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>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)

* * * *

---- The Snowman 3: Snowman With A Vengeance

>Oh the weather outside is frightful

>but the fire is sooo delightful

>so since there's no place to go...

"Music off."

The other five passengers in the limo looked at Kali. Kael raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you were going to try getting into the Christmas spirit."

Kali rolled her eyes. "Look at me. I think I'm making enough concessions to the season already, don't you." The business-casual black dress actually looked pretty good on the five-foot, blonde elf. Someone who didn't know her might even call her cute, especially with the added effect of the brooch in Christmas red and white pinned to her chest, and the matching clip in her hair. Someone who did know her would be surprised anyone had managed to prise her out of the hard-wearing, easy-fit military surplus she'd worn since becoming military surplus herself, even for one evening.

"Whatever." shrugged Elijah, who was also looking a little uncomfortable in his grey suit, although possibly just because it hadn't been properly tailored for his heavy, half-orc shoulders. "Just remember, we need this to go well."

"Yeah." Tobias agreed. "My missus has really taken to this sudden streak of legitimate employment, so don't go kicking this boss in the nuts."

"I still think getting involved with the Takanomi corporation was a mistake - but fine, fine" Kali put her hands up in surrender. "I'm going to this stupid party, aren't I? I'm wearing this stupid dress. I think I've demonstrated my commitment. Although if anyone grabs my ass, I reserve the right to kick him anywhere I damn well please."

"Fair enough." said Kael.

"Would you like to select another track from the playlist." the limo chimed in. "I have a wide range of Christmas-themed music, from traditional favourites like 'Jingle Bells' to classics like 'Santa Baby' and modern hits like 'Christmas With A Bang'.

"Ooh, do you have 'We Wish You A Merry Christmas'?" said Mr. Snowman, just as Kali was opening her

mouth to say 'no'. "That's always been one of my favourites."

"Uh, why don't we wait until we get to the party for the music, Mr. Snowman." suggested Franklin.

"You think they'll have music at the party?"

"Well, it's a party so... yeah."

"And singalongs?"

"Uh... maybe?" said Franklin diplomatically.

"Are you **sure** that this is a good idea?" asked Elijah, looking pointedly at the seven-foot-tall living snowman.

"A lot of the mages have familiars. They didn't seem bothered when I asked if I could bring along a construct. In fact, I think it enhances my reputation with the corp a little. Constructs this sophisticated are pretty tough to pull off. They don't have to know what Mr. Snowman actually is."

"And you're certain the anti-tracking spell is working?" Kael looked intently at Franklin. "We personally might be off limits now we're not freelancers, but van Kleiss might still be tempted to get his property back."

"Positive. Once I knew it was possible to track his magical signature it was pretty easy to work out how it was done and how to block it. Don't worry, we won't have a repeat of last year."

"Oh yes." Mr. Snowman smiled innocently. "I'm very much looking forward to my first Christmas where no one dies."

"It'll be quite warm in the party - aren't you worried about, you know, melting." Tobias asked Mr. Snowman.

"Oh no. Franklin and I have been hard at work, making sure I can conjure enough cold for myself without frosting anyone else up. Why, I'm sitting here in this limo and I've barely made the seat damp. Say, how long do you think it'll be until we get to the party?"

"From this location in optimal conditions the average journey time to Takanomi Plaze is ten minutes." The limo chimed in. "However, given present road conditions I estimate we will arrive at our destination in twenty to twenty-five minutes. If you look out the left windows you will see that we now have an excellent view of Takanomi Tower, which will continue until we turn off the expressway in five minutes."

The tint on the left side windows vanished, and suddenly they were looking out over the city. It was white, whiter than bone, almost the pale silver of a moonlit night. There was no moon tonight, however, and the lights sparkling in the darkness were not stars. The lights of the city, twinkling blue and white, red and orange, winked in the darkness like baubles twisting on a Christmas tree. They cast a faint glow on the thick clouds overhead, and glittered off the still-falling snowflakes.

As the limo cruised sedately along the expressway, mindful of the slippery conditions, they took in the view of Takanomi Tower. Close to downtown but not quite in it, there were no other skyscrapers nearby, and the building towered - for want of a better word - over the surrounding blocks. Normally a glassy obelisk, tonight its tiered upper levels were clad in snow, like marble on a Roman temple.

Kael whistled. "You know, it is pretty impressive."

"Takanomi Tower has sixty-six floors." the limo informed them. "There are eighteen thousand windows and almost two million square feet of floor space. Including the communications spire, the total height of..."

"Thanks, but I don't think we need you to give us a full lecture on it." said Kael.

"Well, whatever you need, I'm here for." the limo said cheerily. "If you don't want to listen to music, I have a range of podcasts available. Alternatively since I'm sensing some tension I could play soothing white noise."

"Thanks, but just driving will be fine." said Elijah; he then added under his breath: "I like a limo as much as the next guy, but did they really have to give us one that talks so much?"

"Consider it a compliment." said Tobias. "I know it sounds a bit inane but that's a full AI, not just a glorified map app. It probably cost a lot more than the limo itself. If the corp is willing to send something like this to pick us up, it means they really value us."

"Oh good." said Kali, in a tone that said that it was not good, at all.

"Really? Are we still doing this?" Elijah asked her. "We all agreed..."

"You all agreed. I just didn't object. Come on, Eli, the whole reason we left the army was because we didn't want to be taking orders anymore. We had it good as freelancers."

"We did. But we needed the corp's protection."

"And why did we need it? Because of him." Kali jabbed towards Mr. Snowman. "Because of him our identities were compromised and we had to sign up with a corp too big for van Kleiss to risk pissing off."

"Come on, Kali." started Franklin. "That's not really fair."

"Not fair?" I'll tell you what's not fair..."

"Music on, next track!" Kael blurted out, and whatever Kali had been about to say to Franklin was interrupted by:

>Oh, you better watch out.

>You'd better not cry.

>You'd better not shout, I'm telling you why...

* * * *

"Arms above your head please, sir."

"Just remember, it's Christmas, so if the suit looks a little tight in places it's just holiday weight." Tobias grinned as the security guard passed the metal detector over him.

"Lot of guys on tonight, pretty heavy security for a Christmas party." observed Elijah, looking round at the dozen or so men in tac gear standing around the heavily marbled lobby. "Anything we should know about?"

"Nah." the security guard frisking him said. "Just routine precautions. Takanomi is new here, they're still a little edgy about this city. With so many corp bigwigs upstairs they thought: better safe than sorry."

"How did you get scheduled for Christmas Eve, Marlowe?" Kali asked the chisel-jawed senior officer. "Lose another game of poker?"

"Lose? I volunteered for this." The hard-faced guard broke into a grin. "My mother-in-law's in town."

"Judgemental, is she?"

"Nope. But everyone has a drink on Christmas Eve, and every year, for the last twenty years, she has a couple too many and ends up hitting on me."

"I wouldn't have thought there was enough alcohol in the world to make you attractive."

Marlowe snorted. "The party's on the sixtieth floor. Most of the guests are there, just a few delayed by the snow. Rather you than me - too many corporate stiffs for my liking. A couple of security consultants got invites but mostly it's execs and techs."

Kali grinned. "Maybe I'll come back down later, see how long it takes you to get a game going."

"You do that. I still need to win back my watch."

Meanwhile, Franklin was trying to explain to another, younger guard why he should allow a seven foot tall walking snowman into the building.

"He's a construct. The invite clearly says 'familiar and constructs permitted'."

"I don't know... isn't it kind of big?"

"That's just holiday weight." said Mr. Snowman nervously.

"Fuck's sake, kid." Marlowe shouted across at the junior security guard. "Why're you holding up the line?"

"Uh, not sure what to do with this one, sir."

"It's a construct? Metal detector first, then give is a quick pass with the ultrasound to check for cavities." He turned to Kali. "Sorry for the holdup. New corp, new guys. Training is still an ongoing process."

Mr. Snowman giggled a little as the guard used the ultrasound, but he was quickly passed. They were about to head for the elevators when one guard, who'd been hanging back, stepped forward.

"I'm getting a lot of power coming off this one." he said, pointing at Mr. Snowman.

Marlowe turned. "Is it a problem?"

The security mage shrugged. "It's unusual. A construct doesn't normally have this kind of energy." He turned to Franklin, and raised an eyebrow. "This yours?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about Mr. Snowman, that extra power is just the cooling spell. Wouldn't want him melting all over the carpets. I know, I know, it's a lot of extra effort, but, well, spirit of the season and all that."

The mage eyeballed him.

"Is it a problem?" Marlowe asked again.

"Hmmm... no."

"Well then let's keep things moving, shall we? Sorry for the delay ladies and gentlemen. The express elevators are on the right."

They hurried past the security guards. What with the snow, they'd been late getting to the tower, and no one wanted to be the last ones to arrive at a party thrown by their boss. As the elevator doors were closing, Franklin said to Mr. Snowman:

"Just as well they didn't check under your hat."

"Franklin, I still don't see why I had to bring my wand if I'm not supposed to have it here. Besides, it feels a little odd stuck in my head like this."

"Given how Christmas Eve has gone the past few years, I just thought it'd be a good idea to have a little insurance." said Franklin, darkly. "Still, with all the security, we probably don't have to worry."

* * * *

"Franklin. Glad you could make it." The middle aged Asian man held out his hand, and Franklin shook it.

"Sorry we were late, Mr. Tanaka. Traffic's crazy out there because of the snow, but we weren't going to miss this. Thanks for the limo, sir, you really didn't need to go to the trouble."

"Nonsense, no trouble at all. Just a small token of our appreciation. After all, this party wouldn't be happening without people like you."

"Oh, I don't know about that." said Franklin humbly.

"Don't sell yourself short, young man. When construction of this building began two years ago Takanomi had virtually no presence in this city at all. We were a soft, juicy fruit surrounded by hungry rivals. It was local knowledge and problem solving abilities like yours - and your team - that allowed us to survive.

And now look at us."

Franklin took in the sumptuous views; from the two-storey-high hall where the party was taking place, they could see the whole city. "I'm just glad this place is finally finished."

"Not as glad as I am." Mr. Tanaka laughed. "I have to say, there were times I thought we wouldn't get to this point. Never mind rival corps, the architectural and construction problems held us back even longer. Over-designed, poorly-costed, and of course finding a contractor who isn't working for one of our enemies is like trying to find a single diamond in a dragon hoard. But we got here, more or less. There are still some cosmetic touches to finish, but at least the building's secure now."

"I'd love to take a tour when it's properly completed."

"When it's properly completed, I'll get you your own office. Of course, you may have to share it with the rest of your team. Say, where are they? I should thank them too. And I heard you were bringing a construct?"

