

# Skyfall

*By Jujen Kai*

## Chapter 30 - The Farmers VI

The four people stood with stunned expressions on their faces as the SUV pulled up in the drive. The little orange light, held to the roof by a magnetic base, flashed as the vehicle cruised to a halt and the driver stepped out. He left the engine running.

"Howdy, folks," the man said as he walked toward them. He wore faded overalls and a blue shirt, and the badge of a Postal Service employee hung from a cord around his neck. The tag identified him as Julian McReynolds. Much like the residents themselves, the carrier had thick black circles beneath his eyes, showing plainly how little sleep he had managed since the storm.

Santos was the first to recover from the shock of seeing the mail carrier. "Hi there," he said simply.

"We're still out running the routes, checking on folks, stuff like that," the man said, stopping his advance and holding out a handful of mail. "Y'all doing okay? Anybody hurt?"

"Nothing serious," Enrico said, hand reflexively going to his head. The carrier craned his neck and looked beyond the group. His expression darkened as he saw the demolished home.

"Oh, bless your hearts," he said softly. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thank you, Julian," Maria told him. "We're taking care of it. Mister McKinley has agreed to let us stay with him for a while."

"Cain't go lettin' folks stay out in the weather," Wes added with a smile. The fact that Julian had not reacted to the way his face looked was a telling factor, Wes knew. It showed how much he had seen in the past few days. "You and yours come through it okay?"

"Some broken windows, mostly. Sherry's got a busted finger where she fell. I guess we did all right," Julian said with a shrug. "I've seen a lot worse out here, that's for sure."

Santos ran forward and took the sheaf of papers the carrier had, flipping through them with boyish excitement. He held up an electric bill and grinned. "Can we throw this away?" he asked gleefully. Santos laughed, but shook his head, a gesture which

he instantly regretted due to the intense spike of pain that followed.

"No, son. We pay our debts," he said, gritting his teeth. "Now if one comes in asking for up-front money, you have at it."

Julian, laughing aloud at the exchange, dug in a pocket of his coveralls and once more extended his hand, this time holding out a paper with typewritten instructions on it. It was obvious from the noticeable errors on the page that it had been hastily assembled.

"Here you go," he said. "This has got directions to the local shelters and instructions on how to make sure your water's safe, stuff like that. FEMA's coming in soon, but their guy hasn't got here yet. Guess he's too busy in the big cities or some such. We kind of made these up ourselves at the Post Office. Based them on old Civil Defense papers," he added with a touch of pride.

"Why, thankee, thankee, Julian," Wes said, coming forward past Santos to accept the paperwork. "Don't figger we're gonna need 'em, but we sure appreciate the effort."

"We're still carrying outbound mail as well," Julian explained. "Thing is, we can't guarantee how long it's gonna take to get where it's going, or, well, even if the destination is even still there. We'll try to get it back to you if it can't be delivered."

"Any word on how bad it really was?" asked Maria as she glanced at the papers he had handed over.

"A lot of places got hit real bad," he said with a sigh. "Word is that most of Louisiana is gone. Cuba, Hawai'i, all them islands, they just flat got flooded out. Some folks still have that internet, and they say that the whole world got hit. Most places are still trying to dig out from under, I guess, and then they're gonna have to decide where to go from here. I guess this is about the worst it could get."

"Oh, God," Maria murmured, her words more a plea for help than anything. She reflexively crossed herself and then turned away from the group for a moment. Julian stood silently, his eyes filled with sadness as he realized that her reaction was due to his statements.

"So how often you gonna be out and about?" Wes asked, trying to change the subject.

"Well, every few days is about all we're saying right now. Most of us are running the routes to check up on everyone, get a feel for the overall damage, spread a little news, and get out the backlog of mail. You can expect that to be less often, too."

"Will you let us know if anyone needs anything?" Enrico requested. "Whatever we have, we'll share." he added, ignoring the way Wes cut his eyes in response to the comment.

"Sure will," Julian assured him. He looked past them to where Maria stood with her back to him. "I hope I didn't upset you too much, ma'am."

"No, it's all right," Maria replied, wiping at her eyes as she turned around and managed a smile.

"Y'all let me know if you need supplies or anything," Julian offered, returning to his SUV and slipping behind the wheel. "We're trying to do what we can to help out."

"Cigarettes!" Wes shouted with a wide grin. The expression stretched his split lip open again, and yet more blood seeped out of the cut.

"And ice cream," Santos called from his seat on the ground, his attention centered on a catalog from which he would never place an order.

"Yeah, I'll get right on that," laughed the carrier, dropping the transmission into reverse and backing out with a friendly wave. His tires made crunching sounds as they ran over loose twigs and small bits of the devastated home. After a moment, he was gone, with only the sound of his vehicle cruising down the dusty road fading into the rapidly-approaching night. Enrico stepped aside to embrace Maria.

"We haven't hugged each other this much since Santos was born," he joked, trying to ease the tension.

"Good Lord, Enrico," she whispered. "All those people..."

"And He delivered us. Remember that, love."

"For what?" she asked, and Enrico knew he had no answer. He pulled her closer and they stood there, in silence, beside the stripped ruins of what had once been their home.

"Hey, boy, let's you and me head on back ta the house and see about rustlin' up somethin' ta eat." suggested Wes, speaking in a low tone to Santos.

"Huh? What?" the teen asked, then looked up and saw his parents. He nodded sagely, knowing when it was time to leave them alone. The emotional impact of the past few days had already passed through Santos as quickly as any other reaction, and he was now becoming almost numb to the tragedy. But he recognized how much it was affecting his family, and knew that they needed to react in their own way. He stood

from the ground, abandoning the catalog where it lay, and followed Wes toward the older man's home. They left the pickup for Enrico and Maria. The two traded joking remarks about the things they had seen or done during the day's labor, each trying to make himself look like a hero.

"Hell, boy, I was gettin' them timbers outta there all right," Wes teased. "Didn't need no Bigfoot comin' in and stealin' my thunder by takin' 'em three at a time!"

"Well, if you'd been carrying more than just those little sticks of trim off the paneling it might have mattered!" Santos shot back with a laugh. "I was taking out eight-foot studs, roof joists, stuff like that. The big stuff!"

"Ahh, anybody coulda did that. It takes a real man ta recognize pretty trim when he sees it!" Wes replied, and the joking continued until they reached the house, and even through their preparation of a simple evening meal.

The meal was eaten in relative quiet, the mood having been broken as easily as had their home. As they all prepared for bed, Wes took Santos aside and spoke quietly with him, trying to warn him that his parents would be depressed for quite some time after what they had just gone through.

"Look, son, I know ya got some bad feelin's about what happened. Your home gettin' all busted up and all. Well, your folks pretty much built that place, so they're gonna be feelin' it even worse. They seen you get raised in there. Everythin' they had for the past twenty-odd years was in that house. Give 'em some space, now, okay? Let 'em come along in their own time."

"Yeah," Santos said, eyes downcast as he considered the old man's words. "I get it. So you want to work with me tomorrow?"

"You betcha," answered Wes, reaching up to ruffle the teen's hair. "Now get ta sleep, 'cause if'n I get up before ya, I'm gonna pour a bucket of water on your head."

Wailing in mock terror, Santos dashed to the pad on which he was to sleep and dived onto it, pulling a pillow over his head and visibly shaking. After a moment, he stuck his head out and grinned. "G'night, Mister McKinley."

"Go ta sleep, boy," Wes said as he laughed.

Enrico rolled over on the quilt he and Maria were using as a bed, pulling his blanket up to cover his shoulders. The cool night air was coming in through the open windows and it made a chill run though his body. He snuggled in closer to Maria's back, wrapping an arm around her torso and pulling her in tight to him. He glanced at his wristwatch, wondering what time it was. The tiny glowing hands indicated

between three-forty and three forty-five. His mind registered the information distantly, brain still fuzzy with exhausted sleep, and he put his head back down on the pillow, wondering abstractly why he had even woken up. He lay there for a moment, relaxed but awake, and began to wonder if he could go back to sleep at all. He ran through the events of the day in a matter of seconds, trying to keep his mind occupied with replaying the course of action so that he would drift back off. It occurred to him that he needed to go to the bathroom and he quietly groaned at the prospect of getting up. Slowly, so as not to disturb his wife, he slid away from her and stood up, keeping the blankets down and close to her body so she could remain warm.

He shuffled away from the makeshift beds in the great room of the cabin, easily navigating the cabin even in the dark from years of having been there. One thing Wes McKinley can be counted on for, he thought as he threaded his way through the room toward a doorway, is consistency. He had never known the old man to change the layout of his home even once.

He was passing through the door when he heard it. A tiny metallic clicking sound that was completely out of place in the house. He paused, senses suddenly alert, as it dawned on him that this was what had awakened him in the first place. The clicks continued for a moment, then became a soft rattle. Wood creaked. Then silence for a minute. Enrico had almost convinced himself that he had imagined the sounds when they began again. He struggled to figure out where they were coming from, straining to triangulate the sound in the dark building.

The sound suddenly magnified, becoming a clearly audible snap of metal on metal and it struck Enrico where the noise was coming from. The front door swung open even as his brain engaged and told him that the sound was that of someone picking the lock. A shadowy figure was framed in the open front door, and a cold chill ran down his spine as he recognized the danger they were in. Totally isolated, with no contact with the outside world. A stranger breaking in. Nearly everyone asleep. That final thought gave him pause and he realized that the intruder was counting on it being everyone, not nearly everyone.

He took a quick pair of steps at a full run, the swishing sounds of his jeans making the only noise as his bare feet swept the floor. Springing forward, Enrico launched himself at the intruder, waiting until he was almost in contact before shouting out, "INTRUDER!" at the top of his lungs. Before the word had even fully left his lips, he slammed into the figure with his shoulder, continuing on to bring a fist into play and striking the chin of the subject with whom he grappled. A sickening crunching sound echoed from the walls of the cabin and a warm wetness splashed across his hand. Together, Enrico and the unknown party smashed into the ground outside the cabin in a flurry of confused punches and muffled curses.

Letting all the hostility he felt at the nocturnal invasion overpower his senses, Enrico threw himself into the fight with total abandon. His knees and elbows became blurs of motion as he assaulted the criminal with all the force he could bring to bear. A fist crashed into his jaw, sending a tooth flying and spilling some of Enrico's own blood this time. The impact only hardened his resolve to end the fight. Determined that he would not allow this person to endanger his family, he began a series of attacks more fierce than any he had contemplated since leaving the service.

The night was suddenly split asunder with the sound of a rifle shot and both fighters froze. A brilliant beam of light played across them from the cabin and a very calm voice spoke from behind it.

"Dad, get up. I've got this."

Enrico slid off the intruder, narrowly avoiding a final weak attempt at a low kick. He stepped to the side before backing toward the house. He could hear Maria and Wes talking in subdued tones behind his son, the older man holding the light that provided his son with a clear view of the intruder. His own breathing was deafening to him, and the sound of his pulse was like a Latin drum beat in his ears. He spat blood to the ground and reached to take the rifle. Santos stepped past him without releasing the weapon, standing on the edge of the porch as though he were some sort of avenging angel.

"Do not move," the teen said. His voice was so flat and emotionless it sent a new chill down Enrico's spine. The light beam showed the intruder to be a male in his late teens, possibly early twenties. He wore black pants and a matching turtleneck sweater, both of which had seen better days. He had the look of a crank user, with skin that was was sallow, sunken eyes that held a haunted look, and a perpetual tremble. Blood covered the lower half of his face, running freely from both lips and his nose, as well as from the side of his face, where Enrico's elbow had split the skin as efficiently as a razor. His mouth twitched as if he were about to speak. The Winchester thundered again, spitting a column of dirt from the space between the man's outstretched legs, less than an inch from what would have been a crippling shot.

"Looks like you don't hear too well, punk," Santos said in a low, menacing voice. "I said do not move. You do it again and I swear I will end you."

A deathly silence fell over the yard. It was broken a moment later when Maria appeared with a section of thick rope. Enrico took it and carefully made his way past Santos to stand beside the man. He pointed at the ground before speaking.

"Get on your belly," he ordered. As the man complied, Enrico dragged his hands behind him and bound them with the rope. He patted the man down, checking for

any weapons, and came up with a battered lockback knife which he tossed aside. He then ran the rope around the man's ankles several times and tied it to the bindings on his wrists, effectively immobilizing him.

"Stay down," he said as he stood from the man and approached Santos. The teen was still holding the rifle in a perfect firing position, butt pulled in tight against his shoulder, eyes staring down the barrel without blinking. His finger was resting gently on the trigger of the .30-.30, and the weapon was aimed directly at the bound man.

"He's not going anywhere, son," Enrico whispered, his face inches from his son's ear. "Give me the rifle."

A visible tremble passed through Santos and Enrico could see the tension building in the youth. A tiny whisper, barely audible even in the stillness of the night, escaped through clenched teeth.

"I can't," Santos said.

Nodding his understanding, Enrico leaned forward and slipped a hand around the barrel of the rifle, lifting it upward very slowly. When it was no longer aimed at the intruder, he twisted it and jerked it aside in a sudden move that left Santos standing still with empty hands. Santos looked at his extended arms for a moment, then let them fall to his sides.

Enrico moved forward in a sudden rush, enveloping his son in a tight embrace which the teen returned as he began to cry silently. The rifle was taken by Wes as Enrico focused solely on his son and the sudden end to the emotionally-charged moment.

"I w-would have shot him, Dad. I was gonna..." Santos began, but Enrico silenced him, tightening his hug until it was nearly crushing.

"I know, son. Thank you." he whispered.

Maria joined them, gently disengaging father and son and walking the teen back to the cabin. Santos turned for one last look, rewarded for the effort by seeing the smile of pride and love on his father's face. Wes locked gazes with the youth as well, nodding his approval of the actions. For the first time, Santos noticed the butt of a heavy revolver protruding from the waistband of the elderly man's pajama bottoms. It was causing the garment to sag downward, but Wes paid it no attention.

Once Santos had been returned to the cabin, Enrico turned his attention back to the bound man. His eyes narrowed as he walked over to where the intruder lay facedown in the grass.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "Why were you breaking in?"

The man started to reply with a vicious oath, but was cut short by Enrico's foot striking him in the ribs. Instead, he snarled back, "I know my rights, old man."

"You done gave them up, ya dopehead son of a bitch," Wes snorted, handing the Winchester to Enrico so he could adjust the revolver in his waistband. "Ya broke into my cabin in the middle of the night. Law says I can kill ya."

At that comment, the man began to struggle against the bonds. His efforts were futile, however, as years of dealing with farm animals had taught Enrico nothing if not how to tie a strong knot. He began to thrash and curse volubly, kicking and screaming obscenities as he realized his predicament.

"Kinda cold out here, Rico. I figger he might last the night, might not. What ya think?"

"Chances would be less if we doused him in water," Enrico replied, stunned as he heard the words tumble from his own mouth. He had already decided the correct course of action would be to take the man into town and hand him over to the Sheriff, but his anger at the situation boiled over and came out in his hostile phrase. Wes simply nodded.

"We could go ahead, ya know," the older man whispered.

"What, kill him?" Enrico asked in the same tone. He was horrified at the thought.

"Yep. He's got it comin', ya know."

Their words carried to the man and he fought harder against the ropes for a moment, then began to beg them not to kill him, crying aloud and pleading for mercy. In the darkness of the night, the would-be criminal wet himself in terror. The two men standing a few feet away were unaware of this, though it would have been of no consequence to them had they known.

"Get the keys, Wes. Santos and I will take him to the Sheriff and get him a nice cozy place for the night."

"Aww, Hell, Rico, you ain't no fun any more, ya know that?" Wes groused, grinning and winking as he turned back to the cabin to retrieve the keys. He paused at the door and turned, calling over his shoulder, "We ain't had a killin' up here in days."

Taking advantage of the older man's absence, Enrico knelt on the ground beside his prisoner, placing the butt of the rifle on the ground and leaning on the weapon as he

spoke. His voice was flat and cold as he addressed the man.

"You almost caused my son to take a human life tonight, mister. I don't want him in that place ever again. So I promise you this much: if you come back out here, I will kill you flat-out. I won't play around, and I won't hesitate. I will kill you. I don't mean I'll hit you, or I'll hurt you. I mean quite simply that I will kill you. You won't be my first, so it's no emotional issue for me. I can kill you and never lose sleep. Do you understand me?"

"Y-yes, s-s-sir," the man stammered.

"Good. Now here's what we're going to do. I am going to walk you over to the truck and you are going to get in the back. I will tie you to the body of the truck, so if you try to jump out, I'll just drag you to death. If you try to run from me when we go to the truck, I will shoot you in the back. I'm actually a very good shot, but I think under the circumstances you've placed me in tonight, I might just miss a little so you don't go clean. Are we clear?"

Unable even to speak at this point, the criminal merely nodded his understanding. Enrico smiled at him, though the expression held absolutely no warmth. Santos reappeared in the doorway, carrying the revolver Wes had wielded only moments before. He also had Enrico's boots with him, and for the first time since he had jumped the intruder, the farmer realized his feet were bare.

Together, they loaded the man into the bed of the truck with no resistance. Enrico roped him in as he had described, then got in and fired up the beaten vehicle. He handed the Winchester off to Santos and slipped the transmission into gear.

"We made it through this, son," he murmured, catching his son's eye. "I think we'll make it through the rest all right."

"You talking about the police or about this?" Santos asked, waving a hand in a gesture that encompassed the surroundings. Enrico smiled in reply.

"Both," he said.

