

The Fighter's Story

By Ghostfriendly



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Barrens Angel

2049. In a city of filthy streets and neon dreams, their dream was to Run the Shadows. Them and every kid in the Barrens with an ounce of grit and a sawed-off, but they knew they had something more.

"All the real Prime Runners started street level." Harry Fawkes said, as he often did, "Cleaning up gangs, then warehouse jobs, then real shadowruns. Fragging stuff up for the triple-A Megacorps! Just remember; never make a deal with a dragon!"

"We've got a long way to go before that, idiot."

Susan Lei smiled at him, fists on her hips. Harry certainly had the Runner's patter down, but Susan's father had been a genuine Kung Fu master, even a minor Runner, back in Canton. And as a Phys Adept, his daughter could channel the true power of Ki. More than the strikes of Leopard or circles of the Crane, she could leap over a wall, or punch through it.

She'd just won another sparring match with her incorrigible childhood friend, at the graffiti plastered dojo where they hung out and trained. Not that she won nearly so often as she'd have liked; Harry didn't have training from the cradle like her, or great control of his Sword-Adept powers, but something burned in his heart that wouldn't give out until he was dead.

"Chip truth is, before we even start as Runners, we need to know *why*." Harry rubbed his nose where she'd tagged him. His smile was still up, on his guileless face; still dancing, "Not for money, not for bosses, not even the thrill. Shadowrunners are the SINless and free. They can show up the Corps, break through their lies. Show slummers and *sararislaves*, there's another way to live. Like Dodger, or like FastJack—I know we can do it, Susan! We can stand free, at the top of the world."

Susan sighed, flopped down on the bench beside Harry. He'd always been a lean guy, but she could pick out the muscles in his back, beads of light on his neck...she looked away, her wide ponytail shifting. He *did* put the work in, but she wouldn't lose to a guy who talked so much.

"Cool your head." She threw him some water; her grin was broad and honest, "Another round in five?"

She faced him in horse stance; feet wide, thighs strong, palm open and ready. She saw the straight punch in his eyes; turned it away and flicked a knifehand at his face. He scarcely blocked her strike, and he flinched. Harry Fawkes might rise to be the king of the shadows, but she would be the strongest fighter, the only one he feared.

Catching his kick, she shoved him back. Grinning, he came right back at her. They moved together; breathed like wolves.

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Mr Yip Lei, Susan's father, had left Canton one step ahead of the Seven Blessings Triad, and gone to ground in the Barrens of the Seattle Megasprawl. Harry had been another slum-kid among six million warm bodies, discounting the ghouls and urban spirits. He and his mother lived down the corridor from the Leis, in a tower block that smelt of soiled chipheads and the fish market. Susan had always been a gregarious tomboy, and Mr Lei had preferred her to mix with even Caucasian boys rather than the ork families on their floor. Susan had always listened to her father, but especially in that.

The cocky, bitter aggression of trog boys offended everything Susan had been taught about restraint and spiritual strength. Growing into a young woman, she saw how many of those orks and trolls filled out the gangs that strutted through rotting parks and streets. As for the rumours about why they *bred* that fast...and of course, they were so ugly.

So her friends had all been humans and the brown-eyed boy next door, always with plasters on his nose and face, seemed to be the last one left. One girl had been killed in a drive by, other friends moved to Chinatown in Tacoma. Some simply disappeared. A few kids had joined the Halloweeners. Harry had gone to 'talk some sense into them', and come back alive as well, although Susan had given him a belting and a lecture, for messing with a gang even Lone Star feared to cross. No, Harry's nose never lost its plaster for long, though his face never lost its smile.

And they had both Awakened as Adepts at thirteen—effectively, superheroes. Harry had gone so wild with joy that Susan had needed to drag him out of a nasty fight with three ork kids. She had worked hard to help him train, and channel his Ki into toughness and speed. There were a few other Awakened street shamans or tailsmongers in the slums, and if they didn't open a drekky little magic shop or do palm readings, their powers usually came to nothing or got them killed.

Susan knew that her powers and her father's training together made her special; Harry knew he was special from sheer pride and spirit. She might have settled for opening a modest dojo, or even tried out for an Urban Brawl team, if all her best friend's talk of midnight infiltrations for justice and freedom hadn't somehow passed on the bug.

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"Hoi, Lei! Is your man still hanging round shady bars in a black trenchcoat?"

"No, Mr Jackson, I confiscated the trenchcoat. And he's not my man."

Jackson had a good laugh at that. Lone Star didn't patrol in the Barrens; Jackson was one of the low rent guards employed by the fish market. He was also a black dwarf, but Susan liked him. Hard to dislike a jolly little guy—even with an AK-97 perched on one shoulder, and an attack dog stood level with the other. Susan scratched under the dog's chin; it whined blissfully.

"Tell Fawkes from me," Jackson went on, "That real Runners ain't like Robin Hood—more like robbing, murdering scumbags. And if he gets you into danger, I'm

taking a piece of his ass. Nice girl like you should be a *schoolmarm*, not a hired killer!"

"I could practise on a mouthy dwarf..." Susan theatrically cracked her knuckles. Jackson chortled as she moved on. Past electronics stalls lit up by trash-fires, folks with faded clothes and desperate laughter, to the local Stuffer Shack on the corner of nameless streets.

She occasionally got work there, unloading deliveries, but it had been a late night run to the Shack, last year, when she'd dropped in on yet another armed robbery. Both junkies had been shoving handguns at the clerk, backs open. She'd taken a moment to channel her Ki, walked in, and punched one across the counter, the other through a display.

She'd been in street fights—growing up in the Barrens, every *week*—but that one fight had felt like something good. Trouble was, that clerk now kept making puppy eyes at her chest whenever she came round for nutrisoy and soymilk.

Training had always come before boys for her, but that had certainly left her limbs toned and firm. Frankly she found her breasts annoying; Harry had learnt very harshly not to joke about them weighing her down. Although for Harry, at present, his dreams also came first, she knew that idiot expected a harem of elf supermodels when he made Prime Runner. She imagined they would stay best friends, and that was all she wanted.

Shuo Cao Cao, Cao Cao dao—Harry burst into the store, something bright and wild in his eyes. As he ushered her outside, Susan felt a lurch of strange excitement.

"I got something. Tonight. Some out-of-town Runners at the Blunder Inn, an extraction job on the Mitsuhama building—OW!" By pure reflex, Susan had clipped his ear.

"Harry Fawkes, did you say tonight, or in about *ten years*? You told me about the 'Zero zone' at Mitsuhama! Zero questions, before security shoot you dead!"

"Don't talk so loud, and let me finish!" Susan took his point and shut up, as Harry rubbed his head, "We won't be going near Mitsuhama. These Runners have a plan, but they need a delivery truck schedule, from the truck depot in the Barrens, here. Milk run to snatch it, but their team are busy with other drek. They said 500 Nyuyen, if we oddjob this there'll be more jobs, bigger, it's a break in a slotting million!"

"Now you be quiet!" But Susan was grinning, despite how she felt, "Really tonight? You could use more training, we need Nyuyen for medkits—"

"We need jobs, and experience, and street cred! This job is now."

"So this is it? We go out tonight, break into a truck depot, take out the guards? Help these Runners steal from a Megacorp and kill whoever gets in their way? Have you *thought* about this Harry? It's what we want to do?"

Harry paused, to his credit. Then he breathed out a lungful of the Barrens' noxious air, and stared in the direction of downtown Seattle. The Renraku tower stretched above the old Space Needle, into the hazy sky. Silver skyscrapers clustered far above the two would-be Runners; aeries for steel dragons. Trash clattered down the grey street where Harry looked Susan in the eye.

"This world...only shadowrunners can break the fragging rules. Susan, please..."

"Oh, you had me at hello. No more of your speeches, I'm all in."

"Wiz, chummer! Promise I'll find a cheap medkit somewhere, before tonight—"

Rushing away, Harry's foot slipped on something unmentionable. He would have fallen onto poisonous grit, if Susan hadn't caught him. She burst out laughing; it was a position from some Tri-D schmaltzfest, except it was the heroine leaning back the hero for the big finish.

"Ha-Harry Fawkes, may I..ha..!" She gasped.

"Yeah, sure."

He held her hair, pecked her on the lips. Susan pushed him down *hard*; he rolled up with his hands raised, "Joke, joke, *sorry*! See you this evening!" He dashed away from her, joy in every step.

It didn't mean anything. She was shocked, *never* flushed. Only death cured stupidity—but she'd teach Harry tonight, and any number of times in their future, that they were both shadowrunners. She'd *never* be just his girl.

"Idiot..." She whispered, with feeling.

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Harry's fruitless quest for cut-price medkits took the rest of the day, apart from a quick practise with the replica samurai sword he'd sharpened to an edge (He had a small-calibre Fichetti pistol, but hardly practised with it; he was a swordsman).

Susan did some looking around the shady edges of the fish market herself, until a small Latino girl from her block ran up.

"It's Mommy. I think she's sick, please...?"

The woman was slumped in an alley, her minidress torn and the BTL chip still in her neckslot. In the dream world she'd paid for, she might have been a music star, an action heroine, or just a happy wife with the white picket fence. Before sensory overload kicked her into the dreamless stupor she'd never come out of, someday.

Susan hoisted her under the arms, and dragged her back to the soiled mattress in her apartment, glaring at any loafers who looked askance. She rubbed at the woman's hands until they were humanly warm.

"Your Mommy will be okay, Maria. She just has a tough job, and needs to forget about it sometimes. I'll make sure she gets back home, safe, before she does any forgetting in future."

"Mm. I wish she didn't have to forget about *me*. It gets lonely."

Susan sat at Maria's side and held her. There was no more anger at the BTL whore's weakness, only desperate compassion for a mother and child. The strong must protect the weak, her father had taught her, and she was strong. What she could do for people like this, she'd never worked out. But as she watched Maria's eyes grow dull, she knew she was Yip Lei's daughter, the strongest girl in town, and she would do anything, beat down anyone, for the ones without strength to fight.

"Hey, do you still like that elf boy on the third floor? Let's find him and some friends, and have some fun together."

"Okay, *Onee-San!*"

All the neighbourhood kids called Susan Big Sister; usually in Japanese, thanks to the Japancorps' global Tri-D. She turfed some older kids off the basketball court, and spent the hours before her first shadowrun playing with the children from her block.

"Evening, Schoolmarm!" Jackson called out on his way home. Susan waved her fist, with a smile not quite as full and bright as her usual.

She wouldn't have minded being a teacher—but for six generations, the Lei family had been masters of Kung Fu. Her father had died last year. The Ripperdocs who couldn't take out the cancer had taken the last of his savings, but he had trained her in martial arts since she was three, and she had survived. Street fights, drive-bys,

drugs and no future; the Barrens broke you, or it made you a fighter. She gave thanks to her father's spirit every night, for forcing all the weakness from her body. Her friends had died or vanished, but she was strong.

Alone, she'd trained herself even harder. She had wept into dirty fighting mats, and pushed out the limits of her strength, because her father had not lied to her, or lived in vain. His gift would lift a simple Chinese slum-girl to the heights of silver towers. To the top of the world.

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They met a few city blocks from the depot, that evening. Harry had found his thickest and darkest jacket, for some protection, and tied on a headband like a proper street samurai. Susan wore the leggings and white sport top she normally used for practise. There was a yellow cloth scarf of her father's that she'd taken some time to put on.

Without cheap medkits, they hoped to avoid fighting. As they set off, Harry remembered what they'd forgotten.

"You've wanted to be a shadowrunner since you were six," Susan sighed, "And you haven't picked a street name?"

"Picked a dozen," Harry grinned ruefully, "Nightcrawler? Stormrider? Night Warrior...?"

"Idiot. What about just 'Warrior'?"

"Hmm, bit simple...but yeah, that could stand out, in a way! Warrior. How about you, chummer?"

"I don't know. Look, you handle the names, I'll be here if there's fighting—"

"Since you're a Fighter?"

His smile was confident and carefree. Nervous as she was, she couldn't help smiling back, —

"Here to fight, huh, *breeder*?" The rough voice stopped them cold, "Meanin' with us?" Then a deep chortle, as the troll ganger stepped out of the alley behind the big ork.

Streetlight glinted over their bald heads and tusks; lit up the orange Halloween jackets. The troll was seven foot, not counting horns, built like a wall. The ork had a handgun, and it was somehow the scariest weapon they'd ever seen.

No. Just a gun, a streetfight. They had fought all their lives and they were strong, they could not back down. They were Runners. Susan—*Fighter*—felt Ki race down her arm, liquid lightning. She saw Warrior lower his stance, grip his sword.

"Don't be a fraghead, kid," The ork grated, "Get off our turf, take your woman back to your drekhole—"

The gunshot cracked through air. Warrior's blow virtually took the ork's hand off. No time for fear; Fighter charged and kicked straight up. Reckless, undefended, but unexpected. The ball of her foot broke jaw; whiplashed a horned head back.

The ork hauled hoop, the troll bellowed, flailing shovel-hands at Fighter's head and darting feet. She was faster and her Ki made her stronger. Fighting guns and trolls barehanded was what Adepts *did*.

With two punches to a bulging gut, the troll was swaying. She leapt, spinning kick; the ganger dropped like a poleaxed bull. Red ki blasted from her hands, she struck again, and again.

"Hey! Hey, it's down."

Warrior's voice brought her back from her adrenaline shot. Panting, as fear caught up, Fighter stared at the twitching bulk.

"Don't think it's even dead. You could have killed *three* normal humans, with that..." Warrior whistled. Finally, he pulled at Fighter's arm. She walked silently on from the broken trog, knuckles singing.

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The truck depot job went as badly as possible without actually failing. After the gangers, there were two human security with batons patrolling inside. When Warrior tripped on a crate, Fighter had to dart behind some shelves, knock them out from behind. Hope neither had seen a face. Then the truck schedule for deliveries to the Mistuhama building turned out to be on a computer. To get the password, Warrior had to threaten a late-working trucker with grievous harm. They

barely registered the difference from Warrior's stories and ideals. All that mattered was, get through the night without failing. Get the job done.

They left through the front door onto the truck-park, through the shadows of armoured monsters. Trucks that the Megacorps ran through the Barrens were land forts, which would rather crush stray slummers underwheel than stop.

"Can we take a route back," Fighter quipped, "That doesn't go through Halloweener turf?"

"I *said* I was sorry. Look, nearly the whole Barrens are turf for some—"

Warrior was still facing Susan when the bullet hit him. Dropped him, as she stared, and the three Halloweeners loped out of the night.

There was no time to channel Ki, she didn't even think. A second shot flew past as she charged, screaming, smashing an ork's flat nose. A kick sent the gun spinning away, and then she slashed her foot around. At the troll, head studded with horn. Older than the last one, quicker.

He caught her foot. Wrenched, and the baseball struck her head. She didn't feel him throwing her to the ground until she hit.

Even down, vision blurred, her leg agony, she tried to crawl. Under the trucks, escape, as she should have done—but her foot was seized, she was dragged through the grit. She tried to free her wrists, but they held her down, she was weak. She couldn't remember how to fight, as blows snapped her head back into the floor.

"...Kill you. Kill you, filthy trogs..."

"*Manners*, breeder." She glimpsed beady eyes, the bloody nosed ork, before he hit her again, "Give you filthy trog. Teach you respect."

"Yeah," A deeper voice, "Just wait your turn."

Then the ork ripped her shirt from her breasts, but it was the burning weight of the troll that crushed her. He clawed her thighs apart, she only had strength to moan. The third man had his PDA out. Streaming her. The world would laugh with them, as they broke all she was and threw a scrap of flesh away.

Her story, life, death. Agony, failure, disgrace. And she could have been a Runner; that almost hurt worse...

Then Warrior hauled himself up on his katana. Emptied his little Fichetti handgun at the troll's head. Only two bullets hit and didn't kill, but the Troll stood up from its victim and stomped toward her wounded friend.

"SUSAN! *SUSAN!*"

She saw, one of her wrists was free. With nothing left, years of training destroyed in little more than a minute, her blow behind the ork's knee barely staggered it. She couldn't fight, but the human Halloweener was aiming his gun at her head. It would be over, she would see her father, no more shame...then a shotgun blast took the Halloweener apart.

There were gunmen in white hoods and combat boots, moving in. The ork was shot dead, blood spray on Susan's face. The Troll went down in a burst of fire.

"What—?"

Warrior sunk back to one knee, clutching his wounded midriff. The leader of the hooded gang threw a medkit at him, then turned to his human followers. Many were younger than the Runners, some wore broken tusks on their necks.

"See the true face of sub-humanity! They fill our streets with poison, they only live by violence—and *see what they do to our women!* We are the Troll Hunters, the heroes to wipe out these monsters from our city! One day, we will dash out the brains of the last trog child against the wall! No good trog but a dead trog!"

"No good trog but a dead trog!" The Troll Hunter gang echoed.

"Ah...yeah." Warrior muttered. Even as he slapped a nanite-soaked dressing and a Bloodbag over his wound, he could not tear his gaze from Susan's empty eyes. As the Troll Hunters began to set an ambush against the Halloweener's expected counter-strike, Warrior pulled her to her feet.

