

# Guise (Preternatural Matryoshka Escapades Book 1)

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[Author](#) **COPYRIGHT**Guise by Jack Salva.© 2019 Jack Salva.All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise — without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by United States of America copyright law.Printed in the United States of America.First Edition, 2019.<https://jacksalva.weebly.com/>This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. **DEDICATION**For my P, love you.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**To the cats - past, present, and future. Thank you for always providing support and perspective.To life. You tried to stop me by throwing obstacles in my way, but I beat you. In doing so I found that all you were doing was showing me how to be a better writer and human being. Thanks.Most of all, to Michelle.Everything I know about strong sexy women I have learned from you and tried to capture in some small way in the female characters. Your love and support gave me the courage to get this story out of my head and onto paper. You inspire me, challenge me, and fill me with a desire to be a better person every day.Thank you my P.Cover by rebecacovers @ fiverr.com **CHAPTER 01**Something was wrong.He had been sleeping soundly, but now he was awake. Awake and terrified. Something had ripped him from the comfortable embrace of his dreams and had him lying there, heart hammering, sweat pouring out of him, breath coming in ragged gasps. The problem was that he had no idea what it was.His eyes darted around the darkened room, trying to see what had jarred him awake. Morning sunlight barely filtered around the edges of the heavy drapes blocking the sliding glass doors to his tiny balcony.Nothing.Taking stock of his surroundings, he tried to slow his breathing and survey the room without any unseen watcher knowing he was doing it. All this managed to do was feed his paranoia. The fact that the illumination barely lit the room didn't help, nor did the fact that nothing seemed wrong or out of place.*Maybe it was all just a bad dream.*However, he usually remembered something of the nightmares that had been plaguing him of late. Now he had no idea what had torn him from sleep other than an overwhelming feeling of wrongness. Of course, it was then that he felt it.He was not alone.There was someone, or something, in the bed with him. Whatever it was, it was snuggled against his left side. Panic bubbled up in his mind once more. Forcibly he thrust it back and tried to analyze what was going on.Something had woken him. Apparently, that something was whatever was causing the pressure along his side. It could be that he had slept funny and his left side had been asleep and was waking up? It didn't have that tingly feeling so he dismissed that. Maybe it was the cat? While Otaku was fairly large, he could hardly sprawl along

the entire length of Darwin's body. Even though it seemed like he had tried on more than one occasion. Carefully, Darwin turned his head to peer at the form lying next to him. All he could make out was what he assumed to be the top of someone's head. The lack of light really did make that exercise futile. Since he had definitely gone to bed alone last night, he had no idea who this person was. The first thing he needed to do, he decided, was to get some space between himself and this intruder. Darwin gingerly crawled his right arm toward the edge of the bed. Finding it, he began to inch his body away from his surprise companion. He was just moving from under their weight when they stirred. The movement caught him off guard and he panicked. Darwin's spasmodic movements sent him jerking toward the edge of the bed. Unfortunately, he had failed to realize how close he was and found himself tumbling from the bed to land in a heap on the floor, the air knocked out of him. Freed, he started scrambling away, managing to smack his head on the nightstand in the process. Tears welled up in his eyes as he slithered the short distance across the floor to his dresser. Laying there, head cupped in hands, he tried to calm down. Finally, the pain subsided and he cautiously peered from under his arms. Apparently, his not so subtle exit from the bed had left his uninvited guest still asleep. With physical distance came the beginnings of a mental one. Anger started to replace fear as he gazed at the silent sleeper. Why was he running scared from a stranger in his own home? If anything, he should be demanding answers from the person. The first question was going to be how the hell they had gotten there! Slowly, he stood and looked around the room with eyes that had begun to adjust to the dimness. Everything was where it should be with the exception of the snoozing stranger and a dark blob near the foot of the bed. Hoping to get a better understanding of what was going on before confronting the person, he moved to the dark mass on the floor. Crouching down Darwin picked through what felt like a pile of clothes finding a shirt, shoes, and slacks. His groping fingers came across something silky and he pulled it from the pile and held it up dangling from one finger. A bra? Darwin shot to his feet and turned back to face the bed. The sleeper lay partly concealed by covers, but one shapely leg was clearly revealed in the faint light. Then, as he watched, the figure rolled over and there was no mistaking her gender. Dropping the bra as if burned by it, Darwin turned from the partially revealed woman and hastily stumbled for the bedroom door. He hurried through the doorway, almost slamming the door shut behind him. He backed off a step and stood there, staring at the closed door. He had no idea who the woman was. He had no idea how she had gotten there. He had no idea if they had -- he bit down hard on that thought and cut it off. "I think you have a serious problem, Darwin," he whispered to himself. Turning to head into the living room to think, his foot came down on something that squirmed. An animal howl accompanied his own shout of surprise as a large charcoal grey cat raced from under his feet. "Damn it Otaku," snapped Darwin. Then, immediately regretting taking his anger out on the cat, he said, "I'm sorry fella. Come here." The cat watched him warily from a distance. Darwin moved toward him, mouthing apologies, and picked him up. Holding the fluffy animal in his arms he entered the living room. Moving over to the couch, he flopped down, absently scratching his pet behind the ears. "What the hell is going on?" he asked the animal. The cat looked back at him and purred. "Right. I guess all you care about is getting a little breakfast." The cat gave a happy meow and wriggled from out of Darwin's grip. After giving the cat fresh water and food, Darwin padded back from the kitchen into the living room. He eyed the bedroom door. It was still closed. Apparently, his guest hadn't been disturbed by the commotion. He dropped into a chair and turned on the TV. Scanning through the channels he settled on one and let the program play unnoticed before him. Darwin mulled over the problem of the person in his bed. He remembered going to bed, decidedly alone, about eleven last night. He didn't recognize the person, at least what he had briefly seen of them. He didn't remember doing anything other than staying in and going to sleep. Why would someone break into his home and crawl into bed with him? It was crazy! Just as he was getting up his courage to go into the bedroom and confront the sleeper there was a knock at the front door. Darwin moved to the door and looked out the peephole. It was Bob. "What does he want?" mumbled Darwin as he opened the door. "You just getting up?" asked Bob brightly. Darwin looked at himself and realized that all he had on were pajama bottoms and a souvenir t-shirt from Carlsbad Caverns. "Yeah," he replied. "What time is it anyway?" "It's just after ten," answered Bob. "You going to let me in?" "Sure.

