

A PENGUIN SPECIAL

PAYOFF

A MINDSPACE INVESTIGATIONS NOVELLA

ALEX
HUGHES



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A Mindspace Investigations Novella

Alex Hughes

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“I appreciate you taking me all the way out here,” I said. “I know you’re overwhelmed with cases right now.”

“Why does Judge Datini want you to look into this anyway?” Homicide Detective Isabella Cherabino asked. She was my partner, maybe, if a telepath consultant like myself could even have a partner in the police force. She was also beautiful, with large breasts, dark hair, strong features, and a strong personality that made me want to be a better man. Even if half the time she didn’t notice me past my talents.

“I owe him,” I said, a little self-consciously. I was embarrassed about it, actually; it was tied up with past sins I’d rather her not know about. It wasn’t at all usual for judges to ask consultants for favors. We were at the university in North Druid Hills on an early September rainy morning. This part of Atlanta was full of trees, both natural trees and those bioengineered to absorb additional pollution and ash from the air. With the air quality so bad these days, we needed all the help we could get.

The university had largely escaped the macro-destruction of the Tech Wars sixty years ago, so the brick buildings were old and unenhanced. The quad around us looked much like it had a century ago or more when it was built. It was deserted, the soggy greenish grass and gray low-hanging clouds more than a little depressing. We walked quietly for a long moment before curiosity got the best of her.

“Why do you owe him?”

“I’d really rather not talk about—”

Distantly I felt the umbrella falling from my hand, my knees going rubbery-weak. And then the world dropped away, into one of my precognition visions, my oddly reliable future-sense. My brain was hit by blinding ice-pick pain. *Ow. Ow!*

Beneath the intense pain was deep surprise and relief. Since I’d burned out my telepathy a few weeks ago saving Cherabino’s life, I hadn’t had a glimmer of anything but static. Now the precognition was working! I’d take the pulsing, blinding pain. I’d take it gladly.

The world turned inside out like an Escher drawing and then I saw it, the vision in three dimensions and wavering color like an old-fashioned tube TV about to burn out. I saw it—I saw me.

Me, in the same clothes I was wearing, pulling myself up the side of an oversized bright-green construction dumpster. My feet scrambled, and I fell, hitting my chin against the lip of the dumpster, blood, blood everywhere. Cherabino behind me yelled something I couldn’t understand.

The view pulled out and I saw in the background the same huge orange crane and building we’d seen on our way to the university.

I found myself on my cheek in the soggy grass on the quad, Cherabino’s hand on the collar of my shirt, shaking me.

“... vision? Because if you don’t get back to reality in one more minute, I swear by all that is holy Adam—”

“Mmph,” I mumbled intelligently. I felt like someone was taking a sledgehammer to my head over and over again.

“There you are.” Her eyes settled into slits as the pain hit her too. Right before overexerting my telepathy weeks ago, I’d accidentally Linked our minds. It was the only telepathic connection I had with the world now, the only thread of telepathy in a world that otherwise felt deaf and blind, but she hated it. Keep my hands and mind to myself was all she’d ever asked of me, and leaving me a tiny sliver of mental sensation, enough to keep me sane, was something she barely tolerated on a good day. Now, with reflected pain shooting into her mind, it was only making the situation worse.

I scrambled to shield on my end, but the mental bricks just slipped through my fingers. The pain reflected back at me suddenly; she'd gotten the brick-wall image up and settled in her own mind. As the mental pressure changed, I saw an intense series of light flashes overcome my field of vision, my injured brain not liking the difference. I'd taught her the shielding a little while ago; at least there was that. Even if it cost far too much on my end.

"I have my own migraines, you know. You don't have to share yours," she gritted.

Deep inside me, deeper than the pain, a small flame of real hope emerged. Maybe—maybe—if the precognition could come back, the telepathy would heal too. Nine times out of ten it healed on its own. I told myself for the hundredth time. But this time I actually started to believe it.

* * *

I trotted down the sidewalk to the edge of campus, the surface warm under my feet even through my shoes, its self-heating element running steadily to dry the ground in between rainstorms. Curls of fog drifted up from the concrete, moisture evaporating. The small bushes planted to one side had the red spots of plants bioengineered to absorb pollution, so I wasn't all that worried about the contents of that fog.

I was walking as quickly as I could to what my internal compass said should be the parking lot where we'd come in and that orange crane from the vision. Cherabino followed behind me, reluctantly huddling under her own umbrella. She was still shielding, and my head still hurt something terrible. Worse was the worldsickness: reality coming in and out of focus over and over until I felt like I was going to throw up, and fatigue like a wet blanket smothering everything in sight. But I moved on in good spirits. Hope helps that way.

My telepathy was everything—literally everything. I'd only been hired in the first place because of my telepathy, and after falling off the wagon they'd hired me again because of that same telepathy. Most normals didn't like telepaths and didn't trust telepaths, but the DeKalb County Police had seen the benefit in having one on staff. The one advantage to my history of drug use, to them, was that it meant I came without Guild ties. The Telepath's Guild, who charged ridiculous amounts for even limited telepathic consulting, had kicked me out years ago. They still weren't my favorite people, but if the telepathy didn't eventually come back on its own—which it would, I told myself—I'd have to go back to them and beg for help. I'd rather have a root canal.

I am a Level Eight telepath, incredibly strong, able to pick up the waves of the quietest minds in Mindspace through training, skill, and power. I'd been able to read crime scenes from hours and days ago, telling you exactly who did what and where. I'd been able to read suspects in interviews. I'd been able to be me. The telepathy was all I was, all I had left from the old days, the old me, when I'd been professor for the Guild and when I could look myself in the mirror and still be proud. Before they'd kicked me out, before the drugs, before everything I wouldn't talk about. The thought of losing that piece—of losing the telepathy forever—well, I'd crawl to the Guild on my hands and knees over broken glass if I had to. If I had to. Life without telepathy was unthinkable.

And yet here I was.

The drizzly rain had picked up, and the sidewalks in places were over an inch underwater. Gray sky, gray clouds, even the grass seemed grayer and nasty, full of puddles and unknown pollutants far away from any filters. Then the wind picked up, and I fought with the umbrella as the harder rain tried to take it from me.

"Tell me what you saw," Cherabino demanded for the tenth time.

I didn't answer, preferring to focus on putting one foot in front of the other in the correct direction. I took another turn, and we arrived on a narrow stained sidewalk next to an open construction area. That huge orange metal crane poised overhead like a vengeful angel. Red, sodden dirt mounded like the surface of Mars for fifty feet in every direction. Wooden and metal pieces like bones poked out of the soil, placed to hold concrete that would never set in this weather. A covered dumpster dripped water on the furrowing dirt ten feet ahead. A green dumpster. As we got closer, my eyes ran over the troughs caused by the runoff, like blood vessels carved into the red earth.

"Now are you going to tell me what you saw?"

"If I'm wrong, I'm wrong." I looked around for a place to put the umbrella, and then, sighing, handed it to Cherabino. I was going to end up soaked to the skin if I was here for long, but that was the least of my worries. I'd try to avoid the split chin, I could do that much, but I never had a vision without a reason for it. And if I was having a vision now, with the telepathy down, it had to be important. I had to find out why. Even if I ended up breaking my chin open in the process.

"You going up there?"

I stared at it, as it expanded and contracted with the worldsickness. "I have to."

