

The background of the cover is a photograph of a long, dark staircase with a person's silhouette walking up it. The walls on either side are made of large, light-colored stone blocks. The overall mood is mysterious and dark.

SHADOW OF TURNING

A Digital Destiny FutureCrime

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Shadow of Turning is a promotional prequel to the full-length futuristic crime thriller Digital Destiny, also by Jeromie Carr & James Dunn.

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1.

Monday, September 14

The Shadow Strikes

“He went nuts,” Denver Police Detective Jack Tate commented quietly to his partner, Kimi Arimuro, as he surveyed the master bedroom of the Robins house. The fine sheets on the oak bed were rumpled. Bottles of perfume and trinkets were strewn in disarray on the lady’s dresser. A crystal lamp was toppled on the floor in the corner. Curled on the floor between the bed and a window was the main attraction: the body of Rundel “Del” Robins. To Jack, Robins appeared to be a distinguished man of perhaps fifty with dark skin and silvering temples. The left side of his face bore two bruises and a deep laceration. An anguished wince was frozen on his face. His teeth were clenched and his hands had barely released his head from their grip.

“That’s what the family’s description was. He went nuts,” Jack repeated as he reviewed the text and audio briefs on his handheld digital D-vice, which allowed him to access a myriad of data stored on DDI’s central, global network.

“You should have fun conducting the interviews,” Kimi responded. You can pretend you’re still a reporter.”

Jack scoffed. Being a detective allowed him to exercise his problem solving skills and become involved in the situation in a way that he had not been able to do in his earlier years as a journalist. He left the technical aspects of crime scene investigation to his partner: “I think you can do your multiscan now.”

Kimi retrieved a flat multiscanning wand from its carrying case. Methodically, she skimmed the wand a few centimeters above the various surfaces and furniture in the room. The electronic wand collected

Shadow of Turning

extensive data about the materials and substances that passed beneath it, effectively creating a forensic snapshot of the scene, forever preserving it for the investigation. As she scanned the crime scene, a voice from the wand would occasionally tell her to back up or re-scan an area or slow down.

Glancing again around the room, Jack asked, "Doesn't this room sort of remind you of that movie where Kesha Arnold and Chris Uruba were locked in their mother's house? I forget the name of it, but it came out around 2042."

"It was *Your Point Is*, and it was in '41," Kimi replied without taking her eyes off her work. "Except this room has more tan in it, and there's no alligator."

Jack preferred not to wait the half hour that it would take for Kimi to finish her scan, so he wandered downstairs to the living room. Del's wife, Fey, sat on the couch, sobbing a little, cuddling and comforting their two small children. She was a Hispanic lady who appeared to be ten years younger than her husband, sporting a professional suit and authentic gem jewelry. Her brother, Anthony Garza, held a compress to a bleeding wound on the corner of his mouth as he sat at the guest bar. Garza was of immediate interest to Jack.

"Are you ready to give your formal statement, Mr. Garza?" Jack asked as he grabbed a barstool. After Garza nodded, Jack prepared his D-vice to record the video and audio of the statement.

"I swear I didn't know that I would kill him," Garza began, quivering slightly. "I really liked Del. I'd never hurt him unless I had to. It was just that he flipped out."

"I need to know how all that came about," Jack said.

Garza took a deep breath. "It was about 17:30. Del, Fey, the kids and I were having a happy, normal supper in the dining room. Donovan, their oldest, was griping that he had a headache, and Del got really mad at him. Then, he got mad at Fey because the spaghetti wasn't made right, but it was how she always makes it. It was like he was getting mad at everything and everybody, and that isn't like him."

"And then?" Jack asked.

“That’s when he got really weird. He was looking out the windows, and started saying things like, “They’re here! Don’t let them get me!”

“Who was here?”

Garza shrugged. “I don’t know. We all got up and looked outside. I even went out and looked for footprints, but there was nobody there. Then, he ran upstairs to the bedroom and slammed the door. Fey decided I should check on him, so I went up and there he was with his back against the wall. He said, ‘Leave me alone! You’re one of them! You’re not going to take me!’ I asked him again who he was talking about, but he attacked me. I told him he was crazy and to get off me, but he wouldn’t. He hit me a few times and grabbed my throat like he wanted to choke me.”

Garza paused. His eyes welled up. “I had to defend myself somehow. It was like he had the strength of a gang. I grabbed a light from the dresser and whacked him with it a few times...I swear it wasn’t very hard. At first, it didn’t have any effect, but after a few more times, he let go of me and fell into the corner. Then he grabbed his head and started screaming. I stood there for a few minutes until he quieted down because I didn’t know what else to do. It was then that I saw that he wasn’t breathing, so I called for medical.”

After getting more details, Jack decided that Anthony Garza had contributed his full story. Once Kimi came back downstairs as Fey’s mother arrived to take the two kids to stay with her. Jack proceeded to question Mrs. Robins. She described her husband’s descent into rage and fear in similar terms as Anthony had.

“He told us not to let the demons take him,” she said as she described Del’s fit at the table.

“Demons?” Jack repeated.

“I’m sorry,” Fey replied. “I don’t think he used that word. I was projecting my own feelings.”

“What do you mean?” Kimi asked.

“I didn’t tell anyone this before because I didn’t want to scare the children,” Fey said. “I felt an evil shadow looming around the house during supper. It was the most powerful, most evil presence I’ve ever felt. It wasn’t so bad in the family room or outside, but it, or they, or whatever,

Shadow of Turning

seemed to be lurking in the dining room. I'm the strong Catholic of the family, and I inherited my mama's ability to sense the spiritual world. Del always thought I was out of my mind, and tonight, I was hoping that he could finally feel something that was real and take me seriously, so I didn't say anything. Then he went upstairs, and I didn't have a chance..." Fey paused to compose herself. Anthony knelt next to her and held her hand as she completed her formal statement.

Eventually, the medical examiner arrived and removed the body. Jack parted company with the family by telling them that if they thought of anything else, they could call him directly. After making concluding comments on their D-vices, Jack and Kimi headed out into the mild September evening. Slipping past the medical examiner's vehicle toward their own transport, Kimi said to Jack, "It's still early. How about coming to our house for a while? Remember my husband, Rick? He makes amazing sukiyaki."

"Thanks," Jack replied, "But maybe some other time."

Jack's attention suddenly focused on a lone, dirty-blonde haired woman lingering on the sidewalk. She was in her middle twenties, wearing running apparel that accented her toned legs and tight, athletic curves. She, along with a small crowd of onlookers, was peering intently at the medical examiner as he hoisted Del Robins' body into his vehicle.

Noticing her partner's interest in the opposite sex, Kimi said, "She's a real warrior goddess, but I'll bet she can't cook."

"I'm just between girlfriends," Jack replied. "I'm not starving."

The two detectives climbed into their vehicle with Jack behind the controls. As he pulled away from the curb, Jack said, "What do you think about what the wife said in there? About the evil presence?"

"You know that witnesses say all kinds of goofy things," Kimi answered.

"I wonder what caused the husband to snap." Jack said. "Oh, well. We'll probably never find out."

2.

Tuesday, September 15

The Shadow in Question

Jack sat at his desk the following afternoon. The imposing figure loomed large on the display of Jack's book-sized D-vice. The figure's huge horns, deep red skin tone, and pointed tail left no doubt in Jack's mind the identity of this figure.

"You aught not meddle in affairs you do not understand, Mr. Tate!" the Devil growled in an extremely low register. "I have claimed another victim, and unless you wish to be the next, I suggest you consecrate yourself by defiling a sexy young virgin!"

Managing the slightest of grins, Jack said, "Is there any purpose to this, Art?"

The Devil's voice changed into a more normal sounding adult male. "You make it so easy, Tate. How could I maintain my status as unofficial department humorist if I didn't do *something* to taunt you? A demon hunt? Come on."

"I didn't say anything about a demon hunt," Jack replied to fellow Violent Crimes Division Detective Art Delancie. "The report about last night's investigation merely included a recommendation that the department follow up on Fey Robins' claim of feeling a supernatural presence as it pertains to the case resolution. I made no claims of its validity."

The Devil's form morphed into the form of a middle-aged, mustachioed man as Delancie revealed his true form. "Can I have the virgin, then?"

Shadow of Turning

“Goodbye, Art,” Jack waved as he wiped Delancie’s image off the display. Art’s good-humored call had come just as Jack had been about to make a more important call. “Get me Danyl Corlac,” he commanded his D-vice. Momentarily, the image of an elderly man appeared.

“Jack, how are you?” Danyl, the lead forensic technician, greeted him. “I suppose you got my message about the results of the Robins digital autopsy?”

“I did, but you didn’t sound too enthusiastic.”

“Well, the results are lukewarm, to say the least.” Danyl allowed several graphics depicting the examination to appear on Jack’s display. “On the good side, we were able to determine very conclusively that Rundel Robins did not die of blows to the head. Our digital analysis, with a thorough simulation, demonstrated that none of the injuries to his head were life-threatening. They were all superficial. I had worse injuries when playing college hockey.”

“His brother-in-law will be delighted to hear that,” Jack said. “What does that leave us with?”

“That leaves us with the bad side. My assistant and I are still unclear about a cause of death.” He summoned a digital simulated cross section of Robins’ brain, dotted with yellow colored areas. “These areas are where we found deficiencies in his brain’s ability to process oxygen. That might be consistent with cellular breakdown associated with certain neurotoxins, but we found no neurotoxins in his system. Maybe he was demon possessed after all.”

“For crap’s sake...” Jack blurted out. He was going to get no breaks from the readers of his witness report.

Danyl said, “I don’t believe in demons, but I do know that when he died, the subject was in severe emotional trauma. We found evidence of heightened blood pressure, burst capillaries, an enormous excess of adrenalin, and a swollen amygdala region. Plus, he was sweating like crazy. If your witnesses are correct, the medical evidence suggests that this guy was insane with terror at the time of his death. His signs are comparable to torture victims I’ve read about in psychological journals who thought they were about to be burned alive.”

“Wow. Poor guy. I’ve always said that fear is the most powerful motivator. He assaulted his brother-in-law over...whatever he was afraid of. And his wife said she felt something, too, like an evil shadow. Two people don’t go nuts at the same time.”

Danyl shrugged. “I’m categorizing this as a ‘health trauma’ until further notice. Regulations require that I get the Department of Health and Safety in on this. As soon as we can officially clear Anthony Garza of any charges, DPD should end its involvement in this.”

None too soon, Jack thought to himself. This is beginning to freak out even me.

3.

Monday, September 21

The Shadow Returns

Jack was enjoying the quiet ride on the motor carriage that was transporting him toward home after a rather mundane shift. He popped a small, light blue tablet into his mouth. This gremlin, a legalized designer drug, would give him a short mental boost. Before it had time to dissolve completely, the artificial personality of a young man dressed in an old-fashioned police uniform came up on his D-vice.

“Yes, Ted?” Jack replied to this digital personality just like it was a real person screening his calls, even though it was nothing more than an interactive user interface that mimicked human communication. As Ted was his designated personality from work, he was not used to hearing from him after hours.

Ted said, “I have Fey Robins. She says it’s extremely urgent.”

Jack approved the call from Fey as Ted disappeared. Del Robins’ widow was crouched in what appeared to be a corner of her house. She was having considerable difficulty steadying her image on her portable D-vice.

“What’s wrong, Mrs. Robins?” Jack asked.

