

As the front door of the small Wimbledon house swung open, Jane caught sight of Mark Gillen's face and wondered if she might not be warmer if she stayed out in the rain.

"Come in" His voice was tight and Jane could see he was angry about *something*.
Regrets? He didn't seem to have them yesterday, so why now?

Jane frowned at this unexpected situation. Mark had called her hotel and invited her over. Now it seemed that the most-obvious reason for a get-together wasn't it. "You don't look too happy."

"There's a reason for that." Mark Gillen's voice was stiff. "Tea?"

Sitting down at the kitchen table, Jane's suspicion grew. "No thanks. What's on your mind?" *No use putting it off.*

"This," he handed her several pages, each headed with the Interpol banner head and a picture of a face that Jane hadn't seen for nearly two years.

She skimmed the document, and tried to contain her growing alarm and annoyance. "Some chick named Jane is wanted to assist in FBI inquiries. So what? Just because *I'm* American...and a nova... Jane's a common name." *And I'm a dummy for using it*, she realized.

"Right." Skepticism saturated his voice. "As you see, Jane Mallory's a shape-shifter. That can make positive ID difficult for law-enforcement, so the details of her DNA are available - for those with the right access, and a sample to compare, of course."

"Sample?" Jane thought for a moment, then sighed heavily. "Hair on the pillow?" Jane sags back in her chair. *That's the last time I don't bring them back to my place.*

"Yes."

"Access?"

He shrugged. "I'm a policeman. I would have mentioned it earlier but, once it occurred to me last night that you were holding something back so...I did too."

Silence settled between them as Jane considered her options. *So much for mindless fun on this vacation...* "I told you almost everything..."

Mark's temper flared. "Yes, you told *most* of the truth over breakfast - being a nova, being an Elite - but left out this one niggling detail."

Jane felt her own anger rising - a defensive reaction to implied criticism. "You wanted total trust on twenty-four hours' acquaintance and a tumble in bed? And who the hell are you to whine at me about *trust*? *I'm* not the one stealing DNA around here."

Mark was undaunted. "Call it a cop's curiosity. I knew you were holding something back and I wanted to know what it was."

"Just *asking* didn't occur to you, did it?"

"Would I have gotten a straight answer?" he demanded.

She paused. "No."

"I rest my case. Feel free to mention anything else that might have slipped your mind."

Jane slumped back in her chair. "So the Americans want to talk to me *real bad*. Big deal. I don't feel like talking to them. There's no extradition order out for me. I'm not *that* important to them. I'm with the Janissaries now-" she held up a hand to ward off any outrage. "It was a case of joining them, or starving." *Looks like he wants more reassurance than that.* "But I haven't operated in the U.K." she added.

“And your field name is...?”

Think fast, Jane. "Arachne." It's the name she would have chosen, in hindsight. *Black Widow* was just a little too theatrical and quite possibly known to her companion. Just because she hadn't worked in the U.K. – yet – it didn't assure her anonymity.

"Arachne? Because of that ticklish birthmark?"

"I didn't know I was ticklish there until last night – and yes." Jane smiled, despite herself and was relieved to see an echo of it on Mark's face. "Stupid me. I'm on vacation and I pick you up and we hit it off and I thought I sort of liked you but now I find out you're a cop and I don't know if I that's going to work because..." Jane shrugs. "You're a cop."

"And yet you insist you're not a fugitive?"

She sighed. "I used to be with the feds. Admittedly, that's not like being a... What do you do?"

"I'm a detective with the Metropolitan police."

"Ah, that explains the 'access'." She chuckled wryly. "Gillen of the Yard?"

"Yes." He didn't smile, having heard the phrase too many times.

Jane sighed. "Okay, so what I did was sort of like what you do. The point is that I was on the side of law enforcement for long enough that I'm afraid that associating with you is going to stir up all sorts of memories--"

"Positive or negative?"

"Both!" *Damn it, why does he have to push?* "I used to be one of the good guys and hanging around with you is likely to just depress me."

"So you don't consider yourself a good guy at the moment?" He asked intently.

She glared at Mark. "Please don't start with the pop-psychology." She paused. "I don't know. I suppose not." She sagged in her seat. "It's too late to avoid depression, I guess."

