

“Grand Theft Ecto—An Ectoverse” Tale

All ectopawns were junkies, and Becky was no exception. Her silence was disquieting. The girl shuddered, her doe-like eyes blinking ceaselessly. She kept licking her lips and breathing shallowly. Her hands wouldn't stay still, sporadically touching the table, herself, her chair, anything on or near her. She flinched as if she saw things that weren't there. Thankfully, the camera that recorded this interview also cataloged her chakras and aura. Hers was a purplish pink: she had ectohoms—or other souls—enter it, but not too many. Probably just one, the puppeteer ectohom, or ectothief, the one who possessed and controlled her. Her solar plexus chakra had a black border—an exit and an entrance for the conquering soul. She had no warding tattoos on her forehead or neck, just unhealed skin grafts that most likely covered whatever artwork had been there initially. Curly hair, air-brushed make-up, and bleached teeth denoted a windfall, but her bony waifishness was less supermodel, more druggie jonesing for their next score. She wore a wrinkled designer mini sundress in bright pink, probably slept in, black runny stockings, and black oxfords.

“This one of them?” asked Jay Zarra, owner of Zarra Investigations and my boss, as he entered the conference room. The firm recently hired me, and this was my first case. He resembled Woodstock from Peanuts, with spiky blond hair, blue eyes, and a bulbous nose. He sported a bright pink vest over a lighter shirt with black slacks. His top collar button was undone, and his sleeves were rolled to the elbows. He carried an empty coffee mug displaying an aphorism in block letters, “The Buck Stops Here.”

“Yeah,” said Franky Kay, leaning back in her padded leather chair. She had a raven black undercut and hazel eyes, and wore a purple pleated shirt dress stretched over her substantially muscular frame. Despite her stockiness, she remained feminine, with Venus Williams' build and Gina Gershon's facial features.

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A large TV took up one wall of the conference room, where we watched a recording of an interview at Brooklyn’s 73rd Precinct. “What was his name, the one who approached you?” asked Jamie Matejka, my former colleague and NYPD Detective. She was questioning one of the perpetrators of a bank robbery from two days ago. A bank robbery with a twist.

“Rudy,” said Becky.

Ectopawns allowed ectohoms—in this case, the soul of a living person—to invade their auras, but in so doing, also surrendered all control to them. An ectopawn would never remember what an ectohom did with their body, which made these poor dupes excellent cogs in any number of crimes, with plausible deniability to boot.

However, current laws treated ectopawns as criminals and fully prosecuted them. Nevertheless, savvy defense attorneys still won these cases over half the time.

In this case, one ectohom—or ectothief—was playing puppeteer.

“Rudy who?” asked Jamie.

Becky shook her head.

“That’s okay. How did Rudy administer the drugs?”

“Patches.”

“Was this one of them?” Jamie presented a used transdermal patch and held it up so the camera could capture the markings on its non-adhesive side.

“Yeah.”

“Note this transdermal patch has a design—a letter, rune, or sigil—on it. I cannot identify the symbol.”

Neither could I. The image was too blurry despite the large, high-definition television screen.

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“It was found adhered to her abdomen,” continued Jamie. “Over her solar plexus chakra.”

I paused the video and sipped my Nespresso coffee—Jay didn’t skimp on his employees. “It’s like that runed patch acted as a gateway,” I said.

Franky lit up a Cloverward cigarette. “Easier for the ecto to possess her?” She exhaled the pungent-smelling smoke.

“That’s what I’m thinking.” An idea popped into my head. “Could we get that patch, Jay?”

“Could get a better picture of it.”

“As long as that image is clear,” I said.

“Gimme a second.” He took out his smartphone and began thumbing it.

We sat on luxurious leather office chairs around a polished mahogany conference table big enough to seat twelve. Caravan Palace’s “Dramophone” played from shelved speakers, while scents of mint and angelica helped to ward the space from ectological invasion. A credenza held a Nespresso machine and various pods, a compact no-name refrigerator—probably from Walmart—and a high-end espresso machine. “The espresso machine is Jay’s,” Franky warned me last week. “Nobody else touches it.” An arrangement of bagels and spreads was tempting, but I refrained. I’m trying to watch my weight these days. Jay went to Costco every Wednesday and Sunday to get the breakfast comestibles at a discounted price. Like most moneyed folk, Jay was both frugal and generous.

I resumed the video.

“What drugs were in it?” asked Jamie, still holding the patch.

“Fantazine. I could tell by the high.”

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Fantazine is an opiate that, once absorbed, feels like heroin but also lubricates the chakras. In small doses, it can be used to enhance soulplay. In larger doses, it affects folks like Becky, rendering them completely pliable.

