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He'd always been a strange little boy, sickly, scrawny, a newt in a world of giants. It wasn't like he'd been born handicapped physically; he was just the runt of the litter. It was like he never got the opportunity to grow physically, always fighting colds, phenomena, and even scarlet fever.

He often felt that he didn't fit into his adopted family because there wasn't anything special about him. His foster parents had other kids and they always had so many animals they took in that he couldn't keep track of all their names. School was very hard for him. He couldn't comprehend as well as the other children his age, and his teachers called him 'slow'. His father would hear known of that, and continued to force the local school to progress his son even though his grades didn't warrant it.

The boy didn't get along with anyone in school, didn't have any particular friends. He ate alone in the large lunchroom and usually sat in the back of the class so the teacher wouldn't notice him much. He participated in class only when forced to, and that was usually after much snickering from his fellow students. He hated the humiliation in answering questions improperly and often wished he had the ability of invisibility during school hours.

His humiliation wasn't just limited to school, though.

He was also a chronic bed wetter, which only got worse the older he got. Well into junior high school, he continued the terrible habit much to his mother's annoyance. She didn't have to yell and scream for him to see how infuriated she was. He was forced to stand there naked while she stripped the bed and washed everything he soiled. Only after she was done with that task, would he be able to wash.

With her assistance.

Running the bath with scalding water, she forced her son to sit in it while she roughly washed his legs, thighs and penis. His shame and discomfort only intensified when he became erect. His mother would act astonished and taken aback at his condition, threatening to beat his 'sin stick' with a ruler if he didn't control himself. He usually found his ability to control his condition limited, and only after a severe beating, and near drowning by his mother, would his erection disappear. But always, there was something about the situation that titillated him...enticed him...

The older he got, the more he realized how much he didn't fit in anywhere...at school, at home, even at church. He often went to bed

wishing that he'd just die in his sleep and alleviate him of the trouble of growing up. He often wondered why his parents ever adopted him. He was so unlike any of his siblings. Even sitting at the dinner table amidst all the talk of athletic achievements, academic excellents, and daily accomplishments, he was merely nondescript. Only taking up space at the table...forging for food against much stronger and more affordable creatures.

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Lisa Arnet woke as the sunlight bled through her partially drawn curtains.

Ever since her abduction by two tormentors earlier in the year, she'd had trouble sleeping through the night and last night was no different. The dreams that came in horrifying waves were always the same, only last night they were a little different...more intense.

Brett Meirs and Alejandro Martinez once again crept into her nightmares. Two killers whose faces changed throughout her dream. They were comforting – smiling family men - greeting her with charm, disarming her hardened defenses. Then they grew dark, their faces becoming intense and threatening. Suddenly their features become distorted, morphing into a grotesque clown, menacing her with a huge butcher knife.

A clown?

She awoke with a start, drenched in sweat, her hand and wrist throbbing from where she'd shattered it escaping her captive's bonds. Rubbing her hand, trying to will the numbness from it, Arnet suddenly felt a shudder and pulled the covers up over her body.

Leaning to her left, she reached under her pillow and breathed a sigh of relief when her good hand fell onto the Glock. She pulled it out and rested it on her lap while continuing to caress her wrist and hand. She tried wiggling her fingers but felt only the rush of pins and needles surge through them.

Damnit...wake up!

She violently shook her hand, as if to wring it dry, and heard it snap. Rubbing it more furiously now, she could feel the semblance of feeling returning.

Relief flowed through her as she laid back down looking up at the ceiling.

Just a dream...Meirs is dead...Alejandro is dead...just a dream...

But the numb feeling in her hand wasn't a fantasy, but a remnant of her ordeal. No matter how hard she attempted to push that incident out of her head, how many shrinks dissected her, the dreams and her hand would never let her forget. Both were singed into her core.

Arnet was sure no one could ever comprehend what she was experiencing.

Oh sure, Jack Saunders – her superior at the FBI had an inkling. After all, he was smart enough to track her down and save her in Mexico. It'd only be a matter of time before Saunders would figure out where she'd been hiding. And he'd come out to the house without calling. He knew her, knew she'd never answer the phone. Smart enough to understand her.

But even he didn't know what haunted her.

No one suspected the sheer nerve it took for her to close her eyes at night or to get out of bed in the morning. She knew how everyone within the Bureau perceived her, whispered about her behind her back. She was that fearless Special Forensic Agent for the FBI

The fearless bitch with the brass balls.

If only they knew.

If only they understood her vulnerability and weaknesses. But that was something Arnet never had, and never would, allow anyone close enough to see. Men were always looking for flaws in the female agents. The fact she was a raven-haired beauty only intensified their search. Certainly someone this good looking couldn't possibly be that smart and stoic as well, now could she?

Arnet was always "on", always wearing her mask to keep everyone away from her failings. She would show no flaws, constantly gazing at everyone without flinching, giving an aura of always being in charge.

Perhaps this was the reason everything seemed so hard, why the fall seemed so far. No longer able to put up the front, her façade, Arnet felt her world crashing down around her. Everything that gave her reason to get out of bed everyday had been stripped from her in a single moment.

Feeling tears running down her cheeks, staining her pillow, she suddenly hated her existence. Hated what got her here.

Wiping the tears with the palms of her hands, she sat up in bed and took one last look around. Items marking her years in college and the academy dotted the landscape of the room. So much work, so much hardship, just to get to this point in her life.

Tears flowed more prominently now. All thoughts of Brett Meirs and of Mexican mass murderer Alejandro Martinez were only cloudy images

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now in the bright sunlight. But Arnet knew what awaited her again when the night embraced her. *They* would be back. Back to taunt and punish her.

Taking her pistol into her left hand, she raised the muzzle up to her temple.

Brass balls indeed.