The job didn't used to get me down. Then again, I've done my best not to think about it – especially since Riyadh. Unwanted, the memory of her last job with Seeker and his treatment of Scott Farrand came to mind. *Some things just shouldn't happen to kids – like Seeker cared.* Through force of habit, Jane hauled her thoughts away from the memory of an otherwise-routine job that had bothered her for the past five months.

Mark watched Jane lapse into silence and wondered at it. Clearly, she was conflicted about *something*. "I'm sorry." He wasn't sure what he was apologizing *for*, but it was something to say.

"Really? Well, that's something." Jane brightened and wondered if she could push her luck. "So, if you're not going to arrest me, want to fool around?"

He stared at her; surprise mixed with a hint of amusement "I'll be late for work."

"Tell them you were meeting with an informant or something."

"Or something." Jane's smile widened, only to fall a moment later as Mark shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I have to get to work. And I need to... sort a few things out."

Deal with my conscience, Jane translated internally, doing her best not to scowl. *Now what?*

Mark broke the impasse. "Look... You're off on some sort of castle crawl for the next couple of days, right?" He took a card from his wallet and offered it to Jane. She caught a glimpse of a heraldic device and a lot of small print before shoving it into a

pocket. “There’s my number,” he explained. “Give me a call when you’re back in London and maybe we can do dinner. Or something.” He added, with a hint of a smile.

“Providing you’ve worked those things out?” Jane added, cautiously.

Mark nodded.

“Fair enough,” she admitted. She was disappointed, but she realized there wasn’t anything she could do aside from accept the situation – that and have a long internal debate about why she cared at all about Mark’s opinion of her career.

“I really do have to get going.” Mark insisted.

“Alright, alright.” She smiled. “But I *will* give you a call on Thursday...”

Jane needed to make some calls – calls that could be misconstrued if overhead on the train, so she treated herself to a taxi for the long haul back to her hotel in Kensington. She closed the glass partition between her and the driver, and leaned back in her seat, thankful that the traditional – and roomy - black cab had yet to vanish from the London streets.

“Richter? It’s Widow.” She spoke quietly, although she doubted the clearly Cockney cabbie could understand Arabic. “I’ll keep it short. If some Britons call, looking for Arachne,” she spelled the word out, “I’m her. And there’s barely a whiff of scandal about me.” She listened for a moment. “That’s fine, but downplay the wetwork.” She chuckled. “No, I’m not interviewing for a new job. I just met a guy with more brains than I anticipated, and he might ask you some questions. Yes, I *know* I’m supposed to be on vacation.” Another pause. “Great. What? Well, if I can bring that through customs, I’ll be happy to. Thanks a lot. Oh, and Richter? Don’t mention the tongue.”

Jane laughed at Richter’s reply – the usual innuendo about why *wouldn’t* a guy like a woman with a three-meter, prehensile tongue - and hung up the phone with a sigh of relief. If Gillen had tried verifying her credentials, only to find out that there is no such person as *Arachne* on the Janissary payroll, it would have added gasoline to the fire. Jane was enjoying her vacation. She didn’t want to have to flee the country before her scheduled departure, for any reason.

Next stop, Salisbury. Jane was looking forward to wallowing in her rarely indulged interest in history. *And after that, who knows?*

“You are *fuckin*g kidding me!” Jane stopped herself short of putting a fist through the table. The furniture of the Hare And Hounds seemed fairly robust, being classic pub woodwork at its mortise-and-tenon finest, but it wouldn’t be able to withstand Jane’s pique if she let her temper get away from her – and it was rapidly moving beyond her control. Two days of relaxation had just been negated by two minutes’ conversation. *So much for thinking he just wanted to have a late-night drink*, Jane thought bitterly.

Meanwhile, Detective Chief Inspector Mark Gillen of New Scotland Yard’s special crimes unit remained steady as stone. Jane’s anger caused not a flicker of reaction. “No,” he replied in that even tone that Jane was beginning to recognize as a sign of irritation. “As a matter of fact, I’m not.”

Jane growled deep in her throat. “Mother *fuck*er.” She spat. “You think I did it.”

Mark refused to comment. He knew the value of letting a suspect talk.

“Did it occur to you that it would be, oh, I don’t know, monumentally *stupid* of me to fuck the guy who would in all likelihood be investigating the death of – who was it again?”

