

# **THE BABEL APOCALYPSE**

SONGS OF THE SAGE, BOOK 1

BY

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## DISCLAIMER

While this is a work of speculative fiction, it is inspired by events, businesses, incidents, technologies, and theoretical concepts that have some basis in reality. Certain long-standing institutions, agencies, and public offices are mentioned, but the characters involved are wholly imaginary, as is this novel's story.

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*"They who control language control everything."*

From the *Babel Apocalypse Manifesto*  
by Professor Ebba Black



# PROLOGUE

It wasn't her cold beauty that marked out Ebba Black as unique—her *chilling looks*, as she called them—although her looks invariably made an impression on all who met her. Rather, it was the fact that she was the last nate in the automated world. That made her famous. Undoubtedly she was celebrated for other things too—Ebba Black the Babelist, the heiress, the conspiracy theorist, the charismatic professor. Maybe even the oddity. After all, Ebba was the last speaker of languages that would die with her. With Elias's passing five years prior, she had no one left to speak them with. And Ebba Black would not marry. Commitment of that sort wasn't her thing, and she would certainly never have children. You could say she wasn't the maternal type.

Ebba knew she was unique in other, ineffable ways, too. For one, she listed things to herself, silently, in her head. *Reasons to know me. Reasons not to know me. Reasons to hate me, to admire me.* But not *reasons to love me*. Never that. That was forbidden. Ebba never allowed anyone to get that close.

Sometimes Ebba even indulged in one of her trademark waspish grins. To no one in particular, while she mentally scrolled through one list: *reasons to kill*. The list with the names. Her *list of lists*. The grin was the only outward sign she was

performing a mental stock-take. It wasn't good to be on that particular list. Ebba Black was neither the forgiving nor the tolerant type.

Ebba was all too aware that she was viewed as an anomaly by pretty much everyone; she was neither feral nor out-soc. So, some of her students—especially those from outside the Republic, such as the Grand Union, and other places too—thought she must be breaking the law. It was a common misconception. She had even once been reported to the authorities by one of those types. For being an unchipped *ghost*, as they called her. That made her laugh; a dark laugh at the irony of it. The *muties*, she called them. Those who had been fitted with Universal Grammar tech.

But while she officially resided in the Nordic Republic, and as long as she remained there, Ebba wasn't doing anything illegal. The Republic was something of a curiosity even among Tier One states, never having passed a lang-law. Yet this singular absence was offset by the special requirements of Nordic birth licenses. To have one granted, prospective parents had to consent to their newborn being fitted with Universal Grammar tech. So everyone got a language chip at birth anyway, together with an ear implant transceiver. Which meant that voice command tech was, for all intents and purposes, *de rigueur* even without a lang-law. But that was the Scandinavian way. In the Nordic Republic, they organized freedom.

For her part, Ebba knew it wasn't her. It was everyone else who had the problem. "That's what you *would* think," her braver, typically male students told her. "You're Ebba Black." *Ha! Whatever that means. How do they know what Ebba Black would think anyway?*

And despite all the false idols—intelligence, wealth, beauty—

that others admired and envied in her, they didn't know the things that had made her the woman she was. No one knew that her will of steel was, in fact, forged from sorrow. But Ebba knew. And she knew that her losses were more than any ordinary person could bear.

What sustained the blackness of her sorrow was vengeance. Vengeance past and vengeance yet to be dealt. Ebba nurtured it in the dark palace of her mind—the innermost, most private mental shrine where she kept the one list, the list that was actualized and ritualized. The list of lists. There remained three names. They were the toughest ones. Especially his, at the very summit.

But something preternatural happened that Ebba knew would change everything. She was witness to an apparition, unheralded early one morning. And it brought with it a warning, a prophecy, and a gift.

\* \* \*

On the morning of October 5th, Ebba had risen before dawn, as she did each day. She never slept much; she felt guilty wasting time on sleep. She had been for her customary five-kilometer run through the early morning Kattegat fog that often enveloped her vast estate at that time of day, at that time of year. She always finished at the cliff top, high above the Kattegat Sound, overlooking the straits and the distant landmass of Zeeland far out in the sea. On that particular day, Zeeland was occluded by sea mists. She then began her daily Wing Chun routine.

Ebba always started with relaxation techniques before moving through the gears, visualizing each gesture in her mind's eye a fraction before execution. And all the while, she

kept her petite, lissome body in perfect balance as she followed her corporeal center line, which guided every attack. She performed her armory of rapid strikes while moving forward, aiming at an unseen assailant on the cliff top.

Afterward, Ebba would normally have completed her morning workout in her live-action pistol range—a concrete bunker adjacent to the orangery, behind the herb garden to the rear of her neo-Baroque manor. Her favorite weapon was her original Beretta 92. She loved its accuracy, and the single-action trigger from the second shot. But most of all, she loved its shape—the esthetics of a step-slide design that hadn't been manufactured for nearly a hundred and fifty years. Ebba had no time for modern coil weaponry. No finesse, no skill required, she was wont to sneer. *You have to make them feel it.*

But that particular October morning, as Ebba completed her final Wing Chun move, punching through the thick fog, a misty doorway opened. Out of nowhere in midair. And what emerged was a shimmering, winged creature, burning in orange-red flame.

