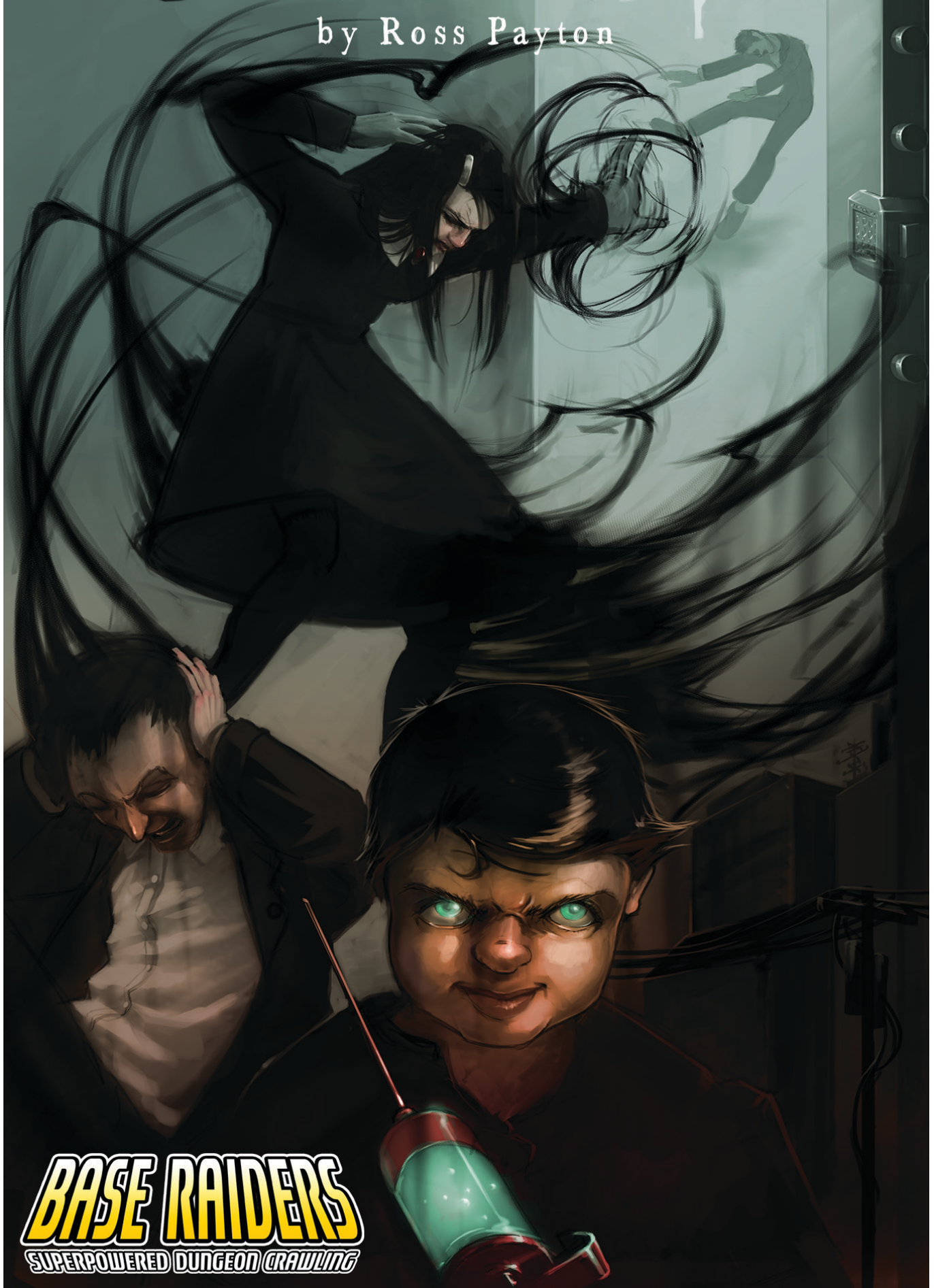


# Pariah

by Ross Payton



**BASE RAIDERS**  
SUPERPOWERED DUNGEON CRAWLING

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Lenny, sorry, - Edge-Cutter- as he likes to call himself, keeps droning away about how easy the heist is going to be, but I'm not in the mood. It's cold, and I'm not dressed for it, but at this point, I don't care. I just want to get it over with. In and out before the cops know what's down in the basement. We're across the street. This is supposed to be the Lower East Side, but it's my first time in New York City, so I all know it's not Times Square. Old brick buildings with fire escapes and locked up bodegas. Smells bad in that weird smell you only find in big cities - exhaust and human waste mixed with a hundred different spilled and sprayed chemicals. It's just past dawn, so the streets are mostly empty. I only see one man, a heavy set guy huddled by the front door trying to smoke and act like he's not on watch out. Lenny said there'd be a few people sitting on it, waiting for their boss man to figure out how to open the vault door, but nothing I couldn't handle.

I cross the street.

Doorman notices me when I'm halfway, making a beeline straight for him. He hesitates at first, not expecting a girl in a thick long sleeved black dress - plain jane goth in work boots. When I hit the sidewalk in front of the door, he decides to act, but it's too late. I've already attacked. The energy flows through me and into his mind. He slumps to the ground, unconscious. Lenny runs past me to check on Doorman.

"I thought you didn't have that kind of control." He says as he pulls a pistol and cell phone from the guy's jacket.

He flicks open a port on his wrist mod and plugs the phone in. Lenny's mods aren't very flashy, but they make him a hell of a hacker. I think at least. I don't know much about tech stuff but he did find the base by hacking some government network.

"I'm getting better all the time and one guy in plain sight is like"

"-Let me guess, something about fish and barrels?" He smirks. Lenny likes being a joker. He's skinny, and gets the shakes every once in a while from the anti-rejection meds for his implants. It doesn't inspire confidence as a partner in crime, but beggars can't be choosers.

