



# Ghost In The Machine



by tanaquific



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Cover art by NickyGabriel

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Georgia smiled as she picked up her cellphone and saw the name on the screen. "Hi, Paul."

"Hey, Georgia." There was a moment of hesitation at the other end of the phone, long enough for her to think, *He sounds tired*, before Paul added in a rush, "Look, sorry to do this, but can I take a rain check?"

"Sure." Georgia perched on the edge of her desk, trying to squash down her sense of disappointment. She'd been looking forward to the two of them spending the evening together, though she knew Paul had been somewhat equivocal about her dragging him along to a swing dance class—despite her reassurances that it would be nothing like Poppi and Sister Anne trying to teach the orphans to waltz. Still, it wasn't like Paul to cry off from something he'd agreed to. "Is everything okay?"

Even down the phone, she heard him huff out a breath. "Just a rough few days at work."

"Hmm." A rough day at work for Georgia meant orders getting mixed up or a shipment from the distributor being late. For Paul—well, she knew a little more now about what he did that had Poppi making faces when Paul wasn't around. Was glad of it too, after the way Paul and his new workmates had helped her make sense of those letters. She wasn't so sure Paul would have confided in them if something was bothering *him*, though. "You planning on spending the evening at home?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay." She nodded briskly to herself. "Sit tight. I'll be over with a pizza in an hour or so."

"You don't have to—"

"Yes, I do." She gave a slight shrug, even though he couldn't see her. "We don't have to talk about it, but it sounds like you could do with someone to hang out with for a while. Okay?"

He chuckled wryly. "Okay. See you in an hour."

It was a good hour later by the time Georgia finally knocked on the door to his apartment. He must have been ready for her, because he answered almost immediately. When she caught sight of him, she was glad she'd come: he didn't look well and there were dark smudges under his eyes, like he hadn't been sleeping properly. Pretending not to notice, she smiled brightly at him and drew him into a quick one-armed hug, before presenting him with the pizza she was carrying. "Pepperoni and pineapple."

He took the pizza from her. "You remembered?"

She laughed as she followed him inside. "How could I forget? Every birthday, Poppi would ask you what you wanted. Every birthday, you'd say pepperoni and pineapple. Every birthday, he'd try to persuade you not to get the pineapple. Or have ham. 'Why can't you have ham and pineapple, like normal people?'" She mimicked Poppi's despairing tone.

Paul put the pizza down on the table, where he'd already set out two plates. "Well, I guess I'm not like normal people," he muttered.

The bitterness in his tone took her by surprise. She bit her lip, kicking herself for the misplaced joke, and yet glad of it. Glad she'd made him reveal himself so quickly and that he clearly wouldn't be able to shrug off whatever was so obviously bugging him and pretend it didn't matter.

Hanging her purse over the back of the chair, she sat down. "Well, why don't we eat this before it gets any colder, and then you can tell me why you're not normal?" She reached forward and flipped open the lid of the pizza box, before tilting her head back and giving him an overly innocent smile.

He stood frowning down at her for a moment and then his expression cleared. Grinning wryly at her, he gave her a nod and joined her at the table.

oOo

"So, what happened?" Georgia sat back and wiped her fingers on a paper napkin. She'd spent the last half hour chattering about a couple of mutual friends from the orphanage that she'd seen over the weekend. She knew Paul wasn't really listening, but she didn't mind.

Paul swallowed down the last bite of his pizza and reached for his own napkin. He peered sideways at her as he cleaned off his hands, clearly deciding whether to confide in her or not. After a moment, he puffed out a breath. "You remember Evie?"

"Yes, of course." Georgia knew Evie had been the one who'd done a lot of the legwork that had tracked down Dubeck, the man who'd sent Georgia that frightening and terrible and miraculous letter.

"She has a son, Matty. He's four." Paul folded his napkin neatly and laid it on his plate. He sat looking at it for a moment before he spoke again. "Three days ago, he was abducted."

"Oh my God." Georgia put her hand to her mouth. "Is he—?"

"We got him back." Paul lifted his head for a moment and flashed her a brief smile. "The woman who took him, she'd lost her own son. All she did was feed him cereal and let him watch cartoons. No real harm done." He fiddled with the corner of the napkin, smoothing it out. "I was supposed to be looking after him when he was taken."

"Oh, Paul." Georgia reached out and put her hand on his arm. "You must have felt awful."

He snorted quietly in agreement. She could feel the tension in him under her fingertips. Still not looking at her, he added, "That's not all. You've heard of Jason Herlock?"

Georgia raised her eyebrows. "The TV psychic guy?"

Paul nodded. "He predicted it. We were at a taping. Someone had hired us to try and convince his wife that Herlock was a sham. Herlock touched me and—" Paul gave a slight shrug. "He had a vision. And then it came true and Matty was taken."

Georgia sat back, looking at Paul, not quite believing him. Though why she shouldn't, when she'd had those letters, she didn't know. It wasn't any stranger or any less likely, was it? Still, that Herlock guy.... "I thought he was a fake."

Again, Paul gave a wry laugh. "So did he, up till then. What he did on his show, it was just a trick: reading people, giving them what they want." He shrugged slightly. "Which is real enough, in its way. It helps people. But this... this was real, too."

"He didn't warn you? That Matty was going to be taken?" Knowing that Herlock's gift was real didn't make Georgia think any better of him—especially not if he'd still let Matty be abducted.

Paul shook his head. "He didn't know. He didn't see that. Just what would happen before and that something terrible was going to happen." He looked up at Georgia from under his lashes, his expression uncertain. "That's not all. When... when we were trying to get Matty back, we asked him to try again. To see if he could see something else that might help. He didn't want to, at first. He said it was too hard. But he did."

He stopped. Georgia saw his hands had curled into fists on the table. "What did he see?"

He hesitated and then, with another brief, nervous glance in her direction, said quietly. "Me. Dead."

"What?" Georgia stared at him, horrified. "*When?*"

He shot another glance in her direction; she remembered that look from back when they were kids, when he was trying to decide how little he could tell Poppi to explain away whatever mischief the two of them had gotten caught at. The corner of his mouth twisted wryly. "It already happened."

Georgia took a deep breath, trying to wrap her head around what he was saying. "You already—? *How?*"

He gave a slightly embarrassed shrug. "There's this thing you can do. A guy I knew when I was in the seminary did it...."

Georgia listened, growing increasingly appalled, as he explained about the ice bath and the drugs and how Keel's friend had stopped his heart. How he'd "died" for four minutes. How he'd seen Tommy—who Tommy was—and learned enough for them to be able to point the police in the right direction to find Matty. He tried to sound matter-of-fact about it all, but she noticed the way his gaze turned again and again toward the door to the bathroom, and the

involuntary shiver that ran through him as he mentioned the ice bath, and the almost angry look on his face when he spoke about Tommy.

At last he stopped speaking. They sat there in silence, Georgia looking at him, her oldest friend. Her best friend. Thinking about how, twenty four hours earlier, he'd been dead, and what if they hadn't been able to bring him back? Thinking about how she'd nearly lost him, and how she couldn't imagine him not being there, and—. She put a hand to her mouth to stifle the sob that rose up in her throat.

He gave her an embarrassed grimace. "I wasn't going to tell you."

She sniffed back another sob. "Like hell you weren't!" She smacked him on the arm, before grabbing his hand, curling her fingers around it in a fierce grip. "If anything had happened to you...." She saw him wince and realized she was squeezing the hand that sported a bandage. She'd noticed it when she'd first arrived, but hadn't commented, suspecting it was part of whatever story he had to tell. She let go abruptly. "Sorry."

"It's okay." He cradled the injured hand in his other, rubbing his thumb over his palm, and gave her a reassuring smile.

"So is that how you got that as well?" She dipped her head toward his hand.

Glancing up, she caught a moment of panic on his face, before he smoothed it away, and she knew there was something else he wasn't telling her, something nearly as bad—or maybe even worse. "It was part of it, yes." He stood up and picked up her plate. "I should—."

"Paul?"

He stopped, holding the plate in one hand, while reaching out with the other to close the pizza box. Maybe only a few people could have read the guilt on his face, but he was like an open book to her. After all, how many times, in all the years she'd known him, had she seen him make himself suddenly useful, suddenly busy, when he wanted to deflect Poppi's questions?

From the expression on his face, she knew he knew she'd caught him out. With a sigh, he stacked the plates together and closed the box, and then sat down again.

He was quiet for a moment, before he said, "I never really told you how I got mixed up with Keel, did I?"

She shook her head, wondering what further revelations he had for her.

He was silent again, clearly gathering himself. She waited, letting him find his own way. At last, he began, hesitantly, "Before Tommy.... Before he healed me, something else happened. I was lying upside down in my car, with my blood dripping onto the windshield and it... made words. My blood made words."

He stopped again, flexing his hands. When it didn't seem like he was going to say any more, she prompted gently, "You mean, you thought you could read words in it?"

