

Jealousy, Rage, and a Secret Mistress

by Mila Burton

1. Getting the Case

It started off like any other, simple enough. I was sitting around in my “office” listening to my favorite station and working on the fifth cigarette of the morning. I know, I know... it’s expensive as hell to waste my ration like that, but I just can’t smoke at night. It messes with my work.

Oh yeah, my work. I’m what you’d call a free agent, or I was at the time. Almost a private investigator, but people pay me for what I can glean from the world around me. I’m a professional snoop; I belong to a professional snoops’ club. You may have seen my work out on the fact-sheets under the name ‘Cloudfoot’. It’s easy enough work; I just go out at night and observe what I can, then come home and piddle it out to my account with the proper keywords and cross-references. Sometimes I cross-reference to the other members of the club; we all make more that way. I think ours was one of the most popular fact-sheets out there. If someone’s interested in what I’ve observed through the night, they credit my account—by the word.

I can’t really say it was a case. A message had shown up in my account box from someone interested in my work. I had read the fact-sheets from the week before, so I knew the name and the question at hand. I arranged for her to meet me personally. I prefer to work face to face with some people, and I wanted to see what she was hiding.

Her driver dropped her off at the front door of my building and then parked the older Plymouth in the lot across the street. I had already gone downstairs to greet her personally, as well as direct her up to my place. I owned the building, a slight advantage. My parents had owned it before and left it to me—I rented the rooms out cheap enough to get tenants. An older building with flaking plaster and real glass, we didn’t have all the modern conveniences; I had to wire my place for access myself.

My client-to-be was a woman of wealth and quite a few years. Martha Taylor was the matriarch of the Taylor clan, a family that had bought heavily into the repeater business when it was first starting up. They were pretty big info-brokers, so I’m pretty sure my account was on some portion of the net they owned. Getting a personal visit from their top mom was sort of like a visit from the queen herself. She had even come with her own entourage, a redheaded girl with hard eyes.

“Are you Mr. Thomas?” Martha Taylor extended a gloved hand.

“Who’s your friend?” I asked. “Just a secretary for taking notes or a talent for checking me out?”

The hard-eyed girl shot her hand out and I thought she was going to punch me.

“The name is Annie Field. That’s what I do. I field for Mrs. Taylor.”

Mrs. Taylor calmed her underling. “Annie changed her last name when she came to work for us. I think names are important. Are you a Thomas?”

“Doubter by name, digger by profession,” I shook Annie’s hand and smiled.

She didn’t smile back. “Yes,” she almost sneered. “I’m familiar with what you do for a living. We didn’t come here to be entertained.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that being a slumlord was what I did for a living. Being a gleaner only padded my account to a level of comfort. I offered Mrs. Taylor a chair and sat down next to my console. “Of course. This is about your son.”

“My late son,” Madame Taylor corrected me. “I’m sure you’re aware of last week’s events.”

I put on my best pity face. “Yes, it’s very tragic.” Jeffrey Taylor had been found four nights ago with a slit throat. The case disturbed the police because the boy had used an antique straight razor to do the job. Gruesome.

Mrs. Taylor folded her hands and placed them in her lap. “What’s tragic is that the police have ruled it to be a suicide. I know that Jeffrey never would have done that. He had too much to live for.”

“Of course, “I agreed. “Who wouldn’t want to be him right now?”

Mrs. Taylor pressed against the arms of her chair and started to leave. “If that’s going to be your attitude, I can always find another gleaner for this.”

I assured her I wasn’t always that flippant, just that it was going to be difficult. “There isn’t going to be much out there that someone hasn’t already laid claim to. It’s not going to be easy getting new info on something like this. Every gleaner in town is going to be all over this and without access to the home itself, there’s not much I can give you.”

By this time, she was rummaging around in her handbag. “I’ve already taken that into consideration. Here’s one of my cards. If you need any special permission to be somewhere, just show them this.”

She handed Annie a small silver and plastic card and Annie handed it to me. All it had on it was her name. By handing me her name, and any access it implied, Mrs. Taylor and I had pretty much signed the deal. I would be paid twice my usual rate, because it would be distracting me from my usual fare. They got up to leave and I opened the door for them.

“Just one question,” I shut the door behind me. “Why’d you want me for this? There are a lot of gleaners who can get more for you. I usually get paid for my style, not my content.”

And the Matriarch smiled. It was creepy watching the folds of her skin fold back from those long white teeth, like watching a giant wrinkled crocodile preparing for the kill. “Because,” she stated, “You’re not a registered talent. You’re one of the only ones.”

“You have something against talents?” I rubbed the back of my neck a little self consciously, I admit. “They can find out a lot more than a norm like myself.”

She stopped smiling. “Talents are the godless offspring of a hedonistic lifestyle. They are unnatural and go against everything I believe in. I despise them. They disgust me more than anything else.”

“Talents were given an unfair advantage,” Annie Field added. “I’ve never met one that used their abilities for anything other than self interest.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I was.

“We’re working on legislation right now,” Mrs. Taylor stated. “It will prevent children from attending Hypnogouge and will also restrict the distribution of NVL to a prescription-only basis. Hopefully, we’ll be able to ban the drug all together.”

That I couldn’t believe. “You’re trying to *ban* NVL? You know the Hypnogouge community is going to fight you on that one. No NVL, no communion. No communion, no Hypnogouge.”

“I am aware,” Mrs. Taylor said coldly, “that there is a pseudo-religion based on the drug. I am also aware that there are people addicted to NVL and that quite a few lives have been destroyed because of it.”

“Hypnogouge uses tele-prompters,” Annie was putting on a pair of sunglasses. “They use talents to tell people that they’re decent human beings. They could tell them anything they wanted to. Would you want someone putting ideas in your head? Did you know it takes no certification to be a tele-prompter besides being a registered talent? Did you know that some talents are what we would consider legally insane? Would you want someone like that broadcasting thoughts into your head?”

“I can’t say that I would,” I couldn’t.

“There are children going to Hypnogouge,” Mrs. Taylor had waved her driver over from the empty lot. “Children are taking drugs and the police are powerless to do anything about it. It’s my understanding that they’re taking illegal drugs as well, drugs that have been mixed with the NVL. There are people taking their children into that environment. And,” she really stressed the *and*, “there are pregnant mothers going to this and subjecting their children to whatever harmful effects the drug has on un-born children.”

“Yeah,” I understood. “That’s where talents come from.”

The Plymouth had pulled up and Annie opened the door for her employer. Mrs. Taylor stepped into the older car and Annie followed. I thought they were about to leave when the back window rolled down and Mrs. Taylor leaned out.

“Mr. Thomas,” she started, “I’ve invested a lot of money into schools and hospitals. Taylor Repeaters has been a major contributing force for the development of young minds across the nation, dare I say it, across the world. Children are our charity. Children are the future of tomorrow. I’m not going to let something like Hypnogouge destroy our future the way it destroyed my son.”

And with that, they drove away. I stood there on the sidewalk watching the stately Plymouth roll down the street. They don’t make cars like that anymore.

2. Meeting up with Sappho

That evening I went down the Lakewood Landing, a favorite haunt of mine. It’s not too brightly lit, like most late-night places these days, and the drinks still have alcohol in them. It’s also the place my dealer, Sappho, designated as our drop point whenever I run out of NVL. Oh yeah, I take the stuff. I may not be a talent, but on NVL, you can hardly

tell the difference.

NVL is one of those happy drugs developed by shrinks to help patients in group therapy be more “responsive to the group goal of recovery”. By stimulating the nervous system and nothing else, psychiatrists found they could raise a patient’s awareness to almost unheard of levels. Unlike MDMA, a popular drug in its day, the patient didn’t experience the overheating and numbness in the extremities that distracted from the therapy session. NVL prevented group sessions from turning into orgies. However, very much like MDMA, the rave culture caught on to it and turned it into the new “in” thing. By raising the empathy levels of a group, you could tell them the music was good and, by god, the music was great.

I use it for the awareness factor. On NVL, I can smell the fear on a liar, spot the blood under fingernails, and hear the bastard around the corner who wants to smash my brains in. You can’t tell the difference between any registered talent and me. Of course, that’s our little secret. Talent gleaners can only charge half as much because of their unfair advantage and I try to avoid using what’s in a person’s head for my facts. I mean, I could be making it all up as far as the public knows. It tends to color the info and it looks bad. I never load stuff like that in my account. I just use it as a guidepost to look in the right direction. I go and *get* my info; most talents just sit back and “psychically divine” the day’s events. What’s the fun in that? You can’t charge travel expenses.

Sappho was at the end of the bar, turning tricks for that night’s drinks. When I walked in she was floating a beer mug about three feet off the bar and spinning it slightly.

“Hey, you,” I sat next to her. “Don’t you know it’s unladylike and unsportsmanlike to show off like that?” That distracted her enough for her to drop the mug. I grabbed it out of the air before it hit.

Sappho frowned at me. “You keep pulling crap like that and I’ll give you webbed toes.” She pulled out a smoke and lit up. “You out already?”

I whipped out the card Martha Taylor had given me and rested it on the bar. Sappho picked up the card and flipped it in her palm. “It’s not very co-operative. Doesn’t like being a card, doesn’t like the name.”

“The name is what’s paying you and my addiction this month, “I plucked it away from her. “What does the name mean to you?”