“You told me I could call you,” she began, speaking in short, muted breaths. “You were the only one who believed me. They’re back!”

“Who’s back?”

“The evil spirits! The Department of Health and Safety cleared the kids and me to go back home yesterday night. About ten minutes ago, the evil spirits came back! Please help me! ”

Jack asked, "Have they tried to physically harm you? Do you need me to call an ambulance?" He had trouble adapting the two standard questions from his police training to a potential supernatural enemy.

"No, but I can hear them moving. Hitting against walls. Passing beside me." Jack heard her reciting something that sounded like Latin as she shrieked a few times.

"Get out of the house right now and stay on a spot on the sidewalk in plain sight," Jack instructed her. "I'm going to send my partner over right away, and I'll be there as soon as I can. You caught me on the motor carriage."

While Fey was still on the display, he summoned Kimi. "I need you to get a scanner to Fey Robins' house priority one."

"Wait a minute," Kimi said. "It says here that the Robins investigation was turned over to the Department of Health and Safety three days ago."

"I understand that," Jack said. "She's onscreen now and says that the demons are back. We need to get someone down there with a multiscanner right away."

"No games, Jackie," Kimi scolded. "You're taking this too far. We're not ghost hunters."

Jack looked on as Fey stumbled through her house on a roundabout course to the front door. "I keep telling people I don't think it's a ghost or a demon or whatever. The point is, the last time she felt that was a precursor to her husband's dying." Jack realized with some embarrassment that his commotion was attracting the attention of the other passengers on the carriage. "I have no idea what's going on, but I'm not going to risk another death. Please drop what you're doing and get over there now. I'll join you as soon as I can catch a ride over there."

Kimi rolled her eyes. "I just got home." A pause. "Oh, alright, I'll go. You owe me a big pot of fondue, though."

Kimi terminated the conversation, but Jack continued to monitor Fey, who was teetering restlessly but silently in the cool evening breeze outside her house. When Jack was able to transfer onto a motor carriage headed for Fey's neighborhood, Jack did some research. He found that

Shadow of Turning

Health and Safety had inspected the house's contents, air, surfaces, and food, but found nothing out of the ordinary. Kimi had transferred the raw data from her room and body scans to them as well; their sole comment on which was, "Received. Nothing useful." Fey was allowed back in the next day, though they recommended that her children stay with their grandmother until the inspection had come to a full close.

It took nearly forty-five minutes before public transit dropped him off four blocks from Fey's house. When he jogged the rest of the way, he saw that Fey was leaning against a tree, watching the windows to the house like a hawk. After spending a few minutes discussing with her if she had any injuries or had noticed anything else unusual, he said, "I'm going to join Detective Arimuro,"

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw a sporty, forest green two-seater rolling past the house on the street. It vaguely reminded him of the classic turbo import that his high school arch-nemesis had owned until he sold it to pay off a drug debt.

Jack entered the house to find Kimi on her hands and knees between the dining room and kitchen, barely keeping herself from keeling over. Her scanning wand was on the floor a meter away from her.

Without looking up, she said in a haze, "Jackie? Take me out of here."

Jack plucked her up and assisted her in exiting the building. Once they were on the front walkway, Jack asked, "Are you alright? What happened?"

After taking a few breaths, Kimi asked, "What did I make you promise to serve me for coming here?"

"Fondue?"

Still unable to stand, Kimi said, "You're off the hook. I did a scan of the whole house. Everything was going great. Then, I went back to do a deeper scan of the dining room, because that was where Fey said the most commotion was coming from. Halfway through my second scan there, I felt dizzy and on edge, especially when I was standing right behind the chair where Del was sitting when he snapped."

"On edge?"

"I kept imagining things," she continued. "Cold hands touching my feet. Circles and triangles were floating around. I think I screamed once."

"Sounds like you were hallucinating pretty bad," Jack commented.

"I thought I was about to die, I really did, or that I was already dead. Everything became distorted and I started losing control of my body. In Cancun, years ago, I essentially drowned, and it felt like that again. I was pinned down flat on the floor and I couldn't move. When you came in, I hoped you weren't a hallucination, and that you could hear me."

"When I found you, you were on your hands and knees instead of flat down. You're definitely disoriented. I'm going to get you an ambulance," Jack said as he quickly summoned one from law enforcement emergency digital assistance. "Whatever it is, it's unpredictable."

Once Jack determined that Kimi had no discernable injuries, the detectives joined Fey, though they agreed not to share Kimi's experiences with her. Soon, a medical unit arrived and applied cursory tests to Kimi, Fey, and, to his protest, Jack. The two women were formally referred to the hospital for additional tests.

Kimi decided to ride to the hospital with Fey while Jack agreed to take the police vehicle back to the police garage. Eager to put the evening's events behind him and take a shower, Jack pulled the vehicle away from the Robins' house. As he was turning around, the green two-seater passed by him going the other direction. Almost by force of habit, Jack glanced at the driver, whom he was then able to identify with complete certainty.

Calling Kimi on an audio channel, he said, "Guess who's back?"

"I can't guess," Kimi replied. "My mind's shot."

"It's the warrior goddess."

"The one from last time?"

"Yep. This time, she's in a tee shirt behind the wheel of a green Albatro." Jack turned the corner at the next intersection to look inconspicuous.

"Why don't you ask her out? Hee hee!"

"Mainly because she's engaged in suspicious activity. I observed her driving by the house a while ago, and now she's driving by it again."

Shadow of Turning

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you, Jackie. I’m shaken up as it is.”

Jack commanded his D-Vice, “Reference the R-CARS tag on the Albatro SA-9 near my locale on or near Grape Court. Show me its registration and driver data.” He parked to examine the result of the query. The vehicle was registered to Poppy Annalique Frainey. He quickly confirmed that Frainey was the current driver and that her address was 9.2 kilometers away from the Robins residence. “Add the vehicle and Poppy Frainey to the Robins file as of peripheral concern. Hey, Kimi. Ask Fey if she’s ever seen a dark green Albatro in the neighborhood.”

“She says she doesn’t think so,” Kimi said after pausing to ask her fellow ambulance passenger. “You need to tell me what you’re up to.”

“Someone who doesn’t live around here is paying attention both times we get called down here. I want to know why.”

“We don’t have a case,” Kimi said. “Anthony Garza was cleared of any charges. Health and Safety is looking into an environmental cause. What happened to me in there was terrifying, and I don’t believe in ghosts, but there was nobody in there but me.”

“Lab work and forensic analysis can tell us what, when and where, but not why. Even if there was no crime committed, maybe this woman knows something we don’t that can aid us or Health and Safety.”

Now’s just as good as any time to find out what she knows, Jack pondered. He felt no need to follow his subject closely. Thanks to the digital R-CARS system in all vehicles in the civilized world, he could track the location of Ms. Frainey’s speed machine from anywhere in town. He figured he would wait for her to go home, wait a polite few minutes, and pay her a visit.

As it turned out, rather than go directly home, Ms. Frainey parked in front of a business block in an upscale neighborhood three kilometers away. Jack arrived there six minutes later. He watched from a distance as his subject stood in the doorway of a busy restaurant. She popped a gremlin into her mouth and began pacing a little bit. A minute later, a group of college-age kids approached her, starting what appeared to be a cordial conversation with her. One of them shook her hand. Another one

had everyone crowd around her and took several pictures of her. *This is too good to miss*, Jack thought. He pulled out his own D-Vice and started to record video of this puzzling scene. The college kids waved goodbye to her and went into the restaurant without her.

Jack debated with himself about approaching her. He knew that her residence would be a better place to speak to her in private than a restaurant. He was also becoming slightly enamored of her. At his distance, he could still make out the outline of her breasts and hips, not to mention her shorter but silky-looking brownish gold tresses. Her strange encounter with the college kids years younger than her made her even more intriguing. He played with the door opener button on his vehicle, still conflicted about approaching her or not, and fantasizing about the miniscule potential he had of winding up in an intimate encounter with her.

Before Jack could reach a decision, an older, balding man in a pressed shirt and tie came up to her. The man embraced her, kissed her on the lips, and escorted her into the establishment. Jack decided he had missed his opportunity and was not going to wait who knows how long for her to come back out. Kimi was right. She wasn't a suspect. He could wait and try again another day after the results of Kimi's latest multiscan were known. The warrior goddess was probably immaterial, anyway.

4.

Tuesday, September 22

The Shadow Gets a Name

Jack sat in Kimi's office. Their attentions were focused on the large digital display, where a youthful man in casual attire was sorting through some notes. "Your note said that you had some interesting information for us, Lance," Jack said. "We've been trying to figure out if we should be smiling or bracing ourselves."

"I've been working on Detective Arimuro's scans for two and a half days, and I still don't know how you should react," Lance Rifkin replied with a partial smirk. "I think it's going to be good news for you. The goal you placed in front of me was to find anything anomalous that could possibly be a detriment to someone's health, life or, as you put it, mental stability. That was the most bizarre request I think I've ever had the whole time I've worked for SiBoTech. Of course, I get a lot more requests for multiscanner analysis from the medical community than I do from law enforcement."

Lance fiddled with his notes and called up a 3D diagram of the Robins' ground floor. Continuing, he said, "I have a positive result to that request, which I didn't think I would. Once the physical data was sorted and I eyeballed a few frequency graphs, things started to make sense. I think you're going to be glad that you chose SiBoTech for this project, because our focus on the medical and chemical industries gave me a great edge."

"Get to the point," Kimi said. Jack could tell that she was masking her excitement.

“Have you ever heard of Buhne’s Columns?” Lance asked the pair.

“Yes,” Kimi nodded. “As I recall, the surgeons used Buhne’s Columns to repair a brain hemorrhage for my aunt in Tokyo.”

“That’s one of the common applications for it,” Lance said. “Like I said, I’m glad we do medical, because our medical data journals were able to match the disturbances in this house you scanned with the disturbances generated by a Buhne’s Column.”

“There was a surgical device in the house?” Kimi asked.

“No, not a surgical device” Lance shook his head emphatically. “That takes us to the most interesting part of my discovery. Medical applications for Buhne’s Columns are microscopic, but what I found was macroscopic by far.”

“Wait, wait,” Jack interrupted. “I’m completely lost. What’s a Buhne’s Column?”

“Let me show you. I found this random video.” Lance said. At his command, the detectives’ digital display showed a video of what appeared to be a tiny robotic guide clinching a microscopic pin, suspended above somebody’s skin. The guide moved the pin around in a tight, rapid scribbling motion.

“The stylus here is generating a Buhne’s Column, which is invisible,” Lance explained. “A Buhne’s Column is a kind of nonparticle beam that can alter its mode and intensity in response to its molecular surroundings. In this video, the column is harmless as it passes through the patient’s skin, but it can discern the nature of the tissue deeper in and shave off the dangerous necrotic tissue without harming the healthy tissue next to it.”

“So it’s like a bloodless scalpel?” asked Kimi.

“Yeah. Since it’s nonparticle, it can pass right through most objects and only assume a rigid form when it touches whatever the operator has conditioned it for. It can be moded to selectively heat, push, or blast any kind of substance and ignore everything else.”

Once Jack nodded his understanding, Kimi asked Lance, “How do Buhne’s Columns apply in our investigative scan?”

“I’ll tell you,” Lance said, indicating a highlighted cylinder about the thickness of a rain barrel jutting through the diagram of the house. “The

Shadow of Turning

pattern of molecular disturbance indicates that a gigantic Buhne's was poking through the house like an arrow through an apple."