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*By Jujen Kai*

## Chapter 31 - The Jenners VI

The sun was high in the sky by the time Marc and Janice awoke, both of them having slept through the cycle of evening, night, and morning. Marc looked at his watch, blinking his eye furiously in an attempt to focus, and cursed quietly when he saw how late it had become. He recognized that some light was coming in through the blackened eye as well, and considered it a good sign. It meant the swelling had begun to recede, and that he might indeed see again through both eyes.

"Hi there," he whispered as Janice's eyes fluttered open. She smiled at him, reaching up to gently trace a path around the mass of contusions on his face. She winked before replying.

"You've got morning breath," she said with a grin.

Marc laughed aloud, stretching his arms overhead as he yawned. "Honey, if that's the worst I've got, we're doing good. Besides, it's afternoon breath, anyway."

"So where do we start today?" Janice asked.

"Well, I was going to start with the van, but after what that postman said about gangs in the area, I think I should work on securing the windows first. I'll bring in our camp supplies, though, so they'll be in here where we can get to them. We need a list of what we've got on hand. Food, water, toilet paper, all of it."

"I get the list, right?"

"Yep," he said with a second yawn, this one larger than the first. It had been the first real sleep they had managed since the storm, and though their sleep had been troubled by horrific nightmares, it had at least been restful.

"Well, I'll get started on some breakfast, then, while you unload the van. I hope you like salad, 'cause I figure we need to use the lettuce and stuff before it spoils."

"You know I'll eat anything," he teased, slipping the yellow shirt back on over his head. He opened the case beside the bed and took out a black nylon holster, designed to be worn inside the pants. He tucked it in through his waistband, attaching the metal clip on the side to his belt and settling the whole thing over his right hip. Carefully, he inserted his revolver into the holster. He shifted back and forth, checking the feel and fit of the weapon's placement. When satisfied, he reached out

for his boots, stopping as he saw the strange look on Janice's face.

"What?" he asked, confused. Janice stood and looked at him for a moment, emotions warring in her eyes as clearly as any time he could remember. After a second, she gently shook her head and tried to smile.

"I never had a problem with it 'til now," she said softly.

"With what? With the pistol?"

"Yeah. It's not one of those BS gun control things, it's just the pistol itself."

"Too close," he declared, not bothering to make it a question. He recognized the resemblance between the revolvers they owned and the one with which Janice's father had taken his own life. "I know it is, Jan, but it's your new best friend. You'll have bad memories for a long time, but if you don't have that gun with you when the time comes, you'll get some worse ones."

"I know," she acknowledged, nodding her head. "It's just, well, it's going to be hard for a while."

"You'll make it," he said, smiling encouragingly.

"Yeah. Gimme," she demanded in a mock-ferocious voice, holding out her hand and beckoning with her fingers. He removed the matching holster from the carry case and tossed it on the bed in front of her. As she began the laborious task of attaching the holster to her waistband with one hand, he sat on the edge of the bed and began to lace his boots.

"Need some help?" he asked as he pulled the laces tight.

"I'll get it," she answered immediately, determined to complete the task without assistance. Marc smiled at her self-confidence, remembering that it was one of the reasons he had fallen in love with her in the first place. She had actually approached him the first time, introducing herself without the slightest bit of hesitation and asking for his number. He had been a bit stunned, but had nonetheless provided her with a business card. She called him the next day, and began what would be the best years of his life.

"How long do you think we'll be without power?" she asked.

"As long as it takes, I guess," Marc said, shrugging his shoulders. "They'll get it back on before too long, but like the man said, we're not real high on the priority list out here in the woods. Hospitals will be the first ones, I would think."

"I'm just trying to plan on how much food we'll lose, maybe how long until we've got running water."

"Well, I guess we figure on half. That way we don't get too greedy. Keep on doing what you were with the food, like the salad you were talking about. Use the stuff first that's likely to spoil quickest. We'll make the rest work."

They left the room and made their way down the staircase. The living room was dimly lit with the filtered sunlight from outside, but it appeared to have been effectively unchanged from the previous day. A lone squirrel stood on the sill of one missing window, chattering madly at the pair as they stepped onto the floor. After a moment of expressing his anger at their interruption, the squirrel leaped from the window and ran across the yard to scamper up a tree. He stood on a branch and resumed his heated chattering.

"Think he even cares about the meteors?" Marc wondered aloud.

"Squirrels seem to weather storms pretty well," Janice said with a shrug. "Guess they're prepared for anything."

Marc smiled and kissed her tenderly before heading to the door. Their hands remained in contact for the last second, fingertips brushing gently as they separated. Marc snapped open the bolt on the door, pondering the possibility of reinforcing it further once he had secured the windows. The light that streamed in when he opened the door was watery and grey, but welcome nonetheless. The air outside was cool, especially for a June afternoon, but he put it down to the presence of the thick overhead haze.

Their van sat in silence, both drivers' side tires flattened by impaled debris. All the windows were gone, and tiny cubes of safety glass littered the dirt around the vehicle. A massive tree branch lay atop the roof, bending it inward by a good eight inches. Marc looked carefully at the branch, wondering how much it would take to shift the weight. After a few minutes of thought, he gave up and went to the back. The roof had been smashed in there as well, and he knew without having to check that it would be next to impossible to open the rear door until the branch had been moved. He moved up to the drivers' side and jerked open the door, ignoring the shower of glass that rained from the window frame. He crawled in and slipped the key into the ignition, turning the engine over. The van still ran, which was a plus in his book. A check of the gas gauge revealed that they had just a little more than half a tank. He tried the radio but got nothing more than static. Muttering an oath of frustration, he pushed in a tape and turned the volume up so the sound would carry to the interior of the house. The opening strains of *Somebody Put Something in My Drink* echoed in the interior, and Marc let out a satisfied sigh as the Ramones began to sing.

He worked his way past the center console, crawling into the back of the van to begin retrieving their belongings. He pushed everything out onto the ground beside the rear passengers' door, digging items out that he had forgotten had ever been included. By the time he had it all out, he was drenched in a thick sweat from working inside the van. The temperature was low, but now he realized just how humid the air was. He paused to slip the cap from one of the water jugs and took a long drink, grimacing a bit at the slightly chemical tang carried by the water. Still pure at least, he thought. After he finished the drink, he looked at the pile of equipment liberated from the van and then loaded his arms for the trip back to the house.

He dumped his burden into the center of the living room floor with no ceremony, then returned to the van and repeated the process twice more until all the items had been brought inside. He wiped a hand across his forehead, wincing as he touched the still-tender contusion surrounding his eye. A few deep breaths later, he was ready to continue. Janice picked that moment to emerge from the kitchen carrying a large bowl of salad. She had already set two smaller bowls on the dining room table, along with a pitcher of water. Three tiny ice cubes floated in the pitcher, looking absolutely alone and out of place.

"They were the last of it," she explained, seeing his gaze drawn to the cubes. "Most of the rest had already melted. I put in all that was left, so it should at least be cool."

They ate in relative silence, each one mentally preparing for the tasks ahead of them. When they had finished, Marc stood from the table and drained the last of his water. It was, as Janice had said, cool, and he shivered as it flowed down his throat.

"I'm gonna see what Leonard had in his workshop," Marc announced, stretching and flexing his back in a series of loud cracking sounds. "Maybe we can rig some kind of shutters or something, so we can get air inside but still lock them if we need to."

Janice nodded, looked past him at the pile of equipment he had brought in from the van and sighed as she shook her head. "Looks like I'll be busy," she quipped.

"Sorry," he said with a quiet laugh. "There was more than I remember."

"Always is. We put in more than we take out, and we replace what we use, so it's going to get bigger and bigger... until something like this happens, at least." Janice ended with a wry grin. "At least it'll see some use."

"Yeah," said Marc, sucking at a tooth. "Kinda hoped it'd be under nicer circumstances, though."

Janice began the Herculean task of running an inventory on their items, and when finished there she would list the contents of the house, along with any necessary warnings about spoilage. The contents of the van would be enough to keep her busy for over an hour. It was difficult to write with her left hand, and holding the pencil made her right ache miserably. She began with the water, listing the amount and where it was stored, then went to the foodstuffs in their sealed packages. Those, she knew, would keep for a long time. She wrote down every box of matches, every candle, assembling a list of epic proportions by the time the hour had finished.

Marc, in turn, went to the small building behind the main house that Leonard had used as a workshop when he went through his 'I am a carpenter' phase a few years back. A heavy table saw sat gathering dust in the center of the room, lack of power making it as useless to Marc as it had been to the mechanically inept Leonard. Ignoring it for now, Marc prowled through the building, gathering supplies to repair the damaged house. A couple of rolls of heavy VisQueen plastic caught his eye, and he placed them near the door, along with a hammer and a mayonnaise jar filled with short roofing nails. The heads were wide and would hold the plastic sheeting better than narrower nails. A roll of duct tape and a box of small screws went on the pile, as did a red plastic toolbox filled with a variety of wrenches and screwdrivers. Marc looked at the pile and groaned at the prospect of carrying it back and forth to the house.

"I need a shopping cart," he muttered before renewing his search. It was in the side room of the building, a narrow garage-type section that Leonard used to house his riding mower, that Marc found his greatest treasure. Rolls of fencing stood against the far wall; silent metal soldiers waiting for their orders. Chicken wire, hardware cloth, and chain link rolls were stacked side by side in the space, covered in cobwebs and with leaves stuck to them. Marc's heart leaped for joy as he saw the rolls, his mind flashing back to the images of Bosnian storefronts with their windows covered by panels of fence to prevent objects from being thrown through them, military vehicles with wire screens to stop thrown grenades, and chicken wire shields that protected bands from beer bottles flung by angry partiers.

"Sweet," he hissed between his teeth. Abandoning the other items for now, he shouldered a roll of chain link and slipped his fingers through another, easily lugging them both to the house. He put them down outside the main door and returned to gather the remainder of his supplies, dragging a heavy roll of chicken wire with him when he returned.

He spent the rest of the afternoon in a flurry of activity, hammering and bolting wire screens into place across every exposed window. He pushed himself harder than he remembered ever having pushed before, urgent to beat the descent of the sun. By the time the sun went behind the horizon, the house was beginning to look militaristic in bent. From the interior, he added a series of boards that could be opened or closed

from the inside only. Each was attached to the frame of the window with long, heavy screws, their apertures closed with bolts that slotted into steel hasps. The side of the boards facing the exterior of the house was covered in two layers of plastic for insulation value, and it wrapped around the wood to attach from the back. Inside the front door, until he could prepare a better bar, Marc propped a 2x4 stud under the knob, bracing it against the floor. Through it all, the music played from the van, easing the tension felt by both of them. Finally lowering his hammer, Marc killed the power to the van and went back into the house.

Janice lit a couple of hurricane lamps, bathing the living room in a soft yellow glow. Deciding they could have more than that, she ignited a Coleman lantern that illuminated the room in stark white light. Her eyes were tired, and her arms ached from hours of writing. Her fingers trembled when she tensed the muscles of her arms, as did those of her husband. They sat on the couch together, talking quietly and resting for about an hour. Standing from the couch, Janice eagerly showed Marc what she had discovered in a closet of her father's room, though the act of checking the room had clearly taken an emotional toll on her. She swept back the blanket covering the long object, exposing a hard plastic case. Marc snapped it open to reveal a gleaming Remington bolt action rifle, topped with a Bausch and Lomb scope. A leather sling ran the length of the weapon, carved with scenes of deer and elk.

"I found these, too," Janice said, holding out a paper grocery bag. Marc peered into it to see five boxes of .30-.06 cartridges and a small cleaning kit that had never been removed from its packaging.

"Nice to see he had good taste," Marc murmured reverently as he lifted the rifle from its grey foam bedding. It was heavy, but felt solid and reliable in his hands. He flicked open the covers on the scope, peering through it to see the wall and was amazed as one of Elizabeth's books, sitting on a shelf, leaped into immediate relief. By squinting slightly, he could even make out the words running down the spine.

"There are deer out here, Marc," Janice whispered in an excited tone. "We used to see them all the time. That rifle will get us food," she added, emphasizing the last word. Marc nodded, having only considered the advantage it would give them if defending the home from intruders. The thought of fresh meat was not a pressing one at the moment, but he recognized that it would be very soon. It hit him in a sudden flash of insight that they had gone from planning to return to Tulsa to preparing this house for permanent occupancy.

He placed the rifle gently back into the case but did not close it. He was determined to clean and oil the weapon to ensure it would function properly when called upon, but only after he had rested some more. It had been a long time since he had put himself through the physical workout he had today, and following on the heels of the sleepless past few days, it was taking its toll on his body.

Janice displayed the exhaustive list she had compiled, directing his attention to several items she felt needed to be used first, as well as some that they had, regrettably, very little of - such as drinkable water. He cursed when he saw how little they actually had.

"If we can get some power, even a little, we can run the pump," Janice said enthusiastically. "Fill up everything in the house that will hold water. Bathtubs, glasses, you name it. There's some bleach in the utility closet, and we can add it to the water to keep it clean."

"Yeah, and if we get too much bleach, then what?"

"Ummmm, we'll have shiny white teeth?" she teased, trying to cheer him up a bit. "Seriously, Marc, I know what I'm doing. You aren't the only one who's gone camping, you know. The standard we used to read was two drops to the quart, eight to the gallon."

"Can we treat rain, you think?" he asked.

"Sure we can. Probably best if we filter it first, but that's no problem. All we need to do is come up with a system for catching it. Did you find any barrels or anything?"

"No, but I wasn't really looking for them, either," he admitted, stretching his back and pacing across the room. He poured a tiny measure of bourbon into a glass and let it flow across his tongue, savoring the slightly smoky taste. "Maybe tomorrow," he mused.

"We need to get some sleep, Marc," Janice prompted. "I know we slept most of the day, but we've got a lot to catch up on."

As if cued by her words, he let out a massive yawn and grinned. "Sorry 'bout that. Yeah, let's get it boarded up and go to bed."

He began the long process of sealing up the house, locking the 'shutters' into place with their bolts. He was working on the front facing when he saw something that gave him pause. Looking closer, he confirmed what he had seen and called to Janice to look. Dancing blobs of firelight were making their way up the road toward the house. Their nature showed them to be not lanterns or even candles, but actual torches, something Marc had not considered ever seeing outside of a movie.

"Load the rifle and get it ready," he whispered, checking automatically for his revolver. As Janice rushed to comply, he watched the sputtering lights come closer. They had already crossed the gate, he knew, and they were making slow but steady

progress toward the house. As they grew near enough that he figured they would hear, he yelled out the window.

"Attention angry villagers! You have the wrong castle! There is no monster here!" he shouted, turning and grinning at Janice. He shrugged when he saw the look on her face. "When am I gonna get another chance to say something like that?" he asked quietly. She shook her head in amazement and passed him the Remington. He worked the bolt and chambered a round, sliding the barrel through the chain link fence that covered the window. The scope centered on the form of the man in the front of a small column just as he shouted a reply.

"My name is Jake Forrest! I am a police officer! Can we come closer?"

"You can! Move slowly and keep your hands in sight! You are being watched through rifle scopes, so let's play nice, okay?" Marc added, intentionally using the plural form of scope to imply that there was a greater force in the house than reality would show.

After a moment, Marc watched as four teenagers in Scout uniforms and two adults walked into the driveway. They were still lit only by the flame of the torches they carried. Two of them were carrying what looked like a stretcher, and they all seemed ready to drop in their tracks. His heart told him there was no reason to delay any longer, but Marc had learned long ago to verify what his heart felt.

"All right, everyone stop there! Officer, you and you alone come to the door! The rest of you stay real chill, and maybe things will go well."

The man approached slowly, hands out to his sides. One of them clutched what looked like a wallet. He held it up as he neared the door, displaying a badge and identification card. Stopping a few steps from the front of the house, he called out.

"Jake Forrest, Oklahoma City Police Department. I have a group of Scouts here in need of shelter for the night. We have little in trade, but we are willing to deal if necessary."

"Let them in, Marc," Janice whispered. She looked at him, her eyes pleading. "They've got someone hurt out there."

"What's up with the stretcher?" Marc demanded, still holding the rifle, though it was not as intently trained on the cop.

"That's the body of one of my Scouts. He fell into a riverbed after the storm, broke his neck. I can have them open it for you if you want, to show you there's nothing going on."

Marc relaxed a bit, letting out a deep breath. His decision would either bolster their number and give them additional assistance, or it would mean the death of both Janice and him. After a few seconds' thought, he lowered the rifle and opened the front door.

"Bring 'em in," he said with a nod.

# Skyfall

*By Jujen Kai*

## Chapter 32 - A Force United

Allowing the Scouts group into the house had indeed been a good move for Marc and Janice, and had put down all Marc's doubts about them. The trudging group of youths and their Scoutmasters, entered the home in a few short minutes, all exhausted from their forced march. Seeing their bedraggled condition, Janice excused herself from the room and returned a few moments later with a tray bearing half a dozen glasses of water. It was only slightly cooler than room temperature, but the Scouts dismissed her apologies for the lack of ice with polite waves and grateful comments.

"We filled our canteens from a creek a couple of hours ago, ma'am," Bill said as he sipped slowly at the glass she gave him. He licked his lips at the clean, smooth flavor of the liquid. "This is a taste of heaven."

"A couple of hours?" Marc asked, raising an eyebrow at the comment from the Scout. "Can you, uh, you know, can you find your way back to it?" His question was hesitant, as he did not want to insult the teen, but at the same time he did not want to elevate his own hopes about replacing their dwindling water supply.

"No problem." The Scout waved his map in the air. "Got the directions right here."

"Good. Come tomorrow, we may take us a little hike up there and get some more."