Ebba watched what she believed to be a fiery angel descend from the sky through wreaths of mist. A six-winged seraph, to be precise. Ebba knew her mythology—tradition placed seraphim in the highest rank of angelology. Ebba was as well-read as she was lethal with a pistol. She also knew it was nuts. Completely. She would be classed as certifiable—yet, she was witnessing it. And Ebba was not the emotional type. She had learned, out of necessity, to regulate her emotions a long time ago, to hide what she truly was—a high-functioning sociopath with psychopathic tendencies. And Ebba was okay with that.

Yet, on account of knowing she wasn't imagining what she was seeing (because Ebba seldom, if ever, doubted herself), and



also on account of knowing (or at the very least, believing) that such creatures didn't in fact exist, Ebba froze in disbelief. And it took one hell of a lot to make Ebba Black freeze.

Crazier still, as the apparition touched the rocky ground two meters in front of her, the seraph transformed into a woman. A beautiful woman in black attire, with red-orange flaming hair and piercing emerald-green eyes—nuclear green, maybe. The type of eyes that locked your gaze and arrested your heart. Eyes that burned into Ebba's own coal-black eyes.

And then Ebba had a further shock. The woman was someone she recognized. After all, Ebba was a hacker extraordinaire. She had back-door access to live sec-cam footage of all the most important law enforcement agencies in the world, including Interpol. But the woman before her looked much younger than her live feed, by around two decades, Ebba guessed. Which placed her in her early twenties. That couldn't be right. *What the beep?*—Ebba thought, censoring her would-be expletive. Ebba Black never swore, even in her head. She remained too refined a lady for that.

As Ebba took an involuntary step back, belatedly wondering whether she was imagining the whole thing, the flame-haired woman began speaking. She was using King's English. Not just the quaint accent, but the whole assorted verbiage of the Old Standard's grammar and vocabulary too. And as it so happened, this was a variety no longer supported by Unilanguage. Tier Two states like the Old Kingdom were no longer permitted independent state official varieties. The decree had already taken effect, at the start of the year. *Is this one a nate too?* Ebba thought. She knew all too well that she was all that remained of the old ways throughout the Tier One and Two states—the automated world.

“Don’t be afraid,” the flame-haired woman said softly. Ebba shook her head. She wasn’t afraid. She never was. But here and now she felt something she had never experienced before, although she wasn’t entirely sure what it was. “I don’t have much time,” the woman continued.

“This is ...” Ebba began. *Impossible*, she thought, shaking her head at herself. She didn’t like the word—no agency in it. Ebba was all about agency. She was always in control.

The woman continued smiling. “This will sound crazy, but I’m from your future.” Ebba nodded in agreement. It sounded crazy all right. “In five years, you will save me from a subterranean prison beneath a salt flat—Groom Lake, Nevada. Which means I can help you here.” Ebba felt her mouth opening before she remembered to close it.

“You’re from the future?”

The woman’s smile became rueful. “Marc Barron must be stopped. But you haven’t managed it.”

Now Ebba’s mind was racing. How did this woman know about that? Her list? The Appleton gang of three: Hadean Burr-Alston, Darya Zao, and, top of the infamous list, Marc Barron himself.

“It’s not so easy to ...” Ebba stammered.

“To get to him? To end him? You’ve tried, I know. You told me.” Ebba was now completely perplexed. The woman laughed, watching Ebba’s expression intently. It was a warm laugh, spontaneous, open, her voice soft, gentle. Not at all prickly, as Ebba had imagined, given her reputation for being ornery and ruffling feathers, while solving the world’s most vexing cybercrime cases. Ebba liked that. She somehow felt a connection with this one. “What I mean is, you *will* tell me,” the woman added, correcting herself, staring at Ebba with her

green eyes. "But you can't get to him without help. You can't do it alone."

"He's protected somehow," Ebba murmured.

The woman nodded. "One month from now, there will be a global language outage. Something you've predicted, right?" Ebba stared in further amazement. "You must prepare."

"Prepare how?" Ebba asked.

"There is a man, a Europol commander: Emyr Morgan. You must find him, recruit him. Help him with your Language Unplugged protocol." Now Ebba was even further taken aback. *How does this woman know about the protocol? And why would she need to seek out this man?*

"Emyr Morgan?" Ebba whispered.