"Oh, they're around here somewhere." answered Franklin. "They're just... mingling."

Kali had been at the party for less than twenty minutes, and already she'd had enough of being mingled with.

"So then I said: 'Franz, baby, I negotiate million dollar deals for breakfast. I think I can get us out of a parking ticket'. He wasn't even real police, just a merc. You know the sort, meathead, mouth-breathing ex-military. A rent-a-cop, the kind corps pay to keep squatters off their empty lots. So d'you know what I did?" He leaned in close, putting his arm around Kali's shoulders, giving her a facefull of whiskey breath. "I convinced the dummy that I was a lawyer for the city government and I could get his licence pulled like that." He snapped his fingers. "Scared the shit out of him, he was like 'Don't, don't, I need this job'. Don't know why, it was a crappy gig, I would have been doing him a favor if I'd got him fired. But of course, I'm not a lawyer for the city." He laughed. "Anyway, then I took Franz to this sushi place to finalize the deal. I saved the corp twenty percent on the contract, five million dollars. The sushi was great too, you should let me take you there sometime."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Harris" said Kali through gritted teeth. "I'm a busy woman." She put a hand on the hand that was resting on her shoulder.

"For you, baby, I am free when-*ever*." He started to lean in closer, then flinched back as Kali tightened her grip on his hand suddenly. "Woah, that pinched a little." He smirked. "Hey, what else d'you think you could do with a grip like that?"

"Excuse me, could I just have a quick word with my friend." Elijah was suddenly somehow in-between them.

"Yo, buddy, we were having a private conversation." Harris scowled, as Elijah tried to hustle Kali away.

"Yeah Elijah, why don't you just let me finish this?" Kali muttered.

Harris was about to follow them when Tobias blocked his path. "Oops, sorry, didn't see you there, mate. Hey, have you tried the canapes, the shrimp here is amazing." Harris tried to step around him but then Kael was in his way, and when Harris finally slid around him Elijah and Kali had disappeared into the crowd.

Meanwhile, Mr. Snowman was making friends.

"Are there going to be party games? I don't know if you've ever played Blind Man's Bluff but it's terribly fun."

"So are you actually *made* of snow?" The middle aged mage he was talking to asked. "Or is it a magical substance that mimics the appearance of snow. Or imprinted ectoplasm, perhaps?"

"Uh, it's just snow. Say, if you don't like Blind Man's Bluff, we could always play charades."

"Fascinating. Well the intellectual range is a bit limited but the physical form is outstanding."

"Excuse me? 'A bit limited'?"

"Hey Lorrel, come take a look at this." he beckoned to a young, elven mage picking at the buffet. "Look, this construct is made of snow. Actual snow." The man reached out and took a pinch of snow right from Mr. Snowman's midriff, and held it out on his palm.

"Well that's rude!" exclaimed Mr. Snowman. "I don't think you'd like it very much if I started picking bits off you." He turned to leave.

"No, wait." said Lorrel. "Forgive Magus Tomlinson, he was just curious. What's your name? I'm Lorrel D'Arlethen."

"I'm Mr. Snowman. Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you too. Are you enjoying the party so far, Mr. Snowman?"

"Well, it's a lovely party but it could do with a bit more Christmas spirit. There's hardly any decoration, just some tinsel on the Christmas tree. And the buffet doesn't even have any mince pies."

"Do you eat mince pies?"

"Well no, but it's the principle of the thing."

"So who are you here with?" Lorrel asked, and there was a slight sharpness to the question that Mr. Snowman completely missed.

"Oh, I came with Franklin. Do you know him?"

"I haven't had the pleasure, no."

"Well I could introduce you."

"No, no, that's fine, I'm sure I'll bump into him sooner or later. Tell me, does Franklin make a lot of constructs."

"Well, I don't really know what Franklin's doing a lot of the time. I'm the only one of me, but Franklin does a lot of other magic."

"Maybe I could enlighten you. Give you a little magical education, so to speak. Do you remember any of the things Franklin says when he's doing magic. Has he ever performed any spells on you? Do you remember them."

"Well when we were in the lab earlier he... oh, hello Franklin!"

"Made some friends, Mr. Snowman?" Franklin said. "I hope you're not trying to get these ones to sing ten verses of Good King Wenceslas."

"No." said the middle aged mage. "We were just having a little chat..."

"We were just talking about magic." said Mr. Snowman. "They're very interested in the magic you do in the lab."

"Are they now?" said Franklin, locking eyes with Lorrel.

Lorrel inclined his head slightly, and smiled as if to say 'okay, you got me, but you can't blame a mage for trying'. "You know, I have to say I wasn't quite sure why a freshly-graduated mage like you was put on the payroll, not to mention why your four colleagues were brought on too. But I'm starting to understand what Tanaka sees in you. You know, we should really have a get-together sometime. It could be good for your career."

"Or yours."

"Mutually beneficial, shall we say?"

"I'll think about it. Come on, Mr. Snowman, let's mingle." Franklin said, practically shoving Mr. Snowman away from the two mages and down the hall.

Franklin kept going until they were some way way from the open-plan area where the party was, and dragged Mr. Snowman into an empty office. "Um, Franklin, why are we leaving the party?" asked Mr. Snowman.

"We're just taking a short break." said Franklin, closing the door. He sighed. "Maybe it **was** a mistake to bring you along."

"Did I do something wrong Franklin?"

"No, no, it's just... maybe don't talk about any personal stuff, especially with mages. They're like piranhas: once they get a sniff of power they have the irresistible urge to swarm in and strip it down. Find out how it works and how they can use it. I should have realized that, they don't need to know about the tablet, just the feel of magic around you is enough for them to start asking awkward questions."

"So... are we just going to hide in this office for the rest of the party? Only... I was quite looking forward to meeting people." Mr. Snowman said in a small voice.

"I guess we can't hide in here all night. Maybe I can get the others to run interference if any mages start sniffing around. I wonder where they've got to? I haven't seen them for a while."

Elijah, Kali, Kael and Tobias were also in an empty office, but one on the other side of the building.

"You were about to break his arm." said Elijah.

"I was not." Kali protested.

"Yes you were. Believe me, I know the look." Kael confirmed. "Yeah, that's the one." he added as Kali turned the full force of her glare on him.

"I am not some two-bit thug who can't be trusted to behave herself at a civilized event."

"So you weren't going to hurt him." Elijah raised an eyebrow. "You honestly were just going to let the arm on the shoulder go?"

"Well... maybe just twist it a little." Kali admitted. "But you saw how he was acting."

"He was a drunk douchebag." said Kael. "This is a corporate party - if you start attacking every drunk douchebag it'll be a bloodbath out there. Just smile, nod, and *tell* them to fuck off. But politely."

"Can we get back out there?" asked Tobias, who was holding a plate of finger foods. "Only I'm starting to run out of pigs-in-blankets."

"Can we?" Elijah looked pointedly at Tobias.

Kali shrugged. "Fine, fine. Point taken. I'll go back out there and simper politely like a good little corporate automaton."

"You can be yourself." said Kael. "Just try... try to be a little less... yourself."

"You mean, without the violence?" Kali suggested sardonically.

"Yes, without the violence."

"No violence it is, then."

* * * *

"I'm sorry sir, your name isn't on the guest list. Perhaps I could see your invitation... oh shit."

The security guard fumbled for his weapon, but it was too late. The angry buzz of the machine pistol echoed off the marble pillars of the lobby, and the guard dropped. The other guards were reacting, but too slowly. Two more of the new arrivals had drawn pistols from concealed holsters, and the other three guards in the lobby went down without firing a shot.

"Klar. Sie sind tot, oder?" the blond giant with the machine pistol asked his companion, nodding towards the other guards.

"Yeah, they're dead." he answered with a Texan drawl. "Easy as pie. Easier than we were expecting, guess your boss was just..." he was interrupted by a burst of gunfire.

The four men who'd taken out the guards dived behind the pillars. Calmly, they shimmied out of their

suit jackets and began to return fire against the advancing security guards.

"Six more." the Texan observed, ducking back behind the pillar just as a bullet zipped past his head.

"Damn, where did they come from?"

"Who cares." The blond answered in a heavy German accent. "Take zem out."

The intruders kept up the pressure on the security guards, but their pistols were outmatched by the assault rifles taking chunks out of the pillars they were sheltering behind. One security guard got overconfident and took a bullet in the leg as he was repositioning, but he was pulled back into cover. The guards kept advancing, until two more heavy-set guys came out of the parking garage and pulled weapons out of their suits. These ones had submachine guns.

"Pull back towards the elevators." That was Marlowe, shouting to his remaining men. "Create a firing line, keep them in the lobby." The guards retreated quickly and professionally, covering each other as they took up new positions in the centre of the building. Now all they had to do was defend the corridor running through the middle of the building, off which the elevators lay.

There was a minute or two of back and forth, bullets pinging around the lobby. But the elevator corridor was too easy to defend.

"Now what do we do?" the Texan asked. "They're dug in there like ticks."

The hulking blond killer rolled his eyes, then said something in German into his radio. He turned to his comrades. "Okay, hold here. Keep them pinned down - *he's* coming."

Meanwhile, Marlowe was trying to get his own radio to work. "It's no use, they're jamming all the frequencies. Vasquez, come here." He beckoned one of the younger security contractors forward. "Take an elevator up to the party and get the guests to evacuate. Tell them to use the emergency stairwells, not the elevators. We'll give you ten minutes to clear the sixtieth floor, then we'll start..."

Whatever Marlowe's plan was, it didn't matter. Fire washed down the corridor, charring them down to the bone in an instant.

* * * *

"Just stick close to me and we'll be fine." Franklin told Mr. Snowman. "Don't worry, it's only a party. So long as we don't talk about magic everything will be fine."

As Franklin opened the door of the office, there was a burst of machine gun fire, then screaming. He recoiled back as if the door handle were burning hot.

"Is everything alright?" Mr. Snowman asked.

Franklin put a finger to his lips, then very cautiously opened the door a sliver and peaked out. He could see men with guns herding the guests together into the main hall, firing their guns into the air to scare the screaming people back. A Takanomi mage tried to form a sign, but he was hit by a wall of magical force and slammed back against the ornamental rocks in the middle of the hall. Franklin pulled back again.

"Uh. No. Not really. We have to get out of here, Mr. Snowman."

"Should we wait for the others?"

"Shit. Uh, I... shit where are they?" Franklin was sweating now. He looked through the door again, then jerked back. "Shit, one of them's coming this way. Fuck, what do we do? Think, Franklin, think." He held his breath, and there was a loud slam as a door was kicked open.

It was the office next door. The gunman dragged out a screaming woman by the wrist, while jabbing his gun into her date's back, forcing them out into the hall.

"Okay, now's our chance." said Franklin. "Come on."