Sorry."The two moved to the living room. Darwin took a chair and Bob sat on the couch."What's wrong?" asked Bob, pushing his thick green framed glasses back up the bridge of his fleshy nose with a finger. "You seem kind of out of it." "Well," began Darwin, not exactly certain what he should say. Before he could make up his mind a husky voice interrupted him."Where do you keep the towels?"Both men turned towards the speaker. She stood at the entrance to the bedroom. Her black hair was disheveled, concealing her face. She had on a t-shirt displaying a flotilla of dieselpunk airships and nothing else."Um, in the closet next to the bathroom," answered Darwin, waving vaguely."Thanks," mumbled the woman sleepily, rumpling her hair. She padded tiredly off in the indicated direction. Both men watched her, noting how the t-shirt barely covered her. A tattoo on her right buttock tried to peak out with each step.She opened the linen closet and grabbed a couple of towels before entering the bathroom. After a few moments, they heard the shower turn on."You dog," said Bob with a conspiratorial chuckle. "Now I know why you look so tired. Where'd you meet her? Taking her to the party?" "What?" asked Darwin, blinking uncomprehendingly at his friend."The girl," answered Bob with a dramatic sigh. "The one in your shower. The one who was wearing your t-shirt. You never told me about her." "That's because I don't know who she is!" hissed Darwin, leaning forward to prop his elbows on his knees. "She was in my bed when I woke up this morning." "And this is a problem?" asked Bob jokingly. "I should have such problems." "But I have no idea who she is or how she got here." "You must have had one hell of a time last night." "I didn't!" screeched Darwin. Taking a steadying breath, he continued in a quieter tone. "I went to bed about eleven. Alone. When I woke up she was there with me." "So you're telling me that this woman snuck in here after you were asleep so she could crawl into bed with you?" asked Bob, incredulity in his voice and disbelief clearly written across his face. "I don't know," said Darwin, leaning back, exasperated. "It sounds ridiculous, but that's what happened." "Uh-huh," said Bob, obviously not convinced. "So what are you going to do?" "Do?" "Yeah, do. If, as you say, she broke in here why don't you call the police?" "And tell them what? I woke up with a strange woman I don't remember going to bed with. Somehow I don't think they'd see that as a crime." "What about ID?" "I found some clothes, but I didn't have time to search them." "What about now," asked Bob, getting to his feet. "I don't know," said Darwin, rising also. He looked toward the closed bathroom door, the shower could still be heard running. "What?" asked Bob, corralling his friend and pushing him ahead of him. "You're afraid of offending someone you say broke in here and attacked you?" "I didn't say she attacked me," grumbled Darwin. "Right, I forgot. She just broke in here to sleep next to you." "Knock it off."The two men entered the bedroom. The drapes were open now, letting in the morning sunlight. The pile of clothes was exactly where Darwin had found them. They walked over and Darwin searched through the pile but could find nothing beyond the clothes themselves. Guiltily, he tried to replace everything as it had been. "Why don't you wait in the living room and I'll get dressed," said Darwin. Bob shrugged and let himself be ushered from the room. Darwin closed the bedroom door and quickly changed. He dressed in jeans, an anime t-shirt, and tennis shoes. Glancing around the room, hoping to spy something else left by the mysterious stranger, he gave up and headed back to the living room. "Well, I'd love to stay and help you solve this little memory problem of yours," said Bob scratching at his thick blond beard. "But all I really came over for was to see if you'd finished the testing yet." "Not yet. I should be through by Wednesday. I'll stop by the office with the results then." "Good enough," said Bob, starting for the front door. "And you're coming to the party on Friday right?" "I don't know." "No excuses. Margie made me promise to get you there. If you're not going to show you can explain it to her." "Okay. I'll stop by for a while." "Great," said Bob, opening the front door. "And why don't you bring along your lady friend?" he added with a mischievous grin and wink. "She's not," began Darwin but his friend was already out the door and laughing as he headed down the stairwell. Darwin closed and locked the door. Water could still be heard coming from the bathroom. Otaku stalked across the floor and rubbed against his legs. "What am I going to do?" Darwin asked the cat. CHAPTER 02The water finally stopped.Darwin looked expectantly toward the bathroom door. He had been sitting on the couch in front of the TV trying to figure out what he was going to say to the woman when she emerged from the shower. He still had no idea. "Thanks, that was great," said the woman, walking from the bathroom. She

