

WONDER CITY STORIES

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WHOSE DREAMS COME
TRUE

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An Entertaining Labyrinth of Side-issues

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An Entertaining Labyrinth of Side-issues

As she stood near the incident site, waiting for her new Bureau intern, Tatyana kept her face in what *she* thought of as a neutral expression. Apparently, some of the other Bureau staff referred to her default expression as "resting bitchface." *I wonder if they would say that about a white American woman*, she thought.

Interns, in Tatyana's experience, were either Bureau spies to keep an eye on agents the higher-ups feared, or they were *actual* bumblers who she generally had to keep from accidentally ending up dead. Time would tell her which kind of liability this new one—conveniently assigned just as she started this big case—was.

The Wonder City police who were stationed around the site perimeter were beginning to talk amongst themselves while aiming significant glances in her direction. She didn't recognize any of the officers on duty—*It has been a few minutes since my last major case*—and suspected she was going to have to go ahead and move in without her pet albatross.

A blue Mini-Cooper screeched into a parking spot on Tatyana's side of the street, and a harried young white woman in a narrow-skirted tweed suit leapt out of it, looked around wildly, then zeroed in on her. *Oh, of course you're my intern*, Tatyana thought without a shred of amusement, considering the various things she might do to make Cagliano's life more difficult in retribution.

"OhhhhhmygodI'mSOsorry," the young woman breathed, hurrying over to her. She stopped ten feet away, fished in her purse, then extended her ID to Tatyana.

Tatyana stepped forward, took it, and examined it. *Kelly Elizabeth Green. If that's your real name, and your real initials, your parents deserve to be kicked.* She tilted it to see the agency hologram on the surface, then handed it back. *Young twenties, hair not naturally this dark a brown, blue contacts, wears Chanel No 5 on an intern's salary, broken left forearm in her recent past given the difference in the circumferences of her wrists.* "Where else in the agency have you been assigned?"

"This is my first assignment!" Intern Green said, smiling hopefully and tucking a lock of her dark brown hair behind one ear.

Tatyana gave her a flat, disapproving stare—*Lies well.*—until the smile wilted into unhappy, wordless submission. Then she said, "I am here to investigate the site. Do you have an agency tablet on which to take notes?"

"Yes, Agent," Green said meekly, and produced it from her purse. *Purse contains white monogrammed handkerchief—unable to clearly see if monogram matches her ID—pack of tissues, two inserter-style tampons, no visible wallet—possibly in another pocket—and a roll of mints.*

Tatyana gave her a brusque nod and then strode across the street to face the police who had been pointing and whispering. She presented the highest-ranking of them—a white man in his early fifties, hair iron-gray under his hat, probably had arthritis in his right knee and hip given how he was standing and moving—with her identification, saying, "Agent Crane, Bureau of Paranormal Affairs."

The officer's face went more hostile than before, though the eyes one of the younger officers—possibly Hispanic twenty-something with a fresh high-and-tight haircut—behind him went wide. Then she was awash in rage, because the older man's gaze went to the silent white woman half her age behind her, seeking some sort of mark of legitimacy. *That will never stop pissing me off.*

"We have the site secured, and the investigation team from the Guardians is inside right now," he admitted grudgingly.

Tatyana tucked her identification away and said, "Good," before walking past him. He started to say something—she heard the definite beginning of "you" come out of his mouth, but he, fortunately, bit down on it and chose to snarl to the other police once he thought they were out of earshot.

She concentrated on what her senses were telling her as they entered the burnt-out concrete husk and stepped around a pile of detritus that was part of the roof collapse. The place stank of chemical-laced smoke and ash: plastics and treated wood, primarily. There was a faint aura left by a reality wave here. Her intern had some powers; she would review Green's para reg profile later. There were two individuals in the basement hole who had paranormal powers. There were no other paranormals within about 300 meters, the extent of her power's precision.

The basement hole had a ladder roped to intact support beams in place of any sort of original stairs or other means of descent. Tatyana didn't bother to look at her skirted intern, just swung herself around onto the ladder and descended in her practical flats and slacks.