I wobbled through the dirt, shoes nearly sucked off my feet by the clay, and carefully pushed the heavy cover of the dumpster two feet to the side. The nasty, oily smell of decomposition wafted out. I pushed harder, hands struggling on the rough wooden cover, already bloated from the rain. When it gaped more than a yard open, I grabbed the lip of the dumpster, set a foot, and pulled myself up, muscles protesting the sudden movement in this cloying cold wet rain.

My shoe slipped—

And my chin hit my carefully-placed hand. I saw stars, and half-fell, half-lowered back to the ground.

I took three breaths, and went back up.

My head screamed, my stomach protested—and then I saw it.

A foot—a swollen foot covered in a dirty sock, ankle with a dark complexion and sloughing skin, poked out from a huge pile of construction debris. I shifted to the right, my hands protesting the sharp metal lip I was hanging on, my head protesting all the exertion as the world wobbled again with indescribable pain. *Just another minute*, I told myself. *Just another . . .*

From the new angle, I could dimly see the rest of a body, jeans and the brightly-colored small-thread flannel shirt. A low, lumpy form at the end. And a reddish cloud against the side of the dumpster, small bits and clumps of something decorating its side. In a fast food dumpster, those could be anything, but in construction . . . well I didn't think they were concrete. Skin and bone and darker things, probably, mixing in with the blood.

I dropped back down immediately, my hands filthy and hurting, and breathed a bit until the world steadied.

"What?" Cherabino prompted, holding on to the umbrella too tightly.

I took another breath.

"What is it, damn it?"

"I'm guessing it's Raymond," I said, "the judge's grandson."

* * *

I sat on a tarp over a pile of boards a few feet away from the crime scene.. Exhaustion and guilt were sitting on my chest like steel weights.

Crime scene technicians swarmed all over the scene like bees on a hive, piled up nearly three deep in the dumpster for the final pictures before they brought Raymond out. For a judge's grandson, they even brought the holocameras, three dimensions of disturbing crime scene to play for a jury in all its detailed glory.

How was I supposed to tell Judge Datini that his grandson was dead? How would this pay him back for my sins? It didn't, and part of me, the cynical part, thought he'd probably try to send me to jail out of spite for the news. There was a reason they told you not to shoot the messenger—it was human nature, and maybe I'd deserve it.

Judge Datini had adjudicated most of my drug charges back in the day. I'd been high then. High and uninterested in anything other than me. For the court appearances, I'd timed my doses of Satin, my drug; Satin messed with the mind, making telepathy unreliable, and I'd had to be careful to time it correctly so I'd have some use of it. Against every code of ethics the Guild believed in—and I believed in—I'd influenced the judge's mind to make him drop charges and give me lighter sentence. He hadn't been a mental pushover and I'd told myself that made it okay. That if it was really important to him he'd overrule my suggestions. But I knew, even then, even high as a cloud, that what I was doing was wrong. Against everything I held sacred and everything I'd ever taught my students. To this day, years later, after I'd been through rehab multiple times and had a solid three-year stint on the wagon, I regretted my actions toward this guy. I was a better telepath than that. I was a better guy than that. Or at least I was trying to be.

A telepath—well, right now I wasn't a telepath and wouldn't be until I healed. My ability needed time, rest, exercises, hard work, and patience. I'd helped students through it more than once. It would be okay, I told myself. But right now the only thing I heard was the inside of my own head, deaf and dumb and blind and panicky without the small scraps of Cherabino's mind she'd share. I'd lived half in Mindspace my whole life. And now I was cut off from it. The telepathy had to heal. It had to. I could keep up the façade with the cops for now, I could lie my butt off for awhile, but eventually it would come out. Eventually I'd have to do the job or get fired.

"Give me your shoes," someone said.

I looked up.

It was Jamal, a tall crime scene technician with short dreads, a standard jumpsuit uniform, and a scowl. He didn't like telepaths, but I couldn't hear him think it. It bothered me that I couldn't hear him think it.

"I need your shoes. To make a cast with. I need to eliminate your footprints," he said.

"You realize it's solid mud out here."

"You're covered in it already," he said back pragmatically. "Go stand on the sidewalk if you really need to."

I looked over at the sidewalk ten feet away. In this section it was caked red with Georgia clay, the clay slowly being baked by the heating element. Without shoes that would be too warm. "I'll stay here, thanks." I took off my shoes, my socks squelching deep in the mud. I consoled myself with the fact that they were probably ruined anyway. My one decent pair of work shoes. And I'd have to get Bellury to take me shopping for more, because the department didn't trust me with my own money. But if it had to be done, it had to be done.

The sky had opened up with a slow rain, and I was getting soaked, but the team—with much swearing—had just managed to put up the tent to shield the evidence, so that was okay. I wasn't going to catch cold, not in a warmish September rain, and maybe it would get the worst of the mud off the back of my neck and shirt.

Above us, that ridiculous huge orange crane loomed. Behind it, several campus buildings stood against the sky, including a huge airflyer deck, the top floor of which held brightly-colored sports flyers from the richer students. I'd met a few of those, back in my time. Didn't make any sense, in my opinion, to give an eighteen year old a half million ROCs to wreck—or to hurt someone else with—but no one asked me.

My focus was going again, my brain jumping from one half-formed idea to the next without reason.

The head of the crime scene team scowled at me, so I closed my eyes and pretended to be useful, to read the crime scene like I would if things were still working. Little pieces of Cherabino's thoughts peppered across the Link, mostly things she was noting about the scene. She was soaked too, and worried about her other cases. What should have been a two-hour errand was turning into her entire day—and she had other pressing cases, other victims to worry about.

Stay out of my head, she told me mind-to-mind when she caught me listening. And threw up a strong shield. I took a deep breath, rode out the strong pain and flashes of light across my vision, and waited for the world to stop spinning.

My brain was not happy with me today.

I opened up my eyes.

“Anything?” Freeman, the other local detective, asked. He was standing right there. Right there. I hadn't felt him getting so close.

Exhaustion helped me suppress any reaction. “Not much,” I said, an almost-truth. “From the looks of things, it's been awhile.” I'd been avoiding crime scenes for weeks for exactly this reason, focusing all my energies on suspect interviews and interrogations—where I could get by with just intuition and bluffs—and suddenly I was tired.

He put his hands in his pockets. “Yeah. Raining for days. Probably whoever did this was counting on the construction crew emptying that container before the smell started, but then it started raining.”

“You're thinking time of death is right before the rain?”

“Seems logical, doesn't it?”

They'd pulled the body out of the dumpster, now, to one side, and were currently casting footprints on the other side. As I got closer, I swallowed, and fought down nausea. It looked like the pictures you saw of the victims from the Tech War river floodings, when the computers had turned the locks backwards and put whole apartment buildings under water, locked from the outside. They still put some of those pictures in textbooks, to show you what the sentient Tech did to us after the madman took over. Raymond's body looked like those pictures, almost, the body all swollen out of its natural shape. The rain hadn't been kind to him, not in that huge petri dish of a mostly-sealed container, and he wasn't recognizable. I glanced—and saw splotches of color, details, and bloat, split clothes and a dark band around the neck, the wound—and looked away again before I lost it. I was *not* going to throw up at a crime scene again. Period. I was a consultant, and consultants didn't have that luxury.