had one towel wrapped around her, again barely covering her. She was using another towel to dry her hair. "Who the hell are you?" blurted Darwin, jumping to his feet as anger over her cavalier attitude got the better of him. She stopped and looked at him from under the towel and through damp hair. "Mind if I get dressed first?" "Uh, sure. Sorry," answered Darwin, feeling foolish for apologizing, but being unable to help himself. He watched her resume drying her hair and head into his bedroom, shutting the door. "Idiot," he admonished himself, smacking his forehead with the heel of his hand and dropping back down onto the couch. After several minutes the bedroom door opened and the woman emerged. Darwin turned, ready to bark out his questions before he lost his nerve, but ended up staring at her with his mouth hanging open. The woman was dressed in the clothes he had found discarded on the floor. She had on a black shirt, the top buttons were undone, encouraging his eyes to linger on her chest. A pair of black jeans were tucked into plain mid-calf black boots. The wide black belt she wore emphasized her curvaceous figure. She moved gracefully over to the couch and sat down near Darwin, facing him, curling one leg under her. Her black hair framed her dusky face, reaching to just past her shoulders. She regarded him from intelligent black eyes perched above lips that were curled up at the edges in a slight smile. Darwin closed his mouth and swallowed. "I guess you have a few questions, Darwin," she said in a husky voice, her smile broadening and giving a twinkle to her eyes. "You know who I am?" responded Darwin, taken off guard. "I don't just turn up in anyone's bed," she replied coyly, lowering her eyes theatrically for a moment. Before Darwin could get out his angry retort, she raised a long-fingered hand to silence him. "I am really sorry for surprising you this way. Well, maybe not really sorry," she said mischievously, causing Darwin to blush. "But I am sorry. If there had been more time I would have approached things differently. As it is, we may not have enough time so I had to take some rather drastic measures." "Time? Time for what?" interrupted Darwin. "That's kind of complicated and a little hard to believe," she answered with a sigh. "The important thing is that it seems I got here before they did. Now we can see about getting you prepared and, hopefully, stopping them before it's too late." "What are you talking about!?" "Look," she said, leaning forward and resting a hand lightly on Darwin's leg. "I know you have tons of questions. I promise to answer as many as I can. However, your condo is hardly secure and I think it would be best that we continue this conversation somewhere I know we can't be overheard. I have an office near here. Why don't we go there and I will tell you why I am here and what this is all about?" "Are you totally nuts!" exclaimed Darwin leaping up. He began to pace back and forth. "You break in. You get into bed with me. When you wake up you act like you own the place. Now you want me to go with you to some place of yours so we can talk about some mysterious something because it is supposedly not safe here." "You have to be out of your mind!" Darwin stopped pacing and confronted the woman. "What I think I'll do is forget your lunatic ramblings and toss you out of here on your very cute behind. I don't know what institution you escaped from, but you can scurry on back to them and leave me out of your deluded fantasies. Now you can either leave on your own or, as much as I am loath to, I will remove you forcibly." "You think I have a cute butt?" asked the woman, quirking one elegant eyebrow. Darwin blinked at her in response, not certain how to respond to this. "Sorry, very cute," she corrected herself. Gathering himself, he moved past her to the front door and opened it. "If you just leave, I'm willing to forget the entire thing. Otherwise, I'm calling the police and having you arrested for criminal trespass. Am I making myself clear here?" "Your profile suggested you might react this way." "Profile?" started Darwin, before shaking his head angrily. "Nope. I don't want to know. Not interested. Please leave. Now." He indicated the open door. The woman untucked her leg and swiveled to face him, casually leaning against the back of the couch. She regarded him and started to twirl a lock of hair with her right hand. She gave every indication of calling his bluff. Darwin stared at her, trying to remain angry, trying not to let his curiosity push his reason aside. He was not winning. As much as he had meant everything he had said, carrying out his threats was another matter entirely. He didn't doubt he could overpower the woman sitting all too relaxed on his couch. However, he would really rather avoid the unpleasantness he was certain would follow that line of action. He could just imagine what the neighbors would be saying as he physically manhandled a woman from his home. Especially if he was asked why and had to tell them the absurd truth. Maybe he could bluff. Darwin closed the front

door, stopping just short of slamming it. He walked to the side table by the chair. Picking up his cell phone from where it was charging he unlocked it. He had no bars. *I always have bars.* He moved it around, but he continued to get no signal. He walked out to the kitchen. Still nothing. He headed to the bedroom. Still nothing. Puzzled, but unwilling to listen to the tiny voice chattering in the back of his mind about unseen observers – now fortified with malicious intent - he stalked from the bedroom and went over to his office. He woke up his desktop only to see a notice that it was offline. "You can't be offline," he said softly to himself, looking over at the blinking lights for his router. "The TV is working and it is the same service." "My office is only about ten minutes from here," said the woman from where she stood leaning against the office doorway, arms crossed casually before her. "All I ask is that you give me thirty minutes of your time to explain what is going on. If you don't believe me after that, we part ways never to see each other again. I promise." "You expect me to believe that?" asked Darwin, frustrated. He continued to check his phone and desktop, but there was no signal and the usual list of local Wi-Fi spots was empty. "I'm trying to help you whether you believe it or not," she said exasperatedly. "If you just give me a chance I can explain everything." "No!" shouted Darwin, frustration building to anger. He stormed towards the woman. "You want to help me? Get the hell out of my home!" Darwin grabbed the woman by her arms, fully intending to drag her to the front door and outside. However, he was stopped short when she didn't move. It wasn't that she pushed against him or anything, it was just that he didn't seem to have the strength to move her. Tightening his grip, he tried once more to push the woman aside but met with no success. She was far stronger than she appeared. Stronger than she should be able to be. "Look," she said in a reasonable tone of voice, stepping toward him. Rather than be chest to chest, Darwin released his grip and took a couple of steps back. "This is getting us nowhere fast. Why not make things easier on both of us and just come with me?" Darwin pondered the unspoken threat he felt lurked behind her reasonable exterior. His plans of forcing her out of his place physically didn't seem so foolproof at the moment. She had obviously sabotaged his phone and computer sometime last night. What else had she done? And why? His thoughts returned to the absurdity of the situation. If she meant to hurt him, why not just do it while he was sleeping? If she wanted to talk to him, why not just come by his door when he was awake? What was the purpose of breaking in and climbing into bed with him only to wake up and suggest they go somewhere to talk? Besides, as reluctant as he was to admit it, he wanted to know more about someone willing to go to these lengths to -- what? Deliver a warning about an impending dire threat to his well-being? Recruit him into a cult? Sign him up for a multi-level marketing pyramid scheme? Get a date? That last thought he pushed aside. *Focus Darwin.* The upside of agreeing to go with her was that he would have her out of his home. The downside was that he would be agreeing to go off with her to some secluded spot for --. Stopping himself from following that line of reasoning, he said, "Okay. Thirty minutes. No more. Once we are done with that I can return to my life and you can go wherever beautiful crazy people who break into homes go that is away from me." "Wonderful," she said, heading back to his bedroom. "Of course, you may change your mind after you hear what I have to say." She paused in the bedroom doorway, Darwin trailing after her. "Or you just might want to keep a beautiful woman with a very cute butt around," she continued, giving him a wink. "Just let me get my coat." Darwin stopped where he was, blushing. The woman emerged from his bedroom wearing a worn black leather bomber jacket. Darwin wondered where it had been and then thought better of asking. He grabbed his blue windbreaker from the coat tree by the front door. Putting it on, he opened the door. She smiled her thanks as he held open the door. She slid past him, needlessly close. Darwin asked, "Do you have a name or am I just going to have to call you 'hey you'?" "Patience." "No," said Darwin, turning around from locking the door. "I think I deserve that much right now." The woman chuckled musically. "Patience is my name sweetie." Darwin followed Patience down the stairwell, pausing on a landing to let two movers maneuver a couch into the recently sold unit one floor down and across the stairwell. As he went down the final flight of steps a voice called out above him. "Darwin? Darwin Mendelson?" Darwin turned around and stepped back. A slender woman with coppery skin wearing a cornflower blue blouse looked down at him. "Yes," he answered. "You don't remember me do you," she accused him, frowning. Darwin blinked several times, trying to jumpstart his brain.