"You low on water?" asked Jake, automatically lowering his glass. The Scouts followed suit, realizing they were rapidly depleting a valuable resource. Marc hastened to reassure them.

"A little. You guys drink, though. You need it, and if it's that close we can replace it. Got a few five-gallon jugs we can take out there and refill. Just that with no power we can't pump any out of the well."

"We've got about fifteen total gallons right now," Janice hastened to add. "I don't think we're going to use it all tonight."

Reassured as to the amount available, the Scouts quickly drained what they had before them, then accepted a refill. This time, they drank slowly, allowing the liquid to slowly be absorbed into their systems. Despite training to the contrary, and efforts to maintain their hydration, each of them had subconsciously taken in less than they should have on the forced march from their campsite and they were in need of more water. The group drank in silence for a minute before Marc noted that several of them were shivering slightly. He stood and excused himself, returning a moment later laden down with an armload of quilts and blankets, which he quickly passed out to the Scouts.

"Get yourselves warmed up," he ordered. "Take off your shoes, cover up your feet, and make yourselves at home. We'll see if we can't dig up something to eat.

Unfortunately the stove is electric, and until we get power it's out too, so nothing hot right now. When it gets light out we can make a fire outside; cook something in the

barbecue pit."

"And not now?" Jake prompted, wrapping a thick grey wool blanket trimmed in Mojave patterns around his shoulders. He rubbed at tired eyes as he waited for the answer, amazed at how the gesture was at once painful and soothing.

"The, uh, the postman came by yesterday," Marc replied after a moment. "Said that there've been some raids around here. Looters and such, taking on the farmers for what they can get. Pretty much everybody out here's got food, water, guns, and other supplies."

"Standard for a rural community," the cop said, nodding his head in understanding.

"Most people who live away from the cities are at least a little bit self-sufficient. Can't always get to the store," he added, the tone in his voice making it sound as though he was or at least had at one time been familiar with that lifestyle.

"Take down a house, crash there for a couple of days, then move on, right?" Vincent asked, his lip curling in distaste. "Like an extended home invasion."

"That explains the reception," Larry noted drily, tilting his head toward the Remington rifle that was now placed carefully on a table, barrel pointing away from the group and in the general direction of the front door. Once Marc had allowed the group into the house, he had placed the rifle there. Still readily accessible should the need arise, it was nonetheless in a non-threatening position at this time. Reaching out as Marc handed it across, Larry accepted the blanket, but set it aside and stood, walking to check on Janice. He knelt before her as she sat in a chair, using his tiny penlight to examine her wrist more closely. He spoke soothingly and in low, soft tones, and within seconds, they seemed to fade into the background of the room.

"So there are, what? Like, gangs, or something out here?" Leon wondered. Marc shook his head, waving his hand as though to dismiss the question. A moment later he thought better of it. It would make no sense to baby the Scouts, not with the events they had come through in the past few days.

"You know, I was gonna just say no, so you wouldn't worry, but I ain't gonna lie to you. No point trying not to scare you, after what we've all been through already. Everybody's already been scared, right? So, yeah, there's some folks running around and trying to knock off the houses out in the woods."

"Houses like this one," Jonathan observed with a wry grin. "How nice."

"Yeah, well, I don't figure on making it easy for them," responded Marc, patting at his revolver. "And before you give me a lecture about the law --" he began with a sideways look at Jake, but the officer cut him off anyway.

"Not going to. You do what you have to," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I know I would. Hell, even now I will if I have to. Better them than me, you know? Me or my Scouts. I mean, what are they gonna do? Fire me? I mean, if any of those things hit in OKC, they're going to be a little busy handling..." Jake's voice dropped away as he saw the look Marc was giving him. He cocked an eyebrow inquisitively, waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop.

"You guys have been out all this time," Marc said softly, realizing the implications of the statement. "You don't know."

"Don't know what?" asked Bill from behind his half-finished glass of water. There

was a visible tremor in the water as the youth held it, mute evidence of the sudden shiver that had overtaken him at Marc's comment.

"This wasn't local," Marc explained, standing from his chair. He began to pace as he spoke, easing the tension he felt by uttering the words. "The meteors hit everywhere. Not just here in Oklahoma, I mean everywhere. The mailman said that they took out the coastal states completely. I'd guess California, Florida, stuff like that just ain't there any more. Tidal waves got them. They blew up all the satellites, tore up the highways, killed a couple gazillion people, and shut off the power all over the place. Kinda like here," he added, swinging his arm in a wide arc that encompassed the lantern-lit house. His voice cracked as he spoke, and he could feel the beginnings of another wave of tears stinging behind his eyes. Even speaking about the events that had taken place was painful, and the memories it brought back struck home with a blow he almost felt physically. The assembled Scouts sat in awe, transfixed by the gravity of his words.

"China, too," Janice said from across the room, biting her lip as Larry probed her wrist. Her voice was husky with repressed pain, but she kept going. "He said a big one hit and apparently destroyed the whole country."

"National Guard's been called out to assist the police. I'd guess they'll mobilize in the big cities first. They're shooting looters on sight," Marc continued, running his left hand through his hair and then scratching at the back of his head. "I guess with this many dead they figure a few more won't hurt."

"Well, there is a control issue to be considered," countered Jake, sitting up a little more formally in the face of what he took to be a challenge. Marc urgently waved him down, holding out his hands in a gesture of peace.

"Not trying to make waves," he said hastily. "I got no problem with them dealing with thieves like that. I worked hard for what I've got and I know damned well I'd protect it, so if they can do it, that's fine. I just..." He paused a moment to consider his words before going on. His jaw worked as he swallowed and he let out a tiny laugh with no real humor behind it. "I've seen quite a few places littered with bodies after things like that. I think I'm just tired of seeing people dead."

"We all are, mister," Vincent said. He was on the floor with his back against the the frame of the kitchen door, staring slightly into space through eyes that had a glassy appearance. When he spoke, his voice carried with it a sadness that was almost a tangible thing. "And I've only seen one."

The room fell silent for a few minutes, partly out of respect for the dead and partly because no one really knew where to take the conversation. After a few moments, with a creak from knees made stiff by so long in a crouched position, Larry Burns stood from his place before Janice's chair. He turned off the little MagLite Solitaire he used for an exam light and took a deep breath, following it with a long drink from his glass. He rubbed at his chin for a moment before speaking, hearing the scratching sound and feeling the thick stubble against his palm.

"Well, without an X-ray I can't be certain, Mrs Jenner, but I'm going to go out on a limb and say it's not actually broken. Looks like a severe sprain with accompanying nerve impingement due to the swelling. That's why it hurts to move your fingers," he

explained with a grin. "Good splint, by the way."

"Thank you so much. Marc did that for me. But you can call me Janice, not Mrs Jenner," she corrected as she held up her finger. For a tiny fraction of time she remembered her mother using that same gesture to indicate a correction to her students, and the memory made the rest of her words stick in her throat. Larry saw the change in her expression and took it for physical pain. He gingerly set her hand down on the arm of the couch, making certain it was in a position that would allow it to relax. The tears he saw forming in Janice's eyes faded and she managed a weak smile for his benefit, letting him know it had not been his fault. As though trying to confirm that statement, she flexed the fingers of her hand and nodded up at him, leaving him to ponder the cause of her pain. Following her actions, he was fairly certain it was not physical, and that part of him that had led him to be a caregiver wondered if there was some way he could help.

"Okay. And I'm Larry," he said, trying to keep the earlier grin going. "You need anything else, you let me know."

"I will," she said gratefully. She directed a wink at Marc to alleviate his concerns.

"Yeah, that name thing goes for you guys as well," Marc said to the Scouts, dropping back into the easy chair after having seen Janice smile and wiggle her fingers following the examination. The wink she sent to him brought a smile to his face and a measure of joy to his heart. The knowledge that it was unbroken was yet another weight lifted from them, and he dared to feel a glimmer of hope that they might come through the situation all right. "Nobody calls me Mister Jenner but telemarketers."

His comment brought a round of well-needed laughter to the room, and Marc felt himself actually relaxing for the first time since the newcomers had arrived. As he felt his body loosen, he was amazed at exactly how tense he had been. First the uncertainty of the group's arrival, then the inner battle over letting them in, then trying to explain how far-ranging the meteor storm had been. It had all taken a heavy toll on the man, and he was still tired from the exertions of the day. A leaden feeling crept over his limbs as he sat back in the chair. He realized that he could very easily fall asleep where he sat. Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs from his mind, he sat forward once again, licking his lips and clearing his throat.

"Look, I'm about ready to drop. I think I'm gonna head for the bed. You guys make yourself comfortable wherever you find room. There's a couple of beds upstairs and lots of couches and recliners spread around here."

"We'll take the couches and stuff," Vincent declared. He looked to Jake and Larry with a nod. "You guys take the beds."

"There's a linen closet down this hall," Janice said, easily slipping into the role of tour guide as she pointed in the direction of the closet. "Extra blankets and quilts, maybe a couple of pillows, I don't know for sure, but..."

"We'll be fine ma'am...I mean, uhhh, Janice," Bill interjected, stammering a bit at the familiar form of address. His smile was friendly and infectious. "We can do without pillows."

"Okay, it's your head," she quipped in response as she cracked a smile. "Anyway, the

linen closet is next to the downstairs bathroom. Last door on the left. In the morning, we'll figure out what to do for breakfast. In the meantime, if you're hungry, there's some food in the fridge. Try not to leave it open for too long, 'cause it's... You know what? I don't think it's got a lot of cool left in it anymore, so use it however you need to. There's bound to be some stuff in there you guys can eat," she finished with a shrug of her shoulders. The concern she had over the refrigerator maintaining its control over their food supply simply vanished as she realized it was a foregone conclusion that the appliance was going to fail.

"Hey, Marc, I really want to thank you for taking us in," Jake began, standing from his seat and extending his hand, but Marc cut him off with a shake of his head and a warm smile.

"Ain't leaving you guys outside," he said, rubbing his hand across his face and the growth of stubble there. A part of him wondered idly how long it had been since he had shaved and when the next time would be, but he dismissed the thoughts, relegating them to the back of his mind along with all the movies he had wanted to see that were also now apparently a thing of the past. He reached out a hand and slapped it into the palm of the cop, shaking hands as though they were the best of friends. "Now, in the morning, when I put you guys to work, you'll probably be thinking you should've kept on hiking."

Marc and Jake worked together to secure the front door and the few windows they had opened to allow circulation in the house, then set about the task of corralling the Scouts and getting them into bed. Jonathan was already dozing, lulled into slumber by the effects of the pill Larry had given him. He cradled his arm next to him protectively, and his head was propped on the toes of his boots. They covered him with an extra blanket and left him where he lay. Bill followed Jonathan's example, slipping his boots beneath his head and wrapping himself in a thick patterned quilt. He kicked out a few times, causing the end of the quilt to flutter in the air until it covered his toes. Satisfied, he draped his forearm across his eyes and waited for the sounds of the adults upstairs to fade.

Vincent stretched out on the couch, wrapping a blanket over himself. Leon took the recliner, snapping out the foot rest and flinging his quilt over his sock-clad feet. He looked at Vincent for a moment as the Scoutmasters and their hosts made their way up the stairs.

"So whatcha thinking?" he whispered to Vincent, looking reflexively around to make sure they were not being overheard.

"It's nice here, man. Might get a little rest. I still want to get Ronnie home, though."

"Yeah. I wanna get me home, too," Leon quipped with a grin. "See how the folks are doing, you know?"

"Yeah. I need to check on my aunt," Vincent mused, voice dropping even lower as he contemplated what fate might have befallen his relative. He felt a quiver in his lip and bit it sharply to forestall the reaction. Leon fell silent in response, and the two youths abandoned the conversation, each allowing themselves to drift into sleep.

The four adults wandered up the stairs, each carrying a candle to light the way. The lanterns had been extinguished before they left the downstairs area, both to darken

the rooms and save fuel. A flashlight was left with the Scouts in case one of them needed to move about during the night. Each of them had also been shown where a small supply of tiny candles were. Originally intended for use on birthday cakes, they were nonetheless suitable for putting out the amount of light necessary to see in an otherwise darkened room. Janice had attempted to pass out books of matches, but each Scout had politely declined the offer, proudly displaying their own lighters and matches from their personal kits.

Nodding a good night to his hosts, Larry took the guest room, while Jake went to the room previously used by the Perrys. Marc stepped away from Janice for a moment and whispered in his ear, explaining what had occurred in the room and why there were no sheets on the bed.

"Been in worse places," Jake assured him, patting the man on the shoulder. "You two get some sleep. You've done more than you can imagine just by letting us stay here. Don't worry about anything happening. I sleep light, and I'll wake you if something comes up."

Marc nodded, and after once more shaking hands with the police officer, escorted Janice to their room. They closed the door behind them, and Marc leaned the heavy Remington against a corner. Despite the possibility of danger from outside, he still could not stomach leaving the weapon unattended with the Scouts. A part of him still remembered the tragedy of Richard Maxwell, a student in his fifth grade class who was accidentally shot and killed by his brother when the two were 'playing war' with a rifle owned - and hidden - by their father. In contrast, Marc had been raised around firearms and taught to respect them, and never had a single accident because of that background. He did not know enough about the teens downstairs to leave the rifle with them.

"You think we did the right thing, don't you?" he asked Janice as she prepared for bed. She responded with a deep, gentle laugh and another wink thrown in his direction. He was amazed at the change in her expression, and it answered his question before she even spoke. He could see that he was not the only one relieved by the diagnosis of the medic.

"Of course I do, Marc. Those kids need rest, and a good meal or two. Once they've had that, they can make their own plans."

"They'll head back for the city, I guess. At least they'll have the chance to get some sleep without rain hitting them in the face. Hey, by the way, glad to hear about your arm," he said in an abrupt change of subject as he peeled off his shirt. He dropped the sweat- and dirt-stained garment on the floor beside his boots, wrinkling his nose at his own smell. "Sorry," he said, managing to blush in embarrassment. "Kinda ripe."

"That's okay," Janice said. She slid into the bed and pulled the blanket up under her chin. "Work sweat I don't mind. It's that 'I-stink-because-I'm-too-lazy-to-shower' smell that I can't handle."

"Wish I could shower," he shot back. Sighing in resignation, he joined his wife in the bed, pulling her close to him. "Long, hot shower, water beating down on my head..." he mumbled, smiling at the fantasy. Janice snuggled in closer, laying her

injured arm across his chest.

"Soapy water, a new smell like spring flowers," she teased in a whisper. With a laugh, Marc leaned his head down and kissed her softly. The pair exchanged a quiet wish for sweet dreams and blew out the single candle on the nightstand. The room went dark; the moon unable to penetrate the cloud cover.

The change to morning was as gradual as ever it had been, but the faint light from the sun had to fight to push its way past the debris cloud that so steadfastly refused to make way for the silvery rays of the moon. It was nearly nine o'clock before there was enough light to see, and the occupants of the Perry house were still deeply asleep. They neither noticed nor cared as to the level of light outside, caught up as they were in their dreams. Bodies long deprived of decent sleep were taking advantage of the opportunity afforded them, and no mere trickle of light would change that.

Jake Forrest awoke with a start, glancing at his watch to see the time. He groaned inwardly as he saw the tiny tritium hands glowing brightly back at him. He blinked several times and rubbed at red-rimmed eyes to clear the last traces of sleep from them, scratched idly at his ear, then yawned and swung his legs from the bed. The floor was cold on his feet and he gasped at the sudden sensation, but it shocked him into full wakefulness. He wondered what had awakened him, but the rational part of his mind told him that it was just the time he had spent asleep. He had not slept past seven o'clock in over a year. Most days he woke up at about five, went for his morning run, and returned home to begin preparing for the day. Nine o'clock was practically unheard of for him.

He padded silently from the room and made his way down the hall to the bathroom, mentally reminding himself not to flush when he had finished. What water there was needed to last, and if the group could go for a while without flushing a toilet, it would stretch the supply. He made a mental note to encourage everyone to go outside as much as possible. The enormous number of trees surrounding the home would be second nature for the Scouts, he thought with a smile.

He stepped out of the bathroom, looking out of the hallway window at the spectacle that was the new sunrise, and shook his head in sadness, remembering the glory it had once held compared with this minimalistic display. He imagined a half-dozen cars with their headlights on parked behind a fog bank and smiled again as he guessed that the effect would be about the same. A movement from below caught his eye as he was turning to leave, and he peered intently out at the man who walked up the road toward the house. He took in the details at a glance, years of street work making the task easy.

A white male, appearing to be in his fifties, wearing long gray pants and carrying a bag that weighed heavily on one hip. He wore a dark blue jacket over a white shirt, and seemed to know just where he was heading. It was not the fact that he was approaching that bothered Jake. He recognized a postal carrier when he saw one. It was the manner of his approach. Long steps, as though trying to move away from something, interspersed with periods of short ones, during which time the man looked from side to side. He carried himself as though he were planning something,

but did not look to be the actual culprit. There was a feeling of unease about the man, so strong that it was palpable even from the second floor of the house he approached. Jake felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise and his lip curled up in response to his early warning system. He looked more closely at the surroundings, taking in the trees and the shadows cast by the weak sunlight. He blinked several times to verify what he was seeing.

Behind the postman, weaving in and out of the trees, the shadowy figures of at least four men could be seen.

Jake muffled a curse and turned away from the window. Quickly he jogged down the hall to where the Jenners slept, knocking quietly on the door until a sleepy Marc opened it. Jake recoiled for a second from the ghastly image of Marc's bruised face, but recovered quickly.

"Your mailman's coming," he whispered. "And there's something wrong with him. Wake Janice and get your rifle. We've got trouble."

