

## *Adaptation ~ Part I*

By Jeremy Tyrrell

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This work was originally written in English in the Australian dialect but has since been converted to a North American dialect.

### *Dedication*

For my wonderful wife and inspiration, my balance and best friend, Josephine.

## *Chapter 1*

*“We care because we are human,  
and we are human because we care.  
He who shuns his brothers and sisters  
is not human.”*

*Sister Candice, Berwick Chapter*

At a stage early on in its existence, Man decided he would be different from the rest of the animal kingdom. He was made of the same stuff, for sure, but his animalistic motivations would be forced to contend with new powers of logic, emotion and free will.

No longer was he content with ignorance, he sought truths. Fed up with barbarity, he sought society.

His base desires have deeper roots, however, and continue to abuse his motivations for their own purposes. History, it seems, is merely a landscape pitted with the outcomes of the constant struggle between the divine and the base.

In the sparkling streets of Newport, Rhode Island, a figure stood silently and watched as busy people bustled by. There was always motion. Motley crowds of individuals did important things and went to places urgently to perform more important things.

There was a hum. If you took away the cars, the buzzing lights, and all the other man made paraphernalia that filled the world, there would still be that hum.

Low toned, omnipresent, it sat just under the range of hearing, almost to the point of being felt.

It was the sound of humanity, of civilization. It had been around for thousands of years, and still it had not changed.

From the ancient Egyptians working the fields, through to the Spanish explorers crossing great seas, across nations and cultures, the hum remained unchanged.

It rippled. It bobbed. It carried on as the people that made it continued to do exactly what it was that they did, this and that.

Ryan was unnoticed in the throng. In his gray pants and black jersey he was neither threatening nor appealing. He did not look wealthy enough to rob, nor was he overly attractive.

His brown hair was cropped just so, not in the latest fashion, nor in some outmoded way. He stood against a wall, covered heavily in graffiti, and it only complemented his unimportance, hiding him in full view from the others walking, running, strutting by.

He closed his eyes and listened closely. The hum was being throttled by the ungraceful mechanical whirring and electronic noise surrounding him.

Cars honked, phones squealed, neon signs buzzed like gnats. Overhead a maglev shuttle clattered and clanked along its magnetic supports as it ferried those within to somewhere better.

There was life in Newport. Human life. It was one of the few spots in America that had been untouched by the ravages of the Hanean War. The people of the town had not been unaffected, of course.

Every citizen had family and friends lost in the disaster. Not that a casual observer would notice. In the years following the bombs, chemical and radioactive warfare, the wounds healed, the media reported less and less about the atrocities, and it became easier for the individual to go back to his life.

Life. It was and continues to be the great conundrum. It is a fallacy to believe that all things natural are beneficial and benign, and therefore anything artificial is, by default, an evil.

But life is indeed unnatural. By rights it should never have happened. Religions have grappled loosely with it, scientists have tried to put it down to statistics, but nothing comes close to explaining how it came to be.

But still it exists. Beyond any doubt.

The conundrum lies in the observations of natural systems. A rock, strong and sturdy, will

eventually be eroded to dust and be strewn across the ground without so much as a hole to remember it.

A river may bubble along for eons only to dry out, leaving a cracked bed. A gigantic star will consume all of its fuel and gradually sputter out.

Little by little a system wears against the onslaught of other systems, bashed, beaten, ground and pulverized down to nothingness, swallowed and reformed.

But life fights against nature. Gravity pulls it down, so it gets up again. The sun sears its skin, so it tans. In freezing cold climates under sheets of ice moss will grow. Next to volcanic vents deep under a crushing weight of water bacteria will thrive. Chip a stone and it will remain so, but cut a finger and it will stubbornly heal.

Death is not the opposite of life, only a stepping stone in a perpetual, mind boggling cycle. Without death there could be no life, no way for the battered being to make way for the next soldier.

No, *Entropy* is the true antagonist, a vile evil that life does battle with every moment of every day. It is an insidious evil that comes in many names. 'Chaos' it is called, and 'Disorder'. But, by far, the most popular name of this evil is 'Nature'.

Nature is a monster. It beats us, burns us, suffocates and kills us, yet spitefully we survive, struggling and fighting against the gaping maw of nothingness.

Some call it 'Mother', but what mother denies her children? What mother would sooner see them rot than grow?

And so Ryan listened. He listened to a girl chatter on a telephone about nothing in particular. He listened to a car sounding its horn angrily and the driver cursing profanities at the pedestrians passing in front of him.

A knock to his shoulder and a muttered apology from nobody in particular brought him out of his thoughts.

"These people have indeed lost their way," he said to himself, "They have grown complacent. They do not hear the whistling of the wind coming to claim their souls, but instead have glutted themselves with indulgences."

A dog scampered past, paused to sniff his feet, and then continued along. He watched as it was swallowed by a sea of legs.

His shoulders slumped as a heavy weight lowered upon them. For a while he stood, desperately trying to avoid the conclusion that was dancing in his mind.

He sighed deeply, far too deeply for a teenager, "And so the struggle *must* be reignited."

He shoved his hands into his pockets and walked along with the crowd until he came to the shuttle station at Memorial Boulevard.

A short while later he had climbed the stairs, looking out over the sea of people waiting impatiently to climb into a pod-shuttle.

A stranger amongst the strange, he blended perfectly on the outside. Inside, however, he was churning. So many people. So many sad, unhappy faces.

From high up on the stairs, the view of the water to the West would have been inspiring, if anybody had cared to look at it.

A janitor dressed in a drab orange wandered around aimlessly, picking up this and that off the floor.

Ryan laughed softly to himself, watching as the crowd dropped their waste, and the janitor picked it up and put it in his little bag. He did not laugh out of spite, rather at the irony: The lowliest among them was the also most worthy, for it was he who acted most against entropy.

To his right was a dull door leading to the magnetic levitation control facility. The handle would not budge.

"Hey!" yelled a voice, "You're not supposed to be over there! The shuttle's that way! Hey!"

Ryan turned to see the janitor marching over to him. He stood still and waited as the man puffed his way toward him.

"You're not supposed to be over here!" he said again.

"I did hear you," said Ryan.

“What are you, eh? Some kind of smart ass?” sneered the janitor into Ryan's face. He smelled like stale alcohol mixed with chewing mint. The skin on his head was flaky under a crop of thinning, dark hair.

Ryan sighed, “I am not, as you say, a 'smart ass'.”

His contempt was palpable. “Furthermore I can assure you that I have good reason to be here.”

The janitor looked unsure. The man, an adolescent really, before him had not seemed terribly important before, but, as he watched, an air of certainty, of grandness, grew about him.

He bit his lip and managed to say, “Oh yeah?”

Ryan rolled his eyes. Dealing with the general population was not something he enjoyed doing. “Yes. And those reasons have nothing to do with you. If you wish to bring this to the attention of Manager Keith Sullivan...”

“Oh, you know Mister Sully, then?” said the janitor, his face breaking into a smile, “That's all right then. Sorry about the barking and all that, you know, but we get rags around here sometimes, doing all sorts. But you're not a rag. So if Mister Sully needs you to go in, that's good enough for me. Here, let me get this, then.”

In truth he was relieved that he did not need to take the matter any further. It was out of his hands now, and he could return to the task for which he was employed.

The janitor fumbled in his pockets and produced a key, unlocked the door and ushered Ryan in. Sullivan was a powerful man about the station. He wore a dark suit, kept a trim mustache, and earned quite a bit more than the janitor did.

As a consequence, he had learned that anyone bearing 'Mister Sully's' name also belonged to such a powerful clique.

“So, you a rep or something? Only ask 'cause Mister Sully ain't so fond of salesmen, you know.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Only you don't look like a salesman.”

Ryan looked impatient.

“I am not,” he said, “And my business is my own and Mister Sullivan's.”

“Oh.”

“I thank you, and I will be sure to mention your vigilance to Manager Sullivan next time I see him, mister, er...”

“Ashraf.”

Ryan smiled.

“Ashraf,” he repeated, “I will be sure to remember your name.”

“It's not an unusual name, where I'm from.”

“I did not say that it was.”

“Only that a lot of people do. See, I'm actually a descendant of the great house of El Vizul. That's my last name, see? They were a powerful influence across Arabia and Syria before the war,” said Ashraf, eager to share his tale, “They owned oil pipelines, fishing stocks, supermarkets. Why, back then you couldn't sneeze without the permission...”

Ryan held up his hand for silence, “Ashraf, I do not mean to be rude...”

The janitor was crestfallen, “Oh, of course, of course. You gotta do some important stuff, then. Just be sure to close this when you're done.”

He pinched and pulled his overalls, turned and went back to picking up bits of insignificant items of rubbish and putting them in his bag. Ryan watched him for a bit longer, then went in and closed the door behind him.

A hall stretched before him, with pipes and electrical cables running the length, lit with a series of tired fluorescent lights.

Whirs and rumblings echoed throughout. The buzz of the lights mingled with the clanking of pipes while a compressor down the hall joined in with its own chorus. It was like listening to an orchestra warming up, only that they never got to the main song.

Although it sounded like discord, there was a rhythm.

It was the rhythm of machines doing what they were supposed to be doing. Individually they were insignificant, but as a whole the system came together to fulfill a purpose.

If one machine stopped making the right noise, as it inevitably would, it would be repaired or replaced, whichever was more convenient or cost effective. The parts of the old machine would be broken, stripped, melted and crushed to become, perhaps, part of a new machine, a new purpose.

Ryan made his way down the hall slowly, listening for the tell-tale sound of workers but nobody was about. The whole magnetic levitation control system was fully automated.

A primary control system was fed a myriad of data from sensors scattered about the tracks, compressors and shuttles, which it used to ensure that the shuttles stayed on the tracks. It was backed up with a redundant control center which would kick in if the primary system ever failed.

It had never failed.

A camera, recessed neatly in the wall, blinked at Ryan as he went passed, silently watching his progress. His presence was not expected, certainly not one of the normal happenings within that tunnel. In a split second the decision was made to report the incident to the security server.

Three levels up, in a small tower overlooking the station, Henry was kicking back in his swivel chair. It was a drudge of a job, but it paid money. Money meant that he could enjoy things like eating and sleeping.

It was a bonus that he often employed these two favorite past times while earning his keep.

In the past year there had only been a handful of 'incidents'. Many were concerned patrons worrying about a bunch of loitering rags.

Others had involved missing children, all of which were found without incident, having wandered off to get lost in the throng. One of the more interesting events had kept Henry occupied for a whole three hours. An actual, live crabman had made its way into the underground power unit.

A few blasts from his sidearm had made short work of it, spattering quivering bits of flesh all over. What took some time, apart from cleaning up, was figuring out how it had gotten past the barriers.

A bit of crawling and poking around revealed that the main sewage grate had several bars melted clean through. No sign of any other intruder was found, and the incident was put down to a breach by Luddite fanatics. It became yesterday's news, then last week's. Within two months it was all but forgotten, but at least Henry had a welcome distraction retelling the story to anybody that would listen, and a grisly souvenir in the form of a crabman's dried up hand.

A monitor flashed to life, beeping noisily, requesting his immediate attention.

"Intrusion Detected - Control Access Corridor," it read, showing details of a figure skulking along a corridor, the images warped from the angle of the cameras coupled with their fish-eye lenses.

It took a few seconds for Henry to put his coffee down and sit up noisily, and a few seconds more to grasp the situation. The figure did not look imposing or menacing, more like it was wandering into a store to browse.

Henry heaved himself out of his comfortable chair and strapped on his holster.

No doubt the access door had been left unlocked and this was some curious foreigner who was looking for the bathroom.

Still, if one had gotten in, there might be more, and if a bunch of rags were to cause havoc in the tunnels, he would never hear the end of it. Henry checked his sidearm, swigged the last of his coffee, took a deep breath and opened the elevator. The doors slid closed behind him.

After a few seconds they opened again, displaying the service entrance, well lit and welcoming. He stepped out cautiously and looked around. Everything was as it should be; the double doors on the other side of the room were sealed, all lights were on.

An air pump kicked in, whirring for a few seconds before coughing to a stop.

To his right he fiddled with a latch and opened the cover to a security monitor. He punched in a few keys and it brought up a map, highlighting the currently tracked location of the intruder.

Making a plan in his head, Henry turned off the monitor, closed the cover and walked to the

double doors. They slid open and he stepped lightly into the corridor.

A gush of coolant through an overhead pipe made him flinch, but he kept his eyes focused at the end of the corridor.

There were a few manholes joining corridors here and there, and there was a chance that the intruder could use these to escape, but these were inhabited by muttrats. They would be sure to let out a squeal if anything came close. No, if the intruder was around, he would be wandering the corridors.

Henry picked up the pace and trotted as quietly as his jangling harness would allow him down the hall to the corner.

He turned to the left, past the coolant recycling processor with its enormous inlet valves, and took the next right. He paused every so often to listen for footfalls or any other sign to betray the location of the intruder but above the hissing and groaning of the pumps, fans and compressors he could not make out anything.

It was unnerving. In his office above he had complete control, video and sound at his fingertips, air conditioning, coffee and a comfortable seat. Down here, in the bowels of the magnetic levitation system, his presence was insignificant.

Beads of sweat started to break out on his brow. He opened an inspection panel and viewed the read out.

It meant nothing to him, giving data relating to flow amounts and temperatures, all in green. Everything was as it should be.

Funnily enough, it did not reassure Henry. It felt like the hush of a crowd before a spectacle, the calm before a tempest. Something was not right and that something was linked to whoever was down here.

Where the hell was he, anyway?

He closed the panel silently and turned down the next two corridors and halted. Around this area was where the computer had signaled the last location of the trespasser.

Gingerly he peered around the corner to see yet another empty corridor. A blast of steam escaped from a pipe at his feet, billowing throughout the corridor before being whisked away by the air extraction system.

Instinctively his hand crept to his holster and touched the hilt of his pistol. Adrenaline crept through his stomach to his chest, creating a sickly sensation of anticipation.

Would he have to fire? Surely not. Surely this whole thing was a misunderstanding, and he would just need to give a few gruff instructions in slow English, make a few hand gestures and politely show the intruder out. That was all.

No, that was not all, and his stomach told him as much.

Quickly he checked behind him, in case anything had dared to follow. He drew out his pistol and held it at the ready, pointing toward the floor with his finger alongside the trigger.

Another blast of steam swam around his boots. He took a few steps forward, listening intently, scanning for anything that could possibly indicate another person.

From beyond, there was nowhere else to go except through a couple of manholes, which he quickly inspected, or through to the control system maintenance, and unless the interloper had a key, he would be well trapped.

A muttrat scampered away into a service tunnel at his approach. They were harmless, when not in a pack, being nothing more than a mutated product of the radioactive and toxic cocktails unleashed during the Hanean War.

He peered around the corner and saw, at the far end, a figure performing an operation upon the access door.

Henry took a breath and stepped around, sighting the laser target directly on the intruder's back.

“Freeze!” he called, walking with deliberate strides, letting his boots clank heavily upon the floor's metal grating. A blank face turned to look at him.

“Put your hands up,” called Henry, feeling more in control now that he could see the intruder

in front of him, "Slowly now."

Ryan stopped what he was doing and did as he was asked. He stood up straight and placed his hands above his head, looking expectantly at Henry.

He was relieved. No, he would not have to shoot, but he might need to put a fist in somewhere. Maybe. With a bit of luck.

"Step back from door now," commanded Henry, "And keep those hands up. That's it, slowly now."

He sighted the laser square on Ryan's chest, finger still next to the trigger.

Henry kept the ball rolling, "Your name?"

"Ryan. And yours?"

"Ryan who?"

"Ryan. And you are?"

That was exactly what Henry wanted, a reason to be hostile.

"Don't be a smart ass. You a Luddite? Huh?"

"No. I am not a Luddite."

"You know what this is? I've got this aimed directly at your chest," he said, "I don't know if you've ever seen what a burst from a S-40 does, but I can assure you, you don't want to find out, and I don't want to have to clean it up afterward. Now, what's your full name?"

Ryan remained silent with his hands above his head. Henry began to feel uncomfortable. He had caught this intruder red handed, he had the upper hand, yet the way Ryan looked through him, he may as well have been holding his coffee rather than an S-40 pistol.

"What are you doing down here? Actually, before you answer that, how did you get down here?" asked Henry, annoyed that he did not appear to be threatening.

"The answer to the second question is, I came through the door and walked down the corridors until I arrived at this location."

Henry snarled, "What did I say about being a smart ass?"

Ryan remained deadpan, "You said not to be a smart ass, and that you had your pistol aimed at my chest. You then went on to ask a redundant question in relation..."

"What? Shut it!" yelled Henry, his voice finding a convenient gap in the constant background noise, "I'm not here to play games. How did you open the door?"

"I did not open the door. The janitor outside opened the door."

"Why? You know him?"

"I know the janitor, Ashraf, well enough," Ryan nodded, "Well enough for him to open the door for me, at least."

Henry licked his lips.

"I'll have to take that up with him later," he said, "Now the other question, why are you here?"

Ryan smirked, "I do believe the question was, 'what am I doing here', and this I shall answer first. I am attempting to open this door to the control system for the maglev shuttles. To this end I have attached a resonance lock pick, fashioned by colleagues of mine, onto the locking mechanism which I was about to activate before you came along."

Henry's eyebrows furrowed as he took all this in.

"Right, OK, so we're still being a smart ass then," he grumbled, "But I guess you're cooperating."

Ryan nodded, "I am. And now I will answer your other question, 'why am I here'. I asked myself that question a long time ago. It is a question that has no single answer, but can be answered only through one's actions."

"Yeah, ha ha. I don't do philosophy," growled Henry, adjusting the pistol in his hands, "And I'm getting tired of your shit. Tell me plain and simple, why are you here?"

Ryan took a breath.

"It would do no harm to tell you, but then again, it would do no good. Still, if you insist... I am here to plant a disruptor on the two control systems, thus derailing up to twenty shuttles and causing injury to and the deaths of hundreds, potentially thousands of people."

Henry could not believe his ears. Blood drained to his feet.

“You... what?” he muttered.

Ryan took a breath and repeated, “I am here to plant a disruptor on the two control systems...”

“Why? Why would you want to do that?” blustered Henry, “You bloody Luddite!”

Ryan's face broke for a second into a scowl, but he regained it quickly. “You mistake me. I am not a Luddite. Moreover, I do not *want* to do it, I never said I *wanted* to do it, but that is why I am here. It is something that must be done, and I am tasked with it.”

Henry stood silent. If this had been a crabman he could have blown it away. If it was a group of rags a simple threat of violence or a blast from his pistol would have sent them running.

This situation, however, this was something else entirely, something which he started to wish he had not come across.

“My arms are getting tired, may I put them down?” asked Ryan.

“No. Hell no. Hell no! You can walk over here slowly, turn around and face the wall, is what you can do. Alright? Come on, and no fast movements or I'll put a hole in you so big you can stick your disruptor through it.”

Ryan shrugged and stepped toward Henry, his feet barely sounding on the metal.

“That's it,” said Henry, glad to be getting this over with, “Like I said, nice and slowly now. Good, now turn and face the wall.”

Ryan did so.

Henry propped the pistol under Ryan's neck and reached behind him to feel for his cuffs somewhere in his belt.

In fact, he had never needed to use them in his entire career. For a split second his brain fought to remember from basic training the proper way to apply them, but as soon as his fingers grasped the familiar metallic arches it came flooding back.

“Let's get these cuffs on you, smart ass, good and proper, and then you can tell the Governor at City Hall what you just told me,” Henry muttered.

He pressed the cuff against Ryan's wrist and closed it with satisfaction, pulling it roughly down. Confident that this man in front of him no longer posed no threat, he holstered his pistol to free his other hand.

Henry grabbed Ryan's right hand to bring it down, but no sooner had he done so than Ryan twisted, whipped around, slapped Henry a blinding blow across his eyes and took his pistol out from the holster, holding it firmly under his chin.

It was a terrible turn of events. Henry's head finally caught up with his racing heart, cursing himself for his situation. Ryan thrust him against the other wall where he stood, clutching his damaged eye.

“If you put your hand anywhere near your belt, I will shoot you. If you try to call anyone, I will shoot you. If you give me any reason to think that you will interfere with what I must do, I will shoot you,” said Ryan impassively, “Now lie face down on the ground.”

Still in pain and a little stunned, Henry slowly knelt down and lowered himself to the floor.

He was still alive, that was something, and this Ryan seemed to be reasonable to a point. He was not a raving lunatic, and he was not a junky or a rag. It seemed that there was every chance that he would get out of this with his life, if not his dignity. But that stuff about the disruptor on the control systems...

“You can't do it,” he said.

Ryan responded, “I can and I will.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked, “Your picture has already been taken, the alarm has not been deactivated, and any moment now the Joes will be down here, and they don't muck around.”

Ryan said nothing, but stood over him and rummaged through his belt. He took the keys to the cuffs, unlocked them and then quietly cuffed Henry's arm to the floor. Henry could not help noticing how gentle and precise Ryan was. The cuffs, although secure and tight, did not hurt.

Ryan took the battery from Henry's radio, his keys and pass card.

“Henry, huh?” he said, examining the pass card, “A strong name applied to a weak individual.”

He finished the frisk and then stood up.

Henry coughed. “Why?” he asked.

Ryan stopped, “Why?”

Henry tugged at his cuffs. He twisted around slightly, “You'll kill people! Why kill hundreds but let me live?”

“You assume that you are still alive out of pity, perhaps? Out of a sense of morality? If that was the case, then I can understand your question. It would indeed be a warped sense of morality to let one live while many died, just on a whim,” said Ryan.

He knelt next to Henry's head and pushed the pistol against his skull. Henry gasped.

“I can kill you if you like, if that would help you. Right now your life is worth the light squeeze of a trigger. Do you know how much pressure is required to activate the triggering mechanism on an S-40?”

Ryan touched the trigger, squeezing it lightly so it moved ever so slightly.

The sensation of the gun against his head amplified Henry's other senses. He realized just how hard the floor was, how bright the lamps were, how very sickly impending death smelled. He listened as the trigger scraped against its railing as it moved half a millimeter.

“How does it feel, Henry?”

Henry panted uncontrollably, unsure of what to say. It felt horrible, indescribably awful. His mind raced of all the things he had and had not done. A moment of hatred for his tormentor, a moment of sorrow for the unfulfilled dreams, a moment of terror for the unknown.

He trembled. This was it. Henry Lancashire's life was to be terminated by his own pistol in a dingy corridor. How long would it be before anyone found him body?

“Can you feel it, Henry? Can you feel the waste? Listen! You can only hear it if you listen!”

The machines continued their whirring. Somewhere down the hall a diagnostics routine started.

“If you listen closely you can hear the dripping of your life as it hemorrhages away, lost to insignificance. Can you hear it? You can, can you not? Now listen, Henry, listen to the billions of lives that exist with no direction, dribbling their gift away without a second thought. Billions of lives, Henry, billions of lives in ruin. So much potential, so much waste! Salvation is what they crave. If you could make a difference, Henry, if you could stop the bleeding, you would, would you not?”

Henry felt the coldness of the muzzle against his scalp, impressing a faint, red ring into his skin. He fought to control his breathing. He fought just as hard to control his shivering.

The pistol was pressed firmly for a few more seconds, then released.

“You are alive because I have not been tasked to destroy you. You are insignificant, and your death would serve no one. Believe me, I do not want to kill you, so do me one service to make it worthwhile,” said Ryan, “Will you oblige me?”

Henry attempted a nod. Ryan leaned in close and whispered in Henry's ear, “Live! Live your life!”

Ryan stood and threw the pistol down the hall. It clattered noisily to a stop.

Henry looked back after Ryan with wide eyes as he trotted back to the maintenance door and activated the resonating lock pick.

“Don't! Please, don't!” whimpered Henry.

Ryan looked back with angry eyes.

There was not anything else to say. He turned and fiddled a bit with the lock until a light turned green on the lock pick. After a brief period the door slid quietly open and Ryan stepped inside.

## *Chapter 2*

*God has done a bang up job, really,  
and for that we are appreciative.  
It's just now we can give him a helping hand.  
- Doctor Gerard Jung*

Ottavio awoke to see white. It was unnerving, a startling blankness. Was he blind? Perhaps he was he dead? That could well be it. Consciousness danced wearily to life as a thousand thoughts rushed through his brain, each fighting for his limited attention.

His heart began to beat.

He tried to remember if his heart had been beating before now, before five seconds ago. For sure he could not say whether he even existed five seconds ago. Considering each second felt like a year in his world of nothingness, it was difficult to pin anything down.

His heart started to beat faster. Where was he and why could he not see anything? If he saw blackness at least he could be assured that there was nothing to see, or if his vision was blurred he could put it down to a lack of focus, but this was white distilled, a white that was so bright yet came from no source and caused him no pain to view.

It was a white that bounced off nothing, cast no shadows, and revealed no forms. It was useless, really. A light that was perfectly luminescent was perfectly useless.

A rhythmic hissing reached his ears. Only after a few seconds did he realize that it was his own breath. He tried to feel around but found that he could not. His arms, torso and legs had been firmly bound, it seemed, preventing him from so much as wriggling. A voice blared into his ears, "Stop struggling please, we are almost done here."

In an attempt to talk back to the voice, he cleared his throat. His tongue, however, was pressed down, and his jaw was clamped in a restraint.

"And do not speak, please, it will only delay matters," came the voice again.

It was female, clinical and unfamiliar. At least it was polite.

He rested, trying to calm himself down as he waited for the voice to return. He fought furiously with his brain to try and remember anything about his present situation. The last thing that came through the fog of memory was his graduation from Shawcroft Military Academy.

It was not a chalkboards thrown in the air moment. Rather a hurried ceremony, a quick speech relayed via the internet and a certificate and code messaged to him. The military was in great demand in those days, and as a young lad Ottavio convinced himself that it was for the benefit of all that he lend his life to saving others.

Besides, college had not been an option. It was not because he did not have the grades, nor the drive, for academia, but rather because the three nearest campuses had been reduced to a smoldering pile of rubble ten years before he had a chance.

His graduation stuck in his brain. It was the moment of truth, the day when he would be an active member of society, the day he could stand up and be counted as one of the good guys. It was also the day when he and his fellow mates fell into a seedy, underground bar and spent the rest of the night in a lockup for disorderly conduct. Youth was a hell of a thing to shake off.

Surely there was more to his life since then, he was convinced. He searched deeper into the bunkers of his mind but came up empty handed. It was like looking through the pages of a diary only to find the words had jumbled themselves, making no sense, not revealing anything. Name, faces, places, they were all there, just not in any recognizable way.

His eyes shot to black, like someone had flicked a switch. He flinched uncontrollably. In the darkness he did his best to control his breathing, waiting for something, anything, to help him understand where he was and what was happening to him. First white, now black, but still nothing to see.

A sharp pain at the back of his head made him gasp. A bolt of electricity shot through his

spine reaching every extremity in his body. His body convulsed against restraints.

“Hold still now, we are about to bring you back. You might feel some discomfort as we return sensation to your nerves,” said the woman. The pain in his head intensified, throbbing, searing.

It crept down and around his face. His teeth exploded in his mouth, his jaw clenched in indescribable agony. Fire and ice raged through his lungs and up his throat.

His fingers jittered and wiggled, his jaw ground down on its restraint.

“Haah!” he moaned, fighting the urge to scream.

Saliva drooled out from his mouth piece. The agony reached a crescendo, thrilling his whole body, and then quickly dropped away, leaving him breathless, moaning.

The pain was gone. The electric sensation had subsided. He felt, apart from a little nauseated, breathless and scared, quite normal.

The voice returned, slightly more animated, “Welcome back, you can open your eyes now.”

After a second he remembered how to use his eyelids and they shot open to see the faint image of a woman in a lab coat. His eyes focused and he blinked a few times. Her face became clear. It was pale, but not white, underneath a head of neatly shaped hair. Her eyes looked stern but friendly, shielding the gentle woman inside by an air of professionalism.

She spoke, “Let us get that uncomfortable mouth piece out from there, shall we?” She reached up and unbuckled a clip near Ottavio's mouth and pulled the restraint out, trailing saliva behind it. Immediately his jaw began to ache. He opened and closed it to get some feeling back. The woman before him merely placed the restraint in a glass container on the bench and got to work on his head and arms.

“You have undergone surgery. I am sure that you have many questions, and all of them will be answered soon, I promise you, but not by myself. I will, however, remove you from your restraints,” she said, “You may feel weak at first, but believe me you are fit to stand and walk around. I encourage you to do so. If you do feel like you cannot proceed at any point, however, please do not hesitate to tell me.”

She had said those words many times before in much the same fashion.

She unclipped his head, then his arms. As she got to work on his legs he held his hands in front of his face, moving them about, retraining himself how to move.

“Penelope,” he croaked.

It was unintentional, and surprised himself. The woman before him, though, her name *was* Penelope. Penelope... something. He was not sure if that was even significant, but it was the only thing that could remember clearly.

Penelope looked up at him and smiled for half a second, before dropping her head and getting back to work on his leg restraints.

“*Miss Penelope, Agent.*”

He swallowed, trying to ease his throat. “I'm sorry,” he breathed, “I didn't... I mean, I don't know why...”