He shook his head. "No. It actually made words." He glanced up at her briefly. "It's called hemography. It's happened to other people. Keel talked to some of them. Turned out seeing the words wasn't the only thing they had in common. They all saw me as well. They all had dreams about me. Some of them saw Tommy healing me—years before it happened. Keel knew all that when he first approached me." Paul snorted. "Not that he mentioned any of that to *me*. Just said he needed an investigator and that if I came to work for him, he could help me find answers. I only found out later he had some of them already, and that he'd been keeping tabs on me for a while."

Georgia shook her head, trying to make sense of what Paul was saying. It had seemed crazy enough when she'd gotten those letters, but it also made a kind of sense when she found out what Dubeck had done. There was unfinished business. But this, with Paul.... "So you're... important? Special?"

"Apparently." He gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Keel says there's some 'large event' coming and that I'm mixed up in it somehow."

"You're going to save the world?" Georgia raised her eyebrows. Not that she didn't think Paul would try. There was a need to help inside him that had been there even on the first day she'd met him, her first day at the orphanage, when he'd found her crying in the closet that held the orphanage's cleaning supplies. Anyone else would have tried to persuade her out; he'd asked if she minded if he joined her—and then talked her out an hour later with promises of cake.

Now, he gave another bitter laugh. "Or destroy it."

Georgia shivered at the way he made it sound like the natural order of things. "You really believe that?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know what I believe any more. The things I've seen...." He fell silent, before he gave himself a little shake. He lifted his bandaged hand. "Before we spoke to Mr Herlock again, I cut myself. I was hoping to get another message. Find a way to find Matty." He shrugged. "It didn't work."

Georgia caught his hand in both of hers, wrapping her fingers around it gently. "But you got him back. You put yourself in danger—."

"I put Matty in danger." He pulled his hand out of hers. "I was supposed to be taking care of him and I let all of this... stuff distract me. I was busy having visions of Tommy when I should have been watching Matty." He shoved his chair back and stood up again. "Evie had it right. She said I wasn't safe. She may not be mad at me any more now we've got Matty back—but she was right: I'm not safe. And that means you shouldn't be around me either."

Picking up the plates and the pizza box, he stomped off toward the kitchen.

Georgia let him go, recognizing from past experience that now wasn't the time to try arguing with him. Instead, she sat back, puffing out a breath as she tried to take in everything she'd just learned—and what it meant, for her and for Paul.

She'd always known, of course, that his faith was deeper than hers: that he questioned more, thought more. For her own part, she was sure God was there, and she knew Poppi and the others at the orphanage had given her good rules to live by—but this world was the one that interested her and the one that felt real. Ghosts and spirits, demons and miracles: they were all just words to her. But for Paul, it seemed, they were very real and, through him, could reach out and hurt the people he cared about. And Paul, being Paul, wasn't willing to take that risk.

She thought again about how he'd been prepared to die to save Matty. About how she wasn't ready for that. About how she'd never be ready for that, never be ready for him not to be there in her life, even if they hadn't seen much of each other in the past few years. How glad she was, despite the pain it had caused her, that uncovering the truth about the letters and about her father had helped the two of them to grow closer again. How she wasn't ready to give up on their friendship just yet, even if he was.

She shook her head. No, he didn't want that either. Not really. He was just trying to protect her and take care of her, the way he'd always done. And maybe he hadn't told her any of this before because he didn't think she'd believe him; or maybe he hadn't properly understood until now what it might mean; but maybe, just maybe, he hadn't told her because he'd been afraid of losing her. Maybe he was pushing her away first so that he didn't have to hear her tell him she didn't want to be around him any more.

Taking a deep breath, she got up and followed him to the kitchen. He was running water over the plates, but she could tell by the way his back stiffened that he knew she was there. She stepped up close, putting her hand on his shoulder. He made as if he was going to shrug her off, but stilled when she tightened her grip.

"Maybe you're right and you're not safe and I shouldn't be around you," she whispered, "but I'm not going anywhere." He half turned to look at her, opening his mouth to protest, but she shook her head. "Whatever's going on, I know you'd never intentionally do anything to hurt me. Just like Poppi never meant to hurt me writing those letters. But sometimes that happens, even with the people we love. Besides," she choked out a laugh, feeling her throat tighten, "what kind of friend would I be if I walked away now, huh?"

She saw him swallow. "A sensible one?" he managed, his voice cracking a little.

"Well, we both know that's not me, right?" She forced a grin.

"Right." He mouth twisted wryly as he lifted a hand and tenderly brushed her hair back from her forehead, accepting her choice. She smiled back at him. Whatever came next, she knew



she'd made the right decision.

oOo

Paul felt a flutter of anticipation in his stomach as he climbed the stairs at Georgia's workplace, heading for the office where she worked. It was a week since he'd last seen her. A week since he'd laid the truth of his life before her in his apartment and she'd told him it didn't matter.

Reaching the office, he rapped on the edge of the door, smiling at her across the large open-plan space. "Hey there."

She looked up, a startled expression on her face, the movement mirrored by the ghostly second version of her reflected in the dark window next to her desk. She was holding a plastic and foil-wrapped package in her hand. Paul could just make out the green and gold of a circuit board through the packaging and he guessed it was one of the computer components her firm shipped around the country and that she'd been figuring out what needed to be done with it.

"Oh, hey. You're here already." She gave him a fraught, preoccupied smile.

"Uh-huh." He wound his way through the desks towards her. "Your colleague downstairs let me in. Said I'd find you up here."

"Yeah." She glanced at her watch. "Sorry. Just need to finish packing this and get it down to dispatch. You would not believe how crazy today has been."

"You're still up for tonight?" He hoped he didn't sound like he was trying to cry off—again. They'd agreed to try the swing-dancing evening a second time and he was feeling more than a little nervous about it.

"Uh-huh. I'm good." She still sounded distracted as she glanced back down at some paperwork that he supposed related to the component she held. Still not looking at him as he reached her, she took a step sideways and gave him a one-armed hug, turning at the last moment to greet him with a kiss on the cheek.

Except he hadn't quite been expecting the hug or the kiss, and maybe he was leaning the wrong way, or had his head at the wrong angle, because—.

Her mouth brushed the corner of his mouth. A jolt of electricity crackled between them. Without thinking, he turned his head further to chase after her lips and capture them for a moment longer. Heat flooded through him as he kissed her more firmly, while his arm came up to draw her closer. And then—.

He came back to himself and drew back abruptly. She was gazing up at him, still within the circle of his arm, all her attention on him now. He felt a shudder run through her, though she

didn't move away. Instead, she let out a small, surprised, "Oh!"

He took a deep breath, trying to collect himself. Trying to pretend that what had just happened hadn't happened, that he hadn't felt—. Because it was Georgia, and.... "Sorry," he mumbled, beginning to pull away.

She tightened her grip on his arm, not letting him escape. He dared to meet her eyes again and saw surprise but also something that made him shiver, that made him think that maybe kissing her hadn't been such a mistake after all. Then she sucked in a deep breath. She waved the package in her hand. "I need to—."

"Yes, of course." He let her step back from him.

She turned and bent over, allowing her hair to fall forward so he couldn't see her face. He could see, though, that her hands were shaking slightly as she slid the package into a large padded envelope that already sat on the desk. She added some papers—most likely the ones she'd been looking at when he came in—before sealing the envelope and sticking an address label on the outside. Watching her as she worked, he wondered why he'd never noticed—never *really* noticed—how beautiful she was.

When she looked back up at him, he saw she'd regained some of her composure, though she still seemed a little shy. Just as he was a little shy. Both of them wondering, he guessed, what that kiss had meant and what the other one was feeling. Both of them wondering what else they might discover during an evening of taking each other's hands and holding each other close as they learned to dance together.

Suddenly, the dance class seemed even more unnerving than it had a few minutes earlier, and yet he found he was looking forward to it far more than he had been.

"I just need to take this downstairs to the warehouse." She held up the envelope.

"I'll come with you." He took the envelope from her, smiling at her, unable not to smile. "Why don't you get your things? If you're ready?"

She smiled back at him. "I'm ready." He didn't think she was just talking about it being time to leave.

oOo

"That was fun," Paul admitted as he walked Georgia home several hours later, the late night streets quiet around them. He didn't think he'd gotten very proficient at the steps they'd been taught at the start of the evening, but he'd enjoyed being close to Georgia while they danced and seeing her enjoying herself.

She smirked at him. "Told you."

He took her elbow to guide them across a crosswalk. "Think I'll be paying for it tomorrow, though." He flexed his shoulder, feeling his muscles stiffening in the cool night air.

Georgia stifled a yawn. "Me too." She waggled her eyebrows at him. "Wanna go again next week?"

