



R DeWolfe ©

>If you read this, at some point you're going to ask 'wait, is this meant to be shadowrun?'

>the answer is: technically no. I just wanted to do some modern fantasy. However, fairly quickly I realised I was straying into shadowrun and just decided to lean into it

>here's a quick reference for the main characters, with their background and closest Shadowrun/D&D analogue:

>Kael - half-elf, the face (rogue)

>Franklin - human, mage (mage/shaman)

>Elijah - half-orc, ex-military (fighter)

>Kali - elf, ex-military (fighter)

>Tobias - human, driver (rigger)

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---- The Snowman 2: Judgement Day

The conference room said money. It didn't scream money, because that would be crass, and frankly unnecessary. There were no gilt door handles or crystal chandeliers. It said money with the clarity and diction of a Shakespearean actor capable of projecting to the back of the theatre while barely raising his voice. Sure, the oval, ice-smooth mahogany table probably cost as much as a modest house, and the plush eggshell-white carpet it sat on might as well have been spun from gold. But the aesthetic was corporate chic rather than Versaillesque decadence, so unless you were the sort of person who spent their spare time flicking through certain select and not publicly available catalogues, you couldn't really guess how much anything cost. You would just know you were in the presence of Money, with a capital 'M'.

The room was minimally lit. Possibly this was for the benefit of the projector, currently throwing a blank screen onto the wall nearest the door. Possibly it was for the figure seated at the end of the table furthest from the door, recessed comfortably in the shadows of a high-backed chair.

The door opened. An orc came into the room, followed by an elf. They stopped, just inside the door.

A voice as rich and dark as the mahogany table issued from the chair. 'Please, sit down.'

The elf nodded over his shoulder, and four others entered the room behind him - three humans and another orc. Their suits were tailored, expensively, with 'professional' stamped all over them like a logo. Professional at what, they did not say. The six of them took their seats either side of the table.

The first ork started to speak. 'Good evening, sir. I'm Hal Ja...'

'No introductions are necessary, Mr. Jagozian. I know who each of you are already, and as I'm sure my agent told you, there is no need for you to know who I am.'

'Yeah, about that.' said the elf. It's... unusual for us not to know who we're working for. If you have any doubts about our professional discretion...'

'If I had any doubts about your trustworthiness, or your competence, I would not have hired you Mr. Callen.' the voice interrupted, silky smooth. 'But this is a delicate matter, and you can't divulge what you don't know. I'm sure you understand.'

'We understand perfectly.' the orc said hastily. 'There's no issue with the terms of the contract - we are at your disposal.'

'Of course.' They couldn't see that the man the voice belonged to was smiling, but they knew he was smiling all the same. 'To business, then. Bluntly, a little over a year ago something very valuable was stolen from me. I would like it back. I would also like you to make sure that those responsible for the theft are suitably chastised.'

'That's it?' Jagozian said abruptly. He corrected himself: 'I'm sorry, I was just expected something... I mean, recovering stolen goods? Surely your corp has assets for a job like this. And don't you have your own security?'

'As I said, this is a matter requiring some discretion; this is personal business, not a corp problem. The item was stolen from my country estate. And I do have security contractors who work for me on a personal basis, however... they failed to prevent the theft in the first place. I'm sure you can understand why I concluded that this assignment requires a more specialised set of skills than I currently have in my employ.'

The elf leaned forward. 'Look, I don't know *who* you are, but I think I can guess *what* you are. One practitioner to another: surely there isn't anything we can do for you that you can't do yourself?'

'Are you trying to talk yourself out of a job, Mr. Callen?' the voice said with a light laugh.

'I'm just trying to see all the angles here. Walking into a job blind is dangerous. I'm sure you understand. Sir.'

'If you were right - and I encourage you not to think too deeply about who *or* what I might be - it could be that I prefer to keep this affair at arm's length.'

'We understand.' the orc repeated. 'But surely - a simple item retrieval? There must be some sort of catch.'

'The private security that handled the initial incident suffered several casualties, and retreated without getting a close enough look at the thieves to identify them. From the accounts of the survivors and the useable surveillance footage, it seems that there were six assailants, but your first task will be to positively identify them. From their work, I am confident that five of them were professional criminals of no great importance; reasonably competent but essentially small-time. The sixth, however, was the one that gave the security detail difficulty. I should mention at this point that all twelve of the on-call personnel that night were ogres, well-armed and experienced. Only three made it back to the mansion alive.'

All six of the suits seated round the other end of the table exchanged a look. It wasn't a worried look. That would be giving too much away in front of the client. But it was a "you just heard that, right?" look.

'We... may need to take on additional team members.' Jagozian murmured.

'Acceptable, so long as you can find contractors whose competence and discretion can be trusted. Take whatever precautions you feel are necessary; this individual should not be underestimated. I've only managed to track him down within the last few days, but I can guarantee that where you find him, you will find my stolen property - and he will not give it up without a fight. You should, first and foremost, consider this assignment a "hit" on this individual, with the objective being the recovery of a clay tablet, the specifications of which will be provided. A bonus will be paid for the elimination of his colleagues, should he lead you to them.'

'Alright, so who's the target?'

'Bear with me a moment, if you please.' the projector started to whir as it came out of sleep mode. 'Although my security didn't get close enough to the thieves for it to make much difference, they were wearing bodycams. Fortunately some of them continued recording after their wearers had become casualties. This image, and a snatch of dialogue, was captured with remarkable clarity.'

The projector clicked through to the next picture. The table sat in silence for a moment.

The elf broke the moment. 'Is this some kind of joke?'

'I assure you, Mr. Callen, this is deadly serious. That is your contract, should you choose to accept it.'

The seven occupants of the room all stared up at the image of a figure who was wearing a floppy felt hat, green mittens, a red scarf, red earmuffs... and who was made entirely of snow. One by one, the six freelancers turned to look at the shadow at the head of the table.

'They call him "Mr. Snowman".'

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The alley was pitch black, save for a flickering pool of light clinging nervously to the security lamp above the side door. The crumbling brickwork of the apartment building had strewn a garnish of masonry over the concrete, which coupled with all the broken glass meant there was almost nowhere you could put your foot that didn't *crunch*. And if it didn't crunch, it was inexplicably and disturbingly sticky. You wouldn't need to worry about muggers here simply because there was nothing here to mug, apart from a few emaciated rats who'd made some really poor life decisions. Even the meth heads would find somewhere more comfortable to get high, like a needle-studded mattress between two dumpsters at the back of a Denny's.

And yet, against all common sense, there was someone here tonight: four silhouettes clustered at the edge of the light. Even more confusingly, tonight was Christmas eve. The rats looked upon the four figures, with as much pity as a rat was capable of, before returning to hunting the cockroaches. Which was easy because even the cockroaches around here had given up on life.

A handful of snowflakes drifted down out of an almost clear sky. They looked like faint stars blinking in and out of existence as they caught the city lights on their way down, before disappearing forever. You could taste the frost on the air.

'Did you get the stuff?' Elijah whispered.

'Yeah, I got it.' Kali replied. 'What about you?'

'I got mine. Tobias - how about you?'

'Lock, stock and two smoking barrels, mate.'

'Dare I ask - Kael?'

'What? You think I can't complete even the simplest task, don't you? You know, some days I don't think

you guys have enough respect for...'

'/Kael/.' Kali hissed.

'I got it, I got it.' There was the muffled sound of a backpack being opened. 'Look, it's all right here.'

'Good, then we're ready.' Elijah said. He reached out, and pressed the buzzer on the intercom by the security door.

There was a hiss of static. Nothing happened for a moment. Then there was a louder hiss of static, and a voice - distorted almost as badly as a subway driver's - came through:

'Password?'

'Password?' Kali said. 'The password is: let us the fuck in Franklin, we're freezing our asses off out here.'

'/Password/.' the intercom said emphatically.

'Wenceslas.' Elijah answered.

'Come a little closer. You're not all in frame.'

They looked up at the blinking red light of the security camera, and huddled tighter in around the door.

There was a click as the door unlocked. 'There's a service elevator at the end of the hall; no one else uses it. Take it all the way to the top.' the intercom told them.

The four of them filed through the door. It was barely lighter inside the building; half the lightbulbs in the corridor seemed to be dead or simply missing. The four shapes in the darkness resolved into four people. A half-orc, tall and built like a guy who spends most of his life at the gym. An elf, who likewise looked like she spent most of her life at the gym, except she was five-foot nothing and wore her hair in a blond ponytail rather than shaved bald. A human, stocky, a permanent five-o-clock-shadow across his meaty jaw; his face said bruiser, but his hands said he'd never been in a physical fight in his life. And a half-elf who, with his fine-boned face and insouciant half-smile, gave the rough impression of something a cat might evolve into in a few million years. Elijah and Kali both wore the kind of hard-wearing army-surplus people who're used to fatigues get when they start buying civilian clothes again; their camo-patterned backpacks were almost identical. Tobias had a puffy black jacket and dark jeans, while Kael was pulling off a heavy grey trench coat that should have gone out of fashion at the turn of the millennium.

There wasn't any way to miss the service lift: dead straight at the end of the corridor. Elijah swung the metal gate back with a loud clatter, and they stepped inside.

'You ready for this?' he muttered to Kali.

'No. Now hurry up and press the button, we're gonna be late.'

'Okay. Let's get this party started.'

* * * *

'Drones confirm: targets spotted. They've entered the building.'

'Well it looks like we've hit the jackpot - we can bag all of them in one go, no interrogations necessary. All teams check in.'

'Alpha: in position.'

'Beta: in position.'

'Gamma: in position.'

'Delta: in position.'

'Copy alpha, beta, gamma, delta. Command confirms all feeds active, all drones in position. Ready to begin Operation Springtime. Stand by for my order.' Jagozian touched his earpiece, cutting his mike.

Callen looked at his partner, the faintest trace of a smile on his narrow, elvish face. 'Well then: let's get this party started.'