"Don't want to join the heroes, Runner?" The Troll Hunter boss snapped, "At least protect your woman, if you have any pride at all!"

"Not my woman." Warrior muttered, "You're a Runner. No, a Fighter. Susan, fight this, please..."

She didn't seem to hear. She trembled as he held her, couldn't move without help, and stared at nothing.

"Mr Fawkes? Please don't think me rude. We are neighbours, but it's so easy to be a stranger in these tower blocks....but anyway, how is your friend, Miss Lei? My son Darren said he hadn't seen her around."

"She's going to be okay." Warrior leaned against the wall of the block, unsmiling.
"She's going to be okay."

"Oh dear, she's sick? Darren said she's always polite to him, and helps out anyone round here in any trouble. Do you need help, for medicine? Or Darren and me, and my husband Frank, we could all come to visit, bring some food?"

"Don't think that's a good idea," Warrior couldn't look the chubby ork housewife in the eye, "I'm sorry. I promise...she's going to be okay."

Survivors of Seattle

A/N: Scenarios in chpt 2, including Warrior's 'domestic incident' are taken from 'Gangs of Seattle' UGC (ProwlingMule), which I completed with Warrior and some random NPCs. The docks fight is from 'Silver Angel' (Naotaka), which I completed with Fighter and some other randoms, who I've replaced to make a continuous story.

In a world of cyber brains and limbs, Susan's body was pure meat. She'd never dreamt of fragging her spiritual essence with cyber, running from soft, shaking flesh to cold chrome...but now there were no dreams but nightmare and she wanted to tear her flesh away. Breaking a spirit could take less than two minutes.

They had hurt her. Done as they wished with her. *She could not stop them.* Years of training, thrown away, beneath lust and animal strength, because she was *weak*. She wanted to tear from every bone her traitor muscles, her trembling skin, as she grovelled on her apartment floor. Crushed her brow into the ground beneath her family's little Buddhist shrine.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Father. Please..."

Her ancestors had been heroes. Their martial arts had been her father's gift. She had smiled and swaggered and failed them all, but no more. No more.

When the vulnerable submissive posture grew too terrifying to bear, she shuffled back to the room's corner, where no bats could strike from behind. Harry had brought her a fresh medkit, but she still felt the pain. He sat with her every day. Talked, without meeting her eyes.

The first morning, she had got through push-ups, even begun her regular forms—but then her arms had fallen uselessly to her sides. She had punched the wall, twisted with hate for the gangers, the trops, herself. The blows were slow and weak, again and again.

She had meditated, tried to, but that was just slumping down to do nothing. There was nothing else to do or be. She was a scrap of meat, crushed in the world's machine.

In the worst of it, she envied the slotheads. Fleeing into digital dreams of glory, with a chip in their neck. If she could ever be any kind of hero, even a teacher, an ordinary woman, anything but the self she despised. She had cared for addicts with pity, not sympathy, but now she *knew*.

Harry's mother often sat with her as well; most of the mothers on the block took turns to bring round soup. They generally told her it would get better. Maria's mother, the BLT user, stared for some time, eyes shadowed in her thin face.

"So. You learnt not to go out at night, like a good girl? With the airs you put on, it probably was going to take a trog gang-rape."

"No. Wasn't...raped."

"Drek, girl, and you're like *this*? This is the Barrens, this is our life! If we get raped and hacked up by some serial psycho, *maybe* Lone Star will act, or maybe the neighbours get a Runner to hunt him down. Anything less, we shut up and take it. Barrens girls do not go into some coma, they carry on, they survive! *Capice*? Anyway. Lend me 20 Nuyen?"

Susan nodded, and passed over the credstick. She knew it was true—shamefully, she would survive.

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Harry brought her food every morning, and joss sticks for the shrine. His nose was broken again. The Shadowrunners on the Mitsuhamas job had paid up and vanished, but he'd met a woman in the same bar. Her ex-partner had thrown her out with the clothes on her back. Harry had gone back with her, they had beaten the man and his two friends bloody—and he'd felt little but surprise when the woman shot her ex dead.

"I didn't tell Jackson that you...but he knows I fragged up. I'm sorry. Susan...he wanted to talk. About payback, or something. When you're ready."

"Those trogs are dead. Nothing to do. It's over." Susan's hands trembled like an addict as she got the joss stick lit, bowed before the shrine again.

"Have to do something. Susan, you're strong. You have to...!" She didn't raise her head. Harry bowed his head with her, face twisted in impotent pain.

Then he got up, and knocked Mr Lei's hologram off the shrine. Susan rose up and hit him in the stomach, caught him on her shoulder as his body folded. Punched him again.

"Idiot! You, you...!" Clinging together, they fell to their knees, "Why? You fragged everything up, talked so much drek about Shadowruns! What gives you the right—!"

"...you're my friend." Harry choked, eyes streaming, "Fragged up. Couldn't protect you. Can't give up. Not letting..."

Susan hit him, once more. Her body screamed at her to get away, not cling to any man's chest, but she fought. She had fought and survived for all her life...she could still fight. Two minutes still hurt like a beast, she still felt broken and weak. But she'd broken her bones before, and they mended.

"Idiot. They could've killed you..." She buried her face in Harry's neck, "But you saved me."

"It wasn't me, those Hunters—"

"Shut up. You saved me. Promise you'll stay."

"Runner's honour. What we promise, we do. Just don't you go away, again, *please*...you're the strongest girl in this drekky town, the best. I won't let this beat you, it fragging can't! We're going to be Shadowrunners, but you're a *Fighter!* You're a *hero*. Always."

She was afraid. She didn't know if the fear would ever leave her—the knowledge of the fall. She would live on, with that pit beneath her feet. But she clung fiercely to her friend, crying for lost innocence and naked rage, as she began to climb back towards herself.

In the next month there were slow steps forward, painful falls back. It took Susan time to go out at night, or without Harry. To lash herself to the present, whenever the past crept back—but she forced every step, as soon she could. There was no longer any doubt she would be okay.

Warrior didn't stop Running; Susan would never have asked him. Since that night, she had even seen a new desperate intensity beneath his unchanging bright-eyed

swagger. After almost a month, and a couple more street jobs, there was a night of drinks with some heavily chromed chummers willing to give a likely lad a chance. There was a magic artefact in the bonded warehouse of a distant Renraku subsidiary. The payment for the rookie would be a burned SIN, the Shadow Rubicon.

He'd be back in about a week, when the heat was off. Susan had made certain *someone else* was planning the job this time, but still couldn't sleep. So she sat up with her little friend Maria. The girl's mother, Ana Ortega, trudged back to her flat in the early morning, to find Susan teaching her daughter meditation in the living space.

"Don't your legs hurt, like that?" She quipped, flopping down and scratching her chipslot.

"Clinging to pleasure or fleeing pain brings suffering." Susan intoned, "Indifference is the Middle Way to peace."

"My legs *do* hurt." Maria moaned. Susan tickled her under an arm, and they squirmed round on the floor together, giggling.

"Right. Some Buddhist you are." Her mother's mouth twitched, "Still waiting for your man to come home, right? Sure he isn't *celebrating* with some Razorgirl?"

"Quite sure, Miss Ortega, because he's not my man."

"Drek, you're a fool. He's an idiot, but you see any better men, here? Do you want to give your first time to some more gangers, or some bum-?" Maria listened with childish solemnity, as Susan got up from the floor.

"Miss Ortega, I'd like my 20 Nuyen back."

"Frag off. You think I've got it? I've got a kid here, I've got...what, you gonna Kung Fu me?"

"Okay, keep the Nyuyen," Susan's arms were loose at her sides, her voice level as a gun, "Just stop using BLTs in alleys where you're not safe. Tell your daughter she can be whoever she wants. Frag, just stop using and set her a decent example."

"Who the frag do you think you are?" The laugh was bitter, "Keep dreaming, Miss Hero--"

"You had dreams, didn't you? Or you'd never have slotted BLT—but that's fake, real is here! The people we love are alive, here. We can dream for the future, not the past."

Ana couldn't stop laughing. Susan held her ground, as Maria stared up at her.

Two days later, a Lone Star cruiser parked in front of the block. The patrolmen in black armour slouched out and lined up most of the local youths against a wall. Waved holograms at them, asked for names. With bored irritation they smacked some faces and pointed shotguns. No one resisted, and no one gave Harry's name. Susan tried to envision nothing but a placid lake, not a volcano.

"No, Officer." Maria's mother drawled, beside her, "Don't know nothing."

"Stupid whore..."

"Yeah?" Maria snapped, from by her knees, "You're a stupid pig!"

The cop was about to jab his knee into the girl's face, but Susan moved. She was between them, an inch from the man's nose.

"She's just a child!"

Everyone went silent. The hulking ork detective in charge shoved his man aside and stared Susan down. Sour-beer stink poured over his fangs—the smell of the gangers, that drekky night. His eyes flicked to her chest.

Her fists shook. Her knees barely upheld her. Her eyes did not move.

"Huh. Shame to mess up a face like that. Ask for McKlusky if you remember anything, sweetheart." The ork stepped back, yelled at his men, and they slouched away.

Maria clung to Susan's waist. Her mother...had wanted to scream at this woman, who seemed stronger than she could possibly be. A Kung Fu Tri-D heroine, a Barrens BLT whore, it wasn't fair...then Susan collapsed onto her shoulder, trembling. She was hugging her desperately back, and Maria's mother found she couldn't stop weeping.

"I can't...the chips, I need them, I'm not..."

"No." Susan whispered, "You're a survivor. You can fight too."

They talked together for a long time, before Ana Ortega said she'd get her chipslot taken out. For a few hours, Susan even forgot to think about Harry, and whatever the frag he'd done this time.

After six days, Harry called Susan on her cheap commlink. He was quieter than she could remember him being.

"Ha—*Warrior*. What happened? Lone Star came to the block, they had your face—"

"It's okay. They don't have names, my SIN's already burnt, they can't track us here. *Su-Fighter*, the Run went great, better than great. Look, our tech guy, our Decker, he can keep this call safe, but not too long. Be at the Blunder Inn, two hours from now, please."

"Idiot. I'd meet you anywhere."

The intensity in his voice, the lightness in her own. It was strange, but Harry had always been good at getting under her skin.

Naturally, the Blunder Inn was badly lit; *Warrior* often joked that was the reason for the blunders. The troll bouncer stepped politely aside for *Fighter*, who moved on quickly to a table at the back. *Warrior* was sitting there, much more happy and alert than he'd sounded, with his old sword and a new flak-jacket. Jackson the dwarf was with him, and a woman with glasses Susan didn't know.

"Hello, Schoolmarm." Jackson drawled, "You know me, this lady ain't picked a Street Name yet, so we'll call her Wizard—"

"Oh, don't worry," *Warrior* patted the woman's hand, "We had trouble with our Street Names too!"

Fighter stared coolly at *Wizard*, not quite sure why she felt so furious. The woman wore a Mage's hood and cloak, attached to a collar. A shoulderless low-cut top which *Fighter* thought rather slutty, and a cold, superior look.

"—If I may finish," Jackson turned to *Warrior*, "This is the lying drekhead whose new friends think he's hidden under the bed from Lone Star, like a good kid. Not pulling one last job with some lady friends, before the team lights out for Hong Kong! Backstabbing scumbags. I should know..."

"*Hong Kong?*" *Fighter* grabbed *Warrior* by the jacket, "*What happened with the Run?*"

"Don't know." *Warrior* grinned like a bad puppy, "More loot than we'd thought, more heat. Maybe someone talked, maybe Docwagon brought a guard back, and he'd seen our faces. Chip truth, we need to get out of town. These guys know some guys in Hong Kong, that place has action you wouldn't believe—"

"And you've got a friend that speaks Cantonese!" Susan was grinning as well, until Jackson hit the table for her attention.

"Fighter. You went through a drekking horrorshow last month but I promise you; in the Shadows it only gets worse. Still think you're hard enough? Whatever gets done to you, whatever you got to deal with, for your life and your team, you *deal*. Can you do that?"

"Yes!"

"Okay. My cousin's friend works on the docks, and some punk two-bit gang's been rolling the Dockers for money. We're gonna take a cab, geek 'em all, and get paid, right now. Ready?"

Susan couldn't help sitting down. The doubt and fear slammed back into her. The blows of the past. They had gone in suddenly, blindly. She'd been thrown down in the dirt, Warrior could have been *killed*, and it was almost too much—

"We've got Medkits." Warrior broke in, "And a Docwagon contract if the worst happens. Drek, maybe we could talk to these guys."

"I'd prefer that as well." Wizard added. Her voice was brisk and refined, with a slight foreign accent.

"I'd *prefer* to kill them." Warrior glanced at Fighter, "But if—"

"Look, kids," Jackson's voice silenced them, "Your biggest mistake was always leaving anybody alive. Some time since I Ran the Shadows, but *always*, you play for keeps not sleeps, meaning you put them in the drekking ground. That's what you have to be ready for, Schoolmarm. You come and kill some gangers with us, right now, or go back to the block and take care of the kiddies. I'm really hoping you pick that one."

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Apart from being the first time that Susan Lei, Fighter, killed for money, the docks fight was an undistinguished affair—almost a milk run. The gang had lookouts posted near the ring of bikes where they were drinking, but the docks were full of huge shipping crates and shadows. Warrior could edge through the dark, two steps away from the ork with a shotgun. Then he charged, snarling, cut it down with one blow. It shocked Fighter—she could never remember him being so fast or strong.

The boss was a big troll; Jackson put a heavy bullet between his horns. From behind a crate, Wizard hurled a firebolt; a ganger dropped, howling. Then Fighter charged, vaulting across a bike. Backlit by burning trash, she was terrified and looked terrifying. No thought but to fight and survive.

She kicked a man back, blocking the bat above her head. Drew her knee up, Crane style, threw up the ball of her foot, with a spear of Ki behind, and an ork's head flew back, *snap*. Then the strange, savage joy burst in. Gangers killed, stole, *raped*, and she could put them down. She was not weak. The trog was dead. And if there was shame she could drown it in blood.

Gangers stumbled from the melee, drawing guns; Jackson shot them down. Warrior reached Fighter's side, chopping at a tattooed man—on her other side, a bullet hit her in the waist.

She fell back onto the twisted stance, halted more by shock than pain. Then Wizard's Heal spell washed over her, Warrior caught her arm, hauled her back up. As he stabbed at the ganger who'd shot her, hacked them down in a hail of blows, she laughed. Leapt forward and slashed her foot around again.

A knife cut through her arm, there was no Heal, but there would be a medkit. If she only bit down the pain, drew back her hand, shattered trog jaw like a brick. She was strong. She'd be okay.

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Wizard threw up in the gutter when she saw the bodies. Fighter held her hair back, as Jackson went to get their money. Warrior had made a brief Comm call, and now he was staring a hole in a crate. Fighter couldn't think why he looked so blue, when he'd made out so well, but obviously she had another friend to deal with.

"Just, it's just—" Wizard wiped her face, wretched, "I did not grow up in a place like this. I was Valedictorian at the University of Heidelberg! But I am here, and those people are dead..."

"Hey, it's alright." Fighter gently stroked her back, "You saved my life. And you did better than us, with your first run. Chip truth."

"Chip truth', that is your...argot? Slang?"

"Yeah, you'll pick it up. I'm sure *that* idiot would teach you. Hey, he didn't already try it on, did he?"

"What is, 'try it on'?"

"*Su-Fighter*, can we talk?" Warrior butted in, "I mean, on our own?"

"Something like this, probably." Fighter muttered

But she was smiling, as she patted Wizard down one last time, threw her arm around Warrior's shoulder, and pulled him a short distance away. Maybe it was the fight making her nerves sing as she walked at his side, maybe happiness for her friend who'd finally made it, maybe she didn't know why. It was so frustrating, she couldn't look him in the face when she thought how he'd cut that ork down, fast and certain. He'd pulled her up, with one fervent arm....

"So?" She knew what would make him smile, "What happened with your first real Shadowrun?"

"Better than great, like I said. Our Decker, Fyrefox, knocked out the warehouse locks and gun-turrets. We shot out the cameras, geeked a couple of guards. Then it turned out the loot had been sent out for shipping, less than an hour before."

"*That's* better than great?"

"Yeah, our Rigger, ork called Roller—good sort—he got us blasting down to the docks in a souped-up Bulldog van. Wasn't too far from here. We blew through some more hostiles, got on the ship, then we ran in another team of Runners, after the same stuff. I thought we could talk it out, but...Runner's Code, every team for themselves. I got tagged again, but I took one out...one of our team almost bit it, but the Docwagon got to him, he should pull through. I didn't get an extra share, I was just in for this job to get my SIN burnt, but now..."

"Now we're going to Hong Kong?"

Warrior turned back to Fighter, and his face was grim.

"Susan...these guys don't know you. I tried, I called them again right now, but...there's only one ticket for Hong Kong. I'm sorry."