"How many are inside?" I ask, trying to push out the fear welling up. I'll have to use a lot of energy to deal with multiple targets, and I don't want it to get out of hand. There are too many innocent people living nearby.

"Six. Here, we need to get this guy out of the way." He holds his wrist to the door, and it buzzes open a second later. I see a closet nearby. Lenny picks the lock with a tool that pops out of his finger, and we drag Doorman in. I don't think he'll wake up for a while and no one is likely to look inside the closet. That should be good enough. Lenny leads me down a flight of stairs. It only takes him a second to unlock the security door leading to the basement. I notice the security door is a lot newer than the rest of the building. They must have beefed up security once they located the base.

The door swings open, and I march in. The only way I can take them all is through forward momentum. Despite my powers, I can't take any more punishment than a normal human. A single bullet can end it all. But they can't shoot if I drop them all first. Keep moving to stay alive, like a shark. Lenny hangs back so I don't hit him with friendly fire.

I turn the corner and see two men in a bare concrete room. They're both looking at me. One sits on a wooden crate; the other leans against the wall. Neither has a weapon. They reach for their guns but I've unleashed a torrent of Pariah's energy into the room. They can't see its tidal wave of liquid darkness spreading through the air, like ink in water. The lights flicker, and the temperature drops to near freezing. Both men collapse into nightmares.

The room has two exits. The sound of furniture being slammed to the ground comes from the left. I walk towards the sound, neither hurrying up nor slowing down. Energy is already leaking out, affecting everything around me. Even though we're underground, a cold breeze is picking up. The ceiling light ahead of me is waving back and forth. A table has been kicked over. Two more men pop out from behind it, guns pointed at me. I try to clamp down on the fear, but my heart skips a beat, and the energy takes over.

My entire body goes numb for a split second and my vision blurs. I can hear myself yelling and wood splintering. I blink a few times, and my vision falls back into focus. The first gunman is sprawled against the far wall, slumped over. The other one is curled up in the fetal position, twitching. It's even colder now. I can see my breath. There are cracks in the walls. I tense up and try to reel in the energy, but I can't stop. It's going to get worse, and I need a target before I lose control.

I look down the hallway to the next room. It's dark. That's okay. I close my eyes and walk. I can feel the next guard's presence now. I know I can theoretically do almost anything with my power, but so far, I've only been learn a few tricks. Extending my senses is one of them. He has a knife, and he's pressed up against wall near the entrance, ready to kill me as soon as I step in. He has night vision goggles, so he can see me in the dark. I keep walking, but right before I step into his ambush, I picture a bright light, as bright as the sun, right in front of his face. I close everything else out, and it feels like tensing a muscle I never knew existed before, but it works. The room explodes in a white searing light, and I hear him yell and stumble back. That gives me enough time to step forward and do the same thing to him that I did to Door-man. He passes out.

That's five guys so far. Lenny said six.

At this point, I'm feeling woozy. The bright light trick is new. I never thought to even try it, but it worked. It hurts to try something new. I try to feel where the sixth guy is, but I don't feel him, so I start to back-track. I see Lenny standing in the middle of the first room, but a gunman behind him points a pistol at his head and has a hand over his mouth.

I say guy, but he's huge dead-eyed shaved head lunk of meat. I want to shower the walls with his blood. No, that's not me. I'm not thinking that. Pariah is, and I can hear it thinking inside my head. I've been using its energy, and now, it wants blood. That's the problem with getting superpowers on the cheap. You can't be picky about their side effects. In my case, I channel energy from Pariah, but the more I use, the less control I have over how it gets used.

"Stop right there!" The man-mountain finally sees me. He presses the gun against Lenny's head. I stop.

"I didn't kill them. Let him go and you can live too." My voice is flat.

He steps back a foot, pulling Lenny with him.

"You just march your ass to the door, and we'll call it even."

"Le...Edge comes with me."

"Fine. Just go!"

It is fine with me. He probably called back up and thinks they can deal with me. I need Lenny alive. I raise my hands up.

"All right. We're going."

As I step into the room, I notice another man crouched behind the wooden crate. He's wearing a business suit and has some kind gadget in his hands, silver metal with power coils emitting a blue light. He points it at me, and I try to unload as much energy as I can, but I feel Pariah's energy being pulled out of me and then everything goes black.

I'm back in that farm house in North Dakota.

I had to walk all day from the bus station to get here, and my feet hurt so badly that I can't focus on Bill.



He's sitting across from me, leaning his forearms on the kitchen table. He's fat enough that just talking gets him wheezing. He picks up the injection gun. It is big, and the needle looks like it should be used on a horse. It is supposed to go in my neck. I start to tune back in.

"Now, the thing is, it needs you. If it doesn't have at least one human to tether it to the real world, it dissipates into nothingness. And from what I can tell, only a few others act as tethers now. It's vulnerable, and it will want to keep you happy."

"In theory." I say and take a sip of tea from his M.I.T. coffee mug. It's gone cold.

"Yeah, I wouldn't have agreed to this if I wasn't sure it would work. I won't have your death on my conscience."

"Oh right, it's not like my life is that important to me." I put the mug down a little too hard. A tea drop falls on the table.

He looks at the mug and then back to me. "I know about your sister."

I'm on my feet, ready to chuck the mug at his head before I realize it.

"Sit." He says, calm and motionless. Bill stares me down. "Please, Emily. Sit."

I realize I spilled the rest of the tea on the table. I walk into the kitchen and grab a towel. As I mop it up, I don't look at him. I suddenly feel so stupid for losing control like that.

"I know you don't want to talk about her, so we won't. I had to make sure you weren't a cop or something worse. A lot of bad people want powers, so I broke into your email. Don't worry, your secret is safe with me."

