

Music

Meet the band.

Frontman: Crowley
Axe man 1: Bruno
Axe man 2: Geronimo
Bass: Scorsese
Drums: Yours truly

We're looking for a label that can deal with our style. A couple have been interested, but nobody has really got what we're about.

It's really pretty simple. After a few bad experiences, we've established three guiding principles for The Ooze.

- We don't do drugs.
- We don't do covers.
- We don't do weddings.

What we do do is serious metal that cranks up the bpm and makes your brain wig out.

Serving suggestion: enjoy with a hundred close friends in a dark club at a high temperature, doused liberally in strong beer.

Wise Words

You can pick up a lot of wisdom from bartenders. Here's an important life lesson handed down to me by Jules at The Click.

The world's greatest hangover cure:

- 1 small bottle tomato juice
- 1 raw egg (no shell)
- 2 parts milk
- 1 celery stick
- 1 part vodka
- 2 sharp red
- Salt
- Pepper
- 4 tablespoons of tabasco

Instructions:

Mix the ingredients together in a tall glass, using the celery to stir.

Down the mixture in one.

Wait five seconds.

When the tabasco kicks in, you'll gladly guzzle the four litres of water you need to re-hydrate properly. And you'll probably never want to drink again.

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I also have a job at the Academy, but you don't want to know about that. No, you don't. Trust me.

One of those days

I find it hard to resist temptation. Sometimes that gets me into trouble, but on some occasions - a few glorious, unforgettable occasions - my lack of self-control results in a monumental level of excess that borders on the transcendent.

Saturday was such a day.

We'd finished our regular jamming session and were knocking back a few in the Gnarly Fox when Chaz leaned across the bar and asked if I was I'd like to "see the back room". Now Chaz is a fine man but hairy knuckles don't do it for me, and I declined.

"You really want to, Caine. Trust me."

That should have made me turn away right then. But like I say, temptation and me have an insatiable relationship, so I got up and followed him along the bar and round to the back room.

Chaz unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Inside was a repro Ludwig Classic kit with a purple shadow lacquer finish. 6mm maple shells. A gold-plated Black Beauty snare. 16x18 and 18x16 floor toms and a 22x18 Virgin Bass, plus a 14x10 rack tom with vibra band rims mount.

"Do you love it?"

I nodded.

"A guy I know commissioned this six months ago and OD'd before delivery. You've got first look. Try it out."

I sat on the stool and felt the bass pedal under my foot. It was like sitting behind the wheel of a repro Lamborghini. I imagine.

I could feel him sizing me up. "It's yours for 40,000."

He knew he had me hooked and he was right. I barely had the strength to haggle. I'd been seduced.

Which is why I now own one of the world's most beautiful objects - and an overdraft the size of Ascendancy Point.

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4 Jun 2006

Hooked up

Had dinner again with this girl I've been seeing. I'm trying not to go crazy with the lecks, but it was either spend or starve - she wasn't about to learn how to cook, and I wasn't going to let her buy me dinner. Anyway, we hit Conundra and went dutch.

I knew she was buttering me up for something. She has this friend who calls her key at all hours - a guy I work with - and they're all whispers together. I like a challenge, but I've given up trying to work out what's going on with those two. He's an all right bloke, but very straight-no-chaser, if you know what I mean.

Turns out they need a favour. I helped her out a while ago with some guys from Hesh, and she's asked me to make a return trip and nudge them again for information. Something to do with the Cube, she reckons. I could do without it, but hey, she's worth the hassle.

And as a bit of a bribe, she's putting this blog live on the link, so hello Earth. Maybe I'll try and persuade Helix to do a deal with some Earth label and get The Ooze on your radio. It's about time you heard some decent stuff.

6 Jun 2006

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A man walks into a bar

So I've been doing the secret agent thing again. My plan was to get matey with the Hesh lot, and step one involved me propping up the bar in Brain Bender last night and looking for familiar faces. I know a few Hesh types drink round there, and I didn't want to wait until their Pyramid night next Monday. So I nursed a pint over a crypto crossword and kept an eye out.

Anyway, I spotted someone I kind of recognised heading for a booth with a couple of colleagues - they were all wearing those carefully shredded music pro clothes - and I shuffled myself into position in the next booth along.

Turned out that I didn't need to make conversation because I could hear every word they said. And I saved myself a trip to Brain Bender next week too, because Pyramid night has been cancelled. There's some exclusive Hesh Solstice party going down instead and everyone will be there. Where 'there' is I don't know. And I'm not sure who 'everyone' is either. But I'm betting it will be a nice big crowd for me to blend into, full of Hesh people getting leathered. Ideal.

Only problem is, I have a bit of a reputation at Hesh. We sent them a demo a while ago and Crowley didn't take rejection well... Suffice it to say that members of The Ooze are unlikely to make the guest list. In fact, my name is more likely to be on their black list. So if you have any sharp ideas to get me into the party, I'm all ears.

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8 Jun 2006

I am the resurrection

I'm not the kind of guy who wallows in guilt, but this weekend, I found out that I'm a bad person. Not intentionally bad. Just bad by association.

That's because I found out what happened after my last encounter with the Hesh crew. It was fun going along to that Pyramid night back in January, and it kind of turned out to be one of the weirdest dates I've ever been on, but the repercussions were pretty harsh. After I - and you, you're in this too - found a way to breach their security, an innocent guy got fired. So please, take a moment to mourn the passing of Charlie Specht's career.

Done that?

Right. Enough wailing and gnashing. Tonight, Charlie Specht lives and works again.

The 'organisers' of tonight's party have left Charlie on the list of invited employees, so I reckon there's a good chance of me using his name to sneak past security. (Thanks to eeeqz and BBuck for the tip.)

Once I'm inside, I'll schmooze anyone who looks like a techie and see if I can get access to their comms files. A nice bit of social engineering. Always a challenge.

I'm also looking forward to a night of free booze on Helix Hesh's tab. But I know that if I have a skinful tonight, I'll get an earful tomorrow, so I promise to behave myself and focus on the job. Mostly.

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12 Jun 2006

THOUGHTS

The night before

That Charlie. He's a great guy. Ask anyone.

I turned up at Below around 7pm and made sure the coast was clear before trying my luck with the two enormous doormen. So I smiled and said I was Charlie Specht.