“She’s unhappy and hiding from something,” she waved the bartender over. “You’re supposed to find her son for her?”

“You haven’t been a loyal reader,” I joked. “I’m supposed to find out who killed him. Last week someone decided he needed a new mouth, about two inches below the first one. The police said it was suicide.”

“They were wrong.”

The bartender came by and took drink orders, then took away Sappho’s trick mug. I ordered a rum and coke. Sappho went with something more exotic.

Once the bartender was gone, she leaned forward on her stool. “So, what are you supposed to learn that the police talents couldn’t? A secret mistress? Blackmail? Rage and jealousy?”

“Oh, if only it were that easy,” I sighed. Sappho’s cigarette was distracting me. I

needed something and she knew it; now she was toying with me.

“It’s never easy, you know that,” she stubbed the cigarette slightly, just enough to shrink the cherry some. “Why *you* though?”

“My client hates talents.”

She grinned over her drink and sucked on the umbrella stem. “I find it ironic that you’re working the case. There’s been rumors going around that any talent who touches this case hits the hospital.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a talent, so I’m not worried.”

“You’re a cheating bastard, then; no skip for you this week.”

“Stop messing around; I’m one of your best clients.”

Sappho giggled and pulled at the hem of her skirt. “Dear one, I know that. Just think of how much I could screw everything up by selling what I know.”

That made me pretty uneasy. “You do that and we’re both out, sister. I’ll have to find an honest job and so will you.”

“Give it up. You’re making enough with that damn building of yours.” She stopped giggling. “You’re right. Maybe I’ll sell my story years from now when you’re rich and famous.”

“No gleaner ever got famous.”

“Your name is pretty well known on the fact sheets.”

I finished my drink. “That’s a net-name. Quit kidding around and give my skip. I want to start working.”

Sappho reached into her backpack and handed me the bulky envelope full of tabs. “I should charge you extra. This mix is tough to get.”

I took the envelope and handed her a similar one with the account code for the day. “You keep talking like that and I’ll just go down to Hypnogouge and steal a week’s worth. I hear they’re handing the stuff out for free.”

She pouted and stuffed the code into her bag. “That’s completely different skip. If you want to see god, go right ahead. If you want clarity, you come to me.” She slammed the last of her drink and walked out.

I left money on the bar for both drinks and started out for the night. I wasn’t kidding about the Hypnogouge remark. If she ever stood me up, I would just wait until Saturday night’s service and grab a handful. I knew someone who could reduce and cut it for me, but I really didn’t trust him. Hypnogouge was a final out—something I had reserved for the day Sappho got hit by a train.

Remember what I was saying about the rave culture? They got their hands on NVL and turned it into some kind of religion. Get a crowd of people in a crowded room, dope them up to their eyeballs until they can hear each other’s heartbeats, then play music and tell them they’re decent human beings. It’s amazing. I’ve seen addicts of less passable drugs go in and give it all up because it’s “robbing them of what a beautiful world it is”. When I take the stuff, I’m just terribly aware how much they guy selling me smokes hates my guts—or how much the same pack is going to cost tomorrow.

Sappho’s an interesting case. Her parents were talents who went to Hypnogouge (dare I say it) almost religiously. Sappho was still an itty-bitty baby when her mother

started taking “communion”--communion being NVL in some rather large quantities. The moment the stuff hit little Sappho’s in-utero brain, she was horribly, horribly aware of her surroundings, namely her mother.

That’s where most of the talents came from. A fetus should never know what its mother is thinking. I can understand Martha Taylor’s hatred of talents. “The godless offspring of a hedonistic lifestyle.” I guess that would go against everything you believe in when your family has owned half the net for the last three generations.

3. The Scene of the Crime

I drove myself out to the Taylor estate the next day. After taking two tabs of NVL in the car, I walked up to the front door.

A mechanical voice answered the doorbell. “Taylor residence. Whom may I say is calling?”

“Gleaner Thomas,” I answered. The voice *was* a computer--it was missing the smack of real lips and breath-marks of a human.

“Please insert invitation,” the voice answered. I took the card Mrs. Taylor’s assistant had handed me and slipped it into the slot under the doorbell.

“Access code: white,” the voice intoned. “You have *carte blanche* to the estate.” And there was a click in the door. My card spat back out and the door unlocked.

Inside, I was greeted by a sweeping marble staircase and monstrous flower arrangements. There was a click of heels on stone and a pertly dressed young girl approached me.

“Hello,” she offered her hand. “I’m Miss Muiz and I’ll be your guide through the estate.”

I shook hands with her. She was very distracting.

“Are you a talent?” I asked.

“Heavens no,” she smiled meekly. “I’m one of Mrs. Taylor’s fields.”

That would explain why she was so distracting. I wouldn’t be able to get much done with her around.

She turned and gestured up the staircase. “Let’s start with the incident point. House, safe.”

I hadn’t noticed it before, but hearing it disengage drew my heightening attention. The IR beam that had been trained on me the since I had opened the door clicked off; the spot felt refreshingly cool. It made sense. Rich family, security system. They just had to send a human to scope things out, that’s all. I wondered briefly about cost.

“How much does a thing like that run?” I asked before I could think about it.

“A thing like what?” Miss Muiz asked.

I had fumbled, now for the recovery. “Your security system. You told the house I was safe, so I’m guessing there was some sort of security system in place when I came in.”

She quickly changed the subject. “I can see why Mrs. Taylor hired you. Nothing gets by you. Hopefully you’ll get to the bottom of this.”

We ascended the staircase and made our way down the hall to where Jeffrey’s

room was. My hands were tingling with the rush of air as we passed and I could feel the skip creeping up the back of my neck. If I had timed the dosage right, I'd be peaking by the time we entered the room.

Miss Muiz opened a door on our right and gestured for me to enter. "The room's already been cleaned, unfortunately. I image you'd be able to get more if the body was still here."

A wave of nausea let me know the NVL had hit home. "Oh..." I clasped my hands behind my back. "I don't think that will be necessary. As long as it was only the body that was removed."

"Body and blood," she responded. "There was a lot of blood."

I rubbed the front of my belly, trying to push the wave back down. "Yeah, that tends to happen in cases like this." I could feel her eyeing me. "I mean, a slit throat, that's a lot of blood. That's the cause of death with that."

Miss Muiz crossed her arms. "Are all gleaners as sensitive as you?"

I winked at her. "Just the good ones."

She smirked and pointed to a spot on the floor. "They found the pup there."

If only she hadn't been a field! I found myself looking at her legs, or smelling her perfume, or imagining what it would be like to touch her hair; I couldn't concentrate. I kept watching the way she moved her hands too much, or listening to the tiny growl and slight lisp when she spoke. Plus, I had to look like I was looking around, not picking up on residue in the room. She needed to leave, and quick, before I started my trip down.

"Pardon my lack of proper respect," she corrected. "They found the *body* there."

I waved it off. "Understandable. I've met plenty of fields and I find your brutal honesty refreshing. It's good to skip past the bullshit and get to the point."

She sent her response loud and clear. It's one of the only times I've ever gotten something off a field but it came across the room like a fist. *Not a talent; just on skip.*

She smiled wide. "Well, I feel I should leave you to your work. When you're finished, just slide your card in that slot next to the door and I'll be paged."

I wiped my forehead on the back of my sleeve as she left to go. At the door, she turned and said, "It's okay. She employs me; she doesn't do my thinking for me. You're safe." And with that she left.

Never, in my whole life, have I ever been so careless or sloppy in front of a girl.

Back to business. I crouched on the floor next to where the body had been discovered. Whoever had cleaned the room had done an excellent job; there was minimal staining to the hardwood floor and most of that was at the joints. Jeffrey had done a clean job himself. There was no trace of cleaning blood from the walls or furniture and it wasn't that it had been replaced—the dust told me that.

I stood with my back to the door, looking out the window. Jeffrey's room faced east overlooking an English garden. I wasn't getting much from the room itself except maybe a feeling of being trapped. More than anything, there was a general sense of oppression—a bird in a gilded cage sort of thing.

The bed didn't have much else to give me. It was unmade and smelled ever so faintly of sweaty teen sex. I touched the linen sheets and almost laughed out loud. I

remember when I was that age, trying to get away with it. We were both so inexperienced and clumsy. The girl was timid and yet... that was odd. The girl was more experienced—like she was teaching him.

I moved over to the walk-in closet; I could feel the girl there as well. As tall as my nose with dull brown hair tied back in an unimaginative ponytail. Her hands were harder than his. I saw slight grooving in the paint on the closet door. This girl had a callous and was strong. She wasn't upper-class. There were even slight treads in the carpet from where she had been. She weighed less but she was stronger than him. It didn't make sense.

On one of the top shelves in the closet was a drawing pad. I flipped through what were first childish, then accomplished drawings. Jeffrey was an artist. He wanted to draw and his mom didn't want him to. She wanted him to be more practical.

At Jeffrey's desk there was a tiny note, "Sunset". The thing smelled of oil and sweat—like he had carried it in his hand—but there was no adrenaline smell. This was something cherished, not protected or feared. Simple block lettering—not Jeffrey's handwriting. Jeffrey used sweeps and curls; he was an artist. Whoever had written the note was practical minded; this was straight and closed print. It wasn't his mother, though; her handwriting was self-important and dramatic.