* * * *

The service elevator juddered to a halt, machinery grinding. Elijah reached out and drew the gate aside. It squealed like a braking freight train.

'You guys! You all came!' Franklin opened the door, all enthusiasm. 'Man, it's so good to see you.'

'Yeah. Sure.' Elijah muttered. 'Good to see you too, dude.'

'Hey, did you all bring the stuff I asked for?'

Elijah reached into his bag. 'Mulled wine, right?' He pulled out a bottle.

'Yeah, that's great.'

'I got the eggnog.' Kali grunted.

Tobias hefted his backpack off his shoulder and held it out: 'Cocktail sausages, pigs-in-blanket, cranberry meatballs, stuffing balls, a bunch of charcuterie. There's also some cucumber and low-fat cream cheese on crackers. We can throw those straight in the rubbish, but if my wife asks, we ate them all and everyone loved them.'

'And I got the Yule log.' Kael announced proudly. 'And the fruitcake, the gingerbread, the panettone, and... I'm not sure what this is, might be a pumpkin pie. Whatever, you said dessert - I got it covered.'

'Awesome. Just leave it on the table there and I'll start handing things around in a bit. Come on, take a seat on the couches.'

'Is *he* here.' Kali asked. Her delicate elfin face was all but expressionless.

'Sure, he's just round the corner in the kitchen. He'll be so happy you all came. Look...' he leaned in and lowered his voice a little. 'I know we're kind of - well, it's not that we aren't friends, but to you I'm just a work friend, right?'

'Hey, just because we don't hang out much when we're not on a job doesn't mean I don't like you, Franklin.' Kael laughed. 'I have the best time when I'm ripping someone off with you.'

'Maybe if you thought of it as work and not a social event I wouldn't get people shooting at me so often, Kael.' Kali muttered.

Franklin ignored this and continued: 'Anyway, I just wanted to say: thank you for coming. This is a really special night for him, what with his birthday today and Christmas tomorrow. We're the only friends he has, after all. I know it means a lot to him for you to all be here. He takes friendship /seriously/.'

'Yeah, there ain't much more serious than half a dozen dead ogres.' said Elijah. 'We're happy to be here; we owe him, after all. Besides, we actually had kind of a good time with him last Christmas.'

'Speak for yourself.' Kali retorted. 'I had my quota of Christmas cheer filled up for the next decade - by the time January 6th came along I was ready to shoot myself if I heard "Jingle Bells" one more time. Speaking of which, did you ever work out why he, you know... stopped.'

Franklin gave a half-shrug. 'From all the research I've done since he woke up, it think it was just a natural hibernation. The binding that defines his spirit is so tied into the Christmas season that when Twelfth Night ended it couldn't reconcile the contradiction of being a Christmas snowman after Christmas was over. So he sort of went into standby mode. By the way, I promise it'll just be for tonight this time - I won't let him drag you to any carol services or Santa's Grottos again. I'm grateful you could spare a single night - I know you probably had other plans.'

'Nah, it's alright.' said Tobias. 'My missus won't mind so long as I'm not out too late; got to get back in time to play Santa for the girls, but until then I'm all yours. She's just happy we're not doing a job this Christmas, 'specially after how last year's went.'

'I'm sure the city's bars will survive without me for one night.' said Kael brightly. 'I can always make up for it later. And I'm pretty sure these two didn't have any plans between a workout session and a rather sad bottle of whiskey, alone.'

'Hey!' Kali exclaimed, and kicked Kael in the shin.

'Shall we go on through?' said Franklin; he turned away from the door. Kael and Tobias followed him into the apartment while Elijah and Kali hung back for a moment.

'You did bring the whiskey, right?' Elijah whispered.

'Right here, in my bag.' Kali replied. 'Say the word and this eggnog will get a whole lot more festive.' She sighed. 'I still don't know why I let you talk me into this. Throwing a party for a walking snowball just feels weird, and I'm not sure how much of his Christmas crap I can take.'

'Like I said, we do owe him. Besides, it wouldn't kill you to lighten up a bit.'

'You never know, it might. Or kill someone, at least.' Kali said. Elijah rolled his eyes and made to step through the door, but Kali stopped him. 'One sec.' She took a swig of the whiskey. 'There, ready. You want some?' Elijah shook his head. 'Suit yourself. Well, let's get this over with.'

* * * *

'What are we waiting for, Hal? We're in position, they're all in there now: let's fucking do this.'

'There's no rush, Callen. Let the streets clear a little. Let them get comfortable - give them time to relax, drink a little. Besides, I want *visual* confirmation that the primary target is inside before we move.'

'No rush? I'm freezing my ass off out here. And if this neighborhood got any clearer the vacuum implosion would wipe out half the city. Send one of the drones to take a look through the skylight and let's get on with it.'

'If we send a drone that close, there's a chance it'll alert them. If he's in there, he'll go near a window sooner or later. Patience.'

* * * *

The apartment was a L-shaped penthouse studio, with a large open-plan main room two storeys high, topped by the building's roof; it contained the kitchen area, a dining table and chairs, and a circle of couches. There was a partition at wider end - bathroom and utility closet on the first storey, two bedrooms with a mezzanine balcony on the second. Spacious, and in the daytime the row of skylights would provide plenty of light. The walls only had a few scraps of flaking paint left on the red brickwork, and the floorboards were chipped and uneven, but the furniture and the kitchen fittings were good quality; someone was slowly trying to make the place habitable again. And there was a seven-foot Christmas tree, decorated like the fir had evolved a glittery, golden armoured shell; the actual branches were barely visible anymore.

'And a hug for you, and a hug for you, and a hug for you - come on Franklin, you too, just because you've already had one doesn't mean you couldn't use one more.'

Red scarf. Red earmuffs. Green mittens and a floppy black hat with a sprig of holly in it. And an expression of pure, unadulterated joy, despite the fact that his face only consisted of two lumps of coal for eyes, a carrot for a nose, and a mouth that was just a drawn-on line. Mr. Snowman stood there with open arms, ready to press you against what he would unironically call his bosom. Elijah barely had time to open his mouth before he was pulled into Mr. Snowman's chilly embrace. Elijah was pretty tall, and he still felt the carrot brush past his ear as Mr. Snowman hugged him.

'No hug for me, thanks.' Kali said as Mr. Snowman released Elijah and turned towards her. 'Uh... my people traditionally greet each other with a bow. From at least six feet apart.'

Mr. Snowman, doffing his hat off with a flourish, gave a deep bow, stiffly returned by Kali. She studiously ignored Kael's smirk.

'I'm so glad you could make it, friends. We're going to have such fun. I've got party games, and songs, and of course there's all the wonderful food you've brought. You know... when I woke up in the freezer... well, I was all alone and it was quite a shock. Of course, Franklin soon came to let me out, but there was a little moment there when I even thought you might all have gotten tired of me, with my silly singing and hugs and whatnot. And now I get to spend Christmas Eve with my five best friends in the whole world. It's - well...'

His voice caught with emotion.

'Uh... are you crying?' Kael asked incredulously. 'You are crying - how are you even doing that? You don't have tear ducts.'

Mr. Snowman reached up with a mitten to his face. 'Oh, this? That's just because I've been baking sugar cookies - the oven always makes me a little weepy, I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry about it, I'm the same with onions.' Tobias grinned.

'I think I need to take a moment to visit the powder room. Do excuse me for a moment, I'll be right back.'

'We're glad you're not dead!' Kael shouted after him.

'I keep a cooler full of powdered snow in the bathroom so he can replace what he loses to melting.' Franklin clarified. 'I've been keeping the thermostat way down for him but it still gets above zero during the daytime. We've actually been experimenting a lot with frost magic - he's a natural at it, he's taught me a huge amount. If anything he's too strong. We've been trying to work on harnessing his magic to create a low-grade cold aura that doesn't freeze everything solid within ten feet. But obviously we've only had a few weeks to work on it.'

'So he really just sprang back to life on December first?' Kael asked.

'Yep. Right at the beginning of Advent. Thank fuck I thought to install a motion-activated camera in the meat locker I rented, or he might have been in there for weeks before I thought to check on him. I looked at the recording: one moment he was just snow, next moment bam, sentience. I'm just relieved I did put him in storage instead of trying to take him apart to see what was wrong with him. Or...' he looked pointedly at Kali. 'taking the tablet out of his head so we could sell it.'

Kali threw her hands up. 'It was just a suggestion - come on, he did look pretty dead. I'm as happy as anyone that he came back to life.' Everyone looked at her. 'Okay, maybe not as happy as /some/ people - and, remind me sometime Franklin, we really need to get you a girlfriend - but I like the guy enough to be happy he's alive. Hey, I came to his party, didn't I? So - let's party.' She held up the eggnog, took a swig, and passed it round.

Mr Snowman came out of the bathroom a few minutes later. 'We should go out on the roof later - the stars are so beautiful tonight. This apartment is so nice, you get a great view of the city even from the bathroom.'

'Have you got any plans for what you're going to do over the next twelve days?' Kael asked. 'I assume we're all expecting that you'll, uh, go to sleep again on Twelfth Night.'

'Well, we're staying in on Christmas day itself, and then going to the skating rink on Monday.' said Franklin. 'I've been experimenting with minor glamours to let us go out in public without attracting

attention, but in the meantime it's amazing how many people will ignore a walking snowman if you tell them it's a suit. I'm still trying to keep a low profile, though - sorry about the security precautions, by the way. I know we probably would have heard by now if van Kleiss was coming for his tablet, but I can't help but being a little paranoid.

'Relax' said Kael. 'Even the most craven, soulless corporate suit has better things to do tonight. Van Kleiss had a black-tie dinner with the mayor and half the mages in the city last year, that's why his mansion was empty for us. Corp officers like a booze and schmooze as much as the rest of us. If not more.'