The woman nodded. "You need his help to accomplish your goal. He will save your life. And you'll also need this." With that, she reached inside her black leather jacket. As she pulled out her hand, holding her palm out toward Ebba, the nothingness she seemed at first to hold materialized into a semitranslucent orb the size of her palm. The orb was spinning on itself or within itself. She proffered it to Ebba. Ebba saw that within the object something was shifting, transforming between misty spiraling shapes that looked like some sort of eternal knot of translucent motion. As she peered into the swirling orb, Ebba saw that the shapes were in fact one single shape—a strange, winged creature that morphed incessantly into some new, languid version of itself, from serpent to bird and back again. As the cycle of transformation peaked, the winged-serpent-cum-bird creature pulsated red before dissipating back into translucence. *Some weird Gestalt-like perceptual trick.* Ebba scrunched up her eyes and shook her head. She felt she was being hypnotized.

"Take it," the woman said finally.

Ebba did as she was bidden. The orb dropped into her palm. But she felt nothing; no weight, no texture. Just nothingness. And as she closed her hand around it, the orb disappeared. Ebba gasped in amazement and shook her hand open to make the vanished orb reappear. But no matter how hard she gestured, there was still nothing. Just thin air.

"It's gone," Ebba whispered.

The woman shook her head. "It's still there. But now bound to you. It will reappear when you need it."

"What is it?" Ebba asked. "A weapon?"

"This is far better than a weapon. It's called a void prism. Marc Barron is protected by something powerful—a gaseous being, a Watcher. That's why you haven't been able to kill him. This will make many things possible, even changing the very shape of time."

"But how can I kill him?"

"Inside the prism is a Chol, which will summon me again. When the kairos moment arrives. I will draw out the Watcher, then he will be unprotected. You will have your shot."

"A Chol?"

"A consciousness, an ancient soul, connected to my own master Chol, located at a distant place in spacetime—the alpha and omega point of time. Remember everything I have said. But most of all, this. When we meet again, in five years, it will be the first time for me. I won't recall this meeting. Remember the chronemics. I will need the time and place markers to find you here." And with that, the woman began fading from view. *Chronemics? Place markers?* Ebba thought. *This is all surreal.*

"Wait," she stammered. "You're Lilith King, aren't you? Director of Interpol's Global Cybercrime Center. In Singapore?"

Lilith smiled wistfully at Ebba as her form continued to fade.

“Lilith,” she murmured. “That’s one name I’ve been called—an old name, given by my father long ago to strike fear into the Sage.”

“You have other names?” Ebba asked, amazed by the strangeness of this woman and her response.

“Echoes in time. On this planet, my second coming has been foretold. Abaddon, Apollyon, Exterminans.” And with that she was gone. The apparition vanished into the thick Kattegat fog that swirled around Ebba anew.



# CHAPTER 1

My mother's dying wish was to be buried in Wanstead earth. The place of her birth. Near the end of her existence, her skin became veiny and translucent and her memory as frail as her body. By then she had begun to address me by my late father's name. I felt repulsion. *I'm Emyr*, I had wanted to scream, *I'm not him*. I was nothing like him. I was tall, dark, and had a strong moral compass. He was slight, with a ruddy complexion, and lacked scruples. But at least I no longer harbored anger for my mother's betrayal, for my boyhood trauma; that had gone. The solace of time. But I hadn't forgiven her either. And as I hurried away from the cemetery once it was done, I felt only ambivalence.

By the time I reached Manor Park, twilight had become darkness. I walked along the pedestrian corridor, heading back to where I had parked my Skyraider. The cold air swirled around me, so I pulled up the collar of my Napa coat against the chilly November evening. Soft grain leather. Italian design. I loved that fur-lined coat. I hated this foreign city. I wanted to get back to my life, and my job across the water; to get home.

The networked system of LED streetlights slowly dimmed behind me before slipping into darkness, while those ahead flickered on, transmitting my location to one another and

London's communication nerve center, hosted on an aging server in space. The electric glow dappled the walls of the buildings, making the windows appear to pucker in the shadowy light.

I heard a group of drunken revelers behind me. "He always has a line for the ladies," said one slurred voice. The boozy pitch contour wobbled toward me, bouncing along the polycarbonate surface. Then came an eruption of cackling.

As I was about to glance back at the voices, a light flickered in my peripheral vision, drawing my gaze upward to the night sky. A soft white glow, high up in the dark. At first it was indistinguishable from the airway lights. But it persisted, the size of a small disk at first, before shifting to red-orange, getting larger. At that point I realized it definitely couldn't be a hover car. This was farther up, probably low Earth orbit, which explained the initial white. But the shift in coloration—that meant a detonation, producing nitrogen dioxide, which turned deep orange when mixed with air. *A gaseous cloud has reached the atmosphere*, I thought. I was witnessing a chemical explosion in space large enough to be visible to the naked eye. But what was exploding?

As I continued looking up, the orange grew in intensity until it flared across the skyline, illuminating the entire landscape around me with an eerie red-orange. It was only then that I became aware of the newly hushed silence of the drunken revelers nearby. And the silhouettes of other people too, who had also stopped and peppered the pedestrian corridor. We were all now strange red creatures, watching transfixed in rapt silence as the night sky was on fire. And just as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone; the orange light faded back into a deep well of pitch black.