I sit back down.

"Why do you care about who gets powers? You get paid either way." I say, still not looking up.

Bill laughs. "The money? I need it to continue the work, but that's it. If I could do this for free, I would. It's the principle of the thing."

At first, I think it's a joke but he's serious. I meet his gaze.

"Okay. Let's do it."

My face presses against the tile floor. It's cold, and as I pull myself up, I can feel the impression left on my cheek. Lenny is on the other end of the pure white tile room. He's pried open a panel in the middle of the far wall. Circuit boards dangle from their wires. I groan as I stand up. Everything hurts, especially my head.

Lenny's all smiles, trying to cheer me up. He always wants me to be in a good mood, which makes sense. After all, if I get too angry or lose control, who knows what will happen? I feel stiff, so I try to stretch a bit. More pain, but that's good as it lets me know I'm more or less intact. Bruises and a headache. No cuts or broken bones.

"What happened?"

"Quartermaster zapped you with a psychic nullifier. He still had a goon left, some redneck named Buck, so they gave me a choice: a bullet in both our heads or I unlock the vault door. I did, and then they threw us in there. He said if we check the base out and give the all clear, they'll let us go. Otherwise, we rot in here," Lenny said with a sigh.

"Who's Quarterman?"

"The fed who found the base? The guy I told you about. He's the one who found it and kept it a secret from the government. His goons are private security. They're going to sell whatever they find to defense contractors."

"Great. You think he'll keep his word?"

"No. He's probably trying to wake up the goons you knocked out. As soon as he thinks they're ready to fight, they'll probably march in. But there should be an exit to the subway. We can loot the place and get out of Dodge."

"How do you know that?"

Lenny points to the panel. "The entire base is rigged with sensors connected to a server. I won't bore you with the details, but if it's connected to a computer system I can get into it. There's a secondary door on the second level. Exit only though."

"What else are we looking at?" I ask, thankful for the lack of techno-babble.

"The sensors aren't tied into everything so I don't have a complete picture but I know there's two levels total, four rooms on this level, two on the bottom. Only two of the rooms are drawing a lot of power. One on this level and one below. I think the one on the bottom is a reactor or a hookup to the electrical grid, stealing power from the city."

"You want to check out the powered room first?"

"Yeah. But a few things first," Lenny says as he walks back to the panel and hooks his wrist up to one of the circuit boards. "This place is sealed up so no one can detect it from the outside, but it has a life support system still in play."

His cybernetic mods click to life.

"Someone's alive down here?"

"Something, more like it. Biomancer probably whipped up a 'guard dog' and left it here to watch the place," he says with air quotes.

The Biomancer was a hero back in the day. Biologist working on a cure for cancer, lab accident, super-genius, builds gadgets, fights crimes, you know the story. According to every news report I found on him, he spent most of his time fighting science villains, curing alien plagues, reversing mutations, or saving the lives of injured heroes. Everyone thought he was an upstanding hero with no skeletons in his closet.

"I thought he was a good guy. He wouldn't make a genetically engineered monster to watch over his lab while his was gone," I say as Lenny watches me walk up to him.

"The drone that alerted the feds to this base was a DNA harvester. You don't collect thousands of samples like that if you're a good guy. Hell, even having a secret biological research lab in a densely populated city isn't exactly good," he says, arms crossed. "He had some kind of secret agenda."

A few months ago, one of his robot drones was spotted near the UN building, but it self-destructed before they could figure out who controlled it. From the images they had of the drone, they figured out it was collecting biological samples from humans - hair, shed skin cells, that kind of thing. The feds started looking for his base, thinking that someone else found it first and activated a drone by mistake. Somehow, Quarterman found the base himself last week, but kept it under wraps. He wanted a big payday. Fortunately for us, he couldn't hack the door controls.

"So before we go in, I need to know how you're feeling," Lenny says quietly. He reaches out to touch my arm, but holds back.

I close my eyes and focus. I can feel Pariah. It's like a filament embedded in my chest that leads out into the black void you see when you close your eyes. Something in the void tugs at the filament, and I can feel a twinge of pain inside, then a slight burning sensation. The energy's flowing back in.

"I'm ready," I say with as much conviction as I can muster at that point.

When I open my eyes, the lights in the decontamination room are flickering, and Lenny's smiling. A concealed door slides open and reveals a darkened hallway. Red emergency lights light a path to the left and another to the right. The smell of antiseptics and disinfectants clogs my nose. I think back to the hospital and what's waiting for me there, but I tune it out. No time to freak out.

Lenny points to the right. His onboard sensors must have a bead on the powered-up room. The hallway is only big enough for one of us to pass at a time, and the sheer amount of pipes and metal fixtures reminds me of a submarine. We creep about fifty feet before he stops at a dead end. He places his hand on the wall, and a second later, another concealed door slides open. I hear a noticeable humming. He steps in first. I look down the corridor to see if anything moves. I can't feel the presence of anyone else, but I know my powers aren't very good at detection yet. My real talent is in wholesale destruction.

I stop at the threshold and see four rows of black metal pillars, each emitting a lot of heat and noise. Lenny motions for me to step inside further inside, and when I do, the door slides back in.

"Some kind of server room he kept active. I'm going to access it now," he says in a raised voice. He's helpless when he hacks, so I turn my attention to the room. There is always the possibility of a trap or robot drone activating, and I would only get a second to shut it down. Lenny connects a wire from his wrist to a port on one of the servers and closes his eyes.

It takes several minutes for him to finish. During that time, I feel weird sensations at the periphery of my extended senses. Tiny pinpricks brushing against my conscious around me, but mostly above. I know what that means. Pariah's acting up. It usually manifests as the kind of things you would see in a haunted house - flickering lights, unnatural sounds, temperature changes, and the feeling that something is watching you. Usually I have to channel more of its power before it manifests, but that nullifier must have disrupted it. I don't know how bad Pariah can get, and I don't want to find out today.

