

The Enemy Within (Part I of Fear), draft of 9/10/06

Acknowledgments:

Special thanks to BBIs Dragon and Abacus for their ideas and input. You guys rock! Likewise, to BBI Berkana for a particular alias; hope you're not upset I borrowed it.

As usual, thanks to D.N. and K.N. for naming names, keeping me anchored, and general kibitzing.

Thanks also to Rush, both for background music and inspirational lyrics which are as usual all too pertinent.

And last but not least, to Sydney Cuthbert, whose screenplay "The Manchu Terror" provided inspiration, and a jumping off point, for certain portions of the tale that would have been significantly different otherwise.

This book, like its companions, is dedicated to the ideals of the Banzai Institute and to all the Blue Blaze Irregulars. As Reno has suggested, you're extraordinary ordinary folk, and only rarely recognized. I'm proud to be one of such a crowd.

Errata & Disclaimers:

Just to keep everything straight, when I started working on these books, I had no idea: a) about the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, b) that network television would suddenly develop a tremendous interest in the weather/geological disaster miniseries, or c) that anything like the destruction of New Orleans would actually happen while the work was still in progress. Any errors I've inadvertently made because of exposure to the aforementioned fiction are the responsibility of those who didn't do their research before me as much as they're mine. Errors I may have made in drawing parallels between what happened in NOLA and my fictive East Coast are solely my own. Political commentary and speculation regarding the hidden motivations which may or may not exist in certain governmental agencies are also mine; while I may not approve of everything that occurs in official Washington, DC in real life, I don't plan to go to any lengths greater than novelizing, and actively discourage the inappropriate use of force by anyone. This is fiction, folks; don't take it too seriously. I certainly don't.

Also, some characters in the story belong to other people (especially Earl Mac Rauch) and I'm only borrowing them without any attempt to profit from them. This pretty much includes any character who appeared in the movie *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the Eighth Dimension* or its print adaptation. Not all of them turn up in any particular volume of my tale. Copyrights and trademarks for *Big Trouble in Little China* and characters therefrom are held by their respective owners as well, and I make no claim to them either. Other characters, whether they appear or are only mentioned, are likewise the property of their individual creators, to wit: Institute Residents Downtown, Thunder, and Tommy Boy, along with BBIs Dragon, Abacus, DaVinci and Knuckles, and Team Renegade members T-Bear, Lynx, Trouble, Calamity Kate, Captain Video, Mr. Wizard, Dr. Science, Stomp, Pandemonium, Sterling, Mayhem, and Jitterbug. BBIs Agate and Pica, and their as yet un-tagged son, are the property of Newman Editorial. All other characters are either based upon living human beings (predominantly of the seriously political bent, or at least in government) or are my own creations.

Author's Notes:

Some names have been omitted altogether for reasons of security; likewise, certain other details have been altered or omitted. At this late date, there is no point in punishing those who were essentially the relatively innocent victims of deception from the beginning by making specific and accurate reference either to them or their locations. Equally, there is no point in changing the names or affiliations of those government personnel who were later indicted and tried, as this information has appeared widely in the news media along with such sentences as were actually handed down.

Apart from matters of capitalization, in which I have consulted the available experts, all *im sehi* terms have been rendered phonetically as best as they were reported to me. Where there seemed to be conflicting information from multiple witnesses, I have gone with consensus opinion. As neither Jet nor Cameo have seen fit to correct me, I'm presuming I've largely succeeded. The meanings of most of these words and phrases should be plain enough from their context or in-text clarifications, with exception of the term *im sehi* itself, which is an approximation of the phrase they use to refer to themselves; the best available English translation is 'the people', 'ourselves', 'us' or some similar term, depending upon context. Customary practice, however, is usually footnoted.

For those unfamiliar with the *im sehi* as a species, it should be noted that they are similar to humans in profile but, due to living in a gravity approximately twice that of our own, tend to be on the short side by human standards and tend toward having a slightly golden cast to their various skintones as well as almost universally dark hair. Their home planet, K'ho, is substantially drier than Earth, which along with a much greater average life span and much lower birth rate gives them a rather different perspective on the relative value of both things and people. Most are telepathic to a degree humans aren't; many have other psychic abilities as well. The vast majority of the *im sehi* have little to no use for human affairs, as they consider *homo sapiens* to be too aggressive, intellectually and psychically dense, overly territorial, outright rude, and unpredictably dangerous; the latter is undoubtedly a result of the *im sehi* anthropologists' first contact with humans, which occurred in the late 1600s C.E. in such places as Scotland, England, and Salem, MA, USA and resulted in several scientists being burned as witches. Thus far, none have been discovered to be native to the Banzai Institute's fiction, but this may simply be a matter of range as both Jet and Cameo value their time with the Cavaliers far too highly to take off on what might prove to be a wild goose chase of that many parsecs.

The Enemy Within (Part I of Fear)

*To you, is it movement or is it action?
Is it contact or just reaction?
And you...revolution or just resistance?
Is it living, or just existence?
Yeah, you! It takes a little more persistence
To get up and go the distance*

*I'm not giving in to security under pressure
I'm not missing out on the promise of adventure
I'm not giving up on implausible dreams
Experience to extremes
Experience to extremes...*

-- "The Enemy Within (Part I of Fear)"
Rush, *Grace Under Pressure*, 1984

Chapter One

The group meeting room in the Banzai Institute's Library was not really designed to accommodate the colloquy in progress, but as with so many other inconveniences in the participants' collective history, they were managing to make do. Extra folding chairs had been set up for the occasion, and one wall was draped with a sheet to provide a 'screen' for the few graphics deemed necessary. Things were going fairly well, considering how much of a mess the usual Friday venue was still in, and the Residents had long since progressed beyond a rather loud discussion of the most recent delay in the remodeling project underway in the conference room. They were, in fact, working their way through the last item of continuing business on the session's agenda: monthly strike team reports. As it was October, it had fallen to Perfect Tommy and Pecos to read them aloud, with the engineer handling those written by men and the petite Korean drummer reading for the women.¹

"... And I was the last over the side again — as usual." Pecos looked up from the pages in her hand before referencing the obligatory time, date, and counter signature information; having reached the end of the document, she sat down, signaling the start of its discussion. In the absence of other directly related images, a file photo of the report writer, one BBI Crunchpuppy, shone against the fabric on the wall for all to see.

"I haate reading these things, even when it's at staff meeting," Wizard said from his seat at the back of the room. "It's that much worse if you actually have to read them yourself." Neither tactically inclined nor assigned to security duty, he had more right than most to the opinion; the routine reports from the few standing strike teams in the field could be deadily boring when you lacked the opportunity to heckle the absent Irregulars' occasional grammatical errors.

Normally, Buckaroo Banzai would have quoted some sage bit of wisdom regarding the nature of patience and investigation, but on this occasion it was clear his thoughts were not entirely in the room. StellaLuna, a recent addition to the group, had never seen him quite as distractible or with precisely that smile on his lips.

"Not gonna learn much otherwise," Rawhide reminded them all, well aware what his friend's expression meant and trying to keep things moving regardless. It was only a matter of time before the reason for that grin would become evident to all. "Shame we can't figure out how to speed Crunchpuppy up," he pressed on. Despite his own buoyancy, he was a bit concerned that the Blue Blaze they were discussing was sufficiently bothered by her performance to deem it inadequate despite guidelines to the contrary.

"I'm not sure she needs it," a new voice said as its owner strolled in late. Had she begun her day on the campus, she would have needed considerable reason to justify it and would probably have spent the next several minutes explaining; as it happened, even StellaLuna could tell that this was the root of Buckaroo's wandering attentions. It struck her as a bit odd that no one greeted the new arrival with more than a nod until she realized who'd just walked in.

The lack of obvious fuss wasn't particularly unusual; Jet Lightfoot was welcome to attend the weekly gathering, but so seldom actually in residence that she could have gotten away with considerably more than sauntering in as things wound down. Her detractors would undoubtedly have interpreted her comment as an attempt to excuse her own tardiness; most of the folk settled around the room knew she didn't stoop to such things. Nor did she believe that her unexpected arrivals should be allowed to disrupt routine beyond what was absolutely necessary; she usually announced herself with little more fuss than if she'd been sequestered in one of the labs for days rather than off the

¹ This particular duty rotates among the Cavaliers on a monthly basis, though trading months is not unknown. -- Lowlight

planet entirely. "Am I missing something here," she said of Crunchpuppy, "or do you think she might be holding herself back subconsciously? I mean, they're only exercises so far, but she could be getting a little too into things at the time to remember that." While she made a habit of keeping up with the doings of all the permanent strike teams and occasionally rode with one or another of those units, the Irregular in question was a recent enough addition to Team Ridge Rider that the gypsy Resident was seeing her face for the first time. In her eyes, Crunchpuppy's photo might as well have been full color, though not quite accurate of hue; each of the subtle shades of gray suggested a relative tone Jet could visualize well enough that she had no fear of failing to recognize the person so represented; still, had she hand-tinted the photo to match her mental image, it would have turned out slightly green. She accepted the shift as a natural consequence of the present lighting rather than assuming the Irregular had dyed her obviously blonde hair that shade for Halloween.

Rawhide refrained from accusing Jet aloud of sharing the Irregular's weakness; with everyone else in the room who'd known her long thinking the same thing, she undoubtedly got the point. It was one of the (dis?)advantages of being a functional telepath, something she accepted as coming with the territory. "You'd recommend?" he prompted.

"Stage something that's directed solely at her, with a minimal chance of collateral damage to anyone else. See what happens then. I'd bet she'll have plenty of speed if she isn't worrying about civs." Anticipating the objections that might raise, she lifted a finger to forestall them long enough to finish. "And if that doesn't work, then I'll see if there's anything physical involved. Wouldn't be the first time some of my buds ended up doing a little stealth reaction training on an unsuspecting cadet." Seniority would have entitled her to one of the last remaining seats at the cluster of tables pulled together for the session, had she chosen to take it; that she did not do so suggested that she knew how late she'd walked into the session, and that she'd been a considerable length of time sitting in the cockpit prior to her touchdown.

If she wasn't actively directing her remark to the slender man in expensive clothes at the front of the room, that luminary was more than sufficiently vain to believe she was. "Hey, I knew you guys were there all along."

"Sure, Tommy," she answered that, her tone making it plain to the rest that he was mistaken. "Don't bother, dear; you'll only ruin your reputation. We were just after a couple of your junglemasters, not teaching you anything." Among family, as it were, she didn't bother to imply that he was unteachable; most of them had heard such teasing before and expected it. "We were targeting one of *my* blowhards that time; you got your babies back intact. Almost before you missed them, thank you."

"Not easy at that range?" Rawhide wondered. The cowboy was not one to waste words, but had been preoccupied with a little undercover operation of his own when she'd been puzzling out the initial difficulties of transit between her home and theirs. He knew precious little of the mathematics involved beyond the fact that Reno Nevada had been known to declare more than once that it exceeded his love of the science considerably.

"You know it. The math gets more esoteric every time you guys have an election lately." The comment made Buckaroo wince; he'd thought her original formulae rather abstruse and wasn't certain he was ready to see their latest incarnation.

"Get ready to have to recalculate before you go home, then," said the Latino man who'd been amusing himself by toying with a double-edged throwing blade during the readings. "We might not know what we do next week for months. Half the country hates the incumbent; other half loves him." Reno had enjoyed the election season far more than most of the people on campus; the conflict and gossip revolving around it might well spawn several short stories or even a novel in the months to come, provided things remained slow enough for him to find the writing time. Adventures rarely started according to any immediately discernible schedule, much to his occasional regret.

"Joy," she said dryly; "I could tell from the conventioning it was probably going to be close, but I'd hoped I'd have a little certainty by now. You think it's arcane to begin with? Even *you* guys don't want to know how many variables those two bozos are trying to add. Not to mention I get the delightful job of deciding whether we need to pack up and move the embassy overseas.² There's too many in the present admin who hate my guts as is; if they don't get sacked soon, Madame Ambassador's outta here. Those idiots couldn't regulate their way out of a paper bag if it was dissolving around them, especially that airhead Attorney General, an' Homeland Security in general."

"He's not all bad," StellaLuna started. Political discussion wasn't a verboten topic, but neither was it encouraged among the younger personnel; there was too much chance of the less seasoned getting emotional about it and coming to blows. The blue-jeaned acoustician had her feet propped on the empty chair in front of her, utterly relaxed right down to her kink-prone hair. Only the fact that she was sitting in on a staff meeting hinted that she was capable of damaging objects larger than a bread box by any means other than accident.

"Probably not," Jet agreed, "but not so's I'd care right now. Why he or anybody else thinks that terrorists are gonna

² This is a reference to the Celestial Embassy of the *im sehi*. The UN, on B. Banzai's behest and confronted with what was pretty well a *fait accompli* in light of Yoyogate and the proof of contact with a second non-Terran species, almost unanimously settled the issue of her immigration status by ruling that they would open diplomatic relations with other peaceful species and accept such ambassadors as those off-planet governments wished to send; a vote to stipulate the location of such Embassies must be within 100 miles of UN headquarters narrowly failed. It is not common knowledge even at the Institute that Dr. Jet Lightfoot, Banzai Institute Resident and Her Gracious Celestial Excellency Madame Ambassador Marim T'khajsif, *im sehi* Ambassador at Large are in fact the same person; if it was, she says, she'd probably never get any work done. She also claims surprise that Perfect Tommy hasn't let the secret out yet, although this is probably just good-natured teasing.

show their own IDs or try to do someone in with nail clippers is beyond me; the only people they're really inconveniencing are the ones trying to be law-abiding citizens anyhow. It's gotten so I can't get on a commercial flight on my own anymore; hell, I can only *just* walk into a major airport trailing the whole entourage, and half the time they harass My Excellency anyhow, even when it's the Embassy plane. Far as I'm concerned, the critical difference between the AG and a fireplace trap is that nobody can successfully argue that the ash hole isn't useful. And I've got this nasty feeling that if he stays in place past January or February, you guys are in for more trouble than I want to contemplate." It was as much of a diatribe as she generally allowed herself publicly, delivered in a matter of fact tone which would have been completely at odds with the words had the speech come from anyone else in the room.

"So we'd solve that by getting him out?" Perfect Tommy suggested.

"Can't swear to it," she admitted. "I just have the impression he ups the possibility by a couple orders of magnitude... but I could be misreading that and he might just up the severity instead. Or I could be wrong altogether — or have the wrong guy on my radar — from the get go."

"Last time you misread things that badly was with Dingo," Buckaroo reminded her. It was less a comment on her accuracy than on her reluctance to mention things she wasn't feeling very certain of.

"Nothing you can do about it yet but wait for the Supreme Court to declare the winner if it turns out to be too close. I just wish I could expect it to happen before Christmas, but I'm not that much of an optimist. And we've gotten entirely off-topic. I think we were on the subject of Crunchpuppy?"