She looked familiar, but he couldn't place where he had seen her before. "Yoki?" offered the woman helpfully. "Yoki Benally?" said Darwin, memory coming back to him all at once. "It's been how many years?" "Only two," she said breaking into a broad grin. She left the railing and came dancing down the short flight of stairs to him. She reached the bottom and moved over to give him a quick hug. "How are you? Do you live here too?" "Uh, yeah. I have the unit on the top left. I can't believe this. How are you?" Before she could answer one of the movers called down to her about where they should put the couch. "I have to go," she said, drifting back toward the stairs. "We'll have to get together sometime and catch up." "Sure," said Darwin. "How about tonight?" she asked, stopping a couple of steps up. "I'm going to need a break after unpacking all day." "Okay." "Stop by after six?" "Count on it." "Great. See you then." With that, Yoki disappeared up the stairs and into her condo. Darwin shook his head in wonderment and turned around. Patience stood waiting for him on the walkway in front of the building, hands in her jacket pockets, a pair of reflective sunglasses masking her eyes. "Friend of yours?" she asked neutrally as he joined her. "From college. What, this wasn't in your, what was it, profile of me?" he asked sarcastically. "It is now," she answered with a dazzling smile, turning to the parking lot. "Where are we going?" asked Darwin fishing his car keys out of his pocket. "We'll take my car if that's okay," she said, moving off to the right. "I can drop you back here when we're finished." Darwin hesitated, then sighed and followed her resignedly. She stopped at a black Scion FR-S. As she opened the door he commented, "You really have a thing for black don't you." "Not really," she replied. "It just worked out that way today. Besides, I thought you kind of have a thing for goth girls?" Darwin opened his mouth only to snap it closed and get into the car. They backed out of the space and headed for the parking lot exit. Patience pulled onto the street and they were off, neither one noticing the individual watching their departure with great interest.

CHAPTER 03 *I am trapped in a room with a crazy person. An armed crazy person. A crazy person who is expecting me to believe them. How did I get myself into this?*

Taking a moment, Darwin went over the last thirty minutes in his mind. After a brief ten-minute drive carried out in silence, they had arrived at a small business park set behind a rundown strip mall. Patience parked in a nearly vacant lot and they got out. Their destination was located between a real estate office and a local pet emporium specializing in saltwater fish. A stenciled sign on the frosted glass door held three lines in a fancy script: Patience Niazi; Security Specialist; Confidential Investigations. Patience unlocked the door and they went inside. The front part was a cozy waiting room. There were two doors on the wall across from the entrance. The one on the right had a brass plate that read PRIVATE. The door on the left had the word RESTROOM stenciled on it in bright white letters. A small folding table on the right held a coffee pot and a stack of disposable cups and paper towels. A battered mini-fridge hummed quietly underneath the table. A green leather couch and a few mismatched chairs were spaced around the circumference of the room. A coffee table squatted near the center of the floor, holding a variety of recent magazines. Patience unlocked the door marked PRIVATE and led him inside. A large wooden desk sat opposite the door, two comfortable looking chairs facing it. On the right-hand wall were floor to ceiling bookcases filled to overflowing. Along the left-hand wall rested a couple of filing cabinets and some lockers. A door was set into the wall behind the desk on the left, leading who knew where. Patience moved behind the desk and cracked the blinds over the windows to let in some light without really giving a view of what lay beyond. Darwin dropped his lanky frame into the left-hand chair. Patience moved from behind the desk and quietly shut the door leading into the waiting room. She threw a switch on the wall next to the door. Darwin looked around. The bookcases held a wide range of titles without any apparent organization. There were reference books on a number of natural sciences, what looked like some textbooks, a cluster of puzzle books and quite a few books dealing with investigation and surveillance. Interspersed among these were other random items – some magazines dealing with special effects, a dozen or so paperback novels, mainly mysteries, and a stack of take-out menus from local restaurants. Also, about half the books looked like they were dedicated to UFOs, ancient aliens, and psychic phenomena. He assumed the file cabinets contained case paperwork. The lockers probably held surveillance equipment and electronics. There was an unassuming framed license on the wall above the file cabinets. She's a private investigator, thought Darwin. "Take off your coat and make yourself