Fighter was silent for some time. Warrior clenched his teeth and shut his eyes—but doubled, ruinous shame was crushing him, worse than any fist.

"Susan, I'm sorry! I promised you, I should stay..."

"You...never promised to stay."

"What? No, I—"

"Idiot. You didn't say 'I promise', you just said, Runners do what they promise. And you are a shadowrunner, Harry. You need to run, or you'll end up dead. And it's your dream. You go, and find it. This isn't a job where you can cling to friends."

Suddenly, Warrior grasped her hand. He spoke deliberately, recklessly—all the strange, hot feelings in Susan's chest exploded and she knew why.

"Susan, I *promise* you, I'll come back. We'll pull a huge job in Hong Kong, get chased out of town again. The Corps will all have forgotten these runs in a year, but we'll remember. We'll Run the Shadows again, together."

His face blazed with idiot, undefeated faith, in a world of filthy street and poisoned dreams. Susan wanted to kiss him right then. She wanted to push him back against a container, and give it all up to him, if he would stay. Prove again, again, she was not a victim, the man who had saved her was not a liar, they would never, could never...

But he would go. And she would endure it. Charging in, holding him back, it would get him killed. And not getting killed, she knew now, was the best a Shadowrunner could hope for.

Raised by Wolves

A/N: Drug running and leg breaking really are starter 'fetch quests' in some Shadowrun UGCs. The Halloween fight with Aria is from 'Wolf Runners' by Sept Wolfke, with apologies. RPG players will recognise a 'high-level-character-assists-the-rookie' scenario. Since the scenario seems to have been written primarily for a straight male or gay female player character, it really could end up as it does here!

The evening after Warrior and his new friends took a fast boat to China, Fighter went back to the Blunder Inn. She didn't have a black trenchcoat, but threw on a leather jacket before knotting her yellow scarf.

The sound system was oozing out Toxic House, as neon snakes fizzled above the bar. It had been Warrior's favourite music, after Chromatic Thrash, though she would always prefer Maria Mercurial—

"Oi, rookie!" A patron with three bionic arms called out, "Geek any of those Halloweeners yet?"

The Runner's team sniggered. Fighter wanted to stare them down, show she was more than a joke, but she *was* a rookie, they were pros. Feinting deafness would have been a deadly insult; she returned a neutral look and walked past to the bar.

She felt eyes on her tush, itching like grit. Though she hardly ever drank synthol, she needed and ordered a glass of the alcohol mouthwash, right away.

A dozen patrons, mostly obvious Runners. One male ork, looking up from his drink—Fighter turned away, made herself calm as water. The man who mattered right now was the Overcoat, alone on a table at the back. She was pretty sure the guy outside the bar in an overcoat was the drug dealer.

Fighter felt very plain. Next to all the chrome limbs and Mil-spec armour, the shamans with dangling fetishes and wild eyes—she *was* plain. Even another Phys-Adept had dragons tattooed down his bulging arms. But she had fought to get here, where she belonged. Time to step up and head for that table.

"My name's Fighter, and I'm looking for Mr Johnson. About work."

The Fixer looked her up and down. She was ready to endure a prostitution joke, but it seemed that female Adepts, Mages and Razorgirls had quashed such humour since the Awakening. He didn't mention her first job, but she knew he was thinking about it.

"Okay. Sit down."

She had no SIN to burn, thanks to her father, but finding jobs was another matter. Warrior had told her about one-Run teams; four solo Runners from four districts pulling one job in a fifth. However, it seemed they didn't come along every week, or use rookies. Underground fight rings were full of master Adepts or trolls, and didn't stop at first blood.

The team with the ork were holding auditions. Fighter quickly shook her head, and the Fixer shrugged; they were all drekking amateurs anyway.

"Hm, you're not Running with that 'Wizard' chica?"

"She got a job to help excavate some Native burial ground in Salish-Shidhe." Low pay, low risk work (presumably a dig run by the Tribal Council could dodge Indian curses), but it helped to have a fancy degree, rather than no more school than what an alcoholic ex-professor had set up occasionally in a local basement.

"Interesting. Triads in Tacoma? Might have some work for a sister."

"Maybe. I'm not a gangster."

"Huh. They don't pay so well as the Megacorps, but they're honest," The Fixer grinned, teeth white against his scraggly beard, "Okay, you can't say no to this. A package needs delivering to my associate in Puyallup. Cardboard box—"

"No. I'm not asking for much, but I'm a *shadowrunner*."

"Of course you are. Look, you don't have a team, you don't even have body armour! On any shooting job, you'd get shot dead. You need money, with no shooting—I bet every Prime Runner started with cardboard box jobs. Some Runners *end* that way, if they stroll onto Halloweener turf."

Fighter thought of Maria's mother. All the pitiful wrecks and staring junkies she'd known. The box *might* be something that wasn't drugs, but you were paid for No Questions.

"Did... Warrior do jobs like that?"

The Fixer laughed, and told her what Warrior had done. A few moments later, Fighter was outside the bar, her arm round a drug dealer's neck.

"What did you sell that idiot?"

"Didn't sell him nothing," the dealer gasped, "Except a bit of Nitro, bit of Jazz. Speed, power, grit—just have a kick coming down. All the top Runners use them. Corporate Special Forces use them!"

"Um, Miss—?" The bar's troll bouncer raised a thick finger. Fighter ignored him.

"This drek, it's addictive?"

"I find staying alive addictive! Want to stay ungeeked, in this biz? Get to the top, protect your team? You need an edge, chummer, razor edge. Your boy wanted *Cram*, but I liked the kid, plus I like my clients not-brain-dead."

Fighter threw the man to the street, collapsed against the wall. Harry had been so much faster in the docks fight. She'd thought he'd been so low because he was *leaving her*. He would have done anything, to reach the top—no, that wasn't right. Harry would have taken any drug, to protect her. To never fail his girl again.

She'd been assaulted, but she'd never thought what that night had done to him. Now, she remember the agony in his face, the shame...though it would be nothing to the pain Harry Fawkes would go through when she next got hold of him.

Susan raised tearful eyes, just as a lookout from the dealer's gang punched her in the stomach. The troll bouncer stepped over her and placated the thug with an apology. That was the most shameful thing of all.

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"Fixer was right." Jackson told her at the market, later, "You can punch, but you're soft as a peach. Knew a couple of Adepts back in the day, who dodged bullets, or tanked them like trolls—old pros. Suppose they trained—I'd ask an Adept. Didn't your old man tell you anything?"

Nothing about the Shadows. Maybe he'd hoped his daughter would open a dojo, or get married. It twisted in her gut, but she was not going back from this path.

All that her father had *almost* told her of his shadowrunning days, when she'd begged and begged, was the Tale of the Marvellous Old Cat.

"There was a swordsman whose house was troubled by a great, ferocious rat. His own cat could do nothing. Three famous mousers from the village were brought in, but fled the house bleeding and defeated."

"Tough rat." Susan could imagine; she'd killed rats in her own bedroom, seen them swarm starving cats in the street. Her father rapped her knuckles, she fell silent as he went on.

"The fourth cat was a fat, nodding creature, like the maneki-neko in a shop window. It waddled into the house, where the rat offered no resistance, and left with its prize between its jaws..."

After her father had finished, Susan shifted her rear against her feet in seiza, and respectfully proposed; a warrior who attained oneness with all being would have no enemies, and never taste defeat.

"Do you believe that? Well?" Yip Lei's stare was hard as jet; she stammered, "That was the meaning, but in this present world, we must grasp new meanings. Now, the maneki-neko, the fat money cat, nods the people into stupor. Except for the rats. That unquestioning, furious drive that tears out the cat's throat, to live. That is the way that shadowrunners live..."

He'd started coughing; Susan got him some water, trying not to scrunch up her nose at the smell of his pipe. She remembered the story from the week before, on the Japanese cultural TriD channel, but didn't mention it.

Jackson had offered her a Ceska handgun. She wouldn't even carry it, though she could not drive the fear of hateful, stunning blows from her body. She was an Adept, a superhuman, Yip Lei's daughter. A furious rat could not doubt in the slightest; she had no place in the shadows, if such thoughts had any place within her. It had taken five attempts, a viciously slashed hand, for her to break a stack of rooftiles again. She had turned away, she had trembled, but in the end she had done it.

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A few days later, she put down her credstick in front of the tattooed Adept in the Blunder Inn. Held his gaze.

"Play baseball?" He spoke without change of expression.

"Ah...I'm a hoops girl."

"Trains you to dodge, I guess. Baseball trains you for these."

Fast as a spitting snake, he threw her a pinned grenade. Shocked, she fumbled the catch; the Adept caught it before it hit the floor. She wanted to tell him who her Father was, but instead she sat down.

"Look, I know baseball isn't why you Run with your team. You can charge down machine guns because of ki. I can punch a ganger's face off, but I know I need more."

"Of course you do. Look, chica, punching out ki is simple. Pooling, gathering, exhaling over the whole body...takes years to get, so if you want to Run, I'd start now."

"And get some grenades?"

"A vest first. And the old insurance," The Adept grinned, and waved brass knuckles in Fighter's face. "All comes together. Circle of death. Anyhow, there's a Mariners game on the TriD. Get the first round in?"

"...first round."

Over the next month Fighter worked harder, trained harder and drunk more synthol than she ever had. The tattooed Adept gave her four hours' training for her Nuyen, plus advice over a bottle between innings of baseball, but it opened up vistas. Another mountain to climb after her years of training; mists of elation above the grit of frustrated shame.

She spent hours on her tai chi forms, and simply standing in the Crane or Cat stance. Letting the Ki settle, unforced. Widening the channels that would let her run faster than wind, one day soon. Then there were the whole days of meditation, exhaling ki from each of the 48 points. A Mystic Shield that might not deflect bullets, but magic energy, with time and effort. For bullets, she remembered Warrior's stories and searched the alleys for a dark-skinned woman with antique cybereyes, who sold Fighter her first flak jacket.

The shadow mall in Puyallup, or the underground market in touristsville, wouldn't have let her through the door, but that was null sweat. She was moving steadily forward, to the future that her Father's arts deserved, leaving *that night* in the dust.

The training was hard, but not nearly so hard as tracking down shaking street thugs, younger than herself. Telling them; pay the Triads back, in nuyen or broken fingers.

A client had asked for her by name. She wasn't sure what that meant, but the Fixer from the Blunder Inn had directed her to a coffee shop in Bellevue.

White houses, clean walks, walled communities with black steel gates. Also Lone Star, like roaches in black full-body armour. Fighter naturally had no guns, but when an Officer told her to face the drekking wall for a body search, she was still very glad that the pig happened to be a woman.

The client was a slim Elven lady, in a skirt suit that probably cost—but it was her smile that hit Fighter like a warm shower in the evening. The Elves she'd known in the Barrens had been dirty-faced angels, but the shining hair and effortless assurance of an elf with *power*...it was like meeting a queen in a coffee shop, smiling at the chosen hero who would save her kingdom.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Her voice was light and charmingly mid-Atlantic, "I'm Aria Landers. Please take a seat."

"Fighter," Feeling very rough and uncivilised, she sat, "I heard you had a problem?"

"All business, then?" Aria re-crossed her slender legs, smiled again, "You wouldn't like a coffee first?"

It was real beans. Even the smell made her light-headed, as Aria went on.

"I own a successful talismonger's shop, in Bellevue, and recently opened a sister site in the better part of Renton. Over the last fortnight, a wretched gang has been demanding protection money from local businesses. Two of our own Security were found murdered, with pumpkins smashed over their heads."

The Halloweeners. With an effort, Fighter kept her breathing level. The Elf raised one eyebrow, and leaned forward.

"I'm proposing that we drop in on the hole where these vermin are lurking, and carry out some pest control. I will pay 1500 Nuyen, one third in advance. I can recommend a gentleman who sells such things as grenades, and will accompany you myself. Are we agreed?"

'Dazed and confused' were the only words. A Halloween chapter house would have maybe twenty gangers, their best weapons, probably a mage. However, Aria was twisting a thread of light in mid air that smelt of jasmine. Elvish magic was only slightly less famous than their devastating charm. Still...

"I...don't know what you've heard about me, but I'm not down for two women charging in blind."

"Naturally..."

Aria had a plan, as it turned out, and that smile. Fighter still had a few questions, but it was the inward urging to get more justice, wipe shame away in blood, that tipped the scales.

"Yeah, we're agreed," On impulse, she grasped the Elf's hand, "Let's show those Fraggers what it means to mess with women."

"Oh, yes...my dear, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

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Earlier that night, Renton had been lit up by another rumble between the Halloweeners and local Human Supremacists. After roaring back home in their flame patterned bikes, to drink to their kills and lick their wounds, the Halloweeners would be at their least ready. There were still two lookouts in orange jackets at each end of the street, faces painted like skulls or monster clowns. The chapterhouse was rotten brick squat, sprayed Jack-o-lanterns grinning from every wall in the light of trash-fires.

Fighter glanced round the crumbling corner. Her chest heaved against her awkward flak-jacket. She had a medkit, cold brass on her fists, and one grenade. She could've taken one guard, but there were four. Beside her, Aria touched her hand.

"H-have you done this sort of thing before?"

"Mages tend to lead...most interesting lives." Her voice was breathy, but she didn't sound scared, "Now run, my brave little rabbit..."

Before Fighter could ask, the Speed of the Hare spell hit her. A smell of sweaty fur, a jolt, and then her arms pumped as she dashed down the street. Faster than wind in an instant.

A leaping kick, a head broken on asphalt. A gunshot, but she was sinking, rising, punching three times until the man fell. She dived for the cover of a dumpster—just like a rabbit, magic was *amazing*—as the other two sentries charging in, spraying bullets that clattered over the dumpster and street. Then Fighter smelt ozone and

heard lightning, as Aria blasted both shooters, and finished the ganger she had only knocked down with a manabolt.

A burned ork was still up after the thunderbolt, staggering and howling. Fighter bought down an axe kick on his neck, lips pulled back in a snarl.

"So ugly..." Aria's gaze rose from the ork, to Fighter as she heaved out breaths, "...so beautiful."

Another spell kicked Fighter's senses into incredible clarity. She walked to the chapter house door, kicked it open, strode down the hallway. Aria threw manabolts into the room on one side. The other side, Fighter kicked down a bare chested ganger stumbling out with an Uzi.

The next two rooms off the hall; one ganger was ready. Her shot hit Fighter in the vest. She fell back to the ground, spun, and kicked up at the woman's chin as she fired again. The bullet hit the doorframe over Aria's head. The Elf froze in a moment of shock, as four Halloweeners burst from the rooms down the hall. One troll. Three sub-machine guns.

Aria dived through the door, just as the storm of shot burst down the hallway. Fighter saw blood fly, the noise hammered at her, she crouched in the doorway opposite, fists pressed to her face.

They were going to fall, here, no...Aria, she *had* to have healing magic, but she'd been here to protect the elf! She could be dead. If she charged right now, the guns, if they threw a grenade...she had a grenade.

Her fingers shook on the pin. What had Jackson told her, how many seconds...?

"Fire in the hole, breeders!" A ganger screamed.

That settled that. The nightmares, the night when these monsters had thrown her down, had carved one good lesson into her body that she'd hammered over in iron. Don't freeze up.

She yanked out the pin, flung the grenade into the hall, and dived across the room to a kitchen counter, the only cover. The Halloweeners' grenade went off by the door. Shrapnel cut her arm and leg like knives, and she was deaf.

On the deck, Fighter felt the thudding steps coming closer, through the blasted door. How could she fight, what could she do...?

Then she felt another huge blast and flash above her, felt bodies thump down. She staggered up; two gangers still stood, lightning humming over their bodies. She punched another one down, ears ringing, again, again...

Aria had Healed herself; as the gangers piled into the room to finish Fighter, she'd blasted them all with Ball Lightning. Fighter's grenade had curved off the hallway into another side-room, doing no damage at all.

"Oi, Spike!" A shrill voice came from the end of the hall, "Those breeders dead yet?"

As Aria quickly dressed Fighter's arm and leg, she suggested a prudent withdrawal.

"No. They'll come after us. It ends here. Two minute's rest, then kill them all."

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In two minutes, they looted the bodies. There was another grenade, medkits, drugs which Fighter threw away, and the female ganger had body armour. Loose Kelvar plates over the legs and chest, linked by tough nanoweave. Protective, but unrestricting, a street brawler's kit. Fighter discarded her vest, and strapped the new armour on.

There was a barred door at the end of the hall; the surviving gangers in there had to be waiting and ready. Fighter stalked up, shattered the bar with an axe kick. Rolled through and *dashed* with magic-fired speed.

As bullets started to pour, she punched the closest, clown-painted ganger in his rotten teeth. Dove back out the door, ahead of the gunfire. The Halloweeners pounded after her, bunched in the door. Another ball lightning from Aria flung bodies back. Fighter rushed back in, through the smoke, then a gout of flame leapt out at her.

This she had learned. Focus on the core, breathe in, then *out*, push the Ki without straining. The magical blast of flame burst ahead of her, like a flower. Flame licked her limbs, scorching, but gone. She never stopped running.