Had she known she was personally the matter of any discussion during a staff meeting, Crunchpuppy would probably have fainted. She had no clue who, if anyone, read the reports she wrote about her team's training exercises; on the rare occasion when she'd imagined it, it was some poor slob of an apprentice who'd been given the task of correlating the incoming data from all the standing strike teams and presenting it as a written composite to some administrative intern. Surely neither she nor her team was important enough for her comments to rate more attention.

As far as that went, she wasn't entirely certain why anyone thought her county was an area sufficiently critical to rate a full-fledged strike team. If the response she'd received to her Blue Blaze Irregular application hadn't borne the Institute seal emblazoned on the paper in the same color-changing ink used on newer paper currency, she wouldn't have believed it was real either and would probably have ignored its instructions to report for strike team evaluations at her convenience. She hadn't scored especially well on any of the battery of tests, which wasn't much of a surprise considering her grades, and had been rather astonished to be assigned to a team at all, much less one located in her own county seat. Montana covered a lot of territory, most of it rural; there didn't seem to be any logical reason to place a team in what amounted to the middle of nowhere. That had kept her up late more than a few nights before the others had persuaded her that she didn't need to worry; if there wasn't some kind of reason, Rawhide would have insisted on dedicating the resources elsewhere. Eventually they'd arrived at a collective best guess: that no one, Dr. Banzai himself included, knew why Sweet Grass County really needed its own team, but the location probably put them at a workable but very discrete range from several places which *did* require coverage. She'd garnered the clerical slot by being the slowest person in the group to complete more than one training exercise, and was resigned to staying there for the foreseeable future. It wasn't like she was expecting to earn any stipends sitting at her computer writing after action reports, but even if she had to face up to her own deficiencies on a too-frequent basis it still beat watching what passed for broadcast tv programming. And there was something to be said for having a mandate to surf the Internet, access the Institute's low security archives, and otherwise make herself familiar with both the state of the art hardware and her fellow Irregulars from across the country.

She was puttering around the break room at her day job, trying to get a fresh pot of coffee made before her immediate boss wanted more, blissfully unaware that more than a dozen people most of a continent away were busy talking about her future, the state of national politics, and the prospects of an embassy as though the three were interrelated. Shorter than most of her contemporaries and constantly reminded of that fact by the office shelves, it took her longer than she would have liked to get the grounds into the basket. Today of all days, she wasn't certain she'd allowed enough extra time. There were better ways the company could have been putting her talents to use, but they'd only been interested in a secretary/receptionist who knew shorthand and could be persuaded to play gofur for the entire office. Consequently, she'd been actively looking for something else from the week she'd been hired until she'd joined Team Ridge Rider almost five months previously, a decision which could not go unnoticed indefinitely and was almost certain to get her fired as soon as her boss could find anyone else qualified who'd settle for the pittance the company wanted to offer; around this office, a single unexcused absence was sufficient grounds for termination if you could be readily replaced. She'd nearly forgotten that in her excitement at being accepted as a member of Team Banzai, though days like this one tended to remind her she was neglecting her job search a bit too much.

Still, she refused to worry about it. There were other positions available, including a few she'd come to consider a step up from her present one even if they weren't real prizes either. Even if the strike team never had an assignment more exciting than finding someone's lost pet, she'd learned a lot more about the finer points of standing up for herself without belligerence in the past few months than she had the entire time she'd been in school, much of which had come simply from being valued for herself by someone other than her father for the first time in her life.

Unfortunately, her teammates seemed to be the only people who shared her sire's opinion.

"Hurry up, Stenberg. And don't spill it all over the clients, either," James Mauland snapped at her from the doorway. He was a singularly nondescript man who nonetheless thought himself a fashion plate, though Crunchpuppy doubted he'd paid as much as \$200 for a suit in his entire life; even if he'd appeared in nothing but a Speedo on First Avenue in December, there were a lot of people who would have overlooked him entirely. He hadn't hired her, but acted as if the fates had decided she was at fault for everything that went wrong in the office. The young Irregular increasingly resented almost everything about him, particularly his posturing; had she possessed even a quarter of the assets he claimed to own, she could have spent the next five years comfortably unemployed without bothering herself over investments. On the other hand, had he actually owned as much as he said he did, the only things that could still be keeping him in a town the size of Big Timber would have been a hidden mine full of gold or diamonds he wanted to keep a personal watch upon or a price on his head. She thought the latter was about as likely as permanent human habitation on Mars this decade; chances of the former she placed somewhere between the Pope converting to Buddhism and the late Mahatma Ghandi celebrating the upcoming national elections by having a posthumous sex change operation.

On this particular Friday morning, the harassed secretary spent several unnecessary moments dreaming of putting a heavy dose of salt into the coffeepot before carrying it into Mauland's private office. Much as it would have served him right, he'd have no trouble placing the blame, and she'd be out on the street before she was prepared for it. In a town this size, it wouldn't do to set the feds on him for discrimination either; much as he deserved to be targeted for it, bringing in an outside authority like that would make her virtually unhireable throughout the county even if she won her case. Constrained by realities as she was, she decided to curse him to his face before going home for the day. He'd mistake it for a flattering platitude, but 'May you receive exactly what you deserve' was usually a very powerful malediction -- and one which wouldn't cause her own karma to rebound upon her in the process.

When she brought the tray into the room, Mauland was starting to pull property files out to show the clients. A man and a woman, possibly father and daughter to judge by the difference in their ages, sat there ostensibly giving their attention to the realtor though each glanced in her direction and dismissed her as part of the scenery as she entered. The female client was 40-something, Crunchpuppy decided, no shrinking violet city girl but more sophisticated than a working ranchwife despite the leather bomber jacket with sleeves pushed up to her elbows. Her companion looked more the part of cowpoke going to seed, a Stetson comfortably in his lap revealing hair turned prematurely white, the lines in his face more a product of weather than anything else. Their body language wasn't quite right for parent and child, the Irregular decided before she reached the desk with her tray; something about the way the woman respected the man without deferring to him in the slightest said that partners was the correct relationship.

The tiny orange kitten that seemed to come out of nowhere to run directly under her feet nearly made the secretary fall as she started back out of the room. Before she could protest, the female client was steadying her. "Sorry about that," the other said with just a trace of an accent; "Chess is always getting under someone's feet."

"I tol' you and tol' you, this ain't no place for no dang cat," the male client chided, his very American accent half a world away from his companion's intonations. *He even sounds like an old coot out of some cheap western*, the Irregular thought to herself.

"Tell Chess, not me," the woman replied, leaning over to gather the small ball of fluff off the floor. When the kitten refused to cooperate, she half-rose to go after it only to end up on the floor on her knees near the desk in an attempt to fish the animal out from beneath it.

"I'm sure it's fine," Mauland began, trying to smooth the waters with some very important customers. "Miss Stenberg doesn't seem to be hurt, so there's no damage done. I'm sure she'll be happy to watch your pet."

"She's *not* a pet, Mister Mauland," said the woman, a certain amount of annoyance in her voice. "If you weren't such a right wanker, you'd know she's the buyer." The kitten took a running series of leaps that culminated in her arrival on the top of the desk rather than in the woman's hands; the stranger spent a moment more on her hands and knees before rising slowly to her feet. "You've steered us fair dinkum, Cal," she told the cowboy; "I just wasn't listening." The kitten ignored her to use Mauland's files as a litter box, leaving a surprisingly large mess for a creature of its miniscule size. "Clearly Chessamine agrees. Good day, Mr. Mauland; you *won't* be hearing from us."

Crunchpuppy wasn't sure what it was all about, but she was certain now that the whole affair had been a performance from the moment this odd couple had walked through the doors. For the moment, the worst of it was that her prime tormentor was going to make her clean up his desk and make sure the defaced pages were reprinted; she probably should have reported the unplugged modem cable beneath the desk, but decided it fit the curse she'd had in mind for him. Let him figure out that his allegedly important patrons had been responsible, if he could. They'd probably been down on their luck actors hired by the competition anyhow. Sure, Mauland had enemies, but most of them were the kind whose attacks would be financial rather than physical; in a burg this size, any others would have to be strictly local to avoid letting him see them coming at substantial range. As long as no one else was being put at risk, she was free to sit back and watch things develop.

Nothing happened in a vacuum, especially at the Banzai Institute. It didn't matter how secret a particular project was, inevitably it affected other things in progress at the time, if only by diverting a single person's attention.

Jet's arrival was no exception. The extraterrestrial woman was not universally adored, far from it. There were

those on campus whose best reaction to her could be described as a sort of wary tolerance, and where Wayback was concerned that distaste had nothing to do with unwarranted concerns about her reputation. He knew her better than he liked, and that was the nicest way he was prepared to say it, though he was careful to remain publicly civil regardless of how annoyed he might be at her. Whether that would be enough to save him if Buckaroo Banzai's restraining influence was ever removed, he wasn't certain; his clairvoyance and telepathy combined just weren't up to predicting her for more than a second or two at a time. It had been enough, barely, to keep him out of harm's way when she'd been operating without the full use of her faculties years before; he wasn't certain he wanted to trust it now that she remembered her own speed.

Alas, what little he'd learned about recognizing her at a distance hadn't survived those first days of their acquaintance, when he'd known her as a mere intern — and thought her human — using a different name. When he returned to the campus now after a brief trip North for family business, he'd been dismayed to find signs of her presence in the Bunkhouse and resigned himself to at least a week of constant concern for the state of his own shields.

To be fair, he well realized that she neither shared his animosity nor let it cost her any distress. The Cavaliers were taking their cue from her attitude, as usual; he privately considered that one more mark against her but knew better than to say anything to that effect where it could be overheard by non-Residents. It didn't take a telepath, after all, to tell that most of his colleagues were well and truly in her camp, though it was impossible for him to say whether this was as much an issue of corresponding opinions as it seemed to be. He hadn't actually caught her attempting anything untoward with her own telepathy, but that didn't make it impossible for her to influence people without realizing it, something even a strictly human religious fanatic could accomplish on occasion. True, Buckaroo Banzai ought to be nearly immune to any undue influence she might otherwise have; the physician and guitarist was virtually impossible for Wayback to read even at close range, which of itself argued that he possessed permanent shields of almost unimaginable strength even before one considered the additional evidence of what B. Banzai had encountered in the Eighth Dimension.

Nonetheless, Jet worried Wayback considerably. There were just too many things about her that set off his warning bells, beginning with the fact that he had a good idea of how little he really knew about her psi abilities. Whether this was simply that she was as much in the habit of concealing them as her off-planet origins, or that she was toying with him now that she'd overcome her earlier limitations, he didn't care to think about for long. It was clear that she didn't concern herself greatly with whether he could read her mind and troubled herself not at all about him individually; her attitude was obviously that he was just another of the Residents, the black sheep who didn't like all his sibs, and these things happened sometimes. If her past behavior was any indication, she might even save his bacon the same as anyone else's if the occasion arose but he didn't entirely trust her to lack some hidden agenda in his direction, not when he felt like she could probably swat him down like a fly as easily with psionics as with her 2G adapted muscles.

So it was that when he read the transcript of the morning's staff meeting, he was not surprised that she'd simply wandered in as though she'd been listening from the start. Seventeen years had elapsed since he'd first tried testing her skills with her active cooperation, and he still didn't know how much range she had, nor could he always tell when she'd been anticipating a topic of discussion rather than reading people's minds. If what Buckaroo said was true, and Wayback had no reason to doubt it when the doctor had access to her tissues for carbon dating, she'd had hundreds of years to learn the trick of predicting individual humans. It seemed to him that even an alien could puzzle it out in that much time, since most the people on Earth behaved more like than unlike each other.

Had he ever taken up role playing games, he might have realized that she frequently said far less than people believed they'd heard. And perhaps it was that literalism came more easily to gamers and to the linguistically inclined; she had both elicited astounding amounts of information and given away very little during the same short conversation more often than he'd realized until the last time she'd been on the premises. The question of the Institute's political leanings had arisen during what had been meant as a photo opportunity, and rather than refusing to comment, she'd spent an easy three minutes making observations about the process without ever mentioning that she couldn't actually vote or endorsing one party over the other. He'd realized there might be some legitimate reason her government had appointed her their ambassador to humanity after all, beyond the obvious benefits to her as an individual.

If her composure was nothing new, it was nonetheless something of a shock to learn that she was gravely concerned about the outcome of the elections beyond the mathematical headaches they were apparently going to cause her. He'd never heard anything to indicate she might willingly admit to a preference, much less to have one hinted at to any decipherable degree. True, she was still being very blatantly closemouthed about the presidential candidates, but the likelihood of the challenger keeping any of the incumbent's top staff in their jobs after the inauguration was slim to none; she undoubtedly knew that as well as he did. The comments about possibly moving her people's embassy echoed very strongly with his own intermittent sense of the future, however, and he had to concede that he might be picking up the same early warning she seemed to be struggling to quantify. He debated keeping it to himself altogether, then decided he shouldn't say anything until after the polls closed anyhow; that would have been entirely too close to influencing other people through his abilities and it was better to just let them vote their consciences.

Unlike Wayback, who had needed to be clued in to her presence, both Buckaroo and Rawhide had known that Jet was inbound well before she set foot on the planet. It didn't matter that the neurosurgeon's detection range exceeded his right hand man's by several hundred miles; the cowboy had very little trouble reading such foreknowledge in his best friend's face if they were together. Likewise, no one had needed to tell her that staff meeting had actually started a mere half-hour behind schedule, or that they'd moved it into the library due to renovations; unless she was in a sorry state indeed, she knew where the two of them were as flawlessly as most sentients remember to breathe. She'd probably known a great deal more than that before setting foot on the campus as well, considering that she recognized psi ability among Team Banzai personnel even in those whose gifts weren't always reliable. The chances of her missing the absence of several people whom she knew were slim, in some cases more so than in others. The probability of her actually missing out on anything critical that came up before she arrived for a scheduled meeting were almost nonexistent, even when she hadn't bothered to announce her intentions to attend.

What the two men *didn't* know, and were intensely concerned about, was why she had turned up in their territory now. They were glad to see her in a way that no one would have doubted, but they also knew that she'd been called stormcrow repeatedly with at least a modicum of reason for the term. Even she accepted the fact that she was markedly nomadic, her wanderings very probably guided by something beyond her understanding. It was possible that the elections alone, closely contested as they were, had been sufficient to turn her attention their way, or that she had some upcoming embassy business requiring her personal attention. Possible, but unlikely given her history with Team Banzai. This was not to say that she had a habit of saving the day; to the contrary, she'd been the one who'd attracted trouble on numerous occasions. She was given to admit that she had a habit of being in the wrong place at the right time without saying why the time was right or what it was right for; not infrequently, it had proven to be the right time for her to end up seriously wounded for no better reason than being there, wherever 'there' turned out to be. As with any Irregular who'd walked into things, sometimes the alternatives were clear, if not always worse than what had actually occurred; other times it was plain that her presence had made a significant difference for someone else's life. Certainly that had been the case on the day she'd first encountered Buckaroo Banzai.