Taking Mr. Snowman by the mitten, he darted across the corridor, shoulder-barging the door to the stairwell open. He was about to lead Mr. Snowman down, but then came the sound of boots on the concrete steps, coming up below them. So he went up.

* * * *

"I. Told. You. This. Was. A. Bad. Idea!" Kali punctuated word with the clack of her shoes on the concrete as she ran down the stairs.

Like Franklin and Mr. Snowman, Kali, Kael, Elijah and Tobias had been coming back to the party when they heard the sound of gunfire. After a brief check to make sure none of them was carrying any concealed weapons - unfortunately, for once no one was - they had decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Fortunately, they were right next to an empty stairwell.

"You told us it was going to be boring. If you'd mentioned the mortal peril, we might have listened to you." Kael countered. "It was just supposed to be a party." he added, a little plaintively. "Is it really so much to ask to just get drunk on Christmas Eve like a normal person?"

"Based on our last couple of Christmas Eves, apparently so." said Tobias.

"Everybody shut up and save your breath." muttered Elijah. "We've got another fifty floors to go."

* * * *

"Jacob Yoshitoyo Tanaka. Born in Old Tokyo 1989. Family emigrated to San Francisco 1991. Scholarship student at Berkley 2007, MBA at Harvard 2011. President of Takanomi trading, Vice-Chairman of Takanomi research division, now director of all North American operations..."

The crowd of hostages parted like a school of fish before a shark. He was slim, well groomed, with a suit that looked expensive even next to the corporate execs. A woman flinched as the coldly stylish man stepped right up to her, examining her with his dark eyes.

"Enough." Mr. Tanaka said, stepping out of the crowd.

"...and father of three."

"I am Tanaka."

"How do you do. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. We have a lot to discuss, perhaps we can go somewhere more private?"

Two goons grabbed Mr. Tanaka and shoved him out of the crowd. With their leader, they took him to the conference room on the floor above. Suits of Japanese armour and priceless Chinese porcelain lined the walls. They sat him down at the conference table, and their leader took the seat opposite.

"You've gone too far this time, van Kleiss."

Piter van Kleiss leaned back. A trace of a smile crossed his face, but his eyes remained cold. "So, my reputation precedes me."

"Tit-for-tat skirmishes are one thing, but storming a corporate headquarters? Holding high-level

executives hostage? You must have lost your mind. Are you trying to start a war?"

"You seem to misunderstand the nature of the conversation. I am the one who will be asking the questions, not you. Sort of 'fill-in-the-blanks' questions actually." He looked sideways at one of his henchmen, a young black guy, a mage judging from his amulets, but he had a laptop in front of him rather than a wand. "Leo?" The younger mage turned the laptop around. On it was the login screen for the Takanomi Tower security system. The cursor was blinking on the box for entering the access password.

"I don't have that code. You want to hack into our computers?" Tanaka exclaimed in surprise. "But why? Why go to all this trouble? You could just as easily have hacked in remotely, and besides, any information you get will be useless. There are safeguards, protocols in place - as soon as they wake up in Tokyo they'll change everything, every password, every database. This is pointless."

"Be. Silent." van Kleiss barked. "I am not interested in the contents of your databases. What I am interested in, however, is the sixteen thousand tons of magicite running through the superstructure of this building."

"You came to look at the architecture?" said Tanaka incredulously. "What kind of hostile takeover is this?"

The henchmen smiled at each other, and van Kleiss let out a small laugh. "My dear Mr. Tanaka, whoever said this was a hostile takeover?"

Tanaka's brow furrowed for a moment, then his eyes widened as realisation dawned. "My God, you *have* lost your mind. You're insane, you can't seriously be thinking of using it like that, it would... the consequences could be..."

"The code, Mr. Tanaka." said van Kleiss, an edge in his voice.

"It's useless to you, there are a dozen other safeguards in place to stop it from being used that way."

"Then there's no reason not to give me the code."

"But I'm telling you, I don't have it." Tanaka protested. Sweat was pouring down his brow now. "Not that one. That requires the master access code, only the CEO and the boardmembers have it. Maybe a few of the mages who built the system, but no one here. No one on this continent, even."

"I am going to count to three, Mr. Tanaka." van Kleiss stated, slowly and deliberately. "There will not. Be. A four. Give me the code."

Tanaka didn't answer.

"One. Two. Three."

"I'm telling you I don't know it. Open a portal to Neo-Tokyo and go ask the board yourself. You're just going to have to kill me."

Van Kleiss shrugged. "Okay."

For an instant, Tanaka became a screaming pillar of fire. Then there was nothing but ash.

* * * *

Franklin gasped as he saw the burst of fire in the conference room, then put a hand over his mouth to stifle himself. He pulled back a bit more behind the suit of armour he was using for cover.

"Franklin! What's going on?" Mr. Snowman whispered.

"Come on, we have to get out of here."

* * * *

"What was that?" asked van Kleiss.

"What was what?" Leo replied.

"There was a noise. Out there." He nodded towards the doors of the conference room. He turned to the blond giant. "Klaus, go check it out."

Klaus nodded and went to the door. A few seconds later he came back and shook his head. "No one there."

Van Kleiss scowled. "I heard something. Are you sure all the hostages are accounted for?"

"We swept the sixtieth floor. But..." Klaus looked at one of the other henchmen, who shook his head. "We still haven't found... them."

"Well then keep looking. They were on the guest list, the guards registered them entering the building. They must be here somewhere."

The henchmen unholstered their guns. "Don't worry. We'll find them."

"You know, Tanaka was right." said Leo as the henchmen stalked off. "There are other safeguards apart from the security key."

"But you can break the encryption."

"Hey, you didn't bring me along for my charming personality. But I can't break the magical lock out. That one's inbuilt into the design of the building, part of the structure of the defence grid. The magicite itself powers the system. You'd need a miracle to get past it."

"You can break the other six security measures?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then get started. Leave number seven to me."

* * * *

"Damn, I still can't get any signal." Franklin shook his phone experimentally, but he was still getting zero bars. "They must be jamming everything."

They were a floor above the conference room, in a part of the building that still hadn't been finished yet. Piles of unused drywall were stacked around and open studs and protective plastic sheeting shone under the flickering strip lights. Tools and workbenches lay scattered about.

"What do we do, Franklin?" asked Mr. Snowman nervously.

"I'm thinking. We can't take the elevators, and the stairs would just lead us back down through them. We can't get a signal out if they're jamming... no, wait, maybe we can! There must be hard lines coming out of this building. Of course!" Franklin rushed over to the nearest 'Fire Exit' sign, which pointed at a door. By the door he found a fire alarm. "All emergency systems have to be hard wired." He pulled the alarm.

At once a klaxon sounded, and the sprinklers went off. Just in the immediate vicinity around them, however.

"Huh. Maybe I should have thought about that a bit more. Come on, we have to go, they know where we are now."

But before he got a dozen paces, he heard the sound of footsteps coming towards them. He grabbed Mr. Snowman by the arm and pulled him behind a stack of drywall.

Suddenly, the alarm shut off, and the sprinklers stopped. A few more drips fell off the faucets into the puddles already pooling on the bare concrete floor. Then there was the splash-splash-splash of footsteps.

"I'm afraid your little emergency has been called off." said someone with a German accent, not as gravelly as Klaus', trying to sound friendly. "The fire department will not be coming to the rescue, if that is what you intended, nor will anyone else. You might as well come out and join the others." There was the ozone smell of magic in the air. "I promise I won't hurt you."

The henchman stepped around the drywall stack and immediately let out a burst of flame from his wand. It cut through empty air. His blond eyebrows furrowed. He was more lightly built than Klaus, and his hair was cut short rather than down to his shoulders, but there was a similarity in accent and the way he held himself that suggested that they had more than just their nationality in common.

The henchman then saw the open door of the emergency exit stairwell, and smiled. He approached very carefully then leaped through...

His boot landed on ice, and went right out from underneath him. Suddenly he was tumbling head over heels down the concrete stairs, until...

CRACK

He landed right next to Franklin and Mr. Snowman, blue eyes staring up at them, empty. Franklin reached out and prodded him. His head flopped around loosely.

"Is he okay?" asked Mr. Snowman.

"Uh. No. Not really."

"I turned the water on the stairs to ice like you suggested. Did we do the wrong thing?"

"Well, I kind of assumed it would just slow him down, but... I guess this works too. Hey look, he has a wand. And a radio!"

* * * *

"I wanted this to be professional. Efficient. It's not a lot to ask." Van Kleiss shrugged. "But alas, your Mr. Tanaka did not see it that way, so he will not be joining us for the rest of his life." The crowd of hostages gasped. "This can go any way you want it to, you can walk out or be carried out. But have no illusions: we are in control."

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened. One of the henchmen by it turned, then his jaw dropped as he saw what it contained. Van Kleiss came rushing over.

"It's Antonio." the henchman by the elevator said.

Antonio's corpse was sitting on an office chair, head lolling to one side. Van Kleiss reached out and smoothed out his sweatshirt, on which was written:

'Now I have a magic wand. Ho - ho - ho.'

The henchman prodded Antonio's lifeless body with the barrel of his gun. "What is this? A security guard? One we missed."

"No. No, this is something else."

"What do we do now?"

Van Kleiss sighed. "Now? Now we have to tell Klaus that his boyfriend is dead. Call him down."

* * * *

"That ought to keep them off balance for a while. At least while they're worrying about us they'll be less interested in incinerating more hostages. You stay here, and stay out of sight." If, as Franklin suspected, Mr. Snowman was the target of this operation, then his objective was to keep him as far away from the bad guys as possible. And he was pretty sure he was about to draw some attention. Of course, Mr. Snowman could be handy in a fight, but now he had a wand of his own he was more confident about doing this alone; in this case, his lumbering friend would just slow him down.

"But Franklin, wouldn't it be safer if we stick together?"

"Don't worry, I'll be back in a minute."

Franklin hurried up the stairs, while Mr. Snowman stood pensively among the half-finished offices. He looked around, and an idea occurred to him.

* * * *

"Well now what do we do." asked Kael. He rattled the gate blocking the exit of the parking garage.

"It's no good." said Tobias. "I've tried all the doors on this side, they're all sealed shut. Can't hack into the system either."

Elijah frowned. "Well, guess we've no choice. We'll have to go back up."

"Oh, come on, really?" Kael asked. He'd long since abandoned his tight-fitting jacket, and there were sweat patches under his armpits.

"It's not our fault you can't stay in shape Kael." said Kali matter of factly.

"But what are we going to do exactly? Can't we just stay down here and wait it out?"

"If we find the control centre I could probably get through whatever hacks they've used to take control of the building's security system." said Tobias. "Plus, we've left Franklin up there."