Behind the muscle was a snifty girl with a clipboard who spent forever looking for Charlie's name on her list. Not on page one. Not on page two. But eventually, she nodded and I was allowed to pass between the twin towers.

Below is a smart venue on any night, but Hesh had clearly spent a few lecks doing the place up. Between the aquaria were screens showing gig footage, pictures of Helix with Joya and Alejo and Jam One, and those blurred images that Viard likes to send out.

Somebody had carved an ice sculpture of the Hesh building, which I later realised was a vodka luge. A chocolate fountain bubbled away in the corner. The usual staff were complemented by a bevvy of tequila girls and models in little black numbers, circulating with trays full of vintage Harbin, and canapes on sticks or on forks or in boxes or in shot glasses.

Turning up early was a good move because it meant I could chat to a few of the girls before the place got busy. I decided to stick with the name Charlie, but I didn't get specific about what I did for a living.

By the time the Hesh staff started turning up, I'd made friends with Mia and Shandy and they'd agreed to keep the food and drink - especially the drink - coming in my direction all night.

The tech team were pretty easy to spot. They stuck together in a little posse by the wall, looking out at the rest of the party and sniping at anyone who was having more fun than them. They had a supervisor called Bridget - a bit of a dragon, and I didn't even try to engage with her - but she went home early, leaving the boys to talk Wheel and the interns to rubberneck for stars.

Nobody famous turned up, by the way, except Hesh himself, who proposed a toast after about an hour, then disappeared.

I wandered across to the techs and asked if any of them were Daemons fans. A blonde little squirt took this as a cue to get defensive, but I reassured him that I was black-and-red to the core, then I waved Mia over. She brought us a tray of drinks and I introduced her to the boys, and from that point on, I was their honoured guest.

Now I know I said I'd keep my intake to a minimum, but sometimes, duty calls for a little personal sacrifice. Mia kept the drinks flowing and we all became bosom buddies, but natural wastage - and a certain amount of tactical spiking - meant that only the Daemon fan and I were left by the time midnight struck.

He'd spent a couple of minutes under the vodka luge and was slurring all over the place before I started probing about the comms logs. I gave him a sob story about how I'd called a girl from the studios once, then lost her number... any way I could dredge the key records for it?

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“No no no... key shystem’s very shimple, though,” he told me, and I was in no position to argue. “Backsh up every hour or sho. Jusht takesh a minute but... shush... not very shecure when it doesh.”

I swore myself to secrecy and he told me how to access the backup system. Knowing what I’m like, I wrote down the details on a napkin and stuffed it in my pocket.

When I woke up this morning, I was still wearing my jeans and the napkin was still there. I’d managed to get back to my apartment somehow.

I made myself a jug of Jules’ magic potion - without the tabasco - and headed into work, where I’m now hiding behind a pair of sunglasses.

Please. Take this link and do something useful with it. Quietly. Far away. Academy numbers all start ‘08’. Go.

13 Jun 2006

Continued.

You know.

From the
previous page.

THOUGHTS

Another headache

Last night, you searched through the Hesh key logs and found the number we were looking for. It's not good news.

I recognise the number. It's belongs to the Academy Crypto department. It's an unallocated extension - just a general contact number for the whole department - but it does narrow things down. Thanks to Ryanandrew, Braxis and Typhin for doing the legwork (along with many others, I'm sure).

Now we just have to figure out who picked up the call. I expect they're sharp enough to have covered their tracks pretty well. I've worked with some of these Crypto guys before - they're a secretive bunch.

14 Jun 2006

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Dolor sit amet

There are some things about Earth that I just don't understand. Take greeking - the gibberish you use as filler text in mocked-up documents. For a start, it's usually Latin: lorem ipsum, etc... But even then, it makes no sense whatsoever. Not content with using a dead language, you garble it and drain it of all meaning.

The reason this occurs to me today is that I've just been over to the Crypto department for a nose around. Talking to those guys can mess with your head.

I worked on a couple of projects with Camden Porta and Neville Clark before this whole CRT thing, so I dropped by to see if I could find out anything about that phone call from Hesh.

Nev is a very, very smart bloke, but brevity isn't his strong point.

"Caine! Good to see you - well I say 'see', but not just to see you, to talk to you, and hear from you, of course, that will be good too, if you want to talk and have any good news. Not bad news - that wouldn't be good, by definition. Yes."

He takes a bit of getting used to.

I fetched him a coffee (decaf) from the machine and we sat on a bench outside the window to have a catchup.

I didn't really have an interrogation strategy. I wasn't sure how I'd ever ask about a call someone took two years ago, but there was no harm in making contact and renewing our acquaintance. Today would be all about small-talk.

Nev seemed keen to hear about the search for the Cube on Earth, and I gave him the official line, which he'd clearly heard before.

That led me to casually remark how different Crypto must have been before the Cube theft and all the departmental musical chairs caused by the CRT. Who was working in Crypto back then anyway? Nev rolled his eyes.

"Ah... simple days then, simple pleasures. Not that work is ever pleasure, even if you actually enjoy it, assuming it's defined in opposition to 'business': business or pleasure? Mutually exclusive."

"Things not so simple these days, then?"

"I don't know... even if knowledge could ever be empirically certain, which it can't be, I'm not even half-sure of what I'm doing. Well, I know what I'm doing, I am competent, but I don't know what I'm working on. Crypto is always strictly need-to-know and I'm used to that - no questions asked, non-disclosure, signing my life away on confidentiality agreements - not actually my life - but, come to think of it, quite possibly - so I don't risk asking questions or poking around or even speculating, which this isn't - this is just a discussion of how I don't speculate - let's get that clear."

"Absolutely."

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“But I’m getting more and more things to not speculate about and I suspect that a few other people are not speculating just as much - in so far as I can suspect anything without speculation, and absolutely without discussion with my colleagues. Sometimes the lack of speculation is deafening - metaphorically speaking, of course, not literally, I wouldn’t want to mislead you. But I’ve probably said too much already. Not a word, Caine, understand?”

“ ... ”

Camden knocked on the window and summoned Nev back inside, waving a key. Nev said goodbye and scuttled off.

So that left me sitting on a bench with a head full of greeking, trying to work out if I’d just been told something or nothing at all. Writing it down hasn’t made it any clearer.

16 Jun 2006

Continued.

You know.

From the
previous page.