“Adrian Lawson, the Minister for Defense.”

“Yes, him.” Jane slumped in her chair and swallowed a glass of whiskey in a single gulp.

“Monumentally stupid or incredibly shrewd.” Mark commented mildly.

Jane suppressed a wince at that. “Maybe,” she conceded. “But my sitting here right now would suggest a certain lack of foresight, what with Lawson’s murder splashed all over the front pages.” *Way to go, Jane. Never thought I would hear myself plead stupidity.*

Mark shrugged slightly, but made no comment.

“So you’ve got a videotape of Lawson’s sub-assistant-junior flunkey snapping his neck, when said assistant is known to currently be in Venice?”

Mark nodded.

“And you’ve verified that guy in Venice is the real flunkey?”

Mark nodded again. This information was nothing that hadn’t already been released to the media.

“And meanwhile, I’ve got the unenviable position of being a shape-shifting mercenary in the vicinity, without much of an alibi. This is just *great*.” Jane muttered. “Still, you can’t be hoping to arrest me, not here.”

Mark shifted slightly in his seat, trying to seem casual and failing.

Jane bit her tongue. “Oh, come *on*. The collateral damage I could cause alone...”

“I don’t think you will.” Mark countered.

“Oh, *really*? Made some calls did you?” she saw the confirmation on his face “Don’t push your luck, Mark.” She warned. “I know what you’re thinking. *Let’s surround her with bystanders. She’ll come along quietly – particularly if she’s innocent.*” Mark returned her glare with a steady gaze. “You’re right – but you’re wrong, too.”

Jane leaned forward, pitched her voice low and spoke quickly. “I think you’re grabbing at straws. You’re under a load of pressure to nab a suspect as quickly as you can. You’ve got, what, your boss, the media and the Prime Minister breathing down your neck, right? I would get desperate, too.” *Who am I kidding? I’m about to end up in the same creek.*

Jane thought quickly, “I like you Mark,” she scowled at his skeptical expression. “Fine, then believe this – I don’t intend to go down for a murder I didn’t commit. Give me twenty-four hours and I’ll find the *real* killer for you.” *And if I can’t, I can get on a plane out of here before you even know I’m gone.*

Mark did some quick thinking of his own. Jane was right – he *could* try arresting her but it seemed that his hopes of containing her with the presence of innocent bystanders might have been misplaced. And the Janissaries were famous for having high-powered lawyers on tap. Even if he managed to book her, she would be out of jail – and likely out of the country – within two days.

“Twenty four hours,” Jane insisted. Mark reached towards her. It might have been an attempt at reassurance, but it set off a variety of alarm bells in Jane’s hyper-anxious mind. Almost without thinking, she disappeared before he could touch her.

Jane had reason to be grateful for her abilities almost every day since her eruption but, right now, she felt particularly happy for them. In fact, she had to suppress an uncharitable laugh at Mark's obvious surprise and anger.

Moving carefully – Jane had learned that swift movement could occasionally give her position away to a sharp-eyed observer – Jane whispered vehemently, “I promise.” Mark's angry glare wasn't reassuring, but Jane hoped that she would be able to ameliorate that, and soon.

A moment later, she matched steps behind a departing patron and exited the too-public bar. Her temper hovered at a seething boil. She knew taking the fall for some of her past ‘jobs’ was a calculated risk, but damned if she was going to take the fall for a hit she hadn't made.

This place is right out of central casting, Jane thought as she looked around The Hub a scant hour later. It was just like a dozen other industrial-space-turned-trendy-bars that Jane had seen throughout the western hemisphere. It had the same terrible acoustics, the same overpriced drinks and the same not-quite-hip music on the sound system. But heavy-buttrussing and brightly colored signs warning against aggression and the use of psionic powers by patrons marked it as a place frequented by novae and their kind, distinctly different from the norm.

As a place of tentative neutrality and definite tolerance of superhumans, it was the logical place for Jane to start her hunt. Given that she didn't have much time, she knew she was going to have to break a few rules, which the proprietors might be willing to overlook, as long as she didn't break any bones. At least, Jane hoped that the proprietors would be forgiving, rather than litigious.