"And look at that," Jack commented. "It goes into the dining room almost straight through..."

"...Rundel Robins' chair!" Kimi finished the sentence.

Lance said, "In all the research I did on these things, there was no mention of any implementation larger than half a centimeter, but the results are practically a perfect match."

Jack asked Lance, "If this column was to touch a human, what would happen?"

"That would depend on what the column was set to do," Lance said. "It could pass harmlessly through them, or it could target a particular substance or cell type. A lot of things are possible. I wouldn't want to have one ripping through me, though."

Jack's thoughts raced. First came a feeling of ecstatic gratification that what had seemed like a long shot was suddenly making sense. Then, as he fixed his gaze at his partner and good friend, it occurred to him that she had likely been the victim of this mysterious force. He saw from the frozen expression of shock on Kimi's face that she had made the same realization. Next came the curious desire to experience for himself a Buhne's Column passing through him. Forcing himself out of the daydream, Jack asked Lance, "Can you trace the source of the column?"

"Give me a while and I'll see what I can come up with," Lance said, bringing the conference call to a close.

Kimi stretched her arms, rose from her chair, grabbed her coffee cup, and headed casually down the hall with Jack accompanying her. When the pair reached the food bar area, Kimi said, "By the way, I found out some more about goddess Frainey."

"I didn't realize DDI gave us clearance to view her information," Jack replied. He ordered an orange juice from a machine.

"They didn't have to," Kimi said as she smiled mischievously. "There's plenty of public info on her. She's a Colorado Vortex."

"She's a pro football player?"

“Goal kicker.” Kimi filled her cup with coffee and a cinnamon stick from another machine. “She’s scored six points so far this season, and scored a game-winner last year.”

“That explains why those people took their picture with her. Now that you mention it, I think I remember seeing her name once or twice during games.”

“She’s a budding star. I knew she was out of your league from the start, but I had no idea how far out.”

“You just watch it, partner. I just wonder why she was so interested in everything that happened at the Robins residence.” Jack took his juice pouch and sat at the bar. “She might be a citizen reporter. News outlets get a lot of stories that way.”

Kimi sat next to him, taking a whiff of her coffee. “Citizen reporters need to be incognito. She’s too famous. Besides, how did she know something was happening?”

Jack replied, “Good points. Captain Miller will want to see...”

“Pardon,” Ted, Jack’s digital personality interrupted. “Lance Rifkin.”

Jack answered the call. “Lance?”

“I’ve already got some answers for you,” Lance said. “Buhne’s Columns don’t spread out from the source like light waves. Even though they can be aimed at any angle or direction, they maintain their original diameter no matter how far they’re projected. That’s why they’re called columns. They’re also absolutely straight. I was easily able to plot out a trajectory for the column that you scanned. It goes up into the air and grazes the top of their neighbor’s house. It doesn’t touch anything after that until it hits two skyscrapers downtown. Then it goes clear out and hits a mountain in a residential area about fifteen kilometers later. I didn’t trace it any farther. There’s no way with the in-house scan that I can tell you where it originated, unfortunately. I’ve just given you the complete trajectory data. You’ll have to map it yourselves. I’ll give you my full report by the end of the day.”

“Thanks, Lance,” Jack said. “Good job. That will be all for now.”

Before Jack could finish his juice, Kimi had cross-referenced the trajectory data onto a scale model graphic of the region. When rendered its

Shadow of Turning

actual size, the column, only a meter in diameter, seemed to Jack as thin and delicate as a spider web against the massive metropolis and even smaller against the more massive mountains in the distance. The visual aid provided Jack with a vivid illustration of the situation. Jack understood that the line had been extrapolated from disturbance readings in the Robins' house, but it was a straight line, ripping through buildings as if it was a gigantic laser.

"There's no way this is an accident," he said to Kimi as he zoomed in to view the Robins' house. The line hit the dining room table almost dead on. "It's too precise. I'm going to ask Captain Miller if we can quietly resume our investigation into Del's death. There's more going on here than meets the eye."

5.

Wednesday, September 23

Who Casts the Shadow?

Fey looked like hell. Her neatly trimmed hair and sharp professional attire did nothing to detract from the bags under her eyes. Nine days had passed since her husband's death. Ever since her second encounter, Human Charities, DDI's welfare branch, allowed her to stay in a shelter free of charge. She reclined in the imitation leather chair in the Denver Police Department's private guest lounge. Jack and Kimi sat on utilitarian modular chairs in front of her.

"I'm sorry if I seem in a fog," she said to the detectives. "I haven't been in my own bedroom since he died. For that matter, it feels like I haven't been in my own house in forever and the accommodations that Human Charities gave us sucks. I'd rather that they had allowed me to stay in mamma's house if I can't go back to my own home."

Kimi replied, "It's for the better that you stay away from your house and away from anybody you know, especially in light of what we discovered yesterday."

"We have reason to believe that what happened to your husband and you was no accident," Jack contributed. "Somebody's been pointing a nonparticle instrument into your house. Our researcher tells us that the beam from this instrument was specifically calibrated to wreak havoc on brain tissue."

"But the demons...," Fey said.

"...are probably relics that the brain produces as neural pathways disintegrate, similar to near-death experiences," said Kimi. "Del may have been exposed to the beam long enough for it to be fatal."

Shadow of Turning

"H...how could that happen?"

"We don't know yet," Jack answered. "And we don't know who or why, but we're treating this as a violent crime investigation. The scan Detective Arimuro did indicated that the focal point of this beam was the side of the table where Del was sitting. DDI has given us access to the last five days of his digital transactions so far, and we've already been in touch with Del's employer about possible suspects."

"He was just a corporate attorney," Fey said. "He reviewed and drafted internal documents for a living. He hardly had contact with anybody other than the managers."

Jack nodded. "That's pretty much what his supervisor and co-workers said. We've been unable to find anything in his digital communications or financial records that form any plausible leads, either. That's why we called you here. Are you aware of anything that might make somebody want to harm him?"

"I can't think of anybody right now."

"Are you sure?" Kimi asked. "If you can think of anything small that we could take to DDI to convince them to give us access to more of his data, we might be able to pursue something more specific."

Fey acknowledged with a timid nod, but was unable to bring anything to light.

"Do you have any reason to suspect that your husband was having an affair?" Jack asked.

"An affair? Never. No, no reason at all to suspect an affair. Why?"

Jack showed her a publicity photo of Poppy Frainey in a Colorado Vortex training uniform. "Have you ever seen this woman before? Maybe just walking down the sidewalk, or casually talking to your husband?"

Forcing a small chuckle, Fey said, "She's not his type at all. I've never seen her before, but I recognize the name from watching games."

Jack continued, "Was he really into football? Did he attend games in person?"

"I guess he liked football as much as anybody else, but he hadn't been to a game in years."

Ever since Jack first laid eyes on Poppy Frainey, his intuition told him that she was somehow involved, but he hadn't been able to discern how. He hoped that questioning Fey about Del's involvement with her would yield some little tidbit of information that would link his warrior goddess to the scene.

"Would you mind looking at a video?" he asked Fey as he began to play the clip he had captured of Poppy in the restaurant parking lot.

"You're a peeping Tom," Kimi chided quietly.

Jack shushed his partner. As it played, Jack noted things that might jog Fey's memory. "That's her vehicle." He pointed out her Albatro. "Have you ever seen it around your neighborhood or where Del worked?"

Fey shook her head.

"Have you or Del ever been to this restaurant before? Is it in an area that Del might frequent?"

"I know where it is, but we've never been there." Fey replied.

The video played on. The conversation drifted to discussions of how the Votrex were doing this season and Kimi's view of the afterlife.

"Oh, my God!" Fey exclaimed suddenly as she lurched backward in her chair. "That's Sarat Kapoor!" She identified the older gentleman who was getting affectionate with Ms. Frainey. Jack paused the video, zooming in on the man.

Fey growled, "I knew he was a bad character, but I had no idea he'd murder my husband!"

"Wait a minute," Jack said, still mentally processing Fey's revelation. "Let's not jump to conclusions."

"He's a treacherous man," Fey said as she grimaced. "He's the murderer, alright. Trust me."

"Why would he want to harm Del?" Jack inquired.

"I'm on the Board of Trustees of Grant Valley Medical Designs. Kapoor is moving to buy out Grant Valley. He owns a number of competing companies. Our bottom line has been faltering for nine quarters, and a lot of board members see Kapoor's buyout as a way to expand our budget and get some new types of projects. We have a vote on the buyout next month. I've been desperately trying to prevent the buyout

Shadow of Turning

because I believe he'll cannibalize our intellectual property and disband us. I also found that he has ties to some very shady individuals."

"Has he made any threats toward you? Would he have any reason to harm your husband?" Kimi asked.

"He wasn't after Del," Fey sputtered. "He was after me. I know it. I'm the main voice against his buyout. Without my intervention, I'm sure that the vote will pass."

"Do you mean to say that you think you were the intended victim?" Kimi asked. Fey nodded.

Jack said, "That might explain why the Buhne's Column was used a second time. He could have realized that he missed his mark the first time. If any of this conjecture is true, you're still in danger."

Noticing that Fey's tears were flowing now, Kimi rushed to her side with a tissue. "Have you told anybody where you're staying?"

"A few people," Fey said.

"We're going to take you out of DDI's care and move you to a police safe house," Kimi informed her.

"Oh, no," Fey sighed. "Move around again?"

Although cautious about circumstantial evidence, Jack felt personally gratified that his obsession with Poppy Frainey was shaping up to be more than a lark. He rose from his seat to make preparations to kick the Robins investigation into a higher gear as Kimi wrapped up the interview to prepare for Fey's relocation.

6.

Thursday, September 24

The Reach of the Shadow

Kimi's house was a welcoming experience for Jack. While starting a family and settling down were not among Jack's priorities, he certainly found the comfy family atmosphere of his partner's abode to be therapeutic compared to his own house, which was devoid of any feminine touches except for a few nick-knacks Kimi had gifted him over time. Since doing two partial shifts in one day was unusual, Kimi had taken advantage of the two-hour space between shifts to invite him over for a brief lunch and a few digital games. They reclined in the family room, joking with each other and sharing gossip.

With a sudden shriek, Kimi sprang from the sofa, tumbling to her knees!

"What?" asked Jack in a mild panic as his police training kicked in, allowing him to take instant note of his surroundings and prepare for possible danger. Tracing Kimi's glance to the right side of the room toward the kitchen doorway, he saw no signs of disturbance.

Kimi rose, patted her spot on the sofa, and sat down again. "I'm sorry, I heard a distant sound and I thought it was coming from near the kitchen."

"I think it was just the house settling."

"Forgive me for panicking. Rick tells me I've been a mess since, well, since I got hit with the column in the Robins' house."

Jack put his arm around her. "It might not be a bad idea to take some leave."

Shadow of Turning

"No, no," Kimi protested. "It's not like that. I just can't forget what happened to me: the hands, the mist. Is that what they mean by the icy fingers of death?"

"Hey," Jack said. "I don't think I ever told you this, but when I was a kid, I developed partial necrosis of the lungs due to an infection. I don't remember much about it because I was only three, but my dad says that the first night of that was the most misery he'd ever seen me in. The paramedics said I only had twenty percent lung capacity, and everyone was afraid I wasn't going to make it. According to dad, when I was on life support, I was terrified of a huge monster stalking me that I called Mr. Bull King."

"Mr. Bull King?" Kimi raised her brow.