'Sorry - /empty/? Did you say his mansion was empty, Kael?' Kali started, half rising out of her seat.

'Don't start that again.' Elijah said, physically pulling her back down.

'Besides, it all worked out for the best, right?' Kael smiled, nodding towards Mr. Snowman.

'Sugar cookie?' Mr. Snowman asked Kali, proffering a plate of star shapes dusted with so much powdered sugar they looked like a Columbian cartel boss's sample platter. She glared for a moment, then shrugged and took two.

'Anyone else want a sugar cookie?' Mr. Snowman asked. Kael took the plate, took one and stuffed it in his mouth, then passed them round while shedding crumbs.

'Damn, these are /good/. ' said Tobias. 'You need to give me the recipe, my kids would love these.'

'Speaking of giving things,' Mr. Snowman said, practically bobbing up and down with excitement. 'I know Franklin said there was no need to bring Christmas presents but I just couldn't help myself. I hope you don't mind, I don't mean to show anyone up.'

'Uh, no.' Kael said. 'What sort of presents...?' he added, with the obvious subtext "what does a seven foot tall snow golem think is an appropriate Christmas gift?".

'Well that's the surprise, isn't it. Here you go, don't wait to start unwrapping - just dig right in.' Mr. Snowman took a stack of brightly wrapped boxes from under the Christmas tree and started handing them out.

Elijah shrugged and tore off the wrapping. He sat there for a moment, open-mouthed. 'Holy crap this is amazing: this is an original set of Aerosmith records. My dad used to listen to this stuff when I was a kid, and he said he got them from his dad.'

'I had this dress when I was five. How did you know?' Kali said in a small voice. Her eyes narrowed, and she looked pointedly at Mr. Snowman. 'How /did/ you know?'

Mr. Snowman smiled in complete innocence. 'Oh, I just looked into my heart and it came to me. When you're a real friend, you just know someone I guess. I just wanted to say thank you to all of you. Franklin, there's one for you too - I was thinking of saving it for Christmas Day, but now seems more appropriate.' He held up a large box wrapped with snowflake wrapping paper.

'This is - oh, this is too much.' Tobias was turning a fist-sized electronic device over in his hands. 'Miniature combi-booster. Amplify your signal, jam someone else's, encrypt traffic - these do everything. This is... I'm chuffed to bits, mate, thank you.'

'Well, it's just a little something.' Mr Snowman said modestly. 'I'm sure Santa will be bringing all your proper Christmas presents tonight. I know you're supposed to be asleep when he comes but I can't help hoping I catch a glimpse of him.' He cocked his head. 'In fact - ooh, this is exciting - I think I hear reindeer on the roof right now!'

'Shall you tell him or shall I?' Kael whispered to Elijah.

'Don't you dare.' snapped Franklin.

'Wait, shut up I do hear something.' Kali said. She paused for a moment, listening. 'There's something on the roof.'

Franklin's brow furrowed. 'I don't hear anything.'

'That's because you haven't got elf ears. Listen, there...'

Elijah was looking up at the skylight. 'Shit you're right. I think I saw movement. Wait, is that a... COVER! GET TO COVER!

Kali reacted first, jumping off the couch and diving towards the kitchen. She grabbed Franklin's collar as she passed him. Elijah and Kael were only a fraction of a second behind her, both grabbing Tobias. They were still making for the cover of the kitchen counters - with their stainless steel doors and tops - when the limpet mine exploded.

The skylights shattered. Mr. Snowman, still standing there holding Franklin's present, was caught in a sudden flurry as glittering shards fell on him and around him. Now covered in sparkling freckles, he turned a bemused face upwards towards the exploded skylights.

A burst of gunfire chased Elijah as he leaped over the counter. The dark outlines of people in tactical gear started appearing at the skylights. 'Hello? Are you Santa's Elves?' Mr Snowman called out. 'Don't you usually use the chimney? Oh right, we don't have one, that's why you're...'

A gruff voice called out from overhead. 'That's him - target sighted!'

'Mr. Snowman! Take cover!' Franklin yelled. 'That's not Santa! They're, uh - well I don't know who the fuck they are but they're here to hurt us!'

'What, and ruin the party? Don't worry friends, I'll protect you.' said Mr. Snowman, taking out his wand.

The gruff voice called out again: 'Hit the lights! Hit the lights!'

Suddenly, it was daytime again. In fact, the searing brightness that filled the apartment made actual daylight look like a cheap imitation by comparison. Midday in the middle of the Sahara was a cloudy Norwegian afternoon by comparison. Mr. Snowman was pinned in the beam of several spotlights. He raised an arm over his eyes and stumbled backwards towards the wall.

Franklin screamed abruptly. He'd been peeking over the countertop when the lights came on. 'Shit, my eyes!' He dropped down behind the counter, hands over his face. 'Fuck, I think I'm blind.'

'What the hell?' Kael called out. 'Can anyone see anything?'

'Only the inside of my own eyelids.' Tobias answered.

'We need to shoot out the lights.' Kali said matter-of-factly. There was the 'click-clack' of a slide being pulled back.

'You have a gun?' asked Franklin. 'Why did you bring a gun to my party?!'

'I always have a pistol on me. You can thank Elijah for talking me out of putting a bullpup in my backpack. Anyone else armed?'

'Me.' Elijah called back. 'Just a pistol.'

'When I say, we empty everything we have towards the skylights. That might take out a few of the lamps.'

'And when we've emptied our mags? We'd be lucky to get one or two of them firing blind. I don't suppose anyone has a welding mask on them?'

There was a clatter across the room. Someone had stumbled into the Christmas tree.

'Franklin... Franklin.' Mr. Snowman cried out. There was a note of panic in his voice. 'I don't feel so good, Franklin.'

'It's working!' a gravelly voice shouted up above. 'Angle the heat lamps down a bit.'

'Mr. Snowman!' Franklin shouted. 'Take cover.'

'I can't see, Franklin.' Mr Snowman called back plaintively.

'Follow the sound of my voice, Mr. Snowman.'

'I can't... I can't...' Mr. Snowman's voice was getting slightly distorted. 'Help me, Franklin.'

'Mr. Snowman!' Franklin tried to scabble out of his hiding spot, but Kali grabbed him and pulled him down.

'Getting shot isn't going to help him, you idiot.'

'Oh dear... oh dear...' Mr. Snowman slurred. 'I think I've started crying again.'

There was the sound of a few more footsteps, making little splish-splash sounds as if they were stumbling through a puddle. Then they stopped, and there was a heavy *thump*.

'Hang on a sec.' said Kael. He started patting down his trench coat. 'Ha - I did leave them in here. Hey Kali, would you like some sunglasses?' He reached out, searching, and found Franklin's arm. 'Pass these to Kali.' Kael told him, giving him the sunglasses.

Franklin took them, but didn't pass them along. Instead, he put them on, and cautiously raised his head above the counter.

Squinting, he could just see the outline of Mr. Snowman. He was slumped down, against the wall, caught in the full blast of the furnace of light and heat coming from above. He was smaller than he should have been. Much smaller. Franklin couldn't even see his legs.

'Franklin... we were having such a good party...!' Mr. Snowman said slowly, as if he was having difficulty forming the words. 'We had... a good time... together. Franklin.'

'Mr. Snowman!' Franklin called out, but he didn't answer. 'Mr. Snowman, don't give up! Mr. Snowman! Mr. Snowman?'

There was no reply.

Franklin sank back down behind the counter. Wordlessly, he took the sunglasses off and passed them to Kali.

'Right... shit, that isn't much better, is it? Okay, now that I can sort of see this is what we're going to do. On my mark Elijah, you're going to give cover fire - just try to get it in their general direction. I'm going to do my best to take out the lights. And you three make a run for the elevator - I don't think they can see us much better than we can see them, or Franklin would have got his dome shot off just now. You might make it.'

'Speaking of the elevator,' said Kael. 'What's that sound?'

'Wha... oh, well that's just perfect.' Kali spat. The unmistakable clunking and grinding of the elevator was just audible through the wall. A second later it came to a halt, and they heard the gate screech.

There was a clang, then another, as something pounded on Franklin's security door. Then a splintering sound as the frame around it gave way. Someone muttered something; too low to hear, but Kali thought

it sounded something like 'fuck me, that's bright'. There were footsteps on the bare floorboards; more than one person. Then someone barked an order: 'Lights off!'

'Lights off.' the gravelly voice up above confirmed.

Kali immediately sprang up from behind the counter, pistol raised, but before she had a chance to use it there was a burst of automatic weapons fire. She ducked down again, bullets pinging off the stainless steel.

'Elijah, on my mark give me cover fire, then...' she whispered, before Kael cut her off.

'Ah, shit. Look at Mr. Snowman.' He was pointing at the mirror-clear stainless steel of the oven door; it was in just the right position to give them a view of the apartment.

A metre or two away from the Christmas tree, there was a mound of snow about knee-high sitting in a rapidly spreading puddle. A red scarf, green mittens, and a carrot lay in the puddle. Only the hat and the earmuffs were still perched forlornly atop the mound.

'Well, looks like mission accomplished.' said a smooth voice on the other side of the counter. 'Secure the asset.' he ordered. Booted footsteps slammed on the floor, and a squad of three men and two orcs in tac gear surrounded the puddle. 'Would you like to do the honors, Callen?'

'It would be my pleasure, Hal.' Callen looked down at the mound. 'Huh - he wasn't so tough after all. We didn't need to pay for the extra muscle.'

'Better safe than sorry, my friend. Now extract the tablet and we can wrap this up. Just in time for Christmas.'

'It's a millennia old, extremely powerful artefact - it's not as simple as just picking it up. You'll have to give me a minute while I give what's left of this popsicle a brain-ectomy.'

'You bastards!' said Franklin through his tears. 'All he ever wanted to do was give people presents and bake sugar cookies. You /bastards/.'