Every superhuman community had a person who knew everything and everyone and would be willing to share it, for a price. Not a stool pigeon, *per se*, but someone willing to answer a variety of questions, if given the right incentive. Fortunately, such people made a point of being well-known, and it had only required a few questions of the Hub's bartender for Jane to divine what she needed. Scanning the crowd, she hoped she would be able to offer a sufficient incentive for cooperation as she scanned the crowd. Finally, Jane spotted the woman she sought.

At a table near one of the club's many well-marked exits, a slender, petite woman with a blonde buzz cut and multiple facial-piercings sat drinking something tall and clear with a lot of ice. She too, was idly watching the crowd, and obviously far more interested in it than her untouched drink. Jane made her way towards the table, wondering what the blonde thought of the stocky, brutish-looking man ambling his way towards her. For maximum impact, Jane had decided to initiate the conversation in a body different from her usual one.

“You're Scheherazade?” Jane sat down across from her.

The blonde gave Jane an appraising look. “Yep. Are y'looking for work? There's always people what need heavy things shifted.” Scheherazade's voice was bored, her eyes still scanning the crowd.

“No. I'm looking for whoever killed Adrian Lawson.”

That got the blonde's attention. “And what makes you think I know that?” she asked warily.

Jane leaned back in her chair. “Because you know everything, Sher.” She replied with a slight smile. “Novas in this town don’t take a piss without you hearing about it.” Jane’s own informants told her that Scheherazade was a data-manipulator *par excellence* and incredibly intelligent, as well as greedy for the finer things in life. *Oh please, don’t be a psionic*, Jane prayed fervently. If her mind could be read, then everything would fall apart.

The other woman grinned slightly. “True enough.” Her smile faded. “But who snuffed Lawson?” she whistled softly. “That’s major stuff. A lot of people have come asking me that. Fellas in black and white, y’know.” Her suspicion was obvious.

“Cops? Go figure.” Jane shook her head. “Not me. I’m the just the poor bastard who got stiffed.”

Scheherazade’s attention sharpened even further. “Yeah?”

Jane smiled bitterly. “Yep. I had that job nailed down and I was ready to go, and what happens? Some little *bastard* slides in and undercuts me.”

Scheherazade examined Jane closely. Clearly, she was skeptical. “And you are?”

Smith says I’ve got a reputation; let’s see if it’s for real. Jane let her form shift into her ‘working body’, the one that – if her boss was to be believed – was becoming increasingly well known throughout the underworld. “I’m Black Widow,” Jane admitted, letting her voice rise. “And I *really* want to know what sort of fuckhead thinks he can fill my shoes!”

Scheherazade shifted away from Jane, momentarily perturbed. But she recovered quickly. “You *say* you’re Black Widow-“

“Prove it?”

Scheherazade nodded.

“Hard to do,” Jane countered. “I don’t know what you know about me.”

“There’s something unique about you,” the blonde prompted. “Something that stays with you no matter what. What is it?”

Jane’s eyes narrowed as she tried to hide her surprise. “You could be fishing...”

“That’s not how I earn my living. Answer the question or get out.”

Good point. Jane realized she would have to give in order to get. “It’s an hourglass, on my back.” Jane wanted to grind her teeth. “And how much is keeping that tidbit a secret going to cost me?”

Scheherazade waved the matter aside. “We can talk about that later. How much are you offering for Lawson’s killer?”

That was quick. Too quick. Jane suspected that Scheherazade wasn’t serious. *Time to push it.*

“What am I offering? A choice.” Jane replied flatly. “Either you can tell me what you know, and earn my gratitude. Or you could keep your mouth shut and piss me off. Me *and* the Janissaries.” The threat was obvious.

“You’re bluffing.” She couldn’t quite keep the unease out of her voice, which reassured Jane greatly.

“Feel free to think that, if you like. It’s not *my* career that’ll get ruined.” Jane gave Scheherazade a steady, assessing gaze – the one she saved for when she was determining precisely *how* to kill someone with the least amount of noise.

Scheherazade chewed on a lump of ice, weighing her options. Jane could almost read her mind. *If I'm bluffing, she gets a rep for being susceptible to pressure. If I'm not, she's got a pissed off, badass superhuman – maybe a bunch of them - on her hands. Tough situation.*

"It'll be difficult." The information-broker said, reluctantly.