The girl flashed into my head again. It was too easy to pick her up in the room. She must have been a member of staff. That would explain the strength to weight ratio and calloused hands. But it wouldn't explain the note or the sweaty teen sex. I was going to have to take the facts home to digest.

If I had the girl, I had the case. Easy. The whole thing revolved around her. I pocketed the note and slipped my *carte blanche* in the page slot.

A minute later, Miss Muiz opened the door. "Did you find anything interesting?"

"I found something," I answered. "I don't know if you would find it interesting or not."

"Try me."

"I found a girl, about so high with brown hair. Mean anything to you? Maybe a kid of one of the staff?"

Miss Muiz furrowed her brow. "The police didn't say anything about a girl. Where did you find her?"

"All over the bed."

She crossed her arms and paced the room. "If Mrs. Taylor wasn't so firm in her convictions we'd have known this earlier. One of the police talents could have cleared all this up. Just the fact that she hasn't allowed any talents in the room has cast suspicion her way."

"Yeah," I fumbled some more. My god, I wanted Miss Muiz. She must have been pumping out some kind of pheromone. "Mrs. Taylor still can't know. I don't have a good idea of her face yet and I'm not good enough to get it. If there was another way of 'discovering' the girl, I could get away with that."

The house assistant gave me a sideways smile. "Maybe there is. Follow me." We left Jeffrey's room and strode to a less imposing door at the end of the hallway.

Miss Muiz held a hand up and asked to wait there while she slipped in. Two sec-

onds later she returned with a small black book of phone numbers and addresses. I flipped through it and noticed one of the “G-H-I” pages had been ripped out. Unfortunately, Jeffrey was inconsistent with how he entered names into the book. Some were last name first, some were first name first.

“You might find someone in there,” Miss Muiz explained. “I had hidden the book trying to hide his friends. Many of them are Hypnogouge faithful and I didn’t want to let Mrs. Taylor turn her son into a martyr for her cause.”

There was a café listed in the book. “I think I may have found something. If I get any news, I’ll let you know first.”

She gave me an honest smile. “Thanks.”

4. The Interview Process

Jeffrey’s friends were well-to-do want-for-nothings. I found three of them in an up-scale coffee shop quoting Marx while being rude to the wait-staff. That sort of thing has always bothered me—it bothered me even more under the influence.

“So do you quote him because he’s right,” I asked, “Or because of that certain ketch quality that all anti-bourgeoisie literature has?”

They tried to ignore me and stirred their decaf latte non-fats—no whip.

“It’s just that it must be hard for elitists like yourselves to stomach that egalitarian crap. Seeing as how you’re better than everyone else.” I helped myself to a chair.

One kid in a silk shirt and Caesar-cut leaned in. “And you don’t think that?”

A girl in tweed giggled and sipped her drink. “Everyone is better than everyone else—at one thing or another.”

I grinned at her pale attempt to be clever. Inside she was praying that no one else remembered where the line came from. She’d heard one of the not-so-popular kids say it at school. If anyone caught her quoting one of them, it would be social death.

The silk-shirt leaned back. “You don’t care much for appearances. What’s a dirty old man like you want with the beautiful people?”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. That’s one of the problems with NVL; you can skip past everyone else’s bullshit, but you also skip past your own. Some people call it honesty—most of them call it rude. I called the waitress over and ordered a café-brevé, “with extra animal fat and caffeine if possible—and real sugar.”

The giggle girl informed how bad that was for me. I told her I didn’t care.

Silky was losing his patience, “What do you want, old man?”

“First, I want you to stop calling me ‘old man’. You’re only ten years younger than me,” I leaned over him, “Fifteen, tops. Second, I wanted to ask you about Jeffrey. You remember Jeffrey, right?”

He remembered. Sometimes, there are things you never want to know and this was something I had never wanted to see. Silk-shirt, who’s name was Peter, had gone to Jeffrey in tears over a girl. She had broken poor Peter’s heart and Jeffrey was willing to help. Eventually, the two of them wound up in a... “compromising” situation. I could let that pass. They were safe, they used protection, no one got hurt, and no one got pregnant.

“What do you want to know about him?” Peter asked. He seemed a little humbled.

The waitress came with my drink. I asked how much I owed her and she told me it was free of charge. “Thanks, Hon,” I stirred in raw sugar and ate the foam with a spoon. Then I turned my attention back to the kids. “I want to know why he killed himself. I want to know why a boy who had everything would do something like that. I want to know why in god’s name this kid felt that was necessary. At least, that’s what his mother hired me to find out.”

Giggle-girl, real name Suzie, looked very solemn. “He hated his mother. They were always fighting about one thing or another. He wanted to play piano; she wanted him to take violin.”

“Great leaders play the violin,” it was the third member of the party, a blonde boy. I tried to ignore him. “What else did they fight about?”

Suzie looked to the others for approval. They didn’t look like they had an opinion one way or the other. “He wanted to be an artist; she wanted him to be a business man.”

“How noble!” the blonde exclaimed.

“I...I don’t want to say anymore,” Suzie excused herself.

Peter leaned back and toyed with his empty glass. “You’ll have to forgive her. She had a bit of a crush on him.”

She knew she could save him, the blonde explained to me. *She was sure of it.*

Peter didn’t even hear what his friend had said. The blonde was a talent. He was more quiet than the others and stared intently at me.

I’ve had conversations like this before. There are no actual words spoken, but a subtle ballet of gesture and nuance where questions come across as smells and eyebrows accuse. It was like everything around us had been sped-up and we were the only people running at normal speed.

The blonde laughed and stared under his eyebrows at me. *They don’t know.*

Secret’s safe, I assured him. *But you and I will be talking later.*

“Jeff was one of those unique people who could do anything,” Peter said. “If he wanted to learn how to do it, he did. He played musical instruments—real ones. He spoke foreign languages. He was an athlete—a golden boy. Stranger, faster, smarter, and more handsome than anyone else.” He laughed to himself and shook his head. “That’s not true. I’m just saying that because he’s dead. He was just like anyone else.”

“He was a brat,” I offered.

Peter glared at me with hurt eyes. “He was like a brother to me. We were best friends. He had everything! I can’t name five people who wouldn’t want to be him.”

“I bet you could now,” snipped the blonde.

“Jesus Christ, Dave, how am I supposed to.... You bastard! God damn!”

With that Peter stood up and stormed out. He bumped into Suzie halfway.

“What just happened?” she asked.

Dave, the blonde, leered at her. “Our dear friend Peter was forced into being honest with someone and having nothing to gain.”

Suzie giggled self-consciously. “Maybe I should talk to him.”

As she got up to leave, the talented blonde signaled to me, *She’s found a new*

crush. That's good. She'll never have to experience real loss.

"David, is it?" I turned to him.

He smiled. "That's right."

"Does Jeff's mom know what you are?"

The grin was more predatory now. "Hell no." He tossed his head and looked around the café. "Let's walk—it's too noisy in here."

I didn't like the sound of that. "I think we should stay here—where the people are. Then maybe you won't jump me."

He shot me a look and tried a little twisting. That's something I hate about talents like that—their ability to twist and prompt what's going on in your own head. The boy wanted out; he wanted one of my cigarettes and he was sure he could get one off me. He wanted cash. He wanted the thrill of being real just for once and the only way he knew how to be real was to bleed—or to taste blood.

"Are you registered?" I asked, changing the subject.

He dragged his fingernails on the tabletop in frustration. "Yes. Yes, I'm registered. And I went to all the happy fun-time schools to boot. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Yeah?" I called the waitress over for another coffee. "What do they teach you in those schools?"

"Ethics." He sneered. "Seven periods of ethics, and morality, and sociology, and why it's wrong to want what you want and to try and get what you want."

"Well," I laughed, "That's got to be better than an underground government bunker. That's what happened to the first, you know. They're only now getting comp—"

"Yeah yeah yeah. I read the fact sheets." I could feel the anger and resentment rolling off him in thick orange waves. Then he lifted an eyebrow my way. "Why are you afraid of me?"

I shook my head. "I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid for you. You're going to wind up living like an animal if you keep that up. You'll alienate yourself and go nuts."

He started popping his knuckles. "I revel in my anger. It keeps me alive. It's a real honest feeling."

"But you always have to keep it in check."

"I don't have to do that anymore," he rubbed a temple. "They did that for me. Most of that is programming anyway. It's not ethics or 'value learning' or any of that crap. It's a fear response that maybe one of us will be stronger than that. That maybe someday a talent will come along that won't take second best." He grinned. "We're the future, like it or not. We can heal, or we can hurt, but we're not going away. People are going to have to learn to live with us—to bring themselves up to our level, rather than drag us down to theirs. It pisses me off. They don't do anything to make themselves better. You can't teach us pre-talent morality, it doesn't work with us. I've taken 'charm' classes, or whatever they call those manners drills. It doesn't work. How can I try to be polite to someone when I know what they really think of me? You just see me as a snot-nosed brat who's out past curfew. I'm more than that and you'll never be able to get over your first impression—the wrong impression. I hate that two-faced nature. I'm sick of everyone lying to me."

"I'm not lying to you," I wasn't.

David shut his eyes and sighed. “No, you’re not. I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not.”