Cherabino was fighting her own nausea—she hadn't brought her nose filters this trip, apparently—but she managed to bend down and look more closely.

I blocked with everything in me. And I got someone else to drive me home, a towel thrown over the backseat of the patrol car to protect the seats from my dripping clothes.

* * *

I stood dripping mud in Paulsen's office. She pursed her lips, reached into a drawer, and came out with a very frayed, faded towel that might once have been blue. She handed it to me without comment.

I patted my shirt and the back of my neck dry, then dropped the towel on the floor so I could stand on it, my socks squelching into the fiber of it. I needed shoes. “I’m going to need to take more time helping to solve this case.”

Paulsen sighed. “You realize we’re behind on our interview load? And I can’t afford to pay you overtime until next month. The interview list isn’t getting shorter.”

“I’ll stay a little late off the clock,” I said, a small iota of relief making its way through my gut. Paulsen didn’t spot-check the recordings from overtime, normally. Maybe my sprained brain would stay a secret just a little while longer. It would heal, I told myself. It would. The precognition was a good sign, even if I kept seeing the flashes of light across my vision all the time now, and I was exhausted and in pain. I could focus past it now, most of the time, more than I’d been able to do a week ago.

Paulsen sighed. “I know it’s not right, the unpaid time, but there’s nothing I can do about the budget talks. The damn politicians—”

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “Really. I was just waiting to see if you had something else for me, or advice.”

“Don’t piss off a judge,” Paulsen said. “And if this one was yours back then . . .”

“He was.”

“If this one was yours, don’t screw it up. We all are suckers for the underdog, for the turn-your-life-around soap operas and happy stories, but you don’t get this old in this profession without seeing people crash and burn. Don’t give him an excuse to think that’s you—I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s going over your file right now, to see what to look for.”

“Thanks,” I said, now twice as paranoid as before.

She glanced at her very tall stack of files sitting in the in-box. “Was there something else you needed?”

“No, I’ll just be going now.”

A little spot of relief entered the air again—I wish I could have said for sure that it was the telepathy, and not just my overactive imagination reading body language. Probably just the body language, as depressing a thought as that was. Just a few weeks ago I could have read her at will.

I grabbed the towel to take with me, and closed the door gently on my way out. I had to figure out how the hell I could get this case—and Cherabino—settled as quickly as possible.

At least there were showers in the men’s locker room. I had a couple changes of clothes there. I needed to be clean, pronto. And I needed shoes.

Then I needed a nap in the crash room instead of lunch. My brain needed the rest.

* * *

Cherabino came and got me a few hours later, after I’d woken up and gone back to the interview rooms. I was better, the pain less, but this late in the afternoon even with the nap I was having trouble focusing. That, and I was so tired, the letters on the files were moving around so much I couldn’t make sense of them. I’d asked Bellury to read the last one. Too many more and he’d get suspicious.

So when Cherabino knocked on the door to the interview rooms, relief hit me like a tidal wave in a kiddie pool—unexpected, devastating, and oddly fun.

She made us walk, of course. Since it was only a few blocks to the courthouse, that wasn’t all that big a deal. Even though I was still tired, it was a tiredness of the brain, not the muscles; with my blood pumping, my tar-soaked lungs panting, I was feeling a little better.

“Would you tell him?” I asked. “Please?”

“It’s your favor.”

I waited.

She sighed. “Fine, but keep an eye on his reaction. I hate to say this about a judge, but he is the family at this point.”

And you are most likely to be killed by the ones closest to you. Sad truth. “We have to inform him today?”

“It’s standard procedure.”

The DeKalb County court complex was like so much of the town, gorgeous on the front end with columns and trees, solid concrete walls and jail-cell barbed wire on the back. It had been remodeled after the Tech Wars when security was a major concern. You could still see the turrets where the old automated motion-activated guns sat before such things had been declared illegal.

Judge Datini’s office was on the third floor, all the way to the back, past a couple of court rooms and several other offices. The corridor walls were paneled with wood and metal, but from the acoustics you could still feel the reinforced concrete under it all, a building huddling under its shell like a turtle.

Cherabino went straight in.

The judge looked up from his humongous wooden slab desk. “Any news?”

He gestured to the chairs in front of his desk, and came around to sit on the small sofa even with the chairs. Judge Datini was short—hardly taller than five two—something that caught me by surprise every time; his personality was so much bigger. He’d lost a lot of weight in the years since I’d seen him on the bench, and not for the better. His dark complexion was mottled, now, and the hair that had been so full and dark was now a pale, limp gray, the hairline so far back you wondered what had happened to him. Today he looked tired, overwhelmingly tired like I felt, with deep, dark circles under his eyes. He looked sick.

“There’s no need to stare,” he said quietly.

I could feel my face warming as the guilt wandered up my neck and cheeks. My attention must really be going, to get caught like that. I’d been far too afraid of him—and the decisions that hadn’t reached their shelf life yet—to ask.

“Yes, I’m sick,” he said in a tone that broked no complaint. “It’s one of the damn supercancers. And I’m getting too old—and too tired—to play the speculation game. Now. Close the door and tell me whatever it is you need to tell me that’s making you so nervous you had to bring backup.” He settled into the sofa like his bones hurt. It was driving me nuts that I couldn’t actually feel that twinge of pain, that I had to guess.

“Yes, sir.” I closed the door. He was going to shoot the messenger; he was going to reverse those decisions, I could feel it. I’d gotten community service, fines, and hundreds of labor-hours for things that deserved years of jail time.

Cherabino shifted in her squeaky chair. “Judge, I’m sorry to inform you that your grandson, Raymond Datini, was found dead this morning on the campus of his university.”

The judge seemed to fold in on himself, his face collapsing into sorrow. “How?” he asked.

“It appears to be a gunshot wound. We’ll know more when we get the report back from the medical examiner.”

He sat there. I noticed a small bonsai on his desk slowly changing color—bioengineered to be calming, maybe. I didn’t feel calm. No one spoke.

Finally Cherabino broke the silence. “Is there anything I can get you? Perhaps a cup of tea?” She

was better at this than I was.

The judge shook his head.

After an eternity, he spoke. “Raymond is such a hard worker, such a good young man. He’s done everything I’ve ever asked of him. Since his parents died in the car wreck, it’s . . . I’ve put a lot of pressure on him. But with the internship, and the degree . . . he was going to be a lawyer. A great lawyer. He just got his LSAT scores.” His eyes seemed to focus, directly on me. “You’re going to find his killer. You’re going to find out who killed my grandson, and you’re going to do it quickly.”

“Campus PD—” Cherabino began.

“Campus PD isn’t experienced. Not like your team. Adam owes me, and you—you, Detective Isabella Cherabino, have the best close rate of any detective in Homicide. Bring me answers.” He looked to the side, blinking back condensation from his eyes. “Bring me answers, okay? I need . . .” He trailed off. “Could you leave?”

“Of course,” Cherabino said, and pulled me away.

* * *

That night, I let my sponsor, Swartz, drag me to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. I ran into two doorways, my visual-spatial sense dramatically off, and I fell asleep halfway through the meeting. Swartz said I snored. He poked me awake several times.

Afterwards, in a fog, I limped up the apartment stairs, Swartz’s arm supporting mine. Despite the skin-to-skin contact—usually a dramatic boost to telepathy—I felt nothing.