“How could this girl function if she’s totally strung out on Fantazine?” asked Franky, her hazel eyes focusing on me. When an ectohom possesses a living person, it feels whatever its target feels, including the effects of illicit drugs.

“We also found this on you,” said Jamie, holding up a pump-action spray bottle. “This is Rupterone. Do you remember using it?” Rupterone is Fantazine's opioid antagonist. It is fast-acting, taking effect in minutes, sometimes seconds.

“All I remember is it was given to me with the patch.”

I paused the video. “A single pump in the nostril is enough to block the effects of Fantazine on the brain, making a person sober again. It was probably the first thing the ectothief did after possessing her.”

“That’s brilliant,” Franky said, her face brightening.

I shot her a dubious glance, then resumed watching.

“What?” asked Franky, noticing my look.

I shook my head.

“I’m respecting the crime methodology, Duncan. Not the criminal.” She took a drag of her cigarette. “Sherlock Holmes did it all the time.”

“Okay.” Honestly, I shouldn’t judge others' opinions of crimes, since my girlfriend and my mentor were both murderers.

“Can you tell me more about this Rudy?” asked Jamie.

“Met ’em at the shelter. Me and the other kids. He looked like a homeless person.”

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“What did he say exactly?”

“To meet ’em at this hotel. Said we could make two hundred bucks if we did what he said.”

That kind of money would make a big difference to a girl like Becky.

“How long ago was this?” asked Jamie.

“Maybe a month.”

“That’s quite the grooming time,” I noted. No wonder these robberies were so successful.

Jamie nodded. “What was the name of the hotel?”

Becky shook her head, her face clouding.

“That’s okay. We have other ways to find that out.”

Over the last two months, a string of robberies—bank, check cashing centers, jewelry stores—plagued Brooklyn. CCTV footage showed the thefts following a similar *modus operandi*. Three dolled-up, strung-out homeless teenagers all entered the target location within minutes of one another. Then, arbitrarily—like animals in a whack-a-mole game—they systematically robbed the place. When one ectopawn moved, the others stood unsteadily. After the last kid left with the loot, the other two fell to the floor, unconscious. The NYPD, the New York State Ectological Investigations Department—which I used to work for—and the FBI were baffled by these crimes. Progress had stalled in the last two weeks, yet the robberies continued.

Most of the affected businesses deferred their claims to the insurance companies. All except one, a Mob-fronted bank. They took such an act personally and hired Zarra Investigations to find the perpetrators. At least, that’s what Jay told us. “Business is business,” he contended, no matter who hired the agency. Jay played the middle, just like my mentor, Marlon Alden.

“Tell me what you do remember,” said Jamie. “If you can.”

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Becky gulped. “We had to dose up three hours before the bank. We went in at different times and stood around. I was in line. Errol played with his phone. Kasim was in another line. Things like that.”

“Why did they patch so early?” interjected Franky, running fingers through her hair.

I stopped the video. “It takes a long time for drugs to reach the bloodstream through a transdermal. I used nicotine patches when I tried to quit smoking a few years back. But I expected instant gratification and never gave the patches enough time to work. I quit cold turkey just last week, and I still don’t crave a cigarette.”

“Gotcha,” said Franky, nodding.

I resumed the video.

“Then what happened?” asked Jamie.

“We waited,” said Becky. “Then I was woken up by some cop.”

“That’s it? That’s everything?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks, Becky.”

As soon as I turned off the video, Jay’s secretary, Nelly, entered with a color photocopy in hand and held it out to me.

“That was fast.”

“I get things done.” Jay smiled broadly.

Nelly grinned before exiting the conference room.

I looked at the symbol on the photocopy:



Familiarity scratched at my mind.

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“This ectothief used different kids every time, right?” asked Franky, gesturing with her lit cigarette.

“I believe so.”

“Then where the hell is it keeping them all?”

“Good question.” I was focusing on the symbol, unsure whether it was a sigil, rune, or a letter in an ancient language. Nothing clicked. “Did they do a reverse image search on this?”

Franky scrolled through the case files on her laptop. “Nope, the searches found nothing.”

“And the same runed transdermal patches were found on all of the ectopawns from every robbery?”

Franky glanced at the file again. “Looks like it.”

“Did the NYPD compare this symbol with an image-specific database?” I wondered who oversaw this investigation; Jamie wouldn’t have skipped a detail like this. Unless it was Porter Walton, an incompetent ectological inspector with no common sense. He never took suggestions from his subordinates and utterly sucked as a person.