# Skyfall

*By Jujen Kai*

## Chapter 33 - The Star VII

"Sheriff's Office!" cried the voice from beyond the door, and the entire room froze in place for an instant. Indecision and uncertainty writ large on their features, they simply looked at one another, unsure how to proceed. Margaret was the first to recover, shaking off the effects of the surprise shout and reaching out to touch Lori on the shoulder. As though the fingers had some sort of magic trapped within them, the shorter woman smiled and nodded to Margaret as she stood.

"Coming!" she called sweetly in response. She began a slow walk toward the door, soft house slippers making a swishing noise on the hardwood floor as she moved. The Monopoly game lay forgotten on the table behind them all; all eyes focussed instead on the door to the house.

Lori swung open the door to reveal the two deputies who had so recently called upon the residents of the Thorsenn house, Phillip Durzy and his partner Hunsaker. Both had friendly grins of greeting on their faces that vanished like snow in the sun when they saw Ketsuo Ohara standing in the room before them. Durzy's hand dropped to the butt of the enormous revolver on his hip as his eyes narrowed in suspicion. The bodyguard could not help but notice that the weapon was, in fact, a massive hunk of black steel with a seven-inch barrel that extended well below the holster. Judging by the size of the barrel, he estimated it to be a .44 Magnum.

"What the hell?" Durzy growled, mind clearly working in an entirely new gear as he tried to determine how Ohara could be here as well as at the Thorsenn home.

"Stand easy, Deputy," Robert Barne requested, displaying his open hands to calm the man. "Ketsuo is a guest here."

"Mister...Ohara?" Hunsaker asked, checking quickly at his notepad to get the name right. "Weren't you over at Erik Thorsenn's house just--"

"I was," replied Ohara, nodding happily as he broke in on the deputy's thoughts. He kept his hands well clear of his belt line, held in plain view, though he was certain that if it all went bad he could access his pistol before Durzy managed to draw his own. "And now I am here, as you can plainly see. The presence of the van outside, compounded with the fact that it was present there as well, should have given you some idea that this odd occurrence would befall you today."

His words, as well as the gentle tone of jest in which they were delivered, took a few seconds to penetrate through the blinking stares of the two men, then Durzy nodded. Snorting through his nose, the fat man chewed on his tobacco for a moment, then shook his head in amazement at his own surprise.

"Well, leastways you found ya someplace to stay what ain't got a bunch of crazies running it," he noted, bringing his arms up to fold them on his chest. He leaned to his right, bracing his shoulder against the frame of the entry door to the home. There was a loud slurping sound from his mouth as he worked at the plug of tobacco for a

moment. At his side, Hunsaker raised the clipboard and flipped his notepad to a new page, plastering on the friendly grin once more.

"So, Mister Barne, you say Mister Ohara is staying here? Not out there?" he clarified, gesturing vaguely to the south and toward the home of the Thorsenns.

"Couple of days, yeah," Robert confirmed with a casual shrug of his powerful shoulders. "And so is Miss Danvers," he added, nodding toward Margaret where she stood, half-concealed behind Ohara's frame.

"Danvers?" Hunsaker asked, spelling out the name to make sure he noted it correctly on his pad. Durzy looked at the woman with a leering gaze, allowing his eyes to roam freely up and down her body, taking in every curve of her form with lecherous delight, lingering on her hips, thighs, and breasts. When he at least returned to looking at her eyes, he was met with a glare as cold as Sierra meltwater. He smiled at her in what he obviously felt was an attractive manner, managing to expose his brown-stained teeth as he sucked in his gut and angled his body slightly to draw attention to the heavy pistol on his hip.

A woman less used to being ogled might have instinctively made some effort to cover herself with her hands, but the actress just stifled a laugh and directed her attention to Hunsaker, nodding her head in what could be considered a polite bow.

"Margaret Danvers," she declared.

"Where do you live, Miss Danvers?"

The question hit Margaret with sledgehammer force, leaving an icy ball of anguish in the pit of her stomach as she remembered her home in Los Angeles and once more envisioned it destroyed by a towering wall of water. Images of friends and acquaintances, co-workers and fans, all annihilated by that same relentless force, crowded in her mind's eye. She swallowed once as her face paled, and she laid a hand on Ohara's shoulder. Feeling the trembling in her fingers, the bodyguard stepped forward with a reply.

"We were living in Los Angeles, California," he said in a near-whisper as his eyes went blank. The words were not pleasant, and he fought to maintain his composure as he spoke. "We were passing through Oklahoma when the meteors struck. Robert and Lori were nice enough to take us in."

"And why is it you didn't tell us this when we spoke to you earlier?" asked the younger deputy, turning a hostile gaze on the bodyguard. "Not like you didn't have a chance."

"No one asked me," Ohara said with a shrug. His lip quirked up at the corner as the gesture sent a tremor through his sutures. "You were rather busy, if I recall correctly, with questioning the Thorsenns about their family, and requesting permission to search their home for some unknown reason."

"Well, that's for safety reasons, Mister Ohara," Hunsaker quickly replied, nodding and smiling as he tried to explain. "There could have been people hiding in the house, you see. We've been getting reports of violence in the area, and there could have been any number of criminals in there."

"In that house?" Robert asked with a barking laugh. "Son, have you looked at Erik Thorsenn? Or his father? Either one of them could take on a dozen men!" He caught

himself before making a further comment about the past battle between Magnus and Durzy, recognizing the baleful glare the fat deputy was directing his way.

"Ask the damn questions, boy," Durzy snapped, reaching out a hand to slap Hunsaker on the shoulder. The reference had obviously not been lost on him, and his barely-controlled anger was made clear in his tone and stance.

"So, uh, apart from your guests, are there just you and your wife here?" Hunsaker continued, startled momentarily by the blow from his partner. He lost track of where he had been on the questionnaire, and actually used a finger to trace down to the question before he asked it.

"Yes, it's just us," Lori confirmed.

"Any appreciable damage that FEMA needs to know about?"

"Naw, only damage we got here is what we had before the storm," joked Robert.

"Ya'll wanna get 'em to fix my lawnmower, though, I'll let you."

The attitude of Phillip Durzy, never warm to begin with, nose-dived following the last remark. He took a step into the house, pointing a meaty finger and fixing his eyes on Robert as he snarled, "These here questions is serious, mister, and you better know it! We ain't out here wasting our time just so's you can make fun of us!"

Robert refused to give way before the attempt at intimidation, shaking his head slowly from side to side as he cocked an eyebrow and sucked quietly at a tooth. His stance told of no fear, and in fact he seemed to grow taller in the face of the threatening posture of the deputy.

"Well, I reckon that about finishes this," he said quietly. He brought up a hand to scratch behind an ear, worrying at the flesh like a dog with a bone. The gesture alone indicated how little the deputy was affecting him. His smile, given without warmth, made it even more obvious. "Think it's about time you folks hit the road."

"Well, Mister Barne, there are a couple more things we need--" Hunsaker began, but quailed when the bigger man looked into his eyes. There was no hint of friendliness or compassion in Robert's expression any longer, and Hunsaker nodded silently as he realized how far over the line things had gone, and how easily things could go from bad to worse at this point. Rather than try to press his point, Hunsaker simply folded his notepad and replaced it in his pocket, holding the clipboard against his left hip. Robert turned to face Durzy, continuing his demands in a calm tone of voice.

"As I said, we're through here. No laws are being broken, and we have not invited you into our home," he said, pointedly looking at the larger of the two deputies, who now stood wholly inside the house. Robert's eyes slowly trailed down to stare at the deputy's feet, then worked back up to meet his gaze directly. "You are not welcome, and as the landowner here, I am making this a formal request for you to vacate my property."

There was no trace of emotion left in his voice as he spoke, and his expression carried only contempt. He locked gazes with Durzy for a further moment until the deputy backed away, placing his feet once more outside the door.

"Thank you for checking on us, gentlemen. I am certain there are others who need your help," Robert said, closing the door in the faces of both deputies. He turned his back on the door, managing a smile for the others in the room. Ohara nodded

knowingly at the farmer, finally stepping out from in front of Margaret.

"That was well played," he praised, reaching out a hand and sharing a shake with Robert.

"Probably not the best move you've ever made, honey, but I'm proud of you," Lori added, stepping up to hug him around his waist.

"I don't take kindly to people threatening my family," Robert said, looking down into the eyes of his wife. In those soft green orbs he saw only a deep love and affection for him. He knew from her look that the decision had been the right one.

"They will return, you understand," Ohara said, striding to the table and sipping from his glass of tea. "This is quite good," he said to Lori a moment later.

"Why will they return?" she asked in reply.

"First, they seem to actually be carrying out a survey for FEMA, one which I am quite sure they will be forced to complete. Second, by his actions, Robert has challenged the authority with which they feel they have been granted as law enforcement agents. While officers with more character would simply realize they had overstepped their bounds, I believe Durzy will take this as a personal affront. He will seek to avenge himself in some manner, once he has had time to consider what that manner might be. Oh, and third, because they will be invited," he added, this time drinking deeply from the glass as the questions erupted around him.

"Invited?" Robert fairly shouted, his tone incredulous.

"Who invited them?" Margaret asked.

"Why would we invite..." Lori began, but paused as she realized the others were speaking as well.

All three of them were staring at Ohara as he slowly drained the glass of iced tea. He lowered it with an appreciative sigh, smacked his lips, and turned his back on the group, heading for the kitchen as though nothing had been said.

"Ketsuo!" Margaret called, irritation leaking into her voice. He turned back with a sly grin, then actually winked at her before setting his glass on the table.

"I'm sorry, did you want some tea also?" he asked, managing to keep a straight face through the delivery of the question, but then slipping into a gentle laugh. He waved a hand at the others for a moment as he regained his composure.

"You have my apologies," he said a moment later, eyes sparkling with mirth. "At times I cannot resist playing my little jokes. Let me explain, though. They will be invited here because some heinous crime has been committed. Arson, vandalism, burglary, assault, the list is effectively endless, but you may rest assured that some such activity will take place. When it does, the response will be that which you have been taught for your entire life: contact the police and let them deal with it. At that point you have invited them to return."

"But how can you be sure that someone's gonna do something out here?" Robert asked, folding his arms across his chest and leaning on the wall as he awaited an answer.

"Because it's what I would do in their position, were I intent on having a legitimate reason to return. Think about it, Robert. These men have access to criminals who would be more than willing to perform some kind of mayhem in exchange for some

misdeed being conveniently forgotten. They catch some teenagers in the act of, oh, let's say smoking a joint," Ohara said, raising a hand and spiralling it in the air as he thought. "Now the options are pretty simple for the deputies, right? One, call mom and dad. Two, arrest the kids. Three, find some way to make the situation go away. What better way than to tell them that if they will go break a few windows, maybe spray-paint a car, that their transgressions will simply vanish from the record. Then, you come out in the morning, find your van has been vandalized, and place a quick call to the Sheriff's Office. Tag, you're it. Next thing you know, Philip Durzy is back. Only this time, you've invited him."

Robert sagged visibly against the wall as the full weight of the bodyguard's words sank in. He licked at lips suddenly gone dry, wiping his hand across his nose and lower face. A sudden sigh of air slipped past his lips, sounding ominously loud in the enclosed room.

"What the hell did I just... Jesus, man, I..." he whispered, unable to complete a thought as he looked helplessly at the others in the room. Lori moved to stand beside him once more, offering silent support as he considered what had been suggested. Ohara stood calmly at the edge of the table, fingers resting lightly on the edge of his glass. His eyes were flat and emotionless.

"So what do we do?" Margaret asked after a few moments of thought. Her fingers were knotting together, clenching and unclenching in complex patterns as she nervously wondered about how to proceed.

"In truth, that is in the hands of Lori and Robert," Ohara answered. He made a non-committal gesture with his hands, inwardly noting that it was much less painful than shrugging but still carried the same meaning. "Were it up to me, however, I would begin by checking and reinforcing the security measures around the farm, then perhaps creating some new ones."

"Security measures?" Robert echoed with a short barking laugh. "I've got the shotgun you saw when you came in. That and a couple of rifles make up my 'security measures' out here."

"Then it would seem clear that new measures must be established. Some form of early warning, intruder alerts, some method for entangling or incapacitating an intruder before they can reach your home, perhaps something a little more...exotic," Ohara said, raising an eyebrow. His eyes were half-closed, and an ecstatic look passed across his face as he fairly breathed the final word.

"Like what?" Lori pressed, cocking her head to the side and narrowing her eyes slightly.

"Yeah, it ain't like I've got rolls of razor wire and a case of claymores tucked away somewhere," said Robert.

Ohara grinned as the ideas began to run rampant through his mind. "While razor wire would indeed be effective, I believe we can make do without it for now," he said with a smile. "As for claymores, well, should those prove necessary, we can always build them."

There was a sharp hissing sound in the living room as three mouths suddenly gasped in air at the concept so casually mentioned by the bodyguard, but Ohara pretended

not to notice. He raised a hand and scratched at the bridge of his nose, then ruffled his hair again as he lost himself for a moment in thought. His eyes were half-closed and a bit glazed as he envisioned the exterior of the house, seeing it from all angles and trying to determine what methods would prove most effective in securing the property. He considered his options for a moment, then pursed his lips thoughtfully. From his back pocket, Ohara produced the thin Motorola radio that the Thorsenns had provided. He switched it on, hearing a quiet beep as it came to life. The channel was already set to six, and he gently pushed the talk switch, giving it a moment to key up before speaking.

"Son of Thor, Dragon," he said. A moment later, edged in static, came the sound of Erik Thorsenn's voice. It had an edge of surprise to it.

"Go ahead."

"Bit of a conundrum here, sir. Expecting some possible incursions. Requesting a consultant to extend long-term options at this station," said Ohara, hoping the phrasing made sense. There was a moment of silence from the other side, stretching just long enough that he truly began to wonder if he should rephrase it.

"Was clear, Dragon. One Valkyrie enroute your location. My architect is your architect."

"Your assistance is appreciated. Advise if we can reciprocate."

"Any time. Out."

Ohara switched off the radio and turned to address the others. They were staring at him with a mix of odd expressions. Only Robert seemed to have made any sense of what had been said, and even he looked perplexed. The bodyguard grinned anew as he glanced at the faces of his friends. A part of him urged him to make this a new joke, to wait until they were insane with questions before explaining, but he held off for now.

"We will have a visitor shortly," he said, extracting the pitcher of iced tea from the refrigerator and refilling his glass at last. "Kim Thorsenn is coming."

"What the hell was all that?" Margaret asked, nodding her head toward the radio that was even now clipped to Ohara's belt. He took another drink of his tea before responding, letting the cool liquid refresh him.

"My methods, Margaret, are a bit...final," he said, carefully choosing the word. "You and I have worked together for some time, and only a few times have I been forced to respond to a developing situation. The results are never pretty, to say the least."

"Well, that's true," the actress concurred, shuddering slightly as she remembered the assailant at her premiere. The screams of the wounded man still came to her in her dreams. There had been others in the past, to be sure, but she so rarely saw the aftermath of his efforts. She flicked back some of her coppery hair with a shake of her head, then sat on the couch as she thought about what he was saying. The expression on her face made clear that she was grasping his implications, but he continued for the benefit of the Barnes.

"Lori, Robert, let me explain to you what I am saying. I am trained to repel the most forceful of attacks. I can make your home a veritable fortress, should you so desire it. It would take an expert to enter without being maimed or killed. That in and of

itself is a problem, though. We do not live in a time when it is legal to defend your property with explosives and kill-traps. If it becomes necessary, I will help you do so, but at this time, I have called upon the Thorsenns to aid us in preparing you to remain secure without resorting to such measures. Kim has designed the security systems for the Thorsenn home, as evidenced by Erik describing her as his architect. Between us I feel confident we can assemble some less-than-lethal means of securing your property."

"I've been out for too long, Ketsuo," Robert said with a nod of his head. "I think I almost prefer the non-lethal means nowadays."

"As well you should," Ohara said. "Understand, I take no joy in what I do. I simply do what I must to ensure that no harm comes to my friend. If that requires me to take measures beyond the norm, then so be it. I have done so before and will quite probably do so again."

The sound of a car arriving cut off the need for further conversation, and Ohara returned to his iced tea, peering over the rim of the glass at Margaret. The actress was looking at him, her eyes wider than usual as she realized he had been discussing her. The use of the word 'friend', as opposed to 'client', was not lost on her. She smiled dazzlingly, blinking away the beginnings of a tear as the depth of the words, and the emotion behind them, registered. No longer was she someone he was paid to protect and watch over. She had become something more now, something with a higher connection, and Ohara would never know just how deeply that affected her. Lori opened the door once more to reveal the form of Kim Thorsenn. The woman wore a loose-fitting black t-shirt that hung to just over the waistline of a pair of worn Levi's jeans. She stood with her right hand outstretched and pressed on the door jamb, affecting a pose of absolute calm. A small suitcase was in her left hand, and a long black plastic box rested at her feet. Her head was tilted slightly down, and she looked up by rolling her eyes up at the group, peering at them from behind her ebony hair. The effect was startling, transforming her from a pretty young woman into a wrathful creature as her lips peeled back to display brilliant white teeth framed by blood-red lips. The look was absolutely feral and touched them all on a deep, primal level. Kim laughed suddenly as she saw the looks on their faces, the burst of sound erasing the effects of the carefully-contrived appearance.

"You folks called for an architect?" she asked.