And that was scarier than anything else. The telepathy was going to come back, wasn’t it? It had to come back. Panic and obsession skittered in the back of my head, and I held it back by force. It had to come back.

* * *

The next morning, I was up bright and early, feeling fully rested for the first time since the injury. Mornings were better. I felt stronger in the mornings, more focused. I brewed my cup of high-grade sim-coffee, sat on the beat-up couch, and started my exercises.

Maybe the brain-wave canceler machine I had in my bedroom was finally starting to work. It was tuned to my mind, the shape of my old uninjured self, and sleeping in it—something I used to do for sanity’s sake, as it kept out the world—was hopefully training my brain back into its old shape. That was what the Guild doctors did with drugs, after all; coax the mind into its old shape.

I did the exercises, pushing my mind into impossible positions. Like a session of yoga where I couldn’t quite make it work, I kept slipping, kept falling flat on my ass. I got back up again and tried—just enough, just enough. Like stretching a tight muscle, you had to push—but not too hard, or you’d injure it.

By the time Cherabino showed up to collect me for work, I was starting to get a headache behind my eyes and had finished a set. An entire set. I took a multivitamin and an amino acid formulation for brain support—both bought through the accountants at the police to make sure I wasn’t trying to pull anything over on them—and actually dared to take an aspirin.

I was out at the corner waiting for her when she arrived.

“Today is about information,” Cherabino said and handed me a cup of coffee as I folded into the

car. “I’ve got a half day to learn everything I can about Raymond before the forensics come back tomorrow and we figure this out.”

I buckled up. “How’d you get the forensics done in only two days?” I asked, impressed.

“You don’t want to know.”

I instinctively went to read her—and she threw up a shield.

“Mind to yourself,” she said.

* * *

Raymond’s roommate, one George Babel, answered the door in a bulky shirt and ratty sweatpants. His dark complexion was scarred with old acne on the right side of his face, his hair shaved tight against his head, and he was very thin; otherwise he and Raymond could have been brothers, though in the picture Raymond had been muscular, healthy. This kid—from the smell of sugar and energy drinks emanating from him—had been a chair jockey for years, and not a particularly healthy one at that. I also smelled something else . . . something familiar. If I’d been able to feel him in Mindspace, I was betting he’d be strained, hyped up on too much caffeine and other things to quite think straight. But since I couldn’t, I’d have to guess, to guess about everything. It galled.

“Who are you?” George asked.

Cherabino flashed her badge again and introduced us. I was a consultant, unspecified, and she a detective, no department given.

“Do you have a minute?” I asked. “We’d like to talk to you about Raymond Datini.”

He gripped the wooden door hard. “Yeah. He hasn’t been here. Is he okay?”

Cherabino focused like a pointer dog going taunt. “Do you have reason to suspect he’s in trouble?”

“He hasn’t shown up in a long time,” George said. “I mean, the college assigned us to the room, it’s not like we’re friends or anything. We get along. I don’t know where he is.”

She nodded.

“Can we come in?” I asked. All the interrogation books claimed people were more likely to tell the truth surrounded by their own things. It was strictly book-knowledge though; mostly I interviewed in the interrogation rooms in the basement of the department.

“Oh.” He frowned. “Yeah, I guess.” He opened the door.

The dorm room was small, just large enough for two parallel beds, desks, and two infinitesimal closets. It was also covered in clutter, clothes thrown everywhere, empty pizza boxes, forgotten soda cans and protein cube wrappers, and layers and layers of cheap paper stirred up like in a blender. The smell was of stale sweat, cola, energy drinks, and desiccated food—along with an unpleasant undercurrent of musty . . . something, and more of that faint sweet smell of George’s.

Cherabino removed a banana peel and perched on a clear spot on the far desk. George took a seat at his own desk, less than four feet from her, and, finally catching up to reality, I leaned against the wall by the door.

Cherabino didn’t say anything, which meant I was up. I relaxed my body language, opened up my shoulders to seem friendlier, and uncrossed my arms. I even added a small, polite smile. Interviews were my gig, and I was going to do a good job if it killed me. I owed the judge, and I knew it, and finding the man who killed his grandson seemed the least I could reasonably do. Plus the whole jail question. I couldn’t screw this up, and this early in the morning, when I was feeling good, maybe I wouldn’t.

“How long have you been rooming with Raymond?” I asked George.

He looked uncomfortable, just a little too tense for the situation, and he kept looking back at Cherabino. "Since May. We both did the summer semester this year."

"And you said the college matched you up?"

"It's the cheapest housing on campus, and the only one open during the summer. If you don't have a roommate going in, it can be a crapshoot. But he's okay. Quiet guy, never really here. As long as I let him sleep, he's cool with pretty much anything. Doesn't mind me bringing over girls. It's not like we're friends, but it works. We kept the room for fall, saved a little money. It's weird he's gone this long though."

"His grandfather said he talked to you a few days ago."

"Um, yeah. That's right. He seemed okay."

"Why was Raymond always gone?" Cherabino asked, following up. "You said he was never here. What was he doing?"

George shrugged. "He's a poli-sci major, involved in all those studies with Professor Klaidman, plus he parties. And his internship was intense; he had to stop the work-study. It's full-time hours even though he's got a full course load. Too much for me—that's intense."

"Parties?" Cherabino said.

"Internship?" I said.

George looked back and forth between us. He shrugged, and looked down. "He works for a state senator. Billy Oden or somebody. The guy's bad news if you ask me."

Billy Oden the Incorruptible? Swartz actually liked him, and my sponsor didn't like any politician. "Why do you say he's bad news?" I asked.

"Other than the fact he's getting Raymond to work for him around the clock without paying him? He says dance, Raymond does a jig, and the whole time Ray's going into debt. Had to call his grandfather for money a couple of times earlier in the semester. It's not right. And lately he's been worried. I think there's something going on. Maybe Raymond found something he didn't like and split."

"How long has he been gone?" Cherabino asked.

"Like, more than a week," George said. "It's been a couple days before, and he's got clothes missing. I didn't worry about it. But—his grandfather called, seemed worried. He said I should report it, so I did, but the campus police don't seem worried either, says it hasn't been enough time. You think something happened to him?" George asked. "He's not on campus. Nobody's seen him."

Wow. Seemed like Raymond's case had gotten thrown about in a bad way for days. If the judge hadn't strong-armed us into it . . . would anybody have found Raymond? If the rain hadn't kept the construction crew from emptying that dumpster, would I have?

"George," I said.

"What?"

"I'm sorry to inform you that your roommate, Raymond Datini, was found dead yesterday on campus." I waited.

George's immediate reaction was scorn, and anger, then he looked down. Took a breath. "I guess I'm going to have to find a new roommate then."

Had they fought? Was George having to pay more of the money share than expected? There was something there he wasn't talking about and without the telepathy I didn't know how to get to it. Normally at this stage I'd be picking up flashes of guilt or shame or whatever he was feeling, and the telepathic read would help me figure out where to press. Without it, I was down to guesswork and prayer.

“You said Raymond partied?” I asked, maybe to chase down the drugs angle. If George was involved, maybe that was Raymond’s connection. I’d been in the Guild school at this age, so I didn’t know firsthand, but a lot of the guys at the Narcotics Anonymous meetings talked about college parties as the places they first met their drug. “Tell us about the parties,” I said.