If she had been any more of a precognitive, both the neurosurgeon and the cowboy would have been deeply troubled by her pronouncement of troubles to come. Neither doubted that there would be problems in their future, for there were always those to try to be prepared for. It was instead an issue of whether she was subconsciously projecting something involving Homeland Security or actually looking, however briefly, at a glimpse of the ever-fluid future. The former could be actively anticipated and tracked forward to a limited extent; the latter could not be knowingly influenced but might fall apart based on something as slight as a change in a single word. No point in asking her which it was, for at this stage she was unlikely to know herself which was happening. It would take something a bit more definitive than they had so far to persuade her to make a deliberate attempt at clairvoyance, for she was understandably reluctant to know too much of what might lie ahead, particularly if there was even a slight chance of her own personal involvement. Too much had happened in the last 20 years for either of them to push the issue.

Her reticence in that regard did not seem to extend to music, as she managed to remind everyone when the meeting broke up and she wandered off to collect some demo tapes Mrs. Johnson had been saving for her second opinion. Buckaroo eventually caught up to her in the archives, where she was listening to them while tracking down a few documents concerning her own past. "Mind if I ask...?" he began.

"Wayback's old reports, mostly. StellaLuna managed to remind me I'd never read them. Thought I'd see for myself what he'd discovered before the mushroom cloud ascended, and whatever else might be related to it." She stopped whatever recording she'd been playing back, but left both cassette and headphones in place. "I doubt there's anything here that's critically pertinent at the moment, but it beats hell out of listening to election propaganda from now until Tuesday. So do some of these, for that matter." That was an unusual comment from her, either astonishingly charitable about the music despite Mrs. Johnson's pre-screening comments or horrendously scathing about the present political landscape.

It made no difference to the neurosurgeon whether she'd actually heard him, read his lips, or pulled his words directly from his mind, though he appreciated her willingness to give him a good approximation of her complete attention. He decided not to worry about asking precisely what she meant by her last comment, but filed a mental note to bring it up later if circumstances seemed to warrant it. "I thought you'd decided Lindbergh was right about that being your own paranoia."

"I did, and he was, and there's been a couple stunts I've pulled since then that I'd be curious to see whether anyone'd detected indicators for anytime since, oh, I got out of primary..." The stack of folders she was assembling was more extensive than Wayback's parapsychology reports should have required and rather uncooperative; she juggled them for a moment while trying to get a rubber band around the pile to stabilize it.

Even knowing that all adults are former infants didn't help him picture Jet in her people's equivalent for elementary school. "Anybody tell you you're a little crazy sometimes?"

"Most my end of the family, frequently, and with great enthusiasm — but they're wrong." Buckaroo raised his eyebrows at her offhanded tone. "I'm crazier than that," she explained, not at all bothered by the notion. "I ever tell you I'd be certifiable if it wasn't for the fact you just don't use language like that about officers of the Crown?"

"We'd wondered about that. You're what — eccentric?" She nodded. "And you're not sure when deliberate crossed the line to habitual..."

"Oh, I know *that* much. It's when I decided I liked it more for itself than as protective coloration that I'd like to pin down. No doubt it goes back at least as far as guard training, but that's as early as I can verify yet." She extracted one last file folder from the drawer before closing it. "Not that I expect these to help with *that*; I'm just curious what he put on paper. In writing or between it."

He'd known her long enough to understand the whys and wherefores of her interest even if it came nearly two decades after the fact; the few things capable of distracting her seriously tended to be powerful, sometimes life altering, diversions. Too, by the standards of her own people, seventeen years was scarcely a noteworthy interval; when one could expect to live for centuries rather than decades, the kind of long-term thinking which would have been luxury for a human became much more of a commonplace instead. By her own admission, the first of his so-called gypsy Residents had spent far too much time dealing with his species to fully embrace the grander vistas her contemporaries envisioned routinely, but she understood the mindset and was apparently content to see what she learned even if it had no immediate bearing on matters at hand. It had been said that librarians were the secret masters of the world, but there were times when Buckaroo wondered if perhaps the definition of that profession should be expanded to include a few people who would otherwise have called themselves field intelligence operatives; certainly Jet never threw away a ready opportunity to add to her personal collection of information. "I didn't think he'd said that much."

"Neither did I," she conceded. "Of course, I think some of this is from that collective study we kinda shoehorned me in on top of. And I know some of it's comment Reno filed about him trying to teach himself our tricks; between you an' me, Lindbergh was always a better med student."

That came as no surprise to the neurosurgeon; not only was the younger man more like her in terms of outlook, certain of his piloting skills lent themselves well to understanding her methods. Wayback was given to thinking of all psionic activities in terms of their usual secrecy and sometimes tortuous thought patterns, whereas Lindbergh ignored the mental clutter of tradition and cued directly upon duplicating the results of her process. Consequently, it had taken him a matter of several seconds to learn to slow his own bleeding; a trick the parapsychologist had yet to entirely master although Jet had explained how close it really was to what the average headblind EMT did. It was unlikely that jealousy came into the picture, since Wayback was quite convinced that he could duplicate any telekinetic feat she tried and had indeed found his own spin on some of the more complicated ones. "He told me that being Irish might help," Buckaroo agreed about the pilot. "Just don't get too caught up in those; we're touring next month. Rehearsal at seven."

"Mmm. Guess I better have a listen to the playlist between now and then."

It was mid-afternoon before Crunchpuppy realized she'd been mistaken about Mauland's reaction to the morning's events. Even though she hadn't been told to research the clients for him, and she'd seen him doing a rather perfunctory background check himself ahead of time, he had plainly spent the hours between that disastrous meeting and the day's last smoking break in search of a way to blame everything on her yet again. Now he was ranting about it to anyone who'd listen for more than a few moments, which meant that most of her fellow employees were caught between the proverbial rock and hard place; the prophets knew he brought in enough business to have some say in who stayed and who didn't. The HR department — Jackie — escaped his tirading due only to the fact that she did the actual hiring and firing. She could theoretically dump him any time he annoyed either her or her father too badly; the real estate agent who hacked off Old Man Lavold didn't last long in Sweet Grass County's business circles. Anyone else was fair game where the moron was concerned; by now, most of them knew that if they just stood there and listened enough to insert appropriate noises at the right intervals, he'd probably refrain from having them tossed out onto the sidewalk.

Except, of course, Crunchpuppy herself. Obviously Mauland didn't think that cleaning up cat poop, polishing his desk afterward, and retyping rather than reprinting the documents had been sufficient punishment for her alleged sins. No doubt her typing would be called into question as well and she'd get yelled at for any character she'd changed, or yelled at just as loudly for any typos from the original which she hadn't fixed. She gathered those pages and left her desk, only to dump them unceremoniously in the lobby's aquarium as she realized that there simply wasn't enough money in the world to compensate her adequately for tolerating the bastard one more afternoon. She went back to her typewriter, slipped one last sheet of paper into it and typed the sentiment she'd chosen earlier to share with the man, then picked up her purse and went to drop the new document onto his desk.

There was a blond man in telephone company coveralls kneeling on the floor near the computer when she walked into Mauland's office, and she considered going back to her desk and dialing 911 since she hadn't seen the workman enter. When he glanced up at her and back down at the floor again before speaking, however, she realized that something wasn't quite right about his clothes. "I'll just be a few more minutes," he told her, his attention apparently on the modem line he'd just removed the plug from. As it was the same line which had been disconnected earlier under strange circumstances, the Irregular wasn't certain whether to help him or to seek out backup. "Just need to change your defective connector."

The odd terminology and the coverall added up for her a moment later; she wasn't sure who or what he was, but

The Enemy Within (Part I of Fear), draft of 9/10/06

phone technician wasn't it. Nor did it seem likely to her that he was a part of one of the reality shows that were beginning to take over the television schedule, which meant that whatever was going on was likely to be illegal, or at least more immoral than the competition usually stooped to. Before she could stop herself, a question she hadn't known she wanted to ask rolled off her lips. "You wouldn't know anything about orange kittens, would you? We had one loose in here."

"Not especially fond of cats; sorry," he said, then winked at her as if letting her in on whatever conspiracy he was part of. "All I know is I'm here to fix the phone." There was the tiniest bit of an emphasis on 'fix' which led her to believe that he wasn't concerned about her saying anything to her co-workers. "You wouldn't want that Mauland guy to have trouble talking to his dear old mama, now?"

"Not a bit," she said, and completed her errand with suddenly cheerful thoughts about the realtor's apparently impending comeuppance. To the best of her knowledge, Mauland's mother had been languishing in a low-rent nursing home for years, either unable or unwilling to recognize the son who never came to visit or called; whatever the fake phone man had in mind, she suspected he was as aware of that as she was. It occurred to her that what she was doing was probably very irresponsible, but that idea didn't bother her as much as it might have before she'd decided she didn't need this particular job. Rather than wait around to listen to Mauland's pontificating before he fired her, Crunchpuppy smiled at the phony repairman and walked out the front door without stopping to finish up her time card. All in all, it was a good day to be alive.

Chapter Two

Wayback was somewhat reluctant to go to rehearsal even under normal circumstances. While he wasn't precisely anti-social, being a telepath didn't make sitting in a room full of musicians all that pleasant for him, especially when their sobriety was questionable. Knowing that Jet was on the premises and would probably sit in only made it harder to persuade himself he needed to be there. Among other things, he was just a bit jealous of her tolerance for large groups of people; watching her practicing with the Cavaliers only reminded him too thoroughly that she'd taken a turn on stage with them from time to time as well.

There had been a time when he hadn't understood why she'd turned her back on her own Residency, or why Buckaroo and the other Residents hadn't stripped her of that status afterward; now that he knew that additional responsibilities had forced her hand, he could see why the Cavaliers would sympathize with her. Alas, he feared his own resentment and distrust would take a lot longer to get over than his one-time lack of the particulars had; once the animosity was there, it was difficult to overcome no matter how unwarranted it was. Perhaps if he'd known her before her rather abrupt initial departure, he would have seen things differently. Learning that she'd been lying to him, and to everyone else, about her identity when he'd first met her had been more than he could bring himself to completely forgive even with the passage of time. Her very ability to dissemble convincingly had come as something of a threat to his self-image he had yet to fully recover from, in part because he still could not imagine how she'd done it; in his experience, it should not have been possible for her to utter a persuasive falsehood to another telepath. Unable to solve that puzzle, he could only wonder whether she simply knew Buckaroo Banzai better than he did, or if she was actually able to read the great man's mind regardless of topic.

Still, his presence was expected, as it was every time they were about to begin a new tour. His voice was passable, and his blues harp improving by the month, giving him little excuse to beg off. He was simply going to have to focus himself entirely on the music, that was all. It might not prevent the extraterrestrial woman from peeking at his thoughts, but it would stop her from easily sensing anything he didn't want to give away if — or perhaps that should be when — she got past his shielding.

She was already in the Bunkhouse when he walked in, tuning a Stratocaster he was accustomed to seeing more often in Perfect Tommy's hands when the engineer took a turn on lead. Rumor had it that the guitar was actually her property, on semi-permanent loan unless she was around and wanted it; all Wayback was certain of was that Tommy was a good deal more cautious with it in general than she presently was. "Evening, Wayback," she said without bothering to look up; there was no way to tell whether she'd recognized his footfall, noticed his reflection in the polished finish of her instrument, or identified him by his own arcane presence. "Mind the wires; Sunshine's re-cabling."

He fought down a nanosecond's resentment that she hadn't given him the chance to figure out for himself what was wrong with the way the room felt; there was too much chance of her noticing his frustration and perhaps making something of it. His head told him she was unlikely to do so; not only did his heart disagree vehemently with that evaluation, it insisted that her age alone was enough to ensure she had dirty tricks the likes of which he was severely unqualified to even speculate upon. Rather than saying anything, he held his tongue and spent several minutes weaving through the wiring to a seat far enough away to minimize any friction between them.

Jet knew how he felt; she could hardly avoid it when the man telegraphed it as much physically as he broadcast it mentally. She also understood that it was just something he had to work through for himself; as with Reno back in the day, there was nothing she could do which he wouldn't mistake for a possibly insidious attempt to win him over — something she simply didn't intend. Either the man would eventually come to the right conclusions or he wouldn't, and in the meantime she wasn't going to worry about his personal problems unless there was a chance of someone getting hurt. She just wasn't around often enough or long enough at a stretch for it to be worth the frustrations of letting it get to her.

Thus when a number of the other Cavaliers arrived simultaneously, they were not particularly disappointed to find the two telepaths being no more than civil. That was certainly more acceptable than the alternative. Fights within the band were usually loud, fast affairs which ended in Buckaroo escorting both the offending parties down to the infirmary for treatment more often than not; this latter possibility served as something of a damper on even Reno Nevada's legendary temper and at least on occasion prevented things from escalating beyond shouting matches. Finding Jet herself engaged in one of those on campus was never a pleasant thing for the recipient, for she generally lost her composure entirely for effect and the target of one of her tirades almost inevitably deserved far worse even if the miscreant wasn't inclined to believe so at the time. Conversely, when Wayback was well and truly mad, his control suffered for it, making him prone to affect anyone within several hundred meters rather than just the direct target of his ire, although thus far the worst he'd done in his time at the Institute was project his own emotions quite loudly enough to cause something of a ripple effect across various corners of the campus. That had ultimately taken several weeks to resolve itself fully, as there had been a few instances where he'd managed to augment ancient resentments rather than spawn otherwise non-existent ones.³

3

On the whole, folk living at the Institute get along remarkably well, and serious problems rarely arise; the nature of communal living dictates

As usual, Buckaroo was the last to arrive, which hadn't entirely prevented the rest of the band from working on the show. It was simply that rehearsing in earnest hadn't really gotten underway; when he walked in, all that had preceded his entrance — good, bad, and indifferent — became little more than a chance for most of the Cavaliers to be certain their instruments were in tune and their fingers and lips warmed up. Kibitzing surrendered to the serious making of music for awhile, tunes being readied for the tour gradually taking on something approaching their final on-stage dimensions. Perhaps as many as half the people in the bunkhouse were auxiliary Cavaliers, interns and the odd Resident who didn't normally perform on stage yet nonetheless needed to be sufficiently familiar with the entire playlist to jump in if required, even if that chanced to happen in the middle of a set; they could have rehearsed for months with such a group without it ever quite sounding like any of the tour dates actually would.

They'd been at it for most of an hour, plenty of time for Wayback to actually begin to relax and enjoy playing with his colleagues, when the inevitable snag occurred. One of Perfect Tommy's strings gave way, the long end of it whipping through the air with sufficient speed and force to slice any flesh which happened to be in its way. Rather than merely inflicting a wound in its passing, however, it struck the engineer's right hand with just enough velocity to embed itself in the surface layers of skin without immediately drawing blood. Had he been able to stop playing before it came to rest, it would probably have remained there, removable without further damage and relatively painless; alas, even his much vaunted reflexes were not quite adequate to that task. Only when the pain registered was he able to freeze in place, and by then the wound had already been compounded. "A little help here," he said, composure working overtime in an effort to keep his voice level; the damage scarcely warranted microsurgery at that point, but would have unnerved anyone who worked so much with their hands.