comfortable," said Patience, heading back behind the desk. She took her own advice and removed her jacket, draping it across the back of her chair. Darwin turned from tossing his jacket into the vacant chair next to him in time to see Patience unclipping a holster from her belt. "What's that?" he asked. "You've never seen a gun before?" she asked with a smile, removing the weapon from the holster. She deposited gun and holster into her top right drawer. "I've seen a gun before," replied Darwin, peeved at her comment. "I didn't know you had one with you is what I meant." "No reason you should have," said Patience, distractedly, unlocking the center drawer of the desk and removing a laptop. She inserted a cable resting on the desk into a port on the computer. Tapping in a series of quick commands, she nodded her head, satisfied with the results. "We should be secure now," she announced. "Wonderful," said Darwin, pulling out his phone and pointedly looking at the time. "The clock is running. Tell me what this is all about so that I can get back to my life." Patience sat back and looked at Darwin. The fingers of her right hand drummed nervously on the desktop as she collected her thoughts. Finally, she sat forward and folded her hand before her on the desk. She caught Darwin's green eyes with her black ones and held them. "Most of what I am about to tell you is going to sound impossible," she began. "Even more of it will sound absurd. However, it is all true. All I ask at this point is that you let me tell you everything without interruption. When I'm done you can ask me any questions you want or get up and walk out. Deal?" Darwin nodded reluctant approval. Taking a deep breath, Patience started her pitch. "Contrary to popular belief psychic powers do exist." Darwin snorted his derision and rolled his eyes. He slumped down in his chair, resting his head against his hand. Patience paused in her recitation, eyes narrowing. She waited a couple of heartbeats to see if there would be any more theatrics before continuing. "The general populace's ignorance of the reality is understandable. The subject has never been treated with any type of academic rigor. Most of what people believe they know comes from an abundance of charlatans and con-men not to mention Hollywood. Given the mountain of misinformation out there, it is not surprising that the few true instances of actual phenomena get swept aside and automatically discredited." Complicating things is the fact that everyone is psychic." Darwin frowned at this seeming contradiction in Patience's tale. "Think of it this way," said Patience. "Everyone can sing. Some people can't carry a tune to save their lives. Most people manage to do okay, but it is not something you would pay to hear. A few are pretty good. And only a handful are good enough to make you sit up and notice." Now imagine taking all of these people and putting them in one room and having them all sing at the same time. Have them sing different songs. How easy would it be to pick out that true singer from the crowd? Unless you are close by or they are truly belting out a tune, they get lost in the noise." Darwin found himself nodding in agreement with her. "Now think of a master craftsman," she continued. "They don't start off being able to paint The Great Wave or assemble a Maloof rocker. They start off doing simpler things and producing cruder products. Over time they develop their talents, refining their skills until they can generate these superior items." Finally, consider a professional athlete. They have an innate talent, but talent alone is not enough. They have to work to become proficient at what they do. They also have to continually practice to ensure they do not lose that level of expertise they worked hard to gain." Patience paused, relaxing a little as she saw Darwin following her arguments. "Psychic abilities share a lot of features from these examples. They also have their own unique issues that prevent people from being aware that they exist." First off, everyone broadcasts to some degree within the psychic spectrum. Just part of being a person. This creates an ocean of background noise flooding the psychic landscape making it difficult to hear your own psychic voice as you spend a lot of energy blocking out the static." Like learning to tie your shoes or fly fish, using your psychic abilities is a learned skill. However, there really aren't any teachers out there so each individual has to fumble along in isolation trying to develop a mental muscle they aren't aware of having let along knowing how to use it." Even if you were lucky enough to find a teacher, they probably couldn't help you with your particular ability." Patience gained some enthusiasm as she saw the question on Darwin's face. "Most likely, any teacher would have a talent different from yours so you could have a telekinetic trying to teach a pyromancer – not very helpful. And even if they had the same talent, we have yet to develop the language to tell someone how we perform some of these psychic feats leaving us no way to instruct an individual." So, given

all these obstacles, is it any wonder that the number of people able to manifest any amount of psychic talent is so small and the capabilities they display so minor?" Darwin reluctantly nodded agreement. "Now add in one more factor," said Patience. "In all these examples, the superior individual excels in one area. You don't really have a lot of piano virtuosos winning marathons. Sometimes you have a Michelangelo who has superior skills in arguably related fields – painting and sculpture. Far rarer is a da Vinci with genius in areas as divergent as mechanics and painting." "One characteristic of most psychic individuals is that they display a single talent. Some believe this is because the use of whatever talent they have engrains certain pathways in their brain preventing them from channeling their abilities in other ways. Like a Michelangelo, there are some who can manifest closely aligned abilities, but usually to a lesser power level. Extremely rare is an individual who can – or has the potential to – manifest significant abilities in a wide range of areas." "An individual such as you." Darwin opened his mouth to comment but snapped it shut. Patience stared at him for a moment and then continued. "This next part is harder to believe," she said, deliberately refusing to acknowledge Darwin's incredulous look. "Employing focused psychic abilities has a calming effect on the background turbulence in the area around the user. This, in turn, allows them to harness a greater degree of their abilities. It also has the side effect of attracting the attention of beings from another dimension. "These beings have no physical presence, existing within a realm composed entirely of psychic energy. When the background noise falls below a certain threshold, these beings can traverse the dimensional barrier and enter our world. Fortunately for us, they cannot directly interact with anything physical and as the psychic practitioner stops using their ability, the background noise increases and the entity either retreats back into its home dimension, if it can, or is destroyed." "However, on occasion, the entity is able to attach itself to the psychic and use them as an anchor to maintain their presence within our world. They battle the individual for possession of their mind and, if they win, relegate the original occupant of the body to the status of a prisoner within their own mind, feeding off of their thoughts and memories until after a while there is nothing left of the original person." "Once established in their host body, they will try and bring others of their kind over into other bodies. Luckily for us, they basically need to reproduce the process that allowed them to cross over, but with another gifted person present which compounds the problem making a full-scale invasion rather impractical." "Sadly, these entities have developed a way to reduce the psychic background noise within an area, making transitions easier and even allowing them to occupy less than ideal hosts. While inefficient and time-consuming, this process does offer a singular advantage which makes it worth their while." "Through this process, they are no longer dependent on a gifted individual using their talents to establish a connection. All they need to do is have that individual within proximity of the weakened area they created and they can launch an assault to take them over." "The more gifted the individual, the better the host they are so a premium is placed on special individuals." "An individual like yourself is priceless to them." Patience paused in her recitation. She leaned back in her chair and plucked at a thin gold chain about her neck. As she pulled on it, a tiny pendant emerged from her blouse. Her left hand played with the small crescent moon hanging from the chain. When she continued, her voice had a faraway sound to it. "There is a group operating somewhere in this area. They have already brought over one of their more powerful individuals. They need you and your abilities to provide a host for one of their leaders. Once that individual has crossed over, they plan on establishing a permanent breach between their dimension and ours. If that happens, they will be able to start flooding into our world and we would have precious little chance of stopping them." Dropping the pendant, she leaned forward and earnestly continued. "The more powerful the alien entity, the more powerful the host they require. The aliens make use of psychic abilities the way we make use of physical ones. However, most human bodies can't stand the strain of psychic manipulation on a scale the aliens are used to. If the entities are not careful, they can easily overload and burn out their hosts." "The only way to stop this leader from coming over, possessing you and creating the breach is for me to trigger your abilities and then train you to combat the entity." As memory faded, Darwin looked at Patience. She sat in her chair, teeth worrying her lower lip as she nervously watched him. He couldn't deny the sincerity in her speech, but seriously? To say her story was unbelievable was to