He laughed. “No, not really. Not for what I said, just how I said it.”

The waitress came by with my drink and refilled David’s water. He took a long draught off the glass and sighed again. His hands were shaking and I pointed it out.

“Nothing gets past you,” he said silently.

“Not tonight,” I joked.

I feel I should take the time to mention the registration process. Any child who shows signs of talent has to be registered with the federal government. Most of pre-school and elementary is spent in a federally funded system to “soothe and educate”. Talents tend to be high-strung and flighty. Pre-cogs are impatient, empaths are suspicious, TK’s are overbearing and egotistical—or idiot savant. The registration process and the schooling it entailed were created to assist talents in working in the world of normals.

Another fun side benefit is, they’ll rate your talent and put it in your file. Any talent can be re-tested for a ‘better’ rating. Highly rated pre-cogs and empaths will make better pay than low-rated ones. Well, it depends on where they’re working. I knew a pre-cog who worked down on Wall Street. He could practically write his own ticket.

Now, the schooling has nothing to do with helping focus the talent or anything like that. As a matter of fact, the kids who are just starting usually rate higher than the ones who are leaving. The school isn’t there for them—it’s there for us.

So here I was, sitting across the table from Prometheus chained. He finally opened his eyes and started at me.

“Why would he do it?” The boy looked at the edge of tears. “I don’t understand. He had every chance in the world to be better. He didn’t have my stigma; he didn’t have Peter’s...failings. None of that. He had everything: money, clothes, security, schooling, normality, a great girlfriend...”

Now the girl I had seen in the room made sense. I held my hand up to my nose. “About this high, with mousy brown hair?”

“Mousy, yes,” David answered. “Virginia.”

“What’s her last name?”

“Virginia Hubbard.”

5. Virginia Hubbard

It seemed that Jeffrey Taylor, heir to the great Taylor Empire, had a girlfriend—underage like himself. I decided to continue my investigation there. If anyone knew why Jeffrey would off himself, or who his enemies were, it would be this girl.

Virginia Hubbard and her father lived in the not-so-nice side of town. I couldn’t quite figure out what a wealthy heir would be doing with a girl like that. They obviously didn’t meet in school; Jeffrey was a private tie kind of boy, while she was obviously public school fodder. The nearest I could figure was Jeffrey had met her at a club or a flick. I had already taken a couple tabs on the ride down, so I was pretty primed to start asking questions. One thing about NVL, you get damned curious while you’re on it. You have to study

everything and figure everything out.

Virginia's father met me at the door of their apartment. He was the biggest man I have ever seen. His pinky was about as big as my thumb, and his arms were—he was huge. Her father was a manual day laborer—running forklifts and backhoes whenever someone needed cheap manpower. I would have nightmares about meeting this man in a dark alley for weeks to come.

When the guy opened the door, all I could see was how tired he was. The NVL had started to kick in and everything was coming into full light. Mr. Hubbard was a man haunted by bills and abandoned dreams. He wanted the best for his little girl, I could smell it, and he wasn't going to let anything stand in the way of a better life for her. Mr. Hubbard was a strong man, and a good man, but he wasn't a particularly smart man and that's really what Virginia needed.

We exchanged a few words. "Martha Taylor is looking at implicating your daughter in her son's suicide." I settled him with cloying words. "I'm here to help clear that up." The poor guy bought it and didn't even ask for ID. Anything to protect his only treasure, the only thing his wife left him.

Virginia herself was a charming child. She would be turning eighteen in the next three months and was looking more and more like the deceased Mrs. Hubbard everyday, according to her father's views. I found the man intensely distracting, but useful nonetheless. He provided an intimate background for Virginia to walk across. I was only mildly disappointed when he excused himself to the back room for evening activities.

Virginia and I sat in the main room. She rubbed her hands together and played with her braids. Perfectly charming. Charming and nervous as hell.

I asked her about Jeffrey. She started to describe him in slow pauses. From the way she spoke, I could tell she had gone to a better school, one of the little expenses her father could barely afford. The way she moved was careful and rehearsed. I had seen the exact same motions from the uptown waitresses and when young Virginia had come out of her room, I had glimpsed the apron she wore at work.

Why was this child working? Somehow she had wrangled a fake ID and an uptown waiting job. I don't know how they had managed that. Visits like this would make her nervous of course. She was breaking the law and her father obviously knew about it. A child her age working anywhere was illegal. Going to school and getting an education was her first line of responsibility, right? That's how it was in my day. You went to school through the year and when you graduated, you were eligible for work. That's when graduating meant something. It was the law. If your parents couldn't afford to support you, they shouldn't have had you. That was just sheer irresponsibility.

"Mrs. Taylor never liked me," Virginia interrupted my brief slip into self-examination. Meanwhile nasty images of threatening letters and phone calls raced through her mind. "I was gutter trash as far as she was concerned." I could smell the fear on this child, this intelligent, shrewd child who was saving up to go to school and live a better life. For a moment, Virginia thought about what would happen if Mrs. Taylor found out about the waiting job. A brief shiver.

"What did you think of Mrs. Taylor?"

Virginia stared at the ceiling. "I don't think she really liked Jeffrey. When he was at his happiest, she was at her worst. She was always trying to control his life: this is the school you go to, these are your friends, this is what you wear, this is what you eat, this is where you sleep and this is when you do that. She had completely structured his life to almost nothing but what she wanted him to do. She wanted him to take over the family business. I guess ever since his father died, she's had a lot on her mind."

And then she brushed her belly. It was such a minute motion and I might not have noticed it, but the NVL exaggerated everything. She may as well have swung her arm across the room. It wasn't showing quite yet and she'd turn eighteen a few months before it was born. If the authorities found out, the pregnancy would have to be terminated. It's illegal, as we all know well, for a child to have a child. It stunts their growth and destroys their future. That's what the Children's Amendment taught us all.

No, Virginia would make an excellent mother. She loved and wanted the child, and with her work experience and savings, would have no problem caring for a baby.

An interesting development. For a moment I jumped the gun thought there had been an argument about it. Maybe Virginia had told him about their child and he had threatened to report her. Maybe her father had killed the boy. But that was a wrong turn. Her father might get himself worked up, but a man that large learns self-control very quickly or else he winds up in prison for something he "didn't mean to do". No, Jeffrey had been happy to hear the news, ecstatic even. Virginia's father liked the boy and welcomed him when he came by.

Jeffrey's mother, on the other hand, would have been furious.

"Where did you and Jeffrey meet?" The moment I asked, she started choking back tears. She told me fully, and thought every word out loud. I only got pictures and overtones of voices from her. She didn't know I was aware, but with that, it didn't matter.

"I was going to Hypnogouge. My mother used to go there and so when she died two years ago, I needed something for comfort. When I was there, surrounded by people and listening to music, I didn't feel alone. I felt like she was with me. Have you ever been?"

I lied and said I hadn't.

She sighed. "A lot of people are against it. I never realized how prejudiced they could be until I met Mrs. Taylor. With Dad, it was 'What ever makes you happy, Pump-kin,' but Mrs. Taylor hated us for it."

"She didn't approve of Jeffrey's going," It was more of a statement than a question. I already knew.

"Jeff went down there one night with some school friends, just to see what the fuss was about. He was dressed in velvet, I remember that. The next time he was in corduroy. The third week he wore silk. He had a budget for nice clothes; most people just pick one comfortable outfit and wear that.

"After Hypnogouge, he started playing piano. It was beautiful. He could make anyone cry with his playing. He told me he'd never taken lessons, but it was hard to believe with how well he played."

"His mother didn't make him take piano?"

“No, she insisted on violin. And after that, he started drawing. I have some of them here,” and she bounded into the next room.

She returned with several large sheets of paper. The drawings were gifted and sensitive, but it may have just been the waves she was giving off. A sleeping cat. A man walking a dog. A woman washing dishes. A nude of Virginia.

“They are very nice,” I was looking at the nude. She realized what drawing it was, blushed and quickly returned them to her room.

When she sat back down, I asked about Jeffrey and his mother. Were they at least civil with each other? Suddenly, I heard the yelling and screaming as Virginia recalled Mrs. Taylor.

“No, they weren’t.”

She was holding back. Jeffrey and his mother fought like cats and dogs. She wanted him to go to one of the better schools upstate and called Hypnogouge a “den of hedonistic hippies”. She had threatened to cut off his allowance and send him to military school. Martha Taylor had even threatened her own son with prison.

“She said she didn’t know what to do with him. He was reckless and selfish. Jeff was going to have a book of his drawings published and she tore the acceptance letter into a million pieces. When he asked her about his happiness, she said that wasn’t important. It was horrible. How could anyone say that to their own son?”

Because, Virginia, she didn’t love him, not the way you did, not the way you love your own child. She had him out of duty. It probably got to him and he slit his own throat in despair. Maybe he did commit suicide, but his mother drove him to it.

“And now, she wants to destroy me to!” Virginia was sobbing. “She’s out to blacklist Dad and if she has her way, why, if she wanted to, no school would accept me! She’d just threaten to pull funding...” These weren’t wild speculations. Mrs. Taylor had threatened Jeffrey with these things one night while Virginia hid in his closet. If Mrs. Taylor decided to destroy someone, she could. Virginia could just forget about her wild dreams of being a pediatrician. No loan officer would deal with such a ruined family.

