

### 13. Piano Man

The big man in Phantom half-mask shadowed Mercury Blue ten paces behind as she turned onto Bourbon Street NW, losing herself in a bedlam of costumes and masks at Saturday Market Mardi Gras. When she glanced back, the man was gone.

Maybe she was just overreacting. Her nerves were frazzled. It was the first time she'd acted without the approval of the band. She could never go back.

Everything she'd done was done for Petie. Now she must do for herself. Petie's device fetched a tidy sum. She was still looking for a buyer for the drive deck. Instead of feeling liberated, she suffered some Dreamtime affliction aggravated by her paranoia over Razors slashing her throat. Her situation was amped-up nearly to breakdown and these frequent spells hijacking her into a strange dimension was all she needed.

She floated dreamily between festive flags, past jazz combos outside the West exit of the Bridge of the Gods. At Saturday Market Mardi Gras, her handpicked Bon Marché Cinderella costume actually blended in. The specter of Taz the Razz and the Razors was ample incentive to go *incognito*, but low profiles were against Mercury's nature. She was lucky Saturday Market was anonymity gilt to the gills. The most bodacious dress here was merely mundane.

Europa, owner of The Shapeshifter, in remorse over Mercury's Dreamtime virus traded favors to set up a private bank account. With her new stake, Mercury knew she needed more than a new look; she needed a complete makeover. Everything, that is, except her ass. After all, that was a work of Art. You don't hire a housepainter to cover up a Picasso. Europa knew this guy who could do a skin change. He was to contact Mercury on Bourbon Street NW. No idea where. She had to keep moving for a half hour without causing a scene. One small comfort was fifteen other Cinderellas sampling vendor booths along the pedestrian mall. She was vulnerable but inconspicuous stuffing herself like a green pepper.

Bourbon Street NW on Saturday night was party-time with flatscreen billboards and holoprojectors looping Mardi Gras themes. A *mélange* of masks—wooden, plastic and rubber, tasseled, frowning, smiling, tragi-comic, with streamers and rainbow colors, monsters and celebrities—bobbed by like untethered buoys swept into a tide

of raucous revelers.

A cloned-Quetzal feather brushed her nose. She sneezed so hard the air blasted out her ears. Her senses were on overload. A veritable aviary of exotic plumage dipped and swam through the palpable aromas of sauteed mushrooms, fried prawns, candied yams and apples, *jambalaya, crawfish pie, fillet gumbo...sonuvagun we'll have some fun*—til tomorrow, when the obligatory hangovers filled NuWorld toilet bowls with purges of wild excess.

Her enjoyment of Bourbon Street NW was curtailed by this peripheral awareness of the Phantom looming in the shadows.

As Mercury wove through lewd pulcinellas poking long noses under skirts and pirates lifting their black eye patches, she stopped at a vendor booth and selected a cowgirl mask with glossy white hat and red lips like a hungry vagina. She discarded the Cinderella mask so she was now a Cowgirl Cinderella. This satisfied her need for calling attention to herself anonymously.

As she donned the mask, she glimpsed the Phantom. His shoulders were broad as an aircraft carrier. She swore he was watching her from the Creole sidewalk café, Artaud's Bistro.

She hurried down the walkway, trying not to look back. Bourbon Street NW was only five blocks long. She'd only covered the first block. *He's following...*, she thought. Panic fluttered in her chest.

Twenty-five minutes to kill—*kill? Quit thinking kill or be killed, dressed to kill, killing time, kill, kill, kill.* Memories of Taz cleanly eviscerating and bagging Toni Bosciani's organs for black market made her breath come fast and shallow. When she bailed on the Razors, she figured Taz would come after her. She'd put it out of her mind until now. She was sure this Phantom wasn't a Razor. There was nobody that big in Taz's band.

At the jewelry booth, Hecate's Gate, Mercury held up a necklace. Light passed through it like a prism. The multi-colored beads were dazzling against her white skin and the white lace of her Cinderella ballroom gown. While admiring her reflection, she tracked the Phantom's movement out of the corner of her eye.

"Those beads complement the gypsy spirit, *mon cheri*," a stooped-over crone with cracked-leather skin declared. She looked authentic in gypsy garb with emerald bolero and arms laden with bracelets.

The Phantom boldly advanced. Sudden spasms jolted Mercury's spine. Her knees turned to jelly; she felt herself sag, backing away.

"Are you planning to pay for that, deary?" the old crone shot her an evil eye, pointing at the beads in Mercury's fist.

"Of course. Sorry." Mercury swiped her smartcard through the receiver and spun on her heels only to run smack into a man wearing ebony and ivory keyboard top hat, black and white tuxedo under black duster, black musical notes trickling like tears down powder white cheeks. His hands were plunged deep into the duster.