"Sure." He gave her hand a squeeze, realizing with a start that he'd been holding it ever since they'd crossed the street. That she'd been letting him hold it. That it felt good. He frowned, recalling that it had only been a week ago that he'd been telling her he shouldn't be around her. And now here he was, holding her hand, without quite knowing how it had happened. Just like, earlier this evening, he'd ended up kissing her without quite knowing how that had happened either.

He silently snorted. Who was he kidding? He knew exactly how it had happened. She might be his oldest friend—apart from Poppi—and he could remember her with pigtails and skinned knees and a gap-toothed smile, but somewhere along the way, in the years they'd barely seen each other, she'd grown in a beautiful, smart, confident woman. A woman he clearly found extremely attractive.

They walked along in silence, occasionally glancing at each other and looking away shyly when they caught the other's eye, until they reached her apartment building. There, she had to let go of his hand to find her keys and open the door. He followed her inside. Reaching the door of her apartment, she turned to face him.

"I had a lovely evening. Thank you." She tilted her head back a little, smiling up at him.

"So did I." His voice was croaky with nerves. He wanted to kiss her, but he wasn't sure if it was a good idea or not, or even if she wanted to be kissed. This was Georgia, after all....

But she went on looking up at him, an expectant expression on her face. He took a half step nearer, reaching up and cradling her cheek in his palm. She didn't move, though her eyebrows rose a little higher, in question or invitation, when he still hesitated. Drawing in a deep breath of anticipation, he bent his head and kissed her.

She returned the kiss, her lips parting under his. This was nothing like the awkward, wet, fierce kiss she'd given him when she was twelve; he'd realized only much later that, at the time, she'd simply wanted someone "safe" to practice with. Not that he'd helped make the kiss any better, with the way he'd reeled back out of a combination of surprise and a fourteen-year-old boy's revulsion for all things romantic. No, this kiss was very different: gentle and slow and sweet, flooding every part of him with desire.

She pulled away first, her face a little flushed. "It's late," she murmured. "I have to be up early...."

He brushed her hair back from her forehead, chuckling. He guessed she was both as eager and as uncertain as he was, not ready to rush things or take things further tonight. "Get

some sleep," he advised. He hesitated and then added. "Call you tomorrow?"

She nodded, smiling at him with her eyes, apparently happy enough with that development, and slipped from his arms.

He waited until she was safe inside her apartment—with a final smile for him as she closed the door—before he turned away. Kissing her was probably a mistake. If he really cared about her, he should surely be putting more distance between them, not getting closer. Not now he and Alva had finally started leveling with each other and were trying to figure out what was happening and what part Paul had to play. Not given what had happened the last time he'd let himself get tangled up with an old flame; it had been sheer good luck that no one had gotten hurt worse than they did that time.

Yet he grinned as he stepped outside and set off briskly toward his own place. Somehow, he couldn't convince himself that kissing Georgia had been any kind of mistake at all.

oOo

Georgia stared glumly at her computer screen, trying to summon up some enthusiasm for translating the various orders that needed to go out in the next week into the replacement stock that needed to be ordered in. Normally she loved her job: making sure everything got where it was supposed to, when it was supposed to, so that things ran smoothly; sorting out the messes when things did go wrong; being in control.

Not today. Today, she felt anything but in control. She still didn't know why she'd kissed Paul when he arrived to pick her up last night, or what to make of what she'd felt—what they'd both clearly felt—when it had turned into more than a peck on the cheek. True, she'd always thought he was cute, in a dorky sort of way, but there'd never really been any romantic sparks between them when they'd been growing up together: he was too comfortable, too familiar. Except now... now she found herself remembering the kiss outside her apartment, and how much she'd wanted him to kiss her. How the flirting and touching as they'd danced had made her heart flutter, even as it had seemed entirely natural. That she didn't know what to do about any of that.

She glanced at her cellphone again, wondering when he'd call. It was already late morning, but maybe he'd wait until lunchtime or until after she got off work. Because he *would* call: if anyone could be said to be dependable, it was Paul Callan. She wondered what he'd say. What she'd say.

With an effort, she forced her attention back to the computer screen.

The chirp of her desk phone ringing a minute later made her jump. She hastily shoved aside some papers that were covering the phone and picked it up.

"Georgia? It's Bob Hills from Jackson Computing here."

"Bob." Georgia smiled. She and Bob had been carrying on a mild flirtation by phone for the past three years now. "I hope you got the network card I sent last night already."

That had been the shipment she'd been rushing to pack up when Paul had arrived and when they'd—. She was distracted enough by the memory of Paul's lips on hers that she almost missed that Bob's "Sure did!" was followed by a slightly weary, "Pity the damn thing doesn't work."

"What? Really?" Georgia rubbed her hand across her forehead. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Plugged it in and it started spewing gibberish. Chattering away like it's my Great Aunt Lucille. Though who or what it's talking to, I've no idea. Spent the last two hours trying to fix it."

"Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear that." Georgia made a face. She hated it when stuff like this happened. Often as not, when the customer sent the part back, the tech guys downstairs couldn't find anything wrong. Still, Bob was a good customer and she couldn't recall the last time he'd phoned up to complain. "Let me check if we've got another one in stock." She tucked the phone between her shoulder and her ear while her fingers flew across the keyboard. "Yup. There's one down in the warehouse. I'll have the guys check it over and send it out straight away. And I'll give you a returns number for the other one...."

A few minutes later, she put the phone down and got to her feet, planning to head down to the warehouse by way of the printer on the far side of the office that was churning out the paperwork for the replacement order. She paused, looking down at the cellphone that still sat infuriatingly silent next to her keyboard. It would be just typical if Paul called when she was down in the warehouse. Not that she couldn't call him back, but—.

Shaking her head at her own foolishness—*How old are you, Georgia?*—she grabbed the phone and shoved it in her jacket pocket.

oOo

Paul breathed in deeply, relishing the chilly Sunday morning air as he jogged along the path that bordered the lake. At his side, Georgia was giving him a run-down of her woeful week at work; it felt like she hadn't drawn breath once since they'd set off.

"...got it back and the guys tested it. Of course *they* couldn't find anything wrong with it. And then on Friday, another customer was complaining about three of the five storage controllers we sent them being dead. Then someone else had a problem with a batch of routers...."

Paul let the stream of complaints wash over him, only supplying the occasional murmur of agreement to show he was listening. He suspected Georgia just needed to blow off steam and wasn't expecting any real reply or suggestions from him. Which was just as well, as he only understood about one word in three of what she was saying. As far as he could tell, they

were having an unusually large number of mysterious, random technical glitches with the parts they'd sent out—which, in Paul's experience, was pretty much standard as far as computers were concerned.

He surreptitiously flexed his left hand, finding the almost-healed cut didn't hurt so much. He supposed he should be glad about that, but it only threw into sharper relief how the problems he faced weren't going to clear up as easily. He and Keel had talked and talked in the past ten days about theories and patterns and possibilities. Keel had also revealed more of the events he claimed were portents of this coming catastrophe, sharing books of prophecy from the past five hundred years. Most of which, Paul had secretly concluded, were more likely the delusions of unfortunates with undiagnosed mental illnesses than true guides to the future. More disturbing had been Keel's reluctant disclosure—only made after Jason Herlock had paid them his farewell visit—of what the psychic had said about the pain he'd seen inside Paul. All of humanity's, Keel had said, looking at Paul cautiously, apparently still unsure whether he should be telling him this.

Yet it wasn't as if Paul felt as if he was filled with pain. Sure, there were dark parts of him, dark memories, occasional dark thoughts—but didn't everyone have those? And it was true that he seemed to be some kind of lightning rod for this coming apocalypse. Yet, right now, glancing at the woman jogging next to him, he felt anything but filled with misery.

She was still talking about work. "...figure out what the hell seems to be frying half our stock. At this rate, we're going to have to test everything—" She faltered as she caught him looking at her. With an extra flush coloring her cheeks, she said, "Sorry. I'm being boring, aren't I?"

He laughed. "Not at all. Just not sure I have anything to contribute."

"Yeah, well..." She slowed and then stopped altogether and turned to look out across the lake that stretched out below them.

Stopping next to her, he reached up and brushed back a lock of hair that had escaped from her ponytail, tucking it back behind her ear. He felt her shiver where his fingers brushed her cheek and an answering shiver ran through him. "Want to get some brunch when we're done? If you don't have any other plans?"

"Sounds good." She glanced sideways at him, her mouth curving into a mischievous grin. "I didn't make any plans for the rest of the day..."

oOo

Two and a half days later, Georgia put down the phone and wearily shifted the order form in front of her onto the stack of papers to her left. At least the pile to her right had shrunk considerably; all that was left were a half dozen items sourced from a supplier in Hong Kong whose offices wouldn't open for another couple of hours.

Leaning her elbows on the desk, she put her head in her hands and breathed in deeply. It

had been one hell of a day. One hell of a last week, really. The troubles she'd listed for Paul on Sunday had turned out to be the tip of the iceberg: there'd been another six calls on Monday and a further five today. She just wished she'd been able to figure out, as she'd run around trying to pacify irritated customers, *why* so many components had suddenly started malfunctioning left, right and center. Sure, you got the occasional defective item, but it was one a month, two tops. Not like this. And it hadn't just been one type of product or one manufacturer.