Within the strongroom, a weaselly man in orange rags was hefting another Flamestrike—Aria blasted him away. Against a wall draped with the Halloween banner, the gang boss had his shotgun aimed. Fighter charged straight at it.

She seized control at the last second, diving behind a filthy couch that exploded in white. As the boss racked the slide, she dashed round. Grabbed the weapon. Struggled—then sent him hard into the wall, her punch travelling only two inches.

She had the shotgun. His eyes were frenzied, from a death-head mask, then she fired. The kick threw her back onto the ruined sofa, but there was silence when the blast died away.

The Halloweeners were dead. She felt strong, but spent. There was an ice box of beer by the coach, so she broke off a bottleneck and poured one down her throat.

"Well. How did that feel?" Somehow, Aria still looked like a fashion spread. Her eyes were bright, eager, "Putting down those scum who hurt you?"

"Don't know. Glad I did it with you. You're really something."

"You...are a woman who's earned her Nuyen." Aria dropped a credstick in Fighter's lap, then sipped at a beer herself. She smiled into her eyes, and then coughed, suddenly awkward, "Ah...Fighter? How do feel about getting a hotel room, and washing the ganger filth off?"

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It was no coffin motel, but a very decent place—Fighter hadn't even been in a cheap hotel, and stared at all the shiny fittings. The carpet felt rich enough to sleep on, let alone the bed; she was dog tired and aching all over. Aria was still smiling; she insisted that Fighter use the shower first.

Susan had stripped off her armour and soaking clothes, got under the hot water. She was working blood out of her hair, wondering why there was only one bed, when Aria stepped into the shower behind her and took hold of Susan's breasts.

"Mm. It's okay, baby. Drek, human girls have such *curves*. So firm, so strong. My Fighter."

Susan's body locked up, like iron. She couldn't breathe. Aria nibbled at her ear, slid one hand down her stomach.

"No. No..."

"Oh no, your body says yes..." Slim fingers kneaded Susan's chest, "Don't be scared. I'll make your body forget everything those filthy trogs did to it. I helped you kill them, and you said yes, you came back here, you want me. I'll get you so many jobs, my dear, we'll be wonderful together..."

Susan howled. Drove her elbow into Aria's side; the Elf's slim body folded up like a jack-knife.

Adventure of the Cardboard Box

A/N: Drumroll please, and Antumbra Saga by Cirion begins! Fighter's first real Shadowrun, the first mission of the famous module, will take us just about to the end of her beginning. I've adapted to some extent; ironically, Wizard is standing in for an eccentric Dwarf shaman the PC could choose to hire, as an alternative to the Troll heavy, Tua. You can't hire them both because of a messy breakup, or something.

"Real Runners don't need to backstab clients, ever," Susan remembered what Harry had said, "They can close any job, and they close it their way. SINless and free. They don't beat on the weak and they can save anybody. Even save the world!"

Aria Landers, fighting to breathe on the floor. Fighter shut her eyes.

She was resting the front step of the block, with Maria's mother, Ana Ortega. The young Adept was still in her armour. Ana was smoking a roll-up.

"Frag." Ana said, again, "I bet nearly killing your client—"

"—isn't too chill, yeah. I gave back most of her money. It should be okay."

"Chip truth, girl. Are *you* okay?"

"...think so. It was just more awful drek. Whatever comes next, I'll deal."

"Maybe by trusting liars a bit fragging less?" Ana blew out smoke in a sigh, "All I've got to say. You trust your idiot boyfriend, then this knife-eared lesbo. Frag, you even believed in *me*. Isn't there, like, loads of backstabbing and lies in your job? Trust maybe not the best play? I just don't want to be telling Maria you wound up in landfill, chica."

Fighter turned away. She had to be more careful...but she had to trust. Jackson. The baseball Adept. Father. He'd trained her so punishing hard, she'd even thought she wasn't loved...but she'd done those push ups, every one, and he'd said she was a good girl. His daughter would defend the weak and make them strong. She had tried, every day.

Then there had been that messy-haired boy, smile full of hope, who dreamt of Running the Shadows, with her. After the assault, he'd never doubted she'd fight again. He'd fragged a lot up, but he'd saved her. Smiled for her and bled, fought and risked it all.

They'd set up an email dead-drop on Jackson's ancient PC, but he hadn't replied to her last message. If he was dead, she would never know, but he was *not*.

She'd always believe in Harry—he'd believed in her. Believing in *no one but* Harry was the scary, easy thing. She couldn't look a Trog in the face, or hear some ganger laugh in the street, without the stab of rage and fear, and the drek kept coming...but life had never been easy. She would trust until she broke, while she still had trust inside her.

"Sorry to say, Ana..." She heard her own voice shake, bitterly smiled, "I'd give anything to have that idiot back here. I...just want him so fragging bad."

Ana sniffed, and threw an arm round Fighter's sagging back.

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"Probably no need to skip town, just stay out of Bellevue," The Fixer told her, "Might be tough finding work for a bit. Sorry."

He did look sorry. A few days later though, when Fighter returned to the Blunder Inn, the Fixer was smiling so much, her back ominously itched. She still sat down. You couldn't work, if you didn't trust your Fixer.

"Fighter. I'd like you to head to Everett and meet with a friend of mine. A Mister Johnson."

A Johnson. Not a street-level fixer, an agent reporting to the Megacorps direct. A tendril reaching down to the gutter, from the titanic old monsters that sprawled across the planet. Fought for it, drawing more into their grasps, through the silent, deniable assets—the Shadowrunners. Fighter could well imagine how Warrior would have smiled.

Everett was the naval shipyard district. In the last year it had been dolled up on Mafia money, with glittering shops and nightclubs bursting out all over. Antumbra was the newest and biggest megaclub, said to have Corporate backing. Its grand opening, that night, was being rabidly touted as the party of the year.

All far over the heads of most slummers in Redmond, but Fighter had actually heard of it. Years ago, the manager of Antumbra had been a rising singer, dropped out of view overnight. Then shot back to the top, as a producer and club-owner—but Fighter had liked her music. She'd played Kali's first single until neighbours banged on the walls.

It was early evening, but clubbers of all metatypes were already crowding the street outside Antumbra. A wide black edifice, with all the neon in white. Flashing in the rain, as Fighter strode closer, from the empty end of the street.

The Johnson was waiting in an alley, near the club. He was unsettlingly nondescript; a human in a jacket, not a suit. Buzz-cut hair, eyes blue and cold.

"You're Fighter?"

"In the flesh."

"Good," No smile, "I'm Mr Johnson. This is a simple job, definite milk run. It could lead to much more, if you play ball, understand?"

"Yeah. The Fix told me that too." She'd had a long metro ride to conclude; she no longer believed in milk runs.

"I have a package. It must be left in a certain room, on the top floor of Antumbra, tonight. Call it a surprise gift. Call me, as soon as the package is in place, and we'll arrange to meet again for your payment of four thousand nyuyen. The room is marked here."

With a burner PDA, the Johnson pinged the map to Fighter's Comm; she supposed that made hers a burner as well. In his other hand, to her dull shock, was a small cardboard box.

She glanced back at the looming Megaclub, already leaking out beats onto the street. Below the name in neon that was twice her height, a Troll guard with a rifle was waving the punters in.

"Surprise present. No appointment, then?"

"Hack their system and get an appointment. Shoot your way to the top floor, fly up on a dragon, I don't care." It was clear he didn't, "It must be secret, it must be done tonight. Deliver the package, and don't even think about what's in it."

Maybe she could still back out, alive. Alone. A failure.

"I'll need an advance."

As Johnson handed her the money, his eyes said the time to back out was gone; no need for threats. Fighter knew Mr Johnson could have her in five pieces, in Corp vivisection labs across five countries, with a movement of one finger.

"We were told you were a shadowrunner. The only one who'd take this job, anyway. Just get it done."

Shadowrunners could close any job. Every huge, mad, dirty job, they got, and this was simple. Deliver a package, do not ask questions. The box weighed on Fighters hands.

She thought of her father. Protecting the weak. Thought of Harry. Her own way, SINless and free. Why had she ever chosen this life? What was the reason she always looked death in the face?

She walked towards the club. Shoved the box into her tote bag for medkits, after she'd checked what was in it.

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When Ilsa 'Wizard' Tresckow, *B.Mag*, had fled the Allied German States ahead of both hitmen and the public prosecutor, *reinvention* had been the word on her mind. She'd known the word meant more than dying her hair, buying a skin-showing top, or talking until dawn with an Amindian shaman near Wenatchee. The backbone of magic, after all, was the meaning of words. However, it had taken the fight at the docks—specifically, the sickening rush of triumph when she had first boiled a human's flesh from his bones—for her to learn that plain word and raw meaning were not always the same thing.

Gripped by revulsion, vomiting on her knees, as her soul leapt with *joy*, for she was alive...it had been entirely new. Weak stomach notwithstanding, she was stronger for it. Some part of reinvention was reawakening—the greatness of the true self—Nietzsche had been very sound on that. It would be as necessary as survival, if she ever meant to return, restore her name, and grind her calumniators into the dirt.

She had never entered a nightclub, so she would find what meaning there was in that. A Runner she'd worked with, on the NAN dig, had recommended Antumbra. Tua was a simple guard-Troll for hire, with her own shotgun and motorbike, too

easygoing and hearty to realise that Ilsa thought her a bore and a *dummkopf*. Although she *had* flattened the pervert who'd groped the young redhead's tush in the queue.

So far, they had stuck to a table in the bar section. Tua had lain out a regiment of dead beer cans already, and seemed to have barely got started on her drinking. Ilsa sat behind a gin and tonic with a bored expression.

The nightclub answered its purpose as such, at least. Music in various modern genres, at a volume to make the eardrums bleed. Flowing cups of the *gut bier*, indeed slopping from the trays of wait-staff, and stumbling dancers, over the floor. Flailing in the darkness, through a packed and heaving forest of human flesh and strobelight. Grinning and screaming, like a soup of Hogath's horrors, stirred by DJ Oliphant's chromatic thrash.

The giant, shining hologram of a dancer cavorted above the mosh floor. Some excited revellers had thrown off clothes they were unlikely to see again. A headbanging dwarf butted his friend in the groin by mistake; another man punched a guard from sheer high spirits, got thrown out with a broken jaw, and no one stopped the party or noticed at all. Ilsa wondered if the club had put something in the drinks, or if there was mind-bending magic at work. Her hands were certainly prickling, and her teeth on edge—but that might just be the noise. Still, the people-watching was worth the door charge.

The guards with batons and rifles, stood brutishly round the room, or out breaking up the odd knifefight. That suit with a weak goatee, pawing at a waitress. Another waitress, a well-built Chinese girl, who seized the drunk's wrist and told him...wait.

Ilsa adjusted her glasses and sat back. That waitress had not been serving drinks in a halter top, split skirt and fishnets, when they'd last met; she'd been killing with her fists and feet. She was undoubtedly that shadowrunner, Fighter. Who had noticed Ilsa herself, in the same moment.

"Hey, Wiz?" Tua boomed, beside her, "Spotted a hot guy? Or, trouble...?" Her piggy eyes narrowed; even Trolls couldn't survive in the Shadows without a sense for danger.

Ilsa thought about introducing Fighter, once she had told Tua *again* that Wiz was not her chosen street name. However, the young Adept's eyes were fixed on hers, desperately. Hers alone.

"Well, hot guy or trouble? Want you to stay safe, chica."

"Hot waitress actually," Ilsa told the first lie that sprang to mind, "I think I might step away for one moment, and try to seduce her in the restrooms."

"HAH HA! Who'd have thought it?" Tua boisterously shook Ilsa's shoulder, almost pitching her glasses into her glass, "Come back here when you're done, I'll get you any guy in this place! Or any girl! Let's all drink a gallon of something awful and get laid!"

"Yes. Quite." And quite appallingly predictable. This waitress, however, was most definitely something interesting.

Ilsa got up, with another glance at Fighter, straightened her skirt and cloak, and then pushed through the crowd to a restroom. Tua kept knocking them back behind her.

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Ilsa had never conceived of a public restroom with noisy couples in literally every stall, but that was thankfully by the way. Fighter took more than five minutes (Ilsa wondered if she was thinking better of trusting a virtual stranger), but when she came in she was beaming.

"Wiz!" Distressingly, that name seemed to be sticking, "What are you doing here?"

"Having what I believe is known as a 'crap evening', and yourself? Was your Shadowrunning so unsuccessful...?"

"No! This for a job. I have to get to the top floor, but it seems I need *an appointment*. The guards in here, it's like talking to drones!"

"Seduction seemed unlikely to work then?"

"I tried telling them I had a drinks order," Fighter went on, with a quick, savage look, "Then a secret message. Then a mixtape that'd make Kali another ten million, if they gave me five minutes, but no tickee, no laundry—no appointment, slot the drek off!"

"How did you gain employment here in the first place? Your Fixer must have supplied you with references, a false SIN?"

"Uh, no, I just went round to the kitchens, and maybe punched out another jobseeker who was getting violent. This place is way over capacity, the waitstaff

were getting wiped out. I got a two-minute interview, 20 Nuyen for the night and this stupid outfit."

"Impressive. And your plan now is?"

"I told you, I'm stuck. I didn't have a real plan, I just have to get in," Fighter looked at Ilsa directly, hands on hips, "You're smart, you went to college and all that drek. If you've got anything, I'll split the money, twenty percent."

"Heidelberg University did not offer modules in larceny. However, I may be able to think of something."

"Can you at least tell me what this is?" Impatiently, Fighter thrust out her bag, and the cardboard box.

Ilsa looked in the box. The hazard sign, on a small steel canister, stared up at her like a demon's eye. She swallowed ever so slightly.

"Fortunately, I assisted the Bruckner group in their research on magically-enhanced—"

"*Tonight* please, Wiz?"

"Fighter, this appears to be a weaponized nanite swarm. If released, it could kill everyone in this building by molecular disassembly, or possibly everyone on the block."

Storming Antumbra

A drunken Elf stumbled past them, hammered at a toilet stall door. The rational course of getting clear from Fighter, then fleeing Antumbra for her life-Ilsa swiftly rejected. She'd fled her home before, but now she was in control. This was more than a Shadowrun, it was a mystery.

Fighter looked like she had just learnt she carried the plague, instead of a WMD. Then strength rushed back to her face.

"We have to get everyone out!"

"You will cause a stampede," Ilsa raised a hand to stop her, "Or get yourself shot as a terrorist."

"Drek, I *am* a terrorist...I'll murder that Fixer, anyway. He couldn't tell a proper Johnson from some Anarchist, or nut-job, or the fragging Jihadis!"

"That is unlikely. Only a government or Megacorp could field nanoweapons. But why use one, against a mere nightclub?"

"This place hit the bigtime fast with Corp backing; that was the word, anyway." Fighter's voice was slightly calmer, "Would a rival Corp pull this drek—why not just mess with the drinks? Frag, is this thing on a *timer*?"

"I saw no flashing digits," Ilsa felt her mind whirr, like the buzzsaw it was, "Doubtless, your Mr Johnson has a remote trigger. He may intend a bluff only, or a false flag, I don't yet know. However, all nanoweapons have tracking signals, and we can be sure this Johnson also has eyes on us in the club. If you try to raise an alarm, or leave Antumbra with this box, he will most likely know and have you killed."

"I'm not leaving this thing in here, with all these people!" Fighter gripped the box, "I'm not going to run from this either!"

"Then you face a difficult task. Perhaps you should ask for a pay rise?"

Fighter's fist stopped a hair away from her own face in the mirror. She breathed out slowly. Ilsa decided to save the witty remarks until they'd sorted this matter out.

"If the box is left on the top floor," She spoke quickly, "The nanites will take time to disperse downwards. The nightclub may be evacuated. Only guards and staff would be in serious danger."

“I can live with that.” Fighter squared strong shoulders, her face now impassive, “How do we get upstairs?”

“I have an idea for us both. Tua, the troll I arrived with, would be too conspicuous. Though a troll would be of use, if it came to fighting. If I can think of something else...”

“No. Not the troll. Just us.” Fighter gripped Ilsa’s shoulder so fast, it took her breath away, “Let’s do this together.”

“...to save my own life, to put those nanites in the hands of a disposal team, I have every motive to betray you.” Trying to recover the initiative, Ilsa made her voice cool, detached, “May I ask what compelled you to so disturb my plans for the evening? What enables you to trust me?”

“...you were at the docks, that night. We fought together. I ought to trust no one...but we have to trust someone. Not a drunk trog, never the fragging Johnsons, but you...you're, you know, a cool chica, Wiz!”

Seeing this brave young woman smile, and screw up courage—perhaps rang a faint alarm in Ilsa’s mind that it was a more than mental problem they faced. But what she knew, right then, was that they could close any job together, with her brains and perhaps a timely dash of brawn.