muster a level of understatement he didn't think was possible. He was supposed to be some kind of psychic da Vinci targeted by an other-dimensional Ming the Merciless set on conquering Earth and the only way to stop it was for her to unlock his hidden abilities and train him in the ways of the Force? He was suddenly very much aware of being alone with someone who sounded totally off their nut. Not only that, he had gone with her where no one knew where he was. And then there was the gun hiding all too close at hand in her desk. If he was going to get out of this alive, he was going to have to play along. At least until he was well away from her. Then he would figure out what to do. "If what you're saying is true," said Darwin slowly. "And I'm not saying it isn't, how do you know all of this? What does this have to do with you? How do these entities know about me? What does this have to do with your sneaking into my place?" Darwin trailed off as Patience abruptly stood up. "We've got company," she said flatly. CHAPTER 04 "What?" asked Darwin, turning to look over his shoulder. Patience stood and removed her gun and holster. She placed the gun in the holster, clipping that behind her. She moved around the desk, headed toward Darwin. "What are you doing?" asked Darwin, getting to his feet. "Preparing for the worst," said Patience. "You might want to get your jacket on and get ready to leave, quickly." "Why? I didn't hear anyone come in. Did you have a premonition or something?" he asked sarcastically, reaching for his jacket. "Maybe I just looked at the security cameras," she answered, nodding toward her laptop. Darwin blushed. The sound of the front door banging open was accompanied by the noise of a couple of people hustling into the waiting room. Shortly afterward, the knob to the office rattled as someone tried to open it. A dull thud followed this as whoever was on the other side threw their shoulder against the door trying to force it open. "Look," said Patience, facing Darwin. "They'll want to take you alive. That gives us an advantage. Our first priority is to get you out of here. Once we do that I can deal with these guys." The door rattled in the frame as someone started kicking it. "Wait a minute," said Darwin, holding up his hands. "This is all a little hard to believe. First, you break into my place. Then you spin some outlandish fairy tale about psychic powers and beings from another dimension. Now you're telling me that there are people trying to kidnap me. Get real." "I think you have some pissed off clients out there and are just using them to try and make me believe your cockamamie story. Well, it isn't working." "I have no idea what your game is, but I am done playing along. You had your say. I listened, but this is where we part ways." Patience grabbed Darwin's arm as he started toward the door. "I don't have time right now to convince you," she said, in a steely tone. "But you have to trust me." "No!" snapped Darwin jerking his arm free of her grip, temper flaring. "I don't." "You do if you want to live," stated Patience flatly. "Those guys outside don't care if you believe me. All they care about is collecting you in one piece to use as a host." Before Darwin could protest further, the office door came crashing in, lock smashed. Two men burst in through the doorway, guns in hand. The men fanned out to either side of the door, their pistols focused on Darwin and Patience. A third man strolled through the ruined doorway, hands in the pockets of his beige overcoat. Like the other two, he was dressed in a conservative blue business suit. He was easily the tallest of the group at six and a half feet, but he did not share the overly-developed muscular build of his companions. "Well, well, well," said the tall man, the apparent leader of the group. "Look what we have here." Patience slid between Darwin and the tall man. "We're just here for the guy," growled the man standing next to the bookcases. "Give him up and there's no need for us to hurt you." "Martin," admonished the tall man, shaking his head sadly. "I do not believe that the young lady will just allow us to take Mr. Mendelson without putting up a fight. After all, as an augmented agent of the Observers, she is sworn to oppose us at every turn, even unto death if necessary." The men on either side of the leader exchanged startled glances. "Her?" growled Martin in disbelief. "An agent? You've got to be mistaken." "Yeah," chimed in the third man. "I've heard stories about those guys. She doesn't look like any super-powered protector." Patience gave the man a condescending smile. "Don't let her look fool you, gentlemen," said the leader. "The Herald was quite specific." The two men tightened their grips on their weapons and sized Patience up once more. Their inability to reconcile her appearance with their leader's claims was plainly written on their faces. However, they both adjusted the aim of their weapons toward Patience versus trying to cover both her and Darwin. "What do we do?" asked Martin. "That is entirely up to Mr. Mendelson here," said the