“Do not worry, it is merely your memory returning. It usually takes a good while, over a day or two, for one's brain to get completely over the trauma. Until then you will have many more episodes of involuntary utterances,” she said, undoing the last strap.

“In a way,” she said, turning back to a bench and typing on her tablet, “It is like looking through a box in the loft and stumbling across an old photograph or two. Personally, I think I would find it interesting.”

“You called me an Agent?” asked Ottavio, becoming annoyed at her nonchalance.

She looked back at him, as if ready to have a chat with an old friend, but she regained herself, professionalism winning over.

“As I said, all your questions will be answered. Until then you had best work on walking around and trying to remember as much as you can. Start with little things first, the basics. Like breathing, walking,” she said, indicating a robe on the bench next to him, “Putting on clothes.”

Ottavio followed her finger and then, with a start, looked down at himself. He was naked. His cheeks went red as he scrambled over to the bench, throwing the robe over himself and tying the

ords awkwardly. His fingers felt like sausages, still tingling and complaining about being told what to do. The back of the gown was open so he kept himself facing toward Penelope.

Penelope smiled wryly and typed a few more notes onto her tablet. It beeped and whirred softly as she did so, lighting her face with greens and blues. There were a couple of perks to her job, mundane as it was sometimes. She pivoted on one foot, picked up some strange looking instruments from off the bench and walked briskly toward the door.

“Wait,” croaked Ottavio feebly. His throat felt like sandpaper.

Penelope did not. She keyed in a number into the locking keypad. It turned green and the door slid open with a breath. She walked out and turned around, and the door closed behind her leaving Ottavio and his bare behind alone in an ill-fitting robe.

He sighed and looked about him. The room was for the most part bare, with uninteresting gray-white walls, fluorescent lights coming from recesses and a clinical, stainless steel bench.

Where he had been restrained was an upright bench, leaning slightly backward, the straps now dangling loosely. The mouth restraint grinned at him garishly, glinting in the cold white light. Behind where his head had been was a glass cylinder affixed to the wall. Inside was a savage looking array of blades, actuators and needles. He shuddered to think what they could have done to him.

Carefully he put his hand to the back of his head, feeling for any sign of damage. All he felt was a slight tinge of pain, a scratch really, on both the left and right side. And a lack of hair. His scalp had been clean shaven leaving only a faint dark dust on top.

Behind him was a large mirror. He walked up to it and looked at the rest of his body but, apart from a couple of needle marks on his hand and arm, everything appeared how it should. Or at least how he thought it should.

It was like looking at a lost friend. He knew it was himself in the mirror, but there was something unrecognizable, something intangibly different. The kind of something that a distant acquaintance would be rude enough to blurt out during polite conversation.

“Ottavio,” called a voice, male this time, “I am so glad to see you up and about.” It came from his right, a black speaker box.

He walked over to it and prodded it with his finger. The voice chuckled, “I am on the other side of this mirror. Just talk openly, and we can converse.”

Ottavio looked at the mirror closely.

“Hello?” he said cautiously.

“Hello indeed, Ottavio. Tell me, do you know who I am?”

He shook his head.

“No? Well, I am not surprised. I am Doctor Gerard Jung, and I have been your surgeon for the past five days. It was quite a delicate operation, but your gray matter is of a good sort, the kind that takes well to this sort of, um, punishment, er, if you will excuse the expression. But it was quite straightforward, quite a neat brain you have. Why, um, only last month I and my team operated on another subject for over thirty eight hours straight just to navigate the cerebellum.”

Ottavio looked at the mirror blankly. It was hard to talk to a person he could not see, harder still since he had not the faintest recollection of who he was.

“What surgery?” he managed to ask, his throat hoarse and dry.

“Well we did not perform a mere appendectomy, Ottavio. What you have been through, as you will soon remember, has been a series of enhancements, er, *adaptations* if you will.”

“Adaptations?” managed Ottavio.

“You must be parched,” said Jung, “We have kept you sustained intravenously, which is very adequate but not at all comfortable. Here.”

A plate on the wall to Ottavio's right slid up revealing a tray with a bottle of clear liquid.

“Go on, I will be right here.” Ottavio looked at the bottle suspiciously, smelled the contents and took a sip.

His throat immediately felt better. He took another few swigs and turned back to the mirror.

“What is this?”

“Water. I'm sure you remember what water is?”

“Doctor Jung,” he said, taking another drink, “Where am I?”

“In a room. Specifically, a, er, recovery room.”

The panel slid closed.

Ottavio coughed. It cleared his throat some. “Can we be a little less specific?”

“Ha! Of course. I was being facetious. You are within an underground facility surrounded by the finest of surgeons who have worked tirelessly on you for the past week. But enough of this, we have much that needs to be done,” said Jung, “Please listen carefully. We had to, ah, *disable* your memory for a bit. It is nothing permanent, I assure you, and you will begin to feel more like yourself soon enough. I have to go now and, er, prepare your next room, but I will return. Do try to remember, yes? Concentrate. Work on smells and, um, textures. The brain responds to, um, those kinds of things. In the meantime you can speed up the process with a bit of a bite to eat. Hmm... where did Maxwell put – *click!*”

Next to him the panel slid open again, this time presenting an unappetizing looking stew. Ottavio scratched his head, took a swig of the bottle and put it down on the bench. He picked up the tray, set it on the bench and had a nibble. Although it resembled glue, it was quite tasty. Very soon he had finished the bowl.

As he set it down a memory came floating to the front of his mind. It settled there, a fleck of a seed. Little by little it grew, dropping roots and spreading out fresh tendrils. This facility, Miss Penelope, Doctor Jung. An image flashed in front of him. Of course, Doctor Gerard Jung. He wore stained shirts.

Ottavio was not sure why that was significant, but it seemed to make sense, and so he clung to it. Stained with yellow nicotine from the way he held his cigarettes too close to his chest when he was thinking. The smell of stale tobacco on his breath. His missing eye that he did not bother to cover up with a patch, or use a prosthetic, preferring to let people see him as he was.

Ottavio swished his finger into the bottom of the bowl, drawing up the last remnants of stew, and sucked on it. It had been more than a little strange, but these people were not enemies, and this place was not altogether unfamiliar.

His memory was returning, as promised, and he was starting to feel at ease. He perched himself on the bench and shuddered.

The cold steel against his naked rear was like a knife. He sat on his hands and looked about, waiting for Doctor Jung or Miss Penelope to return, and keeping himself occupied by examining any thread of memory he found.

Over the next fifteen minutes his thoughts became progressively clearer. He was Ottavio Manieri, operative Agent for Houston Corps, one of the great forty Entities, the largest in America.

Among its many roles, all of which turned profits, was Social Peace and Enforcement of Common Law. It was in this branch that Ottavio was enrolled.

He had been recruited eight years ago and had since worked his way from being a general grunt, to a field agent and now an operative Agent.

Miss Penelope, he was sure, was a senior somewhere in the Research and Development division. He remembered meeting her at a cafeteria along with Doctor... Oh, the name started with a W. Winchester, Winfield, no. He tried to look at the face in his mind from another angle, sneaking up on the name he had associated with it. Winifred. Doctor Winifred, head of some department or other.

“Well met,” he had said. He was a little odd, and his accent reminded Ottavio of a character from a period movie he had seen. Head of Surgery? Biology? He was the head of something.

Satisfied that he was where he should be, Ottavio let his mind wander a bit, hoping it might lead him back to exactly why he was here. He let out a sigh and closed his eyes.

The speaker box broke his daydreaming, “Ottavio, please come over to the box.”

He did so.

“How are you feeling now?”

Ottavio rubbed his eyes and scratched his ear. How did he feel? Like he had just been born.

Shaky, slightly sick and utterly confused.

"Alright, I suppose," he lied.

"If you would be so kind," said Jung, "I am going to ask you to go into the next room. In there you will find a shower and a set of clothes. Wash, put them on, and, um, we'll go over... no, hang about. Um, yes, wash yourself and put some clothes on. Then, ah, you know, await further instructions. Ah, I left it right there all along."

The door at the other side of the room slid open, revealing another room, much like the one he was already in. He stepped cautiously in, waited for the door to slide closed behind him and headed to the waiting shower recess.

The feeling of warm, cleansing water on his skin was like rain on a dry river bed. His pores opened and he gasped, letting the steam fill his lungs. For a while he did nothing but let the water work its wonder.

The speaker sounded, "Sometime today, please."

His joints and muscles ached as he lathered up and rinsed. Reluctantly he got out of the shower and got to work getting dressed in the bright orange jumpsuit laid out for him.

It felt instantly humanizing to wear the clothes. His feet felt snug and protected inside boots, the underwear awarded civility. He tossed the white robe on the table and looked to a mirror on the wall. The collar on the jumpsuit was flipped, so he straightened it instinctively.

And there he was, Ottavio Manieri. Much like he had last seen himself, only void of hair, from his head to his eyebrows all the way down his toes. He wondered whether the man looking back at him was as bewildered as he was, trying to make sense of it all. If only someone would help them out.

He did not have to wait long.

"Well done. Your comprehension and motor skills appear unaffected," said Jung, "Not that we have need to worry, but you, um, understand that we must perform all post-operative tests before we, ah, can give you the all clear. Now if you are feeling up to it, can you please tell me who you are?"

Ottavio cleared his throat. It came out from him before he even realized he was saying it, "Ottavio Manieri, operative Agent four ought eight, Social Peace and Enforcement of Common Law of Houston Corps."

Something else slid up his throat and out of his mouth, "Sir."

Jung sounded satisfied, "Mm hmm. And do you know who I am?"

"You are Doctor Gerard Jung, head of Biological Adaptation and Enhancement sector, sir," said Ottavio. That took a little more effort.

"Very good, very good," muttered Jung, "Your memory is coming back nicely, I see. That means we, um, can meet face to face." In an instant the mirror dissolved to nothing and there stood Doctor Jung, squat and dumpy, hands clasped in front of him.

He nodded his head lightly. A little puff of light hair flipped down over his dud eye. He brushed it out of the way impatiently, beckoning Ottavio to come through.

Ottavio stepped through the opening where the mirror used to be.

Doctor Jung nodded and hustled him through, "I do apologize for the security. Sometimes the subject panics, you see, ah, being in an unfamiliar environment and all. The basic animal instincts have a tendency to take over but you, um, seem to have your wits about you."

Jung turned and walked over to a desk, flicking a few switches. He beckoned to Ottavio, "Come, come! I want you to see what we have done. There are others watching this, too, so, um, do not delay. Come on!"

He pressed some more buttons and a body burst out from the desk, hovering gracefully over the two of them. It was clearly a hologram but that did not stop Ottavio from flinching. He looked closely and realized that it was actually a hologram of himself, standing straight and tall.

Jung gave a little laugh, "Do not be alarmed. Ha! It is merely a generated reconstruction of you. See?" He waved his hand straight through the apparition's leg.

"It is the latest in projection technologies. We use this before and during the surgery so we can spot complications earlier rather than, um, later. And afterward, as an added bonus, I can perform

demonstrations like I am now.”

Jung put his thumbs into his suspenders and stood back, allowing Ottavio a chance to show his admiration.

After an awkward silence and a look of slight confusion on Ottavio's part, Jung cleared his throat and continued, “Well, hum. Yes. Ahem. Ladies and gentlemen of the Board, I thank you for your time.”

He fiddled with some controls. “Is this thing even working? Hello?”

“Yes, Doctor Jung, we are here. You can proceed with the demonstration,” barked a voice from his console.

“Ah, yes. Ah, sorry, I thought I'd lost you. Um, where to begin? Um, yes. I'm here with Agent Ot... Agent four ought eight, who has just come out of, um, surgical stasis. After a brief introduction, I shall demonstrate the latest update in calibration techniques.”

“Yes, keep it brief, Doctor. We are interested in this update, especially the optical display.”

Doctor Jung jumped, “Of course, of course. A lot of the operation had to do with, er, modifications along the optic route. Let's begin with that.”

He moved a mouse and clicked around while the image spun and grew, revealing a close up of Ottavio's head. Hair, skin and bone dissolved away to reveal a gruesome brain, shiny and sticky.

A bulbous part started to glow softly. “As you can see, this part highlighted in orange is the cerebellum. A little up and over, through a few sensitive areas and along this route we find the optic center.”

A red line wiggled its way along, terminating in a pulsing circle.

“This is the path from his eyes to the part of his brain that processes the signals. And we have inserted the two optic interceptors, here and here.”

Two dark, metallic cylinders appeared, animated clumsily toward the brain and clamped themselves over the nerve.

Ottavio instinctively touched the back of his head. He tried to imagine he could feel these little devices under his skin, but he could not. “What do they do?” asked Ottavio, regretting the words as he spoke.

Jung smiled broadly, “Ah! An excellent question, an excellent question indeed. These interceptors receive the signals coming in through the optic nerves. These are the upgraded model from, um, Agent three nine five's own insertion.”

A member from the board spoke up, “Speak only of the current iteration, Doctor.”

He fiddled a bit, replacing the image with a complicated diagram.

“Your eye is a sensor, yes? And a sensor reads in data from the outside world and sends it back to be processed. In this case, the sensor is your eye, hmm, and data is sent as electrical impulses to your brain to be, um, processed, yes, processed into information. The optic interceptor manipulates this data along its route, adding, removing and filtering to, ah, provide better data that will ultimately result in better information.”

A Y-shaped device animated in and attached itself to the interceptors via barely visible fibers. “This fine fellow is the processing unit. It is also attached to auditory interceptors here and here, along with other sensors placed throughout. The interceptors themselves only receive and modify the data signal. The original signal is sent to the main optical unit where it gets processed. This, as you can see, is fitted close to the brain stem.”

Ottavio looked suspicious. He said, “But... everything looks normal. I mean, nothing looks different or anything.”

“Quite right, quite right. That is because they have not been switched on.”

“There's a switch?” asked Ottavio. He felt again the back of his head. There were no surprises.

“Of sorts. And you can stop doing that. The units are underneath the skull, encased in a protective shell which are further encased in biologically neutral membranes with no contact to the outside world except through what is received via the sensory nerves. The power comes from your brain itself, only a small amount is needed, really, which means that we could leave them on indefinitely. Well, so long as your brain keeps ticking along,” said Jung, adjusting the diagram, “See

here. The interceptor is on standby, as it were. What we need to do is, um, run the startup and calibration routine. There are many, many modules included, but we shall only activate a few for now, and more as you proceed through training. If we had it turned on after the surgery, without proper calibration, well, you can imagine. Ha!”

The board member spoke sternly, “Doctor Jung! Stop your chit-chat with Agent four ought eight and proceed with the demonstration!”

Jung closed the diagram, apologizing profusely and walked over to a head brace facing what looked like an alley in a firing range, flanked with dully glowing lights embedded in the walls.

“Please,” he said, “Sit here, place your head in here, and we can begin. To tell you the truth, I am very excited to see this in action. We have refined the software a fair deal and upped the specs of the hardware to new heights, you see, which should cut the calibration time down by over three quarters. It put a bit of a dent in the budget...”

“Of which we are keenly aware...”

“But I am sure the Board is willing to overlook such trivial financial details if the results... ah, yes, sorry, please sit down, Agent, come on now.”

Ottavio walked over and sat down, placing his head in the vice. It locked behind him, holding him firmly. While it was not causing him pain, it certainly was not the most comfortable position to be in. His sudden immobility caused a pang of fear. He worked hard to convince himself that Jung meant no harm and, moreover, knew what he was doing.

“What the Hell is this thing, Doc?” grunted Ottavio.

From the back of the alley a screen zoomed in, racing along a track in the roof of the alley, and stopped before him showing a pattern of concentric rings in glowing red.

“This will take a bit of a while, but we want to make sure that everything is properly calibrated. Oh, what now?” Jung fluttered his hands abstractedly as he examined the readout on a screen. He alternately tapped at a keyboard and fiddled with a mouse, muttering quietly to himself.

“It won't take a minute, members, I am sure. It's only a safeguard on our integration server. There! Now, um, to do this calibration. Um, yes, this will take some time, but it is not difficult, really, and you will be up and out before you know it. Until then you must follow orders to the letter,” he urged, flipping this switch and tapping on that, “Now, members of the Board, I will demonstrate the reduced calibration time.”

“Just tell me what I need to do,” muttered Ottavio through his teeth, his jaw restricted.

After a few more keystrokes a small red light appeared above the screen. “Agent, look directly at that little light that just came on,” ordered Jung.

Ottavio tried his best but, being unable to move his head, found it difficult to get a focus on the red dot. “Good, good, try a bit harder, Ottavio. Don't try to move your head, just your eyes, that's it!”

The light disappeared and reappeared at the bottom of the screen. “Now look at the bottom one. Try to focus as best you can.”

Ottavio continued to follow the lights with his eyes as they appeared at various points on the screen. Little by little the screen moved further away until finally it stopped at the far end of the alley.

“Good, good. That seemed to work out fine. How do you feel?” said Jung.

“Fantastic,” came the muffled reply, “Didn't feel a thing.”

“Excellent, excellent, good to hear,” said Jung, oblivious to the sarcasm, “That's the first part done. Notice, esteemed Board, that the total time for the primary calibration has reduced from hours to mere minutes! Now I am just going to activate the primary optical display.”

The screen slid back up the alley and paused in front of Ottavio.

“Please look directly at the dot in the center of those circles. The screen will flash, but do not look away from that dot or we will scramble your brain,” instructed Jung. He laughed heartily.

Ottavio did not laugh. Neither was there a chuckle from the Board.

Doctor Jung nodded, “No, sorry, um, that was in bad taste. Yes, we, ah, in such a situation we would just have to run the calibration again, um, yes, ah... Just look at red dot and don't look away.

Ready?"

Ottavio grunted assent and the screen flashed a series of shapes and symbols before displaying a red rectangle enclosing the words, "Calibration complete, standby."

The screen turned off and whizzed back down the alleyway.

"Doc?" said Ottavio, "Did the screen just turn off?"

Jung mused, "Yes, it should have. That is part of the calibration routine. Does something, ahem, concern you?"

He could barely contain himself.

"Yes. I can see 'Calibration complete' in red. I mean, it was on the screen, but now the screen's off but it's still there!"

"Ha! Impressive, is it not?" laughed Jung, "That is the primary display kicking in. It will take a few minutes for its own internal calibration, but after that you will experience the full deal. I suppose I had better run you through it."

"That'd be swell."

Jung cleared his throat, "Members of the Board, notice, please, the significant reduction in activation and acceptance by the candidate!"

"We are noticing, Doctor, please continue."

"Right now the main optical unit is using the data we just sent it to align its coordinate system based on the, ah, secondary field of vision. What this means is that the display it inserts remains in a fixed orientation and location relative to the position of his head, and not his eyes."

"Slow down and run that by me again," said Ottavio.

"No, the presentation must continue, and this is as much for yourself as those who are looking on. You will understand in a couple of minutes anyway. Now where was I? Oh yes, um, the display will act very much like a projection screen, overlaying information across what the agent actually sees."

The board member sounded curious, "What kind of information?"

"I was getting to that. Preprocessed data from other sensors, conditional reports, and our new 'friend or foe' highlighting. There really is no limit, no, very state of the art. Many of the results of Minnesota's work has made its way in there," said Jung.

He typed a couple of keys and the seat and brace holding Ottavio swung around to face him. "The unit, the latest model, has a Tactical Coprocessor, amongst the usual collection of processing modules. We will run through that in a short while. It, too, requires an initial calibration."

"These calibrations," the Board member asked, "How often does it need to be done?"

"That's the beauty of it! It is only performed once, to give the units a head start, ha! After that, the units constantly correct themselves based upon the incoming data... not like the gamma models," grimaced Jung.

Ottavio's face matched Jung's. He was not entirely sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Oh," said Ottavio, "Doc, something's up. I'm seeing... I don't know what."

"Yes? What do you see?" asked Jung.

In front of his eyes a set of characters came into view, glowing softly red, semitransparent over the rest of the room. He tried to read a few. "Um, a whole lot of words and numbers. Wait, axis orientations?"

"Ah, a perfect one to start on. Hold on... there. The seat our Agent is in will turn and tilt. Agent do try to, um, hold on tight. We commandeered it from the Aerospace Division and made our own special modifications. Just, ah, one of the measures we've taken to keep within budget."

A few keystrokes later and the seat and brace swiveled slowly, panning and rolling gently.

"The accelerometers and geographical locators will provide detailed information on the orientation and location of your homunculus in the world. Note how your bearing is slowly changing depending on the rotation of your chair. Note, too, that the geographical location is not constant, since the unit is based within your head, and your head is not at the center of your rotation. Is this making sense?"

Ottavio muttered, "I would nod if I could."

“I understand that this is uncomfortable, but please endure me for a little longer,” said Jung, “The location is derived from a GPS signal, your bearing from a digital compass. Oh, it's only about the size of a grain of rice, mind, but it does the trick.”

He tapped a key, flicked a switch and spoke into a microphone. “Please prepare the staging area for the second phase of calibration, Miss Penelope. We're, um, almost done here.”

An affirmation came back through a speaker and Jung turned to face Ottavio. His eyes were moving around as he examined the array of information before him. “You will notice an internal status report. Sensors placed throughout the Agent's body are giving constant feedback, letting us, and him, see exactly how he is feeling.”

Ottavio interrupted, “I know exactly how I'm feeling right now.”

“You might think this is not useful,” continued Jung unabated, “But studies have shown that operatives with direct, um, feedback relating to their own condition perform over three times better than those without. Possibly four, I can't remember every statistic. Anyway, the question, of course, is 'Why?' Alcohol and stress affect one's ability to assess oneself without bias, you see. Lying or acting relies on an Agent's ability to monitor their heart rate and breathing. Wounds inflicted may appear severe, but in reality are superficial, and vice-versa. An objective measurement of these things allows an operative to make an, ah, informed decision as to whether to continue on or abandon an objective, call for reinforcements or go it alone.”

“So I have a readout on whether my leg is still attached, huh?”

“The measurements are based on electrolytes, platelet counts, blood viscosity, skin temperature, hormone levels, oh, too many things to mention, really. We managed to integrate most of the readings to a handful of sensor types, to cut down on costs and the need to wire too many sensors about your body.”

Ottavio watched a readout display information relating to his core temperature. It changed to show his alertness level, then his blood sugar levels, hydration, salt and then a rundown of the state of his limbs, torso and head.

“Hey Doc, why are my legs only at... fifty four percent?”

Jung held up a finger, typed away and turned to the hologram. It changed to an image of Ottavio again, highlighting his legs. Skin disappeared, showing his red, well-formed muscles. Jung tapped a bit more.

He said, “Fifty percent or above is a good, normal number, what I would expect. It used to be about, ah, thirty before we started introducing diasporinol into the muscles before operating. I was going to display this later, but I guess now is just as good a time as any. Actually, I might just finish the rest of the primary work while I am explaining. Hold still a bit.”

He stood up, walked to a bench and picked up a collar. It fit snugly around Ottavio's neck and buzzed a little as Jung clamped it shut. Jung attached a cable from it to a console and sat back down.

“There. That will enable me to perform some minor adjustments. Blast it all! Now I have gone and lost my train of thought,” said Jung.

Ottavio prompted, hoping to get himself out of the restraints sooner rather than later. “My legs? Fifty odd percent?” he suggested.

Jung turned back to the hologram. “Ah, of course, of course. At least your short term memory is unaffected. Your legs, arms, chest, head and the like, you will notice, are not at an optimum level. We have performed work on them all, while you were under, to enhance their functionality and thus your overall usefulness. They are still in the, ah, recovery stage. Seriously, the human body is an amazing thing. Do you like the color red?”

“Was that question directed to the Board, Doctor?”

“What? No, sirs, madams, um, no, I was asking the Agent,” he said, turning to Ottavio, “Red. The display you see, it is in red, no?”

“No. I mean, yes. It is in red. Why?”

“Because we can change it, is all. The last thing we need is you complaining about the color. We have made the interface customizable. Here, use this console,” said Jung.

A console slid up to the seat in front of Ottavio. It contained a display with a variety of

sliders, buttons and other controls relating to the visual appearance of his overlay. He started playing with the hue control. The collar buzzed a little. He watched as the overlay changed to an iridescent green, to a soft blue.

The Board interrupted, "And how much time and money was wasted on making the optical display change color?"

Doctor Jung held up his hands, "None. I mean, well, it was built into the initial design. The UI is well abstracted in the software, we can add modules as necessary. Here, Ottavio, I mean Agent, you can fiddle there while I continue. That should save a bit of time. But do, um, do listen while you're doing so. I'll move along, since I can see you have your wits about you. Now, members, we have gone the extra step from superficial muscle groups to include major muscles, including rectus femoris, vastus medialis, gastrocnemius..."

"I get the idea," grunted Ottavio. He fiddled a bit more with the brightness.

"... pectoralis, bicep, rhombus, ha! Even his sartorius, would you believe? They have all had a radical, um, upgrade, we can say. Many muscle fibers have been either appended or partially replaced with patented neuro-reactive myoactuators. They are completely synthetic, no animal or human products used."

"What is the cost as opposed to the animal derived version?"

"A mere ten percent," said Doctor Jung, hurriedly adding, "Which pays for itself in the long run, because it requires less oxytenamine and doesn't cause any auto-immune issues."

"Um, before you continue..." said Ottavio.

Jung stopped, a little annoyed at being constantly interrupted. "Yes, yes, what is it?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm done fiddling. Can I be released now?"

Jung harrumphed and started undoing the restraints. "Normally subjects are overwhelmed and at least a little appreciative," he muttered to himself.

Ottavio rolled his eyes. "Look, it's not that I'm not grateful, or underwhelmed, it's just that this is a lot to digest. Only a short while ago I couldn't remember who I was or where I was, and then I'm clamped in a vice with a superimposed display in my eyes being told that I have myoactuators instead of muscles."

"No, you still have your muscles and connective tissue," corrected Jung, "They append, not replace. Tendons, you see, are complex, tough beggars. There's only so much we can do to help them out. Nano carbon fibers and a bit of nitrification is about all. Bumps up the tensile strength considerably, but if the substrate is..."

"Well, whatever," said Ottavio, rubbing his jaw, sore from the clamp. Jung unclipped the collar.

"So, I'm guessing these things assist me in some way?"

"Indeed they do, in more ways than you can guess. Crude strength, for starters. Agility. Stamina. Stability. The muscles are still incorporating themselves with the myoactuators in your arms and legs, hence the low reading. The biological coating on the outside integrates nicely with the myosin, but it still is traumatic for the muscles, tendons and cartilage. We will not run through those tests involving strenuous exercise until you have properly healed, in about a week or so."

Ottavio scratched his head and rubbed his jaw. He mused, "So, if I can put this all together in a nutshell, I have been *improved*?"

Jung's face changed immediately to a smile. "Quite right, quite right. Adapted, I prefer. To your line of work. Oh, there is a whole host of improvements, and each will be dealt with in good time. Better than explaining, yes, perhaps it would be best to move you straight into the second phase staging area, hmm?"

"Doctor, this is all very impressive, I am sure. Can you do us all a favor?" came a sour voice.

"Uh, yes, Senator, of course."

"Terminate this demonstration and send us the results, along with the final cost sheet. There's a good chap."

The communication with the Board went black.

“Well, there's gratitude,” muttered Doctor Jung. He turned to Ottavio, “And you could have conducted yourself better. It's not every day you get an opportunity to impress the Board.”

“Sorry I couldn't be of more assistance. I don't know who they are. Shit, I barely know who you are.”

Doctor Jung pushed his face up under Ottavio's. His missing eye was a little unnerving.

“I am Doctor Jung. I've been inside your skull and all around your body. I know more about you than you do yourself. *They* are the Board of Houston Corps', the ones who are funding Project Adaptation.”

### *Chapter 3*

*“An Object has mass and form.  
An environment contains Objects.  
An Agent is an Object that can manipulate its environment,  
in order to affect other Objects.”*  
– *Doctor Gerard Jung*

Training was becoming increasingly intense. Ottavio had grown used to his implants, and was now putting them use in special operations. The previous week's training involved a physical regimen of swimming, running, crawling and climbing, all very commando. To his satisfaction he found he could complete all tasks and barely break a sweat.

He also found that he was genuinely hungry more often. Doctor Jung explained that his myoactuators drew energy from the glycogen reserves. Because of this, his body naturally craved more food as his adipose tissue became depleted of its reserves after training. It also meant that training was very intense so that his muscles did not atrophy as the myoactuators took the load.

Now he was standing behind a Perspex screen in a mocked up shipping yard, complete with metal containers, barrels, cranes and rope lying about. On a loud speaker came the caw of gulls and the swoosh and splash of waves against concrete. The only things missing were the smell of salty air and a sky.

The training arena was an enormous cavity, one of four that Houston used to simulate operational environments.

A voice announced through his commlink into his ear, “Agent, you have excelled in strength, speed and stamina training. I believe you are growing bored of lifting weights and doing martial arts so today's training involves observation, stealth and timing. If you are a good boy, tomorrow we will be working with live ammunition to calibrate your hand-eye coordination. We shall continue until I am satisfied, understood?”

It was Penelope's voice, and it sounded stern. Ottavio tried to imagine that there was a touch of boredom, or apathy, or anything else remotely human, but there was not. Penelope's voice was modulated at all times, carefully controlled, gently inflected to convey her unambiguous intent.