'Ah, that would be Franklin, am I right?' Hal said pleasantly. 'How about the five of you behind the counter come out with your hands up.'

'And why would we do that?' shouted Kael.

'Because at least then I'll hand you over to our employer alive.'

'Hand us over, we're as good as dead, and you know it.'

The smartly-dressed orc seemed unconcerned by this. 'Well, that's as much professional courtesy as you're going to get I'm afraid.'

'You got what you came for.' said Kali. 'You can walk out now with the tablet and we won't stop you'

'From where I'm standing it looks like you're in no position to stop us anyway, Miss...?'

'Go fuck yourself.' Kali leaned round the side of the counter and fired two shots; she pulled back into cover just as the return fire chewed up the floorboards where she'd been lying. The shots skimmed past Hal Jagozian's shoulder and hit the man standing just behind him; he went down, but the muffled cursing that followed told Kali that he'd been wearing body armour. The other four mercenaries overturned the dining table and the couches to give themselves cover. Hal and Callen briskly backed away from the remains of Mr. Snowman to a spot where Kali didn't have a direct line of sight to them.

'Fair point, Miss Go Fuck Yourself. Fair Point. But that's a small pistol and I'm guessing you have limited ammunition for it. On balance, I think I still prefer to collect the bonus for delivering your bodies. One professional to another, it's nothing personal, you understand.' He shouted to his men. 'No heavy

weapons or grenades until the tablet is secure. Take them out.'

A storm of automatic weapons fire filled the apartment. For a few seconds the mercenaries - both those hiding behind the furniture in the apartment and the ones firing through the skylights above them - held down their triggers and hosed down the kitchen counters with a hail of bullets. They pinged and ricocheted off the stainless steel and shattered half the glasses on the countertops, but although they made plenty of dents they didn't penetrate. A shotgun blast exploded a plate of cookies that had been left on the counter, turning Mr. Snowman's lovingly decorated Christmas stars into a cloud of crumbs and powdered sugar. One by one, chambers clicked on empty, and there was a moment's pause as the mercenaries reloaded.

'Any of you still alive?' Hal called out ironically.

Elijah popped out from behind his counter and fired three shots, taking a few chunks out of the dining table and just missing an orc mercenary who'd been taking a relaxed attitude to the concept of 'cover'. The orc dived down, shielding his full body behind the table.

'You should have said "no".' Kael sniggered. Then he realised he was feeling cold, and had a moment of panic that he'd been hit. Until he looked to his left and saw what Franklin was doing.

Their self-taught mage had his hands cupped in front of himself, about thirty centimetres apart. They were supporting a sphere of swirling ice crystals that looked like a giant snowglobe without the kitschy figurines. The sphere hovered just above Franklin's hands as he whispered over it, soft and menacing syllables flowing quickly. His tears were frozen to his cheeks.

This magic - channelling without prepared focus or circle - was orders of magnitude more powerful than anything they'd seen Franklin use before. 'Uh, Franklin, are you sure you know what you're do...' Kael started.

Too late. Franklin rose up and hurled the sphere across the room. It expanded as it moved; bullets tore through the air towards Franklin but they were caught in the maelstrom, disintegrating as they were frozen and bombarded by tiny ice crystals. The pocket snowstorm howled towards the mercenaries' hiding places, ready to...

The elf, Callen, stepped out in front of the onrushing storm and made a deft and complex motion with his hands. Magic sparked at his fingertips, and a second before the ice hit him a fiery glyph appeared in the air. The storm dissipated, fizzing and spitting as it hit the magically charged air around the burning glyph.

If you'd been watching closely, you'd have seen the elven mage breathe a very slight sigh of relief as the last of the ice crystals evaporated, a few centimetres from his face. He quickly backed away into cover again. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead, maybe just from the heat of his spell - although the room was definitely colder now than it had been before Franklin launched his attack.

'Well, good effort, Franklin.' Kael said, resignedly. 'I don't suppose you've got another one in you?'

Franklin shook his head.

'Are we fucked?' asked Tobias. 'I'm no tactical expert but it's looking like we're fucked.'

Elijah got another three rounds off, but narrowly escaped the burst of return fire. He turned to Tobias; 'Is there anything around you can hack?'

'My jack doesn't have the range to find anything from here. Besides, we're on the top floor - it's not like I could drive a truck through the wall.'

'Then we're fucked.' said Kali. She jumped up, put two shots in a couch, and ducked down again quickly. 'But that doesn't mean we can't make them work for it.'

'Wait - look.' said Kael.

'At what? Elijah asked, glancing at Kael. Kael grabbed his shoulder and turned him round, pointing towards the now bullet-dented, but still shiny, oven door.

For a moment it looked like the steel itself was warping and rippling, but then Elijah realised he was watching something happening on the other side of the room, over near the Christmas tree behind the overturned dining table. A pillar of water was rising over where Mr. Snowman had fallen. It undulated as it grew, waves rippling up its mass as more and more water was absorbed. Then it began to spread, taking on a roughly humanoid form; from his position Elijah could only see the upper body, as a head and two arms flowed out of the central trunk. The vaguely rectangular outline of a clay tablet was just visible inside the head. More defined details emerged - an impression of a face, muscles, fingers. The surface took on a glassy sheen as it started to solidify. It was like watching an ice sculpture of a man growing rather than being carved.

The growth stopped. The water solidified. What now stood in front of the Christmas tree looked roughly like a statue of a Greek god, if said god had been hitting the gym and taking a lot of protein powder recently. Except, instead of marble, its sharply delineated muscles were formed from frost-silver ice

It stood for a moment, and with great deliberation looked about the room. Then it bent down, out of sight, for a moment. When it stood up again it was holding something.

With great care, it placed a floppy, black, felt hat with a sprig of holly on its perfectly chiselled head.

It started collecting its other accoutrements - ear muffs, carrot, scarf, etc. The carrot was absorbed into its face until only the tip protruded, conforming to the more human nose that had formed. As the iceman was tying the scarf around its neck it finally seemed to notice the gun battle taking place right in front of it. From across the room it was hard for Kael and Elijah to make out the expression on its translucent face, but it looked like it was frowning.

No one else in the room had noticed the new arrival. Franklin's head was buried in his hands and Tobias was pressed as far into cover as he could manage, while Kali was still crouched in position to take another few pot shots. All the mercenaries were still calmly firing bursts into the kitchen counters, completely unaware of the figure that had coalesced behind them. Perhaps looking for a better vantage point to launch a magical attack, Callen had made his way up the stairs to the mezzanine - which was directly over the iceman - and his orcish partner had followed him.

The iceman looked its hands, then levelled them at the two mercenaries crouched behind the table.

Its hands elongated into blades. Kael couldn't see the mercenaries from where he was, but he did see the blades slice effortlessly through the table. Kael and Elijah looked at each other, eyes wide. When they looked back at the ice man, the blades were flowing back into its arms, re-solidifying into hands again. It looked at its hands, as if confused by them, then it picked up two green mittens and put them on.

Outfit complete. Its serenely vacant expression didn't change, but it somehow managed to look satisfied.

A moment later, one of the remaining mercenaries glanced over and realised his team was down two members.

Then he saw the ice man.

'HOLY SHIT! Hostile, five o'clock!'

The other mercenaries behind the couches turned. It took them a full two seconds to process what they were seeing. Then they opened fire. Their target reeled back as bullets smashed into him, carving craters into his icy torso.

The iceman didn't go down, though. The ice around the wounds liquified and flowed over the injuries, sealing them and re-solidifying over them as if they'd never been there. It picked up the wand - a small branch hung with a glittery star and a few baubles - and aimed it at the mercenaries behind the couches. They ducked, but instead of engulfing them in a freezing blizzard, it just sent out a chill wind that did nothing more than leave a rime of frost on the cushions. The mercenaries opened fire again.

The iceman looked at the wand, shook it experimentally, and frowned. Then with its free hand it picked up a shotgun dropped by one of the skewered mercenaries. Creeping tendrils of frost curled around the weapon as the green mitten closed around it, as if the ice was trying to absorb it. It didn't cover the weapon completely, but it did give it an icy coating.

Still taking bullets from the mercenaries' carbines, the iceman racked the shotgun and levelled it at

them. Even compared to the ongoing gun battle the blast was loud. The impact flipped one of the couches over, ripping a metre-wide hole out of it. The mercenaries scattered. Instead of buckshot, Elijah noticed shards of ice embedded in the wall

Less than a minute had passed since the iceman solidified. Alerted by the shotgun blast, Callen rushed to the edge of the mezzanine and saw the source of the commotion. 'Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck.' He looked up. 'Get the lights on! Hit it with the lights again!'

The iceman looked up sharply; scurrying figures up above were bringing the spotlights and heat lamps back into position. Calmly, the iceman walked over to the kitchen area.

He came to a stop by Kali and Franklin. Franklin's face was still buried in his hands and Kali was hunched down getting ready to spring up for another pot-shot. Then she looked to her left, and saw a pair of pillar-like legs. She looked up.

'Shit!' Reflexively she raised her pistol, but something about the frosty statue's expression made her hesitate, just for a second.

The frozen figure looked down at her calmly, shotgun in hand.

'Come with me if you want to live.' said Mr. Snowman.

His voice was deeper than it had been, and distorted - as if he wasn't used to speaking with his current lips and whatever passed for vocal chords. But there was still a quality to it that was unmistakably... him.

Kali was frozen, figuratively, to the spot. Franklin grabbed her shoulder. 'Kali - Kali! It's okay Kali, he's here to help. It's Mr. Snowman.' He looked up tears in his eyes. 'Mr. Snowman - I... I thought you were.'

'Guys, why don't we leave the touching reunions for later and get out of here, huh?' shouted Kael. 'Can you cover us while we get to the elevator, Mr. Snowman.'

Mr. Snowman's shotgun roared again. There was a scream from one of the mercenaries.