I was pulled out of my reverie by the sight of a hover car descending onto the vertipad ahead of me. A three-wheeler autonomous hackney cab; mass-produced model. I watched in idle distraction as the glass frontage descended level with my eyeline, not twenty meters from me. Inside, I saw a woman, illuminated by the interior safety lighting—late twenties, perhaps, with a small child, a boy of about three or four. The red glow of the vertipad’s perimeter security lights bounced sharply off the polymer composite shell, which advertised the taxi company in holographic lettering. The vehicle came to a standstill on the vertipad.

But something about the hover taxi held my gaze. I realized it was the autogyro system. Something was wrong. Instead of self-stowing, it remained deployed. And the vehicle stayed in place where it had landed, in the middle of the vertipad. *Strange*, I thought. It should have taxied away onto the transit corridor by now. Maybe the explosion had affected the landing telemetry circuit. Stranger still, given the passengers were now stuck inside, why hadn’t they voice-activated the exit? The gull-wing doors remained closed.

I climbed over the thermoformed pedestrian barrier, ignoring the warning sensors as they flickered on, blinking at me, and walked up the vertipad incline toward the hover cab. The woman peeked out, panic etched on her face. As she glimpsed me through the glass, she suddenly began banging as if in desperate supplication. I mouthed that she should issue her door deactivation voice command into the piloting VirDa. She didn’t seem to understand me, so I spelled out Virtual Digital Assistant with my forefinger on the window—*VirDa*; a crude attempt to make her react.

She stared out at me with wild eyes through the gull-



wing window; a look of incomprehension. I realized that her apparent lack of understanding could only mean one thing: she was feral! Her language streaming service was out. She had no idea what I was saying, nor could she communicate with her VirDa. And then she screamed.

Helpless, I watched the terror contained within the soundproofed confines of the plastic hull. The little boy's upturned face shifted to fear and then distress as he witnessed his mother's frenzied panic; the child began to cry. I watched through the glass, witness to the sobs I couldn't hear.

Just then, I heard the roar of VTOL thrust engines. I glanced up. Another hover car was descending, way too fast, dropping directly onto the vertipad, destined for the hackney cab that lay stationary beneath.

I was trained to process details happening in real time with the precision afforded by the slow dilation of protracted duration. With focus, I could unpick the frenzy of multiple rapid events within a temporal landscape perceived with an ethereal slow-motion calm. I observed that the descending hover car was a private vehicle—it had four wheels with expensive alloys that glinted in the marker lights of the VTOL corridor. And as it dropped, I saw that it had air capture ducts underneath and a CO<sub>2</sub> cooling condenser, allowing supersonic flight in international sky lanes. This was a beast of car with a truly global range, an expensive piece of engineering.

There was a man seated at the piloting console. I glimpsed him in the shimmering red of the security lights. To my shock, I realized the descending car was in manual flight mode, which was not permitted in class R airspace, above the city. What was the guy thinking? A collision was now inevitable.

Just before the two vehicles came together, I saw the woman

following my gaze. She glimpsed what was about to befall her, the edge of the other hover car tumbling fast toward her. She made a sudden, startled move for the child. An instinctive shielding gesture, perhaps.

To protect myself, I ran back several meters from the vertipad as the falling vehicle smashed into the roof of the stationary cab. Then came a deafening bang. The impact severed the autogyro blades of the vehicle beneath, which snapped off the roof bearing and spun across the adjacent taxi lane, making a sickening scything sound on the hard plastic surface. I squinted through the darkness as smoke rose from the wreckage. A hissing sound was coming from the tangled mess of the upper vehicle. The hackney cab underneath had somehow resisted the impact. Its reinforced plastic structure appeared largely intact.

I returned to the crash site and climbed onto the protruding front hull, from where I was able to peer into the stricken car on top. The lighting on the piloting console was dimmed, but I could make out splashes of blood on the inside of the cracked windscreen. Some of the ceiling safety lights were still lit; they dimly illuminated the twisted, seemingly lifeless body of the pilot, lying across the front passenger seats where he had been tossed by the collision.

I jumped back down onto the vertipad, searching for the woman and child in the car underneath. My training dictated aiding the most vulnerable first. I turned to a group of onlookers, and called for assistance with getting the injured out.

It was then that I became aware that they were strangely silent, especially given what they had just witnessed—the first hover car crash in years. Each individual was eyeing the others, attempting to mouth something. Only one man seemed still

able to speak. He began talking excitedly. But, to my surprise, he was speaking in a non-Union official language. I recognized it as Mandarin. Others nearby stared at him in startled bafflement. And as he heard the strange sounds coming from his mouth, his words slowly lapsed into silence as a look of darting fear flashed across his face.

