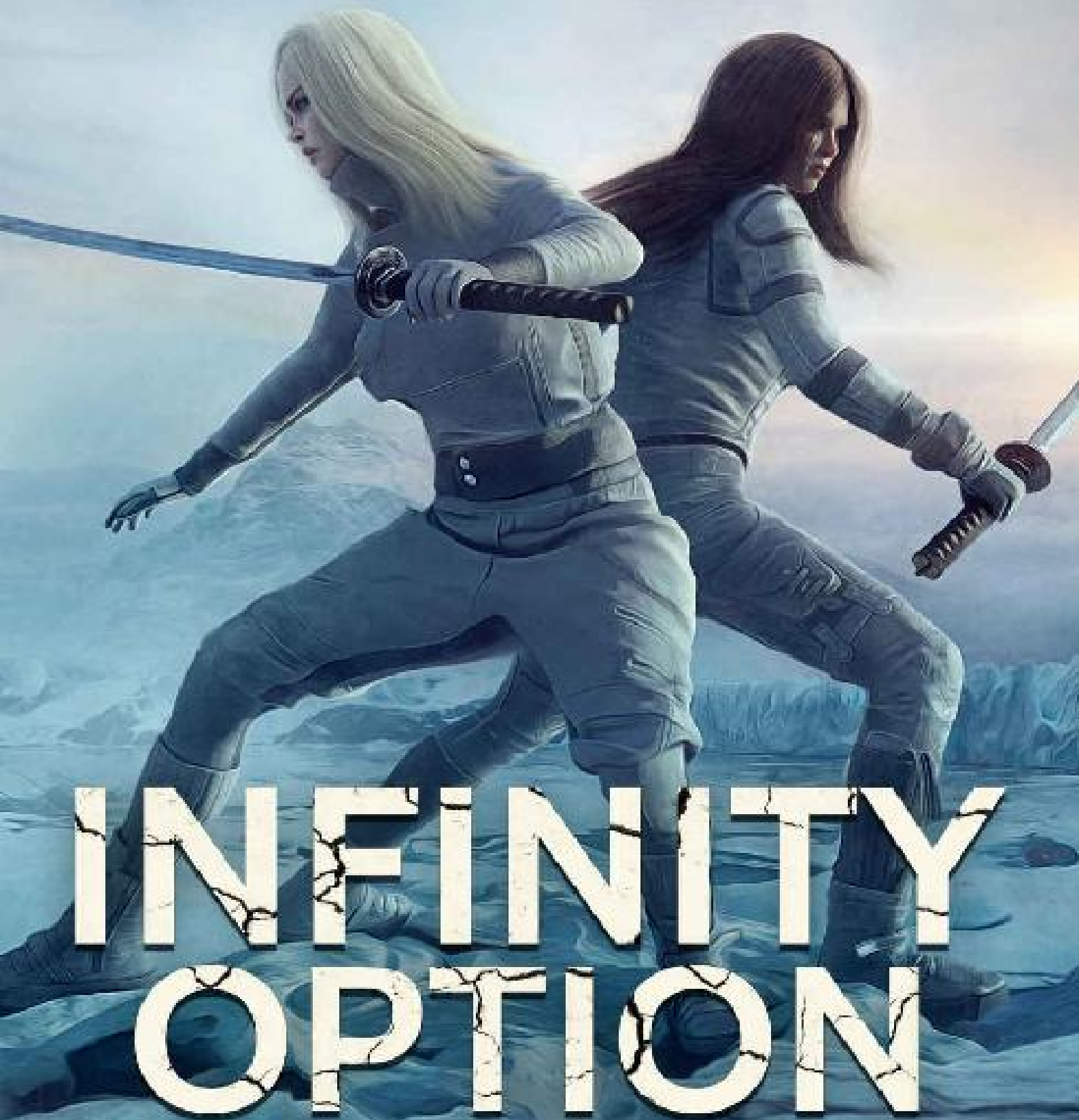


MARC STIEGLER



**INFINITY
OPTION**

DREAD NOUGHT SERIES
BOOK FIVE

INFINITY OPTION

THE DREAD NOUGHT™ BOOK FIVE

MARC STIEGLER



This Book is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Sometimes both.

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make everything better!

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If I've missed anyone, please let me know!

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Skyhunter Editing Team

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Diab Hammad, born in Palestine but the kind of person
who truly Makes America Great

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PROLOG: 1945

Colonel Meyer watched his breath turn to mist as it drifted across the ice cavern. When he inhaled, he tasted bitter despair.

He frowned and forced his back ramrod-straight. Despair was not allowed in his vocabulary, much less in his thoughts.

He touched the skull-and-crossbones insignia on his black uniform and remembered who he was—not a member of the Nazi SS as was proclaimed by his uniform, but a member of the oldest and noblest secret society in history.

He tried to focus on the Great Plan as the Eldest had so often admonished him to do during this project. While the twin experiments with Nazism and Leninism would clearly fail in the near future, it was a minor setback within the context of the ancient journey of the Elder Guides.

The Guides had learned so much from the Hitler and Stalin projects that the Eldest was confident that the Guides could end the chaotic flow of uncontrolled history in a couple more generations.

The leader of the Guides, however, was elderly. He had lived and breathed the Great Plan all his life and accepted his place therein.

The colonel was young and eager. He had hoped the Plan would come to fruition within his lifetime, and he would personally play a key role in its blossoming.

Instead, he commanded the development of the backup plan. He opened the log book to the first blank page and

surveyed the room to identify matters that deserved notation.

He looked around the enormous underground retreat that the new inhabitants were already calling the Fulcrum. The masons had finished the exterior of the sanctuary, a solid brickwork that extended across the floor, up the walls, and across the arch of the ceiling.

A team of slaves scurried to put up the next layer, a confection of wool and the recently invented “fiberglass” insulation. He would have preferred pure fiberglass, but that was scarce, and not even the Guides’ agents in the Reich Research Council could get more.

A layer of plaster would cover this insulating layer, and another layer of insulation would cover the plaster. Another layer of brick would form the interior wall.

He thought steel-reinforced concrete would have been better than brick, but it had been easier to acquire slaves skilled in bricklaying, so he made do. Some future member of the Guides, whoever replaced him, was welcome to upgrade.

The outer brick wall extended halfway to the far end of the cavern. He walked to the center, where the masons were laboring, and peered at the naked ice at the far end, where work on the power plant proceeded.

They had drilled a hole to the surface as an exhaust port for the diesel generators that powered the lights. In the beginning, Meyer had urged that they also use diesel for the permanent plant, but he now understood that there was a significant flaw in that thinking. The duct to the surface was so cold that the exhaust froze, ceased to rise, and trapped more polluted air beneath. The men working on the main reactor were coughing since the fumes threatened to overpower them.

The diesel exhaust would not kill them in its current concentration. A far more horrific fate awaited. Colonel Meyer shuddered as he considered their future.

The Allies had destroyed the Norwegian plant producing heavy water and the stocks along with it, but one large shipment had escaped demolition. The senior Guides had gone

to heroic lengths to hide the shipment from both the Axis and the Allied powers and had kept it for their needs, though they had not known what those needs might be.

Preparing for threats hidden beyond the veil of tomorrow was as natural for the Guides as breathing.

When it became clear that the current effort to tame civilization with Communism or Fascism was doomed, the Guides had hatched the plan to build this sanctuary, and the value of the heavy water had become clear.

At the far end of the cavern, a team of slaves, a mix of Jews and homosexuals, labored to build a nuclear reactor using a design that had been improved over the sketch taken from Heisenberg.

Start with a child's ceiling mobile. Replace the birds and flowers with cubes of uranium. Make it tall, with layer after layer of branches replete with cubes. Then slowly—very slowly!—lower the dangling array into heavy water.

As the heavy water slowed the neutrons, they became easier for the uranium in the other cubes to capture, causing fission. If one lowered enough cubes into enough water, they got a sustained reaction. Seal the container and run normal-water heat exchanger coils around the container to drive a steam turbine. The ice outside the cavern made a very efficient cooling system for the cycle.

At that moment, a cheer went up from the men working on the reactor. The leader, whose name Meyer had forgotten, ran over to him, beaming. “The water is bubbling!”

Meyer nodded. “Excellent work. Seal the tube, and tell your men to take a break before continuing.” He forced a smile. “The sooner you finish, the sooner you can go home, as we discussed when I brought you here.”

The man nodded back and returned to his team.

Meyer unclenched his hands. He had hated allowing these particular slaves to get so close to him, but it was critical for them not to know they were doomed. They would soon soak up enough radiation to kill a battalion.

The main entrance from the outer world opened, and what looked like a teacher with kindergarten children on a field trip entered.

The progeny from the Nazi experiments in genetic engineering had arrived. The Nazis had thought they were running the project with the Lebensborn association to create a generation of pure-blood Aryans, but the Guides had shaped the experiments that molded the children. Each of these youths represented not an Aryan but a superior human.

Meyer had had to leave some of the less-advanced superior children in the outer world so the Allies would think they had ended the experiments, but the colonel had managed to save most of them. Bright-eyed, healthy, and frightfully intelligent, they represented a better future. Their arrival was an event most worthy of logging.

Before he greeted them, however, he made a mental note about another small problem he needed to write up.

Corpses. He would have to figure out how to store or get rid of the corpses of all the slaves who would die here over the next hundred years.

FRENZY

Remy stepped out of the Uber and thanked the driver, then looked at the Spirit of Washington Heliport.

The heliport was not far off the ground. It didn't need to be high to have the required clearance, though it was in the heart of DC. The architects had built the port on a dock that stuck out into the Potomac, so the heliport only needed to be elevated enough to ensure that the propellers cleared the tops of the yachts parked around it.

The noise of an approaching helo drowned out her thoughts. Her ride whirled overhead, then landed on the pad. Remy stepped aboard.

A person she'd never seen before sat in the back, smiling unpleasantly at her. He carried himself like a young man, though he appeared to be middle-aged, with thinning hair and an aquiline nose that suggested his ancestors had belonged to the German aristocracy.

His eyes filled with satisfaction. "Remy. I'm so glad we finally meet."

Remy peered at him. "Who—" She stopped when she spotted another man half-hidden behind her seat.

"It's about time," Bryce crowed as he threw a bag over her head.

Remy struggled, but she knew she'd lost even before she felt a needle slide into her neck and inject a cool stream of helplessness.

Remy was unable to see or to move, and she wondered why she was still conscious. She guessed Bryce had injected her with something like curare rather than ether. Why would he do that? Was that his way of helping her keep situational awareness so she could escape when the time was right, or had he done it to taunt her?

Or did the other man want to torture her with her powerlessness? That led her to wonder, was this other man the Doc?

Confused, Bryce asked, "Aren't we going to Fort Meade?"

The bald man chuckled. "That's not where I have my laboratory." He looked grim. "I had a nice lab in Cuba before you allowed it to be destroyed. Now I'll have to take her to my primary lab."

Bryce could not prevent horror from entering his voice. "Are you going to do to Remy what you did to the people at Camp No?"

Aha. That confirmed that this was the Doc. She would have jerked, but the drug prevented it.

The man chided Bryce. "I told you, once I had Remy, I could abandon those lines of inquiry. I won't have to torture anybody anymore." He paused reflectively. "Not physically, anyway."

The drug could not prevent a cold chill from running down Remy's spine.

Bryce sounded relieved. "Right. Now that you've got Remy, you can force her to tell you how to build a Memwriter." His voice revealed his worry. "Uh, won't you have to torture her to get the Memwriter before you can switch to Memwriter-based research?"

More chuckles foreshadowed the Doc's next words. "If I'm right about how the machine works, I won't need any help from Remy. I just need her body."

Remy wondered if he would kill her now.

Bryce echoed her thoughts in disbelief. “So, you’re just going to kill her after all this?”

The Doc sounded annoyed. “Waste not, want not.”

Bryce relaxed. “Then what’s the plan?”

“I was planning to operate on her when I got her to the lab, but...”

He did not continue for a moment, and Remy’s anxiety grew.

Finally, the Doc continued. “The procedure should be straightforward. I’ve already waited too long, and who knows if someone will interrupt us? Best to proceed.”

Remy heard a zipper moving.

Bryce asked in amazement. “You brought a medical bag and a scalpel?”

The Doc chuckled again. “Always be prepared, Bryce.”

Remy heard him rifling in the bag. He then placed something hard against her head. “Now I just have to find it. Where did your father put the chip, Remy? Tell me now, and we can finish more quickly.”

The instrument moved around her head, down her face, and across her neck.

Bryce cleared his throat. “What’s that?”

The device swept down one arm.

The Doc explained, “It’s a broadband electromagnetic radiation sensor. I’m probably looking for a Bluetooth transceiver, but it might be Wi-Fi.”

He shifted to inspect the other arm, and the sensor warbled. He exclaimed with a child’s delight, “There it is!”

Remy struggled to move in her despair, but it was no use.

Bryce asked, perplexed, “There’s what?”

The Doc explained. “Based on a couple of semi-coherent comments Gerald Tambook made as his mind was dissolving, before his speech turned to gibberish, I came to suspect that the key component of the Memwriter was embedded in a chip in Remy’s arm.” He tapped the machine. “Looks like I was right.”

Pain seared Remy’s flesh as the Doc cut deep. She wanted to scream, but she could not, and she would not have had she been able to do so.

The Doc poked and prodded inside her arm, setting off spasm after spasm of agony. When he stopped, he slid something out of her body.

Smug satisfaction laced the torturer’s announcement. “I have you at last.”

Bryce sounded incredulous. “*That’s* the Memwriter?”

“That’s the part that contains its secrets. The rest is easily duplicated.”

Nimble fingers pulled the edges of the cut together, and strips of tape closed the wound.

The Doc ran the sensor down her arm and the machine warbled again, a different though similar sound.

The scientist paused. “Oh, my! What have we here?” His fiddling with the machine while the contact with her arm shot jolts of pain through Remy’s body. “A miniaturized Apple AirTag, too. Naughty girl.”

He chuckled. “Can’t have that.” He ripped off the tape he had just applied and drove the scalpel into her arm once more.

An infinity of agony later, he withdrew the blade. “Bryce, I have a job for you.” He then explained his plan.

Bryce reacted with disbelief. “You want me to do *what?*”

The Doc cleared his throat. “Now.”

After a bit more nudging, Remy thought she heard Bryce gulp. He growled, “Happy?”

The Doc's voice turned jaunty. "That should make her conspirators much easier to deal with."

The thrum of the propellers changed pitch as the helo descended. Remy strained to make out any sounds that could give her a clue as to their location, but she heard nothing.

Bryce spoke slowly. "You're sending me back to headquarters? I'm not coming with you?"

The Doc spoke with an edge of anger. "Still worried about Ms. Tambook here? Where are your loyalties?"

Bryce was silent.

His boss returned to lecture mode. "I told you not to worry, and I have good news. The next time you see her, she'll be much nicer."

He paused thoughtfully. "Pliant and obedient, even."

Only minutes had passed since Cassie had told her fellow sunbathers on the mega yacht *Glory* about Remy's capture. No sunbathers remained.

Morte Noir, Fenya, and Esin had pulled combat fatigues, assault rifles, and combat knives out of thin air. She presumed the head steward had assisted with the miracle, but he remained offstage.

Alina had not gone full military, but she had donned more sober clothing—jeans and a t-shirt.

Cassie stood holding her cheerleader baton, wearing a bikini and feeling under-equipped. It couldn't be helped.

Morte Noir showed her amusement on her face. "All dressed up but no way to know where to go. And no way to go if we did know where."

Cassie smacked her forehead. "The helicopter. It's still in Florida, waiting for Remy." She looked over the side of the yacht. "We could take the submarine, but—"

Esin finished the sentence. “Too slow.”

Alina shrugged. “I would like to go back to Rivendell on the submarine if you don’t mind.”

Cassie stared at her. “You don’t want to help?”

Alina struggled with multiple emotions before answering. “Of course I want to help.” She looked away. “But I need to protect my children. They’re all alone without me.”

Morte Noir’s harsh laugh mellowed as she accepted the answer. “Of course. Family first.”

Cassie suppressed her initial observation that Alina’s children were only alone if you discounted the dozens of EStormers with mad sniper skills who would die to protect them. She forced herself to lie. “I understand.”

Fenya made a practical observation. “Even with Cassie piloting the copter, we wouldn’t have room for Alina. Just four seats.”

Morte Noir leaped to the next problem. She turned, and a steward appeared before her. “Tell the captain to call the helicopter back immediately.”

Calming down, Cassie grabbed her phone to make a call. “Even if the helo was here, we wouldn’t know where to take it. Time for a video conference.”

She needed a couple of minutes to bring everyone together. Andrey, Laurie, and Tina from Rivendell. Grandma in her Arizona missile silo. Dale and Joyce from the Dread Nought HQ. Cassie was so sure Bryce had taken Remy that she thought about getting him on the phone to demand he tell everyone where he’d taken her, but she refrained.

In addition to listening to the conference, Morte Noir talked softly on her phone.

Dale anxiously asked, “Have you found her?”

Andrey beat Cassie to the answer. “No.”

Jewel’s head poked into the Dread Nought camera, and she whispered to Joyce.

Joyce smiled savagely. “We’ve tracked her to the Spirit of Washington Heliport on the Potomac. She boarded a helo. We lost her there.”

Andrey jerked in his chair. “Let me run that backwards and forwards.”

While he worked, Cassie asked, “What about her tracker?”

Andrey shook his head as he typed. “I’m trying, believe me. Can’t get a connection.”

Grandma muttered while the geeks worked, “I can’t believe I’m stuck in this damned bunker.”

Laurie gave her mother a sharp look. “You can’t be serious. Stay where you are.”

Andrey exclaimed in triumph. “Gotcha! Footage of the helo at its last stop before getting Remy, about to take off.” He popped some fuzzy video onto the screen. Two men clambered aboard, a bald one who looked somber and a tall one who looked jaunty. No faces were visible.

Cassie hissed. She recognized the tall one from the arrogance of his posture and stride. “Bryce.”

Andrey asked, “Anyone recognize the other one?”

Morte Noir cleared her throat. “Hard to tell from here, but I suspect that’s the new Director of AID.”

Cassie groaned. “The Doc.”

That assertion led to another round of hisses from Andrey, Laurie, Dale, and Grandma, who knew about the Doc’s work turning Remy’s dad into a vegetable and his gruesome experiments at Camp No.

Laurie pointed out how bad that news was. “That’s the man who started this mess and killed and tortured so many people just to steal the Memwriter.”

Cassie gawked at her. “Ohmigod. If he knows where to look, he’s got it now, even if Remy refuses to help him.” The proprietary part of the Memwriter that AID had sought for so long resided in a chip in Remy’s arm.

Laurie nodded grimly. “Forget about EStorme and Ruby Rage.”

Morte Noire’s voice went low. “He’s inches away from the real tool for global domination.”

Esin thumped her foot on the deck. “What can we do?”

Fenya put a hand on her shoulder. “We have to wait for the geeks to find her.” She tapped her assault rifle. “Then we can kill him.”

The mega yacht *Glory* steamed with all the speed her wiffle ball could muster toward the USA to hasten the moment when the ship’s helo would reach them. Cassie paced, unable to bring herself to leave the sun deck and the multinational video conference until they had more information on Remy.

The beginning of the next phase started with a photo finish. Joyce broke the tense silence. “Nassau Airport in Yulee, Florida. I’ve hacked into the FAA’s flight plan for the helo.”

Andrey stepped on her words. “Confirmed. I’m following the radar track.” He popped a picture onto the Zoom display. “It’s barely better than a dirt track. The strip is paved with concrete, sort of.”

Joyce joined in dryly. “It has as many cracks as smooth patches.”

Dale added, “I’ll have a Dread Nought team on-site in forty minutes.”

Morte Noir was working on her phone. “That’s just north of Jacksonville, right?” Without waiting for an answer, she spoke urgently into the cell. “I need eyes on the Nassau Airport ASAP.” She listened, then hung up and announced in a smug voice, “I’ll have a contractor there in half an hour.”

Cassie could see how this kind of competition could produce very interesting results. “Will your people be able to snatch Remy back?”

Dale spoke with pride. “My men can deal with any opposition handily.”

Morte Noir frowned. “My man can handle it himself, as long as it’s okay to kill everyone.” She raised an eyebrow at Cassie.

Grandma broke in before Cassie could answer. “Do it! If you leave enough bodies, perhaps those bastards will learn something.”

Laurie, who had never seemed bloodthirsty to Cassie before now, chimed in, “It’s called a teachable moment, Mom.”

Grandma cackled. “Very good, girl. Teach away.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Hold on. Instead, could we—”

Andrey interrupted, “No good. The helo’s landing early. They’ll be gone before anyone gets there.”

Joyce squelched a scream. “That can’t be! The flight plan says they won’t land until Morte Noir’s man arrives!”

Andrey answered grimly, “The radar doesn’t lie.”

Morte Noir tapped her cell. “Faster. Bonus applies.”

Cassie heard the thundering prop wash of the *Glory*’s helo as it approached the ship. “About damn time,” she muttered.

Andrey made an announcement. “I’m getting another radar track coming into the airfield hot.” He whistled. “I mean really hot. It’s a jet of some kind.”

Cassie looked at the image of the landing strip again. “Can that airport even handle a jet?”

Joyce answered, “Not a chance.”

Laurie asked the naïve question. “Could it be a coincidence?”

Cassie, Morte Noir, Fenya, and Grandma answered in unison, “No.”

Joyce studied her other monitors. “Whatever that jet is, it hasn’t filed a flight plan.”

The helo bounced onto the ship's deck, and the whir of the rotors subsided.

Cassie turned toward the helipad. Grandma's voice overrode the others. "Where do you think you're going, Cassie?"

Morte Noir gave a dry chuckle. "You might want to have a destination before you take off."

Fenya gave her a wicked grin. "And considering how prissy you are, you might want to put on some clothes before departure. Or is that a battle bikini?"

Cassie stopped in her tracks and moaned. "I hate waiting." The steward appeared with jeans and a leather jacket, and she changed.

The next few minutes passed in stressed silence. Morte Noir's phone chimed again. Everyone jerked to attention as they listened in. Morte Noir calmly directed her asset, "Go."

She listened and pursed her lips. "Did you get anything?" She nodded. "Excellent work. Thank you."

Cassie demanded, "What happened?"

Morte Noir transferred several images to the conference screen. "He arrived too late to do anything, but he got two shots of vehicles departing. The first was a sports car."

Everyone looked at the blur of a silver Lamborghini racing past the photographer.

Cassie delivered the disgusted answer before anyone else. "Bryce."

Then a photo of an odd-looking airplane pointed toward the tree line took center stage. Joyce spoke for most of the group when she asked, "What is *that*?"

It was an airplane since it had swept-back rear wings and small canards in front, but where one would expect to see jet engines on each side of the tail, a pair of empty boxes were attached.

Cassie asked a more precise question. “Are those empty rectangles engines?”

Andrey looked at the picture with awe. “I think that’s a... well, ahem. Let me confirm before I say something crazy. Hang on.” He stepped off-camera. “Rudy, have you ever seen one of these?”

Rudy Ross appeared on the screen. “Hi, everybody. What did you want me to look at?”

Andrey pointed at the photo.

Rudy stared with his mouth open. “Wow. It’s just like the Jetoptera prototypes, except this one’s full size. Six or eight passengers.” He got excited. “My God, someone did it!”

Cassie tapped her foot on the deck. Since she was still securing her pants and was barefoot, no one heard the impatience in the tap. “What did they do?”

Rudy went rapturous. “It’s a fluidic propulsion system.” He highlighted the empty rectangles on the box-shaped tail of the plane. “No propellers or exterior turbines. There’s a compressor in the body of the plane that squirts high-speed exhaust into the cavity and entrains a large volume of air.”

Andrey added, “See the way the engines are tilted down while it’s on the ground? This jet, like the small-scale Jetoptera prototypes, can rotate the engines to direct the thrust downward for vertical takeoff and landing.”

Joyce muttered, “So *that’s* how they landed a frickin’ jet at the dinky airport.”

Esin stared at it with delight. “How fast can it go?”

Rudy shook his head. “Best guess is point-eight Mach.”

Laurie added a bit of trivia. “So, faster than a Boeing Dreamliner.”

Morte Noir gave them an angelic smile. “I need one.”

Grandma growled. “Get in line, Missy. I need one first.”

ELDER GUIDES LOG: 1970

Decades had passed since Axel Meyer had sported an SS colonel's uniform. He now wore the robes of the Eldest Guide. In a tribute that had surprised him, his predecessor had named him as his successor shortly after the core Guides had set up shop in the partially tamed caverns he had built out for them.

The Elders' icy fortress had never warmed up much. The output from Heisenberg's nuclear reactor had never become reliable enough to make this space truly civilized since heating was the lowest priority, forever taking a back seat to the need to maintain a steady power supply for the diverse array of experiments the Guide scientists ran on an ongoing basis.

Nonetheless, the previous Eldest had been right to insist on the reactor. Replenishing the supply of food and equipment by submarine had been hard enough without adding the need to import millions of gallons of fuel. The resupply problem had forced him to build a second base in an easier locale rather than just expanding the caverns. As it was, he could house only the most important people and the most important experiments here in this safest of sanctuaries.

Today, however, would mark a critical milestone in the annals of the Guides. A remarkable man at Oak Ridge Laboratories in America, one Alvin Weinberg, had built a new kind of nuclear reactor, a molten salt reactor that was guaranteed by the ironclad laws of physics never to melt down or explode or even vary in temperature. Today, they would start the new reactor.

They would retire the original Heisenberg reactor by the simple expedient of letting the device melt its way through the ice beneath them.

Meyer no longer had the athletic physique that had once allowed him to march through the Fulcrum. Instead, he strode gravely to the concrete shielding that separated both the old and the new reactors from the rest of the facility. A thick lead-glass window allowed him to watch as a recently acquired team of slaves brought the new nuke to life while preparing the old nuke to sink into its frozen tomb.

He found the new slaves a little jarring to watch. They were very different in phenotype. They were all Cambodians, volunteers who had sought to escape the Khmer Rouge. Alas, their escape had not changed their fate as much as they had hoped.

Some were already expressing symptoms of severe radiation poisoning and had begged to go back to the killing fields from which they'd fled. It was a little bit late for that.

When the Guides acquired a new technology, such as the molten salt reactor, they discussed whether to allow the innovation to enter the outside world's stockpile of solutions or hold it private. They had decided to keep the molten salt tech to themselves, and action was required to protect their monopoly. Meyer turned to his assistant.

The assistant had once been a bright young girl orphaned during the Korean war. The Guide scientists had used her for a series of experiments in mind remodeling. The experiment had failed in that she had not become enthusiastically innovative in her efforts to meet the needs of her captors.

Nonetheless, the scientists had instilled perfect obedience. The side effects on Debra had only involved the loss of the brighter edges of her intelligence and the shocking disfigurement of her face since they used pain for Skinnerian behavior reinforcement.

She stood alertly next to him, pen and notepad in hand.

He nodded at her. “Inform our agent in Admiral Hyman Rickover’s office to proceed with the suppression of the thorium reactor technology. He must persuade the admiral to use every political lever at his disposal to terminate that line of inquiry.”

Debra finished writing as he finished speaking. Her shorthand was superb. “Any advice for him on how to remodel the admiral’s mind to that purpose?”

Meyer chuckled. “Oh, Rickover won’t need any remodeling. The admiral has spent his entire life protecting his turf from outsiders. Persuading him to declare total war against the thorium reactor scientists will hardly take a nudge.”

The Eldest had another thought. “Our agent should see to it that all the molten salt researchers are blackballed. I want to hear that they are all either selling shoes or driving taxis six months from now.” He muttered, “That should give us the edge in power technology for decades.”

TRACKING

Cassie and everyone else hung with bated breath on Andrey's words as they waited for some clue as to the whereabouts of the enemy jet.

Joyce offered one update when the craft passed through the radar tracking space of a larger airport south of Fort Lauderdale—the folks in the control tower warned the jet off—but that was it.

At last, Andrey spoke. "I've picked it up on the radar of a DEA plane watching for drug traffickers."

Cassie tensed every time he made one of these announcements, which he based on data he'd extracted from the NSA Utah Data Center's collection of every digital signal in the world. Several people had asked where Andrey got his info, but she'd brushed them off. They'd stopped asking, which meant they were trying to figure it out some other way.

She'd been most concerned about Morte Noir, except that the Dark Mistress had never asked. She smirked when someone else asked, as if she already knew about the UDC hack. Cassie found that at least as disturbing.

Andrey hesitated dramatically, then exclaimed, "I'll be damned!" He continued in amazement. "It has to be a coincidence."

Dread throbbed in Cassie's head. "Coincidence?"

Andrey shook his head. "The jet's heading south southeast. It looks like it's heading for you and the *Glory*."

Cries of horror and excitement assailed Cassie's ears. Alina jumped out of her chair. "I need to leave on the submarine *now*."

Morte Noir shook her head. "Too late, girl." She tapped the number for the submarine's commander. "Captain, take the sub out of the dock. Loiter at twenty meters. We might take fire, and if it all goes south, you'll need to rescue us." She listened patiently to a loud voice. "You better believe it'll be crowded if we abandon ship. Hang tight."

She hung up. "The sub is now our backup plan."

Meanwhile, Cassie called the captain of the *Glory*. "Captain, unlimber the Verbas." Verbas were Russian handheld surface-to-air missile launchers, with which the *Glory* was well-equipped from its days as the Russian president's yacht.

Cassie listened to the captain. "I know. I don't really believe we'll need them, but better safe than sorry."

As the ship bustled with activity, Andrey issued a new statement. "Okay, tiny but important update. The plane has shifted slightly west, so I don't think they're coming for you after all. You should still be able to see them as they pass. Certainly on radar, and probably by eyeball."

Morte Noir safetied her assault rifle and slid back onto her lounge chair. "Well, that was exciting." She turned to Alina. "I'll release the sub for you after the jet passes."

Alina nodded curtly and trudged inside.

Grandma had a proposal. "I don't suppose you could shoot it, bring it down, and rescue Remy from the crash, could you?"

Laurie exploded. "Mom! She'd probably die when it hit."

Grandma shrugged. "We have to be practical here, honey. If we don't get her now, they'll kill her anyway." Her voice turned dark. "Or worse."

Andrey interrupted those fantasy thoughts. “They won’t come that close anyway. Too high and too far.”

Grandma persisted, “You don’t have to get the ship that close. Cassie, you still have that flying thingie, right?”

Cassie stared at Grandma. “The flyboard. I could go on the flyboard. I could take a Verba.”

Andrey scoffed. “Too high and too far.” He gave them more details about the flight path.

Fenya, who had some experience with Verbas, offered half-hearted encouragement. “It’s not impossible. Maybe. But you have to go now. You have to shoot it on the approach. If the jet goes by and the missile has to chase, there’s no chance with the plane flying so close to the speed of sound.”

Cassie ran for her room, which was where she kept the flyboard. “I have to try.”

Cassie struggled to balance on the flyboard as she wrestled with the ridiculously long missile launcher she held behind her. The damned barrel was almost as long as she was tall.

Fenya carefully went over the controls again. “Point and click.”

Morte Noir chuckled, then turned serious. “You can do this.”

Esin started recording a video on her cell phone. “This is very cool.”

Cassie rolled her eyes.

Fenya gave her more advice. “Get as high as you can go. The altitude differential is your biggest enemy. Better to be a kilometer farther away than a hundred meters lower.”

Cassie gripped the handle of the launcher. “Check.” With the other hand, she operated the flyboard’s throttle, and into the air she went.

She flew in the general direction of the plane while the captain of the yacht kept her informed about the ship's radar track of the jet.

She had just noticed how cold it was up here when she spotted the jet coming more or less toward her, high above. She pushed the flyboard higher.

Crap, it was *really* cold. If she stopped, her frosted breath would swirl in front of her face and blind her. She continued to climb.

The flyboard beeped a warning to tell her she was running out of fuel. She continued to climb.

She was still below the plane, but it was rushing toward her too fast to risk waiting longer. She hovered, then brought the launcher over her shoulder and fired. The Verba produced minimal recoil. It would have been negligible for someone with a firm stance on the ground, but with Cassie being on the flyboard, the kick knocked her across the sky. She tumbled over and fell upside-down, though she was still attached to the board.

Cassie screamed for no good reason, then threw the launcher away from her spinning plunge. She strove to stop twisting and churning in mid-air. Her thousands of hours of memwritten experience with the flyboard came to her rescue, and she straightened and applied the jets.

They neutralized her spin. Cassie stood on the board long enough to watch the condensation trail of her missile rise, twist, streak toward the jet, falter, and fail.

Her flyboard sputtered, out of fuel.

Grandma had been right after all. Cassie recalled her last words fondly. "And for heaven's sake, girl, take a parachute. Don't trust that thingie under your feet."

Cassie muttered, "Thank you, Grandma," and pulled the ripcord.

Minutes later, she was spluttering in the ocean with the flyboard trying to drag her underneath and a soggy leather

jacket immobilizing her arms. She thought she would survive until the yacht could rescue her, but still.

“Maybe I should have stuck with the bikini.”

Cassie’s struggles to unstrap from the flyboard before she drowned were eventually successful. She kicked fiercely to keep her head above water while holding on to her beloved board, but the weight was too great. She had to let the board go.

As she watched it spin lazily into the abyss, she muttered, “I hate to leave you, but let’s face it. After all that saltwater, you would never be the same.”

The sea breeze carried the sound of a jet ski to her. She looked over to see Morte Noir bouncing across the waves at full throttle. The assassin dropped the engine to idle as she reached Cassie, then pulled her onto the back.

Cassie clung to her rescuer.

Morte Noir purred. “Are you coming on to me?”

Cassie shivered uncontrollably. “I’m freezing to death. I’d hang on to you the same way if you were a Saint Bernard.”

The Dark Mistress chuckled as she gunned the engine. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

A short time later, Cassie sat bundled in blankets in the *Glory*’s conference room, drinking hot chocolate and listening to her friends and coworkers babble, both the ones on the ship and the ones conferenced in from around the world.

Andrey shouted for attention. “I’ve got news!”

Silence reigned.

He continued, “Remy wasn’t on the plane. Her AirTag just pinged from a gas station in South Carolina.”

Cassie suppressed the chattering of her teeth long enough to growl, “Bryce has her.”

Grandma pointed out, “This is what comes of not shooting him the first time we had the chance.”

Dale looked to the future. “He’s surely heading for Meade.” He turned to Joyce. “We need to set up a blockade for his sports car at the fort.”

Joyce pulled out her cell and slipped off-camera, muttering, “A very discreet blockade.”

Morte Noir identified a quicker intervention. “Fenya, put that luscious Southern drawl of yours to work. The Carolina police should be involved.”

Joyce returned. “We’re setting up in Maryland.” She looked at Fenya. “This is the number of the local police.” She rattled off a phone number.

Fenya gave everyone a wicked smile, then tapped her cell and turned sultry. “Oh, my! Are you the police? I’m so happy to talk to you. I was just run off the road by a silver sports car. It must have been doing a hundred miles an hour.” She put a pout into her voice. “I bounced so hard off the road that it messed my hair. And I chipped a nail.”

She listened to the policeman. “No, sugar. Other than that, I’m okay, but that man is going to kill somebody. I just know it.”

Fenya looked at her companions in alarm and mouthed, “Where am I?”

Andrey answered with the state highway number and the closest intersection to the AirTag’s response, and Fenya told the cop.

Another pause ensued. “I’m sorry, sugar. I don’t know what kind of sports car, but I can describe it.” She delivered a beautiful depiction of the vehicle. “You think it’s a Lamborghini? Sugar, I believe you. I can tell you’re a man who knows his cars.” After he spoke again, she answered, “I’m really fine. I can get my own coffee, but thank you so much.” She allowed a hint of command into her voice. “Now, go get your man.”

Morte Noir clapped, and everyone joined in as she commented, “A delightful performance.”

Dale sat frowning in the passenger seat as Timmy drove the Dread Nought assault vehicle, a black van advertising *Linens a la Carte* in an elegant pink font.

Jake, who sat in the back, stroked his sniper rifle. “Relax, Dale. Sure, Bryce has a faster car, but he’s still in North Carolina, whereas coming from DC, we’re just a hop, skip, and a jump from the NSA.”

Dale shook his head. “I’m sure we’ll beat him there, but will it do any good?”

Jake put a hand on Dale’s shoulder. “I don’t care how fast he drives. He can’t outrun a bullet from my baby.”

Joyce rang them from HQ. “We’ve been doing ELINT on the police in the Carolinas. Bryce outran the South Carolina cops Fenya put on his tail. The pursuit in North Carolina has been fierce but futile. It looks like Bryce is using NSA satellite surveillance to avoid the roadblocks, shooting down twisting back roads where the police cruisers can’t match a Lamborghini.”

She paused. “They tried sending a helicopter after him, but the NSA redirected the helo to the wrong road.” After another pause, she finished, “The police radio says the North Carolina police will make one last try at the Virginia border. I don’t see how he can dodge them there.”

Timmy spoke up. “Doesn’t seem likely he’ll make it to us.”

Dale slumped. “You seem to have forgotten. It’s Bryce.”

Upon hearing the same update, Cassie shouted over the roaring of the props, “We can’t go any faster. I’ve got the helo at full throttle.”

Morte Noir spoke with the serenity of one who had lived through crises like this many times in her career. “Sometimes we just have to trust those to whom we’ve delegated the job.”

Fenya snorted. “She says that now, but I think that if Bryce had me rather than Remy, she’d be almost as desperate to get to the fight as you are.”

Morte Noir glared at her but did not respond.

Esin piped up. “It’s not a weakness to care about your people.”

Morte Noir smiled at her. “Well said.”

As the moment for the showdown on the Virginia border approached, Dale linked everyone on a conference call. His team had hunkered down in the weeds near the off-ramp to Fort Meade. They had hurried up, and now they were waiting.

Dale was smugly satisfied that his Joyce had beaten Andrey to reporting on the takedown. Andrey’s sources gave a more comprehensive view with every bit of relevant digital data included, but his access was indirect, whereas Joyce got everything in real-time.

She gave them an excited update. “The North Carolina cops have Bryce in sight. They say Virginia cops have a half-circle blockade to stop him as soon as he crosses the border.” She continued in a puzzled voice that set off the first alarms in Dale’s mind. “I’m not hearing any radio chatter from the Virginia police.”

A few moments later, she gave the next update. “Bryce is slowing down! He’s surrounded by the Virginia cops. The Carolina police are going over to chat.”

Dale held his breath like everyone else.

Alarm crept into Joyce's voice. "They've all gone radio silent. I've got nothing."

Andrey interjected, "Let's see what I can get."

Morte Noir spoke the fear on everyone's mind. "The cops are compromised."

Cassie fidgeted in her seat as she pushed the helo forward.

Sensing her anxiety, Esin leaned forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "If we can't stop him before he reaches his headquarters, we'll come up with another plan."

Morte Noir cleared her throat. "Esin's right, but—"

Fenya finished dryly, "But it'll be harder than hell."

Andrey spoke shortly thereafter. "Joyce was right. Bryce *has* been using satellites. I'm looking at the images he used right now." He sighed. "The NSA has stopped tracking him. I have one last image. The Virginia state police formed an escort around him."

Andrey finished sourly. "It's like he's in God's palm."

Dale took command. "Cassie, Morte Noir, stand down. You can't get here in time. If there's an opportunity, my team will take Bryce and recover Remy. Otherwise, we need a new plan."

Cassie growled, "I should be there."

Morte Noir shook her head. "He's right. Time to work on Plan B."

Cassie looked at the open fields of South Carolina below, comically far from the action. "Whatever Plan B ends up being, I know the first step." She pointed down. "If I let you people off at that farmhouse, can you make your way home?"

Esin clapped. "Road trip."

Concerned, Morte Noir stared at the pilot, then relented. “No problem.”

Cassie dropped them off while a farmer, a small boy, and a smaller girl watched in open-mouth amazement.

Morte Noir yelled as she hopped off the helo, “Can I tell everyone where you’re going?”

Cassie gave her an irritated smile. “We need better wheels.” She took off and headed west.

Dale got sporadic updates from Joyce as she captured social media videos from people who snapped pics of a line of police cars speeding down the highway with a silver Lamborghini in the middle of the procession.

A minor hiccup occurred when the Virginia cops handed off the sports car to the Maryland cops, but Bryce sorted it out, and the caravan resumed.

Finally, the troupe approached Fort Meade. Dale watched forlornly as they reached the gate.

Bryce stepped out of the car and went around to shake the hand of every policeman who had accompanied him. He turned to the open fields in which Dale hunkered down and grinned.

Andrey spoke. “The AirTag pinged. I have confirmation. Remy is still with him.”

Dale trained his binoculars on the Lamborghini’s passenger seat. No Remy. Was she squeezed into the trunk?

He turned his attention back to Bryce. Dale knew it was impossible for anyone to see his camouflaged Dread Nought agents, yet Bryce leered at him, waved at his invisible audience, and took a bow as if he were responding to a cheering crowd.

Then the bastard slid into his silver chariot and cruised into the NSA’s parking lot.

ELDER GUIDES LOG: 1975

Though Meyer had never been a scholar, his favorite room in the Fulcrum was the private library of the Eldest Guide. The oldest leather-bound volumes, logs dating back to the very birth of the Guides, gave off an aroma he associated with the long-departed Eldest who had set him on his path. Here in the library, he felt the warm weight of the wisdom in these volumes that his mentor had left to him.

Despite the comfort of the books, the room felt cold, though the problems with keeping the caverns warm had been solved by the improved reactor years ago.

The chill now rested with him, not with the heating.

When he held his hand before his eyes, it trembled. He had become philosophical about the disability, though one aspect of the malaise annoyed him. He could no longer make entries in the logbook.

He turned to his new assistant, another young woman with the grotesque scars that spoke of her docility training. One of the new Debra's special characteristics was the artistry of her cursive. She would update the log for him until the time came to discard her like the other Debras.

She was waiting eagerly for his next words. "Please bring in the boys."

The Debra scurried to obey, then retreated to a corner to record the minutes of the meeting.

Leo bounced through the door first, as bright-eyed as he had been as a baby. Meyer could not help smiling, though he

knew he should not encourage him. The Guide's future depended on science, not emotions.

The Eldest remembered christening the boy. He had used a modified tradition from his time as a Nazi, though Nazism had expired years before Leo's birth.

In the SS, they had performed the ceremony beneath a Nazi flag and a portrait of the Fuhrer. Meyer replaced those with a carefully preserved painting of the first Eldest.

Beneath the painting, in front of a congregation of Elders, he had held his SS dagger over the newborn and recited, "We take you into our community as a limb of our body. You shall grow up under our protection and bring honor to your name, pride to your brotherhood, and inextinguishable glory to the Elders."

Ancient history. In the midst of this reminiscence, Leo ran into his arms, cried out, "Papa!" and hugged him.

The blatant display of emotion snapped the Eldest out of his indulgent mood, and he abruptly directed, "Take your seat, please."

Franz entered quietly, with the dignity of a teenager two years older than his schoolmate. He nodded gravely. "Papa." He took his chair without prompting.

Meyer's face assumed a fatherly expression, though he, Leo, and Franz were not related by blood but only by intellect.

Without a doubt, Franz and Leo were the smartest children in their genetically selected breeding cohort. Someday, one of them would take Meyer's place as the Eldest.

But that day was far away. Leo sat on the edge of his seat, bouncing with an exuberance that did not become a future leader of the Guides. The Eldest realized he would have to hold on to life long enough to make sure these two were ready to supplant him.

Meyer injected patience into his voice. "Have you both been taking your treatments?"

Leo froze like a deer in headlights.

Franz answered, "I have." He glared at the other boy. "So has Leo, even though I have to kick him to do it."

Leo stuck out his tongue. "It's yucky."

Meyer sighed. "It's necessary." He looked at Franz. "I'm counting on you to make sure he behaves on your journey."

Leo bounced in his seat again. "Are we going Outside?"

The Eldest smiled. "You are. I want you to go out and see the world you've been studying for so many years. Your tutor will introduce you to every aspect of the Outside, from the luxuries of the powerful to the destitution and malnutrition of the lowliest. When you return, you'll understand in the deepest sense why we must abolish uncontrolled history."

Leo clapped. Even Franz had trouble controlling his excitement.

The Eldest leaned back in his chair. "Now, what's your favorite class? Each of you."

Franz spoke first. "I like the computers." He leaned forward to speak earnestly. "They are getting smaller and cheaper all the time. I can see a day coming when we'll be able to put a computer in a missile and guide it to its target as if it were smart."

Meyer steepled his fingers. "What would you do with a smart missile?"

Franz gave him a "Well, duh! Isn't that obvious" look but answered without sarcasm. "I'd use them to kill the people who fight against the Plan without hurting the potential workers and slaves."

The Eldest leaned forward with tension in every muscle. "And without hurting who else?"

Leo raised his hand but answered without waiting. "And without hurting the potential new Elder Guides." He spoke from rote. "We will need many new Guides when we have control, and here and there among the workers and the slaves are children born with the gifts to join us."

Franz put up his hand impatiently. “Yeah, yeah. I know. Protect the potential above all.”

Franz didn't sound convinced, but Meyer let it go. He turned to Leo. “Franz wants to study computers. And your favorite subject?”

Leo exclaimed, “Sociology!”

Franz exhaled in disgust. “Boring.”

Meyer hid his pleasure. “Why?”

When Leo spoke, his eyes were full of wonder. “I love the equations. You can see how you can reshape a whole community with a change in leadership or with just a change in the dispersion rates of true and false information.”

The Eldest had trouble breathing in his excitement. This was what a long line of Eldest Guides had patiently built toward—the hope that someone would see the engineering possibilities embedded within the science of sociology.

Centuries before, a visionary Eldest had realized that the solution to mankind's greatest ills lay not in mechanical technology but rather in remodeling the human race, both the individual human minds and the cultures they built.

After the Guides fixed the species, hysteria would no longer drive history. Never again would a city mayor think to suppress the Black Death by locking people in their houses, which accelerated the spread by trapping people in rat-infested houses and making them easy prey for the fleas that spread the disease.

Never again would a doctor like Ignaz Semmelweis, who in 1850 had scientifically proven that washing your hands before surgery saved patients' lives, be incarcerated in an insane asylum for his relentless pursuit of a saner world.

Never again.

Better machines, like Franz's smart missiles, might be useful. To really transform civilization, however, one had to focus on improving the minds and the societies.

During centuries of scientific anthropological analysis, the Elders had developed the mathematics of sociology far beyond anything developed Outside. The knowledge was not enough to remodel civilization by itself. The Guides needed more insights and/or better technology to end the chaos.

Perhaps the insights and tech were on the brink of arriving. With the ultra-bright Leo on the case, perhaps they could bring all the pieces together within the Eldest's lifetime.

Long ago, he had surrendered the hope that he would live to see the triumph of the organization for which he had built the Fulcrum. Now, that hope was back on the table.

The Eldest chuckled. "Pay no attention to Franz, Leo. Sociology is a wonderful thing to study."