'Yeah, that works.' Kael started to rise out of his hiding position. 'Come on, let's move.'

'Stay behind me.' Mr. Snowman advised.

They were still taking fire from the back of the room and the skylights. Callen was weaving his hands through the air, snaking trails of magic shaping into a complex pattern, but Elijah raised his pistol and the elven mage dived out of the way a second before bullets ripped through the space he'd been standing. The pattern collapsed.

Keeping low, the five flesh-and-blood companions headed for the door. Mr. Snowman kept firing his shotgun with steady efficiency, forcing the mercs in the apartment and on the roof to keep taking cover. Keeping himself between his companions and the attackers, he absorbed all the bullets intended for them without even seeming to notice. They made it through the doors just as the lights came on again. Elijah grabbed the gate and pulled it aside, and together they piled into the elevator. Mr. Snowman backed in, still firing as the elevator started to descend.

The penthouse apartment slid out of sight. There was a collective sigh of relief.

'Well, that was a close one.' said Kael, brightly.

'Mr. Snowman came through for us again, didn't you?' said Franklin.

Mr. Snowman didn't reply for a moment. Then he said, still in his new deeper, unusually accented voice: 'I feel funny, Franklin. Something's wrong with me.'

'It's okay, Mr. Snowman, it's just...!' Franklin paused for a moment, thinking. 'Uh - actually, you're probably burning a lot of magic at the moment. Right now you're having to make an effort just to hold

your body together. We need to get you some fresh snow as soon as possible. Don't worry - we'll get you straight to a freezer.'

'We're not out of here yet.' said Kali. 'Everyone stay sharp, they probably have someone watching the exit.'

'Uh, guys - they're on the roof, right?' Tobias looked worried.

There was a sudden lurch, then the elevator ground to a screeching halt. Then there was a loud, continuous, bang, like an avalanche of metal hitting the roof of the elevator.

'They've cut the elevator cables.' Tobias said flatly.

They were halfway between floors, looking out onto a nondescript corridor.

'Just as well the brakes worked.' muttered Elijah. He pulled back the gate. 'Okay, everyone out. They'll know roughly which floor we're on, we can't hang around.'

'Follow me.' said Franklin. 'I think I know a way out.'

They hurried down the empty corridors; the building was barely half-occupied, and if any of Franklin's neighbours had heard the firefight going on above them they didn't seem to care. It went with the neighbourhood. Franklin led them to an emergency exit stairwell. They heard the sound of boots a few floors above them as soon as he opened the door; Franklin put a finger to his lips, and wordlessly indicated that they should follow him down. As quietly as they could, they made their way down the stairs. Ignoring the signs pointing to the emergency exit, Franklin only stopped when they got to the basement.

They listened for a moment. There was no sound of anyone following them.

'What now?' asked Kael.

'There's an access hatch at the back of the building; it leads out onto an alley. They might be watching the main doors and the side doors, but I doubt they noticed the hatch - only the contractors who service the heating and the plumbing use it.'

Kali nodded. 'Good idea. Keep an eye out, though, just in case.'

Franklin guided them through the pipes and boilers until they found the hatch. It took Elijah and Tobias between them to open the heavy steel doors - they all winced at the loud *clang*, but there was no shout of alarm or running boot-steps. Kali took a peek through the hatch; it was clear, she waved them through. Once they were all out in the alley, they carefully shut the hatch behind them and slid a crowbar through the handles.

It was only then that they took stock of their surroundings. Three high walls on either side - and a heavy metal gate surrounded by a fence, blocking the only way out.

'Well.' said Kael. 'Now what the fuck do we do?' He turned to Tobias. 'Can you hack the lock?'

'If I had any kind of equipment, maybe. But it's not networked - all hard-wired. I could drill through the case and spoof the activation pulse, but I don't have a drill; it's so basic there's nothing else you can do with it. You just need one guy there...' - he pointed at a button on the wall behind them - '...and one guy there.' - he pointed through the bars to a switch at the mouth of the alley. 'Cheap and easy. No code to hack or key to lose. Just an idiot-proof way to make sure someone wanting to get in has to have someone go through the building to get to this side, and no one can take anything out without someone on that side.' He rattled the gate. 'You'd need a half-hour with a plasma torch to get through just one of these bars. This thing's built like they were expecting anything up to and including a tank.'

'Shit, they must have put this in after the robberies last month.' Franklin said bitterly. 'The tweakers round here will use anything - sledgehammers, power saws, jackhammers. Trucks. The real estate corp doesn't give a fuck if they rob the tenants, but the last time they made off with a whole boiler. Sorry guys.'

'Anyone a good climber?' asked Kael. They all looked up. The top of the fence around the gate was a good four metres above their heads, and festooned with an array of barbed wire and spikes.

'So we go back through the building.' said Kali. 'If we conserve our ammo and... '

But she'd barely started speaking before Mr. Snowman stepped forward. He considered the gate for a moment, then just... stepped *into* it; Kali stopped, open-mouthed. His body flowed around the bars, letting them pass through him, before re-solidifying on the other side. There was a moment of resistance as the shotgun got caught, with a clink of metal on metal, but he turned it vertical and pulled it through. Then he paused, as if something was wrong, and raised a tentative hand to his head.

'Uh, you dropped this, Mr. Snowman.' Franklin said, passing his floppy black hat through the bars.

'Thank you, Franklin. I will now press the button on this side. Please press that button at the same time.'

As Mr. Snowman walked off, Kael whispered: 'Is it just me or does he seem a little off? Apart from the six-pack, I mean. He's usually a little more... bouncy.'

'I told you, he's making an effort just holding his form right now.' Franklin replied. 'He doesn't have any energy to spare. I don't know how long he can keep it up, we need to hurry.'

The gate swung open, smoothly. They clustered around the mouth of the alley, as Franklin motioned at them to stay back while he took a look.

'Shit, there's a van there. There's never a van just parked on the street around here. We're not getting out of here on foot - where did you guys park?'

'The multi-storey garage four blocks from here.' said Tobias. 'Before you ask, I can't call my car - too far. And even if I could... it's just my normal car. They could trace it back to my family. Sorry mate, but I can't take that risk.'

'Isn't there anything around here you could hack?' asked Elijah. 'Isn't there any way you could boost your signal?'

'Not unless you have a...' Tobias began. Then he smacked his forehead. 'Shit, I'm an idiot.' He reached into his jacket and pulled out the combi-booster Mr. Snowman had given him. 'Better hope this thing comes with batteries included...' he fiddled around with it for a moment. 'Bingo! Alright, this'll amplify my signal nicely. Just let me connect...' he pulled out a lead from the combi-booster and reached up behind his ear; he fiddled a moment, then it slotted into the jack port embedded in his skull. 'Now we're cooking with charcoal.' Tobias smiled. 'Gimme a sec...' He closed his eyes. 'Searching... searching...'

There was an agonizing wait as Tobias scanned the airwaves for a tell-tale signal. Probably only a minute or two, but it felt a lot longer to the others standing with him in that cold, grimy alley. Then he hissed a muffled 'Yes!', as loud as he dared.

'What've you got?' asked Kali.

'Public works vehicle. Trash-bot transporter - you know, litter bugs. Takes its sub-units out during the night to pick up your soda cups. They only go to their depot once a month for servicing, rest of the time they live a bay at the centre of their patch - and lucky us, there's one just around the corner.'

'Can you hack it?'

Tobias looked at her and raised an eyebrow. 'Is the Pope a nonce? Just gimme a minute.' He closed his eyes again. 'Okay, it's coming. I'm telling it to deploy its bots along the way so we'll have room. It'll stop to deploy its last bot just in front of this alley - we get in quick, maybe they won't notice. Who pays attention to a rubbish lorry?'

'These guys aren't amateurs.' Kali mused. 'But I guess we don't have a choice.'

It was less than five minutes before the bot transporter came around the corner; a regular small truck with a cab, just one converted to weak-AI automatic. It came down trundling down the street slowly;

there was no reaction from the van parked in front of the building. Right on cue it pulled over opposite the alley; its side hatch opened to release a sweeper bot that looked like a dome-shelled tortoise with crab pincers.

'Right, everyone in the back - quick.' Tobias whispered. They scurried out of their hiding place, careful to keep the vehicle between them and the surveillance van, and piled in the back of the autotruck. Franklin led Mr. Snowman by the hand - mitten - and Elijah took up the rear, covering them in case any of the mercenaries made it out the building behind them. As soon as he was in, the hatch closed and the truck pulled away.

They didn't even dare breathe a sigh of relief this time. Kali and Elijah kept their pistols ready. Everyone had their eyes fixed on the back of the autotruck, expecting the bullets to come slamming into it any moment. The seconds ticked by. The autotruck rounded the corner. Still, there was no sign of pursuit.

'Can you tell if anyone's following us?' Kael asked Tobias.

'I've got the feed from the autotruck's cameras - nothing's moving out there. No sudden radio bursts either. I think we made it.'

'We should find somewhere to pull in. Get off the street.' said Franklin. 'We need to work out where we can find Mr. Snowman some more snow.' He rubbed his hands together and blew on them. 'At least it's cold out here; that should give us time. How're you feeling, Mr. Snowman?'

There was a pause, as if he was thinking about it.

'Smooth.'

'Ookay.'

They let the autotruck follow its pre-programmed route for a few more blocks, then Tobias took control of it again and sent it into an underground parking garage for a light industrial area.

'We should find a new vehicle.' Kael said. 'Once they realise we're not in the building anymore their first move will be to go back through their surveillance footage. I doubt there's been a lot of traffic through there in the last hour. Anything around here you can hack?' he asked Tobias.

'We probably don't need to worry too much. I disabled the autotruck's transponder and netlink as soon as we were in, the only way they could find it is with a visual search. Hang on, lemme see what else is around.'