“In front of you is a course designed to examine your abilities in evading detection, operational environmental awareness and improvisation. Martial arts are for a last resort, after conflict resolution. In the field, evasion is your best option for getting a job done. If no one knows you are there, then there is no need for violence, security is not altered and the scene is left ready for a following mission if necessary,” said Penelope.

Ottavio wondered if she was reading off a script or if she had done this so many times that she just came across as an automated voice message.

She continued, “The goal in this instance is simple, escape through the blue door on the other side of this course. There are a number of operatives, along with sensors, traps and observation cameras that will be looking for you. You are to enter the course at the door on your right. Do not engage any operative, non-lethal or otherwise, but feel free to deactivate or use any equipment or trap. If you are spotted an alarm will sound, and if you are caught you will have to repeat this until you have successfully completed the goal or until we all get tired.”

“The course will begin as soon as you leave the room. Although the time taken to complete the course is a quantitative factor, we are more interested in your methods and abilities. In the field, the time taken to complete a task is seldom as important as the task itself. Take as much time as you need, but please keep in mind that some of us have other duties we wish to attend to at some stage.”

Ottavio guessed that last bit was not scripted.

His commlink beeped and went silent. There was nothing left to do but begin.

From behind the Perspex wall he scanned the yard. It seemed innocent enough, and looked surprisingly real. Shipping containers were placed about in a semi-formal fashion. Coils of rope and

other tripping hazards were scattered around. Here was a forklift, there was a truck.

On the far right was an observation room, dimly lit. He imagined peering eyes and touchpads watching his every move. Sodium lamps were dotted throughout, along with a couple of tiny red dots belonging to sentry devices.

Making a mental map in his head, he took a breath and stepped out of the room into the course. An alarm blared into his ears, startling him.

His commlink hissed, "Start again, Agent."

Ottavio's face blushed with embarrassment as he walked back into the room. He had not taken even a step before failing the course.

Miss Penelope, after a couple of seconds to let it soak in, said, "It gets everyone the first time around. Remember, a mission has no beginning, nor an end. So long as you are alive, you are interacting with your environment. As an Agent, you must *always* be on guard, you must always be aware of your environs."

He looked at his optical read-out as his heart rate slowed down and his adrenaline levels plateaued. His commlink went silent.

Again he looked out at the course. Nothing was moving. How had he been spotted? The doorway was concealed from the rest of the course by a large shipping container. Whatever sounded the alarm must have been something close to the doorway. He crouched down and peered around the corner. The red metal of the container loomed before him.

To his right was an uninteresting wall. He looked at the floor and stopped. The floor appeared slightly curved. The light off an overhead lamp bowed lightly over the tile. A pressure sensor.

There did not seem to be any way to deactivate it, so Ottavio carefully stepped over. No alarm sounded. He let his weight move onto his foot as he stepped from the room. Still no alarm.

He checked the surrounding tiles and, confident that he had avoided the first trap, squatted cleanly behind the red container.

His commlink squealed to life, "Very good. It is important to realize that obstacles, cameras and alarms are placed in plain view when used as a deterrent, but are concealed when needed as a genuine counter-measure. Just because you may have avoided perimeter security does not mean that you are ever in the clear when in a hostile environment. Continue on."

He crept to the edge of the container and peered around. A few barrels of cable and rope, metal and wooden crates, concrete pylons and a forklift separated him from a series of colored containers. The moment he left the security of his container he would be exposed.

He took a moment to examine his optical display.

"As you no doubt realize, it is impossible to cross this portion without being exposed," squeaked his ear, "Ambient light sensors placed throughout your body measure your visibility with respect to your surrounds, giving you a fairly good idea of how visible you are at any given stage. Notice the value change as you step into or out of a shadow, or stand up or crouch."

He experimented a bit by raising and lowering his head, amused by how much a small change in his posture affected his apparent visibility.

"Note, too, that your visibility from one direction is not necessarily the same as from another, hence you will need to take stock of your visibility from all sides, depending upon the situation. A clever operative is always aware of how he appears to others in the field, be they friend or foe. Camouflage paint and clothing can help in an arboreal environment, but your best option, especially in an urban situation is to be aware of the enemy's location and use whatever cover you have to your advantage. Proceed."

Ottavio studied the space for a while. There were no cameras, no bodies walking about. Somewhere at the back of the facility, a generator began to rumble.

He was about to make a run for it when he noticed at the far end a head slowly sweeping from left to right, and then back again. In an instant his optical display placed an orange square around the head. His eyes fixed upon it. Information relating to the distance and relative location appeared above it as the image within the square enlarged to reveal more detailed features of glasses, brown hair and blue cap.

He lowered himself to the floor and began to crawl to the nearest crate. It was not much and he would be exposed on either side but at least the immediate threat in front of him was taken care of. He reached the crate and tucked himself behind it. The glare of a lamp to his left made him feel strangely uncomfortable and naked. Ottavio carefully raised his head over the edge to watch the sentry at the far end.

His head rhythmically turned to look left to right, right to left, pausing every now and then to examine something more uninteresting on the floor or wall. Every time the head swept the other way, Ottavio wriggled and squirmed his way to another shelter, closer each time to a wall of coiled cable. From there he could take a little time to plan his next move. He timed carefully and sprinted, crouching, over to the wall and hauled himself under some loose tarpaulin.

His ear crackled, this time the voice sounded like Doctor Jung's, "Well done, agent. You have, no doubt, observed the processing unit's friend or foe function, a, um, subsystem to determine the significance of another person in your environment. Experiments with, um, artificial intelligence proved to be costly, inefficient and prone to error. Instead, the new unit uses, um, the brain's *own* interpretation. Ha! Considering the human brain is already highly geared for reading the attitudes and emotions of others, it is a small step to interpret these signals. Saved us a lot of time, I can tell you. Since you are in a position of cover at the moment, I will take this, er, opportunity to explain some of the functionality."

"Firstly the term 'friend or foe' is a little misleading. I prefer to call it 'hospitable or hostile' in that not everyone who you deem hospitable is actually your friend, nor everyone who does harm is necessarily an enemy. Rather it is your brain's own interpretation, you see, yes, and this is built up from body language, subtle clues in um, facial features, the way they may talk or comport themselves. In fact we, ah, we gather so much data and process it so blindingly fast that our minds are usually made up in the first second. We did have, um, certain, er, issues with one subject, as I recall. Turned out he had a condition not unlike Asperger's..."

Penelope's voice interrupted, "We *are* on a clock here, Doctor."

"Ahem, yes, I shall be, er, brief."

"As always."

Jung continued, "So you may notice that, in the field, the highlighting box subtly change color depending on how you are interpreting the person in question. We found that color is a very, um, natural way to associate our feelings towards others. This can help you make decisions about who, um, you can trust, who you should hide from and who you should consider a, er, a threat. Note that it is hardly absolute and discretion *must* be used. Why, the first operative who had the beta cerebral interpretation friend or foe implant very nearly killed a fellow agent because of a, hum, mild case of, what's it, paranoia fed a positive feedback loop to the point where his own feelings fed off the readings of the unit, ending in a situation where he could happily dispense with his friend..."

"Doctor..."

"Alright, alright. Um, but the moral of the story is, and I can't stress this enough, that is to say, what we can learn, um, is that even though we have eliminated the, um, feedback loop, to an extent, that is, you should be aware that it is an *indicator*. We hope that it will prove useful not only within a firefight, letting you quickly spot who's who, but also, um, when you might be undercover, performing a covert operation and such. Knowing who you trust, and do not trust, that sort of thing. Keeping tabs on the, er, locations of those around you."

Penelope rejoined, "Thank you. Very enlightening. Sorry for the delay, Agent..."

Jung sounded hurt, "It was necessary information."

Penelope sighed, "Doctor we are in the middle... Ah, Ottavio, please proceed. And remember that you may not attack, injure or subdue any opponent. This is about stealth, not strength. Now Doctor Jung..."

The commlink buzzed to a close.

Ottavio shook his head clear and tried to concentrate. Getting past that sentry would take some doing, considering the only other path would be over the crates, and they were stacked four high. He probably could scale the sides easily enough, considering his new myoactuators, but

hollow metal containers have a notorious reputation for making a lot of noise. He decided against it, instead thinking of a way to remove the guard from his position.

He peered out from under the tarp and, seeing that the coast was clear, wriggled up to the edge of the cable rolls. The sentry was still there, looking a little bored. The square appeared, still in orange, around him. From this vantage point he could make out more features along with the rest of his body. He wore gray coveralls with black boots. He was seated on small, uncomfortable looking box holding a sub-machine gun. The highlighting box turned from orange to red.

Several options ran through his head, from going back to find another route, to throwing a stone as a distraction, to rigging up some kind of trap with the cable. Dissatisfied with those ideas he looked around for anything that could help. A red light on a metallic box on the wall to his right winked at him. Conduit sprouted from the top and bottom. Wriggling over he followed the conduit with his eyes. They went in a straight line up the wall before splitting into three, each line terminating in an overhead light.

Ottavio tugged a bit at the box, not daring to make too much noise. It gave a little, revealing a set of fuses inside. He grabbed a loose piece of cable and carefully fed it in. There was a blue spark, a pop and the smell of ozone crept into his nostrils.

Two of the overhead lights went out, plunging the area into a gray darkness. Quickly he pulled the cable out, closed the box and wriggled under the tarp.

“Hey!” muttered the guard into a commlink, “He just knocked out two lights! Is he allowed to do that? Huh? Since when? Oh, whatever, just a second.”

The guard grudgingly stood up, cocked his gun and walk to underneath one of the lights, looking up at it in mock wonder.

Seizing the opportunity, Ottavio sprinted as lightly as he could behind him, ducking around the shipping crates, behind a stack of drums. From this point he could see a blue door at the far end. His optical readout indicated it as being eighty four meters away, a short run, but no doubt precarious.

He could hear the guard grunting behind him, “...allowed in the other runs. Well how was I supposed to know? Yes... ah, yes ma'am. Sorry ma'am. Oh, of course, I... yes, at once.”

Footsteps scuffled away.

Penelope's voice, a little miffed, came sighing through, “My apologies, Agent. We do try and make all simulations as real as possible, and I guess this includes hiring monkeys for staff. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better to stick with the virtual environment training. Your ingenuity and indirect approach are to be commended. Go on.”

Ottavio scanned about. There was a catwalk positioned a short distance away from which dangled an incandescent light. It led to the roof of a shack, a guardhouse apparently, with poky windows and several cameras positioned on the corners. Crude though it was, it was well situated to observe the room.

He weighed up his options and sidled over behind the barrels.

Before him buzzed a camera, rocking back and forth. It swept passed his location but, being tucked away safely behind the barrels, he avoided detection.

His foot knocked against an innocuous toolkit next to a lunchbox. Ottavio rolled his eyes. It was all too convenient. He was used to these set ups from his earlier training, props that had been placed at various parts of a course to prompt him into action.

He knelt down and opened the kit. Inside was an assortment of tools, including hammers, screwdrivers and spanners. He fished around quietly and took out a pair of side cutters and a long screwdriver.

Something nagged at him. It would be too easy to reach the cables of the camera undetected, and this was not a lesson in how to cut wires, this was about stealth, awareness and observation.

From where he currently hid he could see nothing obvious that prevented him from disabling the other camera. Nothing obvious, but perhaps he should not be looking for the obvious.

He examined the walls and path looking for tripwires, light beams, pressure plates or anything else that might indicate a trap, but there was nothing. Unconvinced, he closed his eyes and listened.

He heard a faint whirring above him.

Turning, he looked up and saw the glint of a lens poking out from a gap high up between two crates behind him, pointing straight toward the first camera in a classic configuration enabling mutual observation. There was no way to get to its cabling, protected as it was between the heavy metal crates.

He squatted again and rummaged through the toolkit.

Smashing the lens with a hammer would indeed disable the camera, at the expense of creating a racket, and if he missed and hit the metal of the shipping container, he may as well ring the alarm himself.

He poked around a bit more and found some duct tape, a lighter and a center punch; there was nothing he could use to remotely disable either camera.

In a flash of inspiration, he grabbed the center punch and used his incredible strength to drive a hole in the side of one of the barrels. Nothing came out. He tried again a bit lower, and goopy black bitumen dribbled from the side.

Ottavio held a spanner in the tar and flicked it at the camera. After a few attempts he managed to spatter enough tar to cover the lens completely. Confident that it was clear to proceed, he waited until the first camera swept away before scuttling up and cutting the cable with his side cutters.

It ceased humming and buzzed to a stop. His commlink squealed, "Impressive thinking, Agent. The barrel was actually meant as a prop, but you have used this to your advantage. A resourceful Agent thinks not only of what is on his person, but what is about him. On that note, another method of disabling the cameras is to use the tools to open the access panel you passed a few feet back and disconnect the cabling."

"Or failing that, um, you could have used the conductivity of the shipping container to which the camera is attached, and, um, shorted a power cable to it," added Doctor Jung.

"Quite."

"Or, and I am yet to try it, but I think it would be possible to, um, use a series of electromagnetic pulses, short range bursts if you like, you know, make and break a circuit to produce an arc. I think if you match the electronic resonating frequency of the camera's circuitry..."

Penelope quickly interrupted, "Yes, yes. Skinning cats and all. Proceed."

Ottavio pressed himself against the wall of the shack, slid along silently to a window and peered in. The windows were covered in a brown, hazy film, obscuring the guard seated at a desk inside.

He appeared to be sleeping, no doubt playing his part for the 'simulation', although Ottavio could not help but wonder if he was just making light of a boring situation.

He could hear the noise of a camera around the edge of the shack going through its motions, waiting for the sign of an intruder to crop up. Ottavio decided to get this over and done with.

Like a cat he turned the corner, popped past the doorway to the internals and crept underneath the camera.

In a moment he had cut the wires and arrested its humming. He sneaked back to the window and peeped in, noting that several of the monitors were now blank. The guard still snored soundly, so Ottavio moved around the corner and looked toward the blue door.

He saw the faint glow of a laser trip-wire and, confident that it was the only obstacle between himself and his objective, stepped lightly over it and grabbed the door handle. It did not turn. He grimaced, stepped back over the trip-wire and sprinted back to the shelter of the shack.

"Nicely done, agent. You have indeed reached your goal in a solid time, but the mission parameters have changed. The door is locked, as you have discovered. Although undoubtedly you could pick it, or smash it to pieces, this simulation requires that you find the key," said Penelope, "Even in the simplest of missions the parameters may change at a moment's notice. An agent must therefore adapt to any change seamlessly. So, to save everyone some time and avoid you hunting around in the wrong area, the key is within the guardhouse. Also, if you do sound the alarm, you will not need to re-complete the first part of this course. As always, do not engage the guards or resort to violence of any kind against them. Carry on."

Ottavio scratched his chin and looked back around the corner to the doorway. It was open, beckoning for him to walk straight through. He crept slowly up to it and looked in.

The guard was slumped in a chair, snoring exaggeratedly. On the wall behind him was a key hook, and upon that hook was a rather obvious looking key with a blue tag.

The flooring of the shack looked wooden and old. In fact it was a veneer of wood over a solid steel frame, but the effect was the same. Ottavio imagined it creaking under the lightest of pressures, making it impossible to get to the keys without waking the guard.

“Simple,” he thought, “But effective. No, there is another way.”

Above the key was a manhole leading to the roof. The catwalk, of course!

He crept back to his spot behind the barrels and looked along the catwalk to the far end. Several metal ladders poked down along its length, each well-lit in the glow of bright safety lamps.

Perhaps he could knock out a light or two, or kill the power. He decided against it, as it could bring attention, and while he knew there was one guard in the guardhouse, there might well be others positioned in obscure locations, ready to sound the alarm should anything strange happen.

He crouched low to the ground, moving along through the shadows to the far end of the room, dodging the downward glow of the safety lights. He stopped underneath the end of the catwalk.

A way above him, he heard footsteps clanking softly on the metal grating. The shadow of a guard patrolling it flickered through the bands.

The thought passed through his mind, which he quickly dismissed, to take the guard down quietly. He decided instead to wait and watched the silhouette as it paced toward the guardhouse.

When he was convinced that the guard was far enough away, he hoisted himself up a crate, scrambled up a rope dangling from a large, rusted pulley and plopped himself neatly onto the catwalk with a faint twang.

He looked over and saw the guard turning back along his route, straight toward Ottavio. He gripped the side of the railing and hurled himself over, and clung to the underside of the catwalk like a gecko, his feet pushing on each railing, and his fingers gripping the sharp edges, and just in time.

The guard had indeed seen something, a blurred flash, and had taken out his flash light. The beam danced around on the walk, revealing only a lonely set of rails and some rusted flooring.

Sweating and starting to feel the burn, Ottavio stayed silent, clinging upside down to the metal rails, praying his fingers would continue to obey him. His mind imagined the metal digging into his skin, but still he held on.

Eventually the sound of the guard's footsteps became louder until they passed straight over him, receding into the darkness around the corner.

Tensing his muscles and preparing himself mentally, Ottavio let go with his left hand, swung smoothly out from under the catwalk and pulled himself back up. Without pausing for breath he began to creep toward the guardhouse. In a trice he had made it to the manhole, and he lowered himself onto the roof.

He flattened himself and poked his head into the manhole. The guard was in pretty much the same position, snoring with a lesser intensity. The key was dangling temptingly on the wall, just out of reach. He tried anyway, to no avail.

Ottavio sat back up and put his feet in the hole, gripped the sides of the manhole and smoothly lowered himself in.

Dangling a foot off the ground, his biceps rippling gently, he let go with his right hand and pivoted himself slowly. He looked much like a ballerina, floating lightly and gracefully in the air, turning easily, supported only by his arm. He reached out and lifted the key from its hook.

Ottavio popped the key in his mouth, grabbed the top of the manhole with both hands and hoisted himself up. The snoring of the guard stopped. Ottavio, convinced he had been made, rolled to a position underneath the catwalk and listened.

“Bloody hell, did you see that? Well you should have! Moved down the hole like a snake, barely made a breath of... oh, yes? Yes, ma'am! Sorry I... But he came like... No, I thought that was the end. Yes, ma'am, at once!”

Immediately the snoring started again, louder and stronger than before.

Ottavio's ear squealed, "Oh, for Pete's sake! Agent, ignore the ape in the guardhouse and make your way to the blue door."

Penelope sounded more than a little peeved.

"Your performance today has been more than impressive, and while you have discovered many aspects of your new abilities, I do think we have only witnessed the tip of the iceberg."

## Chapter 4

*“We are responsible for our actions  
the decisions that led to them  
and the ramifications that follow.”  
- Brother Targus, New York Chapter*

A balding man, dressed in a drab cloak tied at the neck with a rough drawstring, addressed Ryan from across a large, wooden table, “Acolyte Ryan, do you feel for these people you killed?”

“Master Theodore, I feel for them. My heart bleeds from a thousand cuts,” replied Ryan.

His outward appearance of an aging man was one he kept up deliberately to mask the real man underneath. Only the sparkle in his eyes revealed the fit, active mind that had cultivated the many years of wisdom.

“Do you understand the consequences of what you have done?” he asked.

“There are many consequences, so many I cannot hope to understand them all. However, I do believe that I understand those that are the most significant. I have reconciled it within myself.”

Master Theodore adjusted his spectacles. He leaned back into his creaking chair. “Yes,” he sighed, “I am sure that you have. I do have faith that you are more than capable of justifying your intentions in some sick, perverted way, and that you have not acted without significant forethought. I wonder, though, if you have acted alone, or if this was thrust upon you by another.”

Ryan shifted in his seat and fixed his eyes on a flaw on the table. Silence cloaked the room for a few seconds. Master Theodore looked old, stern. His long robe hid his aged body, a body that had visited so many parts of the world, stood silently among countless leaders and diplomats.

It was but a shadow of its former self, but an inner strength still held him tall and upright. The body, he always believed, was a thing to be conquered, not to be conquered by. And even though arthritis crippled his left hand, and his spine had slipped a few centimeters, he always maintained an erect posture with his head and shoulders back and chest proudly out.

He drew breath and continued, “Very well. We must work off the assumption that you operated alone. Considering that you are but an Acolyte, and that the deed performed is heinous in the extreme, all responsibility will fall directly onto your shoulders.”

Ryan continued to remain silent. Master Theodore nodded and continued, “Silence is a fool's shield, boy. But that is not an issue governing my thoughts right now. I am very interested to hear your justification, Acolyte. We must ask you to explain your debased actions. The slaughtering of innocents? The wanton destruction and disruption? Why, Acolyte?”

Ryan tossed some thoughts about in his head. He could not stand to argue against Master Theodore, nor the other two Masters present, and he knew that they would eventually get to the truth, one way or another. Unless he could anger them, divert their questions and prevent them from administering truth serum.

“I intend to reignite the struggle,” he said at last, looking Master Theodore in the eye.

Taken aback as he was, Master Theodore kept his composure. Those words, 'reignite the struggle', were not Ryan's. They had been uttered by others before him, but that felt like a lifetime ago.

Master Pietro, to Master Theodore's left, leaned forward and spoke, “Your answer is designed to shock us, or, at the least, make us think that you are more than what you seem. You will do well to answer very carefully from here on, *boy*.”

Ryan glared back at him, but said nothing.

Master Pietro had dark, brooding eyebrows that dominated his face. His smooth scalp and nose that had been broken on more than one occasion gave him the appearance of someone who could just as effectively use his fists as words.

Such an impression would be correct. Underneath his robe he held a trim, taught body, an excellent specimen of human conditioning.

He continued, "You have committed what can only be described as an unsanctioned, undignified and morally reprehensible act of terrorism. Reignite the struggle? You have not reignited anything. You have acted ruthlessly, irrationally and without compassion."

Ryan took a breath. He had dipped his toe in, he may as well go for a swim, "The world has been shocked by the deaths of over eight hundred people. As more events like this follow, their safe little world will be rocked..."

"Rocked? It was little more than a headline in the newspapers put down to a terrorist act! Are you so naïve that you believe direct intervention is without cost? And did you really think that murdering a few hundred innocent people would bring about some kind of revolution?" boomed Master Pietro.

"No," said Ryan, looking up, "But a few million might. That was just the start."

Master Theodore raised his eyebrows, "The start? The start of what?"

"Man is a sluggish creature, and every change in history requires a war, an uprising, a revolution to get him to move. Some wars begin with one death, others with a thousand. And that was the start of the war."

"War?" hissed Master Theodore, "What the blazes are you talking about? We are not at war, Ryan."

"Oh, but we are. We always have been. It is just that we have been lulled into a false sense of security. The Devil's master stroke, they say, was convincing us that he does not exist," said Ryan, his eyes blazing, "We are at war with entropy, the devil that sucks the life out of every one of us. And the cretins you watch over are happy to let it grind them up and spit them out and they laze away in comfort, eating, dancing, having sex, drinking their brains to oblivion."

Master Jacob, gnarled, stooped and with his eyebrows matching his beard in length, raised his hand, "Please, Ryan."

"They waste their days with pleasures, in a state of nullity, drinking the catatonic syrup of self-gratification..."

"Acolyte, stop! The Brotherhood of the Vigils seeks to retain a balance, to help humanity forward by maintaining order. Man must progress at his own rate, not through violent means, and not through acts of terrorism," said Master Jacob, "The fundamentals are not to be toyed with lightly. Disrupting the balance of Life and Death, especially by one so inexperienced as to form such clumsy views of the world, could spell disaster..."

"You are wrong! Man is more resilient than the credit you attribute. If I took the lives of a thousand, and by doing so allowed the lives of millions to thrive, in what way does that make me different from doctor who uses the organs of a dying patient to save the lives of ten others?"

Master Jacob shook his head sadly, "Numbers? You speak of humans as numbers? Ryan, we cannot hope to display how precious the gift of life is while at the same time we tear it away!"

Ryan seethed, "And this is where the Brotherhood is misguided. For without taking a life we cannot show how precious it is! It is for this reason we must..."

"Be silent, boy!" demanded Master Theodore, "You are just an Acolyte, and this council has been formed to decide your fate. You have committed an act of extremism, causing the deaths of hundreds of innocent lives and have attempted to justify it using a bastardized creed counter to that of the Vigils! I think we have heard well enough."

Master Pietro nodded, "Quite enough. Take him to his cell, and we shall confer."

Ryan was led from the room by two hooded figures. He went quietly. Master Theodore turned to Master Pietro, "This is worrying."

"Of course it is. He speaks like, dare I say, like *Isaac*," said Master Pietro.

"Isaac is dead, and his extremist ideas died with him," sniffed Master Jacob, "I examined his remains myself."

The room fell silent once again while the three sat in thought. Master Pietro spoke first, "Ideas never really die. They do not exist only in someone's mind. They just get buried, waiting for another to uncover them."

"We burned all his texts," said Master Theodore, "Deleted his documents and propaganda. We

sanitized everything and everyone he touched.”

“One can tear down a forest, Master Theodore, burn it to the ground, salt the earth such that nothing may grow again, but one cannot remove a single seed of thought from a man's mind,” intoned Master Jacob, “But I cannot fathom how Acolyte Ryan has come to his conclusions without help. The words he spoke...”

“Were of Isaac, almost verbatim: 'Drinking from the catatonic cup of self-gratification'.”

Eyebrows furrowed as brains got to work.

Master Jacob pressed his fingers lightly together. “If the fruits from two trees taste equally bitter,” he said, “Then we can assume they came from a similar seed.”

“Isaac worked silently, insidiously. It took years to root him out, as you will remember,” said Master Theodore, “This one act was brazen and callous, almost bloodthirsty.”

Master Jacob looked thoughtful, “But his words are the same! By ridding ourselves of one weed we have satisfied ourselves that the garden is clean. We have been foolish!”

Master Theodore protested, “His followers were found and sanitized, the encampments destroyed. The Directors were disbanded. The memory of Isaac is shared solely between us. Unless...”

His eyes widened.

“Unless?” prompted Master Pietro.

“Unless, as Master Jacob implies, the problem ran much deeper than we originally thought. Isaac, though he was the face of the problem, he may not have been the root. Blast it all, we need some tea.”

Master Theodore rang a little bell three times.

The three sat in silence for a while longer. Eventually a solemn figure scuttled in, carrying a tray laden with silver tea cups and a tea pot. After a short interlude the three sat back and discussed matters.

“Ryan has a mentor, this much is clear. Whether he or she is still alive is relevant, but not determinable at this time,” said Master Pietro, sipping his tea, “If we assume that Isaac had a mentor, and that this is the same mentor as Isaac had, then his age must be at least that of Isaac's, or older, putting him at over fifty years of age.”

Master Theodore shrugged, “Indeed. Or it could very well have been a disciple of his, making him at around thirty or so.”

Master Jacob disagreed, “No! We interrogated everyone. We turned this place upside down. Truth serum was applied to over half of our brothers and sisters. All systems were scanned, all documents checked.”

“And there is no way one or two could have slipped by?”

Master Jacob shook his head.

“What is more, we can assume that the extremist ideals of his have grown since Isaac's time, as indicated by latest attack.”

“It will not be easy to find the mentor of Ryan. And even then, if we were to uncover a vein of filth in the Brotherhood, we do not know how deep it runs,” said Master Pietro, “The plain fact is that Ryan may be the sole follower, or just one of many. My biggest fear is that we have been too blind for too long, and that the rot has had time to spread.”

Master Theodore munched on a biscuit in thought. “And what of us?” he asked.

Master Pietro looked at him sideways, “What of us? As viewed by the public eye? We are meaningless, as we always have been. Unless, perhaps, you are concerned that there will be an association between the attack and the Brotherhood, in which case I hold a serious fear that we may lose our anonymity.”

Master Jacob hissed, “This risks everything! Whatever action we take must be swift and quiet. We cannot risk having any attention, of any kind, no matter how insignificant.”

“What do you propose?” asked Master Pietro, rubbing his chin. The scratching sound of his fingers against his unshaven skin echoed through the room.

Master Theodore closed his eyes in thought. The other two let him think.

“I propose to find this radical,” he said, “I propose to let Ryan lead us to him. That we allow him to escape. I propose that we then trail him until he makes contact with whomever is causing us angst. At that point, we shall decide what further course of action must be taken.”

Master Pietro nodded, “But how can we be sure that he will try to escape, and that he will do so without violence? We cannot allow one of our own to be harmed.”

“We sentence him to sanitation in the wastes,” said Master Theodore, draining his cup, “In this way, he is alive and exposed. If someone cares enough for him, they will attempt to break him out, or provide him means to escape. If not, we afford him an egress, and he returns to his mentor. If he does not attempt an escape, then we cleanse his mind and search for the rot via other means. In all circumstances, we are in a better position than we are in now.”

“Very well,” said Master Jacob, “We are in agreement, then?”

“We are,” said Master Pietro.

## Chapter 5

*“Civilization was born from a desire to separate  
the animal from the human,  
the base from the divine.”*

– Director Antonio Bianculli

Arms Master Goldsmith stood before Ottavio behind a Perspex window. He stood awkwardly, his boa constrictor arms barely allowed him to place his hands rigidly behind his back and the camouflage shirt that was stretched across his broad chest threatened to give out at any moment. The cap he wore, indoors or outside, was old and battered but fit his head perfectly.