His eyes went soft and unfocused. "In your hands, perhaps sociology will save the world."

FLIGHT PLANS

Cassie walked across the tarmac and entered the hangar. The last time she'd visited this airport, two aircraft had occupied the opposite ends of the otherwise empty space.

Times had changed. Now a half-dozen gleaming white flying machines crowded each other, vying for attention from the engineers working in silence to complete them.

She spotted a young fellow with a slender mustache and feverish eyes facing a half-circle of other men, both older and younger. He spoke to them in crisp yet urgent tones. He clapped his hands, and the others ran off to carry out his commands.

Cassie approached him from behind while he stood with hands on hips, deciding what to do next, and whispered in his ear. "Derek. So nice to see you again."

Cassie watched in amusement as Derek Hart spun to stare at her. The confusion on his face gave way to astonishment, then anger, and settled into acceptance. "Cassie. I never really expected to see you again."

Cassie pointed at the closest Gobi airplane. "What can I say? You're building the best eVTOLs in the world." She licked her lips. "And I need one really badly."

Derek stepped away. "You can't seriously think you can steal another one." He looked around, then yelled, "Santiago!"

The stocky chief engineer glanced at Derek, saw Cassie, and grabbed a large wrench before running over to his boss.

Cassie laughed as she held up a hand in protest. “Oh, please!” she got out between snorts. She held her stomach, which hurt from the laughter. “You’re killing me.” She hiccupped. “A little while ago, I fought the greatest martial arts expert in history, and *you’re* threatening me...” laughter threatened to overcome her once more, “with a wrench!” She whooped.

Derek and Santiago looked at each other in confusion. Derek shrugged. Santiago lowered his weapon.

Cassie regained control. “Much better.” She took a deep breath. “Honestly, I expected a better reception. I mean, we gave you forty mil, and we got you on track to finish certification ahead of schedule. What’s not to love?”

Derek growled, “You hit me with a cattle prod.”

Cassie waved that away. “Think big picture. Forget ancient history. You have to let the little things go.”

Derek considered his tortured relationship with the woman before him and finally chuckled. “Fair enough.”

The chief engineer, presuming the crisis had been averted, turned to go. Derek stopped him. “Santiago, please stay.” He looked at Cassie thoughtfully. “Better safe than sorry.”

Cassie nodded vigorously. “Absolutely. I want the chief engineer in on this too.”

Cassie followed Derek to his office in a corner of the hangar. Santiago sauntered behind her. She considered disarming the big guy but figured the wrench was giving the men peace of mind and left it alone.

They all sat down in the relative quiet of the threadbare room. Derek sounded tired as he asked, “So, what do you want this time?”

Cassie threw a leg over the arm of her chair. “As you’ll remember, last time, all we really wanted was to buy an airplane.”

Derek filled in the missing context. “You wanted to buy a unique prototype that I did not dare sell under any circumstances.”

Cassie nodded. “Fair point.” She swept her hand toward the office window and the view of multiple planes in the final stages of completion. “Again, ancient history. Looks like business is booming.”

Santiago stared at her skeptically. “You just want to buy an airplane?”

Cassie looked away and winced. “More or less. A little more than that.”

Derek was wary. “No problem with buying a Gobi.” He held up his tablet. “I will put you on the waiting list.”

Cassie coughed. “Well, about that...”

Santiago saw the obvious. “She doesn’t want to wait. She wants the next one.”

Derek scowled. “That will be a problem.”

Cassie waved it away. “Actually, it won’t be. I already talked to the buyer, and he has given me his place in line.”

Santiago exclaimed, “How?”

Derek laughed. “You bought him out.”

Cassie gave him an impish grin.

Derek shook his head. “Okay.” He looked at Santiago. “It’s supposed to be ready today, right?”

Santiago nodded. “She can take it at the close of business.” He stared at her. “Assuming she pays.”

Derek shrugged. “Honestly, all things considered, her credit is good here.”

Santiago looked at him doubtfully but was silent.

Cassie swept her leg off the arm of the chair and leaned forward. “Now comes the part that’s a little more complicated.”

Derek groaned.

Santiago tightened his grip on his wrench.

Cassie explained. "I'm going to need every plane that comes off the line for the next month."

Santiago stared at her.

Derek opened his mouth, then closed it. "Did you buy out all the other clients as well?"

Santiago leaned in. "How did you find out who our clients are, anyway?"

Cassie looked innocent.

Derek dimly perceived the truth. "Let me guess. You're a secret agent, right? For some hush-hush government agency." He frowned. "No, that can't be right. The feds never have the money for anything."

Cassie chuckled. "You can say that again. But you're not far off the mark." She watched their faces as their fear grew. "Hey, I'm one of the good guys. Really. Don't you trust me?"

For a moment, it looked like she'd lost them, but eventually, Derek sighed. "For no good reason at all, I believe you."

Cassie's smile hid her exultation. She pulled out her tablet. "Look, I have some modifications I'll need you to make." She waved Santiago over to the desk. "You'll want to see this too."

Santiago needed only two seconds to spot a big problem. "You want to pull out the batteries? What are you going to do for power?"

Derek eyed Cassie. "Doubtless, she has batteries of her own. Much better than ours. Right?"

Cassie shrugged. "Something like that." She flicked to another image of the plane and a bucket of goo.

Santiago again leaped to the right conclusion. "You want us to paint the plane with that?"

Cassie nodded. "Let me show you why."

The men watched the photorealistic video of a plane covered with the paint. After a moment of oohing and aahing, Derek smacked the desk. “See? I *told* you she was a secret agent.”

Remy’s memories of the next section of her life remained forever spotty. First, she lay bound in a cramped space that bounced with the erratic rhythm of an aircraft while she listened to the purr of an engine that was neither a propeller nor a jet nor an eVTOL.

She felt the gentle bounce of a landing and a takeoff, perhaps for refueling.

After another bounce and landing, the airplane’s hatch cracked open, and a gust of chilly air flooded the compartment. Many hands grabbed her, some gentle, some not, and carried her through a series of warm corridors to a room with a bed, where they injected her with a drug that left her unconscious.

Mild sensory deprivation followed. They freed her arms, but they trapped her hands in tough plastic mittens impervious to her teeth. She could not use her fingers, not even to remove the leather blindfold locked onto her head.

Stumbling around the small room, she found a toilet. Someone—a woman, she guessed—came in and fed her, though the attendant maintained a strict silence.

No day, no night. She lost track of time. She did not, however, lose track of herself.

Remy suspected this treatment had broken many people her captors had brought here, but she was not just anyone. She was Remy Tambook, daughter of scientists, destroyer of conspiracies, and cheerleader for all who were good in the world.

Blind and largely helpless, she began an exercise regimen. The basics, including pushups and jumping jacks.

Cheerleading: high-V, low-V, clean, and punch. Martial arts: push kick, horizontal elbow, oblique kick, palm strike.

She listened to every sound and muffled footstep outside. She memorized the smells and movements of every captor who entered her room.

She shouted the words of victory every cheerleader learned and laughed as she wondered what the people watching her thought of this.

As she shouted, she not only *sounded* triumphant, she also *felt* triumphant. She knew one true thing, truer than the rising sun they never let her see.

Cassie would come.

HEART OF DARKNESS

Operations at the NSA headquarters never went to sleep. More people worked there during the day, but analysts and software geeks also pursued their goals in the dead of night.

Of all the NSA divisions that worked through the darkest hours, AID literally took first place. Since this bottommost outpost in the basement had no windows, the lights burned continuously, bathing everyone and everything in an angry glare.

That was the description Cassie had coaxed from Bryce at one point.

Timmy hovered Cassie's Gobi several thousand feet up and a half-mile from the fort. "This where you want me to drop you?" He gave her a wicked smile. "As in, *literally* drop you?"

Cassie nodded. "Perfect. Once we're clear, go closer so you can zoom the video on possible marks."

After popping the hatch and grabbing the bar she'd installed over the opening, she addressed the next instructions to Dale. "You see how I'm doing this? Hang onto the bar, lift your feet with the flyboard attached, and swing out before releasing your hold. It's really easy." She wasn't certain how easy it would be since this was her first time using the bar, but it sounded good.

Dale grumbled. "Surely there's a better way."

Cassie laughed. "Just be glad we're not doing it the old way."

Dale raised an eyebrow. “‘The old way?’ How could it have been worse?”

Cassie explained, “Since you can’t step out with your feet locked into the flyboard, without the bar, Remy and I had to lean forward and tumble out headfirst. Then we had to crank the jets to stop the tumble and flip upright.”

Dale grimaced. “Okay. That was worse.”

Cassie dug into her purse, pulled out her lipstick, and retouched the luscious red with a swish.

Dale watched, struggling to control his exasperation. “You need to do that now?”

Cassie gave him a smile that hinted at deep secrets. “I had to make sure it works.”

Dale shook his head. “Shall we depart?”

Cassie laughed, grabbed the bar, and swung out.

Dale flailed but managed to wobble into position next to her. They slowed to land in the NSA’s parking lot.

Fort Meade’s vast parking lot offered no hiding places for their flyboards, so they laid them on a grassy stretch beyond a far corner of the mirror-glass building where almost no one walked. Then they placed a green tarp over them and hoped for the best.

Finally, they wandered to the edge of the parking lot and waited.

The next step took a frustrating amount of patience. Cassie quickly tired of smiling and laughing and flirting with Dale, but she continued for the benefit of passersby who didn’t qualify as marks.

Timmy had brought the Gobi in close and was zooming on the faces of every person who parked a car. Andrey, Morte

Noir, and Joyce competed to see who would identify the NSA employees first.

Andrey and Joyce traded places in the count of how many faces they rejected fastest. Morte Noir seemed unable to match their performance in identifying NSA employees who were not part of the Analytical Intelligence Division.

However, when the Mistress finally spoke, she scored gold. “That woman works for AID. Shanika Thorpe.”

Given a name rather than just a face, Andrey confirmed the ID in moments.

Joyce spluttered in frustration. “How did you know?”

Morte Noir shrugged. “Most of the people at NSA are just muggles like the rest of the world. Not worth noticing. But the AID agents are important. I have most of them memorized.”

Andrey distilled that. “So, Joyce and I have been wasting our time, is what you’re saying.”

The Mistress gave him an ethereal smile.

Cassie and Dale strode up to the woman, who was struggling with her purse to retrieve her keycard. Cassie stuck out her hand. “Shanika Thorpe?”

The mark looked up and instinctively shook hands.

Cassie spoke soothingly. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be all right.” She brought up her baton and tasered the woman.

Dale injected a sedative into her neck. “No worries, ma’am.”

They fussed over her as they helped her back to her car, zip-tied her hands and feet, laid her gently on the back seat, and relieved her of her purse and keycard.

Andrey spoke. “I’ve got it from here.”

Once the action started, it didn’t stop. They had barely stepped away from Shanika’s car when Morte Noir spoke again. “There’s your male target halfway across the lot. Blaine Hutchison.”

Timmy guided them from his high perch until they intercepted Dale's new best friend.

Arm in arm, the newly minted AID agents, Shanika and Blaine, strode through the main entrance.

As Shanika and Blaine approached the reception guards, they subtly transformed into two more unassuming visitors.

Cassie took on a brash Australian accent. "G'day, mate," she said to the man in charge of the x-ray machine. "Cassie and Dale Pandora."

Dale nodded at everyone with a big smile. "We're here to see the local chief of Five Eyes." He named a name.

The receptionist looked at them suspiciously, checked their IDs, and had each step in front of the vidcam for facial recognition.

Cassie appeared as nonchalant as she felt. This part was easy, thanks to the Israelis.

In 2011, the Israeli NSO Group had developed Pegasus, the ultimate solution in spyware. Pegasus could perform zero-click installations of itself on most Androids and iPhones if you could get within Bluetooth range.

The Pegasus software was a closely held secret, accessible only by a very tiny number of men and women of incorruptible integrity, and by a negligible number of totally corrupt men and women of great power. Andrey had managed to snag a copy through the UDC and had successfully infected the phones of all the covert operatives who had attended the most recent Bamburgh Ball and Congressional Auction.

With this stockpile of compromised phones, he had sent a series of messages through the networks of the intelligence community to snag invitations for two members of Five Eyes, the most sophisticated international co-op of intelligence gathering agencies, to visit Fort Meade.

Hence Cassie and Dale Pandora received pretty Visitor badges. An enthusiastic young man escorted them to a conference room with a table covered with infrared and radar satellite photos of the South China Sea.

Cassie and Dale thanked their liaison for his help.

The man nodded. “Restrooms down the hallway on the right. My office is on the left.”

Cassie did not quite shove him out the door.

Dale looked forlornly at the stacks of data. “This is very high-quality material. I’d love to look through it.”

Cassie hit his shoulder. “No time to play, Blaine.”

Shanika and her partner strode down the hall in hurried but confident silence toward the elevators and plunged into the realm of the enemy.

Cassie realized she’d been holding her breath during the elevator ride to the AID headquarters when the doors opened. She exhaled, then swallowed a lungful of fresh stale air.

Dale removed Blaine’s keycard from the control pad and waved for Cassie. “Heart of Darkness, Floor One, Ms. Shanika.”

Cassie stepped out. “So far, so good.” She threw her hands up. “Now we’re on our own. Blaine, which way? Left or right?”

Dale laughed. “Heads we go left, tails we go right.” As he pretended to flip a coin, he casually asked, “Getting anything yet?”

Before departing on this journey, Cassie had let Andrey inject yet another goddam chip into her. Since she couldn’t get her cell phone through the checkpoint, she couldn’t listen for a ping from Remy’s AirTag.

So Andrey had miniaturized a custom circuit that could listen for the AirTag and implanted it in her arm. All they had to do was get close to the girl, and the chip would inform her.

Cassie shook her head at Dale. “No tingle.”

Dale shrugged. “It was too much to hope for.” He pointed to the right. “For want of better advice, let’s go this way.”

Even in the AID HQ, people were sparse at two in the morning. A couple of people watched them go by, but Cassie had stepped into her scam role. She moved with graceful confidence, completely at ease for her audience while churning with anxiety inside.

When Cassie nodded at the passersby, they nodded back.

As they proceeded down the corridor, Cassie got excited. “These look like interrogation rooms.”

Dale was a few feet ahead of her. He stopped suddenly. “Oh, yeah. They are.”

He was looking through the window at a room where two men stood over a third strapped to a gurney. The man’s face was covered with cloth. One of the interrogators was pouring water on it.

Cassie clenched her jaw, then exhaled slowly to relax. She put her hand on Dale’s arm. “Stop, Boy Scout. Not today.”

Dale shuddered. “Prioritize.” He gave himself a probably-true rationalization. “Honestly, he’s probably a bad guy. Probably someone I’d want to waterboard myself.”

Cassie shook his arm. “That’s the spirit.”

As they hustled down the corridor, they came to a string of closed rooms with keycard locks. Cassie whispered, “Prison cells?”

Dale examined them thoughtfully. “They have to keep the prisoners somewhere.”

Cassie glared at the row of doors. “This is where they’d have Remy, then.” She ran to the end of the hall, then walked

back slowly, stopping at each door. When she got back to Dale, she announced, puzzled, “She’s not here.”

Dale sagged. “Where would they put her?”

Cassie had one last idea. “I don’t know where they’d put her, but I know where they’d put someone who knows. Follow me.”

She trotted back the way they had come. Conference rooms and shared offices gave way to larger conference rooms and bigger offices.

Amused, Dale asked, “Where do you think they’d put someone who can answer our questions?”

Cassie answered grimly, “They’d put him in the biggest office in the place.”

Dale’s eyes widened. “Of course. The director.”

Cassie nodded. “The Doc.”

At the end of the hall, they found a door that opened not into an office but into a reception area. Cassie strode in and stopped. “Uh-oh.”

Dale, a step behind, asked, “What’s wrong?”

He halted behind her. “Well, this is bad.”

The director’s admin was slumped on her desk, unconscious.

BEDFELLOWS MOST STRANGE

The shock of seeing a comatose woman sprawled on a desk interfered with Cassie's connection with her body. As Dale checked to make sure the admin was breathing, Cassie noticed a tingle in her arm. Her eyes blazed as she whispered, "Remy's here."

Dale looked up from examining the body. "She's alive." He finally realized what Cassie had said, and his eyes brightened. "Let's go find her."

Dale beat her to the door to the inner office and rushed in. "Well, this is complicated."

Cassie stopped behind him. "Bryce."

Bryce looked up from the director's desk in exasperation. "Can't a guy rifle his boss' office in peace anymore?"

Cassie drifted to one side of the desk, and Dale went to the other. Bryce could not escape, so he raised his hands to form a T. "Hey, timeout. You looking for something in particular? Maybe I can help."

Cassie swept the room for Remy and stated the obvious. "She's not here." She walked around the room slowly, inspecting every cranny for a hidden closet while listening to the tingle in her arm.

Bryce raised an eyebrow. “Who’s not here?” His face cleared as he deduced the answer. “Remy. Ah. He was right.” A wicked smile lit his face.

Dale stepped closer and demanded, “*Who* was right?”

Bryce assumed a haughty tone. “The director.”

Dale spoke with a certainty that went beyond the level of confidence he and Cassie had. “The Doc.”

Bryce shrugged. “He thought you’d break in to look for her.” His smile widened. “He didn’t think you’d get this far, but I had faith that if you came, you’d get all the way.”

While this conversation was rumbling forward, Cassie was desperately searching the room. The arm with the tracker passed very close to Bryce.

Cassie gasped, then stepped into the agent’s personal space.

Bryce leaned to her, inhaling her perfume. “You smell lovely. Shall we do it right here on the desk?”

Dale growled.

Cassie paid no attention. She brought her hand up to Bryce’s face, then lowered it to his groin.

Bryce chuckled. “Oh, yeah, baby.”

Cassie stepped away. “Dammit. What did you do, swallow Remy’s tracker?”

Dale blinked. “What?”

Cassie growled, “Remy’s tracker is down around Bryce’s intestines.”

Bryce spoke in a tone of wonder. “How did you...” His voice turned exasperated. “It should have flushed out by now.”

Cassie chortled through her frustration. “It’s designed to lodge in the body. Clearly, it got stuck.”

Dale looked at the two of them, then brought them back to the key question. “If Remy’s not here, then where is she?”

Cassie leaned into Bryce. “Exactly. Spill.”

Bryce made a T with his hands again. “If I knew—which I don’t, by the way—why would you think I’d tell you?”

Dale growled, “Because you’d like to walk out of here intact.”

Cassie shook her head. She stepped back, considered the situation, and saw the truth. She spoke with dry confidence. “You don’t trust him any more than we do.”

Bryce gave her a broad smile. “Trust but verify.”

Cassie spoke distractedly. “‘Trust but verify’ is another way of saying you don’t trust.” She gave him a penetrating look. “And you didn’t merely refuse to tell us where she is. You asked why you should answer. Who were you asking, Bryce? Us, or yourself?”

Bryce frowned.

Dale heaved a sigh as he came to a decision. When he spoke, it sounded as if he were chewing glass. “We should team up for this office search.”

Bryce looked at him in disbelief, then laughed so hard he had to wipe away tears. “The Boy Scout yields to reality.”

Cassie took that as an agreement to work together. “What’ve you found so far?”

Bryce looked around the room, disgusted. “Nothing of note.” He brightened. “Well, maybe one thing.” He reached under the desk and clicked a button.

A chunk of the bookshelf behind the desk swung away, revealing a safe.

Bryce went over and ruefully tapped the steel vault. “Wasn’t able to crack it. I was going to come back with tools.”

Cassie joined him in scrutinizing the obstinate device. “At least it’s not digital. Combination lock. Old-school.” She fluttered her fingers. “Fortunately, so am I.” She spun the dial, closed her eyes, and went to work.

Bryce whispered to Dale, “Think she can do it without tools? I think she can. Bet?”

Dale chuckled. “No bet.”

In the context of breaking into the director of AID’s office, the time it took for Cassie to open the safe seemed interminable, though it only took a handful of minutes. She felt the last tumbler pop into place and opened the safe.

Bryce rubbed his hands. “Excellent.”

Dale reminded them of their missing companion with a callback to her favorite words. “*Most* excellent.”

Cassie started plucking stuff from the safe. “Let’s see what we’ve got.” She pulled out a sheaf of certificates. “Maybe a hundred mil in bearer bonds.” She handed it to Bryce, who threw it on the desk.

She pulled out another folder with a cover sheet bordered in a thick, bold red line. “SCI docs. Humint. Now we’re getting somewhere.” SCI, or “Sensitive Compartmented Information,” was the designation for serious national security secrets. Lesser classifications like simple Top Secret were used as much to keep the public from knowing the government’s business as anything.

More than one NSA employee had suggested that Confidential and Secret documents be placed in a public warehouse with limited security so the Russians could steal it all and waste thousands of man-years of effort trying to glean something valuable from it.

SCI data, however, could put good people at extreme risk. Cassie opened the folder. “Here are the names of the five agents collecting data on Iran’s nuclear capabilities.”

Dale held his head. “They’d be dead in minutes if that got into the wrong hands.”

Cassie barely heard him. She closed the folder and tossed it on the desk. “Irrelevant.”

As she removed additional lethal SCI materials from the safe, Cassie muttered, “At least he had the good sense to not take this stuff home with him.”

Dale gasped as he looked at a set of satellite photos. “My God, look at this resolution! Incredible.” He thought about the risks if just one of these images got out. “If an enemy got their hands on this, they could retrofit the camouflage for all their operations, bunkers, and missile sites to make them invisible to us. It would be a disaster.”

Bryce shrugged. “Not so much since 2019, when a political numbnuts published a photo from one of our best and newest satellites on Twitter.”

Dale looked physically ill. “Did they put him in jail forever?”

Cassie knew the story. “Naw. He was a very powerful pol. The revelation barely made the news before his people inserted a racier scandal about one of his mistresses or something like that and drove the story of treason from the news cycle.”

She peered into the back corners of the safe. “That’s it.”

Bryce was angry. “Nothing important.” He held out a scribbled note. “An old invitation to a party from someone named Franz. Any idea who that is?”

When he got no reply, he handed the documents back to Cassie one by one so she could restack them in their original arrangement.

They spent a few more minutes combing the office for clues. Cassie hadn’t been able to sneak a thumb drive through the checkpoint, so she couldn’t infect the Doc’s computers with viruses. Playing with the login screen proved futile.

Bryce turned from the last bookcase and threw up his hands. “That’s it, then.”

Cassie pulled out her lipstick. “One last thing.” She stepped up to Bryce and twisted the knob backward hard.

A thick hypodermic needle emerged from the candy-red gloss.

Bryce became aware of the threat too late. “Hey!”

Before he could escape, Cassie jabbed the needle into his meaty shoulder muscle.

Bryce jumped. “*Bitch!*”

Cassie laughed in delight. “Oh, get a grip. It’s just a neurotoxin. You have hours before you start convulsing. If you get us out of the building successfully, I’ve got the antidote in my pack.”

Bryce rubbed his shoulder. “I would have helped you without this.”

Cassie shrugged. “Trust but verify.”

When they reached the tarp with the flyboards, Cassie rummaged in her pack until she came up with a vial. “Drink this.”

Bryce chugged the liquid, glaring with eyes that seemed brighter than the moon. “I can’t believe you did that.”

Cassie stepped behind him and rubbed his shoulders with a deep massaging rhythm. “You’ll get over it.”

Bryce shook his head. “Until next time.” He spat the final word. “*Partners.*”

After he departed, Dale laughed softly. “That was fun.” He looked at Cassie, puzzled. “Though a little dark, even for you.”

Cassie punched his shoulder. “You should know better. There wasn’t any poison.”

Dale looked more puzzled. “And the antidote?”

Cassie shrugged. “Sugar water.”

Dale continued to look at her as if he’d expected there to be more to the story.

In the end, Cassie yielded. “I brought the hypo in case we found the Doc but not Remy.”

Dale waved for her to go on.

The full explanation came forth. “I was going to use the poison fakeout with him to prevent him from guessing the real purpose. The syringe contained a tracking chip.” She brightened. “Now, even after Remy’s chip leaves his body, we’ll be able to follow him.”

She finished grimly, “I had hoped to track the Doc to Remy, but that plan’s out the window. We can only hope that Bryce will lead us to the Doc, and *he* will lead us to Remy.”

ELDER GUIDES LOG: 1995

The Eldest settled into his wheelchair. He waved his hand in a “forward” gesture for his newest Debra. “Take me to the gym.” He wanted to watch Franz’s and Leo’s last training bouts before they returned to the Outside.

Judo was the technique of the day. While he watched the two young men he could not help thinking of as his children, Meyer felt simple pleasure. He could not distinguish the details of their strikes and blocks since they moved too fast for his tired old eyes, but their instructor delivered ebullient reports on their progress. Their physical prowess matched their intellectual excellence, marking them as peak results of the ongoing genetic experiments.

Actually, they were far better than simple evolutionary improvements on the standard genotype. They were anomalies from the second generation of breeding experiments, never since replicated in the third or fourth generations of research. Preserving their superior DNA was high on Meyer’s list of priorities.

Meyer had spent considerable time consulting with the senior Elders on the choice of breeding material for his two favorite students. They had come to a conclusion that still shocked him.

The Jews might be subhuman, but Ashkenazi Jews had produced a disproportionate percentage of Nobel laureates. The Elder Guide scientists had concluded that sometime during the millennia of brutal oppression, Darwinian forces

had created a genetic mutation that made some of them uniquely brilliant in valuable ways.

Meyer shuddered at the thought that the Jews might have something crucial to contribute to the development of the superior man. He had expended much personal effort eradicating them in his youth.

He could not fight the science, however. In retrospect, it made sense that natural selection would mock what he believed about racial superiority by hiding critical genes in a branch of the species he despised.

Inevitably, the relentless march of biological evolution cared nothing about the Eldest Guides' biases. Only results mattered. Meyer strove to emulate nature's methodical approach while pursuing his goal.

To that end, he had ordered that several Ashkenazi girls be kidnaped for the breeding pool. Perhaps when Franz and Leo used them, the hybridization would enhance the mutations of both the Aryans and the Ashkenazis to produce a next-generation human able to transcend all others.

Franz's and Leo's bout ended. Franz saw Meyer out of the corner of his eye and signaled Leo and, their lean bodies glistening with sweat, they came over and nodded in respect.

Leo asked, "Eldest, how may we help you?"

Meyer answered in a raspy voice thickened with phlegm. "Come with me to the library. Time to pick your projects."

Minutes later, they sat sipping tea, surrounded by the Eldest's books, from ancient tomes of philosophy to modern electronics, software engineering, and molecular biology texts.

Leo burst out, "Eldest, I don't want to go Outside just to do research."

Meyer blinked. Was he facing a rebellion? "Do you have a different plan, or do you plan to sit at a desk and read the classics forever?"

Leo shook his head. "Our time has come. The Outside has developed the technology we need to start cultural

engineering.” He put his tea down. “We’ve done enough small-scale experiments. It’s time to begin large-scale prototyping and mold societies on a national scale.”

The Eldest stared at him with his mouth hanging open. “You can’t be serious.” One of the things the Elders had learned from the Stalin and Hitler fiascos was to remain hidden until they had all the kinks straightened out. The next time, they would have their plan locked down and guaranteed to prevail.

That had required the Elders to accept some disappointing tradeoffs. In recent decades, the only plans they had considered reliable enough to power a full-scale return to the world required a yet-undeveloped technology for swift personality remodeling. Meyer had figuratively sat on his thumbs, waiting for the Western technology race to deliver the necessary breakthroughs.

Franz coughed. “I’m afraid Leo’s enthusiasm has gotten the better of him, but he might still be right.”

Meyer stared at him. “Explain.”

Leo blurted, “Yahoo, and the new version of AOL that’s integrated with the Internet!”

Meyer raised an eyebrow, then turned back to Franz. “*Explain.*”

Franz chuckled. “Yahoo and AOL are digital community networking systems. Strangers separated by thousands of miles can find one another and share knowledge and wisdom.” He finished dryly. “And bad jokes.”

Leo glared at Franz. “And lies. And echo chambers for fabricated realities.” He looked at his mentor. “We can create geographically dispersed communities, full-fledged cults with millions of members, carved from their host societies by feeding them whatever fallacies we want them to believe.”

The Eldest suddenly felt his age. “I don’t understand. Won’t the ability of truths to spread the same way wholly counter our lies and falsehoods?”

Leo leaped to his feet, too excited to sit still. “No!” He calmed down. “Though I understand why you might think that.” He struggled to speak soberly but wound up sounding like a teacher lecturing a child. “When well-crafted lies meet truth, the lies always overpower the reality.”

Meyer looked at Franz. “Is that true?”

Franz sighed. “We’ve been conducting small-scale experiments with the slaves in the Arena, using digital media to reinforce cross-group conflict. Our evidence suggests that Leo is correct.”

Given his best friend’s support, Leo regained control and sat back down. “A good lie stands out in a way a truth simply cannot. People transmit the best lies to each other faster, more often, and to more additional people. A lie on a digital network is like a virus spreading in a crowded city with no immunity.”

The Eldest found that unlikely and fought back. “Saint Augustine. *The truth is like a lion.*”

Franz offered the next line. “*You don’t have to defend it. Let it loose.*”

Leo finished. “*It will defend itself.*”

Meyer smiled in satisfaction. His students had studied everything from the latest tech to the classics and had paid attention at every step. “And when the truth catches up?”

Franz shook his head. “The truth loses. A correctly engineered lie is not only more exciting and more stimulating, it is also more memorable.”

Leo leaned forward and explained confirmation bias, the Overton Window, anchor points, gaslighting, and everything else Meyer had to know to confirm their mission, with occasional interjections from the other young man.

Then Franz clarified an important detail. “But this next phase does need to take place Outside on the real networks, even though they don’t yet have many users. We’ve pushed as far as we can with studies in the Arena.”

Meyer nodded thoughtfully. “Leo, I want you to write up a detailed proposal. If your plan is as sound as it seems, I’ll send you to America to work with AOL and Yahoo. We’ll go from there.”

Leo’s eyes glowed. “Thank you, Eldest.”

Meyer waved him out the door and turned to Franz for a private conversation, with only the Debra listening.

The Eldest clasped his hands together and studied the older of his favorites. “So, Franz, what about you? Still interested in building smart weapons?”

Franz slumped in his chair. “It would be fun to work on that, but honestly, it’s not a good use of my time.”

Meyer suppressed a huge smile. This was going better than his highest hopes. “Why would it be a waste?”

“The people Outside are already developing that technology. There are so many of them and so few of us that they’re bound to develop it faster.”

Meyer chuckled. “*His heart is in his weapons.*”

Franz smiled back. “George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman.*” He shrugged. “We should steal what we want, as usual, then suppress the Outside tech to the extent we can, thus maintaining our advantage.”

Meyer sipped his now-cold tea and gestured for the Debra to warm it up. “I confess, I’m delighted that you reached the conclusion the Elders have agreed on for centuries.”

Franz gave him a sour smile. “I know.”

The Eldest moved on. “So, what’s your new plan?”

Franz shifted uncomfortably. “I was thinking I could go with Leo and support him in his project.” He sighed. “He really *is* onto something. It’s possible we can end uncontrolled history without the breakthrough in mind remodeling we’ve

been waiting for ever since you built the Fulcrum.” He curled his lip in distaste as he glanced at the Debra’s twisted visage. “The mind remodeling breakthrough that is quick, cheap, and easy.” He turned his eyes from the Debra. “And doesn’t require ruining the original.”

He frowned. “Leo might get into trouble building these online cult groups, which he will eventually engineer for violence augmentation. Think of the Stanford Prison Experiment, but on the grandest scale and with no boundaries.” In that classic sociological experiment, random college students had been assigned as guards and prisoners, leading to off-the-scale levels of hate between the two groups.

Franz leaned forward. “I should be there not only to help him with the technical problems but to protect him.”

That caused Meyer to frown. Franz was looking at Leo as a younger brother. The Guides had worked for generations to stamp out familial loyalties that might take precedence over loyalty to the Plan.

At the same time, he was thrilled about the idea of Franz and Leo pursuing this line of investigation. It sounded nearly ripe for use in a large-scale cultural engineering project.

He had an idea for how to get the best of both worlds. “Leo must succeed or fail on his own, but his research needs you as much as it needs him.”

Franz looked at him quizzically.

Meyer explained. “I’m going to send you to Moscow to set up a second prototyping project. Instead of just one experiment, we’ll have two in competition.”

Franz snapped back in his chair, pain on his face. “I don’t want to fight Leo.”

Meyer waved away his concerns. “Nonsense. You spar with him all the time, and you’re both much better at martial arts because of it, or that’s what your instructor says. Do you disagree?”

Franz frowned. “I guess not.”

The Eldest nodded graciously. “It’s decided, then. Let the best prototype win.”

THE CHAIR

Laurie Tambook hovered the Gobi near her mother's missile silo. Years had passed since they'd been together, though she and her mother had digitally conferred since Laurie's arrival at Rivendell.

Now, minutes before the reunion, she realized she needed to build up her courage. Her mother demanded maximum effort from everyone around her. On the one hand, her forcefulness had made Laurie into someone who could achieve great things, such as inventing the Memwriter.

On the other hand...dear God, she was *exhausting*.

Laurie flipped the paint on and landed a ways from the dome her mother called home. Laurie cleared her mind of expectations and marched across the parched landscape to the front porch.

As she knocked on the door, she felt a smug satisfaction that she'd beaten Mom's surveillance systems and gotten this far without alerting the occupant.

She had to withdraw some of her smugness, however, when her mother flung the door wide after the first tap.

Laurie held her breath.

The woman frowned at her. "About time. You're as bad as Remy."

Then her mother spread her arms and beamed. "Girl, come here." The hug was all-encompassing.

Laurie released her breath. She was home.

Laurie sank onto a battered old couch whose soft cushions had almost swallowed her in her youth. “Can’t believe this old thing survived a rocket-propelled grenade.” She rubbed a scorch mark. “I think I did more damage to it when I bounced on it after you went to bed.”

Mom kicked back in her rocker and sipped her tea. “They don’t make ‘em like this anymore.”

Laurie took a bite of a lemon cookie. She thought the comment applied to her mother even more than it applied to the sofa. “I presume it still leads the way downstairs?” She reached around back to touch the hidden toggle for the hatch to the bunker.

Mom cackled. “What would I use to replace it?” She leaned forward in the rocker to confront her daughter. “Now, tell me. How did you sneak past all my vidcams? Where’s the weakness in my defenses? If you don’t tell me, it will be your fault when some joker from AID or Gamma shows up and kills me in my sleep.”

Laurie closed her eyes. “Don’t worry, Mom. Your surveillance is fine. Remy and Cassie just...well, you have to see it to understand it. Or not see it, as the case may be.”

Mom stopped rocking. “What did they do, make it invisible?” She chortled. “Way to go, girls.”

Laurie rose from the sofa. “Come on, Mom. I have a gift for you.”

They went outside and behind the dome. Grandma trundled behind her walker, muttering, “If we go too far, the sand will gunk up my wheels.”

Laurie rolled her eyes. “I’ll buy you a new one.” She frowned at the walker, which had torn pads. Also, the brakes no longer worked. “I will buy you a new one anyway. They have walkers that are more like 4x4s for negotiating all kinds of terrain now. You can take them on hikes.”

“This one’s just fine.” Mom stopped next to her and scanned the horizon. “Which way from here?”

Laurie smirked. “You tell me.”

Mom carefully looked around, then gazed away from the house. She paused and moved her head from side to side. “There’s an optical illusion over there.”

Laurie clapped. “There certainly is.” She led the way toward a piece of the landscape that shifted when you moved, indicating that it was closer than it appeared.

Mom exclaimed, “Is that a Gobi with a paint job? A custom job to blend into the background behind my house?”

Laurie considered how to explain it. “It’s a paint job, but the customization is in the rendering.”

Her mother goggled. “The rendering?”

Laurie took a breath. “Back in 2022, at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Volkswagen presented a car painted with digital ink. The paint is made up of millions of pixels that you can turn any color.”

They reached the plane. This close, the edges outlining the plane became starkly visible. Mom touched the fuselage. “So it’s like a huge curved monitor.”

Laurie nodded. “The plane’s sensors work with the digital paint so that whatever the plane sees on the right side is duplicated on the left. The front is copied to the back, and the bottom to the top.” She looked at the sky. “If you thought it was hard to spot the plane from your house, believe me when I tell you it’s pretty much impossible to spot five thousand feet up.”

Her mother whistled. “Well, thank you for showing it to me, but doesn’t Cassie need it? You better get going.”

Laurie shook her head. “Cassie has her own.”

Her mother’s eyes got big. “So, this is yours?”

At this second misunderstanding, Laurie laughed. “This one is *yours*, Mom.”

Karla opened her mouth, then closed it. “Then you better get to work, kiddo. You’ve got a lot to teach me about flying this thing and not much time.”

Laurie raised her eyebrows. “What’s the rush?”

Grandma snorted. “Who knows, but trust me. We’re already late.”

Dale drummed his fingers on his desk at the Dread Nought HQ. He had always figured being the CEO would not be a lot of fun since even though the office and the desk were bigger, the problems were also bigger.

He was seriously unhappy with the plan to find Remy. Waiting for Bryce to hook them up with the Doc and waiting for the director to hook them up with his victim would take a long time, at best. He had a bad feeling that Remy would not survive the waiting game.

But what else could he do?

He had one last thread to pull, a tiny coincidence that nevertheless bugged him. No doubt the correlation would dissolve on closer inspection, but he had nothing to lose.

He called Joyce into the office.

She rolled in, flushed with energy. She was enjoying her new job as COO enormously. Dale thought sourly that maybe he should have forced her into the CEO role and taken the COO slot himself.

She plopped into a plush chair by the side of the desk. “How can I help you?”

Dale leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “I’m sitting here stewing in my own juices because of a peculiar aspect of Remy’s kidnapping.”

Joyce leaned forward with grim determination. “Tell me.”

Dale rocked his chair. “Remy outmaneuvered a vast array of enemies with vast resources for years.”

Joyce dryly added, “Including us. Including *me*.”

Dale leaned forward, snapping the chair upright. “Exactly, yet the Doc caught her within moments of leaving Dread Nought.”

Joyce saw where this was going. “It was the first time she’d appeared at a large gathering without special protection.”

Dale nodded.

Joyce stated, “You think the Doc has a spy in Dread Nought.”

Dale looked at her with worried eyes. “Is that too farfetched?”

Joyce snorted. “As it happens, I’ve been thinking along those lines as well.” She gave him a knowing look. “Easy to guess the most likely candidate.”

Dale sighed. “Curtis.”

Joyce pulled out her phone. “Jewel, have you finished analyzing the messages that went out of the building during the New CEO party?” She put her phone away. “She’s bringing them.”

Jewel appeared at the door.

Dale waved her in.

Joyce pointed her to a chair. “What have you got?”

Jewel put her tablet on the desk and showed them a page of phone calls. “Half a dozen people made calls during the party.” She struck half of them out. “Some went to known numbers, customers, and informants.”

She struck out a couple more. “For the moment, I’m also striking the ones that didn’t get rerouted through a VPN, which allowed us to trace their endpoints. We’ll want to question the people who made those calls, but they are probably not double agents.”

Dale grew impatient. “That leaves two calls. Who made them?”

Jewel brushed her hair back. “One was made by Catseye.”

Joyce looked at Dale. He looked back. Catseye had walked through fire for Dread Nought’s customers and had quietly told Dale how delighted he was with the company’s new direction.

Dale frowned. “Seems unlikely.”

Joyce nodded. “And the last one?”

Jewel slumped. “You might be right about my partner. The other call, made shortly after Dale introduced Remy, was made by Curtis.”

Dale thanked Jewel, sent her back to work, and called Andrey.

The techie answered on the first ring. “You have something on Remy?”

Dale gave him a motivational answer. “We might know who betrayed her. We need you to confirm or deny.”

Joyce broke in, “I’m sending you the recording of the conversation he initiated from Dread Nought that might have informed someone about where and when to make the grab. It’s encrypted and onion-routed.”

When he was excited, Andrey’s Russian accent got stronger. It did so now. “He can’t stop me from tracing him. Give me a couple of minutes.”

Dale visualized the process Andrey would pursue. With access to all the messages running through all the onion routers via the UDC, he would decrypt the onion wrappers to maintain a continuous track of the underlying messages. Simultaneously, he would use the Key to decrypt the underlying messages.

After a period of silence, Joyce, who had been read in on Andrey's tools, shook her head. "I still can't believe he can break all the comm in the world."

Andrey responded with frustration. "Not quite everything in the world. I can't decrypt Curtis' message."

Dale considered what that might mean, but Joyce asked the next question. "Were you at least able to track it? Where did it go?"

Andrey allowed triumph to suppress his irritation. "Fort Meade."

Dale joined the others in silence. None of them wanted to believe Curtis was the Doc's spy, but they had to pursue the analysis to the grim end.

Dale prompted Andrey. "You couldn't break the encryption. I know there are streams of messages around the world that are similarly unbreakable, but I only know of one other person whose encryption you can't break."

Andrey responded, "The Doc's. He uses a one-time pad." He exhaled in quiet rage. "I can't be sure, but it looks like Curtis used a one-time pad too."

Though still blind, Remy turned her head toward the door when it clicked before opening. The soft footsteps had a firmer rhythm than most of her attendants'. She had once heard the word "Debra" outside her room just before this attendant entered. This must be her.

For the first time ever, Debra left the door open as she approached the bed. Remy tensed. Was this her chance?

Not until she had a clue about what lay outside her cell. She forced herself to relax.

Debra wrapped her hand around Remy's upper arm and spoke in a voice so beautiful that tears welled in Remy's eyes. Was Debra's voice that melodic, or was it just Remy's hunger

for the sound of another person speaking? What difference did it make? “Please come with me.”

Debra took her out into the corridor. Remy, sensitive and alert in ways she had never experienced before, could detect the change in air pressure as they passed openings for other corridors. She waved her free arm, trying to touch the passage’s walls, hoping to get a sense of the size of the hallway.

Debra shook her. “Stop that.”

Remy clenched her teeth. It was not yet time.

They wound up in another small room. Remy didn’t know how she knew it was small, but the air felt still and compressed like in her own room. Debra guided her to a padded, high-backed chair and laid it back.

Someone who had a heavier step entered. Perhaps a male. He came over to the far side of the chair.

With synchronized movements, Debra and the man grabbed her wrists and strapped them to the arms of the chair. Remy’s nostrils flared as she struggled against the restraints, but the struggle lasted only a moment. It was not yet time.

The man chuckled, and a hint of admiration touched a voice she recognized from the helicopter. “The cheerleader survives. You have no idea how many people I’ve broken by this point in the treatment. Amazing.”

Debra removed her blindfold. Remy blinked in the sudden brilliance, though the light was very dim.

First, she saw the man she had hated long before she’d heard his voice and a rage-filled word erupted from her. “Doc.”

He gave her a wide smile. “She continues to amaze.”

She turned her head to look at Debra and blinked again. Debra’s face was angelic, flawless in every line and curve. Her perfection suggested a sculpture executed by a world-class artist at the peak of his powers.

Remy shivered when she realized Debra was probably the result of such sculpting.

The Doc nodded at the attendant. "You may go now."

Debra silently left.

The Doc fiddled with some equipment behind Remy. "I need to apologize for how long it took me to get ready for this meeting. Your father is not only an engineering genius but an artistic genius as well. His circuitry was remarkably hard to reverse-engineer." He pulled out a balaclava with threads of silver and gold woven into it. "I believe you know what this is."

Remy looked at the cap in horror. "No." She whipped her head from side to side in a panicked attempt to stop him.

The Doc struggled to pull the device over her head. "Stop fighting me. It will all be fine soon." He succeeded at last. "This is very exciting from a research perspective. You're my first memwriting subject. We will learn so much together."

Remy thrashed wildly but could not stop him as he adjusted the cap and strapped her head into position against the headrest. He taped her eyes open. "You've missed your parents, haven't you, Remy? Time to get to know them a little better. I'm going to show this to you a couple of times. Then you, of all people, know what happens next."

Remy knew. The Memwriter would repeat the memory over and over until it dominated every other memory of her parents she'd cherished.

The movie played. It could not be her parents. It had to be a deep fake since her mother and father would never brutalize her like that.

But it looked so real!

She screamed as she had never screamed before.

THE BAIT

A riot of colorful flowers overflowed the pots that lined the sidewalk outside Pineapple and Pearls.

The restaurant's website recommended that guests arrive in formal wear. For men, it suggested emerald-green tuxedo jackets. It deemed sequined gold dresses appropriate for women.

Dale looked at Joyce. She was the only one attired in the recommended outfit, dazzling the passersby with her glittering dress. He had worn a three-piece navy blue suit with a striped maroon tie.

Jewel had tried to fit in. She was wearing her most formal thigh-high black boots, a black lace cocktail dress, and enough Goth makeup to rival a raven.

Curtis wore his best black jeans, a white shirt whose collar sagged, and a scowl that matched his mood. "What are we doing here, anyway?"

Dale felt like scowling back but remained upbeat. "We're celebrating a major upgrade in Dread Nought's capabilities."

That mellowed Curtis' unhappiness. "What are we getting?"

Joyce chortled. "The secrets of the web."

Curtis stared at her as she led them away from the restaurant to a flower shop named She Loves Me next door.

Jewel blinked. "Isn't the restaurant over there?"

Dale explained, “The restaurant has a private dining room in the flower shop.”

Joyce scrutinized the shop’s sign. “Specializing in ‘untamed florals’ for special events.”

Jewel clapped. “Oh, cool.”

Curtis went back to scowling. “*Flowers.*”

After they were seated, and despite Curtis’ repeated efforts to redirect the conversation to the Dread Nought news, Dale refused to mention it again. “Order first,” he commanded.

A statuesque waitress in a red designer sheath swayed over on high heels. Her deep Southern accent coated her words with warm honey. “What can I get y’all?”

Dale ordered short ribs with red grits. Joyce got scallops with brown butter sabayon, and Jewel requested foie gras with blue cheese and truffles.

When the waitress got to Curtis, he was too tongue-tied to speak.

The waitress gave him a glowing smile. “Sugar, I see you’re having some trouble.” She leaned over and let her perfume roll over him, then patted him and whispered, “Don’t worry. I’ll order for you. I promise you’ll like it.”

She moved away.

Jewel leaned over to smack his shoulder. “Geek guys. Seriously?”

Fenya chortled as she placed the phone she had slipped out of Curtis’ pocket in front of the vidcam. “Geek guys. You have to feel sorry for them.”

Andrey’s voice came from the speakers. “Hey! I’m a geek, too.”

Fenya responded quickly., “Yes, but you’re a *good-guy* geek. It’s different.”

Esin giggled. “Was that what you call ‘a quick save?’” She got serious, sort of. “But it’s true. In my experience, good guy geeks are more polite.”

Fenya snorted and brushed back a strand of Esin’s hair. “In your experience? You’re still a trainee, girl.”

Andrey spoke impatiently. “Okay, let’s pop that puppy open and see what we’ve got.”