Slacker

Nev was right about one thing: business and pleasure are mutually exclusive.

You volunteer to do someone a favour and then it's hassle, hassle, hassle. I can't just walk into Crypto and interrogate people - especially now that the Academy's broken up for the summer. What does she want me to do? Go round to Nev's place and ask him out for a drink? Yes, we worked together, but Nev and I never exactly socialised outside the office - maybe a swift one after work with everyone else, but that was it. I don't even know where he lives.

Anyway, I'm not convinced he'd say any more to me than he has already. Nev's the kind of bloke who permanently fears for his job. Frankly, if he wasn't working in Crypto, I've no idea what he'd do with himself - I don't think he'd risk it. Camden puts the fear of Gyvann in him, so there's no point in me trying to squeeze him without a good, persuasive reason for him to talk. And I don't have one. Maybe I'll think of one, but don't count on it - I haven't come up with one yet, and I've had plenty of encouragement in my ear. I couldn't even go to my jamming session this weekend without getting a motivational talk about my priorities.

I'd still like to help out, but this is starting to get old.

...Sorry. Just blowing off some steam. Normal service will be resumed.

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27 Jun 2006

Cracker

You guys have been busy. I got a couple of messages (JD - you know who you are) suggesting I entice Nev with a juicy bit of cryptography.

It wasn't a bad plan, and Anna Heath had just come up with some evidence - not proof, just evidence - connecting Crypto to the stolen tech hardware, so it certainly seemed worth a go.

JD sent over a neatly enciphered message written by a guy called Scott. For those of you who want to crack it, here's a copy:

PMEOTXRFJR DYJRNAEQNPWZBT IZERIBEGALNZTIKVINWGAUMMGMRBRURUSMER
YUMKAUZKRHAOGMMZXJYLYVHTYEDHHTELVXR IHTT FELOHMWHTCMNATIAXPHGA
FSNSMZCMKPGKVCTI ZMMZEUMKUZNPHTI ZWIUZUPYKVNVAUIUURGAI SEUIZWG
NAWGKNMMZMHTWEALNMRQNGASYININGAAURUZ OZIMMZKZWYLZIVCSYKVV CNQ
KWR FZOIJGCOOWRAVKVPQELVXAOLTKVEGSCRIWGMKAGUNNQNMQAUPLAGAOVX
VXNABVFUVGKVJNOOMMZKWMUZGCMKSYMMWWEVCINSMSZRHMKNQKWFSSYPMDW
IUPQSMRFALKVPQLQBVIBNQVGEQXCELVCAVMMWZPMNZNQQBAVYLS CFUJMRQPM
YVNANMRQVURUAOJRSCYVKPALMZMMPUBTWIINGKOOSZKPKNAXZIDINQPQBT
IZMZP MERPHMOHTALWMVCFSAOTXPWJMNBGANAGKNZKWXJINGKFGYEOOVXWZJN
KPAXVCAOCMGKPMYVWGEQEQGKURYENQFXWEPLWINQKWNQEG LQNPALDCVGI BGN
YVVUMKYLWMXJPHOOEQHTSZMWMZPGK PWRUNUPPHINRFXJYLVKVAOELXLPKKNJN
OOVCMZNBISIBPMAOVXPGRQVGERMKRIDVNQNA YVGAGKVGIZKVEGUPTFXLERWG
INIZVGAONQZOAJKAXNANSUZHTELPHYVWGKPGMSMIUNBZIBVMWMMZOIJJRKV
JNELINKVPQSC TIBVMKISZMKNJNPQVCMZYVISHTSZHWVXTFEGLTKPXLVGVXIB
AXTFTIYVWEOOXJIUGAKNSZQNMXCBTEOMMPQKNPMKVIUFXGKPMYLYEOELPU
KNZMURKPGCNPELMMWZKNSUZRUHWJRLQURAVPLYEWGEOP LUNVXELGCDARHNS
VGKVHTSCFGDLKWNPAGSCZKNQGANABTPWNSRHJRAGPHGAZIPHHWIJRUDBMKCO
PUJMWIINNQHTLTIZWMVCRHOOWEVEGERVXRI PQGMNQWGAOWMZKFXKNZMALWE
VGYLOUPNBPHWGRBMWKPYPWHWUZMMNQWGNMJMKPMMRUTIAGJRYVWGA VNAOLT
IZERPQMZSZYLNQWIWICKIJRBEQIUYEHTELNQOOVGF GUZEODONS VUPLNANBAO
RQSZZKNQMKBTRUORJALMZWRWIPUFGPLYEUZSCDSFGTIXJKVURFXRFPMERKV
PQELFSSVMGINKPNPPIAGSCVCNQMJRGCUNMTFUPRHFZXOEG LTAVF XEOGCJN
VXELPLYVWGSYPMNQFXWZIUHQE OFXWZTXNAVGHWNQNGAISEUWGAUZKTXAVRI
YEJRMZINYVGCKWYEEGLQRUGAEGUPAGNZVUNATI VUNPKPURAOLTKPURLQAXSZ
SYZOPWMWRUKNYLKWIEUEGLQMWUZ YENQRQKVAODZVXEUXCWMZMNMGAAVMMGAEG
ELAGNZFXKNTXKWCMEGNZAUUVXVXWMCGEQLQNPFGYELWIIUURWMSZYLZKEGGM
NMPHGARFVGYLUZXRHI ZIUOOLQMMGKCMERDLHWPQNZHWPVGRBBT INGASMA Y
XJIZYEHTLQMHWTXMKAXKVDQTXNMJMKVZOE L RHGAVGNMTXGKJRJRNMKV KMH
UPWZJMEOPGHWAUXJYLP HRBBVBI SVXGKEQFGFXLSZYLZKNSVGNZNQAVRHWZ
XJPHNBGAKNPMI ZYEIBUPNMCMHWUPERFX

No offence taken, Scott.

Anyway, I looked in at Crypto this morning and there was Nev, bent over his key. He never did know how to take a break.

"Caine! How are you? I'm not asking for a full medical report or psychological profile - it's just an enquiry based on popular social conventions. So. You. Okay?"

"I'm all right, Nev. You working hard?"

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“Just trying to get ahead of myself. An impossible endeavour, in terms of both time and space, I realise, but I meant it metaphorically. I hope that was clear. What are you, what are you, what are you doing here? Except standing. And frowning. I can see you’re doing that. It was more a question as to your intentions here, now, for being here, now.”