Lenny opens his eyes and sighs. "Good news or bad?" he asks.

"Bad." I say.

"This wasn't Biomancer's primary base. He built it to harvest genetic material from VIPs and as a secondary storage site. The servers mostly monitor and control the harvesting drones. There are some encrypted archives, but I can't access them."

"So, it's not here."

Lenny shakes his head. He seems to take it worse than I do. I think of everything I've risked so far and for nothing. He continues talking.

"But, he had a teleporter installed so it could send genetic samples back to his research lab. It's not big enough to send us, but if I can get to it, I think I can pull enough data from it to determine where the lab is located."

"You're sure?"

He nods. "We get the teleporter data and then get out. Deal?" I say.

"Of course! I want to get out here too. It's on the second level, so we have to find the ladder down."

He opens the door, and we creep down the hall. After we get past the decontamination room, we find a gurney in the middle of the hall, and of course, it has dried blood stains on it. Lenny pushes it down the hall, out of the way, but the wheels squeak more than I'd like.

He opens another concealed door ten feet past the gurney. It's a lab. Microscopes, beakers, eyewash station, even lab coats hanging on a rack by the door. That's when I feel a stabbing sensation ahead of us in the hallway. We woke something up, and it is close. I can't see where it is, but I can feel its approximate location by the ripples it causes in the flow of energy. I shove Lenny into the lab, but before I can get inside, I see it launch itself at me.

It is human shaped, but it has dark scales patterned like the environment behind it, like a chameleon, and it is barreling through the air at me. I try to focus, but it is almost on top of me. Its claws are about to tear my face off when a surge of pain explodes in my head. Something is pulling me away from the creature.

Everything goes black.

The concrete is cold and pressing against my face. I get up and see that I'm on a sidewalk between two gray Brutalist-styled apartment buildings that I recognize as Soviet mad, chipped and stained concrete walls and poorly fitted windows. A thick mist lowers visibility to maybe fifty feet. I am in the Ruined City. I am not physically there, of course, because that would be impossible. It is a mental construct built by Pariah. Back in reality, it just looks like I'm unconscious. I guess that creature didn't kill me, or I wouldn't even be here.

When I was first injected with the attuning drug, I didn't know much about Pariah, and I've only learned a little more since. Decades ago, the Soviets wanted to create superhumans to fight the Americans. Most of them focused on improving loyal soldiers into super soldiers, but one program looked at younger test subjects. They took a child, a young boy, and experimented on him. The boy gained psychic abilities at an exponential rate. At first he had a bit of telepathy, but the next day he displayed telekinesis, and then the day after that, pyrokinesis.

His power grew so quickly that they were unprepared for the explosion. He destroyed the research facility and escaped. The military pursued him, but he easily destroyed anything they threw at him, including super soldiers. The boy, codenamed Pariah, found the generals and bureaucrats responsible for the program and killed them. I can't stand the thought of killing someone but they deserved everything Pariah did to them. His body, unable to contain the raw power he channeled, burned out shortly afterward. He was no longer a he, but an *It*, a being of pure psychic energy.

By then, Pariah had figured out how to continue to exist after death. It could already project its mind out of its body, so that wasn't the problem. The problem was it would eventually lose its sense of self and dissipate if it spent too much time as an incorporeal entity. While it had vast power, its mind was still similar to that of a child. It could not handle existence without a body. The Ruined City focuses its mind so that it can remain intact. It thinks of itself as a creature that lives within the Ruined City. Sometimes a boy, sometimes a monster, but always one being with one body. It has no idea how the Ruined City connects to the rest of the universe, but perceives it as a prison that keeps it away from whatever it desires. It does not realize that the Ruined City is all that keeps it intact. I'm still not sure what it would do if it was on Earth.

The Ruined City is, through the psychics that channel Pariah's energy, only tangentially connected to the real world. I think it may have a few other connections to reality like the lab where the boy lived, but for the most part, it can only see glimpses of Earth through people like me. I don't know how many other people are connected to Pariah. I'm only aware of one - a catatonic man in a Russian hospital. Pariah doesn't get much use out of him. We tether the Ruined City to reality, and the Ruined City holds Pariah together. I assume there must be at least one or two other desperate base raiders like myself who would do anything for the ability to channel even a fragment of Pariah's true power, but I haven't met any yet. It could just be me, the coma patient, and Pariah.

How Pariah formed a bond with the coma patient or how someone figured out how to attune a human to it is a mystery to me. It's a mystery I'd like to solve, but it will have to wait. Maybe the Soviets figured out the process, but abandoned it after they realized the drawbacks. It might have been a supervillain. They were crazy enough to try.



Escaping the Ruined City is my priority now.

Even though the Ruined City is technically the hallucination of a psychic ghost, I can't leave whenever I want. It's not a dream. There are definite rules, and escape is only possible at the blast crater in the center of the City. The geography shifts every time I visit, but I always seem to know where the crater is. I turn and start walking down the sidewalk. It's cold, but at least there's some light like the light of a late afternoon on a cloudy day. As I walk, I notice how still everything is. There are bits of dying grass on the lawn between the sidewalk and building, but despite the slight breeze, I can't see the grass move. I feel like I'm in a photograph of a dead and distant place. I don't belong here. It's only a matter of time before the City starts reacting to me.