Jack stuttered. "L...look, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I think everybody's near-death experiences are different, and I hope that yours were squarely in the realm of science and medicine."

Before they were able to explore the topic further, Kimi received a call from Benji Miller, their supervisor. Shaking herself back into a professional demeanor, Kimi transferred the image of Miller, a slightly portly gentleman in his fifties, to the large display on the wall.

"I'm really sorry for interrupting you during your off time," Miller began, "But you said you'd be together, and I need to handle a few things before you speak to that woman this afternoon."

"Anything we can do," Jack said.

"In the last hour, the Robins investigation has come to the forefront," Miller said. "The commissioner found out about the safe house assignment for the victim's wife, and, as you'd expect, that generated a ton of questions that I didn't have answers to."

"If you find any of the answers, let us know, okay?" Jack smiled. "We're pretty short in the answers department ourselves."

"One of the big issues is the lack of certainty that this needs to be a criminal matter," Miller explained. "The Department of Health and Safety still claims the original incident as theirs. On top of that, the justification for your questioning this Poppy Fraaney person is largely circumstantial, and she's famous enough to publicize anything that happens."

Jack quickly chimed in. "I'm a personal eyewitness to her being near the Robins' house both occasions we were called down. The victim's wife positively identified her boyfriend as someone she met with immediately after one of those occasions, and established a motive against him. Ms. Frainey is the one person who might be able to tie everything together. We can't proceed until we have her statements."

"I trust you, Jack, but if this interview turns out as badly as yesterday's probe into HalmanAbramsSatalini, you won't have a case and Mrs. Robins won't be staying with us much longer."

"HalmanAbramsSatalini didn't go badly, sir. We just didn't get what we needed from them. The Operations Director wouldn't let us in without a warrant."

"The Operations Director is an itch and a flea short of filing a formal complaint about the affair. He wasn't amused at your implication that his company is involved in a homicide. How did you come by that conclusion?"

Jack fished for words. "I didn't imply anything to him. I only stated that my inquiry was part of a Denver Police Violent Crimes Division death investigation. I did a search of publicly available information and found that HalmanAbramsSatalini was one of only two businesses in the metro area that owns a large-scale Buhne's cannon. Now, the beam that Kimi identified that poked into the Robins' house had a very specific trajectory that could only have a fixed number of places of origin. Guess what business has six floors in one of the two buildings the beam's trajectory hits."

"You don't have to convince me," Miller replied. "Just make sure that the lines you connect the dots with are thick. People are already calling you, 'Inspector Tate, Ghost Hunter.'"

"Not ghost," said Jack. "The invisible man."

"Spare me."

"I've been thinking about this. Just like the invisible man could stalk his victims without being seen, we're dealing with a device that can essentially kill people leaving no trace of its presence or where it came from. It can pass through walls leaving no damage. It can evidently be

Shadow of Turning

deployed from many kilometers away without a clear line of sight. Unless someone like Kimi is there with a multiscanner during the actual attack, it's almost completely untraceable."

Kimi added, "We've thought that energy guns were the proverbial ice bullet, but a large scale Buhne's Column is worse. If anything we've discovered is true, we need to stop this before other people see its potential."

Miller said, "Let's not let our imaginations get ahead of the facts. Just get through the Frainey interview and take it one step at a time. I'll be really interested to see what our football player du jour has to say."

7.

Later That Afternoon

The Goddess and the Shadow

“First of all,” Jack said to Frainey, “We really apologize for the short notice. Thanks for coming down. We’re under a huge time crunch.” He sat at a simple circular wooden table in an interview room next to Kimi across from their interview subject, who, to Jack’s carnal dismay, was wearing a workout tunic and loose jeans that concealed her toned curves from view. Only twenty minutes before, the detectives had plucked her from her condominium with no notice or explanation other than that there was a crisis and she could face a citation for refusal to cooperate with an investigation if she didn’t drop what she was doing and come with them. Of course, the urgency was a ploy to get her to the police district house before she could contact or warn anybody.

“It’s alright,” Frainey replied with a slight Texas drawl as she thumped her left index finger on the side of the table. “I don’t know how I’ll be able to help.”

“Believe us,” Jack said, “Anything right now is better than what we have. There was a biohazard situation last Monday in the Pioneer Creek neighborhood and we’re trying to gather facts about what people saw and smelled.” The words “Pioneer Creek” made Frainey stop thumping. “The Denver Police and the Department of Health and Safety have contacted all the residents, but they’re still coming up short. Normally, we wouldn’t contact anybody who lives outside the neighborhood, but a Vortex fan recalls seeing you in that area that day and thought that you might have been jogging along the trail and seen something.” Despite a nagging

Shadow of Turning

discomfort with using a cover story, Jack's primary emotion was curiosity as to where the conversation would go.

"A fan? Who?" Frainey asked.

"So you *were* there?" Kimi asked, diverting from Frainey's question.

"For a while," Frainey replied.

"Please tell us that you saw something," Jack pleaded. "We don't have many other avenues."

"I don't know what to say," Frainey said. "I really didn't see anything unusual."

"Any smells, or eye irritations?"

"Sorry, no. I was just driving through with my windows closed. I wasn't jogging."

"I hope you don't mind me asking," Jack said after a pause, "But that neighborhood is pretty far from your place. What were you doing there?"

"Oh," Frainey said as she folded her hands in her lap, "I'm getting tired of condo life, and I might be interested in getting a house down there, so I was just sort of scoping things out."

"Good choice," Kimi chimed in, nodding at Jack. "Do any of the other Vortex players live there?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Have you ever bothered to get out of your vehicle and really look at the houses and, as they say, smell the roses?" Jack asked with a chuckle.

"No," she replied. "I'm not at that point yet. I'll probably find somewhere with smaller houses that's a little closer to the Vortex headquarters."

"Has there ever been a time, maybe not that day, but some other time, when you've found yourself on foot in that neighborhood?"

"No. I've only driven through it once or twice before."

"Do you remember when the last time was that you were there?"

"It had to have been a few months ago," she said.

"Do you know the Robins family? Del and Fey? They live in a brown house on Grape Court kind of in the middle of the block."

"Oh, no. I don't know anybody who lives there."

After asking her several more times if she was sure she'd never heard of them, Jack said with a somber face, "The reason I'm asking is that both of them are dead. The husband died in the house on the 14th, and the wife died in the hospital a few days ago." That was the cover story that he, Kimi and Miller agreed on to protect Fey and her kids.

Frainey grew flush and sat straight up. "Really? How awful!"

Jack continued, "We're working with the Department of Health and Safety to determine if there might be some illegal toxic contamination in the area. Are you completely sure that you don't have any information at all about anything that could have been a cause of their deaths?"

The young woman shook her head. "Nothing, I'm sorry. That's so scary!"

"Were you aware of any of that?" Kimi asked.

"No. Guess I'm glad I stayed in my vehicle."

Without reluctance, Jack asked a pivotal question: "What about September 14th? The night when the husband died?"

"What about it?"

Looking Frainey directly in the eyes, Jack asked, "Did you see anything unusual that evening, or have any strange or frightening feelings as you were walking around the Robins' house, maybe before emergency responders arrived?"

"No," she said hastily, followed by an extended pause. "Look, I'm sorry, officers, but this conversation is making me a little uncomfortable. I'd like a lawyer."

"Of course you may get a lawyer," Jack told her. "But we're not holding you here."

"Then we're done," Frainey huffed. She spun out of her chair and stormed out of the room without another word.

Oh, we're not done, Jack thought. *We're just beginning.*

He rose slightly out of his chair, but Kimi put her hand on his shoulder, saying, "Let her go."

"What do you think?" Jack asked.

Shadow of Turning

"I'll have to admit that I was beginning to think that she was one of your wild goose chases," Kimi said. "However, after all those falsifications she just let fly, you've made a believer out of me."

"She's hiding something."

"Or protecting her man. I've got women's intuition on this one. She knows she's young, pretty and successful now, but she won't be able to preserve her looks or athletic ability forever. Along comes a wealthy businessman who buys her an Albatro, strokes her ego and promises to keep her on the financial sunny side. And he's not too bad looking, either. Kapoor owns her."

Jack was already issuing directives to a screen on the wall, calling up his research file on Sarat Kapoor. "I'll buy that. We have nothing on him, though, except motive as declared by Mrs. Robins, and two degrees of separation from the crime scene. There has to be more to this."

"Tell you what," Kimi said as she smiled at her partner. "I can push a warrant through this afternoon. Tomorrow morning, we'll pop down to HalmanAbramsSatalini and see if we can find the murder weapon."

8.

Friday, September 25

In the Tower of the Shadow

Jack and Kimi stood in the reception area of the industrial/mechanical engineering firm HalmanAbramsSatalini. Kimi carried a standard crime scene multiscanner and scanning wand. Before them stood three figures, one of which was charter partner Harold Abrams. He was a tall, slender gentleman in his sixties clad in a simple blue sweater and slacks that disguised his authority and influence.

“Please know, officers, that we’ll do everything we can to accommodate you,” Abrams said, petting his uncombed gray hair. “We run an honest, well-respected firm here, and we’re pretty proud of our work. It’s utterly unthinkable that something we do here could be part of a criminal investigation, especially a murder. I don’t approve of your presence, but we’ll cooperate, of course. Do you mind telling me what you’re investigating? Whose death?”

“We’d like to tell you more, but we just can’t disclose the details of an open investigation.” Kimi explained.

“I understand, I guess,” Abrams said, turning to face his two colleagues. “I’d like to introduce you to Rich Martas, our Director of Denver Operations, and Carol Burr, our mining industry technical lead. They’ll be your escorts-slash-tutors.” Martas, looking no more than forty years old, pointed and whispered at his wrist D-Vice, attempting to carry on a conversation with someone on the other end. Burr, looking bit older-looking, demurely eyed Jack and Kimi with her arms crossed.

Shadow of Turning

"Please say you're not going to be here very long," Burr said to Kimi. "We're very busy and disruptions only make us fall farther behind."

"Ditto for us," Jack said. "Let's get started."

Martas said, "In your warrant, you mentioned interest in one particular piece of equipment called a 'rock toaster.' Is there anything I can explain for you on the front end?"

"Well," Jack began, "When I contacted you earlier, you said that you have only one such device, and that it's used for mining. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Martas said as he ended the conversation on his D-vice. "While the machine is still in developmental stages, our plan is eventually to manufacture and lease out an inventory of them to various mining companies locally and globally. Leases from our existing clients alone should pay for the R&D in two years, plus a projected fourteen percent profit from new business we have in the buffer."

"Umm, that's nice," Jack nodded with pretend interest. "What exactly does a 'rock toaster' do? Make miners breakfast?"

Scowling at Jack, Kimi said, "We'd like to look at it, please."

"Okay," Burr nodded. "Come this way." She parted with Abrams and Martas, leading Jack and Kimi down a hallway, through a doorway, and into an interior elevator. It's in our Conifer lab, on the 38th floor."

When the elevator opened, the parade continued down a plain corridor through sliding glass doors labeled 38B: CONIFER. Jack made a mental note of various contraptions on shelves and tables lining the walls, some of which appeared to predate DDI's decade-old standardized global network. Burr stopped in front of a bulky device that, to Jack, resembled the arm and torso of a death match robot from an old Japanese anime. Mounted on its own metal frame, it stood perhaps three meters tall, and its base was almost as wide.

"Here it is," Burr said.

"First things first," Kimi said as she shoed everyone away from the machine and activated the multiscanner.