I resumed my rescue attempts on the vertipad, picking up a broken piece of carbon-reinforced sidebar lying next to the wreckage. I used it to try and prize open one of the gull-wing doors of the hackney cab, but the weight of the upper vehicle prevented the door from deploying. I ran around to the other side. This time I managed to apply enough pressure to gain leverage. The door hissed as the hydraulic mechanism deployed and the gull-wing slowly opened up and out. The woman and child lay crumpled and still on the floor of the vehicle beneath the concave splintered roof.

As my first aid training kicked in, I checked they were both breathing. Then I lifted the child out, supporting his head, followed by the woman using a shoulder pull. I quickly carried the boy down the vertipad incline, away from the vehicle, then carefully pulled the woman along until they were both a safe distance from the wreckage. The woman's nose looked broken and blood oozed from her nostrils. She had been thrown forward against the glass passenger cabin frontage. I suspected there may be internal injuries, too.

Just as I finished placing them both in the recovery position, a flicker of flame began nibbling gently from somewhere beneath the plastic front of their cab. I smelled the distinct odor of rotten eggs—the toxic combination of sulfur at high temperature that had leaked from the ion-sulfur battery and reacted with hydrocarbons in the taxi shell to create hydrogen

sulfide. The flames began spreading rapidly. Before I could act, they had engulfed the second vehicle. The man, even if still alive, was now beyond my help.

I felt the vibrations of an incoming alert in my ear implant—I tapped my left wrist to activate my holotab. The chip in my wrist glowed briefly green before projecting a holographic screen. There it was—a Europol alert banner scrolling across the small translucent screen floating above my wrist. A red alert status had been triggered.

“Global language outage. Report to HQ.” The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. *A language outage. What does that even mean?*

I knew I had to get help for the hackney cab passengers before responding to the alert. That was the protocol: ensure no immediate danger to life before answering another request.

I scrolled through the menu on my holotab using the eye-tracking sensor tech, selecting the London emergency services app with a blink command. Then I issued an in-app voice command, placing a facecall.

The connection should have been instantaneous. But instead, I heard the distinctive shrill pitch of an unrecognized call attempt. I frowned and tried again. This time I was patched through to a human dispatcher. An actual human! But then again, the Old Kingdom was just a Tier Two state. Soc-ed classification and the United Nations’ job automation agenda didn’t fully apply.

The dispatcher was a young woman with her headset slightly skewed. She appeared surprised to see me through her screen.

She began speaking: *“Toate serviciile de urgență sunt indisponibile.”* I regarded her in surprise. As my auditory nerve activated, my language chip began to auto-parse. I recognized her words as the state official language of Romania. *What the hell ...*

“All emergency services are down?” I asked. She looked at me, both confused and alarmed. It was clear she had no clue what I had just said. I blink activated the language app on my holotab before issuing my voice command.

“Switch to Romanian as default,” I said. The single vibration in my ear implant indicated that my language setting had been changed. I addressed the woman again. “*Toate serviciile de urgență sunt indisponibile?*” I repeated, this time in Union Standard Romanian.

“Da.” She nodded.

“*Ești româncă?*” I asked. She shook her head. *If she’s not a Romanian national, then why does she have her language set to Romanian?* I thought. Especially working in the London emergency services center, where the VirDas operated solely on the local state official standard. Last time I’d checked, there was only one state official language in the Old Kingdom. And since Unilanguage’s decision to stop supporting King’s English at the beginning of the year, all official VirDas in London now only ran on the North American Standard variety.

“*Nu mai pot vorbi engleza, nu înțeleg ce s-a întâmplat,*” she replied with a small shrug, tears welling in her eyes. And abruptly, she pulled off her headset and ended the call. She seemed equally shocked at her inability to speak English anymore.

“*Dezactivează limba română. Setează limba engleză ca implicită,*” I said, issuing my voice command into my holotab to deactivate Romanian and return to English. “Facecall Europol SOS.”

I was patched through to the Europol virtual emergency response center. The standard, flaccid face of the dispatcher VirDa appeared on the holographic screen, which projected from my wrist like an ethereal membrane in the dark of the autumnal evening.

“Commander Emyr Morgan,” the VirDa said, addressing me in the Europol default, North American Standard English.

“I’ve received a code red alert. And I have civilians down. The London emergency center is no longer operational.”

“Yes, a catastrophic language outage has been reported,” the VirDa confirmed. “What do you need, Commander?”

“An air ambulance, a paramedic, and direct access to a local ER.”

After a slight pause, the VirDa responded. “I have placed an emergency request. A Union crew is assigned, traveling across the Old Kingdom channel via the South Holland airway.”

“Copy, thanks. End call,” I said. *Catastrophic language outage? What the hell’s going on?*



## CHAPTER 2

I glanced down at the unconscious woman and child. They lay on the cold modular surface at the foot of the vertipad where I had placed them. I took off my Napa coat, draped it over them, and slipped off my black mourner's jacket and placed it under their heads. As I finished, I became aware of the unnatural behavior of the people in the High Street pedestrian corridors that gave off from the vertipad.

