, eyes wide. "J- Jenny: it's like you warned us. There's a drone out there now! It's from Black Star Fashions, but it was checking out me and Jaz and Zee! It even looked like it wanted to follow me in here! I think it's been hacked!"

At the other girls' looks, Abby rolled her eyes. "Oh, all right!"

Leeth had started stripping at the first syllable. *If this works...!*

She ignored all the women and girls who'd eyed her curiously while she'd waited in the restroom, dressed only in bra and panties. Trying to stay calm while the others all exited to wander around some more stores and be checked out by the drone.

For one overly-helpful grandmother, she made up a story about her clothes being ruined when a friend spilled a whole chocolate milkshake on them, and was now getting her something to wear. But otherwise, people had just kind of looked her up and down either disapprovingly, or amused.

At the sound of six giggling girls bursting through the doors, though, she sensed the news was good.

"That was *sweet*," gushed Abby as they all crowded in.

Sofia clapped Leeth on the back. "I swear, that drone did a double-take! You should have seen it, the instant Abbz rocked out into the food court: like a bee to honey!"

Leeth considered pointing out that bees didn't actually get attracted to honey, but the others were too excited, buzzing like bees themselves. They explained how they'd chatted together while hitting some more stores. The drone had tried to stay unobtrusive, but they all agreed it was like it couldn't believe that the girl in the camo-makeup was Abigail Turner of North Beach. The whole time, her boyfriend had watched in

bemused interest, shaking his head.

When they then added that Mai Lyn had finally sent it buzzing off after capturing its suspicious behavior on her 'StalkerApp' and reporting it, Leeth wrapped the girl in a heartfelt hug, even as she wondered what 'StalkerApp' was.

Five minutes later, they shared kisses and hugs all round. With Abby's face cleaned up so she looked herself once more, and promises to get together again soon, 'Abbz' swayed out, seventy three creds richer and eager to fill her patient boyfriend in on the prank. Leeth and the others waited, then re-emerged into the food court and made their way out of the mall.

All doubts on the parts of her new acquaintances seemed gone, and Leeth tilted her head as the glass doors slid shut behind them, the sun now low on the horizon.

"I don't s'pose any of you live in Oakland? Fruitvale, even?" she asked.