“i was wondering if you could help me out...”

And so I gave him the enciphered note, saying we’d intercepted it from Earth, but that I was snowed under and having a bad day and nowhere near as good as him at this kind of thing and... anyway, he bought it.

With that out of the way, I sat on the edge of his desk and got all casual.

“Everything all right here, then? Nothing too stressful going on...?”

“No, no - everything’s fine here. That’s fine as in acceptable, not in the sense of top quality. One word, two very different meanings. I should really stop using such confusing terminology. Language is a terribly blunt instrument - perhaps I should just stop using it altogether. Hmmm.”

And with that, he did. Clammed up completely.

I wasn’t going to get anything else out of him, so that was it for the day.

He said he’ll get back to me when he’s cracked the cipher - which shouldn’t take him long at all. I wonder what he’ll make of it.

29 Jun 2006

Continued.

You know.

From the
previous page.

Cracked

Nev doesn't have a great sense of humour. Irony, to him, means something metallic, and I don't think I've ever heard him crack a joke. He can, however, crack a mean code, and he sliced his way through through your flattened frequency message in no time. Even with the special diagram.

For those of you who couldn't spare the time to decipher the whole thing, here's the plaintext version. I've added some punctuation.

Neville Clark: good day. This message is coming to you from Us On Earth. Caine is a nice bloke, but a bit thick. He has no idea what this message says. We implore you for your help. We will offer any possible assistance we can to aid your own causes, and we guarantee absolute discretion. We are working to discover the identity of a person in the City. While we would not begin to consider putting you in a position of danger, we think you might know more about the matter. Simply put, you are in a position of more information than we are. So anything you can tell us is absolutely helpful. Can you tell us where all the top-secret work is coming from? Who is handing out these jobs? Where is all the work going? We expect you won't be able to answer so directly, but anything you can tell us will be much more helpful than what we have now, which is very little. You should be able to return a message to us by way of Caine. He should have no difficulty getting something back to us in good order. Thank you so very very much Neville. You are doing terrific things, and we can't thank you enough.

Now, Nev found this very troubling. He was willing to believe that I was completely ignorant of the message's contents - a bit too willing, in my opinion - but he was still faced with the awkward issue of what to tell me. He opted for diplomacy.

"Caine, yes, the message. Come with me outside, outside the office, outside the department, perhaps even outside the Academy, yes, outside the Academy, not immediately outside but beyond its reach, if ever such a thing is possible, walls have ears - again, that's figurative, though if clocks can have hands, who can say?"

I suggested Fenlon's, and we slid into one of their booths at the back with a couple of cups of the black stuff.

"That message, Caine, the encrypted message you gave to me, yesterday, I think I deciphered it, I mean, I believe I did. I have. Where did you find it, if you found it, or even if someone else did?"

"It came through the link and was sorted through to my desk. I took a quick look at it and thought you'd be the best man to figure it out. Does it say who it's from?"

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"Not specifically, no - in that the sender isn't named, though the intended recipient, to some extent, is identified with a little... well, I'm not in a position to disclose too much, though any amount may be too much at this stage, though too much is a subjective measurement and one that I'm not really in a position to make."

"...So what did it say?"

"Not telling."

By this point, Nev had been stirring his coffee for more than a minute. It now commanded his complete attention. He hadn't even put any sugar in.

I made things easier for him.

"Well, does it need a reply?"

His coffee spoon came to a halt and he looked me in the eye.

"Whoever they are, and I don't know if you know them or if they indeed know you, tell them to take the backdoor, in a metaphorical sense, though the term has become accepted as something of a literal noun in tech terms too, of course."

My key bleeped in my pocket.

"It's a touch unreliable and it might take a few attempts to function, that is, to respond in the desired manner, that is, to produce information, and I don't know what information there might be there, but there it is. There."

And here it is here.

It looks like some sort of file system, but I haven't had the opportunity (or the patience) to crack it myself. I reckon you lot should be able to bombard it enough between you to come up with some tidbits. I'll see what I can squeeze out of it over the weekend. Let me know what you find.

30 Jun 2006

Continued.

You know.

From the
previous page.

Rage against the machine

How are you getting on with jimmying that backdoor? I had a go at it myself, after my session at the Fox at the weekend, and didn't manage to get very far. It's a finicky old system all right.

Through a bit of trial and error, I started to spot a few patterns in how it all might work. Maybe you've figured it out already, but take a look at this box:

```
MOUNT      -          -          -
-          SWITCH  CACHE      -
-          ROTATE  ZONE       -
-          -        -          -
-          -        RUN        -
```

The order this runs in is MOUNT->SWITCH->ZONE->ROTATE->CACHE. Looks like each command moves in a certain direction to the next command and if you're lucky, you can get files out of it.

I'm pretty sure RUN can be placed anywhere. If you can't figure out where to place your next command, try putting RUN near your last command and see what kind of error message you get. It's a process of elimination.

With such a fragile looking system, I couldn't resist the urge to try and break it. I think my inner Luddite takes great pleasure in crashing software. So I tried setting a few challenges, like this:

```
MOUNT      -          -          -
-          FLUSH   PREAD      -
-          ROTATE  -          -
-          -        -          -
-          -        RUN        -
```

This runs as MOUNT->FLUSH->ROTATE->PREAD->FLUSH->ROTATE->PREAD->FLUSH... ad infinitum. The command interface flips out and spews bizarre, random files. There must be more stuff to be snagged by pushing the system till it snaps.

The other great thing about breaking the system is that the error messages can be very helpful. So far, I've seen:

```
Access Error: Unable to access file
Runtime Error: No area has been accessed
Access Error: Unable to get read handle
Runtime Error: Timeout in folder
Access Error: Unable to reset read permissions
Access Error: File handle not available
Error: All login sessions ended. File server inactive.
```

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...and probably some others which I forgot to note down.

The weirdest file I've come across has been this. I can't remember the exact commands I used (yeah, I know) - I was just trying to break the system again and see if there were any holes. The file doesn't mean a lot, but here it is:

```
#echo stream nowait root internal  
#echo dgram wait root internal
```

So you can add that to the pool of collected knowledge. Assuming you have any. Hardly anyone's sent me anything, but I'm guessing you guys have been making some progress. Make sure you send me any material you dig up, and keep at it.