Joyce watched Curtis with amusement. “There’s steam pouring out your ears.”

Curtis whined, “Can we just get on with it?”

Jewel hissed, “We’re celebrating. Enjoy it.”

After the waitress departed with their orders, Dale relented. “We’ve all suspected that Remy and Cassie have a Quantum Key that allows them to beat every major encryption schema in the world.”

Jewel, pretending that surprised her, widened her eyes. “I wondered about that.”

Curtis ground his teeth. “Hell, yeah. Obvious.”

Jewel asked, “Are they going to let us use it?”

Joyce picked up the thread. “It’s more complicated than that.”

Curtis groaned.

Dale overcame his anger at the traitor and playfully punched him in the shoulder. Curtis winced.

Perhaps Dale was still angry. “The Key is not a one-size-fits-all solution.”

Joyce augmented that with, “There’s no ‘encrypted data here’ port with a matching ‘decrypted data here’ outlet.”

Jewel leaned forward. “Sounds interesting.”

Dale nodded. “You need a world-class hacker to act as the Key whisperer.”

Curtis’ eyes blazed with greed. “I’m there.”

Dale smirked. “I thought you would be.” He tilted his head at the other geek at the table. “Jewel, too.”

Curtis frowned. “Whatever.”

Jewel prompted, “How many Key whisperers are there? Do we figure it out on our own, or will one of them teach us?”

Dale sincerity. “There’s only one right now.” Technically, Andrey, Remy, and Cassie could all whisper to a key, and for simple tasks, there *was* an encrypted-in decrypted-out capability. “A Russian named Andrey.”

Curtis frowned. “What’s so special about him?”

Joyce explained. “He invented the Key. One might say he has a special affinity for it.”

Dale continued. “He thinks he’s simplified it enough so other world-class hackers can do the job.” He pointed at the Dread Nought software engineers. “We’ll see if either of you can do for us what he does for Cassie and Remy at Rivendell.”

Disassembling Curtis’ phone proved more difficult than they’d anticipated. In the end, Fenya didn’t have the patience for the kind of precise surgery Andrey demanded. “Let’s either pound it with a sledge or cremate it with an acetylene torch.”

Esin took over. “Is this design typical for a cell phone? I can just pop mine open with a piece of stiff wire.”

Andrey growled in frustration. “It is *not* typical. That thing is rigged like a bank vault.” He turned philosophical. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. I haven’t been able to load the Pegasus virus on the phone, either. Curtis and his boss have seriously paranoid high-end tech.”

Fenya returned to her earlier recommendation. “Can’t we just, you know, hit it with a hammer and pull the chip?”

Andrey sounded alarmed. “Not only would Curtis and the Doc know he’d been blown, but I’m pretty sure that if we do this wrong, we’ll trip a self-destruct circuit. It’ll blow up, and you won’t look so smug anymore.”

Chastised, Fenya responded, “Esin, you just take your time.”

Dale listened as Curtis grew more eager. “So, when can we start?” He reached for his phone. “Can we zoom this Andrey guy and get to it?”

Dale jerked forward and grabbed Curtis’ wrist before it reached his pocket. “No zooming. Too many organizations and individuals breach Zoom all the time. This needs a personal touch.”

Joyce laughed. “Patience. Andrey will be here in the flesh in a couple of days.” She explained where and when he would arrive near the Dread Nought HQ.

Dale warned them. “About Andrey’s interpersonal skills. He’s, um, socially—”

Joyce completed the sentence. “Inept.”

Dale nodded. “So we want you two to meet him at the drop point. You can speak geek with him. Make him feel comfortable.”

Curtis grinned. “Not a problem.”

A waiter entered with the first course. Dale watched the dishes land on the table. “For now, eat.”

Fenya muttered, “Heisting a cell phone should not be this difficult.”

Esin straightened after a particularly delicate operation. “At least you brought our lock-picking tools. Think how difficult this would be without them.”

Andrey affirmed that. “Indeed. Fenya, without you, we’d have failed.”

They were trying to soothe Fenya’s ruffled feathers. She appreciated the effort even if she did see through it. “How else can I help?”

The case fell apart in Esin’s hands and Fenya winced, expecting an explosion.

Andrey sighed in relief. “Congratulations, everyone.” His next words came out fast. “Now snap out the memory chip and copy it. I’ll decrypt it later.”

Dale was studying the dessert tray when disaster struck.

A petite, energetic young waitress with big, innocent brown eyes and jet-black hair came around to refill their water glasses. She stumbled and splashed half the contents of the pitcher on Curtis. Horror filled her face. “Oh, my gosh. I’m so sorry.” She vigorously attacked his soggy clothing with a napkin. “It will be okay. I’m *so* sorry.”

Curtis tried to stop her. “Never mind. Just go.” He put up his arms in defense.

The girl continued long after her efforts stopped helping. “It should air-dry from here. I’m really sorry.”

Curtis maintained a stoic silence.

Dale gazed at him. “Let’s see if something sweet makes this better.”

Curtis reluctantly agreed.

The dark-haired girl, after she stepped behind Curtis and out of his line of sight, gave Dale a thumbs-up. The tension he hadn't known he was feeling slid away. "Dessert is definitely the answer."

After seeing Curtis off outside the restaurant, Dale stuffed Jewel and Joyce into his rented Honda Civic and joined Fenya and Esin and Andrey on the video call.

Laurie and Morte Noir had also joined the conference. Laurie muttered, "We are *not* taking bets on how long it takes Curtis to call his evil overlord."

Fenya agreed. "Of course not. Ten minutes, tops."

Morte Noir backed Laurie. "It would be unseemly to bet on the timing of a betrayal. I think he'll wait at least an hour. He needs to give some thought to how to pitch it so he becomes the golden boy who can run the Quantum Key."

Jewel distractedly grabbed a chunk of her lank hair and twisted it into a knot. "He's too impatient to wait an hour. Laurie's right. No guessing, though as the Mistress pointed out, he *does* need time to strategize. Half an hour."

Dale wrinkled his nose. "The betting no one is doing suggests we have time to get back to the office before anything happens." He started the car.

Joyce grumbled, "And I have an announcement as the COO of Dread Nought. I'm getting Dale a company car with enough room to seat three people comfortably. Or five."

Dale complained, "I want good gas mileage too."

Morte Noir chortled. "He really is a Boy Scout, isn't he?"

When Dale and company reconnected from his private conference room at HQ, Andrey had more good news. "I've

broken the encryption on Curtis' memory card."

Dale blinked. "I thought you couldn't break the one-time pads."

Jewel was annoyed by his ignorance. "He can't break the one-time pads, but you can't encrypt the one-time pad data with data from the one-time pad. Right? You have to use something more traditional and *breakable*." She turned back to the monitor. "Did you get his pad?"

Andrey preened. "I surely did. I have the past and future numbers from the pad, which means we can break both his future calls and, perhaps as useful, his past ones." He was silent, then, "Got the conversation he had with the Doc while Remy was at Dread Nought for the party."

Andrey played the conversation in which Curtis gave the Doc Remy's location.

Dale noticed Joyce clenching her fists like he was. "As CEO, I hereby command that the COO is not allowed to murder the traitorous son of a bitch."

Morte Noir interjected with alarm, "Absolutely not. Now that we're on to him, he will be very valuable to us."

Fenya offered soothingly, "Don't worry, Joyce. You can kill him when we're done with him. I'll help if you want. No charge."

Morte Noir schooled her lieutenant. "No freebies. We must follow our principles."

Joyce laughed. "No problem." Her voice turned dark. "I can do it without your help."

Jewel shivered.

Andrey interrupted, "Okay. Curtis is making a call."

The conference went silent.

Leo studied the circuits under his microscope with irritation. What was he missing?

The effort to remodel Remy's mind was proceeding far more slowly than he'd anticipated. Something was not working correctly. Was it something about her or about the Memwriter?

His phone buzzed, augmenting his irritation. He reached out to shut it off, but the Caller ID caught his eye. Curtis.

Curtis rarely called, and when he did, he generally brought worthy news. The Doc stepped away from the microscope. "What do you want?" he asked with less patience than he had intended.

Curtis paused, taken aback. "I've got a lead on another great opportunity. One you've wanted for a while."

Leo tried to get his head out of Memwriter circuit research mode to think about other things he wanted from the Outside, and his impatience boiled over. "What?"

Curtis tried to continue with relish but stumbled. "They're bringing Andrey, the mastermind of the Quantum Key, to me."

Leo paused to consider the implications. Was full control of the data streams of the world within his grasp? "You're sure?"

Curtis gave a harsh laugh. "Our moron CEO just gave me the schedule." He told Leo the time and place. "This should be as easy as the Remy snatch. Easier. Andrey is a tech wizard but has no combat skills."

Curtis' last tip had paid off with the most important capture in human history. "What kind of security will there be?"

Curtis hesitated before answering. "I don't know. Dale didn't say anything about security. The only other person I know will be there is Jewel."

Leo knew it couldn't be that easy.

Curtis knew it too. "You want to send Bryce? Take Andrey to Fort Meade?" He gulped. "Bryce'll have to hit me pretty

hard to make the snatch look good.”

The Doc looked at the heavens. Bryce could hit Curtis with a stuffed Hello Kitty doll, and everyone would consider it credible when the geek collapsed.

However, as he considered Curtis’ recommendation, he realized the Key was too valuable to share with the NSA at large. “I want Andrey here.”

He developed a plan. “I’ll bring Bryce along. He can scout the location and see what kind of security Dread Nought puts in place.”

Curtis sounded skeptical. “Just Bryce?”

Leo chuckled. “Just Bryce. He’s excellent at working alone, and he performed competently for the Remy snatch. This should go just as well.”

THE ESCAPE

Another memwriting nightmare ended. Remy's breathing hitched as she looked around the bare room.

The Doc had not reapplied the blindfold after the memwriting began. He also allowed Remy to sleep between sessions. She didn't know if that meant she only had one encounter a day or if she napped several times every twenty-four hours.

She had not lost count of the sessions she had suffered, but the number was getting harder to remember with each battle in the chair.

She had to get out.

The slave Patti unstrapped her and led her out the door and into the passage that led to her cell.

Remy now understood the routine, and she had studied all the possibilities for escape. She would never have a better chance than this.

Remy's hands were still trapped in the mittens, but that did not make her helpless. She jerked out of Patti's grasp and put her arm around the slave's neck in a chokehold.

Remy gave a command compounded by rage. "I don't want to kill you, but I will unless you help me. Take me to the hangar with the airplanes."

Patti hesitated.

Remy squeezed her neck and her carotid. In a few seconds, the woman would pass out, and during that time, she would

feel like she was dying.

Patti whimpered, “The hangar has a lock. I can’t get through.”

Would Remy have to use her to find another slave who had access? She couldn’t afford to waste that much time, but she might not have a choice.

While considering this problem, she decided to solve a smaller one. Remy loosened her grip on the slave’s throat. “At least get these gloves off my hands.”

Patti obeyed.

Heart still racing, Remy formulated her next avenue of attack. “Is there any other way out of here?”

Patti hesitated, and Remy tightened her arm again, then loosened it. “Tell me!”

“There is a stairway to the outside.” Patti coughed. “I don’t think you want to go there, but I’ll take you.”

Remy pushed her forward. “Show me.” They ran down the hall.

Miraculously, no one appeared as they fled. Remy was experiencing a sinking feeling that she had been set up when they reached a door. Patti pointed. “Here.”

Remy grabbed the door as an usher would. “After you.”

The door opened onto a narrow cylinder filled with a steel spiral staircase. Remy peered up a dizzying series of steps that seemed to go on forever and nudged Patti.

Remy’s legs burned as they climbed. It was bad but tolerable. She congratulated herself on the exercise regime she had sustained throughout her imprisonment. Had she not stayed fit, she could not have made it.

Patti held up surprisingly well. Apparently, the Doc and his people enforced an exercise regime for the slaves as well.

As they climbed, the air turned frigid, and as they neared the top, they couldn’t touch the handrails. The steel was too cold for contact.

Where were they, Siberia? Remy grimaced. It didn't make any difference. Even in Siberia, villages dotted the landscape, and paths and roads crisscrossed the terrain. She could do this.

They came at last to another door. Patti looked at her doubtfully. "You'll need a coat."

Remy heard a blast of wind outside, then silence. "I have to do this." She flung open the door and stepped out before she lost her courage.

The cold shocked her to her bones. Her breath formed glittering ice crystals in the air.

She barely noticed.

Solid ice flowed in every direction for as far as the eye could see. Long crevasses showed hints of blue-green iridescence from deep within. A mountain of crystal white crags rose in the distance.

She had thought Siberia would be the worst possible place.

She had been wrong.

As she fought her despair, a voice she recognized arose behind her. "Isn't Antarctica beautiful at this time of year?" The Doc spoke in a poetic cadence.

"A land of ice and snow

Where only the brave dare go

A place of beauty and mystery

Where nature reveals its history

A wilderness of cold and wind

Where life and death are intertwined

A frontier of science and exploration

Where humans seek new inspiration."

He finished, "Truer than the author could know."

Remy had failed.

Remy needed a moment to gather her strength and shake off the hopelessness. She asked distractedly, “Who was the author?”

The Doc chuckled. “GPT-4.” He waved a hand at the deadly beauty surrounding them. “Something I had it create during my first experiments with AI.”

He let his eyes drift as he reflected. “Turns out to be a very able assistant when you’re engineering conspiracy cults. I thought I was doing well when I created EStorme, but when Franz developed Ruby Rage, I knew he’d taken the next step. In retrospect, it’s obvious. He figured out how to use AI to fine-tune incitement to violence.”

Remy thought that was interesting and would have asked who Franz was, but she was shivering too hard to care.

She looked yearningly at the nearest crevasse and considered running over and plunging into the abyss to end it.

She forced herself to remember that this escape attempt had been a long shot. Her actual goal had been to collect the information she would need for the real thing. “How did you find me?”

The Doc laughed with delight. “Isn’t it obvious? I put a tracker inside you.” When she glanced at her arm, he shook his head. “Tut, tut, girl.” He touched her chest. “I planted it inside the aorta. You will not be cutting it out with a kitchen knife.”

He thought about her cleverness and desperation. “Nor will you bite it out. And the tracker talks to the locks. Even with the right key card, the hangar will stay locked if you try to access it.” He smiled wickedly. “Without me overriding it.”

He put his mouth to her ear. “You belong to me, and soon, you will accept that.”

The confidence and arrogance in his voice drove her to a frenzy. She struck at him with all the speed and skill her training had given her.

He dodged with a swift, precise shift of his head.

Again and again, she struck.

Again and again, he parried or dodged or blocked.

Was he as good as she was? How could that be? Or had the weariness and anguish and constricted internment defeated her?

In the end, she stumbled and fell to the ice. The Doc and the slave each took an arm and dragged her upright. In the tone of a man speaking to his favorite kitten, he murmured, "Let's get you back inside." He squinted against the glare reflecting from the ice. "If you stay out here, you're going to need shades."

They half-carried her back to the Fulcrum, to life and a horror worse than death.

She embraced the reason she had not taken the path to the crevasse: to finish this. Too softly for her enemies to hear, she muttered, "*Cassie.*"

THE STOWAWAY

After several sessions with Dulcolax, several more sessions with Milk of Magnesia, and a remarkably uncomfortable enema, Bryce flushed Remy's tracker out of his system. Just in time, since the director had a new job for him.

In the 3 AM darkness, Bryce stood on the roof of the Walmart on Lee Highway and peered at his surroundings with satisfaction. The road noise from the cars on the highway was a nuisance factor, but the store sat in imperial isolation from the surrounding city, sequestered by its immense parking lot. The roof of the store supplied the only high point nearby. Bryce unlimbered his sniper rifle, fitted the infrared scope, and carefully scanned the landscape.

In the scattered trees beyond the parking lot to the left, he saw the warm red outline of a human body arrayed on the ground in a sniper's pose. A moment later, Bryce spotted another one on the right. He fired once at each target, and the bodies faded in his infrared vision as they cooled. "Security eliminated."

The Doc sighed with relief. "I was worried that they would out-deceive us."

Bryce continued to watch the targets. No movement. He had killed them, all right. "Dale's in charge. He's hardly the most cunning opponent on the planet."

A breeze wafted the purr of an automobile to Bryce's location. "Incoming." He spotted the vehicle as it passed under one of the parking lot lights. "Black SUV. Probably Curtis."

Moments later, after the SUV parked under a light in the center of the lot, Curtis stepped out of the passenger side door. Jewel stepped out of the driver's side. The Doc answered, "Confirmed."

Then Bryce heard a breeze whispering through the leaves in a forest. Except there was no forest. He informed the Doc. "Something else is coming. Something different."

The night lights in the parking lot highlighted an aircraft floating straight down. The Doc explained, "It's an eVTOL. I've suspected Cassie and Remy had something like that, though I still don't understand the details. Sometimes they go a lot farther than the batteries on a plane like that should take them."

Bryce grunted. "If Cassie's on board, do you want her, too?"

The Doc thought about it. "With the Memwriter, I no longer need her, and she's dangerous. Kill her."

Bryce realized he shouldn't have asked the question if he didn't want the answer. Nevertheless, he knew the right response. "As you wish."

The hatch popped open, and a pale, pasty geek stepped out. Bryce tensed. "Confirm target."

The Doc looked at the photo Curtis had given him. "That's Andrey."

A smallish woman who was not Cassie hugged Andrey as he got out. She watched Curtis and Jewel approach and yelled something at them before climbing back into the plane and lifting off.

Bryce relaxed into a sniper's trance. As Andrey shook Curtis' hand and turned to Jewel, Bryce fired twice.

Both tires on the driver's side of the SUV sagged to the ground.

Andrey, Jewel, and Curtis looked around in alarm.

The Doc flung open the door of the store and trotted over to them, waving a pistol. "Stay calm, everyone. I have a little

business proposition for Andrey.” He waved at the other two. “Go now.” As they backed away, he fired into the air. “Faster.”

Curtis and Jewel ran.

Andrey’s voice trembled. “I’m not going back to Gamma. I’ve spent too much time in basements already.”

The Doc made a soothing motion. “You’re safe with me.” His voice turned hard. “As long as you do as you’re told.” He waved at the roof of the Walmart and at Bryce. “Come on down.”

Bryce hesitated. He hated to abandon the most strategic position in the locale. He took one last look around, then clambered down his rope to fetch the getaway vehicle from the truck delivery side of the building.

He listened on his earbud as the Doc pitched the merits of joining AID. “Cheer up. You’re about to get an extraordinary research lab and a team of outstanding assistants.”

Andrey spoke bitterly. “What I *want* is sunshine.”

Bryce had heard the Doc talk enough to hear the nasal tone that indicated the AID director was lying when he said, “And sunshine, you shall have. So bright you’ll need to wear shades.”

Bryce motored up with an AID urban combat vehicle, a white van advertising *HVAC Refrigeration Heating Electricity* on the side. He went to the back, flung the rear doors open, and hopped out. “Everybody in.”

Three shots rang out from the roof of the Walmart Bryce had just abandoned. He saw the Doc hit the ground before he fell himself.

Grandma stuck her head out the hatch of her Gobi to look at the Walmart below. The swirling wind mussed her hair as the local breeze collided with the hovering plane’s prop wash. “Looks like Bryce is on the roof,” she shouted over her

shoulder to her companions. She grudgingly admitted, “He picked the right sniper’s position, all right.”

Laurie chided, “Of course, Mom. He’s a professional.” “Unlike you,” she did not add, though everyone heard it.

Grandma snapped back, “You want to use my plane? You let me come along and help. Those are the rules. Deal with it.”

Fenya held onto Grandma’s arm like the old girl’s life depended on it, which it might if the breeze turned gusty. “Grandma, we’re delighted to have you along. I’ve been dying to see you in action since, like, *forever*.”

Jake, who was holding her other arm, spoke impatiently. “Have you seen enough? Can we bring you back inside? Please?”

Grandma turned her head this way and that. “What are those little dots of light on my fuselage? Shouldn’t the plane be black? And the dots are winking. Are those defective pixels in the paint?”

Laurie answered with asperity. “Who cares? They can’t see us. Not unless they spot your silver hair hanging out the hatch.”

Fenya leaned over to peek at the defective lights. “They’re images of the stars above us. From below, we look like part of the star-filled sky.”

Grandma harumphed. “Doesn’t look like it from here. Why didn’t you just say so?” She let them pull her back into the plane.

Curtis arrived down below. Then Remy’s and Cassie’s Gobi came in and dropped Andrey into the trap.

Grandma impatiently muttered, “Come on, bastard. Call your minion Bryce off the roof to join you.”

Fenya warned, “It may not be that simple. We may have to take Bryce from here.”

Jake added with relish, “Hope so. The Gobi’s not stable enough as a sniper platform for precision work. We’ll have to kill him.”

Grandma high-fived Jake. “Good by me.”

Laurie interrupted sharply, “Only as a worst case. Remember, we have a tracker on Bryce but not the Doc.”

Fenya let her drawl thicken. “So, we might still have a use for the boy.”

Finally, the Doc did as they’d hoped. Bryce looked around the roof one last time.

Grandma chortled. “It’s almost as if he knew we were just waiting for him to go.”

Bryce left.

Laurie brought the silent Gobi down and put it in an automated hover a foot above the roof.

Fenya hopped out, then Jake, and together, they helped Grandma take the big step off the plane. Laurie handed down her walker and all three sniper rifles.

Laurie reminded everyone of the plan—primarily, Grandma figured, to remind her mother to be patient. “As we discussed, Fenya fires first since her shot must be perfect.”

Fenya did not move her eye from her scope. “Check.”

Laurie continued, “Mom, you fire next.”

Grandma scowled. “Because if I’m a little off, it’s okay.”

Laurie finished, “Jake, you’re last.”

Jake didn’t sound happy, either. “Right. Because my target is the easiest. Sheesh.”

The Doc walked out and waved his gun at everyone.

Grandma grumbled, “Andrey, Joyce, and Curtis. None of the geeks look as surprised as they’re supposed to.”

Laurie laughed. “No surprise, Mom. None of them are actors, and they all expected the Doc to show up. Curtis just didn’t know Jewel and Andrey knew.”

Fenya chuckled. “Such delicious webs we weave.”

Bryce arrived in the AID van.

Fenya shot the Doc. Grandma shot Bryce. As Jake fired, Grandma muttered to everyone, “Now, *that’s* satisfaction.”

Bryce coughed up blood. He’d taken a bad hit to the chest. His analytical mind, disconnecting from his body, concluded that the sniper had missed. If the intention had been to wound him, the hit was overkill. If the intention had been to kill? Well, Bryce was still thinking about it, wasn’t he?

The Doc had come off better. He jumped up, almost collapsed from the pain, then grabbed Bryce and hauled him into the van. As he swung the doors closed, he breathed heavily. “Safe for the moment.” The van had bulletproof Class IV armor. Anything less than an RPG could not harm them.

Bryce spared a thought for the mission. “Andrey?”

The Doc lurched into the driver’s seat. “Running like a rabbit.”

Bryce tried to sit up and lay back down. “Hospital.”

The Doc gunned the engine. “Right.”

Bryce coughed.

As the Doc hurtled down the road, he reflected on the recent disaster. “So, they out-tricked us after all.”

Bryce grimaced. “Apparently.”

The Inova Fairfax Hospital lay three and a half miles from the Walmart. In a few minutes, the Doc helped Bryce into the emergency room.

As attendants rushed around and strapped Bryce to a gurney, the Doc winced. “I’ve got to go.”

An attendant looked at him with alarm. “You need treatment, too.”

The Doc shook his head. “I’ll live.”

Bryce agreed with the attendant. “Stay.”

The Doc frowned. "It's not safe here. It might not be safe for you, but it's also not safe for you to travel any farther." He looked into the distance. "I have a safe place. They can fix me there."

He departed.

Grandma listened with more patience than usual as her daughter complained. "Mom, I think you hit Bryce a little harder than you should have."

Grandma accepted the criticism because Laurie was right, dammit. "Child, I know. I may have lost focus a touch. Forgive an old woman for wanting him dead."

Fenya cleared her throat. "Still a good shot. It should serve the purpose." She stuck her hand out of her sniper position and gave Grandma a thumbs-up. "You can come with me on a snipe hunt any time."

Laurie turned to Jake. "I presume you scored?"

Jake nodded. "Transmitter is attached to the van. Let's power up the tracker and see what we've got."

They watched the twin tracks of Bryce and the van as they went to the hospital. The two tracks separated, with Bryce staying behind and the van heading south.

Jake asked a question about cleanup. "What about the mannequin snipers we left in the woods for Bryce to shoot? They've cooled to ambient temperature by now, so it's going to be tough to find them."

Laurie nodded. "I'll have Tina pick them up at first light. I doubt anyone will stumble on them before then."

Then she gave the order. "Okay, everybody into the plane. We'll follow the van, but it looks like we know where he's going."

Cassie answered as the mixed sniper team composed of Morte Noir's people, Rivendell residents, and employees of Dread Nought called in from their first joint op.

Laurie spoke first. "He's heading toward you full speed."

Cassie looked across the ragged airplane strip where the Doc had left the Jetoptera—the same field on which he'd landed the last time they had tracked him. "Guess it's time for me to do my thing."

Grandma grumbled. "This isn't a great plan."

Laurie scowled at her. "I don't like it either, but it's the only plan we've got."

Fenya reminded them that they did have an alternative. "You could still take him and let me torture Remy's location out of him. Just sayin'."

Cassie demurred. "This is more reliable." She gulped. "Even if it is a little more dangerous."

Jake cheerfully stated, "You got this." He scowled. "You beat me every time. You'll beat the Doc, too."

Fenya added, "Amen."

Cassie cleared her throat. "That's it, then. Text me if he changes course. Otherwise, I'm incommunicado as of this moment." She hung up before anyone could say goodbye again.

She sprinted across the field to the plane, breached the lock with her customary ease, and pulled a tarp out of her pack.

The rear of the plane included a snug closet. Shortly before the Doc reached her—many hours from now—she would squeeze in, throw the tarp over herself, and hunker down to fly wherever he chose to go.

According to the plan, the Doc would be too busy hurrying home to fiddle with the closet, and if he did open it to find the

crumpled tarp, maybe he would skip any further investigation. The plan was not foolproof, but it played the probabilities pretty well.

As a worst case, if the Doc found her, she would hand the creep over to Fenya.

CASSIE IN UNDERLAND

Cassie could hear the Doc's labored breathing as he strode through the cabin to the pilot's seat. As she'd hoped, he focused on getting the plane into the air.

Soon, they were flying high and fast. The Doc did not stir from his seat except to land the plane and take off again once.

They landed a second time, and the Doc left the plane with a muttered, "Home at last."

Cassie wanted to scream from the pain caused by her cramped position in the closet, but she waited for five long minutes after the Doc had departed before venturing out from beneath the tarp. She slunk into the pilot's seat, quickly examined the instruments to confirm she could fly out of there, and examined the landing pad. Only then did she realize she was more trapped than she'd expected.

The plane did not rest on an airstrip or at a heliport. It was parked near the middle of a huge covered hangar. Peering at the ceiling and walls, she concluded that the only way in or out was through the currently closed roof.

Two men in gray coveralls strode toward the plane, deep in conversation. Cassie held her breath.

Laughing, they walked past the hatch, and she heard their muffled voices as they examined the engines and started refueling.

Cassie pulled out her tablet, synced her Quantum Key and the ghostwriter that would edit her presence out of the vidcam feeds she encountered, and tried to hack the building's Wi-Fi.

She got no signal and prayed that the hangar was the only dead zone. If these people used hard-line wiring for everything, she was in big trouble.

By the time the men finished their work and departed, an icy chill had crept through the plane's cabin. Wherever the Doc had brought her, it was seriously cold outside.

Cassie popped the hatch and hopped to the floor. She felt an overwhelming urge to bend over and run for cover, but she knew her best bet was to play the bitch princess. As the daughter of one of the bosses, she would pretend she owned the place. She poured confidence into her posture and flipped her hair back defiantly.

When she turned in the direction the workmen had gone, she froze. A woman in ill-fitting green coveralls dotted with lots of large pockets carried a basket of cleaning supplies and shuffled up on silent feet. She gawked at Cassie in surprise. Cassie returned the look with horror.

Scars covered the woman's face, a patchwork of hues that varied from white through flame-red to burnt umber. Only her eyes remained untouched, still bright, though filled with fear.

Cassie blinked away the shock. She removed her gaze from the ruined face and focused on the woman's nametag. The tag held the photo of a teenager, presumably this woman before her disfigurement, in addition to a written designator. A name.

Cassie nodded serenely at Rose. "The plane is waiting for you."

Rose closed her mouth and looked at her feet. "Thank you." She scurried to the hatch.

Cassie could see nothing in her mind's eye except the woman's original face. What kind of pain would she feel when she looked in the mirror and saw both what she had been and what she had been made into?

With growing horror, she wondered if that was the torturer's intention. To ensure that the woman never forgot what had happened to her and what could happen again.

Cassie marched to the exit, clenching and unclenching her fists. She'd had plenty of reasons to kill the Doc before this, starting with Neil, whose chest had been desecrated the same way as this woman's countenance. The plane's cabin cleaner was just one more reason to add to the pyre.

Escaping the hangar proved a formidable challenge. She'd examined the placement of vidcams before stepping out of the Jetoptera, and there were no blind spots. She now roved between the planes, approaching the exit in a drunkard's walk.

Eventually, she stood under the wing of the closest aircraft, chewing her lip. She still didn't have a Wi-Fi signal worth mentioning. She would have to play the bitch princess in full view of the cameras and hope that either no one was watching or she performed her role without flaw—and that bitch princesses were a thing here.

She had one last idea. She unstrapped her wristwatch, which contained the ghostwriter, and flung it next to the door.

She buried her face in her tablet and walked with serene confidence across the empty space. When she casually scooped up the watch, she breathed a sigh of relief. The vidcams were indeed hooked up to Wi-Fi, and the ghostwriter had performed its magic for her last surge across the hangar, rendering her invisible.

Before exiting, Cassie spent time studying the electronic lock, which allowed only authorized personnel to enter the hangar. She would need the right keycard.

No problem.

Beyond the door, the air in the hallway was warm. Cassie spent a moment hugging herself. Then she hurried down it, praying to find a hole she could hide in before someone showed up and challenged her. Even though her gear had hijacked the vidfeeds and removed her from the stream, the guard watching the videos would know something was wrong

if someone pointed accusingly at thin air, then spun backward and knocked themselves out.

She heard voices coming down a side passage as she spotted the door to a men's restroom. She searched wildly for the women's equivalent, but the voices got closer, and Cassie dodged into a man's most sacrosanct space.

One man stood in a urinal, staring at the wall. Cassie snuck past and into a stall. Whew.

Now that she had a few private minutes, she went to work performing a full hack on the network. She got access to all the unedited vidfeeds, so she now had the ability to make herself invisible to the system no matter where she went.

Eventually, she found Remy.

The feed from Remy's room made Cassie sick. Her partner sat with a Memwriter pulled over her head as she watched a video. Cassie had seen Remy memwriting before, but this was different, not least because Remy was strapped to the chair. Worse was the emptiness in her eyes. Even the cleaning woman had looked more alive.

Was Cassie too late?

Leo lay back with his eyes closed as the blood transfusion dripped into his arm. The Guides' head doctor had stitched up his side but refused to give him any painkillers until he'd undergone his regular treatment.

Leo had complained, "So, you're using the painkillers as blackmail."

The doctor had given him a sober smile. "I certainly am. You're overdue for your treatment, and you will now follow my orders on pain of, well, continuing pain."

Leo had muttered, "The treatment's still yucky."

The door to the treatment room swooshed open. Leo opened one eye and gave the newcomer a wan smile. "Franz."

Franz looked grim. “I told you going hands-on would get you in trouble.” He continued quietly, “I told the Eldest he should send me to protect you, but he wouldn’t listen.”

Leo shook his head. “I wouldn’t have listened either, and he was right. I’m still alive, and you’re doing great work on your own.”

Franz pulled off his shirt and sat on the bed next to Leo’s. He stabbed himself with a needle and hooked up to his donor.

Leo watched in fascination. “I still can’t believe you don’t get a nurse to do that. I tried a couple of times, but the sharp jab made me jerk, which messed it up and hurt even more.”

Franz smirked. “You always were a baby about this.”

Leo closed his eyes. “I can’t deny it.”

Franz pushed on. “It’s about time you admitted the treatments work. Surely, as a researcher, you have observed for long enough to know.”

Leo grimaced. “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. The two of us are aging a third slower than people Outside.”

Franz did the calculation. “So, being chronologically about sixty, we are biologically only forty.”

Leo grunted. “Good thing, too. I would be looking at a much longer recovery from this blasted bullet if I only had the recuperative powers of a senior citizen.”

He snorted. “Have you followed the EStormer claims that adrenochrome taken from babies enhances longevity?”

Franz looked at him in puzzlement. “I thought you’d planted that notion since it’s a powerful hate motivator.”

Leo shook his head. “They invented that one on their own. I would have been more subtle. People Outside synthesize adrenochrome in the lab for experiments all the time. No need for baby’s blood.” He pondered the matter. “If I had invented the story, I would have made up a chemical compound that doesn’t exist so it wouldn’t be easy to fact-check.”

Franz laughed. “Even though, as you have proven multiple times, your cultists will believe it even, or especially, when it’s a blatant lie that can be trivially disproven.”

Leo joined in Franz’s laughter. “You got me on that one.”

Franz continued thoughtfully, “It’s not a surprise that they invented the idea of Satanic baby’s blood rituals without our assistance. People have been demonizing their enemies by claiming they eat babies and drink their blood since time immemorial.”

Leo spoke sorrowfully. “Even when it’s too ironic for words. The Romans accused the Christians of eating babies, and a few centuries later, the Christians accused the Muslims of the same thing. What goes around keeps going around, I guess.”

Franz let his anger show. “More like, do unto others as has been done unto you. That is why it’s up to us to stop it and why the Elder Guides were founded in the first place.”

Leo didn’t bother to answer. They had both committed their lives and their souls to the cause. He spoke mournfully. “I just wish longevity enhancement was as simple as adrenochrome. You know, there might really be a single molecule that slows down aging.”

Franz scoffed. “One that has escaped the research of *our* scientists? The anti-aging formula has to be a complex stew of multiple chemicals in the blood. Otherwise, we would have figured it out.”

Leo sighed. “I suppose.”

A timer chirped, and he pursed his lips. “Session’s done.”

Franz nodded. “Indeed.”

They looked at the cribs in which their donors lay passive and quiet.

Leo whispered, “Until next time, little ones.”

Cassie shook with the desire to fling herself heedlessly down the halls to rip the Memwriter off Remy's head but muttered to herself. "Get a grip. You need a plan."

As she scoured the feeds from the facility, she realized her plan to play a princess would have failed. Other unscarred women roamed the halls, but they wore sober, dark colors that didn't quite constitute a uniform. Cassie's clothing presented a glaring contrast.

She wasn't entirely out of place. She wasn't wearing a t-shirt with the words, *Powered by Bitch Dust* in a Disney font with silver sparkles, but her pantsuit was sky-blue, not navy, and she carried a purse rather than a fanny pack.

Switching from vidfeed to vidfeed, she followed a woman with some approximation of her build to her room. Hopefully, Cassie could steal some clothes and blend in.

The process took too long. The door to the restroom opened and someone shuffled in, dragging something with squeaky wheels across the floor. Cassie peered under the stall door to see a wheeled bucket and a mop sliding across the tiles.

Cassie prayed the woman would leave her locked stall alone, but no such luck. The woman knocked on the stall door. "Please come out," she requested in a bleak monotone. After knocking, she stood waiting patiently. It became clear that she would wait forever.

Cassie flung the door open to find another scarred servant. Once again, the horrors written on the woman's face made Cassie pause.

The name tag said Gale. Gale stared at her. "You don't belong here."

Cassie gushed, "I know. I'm so sorry. I just couldn't wait to get to the ladies' room."

The servant's expression did not change. "I didn't mean that. I meant..." She looked down at her mop. "Leave, please." Gale went back to work on the floor.

Cassie rushed out and peered around, then looked at the vidfeeds on her tablet. She'd gotten so immersed in tracking the one woman for clothes that she'd lost operational awareness. She couldn't afford that again.

She found the women's restroom and hustled in. She passed one more servant on the way, but the woman didn't look at her, and Cassie didn't look at the woman.

She was getting the hang of it. The easiest way to deal with the walking atrocities was to not look at them.

One insight led to another. She realized how to hide in plain sight.

She had brought her full makeup kit so that if she couldn't figure out any way to get both Remy and herself out of the Doc's prison, she could go all *Tale of Two Cities* and trade identities.

Fixing herself to look like Remy was the least of her capabilities with makeup. She set to work on her face.

Soon, a horror appeared in the mirror, with mottled burns and twisted scars.

She couldn't achieve a perfect result. Try as she might to add shading to suggest the hills and valleys of the rough pockmarks of the real servants, anyone who looked closely enough would see smooth skin belying the less-than-skin-deep disguise.

She still thought it would work.

More skulking down the halls, guided by her video feeds, led to a locker room in which the servants stored their uniforms. She breached the simple key locks on one locker after another until she found uniforms that would fit her as poorly as they fit the owners.

The name tag on one of the uniforms caught her eye. "Taking that one would be a terrible mistake, girl," she muttered to herself.

She couldn't help smiling as she pulled it on.

Cassie breathed a sigh of relief. She would now fit into the realm in which she would be operating. No one would notice her. She flipped the ghostwriter off.

Time to work. She memorized the paths through the facility to Remy's torture room and stuffed her tablet into one of her uniform's oversized pockets.

Cassie shuffled down the passages toward Remy's torture room, wearing the same zombie-like gaze as the others. The first time she turned into a hall occupied by a pair of the masters, she flinched.

As expected, the men did not notice. They were too busy not seeing her. She had turned the ghostwriter off for this part of the journey to avoid having a watcher wonder what people were looking at that wasn't there, but it would have made no difference.

Her plan stalled when she approached the door behind which Remy dwelled. She had not brought her tools for breaching keycard locks, figuring she had a less obtrusive solution than hacking. She would simply find someone with the right card and use theirs.

She intended to walk past the room and look for someone carrying an appropriate card, but as she neared it, the screaming started. Cassie didn't just flinch. She froze outside the door.

The door opened, and a balding man stepped out. He looked like the person who had accompanied Bryce during the kidnapping. She recognized him from the video of the helo's takeoff.

The Doc.

Cassie swallowed her rage, and as the door swished shut, she stumbled into him.

The bastard jerked as pain from the bullet wound jabbed him. "Aargh."

Then disaster struck. He looked at her. She was so screwed.

He swiftly looked away.

Cassie looked down at her feet. "Sorry."

The Doc paused. "You sound familiar." He turned and looked at her name tag. "Cassie."

She'd been stupid to take the uniform with this name tag, no matter how rich the irony. She hardly dared to breathe. She resisted the temptation to look up and shifted just enough to tumble a lock of hair over part of her face.

The Doc grunted again in pain, then, overcoming his physical infirmity, he chuckled. It ended with a snort. "Subliminal." With that cryptic remark, he departed, favoring his side.

She felt dizzy. Such a close call. Such a smashing success.

She stood there, relishing the smooth feel of the keycard she had taken from her nemesis. She wallowed in her triumph long enough to regain her confidence. The next few moments would be even more dangerous than the ones that had just passed.

Remy's renewed screams kicked her back into action.

Cassie had to throw caution to the winds yet retain her sanity. How could she get through this door with limited risk?

If she slid the card through the lock and opened the door with the cameras watching, someone would notice an unauthorized menial using a high-powered keycard. No good.

So, she trudged into the nearest closet, flipped the ghostwriter on, and trotted back to pretend to be inspecting the wall by the door. As a pair of chatting workers went by, she used them as a distraction while she cracked the door open and squeezed inside.

THE DEBRA

The screaming stopped before Cassie slid through the door.

Remy sat in the Memwriter chair, staring at a screen on which deepfake horrors played. These particular horrors involved Cassie using a knife on her partner.

Cassie ran silently to Remy's side and flicked the Memwriter off.

Remy blinked and looked at the intruder. "Who?" She peered at Cassie's face, not flinching but without recognition until wonder filled her eyes. She opened her mouth again.

Cassie knelt beside her and hissed, "You can't look at me. On the video, I'm a ghost. Understand?"

Remy's attention drifted back to the screen like she was a zombie who had suffered a momentary distraction and returned to the contemplation of human meat. She spoke while barely moving her lips. Her voice wept. "Cassie."

Cassie hesitated. They had to hurry, but she could not help asking, "How badly has he hurt you?" It occurred to her that this question was not just rhetorical. If Remy's brain had been trained to believe that Cassie posed a threat, releasing her would go seriously wrong.

Remy stared at the screen. "Part of me wants to hurt you, but only a small part." She hesitated before admitting, "Well, a small part of me has always wanted to smack some sense into you, but this is worse."

Memories of the last person in Cassie's life that the Doc had warped like this flooded her mind. "At least you're in better shape than Neil."

Remy continued after a couple of deep breaths. "I might have resistance to his abuse of the Memwriter. I recognize the difference between normal memories and the superbright memories that come from a session, so they are less real for me." She sobbed, which was in character for someone strapped into this hell-throne. "But I'm losing."

Cassie's manic urgency returned, and she focused on the straps holding Remy's arms down. "Can you walk? Can you run? Because the moment I free you, we have to skedaddle and steal a plane before they catch us."

Remy shook her head a millimeter. "Can't." She described the tracking implant and her aborted attempt to escape. Taking the care to speak clearly without moving her mouth took enough time to drive Cassie nuts. Finally, Remy finished, "If I get free again, the whole place goes into lockdown. No planes."

Cassie stopped pacing. "So, what's the plan? Any ideas?"

Remy answered, "First, fix the machine so I can toggle it on and off by moving my head. I need control of how much memwriting he can do to me."

Cassie closed her eyes and thought about the wiring of the machine, for which she knew the full schematics. She jiggered the power connector until, by pressing her head back, Remy could cause the machine to flip on. By relaxing, she could shut it back off.

Cassie nodded. "Done."

Remy sighed in relief. "Okay. Here's my idea." It took another long, slow conversation to lay it out.

Cassie shook her head. "It'll take too much time." Also, Cassie would have to really dig into her role as a submissive servant. It would be her most difficult performance ever.

Remy muttered, "Believe me, I wish there was another way."

Cassie shrugged. “Let’s look on the bright side. This way, we get to kill him.”

Bryce heard an argument outside his hospital room. A quavering yet determined woman’s voice demanded, “He’s just got a flesh wound, dammit! He’ll be fine. I’m going to talk to him. Try to stop me, and he and I will both take you down.”

A walker wheeled into his room, and the woman driving it pointed a finger at his chest. “That was a down payment on the punishment you deserve.”

Even if he could disconnect himself from the machines keeping him alive, he didn’t have the strength to fight or run. He tried to breathe some irritation into his voice but doubted he’d succeeded. “Ms. Karla. How sweet of you to visit me in the hospital.”

Grandma spun her walker so she could sit on it, then leaned forward and peered at the wound. “Can’t see much with all that gauze over it.” She leaned sideways to view it from a better perspective. “I guess it went a little deeper than I planned.”

Bryce might not have been at the top of his game, but he could still muster enough neurons to interpret that properly. His eyes widened. “*You* shot me?”

Grandma looked offended. “Think I couldn’t?”

Bryce struggled to avoid laughing, but a chuckle escaped. It hurt. “You shot down our drone with a sniper rifle. I wouldn’t put anything past you.”

His eyes gleamed. “You missed, so you were either trying to kill me or just nick me. Which was it?”

Grandma’s eyes held an inferno. “Both.” She looked away. “According to the plan, I should have just nicked you.”

She turned an eagle-eyed glare on him. “But in my heart, I wanted you dead after you sold Remy out to the Doc.” Her expression changed.

Bryce chortled. “Somehow, guilt doesn’t fit on your face very well.”

Grandma rubbed her eyes. “I think my desire for vengeance interfered with my shooting.”

Bryce patiently waited for her to continue before prompting, “And?”

Grandma ground out, “I’m sorry I almost killed you.”

Bryce savored the moment. “And lo, reality is shaken to its core. Ms. Karla apologizes.”

Bryce felt a cough coming on and focused on suppressing it. Coughing brought agony. After he recovered, he pressed on. “What was the plan? Persuade the Doc to go wherever he took Remy? You thought you could somehow track him?”

The cough he’d suppressed returned. He shuddered as the pain wracked his body. “You’re doomed to failure if you think you can track that bastard.”

Grandma’s face lit up. “You know where he is?”

Bryce shook his head. “I only know it’s far, far away. Someplace where you’re a hundred miles from any cell phone connection. You haven’t gotten a peep from your tracker, whatever it is, have you?”

Grandma’s face filled with concern, then fear. “Not one chirp.”

Bryce frowned. “You know, I’ve been trying to dig into the Doc’s operations as well. Dale knows. He and I were collaborating on it. You didn’t have to shoot me. We could have just talked about it.”

Grandma snorted. “There’s trust, and then there’s trust.”

“Well, Ms. Karla, if the Doc’s manipulating AID the same way he’s manipulating the EStormers, it’s time for more trust.”

Remy's grandmother patted him on the cheek. "You could still grow up to be a nice boy."

Bryce chuckled, then groaned. "Forgive my skepticism, Ms. Karla."

She grew stern. "And call me Grandma." She touched his chest. "You've earned it."

Cassie carefully wiped her eyes before she departed from the Memwriter room to make sure neither her rage-driven tears nor her fingers had marred her makeup. She popped the door barely enough to squeeze through and quickly shuffled to a closet, into which she slid before turning the ghostwriter off.

She waited for a couple of minutes, catching her breath and listening for the hurried footsteps of guards running to see why the door to the torture chamber had mysteriously opened.

No one came. She had escaped detection.

She could not risk visiting Remy again. Cassie would embrace her servant's role and wait for the event that would signal the next step in the plan.

She had one last task before going full minion. She went back outside the Memwriter room and let the Doc's keycard flutter to the ground while she blocked the vidcams with her body. She slid it partly under the door. When the Doc found it, he would assume he'd dropped it.

Fully adopting the servant act proved to be easier said than done. How did they get their assignments? She couldn't just wander the halls and sleep in the dorms without performing any tasks, could she?

She drifted through the facility and eventually found her way to a huge kitchen, where the servant overseeing operations gave her a quick, hard look the way all the servants did, then put her to work chopping onions.

Cassie had never been so happy to see onions in her life.

After Cassie slipped into the rhythm of kitchen life, she wondered how these people knew when to stop working and do something else, like sleep. She also wondered if they ever talked about anything other than the next task. She suspected not.

Hours later, a new team of servants filed in. Aha! Shift change.

Cassie followed the others to a barrack full of double bunks. Everyone other than her had an assigned bunk. She went into the bathroom to avoid having anyone notice her puzzling lack of a place to sleep.

As soft, steady snoring filled the room, Cassie snuck back in and slid underneath a bed to get some shuteye.