"Oh Franklin's a survivor, I'm sure he'll be fine. And he's got Mr. Snowman with him."

"Move." said Kali. "I don't plan to stay trapped down here until someone finds us, and you got us invited to this so you're taking point."

"Hey, I didn't get us invited so much as dropped a few hints..."

"Just go." said Elijah. "Or do you want to get left down here on your own? How confident are you that they won't check the garage eventually?"

"Point taken."

They crept back up the stairs, until they came to the ground floor.

"You know, we never actually checked to see if the front entrance was clear." said Tobias. He opened the door a crack and tried to squint through. "Hey." he whispered excitedly. "There are Takanomi security guys out there. The arseholes upstairs must have bypassed them and gone straight up to the party."

He was about to open the door more when Kali grabbed him, and pulled him away from the doorway. Carefully, she took a look for herself.

"Those aren't our guys. Shit, do you have no memory at all? None of those people were in the lobby when we came in, and I don't see Marlowe anywhere. They're just using Takanomi uniforms."

"Fuck. Now what do we do?" asked Tobias.

But before anyone could answer, there was a shout from one of the armed men in the lobby. He'd seen the half-open door.

"We run." said Kael.

* * * *

"Hello? Can anyone hear me? Armed men have seized control of Takanomi tower and are holding at least fifty Takanomi corp employees hostage."

"Sir, this is a police channel."

"Um... yes, I know. That's why I'm calling."

"This channel is reserved for internal police communications only. If your corporation is experiencing a security breach you should call Takanomi corporate security." The voice was female, but stiff in a way that meant Franklin couldn't tell if it belonged to a very good AI or a very bored human. "The police only respond to crimes being committed on public property, except in the event of mass murder or wider danger to the city."

"Look." Franklin shouted heatedly. "They've killed all the corporate security and they've already incinerated a hostage. I'd say that counts as mass murder!"

"I'm sorry sir, I can't just send police officers onto corporate property without consent from a corporate officer and an agreement to reimburse the city's expenses."

"Oh for fucks sake - wait, yes, okay. I'm a corporate officer. Takanomi company ID: 3436 dash 17 gamma."

"Okay, checking that now sir. Well... it's a valid ID but it's rather junior. You *are* aware that calling in a SWAT team could leave your corporation open to major financial liabilities? You're already racking up charges just by using this channel."

"Yes, fine, come the fuck down here and bill me. Just send someone."

"I'm sorry sir, I'll need to check with my supervisor to authorize the expenditure. But I can send a patrol car in the meantime to assess the situation. After all, you wouldn't want us to bill your corp for a full SWAT team if it turned out you were overreacting a little and you only needed a few patrolmen."

The expletive laden response Franklin had lined up was interrupted by a burst of gunfire. Franklin ducked as bullets pinged off the steel railings.

* * * *

"Duck!" Kali shouted, and Kael hit the floor as bullets shattered the ornamental mirrors on the wall beside him, showering him with glass.

They'd made it up about five floors before they'd heard boots coming down the stairs above them; the bad guys, of course, could still use the elevators. So now they were dodging and diving through the plush offices and conference rooms on this floor, trying to find another exit. The only advantage they had was that there was so much floor space the six or so hunters were having a hard time pinning them down.

More bullets ruined the faux-mahogany finish on the overturned conference table Tobias was hiding behind. The attacker came forward, assault rifle levelled, but he made the mistake of not checking his blind spots as he came forward through the doorway into the conference room. Elijah leaped out from behind the door, and tackled him to the ground. There was a brief but vicious struggle and they fought for the weapon, then Elijah got in three heavy punches that split the guy's lip and broke his nose. Suddenly, the gun was in Elijah's hands.

The gun's former owner put his hands up just as the muzzle came up to point at his face. "No, no please!"

Elijah paused. At that moment another fake security guard came through the doorway and saw Elijah. He raised his gun, but Elijah was quicker, and the bad guy got four rounds in the chest just as his finger pulled the trigger. He went down, and his shots went into the ceiling. But the distraction gave the man Elijah had just disarmed his opening. He kicked the gun out of Elijah's hands, then dived for the one his fallen colleague had just dropped. This time, Elijah was slower - he got to his weapon, but the bad guy was already bringing his gun up.

The assault rifle spat bullets at him, but Elijah was already on the other side of the table with Tobias. Elijah returned fire, but was forced to duck down again as another burst almost took his head off; it shattered the window instead. There was another burst, and Tobias recoiled as a round punched through the table right by his head. He pulled Elijah clear just as more of the table was turned to splinters. They shimmied along behind the long conference table, Elijah returning fire. Then his rifle clicked on empty. They kept edging along behind the table, but there was nowhere to go.

"You are done!" called someone with a European accent. "You've got no more table. Where are you going, pal?" There was a click as a fresh mag was loaded. "Next time you have a chance to kill someone, don't hesitate."

For a split second he was aware of the sound of footsteps coming up behind him. He turned at the exact instant Kali jumped, and her flying kick landed square in the middle of his chest. He didn't even have time to scream as he was thrown over the table and out the broken window.

"Thanks for the advice." said Kali. She ran to the window, and was just in time to see him land on the bonnet of the police patrol car which, having done a perfunctory drive by and assessed the situation non-critical, was just pulling away. The bonnet crumpled and the windscreen shattered. The cop inside panicked and slammed the car into reverse, tearing over the flower beds as the snipers watching from the building opened up on him.

"Welcome to the party, pal!" Kali laughed.

"Good timing." Elijah said.

"Hey guys, look at this." Tobias called out. He'd rushed over to the gunman Elijah had just killed, looking

for another weapon or more ammo. Instead he found a duffle bag. After rummaging around in it for a moment, he pulled out something that looked suspiciously like a detonator. Then he reached in again, and pulled out a brick of plastic explosive.

"Huh." said Kali. "Now that's a problem."

"Think they're going to try to bring down the building?" asked Tobias.

"I don't know." pondered Elijah. "They don't strike me as suicide bombers. Plus, we didn't see any of this stuff in the garage. That'd be the logical place to bring down a couple of pillars."

"How is this still getting worse?" muttered Kali.

"We're just lucky like that." said Tobias. "What should I do with this?" He gestured to the duffle bag.

Elijah shrugged. "Better hold onto it - we don't want them getting it back, and it might come in handy. Where's Kael?" he asked Kali.

"Keeping the rest of them busy. Come on, let's go."

They found Kael sheltering behind the heavy ceramic base of an ornamental fern. He was pinned down by two more guys with assault rifles, shooting down the corridor. "Hey guys, nice to see you. Could you maybe get me the fuck out of here." Kael said as the fern above him was steadily shredded by the volume of incoming fire.

"Sorry, don't have any ammo for this thing." Elijah said, displaying the empty mag in his rifle.

"Well distract them. I have an idea."

Elijah turned and began making his way through the offices until he had a clear view of the men shooting at Kael through the glass panels. He grabbed a heavy metal stapler and threw it hard enough to shatter the glass, then aimed his rifle as if to shoot at them. They quickly turned their attention to him, and Kael was able to make a break from his hiding place.

"Okay, follow me." They ran through the offices, bullets ripping through computer monitors and desks. Kael led them to the elevators.

"What the fuck Kael?" asked Kali. "You know they control the elevators, right? We get in one, they'll just send it to the floor with the most guns on it."

"Who said we were getting in one?" Kael grinned. "Come on, help me get these doors open." Quickly, they pulled back the elevator doors, and found themselves looking down an empty shaft. Kael pointed to the right. "Look - a ladder."

One by one the four of them swung themselves out into the shaft and onto the ladder, Kali first, then Kael and Tobias, with Elijah bringing up the rear. Elijah let the elevator doors close again, and they started the long climb.

"It should take them a while to work out where we've gone." said Elijah. "Good idea, Kael."

"Was it, though?" said Kael, sweating profusely. "We just got to the bottom..." he took a wheezy breath, "...and now we're going back up?"

"I'm not happy about it either, mate." said Tobias, who was also breathing heavily. "But somehow I don't think the guys in the lobby are going to be sympathetic about it if we try to go back down."

"I should have got you both gym memberships for Christmas." said Kali. "Maybe your New Year's resolution should be... shit, did you hear that?"

There was a whirr, and one of the elevators started coming up. Fortunately, not the one in their shaft. It stopped a few floors above them.

"Why would they be stopped there." wondered Kael out loud. "The party's twenty floors above us, they... shit."

A crack of light appeared in the shaft above them, as someone started trying to prise open the doors.

"We need to get out of here." said Elijah. He looked for the nearest doors, but they were between floors.

"No time." said Kali, eyes fixed on something opposite her. "Oh fuck but I'm going to regret this." She jumped out into the shaft. Her hand caught the lip of the edge of a ventilation duct. "Come on, follow me." she said as she pulled herself in.

Kael made the jump quickly, but when Tobias tried it he almost didn't make it, and only Kael's fingers closing around his wrist stopped him falling all the way to the bottom. The duffle bag swung precariously from his other hand before Kael managed to pull him up.

"Probably shouldn't drop that." Kael suggested, eyeing the explosives.

Elijah made the jump, but it wasn't easy for him to pull himself into the narrow duct. He just squeezed in as the elevator doors above opened.

Kali took out her phone and switched the light on. It allowed her to see that she was in a ventilation duct, big enough for her to go on hands and knees, and the guys behind her to crawl.

"Perfect." she rolled her eyes. "Just perfect. *Come to the party, Kali. Get in the Christmas spirit, Kali.

There'll be drinks, food, we'll have a good time.*"

"Can we move it along?" asked Kael. "It's a little cramped in here."

"Oh, really?" spat Kali as she started to crawl. "Ugh, now I know how a 9mm in a magazine feels." she muttered to herself, then directed behind her: "You'd better not be looking at my ass, Kael."

"I can look at literally nothing else right now."

"Fine. Just don't enjoy it. I swear, when we get out of this..."

Kali stopped abruptly. Kael was about to hiss at her to keep moving when he heard it too: footsteps below them. Then, ahead of them, a section of duct rose with a metallic *tonk* as someone, testing, pushed it up from below.

* * * *

"There." said Mr. Snowman proudly. "That should make them think twice." He twanged the wire of the improvised tripline he'd strung across the doorway.

Mr. Snowman had been busy.

Franklin had told him to stay hidden while he went up to the roof to call for help, so Mr. Snowman had decided to make himself useful. On the correct assumption that Franklin might have bad guys on his tail when he came back down, he'd decided to set a couple of booby traps around the unfinished offices spaces to give a nasty surprise to anyone trying to follow Franklin. Of course, Franklin had been in such a hurry that he'd very nearly had a nasty surprise himself, but Mr. Snowman had managed to stop him before he ran into the first trap.