“What does the word ‘sunset’ mean to you?” I asked.

She clutched her belly, and then self-consciously gripped the arms of her chair. “I don’t know what you mean...”

Oh, her mind was going a mile a minute. All I could hear was her *Please don’t let them take this from me it’s all I have left of him dear god let me keep this one I love him and he loves me and I will carry this through but don’t let them stop me don’t let them destroy this beautiful thing....*

Suddenly my eyes started to water and my throat tightened up. It was getting harder and harder to concentrate on what was going on. Why was she so nervous? I tried to gather myself. “Sunset,” I started, “Was a note I found in Jeffrey’s desk. ‘Sunset’. Nothing else.”

She seemed to calm down. “Oh, I thought you meant something else.”

“What did you think I meant?” It seemed such an odd thing to say. “You didn’t think I meant the kid, did you?”

Virginia’s eyes bugged out of her head. “So, you’re like the others. You’re just like

them! Well, I won't let you do anything to my baby. My baby won't let you do anything to him. Don't you ever threaten my child's life again!"

Mr. Hubbard came out from the back room to see what the shouting was about. Virginia squawked on about how I was just like the others: "He's another sneak, just like the rest!"

Mr. Hubbard took my hand and walked me to the door. "Well, mister, I'm sorry but you won't be able to stay here. Little Virginia is in a very sensitive time and can't be upset." He walked out of the apartment with me and helped me down the long flight of stairs--talking the whole time. "She's a lot like her mother, my little Virginia."

I rubbed at my temples. "She's had other visitors?"

He laid one of his huge hands on my shoulder. "A lot of people have come so see us since that poor boy hurt himself. Most come in and point fingers at her and call her names, but I never saw them to the door. She just chases them off herself." I started to twist my ankle; Mr. Hubbard caught me and lifted me back up onto my feet. "I don't know what she says to them, but they get and stay gone." He gave me a round-toothed smile. "But you've been real polite with her, so I'll see you get home."

He walked me out of the apartment building and down to the transit-stop.

"Where do you want to go?" He asked.

"I don't know." I could barely think and my head was hurting.

He pulled a book of matches out of my pocket from the Lakewood Landing. "How about I send you here?"

I started at the book of matches. Sappho--she would be there. She sold me the wrong thing. This was all wrong.

"I'm really sorry about this mister," he placed the matches back in my pocket and waved the transit down. "Virginia really has her mind set on this and she's not going to let anyone take it from her. I hope your head feels better."

The transit pulled to a stop and Mr. Hubbard helped me aboard. I watched him through the back window as we pulled away; he was wringing his hands and shaking his head. The entire time I was thinking about my auto; I would have to make another trip down to retrieve it. Hopefully they didn't tow in this neighborhood.

6. The Healing Process

When I go back to the Lakewood Landing, Sappho was still there, drinking away.

"Greetings, gleaner Thomas," she piped cheerily.

"Hello, dealer Sappho," I growled. I was pissed. "You sold me bunk skip."

She looked genuinely hurt. "Why would I do that? It's bad business and you might go religious on me."

"I went to interview the Taylor boy's girlfriend and I can hardly remember a thing. I needed the stuff to work, not get a cheap high. You sold me crap."

She started to stare at me and it was making me uncomfortable. "What do you mean, you don't remember anything? I got you the same as usual, same dosage, same everything. Who have you seen tonight?"

“Virginia Hubbard and her father and...” I couldn't remember. There had been someone else there, but who was it? No, it had just been them. I was mistaken.

“And who?” she asked.

“And no-one,” I snapped back. “It was just those two.”

“Where do they live?” Sappho was studying me. I could feel myself squirming.

“How should I know?”

She started to get out the money for her drinks. “Well, you went and saw them, so you must know where they live. Where is that? Uptown? Downtown? Apartment or house?”

“They live in a condo,” I was guessing at that point. I really had no idea how I got there.

Sappho leaned in and stared me straight in the eyes. “Let's go back to your place. Do you remember how to get there?”

That pissed me off. “Of course I do; it's walking distance from here.”

But outside I starting walking the wrong way, and even after Sappho lifted my wallet off me (dirty sneak) and told me where I lived, I still couldn't make the walk. I kept taking wrong turns and tried to enter several wrong buildings on the way. We made it to my building (Mine, damn it. I owned the thing) and started the long walk up the stairs. I kept tripping and had trouble working the keys. Looking back on it, I'm glad the dead bolt was the only security I had invested in. I wouldn't have been able to remember a door code.

Once inside, Sappho sat me down on the couch and stared intensely into my eyes. “Now, listen very carefully. Try to think. Try to remember what happened back there. Who was in the apartment when you went to visit Virginia Hubbard? Please tell me what you remember about it. Did you eat anything? Did you drink anything?”

“Virginia who?” I was in sad shape.

She grabbed my head with both hands and pulled me in until our noses were a centimeter apart. I thought she was going to kiss me and was disappointed when she didn't. “If you don't help me, it's only going to get worse. I need you to think about what happened back there. It's the only way I can find the damage and fix it. Please, Thomas, I need your help. You want to do this. You'll feel better if you do this. You need to do this. You want me to help you through this. Please, I need your co-operation on this.”

I pretty much started rambling at that point. I told her about the ride down, and when Mrs. Taylor hired me, and when I first met her and the first time I took skip and got clarity and memories about my mother and the ride down to the Hubbards' and Virginia's huge father, and just when I really started to loose it, I passed out.

* * * * *

When I woke up, my head hurt and Sappho was smoking my cigarettes.

“Don't move too fast,” she said between puffs. “You're lucky you can remember how to breathe.”

“What just happened?”

“Well, it didn't *just* happen, it happened about six hours ago. But basically, someone didn't want you to remember something so they started putting up blocks. The only

problem is, they never stopped.”

“I got wiped,” I moaned and reached for my smokes. I had seen it happen before to other gleaners. Some talents were nasty and knew how to hurt where it hurts a gleaner most. “Like a screen, wiped, blank, complete delete.”

“Not delete,” she corrected me. “More like hide. Restricted access.”

“Who?” I couldn't find my lighter.

Sappho had it and lit the cigarette for me. “Virginia's kid. He's good.”

I took a long drag. “I was attacked by a fetus?”

“Talk about rights for un-born children,” she laughed at her own joke. I didn't think it was funny and glowered at her. “No wonder so many people are afraid of Hypnogouge.” She grinned through the smoke. “You remember much?”

I pressed at my temples and rubbed caked blood from my nose. “Oh yeah. I remember every god damned thing now. I should report the little bastard.”

Sappho slid off my desk and walked to the kitchen. “You do that and a doctor's gonna die. That child isn't going to take too kindly to an attempt on his life. He just saw you as a threat. You're lucky. He could have really rearranged your face, and I mean that. There are six talents down at the county hospital on life-support. As the first non-talent on this case, I congratulate you on getting this far.”

“Is this some kind of test?” I rubbed my head. “How do you know about this? What the hell is going on? How many people are involved in this?”

She held her hands out in mock-surrender. “Will you settle down? We talents are a very close-knit group, okay? It's just stuff I've been hearing about. I was worried that something might happen to you--that's why I put the box of matches in your pocket; you needed someone to guide you back if anything happened and my instinct was right. I'm just glad I found you. Now I can tell the others...”

“Why does my head hurt?” I followed her into the kitchen on shaky legs. She was getting my coffee maker ready to do its job. “Is it brain damage?”

Sappho spooned the grounds into the top and laughed. “Hardly. You're just experienced what most dis-associatives get after integration.”

I rinsed out a mug. “You've lost me.”

“Multiple personalities,” she explained. “Also known as dissociative identity disorder. When they switch from one personality to another, they get headaches. Same thing when personalities share information. I see it a lot down at the hospital.”

“Hospital?” It had never occurred to me that Sappho might be a multiple.

“Yeah,” she smiled, somewhat strained. “It's where I work--at the state hospital. You didn't think that the few credits I download from your account paid my bills did you? Where did you think I got your supply? You've been using medical grade skip, not that crap from Hypnogouge. It's uncut. No X, no acid. Pure NVL.”

I was still reeling from the revelation that she had a real job. She had never struck me as the philanthropic sort. And it had never occurred to me that my working addiction was being funded by a kook farm. “Do you mean to tell me that you've been giving me the same stuff that they give nut-bags? How long have you been working there?”

“Officially, since I turned legal,” she grinned. “Un-officially, since my mom fig-

ured out what I could do.”

“And that is?”

The coffee she had started had finished brewing and she poured me a cup. “People co-operate with me. They always have. It's a good thing you came to see me after your little run in with Virginia's son. Opening closed doors is one of my specialties. I help people remember and I do re-integration on the physical level. We had one case, oh, I think she had eighty or so running around in there...”

I couldn't let her finish. “Eighty what?”

“Personalities,” she smiled and poured herself a cup. “Do you have any cream? This stuff is awfully strong.”

“I like it like that. Anyway, cream goes bad.”

“Just asking. Anyway, she had sections that were blocked off to the point that she couldn't remember her own name. It's really just a function of memory, you know. It comes down to, 'I don't want to remember that this happened to me, so it won't' and it's just like it happened to someone else. Personality is a function of memory. What you learned today will govern your actions tomorrow.”