It almost looked like there'd been a power surge in the warehouse or the building had gotten hit by lightning. Except when Steve, her boss, had suggested the technicians pull some parts at random from the shelves to test them, they'd all checked out. Which also ruled out the very faint possibility it was some kind of virus.

After she'd gone in to report to Steve that the tests hadn't thrown up any issues, he'd leaned back in his chair, turning a pen over and over between his fingers. "Is it one of the couriers?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "Did they change their machinery or... or, oh, I don't know, the truck doing the pickup has an electrical short and there's static everywhere?" He sounded like he was grasping at straws as much as she was.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I already checked and it's an even split which firm we used. It'd be a pretty big coincidence if they both had a problem."

"Yeah." He nodded. "Still, try giving them a call. See if they've changed anything or anyone else has reported any problems."

An hour later she was back in his office to confirm that both courier companies had assured her they hadn't made any changes to their depots or their processes. She flopped down in the chair on the far side of his desk. "And we had another complaint come in. Couple of storage controllers we sent to Milwaukee."

"Dammit!" Steve rubbed his hand across the top of his, his expression turning even more frustrated.

"I did notice something, though, when I had the dispatch notes out to talk to the couriers." She waved the sheaf of paper she was carrying. "Everything was shipped out Thursday or Friday. Apart from one rush order that went out yesterday. Although I'm kinda dreading finding out tomorrow that all Monday's shipments are faulty as well."

"Hmm." Steve fell silent, staring into space. Georgia waited; it wasn't as if she had any more insights to offer. At last, he shook himself and leaned forward. Shooting a quick glance in her direction, he carefully straightened the keyboard on the desk in front of him. "Do you think it could be sabotage," he asked carefully, keeping his voice low.

"What?" Georgia sat bolt upright. She took a quick look over her shoulder, through the open office door, to where her colleagues were trying to get on with their work as best they could while the future of the company hung in the balance. "You're joking, right?"

He shrugged. "What else can it be?"

"But who—?" She shook her head. "No, it's not possible...." They were normally such a *happy* company.

"Are those the dispatch notes?" He tipped his head toward the papers she held. When she nodded, he held out his hand for them. "Let's check and see who handled what."

Another half an hour passed and they were no further forward. They hadn't been able to find a single common thread to tie the packages together: different technicians had tested them, different staff in the warehouse had picked or packed them, different couriers had signed for them when they were picking up. If there was some kind of conspiracy to bring the company down, it was a very elaborate one.

Georgia had shaken her head. "I think I'm beginning to think Barney had the right idea when he said the damn things were possessed," she'd muttered.

In the end, all they'd been able to do for the rest of the day was try and repair the damage as best they could. Georgia had concentrated on getting replacement parts shipped direct from the manufacturers or the distributors, while Steve had left mid-afternoon to collect an order from a distributor over in Worcester and was then planning to drive round some of their local customers to deliver what he could. Meanwhile, all they could do was hope inspiration would strike to help them figure out what was wrong.

Rubbing her fingers across her eyes, Georgia wondered if she should call Paul in to investigate, even though it wasn't really his kind of thing—despite the jokes about possessed parts. *Maybe he can come in and do an exorcism....* Still, it would be nice to have him around, if only to commiserate. And to think that, just this time last week, he'd been picking her up to go dancing and they'd been sharing that unexpected kiss that had set things in motion between them. He'd kissed her again on Sunday, after they'd both gone home and showered and met again for brunch, and then wandered around the Museum of Fine Arts, holding hands and maybe paying rather more attention to each other than the paintings and sculptures around them. Another shy, quiet kiss, both of them content to take things slowly for now.

If not *too* slowly: Georgia sat bolt upright as she suddenly remembered she and Paul had arranged to go dancing again today. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was already after six. She'd need to stick around a while longer to make that call to their supplier in Hong Kong—and goodness knows how much time it would take to get things sorted out once she did get through.

With a heavy sigh, because she wanted nothing more than to get out of the office and get on her dancing shoes, she reached for her cellphone.



Paul sat at the table in SQ's offices, his chin propped on his hand, only half-listening to Keel expounding on his latest theory about their current case. His mind was mostly occupied with thoughts of spending the coming evening with Georgia.

He lost Keel's thread entirely when his phone rang and he saw it was Georgia calling. Holding up his hand to halt Keel, he answered. "Hey, Georgia." He ignored the smirk Keel gave him from the other side of table.

"Hey, Paul." He heard her draw in a deep breath and he knew it was going to be bad news. He wasn't surprised when she said, "Look, I'm sorry but it's my turn to need a rain check. Things have been just crazy at work the past couple of days and I'm still stuck at the office and I don't know when I'll get away."

Glancing up, Paul saw Keel was now pretending to be absorbed in a book he'd picked up from the scatter lying on the table between them, but still grinning to himself in a way that suggested he found Paul's love life highly entertaining. Feeling a little irritated, because it was really none of Keel's business, Paul swiveled on his stool until he had his back to his boss and concentrated on what Georgia was saying. "Trouble?" he asked.

Georgia's sigh was clearly audible even over the phone. "Remember that thing with the parts I was telling you about Sunday?" She let out a harsh laugh. "Of course you do. I couldn't shut up about it, could I?"

"I didn't mind." He hadn't, really. He'd liked being there for her. While he admired the way she'd grown into a confident, poised woman, he'd realized, after helping her with the letters from her father that had come through Dubeck, that one of the reasons they'd drifted apart was because she didn't seem to need him any more. Not to confide in, or to consult, or to cheer her up. He suspected that was largely his fault: after he'd graduated from High School and left St Jerome's and moved into a dorm at college, he'd been too wrapped up in growing up and becoming an adult to see that she might still need him just as much as ever but didn't feel able to bother him any longer with her "juvenile" concerns. And then she'd moved on too, building a life that didn't really include him.

Now, at the other end of the phone, she made a noise that suggested she didn't really believe him. However, she didn't argue the point. All she said was, "Anyway, it's gotten a whole lot worse. We've had problems with all kinds of stock and I need to stick around and phone our suppliers in the Far East, so...."

"No dancing," Paul finished for her, trying not to let his disappointment show in his voice. Though just because they couldn't go dancing didn't mean the evening had to be a complete dead loss. "Want me to be the one to bring pizza this time?"

"Oh, you shouldn't—."

"Yes, I should." He hoped she could hear his smile as he added, "Your turn to choose the

toppings.”

He could certainly hear the smile on her face when, after a moment’s silence, she said, “That sounds nice. Thank you. It’s a little lonely here now everyone else has gone home. And hey,” she chuckled, “maybe while you’re over here, you could perform an exorcism or two? One of my colleagues swears the computers are possessed. Not that—.”

Abruptly, the line went dead. Paul took the phone away from his ear and looked at the display, but the battery and signal meters both showed a steady three bars. He put the phone back to his ear. “Hello? Georgia?”

There was no reply and nothing from the phone, not even static. He repeated her name; when there was still nothing, he pressed the button to the end the call. Pressing the dial button, he checked that he could get a tone. Maybe Georgia’s phone battery was flat or she’d hit a dead spot in the signal. Not that it mattered: he was pretty sure he could remember what she liked on her pizza almost as well as she remembered his favorite toppings.

Turning around and putting the phone down, he saw Keel was looking at him quizzically over the top of the book he had propped up in front of him. “Everything okay?”

“Uh-huh.” Paul slid off the stool. “Georgia’s stuck at work, so I’m going to take her something to eat. The computer company she works for’s been having some problems with faulty stock. And whatever it is seems to be affecting their phones as well. We just got cut off.”

“Hmmpf.” Keel turned a page in his book. “Maybe it’s another Unterweimer, like Mr Friendly?”

Paul gave an uncomfortable laugh. The encounter with Mr Friendly—the way he’d taunted Paul and shown him his dark side; the damage he’d nearly been able to wreak on Doctor Bauer and his patients; the discovery, after it was all over, of Raina’s true nature—had been an experience Paul was keen to forget. “I doubt it,” he tried to reassure Keel, suddenly feeling uncertain himself. “I’m sure it’s just static or a bad batch or—.”

The disbelieving look Keel gave him didn’t settle his feelings. With a grimace, he reached for the phone again and dialed Georgia’s number.

It rang twice before someone answered. “Hello, Paul.” A man’s voice.

“Who is this?” Paul’s gripped the phone harder. “Where’s Georgia?”

“Georgia’s busy right now.” The man sounded rather pleased about that. “Come to think of it, Georgia’s going to be busy for a while. Like the rest of her life.” The man paused, as if waiting for a response from Paul, but Paul was too shocked to say anything. Not because he believed a word of what he’d just heard from whoever—or whatever—had taken the call, but because his mind was racing with horrified visions of what might be happening—*have happened*—to Georgia.