“Not sure the NYPD is equipped for that,” said Jay, smirking.

“Wouldn’t the reverse image search have included these databases?” asked Franky, exhaling a blue cloud of smoke.

“Not necessarily.” I waved away the smoke. I was thinking tattoos. “Can we get Wash in here?”

Jay picked up the receiver of the office phone on the table. “Wash? Come to the conference room.”

“What are you thinking?” asked Franky.

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“If this image can’t be reverse searched, it’s most likely an original. And the only original images I can think of that are of any consequence are tattoos. Not all of them are digitally photographed and uploaded to the web.”

“So most tattoo artists keep hard copies of their work,” Franky said. “To display in their parlors.” Most everyone wears tattoos or computer chips these days to ward their chakras from ectohominid possession.

“Yes. But tattoo artists also take photos of their artwork as compilations, usually organized by themes, like arranging tattoos that are best for warding sacral chakras. To sift through that amount of uploaded tattoo photos and reverse-search the images the old-fashioned way would suck. But there’s no other lead I can think of.”

“Does the ectothief have a tattoo of this image or would it use a transdermal?” asked Franky.

“Wouldn’t matter. It just uses them as gateways.”

Franky nodded. “You might be right.”

“We’d want to Google all tattoo artists in the area,” I added, “and sort them by specialty.”

“Why’s that?” asked Franky, tamping out her cigarette.

Hogan Washburn, or “Wash,” entered the conference room, his laptop in hand.

“What’cha need, Duncan?” asked our IT specialist. Wash had messy, slicked-back hair and wore thick-lensed glasses, a Pokémon t-shirt over a black thermal long-sleeve, skinny jeans, and red high-top Chuck Taylors.

I showed Wash the image and told him what I needed.

“There are programs that can do it. A new one, highly reviewed but not vetted,” said Wash. “But...” He looked at Jay with raised eyebrows.

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“There licensing available?” asked Jay.

“I think so.”

“You’re the expert, Wash. Check it out, see if it’s legit. Also, see if they offer subscriptions. Cheaper than licenses.”

“Gotcha,” said Wash, tapping away at his laptop.

A thought emerged. “This ectothief has to be an Unaware.”

Jay blinked. “Why?”

“Awares or Adepts wouldn’t need aids to perform ectological magic. They’d just do it.”

Since the Crossover, people have been classified as Unawares, Awares, or Adepts. A majority of the population, 80%, are Unawares like Jay and Wash. They cannot commune with the souls of the dead, read people’s auras, or see the ectoverse. Unlike Awares, like Franky, who can do all of that. Fewer than 1% are Adepts, who can control souls, or ectohoms, whether free-floating or within a human body.

I recently discovered that I was an Adept. And I was back in training with my old Adept mentor, Marlon Alden. I didn’t share my abilities with my new colleagues; as far as they were concerned, I was an Aware. And I planned to keep it that way; being an Adept paints a bullseye on your forehead.

“You’re onto something,” said Jay.

Another thought occurred to me. “This can’t be the first time a robbery like this has happened.”

“What do you mean?” asked Franky.

“As unique and innovative as this whole thing seems, it can’t be original. The Crossover happened sixty years ago. Someone must have performed this crime since then.”

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“Maybe,” said Jay.

I looked at Wash. “Do we have access to old criminal case files?”

“There’s a database.”

“How far back does it go?”

Wash made a face. “How far back do you want it to go?”

I mirrored his expression. “The Crossover?”

He winced. “Those are paper case files, Duncan. The City keeps talking about going paperless someday, but the amount of backlog files to digitize is immense!”

“The City can’t get interns to scan documents all day?” asked Jay.

Wash sighed. “The City runs its network on Windows 98. Do you think they’re efficient enough to hire interns? Or have enough scanners?”

“Well, shit,” I admitted. “How’d ectological inspectors handle cases like this then?”

“Do you have any former mentors? Retired from the force?” asked Franky.

“Not an inspector, no.” Would Marlon have any clue about these robberies? If I asked him, he’d probably demand to be paid as a consultant. I didn’t blame him; Zarra Investigations could afford it.

But I wanted to solve this case myself.

“You didn’t answer my question from before, Duncan,” said Franky.

“The one about Googling local tattoo artists by specialty?”

“Yeah, that.”

“I can do it,” Wash piped in.

“What’s next, Duncan?” asked Jay.

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Since this was my first case with Zarra Investigations, I figured Jay was testing me. "Let's look at the map."

Jay received the case late yesterday afternoon, so our investigation was still in its infancy. A street map of Brooklyn with pins at the addresses of the robberies was displayed on a bulletin board in the back of the conference room. I wasn't sure why they had a paper copy, since this could be easily rendered on Google Maps.