# Skyfall

*By Jujen Kai*

## Chapter 34 - The Pirates VIII

Nomad was slumped forward in his chair, the far right side of his forehead barely touching the desk behind which he sat. His head rested on his right hand, matting his hair. A thin line of drool ran from his lips, collecting in a puddle on the synthetic tabletop of his desk and slithering dangerously close to the piles of yellow legal pad pages stacked there. The terminal in front of him was still lit, locked in place on the last entry he had made in the carefully-assembled notes he was transcribing from those very pages. A long line of lower-case "z" characters had marched across the screen, mute evidence of the pressure of his thumb as he had fallen asleep at last. The exhaustion of the previous few days had caught up to him, despite the massive quantities of coffee he had poured into his system practically by the potful. All the sleep he had managed to get since the storm was obtained in tiny, fitful amounts from which he always awoke in a cold sweat, haunted as he would forever be by the image of a teenager fairly exploding in front of a shotgun Nomad was firing. In the doorway to the study, the shadowy form of Lysette DeLacourt, backlit from the hallway light, glanced in to assure that he was all right. Withdrawing silently as she saw that he was asleep, the blonde walked silently back into the living room, where Falcon stood watching the video monitors with professional interest.

"See something?" Lysette asked.

"Nay, was only checking their range," Falcon replied in her thick Irish brogue, all pretense of hiding her accent having been dropped. She reached out with one crimson-painted nail to tap at one of the screens. It made a ringing sound as she contacted the glass. "This one. Northeast corner. Tis a bit off. Needs ta be lowered a couple degrees ta give it full coverage of the wall. No rush, though, we can move it tomorrow."

"So, you never did tell me, what happened with Nomad before I came in?" asked the blonde woman, settling herself into the armchair. She propped up her feet and lit a cigarette, waving a hand to indicate an empty seat on the couch. Falcon nodded and practically threw herself into the space, curling her feet under her and rocking slightly as she settled into place. The image was not dissimilar to a teenaged girl making herself comfortable, with the notable exception of the twin autopistols slung low on her hips. Beside the couch was a small bag that Falcon had brought with her. It had been left outside when she made her dramatic entry, and she had since retrieved it. The contents were a mystery to all but the red-haired woman, and even Nomad's heavy-handed inquiries as to the type of items she might carry had been in vain. Lysette had enough tact not to ask.

"Ahh, 'twas a bit of nothing," she said dismissively. "I came in with a couple questions, trying ta see how much the little man'd give up. He did good, ye know," she noted as an aside. "Wouldn't give ye up, not even a bit. Said ye were out getting

some food or some such. Never said nary a word about when ye'd be back. I was on the end side of quitting the talk and he spoke a bit of rudeness, so I gave him a tiny kick. Naught but a little one, I swear, but the lad couldn't hold his food after."

"So you kicked him," Lysette said with a nod. "I figured as much. Never seen him lose it like that, 'cept when he splashed the gangers the other night. Boy can eat burritos and eggrolls together, top it off with a slice of cold pizza and he still won't get sick. Kind of stood to reason there was something behind it happening there," she added, using her cigarette to point at the damp spot where Nomad had scrubbed away the evidence of his sickness. Falcon put on her best innocent look, batting her eyelashes and giggling like a schoolgirl as she did so. After a moment, Lysette joined in with a quiet laugh of her own.

"You never change, do you?" she asked.

"What'd be the point?" Falcon shot back, her accent making the last word sound like 'pint'. "Ye go through life changing all the time, who's gonna know ye when they come ta yer wake? All them people, sittin' about and carrying on about who ye were. Why, they'd wind up thinking they'd come about ta celebrate six different people," she added, making a slapping motion at the air to indicate her disapproval of the idea. She followed it with a beckoning gesture to Lysette, then put two fingers to her lips in a pantomime of smoking. Lysette responded by fishing out her pack and tossing it to the redhead. Falcon slipped the orange Bic lighter from the mouth of the pack and snapped it into flame, igniting the tip of a cigarette. She drew the thick smoke into her lungs as she tossed the pack back to Lysette.

"Had to be a bit of a scare for Nomad, though. One minute he's alone in the house, then he's got Lara Croft staring him down," Lysette laughed, nodding her head at the outfit Falcon wore and noting its resemblance to that of the video game heroine.

"Oh, nay, ye'll not be comparing me with a bloody Brit, now, will ye?" Falcon protested, eyes wide with feigned shock. She glanced down at herself, then looked back up, face split wide in a grin as she winked at Lysette. "It is a grand thing, though, innit? Shows off me hips good, and the belt looks fair juicy around me waist. Keeps me toys where I can reach 'em, as well, no matter where me hands might be at the time they're needing ta be held."

"Well, nice to see you chose it for all the right reasons."

"And what o' ye, then? Carrying about that bloody great hog of a banger," Falcon said, inclining her chin toward the MP-5 that hung on the edge of the chair in which Lysette was perched. "Ye're gonna tell me it ain't making ye look a sexy beast, then?"

"No, not at all," Lysette said as she laughed. "It does do that, and quite well, I might add. It's come in handy since I got it, though. Got the two of us out of a nasty scrape."

"What is it ye've been doing with that fella, anyhow? We've not one of us heard from ye in ages, and then up ye jump, flashing us the notices. That was what? Three months back? Ye've been rolling about with this bloody pirate that long?"

"Longer. Hell, I've been with him for almost a year now. He was making a broadcast one night, dropped a couple of names I recognized. I spent a couple weeks tracking

him down. Took him aside and explained that some people wouldn't take kindly to those names getting out, you know?"

Falcon grinned through a wreath of smoke. It trailed along her face, teasing at her hair before dissipating into the air in thin curls of grey. Twin plumes slid from her nostrils as she slowly exhaled. "And he thought ye a nutter, did he?"

"No, actually, he thought I was quite normal, which I guess compared to him is kind of relative. He just figured I was a government spy sent to kill him," remembered Lysette with a faint grin. "I thought he was gonna mess himself. He was eating some crappy TV dinner, right? So he grabs a fork and holds it out like he's gonna stick me. He's backing away, trying to figure out how he's getting out of his van, and he's holding me back with a damned fork."

"What'd ye do?" asked Falcon, leaning forward and wrapping an arm around her knees.

"Well, I drew my piece," Lysette said matter-of-factly. "He starts shaking, drops the fork, and pretty much goes down to his knees hoping he won't get aced right there in the middle of nowhere. I let him go on begging for a while, 'cause let's face it, that's fun, but then I got tired of it and I just flipped the pistol around and handed it to him butt first. He took hold like it was a dead fish or something, and I looked him in the eye and told him pretty much straight up that there were people out there that would not hesitate to put him down. Told him he needed someone who'd look after his ass while he said all the stupid crap he wanted to, and after that it was just a matter of time."

"So why the sudden contact? Did ye just start missing all yer mates?"

Lysette nodded, butting out her cigarette and leaning back in the chair. She slung a leg over the side, letting it hang over the arm of the chair as she thought for a minute before answering. When next she spoke, her voice was low and quiet, and carried a note of something that sounded like sadness. "In truth, yeah. I'd been running around, going place to place, and I just wanted to talk to someone familiar. Someone normal. Someone not him," she added, jerking a thumb toward the study where Nomad was sleeping. She fell silent for a moment and Falcon dropped a question she had not expected, delivered, as usual, with all of Falcon's notorious social grace.

"So are ye shagging him?"

"What?" Lysette snapped back, sitting bolt upright in the chair, her face a mask of surprise. She thought in a flash how lucky it was that she had not been drinking anything at that moment, else the floors would need cleaning once more after the movie-quality spit take she could see in her mind. As it was, she actually choked on a lungful of air and coughed once or twice to clear her lungs.

Still maintaining her childish look of innocence, Falcon pressed her fingertip to the tip of her freckled nose and winked at the blonde. "Got ye with that one, aye? Truth, though, I had ta ask. Might make a difference when it all drops in the pot, ye know?"

"Oh, no. No, no, no," Lysette denied, waving her left hand in a negative motion as she chanted the words like a holy mantra. She joined in with the right hand a moment later, still muttering, "No".

"I take it then ye're saying no?" Falcon joked, leaning back her head and laughing at

the reaction of her friend.

"Done a lot of things in my time, Col, but never once did I..." Lysette began, then cut off as she looked up into Falcon's face. The vibrant green eyes held a strange, faraway look and Falcon dipped her head for a moment, remembering times long past. Not all the memories were pleasant, as evidenced by the pained expression that crossed her face for a moment.

"Haven't been called that in ages," she whispered in a sad voice. "I sometimes forget that's me name at all. Used so bloody many others, ye know?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean - "

"Not a problem. Not like I keep as many names as ye, anyway," the redhead interjected, waving her hand to dismiss Lysette's apology as unnecessary.

"Well, I'm down to about two right now. I remember enough of some of the others to get access to my accounts and such, if I'm in a place where I can get to them. With all that's happened, a lot of them are just lost. Lost my ATM cards and all the documents when Nomad's van got squished."

"On that, ye said ye were running a broadcast when the storm came?"

"Yeah," Lysette replied, rubbing the back of her hand across her eyes. Her face was pinched in a tired expression, and she knew she would need to sleep soon. Sitting and talking to Falcon simply felt good, though, and she was loathe to give it up just yet.

"Had a hacker snagging us some satellite time, Secret Service showed up to bust him, and we got caught in the middle. The meteors hit and we took off. Did manage to snatch the MP-5 out of the deal, though, so I'm not complaining much."

"Always nice ta get ye a souvenir," Falcon quipped with a wide grin.

"Cost us the van, though. All his broadcast equipment was in it."

"And that's why we're planning this little caper, then?"

"Yeah. We want to get the word out. Nomad seems to have found enough to show that Big Brother knew this thing was coming ahead of time and didn't tell anybody. They boosted their satellite production and the amount of spending on spacecraft in the past few months. It looks like they were planning to replace the damaged ones."

"So ye're stringing together all this on the satellite budget?" asked Falcon, quirked an eyebrow as she took another long drag on her cigarette.

"That's just another brick in the wall," declared a voice from the doorway. Nomad stood there, looking infinitely worse for wear following his nap. His hair, once a disorderly mop, was now a lopsided disorderly mop, having been compressed against the side of his head as he slept. The skin beneath his eyes had thick dark circles from lack of sleep, and he had a crease in his face where it had lain atop the edge of the keyboard. He raised a hand to rub at his neck, easing the stiffness left behind by his awkward position. He licked at his dry lips before continuing.

"I've found some things in there that'll make you sit up and take notice, that's for sure. The President's conference was cut short hours before the storm. I think somebody meant for him to be in the air when it hit. Take him out of power, let the shadow government start doing its thing. There was a recent upswing in gun control efforts, if you remember, fueled by a sudden surge in the number of school and workplace shootings, all of them carried out by people who then either shot

themselves or pulled the suicide-by-cop routine. A lot of places made registration mandatory on a municipal level. They bypass state or federal laws when they do it that way, and they can always point to all those recent shootings and say that was why they did it. Either way, the locals now have records of who owned what in a lot of areas. Big cities, especially. Then, if you look at the records, you'll see where large parks were modified just outside of a lot of major urban areas, under the guise of 'cleaning up the area'. They bulldozed adjoining slums; created a buttload of vacant space."

"And that means?" Falcon asked. She crushed out her cigarette in the ashtray and stared intently at the radio pirate as he explained his findings..

"Now they know where the armed citizens are, and they're readying areas for containment facilities," Nomad said flatly. "Parks are ideal. A lot of open space, easily fenced, and often with water sources already in place. They use the adjoining areas to put up command centers and 'refugee processing stations'." He made "air quotes" as he spoke, swinging his hands wildly throughout the rest of his declarations. Lysette shot Falcon a warning look, knowing that Nomad was launching into another of his tirades and that with the lack of sleep the man evidenced it could be one for the record books.

"I found statements that show that there's been a lot of pressure put on the President to recall our troops from overseas. Not for the reasons one might think, but just because. It isn't like the pressures were a reaction to public outcry or anything, just that certain people in the government wanted them brought home. The Pres wouldn't do it, though, because he thought he was repaying some kind of debt."

"I saw how he repaid his debt to the Brits," Falcon sneered. "Bring in two thousand soldiers, send them house ta house in the Eire, and start geeking anyone who give 'em a bit o' lip."

"Yeah? Same thing in Colombia, but with more men. Rockets, flamethrowers, air strikes, the whole nine yards. Syria had tanks as well. Point is, he wouldn't bring them home until he thought the debts had been cleared. Made himself more than a few enemies doing it that way, including the Veep."

"So you think the Vice President knew about the storms?" Lysette asked.

"I don't know," Nomad said, and it was obvious that the confession pained him. "I can't track that down, and I can't even get enough leads to make that connection. Seems awfully convenient that he was touring the base at NORAD when the storm came, though. Biggest shelter he could find, you think? Anyway, the Pres dies, the Veep turns it all over to FEMA, and we're all stuck on the long end of a shaft that's going right up the common man. You think they had control before? Hell, there's nothing to stop them now. They can roll roughshod over pretty much anyone they want to, all safe and secure behind their Executive Orders. Say something they don't like, BANG! You're dead. Look at them wrong and you're in a cage. What is it they used to say? 'Toe the line and you'll be fine'? You ain't seen nothing yet. Give them half a chance and they'll have us tagged with radio collars and genetic ID chips, begging for a handout from the Man with the rest of the proles. Standing in a bread line and praying there's enough to go around. Marked with the number of the beast,

to borrow from some of the more traditional broadcasters. Now we get the camps being set up, and it won't be long before they start going house to house right here," he announced, intentionally echoing Falcon's words concerning Ireland.

Nomad was becoming even more animated than usual, pacing madly around the room as the two women watched. His bare feet swished on the carpet and his arms moved about so much they began to create a breeze. "Hell, man, we spent two hundred years building a system the rest of the world envied and feared, then in the next thirty we crapped it all away. Nobody left but a bunch of puppets running the show for the real masters of destiny, man! They've been back there the whole time, you know, watching and waiting. Then along comes the meteor storm, and they say, 'hey we've got them now! Let's bend them all over. Nobody can stop us, so what have we got to lose?' I have been warning these people for years!" he suddenly shouted, stomping his foot angrily on the floor. His hands clenched into tight fists and he slammed them onto his thighs as he gritted his teeth. "Did anyone listen to me? Oh, no! Not me! Not the Nomad! 'He's a crazy man', they said. Always going on about UFO's and Men in Black, seeing the Man behind everything. Well I was right, damn it! I was right and they'll know it now for sure! Is there any more coffee?" he asked in an abrupt change of subject, his voice softening as he looked hopefully at Lysette.

"In the kitchen," she replied with a shrug. The time with him had effectively inured her to his sudden swings of mood and topic.

"I'm thinking that coffee's the last thing ye're needing there, boyo," Falcon said with a friendly grin. "Looks like ye're worked up enough already for the three of us."

"I need to stay awake to keep working," he protested. He adopted a haughty pose, bracing his hands on his hips and staring down his nose at the woman.

"Ye need some sleep," Falcon shot back, standing from her seat. She calmly approached him and laid a hand on his shoulder as though they were the best of friends. "Else ye'll be seeing things wrong. If ye've got a message ta get out, it'd better be something solid, else we'll be the ones what have ta eat the results."

"What results?" he asked.

"Riots for a start. Been there, mate, and I've seen them up close and personal-like. Ye start telling the folks what's going on and there'll be a war. They'll take ta the streets and they'll do it rough. A lot of them won't be seeing another day once they do it, either. When the bronzes come, they'll shoot first and spit on the corpses later."

"What do you mean, the bronzes?"

"Police, man, police. The people are gonna go off their nut. When they do, ye can rest calm it'll be the bronzes putting down rounds ta stop the problems."

"They wouldn't open fire on their own citizens like that," Nomad said. It was more of a question than a statement, however, and a flicker of doubt passed behind his eyes.

"Nay? Just let it pass, will they?" Falcon snapped in response, suddenly all business. She reached down with her left hand and pulled up her t-shirt, dragging it free of the waistband of her pants to expose hard abdominal muscles and a quarter-sized mass of pink scar tissue just below the floating ribs. Still holding the shirt, she jerked her

chin downward toward the scar. "That'll be from one o' them kindly police fellas back in the day, ye see. Got that just passing by a row once on me way back from the store. Wrong place, wrong time. They killed near a dozen that day, all 'cause some stupid wanker wanted ta toss rocks and act the maggot. Way I heard it, him as started it all walked away with nary a scratch. More'n a few o' the rest o' us wasn't so jammy as was that one, ye see. So don't go thinking ye'll get away with riling up the folks and then being the big hero. There's gonna be blood ta pay, boyo, and that's a dear price indeed."

The room fell silent following Falcon's outburst and Nomad hung his head slightly, looking suitably chastised by the exclamation. He bit his lip and took in a deep breath, held it in his lungs for a moment, then nodded to her as he looked carefully at the wound she so casually displayed.

"Yeah, I know. Deep down inside I do know it, okay? It's just that if I stop to think about what's gonna happen after I say my piece I'll never say it at all. I know people are gonna get hurt, and I know it could just as easily be me getting shot as any of the rest of them. Hell, it probably will. But the point is, there's a lot of things people aren't being told and they've got a right to know about it. Nobody's gonna tell them if I don't. Nobody else is gonna take the time and effort to track this information down and set it free. It's what I do, though, and it's about all I'm good at. And I am good," he added in a voice that no longer held any doubt. The words were not boastful or exaggerated, but were delivered as a simple statement of fact.

"Yeah, Nomad, you're good," Lysette concurred, raising a hand to cut him off.

"Probably one of the best at putting this crap together. The only problem right now is that you've got to act with some responsibility. What you say may very well cause a bigger problem than we've got now. I'm not telling you not to do it, not by a long shot, but I want you to understand what Falcon is saying. Your broadcast is going to lead to violence. Period. It's just that simple. What you are telling people is that the monkeys they put in office have betrayed them. The results can be predicted fairly easily."