After a few seconds, the man at the other end of the phone seemed to realize he wasn't going to get an answer. He spoke again. "She doesn't want to see you, Paul. Not ever. Best forget about her, okay?"

The line went dead again.

oOo

Alva had already put down his book and was halfway across the room to find the Polaroid camera when he heard Paul's sharply voiced questions to whoever had answered the phone. Spinning around, he saw Paul's expression grow even more horrified at whatever response they produced. "Something's wrong?" It wasn't really a question, more a way to jerk Paul out of his evident daze.

"Very wrong." Paul looked down at the phone still in his hand as if not quite sure how he came to be holding it. Then he shoved the phone back into his jacket pocket. "I'm going over there. I think Georgia's in trouble."

Alva resisted the urge to say *I told you so*. Instead, he simply said, "I'll drive."

Paul gave him an absent nod as he headed toward the door to grab his coat and scarf. Alva carried on to the cabinet where he'd stashed the camera. Whatever was at the root of the problem might not be an Unterweimer, but electromagnetic discharges were common enough that the camera was likely to prove a useful aid in locating the source of whatever trouble Georgia was in.

By the time he'd fetched the camera—Evie had tidied the drawer at some point, so he was able to find it straight away—and then his keys, and then shrugged into his own coat, Paul was waiting impatiently by the open door. He hurried down the steps and toward the car parked in the alley, and then stood by the passenger door, hopping from foot to foot, while he waited for Alva to finish locking up and catch up.

"She works in South End, a few blocks from the medical center. If you take—"

"I know." Alva gave him a reassuring nod. "You can give me directions when we get there."

He squinted at Paul again after they'd pulled out of the alley and were on their way. The younger man was leaning forward, peering ahead impatiently, and Alva could almost feel him urging the car on through sheer willpower, though they were still at least ten minutes away from their destination—maybe more if the rush hour traffic hadn't cleared. After a few minutes, he flung himself back in his seat, groping in his pocket for his phone. He hit a few keys and then held the phone to his ear. Moments later, he made a disgusted noise and let the phone drop to his lap.

"No answer?" Alva cautiously made a turn onto a wider, busier street. Out of the corner of his

eye, he saw Paul shake his head. A longer glance showed him Paul had his eyes closed, a pained look on his face. Trying to sound reassuring, Alva said, "I'm sure she's fine."

Paul threw him a disbelieving look, clearly unconvinced, but didn't comment. Shortly after that, he began giving directions, the strain evident in his voice. Following the instructions, Alva reflected there'd been many occasions when he'd seen Paul rush to help someone in danger, often apparently heedless of the risk to his own life or freedom. He seemed incapable of *not* helping. But Alva thought he'd never seen him look so afraid for someone as he did now.

It wasn't surprising, was it? The way he clammed up or kept his answers short and curt whenever the topic of Georgia came up made it clear he cared deeply about her, beyond mere friendship. Alva had to confess to himself that he'd initially taken an interest in their developing relationship out of a rather childish enjoyment at tormenting Paul about it. Then he'd thought about the matter a little more, remembering what had happened with Rebecca: how she'd been able to bring out a side of Paul that Alva had always suspected was there—it was inside everyone to a greater or lesser degree, after all—but buried deep. What if the forces swirling around Paul were able to use his feelings for Georgia in the same fashion?

"This is it." Paul indicated a building coming up on their right, a two-storey edifice of no discernable charm, clad in unpleasant mustard yellow siding. Alva turned into the deserted parking lot and pulled up in an empty space near the front entrance. Paul was out of the car and heading for the door almost before they came to a stop.

Alva killed the engine and followed more slowly. By the time he reached the door, Paul had pressed the button on the entryphone twice. Through the glass doors, Alva could see a dimly-lit reception desk. He'd already seen that the rest of the building appeared dark apart from a row of windows at one end of the top floor.

"There's no answer." Paul rattled the doors in frustration, but they were locked.

"Maybe Georgia can't hear the buzzer?" Alva suggested. "Or she's still on her way down? Maybe she's gone home?"

"She said she had to stay late to make a call." Paul pressed the entryphone button again, leaning on it for a good twenty seconds. Alva could hear the buzzer sound even through the glass and he guessed anyone upstairs would be able to hear it as well. Paul gestured toward the lit windows. "Besides, there's a light still on in her office."

"Is there another way in?" Alva had taken a step back and was looking up and down the length of the building.

"There's a loading dock." Paul pointed to their left.

"I'll check it out. You stay here in case she comes down."

Paul nodded absently, taking a step back and peering up at the lights above as Alva hurried off toward the end of the building. He found a large roll-up door, with a standard door next to it. Both were firmly locked. He headed back to the main door. Paul was still outside.

He glanced hopefully at Alva as he approached, but Alva shook his head. "Locked."

Paul took a step closer to the door and pounded on it. The glass rattled, but there was still no reply. He tried the buzzer again.

This time, when he let go, there was a brief burst of static from the speaker, followed by the sound of laughter. A man, Alva thought. Or maybe not a man....

"Georgia!" Paul flung himself at the door again, trying to break it open with his shoulder. It shook but held firm.

When he made to throw himself at it again, Alva grabbed him and pulled him back. "You're just going to hurt yourself."

Paul gave him a wild-eyed look. "Georgia...," he managed.

Alva nodded. "I know. We need something to break in with. Wait here."

Alva hurried back to the car, returning a minute later with a tire iron. Paul grabbed it from him and swung it at the door. A crack appeared in the glass. Paul swung again and this time the glass shattered, large shards cascading down. Roughly knocking several more pieces out of the way, Paul reached through the hole and unlocked the door. Then he was inside, heading up the stairs two at a time, while Alva tried to follow as quickly as he could.

oOo

Reaching the top of the stairs, Paul turned down the darkened hallway toward the office where Georgia had her desk. He could see light spilling through the open door, but even as he opened his mouth to call her name, he saw the light flicker. It went on flickering, while a phone began to ring—followed by second and then a third. As he thundered on down the corridor the whine of a photocopier and the chatter of a printer added themselves to the din. Through the cacophony, he thought he caught Georgia's voice saying "What the—?"

He skidded to a stop in the doorway, catching himself on the doorframe and ducking instinctively as he caught sight of a sheaf of paper, end on, barreling toward him at neck level. The paper slammed into the woodwork above his head an instant later, the sheets cascading around him. Peering up cautiously, he reckoned it must have come from a printer on a table a few feet inside the door. Beyond that, a fan was whining noisily as it turned, catching up strips of paper from the bin underneath the shredder and whirling them into a snowstorm. On the other side of the room, beams of light panned across the floor as a photocopier endlessly copied nothing. Paper spewed from a fax machine to his right and a monitor on a desk to his left was being slowly nudged toward the edge by the vibrations of

the computer tower sitting next to it, the fan inside emitting an unhappy whine as it turned much too quickly.

"Georgia?" he called. He could sense Keel had arrived behind him but he ignored him as he peered around the room, unable to see her anywhere. "Georgia!"

"Paul?" Georgia's voice came from down near floor level, from somewhere behind the desk next to hers. The fax machine on the end of the desk abruptly stopped shooting out paper. Georgia emerged a moment later, holding a plug in her hand.

"Are you okay?" Paul took a step forward, glancing around and bracing himself for another attack.

"Yes, but—" She sounded breathless. Even as Paul turned back to see her gesturing at the misbehaving machines with the plug in her hand, the calculator on the desk spat out its roll of paper, propelling it up and into her stomach. She let out a cry of pain.

That was enough for Paul. Dashing forward, he grabbed her arm and dragged her from behind the desk and toward the door. Halfway there, he shoved her head down with his other hand when a glance showed him that a small fan was trying to launch itself at them from the top of a filing cabinet.

A moment later, they were in the relative safety of the hallway. Behind them, the cacophony of phones and machines continued, while some of the shredded paper followed them in harmless eddies through the door.

Holding Georgia at arms' length, his hands gently gripping her shoulders, Paul examined her carefully. Her eyes were wide with shock, while a bruise was already starting to bloom on her forehead where something—perhaps another ream of paper, like the one that had threatened him—must have hit her before he arrived. "Are you okay?" he asked again, realizing he was breathing hard himself.

She nodded. "Though I've no idea what just happened. One minute everything was quiet and the next—" She turned to look toward the office, shaking her head. "I started trying to unplug everything, but—"

Above them, the strip light suddenly flared into brightness, before there was a loud bang and it went out. Small pieces of debris—the plastic cover, Paul guessed—rained down on them. Georgia let out a small cry of fear, while Paul ducked his head.

"Come on. We need to get out of here." That was Keel, tugging on Paul's arm. Turning to Georgia, he added brusquely, "Where's the fuse box?" When she looked at him blankly, he said, "Where does the power come in to the building?"