"Did anyone add dates to those pinned locations?" I asked.

Franky handed me Post-it labels and a pen. "Have at it, New Guy." She smiled deviously.

One of the unwritten rules at Zarra Investigations was, *If you ask, you do*. I stood, grabbed the Post-its, and approached the map. My back was to the large television screen in the front of the room.

I heard stifled laughter behind me. "What?"

"Nothing," said Jay.

A few minutes later, dates were attached to the places that were robbed. I looked at the map, trying to find patterns. The locations of the robberies appeared random, zigzagging from Downtown to Brooklyn Heights to Boerum Hill to Cobble Hill to Carroll Gardens.

"They're all over the place," said Franky, stifling a giggle. "Why is that?"

What are they laughing at?

"Are there any businesses in these neighborhoods that weren't robbed?"

"Thinking next targets?" asked Jay, with a snort.

I nodded. "Can we get a list, Wash?"

"I'll do ya one better," said the techie. "Gimme a sec." An addendum to the former rule was, *Unless Wash can do it faster*.

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Wait a minute, Wash *can* do it faster....

The laughter continued behind me.

What the hell is so funny?

I ignored the hilarity and drew lines between the appropriate places and dates, looking for any pattern.

“Well,” said Jay. “You can almost predict the next place the Ectopawn Crew will hit.”

I guessed that’s what we were calling them.

“I think so.” I took out my smartphone and consulted the calendar. I looked back at the dates. Today was Friday, and none of the robberies took place on a weekend day. “All these robberies took place within four business days of one another.”

“Business days,” said Franky. “Not calendar days. Brilliant.”

I turned around. A street map of Brooklyn was on the large TV screen. The places where the robberies took place began popping up as different colored dots with dates attached to them.

“Geez. Why’d I go through the trouble of marking the paper map?” I asked, annoyed.

The room erupted in laughter.

I looked at my colleagues. “I didn’t have to mark anything on that map at all, did I?”

Another outburst.

They gave me a stupid task. And they got a kick out of it. I should have known better.

I frowned. “You all suck!”

Jay slapped his thigh a few times, losing himself in his mirth. Wash put his fist to his mouth, trembling. Franky clapped repeatedly, her snorting guffaws out-sounding the rest. I started to laugh a little, too.

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You can always tell the climate of a workplace by how the employees are treated. The camaraderie at Zarra Investigations was entirely welcoming. I saw myself becoming comfortable here, now that I had endured some hazing. It was much better than the last place I worked.

“Okay. Show me what you got, Wash.”

Lines like those I drew on the wall map appeared on the screen, each labeled with a distance. A window with a Google Sheet opened. Two columns were populated with business names and distances. At the bottom of the distance column, the average was calculated. There was no significant difference between the lengths and the average.

“I could have done this,” I said, a touch peevish.

“Yeah, but you didn’t, Inspector,” jested Wash. He sometimes called me by my previous title—Ectological Inspector for the State of New York. I didn’t mind so much.

“Check the armored truck delivery schedule?” asked Jay.

“Why?” I asked.

Jay raised his eyebrows. “To see if any guards cased the places before the crimes happened?”

I blinked. “Oh.”

Jay narrowed his eyes. “Ever work a robbery with the NYPD, Duncan?”

“No. Ectological inspectors hardly worked mundane crimes.”

I felt scrutinized. And I didn’t like it. The bosses at my old job looked at me this way all the time. If Jay did this only occasionally, I could handle it, but I still didn’t like it. He was indeed testing me. He stood and walked towards me. “Don’t the NYPD require all ectological inspectors to take the Detective’s Exam?”

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“It wasn’t a requirement. It was a suggestion.” New York State was so short of ectological inspectors they let the rules slide for the ones they had.

“You opted out?”

“I opted out.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to become a first responder.”

“I get it. But I need you to be a first responder, Duncan. Zarra Investigations needs you. You won’t have a team to do the tasks like you did with the NYPD, but you won’t be called to every crime in the Five Boroughs, either. You’ll be on your own, with maybe Franky as a partner. But she’s a chakra profiler, so her focus will be different than yours.”

“Okay.”

“Sign up for the exam, take a review course, *pass* the exam. I’ll handle all of the expenses...Okay?”

“Got it.”

“Good.” He paused, studying me. “You maintain your firearm certification?”

“I have, but I’m a terrible shot.” I wasn’t going to lie; I had nothing to hide.