Once he'd seen them, Franklin was pretty sure the traps weren't going to slow anyone down for more than a few moments. Mr. Snowman's idea of an anti-personnel device was less vicious than the average internet prank video. Still, maybe the ball bearings on the floor would mildly annoy the bad guys before they caught up and riddled Franklin with bullets, or char-grilled him with magical fire.

Unfortunately, there was nowhere else to go. They were closing in from all sides, and there was no open route to a stairwell. Franklin breathed deeply and flexed his fingers around his captured wand. There were a lot of them, and they clearly had mages, but maybe with Mr. Snowman's frosty magic there was a chance they'd be able to hold them off.

This part of the building hadn't even had most of the lighting installed, and apart from a couple of lamps the workmen had left, it was dark. Plastic sheeting fluttered, and Franklin tensed.

"Get ready." he whispered to the crouching bulk of his icy companion. Mr. Snowman nodded.

Unseen by them, not fifty feet away, a dozen men - most with submachine guns, but two with wands - made their way through the maze of half-finished wall panels and bare concrete pillars. The blond giant Klaus was leading them.

"Remember, nobody kills him but me." he growled.

"Van Kleiss said to take him alive." ventured one of the henchmen.

Klaus glared at him, and the henchman's objection visibly wilted. He gave a hand signal, and a few men moved forward, while he took a few more round in a flanking move.

The point man carefully nudged aside a hanging plastic sheet, and the flashlight on the barrel of his gun swept across the room, searching for a target. Nothing. He stepped forward, and seeing the pullcord for the striplights beside him, he took one hand off his gun and pulled it, not looking away for an instant, ready to gun down whatever the light revealed.

Nothing happened.

Or rather, the lights didn't come on. There was, however, a clattering sound. Puzzled, the henchman looked up, just in time to see the power tool coming down the air vent, falling straight towards his head.

clonk

The henchman folded like a bad poker hand. The guy behind him came up and knelt down to check on him, then two more came running, guns levelled, looking for the threat. They saw the power tool with blood on it, and the henchman on the floor with a visible depression in his skull. The guy kneeling down beside him put two fingers on his jugular vein, checking for a pulse, then looked up at the other two and shook his head.

"Marco is down." one of them radioed. "Watch for traps."

Cautiously, they moved forward, sweeping the path in front of them with their flashlights.

Having heard the bad news about Marco, the other henchmen were being cautious as well. Instead of spreading out they'd formed clusters. Three of them came to a door. They stopped. One of them slung his machine gun and prepared to open the door while the other two covered it with their weapons. Slowly, he reached for the doorknob; there could be anything on the other side - a claymore, perhaps - so he made to jump out of the way as soon as the door swung open.

Unfortunately, it had not occurred to him to worry about the doorknob itself. In the darkness, he hadn't noticed the slight cherry-red tint the metal had.

He put his hand on the doorknob, and his eyes widened. He let out a hiss of pain and tried to jerk his hand away, but for a few agonising seconds he couldn't get it away. When he finally did, the skin of his palm peeled away like the crust coming off the melted camembert on the buffet table downstairs. Biting his lip, trying not to scream while still letting out low moans, he stumbled backwards.

Even more unfortunately, he was now not paying attention to what he was stumbling into. His gasps of pain stopped abruptly as he put his foot down on the board laying across the left doorway, and one of the long, sharp nails that had been left therein went straight through his boot.

Now he screamed. If he hadn't already been injured he might have had the presence of mind not to reach down, grab the board, and yank the nail out. But he did, and suddenly there was blood everywhere. Arterial blood. He got a few more limping steps before sinking to his knees, then passing out. The two henchmen with him forgot what they'd been doing and started frantically rummaging in their kit for bandages, while one of them pulled off his boot and tried to apply pressure to the wound.

Klaus heard the scream, from somewhere off through the darkness, but he wasn't going to let casualties slow him down. The hurrensohn who killed his beloved Antonio was close. He could feel it. He pushed through a doorway and swept the room with his flashlight, but there was nothing there. He took aim, and motioned the guy behind him forward while he covered him. This henchman, who had also heard the scream and was very much less enthusiastic about the pursuit, crept forward quietly and cautiously.

There was no door in this doorway, just a plastic sheet. The henchman crouched down and shone the beam of his flashlight along the base of the door, checking for tripwires or lasers. Nothing. More confidently now, he signalled back to Klaus that he was about to go through. In one fluid motion he ripped the plastic sheet aside and jumped into the room.

No one. There was, however, a heat gun - the sort used for stripping paint - fixed just above the door, its trigger hooked around the chord the plastic sheet was hung from. On its own, the heat gun would have given him some nasty burns, but the henchman was wearing a hat that in ordinary circumstances was top-of-the-line tactical gear, but to a five hundred degree heat gun was unfortunately very flammable.

His head went up like a candle. Screaming, he dropped his weapon and tried to rip his headgear off, but all he succeeded in doing was burning his fingers. As drips of his own fat began to weep down his cheeks he frantically ran back towards Klaus. However, at this point he couldn't see anything, and he ran right past Klaus and headfirst into a concrete pillar. He collapsed, and lay there as the last flames flickered around the melted ruin of his head.

"We're dealing with one sick bastard here." muttered one of the remaining henchmen, looking down horrified at the smouldering remains of his former colleague.

Klaus put his finger to his lips, and motioned them to keep moving.

The net was tightening. Franklin could hear them coming closer and closer. Oddly, he also thought he heard someone screaming. He hoped the bad guys weren't torturing the hostages, but after what they'd done to Mr. Tanaka he wouldn't rule it out. He shuddered. Maybe it was Kali, or one of the others - maybe they'd brought them up here in the hope they could flush him out. He bit his lip. What could he do? He was sure they'd kill him if he stepped out of his hiding place.

The henchmen were getting close, not that they knew it. Three more were coming from the opposite direction to Klaus. They hadn't encountered any traps yet, so although they'd heard the radio message about Marco they weren't as cautious as they should have been. They cleared the rooms quickly and methodically, flashlights tracking from side to side - no tripwires, no lasers, no pressure plates.

They missed the clingfilm that had been stretched across the doorway at head height, all but invisible in the darkness. Clingfilm that had been coated with a thick layer of superglue.

The henchman on point walked straight into it. As he pulled it away from the doorframe, he triggered the fan that lay directly opposite the door. This blew a whole pile of fibrous insulation material all over him, but this was the least of his problems because the clingfilm was still stuck to his face and blocking his mouth and nose. At first, he didn't panic, and with more sense than most would have showed, instead of ripping at it and tearing bits away he very carefully teased the whole thing off his face. However, this still left a layer of superglue all over him, which was still blocking his airways. He tried to wipe it away, but the viscous stuff clung to him like, well, glue. Now he began to panic. His comrades came to try help him but there was nothing they could do either. A minute or two later, it was all over. Grimly, the two henchmen looked at each other. One of them radioed Klaus with the bad news, and asked for further instructions.

"Keep moving in. We almost have him."

They were close. Franklin could hear them, only a section or two away now, but some seemed to be

closer than others. Maybe the traps had slowed a few of them down a bit. He motioned to Mr. Snowman. "Come on, we have to move. That way." He directed Mr. Snowman ahead of him, away from the sound of approaching footsteps. Franklin then followed.

He'd only gone a few paces when he realised he'd fucked up. In order to follow Mr. Snowman, he had to cross past an open doorway on his right. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flicker of movement there.

He turned just in time to see a henchman raising his gun. There was no time for him to run, and even if he could bullets would punch through the drywall like it was paper. He was definitely dead.

And he would have been, if the sight of Franklin hadn't caused the henchman to stop looking where he was treading. Instinctively when he caught sight of the prey he took a step forward... right onto the ball bearings Mr. Snowman had left scattered there. His feet went out from under him just as he was pulling the trigger, and his shots went wild. He landed on the bare concrete floor with an unhealthy *crack*. Hearing the burst of gunfire the guy with him came running in, also saw Franklin, and also ran straight onto the ball bearings. He too went flying, landing on his arm and crying out in pain as bone audibly snapped.

Franklin, hearing more coming, didn't stick around to appreciate his luck, and quickly followed after Mr. Snowman. He heard someone shout behind him:

"There! There he is!"

He ran after Mr. Snowman, who he could just see ahead of him. The hunters were right behind him now, he could feel it. A burst of gunfire tore through the air and knocked a chunk out of a concrete pillar. He saw Mr. Snowman had come to a staircase - not one of the main stairwells running the length of the building, but a single flight to the floor above that would form a courtyard-like space when the building was finished. This was what Mr. Snowman had cleverly centred his traps around - an escape route Franklin hadn't realised was available. But Mr. Snowman had stopped. 'Go!' Franklin mouthed. 'Go on, keep moving!'

Mr. Snowman saw Franklin was near, and headed up the stairs. Franklin was bounding up them

moments later, taking them two at a time, and saw that Mr. Snowman had stopped again on the upper floor. He also saw that there were two heavy cans of paint balanced on the railings, but he didn't pay them much attention because he was pretty sure that the men chasing him were only seconds behind. He got to the top and was about to keep running along the corridor, then realised Mr. Snowman wasn't following. He ran back and grabbed him by a frosty arm, but Mr. Snowman - who weighted considerably more than Franklin - didn't budge an inch.

Instead, he waited until the sound of footsteps was right below them, then pushed the first paint can over the edge. The rope tied around its handle snapped taut.

The leading henchman, who had just run past two of his colleagues on the floor, one with a concussion and one with a broken arm, was wary at this point. When he got to the stairwell he was alert for danger, so when the paint can came swinging down towards him he had the reflexes to duck sharply, and shout "Heads up!"

The guy behind him was not quite so quick to react. He just had time to go "Huh?" when the paint can hit him at full force in the face. A large, metal paint can is heavy enough on its own, and this one was full. At that point, the second henchmen wasn't getting up for a while no matter what, as the can shattered half the bones in his face and forehead. However, he'd got five steps up, so when it hit him he was thrown down the stairs. He landed on his back, his head cracking on the concrete.

"Francois!" yelled the first henchman, looking back aghast... just as Mr. Snowman pushed the second paint can over the edge. It hit the distracted first henchman in the face just as he looked round again, causing a similar array of massive facial and skull fractures. Although fortunately for him, instead of landing on the concrete, he landed on his comrade.

Mr. Snowman leaned over the railing and looked down. "Oh dear - do you think they're okay? I was only trying to slow them down."

Franklin took a look too. "Well, they'll definitely be slower now." He winced as he saw the still living henchman on top spit out a couple of his teeth, and moan. "A lot slower. Come on, let's get out of here." He turned to run off down the corridor, but Mr. Snowman put an arm out blocking his path, and pointed to the tripline he'd strung across it. Gingerly, Franklin and Mr. Snowman stepped over, it, then ran for it.