She shook her head as if to clear it. "There's a switch room downstairs." She began leading them back along the hallway. Above them, another light blew out. She flinched but picked up

speed. "What's happening?"

Paul shook his head at her, wishing he knew.

"It appears your building is possessed." Keel sounded remarkably calm, even though the wall light halfway down the stairs was sending out sparks as they passed it. At the reception desk, the phones were ringing and the LEDs on the switchboard were flickering wildly. "Probably an Unterweimer."

"A what?" Georgia threw a disbelieving look over her shoulder at him.

"Never mind." Paul had spotted a door labeled *Server/Switch Room*, with a key hanging on a hook next to it. "Is that the key?"

Georgia nodded. Reluctantly letting go of her arm, Paul grabbed the key and shoved it into the lock, noticing his hands were shaking. Flinging open the door, he felt a wave of cold air roll out. For a moment, he wondered if it was more evidence of whatever they were facing, before he caught sight of the racks of computer equipment, illuminated by the light falling in through the door, and realized the room was probably air conditioned.

"There's a light switch...." Georgia had stepped up next to him and was fumbling around on the wall inside the door at shoulder level. Suddenly light flooded the small room. "Oh, God."

Paul supposed that was for the curls of smoke rising up from some of the computer equipment, but he was too busy heading for the two large trip switches he'd spotted on the far wall to pay much attention. Reaching them, he threw them closed, plunging everything into darkness.

Sudden quiet descended as the phones stopped ringing. He heard a couple more bumps from upstairs and then nothing but his own ragged breathing.

Turning, he could sense Georgia moving near the door. "There's some flashlights...." There was a sudden bright flash of light beyond her. "What the—?"

It took a moment for Paul to realize that the image imprinted on his retinas showed Georgia with her back to him and, beyond her, Keel with a camera raised to his face. Then Georgia switched on one of the flashlights, the beam wavering as her hands shook.

Paul strode forward, gently taking the flashlight from her and wrapping his arm around her. "For God's sake, Keel. It's not Georgia!"

"We don't know that." Keel's expression—what Paul could see of it, with the flashlight mostly directed at the camera in Keel's hands and the polaroid he'd just taken—was as smug as his tone.

At his side, Georgia rubbed a hand across her forehead. "Will someone please explain to me

what's going on?" She dipped her head at Keel. "You're Paul's boss, right?"

"Uh-huh." Keel waved the polaroid, to dry it or make it come out faster, maybe. "It seems there's some kind of entity, probably something called an Unterweimer, controlling the electronics here. They're not possessed, but somewhere here is somebody who is." He held the polaroid up at eye level, the image facing away from Paul and Georgia, and grimaced. "But not you."

He turned the photo around and Paul saw it was normal—or as normal as a photograph of a frazzled and startled looking Georgia could be.

"Well, I could have told you that." Georgia sounded cross and Paul couldn't blame her: he could feel her trembling and he guessed she was still pretty spooked. On the other hand, he knew she wouldn't necessarily be the best judge of what was happening if she *were* possessed: when Spencer had been controlling him, everything had seemed perfectly normal, even as the two of them had done terrible things to Rebecca and Evie and Keel. He drew Georgia closer, pressing his face into her hair for a moment, wondering what he would have done if she had been possessed.

Still leaning against her, he turned his head to look at Keel again. "But if Georgia's not possessed, then we need to find whoever is."

oOo

Leaning against Paul, Georgia drew strength from the sense of security his arm around her gave her. Then, a little reluctantly, she pulled in a deep breath and pushed herself away from him. "So what do we do now?" She switched on the second flashlight and pointed it back into the switch room. The server racks seemed to have stopped smoking, but the acrid tang of overheated metal and burned plastic still hung in the air. Probably the whole lot would need replacing.

"We need to find the person the Unterweimer is possessing." Paul's boss—Keel, she remembered now—waved the camera meaningfully.

"You think they're still here?" Paul sounded doubtful.

"If it *is* an Unterweimer, they would have needed to be close enough to control everything." Keel grinned cheerfully. "But I suppose they might have left while we stood around talking. Shall we go see?" He gestured for them to lead the way.

Paul took Georgia's hand as they set off, curling his fingers around hers and giving them a reassuring squeeze. Though she was feeling a lot calmer now—now things weren't launching themselves at her or exploding around her—she didn't mind. It reminded her of when they were children back at the orphanage, embarking on some mildly nefarious plan they'd cooked up. Strange thing was, she'd always thought she was the wild one, dragging a reluctant, wiser Paul along on her crazy schemes. Now it seemed he was the one involving her in stuff



she wasn't sure she wanted to be mixed up in.

They started off in the lab on the other side of the corridor, where the technicians tested parts and put together custom builds. Paul indicated she should hand over the flashlight she carried to Keel. He took it with a nod of thanks and disappeared down the far end of the lab. She saw the beam waving around crazily as he worked his way back toward them, checking under benches and even in cupboards. She and Paul did the same from the other end. Paul still hadn't let go of her hand and she rather liked that, even if it would have been faster to find a third flashlight and have all three of them look.

Satisfied the lab was empty, they moved on to the restrooms and storeroom next to the switch room, confirming that whoever was causing all this trouble wasn't hiding there either. Then, as they crossed the reception area on their way to the warehouse, she saw the mess around the front door that she'd been too busy to pay attention to as they'd come down the stairs. "You broke in?"

Paul nodded, leaning over the reception desk and checking no one was hiding underneath.

"Wait a minute...." Something that had been nagging at the back of her mind finally became clear. "How did you even know? How did you get here so quickly? All that stuff," she gestured upward at the office above them, "it only started right before you showed up."

Ahead of them, Keel was already pushing through the double doors into the warehouse area. Paul shrugged. "I called you back after we got cut off. Someone else answered. A man. He... It didn't sound good."

"Oh." She wondered how many people she knew would come charging to her rescue instead of calling the police. "Well, thank you for coming to check on me." She briefly tightened her grip on his hand.

Paul smiled back at her. "Always."

oOo

Half an hour later, they were back up in the office, having searched the whole building and found it empty. They'd decided against turning the power back on, but the flashlights showed the mess from earlier on clearly enough. Paul propped one of them on top of a filing cabinet and the other on a desk, providing enough light for them to begin setting the room to rights a little.

"Now what?" Georgia asked as she and Paul began straightening equipment and picking up the heaps of paper that were scattered across the floor.

"Now we need to figure out what's going on and why." Keel perched himself on the edge of a desk, one foot swinging as he watched them work.

"You think there's a reason?" Georgia knelt down and shuffled together a handful of invoices that must have been blown off the bookkeeper's desk.

"There's always a reason." Paul, collecting unused paper from the floor around the photocopier, sounded weary.

"So when did this start?" Keel had been fiddling with the camera, but he put it down on the desk next to him.

"This?" Georgia gestured around her.

Keel shook his head. "No. Before that. Paul said odd things have been happening for a while."

"Right." Georgia tapped the invoices on the desk to square them and set them back where they belonged. "Friday, I suppose? We must have taken three or four calls from customers complaining their components didn't work."

"Didn't you say there was a problem with something before that?" Paul looked up at her from where he was now on his knees a couple of feet away, gathering up paper from the shredder bin. "Only you couldn't find anything wrong with it when it came back."

"Right." Georgia nodded. "The network card I was sending when you picked me up Tuesday and—." She stopped, heat rising in her as she remembered that awkward, unexpected first kiss. Remembered, too, what it had led to later in the evening, outside her front door, and then on Sunday as well. Seemed Paul was also remembering, by the half-embarrassed smile that lit up his face. He reached up and took her hand, gently rubbing his thumb over her knuckles.

A cough from Keel dragged her attention away from Paul. She caught an amused expression on his face, before he quickly replaced it with an innocent air. "So, you had a problem with this... network card, did you say, on Tuesday?"

Letting go of Paul's hand, she nodded. "Well, we sent it out on Tuesday. Express order. The customer rang up Wednesday morning complaining it wasn't working properly. We shipped another one out and got him to send the first one back. But when we tested it, it seemed fine."

"Hmm." Keel tapped his fingers together. "And when did you send the other orders out?"

"Thursday or Friday." Georgia leaned back against the desk and ran a hand through her hair. "Though now that I come to think about it, I don't think there've been any complaints about the orders that went out Thursday morning. Only the ones we sent out in the afternoon, after we got the first card back."

Keel nodded, his expression thoughtful. "It sounds like the first card was... patient zero, for want of a better term. So the question is: what infected the first patient?" He spread his

hands. "Or rather, who. Did you have any new starters last week? Someone who could have brought this Unterweimer with them?"

Georgia rested her hands on the desk on either side of her. "No. We haven't had anyone join for, oh, six months."

"So it could be anybody." Paul had apparently given up on trying to clear up the shredded paper, though he'd managed to get the worst of it up. He came and sat next to her, covering her hand with hers. "Place like this would be like a candy store for a kid to something like that."