4 Jul 2006

Continued.

You know.

From the
previous page.

On trust

Well, I asked for what you found - and you found a lot. Thanks to JD, SteveC, Duckie, Jon 79, Gaspar, E Cat, rho21, Xena and everyone else who sent me information or worked to get it. Looks like it was more complex than I'd thought - convoluted and time-based - so you've done great work to get this much. If there's any more, keep sending it over.

So what does it all mean? I've passed it on to Her Majesty, to see if she can figure any of it out. She's clearly not working alone on this, so we'll see what her friends make of it - whoever her friends are. I'm starting to wonder just how deep this whole conspiracy goes (I mean, thefts from inside the Academy?). I'm willing to take a certain amount on trust, but there is a limit...

Anyway, here are my thoughts.

Not having a great deal to do with particle physics, I'm none the wiser regarding the hardware stuff.

The to-do lists and emails are, I reckon, just relics of office life - I see enough of those at work to know they're pretty everyday.

The suspicions about Sente are interesting, but to be honest, I can't see him being up to anything too sinister. There are rumours like that in the papers every week. He has to keep an eye on his departments, and as an ex-cryptologist, it's no wonder he's round there a lot. Maybe he's keeping his skills sharp. Or maybe he has things he needs to hide - I don't know.

But the girl... the girl I can understand. Yes, there's a mystery there, but she sounds like she was/is being blackmailed to inform on her colleagues. She has a fairly young voice, intelligent of course, stressed out... I don't know many of the junior researchers in Crypto, and I don't recognise the voice straight off, but I'm sure you're right - we could probably find her soon enough. I don't know where it would get us, but we could find her.

I looked up that calligrapher assault. I'll have a nose around.

Keep digging.

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6 Jul 2006

THOUGHTS

Wild Geese

I don't like waiting. I'm being kept on alert now in case I'm required for some kind of tailing duty. Apparently you lot have something to do with it, so I expect you know more than I do. Once again, I feel like I'm walking blindly into a situation, led by several thousand one-eyed people.

What makes this awkward is that I've had to borrow Crowley's car, and he's kind of precious about it. I owe him now. I hate that. I said I'd only need it for a day or two, and that was on Monday... I'm tempted to just block his key.

Here's a tip. Never steal an egomaniac's wheels.

26 Jul 2006

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Ooze zone

THOUGHTS

Crash

Got stuck in traffic on Sharp Avenue and tried to be clever - went into manual, then went into a lamppost. I've called Kurt.

Trying to catch up now on foot.

26 Jul 2006

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Joyless

I kept an eye on your tracking reports as I headed south down Sharp Avenue and into the Old Town. The car took a little while to push out of the road, and I'm not as healthy as I should be, so I was a distance behind the delivery truck when the signal disappeared.

But I kept going (coughing up my lungs along the way), and checked out the place where it vanished. No obvious signs. No big lead-lined warehouses. No tyre tracks. The Brotherhood of the Six temple was right there, and I knocked on the gate to see if the brothers and sisters had seen or heard anything. No joy.

They could be lying, of course. Then again, a lot of stuff goes missing in Caldera, where you don't survive without being a wise monkey: see no evil, hear no evil, and, most of all, speak no evil to the authorities.

Also, I may have been looking a little disheveled after a car crash and a jog across town. If someone banged on my door in that state, I wouldn't have been too hospitable either. Maybe we'll get a search party together and give the area a proper going over.

I think that's me for the night. Tomorrow, I have to face Crowley. I'll need all my strength for that.

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26 Jul 2006

The dying of the light

I'm going to keep this short.

We found Anna this evening, me and the girl. Fleming's been going completely mental the past day or so - weird to see a calm bloke like him go totally crazy. He's the one who insisted we keep on searching the area Anna disappeared. Us, and the police, and all friends of the Heath family which, as far as I can tell, amounted to about half the population of the city, and the brighter half at that. It was the girl who demanded we go down into the tunnels.

The police have gone over them repeatedly but she, thinking as ever that she knows better than anyone else, insisted we go down again, starting from where Anna disappeared and working outwards in concentric circles. I'll give it to her - she knows her way round down there. I've been to a couple of "Raves in the Caves" in my time, but other than that I steer well clear: people get lost in that place and never come back. But she spent a lot of time there when she was a kid. She knew all the hidden tunnels, the ways through seemingly impassable blocks. And that's where we found Anna. She's dead. And by the look of her, she didn't go gentle into that good night.

We've informed all relevant authorities. But I have to go now. I need very urgently to be far more drunk than this.

28 Jul 2006

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Aftermath

It's not been the best day. I could think of things I'd rather have been doing. Hanging out with Anna and her kids, for one. Or listening to Scorsese work on the E-flat diminished ninth. Or cleaning my flat with a toothbrush. Instead, I was at Fleming's house. With the children. Working out what I was going to say at Anna's memorial service.

She was just normal, that's the thing. She wasn't the wisecracker or the moody brilliant one or the one who turns up an hour late to meetings with an unexplained black eye. (Not all of those were me.) She was steady and reliable and, yeah, good. She was never a pushover - particularly not in the area of expense claims - but she'd bend over backwards to do you a favour if she could. She loved her family and her job and reminded everyone she knew just how rare it really is to meet someone normal.

I said all this at the memorial service. I'm not much on public speaking but Fleming asked. Sente spoke before me, about her career and her legacy. Her mother's brother spoke after me, about her family and home. I was blown away by the number of people at the service - everyone from a couple of Council members to the department's janitor. It occurred to me, as I listened to the speeches and the songs, that someone sitting on one of those chairs on the lawn must have known what happened to Anna and why.

It's all been a bit of a game up to now. Decrypt mysterious messages, follow disappearing delivery trucks, see if X marks the spot. But it's not a game. And if I needed that hammered into my head with red-hot nails well, spending today with Anna's sprogs has done the trick.

The girl who got me and Anna into all of this has promised we're going to have a talk. A real talk. Soon.

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3 Aug 2006

Hush

Sorry for going quiet. It doesn't seem like the right time to be loud. Just at the moment, it's kind of a relief not to have the band every weekend - Crowley is still wracked off about his car, so he hasn't been coming to the sessions. Geronimo has been trying to talk him round, but I honestly don't care if he comes back or not. I don't have the energy to deal with another diva right now. There was even a part of me that found the blackout oddly calming. A forced halt. A minute's silence.