Klaus and the remaining six henchmen got to the bottom of the stairs seconds later. At that moment the radio buzzed for a second before the static resolved into van Kleiss's voice. He was calling off the search.

Some of the henchmen made to turn around - the ones that weren't checking on their two bloodied colleagues at the bottom of the stairs, that is. But Klaus reached out and switched the radio off. He ran up the stairs, the muzzle of his submachine gun leading the way, and seeing that there was no one waiting at the top he quickly made to chase after his quarry down the corridor...

... and got all of three feet before he encountered the tripline and went straight down. His nose broke his fall, and itself too. He lay there for a moment, still enough that he could have been knocked out. Then his fist clenched and he slammed it on the floor again and again and again, venting his frustration on the tiles that slowly cracked under the force of his blows.

The rest of his men reached the top, and found Klaus getting to his feet, blood streaming down his nose. Van Kleiss's order came over the radio again: pull back. Angrily, Klaus shoved one of his men aside and began heading back the way they'd come.

* * * *

Kali watched the metal panel right ahead of her rise, and then fall, as the guy in the corridor below pushed the tip of his rifle into it. She didn't dare move - they were right beneath her, she could hear them, the slightest shift in her weight would give her away. But she didn't dare not move. One more panel, and they'd know anyway. She held her breath, waiting for the bullets...

There was a burst of static, and she heard a voice coming over a radio. It wasn't close enough for her to hear what it was saying, and in any case she didn't think it was in English. Maybe German? Whatever it was, after a moment's back and forth, they started jogging off down the corridor.

Kali almost collapsed with relief. Behind her, Kael let out a long exhale.

Tobias, with typically British understatement, said hoarsely: "Well that was a close one."

* * * *

The assault had begun. With one of their patrol cars shot to pieces, the city's police force wasn't in the mood for negotiation. Besides, Takanomi corp would be footing the bill for this operation. The cops were determined to take advantage of the opportunity. Who knows, they might even rescue some of the hostages as well.

The snowfall had stopped now, and the air was crisp and clear. Two SWAT teams converged from opposite sides of the building. The plan was to try a stealth insertion first; each team had a rigger with the tech to hack the locks on the doors. If that failed, they also had breaching charges.

"No sign of any activity, sir." reported the north SWAT team's spotter. "The lobby's empty. I can see the broken windows on the third floor they were firing from before, but there's no one there now."

"Copy that." said the team leader. "They probably pulled back to the upper floors when they saw us arrive." He hacked up a lump of phlegm, then spat it out. "This is just some corp skirmish that got out of hand. I bet they'll surrender as soon as we breach the building. Alright, move up."

Crunching through the snow, they made their way to their target: the secondary doors on the north face of the tower. The rigger got to work while the others covered him, laser sights penetrating the glass frontage and dancing over the security checkpoints and concession stands inside. The interior lights had all been shut off. Still no sign of anyone.

The rigger spent an agonisingly slow minute trying to crack the lock. No luck. He shook his head and pulled away, and the team leader motioned to the guys with the breaching charges. They placed them on the heavy, reinforced glass panels, then retreated back with the rest of the team behind a heavy concrete planter filled with frost-rimed rose bushes. For a moment nothing happened, and the only movement was their breaths drifting mistily up into the night.

Then the charges blew and the glass shattered. The SWAT team came out of cover as one and quickly advanced on the breach. But before they could set foot inside the tower, the gunfire started. Muzzle flashes suddenly lit up the lobby, and exposed on the open concourse outside the building, half the SWAT team went down right away. Their vests stopped any fatal injuries, but with their legs and arms torn up they were out of the fight anyway. The others returned fire while trying to drag their comrades to safety, but the hostiles inside the building were entrenched in prepared positions. Only the muzzle flashes gave away roughly where they were, and the SWAT team's fire did nothing more than take chips out of the freshly installed marble. Mauled and bloodied, they pulled back.

The SWAT team on the other side of the building fared similarly. The stealth option had failed.

But the cops were far from done. If subtlety hadn't worked, there was still brute force. Infuriated by the casualties they'd just suffered, they sent in their most powerful asset.

The dragon came bounding up the street from the east, straight at Takanomi Tower's main entrance. On its back was strapped a palanquin carrying four mages. Asphalt cracked under the dragon's claws as it charged, and as it neared the steps it took a deep breath, readying its flame.

There was a crack of thunder, and a massive bolt of lightning fired from the tower. It hit the dragon square in the back and slammed it to the floor. The mages started returning fire, magical fireballs arcing towards the building. But they dissipated against the tower without so much as cracking a window.

* * * *

"No!" Franklin yelled in horror as another lance of crackling energy hit the dragon. The mages it carried were still fighting back, completely uselessly. The palanquin, and the runes inscribed across it, had given them some protection, but it was on fire now. "You idiots. The building is designed to resist a magical attack! Get out of there!"

"What do we do, Franklin?" Mr. Snowman asked, clutching his scarf.

Franklin slammed his fist against the window. "Idiots! They could throw fireballs at this place all day and it wouldn't do anything. The structure dissipates magical energies."

The radio he was holding crackled, and Franklin jumped, before remembering he'd turned it back from the police frequency to the one the bad guys were using.

"Hit it again." That was the leader, he was sure of it.

"You've made your point, asshole." Franklin shouted into the radio. "Let them pull back."

"Thank you, I'll take that under advisement. Hit it *again*."

"Dammit!" Franklin shouted, and slammed his fist on the glass again. He turned to Mr. Snowman. "There's nothing we *can* do."

* * * *

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" asked Tobias, as he wheeled the chair towards the open elevator shaft.

"No, but we can't just stand here and do nothing." Elijah answered. He was holding one door, Kael was holding the other.

"Come on, come on." shouted Kali from the window, as she watched the police mages bail out from the palanquin. "Those guys can't take another hit."

"Well, here goes nothing then." muttered Tobias. The chair, and the brick of plastic explosives they'd tied to it, disappeared down the elevator shaft. "Bombs away."

* * * *

Piter van Kleiss was also standing at the window, some twenty floors above Kali, watching the police mages rolling off their injured dragon.

Then everything went white, and the building shook. The explosion rocked the office back and forth like an earthquake for a moment. A henchman skidded through the door.

"They're using artillery on us!"

Van Kleiss stepped away from the window. "You idiot. It's not the police." He sat down in the executive chair. "It's *them*."

* * * *

Kael coughed, then looked up. He was prone on the floor, arms folded protectively over his head. He got to his feet, and gingerly checked to make sure he was still in one piece. "No, no, that's fine, I didn't need eyebrows anyway." he said to Elijah, who had dived to the floor beside him as the backblast came up the elevator shaft.

"Hey, it worked, didn't it." Elijah wheezed. He looked over at Kali.

"Yeah, it worked alright. Probably didn't get all of them, but we took out a floor or two."

"Good job, mate." Tobias clapped Elijah on the back. "I'll be sure to tell the cops it was your idea." He thought for a moment, then added. "Especially if they ask us to pay for the damage."

* * * *

"*How* have you still not found them?" van Kleiss demanded.

They were in a vault-like room. Leo was beside him, working on an incantation over a sigil inscribed on the floor. The only light came from Leo's amulets and the red flames of four candles at each corner of the sigil.

"It's a big building." Klaus growled. "A lot of the internal security hasn't been installed yet."

"You have dozens of men. There are only five of them, how difficult can it be?"

"I almost had one of them until *you* called me back. Up on the sixty-third floor. They must have split up, my men reported engaging someone down around the tenth floor too."

Van Kleiss opened his mouth, about to retort back, but then he closed it again. He took a deep breath. "Never mind. It's too late now, we'll just have to leave them. Start moving the hostages up to the roof. Now that the police have failed to take the tower by force, it won't be long before..."

Suddenly it went dark. The four candles winked out simultaneously, and Leo amulets faded. Klaus switch on a flashlight. Van Kleiss turned to Leo.

"Tell me you finished."

Leo wiped the sweat from his brow. "Yeah, but barely. What the hell was that?"

Van Kleiss smiled. "That was a conclave of mages working together to place a suppression field over the building. Rule one in the field manual of all government agencies: when confronted with a rogue mage or mages, summon all available practitioners and raise an incantation of suppression to stop all magic use within the target area." The building began to creak and shudder around them. Van Kleiss's smile grew wider. "The safeguards that can never be broken are broken automatically in response to the unsanctioned use of magic. You asked for miracles, Leo, I give you: wizards."

At the centre of the shielded room, a crystal on a plinth began to glow.

Van Kleiss reached into a jacked, and pulled out something rectangular wrapped in velvet. Carefully, he unwound the wrapping.

It was a clay tablet. Not unlike the one inside Mr. Snowman. Van Kleiss ran his fingers across the Sumerian writing imprinted on the surface, and smiled.

"It's time. Let's open the portal."

* * * *

"Do you hear that, Franklin?"

They'd made their way up, away from the last place they'd been seen, until they'd found a quiet spot just below the roof. They'd spotted some of the bad guys earlier, but they didn't seem to be looking for them.

"Yeah, someone's coming up the stairs. Lots of people." He edged round the corner, and took a look over towards the stairs leading up onto the roof. Armed men were herding the Takamoni corp employees up onto the roof. "What the hell are they doing?" Franklin wondered out loud.

Then a nasty thought occurred to him. He ran back towards where he'd seen the bad guys doing something earlier, and climbed up among the girders to get a better look.

The whole roof was wired with enough plastic explosives to blow them all into orbit.

"Shit." said Franklin. He thought for a moment. "Fuck, we don't have time. Okay, Mr. Snowman: go after the hostages and get them off the roof. If anyone gets in your way, ice them. I'll stay here and try to disarm this." He began pulling detonators out. Mr. Snowman stood there for a moment, until Franklin shouted: "Go on, go!"

"But what if I don't see you again, Franklin?" Mr. Snowman asked, lip quivering.

"I'll be fine! We don't have time for this - go!"

Mr. Snowman hurried off. He reached the door to the roof, and it opened just as he got there. The henchman on the other side was just as surprised to see Mr. Snowman as Mr. Snowman was to see him. He was even more surprised when Mr. Snowman reflexively let out a burst of intense cold from his wand. A moment later, the henchman was an icy statue. Mr. Snowman barged past him and up onto the roof, where the confused and frightened hostages were milling around.

They were frightened not just because of the whole hostage situation. The communications spire was glowing and arcing with arcane energies. A crack of purple lightning reached up into the sky, and a circle glowing in colours beyond the range of mortal comprehension opened in the clouds. Weird shapes and shadows flickered reflected across the pure white snow covering the roof.