“And that's why I have a headache?” I sipped my coffee; it helped.

Sappho walked back into the main room and resumed her perch on my desk. “From what you've told me, or should I say, from what you told me earlier, I'd start looking a little closer to home for Jeffrey Taylor's killer. I think someone was trying to do his mom a favor. Did he have any brothers or sisters? Who was the next in line to take over the company?”

I dug through my brain, but it was like digging in quicksand. “I'm too muddled to think right now. Why don't you just tell me what you think and I'll see what I can come up with.”

She sat and sipped her coffee. “It's just that, I don't think he wanted to follow in his momma-san's footsteps. Compared to his music or his artwork, it must have seemed pretty petty to him.”

“I'm not following you.”

“That's because you've been jostled.” She stared into space. “Hypnogouge belief states that...”

“I didn't know it had a dogma.”

“It doesn't, but there are basic beliefs that people take home with them. Mainly, that the worth of a human is their influence on other humans--what they can create and the feelings they can bring out in other people. Like with me, my purpose is to help people live happy, functional lives. I do that at the hospital. I take broken things and fix them. That's my job. It's my duty to the human race to live to my full potential. If I thought it was my duty to play music that woke something up in other people, or create works of art that showed how wondrous the world really was, I don't think I could live with myself if someone wouldn't let me do it.”

“You think the Taylor boy slit his own throat.”

“I think that someone slit it for him. I think that his mother, or someone with her interests in mind, did it. I think someone was trying to keep him from being the next Lord

Byron. I think someone was trying to protect Mrs. Taylor from having to deal with the failure of a son who didn't like her and didn't like what she had slated out for him. I wouldn't be surprised if she did it herself. I'll bet that's the real reason she won't let any police talents on the scene." Sappho handed me a cigarette and lit it for me. I hadn't even realized I wanted it until then. I was still pretty messed up.

"Okay, so she kills the boy. Why does she hire me to find his killer?"

"Easy," She lit her own smoke and knocked her head back with the inhale. "She wants to blame the girlfriend, destroy the child who's in-line to inherit, and wipe out any memory of her own failure as a mother."

"And you got all this from what I told you this evening?" My head was spinning.

"I could have told you all that this afternoon when you came to see me."

"I thought Mrs. Taylor hated talents and wouldn't hire them."

She leaned back on my desk and laughed. "Who said she did? I was talking about that card you gave me. It was tough, but there was still a little left."

I sipped my coffee and flicked the ash from my cigarette. "I guess I didn't read the fine print."

"You wouldn't have been able to. You don't have co-operation."

I rubbed at my temples. The entire night had been a bust and I felt like crap. All I wanted to do was sleep.

"May I make a suggestion?" asked Sappho.

I nodded feebly.

"Take a nice long shower, get some rest, and tomorrow morning give Mrs. Taylor her money back and drop the case. You can't tell the authorities what you know without endangering the baby, his mother, and her father. Wait four months until the girl's legal and the kid's born, then spill everything."

"That's a lousy suggestion."

"Are you kidding? A hot shower would do you a world of good." She walked her mug into the kitchen.

"I meant about dropping the case," I shouted after her. "I think that's a coward way to deal with it."

"Think of it this way," she picked up her backpack from next to my desk. "You tell what you know now, and three good people get a world of hurt for it. You drop the case, and you're out a few bucks. I think anything else would be more cowardly."

And with that, she placed a kiss on my forehead and waltzed out the front door.

7. Dropping the Case

I called Mrs. Taylor the next day and told her I had to drop the case. I lied and said that family business had come up and I had to leave town to take care of it. She sounded strained, but thanked me for taking it in the first place and told me to keep the money. I felt a little bad about keeping it and lying to her, but only a little bad.

I still uploaded everything I knew up to my account. I didn't say anything about the baby or what it had done to me. That would have let people know something was up. I

just put up what Virginia had told me and set a date for release on it. Two weeks after Virginia's eighteenth birthday. I thought it would make a nice surprise.

I stayed in my apartment for the most part. Sappho would come by with drinks and NVL. We'd spend all night talking about what was going on out there in the world, or just listening to music. I collected rent from my tenants and had food delivered. I had become a hermit.

During that time, I decided to use the money Mrs. Taylor had given me to fix the building up. I evicted some troublemakers, renovated the empty units, charged a little more for rent, and fixed things as I could. Sappho helped me pick out wallpaper and carpet and we re-did all the hallways. I had the exterior sandblasted and replaced the broken glass. Renovating the building was something I had meant to do since my father had died.

I also fixed up the garden outside. When my parents had lived here, the garden was my mother's project, but it fell into disrepair after her death five years ago. Actually, the whole place had gone under after I took over. A gleaner's life of intrigue and adventure was far more interesting than taking care of my main source of income. I was finally acting like a landlord.

I noticed the change almost immediately. My tenants were saying things like "Hello" and "Good morning" and "How are you today, Mr. Thomas?" when I passed them on the stairs. Rent started coming in on time--sometimes early. Noise complaints went down. The police spent less time in front of my building. We joined the neighborhood watch. The school board listed us as a safe house.

The building wasn't the only thing changing. Working in the garden was more strenuous than sitting in front of a terminal so I started to lose weight and get a tan. I tried quitting smoking and wound up smoking less. I started eating fresh vegetables from the garden and fresh bread from my downstairs tenant, Mrs. Tortuga. People respected me. I felt younger.

Sappho came in one morning with Thai food and one of her stupid grins.

"One of your neighbors asked me when you were going to turn me into an honest woman," she giggled. "I thought about telling her I was a drug dealer that sold other people's prescriptions."

"That's Mrs. Harvey," I unpacked the food. "If you had said that, it would have given her a heart attack."

Sappho opened her chicken satay. "So, when are you going to make me honest?"

"Never. I think it's wrong to imprison a wild animal."

We sat and ate for a few minutes. I had been working most of the morning on the roof hooking up the repeaters for tenant access. If they had access, they'd use more electricity. Secretly, I was still a slumlord.

"You've done a really nice job with the place," Sappho said between bites. "What happened to you, huh? Why'd you decide to start doing your job?"

"I figured I'd be here for a while. I might as well live in style."

"Makes sense."

"I wanted the neighborhood to be proud we were here."

"Right, sure."

“I thought being the landlord of a dump would look bad on my resume.”

“Whatever. What's the real reason?”

Long sigh. I couldn't get past her. “Gleaning took me away from what was really going on. That's the sad part. I went out to observe what was going on, but I never noticed what was happening in my own home. I had to stop that. What better way to do it than with the money I had made from a case?”

Sappho's eyes bugged and she coughed a bit. “She paid you that much? My god, man, I didn't know gleaning paid that well.”

I passed her a glass of water. “It doesn't. I still had to dip into savings.”

“Wow,” she said between coughing and gagging. “Who would have thought you could take this so seriously?”

I gave her a hard look. “You take your real job seriously.”

“My real job helps people.”

“I give them somewhere to live.”

We ate in silence. I cleared my plate and headed back out for the roof.

“Oh, hey,” Sappho shouted after me after I was half way up. “Virginia Hubbard gave birth this morning to an eight pound baby boy named Sunset.”

8. Secret's Out

I had been waiting for the news for some time and now that it was out, I could leak what I knew. I called up Miss Muiz at the Taylor estate and let her know what I was about to release. After she gave the okay, I opened access for the whole dirty story and the police picked up on it. With something like that, well, ‘Cloudfoot’ made a pretty penny that night on several different fields. A reporter would call it a scoop; a detective would call it a clue. The police decided to call it evidence.

Talents swarmed over Virginia Hubbard and her newborn son. People made donations. Sunset Hubbard became a household name—the last scion of the Taylor empire. Speculation ran wild about who would inherit the Taylor fortune.

Virginia's father spent a month in jail for multiple violations against the Children's Amendment. He used the time to get some high-school classes out of the way. Thanks to rehabilitation programs, he was able to get a better job after he left. The sentence had been a month because Mr. Hubbard “just didn't know better”. The defense played up his lack of education and portrayed him as the victim of an educational system that “let one fall through the cracks”. I was glad to hear that he'd learned how to read. I still wonder to this day why Virginia and her mother never taught him. I guess they were women who needed a strong man, not a smart man. He was more of pet to them than anything.

Mrs. Taylor went to trial for custody of Sunset. My testimony was brought in by Virginia's lawyers to show what an evil woman Mrs. Taylor was. The fact that Jeffrey had slit his own throat was a definite count against the matriarch, but Virginia's breaking the law by working while pregnant was a count against her. Honestly, I don't know why I was called in at all. My investigation had revolved around Jeffrey Taylor, not his son. I had never even included the child in my Cloudfoot reports.

Virginia had brought Sunset for the whole thing. The baby had an immediate effect on the people around him. The police who had ruled on the suicide started to question their original findings. For a while, I actually thought that they'd reverse their decision and try to charge Mrs. Taylor with murder. Of course, there was no evidence that could prove it, but secretly, everyone in the courtroom wanted her to fry.

I can't really say the woman was evil, maybe just a little misguided. She wanted her son back and this was the only way she could do it. She felt that Virginia's lying and illegal secrecy was the cause for the suicide. She blamed Hypnogouge and NVL and talent tele-prompters who put unreal ideas into his head. She blamed a society that broke all the rules.