"I like her way of explaining things better," Nomad said with a smile, pointing at the still-exposed flank of Falcon. The redhead grinned despite herself at the unexpected praise, then released her shirt to fall back at her side. Stifling a laugh, she composed herself and directed a stare at the pirate.

"Get some sleep," she ordered with a mock snarl. "Go back ta working on yer speech when ye wake up. Then when the time is right, Legion and me'll walk the bloody path right alongside ye."

"All right, all right," he said, giving in at last. He took another deep breath that spontaneously transformed into a yawn, then shook his head a bit as it ended.

"You're right. Look, I'll see you two in the morning. Or evening. Whatever.

Whenever it is I wake up, at least," he mumbled, turning and shuffling down the hall toward his room. A moment later, the sound of his door closing drifted to the ears of the two women.

"Nicely done," Lysette said, reaching out to tap Falcon over the scar she had shown.

"Aye. Who knows when ye fall off the bars in the playground at seven years that

ye'll maybe need the scar ta convince some bloody moron of something or other one day?" Falcon whispered back with a quiet laugh. "God above, is the boy on the drink? There's nary a man'd fall for that one back home. What a tool."

"Come on, Falcon," Lysette said, laughing along at the joke. "Got a room upstairs for you. All the comforts of nowhere, but it's got four walls and a roof."

"That's fair," Falcon said. She wiggled her eyebrows and winked. "Hope it's got a floor, too, else sleeping's gonna be a bit o' murder."

"I swear, woman, you never change."

# Skyfall

*By Jujen Kai*

## Chapter 35 - The Farmers VII

Enrico felt himself a tremendous fool, and the look on the face of the user he had captured did not make the feeling any better. The kid was displaying a look of triumph that made the elder Chavez want to strike him in the face with the rifle butt. In all the excitement of the capture, no one had remembered that the battered old Ford no longer had headlights. It was utterly impossible to take their prisoner to town until morning, and Enrico had been forced to drag the laughing youth into the cabin as Santos apologized for failing to mention the lights.

"Keep looking at me like that, boy," Enrico muttered, glaring at his prisoner for what he figured to be the fiftieth time. The look was truly beginning to wear down his reserves of patience, and that showed in the icy tone of his voice. "Here in a minute I might just decide old Wes is right about how to handle you."

"What? You gonna kill me, man?" said the bound man. He made the question even more of a challenge than Enrico's statement of a moment before, following it with a squaring of his shoulders and a sneer of disdain. "Not a chance. You'd'a done it out there if you was gonna do it at all."

The man collapsed to the floor before he could say another word, a yelp of pain escaping his lips and terminating in a rush of sputtered obscenities. Behind him, a knowing grin splitting his face, stood Santos. His left foot was still held off the floor where it had been so casually thrust into the back of the prisoner's knee. He shrugged a little and put an expression of feigned sympathy on his face.

"Gee, Pop, looks like he fell down," he said with exaggerated innocence.

"You big dumb son of a - " the man began, his voice cut off suddenly by one of Santos's enormous hands wrapping around his throat. All pretense of joking dropped, Santos dragged the sallow-faced man close to his own face, eyes blazing with an inner fire born of incensed anger.

"You finish that comment and I'll break your jaw," Santos declared. Gaze still locked on the prisoner, he raised his other hand to forestall any intervention by his father. Enrico had begun to step forward, afraid that Santos would overstep himself. The bulky frame of Wes McKinley's revolver was still jammed in the teenager's pocket, but he made no move for it, settling instead to expand on his threat to the addict. "I can do it, too. Don't take more than a good hard hit, and I'll figure you've got it coming if you call my mother that. You got me?"

The head shifted a bit in an attempted nod above his hand, and Santos loosened his grasp enough to allow the man to fall back. Little gagging noises sounded throughout the otherwise still cabin, causing Wes to screw up his face into a terrible grimace at the sounds. Turning on his heel, he went into his bedroom and emerged a moment later with a pair of heavy wool socks in hand. He walked calmly over to the bound man, stretching one of the grey socks in his hands.

"Open yer mouth, boy," he commanded. There was a moment of hesitation, but the prisoner finally complied, opening his mouth wide. Wes jammed one of the socks into his mouth, then wrapped the other around his head to secure it in place. He tied it into a tight square knot and stepped back to admire his handiwork.

"Never did care fer that kinda language, 'specially not with a lady in the house," he said. "'Sides, now he can't be makin' them there 'ack' noises. Come first light, Rico, y'all get this trash outta my house. I don't want him stinkin' the place up, ya know what I mean?"

"Yeah, Wes, I know," Enrico replied, looking not at the prisoner but at his son. The teenager's expression was still angry, and he carefully pulled Santos away. When they had stepped a couple of paces away, Enrico whispered in his ear.

"All right, son, he's not going to say anything else. You need to calm down."

"But, Dad, you heard what - "

"Yeah, Santos, I heard it. Point is, he's gagged now. It's over. Let it go."

There was an audible sigh from Santos as he looked at the man and let out a deep breath. He closed his eyes for a moment, then nodded a little bit.

"You cool now?" asked Enrico.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Good. Now help me tie his ankles and wrists together again," Enrico said. They had been forced to remove the hobble to get him into the back of the truck in the first place, and he had not been re-secured since that point. Santos nodded again, this time more briskly, and turned to regard the man once more.

"Hey, Cranky," he called to the man. "Roll over on your side."

The response was a muffled imprecation, and no less than the teen had expected to receive from the man. With yet another shrug of his mountainous shoulders, Santos stepped calmly over and grabbed the addict by his left arm. With a grunt, he flipped the man completely over onto his belly, then reached down and grabbed his ankles. Holding onto the man's feet, Santos dropped to the floor and pulled, dragging the feet up to meet the bound wrists.

"Might wanna tie him up quick, Pop," he said with a smirk. Behind him, the prisoner screamed agonized curses into the gag. Shaking his head, Enrico moved in and deftly tied a series of knots to secure the man. When he had finished, he signalled Santos to release the feet. They moved less than six inches before the rope stopped them.

"Should've rolled over, Cranky," Santos taunted as he stood. The look in his eyes said that he wanted to plant a kick into the man's ribs, but he refrained from doing so.

"Leave him alone, Santos," urged a soft voice. Maria stood in the door to the kitchen of the cabin, hands clenched around a cup of coffee from which thin streams of steam were slowly wafting. She extended the cup to Enrico. "We made it on Wes's stove," she said. "It's kind of harsh, but it's strong. Should help keep you awake."

"Thank you," Enrico said with a sigh of gratitude. He held the cup up near his nose, teasing himself with the scent of the drink. There was no doubt that Wes had prepared the coffee; it was much stronger than that which Maria would ever have made.

"Awake?" Santos asked, looking with surprise at his father.

"Yeah. Someone's gotta sit watch over...Cranky," Enrico replied. Despite the gravity of the situation, he found himself unable to suppress a grin at his own use of his son's nickname for the meth addict.

"He ain't getting out of those ropes, Pop," the teen protested.

"And if he does? If he somehow escapes, what do you think he'd do to us? I can't take a chance on him suddenly deciding to be nice to the people who just beat him and tied him up. You get some sleep and we'll take him into town tomorrow."

Santos debated the point with his father for a few more minutes, but soon realized that Enrico would not budge from his viewpoint. He then tried another tack, volunteering to sit watch so that Enrico could sleep. He argued that Enrico would be driving, and would need to be well-rested, and that Santos could go longer without sleep than his father in any event. When at last Enrico simply shook his head and patted the teen on the shoulder, Santos gave up and retreated to his sleeping pad. He made a point of displaying the revolver to 'Cranky' as he slipped it under the blanket where it would be near his hand as he slept. Propping his head up on his pillow, Santos leaned back and stared at the addict, determined not to go to sleep.

Santos awakened instantly at the touch of a hand on his shoulder, eyes snapping open to see his father looking down at him. The older man's face was tired, but he grinned anew as he handed a cup of the thick coffee to Santos.

"It's morning," Enrico whispered, smiling at the look of surprise on his son's face as he made the announcement. "Get up and get ready, but be quiet about it. I don't want to wake your mother or Wes if we can help it."

Numerous mornings spent preparing in silence during a dozen previous hunting seasons had left Santos with the ability to do exactly as Enrico wanted, and within a few minutes the youth was ready to go. He finished tying the laces of his work boots and took another long swallow of the bitter black coffee before reaching for the heavy pistol. Enrico stopped him with a quiet clucking sound, shaking his head in a negative gesture as Santos looked at him.

"They might need it here," whispered Enrico, reaching out to hand the Winchester to his son. "We take this."

Santos responded with a simple nod, then held up a hand to decline the offer of the rifle. He moved on tiptoes to where the prisoner lay, gripping him strongly by one arm and leg. With a muffled grunt of effort, he hoisted the man onto his shoulders and carried him toward the door as though he were no more than another sack of feed for the cow. Enrico slipped a backpack loaded with a few meager supplies over his shoulder and quietly opened the door. He followed his son onto the porch, then slipped the portal shut behind them, twisting the knob to be sure it was locked. They marched in near-silence to the pickup, where Santos very gently placed the addict into the bed, tying off the ropes to the stanchion behind the passengers' seat.

"I could have dropped you," he whispered in reply to the man's muffled oaths. He paused to catch his breath, looking around at the landscape in the pitifully pale light of the dawn. It appeared totally alien to him now. This area, where he had been raised since birth, was now so dramatically altered that it felt almost as though he

had never before been there. Shaking off the disturbing feeling, Santos joined his father in the pickup, only now accepting the rifle. He cycled the action, stripping the round from the magazine and keeping the chamber free, then placed the butt of the weapon on the floor, barrel pointing up and back. Beside him, Enrico shoved the light pack into the floor and stretched a seatbelt across his chest, waiting for his son to follow suit before he even touched the ignition.

The Ford backed slowly down the driveway and onto the narrow dirt road that served both the McKinley farm and that of the Chavez family. Essentially little more than a path slightly wider than one vehicle, it had been overlaid with a thin covering of gravel that time and the motion of vehicles had worn away. Now in short supply, the gravel was only occasionally glimpsed in the soft orange-brown dust that made up the bulk of the roadway.

"See if there's any news on," Enrico said. Santos just shook his head sadly.

"Radio doesn't work. I tried it earlier, just got static."

"Try tuning it," Enrico suggested, eyes trained on the road as he swerved slowly around a large and shapeless mass that might once have been shrubbery. With a sigh, Santos switched on the radio, keeping the volume low as the expected hiss erupted from the tiny speakers. He slowly twisted the tuning knob, hoping against hope for something, anything, to come from the device. If he had his preference, it would be for something with the energy of Hank Williams Jr., Toby Keith or Charlie Daniels, though at the moment he wanted just to hear something beyond the solid wall of white noise that hissed and crackled in the cab.

"...yet..." said a voice on the radio, barely audible over the static. Santos felt his heart leap inside his chest. The signal was faint, but he began to gently coax the dial backward. When at least the sound came through, it was heavily shot through with static, but was unmistakably a human voice. Only portions were audible as the Ford passed through the forested area surrounding the road.

"...exists. All citizens are urged to remain in... unable to comply, then you should report to your nearest law enforce... temporary housing assignment. Shelters are being set up in every possible location to aid you. Food and clothing..."

The static took over for a moment, and Enrico took that opportunity to glance down at the dash. He realized that he had been so intent on the broadcast that their speed had fallen to a mere ten miles per hour. At this rate, he thought, we might reach town by noon. He pushed a little harder on the accelerator, easing the pickup around a hole that had been troubling them for the past few weeks. He knew that the chances of it getting fixed now were slight at best. The trees around the road thinned as he neared the top of a hill, and the signal came through more clearly. Feeling no need to hurry, Enrico slowed to a halt to hear what was being said.

"...news brief," a new voice declared, pausing for a moment as though the speaker were examining information arrayed before his position. "Keep it here and keep informed. We'll have more music here in a few minutes, folks, and we'll be replaying that message throughout the day. Just a recap for you: Power is being restored. If your home is livable, they want you to stay in it, and if it's not, there's shelters being put up. If you can hear us, you should be close enough to a town. Get

there however you can and they'll take care of you. Now here's a little something to soothe the spirits."

The voice faded away and was replaced with the opening strains of Seven Spanish Angels by Willie Nelson and Ray Charles.

"Well, that wasn't much help," Enrico muttered, though he too was glad of the simple human contact provided by the voice. The storm had emphasized how cut off the two farm families were, even living just twenty miles from town. Certainly there were other families who lived out in the area, each having made their own roads off of the simple two-lane county affair that linked them to the nearest main roads, but it was seldom that they had any form of interaction outside the feed stores and school functions. Most of them preferred it that way. Even the children, who walked in some cases more than half a mile to and from the road to meet the school bus that lumbered through early in the morning, were the solitary type and had been raised in most cases to continue a family farm tradition.

Enrico slipped the truck back into gear and started down the hill, losing Willie's voice in a fresh rush of static. As though reading his father's thoughts, Santos reached out and switched off the radio.

"Pop?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you scared?"

"Nothing to be scared of now, son," Enrico said, throwing a wink sideways to reassure the teenager. "The worst is over now. All that's left is the cleanup. We'll build us a new home, and everything will be fine," he said, swallowing to keep his voice from cracking at the thought of their demolished home.

They drove on in silence, each man lost in his own thoughts, the steady hum of tires on the road the only sound to break the eerie quiet. Their route of travel took an unexpected detour due to an obliterated section of road on State Highway 15, forcing them to turn around and backtrack to the closest crossroad, linking back up with their original path several miles further out. Enrico had no trouble finding his way, having previously used many of the back roads. He had always felt that it was much better to know the roads of your area than to not, and that knowledge was paying off now.

"Woodward coming up," he announced a few minutes later, rousing Santos from the half-sleep that had set in on the longer-than-usual journey. Blinking, the teen sat up straight in his seat, looking around at the differences made by the storm and the events that had occurred in its wake.

Vehicles sat unattended on the shoulder of the road, massive scratches and dents showing clearly where a dozer of some sort had been used to push them clear of the road. Most had no windows, and those that remained were spiderwebbed with cracks that rendered them useless. A yellow flash in one of those revealed itself as a Garfield decoration as the Ford passed, hanging precariously, attached more by age than by the suction cups attached to his fuzzy feet. His enormous smile seemed oddly out of place, and Santos shuddered at the thought that it was some sort of perverse warning sign.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing ahead of them. A school bus sat perpendicular to

the road, blocking it completely. There was a visible silhouette of a man in the drivers' seat, engrossed in a book. Beside the bus, perched on the hood of a black-and-white police cruiser, sat a young, bored-looking cop with a shotgun in his hands. "Roadblock?" Enrico asked in reply, unsure why the vehicle was being used in such a manner. He slowed his approach as the cop slid off the hood and waved them to stop. "Keep your hands up on the dash, son. Whatever you do, don't reach for anything, not with that .30-.30 sitting there."

The Ford coasted to a stop a few yards from the officer, who kept his weapon ready but not actively pointed at the newcomers. He adjusted the brim of the baseball cap he wore, drawing subtle attention to the word "POLICE" emblazoned on it, and stepped smartly up to the drivers' window. The shotgun was now leveled, barrel ominously close to the hinge of the door so that it could be brought into play without hesitation should it be necessary.

"What brings y'all here to Woodward?" he asked, his voice a long slow drawl.

"Caught a dooper breaking in to our house," Enrico explained, holding his hands just high enough to be seen at all times. From the corner of his eye, he could see that Santos had followed his orders; the teen's hands were pressed onto the dash with enough force that the knuckles had gone white.

"Ain't no one here gonna bury him," remarked the officer, mouth turning up in a half-smile. "Folks around here are a mite busy."

"He's...uhh, well, he's not dead," Enrico said. The remark had taken him off-balance, and his sudden confusion was apparent in the hesitant manner of his speech. "We've got him, you know, here. In the back. Tied up."

The officer craned his neck, peering over the edge of the truck bed to see the bound figure in the back. He nodded once, then shrugged his shoulders. "Where y'all from?"

"Out west of Sharon," Enrico said. "I'm Enrico Chavez. This is my son, Santos."

"Nice to meet you," replied the officer with a slight roll of his eyes that made it clear the statement was purely to be polite, and not something he actually meant. "I'm the welcoming committee. Here's the rules, so you pay close attention, 'cause I ain't repeating them. The Feds told us what there is to say, and I get tired of saying it over and over."

"You can just give us the short version, Officer...Crane," Enrico interrupted, squinting to make out the worn nameplate in the dim light. "We don't intend to stay long."

"Short version. Okay. The whole town is under martial law. We're killing looters on sight. Keep that in mind. Y'all might want to keep your receipts while you're here," he added with a grin that bordered on sadistic.

"I assure you, we're not thieves."

"Don't assure me of nothing, pal. Got a half-dozen men rotting in the landfill said they wasn't thieves, either. Anyways, hospital's open for immediate emergency care only. Don't look like y'all need that, so there ain't much point in telling you about the rules there. Now then, you say you want to do what with the punk back there?"

"Well, we brought him here to turn over to you guys. We sort of figured you'd know

what was best to do with him," Enrico said, trying to ignore the gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach. A voice in the back of his head was telling him that it might have been ultimately more merciful to have killed the addict back at the cabin.

"I'd'a shot the little maggot if it was me," Crane said, face cracking with a smirk.

The expression stayed even as he looked at Santos, raising the barrel of the shotgun until it was even with the window. "Hey, kid, I'm gonna take a look in the back of the truck. I hope I don't need to tell you to keep your hands off that rifle."

