

Weatherglass

(Joe Sault, book 3)

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Sault turned so suddenly into Fan Pan Alley that his companion overshot and had to double back to follow him.

“Umm...Detective Sault, I don't think that this is a good idea...” the younger man called after him.

“You don't have to come,” Sault barked. Outright politeness was impossible for him right now. Sometimes, he could barely manage civility.

Three weeks earlier, in the span of only a few days, his partner suddenly quit, his very special AI abandoned him and his wife revealed that she was considering the same.

He felt he deserved little of it and, after the initial shock and fear subsided, it was replaced by anger and resentment; swells of venom that thrashed and churned deep in his gut, and colored everything. He knew it wasn't balanced or healthy and had to be contained, but the effort left him little patience and few words for anything or anyone else.

His host caught up as Sault was examining a chipped and peeling red door affixed with a tarnished brass address number: 23½. It was overly tall and thin and appeared to be latched on the left by a knob and deadbolt which, it seemed, no longer worked, as the door was now secured by a large, rust-pitted padlock.

“I assume you have a key for this,” Sault said.

“Um...yes, of course, but...” The man almost stuttered and his eyes cast about, nervously.

They'd only just been introduced, and Sault couldn't immediately recall the younger man's name—a tongue twister, he remembered. The detective flipped a mental switch and rewound and replayed their introduction from a half hour earlier. Thanks to Vivia and the nanobots which had altered his nervous system, he could do that now, sometimes. In-retro, he saw the spindly, dark-skinned man extend a hand, “Detective Sault, so glad you could come. I'm Deven Ajagavakar...” The correct Romanized spelling and Hindi characters also entered Sault's consciousness, unbidden. He ignored them.

“What's the problem, Deven?”

“It's just that it's getting late and this is not the best neighborhood.”

Sault considered the dull light from the slim rectangle of dreary sky

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lighting the narrow walkway and judged it to be about four in the afternoon. Two gas lamps affixed high upon one wall flickered dimly, adding little more than ambiance and deep shadows to the brickwork and cobblestones. For several years, Chinatown had been the core of his patrol beat and he found Deven's evaluation surprising.

Ajagavakar flipped through keys on a huge iron ring, finally singling one out. He stepped forward, quickly unfastened the lock and flipped off the hasp.

“Why would that make you so nervous?”

“I'm not nervous!” Ajagavakar spat, reflexively. He was definitely nervous. In a calmer tone, he added, “I'm just worried about you. There are clan-gangs, territories. If there is trouble, you could get hurt.”

Sault snorted. He had plenty of combat experience and at least fifty pounds and six inches on this timid desk jockey. If anyone had anything to worry about, it was Ajagavakar. But in any case, Sault knew there was nothing to it.

He grabbed the doorknob and turned, not knowing what to expect, though he'd been through this door before. It swung outward on creaking hinges revealing a damp and dingy storage room filled with ancient cleaning supplies.

Sault was about to comment when a large shadow fell across him. He heard Ajagavakar's body slam against the far wall and from the impact Sault could tell he'd been harshly shoved.

He turned and looked up.

A young man towered over him, intimidatingly close, not a drop of kindness in the eyes. Sault guessed him to be in his late teens but unusually large; tall, wide, muscled, with shaggy, blonde hair, a sharp and angular nose, and an irregular, gap-toothed grimace, like tombstones in an unkempt graveyard. Below his left eye was a sickle-shaped scar, red and angry against the pale skin.

He was accompanied by three others, all similarly dressed. Obviously a gang, but not scrabbling urchins. Their clothes were clean and coordinated and made of fine materials. But, most-tellingly, they all bore exploded-art tattoos—the new favorite among the aristocracy—that writhed and seemed to hover just above the skin.

They came from money; no doubt private schooled.

A slithering dragon reached toward Sault, and he calmly watched its tongue coil along a fingertip that landed hard upon his chest, forcing Sault to push back in order to hold his ground.

“What're you pair of geezers about?”

Sault was surprised by the lower class, British accent. It fit the

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steampunk attire: top hat—the brim of which supported an oversized AR monocle with three purely decorative lenses flipped to one side—ornate black and red velvet vest over a plain white dress shirt, gold watch on a chain. The rest was predominantly leather: cape-like trench coat, utility belt, pants, boots, all crunching at the creases, every time the man shifted.