Virginia was there to defend her rights as a mother. She stood on the stand multiple times and was charming, or cried like a good little victim. Her stance was, "How could you let this woman raise a child at all? Her own son had slit his throat; if she had been a better mother, her son wouldn't have taken his own life."

Mrs. Taylor, who had never broken a law in her life and was known as a great humanitarian with several charitable interests involving children, was a logical favorite for custody of the child. She would be able to provide and care for Sunset better than anyone else. "I loved my son," she said. "I tried to do everything for him. He had the best education I could provide. He had medical care and always ate the right thing. I tried to follow the law. I did what was right according to the law of the land. The only reason I tried to get him out of Hypnogouge was it was destroying him. He was addicted to a dangerous drug before his eighteenth birthday. He was swayed by teen-agers how were more worldly than him. His...girlfriend...the mother of his child, was knowingly breaking the law by working when she should have been concentrating on her schooling. Had I known a child was involved, I would have done anything for him. He was a part of my son and I loved my son. I wanted whatever would bring about his happiness. To know that he hid something like that from me, something that brought him such joy and pride, that's something I will never forget. That's something I will have to take to my grave: that my son was ashamed to show me something that made him proud."

But, Virginia's tearful speech on how Mrs. Taylor had destroyed her son by trying to live his life for him—well—the jury looked like it wanted to leap out of its seat and tear Mrs. Taylor apart. Virginia sat there with that wailing baby on her lap and cried about how Jeffrey had no other way to go. "Of course he was ashamed. His mother had called us degenerates—the scum of society. She hated Hypnogouge because it taught that you didn't have to be rich to be successful. She was afraid of the change that had happened to her son because it wasn't a change she approved of. He wanted to be an artist—he was an artist—but she told him that was a shameful thing to be. She told him that if he wasn't what she wanted him to become that she would disown him. Of course Hypnogouge is to blame. Mrs. Taylor wants the whole place shut down. She's lobbying to have NVL outlawed. She was willing to sacrifice her own son for her legal cause! Martha Taylor may not have killed her son Jeffrey, but she practically put the razor in his hand!"

The redhead, Annie Field, had been present during the court drama. I had seen her sitting close to Mrs. Taylor for most of the trial. During Mrs. Taylor's testimony, she came

and sat by me. Funny thing was, once she did, I didn't hate Mrs. Taylor as much as I had through most of the ordeal.

"Of course not," she smiled after I told her. "It's that damn baby. He hates Mrs. Taylor and sees her as a threat. He wants everyone to hate her too."

That amazed me. "Have you told anyone? You should tell someone. Tell the bailiff or the judge."

She grinned. "I already have. The jury will be making their final decision well out of Sunset's sphere of influence. I'm here to field for them more than anyone else. And I'm not the only one."

Annie pointed around at others in the courtroom. "They're all fields. Mrs. Taylor hired them to come in and make sure this was a fair trial." They were all hard-eyed individuals with looks of stern concentration on their faces. I spotted Miss Muiz in the crowd. She looked straight ahead with furrowed brow.

After a week of arguments, examinations, and cross-examinations, Mrs. Taylor was declined custody of the child. She had lost her son completely and the jury seemed happy to do it. I remember watching them smile as the matriarch broke down in tears. She was ruined; she had lost to a gutter punk because a gutter punk who had broken the law and did drugs while she was pregnant was a better mother. It was a huge blow.

But something else had bothered me. Mrs. Taylor had been surprised, but overjoyed to hear that she had a grandchild--so overjoyed that she wanted to raise him. From when I had first spoken to Virginia, I thought that Mrs. Taylor would have been horrified to find there was a child. With what I had heard, Mrs. Taylor would have destroyed the family just to destroy the child. She wasn't an evil old witch--she was a lonely old woman who wanted to be loved. She had enough charities for children to prove that. Charity is an action of guilt. If you didn't feel just a little guilty about being better off than someone else is, you would never give your money away.

I remember that earlier that morning, while Mrs. Taylor's lawyers were cross-examining Virginia for the umpteenth time, Miss Muiz threw up in the courtroom. She had looked pained most of the day; the fielding had really taken it out of her. She wasn't the only one. The other fields in the room had suffered nosebleeds, fainting spells, and a variety of other ills. Annie seemed to have held up pretty well.

People around that baby just acted differently. I didn't want to get anywhere near him; I didn't want a repeat of the last time. I was glad that Annie, Miss Muiz, and the other fields had been there. I felt safe with them, knowing that Virginia and her demon child Sunset would never be able to get into my head. Nonetheless, I did need to talk to the young mother. I still had curiosity eating me up from inside and I wanted some answers to some final questions. I had to get the full story, and in order to get that I would have to visit the Hubbards.

I don't know what frightened me more, the fact that I had stayed out of the gleaning biz most of four months and liked it, or the fact that the Hubbard-Taylor kid had spooked me so badly I couldn't go down there by myself.

I called Sappho to cancel our session that night and then got on the horn with Mrs. Taylor. I needed to borrow one of her fields for the night. She was reluctant, but after I

explained what I needed, she sent the girl over. Ms. Annie Field came over in the Plymouth, looking pissed.

“So now I’m helping with a custody battle,” she whipped her sunglasses off. “Three years ago, I never would have thought it. Nowadays, I’m not so sure.”

I cleared off a chair for her. “I appreciate your coming by. I’m really going to need you for this one.”

“You sure spiffed this place up,” she glanced around the room. “I barely recognized it.”

“I had some time to fix it up,” I explained. “Your employer had paid me pretty well for...”

“You testified against my employer in court,” she didn’t sit down. “And it was your fact-sheet that caused the whole fracas in the first place. You’ve got a lot of nerve asking me to come over here.”

“I know Martha Taylor is a fine, upstanding woman,” I pleaded. “I said so in court. Look, if she didn’t trust me, she wouldn’t have sent you by, right?”

“It’s still reeks,” Annie put her shades back on. “Give me a cigarette and I’ll think about it.”

I handed over the precious tobacco and lit it for her.

“I’ll go,” she exhaled. “But I won’t like it.”

9. Sunset

Virginia Hubbard was still living with her father. He had been let out a week ago and was waiting at the door for us. The baby was wailing in the background.

“Watch out!” Annie shouted.

Mr. Hubbard swung one of his ham-sized fists at me. I thank whatever god there is that Annie was there. She grabbed the man’s fist, swung herself behind him and laid a kick to the back of his left knee. Mr. Hubbard hit the ground with a thump I could feel in my feet.

“What the hell was that?” Annie yelled at me. “I didn’t know I was going to have to save your hide too!”

Mr. Hubbard was gasping on the floor. “I don’t understand,” he was saying. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“You’re responsible for my father being in jail,” Virginia answered from her side of the room. She looked tired and worn.

Annie helped the huge man up. “He’s going to land himself in prison again if he keeps this crap up. How about you go outside and cool off, huh?”

Mr. Hubbard was rubbing his forehead. “Yeah, I...I think I will. I think I might go get some aspirin or something. Are you going to be okay, honey?”

“I’ll be fine, Daddy,” Virginia said. “Why don’t you go get a drink or something? This should be over soon.”

Annie let him out and shut the door after him. “I hate that kind of crap.”

I smiled best I could at Virginia. “Does your father always take swings at people

who come to visit? I remember he was much more polite the last time we met.”

“Maybe he had time to think about it,” Virginia responded. “After all, you went and had the poor man sent to prison for something I did.”

Something about her voice was strained and hurt. I couldn't put my finger on it without a healthy dose of NVL and I had quit taking the stuff. “Prison was a wonderful thing, Virginia. Daddy got to learn how to read. Why didn't you or your mother ever teach him how to read?”

She practically spat at me. “He didn't need to.”

I could feel my stomach turning. There was something sick and stunted in the air. Virginia wasn't nearly as charming as when I had first met her. I half expected her to split open like an egg sack and have thousands of insects crawl out of her. The girl was *that* sick looking.

“I interviewed you while you were still pregnant,” I explained. “I'm the gleaner who filed the report after your son was born.”

“You testified against Mrs. Taylor,” she replied. “I remember you.”

“Your kid cries a lot,” Annie was working her way between Sunset and me. “Is it okay if I hold him? I've never touched someone famous.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Virginia started. “Don't touch him. You just attacked my father; I don't think I want you touching my baby.”

“Your father attacked me first,” Annie retorted. “I was just defending myself. It's not like I broke his neck or something.”

Virginia started to stand up but stopped suddenly when Annie picked Sunset up. The baby kicked and screamed. Virginia gave Annie a dull look. “I don't understand what came over Daddy. I've never seen him attack anybody.”

“Maybe he's a little upset because the baby's been crying all day,” I offered.

“He only just started crying,” Virginia argued. “Sunset is usually a very well behaved child. I think he's one of the best babies in the world.”

I sat down facing the young mother. “Did you name him that before or after his father's death?”

“What do you mean?”

I gave Virginia a hard stare. “The father of your child killed himself and left a note of ‘sunset’. Maybe you could explain that. It was you who wrote the note. Maybe you know exactly why he killed himself...”

Virginia stared back. “First of all, Jeffrey never slit his own throat and...”

Annie was holding the baby and bouncing him up and down. The kid was wailing his head off and Annie was singing to him.

