

NECROGRAPHER

"....and the people will rise up from the ashes...."

"Okay Vanessa. She's all yours," Lieutenant Minsky pointed to the shredded corpse.

Vanessa cleared her throat, taking in the bloodied folds of cloth. The victim's Teflon skirt had been roughly slit from waistband to knee.

"Take a diamond knife to do that," Minsky said.

Vanessa nodded, her lenses capturing the details. "Recording initial attack parameters. Premeditated activity, perhaps. Criminal was, is, prepared." She turned to Minsky, "Have there been any others?"

Minsky frowned, "There was a similar one two blocks away. Ten days ago."

"Two blocks from here. That was one block east of Thompkins Square Park?"

Minsky nodded.

"The Clink's tough on women. Record of background details for file." Vanessa said, panning the surrounding alley. Bricks blackened from years of soot—turbine belts should have blown the soot out to sea. She spoke clearly for the official record, "Lieutenant Minsky, commanding officer—Necro squad. Location, Fifth Street and Avenue D—two blocks south east of Tompkins Square Park, The Clink, New York City," Vanessa paused, her lenses focused on the victim's open eyes—retinal scan feedback posted a name and personal details at the bottom of her field of vision. "Based on retinal scan, victim is Gloria Shampoo, age twenty-two. Last tax record indicates

waitress as primary employment. Actress wannabe. Two doses of fresh stardust were found in the victim's purse. That the purse was on the body and that the drugs were not touched, may rule out a financial robbery or an addict seeking a high." She turned to Minsky. He was listening to her report—standard procedure, after all he was the cop, she was just the necrographer. She cleared her throat, "Was she raped, molested, or dismembered in any sexual manner?"

"No. As far as we can tell without official autopsy, the victim was killed for fun or according to someone's twisted methodology."

"And the other woman that was butchered two blocks from the park?"

"The same," he answered, "All we needed with this Panther situation. I can't keep up. I haven't slept in weeks."

Vanessa said nothing. Minsky had two teen-age daughters. Always painful for him to think of the possibility. "Let the record state Gloria Shampoo was murdered in a similar manner as the killing ten days ago. Let the record further state that—" Minsky began shouting down the alley to his subordinates.

Minsky turned to Vanessa and said, "We have to go. Got a triple homicide couple of blocks from here. I'm going to leave an officer. Coroner's team will be here soon."

Vanessa was still filming the victim's body, her eyes focusing, lenses shooting every millimeter of bloody flesh to facilitate the coroner's inquiry and verify appropriate police procedure, should the victim's relations decide to sue. "Need me on the homicide?"

"No, we can get by without you. You've worked a double shift already and the homicide's on Filmore's turf anyway. Your father would have been proud. Think the

department's going to hire you soon. Go home, get some sleep. It never stops, you know." Minsky said sadly.

Vanessa stopped framing and watched Minsky walk to his hover. "I know," she whispered and stood up. They'd been talking about hiring her full time for years now. And for years she'd freelanced like all necrographers. Minsky was nice. He'd worked with her father too. Back when the Department had necros on the payroll—until he was brutally murdered on the job. After that the Department laid off all the necros, then rehired them as freelance. Claimed they couldn't afford the liability insurance. Maybe someday she'd...Too much to consider. She uploaded her record of Gloria Shampooon and caught the Bronx-bound subway.

By the time the train hit the Bronx, it was crammed with commuters heading home. Vanessa stared up into the sullen eyes of the Panther. The criminal was depicted as a well muscled Middle Eastern male standing at a railing overlooking the Hudson River. Choppy white caps tossed river spray in the background. The official Wanted display lorded over the train's passengers as they clung to the aluminum hand holds. Mohammed "The Panther" Malik was wanted by North American Territorial Justice for crimes committed against the State. Vanessa couldn't stop herself from staring into the Panther's dark eyes. What exactly was a crime against the State? As a necrographer, she saw the product of heinous crime six days a week—sometimes more often. Most perps were never found. What could the Panther have done?

A small Chinese boy jostled through the train, shoving his way to the end of the car. The boy yanked the emergency brake cord and slipped through the door into the next car. Vanessa winced as steel grated against steel—emergency brake. She gripped tight to the aluminum hand ring overhead but slammed hard into a grey-haired geronto decked out in a dark trench coat. The train ground to an unpleasant halt—lights snuffed. Panic hurled bodies into one another. Vanessa toggled her lenses to infra sighting.

With slight trepidation she picked her way through the crowd of accident victims—bodies brilliantly outlined under the infra red filter. Sickening sounds of broken bone and human cries split the calm. She reached the cabin door separating her train from the next car and yanked the manual release. What a crazy boy, she thought, stepping onto the flexible middle between the two cars. Smoke filled the air, but she didn't smell metal or oil, so the train wasn't burning. Her stomach sank—drum fires—*nomads*. Not good, she thought, proceeding with extra caution.

Maybe the Chinese boy wasn't crazy. Maybe someone wanted the train stopped. Something bad was going down. The distant squeal of approaching sirens cut through the hysteria. She jumped from the train, hit the ground almost two meters below and crawled ten meters, finally bumping into a squat fabricated out of four weathered appliance boxes. She slipped behind the flimsy structure and caught her breath. Speed metal crunched the air mercilessly. She glanced around the boxes, through the soot-covered trash.

Clusters of hesitant nomads worked their way around the train wreck. Local cops screaming in on all-terrains. The angry floods of hover-cycles just coming into view a kilometer away.

The speed metal grew louder. Vanessa looked around, it was coming from inside the box. She pulled back out of sight, lifted a corrugated flap and peered into the carton home—beady eyes, drug store spex. Net-linked....kid, head-banging, body gyrating to the beat, attending a virtual concert—context snake down the front of his ragged pants. Venessa dropped the carton's flap and switched off infra. "Time to go to work," she said, thinking about doing some freelance padding—not her territory but....

She stood and caught sight of a pair of black clad figures with long hair pulled tight in pony tails. They hefted a dull carbon hull—diamond gauge missile tube. "Film, distance, record—*now!*" she clipped and flinched as the pair blew back through the air landing on their asses. Grey rocket exhaust—