Time to slap her vanity. "I doubt that. A nova pisses, you hear about it. Either you've already got what I want, or I'm wasting my time. I don't like wasting my time." Jane added in an ominous tone.

Scheherazade blanched. *My god, what sort of reputation do I have?* Jane had made a point of never paying attention to her own press, but now she had to wonder. Then again, Scheherazade's reputation was solely as a manipulator of information and data – not as a fighter.

"If I get you what you want... You'll owe me?"

Got her. Jane smiled slowly. "Me? I'll tell Smith over at Janissary HQ that *he* owes you." Jane knew that such a favor was a far juicier offer. *And he'll acknowledge it too, unless he likes dealing with bullshit legal issues...*

Much later that same day, Gillen sagged back in his chair, wondering what rank he would have to reach to acquire something other than the lumbar-nightmare that he currently sat upon. With everything else, an aching back was the last thing he needed.

A dog's dinner of a press conference that morning had been followed by a bawling out from his superintendent, which Mark had done his best *not* to pass on down to the rest of his team – but it had been tough. The forensics department was stumped, and the usual sources of information – stoolies and potential witnesses - had come down with amnesia in light of this high-profile murder. It was not an auspicious start to a high-profile case.

Personal stress, on top of all this, was not welcome. *You had to have one wild night, didn't you?* He shook his head wryly at the outcome of a post-informant drink at a moderately upscale bar on Dean Street. *And she said she was an Elite – it made her sound exotic. Brilliant. Just goes to show that people never really grow up.*

Mark wanted to smile at his own folly, but he was too tired. Furthermore, he still hadn't quite figured out why Jane's probable associations bothered him – beyond the obvious antithesis of peacekeeper/likely-lawbreaker. Despite everything, he had enjoyed their brief time together, and the possibility that future encounters would be impossible disappointed him.

Mark sighed and shrugged off the shreds of an idle daydream. *She's probably halfway back to Dubai by now,* he realized. *Just pray no one realizes you were the one who let her go.* A knock on his door brought Mark's attention back to the matter at hand. Waiting for Gillen's attention was Detective Sergeant John Fletcher.

Fletcher set Gillen's teeth on edge for reasons he had yet to determine. Fletcher had joined SO1 - the Metropolitan's Special Crimes Squad – less than a year ago and was generally regarded as being a copper who would go a long way in a long time. He wasn't spectacularly brilliant, but not a moron either. But *something* about him always unsettled Mark. Whether it was his tendency to use over-pungent cologne, or the omnipresent nicotine stains on his fingers, the DCI didn't know. At this point, he didn't have the time

to stop and think about it. Fletcher was a competent, hard-working detective, and that was all that mattered.

Mark waved him inside and indicated he should shut the door. The Yard's penchant for glass offices didn't make for much physical privacy, but at least their conversation wouldn't be overheard. "What's on your mind, John?" Mark privately hoped he wasn't about to be taken to task *again*. Bollocksings from the higher-ups he could take, but he was in no mood for it from anyone else.

"Just one thing, Chief. Regarding our suspect list for Lawson case." Fletcher leaned against the door and sipped at a Styrofoam cup of some nameless liquid from the canteen.

"What suspect list?" he asked wearily. "Unless there's been some break in the past half hour, I wasn't aware we had one."

"What about that American nova, Jane Mallory?" Fletcher asked with a show of casualness. "She fits, doesn't she? A fugitive shape-shifter, spotted in London in the past three days?"

Mark kept staring at the memo in his desk. "And why are you suggesting this particular person?" he asked carefully.

"As I said, she fits. According to my friends in forensics, you ran a DNA test a couple of days ago and her name came up. Sure, it was a full day before the killing but it's easy enough to establish her on the scene, if the need arises."

"The need, Fletcher?" Mark finally brought his gaze up to the sergeant and not liking the cocky expression he saw.

Fletcher shrugged easily. "Number Ten's going to go nuclear if we don't come up with someone to charge, pronto. A whole lot of careers could go down the shitter."

"Yours and mine, both, hm?"

Fletcher shrugged, "Maybe all of us, maybe just yours, given that you're the one with the recent DNA and no-one booked."