Work went crazy then, of course. Crisis talks, all-nighters. The worst thing about it all was the empty desk at the end of the corridor. Despite myself, for a split second, there was this evil, heartless voice at the back of my head cursing Anna for leaving us short-handed. Maybe I shouldn't even admit that, but I thought it...

Aiko's put up a little memorial page for anyone who wants to pay their respects.

Since the data link came online again, people have been saying that things are back to normal. Try telling that to Otto and Pip.

18 Aug 2006

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Everyone's a critic

Another reason why I've been quiet is I'm not sure who's listening. Garnet has started some kind of military coup in the CRT, pulling rank as the most senior member and 'taking matters in hand.'

This seems to mean him calling a lot of meetings that start with, "It has come to my attention...". He sent written warnings to a bunch of girls who'd been using the CRR to copy shoe designs, and Von got shouted down for cloning Earth consoles on Academy time. And he wiped all of my OZ tracks off the servers, saying they were unprofessional and subversive. I've had reviews like that before. I liked those reviews.

As far as I know, he hasn't cracked this blog yet, but I'm leaning on the short odds. Our mutual friends aren't telling me much either, but that's nothing new. With Garnet's contacts, nobody can be sure if any comms channel is really secure. The less I know, the safer I am, apparently. I'm not sure I want to be safe while my buddies risk their necks, but I'm not getting much of a choice right now. Having said that, with all the secrets knocking about round here, who knows what they're really up to.

Henrik has been more stony-faced than ever. He won't meet anyone's eye. I don't know if Garnet's ordering him around or vice versa, but there's a humourless cloud hanging over the whole place now. As if we didn't have enough to mourn already.

22 Aug 2006

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Warning

I'm not usually good at taking advice. If someone tells me to do something, I tend to do the opposite. This is why I've never tried parachute training.

But once in a while, a few wise words make it through my defences, whether I want them to or not.

A few days ago, one of you guys sent me a message. (Hi Rose.) I read it and ignored it, but it wouldn't leave me alone. It suggested that Anna might have been killed because of me. Instead of me. So I'm responsible for Anna's death.

That stayed with me. There's also, of course, the sense that I was the intended target and I had a narrow escape, which is unsettling. It occurred to me that I could be dead right now and not writing this, that my hands could be cold and still, not tapping away at this keypad.

I made the mistake of saying all this out loud when we were out for a drink the other night. She took it the wrong way and called me, in her own roundabout manner, a coward. After some consideration, I was forced to agree with her. I've had enough. I want out. I've nearly been killed and Death has trailed behind me. I'm a menace.

She's hardly playing safe herself, but at least she seems to have some clear ideal she's aiming towards, something to have faith in, something to make it seem worthwhile. I never had that. I just had her.

Rose's message also suggested that we were set up: "It seems possible to me that, due to the number of people who knew you were involved in tracing the parts, the attack and murder of Anna was planned. I think that your whole mission had been betrayed by someone. I think you guys were expected and watched." That's the most worrying thing. I can't read anyone in this game, so I'm folding.

Keep in touch. I'll be around.

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6 Sep 2006



Ooze
Zone

THOUGHTS

Plastered

Those girls should really learn to look after themselves. Broken bones, radiation poisoning, post-traumatic shock... Still, some of the pain went away after I prescribed a few of Chaz's cocktails down at the Fox. I don't want to get too involved, but there's no harm in offering some support. Even Kurt joined us for a few jars.

As ever, alcohol cured all ills (even if the Zombie Droppers caused a few headaches) and diplomatic relations have been restored. I'm not going along on their next crazy trip, but I'll be keeping an eye on them as much as I can. I just thought you'd like to know.

3 Oct 2006

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A song for the deaf

I'm not really a political animal - I leave that stuff to the middle management and megalomaniacs - but right now, I feel like a placard-wielding activist. This lockdown is insane. Blaming Earth for all our problems is so wrong-headed I'm tempted to unscrew Earlywine's cranium and check the contents for damage.

Still, I'm pretty sure this is just a knee-jerk thing and we'll get back to normal eventually. Garnet's calling it a 'period of stability and consolidation'. You don't want to know what I'm calling it. Or him. He's got us working on admin tasks and process checks with the MC guys - small-print things, the kind of stock-taking jobs Garnet adores.

None of this is getting us any closer to the Cube. In fact, I reckon this whole lockdown is probably getting us further away from it. But who listens to me? I'm just an Academy scribe...

I'll try and keep in touch if I can. Hopefully, this embargo won't last long. You'd better hurry up and find that Cube soon, though, just in case.

20 Oct 2006

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Enjoy the silence?

...Aaaand we're back.

It's been a while. Happy Solstice. Welcome to 270. Hope you've been keeping well.

I've just been looking back over my last post and, well, it feels like a long time ago. Maybe because it was. So what have you missed...?

Previously on Perplex City: Scarlett has been kind of a wreck since she got back from Lancewood. Killing that guy - even if it was an accident - has freaked her out in some semi-permanent way, though we've been trying to talk her through it.

Her sister remains an enigma - I may or may not be single, depending on the futures, biorhythms, solar flares or the previous night's poker - but the lack of adventuring has made things a bit easier between us. Relationships run so much more smoothly when you're not being asked to risk your life.

As I suspected (and even I'm impressed with my foresight here), the comms lockdown has only hindered the hunt for the Cube and given the Third Power more of an advantage. Apparently. I mean, that's what I've been told, while trying to keep my distance from the whole life-risking thing. The CRT has been doing a lot of not very much and Garnet has continued to be all kinds of intrusive. The place has felt pretty empty since Von got sent back to school.

Maybe the biggest intrusion was Garnet suspending Kurt this afternoon. Seems pretty harsh to me - I mean, the link only got hijacked once, and they spotted that straight away. But it looks like Kurt's taking the fall for it. I'm betting they'll bring him back again in a month or two when the papers have got bored of the story. If they really wanted rid of him, they'd have fired him.

In other news... The Ooze are jamming again, and I've written a few new tracks which have gone down well with the crowds ('Faberling' could be a single, and I'm pretty pleased with 'Boolean Night'). The guys are letting me do a couple of acoustic numbers, though Crowley is demanding an a cappella solo now... swings and roundabouts.