The day had brought up thoughts and memories that made her sick. The Fulcrum was filled with the most vile disease mankind had ever known. If she could press a button and blow it all to hell with Remy and her still inside, she would.

Perhaps it was just as well that she couldn't sleep. She would have tossed and turned with fevered nightmares, which would have worked poorly in the narrow space beneath the bed.

After several hours of irritated immobility, she slid out and closed the door gently as she returned to the harsh glare of the hallways.

If she was going to wander the halls, she needed to look like she was on a mission. She had identified a possibility while working in the kitchen.

She went back into the food area, requested and received a pot of coffee, gathered cups on a tray, and set out to familiarize herself with every place she had seen on the video hookups.

She was meandering toward the end of the facility where the top-level bosses resided when a woman in a servant uniform stopped dead to stare at her.

Cassie stopped so suddenly that the coffee in the pot sloshed. Her eyes widened with a new kind of shock.

This servant had no scars. Quite the opposite. This servant's face had the perfectly chiseled contours of a Vogue cover model. She appeared angelic and innocent and worldly-wise at the same time.

Cassie tore her eyes from the vision and focused on the name tag. Debra. Cassie turned her attention to the name tag's photo.

Once upon a time, Debra had been pretty, but not like this. Just as the people who ran this place had carved the faces of the other servants to suit their needs, they had sculpted this one as well. It was just as horrible in a very different way.

Debra had spent her time studying Cassie as Cassie studied her. She had not turned her eyes away from a servant's face like the others.

Cassie drew the only possible conclusion. Debra had seen beneath the surface.

The beauty spoke accusingly in a tone impossible for the other servants. "You don't belong here."

Cassie stood like a deer caught in headlights. Anything she did would blow her cover. She tried the only thing she could think of that did not involve violence and a swift response from the guards. "Help me."

Tears glistened in Debra's eyes, and she looked away as the other servants had after examining Cassie. Finally, she turned her gaze to Cassie's face. "I will show you. Come with me."

SPIRIT OF COMPETITION

Laurie listened to her mother repeat herself. “I need a suitable hobby since I’ve been forced into retirement. A little more income never hurts either.”

Laurie clenched and unclenched her fists under the table as she glared at her parent on the wall screen. “Mom, I will *not* help you persuade Fenya to take you on more missions.”

Grandma glared back. “Spoilsport.”

Andrey drifted into the conference room, followed by Morte Noir and her posse. Tina and Brett quietly entered last.

Images appeared on the two side displays—Joyce in the brightly lit Dread Nought HQ and Dale from a dark, dank place that might have been a sewer. Laurie opened her mouth to ask where the hell he was, but her mother spoke again.

Laurie chopped her hand down to interrupt her parent. “We’re done discussing your budding career as an assassin. The meeting’s about to begin.”

Morte Noir languidly took the chair at the head of the table. She lifted an eyebrow at Laurie. “So, why did you call us all here?”

With an effort, Laurie transformed herself from the annoyed daughter she had been to the persuasive speaker she needed to be. She would need all her skills for this conference. Every conversation she’d had with Morte Noir since the Mistress had kidnapped her had felt like a dance with a snake.

At least the snake had become friendlier with time.

Laurie started her pitch. “Let’s consider the situation. Remy’s been kidnapped, and Cassie is hopefully incommunicado, skulking through enemy territory wherever Remy is, trying to find her.”

Fenya slumped in her chair. “Let’s be clear. That’s the best case. Worse cases—”

Morte Noir interrupted. “Are too numerous to list here.” She looked at Esin. “What’s the proper attitude?”

Esin stiffened upright. “Assume the worst, but assume you can fix it.”

Laurie marveled. “Thank you. That is exactly the perspective I was hoping for.”

Everyone watched as she licked her lips. “I think we can do more to assist Cassie and Remy.”

Morte Noir gave her an intrigued smile. “Go on.”

A brief burst of gunfire came from Dale’s speaker, and he grinned into his cell phone’s camera. “Sorry. Out making money for Joyce.”

Joyce sighed.

Dale continued, “Anyway, I’ve been wracking my brains to think of other things we can do to help. What’s your idea?”

Laurie took a breath. “We can try to trace another thread back to the Doc’s home lair. If we succeed, we can facilitate their escape.”

Fenya offered a satisfying though darker possibility. “Or wreak unholy vengeance if we’re too late.”

Morte Noir was, as always, fast on the uptake. “The Moscow one-time-pad nexus?”

When Andrey had first attempted to unravel the Doc’s network, he’d found two areas of concentrated traffic using one-time-pad encryption, which was invulnerable to the Quantum Key. One center of action was in the United States. The other was in Russia.

Dale splashed in the sewer. “Are we confident the Moscow agents work with the Doc?”

Andrey sighed. “I don’t think the Doc runs it, but it seems related. The Ruby Rage tech is very similar to the EStorme tech. Actually, it’s superior but clearly derived from the EStorme engineering. Then there’s the network traffic analysis.”

He shrugged. “If it’s not the Doc, it’s someone who knows him. Maybe even his boss.”

Laurie asked, “Two major nodes using one-time-pad encryption. The two most well-engineered conspiracy cults. Does anyone think that is a coincidence?”

None of the covert agents at the table responded, but Laurie hadn’t expected an answer. In the world of clandestine ops, no such thing as coincidence existed.

Joyce, who was not covert, snorted. “Still, no real proof of causation.”

The Mistress observed, “Andrey hasn’t been able to backtrack from EStorme to the Doc, even though that connection is clearly tight.” She grimaced. “Tracking through Moscow to find Remy is flimsy. This is a long shot.”

Laurie leaned toward Morte Noir. She considered it crucial to bring the Mistress into the operation. “While living with you, I learned enough about your operations to know that you pursue flimsier lines of attack.”

Morte Noir glared at her. Then she brought her forefinger to her mouth, licked it sensuously, and made a firm stroke in the air. “Score one for the retired cheerleader.”

Grandma interrupted this scene. “Long shot or not, they’re my girls. I’m in. Just tell me where to go and who to shoot.”

Fenya covered her mouth and laughed silently.

Laurie rolled her eyes. “Even if we don’t find Remy, as a worst case, we will wreck the most dangerous engineered conspiracy network sabotaging the world. I’d still call that a win.”

Morte Noir grunted. “That is where you and I have a problem. Sounds like pro bono public service work to me.”

Fenya pursed her lips. “Let me just say that my Mistress objects to freebies more than I do. I could go pro bono using my vacation time.”

Laurie went back to the point. “Getting nothing except the sabotage of Ruby Rage is the worst case. The focus is still Remy.” Desperation colored her voice. “We need to up our game to find her.”

Morte Noir contemplated her. “Who put you in charge?”

The snake’s fangs had appeared. Laurie was not surprised. “You all did when nobody came up with any more ideas beyond thrusting Cassie into the plane to Nightmaresville. We need more.”

Morte Noir chuckled. “You’ve gotten very bossy since you’re no longer my prisoner.”

Grandma snorted. “She was always bossy. I have no idea where she got it from.”

That left everyone speechless. Not one covert agent was brave enough to offer the obvious answer.

Grandma continued, oblivious. “You say my daughter wasn’t like this when you had her? Should we try that again?”

To dodge this question, Morte Noir moved on to her next tactic to derail Laurie, which was deflection. “Aren’t you supposed to be working full-time to fix your husband?”

Whoa. When the snake struck, it went straight for the heart. Laurie looked away. “Everything I know how to do is being done. He’s better.”

Esin nodded vigorously. “I have visited him. He no longer drools. And he says words.” She looked down at her lap. “Though not really connected words.”

Laurie gave them the latest. “He’s now able to combine a subject and a verb.” She hunched her shoulders, a haunted look in her eyes. “But he’s plateaued. I can’t do anything more

for him.” She looked into Morte Noir’s eyes. “So I’m free to try something for Remy.”

A sharp snap echoed from Dale’s speaker as sparks flew from a nearby pipe. He ducked. “Gotta go. I don’t care who’s in charge as long as we have a plan. You have the full backing of Dread Nought.”

Before he could hang up, Joyce yelled in a strangled voice, “Dale! Interest payments on the leveraged buyout bonds next week.”

Dale grimaced and corrected himself. “Dread Nought can put a small but elite team wherever you need them, whenever you need them.” He fired two rounds. “Okay, Joyce?”

Joyce gave him a steady glare, then relaxed into sarcasm. “Whatever you say, boss.”

Dale blinked out.

Morte Noir laughed. “Okay, Laurie, I guess Dale agrees that you’re the boss.”

Andrey shrugged. “Me too. She’s got good ideas.”

Grandma glared at everyone. “Of course she does! She’s my daughter. She might be bossy, but she’s smart. Let her run with it.”

Laurie raised an eyebrow at the EStormers, whom she’d invited in case this moment arose. “Tina, Brett?”

The husband-and-wife team laughed gaily. “She’s Remy’s mother, and Remy is the Emerald. EStorme will do whatever you ask.”

Laurie blinked. She had to point out the truth even if it hurt her case. “Remy is not the Emerald.”

Tina agreed. “There is no Emerald. There is no spoon either. But Remy is still viewed as the Emerald by EStormers.”

Morte Noir asked, fascinated, “How do *you* view her?”

Brett answered phlegmatically. “She’s our spiritual leader. Of the AStormers, that is.” He turned unusually loquacious.

“She leads the EStormers because she is the Emerald. She leads the AStormers because she is not.”

Laurie blinked. “AStormers?”

Tina nodded. “EStormers who have Awakened. Who recognize and reject the assaults on our minds by the conspiracy sites. We have our own website. There are a lot of us now. Thousands.”

Brett corrected, “Tens of thousands.”

Everyone chewed on that.

Laurie shook her head to refocus. “Anyway, we’ve penetrated EStorme as far as we can. The Doc knows we’re deep inside and firewalled himself off from them, but Ruby Rage is untainted.”

Fenya smirked. “Virgins for the breaking.”

Laurie looked to the heavens for guidance. “Whatever. They aren’t expecting us to attack them.”

Morte Noir showed some enthusiasm. “We might be able to trace through them to whoever controls them.”

Laurie nodded, relieved that the Mistress might be getting on board. “If we can’t trace, we can at least start destroying. Perhaps weaken them enough that someone panics and makes an unforced error.”

Tina offered optimism. “Maybe the Doc will screw up.”

Laurie was about to point out how unlikely it was that their cold-blooded nemesis would panic, but Esin picked up on the idea. Her eyes glowed as she said, “Then we could capture him and force him to trade.”

Fenya nodded agreeably. “Or we could just strap him to a table and persuade him to tell us where he stashed our girls.” She rolled her lips as she reflected. “I still think that was what we should have done when we had him in the Walmart parking lot.”

Morte Noir frowned. “Spilled milk.” Laurie held her breath as the Mistress considered.

At last, Morte Noir turned to Andrey. “It’s up to you to find the Ruby servers and their engineers. Let us know when you do.”

Grandma added, “Then Fenya and I can kill a couple of them to, you know, motivate the others to cooperate.”

Laurie suppressed a shriek. “Mom! Enough already.”

Morte Noir laughed, then looked annoyed. “I still don’t like it. Too much public service, not enough profit.”

Esin carefully kept her gaze on the tabletop as she said, “In my role as your team member who can only engage in worthy projects, I say this is a worthy mission. Isn’t it?” She turned mournful puppy-dog eyes on her leader.

Fenya groaned. “I can’t bear seeing Esin like that. *Do something.*”

Morte Noir chewed on it. She frowned at first, but slowly, her expression faded to one of calm suffering.

She threw her hands up. “I surrender. I hadn’t wanted to use my backup justification, mind you, because it sounds like a rationalization, but I can still support you with the goal of maximizing profit.”

Everyone stared at her, mystified.

The Mistress looked around the room and spoke with exasperation. “Laurie pointed out a long time ago that I should partner with Remy because the people chasing her were planning to build a world in which my services would no longer be needed.”

She pointed an accusatory finger at the retired cheerleader. “You were right, dammit. Unless we intervene, they’ll shatter my marketplace with their new technology.”

She turned cheerful. “So I have to destroy my competitors before they destroy me. Isn’t that what capitalism is all about?”

THE BOSSES

Cassie had the organization of the Fulcrum dialed in. At the bottom labored the servants. Slaves, really, but Cassie couldn't bring herself to use the word.

Above the servants were workers like the maintenance crew for the aircraft. However, from the conversations she'd heard in the halls, they did not think of themselves as simple workers. She had drawn the conclusion that they *believed* in whatever the Doc and his partners had planned. They seemed much like EStormers in their dedication, though she didn't get the feeling that they'd been manipulated by conspiracy image boards. Their dedication predated the modern tech.

The bosses ran the show. Unlike the cynics who ran the boards, however, these bosses did not just command. Like the workers, they also *believed*.

What kind of threat might a fanatical organization that conducted advanced scientific research present? The experiments she'd seen being performed on the vidcams wired to the hall called the Arena made her shudder.

The silent Cassie followed the silent Debra down the halls into the most luxurious section of the facility. Thus she entered the realm of the bosses. Paintings from many eras decorated the walls, interspersed with sculptures of stone, metal, and wood.

They came upon a painting of a woman drawn in shades of gray. The woman's pitch-black hair leaped out at the viewer,

the closest thing to color the artist offered. Cassie almost dropped the coffee tray.

Cassie had spent time wistfully examining the most famous lost and missing works of art in the world in her early days as a thief. If she found or stole one, she would be set for life. It made a nice fantasy.

Yet here she was, walking past the *Portrait of Trude Steiner* by Gustav Klimt, a piece that had been lost during the Nazi invasion of Vienna.

She had recovered enough to show no interest by the time they passed Vincent Van Gogh's *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*, supposedly destroyed when the Allies bombed Magdeburg.

Cassie realized she was walking through one of the great art museums of the world.

She would still blow the whole place to dust if she had the chance.

Cassie followed Debra through a richly carved mahogany door. The aroma of leather-bound books wafted around them, so Cassie thought they'd entered a library.

Instead of a huge repository, however, she found an intimate and cozy sitting room. Three men relaxed in high-backed velvet chairs around a small round table. One of the men shook with the frailty of age. A second was middle-aged, with the sharp eyes of a hawk. The third...

Ohmigod. The Doc.

Debra nudged her out of her petrified posture and pointed Cassie to the table.

Cassie resettled into her role. She knelt to place the tray on the table, then poured coffee for each of the men. She carefully avoided looking into the Doc's eyes, though she saw a brief distorted glimpse of him reflected in the gold filigree around

the enameled cup. He did not see her, much less recognize her. Disaster had been evaded.

Debra waved her to a corner of the room, then grasped a leather notebook, opened it to a blank page, and picked up a pen.

Cassie did her best to turn invisible and listen.

Morte Noir walked into the conference room in Andrey's Vault, stirring a cup of tea. Laurie and Andrey awaited her.

The Dark Mistress raised an eyebrow. "Am I early, or is everyone else late?"

Laurie gave her a brooding look. "This is just a small meeting for an update and to see if you can help in any way. Andrey's stuck, and Dale and Joyce have reached the end of their leads."

Morte smugly replied, "So you need me for my humint since I have a worldwide network of informants." She sipped her tea. "Where are we?"

Andrey brought up a world map on a wall display, then zoomed in on a city in Russia. "Ruby Rage originated at the Internet Research Agency in Saint Petersburg." A secondary window displayed a dull block-shaped building of concrete and glass. No signs or insignia hinted at the purpose or ownership of the facility. "At the time, they operated from here."

Morte Noir nodded. "Makes sense. The 'Trolls from Olgino,' as they are called, also founded Russia's cyberwar system. Prigozhin started the company with bot attacks on Western democracies to support Russia-enabling politicians."

Laurie shook her head, dizzy. "The same Prigozhin who founded the Wagner group?"

Morte Noir grinned at her. "Same guy. He also ran a catering company that supplied food to the Kremlin before he

went into the war business.” She laughed into her tea. “Anyway, it makes sense that the trolls would branch out into full-fledged conspiracy engineering.”

Andrey shook his head. “Except I don’t think they did. Shortly after they established the Ruby imageboard, it changed hands.”

Morte Noir saw two possibilities. “Did they give it away, or did someone hijack it?”

Andrey’s whisper was low and uncertain. “Unclear. I would say they gave it to someone, except that days before the transfer, two of the top Research Agency executives suffered accidental deaths.”

Laurie was still puzzling over an earlier point. “Andrey, how do you know it changed hands? If it was a voluntary exchange, I’d expect there to be a contract and maybe a payment.”

Andrey sighed. “There might be a contract. I can’t tell. The new owners communicate between themselves and with the IRA using one-time pad encryption.”

Morte Noire locked onto this datum. “So, it *is* the Doc.”

Laurie responded dryly, “Or someone in the Doc’s community. Someone like him. A friend, an enemy, or a collaborator.”

Morte Noir gave her an approving thumbs-up. “You’re getting the hang of this, but you overlooked the most likely possibility. If this is a new player, he’s probably a friend *and* an enemy *and* a collaborator.”

Laurie frowned in consternation. “Because that’s the way it works in your world.”

Morte Noir refrained from pointing out that “her world” was now Laurie’s world as well.

Andrey returned to the topic. “Anyway, breaking into the Ruby Rage system is going to be tricky.”

The Dark Mistress gave him a puzzled stare. “I have a vague memory of Remy or Cassie telling me that hacking EStorme was pretty straightforward. They tapped into the cables on the roof of the EStorme server building.”

Laurie shook her head. “That wouldn’t work here anyway. Remember, we don’t just want to control inputs and outputs. We must get inside and glean every scrap of data that might help us find Cassie and Remy.”

Andrey looked wistfully into the distance. “Ah, the good old days.”

Laurie cleared her throat. “What does *that* mean, exactly?”

Andrey frowned. “Regardless of the depth of penetration we need, we have a problem. Ruby Rage is vastly more paranoid and sophisticated than our previous target. EStorme has a single server site, a nice central point of control.”

Morte Noir shot Laurie a sly glance. “Which is known as a nice central point of vulnerability for those of us on the attacking side.”

Andrey nodded. “That too.” He took a breath. “Anyway, the Rage site is mobile. They redirect the domain name to a different IP address with a different server farm every week.”

Laurie intruded. “How many farms do they have? Can we just hit them all?”

Andrey shook his head. “It’s a new site every time.”

Morte Noir summed up. “Then even if we gain control of one, in a week, they’ll get it back.” She frowned. “Troublesome.”

Laurie squinted as she tried to visualize the enemy’s network in her mind. “Forget the server farm. What we want are the people behind it. We want whoever designs and publishes the messages that drive the cult and mold the group’s thinking. Can we trace that person’s location?”

Andrey brought up a new set of red dots on the world map. “Even that’s not easy. The Doc’s people set up a private VPN, using one-time pads for the routing encryption, between all these cities. The message origin locations in all the cities are nondescript public places. I suspect the real home of the engineering team has a hardline connection to each of those public spots, so the NSA can’t even get ELINT.”

Andrey brought up a side window on which he showed them the endpoint in each city. “If I had to guess, I’d pick Krakow as the central site. The message distribution pattern around Krakow is more vigorous. But that’s just a guess.”

He let the scenes shift among the cities. “I don’t suppose either of you has an idea.”

Morte Noir had been studying the dots on the map since he brought them up. Something about one of the locations nagged at her.

When a Salvador Dali sculpture in the middle of a plaza popped up, she snorted. “Thus does the universe mock us.”

Laurie leaned forward. “You know where they are?”

Morte Noir explained, “They are in the only place they could be. Marbella.”

Laurie and Andrey stared at her without understanding.

Morte Noir cleared her throat and controlled her frustration with the ignorance of her audience. “You’re familiar with Madripor, the fictional city-state in the comics that’s run by criminals?”

Andrey smiled. “Of course.”

The Mistress smiled back. “Well, Marbella is the real-world version of Madripor.”

Eldest Guide Meyer accepted the coffee from the serving slave, then looked at the Debra. As he studied her, she looked

back at him with a steady gaze before clutching the log book and retiring to the corner chair to take notes.

Meyer nodded in approval. “She seems slightly less submissive than the others.” He sipped his coffee. “I like it.”

Leo watched her lean over the log and write. “I made her slightly less obedient to enable a modicum of initiative.” He frowned. “Obedience and initiative seem inextricably and inversely intertwined.”

Franz laughed heartily. “You needed to conduct research to draw that conclusion?”

Leo glared at him. “The self-evident is not always true.”

Meyer chuckled. “Though that’s usually the way to bet.”

Leo flushed as he had when he was a child, and Meyer suppressed a smile. Though Leo was much older than he appeared, he still treated the Eldest with the same respect Meyer had shown his father.

Meyer waved a hand at the Debra. “I am also delighted your technique has improved to the point where we no longer need to mutilate them.”

Franz snorted. “You think not? Don’t, under any circumstance, ask her to unzip her coveralls. The scars...” He shuddered. “Just as bad, but no longer displayed as a part of the continuous reinforcement process.”

Leo defended his work. “It’s still better. Not only is it more pleasant for us, but it means we can send them on missions Outside.” He leaned toward the Debra and traced an outline of the woman’s crisp features without touching her. “Particularly with this patina of augmented glamor.”

Franz continued to contemplate the Debra. “Some patina. I swear, if she retained the ability to give orders, I’d do anything she wanted just to see her smile.”

He cocked his head as he tore his eyes from the vision and looked at the man he treated as a brother. “How did you do it?”

Leo shrugged, which caused him to wince and touch his side.

The Eldest asked with concern, “Are you sure you shouldn’t still be resting?”

Franz observed practically, “I thought the doctor gave you pain pills.”

Leo clasped his side. “I wanted to have a clear head for this meeting.”

He waved the matter away and returned to the question of how he’d crafted the Debra. “I fed my AI a large data model filled with images of the most beautiful women in the world, showed the AI the Debra’s original appearance, and used an arcane bit of prompt engineering to say, ‘Perfect this face.’”

Franz silently clapped. “So, you’ve mastered the intricacies of AI manipulation.”

Leo gave him a smug grin. “All because of you.”

Franz sat back, startled. “Me?”

Leo sipped his coffee. “I figured out how you engineered Ruby Rage to reach the next level of fanaticism.”

Franz smirked. “Ah.”

The Eldest looked at the two as they communicated without words, using a sign language they had developed between the two of them, leaving him behind. Meyer wasn’t sure if he was pleased or irritated. “What *was* the secret of Ruby Rage’s success?”

Franz graciously bowed to Leo. “Go ahead.”

Leo leaned forward. “Franz trained his AI with a database of all the documents from all the zealots from all the cults across human history. Everything from the recruiting websites of modern-day jihadists to the ancient texts of the Hashshashin sect.”

The Eldest nodded. “The group from whose name the term ‘assassin’ was derived.”

Leo continued, “Franz used our standard sociological engineering tools to draft messages for the imageboard, then had the AI suggest ways to punch it up to elicit specific audience responses.”

Franz clapped again. “Bravo.”

The Eldest grasped his chest as his heart fluttered.

The Debra rushed to his side and knelt by him. “Have you taken your pills today?”

Meyer answered through clenched teeth. “Not yet.”

Debra put her hand on his. “You know you need—” She stopped abruptly.

Leo leaned forward, studying her actions. “And there it is. The limiter training has kicked in.”

Franz raised an eyebrow. “‘Limiter training?’ You really *have* invented new features.”

Leo glared at him. “Moments ago, you said you worried that she might give a command and you would obey.”

Franz grunted.

Leo waved a hand as if presenting the Debra on stage. “That was her getting as close to ordering someone around as she can.” He brushed her cheek. “She is taking the initiative to get her owner to take his pills, but it puts her mind in conflict with the training that prevents forceful recommendations.”

The Eldest coughed. “Well, she was still successful in imposing her will on me.” He spoke to the Debra. “Bring me my pills, child.”

The Debra went to the coffee-serving slave and gave her directions for retrieving the pills, then went back to her note-taking position.

The other slave hastened to bring Meyer his medication.

Franz commented, “She can’t command us, but she can use the other slaves?”

Leo grinned. “Is that a nice touch or what?”

Meyer returned to an earlier point. “You say you’ve sent agents like this to the Outside?”

Leo shrugged. “They’ve had mixed success so far.”

Franz shook his head. “Don’t let him downplay his accomplishment. Leo’s slaves have scored a number of wins Outside.”

Leo was too honest a scientist not to point out a failure as well. “Though the remodeling of Cassie Parker’s boyfriend did not manage to produce the needed outcome.”

The Eldest waved it away. “The Remy project has challenged us with extraordinary setbacks since the beginning. Failure there is no insult.”

Franz homed in on the latest passage in the ongoing story of the Guides’ efforts to acquire a Memwriter. “How is the remodeling of Remy’s mind going?”

Leo brightened. “If you’d asked me yesterday, Franz, I would have said that progress was disturbingly slow. Until now, she has fought it, and for reasons I’m still investigating, she has achieved considerable success.”

He sat back and sighed with satisfaction. “But today, I achieved a breakthrough. It’s as if she finally used up the last of her strength. Her will has cracked like a car windshield.”

He took a sip of coffee. “A few more sessions, and her mind will shatter. We’ll be able to rebuild it according to the plan.”

Franz continued to press. “You’re confident she’ll destroy all knowledge of the Memwriter in the Outside?”

Leo looked into his eyes with confidence. “Every blueprint, every database, every chip fab with a database. The rooms in Rivendell outfitted with box-size Memwriters for teaching the EStormers. She’ll destroy them all.”

Franz stared back, demanding more. “I’m not just talking about data and hardware, Leo.”

Leo went nose to nose with his friend. “Don’t worry. When I’m done with her, she’ll do everything we ask, including kill

her parents.”

Franz relaxed. “And her partner? What’s her name?”

Leo nodded. “Cassie. Yes, she’ll kill Cassie too.”

The Eldest added with satisfaction, “And Leo, if the Memwriter works as expected, she’ll worship you for making her do it.”

Cassie held her breath while the bosses’ conversation ended and the men departed. Debra wheeled the Eldest out of the room last, nodding at Cassie and the tray awaiting removal.

Cassie took a shuddering breath and took stock of her situation. She was gleeful as she thought about the least valuable but most prized factoid she had acquired.

Leo was the Doc. The Doc was Leo. She loved knowing her enemy’s true name at last.

Leo had a counterpart in Moscow. Franz. She wondered what, if anything, Grisha knew about the inventor of Ruby Rage. She wondered how he would react if she told him about the true bosses of the Rage, these creeps in Antarctica. That might be fun.

Nobody seemed concerned about a servant in the top bosses’ private lair. It made sense. Why would they care about the minions? Not only were they submissive, but the new ones had Leo’s “limiters”—another chilling technology.

Not all slaves were created equal. Cassie wanted to demonstrate that a slave with free rein could punish her abusers.

The library should tell her a great deal about her adversaries. She began perusing the shelves.

So much science. Technology, engineering, and mathematics... These people had fully embraced the direction in education in which many teachers Outside urgently wanted to go.

She realized she had just thought of the rest of the world as “Outside,” and her heart skipped a beat. She was now immersed in this alien culture. She felt a feverish desperation to free Remy.

Her despair deepened when she found shelves filled with books on sociology and psychology, most of which were new to her. Many of them smelled like old leather.

One caught her eye. During her brief experience memwriting physics, she’d encountered a book entitled *Introduction to Advanced Quantum Mechanics*. Talk about a contradiction in terms. She had immediately known the text had nothing in common with an “Introduction.”

An author with the same streak of dark humor had written *Introduction to Advanced Sociological Mechanics and their Application in Culture Formation and Modification*.

She plucked the tome off the shelf and helplessly stared at the equations therein. Was this book a mathematical hoax or a true work on how to manipulate societies? She shivered, suspecting the latter.

She realized that this had been published in the Fulcrum. No one Outside had any clue how far these people had advanced in this perilous field.

Against such deep knowledge, what defense could Rivendell and America muster? Had her world already lost?

She moved on. Eventually, she came to another shelf of leather-bound books. The ones on the left looked worn and ancient, and she had difficulty making out the letters. To top it off, the author had written in an unknown language. Maybe Latin? It looked like some phrases she had seen written in that language.

To the right of the Latin were books in similar bindings written in German. That wouldn’t help her unless she could use a Memwriter to pick up the language.

She did not, however, trust the Memwriter Leo was using on Remy.

The rightmost books on the shelf were titled in English, *Log Book of the Elder Guides*, and they had dates. Someone had gone to the trouble of embossing the titles in gold.

She realized these books looked identical to the one Debra had held. The current log recorded the conversation that Cassie had just witnessed between Leo and Franz and Eldest Meyer.

She could not help reading a few passages. The story of the Elder Guides was fascinating. Also, if you believed the precept that you should know your enemy, this history was important.

No one would notice if a few of these volumes went missing. She shoved a couple of the recent logs into her ill-fitting coveralls before collecting the tray, then paused. “Why not?” she asked the air.

She grabbed the book about advanced social mechanics and stuffed it in with the others before departing.

THE UN OF CRIME

Morte Noir sat outside the café, sipping coffee under the clear Marbella sky, surreptitiously scanning their surroundings.

Laurie took a sip of her tea and followed the Mistress' shifting eyes. "Isn't this area a little too working-class for you? Why are we here?"

Morte Noir allowed a wicked glint to show in her eyes. "Esin, what's special about this place?"

Esin had been inspecting the area with bare-faced interest. She pointed at a nondescript building across the street. "Security cameras with multiple overlapping fields of view."

Andrey choked on his Coca-Cola. "So, they're watching us? Can Gamma tap their signal?"

Laurie put a hand on his arm. "I'm sure Morte Noir has us covered."

The Mistress nodded at Laurie and gestured at Esin. The girl continued, "Bulletproof glass. Guards on the roof with heavy weapons, almost hidden in the eaves."

Morte Noir nodded. "Conclusion?"

Esin doubtfully offered, "A drug cartel's headquarters?" She watched a man with a disciplined stride and a military haircut enter the building. "No. Police station."

The Mistress gave her a wide, approving smile. "You continue to please."

Laurie stared at the building. “Very low-key. Are they afraid?”

Morte Noir put her cup down. “Not exactly. Detailed rules of engagement have been drawn up. The cops deal with the street crime. If any members of one of the one-hundred-plus criminal groups get picked up, they are turned over to their local boss for punishment.”

Laurie snorted. “So the criminals get off Scot-free.”

Morte Noir chuckled. “Not hardly. Sometimes the foot soldiers beg the police to keep them in jail.”

Laurie clearly didn’t believe her.

Andrey figured it out. “Let me guess. The crime lords want to live here in peaceful comfort. They don’t want any violence or petty crime, so the punishment for breaking the local laws is severe.”

Morte Noir smiled, then sighed. “Well-said. Though in recent years, things have changed. A number of the new kingpins have refused to follow the conventions. They’ve brought in associates to settle scores here. A tragedy for the city sometimes called ‘The United Nations of Crime.’ The associates don’t follow the rules, and all our lives suffer for it.”

Anger showed on her face, then faded to satisfied contemplation as she observed, “Needless to say, I’ve taken steps to fix the problem. This *is* one of my hometowns.”

A young man with severe acne pockmarks and a feverish look in his eyes charged up to their table, pursed his lips, and dragged a fifth chair up.

Laurie blinked. “Can we help you?”

Coldness replaced the fever. He spoke with a posh British accent. “My name is Alistair. This is my table from nine to eleven every morning. Everyone knows that.” He reached under his Hawaiian shirt, a wild melee of yellow and red and blue ribbons wrapped around a Dolce & Gabbana logo. He brought out four phones and spread them across the table.

Morte Noir raised her eyebrow at the phones and turned to Laurie. “Laying out your phones on the table is a local way of showing how important you are.”

She reached into her purse, withdrew a phone encased in a gold cover rimmed with black opals. She placed the phone face-down on the table. The back of the phone displayed a silhouette of the Grim Reaper so dark it seemed to suck the light from the entire area. “I call and raise you one red dot.”

Alistair frowned at the phone, then followed Laurie’s eyes to his chest.

The blood-red spot of a targeting laser brightened a blue stripe on his shirt near his heart.

Morte Noir shook her head. “You really must remember the basic rules of courtesy.”

The Brit turned pale.

Esin examined the laser point, then twisted to look for the source. Her face lit up, and she waved at the sniper. “Dave!”

The Mistress closed her eyes for a tired moment. “Discipline.”

Esin put her hand to her mouth in horror at what she had just done. “Sorry.”

Laurie looked in the direction in which Esin had waved but could not spot Dave. She thought it was just as well since she would have also been tempted to wave at her old Go partner from her time as a forced guest of the Mistress.

Morte Noir pressed on with the matter at hand. Focusing on Alistair, she asked, “Have you talked to Francesco lately?”

The Brit tore his eyes off the death dot on his chest. “He went away on business.”

The Mistress chuckled. “It’ll be a long trip. He’s fertilizing my garden.”

Alistair swallowed hard. “How can I help you?”

Morte Noir turned to business. “I’m looking for a team of hackers who run trolls and bots on the web.”

Alistair rubbed his nose. “Pick a direction and walk a mile. You’ll pass two or three hacker teams on the way.”

Andrey leaned forward. “These hackers will look like me. Pasty-faced.”

Laurie could not help inserting, “Maybe also minty-green from the lack of sunshine.”

Andrey frowned at her, then chuckled. “Black t-shirts, worn jeans. Baseball caps like Taras Kulakov.” He let his American accent fade into a thick Russian slur. “They’ll sound like this.”

Laurie added, “They should be established. Not new arrivals, but not old-timers either.” She gave Alistair the date when Ruby Rage changed hands. “They should have arrived around that time.”

Alistair frowned. “I don’t recognize them offhand. I could dig around.”

Morte Noir spoke sternly. “Do that.” Her voice warmed up. “Here’s some incentive.” She pushed a thumb drive across the table. “Cold wallet.” The “wallet” contained crypto-cash. Being offline and unpowered meant no one could hack the drive to steal the cash.

Military-grade encryption protected the currency. If Alistair did a good job, she’d give him the key.

Alistair brightened. “I am at your service.”

Laurie followed as Morte Noir entered a car that had just stopped for them and watched with bemusement. “No limousine? We’re using Uber?”

After the car accelerated, Morte Noir replied, “The whole of Marbella is Uberized. All the criminal enterprises operate in a gig economy. There’s no top crime boss, no *capo* to whom everyone reports. Instead, there’s an interlocking web of organizations with specialties. One gang sells guns, including

missiles for the discerning customer. Another specializes in fast delivery, with retired race car drivers who service a three-hundred-mile radius in two hours.”

They entered an area of large mansions with gated driveways. Laurie nodded. “This seems more your style.”

Morte Noir purred. “Puerto Banús. The wealthiest and, frankly, the most extravagant part of the city. I have a place here.”

Laurie snorted. “I take it these all belong to high-end criminals?”

The Dark Mistress laughed. “Oh, heavens, no.” She started pointing at estates. “That one belongs to a shipbuilder. The one next to him is a banker specializing in real estate. Next to him is the owner of a continent-wide franchise of car dealerships.” She paused, then continued with a caveat. “Though the car dealer proves that the criminals are seamlessly interwoven with the others.”

Andrey looked puzzled. “The car dealer is a crook?”

Morte Noir answered in a dry tone. “A major avenue for money laundering is the buying and selling of automobiles. Just about every criminal enterprise in Marbella works with the car dealer.”

An alert on her phone grabbed the Mistress’ attention. “Oh, my. We have visitors.” She leaned over and tapped the Uber driver on the shoulder. “Drop us a block from the house.”

She grinned at Esin. “Training time.”

Laurie followed as Morte Noir led them at an easy pace down a quiet street to a block-shaped orangish-red brick mansion with a tile roof. It had the clean, stubby lines of a fortress designed by an artist.

Laurie whistled. “When AID blew up your home in Scotland, why didn’t you come here?”

The Mistress cleared her throat. “I didn’t know how deeply I’d been compromised, so I needed to go someplace no one could possibly predict.”

Esin, charged with energy in preparation for the upcoming training lesson, skipped a few steps. “So we rode on a submarine and went to Rivendell. Very cool.”

Laurie missed a step as she looked closely at the front of the house, then pointed. “Somebody broke a window.” She smirked at the Mistress. “I would have expected bulletproof glass in a house of yours.”

Morte Noir’s eyes gleamed. “*You* would. Those windows are fragile, so the house practically begs the passing burglar to break in. I expect a dozen or more groups of lowlifes have marked this house for use for different purposes. The goal is to lure them in so we can take them out and clean up the city.” She looked at Andrey. “I think in computer hacking, you call it a honey trap.”

Andrey winced. “A honeypot. A honey trap is, uh...” He blushed.

Esin came to his rescue. “A honey trap uses sex for bribery and blackmail. One of our main enterprises.”

Morte Noir shook with silent laughter. “I just wanted to watch Andrey blush as he tried to explain a honey trap.”

When they reached the door, the Mistress looked at her phone. “When the idiots broke in, they left the door unlocked so anybody could interrupt them. Honestly, Marbella used to offer a better class of criminals. Since the pandemic, the Eastern Europeans have cratered the ambiance.” She turned to Esin. “After you.”

Esin quietly opened the door, then charged in. Morte Noir followed. The guttural grunts and sharp smacks of a fight escaped to the porch. Laurie hung back to speak to Andrey. “You should count to ten before going in. Let us clear the space.”

Andrey gulped and nodded.

Laurie entered a scene of considerable disarray that constituted what the Dark Mistress would consider a hands-on classroom setting.

A single victim, a big fellow with blond hair and blue eyes, sat bound to a chair. He seemed unable to keep from looking at a cordless drill lying next to his bare feet. The pattern of blood on the carpet suggested the other men had been using the drill on the fellow's toes.

The victim shared the room with three assailants whose greasy black hair contrasted harshly with their pale skin.

One of the attackers lay in the middle of the room with his neck at an unlikely angle. Laurie suspected he no longer needed to breathe.

A second thug stumbled to one side, holding his head as he fought to regain his addled senses after a hard strike to the temple.

Esin planted her hand on the third assailant's nose, creating both a *squish* and a scream of enraged pain.

Morte Noir stood to the side, observing as if she were taking notes. She whispered to Laurie, "That Memwriter of yours is a marvel. She might now be as good at combat as I am, with only a fraction of the training."

Laurie chuckled. "You could use the Memwriter too, if you'd just go straight."

Morte Noir snorted.

A dull thud announced that Esin had taken a bad hit. The Mistress remained motionless. Laurie didn't bother to suggest that she should assist in Esin's labors. She knew the answer.

The dazed thug recovered and took stock of the situation. Laurie could practically hear the wheels turning in his mind. The assailant instantly dismissed the geek who had only now entered the room as harmless. He shot a longer glance at Laurie but concluded that however athletic she might be, a woman in her forties or fifties was too old and wouldn't have serious fighting skills.

His eyes lingered on the Mistress, but only because no man could help letting his eyes roam over her. She was clearly a plaything of the owner of this mansion, too concerned with breaking a nail to intervene.

A jade statuette of a mermaid with a sailor kneeling before her lay on the coffee table. The thug grabbed the statue, and with cautious, silent footsteps, he snuck up on Esin from behind.

Laurie jumped to intercept him, but Morte Noir blocked her. "Training," she whispered.

Laurie opened her mouth to object, but Morte Noir had turned from her to the stealthy assailant. She delivered a carefully measured tap to his head with the edge of her phone. Not enough to take him out of the fight but enough to make him stumble.

Esin heard him trip. She whirled, then kicked him in the groin and punched him in the throat.

Moments later, Morte Noir's petite but fearless protégé finished the last one.

Morte Noir clapped. "Three to one, single-handed. Your tactical skills are exceptional, though you still need better situational awareness. Well done."

Esin's eyes glowed. "Thank you, Mistress." She swept a leg to take a bow.

Her leg failed, and she fell over.

Before dealing with any of the mangled intruders or their victim, Laurie helped Esin onto the couch. Morte Noir inspected the thugs for weapons, and Andrey sought out ice packs for Esin's rapidly swelling knee.

Laurie began assessing the damage, but Esin shrugged her off. "I'm fine."

That might have worked on someone else, but Laurie had dealt with teenagers like Esin for many years and was not so easily repulsed. “You are *not* fine. We will take care of this right now, or it will get worse.”

The Mistress spoke in a firm tone from across the room. “And if you aren’t in top shape when I need you, I shall be most displeased.”

Esin grumbled, but Andrey ran up with the ice, and Laurie went to work on her.

Morte Noir popped her pearl-handled Italian switchblade open and cut the victim free. “Shall we send you to the hospital?”

The vic shuddered. In a thick Swedish accent, he responded, “No, no. Let me just go.”

The Mistress raised an eyebrow and sighed. “As you wish. I doubt you can wear shoes at this point. Let me get you a couple of towels to wrap around those feet so you don’t bleed on my carpet anymore. Then I’ll call you an Uber.”

The Swede mumbled, “Thank you.”

As the victim hobbled out the door, another man entered with a more spritely step.

Esin saw him first and threw her arms out. “Dave!” She tried to get up.

Laurie pushed her back down. “Hug him from here.”

After Dave gave and got hugs all around, he turned to Morte Noir. “What’s next?”

The Mistress wrinkled her nose. “You tell me.”

Dave scanned the room, which was still full of corpses. “Cleanup.”

Morte Noir spoke sympathetically. “I would make Esin do it since the rule is whoever makes a mess cleans it up, but she is out of commission.”

Dave grinned at Esin. “Good planning.”

The girl snorted.

The Mistress spoke to her. “When you’re feeling up to it, I want you to do a selfie video to inform everyone in Marbella about these dead deadbeats.”

Esin’s brow furrowed as she tried to grasp the reasoning. Then her face cleared. “So the lowlifes around town will come after me. Then I can take out more of them.”

Morte Noir nodded. “It’ll give you more practice.”

Esin brightened. “I can be a honeypot.”

Laurie saw the eagerness in her eyes. Esin looked like a high school girl going to the prom. Laurie wished for a version of the world in which Esin could be such a dancing queen.

The young woman muffled a giggle. “I can be a honeypot in addition to being a honey trap like I often am.” After a moment’s thought, she picked up her cell phone and snapped pics of the corpses. “For my video,” she explained.

Laurie sighed. So much for the vision of Esin’s prom night.

Morte Noir smiled at her. “You mentioned earlier that you expected me to have bulletproof glass.”

Laurie glanced at her. “What about it?”

Morte Noir pointed at a switch next to the living room window. “Since we’re here now, the honeypot is closed. Flip that if you please.”

Laurie flipped the switch. Thick armored glass rolled out of the walls and set into the window frames.

Laurie stared as the house transformed.

Morte Noir raised an eyebrow. “Satisfied?”

Dave turned to Morte Noir, then pointed at the bodies and changed the topic. “Fertilizer?”

The Mistress just smirked.

Dave began the grueling job of dragging the corpses out to the garden.

Laurie worked with Morte Noir to make tea and cookies, as they had so many times in Scotland. They brought the tray into the living room to share with Esin after Dave removed the bodies.

Since they had some downtime, Laurie pursued a lingering question. With a man cursing and a shovel striking dirt in the background, she asked, “Since Marbella is the heart of the criminal gig economy, I would expect you to have thriving business interests here. You mentioned organizations that focus on race car deliveries and money laundering. What’s your specialty?”

Morte Noir looked at her thoughtfully. “Insightful question.” She sipped her tea. “Did Remy tell you that I performed the role of negotiator for Orinoco’s cobalt mines?”

Laurie nodded. “It seemed like excessively honest work for you. I’d have expected you to negotiate for AID and Gamma.”

The Mistress laughed. “Too easy. Anyway, I presume Remy didn’t tell you that I am also the contract enforcer. Judge, jury, and *executioner*.”

Laurie froze as she was about to nip off a piece of lemon cookie. It didn’t seem as tasty anymore. “I see.”

Morte Noir shrugged. “I haven’t had to perform any executions for Orinoco yet.”

Esin spoke with satisfaction. “The Dark Mistress’ reputation supplies all the enforcement needed. As usual.”

Morte Noir nodded. “Here in Marbella, I don’t do much negotiating, but I *am* the premier contract overseer. When a small team specializing in drug imports makes a delivery to a major distributor, either or both organizations can turn to me to guarantee fulfillment, both the transfer of the goods and the payment.”

Andrey interpreted that. “She’s what I think you would call an ‘escrow agent.’”

Laurie snorted. “An escrow agent with guns. You’re effectively the legal system.”

Morte Noir looked delighted. “A nice analogy.” Her phone beeped. “Here we go.” She put the phone on speaker. “Alistair, so good of you to call back.”

“I think I found your boys. Do you want me to set up a meet?”

Morte Noir chuckled. “I think it would be more fun to surprise them. Do you know where they hang out? Where we could hook up with them the way I hooked up with you?”

Alistair echoed her chuckle. “I thought that might be your choice. There’s a restaurant they frequent for lunch. The Buenos Aires Steak House.”

Morte Noir gushed, “You’ve been so helpful. I’ll send you the key to the wallet after the meet.”

After she hung up, she turned to Andrey. “How would you like to do a little undercover work?”

Andrey pointed at himself and squeaked, “Me? I’m not an undercover kind of person.”

Morte Noir nodded. “You’re not. What I meant was, how would you like to go undercover as yourself?”

THE HOME OF THE RUBY

On one of the narrow pedestrian streets in Marbella's old town lay a small restaurant with a half-dozen outdoor tables crammed together. Each of the narrow, gleaming ebony tables accommodated two ivory chairs.

You could not help overhearing the diners seated next to you. They became friends who heightened the joy of the experience, or they became enemies while your dining experience deteriorated under the influence of their inane outpourings.

A group of pale young men with dark stubble had pulled two tables together to seat four. As Esin approached with Andrey, the men guffawed at what one had said.

Esin wrapped her hands around Andrey's upper arm and said in a giddy voice too loud for the hackers to miss, "Let's sit at this outside table." She pointed at the one adjacent to the four men.

Andrey stared into her eyes as if he were mesmerized. "As you wish."

They sat, and a waiter brought each a glass of white wine.

Esin caught the gold chain hanging from her neck and pulled the diamond from her bosom. She languidly waved it from side to side as if to hypnotize him. "So, since you bought it, do you like it on me?"

Andrey gripped the table and gulped. "Oh, God, yes."

Esin saw that he needed more encouragement to overcome his anxiety, so she helped him wrap his fingers around her delicate hand and bring her fingers to his lips. She feared she would have to whisper instructions, but he figured it out and delicately kissed her hand.

Cover established. Esin sighed in relief.

Esin kept up a flood of chatter as Fenya had taught her, trying to attract the attention of the Russians sitting next to them. Their gazes lingered on her from time to time, but they paid no attention to her partner. Their steak dinners commanded their primary focus.

Esin and Andrey had thick slabs of Argentinian beef delivered to them, bubbling and sputtering as the scorching plates seared the meat. Esin continued to speak loudly, desperate for attention from the hackers. “So, baby, whose secrets are you stealing this week?”

Andrey’s eyes widened in horror. “We can’t discuss that here.”

The conversation at the adjacent table faded, and one of them leaned over. “Andrey?”