“Call Metropolitan Rod and Gun Club, ask for Barry, he’ll set you up. I’ll cover the membership fees. Just handguns. I’ll also pay the annual maintenance costs of your certification while working here.”

I nodded, appreciating his support, but not looking forward to these extra headaches. Again, I marveled at his rollercoaster spending. “Okay.”

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“I’ll make a detective out of you yet, Griffiths.” He slapped me on the shoulder. He used my last name. Just like my old bosses. Great. “Wash? Pull up schedules of armored car deliveries for the last two weeks.”

“Sure, Jay.” He typed on his laptop. “I’ll chart the routes on the map, too.”

Within seconds, new, different-colored routes appeared on the large digital map of Brooklyn.

“Which ones happen a day or two before each robbery?” asked Jay. He went over to the espresso machine and warmed it up.

More routes and images appeared on the screen, overlaying the previous ones.

I had a thought. “Can we get the bank’s footage of the days in question?”

“Got something?” Jay retrieved light cream from the fridge and poured some into the espresso machine’s milk cup.

“I think so.”

A video image appeared on the screen of the same place that was robbed only two days ago. Two armed guards carrying a steel box entered the bank. One appeared a little unsteady on his feet, his head darting to and fro.

“There.” I pointed at the screen. “Rewind it, Wash. Then play it at half-speed. Zoom in on the guard on the left.”

Wash did so.

“What are you looking for, Duncan?” asked Franky.

“See that guard who’s walking unsteadily?”

“Looks drunk,” said Jay.

“He’s possessed. Not drunk.”

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“Do you think he’s hopped up on Fantazine?” asked Franky.

“No,” I said. “Some other way. Maybe he was paid?”

“Sure about all this?” asked Jay.

I shook my head. “Not without an ecto-camera. But why else would he be walking around with his head darting about like he’s looking for escape routes? Look at the bank video from the stop before, and I bet that guard is walking just fine.”

“So, we find that same guard casing the place in another bank that’s not robbed, that will be where the Ectopawn Crew will hit next?” He took a seat at the head of the table with his steaming latte.

“That’s my guess.”

“A damned good one, Duncan! Excellent work!” He blew on his latte then sipped it.

Did I pass your test?

Wash pulled up the appropriate video from a check-cashing center that had not yet been robbed. Two armored truck guards entered carrying a heavy steel box, one unsteady on his feet, casing the place like the last guy.

“That’s him,” I said.

“Great! We got our next target,” said Jay, blowing into his mug before sipping. He looked at me. “Go through our wardrobe room for a pair of coveralls. They’ll go with your utility belt. Find a cap and a wig, a pair of scuffed work boots too; you’re still too recognizable in your usual attire. Need to buy them? You’ll get reimbursed. Get a pair of sunglasses too. Whatever you purchase stays here. Remember to get receipts. Roll the clothes around outside on the street. Don’t shave for the next two days.”

I knew what he was planning for me.

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“I’ll make a detective out of you yet,” Jay repeated.

A different spreadsheet appeared in another window. “I’ve got several specialty tattoo shops in the area, Duncan,” said Wash. Business names and addresses populated the page.

“Got some leads to chase down,” said Jay. “Good, visit these places tomorrow. I know it’s a Saturday, but just think of the fat bonus you’ll get when you close this case.”

Working on a Saturday was something I was used to. I can have my daughter Cat hang out at one of her friends’ houses since Cordelia will be teaching yoga classes all day.

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“Why the *fuck* would I put *those* symbols on somebody?” The tattoo artist asked, sneering. He cleared his throat and spit into a garbage pail. Then he went back to work tattooing an image of Mickey Mouse on a client’s buttock. He sported plenty of artwork himself, especially a swastika tattoo on his forehead, warding his third eye chakra. Something told me it wasn’t the Hindu symbol of purity and luck.

I shrugged; Franky sighed. We were at a dead end with this line of inquiry. This was the fifth tattoo parlor we visited. The artists in the earlier ones had never seen symbols like the ones we showed them. This particular artisan was more animated about his unfamiliarity.

I pushed anyway, questioning his ignorance. “So you recognize this symbol?”

The tattoo artist glanced at me coolly, then refocused on Mickey Mouse.

“It’s just a question,” added Franky, a girlish lilt to her voice. “It would help us out a lot.”

Mr. Swastika stopped working, looked at Frankie, and his expression softened for a microsecond. “Ancient Hebrew alphabet,” he muttered. “The letters M and R.”

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His response made sense. Did a Jewish person engineer these robberies? That seemed far too obvious, a red herring. And Mr. Swastika still left me wondering. Monday’s sting turned out to be the best lead we had.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Dolph,” said Mr. Swastika. “Dolph Meiter.”