“Welcome to arms training, Agent,” he said, with a surprisingly smooth voice, “Today we will commence the first of many exercises to get you fit for field duty.”

His face was a map of history, pitted and gravelly from the abuse it suffered during the war. “You will be working with live rounds, agent. You will listen and follow each and every order I give while you are within this range.”

“Ahem,” came a voice.

Doctor Jung tottered in from behind Goldsmith, who raised his eyes to the heavens. “And any orders from Doctor Jung,” sighed Goldsmith.

Jung smiled with satisfaction and adopted the same stance of Goldsmith. He looked even more awkward.

Goldsmith cleared his throat and continued, “Right. Now I know I had you for basic arms training several years ago, and I understand you know how to handle a firearm, but this is different. I have been informed that you have, um, appendages...”

“Adaptations, Benjamin,” corrected Jung.

Goldsmith bit his lip, “That you will need to come to terms with...”

“Calibrate.”

Goldsmith winced. Perhaps it was better to get started.

“No point standing around yapping, agent. Turn around. Before you is a firing range. Normally, as you would remember, you would be learning with other recruits, but because of your special needs, you will be getting one on one training. Go and stand over by the left range and don't touch anything!”

Ottavio did so. Placed on the ledge were several pistols. He resisted the urge to pick them up.

“Very good, at least you can follow basic orders. Now in front of you is a blue pistol. This pistol is not live. It's a... um,” he sighed, “The Doc can tell you more about it.”

Jung cleared his throat and spoke, “Yes, thank you Benjamin. This pistol will be used to, um, calibrate your hand to eye coordination. You see, yes, we can use the accelerometers, force meters and geometric locators placed throughout your body to determine the attitude of any weapon, or other such, ah, device, held on your person. Anything from a pistol grip, to a rifle grip all the way up to a shoulder mounted device, like an RPG or grappling hook launcher. But primarily you will be dealing with your issued sidearm, so we will start with this. Arms Master, we shall start with the blue pistol.”

Goldsmith got into his element, “Right agent, pick up the blue pistol that you see in front of you, keeping your finger away from the goddamn trigger! Note the weight and feel of it. Good. Hold it by your side, keep that elbow slightly bent. There is a screen to your right, look at it!”

On the screen a series of patterns and shapes flashed, before going black. “Righto agent, now look back to the firing range and raise your weapon,” barked Goldsmith.

Ottavio did so. A target popped up a short distance away. It was patterned in a strange set of curved grids.

“We shall begin the calibration now, Arms Master,” said Doctor Jung, “Agent, aim down the site and shoot the target a few times. Don't worry, there are no, um, live rounds in that pistol, only a

laser which shall be used to provide feedback.”

Ottavio lined up the pistol with the center of the target and squeezed the trigger a few times. A little red dot shone on the target and the screen beeped happily.

“Nice work. Now the target will be moved further away. Just do the same thing.”

“And then we'll get on to some live rounds,” grumbled Goldsmith, not at all content with fancy words and lasers.

“Yes, yes, Benjamin,” Jung hushed, “All in good time. Agent, continue on.”

As the target moved back, Ottavio watched as the distance displayed by the optical processor ticked away. It stopped at twenty meters.

“As soon as you wish, agent,” urged Jung.

After a series of shots the target was moved successively backward, until finally it slid quickly back to its original position. “Good, good. You have already got a decent coordination, it seems, so this should be, ah, smooth,” called Jung happily, “Look to the screen again and whatever you do, do not look away until I say. Yes? Do not even blink. I am going to upload the calibration information that we have just gleaned to your processors. Sort of a, um, hang on, a starting, um, standby... there. That was not so bad, eh? Now, hum, try a shot without aiming down the sights!”

To his surprise, a set of cross-hairs appeared on his optical display. They moved about roughly as he adjusted the pistol in his hands. He squeezed the trigger and watched as the red laser dot appeared close to the middle of the cross hairs.

Goldsmith spoke, “You will find that the cross hairs you see are an approximation only, and that each and every pistol you use will be different.”

Jung interrupted quickly, “But still the cross hairs are a vast improvement on, um, snap shooting...”

“Every round of every firearm is unique and should be treated as such, be it single-shot, burst or auto-fire,” continued Goldsmith earnestly, “There are also factors of kick-back, differences in the barrel and projectile, misfires, cross, head and tail winds, heck even humidity in the air if we're talking about a rifle over a distance. While I understand the benefits of this assisted hand-eye coordination bullshit, nothing can beat practical experience.”

“Bullsh...? Benjamin, really, I... I am stunned,” blustered Jung, his face turning a shade of vermilion. He calmed himself down, daubing his forehead with his handkerchief.

“This level of development has superseded Tsang-Tao's own development. With their system, the weapon performs the work of feedback via a unique uplink, and thus their troops are limited to using only Tsang-Tao issued weaponry, and only those that have been commissioned to the soldier. There's no, um, scope for picking up a weapon dropped in field, or trading weapons between troops,” he said.

“All the same, practical experience...”

“Is a valuable asset, don't get me wrong. But we can always assist it, Benjamin. You'd be surprised with, um, what we can do with nano-processors these days.”

Goldsmith snorted, “You'd be surprised the difference a few percentage points of humidity makes to a shot.”

“Well I'll have you know that *actually* we are working on a new algorithm that takes into account the, er, state of the subject's own interpretation of environmental factors to provide...”

“Geez! Move to the next pistol agent, we're going to have some live firing already,” barked Goldsmith, cutting Professor Jung off, “This is the HK 17-S, one of the newer pistols on the market. This has a low kickback, but at the same time less stopping power. Its primary use is for close range and covert operations, hence the adapter for a silencer. In the field, do not try this against body armor, but instead go for the soft points, joints and limbs, to disable an enemy. Go ahead, pick it up and feel the weight.”

Jung squealed, “But do not fire just yet! I have not changed the targets over! Wait!” The target whizzed away and was replaced by a conventional set of concentric red and white circles.

Goldsmith grimaced. Jung was beginning to get on his nerves. “Can we proceed now, Doc?”

“Yes, yes. No! Wait, we forgot...”

“Let go of a couple of rounds, agent,” shouted Goldsmith, drowning out the babblings of Doctor Jung. Ottavio happily brought up the pistol and felt the satisfying crack, followed by the smell of gunpowder as he squeezed the trigger. He left the target peppered with bullet holes.

Goldsmith laughed heartily. His camouflage shirt did not see the funny side.

“Sorry Doc,” he laughed, “You were saying?”

Jung crossed his arms haughtily, “That was unnecessary, Benjamin. I was merely saying that we forgot to inform Miss Penelope. She insisted on being here to view the results of the new class of implant.”

“Well how about you go and get her, and we'll continue on here, eh?” said Goldsmith.

“And leave you without a scientific body to, um, answer pertinent questions? I think not!”

“Suit yourself. That next pistol is the P-66, standard issue firearm, forty caliber round adaptable to armor piercing or anti-personnel rounds. And yes, we have EMP, explosive and incendiary rounds as well and no you won't be using them unless you need to because they're bloody expensive and travel pretty much the same as armor piercing rounds, so don't bother asking! Also, you may be lucky enough to be a tester for some of our other kinds of rounds in development.”

“Other kinds?” asked Ottavio.

“Yes,” ejaculated Jung, overeager to explain the goings on in his research teams, “We have two of special note. Well, um, we have more than two, but, um, two that you would care about. There's the, ah, 'rad rounds' and the plasma shells. The rad rounds, as their name suggests, are loaded with a small quantity of radioactive material. Now, I know what you're thinking, but they're perfectly safe.”

Ottavio looked unsure.

Doctor Jung proceeded to convince him, “No, um, you see the two compounds are practically inert, but upon impact they are thrust together!” He clapped his hands demonstratively, proud of the effect.

“When they hit, a millisecond, well, a few nanoseconds or so later, I won't, um, bore you with the exact details, yes, but a short time later a shower of gamma rays is emitted. You can think of it as explosive radiation.”

Goldsmith grimaced, “And what good is that supposed to do, doc? Give our enemies a bad case of suntan?”

“No, you misunderstand, my learned, um, compatriot. While a round into living tissue would certainly cause damage, and, ah, an increased risk of cancerous tumors, um, these rounds are immediately destructive to memory chips and other capacitive devices, pretty much scrambling the circuitry,” said Jung. He propped his thumbs to his chest proudly.

Ottavio nodded, “Not bad, doc. Take out the circuitry and leave the mechanics intact, eh?”

“That's the plan. And then there are the plasma shells. We've got them rigged up for firing from a shotgun, although we are working on a smaller, um, variety for, ah, pistols and rifles and the like. They won't be in production or even testing yet, no, um, mostly because we are still trying to keep the rounds stable while in flight. We've got the electromagnetic containment working fine, it's just that sometimes it fails, prematurely releasing the plasma while it's still in the barrel. Um, my idea about a toroidal delivery design is more...”

“Dammit Otto, stop giving him an audience,” demanded Goldsmith, “We've got a whole lot more to get through.”

Jung looked hurt. “I was merely informing you both...”

“Why don't you go and grab Miss Penelope, eh? I'm sure I can handle a few minutes without a significant scientific presence.”

Jung frowned and left the room to the obvious relief of Goldsmith.

“Thank God for that. Hopefully she's on the other side of complex,” grumbled Goldsmith, “Let's get through a couple more pistols before he gets back. Unfortunately we'll need him for calibrating the rifles and heavy weapons. Anyway, Agent, look alive! Check your magazine!”

Ottavio slid out the magazine and inspected it.

“Now, note that your pistol is not loaded. There are magazines in front of you. The red one is anti-personnel, the blue is armor piercing, the green is your general purpose lead slug. Load up the GP's, agent, and empty the magazine at the target before the egg-head gets back.”

Ottavio slid the magazine in and it clicked neatly into place. The target slid back to thirty meters and waited while Ottavio cracked off twelve shots. The target was spattered with a neatly placed collection of holes.

Goldsmith barked, “What are you waiting for, agent? Press that little button on the side, drop out that mag and load up the AP rounds!”

Ottavio hastily did so.

“Steady on there, agent. Note that the charge in each round is slightly heavier, so you'll get a bigger kickback. Peel off a couple just to get a feel.”

Ottavio's cross-hair display wiggled and squirmed as he fired. He found he had to fight harder to keep it steady.

“Bit more of a mule, eh? Finish that in three round bursts, then load up the Shredders.”

Ottavio gripped the pistol and soon emptied the magazine. He picked up the red magazine, locked it in and stood at the ready.

“Anti-personnel rounds are slower moving, not that you'd notice, and also a little heavier. What makes them different is that they splinter on entry, creating a larger area of soft tissue damage. You hit a soft target with an AP and it'll make a pinhole clean through to the other side, spending most of its energy on whatever is on the other side. Shredders don't do much for penetration but they sure as hell make a mess. Wait up. Let me just change the target over... there.”

A silhouette of a man slid into view. Goldsmith's voice became serious, “If you need to disable a target go for a lead slug in the knee, break out a stun gun, gas him, use bad language, whatever. When using Shredders you shoot to kill, not wound or maim, you got me? Alright, give me three head shots, three chest shots and three liver shots. Go.”

Ottavio did his best, leaving the target with several well-spaced holes.

“You see what I'm saying about them cross-hairs? They're a rough guide only. The weight and shape of the Shredders makes them inaccurate at anything further than a stone's throw, but don't let that deter you if you need to make a shot. Aw, crud.”

The door slid open and Doctor Jung came puffing in with Miss Penelope in tow. A white coated man hustled in just before the doors slid shut.

“Did I miss much?” asked Miss Penelope to Goldsmith.

“No, ma'am. We were just about to move onto the Desert Eagle.”

“Good,” she said, “Act like we are not here.”

Doctor Jung mopped his brow, “And I do hope you informed him of the effects of kickback on his assisted hand eye coordination?”

“More or less,” grunted Goldsmith. Not wishing to let Jung start a lecture he quickly added, “Agent, make that pistol safe and pick up the next one. This is a Desert Eagle. Normally an agent would need to work up to this but Doctor Jung has assured me that your physical attributes are up to scratch. Fifty caliber rounds are substantially more powerful than your forty. If you need stopping power, this is your weapon of choice. Load up and clean out a magazine!”

Ottavio's ears rang as the pistol jerked and punched his palm. The target resembled Swiss cheese. “Seven shots is a small magazine, granted, so be sure to make each shot count. You don't want to be caught out reloading. You also might have guessed that this isn't designed for silent work. Load up again and give me two head shots, two chest and two liver shots, and this time take a bit more time to aim after each round!”

While Ottavio worked on his aim, Miss Penelope watched on as her assistant tapped away at a touchpad. Ottavio finished and waited patiently.

Doctor Jung coughed and Goldsmith sighed, “Well and good, agent, you're coming along nicely. You will get more practice with reactions, aiming and weapons maintenance later on this week. Right now, we need to move onto small arms and rifles. Please stand in the red zone while I prep the area, and for God's sake don't leave it until I tell you to.”

Ottavio walked away, stood inside a red circle and waited while Goldsmith came out from behind the Perspex and replaced the pistols with a series of rifles. Once he was safely back behind the Perspex he called to Ottavio to return to the range.

“Now I would prefer to get straight into it, but Doctor Jung *insists* that you need to be recalibrated for use with two handed weapons. As before, pick up the blue rifle.”

After a short while Ottavio's cross-hairs were aligned properly. Jung gave a nod and Goldsmith proceeded with his lesson, “The first weapon across is your MP-14. Nine millimeter rounds fired from a machine-pistol. You've got a retractable stock, iron sights and burst or automatic fire. Indispensable in a close fight, practically useless at medium to long range. It's got a high rate of fire, allowing you to empty out a complete twenty five round magazine in under two seconds, so control the urge to spray and pray. Instead, use controlled bursts.”

Ottavio used two magazines, alternating between single and burst shots. The targets whizzed away and were quickly replaced.

“Nice. It's also a fairly easy to reload, as you can see. The only thing I find is that if you don't slap the mag hard enough it has a tendency to drop out when firing. A fairly significant design flaw, if you ask me.”

Jung butted in, “One that will shortly be rectified, hmm, we have put pressure on our suppliers, um, to...”

“But for now, you've been warned. This next is your Fairchild Mark Two assault rifle, 'Betty'. The Mark One, 'Annie', saved my hide on more than one occasion. But that was then, and this is now. Five point five six millimeter rounds tucked into a twenty four round magazine. Not so useful in covert ops or tight spaces, you will definitely want one of these by your side if you're caught in an urban fire fight.”

Ottavio hefted it against his shoulder. It fit comfortably and pushed back firmly as he squeezed the trigger.

“You get to play with that more next week. Right now, pick up that shotty,” said Goldsmith, aware of the expectant group behind him. He would have preferred to take his time, take things a little slower to give Ottavio a bit more advice. Too many agents raced through the course, learned how to fire and how to kill, but not so much when and why. Experience and discretion, he mused, was not something that could be 'downloaded'.

“The SP-26 shotty, pump action reload, six rounds in the tube and one in the chamber. It's adaptable to fire anti-personnel, EMP and incendiary rounds. As before, we're not going to be playing with the latter because they're expensive and behave pretty much the same. Close range it's lethal but at anything more than thirty yards you'll just be making noise.”

“Right, now if you could move into the room on your right, we'll practice demolitions.”

Goldsmith went through the finer points of grenades, mines, time bombs and rocket propelled grapnels as Miss Penelope chatted quietly with Doctor Jung.

“How would you rate his progress so far?” she asked.

“Well, it's, um, early days yet, Miss Penelope. He's only really gotten to start to know his limitations. We haven't properly discussed his dietary requirements or, um, energy expenditure, not in detail. It might be worthwhile putting him through the rig until he burns up,” he said, dabbing his forehead. He was not a fan of explosives, even if there were several solid Perspex walls separating himself from them.

“What about his mental state? I would argue that is of more importance.”

Doctor Jung flinched as flash-bang went off.

“Um, yes. All things considered, I think he is coping just fine. He did express some, um, distress in relation to being modified, that he did not ask for it, but I think he has come to accept it. We have not switched on any of the higher functions, yet. Things like electronics hacking and lock-picking, well, I think it would be best if he sees other operatives like Agent Norbert in action. That way it will be a natural progression once we do turn them on. Yes.”

Miss Penelope touched her chin. It was the lightest touch, barely making an impression.

“A softly, softly approach? Will the Board appreciate the delay? The whole point was to

demonstrate definitively that an operative could withstand the pressures of having full adaptation. They already have examples of partial modifications...”

“Believe me, Miss Penelope, I am very keen to see all implants and software modules firing in unison, but the simple fact remains that many of the modules still have the possibility of causing, hmm, episodes, and I think you and I can both agree that another failure on the scale of Agent Boris could very well sink the Project altogether.”

Miss Penelope waved her hand. “You are referring to Kepler's interference? It was a mistake to involve him.”

“He is making progress very, um, difficult. All this screening, and background checks and... Really, I can't see how security has anything to do with the modifications, or with Agent Boris!”

“You are preaching to the choir, Doctor,” she said.

“Kepler is always meddling, always putting his rubber stamp in the way. Why, if it weren't for him, we would have had Agent Ottavio modified...”

“Adapted...”

“...six months ago! For whatever reason, um, or reasons, I still can't grasp, he outranks Commander Ali. I mean, Ali! He's a war hero! I wouldn't believe that, um, Kepler has even fired a gun,” said Doctor Jung, sweating, “Er, and his current campaign only means that we need to be extra careful, my dear. Yes, if we were to give any reason for him to suspect a security issue, no matter how bizarre the link, he could pull the plug on the whole lot! We have to proceed carefully!”

“All the same, if we continue to pussyfoot around we may well be seen as stalling. We shall lose face, and see the support dwindle until the only choice left is remove all implants and destroy the subjects,” countered Penelope, “In short, if you do not deliver soon, then the Project will be sunk by your own hand. While I will, of course, do my best to keep the lions at bay, I am going to need to toss them a carcass every now and then.”

“Your analogies, my dear, are frightful,” said Doctor Jung, “But I think you've made your point. I will take your advice under, um, consideration. But these things do take time. Even if, for instance, I turned on the Lock-Picking module, he would need at least a week or two in training to perfect it. And then there is the added responsibility of ensuring he, um, understands when and where to apply it, the different types of tumblers out there. The modules only aid, Miss. They cannot perform the duties in and of themselves.”

Penelope watched as Ottavio worked at lobbing grenades. One by one they exploded further down the range, knocking over wooden targets.

“What about combat modules? Surely they can be incorporated in his current routine? The Sure-Arm and Eagle Eye modules need to be field tested,” she offered, “Switching them on now would only save time while he is in basic training...”

Doctor Jung stubbornly shook his head, “No. No, I could not authorize that. Any advanced combat modules are strictly pending his first few missions, and you know this, Miss Penelope. He, um, he could react violently, like Agent Boris, at any stage, making him extraordinarily dangerous should he have those modules active. It cannot be any sooner than the critical modules have been activated and demonstrated in the field.”

“Which critical modules?”

“Berserker, mainly. But also, um, Agility, Friend or Foe and Kung-Fu, at a minimum. But Cat's Eyes, Light Step and Prime Hacker we could simulate in house, if, ah, necessary.”

Miss Penelope's face gently pushed itself into a frown.

Doctor Jung let out a pathetic little laugh, “Ha ha.”

Her face remained unchanged.

“Well, now, um, please do not be upset, Miss Penelope. There is an order and a time schedule for these things, and so long as he lives up to his, ah, hype, then everything will run smoothly, hmm. I assure you, by the end of this year, the subject you see will be a prime example of exactly how much an Agent can be modified.”

“Adapted,” corrected Miss Penelope, letting her face return to normal.

“Ah, yes, of course.”

“We must maintain this line of language. The Luddites have exposed pictures of modified Tsang-Tao troops. They are grainy, but clearly show the abominations that are being produced over there.”

“Yes, Miss Penelope but Project Synergy...”

“The negative PR generated from the images has put Tsang-Tao on the back foot. While Houston might assume to take the high ground, the only difference, really, between what they are doing and what we are doing is that their agents look like freaks.”

“Really, Miss, I must protest...”

“While they can weather the storm by hiding in their fortress of misinformation, Houston simply cannot. I know, Doctor, our *adapted* agents are much more sophisticated, much less intrusive, but that does not mean that we are immune,” she went on, “If anyone were to catch wind of what is going on, especially the Luddites, the Board would shut us down rather than risk any media scrutiny or comparison. Unless, of course, we can prove the undeniable worth of Project Adaptation.”

Doctor Jung shuddered. When it came to the Board, he was happy to let someone else handle the negotiations.

“Very well, Miss Penelope, we shall endeavor to accelerate the activation of his modules.”

## Chapter 6

*“Man is a social creature.  
Man is a vain creature.  
Man uses society to feed his vanity.”*  
– *Lessons of Gaetta*

Simon, broad shouldered, fit and slightly sweaty, came jogging over.

“Hey Otto! You going to sit there all day?” he asked.

Ottavio looked up and pushed out a smile. Simon could be a bit overwhelming. He had not seen him for quite some time, but he sounded pretty much as he remembered.

“Seems like a plan. What have you been up to?”

“Eh, this and that. I haven't seen you since I left for Uganda. You were heading off to do some pussy peace keeping mission.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Simon grinned to himself, “Yeah. Kicked a lot of butt over there. You want peace keeping? Try breaking the peace with a bullet in your head. Ha! Uganda was a whole lot more interesting than, wherever you went.”

“New Guinea.”

“Whatever. Anyway, enough about me. Supposed to be setting up my new team. Bunch of wannabe pansies. How are your legs holding up after the surgery?”

Ottavio instinctively rubbed his knees, “You know, it's strange. This readout thing is saying they're still only at seventy percent.”

Simon replied, “Ha, yeah, I had the same thing. It's those myoactuators, they take a bit of time to bond with the muscles or something. Why, you hurting?”

“No. I mean, they're stiff, but...”

“Well you can sit there whining or you can stretch them legs, eh?”

He tossed Ottavio a basketball. Ottavio bounced it a few times and trotted after Simon.

“So, you've been modified as well?” he asked.

“Sure have, best thing I ever did. Check this out!”

Simon grabbed the ball, bounced it around playfully and raced to the hoop. With a light grunt he launched himself up into the air and slammed the ball through the ring before dropping lightly to the floor.

“See that? I'm six one, and that's at professional height. Now let's make it a bit more interesting, eh?”

He pushed a button on the side of the pole. The ring rose up higher and higher. “Right, that's a full three feet higher than professional standards.”

Ottavio watched on expectantly. Simon checked his footing and paused for a bit, concentrating. He crouched, sprinted and then practically flew up to the ring, dropping the ball neatly within. He landed as lightly as before, grabbed the ball and passed it to Ottavio, smiling happily.

“Now don't tell me that wasn't impressive, because it bloody well took me a while to master, even with the implants!” snorted Simon.

“Can I do that?”

“Dunno,” said Simon, shrugging, “Probably not. Heck, why don't you give it a try. You're supposed to be exercising, anyway. Here, I'll lower it back down to pussy height.”

The ring obligingly sank. It still appeared formidable. Ottavio rolled the ball in his hands, hoping he would not appear too foolish.

“Just be careful coming back down, right,” warned Simon with a smug smile.

Ottavio nodded and bounced the ball to get a feel of its weight. He took a run and jumped as hard as he could. To his enormous surprise the ground seemed to fly away from him as the ring

came down to greet him.

“Uh!” he grunted as his head collided with the backboard. He flopped clumsily back down to the ground, clutching his head.

Simon came over, laughing hard. When he had caught his breath, he said, “Oh mate, you should've seen your face! That was priceless. Yeah, mate, you've gotta learn to control it!”

Control. The word rattled inside Ottavio's head. It seemed that for the past few weeks, he had been rolling along on a wave, being pushed this way and that. Ever since he had woken up from his surgical stasis he had been doing whatever it was that Houston asked.

As he lay there on the floor, he tried to think of the last time he made a decision for himself. Something that did not require a command from above. Something for which he was wholly responsible.

Simon slapped his face.

“Hey, princess,” he said standing over him, “You thinking about lying there all day?”

“Would that be so bad?”

Simon grabbed his hand and helped him to his feet. “Come on, princess, walk it off and try that again.”

Ottavio dusted himself off and tried to concentrate. After a few attempts Ottavio managed to pot a few clumsy hoops. Simon mused, “When I was a pup, I remember getting teased by the bigger kids 'cause I couldn't dunk a ball. And it wasn't for a lack of trying, either. I ended up getting real good at shooting, but. Man, if those guys could see me now! How are you feeling, anyway? Your legs stinging yet?”

Ottavio was a little puffed, “Absolutely. Well, not stinging, more like an ache.”

He sat down and rubbed them a little. Simon sat next to him and drank noisily from his water bottle.

“Yeah, they'll do that a fair bit. Takes about a fortnight before it stops. Until then, get as much exercise as you can. I dare say you won't be doing the full height of the ring for a while. Kind of depends on what kind of actuators they stuck in. Mine, you see, mine are designed to aid with strength and speed. Others, like Cassandra and Lucas are more for endurance and stability.”

Ottavio looked up, “Cassandra Whithers?”

“Oh, you've met her, then. The brunette with the tight rack.”

“What... I know her. I just didn't know that she applied for special duties. I knew Lucas did, we applied together. But I thought she was transferred...”

Simon looked at him sideways, “Oh... I get it.”

“What? There's nothing to get. I just didn't know, that's all.”

“Uh-huh. Didn't know, right on,” pushed Simon sarcastically.

“So their implants are different, then?” said Ottavio, trying to change the subject.

“Of course. We're a bunch of guinea pigs, mate, didn't you know? I mean, they've got all these ideas of how they can improve agents. Take me, for example. They've geared me toward hand to hand combat. I'm stronger, faster and I've got the reflexes of a cat! What's more, they've even given my skin a going over. It was painful as, let me tell you, but well worth it. Look!”

Simon grabbed a combat knife from his belt and dragged it over his arm. Although it was razor sharp, it barely left a scratch. “They call it plasmesh or synthmesh or something. Don't care for the name much but the results speak for themselves. Doesn't mean I'm invulnerable, you know, but in a straight-up fight it's like I'm wearing armor!”

Ottavio whistled appropriately. Simon put his knife away and pointed with his chin. Ottavio could see Lucas on a treadmill.

“Lucas over there, he and *Cassandra* have been assigned espionage and reconnaissance duty. They've got some kind of visual enhancement. Lucas is getting trained in using a super-range sniper rifle, and *Cassandra*...”

“Stop that,” hissed Ottavio.

Simon poked him in the ribs and chuckled, “Whatever. She's multitalented. Apart from her tight rack, she's also got the lightest fingers around.”

Ottavio scowled.

“Man, you should see your face! I was talking about her picking a lock! Shwick! Just like that. Skilled hands. Very skilled hands,” he winked, “She's modded up with some Lock Picking thing, feedback sensors in her fingers, and she's got an enhanced hearing module, Owl Audio, which means she's probably listening in on us right now!”

Ottavio tried not to look worried. He failed.

“Geez, relax a little, mate. I'm just having a go. Doc tells me it's strictly ultra-sonic hearing so she can listen to locks and stuff while she's fiddling.”

“They're going to make us a team, aren't they?” surmised Ottavio.

“Huh? Well, check out the brains on this one. They must've given you a cerebral upgrade. Didn't know they had an Einstein Module. Yeah, looks like I've got me a team of pussies. Personally, I'd prefer a whole team of me's. We'd just go in, kick some ass and get out. But I guess if there's a lock to pick I'd prefer to watch a bit of candy... Hey look, mate, if you want to have a crack, go ahead. But I think she goes for the bad boys. So don't be surprised if you have to be knocking on my door to give her flowers.”

Ottavio rubbed his head, “Look...”

“It's perfectly natural. I have this thing, you know, women just fall at my feet. Well, I'm still working my way through this facility. Last week was that chick on reception...”

“Natasha?”

“Yeah. Wasn't worth the hassle. The biology chick was better. Then there's Penelope...”

“Penelope?” scoffed Ottavio, “You're dreaming.”

“Yeah, yeah I might be,” Simon said, smirking, “But every fortress has its weakness, and she'll crack eventually. They always do. Until then, Cass will have to do.”

Ottavio pretended not to care. He did not make a good job of it.

Simon's face darkened a fraction, “Hey, don't sweat it. Just keep it professional, yeah? I don't need you getting shitty out in the field. Come on, snap out of it. Let's go for a bit of a run around the track.”

Ottavio followed him around the track, trying his best to keep up.

“Geez, Simon, is that the best you can do? You'll want to get those implants looked at,” joked Ottavio.

Simon happily accepted the challenge and took off down the track. In thirty seconds he was coming up from behind Ottavio. He slapped him playfully on the rump as he passed, “Come on, bitch, what do you think of that, eh?”

He slowed down and allowed Ottavio to catch up.

“So,” puffed Ottavio, finding it difficult to run and talk, “What have I been adapted for?”

Simon scratched his nose, “Yeah. That's what's screwed up about this place. I'm clearly the best operative they've got, I'm already modded, and they go and give some pussy the works. I've already put it to the Doc. He seems to think you're the next big thing.”