"N-no, sir," Santos stammered, looking at the gaping maw of the scattergun as a cold fear twisted his insides. He struggled to keep control of his bladder as the sensation of pure terror washed over him.

"Good," Crane said, taking a step back to a position behind the drivers' door.

Holding the shotgun in his left hand, he reached over with his right and tore free the gag from the bound man.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Dave. Dave Marsters. Man, you gotta help me! Get me out of here!"

"Shut the hell up, Dave," Crane said calmly, breaking through the terror that had gripped the criminal. "You break into their house?"

"They were going to kill me! The old man, he wanted to tie me up outside - "

"Damn it, I won't ask you again!" snarled Crane, snapping the short twelve-gauge up and over the side rails of the truck so that the muzzle hovered five inches from Dave's face. There was a quiet whimper from the addict as he nodded desperately.

"Yeah, I did it. I broke in. But I got rights - "

Once more, Crane cut him off, this time with a long stretch of his arms that brought the butt of the shotgun around to hang in the air menacingly for the briefest fraction of a second before he slammed it downward into Dave's left temple. The addict fell silently to the bed of the pickup, blood oozing from a pressure cut along the side of his face.

"Should've shot him when you had the chance," Crane repeated to Enrico as he looked inside the cab once again. He was completely calm, as though the events in the back of the truck had never occurred. He swung the shotgun up and propped it on his shoulder, muzzle pointing skyward. "Take him in to City Hall. They'll find him a nice set of chains."

"How long will he be in jail? I mean, if he comes back..." Enrico began to ask, the thought of the addict returning to plague him and his family too unpleasant to voice aloud.

"Oh, he ain't going to jail, mister. He'll be working for the city. Somebody's gotta dig, right? Makes sense we should use him. Hell, in the big cities, they done pulled all the convicts out. Took the non-violent offenders and put 'em to work in chain gangs doing the dirty work. Frees up more of the folks with skill to work on the electric, water, stuff like that. Didn't take more'n a day before the Feds put out the order to clear the prisons."

"And what happened to the rest of the prisoners?" Santos asked, though in his heart he felt he already knew the answer.

"They got a bullet in the back of the head out in the exercise yard. Cleaned out a lot

of space when they did it, too. Most of the prisons - the ones what survived the storm, anyway - are being used as shelters now. No point letting the rooms go to waste, you know."

"So they just killed all..." breathed Santos, swallowing past the sudden taste of bile that rose in the back of his throat. The attitude of the officer was so cavalier as he discussed the slaughter of the convicts that it reminded Santos of the time Marcia Greenley had become ill as he described the process of butchering a hog. He suddenly felt himself on her end of the conversation, and it made him gag a little. "Thank you, Officer," Enrico said, wiping at his mouth in an unconscious mirroring of the gesture his son was making at the same time. "We'll be back in a few minutes, once we drop off this...Dave." he finished, forcing himself to use the man's name. "Hey, one more thing before you go in," Crane said, leaning partially into the cab. The scent of his sweat was already strong, despite the early hour. His eyes cut left and right in a conspiratorial fashion as he lowered his voice. "Y'all are all right folks, even if you are a bit naive, so I'll tell you up front. Hide the rifle. Don't let anyone in town see it. Don't tell no one you've got it. We're supposed to take them away from people."

"And why aren't you?"

Crane sucked absently at a tooth for a moment. "Look, I'll be the first to admit, I don't mind the idea of knowing that nobody's gonna draw down on me in town. Point is, though, there's a lot of folks that ain't in town. Folks like y'all. We start locking the towns down and making them strongpoints, what happens to the people out in the sticks?"

For emphasis, he tilted his head back to the unconscious form of Dave Marsters.

"Things like him happen. Ain't no point in taking what you've got if it's gonna make things easier for the likes of him. Besides, there's some folks what hunt for their food. What good's it gonna do for me to take your rifle if your family goes hungry? Hell, then you wind up down here anyway, looking for a shelter, and we gotta go through this whole meet-and-greet thing all over again," he said, wrapping up the conversation with a wide grin that held genuine warmth. He slapped a hand on the pickup door and gestured it forward as he raised a radio from his belt and spoke into it. The driver of the school bus put down his book, cranked on the big engine until it caught, then backed the bus off one side of the road until there was enough room for the Ford to pass through the gap between it and the patrol car.

Enrico slipped the clutch and rolled the pickup forward, leaving the officer to walk back to his cruiser. In the rearview mirror, he watched as the bus moved back into place behind them, the driver killing the engine and locking them into the town with all the finality of a coffin lid slamming shut.

# Skyfall

*By Jujen Kai*

## Chapter 36

Marc Jenner was dreaming, and he knew it. He found himself on a child's swing, gently swaying back and forth. Rocking his legs to pick up speed, he threw himself from the swing in an extravagant jump that never ended. He simply took flight. He flew from the playground over the scene of his home in Tulsa, waving happily as he saw Janice leaving for work. The back of her car, for some reason, was filled with animals; monkeys and dogs competed for space in the seats, and each was vocally demanding a seat belt. Marc smiled at their antics and flew on until he came to a floating building. It had no markings to indicate ownership, and he wondered how it came to be in his dream at all. A heavy white door seemed to beckon to him and he approached it, raising a hand and knocking. He knocked several times, then pulled back his hand. The sound of knocking continued without his assistance.

Sitting upright in the bed, Marc realized that the sound was coming from his own door. Sniffing and rubbing at his grizzled face, he slipped out of bed and padded to the door, his fragmented mind taking a moment to remember that they had guests in the home. One of them must have a question. He removed the chair from its place under the knob and swung the door open a fraction. Jake Forrest stood framed in the portal, and recoiled a bit as he was met with the livid yellow-and-black bruise that occupied fully a third of Marc's face.

"Your mailman's coming," he whispered. "And there's something wrong with him. Wake Janice and get your rifle. We've got trouble."

"Trouble? What's wrong with the mailman? What's going on?" Marc asked in a sleepy voice. He was having difficulty piecing everything together, and the frantic expression on the face of the police officer seemed to frustrate him further. Shaking his head to clear it, he took in a deep breath and nodded. "Okay, now tell me what's up."

"Your mailman is coming up the road. There are four men trailing him in the woods, and I think there's about to be an attack on the house. Everyone is in danger. Do you understand?" Jake asked, pacing his words slowly so that they would penetrate the fog of sleep in which Marc found himself.

"Yeah. Yeah, I've got it," Marc said finally. He reached around the door and picked up the heavy rifle by its decorated strap, slinging it up on one shoulder as he went to the bed. He shook Janice awake.

"Jan, wake up. Listen to me. Don't get scared, but Jake says someone's following old Jacob Rosenberg, the postman. It might be one of the gangs."

Janice yawned and nodded, her eyes showing far more alertness than those of her husband. She had always been more of a 'morning person' than Marc, and it showed in how easily she understood the implications of his words. "Get the boys together and bring them up here," she said. "I'll keep an eye on things while you talk to them from downstairs."

She stood and dressed quickly as Marc slipped into his boots without bothering to tie them. She placed her revolver beside her on the bed. Marc cursed himself quietly for almost leaving his own beneath the pillow. The holster was still slipped into the waistband of his pants and he jammed the pistol into it as he stumbled from the room, still fumbling with the rifle on his shoulder.

"Watch over him," Janice murmured in a quiet voice, her eyes flicking upward to the heavens.

Once in the hall, Jake beckoned Marc to follow him to the remnants of the upstairs window, silently indicating to the man that he should keep well out of sight. Marc crouched beside the sill and peered over the edge, grimacing as he strained to squint his right eye and make out the details of what he was seeing below.

"Larry and I can make a show of it downstairs if you want to hang that ought-six out the window," Jake offered. "I woke him while you were getting ready."

"No," Marc said after a moment of thought. "It's my house...well, sort of, but I think I should be downstairs to confront them."

Jake took a deep breath and cocked his head to the side, a contemplative look on his face. After a moment, he shrugged and simply nodded. "Okay. I'll have Larry stay up here, then."

Marc nodded and crept quietly down the stairs as Jake went to advise the medic of his assignment. He made his way to where Vincent lay snoring in the recliner, gently awakening the Scout.

"Wake them up and go upstairs," he ordered, gesturing at the other Scouts. "The gang we were talking about? It's here. Go up and find Jan. Stay with her."

Vincent nodded sleepily, then lowered the base of the recliner and woke Leon, quickly filling him in. A few seconds later, Jonathan and Bill had been alerted as well, and the quartet of Scouts headed for the stairs. Jake was on his way down, and Larry was visible crouched near the window, silently beckoning them to come

upstairs.

"Vincent," Marc whispered. He drew his revolver and extended it butt-first to the teen. "No matter what, don't let them get to her," he said, his tone half-order and half-plea.

"I don't know how to shoot," Vincent whispered back, eyes wide as he looked down at the pistol. He held up both hands, palms flat out to decline the weapon.

"I do," said Jonathan. He swallowed deeply, recognizing the import of the duty he was accepting as he reached out and took the pistol. "My cousin has a lot of guns, and he takes me out every now and then to shoot. I'm good...Marc," he said, struggling to remember the name.

"Thank you," Marc said, biting at his lip as his mind whirled with the possibilities of the situation they had entered. A brief flash of memory hit him and he caught the Scouts once more just as they passed the rapidly-descending Jake Forrest. "Tell Larry there's a .357 in the room Jake was in. It's in a walnut box."

"Running out of time!" Jake prompted, the words not so much spoken as breathed. His urgency pushed the teens, and they scampered up the stairs in a crouched line, each careful to avoid unnecessary noise and keeping themselves well out of sight as they neared the hallway window. Larry patted each of them on the shoulder and pointed to the end of the hall, where Janice stood waiting. In turn, she ushered them into the room shared by Marc and her. There was a pause as Jonathan relayed the information from Marc, after which Larry gave a high-sign to the photographer. He duck-walked away from the window behind Jonathan, rising only when he felt it safe to stand to full height.

Marc eased back one of the bolts on a shuttered window, noticing Jake doing the same further down the wall. As one, they slid open the boards Marc had placed over the windows, letting twin streams of pale light into the room. Both men blinked and then gazed through the holes.

Jacob Rosenberg was less than fifty paces from the door now, and the shadows had detached themselves from the trees, sweeping in from the flanks to approach the house unseen. There were indeed four of them, clad in a ragtag assembly of clothing that seemed designed for show as much as functionality. Two hundred dollar jackets worn over bleached jeans, tennis shoes, gold chains, and a variety of baseball caps decorated the teens. Each appeared between sixteen and eighteen years in age, and each carried some form of firearm. It was difficult to get an exact fix on what each had, but Marc was fairly certain he glimpsed the improbable frame of an Uzi submachinegun on a strap around the neck of one of the men. He whispered as much to Jake, and the cop looked at him with concern.

"You sure?" he asked. He had spoken to many witnesses in his time, and so many of them had been conditioned by the media to refer to any weapon that appeared unusual as either an Uzi or an AK-47 that he automatically had doubts when he heard them referenced.

"I've seen them before," Marc affirmed. "I'm a war correspondent."

"Shit!" Jake hissed between clenched teeth. "This is gonna suck. Follow my lead, and if it starts, drop that one first. I'll challenge them and hopefully they'll break. If they're no threat, they'll stop."

Marc nodded, snapping off the safety on the big rifle. He eased up toward the window, propping just the tip of the barrel on the open portal. Through the wide scope, the youth leaped into focus. Gently moving the stock a bit, Marc swept it across him until the weapon carried by the ganger hove into view. He swallowed nervously as he saw it. Hanging by a black nylon strap and partially concealed by the overhanging Starter jacket, the weapon was indeed an Uzi, and a spare magazine jutted from the kid's right front jeans pocket.

"How the hell did he get that?" Marc asked, voice pitched so low that not even Jake heard the words. He snugged the stock in tight against his shoulder as the gang of kids began to move for the relative safety of the edge of the house.

"Police! Drop your weapons!" Jake suddenly shouted. His voice echoed in the house, and echoed from the trees outside as well. Marc jumped at the volume and imagined for the briefest of seconds that the cop would have made a wonderful drill instructor.

The effect on the youths outside was immediate. They pawed instantly for their weapons, and those who already had them in hand swung them up to cover the house. The first round barked from the matte-black snout of a Glock pistol, punching a neat hole through the front door and shattering some glass item in the living room that had somehow managed to survive the storm. Their actions left no doubt that they were hostile, dispelling any notions the defenders might have had that they were somehow simply escorting the postman.

Marc watched, fascinated, through the scope as the youth with the Uzi gripped the butt of the weapon and began to lift it, hand moving forward to wrap around the short grip behind the barrel. Everything seemed to be in slow-motion, and he could actually see the long finger as it wrapped around the trigger and began to squeeze.

Then the rifle bucked against his shoulder in response to his own squeeze. The round took the gunner in the throat, just below a prominent Adam's apple that had, no doubt, been the butt of many a joke in his school. The entire house seemed to shake

as the thunder of the rifle reverberated from the walls. In the driveway, the Uzi managed a single crack as its wielder stumbled backward for a step, then simply folded into a heap on the ground.

Just that easy, Marc thought, and you've killed a man.

Jake Forrest lined up his sights, catching the running form of a teen with a cut-down double-barreled shotgun in his hands. He snapped off two rounds, watching the teen stagger and fall as at least one of the heavy slugs impacted. Sticking the barrel halfway out of the window, he snap-aimed and fired a third time, unsure if it hit or not. His attention whipped back to the remaining teens. The one with the shotgun had at least been smart enough to dive for cover, as opposed to the moron armed with the Glock. In classic Hollywood fashion, he stood facing the house straight-on, pistol extended fully and held horizontally as he rapidly burned through the magazine. Slugs hammered the walls and occasionally broke through to wreak havoc in the interior of the house.

Why? Jake asked himself as he settled the front blade of his sights on the ganger. He had a momentary vision of one of his Scouts standing before him and his mind raced through a million questions, wondering what the difference was that made them respectable kids when these teens had turned to violence. Was it a sense of patriotism? Religion? Upbringing? Somewhere along the way these four kids had gotten a wire or two crossed and the part of him that had loved the sociology classes in college wondered what had caused it. The instinctive part of his mind ignored the questions and dropped the hammer on the P220, feeling the familiar recoil as it roared. He fired three rapid shots, swallowing to keep from retching as he watched the teen jerk and scream as the jacketed hollowpoints ripped into him. At the same time, another of the rounds from Marc's rifle caught the youth in the abdomen, knocking him to the earth in a dusty tangle of limbs.

The fourth ganger had taken advantage of the confusion of the fight, reaching out to snag the now-running figure of Jacob Rosenberg. He held the postman in front of him as a shield, a .45 automatic pressed against the temple of his hostage.

"Drop it!" Jake shouted again, voice lost in the echoes of the gunfire that had erupted. The smell of cordite was thick in the house, and from outside came the sounds of wailing as the injured gangers felt the pain of their wounds.

"You wanna watch him die?" the youth yelled back. His eyes were wide with sudden fright, and they flicked back and forth, taking in the sight of his partners as they lay bleeding on the ground. "I'll do him right here!"

Marc leveled the sight of the Remington, focussing on the wrist of the teenaged killer. He wondered if a round through that joint would disable the hand before it

could shoot Jacob, but did not trust himself enough to place the shot accurately. If he failed, the kid would kill Jacob before anyone could even react. As tense as the ganger appeared to be, it was a possibility even without the bullet.

"I can't take him," Marc said flatly. Jake nodded as he stepped away from the window.

"I'll go out there," he said.

"What?" Marc asked. His voice cracked with tension and reached an octave he had not hit in years. "You can't - "

"I have to. Somebody's got to get his guard down. He'll move the pistol to point at me. That's when you shoot him. In the forehead if you can. It'll be quick that way."

"And if I can't?"

"Then do what you can, damn it!" snapped the cop in reply. He glared angrily at Marc for a second, then his expression softened. "Just...just do what you can."

Outside the house, the ganger was beginning to backtrack, dragging a crying Jacob with him. The old man's feet caught and he stumbled once, but the teen jabbed him in the head with the barrel of the old Colt, and he moved with more caution. He was blubbing now, tears running unchecked down his grizzled face as he babbled out a mixture of prayers and pleas.

"Just hold on," the teen demanded, his voice audible even to the tortured ears of both Jake and Marc. "Just another minute."

Marc looked at Jake with a quizzical expression on his face, obviously wondering what the kid meant. Surely he did not think that in the span of a minute he would get away? Jake shook his head and shrugged, wiping a sweaty palm on his pants before dropping the empty magazine from his pistol and replacing it with a fresh one from his pocket. He then resumed his grip on the weapon and steeled himself for the confrontation yet to come. He reached a hand to unbar the door, and noticed that it had a definite tremor.

The boards covering the kitchen window imploded with a crash, showering the room in wood slivers. Marc caught the sight from the corner of his eye, and it was all too reminiscent of the events precipitating Elizabeth Perry's death. He saw again the woman, slumped against the wall, her body riddled with shards of glass that had shown no mercy to the tender flesh of a beautiful, loving woman. The image overlaid his senses just long enough for him to fail to react to the angry face of another ganger rising up in the shattered window with a smoking shotgun in his

hands. Marc tried to cry out, but his voice failed him. He jerked against the Remington, trying to swing it around to address this new threat. The tip of the barrel caught against the chain-link covering the window and he jerked to free it, clearly seeing the maniacal grin splitting the features of the kid as the shotgun slide snapped back and forth. Weak sunlight glittered off the brass attached to the red plastic shell as it was ejected and flew from the weapon in a seemingly leisurely arc.