“Some campus-wide hangout at the Plantation,” he said, then frowned. “Well, it’s not my scene. He went sometimes, but he did the frat party thing too. He liked to drink too much, if you know what I mean.”

I looked at the guy, hyped on caffeine and almost certainly something else, and wondered why he’d felt the need to say something. But people could get real judgmental on other people’s habits, even if they had their own.

“Did he have trouble sleeping much? Did he seem erratic? Up and down?” I asked.

“Sometimes. Look, he paid the rent on time. He’s not a bad roommate,” he said.

“And the Plantation?” I asked.

“It . . .” George paused.

“Yes?”

“Well, it doesn’t have a great reputation. My friends tend to stay away from that crowd. Listen, it’s getting late and I’ve got a paper due in an hour.” He looked at the door significantly.

Cherabino handed him a card. “You’ll call us if you remember anything else?”

“Of course,” he said, and stood up, obviously a prompt for us to go.

“Anything at all?”

“You got it, man.” He looked at the door again.

“We’ll be getting out of your hair now,” I said.

* * *

Billy Oden’s campaign office was on the bottom floor of a large post-Tech Wars concrete condominium building, next door to a dry cleaner and a pizza place. The signs in his window—OUTSTANDING ODEN, VOTE ODEN, and other uncreative examples of the type—were printed in garish colors and blocky fonts so large you couldn’t possibly overlook them.

The bell over the doorway rang dully as we entered. It was dim inside, the window largely covered by the signs, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. Long rows of tables filled the large room beneath another garish sign, each table filled with papers and people. In the back of the open space, maybe twenty feet back, a boxy office stood next to the restrooms. Its walls didn’t reach all the way to the ceiling, and its door closed with a *click*. The outside walls in the building, like most of the buildings built after the war, were three feet thick, and the acoustics as a result felt heavy and muted.

There was also a security guard, as was traditional for this kind of post-war building, a hefty guy with a large gun seated in an alcove eight feet away on the right wall. I wouldn’t be surprised if a huge concrete cover sealed up the building’s front every night; after the Tech Wars, people got paranoid, and for good reason. Why a politician had chosen this particular building with all its paranoia rather than the newer grown-crystal open buildings told me something about his character.

As we walked in, a hawkish guy in a far too expensive suit punctuated an order to another, then stood up. He came over, his hard-soled shoes making hollow *thuds* on the floor. “How can I help you?” In his mouth, the standard words became almost a curse.

“DeKalb County Police Department,” Cherabino said, flashing a badge. “We’d like to speak with Senator Oden.”

He adjusted his cuff links. “Of course,” he said, in a tone that said anything but. “His earliest available appointment is tomorrow.”

“It’s in his best interest to cooperate with law enforcement. I’d like to speak with him now,” Cherabino said evenly, a kind of leashed expectation coming over the Link. “Who are you?”

“Rafael Mantega, Senator Oden’s campaign manager,” he said smoothly. “And I’m afraid the earliest available appointment is tomorrow morning. I can offer you a slot at eight-thirty a.m.” He seemed pushy, and I wished I could read him to see why, but I felt nothing.

Cherabino held her ground. Finally she shrugged. “Put us down for eight-thirty then. But it will be here, not at the capitol.”

“Of course,” Mantega said smoothly. “Who should I attribute the appointment to?”

She frowned.

“Detective Cherabino,” I told him.

“I’ll make a note.” He smiled an empty smile, his eyes following us as we exited the door. “You have a pleasant day.”

In the steel-lattice-reinforced parking deck behind the building, I asked Cherabino, “Is it suspicious they won’t talk to us right away?”

“Could be. Probably Mantega’s just being an asshole, throwing his weight around.”

“You’re still going to run a background check on him, aren’t you?” I asked.

She stared at me, her car door half-open.

“Sorry, stupid question.”

* * *

The Plantation was an old house in the style of *Gone With the Wind*, with a cluster of huge tall columns, two porches, and a yard that was trampled down so dramatically it was nearly half dirt. It was set far back from the road, down a long dirt path with tire tracks on its sides in long rows. Huge trees, twisted from the pollution and the aftermath of the Tech Wars, shaded the area. It was two o’clock in the afternoon, and the bright sunlight, even under the trees, was not kind to the house. The paint was peeling in small strips, the columns dented and stained near the base. And the bronzed-lettered square sign on the street had a pair of dirty underwear hanging from its corner and two letters missing.

Cherabino parked her unmarked detective’s car close to the house, angling the driver’s side for an easy dash back to the car. Since I’d been cut off from the world and seeing only her thoughts these last few weeks—even with her mostly blocking me out lately—I was starting to notice how many things she did, as she put it, “with an eye to officer safety.” Even the way she got out of the car, watching the bushes and the house out of habit and cautiousness, stood in sharp contrast to my normal habits.

A month ago, I would have been able to tell whether there was someone there from a distance; I was a Level Eight telepath, and even the quietest mind made ripples in Mindspace I could detect through training, power, and experience. But now—now. I still couldn’t feel anything but Cherabino’s mind, the world a wash of static. If someone charged out with a gun, I wouldn’t be able to drop them with a thought. Not now. I looked at the bushes myself, and suddenly felt vulnerable. Not only could I not sense danger coming, but I couldn’t take it out. Not even one, lone guy.

Was this how regular people lived all the time? Was this how I would live now, if my mind didn’t heal itself? Sometimes they didn’t, after the kind of trauma I’d been through, and—

“Ahem,” Cherabino cleared her throat pointedly. “Let’s get this done and back to the station on a

reasonable time schedule, okay? I have other cases to work today.”

I sighed and closed the car door, a soft *snick*, and I followed her, cautiously, all the way up the front of the house and inside the huge double doors, which were hanging slightly open.

Inside, a man’s voice called out, annoyed, “Are you back with the carpet cleaner? What did you do stop at three stores?”

“Who is this?” Cherabino called back. She was bladed, her shoulder leading, hand close to the gun without making a production of it. She was expecting trouble, and for the first time since my Ability had shorted out, I felt . . . naked. I didn’t have a gun, and for the first time, I needed one. I didn’t have telepathy. I didn’t even have a rock to throw.

We were standing in an old entryway, ancient wood floors with chips and scratches so deep you could hardly see the grain. A long, Scarlett O’Hara–type staircase went up to the right, to a place we couldn’t see, and to the left, where the voice had come from, someone had knocked out a wall and set up a raised area with tables and chairs, bright disco lights and a dais on the end, presumably for a DJ since there was DJ equipment set up. Shiny mechanical spinners lined the walls, covered in mirrors. More mirrors adorned the tables, so that, at night, with the lights going, it would be a veritable treasure-trove of glittery lights. Here, now, in the daytime with the blackout curtains up and away, letting sunshine in, you could see the layers and layers of faded stains on the small strips of carpet on the outside of the room, and the deep scratches on the tables and dirt on the floor. This was the kind of club that was ridden hard and put away wet, and I felt dirty just standing here.

Cherabino moved forward, around the corner to the left, toward the voice.

“You know very well what . . . You’re not Parna,” a dangerous voice returned, and Cherabino stopped, her hand going to her gun.

I turned the corner too—a wide door on tracks was closing. Cherabino had seen something; she’d seen something to spark recognition and surprise but I hadn’t seen what.