It was the near silence that was most striking. The evening chatter had evaporated. Bystanders were now dispersing from the scene of the crash, some in silent panic, while others cast furtive glances at their companions. Further down the pedestrian corridor, people were moving around in a hushed trance, seemingly unsure what to do. I watched one man sit quietly against a polycarbonate barrier. He began sobbing.

I heard one voice finally: a man. He was speaking in an unusual language, addressing a woman; a wife or girlfriend, maybe. The couple were moving away from the crash site as my language chip began auto-parsing the words. It was Hindustani, one of the two state official languages of the Indian Republic. The woman studied him fearfully, shaking her head. She began speaking something else in response. It was a variety of Lusitanian! I recognized it as the state official language of

Brazil. Each of their pitch contours became increasingly plaintive until they lapsed into silence, shoulders hunched in mutual incomprehension, glancing at one another in visible distress.

I heard another voice about a hundred meters away, along Manor Park High Street in the direction of East Ham. It was a woman. Her voice was muffled at this distance, although at least it sounded something like English. She had activated her holotab and was speaking to someone. Her silhouette appeared ghostly under the pale streetlights. I had the impression she was trying to summon help. I hoped she'd have better luck than me if she was calling the local emergency services.

As I took in the strangeness of the scene, a new commotion caught my attention. Two menacing figures were accosting passers-by farther down Manor Park High Street. And they were brandishing bladed weapons. They moved deliberately, threatening, targeting individuals—searching for someone, maybe. People scattered from their path as they approached like a pair of wrecking balls.

Then they zeroed in on the small figure of the woman, still on the facecall on her holotab. The larger of the two figures grabbed her by the throat from behind. She screamed as she turned. Her voice was high-pitched, the unexpected attack prompting a shrill cry of panic.

They began half dragging, half pulling her along the pedestrian corridor toward a grocery store entrance, while other people nearby were dispersing in silent fear. At the store entrance there was a further commotion. The two armed figures—definitely male, I now saw—were gesturing at her to do something, threatening her. I heard her muffled replies, the words indistinct at this distance. Then I saw the large fist of



one of the men as it came into full view under the streetlight. It smashed hard against the side of her face. As the woman hit the ground, the sound of the impact echoed in the new stillness of the night.

There was another man nearby. He stepped forward, coming to the fallen woman's aid, braver than the others. He also seemed still able to talk. As he reached the woman, his muffled words carried to me. But the tall, skinny silhouette slashed him with his blade, and the man stumbled. The armed men then picked him up, abandoning the fallen woman, dragging the injured man to the entrance of the store as he cried out in pain. Within a few seconds they were inside, still dragging the man.

I flinched. This was distress I couldn't ignore. It drew me in; I knew I needed to do something while awaiting the air ambulance. I began jogging toward the stricken woman. She was now sitting on the ground, her hands clasped around her ankles. She began jabbering as I neared. It was English, but a variety I didn't have access to.

"Rah! Wagwan? Dem man dun grunt. Man knew it was sus. Two roadmen from upsuh. Dem man had rambos. Da tall one, my man pointed da skeng. Man squealed."

I didn't have a clue what she was saying. But I could see that despite her animated demeanor, she was badly shaken. The smoldering flames from the hover cars behind me illuminated her face as she spoke. She was young, maybe twenty, and pretty.

"Why dem man dun dat for?" she asked. "It hurt innit. Man felt da ching, a sharp one. Da shorter roadman, my man was blacked up. Dem man dun be red spicers. My man was mean crazy. Big man ting! Da look in dem eyes. My man was clapped. Dem man wanted in Grocerido. Tried to make man operate da

Welcome VirDa. Man dun scream, dun hav no account.” As she finished, I followed her gaze toward the self-service store entrance nearby.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Something about Grocerido?” I asked. She stared through me. But then she was off again.

“Man was shook. Real bad shook. And man a baller. Man was gonna leg it, ain’t gassin. But den, man saw you. A bossman? Peng, big one. Wagwan piff ting.”

“New Blinglish?” I asked, guessing that’s what she was streaming. Part of a high-end package, a non-standard variety used by posh moots. But for that class of rich kid, non-conformity, not being readily understood—that was kind of the point.

“Yuh dun know,” the woman replied, nodding.

“Can you switch to North American Standard?” She shrugged. I sighed. “Look, I have access to two hundred and fifty varieties. But only the state officials.”

She frowned and then pressed on her wrist chip, reactivating her holotab. She issued a blink command to select her language app before speaking an in-app voice command. “Variety: English, North American Standard.”

The woman stood gingerly. Her eyes wandered along my white starched shirt and the line of my black kydex shoulder holster, reaching an abrupt terminus at my coil pistol.