Even though Pariah realizes it needs me to survive, that doesn't necessarily mean I'm safe here. The City has its own psychic immune system that attacks foreign minds, like me. It acts independently of Pariah. Even if it realized the Ruined City was trying to hurt me, I don't think Pariah would help me. It isn't the most stable of psychic godlike beings. Far from it. I get to the end of the sidewalk and see that I'm a four way intersection. There are outlines of smaller buildings across street packed closer to each other. The commercial district. Stores and warehouses Pariah saw before he was in the lab. I need to keep going south, but as I set foot on the cracked road, a truck's horn blares. A second later, a shadow of a truck drives across the road and kicks up pebbles at me. More vehicular shadows drive across the road, an instant rush hour. Even though they're shadows, they probably still hit like real vehicles here. I don't know what happens if you die or pass out here, but this is not the time to find out. I walk west on the lawn circling the apartment building. After a block, there are stairs leading underground. It seems to go to a tunnel going under the road. Flickering fluorescent lights illuminate a bare concrete corridor. The shadow traffic hasn't let up so there is little choice but to keep moving.

The corridor is utterly barren, but the stairs leading up to the other side are within sight. It is colder down here, cold enough to make me shiver. As I approach the halfway point in the corridor, the earth trembles for a moment. Then the concrete tears and snaps apart. I am deafened by the sound. The floor juts up at a high angle from the tremor, and I use that to run and jump as far as possible towards my goal, but I fall short. When I look up, I see only blackness ahead of me. The corridor stretches on for another few feet then a pitch black wall, where the lights do not shine. I turn back and see the stairs I took are gone. A blank wall has replaced the stairs. The Ruined City is trying to trap me, but I have a few tricks of my own.

I close my eyes and think of the blast crater. It's pulling to me, no matter where I am in the City. When I stand still, I can feel its tug, so I start to walk forward, slowly and heel to toe. For a few steps, everything is fine, but then the tremors start again. The dust of shattered concrete pours over me, but I stay focused. The breeze turns to a strong gust of wind. Dust abrades my skin and threatens my balance, but the crater's pull is stronger now. I step in a puddle, but I press on. The water seeps through my boots, frigid enough to make me gasp when I feel it. After a few dozen steps, it is ankle deep. It gets deeper at a faster rate now. Ten steps further and I reach knee height water. My teeth are chattering, and I can't stop it, but the crater is getting so close. It can't be much longer now. The water soaks upwards in my dress, and I can barely move my feet, so I fall when the floor suddenly drops a foot. I'm only underwater a moment, but the icy water hurts more than I can bear. I push off from the bottom with my hands, and I hack up water when I surface. I open my eyes. The stairs are just ahead of me, leading up.

I crawl up the steps, shivering and weighed down by my waterlogged dress, but when I reach the top, I see that I'm at the edge of the blast crater. It's over a hundred feet in diameter and five feet deep. In the center is a single raised metal platform with an operating table on it and nothing else. Before I can scramble to the platform, Pariah is there, a small boy in a hospital gown sitting on the operating table.

"Hello, Emily," the creature that still thinks it is a child says.

I hoist myself up the platform. I see a syringe filled with a dark red liquid on the operating table. The exit out of the Ruined City is never the same. Sometimes, it is a door or a ladder or a gate, but once, there was a scientist tied to a chair, next to a stool with a pistol on it. I knew he was one of the ones that experimented on Pariah. He pleaded to let him go, that he had children, that he was sorry. I knew it was only a manifestation of the City, that the real scientist had been dead for decades. The pistol was heavy, and I

had never fired one before. I missed with the first shot. The second shot hit him in the ear. He screamed and begged for mercy, even as he bled. I shot him in the stomach, and he mewled at me, unable to speak coherently, but his eyes pleaded for a merciful end. The next shot in the chest silenced him, and I was able to leave. Since then, I swore not to kill unless it was absolutely necessary.

The syringe is either meant for me or for Pariah. The boy looks at me with a calm, unreadable face.

"Hi kiddo," I say, forcing myself not to shiver or chatter my teeth.

"You nearly died. It's scary out there," the boy says.

"The sooner I get back, the sooner I can get away." I reach for the syringe. It looks more like an ice pick than a real hypodermic needle. It is heavy and warm to the touch.

"You just want to leave because you hate me. You think I'm bad," the boy says with a frown.

"If you're bad, I'm bad, and we bad people have to stick together," I say as I kneel to look at him face to face.

"You mean that?"

I nod.

"So, what now?"

"I hoped you could tell me. What am I supposed to do with this syringe?"

The boy shrugs. I have to choose. Something tells me I can't just guess and hope it will work. I'm missing something. The needle is only part of the picture but the only other puzzle pieces are the operating table and the boy. In the City, I can't assume anything.

I bend down to look at the bottom of the table and see a piece of paper taped to it. I get it and read. Notes from the Biomancer about a cloning quick-growth chamber. The project's called CAPGRAS. A handwritten note reads "the solution is ORALLY ingested not INJECTED. VITAL!"

Pariah's smiling now. There is no way I can read its mind, but I know what its thinking.

I put the needle into my mouth and push down on the plunger.

I'm on my back looking up at the low ceiling of the lab. Lenny is near the door, tensed. The door's closed, but the creature is trying to pull it open. Its claws have hooked onto the edge of the door somehow. It has the door open a few inches when Lenny darts in and fries it with his built-in taser. It screeches and lets go. The door slides shut. I pull myself up.

"Need a hand?" I say with a false bravado. Still light headed from the trip, I manage to keep from swaying around like a drunk.

"Need more than a hand!" Lenny says as he checks his hand. I remember he said his implants have batteries that he can recharge with conventional power sources or draw on his bioelectric aura or something like that. The point is if he can't charge them normally, he will burn calories to do it, but that hurts. The taser must use a lot of juice. He's probably checking the gauge now.

"How long was I out?"

"Five minutes, seven seconds."

"Well, at least it can't get any worse," I say. I can hear the creature still trying to get in; its claws scrape the metal.