Standing in front of the now-closed door was a white, overweight guy in an Atlanta Braves baseball cap, with the small three-dot tattoo on his right hand that would tell paramedics he had an artificial heart. He was sweating, droplets of it on his neck, and the butt of a gun showed faintly through his shirt on his waistband.

“The club is closed,” the guy said, his face screwing up in what should have looked ridiculous but instead looked fierce, like the glare of a bulldog before he bit down and didn’t let go.

Normally at this point Cherabino would have flashed the badge, but oddly, here, she didn’t. “When’s it going to open?” she asked instead, her voice pitched higher, like a silly college girl. She played with her hair in a way that made her suddenly less threatening. I did a double take. She could almost pull that off.

But I could take a cue. “Yeah, I majorly need a break,” I said, and pulled her toward me suddenly.

She threatened me with violence over the Link if my hands got too friendly, but giggled. “We need someplace to go,” she said, and put her hand on my face, shyly.

The guy with the gun relaxed his body language. “We’ll be open at six,” he said.

“We’ll see if we make it that long,” I said, smiling down at her lecherously.

The threats in Cherabino’s head escalated into a kidney blow, but she smiled, playing along for his benefit. She giggled again. “Let’s get out of here, okay?”

And we wandered out, hand in hand, flirting—me enjoying it immensely while the back of my neck itched like someone was going to shoot me at any moment. But we made it back to the car and she pulled away.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

She shot me a glare. “Drugs. A lot of them, and guns, and ammunition. They’re running a major operation out of the place—and, better, we have a guy inside already.”

* * *

She drove us through the skylanes to a small divey barbeque joint maybe ten miles away, and got a table. We ordered tea and waited. And waited. I got more and more tired, and finally asked the waitress for a cup of coffee, which made me feel jittery but got me to focus.

Finally, forty minutes later, Johnny Kubrick walked in the door. He sat down at the table, took off his filthy knitted cap, and scratched his scalp. The tracks on his arms flexed with the movement, and his painfully-thin face grimaced. Cherabino offered him wipes she’d gotten from the waitress earlier. He nodded to me, and took them.

“Hey, sweetcakes,” he said to Cherabino.

She blushed, and didn’t object to the title, which was odd.

“You working the Plantation?” I asked him. We’d worked together for a year or two, taking down the guys who’d once sold me my drug.

“That’s right.”

“I was starting to think you missed the signal,” Cherabino said, with a little smile.

“Naw, just needed a second to extricate smoothly. Good to see you again.” He winked at her.

Huh? There was some history here I wasn’t aware of, I could feel it. It took everything in me not to sneak out over the Link and take the information from her, but I’d promised. And my promises mean something. Or at least they did, now.

Kubrick meanwhile had washed off the apparent caked-in grime from his hands, the apparent track marks on his arms, and was working on the black-eye makeup on his face. He had a pile of wetwipes on the table already, their formerly-pristine surfaces now covered in multiple colors of dark pigment. His face, once he finished swiping at it, ended up a little streaky, like a rock musician after a crazy-sweating concert, but it was obvious, once the makeup was off, that he was just lanky, thin, naturally. The sickness, the addict’s heaviness and history ground in, well, they’d all been painted on, and had come off that easily. He still smelled, but I was betting that was the clothes he was wearing; he’d always smelled like a rose when he wasn’t undercover.

“Thank you,” Kubrick said to the waitress, as she dropped off a cup of coffee for him. She did a double-take and smiled uncertainly before taking our orders. As I remember, she was dating one of the beat cops from the area, and could be trusted to keep her mouth shut—or at least Kubrick had some kind of reason to believe that, or he wouldn’t have taken off the disguise where she could see him.

So. Time to order. I got a soyburger with real pulled pork, real bacon and pickles, with Brunswick stew and home fries. Cherabino got a loaded baked potato with fried okra on the side and a large unsweet tea. And Kubrick got a salad. A big salad with every conceivable vegetable, and he ordered it like it was the finest ambrosia available. Maybe to him, it was. It certainly cost enough.

“Funny seeing you here,” he told us. “You’re a little out of your territory. I assume Homicide has a pending case?”

She nodded, her face a little softer. She was very comfortable with Kubrick—very, very comfortable; she wasn’t putting up the walls she usually did with the other cops. “We’re looking into the death of a college kid. It’s got connections to the system in Decatur,” she said. “The kid’s roommate says he’s involved in the drug scene, and that it was out there in the Plantation. Looks like point-blank gunshot, a la drug execution. Doesn’t look good for your guys.”

Kubrick frowned. "What does the student look like?"

Cherabino gave a description.

He nodded. "I've seen him. I'm surprised you even got a glimpse. This group is careful. They lock their doors obsessively, they clean up after themselves. You wouldn't believe the hoops I had to jump through just to buy the first dose of drugs. They normally require a student ID, if you can believe it. Did you use the telepathy?" he asked me, in a tone of idle curiosity.

I shrugged. He'd liked my "extras," as he called them, back when we'd worked together bringing down dealers, but it had been awhile, and I wasn't—under any circumstances—going to mention the sprained mind to him. Most normals feared telepaths, back in the back of their heads, whether they admitted it or not. I wasn't going to give him or anyone else a reason to think I was weak.

"Tell me about the dead kid," I said.

Kubrick sat up, rubbed his nose, thought about it. "He's been coming to the Plantation as a party-goer for awhile. Rumor has it they've put him on a rub-a-dub."

"Rub-a-dub?" Cherabino asked.

He sighed. "Give the kid some overpriced drugs on credit, get him good and hooked with a real big bill, then tell him the only way to work it off is to start dealing. You do it with somebody you don't think is going to be easily suspected, somebody who's hooked but not desperate, somebody good with street smarts who has contacts you think you can turn into money. Rumor has it he was supposed to be selling on the campus, but nobody there seems to know about him."

"So he can't be selling much," I said.

"Or he's doing it so quiet none of the guys are hearing about it. Campus PD is great at finding the drugs. They have dogs sometimes, they have people inside, and every year they pay a student to buy before they sting. That's why the traffic's out of the club, back there. It's easier. Campus doesn't have jurisdiction. That's why they called the county narcotics unit, though; won't be long—if you didn't spook them too bad—before we have them red-handed."

"How much was Raymond buying?" I asked, out of curiosity. With his class load and that internship, and him still with his head above water, I couldn't see him having a heavy habit, not yet. Things tended to fall apart in those situations, ask me how I knew. Of course his drug was— "What was he buying?" With the right kind of synthetics, you could be boosted right through the courses.

"That's the thing," Kubrick said. "He was buying old-fashioned straight snow cocaine. The pricey stuff. And to get him on the line they were probably charging twice what it was worth. Even at twice a week, he was blowing through money like nuts."

"Where did he get that kind of money?" Cherabino asked.

"Stealing," I offered, quietly. "Cons. Stickups. Or some kind of skill you can barter for cash from the right kind of people. It's there, if you're willing to go low enough." All sorts of things were there if you were willing to go low enough.

Our food arrived. We dug in, but my fancy burger with all the fattening stuff didn't have much taste. Raymond was from a good family, a rich background. And it sounded like he'd been on the first rung of that ladder I'd ridden down to hell and back—the first stages of the world falling apart.

"So," Cherabino said quietly. "Any reason to think someone ordered Raymond killed? Maybe one of the guys from that room?"