“It’s all right. I’m with Europol,” I said, trying to sound reassuring as I placed my hand on the weapon. “I’m Emyr Morgan. What’s your name?”

“Arlo Sallow. They’re feral,” she declared, eyes wide as she gazed toward the store. She was still shaking.

“It’s shock. You’ll be safe now.”

“They wanted me to voice register so they could loot the place. But I couldn’t ...”

I got it. She was still in her Blinglish default. Not the state official variety. New Blinglish wouldn't work on any public VirDas in the Old Kingdom. "They grabbed the other guy, to get them in. He was streaming official English. They cut him bad. With their knives. And they were both manic, on something." Arlo was standing unsteadily now, rubbing a tear from her eye.

"Looked like zombie blades," I said. The top of her head barely reached my chest. I watched her lips tremble in the flickering neon of the Grocerido holographic adverts. The store frontage scrolled through various waveguide displays. The garish advertising promoted the deals of the day, ranging from toothpaste to chocolate. The prices bounced across the frontage in yellow and red splashes. "Appleton subscriber? I assume, with a lexical package like that." She nodded. "Gun activate."

Arlo watched, slightly alarmed, as the bright green glow of the capacitor slowly crept on as the gun's electromagnetic coils began far-field charging. She probably hadn't seen a coil pistol up close before.

"I'll take it from here," I muttered as I approached the Welcome VirDa, moving away from her. I wanted to get in, to see what I could do for the guy the two ferals had snatched.

At the entrance I heard banging from inside, behind the opaque glass of the storefront. Someone was trying to get out.

The virtual face of the VirDa faded in, wearing a simulated peaked Grocerido cap. The store name was written on it in mustard-yellow lettering, with ostentatious flourishes running beneath the letter "r."

"Welcome to Grocerrrrrido," the pasty-looking male face said with a fake broad grin, rolling his r's in lavish welcome. The sec-cam in one corner of the display blinked at me, while the language streaming orb of the registration terminal above

the screen began to vibrate, scanning the live rebounds from my language chip. “No account, *no* problem,” the talking head continued. “Register your voice print and come on in. We are Grocerrrrido!”

I spoke into the mic protruding from the beveled side of the VirDa screen. “Emyr Morgan. Europol business. I request immediate access.”

The dumb AI ignored me and just repeated its standard greeting. “No account, *no* problem. Register your voice print and come on in. We are Grocerrrrido!” I sighed. Europol had no jurisdiction in this neck of the woods.

“I give permission for registration of my voice print and DigID credentials,” I said quietly, issuing my voice command. As I spoke, the sec-code encoded in the metadata of my acoustic signal was registered by the VirDa. *I now have a retail account with Grocerido*, I thought with a grimace. *A cheap chain based somewhere in the Old Kingdom—up north, no less.*

“Welcome, Emyr,” the pasty face boomed with a fake-friendly flourish. “Registration complete. Your voice commands are now recognized. You’re good to go.” My voice print could be matched with the unique LS rebounds from my language chip, now stored in the Grocerido database.

As the glass door opened, a middle-aged woman ran out, scarcely taking me in as she brushed past, panic etched across her face. I glanced after her in surprise as she disappeared into the night.

I was standing on the threshold of a brightly lit store with rows of neatly stocked shelves. Music was playing softly from the ceiling speakers, and navigational VirDa displays blinked at me from the end of each aisle. I could hear groans coming from somewhere.

The VirDa's pasty face materialized in front of the first aisle on the navigational screen. "Hello, Emyr. This is the canned food aisle. The first heavyweight on our best canned foods list is the mighty salmon. We also have canned pinto beans, soups, tomatoes, kidney beans, white beans, even canned clams. You say it, I'll find it. Let me be your guide."

"Shush!" I hissed in irritation. I was attempting to locate the groaning while also listening for the ferals. The pasty-faced VirDa suddenly looked crestfallen.

"No need to be rude, Emyr. I'm just doing my job. Do let me know if you need me." The VirDa's face faded out and was replaced by more scrolling mustard-colored marketing.

As I turned into the third aisle, I saw the injured man. He was lying against a stack of breakfast cereals, where he had been abandoned. He was badly injured, his white shirt almost completely bloodied. His eyes flickered closed as I approached. He was slipping into unconsciousness. I crouched next to him and undid his shirt, revealing a long but superficial gash running across his stomach. I did a quick take. It was a nasty wound but survivable. It wasn't immediately clear why there was so much blood on the floor.

Then I saw it. The knife stroke had extended across his entire body, cutting through part of his wrist, clipping his radial artery. Blood was gushing out. It had been several minutes already. I scanned for an aisle that contained toweling, then dashed to retrieve what I could. I returned after a moment to bandage the man's wrist, but he was now completely still.

I felt for a pulse, but I knew I'd lost him. This was senseless butchery of an innocent bystander whose only mistake had been to try to help Arlo outside. Just then, I heard it again—the annoying sound of the VirDa's booming voice from a few aisles away.