"We have another problem aside from the guard dog," Lenny says as he taps his wrist mod. "Quarterman and Buck are freaking out. The police have cordoned off a four block radius around us. They're preparing to move in and take down anything, anytime now."

My trip to the Ruined City must have unleashed enough energy to haunt a big chunk of the Lower East Side. They're probably seeing ghosts of dead Russian scientists, bleeding walls, objects moving on their own accord, and worse. I'm not even sure if Pariah is aware of the side effects of my powers or if it delights in them terrorizing the living.

"How do you know? I remember you said this place was sealed off so you couldn't get a signal in or out."

Lenny grins, proud of his cleverness. "I can pick signals inside the base while I'm inside. I set a bug on the vault door. It picked up the vibrations of their speech and transmitted it to me. Very advanced tech."

"Nice."

We both pause and look at each other. I'm sore and tired, and Lenny's a nervous wreck. He's not much for the frontline, but we didn't have much of a choice. There is no one else we can trust to go on these missions.

I finally have a chance to look the lab over. It's not much, as far as I can tell. A computer terminal with a schematic of the base on the screen sits on a table at the far end of the lab. At least Lenny's fast when it comes to hacking. I inspect the screen. It lists four rooms on this level: archives (the server room), the lab, living quarters, and the decontamination room. A ladder is down the hall and across from the living quarters. The reactor and teleporter take up most of the bottom level with the remaining space labeled drone storage. The exit to the subway is adjacent to the drone storage chamber.

"Can you hack the drones?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Not from here. The controls are in the living quarters for some reason."

"I can push the guard downstairs. Use the drones to slow down Quarterman, and I'll take the monster down" I say. The energy flows through me stronger than ever, and I can sense the Pariah wants me, needs me to win.

Lenny scrambles behind me and triggers the door open. I unleash a torrent of energy, charged with the fear and pain I felt in the Ruined City. It fills the hallway before the creature can react. It shrieks and backs away, but still tries to hold its ground. I force the issue by redoubling my efforts and am rewarded by causing it to panic and flee to the only place it can, down the ladder.

I follow at a slow but steady pace. Lenny races by me and ducks into the living quarters. Behind me, I can feel Quarterman and Buck getting closer. The other guards are still unconscious. They must be in the decontamination room, but they've stopped. Lenny must have locked the inner door. It's only a matter of time before they open it.

I mount the ladder and do a fireman's slide down. It is amazing what you can learn from online videos and tutorials. All that is needed is the desire to learn new tricks. There's not exactly a how to guide on base raiding, but I figured that bases would have ladders and that it would be useful to learn how to slide down them.

The lower level is much warmer than the top floor. There is a low humming noise everywhere. I can practically feel it. Not sure where the creature fled. I can't sense it either. It must have some kind of ability to conceal its presence, either camouflage or a psychic cloaking power. It is going to ambush me, but it knows I can lash out. If it is smart, it will try something new. I have no idea what.

I advance into the intersection and get my answer.

A metal pipe flies at my head. I only have time to throw my arms up. It slams into my left forearm, and the pain starbursts in my arm, sending out a thousand tendrils of agony through me. I can't give in to the pain.

Instead of following up the attack with a charge, the creature has turned a corner down the hallway, out of sight. It only takes it seconds for its aura to fade from my senses. It is either heading towards the reactor or drone storage. I clutch my forearm and give chase. I need to get line of sight with it. On instinct, I head towards drone storage. My boots clang on the metal floor, but I don't care at this point. Rage overtakes me. I turn the corner just in time to see a few dozen hawk-sized drones, all lined up on racks, light up in unison. The light silhouettes the creature, and I unleash as much energy as I can handle on it. It staggers back and falls against a rack of drones. The drones start flying out, leaving us back in the dim red emergency lights. I lash out again with as much of Pariah's energy as I can, and it howls in pain and clutches itself. It holds a single hand up at me, pitifully trying to ward off my next attack.

Now that I can see it, I realize that it is not as lethal as I thought. Its face is deformed, half-lizard and half-human with huge eyes that are brimming with tears. I can't tell its gender, or if it even has one, but its ribs stick out from its chest and dark welts and old scabs crisscross its body. I start to feel that my right hand is wet so I look down. The blood's soaked through the sleeve of my dress.

I can't kill it and I can't leave it here to die alone. Before I realize it, the energy flows through me and into the creature, but instead of a cold river cutting through my mind, it's warm and gentle. My sight is replaced with visions of a clawed hand rattling a bar of a cage. Biomancer, in his environmentally sealed body armor, strikes the hand with a cattle prod. I realize by now that I'm seeing the memories of the creature, who I now know is called Fetch.

The memories blur together as Fetch's life unfolds in front of my eyes. He was created by splicing the DNA of an alien and a mutated human together, an impossibility that Biomancer somehow made viable. The Biomancer considered him a mediocre creation and did not engineer further beings like Fetch.

He was conditioned to run the DNA harvesting base and acquire genetic samples the drones couldn't reach, which explain the chameleon skin and cloaked aura power. It has been over a year since his master last communicated with him, and his supplies are running low. His life has been nothing but Pavlovian conditioning, loneliness, fear, and the knowledge there is no one like him in the world.

Vivid as they are, the visions last less than a minute. Fetch pleads with me, unable to comprehend who I am or what I intend to do with him. My newfound ability to read his mind sprang from my desire to understand him. It is a simple matter to reverse the flow of energy and send Fetch my memories. He gasps and closes his eyes.

A gunshot echoes somewhere in the distance. There is no time to wait for Fetch to wake up.

I try to run back to the ladder, but I can't climb up in my current condition. Lenny has some kind of high-tech first aid kit, but we have to deal with Quarterman and his goon first. I extend my senses and see that Buck is unconscious, but Lenny and Quarterman are still up, walking slowly towards the ladder. They're talking.