Kubrick paused, fork on the way to his mouth. "That's the thing. Nobody's in a turf war right now, nobody's actively pursuing the college except this group. And Raymond wasn't making any waves that I could see. They had him right where they wanted him. No reason to wish him dead—much less to do it. If you're asking me—"

“We are,” I said.

“If you’re asking me, whoever killed him wasn’t involved in this drug group. Maybe it’s on the selling end. I can try to find out who exactly he was selling to. But my gut says whatever the issue was wasn’t drugs.”

“You sure?”

“It’s just a gut. Nothing like your stuff. But my gut is usually right about this kind of thing.”

“Even so. Catch us up with the players in this group,” Cherabino told Kubrick, and added, “please.”

And I got a sudden, intense flash of interest from her, and then him and her in the middle of sex, and I knew he had a tattoo on his hip. I shut down the Link as much as I could, strong, from my end, and shuddered. Old memory, faded with time, but—

This was Cherabino. I pushed away my burger, as Cherabino and Kubrick talked shop, comfortable enough with each other to smile, to joke, to flirt.

I talked just enough not to draw attention, my stomach curling in jealous anger. And I left, reminding myself that hating someone for having what you couldn’t wasn’t a good idea.

I’d have a lot to talk about to my sponsor tomorrow.

* * *

Cherabino had other cases, so she had me call in to see if Bellury could come pick me up while she went to talk to victims’ families in cases she didn’t want me there for. I told myself it wasn’t personal and she just wanted space. But part of me wondered jealously if she was just wanting to spend more time with Kubrick.

The phone rang, and I got transferred.

“Hello?” Bellury answered.

“It’s me. Listen, is there any way you can drive out to—”

“You just got a telephone call from a judge,” Bellury said. “Judge Datini. He wants you and Cherabino in his office right away. Is this something I need to be there for?” His tone was a mixture of support and suspicion. “I can bring the drug testing history if that’s the issue. We’ve got years of it. We can do another one today.”

I could feel my cheeks heating. “No, that’s not what this is about.” Though really, at its core, maybe it was. I needed to pay off the debt I had to the judge—now. “What did he say exactly?” I asked.

* * *

Judge Datini answered the door stooped over, looking very frail. “I have twenty minutes before court starts. Come in.”

He led us back to his office again and settled down behind his desk, rummaging through drawers. The window shades were drawn and it was darker today than usual. The little bonsai bush on his desk gave off a faint glow, the light changing slowly over several minutes to a different color, and then another. Had to be a very expensive genetic splice—something with a deep-water fish, maybe.

Cherabino waited to speak until the judge was seated, until he had fished out a brand-new unlabeled file and settled back in the chair. “You wanted to see us, Judge.” She was thinking she didn’t have time for this. Her boss was already up in arms about the time she was spending on this case.

“Have you made any progress on the case with my grandson?” the judge asked me, specifically. He held my eyes.

I nodded as seriously and competently as I could, and did my best impression of Cherabino's competency. "We've got several promising leads we're pursuing."

"None promising enough to tell me about." A heaviness settled over the judge. The mammoth desk and rows of ancient leather-bound books in bookshelves filled nearly the entire space, so that he looked small in comparison. Small in a way he hadn't before. "And why is that?"

"I . . . it's only been a day," I said.

"These things take time," Cherabino said, cautiously. "Give us a chance to do our jobs."

"It's not you that I asked to find my grandson," he said.

"Even so. Was there a reason you asked us to come in?" she asked.

The judge visibly shook himself, like walling off a part of his reaction he wasn't ready to look at. "I received a letter from Raymond this afternoon. He'd put it through the system without an office number. Anything without an office number gets routed around for at least a week before they can find who it belongs to. He knows this."

He pierced me with a look.

I owed this guy. I owed him a lot—and since Raymond had been found dead, my only option was to pay him off with the truth about what happened. For all of Cherabino's suspicions, I couldn't see him doing the deed—why would he request our services if he'd known what happened already?

"What is in the letter?" I asked him.

He pushed a file forward. When Cherabino was just about to take it, he put his hand over hers and took a breath. "These are, well, it is to say that they are pictures, explicit pictures of a young woman—a very young woman—and an older man engaging in, shall we say, acts of a sexual nature. I received them an hour ago. I have no idea why he would send me something like this. Well, you can read the letter for yourself. He says he needed me to keep them, and needed me to help him figure out what to do." He lifted his hand, and let her have the file.

Frowning, Cherabino visibly braced herself, and opened the file. I looked over her shoulder, and saw what had been described, various sex acts between a young girl and an older man. Unfortunately, they weren't the worst thing I'd seen in this job, since there was no apparent injury involved, but the pictures were disturbing enough in their own right. She was so very young. . . .

Cherabino's finger settled on a spot in front of the photo, and her shoulders slumped, just a little. "This is Billy Oden. The older man."

"You sure?" It occurred to me he was married. "An affair?" I hoped it was an affair. . . .

My eyes went back to the faintly-glowing bonsai, for something to look at.

She cleared her throat. "My gut says prostitute, Adam, and illegal one at that. Otherwise why send these? We'll ask the forensic age specialist to give us a better view, but I'd be surprised if this girl is eighteen. If she's not, this is—"

"A very sensitive situation," the judge said. "Something that could destroy a man with a very notable career."

"And Raymond sent the pictures to you," I said.

He looked very old, and very tired. "And now he's dead. I'd suggest you find out why, and soon. Otherwise I can—and will—reexamine my ruling in your case."

I swallowed.

"He's my grandson," the judge said, voice like steel.

"I understand," I said in a small voice. "I understand."

* * *

Cherabino made us walk back through the square. Her sensei said she was spending too much time at her desk, she was thinking. She needed to walk more, try to do a little better. She could feel her muscles tensing up, she thought, especially the long ones in her legs. Her sensei was probably right. The fattening lunch had nothing to do with anything.

I pulled back from her mind, fuzzily thinking I shouldn't be listening in so much. I'd promised, but my attention was starting to go as it entered the two to three o'clock range where my brain didn't like to work as well. That and I wanted to think about something—anything—other than the judge's ultimatum.

We passed a block of restaurants near the old subway station; this whole area had survived the Tec Wars well, and so the original brick architecture still stood with only minor renovations. A very faded mural of what might once have been a rainbow and a burrito beneath a moonscape adorned the wall. A neon sign advertised a special at the oxygen bar across the street; the air quality was relatively good today, hardly making me cough at all even with the wind blowing directly at me, and as a result their business was probably suffering. The laser tattoo shop next door to them actually had a line, though.

We waited at a crosswalk as a flyer came in to land on the roof of the mechanic's shop on the corner of Church Street. Then, when the signal turned green, Cherabino started across. I trotted after her.

When I caught up, I forced myself to confront the thing I feared. To think about the case, and actually try to solve it rather than running away like I wanted to.

"This is about a sex scandal with a state senator?" I asked Cherabino. "Nothing to do with the drugs?"

"It's looking like it," Cherabino said. "I can't spend any more time on this today—I'm a couple hours late as it is—but I'll have a uniform go get the senator for you to interview. If you catch him in a lie or get a confession, maybe we won't need the forensics at all."

"But no pressure," I said, nervously, as we passed a few old houses with law firms inside. Even if she couldn't work more, I had to. I knew I had to.