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Back in the club, twenty minutes later, Fighter was on the job again. Squeezing her drinks tray through a tangled ruck of clubbers, she stumbled. A glass of Herlig splashed over a suit; very suddenly, she pushed through the crowd and away. The Herlig’s owner started after her, swearing—then he was pulled back by the suit’s owner, teeth flashing with inaudible rage as the music boomed. As a final touch, Fighter stumbled again and fell headlong. Men and women moved to help her, and got caught in the growing fistfight themselves.

Two guards strode towards the brawl, batons ready. Ilsa waited, then moved past them to a wall panel. It felt tenser than she’d imagined, but she had read several books on electronics in her spare time. She cut a single wire, and the latest Glitch Punk track faded to silence and sore ears. Silence quickly broken by a chorus of boos, rising to a dull roar of fury.

Ilsa darted back round the edge of the floor, toward the backstage door. She was almost crushed against a wall, once, but soon faced the uniformed ork doorguard

and his shotgun. She had the bag that hid the nanite box, and their gear, in one hand, and quickly waved Fighter's staff ID with the other.

"Tech support, freelance. Kali brought us in to deal with these faults, before they wreck her opening night and kill Antumbra. I will have to go backstage, to restore the music."

"Got a work order?" The guard grunted.

"This is an emergency." Ilsa's voice remained cool.

Then Fighter hauled herself through the dark sea of bodies, like a swimmer, and pushed a paper into Ilsa's hand. As soon as her partner cut the music, she had rushed ahead of the crowd to the floor manager, sworn like a desperate soldier that she would get the right form to the sound crew, and forced her way back to Ilsa with the form, as the manager vanished beneath a wave of complainants.

"Here," Ilsa presented the work order, "Now, we will both be seeking new jobs tomorrow, unless I get backstage and fix this fault at once. You, girl." She snapped at Fighter, "Show me exactly where the flux capacitors are located, so that I can rewire them immediately."

Furious shouts, and the thump of blows, came from the club behind them. The ork guard shrugged, and waved the two women through, with their bag.

Past the door was a stair to the basement, the sound system—and another stair heading up to the top. Fighter breathed out, as they started to climb.

"Some guys are probably getting killed back there." She muttered.

"You only knocked a person's arm. Those people are...probably...responsible for their actions."

"Right. I mean...we got through like magic. Ha, magic! How...?"

"Present a clear solution, and drop the right names; you learn that in academia. And always have the correct paperwork."

The two young women moved past small glass-walled offices on the top floor. Fighter carefully ducked into an office, and came out in her street armour, with her father's scarf on her neck.

“Not doing rolls and kicks in that stupid skirt, at least...” She slipped on her studded knuckles, checked the throwing knives she had practised a little with, and really hoped she'd have no need to use, “Wiz, what spells have you even got? Firebolt, Heal...hey, can you do Speed of the Hare?”

“That is a shaman's ritual. Mages such as myself draw from the manasphere directly, whilst shamans obtain the aid of animal or elemental spirits, hence Speed of the Hare. However, Mages can learn such rituals if so inclined. Professor White Eagle's early publications on a Unified Magical Theory—”

“Okay, save the rest for later. Now, any unlocking spells? Or do I need to kick this door down?”

Sniffing, Ilsa stepped up to the door ahead. Ran her fingers over the keypad, eyelids flickering.

“There are stronger life Essence traces, on the keys eight, four and zero. If the code is four digits...” She started to test combinations.

“Traces on the keys'?” Fighter shook her head, “It's the essence of life itself, not dandruff! What sort of spell is that?”

“Not even a spell,” Ilsa responded, “One merely perceives, through astral space, the Essence that any living metahuman naturally extrudes,” The door clicked. She strode into the conference room ahead, without looking, “I'm fairly certain even Physical Adepts can work the trick—”

“MORE FANGIRLS!?”

An angry looking dwarf in body armour stamped around the conference table, waving a handgun.

“Look, you psycho stalkers!” The guard began, “Kali is sick of you, and we're sick of dealing with you! I think we'll string up your bodies outside, this time, as a warning—!”

Ilsa did not know what to do, so that was when she threw a firebolt. The dwarf guard fell with a scream, but then three guards burst in, handguns ready.

Fighter instantly shoved Ilsa down, behind a snack table. Bullets whipped past; punched at her chestplate, spun her into a roll. Crouched behind the conference table, she fired bright Ki down her limbs, but these were trained guards, not

gangsters. They were firing and moving round. Then Ilsa gasped out her spell and Fighter moved, fast as a hare.

She leapt onto the table and rolled down its length, smacking a blazing gun away. Bullets cracked the wall, behind. Her fist struck the next guard like a missile, as her feet hit the floor, then she knocked away the third guard's gun and drove in a turning kick to the belly. As that guard curled up, as the guard she'd punched came roaring back up, saved by armour, she jumped. Axed down her elbow into a neck, shot her foot back into a throat. Hit the ground between two expiring bodies.

Then the last guard came from behind. She barely got one hand between his baton-choke and her throat. He was armoured, his footing was firm, he pressed so close into her back, she almost retched...but his training had not prepared him for a Kung Fu mistress, who swung her straight leg right back overhead, into his face. He reeled back, her body dropped to a low stance, her elbow shot up into his chin, he was down. She breathed out, then rushed to help Ilsa up.

“Shaman spell, you said, Wiz?”

“My work in Salish-Shidhe. The Native burial ground,” Ilsa fumbled with her glasses, “I had time to investigate your traditional American magic. That spell is indispensable for support of an Adept, I was told.”

Fighter grasped the Mage's hand, hauled her up. A faint booming seeped through the floor; the club had managed to get its sound fixed. The noise of pounding boots was closer.

“Must be somebody without a gun up here.” Fighter stared at the door straight ahead, “No spies. We can get them to clear the building. Save everyone.”

“Or possibly leave the box, and, I believe you say, ‘Slot and *run*-?’”

“No. We save everybody, we close the job, and we close it our way, now!”

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Past the conference room was a small studio; the footfalls were right outside the far door. Crouching behind a mixing deck, Ilsa recast the weak Speed ritual she'd learned from the Amindian shaman. Fighter knelt by the door, fists up.

The first guard burst in, an ork with a baseball cap and shotgun. Fighter sprang up like a leopard, hammered in a fist to smash a sternum. Spun into a kick that threw

the ork into the guard behind. She darted after them into the next office, finishing the second guard with a chop behind the neck.

To her right, past the tangled, dying guards, the next squad were already charging down between the desks. A gunman, a female ork, a black-hooded security Mage. A troll in uniform. Huge brown forearms, a massive rifle.

Ilsa could hear it thundering closer. She'd watched Fighter beat down every guard, fast as a hare, fearless as a dragon. Why did she look fearful now?

“ON THE FLOOR!” The troll guard bellowed, “Give the frag up, NOW!”

Fighter threw a knife, as she ducked behind a desk. She couldn't miss the troll, but he barely slowed. The enemy Mage threw out his hands, the desk exploded in flames. The man and ork sparkled with guiding magic, as they opened fire. Fighter rolled back into the small studio, trailing blood.

Her Mystic Shield hadn't held. She was burnt, breathing hard on scorched air, as the security charged closer. The Heal spell closed some wounds, not all.

“Any more tricks?” She screamed at Ilsa.

Quickly, the young Mage fixed her mind on rage, passion, *protection*...bars of thin red flame shot up across the door. She grinned as the guards stumbled through, yelling in shock. A Mage always had the answer.

She blasted the enemy Mage with firebolt. Blood sprayed from the ork's jaw, as Fighter pummelled her, but orks of either sex were *tough*. Ilsa's grin vanished. The Fire Wall had barely slowed them down.

Another guard thrust a gun at Fighter's head, from behind—she barely ducked, blocked, drove her fist through the man's throat. As the bloodied ork levelled a shotgun, Ilsa flung another firebolt and finished her. Then the troll charged through the fire wall, and dashed Fighter hard to the floor with his rifle butt.

It sounded like an axe. She flopped over, stared up at the troll. Shook on the ground, like a rabbit. Ilsa stood, at gunpoint, almost too weak with fear to raise her hands.

“*Nicht schiessen!* She made me to—!”

“Too late, Shadowrunner.”

Surrounded by flame and bodies, aiming his rifle with one claw, the troll lifted Fighter by her head. It would be over with one twist, Ilsa knew she was going to

die. She'd never clear her name, her shame would be forever, and she hadn't even begun to fight back...

As Ilsa screamed out her lungs, Fighter drove up a Ki-powered kick from the floor. It cracked the troll's knee, the gun roared at the ceiling. Ilsa hit the deck, blasting out another firebolt.

Bellowing pain, the troll sunk down. Fighter staggered up, spun, and struck with her palm. Threw back the Troll's head, *crack*. Fell to one knee, let out a breath like a joyful sob.

She needed both a Heal and a medkit. She might not have heard Ilsa's surrender, that burned in the Mage's stomach like acid—and said nothing anyway. She only held the slighter girl with all her strength, tight as a lover. Their breaths came harsh and hard.

Then she clasped Ilsa's hand once more and stood, marched onwards. Ilsa, shaking under the fact that she was alive when she should have died, assumed she could only follow because she'd gone crazy too.

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Kali's office was the next room, bedecked with plasma screens and marble dragons—bigger than Fighter's old flat. The Caucasian woman at the heaped, solitary desk still had the leathers and multi-dyed hair of a rockstar, but the eyes of a Corp predator. A sharks that clung to the limbs and shadows of the great monsters, fighting and bleeding for the chance to be big.

More footfalls from the door behind her. Ilsa raised a burning hand.

“No guards.” Her voice was wilder than she liked, “We must talk, now!”

“Whatever your demands are,” The executive's eyes narrowed, “I will give you nothing.”

With a single stagger, Fighter leaned into the desk, and put down the box.

“Miss Kali, we're not terrorists. You're in great danger, but we are here to help. I was hired to plant this, this—”

“—box of weaponised nanites.” Ilsa supplied, clawing back some dignity and control.

“–yes, that, but I didn’t know. You have to make your guards get everyone out the building.”

“Must I? You’ve *killed* half my guards–”

“–if you hadn’t order them to shoot on sight,” Ilsa cut in, “This senseless violence might have been avoided. Can you give us some clue, at least, as to why your enemies would resort to this?”

“No. It’s insane.” Kali sat back, visibly stunned, “Even a rival club, Inferno or Penumbra, wouldn’t send more than a bomb, or...”

“What about this location? Why have my teeth been on edge, my fingers pricking, since I entered this madhouse? Why do your patrons seem crazed with passion and fury?”

“Wiz,” Fighter clenched her teeth, “It’s a *nightclub!*”

“Not just a nightclub,” Kali’s voice was very quiet, “I sunk all I had in this place, Mitsuhama and the Mob put in ten times that much. It had to be the hottest club in Seattle, the best. They insisted I build up this site, with the basement going down to those weird caverns. There were rumours, disappearances, crazy drek– something down there make people up here lose control. I swore I’d do anything, to bring this club to the top–”

“–even pairing a nexus of human passion with what could be a Site of Power? A confluence of leylines, enshrined and refined in the Fourth Age? *Ach, Scheisse!* At any moment a Horror could be called up, to devour this entire city in a manner unspeakable–”

“Great. Just great!” Fighter’s voice rose to a shout, “We can deal with that later! *What about these nanites?*”

Faint music still thumped up from the club in the silence. The guards poised beyond the door exchanged blank stares. Kali was first to speak.

“Give me the box. I can get a specialist team here from Mitsuhama in minutes. No need to stop the party, there have been too many setbacks for Antumbra’s opening night already. As for you two shadowrunners...there is a lift in the next room, down to the basement. I’ll pay you 10,000 Nuyen to sort out this Power Site. You could even refine, or control it, isn’t that possible?”

“Theoretically–”

“Chill! If we can just tame that power, this club will be novahot. Hottest in the world!” Rising in excitement, Kali flashed an incredibly white smile, “You two could even sing there!”

“*Wie bitte?*”

“Really. You’ve both got the looks, strong voices, and *definitely* the street cred. The punters all love that outlaw hero shtick. You could be megastars, Instead of rotting in jail or killing for money. One way or another, plenty of Runners cash in. I’ll have contracts ready, by the time you get back.”

“I’m not a singer.” Fighter cut in, “I’m a Shadowrunner. Get everyone out the building.”

“Look, I’ll call Mitsuhama—”

“No!” Fighter’s hand struck down between Kali and the phone, “You want to hush this up, for your grand opening. You want them all to keep dancing down there, with this thing up here! Evacuate them, now!”

“Fighter—” Ilsa tried.

“Let me call Mitsuhama,” Kali had stopped smiling, “You’re here to help, you say? You killed my people, you’re putting the lives of hundreds at risk, and you don’t even know *why!*”

Then Fighter bowed her head, upholding herself on the desk. Her heart groaned from the hours she’d carried the box, and all those lives. Her flesh shook and moaned, with the bullet-bruises, the burns, and every vile thing that had been done to it. Kali sighed.

“How old are you, girl, *nineteen?* Why keep doing this? You need to—”

“—I need to do my job. My way. Not yours, not the Johnson’s. My own. I’m a Runner, I’m a killer, but you can’t buy me with a record deal. I did not fight my way up here just to submit! We can save all those people, Kali. For the last time—”

“NO!” Kali’s voice still had the power of a true rock star, “I’ve waited years for my comeback! No one, nothing is going to ruin my opening night, you selfish fragger! SECURITY!”

The guard burst in behind Kali, as she dropped and ran. Fighter dived behind the desk, and Ilsa huddled behind a statue. There was another troll, another Mage. Two gunmen, aiming.

Ilsa snapped her fingers; the Haste spell she'd held ready flew to Fighter. The Adept dashed low around the desk, a gout of fire burst on her shield of Ki. The Mage flew back, blood pouring from his mouth.

With a roar, the troll struck at Fighter with claws, fangs and rifle. The tip of the weapon slashed her face. She ducked back. Kicked the gun aside. Punched through its nose, and grinned.

She would never stop fighting. This was where she belonged. She would go anywhere, give up anything, to be a woman who was not weak.

Aiming carefully, Ilsa burnt out the troll's brains. This was where she belonged too, and Harry. They were the cat-slaying rats, the tiny stones in the world's machine, the SINless and free.

Fighter kicked another man to the floor. The last guard of all prudently fell to his knees on the plush carpet. Kali had already vanished, with remarkable speed, behind the steel door of a panic room.

"Please! I have a family!"

Fighter glanced at the other gunman, who she'd killed. Even as the fire drained from her spirit, she put her fists on her hips and smiled gently.

"Can *you* get this building evacuated? Unless you'd like to stay here, with the nanites?"

The guard scrambled for his comm, and made the call. Fighter looked down from Kali's full-wall office window, as figures trickled out onto the grey street. She told the guard to be careful, and he ran.

She also watched from the window as ranks of Lone Star cruisers howling in to surround the building. Presumably Kali's panic room had a phone. Still, the lines of black roaches circling Antumbra got all the revellers out even more quickly.

"We should lie down," Ilsa mentioned, as she hauled a couch to block the door, "In case of snipers."

It was little more than an hour until dawn. Fighter flopped backwards onto the plush carpet, then raised her comm-link.

"Mr Johnson? Your box is in place. If it happens to be, oh, a bomb or something, could you please wait until we've left the building?"

"*Sehr gut*," Ilsa flopped to the ground beside her, "Now how the frag do you propose that we ever leave this building?"

Dark Side of the Moon

It was Mr Johnson who proposed a ‘mutually profitable solution’, over the Comm-link, to the problem of the Runners exiting Antumbra before a Lone Star breach team blew them away.

“...a lift to the basements. They go down to a system of caves, it seems, which may well connect to the sewers. Take note of anything, ah, *noteable*, down there and make certain the area is entirely safe. I may even pay a bonus, or at least reconsider cutting your fee for late delivery.”

“You always knew what was there, did you not?” Ilsa butted in on the Comm-call, “A Site of Power, truly?”

“Who *is* this?”

“Hired help,” Fighter shoved Ilsa away, “Look, what’s down there? If it’s this Horror that could eat the city, you can both—”

“A possibility, one chance in a hundred!” Ilsa protested, “Better chance than the police, ah, ‘po-po’, as you say, with their assault drones and machine guns!”

“Your ‘hired help’ seems to have grasped the situation,” Johnson observed, before ringing off, “See you at Romero’s Diner, Gideon Street. Think of the money.”

Fighter couldn't hear the Lone Star rotor-drones, hovering closer to the window, because they made no noise. But she could sense them, and their machine guns. Ilsa was crawling over the carpet towards the lift; whatever a Site of Power was, it looked like she'd have crawled over hot coals. Fighter granted herself a moment of exhaustion, then followed.

The lift door hissed shut, as the spotlight of the first hover drone filled the office. Lit up the bodies of the guards, and the plain cardboard box sat upon Kali's desk.

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“So then, Wiz,” Fighter grouched at Ilsa, leant on the wall of the descending lift, “I’m sure you can’t wait to tell me what this was *really* about.”