"Kid, you got a tiger by the tail and you don't even know it. Your friend is a walking, talking, weapon of mass destruction. The havoc she's causing above us is nothing compared with what she can do," Quarterman's voice reminds me of Principal Copper, the kind of guy who knows what's good for you if you would just listen you stupid kid. Never listens to anyone but himself. It never occurs to him that he might be wrong about anything.

"I trust her," Lenny's voice is weak and unsteady. He grunts with pain. They're both walking towards the ladder. I hide around the corner so that they can't see me from the top of the ladder.

"Call her out. Bring her here," Quarterman whispers, but I have great hearing. I can sense them as well, but a void hovers next to Quarterman. That must be the nullifier he used earlier.

A pistol clicks.

"No." Lenny is not a punk at least.

I can try to drop Quarterman, but the nullifier might shield him from part of the blast, or even if it doesn't,



the gun might go off anyway. I've just learned a new way to channel Pariah's energy, so maybe I can find a way to resist the nullifier.

"Hey Edge-Cutter. It's all good, come on down." I call out from behind the corner. He said I should make up an alias too, but I thought getting rid of names like "Captain Victory" or "Evilla the Spider Princess" was one of the few good things about the disappearance of all the superheroes and villains.

Quarterman drops the nullifier down the ladder. It lands hard, but remains intact, obviously built to survive combat conditions. It projects a bubble that I can't penetrate. Lenny cries out and collapses. Quarterman must have knocked him out with the pistol. Quarterman climbs down the ladder and picks up the nullifier by its strap with one hand, his gun in the other. I try to down him with a wave of energy, but it dissipates on contact with the surface of the nullifier's shield.

There is no choice but to flee, so I stagger down the hall to the teleporter room. He can hear my footsteps and follows right behind me. The room is small with only a few shelves of equipment and an oven sized machine that must be the teleporter. I don't see a switch to shut the door, but there is a control panel on the teleporter. I hit as many buttons as I can before I duck behind the machine. Quarterman edges around the corner into view just in time to see the teleporter light up the room. He dives back into cover outside the room, but pops his gun in and fires three random shots. The noise is deafening and one round ricochets off the teleporter next to my face. I yelp in fear, and the bastard laughs.

"Not so tough are you? You little freaks! Think you can juice up and do whatever you want," Quarterman calls out to me from behind the wall, his voice cracking with fear and rage.

"You won already! Take what you want and go!" I yell from behind the teleporter. He's holding all the cards, but he's afraid to enter the room.

"Turn it off!" The teleporter is still on, blinking and humming with power. I'm not sure what I activated on it. Might be the self-cleaning function for all I know, but Quarterman doesn't want to mess with it.

"Why should I?" My arm is in agony, and I doubt I could stand up on my own at this point anyway.

"You care about your buddy?" Despite the nullifier, I can feel Lenny's presence. He's barely conscious, and helpless if Quarterman decides to go back and shoot him.

"Okay." I say weakly.

There is nothing left I can do. That nullifier is too strong to fight and the exit to the subway is down the hall, past Quarterman. Hauling myself up is harder than it should be, but I manage and hit the control panel a few times. The machine shuts off. Quarterman walks in, shoulders slumped, covered in sweat. The gun's pointed at the ground.

"This is what you deserve," he raises the gun up, but it's pointed at the ceiling, not me. This is the first time I've gotten a good look at him. He's bald, fat, drenched in sweat, and wears an ugly dress shirt and pair of khaki pants. The shirt's got blood stains on it, especially around the sleeves, and is torn in a few places.

"I have a pension and a mortgage and a shot at upper management in a few years. You think you can come in and screw with that? I can't be seen doing this! The FBI's going to find the base! The press will love that! They love taking men like me down. Those rats, those cowards," Quarterman waves the gun around as he rants on about how it is not his fault and how he needs the money and how I deserve what is coming to me. He has never pulled a trigger on a person before. It is not easy, but he'll get over it. He is working his courage up with the rant.

I'm trying not to focus on the fact that I'm about to die and think of a way out. My powers won't work, but I could rush him. Even though he's older and out of shape, I'm seriously injured and exhausted. Before I can think of any other ways out, a scaly hand just appears out of nowhere and grabs Quarterman's pistol. I can see Fetch now even though his chameleon skin mostly hides him. Another hand grabs Quarterman's throat. He instinctively drops the nullifier to try and pull Fetch's hand off his neck. The gun is pointed at the ground, so I pry it out of Quarterman's hand. Even though I have only one good hand, I still manage

to get it free. At this point, Quarterman's gasping for air and blood is trickling down from the side of his neck.

'No! We don't kill!' I yell.

Fetch turns to look at me. He's confused. Quarterman's barely struggling.

"We're better than they are. You get it? We have to be better."

To my amazement, Fetch lets go. Quarterman falls on the ground, coughing and writhing in pain. I finally realize I'm inside the bubble of the nullifier. I look down at it. A red light blinks. The battery must be out.

The next hour passes in a blur. Buck had three pairs of handcuffs on him, so we use those to restrain him and Quarterman. They left the other goons out of the base. Lenny recovers and uses his first aid kit on us. Our wounds are stitched and sterilized. Painkillers dispensed. It has some kind of gel gun that sets a cast around my arm in seconds. He says it'll leave a nasty scar on my forearm, but other than that, it will be fine.

Fetch can't talk like a human, but he understands English, so he can write notes. He wants to go with us, and Lenny trusts my judgment. We get the coordinate data for Biomancer's main base from the teleporter and then scavenge as much as we can from the base.

