

Sons of Nowhere (Prologue)

By Nicholas Almand

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For Dwayne.

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PROLOGUE



Dr. Linda Malone looked down her nose at the crumpled form on the infirmary bed. Dexter Murphy was eleven years old; a redhead with freckles that covered what remained of his body. Malone frowned at the boy's hand. Despite the efforts of the Ophion Foundation's security officers, none of his fingers had been found. Malone turned away, locking eyes with Gedeon Vassago.

Tall, over sixty, with a scarred face and a ponytail, Vassago had a presence that demanded respect. The six years he spent on television debunking cryptozoology had been a very lucrative testament to that. It was ironic, then, that he had dedicated the last 17 years of his life to being Director of Cryptozoology for the Ophion Foundation. Still, Malone had little use for his overly familiar cadence and cheap cologne.

Dexter Murphy was smiling.

"Has there been any brain damage?" she said, nodding to the long gash in Dexter's face, just above his left eye. As it flickered between open and shut, Malone noted that his left eye was blue. His right eye had been green before the surgeons were forced to remove it. Funny. In all of her time as Director of Parapsychology, Dr. Malone had never noticed Dexter's heterochromia. Not that it mattered anymore.

“I can’t really tell, but I don’t think so,” Vassago said. “He seemed pretty lucid when security found him. He even asked me how my ex-wife was doing before he went into surgery.”

“Good,” Malone said. It was too early to know what the sum effect of these injuries would be. There were at least three more surgeries scheduled for Dexter in the coming weeks, but if he were to keep a dream journal during the recovery periods, they could determine whether the trauma had affected his...

Right. No fingers. Malone made a note to order a digital tablet for him, in that case. If the surgeons could save the other arm, he could use the residual digits on a touch screen. If not, well, he still had a few toes left.

She furrowed her brow as she typed a list of equipment into her phone. The uncertainty was starting to become annoying. If the right leg couldn’t be saved, they would have to ship a child-sized electric wheelchair in from California. That wouldn’t be cheap. Prosthetics, too, would have to be considered. Adding an artificial gastro-intestinal tract on top of that would likely cripple Project Ithaca’s medical budget for the year. At least ordering a glass eye would be simple enough. The damage to Dexter’s face was relatively minor, all things considered. If one of the surgeries went wrong, he was safely in the “open-casket” category.

Then there was the other matter to consider. What to do with Eddie? Major Hong wanted him decommissioned, but he would have to give that order over her dead body. Eddie was the only test subject in years to display physical mutations after the treatment. At the very least, Eddie was the only one they could still study. He was unique in the entire world for that reason alone. There was no way Malone would allow him to be destroyed over this nonsense.

“You’ve got a strong stomach, Linda,” Vassago said, gently patting Dexter’s hair.

“Mortuary work will do that, Gedeon,” Malone said. She didn’t bother to lift her eyes from her phone. She’d forgotten to factor the price of reconstructive surgery if Dexter’s limbs could be saved. This incident was going to be costly, no two ways about it.

“I had no idea you worked in a morgue,” Vassago said, pulling a cigarette from his pocket. “Where’d you find the time between studying all those half-deluded psychics?”

“Family business,” Malone said, hardly listening. Her eyes drifted back to Dexter. He stirred in the bed, giggling to himself as though recalling a secret joke again and again. It was no surprise. He was on enough medication to kill a small horse. In practical terms, there wasn’t much left to do until after his next surgery. Malone checked her delivery timetable. If she filed the requisition before 5:30 PM, Dexter’s tablet could be delivered to Acis Island as early as Wednesday morning. Malone slipped the phone back into her lab coat and headed for the door.

“Where are you going now?” Vassago’s voice followed her down the hall. Malone stopped, but did not turn to face him.

“I need to speak with Eddie,” Malone said. Vassago balked.

“Eddie? Are you out of your mind?” he said. “There’s no telling what he’ll do right now! They haven’t even hosed the blood off him, for Christ’s sake!”

“I don’t need your approval,” Malone said, scoffing at his naked dread. She was in no danger from Eddie. Malone had made it abundantly clear to him that she was the only Director in the Ophion Foundation who didn’t want him put down like a rabid dog.

“At least let me go with you,” Vassago caught up with her, placing a hand on her shoulder. Malone narrowed her eyes at him.

“That won’t be necessary, thank you,” she brushed his hand aside. There were nine other test subjects in Project Ithaca, and every Director seemed to have a favorite. Despite his cavalier manner, Vassago had taken Eddie’s attack on Dexter the hardest. Malone didn’t see the point, frankly. Dexter was alive, stable, and there was no indication of brain damage. He would adjust to his new body, no matter how little of it was left. Dexter was young. He would cope.

The single corridor to the containment cells was narrow and deep, designed to bottleneck escapees into the cafeteria. The sheer length of the hallway would, in theory, give security enough time to mobilize against them. The last time Malone had been down this way, the floor had been streaked with blood. She nodded. The security team made a surprisingly good custodial staff in an emergency.

The containment cells were shaped like steel globes on stilts, sporting a single door at the top of a short collection of steps. There were no windows in the cells themselves, but each was equipped with a two way mirror that allowed Ophion security to monitor the prisoners' activities on a 24-hour basis. A chair bolted to the floor was the only furniture within.