With several physicians in the room, no more than two of them sharing the same specialty but most of them more than sufficiently qualified to deal with such minor traumas, a certain degree of initial confusion might have been expected had there not been a plan in place which allowed all of them to be certain whose turn it was to handle the initial examination. Various notions had been advanced in that area before common sense ultimately prevailed; the closest qualified person was *always* the first responder, whether that soul was a specialist MD, held nothing more than a Red Cross First Aid certification, or fell anywhere between. It didn't prevent others from lending support, but it did enable everyone to tell at a glance who was working and who could afford to stand down, both on campus and in the field. New Jersey, however, wasn't quite certain how to remove a wire guitar string and studied the problem for several seconds longer than his patient would have preferred before finally forming a loop in the longer end of the string and tugging gently on it. A thin trail of blood came to the surface behind it, its length far more alarming than the amount was. "I hate to have to stitch that," the lanky pianist said; "it's so shallow."

"Superglue," Tommy Boy suggested, pitching her voice to carry across the room. It was one of the few highly popular major innovations of the past three decades that the Institute had taken no part in developing, even by consultation, so more than a few faces registered surprise at the suggestion. Another, which might have, did not, suggesting familiarity with the concept. "Ever stick your fingers together by accident?" the Information Systems Resident asked them; "Works just as well on purpose, especially for awkward stuff. Thunder swears by it." Most of them either knew her husband, or knew enough of him to know that if anyone could say whether it would hold up to the stresses of playing or of flying, the pilot was the man.

"I'll second that," Jet said, tossing a small bottle of the adhesive to New Jersey. "And you know how hard I am on *my* hands." She could have phrased that much differently, as every Resident knew; only the presence of interns prevented her from mentioning specifically that she'd used it for quick patches to most parts of her skin which saw sunlight from time to time, artificial as well as natural. "Go thin; it'll stay on better."

New Jersey hadn't been surprised that she'd been carrying the glue; while she seldom had absolutely everything she might have needed on her person at any given moment, the ever-changing assortment of items to be found in her pockets had frequently included things far more exotic. The only things he thought unusual about the brand she'd chosen were that it came in a bottle and was applied with a brush, rather than the more common tube with plastic tip; apparently the container was much more stable for transport as well as use, for it would have been almost as hard to crush in a pocket as it was for him to tip over. "I don't suppose this is FDA-approved," he commented, largely in jest. Perfect Tommy nearly pulled his damaged hand away and hissed between his teeth as the compound stung his open wound much more than he'd expected.

"That's what they were after when they invented it," Jet told him, "but then the Feds said no, something about it irritating delicate skin as I recall. Finally got a different version past clinicals a few years back, but the real deal works better for where I end up using it." Again she might have meant more than she said; while it was common knowledge around the campus that she was not human, she wasn't inclined to parade the fact unless it was critical to matters of the moment. The chances of her intending to include geographical locations rather than merely wound types were even, at best.

Several people exchanged you-learn-something-every-day looks, and the injured guitarist glared at both Tommy Boy and Jet for several moments before his doctor pronounced him mended. "Try it; let's see if it holds." The engineer obeyed, and found that apart from a miniscule tug the length of the cut, the hand felt almost normal now that

a certain flexibility of mind and levelness of temper. Still, when you work and play with the same group of people 24/7/365, there are inevitably some interpersonal difficulties which just can't be mended overnight, or even in a matter of a mere few days.

the air couldn't get in. He fingered an experimental riff in the air before switching instruments, and the rehearsal resumed without further incident.

Even though she felt like she was the least-qualified in the group, Crunchpuppy couldn't help looking forward to strike team functions. In Big Timber, most of them were social affairs rather than training or (*gasp*) missions and she needed only to mention them in passing when she wrote her reports. People at the Institute were interested more in the fact that team-building exercises of some kind were ongoing than in the particular nature of most of them, although there had been an incident or two where her writings had sparked offers of assistance from various Cavaliers who'd had a special interest in whatever official roadblock a planned activity had encountered.

The day before Halloween, however, fell into a category of its own. In part due to the holiday being the anniversary of the initial Lectroid invasion, the whole weekend was considered a time when special watchfulness was called for. Hanoi Xan's few remaining minions might not have been skulking around central Montana, but they too had been known to increase their activities when the abundance of costumed characters made Death Dwarves as inconspicuous as they could ever be. The World Crime League got into the act as well most years, which meant that Team Ridge Rider was saddled up to deal with any situation that might arise in their rather broad operating area, be it assisting with Devil's Night arson inquiries or simply discouraging underage drinking or the toilet papering of local houses while the sheriff's department was occupied x-raying bags of candy brought in by young trick or treaters. Once, they'd told Crunchpuppy, they'd even spent Halloween divided between tow truck duty and amateur cat wrangling when the proprietor of the local garage had succumbed to a critical illness and the first responders had inadvertently released all four of his pets.

On this particular Saturday morning, they were working the Halloween Parade from the top of a voter education float they'd built. They didn't always agree with each other over who to vote for — and wouldn't have wanted to — but promoting the idea of responsible citizenship had been a Team Banzai priority from the beginning. Turnout in the last few elections had been far lower than weather alone could have accounted for, which state election officials had taken too much notice of for the county's comfort. Consequently, with the major political parties trying hard to get voters registered and to the polls, Team Ridge Rider had stepped in anonymously and solicited every political party registered in the state for contributions toward two non-partisan parade entries for Sweet Grass County; one for Independence Day promoting voter registration and another for Halloween reminding people to go to the polls. To no one's surprise only the Republicans and Democrats had come through with funds, though Ridge Rider hadn't allowed that to influence either of the designs; the present creation was festooned with no less than seven large foam-over-chicken wire pumpkins, each "carved" to represent a candidate registered in enough states to have a theoretical shot at the electoral votes needed to win. The oversized ballots leaning up against some of the fruits had been designed to be illegible in a way that made the best use of the limited funding as well as addressing the impossibility of getting an accurate sequence for the names during the design process. Most of the strike team, and a few other volunteers, rode in the remaining spaces, dressed as oversized autumn leaves or sheaves of grain and tossing wrapped candies and beads to the crowd along either side of the route. BBI Roswell sat astride the old red Massey Ferguson pulling the flatbed, an oversized straw hat perched on his head and a pitchfork duct taped upright to the fender next to him; by present standards, the cranky vintage 1930s workhorse was far too small to be taken seriously as more than a brushhogging device for especially large lawns or a show item but he gave it pride of place in his garage/workshop.

Crunchpuppy had been a little nervous the first time she'd joined the others atop the slowly moving platform in July. She still wasn't certain she liked the idea that it lacked side rails of any kind, but no longer felt particularly conspicuous. There was a big difference between wearing an Uncle Sam suit that showed every contour and the leaf costume which revealed little more than her painted face and hands. It might have been slightly simpler to toss trinkets to the onlookers if they hadn't all needed to remember how fragile these suits really were; while no one really expected the kind of trouble which would warrant moving at full speed, the leaves were designed to be ditched in a matter of seconds if necessary. Unfortunately, that limited their movement while wearing them and required some planning before it was possible to reach additional supplies of candy and cheap toys. It was a lot nicer than having to wear the other costume possibility, though; the day was much too warm and sunny for snow gear. She wouldn't have been able to enjoy the looks on kids' faces when she managed to toss things right into their buckets if she'd been sweating like the proverbial pig. Aiming thrown objects like that was one of the few new skills she'd developed since signing on that she was actually proud of, and one that carried over from combat training to entertaining a crowd quite nicely even if she wasn't actually slinging knives like a rodeo entertainer. Mauland was just lucky that he hadn't kept any blades around the office, she told herself as she spotted him in the crowd, though at heart she knew she was only indulging in a little wishful thinking; no expression on his face could possibly have been worth being dragged off in handcuffs.

Had she not been looking for him specifically, she knew she never would have managed to see him leaning up against the office's plate glass window where it met the brick wall. He'd spent some of Old Man Lavold's money to sponsor a convertible for last year's Miss Pumpkin and should have been riding along in the front seat instead since he hadn't been chosen Grand Marshal, but none of the Irregulars had spotted him in the staging area earlier, leaving Crunchpuppy more curious than she would have been if it had remained merely an issue of her abrupt and unannounced departure from the firm. Something was up, she decided, though she was well aware it could be as

simple as an ego fit; she'd seen enough of those in the last month to last her several lifetimes.

Tannim, a usually cheerful short order cook who'd learned somewhere how to notice things most people missed, sideslipped over with great care for his costume; his height had inspired the grain costumes since constructing a proportional leaf for him without overt seams had been impossible. "Something wrong?" he asked his unemployed comrade.

"Just found my ex-boss. I'm probably just jumpy, but I didn't expect him to be watching," Crunchpuppy answered. "When you guys didn't see him before kickoff either, I figured he was at home, sulking."

"Maybe he's heard you signed on and has second thoughts." It was a reasonable possibility; in a town this size, there were still people who couldn't identify a single member of Ridge Rider, but if any of them were unaware of the Blue Blazes' presence or their motto,⁴ it was a pretty sure bet that the ignorant person(s) had just moved into town. Mauland had a great deal to answer for as far as the team was concerned; it was simply that the time wasn't right yet. Treating people badly was never good for one's social life in the long run, but any unrelated adult inflicting temper tantrums on an Irregular more than once was outright asking for trouble.

"Something strange went on yesterday, before I walked," she said, raising a different possibility. "At the time, I didn't say anything. It felt too much like his karma was finally beginning to catch up, y'know?" Tannim looked thoughtful, as though he would have liked to nod had his clothing allowed it. Neither of them stopped tossing candy over the side. "First, this odd couple comes in claiming they're looking for a ranch — she's in a bomber; he looks like a B-movie cowboy that's too stubborn to retire. Then, turns out she's representing this micro-sized cat that came out of nowhere and she gets all bothered when Mr. Outstanding doesn't know that. Unplugged his modem when he wasn't looking, and the two — three, with the cat — take off. Late afternoon, I walk in on this fake phone technician in there messing with the same cable, so maybe we ought to be wondering what's up with that." She didn't have to suggest it was more from curiosity than any desire to share her findings with Mauland; right now, the only help he was likely to receive from the team would be incidental to something considerably more important on their collective agenda.

"I'll keep my ears open. Never know what you'll overhear at the Skillet, or in Madhatters."

Jackie Lavold was not a happy woman, though she went to some pains to avoid showing it to the parade crowds; there was always the chance that someone would ask what was wrong and she didn't have a story ready to tell them. Just when the tallish brunette had thought things were as well in hand as anyone could have wanted, they'd fallen apart.

Again.

The truly annoying thing about it was that she'd come so close to making the case against Mauland stick -- closer, by God, than any of the professionals had managed to get. She'd been so certain it had only been a matter of time once she'd hired Stenberg, figuring that she could choose no one safer as her immediate backup than a Blue Blaze Irregular; none of them, at least, could be bought with the sort of coin her target would be able to offer. She'd known most of the sheriff's deputies since childhood and couldn't bring herself to say as much about the officers, some of whom thought the man was one of their distant relations; as thin as the population was spread out in the state, family meant a great deal more than it would have in the city, and there were still folk who were more apt to sweep their family skeletons into the closet than to help bring them to justice.

Being an amateur, the younger Lavold was quite unaware that several forms of corruption were no more than an occupational hazard for the pros who'd reluctantly confessed their inability to pin anything on the man they were trying to claim was a fugitive from justice. The lead Marshall on the case had been after him for years before finally tracking him to Big Timber. She supposed that Sheriff Ames had pointed the fed at her father largely because the man had been too reserved and careful for her to imagine him asking anyone but the local authorities about Mauland. Dad had been closeted with the Marshall, some guy named Keppel whom she'd only met that once, for most of the afternoon before the stranger had reluctantly enlisted her as someone sufficiently close to his target to escape the man's notice. Eight months had elapsed and she'd followed her directions, apart from choosing a newly-minted Irregular over two other equally qualified candidates when she'd needed to hire new office help. Mauland hadn't given any indication he intended to run, so she'd only observed as best she could until a few days ago when Keppel had called her with the news that he'd finally managed to get authorization for some action on the case. And of course, the very day the Marshall's people had turned up to set up their surveillance, that fool Irregular had walked out of the office without bothering to give notice. If Mauland had had the opportunity to vent his anger and fire the girl, he probably wouldn't have been giving suspicious looks to everyone else in the office, clients and staff alike.

On the other hand, if he'd discovered since then that his ex-secretary was an Irregular, it was entirely possible that he was looking for payback. Keppel had possessed an entire sheaf of warrants he'd wanted to serve on Mauland but hadn't yet been able to make them stick as he'd lacked adequate connection between the realtor and his most recent previous identity. As it was, most of those arrest documents had been heavily edited since their initial issuance and just as thickly covered with judges' initials authorizing the many name changes; if the fed was to be believed, the man who'd been selling real estate out of her father's offices for the last five years had used no fewer than a dozen names

in as many states while acting as a high-level courier — or possibly assassin, opinions in Washington varied — for the World Crime League. If Mauland really was the man the Marshall Service wanted, he was absolutely capable of violence against Stenberg and wouldn't miss any sleep over it. It was this thought which had led to Lavold's present errand -- finding the Irregular before the realtor did.

Annoyed at the other woman as she was, it just wasn't in her character to sit back and do nothing to prevent potential bloodshed. Nor could she in good conscience say that the bastard hadn't provoked the secretary considerably; the only reason she'd tolerated the man herself for most of the past half-decade was that he'd brought a lot of business in. Whether he was using his real name locally or not, the Maulands were a prominent family in these parts. Losing their custom *en masse* would have had a tremendous impact upon the Lavold family fortunes, but finding out he was a wanted man had made all the difference in the world. If Keppel hadn't all but demanded her cooperation as a concerned citizen of the United States, she would have sacked the arrogant bastard months ago and good riddance to him.

Lavold was beginning to think that the woman she sought had opted to miss the parade rather than risk seeing her ex-boss again by the time the final units in the procession reached the end of its route and fractured haphazardly against the end of the high school parking lot. Some of the participants wanted nothing more than to climb into their trucks and head for home; others were kibitzing or in various stages of removing costumes. A church youth group, rather than having designed a float for the affair, had set up a barbeque wagon at one side of the lot and was doing a brisk business selling drinks and cheap hot dogs to the paraders, their relatives, and the set-up/breakdown crews starting to turn the flatbeds under floats into recognizable truck trailers again. Most if not all of the local Blue Blaze Irregulars were in the midst of that chaos, removing the foam pumpkins from their own trailer carefully enough to suggest that at least one of the group planned to use them as seasonal decor when the trick or treaters came to call on the morrow. Stenberg was not immediately visible, something which didn't deter the woman who'd hired her; if she couldn't warn the unemployed secretary face to face, at least Lavold could give the message to her cohorts, all of whom were likely to get involved now whether Mauland attacked or ran.