Lenny picks up the FBI right outside the vault door with the bug ten minutes after we secure Quarterman and Buck. He grabs the bug and says we need to get out ASAP. Fetch fills a spare body bag with smashed drones - apparently Buck broke all of them with a baton when Lenny attacked him with them. They were designed to discreetly harvest DNA samples, not pick fights with oversized rednecks. Lenny rips off a few valuable parts from the base and a few hard drives from the server room. He also wipes the computer terminal in the lab so that the feds can't use it. It is not as much as we had hoped for, but the black market loves tech stuff, even broken parts. I even haul a backpack full of gizmos.

Lenny grabs the nullifier and asks what he should do with it. I tell him he can do whatever he wants with it. I trust him. He slings it around his shoulder.

We make for the subway exit. Fetch wanted to activate the self-destruct feature, but that would kill everyone in a three block radius, so we persuade him not to. He does have one useful thing for us. Biomancer developed a drug for interrogations that destroys the short term memory of a person, making them forget the last twelve hours of their life." Fetch finds a few doses in the lab and gives Quarterman and Buck a shot. Hopefully, they won't be able to give the feds any info about us.

The exit is a one way trap door that leads to a long thin metal tunnel. The rumbles of the trains in the distance let us know we're not too far from the active tunnels, and I can feel the presence of rats nearby. Another trap door at the end of the tunnel opens into an abandoned tunnel. The mouth of the tunnel has a chain link fence covered with a tarp. Fetch fades from sight as we hear a subway pull into a station very close by. I sneak up to the fence and push the tarp back a bit. We're next to a large empty terminal that looks like it has been abandoned for years, but past a row of pillars, there's an active terminal. Fetch motions for us to wait and enters the main terminal. He's cloaked, so I can't see where he goes, but he's back in a few minutes with a duffel bag. He takes out a rumpled shirt, jacket, jeans, and a ball cap and proceeds to put them on. He shifts his skin to appear normal, at least as normal as he can. He can't quite cover up his shape, but unless you look at him closely you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between him and a creepy homeless guy.

He leads us across the abandoned terminal. I almost trip over a groove in the ground, which must have been part of the rail many years ago. We enter a path between the barriers that divide the empty and active terminals. We go up a set of stairs and stop. Fetch pushes a tile near the ceiling, and a concealed door slides open to reveal a small hallway that dead ends in another door with a peep hole. Fetch looks through

it and motions for us to wait. Five minutes pass, and he opens the door and shoves us through. We're in a pedestrian tunnel next to a vending machine. Commuters are walking in groups. Fetch waited for an opening to push us through. No one pays attention to the goth, the skinny punk in the army surplus jacket, and the guy with the weirdly shaped head, who all just seemed to appear from behind the vending machine. We walk up to the street. Lenny checks his GPS and sees that we're a dozen blocks away from the base. We're free.

It takes us six hours to get to the safehouse with all the loot, a day to sleep off the exhaustion and fear, and a week to sell some of the drone parts. Fetch isn't sure what he wants to do now, but after I explain what our next mission is, he makes me promise that I'll take him to Biomancer's base. He deserves it more than anyone else alive. He spends the rest of his time watching TV and reading books. Getting over culture shock is a hell of a thing I guess. The news doesn't reveal much about Pariah's manifestation above the base. Supernatural incidents are getting to be more common now that anyone with the desire and a lack of common sense can get superpowers. It does say that an old woman was hospitalized for a heart attack and has fallen into a coma, thanks to me.

Lenny gives the coordinate data a look over and realizes he's in way over his head. It'll take weeks, if not months, to puzzle it out. Our money won't last that long, so we'll have to find some other place to raid. We have leads for that.

I ask Lenny about CAPGRAS after I looked the word up. It's a mental illness where a person thinks someone they know has been replaced with an impostor. He asks me how I knew, and I tell him that Pariah told me. That unnerves him, but he tells me there was some unencrypted data on the computer in the lab. It was about Biomancer's project to create clones of important people so that they could be replaced with loyal followers. It required three auxiliary bases, similar to the one we just raided. He had built two of them before he disappeared. Their locations were listed.

I later notice he's repaired the nullifier instead of selling it. Can't say I blame him. After all, we could last for months without having to raid if I didn't insist on spending most of the money we raised for Alice. No anonymous envelope of cash slipped under the front door though. Dad just gets a notice that the insurance policy was renewed for another year and all outstanding bills have been paid off. There's no dramatic visit or confrontation either because there would be no point to it.

One night a month later, I get as close as across the cul de sac on the empty lot where Mr. Clayton's house burned down a few years ago and no one has bothered to rebuild. It is raining, but I can see the light is on in her second story bedroom. She's probably reading another book on Africa, or South America, or some other exotic place where it is warm. Staying up too late isn't good for her, but she deserves it. Dad's not good at taking care of her, but she'll get the best treatment the hospital can give her.

It's not the cure though. Biomancer had that but he never shared his cure with the rest of the world. He saved the president's life ten years ago, but said it was impossible to mass produce. I can feel myself crying because I know she misses me, and I want nothing more in the world than go to her, tell her I'm all right, I'll find the cure, and I'll make her okay, but Pariah wants a body to inhabit. It might possess her. I have no evidence to confirm it, but I can feel its desires now. It hungers after her for some reason, and I don't want to find out why. I can satisfy it with a cloned body, I think.

We all need to crack open that last base. Lenny needs the money to pay for his meds. Fetch needs to come to terms with his creator and himself. I have to satisfy the twin demands of myself and Pariah. I am caught in a storm that I chose to be in. It almost destroyed me already, and ahead are more dangers, but I can't stop or pull myself out, nor do I want to be out of it. The majority of people accept their fates and flee when they see a hurricane bearing down. They don't see that the destruction clears out stagnation. It changes all possibilities, turning the certainty of failure into the faint chance of success. All the pain and fear is worth the possibility that Alice lives to see graduation. I can't wait to see what Biomancer left behind for us.