"Do we really have time for this?" Burr protested.

"Procedure," Kimi replied as she meticulously swept the wand across the device and every surface near it.

While she performed the scan, Jack asked, "So, what exactly does this thing do?"

"It sends a non-particle beam into strata at a mine site," Burr explained. "It has the ability to pass harmlessly through any molecular structure not specified as the target, and separate any unwanted material from the target. So, for example, it can dislodge waste minerals from around a gemstone deposit without harming the gemstones. And, it can do it a bucketful in the same time it would take a human to dislodge a gram of waste."

"So, it's similar to a Buhne's machine that treats cancer patients?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Burr said. "It's a Buhne's device, but on a much larger scale."

"How much larger?" Jack asked.

"In our benchmarks, it could emit a beam from the surface that penetrated one hundred fifty meters through what was primarily granite and clay."

Jack asked, "How far could it go in open air?"

"We haven't done much open air testing," Burr said. "We've projected it maybe a thousand meters through the air. The math guys downstairs say that the denser the matter, the shorter the maximum projection distance."

Pacing to the glass doors, Jack peered out of the lab and through a window in a room across the hall. The western edge of the city came into view, with the mountains in the distance. Using this reference, he rotated himself to face the approximate direction of the Robins house. "Could it project a column five kilometers through the air?"

"Given the number of variables, anything I say would be pure speculation," Burr said. "My guess would be that it's not likely."

Stepping around Kimi, Jack neared the apparatus. Its frame was anchored to the floor, but the unit itself appeared to rotate about a circular ball-bearing track. "How do you move and aim it?"

"With great agony," Burr chuckled. "You have to push it around on the track and aim its arm with a manual crank. It's ultimately designed to be attached to a motorized digital motion system so you can enter a

Shadow of Turning

coordinate or angle on a digital interface, but it's a prototype and it has yet to have that installed."

"What about remote guidance?" Jack asked.

"Eventually," Burr answered. "But not yet."

"So, whoever wants to use it has to be present in this room?"

"As of yet, that's true." Burr stepped up to the apparatus and clutched a small handle on its base. "This is how you..."

"Please," Kimi interrupted her as she scanned the side of the frame. "Step back and don't touch anything right now. I'm running a CSI scan."

Burr huffed and moved away. "I was going to show your partner how it's done. Now that he's asking some of these questions, I'd like to see what it could do myself, actually."

Patting Kimi on the head as she knelt beneath him, Jack backed away from the device and said, "I'd like to get any logs you have that may indicate who was using this, when, and where it might have been pointed, as well as everyone who was in the facility at the time."

Burr replied, "We don't have much. It's not attached to DDI's master system, so we don't collect any data on it. Our only security cameras are at the front entrances. We don't monitor who comes and goes from individual floors or labs." Snarling, she added, "Maybe we *should* start monitoring things closer if we have to expect police investigations. I'll try to get you the A/V images from our cameras."

Soon, Kimi completed her scan and Jack obtained access to the required surveillance records. Once the detectives wrapped up their business and were back in the waiting police vehicle, Jack said, "Now we've seen the murder weapon. Maybe the Health and Safety people will finally take this investigation seriously."

"Not so fast," Kimi scolded him. "We still have a lot of data to analyze. Even if we conclusively show that the rock toaster was the harmful device, we haven't ruled out that it was an accident. We have yet to link the Robins' or Frainey or Kapoor to the machine or the business." As the driver pulled away, Kimi remarked, "We have one more guest of honor to meet with. I'll work on the necessary approvals to invite him to the district station."

9.

Thursday, October 1

The Shadow is Cornered

Sarat Kapoor crossed his arms while his thick, black brows furrowed. He eyed Jack, who had just risen from his seat in the police interview room. Next to Kapoor was Carl Carlson, his attorney, who had placed a pricey two-frame D-vice in front of him. Kimi was monitoring things from a nearby room, ready to do any behind the scenes research needed to support Jack's questioning. Twenty minutes had already passed since a uniformed officer had ushered the two into the presence of their questioner.

Carlson stood, palms planted firmly on the table, arching forward at Jack. "When you first hauled my client in, I thought you were just another smartass cop who couldn't stand ending an investigation without making some random arrest," he said. "After I read your case brief, however, I see what this is really all about: revenge. Your partner was trapped in a house and almost died of a yet-to-be-determined cause, and you're out to make somebody pay."

Unintimidated, Jack replied, "Oh, the cause is very much determined, and the fact that an officer of the law was involved will only heap additional charges on Mr. Kapoor."

Kapoor blurted out, "This is beyond ridiculous! How can you possibly charge me with anything? What stunt are you trying to pull?"

"Mrs. Robins named you as a suspect before she died, and your girlfriend lied to us about what she was doing just before I caught her

meeting with you the evening of the 21st," Jack said as he strode closer to his suspect.

Not leaving his seat as Jack approached him, Kapoor replied, "Poppy is her own person. I have neither knowledge nor control of her actions. She's a sweet girl, but she's connived against me more times than I care to acknowledge. Why am I not surprised that she lied to you? For all I know, she has a secret lover in that neighborhood."

Jack gathered momentum. "I think you sent her to the Robins' house on both occasions because you didn't want to be placed at the scene. What was her task? Recon? Did you need her to help you aim your death column?"

Carlson shoved his D-vice in Jack's face, displaying a complement of charts and motion images depicting Kapoor's whereabouts, which had been the subject of examination a few minutes prior. "You have evidence for exactly none of that, Detective Tate. On the evening of the 14th, he was at a gallery for far longer than the duration of the events you describe, and has the financial transaction log to prove it. On the 21st, he was working late at a customer's site until minutes before his dinner with Ms. Frainey, and we've pulled the video to prove that, too."

"We weren't even on the best of terms on the 14th," Kapoor said. "Poppy and I had a small blowout over finances a day or two before. Really, I must declare my ignorance and innocence of this whole business."

"Mrs. Robins didn't agree with that," Jack said. "She knew about your reputation of making one-sided business deals. She was crusading to save Grant Valley Medical from being your next victim. You need that acquisition, and she was in your way. She was the kingpin of the resistance against you. Without her crusade, the rest of the Board of Directors would lose their spine and vote to have you buy them out."

"I barely knew Mrs. Robins," Kapoor began. "However, from what I do know of her, she had more than a business reason to block the sale. I hope it will come as no surprise to you that we Hindus are a target of great persecution from the Catholic Church. Mrs. Robins was keen on following His Popeness' lead in eradicating the sinful Hindu scourge in the Western world. A message from her to her colleagues was leaked to me that called

Shadow of Turning

us a bunch of snake, um, copulators. My condolences to her friends and family, but I advise you to take what she said with a grain of salt. She was an opportunistic racist."

"Be that as it may, DPD still holds her statements as credible, especially in light of the interesting coincidences around what happened at least twice in her home and the presence of your main squeeze. She knew about the Robins' dangerous predicament, and you most certainly did, too. The D.A. is pushing DDI to release all digital conversations between you and her for two days on either side of both dates."

"Good luck with that," Carlson interjected. "DDI's privacy regulations are the most protective in the world. You'll have to prove your highly improbable case to them before they'll let you see anything. I also add that it was quite a mean trick you pulled on Poppy. You summoned her on false pretenses to try to trick her out of some sort of confession. Mr. Kapoor is retaining me to represent her interests as well as his own, and she's been advised not to speak to police again without me. If you attempt to communicate to her without my presence, I'll personally press criminal misconduct charges against you!"

Addressing Kapoor, Jack advanced, "Tell me...when we do eventually acquire copies of those conversations from DDI, or when we find a witness, or your sweetie pie breaks down and tells us what you were discussing, what will we find?"

"Nothing. Not a thing."

"Have you ever heard of the firm HalmanAbramsSatalini?"

"Heard of it somewhere. Know nothing about it."

"Do you know anybody who works there?"

"No."

"Do you have any investments in it?"

"No."

"Do you even know why HalmanAbramsSatalini is pertinent to this investigation?"

"I read the case brief you gave Carl. They're named as a potential entity of interest. I was informed that you might be asking about my

relationship with them. And there is none, just like I have no connection to the crimes you're investigating, and the same for Poppy."

"Are you telling me that your name isn't on the firm's investor and customer records?" Jack had no such records, but he hoped that Kapoor didn't know that.

"No. No. It is not."

"Are you sure?"

"Not even in your days of racketeering and arson?"

Carlson broke in. "That's inappropriate, detective!"

Jack would not be outdone. "Well, I suppose it is a little inappropriate, considering you were acquitted of the racketeering charge, and you got the arson charge reduced to trespassing on a derelict property."

Slapping his D-vice down on the table with a thud, Carlson growled, "You don't have a case against him! You haven't found a single credible link between him and the unfortunate mishaps you're investigating. Considering your victim's documented bias against his religion, if you bring charges against him without more grounds, I can have you written up for violating the anti-profiling statute."

Jack rolled his eyes. "If you'd like, I can get Detective Pitambar from District 1 to conduct the interview."

"That's won't be necessary, thank you very much. Is there anything else meaningful you wish to discuss with my client?"

"No. That will be all. We will not be charging your client at this time. He can go." Kapoor and Carlson departed in a huff, swearing at each other about Jack and that damned corrupted mayor.

Jack remained steamed about the interview most of the rest of the day. It took Kimi to remind him that it was best to forget about it for the time being and concentrate on other parts of his caseload. After all, it would only be a few days before the multiscanner results came in.

10.

Saturday, October 3

The Shadow Turns

It was mid-afternoon. Jack plunged the thin, hollow pipe into the ground at the base of one of the medium-sized cherry trees in his cozy backyard. Touching the trigger button on the end, an air-propelled dose of powdered garden winterizer jetted from the attached papercloth tank, down a hose, through the pipe, and into the ground. This was one Saturday where his lack of other plans and general restlessness had driven him to do some seasonal yard work.

As he pulled the pipe up from the ground to relocate it to the other side of the tree, Kimi called, telling him in a hurried tone that he needed to turn on the Vortex game immediately and go to the sideline report. He managed as best he could with his wrist D-vice to turn to the Colorado Vortex vs. L.A. Adept football game in its second quarter. He spent no more than a few seconds viewing the sideline report before he dropped his gardening equipment to find the first available police vehicle to the stadium.

The next twenty minutes was a blur in his memory, as he alternated between conversations with Kimi and the stadium security chief, kept tabs on the sideline report, and attempted in vain to discern the whereabouts of Fey Robins and Kapoor. The chief of the stadium security detail, DPD Sgt. Leanna Lomis, met him at the service entrance. She was a younger, black uniformed officer who carried herself as if she had been on her feet all day. She hurriedly shook Jack's hand, escorting him to her office.

"Now, would you mind filling me in on exactly what the hell is really going on here?" Lomis demanded, surveying the video from the sideline area.

"Honestly," Jack replied, "I've told you all I know. Poppy Frainey is connected to what my partner and I believe to be a very high tech homicide. At 16:35 this afternoon, my partner, who happened to be watching the game, observed that Frainey and the other affected players appeared to be experiencing symptoms similar to the victim of our homicide. The report specifically mentioned disorientation. I'm here to find out if the venerable Ms. Frainey and company are being assaulted with a deadly weapon."

Lomis put her hand on her hip. "Three players are being treated for dehydration. That's all."

"Dehydration? Oh, please. It's 12 degrees Celsius out and the only affected players are ones who had been sitting down in the shade for half an hour. Hello, cover story."