Keel nodded. "I suppose we'll just have to photograph all your colleagues." He picked up the camera again and waved it eagerly.

"What?" Georgia stared at him in shock. "You can't—." She took a deep breath. "I mean, how am I going to explain *that*? You? How am I going to explain *this*?" She waved a hand around at the office, now mostly restored to its proper state, but she meant the servers and the blown lights and the broken front door. She suddenly felt very tired.

"We'll figure that out tomorrow." Paul slipped his arm around her. "Let's finish up here and get you home and get some sleep."

oOo

Paul was glad when Georgia nodded her agreement: he didn't like the way her skin had turned chalky with exhaustion, making her freckles stand out starkly.

She swept her gaze around the room. "I guess we're about as done in here as we can be. Just need to get the door boarded up downstairs. And then I suppose I should call my boss." She closed her eyes and let out a long, tired-sounding sigh.

"If you've got some boards and some tools, Keel and I can see to the door," Paul offered. Keel, who'd been turning the camera over in his hands, apparently lost in thought, gave him a startled look.

Georgia opened her eyes again, shaking her head and smiling at him. "No, I'll call someone. I think there's an emergency glass place a few blocks over. That way, if anything happens...." She pushed herself off from the desk and he let his arm fall away from her.

He supposed she had a point: best to call in the professionals. Just like he and Keel were the experts for sorting out the less tangible problems she faced.

Watching her find a phone book and shift the flashlight so she could see what she was doing as she leafed through it, he wondered where the person carrying the Unterweimer was now and whether they knew what they were harboring. Which reminded him—. "We need to look out for someone who smells of tar," he announced to the room in general. "That should

narrow it down a bit.”

“What?” Georgia looked up from the phone book, a frown creasing her forehead.

“Yes, of course.” Keel sounded mildly annoyed, perhaps at himself for forgetting something so obvious. When Georgia raised her eyebrows, he elaborated, “The presence of a possessing entity, such as the one responsible for these events, induces certain chemical reactions in the human body which, between them, generate a bituminous odor that—.”

Seeing Georgia’s expression begin to glaze over, Paul quickly interrupted. “If the person who’s possessed is around, you can smell tar. It’s pretty distinctive.”

“Hmm.” Georgia scrubbed a hand across her face. “I don’t remember smelling anything like that in the last week.”

“You’re sure?” Keel gave her a surprised look.

She nodded. “If it’s as strong as Paul says, I’m sure I would have noticed.” She gave a slightly nervous laugh. “Of course, you can’t smell anything but Barney’s aftershave when he’s around....”

“It could be a cover?” Keel sounded like he was taking the idea seriously.

Georgia snorted a laugh, bending back to the phone book. “No, that’s just Barney. Oh, here we are.” She put her finger on the page. “These people should do.”

She picked up the phone on her desk, tucking the receiver between her ear and her shoulder, and reached for the dial pad. Then a frown crossed her face. With a sigh, she dropped the receiver back in its cradle and bent down to pull her purse out from under the desk. When she started rooting around inside it, Paul guessed the office phones must be down, along with everything else and she was looking for her cellphone. He turned back to Keel. “So it looks like it’s not an Unterweimer. It’s something else. Maybe we—.”

He broke off from what he’d been about to say as a burst of laughter split the air—a familiar, mocking laugh that Paul had last heard coming out of the entryphone downstairs. Turning, he realized it was coming from the cellphone in Georgia’s hand. She must have opened it to make the call. Now she was staring down at it in horror as it laughed at her.

The laughter stopped and was replaced by a voice that Paul also recognized: it was the man who’d answered Georgia’s phone a few hours ago. A chill ran down his spine as he listened to what it had to say now.

“That Paul’s a smart boy, isn’t he, Georgia?” The voice sounded amused. “Is that why you like him so much? Is that why you have such bad, *bad* thoughts about him? Such a naughty girl, Georgia! What *would* Poppi think?” The voice was silent for a moment before it promised softly, almost seductively, “He’ll be letting me in soon. I’m so looking forward to wearing his

skin. Oh, and Paul?" Paul started up at being directly addressed. "Mr Friendly says to say hello." There was another cackle from the phone, cut off abruptly as Georgia slammed the phone shut.

oOo

Paul starting up from his perch on the desk had made Alva shift his attention from Georgia's shocked face to Paul's horrified expression. He saw it grow even more appalled as Paul reached the same conclusion Alva had reached himself a few seconds earlier.

"It's me," he croaked, hands spread wide as if to ward off an attack. He went on staring at Georgia as he carried on talking, explaining it to her, or perhaps to himself. "I'm the new person here. I was there when you were packing up that first parcel. And I think you were even holding it when—" He broke off, clearing his throat, his face going from pale to flushed.

*When what?* Alva wondered. A glance at Georgia showed she was blushing, too.

She thrust the phone forward, almost as if hoping Paul would take it from her. "And now it wants you? It wants to possess *you*?"

He nodded. "I think so. I think it's all part of, you know, that... 'large event' I told you about." He shot a nervous look in Alva's direction, as if he was worried he was going to get into trouble for talking about it to someone outside SQ.

Georgia turned her gaze on Alva as well. He shrugged. "I don't know exactly what Paul's told you, but he's... special, yes. And he has a significant role to play in what's coming."

"The Apocalypse?" The words were accompanied by an awkward laugh, as if Georgia couldn't quite believe she was suggesting it.

Alva dipped his head and gave a wry smile. "Maybe. Whatever it is, there are forces out there that are trying to attack our world—and there are people who are uniquely vulnerable to them. People like Paul. But so far we've only run into them by accident, as part of an investigation into something else. This is the first time one of them has deliberately tried to target Paul."

"So why now?" Paul had sunk back on to the desk, his hands curled around the edge, gripping tightly.

Alva gestured around them. "A place like this? Full of electronics? It's Disneyworld for something like that. Maybe it was hanging around here anyway? Or maybe it knew about Georgia and thought it might be able to get to you through her?"

Paul shook his head, his expression bitter. "Well, it was right about that."

Alva waved a hand. "It would have still needed a way in. Entities like that can't just take

someone or something over; they need a strong emotion or someone in a vulnerable state to be able to break in. Like Doctor Bauer and his overwhelming need to find a cure for the disease that killed his daughter." He looked from Paul to Georgia and back again, remembering how Paul had left that sentence unfinished. "Did something else happen when Georgia was packing up the parcel?"

The two of them exchanged another look. Paul cleared his throat. "We kissed," he admitted, his gaze sliding away from Alva's. "Kind of by accident."

"Ah." Alva tried not to sound too amused. The current situation was serious, after all. "And you hadn't kissed like that before?"

"Well, not since I was twelve." Georgia let out wry chuckle. Looking back at her, Alva saw she was doing her best to smile. He realized she'd been trying to make the best of the situation ever since they'd first arrived. Hadn't she even been attempting to unplug things when they started going crazy, instead of just getting the hell out of there? He was beginning to understand why Paul liked her so much.

He thought back to what the entity had told them a few moments earlier. He gestured toward the cellphone still in Georgia's hand. "Didn't it say it was looking forward to wearing Paul's skin? And something about Paul inviting it in?"

"Uh-huh." Alva saw a shiver run through Paul as he answered. "Is that significant?"

Alva nodded. "I think so. It may be something the Japanese call an amanojaku. The legends about them say they can 'provoke a person's darkest desires and thus instigate him into perpetrating wicked deeds'." He made air quotes around the statement. "But the entity can't simply forcibly occupy someone's body. It needs the person to invite it in. My guess is that it saw Paul's interest in Georgia, worked out how to use the electronics to cause a little chaos and get Paul's attention, and was hoping to make Paul jealous enough to invite it in."

"So where is it now." Paul had pushed himself off the desk and was looking around, his hands curled into fists as if he was planning to either smash something or challenge the entity to appear and make a clean fight of it.

Alva shrugged. "I'm not sure. We killed all the power in the building, so that should have forced it out of whatever it was hiding in. Unless it's somehow managed to possess someone else...."

There was a moment's silence while they all pondered that possibility. Then Paul smiled grimly. "Not all the power."

He took a two quick steps until he was standing on the other side of the desk from Georgia. He held out his hand to her. "This entity. It used your cellphone to speak to us: just now and earlier, as well, when I tried to call you back. And the phone has its own battery."

Georgia brought her hand up, offering him the phone. Paul reached out and briefly covered her hand with his, before he took the phone from her, turning his hand palm up to look at it. He flipped it open with his thumb.

"Hello, Paul." The entity's voice sounded a little tinny.

Paul looked up at Georgia. "How...?"

"Like this." She reached out and closed the phone before turning it over and laying it back in his palm. She put her own hands on either side of the phone, doing something with her fingers that Alva couldn't quite see.

"Oh come now, Paul." Even though the phone was closed, the entity's voice could be heard quite clearly. It sounded caught somewhere between peevishness and wheedling as Georgia fumbled with the phone's casing. "Is this really necessary? We could do great things together, you and I. You have such pot—."