Esin turned away to mutter, “Thank you, Allah.” Step One was complete.

Andrey looked at the man who had spoken. “Sasha?”

Three more voices chorused, “Andrey!”

Andrey looked at them with honest joy. “Hi, everybody.” He shot them a puzzled expression and spoke in Russian. “What are you guys doing here?”

A flood of answers and laughter ensued.

Esin pouted and poked Andrey. “Hey, you know I don’t speak Russian.” Actually, she did, having memwritten it in preparation for this mission.

Andrey kissed her fingers again. “Sorry, love, but these guys speak English so badly that I don’t think you could follow them anyway.”

Still pouting, Esin sat back and folded her arms. She continued to listen.

Andrey asked, “You guys here on vacation?”

Sasha laughed. “We’re here for our job. Permanent residents.”

Andrey looked puzzled. “You left the Internet Research Agency? I didn’t think you could leave that organization except in a box.” He pretended to shiver. “Though it might be worth the risk to get out of Petersburg. Snow everywhere.”

One guy defended their homeland. “Hey, it’s not that bad.”

Another one nudged the first. “Yeah, but seriously?” He pointed to the sky. “Sunshine.” He waved into the distance. “Beaches.” He leered at Esin. “And beautiful girls everywhere.”

He snorted. “Even Andrey got one.”

Esin wasn’t supposed to understand what they were saying, but she didn’t need words to understand the Russian. She glared at him.

Andrey grabbed her hand. “You’ll have to find another. This one’s mine.”

The Russians roared, and Sasha went back to the topic. “Anyway, we’re still sort of working for IRA.” He scratched his head. “It’s a little confusing.”

Andrey pointed at Sasha’s Rolex. “Pays well.”

Sasha chuckled. “Better than before.” He shook his head. “You would not believe what we’re doing. We’re a long way from trolls and bot farms.”

Andrey chuckled too. “No doubt still bilking suckers one way or the other.”

Sasha gave him a wan smile. “For sure, but it’s different.” He changed the topic. “What about you? You said you were on the verge of something incredible. Something that would change everything.” He leaned over and whispered. “Then you dropped off the face of the earth.”

Andrey gave a weak laugh. “Turned out not everyone wanted everything changed.” He shuddered. “I was on the run for a long time.” He smiled at Esin. “But I found my way to Marbella and to Esin.”

Esin grasped his hands. “I see *you* no matter what language you use. Don’t think about the past.” She brushed his cheek. “Think about the future.”

The Russians oohed and aahed, and the complainer smirked. “You’ve been hacked by a pretty face. She owns you now.”

Andrey smiled. “More or less.” He turned to Sasha. “I’ve been doing consulting gigs lately.” He nodded at Esin. “Esin here works for my client.”

Sasha turned to her with renewed interest and asked in accented English, “Who do you work for?”

Esin took a sip of her wine. “It hardly makes a difference.” She looked lovingly at Andrey and nodded. Time to nudge the hackers.

Andrey gave her a barely perceptible nod of acknowledgment. “Currently, I’m acquiring aircraft blueprints. You?”

Sasha whistled appreciatively. “Blueprints. Much cooler than what *we* acquire.”

Andrey gave him a wide, clueless smile. “What do you acquire?”

One of his companions snorted. “Cultists.”

Sasha glared at him, then turned back to Andrey. “It’s the next step after trolling the fools to hack democratic elections.”

Andrey dabbed his mouth with his napkin. “Have any jobs for a world-class hacker? I’ll be done with my current gig soon.”

Sasha considered. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Esin sighed. “I know that look. You’re pitching your services.” She glanced at Sasha. “Right?”

Sasha laughed and replied in English, “You know your man, but he doesn’t have to sell me.” He waved his hand at his companions. “We all know Andrey’s skills. If I can use him, I will.”

Esin returned to her pout and pretended not to believe him. “You should bring him back to your office, introduce him to everyone, and let him show everyone what he can do.” She leaned close enough to Sasha so he could smell her perfume and feel her breath on his cheek. “Please.”

Sasha shook his head to clear it and frowned, knowing he should not. However, his pride in what he had built, blended with the look of fascination in Esin’s pleading eyes and Andrey’s look of challenging amusement, won out. “Come on.”

Andrey watched the unease grow in Sasha’s eyes as they Ubered to the HQ and nudged his old friend. “You don’t have to give us the tour, you know.” Morte Noir had emphasized the importance of not appearing pushy, and as Esin had pointed out, once they knew where the office was, she could just break in at midnight. Andrey had pointed out that that wouldn’t make a difference since there would be as many hackers in the building at midnight as at noon.

Sasha shook his head. “I know you. No problem.” He cast doubtful eyes on Esin. “But your girlfriend...”

Esin pouted again but allowed the expression to fade when she saw it would do no good. She placed a hand on Andrey’s shoulder. “It’s okay. Go hang out with your guys for a little while.” She gave him a forlorn look, followed by a wicked smile. “I’ll just stand around outside and see who I can pick up.”

Andrey snorted. “You’re a devil, you know that?” He turned to Sasha. “It’s cool.”

They came to a two-story white stucco building with lots of windows equipped with heavy shades to keep out both the

glaring sunshine and prying eyes.

Esin gave him a serious smooch before she let him go.

Andrey looked around. “There is a significant shortage of cafés on the block. My girl can’t even sit down out here.”

Sasha grimaced. “Yeah.” He brightened. “I can have the Uber guy take her someplace nice.”

Esin shook her head. “I will just hang out in the sunshine.” She struck a pose, back arched, serene face pointed skyward. “I’ll wait for you.”

Andrey gawked at her uncertainly. He was unsure of what to do, which was how he should behave, so it was good.

Sasha grabbed his shoulder. “She’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

It took only a minute to rumble past the security guard and the receptionist. Then they were in an ocean of cubicles, almost deafened by the clicks of keys.

In spurts, Sasha explained the nature of their work to create and manage the Ruby Rage conspiracy site while introducing Andrey to his engineers. The discussion of their operations confirmed he’d found the right office building and the right group of geeks.

As Sasha talked about the algorithms used to engineer rage-provoking prose, he stopped and grinned. “Andrey, I know just how to use you.”

Andrey rubbed his hands together. “I knew you’d have something for me. What do you need hacked?”

“The algorithms for one of the social media companies.”

Andrey looked confused. “Which algorithms? Those places are chock full of algorithms.”

Sasha laughed and slapped his shoulder. “The algorithms they use to determine the next post to show you.”

Andrey nodded. “So, if you’re reading a post about cooking, it’ll offer more posts on cooking.”

“Exactly, but the algorithms can serve other purposes as well. Suppose the service is owned by a corporate arm of China. The Chinese government will set their algorithm to recommend posts with positive things to say about China and avoid posts that are hostile.”

Andrey scratched his head. “I’m still not seeing your goal.”

Sasha nodded. “We’re seeking a particular kind of anger and rage, the kind that shapes a cultist who can be controlled through his hatred. We’ve hacked most of the social media sites and tweaked their suggestion algorithms so that if you show an interest in a post that is somewhat angry, the code will feed the target more posts with more anger. If they click again, we feed them more until they’re ready to experience the full power of the wrath storm of our Ruby Rage image board.”

Andrey goggled. “You’re expanding your audience with people who didn’t start out with that much anger but could be lured into deeper and deeper levels of fury.”

Sasha grinned again. “Neat, right?”

Andrey saluted. “Genius, Sasha. So, a couple of the social media data centers are harder to crack than the others?”

Sasha pointed at him. “Not for you.”

Andrey laughed. “Show me the code to inject, and you’ll own them.”

Or not. Andrey put a new project on his list of to-dos. He would hack into all those data centers and invert the algorithms so the next suggested item was *less* angry. He would consider it his personal effort to make the world a saner place.

The closed door to one office suggested that one person did not like sharing the communal cube space and had the juice to get his way. Andrey sauntered over to it. “Your boss’s office?”

Sasha’s pale face turned whiter. “He keeps it locked. Leave it.”

Andrey ran his finger over the woodgrain. “Who is he, anyway?”

Sasha shook his head. “I really don’t know. We call him ‘the Doc.’”

Andrey was taken aback. “The Doc? I ran into someone who called himself that in the US.”

Sasha grimaced. “Different guy. The one in America is his brother or something. Very mysterious.”

Sasha brightened. “Anyway, the AI he trained is very cool.” He explained about the AI’s use for the Ruby Rage cult and laughed. “One of my guys started believing the shit he was inventing at his desk.” He turned sober. “I had to let him go.”

Andrey asked a question for which he suspected he knew the answer. “Where is he now? Maybe his new employer will have a job for me.”

Sasha replied, “He died in a car wreck a couple of days later.”

Andrey responded in a world-weary voice, “So, you can’t quit.”

Sasha shrugged. “Hey, you only live once, and we’re living the dream here. Why would we want to leave?”

Sasha’s meandering tour brought them to a sour-face hacker who looked at Andrey skeptically. “Sasha’s told us about you. Some sort of ultra-wizard for re-engineering modular reusable code.”

Andrey’s alpha geekness compelled him to speak. “I’ve done a little work helping people improve their stuff.” He glanced at Sasha. “Even gave your boss a few pointers.”

Sasha laughed and slapped him on the back, which caused him to stumble. “All too true.”

The interrogator remained skeptical, and Sasha laughed again. “Damir, send the source for one of your modules to the machine in the Zeta conference room.” He gave Andrey a wry

look and made a reference to an old ballroom dance movie.
“Show us your *paso doble*.”

Andrey shook his head but let Sasha lead him to the conference room. Showtime.

THE BARBIE DOLL ASSASSIN

Leo walked into the memwriting room to find Remy already strapped in.

Remy, who had been looking straight ahead with glazed eyes, turned to him. Her face lit up with happiness, and her eyes were sparkling and worshipful. “Oh, Leo, I’m so happy you’re here.”

He caressed her cheek as she twisted to kiss his fingers.

He shook his head. “No, no, my love.” He finished tightening the clamps on her head. “Soon you will be healed, and we can be together.”

Remy’s voice filled with hope. “Today? After this session?”

Leo thought about it. “Perhaps tomorrow. We’ll see.” His voice turned stern. “You’ll have to be a very good girl.”

She stared forward eagerly. “I’ll be good.”

“Excellent.” Leo turned on the machine and left the room.

Since the day of the breakthrough, when Remy’s mind had collapsed, Leo’s progress had been extremely swift. He was taking copious notes.

In one respect, this experiment had been a disappointment. He had not been able to remodel Remy’s mind in an afternoon or even a weekend. However, with the knowledge he had gleaned, he thought he could trim the time down to a week for the next patient.

That would be good enough for the next undertaking. It would take place Outside and be more than an experiment. It would be a “learn by doing” project.

The Speaker of the House in the United States was about to go on a two-week trip to visit his cabin near Lake Placid. Leo planned to turn the Speaker into a minion for the woman the Elders had planted in the House.

In the original *Dracula*, the vampire had a human servant who was loyal and unable to think an independent thought. Like him, when Leo was done with the Speaker at the cabin, the congressman would heed the Elder with the same obedience. Leo thought the man should get a new title befitting his new station.

The fellow should be known as the Renfield of the House.

Anytime an aircraft landed in the Fulcrum hangar, a slave was assigned to clean it.

Cassie scrubbed vigorously at a semen stain on the seat of one of the rear chairs in the newly arrived jet. As she thrust her brush against the fabric, she philosophically reflected that this was easier than removing the chewing gum stuck under the arm of the pilot’s chair.

After the meeting in the Eldest’s private office, she had concluded that Debra had authority similar to that of the bosses in some ways, so she had struck up a relationship of sorts with her.

During their brief breaks, many of the servants went to the hall of paintings and huddled together, staring at the artwork. It made Cassie think of the way horses in a herd would stand side by side to feel companionship.

From time to time, Debra similarly would stand in the hallway of paintings, staring at an artwork at random. Cassie would see her on the hacked vidfeeds and join her, stepping up

close and muttering a few words without looking at her. Sometimes, Debra muttered back.

Cassie had once said, "It would be great if I could get a job cleaning the airplanes."

Debra had muttered under her breath, "I'll see."

The next day, Cassie had gotten a keycard with access to the hangar.

By and large, Cassie found the slave work in the Fulcrum physically tiring but not mentally taxing. The labor left her mind free to roam and roam it did, using her brief rest breaks and the sleep period to scroll through the surveillance from the ubiquitous vidfeeds and gaze into every corner of the facility, soaking up whatever had happened that day.

She looked over workers' shoulders at their monitors as they worked on confidential data. She watched them repair the facility's machines. She watched them play, and she watched them conduct ghastly experiments with the slaves.

She had also burned a comprehensive map of the place into her mind as deeply as if she'd memwritten it. She could find her way blindfolded to the underground pier where the Elder Guide submarine, an antique from World War II, docked to bring supplies. She could wriggle through the ducts into any of the compute server rooms or unlock the vault to the nuclear reactor room.

She never did any of those things.

She toyed with various ways to sabotage the facility, all of which she rejected when she remembered that getting Remy out was the number one priority.

She hated that Remy's plan still offered the best chance of escape.

The Memwriter room had multiple vidcams for recording the events during the brainwashing treatments. However, these cameras were disconnected from the main surveillance network so the Doc could collect the data without the security guards spying on him.

That caused Cassie no problems. She broke Leo's private network and watched the sessions when she could.

Like every other aspect of this place, those sessions produced mind-numbing horror. Cassie had a lot of trouble getting past that numbness to focus on the plan.

She was listening when the Doc said, "Perhaps tomorrow."

At those words, the nightmare faded into the background. Could it be that Remy's plan would work? Was Leo really planning to take Remy Outside?

Then she looked at the expression of love on Remy's face as she gazed upon her torturer. Her face was so sincere that it sent chills down Cassie's spine.

Was Remy giving Leo an Oscar-winning performance, or did she have Stockholm Syndrome?

Or worse, had Cassie's jury-rigged sabotage of the Memwriter failed, leaving Remy helpless? Had she turned into the minion Leo had striven to create from the beginning?

Leo held the roses in one hand as he fumbled his keycard through the reader with the other. He stepped into the cell.

Remy sat cross-legged on the floor, weaving her head to and fro, mumbling. When she saw him, her eyes widened. "Leo!"

She rose from the floor with the nimble grace of her cheerleader past, then bounced and ran to him.

She stopped hesitantly with her face inches from his. "May I...may I hug you?"

The Doc calculated the correct response. He spread his arms wide and let her wrap herself around him, then gently pushed her away and handed her the roses. "Congratulations. You're well now."

Remy gasped with delight and lowered her face to the petals. “So wonderful. It’s been such a long time since I smelled flowers, since...” Confusion congealed on her features. “Since...”

Frowning, Leo tapped her cheek.

She blinked back into the present day. “We should get a vase and put water in it. Are these the only roses in the Fulcrum? We have to preserve them.”

The Doc laughed. “No need. We’re going Outside. I’ll buy you a hundred roses if you’d like.”

Remy’s expression shifted between delight and doubt. She spoke meekly. “Are you sure I’m ready?”

The Doc clasped her hand. “Ready enough. Pack—” He was going to tell her to pack her things, but she didn’t have any. When they landed, he’d have to get her some clothes.

He opened her door with his keycard and led her toward the hangar.

When Cassie saw the Doc take a delivery of fresh flowers from the pilot of a just-landed airplane, she knew her moment had come.

Remy’s plan was coming to fruition.

Cassie hastily dumped the rest of the workmen’s clothes into the washing machine and hustled to the closet to get her mop, broom, and scrub brushes. She took one last look at her vidfeeds.

Debra stood in the hall of paintings.

Cassie struggled with herself before making the only decision she could. She muttered, “Dammit,” and dragged her gear to the hall.

She stood next to the beautiful slave in the silence that seemed to comfort her. Then Cassie’s need to move on built to

the point where she could no longer stand it. “I’ll be back to set you free.”

No quiver of movement indicated a reaction to this announcement. Debra just muttered a full sentence in response, a sentence that haunted Cassie as she rushed to the hangar, lost the vidcams by moseying among the airplanes, ditched her bucket and mop, and boarded the Doc’s plane.

She shook her head to purge Debra’s response from her mind. The words were not as special as the tone in which Debra had spoken them, a wistful and forlorn timbre suggestive of the polite discussion of a pure fantasy. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

As Leo led Remy through the passages to the hangar, he quizzed her. “Will you be happy to see your parents?”

Remy nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes. I shall be ecstatic. I shall bounce with joy.” She tried to raise her arms in a cheer, but Leo maintained his grip on her right hand. “Mom! Dad!”

Leo laughed. “Very good.” They turned a corner. “And when you’re alone with your dad?”

Remy brushed her hair back. “Dad, I love you so much. I’m so sorry you’re still in a coma.”

Leo continued the testing. “What do you give him?”

Remy grinned. “Potassium chloride. Ten grams. Injected.”

A lethal overdose.

Leo suppressed a chuckle. This was going so well. “And your mom?”

Remy frowned. “Mom. I’m so glad to be home. I’m so sorry I’ve been a disappointment to you my whole life. I have something for you.” She broke from Leo’s grasp and delivered a snap kick to the air. “Strike to the temple.” She looked down and struck at the floor. “Snap the neck.”

Memwriting a training sequence brought a whole new level of meaning to “immersive education.” Leo continued. “And your partner?”

Remy blindly threw her arms around Leo. “Cassie! We need to do some training. Real swords this time.” She stepped back and swung her arms as if cleaving with a katana. “Separate the head at the base of the jaw.” She frowned, puzzled. “I had her helpless once when I had a sword. Why didn’t I do it then?” Tears formed in her eyes.

Leo grasped her shoulders. “You didn’t know then what you know now. It’s okay.” He brushed her hair. “You’ll do better this time.”

Her tears evaporated, and her hair swooshed as she whirled down the hall. “Let’s go. I can’t wait to see them.”

As Cassie boarded the jet, she scraped off the war paint with which she’d covered her face for longer than she cared to remember.

Finally free of the red and purple pseudo-scarring, she scrunched into the closet before the Doc opened the plane’s main door.

Remy cooed, “Beloved, can I fly the plane?”

The Doc chuckled. “After you complete your mission, I’ll buy you your own plane.”

Cassie could hear the pout in Remy’s voice. “You don’t trust me yet.”

The Doc replied, “I will trust you even more when we’re done.”

The engines started, producing the same soft purr Cassie had heard on the trip here. The plane tipped as it lifted, throwing her to one side. As she steadied herself, she knocked a spare pair of pilot’s headphones off a hook.

They clunked on the floor.

Leo asked sharply, “What was that?”

Cassie held her breath.

Remy spoke distractedly. “What was what, beloved?” Petulant again, she added, “I think I broke a nail.”

Broke a nail? Sure, Remy was still a cheerleader in part of her heart, but she’d never been a freaking Barbie. Was this more performance art, or had Remy’s mind been mulched so badly that she’d turned pink? A Barbie Doll assassin? The mind reeled.

The Doc patted her hand. “We’ll get you a manicure after we land.”

The plane lifted free of the hangar and accelerated into horizontal flight.

Cassie waited half an hour, letting the Doc put four hundred miles between them and the Fulcrum.

As she carefully stood up, Remy asked, “Beloved, are we on autopilot now?” She continued meekly, “Can I hug you?”

Leo answered with surprising tenderness, “Come, my darling.”

This was the right moment. Cassie opened the closet and took her first silent footstep.

A moment’s turbulence threw her back against the door, driving it into the frame with a *crack*.

The Doc pushed Remy back into her seat and spun to her. “You!”

Cassie snarled. “You. Come and get some, old man.” She leaped at her enemy.

Leo hurtled toward her and launched a blindingly fast straight punch to her chest.

Cassie bounced back from the hit. God, he was fast! And karate from an alpha geek?

She didn't have time to re-evaluate the villain before her. She had to focus on blocking and dodging and not getting killed. Her back hit the closet door, and she barely twisted away from a strike that splintered the wood.

Cassie struck back, and he gave ground as he dodged. She followed up with a flurry of strikes and kicks to no avail.

Had she lost her skills during her time as a slave? No. She might have lost some precision, but her memwritten training was still active.

Then she understood. The Doc hadn't just used the Memwriter to torture Remy. He had also used it to train himself.

How should she adjust her tactics in the face of this radically greater threat?

Her thoughts moved too slowly to save her. He struck the side of her head.

Dazed, Cassie collapsed in a heap in the aisle between the seats.

Leo took several deep breaths, then spoke over his shoulder. "Remy, come here."

Remy hurried to his side. "What, beloved?"

He stepped out of the aisle and pointed at Cassie. "Finish her."

The moment of truth had arrived. Helpless, Cassie watched Remy.

Remy answered automatically. "Of course, my love." She balled her fists.

Then her whole body shifted like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. As her muscles and posture changed, the Barbie Doll killer molted to reveal the adult Remy. The Remy who had transformed upon seeing her father's ruin. The Remy who had sought vengeance and had ultimately found a new

balance between the high school cheerleader and the nuke-bearing Angel of Death Cassie had fought by the Reflecting Pool.

Cassie watched Leo absorb this evolution, but he reacted analytically as a scientist. To be fair, how could he have known what he was seeing? Had Cassie not witnessed the earlier transitions, she would not have known either.

Leo patiently prodded, “Well?”

With a speed even greater than the Doc’s, Remy struck him first in the gut and then in the throat.

He fell to the deck, as helpless as Cassie.

Cassie croaked, “I was worried. I didn’t know if you were you.”

Remy took a gasping breath. “I didn’t know if I was either. I had become the person I was pretending to be.”

Cassie eased to her feet. “Yeah.”

Remy seemed lost. “What next?”

Cassie glared at Leo. “Like we planned, or like I planned. We throw him out the hatch.” She removed his shoelaces so she could tie him up with them.

Remy nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll have to slow down for that and lose some altitude.”

Cassie felt a shot of alarm. “Not too much altitude. Wouldn’t want him to land intact.”

Remy moved to the pilot’s seat. “Wouldn’t make any difference. We’re in the middle of the ocean.”

Cassie frowned. “Fine.” She kicked Leo in the head to minimize the risk of an argument and dragged him to the hatch.

As the plane descended to five thousand feet, Leo came around. “Wait. I have something you really want.”

Cassie opened the hatch. “You grab the feet. I’ll grab the arms.”

Remy dutifully grabbed the Doc's legs. "Ready when you are."

The Doc shouted, "I can cure your father."

THE USB

Esin skipped and spun outside Ruby Rage's headquarters, listening to music on her phone while she figured out what to do. In the end, she took a photo of herself with the Ruby HQ in the background and uploaded it to the channel on which she'd announced the executions of the gang members at Morte Noir's house. "It's another beautiful day here in Marbella," she posted gaily.

A few minutes later, a black Range Rover pulled up. Three men stepped out.

Esin muttered in mild disappointment, "I was sort of hoping for four, just to make sure I could do it."

The men approached, slapping heavy leather blackjacks against their palms.

Esin dropped her purse on the sidewalk, letting it spill half its contents on the pavement, and went to greet them. "I take it you want me alive."

The leader hefted his weapon. "You could come peacefully. Tell us who your boss is."

Esin gushed, "Oh, heavens, no. I have no such constraints about keeping *you* alive." She lunged at him and sliced at his carotid with a knifehand strike. It only rendered him unconscious, but it reduced the count of opponents.

It did not go as planned, however. To penetrate Ruby Rage's HQ, she had intended to get hit hard enough to suffer a serious injury. She had not intended to get hit on the head with a sap.

She shook it off, but when she had trouble focusing her eyes, she concluded she might perhaps have a mild concussion.

Her last roundhouse kick sent her to the ground when the leg she'd injured earlier, which had taken another hit in this fight, gave beneath her.

She knelt on all fours to get control of her spinning head. Fortunately, her opponents were in worse shape than she was. Regaining some of her strength, she worked her way around them, delivering killing blows.

The Ruby Rage security guard ran out. "What happened here?" he asked in Russian.

"What does it look like? I was attacked by these thugs."

The guard stared at her. "No English."

Esin sighed. She could not explain in Russian since she wasn't supposed to know that language, so she pantomimed dragging the bodies into the car and around the corner so no one would associate the deaths with the building.

The guard got the picture and started putting the trash in the back of the SUV. Esin pointed at her leg, hobbled three steps, and pointed into the HQ. The guard nodded distractedly.

Esin scooped up her purse and limped briskly to the young woman at the reception desk. "I need a bathroom."

Fortunately, the receptionist spoke English. When she saw Esin's state, she pointed into the hallway behind her. "On your right."

Esin started down the corridor and stopped as if she'd remembered something. "Hey, I don't suppose you have any spare cables?" She pulled out a USB with a mangled connector. "Those assholes out there spilled my purse on the ground and stepped on the power cable for my phone."

The receptionist frowned but reluctantly confessed, "We probably have one in the spare parts closet down the hall on the left."

Esin shot her a gleaming smile. “Thanks.” She staggered to the storage closet.

Victory. They did have cables. She yanked a handful off a shelf and replaced them with a handful of cables from her bag.

As she fell against the door to the restroom, she spoke with good cheer despite the pain from her knee and the nausea from the head blow that threatened to overwhelm her. “Mission accomplished.”

Half a dozen engineers sat quietly in the conference room, watching Andrey stare at a projected screenful of code. Each time a murmur arose, Sasha glared at the offenders. “Stay quiet or get gone.”

Andrey flipped to a second page, and after a tedious interval, he flipped to the third page. There, he paused for a long time before highlighting a line in the middle of the page. “There’s a bug here.”

Damir gasped. “I was going to fix that tomorrow.”

Sasha no longer had to complain to keep the room silent.

Andrey abruptly sat back. “From an architecture point of view, Sasha, I can’t believe you people are still using inheritance hierarchies and subclasses. You know you should use delegation, not inheritance.” He went back to the previous page and highlighted a function, then opened another window and wrote a new version. He explained why his version could be reused in more situations, reducing the amount of code they needed to write and eliminating all the potential bugs those extra lines of code could have introduced.

Damir sat with his arms folded in denial. Everyone else looked dazed.

Sasha shook his head, bemused. “We’ll have to upgrade our review process.” He glared around the room. “This, everybody, is the difference between a world-class hacker and a world-class software engineer who hacks.”

Andrey was trembling from the stress. He needed a fix. “Any chance I could get a Mountain Dew?”

Sasha slapped him on the back. “Somebody get the man some caffeine.”

Andrey stood unsteadily. He would probably not have a better chance than this. He fell sideways, taking the keyboard with him and slamming its USB cable hard against the table.

He sat back down and mumbled, “Sorry,” then wriggled the USB out of the keyboard with some difficulty. “As it happens, I have a spare USB in my pocket. Let me fix this for you.”

Sasha snatched the keyboard away. “I love you, man, but there’s no way I’m letting you stick your line into my equipment.” His eyes danced. “No offense.” He turned to the audience. “Someone bring me a USB cable from the closet.”

Andrey shared the laughter. “Shucks. I was hoping to try out this new device on you.” He leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, “Are you familiar with the USB cables with built-in Wi-Fi and web servers?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cable. “They look just like this.”

Sasha took the cable and studied it. “It looks normal.”

Andrey laughed. “It is.” He dropped to a whisper. “If this really was a Hak5 cable, you couldn’t tell the difference.” He shrugged. “I couldn’t either.”

Sasha shuddered. “How many people are being surveilled with these things and have no clue?”

Andrey smirked. “More today than yesterday, and more tomorrow than today.”

Esin let Andrey help her into the Uber. As they took off, she asked, “Did you accomplish your mission?”

Andrey smiled in affirmation. “You?”

Esin nodded, which set off her nausea again. “Both missions.” She held her head.

Andrey raised an eyebrow. “Both? What besides switching the cables?”

Esin weakly told him about the gangsters in the street. She forced some strength and cheer into her next words. “I’m trying to fulfill my role as a honeypot.”

Andrey looked puzzled, then understood. “Ah. Drawing in thugs to,” he gulped, “eliminate them.”

Esin’s nausea worsened, and she tapped the driver on the shoulder. “Would you pull over, please?”

The car came to a stop.

Esin opened the door. “Thank you.” She leaned out.

Andrey watched in alarm. “Are you okay?”

Esin shook her head, and the motion pushed her over the edge. She vomited onto the curb. “Now I’m fine.”

Laurie went to the door of Morte Noir’s mansion to greet the returning Rage saboteurs and found Andrey half-carrying a bruised and battered Esin. She gasped. “What happened?”

Morte Noir’s voice rose from behind her, holding humor and concern. “Esin! Did you let the hackers use you as a punching bag?” She and Laurie rushed to relieve Andrey of his burden.

Andrey told them about Esin’s diagnosis. “We think she has a concussion.”

Esin freed an arm from Laurie’s grasp to touch the side of her head. “Hit here.”

Laurie gingerly touched the indicated spot, which felt soft and spongy. “Definitely.”

Morte Noir pulled out her phone and snapped the flashlight app on. She then inspected Esin's eyes. "Looks okay from here. Probably." She sighed. "I'll get you an appointment for an MRI. In the meantime, the prescription is rest. Let's get you to bed." She paused as a better idea came to her. "Wait. Let's get you into a lounge in the garden."

Laurie brought out lemonade, Dave brought cookies, and Andrey and Morte Noir pestered Esin with questions about the fight and the state of her concussion.

Laurie cleared her throat. "Step away from the patient, people. Morte Noir, you're the one who said she needed rest, so let her rest."

Laurie settled into a lounge while carefully looking away from the low mounds among the flowers where Dave had planted the "fertilizer." She focused on the red, orange, and pink roses, all of which blossomed with vibrant good health.

No question. The plants loved the fertilizer.

She took a deep breath. Living and working with the Dark Mistress was screwing with her head.

Before Morte Noir had kidnapped her, she would have been appalled. Now, she couldn't fight with the notion that taking out a team of gangsters busy using a drill on their victim was an act of goodness. The covert world in which she now operated was too dark to see it any other way.

She still had a quiver of concern about Esin's intentionally calling thugs to her for elimination, but she hadn't the heart to complain.

The aspect that bothered her was that Remy and Cassie had agreed to introduce Esin to the Memwriter on the condition that she use her new skills and knowledge only for good.

Was her honeypot operation really on the side of the angels?

The angels periodically offered up ethical conundrums as well. In some tales, the Archangel Michael had smote one

hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrians in a single night's quest for justice.

Esin had a long way to go to catch up with Michael.

Laurie wondered what situational context would force her to justify an even more outrageous corruption next?

Her phone rang. It was an unknown number, so she answered cautiously.

The voice on the far end caused her to bolt upright. "Remy!"

Everyone sat bolt upright, including Esin with her concussion, which was a problem, but Laurie could not deal with that now. She reluctantly put the phone on speaker. "Remy, how badly hurt are you?"

Remy sounded healthy but anguished. "I'm good, Mom. That's not why I'm calling. It's about Dad. And the Doc." Her voice thickened. "And a cure."

As Remy explained the Doc's offer, Laurie knew she faced the next step in the evolution—and the devolution—of her moral code.

Would she betray the world to cure her husband? Or do something even worse?

LIGHT YEARS FROM MORALITY

Cassie glared at Leo as she contemplated throwing him out the hatch without further ado.

Remy saw the murder in her eyes. “Please, Cassie! Just hold on for a couple of minutes. Eliminating him is easy.”

The Doc coughed. “But a bad idea.”

Remy continued as if he had not spoken. “After we throw him into the ocean, we can’t change our minds. Let’s be certain we’re doing the right thing.”

The Doc gurgled in assent.

Cassie muffled a scream and kicked him in the head hard enough to shut him up. She rolled him on his stomach so she could watch his hands and make sure he didn’t free himself during the upcoming debate.

Remy rifled his pockets. “Ah.” She pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

Cassie spoke in outraged bewilderment. “Who the hell are you calling? We don’t need a consultation right now.”

Remy spoke with quiet confidence. “A consultation is exactly what we need.” Cassie heard the phone ring, and Remy turned up the speaker. “Mom?”

Cassie jerked as if she had been hit by her taser-baton. “No!”

Remy didn’t pay any more attention to her than she had paid to the Doc. She explained the AID director’s claim to be

able to fix Dad. “What do you think?”

A long pause indicated that Remy’s mother was thinking hard about it. Then she sighed. “Is he there? Is he listening?”

Cassie nudged him in the side. “Are you here? Are you listening?”

Leo tried to roll over to face the microphone, but Cassie kept him pinned. He twisted his neck as far as he could. “Hello, Doctor Tambook. I’m here. You should call me Leo, by the way.”

Laurie spoke coldly. “How do you think you can help Gerald?”

Leo shook his head. “Tsk, tsk, Doctor. We make a deal first. Then we talk.”

Cassie couldn’t stand it anymore. She spoke forcefully. “This is a bad idea. The Doc has killed more people than I can count, and that’s just his personal score with the people from Camp No. Who knows how many he’s killed with his manipulation of governments.”

The Doc snorted. “Not as many as you might think. Our purpose is not to turn the world into chaos. Our goal is to save it. Reliable government is part of that. I helped install the latest government in Mauritius, and it’s now the best-run country in Africa. Look it up.”

Cassie countered with knife-edged words. “What about what you’re doing to my country?”

The Doc wriggled in what might have been a shrug. “Your country is a mess. Intolerant rage everywhere you look. We’re just speeding up the inevitable breakdown so we can rebuild it sooner rather than later and bring your people out of the deathly cycles of uncontrolled history.”

He paused. “Besides, we’re making a very big omelet. We need to break a lot of eggs.”

Before Cassie could scream in outrage, Andrey interrupted from Laurie’s side of the conversation. “It’s true. Mauritius is the best-run country on the continent.” He added dryly, “Of

course, there is no evidence that the Doc had anything to do with it.” He muttered, “I might be able to find out, but it’ll take time.”

Cassie exhaled hard. “He’s probably telling the truth. His people, the Elder Guides, are *not* agents of chaos. Just perpetrators of horrific experiments.”

Leo chuckled. “You’ve never done anything bad in the pursuit of a greater good? Like breaking out a prison wing full of criminals, for example?”

The Doc was a tiresome individual. He reinforced how tiresome he was by speaking again. “Consider the life of Gerald Tambook. Working with you, Doctor Laurie Tambook, he built the Memwriter, a transformational tool that will make every human being an expert in things they never could have learned about before. It will power up every member of humanity and propel us ever faster on the quest to build a better world.”

He cleared his throat, and a drop of blood dribbled on the deck. “The acceleration in our development of just the field of medical technology will save millions, perhaps billions, of lives. You must not discount the good he can do if he’s restored to his former genius. What other projects do you two have in the works that could make people stronger and the world better? What losses are we incurring even as we talk about it?”

Cassie reeled as she listened to the bastard talk his way out of immediate execution. She stated the obvious. “Remy, you know what he’s doing, right? You want to save your father because you love him, so Leo is trying to rationalize a justification for you to do what you want to do anyway.” She delivered her next words with all her fury. “*Are you going to fall for it?*”

Another wracking cough made Leo thrash on the floor.

Remy looked at him in concern. “Are you okay?”

Cassie half-screamed, “He’s going into the drink! Who cares if he’s okay?”

Leo reported calmly, “I might have internal bleeding, but as Cassie pointed out, it’s unimportant. To the other point, of *course* I’m trying to give Remy and Doctor Tambook a rational justification. Where I grew up, emotional bonds were frowned upon. This decision would be based on a rational evaluation of the pros and cons.”

He struggled to breathe. “None of which changes the right decision, however. If you follow your heart to protect your father and your husband, your heart will be doing the right thing because it is aligned with what your head knows is correct.”

Remy was in pain. “When I danced with Dallas Ferris at the Auction, he told me the Doc was my best chance of curing Dad.”

Cassie couldn’t even use her clenched fists on the bastard lying helpless by the hatch. Tied and bound, he remained unstoppable. She knew the outcome before Laurie announced it.

Eventually, Remy’s mother broke the silence. “What do you want in return for helping me cure Gerald?”

Leo chuckled. “Obviously, I want your word that I will come to no further harm during the process we are about to undertake and my freedom after we’re done.”

Cassie saw a glimmer of hope. “So you finish, we dump you outside Rivendell, and all bets are off.”

More coughing accompanied Leo’s reply. “Get me to my jet, and give me a hundred-mile head start before you attack me. Then all bets are off. I’ll try to take you, you’ll try to take me, and the Wheel of Life will spin once more.”

Cassie started to object, but Morte Noir interrupted, “It’s a good deal. Take it.” She added dryly, “I will act as contract administrator. Judge, jury, and executioner.”

Cassie thought that was a reasonable silver lining.

Laurie cleared her throat. “Cassie is right.” That made Cassie feel a moment’s joy before she continued, “But so is Leo.”

Her voice held her frustrated anger. “I agree to your terms unless you fail. Then I turn you over to Morte Noir.” She purred, “For breach of contract.”

Her voice changed again, demanding more. “How do you propose to fix him?”

Leo paused before answering. “Some of it we will have to figure out together. I don’t entirely understand how he did this to himself.”

Laurie reluctantly accepted that. “Legitimate, but what’s the basic approach?”

Leo spluttered, “PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

Cassie saw that as a dodge. “Get to the point.”

Leo rolled enough to glare at her. “I *am* getting to the point.” He rolled back. “One way of thinking about PTSD is that the sufferer has certain memories that are too bright and are wired to loop through the mind again and again. In short, those bright memories are—”

Remy saw it and finished his sentence. “They’re like memwritten memories. The lines of memory cut across your other thoughts, drowning them out.”

Laurie pushed forward. “Fine. Like PTSD. What do you plan to do with that analogy?”

Leo laughed painfully. “I submit it’s more than analogy. The neural machinery is quite similar, perhaps identical.” His voice was soft. “And there are drugs for dealing with PTSD.”

Cassie could almost hear Laurie thinking. Finally, Remy’s mother spoke with a spark of hope. “Prazosin, for helping victims with nightmares.”

Leo nodded. “Since the Memwriter also produces dreams and nightmares, that seems like one of the most promising choices. I would like to try it in conjunction with Zoloft, which more generally mitigates PTSD symptoms.”

Laurie hotly responded, “That is not a cure.”

Leo's body shook. "Of course not. We will use the medication to remove the brightness, and we will use the Memwriter to fix the contrast, comparing before and after shots of neural activity. Make no mistake. We still have considerable work to do. Believe me when I say you'll be better off with me by your side."

That ended the conversation, but Cassie couldn't help saying, "We're going to regret this."

Morte Noir laughed. "Of course we are. And then we'll fix it."

Cassie stiffly stepped down the stairs from the Jetoptera's door and stretched before Laurie accosted her. "Where's Remy?" Her tone turned dark as paranoid fears took hold. "Did he do something to her?"

Cassie winced as she twisted the wrong way. "The Doc didn't get a hit in on her when we took him down on the plane. I was his punching bag."

Laurie seemed torn between running to find her daughter and worrying about Cassie. "Are you okay? Can I get a medic for you?" She hopped up and down with the desire to move on.

Cassie waved her toward the plane. "I'll be fine. Go."

Laurie spun, but Leo was already taking his first precarious steps down the stairs with his hands behind his back and ankle bindings so short he could barely hobble.

Cassie watched as Laurie clenched her fist, ready to strike, but Remy's head popped out of the plane as she guided her prisoner to the ground. "Mom!" She waved, shaking Leo so hard that he almost fell the rest of the way.

Cassie watched like a hawk as Remy hugged her mother. If Leo's mental remodeling had worked, this vulnerable moment would give Remy an easy opportunity to murder her parent.

The hug seemed full of love, so Cassie breathed a sigh of relief.

Leo watched the reunion with frustrated bemusement.

Cassie couldn't help blurting, "She's a lot harder to mind-rape than you thought."

Leo glared at her. "You did something. What did you do?"

Laurie butted in. "We can't keep him tied up like this the whole time he's here."

Cassie listened to that with alarm. "He's been using the Memwriter to train himself, and his skills are similar to mine and Remy's. I don't know how we're going to contain him even with chains."

Leo rolled his eyes. "I promise I won't try to escape until Gerald Tambook is clearly on the road to recovery."

Cassie snorted. "As if we'd trust your word."

Remy cast doubtful eyes on both Cassie and Leo. "We probably *could* trust his word. Iterative prisoner's dilemma."

Cassie groaned. "Don't go talking about the game theoretic basis of societal cooperation."

Remy gave her a wan smile. "Why not? *He'd* talk game theory."

Leo nodded. "I would. Besides, I have a vested interest in helping the doctor recover. Healing him will give me crucial insights I need for my work."

Laurie added, "Besides, he's a long-term planner. After we heal Gerald, Leo here plans to take him back and put him to work for the Elders, along with me." She put her hands on her hips and glared at him, daring him to deny it.

Leo threw his head back and laughed. "I will so love working with you all when you finally realize I'm right."

Cassie felt horrified by the confidence in his voice.

Laurie turned to her. "Memwriting himself was not unexpected. I started planning for his arrival the day we

succeeded in...” She stopped when she realized she was about to give away useful information and pointed at the hospital wing of the fortress. “Anyway, he’s probably as good as his word.”

Before Cassie could object, Laurie continued with a wicked inflection in her voice. “So, trust but verify.”

Laurie and Leo shared a laugh, which grated on Cassie.

Laurie continued, “The floor of the hospital Gerald is on has been upgraded to be a prison ward. We’ve put locks and vidcams everywhere.”

Cassie shook her head. “It’s not enough.”

Laurie nodded. “I know you think his memwritten martial arts make him formidable, but that’s not his greatest weapon.”

Remy was staring at Leo, as she had for most of the trip—as if he were an undulating snake, and she was on the edge of being mesmerized. “His mind is. Twisted but extraordinary.”

Laurie acknowledged that with a jerk of her head. “Which is why I’m not going to tell you about any more of the precautions we’ve taken.” She looked at the main building and crooked her finger. “Except this one.”

Brett lumbered across the grass, and Laurie continued. “Brett or another AStormer like him will accompany Leo at all times. I’ve put Brett through Memwriter martial arts training as well. I’m sure Leo’s better, but Brett should be able to slow him down.”

Brett towered over the prisoner, then lifted him by the shoulders. “Mr. Leo. Welcome to Rivendell.”

Leo craned his neck up to look his keeper in the eye. “This is all unnecessary but understandable. Mr. Brett, I’m sure we’ll get along just fine.”

Formidable readiness flooded Brett’s eyes. “Oh, yes.”

After the male bonding moment, Laurie pointed at the main building. “Remy, please undo his bonds. We need to get to work.”

THE BROTHER

The Eldest sipped his coffee as he watched the Debra walk over to her note-taking nook. He briefly wondered what had happened to the slave who had accompanied her for a while since she had been good at her job as well as obedient.

He banished the thought from his mind. Either she had died or been reassigned. No big deal either way.

The Eldest turned to Franz with a frown. "I'm disappointed that you've left your projects dangling, unguided, to worry about Leo."

Franz frowned back. "He's one of our brightest minds. Rescuing him should be a top priority." He added, "If they haven't already killed him."

The Eldest held out his cell phone in a shaking hand. "Rest easy on that account. I received this from him." He showed Franz the text.

I was foolishly arrogant. Now prisoner of Cassie. Agreed to help cure Dr. Gerald Tambook. Achieving great insights in the process. Do not try to rescue me. This is the only message I'm allowed. Should return in three or four months.

Franz stared at it and broke into a bitter laugh. "I would question the veracity of the message, but only Leo would get this excited about research he's doing as a prisoner."

The Eldest took his phone back with a chuckle. “My thought exactly.”

Franz tensed. “They can still double-cross him after he gets the engineer on the mend. They all want him dead, and most of them would happily perform the execution.”

Meyer looked at him doubtfully. “Let’s be clear. With their lack of understanding and the unfortunate series of sorrows we’ve imposed upon them, their perspective is understandable.”

Franz sat back in his chair. “I hear a ‘but’ coming.”

The Eldest tried to chuckle, but it came out as a gurgle through the phlegm. He coughed it up. “By all accounts, these are people who keep their word.”

Franz opened his mouth to object, but the Eldest raised a hand. “And remember, even if they break their oath, they’re facing our Leo. When has he ever been outmaneuvered?”

Franz turned grim. “Just now, when they took him.”

The Eldest cast his head down. “Fair enough, but insufficient to disregard his wishes.”

Franz sighed in resignation. “Where did they take him?”

The Eldest considered not answering the question. It would give Franz the information he needed to go against both Leo’s wishes and his own.

However, it would be easy for Franz to figure it out without help, so he answered. “We presume they took him to Rivendell.” He scratched at the papers on the coffee table. “Debra, do you have the satellite photo?”

The Debra silently retrieved the missing image from Meyer’s desk and handed it to Franz.

The Eldest touched the edge of the photo. “We got this from the NSA.”

Franz studied the picture. “It’s clearly Rivendell,” he muttered and pursed his lips. “And that’s one of our Jetopteras in the clearing.” He knew the plane belonged to the Elder

Guides since only the Elder Guides had them. The rest of the world thought the craft was still in the prototype stage, an understandable error since even the company creating the plane didn't know the Guides had stolen the plans and completed the work, free of the regulatory restrictions with which the FAA sabotaged projects.

The Eldest highlighted additional evidence. "Also, Leo says he's working on Gerald Tambook." He pointed at the east wing of the main Rivendell building. "Tambook's in this hospital, which was originally built specifically for him, though they've since expanded."

The frown on Franz's face deepened. "We still need to verify that he's okay."

Meyer issued a warning. "Don't go there. I refuse to let you risk yourself. There are only two of you, and the Elder Guides can't afford to lose you both."

That was the problem the Elder Guides had fought for centuries—the irrational emotional attachments of family members.

Technically, Franz and Leo were not family, but they had grown up together. The Elders knew how tightly the two had bonded.

Had Meyer followed standard Elder protocol when he sent them Outside, the boys' relationship would have been much different. With one in Russia and one in America, he would have made their competition a death match. Only one could win, and the Elders would require the winner to execute the loser.

However, Meyer had broken with tradition. He hadn't known why at the time, but he had used the rationale that both unique individuals had too much value to eliminate.

He now knew he had lied to himself. His real reason had been familial. Just as Franz and Leo viewed each other as brothers, he viewed them as sons.

Franz interrupted his musings with a grin. "Don't worry about me. Leo says he was taken because he got arrogant. I

won't be.”

A deep furrow creased Evgeni's brow as he unlocked the door to his office. He was brooding when he should have been celebrating. Around the world, his enemies had retreated, leaving him alone to do whatever he wanted in key battles.

It was too good to be true. Something was going on, and he was out of the loop. The situation gnawed at him the way the mysterious value of Remy for AID and Dread Nought and Morte Noir had ground on him. They had kept him from knowing the real scoop about Remy and Cassie for much too long.

His fears had been growing for weeks now. This time, the stakes in the conflict about which he knew nothing seemed bigger, if only because the Doc had dropped out of contact, along with everyone else.

If he called Morte Noir, could he make a deal to get read in?

He pushed the door aside and stepped in. He immediately noticed a curtain fluttering in his open window and caught his breath. He always left the window closed.