“He didn't start crying until you showed up,” Virginia had a lost look on her face. “It's so different when you're here. It's all so different. Why didn't you do this last time you were here?” Then she broke down and started to cry.

“This kid is exhausting me,” Annie complained. “And he's not that heavy.”

I reached out and took Virginia's hand. “It was the baby all along, wasn't it?”

Virginia tried to wipe away the tears and sniffled. “I've tried everything, really. I can't keep him happy all the time and if he isn't happy, oh god, if he isn't happy...” and

she started a whole new volley of tears.

“When did it start?” I asked. “It was when Mrs. Taylor started making threats, wasn’t it?”

Virginia rubbed her nose on her sleeve. “Jeffrey was a threat. He wanted to tell his mother, he wanted to live with us and help support Sunset, but that would have been so dangerous and Sunset couldn’t let him. He was so proud to be a father; he wanted to tell everyone. He was so happy, so proud.”

“I can’t keep this up much longer,” Annie said. “We need to hurry this up and I think it’s obvious what happened.”

“Sunset did it, didn’t he?” I asked. “He saw his own father as a threat.”

“He was going to expose us!” Virginia cried out. “What were we supposed to do? If anyone had found out, the pregnancy would have been terminated. He was inspired and wanted to write a song about it. I couldn’t stop him, he was such an artist, so inspired.”

“So Sunset put an idea in his own father’s head,” I made the summation. “Sunset asked his father to kill himself to remove the threat.”

“Very nice,” Annie said. “But I’d like to have enough energy left to get us out of range when it starts up again. We need to go now.”

Annie handed the girl her baby back and we backed out to the door.

“But what do I do?” Virginia begged. “What do I do now?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Try taking him to Hypnogouge.”

We backed out and walked to the car. Once outside, Annie started throwing up on the pavement. “Christ,” she swore. “Don’t ever ask me to do something like that again.”

10. Loose Ends

The fact sheets had a report that night of an apartment fire. When I read what had happened I cried for a good hour. I felt I should send flowers to Mr. Hubbard and apologize for everything. Virginia was in less pain now; she had died in the fire. Sunset had survived thanks to a kindly neighbor who heard his cries. I suspected something else, but there it is; the fact sheets can only broadcast so much.

Mrs. Taylor would be adopting her own grandson. The police had ruled it arson, but it was Virginia who had set the fire. It may have looked suspicious to the crowds, I mean, you lose a custody battle and the person you lost it to dies soon after. That’s one thing about having talents around--there’s no doubt. Mrs. Taylor was never suspected of anything. Of course not--she was innocent.

I didn’t see much of a fight from Mr. Hubbard. He’s lost his only daughter just as suddenly as he’d lost his wife. I don’t think he really wanted to deal with the child as was; he’d seen what Sunset could do and I wasn’t about to tell Mrs. Taylor that she had just taken her son’s murderer under her wing. (I’m sure Mrs. Taylor could always buy as many nannies as her grandson needed. Add to that, she had her fields.) I offered Mr. Hubbard a unit in my building. It was the least I could do for the man. Every time I got involved with his family, something went wrong. He was cursed with me.

Sappho came by that night with drinks but no NVL. I’m glad she didn’t bring the

stuff that night, though; I didn't want to know what else was going on out there. I already knew I had to confront her on something.

"You knew about the baby," I stated. Sappho had drunk enough that her guard was down.

"And?" she asked.

"So why didn't you tell me? You knew he was dangerous and you knew that he could have done something like that to his own father. You knew what Virginia would be facing once that kid was born." I was pissed. She had lied to me and let a lot of human suffering run around for it.

Sappho drunkenly lit a smoke. "So what if I did? She'll live."

"Virginia torched the place." I polished off my drink. "Or maybe you haven't heard, knowing what an unfaithful reader you are. She's dead."

She stared into space long and hard. "Well then," she said and took a long drag off her cigarette. "Well then," she repeated.

I started clearing bottles from the room. "That's right. How many lives were destroyed for that, huh? Who's the coward now, huh? I don't know why I let you past the front door. You're the worst kind of poisoner there is."

"I screwed up," Sappho was playing architect with her ash. Her eyes watered up. "I should have talked to someone first. I should have talked to a precog or something."

"You should have done something," I agreed. "But you lied to me and you acted irresponsibly. What were you thinking?"

She stared at the ceiling and numbly smoked. "I thought I was doing the world a favor. Mrs. Taylor was an unhappy woman. She hated her son and what he'd become. Secretly, she was glad he died." She gave me a long stare. "She was the perfect bad guy. Rich, mean, powerful—everything that the common person hates because they don't have it."

"Jealousy, rage, and a secret mistress," I recanted. "That's what I was supposed to find and you wanted me to find it. How long had you known about the baby?"

"Since I heard the news."

"Then why did you lie to me?" I was getting more and more pissed by the minute. "Why did you let me sit back while the world blew up? Why'd you let me report any of it? Someone could have helped Virginia with that kid--there are facilities for that sort of thing. If anyone had known that the child was responsible they could have given him a proper environment but instead his mother dies in a fire and unprepared people are about to raise him. Why didn't you let me know what I was getting into?"

Sappho started laughing. "You're a lousy reporter; you know that? You're a bad gleaner. If you had been doing your job, you would have finished the investigation. If you hadn't given up after that night, if maybe you'd dug a little deeper, looked a little harder, you might have found the truth yourself. But no, you were willing to listen to me and hide in your apartment until everything was okay for you to run out and be the hero. Christ, man! You testified in court! This is more your fault than anyone else."

I grabbed her smokes from her and stole a cigarette. "I feel used."

She got up and walked into the kitchen. "You should. You were used." She came

back in with four more drinks. "I used you to protect something I hold very dear and to destroy someone who hated me and my way of life. I admit it; I was wrong. I ruined someone. But think of it this way, Mrs. Taylor was going through government, giving funds to people she agreed with, refusing funds to people she didn't. She was a powerful lobbying force who wanted NVL outlawed and Hypnogouge shut down. Thomas, you gave me the perfect opportunity to save my belief. You let the Christians eat the lions for a change."

"Cursed is the man who is eaten by the lion, for he becomes the lion."

"Blessed is the lion eaten by the man, for he become the man."

"You used me for your own personal crusade," I sneered. "I should report you for dealing."

Sappho grinned. "I'll report you for buying."

I took another drag off the cigarette. "But, I let it happen. I did. I could still report that aggressive little brat. I could call Mrs. Taylor and let her know what she's in for. Christ! If I had only let the story out beforehand! Instead, everyone has to go through trials and fires and parents lose their children and children lose their parents and the whole thing is just so god damned awful. I'm an awful person. I sat around and let it all happen."

She stood up and smoothed down my hair. "I know it was awful, and it was wrong, but it's happened and there's really nothing you're going to be able to do about it now. It's my fault, too. I thought that Mrs. Taylor was going to go to jail. I know we disagree on that one, and I know I violated your trust, but I hate the woman and everything she stands for. She wants to rebuild the world into something she sees as perfect and she's willing to destroy anything that doesn't fit in with her vision."

"You sound just like her."

Sappho reeled back like I had struck her. "I can't believe you just said that."

I grinned and took a swig. "Believe it. You were acting like a dumb-ass and I thought I'd point it out to you." I rested a finger on her nose. "You will never be better than the people that say they're better than you. You will never get there by saying you're better. You will never win at that game because they wrote the rules and you just don't play that game very well without sounding like a self-righteous bigot."

She slapped my finger off her nose. "Fine, I was wrong."

"Fine."

"FINE!"

I took another swig. "Good, then it's agreed."

"What?" Sappho nearly choked on what she was drinking. "What's agreed?"

"You're going to call Mrs. Taylor tomorrow morning and apologize to her."

Her eyes bugged. "You're insane."

"You won't be alone," I leaned back and shut my eyes. "I'm going to apologize to her as well. And then she's going to apologize to you."

"Why would she apologize to me?"

"Because you're going to show her that you're not evil. You're going to walk in there and you're going to say, 'Martha Taylor, I am a talent and I do not like you and I lied to one of your employees in an attempt to ruin you, but I have seen the errors of my ways and I wanted to apologize.' And then you and she will have a long talk and after all that,

she will apologize to you.”

Sappho took a drink, stared at the floor, took another drink, and then burst out laughing. “Okay, Ghandi, joke's over. You're kidding right?”

I laughed. “Of course. How could I ever make you admit you were wrong?”

“Thank god,” and she laughed some more and headed to the kitchen.

I followed her in. “There's just one thing I don't understand.”

“Only one thing?”

“The name,” I stared out the window. “Why did they name the kid Sunset?”

Sappho giggled. “It's a Hypnogouge term. It means, roughly, 'the greatest thing you can achieve'. It's used a lot in funerals and memorial services. 'He has had his noon; he has had his brightest moment. Now he has had his sunset.' You should attend. They're truly beautiful.”

We sat and polished off the rest of our drinks until Sappho passed out on my couch. I covered her with a spare blanket and stood there for almost an hour just stroking the hair away from her face. Sappho is a strangely beautiful woman. I haven't told you that, but it's my little secret. She's a lousy psychic and an only halfway decent dealer. She is a good person, though. And I wasn't kidding about talking to Mrs. Taylor.