'While you're at it, can you search for anywhere nearby that might have a freezer?' Franklin asked. 'A restaurant or a convenience store won't be enough, it needs to be somewhere with big industrial freezers where powdered ice builds up; it's the closest we'll get to snow until it actually snows.'

'One thing at a time, Frankie. Okay, I think I may have found us some wheels. Let's not hang around, right?'

Still alert for any sign of danger, they followed Tobias through the shadows of the sparsely lit, nearly empty parking garage. Tucked in at the back by rusting steel double-doors was another truck.

'Really?' Kael raised an eyebrow. 'First a garbage truck, now a laundry truck?' The boxy grey vehicle blended in well with the concrete pillars around it. 'Would a Ferrari really be so much to ask for?'

'We wouldn't all fit in a Ferrari.' Tobias reminded him, nodding at the Olympian bulk of Mr. Snowman. 'Besides, it's Christmas Eve, there's no one else here. Look around - there ain't much else to choose from.'

'You know, I starting to think this profession isn't as glamorous as people make it out to be.'

Tobias hacked the lock of the laundry truck in less than thirty seconds. This truck was an older model that required a human at the wheel to supervise the automatic drive, so Tobias took the driver's seat; Kael took the passenger seat and the rest climbed in the back. They were out of the parking garage less than five minutes after they'd arrived.

'So where to now?' asked Elijah.

'I had a quick look online just now, doesn't seem to be anything like Franklin was talking about nearby.' said Tobias. 'Are you sure a walk-in freezer in a restaurant won't do?'

'Not unless you think its a good idea to barge into every restaurant in the neighborhood one by one to commandeer their freezers.' said Franklin. 'That might attract attention. Even if we weren't accompanied by a giant, walking ice statue.'

'Sorry mate - fresh out of ideas, I'm afraid. Hey... isn't there an artificial ski-slope down south? I've taken my girls there once or twice.'

'That's way out in the suburbs, isn't it? And we're on the wrong side of the city. There must be something closer.' Franklin said, wracking his brains. 'There must be some sort of...'

'I've got it!' Kali yelled. 'Take the exit here. We need to get on the highway.'

'Shit.' Tobias jerked the steering wheel to the right, narrowly hitting the on-ramp rather than the barrels around the divider. They found themselves cruising down an almost empty highway. 'Alright, where are we going?'

'There's an ice cream factory just off route 94.' Kali explained. 'The Lindt-Pfizer plant; all the industrial cooling equipment you could ever ask for. We need to go due north.'

'How do you know...' Kael began, twisting round in his seat to stare at her.

'Went on a school field trip there when I was a kid.' Kali said, shooting him a look that said "if you ever bring this up again, you're dead".

Elijah raised an eyebrow. 'Good memory you have there.'

There was a pause.

'Oh shut up, everyone has a cheat day now and again. Just keep an eye out.'

Kael shrugged. 'Alright. But we should be clear.'

'They should never have found us in the first place.' Kali retorted. 'Don't let your guard down, that's all I'm saying.'

Midnight was closing in. There was the tantalising hint that it might snow, soon; tiny flakes spotted the windshield here and there. But the sky was still mostly clear, the stars shining down on them with brilliant equanimity.

They got a good five minutes down the highway before Kael said: 'Uh... guys - I hate to say this, but Kali might have had a point. There's a chopper above us.'

'You mean a drone?'

'I mean a chopper. Civilian model, built for speed, no weapon mounts.' Kael pointed at a sleek, black silhouette in the sky above them.

'You think it's looking for us?'

'Maybe. Question is, has it found us?'

Tobias shook his head. 'No way. We're clean. We're not putting out any kind of signal they could track,

and I know we weren't followed from the garage. There's no way we're anything but another truck to them.'

'I'll take your professional word for it, but it's definitely following us.'

'Well they found us some other way then. Shit, we're not going to be able to outrun it.' said Tobias.

'No, but we might be able to outrun whoever it's spotting for.'

Tobias slowly ramped up the laundry truck's speed, which wasn't saying much. 'How much further to the factory?'

'At this rate, maybe ten minutes.' Kali shouted from the back. 'You'll see the signs when we get close.'

'We might not have ten minutes.' Kael said. 'I think they've realised we've seen them. They're coming down.'

Suddenly the roar of rotor blades was audible over the truck's aging engine. A burst of bullets studded the roof of the laundry truck. Nothing penetrated.

'I thought you said they weren't armed!' screamed Franklin.

'I said there were no weapon mounts. That was small arms.'

More bullets pinged off the roof, then a couple of rounds punched through the rear door, narrowly missing Elijah.

'Shit.' Kali kicked open the door, and found the chopper hovering only twenty metres above the highway.

There was a mercenary with a carbine hanging out the side on a strap. Kali fired a few shots; no good. The mercenary returned fire, and Kali had to throw herself down behind a laundry hamper, next to Elijah and Franklin. Nothing hit the truck, though - bullets chewed up the asphalt.

'He's not aiming for us, he's aiming for the tires!' shouted Elijah. 'We don't have anything that could take down a chopper - what do we do?'

'Junction ahead.' grunted Tobias, swerving sharply to avoid another burst. 'Plenty of bridges. Let's see how much they want us.'

Mr. Snowman let off a few blasts, but the spread on his shotgun was too wide to do much; the chopper was still too far behind them. Tobias pressed the accelerator flat. The engine growled in protest, but the truck gained speed. The first bridge crossing the highway was just ahead. The chopper's nose began to dip...

'There's no way they're crazy enough to...' Elijah began.

The chopper followed them as they passed under the bridge, only a metre or two above the road, flying slow but perfectly level. The mercenary with the carbine fired, missed again. Kali opened up with her pistol; a couple of shots punched through the chopper's windscreen but missed the pilot. The mercenary changed his target and fired point blank into the back of the truck.

Kali screamed as a bullet ripped through her leg.

'Kali!' Elijah grabbed her just in time to stop her falling out the back of the truck.

Mr. Snowman aimed his shotgun, then seemed to reconsider. He grabbed a big laundry hamper in one hand, and flung it out the back of the truck. The carbine fired again just as he let go.

The hamper tumbled in a low arc through the air, before slamming into the chopper's bullet-riddled windscreen. It smashed right through the windscreen, then right through the pilot.

The chopper nosedived into the asphalt, then flipped and began to roll. On its third roll, the gas tank exploded and liquid fire sprayed across the highway as it was engulfed in a ball of flame.

As the burning wreckage slowly rolling to a stop, the truck began to pull away. But Tobias was having to wrestle with the steering wheel.

'Guys, I think they may have hit the...'

The tire burst. Tobias managed to keep it level just a few seconds more, long enough to brace, but the truck careened over the median. Then it flipped. It skidded to a screeching halt as oncoming traffic slammed on their brakes. There was a near miss as a car swerved around them at the last moment, then everything was still.

'Well, that wasn't so bad.' Kael said, hanging sideways in his seatbelt. 'Everyone all right?'

Kali pulled a towel off her face. 'I've been shot, you idiot.'

'Well, at least you've got plenty of material for bandages.'

Groaning, they dragged themselves out of the wreckage of their vehicle. Mr. Snowman hauled Franklin out by the back of his jacket, while Kali limped out supported by Elijah; she was the only one with a serious injury - the rest had a few cuts from broken glass, but nothing major.

'What now? Do we keep heading for the factory?' asked Tobias.

'We've got to keep heading the way we were heading anyway.' said Kael. 'That chopper was trying to slow us down for someone. We've no idea how close behind us they are.'

The traffic had come to a halt across both lanes, northbound blocked by the burning wreckage of the chopper, southbound by the overturned laundry truck. It took them a moment to realise that they could hear an engine - the engine of something large and heavy, somewhere back along the northbound carriageway.

As one, they turned to look.

The shape of what looked like a large truck was just visible behind the flames. It was stopped behind the burning wreckage. Then they heard the engine start to rev.

'Get the pistols.' Kali said. Franklin grabbed them from the overturned truck and handed them back to Kali and Elijah. 'Come on, let's move.'

They headed for the nearest vehicle, a small, white refrigerated truck. The driver, wearing a white uniform with a logo on it, was already approaching them.

'Hey, are you guys all right? D'you need me to call...' he trailed off as he caught sight of Mr. Snowman. Then he looked down at his shirt.

The logo was a happy-looking snowman - not with red ear muffs or green mittens, but all the other usual snowman things like the carrot nose and the scarf. The lettering underneath the logo read: Fred Frosty (a Lindt-Pfizer brand)

The helicopter exploded into burning fragments as a eighteen-wheeler smashed through it. The lightweight frame of the chopper barely scratched the chrome grill of the black, streamlined juggernaut. Its engine revved, and it started to pick up speed.

'We need your truck.' said Mr. Snowman. Then he remembered to add 'Please.', because no matter what else was happening he still had manners.

The driver just stood there, agape.

Tobias was already in the driver's seat; he found the keys still in the ignition. Tires screeching, he swung the truck around in the most ungainly donut ever performed. Mr. Snowman practically ripped one of the rear doors off, letting out a blast of cold air from the refrigerated compartment; it was stacked with boxes. Elijah and Kael got Kali on board. The truck was already moving as Franklin and Mr. Snowman jumped into the back.

'Go, go!' Franklin yelled. Tobias put his foot down.

Kali hissed in pain. 'I'm bleeding, bad.'

'Keep pressure on it. Here.' Elijah offered her a towel.

The rumble of the eighteen-wheeler was closing. The frozen goods truck was picking up speed, going the wrong way down the highway, scraping the divider to get past the stationary traffic backing up behind the crash. As the eighteen-wheeler pulled level, a hatch in the top of the trailer opened and a merc climbed out.

He was holding a missile launcher.

'Step on it.' Kael shouted.

'This is as fast as this thing goes.'

'Are you kidding? I could get out and run faster than this.'

The merc fired. The missile hit the road close enough behind the truck that the blast knocked Kael and Franklin off their feet and left a sliver of shrapnel embedded in Mr. Snowman.