leader reasonably, removing his left hand from his overcoat and waving toward Darwin. "If he comes along peacefully, I see no reason to escalate this situation into violence." However," he continued in a harder voice, pulling his right hand from his overcoat and aiming the revolver in it squarely at Patience's head. "Should he decide to be uncooperative, we will be left with no choice but to kill this fine looking woman before removing him by force." "What do you say Darwin?" asked the man, cocking the hammer on his revolver for emphasis. "Do you really want her death on your conscience?" Before Darwin could answer, Patience acted. Placing a hand on Darwin's chest, she pushed him toward the corner by the bookcases and her desk. He went sailing through the air, impacting the bookcase and tumbling to the floor, stunned. At the same time, she pulled her Ruger Blackhawk and fired at the man who had just entered the back door in an attempt to take her by surprise. Three rounds hit him in the chest, stopping him and pushing him back. Two more rounds connected with his head, spreading his brains across the wall. As the man's lifeless body collapsed to the floor, the three men facing her opened fire. Their bullets passed harmlessly through the space where she had been standing, impacting the wall behind her desk and shattering the window above it. Patience cracked open the cylinder and dropped the spent ammunition, sacrificing the remaining round in favor of using a speed loader to reload. She snapped the cylinder closed with a practiced snap of her wrist. Patience finished rolling to her right and popped up into a kneeling position. As she stood, she fired on the man closest to her. Bullets hit him in the knee, hip, shoulder, and head. The man dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. "Kill her!" screamed the leader. The remaining two men adjusted their aim and fired. Patience sprang upward, cartwheeling through the air to land behind her desk. As she did, she emptied her gun into Martin's broad chest. The stocky man staggered backward, gun falling from his hand, before slamming into the wall and sliding to the floor. "You're out of bullets bitch," spat the leader. "But not tricks," retorted Patience. She dropped her gun onto her desk and sprang across it at her final enemy. The leader fired his last round. Patience landed in front of the leader and slapped the gun from his hand. The man backpedaled and reached inside his overcoat. He pulled out a pair of butterfly swords and adopted an aggressive stance. Looking at her, he smiled. Patience glanced down to see a dark stain spreading on her shirt just below her ribs. Frowning, she reached into a back pocket and removed a small metal rectangle. With an expert flick of her wrist, she snapped open the balisong. "Mine is bigger," said the leader mockingly wiggling the swords in his hands. "And it comes with a friend." Patience snapped her arm straight down and grasped the short metal tube that dropped into it from the gravity holster strapped to her forearm. Depressing a button on the cylinder's base caused it to telescope into a short stick. Silently she advanced. The two exchanged a rapid series of strikes and parries too fast for human beings to be moving. After five minutes the two broke apart and examined each other. Patience had a hairline cut on her right cheek and a solid slice on her right thigh. The leader was missing the smallest finger from his left hand. A half dozen stab wounds leaked blood down his left arm from the elbow to his wrist. The left side of his jaw was cut open down to the bone. His right wrist hung at an unnatural angle. With a snarl, the leader shook his right arm, aligning the shattered bones in his wrist before tightening his grip on his sword. A soft glow surrounded the wound. Duller glows haloed the stab wounds on his arm. The cut on his face dripped blood, soaking the collar of his coat. "Not that strong then," said Patience, breathing hard. "Strong enough to finish one low ranking agent," said the leader with venom. Before he could attack anew, he let out a gurgling wheeze. His swords dropped from his hands as he clutched at his throat where Patience's balisong protruded. Patience watched as the glow about his wounds flickered off and feebly appeared around the knife in his throat. The man fell to his knees as the glow stuttered and winked out. He fell forward, dead. "You should have saved the banter for after the fight," said Patience tiredly. "Good advice," said Martin, pounding a massive fist into the bloody wound on Patience's side. The blow sent her careening across the room to slam into the lockers. Her baton dropped from nerveless fingers. Pressing an arm against her injured side, she faced her attacker. Martin stood shakily facing her. The front of his suit was blasted away where Patience had shot him. The bulletproof vest underneath his shirt showed a small bloodstain. Face set in a determined grimace, he stalked toward her, intent on pressing his advantage. Patience waited for him to reach her. Martin jackhammered a punch to her head.

Patience swayed aside and grabbed his wrist, twisting his arm. Martin staggered, thrown off balance. Patience spun him about before changing her grip and wrenching his shoulder to stop him in his tracks. As he slammed to a stop, arm held at an awkward angle, she smashed her other hand into his elbow. A thunderous cracking sound accompanied his screech of pain. Patience let go of Martin and circled left. His arm hanging limply at his side, Martin tried to keep pace with her. She nimbly moved behind him and lashed out with her foot at the side of his leg. His knee shattered and he dropped to the ground, roaring in pain before laying there whimpering in agony. Patience strode over and rolled the large man onto his back. Slapping aside his feeble efforts to defend himself, she grabbed him by the collar. She lifted him up and locked eyes with him. "How did you know I worked for the Observers? Who's your boss? Where are you located?" His mouth opened and closed like a gaffed fish. As he started to answer his eyes widened. Body stiffening, Martin began to vibrate and thrash. "No," whispered Patience in annoyance as a dark nimbus slowly expanded around his skull. In seconds his head was covered. A moment later, the nimbus imploded along with Martin's head. "Damn," swore Patience, dropping the corpse to the floor. She stood up and looked around. Her office was littered with the bodies of her attackers. A groan from the corner reminded her of the other survivor of their encounter. Patience made her way to where Darwin was sitting on the floor, rubbing the knot on the back of his head. She squatted down and peered at him. "You okay?" she asked solicitously. "I guess so," said Darwin, uncertain. "Let me see," she said, turning Darwin so she could get a look at the lump on his head. Gently, she probed the swelling. "Ow," hissed Darwin, flinching from her touch. "It's okay. Just a bump. What happened?" "Later," she said, helping him to his feet. "Right now, I'm going to take you back to your place. Then I'm coming back here and cleaning things up. After that, we can continue our talk." "What happened with ... " began Darwin before stopping. He looked around the office, taking in the carnage. His stomach heaving, he turned and vomited noisily. After a few minutes of dry heaving, he rose from his knees and wiped a shaky hand across his mouth. "Did you," he began to ask before catching sight of Martin's headless corpse. His eyes grew wide and his breath started coming out in ragged gasps. Gulping, he glanced away only to focus on the leader, laying on his side with a knife in his throat. "I don't feel so good," mumbled Darwin. Patience caught him as his eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped, unconscious. Lifting Darwin in her arms, she carried him to the chair behind her desk. Gently, she set him down. She checked that he was okay, just overcome by shock. Frowning, she walked over to the body keeping the back door open. She pulled it inside, glancing around to see if anyone was about. As expected, it was quiet. There was a reason she had established her office in this area. Of course, this kind of violence hadn't really been part of that plan. She closed the door behind her, cutting off the bright sunshine. Moving purposefully, Patience headed into the waiting room and locked the front door. It wouldn't do to have a potential client walk in right at the moment. Going back to the office, she stopped in the doorway. Naturally, she would check the bodies, but she didn't expect to find much. The window would need replacing. A sheet of plastic and some duct tape from one of the lockers would do as a temporary repair. The office door would need to be replaced. The doorframe as well. Cleaning the place would be a chore, but she had been thinking of repainting anyway. And then there were the bodies. "I hope the Dumpster out back is big enough," she said.