"Hello. Um. Hello? Excuse me." Mr. Snowman called out, to little effect. "I think we should all get off the

roof."

"What the fuck is that?" someone asked. "Is this some kind of sick joke? What kind of mercs use a snowman?"

"Uh... I'm not one of the bad guys. And we really have to get off the roof."

"Wait, isn't that Franklin's construct?" someone else called out. "Shit, what's it doing up here?"

"How's it even still working? I can feel the suppression field around us."

"Never mind the snowman, how the fuck is that portal open?"

"THE ROOF IS GOING TO EXPLODE!" Mr. Snowman. Then to get people's attention even more, he started shooting multicoloured sparks out his wand.

This worked in drawing people's attention to the fact that they should probably get off the roof, and that there was now a clear path to do so. The hostages started running back down the stairs. The problem for Mr. Snowman, however, was that this also drew the attention of two more police dragons that were circling overhead. They dived, and the leading one let out a burst of dragonfire that scorched a path across the roof to Mr. Snowman.

"I'M ON YOUR SIDE!" cried Mr. Snowman, but they didn't seem to hear him. So he ran. The first dragon pulled up, but now the second one came in. More dragonfire shot towards Mr. Snowman.

As chilled as he was, Mr. Snowman was pretty sure that dragonfire was the of the few things hot enough to give him a seriously bad day.

"Oh dear." he whispered to himself.

* * * *

Franklin managed to get the detonators out of a few more of the explosives after Mr. Snowman left him. Then he heard a *click* just behind his left ear. It sounded unpleasantly like a round being chambered in a gun. Slowly, he looked around.

"We are both professionals." said Klaus. "This is personal."

"Woah, hold on, I am really not..." Franklin started, before diving aside mid sentence and running. He had one hope: that with all these explosives around, the blond German bastard wouldn't be crazy enough to shoot at him. A bullet pinged off a girder. Oh well.

Klaus apparently realised the danger, however, but he didn't fire again. Instead, he ran after Franklin, who was frantically trying to conjure any kind of spell. Nothing. His wand was dead. What the fuck was going on?

Franklin jumped down from a catwalk, and started heading away from the roof. Klaus wasn't far behind him. Now he was clear of the explosives, there was nothing stopping Klaus from shooting him, and bullets knocked craters out of the concrete around him. He ran through a doorway, then paused. Maybe it was time to take a leaf out of Mr. Snowman's book.

Klaus got to the doorway. Leading with his gun, he poked his head through to make sure the coast was clear. Just an empty corridor. He kept running. He could still hear Franklin ahead of him. Any second now. He saw the tripline across the doorway ahead of him, and grinned. Not this time. He didn't stop running, just jumped straight over it.

Right into the second, thinner, wire, which Franklin had left at neck height. Klaus' weight pulled it away from the doorframe where Franklin had stapled it, but the other end was still wound around a reel that Franklin had heaved over one of the open roof joists. As Klaus struggled, feet kicking, more of the wire

ended up wrapped around him. Slowly, his struggles faded.

Franklin thought for a millisecond about going back to cut him down, but there was no time. He rushed back towards the explosives. Maybe he could still take the detonators out before they blew it. He was running so hard that he didn't even check if the coast was clear.

click

"Fuck".

Two more henchmen stepped out, guns trained on him. He dropped the wand. They motioned for him to follow them.

* * * *

Mr. Snowman dodged another burst of dragon fire, but now he was out of roof. At least the hostages had gone back down, but the police dragon was circling round again, and there was nowhere left for Mr. Snowman to run.

"Oh dear."

He jumped.

* * * *

"You know, I had intended for you to be on the roof tonight." said Van Kleiss. "After all, when I was arranging this mass human sacrifice I thought: who better to be the guests of honor than the very five thieves who delayed this day by almost two years. I went to quite a lot of effort to slip your name to Takanomi's recruiters. But there is something... appropriate... about you being here to witness the final culmination of all the plans you managed to frustrate. I only regret that your four colleagues aren't here to witness this event. Or that ridiculous snowman."

Franklin just stared, open mouthed. "What?"

"I'm sorry, are you actually so ignorant that you have no clue whatsoever what this is about?" asked van Kleiss. He seemed almost peeved.

"Uh... yes?"

"You had the tablet, didn't you? You read the incantation. Do you mean that you actually performed a spell like that without having any idea what it was?"

"Well, I mean I kind of... well... Maybe."

"Do you have any *idea* how much you set me back." van Kleiss hissed. "Do you have any *idea* what I had to do to get my hands on another one of these? Do you even know what this is?"

"It summons a spirit, right?"

The dark haired, dark eyed mage leaned towards Franklin and smiled at him with absolutely no mirth whatsoever.

"It summons a god."

* * * *

"Well, we're here. Where are all the people?" asked Kael, breathlessly.

He was holding a rifle. They were all holding rifles. When the dust had settled after their little stunt with the explosives, they'd gone back down again looking for a way out. They hadn't found anything - the explosion had shattered a lot of windows, but it hadn't opened any doors. They had, however, found a lot of guys who no longer had any use for the weapons they'd been carrying. After a bit of persuading by Elijah, they'd agreed that they might as well come back up and see if they could find Franklin and Mr. Snowman, and maybe free the hostages.

However, the sixtieth floor seemed to be empty now. Tobias sat down heavily on the edge of an ornamental rockpool. "That's it. No more stairs. I don't care if the people aren't here. If they want to be rescued, they can come to me."

"Oh, get up." snapped Kali. "We must be close, we can't just sit here and wait for..." she stopped, elf ears pricking at an unfamiliar sound. It was the sound of panicked shouts and screams, from a crowd of frightened people. "Huh, okay. Guess they are coming to us."

* * * *

"They're coming back down!" one of the henchmen shouted to van Kleiss.

"What?"

"Something's wrong, the hostages are coming back down."

"Blow the roof." snarled van Kleiss.

"But Klaus is still up there."

"Blow the roof!"

Van Kleiss pushed past him and mashed his hand down on the switches.

* * * *

Mr. Snowman jumped just as the roof went up. Both the police dragons were caught in the blast, as the explosion sent a pillar of fire into the night sky.

Having avoided incineration, Mr. Snowman tumbled through the air towards the snow-covered ground, sixty-six stories below.

* * * *

"Now you will see." said Van Kleiss, grasping the glowing crystal. "Now you will see the power you tried to use but didn't understand. In ancient days, the first mages called upon their gods for power rather than taking it from the world around them. Priest and wizard, wizard and priest. There was no difference in those days. In order to better channel this power, they often built their gods vessels to hold them in the mortal world. Idol statues. The ones sitting in museums are empty now - hollow, dead things. But once they walked, and spoke, and wielded power, like your Mr. Snowman. And bestowed gifts upon the men who had summoned them." He turned back to the crystal. "When I found out about Takanomi's plans for this building, I saw the opportunity right away."

"A building designed to channel magic." Franklin said, slowly understanding. The massive explosion was still ringing in his ears, and bits of the building were falling off around them.

"Yes. They intended it to be used as a defensive measure." Van Kleiss laughed. "With magicite running all through the building, any magic targeted against it would be channelled through the core of the building and grounded. A perfect shield against magical attack or interference." He ran his fingers across the crystal. "From this control centre, they could even direct the flow of magic, store it safely if it couldn't be discharged out of the building. Of course, they understood some of the dangers that came with this. That's why they included so many safeguards. But I don't think they ever really saw its true potential."

"With it, you can channel the kind of power needed to summon a god."

"Exactly. That kind of power can be handled safely by any mortal mage, not these days. I have no idea how you managed to create your snowman; even in the limited form you summoned it, the effort should have popped your brain like a grape. In the past it took the efforts of an entire temple to bring their god onto this plane, and most of their knowledge has been lost now. But with this building, and the right spell..." he looked down at the clay tablet. "You could summon a true god."

"Who will then take over the Earth and reward you handsomely, right?" said Franklin sarcastically.

"You're on the right lines, but not quite. Do you see a statue here?" Van Kleiss said this in a subtle tone that Franklin didn't like one bit. "The standard practice, for safety's sake, was to summon the god into an idol. But there was a more advanced option. Do you know what an avatar is?"

It took an effort of will for Franklin not to let his mouth drop open.

Van Kleiss wasn't just trying to summon a god. He was trying to become a god.

"This is crazy! You're just one more power-hungry mage." yelled Franklin.

Van Kleiss snapped round to face him. "I am an exceptional power-hungry mage, and I'm about to be moving up to power-hungry deity, so you'd be well advised to be more polite."

Something was wrong, however. He was waiting for something that clearly wasn't happening.

"Where's the power?" asked Leo. "The roof has blown, the building should be channelling the energy of the sacrifice into the portal."

"We blew the roof too late." his boss said. "There was no one up there. Never mind, we can't wait any longer. We'll just have to do the summoning, then make the sacrifice."

"It's too dangerous!" shouted Leo. "Without the energy provided by the sacrifice the entity will be enraged. You won't be able to control it, it'll take the blood of anything it sees!"

"Elu! Elu!" Van Kleiss had already begun to chant, reading from the tablet as he gripped the crystal. Leo opened his mouth to protest again, then thought better of it and just ran for it. The henchmen holding Franklin at gunpoint were starting to look nervous.

Franklin frantically tried to think of anything he could do, but as far as he could see it, he was fucked. If the summoning worked, van Kleiss would become possessed by a millennia old deity. When Franklin had summoned the spirit - or god - now known as Mr. Snowman, he had very deliberately tried to be as delicate as possible and only touch the magical entity lightly as it passed through him, guiding it into its new vessel with a suggestion of what it should be. Van Kleiss, however, was about to rip a deity out of its dimension and cram the whole thing into his skull.

As far as Franklin could see, there were three possible outcomes of this. One: the sheer power would explode van Kleiss like a mushy human pinata, killing everyone in the room, and possibly the whole building. Two: van Kleiss would somehow manage it, then to replace the missing sacrifices would kill everyone else in the room. Or three: van Kleiss would fail but survive. Technically this represented the best outcome, but Franklin was still being held at gunpoint and he was pretty sure that van Kleiss was unlikely to be magnanimous in defeat.

The chanting reached its highest pitch and the glow of the crystal turned from light pink to searing white. Then, silence. Van Kleiss, or whatever was standing there now, took his hands away from the

crystal and turned around. Sparks of a colour beyond colour danced and jinked over his skin. Eyes that glowed like dying stars fixed on Franklin.

"Come here." The voice was still van Kleiss', but it sounded like a whole choir of him now. "Come here, Franklin. I am going to show you the meaning of the word 'hell'."

He walked forward, and in passing plunged his hand into the chest of one of his henchmen, ripping his heart out. Incidentally, as if it was a minor detail, never taking his eyes off Franklin. Eyes that glowed brighter as the heart gave its final spasm.