'I think we may have pissed them off.'

Elijah fired his pistol a few times, but the moving vehicle hampered his aim. 'We have to get off the highway.' he told Tobias.

'D'you see an exit mate? I can't make this thing fly.'

'Check the boxes. Maybe there's something we can use.' Kael began frantically ripping apart plastic and cardboard packaging. He pulled out a packet of something. 'Oh, great. Anyone want ice cream?'

The merc levelled the rocket launcher again. Tobias saw it in his wing mirror and swerved; the missile zipped past them and took a chunk out of a concrete pillar.

'I would like some ice cream, Kael.' Mr. Snowman said. He took the box from Kael's unresisting hands. Then he stuck the barrel of the shotgun in it; when he took it out again a moment later, the packets were deflated, as if something had been sucked out of them.

Mr. Snowman aimed his shotgun carefully at the grill of the eighteen-wheeler, and fired. It wasn't a shotgun blast. This time, it fired a solid slug that smashed into the chrome grill. Then there was an explosion, and a morningstar of icy spikes burst from the impact point.

'Damn.' whistled Kael. 'More ice cream, Mr. Snowman?' he asked, ripping open another box.

'Thank you, Kael.'

Mr. Snowman fired again, just as the merc brought the rocket launcher to bear. Suddenly, there was no merc, just an expanding cloud of razor-sharp icicles surrounded by a pink mist.

The eighteen-wheeler kept coming. It drew level with them and another merc appeared through the hatch. Suddenly Tobias yelled: 'Hold on.' The truck veered across all four lanes, narrowly missing an

oncoming car, and made it to the on-ramp. The brakes on the eighteen-wheeler screeched like a banshee. It swerved onto the exit-ramp.

The truck took the tight bend on two wheels. In the back, Franklin and Kael were thrown against the stacks of ice cream boxes, and Elijah had to brace to keep Kali sliding as he tried to tie a tourniquet. Mr. Snowman's feet grew long, sharp claws that anchored him to the floor.

Then Tobias had to jam on the brakes in the face of a car coming the other way. A horn blared, as Tobias manoeuvred past, clipping the other car's wing mirror. They made it to the end of the on-ramp. 'Hey, I can see the signs for the factory - d'you still want me to go there?'

'It's as good a place as any to lose them.' Elijah called back.

Then the eighteen-wheeler appeared round the bend of the exit-ramp. Facing them dead on, just the other side of the junction, it started to accelerate. 'Oh shit.' Tobias muttered. He floored the accelerator, and the truck jerked forward. Then he jerked the wheel left.

The truck dodged past the eighteen wheeler with less than a metre to spare. Tobias floored the accelerator, and they sped off down the road towards the factory. Behind them, the eighteen-wheeler skidded to a stop, then turned to come after them.

'How the hell do you actually plan to lose these guys?' Tobias yelled, glancing at his wing mirror at the once more rapidly approaching chrome grill.

'The factory is a couple of square miles.' Kali shouted back to him. 'Just get us there. We'll be better off than trying to outrun them in this piece of crap.'

The eighteen-wheeler closed on them again. Mr. Snowman fired, and this time ice crystals exploded out of the windshield. It didn't make a difference, though.

'It's an automatic.' shouted Franklin. 'The processor is directly under the driver's seat.'

Mr. Snowman looked at him coolly. 'This weapon will not penetrate that far.'

'Give me a moment, I'll think of some... oh shit, hold on.'

The grill of the eighteen-wheeler slammed into the back of the truck. Tobias fought with the steering wheel. The eighteen-wheeler hit them again.

'They're trying to drive us off the road!'

'You think?' Tobias shouted back. 'There's a gate coming up, what do I do?'

'Ram it.'

'Alright, hold ooon...'

The truck smashed through the gates, the eighteen-wheeler right behind them. Tobias drove them straight into the heart of the site, heading for a cluster of warehouses with a bunch of industrial-looking metalwork. A few workers scattered as the two vehicles roared past. Sparks flew as they connected again.

'Excuse me, Franklin. I will be back in a moment.' said Mr. Snowman.

'Back? Where're you going...'

The eighteen-wheeler hit them again, and this time Mr. Snowman grabbed onto the grill. As the truck pulled away he was left hanging there for a moment, then he began to climb over the hood towards the cab; his feet had formed into spikes like climbing crampons.

Kali moved Elijah aside so she could see what was happening. 'Holy shit.'

'Be careful, Mr. Snowman!' Franklin shouted.

Mr. Snowman reached the cab and methodically kicked aside the remains of the windshield. Then he took off a green mitten and his arm formed into a long blade again. It stabbed down, into the driver's seat.

The effect was immediate. The lights on the eighteen-wheeler shut off, and it began to swerve from side to side. It clipped the truck again. Mr. Snowman was still clinging to the cab when the eighteen-wheeler overturned onto its side. Momentum kept it going, screeching towards the truck.

'What's happening back there?' Tobias shouted.

'Don't stop!' Kali shouted.

But they were out of road. The only way through was a building up ahead, with its doors open. There was a tanker just inside the doors, hooked up to a huge vat. The truck swerved around it, barely. The warehouse was filled with vats, each of them frosted with frozen condensation.

Then the eighteen-wheeler hit the tanker. It gouged a huge rent in the side and finally came to a stop. Franklin held his breath, waiting for the explosion...

A tidal wave of milk erupted from the tanker. In a few seconds the ground was covered in white, foamy liquid. Mr. Snowman was thrown clear of the wreck, sliding across the floor on his back out of sight.

'Hey, stop the truck.' Franklin called. 'We need to get Mr. Snowman.'

Tobias hit the brakes. They started to slide on the icy factory floor. 'Oh fuck.' Tobias said quietly.

They crashed into a stack of ice cream boxes.

For a few moments nothing moved. Then Franklin flopped limply out of the back of the truck. He went to check on Tobias as Elijah and Kael helped Kali down. Tobias had a cut on his head from where it had hit the steering wheel; he was groggy, but conscious.

A bullet hit the back of the truck. They couldn't even see who was shooting - there was a cloud of steam coming off the milk pool as it touched burning fuel - but it came from the direction of the eighteen-wheeler. Then a figure became visible in the steam. Kali fired her pistol, but she only got one round off before it clicked on empty.

'Shit. Elijah?'

'I'm out. Come on, let's go.'

'What about Mr. Snowman?'

'He's in less trouble than us right now. Probably. Come on, move.'

They began climbing up the steel stairs to the gantries above the vats. Franklin was supporting Tobias, Elijah helped Kali limp her way up. Kael brought up the rear, holding Elijah's empty pistol. Out of the mist, Jagozian and Callen emerged. Jagozian's perfectly tailored suit had a couple of rips in it; Callen had a cut on his forehead. And a minigun, hanging from shoulder straps.

'There was a whole command centre in there, you know.' Jagozian shouted up at them, conversationally. 'Do you have any idea how much that vehicle cost? Or that helicopter? Do you know how much more expensive it's going to be for us to hire from mercnet when word of this gets around? This was supposed to be clean. Professional. Do you understand the damage this is going to do to my *reputation*?' He looked down at his shoes, and sighed. 'And do you have any idea what milk does to Armani leather?'

Callen let off a blast with the minigun. The *burr* of high-powered rounds ripped through the catwalk a few metres from where the five bruised fugitives were limping. He tried again, but he was having trouble handling the recoil, what with keeping his footing on the ice and milk.

Jagozian was still talking. 'I'd ask you where the snowman is, but right now I don't even care. I'll find him sooner or later - this tracking spell is the one thing about this op that's worked right.' He held up a disc that looked like an old fashioned compass. 'Everything you've done tonight was completely pointless - his magical aura is so large I could track him anywhere on the planet. You could have done this the easy way, you know - it would have been quick. I didn't have anything against you, this was just business. But now I'm going to take every *cent* of this debacle out on your hides.' He was almost snarling the words now.

The catwalk led into a mess of pipes and switches. Kael got out of the open just as Callen found his mark, bullets pinging off the ducts.

'Now what?' asked Elijah.

'We find another vehicle.' Kael suggested. 'We hijack another truck. They've got nothing to follow us in now.'

'We can't leave Mr. Snowman!' Franklin protested.

Kael shrugged. 'I'm sorry, Franklin. Really - Mr. Snowman was a good guy. But Kali's shot, Tobias is probably concussed, we've got no weapons and they've got a fucking minigun. Would Mr. Snowman really want us to stay and die for him?'

Franklin knew the answer to that, even if he didn't like it.

They could hear footsteps somewhere around them, but in the maze of industrial equipment it was impossible to pinpoint. They kept going, hobbling through the narrow walkways. The machines around them were still operating, squirting ice cream onto conveyor belts, stamping it, wrapping it.

Kael caught a glimpse of a reflection behind them, a twisted face on a curved pipe. 'Down!'

The minigun opened up, punching holes in the machines, sending sparks everywhere. Showering them with metal fragments. The screaming hail of bullets stopped after a few seconds.

'It's reloading.' Elijah whispered. 'Run!'

He picked Kali up, like a little kid, which was about the most shocking thing any of them had seen so far. They ran, sprinting down the aisles, until they rounded a corner and found themselves over another set of vats. These ones held molten chocolate.

'Keep going, I've got an idea.' said Franklin.

'Wha...'

'Just go! I'll catch up.'

Callen dragged himself through the automated production line. There was a sheen of sweat over his perfectly proportioned face; he seemed to be having trouble with the weighty minigun. Jagozian came round the corner.

'Did you see which way they went?' the orc asked.

Callen pursed his lips. 'I thought they were heading towards you.'

'They must have taken a sideway; I didn't see anyone.'

'Get behind me.' Callen growled. 'And this time, don't bother talking to them. You always talk too much. Just fucking shoot them.'