You missed a kick-ass PCAG final. Champaign sneaked it, the little brat. More evidence that she is indeed a baby cyborg.

And I'm going to make sure Kurt, Scarlett and that sister of hers all come along to the Ball tonight. I've always found that, when you least feel like a party, that's when you most need one. Apart from anything else, I think the Academy owes us all a drink.

So how about you? What have you guys been up to? I gather the Cube hunt is gathering pace, but just how close are you? I've missed getting your messages - let me know what's going on.

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15 Jan 2007

Novocaine for the soul

Alcohol. A blessing and a curse. A relaxant and a depressant. I've had so many great times after a drink or two, only to forget them by the morning. Hate that. And last night, I saw again the positive and negative sides of drunkenness with glaring clarity, as well as the pros and cons of sobering up.

I managed to pressgang Scarlett and Kurt into coming out with us to the Ball. Deep down, I told them, they'd regret it afterwards if they hadn't gone. So the four of us turned up at the Academy in our glad-rags, mostly with faces like wet fish, and made our way straight to the bar.

All started well. We took the edge off our thirst and Kurt began to relax - even if relaxation meant him 'finally saying what he thought' about certain members of the CRT. I played along. Scarlett downed her first two pretty fast, but halfway through her third, I heard her laugh for the first time in forever.

That was the moment, the peak. When Scarlett laughed, I really felt like I'd done a good thing. Kurt and her sister knew it too, seeing her smile and knowing that this could all get better, that everything could be overcome, forgotten, consigned to the past. Just one laugh, and we all felt stronger.

Then the cops arrived. There was no way to be discreet, but they didn't need to stage the whole arrest so publicly. Every journalist in town was there, along with every dignitary and everyone who has ever respected Sente - including his family. Scarlett dissolved. She put her hand to her mouth and let out this silent scream, this gasp that sucked the air right out of her. It looked like she was suffocating, and she grabbed my arm and slid down it as her knees went, and the tears started, and her father was marched away.

Her sister yelled them all the way out of the hall. She messaged me later from the station. Some poor duty officer must have been wishing he'd switched shifts.

Kurt stood back and watched it happen, a bit glazed already, and I think that's the point at which his intake accelerated.

I didn't hang around for long. The party atmosphere had kind of dissolved when the host was led away in cuffs, and Scarlett was a mess, so the pair of us left Kurt to it and headed back to mine, to wait for more word from the station.

Scarlett... she's a sweet kid. She poured herself another drink (a large one), which she hiccupped down, and we crashed on the couch for a while, talking and mumbling and then not talking at all. She looked up into my face, close, and I could taste her breath. Sweet, but sweet with liquor. She stayed there, craning up at me. I was maybe just a drink short of leaning down.

I stroked her hair and she went to sleep after a while.

Like I said: a blessing and a curse.

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Freak scene

I'm not normally the one preaching discipline, but somebody round here needs to work. I mention this because the big sister has been giving it to me in the neck for not being there when I'm needed. Where 'there' is - or when 'when' is - I don't know. But apparently, the vital moment clashed with me going into work at the CRT, just when the link has re-opened and we're totally short-staffed and Sente has left the whole Academy rudderless and it looks like the Cube could be found by anyone at any moment, which could plunge the city into even deeper political turmoil.

Selfish of me really.

Anyway, in what spare time I have, I've been doing my best to offer some TLC and stuff. My version of TLC usually involves tequila and lime, but everyone's been feeling a bit fragile lately. Scarlett's been freaking out today because the cops or some journo has turned over her house... nothing taken, by the looks of it, but freakworthy none the less. Fortunately, she was at my place at the time - I was sleeping on the couch, before you ask - so any real trauma was avoided. Her sister was more wracked off about the break-in than anyone, but since their dad got taken downtown, she's been hyper-twitchy about everything. Joy.

Right now, Garnet's scowl is a blessed relief from all the hassle at home. I can see myself becoming a model workaholic for the next few days.

18 Jan 2007

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Fire coming out of the monkey's head

Lettie's gone rogue. Since the break-in, she's been kind of unable to sit still - which, compared to how she'd been over the previous month or two, was something of an improvement. She was cooped up here too long and, finally, she decided to get out and do something. I wasn't about to stand in her way.

I don't know what she plans on finding out or really where she's gone to look. But I'm glad she's back on her feet again, back to being her old self. As she keeps telling me, she's not a little girl anymore.

Her sister disagrees, of course. Maybe that's a sister thing. And if Lettie gets in trouble, no doubt it will be my fault. But I'm not worried. Everybody gets the urge to escape every once in a while - I can identify with that. She'll turn up when she's found something.

I have plenty to keep me occupied anyway. The guys have been hassling me for extra sessions over the weekend. We've got a gig next week and some press people are turning up - not that I'm all that fond of hacks right now. I'll be sure to lock my door on the way out.

19 Jan 2007

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THOUGHTS

I want to break free

With the old man in prison, Von doing his homework, Kurt gone AWOL, Anna sadly departed, Aiko sculpting some monolithic monstrosity and Tippy filing her nails, there's only me and Garnet left to do the work around here. And Garnet's delegating.

He's had me checking through all those printing irregularities, working with MC on how to 'accelerate the retrieval process', coming up with new puzzles and auditing all the previous answers from you Cube Hunters on Earth, trying to see if there's any kind of pattern or if the Third Power might have infiltrated you all. Knowing how you've had problems with moles before, I suppose I can understand why - but there are around 52,000 of you registered online, and who knows how many hundreds of thousands watching from the sidelines... he'll have me sifting Alchemy Beach for sugar next.

Then there was the gig, which was hectic but good. For the first time in months, I've come off stage with the lads and we've all had a real buzz going. There was even a group hug at one point. Mo said it was the best set we've ever played, and we stayed out until a reprehensible hour on a school night. I paid for it in the morning.

Incidentally, to those of you that asked: no, there are no images of my coded tattoos. I prefer to retain them for private viewings at my discretion.

Scarlett's still away on her info hunt, and yeah, I am getting worried. With plenty to keep me busy, I've not been as frantic as Krazy Kurt and his Anxious Assistant, but it's true, she should have been in touch by now. She might be on her way up to Anjsbourg for all we know. In fact, that would be all right. She's done that before. Anjsbourg, Schmanjsbourg. But she must be in pretty deep if she can't even key us a line. It looks like everybody's done a disappearing act except me, and I could really, really do with a break.