He focused on his breathing to enhance his calm. His office lay near the top of the Kremlin, so what threat could an open window represent? It was absurd to think that someone would break in. Presumably, the maid service had left it like this. Yes, of course.

He turned to his desk, and his earlier unease erupted into a blaring fire alarm.

A dark-skinned teenage girl in a sky-blue jumpsuit sat in a visitor's chair, paging through an old leather-bound book. He should have focused on the girl, but the book drew his gaze. He did not recognize it. It had not come from his shelves.

The teen looked up with a gleaming smile. “You have a wonderful library! I can see why Cassie and my Mistress

agreed you should have this.”

She hopped up to offer him the tome.

Evgeni took it without thinking, and touching the rich leather calmed him.

He examined the cover and read the gold-embossed words thereon, then muttered, “My German is barely passable at best.”

The girl looked sad. “Not surprising since you don’t have access to a Memwriter.”

For the first time, Evgeni noticed an odd lilt in the girl’s Russian. A hint of an Arabic accent?

Only then did he absorb her words. This teenager had used a Memwriter! A dozen questions fought to be asked first.

The girl interrupted his internal battle. “The title is *Log Book of the Elder Guides*.” She tilted her head. “Morte Noir urges you to read it.”

She leaned in and whispered, “You should be very careful about who you trust to translate it for you, however.”

Evgeni stared at her. “Why?” He rifled the pages. “What does a decades-old book have to do with anything today?”

The girl’s eyes flashed with amusement. “If I told you, you would be unwise to believe me. Why would you trust me?”

Evgeni blinked, then laughed at the girl’s analysis. “I promise I’ll take a look at it.”

The teenager wrinkled her nose. “I guess that’s good enough.” She strode to the window and pulled a snowboard-like contraption from behind a chair. Presumably, she had placed it there earlier.

As she strapped her feet down on the machine, she looked up. “Almost forgot. My Mistress warned me that you wouldn’t believe anything you didn’t pay for, so she’ll send the bill to Grisha tomorrow.” Her voice was serious for the first time. “You’ll want to pay.”

Evgeni gave her a noncommittal smile.

She sighed. “I guess that will have to do as well.” She flung herself head-first out the window, and a sound like a jet firing rolled through his office.

Startled, Evgeni ran to look for her, expecting to see her splattered on the ground below.

The earth held no broken bodies, however. It took him a moment to spot her skateboarding across the sky, weaving her way into the distance with a joy that made Evgeni catch his breath again.

He realized he should have been more afraid of this messenger than he had been. If she worked for Morte Noir, she could undoubtedly have killed him without a single blink of those innocent eyes.

He turned back to the book with its beautiful old binding. He definitely had a place for it on his shelves.

He opened it to the first page. Though his German lacked a great deal, he was able to stumble through several paragraphs well enough to grasp the gist.

Whoa. He *would* pay Morte Noir’s bill when it arrived.

Franz hitched up his heavily laden backpack and pulled the hip belt tighter. More weight shifted from his shoulders to his hips, and he heaved a sigh of relief.

Mosquitoes twisted and turned in the air inches from his tender flesh, trying to penetrate the invisible barrier constructed by generously swabbing DEET on his exposed parts. As he futilely swatted at the bugs, he contemplated the madness of his plan.

Rivendell was a very hard target. Gamma had tried a frontal assault and been literally cremated when disguised incendiary bombs went off amid the troops.

An effort to sneak in an asset pretending to be an EStormer had gone even worse, which had forced Franz to reveal

priceless truths to the Gamma leadership when the asset embraced the EStorme cult.

Since the fortress was filled with fanatics who recognized each other on sight, he couldn't infiltrate as a guard or a soldier.

So he stood on a dirt road in the middle of the jungle and pulled out a gun, preparing to shoot himself.

There had to be a better tactical solution, but what?

Franz scanned the nearby shrubbery and selected where he would toss the gun after using it.

He checked the time. The truck should be here any minute. He wrestled the controller for his drone from the pocket attached to his shoulder pad to confirm the truck's punctuality.

It would come over the ridgeline in a few moments. He pointed the gun at himself and fired.

Step One in Franz's plan more or less went as he had hoped. The truck filled with patients for the Rivendell hospital stopped before running him down—an excellent beginning.

The supervising medic climbed out and examined him. "He's been shot from close range." He grunted. "Lost some blood. Unconscious, not sure why."

A soldier hopped down and scrutinized the forest. "No sign of the shooter."

The driver called, "What should we do with him? Put him in with the others?"

The medic shrugged. "It's not a life-threatening wound. Normally, we only bring patients with complications, but I can't think of anything else to do."

He pointed at the soldier. "Stand guard while Jose and I get him into the back."

The driver assisted the medic in stripping off his pack, then loaded him into the truck.

Franz groaned as if he were coming around, then spoke the fluent Spanish he'd memwritten over the course of the previous few days. "What happened?"

The medic leaned over him. "You've been shot. Relax. I'm about to give you something for the pain. Then we're taking you to the best hospital in Orinoco. At Rivendell."

Step Two in Franz's plan went without a hitch. A receptionist cast dubious eyes on him. "He's not on the list."

The medic waved his hands helplessly. "We found him in the jungle. Should we have left him there?"

The receptionist frowned. "Let me find a free bed."

Moments later, they took him on a gurney to a room that contained another man whose labored breathing would have kept Franz up all night had he been planning to sleep.

Franz had a little trouble with Step Three. After the surgery to repair the bullet hole, they hooked him up to pain medication. He'd refused, and the doctors had responded agreeably.

However, when he pulled the tubes off his arms and twisted to get out of the bed, he almost screamed from the pain.

He had not anticipated hurting this much from a little gunshot.

However, Leo had hit him hard enough in karate practice to bring tears to his eyes. This was only a little worse. He gritted his teeth, dragged on his clothes, and proceeded down the hall.

Step Four proved easier than anticipated. He took the stairs to the next floor. When he exited, he found two guards on the door to the wing of the building in front of him.

Since Rivendell did not ordinarily offer its medical services to criminals, the presence of guards told him he had come to the right place. Rivendell's only prisoner was Leo, his brother-in-arms.

Prisons are designed to keep people from getting out. Getting in was theoretically easier.

During Step Five, however, he encountered some modest obstacles.

One of the guards waved at him with the rifle. "You're not supposed to be here."

Franz put his hand on the doorframe, pretending to hold himself up. Unfortunately, the hole in his side caused him to use it to take some of his weight. "Brother, you aren't kidding about not being here. Where am I, anyway?"

The other guard safetied his weapon and approached him.

Franz chopped at his throat, leaped at the other guard, kicked his legs out from under him, and hammered the fellow's head on the tile floor.

An electric streak of agony spread from his abdomen, and Franz hit the floor next to the guard.

He had really screwed up by shooting himself so realistically. He lay on the cold tile to gather his determination. Warmth grew around the focal point of pain; he had pulled the stitches the surgeon had meticulously inserted. Blood leaked through his shirt.

Before he rose, he searched the guard for a key card. Not finding one, he used the butt of the guard's rifle to pound on the hinges to the door, which were on this side to prevent the prisoner from attacking them from the other side.

He loosened the cylinders enough to wriggle the door loose, and the ruined door squealed as he levered it aside.

Franz muttered, "I guess my arrival has been officially announced. Hope no one is listening." Taking a last breath, he stepped into the prison ward that held Leo.

Step Six involved finding Leo and beating a hasty retreat. The retreat would be easy. He'd seen a pair of Gobis parked outside when he'd entered, and he was confident that he could hotwire one.

He just had to find Leo. Franz stumbled down the hall, coming first upon the bedroom in which Gerald Tambook wrestled fitfully with sleep.

Next, he came to a darkened conference room with one person visible from the door, looking morose.

Step Six, accomplished!

Franz stuck his head through the door and shout-whispered, "Leo!"

Leo rolled his eyes and groaned. "I told you not to come."

Franz grimaced. "Come on!"

The lights came on. After skulking through the darkened halls, it felt like the brilliance of a thousand suns struck him at once.

He blinked away tears to see that Leo had companions.

A big man stood in the far corner, watching Leo with a steady, deadly gaze like a bodyguard. He seemed happy to be unnoticed.

Laurie Tambook, Remy Tambook, Cassie Parker, and Morte Noir sat at the far end of the table. They were examining him like a bug under a microscope.

Franz needed a new plan for Step Seven.

JUDGE, JURY, AND EXECUTIONER

Franz turned back to Leo, who waved him to a chair. “Sit down, Franz.” He looked at the others. “Franz, I think you’ve studied everyone here. Everyone, this is Franz.”

Franz sat as ordered and acknowledged each member of this odd coalition of scientists, assassins, and burglars by name.

Morte Noir spoke with cold authority. “It’s a mistake not to kill him now.”

Laurie rolled her eyes. “The problem is, it would also be a mistake to kill him now.”

Leo twitched his nose. “Also, we have a deal.”

Remy and Cassie exchanged looks, and Cassie spoke. “Everybody is right, unfortunately.”

Franz realized he was facing a trial, and he tried to assign each person a role. The way everyone looked at Laurie, she seemed to be the judge. Remy and Cassie acted like a jury. Leo was a witness for the defense.

Morte Noir was the executioner.

Franz considered the odds of making a jailbreak from the courtroom. Even with a bullet hole, he thought he could take Cassie. Leo could take Remy. If they moved fast enough, they could tackle Morte Noir together.

That left Laurie, whose martial skills might be negligible since she was just a scientist or formidable since she was the inventor of the Memwriter.

As he sized up the battlefield, Leo used his hand signals. *If you try to fight your way out of here, I swear I'll help them stop you.*

So much for his battle strategy. Franz had repeatedly been amused over the years when covert agencies engaged in crazy temporary alliances for mutually beneficial missions. Apparently, now the Guides were being roped into those kinds of deals. He wondered how he would explain this to the Eldest.

He had the dark suspicion that Elder Meyer would just laugh.

Franz thought about asking Leo if he had helped the others catch him but chose not to. He didn't want to know. Instead he folded his hands on the table. "I seem to have arrived at an awkward moment. Apparently, you have a deal with my friend here, and I am interrupting. How can I make up for my mistake?"

Leo signaled, *Let me handle this.*

Unfortunately, the pickpocket seemed very aware of small hand movements. Cassie spoke quietly. "Leo, your fingers are twitching uncontrollably. Do I need to get you a piano?"

Morte Noir continued to stare at Franz as she spoke to Leo. "Put your hands under the table, or I will cut them off."

Laurie rolled her eyes. "He's being very helpful."

Morte Noir remained unmoved. "He can be just as helpful with his hands stuffed and mounted on my wall. He doesn't need them for you."

Laurie covered her face, then separated her fingers to peer thoughtfully at Franz. "She has a point."

Leo slid his hands under the table.

Franz held up his hands. "Hey, I surrendered peacefully. Let's continue in that vein."

Remy observed in an upbeat voice, "Our new guest is very polite. Surely we can make some arrangement where everyone keeps their hands as well as their heads."

Franz blurted an offer he'd been contemplating since Remy and the Memwriter arrived on the scene. "Let me suggest one. I want you to think very seriously about an alternative future we can build together." He licked his lips. "You could all become Elder Guides."

Cassie's expression reflected her fury. "Kill him now."

Franz watched all the eyes in the room turn on him with rage and agreement. He temporized, "Don't answer just yet. Think about it."

Leo cleared his throat to bring everyone's attention back to him. "Folks, let me show Franz the progress we're making. I'm sure I can make him understand how important our research is." He glared at his fellow Guide. "Then he can leave, and we can get on with our work."

Morte Noir pinched her nose. "You know we will have the same problem with him that we have with Leo. If we don't kill them now, we'll have to kill them later since they will eventually try to kill us."

Remy shook her head. "As Leo pointed out, if we kill his BFF, he'll be too upset to help us anymore. This is a natural extension of the original deal."

Cassie nodded. "I'm fine with killing them later."

Franz sighed in relief. The jury had decided on a reprieve.

The meeting did not so much adjourn as move venues. As Franz followed Laurie down the hall, Morte Noir whispered in his ear, "We have a date in the future. Mark your calendar in black."

Primal recognition of his own mortality forced a frisson of fear down Franz's spine. How irritating.

Morte Noir sauntered away as everyone else crowded into the room that held Gerald Tambook.

Laurie kissed her husband on the cheek. “Wake up, honey.”

Gerald shifted and groaned.

Remy did the same thing as her mother, and Gerald’s eyes popped open. His voice croaked but held good humor. “Goodness. Party.”

Laurie gave him a tired smile. “We have guests.” She pointed at Franz. “This is a friend of Leo’s.”

Gerald stared at him with innocent eyes. “Welcome.”

Leo put a hand on Gerald’s shoulder and squeezed. “He still has trouble with sentences of more than two words, but he’s clearly coherent.”

Gerald picked up the pad of paper and pen next to his bed, flipped past a bunch of pages filled with equations, and began to write.

Laurie frowned. “Different parts of his brain have recovered at very different rates. His math skills came back with a vengeance.”

Remy and Cassie leaned over and started quietly talking with Gerald, distracting him from the math.

Leo nodded excitedly. “Franz, remember that I mentioned we might be able to use PTSD drugs in conjunction with the Memwriter?”

Franz couldn’t help smiling. “You were a dead bore on the subject.”

Leo waved it aside. “Undoubtedly. Anyway, this Doctor Tambook,” he nodded at Laurie, “came up with the idea of mixing in additional drugs that reopen the critical learning period from childhood.”

Franz gave him a puzzled look. “MDMA and ketamine? To what purpose?”

Laurie jumped in with some excitement of her own. “It allows us to up the rate at which we flood his mind with true memories. Like a firehose.”

Franz studied Leo. “You’re thrilled.”

Leo gave him a stern look. “We need to know how to repair people when...you know.”

Franz did know. *When we no longer need them as minions but it would be problematic to dispose of them.*

Laurie watched them with sufficient understanding of the unsaid words to swell with rage. “We *should* just kill you both now.”

Leo grinned. “But you won’t.”

Laurie ignored him. “So, Franz, this is what we’re doing. Are you going to try to interfere again? Should I just drop your body in the jungle?”

Franz raised his hands. “I’m good. Just leave me in a city with an airport, and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Laurie nodded. “Until next time, then, when we’ll make a better attempt at killing each other.”

Long after an AStormer had departed with Franz for Ciudad Bolivar, Cassie remained with Gerald, watching him doodle equations. She had no idea what he was writing or whether it was even coherent. That reminded her of another vexing problem she had recently faced.

The Elder Guide’s *Introduction to Advanced Sociological Mechanics* had crushed her respect for her intellect. She had memwritten the darn thing, just as she had memwritten the books on relativity and quantum mechanics Remy had fed her long ago.

However, memorizing the physics books had not given her mastery, and no other experience had made so clear to her the difference between knowing and understanding. Still, after many months, during which her subconscious brain had chewed on the data, she had experienced a “thump” as a

slowly expanding subconscious grasp of the principles had burst into a mind-bending conscious awareness.

She was still waiting for *Sociological Mechanics* to thump in her mind, but it might never do so. Hard though exotic physics were, sociology was harder. It made sense in a way because, ultimately, physics made sense. Human beings labored under no such requirement.

Inspiration struck, and she sped through the hallways to her room, grabbed the intro off her shelf, and sped back. Remy blocked her way. “You seem awfully excited about something.”

Cassie paused and blurted, “Your dad. Math.” She held up the sociology book and opened it to a random page. “Math. Really hard math.”

Remy gazed at her skeptically, but when Cassie ran down the hall again, she kept pace.

Cassie ran into the patient’s bedroom. “Doctor Tambook, I have something for you.”

Laurie looked up. “Yes?”

Cassie shook her head. Remy explained, “It’s for Dad.”

Cassie handed the book to Gerald. “Could you tell me what this says? I’m having trouble understanding it.”

Gerald took the leather-bound tome and sniffed it. “Beautiful. Craftmanship.” He opened the volume reverently.

He skipped the introduction, which was the only part Cassie had understood. Gerald still had trouble reading sentences, and these were written in German.

He reached the math. “Beautiful. Craftmanship.”

Cassie groaned. “He’s still talking about the cover.”

Laurie leaned over and watched his eyes as they slid across the equations. “Allow me to disagree with you.”

She stood up. “He’s saying the math is as wonderful as the physical embodiment.”

Gerald turned a page. “About what? About what?” He frowned as he brought the book up so close it seemed unlikely that he could focus. “People?”

Laurie brushed his hair back from his forehead. “Yes, darling. It’s about people.”

The breakthrough came so naturally that it took a moment for his audience to recognize it. “I can’t believe they can re-engineer an entire culture so easily. Are we really this vulnerable to manipulation?”

Laurie held her hand to her mouth. “Oh. My. God. He just used complete complex sentences.”

Morte Noir leaned against the door to Leo’s room. “You don’t have enough stuff to need this long to pack.”

Annoyed, Leo did not look up from his tablet as he answered. “I’m making sure I have all the data.” He pursed his lips. “I really need to see Dr. Tambook again and hear him speak. Don’t you understand? He could still relapse or suffer more subtle side effects. I should stay a few more days.”

Morte Noir entered the room and grabbed his duffel. “Not a chance. We’re going now.”

Leo took on a stubborn look, but Brett noticed it and rose. “You heard what she said.”

Leo threw his hands up. “Let’s go.”

They hustled him down to the first floor and out to the yard in which Leo’s Jetoptera resided when Cassie wasn’t taking it out for joy rides to make sure the battery stayed charged and the carburetors opened properly. That was a weak justification since the engines didn’t have carburetors.

On the way, they picked up a crowd.

Laurie stepped forward. She looked like she might throw up, but she grasped his hand. “Thank you.”

Leo shook her hand warmly. “It’s been a pleasure. I know you still think it’s unlikely, but I still believe we will work together again one day under more pleasant circumstances.”

Cassie arrived in time to overhear that and snorted. “Don’t hold your breath or expect us to join your cult.”

Leo frowned, but before he could respond, Remy interrupted. “We can also hope that Leo will realize the Elder Guides are evil.” She gave him a sincere smile. “Once you see that, you’ll always be welcome at Rivendell with the AStormers.”

Leo rolled his eyes, boarded his jet, and departed.

Andrey came out with a joystick console suitable for a video game.

Esin followed with an eager look on her face. “Mistress, you requested us?”

Morte Noir gave her a warm smile. “I certainly did. Andrey, give her the controls.”

Esin took the joystick. The small display showed a widescape view of the terrain north of Rivendell, and a white dot indicated Leo’s Jetoptera. She instinctively skewed the joystick and zoomed on the plane. “I know what you want me to do.” She frowned. “I’m so sorry.”

Light danced in Morte Noir’s eyes. “What do you think I want you to do?”

Esin tapped the side of the controller. “I know what this is. It’s similar to the one I used to shoot down a drone when you were testing the lasers.”

Andrey gave her a thumbs-up.

She swallowed hard. “This controls the full-sized megawatt laser for shooting down hypersonic cruise missiles.” Her shoulders slumped. “You want me to shoot Leo down.”

Morte Noir looked away to hide her smile. “Is that what I want you to do?”

Laurie strolled closer. “I wondered if you planned to kill Leo after we had my husband back on his feet.” She looked puzzled. “This is awfully direct for you. What are you really doing?”

Morte Noir shot her an evil look. “That’s what I get for letting you get to know me so well.” She pointed at Esin. “Why won’t you shoot?”

Esin pursed her lips. “It wouldn’t be right to break our promise.”

Morte Noir pointed at herself. “Why wouldn’t I shoot?”

Esin pondered that. Then her unhappiness at disappointing her Mistress lifted, and she looked like she could fly. “You are a contract negotiator and enforcer. No one would be able to trust you anymore if you violated one of your contracts.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Damned iterative prisoner’s dilemma. I hate it when we’re so easily controlled by math.”

TURNABOUT

Laurie held the walker for her husband as he stepped off the treadmill.

Gerald grabbed the handlebars with a grunt. “Not invalid,” he complained. “Should help, not leech.”

Laurie smiled. “You should stop beating yourself up. Everyone understands you need to take it slow.”

Cassie ambled in.

Gerald gave her a wide smile. “Cassie.”

She hugged him gently. “How’s the social mechanics coming?”

Laurie allowed the scientist within her to take notes. If the recent pattern prevailed, shifting topics to mathematics would allow Gerald to enter a more coherent state.

Gerald pointed at the book, which was sitting on a nearby chair. “It becomes more remarkable as I learn more about it.” He shook his head. “To think it’s all been done in private by a secret society.”

Laurie responded dryly, “In retrospect, it’s not *that* surprising. They’ve been working on it for over a century with no competition from the outside world since no one could figure out how to make a quick profit from it.”

Gerald’s eyes remained on the book. “It’s still remarkable.”

Cassie snorted. “It’s still gibberish to me. I needed to steal the introduction to the introduction if they have such a thing.” She looked away. “Then I might be able to use it.”

Laurie looked into Cassie’s eyes. “You have an idea.”

Cassie grinned. “Andrey has full access to Ruby Rage’s computers.” She looked at Gerald. “What if we used what you’ve learned to fool with their propaganda?”

Cassie led the couple to Andrey’s Vault, where he joined them.

As they sat down, Cassie nodded at the geek. “Please tell them what you told me.”

Andrey cleared his throat. “Up to this point, we’ve just eavesdropped on everything that passes through their machines, sifting the data for information about the Elder Guides. We can do more.”

Laurie peered at him suspiciously. “Like what?”

Andrey turned mischievous. “We can inject new posts, verifiably written by the Ruby. We can alter messages before they’re posted.”

Cassie explained her idea. “We can alter the posts to make them gentler and less angry.”

Laurie considered. “Less hyperbole, less absolutism in the certainty, and more qualifiers about alternative possibilities. Basically, things to talk the Ragers down from being high on hatred.”

Gerald frowned as he looked up and away, perhaps studying equations. “That’s the right general idea, but it’s more complicated than that.” He took a breath. “Subtlety.”

Cassie gasped as she had her next idea. She tapped her tablet and dropped it in front of Gerald. “How would you edit this Ruby post to make it calm the readers rather than enrage them?”

Gerald looked at words on the tablet, then at his equations, then back. He marked up the text, and the handful of words transformed the emotional feedback. Cassie felt the difference deep in her gut.

Laurie pursed her lips. “This is great, but won’t the Ruby Rage programmers in Marbella notice that the messages they’re submitting don’t match the messages they’re publishing?”

Andrey clapped in delight. “Not necessarily. I can configure the servers to feed the original messages back to the computers on the Marbella network and to all the login IDs that belong to the Rage engineers. They’ll have no clue that we’ve tampered with the messages.”

Laurie pressed, “Unless they read anonymously from a cell phone or a remote Wi-Fi network.”

Cassie waved that away. “Even then, the changes to the posts are, as Gerald says, subtle. They’d have to be suspicious.”

Andrey steeped his fingers. “My only concern is the subtlety. Will those small changes really be enough to make a difference?”

Everyone looked at Gerald, whose voice cracked as he undertook the complex process of laughing. “This will work much better than trying to shut down Ruby Rage. Think of it like a billiard ball on a pool table. Stopping it is hard, but it only takes a little nudge to redirect it to a different pocket at the far end.”

Laurie gave them free and easy laughter. “This project’s a go. Gerald, you’re working with Andrey.”

Andrey twitched his nose. “Give us a couple of weeks to do some experiments.” He grinned. “Then we’ll own them.”

Dale stood in a hall in the Congo’s Palais du Peuple, examining the cracked walls and table edges burned during an

assassination that had taken place here not long ago. Gamma had deleted a Judicial Council justice from the world to enable an authoritarian politician to remake the votes and declare himself President.

The new Congolese dictator had immediately implemented two policies. First, he had declared fealty to Russia, which had used a Ruby Rage assassin on his behalf. Second, he had started an investigation into Congo's governmental financing to identify every revenue stream he could redirect to his personal bank accounts.

The dictator had found many lucrative opportunities.

Dale flashed back to Joyce's explanation of the mission.

Joyce spoke like a cat staring at a bowl of cream, licking her chops. "I've been studying the world's most flagrant sources of corruption, looking for opportunities in line with our new corporate mission statement. It turns out that many of the most lucrative targets are in countries where Gamma and Ruby Rage have subverted the governments."

Dale smiled. "I presume you have a particular possibility in mind?"

Joyce nodded vigorously. "The guy Gamma put in charge of Congo a little while ago has already siphoned off almost a billion dollars for himself."

Dale whistled. "A fast worker."

Joyce grunted. "He's a record breaker. Never has so much been stolen from so many in so short a time by so few." She returned to the topic. "Anyway, he tossed his opponent in jail on a charge of homosexuality."

Dale snorted. "Unbelievable."

Joyce continued. "So I made a deal with the poor jailbird. If Dread Nought can get him into power, the current dictator's fortune belongs to us."

Dale let his doubts color his voice. "Is that legal?"

Joyce laughed. "I asked our lawyers. There's some argument, but I have a contract, and everyone agrees that

possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

Dale smiled, not pleasantly. “So, we will have to take possession early in the game.”

Due to the importance of the mission, Dale had brought a number of Extreme Risk agents to back him.

Dead Dave, who had drowned on a training mission but come back from it, called from the drop-off zone in front of the building. “Boy Scout, we have contact. Incoming.”

The palace doors gracefully rolled open, and the dictator, locally known as President Michel, stepped through, surrounded by sober Ruby Rage goons and eager flunkies.

Dale tipped his head at his partner Hurricane, an Extreme Risk agent whose first name was Katrina.

Hurricane swooshed the skirt of her formal gown, and Michel gave her a dazzling smile. Hurricane might not have Morte Noir’s gifts, but she was very good.

Michel returned his attention to a minion pressing him for an answer to what was undoubtedly a very important question.

The Wasp struck from behind, and two Ruby Ragers went down before they even realized they were under attack. Hurricane leaped into the middle of the fray but didn’t windstorm anyone despite her nickname. Rather, she fulfilled her assigned mission by grabbing the president and dragging him clear of the combat.

That left two Ragers and a passel of minions whose loyalty belonged to their paychecks. Dale took out one Rager, and Wasp took out the other. The minion who’d had the important question for the president realized his question was not so important and joined his fellows, who were fleeing in all directions.

Hurricane marched the president out to the black SUV in which Timmy was waiting, engine hot. When Dale reached the door, Timmy was already accelerating away.

Another SUV holding two more Dread Nought agents followed.

A third SUV followed the Dread Nought chase car. A shot rang out and echoed around the plaza. Dale could not tell which direction it had come from.

This third SUV, carrying Michel's soldiers, careened into the flagpole, toppling the new state emblem the president had insisted on adopting.

A delivery truck from Kinshasa Logistics rolled up, sporting an abstract purple and blue K with a truck silhouette inside as the logo.

Dale led his team to the truck and hopped into the front passenger seat.

He stared dumbfounded at the driver.

"You can close your mouth any time," Joyce announced as she put the vehicle in gear. "I told you I occasionally need to get out to learn about our new field operations."

She gave him a sly smile. "Besides, I want to be here for the party when we fulfill our first billion-dollar deal."

Dale leaned against the wall and watched the Wasp chain President Michel to a chair in the living room of the Airbnb Dread Nought was using as a safe house.

The Wasp offered a suggestion. "If we don't put a tarp under the chair, we'll get blood on the carpet."

Dale glared at him.

Joyce raised her eyebrows at the Boy Scout. "You know, if we use the same technique on Michel that the Doc tried to use on Remy, we could finish up here with no muss or fuss."

Dale continued to glare.

Joyce shrugged. "Just sayin'." With a twinkle in her eye, she pulled out her phone. "I guess we go with the Wasp's plan." She tapped a few keys. "Timmy will pick up a tarp on his way back from retrieving Jake." She continued to address

the Wasp as if Dale weren't there. "Forgive the Boy Scout for not thinking about the tarp. This is not really his thing."

She frowned thoughtfully. "Until Timmy gets here, we can't cut him, but I do have a hammer in my purse."

Dale rolled his eyes. Joyce was really getting into the part she was playing—a torturer.

As he contemplated her performance, Dale wasn't sure where the acting ended and reality began. She might make a very good torturer when all was said and done. How well did anyone ever know their compatriots?

Michel stared at them with eyes as big as the moon and grunted against the ball gag in his mouth.

The Wasp swiped a tissue across the President's forehead to clear the beads of sweat. "Don't worry. I'll let you speak before Joyce uses the hammer. All you have to do is answer her questions."

Joyce shook her head. "No hammering for me. I invited an expert in for this project."

Dale left his observer position and moved to the center of the room. He hadn't heard about this twist. Alarmed, he asked, "Which expert?"

A lyrical female voice with a Southern drawl answered from the kitchen. "Me, of course. Joyce cut a deal with Morte Noir."

Fenya came over to stand next to Dale. She wore skintight leather from neck to ankle, with pointed silver studs outlining her figure.

Dale stood speechless. He realized he didn't dare complain. It would weaken the power of everyone's performances for their guest.

Joyce put a forceful hand on his shoulder. "Let's talk in the other room." She reached into her purse. "But first." She pulled out a ball peen hammer.

Fenya put her hands on her cheeks in mock surprise. "For me? Joyce, you really know how to please a woman."

Dale opened his mouth to object, but Joyce frog-marched him into the kitchen.

Dale turned on Joyce and whispered fiercely, “Fenya? Are you crazy? She’s the real deal.”

Joyce gave him a smug smile, then whispered back just as fiercely, “Relax. You aren’t the only one who knows she’s the real deal. Michel knows that, too.”

She shrugged. “I probably didn’t have to bring her in. The president’s a dictator and a bully, which means he’s also a coward. I think he would have caved when I pulled out the hammer.” Her laughter held no humor. “Fenya’s just the icing on the cake.”

Fenya appeared in the doorway. “You should come listen. He can’t stop talking.”

Michel was on a roll. He spewed information about his bank accounts and shell corporations until his voice turned hoarse. The Wasp gave him a sip of water.

Joyce used her tablet to verify the information.

Fenya knelt next to him and put her baby blues nose distance from his chocolate-brown eyes. “You aren’t holding out, are you?”

Dale shivered at the gentle yet terrible warning in her voice.

Michel shuddered. “I have one other small account.”

Fenya cocked her head. “And the number is?”

Joyce verified that one as well and looked at Fenya and Dale. “That about wraps it up.”

Dale stepped forward. “Actually, I have some additional questions.”

The president, having brightened in the hope of being done, shrank again. “I don’t know anything important.”

Dale shrugged. “I want you to tell me every detail you’ve learned about every Ruby Rager who helped you become president.”

Michel opened his mouth, then closed it. “Mostly, they’re just bodyguards.” He looked around, and for the first time, his voice held an emotion other than terror. “Not very good ones at that.”

Joyce saw where Dale was going and leaned over to carefully step the president through the details of all the acquaintances he’d made via the Ragers.

The ex-president spoke rapid-fire. “Some man who showed up a couple days after the Judicial Council justice died in that fireball to make sure I understood the agreement. All the Ragers fawned over him like he was the right hand of God.” Michel shuddered. “When he smiled, I could imagine him sticking me on a spit for roasting.”

Joyce looked at Dale with a raised eyebrow. Fenya voiced the obvious. “Grisha.”

Michel continued. “A couple of days after he left, one other guy showed up. An older fellow who spoke softly. Really cold, though. Analytical. A doctor.” He grimaced. “I don’t understand why, but he was even scarier.”

Catching the scent, Joyce interjected, “What did he want?”

The president looked puzzled. “It was odd. All kinds of questions about puzzles, my parents, my childhood. Logic questions. It was like he was giving me a psych exam.”

Joyce looked at Dale. “The Doc? Leo?”

Dale thought about it and shook his head. “This was a Rager operation, not EStorme. It was the other doc Cassie told us about. Franz.”

Joyce’s eyes glowed. “Michel, how did he get here?”

The president swallowed another sip of water. “He came in a really fancy jet that could take off and land vertically. He landed at the helipad outside the palace.”

Joyce shouted, “Gotcha!” She went back to work on her tablet. “Let me get the Insta division to work on looking for his Jetoptera.”

The Wasp gave a little hop of happiness. “Oh, I know what Joyce’s handle should be in the field. She’s the Beagle, nosing out the bad guys and the money.”

Joyce frowned. “Whatever.” Her expression turned fierce. “But you should hold off until I find that sucker.”

GATE CRASHERS

Cassie reached Andrey's sanctuary before the other people Laurie had called in for a "Let's Destroy the Elder Guides Once and For All" conclave.

She dryly observed to Andrey, "We hold an awful lot of meetings here in your Vault. Do you think we should trick out another conference room with displays like yours so we can move out?"

Andrey shook his head. "I really like having the meetings here. I like having so many people around. So much bustle and energy." He looked away as memories haunted him. "It's much nicer than living alone in the basement of the Kremlin."

Cassie studied her feet, embarrassed. It was hard to remember the desperation of Andrey's plight before she and Remy had liberated him. She shrugged. "Into the Vault, then."

A few minutes later, they had a quorum. Joyce had flown in for the meeting and began her presentation by imparting crucial new data about the enemy. "The Elder Guides have a second major base, a backup headquarters if you will, in Krakow."

Morte Noir looked skeptical. "Poland? Why? It's far from everything."

Joyce took affront. "And close to everything as well. It could be for Franz what the Camp No base was for Leo."

Laurie objected. "It might be too far from centers of wealth and power for an HQ, but it's too close to civilization for a torture research lab like Camp No."

Joyce's eyes gleamed. "Ah, but that's where you're wrong. I think Krakow started as a human engineering research lab, then grew into a larger base."

She pulled up a picture covered in different-colored lines. A map legend identified each color: Level One, Level Two, et cetera, up to Level Nine.

Cassie had seen balls of yarn torn apart by cats that had more order. "Those are levels of what?"

Joyce brought up a picture of a cathedral with no windows, lit by a combination of crystal chandeliers and the eerie glow emerging from statues of religious figures. "These are the levels of the old Wieliczka Salt Mine. The mine has nine levels of galleries, chambers, and tunnels reaching over nine hundred feet into the ground. It has a hundred and fifty miles of tunnels to play in."

Tina whistled. "That would make a great maze for the kids."

Remy added, "The Minotaur's labyrinth was simple in comparison."

Cassie was perplexed. "Why would this make a good place for a torture research lab?"

Joyce gave her a cold look that also contained horror. "Because in a puzzle box like that, no one can hear you scream."

Laurie scratched her head. "The Elder Guides don't *own* it, though, right? I've heard of it. Open to the public. You can take a guided tour."

Joyce shifted from side to side, contemplating the complicated answer to the simple question. "You can take a guided tour of a small section of the mine. The rest is nominally closed. Go half a mile in any direction from the nicely lit and well-maintained tourist tunnels, and you're into territory that officially hasn't seen a human being since 2007. Huge swaths haven't hosted mining operations for decades."

She licked her lips. "It's a perfect place to maintain an impregnable underground bunker, lab, and headquarters, with

a major city and all the amenities within bicycling distance.”

Laurie tapped the conference table. “I suppose it’s possible. How did you decide this was the place?”

Joyce nodded. “Great question. I started with the list of cities Andrey gave me that are on the Elder’s one-time-pad-encrypting onion router. I then scoured each city for images of a Jetoptera from the days before Franz showed up in Congo to talk to Michel.”

She displayed an image of a Jetoptera in a parking lot mostly surrounded by trees. “My team found this picture on Facebook.”

Joyce switched to an overhead shot of the Jetoptera’s parking lot. “Then Andrey found this satellite photo for me.” She zoomed the photo out until the plane was too small for recognition and a major city filled much of the image.

She finished with relish. “Krakow.”

Cassie bit her lip. “This complicates things. Blowing up the Fulcrum isn’t enough to destroy the Elders. The survivors will simply move their central command operations to the salt mine and pick up where they left off.”

Tina pounded the table with her tiny fist. “I say let’s blow the Fulcrum to smithereens, then see what happens.”

Morte Noir shook her head. “I think the answer is obvious.”

After a long pause, Laurie prodded her. “What answer is obvious to you?”

The Mistress shrugged. “We have to hit them both at the same time.”

That brought a number of objections, not the least of which was the amount of resources it would take.

Tina raised her hands for attention. “Hold on there, partners. You keep on talking like the only people you have are the Dread Nought Extreme Risk agents and Morte Noir’s network of assassins.” She pointed at her chest. “We

AStormers want a piece of the action too. Give us the Gobis, and we will take ‘em out.”

Laurie objected to Tina’s objection. “*You* hold on. We’re talking about our fleet of stealth eVTOLs like it’s an air force, but it’s not. We can’t carry a single serious bomb or missile, and besides, bombs wouldn’t do any good. The Fulcrum is buried too deep in the ice. Even a nuke couldn’t take it out from the surface, so it would be a ground assault, with the tunnel Remy found acting as the pass at the Battle of Thermopylae for the Elders. The AStormers would get slaughtered.”

Andrey timidly held up his hand. “Uh, I have a solution to protect the AStormers. I think I know how to recruit an army willing to take the losses necessary to win.” He explained his plan.

Laurie frowned, but Morte Noir’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s such a satisfying alternative. Ironically elegant.” She turned sober. “I think we should add a diversionary assault to the operation that, if successful, could achieve the objective even if the main thrust fails.” She explained her plan, to nods of agreement.

Remy waved it all away. “If you all fail, don’t worry. I have a backup plan.”

They took a break while Cassie demanded details on Remy’s backup proposal. Remy pressed her lips firmly together, reminding Cassie of the early days of their partnership when Remy kept almost everything she knew secret. Steaming, Cassie pushed her back into the conference room.

Laurie called everyone to attention. “That leaves us needing a plan for the secondary Elder HQ in the salt mine. I’m open to suggestions.”

Joyce giggled. “I have a thought. We could go into the mine as part of a wedding.”

Morte Noir burst into laughter. “Beautiful.”

Cassie shook her head. “Wouldn’t we look suspicious, holding a wedding in a mine?”

Joyce blithely answered, “Not at all. Almost every weekend, there’s a wedding in one of the largest chambers.” She showed them a picture of a giant excavated cavern filled with tables and chairs facing an auditorium stage. “Hard to believe this is four hundred feet below the ground, isn’t it?”

She cleared her throat. “Anyway, like I said, a ceremony every weekend. People book months in advance.”

Dale chimed in from wherever he was, his first contribution to the discussion. “Looks like we’re crashing a wedding.”

Fortunately, Grisha’s boss had tricked out his office with comfortable chairs. He patiently waited for Evgeni to start the conversation, getting more worried every moment that passed. The boss kept his fingers steepled, forefingers touching his lips, for a very long time.

He’d never seen Evgeni look so uncertain.

Evgeni brought his hands down to form fists on his desktop. “We seem to have lost control of our Ruby Ragers.”

Grisha sat up like he’d been zapped by Remy’s cheerleader baton. “How could that happen?”

Evgeni shook his head in despairing uncertainty. “Since the Doc dropped off the grid, I’ve been searching for him.”

Grisha snorted. “Fat chance. We’ve tried before.”

Evgeni nodded. “I did track his imageboard engineering team to Marbella.”

Grisha gave him an appreciative smile. “Congratulations.”

Evgeni pursed his lips. “When small successes are cause for celebration, you’re in trouble.” He chuckled. “I asked

Sasha, the leader of the team, if he understood what was happening. He claimed everything was fine.”

His smile turned unpleasant. “He politely implied I was out of my mind.”

Grisha’s eyes widened. “Where did you bury his body?”

Evgeni waved that away. “My restraint bore important fruit. I showed him messages on my phone of various moments of questioning bordering on disobedience.” He continued in a tone of immense satisfaction. “He compared the messages I was getting with the versions of the same messages that came back to his team in Marbella. He practically screamed in pain. Went on about having to blow up all the servers and start over with new, uninfected hardware.”

Grisha put his hand over his eyes. “Sounds like Cassie did him in.”

Evgeni glanced at him in delight. “Wait for it. Sasha asked, ‘How could this happen?’ Then he screamed again. ‘Andrey!’ was almost his final word on the subject.”

Grisha gaped. “Andrey? *Our* Andrey? Quantum Key Andrey?” He answered his own question. “Of course, our Andrey. No one can make you scream as much as Andrey, not even Cassie.”

Evgeni steepled his fingers again. “So I surmise.”

Grisha picked up on Evgeni’s careful wording. “*Almost* the final word? What else did he say?”

Evgeni grimaced. “He said the interloper couldn’t have been Andrey since the attacker had hacked not just the servers but also all the posts—the rages, in Ruby parlance—and altered them with such subtle skill that the perpetrator must be using the same book on sociological engineering the Ruby team was using. A book they’d received from the Doc, a private tome that was never published.”

Grisha bit his lip thoughtfully. “It was probably still Andrey, working in conjunction with someone from the Doc’s world who also had access to the book.”

Evgeni spoke distantly. “Elder Guides.”

Grisha blinked. “What?”

Evgeni growled in frustration. “We’ll come back to that in a minute.” He leaned forward. “This is all of secondary importance now.”

Oh, no. What could have gone so wrong that the loss of the Ragers was secondary?

Evgeni continued, “The latest bit of insubordination is that the Ragers are getting together with the EStormers to attack an enemy of mutual interest.”

Grisha got dizzy. “What? We trained them to hate the EStormers.”

Evgeni looked out the window. “Precisely. Very strange.” He paused. “Indicative of how extraordinary the attacker’s skill makes him.”

Grisha refocused. “We need to do whatever it takes to call them back. I should be able to handle this. Max worships me.”

Evgeni raised an eyebrow. “Does he worship you as much as he worships the mission?”

Grisha was silent.

Evgeni shrugged. “Plus, I’m not sure calling them back is the right play. I have uncovered a set of truths that might make the Ragers’ behavior more understandable.”

He pulled out a leather-bound book with a sticky note on the cover and showed Grisha the words “Elder Guide Log.”

Evgeni interrupted his subordinate’s inspection. “It seems the Doc was playing us all along.”

Grisha snorted. “No surprise there. As we’ve discussed, the questions have always been, which of us was getting the most value from the other, who would finish first, and who would destroy whom?”

Evgeni proffered the book. Since he had trained Grisha to treat ancient tomes with respect, he took it carefully in his hands for examination.

Loose pages had been inserted seemingly at random through the first half. Grisha flipped to the first. “What is this?”

Evgeni watched him closely. “It explains the Doc. Who he is, where he comes from, and who his real friends are.” He growled. “It’s incredible. I wouldn’t believe it if it wasn’t for the clear authenticity of this log.”

Grisha cleared his throat and spoke with irritation. “It’s in German. Is this a Nazi thing?”

Evgeni chuckled. “Not exactly.” He pointed at the loose page Grisha fingered. “I’ve written down translations for the more astonishing passages. You should read them at some point.”

He stood abruptly and walked to the window, where his eyes wandered across the sky as if watching something fly there. Someone invisible to Grisha. “In the meantime, it looks to me like our enemies Cassie and Remy have formed an unholy alliance of Storm and Rage to attack the Doc’s home base.”

Grisha snapped the book shut and grinned. “So, you’ve decided to pull the plug on the Doc, and you’re going to let our enemies take him down.”

Evgeni allowed his bliss to show. “Why would we do it any other way?”

Max Balakin looked out the back of the army truck and ruefully reflected on the meaning of faith. That required a philosophical turn of mind for which he was not well equipped, but he nonetheless struggled forward.

Notably, he struggled with the realization that doubt could strengthen one’s faith.

Recently, there had been a period during which the rages published on the Ruby site had sounded hollow, insincere, or

even false. Then the Ruby apparently cleared some personal hurdle.

Or perhaps Max had cleared a personal hurdle. He thought it was more likely to be the Ruby's transformation since he had mentioned his doubts to two of his trusted lieutenants, and they had acknowledged developing the same misgivings.

Regardless, the period of doubt had been followed by a new enlightenment. Of course a surviving offshoot of Nazism that had survived the Great Patriotic War had formed the global network of baby-blood-drinkers he fought. Nazism remained alive and well, if quiet. Had Max not participated in the recent war to wipe the resurgent Nazis from Ukraine?

The Ruby's follow-up lesson had concerned the EStormers, the Ruby's bitter rivals. It turned out that they too fought against the global Satan worshippers. The Ruby and the Emerald had finally recognized each other as fellow travelers, at least for this mission. The EStormers violently rejected the necessity of the rise of the Russian Imperium, and they expected John Kennedy Junior to return from the dead rather than Josef Stalin, but against the pedophiles, Ruby and Emerald formed a united front.

The Ruby's final revelation had caused not enlightenment but joyful delight. Working with the Emerald, he had found the Satanists' secret headquarters. At last, the target of all Max's dreams had been revealed.

However, when the Ruby described the enemy base and its location, Max's elation turned to despair. He had no way of even getting there, much less of penetrating its formidable defenses. He was pondering the possibility of hijacking a nuclear warhead when the Ruby revealed that he had allied with the Emerald, who had extraordinary resources to commit to the attack.

The truck bounced to a halt, then proceeded through a gate and parked. When Max stepped off into the inner yard at Rivendell, he had never felt as proud of his community. None of them flinched or recoiled at being here in the place where

so many of their comrades had burned alive the last time they had come.

Someday, they would probably have to slaughter their new allies. Eventually, the Emerald's dedication to American imperialism would collide with Max's more worthy goal of a Russian empire, but that was far in the future. Today, they made a wonderful team.

Max and his fellows looked across the sward to behold a sea of Gobi VTOLs that were almost invisible because of the camo paint that made the belly of the plane as green as the grass, the centerline of the fuselage as white as the concrete in the fortress walls behind them, and the canopies as blue as the sky.

What a remarkable technology! How had EStorme gotten their hands on it?

A short woman with an enchanting smile and a Colt strapped to her side strolled up to shake his hand. "Max? Tina. I'm thrilled that we're going to work together to bring down the Satan worshippers." She pointed a thumb behind her. "My husband Brett is thrilled as well."

Max looked at Brett and swallowed hard. Her husband didn't look thrilled, but Max did his best to match Tina. "It's wonderful to be working together to defeat mankind's greatest enemies."

Brett's grin laid Max's worries to rest. "You can say that again, partner."

STORM AND RAGE

Max led the fleet of invisible aircraft across the threshold where Antarctica's rigid glacial ice touched the rolling liquid sea. "Not much farther," he announced in sober tones that nonetheless held a hint of glee.

Tina spoke harshly over the radio. "No more chatter. You're the ones who're at risk. Stay sharp."

Max didn't need the warning since he had clocked far more time in firefights than Tina, but he didn't mind. She had warned him that the Elder Guides had a number of technologies they'd never allowed to reach the public's awareness. Tina's source didn't know if the Elders had any secret weapons, but the possibility existed.

The source *had* reported SAM missile batteries hidden in ice caves that looked like Russian S-400 missile batteries equipped with both Nebo SVU VHF-band radars and Protivnik G L-band radars. In this configuration, they could detect even stealth aircraft from a hundred miles away.

Fortunately, the stealth-detection radars could not zoom in and target well enough to deliver a missile. The radars delivered early warning, but a stealthy target could fly within twenty miles before the system could acquire missile lock.

Max planned to take his fleet out of the targeting envelope well before that happened.