#

“...and for you, Duncan, we have an ectobola.” Wash held out what looked like a taser with a connected cable protruding from its front cartridge. “It’s a bolawrap with ectological abilities.”

Wash, Jay, and I were in the skunkworks at Zarra Investigations. Steel shelving units lining the walls held containers with weapons and other tech. A standing desk workstation supported a no-seating norm at one end of the room. Wash didn’t like anyone staying too long in his workspace. Besides, there were no chairs here. An upright crash test dummy with numerous dents sat in the middle of the other side, looking very much like a target.

“What does it do?” I asked.

“It launches a 7.5-foot Kevlar cable weighted at both ends and wraps around the target, effectively restraining them.”

I noticed a silver glow radiating from the device. “What makes it ectological?”

“Not only does it restrain the target,” said Wash, “it also traps *all* the ectos inside the target’s shell.”

I whistled. Where was this gods-damned device last year when I was chasing that ectomule Loaded Larry around half of Brooklyn? It had ended up a disaster, but if I’d had a contraption like this, things would have been different. Much different.

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“Use it on the ectopawn with the money bag,” Jay interrupted.

“Why?”

“Don’t want any lawsuits.”

Wash held out the ectobola to me. “Try it out.”

I eyed Wash; he reminded me of Q from the James Bond movies. “You know that I’m a lousy shot, right?”

“You don’t have to aim it. It’s not a weapon. It’s a non-pain compliance device.”

I gave the techie a quizzical squint.

“Point it in the target’s general direction,” said Jay. “Let it do the work.”

“Okay.” I grabbed it and pointed it in the “target’s general direction.”

I activated the device. My shoulder bucked a little from the kickback. A weighted cable shot out of the front end, whirling like propellers, as it flew on. Its cables wrapped around the shaking crash test dummy, enveloping the target in silver ectological lightning.

“You see?” said Wash. “Easy-peasy.”

A gnawing doubt told me I’d fuck this up.

#

EZ Check Cashing resembled the love child of a standard bank lobby and an off-track betting establishment. Counters flanked one wall, where cashier cages with plexiglass windows separated customers from employees. Two tables lived in the center, with chain-tethered pens and forms stashed in built-in cubbies. The walls and employees’ polo shirts were a garish yellow. Posters with rates and fees papered the walls. An LED screen displayed scrolling figures and percentages. Synthesizer Muzak sprang from hidden speakers, and rosemary incense wafted throughout, warding the place.

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The manager of this business fully cooperated with Zarra Investigations; it would only benefit her if she did, especially if we were successful.

I came to the place earlier to set up. I needed to create a barrier to keep the ectothief—or anyone else, for that matter—from exiting. I drew a Line of salt from one wall to the other, the length of the exit. I’d add grave dust later to activate it. Since I knew there would be foot traffic walking in and out, I slowly *and* carefully covered the Line with a long rubber-bottomed safety rug, ensuring that the Line was not disturbed when the rug was placed. Franky and Jay helped; we worked to make sure that the salt Line wasn’t disturbed. I left it exposed in a corner I planned to stand by when the robbery occurred.

Dressed in slacks, a turtleneck, cardigan, and a blonde wig, Franky stood at one of the cashier cages. She had a stern look going, a far cry from her usual cheerful visage. She’d really gotten into character, taking her disguise to another level.

Jay was positioned behind the plexiglass, acting as a cashier. He wore the place’s yellow polo, a black blazer, and a nametag proclaiming, “Hi! I’m Steve.” His hair was slicked back—it must have been a feat battling his blonde spikes—and he sported ecto-goggles, which resembled rectangular-framed glasses.

I was dressed in dirty gray coveralls. I kicked them around on the street and stomped on them earlier that morning. A smudged rag stuck out of my back pocket. Scuffed work boots adorned my feet. I sported a brown pony-tailed wig, along with a greasy backwards baseball cap. My two-day stubble overshadowed my balbo-style beard. Wayfarer sunglasses framed my eyes. I wasn’t used to this get-up; I missed my dapper attire.

My Aware utility belt was populated with tools I used as an ectological inspector. It included slots filled with vials of grave dust, salt, ecto-protecting oils and herbs, and a few

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ectotrap, which were glass jars with leaden-corked tops and essential oils and herbs inside them. I had plans for all of these items.

The first of the Ectopawn Crew entered, wobbling a little. He had a determined look on his face, like the one I’d worn as a teenager, coming home drunk and trying to hide it from my parents. I wasn’t successful then, just as this kid wasn’t successful now. He sported a brown derby and a black glossy vest over a beige dress shirt, with a red polka-dot bowtie. He took a spot in the corner and fiddled with his smartphone. I named him Bowtie.