Two individuals, one tall, in steel armor with the Guardians logo on its breastplate, one short, in bronze armor similarly adorned with the logo, were bent over something in the corner of the room. The Steel Guardian straightened up and regarded them impassively through the half-clear half-masked visor of his helmet, his broad, pale jaw set. *White man, in his thirties, didn't have time to shave thoroughly this morning. Armor poorly maintained with numerous scratches and dents; he doesn't get on well with the Guardians' quartermaster.* The Bronze Guardian looked up, and that helmet was entirely opaque.

Tatyana presented her identification again. "Agent Crane, from the Bureau. This is Ms. Green, my assistant."

Green had descended the ladder and was at her shoulder, Bureau tablet at the ready. Tatyana gave her a brusque nod of approval and thought, *Note to self: Green either levitates or flies.*

"This is Guardians business," the Steel Guardian said through his teeth. *Voice rough, possibly has been here for a while breathing the remaining smoke, possibly rearranging things—yes, ash and soot on the gloves.*

Tatyana allowed her expression to flicker to boredom. "This will be easier if you back off that now. I know your Copper Lawyer is always eager to go to court, but you know that the Bureau will win in the end. Of course, that will mean that you'll have a chance to hide whatever it is you don't want me to see, and then we'll have more go-rounds in court."

The Steel Guardian blinked, but otherwise looked unmoved. The faceless helmet of the Bronze Guardian was uninformative, but Tatyana could feel that person's energy power starting a low boil in their hands.

Guardian and Bureau agent continued to stare at each other in silence a long time.

Green shuffled uncomfortably, and Tatyana served her several mental demerits. The Bronze Guardian shifted their weight.

"As you prefer," Tatyana said, and pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. She hit the speed-dial for Cagliano's office.

"Cagliano," came the gratifyingly prompt response.

"Sir," Tatyana said crisply, keeping her eyes on the Guardians, "I believe we need to declare a city-wide emergency."

The Bronze Guardian glanced at the Steel Guardian, and Tatyana felt the energy they had summoned disperse abruptly. *Body language suggests young. Slightly jerky movements suggest still unskilled at moving in the armor. Or that the armor is powered, despite their claims to never use powered armor. Note to self: Look up the new Bronze Guardian in the Registry.* Green made a very soft noise that Tatyana was likely the only person to hear, but it still earned more demerits.

Cagliano cleared his throat and said, "I see, Agent Crane."

The Steel Guardian swallowed.

"This will allow me to activate the full Gold Stars roster, correct?" Tatyana said, enunciating very clearly in her BBC accent.

"Yes," Cagliano said. "With our office in command."

"With our office in command," Tatyana repeated. "The police come under our jurisdiction as well, if I recall correctly?"

"Yes," Cagliano said.

"And we can seize and search all assets of anyone impeding our investigation of the worldwide threat currently present in Wonder City?" Tatyana continued.

"Yes," Cagliano said. She could practically hear the sweat spattering his desktop.

The Steel Guardian's jaw unclenched, and he said, tightly, "The Guardians cede this territory to the Bureau of Paranormal Affairs."

The Bronze Guardian probably was giving him a disbelieving look under that helmet visor. "Please hold, sir," Tatyana said, and gave them a sweeping theatrical gesture indicating that their exit was required.

She watched the two ascend the ladder in silence. "Ms. Green," she said. "Please escort them from the premises." And turned away to allow her to navigate the ladder in privacy, however she managed it.

She waited until she heard Green's footsteps fade away before she said, "It appears that the citywide emergency is not required at present, sir."

"Who was giving you trouble?" Cagliano said, relief clear in his voice.

"The Guardians," she said, looking around the basement. "We'll find out why. Could you please have the Gold Stars send two 24/7 guards to the incident site?" Green's footsteps were returning.

"Of course, I'll notify them immediately," he said. "Well played, Agent."

"Thank you, sir," she said, and hung up on him.

Green said, from the foot of the ladder, "I saw them out to the street, Agent. They paused to speak to the senior police officer — nothing of consequence, but I recorded it — and then flew toward the Guardians headquarters."

"Thank you, Green," Tatyana said, moving over to the area the Guardians had been examining. Despite the demerits, recording the conversation was a nice thought. "You may call me Crane."