The Dark Mistress sipped her tea as the submarine captain sang out, “Dead Slow Ahead.”

He turned to her. “We can’t see a damn thing in the pitch-black out there. If we can’t flash the lights and we can’t ping the sonar, the only way we can find anything is by crashing into it. If we crash into a chunk of ice, it will hurt us much more than it will hurt the ice.”

Morte Noir frowned. “Yet the Elder Guides dock an antique WWII submarine down here. How do they do it?”

The captain, who had retired as a US Navy sub driver before joining Morte Noir’s covert ops organization, shook his head. “They probably blast the place with sonar or ask the dock operators to turn on a homing beacon.”

He paused. “With a leading-edge American sub, we could detect the distance to the ice with gravitometers. We could passively listen to the echoes of the ambient sounds of ice cracking. We could...” He swept his hand around the sub. “Beautiful as this sub is, Mistress, it was designed to operate close to the surface, using sunshine with the external vidcams or commercial sonar to see where it was going. It is not a ‘run silent, run deep’ warship.”

Morte Noir closed her eyes to calm herself and avoid venting her frustration. “So I’m aware. I really regret the lack of torpedo tubes.”

Morte Noir had bought the sub after AID had destroyed her home in Scotland. She had wanted a truly safe haven, mobile and invisible, from which to conduct her affairs.

As comfortable as it was, she preferred the convenience and spaciousness of Rivendell as long as the AStorme HQ wasn’t hit by hypersonic cruise missiles very often.

The Mistress sighed. “Think you can find the dock with one ping?”

The captain hemmed and hawed. “Probably.”

Morte Noir waved permission. One ping sounded.

Esin, who was taking lessons from the sonarman at the moment, clapped in delight. “There’s a hole to the southwest.”

The captain gave the orders, and the sub cruised a little faster until it hung beneath the hole. He pointed at the display hooked to the external vidcam pointing overhead. “There.”

Morte Noir could see the dock lights above them, still a considerable distance away.

The captain warned, “Keep a lookout, everyone. We have no idea what kinds of defenses they have protecting the entrance.”

For this assault, Tina had offered a squad of AStormers, and Morte Noir had taken them on board. Jean, the leader of the squad, pointed at the vidfeed. “Is that a net up there?”

The captain acted immediately to ensure he could still ask questions later. “All stop. Anyone else see it?”

Morte Noir peered at the display. She occasionally saw a flicker of a thin line in the dock’s light. After a moment of uncertainty, she came to a strategic conclusion. “It doesn’t make a difference. It’s time to send someone to investigate.”

Esin saluted. “Oh, goodie. Can I go?”

Eldest Meyer sat in his library, sipping the vile protein drink his doctor had prescribed. The drink was supposed to taste like chocolate, but Meyer could not get the image of cow manure out of his mind.

The Debra removed the cup from his lips, then replaced it. “More, please.”

Meyer closed his eyes. He wanted to thrust the cup to the side and throw its contents across the carpet, but his hands were shaking so badly that he worried he would miss.

Besides, if he spilled this cup, the Debra would just bring more.

Meyer turned his face away so he could speak without the Debra pushing the cup into his mouth. “Let’s do this in one giant gulp.”

She nodded. “As you wish.”

The Eldest turned to her, opened his mouth, and swallowed until nothing remained. “Aaack.”

A low alarm bell went off, followed by a general announcement. “Stealth aircraft fleet detected. Precise number undetermined. Battle stations. Missile batteries free. Brace for bombardment.”

Max watched his mapping system count down the distance to the Fulcrum’s entrance. He would bring the fleet down to the surface about fifty miles out.

The flaming trails of rocket exhausts surged across the dazzling white ice sheets.

Clearly, the stealth and the EMCON and the communications shutdown had been for naught. He shouted into the radio, “They found us! Hover height *now!*”

His pilot pointed the nose at the glacial surface. The others followed him.

Too many followed too late. Elder Guide missiles and Ruby Rage airplanes intersected, leaving only brief, blinding bursts of brilliance behind.

Max watched grimly as the survivors joined him at “hover height,” barely five feet above the frozen water.

As they hung there, Max snapped at the pilot. “What are you waiting for? Keep going.”

The pilot gulped and pushed the props to an angle that drove the plane forward at a creep while maintaining a few feet of clearance. A dune buggy on the ice could have kept up with them.

Max counted the surviving craft with fear and rage. He'd lost about half his people. He had enough to go on, but, dearest Stalin, so many losses!

He spoke once more. "Tina. Any bright ideas?"

Tina, who was leading the small flock of AStormer Gobis a mile behind Max's larger fleet of Ragers, watched the ground approach as Brett followed Max's lead and threw their ship into a hard descent.

When Max asked for bright ideas, she licked her lips and answered with stolid determination, "Sorry, Max. Low and slow, like we discussed in training, is the best answer I know."

Max growled, "They know we're coming and are prepping their defenses as we speak."

Tina shrugged. "We knew they would see us coming. We just didn't know they would be able to acquire us for missile targeting."

Brett joined in. "Buck up, Max. Just remember, when you see the whites of their eyes and they see you, dig in and wait for our snipers to take them out."

The man's eyes had an unholy glow. "The next casualties will be theirs."

As the airlock flooded with water, Morte Noir remembered how much she had hated diving off the coast of Denmark to cut a series of cables for a job. Christ, the water was cold, even wearing a dry suit.

Esin gave a muffled "Ooh" that expressed both excitement and discomfort as her first such experience began.

The lights above brightened until they could clearly see a loose steel mesh. Above the net, swells rolled gently across the

docking pool.

Morte Noir signaled for Esin to stop and help her examine the dock for defenses. They spent a minute scanning the area and saw only two guards, women with mutilated faces carrying M-4 assault rifles. No problem there if they could get through the net.

Morte Noir pointed at the control panel, which could presumably slide the mesh to the side for a docking sub. Esin nodded, which hopefully indicated that she understood the goal.

For Esin, the first goal was to get through the net. She'd brought the sub's oxygen-arc cutting setup and a paint scraper.

First, she attacked a link in the net with the paint scraper to clean the surface. Then she applied the cutter. An electric arc heated the steel enough to burn in the flow of pure oxygen, and the furious jet of gas blew away the rust as it formed.

Morte Noir watched for the guards to pace into line of sight of the brilliant glare of the cutting. When a guard approached, she tapped Esin on the head to stop operations.

It took a long, anxious time to cut an opening large enough for a person to wriggle through. Morte Noir went first.

The Dark Mistress had brought an H&K P11, an odd-looking pistol with a huge cylinder that was specifically designed for firing underwater. As a practical matter, after she broke the surface, she wouldn't need a gun that fired underwater. She would need a weapon that could fire after spending a lot of time drowning in the sea, so she'd also brought an old-fashioned AK-47.

As she broke the surface, she swept the two women with her assault rifle. They fell, never having had a chance.

Esin broke the surface next to her. "I'll pull back the net." She ran to the control panel.

Morte Noir sprinted to the dock's entrance to the main base, scanning the walls for security cameras and shooting them. "Hurry. Reinforcements could arrive at any moment."

For Eldest Meyer, who had been a colonel in the SS, the reports he received from the Fulcrum's command center brought back vibrant memories of war. Gunfire and artillery bursts and the screams of dying men supplanted his view of his comfy office and almost blocked out the sound of the Debra's melodic voice.

However, the Debra's words reached him eventually. "Are you *okay*?"

Meyer gripped the arms of his chair, blinked away the ancient history, and returned to the present.

His hookups in his library allowed him to listen in while the commander of the Fulcrum's forces in the control center heard the radarman report, "Missiles launched. Missiles engage." He paused. "Eighty percent hits."

Meyer sighed in relief. Franz had made a crucial contribution to the Fulcrum's defenses when he had stolen the plans for a next-generation S-400. It had a narrow-beam targeting system that could not only detect the general location of a stealthy enemy but could also penetrate the invisibility and deliver a firing solution.

As per Elder Guide SOP, Franz had also bribed the Russian project managers and testing teams to reject the new system, thus making the much-augmented missile system a monopoly belonging solely to the Guides. No one even knew about it Outside.

The commander asked the radar operator, "Where are the survivors?"

The man's voice was crisp despite the puzzling news. "They've disappeared. No targets remain."

The commander swore. "They're up to something." He paused, then deployed everyone to face a surface attack. "Unit Three, take the trenches around the topside exit shaft. Unit Four, man the weapons above the aircraft hangar."

Max bit his lip until it bled. They were moving very slowly, but the enemy's SAM systems could no longer target them since they were only five feet in the air.

His pilot pointed forward. "Contact."

Max saw men with assault rifles, grenade launchers, and rocket launchers scurrying to two separate areas. He spoke for his assembled forces and especially for Tina. "Two enemy formations, one by the roof of the aircraft hangar, one by the tunnel entrance." He hefted his assault rifle and turned to the pilot. "Don't land until they fire at us."

The pilot was watching the men and the terrain with unwavering focus. "We're so close. They should be shooting at us already."

Max chortled. "Our planes are glacier-white at this point. We might be visible to their next-generation radar, but their troops' eyeballs are another matter."

They continued to close.

THE TRUTH IN DELUSION

Meyer shivered as another alarm wailed, then subsided. Someone in the command center alerted the commander, "Someone breached the dock. The barricade net retracted, and our sentries are not responding."

The commander growled. "The topside attack was a diversion. Units One and Two, to the dock. Hurry!" He paused, then demanded, "What's happening topside?"

The radio operator shook his head. "Everyone's in position. No contact."

The commander sounded like he was going to pull out his hair. "They can't just disappear!"

The radioman spoke urgently. "Contact. They snuck up on us." He listened for a moment, then, "Close quarters, practically hand-to-hand."

The commander moaned. "I just sent my backups to the docks." He spoke with determination. "Unit One, proceed as directed. Unit Two, go to the hangar roof to reinforce that position."

Max got closer than he'd dared dream before he heard the first combat report from one of his pilots. "Taking fire."

Max had determined that the enemy troops at the tunnel were disappearing into trenches, only their heads and their

weapons popping up.

Tina reminded him of the plan. “Drop now, Max. Let us do our thing.”

Max shook his head. “They’re too well-fortified.” He shouted with excitement as he rallied his men. “Ragers to the tunnel. The enemy is hidden in trenches. Pilots, take us in. Full speed! Drop us among them!”

He heard Tina groan. “You idiots! You’re going to get yourselves killed!”

Max laughed. “You’ve never seen us hand to hand. We’ve got this.” His Gobi floated over a trench and he jumped through the hatch, shouting, “*For the Imperium!*”

Tina watched in despair as Max’s troop jumped into the trenches and disappeared from view. How were her snipers supposed to help him now?

They couldn’t help Max directly, but she could confound the enemy’s reinforcements.

The turmoil around the hangar had shifted focus from setting up the close-in anti-aircraft batteries and other pillbox defenses to the battle in the trenches by the tunnel. All weapons, from forty-millimeter autocannons to basic assault rifles, were trained on the remote firefight, triggering a burst of fire any time a Rager’s head popped up.

Tina’s fleet, as close as it was, was still invisible. She nodded. “They think the Ragers are the only attackers here.”

She spoke for Max in case he could hear her. “Don’t worry about the bastards at the hangar. We’re taking them out.”

She turned to Brett. “Honey, left flank. Let’s sneak up on those jackals and see how many we can eliminate before they figure out we’re here.”

As much as any of his troops, Max reveled in this moment of majestic chaos. He couldn't see much, but the triumphant shouts for the glory of Stalin and the Imperium told him the story. "We're winning!" he shouted into the headpiece, "On my signal, charge the tunnel!" He'd wait until Tina made some progress with the Guides at the hangar, then lead the charge that would take them into the heart of the enemy.

The dying man he had just defeated held a hand grenade up for his attention. The enemy soldier had pulled the pin long ago.

Max jumped away too late. The explosion blew him into the wall at the point where the trench made a right-angle turn.

When he regained consciousness, one of his lieutenants was hovering over him. The idiot shook him, which caused his body to scream in pain.

Except his right leg, which felt fine. He realized the leg was parked against a wall twenty feet away.

Max couldn't hear what his man was saying, but he knew what to order. "Charge!"

He could see his men's heads as they jumped out of the trenches around him and rushed the tunnel.

The lieutenant hesitated, unable to decide what to do. Max used his left arm, which hurt less, to push him away. "You too. Leave me."

Max turned philosophical. He'd already nearly died twice in the service of the Rage. It hadn't taken, so he figured he was likely to survive this time, too.

His next breath left him coughing up blood.

If he almost died enough times, eventually, he'd come up short.

The Eldest Guide listened as news of yet another threat poured into the control center. “Another assault team has approached the hangar from the other side of the tunnel.”

The commander groaned. “Are they engaged in close combat too?”

Whoever had made the first report answered, “Negative. These attackers have large numbers of snipers. Very effective. They’re taking out anyone who tries to bring our major weapons to bear.”

The commander listened in dismay. “Don’t commit the reinforcements until we figure something out.”

Meyer saw an opportunity to help. “Commander. Send up the rest of the slaves.”

The commander replied in frustration, “They don’t have weapons. We can give them guns, but they don’t have any training. They’d just die.”

Meyer nodded, though the commander could not see him. “Exactly. Use them as meat shields.”

The commander scoffed. “That would be a waste.” Then he remembered they could always manufacture more slaves.

Meyer pushed on. “Start with the slaves in the Arena and gather the rest. Get them up to the hangar as fast as they can run.”

The Debra looked at her leader with concern. “Should I go too?”

Meyer touched her hand. “No, Debra. You stay here with me.”

Tina muttered, “Something’s finally gone right.”

Brett answered before he took his next carefully aimed shot. “We have these bastards by the short hairs, don’t we?”

Tina’s snipers were moving toward the hangar in small units, with the rest of her team sniping anyone stupid enough to try to shoot back. The enemy had given up on targeting Max’s people five minutes ago, which was a lifetime in a firefight like this one.

Suddenly, huge numbers of people with mutilated faces flooded out of the hatches and charged Tina’s position. Enemy soldiers came up behind the slaves and, using them as cover, started hitting Tina’s people with great success.

Brett observed, “They’ll overrun us if we don’t change tactics.”

Tina realized this part of the operation had just come to an end. “Everyone, target the hangar roof motor assemblies. Blast them. Then get back to your airplanes, snipers in the rear covering those at the front as they retreat.”

Max’s lieutenant reached the tunnel. The first half-dozen men to arrive shot the hatch to pieces and charged through. A barrage of fire echoed up the stairwell, and three of the men who had gone in stumbled back out, wounded.

The one who could still talk coherently explained, “Reinforcements. No chance.”

The lieutenant knew what to do. Earlier in his career, he had trained for audacity and tenacity. No thought of retreat had entered his mind.

However, the leaders of Ruby Rage had modified the training. Now, when he faced a hopeless tactical position, he knew he should withdraw to fight another day. “Demolition team, satchel charges now.”

The men lugging the satchels hustled up. One by one, they threw the enormous packages of explosives down the stairs.

A series of explosions from deep beneath the ice sent rumbles up the stairs, and ice shards swirled out of the tunnel.

The lieutenant shouted for his earpiece, “Pilots! Pick us up!” He grabbed two of his men. “Except you. You’re coming with me to get Max.”

Morte Noir made it to the staircase that led up before a burst of machine gun fire forced her to dodge sideways and retreat.

Adjacent to the stairwell, a pair of large service elevators connected the dock to the rest of the complex. She was contemplating the merits of going into the elevator, cutting a hole in the roof, and shinnying up the cable when Jean arrived in full battle rattle. “Status?”

Morte Noir pointed at the bullet holes around the stairwell. “Elders on the next level.” She pointed at the elevators. “I’m thinking about—”

The staccato rhythm of multiple assault rifles unloading continuous fire echoed down the stairs, throwing up clouds of dust from the shattering tile floor.

Bells dinged, barely audible over the gunfire. Both sets of elevator doors opened simultaneously, and the slaves in the elevators fired.

The slaves did not take the AStormers unaware. They fired back. Most of the combatants on both sides fell in the ensuing bloodbath.

Two Elder Guide guards in military uniforms stood behind the slave meat they had used as shields. One threw a flashbang.

Jean had stepped in front of Morte Noir when the shooting began. She had protected the Mistress not only from the bullets but also from the blinding flash before falling heavily to the floor.

The Mistress stood deafened in the silence of the aftermath of the flashbang. However, she had been in situations like this before. Her ability to instantly comprehend a jumbled stew of bodies, guns, and shooters saved her.

Of the handful of people who had not been shot, only she and the two Elder soldiers were not blind. She unleashed her AK-47 as they whipped their guns around to point at her.

Morte Noir fired two three-round bursts. Then only she remained standing.

She looked down at her protégé. “Esin, you okay?”

Esin shook her head, not in denial, but in a futile attempt to hear what Morte Noir was saying.

Jean lay panting, bleeding from multiple bullet holes. Her survival was questionable.

Morte Noir heard Jean’s voice as if it were muffled by a thousand pillows. “Did we win?”

What an interesting question. Technically, the sub attack had just been a diversion, so they didn’t have to reach the main levels of the Fulcrum to succeed. However... Morte Noir answered with chilling good cheer. “We haven’t won yet, but we will in a few minutes.”

The Ruby Ragers’ and the AStormers’ planes landed on the ice within visual distance of the sea, with a glacial mountain range between them and the Elder Guides’ headquarters. The AStormers had better medics, and the Ragers had more badly wounded soldiers.

Tina knelt beside Max. Her medics had taken thirty seconds to examine him before shaking their heads and moving on to those they could save.

His breathing came out labored. “Did we win?”

Tina brushed her hand over his forehead. “Your men dropped the satchel charges straight down the tunnel. There

was a huge explosion.”

Max nodded. “I heard. Are the Satan worshippers all gone, then?”

Tina smiled and lied through her teeth. “The plan went as we’d hoped. We’re all going home now.”

Max inhaled. “That’s all I needed. Thank you.” He exhaled. A raspy cough faded in his throat. His features relaxed a last time.

Brett hugged her. “Well said, if a little exaggerated.”

Tina closed Max’s eyes. “You know, he spent his life thinking he was fighting the good fight against a network of blood drinkers. For years, it was just a delusion, but here at the end, delusion merged with reality. In his last battle, he got to combat the enemy he had yearned to face for such a long time.”

She brushed back a stray hair on Max’s forehead. “So few of us get to die in the act of accomplishing our life’s mission. Max, what a lucky man you were.”

Morte Noir placed a last charge in the elevator. “Let’s boogie.”

Esin fired one last burst up the stairwell. “Yes, Mistress.”

They darted back to the sub as fast as they could, given the slicks of blood through which they maneuvered.

The AStormers with the fewest wounds had dragged or carried the others back to the sub. Jean still breathed, but for how long, no one cared to guess.

Esin had spent her recent minutes in a somber state. This was the first action in which she had participated that had not been an out-and-out success. Nonetheless, she could not help but giggle as she slid down the sub’s ladder and dogged the hatch. “I think we might have planted enough C-4 to satisfy even Bryce back there.”

Morte Noir smiled. “You might be right.” She pressed the button on the detonator, and rumbling explosions followed the sub down the shaft from the disintegrating dock.

Worried, Esin asked, “How do you think our friends are doing in Poland?”

Morte Noir swallowed hard. They didn’t even know how their friends in the main topside assault here in Antarctica were doing, much less the ones in another hemisphere. In the end, she decided to strike an upbeat note. “Probably better than us.” Surely she was right. Wasn’t she?

‘TIL DEATH DO US PART

Descending into the ancient salt mine near Krakow felt like entering a cathedral carved from stone. For centuries, miners had carved out intricate corridors, holy chapels, and grand chambers from the solid rock salt.

One of the largest chambers provided refuge not only for Sunday wedding parties but also for revelers at the annual Wieliczka Salt Mine New Year’s Eve party.

That chamber, however, held few artistic flourishes aside from the chandeliers carved from salt crystals that danced like diamonds in the soft light.

St. Kinga’s Chapel, one level above the main auditorium, supplied an inspirational venue for the holiest of sacraments. Here, the most skilled craftsmen in the mining community had hewn sculptures of religious figures. These emerged seamlessly from the salt tiles on the floor.

The sculptures all contained receptacles in which the miners had once put lit candles, enabling the revered figures to glow with a holy internal light.

Today, the religious statues were lit by lithium-ion-powered LEDs.

Cassie barely touched the wall on which someone had carved the Last Supper. “They did all this by candlelight,” she whispered. “Were they crazy or inspired?”

Dale stood so close that she could feel his breath. “Is inspiration not a form of insanity?”

Remy stood farther away, holding hands with Casper, the Extreme Risk agent who'd gotten his call sign for popping up in the middle of a firefight and winning the day.

Remy hissed, "What makes *me* crazy is watching you play with the sculpture. No touching!"

Slip tutted. "Relax. Thousands of people touched these things before the Man decided to disallow it." She turned to Dale and Cassie. "Hey, Boy Scout, I think it's time for us to go to work."

Cassie looked around the room. The ceremony would start at any moment.

Dale nodded at the Slip. "Go time."

The Slip grabbed her partner Dice and wandered across the room to the exit.

Cassie muttered, "I wish she'd taken another partner. I understand Dice got his name by almost being killed on almost all his early missions. Seems like a bad omen."

Dale shrugged. "Slip said he's the best choice for this assignment. She knows better than me."

A Polish hymn played, and the minister announced, "Everyone, please take your places."

Leo led a small team of Elder Guides, elite warriors all, down a dark corridor from the Elders' command center to the public spaces in the salt mine.

Everyone wore night vision goggles and lit the path with low-power infrared flashlights. A random wedding guest who stumbled drunkenly into the pitch-black of the passage would not know they were there.

They came to the tourist portion of the mine, tossed their goggles into the inconspicuous box labeled *Maintenance Workers Only*, and shrugged off their coveralls.

The team looked festive in tuxedos and formal gowns.

Gearing up for the op in Krakow had begun when the tracker Leo had planted in Remy's aorta registered as being at the airport. Leo had cursed profusely since that suggested she'd found the Elders' secondary HQ.

After he'd gotten over the irritation, he'd been happy since she was coming to him for disposal.

When Remy's tracker entered the salt mine, Leo had sworn again. He had to kill her immediately lest she do something ridiculous like publish the base's location on social media.

Not that killing her would be easy, even here on his turf. The Elders' surveillance monitors picked up others, including Cassie Parker and Dale Strickland, heading for the cathedral. What were they up to?

He checked the schedule, and as usual, the church had a wedding scheduled. It had been booked well in advance by an American couple. Were Remy and company going to crash the ceremony? Did they think they could sneak into the Elders' base from there without detection? He grimaced as he considered the possibility that they would succeed. He still wasn't sure how Cassie boarded his jet at the Fulcrum. Very irksome.

He had little choice but to stop them at the wedding. Fortunately, the Elders had anticipated this kind of threat and the resulting intervention and developed the outline of a cover story long ago. Just fill in the blanks for the bystanders, and the Elders' secrets would remain intact.

Leo hoped the knowledge of the base would die with the Dread Nought agents here, though he doubted it. Eventually, he would probably have to buy out, burn down, and destroy the entire Dread Nought Corporation to repair this leak.

As Leo's team approached the cathedral, he slowed down. He pointed at a wire barely wider than a hair that ran across the floor, up the walls, and across the tunnel's ceiling. "I guess Remy and company didn't want the real wedding attendees to

know they were at risk of being infiltrated by people with guns. That is a camouflaged metal detector.”

Franz blew out a breath. “You called it. No guns. Ceramic blades only.”

The other members of the team mumbled in annoyance as they presented their firearms. Franz collected them all in a bag labeled *Dangerous Waste. Maintenance Workers Only*, then pointed down the passage to where they could hear the Beatles’ *All You Need is Love* playing.

Leo rolled his eyes. “Outside rituals are ridiculous.”

Franz gave him a knowing smile. “And yet, as you know far better than I, they play an important role in engineering societies.”

Leo grumbled as he led his team into the chamber.

Slip and Dice grabbed their packs from just outside the cathedral and trotted through the corridors to a tunnel with a chain across it and a sign that read *No Admittance*. Slip heaved a sigh of relief. “At last, we can change into work clothes.”

Dice offered mournfully, “But you’re so beautiful in that dress.”

Slip disregarded his words and, around the corner in a space where no humans ventured, switched clothes.

Moments later, they both wore coveralls the same shade of gray as the salt walls. Accents of darker gray and black twisted across the fabric in a reasonable imitation of the shadows created by the flickering light.

They trotted down through the corridors to the end of the lighted tunnels, and Slip yanked out her night vision goggles. “This is more my style, peering into the darkness for enemies who can’t see me.”

Dice turned up the infrared lamp attached to his goggles. “Ghostly green everything. Any idea which way to go?”

Slip had memorized the map of all nine levels and worked with everyone who had a clue about the Guides to guess where in the maze the Elders would build their headquarters. There was general agreement the Elders would build far from the tourists but close to exits. That left a lot of room for error, but she was game.

She pointed at a flight of stairs. “That way.”

Dice spoke casually. “What are our chances of actually finding these people?”

Slip heard a scuffle of feet and threw Dice down a side tunnel, then whispered, “One hundred percent since they’re coming to us.”

Dice nodded. “Infrared off.”

Slip flipped her light off as well, and they listened, barely breathing.

She recognized Leo’s voice. “Hurry. We want to tag all the Dread Nought people before the wedding ends and the reception begins.”

The Elders hustled past their side tunnel. In the light of the Elder’s infrared flashlights, Slip could make out the crush of enemy bodies.

Dice whispered, “That’s a shitload of bad guys.”

Slip went down the corridor Leo and his people had come up to the next tunnel intersection, then paused. The next steps involved wild guesses.

Dice muttered, “It sure would be nice if those guys had left a trail of breadcrumbs.”

Slip sighed. “In the original labyrinth, Theseus used a skein of thread.”

Dice grunted. “Whatever works.”

Slip stood chewing on the choices, considering flipping a coin.

Then Dice chuckled and spoke with quiet pleasure. “Those Elder guys aren’t superhuman after all.” He pointed down a

branch from the main corridor. “What do you think that is?”

Far down the tunnel, as it was about to curve, a tiny bright spot appeared on the wall.

It took Slip a moment to deduce the cause of the spot. She breathed a sigh of relief. “The Elders can’t get through these tunnels without help either. Think that’s an infrared reflector?”

They picked up speed as they rounded the bend by the marker and saw another marker down the passage.

They then reached an intersection where a brighter glow of infrared shone from around the corner.

Dice dubiously asked, “Entrance?”

Slipped grinned into the darkness. “Let’s raise the curtains and enter stage left.”

Leo watched his people creep through the crowd as the minister spoke. The cathedral had no benches for this ceremony. The only person seated was a little old lady who had turned her walker into a chair. He swallowed a laugh as he watched someone lean over to speak to her, and she told them with a frosty wave of the hand to “Scat!”

The Elder agents slowed and stopped in pairs as they identified Dread Nought operatives. When the word was given, each Elder couple would ambush a Dread Nought pair, leaving them dead before they even realized they were under attack.

A handful of Leo’s people wound up along the edges of the hall with no targets. Franz sidled up to him and whispered, “You’re allowed to be smug for bringing more hitters than any of us thought reasonable. Dread Nought infiltrated this wedding with a formidable force.”

Leo grinned at him. “I saw you checking out the bride. No doubt it was to ensure she wasn’t a Dread Nought agent, even though she reserved the chapel months ago.”

Franz grinned back. “Hey, a guy can look, right? That’s the slinkiest wedding dress I’ve ever seen.”

Leo nodded. The bride’s skin-tight white gown was largely made up of slits and holes that provided an excessive view of the lady’s charms. “She can’t be an agent since she’s clearly unarmed.”

Franz spoke with appreciation. “Though she does have fine musculature. Very athletic.”

He grimaced as he changed the topic. “So, what’s their plan? Do they think they have enough people here for a direct assault?”

Leo frowned back. “On the one hand, that would lack subtlety. On the other, one of the leaders here is Dale Strickland. He’s a direct-approach guy.” He sighed. “On the third hand, Cassie’s here too. She’s anything but a direct-approach girl.”

Franz looked around. “Where is she, by the way? I’d like to talk to her before we kill her.”

Leo turned to look at the wall. “She’s at the far end with Remy, as far as I could get from them. If they look this way, they’ll recognize me, dammit!”

Franz blushed. “Me too. Oops.” Unfazed, he peered at the remote corner. “I think they’re watching the wedding.”

Leo relaxed. “I’ll need your help, actually. Track down Elder Elisabeth and send her over to distract Remy and Cassie while I speak to the bride.”

Franz chortled. “You’re going to tell the bride there’s a raid?”

Leo glared at him. “We can’t have the police in Krakow thinking there’s a violent gang hanging out down here. We have a cover story, and we have to use it to persuade all the bystanders here we’ve taken care of the problem, and they should not, under any circumstances, make a report.”

Franz nodded. “I get it. We can’t just kill all the witnesses.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “That would *definitely* blow our cover.”

Leo watched impatiently as the ceremony ended. He pulled on his too-tight collar.

“Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?”

“I do.”

“You may kiss the bride.”

The bride’s sultry growl echoed throughout the chamber. “Oh, honey, I’m going to do a lot more than that.”

She slid her veil aside far enough to kiss the groom so hard Leo thought she’d set the lights to flickering.

Franz applauded with real enthusiasm. “She is one helluva piece of work. I’m really looking forward to seeing her face under that veil.” He turned thoughtful. “Think we could kill the groom and persuade her to join the Elders?”

Leo pursed his lips. “You’ve got it out of order. We persuade her to join the Elders, then we let her kill her husband.”

Franz laughed into his hand. “You need to lighten up.”

Everyone retired to the banquet hall, where there were fewer sculptures and far more to drink.

The bride and groom boogied to *Shut Up and Dance*. *I Wanna Dance with Somebody* followed, and the bride danced with another partner.

Leo cleared his throat. “My cue.”

Franz patted his shoulder. “I’ve got Cassie and Remy.” He peered across the room. “And Dale, who is practically wrapped around Cassie.”

Leo carefully headed toward the bride. “Whoever Remy’s with is sure to be an agent as well.”

Franz chuckled. “Natch. Worry about yourself. The new wife looks like a feisty piece.”

Leo intercepted the bride as a female member of his team intercepted the groom. He started his pitch. “Mrs. Quinn, congratulations.” He took her right hand in his left, placed the other hand on her hip, and began to waltz.

Mrs. Quinn’s perfume almost made him forget his purpose as she came close. “Thank you.” She sighed. “You know, Dave and I have married several times before. It never lasts, but the honeymoon is to die for.”

Her body tensed as if she were about to flip him to the floor. Leo reacted instinctively and maintained his balance, then spun her out and back.

Had she done it on purpose, or had she been clumsy in a way that set off alarms in his head? Perhaps neither. He thought she might have learned to dance while studying aikido, and her muscle memory had gotten confused in the excitement of the wedding.

He turned his focus back to his mission, only half-remembering her last words. “Funny you mentioned dying. I sincerely hope you don’t have to die this time either.”

The bride bobbed again. With another man, it would have brought them both to their knees, but Leo was prepared this time, and an observer would not have seen the moment’s loss of balance.

After that, the bride’s rhythm changed. She responded to his movements with liquid grace as if she had danced with him a hundred times before. He thought she would make a fine addition to the Elder Guides.

She restarted the conversation. “You were saying something about dying?”

Leo dipped her. “Your wedding has been infiltrated by terrorists. I brought a team of international secret agents to stop them. We have ties to most of the governments in the world.” That was true. The Elder Guides did have deep, dark ties to most of the governments.

The bride whispered, “Oh, no. Am I in danger?”

Leo pursed his lips. She was asking the right question, but she didn't sound frightened. She sounded excited. “Don't worry. My men have identified the enemy operatives and will take them out as soon as I get you to safety.”

The bride responded by moving closer to him. “Lead me away.”

Leo guided her to a corner of the room. “I'll leave you here.”

The bride chuckled. “Abandoning me so soon, Leo? I don't think so, even though you're a seriously irritating mark. I've tried to kill or disable you three times, and you haven't even noticed.” She removed her veil. Her next words dripped with the honeyed accent of the South. “Pooh Bear, call me Fenya. Morte Noir sends her love.”

FACEOFF

Slip eased into her climbing harness and arrayed her cams, the mechanical devices you pushed into cracks and expanded to set anchor points, on her belt.

Dice watched with a combination of awe and horror. “Glad it’s you, not me, climbing along the ceiling.”

Slip chuckled. “It’s the only way to approach the entrance without being picked up on the vidfeed.”

She shinnied up to the ceiling and started the laborious process of crawling upside-down along the tunnel toward the brighter infrared light.

There was a vault door at the end and a pair of vidcams above looking down the corridor.

Slip couldn’t tell if the cameras could see her. She doubted it, but her camo coveralls, combined with the slow pace of her progress, should make her invisible even if the surveillance caught a glimpse of her.

She hung over the cameras and studied them. As she had hoped, they were wirelessly connected to the monitoring station. “My ghostwriter has control of the cameras. Dice, come on down.”

While Dice hurried down the corridor, Slip performed a double flip and landed in front of the vault door. She shook her head. “Cassie could probably jigger this digital lock, but I can’t.”

Dice smiled wickedly. “Not a problem.” He reached into his pack. “She’s not the only one who knows how to use thermite.” He burned through the latch. “Now try it.”

Slip hesitated.

Dice raised an eyebrow. “What are we waiting for?”

Slip grimaced. “We have two scenarios. In the easy one, behind this door, there’s nothing but a vidcam.”

Dice nodded. “And our ghostwriters neutralize it.”

Slip continued, “In the hard one, there are guards greeting everyone.”

Dice shrugged. “So we take ‘em.”

Slip frowned. “This is a recon mission. Minimal violence, no alerts to the enemy if we can help it.”

Dice tried to speak, but Slip continued forcefully. “Furthermore, although the ghostwriters will shield us from the vidcams, any watcher will see the thrashing and tumbling guards on full display.”

Dice sighed. “So, what’s the plan?”

Slip shrugged. “If we can’t hide the thrashing of the guards, maybe we can misdirect the watchers.” She explained her idea, and Dice reluctantly agreed.

They switched from their coveralls back to their wedding attire. Slip propped her collapsed baton in the open top of her purse.

Dice looked at it with disdain. “Such a girlie weapon.” He slid his own baton into his jacket pocket.

Slip took a deep breath, shut off the ghostwriter, and opened the door.

Leo shouted, though it was unnecessary since his team all had earbuds. “Now!” He leaped away from Fenya and drew his

wakizashi, a short samurai sword, from beneath his tuxedo.

It took him too long. Fenya leaped after him, drawing a long knife from her back.

Leo would have sworn she could not have hidden a toothpick in that dress. He twisted out of the way, but Fenya's blade smoothly sliced through the tux and the shirt, barely parting the skin covering his rib cage.

She had taken him by surprise, but Leo's reaction speed, incredible even before he acquired the Memwriter, was now barely human. He flicked her second thrust aside and struck.

Fenya had the skills provided by a decade of surviving stronger foes with longer reach. She leaned back, parrying.

Blood welled from just below her collarbone in a line that slid into her cleavage. Out of range of Leo's sword, she paused to run a finger over the surgically clean cut from the ceramic edge, then placed her finger in her mouth while wicked lust filled her eyes. "I've had rougher foreplay."

In this moment of less immediate lethal threat, Leo glanced around the room. He gasped. "What did you do with the wedding party? Are these *all* your agents?"

Fenya rolled her hip to the side. "Not only cute but smart too." She launched an attack, he drove her back, and she answered his question. "We bought the wedding date. The original couple and all their guests are in Fiji for a month-long celebration."

The minister leaped into the fray with a knife longer than the *wakizashi*. Leo demanded in amazement, "Even the priest?"

Fenya gave him a sultry laugh. "He's one of Morte Noir's gig employees. He works as an actual minister when not on assignment."

Leo realized he had been out-trapped.

He also realized the trap was much larger than he'd appreciated. Not only were his people outnumbered at the

wedding, but Dread Nought and Morte Noir had sent enough people to attempt a credible assault on the command center.

Particularly if he lost all his warriors here.

He screamed, “Retreat!” as he broke away from Fenya and headed for the exit that led deeper into the mine. Next he spoke for the people in the HQ, connected through the series of Wi-Fi repeaters with which the Elders had riddled the tunnels long ago. “*Sentries! Red Alert! Lock it down!*”

The second order elicited no response. He almost panicked. “*Sentries! Report!*”

No one answered.

Slip stepped into the reception area of the Elders’ command center to find two guards playing cards at a table.

One guard looked up in concern. “What’s happened?”

The other guard leaped to his feet and angrily barked, “Who’re you?”

The plan for quietly exploring the HQ was out the window. Time for Plan B. Hopefully, a minimal version of Plan B, lest they have to go with Plan C.

Slip turned to the nice guard. “We’re about to be attacked. We need to get to the control room ASAP.”

The angry guard reached for his gun. Dice chopped his hand away and spoke to the other one. “The control room, *now!*”

The nice guard, still seated, pointed at the exit. “First corridor on the right, third door on the left.”

The angry guard stared at him. “Don’t tell them!”

Slip gave a wracking cough and gasped, “Gas,” as she grabbed her throat and swooned into the arms of the angry one.

As she swooned, she grabbed her baton and hit the guard with the cattle prod end. He swooned with her, and they fell behind the table, out of view of the surveillance cameras.

Dice mimicked her, gasping and gagging and falling on the guard in the chair. He fell prey to a taser blast from Dice's baton.

Dice struggled to his feet, and with a performance of dying so extreme it belonged on the stage of a Greek tragedy, he stumbled around until he too fell behind the table.

Slip growled, "You're up for an Oscar. Let's turn on the ghostwriters and get on with it."

Dice grinned. "Let's go."

An alarm blared throughout the HQ. "Red Alert. Seal all blast doors."

As a thick steel plate moved, they dashed for the exit like Olympic runners in the fifty-yard dash. They squeaked through the door without catching Slip's ankle.

"Blast doors," she spat. "Of course."

They reached the control room to find that the door had auto-locked. Slip banged on the large bullet-proof glass window and shouted, mouthing, "Let us in! We're under attack!"

Dice went to work on the door with the thermite.

One of the three men watching the surveillance monitors came over to Slip and shook his head. "*No Admittance!*"

Dice blew the door and slammed it open.

The guard talking to Slip went down first.

The other two barely had time to realize the attack had come to them before they went down.

Slip studied the controls. "So much for a nice, quiet entry and exit."

She found the control for the alarms and shut it off, then grabbed the mike and handed it to Dice.

Dice smiled as he spoke over the compound's speaker system. "Test complete."

Laurie stood next to her mother, who sat on her walker, clenching her cane. Laurie gripped her knife and reiterated, "Mom, everybody in this room is a trained professional killer except us."

Grandma tapped her cane on the salt tile floor. "You've got memwritten training. You can take any of those assholes."

Laurie hissed, "Memwriter training does not make me a match for a man with years of experience."

"Hmph." Grandma moved her feet. Still sitting on the walker, she wheeled her way along at a creep. "Get behind me and see how it's done."

Laurie swallowed her fury. Neither belonged here. Laurie wouldn't have come if not for her mother, who had planned to fly her Gobi here alone if she hadn't agreed to come along. "Mom! *Stop!*"

Undeterred, the older woman continued creeping.

Hurricane's partner lay on the floor. She stood near the wall, holding off the two assailants who had engaged them.

No one paid attention to the little old lady on the walker.

Grandma jumped up and swung her cane with both hands. The metal cane, stripped of its rubber tip, struck one of the assailants on the back of the head.

Grandma, supported only by her frail legs, fell to the floor.

The other attacker whirled to address the threat and saw an elderly woman lying helpless. He understandably concluded the threat was the middle-aged woman holding the knife and lunged.

Laurie's body reacted without her, performing exactly as the Memwriter had trained it. She twisted, parried, and

riposted.

The assailant looked at the knife buried in his stomach, then lurched back into Hurricane's knife. It punched into his kidney.

Laurie looked at the bloody knife in her hand with stupefaction.

Perhaps she was better equipped for this fight than she had known.

Hurricane looked at Grandma. "Are you insane? Stay here by the wall." She rushed past Laurie, then looked over her shoulder at Grandma. "Thanks for saving my life."

Dice stared around the room. "So, our stealth surveillance is blown. You have a plan? Should we still run through the halls, maybe find a map, and see what we can find out?"

Slip let her shoulders fall. "Doesn't sound sensible anymore, does it?"

Dice brightened. "Glad you agree. I have an alternative plan."

Slip's heart stopped. She knew what Dice's plans looked like, but they needed a better proposal, so she cautiously asked, "What did you have in mind?"

Dice grinned and reached into his pack. "C-4."

Slip goggled. "You want to blow the place up with us in it?"

Dice gave her an exasperated look. "We'll plant the bombs and set them for remote detonation. Let Dale decide if and when to blow the place."

He looked around. "I gotta say, this command center is a critical piece of the infrastructure. A perfect place to plant the first explosives."

Slip rolled her eyes but couldn't disagree. "Very well."

Dice peered to the right. “Aha! Load-bearing wall.” He went to a corner and struggled to move a rack of computing equipment aside. When he had that out of the way, he wriggled a block of explosives into the corner.

He swore.

Slip, who had gotten distracted by the array of monitors with views throughout the facility, asked inattentively, “What’s wrong?”

Dice rose from the floor, still holding his bomb. “Good news and bad news. I can’t wedge this into the best place to bring everything down.”

Slip turned to him with a frown. “The good news?”

Dice chuckled. “There’s already a block of explosive in position. I think they rigged this place so they could blow it themselves.”

Slip rubbed a hand over her face. “That’s much worse news than the bad news.”

Dice looked puzzled. “What are you talking about? It’s great! All we need are the codes, and we can use their own charges against them!”

Slip shook her head in horror. “We can’t blast this place.” She pointed at one bank of monitors. “They have rooms full of victims strapped to beds, being experimented on. We have to get them out first.”

Cassie had lost track of Dale in the fight. He had jumped into a melee to pull a severely wounded Dead Dave to safety, lest the man die again.

After the opening series of ambushes and counter-ambushes, the Elders executed a calm and steady but hurried march toward the exit.

The Elders mostly hadn’t had memwritten training, so Dread Nought’s and Morte Noir’s operatives were reasonably

well-matched with the Elder Guides. Each faction had sent comparably elite warriors.

Fighters of overwhelming skill nonetheless appeared here and there. Cassie jumped from battle to battle, helping her people out of jams when they were outnumbered or facing someone whose skills rivaled theirs.

The chamber narrowed near the exit. Fewer people could squeeze into the melee.

Cassie heard Leo's shout, "Get behind us! Franz and I will cover the rear!"

Remy screamed with the righteous fury of an avenging angel. "Leo!"

Leo responded quietly, almost laughing, "Remy! Come to me, girl."

Cassie hopped through the minefield of wounded and dead and those yet undecided to stop Leo from killing the thoughtlessly raging Remy.

Franz attacked Remy as Cassie attacked Leo. Confusion prevailed as each pair tried to double-team a member of the other team, and the opposing teammate exploited the moment to attack an exposed flank.

The fight became a four-person dance. One moment, Franz and Leo separated to attack the girls from opposite sides, leaving Cassie and Remy back-to-back. Another swirling series of steps left Cassie and Remy attacking from opposite sides, with Leo and Franz fighting back to back.

They all reached the exit. No additional combatants from either side could enter the narrow confines in which the battle blazed.

Cassie fought side by side with her partner, with Franz as her opponent. Remy faced Leo, her face devoid of expression.

Cassie offered a brief thought of thanks that she faced Franz. She knew from the fight on the plane that Leo was faster than she was. He was as fast as Remy, who had bested her by the Reflecting Pool.

The only reason Cassie was still in the fight was her sword. She and Remy had brought tempered steel. Of necessity, the men had come bearing ceramic blades. The ceramic was hard and incredibly sharp but brittle. Leo and Franz both had to be careful lest a bad parry allow their opponents to shatter their weapons.

It made the fight almost even.

But Leo knew Remy's greatest weakness. He flicked his sword at Cassie.

Cassie parried.

Franz swept his blade at Cassie's exposed chest.

Remy reached to parry Franz's blade.

Franz twisted his sword a few spare millimeters. He missed Cassie. Instead, he cleanly cleft Remy's forearm above the wrist.

Time should have stopped for this outrage, but no.

A shot rang out, and Franz spun down.

The soft thump of a ricocheting bullet echoed around the chamber.

Dale staggered, then stumbled to the floor.

Leo grabbed Franz as he fell and dragged him down the corridor. They disappeared at the first intersection.

Cassie caught Remy as she fell. Remy stared at her with unseeing eyes, but she smiled gamely. "Was that a win?"

VALKYRIE FURY

Before Slip could develop even a glimmer of a plan to evacuate the experimental victims from the command center, Dice pointed out a problem on another monitor. “They’re back.”

At the end of the corridor in which Slip had crawled across the ceiling jogged many men, along with one person carried by half a dozen others.

Dice asked, “Wasn’t the plan to take out all those bastards at the reception?”

Slip spat, “That was the plan on paper, but we all knew it wouldn’t be that easy.”

Dice observed, “A lot fewer coming back than went out.”

Slip turned to the practical problem. “There are still too many of them, and when they see that we burned through the door’s latch with thermite, they’ll know we breached the HQ.”

Dice hefted his C-4. “Can we just blow them up?”

Slip grimaced. “Do you want this place to collapse?”

Dice frowned. “Okay. No explosives.”

An idea formed in Slip’s mind. “Just a little bit of explosives.” She explained her plan.

Dice laughed. “Who knows? That might work.”

Leo examined the door. “Breached. Now we know why no one answered when I called.”

Franz moaned, but he was unconscious.

Leo swung the door out of the way while a couple of his men took up firing positions with the weapons they’d retrieved on their way back.

They found the two guards, who were still out.

Leo turned to the men carrying Franz. “Take him to the...” He dared not split his forces in the face of a threat of unknown size. “To the control room,” he barked. From there, he would be able to see enough to decide what to do.

Moments later, he rounded the corner and saw the breached control room door. Too late. He looked through the window to assess how bad the news was.

One or two small explosions had blasted most of the equipment. Leo realized with dismay his plan to track the attackers from here was doomed.

Two of the three sentries were still on their feet. The third was lying in a corner.

The male sentry was pulling apart the control panels, clearly trying to make something work again. The woman paced, looking like she wanted to tear out her hair.

Leo charged in. “What happened?”

The woman spat, “Two men defeated our security cameras. Not sure how. Took out the guards at the vault entrance. Not sure how.”

She pointed at the door. “Fried the door. We fought, but they had incredible combat skills.” She pointed at the unconscious man. “Took Gregory out in a heartbeat.” She licked her lips. “The only reason we’re still standing is they were only interested in blowing up the electronics. Then they left.”

Leo stood in a daze. He shook his head to snap out of it.

The woman peered past him at Franz and pointed. “He’s bleeding out! Lay him down on his side, right side up. Keep the bullet hole above the heart.”

She ran to the wounded man.