She stopped to look at me. "Adam, you have a judge asking a personal favor of you. And his grandson is dead. Whatever you owe him, unless you can bring him a head on a platter in the next week, you're out of luck—you might have your future in the department blocked, and that's assuming he doesn't actually follow through on the threat. The pressure doesn't get any higher than this, and if you think otherwise, you're kidding yourself."

I shivered a little as the wind blew out of the south.

* * *

I'd managed to grab a quick nap in the crash room—consoling myself with the idea that lunch had been work today—and was feeling a little better. I was having trouble reading, but I could force it, and I could focus if I used up a lot of energy. This would probably be my last useful interview of the day; I'd either have to switch to easier suspects (God willing, there were some in the queue), or find something else useful to do. Maybe Paulsen was right. Maybe working on cases right now wasn't all that great of an idea. Not that I had a choice.

"Was it really necessary to have uniformed police officers drag me out of my office like a common criminal?"

"State Senator Oden," I said, and stood. I'd missed the door opening, somehow. A uniformed officer smirked from the door, then closed it. Great. Now I'd have to spend a lot of time soothing the senator before I could do anything else useful. "Thank you so much for coming," I said on autopilot. "Please

come in.”

Billy Oden was a wiry man, all teeth, with a very good hairpiece and a pale, too-smooth face that spoke of subtle plastic surgery, a lifetime indoors, or very expensive health treatments. Something about the way he moved made me think of a tennis player, *whap* to return the ball, *whap* to hit it back at you. His cheeks were ruddy with anger.

Behind him was the pompous campaign manager from this morning, Mantega, in an even more expensive suit. He was a lawyer by trade, and I vaguely remembered Cherabino had found his record otherwise to be clean. She'd made some comment about his previous clients, something about defending the scum of the earth.

“I'm surprised you people didn't drag me down in handcuffs,” Oden said. “It's a disgrace to our system of government. I'm a state senator, for the love of God.”

I pasted on the most natural smile I could manage, relaxed my shoulders, and held out a hand. “I'm sorry for the rough treatment. The officers must have gotten a little overzealous. Please, sit. Can we get you guys some coffee?” I did my best to project hail-fellow-well-met, not because I thought I could actually manage the feeling in Mindspace, not now, but because my micro-facial expressions and body language would at least project it some. Politicians were good at reading people, and I'd have to be careful. Very careful, this late in the day, so I wouldn't miss anything. I'd do this. I'd do it if it killed me. They sat, Mantega finding a seat very close, arranging his cuff links carefully before placing them on the table.

With as tense as they were, I'd have to softpedal it. “I'd like to ask you some questions. Namely, about your intern, a Raymond Datini? He was reported missing a few days ago.” I forced myself to focus on strategy, where I was going with this.

Oden shifted in his chair, seeming to relax. “Yes, Raymond works for us. If that's all this was about you could have made an appointment. I would have talked to you.”

I completely ignored the implication that he wouldn't talk otherwise, and reinforced my pleasant body language.

Just then, Bellury appeared in the doorway with two coffees in hand. *Thank you*, I mouthed at him. He frowned at me in return, probably unsure why the words hadn't just appeared in his head, but I stood up and took the coffee to overrule the moment.

“Ah, here we go,” I said, and put the coffee in front of the two men. Mantega sniffed at it and pushed it away; Oden held it in his hands.

I pulled the chair around and sat down on the side of the table, perpendicular to Oden, as to seem more friendly. He blinked when I got into his personal space, but settled down nicely when I backed up a half-foot. Apparently we weren't that friendly yet, but that was okay.

Bellury settled in his chair in the corner and held the files I'd asked him to bring.

“Senator Oden,” I began, and paused for him to correct me.

As expected, he put in, “Billy, please.”

“Thank you,” I smiled the expected smile. “Now, let's start with the legal disclosures. I'm a Level Eight telepath.” I paused. It was technically true, even if I wasn't operating right now, and the disclosure intimidated most people. “I'm required by law to tell you that skin-to-skin physical contact can increase my ability to read your mind, so for most people it's considered wise to avoid all physical contact with telepaths. The Guild recommends that if you have something to hide from a telepath, you think about something else.” That part usually got me a flash of a secret, a flash I was sorely missing now. “Do you have any questions?”

“Am I under arrest?” Senator Oden squirmed a little in the chair.

“No,” I said soothingly. “Nothing like that. Even so you’re entitled to a lawyer if you want one. You should also know you’re being recorded. It’s just standard procedure, to make sure I’m doing my job correctly.” I smiled again, and shrugged in a self-deprecating way. “Do we need to wait for anyone for you? Are you comfortable?”

He drank a little of the coffee and made a face. Bellury had likely given him the department standard stuff, which was swill, even if most of it was actually beans, not simcoffee. It was still vile. “Yeah, enough, I guess. Let’s get this over with.”

“When was the last time you saw Raymond?”

He thought. “It must have been two weeks ago. At first I thought he was working on a special project for Rafael here, but later he told me Raymond hadn’t been into work in days. He’s the grandson of a judge, you understand. I was willing to be flexible, especially with the health issues he talked about, but he should have called. I haven’t seen him since. Have you heard anything?”

“Health issues?” I asked.

Oden shrugged and dared another sip of the coffee. “He’d lost a lot of weight and was looking pretty sick. He was late to work, more than usual for a college student, but he said he hadn’t been feeling well and I didn’t pry. He didn’t give me any details.”

Huh. The judge hadn’t mentioned health issues, and with the roommate’s and Kubrick’s information, I was leaning toward the beginning of a serious drug habit. Or, I supposed, trying to be generous, it could just have been the overbooked hours the roommate said he was keeping. Those could make your body complain after a while.

Back to the interview. Um, okay, standard alibi type question.

“Where were you on Friday morning between the hours of eight and eleven at night?” I asked. The medical examiner’s report had finally come back, and that’s when she estimated Raymond had been killed. As I’d thought, execution-style shot at close range from a .38, one of the most common guns on the street.

“At home, with my wife and children,” Oden said.

I looked at him, trying to get a read off body language since I couldn’t do it with telepathy. He was nervous, twitchy, but I couldn’t tell why, and the alibi wasn’t much of one. Better than being alone, but barely. Spouses lied for each other all the time. I tried to picture Oden killing Raymond over pictures, and couldn’t. Maybe it was Mantega; he looked slimy enough to manage anything.

“Why do you ask?” Oden said, into the silence I’d let sit too long.

I reached over as Bellury handed me the files he’d brought. From the top one I placed three pictures in front of Oden—the first, of Raymond alive, and the next two of the murder scene—the third with a very explicit close-up shot.

Oden scooted back suddenly, the metal feet of the chair scraping against the floor. The shock on his face seemed real to me, but without my telepathy I felt deaf and dumb. It didn’t matter, I told myself. Most people want to tell the truth; they’re just looking for an excuse.

Mantega’s reaction was less extreme, but he still seemed surprised, even a few seconds later. Either I’d missed something or . . .

I kept my voice soft and matter-of-fact. “Raymond Datini was found dead on his college campus yesterday.” Then I placed the three pictures we’d gotten from the judge on top of those pictures. The senator on top of of a very, very young woman. “These photos were sent to Raymond’s grandfather—the judge—just before Raymond was murdered.”

I kept leaning forward, interested, and watched their reactions again.

Oden’s face fell, something like shame coming over it before being replaced by panic. Mantega

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