Mark chose to ignore that. "And the matter of motive and alibi are just a formality, are they?"

A shrug dismissed that question. "How can a shape-shifter establish an alibi strong enough to convince a jury? And motive? Hell, that woman's been AWOL for what, five years according to Interpol? A hit for money, easy enough."

Mark wasn't about to admit that these were all questions he had asked himself in the past forty-eight hours. "Paid for by whom? And why?"

"Come on, Gillen, you know that won't matter when you make the arrest. After that the media will back off and you can take some time building the rest of the case."

"If I make an arrest."

"Who else have you got?"

"No-one," Mark admitted angrily, "But I've spent twenty years doing my job honestly, I'm not about to change now."

"Really?" Mark stifled a momentary urge for violence. "That depends on the incentive, doesn't it?" Fletcher's smug grin returned. "*Upcoming Young Sergeant Cracks Case.*" He mimed an imaginary headline. "Sounds nice, doesn't it?"

"Not nearly as nice as *Presumptuous Sod Gets His Arse Kicked By Supervisor.*" Mark threatened.

“Now, now, Chief. We can’t give in to that stereotype of coppers as violent bully-boys, can we?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Fletcher just smiled at that. “And there I was thinking you’re above temptation.” He turned to leave Gillen’s office, and then changed his mind. “Incidentally, what were you doing with that DNA? We haven’t got any other superhuman-related cases open, do we?”

Mark swallowed a curse. “I was following a hunch, Fletcher. And it turned out to be incorrect. Now, if you’re done with these bright ideas...?” Gillen turned his attention back to the newest stack of paper on his desk.

Gillen heard Fletcher mutter something smug and inaudible, followed by familiar swing-and-click of his office door. Only then did he let out a low growl of weary anger. Now he had to decide what to do about Fletcher, on top of everything else. A detective who suggested planting evidence had no place on Gillen’s team – or anywhere in the police force, if Gillen had any say about it.

Mark glanced at the clock, surprised to see that it wasn’t yet noon. *Four hours*, he thought. Mark half-hoped that Jane was already out of the country, as he planned to name her as a suspect at the four o’clock press conference. Despite Fletcher’s apparent disregard for the law, he had a point in that a shape-shifter would have a lot of difficulty convincing a jury – particularly a jury of non-superhumans – of anything, and Jane’s by-no-way-reliable word was hardly iron-clad proof of innocence.

Shaking his head at human folly – Fletcher’s, his own – Mark returned to work. Regrets could – had to – wait.

Three hours later, Jane was in Liverpool, cursing hooligans, phone boxes and stubborn-minded merchants – in that order. It had taken her what felt like an age to find a functioning phone box in the urban wasteland that was Toxteth, and longer yet to acquire enough change to make a phone call to London. Finally, she had just resorted to the simple expedient of bribery and handed a local pub-keeper a twenty-Pound note in return for fifteen Pound’s change. She had no idea how long this call would take, or how much it would cost and she didn’t want to risk an unexpected cutoff in the middle of it.

“No! Not your voice mail, damn it!” Jane pushed some more phone-buttons, trying to navigate her way through an automated phone system in hope of connecting with a human being. Finally, she succeeded.

“I need to talk to DCI Gillen right away. It concerns the Lawson case.” She paused for a moment. “No, I will *not* give you a message. Yes, I *know* he’s busy and has all sorts of time-wasting cranks calling, but I’m not one of them.” Jane listened to the ever-so-reasonable voice of the anonymous constable at the other end of the line. “No, I don’t want his voice mail.” She sighed. “Look, just page him and tell him...crap.” *This is a bad time to drop your real name, Jane.* “Don’t hang up when you hear this,” she added hastily. “Tell him Arachne is on the phone.”

To Jane’s surprise, the line wasn’t immediately disconnected. She endured fifteen minutes of canned public relations schpielung – *thank god I changed a twenty and not a ten* – before she finally heard another live voice.

“Arachne?” Mark’s caution and strain resonated down the line, and Jane’s heart would have bled for him, if she hadn’t been so wrapped up in her own troubles.