His fear for Franz’s life wrenched Leo out of his funk. The problem of the two special ops agents who had blown through faded into the background.

Leo had studied and become an expert on many things, but emergency medical procedures were not among them. “We packed the wound while running back here. What do we do now?”

The woman looked between Franz and Leo several times, and her frown turned darker and stormier. She muttered, “I should not be doing this.”

Leo started to ask what she shouldn’t do, but her brow cleared as she made a decision. She ran out, saying, “Give me a minute.” Leo heard another door slam.

The other sentry knelt next to Franz and spoke grimly. “Don’t worry. She was training as a doctor before...well, before she joined me.”

Leo asked the question he’d meant for her. “What did she mean about not doing something?”

The man looked panicked and confused but answered, “I think she thinks you need a real doctor, not someone who never finished her program.”

Leo nodded. The people in his community often joined after abruptly quitting their earlier lives. True Elder Guides—not the Ruby cultists, the ones who understood—frequently entered the community after the world had knocked them down one too many times and they realized how difficult it was to make progress. People who operated under the heavy hands of overbearing regulation and brutal litigation, such as doctors, were easy recruits.

The female sentry returned with a bag and pulled out a roll of cloth. She started re-packing the wound.

As she worked, she explained, “The shot tore through the subclavian artery beneath the collarbone.” She finished packing the wound and put the roll back in the bag. “This is hemostatic gauze. It contains stuff that will promote clotting.”

She stood up. “He needs a hospital, stat.”

Leo froze. The scope of the disaster drove him toward panic, but he resisted.

The breach had left the salt mine headquarters fully compromised. Even if he tracked down the invaders, they had been sent by Dale and Remy, who would tell the authorities about this lair. He had only one course of action left.

He flicked a finger at the two sentries. “You’re with me.” Before he led his augmented team out, he asked, “Can we still trigger the emergency broadcast to evacuate the compound?”

Laurie had maintained a stern focus on the Elder Guide henchmen behind Leo and Franz, ready to jump in if any of them made a move to attack her daughter. Hence, she missed the climactic moment of horror when Franz amputated Remy’s arm.

Her first indication of disaster was a gun going off next to her ear.

She jumped half out of her skin, then looked down to see her mother with her ridiculous oversized pistol staring grimly at the departing Elders. Laurie yelled so she could hear herself, “Mom, I told you not to bring that damn thing!” She pointed at where Dale had fallen. “Ricochets! Look what you did!”

Grandma gave her daughter the evil eye. “Are you serious?” Her eyes widened when she understood Laurie’s anger. “Look at Remy.” She pointed a trembling finger at the youngest member of their family.

Laurie’s heart stopped as she stared at her daughter, then at the forearm lying on the gray tiles.

She leaped into action, shouting. “Plastic garbage bags! Ice! Water!” She bellowed like a drill sergeant. “Now!”

Cassie shouted, “The bar!” She ran across the chamber to the fully stocked table from which no one had taken a single alcoholic drink.

Dale recovered enough to help Remy slide to the floor. One of his arms hung uselessly by his side, but he held Remy’s elbow high while Hurricane sliced off strips of formal wear and wrapped the resulting bandages around the stump.

Seeing that Remy was surrounded by assistants, Laurie’s gruesome job loomed before her. Pursing her lips, she pushed through the crowd, and without hesitating, picked up the severed limb and ran after Cassie.

Cassie laid the bags out on the table. A champagne bucket filled with ice sat nearby, alongside a case of Fiji bottled water. She looked up. “Now what?”

Laurie gently slid the arm into a plastic garbage bag and looked at the bucket. “Too small.” Letting her eyes roam, she spotted a better solution. “The garbage can.”

Cassie grabbed the can and brought it to her.

Laurie popped another garbage bag into the can and rolled the bag’s edges over the sides. “Fill this with water and ice. Make a nice slush.”

Cassie dumped in bottles of water as fast as she could pop them and threw every ounce of ice from the bucket and the bar fridge into the can. Laurie carefully twisted the top of the bag holding the arm into a knot and pulled it tight—watertight. She glanced at Cassie’s efforts. “Enough.”

She lowered the arm into the can.

Cassie looked at her, puzzled. “What now?”

Laurie grimly answered, “Now we get Remy and her arm into surgery.” She cleared her throat. “We’re going to save that arm.”

Laurie tried to force the wounded Dale to back off Remy support duty, but he shrugged her aside. “Salt walls seem hard, but they’re not like concrete or steel. The wall soaked up a lot of the energy, so the bullet barely hit me.” He winced. “I confess, it’s painful since it’s lodged in my shoulder, but I’ve got this.”

Giving up on forcing good sense on those around her, Laurie assigned Hurricane to support Remy on one side while Dale supported the other. Laurie herded the trio toward the elevators while Cassie ran ahead with the garbage can to call the elevator down.

The elevators were so far from the reception area that Laurie wanted to scream, but finally, they reached the shaft, where Cassie stood impatiently holding a door open. “Going up?”

As the elevator climbed, Laurie typed on her cell phone. Finally, she muttered, “I’ve got service” and pounded on the phone to get the answers she needed. “I’ve got our destination,” she shouted too loudly in the confines of the elevator. “University Hospital in Zurich.”

She continued in a normal voice, “They have a department of plastic and hand surgery that offers limb replantation services.”

The elevator shuddered as if it were touched by a tiny earthquake. Laurie looked around while squelching her panic. “Now what?”

As the doors opened, Cassie answered, “Now we hurry.”

They hustled Remy into one of the Gobis parked on a nearby field. Remy sat in the back with Dale on one side and with the can holding her arm on the other. Her glazed expression told Laurie that no one was home.

Cassie gunned the engine. “We’re less than three hours out. Will we make it?”

Laurie let out a shuddering breath. “You can reattach a finger up to twenty-four hours later if the amputation is clean and the finger is kept just above freezing.”

Cassie laughed hysterically. “So we didn’t have to hurry.”

Laurie continued. “You have less time as the body part you’re reattaching gets larger. Four to six hours tops for an arm.”

Cassie nodded. “We have time, but not a lot to spare.”

Laurie tried to look on the bright side. “At least we’re not trying to save something larger.”

Slip followed Leo through the corridors, maintaining a fast pace. She silently cursed as she kept pressure on Franz’s wound. Dice helped two other agents carry him.

She had many reasons to curse. First and foremost, she cursed the early return of Leo and company that had entrapped her and her partner. That, however, was not her fault.

Next she cursed not having a decent exit strategy. She supposed that was not really her fault either.

However, her answer to the lack of exit strategy had been to make herself invaluable to someone who knew how to get out of this place. So now she was saving the life of a man she should kill because his life was important to another man she should kill.

She hoped Remy and Cassie would understand. She thought they might. When Slip had seen all the bedridden victims on the monitors, she had realized that her first priority had to be getting out the word about their plight, even if it meant letting Leo and Franz live.

That *was* her fault.

They came to a bank of elevators that did not show up on any of the maps she had memorized. Slip gasped.

Leo turned alertly. “What’s wrong?”

Slip thought fast. “Thought the bleeding had restarted. It’s okay, though.” She returned to her thoughts.

The Elder Guides had secret passages to get in and out of the mine. They were probably a mile from the other entrances and exits.

It made so much sense that she was embarrassed since she hadn’t assumed that from the beginning. When she told Cassie and Remy about it, they would smack their heads against a wall for not realizing it earlier.

Since the main broadcasting system was offline thanks to Dice and his explosives, Leo had sent his troops running through the facility, shouting the evacuation order. People hustled to the elevators from every direction.

Leo stood there clenching and unclenching his jaw as he watched others jam into the elevators and depart.

Eventually, Slip could no longer stand it. She spoke quietly. “We need to get Franz out of here.”

Leo nodded, clenching his jaw again. “Just another minute.”

The last of the crowd vanished, and a group of Leo’s assault team members ran up, out of breath. One spoke. “I think we got everyone.”

Leo pointed at an elevator arriving for another load. “Go.”

They departed, and the bell announcing the arrival of another elevator chimed. “Let’s go.”

The six—Slip and Dice, Leo and Franz, and the two agents carrying him, entered the elevator. It was tight, but it *was* a big cabin, so it was not too bad.

Leo fiddled with his phone. “I cannot believe it has come to this.”

Slip wondered what that meant. Dice looked puzzled as well.

The elevator ride took a long time. Slip could not keep the anxiety and the need to hurry off her face.

Leo distracted her. “I know you said he needs a hospital ASAP, but the bleeding’s slowed.” He took a deep breath. “Can he make it to the Fulcrum? That’s the only place I’m confident he’ll be safe.”

Slip felt consternation surge up her spine. He didn’t know the Fulcrum was under attack. Or maybe he knew more than she did, and the attack had been repelled. Whichever, she gave him the answer he wanted to hear. “It’s not without risk, but yes.”

The elevator slowed, and Leo held his phone high like a magic wand about to spout flames.

Slip suddenly knew what he was about to do. She touched his arm. “You can’t blow it up. What about the—” She knew they wouldn’t think of the people strapped to the beds as victims, so what would they call them? “Subjects? So much research lost.”

Leo’s face twisted in agony. “I didn’t blow Camp No in time, and our work was exposed to the Outside. Never again.”

She couldn’t let him kill all those people. So much for plans B, C, and D.

She launched herself at him, but she must have telegraphed her intent. Holding the phone out of reach, he fought her one-handed, blocking her thrusts with an easy grace, then slamming her head against the elevator door.

She didn’t have a chance.

Leo’s eyes widened with enlightenment. “You’re the attacker.” He struck her again, leaving her dazed. His next blow would kill her.

The elevator door opened. Dice dropped Franz, grabbed her, and fled.

Slip felt a barely perceptible shiver from the ground beneath her feet. “He killed them all,” she sobbed. “They’re gone.”

Cassie stomped into Andrey's sanctuary like a thunderstorm promising destruction. "Tell me about Remy's plan."

Andrey spun in his chair, then wheeled back until the chair hit the desktop. "What plan?"

Cassie planted a foot on the arm of the chair. "The backup plan in case the assault on the Fulcrum failed."

Andrey looked away. "Oh. *That* plan."

Cassie nudged the chair. "Well?"

Andrey gulped. "I know hardly anything about her plan."

He sounded like he was hiding something, so Cassie kicked the chair. "Who knows more?"

Andrey explained, "Remy hatched the main plan with Rudy."

Cassie wanted details. "And?"

Andrey squirmed to the side. "And they asked me for a little help."

Cassie stepped back. "Call Rudy. Get him to the Vault."

Andrey looked stubborn. "It's a bad plan. We need something else."

Cassie glared at him until he picked up his cell, then stomped into the conference room.

Cassie clenched her fist as Rudy reiterated Andrey's words. "It's a bad plan."

Cassie leaned forward. "Yet, *you* put it together."

Rudy grimaced. "I didn't think she'd really do it, just like I didn't think she'd use the prototype when she asked for it." He brightened. "And she didn't. You stopped her."

Cassie closed her eyes. “Why did you build them for her, then?”

Rudy flushed, embarrassed. “It was technically interesting.”

Cassie forced herself not to scream. “I agree it was a bad idea the first time, but what about now? Don’t you think the Fulcrum deserves this?”

Andrey interjected, “Sure. That’s not the problem.”

Cassie raised an eyebrow. “The problem is?”

Rudy sighed. “It’s a suicide trip.”

Cassie could see why that might be worth examining. “Why?”

Andrey explained.

Cassie paid only minimal attention, but the explanation brought up another question. “How was Remy planning to deliver them?”

Andrey pulled up a number of photos stolen from the Utah Data Center.

Cassie gasped, then looked longingly at the photos and drew the obvious conclusion. “Well, if you’ve gotta go, that is the way.”

Andrey and Rudy reluctantly agreed.

Cassie had one last mission to complete before she departed. She walked into the Memwriter room to find Dale blinking like a Memwriter user typically did after a session. Her purpose was serious, but she chose a nonchalant approach, putting a hand on her hip and asking, “Whatcha learning about today?”

Dale grunted and pointed at the book on the table, *Introduction to Advanced Social Mechanics*. “I can see all the

equations in my head, but I'm not sure I'm making any progress."

Cassie groaned in sympathy. "I hear you. I memorized the whole blasted thing, but hardly a single page has settled in my mind yet." That was approximately true. The preface was written in English, and that was straightforward, although terrifying, since it gave examples of how the material in the book could reshape humans' thought processes.

She laughed as she asked the next question. "What on Earth compelled you to try to figure this out?"

Dale shrugged. "This is along the lines of knowing your enemy better than he knows himself." He looked at the book and slumped. "I confess, I might have taken the idea a step too far."

Cassie gently pushed on his shoulder. "Not too far, just too soon. Time for you to take the actual next step." She grabbed his hand. "Come with me."

Dale followed her out of the building. "Where are we going?"

"To the waterfall."

The waterfall often had visitors from the Rivendell compound. Cassie prayed that they would find the banks unoccupied, and her prayer was answered.

She released Dale's hand. "What do you see?"

Dale looked around and shrugged. "You asked me that here once before. Like the last time, it's beautiful." He looked at her. "What am I missing?"

Cassie frowned. "I keep hoping you'll see the *thump*."

Dale raised a quizzical eyebrow.

As best she could, Cassie described the event she had experienced some months after memwriting advanced physics

and chemistry.

Dale shook his head sadly. "I guess I'm not smart enough."

Cassie pursed her lips. "You're just blocked." She got behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Kneel." She had no reason to believe this would make a difference, but it felt right.

Dale chuckled as he obeyed. "The ground is cold and wet, according to my knees."

Cassie put her hands on the sides of his head. "Look at the foam from the crash of the water against the rocks. What color is it?"

Dale shrugged. "It's white."

Cassie pressed. "Why?"

"The bubbles are formed by surface tension. They're transparent, but they scatter the light." He paused. "Multiple scatterings send the light to us as if reflected."

Cassie squeezed his temples. "Can you see the individual lines of scattering?"

Dale stared at the foam.

Cassie spoke lyrically. "Don't look with your eyes. Look with your mind and your heart merged into one. Can you see the lines?"

Dale muttered. "No." He paused, then whispered, "Yes."

Cassie stepped away. "What else?"

Dale spoke so softly that Cassie could barely hear him. "I see the electric cohesion in the water that creates the surface tension that creates the bubbles that create the white light."

His eyes darted to the sky. "I see the same scattering by the ice crystals in the clouds, making them as white as the bubbles."

Cassie urged him to his feet. "Go on."

Dale's eyes roamed, unfocused and seeing nothing except with his heart and mind. "I see... Oh, my God, what I see!" He

focused on his mentor. “Cassie, what did you do to me?”

Cassie sucked in a sharp breath. She always said that to Remy. Was she as bad as her partner?

Dale’s eyes lost focus once more. “The whole universe is dancing, isn’t it?”

Cassie chuckled. “That’s the way Morte Noir sees it, and she hasn’t memwritten any physics yet.”

Her eyes gleamed. “Your inner eye now sees through the lens of your fully integrated knowledge. You will see more as the integration continues.”

Dale held up his hand to shield his eyes. “It hurts, it’s so beautiful. How do I stop it?”

Cassie laughed heartily. “Ah, Dale, you can never stop it. This is why the AStormers call it an Awakening.”

Dale looked around in panic. “If I can’t stop it, I’ll be trapped.”

Cassie spoke soothingly. “Don’t worry. Your awareness will fuse with the rest of your thinking and slide into the background. You’ll be able to focus as well, or better, than before.”

She let that sink in before continuing. “But no matter how hard you concentrate on the task at hand, whether you’re focused on your success or your survival, you will always have it here,” she touched his chest, “in your heart, singing. Murmuring that you are more than you know.”

HIGH FLIGHT

Sixty-two miles north of Los Angeles lies Aerospace Valley, centered on the city of Palmdale. Area 51 primarily gets the sensational news coverage so the real home of next-generation aerial weapons can operate in peace and quiet.

In the valley was an enormous facility filled with gigantic white buildings. Some were hangars, and others were manufacturing facilities for building the machines that went into the hangars. The biggest buildings proudly proclaimed their owner to the world: Lockheed Martin. The corporate logo was augmented by a cartoon illustration of a skunk with its arms crossed and a mischievous open-mouthed smile.

The facility was known throughout the world as the Skunkworks.

An olive-drab flatbed pickup with the words US Air Force and a serial number painted on the side rolled up to the main gate.

The driver, a cute brunette with a bored expression, flashed her badge and her paperwork. "Special delivery. A payload for the," she looked at her paperwork to remind her of her destination, "SW 28 Development Building."

The guard looked at her documents and nodded. "This all looks good." He glanced in the back. "Are those bombs?"

Three teardrop-shaped metal vessels were tucked into a metal skeleton decorated with a complicated array of hinges and latches. Each hypothetical bomb had a pair of streamlined

fins jutting to the side. The developers had given the devices blue paint jobs.

The driver shook her head. “Not sure. They’re the same color as practice bombs, aren’t they? Deep Saxe Blue Number 113.” She pointed at the skeleton that enclosed the devices. “They call that contraption ‘the Stick.’”

The guard scratched his head. “I didn’t think they were ready for this yet. Prototypes, you know.”

The driver scowled. “Whatever. Could you point me in the right direction?” She waved a hand at the vast sweep of the complex. “I got no idea.”

The guard chuckled. “It’s pretty easy.” He pointed, waving between multiple buildings until a person of reasonable intelligence would be confused.

The driver seemed unfazed. She tipped her hat to the guard. “Thanks. See you on the way out.”

The guard looked morose. “Probably not. Shift change in five.” He sighed. “Sorry I’ll miss you on your way back...” he peered at the name patch on her shirt, “Cassie.”

Cassie drove very slowly, bouncing with anxiety as she maneuvered through the maze of twisty passages all alike that connected the nearby buildings.

She finally rolled up to what she thought was the right hangar since it was in the right place, though it had no markings. She walked to the immense garage door to open it.

The door had a common padlock, and Cassie chuckled. Thirty seconds later, the lock popped. She went to fling the door up but instead peered through the small window and listened to a loud conversation within the building.

A guard was talking to an engineer wearing a button-down shirt and pressed pants who whined, “My teammates were

supposed to be here. All four of them.” He flung his hand out in a sweeping gesture. “Where are the other guards?”

The guard shrugged. “Don’t know about the engineers, but I’m as puzzled as you about the guards.”

She’d heard enough. She decided to go in.

As she flung the metal door up, the two men turned to stare at Cassie with blank looks of surprise.

She felt immense relief there were only two of them, but she scowled for the audience. “Gentlemen, I have a delivery to make.”

She pulled out a tablet with a form on display. “Would either of you be willing to sign for the shipment?” She strolled up to the men and thrust her tablet at them.

The engineer instinctively reached for the tablet before looking past her at the truck. “What the hell is that? Are those bombs?”

The guard looked more alert.

Cassie sighed. “Someone said weather sensors, but I’m not sure.” She pushed the tablet into the engineer’s hands and struck the guard in the throat.

The engineer stared at her until she delivered a hard jab to his nose.

She kicked the guard in the temple, then put her arm around the engineer’s neck in a chokehold until he slumped, unconscious. “Sorry,” she muttered, not because she meant it, but because that was what Remy would have said.

After she’d dragged the men to a corner of the hangar and zip-tied them together, she examined the target of her affections.

Half-filling the hangar was the sleekest aircraft man had ever designed. Gentle curves ruled the contours of the vehicle, though she could not see it as well as she would have liked. The obsidian blackness of the matte finish sucked up the sunlight filtering through the door.

The SR-72's elegant beauty brought tears to her eyes. The name did it no justice. She could never think of it as anything but "the Dark Star."

She found additional light switches to increase the brightness. A couple of minutes later, she had the truck and the Stick under the plane.

No obvious latch controlled the bomb bay doors. No problem. Andrey had briefed her thoroughly, using the detailed blueprints stored at the UDC. She opened the bottom of the plane as easily as she had once opened the vault behind the cashier's desk at a camera store.

The hoist whined as it lifted the Stick into position, and then Cassie snapped it down. Finally, she rolled the truck around the corner and returned wearing a flight suit she had pilfered from Edwards AFB a few days earlier. Rudy Ross had adapted it for the Dark Star, but it was not really made for this plane.

Rudy had gone all parental on her. "Careful with the g-forces," he'd warned her. "This will not protect you from blackouts like a *real* Dark Star suit would."

The thought that this was going far too well passed through her mind, and she muttered, "Considering the doom waiting for me at the end of the trip, a little good luck getting there meets the needs of Murphy's Law."

Finally, Cassie wriggled into the pilot's seat and triggered the engines. The whining of spinning turbines greeted her, eager to please.

She patted the instrument panel. "We're ready, baby."

Dale watched yearningly from behind a stack of crates as Cassie reached the ladder to climb into the cockpit. "I should have kissed her," he muttered distractedly. "I should go kiss her now."

Bryce punched him in the shoulder. “Hey, if you get to kiss her, I get to kiss her too. She still owes me dinner and a movie.”

Dale continued to watch Cassie as he answered, “She only owes you a movie. When you stole her French fries, you said that counted as dinner.”

Bryce marveled. “That was a long time ago. You have a remarkable memory.”

Dale’s voice got even more distant. “You have no idea.”

Bryce changed the topic. “What was that about a missing engineering team? I understand what happened to the missing guards.” He pointed at the three saps they’d hit with trunk darts, now taped and cuffed. “But the engineers? Did you take them out while I wasn’t watching?”

Dale laughed since they’d been together the entire time. “Sorry. The universe continues to keep secrets whose truths will remain veiled forever.”

Bryce glanced at him. “You talk like a Buddhist mystic. You okay?”

Dale smiled. “Don’t worry, Bryce.”

Bryce frowned. “I still don’t get why we’re skulking behind these crates. We should’ve intercepted the girl on her way here and breached the base as a team.”

Dale shrugged. “I thought about it, but she would have been angry that she’d dragged us into it and furious about the need for tearful farewells. I figured we’d clear enough obstacles so it’s easy for her but not so easy that she worries it’s a trap. This is better.”

Bryce sighed. “True.”

The enormous jet’s engines flared, and Cassie’s monster taxied away.

Dale and Bryce dragged the guards into the open. One had recovered from the tranquilizers and glared at them, unable to speak through the duct tape.

Bryce patted his cheek. “Don’t worry. They’ll find you at shift change.”

Dale heard the twin sounds of clapping and laughter from the hangar opening. He raised his dart rifle as he turned to meet the threat.

Bryce turned at the same time, then pointed his rifle at the ground. “I think we know what happened to the missing engineers.”

Morte Noir saluted. “Perceptive as always, Bryce.” She nudged her companion. “And see? This is what happened to the missing guards.”

Dale kept his rifle zeroed in on the man next to her. “What’s he doing here?”

Grisha took a bow. He smiled so wickedly Dale considered shooting him just for that infraction.

The Gamma assassin paid no attention. “What am I doing here? Seeing my enemy off on her journey to destroy another enemy of mine, of course.”

Dale reluctantly lowered his weapon. “How did you get here?”

Morte Noir laughed. “I suspect I learned of Cassie’s latest mad venture the same way you did. Andrey told me and asked me to help him stop her.”

Dale nodded. “Pretty much the same.”

The Dark Mistress looked pointedly at Bryce. “I see you brought a friend from AID. Why did you trust him?”

Dale grimaced. “In our most recent dealings, he’s seemed to prefer Cassie to the Elder Guides. Even if his *boss* is an Elder Guide.” He glared at Grisha. “You brought a little friend as well. One even less trustworthy. What’s the deal?”

The Mistress shrugged. “I sent Esin to assess Grisha’s boss a little while ago. Based on her report, plus a few other data snippets, I concluded he might want to join this ridiculous crusade.”

Grisha looked like he wanted to spit. “If the vision of the Russian Imperium fails, it will fail at the hands of fools like you.” He did spit. “Not at the hands of some zealots with Nazis in their history.”

Grisha spotted the guards lying behind Dale. “You left yours alive too? I wanted to kill the engineers we intercepted, that being both easier and more reliable, but,” he rolled his eyes, “Morte Noir wouldn’t let me. Can you believe it? The Mistress of Assassination told me not to kill them!”

Bryce chuckled. “I wanted to kill the guards, but the Boy Scout interfered.”

Dale looked to the heavens for guidance. “Enough with the AID-Gamma bonding already.”

He led the group into the open, and they watched the long black shape of the Dark Star as it left the runway and leaped starward. He muttered, “I really should have kissed her.”

Bryce shook his head sadly. “Dale, you have to get over it. You know she’s on a one-way trip.”

Dale gave him a sad smile. “But you know she had to go.”

The higher she flew, the farther the world fell away below her. The sun rose, tenaciously pacing her in her mad dash to the edge of the inky void.

Words from an ancient poem came unbidden to her. *Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.*

Lifetimes ago, she’d felt the bonds slip from her for the first time when Remy introduced her to the flyboard. On the board, the sun and sky had been *right there*, pressing against her.

Now her Dark Star wrapped her in a cocoon that denied all her senses save sight and sound.

Of course, her craft supplied new senses to supplant the old ones. With her ELINT, she saw beacons of energy so far away that the signals had to wrap around the curvature of the Earth to reach her. Blending with her mind, the computer's thoughts studied the distant sources and presented their patterns and their intentions.

Her radar showed her reflections off aluminum and steel from farther than the naked eye could behold. Cell towers and skyscrapers crowded her vision.

The infrared sensors showed her people and animals ninety thousand feet below her. A touch of a button allowed her to zoom in to see who was petting their dog and who was not.

Her optical sensors elevated her sight to levels best understood by astronomers peering through the largest telescopes, trying to see the beginning of time.

She zoomed in on a man petting his dog and reveled as he removed the leash and let the pup run free.

Her Dark Star blended her new senses into a single display, a fusion of intelligence that encompassed the universe so powerfully she had trouble remembering to breathe.

Everything she saw sang for her.

She touched the stick, a twitch barely stronger than a thought, and her Dark Star gamboled above the clouds, laughing with her as eccentric air currents tried to fling her from side to side. The gusts slipped around her, defeated by the perfection of her curves and her laminar flow.

Thoughts from her previous life, the life before the Dark Star embraced her, drifted to her like flakes in a snow globe.

She wondered if she should have kissed Dale.

She wondered if she should have kissed Remy.

Perhaps she should have kissed them both.

All those questions fell away with the wind. She had chosen her lover: thirty tons of titanium with sixty thousand pounds of thrust. She banished regret.

Her lover loafed along at Mach Four, ninety thousand feet from everywhere.

A rainbow appeared. Cassie hadn't known you could see those above the clouds, yet it soared amongst the sunsplit clouds, its luminous colors shimmering in the sunlit silence.

She merged with her lover until the boundary between them dissolved. Her eyes, her sensors, begged for her attention.

A rocket launched, identified by her lover as a surface-to-air missile aimed at her. She complimented the distant weapons officers for finding her flying so stealthy and so high. She tapped the stick to roll once, twice, three times, taunting the hopelessly slow missile far below.

She flowed onward. The foaming surface of a quiet bay caught her eye. When she zoomed in, dozens of dolphins splashed joyfully around a canoe shared by a man and a woman. She wondered if the dolphins would tip the boat, but no harm came to any of the playful fellow travelers.

Phosphorescent waves capered in every direction.

Ahead, a continent covered with snow and ice grew in her vision. Not long now.

Three more missiles came for her. She recognized them as weapons of the Elder Guides.

She caressed the stick again and again, spiraling and pirouetting. Her unyielding enemies could no more harm her than the dolphins could.

The opening made by the Ragers at the Fulcrum tunnel entrance blossomed into view. The end drew nigh.

She tipped her bird over and descended at Mach Six, screaming with joy.

THE SEARING EDGE OF NIGHT

Ninety thousand feet, six times the speed of sound, seven seconds. Cassie came nose to nose with the glacial peaks of Antarctica in the time it took to inhale a deep breath.

Shards of ice, blobs of water, and steam from the heat of her passage trailed in her wake.

The breach in the ice she sought drew near. She toggled the safeties of her children, tucked into the Stick in her belly. Her Dark Star blinked a quiet alert for the moment of transition.

She twisted straight up, then accelerated. The g forces mounted in the arcing curl, four, then eight, then twelve gees. Too many. She passed out.

Her ship, the hypersonic extension of her mind, knew what to do without her, and as she climbed, consciousness returned.

More missiles flared to life below. They sought her in vain.

Time for the finale. The bomb bay doors whirred open, and her first child fell into the sky. At the proper time and altitude, the second child followed, trailed by the third.

She was free to die.

The itty bitty fusion bomb tumbled through the air, then popped its wings and took control of its flight and destiny.

Remy had built the prototype during her crusade to wreak vengeance on those responsible for mind-blasting her father. It had started life as a boron-hydrogen power producer, a stock generator from Rudy's production line. Remy had added a hollow tungsten carbide sphere filled with deuterium with a dash of tritium thrown in, stolen from the tritium filtration system of the Palo Verde Nuclear Reactor plant.

She had also removed the limiters that prevented the fusion reaction from damaging the system's components. Rapidly over-cranking the reactor generated enough heat and pressure to cause a handful of deuterium-tritium atomic fusions.

That yielded the smallest hydrogen bomb explosion ever imagined.

The bomb glided down the burning shaft of jet exhaust and cooling plasma left behind by the Dark Star, a turbulent mixture that defeated the missiles aimed at the bomb rather than the aircraft.

The bomb descended, constantly correcting its course to reach the hole in the ice it yearned for.

It continued into the hole, its quest yet to be fulfilled.

It struck a barrier of ice. The impact triggered the reactor. Water vapor and plasma erupted to the surface as the itty bitty bomb loosed its unchained power.

In the fields of Montana, a fleet of Minuteman missiles huddled in their silos. Like cattle and gazelles, they clustered for protection from their enemies.

If an enemy dropped a missile into the field, even if it struck one of the silos and destroyed its inner jewel, the death of that Minuteman would ensure the survival of the others. How?

The blast vomited such a vast spout of turbulence that it threw the subsequent missiles off their trajectories. The deflected missiles might have been able to destroy an

unprotected city despite their course deviation, but the hardened silos survived.

Due to that phenomenon, known amongst the cognoscenti as “fratricide,” you could take out one missile in the huddle but no more.

The first itty bitty bomb created a comparable tempest.

But Cassie’s second child was no simple ballistic warhead, falling helplessly at the mercy of the winds of fate. It was a glide bomb capable of perseverance as it flew toward its destiny. Just as the first had maneuvered through the jet exhaust of the Dark Star, the second one pierced the backblast of the brother who had gone before. It bucked and rolled through the turmoil, a bronco rider hanging on through a taste of Armageddon.

Down and down it sallied into the deep hole its sibling had created before blazing into a glory as rich and golden as its predecessor’s.

When it touched down, hell reigned.

Eldest Guide Meyer swallowed the last pill with his last sip of coffee. The pill stuck in his throat.

The Debra watched his widening eyes as he reached for his throat and surmised the problem. “May I help you?”

Meyer held out a hand to keep her at bay. He coughed, swallowed again, and felt the pill slide down the rest of the way. “I’m fine.”

The Debra hesitated. “It would please me if you would use water or tea to take your pills. A liquid not as thick as your coffee.”

Meyer smiled wearily. She was banging against the limiters Leo had set up again, coaxing him to take better care of himself. He wondered what sort of caring, nurturing person she would have been without the Elder Guides’ mind

remodeling. Would he have become fonder of her, or would he have found her more irritating?

The current irritant was the recent attack on the Fulcrum. He suspected the attackers had no clue how severely they had compromised the facility.

His men and slaves had cleared the tunnel to the surface reasonably swiftly. They had set small explosive charges to free blockages, allowing tons of ice to fall to the main floor.

The staircase was a total loss. You now needed a rope to come and go, and the hole was much larger than it had been. He had received reports that for the rock climbing community, the new path was much more fun than the old one.

The greater disaster was the loss of the dock. His people still labored around the clock to dig through to find out how much damage the attackers had caused.

His engineers had no idea how long it would be until they could bring in the submarine laden with supplies again.

The hole that led to the surface could not substitute for the dock. The Jetopteras could bring small amounts of goods after the damaged hangar roof had been repaired, but neither of these avenues could fulfill the resupply needs of the thriving Fulcrum community. Meyer would have to take strict measures to keep his headquarters operational. Protecting the food supply took highest priority.

He took the Debra's hand to treasure these last few moments with her.

She looked puzzled.

He did not tell her that his trusted lieutenants were executing the slaves in the Arena and that as soon as the slaves had repaired the hangar roof, he would execute the rest.

Even the Debra.

A loud rumble heralded a harsh tremor that shook his chair until he thought he would fall off. Debra stumbled but remained on her feet. His empty coffee cup fell on the carpet.

A handful of books shook free of the shelves and tumbled to the floor.

Meyer asked, “What was that? An earthquake?”

The Debra had turned her head to the ceiling, and a single tear left her eye. The Eldest found that disconcerting since she had been fixed so she could no longer cry.

Meyer futilely smacked the arm of his chair. “What?”

The Debra’s face filled with elation. “It’s Cassie. Fulfilling her promise to free me.”

Meyer glared at her, wondering about the gibberish Debra had just uttered.

A second rumble vibrated through the room and the ceiling collapsed, backed by uncountable tons of ice.

Cassie triggered the third of the bombs and continued to climb with an acceleration that forced her face into the grimacing grin of an astronaut during takeoff.

She no longer needed to ascend. In fact, it was contraindicated if she wanted any chance to survive. She had no choice, however. The being melded from woman and Dark Star yearned to see the stars.

She flew until the air around her thinned to the point of near-vacuum, high enough that the atmosphere no longer turned the sky blue. Before her lay inky black, broken by brilliant twinkling stars and the glorious band of the Milky Way, so thick with glowing points that it seemed to be obscured by clouds. Off to one side, the sun burned furiously.

Higher still. She fought until her lungs—her engines—gaspd for breath.

She ascended until her engines screamed and threatened to shut down, then keeled over and started a spin toward Earth that a lesser craft with a lesser pilot could not have controlled.

Gulping air at last, she leveled off higher than before and charged north. In a few minutes, she backed off to cruising speed, reaching a state of maximum fuel efficiency.

It didn't make any difference. She barely had enough fuel to reach the ocean's edge. Then her engines would sputter, and she would glide like a brick dropped from the top of a skyscraper.

The adrenaline drained from Cassie's body. She could have happily taken a nap, but that would be nonsense. She would soon sleep all too well.

Unless she found an iceberg with a nice flat runway on which she could crash-land and make a few calls. She hadn't seen any on the way south, so she had little hope, but she grimly clung to that glimmer.

Ironically, though she had scored a perfect trifecta of hits to destroy the Fulcrum, the automated missile batteries continued to operate. She detected multiple launches, and targeting radars still tried to zero in on her, so far in vain.

She laughed. If only they'd known they didn't need to do anything to blast her from the sky.

Then there was a miracle.

Dale's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Cassie, I have a tanker more or less due north of where you should be. I can't see you, but you can see my plane. Find the plane and refuel."

Cassie returned her attention to her aircraft's senses and saw a radar reflection burning bright. She pointed her nose toward the pinpoint of hope in the distance.

Unfortunately, the missile radars acquired the remote sensor return and shifted targets.

Not only would they now destroy her refueling hope, but they would kill Dale in the process.

Cassie had only one option. As the missiles sped past, she gunned the engines and danced up to the lead missile. She tucked her wing neatly under the body of the rocket and spun her craft quickly, tossing the missile into an uncontrolled tumble from which it could not recover.

She then motored up to the second missile and tucked her wing under it as she had the first. The missile exploded as she started her rotation.

Half the wing shredded and blew away. Cassie and her Dark Star tumbled with no hope of resuming control. They struggled for enough domination over the winds of fate to land with more elegance than a brick.

The third missile flew on, undeterred, and the brilliant spot of the tanker flared, then disappeared.

Cassie continued to fight the physics of flight with some success. The tumbling stopped, and the spinning slowed.

An iceberg appeared before her. Not the iceberg of her dreams with a nice flat top for landing, but an iceberg nonetheless.

With a painful mental jerk, she wrenched her awareness from her beloved plane and looked to save herself. She pulled the ejection lever...

And nothing happened. Cassie rolled her eyes. "Everything else works like a dream on this damned prototype, and you're telling me the ejection seat is broken?"

She continued to maneuver her damaged craft until it touched the edge of the iceberg, a short, flat area that gave way to a glacial mountain all too soon.

The Dark Star spun on the ice, hit a boulder, and broke into pieces.

The plane started sinking into the ice, the heat of its skin melting everything around it. Cassie struggled with the seat belt, finally got free, and went to work on the hatch.

She eventually succeeded in wrenching the door off and jumped into a freezing pool of slush.

A chunk of the mountain overhanging the plane broke off and tumbled down, shattering as it fell.

It trapped Cassie in the slush.

Cassie wondered dazedly whether she was freezing to death or drowning or both.

She opened her mouth to scream, but water filled her lungs. That was fine. She could talk to herself without speaking.

As the cold seeped through her body and oxygen starvation seared her lungs, the awareness of the universe she had described for Dale comforted her. In her mind's eye, she could see the cells in her body slowing down, the electrical impulses of her brain becoming more sporadic, and her heart pulsing one last time. As with every other aspect of the universe she had come to understand, its beauty captured and provoked her.

Her neurons fired in farewell, giving her time for a last thought.

No matter how artistic and lyrical, dying still sucks.

FUTURE HISTORY, UNCONTROLLED

New York Times headline:

Volcanic Eruption in Antarctica

An immense volcanic eruption has occurred deep under the ice in Antarctica. The blast, estimated at over ten times the power of the Hiroshima bomb, was strong enough to breach the continent's glacial surface and spew immense clouds of steam in every direction. Readers in South Africa should see the clouds in three days.

Some scientists disagree with the volcanic eruption's analysis. They point to seismic readings suggesting a series of three separate blasts, though they have no explanation. Other scientists say the second and third seismic readings were simply aftershocks as the ice above the volcano shifted and collapsed.

A minor increase in radiation in the steam has raised some concerns that a vein of uranium ore from beneath the volcano had melted into the magma and was then ejected into the atmosphere. Detailed readings indicate the bump in radiation poses no threat to human life.

Greenpeace announcement:

Massive Explosion in Antarctica is yet more proof of global warming

When will people listen?

Fox News headline:

Democratic Congress Leaks Radiation into Our Air

Had the Democrats taken events in Antarctica seriously, rather than focusing on their radical fascistic socialist agenda, the immense clouds of radioactive particles now fast approaching the rural communities of America would have been properly contained beneath the ice where they formed.

When will people listen?

Ruby Rage imageboard gem-drop from the Ruby:

Radiation Proof of Nuclear Testing

The presence of radiation in the Antarctic steam cloud is proof that yet another nation has entered the Nuclear Club. No evidence is required to know that the culprit is the Nazi who recently overthrew the legitimate President of the Congo, a wise man who had accepted the role of his country as part of the Russian Imperium.

Unfortunately, the Congolese dictator has taken a giant step forward in nuclear technology: the device they tested released so little radiation it should be

considered a “clean” next-generation weapon, making its use in everyday warfare not merely possible but inevitable.

Fear not, fellow travelers. We shall cleanse the Congo of this foul disease, as we have cleansed so many others in the past.

A Storme website, posted by Tina:

With horrific losses, we won.

A handful of neurons established connections and fitfully fired. Another sequence of neurons detected an acoustic event and relayed the sound to the awakened neurons.

The collection of cells in this temporary revival was inadequate in number to parse the sounds as the word “Hallelujah!”

A short time later, a much larger collection of neurons engaged. Their connections were inadequate to enforce the directives that came first to their meandering attempts at thought: the demands to breathe and to shiver all the muscles to warm up.

Fortunately, neither shivering nor breathing seemed necessary, and the cells returned to sleep.

An even larger and more distributed mesh network of neural cells fired soon thereafter. More acoustic stimulation occurred, and the voice recognition system identified Dale’s voice.

Dale was dead, so the cells deduced that they too were dead. Moreover, they had apparently gone to heaven. This

presented a puzzle far beyond the cells' capacity to analyze. While the Boy Scout would surely make it through St. Peter's Gate, the cells knew they were destined for the flames of hell.

Sometime later, the newly activated brain tissue parsed another conversation. This discussion centered around the recent and fortunate life-saving use of a remotely piloted fuel tanker drone, though the cells couldn't see how that related to anything.

Another conversation, or more likely, a dream, followed, reiterating an earlier conversation about how you could keep a finger alive for a day if you kept it just above freezing, but you could only keep an arm alive for an afternoon, and you could only keep a whole human suspended for a couple of hours before you had to bring the body back to life or watch it die.

Except that the record had been broken. Someone was on track to bring another someone back after three hours of immersion in icy slush. It would be a miracle—a scientific miracle, but still a miracle.

Before their network dissolved again, the aggregated cells wondered who the lucky survivor was.

Finally, the axons and dendrites connecting distant clusters of neurons sprang into action, and a foggy approximation of a human mind emerged.

Cassie snapped her eyes open. A gaggle of people was staring and smiling at her. They all held their breath and cheered.

Remy was there, with a cast on one arm. She wiggled her fingers.

Cassie couldn't remember why Remy had the cast, but she understood that the wiggling fingers were a good sign.

Remy stepped forward. "*Most excellent!* You're back. There's a problem, and I really need your help."

Cassie's memories might be fractured and distorted, but she could still remember some basic principles. Although she couldn't remember why she couldn't remember, she knew who to blame.

She spat the words that leaped into her mouth. “Remy, you bitch, what did you do to me *this* time?”

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The child's mobile design for a nuclear reactor was described to me by a fellow hardcore science fiction author, David Brin. He attributed it to Heisenberg, who did work on the Nazis' nuclear project. I have not found confirmation of the design, but David is a reliable source—far more reliable than the online media from which too many of us, me included, get our news.

The Nazis had already tried to build a reactor like Fermi's with graphite as the moderator, but unbeknownst to them, their graphite was tainted with boron, which absorbed neutrons and destroyed all hope of getting a chain reaction. Disaster averted.

Admiral Hyman Rickover did obliterate all work on unassailably safe molten salt reactors to focus America's resources on the pressurized light water reactors he preferred. His reasons for destroying the thorium reactor research sort of made sense at the time but became obsolete a couple of decades later. Now we're stuck with nuclear reactor tech that is riskier than it needs to be and juices the opponents of the best carbon-free energy source that works well at midnight. Success averted. Win some and lose some, I guess.

The PTSD drugs are very real and are effective, judging by how they've helped a friend of mine. If you have a friend who suffers from PTSD, urge them to see a doctor and consider a prescription.

It is all too true that a political moron published one of the most sensitive photos from one of our newest surveillance satellites on Twitter. If you don't know which political moron

violated our national security in that horrific fashion, look it up.

The scene about rewriting software in real-time when Andrey is with Sasha is derived from a true story. I have a friend, a software engineer whose neurodivergence was severe enough to make it difficult for him to live alone. The upside to his condition was that it gave him the ability to focus on a page of code with freakish intensity and clarity.

Anyway, I was sitting next to him at a conference at which I was about to make a presentation on secure software using coding examples. He started reading through my main example, which was seven pages long, pausing from time to time to inspect some item closely. About halfway through, he pointed at a line of code and said, “There’s a bug here.”

There *was* a bug there. I looked at where he pointed and shook my head in amazement. I explained, “Yeah, I know that’s a bug, but it doesn’t have anything to do with the point I’m making with this example, so I didn’t bother to correct it.”

Fortunately, no one else in the auditorium noticed when I brought it up on the main display.

The Lebensborn Association was a real organization that worked with the Nazis on their real genetic experiments. You can read about it in *The Atlantic*.

The line of poetry Cassie quotes as she rides the Dark Star is from *High Flight* by John Gillespie Magee Jr. Two other phrases from the poem are buried in the text. There; I’ve given you a minor mystery to unravel for your amusement.

Most of what I said about Marbella was true at the time of writing. Is it still true as you read this? You’ll need newer information.

There’s a poem about Antarctica that Leo says he had GPT-4 write for him during his early experiments with AI. In reality, I had GPT-4 write this poem for me during my early experiments with AI.

It seems clear that this type of AI will soon be good enough to replace humans in certain kinds of work for which

humans are ill-equipped. We should experiment with replacing politicians with AIs. The politicians will claim the AIs tell too many lies. Seriously, are the politicians complaining about lying?

Whether AI can drive the engineering of conspiracy cults to a higher level is less certain.

However, though AI-engineered cults are not presently extant, neither are they out of the question. Generative AI had yet to be born when I wrote the first Dread Nought novel and created EStorme and Ruby Rage. I did not have a clue at the time about what new tech Franz could introduce that would enable him to supercharge Ruby Rage for higher levels of violence. In hindsight, it's clear that generative AI was that technology.

It's true that falsehoods and lies outcompete truth on social media. This is obvious only in hindsight, unfortunately.

For those interested in experiments on the vulnerability of humans to social remodeling, the Stanford Prison Experiment was a real thing, as were the Milgram Experiment and the Robbers' Cave Experiment. Check them out to learn the scope of the risks we run from social-network-fueled conspiracy cultism.

We who worked on the early implementations of global hypertext predicted a lot of things correctly. We foresaw that knowledge would spread at an accelerated pace, and to steal a phrase from Eric Drexler, we knew that would lead to a leap forward in the evolution of knowledge.

We did *not* predict the development of echo chambers of delusion that would spawn global cults, and we did not predict the speed with which lies would outperform truths. Now we need to make another leap to ensure that wisdom evolves faster than delusion.

Some of you will not be surprised to hear that when I am world-building, I fabricate my hypothetical technologies in pointlessly rich and accurate detail. One of the strangest experiences of my career was designing the sociological machinery behind the EStorme and Ruby Rage imageboards.

When I finished integrating a viable combination of memetic mindwashing techniques into a fully-fledged mental assault weapon, I was depressed by how realistic it seemed.

In *Zero Sum*, one of the consortium members who helped Dale buy out Dread Nought observed with relief, “We don’t have millions of whacked-out loons out there. We have a handful of secret agents and psyops engineers transforming ordinary people into whacked-out loons. It restores my faith in the basic nature of humanity.”

These stories are oddly less dystopian than reality because, as this investor noted, in the world of Dread Nought, human beings are not naturally as insane as they appear to be at the current moment in time.

In our reality, we don’t need a covert team of social engineers manipulating us. We manipulate ourselves. So fighting the madness will be even harder.

This leads me to ask a question of those of you who will read this more than fifteen years hence, in 2040 or so.

Did we win?

If there are still readers of books like this in 2040, presumably, the answer is yes.

Marc Stiegler

August 2023

OTHER BOOKS BY MARC STIEGLER

The Braintrust

The Braintrust - A Harmony of Enemies (1)

(Prometheus Award Nominee)

The Braintrust: A Crescendo Of Fire (2)

The Braintrust: Rhapsody For the Tempest (3)

The Braintrust: Ode to Defiance (4)

The Braintrust: Requiem (5)

Dread Nought Series

Triple Cross (1)

Double Tap (2)

Power Plan (3)

Zero Sum (4)

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