“What?”

“You've got the works, baby. Doc says they're gonna switch on modules as you get better. Something about not overloading your pathetic little brain by having them all on at once.”

“That's bullshit. I mean, Doctor Jung didn't say...”

“Nah, he wouldn't. Not until he was sure you weren't going to flip. Oh, shit. You're not going to get all weird about it are you?”

Ottavio's jaw pushed forward. What had Houston done with his body?

“No,” he said, “I'm sure there's just been in a miscommunication or something.”

“Hey, if you don't believe me, ask Penelope next time you see her. Say, do you reckon she... Nah, never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Hey, let's have a quick chat to Lucas.”

The two left the track and plodded over to where Lucas was stretching his arms. Behind his quiet brown eyes and cropped hair, Lucas was a silent lake, brooding and still. During missions,

during leave, it did not matter, he was unflappable.

"Howdy, Lucas," yelled Simon, slapping him on the shoulder. Lucas nodded politely.

"Hello. It's good to see you up and about, Ottavio," he said, attempting a smile.

"And you, Lucas. Say, Simon was just telling me about this super-long range sniper rifle," said Ottavio, shaking his hand.

Lucas again nodded, "It's something to behold. I'm still getting the hang of it, but the idea is that each round has microfine flechettes integrated with actuators that adjust depending on the bullet's trajectory. In short, I can put a piece of lead in a target three kilometers away so long as I can maintain a line of sight, and get the starting angle right."

"Sounds touchy," smirked Simon.

"It takes a bit of getting used to, and a good pair of steady hands. It removes a lot of the variables of turbulence and aerodynamics from the picture, which is nice, and it also means that the target can move a bit, but too much adjustment can cause the round to tumble or drop prematurely," said Lucas, "I've been modded with Steady Hands and Eagle Eye. Jung says the lab is working on newer versions, should be upgraded sometime next week. Still, it's not like a standard rifle. It's got a massive kick, even with the anti-recoil, and the guidance is very... subtle."

Subtle. That described Lucas perfectly. His emotions hardly ever showed, creeping out only through the barest of facial changes. Anyone who did not know him would consider him cold and impassive. Anyone who worked on a mission with him would know otherwise.

Simon spat, "Pah. Long range bullshit. Just give me a knife and row of jugulars! None of this hiding for me!"

Lucas countered, "A single bullet can change the course of an empire, Simon, more than an ocean of blood."

"Well said!" said a puffing Doctor Jung, "Well said indeed!"

He tottered up to the group.

"Agent Simon," he scolded, "Agent Ottavio is still under observation. You were ordered to inform me prior to any exercise received."

"Sorry, Doc. I thought you had already been informed. Must've been a miscommunication."

"Yes, well, you can fill me in on what you have been doing. Ottavio, you are to report to Miss Penelope at once."

"Do I need to accompany him?" said Simon, a twinkle crossing his eyes.

Doctor Jung, missing the subtleties, shook his head. "No, I need you to report on your training of Agent Ottavio, then go over the training plan for Agent Lucas."

"You're my trainer?" asked Ottavio to Simon.

Doctor Jung led them away, "Yes, yes, Agent Simon is your physical trainer, even though I personally think that one's trainer and one's squad leader should be separate concerns."

"I'm as good a trainer as you'll find out there. And if I can't pick my team, at least I can mold these pussies into proper fighters," said Simon after them. What passed for joviality had left Simon's face. Doctor Jung sensed the change in the mood.

"We can, um, discuss your objections in private, Agent Simon. For now, Agent Ottavio, get along to Miss Penelope's office. She is not one to be kept waiting!" said Doctor Jung, waving his hand at Ottavio.

Ottavio cantered away, leaving the three looking after him. He entered the main hall and slowed down to a fast walk. It would not do to be running inside, not unless there was an emergency. Guards were posted all around, guards who had been trained to immobilize first and ask questions later.

Funnily enough, even though Ottavio had been at Houston Corps for several years, he had never gotten to know many of them except for Kilroy, the guard posted by the dormitories, and Wei, who wandered the mess hall.

For the most part they kept to themselves, watching silently from underneath the silver visors of their helmets. On more than a few occasions Ottavio found himself wondering if there were actual humans underneath the armor.

This was a different sector of Houston Corps, with higher security and fewer people than the General Access facility in Minnesota where he used to work.

Everything was polished and sterile. A few pot plants were dotted about and a small fountain was placed in the foyer which emitted a constant trickling noise in a futile attempt to bring life to the white, fluorescent-lit walls. The marble on the floor echoed happily as he marched along.

As he whizzed past the front desk, Natasha urged him on, "Miss Penelope is waiting for you, Agent Ottavio. Please see her in her office at once." Ottavio nodded and continued on to the Biological Research wing.

Natasha was nothing if not efficient. She was pleasant enough when she needed to be, which was often, but Ottavio had seen her other side on more than one occasion.

Several people passed him by, some he recognized, some he did not. Being new to the sector, he tried hard to remember faces and names where possible, especially the more important ones. He passed by several offices before stopping at Penelope's.

Ottavio buzzed the intercom.

"Yes?" came her voice.

"Agent Ottavio, ma'am."

"About time, come in."

The lock on the door clicked and Ottavio pushed it open. Penelope sat behind a small, black desk, her hair pulled up tightly. Although her face was serious, Ottavio saw a softness behind the glasses and straight mouth. She was motherly, in a regimental kind of way.

He stood to attention, "Ma'am."

"How do you feel? And please do not bother to give me numerics. I already have a detailed chart of your recovery progress. I am after how you, personally, feel."

Ottavio thought for a bit. I would not do to appear dissatisfied. "I feel fine and fit. A little sore in the legs, but only because I've been exercising in the yard."

"What about your emotional status. Are you happy? Sad? Angry?"

"No," said Ottavio, shaking his head, "I can't say that I'm angry or sad in any way."

"Do not lie to me, Agent."

He gritted his teeth. There was no hiding from Miss Penelope's eyes. "Honestly? I am displeased with my level of modification," he said carefully.

"In what way?"

"I don't remember signing up to have these implants in the first place, ma'am."

Miss Penelope replied, "You did when you signed up for special duties."

"Simon told me. How much of my real body is left?"

"Adaptation does not replace, only augments. You are still you, if that is what you are concerned about."

"I signed up so I could perform covert work, not to be some guinea pig getting robot eyes. I signed up so I could be a better Agent."

"And we have made you a better Agent."

Ottavio swallowed his words.

Miss Penelope went on, "The adaptations we have made are in line with Houston's policy. If you read under section forty two..."

"I'm sure it's all legal. I just didn't know Houston owned my ass. Literally."

"You will refrain from using such vulgar language, Agent."

Ottavio simmered. There were things he wanted to say, about how he felt violated, about how the adaptations were amazing, but they made him feel like a machine. Again, he swallowed his words.

"I understand ma'am."

"Good. So long as we are clear. Now, are you nervous about your performance? After all the work that has been done, surely you realize that we have high expectations of you?"

Penelope leaned forward in her chair, watching him with eagle eyes.

Ottavio pursed his lips. Expectations. There was something in the way she said that word that

made him think twice. He opted for a safe approach, "I will always strive to perform at the top of my abi..."

"Do not give me bullshit answers, Agent! We have invested a lot of time and money and more than that we have bent several federal and international laws to make you the way you are," Penelope lowered her spectacles, "You are the end product of nearly three decades worth of research and development. Your body has been selected as the prototype for demonstrating our full capabilities for biological adaptation."

"Lucas and Simon, they..."

"The others have been enhanced in their own way, displaying specialized adaptations. They are but window dressing. You, Ottavio, you are our trump card. People are watching you, very important people who make very important decisions. Do not underestimate your importance."

"I understand..."

"Silence! I know you do not understand. Listen very carefully Agent. I will say this clearly: We cannot risk losing you. If there is ever a choice between saving yourself and saving others, you are to choose yourself. If you must choose between obeying orders and saving your life, you must choose your own life. I know that this goes against your basic instincts of team camaraderie, as well it should. You are human, after all."

Ottavio waited in silence. He was not sure if she wanted him to say something, but he could not think of anything to say, so he kept quiet. Penelope leaned back in her chair.

"Feelings are just that, feelings. They come and go as they please, and think that they can rule your reason. Remember first and foremost that you are an Agent, and as such you must follow orders. I am giving one of them to you now: Save yourself at all costs. I hope I have made myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Do you agree with my orders?"

Ottavio knew the answer, "What I agree or disagree with does not matter."

"Very good," cooed Penelope, "Now I have some news for you. You are to be sent on a mission in a fortnight. It is fairly light, mostly reconnaissance work, but your every move will be monitored and scrutinized. Expect a full briefing at oh-nine hundred on Thursday."

"Yes, ma'am," said Ottavio.

Penelope looked him up and down.

"Tell me, Agent, have you met the other members of your squad?"

"I believe so, ma'am. At least, I know Simon and Lucas."

"What about Agents Norbert, Cassandra and Emily?"

"No ma'am."

"No?"

Ottavio swallowed. "Well, I have met Agent Cassandra briefly."

"I see. And what do you think of her?"

"I can't say. I only saw her..."

"Again with the bullshit. Agent Ottavio, we will be able to proceed much faster if you understand that I am not interested in fluff for answers," said Penelope. She tapped out some pencil shavings into a bin.

"You deliberately did not mention her name when I asked about who you knew in your team, and yet you now reveal that you know her. I wonder, am I going to have to intercede at some point in the future in relation to an unwarranted advance?"

"No ma'am."

"Because this establishment is above human emotions and cravings, you understand," continued Penelope, "We are leading the world in technological advancements. We bring peace to otherwise troubled areas. We prevent chaos from taking root. These are Houston's roles and I will not have them undermined by some pathetic primal craving. Do I make myself clear?"

"Absolutely, ma'am."

"Good. Now get back to training. You will not be one hundred percent by next fortnight, I

understand, so keep the intensity down. I do not want any stuff ups.”

The door unlocked behind Ottavio.

“Yes, ma'am.”

Ottavio walked out the door and into the hall and headed back toward the gymnasium, slower this time. In truth, the fact that he was going on a mission so soon after his surgery did worry him, and the words of Penelope only served to worry him more.

He stopped to think at a drink fountain.

Expectations. Important people. He had applied for advanced duties expecting a bit more risk, not to be studied like a lab rat in some grandiose experiment.

And all that about saving himself at all costs. Of course he would never risk his life needlessly. His friends however, if they were in trouble, he would have to save them if he could. They would certainly do the same for him. He comforted himself with the idea taught in basic training, “Don't get into a compromising position and you won't have to get out of one.”

Ottavio continued down the hall.

“Hello Natasha,” he said, attempting a smile.

“Good morning Agent Ottavio. I trust your day is going well?” said Natasha, tapping away at a keyboard.

It was not really a question, but Ottavio answered it anyway.

“It's going pretty good, all things considered. And you?”

“Well as can be expected. Can I help you with something?”

“Any news?” suggested Ottavio.

Natasha continued tapping on her keyboard. A phone rang.

“Nothing that would interest you, I'm sure,” she said, picking up the phone. Ottavio took that as his cue that the conversation, what little there was, was over.

“Alright, bye,” he said, and walked back to the gym. Doctor Jung was waiting for him.

“I trust Miss Penelope informed you of an impending mission, Agent? This means you are, um, to be in a peak state of performance. Well, as peak as we can get you. I have gone over the training regime, and you shall be getting top ups in hand to hand combat today and tomorrow, and some more lock picking tomorrow afternoon and the next day,” he said, tapping on his touch pad, “Agent Simon is waiting for you now over in the dojo. You will be training alongside agents Cassandra, Norbert, Emily and Lucas.”

“Right,” said Ottavio and he made to leave for the dojo.

“Be sure to integrate yourself into the team, Ottavio. You are to work seamlessly. Agent Simon is your leader, obey his orders, after mine and Miss Penelope's of course. Oh, and Ottavio? I am sure Miss Penelope spelled out your, um, importance to us here. Let me give you a little advice for free. Miss Penelope is a practical woman. And she does not use words idly. And although she does not hold a, um, military position, you would do well to follow any orders given by her. To the letter. Above all others.”

For once Doctor Jung's face was serious. Ottavio looked at him for a few moments, before nodding slowly in comprehension.

“This sector works differently to the General Access you may be used to. Do your best to figure it out, hum, quickly,” said Jung.

His face changed to its normal, sweaty self, “Run along now, boy. You have some kung fu to do!”

## Chapter 7

*“No mirror can reveal it,  
no surgeon can remove it.  
It is an invisible enemy, the worst kind.”  
- Sixth Tome of Brother Jacob*

In the briefing room, six agents sat at ease on their steel benches.

In front of them stood Commander Ali-Baba. His dark eyebrows sat flat across his eyes. His right hand had been replaced, after being lost in the Hanean war, by a crude cluster of actuators and sensors. He had been given the opportunity, on many occasions, to upgrade to a more sophisticated model, but he refused.

He missed his real hand. He missed the way he knew exactly what it would do, how it felt, how it gripped things. No matter how fancy the skin toning, or how realistic the articulation of a prosthetic, it would never replace his old hand. Any attempt would just be disrespectful.

He clutched a remote control roughly while he waited patiently for the crew to settle.

Ali-Baba cleared his throat loudly.

“If you've quite finished, we can begin,” he said, his gravelly voice hitting a tenor's timbre.

The background noise stopped abruptly and the agents sat straight. Ali-Baba clicked a button on the remote control, making a map appear on a board behind him.

“You will be deployed outside of Chicago, in the province of Illinois at twenty hundred hours local time. Insertion is here, on the outskirts of Wheaton, about thirty odd kilometers out. You are to make your way on foot to this structure here.”

A green indicator flashed over a building to the North West.

“This used to be a fire station. It is disused now, any locals are to be considered squatters. Agent Cassandra, you will attain access to the structure. Agent Lucas, you will set up in the tower and provide long range observation. Agents Norbert, Ottavio and Simon, you will provide cover and engage any hostiles that might be in or around the structure. Agent Emily, you will join Cassandra and scout for and disable any traps in or around the structure that may pose a threat.”

Ali-Baba clicked the remote again. The map widened to show a satellite view of the main town of Wheaton. It looked tight and clustered.

“Once you have established a base camp and secured the surrounding area, if the team leader deems it safe you will make your way to the eastern edge of the town.”

The map showed a wriggling path up and through the town, highlighting various buildings and landmarks along the way.

“The town itself is lightly inhabited. They won't trust outsiders yet. Houston's Hearts and Minds hasn't established itself here, so avoid any contact. Feel free to engage any hostile, but do not fire if you are not directly threatened. We aren't here to win friends, but we also don't need the media hounding us for perceived crimes against humanity. Your objective is located somewhere around here.”

Ali-Baba tapped the remote control. The map zoomed in on a section of the town, highlighting a series of buildings.

“One of these buildings holds what we believe to be a cache of drug manufacturing equipment and a functioning laboratory. We haven't got a perfect bead, but we've tracked energy usages and equipment being shipped into the area. Considering this place is supposed to be as dead as a doornail, there's definitely something fishy going on.”

Simon raised his hand, “So we blow it up?”

Ali shook his head, “Once you have determined the location the cache, agent Norbert will tap any network and record intelligence. You will then return to the base and await further instructions. While we definitely want to put a sting on any drug or weapons manufacturing being performed in this area, the site itself has been earmarked for peaceful industry. Hence, all equipment must remain

intact. This last order is critical to mission success.”

Emily raised her hand, “Can we expect any traps, sentries or security around the laboratory site, sir?”

Ali-Baba checked his notes, “The laboratory is presumed to be automated and security light. Nothing is showing up on thermal satellite imagery except small motions in and around the area on a regular basis. The amount of activity around the area would only warrant a few cameras and possibly a robotic sentry or two to keep out nosy locals and scavengers. We expect the laboratory and cache to be hidden from plain view, but accessible. Still, keep on guard. Satellite imagery and intelligence can only provide so much.”

“Being close to the wasteland as it is, you can expect a mutant or two that may have wandered in. There's nothing of interest to attract any Rags, and no significant military presence has been seen nearby. Radiation and toxicity levels are within acceptable limits, but still, don't drink the water. Any further questions?”

Simon coughed. Nobody raised their hands.

“Good. Simon, special briefing in my office in two minutes. This should be a nice, easy mission, people. You've been training together for the past while, now let's see if we can't get you functioning out in the field. You leave in half an hour. Don't get hurt out there.”

The chatter renewed. Simon slapped Lucas on the back, “Here's hoping you get to try your toy out.”

Lucas shook his head, “It would be better if I never have a need to fire it.”

“Pfft! Mate. I'm not sure if I've ever seen you as a pacifist, Lucas.”

“I'm not a pacifist, Simon. If I were, I would not be in this role. It's more so that my shots are for a kill, not wounding or disabling. If I squeeze the trigger, the target is dead.”

“Of course, that's the idea...”

“The removing of a life from this world is a serious undertaking, and I'm convinced that many situations can be resolved without the need for death,” responded Lucas.

“Oh great,” said Simon, looking at him underneath lowered eyebrows, “I've got a bloody sniper with a conscience. Am I going to have issues with you out in the field, mate?”

Lucas shook his head. “No,” he said firmly, “I won't hesitate to make the shot if ordered. I only said it would be better never to need to fire it.”

“Whatever. You guys get your asses to the staging area, eh?” Simon called, trotting off to Ali-Baba's office.

Lucas scratched his head absently.

Ottavio turned talk to Cassandra but she was already half way out the room, heading to the staging area, so he turned to Norbert. He had a light stubble smeared across his face. Several scars raised the skin in patches, giving him an air of someone who narrowly missed out on the experience of dying on more than one occasion.

“Howdy,” said Ottavio, nodding slightly, “We haven't spoken much in training.”

Norbert looked him up and down.

“There's probably a reason,” he grunted.

Ottavio looked him square in the eye, unsure of exactly what to say. Norbert snorted, turned on his heels and headed off. Ottavio watched as he walked out the door.

“Did... what did I say?” he appealed.

“Don't pay him much attention,” said Emily, pushing Ottavio out the door as well, “You got more out of him than I have so far. All the mods must have made his brain a little strange. I think he spends his time in his dorm wearing a tinfoil hat. Come on, we'd better get suited up.”

Ottavio walked along the corridors with her and Lucas. She had a spring in every step, causing her light hair to bounce lightly off her forehead as she went.

“He can be a bit of a dick, I've heard,” she said, “But he's alright underneath, you know. That's what Natasha says, anyhow. I admire your attempt at small talk. If we're a team, we'd better get to know each other a bit better. Outside of training and all.”

Lucas nodded, “Considering we've all been modded in some way, that's at least a talking

point.”

“I've been meaning to ask, where do you hail from?” Ottavio asked.

“Data Gathering under Industrial Intelligence,” said Emily.

“That's based in Seattle, isn't it?” said Lucas.

“Yup. Can't say I prefer the weather there to here.”

Ottavio ventured, “So I take it you're a specialist on security?”

Emily laughed, “Ha! Hardly. I mean, yeah, that's where I'm headed, you know. I mean, I can hack a standard camera based security system no problem. It's the higher grade ones with sentinel turrets that are still giving me the peeves. Still, with this new implant...”

Emily tapped her head knowingly.

Lucas asked, “Exactly what kind of an implant aids your ability to hack a system?”

“Oh, Doctor Jung could tell you all about it, but basically I find a hotspot on a terminal and use induction sensors on my fingers to get feedback based on the type of system I'm hacking. For example, on a Boswell numeric system I can see the effect of the keys as I press them,” said Emily, poking the air, “It's just a matter of finding out which response indicates a valid entry and which is invalid, and then following the pattern. It isn't as hard as it sounds, really, well, at least not as I see it. And it sure beats guesswork.”

“Boswells are getting a bit long in the tooth, but,” said Ottavio.

“Sure are. Doesn't mean there aren't a heck of a lot installed around the place. Besides, I don't just do the Boswells. The Indusafe ones are almost identical, except the feedback is a little harder to get going.”

The three walked into the staging area. Norbert was already getting his vest on. Cassandra was busy checking the contents of her belt. She smiled as they walked in. Ottavio smiled back. Lucas nodded.

“Help me out with my rifle, will you,” Lucas asked.

“Sure,” Ottavio grunted, fixated on Cassandra's frame.

Emily pushed him out of the way and bubbled, “Oh my God! Cass, I'm totally sorry about the dojo yesterday. I mean, I totally thought you were ready!”

Cassandra bundled up her dark hair from her shoulders and put on her helmet.

“Please, don't sweat it, Em,” she said, “I should have been ready. And you've apologized fifty million times.”

“No, girl, you had your hand up and you were looking away. Come on, I'll give you a freebie,” said Emily, holding her chin forward, “Don't be shy. I can take it. Just give me a bit of warning first, okay?”

Cassandra laughed.

“Stop that, Em! Come on, we're supposed to be getting ready,” she said, “Simon's going to get to play leader, so we'd better not piss him off.”

She looked at Ottavio, standing there like a lost puppy.

“Dust-off is in a few minutes,” she said, “You'd better get your gear.”

“I'm, um, I'm helping Lucas...” faltered Ottavio, looking over his shoulder. Lucas had already gone to the quartermaster store to retrieve his super-sniper rifle and was muttering to himself.

Ottavio reluctantly left the two of them to chat and went to check his gear.

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The drop ship whistled and hummed under the clouds. Pilots Harvey and Oscar expertly guided it over the Allegheny Mountains, preferring to skim close to the tops of the trees than take it to a height.

Underneath them, Ohio, the ground alternated between wastes, scattered settlements and fully functioning cities.

Supersonic flight had replaced conventional travel for military institutions several years back since the development of a mass producible class of SioNef engines. Cheap, reliable and very fast,

it allowed Entities like Houston to put Peace Enforcement Officers and Agents on the ground in record time.

Upon the approach the drop ship swerved gracefully around a flock of geese before bringing the ship down to rest next to an abandoned petrol station. Dust blustered around it as the engines whined and grunted.

A door at the rear opened and six figures dropped onto the ground. Two stood guard while the rest took cover by a nearby building. One of the two gave a thumbs up and the pilots whizzed back up into the black-gray sky.

Crickets, quietened by the onrush of dust and noise, resumed their chirruping.

“Right-oh mates,” said Simon, “Let's do this smooth, eh? First things first, switch to night vision. Lucas, do a thermal, Otto keep your peepers wide and your weapon up.”

Lucas obliged while the others switched on their night vision.

“I'm not getting much, sir. There's a hot spot or two over by the south, probably subterranean pockets of heat. The town appears pretty much quiet apart from a few houses, nothing immediate.”

“Lucas, you and Otto head over to that burnt out building over there,” ordered Simon, “The rest of you hang back with me.”

Lucas and Ottavio paced slowly over to the other building. Crickets scuttled away from their feet as they crunched quietly on the gravel. Ottavio held his assault rifle at the ready.

“Pretty much a ghost town,” said Lucas. His enormous rifle was strapped to his back, making his gait a little awkward.

“You need a hand with that thing?” asked Ottavio.

Lucas shook his head, “No, I'm just not used to carrying it in the field. That's something I'll have to learn. See anything?”

“No,” said Ottavio.

“All clear here, sir,” he said into his commlink.

“Roger. Otto, we'll advance to the tall building further on. Cover us,” said Simon, “Anything moves, shoot it.”

Ottavio scratched his head, “Ali said not to engage...”

“Ali's not here, Otto,” Simon snapped, “Move equals shoot, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ottavio held his rifle firmly as he watched their shadows creep along the walls. The moon was bright but the clouds softened her glow, casting the road and buildings in a mellow, pale hue.

Simon called through, “Otto, Lucas, move forward along the side of the road. Over the crest is the fire station. Get into a covered position and tell me what you see.”

Ottavio patted Lucas on the shoulder and led the way up to the top of the crest before crouching behind a cluster of concrete that used to be a retaining wall for an office complex. Lucas crouched next to him, scanning.

“I've got three hot spots, sir. Confirmed movement. One by the eastern edge of the station, the other two over by the main door.”

“Roger that Lucas. Hold tight,” said Simon.

The pair stayed crouched. Ottavio's optical display placed yellow squares around two of the figures. The other he could not see. He looked closely at one of the silhouettes. Even after his visual display interpolated the image he had trouble making out features.

“Crabmen, I'll bet,” he said.

“Could be some locals scavenging,” suggested Lucas.

“At this time of night? Wouldn't be anything left to scavenge. Besides, I'm pretty sure that one's got four arms. Nah, I'll stick with crabbies.”

Norbert's voice came through the commlink, “Listen, man, if you've got crabs, man, I can recommend a good powder. Turn your damn commlink off when you're not talking to the crew!”

Even in the dark Lucas could feel Ottavio's face blush. A rookie mistake, harmless but embarrassing. The pair stayed silent for a while.

“What's he playing at?” whispered Ottavio, looking over at the others.

Lucas kept his eyes on the station, watching the heat signatures amble about.

"He's playing it safe," he said, "I bet he's making sure this one goes off without a hitch."

"What's going to go wrong? This place is dead."

"Yes, perhaps. But that doesn't mean that stuff can't go sour."

"Report in Lucas, any changes?" squealed Simon over the commlink.

"No sir, as before."

"Right. Right. Lucas, do another quick sweep of our surrounds."

Lucas did so.

"Nothing else sir, we're alone."

The commlink went silent for thirty seconds. It sounded as if the crickets were holding a party.

"OK, here's the plan. Otto, Lucas, move forward to within twenty meters of the fence line on the side of the main door. Norbert, Cass, Em, head to the eastern side and hold tight. I'm going to be on the direct approach. Call when you're in position, and nobody fire unless fired upon."

Ottavio looked to Lucas who nodded. The two moved forward slowly and settled in a ditch by the road, watching the main entrance. They could see the crabmen clearly now, night vision showing up their exaggerated features in a garish green.

Stumpy legs supported a stout torso, covered in shining gray armor. Several limbs protruded rudely, some hanging uselessly, others sweeping the air with agitation. At the end of each was a three digit hand, the nails warped and ending in a point. A flat head, tiny eyes and a mat of unkempt hair finished the monsters. The mouth, void of lips, salivated continuously.

The crabmen snatched at the air distractedly, unaware of the presence of the approaching crew.

"Ottavio and Lucas in position," whispered Lucas, unhinging his pistol.

After a short while, Norbert called through, "We're in position, sir."

"Sweet. Right-oh guys, hold tight," said Simon, "I'll take out the one on the east, and then the two at the main gate. Nobody is to fire a weapon, eh? We're going to do this silently."

Ottavio's heart rate started to climb as he watched Simon creep silently through over the fence and behind a crabman. It barely let out a scream before it crumpled to the floor.

The noise attracted the others by the gate.

"The other two are coming your way, sir," warned Lucas.

Ottavio instinctively aimed his assault rifle. Lucas touched his shoulder and whispered, "No, these are Simon's."

Ottavio lowered his gun.

Simon, like a leopard, moved to the edge of the building. Simon's blade severed the larynx of one before he ducked, twirled and rammed it home into the skull of the second. The two bodies crumpled to the floor uselessly in a pool of dark blood.

It was over in a second; at least, it would have been if Simon had not continued to desecrate the bodies. He hacked and sliced and sprayed juice all about. The macabre ritual went on, sickening those that watched.

"All targets have been neutralized, sir," said Norbert cautiously.

Simon danced a little more and rammed his blade into what was left of a torso.

"Oh, yeah! Woo! Too easy," he panted, smiling broadly and looking at his handiwork. Ottavio and Lucas scuttled over to join them, stepping gingerly over the pieces.

"Right, mates, move in and secure this building," said a satisfied Simon, wiping the blood off his knife, "Damn, it's good to see some action again, even if it is just against some dirty crabs."

## Chapter 8

*“He only believes. But he does not know!  
Yet he will quote himself as scripture.  
Others will listen, they will follow.  
They will sacrifice themselves for his words.”  
- Brother Isaac*

Ryan sat in his cell, staring blankly at the wall. There was no means of escape. His cell was fortified, cameras watched his every move. The doorway tantalizingly lay open, only a faint red hue suggested the presence of a magnetic field.

Around his neck was a choker, primed to arrest his breath if he approached the doorway. It was uncomfortable, but Ryan knew better than to fiddle with it.

The collar was a holdover from the mass arrests and interrogations employed by the government during the Hanean War.

Tamper proof steel belts attached to magnetically sensitive actuators meant that no knife could cut through the band before the subject's larynx was crushed. Moving toward a strong magnetic field shortened the bands, giving a sensation of suffocation. The stronger the field, the tighter the bands squeezed, providing a clean warning of where they could, and could not, stand.

Brother Rumi came marching to his cell.

“Follow me,” he said.

The red hue diminished from the doorway, and the guard stood waiting, a magnetic prod in his hand. He did not need to use it, as Ryan came quietly and obediently, holding his head high as he was marched up the corridor past other cells.

They were empty. The last time they were full was toward the end of the war.

Brother Isaac's extremist followers had been housed there, awaiting sanitation. It had been a long and arduous task to find them all, a task that meant the deaths of more than a few fine Vigils.

It was a private war waged within a global one. Its history would never be housed in a public library, never learned in a classroom. It would, however, be remembered by those who were involved and kept in the annals of the Vigils.