A lot could be said (and much had undoubtedly been written in various governmental archives) regarding relations between the Banzai Institute and the Department of Homeland Security. For the most part, the two organizations co-existed in a state of mutual suspicion and grudging acceptance under the best of circumstances; on the rare occasions when it had gone beyond mere wariness, it had inevitably been Homeland Security who'd tried to instigate something untoward. Team Banzai may have had plenty of collective reason to distrust the feds as a group, but was by default much less inclined to paint the entire Department of Defense with the same brush; anyone with a predilection for such grudges was unlikely to gravitate toward the Institute to begin with and the few who did had their eyes opened very quickly. Even those individual Irregulars, apprentices, interns and Residents who had reason to despise federal behavior were aware that there were at least a few principled persons working for each of the various agencies involved.

This mutual antipathy, however, meant that the Institute was far more likely to pass along verifiable threats to federal security or even individual government personnel than Homeland Security was to inform Team Banzai of any similar hazards from third parties. Consequently, even if she'd possessed solid evidence that Thorvald Mauland planned some manner of mayhem with Stenberg as its target, Lavold would have found it very difficult to get the Sheriff's office to take it seriously. She had no personal beef with Sheriff Ames, or with any of his deputies, and had seen jurisdictional politics played out on enough tv cop dramas to understand that the officers might very well let jealousy — or whatever other territorial imperative it actually was — prevent them from buying into Marshal Keppel's evidence until it was too late. Too, she felt like she owed the other woman *something* for not actually warning her of possible trouble sooner.

So, she kept at it and finally came across Roswell tinkering with the ancient red tractor which had pulled the 'Vote Float' through Big Timber's streets. He was the only one she recognized immediately as one of the Blue Blazes, for all the rest of them were undoubtedly wearing makeup. She'd never had much to do with the man; occupied with the family business as she was, there had been little opportunity for socializing with anyone but clients or kinfolk and he was neither. Guys who lived on the edge of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness and repaired other folks antique machinery for a living didn't walk into real estate offices very often, and even if he had, there was just too much difference in their ages for an immediate friendship to have started. All she knew about his personal life was that he was something of a mystery to most of the town, a bit of a loner with a strange attraction to old equipment and, if rumor was to be believed, some manner of degree in biochemistry. He proved to have a smoother manner than she'd been prepared to expect given the way an occasional client had been badmouthing him while coming into the office. "Miss Lavold," he greeted her; "Not in the market for my Massey, are you?" It could have sounded defensive, but just then seemed more like he was joking.

"I'm looking for your troop, chapter — whatever it is you call it. You Banzai folks."

"The fan club, you mean?" It was small talk and they both knew it; in Sweet Grass County, there wasn't a real distinction between strike team and Hong Kong Cavalier fans serious enough to admit to it. Too many of the people who'd grown up here had learned to ride, shoot, and toss a lasso before they'd finished high school; beyond that, all an Irregular would need to meet minimum strike team qualifications for the area was search and rescue training. Still, while nearly everyone in the county knew about Team Ridge Rider, conventional wisdom said they were merely a fan

group; after all, they were perceived as neither more nor less dangerous than any other likeminded collection of people between 18 and 80 presently living in the county. If that chanced to be a misperception, Ridge Riders didn't go very far out of their way to correct it.

"Of course," Lavold answered. "Our secretary walked out of the office yesterday, and I'd like a word with her about the circumstances. If that's not possible..."

He interrupted before she could finish. "We heard she'd quit last night. Something about that character you've got pushing most your properties. I hope you're not planning on blaming more of his BS on her."

"Nothing of the sort," was as far as she got.

"Hey, Crunchpuppy!" Roswell called, drawing rather less general attention than the peculiar handle should have; at the far end of the flatbed, Stenberg peered around the end of a half-unloaded jack o'lantern and acknowledged with a wave that was only marginally impeded by the remnants of orange foam hanging from that wrist. "If this is something confidential..." Roswell began, warning Lavold that he planned to listen in.

"Actually, she might want a few of her friends around. To prevent interruptions."

Something was definitely up. He wasn't sure what, but he could smell change barreling down on Big Timber like the Twentieth Century had finally decided to catch up to the entire county in one decisive headlong rush. While there was no doubt in his mind that *that* was long overdue, he despised the feeling that things were out of his control. It had always happened to some extent when someone tried to quit working for him, but never to this degree before; this wasn't simply a matter of having to take care of his most recent secretary (though that *was* on his to do list), but rather something much broader and more complex, something likely to affect the whole area instead of only his pathetic excuse for a life in hiding.

It was possible, of course, that he was looking for something that wasn't there; certainly he was thoroughly sick of pretending to be nothing more than a real estate salesman in this hick town in the middle of nowhere. He missed what he considered his true calling, assuming whatever guise allowed him to get close to his intended target, then moving on a step or two ahead of the local cops after he'd finished. Not for him this nonsense of hanging on to a cover so long that he could scarcely remember being anyone else, of falling into the same terrible morass of mundanity that lesser souls were forever trapped in by their own inability to think at all. Even that foolish woman who'd walked out on him lacked the brainpower to suspect he was anything more than a commission slave, though he had no intention of allowing her to get away with embarrassing him like that. She'd do nicely to hone his long-unused skills on before he abandoned this god-forsaken excuse of a burg and returned to both civilization and his old vocation.

He wasn't greatly distressed that he was all that rusty — some things you never forgot — and only slightly concerned that the authorities might still believe he was alive; five years was a very long time in a successful assassin's career. Naturally, he was exceptional; he wouldn't have been in the employ of Hanoi Xan himself otherwise. Had he been merely average, he would have been doing well to have ever obtained a position with some lesser World Crime League boss, or worse still, have ended up on the payroll of one of the few Mafiosi who'd survived Xan's takeover bids with their territories still relatively intact. For one of his calling, that was truly a dead-end job.

Nearly half a decade had elapsed since he'd been part of that world of shadows, however, and by now it was likely that even Interpol had lost interest completely. Presuming that they'd ever managed to untangle more than a few of his false identities, they still should have run into at least one full-on roadblock; he'd killed off several of his own *personae* along the way to facilitate his disappearance, and in one instance even left behind the corpse of a Lectroid for the authorities to misidentify as his own. If anyone in a legal position to do something about it suspected he was still around, none of his few remaining World Crime League contacts were aware of it. As for his master, the Pivot of Mystery, Hinge of Fate of All the Asias, and Face Without a Name, Master Xan was well aware that the man presently calling himself Mauland hadn't taken on a contract in three score months, and seemed well pleased that it had been so. This too might perhaps be part of the assassin's state of disquiet; there had undoubtedly been machinations within machinations that he had been unaware of in light of the more immediate threat of capture after his last job. Any political editorial page worth reading more than once was sufficient proof of that. Given what he knew with certainty, affairs had only just begun to reach the point at which he would have reactivated himself had he been in his Master's shoes.

First things first, however. No matter whether or when he might be called to serve Master Xan once again, it wouldn't do to leave any loose ends, not even out here in the booniesticks. Nor could Mauland-the-realtor simply vanish after someone he'd even glanced at across a room but never met made the headlines as the victim of violence in the area. No larger than Big Timber was, that would be the moral equivalent of holding up a *Looney Tune*-esquely huge neon "Bad Guy Here" sign for the constabulary; any investigation which might impact his false life however tangentially was something to be avoided. He was going to have to come up with a plan that made her death look entirely accidental, or which involved persuading her to leave town for a much bigger municipality where her demise would seem little more than the results of her own bad judgment in an unfamiliar and obviously crime-ridden place. This was definitely going to take some thought, but if there was anything he enjoyed, it was the challenge. It had been *far* too long since he'd dealt with anything interesting enough for him to consider it even marginally in his league; he'd

never considered something as mundane as doing in a mere secretary as being sufficiently worthy to rate calling it a diversion. Only his circumstances raised it to the level of genuine annoyance now.

Still, it would suffice for a taste of action before he resumed his old career. He'd had as much of "retirement" as he could stand; if he wasn't called soon, he was sick enough of his present mundanity to start looking for jobs on his own. There was only the immediate obstacle to overcome, and any ensuing uproar to ride out, and then he would be free to drop the charade altogether and return to the real game.

To all appearances, it was what passed for an average October Saturday in New Jersey, but security had become much more low profile than it appeared around the Banzai Institute, largely due to the early-80s success of the Oscillation Overthruster and its immediate consequences. There had been a period, thankfully brief in light of recent years, when literally millions of people had wanted to know as much as they could possibly learn about the campus and its inner workings, and not all of them had confined themselves to gathering such information by strictly legal means. For the most part, this had been due to excesses of zeal rather than hostile intent, and many of the would-be trespassers had given themselves away by triggering such simple alarms as professionals would have deemed nearly useless. Those had been, and were still being, altered after every attempted entry for no more reason than to keep the general public guessing; that sort of alarm was present less as a genuine deterrent than as part of a layer of decoys, something for the pros and semi-pros to find readily and believe they'd disarmed before pressing forward. And indeed, some of them could legitimately be disarmed, but in doing so the infiltrator(s) often armed the next level of security measures.

Eventually, the numbers had diminished considerably. These days, most people who breached the Institute's outer perimeter meant to cause some manner of harm and were rather more summarily dealt with when encountered. The changing numbers and motivations meant nothing to the basic principles which underlay security: to wit, if someone wanted in badly enough, there was no stopping it and the safest approach lay in knowing who, how, and where early enough to deal with the situation while it could still be handled with minimum fuss. Security patrols riding the perimeter wall may have been obvious in the performance of their duties, but behind every visible deterrent lay at least one and more often two or three backups. Some of them went beyond mere alarms or containment devices, though few were lethal unless provoked.

The last line of acknowledged defense was subject to just such incitement, being mainly human. Should it come down to an evacuation, each of the Residents was expected to protect any interns, apprentices, and civilians at hand to the best of his or her abilities. Thus far, it hadn't been an issue, nor had it been discussed beyond the Residents and those few interns who were auxiliary Hong Kong Cavaliers; if it became necessary to put such a plan into motion, it would undoubtedly reassure junior personnel to believe it had existed since the founding or that their seniors were just doing what came naturally. The truth was that no one person had devised the guideline with specific tasking in mind; like so much else that had passed into Institute tradition, it had been an issue of codifying consensus opinion, though in this case it had escaped discussion entirely until the World Trade Center collapses had brought the issue into painful focus.

For the present, such things were only theoreticals and worst case scenarios. Perhaps they were taken a bit more seriously than usual due to the season, but not to such a degree that their existence was as much as slightly hinted at. Halloween had been an interesting time of year around the campus since its inception, with people in costume even if the Cavaliers weren't on stage somewhere. Before it had become fashionable for adults to pretend to be things they were not, those children who braved the weather to knock on the front gates had been greeted by all manner of peculiar characters ranging from Pinky Carruthers' rendition of a punk mobster to Perfect Tommy's Pythonesque charwoman to Big Norse's drag king take on zero-gravity football uniforms.

Since 1984, however, the holiday had taken on a somewhat more sinister aspect, being as it was a reminder that there was no way of knowing with any certainty whether the Lectroid threat was truly ended. While each year that passed without additional sightings was further reassurance that it had been thoroughly dealt with, the fact remained that the hostile aliens had escaped human detection for over 40 years after hypnotizing Orson Welles and his radio production team. The Adders, their parent species, had passed undetected longer than that in places despite Team Banzai's vigilance and several governments' efforts to weed them out of the world's law enforcement community; at least one of them, John Underwood by name, had been an FBI agent as recently as 1987 before revealing himself. Beyond the Institute's various campuses, it had in fact gotten to be such a troublesome issue that Buckaroo himself had been forced to put an end to certain rumors regarding the 2004 Democratic Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates and the Republican administration's Attorney General in such a way that it was blatantly clear that none of the accusations had been more than highly partisan wishful thinking. None of the three men had particularly appreciated those rumors, nor been especially quick to avail themselves of a telling public response to the issue which involved more than words, which had only succeeded in suggesting there might be some truth to the tales.

Nor had all of the security risks which predated Yoyodyne vanished. There were certainly fewer Death Dwarves than there had been before the raid on Hanoi Xan's fortress in Sabah, though the World Crime League had made

efforts from time to time to take up the slack.⁵ As a result of all the hazards, it had long since become policy that all on-campus costumes were required to display certain pictographs on several surfaces as a means of quick pre-identification; anyone found on the grounds on Halloween without such markings, which were rendered in IR sensitive ink and face paints, was subject to immediate and sometimes intense questioning before they could so much as reach for the more usual ID passes. Like the biometrics which Team Banzai had pioneered long before the general population had heard the term, the symbols were not definitive identifiers in and of themselves, but they certainly made life a little easier for anyone on security watch.

This being the first time in quite some while that Jet had been in residence for the occasion, she had not entirely considered her timing. Holidays, particularly human ones, weren't really something she kept track of, for more often than not they turned into just another working day for her. That was simply the way things had been for longer than she remembered and she accepted it as one of the social limitations which came with the territory. Thus it was not until the afternoon of her second day on campus that she realized she needed to give some thought to a costume. This was not as easy as it seemed, for *persona* shifts had always come easier for her than wardrobe shopping had. As her people's ambassador, she was blessed with a surfeit of designers, human and *im sehi* — and those of several other races as well had she but expressed any interest — at her beck and call; as a Banzai Institute Resident she could, except for black tie affairs, get away with a good pair of black jeans and an Institute T-shirt nine times out of ten. She owned a much broader selection of clothing than that, but nothing that struck her at once as sufficiently dated to make a good costume of without alterations, and the whole homicidal maniac thing had been overdone to death.

There were a few souls who might have been foolish enough to suggest she wear her own people's dress regalia, as she had yet to display it publicly; none of them were Institute personnel. It was something of an open secret among the interns and residents that their own Dr. Lightfoot was also the ambassador of a distant planetary system, but her exact social status among her own people was another issue, one she felt no particular need to share with all and sundry. Of those presently on campus, less than a handful knew that her kinship ties extended far beyond the capital city into the often treacherous sands the remaining freeclans claimed as their hereditary ranges. Had anyone questioned her about such things, she certainly would not have denied it, but her traditional garb simply wasn't something to be trotted out merely for the amusement of the masses. It mattered little that she'd spent a considerably larger part of her life pretending to humanity, for her there was simply too much emotion tied up in the garments for her to ever be comfortable with the idea of using them in such a way. Privacy was hard enough for her to come by on her own planet for her to deliberately expose ages-old custom to the potential ridicule of those who could not possibly understand, something the paparazzi would undoubtedly do if she passed within a quarter mile of the perimeter wall while wearing the desert robes.