The other henchman was right on the cusp of getting the fuck out of there, but he postponed the decision just a little too long. It was not, however, his boss he should have been worried about. He turned just as Kali, Kael, Elijah and Tobias ran into the room. He raised his gun, and immediately died in a hail of bullets.

Van Kleiss sprang forward and grabbed Franklin by the throat, holding him as a shield, blocking the others' line of sight. Kael noticed two things at this point.

"Hey, is that van Kleiss? Shit, what's wrong with his eyes?"

"He summoned a god!" Franklin yelled. "Shoot him."

"Uh... what?" asked Elijah.

Van Kleiss snarled, and tightened his fingers on Franklin's throat. "Don't come any closer. Drop your weapons."

"He's possessed! You've got to kill him, or shit is going to get Biblical. Literally. Fire, plagues, rivers of blood!"

"Am I the only one feeling a bit out of the loop right now?" asked Tobias.

"Yeah, I feel like us and Franklin have been having very different evenings." said Kael.

"Drop. Your. Weapons. Do it, or I'll rip his throat out."

"Don't listen to him! You've got to kill him now, while he's still weak. Without a physical form we may be able to banish the entity."

Van Kleiss dug his fingers in. Franklin gasped for air. His throat was visibly bleeding under Van Kleiss' nails.

"Okay, okay, cool it." said Kael. "We can all walk away from this. We'll just put our guns down and talk about it." He gently lowered his rifle to the floor, and motioned to the others to do the same. They were reluctant to do this. "Come on guys, *trust me*" Kael said with heavy emphasis. Elijah and Tobias put their guns down.

"You sure about this?" asked Kali.

"Yes." said Kael.

Kali put her gun down. Kael gave her a pat on the ass. "Good girl."

Van Kleiss started to laugh, a laugh that reverberated with all his newfound eldritch menace. And loosened his grip on Franklin.

"Franklin, now." Kael shouted, raising the pistol he'd pulled from Kali's waistband. He emptied the entire

clip as Franklin threw himself aside. The first bullets shattered the window, then one went into van Kleiss' shoulder. He stumbled back, eyes widening in shock. One step. Two. Then his foot found nothing but empty air.

But he still had a grip on Franklin's arm. As van Kleiss fell out the window, he dragged Franklin with him. Kael rushed forward to grab him, and just managed to get to him before he went out the window. He grabbed his leg, but Franklin was left half hanging out of the building, van Kleiss dangling from his arm. Franklin slid another inch over the edge.

A snarl twisted van Kleiss' face, and his free hand reached up - not for something to grip onto, but towards Franklin's heart.

But Franklin was frantically shimmying out of his jacket. As van Kleiss' hand came up, it slipped off. And suddenly the sleeve he was holding onto was held by nothing at all. Mouth open in a gasp of surprise, van Kleiss fell.

All the way to the ground.

Franklin breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "Thanks." He gripped Kael's hand, which was still around his waist.

"Don't mention it." said Kael. "Uh... could someone maybe pull us back in?"

"Oh, shit, yeah." said Elijah, who had rushed to the window with Kali and Tobias, watching van Kleiss fall. Quickly, Elijah and Kali hauled Franklin and Kael back inside.

"Uh, guys..." said Tobias. "I'm not sure it's over."

* * * *

Van Kleiss sat up, which surprised the police and medics who'd rushed forward to treat the casualty, or more realistically recover the body. "I. Am. A. God!" he screamed at no one in particular. He looked up, all the way to the sixtieth floor. "Did you really think that a mere fall could kill me."

Then he began ripping hearts out. Half a dozen cops and EMTs fell, the rest running for their lives. Van Kleiss' eyes shone red, and his shattered bones visibly straightened. He clicked his fingers, testing. Sparks shot between them. He smiled.

Then his smile faded, and his face twisted into a malevolent scowl. "You! What are you doing here?" he spat at the figure walking up to him across the snowy plaza.

Mr. Snowman frowned. "I came here for a Christmas party. Why, what are you doing here?"

Van Kleiss thought for a moment. Then he said: "Ending the world."

"That doesn't sound very nice." said Mr. Snowman. His voice had more of an edge to it than usual. He raised his wand.

"Doesn't it?" said van Kleiss, indifferently.

"So I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to stop it."

Van Kleiss considered this for a moment. "Are you a god?"

"Umm... no?" Mr. Snowman looked confused.

Van Kleiss' hands jerked up. "Then die!"

Lightning shot from his fingertips. The coursing bolts struck Mr. Snowman again and again, stripping away all the snow, whittling him down until there was nothing left but a black felt hat, a scarf and earmuffs, and green mittens. They fell to the ground, empty.

Van Kleiss, or the deity formerly known as van Kleiss, then turned his attention on all the assembled onlookers - police, firemen, reporters, and the unwisely curious public. Lightning shot out from his fingers again, jumping from person to person, transfixing them through the heart. Van Kleiss half cackled, half screamed, as more and more connections were made. The transfixed people rose into the air writhing. An unearthly gale blew, whipping up the snow.

A blizzard coursed across the plaza, snowflakes sparkling and popping as they hit the streams of lightning.

And then the blizzard stopped. Van Kleiss, lightning still spewing from his fingertips, looked round. Then he looked up.

"I'm disappointed in you. *Very* disappointed." said the hundred foot tall snowman as his fist came down. "Reassembling myself was the first trick I learned. It didn't kill Mr. Snowman last year, did you really think it would kill me?" Like the icy form he'd been forced to resort to last year, this version of Mr. Snowman was sculpted more like, well, a Greek god - perfect proportions, chiselled abs, a jawline Hollywood would kill for. No hair, though. However, this time he was clearly still made of snow rather than ice - the plaza's white blanket had vanished, along with all the snow for several blocks around.

Whatever the titan was, it was done fucking around.

Van Kleiss stopped the lightning and dodged aside as Mr. Snowman made a grab for him. "How are you doing this?" He screamed. "I feel no blood on you! Where is your power *coming* from?"

The colossus looked down at him stoicly. "If you had waited a few minutes after incarnating before starting a massacre, you might have figured it out for yourself. But then, you always were impatient."

"Are you a god?" van Kleiss asked again, weakly. "How are you doing this?"

Mr. Snowman smiled. "Christmas has a magic all of its own."

He reached down, and with the very tips of his massive thumb and forefinger picked up a twig with some baubles hanging from it. Then he pointed it at Van Kleiss.

Pure white light washed over the possessed mage, cutting through him like an x-ray. Van Kleiss screamed, as **something** - not something physical but made of light itself - was ripped out of him. He tried to hold onto it, but the force of the white light was too strong. The light vanished, and whatever it had caught vanished with it.

* * * *

Franklin, closely followed by Kali and Elijah, and less closely by Kael and Tobias, who looked on the point of collapse, rushed out of the tower just in time to see the white light cut off. All around the plaza, people blinked the afterimages away. They were still alive, and none the worse for wear. In fact, many of them felt better than they had in years, as if they'd just had a warm bath then spent a couple of hours in front of a fireplace under a blanket cuddled up with their loved ones. They also had an aftertaste of mince pies and eggnog, and a slight ringing in their ears - although it was more like jingling sleigh bells than tinnitus.

Mr. Snowman looked up to the sky, at the still open portal. Then he began to climb. Storey by storey, he made his way up Takanomi Tower, his massive limbs making short work of the climb. When he got to the top, he looked at the portal for a moment, then at the communications spire that was still - amidst the ruins of the rest of the roof - coursing with arcane power. Then he reached out, ripped out the communications spire, turned it upside down, and jammed it back into place.

The stream of energy changed colour. Then the roof exploded. Again.

The maelstrom of energy from the collapsing portal hit Mr. Snowman full in the face. The frosty form resisted for a moment, then exploded too.

Franklin look on, aghast. "Mr. Snowman! No!"

The explosion ended, and for the first time that night there was complete silence. Franklin collapsed to his knees.

Then it started to snow again. Pure white flakes drifting down all over the plaza. Franklin held out his hand, letting the downy motes collect on his palm. "Thank you, Mr. Snowman."

"No, thank you Franklin." said Mr. Snowman from behind him. He was back to his regular shape and height, and with all his accoutrements - hat, mittens, scarf and all. Franklin didn't even say anything. He just threw his arms around him. "Thank you for always believing in Christmas." Mr. Snowman smiled. "No matter what happens."

Suddenly there were screams from the Takanomi corp employees fleeing the tower. From amongst the crowd, Klaus shoved aside the EMT trying to treat him, and drew a gun. He roared with rage, and levelled it at Franklin.

"Oh, not now, we're having a moment." said Mr. Snowman, and froze him solid.

"About time." muttered Franklin.

"Well, I think that about wraps it up for Christmas Eve for this year." said Kael.

"It's morning anyway, or near enough." said Tobias, looking towards the first glimmers of light on the horizon. "Hey, what say we do Christmas Day at my place this year? My kids would love to meet Mr.

Snowman. In fact, we'd love to have all of you. It'll be great. You know, so long as you don't stick around to hear what my missus has to say about it the next day. There'll be Christmas lunch, games, shit like that. "

"Ooh, goody." said Mr. Snowman. "Can we go Franklin? Can we?"

"Is there booze?" asked Kali.

"Enough to knock you out 'til New Year."

"Perfect. I'm in."

"Seconded." said Elijah.

"Yeah, I'm in too." said Kael. "Just one problem: how do we get there?"

There was the honk of a car horn. They turned, and found their limo waiting there on the plaza.

"Huh. Okay then." said Kael. "Tobias' house it is then." He opened the door and was about to get in when he noticed something. "Uh... why is there an unconscious black guy in the driver's seat?"

"He was trying to hijack me." the limo announced. "So I deployed countermeasures."

Franklin looked into the limo. "I think he was one of the guys working for van Kleiss. Leo, or something? Is he going to wake up anytime soon?"

"No." the limo answered.

"We should probably get the police and... you know what, I am completely beyond caring at this point. We'll deal with him in the morning, let's go."

They got in the limo. As it started, the limo asked: "Would you like refreshments from the minibar."

"*Why* did you not mention this earlier?" asked Kali.

"You were on your way to a party. But now the party is over and your breath alcohol content and heart rates indicates that it was not relaxing. Would you like me to play some soothing music to help with your stress levels?"

"Give us all a decent bourbon and you can play anything you like."

Five glasses popped out of a polished wood panel, each filled with amber liquid. And as the first rays of Christmas day dawned on lightly falling snow, and the limo drove away, the music started to play:

>Oh the weather outside is frightful

>but the fire is sooo delightful

>so since there's no place to go...

>... let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

---- The End ----