"All I know is what the nurse told me a while ago," Lomis said. Jack could sense she knew that he was about to pull rank on her if she gave him the runaround. "They're all being treated for a medical condition that appears unrelated to the game, and they're being given fluids and magnetic therapy because it looks like dehydration. What can law enforcement do that medical can't?"

"I'm still waiting for my scanning guy to arrive. Once he gets here, we can take a sampling of the area and confirm if there's any immediate danger. Our first priority is to get those players to a safe zone." Jack paused and tapped on his wrist D-vice impatiently. "Unfortunately, until we get a good scan, we have no real way of knowing where safe zones are."

"Does it help that they're in the locker room now?"

Jack realized that he would have to make some really good guesses until the multiscanner arrived. "Where were they when they were feeling the symptoms?"

"I think they were sitting on the home team benches."

"How far away from the benches is the locker room?"

Shadow of Turning

“Just behind the benches.”

Shaking his head sternly, Jack’s declared, “Not far enough. Where’s a concealed, safe place that’s clear on the other side of the stadium?”

“I suppose the Gridiron Lounge, on the southeast side on the A level. Nobody’s allowed there except for players and senior staff.”

“Give the word to the coaches and managers that I’m relocating all the sick players there, and if there’s anybody else who feels dizzy, hallucinates, or has a panic attack, make them come there right away.”

“Don’t you dare do anything that will come back on me,” the security chief said as she wagged her finger.

Wasting no time, Jack jogged to the players’ lounge and let himself in. While Frainey and the other affected players had yet to arrive, there were a few Vortex team executives at the bar to whom Jack had to excuse his presence. He once again checked the public sideline status report. Mordie Grillot had forfeited his position on unbecoming conduct until further notice. Poppy Frainey, George Gomez, and Kenneth Mersey were all reported in medical care due to a condition “not related to the game.”

He barely had time to get his bearings when Kimi called. “Fey and her kids are safe. They were at a park. I sent them back to the safe house as a precaution. Also, maybe this is logical because his girlfriend is a player, but Kapoor is at the game. He fingered in his ID at the west entrance at 14:42.”

“My main concern right now is the multiscanner. Could you please light a fire under the crime scene analysis team? I’m trying to find a secure place to house Poppy and the others, but it’s kind of hard to know what places are safe if I don’t know what places are dangerous.”

“Doing my best, but it’ll be at least another twenty minutes before one can get to your location. Remember what you told me once: patience isn’t just a virtue for geezers.” One of the older executives cast a disapproving scowl over his shoulder at Jack.

Waving at the executive, Jack said to Kimi, “I have lots of patience, thank you, but twenty minutes could be too late.”

"Listen," Kimi replied, "I'm almost to the HalmanAbramsSatalini building. I may be able to assess things better there than you can here. Carol Burr is on her way to let me in."

Jack had to break contact with Kimi as the door to the lounge opened. Poppy and two other Vortex players in red and black jerseys entered, accompanied by Sgt. Lomis, a trainer and a physician. Poppy and Harold Mersey, a Kickoff Sprinter, were both in medical transport chairs. George Gomez, a Safety, stumbled along behind them without a shirt or cleats. The trio of players appeared generally lethargic. Poppy rocked slightly back and forth in her chair, gently rubbing her temples. Mersey clenched a hydration bottle and mask, but appeared almost asleep.

Poppy immediately recognized Jack. "What's he doing here?" she asked her trainer.

"He's a policeman. He's here to help," the trainer whispered back.

"Tell him he has to leave. I don't want him here." Poppy said with as much strength as she could muster. The trainer shushed her and cradled her head. Poppy continued to protest, though Jack could not hear most of her mumbling.

To Lomis, Jack asked, "Can you get someone to detain a spectator named Sarat Kapoor?"

Lomis consulted her D-vice. "He's seated on the mezz-terrace, seat MT6-2," she replied. "Looks like he's not in his seat. I'll help security locate him."

"He should be considered dangerous, so use caution," Jack said as Lomis started to take inventory of available security guards and police officers. "And whatever you do, *do not* indicate to him that we've had contact with any players, especially Poppy. He's to be treated as need-to-know."

When Sgt. Lomis exited, Jack turned to the physician, whose name was Bill Romano, questioning him about the players' conditions and the circumstances of their afflictions. Romano explained, "The main thing that happened first was that Miss Frainey fainted and hit her head on the bench. I came right over. She just suffered a mild bump, and I gave her

Shadow of Turning

water, oxygen, and a magnet collar because usually when a player passes out, it's due to the heat."

As Romano continued, a call from Kimi interrupted. "I thought you'd want to know right away," she said. "I'm in the building and looking right at the rock toaster. I turned it off immediately, but it's definitely pointed in the direction of the stadium. Burr says she'll do the exact calculations. She also says that the machine could have been repositioned and activated any time in the last twenty-four hours or so, maybe longer. I told her to get a listing of every employee who passed through security in the last two days. How are things going with you?"

"We've relocated the players in question to the private lounge, which is on the other side from the sideline benches. They look okay, but I'm still surveying them and their doctor."

"Do you still want the scanner?"

Jack almost rolled his eyes at the absurdity of her question. "Don't you think we should be prepared?"

"Yeah. I've got my little wand here, so you can have the big guns."

Kimi terminated the call after she informed Jack that the scanning team would be there in a few minutes, so Jack continued with his interviews. Romano told of how Frainey, Mersey and Gomez in turn had bouts of what was initially interpreted as heat or hydration problems, but when their conditions worsened, he took them to a nearby shaded area to decide what treatments to administer. When Jack inquired about psychological symptoms, Romano looked puzzled and told him he should confer with the individual patients.

"Chair Two, come here," Romano issued the command and Poppy's chair came to him on its own.

"Leave me alone!" Poppy protested with shallow breath.

"To tell you the truth," Jack said, "I'm not legally permitted to speak to her without her attorney present. What about the others?"

Gomez said, "We were just sitting there when Poppy passed out cold and Bill came to her rescue. Then, about five minutes later, Mordie Grillot got really annoyed and told Bill that he wasn't going to let him kill Poppy."

"Kill?" Jack questioned.

Gomez nodded. "That's what Mordie said. None of us knew what he was talking about, but I said I'd look on to make sure Bill was gentle with her, which of course he was. Then, I started getting these weird bursts of heat like I was on fire. I don't remember what happened next because I couldn't think about anything but the heat. Bill told me that Mordie and I got into a shoving match and he pushed me to the ground and yelled at me to get away from him. I think that's when the Defensive Coach dismissed him."

The trainer chimed in: "Grillot went to the showers to cool off."

"Could you get him, please," Jack requested. The trainer nodded and departed.

After hearing of Grillot's outburst, Jack immediately thought of Del Robins' final minutes. For the first time since the initial call from Kimi in his garden, Jack was certain that this day's happenings were consistent with the rest of the investigation.

Barely getting back in the groove of questioning Gomez, Ted, his digital personality, came to life and informed him that Doug McCallum, the Commissioner of the football league, wished to speak to him immediately. It was getting stuffy in the lounge, and Jack was edging on a bad mood. The last thing he wanted to do was P.R. to a sports executive. Nonetheless, he shifted gears to address the image of an aging, thick-chinned gentleman in an expensive logo blazer. Jack had to explain once again what was going on, hoping that he wouldn't be laughed at.

Upon hearing that several players had been questioned and one fan was missing, the Commissioner interrupted Jack. "The city and the stadium might be yours, cop, but the fans and players belong to us. Their safety is my responsibility. You're about ten minutes from the biggest publicity kick in the balls your police department has had in a long time! I've already spoken with your superior, Benjamin Miller. He said he'd back me if I ordered a full stadium evacuation! You'd better be damned serious about what you're doing!"

Jack wiped a bead of sweat from his hairline. "We have no empirical evidence that anyone is in danger." Going for the best comeback he could generate, he said, "Everything we're doing here is a precautionary

Shadow of Turning

measure. If I had reason to believe that there was any reason to do so, I would call in the evacuation order thirty seconds before you could.”

One of the executives dashed across the room to Jack, fumbling to get in on the conversation on his own D-vice. “That is not happening! Doug, I’m right here hearing everything, and it’s not that bad.”

McCallum’s voice cracked as he muttered his last words before going private with the Vortex exec. “Ten minutes, cop.”

Jack had played hardball with powerful businesspeople before. He imagined 4-to-1 odds that McCallum had twisted the truth when he said that Miller would back him; yet, there were butterflies in Jack’s stomach. All the executives departed, so Jack called Kimi to help ease his mind.

“I heard,” Kimi immediately responded, having been a silent remote spectator in the digital conversation. “Don’t worry. The scanner is just arriving in the parking lot. They’ll be to your location in a minute. Hey, you look bad.”

“I’m okay. It’s just that it’s really stuffy in here and I’m losing my patience with everyone I have to corral to make this work. I should have made you go here instead of me.”

“No thanks,” Kimi replied, chuckling. “There’s no fondue in the world good enough to make me want to go near that death column again. If it makes you feel any better, things are pretty slow here. Carol is running a trace on the rock toaster and we should know in a few minutes exactly where it’s aimed.”

Jack complimented his partner on her work, and then resumed his conversation with Gomez. “What about mental symptoms? Did you experience any weird sensations, or feelings, or hallucinations?”

Gomez hesitated, sitting down at the booth next to Jack. He said, “I’m kinda embarrassed about this, but yeah. It was like somebody was watching me, and I kept seeing someone out of the corner of my eye, but whenever I turned to look at him, he disappeared. Every time I saw him, he was closer and closer to me. And then, somebody was saying to me, ‘Come. Come. Come.’ That’s when I started feeling like I was on fire.”

Romano interrupted. "Sir, excuse me, but Harold's isn't stabilizing, and I need to get him and Poppy, and preferably George, to a hospital right away. Is it safe to do that?"

"Of course," Jack nodded, his thoughts beginning to drift a bit. He decided to check up on the scanning team. "Hey, Swirtz, where are you guys?"

Ron Swirtz, carrying the multiscanner unit, replied, "We were just about to look you up. We're at the service entrance."

"Thank you so much for coming at such short notice," Jack said, wiping another trickle of perspiration from his forehead. "Go to the home team sidelines and scan everything from the white line to the benches clear into the locker room. I'll meet up with you shortly."

"Right away," Swirtz replied.

"And please keep a low profile, and by low, I mean invisible." Jack popped a gremlin. He decided to wait a minute before heading down to the field level to coordinate the scan. He needed more courage to face the roaring crowd than he currently had. The gremlin might make him more confident, or at least less concerned. He passed the time by gazing out the lounge window into the hazy skyline, waiting for the mood-enhancing pill to kick in.

Sgt. Lomis' voice interrupted his mental recess. "We got him."

"Hmm?"

"Your guy, Sarat Kapoor. We found him nonchalantly heading for the exit, just as the game was getting interesting. He's in the security office now in police custody." Jack applauded silently, receiving a momentary pick-me-up from the news. Jack decided to take a seat for one more minute to stave off the lingering fatigue.

A commotion coming from the other side of the main door gave him a slight start. The brass door handle jiggled suddenly. The door flew open, revealing a huge, African-American man in a Vortex jersey. Being a sports fan, Jack recognized him instantly as Mordecai Grillot, starting Line Backer. Grillot stood firmly. His narrow eyes could have been ablaze with the fires of hell as he made visual contact with Jack.