“*Obviously*, your Johnson never wanted the nanites released.” The Mage spoke fast and impatiently, a little flushed, “He wanted them found. There will be a military nano-hazard cordon around Antumbra by midday; a sharp fall in local property

value. I imagine, as your UCAS army thoroughly search this place for more WMDs, a unit in our employer's pay will secure something of interest in the basement. After we, of course, have made certain of their safety. ”

“Drek...yeah.” Fighter's head drooped, “The army's all on Corp payrolls, like everything else. So, that's it.”

She pictured some hundredth-floor boardroom in the sky, as the lift sank them deeper under the earth. Placid *saraimen* arranging their silent chess game. Johnsons and Runners, nightclubs and armies. Pieces, that never saw their destroyers.

“You must be relieved,” Ilsa's voice had an edge, “That no lives were in real danger, apart from ours.”

“Yeah, and the guards we killed. And it almost felt good, thinking we'd saved some guys for real. We probably won't even get to save Seattle from some filthy great sewer-Horror.”

“You would really prefer...?”

“My man would've liked it. Oh, he'd have smiled...” Fighter looked up, grinning. “Let's just save ourselves, Wiz. Get through alive, and get paid.”

“Quite the attractive proposal.”

Ilsa's mouth twitched. Then the lift stopped, and opened right onto the caves.

The air seemed full of static, or living mist. Even Fighter felt her teeth ache and skin writhe. Ilsa looked as if she might swoon. The Mage shut her eyes, stared into the Astral. The darkness was full of stars, drifting and gathering ahead.

Even in the material world, a faint glow from the hewn, reddish walls relieved the tunnel's darkness. The pressure of rock on every side, in the gloom, still gripped Fighter's breath and shook her knees.

Always (she hated it, didn't know why) darkness in enclosed spaces gave her the screaming awfuls. She could hardly move, as if claws still held her. Down in the dirt, shaking...would it ever end, it would *never* end...

“A Site of Power, *Ein Grosser Sitz*, unclaimed!” Ilsa whispered, “Of course, a Megacorp would spent lives for this...I might have lived and died, and seen nothing so magnificent”

“...is that right? Okay. Glad for you, Wiz.” Fighter smiled at her bravely. She could see the young Mage wasn't shaking wholly from excitement, or cold. She

hugged Ilsa's bare shoulder, felt better herself. The Mage looked taken aback, moved slightly away.

"The Mages of the Fourth Age marked out and made stable these sites," She recounted, "Protecting them with riddles and guardian spirits, according to the best sources. The riddles should be *mache*, window dressing only, As for the spirits. we should talk, not fight."

"I'll leave that to you, then. I guess your shaman chummers taught you...?"

"I can speak with spirits, or call them. Not bind them, but I believe the guardians should let us pass through. They may even aid us...other magical creatures will have been drawn to this Site. I cannot say what. *Das ist die frange*, the problem..."

Fighter stared down the tunnel. Her father had told her about the hideous *Ou Wu*, Fox Spirits. The Yama Kings. But it fell on her like a sheet of ice. after all the horrors she'd endured-anything in a world of darkness and monsters could be waiting ahead. Ready or not...she didn't even *know* what they could do to her. But they both knew what Lone Star did to female Shadowrunners.

Fighter hugged Ilsa again; she didn't pull away. Shivering, in the shoulderless top and skirt she'd worn to go out to a nightclub, the slimmer girl moved along just behind the Adept, both of their nerves' on a razorwire edge.

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The floor was damp, and sour-smelling; this was a good sign, Ilsa mentioned, of some connection to the sewers. She remembered, rather than mentioned, the magical animals and test subjects that were supposed to lurk in the Heidelberg sewers, with the ghouls. Wretched survivors of the Krieger Strain, the plague that had once killed a quarter of the world, cursed with hunger for human flesh.

The tunnel still ended in shadow. They edged further on. It was the snarl that suddenly terrified, from the darkness, before a huge canine shape galloped down the tunnel at them.

Fighter loved dogs, but she knew about mad, and feral. The hellhound might have been a feral slum dog, before magic made its face a skull, its eyes fire. Her kick broke the hound's head on the wall.

Two more hellhounds raced up after it. Ilsa deployed her weak fire wall, stopping their charge. She blasted one, Fighter put down the other.

Another growl from ahead. Both of them advanced quickly, better to see what they faced—

The cavern ahead held a pillar that *sang* with magic, an iron gate, and a small, stinking pool. Sliding from the pool was a thing that could have been one the famous Seattle sewer alligators, generations ago. Now it was a scaly monster the size of a horse, its eyes were bulbous, *yellow*—

Ilsa hid her eyes. Fighter stared back at the basilisk, and did not move.

She could not move, or scream. Invisible claws held her, burning yellow eyes. Ilsa's blind firebolt hit the wall behind. Its belly scraped on stone, closer, strings of drool from its fangs. Its growl was laughter, it would touch her flesh and *her mind would break...*

Ilsa's cry was like death-rattles and vomit, then something hideous erupted from the pillar. A cloud of corpses; three rings of finger-length fangs within its maw. The basilisk's head whipped toward the new threat, and Fighter's scream was released.

Eyes shut, crying out with every punch, she smashed the basilisk's skull. Then pulled its foreclaw out of her leg. Thrust fists that shook like reeds at the floating Abomination.

"I...can actually control it," Ilsa gasped, sweating, "For at least another—"

"SEND IT BACK TO HELL, RIGHT NOW!"

Ilsa made a gesture; the Abomination dissolved in a splatter of noxious blood. As she fell against the wall, Fighter limped quickly to her side.

"I almost killed us both. The power here, the *spirits*...within minutes, it would have broken from my control. Torn us to shreds!"

"You saved me from that, Wiz. *Thank you*. Again...college girl always pulls something out of the hat!"

"Do not make light of this," Ilsa pushed Fighter's hand away, "Students of magic die—I've seen them die—from attempting magic for which they are not ready. I was insane to use the power here, any Mage would long to, but *I am not such a fool...*"

"Yeah, I get it...but messy, crazy, stupid, we've got to do anything that means we're not dead. That's Running. That's even staying alive in the Barrens."

“It wasn’t Heidelberg. Until my supervisor ignored a simple precaution, and a Hellmouth opened up in the old library. Three dead students. One on a scholarship from Saeder-Krupp...and on the risk assessment, my name.”

“...the fraggers set you up? That’s why...?”

“I am here, right now, yes. Now you know, it seems.” Ilsa stood up, bosom heaving. She huffed, and visibly came to herself, “They disgraced me. One day, they will regret it.”

Fighter thought of Ilsa facing the basilisk, blind. She smiled to think—this girl’s pride could likely bounce her back up against anything. Once Ilsa had Healed her leg, they moved on.

Sheer weight of iron spoke of the gate’s incredible age; it was completely unruined. Two statues of angels with stone lecterns stood either side, facing outwards.

“That pillar draws on the leyline grid that surrounds the Site of Power,” Ilsa’s voice was reverent, her face flushed with excitement, “The centre will be through here. The statues...should be facing the lecterns. A Fourth Age Summoner would have called up an earth spirit to move them, however...”

“What? *Oh*, right, the heavy stuff,” Fighter rubbed her hands. Her muscles stood out, as she heaved a statue round. “Hey...ugh...what can you do with this Power Site thing anyway?”

“The applications are potentially endless. In theoretical magic alone—”

“Ah, changing the subject. Did you ever have a *guy* you liked?”

Ilsa glared at Fighter for a moment, then smirked when the Adept stuck her tongue out.

“It could have made Antumbra the most successful nightclub in Seattle, by maddening the patrons,” She mused, “It could be put to far, far worse uses...”

“Ugh. If it’s anything too bad...another Corp might pay us to steal it back?”

Fighter shifted the last statue. The gate creaked open, and they walked through together.

The cavern past the gate was much bigger, and dark, the mystic glow patchy or absent in the high space. The raw mana in the air, however, was a tangible pressure on the skin. By instinct, the Runners edged forward in silence, so they saw the pale figure crouched on the floor before they fell over him.

“Cold. So cold...”

“Hey, pal.” Fighter shielded Ilsa with her arm, edged closer, “What are you doing here?”

“Near the fire. Fire is warm.” It raised its face. Half of a face, “Your flesh looks warm...”

As Ilsa blasted the ghoul, then flung a firebolt again, a host of figures filled the cavern. Rising from starvation torpor, like the dead from their graves. Bloody sores on white skin, teeth glaring from rotten cheeks.

Ilsa pulled Fighter back to the entrance; where the path narrowed, she threw out a wall of flames. The ghouls loped through it, demonic in the firelight, reaching for flesh.

“*Don't let them bite!* Not even scratch!”

Fighter grimly struck out with her feet. She sent three ghouls back with a sweeping kick, Ilsa blasted one. Another seized her foot. She twisted, lashed the foot up, the jaw went *crunch*. They died, but their rotten frames were unfeeling, tough as orks. A claw on her arm; she wrenched away, kicked it back for Ilsa's firebolt to take down. One clawed at her side; her knee almost broke it in half.

Two more lunging at her face, too many. At her back, Ilsa coolly flung another firebolt, glasses flashing in the firelight, like an evil-smiting Mage of legend.

Another stumbled from the flames, shaking its head like a dog. Crying out as she knocked two more ghouls down, Fighter lunged and kicked it back through the fire-wall. She took down three more ghouls too cowed by the charge through fire to have any defence, and then she heard the scream.

One ghoul smoked at Ilsa's feet. The other was gripping her. Blood ran down her chest. She tried to push it off, it dashed her head against the wall. Bit at her bare shoulder and neck like a wolf, clawing her breast in a vile parody of viler instinct.

Ilsa screamed again, as Fighter chopped the ghoul's neck. Both of them were screaming. Fighter didn't feel the claws that raked her own arm. She turned, another gaping jaw, black eyes inches away, its breath like the grave...she moved in a nightmare. Her uppercut smashed into the monster's jaw and threw it back. She

kicked the last ghoul to death, then she fell down. She would have cried Ilsa's name, but 'Wizard' was the only name she'd known.

Spirits of Earth and Air

Sprites of earth and air,

Fiends of flame and fire,

Demon souls, appear in shoals,

This dreaded deed inspire...

-The Sorcerer, Gilbert and Sullivan

Ilsa's eyeglasses were smashed. They had two medkits left—Fighter closed the Mage's wounds with one, and saved the other. They had no Krieger Strain antivirus. No Comm signal to summon DocWagon, underground.

“An hour, perhaps two,” Ilsa’s eyes stared at nothing. Blood cooled in her hair, “Then the coma, the end. Most of them cannot speak. An animal, my mind, gone...”

“Let’s move then.”

“No.” Ilsa tried to push her back, saw her fingers grey already at the tips, “Never a chance, this was insane. I should have planned our escape, I was a fool. Valedictorian! Wizard of the age, Shadowrunner! Fool.”

“Both of us. We’ll have a better plan next time.” Fighter placed the Mage’s limp arm on her shoulder. Hauled her up, trudged on.

“Fool. Fool,” Ilsa moaned, “*Bitte kameradin*, let us face the end with our pride! While I still can, your knife...let us end this all. *Bitte!* please—!”

“NO! NO! NEVER SAY THAT AGAIN!”

Fighter couldn’t slow her breaths. Stumbled, against Ilsa’s weight, she hadn’t protected her—she was weak. So helpless she was naked, weak as rags. A little girl, alone. With her silly dreams. She would walk into the monsters’ arms, waiting ahead—they would crush her strength, strip her flesh away, laugh at her tears. Laugh as the friends she’d failed wept. She’d never see them, never, never break free...

Her father. His strength. Ana, Maria, their smiles. Warrior. Her love and best friend, standing through gutshot pain that night, to save her everything. Ilsa. The friend she held, would fight out her life to save. She was Susan Lei, Fighter. Her heart cried out to see them all smile again, with no shame. No more despair.

“Saving you. Not giving up.”

“*Schiess*, it hurts. *Bitte*...”

“Know it hurts. Don’t give up. Never leave you again, we will never give up.”

Gripping Ilsa’s bloodied side, she almost wrestled the Mage onward, into the darkness.

There was another gate. Six holes in the wall, faces of the six metatypes carved on blocks. Fighter placed the human block; a jolt of energy scorched her. She hit the wall and cursed.

“There were elves in the Fourth Age.” Ilsa croaked. Fighter pushed her back from the trapped puzzle. Ilsa told her the order—Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, Trolls, Humans—and the gate swung back with a burst of heat.

“Where would we be without you? Just, this one time, stay back. You’ll survive, we both will, somehow...”

Behind them, the gate creaked shut.

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The heat grew stronger, as they approached; more than mana, almost raw essence of life. Weak as Ilsa was, Fighter saw her straighten and move faster, desperate to see and know before her mind’s decay.

The air was like synthol; no question how Antumbra had made money. This close, Fighter felt suddenly that she could run ten miles, battle an army. Kiss her Warrior like a TriD star, if he’d been there for her, one last time...though she was truly glad he wasn’t there, and about to die like them.

A cavern, a vast pit. Four pillars around the walls, four bridges to a rock spire in the centre. A figure on each bridge—women formed from cloud and lightning. Twisting and dancing forever, with a noise like wind, as the fire elemental burned in the centre above.

Horns blazing above a coal-dark face. Wiry limbs like a squatting demon. Ribbons of fire glared through magma skin. Its voice, the ash of a thousand forests on the wind.

“Who dares disturb my domain?”

“A free spirit, drawn here, to the passions of the nightclub—ah, *schiesse!*” Ilsa hissed, “The Site, the guardian spirits, it has control. We cannot fight it!”

As foot-long slits of flame rested on Fighter’s cold brow, one air spirit twirled a little faster. A whip of flame lashed out, and the dancers fell back in step.

“Well? I command you, speak!”

“W-we dare.” Fighter spoke up, “If you’d allow us, to pass—”

“Impudence! I brooded over the camp-fire of your first fathers, I will be alive when the last star goes out! The insect passions of your pitiful revels called me to this pallid circle of light, from a universe of inferno. I have ‘Antumbra’, and I will hold it all. I am the fire that drives, all things within my domain move at the will of Torphet! From your little house of music and hunger, my kingdom will spread—!”

Fighter balled her fists, inhaled.

“Is there a camera in here? Is this a fragging joke?”

Torphet drew in a backdraft breath.

“YOU DARE—?”

“Yes we dare, and who even talks like that? Your kingdom will spread? There are drugs, machines and lawyers up there, that will buy your soul and kill your heart. Megacorps that kill thousands each day, don’t even notice! The smallest slum child that could grow up to be anyone means more than your eternal stupidity, and I beat worse monsters than you on my first shadowrun!”

“So then,” Ilsa slumped against the wall, palm to her face, “We will die with our pride.”

“YOUR SOUL WILL BURN!” Torphet rose to the roof, hands blazing. *“DESTROY HER, MY SLAVES!”*

As the Adept had hoped, all Torphet’s wrath was on her. As Ilsa dropped behind a boulder, pale and wracked, Fighter dodged a column of flame. The rock smoked; her Mystic Shield would clearly do nothing. Between the wind dancers’ hands, lightning flashed.

“The four pillars, around the room!” She heard Ilsa shout, “Break—!”

She ran without hearing the rest. Another gout of fire. She rolled beneath, smoking and scorched, but came up. Inhaled. Smashed a side-kick through the first pillar.

Bonds broken, one guardian air spirit turned on Torphet, growling like thunder. Two still-bound spirits wrestled the turncoat down. The fire elemental and the last spirit raised their claws at Fighter again, hissing in rage.

The second pillar was far—she still ran. As the baseball Adept had taught, she poured down her Ki to her legs, where it settled like a spring. Then she dashed for the pillar through fire and lightning, with all her superhuman speed and her soul’s strength. Broke it in two.

Her back was burned, stank. She hadn’t felt it, couldn’t feel it yet. A second air spirit turned on its captive sisters. Another blasted her with wind, slashed her flesh, threw her down. She rolled. Lightning blazed past, then Torphet’s firestream scorched her leg like a branch. She came up, fell again with a groan, tumbled forward. Dashed for the pillar, through a fog of pain.

One blow was still enough—she’d broke her first brick when she was eight. As the freed air spirits pelted him with lightning, Torphet blasted one to vapour, blazing with wrath. Fighter saw a thousand eyes in his fire. Clubbers and ghouls, executives and gangers, mad hunger to devour and possess.

She dropped down, fumbled with a medkit. A windblast scattered it in the dirt. She had to get up, now, as Torphet raised a fireball high, flung it down where she lay on the ground.

Then Ilsa cried out in a voice like breaking rocks. As she stood up, something black and heavy stood above her; her eyes were living emeralds. She waved her hand, summoned shields of magic. The sheer heat was punishing as the fireball burst, but Fighter stood again, flesh knitting on her leg. With another gesture, Ilsa smashed the last pillar to atoms. Torphet screamed like a skyscraper falling, threw an inferno at Ilsa, but apart from the shield her skin was craggy rock now. Her clothes fluttered and charred but she stood, her resolution more beautiful than her body.

“YOU CANNOT KILL ME! YOU WILL BURN FOR EVERMORE, I WILL HAVE MY REVENGE—!”