Ectopawn Number Two appeared at the entrance, a young girl unsteadily walking on heels, dressed in black, with kohl eyeliner and an Egyptian queen hairstyle. She carried an oversized messenger bag. *I wonder what that’s for!* I called her Nefertiti.

I intended to catch this ectothief, no matter what.

Then Nefertiti tripped on the safety rug—the one with the salt Line under it. *Shit!* She got in line behind Franky and waited.

I placed this safety rug over the line to prevent people from breaking the line.

So much for that plan.

I was going to have to play it by ear from here on out.

The third and last ectopawn entered. Despite the setback, I grabbed an ectotrap from my belt and removed its cork. This nattily-dressed-yet-emaciated young man, in a blue pin-striped three-piece suit, had an ectohom possessing him, alright; I could tell by his glowing purple aura and the superimposed shadow that moved microseconds after he did. I dubbed him Three-Piece.

This ectopawn would make the first move.

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Jay noticed him come in; he squinted at the man for a moment, looked at Franky, and subtly nodded to her. Jay’s ectoglasses technically made him an Aware, and with Franky’s natural abilities, both of them were able to see what I saw.

I let out a slow breath. *Should I apply grave dust to the Line to see if it would work?* I decided to do it. Furtively. The Line did not activate; it was surely broken when Nefertiti tripped over the rug.

Shit!

Three-Piece produced a Rupterone pump, sprayed a dose into his nose, and dropped it back into his pocket. Then he produced a gun from his jacket and pointed it in the air. “Everyone be cool, this is a robbery!” A shot rang out.

The sound was loud and resonant. My ears rang. Everyone responded immediately—screaming, crouching, scrambling. Franky hunkered down on the floor and looked at me. With his hands in the air, Jay focused on me as well. The other members of the Ectopawn Crew remained standing, waiting, swaying.

I had to think fast. I still had a few choices, all involving placing myself between Three-Piece and one of the others. An idea came to mind, and I readied another ectotrap, holding it in my other hand. Both hands, with ready containment units, were at my sides. I moved to a place allowing me to cover two possible routes the ectothief could take. I just hoped that I could catch it in time. I also wished it wouldn’t wise up to me.

As speedy as a pinball, the ectothief dashed out of Three-Piece, zipping towards Nefertiti with the messenger bag. I wasn’t fast enough, my reach falling short. I quickly scanned the lobby to see if Bowtie or Three-Piece had changed positions. They hadn’t.

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“You!” said Nefertiti, already dosed with Rupterone. She pointed at Jay and pushed the messenger bag through the slot in the plexiglass. “Start filling it.” Jay opened a drawer and started stuffing the bag with cash.

I repositioned myself within reach of Nefertiti’s routes to other ectopawns. I hoped I could anticipate its next move, allowing me to catch it successfully.

The ectothief left Nefertiti and zipped towards Bowtie. I missed it. Again. He dosed himself with Rupterone and produced a small firearm from his pocket. He started waving it around. “Everyone, come to this corner and get on the floor!” He was addressing everyone outside the plexiglass stations: customers, security, and maintenance.

“You all better listen!” stated a security guard with the attitude of a retired cop. He started herding the others.

Shit! I had to stay upright, mobile. I had to think of something fast. Everyone complied with Bowtie’s instructions, except me.

Bowtie glared at me and focused his firearm. “You! Over here!” He pointed to the group of people with his gun, indicating where he wanted me to go.

I stood and stared, frozen, my mouth hanging open. *Am I going to get shot?*

“Get over here!” Bowtie shouted.

I widened my eyes, shook my head, and twitched my lips. I crouched on the floor, keeping my focus on Bowtie. I feigned as much terror as I could muster; I hoped the forced fight-or-flight reflex would work. I only needed a minute, maybe less. The gun looked like a small-caliber firearm. How good was this kid’s aim? Maybe I’ll survive this with a scar to tell my grandkids about.

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Bowtie made a face. This was good. I was giving Bowtie—or the ectothief—pause. He shook his head. I looked completely non-threatening. This was a win. The ectothief left Bowtie and dashed towards Three-Piece, at the far end of the counter, near a gate into the employee area. I didn’t think to ready my ectotraps. He yelled, “Hurry it up back there!”

Jay slid the filled messenger bag under the plexiglass to Bowtie. The ectothief kept stealing glances at me.

Since my plan was blown, I had to think of something else. But the only ideas that came to mind involved me using my Adept abilities. How long can I keep my powers secret?