“Neither of us have much time, so shut up and listen,” Jane spoke hastily. “A mutant shifter named Patrick Clarke killed Adrian Lawson, paid off by some middleman in London. Clarke is currently face down and out like a light in the Pemberton Hotel near Toxteth – about a mile away from where you’ve no doubt traced this call. If you move quickly, you might be able to grab him before he recovers from his alcoholic coma.” Jane didn’t mention that she had visited the very-tipsy Clarke and taken her own steps to ensure that he would be unconscious for a few hours.

Mark didn’t speak for several moments, but Jane could hear a flurry of activity in his vicinity. “And how do you know this?”

“Come off it, Gillen, I’m not divulging my sources. Let’s just say that there are people who are more scared of me than they are of you.” *True enough.* “Send a team.” She insisted. “Clarke’s soft. Slap a collar on him – “ police shorthand for an anti-superhuman neural disruptor, “- and he’ll give.” *Why* an unprofessional like Clarke had been hired for such a high-end murder was a question Jane didn’t care about.

“And I’m supposed to trust you?”

“I would say I’ve got enough vested interest in the real perp being caught, wouldn’t you?”

There was another long pause. “You’re asking me to take a lot on faith.”

“That’s the nature of the informant game, Gillen. Tell me you’ve got something better to go on.”

“Oh, there’s someone...”

Jane took a deep breath. “That candidate won’t stand up in court, Gillen, I *promise* you that. Grab Clarke – prove me wrong.”

Mark’s spoke in the bland monotone of Official Authority. “We’ll take your information under advisement and act upon it if it seems necessary.”

Jane sighed, and wondered how quickly she could find a flight out of the country. She was just on the verge of hanging up the phone when Mark spoke again. “And if it is necessary,” he paused. “Dean Street, tonight – same place, same time.”

Jane frowned in puzzlement for a moment, then nodded to herself. *Same place where we met. An informant-to-cop talk, or a genuine conversation, or a trap?* She would have to think about it. Given that she and Gillen had met at past midnight, she had plenty of time to consider her options.

“Maybe,” she replied, sounding reluctant. “Providing you’re not swarming with bluebottles.” She added – Mark knew that local term for uniformed police amused her.

He responded briskly, “That depends,” and ended the call.

Jane put the phone back in its cradle. “You’re going to have to talk fast, aren’t you, Mark?” she asked the thin air. “At least you’re more likely to be believed than I am.”

Much later, Jane slid herself in between a half-drunk salesman and Mark Gillen, both of whom were part of the crowd propping up the bar at Enzo’s on Dean Street. Ordering a large whiskey, she glanced sidelong at Gillen and tried not to wince at the darkness beneath his eyes, the fatigue that was so apparent as he slowly sipped from a pint of beer.

Rather than saying anything, Mark gestured towards an album-sized table near the rear of the bar. Jane was willing to bet it would have been more comfortable to stand up, rather than sit on the trendy furniture at the table's side, but it *was* quieter. Despite the lateness of the hour, it was still Friday night and the dedicated drinkers had little reason to go elsewhere. Fortunately, they preferred to stay near the bar.

"So you've seen the news," he remarked as quietly as he could.

"Of course I did," she replied in the same mild tone. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Good spin by your media people – made it sound like you've got informants on every corner."

A hint of a smile appeared on Mark's face. "You mean we don't? It certainly seemed that way this afternoon."

"True. Did Clarke give?"

"Not yet, but he will. He's in the special lockup and gotten a solicitor who has, of course, told him to keep his mouth shut. But he let a few things slip before counsel arrived – funny how they often get delayed like that." Now the smile was obvious and just a tad conspiring. Mark nodded fractionally as he took another drink. "You were right, he's soft. Total balls-up on the part of whoever hired him."

"Think you'll get that, too?"

"We're reasonably confident, yes." Mark admitted.

"Good. I'm glad it worked out. I would hate to go down for a murder I *didn't* commit."

Mark's face darkened, and Jane cursed as she realized the implication of her words. "This is what I get for associating with law-abiding citizens." She complained. "They're good company, but a supposedly ruthless nova Elite has got to be so careful what they talk about."

"Supposedly ruthless?" Mark inquired tersely.

Jane shrugged. "How do you think I got Scheherazade to talk when you couldn't? My boss tells me I scare most Elites white – but I never really bought into that stuff, myself." She sighed. "Then again, I never expected things to go so far. It's amazing what you'll do when the wolves are at your door."