The attention to detail was impressive.

“We’re just clerks, headed for the docks. Not looking for trouble,” offered Ajagavakar, meekly.

This sparked incredulous huffs and chuckles from the three backup singers who leaned against the bricks in various poses, at ease in their menace.

The big man jabbed his finger harder against Sault’s chest “*This one’s* no clerk.”

Sault looked down at the offending finger and coolly considered all his options, other than compliance.

He glanced at the other three. All had lean, hard, engineered bodies and mean faces but, unlike their leader, there was less intensity in their demeanor, less resolve in their eyes. They would flinch. Sault was heavier, more experienced and innately angry. If the big guy went down quickly, the others would hesitate and that would be all the advantage he needed. He could take them, one by one.

His heartrate quickened.

“We’re on contract to Grestoke Import,” Ajagavakar declared.

“That so? Well now, we don’t mess with Greystoke folk, do we lads?” he said with a wink toward his crew. “So, how’s ‘bout show’in us yer ID so we can send you on yer merry way, then?”

Sault hesitated, knowing that “Police Detective” would not be well received but he was surprised when Deven stole the spotlight by clutching his lapel and inching backward. It was a laughably overt tell and the three wallflowers sprang forward like greyhounds, wresting his papers from his jacket pocket and flinging him back against the wall where he cowered, fearful of what, Sault had no idea.

As far as he was concerned, this was just getting interesting.

“Hol’ up, mates,” the young thug said, flipping through Deven’s ID, looking him up and down. “It appears we have ourselves a proper gentleman. Great jammy day! The toffer’s a McClellan!” he announced, with mock grandeur.

Sault choked on a laugh. The disparity between Ajagavakar’s clearly South Asian decent and the name McClellan was obvious, but no one else seemed to notice, and his reaction drew attention back on him.

“But *you*...” the brute began, scrutinizing Sault, troubled by his lack

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Ajagavakar seemed to have gathered himself. “He’s my footman, and you’ll leave us be, if you know what’s good for you,” he declared boldly, though unable to keep the quiver from his voice.

No one was buying that and one of the gangsters put him back in his place by threatening a backhanded slap.

“Footman? I don’t think so.” The big thug squinted and his lips tightened. He leaned in, eyes drilling into Sault’s, and his voice dropped to a growl, like a corpse dragged through gravel. “A body guard, perhaps? Not a very good one, escorting a McClellan through Greystoke’s Alley.” This elicited smirks and sniggers from his buddies but his gaze remained fixed. “Play nice, bodyguard, and it’ll only cost the McClellan a couple fingers and we’ll spare your shoot’in arm, if the ransom’s quick.”

Sault’s knuckles whitened, his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palms.

“How about, *you* back off and I let you live,” he proposed without breaking eye contact.

Ajagavakar emitted an audible gasp and flattened against the wall as if he might push his way through to the other side.

The large teen straightened and began laughing which prompted a similar ruckus from his crew. “Oh! That’s gold, that is,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. He wiggled his fingers, beckoning for Sault’s papers. “Time to give ‘em up, mate,” he said, his tone suddenly serious as a bullet.

Sault didn’t move.

The big man locked eyes and called out to his crew. “Let’s ring him out, lads, and see what he’s about.”

And the three moved forward.

Sault’s stomach knotted, his heart was racing. A sharp bolt of excitement flashed through him and ignited his anger like a keg of gunpowder.

He grabbed the thug’s extended finger and twisted, throwing his body into it and folding the other man’s hand backward against his forearm. The move caught everyone off guard and the advancing gang stopped in their tracks.

Under pain and pressure, the larger man was forced to kneel, but there was no surrender in the eyes. The thug’s brow furrowed and his grim smile returned and the wrist pushed back with the startling power of enhanced muscle. The huge kid unfolded looming over, once again. He shook his hand free of Sault’s grip, grabbing him by the coat collar and yanking him, one-handed, off the ground.

Ajagavakar slid a few more steps away along the wall, cheeks sandwiched by palms as if he were a Munch painting. “Detective Sault,

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Sault ignored him. *What could a software executive know about physical danger?*

The young thug hauled back and slammed a fist into Sault's forehead, near his right eye, and Sault experienced an explosion of pain far more intense than he'd anticipated.

A brief maelstrom of fear whirled through him somehow fanning the malicious embers in Sault's psyche. Bizarrely, he felt giddy.