The ectothief zipped to Nefertiti, once again ignoring me.

I had to do something; I was running out of choices.

Although I still had the ectobola.

I stood up and looked to see where the ectothief was.

It was in Three-Piece, who was staring right at me. It pocketed its gun, then zipped to Bowtie, the ectopawn with the cash-filled messenger bag. And the gun. It pointed the firearm at me. “What are you doing? Get over here!” it demanded.

Shit!

“I said get over here!” it repeated.

I focused on the gun, on its barrel, with the open end gaping like a large chasm at me.

Shit shit shit shit shit!

Out of the corner of my eye, something moved—Bowtie noticed it too late. Using the distraction, I drew the ectobola and pointed it in Bowtie’s “general direction.”

I activated the device.

Franky tackled Bowtie, swatting his gun arm down.

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The weighted Kevlar cable sailed above its target....

I gulped.

...And wrapped around the security guard.

“Godsdammit, Franky!” yelled Jay, expressing my sentiment.

Franky was on the floor, wrestling with Bowtie. She worked hard to remove the gun from the kid’s hand. The ectothief within Bowtie looked all around the place for escape routes.

I had to do it. I pulled down my sunglasses, allowing my eyes to peer over the top of the lenses. I inhaled, slowly blinked, and everything within sight turned silver, like a reverse negative of a photograph. “*YOU THERE! LOOK AT ME!*” My voice was thunderous.

Both Franky and Bowtie stopped wrestling and gaped at me, confused.

So did everyone else in the place.

So much for keeping my Adept abilities to myself.

I grabbed an ectotrap from my belt and opened it. “*IT’S OVER. YOU’RE DONE.*”

I discerned the ectothief trembling inside Bowtie.

“*GET IN HERE!*” I lifted the ectotrap, pointing it at him.

Bowtie inhaled deeply, exhaled, and the ecto-thief bolted out of him.

Towards my ectotrap.

Just in case, I braced myself.

It looked at me quizzically, as its funneling lower half stretched towards the ectotrap. It was like an ectological vacuum had been turned on.

I then recognized the ectothief—I knew who it was. “YEAH. YOU’RE DONE ALRIGHT!”

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The ectothief tried to pull back but couldn’t avoid being sucked into the ectotrap, like a genie returning to its magic lamp ass-end first.

I stoppered the ectotrap and let out a long-held breath.

All of the ectopawns dropped to the floor, out cold.

Franky looked at me like I had grown a second head. “What did you just do?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

#

“Rudolph Meiter,” I said. “Also, Rudy. And Dolph. Interesting trick you did with the Fantazine patches.”

The tattoo artist from the other day—Mr. Swastika—sat handcuffed to the table in an interrogation room of the 73rd Precinct, across from me. Jamie Matejka, my former colleague, sat to my left, while Jay was to my right.

“Fuck you, Dick!” said Mr. Swastika. I wasn’t sure if he was calling me a penis or a detective’s epithet. Probably both.

“Used your initials in the Hebrew alphabet,” added Jay.

“And tried to divert us by hinting that the ectothief was Jewish,” said Jamie.

Mr. Swastika, aka the ectothief, or Rudolph Meiter, glowered at us.

“I have a question for you, Mr. Meiter,” I began. “Did you tattoo those letters on your abdomen or did you use a patch as well?” I didn’t see the booking report, so I didn’t know the answer to this question.

“Do you think I’d tattoo *that shit on me?*” asked Mr. Swastika—I liked that moniker better.

I nodded in understanding.

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“Where’s the rest of the money, Mr. Meiter?” asked Jamie.

“Fuck you, bitch!” spat Mr. Swastika.

“Might wanna rethink your answer,” said Jay.

“Why is that, Dick?”

“You know Nathan Ford?” Nathan Ford ran the Irish Mob out of Hell’s Kitchen. He was the boss of one of the organized crime families in Manhattan.

Mr. Swastika’s eyes widened. Sweat began to trickle down his temple. “Why do you ask?”

“‘Cause he hired me,” said Jay. “My detective agency. He wanted to know who robbed him. Think he wants to make an example.”

Mr. Swatika audibly gulped. His eyes widened. His mouth gaped. His breaths shortened. He shuddered. “*Fuck* me...!”

“Want me to give him your name? Could tell him we never found the thief.”

“I’ll talk, I’ll talk,” cried Mr. Swastika, wheezing, gasping, gulping. “I’ll tell you everything...!”

#

On the way out of the precinct, I handed Jay a receipt for the grave dust I purchased that I never really got to use. “Did I pass your test?”

Jay just laughed.