There were a few purely tactical considerations as well, most of which came from habit more than any foreboding of trouble. She was not a violent woman but neither was she a pacifist; like anyone else in her primary line of work, she lived with the constant threat of death over her head and had learned the necessity of being prepared to counter an attack at any time. In that, she was little different from any uniformed cop in an inner city precinct, though the average police officer was perhaps not so often ambushed with intent to kill. Venturing forth from her chamber sufficiently disarmed to pass an expert body search was, if not the moral equivalent of an invitation to assassins, less than wise even among those she could reasonably expect to be her friends.

Likewise, any costume she chose had to allow her a freedom of movement which would not have been an issue for other folk. Not only were there times when the best response to an attack might be either flight or purely hand-to-hand, it was also good to be prepared for the occasional necessity of rescuing someone or something else from a precarious locale. And quite apart from such matters as her ID, it would be good to have some way of carrying a few other things she considered essentials where she could access them easily. She wasn't likely to need to touch up any makeup, but it was a rare week when she didn't find some need for an item or two from the pared-down medic kit or a tool from the swiss army knife she regularly carried. If she played her cards right, she ought to be able to forego the spare markers she usually needed; while the younger kids would be much more interested in candy than in autographs, the same could not always be said of the older ones and in any event was rarely the case with the parents. She wanted to dress so that she could pass largely ignored, if only she could figure out how to do it. Hiding in plain sight was something which had appealed to her sense of humor long before she'd gone into intelligence work.

In the end, it took a trip to the Arts building as well as some rooting through her own closet to obtain all the necessary props, but she thought she'd pass muster. If she was going to look a bit more like the professionals than the amateurs who'd also be out in droves for the festivities, that was not an altogether bad thing. With a phony press pass and her face obscured by any of the cameras, some of which she planned to tuck away in the vest of many pockets, the usual suspects would have a difficult time being certain she wasn't just a stringer for some startup tabloid. All that remained was to give her imaginary employer an appropriate name to print above its non-existent headlines, and she'd be ready to run up a mock press pass.

⁵ As reported by Reno in *Buckaroo Banzai Against the World Crime League*. Alas, while Team Banzai was able to put an end to any future large-scale threat from the original Bravos, the WCL was not so badly damaged that it couldn't recover.

The Enemy Within (Part I of Fear), draft of 9/10/06

Chapter Three

The sandwich board standing outside Madhatters Saloon hadn't changed in a week, but that wasn't because anyone had gotten lazy. Quite the opposite, in fact, and the double-sided board hadn't gone out front at all on Tuesday, to prevent the artwork — a lovingly chalked jack o'lantern and autumn leaf border — from washing off prematurely in the cold rain which had eventually turned into sleet, then snow. *Halloween Costume Contest*, it said, *Saturday @7pm-Midnight Cash Prizes No cover*. Apart from the care which had been lavished upon it, that was nothing unusual anymore in Big Timber or more than half of the rest of the country; bars had been hosting adult costume competitions for years, and Madhatters seldom had a cover charge anyhow. It rarely had live entertainment, either, especially after the winter weather began to roll in; over the course of the average year, probably ninety-five percent of the music heard there came from the jukebox in the corner and consisted of various forms of country and/or western.

It wasn't the clientele, the ambience, or the music which made the place something of a hangout for Team Ridge Rider; when they wanted to listen to rock and roll, they went out of town to concerts or sat around their own stereo systems. What brought them to Madhatters was the food, and on this particular evening, the costume contest. Even if you had no plans to enter, it was always good for a laugh or five. Usually some local personage — of rather dubious celebrity anywhere beyond the Sweet Grass County line — would be given a microphone and a stack of three by five cards to read from, sorted according to category. On the rare occasion when a chosen MC failed to show up or wasn't sober enough to read the cards, some poor designated driver would find both cards and mike thrust unexpectedly under his or her nose instead. This could lead to considerable amusement in its own right if the unlucky soul wasn't actually a county resident, for along with the usual classifications like Most Original and Best Couple, there were winners for Sleaziest, Least Forethought, Grossest, and Worst Costume Idea, which latter was reserved for the people who tried overly hard to pull off a celebrity or character impersonation they simply weren't suited to do. BBI Roswell was himself an entrant in that particular category, having given up the morning's overalls and red-plaid flannel shirt for a pair of chinos, a ladies' XXXL T-shirt and winter-weight chambray overshirt, a massively padded out false chest, a blond wig he hadn't bothered tucking his own lengthy and much darker locks under, and a pair of handcuffs around one wrist; even if you managed to ignore the bushy black beard he routinely sported, it would have been nearly impossible to mistake him for the real Martha Stewart. In Big Timber, no one would presume he was dressed as a biker trying hard and failing abysmally to play Martha; he was just the kind of guy who would have looked like a hardcase full time unless someone convinced him to get a much more conservative shave and haircut and give up his chaps. The only fortunate thing about his costume choice, thought Crunchpuppy, was that it saved him from the possible ignominy of having to run the show at the last second.

After seeing her ex-boss that morning, she'd almost stayed home to avoid the possibility of running into him again without realizing it immediately; Jackie had told the whole strike team enough to make it clear that she didn't really want to encounter him alone. Tannim had talked her out of that and into changing her own costume to something outrageous enough to be worth entering the competition. After an hour or so of work, they were a couple and entered in the Best Monster category. He'd stayed with the costume he'd had in mind all along, an Einstein wig dyed green and mounted atop a Frankenstein head, with a white lab coat, a pocket protector and a name badge which read 'Frank Einstein'. She'd only really needed a bit of greasepaint, a monster wig, a thrift shop bridal gown, and a few dead flowers tied into a bouquet to become Frank Einstein's Bride; he'd surprised her by springing for a pair of "wedding rings" from a gumball machine in the diner before they'd arrived at the bar. She'd almost lost her composure permanently when, rings barely out of their plastic containers, he'd dropped to one knee and asked her if she'd get hitched to an undead egghead for the evening; her reaction had been enough to make him laugh hard enough to have trouble getting back up. By the time they'd walked down the street to the bar, other people clearly thought they'd both had a snootful from the way they were laughing and teasing each other. Then he'd insisted on lifting her over the saloon's threshold and made certain that half the town would be discussing "the Einstein's" by morning.

As performance for the sake of performance, it might have been done better if they'd rehearsed it. As a method of ensuring that Crunchpuppy would have extra eyes on her throughout the evening, however, it left little to be desired considering the short notice. It was still possible that someone might upstage their entrance, but that couldn't be helped. They'd drawn enough attention that neither Mauland nor anyone else was likely to get close to her without *someone* noticing, and that was about as much as they could have asked without having the entire sheriff's office think she was just another crazy female with a hyperactive imagination. Blue Blaze Irregular or not, there were just some prejudices that were difficult, if not impossible, to persuade others to give up.

They'd claimed their usual table just far enough back from the pool tables for serious conversation, although this looked like it was going to be one night that they'd have to raise their voices to hear each other anyway. It was definitely threatening to be one of those evenings when Team Ridge Rider would usually just walk away, not wanting to be on the premises if the State Fire Marshall happened by. Better, should *he* show up, to be hanging around the firehouse waiting for the possibility they'd be needed to help the volunteer department persuade the bar's other patrons to leave in an orderly manner. Still, the three of them had already signed up for the contest and the rest were supposed to show up before it started; if Crunchpuppy's best protection right now was visibility, it only made sense to

provide her with as much of a bodyguard as the team could muster.

BBI Greyhame appeared from the depths of the crowd only a few minutes later, having made good use of her staff to clear a path; she was dressed as her wizardly namesake, complete with a long, grey, and very fake beard. The tall hat clinging vertiginously to her head had seen better days and looked as though she'd probably had to stuff something into it to keep the point from collapsing altogether. "Brought you a present," she half-screamed to Crunchpuppy as she handed over a small cardboard box; a small loop of rubber band protruded through an equally miniscule hole in the center of the lid and was secured there by a cutdown piece of bamboo skewer. Printed in a small and slightly shaky calligraphic hand next to that rather odd closure was the legend 'For when you need a smoke'. She gave the other woman a chance to read the words before adding, "Use it in good health."

"Thanks," the plump blonde told her, meaning it. The taller Irregular had more than her handle in common with the Tolkien character, though there had been little enough opportunity to practice that particular craft in Big Timber for the public's enjoyment before 9/11, given local prejudice against a female pyrotechnician running the Independence Day fireworks show. The only word on the package which had real meaning was 'smoke', which told Crunchpuppy she wanted to hold her breath before pulling the skewer; Greyhame had acquired some amazingly pungent recipes for concealment gases, including one which smelled disgustingly like skunk. "I'll keep it handy."

BBI Rodeway dropped lightly into a seat as she said it, his whole attitude so much like a younger version of the old coot she'd seen in the office the previous day that she would have had to chuckle even if he hadn't been an indigo rendition of Marty McFly from *Back To The Future 3*. "You haven't gone all Hollyweird on us and decided to try out wrinkles in your spare time have you?" she teased. Anyone who might have overheard the comment would have been mightily confused by it, as his obviously fake handlebar mustache was glued to a face not yet harshly tested by his relatively few winters.

"Not so's I'd know it. Don't know any orange cats, neither, but I woulda liked to been there." A stringer for a regional trade paper, he was always interested in a good tale even if it wasn't related to trucking; if he'd been inclined to stay in one place long enough to make Residency, he would undoubtedly have been part of the Institute's public relations department. As it was, he occasionally found himself wishing he could write about his occasional adventures transporting cargo for Team Banzai and frustrated in that regard by the fact that he'd yet to move anything which wasn't somewhat sensitive. "Real Estate Agent Less Than Purrfect'," he continued, pushing the neon blue straw cowboy hat back a bit; "Cat Client Hisses Lack of Research".

"Don't forget 'Phony Phone Man Follows Furry Feet' — or something of the sort." Greyhame didn't usually suggest additional headlines, but usual was hardly turning out to be the word of the day. "Jackie didn't take that too well, did she?"

"Would you?" Tannim asked. "Even if I was pretty sure the creep was popular, it doesn't mean I'd expect his fans to be so interested they'd care about every word he had to say." None of them was absolutely certain that the impostor had planted anything in Mauland's office, but considered it a good bet that the man now had a bug on his phone and a keystroke recorder or other high-tech device attached inconspicuously to the computer. Jackie Lavold was either going to have to get used to that notion quickly or avoid his workspace entirely for awhile.

"Well, we'd better be ready to help bring the so-and-so in when they serve the warrants," Roswell said.

"No joke. I want to be there when they bust him," Crunchpuppy agreed, "just to see the look on his face when it all catches up to him out here in our neck of the woods. And to watch the rest of that clan figuring out he's not who he says he is."

"You better hope this Keppel guy's right, Crunch. If he's not, there's still someone floating around out there who's a lot worse than anything you've seen in the office. That guy finds out we've heard of him, he's likely to try to do us all in." Right though Rodeway was, it was not a comforting thought.

"Um, anyone up for a sleepover at the teamhouse?" asked Greyhame, glancing around rather more nervously than they'd seen her do in a long time. "Like, when they kick us out of here?"

The bitch doesn't just have friends; she lives a charmed life, the man known locally as Mauland thought to himself. It was just after midnight, and so far he'd thought up several simple plots by which to remove the obstacle from his path without waiting for her to leave town. Any of them should have worked, even — perhaps especially — here in North Outer East New Jesusville where the likelihood of suspicion was much lower than in any of the places he considered truly civilized; so far, she or her friends had managed to foil each of them, apparently without ever realizing he was watching her for it was obvious that she felt comfortable within the crowded confines of the saloon. The chances that she knew what he was were low enough that describing them as 'anorexic' would have given her considerable benefit of the doubt. Nonetheless, he'd dropped by her house and substituted amanitas for the commercial dried mushrooms she'd bought at the IGA earlier in the day only to watch her carry them out to the garbage can after scorching rather than sauteing them; they'd been so badly burnt that he'd had to fight to avoid coughing from the odor which carried downwind toward his hiding place. He'd tried sabotaging her car exhaust in the expectation that someone would find her body and presume it suicide only to have her ignore the vehicle to walk to the party with a date. Then he'd tried doctoring her drink with a fast-acting Russian poison which simulated a stroke within 24 hours of ingestion, and that klutz Svendsen from the Courthouse had managed to knock it over before Stenberg had taken even a single sip. Given the lack of prep time and resources he was having to compensate for,

there was only one other tack he could think of which was certain to go unremarked in a town where the murder rate was something so miniscule it was measured in cases per decade rather than annually; either he was going to have to get her separated from the mutant Frankenstein's monster, or they were both going to have to be coerced into a little walk down the railroad tracks just in time to meet the next freight east.

In the meantime, about all he could do in the noisy crowd was try to keep sight of her and wait for an opportunity. Presuming the Deeds clerk didn't keep knocking over her drinks, the mark would have to visit the Ladies' room sooner or later. He just hoped that his luck had improved by then.

The rest of Team Ridge Rider wandered in well before the end of registration at nine, though if they hadn't discussed the plan in considerable detail earlier in the day, Crunchpuppy wouldn't have been able to pick most of them out of the crowd. BBI Hanover Fist, naturally enough, was one of only two exceptions; a particularly outspoken Irregular with a large following for his weekly newspaper column despite the fact he was a lawyer, he'd arrived dressed as his namesake from the movie *Heavy Metal*. It wasn't going to win him any prizes unless they added Best Schizoid Idea to the categories although it certainly took advantage of his beanpole physique; most of the people in town hadn't seen the film when it was first released, and many of them had likewise ignored the legitimate video versions. Only a handful outside the team were likely to grasp that his attire was intended to represent a particular individual rather than some random skinny geek.

BBI Turbobooast, normally more interested in the wild blue yonder than anything on the ground that wasn't capable of learning to fly, had abandoned his coat at the door to reveal the sherwani and pyjamas he'd bought mostly as a souvenir of his trip to India the previous spring. If his now-fading tan wasn't quite the skin tone the tailor had had in mind for the fabric, the team's on-call pilot wasn't worried about it. Nor would he have had any concerns about what the neighbors would say if they'd seen him in the outfit at any other time of year; he hadn't crossed the line between self-confident and self-centered but his height was enough to dissuade most catty rumors regarding sexuality or ethnicity. Still, if he hadn't decided to join the others at their table, he might have remained lost in the crowd for most of the evening, as his color scheme was relatively subdued in comparison.

There were as well the brothers, who'd abandoned their usual matched set costumes this once for Crunchpuppy's sake; rather than something along the lines of cowboy and indian or cop and robber or even superhero and sidekick, BBI Rosenkranz was wearing a badly fitted cheap suit with a set of Groucho glasses and carrying a huge rubber cigar while his younger sibling BBI Guilderstern had donned a more conservatively tailored suit, tie, and hat but had a pair of Wayfarers hiding his eyes and the name ELWOOD 'tattooed' across his knuckles. Thus attired, they blended into the crowd a way no one stalking their fellow Irregular would readily notice; while there were plenty of pair and group costumes, anyone local could have been forgiven for missing them and deciding they'd stayed home. While they weren't twins, they might as well have been the same age; certainly they worked closely enough that if the elder hadn't been a farrier/blacksmith and the younger head wrangler for one of the local dude ranches, they might have been in business together.