Eddie was in that chair, fastened there with handcuffs on his wrists and ankles. Two security officers flanked his cell, armed with state-of-the-art Yebra-Ramses Digital Safety assault rifles. Eddie was bald; completely hairless, in fact. With his pale skin and unblinking, ink-black eyes, Malone had been told he resembled a shark. She usually didn't see the resemblance, but now that Eddie was covered in Dexter's blood...

"Can you give us a moment alone?" Malone said, adjusting her tone to emphasize that it was a command, not a request. The security officers nodded and took their leave. They stayed within the corridor, however, refusing to go further than a dozen yards away. Malone nodded back to them. It was commendable that they remembered protocol, even when taking direct orders from a Director. She would have to take down their names. Malone sighed as she approached the cell door. Eddie was nowhere to be seen.

"Eddie, it's Dr. Malone. Take down the filter so we can speak face to face," she said. Slowly, her brain stopped overlooking Eddie's body and he appeared before her, half-naked and caked in dried blood. That was Eddie's Paradox. He could make your brain ignore him the way one ignores the physical presence of air or individual voices in a muddled crowd. If he didn't wish to be seen, he could will himself to be nearly undetectable. In the eyes of the other Directors (and especially Major Hong), this made Eddie almost prohibitively dangerous.

"I wouldn't exactly call this face to face, Doc. All I got is a mirror on this side," Eddie was relaxed in his chair despite the handcuffs on his bare wrists and ankles. His mouth was covered in the ugly maroon of dried blood, matched by his hands and arms up to the elbow. The stains dribbled down his chin and onto his bare chest, with a few stray drops on his shorts. Up close, she could do nothing to distance her perception of Eddie from the crime he had committed.

Eddie smirked. "Damn, I'm a pretty motherfucker!"

“That’s enough, Eddie,” Malone said. She focused on his eyes through the two-way mirror. It really was unsettling when you got close enough to notice that he never blinked. “I need to know exactly what happened between you and Dexter Murphy.”

Thank God the surveillance cameras didn’t record audio.

Eddie did not answer at first. His eyes, solid black, seemed to squirm in their sockets. Malone wondered how much of the truth she was actually going to get.

“Well, I gotta say I’m somewhat to blame,” Eddie began, grinning to himself. “But that kid needed to be taught a lesson, and he just wasn’t getting it. So I took it upon myself to mete out a little justice.”

“What do you mean by, ‘taught a lesson,’ Eddie?” Malone said. God damn it, Eddie, was this a pride thing again?

“Ginger Kid kept sticking his nose where it wasn’t wanted,” Eddie said. “And he caught me having a little fun. You know, the kinda shit Dr. Kyle tells me is ‘anti-social’ behavior? I was messing with Chris and Alasdair.

“So Ginger Kid drops in on me right after I’m done doing my thing, right? And Chris is on the floor crying like a bitch as usual, being loud as fuck and damn near getting me caught all by himself. I shut the door, and Ginger Kid tells me he saw what I did and he’s going to tell Major Hong on me. So I’m all like, ‘the fuck you say?’ And he’s just being the shittiest little prick about the whole thing. Remember how he told all the guards that Scott and Kevin were fags? He starts threatening *me* with the same shit, even though I ain’t even done nothing faggy!”

“What exactly did you do to Alasdair and Chris?” Malone said.

“Nothing! I mean, I was going to cut off their dicks for shits and giggles, but Chris pissed himself,” Eddie said. He began to laugh: a dry, hoarse sound akin to a cough. “It was the funniest shit I’d ever seen, so I let ‘em both off the hook.”

“You had better be joking, Eddie,” Malone said. She had told him about pulling this shit! No wonder he’d lost it on Dexter. She spoke quietly and evenly, suppressing the instinct to yell. “Nobody minds if you have a little fun, but I have made it abundantly clear that you are not to inflict any permanent injuries on the other subjects.”

“Little late for that,” Eddie laughed. “Besides, you’d do the same thing! One of ‘em was pissing the bed, for fuck’s sake! You condemn me now, but mark my words,

once those kids get old enough and things get even more faggy around here, you're gonna give some kinda order to cut everybody's junk off in the name of 'sanitation and welfare' or some shit. And when you do, I'll remind you of this conversation and how you spoke to me."

"You're getting side-tracked," Malone said.

"All right, all right," Eddie let his head roll backwards. His smile disappeared. The two of them sat in silence for a long moment. Did he fall asleep?

"He was laughing at me," Eddie's voice was low.

"What?" Malone raised an eyebrow.

"The whole time. He just kept laughing at me. No matter what I did to him, he just kept laughing and talking shit. He said that I must like little boys and he was gonna tell everybody."

"Even after you began to eat him?"

There was no reply. Eddie started to breathe heavy, his chest rising and falling with increasing frequency. He finally spoke through gritted teeth.

"That's when the laughing started."

Malone felt a chill slide down from the base of her neck.

"Tell me something, Doc. Is he still laughing now?"

Dr. Malone didn't answer.

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