While the world was busy destroying itself, a small but powerful force was fighting to arrest its total destruction.

A dark door opened and Ryan was pushed through. Down some stairs and through another door, he was thrust into a small room containing a hooded Master Theodore and a wooden chair.

“Sit down and be attentive,” he commanded.

Ryan did so.

“Acolyte Ryan, your actions were of an extreme nature. The Brotherhood abhors violence as a means to an end. Whether you have convinced yourself of the need to push humanity or whether this was thrust upon you is of no matter when it comes to our decision,” said Master Theodore ominously, “Further, you have put our position at risk to satisfy your own demented ends. In short, you have betrayed the Brotherhood.”

Ryan remained silent.

“You have betrayed your Brethren. You have betrayed our ideals. You have betrayed the Fundamentals. You have murdered in cold blood. You have wantonly destroyed.”

Ryan continued to sit still and listen. His contempt was palpable in the cold room.

“From where your ideals have come, we cannot say. Understand, though, that if you have poisoned the minds of other brothers and sisters, we will find and sanitize them. They will be unburdened. You, however, are another matter. Punishment may be an option for the accidental loss of a life. I cannot think of a punishment great enough, however, for the slaughter of *hundreds* of lives. In any event, punishment can serve no purpose.”

Ryan sniffed audibly.

“Your acts were not rash. In fact they were rather calculated. You acted not with love for humanity, not for the furthering of mankind, but sheer hatred of your fellow man. Your justifications are not valid, neither logically nor emotionally. They are *insane!*”

“I protest that they are indeed valid,” said Ryan.

Master Theodore glared at him. He leaned forward and said, “You can protest all you like. You can protest to the families of the lives you took.”

“They will have already recovered from whatever selfish grief they may have had.”

“Still you display your hatred of man. With such a black heart you cannot possibly hope to change the hearts and minds of people. The Brotherhood works slowly and with compassion, not quickly with ire. You have been misguided, and, although I expect you not to answer, I must ask how and by whom.”

Ryan sat in silence. Master Theodore stared at him.

He was just a boy when he first saw him, wide eyed and naïve. Something had changed. His eyes had been replaced with cold orbs, impassive and unseeing. His mouth which had once spoken softly now sounded bitter.

An evil had gotten to this one, and Master Theodore was determined to find and cut it out like a cancer.

“I must encourage you, Ryan, to speak now,” he urged, his voice softening. Ryan sat still, not meeting Master Theodore's gaze.

“Very well. Seeing as how your heart has been corrupted, along with your brain and your soul, the council has decided that the only course of action is to banish you from this Brotherhood for the rest of your life.”

Theodore watched for any sign of reaction from Ryan. He sat like a statue, his breath controlled and his eyes unwavering from a point on the table.

“Furthermore, I have bargained on your behalf for clemency. Your life will be spared. You will be escorted to a sanitation facility in the wastes where you will be processed until such time as your mind has been deemed to be cleansed. A clean mind will allow, but will not guarantee, a clean soul. If you attempt to leave the facility before this time, you will be killed.”

Master Theodore leaned back in his chair. He stated, “This is the judgment of the council, pending any further information. Take him away.”

Ryan was led roughly down the hall and back to his cell. The red light in the doorway illuminated once more as he sat on his bunk. Brother Rumi watched him for a few moments before heading back to his post further down the hall.

His bunk was a bit uncomfortable so he twisted a little and faced the wall. He did not wish to admit it to himself, but he was scared.

The Vigils were powerful, they had eyes everywhere, and they knew so much about so many things. There was nothing to say that they did not already know exactly who had lifted the veil from his eyes, or that they knew what would come next.

By denying any further involvement, he may have aroused suspicion, which would cause them to investigate further, deeper. Truth serums, surely, possibly mind games.

His correspondence with Abraham had been encoded, and these were safe, but still his brain fought wildly as it thought for any communique or message that could be exploited by the Vigils to reveal his name.

He had been thorough. Anything remotely revealing he had erased. There was nothing left but to trust in Father Abraham's words, “They will seek to harm you but do not fear. Your salvation is at hand. I will see to it that you, my son, will not endure their wrath. This I promise.”

When he became an Acolyte, he had uttered 'I promise' to Master Theodore as required by the Brotherhood. He had sincerely meant it at the time.

He had looked into the eye of Master Theodore, who asked him the questions of loyalty to, servitude of and love for his fellow man, and he had said, 'I promise'.

A niggling feeling poked its head up through his stomach. He banished it and his memory of his initiation and instead thought about Father Abraham.

It was a faceless vision, since he had never met him, but naturally his brain put an old, bearded head on top of a cloaked body.

He was both wise and ruthless. He had shown the flaws in the Vigil's thinking. The self-serving lies. The hypocrisies. The backward logic that stunted progress. He had revealed them to Ryan, and all had been proven. The rhetoric of the Vigils was outdated. They were archaic. They were, in fact, holding everyone back. Including Ryan.

He was determined not to die a withered nobody. He would make a difference to the future, not just observe it as it goes by and make banal proverbs to explain it.

They were so sure of themselves, but Master Theodore was wrong about at least one thing. He had not acted with hatred, he had acted with sadness. Society had deteriorated from being the core of civilization to a mere collection of doe eyed individuals all scrambling for themselves. Ryan did not belong in society, not in this world, anyway.

It was a world where amazing brains lay dormant, slaves to machines. A world where hearts beat in a muffled chorus of melancholy, crying for salvation. A world in which souls were as indistinct as grains of sand, worthless and insignificant. Ryan could not live in such a world.

Abraham had helped him realize that. Abraham would help him change it.

## Chapter 9

*"Listen up! A mission where you come back with the same number of rounds, limbs and members as you went out with, that's the most successful kind you can have."*

*- Arms Master Benjamin Goldsmith*

"We've got someone living in the house two down from the demolished surgery," said Emily on the commlink, "I can see a light inside."

"Roger that. Emily, hold your position, I'm coming over. Everyone keep on your toes. Otto, come with me. We'll have a little look-see," said Simon.

Ottavio and Simon crept to Emily's position and watched the window. As she had said, an oil light was flickering about inside.

"Lucas, can you see anything?" asked Simon.

Lucas, stationed in the watch tower, had been following their progress from afar. He examined the area.

"No sir," he said at last, "I've got too much obstruction. I don't have a clear line of site to anything between the supermarket and the objective area, sir, it's far too crowded."

"Damn. Alright, alright, Otto, get under that window and tell me what's in there," whispered Simon.

Ottavio scuttled quietly, observing his visibility on his optical display closely. He stuck to the shadows, ducking along the building line until he crouched like a fly underneath the window.

Listening carefully, he could hear faint murmurings from within, "... ain't got nothing. It's not like we're the only ones here, you know. It's not like I don't got no more gear."

Another voice, closer, could be heard, "Yeah, but that's the way Sammy operates. Deal with it. Good night."

"So? I mean, you know, Sammy's got his stash and all that, fine, I get it, it's his, you know, but what about a bit of tit for tat, is all I'm saying."

"Why don't you ask him instead of pestering me. I'm trying to catch some shut-eye, if you hadn't noticed."

"I will, you know, I have. I mean, he's always going on about his stash, and going on about starting a caravan or something, but, like, charity begins with a home, you know."

"At home, numb knuckle."

"What?"

"If you ask me, which you probably won't, but if you did, and you used your noggin, instead of banging on about what he's got, try figuring out what he don't got. Get it? You get that going, you'll be on his caravan."

"Huh?"

"Oh, man, you're stupid."

"Don't call me stupid."

"Listen, if I've got, um, a rock, and you've got a rock..."

"I've got lots of rocks, Al!"

"Yeah, in your head, I know. Now, shut up and listen. Now, if you want to trade me a rock for a rock, what's the point? See? I've got mine, you've got yours, there's no need. No need, so no trade. But if you had something better than a rock, like a..."

"A bigger rock?"

Al sounded peeved, "No... Look, didn't I tell you to shut up? Now if you were to get, I don't know, a useful tool, like maybe a screwdriver, or a hammer..."

"A what?"

Al sighed, "I'll be sure to show you if I ever find one. It's not important. Oh, crap. Right, let's stick with a screwdriver. You know what a screwdriver is? Right, so you got a screwdriver and I got

a rock, I'd want to swap my rock for your screwdriver, see? Because a rock is worth less than a screwdriver.”

“Um... Yeah, a rock's definitely worth less.”

“Right, so since you got something worth more than me, I'll wanna to deal with you. That's economics, that is. You gotta use your noggin.”

“Oh, I got it! I think.”

“Something tells me you don't got it...”

“Nah. See, the bit with the screwdriver. How am I supposed to make a one of those? Out of the rocks or something?”

“Aw, man! Look, just let it go for today and I'll run it by you tomorrow. Now get some sleep!”

“But where am I supposed to find one of them ammers?”

“That's a *hammer*, ding-bat, and I was only using it as an example...”

Ottavio rolled his eyes and left them there, crawling back to the previous house like a mouse.

“Two men, sir. Scavengers,” he said over the commlink, “Not a threat.”

“Are they armed?” asked Simon.

“I didn't look in the window, just listened. It sounded like they were winding down for the night.”

“So they're possibly armed.”

“What? No, they're just talking.”

“That's 'just talking, *sir*'. You didn't check for weapons, which means the possibility has not been eliminated...”

Ottavio protested, “We can pass them by quietly. They're too busy yapping to hear us anyway.”

“How hard would it be to take them out?” asked Simon.

“Why would we need to?”

“I didn't ask for your opinion, Otto.”

Ottavio swallowed. Something in Simon's voice sounded very cold, very unlike the Simon he used to know.

“They'd put up no resistance,” he said, “But...”

“But what?”

“They're harmless.”

“Says you. Now give me a damn straight answer, Agent!” barked Ottavio's commlink, “Can you take them out quietly?”

“Of course I can, because they're not armed!”

Up the road, Simon held the bridge of his nose and breathed heavily.

“Right-oh mates, Otto's having a crisis of conscience,” he muttered, “Whatever, fine. We'll pass 'em by. One less mess for the cleanup crew, I guess. So let's keep on quietly. Ottavio, stay under that damn window until we've reached that cluster of buildings over there by the tree, then follow us on. If they so much as poke their heads out of the window, you cut them down, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“That's yeah, yeah, *sir*! The rest of you, move! Lucas, eyes peeled,” he hissed.

The crew made their way silently on the other side of the road while Ottavio sat under the window again, listening to inane conversation regarding the value of trash and the intricacies of bargaining.

A fly swished passed his nose. He swatted it and it buzzed angrily away.

Wheaton, like so many others, was a dying corpse with inhabitants clinging to it like flies. The wastes crept slowly toward the cities as towns and suburbs became progressively void of inhabitants.

Those who left early settled in the few major cities that had remained unaffected by the fires of war, returning to a semblance of normal life.

Those who stayed behind spent their time scavenging among the debris of a world lost, trying to find any kind of comfort from the pieces they found.

Crabmen, muttrats and muttdogs, mutated beasts that wandered the wastelands, hardly ever made it anywhere near the big cities.

They ran a gauntlet of hostility from any inhabitant in the valence towns; Locals trained their weapons on them as a matter of duty, sport or a little of both. The sewers and aqueducts, however, provided a safe passage, often all the way to heart of a city. Gates, locks and sentries had been installed at the major points to prevent their access and, for the most part, the city population dismissed them as a disgusting novelty.

Still, every now and then a malfunctioning gate provided passage for all sorts of strange creatures, mutated and anomalous, to scuttle, squirm and crawl their way to make their home in the sewers and subways of the cities.

Some ended up as trophies, others were destroyed without ceremony by various teams hastily formed to deal with an incursion.

Perched underneath the window, Ottavio wondered quietly what quality of life these two could have. Their greatest concern, it seemed, was how to trade up the junk they found scavenging through the wreckage of suburbia for the chance of one more day on Earth.

If they disappeared tomorrow, the world would continue to turn, oblivious to their existence or lack thereof.

And yet they *deserved* to live, he decided, they deserved his efforts.

He had joined Houston to make a difference, to defend the sorry lives of these souls. That is of what he had convinced himself, at least. He did not intend to be a hero, or some savior of the downtrodden, but he felt that he needed something to act as a reason, and this was as good and noble a reason as any.

Among the throng in the big cities, out here in the fringes, further out in the wastes, people were doing their all to recreate. It was the throbbing heart of civilization, and Houston was part of keeping it beating.

And he was a part of Houston.

He wondered if he were born in the fringes, or in the wastes, if he would fare so well. He decided that he would, that he would have pushed for all of his might to grow into something better, and leave the world a better place. For a moment he almost believed himself.

In reality, he admitted, he could have just as easily wound up another scavenger, or a drug dealer, or a rag. The environment would shape his behavior. It would have chewed him up and turned him into a hollow, bitter wreck like those shown on the evening news.

That was a conundrum, he thought as he watched the shadows of his companions moving from structure to fallen structure. If he were born again, would his nature come through in his other self?

“Otto, you gonna sit there all day? Get your ass up here!” came Simon's voice.

Ottavio hustled up to the others and they continued on their way, moving from street to broken street, until they arrived at a clearing. Looming up in front of them were the remnants of a sporting complex. Once a hot spot for vibrant teenagers and young families, it was now host to the unmistakable stench of decay.

Simon pulled his crew in tight and holed up in a cluster of walls lining a short road up to the complex.

Sweeping slowly and methodically, they found nothing within the fallen buildings but a handful of muttrats and few mangy mutated dogs. The rats made convenient target practice, the dogs presented Simon with another opportunity to demonstrate his grotesque ability with a blade.

After a solid half hour, they had turned up nothing.

“If it's anywhere, it'll be in the sporting complex,” said Norbert.

“Yeah? Well thanks for the heads up, Norbert. We do this thing by the book, and that means moving house to house, leaving nothing uncovered,” grunted Simon.

“I'm saying that we could save a lot of time if we eliminated the more obvious targets first.”

Simon sighed, “Alright. Fine. We'll hit the big ones. We've pretty much knocked off these wrecks anyway. Lucas?”

“Lucas here, go ahead.”

“The sporting complex. You got a line of sight?”

“Yes, sir.”

Simon sighed, “Well?”

“There's a sentry-bot stationed by the main gates, along with two slug turrets on the pillars to the right and left. Not even sure if they're working. Cameras all around. If I was a betting man,” said Lucas, his voice slightly crackly, “I'd put money on there being something very interesting inside.”

“Could you hit the bot from where you are?” asked Simon.

“I've got a bead on him right now. So long as he doesn't move about too much, you're looking at one deactivated robot.”

“It could be a ruse, man,” suggested Norbert.

“It could be a ruse, *sir*. And in what way?” asked Simon.

“Fortify one building to attract attention. By the time the defenses have been breached, the real location has had enough warning to prepare itself, call for reinforcements, batten down the hatches.”

“We've checked the others.”

“On this side of the complex, sir,” said Norbert.

Simon gave him an eyeballing.

“You got anything to add, Otto?”

Ottavio reluctantly agreed with Norbert. “He's got a point, I guess,” he said, “That's a display of force, not insurmountable, probably designed to keep the locals out, and it's certainly enough to hold us back for a bit. Besides, our mission is to find the laboratory, not destroy the defenses. The building is of definite interest, but, personally, rather than knocking on the front door, I'd attempt some other mode of entry.”

Norbert grunted his agreement. Simon looked pensive. He preferred a direct fight to sneaking about in fallen buildings. It was his call.

“OK, fine. What other mode of entry are you thinking of?”

“Those cameras, turrets and whatever is within, must be powered. Local power here is not via a plant, so we're looking at a small fusion generator. Access to that generator must be swift in the event of overheating or a failure,” said Ottavio, “So somewhere close by. Could be one of these facilities, or...”

His eyes locked onto a maintenance shed, about one hundred meters from the main entrance.

“They would not have it so open as to be obvious, but I reckon there would be an electrical access point in there. If we can't gain access, at least we'll be able to disable most of the defenses quickly by cutting the power.”

Simon looked to Cassandra.

“You?” he asked.

“Couldn't hurt to have a look,” she said, shrugging, “Beats a frontal assault, gives us a chance to examine any other possible modes of entry, and could give us the drop on anyone or anything that's inside.”

“Right. OK. Whatever, we'll stay here. Otto, take Em with you. You've got ten minutes to find a way in, golden? Otherwise you'd better lock a mag into that rifle. Keep me posted, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” said Ottavio, making his way through the shadows to the maintenance shed.

Emily followed closely. They timed their movements to avoid detection by the sweeping cameras and turrets, and were soon hidden by the walls of the shed.

“He can be a dick but he's got a good head on his shoulders,” she said.

“Simon?” asked Ottavio, checking to make sure his commlink was off.

“Norbert! He's probably just touchy getting the feel of the new group. He looks like a bit of loner, you know, does his thing the way he wants, by himself, you know?”

“Well he's going the right way about it,” Ottavio whispered.

“I think he and Simon have history,” she said, looking around the wall for traps, “Just the way he talks. I haven't had the heart to ask him, you know. Hold up!”

She pointed to a large concrete circle hidden by tufts of dried grass and bracken. "I think you've found your access point, Otto. Stand back a bit, let me have a look at it first. Ah, see, it's primed!"

"Primed?"

Emily ignored him, excited at her find. She commanded, "Stand back, this baby is mine."

Emily knelt down and got to work, carefully working her tools in and around the edge of the circle.

"Shit, it's a toughy! Almost, wait, almost..." she whispered, easing a long, dark shim into the crack. A faint click sounded. "There, she's all yours," said Emily, standing up proudly.

Ottavio was impressed by the demonstration, "OK, I guess that was cool. What did you just do?"

He knelt down to inspect her handy work.

"Oh, it's a simple reed switch sensor, see, so I put a teeny magnet next to the actuator. Now when you open the grate, it'll think it's still closed, see? You gonna open that thing or just look at it?"

Ottavio gripped the cover firmly and pulled, his myoactuators kicking in, making it seem effortless to raise the circular slab of concrete.

"Ha, see? Now hang on a tick," said Emily, rummaging around in her kit. She pulled out a small can and sprayed the reed switch.

"Glue," she said, "Fast drying. Neat trick I learned back in Washington. Stops it from being knocked about by clumsy oafs like yourself."

She gave a cheeky grin and dropped down into the hole. Ottavio called in the progress to Simon and followed.

"Keep your eyes peeled," whispered Ottavio, adjusting his night vision

Inside the hole was almost too dark to see by. A spider's shell dropped lightly from the wall as Ottavio brushed past it.

"You mind your eyes, and I'll mind mine. Hey, check this out!" Emily whispered as she wriggled her way past Ottavio to a panel on the wall.

"Sweet! Boswell, model fourteen. Piece of cake, watch and learn!"

Ottavio stood back and let Emily work at the electronics. She expertly placed her fingers around the panel, feeling for faint traces of electrical activity.

"See?" she said, knowing full well Ottavio did not, "The serial cable to the interface is around... here. Ah, now we're cooking. Now, as a starting point, I'll press five. Ooh, see, now that's one of the numbers, but it isn't the first one. The resonance just isn't right. Hang on."

She babbled away, tapping various combinations, letting Ottavio know all about it.

"No fours, which means we've got a double in there. And since we only have a six and a five... nine... one! So it has to be six-five-one-one-nine! You wanna punch it in?"

"Sure, six-five-one-one-nine," said Ottavio, tapping the numbers on the panel.

"Don't forget to press 'OK', dingus," giggled Emily, proud of her new skills.

"Cheers," said Ottavio.

He pressed OK and an emergency light came flickering on. The wall next to the panel slid open, revealing an access tunnel. He turned off his night vision.

"Emily, you are nothing short of awesome," laughed Ottavio.

"I bet you say that to all the gals, boyo! Come on, you take point."

Ottavio looked at her sideways.

"I've always wanted to say that in the field," she said.

Ottavio smiled and turned back, looking down the dimly lit tunnel.

He called in, "Simon, we've found what appears to be a maintenance tunnel running toward the main building. Emily has disabled the security, we're about to head in."

"Roger that," said Simon, "I'm not about to put all our eggs into one basket just yet. Let me know if and when you get access inside."

"Yes, sir," said Ottavio. He stepped into the tunnel, stooping to fit through. Electrical wiring,

gas and water pipes followed them along. Ottavio could hear a low hum around him.

They edged along slowly until they reached a service ladder leading upward into the maintenance shed. The top was covered by a grate.

“Continue on down the tunnel, or pop our heads up?” asked Emily.

“We'll have a look around here. You want to check out the grate?”

“Sure, stand back.”

Emily climbed up and poked around. It was clear, so Ottavio heaved the grate up and out. The two climbed up into the dark shed. Ottavio turned on his torch and looked around, inspecting the various items on the shelves. His torch fell onto a fusion generator.

“This is some high tech stuff,” he muttered, “It's not a two-bit operation. Someone's getting geared up for industry.”

Emily whistled, “You're right. That thing could power a whole factory, no sweat.”

Ottavio and Emily scouted around thoroughly, but no sign of any surveillance could be found.

He called through to Simon, “Simon, come in.”

After a brief pause, Simon's voice came through, “You in, Otto?”

“Kind of, sir. We're in the shed and from the looks of things we're heading in the right direction. Got a beefed up fusion generator, and some serious cabling. I'm surprised recon didn't pick up the EM signature,” he said, “Got here from an access point off the tunnel, which looks like it heads directly under the main structure and then some.”

“Is it safe?”

“Safer than sitting around out there.”

“Wait five, we're coming in. Lucas, keep your eyes on that gate. If any alarms sound or there's any sign of reinforcements arriving, I want that bot destroyed, got it?”

There was no response from the commlink. Simon paused in stride. It was not like Lucas to miss an order.

“Lucas?” he called through. Still no response.

“Lucas come in!”

He sounded genuinely perturbed.

“Sorry, sir. Come again,” said Lucas.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I guess the commlink must have failed. What was it you wanted?”

“Alarm goes off, you shoot bot. Easy enough?”

“Consider it done,” said Lucas.

Simon, coming down from his scare, growled, “And don't give me this bullshit about a dodgy commlink. If I can't rely on you...”

Lucas interrupted, “You can rely on me. My apologies, sir.”

Within minutes the rest of the troop had arrived. Simon looked about.

“Nicely done, mates,” he said, patting Emily and Ottavio on the back, “Kudos and congrats and all that. Now get back down there and get into the main complex. Cassandra, go with Otto. Emily, stay here and take a squizz at the front door. If something goes down I want out fast.”

Emily started on the door as Ottavio and Cassandra lowered themselves back into the tunnels. They made their way along slowly and painfully, stooping even lower to fit under dangling cables and hastily fitted piping.

Ottavio watched his geolocation on his optical display carefully.

“We should be just underneath the superstructure now,” he whispered, “Let's keep going.”

Soon another access point came into view. The grating on top had a sturdy looking lock attached to it.

“You reckon you can pick that?” asked Ottavio with concern.

Cassandra pushed him aside. Ottavio could not help but feel a slight thrill at her touch. He mentally slapped himself and tried to concentrate on the task at hand.

“Let me see...” she said, “Sure, no problem. It's going to be a little fiddly, being on the other side of the grate, but.”

In less than a minute the two were topside, carefully inspecting their situation. Light from the access tunnel below revealed that they were tucked behind a large air conditioning unit. The room was quiet except for a soft, infrequent beeping.

Cassandra ventured to look around the unit, expertly surveying the room.

“Ottavio, we’ve got a Regent class thermal camera about six meters up on the right facing the internal door,” she whispered, sotto voce, “We can’t get to it from here without being spotted.”

Ottavio had a look for himself. The camera sat like an ominous gargoyle staring at the room from above, a small red diode blinking away steadily. Cassandra was right, there was no way they could disable it from where they were, save blasting it with bullets.

The two dropped back into the tunnel again.

“Simon, we’ve got access to the main building, but there’s a thermal camera guarding access to the internals.”

“Roger, stay put. I’m sending Norbert down to take a look,” said Simon.

Ottavio terminated his commlink and groaned.

Cassandra laughed lightly, “You two had a falling out already?”

“No, that’s just it. I’ve hardly spoken two words to him, not for want of trying. He’s unapproachable.”

“Probably just moody.”

“We’re supposed to be on a team, you know, work together and all that bull crap. Ah, whatever.”

Presently Norbert arrived. He stayed in the tunnel, not even bothering to look at the camera but instead followed with his finger a tussle of wires along the wall. Cassandra and Ottavio moved back as he roughly pushed past them, mumbling to himself quietly.

Eventually he found a panel in the wall which he levered off noisily, revealing a cluster of wires inside.

“You need anything?” offered Ottavio.

“Yeah, you to stand back,” Norbert said curtly.

He resumed his mumbling, “Seven, seven point two... two... seven point three... it’s got to be here somewhere... staring at me... six... damn!”

The muttering continued, sometimes intelligible, sometimes mere noises, until finally Norbert grabbed a wire between his fingers.

“Nine point five, finally,” he said to himself, and cut the wire neatly with his combat knife.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“Anything else what?” asked Cassandra, her eyebrows furrowed. Ottavio caught himself admiring her angry face.

“As in, the camera that you wanted me to deactivate is now deactivated, so, that task being achieved, is there anything else you need me to do?”

Cassandra’s eyebrows furrowed harder, “Well maybe you could deactivate the other cameras, hmm? The turrets?”

“Well maybe I could if they were running along the same cabling, *miss*. The rest of these are lighting and air conditioning controls. Maybe you’d like me to turn the heating up?”

“How do you even know you got the right one?”

“I’d love to take the time to explain but we’re supposed to be out of here by sun up.”

“Look,” said Ottavio, pushing a fuming Cassandra toward the ladder to avoid a fight, “Thanks for the help, but just hang here for the time being.”

“Whatever, man,” Norbert snorted and sat down on the metal grated floor. Ottavio followed Cassandra up the ladder and back into the room.

The red light underneath the camera was still on. They looked at each other with consternation.

“It’s deactivated, right?” asked Cassandra.

Ottavio shrugged, “I guess we’ve got to take his word for it. For what it’s worth. Simon,” he said to his commlink, “Norbert has deactivated the camera, I’m going to try for the internal door.”

“Roger, proceed with caution. Hold up. Lucas, how's that bot doing?”

“Still stationary, sir. No alarms visible,” report Lucas.

Simon said, “Sweet. OK, Otto, head on up.”

He took a breath and stepped out from behind the air conditioning unit. The camera sat quietly, no alarms sounded. Ottavio reached the internal door, inspected it and waved Cassandra over.

She peered at the lock expertly.

“This one will be a little more difficult. Pre-war but expensive. Just give me a few minutes,” said Cassandra, inserting her delicate instruments into the lock. True to her word, in three minutes she had it open.

“Just a sec, I'm going to take a cast.”

She took out an odd device with a very thin shim on one end and an array of buttons of the other. She inserted the thin blade into the keyhole, squeezed a button, and pulled it out. “There,” she said, “When we get back home we'll make a key in case someone needs to come back here again. Makes life a little easier.”

Ottavio carefully pulled the door, swinging it slightly open so he could peek inside. Desks, stools, robotic preparation equipment and evacuation chambers were arranged neatly about.

The hardwood floor, once bearing the pounding feet of elite sportsmen, now bore the brunt of stainless steel vats. This was indeed a drug laboratory, although it was strangely void of workers.

“Looks like we found it,” mumbled Ottavio, letting Cassandra have a look, “Better call in Norbert.”

“Report it through to Simon, let him call in Norbert,” huffed Cassandra, crossing her arms. Ottavio did so.

“Sweet. Let Em and Norbert take it from here. You and Cass come back to the shed once they're happy,” said Simon.

Norbert found an active terminal and began to hack away, letting Cassandra and Ottavio head back to the shed.

“What's up Norbert's ass, Sim?” Ottavio asked.

Simon shrugged, “His head. And that's 'what's up Norbert's ass, sir!' We're still on the clock. Look, he's doing his job, eh, and that's all that Babs or Miss Money Penny give a toss about.”

“But he's...”

“Listen, if you've got a beef with him, that's fine, sock him in the stomach or have a cry later in our debriefing, whatever, but for now I just want this mission wrapped up clean and proper, yeah?”

“But...”

“Is he preventing you from performing your duty?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“No.”

“Alright, dry your eyes, suck it up, follow my orders and we won't have a problem.”

“Sure. So what about the rest of the facility, *sir*?”

“Well that tunnel continues straight on, yeah? So we'll probably want to map out the possible points of access. Take Cass and have a look. Just don't touch anything,” he ordered, adding, “Or anyone in the tunnels, haw haw.”

“Hilarious.”

“Hilarious, *sir*. We've got a clear point of entry here, so there's no need to go being a hero and opening up all the other doors as well.”

Ottavio nodded, “Got it. Investigate the tunnels, don't touch anything.”

“We'll pull out once Norbert's done and you're back,” nodded Simon.

“And if I could make a suggestion, *sir*?”

“Go ahead.”

“It'd be a good idea to reactivate that camera once they've finished in there. No point letting

anyone know we've been here," Ottavio suggested.

"Yeah, good point. I'll let him know. You get going, I want to get back by breakfast."