Then there was BBI Spinner, who perhaps came the closest to upstaging 'the Einsteins' as well as being a great deal flashier than most of the crowd; she only incidentally had the greatest leeway of the whole team to bring her weapons of choice into the bar and had no trouble catching Crunchpuppy's attention. No serious historical costumer worth his or her salt would have looked upon the outfit without a deep sense of horror at its inaccuracy, for the underskirts were completely wrong, there being far too few of them and the pair that were present nowhere near as stiff as they appeared to be; fortunately, while Big Timber had a museum, it wasn't the sort where people cared a fig about 400 year old clothing and if anyone on the premises was troubled by such things, they weren't approaching Spinner to tell her about it. The elaborately decorated fan which went with the costume, and the lacquered combs which held her hair in its rather fantastical updo, were not merely part of the illusion; each could be dangerous in the right set of hands, along with the paste jewel-encrusted 'brooch' at the top of her bodice. That was no more a fancy pin than she was really Mary, Queen of Scots or any other member of Her Majesty's court. Fully half the stays in her corsetry had been constructed to come loose on demand, and like the reproduction 15th century bodice dagger they were quite sharp enough to dissuade the opposition as well as being decorative. It had made for some interesting evenings at both sewing machine and forge, even with help from Rosenkranz and Guilderstern. The envious looks she drew now from several women and the high school Drama teacher were well worth it, although it seemed she might have to contend with at least one unwanted business proposition before all was said and done; she had no trouble recognizing *those* when she saw them after she'd assembled all those costumes last summer with the intent of financing an East Coast vacation and ended up spending nearly 2 weeks in Cooper's Lake, Pennsylvania⁶ at some recreationist "war" where she'd found herself pinned down not by a lack of sales but rather a surfeit of orders.

BBI Stryker was undoubtedly somewhere not too distant, but neither Crunchpuppy nor Tannim could have said

⁶ For those readers who absolutely *must* know, Cooper's Lake, PA is the annual home to an event called the Pennsic War, which is put on by the Society for Creative Anachronism, a historical reenactment group specializing in the middle ages. Now approaching it's 35th year, the average attendance is upwards of 10,000 people. The USPS has given the site it's own zip code due to the regular August influx, and event organizers are required by law to do the same kind of emergency planning as any permanent town of that size.

where the carpenter was or how he might be dressed. As he'd spent a decade plus plying his main trade in Pierre, South Dakota, he was the closest thing to an outsider on the team, and perhaps missed the city in ways none of the others did; while none of them lacked experience of city life entirely, there were just some jobs cities had no use for and some of them had felt too boxed in or too alienated trying to live jowl to jowl with folks who would prefer to forever remain strangers. Stryker hadn't had to contend with the same degree of indifference, for like most hardhats he'd grown accustomed to hanging out with the work crew he saw daily. There were times when he missed that rough camaraderie, for Big Timber wasn't a large enough place to support housing construction on a year-round basis and he spent most of the cooler months working for individuals as a handyman-for-hire; Ridge Rider was as close as he got to having any kin in the area since his sister had remarried and moved away the previous spring, leaving him the family 'manse' he spent most his free hours restoring. He was, in fact, just as likely to have forgotten about a costume altogether after most of an afternoon's work on the old pile, and might well have made a last minute decision to watch the entrance instead of coming inside; while it was just possible to keep an eye on a business without drawing comment, anyone who didn't belong in the alleys behind or beside commercial establishments would discover within hours that the entire town knew they'd been seen there.

The first real glitch of the evening came just after their waitress had delivered a round of drinks to the table and Greyhame inadvertently upset Crunchpuppy's overpriced cola. Rather than continuing to fizz as it ran crookedly across the tabletop, it lost the majority of its bubbles on contact. It was a behavior none of them had seen before, thus instantly suspect given what they'd been told. "You're moving out," Roswell told her; "I don't want you taking chances this is circumstance."

"So who do you suggest I move in with?" Crunchpuppy wondered. She wasn't sarcastic, just curious whether he'd thought things out.

"I think Greyhame has the right idea for tonight," the team leader answered, clearly working out the details as he went. "Anybody not have kit at the teamhouse?"

"Can't swear for Stryker or the Hardy Boys," said Rodeway, referring to Rosenkranz and Guilderstern by their better known collective nickname, "but I've got doubles except for a parka."

"I don't think we have to worry about Spinner, either," Greyhame commented after everyone else at the table had answered in the affirmative. "Last I saw, she had at least a couple acres of tent and a half dozen sets of garb in progress in the basement. Way she sews, she doesn't need a change of clothes on hand..."

"Good. Let me think about it for awhile, Crunch; right now, I'm not sure whether staging a skip or a real move is a better idea. I may want to have a word with this guy Keppel first," Roswell said. He wasn't trying to mislead his most recent recruit, but felt that he didn't really have enough information to work with yet and it showed in his tone. "But you're not going anywhere without at least a couple people watching your back until they pick up whoever just tried to mess with us."

Mauland had to concede that his luck had changed, but not for the better. His target got up to visit the necessary, all right, but never alone. Not that it would have mattered if she had, for the bar was simply too crowded for him to have gotten that close to the Ladies' room without being noticed, even if he'd preceded her there.

And while he'd expected her to leave with that hideous excuse for a mutant monster, the group who departed Madhatters just after the contest judging was sufficiently raucous to make things difficult; two or perhaps three witnesses he could possibly have taken down before anyone else noticed but not most of a dozen, especially a gaggle already drawing attention to themselves to the public's dismay. It was plain they weren't ready to stop celebrating and were simply removing themselves to someplace rather more private where they could carouse to their hearts' content. The only good he could see of it was that Little Miss Fancyskirts was probably going to lose her costume in more ways than one from the way a couple of the guys were leering at her. Mauland would have hated her anyplace on the globe just for that dress; even as a reproduction, he judged it to be worth enough to pay the fees he charged for a phone conversation with a potential employer. Had it been original to its period, it would certainly have brought in enough at auction to pay a day or two of retainer. No one foolish enough to live in the ass end of civilization by choice deserved it.

He would very much have liked to be the man who destroyed it, for it was far too frilly to survive the attentions of any careless soul, much less several obviously drunken ones. His target's less ambitious attire was scarcely holding up either, and only her date appeared to be pawing her. Not a situation any professional assassin wanted to walk in upon when restricted by the need to make it look accidental, unless he could somehow get at the heat source at their destination and induce it to produce too much carbon monoxide. He very much doubted he could have managed to redirect the entire cohort along the railroad tracks regardless of how much time he'd had to prepare, for it was readily apparent that they were all bent upon the same destination. Without a good idea where they were going and lacking the means to follow them without their notice, he was just going to have to give up for the night.

Unbeknownst to either Mauland or Team Ridge Rider, someone else in the crowd was very interested in the realtor's movements and intentions. He'd been there several hours ahead of opening time with his camera crew, setting up their equipment while several members of the bar's staff looked on; not only would they not have gotten any real footage if they'd just walked the smaller hand held camera into the place once the crowd started arriving,

they wouldn't have had the breathing space to turn it on successfully. Fortunately, the locals didn't seem to care why any television people would be interested in the saloon, much less Big Timber, for the only kind of questions the personable blond producer/director had really needed to answer in that regard had involved payment and waiver issues. It was a good thing for them, Hunter had no doubt, that he was as ethical as he was or they would have been out the bill for repairs to the building as well as the 'appearance fees' and 'royalties' he'd alluded to. If it hadn't been so important to catch Mauland on tape, it would almost have been a shame that the grandfather of reality shows he was allegedly making here was nothing more than a scam; *Candid Camera* may have been a decades-old concept but apart from the technical changes over the years — and the way they were marketed to the viewing public as 'reality shows' — there was precious little difference between it and its more recent cousins like *The Real World* or even *My Big Fat Ugly Boss*.

Of course, he *had* needed to ensure himself the run of the place, if only to be in a position to prevent their suspect from actually doing permanent damage to the Irregular who'd unwittingly volunteered herself as a stalking horse. He wouldn't be happy with himself (and it wouldn't look good on his record) if the woman was seriously hurt, particularly as he wasn't exactly authorized to be following her around; this was precisely the kind of work which made him wish for the latitude he'd had in the old days, before he'd gone relatively legitimate. Back then, he would at least have had the leeway to get close enough to her to know whether to let her in on the old man's plan. Now, he had to make an obvious attempt to follow rules, and make an increasing number of the plans himself; the former was much more of an issue than the latter as he'd always been good at landing on his feet.

Still, it wouldn't do for her to recognize him. She'd realized too quickly that he hadn't been a phone company technician in spite of the coveralls and props, which meant either she was much better than average at spotting fakers or that his luck had gone cold enough to be sub-Arctic. Forced to make a choice between brazening it out in the hopes she'd remain silent and letting her in on what he'd hoped she'd mistake for a 'joke', his instinctive response had been to go with the latter from the moment he'd opened his mouth. From her reaction, he'd made the right move, something the page she'd dropped on the desk seemed to confirm. Unfortunately, he hadn't been using much of a disguise at the time, which could make for an extremely interesting moment or two if she spotted him in the crowd even if she'd decided she preferred him to Mauland.

It turned out that he needn't have worried about it all that much. The crowd density alone made it essentially moot, for even if Stenberg saw him, Mauland wasn't going to have the simultaneous line of sight he'd need to realize there was a possibility he'd finally been made. Instead, the issue was whether the cameras would have a view of the erstwhile realtor at a critical moment; except for the bathrooms, the entire place was covered by their overlapping fields of view — some areas more so than others — but that didn't ensure that any of the lenses would actually be able to pick up their subject through the press of costumed bodies. The only cameras in public areas which were guaranteed that ability were mounted outside and above the doors; counting the ones in the kitchen, that gave them a total of five, none of which was likely to catch anything some live witness wouldn't have called 911 over almost before the electronics had an opportunity to record it.

Behind the scenes, Keppel was sitting in a nondescript panel van marked with the logos for the state's largest linen supply company, its windows tagged with bright orange tow-away stickers to discourage anyone but the local law from disturbing it. It wasn't the best platform for surveillance in such rural parts of Montana, although location was less of an issue as a rule than the fact that no one could see into it readily. *That* alone meant he was willing to go to great lengths to keep the vehicle as his rolling command post and computer center, including having the technical boys install a satellite uplink dish as far forward as it was possible to place anything without interfering with access to the driver's seat. The antenna itself was somewhat movable on its mount but that mount was sufficiently recessed into the body of the van to be missed unless the observer was above it; no one on foot would have been able to tell without specifically looking for unidentified signals on the correct frequencies when it was in operation, and even then it would have been difficult to crack the encryption to make sense of the transmissions. The whole affair was essentially a mobile Wi-Fi hot spot when powered up and he was using it now to handle the feeds from all of the cameras installed at Madhatters Saloon as well as an IM link to headquarters on the East Coast. This, not the number of available cameras, had determined how well the bar could be wired; he'd spent about half the evening wishing that he'd had enough processor speed and memory to have handled just one more, since a ceiling POV would have been much more useful.

Alas, there were always hurdles to overcome with the mission budget or equipment. That was as much a fact of life as the occasional presence of corruption in any standing law enforcement or security unit. He counted himself fortunate to have recruited his current partners for all that the younger man had been a fugitive from justice when they'd first met, and the woman his sometime accomplice. The other pair had come into the game rather warily, which was understandable given the number of times officialdom had attempted to lay traps for the former con artist; it was probable that neither would have considered it at all if Hunter's old mentor hadn't fallen victim to some young punk at the wheel of a stolen car. By then, Keppel had been tracking both of them long enough to have been fairly certain that the original charges were bogus and to want the kid on his own team even if it took calling in every favor he was owed in order to get Hunter's old identity erased. The effort had proven itself more than worthwhile on a remarkably regular basis since then, for the younger man had a knack for making do when most other marshals would have deemed the resources at hand terribly inadequate. His old workmate, though perhaps not so glib, had learned the art

of persuading a target audience to presume much more than she actually said; consequently, Parrish had drawn the assignment of working the barroom in an attempt to keep an eye on Mauland that the cameras couldn't, dressed as some slutty-looking 80s pop star whose name Keppel could never keep straight for laughing at her newspaper tutu. Hopefully, if the target actually saw her, he'd be sufficiently distracted by the outfit to ignore her face.

Parrish knew she shouldn't really have signed up for the costume contest herself; if Mauland left early for some reason, she wouldn't be able to slip out the Ladies' room window quickly enough to follow him. On the other hand, trying to tail him while dressed like Cyndi Lauper wasn't all that viable even if she took the alleged skirt off first. She decided that if Keppel wanted to chew her out, he could just take a number.

She hadn't really looked at the top of the signup sheet before writing a phony name and a cutout phone number on it, so she was more than a bit surprised when she heard her *nom de soirée* called as a competitor in the Scariest Costume category — and flabbergasted a few minutes later when she won it. She wasn't worried about being recognized by then, as her mark had given no sign of it despite seeing her; it was simply the fact that the judges thought her Lauper disguise far outweighed any of the various monsters and witches. It was not until she found herself standing next to the jukebox with other winners and took the time to glance at the available titles that she realized how much of a threat a female New Wave pop artist actually was to these people's collective worldview; after such a revelation, she could only wonder whether the local cable or satellite tv provider(s) even offered MTV or VH1.

It wasn't long after that when a group of about ten costumed souls departed more or less simultaneously, something Parrish wouldn't have taken any real notice of if Mauland hadn't started out the door after them. She said something quite unprintable inside her head and did her best to work her way through the crowd, pausing only slightly to get rid of her own tutu before borrowing someone else's long coat to throw over the rest of her outfit. Someone in the crowd might have shouted at her about the outer garment as she went out the door, but she didn't hesitate to verify it; the weasel she was after might already have managed to ditch her and she just didn't have the time for such social niceties as debating personal property.

It didn't take a great deal more effort to discover that there had been no real need for haste; she emerged onto the sidewalk just in time to watch the poser realize he couldn't get at Stenberg as long as she was surrounded by the others. The agent followed her target at a discrete distance anyhow, only to find herself just as stymied when he climbed behind the wheel of his car. She could only watch his departure and hope that one of the guys had managed to put a tracer on the vehicle; it wasn't too likely that he'd skip town before making at least one attempt on the Irregular, but there was always the possibility that he'd already arranged some backup plan involving her house or car. It wouldn't do for this one to get away from them again.

Chapter Four

Religion, or the lack thereof, had never been a barrier to association or advancement at the Banzai Institute any more than natal language had; aside from dietary restrictions and availability for duty assignments, it was considered no more important than any other single aspect of a person's background until an individual decided to make it a problem for someone else. A first offense rated a stern warning and a second incident resulted in the ejection of the offending party from the grounds, no matter their specialty; only the duration was in question, varying in relation to the severity of the violation. Consequently, while there were any number of impassioned dialogues on the subject taking place in the average year, proselytizing was not usually much of a problem for those on the grounds.