Jake spun in place as the window disintegrated, his pistol rising in a quick motion that displayed years of training. As the ganger jacked the slide on the shotgun, the cop was already tightening down on the trigger of his pistol, discharging three lightning-fast shots. The wood around the window frame continued to shatter under the onslaught of his rapid fire. The teen ducked back from the window, shotgun thundering a blast into the ceiling as he jerked it back as well.

A crack that only an hour ago would have been deafening sounded, signalling the forced opening of yet another window, this one in Leonard's study. It sounded as though the gang was using a sledgehammer to break the shutter free.

"Jesus, there's more of them!" Marc shouted, fumbling in his pocket for some of the precious .30-.06 cartridges he had jammed in there before leaving the bedroom.

"You think?" Jake shot back, dragging out his third magazine and clenching it between his teeth. He mentally berated himself for only bringing four spares, though he knew it was a waste of time to consider. Thirty-five total rounds was more than he habitually carried on patrol, at least without returning to the scout car for replacements, and he had very nearly left most of them at home. Only the fear of having them stolen had brought them along in the first place, and now he was doubly glad of his paranoia.

"So what do we do?" asked Marc. He found himself wondering just what kind of chance they had. There was no way of telling how many of the criminals lurked outside, armed and ready to kill them all. The gang could as easily burn them out if they chose to, setting fire to the house and waiting for them to emerge.

"Oo eep shoing vem!" Jake replied, voice distorted by the metal he held in his teeth. He ignored the gibbering noises he made as he spoke, letting actions show his intent. He settled the sights of the pistol on the kitchen window and began a slow advance, carefully placing one foot in front of the other in a slow, sinuous movement. The top of a cap appeared and he caught himself just before snapping off a round. A second later, he saw that it was supported on the barrel of the shotgun.

Haven't seen that trick in a while, he thought. Memories of serial westerns ran through his mind's eye, and he grinned as he thought of something he had always wondered while watching them. He stood steadily, ignoring the horrible pounding

that came from the study as the gang attempted to batter their way through the boarded window. Slowing his breathing, he sighted along the barrel of the SIG-Sauer, concentrating on his sight picture. He slowly stroked the trigger, feeling it break gently beneath his finger. The pistol barked once and the shotgun flew away from the window, barrel hit squarely by the slug. The confused teen, caught up in some perverse desire to see what had done that to his weapon, popped up and peeked in the window. He fell back a second later, victim of yet another of the hollowpoints.

Spitting on the floor to clear his mouth of the taste of bile, Jake turned away from the window and looked for Marc. The photographer was now entering the study. Jake, confident that Marc could handle the new intruders, returned his attention to the plight of Jacob Rosenberg.

The study was shrouded in darkness, pierced by the beams of light making their way through the cracks in the window frame where the gang had been busy tearing the shutter down. Marc knelt beside Leonard's desk, propping the barrel of the rifle on the heavy wood. He pulled the rifle tightly to his shoulder, gazing through the scope at the cracked wood even as something struck it yet again. The bolts he had placed in the wall gave way on one side and it fell crookedly, exposing the faces of two more teens. One was holding a short-hafted sledgehammer with a four-pound head. His partner, slightly behind him and to his left, was armed with some form of carbine. Marc did not hesitate, slipping the trigger and killing the armed man where he stood. He jerked at the bolt, slamming it home and reacquiring a sight picture. The second youth was gone. Sure that he would return, Marc was content to wait for the moment. A second later, he dived for the floor as a hand clutching a small autopistol poked into the window, the weapon spitting fire and lead in random patterns as the hand swept it across the interior of the room.

Marc crawled on his belly toward the window, cradling the Remington in his arms as he slithered through a storm of paper torn from books once priceless. A splinter of glass, blasted from a forgotten picture frame, spiked itself into the back of his calf; an angry hornet stinging deep to draw blood. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to continue. The room was a hell-storm of flying bullets and thick smoke as Marc drew himself up to a position beneath the window. He rolled onto his back, letting out a small groan as the glass fragment was driven deeper into the meat of his leg. He raised the rifle, pointing the barrel up toward the gun. Just as he gripped it to fire, the pistol was withdrawn and he cursed aloud.

Marc forced himself to breathe slowly and evenly, knowing somehow that the teen would want to check the results of his work. After a moment of brief quiet, a shadow filled the window. A moment later, the head and shoulders of the teen slipped into the gap as he wormed himself into the room, apparently satisfied that his wild fire had pacified the room. He glanced down to see the barrel of the Remington not four inches from his lips. His gaze travelled down the weapon to the sad eyes of the man

who held it.

"I'm sorry," Marc whispered as his finger tightened on the trigger. Confusion and terror warred for control on the face of the ganger for an instant, and then the face itself - along with a large percentage of the head that had held it - was simply gone, victim as much of the blast effect as the bullet from the .30-.06. Marc cursed and spat as he was showered with thick blood and gore, and the realization of what was covering his face made him vomit. His entire body shook with the effort as he continued to heave. Every time he tried to stop, he was confronted with another image of the carnage which he himself had wrought and the process would begin anew.

Jake stared out the window at the youth who still held Jacob Rosenberg. He heard the sudden burst of gunfire from within the study and grimaced at the volume of fire. A part of him fairly screamed for him to go and aid the photographer. He wavered for a moment, unsure what course to follow, when there was a sudden silence. He found himself actually holding his breath and had taken a single slow step away from the window and back toward the study when he heard the distinctive thunder of the Remington. Nodding when there was no answering fire, he returned to the window.

The teen was even more frantic now, looking around as though searching for some escape from the situation in which he found himself. His steps came haltingly, and he was more dragging the postman than walking with him.

An odd silence settled over the Perry house, and Jake could hear Marc spitting and retching from within the study. There seemed to be some sort of pause in time, and the officer looked around as though expecting everything to be suddenly over. The only movement he could see was that of the kid and his hostage in the yard. Clouds of chemically-scented smoke drifted lazily through the room, borne on breezes that wafted through the opened windows. He was aware of his own pulse, pounding in his temples like a drummer in a speed-metal band. It felt strangely like being in the eye of a storm, and he could not help but hope that he could harness some of that peace as he slowly drew in a ragged breath through his nose, trying not to sneeze at the cordite smell in the air.

Marc Jenner staggered in from the study, head and shoulders bathed in blood, and the cop gasped at the sight. His fear was suddenly given life, and he wondered how he was going to explain the injuries to Janice. He knew that with that much blood the man should not be walking, let alone nodding and giving him a thumbs-up gesture, and the rational part of his mind fought to accept what he was seeing.

"It's not mine," Marc wheezed, chest still heaving from being sick. Reality slammed back into place and Jake was suddenly himself again, his senses flooded with input as he nodded to his host and spun back to the window. In the yard, Jacob started a

keening wail of terror that grated on the nerves, and his captor smashed him in the head with the butt of the Colt he carried. A trickle of blood started to run down the old man's face, and Jake gritted his teeth against the frame of the magazine he still held in his teeth. The motion reminded him that he had fired five rounds and he slipped the magazine free, ejecting the old one and replacing it. The dropped mag still held two rounds, and he crouched to scoop it up, shoving it into a back pocket in case it was needed later. He worked his jaw once, easing the stiffness in the joints, then half-turned to Marc.

"That it, you think?" he asked.

"God, I hope so," came the reply.

"Let's get the postman, then," Jake said, reaching out once more to remove the 2x4 from the door. The hairs on the back of his neck rose, and he gave in to the urge to once again look into the kitchen. The threat there was long since over, though, and he dropped the heavy board to the floor. Snapping back the bolt on the door, he eased it open and glanced outside. He could see the shattered body of the kid with the Glock, as well as the one carrying the Uzi, who had fallen just behind the rear of Marc's van. A still-twitching foot extended beyond the edge of the house as well, and he remembered the youth he had shot first, the one with the sawed-off shotgun.

"Looks good," he said as he pulled his head back into the house. "Take the window. Back to the distraction plan. When he moves the gun, drop him."

"Got it," Marc agreed weakly. He thought of Janice upstairs, feeling a deep longing for her contact at that moment. He wanted so desperately to feel her arms around him, to know the simple security of her embrace if even only for a second. His heart ached at the thought that he might not see her again after this, that some simple miscalculation could leave him as dead as the headless youth in the study. That image brought another wave of nausea, and he forced it back with an angry swallow. He nodded to Jake as he rested the rifle in the chain-link cradle outside the window.

Jake stepped from the house, pistol trained intently on the hostage-shielded ganger. He moved slowly, choosing the placement of his feet with care. He swung his eyes from side to side, taking in the bodies that lay sprawled haphazardly in the dust. They were no longer making any noise. It appeared that they had indeed dealt with all the threats that existed.

Except for this one, he thought, training his eyes on the frightened kid once more. He felt a raw red fire inside himself, anger forcing its way up from his belly as he looked at the abused form of the postal carrier. For every staggering step the kid took backward, Jake moved forward two in his deliberate fashion. Soon, he was less than twenty feet away from the teen; the combined stench of sweat and of fear

greeted him at that range.

"It's over, boy," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. In his field of vision, Jake saw only the upper part of the teen's face. The lower half was bisected by the tritium-tipped sights of the P220. With only a few pounds of pressure, the hammer would fall, initiating a chain of events as predictable as time itself: Hammer meets firing pin. Pin strikes primer. Primer ignites powder. Powder propels bullet. Bullet erases threat. It was a simple process, yet one of absolute finality. At that moment, Jake Forrest was utterly prepared to begin that chain of events without a second thought.

He saw the teen struggling with what actions to take, and took up a fractional bit of slack on the trigger in preparation. He silently prayed Marc would be able to make the shot, then took a slow breath. Time to piss the kid off.

"I'm going to kill you, you know," he said, almost conversationally. "I'm going to shoot you, just like I shot your pals back there at the house. I'm going to enjoy it, too, just like I enjoyed what I did to them. Hell, kid, this is the hottest I've been in years. Wasting you morons really turns me on. I guess that means we're a lot alike, huh? I mean, that's about the only way you guys can get your rocks off, right? Killing people? Come on, kid, tell me what it feels like," he purred, allowing the ghost of a smile to split his face. He licked his lips hungrily, allowing the smile to become real as he saw the reaction in the youth. Anger was writ plainly across his sweaty features as the cop continued to speak in a voice that could easily be called seductive in tone.

"Yeah, tell me all about it. How it gets you off to see someone beg for their life. Sweet, isn't it? I mean, with you not able to get laid by a real girl and all. You can tell me, man, it's okay. Hey, I mean, the dead ones don't say no, do they?"

The last comment was the breaking point. Roaring in frustration, the kid swung the pistol away from Jacob toward Jake. It had traversed fully half the distance and Jake was beginning his squeeze when a tiny hole appeared in the youth's forehead, just an inch above his left eye. The back of his head became a red mist as the Colt barked off a single round into space. Jake flinched slightly at the sound, but not so much that his shot missed. It took off the rest of the teen's scalp even as he fell, the deep sound of its discharge almost masking the sharper sound of the Remington. Jake rushed forward, grabbing the sagging form of the postman.

"You're okay, sir," he soothed.

Inside the house, Marc felt himself sagging as well. Holding the point of aim had drained him of what little strength he had left and he collapsed, sobbing, to the floor as he scrubbed at his face with sweaty hands. The pain as he rubbed his bruised eye was almost unbearable, but he kept at it, crying aloud as he continued the cathartic

experience. Tears ran freely from his eyes, tracking across the blood that covered him until he rubbed against them, feeling the oily slickness and using it as a base for clearing away the gore. It was as if by clearing himself of the filth and debris left by his recent deeds, he could manage to cleanse his soul of the taint he felt the killings had left in him after the past few minutes.

In the driveway, Jake supported the elderly man for a second then gently disengaged himself. "Go on inside," he said. "I've got to collect these weapons."

"How...how many?" Jacob asked, breath coming in little short gasps. "How many did you...?"

"Four here, two or three around the house." the cop reported. He looked sharply at the postman. "How many were there?"

"Eight."

Jake felt his heart sink, matched by a twisting sensation in his stomach. He clutched at the old man's arm, pushing him toward the house. "Run!" he shouted, adrenaline coursing once more through his veins like fuel in a high-performance engine. He brought the P220 back up into a sharp point, tracking around the house as he began to follow the man. He moved from body to body, trying to ignore the sight of the corpses as he looked for anyone that might still be in the area. He caught a movement from the corner of his eye and started to turn.

At the van, concealed by the bulk of the tree that lay sprawled atop the vehicle, stood another ganger, pausing for cover in what had been a hard run toward the house. The late arrival held a long gun in his hands, carried low at the hip, and it began to spit flame even as the cop tried to turn to meet it. He knew without question that he would never make it in time, and prayed desperately for some miracle to help him keep the Scouts and Jenners alive. Slugs were tracking across the ground toward him and he had not even completed half of the turn it would take to address the shooter.

The sky split with a thunderclap of sound. Divine lightning streaked down in the form of one-hundred fifty-eight grains of semi-wadcutter, fired from the avenging angel that hovered without wings in the upstairs window. The rifle stopped short as the heavenly bolt shattered the skull of the youth who carried it. As the weapon clattered noisily to the ground, Jake felt his entire body begin to tremble. Head shaking as though he were in the throes of a seizure, he looked upward. There, framed in the window and supported by a hand holding his belt, was Jonathan. He held Marc's Ruger in his hands in a grasp so tight it threatened to leave permanent prints in the checked wood of the grips. His eyes were dark and his mouth little more than a tight line. A second later, he flopped back in through the window.

Jake was shaking so much now that he could barely hold onto his pistol, and he called out to Marc, demanding to know how many had been at the back of the house. Marc reported back in a weak voice that he had shot two in the study. Jake added the numbers up in his head. Four in the yard, the shotgunner at the window, the two in the study, then this one. Eight. He ran the numbers through his mind again, then a third time. Finally, he allowed himself to relax a bit. He paused where he stood and offered up a prayer of thanks, then set about the grisly task of disarming the dead. He started with the Colt, stripping the magazine. The rounds inside were fully jacketed, but at least he could replace some of the ones he had used in the fight. Tucking the pistol in his waistband, he headed for the Uzi.

Marc levered himself to his feet as Jacob Rosenberg stepped into the house. He launched himself at the old man, embracing him in a fierce hug that was returned with gratitude. Marc gestured at the decanter that had managed to live through the violence, and Jacob nodded, pouring himself a drink. Stepping to the base of the stairs, Marc called to the others, telling them that all was as secure as it would be and they could come down. He then took the proffered glass from Jacob and drained the bourbon in one long burning swallow. He put the glass down in time to catch sight of his wife as she ran down the stairs to meet him. Forgetting his appearance, Marc embraced her tightly and let himself cry. To her credit, Janice managed to hold back her personal revulsion at the sight of her husband, so glad was she to hold him in her arms.

The Scouts filtered down the stairs in a group, followed by Larry Burns. He was holding Jonathan's hand as if leading a child. The Scout looked out at the others through glassy eyes. No one present had any illusions about how traumatized the action of killing had left Jonathan. The youth was trembling but no tears came from his haunted eyes.

"We held them," Marc murmured into Janice's ear. He began to shake then as adrenaline washed through him and left him feeling icy cold. He had no way of knowing that the same thing had already happened to Jake Forrest, but he saw the shaking form of Jonathan and he nodded to the youth, the two of them sharing a look that spoke volumes about what they now had in common.

Jake appeared in the doorway, arms loaded with weapons. He laid them carefully in the opening, taking a moment to remind everyone not to touch them. He indicated the Uzi, almost casually mentioning that it was a civilian semi-automatic version, and not the fully automatic weapon he had feared when it had first been seen. The youth that had hidden in the trees had been carrying a well-worn Ruger Mini-14. Jake placed it carefully atop the pile, along with the two extra magazines the kid had stashed in his jacket pocket.

"Danny Herman," Jacob whispered. "He used to carry that thing deer hunting. Never

knew he had them big clips for it, though."

"That means they took his house too," Jake said softly. "So how did you get caught up in this?"

"They were waiting at the gate. Hiding in the trees. I never even saw them until they stepped out, and by then it was too late. They told me to come on up to the house and knock so they could get in. Asked me who was here. I..God help me, I told them," he said in a sudden rush of words, bursting once more into tears. Janice moved to comfort him, but he waved her back. "No, ma'am, I'm...I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Jacob," Marc said. His voice was thick with emotion and fatigue, but he put a hand on the elderly man's shoulder and bent down a bit to look him in the eyes. "We're okay. You didn't do anything wrong."

"He's right," Jake said, patting the postman on the back. "You did the right thing. You did what you had to to stay alive. If it hadn't been for you coming down the road, I probably wouldn't have noticed them at all, and where would we be then?"

Jake gestured over the postman's head, pointing to the bourbon and then back down at Jacob. Larry took the hint and poured another stiff drink for the man as Jake excused himself.

"Still more guns out there," he explained. "I want to get them in here so we can see what we've got to deal with. Maybe we can find out who owned them and the locals can check on their homes."

He stepped from the house and headed for the side, secretly glad to be away from the emotional drama unfolding within the house. Outside, he could be by himself, alone with his own feelings of doubt and fear. The events of the firefight had left him feeling somewhat ill at ease, and the sure knowledge that the kid with the Mini-14 was going to kill him had not been lost on him. He wondered what was going through Jonathan's mind at the moment. So lost in his thoughts was he that when he rounded the corner to see the first kid he had shot, lying on the ground with blood streaming from his abdomen, staring at him and still holding the shotgun, he was taken completely by surprise.

The flash from the twin muzzles was almost anticlimactic.