The voice broke off abruptly, even as a soft click indicated Georgia had pulled the battery free. She looked up questioningly at Paul. "Is it gone now?"

"Maybe." He groped in his pocket, producing his own phone a moment later. He glanced across at Alva as he juggled the two phones so he could take the battery out of his as well. "Keel?"

Alva was already ahead of him, taking his phone from his jacket pocket and dismantling it. "The flashlights, as well." He turned off the one nearest him and shook out the batteries, while Georgia dealt with the one on her desk, plunging them into darkness apart from the faint orange glow coming in from the streetlamps outside.

"You think that's enough?" Georgia asked doubtfully.

Alva shrugged. "It'll have to be. We can't power off the whole city." He listened for a moment, but the office was surprisingly quiet, only the sound of their breathing breaking the silence. He couldn't detect any background electrical hum that would indicate there was something still switched on close enough for the entity to jump into easily. Fumbling the batteries back into the flashlight, he turned it back on.

Georgia did the same with the other flashlight. In the sudden, surprisingly bright light, Alva saw Paul was sliding the batteries back into the phones, first his and then hers. Then he opened Georgia's phone again. This time, there was only silence. He frowned down at the phone for a moment, before he pressed a couple of buttons. Alva heard the sound of a dial tone, followed by the tones for a string of numbers. A moment later, Paul's phone began to ring. He flicked it open to answer it and, again they waited, all of them no doubt wondering if the entity was only hiding. But, apart from the slight whine of the two phones next to each other, there was silence. When thirty seconds had passed and there was still nothing, Paul closed both phones. He held Georgia's phone back out to her. "It seems to be gone. For now

at least.”

Georgia huffed out a breath. “Good. Now maybe we can finally get everything cleared up here and go home....”

oOo

When Paul walked into the SQ offices the next morning, Keel was sitting at the main table, reading a book. He glanced up at Paul. “Did Georgia get home okay?”

Paul nodded. Keel had driven them back to her apartment once the repairs had been made to the front door and he’d offered to see her inside and to stick around if she wanted him to.

Keel directed his attention back to his book, turning a page. “So did you stay the night?” The casual way he asked and the way he slyly peered up at Paul after he did so suggested he was far more interested in the answer than Paul cared for. Biting back the retort that his personal life was none of Keel’s business, Paul simply put down the coffee he was carrying and shrugged out of his coat, making it clear he wasn’t going to reply.

In fact, he had stayed the night. Georgia had still seemed on edge and she’d gratefully accepted his offer to sleep over if that was what she wanted. He’d started turning away toward the couch, but she’d shaken her head and led him into the bedroom. She’d disappeared off to the bathroom and come back wearing modest pajamas; when he’d finished his own ablutions, he’d stripped down to his undershirt and boxers. Despite the layers of clothing, though, he still felt awkward climbing into bed with her and having her spoon up close to him: the dormitories for the opposite sexes at St Jerome’s had been strictly out of bounds, so whatever nightmares she’d had as a child, he hadn’t been the one to comfort her. She hadn’t seemed at all troubled, though: he’d heard her sigh contentedly as she’d settled against him, and she’d quickly relaxed and fallen asleep.

It had taken longer for him to drift off. He was painfully aware of the beautiful woman in his arms and how much she meant to him—and how much he wanted to avoid anything bad happening to her. God knows what that entity could have done to her tonight—and God knows what might happen next time. And he reckoned there would be a next time, if they continued seeing each other. Hadn’t he told her he wasn’t safe?

Yet waking the next morning with her warmth against him and her hair on his face had felt so right....

A cough from Keel brought Paul’s attention back to the present. “I’ve been reading up about our friend, the amanojaku.” Keel tilted up the book he was holding.

“You think it’s still around?” Paul settled himself on a stool opposite and took a sip from his coffee.

“Maybe.” Keel shrugged. “I don’t think taking the battery out of Georgia’s phone destroyed it



altogether. Just forced it out.”

“So it could be hanging around looking to attack again?”

Keel waved his hands, indicating he didn’t know. “Best case scenario, it’s been sent back to wherever it came from, so it’ll take a lot of energy and emotion, or the right person, for it to find its way back into our world. Worst case, all we managed to do was displace it and it’s still around, looking for another opportunity to cause trouble.”

Paul wrapped his hands around his coffee cup. “You think I should stop seeing Georgia?”

Keel raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to stop seeing her?”

Paul huffed. “No. Not really.”

Keel bent back over the book. “You worry too much about the future, Paul. Sometimes we just need to let it come to us.”

Paul huffed again. “That’s a bit rich, coming from you.” Hadn’t Keel been stalking him for years, trying to figure out what role Paul would play in what was coming?

Keel’s lips twitched, but he didn’t reply.

Paul narrowed his eyes, wondering if Keel wanted him to stay involved with Georgia precisely because he thought Paul’s feelings for her would attract more of these entities and precipitate some kind of crisis—and damn whatever consequences there might be for her. Keel didn’t have a good track record of being either open or overly careful about collateral damage where Paul was concerned.

Paul’s developing suspicions were interrupted by Evie hurrying into the office, a bright smile on her face. “Hey, guys. How’s things?”

“Well, apart from Paul and his girlfriend attracting a Japanese demon....” Keel turned another page in his book, pretending he wasn’t aware he’d just made Evie freeze in the act of unwinding her scarf and give Paul a startled look.

Suppressing a sigh, Paul steeled himself to explain how he and Keel had spent the previous evening.

oOo

A knock at the door of his apartment interrupted Paul as he was ironing shirts. When he opened the door, he found Georgia outside. He hesitated a moment before saying, “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” She gave him a searching look.

He hadn't seen her since he'd left her apartment the morning after the entity had attacked them. He'd phoned her later that day, to check she was all right and to make sure the entity hadn't returned. She'd told him everything was quiet and that she'd made up some story for her boss: *said I caught this kid who'd been sneaking in and messing up the stock and hadn't realized I was still around. That he'd turned the place over a bit and kicked in the door, but you'd happened by and scared him off. Convinced him it wasn't worth troubling the police over.* He'd told her to call him if anything more happened, before he'd hung up. He hadn't spoken to her since.

That had been three days ago. It was Friday evening now, and he'd spent the intervening days trying to convince himself he should stay away from her. Because he'd been right, hadn't he? He was bad news and she'd nearly gotten hurt because of him.

"Can I come in?"

The question made him realize he'd been staring at her, drinking in how beautiful she was. How much he wanted to take her in his arms and hold her close. He cleared his throat.

"Of course." He stepped back, letting her pass him. She moved into the middle of the living room, turning to face him as he closed the door.

She hitched her bag a little higher on her shoulder. "So, you're ignoring me, right?"

He started guiltily, though he shouldn't really have been surprised. She had that look on her face, the one that said he was an open book to her, that she knew exactly what he was thinking.

With a shrug, he headed past her to switch off the iron. "It's for the best," he muttered.

He turned back to see she'd folded her arms, her expression now holding more than a hint of annoyance. "Don't I get a say in that?"

He spread his hands helplessly. He wasn't sure he was up to facing down a determined Georgia. She could be such a force of nature when she had a bee in her bonnet. "I told you," he said, his voice cracking, because this wasn't what he wanted either. It was just *necessary*. "I'm not safe. You shouldn't be around me. What happened this week—."

"Was pretty scary, yes." She met his gaze, her chin tilted up in challenge. "And that... thing could come back? Or something like it?"

He nodded. "I don't want you to get hurt. Again."

"So, what?" She raised her eyebrows. "You're just going to stop talking to everyone you know? Me? Poppi? Those people you work with?"

"That's different...." He stopped, seeing her expression cloud over.

"Just me, then?" She took a deep breath.

"It's not that." He dropped his head, not able to look her in the eye as he fumbled for the words to tell her to leave. "You're different. You're...." The words died on his lips as she swiftly crossed the space between them and put her hand on his cheek, tilting his chin up to make him look at her. Her expression had softened, her eyes filled with concern. Filled with love. He couldn't bear her scrutiny for more than a moment. Closing his eyes, he whispered hoarsely, "I'm not safe."

"I know." He could feel her breath on his face as she spoke, moving closer. "But it doesn't matter. Life isn't safe. And the only way we get through it is by having the people we love around us. Helping us...."

"You shouldn't be here," he tried again, eyes still shut. She was close now, so close; he realized his hands had automatically come up to catch her elbows: to draw her to him or push her away, he didn't know any more.

"I know," she whispered back, drawing him down to her so she could capture his mouth with hers.

*Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof*, a small voice at the back of his head reminded him, sounding remarkably like Poppi.

He didn't think the Darkness was done with him, not by a long shot. And that meant those around him were still in danger. But for now, he gave himself up to Georgia's kiss, with its offer of love and friendship and help. Accepting the gift freely given.

oOo