As the air spirits threw wind and lightning, Fighter charged at the fire elemental down the bridge. The heat dizzied her stumbling mind, the fire would burn off her arm—she gritted her teeth. Dropped into stance. Punched out at the monster, an inch

from the flame. A fist of pure Ki leapt from her hand. With the lightning, it threw the Elemental out from the physical world.

As the earth spirit Ilsa had bound with her little strength, for a minute, sunk back into the ground. Flinging down the young Mage with skull-cracking force.

Burnt and almost insensible, Fighter slumped down. The air spirits whispered cool breezes through her hair, but she understood nothing.

As the dancers drifted away to another tunnel, following the call of open skies, she moved. Gathered the medkit, though it did nothing for Ilsa see could see—her face didn't look human, she felt like a sack of grinding pieces as Fighter lifted her up. She still gripped the Mage and trudged on, after the spirits. The Site of Power thrummed behind her, empty and unguarded.

After five minutes, she hit the sewers. After ten more, she was climbing up from a manhole into a cloudy dawn, already reaching for her comm. Eight minutes later, a white armoured van screeched into the curb. An ork leant out with a gun holstered under his medical coat.

“Ordered a Docwagon, Chica? Looks like you need it!”

“Not me. Friend. Down there. Bring her out. Save her, please...”

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After the Docwagon team had hauled Ilsa out of the sewer, popped out the required anti-virus for them both, and assured Fighter she would be up again in maybe a fortnight (“Could've been a week, if you'd only gone for our Platinum contract!”), she limped to Romero's Diner, to see Mr Johnson about their money. The news on the café Tri-D was about nothing but the former Antumbra nightclub. Deaths and injuries in the opening night riot, then the nanoweapon. The Lone Star cordon had already switched out for camo-armoured marines and yellow tape.

Kali had already fled the country. Neither her mob nor Corp backers would be seeking her to give a severe verbal warning. Fighter learnt, a week later, that the former nightclub's site had been snapped up by a rumoured front-company for Aztechnology.

“I'm glad to see you, Fighter,” Mr Johnson sipped his coffee; she ignored his gesture to sit, “Your work to secure the site of interest was more than satisfactory.”

“What are you going to do with it?” She had little else to say.

“Not my department. Set up a research lab, I imagine. Our job is Not Asking Questions.”

“And taking the money?”

Mr Johnson finally cracked a smile. Fighter stared back grimly, and took the credstick. Far from being cut, it more than she'd expected.

“You should consider getting a better Fixer. There are some smart operators at the Green Dragon bar, or the Seamstress' Union in Touristville. I'll mention your name in both places.”

It wasn't a rush of triumph that made all the blood and pain alright. Nothing would ever make up for the sight of Ilsa's face—but it was something. She had closed a real shadowrun, a Johnson was more than satisfied. She had what it took, though it had taken everything. She was on her way up. Going somewhere.

She went to Ilsa's bedside, in the black market clinic disguised as a garage. She was holding her hand three days later, when the wizard opened green eyes again, and it was very nearly worth it.

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After a week of laying low, she went back to her old neighbourhood. It had always been plain and dirty but after the horrors beneath Antumbra, perhaps it seemed even plainer. She felt the eyes of huddled gang lookouts and shadowy loafers a little more keenly, again. She'd known—after that night almost three months ago, she had known—how the plain world was earthquake country. An instant shift, the slide into horror and loss; and you never, ever got how deep the horror could go.

It was the people she came back for; she hugged Ana, lifted Maria into the air, told them thanks. They smiled like before, but they didn't talk for long.

People watched her at the fish market. Children smiled from a distance. Everyone was careful, no one laughed.

“They know you're a Runner,” Jackson told her, when she asked, “They don't know, or even think, that you're the specific fragger who dropped a nanoweapon of mass destruction in a packed nightclub, for money...but folk sort of remembered what Runners do, when that story broke.”

“Lone Star been around?” Fighter knelt to pet Jackson’s big old dog.

“Nah. This time, your bosses remembered to pay them off right.”

“What about Warrior? Harry? Has he—?”

“Changing the subject, Schoolmarm, how’d your first proper Run go? Looks like you went through hell.”

“We went through hell. Both of us almost died,” Her head was bowed, her voice harsh, “We got the job done. That’s what Shadowrunners do. I’m a Shadowrunner. Nothing else.”

She glanced up, at the civilians with faded clothes and bitter laughter, moving through the market and the streets. There was a little fear of her, but there was more respect. She killed for money, threw everything into chaos. She had saved her friend, she would never stop fighting. No one would ever say she was weak.

“Yeah, sure. Not asking how you got the money, but any thoughts on spending?”

“Information.”

“I’d go with security,” The dwarf tipped back the synthol can in his hand, “Docwagon, a proper safehouse. Protection. One step in the shadows, you get fraggers back from behind. Itching to give you what you deserve.”

“I didn’t deserve this. No one does. If killing and taking back are the only way, it’s better than waiting in a corner to die.”

“Yeah.” Jackson crushed the can in one fist, “See you in hell, Fighter. See you in hell!”

Ain't no ten commandments

Ship me somewhere east of Suez,

Where the best is like the worst.

Where there ain't no Ten Commandments,

Where a man can raise a thirst.

-Mandalay, Kipling

If the Corps took one thing more seriously than loyalty, it was bright sparks on the cutting edge; those irreplaceable talents of research and business who made certain of their market share going up like the tower of Babel. Top human resources had unlimited funding and expenses, well-armed security details, and the knowledge that their employers would see them dead rather than working for a corporate rival.

Which all made work for the Shadowrunner to do. Sometimes the Megacorps sponsored a kidnapping, sometimes the Veeps themselves paid for a defection. Harry Percy Fawkes, Warrior, still liked to think of the job as saving a princess from a tower.

The last guard was martial arts trained; he swiped Warrior's legs out, raced for the alarm. Owens, the team shaman, stood in his way, off-balance—but Warrior palmed his Browning and shot the guard from the floor.

"Close one, rookie." Owens quipped, lowering tattooed hands, "You can take a few blows, at least."

"Got used to it, back home." The elf shaman scoffed, but pulled him up.

After the team's first job in Hong Kong, when Warrior had gone loud too early and turned a milk run into a bloodbath, Owens had wanted him out. Runners needed a lick of brains to go with their courage, he'd said—though Warrior had been nothing but terrified on every Run since his first. He could only fight with his every atom, for his team, because he could not see again what he saw in all his nightmares.

He'd held his ground. He'd fragged up, he wouldn't next time. Alison Douglas, the team's boss-lady, had settled it with her maxim that Runners couldn't live long without brains, but couldn't Run at all without; 'Drekking goots, that ye can't get in six-packs from nae drekking *Stoofers Stack*, ye ken?'

Now they'd reached the top floor of the Mandarin hotel, Lantau island, Hong Kong, passing the lobby guards in stolen uniforms. Stepping over the floor guards they'd taken out, the team sealed the fire-escape doors and service stairs. The decker, Fyrefox, had jacked in and frozen the lifts before the shooting finished. Roller would be bringing up a Corp-leased rotorcraft for their exit.

Dr Kaori Tanaka, the wunderkind of Renraku's marketing division, was the target. On Lantau one week for a conference; she was in room 498 ahead. They'd pulled a few small jobs since landing in Hong Kong, one biggish one without Warrior. This was his first top billing.

"Och, they locked her in!" Douglas, a chromed dwarf from Clydesprawl, kicked at the offending portal, "Security door tae; place must see a good many Corp bigwigs. Get yon open, Foxy. Haud on in there, doctor, we'll get ye oot."

Fyrefox, the team grandad at thirty-six, twitched and nodded, staring off behind his goggles into cyberspace. Warrior pictured him blasting through firewalls and hunter-killer programs, down the corridor to Tanaka's room and its computerised lock. In case the decker hit Black ICE and started bleeding brain, Owens and Douglas were watching him. Still twitchy from the tab of Jazz he'd dropped, Warrior was glancing away at the lift—as the doors jerked open.

He shouted, hit the deck as an SMG sprayed the hallway. The doors were forced back. The guards in red, who had rappelled their way up the lift shaft, stepped out.

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Full-body armour in red. Stone-calm eyes, all Japanese. Two with SCK sub-machine guns, two katana shining in the soft orange light. One woman, a miko shaman. Renraku Samurai, crack troops. Harry had heard the stories.

His new sword shook once as he thrust it out, then steadied. A *gaijin* in a headband, with a katana—the Samurais' mouths twitched. He was grinning back, himself, in shock and triumph.

"Come on!" Douglas roared, "Ye banzai bastards!"

A firestorm from her smartlink rifle stopped a swordsman. Then bullets hammered her dermal armour, knocked her back behind the table and chairs in the wide hall. The gunners and the miko reeled back, as Owens exploded a ball lightning; her gathering wind spirit howled off through the ceiling.

And Warrior, with a wide open hall and a samurai to duel, dashed in. Charging without fear, right where he belonged.

One mighty blow hammered his sword down, but he darted back. Threw up a block, slashed back and struck again. Vat-grown muscles, wired nerves; the samurai moved with the power of a deadly machine. While the Ki flared through Warrior's limbs, shot up his striking speed, as the Jazz lit up his brain.

His arm was cut. He'd trained, Susan had trained him hard, but the samurai had trained longer. But he was faster. He cried out, struck again in a frenzy. Magic from both shamans flashed around; swords clashed almost continually in a steel scream.

As Warrior fell back, Douglas flung the hall table at his enemy with one cyberarm. The samurai halved it with one blow—behind it, Warrior darted in. A pommel-thrust at the windpipe, samurai down. He dashed on, at the gunners—with their armour they were back up. Firing at Douglas—but Warrior flew at them like a lightning bolt on drugs and magic; they fell back. He chopped one through the neck. The miko threw acid into his Mystic Shield. Douglas slumped in a pool of blood, but she was still firing.

The last gunman narrowed his eyes, fired. Bullets ripped apart Warrior's arm as he staggered back—and he was dropped down from the Jazz. Dropping his sword, as he fell to one knee. Fyrefox the decker sat up, firing his heavy Ares handgun—the door to the target clicked open behind them. The gunman took cover, as Dr Tanaka stumbled out. A surprisingly young woman, long black hair.

The light of their rotorcraft, their exit, blazed from the window behind them. Their pilot shot out the window with its mounted gun; the Runners clung to walls in the rush of wind. Like a mad bird with sheet-metal feathers and rotors tipping its wings, the Raptor backed into the skyscraper, tilting its tail up, until it could drop the back ramp to reach one step of air away from the building. More guards were coming up.

"TIME TO ROLL!"

One swordsman surged back up in a river of blood, as he saw the doctor. Screamed a corporate battlecry, as bullets thudding in armour; rushed at Tanaka, eager to give his life for his masters. Whatever Warrior would give his life for, he would not see the woman hurt, never.

Unarmed, he threw his shoulder at the charging samurai. Thinking of Susan, what she would do, he flung his good forearm up. The sword struck down, he blocked hard at the wrist, kicked the man back. A wall of lighting flashed up between them, as Owens pulled Dr Tanaka up the ramp of the rotorcraft that hung outside the skyscraper window, in the screaming wind. Still covering them with his pistol, Fyrefox followed him.

"Douglas! Rookie! Get the drek out!"

Douglas couldn't get out; she was cursing, riddled with bullets, on the floor. Warrior had to leave his sword, pull the weight of her chrome with one hand, but he was seeing that night, again, Susan, down...to get to her, he would have gone through the lightning.

The others pulled them in, and then they were roaring away, across dark Victoria harbour toward the lights of Hong Kong. No aerial drones hummed after them; Fyrefox had seen to that as well.

"Is Douglas okay?" Roller, the ork rigger, shouted. "The target? You all okay?"

"Yes." Warrior gasped, "Yes, they're safe, it's alright, saved her..."

"Aye, ye did a bit," Douglas grated from the floor, clutching a Medkit, "Dinae hold ye breath for me ta swoon, or nowt. All in a good night's work."

They all laughed, through the blood and fatigue; except Dr Tanaka, who stared. Warrior worried for a moment that she might be in shock, but no, she was tough—she was simply bemused. It took a certain kind of individual to Run the Shadows, a breed apart.

"Doctor! Welcome aboard Shadowrunner airlines," He tried, "I'm afraid we can't offer inflight meals, the pilot never shares that hipflask of Herlig—but we'll get you home, hell or high water. If they send a dragon after us, we may charge extra..."

The dark-haired women stared out the window, away. Surrounded by laughing, blood-bound friends, Harry felt suddenly very lonely. He kept joking, slapping a medkit on his ruined arm, because when he stopped, and adrenaline faded, the Jazz would *really* crash him down to the pit.

The little tabs weren't cheap; he had to hold them back. Save them for the next Run, every Run—or his team would die, him to blame. He would not see his friends taken as he watched, like Susan. Never leave them behind—like Susan. He couldn't even answer her letters. When the Run was over, the Jazz crashed out, he could do nothing but crash down on his back to count the hours. He could do nothing for the girl he loved, and he would never save her.

An afternoon of vigorous sparring practise had stretched to early evening. Outside their gym, Harry gazed wearily up at the starless Redmond sky. It looked like more acid rain tomorrow.

"Drek, it's late. Walk home with me, Susan."

"Sure, I'll walk you home," Her eyes were bright from their exertions, as she grinned, "Pretty boy like you? Definitely going to get snatched."

"Oh? Didn't know you felt that way." He flicked his messed-up hair outrageously, and she laughed.

"Idiot."

Early evening was late in the Barrens. The streets filled up with gangers and dealers; from the next block over they heard a machine gun's bark, a brief cry. Hoarse, primal noises, from an alley mouth ahead. Susan looked away; Harry walked between her and the alley as they passed, so she wouldn't recognise anyone she knew.

She would've smashed even the thought to atoms, that it could have been her, but the Barrens held a whole dark world of vile ends. Snuff BLT makers, the Bunraku slavers, sheer famine and disease. Her father's career earnings had saved Susan as much as his training, before the Ripperdocs took the last of it. She and Harry got odd-jobs when they could, his mother occasionally got shifts as a waitress. Susan had all but forced Harry to take some of her father's money, for her sake. One way or other, they'd kept barely above the pit beneath them, mass grave of young dreams and bodies.

"Susan? You okay, chummer?"

"Yeah. It's just stupid...thanks, anyway. I guess you're going out again, about Shadows stuff, jobs? Just stay out of trouble."

"Sure. I'll stick to the main streets, not get mixed up in anything—"

"If you see anything, turn around. Get home early for a change. I mean...your Mom told me she worries, Harry."

"Yeah. When we're real Shadowrunners, I'm going to get her a house in Bellevue. Way better than she had, before my so-called Dad took a hike. I'll get her out of this stinking place."

"Hm. I think you will, Harry Fawkes." Her voice was unusually light, "You've got some good points, you know? Some good dreams."

Harry glanced back at her. The faith in those dark eyes was his surety, always. Anchor of the dream he'd rather die for than live without. They would bat-out-of-hell away from this place, someday, together. She was born to Run, so was he.

"I...suppose you should make time for that girlfriend of yours too," Susan looked away, "What's her name? Cathy?"

"Ah, we broke up last weekend. She's alright, it was both of us, usual thing..."

"Hmph. Idiots." Susan flicked a very light backhand, Harry ducked his head. He didn't pick up that 'idiots' wasn't just him.

For Harry, girls had always been simple and impossible. For a few months his lively ardency charmed them. After that they usually got bored; looked for a man with both feet on the ground and a promising career in a street gang (a few had joined gangs themselves). He knew, sometimes, it had been him – a couple of hard breakups sat punishing heavy on his conscience – but he had tried, always tried, to treat the girls right. He couldn't give what would tie him to Redmond forever, but he had given them all the love he could.

When that had meant sex ('Mm, if you really get famous, I'll tell everyone it was me who took your cherry...'), then he'd always used protection, always done his best, and got better. Someday, when he rescued a CEO's daughter and she upturned soft eyes towards her saviour, or when a strong dark-haired razorgirl cornered him on the backseat of a stolen Saader Westwind...he didn't mean to be found a stammering virgin. He was a shadowrunner; he had to be a pro, a hero in every way. You never got out of the Barrens, unless you were strong and smart and dauntless. No doubts, and no regrets.

Only Susan stayed. His rival, his nakama. She smiled at his dreams, never laughed. She beat him up, pushed him on, raced ahead with the grace of strength. Dauntless as a dragon, if a dragon with all its power could be that beautiful.

He'd told himself, love between Runners brought death. When he'd told her, she'd smacked him and said he needn't have bothered to mention it. There was nothing false in her eyes, no nonsense. More than anything, that was why she deserved someone better than he could dream of being.

"Susan, you're right. I'm almost twenty, now; if I'm going to get out, I need to get serious. No more girls, until we get our first real shadowrun. Promise."

"And so," Susan smiled, "The ladies of Redmond were safe once more. Though why you went to so much trouble for some of them, I do not know."

"Hm...I liked them? I like girls, Susan. I'm going to go to some trouble, if I'm a guy."