Another pounding, this time, on his left. He had known that the kid was powerful, but still, he was surprised to feel a welt, and blood oozing down his cheek, dripping off his chin.

He wondered if his jaw might be fractured.

Was that even possible?

Idle, disconnected observations, devoid of fear.

The next round was a gut punch that knocked the breath out of him and filled his head with an angry swarm of hornets. Sault was surprised again. He hadn't thought such a powerful blow physically possible as he was still suspended above the ground in the grip of the kid's left hand.

Struggling to breathe, he almost lost hold of his anger, but then it returned like an old friend, slamming back through his veins like amphetamine; a blazing, electric meteor.

Now!

He hammered both fists into the goon's ears.

Suspended as he was, it was an awkward move and but he gave it everything he had and the blows landed well. One fist caught a spiked earring just right and Sault felt it pull through the lobe, then snag and drag and gouge into the man's neck.

His heart pounded with exertion and release and delight.

The kid shrieked a grisly mix of shock, agony, and outrage. His face contorted, veins popped, his hands crimped into gnarled talons. His entire body vibrated. Momentarily stunned, he staggered backward. His top hat falling off, crushed underfoot.

Sault fell free, quickly found his balance, and savagely stomped on his reeling attacker's kneecap. It caved inward, bone snapping like kindling—a sound like a firecracker detonating in a metal bucket.

The boy tumbled backward against the weathered red bricks, almost piling into Ajagavakar who leapt to one side. Then he slid down the brickwork, howling, eyes popping at the sight of his dangling shin which he vainly attempted to cradle in both hands.

Sault heard the *snikt!* of three switchblades but the other thugs were not advancing. In fact, they had eased away, beyond range of the brawl and even with knives drawn, the threat was unconvincing.

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they could hope for now was an opportunity to pull their friend away.

An opportunity that he wasn't about to give them.

The crumpled heap at his feet, moaned; a resonant, wheezing, thickened by mucous and unintelligible.

And pathetic.

Clearly, he'd never had his intimidating tactics challenged and, despite his physical attributes, had little ability to back them up.

Sault stood fuming over the man so easily reduced to a frightened child, hunched and hiding his face in his shoulders, one hand up, palm outward, defensively, gesturing for mercy.

Sault wasn't feeling merciful.

"Detective Sault. That's enough! Let it go." Ajagavakar commanded, reading him correctly.

It was an easy read.

Far from assuaged, Sault's anger had yet to peak.

He reached down, slapping away the flailing hand. The boy folded his arms over his head like a helmet and Sault slammed his fist into them.

Again...

Annoyed yet fueled by the dull, persistent throbbing of his injuries.

Hennessey!

...then again...

Enraged by bitter disappointment in the brevity and ease of the battle; a promise broken, a betrayal.

Vivia!

...and again.

Furious at the ignorance and audacity—threatening life, thinking that taking a couple of punches evened the score.

Maya!

Again!

Blood oozed and splashed under each blow. Sault didn't know if it was from his knuckles or the boy's arm. He didn't care. Beneath his fists, he felt ropey muscle deflate, turn to mush. The boy yelped yanked an arm away.

Sault saw his prize and pummeled with renewed brutality.

Whimpers faded to moans which melted to silence. Bone softened beneath his knuckles and, finally, the kid's other arm fell limp.

The body slumped, head dangling like a loose button, and was still and silent.

The other three gangsters stared open-mouthed and transfixed. Sault lifted his gaze and looked toward them, chest heaving, fists still balled and bloody. Startled from their trance, they scrambled away down

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An image of his father flashed through his mind accompanied by a swell of indecipherable emotion that flared across his skin in a prickly wave of heat that seemed to wash away the last of his strength. It was random and irritating and dampened the pleasant numbness of exhaustion.

He fell to one knee, panting like a jungle cat as the last of the fever drained from him. The cobblestones were grouted with blood and the ache in Sault's arms competed with his battered face.

"Almighty God!" exclaimed Ajagavakar, in Hindi. Sault's interface reached into A-Space and translated, though he barely heard it. Ignored it.

Breath seething between teeth, Sault hauled himself to his feet then looked down upon the crumpled form, motionless but for knots of writhing serpents weaving across the slack lump of tissue.

"Almighty God!" Ajagavakar whispered.

There was no doubt the kid was dead.

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