CHAPTER 05 Darwin swallowed the aspirin. Crumpling the paper cup, he tossed it into the wastebasket. He still had a killer headache, but the aspirin should help with that. Eventually. He looked at himself in the medicine cabinet mirror. A stubble of growth covered his chin and cheeks. His green eyes looked fatigued, with the beginnings of dark circles setting in beneath them. His reddish-brown hair lay in an unruly mop atop his head. Rubbing a finger along the slight bump on his nose, he shook his head ruefully. He was having trouble accepting the events of the past hour. Had people really tried to kidnap him? Had the woman sitting in his living room really killed them? Could it be possible that she wasn't crazy after all? That what she had told him was true? *About the only thing I do know is that I have no idea what is happening.* Sighing, Darwin left the bathroom and headed back to the living room. He heard water running in the kitchen. He headed there. "Oh my God!" Patience stood by the sink, her shirt laying on the counter. She was using a hand towel to clean an ugly ragged gash on her left side. A purpling bruise haloed the gash, blood leaking from

the torn edges. "It looks worse than it is," said Patience without looking up. "Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?" asked Darwin. "It's only a flesh wound. It may look bad, but I'll be okay." "A flesh wound? As in you got shot?" "Grazed really," she confirmed, rinsing the towel before cleaning the wound further. She pressed the damp towel over the wound to staunch the flow of blood. "You have any gauze?" "I should," said Darwin, heading back to the bathroom. He returned carrying gauze, bandages, tape, an elastic bandage, scissors, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and a tube of antibacterial cream. He dumped his arm full of medical supplies onto the counter next to Patience's shirt. "Let's take a look at that," he said, bending over to get a better look at her wound. "Sure," she answered. She relinquished the towel to Darwin and raised her arm over her head to give him clear access to her side. Darwin hissed as he examined the gash. He cautiously dabbed at it with the towel before setting that aside. He picked up the hydrogen peroxide and splashed some out onto a clean corner of the towel. "This might sting," he warned her, gingerly applying the antiseptic to her wound. Surprisingly, the injury did not foam. Doing a second pass, Darwin set aside the towel, satisfied. He picked up the antibiotic cream and applied a liberal dose to the gash. With the wound cleaned and treated, Darwin tore open a couple of large gauze pads and gently placed them over the gash. He tore off some strips of tape and secured the gauze. He picked up the roll of dark purple self-adhering bandage and covered the gauze, wrapping the elastic bandage around her torso a few times. "Thank you," said Patience as Darwin finished his ministrations. "Shouldn't you go to the hospital?" "I'd rather avoid that, thanks. Too many questions I really can't answer." Darwin looked from the bandage to her face. In the process, it finally registered that she wasn't wearing a shirt, only her bra. He gazed appreciatively at her revealed physique for a moment before becoming embarrassed. Hastily he looked away and began fumbling with the medical supplies he had brought out. Noticing his reaction, Patience smiled to herself. "Hand me my shirt?" she asked, letting a hint of her amusement color her tone. "Sure," replied Darwin, passing it to her. He finished gathering the medical supplies and returned them to the bathroom as Patience dressed. "What now?" he asked, returning to the living room. "Well, that depends," answered Patience, crossing her arms. "On?" "You. We never finished our talk. However, I think you may have heard enough and definitely seen enough to decide if you want to learn more. If you don't, I'll leave you alone as promised. I'll still try and protect you, but it will be a lot tougher." "I'm hoping you want to hear more. I'd really like to help you. Not just to stop them, although that is important as we'll hopefully discuss. I'd also like you to realize your potential." "More importantly, I feel like I know you from all the research I've done. Meeting you has only confirmed most of what I thought. You're an interesting guy. One I'd like to get to know better when this is all over." "If you're interested." Darwin gaped at her, not knowing what to say. He felt his face turning red. Words died stillborn in his throat. "Tell you what," said Patience before the silence stretched to an uncomfortable length. "Why don't I give you some time to think things over? You've been hit with a lot of information all at once. You probably need time to yourself to digest things." Darwin nodded gratefully at the out provided to him. "I don't think they'll try again so soon after their first attempt to nab you," said Patience, picking up her jacket from where she had tossed it on a chair. "They'll want to know what happened and that should buy us some time." "Why don't I head back to my office and handle things there? Maybe I can find something to give us a lead. I'll take care of that, get cleaned up and come back here later to see what you've decided. How about I come back around eight?" "Sure," agreed Darwin, relief evident in his voice. "What are you going to tell the police?" "Nothing," said Patience, headed to the door. "Getting them involved would only complicate things. Besides, they wouldn't believe the truth. One thing you're going to have to accept is that this situation falls outside the bounds of normal law enforcement. The fewer people involved, the better for all concerned." Darwin mulled this over, clearly not convinced. "Okay, for now. At least until I have time to think things through." "Fair enough," agreed Patience, opening the door. She paused in the doorway and faced Darwin. "I am glad you are okay. I would have preferred this hadn't happened, but maybe it is for the best. We'll see." Darwin watched Patience descend the stairs before closing his door. He took a moment to rest his head against its cool surface. He closed his eyes against the throbbing in his head, wishing it away. The pain ignored his silent pleas. Sighing, he pushed himself from the door and headed for

the couch. He dropped bonelessly and lay there face down. After a minute, he rolled onto his side. Grabbing the TV remote, he switched on the set and turned on an old B-movie. Letting the show play he tried to relax. His thoughts raced aimlessly over the events of the morning, hopscotching across images and ideas. Patience in nothing but a towel. Psychic powers. Men with guns. Yoki bouncing up the stairs. Patience biting her lip. Headless bodies. Bob laughing. Other dimensional beings. Patience's necklace glittering against her dusky skin in the cleft of her --.

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In the world of Guise, everyone is not whom they appear to be except perhaps for Darwin Mendelson. He is a regular guy. An author and software tester. He leads an ordinary life.

Until the morning he wakes up with a strange woman in his bed.

Patience Niazi is a private investigator assigned to protect Darwin from people who want to exploit his unique talents. Talents he doesn't know he has.

Now he is being hounded by a secret organization of other dimensional body possessing entities intent on using him as a host for their leader, so they can launch an all-out invasion of the Earth.

If Darwin can stay alive and out of his enemies' hands long enough, he may be able to use what training Patience can give him to save himself, his friends and his world.

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