## Chapter 10

*“When the Devil seeks his prey,  
He does not give chase.”  
- Wisdom of the Vigils*

Rocking slightly, a transport rattled out through Harrisburg's southern gates. Sentry guns posted at the top of the walls tracked its movement slowly as it left, following it until it had reached the other side of a pontoon bridge, constructed over Susquehanna River during the Hanean war.

The city functioned well enough, having only sustained light damage from misguided shots. Philadelphia, by contrast, had sustained a much more focused, brutal pounding. Many of its proud buildings had been crushed to street level. Many of its inhabitants were crushed also.

Those who managed to leave resettled in a few of the other large cities, only to face yet another onslaught as Scranton and then Erie and then Pittsburgh came under fire.

Harrisburg's defenses were reinforced as more and more refugees came to depend upon it for shelter, and, more than a decade after the bombs had stopped falling, they remained, keeping the city safe and its people secure.

The transport left the pontoon and rumbled on, leaving the range of the turrets. It continued along quickly, rolling past rows of houses, swerving every now and then to negotiate another vehicle, but never stopping. Locals poked their inquisitive noses out from dirty windows to watch as it went.

Anything that came out from the city gates was of interest. Like a pretty carriage drawn by a horse, the locals watched on entranced, making up their minds as to the contents.

Not that any would dare attack, not unless it was imperative. Any weapons outside the city were rudimentary at best and all ammunition was conserved to fend off roving bands of rags or other unsavories.

As it continued on, hour after hour, the number of locals thinned. Houses became more sparse and ruined. Whole streets had been scavenged clean and razed to the ground or burnt in an uncontrolled fire.

Wild animals scuttled about through the ruins, looking for any morsel to fill their mouths.

A muttrat, busy chewing on a gristly bone, did not move out of the way fast enough and was crushed by the truck's tires. Its body was found and consumed within minutes by other foul beasts.

This was the wastes, a vast expanse of scorched earth tortured by radiation, toxins and mutagens.

All across the globe, from India to Istanbul, it appeared the same: brown-gray and hostile.

Cities, suburbs, parks and towns, monuments built to stand tall and proud, all had been reduced to jagged obstacles. Roads were pitted with holes, broken and cracked, the truck's oversized tires struggled to find a purchase.

It was twilight now. The truck left the main road and roared off down a dirt track toward a pile of boulders that hid a dirty, little barn.

The door creaked open as it approached. Inside a security camera blinked steadily as a plasma sentry gun tracked the transport inside.

The doors closed, yellow lights lit the room and a red strobe began to pulse. The earth groaned a little, and the truck began to sink through the floor.

The Vigils were masters of disguise. Most of the time they hid in plain sight, opting for anonymity within a crowd over sneaking and hiding. People have a tendency to pay attention to that which is different, beautiful, or clever. The Vigils ensured that they seemed uninteresting, plain and worthless.

The truck, for example, was neither a new model, nor too noisy or beaten. It had just the right amount of muck on it, with cracked yellow paint and a worn out sign for a business no one would want and phone number that did not exist.

The driver wore faded blue overalls, clearly just another boring worker with a boring delivery

to a boring location on the other side of the wastes.

The shack was no different. Anyone who had made it out to that portion of the wasteland would need a reason to go there, and even if they had found the shack they would have found nothing inside but dust, cobwebs and some broken shelves.

If they managed to probe further, deliberately or otherwise, they would have met their end in a hail of searing plasma.

It served as a secure entrance to one of the Vigil's underground facilities and it was to here that Ryan was being transported to be cleansed in the process of Sanitation.

The platform slowed and stopped its descent inside a room carved out of the Earth, reinforced with giant steel braces. A Vigil, Brother Petroclus, came out from a solid, black door flanked by two guards. He approached the truck to talk to the driver.

"Brother Farnham, it is good to see you," he said, offering his hand.

"And you, Brother Petroclus!"

"How was your drive?"

"Uneventful. Here, I come bearing a gift," replied the driver.

He produced a book, red in color, from his overalls and handed it to Brother Petroclus.

"Ah! My sincerest thanks, Brother! Wherever did you find it?"

"Believe it or not, I had to appropriate it from Brother Holland! He pretended he did not know of its existence, and so by that reasoning I determined that, if he knew not of it, he would not mind its departure!" laughed Brother Farnham, showing his palms.

Brother Petroclus looked the book over and put it away into his jersey.

"Once again I thank you. I am sure that this... Oh, Brother Marcus? What are you doing here?"

Brother Marcus, his hair slicked down, sauntered out from the passenger seat.

"Hello, Brother Petroclus, old chum! I came to keep Brother Farnham company on his long drive," he said cheerfully, "And to see that his payload gets the treatment."

"This is most irregular, Brother Marcus. I was not informed of you being here, or that you would be overseeing the treatment. Was this sanctioned?"

He replied, "I will not be responsible for his treatment, I am only here as an observer. Besides, Master Jacob held no objection."

"That is not the same thing. Well, anyway, to the more serious matter. I have been in contact with Harrisburg, and they have informed me that this one has a particularly unclean mind," said Brother Petroclus, wringing his hands, "His room has been prepared. Brother Justin, Brother Aaron, please escort our guest."

The two guards, armored in dull gray, walked to the back of the truck and entered the code. The doors squeaked as they swung back, revealing Ryan, his dark eyes smoldering, glaring back at them.

"Out," ordered Brother Aaron.

Ryan clumsily got to his feet. His legs were sore having been rocked about in the back of the transport for so long.

He stepped out and squinted in the light of flood lamps.

Brother Aaron pushed his arm, "Move."

Brother Petroclus walked ahead of them, opening the security door and chatting to Brother Farnham. Brother Marcus followed from behind. Inside was well lit and at a comfortable temperature. A maintenance robot whizzed past them to quickly inspect and service the truck.

Ryan was led into a room with white walls and a bench. It reeked of bleach. The door slammed behind him. The sound of the lock sliding into place echoed for half a second.

"Strip," came Brother Aaron's voice through a speaker.

Ryan did so methodically, placing his plain clothes in a neat pile on the floor. When he had finished, he stood facing the door. Blasts of cold disinfectant and disirradiant sprayed his body from nozzles protruding from the floor and walls.

His skin broke out into goose pimples, and he started to shiver.

The blasts stopped, the door opened. Brother Aaron was waiting on the other side, holding a gown.

“Dress,” he said.

Brother Aaron certainly had a way with words. Ryan took the gown and slipped it over his head, tying the knot at the back and feeling at least a little warmer after the disinfection process.

“Drink,” said Brother Aaron, holding out a small cup of clear liquid.

He hesitated and smelled it first. It seemed innocuous enough, smelling somewhere between apples and liquorice.

Brother Aaron, not content with Ryan's reluctance, brought his hand close to Ryan's neck. Embedded in his leather gauntlet was a strong magnet. The collar began to twist.

Ryan gasped. Brother Aaron held his hand close for a few seconds, before taking it away, allowing Ryan to get an understanding of exactly who was in charge.

The collar eased and Ryan gulp air down noisily.

Not wishing to offend any further, he tossed the liquid into his mouth. It tasted like flat cider and went down easily.

“My, that was pleasant, Brother. Your hospitality knows no bounds. May I have another?” he joked.

“No,” said Brother Aaron, leading Ryan over to a basin.

“What now?” asked Ryan sarcastically, panting slightly, the collar still unwinding.

Brother Aaron looked at him dead pan.

“Wait,” he said.

Ryan waited. Brother Aaron stood by him, expectantly.

After a short while he made to speak again. Involuntarily he convulsed, clutching his stomach. Brother Aaron supported him over the basin as his stomach violently emptied its contents again and again.

It was over after a minute.

Ryan wiped his mouth with a towel and glared at his captor, his hatred swelling like a blister within him. His stomach continued to wiggle in little bursts inside, making him burp.

“Walk,” said Brother Aaron, pushing Ryan into yet another room.

It was another white room, clean and dry with a drain at the center. A shower head jutted from one wall, a toilet was affixed to another. Brother Aaron left the room, locking the door firmly behind him.

The toilet beckoned. Whatever it was that Ryan drank was working its way through his bowels at an alarming speed.

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Brother Petroclus flipped through the pages of his book, a translation of Homer's 'The Odyssey'. It was liberating to thumb pages made of paper. The synthetic feel of an e-reader was just not the same, no matter what the advertisements said.

He had been tense since Ryan had come into his custody. He had put the brethren on full alert under orders from Master Theodore himself, before and during his tenure. What they were on guard for, he was not told, only that the unclean one, Ryan, may attempt an escape.

An hour later his eyelids began to meet more often. He closed the book, put it on the desk and sighed.

He had come to be a Vigil as a teenager, trained and served loyally. It was not as if he had sought after such a life, it sort of just found him. As a typical youngster, he would hang out with his friends, watch television and surf the internet.

Then contention about some island or atoll called Midway seemed to dominate the headlines and chat rooms. He was old enough to understand the politics, but too young to care.

That was until the media started talking about treaties, and defenses, and invasion.

He had spent a lot of time watching images of the Hanean war, how it ravaged lands, buried

cities in clouds of glowing dust.

He watched as headlines screamed about deaths, about 'Terrorists' and about 'Peace Processes'.

Numbers jumbled into other numbers, statistics jostled for position. After a while it all blended into a fuzzy noise of tabloids and sensation.

The scene moved from the atoll, the archipelagos, to Hawaii. At unbelievable speed, the floodgates opened and fire flew across the Pacific and landed firmly upon American soil.

The first mainland city was San Francisco, its fantastic lights disappearing under a haze of fire and dust.

Like a wildfire, the face of war menaced its way across the mainland, rendering to ashes town after town, city after city.

Breaches in security meant that missiles were launched against both coasts unimpeded. New York fared terribly, its population massacred like so many ants.

And still the tabloids came, and still the numbers rang out.

Missiles were launched in retaliation, decimating strong points in China, Pakistan and Korea, along with tactical bombing raids. They were surgical in their precision, knocking out missile silos, airfields, aircraft carriers and bunkers.

But as fast as they were knocked out they were replaced by a seemingly endless supply of people, machines and weapons of war.

And with each new raid, more and more suburbs, towns and cities were demolished.

A steady stream of people came through his home town of Apple Valley, Minnesota, carrying injured family.

Many retained severed body parts in the insane hope of reaching a hospital that could sew them back on. Days were filled with screams and cries, a constant wailing that would fill even a banshee's heart with woe.

Petroclus remembered it well. His innocent heart broke as woman after man after child died despite his efforts.

Though the numbers were overwhelming and many of his townsfolk up and left from horror, fear or exhaustion, Petroclus, his mother and his friend Drewen, continued to tend to the sick and dying.

It was during this time that Drewen introduced Petroclus to a strange man he had met. He did not have the same manic, dirty face as the refugees, but one of soft melancholy.

"Hello young man," he had said, "I have been watching yourself and young Drewen here tending to the sick. Why, I ask? Why not just leave and head to Minneapolis where it is safer?"

"Then you don't understand. These people are hurt, and we've got to help them. They are coming because their homes have been destroyed. Just look around you!" he had said.

"Do you know any of them?"

"What's to know," he had replied, "They're people, aren't they?"

"That is a noble thing to say, young man. You want to help people, even those you do not know. But listen, if you really want to help people, then come with me."

That was so long ago but the words were etched into Brother Petroclus' memory.

That was Brother Warren, and he was to be Petroclus' and Drewen's mentor. He was an excellent role model, showing them the fine arts of the Vigils.

Balance instead of extremes, influence rather than direct action, anonymity rather than fame. Above all, he would always act in the interests of humanity as a whole, not for individuals, nor for himself.

That was long ago, and this was now. He needed to get his sleep to be prepared for the terrible process of sanitation the next day. He prepared himself for bed in his small bedroom, ready to turn out the light, when an alarm sounded.

Cursing quietly he hastily donned his robe and walked briskly to the interphone. He called up the guard house.

"Brother Frederick, what is going on?"

Brother Frederick, the Brother on guard duty that night, was quick to answer, "It is the unclean one, sir. He insists that he has taken ill."

"Blast it! I will be right there!"

Petroclus made his way out to the cells, joining Brothers Frederick and Aaron. The trio went to Ryan's cell where he lay on the ground, clutching his stomach and moaning loudly.

At the sound of their approach he looked up. His face was white.

"Get up, boy. You have been purged and checked thoroughly."

Ryan grimaced.

"It hurts! It hurts!" he panted, "What have you done to me?"

"Nothing that can cause you pain."

"Oh, but it burns! It has not stopped burning since the shower. It has only gotten worse, ow!"

"Really, Ryan, that is quite pathetic. Now get back to bed and stop this charade."

He had seen every trick, from subjects plucking hair from their head and claiming that they were going bald, to punching themselves in the stomach until they bruised to make it look like internal hemorrhaging.

It was only after they visited the infirmary and witnessed Brother Christopher's thorough methods pertaining to diagnosis that they returned quietly to their cell.

This particular act was probably one of the worst performed, however, and that worried him. Ryan was a smart one and should have been more than capable of acting the part of a sick prisoner.

"Call Brother Christopher. And unless his leg falls off, do not disturb me."

He stormed to the cell door.

Ryan wailed louder, "Oh, I am dying!"

"Rubbish!" scolded Brother Petroclus, turning back around, "If you were really in so much pain you would not be able to talk..."

He stopped himself. Ryan did not want to go to the infirmary, he wanted to create a distraction.

"Blast it! Leave him and come with me!"

He raced out of the cells and skidded along the corridor, his mind racing with possibilities. It seemed like an endless run from the cells, and all the way he looked about for anything out of the ordinary.

Brother Marcus met him by the main entrance.

"Ho! Brother Petroclus! What is with the hurry? Is everything alright?" he asked.

"My suspicions are aroused," he replied sharply, side-stepping him, "Have you seen or heard anything strange tonight?"

Brother Marcus scratched his head, "Well, that all depends. I have only been here a short while, so I am still getting used to the..."

Brother Petroclus pushed him out of the way, "Curse it! I do not have time!"

He raced, skidding on the tiles, down the hallway and back to the dormitories and swung into his room.

The book was no longer on the desk where he had left it, but had moved over to his personal terminal. Fine filaments had extended from it, felt their way inside the crevices of his terminal and attached themselves to the motherboard.

It had found a sweet spot and was tapping its way into the computer's circuitry. Billions of computations whizzed around inside microprocessors hidden under the book's cover as it probed various portions of the system.

"Shoot it!" yelled Brother Petroclus, "Shoot the bloody thing!"

Brother Frederick was pale and sweaty. "What, shoot your terminal?" he asked, cocking his machine pistol.

"The book, the terminal, whatever, just shoot!" hollered Brother Petroclus, pointing wildly. A hail of bullets riddled the book and terminal alike.

Smoke and sparks streamed out from the many newly created holes, but it was too late. The probes had found the master password and in half a heartbeat deactivated all of the facility's

defenses.

The lights flickered out and emergency lighting, pale and ghostly, came on. The air conditioning units ceased, leaving the smell of gun powder lingering in the air.

Outside, the rumble of the elevator platform sounded.

“Brother Frederick, inform Master Theodore of Harrisburg that Brother Farnham is a suspected traitor aligned with Ryan. Brother Aaron, call everyone to arms. We are about to have company,” ordered Brother Petroclus.

Brothers Frederick and Aaron rushed off to fulfill their orders while Brother Petroclus headed back to the cells, stopping to put on a suit of body armor from the locker rooms. He closed the cell block door behind him firmly and walked over to Ryan's cell. The magnetic field at the doorway was still functional, working off the emergency power.

Ryan was standing, waiting for him. His face was no longer white with pain, but flushed red with excitement.

“I am feeling much better, thank you Brother,” said Ryan, smiling, “It must have been wind.”

“You treacherous scoundrel...”

“Tell me, did you enjoy your book? Hmm, perhaps you did not get to read the part about the horse. It always was my favorite.”

“I have read it. Did you know that Dante placed Odysseus in the eighth level of Hell?”

“Trickery and treachery, yes? I guess some do not appreciate wiles.”

Brother Petroclus stood silently.

Ryan pushed further, “And what of my friends? Have they come to visit yet? I am sure you will make a great host for them.”

“The doors are sealed. None can get through.”

“You do not have to lie to me, Brother. I can see from your face what faith you have in those flimsy doors.”

Brother Petroclus moved to the intercom.

“Brother Frederick! Have you called for help?”

The intercom remained silent.

“Brother Frederick! Damn it all to Hell! Brother Frederick!”

Squatting at the front desk, Brother Marcus ignored the cries from the intercom. He had more pressing needs in front of him. The emergency door release was not responding, its capacitors were fried thanks to the overloading of the power circuit.

Outside the elevator platform slid to a halt and eight masked men, dressed in shining black and gray, jumped off and ran to the outer door. They waited patiently outside like mannequins.

“What are you doing, Brother Marcus! Call for help! Can you not hear Brother Petroclus?” yelled Sister Tzu, trotting over and waving her hands, “Wha... Why are you down there?”

He looked up momentarily from the innards of the front security desk then resumed his fiddling. Sister Tzu was no fool.

“My God! Traitor! He is trying to open the main doors!” she yelled to anyone who would listen. Infuriated by her cries, he lashed out, kicking her square in the stomach and sending her sprawled out on the floor.

Brother Amos came rushing over to aid, drew his pistol and aimed shakily at Brother Marcus.

“What is going on?” he demanded.

He was ignored.

“Brother Marcus, stop whatever you are doing! I will shoot you,” he said as he cocked his pistol and adjusted his aim.

“Do not be silly, Amos old boy, you have no time,” said Brother Marcus somberly, completing the circuit and joining the last of a cluster of bared wires. Brother Amos turned around as the main door hissed, unbolted and swung open.

He let out a cry and ducked behind a chair, firing wildly at the door.

The shining black force burst in just as Brother Frederick and his men came racing into the front area.

Brother Aaron managed to get a few shots out before his arm exploded in a hail of red.

He fell to the floor, groaning in agony. Brothers Victor and Ahmet fell beside him, their lives spilled messily across the white tiles. Sister Hali followed shortly afterward.

The intruders moved about methodically, checking and clearing each room with precision. Any resistance was met with an accurate volley of bullets.

Brother Frederick burst out from his shelter, raking the troop with bullets. Two fell before he, too, felt the barrage of their wrath. Soon the foyer, mess hall and dormitories were littered with bodies.

Brother Amos hung loosely over the chair, his pistol lying in his blood.

At the sound of the commotion, Ryan began to become agitated.

“They are here,” he laughed, shaking his finger, “They have come for me.”

“The Devil takes care of his own, I see. You have let yourself be used,” snarled Brother Petroclus.

Ryan's smile fell.

“Save your breath, sheep, while you can still breathe! It is but a matter of seconds before your life is within my hands!”

“The beginning of my life, along with its end, has nothing to do with you.”

The noise stopped.

Brother Petroclus listened as the men made their way to the cells. Heavy boots scuttled across the floor outside, kicking away debris and bodies alike.

“Tick, tock, tick, tock... Can you hear it? That is your life ticking away, that is the pendulum swinging,” whispered Ryan, approaching his cell door.

Brother Petroclus straightened himself, “The pendulum swings wide, but always about the center. What may transpire now shall be rectified in the end.”

He did his shaky best not to let his fear shown through.

Ryan stopped a few feet shy of the cell door, the band around his neck already starting to tighten. He ignored the choking to make his point, “We shall soon see how well your annoying proverbs stand up to the cold reality of a high velocity bullet.”

The cell block door slid open with a hush. Brother Petroclus bravely turned to face the menace.

“God save my soul,” he said, as a burst flared from a muzzle. As darkness covered his eyes, Brother Petroclus silently prayed for the salvation of man.

## *Chapter 11*

*“If you give the people something to fear,  
they will fear it.*

*If there is nothing to fear,  
they will find something.”*

*- Director Sonn Tran*

Commander Ali-Baba stood silently, waiting for the crew to come in. They were tired but attentive. He began the debriefing, reiterating the mission objectives and confirming with Simon the outcome.

“The data uploaded by Agent Norbert is being analyzed as we speak. From initial results, it seems the lab was a work in progress, being set up by the local drug manufacturers,” he said, unsmiling, “The facility will now be commandeered by Houston and brought under control, for the greater good of the population of Illinois. No point letting good equipment go to waste. It has been earmarked for our own biological division, so you can sleep knowing you've not only taken a ton of Whiz off the street, you've also paved the way for further research. Nice work the lot of you.”

He turned to Simon, “Any issues?”

Simon scratched the back of his head, “No sir, nothing to report. No hostiles were encountered. Unfortunately.”

“Did you make contact with any of the locals?”

“No sir, unless you count a handful of crabmen and a mangy muttrat 'locals'.”

“Crabmen. Fine. Was there no-one else about?”

“Ah, there were a couple of blokes in a house that we passed by, sir, but we weren't detected and they weren't looking. Also Lucas reported heat signatures out of some of the other houses further away, so the place still has people about.”

“And you are sure you were not seen?” asked Ali-Baba, looking carefully at Simon. Simon swallowed instinctively.

“Like I said, sir, we passed them by unseen. Otto was underneath their window the whole time, eh. They didn't say boo.”

“In your opinion, is the zone ready for a return mission?”

Simon nodded lightly.

“Sure. We got in and out without setting off anything. Only thing anyone snooping around might find would be a pile of rotting crabmen at site A, sir,” he said, “That's if the muttrats leave anything behind.”

Ali-Baba made notes on his touchpad.

“What about the security? What were the defenses like, Agent Emily?”

After the details of the mission were passed onto Ali-Baba, and all his questions were answered satisfactorily, the troops filed out.

Ottavio showered before returning to his room. Even though the mission had not been very taxing, he felt tired. He kicked back on his bed and flipped on his television. After cycling through a few channels, he switched to the news stream:

*“... of Internal Security strongly suspects that the disaster in Rhode Island is the work of a terrorist organization, but as yet none have laid claim to the incident that took the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians. Until further information arises, however, he strongly urges the public to remain calm, citing the long standing safety record of the maglev railway and increased security measures put in place.”*

*“In further news, more pictures have arrived of sightings of what people have dubbed the Hellbeast. The low resolution pictures show the silhouette of a large body, long horns, and a mouth filled with teeth. Experts are divided as to whether the new set of pictures are a hoax or genuine.*

*Critics have pointed out that the pictures have always been taken at night, that the form is too*

*well in the frame for a rushed shot, and that such a beast would be sure to leave a large trail.*

*Expecting yet another sample of megafauna, so called Freak-Hunters from around the Illinois region have flocked to the last known sighting, hoping to add another trophy to their walls... ”*

The events of the night ran through his mind. Something felt strange. He turned the television off and pushed his eyes into his sockets.

He examined the mission in its pieces. The crabmen being slaughtered by Simon. Lucas perched up in the station's tower. The two men chatting in the house. The keypad, the traps and bots. The fusion reactor and equipment. Something just did not add up.

It was the mission, the mission as a whole was strange. It was plausible enough, a drug manufacturing laboratory hidden on the edge of the wastes, and it was only natural that Houston Corps would be interested, for humanitarian purposes of course.

It just seemed too perfect, too easy. Everything went off without a hitch. Simon insisted on performing a solid sweep, even though it was more than obvious where the location of the laboratory and cache lay. Ali seemed very interested on determining whether the crew had been detected.

Ottavio lay down on his bed and sighed. A knock sounded at his door, so he got up and opened it. It was Lucas, looking as tired as Ottavio.

“Hey, what's up?” said Ottavio.

Lucas looked somber, but that was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Not a lot,” he said, shrugging. He stood, waiting in the doorway.

Ottavio furrowed his eyebrows, “Hey, you knocked on *my* door, remember?”

“So let me in, then.”

Lucas was awkward. Ever since Ottavio had known him, he could never quite pick what was going on inside his brain.

One minute he could be almost sociable, but then he would quickly fall back into his quiet, stoic self. Ottavio ushered him in and closed the door.

“Seriously,” he said, trying to think of a time when Lucas was not, “What's going on?”

“I've been thinking,” Lucas finally said, picking his words carefully, “That the mission was *weird*.”

“You think?” said Ottavio, interested to hear what Lucas had to say.

“Yeah, I do.”

Ottavio scratched his chin.

“I've been thinking the same thing. Weird sums it up, I guess. I mean, we hit it hard, it went off well. It did seem almost text book. Scripted even. Like, everything was supposed to go off as it did. We're a new team, Lucas. There are supposed to be wrinkles to iron out. I don't care how long we train together for, there's the simulators, and then there's the real thing. Perhaps the big wigs set up a lolly to see how we performed. ”

“It would be a pretty elaborate setup just as a training mission,” said Lucas.

Ottavio rubbed his eyes. Something else was bothering him.

“But that's not all,” he said, “I mean, if it was a drug lab, why advertise? Why bring in that sort of equipment. You didn't see it, but there was this huge fusion reactor, full on large scale stuff.”

“The place needs power.”

“Yeah, but not *that* much. If that thing was running at full power, Wheaton would practically glow. And how about this,” he said, getting his head around things, “What drug factory is ever without its share of goons loitering around? Come on, we've busted a couple of drug labs, you and I, and I don't think I've ever seen one so, I don't know, professional. And the stuff inside, it was all new, like the stuff you see in the labs.”

Lucas' eyes narrowed, “Do you think that Houston had already started moving their stuff in?”

“I didn't, but I'm starting to think it now. There were no drugs. There were no rags, no goons, no guards. For the cost of the equipment that was inside, they ran loose security,” said Ottavio, leaning back and looking at the ceiling, “Shit. Was that all some sort of ruse? Or is it that they don't

trust us to work together yet?"

"You're right. Well, I think you're almost right. One can expect they would not wish to risk us on anything more than reconnaissance. In fact, I'd be surprised if they let us near anything that would require live ammunition for a few months," said Lucas, "It's the other way around. I think it's not the Board that set it up, but Ali. I think he needs to show the Board some bang for their buck."

He walked over to Ottavio's stereo radio and turned it on. Deep bass tunes blared in the room. Ottavio looked at him strangely. Lucas pointed to the ceiling knowingly.

"The thing is, I saw something," he whispered, sitting back down.

"Like what?" said Ottavio, looking from the stereo and back to Lucas. He studied his face.

"When I was up in the tower, as you were approaching the objective zone, I was doing sweeps of the surrounds. As a precaution, I did a thermal one as well. To the east, about eight hundred meters away, were two people wandering through the ruins. I watched them pick their way over rubble toward the site."

Ottavio frowned. "OK, I'm not picking up the strange vibe. Just a couple of scavengers. It's not like the place was uninhabited. What's the big deal?" he asked.

"I had them square in my sights, they left heat signatures on the ground as they walked. They were there. You know?"

Lucas stopped and looked at Ottavio.

"They were there," Ottavio confirmed, "I'm down with that."

"They were just there. You know, I *saw* them. No mistake. And then they both stopped short of the supermarket, turned and, I'm certain of it, they looked directly toward me."

"Right... so you were made?" said Ottavio, "Why didn't you call it in."

"Are you going to let me finish? I *was* going to call it in. Seriously, I was just about to tap the comms when, ah, but they, um, they just *vanished*," hushed Lucas.

"They saw you seeing them, so they ran? Hid? Ducked down behind..."

"No, Ottavio, they vanished. As if they had never happened, just not... *there* anymore!"

Ottavio shook his head. "Nope," he said, "No, you've lost me again."

"Damn it! Aren't you listening? They... they were gone! Just gone! No movement, no ducking down, no nothing. Imagine seeing me, and then I'm gone. Just like that."

"Shit."

"So I then tried to get a visual on them but they weren't there. They just weren't there! It's not like the area wasn't illuminated enough. I could see everything. Everything! Just not them. So I switched to thermal again, but they were gone."

Ottavio looked at him squarely. He was not playing games. If anything, he looked scared.

"Gone?"

"They were there, then they weren't there!"

Ottavio's eyebrows popped up, "You didn't think to report *that* in then?"

"Report what? There was nothing there! Hey Simon, beg to report that I can't see two guys who I've been tracking for the past minute. How is that going to go down? Huh?" said Lucas, grabbing his head with his eyes wide, "And I've just got implants that directly affect my vision and perception. Top of the line, top dollar stuff. They're watching me, they're watching us! Penelope has been banging on about it enough. If I start saying that I'm seeing things that aren't there, they'll start fiddling away, or scrub my memory and post me in Facilities. Hell, I've heard stories about what happens to special ops agents gone faulty, and I don't want to give them an excuse."

"OK, slow down. Let's be rational, alright? If there was someone there..."

"Shit, Ottavio, there was!"

"Alright, I'm just saying that if there was, then they will have a reason for being there. Could you make out any faces, uniforms or whatever?"

"That's just it. Thermal's always fuzzy and they were a bit away, but they were masked. The bodies lacked any definition, no pants or shirts or anything. And no faces. Like I was looking at a damn space suit. They were talking to each other, that's the way it seemed anyway. They were blobs of heat, no real definition, nothing really distinct," he said.

Lucas rubbed his face while Ottavio made him a coffee. The room's facilities were modest, but at least the coffee machine was decent.

"Like you said, thermal is fuzzy. Maybe you were looking at something else. You know, thermal works a little different to light. You can get reflections off shiny surfaces, you can get spots of..." tried Ottavio, but he gave up, "Yeah, that's lame, I know. You've worked with it more than I have. If anyone is going to make a positive with special optics, it's you."