Shadow of Turning

Appearing just as surprised to see Jack as Jack was to see him, Grillot spoke: "Where are the other players? Where did you take them?"

"They're going to the hospital. They're very sick," Jack replied.

"I won't let you kill her!" Grillot shrieked. "She didn't do anything to you!"

Jack rose to meet the muscular athlete, who was issuing profanity. "She's out of danger, and you..." Grillot exploded his right fist into Jack's neck, sending him to one knee in howling pain. Jack reached for his firearm, but Grillot, who still had the element of surprise, hammered his right arm and face before he could firmly grasp the weapon. Too weak to give it his all, Jack could only stumble against the wall, blood trickling from his nose down his cheek.

Jack figured that this hulk was in a state of violent paranoia, similar to what Del Robins had experienced when he attacked his brother-in-law. He was likely just as sick as his teammates, perhaps more.

Not relenting, Grillot again struck Jack's face and upper torso, using a series of alternating left and right jabs, voicing profanity-laced threats all the while. Jack fought to secure his weapon in his right hand, but the conditioned football player grabbed the detective's wrist, twisting it relentlessly. Pain surged in four or five places in Jack's upper body. "Wait! You're going after the wrong guy!" Grillot ignored his words. Trying to speak into his wrist D-vice, he shouted, "Officer distress! Officer distress!"

Given the involuntary mental state of his attacker, Jack decided to forego lethal force and use both hands to defend himself. Receiving abdominal blows, he wriggled his wrist out of the hold. Tripping Grillot up with his leg just enough so when he thrust all his weight on his foe, Grillot fell to the floor.

Jack was not going to engage this rage-induced man any more than he had to. Using his momentary advantage, he crawled toward the open doorway. Grillot was on his heels, tackling him flat with all the force of a two-time All League Bowl defenseman. Facing utter physical and mental exhaustion, he curled against the wall.

"Give her back!" Grillot demanded, attempting to throttle Jack's neck.

Hurried footsteps rounded the corner. Two armed police officers appeared, immediately ordering Grillot to cease. When he refused to comply, the cuffs went on before Jack could say a word. Assuring that Jack was out of harm's way, the uniformed officers administered an electronic tranquilizer to the wild Vortex player and dragged him away. Jack found a breath to shout to them, "Please get him to the hospital right away. He has severe internal head trauma." One of them acknowledged with a grunt, instructing Jack to stay put until medical help arrived.

Plugging his gushing nose and cradling his right arm and shoulder, Jack plopped himself in the middle of the floor, mentally debating with himself about the prospect of rising to his feet. Every bone and muscle seemed to ache and throb. The stuffy heat felt much worse in the corridor and his sinuses were stopped up.

"Jackie?" Kimi's familiar voice came from his wrist D-vice. "Jack? Are you alright? Are you in trouble?"

"Mordecai Grillot attacked me," Jack replied. "I'm okay now. They took him away. He had paranoid, violent tendencies, just like Del."

"You're not a one-man army," Kimi said. "One of these days, you're going to end up knocked out in a dumpster. By the way, do you want to know what I found out about the rock toaster?"

Before attempting to acknowledge Kimi's question, Jack closed his eyes and took a deep breath. As he opened his eyes, the room seemed to be enveloped in an eerie shadowy darkness. Jack could barely see a meter in front of him. The industrial lights above him were shining as brightly as ever, but somehow, their light didn't reach the walls or floor. They might as well have been stars shining in deep space with no satellites to catch their beams.

Jack blinked. No change.

Kimi: "I heard that you got Kapoor in custody. Hey, are you okay?"

A faint green glow from around the corner caught Jack's eye. Watching the unusual light flicker slightly, he knew that something had just gone terribly wrong. Had Kapoor activated some kind of chemical incendiary device before his capture?

"Jack, are you okay? I can see you moving."

Shadow of Turning

"Yeah," Jack replied, barely paying attention to her.

Suddenly, the floor trembled for a second in the vicinity of the green light. Then it trembled again. And again. And again. Each time, the source of the tremors seemed to be drawing closer. Footfalls, heavy and deliberate. One more tremor rumbled as a large figure stepped around the corner. Wearing a leather and chain mail tunic, it was almost as tall as the four-meter-high ceiling. In its muscular right hand was a huge bladed scepter on top of which was a brilliantly burning green flame. On its head was an oversized helmet made of gold, featuring jeweled horns and an elongated snout with a shimmering ring through the nose. The creature glared at Jack through eyeholes glowing green, taking one or two steps closer to the battered detective.

Fear gripped Jack at the sight of this figure. His heart began to beat furiously until it felt like he was out of breath. There was no mistaking what was happening. The menacing creature was completely familiar to him.

Mister Bull King.

11.

A Few Seconds Later

The Shadow and the Spider

Kimi stood near a window on the 38th floor near the Conifer lab after placing results of the rock toaster's trajectory on a large digital wall display. She held a portable D-vice on which was the image of her partner on the floor in the stadium, holding his bloody nose, crouching in a defensive posture.

"What's wrong, Jack?" she asked. Jack seemed to be too focused on whatever he was looking at to reply. "Is Mordecai Grillot back? Do you need more help?"

"I...I'm okay, I guess," Jack stuttered.

As usual, Jack was trying to be the macho cop, shunning assistance. His behavior, however, was more than a little peculiar. Kimi could see Jack's face and upper body in his wrist D-vice's video. His hollow expression betrayed the tempest in his soul. Even as he rose to his feet, however, there was no indication of what was happening in front of him that could be causing his unrest. There were no noises except for the distant stadium crowd.

"You turn that unit around right now," Kimi scolded. "What are you looking at?" Jack turned his device to allow Kimi to view what was in front of him. There was just an empty cement hallway, wide and brightly lit.

In short breaths, Jack said, "Somebody...repositioned the...rock toaster."

Shadow of Turning

"I was right," Kimi said. "I've diagramed its trajectory. I can show it to you. It's pointing right at the home team benches. I'm still waiting for the multiscanner team to collaborate, but..."

"No," Jack interrupted her. "You don't...understand. It got...repositioned...a few minutes ago."

"No, it didn't," Kimi replied. Jack was known for his erratic behavior, but this was odd, even for him. She watched the video as Jack tripped down the hallway into what must have been the players' lounge. He slammed the door behind him.

"It may have been...pointing at the benches...a while ago, but...now it's pointing here...and I need to get away!"

Jack continued across the room, slipping out another door into an office space. Kimi heard someone ask Jack to identify himself, followed by Jack's directive: "Denver Police! Get out! Run for your life!" He passed through another door and plopped himself in a chair.

Starting to catch his breath, he said, "I've been hit with the...death column! I was in the Vortex lounge, and after they carried Grillot away...I hallucinated. I saw the bull monster."

Kimi didn't need to hear more. She immediately summoned medical help for Jack, saying, "Everything's going to be okay. You have the suspect in custody."

Finally catching his breath, Jack responded, "There's another suspect." He winced in agony. "It sucks to be me right now."

"Another suspect?"

"Yeah. Somebody repositioned the rock toaster in the time between when Poppy passed out and now." Jack paused, curled up in his chair, and winced again. "Please, God. My head hurts. Tell the medics to hurry!"

Not only did Kimi feel helpless to assist her partner from her remote location, but she began to feel physical pain along with her partner and friend. Then, she considered what he had said. The rock toaster was not remotely repositionable. How was it possible that someone could have moved it? She had been in front of it most of the time since her arrival. She and Carol Burr.

Come to think of it, Burr had been present when Jack had told her he was relocating the sick players to the lounge. Burr had been at its controls when she extracted the trajectory data. Was it possible that Carol Burr was the missing link in the investigation?

Kimi approached Burr as she stood in the Conifer lab. Sternly, she said, "Ms. Burr, I'm going to have to ask you to come to the station with me."

"Wh...why?"

"I have a few other questions I'd like to ask you in a more controlled setting."

Burr bolted toward the exit where Kimi was standing, closing the distance between herself and Kimi too quickly for Kimi to react further. Kimi drew her weapon, but Burr was prepared. The HalmanAbramsSatalini employee snatched the weapon out of her hands and continued out into the hall.

"Stay back!" Burr shouted as she pointed the weapon at Kimi, though still running.

Calling to the voice recognition D-vice in her gun, Kimi said, "Barney, stop!" The red status indicator on the weapon immediately turned green. "It's deactivated now. Drop it!"

Burr dashed into a waiting elevator, disabled weapon still in hand. Clearly, she had a contingency plan in mind. Kimi called for backup to cover all the building's exits as she summoned another elevator.

Kimi's elevator reached the ground floor. Cautiously, she stepped out into the atrium. There was no sign of her suspect. "Anybody see her?" The security guard in the basement responded in the negative, as did Jun Matsumoto, Kimi's uniformed driver who waited by the main entrance.

"She might have gotten off on another floor," the security guard commented on his D-vice. "Wait. There she is. On the roof." Kimi was able to view the video from a rooftop camera, showing Burr rushing around randomly, probably trying to locate the emergency chute.

Another elevator ride later, Kimi and Matsumoto were on the roof. As soon as Carol saw them, she darted directly for the northwest lip. Kimi froze in her tracks, shouting, "Wait. There's nowhere to go!"

Shadow of Turning

Placing Kimi's useless weapon down her pants, Carol climbed up on the safety fence, peering down over the edge. Her small D-vice alerted her of her precarious position. Matsumoto drew his weapon and started jogging toward her. Kimi told him to hold his position and not fire.

"Are you okay?" Kimi asked Carol, who was still a good five-second run from her. She reasoned that Carol might be having rock toaster-induced paranoia. "Nobody here is going to hurt you."

"I don't care," Carol replied.

"Do you see anybody up here but me and Officer Matsumoto?" Kimi attempted to discern Carol's state of mind.

"Please go away," Carol said.

Kimi remembered that Carol had touched the rock toaster's controls before she had a chance to scan for traces. Perhaps she had been attempting to cover her tracks from an earlier time. She asked bluntly, "Carol, did you point the Buhne's Column at the stadium today?"

"Go away," Carol repeated, scooting down the edge of the fence, searching for some way to escape.

After having experienced the effects of a Buhne's Column herself, as well as her years of dealing with the alcohol- and drug- impaired, Kimi decided that Carol's actions and words were those of someone too coherent to be under the influence of an invisible beam. Moving a few steps closer to her suspect, she declared, "You were aware that that machine could kill somebody. Why did you do it?"

Carol climbed to the top of the fence. "No. Please. I can't."

Realizing what was happening, Kimi called for a jumper rescue. Fighting an intense urge to stop being a cop and talk this woman down, Kimi asked, "Did you or didn't you point the rock toaster at Poppy Frainey? I've got the scans from a few minutes ago. They'll tell me even if you don't."

The distraught mining tech peered down the ledge at the atrium roof fifty-eight floors beneath her. "Please, no. You have to understand I was being blackmailed!"

"Blackmailed? Who was blackmailing you? Was it Sarat Kapoor?"

Carol only responded, "I love my family."

“What about your family? What did he say he’d do? Please tell me and *get down here now!*”

Kimi could hear the status updates of what was happening on the ground. Police and security had pulled out the building’s slime spider, which was a huge, fireproof, stretchable pouch meant to assist in rescuing fire victims and suicidals from tall structures. Its massive array of small feet, covered with orange adhesive goo, could cling to any smooth metal or glass surface and move up heights far in excess of any ground-based ladder. The slime spider was beginning its ascent directly beneath Carol.