"Guess you do. Guess you are." Susan studied the other side of the street, "And after that? No falling in love, for shadowrunners?"

She was right beside him. Dark hair shining, unkissed. His dream, his girl, nobody's girl but her own, always beside him. Simple and Impossible. He had to be serious. He just could not stop dreaming.

"...I guess. We'll see what happens."

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Even with Wuxing cutting the fee, because the Corp had paid for the rotorcraft—and with medical bills—the team had earned enough to celebrate. Three days later, with no apparent heat, and Warrior's arm out of surgery, all of them but Douglas went to Downtown, and Happy Valley.

Bar Akatsuki had low, soft lighting, an imitation cherry tree over the stage, and girls in kimonos twirling slowly like spirits. Nothing on the menu but overpriced synthol champagne, but that was what they wanted. They clashed glasses above the low table. Toasted Tanaka's new job, Douglas's new cyberlimb, and their likely lad who'd more than earned his pay. Harry proposed a minute's silence for the imminent seppuku of a Renraku security chief, with shameless bathos—for almost a quarter of the minute, his friends laughed and laughed.

"...what we did to earn this money, I can't tell you, of course," Owens declaimed, one arm around a giggling hostess in a shimmery frock, "But I'll just say; those guys couldn't do a thing without me. I can call on the spirits of sea and sky—"

"You, or anybody!" Roller and Warrior shouted together, "But will they *come* when you call?"

This was it. They were alive and undefeated, living the dream. Even if the cloned muscle patched into Harry's arm still ached, and his veins ached for Jazz, like the ghost at the feast. He took another hit of champagne, bit his lip.

He wasn't mixing drugs and drink, wouldn't be going out like that. He knew he could probably break it off, still, but he *couldn't*. The Jazz kept him where he belonged. Running the Shadows. Not a dreamer, not an idiot—a pro Runner, with

friends who trusted their lives to him. There would be more runs, he'd feel alive again and strong, he'd live out every dream he'd ever had.

Except one. After they'd brought their first Run off, smooth as an Elvish smile, he'd say, you did well. She'd punch his arm, glance away, say he wasn't so bad himself. He'd gently turn Susan's face to his, stroke her hair. See in her eyes, she wanted this too, and then kiss her, really kiss her. Show her how good he could be, for her. Everything he'd practised with those other girls, all for her. Tell her he'd never leave, they'd take the world, together...

He had watched as they threw her down, and tore everything away. His Run, his plan. She was better without him. Unless she'd died tonight on another Run, alone. Or the blank-eyed despair had come back, and she couldn't fight this time, because he'd left her alone. But it had hurt to even look at the girl he'd failed, then it hurt every minute he missed the girl he loved...

He needed to write back to her. He needed to send his mother that money. He needed one tab of Jazz, another drink. He needed to hold her, kiss her eyes, tell her he'd been an idiot to leave, but he would hold her and love her until they forgot all the drek, he needed—

"Sir? Is something troubling you?"

Dark hair to her waist, white dress almost ghostly in the low light. The hostess's smile was lipsticked, her breasts almost spilt from her dress, like it had already been torn away...but her eyes were full of concern, and they hit him like a fist.

He told her he was an idiot, the biggest drekhead in the world, everything he could never tell his friends, and she listened. He should have stopped, a real man would have stopped, but now she was leading him up the stairs, through the champagne haze. A room full of painted screens and futons, the sickly smell of what lay ahead, idiot, idiot, but he needed to kiss her. Stroke her dark hair as she pulled his belt off, tell his girl he'd make everything right, someday.

She had to get him completely hard with her mouth (Maybe the drink, maybe he'd never dreamt of this...), before she lay back on the futon. He asked, condom? but her hand reached out to him, and he forgot to ask again. Her mouth twitched as he kissed her hand, like he'd kissed Cathy, Jane, Zoe...that Elf girl he'd loved for a month, almost as much as he'd loved Susan Lei for always. He'd never lovingly kissed her hand, never kissed her breasts as he gripped her under one thigh. Lifted and spread, *her eyes were dull and empty beneath him*, but he couldn't stop, couldn't leave her. He said Susan's name like a blasphemous, miserable prayer.

When he'd finished, he didn't want to let go of her. Through the screens, from other futons, harsh, violent noises stirred his nightmares.

"I-is there anything...? I can help you. Save you. Why are you...?"

"Sir. I think you should go now."

"I'll pay you again, I can pay. Just, please..."

The hostess's eyes widened, as Harry slid down her worn body. Her sex looked battered and unclean as it was assured to be—he almost wept synthol tears to think what men, like him, had done to this girl for too long. It tasted so sour he almost gagged. He still kissed her sex, gently. Circled his tongue lightly, then faster, until he found just what she liked and her thighs shuddered in his hands. He prayed that Susan Lei would be always safe, always strong, happy as he wished, wished, wished he could make her, as the hostess arched her back and moaned for him to never leave.

Harry woke in the early morning. He was still on the futon, still naked, and there were three women kneeling beside him. Smiling, they buried him in their bodies and lips without a word.

Harry didn't blow his whole payroll, but most of it. He drank a lot more after that. When Alison Douglas finally dragged him back to the safehouse, for a belting and stern lecture on moderation, he was utterly spent, drunk, and high. Still lost in a dream.

Out of Hell WARNING

A/N: Warning for another chapter, this time for extreme threatened violence and referenced actual rape. Also, more satire of Goblin Slayer, though GS viewers should find the other warning elements par for the course.

“So, Fighter. Not asking how you got the money, but any thoughts on spending?”

“Information.”

“I’d go with security . Still, chip truth? Spend that Nyuyen on something you really want...”

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In the simulated dream of Better Than Life, any chiphead could be practically anyone they wanted, until their brain fried. A music star beloved by millions. A heroic Shadowrunner, saving the world from horrors. A martial arts heroine, beating her would-be rapists to jelly. Of course, the Simsense data had to be collected from celebrities, or actors, before the makers overclocked every digitised sensation and sentiment past the human brain’s natural capacity, hence Better Than Life. Pornography, of course, was the lion’s share of BLT sales, but a fair number of discontented Seattleites preferred violence. Seeing it, committing it, even living through the moment of death themselves. Which all made work for a street gang of notoriously flamboyant psychopaths to do.

The studio had a tiled floor and central drain, though, to keep the mood right, it was rarely cleaned. The ork Halloweener who occasionally did that job was now slouched by the door with a shotgun, dully watching the two human Halloweener techies set up the Simsense capture deck. The Asian girl tied to the metal frame—she looked about fifteen, a typical teenage runaway or slum kid—had gotten her datajack implanted by a tame Ripperdock yesterday. One techie pushed the cable into her neck that would record what she saw and felt—his own cable was already

plugged in. The other techie showed her the blowtorch, and then they left her a few minutes to fully appreciate her situation.

“Fragging place stinks today.” The ork muttered.

“Big custom order, yesterday,” The thinner techie was a talkative character, “From a name you’d most likely recognise if you watched the news, though *of course* the Archconservative party denies all links to anti-meta violence. This fragger wanted a BLT about killing orks, you see. Like that old fantasy drek, *Lord of the Flies* or whatever, before you ugly fraggers really turned up. We tricked out this place as a dungeon. Brought in Zed here, with a suit of armour! Rounded up a dozen ork kids from a squat–runty squirts, more like *goblins*–and then turned them loose with fake weapons. Zed painted the fragging walls with them. Not meaning to *offend* you, of course, chummer!”

The other techie, Zed, sniggered. The ork, old for a ganger, old for an ork, had seen too much drek to give a drek anymore.

“That wasn’t even enough for this guy,” The thin techie went on, “He wants to finish up by saving an Elvish princess! From a mob of orks, that...you know, gave her a good seeing to. Wanted to watch all that ork-on-elf action before he ‘saved her’, of course, and *then* show the knife-ears how a real gobbo slaying man does it. And to think some fraggers call us sickos!”

“That the princess?”

The ork jerked his head toward a blond teenage elf, still in her princess costume, who didn’t look like chaining her to the wall was needed. Her violet eyes were empty as pits.

“Thought she should watch this,” The techie indicated the blowtorch. Zed seemed more enthralled by the fiery pilot light than the girl’s sweat-soaked, shivering body, “Help her appreciate how lucky she is. Of course, this other slag is going to *enjoy* getting her eyes burnt out. At least we’ll cut the Simsense tape with a pleasure track, so users will *think*–”

Then there was a sound, outside the studio’s steel door. A hand ran over a keypad–as Ilsa had taught her, Fighter punched in the code. The door slid open, and she stood there.

She made a sound like a sob. Stared at the elf girl, the Asian child's pleading face. She wanted to tear at her eyes; she clenched shaking fists.

The ork finally moved. Fighter moved like a snake, kicked him into the floor. The techies scabbled for handguns—two steps, two blows. Their necks flopped like fish. More blood leaked over the tiles. It wasn't right, it wasn't *enough!* The ork ganger was rising; orks were tough. On his knees, throwing up his claws, rough voice pleading.

She looked on the ork—and still felt *fear*. Hateful fear. This room touched the otherworld where her man was dead, shot down with all their hopes, that night...it touched her like a frozen sea. The world where she was a broken shell who would never fight again, tossed aside as the soiled trash of *monsters like this!*

When the girl made a weak noise, something in Fighter snapped.

She'd hit at the human monsters with all her strength. She slammed the trog back down on the floor of the nightmare room, with the measured force of rage and hate.

“Not right. Should not be, not in this world! I'm going to make the world right, trog! Kill all of you, in the world, and you cannot stop me!”

She hit him again. Like a hunger, she couldn't stop. The girl on the frame surfaced from terror and started screaming—Fighter didn't want the child to see any more. She hauled the broken ork by his jacket out of the room, wild eyed. Stumbling for what she needed, fast as if she fled some crippling terror—except she had never fled. She'd seen through every Run to the end.

The child's screams drowned the thumps against flesh, outside, and the ork's final groan. The elf girl had still shown no reaction at all.

It seemed a lifetime for the runaway child before Fighter came back in, and unbound her. She clung to Susan with her whole icy form. She couldn't answer Susan's voice, just pour broken thank-you's into her neck. But she was alive, she would see the day, she could be anything at all. Susan sobbed again, hugged her back.

The elf girl shrank against the dungeon wall in silence, as Fighter held out a bloodied hand. She couldn't look her in the eye—Susan couldn't look her in the eye. Her own assault had almost crippled her; if Harry had been killed that night, she would have broken forever. And the fate of this girl had been far worse. An innocent who'd never killed, not even made wrong choices, just been taken and raped until there was nothing else...Fighter wanted to put her head on the ground and weep.

How could she say to this girl, it would get better? She was an impostor, no hero, she had done nothing of worth, endured nothing worth pity. *She* was the shell of a woman, staring into those empty eyes...no. She had come here to save this girl, she could fight for her, and that was all that mattered.

“Come with me, please. I’ll take you out from here, no one will hurt you. I’ll find you help, somewhere. There must be hope for us somewhere, please...”

Her gentle voice finally calmed the elf, she allowed herself to be unchained. Fighter lifted her frail body with one arm, held the little human girl by the hand, and they went out of the dungeon together.

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Several more dead Halloweeners were scattered over the ground floor of the derelict apartment block. The street gang had chosen secrecy over conspicuous security for their valuable snuff BTL studio in the basement. Susan had still spent the last of her money hiring a street-level decker and gunman, who were on guard outside. More hired thugs than shadowrunners, they looked away when Susan walked out with the girls.

“See if there’s a customer list on the simsense deck, or anywhere. One of you stay with the girls in the van, I’ll search the place again.”

There was a locked room with two more kidnapped or trafficked girls, and one boy, huddled together—as well as an ork girl’s naked corpse on the floor. Susan gazed at it for a while. The others could only stare at her, but they followed in silence. Susan lifted them into the cheap van that was their exit, taking time to reassure them, they were going somewhere safe. Ilsa had found a small office in the Renton city hall which still had nominal responsibility for missing persons, and wouldn’t sell them right back to the traffickers. The hired guns’ eyes flicked to the ends of the street, sweating at the thought of ganger bikes roaring in.

Finally, Susan got in the van and told the gunman to drive. She held the elf girl’s hand, smiled bravely at the others. She could tell them they would be safe now, she had done everything she could...but she didn’t know if she could ever do this again. See the horrors, the eyes where hope fell on stony ground.

What she had done to the ork—hadn’t been what she’d wanted to do. A short rain of blows, one fatal strike into a slab of meat. The hell they had forced these girls through, for kicks and money—she should have broken his fingers, one by one.

Then crushed something vile between her foot and the floor, as the ork screamed...but he'd looked so broken and pitiful, she'd just killed him. Perhaps it wasn't in her to torture, or to wipe out every trog ganger in the world. She been crazed with fury, but it was her Warrior who'd had the crazy dreams, and never like that.

The victims began to ask where they were going. She told them, smiled and clasped their hands. Perhaps a little despair vanished away. So many BLT hells, so many innocents, but these ones would smile again, someday. Maybe she would go back and save more, but not tomorrow.

What would she do? The elf girl was cold against her body. She would die if it would save this girl, but after a ten minute drive they would never meet again. She killed for money. There *had* been a reason—Harry had always known why.

He'd finally sent a message from Hong Kong. Short-strangely sad-saying little but that he wasn't dead. That was almost enough. In a year he would come back, she would wait for him in the shadows. Meet him as a Runner, the best there was, and stand at his side without shame.

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When it was finished and she was alone on a meaningless street, she called Ilsa.

“Hoi. You know that thing I said about?”

“You did it.” There was perhaps a little more feeling in Ilsa's voice than before, “Was it a help to you?”

“...it wasn't about me.”

“I suppose not.”

“Don't think I could do it again. Not right away.”

“That's understandable. Of course, the information and expenses involved in raiding a secret BTL lab practically exhausted your money from Antumbra, and now the Halloweeners ought to be looking for you seriously. It will be unsafe for you to return to your old neighbourhood—and, of course, unsafe for your friends.”

Susan had known it was coming. The last step into the Shadows, out of the light. Her friends would survive in Redmond—she told herself—and she wasn't alone. She

had Ilsa, and Harry. Friends, chummers, distant lovers; whatever their bond was, it would endure as long as life.

“Crash at your safehouse, for a while?”

“There should be barely enough room. My share of our money appears to have been eaten by excess medical fees. Although to wield, albeit for moments, the mystic forces of a true Site of Power, was—”

“—*almost* worth it?”

“*Ja*. As I was saying, we will need more work, *schnell*. I ask for only a paying job, not a safe one. We have both proved that we are Runners, if nothing else. Trouble is our business, as you say, and...”

“...there are no fragging milk runs in the business. Be seeing you, chummer.”

Fighter ended the call. Her faithful street brawl armour chaffed at her flesh—she was only flesh, almost totally spent. She needed a shower. Wash the day’s filth away. Except for the children that had clung to her, blinking in the light of freedom. She hoped she could cling to the memory through lonely nights, and bloody ones. Beyond that, she would take whatever came, and wait for what was coming.

Silver towers stretched into the smoggy sky; a Lone Star rotorcraft hummed in the distance. On the street, her eyes darted between loafers and alley mouths as she walked. Touching her father’s yellow scarf, with a single glance back, Fighter vanished into the shadows of Seattle. Whatever waited ahead for her, she was right where she belonged.

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Coda

On Ilsa’s insistent advice, Fighter sold the BLT customer list to a fence rather than going after them herself. If she had recognised the Archconservative candidate’s name, she could have gotten twice the money. Nonetheless, his withdrawal for ‘personal reasons’ was announced within a fortnight.

Susan and Ilsa naturally made sure their names were never linked to the rescued victims. Later, rumours trickled through the Seattle Shadows of profitable Runs on a secured warehouse and a pharma lab. Another BTL studio turned over, months

after that. Nothing earth-shaking. None of the Fixers or Johnsons would have risked a guess on just *what* Fighter would do, to shake Seattle, or the world. They were waiting and watching, as always.

While Seattle's Elvish community preferred to put on appalling airs about anti-meta outrages, rather than do much more for trafficked women in Seattle, the Elf girl was adopted by a well-off family who moved with her to the homeland, Tir Tairngire. They were regarded with slight disdain by the native Elves, and their daughter with worse than disdain; but they arranged a magically-gifted therapist for her, and lived in a rural community where humans and trops were not permitted.

After a year, the elf girl started to paint landscapes; sold a few at first, then several. After three years, her small gallery was well reviewed. After four years, though making love was still a distant hope, she got engaged to a young Elf, a Tir native. He joined the Tir Peace Force for the 2053 invasion of CalFree, with the aim of killing all the humans and trops that he could. For the security and spread of their most blessed Land of Promise, that suited the Tir Peace Force down to the ground.

About four years after Fighter had carried the Elf girl through the night—as a demon of flame roared in the sky and a mad Emperor wailed across the lake—the Adept stared at the young Elf soldier aiming his gun. Her feet were set, her knife hand raised. Bloodied up to her elbows. Fighting to the end.

TBC