"Are they, still?" Mark asked, abruptly.

"What?"

"Are the wolves still at your door?"

Jane stared at Mark, wondering what had provoked this line of questioning. "Does it matter? It's not like I've got a whole lot of career options. It's a little tough to go anywhere after the Janissaries."

"Bullshit."

"Excuse me?" Jane's temper started to rise.

"You've got dozens of alternatives." Mark insisted. "Or are you one of those irritating people who enjoys self-inflicted melodrama?"

Jane submerged her initial impulse to throw her glass at Gillen – she would be the first to admit she couldn't take criticism well – and indicated for him to continue.

"You say it's tough to find work after the Janissaries? I would almost believe that, given their reputation." Mark's disapproval was plain. "But you're a *nova*. You've got

skills that would encourage any potential employer to overlook a..." he paused, looking for the right word.

"Colorful?" Jane suggested.

"Good enough. A colorful past." Mark shrugged. "I can't say I would approve of that – the overlooking – but it *would* happen."

"And what legitimate careers would there be for an invisible, wall-crawling, shape-shifter?" Jane asked dryly.

"Don't give me that. You were with the FBI for, how long was it? Seven years. Counter-terrorism, if I recall correctly. You couldn't find an organization that could make use of that?"

Jane didn't answer. She was remembering a chance meeting in Cairo, two weeks ago, with a nova named Celestine. He had said many of the same things and started a train of thought that Mark was building upon.

Finally, Jane realized the silence between them had gone on too long. "Maybe."

"Definitely." Mark insisted. "Or are you telling me that groups like..." he thought for a moment. "Like The Directive really care about your past that much?"

Jane winced. "The Directive is why I left the States," she admitted. "The thing about the feds is just a front. The Directive is the outfit that wants to talk to me so badly."

Mark frowned. "Why?"

"I said *no* to them. They don't take rejection well. In fact, they seem to have adopted a policy of *join or die*."

Mark's eyes widened. "Really?" This ran contra to The Directive's carefully crafted public image – although Mark had to remind himself that Jane might be exaggerating, or lying outright.

Jane nodded. Despite being refreshed by this moment of honesty, her past wasn't something she wanted to discuss in detail.

"Difficult, but not insurmountable, surely? Not for someone who can change faces easier than most of us change clothes."

"But there's always the tell-tale DNA," Jane riposted, smiling slightly.

Mark chuckled at that. "True. Still... 'Fool you once'?" he misquoted.

"True enough." Jane swirled the last of her drink at the bottom of her glass, and wondered what to say, next.

Mark broke the silence. "I have to go. If I don't get some sleep, I'm going to pass out."

Jane's conscience twinged guiltily as she realized it was past 1AM. "Sure thing," she replied with a show of brightness. "You know, I'm not leaving until Monday. Would you like to _"

"No."

"What?" Jane frowned.

"No, I don't want to see you over the weekend." Mark took a deep breath, released it slowly. "You're interesting company, Jane, but I really can't spend time with you while..."

"While I'm doing what I do, for whom I do it?"

"Essentially, yes. As you said, it's a case of 'ruthless Elite and law abiding citizen'. It just won't work."

“*Supposedly* ruthless,” Jane grumbled, wondering why Mark’s rejection stung her. *Wasn’t it supposed to be just a night’s fun?*

Mark smiled wanly. “Whatever you say, Jane. But while you’re with the Janissaries, even an occasional drink is out of the question.”

Jane regarded him carefully. “And if I quit my job?” *Never mind wondering about the implications, just keep talking.*

“Well, that would depend on where you went next.” Mark tried for a conciliatory tone. “You’ve got my number. I’m not going anywhere for the foreseeable future. If your circumstances change-“

“You mean if I become a ‘good guy’ again?”

“And take yourself off your self-erected cross,” Mark added. “Then look me up. We could chat, then.” His slight smile widened a notch. “Or something.”

Jane couldn’t help laughing at that. “Or something. Right.”

“Right.” And, with that, Mark left Jane alone with two empty glasses and – she noticed – the unpaid tab.

Smiling at that, Jane waved a waitress over to order herself another drink, and contemplated her future. Maybe it wasn’t quite so bleak as she feared...