The collision caused him to teeter as if intoxicated. His torso rolled with the impact, but he gave no ground, coming back around right into her face. Any willpower she might have had to stand *her* ground wilted under his Cajun cayenne breath.

Sandwiched between the piano man and the Phantom, Mercury thought of bringing up a knee and making a backhanded sweep down octaves of his keyboard, leaving him doubled over. But the pupils behind the black and white porcelain mask caused her to freeze.

"Death is the relentless stalker," he cautioned, smelling of Creole cuisine. "But we never know the where or the when of it now, do we, missy?"

Mercury glared at him. Missy was her mother's name; she was not her mother. As the piano man pulled his hand from the pit of his pocket, Mercury backed into the vendor booth, knocking over a rack of beads. Her breath caught in her throat like a fishbone.

"Watch yerself, Gracie," the gypsy crone chafed, evil eye rolling Mercury's way. "Or you pay for all, ay?"

The piano man snared her by the wrist, preventing a clumsy fall into the beaded booth. "Sorry," Mercury sputtered. The piano man jerked her back into a waltz.

"We must be prepared," he said, voice rising in overtones, "for death shows no mercy."

She pushed off and yanked to free her wrist from his grip. He held fast, twirling her back into his face. "If I could have a minute of your time, Miss Blue, it could add years to your life."

He opened the duster as if to expose himself. Embedded in his chest was a subdermal flexible flat screen covered with Sim-Skin framed by a neat cutout in his tuxedo. Running along the bottom of a glowing homepage was a banner, *I pledge allegiance to the NuWorld and to the future for which it belongs, one state, without death, maintained in virtuality for access to all.*

As the Phantom retreated into the shadows, the thought that maybe he was her contact hot-spliced her disoriented brain.

The piano man's eyes held her captive. Pinching the palm of his hand, a pointer telescoped from under his nail. He started pressing buttons on the upside down menu bar plugged into his navel. He moved through menus with cultivated skill, not your average Plug and Pitch.

"How do you know me?" Mercury asked.

"It's my business," he replied, "You're awfully uptight for someone who's worth...well, let's just say *enough*."

The piano man invited her to sit down at a sidewalk table in front of Artaud's Bistro.

No sooner had she taken a seat than a Gen-3 robo-waiter wheeled up. She waved it off.

The Gen-3 replied, "You must order. Others want the table."

She saw no one waiting. "Give us a minute," she picked up a menu. "That's all I should need." The waiter wheeled around and rolled back into the coffeeshop.

The piano man lifted his palm as if stopping traffic. A video played on the chest reader. Scene of an accident. Flashing lights. Rescue workers. Jaws of Life.

"What could be more terrible than the prospect of imminent death?" the piano man asked, pointing to the screen. Mercury squirmed wondering if he'd been hired by the Razors. But Taz wouldn't be denied the pleasure of hearing her scream. "With a Guaranteed NuLife Resurrection Plan, there's no need to be uptight ever again, Miss Blue."

A mortally injured man was dragged bloody and unconscious from twisted wreckage as the chest video played.

"Imagine how stress-free your life would be if death could be cured," he added with a wink, "if caught soon enough."

The waiter was back. Their minute was up. Gen-3s were so literal. "No soliciting on bistro premises, sir."

"Soliciting?" the piano man looked offended, "There's just so much on your menu. I can't make up my mind. Come back in a few minutes."

The Gen-3 wheeled around and went back inside.

The video zoomed in on a blood-soaked man on a stretcher. An ambulance pulled up and paramedics rushed to the victim's side, ripping open clothing and attempting to restart his heart. To no avail.

"By looking at me," the piano man continued his pitch, "I'll bet you couldn't tell that, only five months ago, I was declared *dead* at the scene of this accident." A somber paramedic, shaking his head, pulled the sheet up over the man's face.

This would cost her dearly, Mercury realized. She was shark bait. The challenge was how to minimize the damage. A plug and pitch always knew when a mark was the beneficiary of some windfall. It could be worse. She could resist. A plug and pitch could extend that pointer and prick her neck, injecting a quick-acting brain inhibitor. Then she'd be signing up for the most expensive policy. She reached for her smartcard.

"Hear me out," the piano man insisted. He was as persistent as a missionary.

Hooked, reeled-in and writhing on his line, she avoided his mesmerizing eyes and focused on the stream of masks and costumes drifting by.

