

A person wearing a dark hat and a purple jacket is walking away from the camera down a narrow, dimly lit alleyway at night. The alleyway is flanked by buildings with various signs and lights. In the background, a sign for a restaurant is visible, along with a sign that says "HT BUS 16 SEATS". The overall atmosphere is gritty and urban.

**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 21

by Jeff Somers

21.

I was being eaten alive by an old woman in the dark, one fucking bite at a time.

So far she'd nailed me three times: The first nip in the neck, and once each on my already-bloody hand and arm. She kept creeping up on me in the dark, and her green, muddy teeth were surprisingly sharp, like dogs' teeth.

The dark: I'd never been in such complete darkness before. The sky had scummed over with clouds, and the moon was hidden away. There were no lights anywhere, and I'd been crushed under a thick, complete blanket of *nothing*. No noise, no light, my eyes finding the vague, indistinct edges of things and sending me crashing into walls and tripping over every bump. Alt James had cleaned out my pockets; I didn't even have my lighter.

The skinny bitch, she could fucking see in the *dark*, the way she moved.

I'd stayed inside the building, figuring that having a wall to back against was better than wandering the streets in pitch dark, where other ... people might be lurking. I at least had a vague memory of the layout of the immediate room and hallway, and I'd found something that felt like a rusty metal pole, maybe three feet long and more

comforting than effective. I hunkered down in one corner down near the rusty garage doors and stared blindly into the murk, eyes aching with the effort to spot her white hair a second or two before she darted in close, teeth snapping, hands pushing.

I told myself that all I had to do was survive the night without being entirely digested. It didn't make me feel any better.

I was not a good man. I knew that, but I certainly did not deserve *this* bullshit, and the fact that the universe—all of them—saw fit to dole this out to me made me want to burn the world down. I'd spent my life seeking rules, ways to do what I wanted, needed to do without being a virus, without being destructive. To find a way for it all to serve a purpose. If this was my reward, I'd wasted my time. I could have been enjoying myself.

I heard her, suddenly, a snuffle across the room, muffled but not before I'd heard her. She was right in my line of sight, up on top of the loading dock, three or four feet higher than me, creeping close to the floor. I got up onto the balls of my feet, balancing, but didn't try to displace; she'd shown me she could see better in the dark than I could, so there was no point. I had wall to my back and sides where I was; she could only come at me from the front. If I was patient and lucky I might finally clock her in the head, be able to fall asleep before sunrise.

I sat and listened, trying to keep my breathing slow and shallow, kept my hands loose and let one end of the rusty metal rod rest on the floor between my knees. I kept my head turned towards the spot I'd heard her, making her think I was stupid, and waited, tense, holding my breath. I didn't have much experience with this sort of thing; my gig was to intimidate people with The Bumble crowding them from behind, then making them hurt professionally, expert pressure,

sudden violence, and you walked out onto the street to have a smoke and get in the car while your client lay in a pool of their own piss, screaming. Clean and professional, purposeful. Not shivering in the dark forever, fighting off this crazy bitch.

I heard her again, somehow *above* me, and tried to roll away from the wall. I was too slow, and she was on me, light as air but pushing her snarling, greasy mouth towards me, enveloping me in a cloud of rot and copper. I swung the rod straight up, not managing much force, but connected solidly with her and got a squawk of rage for my trouble. I pushed myself to my feet and swung it again in a descending arc, but I hit the concrete floor and nothing else, a shock slamming up my arms and settling into my lower back in the form of a nice, burning ache.

Spinning slowly, I held the rod out in front of me, trying to see some sign of her. Then I froze, cocking my head, and heard it again: Voices, whispered, inside the building.

It spooked my little cannibal, too; I heard her moving quickly for the first time as she rushed out of the room, a startled stray cat, and for the first time all night I was confident of being alone in the darkness. After a second of triumphant relief, I realized that this hadn't actually improved things all that much, and started taking slow steps towards the raised platform of the loading dock, where I could use it as a guide to the short flight of steps leading me up towards the exit. I had to move carefully, but I tried to hurry, because I wanted to reach the doorway before anything else did.

It was sweaty work, trying to hold your breath and drag yourself silently through the murk. I didn't hear anything else by the time I found the lip of the dock and started to my right, one hand on the cold stone to make sure I didn't go sailing off into the corner, but

after a few steps I heard them again: More than one person, hissing at each other, a group of people trying to stay stealthy and quiet and failing almost completely. I wondered if my friend the Cannibal might not reach out to them first, drop in on them for a little snack. I'd know by the sudden and persistent screams of horror and *what the fuck*.