“Sir, we don’t have you registered yet. I can help. Welcome to Grocerrrrrido.” There was no response. I knew that could mean only one thing: the two ferals.

I jumped up and moved toward the sound. As I rounded the corner, I clapped eyes on the taller feral who I had seen slash the now-dead man. He had matted, straw-colored hair and dirty-looking pants, and was helping himself to liquor bottles, tossing them into a shopping cart, ransacking shelves as he moved steadily down the aisle.

“Hey,” I called loudly. The feral froze and slowly turned around. He grinned as he clocked me, pulling something out of his jacket. I was right. It was a zombie knife. It had a nasty-looking twisted, serrated blade with a blue-threaded handle.

“Put it down,” I grunted menacingly as I pulled my coil pistol out of its shoulder holster. The feral paused, the grin slowly disappearing from his face.

I suddenly heard a noise behind me. Hoarse breathing. And as I turned, I saw the other feral, who had appeared seemingly from nowhere. This one was shorter; a youth in his late teens with bad teeth, blotches of red pustules on his face, and dilated eyes. *Arlo was right*, I thought. They were Red Spice users. Or at least this one was. And judging from his crazy eyes and sweaty demeanor, his Deep Brain Stimulation implant was offline, just like his language chip. He was beginning to struggle with cold turkey.

The short feral charged, aiming to shoulder-barge me. I braced myself as we collided. The impact knocked him backward. He fell, coming to rest against some shelving while beholding me above him in surprise, standing unmoved. But he had succeeded in knocking the pistol out of my hand. It clattered onto the floor, the green activation coil slowly

fading into inertness as it stopped spinning across the tiled surface. The fallen youth jumped up and scrambled toward it in sudden glee. He picked it up clumsily, squealing as he turned and pointed the gun at me. And then he attempted to fire.

Nothing. His glee was short-lived. The feral looked bewildered, staring back up at me wildly, almost accusingly. He couldn't have known that Union weapons were fingerprint locked.

The feral began shaping to throw the gun at me, hard. I watched his arm as it bent, focusing on its trajectory. These two were dangerous; they needed taking out before anyone else got hurt. Myself included.

The stillness I felt inside my mind in the maelstrom of erupting violence was the result of dedication and training. But I also knew that, in some measure at least, I could trace it back to the physical abuse I had experienced from an early age. Growing up with a violent father, I had learned to compartmentalize; I didn't feel pain in a conventional way. And the skills I'd learned as a Heddlu cadet, and later in advanced combat training courses and in Muay Thai competitions, had further taught me that when someone brought violence, be it a perp or an opponent, even this could be leveraged to take out the other guy.

In that moment, just before the feral could throw the gun at me, with his arm raised, he had exposed himself. He was vulnerable. He didn't see it that way, of course. But that was the moment for me to unleash a sudden decisive move to neutralize him. I took one stride toward him and delivered a forearm smash to the side of his neck near the carotid artery. A brachial stun.

The feral collapsed to the floor. He would be out for between five and thirty seconds—forever, in a fight. This was not an

ordinary knockout. The feral's entire nervous system was completely messed up. It would take him several more minutes to manage effective motor control after regaining consciousness. That would at least provide me with some breathing space to deal with the other one.

I stepped over the limp body on the floor. "That's mine," I hissed at the unconscious form, picking up the gun. I holstered it, then turned to the taller feral. He was still there, having taken in the entire scene. But as I faced him, he took an involuntary step back before spinning around to flee. This was the one who had already killed. I wasn't going to let him get away.

I began marching after him with long, fast strides. He disappeared around the end of the aisle, heading toward the exit. I knew I would catch up. The store's automated checkout system had no way of charging him for the goods he'd removed from the shelves. He was stuck in here.

I heard him before I rounded the corner of the final aisle. He watched as I approached, his eyes fixed on my looming figure. I studied the long knife, which he had raised, threatening me as I approached.

"Gun activate. Stun rounds." I only wanted to incapacitate him. Lethal force was always a last resort. I heard a click. Now only polymer bullets had been loaded, with a low muzzle velocity setting. I aimed low and fired. The feral toppled over and lay motionless underneath the exit VirDa screen, just in front of a self-checkout scanner. A bottle of liquor he had been clutching in his other hand rolled out of his grasp and grazed the supermarket floor with a rhythmic clinking. Its holographic sensor fusion label sprayed refracted beams of reds at random into the air.

"You have a security breach in your store," I said, speaking into the beveled mic on the exit VirDa screen. The pasty face



appeared on the display. *What else should I say?* I wondered. *Someone is dead? Killed by feral drug addicts, now incapacitated?*

“Thank you, Emyr,” the face said cheerfully. “I will notify local law enforcement.”

I sighed. *Everything in London is down.* Outside, I saw that Arlo had already disappeared. I didn't blame her. I headed back to the mother and child.