One, two, a few, the Gen-3 returned exactly at the three-minute mark, poised with a pick to take their order. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," the piano man ordered without looking at the menu. "The lady and I will have your Creole-styled seafood gumbo special, a side of crawfish boulettes in brown gravy and sweet potato and apple salad."

"Anything to drink with that?"

"Of course. I'll have a gin fizz. The lady needs a bloody martini."

The piano man explained how a NuLife Quick Response Resuscitation Team, dispatched to the scene, ran an endotracheal tube down his throat filling his lungs

with perfluorocarbon to provide oxygen and to chill the brain. “Looking at me now, you might ask was I merely dead or really, most sincerely dead?”

“There’s a critical period between the time one is declared clinically dead—from the time one’s heart and breathing has stopped—and the time one is biologically dead; that is, the point where cellular regeneration is not an option. Damage to individual cells is not the same as a holistic breakdown when one is most completely dead. Even then, not necessarily *beyond recall*.”

The Gen-3 returned with their order. The piano man slurped the steaming gumbo from the bowl, stuffed his mouth with balls of battered crab, talking with mouth full. “Current medical technology has extended the critical period between clinical death and biological death to roughly 30 - 40 minutes,” he said, cornbread crumbs falling onto the table, “which is time enough for our quick response teams to prepare your body in a not-totally-dead condition with brain functions slowed down due to the chill factor but preserved with ample oxygen.” He drank half his gin fizz in one gulp. Spooning the gumbo, he continued, “Transported to one of our NuLife Resurrection Centers, you are reconstructed, as in my case, or placed into cryonic hibernation until your resurrection.”

“Okay,” Mercury said, the aroma of the gumbo making her stomach rumble, “what determines time of resurrection?”

“Sufficiently advanced medical knowledge. Call it capability.” He put down his spoon and leaned over, pulled up his pantleg and with a quick twist detached his leg below the knee. He held the leg up and asked her to press against the bottom of the foot. She hesitated. He handed her a clean wipe. She pressed on the foot and the foot pressed back. “This kind of flexing action, was difficult to adjust ten years ago. Not only can I now walk normally, I can spring six feet into the air.”

“Yes, capability, of course,” Mercury acknowledged, tasting a crab ball, “then what?”

“Well, it depends on what plan you have,” his eyes were impassioned like all true techno-evangelists.

Mercury nodded. “So basically how invested I am?”

“We offer a plan for every contingency,” he wiped his fingers and keyed up an Option screen on his chest reader. Lists of covered limb and organ replacements, rehab therapy, reconstructions and cryonic suspension plans scrolled across his chest. He’d spilled some gumbo on the screen, picked up a napkin but only succeeded in smudging it. “These options guarantee eventual full resurrection. All roads lead to the same destination, but some are laid in gold.”

“Even in death there are class distinctions,” Mercury noted glumly over the gumbo.

“Our premium plans, such as Plan A, the lead-to-gold plan, offer more immediate resurrection with enhancements, but sooner may not be better. The first release of new wetware programs have the most bugs. The biggest risk is to do nothing and let death have its way with you. Why, I know a CEO of a mega-corporation. No

decision is made without his knowledge. He, too, was declared dead. He has no more brains than you, Missy..."

Mercury cringed. There he goes again confusing her with her mother.

"...what he did have is a Guaranteed NuLife Resurrection Plan. There's a woman I know, writes poetry that moves even a stone to tears. She died from heart failure. And she had no bigger heart than you, but what she did have is..."

"A Guaranteed NuLife Resurrection Plan?" Mercury finished.

"Now you're getting it." He reattached his leg and finished his gumbo with gusto.

"What if resurrection isn't an option?" Mercury ventured. "I mean, aren't there situations where one's too far gone?"

He leaned to whisper in her ear. Hot pepper sauce on his breath made her eyes water. "We have plans for *all* contingencies."

"I'd like to learn more."

"For that, you'll need an appointment. I can reserve a time for..." He keyed in a number which blinked in a text box on the chest reader. "...say twenty percent upfront, the rest when the job is done?" The inside pocket of his duster was a flat smartcard receiver for credit transfers. "We have Resurrection Clinics as far away as...Europa."

"Oh," Mercury's eyes brightened, "That's reassuring." She picked her card and watched the credits clicking off. The plug and pitch was apparently his cover. He handed her a slip with time and place. Tomorrow afternoon. He tossed back the rest of his drink. "See you then."

As he melted into the crowd, Mercury heard him calling out, "You can never have too much resurrection insurance."

Mercury looked around. The Phantom was nowhere to be seen. She breathed in the rich aroma of the gumbo. The Gen-3 came back with the bill. A New Year's Eve party at the Cajun Gator would have cost less.

But the piano man was right.

She did need a bloody martini.