“I can’t!” Carol cried as she teetered, gripping the simulated wrought iron fence.

“What did Kapoor say he’d do?” Kimi demanded to know. “We have him in custody right now. He can’t hurt you. Stay right there and I’ll come and get you.” Kimi delicately inched closer to Carol.

Still gripping the fence, Carol hoisted her outside leg around her body. This caused her to lose her center of gravity, and her body began to slip over the outer side of the fence. In the process, she somehow let go. Though Kimi ran as fast as she could to the fence, she was not fast enough to rescue Carol or stop her from her striking her head on the corner of the solid steel edge of the building on her way down, down, down.

The bars were too close together on the fence for Kimi to poke her head through, but she heard the “phwump, clap” as Carol landed inside the spider’s pouch and it closed automatically around her like a gigantic Venus flytrap.

Matsumoto approached Kimi. “She dropped this over there,” he said as he handed Kimi her weapon, still deactivated. Both officers rushed to the elevator. Kimi barely had time to check on Jack, who was being taken to an ambulance.

At the base of the building, the spider was already on the ground. As the sack opened, Kimi cautiously readied her weapon; regardless of her condition, Carol Burr was still under arrest. However, even in the three minutes before emergency medical workers arrived, Kimi discerned easily that no arrest would be necessary. Even though the spider had caught Carol, it had obviously been too far beneath her to break her momentum.

Shadow of Turning

From Carol's injuries, it appeared that her death was more due to full body trauma than head injury.

When the crowd dispersed and they transported Carol's body away, Kimi dismissed Matsumoto. She preferred to take public transportation to the hospital to meet Jack. She needed some time alone on the motor carriage to reflect and shed a few tears before she had to be the tough cop and supportive best friend.

12.

Monday, October 12

Grabbing the Shadow

Seven people sat in imitation leather chairs scattered casually around a cozy room featuring a rock garden, several hand-woven rugs, and a gigantic digital display on one wall configured to depict a lush rain forest. The greet room within Grant Valley Medical Designs was meant to convey the comfort and friendliness of a luxurious family cabin. Vince Patrice, President of the Board, desired this for all his guests, but friendliness was especially important for the guest currently entering the room from the more businesslike lobby. Sarat Kapoor issued greetings to the seven board members present before he took a seat next to Patrice.

"We're delighted to have you come here, Mr. Kapoor," Patrice said. "We know it's highly unusual to complete business contracts in person these days, but I was able to assemble all of us."

"Certainly, I understand," Kapoor replied with a bland smile. He scanned the room partially to take in its décor, but also to make eye contact with each party. He noticed one person he did not recognize from his previous interactions with Grant Valley: a boisterous-looking middle-aged fellow sporting a large moustache. This man nodded in return.

"I'd like you to meet James Frostie," Patrice motioned at the unfamiliar man. "He's our newest board member."

Kapoor nodded at the man's. "Oh, yes, I heard that you had to conduct an emergency election to replace one of yours who..."

"...passed away," Patrice finished. "Yes. Unfortunately, Fey Robins and her husband died in their home a few weeks ago."

Shadow of Turning

“My condolences,” Kapoor said. “I spoke with her on occasion. It’s tragic to see her go. Good to meet you, though, Mr. Frostie.”

“She was a good friend and a conscientious businesswoman,” Patrice said. “However, she was also a dissenting vote against today’s very crucial sale. With her, our vote was 3-4 against our desperately needed sale to you. With James Frostie in our corner, our vote was 4-3 in favor.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” Kapoor remarked as he straightened his hand-tailored suit. “Yes, fate works out strangely sometimes.”

The group spent a few more minutes exchanging pleasantries and breaking the ice before it was time for business. Speaking to the group, Kapoor said, “Grant Valley is such a unique company, and I cannot seem to make the same things happen in my business as you have done here. It would be my pleasure to take you all under my wings. I trust you have a document for me?”

“We do,” Patrice acknowledged as he transferred a document to Kapoor’s D-vice.

A digital personality on Kapoor’s D-vice informed him that the contract was exactly identical to the one he had been allowed to review over the past week. He, in turn, transferred his side of the contract over to the board members for their final review.

“Are there any motions for last-minute discussion?” Patrice asked his board. After a round of nays, he directed them to validate the contract, which they all did by placing their fingers on their D-vice’s finger scanner. There was no need for more, as each member had thoroughly reviewed the contract beforehand.

Kapoor validated his side of the contract with a ceremonial wave of his wrist before the final finger ID. After three more minutes of third-party legal validation via D-vice, a congratulatory letter was sent to each of the participants and the sale of Grant Valley Medical Designs to Sarat Kapoor’s master company was complete.

As Kapoor was commending the board members on their inclusion into his family, the man with the moustache rose, standing in front of the main door. He said to Kapoor, “This occasion wouldn’t be complete until

we include two more guests." At his words, the rest of the board became silent, almost somber. "You may come in, O exalted ones!"

The back door opened. Kapoor clutched the sides of his chair in complete shock as Jack Tate and Fey Robins entered.

Kapoor said to Patrice, "You told me she was dead." Patrice said nothing.

After a quick exchange of glimpses with Fey, Jack declared, "Sarat Kapoor, you are under arrest for the murder of Rundel Robins, conspiracy to commit murder against Law Officer Kimi Arimuro, conspiracy to commit murder against Fey Robins, conspiracy to commit murder against Anthony Garza, conspiracy to commit murder against the Robins' children, Donovan and Lucia, blackmail leading to the commission of a felony against Carol Burr, and two counts of the deployment of a device of terrorism. The feds will probably add onto that last one."

"Impossible!" Kapoor growled.

"Give it up," Jack replied. "I had to go to the hospital recently, and it not so coincidentally happened that I met your girlfriend in the emergency ward. She told me that she didn't appreciate your using her as an accessory, and she confirmed that on both occasions in question, she appeared at the Robins' house on your behest. That was the vital link we needed to prosecute you."

"You were under orders not to speak to her without her lawyer!" Kapoor protested.

"Oh, her lawyer was there," Jack nodded. "She got her own lawyer, one who would look after her own interests instead of yours."

After quickly glancing around the room, Kapoor shot up from his chair, bolting for the main door. To his surprise, the man he knew as Mr. Frostie clotheslined him across the neck, clutched his upper body, and threw him to the ground without mercy. Jack hurried to the commotion, rolling Kapoor around to apply handcuffs behind his back. To Mr. Frostie, Jack said, "Thank you, Detective Delancie. It would've been too suspicious if there hadn't been a seventh board member."

Shadow of Turning

Grinning from cheek to cheek, Art Delancie replied, "Any time. It was fun, but when you asked me to do a few minutes of undercover work, I thought you meant do some work under the covers. Har har!"

"So the whole thing was fake?" Kapoor asked as Delancie pulled him to his feet. "The sale?"

"The sale was plenty real!" Fey blurted out from across the room, "Changing my vote to yes was a small price to pay for playing a part in your ruin. Business will go on without you. We'll spend all your money saving lives with our products while you crawl around in your concrete maze like a trapped rat!"

Jack stepped in. "I think that's all the excitement our trapped rat can handle for one day." He and Delancie led Kapoor out of the building into a police vehicle. Kimi was there, waiting for them, having monitored the whole affair. She told the driver to return to the district station without her because she would be spending the rest of the day with Jack and Art on some well deserved time off.

"That went surprisingly smooth," Jack said as he and Art met up with Kimi. "I think it's time to make good on my promise. Let's all go to Hogan's Wine + Dine for some fondue and drinks."

"I thought you'd never ask," Kimi replied. "My husband can have a guy evening with our son without me." The three began strolling down the sidewalk toward the motor carriage stop that would take them to the restaurant.

"How's your recovery coming along," Jack asked Kimi.

"I'm still scared to sleep at night because of the nightmares I've been having since I got hit with the rock toaster. Other than that, I feel fine and my brain scans are normal. The big question is how *you're* recovering. You got hit a lot worse than I did."

"Me? I still get headaches, and I'll be on a psychotropic regimen for quite a while. I can't keep my gun by my bed because the doctor's afraid I'll hallucinate and shoot someone."

Art chimed in. "Sounds like I missed a lot of excitement. You guys are lucky to be alive."

Kimi said, "I still can't believe I let Carol Burr take control of my gun."

"I still can't believe that your gun's name is Barney," Jack joked. "I never found out what happened with that whole blackmail angle."

"Oh, that," Kimi said. "Since she's dead, DDI let me look a little deeper into her digital records. From what I can piece together, Kapoor found out about the rock toaster and its ability to destroy someone's brain. He had to find someone at HalmanAbramsSatalini whom he could manipulate into aiding him. He did some digging and found that Burr was involved in some sex slave trafficking some years ago, so Kapoor blackmailed her into aiming the device where he wanted."

Art asked, "And you say that you think he tricked Poppy Frainey?"

Kimi explained. "When I interviewed her, she swore up and down that he told her to spy on Fey Robins because she was a rival who was partnering with organized crime to take him down. She claims she never knew Kapoor had any malicious intent."

"That reminds me of a call I promised to make once Kapoor got cuffed up." Jack said. Poppy's face appeared on his D-vice. "Sarat has been arrested," he told her.

"Thank God," she sighed. "Is Mrs. Robins okay?"

"She's just fine. How did things go between you and the Head Coach?"

"Well, I'm on paid hiatus until after I'm medically cleared, so that might be the rest of the season."

"I understand that," Jack said. "You know, I never got a chance to talk to you about your experiences when you were under the spell of the column. What was it like for you?"

"I just felt sick and dizzy and I started to black out," Poppy explained. "For a while, I thought I was dying, but then, I saw my grandmother come for me, and I knew everything was okay."

"Okay because your grandmother was there to comfort you on your journey to the other side?"

"No," she chuckled. "My grandmother is still alive and I visit her regularly. That's how I knew I wasn't really dying."

Shadow of Turning

"You're pretty smart, for a jock," Jack said. "I guess I'll be seeing you the day of your boyfriend's trial. I assume they'll want me there as the arresting officer and as a material witness."

"Ex-boyfriend," she winked and signed off.

The three detectives stood on the street corner for another few minutes waiting for their motor carriage to arrive. A young man in a business suit started to cross the street at the pedestrian zone. Suddenly, the motor carriage arrived down the next cross street. As it turned the corner, it came within half a meter of striking the young man. The driver immediately stopped and the young man began shouting at him.

"Hold on," Jack said, popping over to the location of the incident. Jack recorded the driver's operator number on his D-vice and let the motor carriage continue to the stop.

"Do all Denverites drive like that?" the young man fumed.

"No," Jack said, "Only about 38.7% of them. Are you visiting town?"

"I just relocated here on Saturday from living in Eastern Europe," the young man said. "Are you a cop?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "My name's Jack Tate, Denver Police Violent Crimes Division."

"Nice to meet you." The young man extended his hand. "My name's Bart. Bart Wolfield. Thanks for checking on the situation for me. I owe you one."

"No payback necessary," Jack said, turning around to join his work pals. Before he reached the motor carriage, now waiting quite cordially for him, the sound of thundering footsteps and an eerie green glow from behind startled him. Spinning around, he saw, only for a fraction of a second, his menacing, bull-faced adversary standing next to Mr. Wolfield, as if it was waiting for Wolfield to give it the command to attack.

Jack shook off the vision, knowing that it was only the influence of the shadow. His medication would soon heal him of the delusions that could only interfere with his destiny.