Jagozian nodded. He let Callen pass, and fell in behind him. Callen was about to continue the chase when he noticed his reflection on the side of the machine ahead of him. His face looked back at him, but behind his shoulder was... not his partner.

He swung the minigun around but Franklin had already dived forward. He cannoned into the elf, knocking him backwards over a conveyor belt. They both went rolling across the floor in a jumble of fists and elbows. Franklin flailed wildly, but he didn't know anything about hand to hand fighting. He just kept swinging, forcing the elf to keep his hands off the minigun and protect his face.

Covered in squashed ice creams, they wrestled for leverage. Callen was taller but he had his heavy weapon weighing him down. He finally got to his feet again, only for Franklin to launch up and tackle him, slamming him into a railing. There was a five metre drop down to the next level. Franklin strained, trying to haul the elven mage over the waist-high bar - the minigun was already over the edge, dangling over the drop, pulling Callen down.

The elf snarled, and unclipped the gun's straps. It fell to the catwalk below with a clatter. Freed from his burden, Callen started to fight back. Blocking a clumsy strike, he jabbed an elbow into Franklin's cheek. Then brought a knee up into his stomach. In desperation, Franklin threw himself forward again and slammed Callen into a machine; Franklin wasn't exactly muscular for a human but he still outweighed the elf. They grappled, and fell onto the conveyor belt.

Callen was on top. He punched Franklin once, twice in the face, and Franklin finally released his grip. The elf stood up, and placed an expensive heel on Franklin's throat.

'That wasn't a bad glamour, you know.' he said, breathing heavily. 'For an amateur. Now let me show you what a real mage can do.'

A dark fire ignited in the back of his eyes as he began to move his hands, etching an unnameable symbol into the air. Weakly, Franklin tried to move the foot off his neck, but it would budge.

With all his remaining strength, he brought his feet up and kicked out at Callen's other knee. The elf collapsed, and his working dissipated. Franklin began to scabble away. Callen, on his knees, snatched at Franklin's foot. Franklin grabbed the side of the machine and tried to pull himself free. Then he noticed the control panel.

He pressed the big red button.

Callen let go as he realised what was happening, but it was too late for him. Franklin snatched his foot out of the way just as the press came down.

There was an unpleasantly organic cracking sound.

Franklin pulled himself up. He stood rooted to the spot for a moment, shaking. Then took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and counted down from ten... slowly, the shaking subsided.

When he opened his eyes he noticed that the products on the conveyor belt were 'Santa's Elves' candies.

Not wasting another moment, he started running in the direction he'd last seen the others. He was just coming to the chocolate vats when Kael came round the corner. Tobias and Elijah - still carrying Kali - were close behind him.

'Hey, what...' Franklin began.

'You were taking your time. We thought you might need help.' said Kael.

Franklin shook his head.

'He's...?'

Franklin nodded. 'The guy with the minigun is... he's not a problem any more. I haven't seen the orc.'

'Right here.' shouted a voice behind them. They turned. Hal Jagozian was walking towards them on the catwalk above the vats, with a small pistol aimed at them. It was the first time they'd seen him holding a weapon. 'So, who wants to be first?' he asked. 'Or shall I just shoot out your kneecaps and we can decide the rest later?'

'Why isn't he shooting?' muttered Kael.

'Because he's not sure that pop-gun could get us all.' Kali whispered. 'Start backing up.'

But Elijah had barely lifted his foot when a bullet pinged off the catwalk. 'Don't move. I don't suppose you've seen Mr. Callen, by the way?'

'He's dead.' Franklin said loudly. 'I killed him. If you're going to shoot someone, shoot me.'

The orc stopped dead in his tracks. 'You killed him? You!?' His face twisted with rage. 'Oh no, I am going to take my time killing you. But first, you can watch **your** friends die.'

Just as he was taking aim at Elijah and Kali, the conveyor belt feeding into the vat next to him from the lower levels activated. Cocoa solids began tipping into the vat; Jagozian swung his pistol around.

Mr. Snowman crested the top of the conveyor. The real Mr. Snowman, more or less - he still looked a little more icy than snowy, but he was back to his powdered, puffed up, rotund self.

And he had his wand raised.

'Shit.' Jagozian said.

A cone of wintry wind howled forth from the tip of the wand. Jagozian dived aside, but he wasn't quite quick enough - the storm hit him, encasing his body from the armpits down in ice. He was slammed back against the railing. For a moment he teetered there, flailing his arms for balance.

Then he tipped over, into the vat of molten chocolate below. Even now, he didn't give up. His hands clawed the air futilely for a few moments. Then he slipped beneath the rich, dark surface.

'Mr. Snowman!' Franklin yelled. 'You're... you again!'

Mr. Snowman took hold of a chain dangling above the vat and swung himself over to the catwalk. 'Franklin!' He gave his friend a crunchy hug. 'You were right - there's powdered ice all over the place here. Why, I landed in a big pile of it when the big truck crashed. Then I kept finding more of it, almost wherever I stepped. I was able to pull myself together in no time. Granted, it feels a little scratchy, but it certainly feels better than being... slim.'

'I'm just so happy you're okay.' smiled Franklin. 'Come on, let's get out of here.'

He took Mr. Snowman by the mitten and tried to lead him away, but Mr. Snowman didn't budge.

'I'm sorry, Franklin. I'm sorry.' He bent down and picked up the compass Jagozian had dropped. 'I heard what he said about tracking me. If he could do it, whoever sent him will just send someone else, who'll do exactly the same thing. I can't leave this factory with you.' Mr. Snowman tried to smile, and looked even sadder. 'At least I got to spend another Christmas with you - look, it's past midnight.'

'Mr. Snowman? Come on, let's go.' Franklin tried to tug him away again.

Mr. Snowman turned away, facing the vat, put his hands together and bent his legs, preparing to dive.

'No! Mr. Snowman, what are you doing?'

'I have to go away.'

Franklin stepped in front of him. 'But you can't leave me. I'm your friend! We're your friends!'

'That's why I have to do this.' he said, forlornly.

Franklin started trying to push him away from the edge. 'No, don't do it! Please, don't go.'

'I'm sorry, Franklin, it has to end here.'

'Mr. Snowman...' Franklin sobbed.

Mr. Snowman, standing directly above the molten chocolate vats, was weeping too.

He prepared to jump. Kali, standing on her one good leg now, laid a gentle hand on Franklin's arm and pulled him aside.

'Goodbye.' said Mr. Snowman.

Then Kali stepped in front of him. 'What the fuck do you think you're doing, you gigantic popsicle dumbass?'

Mr. Snowman looked down at her, nonplussed. 'As long as I'm with you, they won't stop hunting you. I have to go.'

'Use your brain - or tablet, or whatever - for a moment you idiot. Why do you think it took them an entire year to track us down? They can only track your aura when you're active.'

'Hey, that's right.' Franklin exclaimed. 'He didn't have an aura after he shut down last January. I checked. The tracker must have only started working on December 1st.'

'Yeah. So whoever came up with the aura tracker - I'm guessing it was van Kleiss - only has twelve days to find you now before you become invisible to him again. And it didn't take them the best part of a month just to track you down to Franklin's place. Look at the resources these guys had - it takes time to put that kind of shit together. More than twelve days - trust me, I've been doing this a while. And it's not going to get any quicker when word gets around of what happened to the last guys hired to do this job. We just have to lie low for two weeks, then we've got a whole year to figure out how to hide you properly.'

Mr. Snowman's brow furrowed. 'But you'd be risking your lives helping me.'

'We'd be risking our lives without you.' said Kael. 'Van Kleiss could still track us down by other means. He's not going to stop looking for us just because you're gone. You've saved our lives, what, four or five times tonight? What happens the next time his goons find us if you're not around to save us? You'd be putting us in more danger by not sticking around to protect us.'

'Well, I suppose that's possible...'

'Mate, your total collective experience of this world adds up to less than two months.' said Tobias. 'Trust us: we're better off with you around.'

'Look, if you change your mind you can still nobly sacrifice yourself later.' said Elijah. 'Can we get out of here now? Before Kali bleeds to death?'

That seemed to clinch it. They started making their way down the network of gantries and catwalks, back through the factory. On their way, they found the dropped minigun.

'Hey look, a Christmas present.' Kael picked it up, grinning.

They made their way through the tangle of industrial equipment and finally found a side door. It came

out onto a fire escape balcony overlooking the courtyard they'd driven in through.

There were black vans and at least twenty mercs waiting down there. The six of them ducked back inside the building.

'Well, that's inconvenient.' said Kael.

'Oh, I don't know about that.' said Mr. Snowman. 'If I may borrow this for a moment.' He took the minigun out of Kael's hands. 'I can't say I like these things very much, but I have learned a thing or two about them tonight.'

Mr. Snowman tapped the minigun with the wand, and ice began to spread over its surface, infiltrating the openings around the magazine and the firing chamber. Then he pressed the button, and the minigun's motor started to whir.

Kael smiled. 'Now **that's** cool. Hey - maybe just shoot up the vehicles, avoid the mercs? They're just grunts, they won't stick around to the bitter end.'

'That's a very good idea, Kael.' said Mr. Snowman, brightly.

'Hey, it is Christmas, after all.'

The first real flakes of snow were just beginning to fall as Mr. Snowman stepped out onto the fire escape and opened fire. One by one, the vehicles were ripped apart by an unending hail of supersonic ice crystals, which just skirted around the mercs in cover behind them. A few of the mercs returned fire with their carbines. This did absolutely nothing. After a brief reanalysis of the profit/risk balance of their employment in light of these developments, they began to scatter, gas tanks exploding like fireworks behind them.

'Merry Christmas, everyone...' Mr. Snowman called happily after them, over the roar of the minigun.

'...and a Happy New Year!'

---- The End ----

> In case you hadn't guessed, I have some unresolved issues over the ending of Terminator 2, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

> I didn't realise I had almost 16k words' worth of issues, but oh well, it's still cheaper than therapy.