The steps were pretty much where I expected them to be, making me think I might even get used to being blind, given enough time.

I took them slowly, careful, sweat and blood sizzling on my skin. When I reached the smooth floor of the dock, I inched my way to the right until my outstretched hand found the wall, tracing my fingers along the rough cinder blocks until I found the corner. A few fumbblings to the left and I had the open doorway in front of me, the air somehow feeling thinner, less dense than in the rear. I made sure of my grip on the rusty metal rod and hesitated; whoever this was, they probably saw better in the dark than I did, probably knew the layout of the building better—were used to living in this craphole abandoned world. But I couldn't hide in the loading dock—as the frail old woman who'd been fucking *eating* me for the last few hours had proven, that was a recipe for getting my ass kicked.

Swallowing bile and fear, I stepped into the chasm that was the hallway, pitch black and endless.

I could hear them again, tense whispers, several voices. Knowing that I could hear them but they had no idea where *I* was gave me some comfort—if I managed to stay quiet and kept my ears open, I might survive. Then I imagined spending the rest of my life—fuck, the rest of *forever* like this, being hunted every night, starving until I was hunting the old bitch right back. It got me depressed again.

Creeping along the hallway, I tried to picture it and estimate how

far the small elevator lobby was. The yawning, empty shafts might be useful if I had a group who weren't much better in the dark than I was—get their back to them and menace them, try to make them take that fatal step back, let the building do some work for me.

It wasn't a very good plan, but it was the best I could do with my available tools: a rusty metal rod, the possible element of surprise, and some open airshafts.

I didn't have a lot of time; I had to get to the elevator lobby before my new friends did. Fixing my memory of the hallway in my mind, I started forward at a steady pace, swinging the rod in front of me like a blind person to catch any obstacles or fucking vampires or what the hell before I stumbled over them. I felt raw and bloody, festering infections starting to boil under my skin—my new friend did not, I was pretty sure, have the best dental hygiene, and apparently being fucking immortal didn't do anything for your overall upkeep. I wondered if people broke bones and spent eternity limping.

After ten or twelve steps I felt the space around me change, and figured I'd found the lobby. I changed the rod to my right hand and swung it out horizontally from my hip and kept walking, smacking it into the far wall after a few more steps. I found the wall with my hands and moved in carefully, judging the approximate center of the room by memory. With my back against the wall, I had the hallway to my right and the airshafts directly in front of me. There was no time to double check my memory. I took the metal rod in my hands and banged it hard against the floor. Just once.

The voices, separated from me by a couple of walls, stopped.

I gave it a few seconds more and then let the jagged edge of the pipe drag across the floor a little, the scraping sound loud and clear. Then I hefted it in both hands and stood there, staying still, waiting. I

knew the noise might draw my biggest fan back to me for another bite, but I was banking on the Gray Ghost being more afraid of the unknown group than she was hungry—one half-blind asshole was one thing, five assholes who maybe saw just as well as you did in the dark was something else completely.

They were trying to be quiet again, and failing pretty spectacularly, completely unaware how sound traveled in the empty concrete box we were in. I could track them pretty easily just with my ears, but a minute or so later I realized I could see the hallway a little—lights were dancing along the floor and walls, clean blue electric light, bouncing like a handheld flashlight would. I wouldn't remain hidden against the wall if they were able to fucking put a light on me, so I started creeping towards the hallway. I would just have to let them move past me and try for a lucky shot, knock in some heads, maybe score a flash for my trouble and have a way of getting around that didn't involve breaking my neck.

There were four of them. They moved past me in a vague group, two flashlights in the front lighting the way, no sense that attacks could come from somewhere other than directly in front of you. I waited until the last two were a few steps past me, then picked a spot that seemed like it might reasonably be someone's head and rushed forward, taking a swing.

I didn't hit anything, cutting through air and losing my balance as someone smacked a shoulder into my belly, knocking me over with ease, the rod springing from my hands and clattering away. I tried to kick and roll, but someone had my legs trapped under theirs and then there were hard, confident hands on my wrists, weighing me down.

“Get a light!” Someone yelled from the hallway. I knew the voice, and froze, watching the bouncing light approach and then turn

directly on me, burning into my eyes and skin.

“Holy shit!”

I squinted up into the creased, red face of The Bumble. He was grinning down at me, and his grin was horrible, like a mistake, and I loved the sight of it.