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24 Jan 2007

Sugar spun sister

I got recognised today. I was walking down the Old Coast Road when some guy came up to me and asked if I was that dude from The Gunge. This must be what fame is like.

The reason I was over that side of town is I was trying to track down the non-girlfriend. She's not answering her key and I've tried her apartment a couple of times - no luck. I'm starting to wonder if she's gone after Scarlett, wherever she is. That's assuming she's gone voluntarily and hasn't been grabbed by evil henchmen.

I don't mean to sound flippant. It's just tough to feel close to a girl who keeps you at arm's length all the time.

Scarlett, though, isn't as strong. She says she can look after herself, but I've spent enough of the past few months looking after her to know that she's not like her sister. I'd be looking for her now if I knew where to start.

It's been days now.

I walked from the Strip and past Milamont Parade, looking in at the windows to see if a light might be on, but nobody's home. I had a copy of The Sentinel under my arm. I was going to share it with the girls and make jokes about the review and being famous and being fought over. I had all these jokes.

I'm Caine. My band is called The Ooze, and we're kind of thrash metal polymaths.

Imagine if RFD mated with Motorhead and Smashing Pumpkins, then sent their offspring to the Sorbonne. That's us.

My thing is drums and backing vocals, and I strum a bit too.

I also have a job at the Academy, but you don't want to know about that. No, you don't. Trust me.

26 Jan 2007



Ooze
Zone

THOUGHTS

Times like these

So I think I know how Scarlett felt. Sitting around in the apartment, I just feel useless. I have all this pent up energy and nowhere to direct it, so I've found myself wandering a circuit after work (and all weekend) between my place, Scarlett's and her sister's, looking for signs of life. Signs of someone to help, something to do.

I've given up on calling them. They've both got enough messages from me to know I'm around.

On Saturday, after the session, I drank my way round our old haunts near the Strip, keeping an eye out for either of the girls. Pointless, I know. But given a choice between futile faffing and sitting still, I choose the faff. Especially if there's liquid anaesthetic involved.

29 Jan 2007

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The deepest blues are black

Lettie's alive. That's the one important thing.

I have a chestful of cracked ribs, a shiner as black as boot polish (actually, it might be boot polish), and three of my teeth feel like they'll fall out if I eat anything more solid than a cappuccino.

You should see the other guy's knuckles.

Everything happened at thrash speed last night, so I should probably slow events down and strum through them chord by chord.

After work, I went a'wandering. Down to the Strip (lights out), up by Milamont Parade (nobody home) and then headed back to mine - along Holl Lane, past Ascendancy Point. I saw Kurt and the non-girlfriend hustling down the stairs into AP station, and I yelled after them, but they didn't hear me, so I followed.

I tried hailing them on their keys as well, but while I was still dialing, Kurt rushed over and stopped me.

"No keys," he said, and grabbed it out of my hand and gave it to some huge dude in a suit. That's when I noticed half a dozen of these guys with ear-pieces, standing around and looking conspicuously casual. I wondered what kind of employer Kurt had found himself since he got suspended. Anyway, as you now know, it was the police hit squad assault unit tactical task force people.

They dragged me through some doorway and told me to shut up, which I did. I gathered it was a rescue attempt. The non-girlfriend didn't say a word, just stared at me and stayed close to Kurt. The others seemed to be growling, but I might have imagined that.

Most of the story you heard. We split into two groups, and the chief growler decided he wanted to keep an eye on me, so I tagged along with him and Kurt. Everything went smoothly until we bumped into a pair of guards who needed distracting. I felt like a bit of a spare clue, so I thought I'd make myself useful. All those nights sitting at home, waiting to do something. Clearly they'd addled my brain.

I make a convincing drunk. I've had practice. I landed a couple of good punches - good enough to be annoying - and they dragged me away in cuffs. I thought they were just going to chuck me out the front door, but instead they got on their keys and took me upstairs (in the lift, fortunately - I wasn't in a fit state to take the stairwell).

We got off at the 110th floor. They dumped me outside a door, which was opened by a sleazy looking fella with bad skin. He was wiping his hands with a rag.

He pulled me inside. The guards walked away. Nobody was saying much. I thought I'd join in.

"Caine Johansson. What are you doing here...?"

He threw in a couple of unnecessary kicks. He wasn't going to make me talk by winding me. I didn't think he'd appreciate the advice, so I stayed stumm.

"Are you alone? Are you alone?"

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Another kick, another rib gone.

There were other people in the next room. I could hear them.

He sighed, grabbed me by the hair and hauled me into a store room.

Scarlett was tied to a chair, gagged, and barely conscious. Her fingers were bleeding. She didn't react when I was flung down behind her. But I was glad to see her. Glad, upset, nauseous. All these things.

The door slammed. It didn't sound like he locked it. They must have assumed that I was no threat and, having seen my fighting prowess downstairs, they had good reason.

I crawled to the other side of the room and tried talking to Scarlett. She came round slowly... very slowly, half-starved and maybe drugged. She tried to say my name. We sat and cried at each other for a while. I told her it would all be okay. I didn't want to say any more in that room.

And then the lights went out. We heard gunfire. I wriggled on the floor and stood up, still cuffed, and tried the door handle. It opened. My sleazy friend was backed up against the wall, gun drawn, facing away from me and staying out of the firing line.

What I did next was... troubling. I still think it was the right move. He would have done worse to me. I think he'd already done worse to Lettie.

I kicked him. A hard, shoving kick that pushed him away from the wall and into the open. A shot ripped through him before he could recover, and he span round to face me before he dropped.

I'm trying not to dwell on that image.

Then I turned back towards Lettie and helped her to spit out the gag, and before I could do anything else, the police stormed in and it was over. The gunshots stopped. There was some shouting. I heard a guy screaming, wounded. But there was another yell, full of pain and fear, a desperate wail from a voice I knew, searching, picking through the bodies, and Scarlett tried to stand, still tied to the chair, answering the call, murmuring a name in return, drawing strength from the word: "Violet... Violet. Violet!"

I don't have any family to speak of. My parents both died a while back, and I've got no brothers or sisters. It's never really bothered me. I've never really felt like I missed out or anything. Until yesterday.

Continued.

You know.

From the
previous page.

31 Jan 2007