Unless, of course, the self-proclaimed missionaries were outsiders who insisted upon preaching at the front gate. That was deemed to be somewhat more than a nuisance, as there were those who would be only too happy to claim that the Institute condoned — or worse, supported — the presence of such evangelists. Tired of dealing with them, an Intern named Bantu had once posted signs on the gate in the hopes that the measure would be adequate to discourage the practice. Her efforts had gone unrewarded in that the sermonizers continued as if the placards didn't exist, even when it was plain they were able to read them. It had since become common practice for those on gate duty to ask politely that such unwanted guests leave quietly, then to turn on a set of speakers installed for the purpose and treat noncompliant pulpit seekers to a track or two from the latest Hong Kong Cavaliers album, much to the general delight of the fans they'd usually been annoying. Only rarely did it become necessary to take additional action, in which instances the New Brunswick Police were asked to remove the trespassers; if they were still busily haranguing when the sirens became audible, they usually fell silent and tried to retreat from the premises rather than wait to be carted off in the back of an official vehicle. Naturally, some were better at this than others, and Perfect Tommy had studied them thoroughly enough that few indeed were the interns who would risk losing more than a few donuts to him over whether a particular repeat offender would manage to get clear.

Halloween morning chanced to be one of the rare occasions when Jet Lightfoot was watching the gates personally. This was one of the few duties rarely assigned to Residents without multiple indicators that trouble was brewing, so she'd called ahead to let the interns she was replacing know she was coming and to reassure them that she had no premonition of danger. She would have been the first to admit that it was a simple matter of personal preference rather than any sense of duty or honor or even fairness; while she was more than adequately qualified to handle the job, her opportunities to just stand around in planetary sunlight without a pressure suit, even while tending to business, seemed to be dwindling with each passing year. That alone made a post others might consider onerous something she'd actually looked forward to from the time she'd discovered a sufficient hole in the schedule circumstance had set her for this visit. It didn't bother her that part of her shift would be in darkness, for she couldn't remember the last time she'd actually witnessed a sunrise from the ground.

Her patience had just been rewarded with one of the most glorious views in the state of New Jersey when she took note of a group of young men walking up the long driveway. Had it been another day of the week, or had they been dressed differently, she might have been more concerned; on what promised to be a bright Sunday morning, however, there was at least a fifty-fifty chance that a half-dozen fellows in suits and ties were in fact the promoters of some lesser recognized religion or perhaps a mere cult. Too, if they had other plans in mind, there were only six of them; this was a sufficiently unimpressive number that she felt no need to call for backup at once. Barring either high explosives or the sort of accident she hadn't been prone to in years, she shouldn't have a problem holding them back until assistance could arrive; should they have concealed pyrotechnics sufficient to breach the gates, no number of Interns standing at her back would be adequate to prevent chaos.

Events were to prove her initial evaluation correct, although she was to regret it all too quickly. Not only were they religious, they were fanatically opposed to the Institute's policy of tolerance for human philosophies, though *that* at least was apparently something they could understand might be a matter of organizational error rather than outright sin. The existence of extraterrestrials on the face of their own God-given planet — Lectroid, Adder, or otherwise — was, however, something they found completely intolerable. Bad enough that the demonspawn from space might contaminate their own species; the handful on the pavement on this particular morning had concluded that otherworldly origins necessarily precluded any possibility of belief in God, for wouldn't He have mentioned children on other worlds in the Bible if He had created any? It was plain from this lack of Biblical reference that anyone who had not been born on Earth to completely human parents could only be Satan's creatures. Surely He would therefore wipe clean all the sins of anyone who removed such a corruption from existence, guaranteeing the devotee a place in the highest circles of heaven.

Their attitude caught Jet off guard, in large part due to the fact that she hadn't encountered anything like it directed specifically at her in the twenty years she'd associated herself with the Institute. She didn't need to be a telepath to understand quickly that they were extremely narrow-minded, would barely have needed to recognize spoken English to know they were certain they were confronting a target once their leader opened his mouth in a blistering tirade which only seemed to further incense his comrades. Any concern she might have had regarding her own ethics went by the wayside at that point; if they were going to insist on broadcasting their emotions, they'd waived any right to surface privacy even if they didn't have the ability to shield their own minds. What she was able to ascertain was not the slightest bit reassuring; the unreasoning and very personal hatred emanating from the preacher and his little flock

was exactly the kind of thinking which left people open to recruitment by terrorists. She *had* seen it before elsewhere, had even been a target of it, but only from other non-humans and even then her would-be assailants had despised her merely for the fact of her species. The micro-mob below was increasingly having its attention focused on the fact that she was a particular individual and not merely a member of her kin group or race, and for once the enemy could not have cared less — presuming they even knew — about her psionic abilities. It was strange as well that none of their cult had ever crossed her path before, which prompted her to a certain amount of concern that the entire group might be a pawn in someone else's hands. That too would not have been a completely novel situation; at her age, *those* were rare.

Under the circumstances, there was nothing to be gained by calling out the troops, but ducking out of their line of sight and reporting the verbal incursion might be worthwhile. There had been a time when she would have needed to pull out her go-phone to accomplish this latter; these days, she wore the latest prototype rather more discretely than the Secret Service carried their wireless commo, and it wasn't even necessary to lift her watch to her lips in order for it to operate. "Code Zulu Hotel," she said quietly, expecting the voice-coded mike to pick it up beginning with her second word.

"Zulu Hotel acknowledged," Pinky Carruthers' voice replied in her head; from the sound of it, he'd been going over the latest reports before turning in. "What's the prob, babe?"

"Got the 'friends of Jesus' minus their 'chartreuse microbus', but they're gettin' a little personal. Could be a screen for something else, so run me a Brown, would you? I'm switching channels for a couple to talk to the bluesuits, but check me back in three." Those were not unreasonable requests; if there was something beyond the obvious, the other sentries and the Residents needed to know about it, which warranted instating Condition Brown largely to get Professor Hikita's attention. If she didn't respond to the callback on time, and failed a second try one minute later, that would push the situation to a full-blown alert — although Jet was one of the very few people who could prevent such an escalation even if every go-phone on the planet became inoperable in the meantime.

"Will do," Pinky agreed and signed off.

Jet toggled the transceiver to the police band as easily as she might have reset the watch function, her eyes on a small color monitor mounted inside the gates as she realigned one of the fiber optics cameras for a better view of the proceedings. "New Brunswick Dispatch," she said in a more normal tone than she'd used with her colleague, "this is Baker Iowa One Six, please respond." If the protesters on the other side of the barrier had heard her notifying her peers, they should have given some sign of it; now that their volume was increasing, it was necessary to compensate a bit.

"Dispatch," came back a moment later as the duty officer recognized the call sign for his counterpart at the Banzai Institute's front gates; "go ahead, One Six."

"Request you roll multiple units code three to Point Zulu. I have a four fifteen that might go four oh four. Recommend they engage with caution, over." Everyone who worked the Institute's front gate knew the first code she gave; 'disturbing the peace' was usually the most serious charge the prosecuting attorney would consider without anyone managing to get over the walls, and consequently most incidents were easier to call in that way. Four oh four, however was the code for "riot", something she judged was only slightly less likely to develop than a hostage situation. If things got out of hand in that particular direction, New Brunswick's Finest were going to be at a disadvantage regardless of whom they sent, but the SWAT team — and the inevitable reporters who'd take notice of it — made the best possible distraction to use against fanatics while a much smaller rescue team with considerably more training responded. That such a group possessed no official authority to act would scarcely matter by the time the dust settled.

"Ten-four, One Six. Units responding; ETA seven minutes," the dispatcher told her after a slight pause to handle the request. As several of the Institute's Residents were accustomed to serving as something of an auxiliary unit when needed, most of the department's officers were inclined to treat the gate chief with almost as much respect as they would have given officers of a neighboring department, which eliminated any supervisory delays when the call was as relatively routine as this. After all, Dr. Banzai insisted upon paying property taxes on the campus' acreage, something which was not the case with any other educational facility in the area; that sort of thing tended to get attention at both township and county levels.

"Ten-four. Will advise. Going ten twenty-three, out." Jet slaved her second tiny camera to the first with enough offset to provide a profile view of events and instructed the more obvious ones mounted on standards above the wall to scan the entire area in infrared as well as visible light. She also lowered her personal shields to range for additional threats, preferring to let any human attackers announce both their presence and location(s) by broadcasting their hostile intent. The hardware would provide a record acceptable to the courts and useful for further analysis or at the least as a training aid, whereas her own observations would necessarily be a bit less objective but were usually more immediately useful.

The shouting was still in progress when her go-phone switched channels on its own to let her accept the incoming call. "Gooooood morning, Gatewatch," came over the bone conduction speaker adhered to the skin just behind her earlobe.

"You're way too cheerful for this, Reno," she answered; "lay off or I'll make you come down here and listen first hand." After all the years she'd known him, she had no real worries that he'd take her seriously; if he wandered down

with no more info than he probably had, it would be his own idea rather than hers.

"Give a guy a break; I just won twenty off Tommy."

"I suppose you're forgiven then," she told him, well aware how seldom that happened and wondering exactly what the terms of the bet had been. "Nothing new down here, but you guys keep 'em open, okay? I'm not reading this as a general alarm, but no use getting complacent." On the screen in front of her, several of the so-called missionaries had spread out across the driveway without causing any additional concerns among the relatively light assemblage of Hong Kong Cavalier fans at this early hour. When one of them leaned over at the edge of the pavement, however, it got her attention at once. "Hold on," she said; "I think we may be about to have grade five incoming." A clang against the gates themselves a moment later proved her right. "Yeah. At least one of these guys is throwing rocks. Or chunks of pavement." Not too surprisingly, the fans gathered around the gate didn't move at once; the few who actually had their faces to the cameras had that deer-in-the-headlights look.

"You want the foam armed?"

"I can handle that if it's clear we need it. They start throwing ordnance, you guys got bigger troubles to worry about than just me." After a previous attack which had taken out the original gates, a fire repression system had been designed to help limit the damage explosives might do, but nothing short of a containment field the entire length of the wall would prevent someone from breaching the perimeter that way. "You might wanna see if anybody standing around out there is ours, or if Scooter can at least hit somebody's cell phone an' get the civs cleared before they get hurt. If I decide I need to bug out, you better fire up the big guns." That last was not a measure any Resident or Cavalier wanted to contemplate for any length of time, nor was it one which any lesser ranked personnel would have understood in the way she intended it; the guns she referred to were extremely serious ordnance she'd been compelled to leave behind at the end of her first visit to the campus, and not really intended to be used at ground level or for anything less threatening than a no holds barred assault. Most of the folk who'd made Residency since those days had tried to misinterpret her act as one of practicality, as she would never have gotten off the ground without removing the cannons from her fighter; it had been necessary to point out to them that if her actions had been purely pragmatic, she need not have rebuilt the weapons sufficiently to make them operational again before heading for the deep black. It was altogether too sensitive a topic to have shared with junior interns, apprentices, or most of the Irregulars.

"We're pulling in your pictures now too," Reno told her. "I don't think you have to worry much about civilians, but watch out for the beanpole in green flannel. Rayne goes overboard like Tommy used to."

The Abomination herself was working the front gates, just like Elder Feng Ho had predicted, once again demonstrating for all to see that the Lord spoke to him. Brother Epistolary Judah was almost beside himself at this chance to preach to his little band of the faithful where they could see for themselves what the enemy looked like; the fact that she appeared so much like a human being troubled him not in the slightest, for it fit in exceptionally well with the theme of his intended sermon. The Creator required him to minister to those who had not yet heard His truth as well, though it was entirely up to the Lord to decide who might hear and receive salvation, and who must remain forever unworthy of understanding. It was not at all necessary for Judah to see the big picture yet, if ever, so long as he remained steady in his faith and continued to bring the True Word to the public.

He said a brief prayer in silence as his tiny flock proceeded to a place directly in front of the gates, slowing only to step into the drive to avoid colliding with the idolators who stood along the way awaiting the masters they so wrongly adored. By the Grace of the Lord, one or two of those sinners might yet be delivered, for thus far they had only been deceived rather than given a place in the ranks of the unholy who stood with the Great Enemy; he asked not that they be turned from their wickedness but rather that he be given the words with which they could be persuaded to repent. The Initiates with him chanted their prayers aloud as they'd been told to do for the benefit of observers; unlike full Brothers, they were still worldly enough to lack any real understanding that while their acts were pleasing to the Creator, the volume level of those petitions had no other human purpose than to set the stage for their superior.

By the time the group reached a spot just far enough away from the barrier that there was no chance of it striking any of them if it opened outward, Brother Epistolary Judah was pleased to note that most of the unbelievers were looking at his band of saints-in-training. He took a deep breath, reminded himself that this was one of the talents with which he had inevitably been graced, and began the Service for the Day.

Once she'd asked for Condition Brown and Pinky had updated the Residents, Scooter Lindley began combing his databases in an attempt to identify the group Jet had reported at the gates. After he had screen captures from the main gate cameras and had started the face recognition software running, he began searching for any known religious groups who might conceivably have some bone to pick with the Institute's recent actions. Finding nothing with the standard queries, he considered what else might have the itinerant Resident using the term 'personal'. It didn't take him long after that to discover that she'd understated the case, or to identify a recently founded cult which called itself The Assembly of the One True Holy Word of God and answered to a charismatic Asian calling himself Elder Feng Ho. The Oriental aspect of it would have been enough to set off all his personal alarms but for the fact that the Elder seemed to adore the camera nearly as much as Perfect Tommy did; the group's official web site bore not one but three photos of their much adored leader at the top of the home page, with so many links to various video

sermons along the left margin that the list extended below the edge of the rather large window. A background search on Feng Ho revealed the moniker to be a 'professional' name, dating back some ten years or more to the man's days with a group of fundamentalists sufficiently mainstream to have their own media ministries throughout California; he'd been born James Shen Lee before assuming the moniker he'd used while working as one of their radio pastors to the Chinese-American community. Eventually, there'd been a falling out over both funds and one of his more extreme sermons. While the older group had officially defrocked him over the anti-extraterrestrial themes he'd started to develop, there was little doubt that the money issue had been the real center of division. Out of work as well as broke, he'd vanished for awhile, only to reappear on the East Coast nearly five years later, calling himself first a prophet and now the Elder of the smallish group of fanatics he'd managed to gather around himself.

Of itself, the Assembly didn't seem to be that large a threat to any Institute interests in the long term, unless it converted or bought itself a few judges or high-powered lawyers; while they weren't admitting their actual numbers on the Internet, the hate-filled propaganda and the fact that there were so relatively few outside references to the group - - none which failed to refer back to the official site in terms so glowing they could only be written by supporters -- led Scooter to believe there might have been as many as a few dozen serious members, probably less than a hundred. The extent of their online presence didn't guarantee there weren't more followers than that, but any others were likely to be fringers at best and not to be relied on by their superiors in a crunch.