Lucas took the cup of espresso and drained it.

"I kept checking about after that, but they never returned. Not a trace. Not on visual, not on thermal, not on UV, not on Broad Spectrum."

"Do you think they saw you?"

Lucas popped his head up, "Hmm?"

"You said they turned and looked your way. Did they actually see you? Were you made?" Ottavio persisted.

Lucas rubbed his ear lobe gently, his mind's eye wandering back to the event.

"You know," he said, "It did seem like one of them turned to my direction, just before... just before they went. It was like they were discussing something about me. But I don't know how they could have spotted me, not that quickly, or from that distance, not in the dark like that. And then to just vanish..."

"There's an explanation for everything."

"I'm not going crazy."

"I never said..."

"I'm not crazy. I know what you're thinking, but it's not true. I'd know. I'd know if I was cracking up!"

Ottavio and Lucas sat quietly for a while, Lucas nurturing a second cup, Ottavio rubbing his eyes.

This was certainly baffling. Implants or no, Lucas had the eyes of an eagle and a mind that could not be fazed easily. He never joked around or made things up for attention. So Lucas was not the problem. Ottavio looked at him carefully.

This really had Lucas riled up. His normally relaxed face was furrowed with consternation, making him look almost scared by the soft lamplight. His speech, which was normally slow and impassive, sounded erratic.

"Listen, man. I've worked with you a fair bit," he said, "And if you say you saw something, then I believe you, you saw something. And you're right, that is weird."

Lucas nodded in gratitude.

"Thanks, that means a lot," he said, looking into the bottom of the cup, swirling the remaining liquid absent-mindedly, "I just can't see how anything can disappear like that. They didn't move. They just turned and, poof, they weren't there any more."

He looked deeply into his cup for a bit longer.

Ottavio ventured, "Are you going to inform Simon or Ali? I'm pretty sure they would want to know about this."

"Damn it, Ottavio!" groaned Lucas, "I can't. And you can't either! I have been going through this over and over in my head on the trip back, trying to convince myself that I hadn't actually seen anything, or that it was some kind of illusion. Hell, what if my implants really are screwing up?"

"But it can't be an illusion, Lucas. They were on thermal, they left tracks, you obviously made out human forms," said Ottavio, "Which means you did see something, and what you saw has to be reported."

"No! That's not going to happen," said Lucas firmly, "This was just an incident, isolated to that mission. I'm not going to be sticking my head on the block."

"Aw, Hell! Lucas, do you see what you're doing to me? I've got to report this. Sim is already on my back about not following process. If I don't report this, and it gets out that you told me..."

"I won't say a word. It's not in my interest."

"They have these rooms bugged! I'm pretty sure they could filter out the noise of a radio if

they wanted.”

“Not if I don't have reason to, they won't,” said Lucas, shaking his head, “And you won't tell them either. And if anything does eventuate, not that it will, but if it does, I'll back you up. I just... I just needed to tell someone.”

Ottavio held up his hands in resignation.

“Alright, Lucas, but for the record, and for what it's worth, I think you should tell Simon or Ali or Jung or whoever what you told me, but I guess you won't,” said Ottavio, pouring himself a glass of water, “Failing that, the only other advice I can give right now is to go and have a shower and sleep on it.”

Lucas got up. He had regained his composure.

“Not a word of this to anyone,” he said and walked over to the door.

“And Ottavio?” he said, opening the door wide.

“Yeah?”

“Turn off that damn stereo, man, it's giving me a headache,” said Lucas loudly, closing the door behind him.

“Perhaps Lucas is going crazy,” thought Ottavio, switching off the tunes, “That was almost a joke.”

He rolled back onto his bed and closed his eyes. His optical display faded after a few seconds, allowing him to view the back of his eyelids without interference. Before he could stop himself, he was asleep.

## Chapter 12

*“A guilty man sweats,  
his mind wanders back to his secret  
like a tongue to an ulcer.”  
- Sister Losovic on Interrogation*

Master Pietro's eyes were like fire, Master Theodore's like ice.

“Br... Brother Farnham?” blustered Master Theodore, “Surely he is not part of this treachery! I cannot believe it. I simply cannot believe it!”

“Believe it, brother. Do not let your emotions guide you on this.”

“I still... yes, yes, you are right. Yes, we must continue to find the cause, at all costs. Hmm, interrogating Brother Farnham must be done thoroughly. False information is worse than none.”

“We must be careful with our questions, then. Brother Renee, open the door,” said Master Pietro.

The cell block door slid silently open and the two walked to Brother Farnham's cell. He sat on his bunk, his eyes were swollen from crying and he looked unkempt. At their approach he scrambled to his knees.

“I swear, I swear, I am no traitor!” he blurted, bowing his head low. His crying was pitiful.

“We shall see, Brother Farnham,” said Master Theodore, shaking him off from his feet, “We shall see. You do understand the gravity of your situation? Nine of our brothers and sisters are dead and two have been severely wounded as a direct consequence of your actions. Not only that, but a wicked mind has been released from our custody without being traced.”

Master Pietro lifted Brother Farnham's face. A trail of drool connected with the floor.

“We are against the salvation of humanity through violence, Brother Farnham, but we will use force when necessary. I, for one, have no hesitation to use *barbaric* means of interrogation.”

Brother Farnham looked mortified, “Please, Master Pietro, I will gladly tell you anything you wish to know. I offer my knowledge freely and unreservedly! I am no traitor to the Brotherhood!”

“Then you will not object to an injection of truth serum?” asked Master Pietro, raising his eyebrows.

Brother Farnham licked his lips, “Yes, of course, of course!”

A short time later Brother Farnham was restrained to a chair in a quiet room with Master Theodore sitting in front of him, his hands clasped together.

Master Pietro was in the next room, watching Brother Farnham on a screen next to vital statistics worming their way along a monitor. His heart rate, skin conductivity and eye motion fluctuated, then settled to a rhythm as the serum began to work its magic.

His eyes started to glaze.

“Brother Farnham. For the most part I do not believe you,” said Master Theodore, “You say you brought the book to Brother Petroclus as a *gift*.”

Brother Farnham's eyes flickered involuntarily.

He sighed, “Yes. A gift, I brought it to him. He reads, he likes to read books. Not electronic books, but books made out of paper.”

“So he reads many books?”

“Yes, he reads a lot. He reads when he is bored. He reads at night. He says it helps him fall asleep. My eyes are... are strange. I think I am staring.”

Master Theodore ignored his complaint, “Why this book in particular?”

“It was a proper Greek translation. Brother Petroclus wanted an older text. He liked the pages, he liked the older language. Why am I staring?”

“Have you often brought books over for Brother Petroclus?”

“Yes. Often. Other books. Many other books, I can think of them. Other books, the Iliad, another the Peloponnesian War, of course it was hard to find. Homer. He likes the Greek classics, he

likes...”

“On every run?”

Brother Farnham's head began to spin. He breathed deeply, talking involuntarily as he did so.

“Yes, not always, often is more correct, often is the word, but yes,” he managed, “I do not mean to offend if you think I am being rude.”

“You are not offending me. It is the serum. Ignore its effects and think only of my questions.”

Brother Farnham closed his eyes and grunted while his head swam about the room.

Master Theodore's eyes narrowed.

“Do not try to fight the serum, Brother. It will be more painful if you do. Now, does anyone else know you bring books?”

“Others will know. Greek classics. I am not fighting, but I am not comfortable. Yes, they know, people talk. They talk all the time. There are no secrets, no secrets of mine. I will tell you anything.”

“Who?”

“Who? Who? Everyone will know, but he wants specifics, a person, a name. Brother Xavier knows. He knows. Brother Xavier and Sister Ping of the library. Of course, those who work in the library. They give me the books for Brother Petroclus, it is arranged. It *was* arranged. I have but to ask. Others know. Such an odd feeling.”

“So it is most likely common knowledge, then?”

“Such an odd feeling. I want to think, or not think...”

Master Theodore patiently repeated his question, “Is it common knowledge?”

“Yes! Knowledge. Everyone is knowing, knowledge is power. The books, Sister Ping is in the library. Power is knowledge, the people are therefore powerful. Stop it! Stop it!”

Brother Farnham writhed in his chair, trying desperately to free his hands. It was an instinctive reaction to the elixir flowing in his veins.

Master Theodore sat back in his chair. Truth serum was an effective technique. Developed by the Vigils over many years, truth serum seventeen achieved a fine balance between allowing the subject to remain coherent while at the same time arresting their ability to censor their words.

It was an effective tool, but as with any tool it required skill to be wielded properly.

Earlier versions of the truth serum had subjects babbling incoherently, producing every word and sound that entered their mind. Trained liars, it was found, could befuddle the process by thinking of everything and anything, letting the truth be mottled by discord.

Further improvements slowed the path of selective thought, while opening the channels of memory and auditory processing.

“Tell me, Brother Farnham. Brother? Brother? Stay with me now. Brother!” yelled Master Theodore, snapping Brother Farnham out of his daze, “If you, as you claim, have any love for Brother Petroclus, you will put your efforts into answering the questions. Do you know, or have ever heard of, a Brother Isaac of the Paris Chapter?”

“Isaac, try and think. Isaac. No. Isaac, Brother Hissam. Son of Abraham, the ram, the bush. He was sacrificed, but I do not know him. I know no Isaac.”

“Think carefully. *Isaac*. You have met him, have you not?”

Brother Farnham's pulse remained constant as he searched his mind.

“No. No. No, Isaac I would have remembered his name, Isaac, I can imagine. Like worms in my head, they wriggle,” he said.

Master Theodore insisted, “Focus, Brother. Isaac! Think of Isaac!”

“No. N-no. There is no Isaac. He is not a Brother, perhaps, is this a trick? He is from Paris, I would not have known him. I could not have known him, I have never visited the Paris chapter. France, it is in France. Isaac is a ruse, maybe?”

Satisfied, Master Theodore moved on, “Where in the library did you find the book?”

“The book was not in the library, so I looked. I do not know Isaac. Surely we have many brothers and sisters, surely I would have heard of him...”

“Enough of Isaac. Think now of the *book*. Where in the library did you find the book?”

“No. I looked. I searched, I wanted to please Brother Petroclus. He is a good Brother, an excellent Vigil. A friend. The book, I looked and found it elsewhere in Brother Holland's room. In his room, I was frustrated. I went in, I broke in. I swear I broke in!”

“You broke in?”

“I did! Brother Holland is strange. I was suspicious of his intentions toward Sister Gertrude. I do not trust him, do not say that! Damn! I do not trust him! Think of the book, that was the question! Holland had the book in his room on his desk! Hn! Isaac! No! Ah!”

He slipped one hand from its restraint and repeatedly slapped the desk in frustration, trying to concentrate. Brother Farnham took a breath, babbling while doing so. His eyes rolled to the ceiling as he tried to clear his thoughts. Master Theodore signaled to Master Pietro to let him continue.

“Be calm, Brother Farnham, be calm. It is so much easier if you do not fight the elixir. You will be tired from talking, to be sure, but it will pass.”

“Pass? I am worried that it will not. And even if it does not, I must be calm. Calm and think. Think of the book, of Isaac.”

“No, do not think of Isaac, Brother. You do not know him, and he is not your concern now. Think of your Brother Petroclus. Tell me, though, did Brother Petroclus deserve to die?”

A fresh well of pain gushed from Brother Farnham, “My dearest brother, I knew him a long time and he is dead! He did not deserve to die, no, no, he was a good man, better than me. I look up to him, I looked up to him, no, and whoever killed him deserves to die. By my hands or another I would gladly see them dead. My dearest Brother Petroclus, I wish I had never given you the damn book!”

Brother Farnham beat his breast as tears streamed down his face. Saliva rolled out one side of his downturned mouth. He wiped it away hurriedly, nattering all the while. Master Theodore watched him like a hawk.

“We were together, he and I, under Brother Warren. And Brother Drewen, we were together. I must tell Brother Drewen, does he know? Does he know?”

“No,” said Master Theodore, “He does not know. If you like, you can inform him. But not now, not in your state. The serum will pass in a short while, and then you will be fit to tell him.”

“I will, he will be sad to hear, as I am, but he must know. He will want justice like I do. I want justice for my Brother!”

“Yes, I understand completely. Justice is something upon which we can all agree. Now Brother Farnham, you said that you do not trust Brother Holland.”

“I did not mean to say it, but I did and I do and you know it now because I have said it. I said it! I should trust my Brothers but I do not. Not all, not Brother Holland. He knows it now, I must elaborate, yes, he knows. Sister Gertrude. She is pretty. Have you seen her?”

“Yes, I have.”

“He has looked at Sister Gertrude in ways unclean when she has turned her back. He thinks that nobody has seen him but I have, and it angers me greatly!”

His fists clenched, “She has already refused him publicly, she said no, she said no, but he pesters her, I see these things. Sister Gertrude cannot abide him. He does not think with his head, he thinks with his cock! And now I am speaking in a vulgar tongue. I am sorry!”

Master Theodore leaned forward, “I have no concern for your method of speech, Brother. But I have concern about your intent. Have you worries for Sister Gertrude for your own reasons?”

Brother Farnham shook his head, “No, I love her like a sister. She is a Sister. She is beautiful and wise, wiser than me, I love her deeply, and I know Brother Holland does not respect her. His youth has a hold of him, he knows it but does not care. She is strong but I fear for her safety. She is not safe.”

“Do you think he is acting selfishly?” asked Master Theodore, raising his eyebrows.

“I do, I do, that seems right! The way he acts is selfish. His actions are solely for himself. Not just for Sister, not just for her. His actions are not pure. I trust him even less, and now I suspect he has had something to do with Brother Petroclus, my dear Petroclus! He cannot have, but he must have!”

Brother Farnham caught his breath and stared wildly at Master Theodore.

"The book," he gasped, "The book. It was him! He tricked me, he let me know where it was! He wanted me to find it!"

"Really? How?"

"The library, tricked, yes. I was asking Sister Ping at the library, she smelled like almonds. Concentrate! Hn! She said he had borrowed it but when I asked he denied he had it. The way he talked, he was lying and I could tell and I thought it was strange that he would lie. I thought I was clever, I thought I was so clever, but I did exactly what he wanted. So now I know, he wanted me to search for it! He wanted me to give it to my Brother Petroclus. Dear Petroclus, I am a fool! A bumbling fool!"

"I see. If it had gone back through the library, they would have detected the tampering for sure. He needed you to steal it and deliver it directly to the facility."

Master Theodore got up from his seat and walked behind Brother Farnham. He said, "Dry your tears, Brother. Sister Marianna will be in shortly to undo your restraints and apply a countering serum. We shall find whoever is responsible, and we shall bring them to justice. You will remain here until the serum has worn off and then you will be free to talk to Brother Drewen. Try to settle down. And drink water."

He left the room and went to speak with Master Pietro.

"Well?" he asked.

Master Pietro looked satisfied, "Either he is an expert liar, which I disbelieve strongly, or his heart is pure. We must talk to Brother Holland immediately."

"My thoughts exactly. Aptitude for mental or corporeal control are neither one of Brother Farnham's strong points. I do agree that it is very unlikely he has converted, and that he has performed a favor only via trickery. Let us question Brother Holland at once!"

Masters Theodore and Pietro left the interrogation area and walked briskly to a hall lit by soft lighting. The floor was of old marble, laid out hundreds of years ago, slightly bowed in tracks from years of passage. As they walked they passed portrait after portrait of faces staring back at them. These faces belonged to Vigils of repute.

One was Brother Neebo, famous within the Order for being instrumental in resolving an escalating war between neighbors Pakistan and India.

The infighting had diminished the powers of both countries to the point where an invasion by the Russian empire, under the guise of peace keeping, could have led to the dissolution of both countries and the unquestionable dominance of the Russian empire of the Asian state. Such a consequence would have upset the balance of an entire continent.

Another was Master Vanessa of Spain, whose skills of persuasion were still used as examples within texts for Acolytes and Brothers alike.

One notable example was when she and her members halted the construction of the San Diego hyper-fusion reactor. By her subtle intervention the flaws and potential safety issues of the hyper-fusion theory were revealed publicly by scientist Yan Wei Chan, saving mankind the disgrace of wiping out millions of square kilometers in the blink of an eye.

The portraits were always performed post-mortem, as fame within the Brotherhood was held for deeds performed, not those yet to be performed.

The living could look to the dead as inspiration rather than being satisfied with their own achievements.

"I have a bad feeling about all of this," grunted Master Pietro as the pair marched down the hall, their robes flying about them, "I hardly wish to say it, but if the words of Isaac have reach the ears of the young, we may be looking at another schism."

Master Theodore kept his eyes fixed down the hall, "Then we cannot let his words go any further. Mankind is still recovering and cannot survive without direction. I share your bad feeling, especially considering the utter violence surrounding anything to do with Ryan."

They reached the library. Old wooden shelves and stone floors quietly allowed themselves to be accompanied by the sharp lines of new benches, consoles and viewing equipment.

While many of the older books on the shelves were rotten, they had, at least, been scanned in or painstakingly transcribed and stored digitally. The sea of books were made up by entries from across the world, some very rare indeed.

The knowledge of the Brotherhood did not stop at the library housed under the roof of the Harrisburg Chapter. Across the globe, within many other libraries just like it, sat a wealth of books, recordings and transcriptions that had been rescued from the unforgiving teeth of war, crime and neglect.

Brother Xavier was busy cataloging the latest additions.

“Hello, Master Theodore, Master Pietro. What may I do for you?” he said.

“Hello, Brother Xavier. Is Brother Holland in here?” asked Master Theodore.

Brother Xavier shrugged, “Let me think. Brother Holland, you say? No, I have not seen him all morning. Have you tried his chambers or the dining hall?”

“No, this is the first place we have looked. If you see him, tell him to come to me at once.”

“I will, Master Theodore. Is there anything else? We have a new collection of Prahbreet and Harshiet and a couple of Lily Ungbert just in, having been saved from the ruins of New Delhi if you are interested. I know you are a fan of Indian Poetry.”

“Oh. Thank you, but no, no right now. Tell me, Brother Xavier, do you examine each book as it comes in or out?”

“If not me, then Sister Ping. But each book, yes. Sometimes there are dog ears on the pages, and these have to be straightened out before they are put back on the shelf otherwise they would permanently crease. Other times the covers are damaged or torn, or there are pages missing.”

Master Pietro asked, “Do you have any works referencing the siege of Troy?”

“Oh yes, Master Pietro. There is a lovely, leather bound 'Aeneid' if you like, very well preserved.”

“What about 'The Odyssey'?”

Brother Xavier rolled his eyes, sighing loudly.

“Oh great. Yes, Master Pietro, we have a nice copy of it, translated by none other than Federico Vasquez accompanying the original text, but you will unfortunately have to settle for the digital version like everyone else.”

“Why not the book itself?”

“Why does everyone insist... I am sorry, but currently it has been borrowed by Brother Holland. I have asked for it back but he insists that he has misplaced it at another Chapter. And, if it ever *does* comes back, Brother Farnham has expressed his desire to get a hold of it. It has been sitting on the shelf for goodness knows how long, and now all of a sudden everyone wants to read it,” said Brother Xavier, exasperated, “If you wish, I will ask Brother Farnham if he can do without so that you may get it first, Master Pietro.”

“That will not be necessary. It would not be fair, for starters.”

“I think he will not mind. It is not for him, you see, he borrows books to send to Brother Petroclus and Brother Christopher at the Remote Facility, you know, where they used to do the sanitations. So it is really up to them. I am sure I could send them something equally as interesting. We have a whole library of books, after all.”

“Thank you, Brother Xavier, but I guess I will have to wait my turn. You have been most helpful.”

“No, thank you, Master Pietro. May your path be straight,” he said.

“And yours be balanced,” said Master Pietro, ushering Master Theodore out of the library.

“Well,” he said, getting clear of the heavy library doors, “That matches Brother Farnham's story well enough. I do not think we need to waste time talking to Sister Ping, but instead find Brother Holland without delay!”

After poking their heads into the dining hall and scanning the few heads enjoying their meals, they walked briskly to the dormitories.

Sister Hunter walked by and bowed her head. They did the same, and continued on. Respect within the Order flowed in both directions, under the principle that age is merely an indicator of

how many deeds may yet be performed.

As the Acolytes were given respect and trust, they learned quickly the value of the words of the experienced. The pride of youth was happily tempered by the wisdom of the elderly, and the exhaustion of age was moderated by the energy of the young.

They reached the dormitory wing and knocked roughly on Brother Holland's door.

They waited for one minute before trying again. There was no response. Brother Alexis came out from next door, coughing up phlegm.

"It is about time... Oh, Master Pietro, Master Theodore, forgive me. I thought you was young Brother Holland," he said, clearing his throat.

Master Theodore said, "I am not. Why would you think we were he?"

"The knocking, I thought it must be Brother Holland a-fiddlin' with his lock or a-bumpin' the door with that silly cane he insists on carrying. My old ears are not what they once were, you know, but he makes such a racket sometimes."

"Why did you say, 'It is about time' before?" asked Master Pietro.

"Well, I have been a-waiting, eh? I wanted to discuss some matters with him last night, but he did not arrive. So I knocks on his door at eleven last night, no, half past eleven it was," said Brother Alexis, looking at his bare wrist, "Where did I put my watch? Anyway, you see, I wanted to pick his brain about a few things, nothing terribly interestin' mind you, but he seems to be avoiding me. Either he is a-sleepin' off whatever he got up to last night and not answering his door, or he did not come back to sleep at all! Perhaps he has fallen asleep in the library again. I will go and get me shoes on and go see..."

"Thank you, that will not be necessary, Brother Alexis. We have just now come from the library and Brother Xavier assured us that he was not there."

"Hmm. He is always sniffin' about over there. Well maybe he is hovering somewhere around the technology wing. I know of a few spots where he might occupy that mind of 'is for a good while. Might give me a reason to go stretch me legs," said Brother Alexis, wiggling his bushy eyebrows.

"Yes, well, perhaps you could go and look for us, Brother Alexis, if that is not too much hassle."

"Not at all, Master, not at all."

"If you do see him, please send him to me at once," said Master Theodore. They watched as Brother Alexis hobbled off down the hall. He was old, tired, but had an inquisitive nature that time could not tame.

After he had turned the corner, Master Theodore took out a resonance lock pick, "Keep a lookout, Master Pietro, and I will open this door. This matter must be resolved before the attack of the sanitation facility becomes common knowledge. Rumor is a beast best slaughtered in the womb."

The lock clicked.

"There. Whatever secrets Brother Holland is hiding, we will find out."

He slipped the lock pick back into his robe and pushed on the handle. The door swung easily, revealing a view to Brother Holland's desk.

Masters Pietro and Theodore stepped carefully inside, closing the door behind themselves.

Without a word they looked over the room. Nothing seemed unusual. Brother Holland's personal touchpad lay on his desk amongst a few empty cups of coffee, recharging from the outlet.

The lamp was glowing softly against his bed head, revealing unkempt sheets and a pillow thrown to one side.

Master Theodore walked to the touchpad and flipped through a few entries while Master Pietro went to look in the wardrobe.

A shuffle through the robes and garments revealed a small package containing cigarettes, two bottles of gin, some chocolate bars and a handbook on nano-electronics. In a drawer next to some shoes was a further stash of chocolate, along with a wooden box containing several magazines of pornography.

“Tsk. Brother Holland, young lad, what have you been up to?” he mumbled to himself, thumbing the pages of the electronics manual. It was not irregular for a Vigil to be skilled in various topics, and from what he remembered, Brother Holland was very interested in technology

What was odd was the secrecy of the alcohol, pornography, tobacco and chocolate. It was contrary to the core beliefs of self-moderation, morality and control. It was certainly not Vigil-like behavior.

Master Theodore, meanwhile, was examining the erased messages. Brother Holland had deleted several messages, but had not taken the time to wipe their data completely.

He read the first:

*My dearest and most loyal friend. I know you are upset by her refusal, but do not fret just yet. The female of our species is nothing if not fickle. Persistence and determination, my brother, are not to be underestimated, nor the power of persuasion through flattery.*

*Vanity lies within us all, in one way or another, and it's vanity that has brought down empires, reduced city walls to rubble and inspired great acts of injustice. At the same time, it bolsters us against the world, being a warm blanket against the cold words of others. In effect, then, it's a tool for you to wield. Like all such efforts, however, a blunt approach will do more harm than good. After all, a hammer, no matter how heavy, no matter how forceful, must strike the nail and not the board.*

*No, subtlety is the key. Don't try to hasten the outcome, nor attempt to assume too much. The best fruit is that which has been left on the tree to ripen. Occupy your thoughts with other things. Give your efforts time to take effect.*

*Let me know how things turn out. I'll wait eagerly to hear of any news.*

*By the same token, how is that book you were writing coming along? Father has expressed his desire to hear of its publication.*

*It would not do well to leave it too long.*

*Your friend,*

*Alejandro de Feres.*

*P.S. As always, delete this after you have read it.*

Master Theodore scratched his chin. “Master Pietro? Do you know a Brother Alejandro?”

“I know of Brother Alessandro in Pisa, and Alexander in Wales.”

“Not Alejandro? De Feres?”

“Hmm, none spring to mind, but you could always look in the category, there are bound to be quite a few. Why?”

“I do not know just yet,” said Master Theodore.

He frowned and turned back to the tablet. He skimmed through and looked for other messages from Alejandro:

*Dearest Brother,*

*There are wheels in motion. Once they start to turn, they can't be stopped. Do you understand what I am getting at? I hope so, for I cannot express in words the importance of timing in this situation.*

*If your book cannot be written in time then we must consider alternatives.*

*If you've run out of ideas for the plot, then you must say so, for I may be able to help.*

*I'm worried, please allay me of my concern.*

*By the by, I saw Sister Gertrude yesterday. She appeared in good spirits. I hope this had something to do with yourself? I told you she would come around. Now you are free to concentrate on more pressing matters.*

*Let me know how it goes,*

*Alejandro de Feres.*

*P.S. Delete this.*

Another read:

*This is it, you mustn't tarry any longer, Brother Holland. Can't you see that everything hinges*

*upon you completing your part? Can't you feel the growing pressure under your thumb as you wait to pull it from the dyke?*

*What am I supposed to tell Father, that we must wait forever longer because of a woman?*

*If she holds your thoughts so strongly then you are weak indeed and have no place amongst us. Prove yourself worthy, I beg you, or Father will find another way and I assure you that your matter will be dealt with afterward.*

*Your friend,*

*Alejandro de Feres.*

*P.S. I trust you have been deleting my messages after you read them?*

From his robe Master Theodore took a memory pod, downloaded the rest of Brother Holland's messages, and started on the drawers.

"Master Theodore," came Master Pietro's voice from the bathroom, "Cordon off this room. We are now investigating murder."

The shrunken husk of Brother Holland's body was splayed out in the bath. His pale skin was pulled against his bones, making his eyes bulge out in a sickly stare of surprise, looking to the ceiling as if it were his salvation.

His lips were pulled back in a sickly grin, revealing light blue gums and white teeth. He looked like pale piece of jerky, a far cry from his former, plumper youthful state.

"How did he die?" asked Master Theodore, "I see no bruises, no lacerations."

"There is no blood," whispered Master Pietro, examining the body carefully, "It has been drained or siphoned off."

"Drained?"

"Seems so."

He lifted Brother Holland's head a little.

"There are no obvious wounds, no cuts. No, wait," he peered closely at the neck, "See here, two puncture marks. I can only assume the blood has been washed down the drain, but a forensic analysis might tell us more. But why? Why drain the blood?"

"Drained or drank?"

"Master Theodore! Are you speaking of vampires? Really?"

He shrugged. He said, "It is not like this sort of thing has not happened before. And you said it yourself, you have two puncture marks, just like in the stories."

"And they are just that: stories. This is real life, Master."

The pair looked over the body and around the area for a few minutes. Nothing appeared disturbed. If there was a struggle, it did not happen inside Brother Holland's quarters.

Master Theodore rubbed his eyes, "This body had been posed. The blood has been drained. We are meant to have found it. You see? We were meant to see it, examine it, ponder over it."

"It certainly seems that way. Although, to be fair, it would not be very easy to dispose of a body on this compound."

"No, but if this was a crime of passion, his body would be slumped in any old fashion. There would be bruising, and broken furniture, and even if he had died in the bath, the killer would not have wasted any time in posing him, and especially not of draining his blood."

Master Pietro nodded. It was a fair point. "So why, then? Why go to this length? Any killer is sure to get away from the scene as fast as possible, and if they wanted to send a message, as you suggest, why not leave a bloody note?"

"Perhaps we are mistaken. Is it a ritual? A symbol? Let me see... blood. Blood has been drained. What of blood?"

Master Pietro suggested, "It is generally associated with the color red. It is warm. It is what sustains life."

"Blood is life. Yes, blood is life. In any culture, it symbolizes a person's life force. Brother Holland's life has been, um, washed away or, perhaps, drained, as it were."

"Lost? Stolen? Wasted?" Master Pietro suggested.

Master Theodore did not hear him. He was alone in his thoughts. He stood up and looked at the wall in concentration.

“Drained. Dripped. Huh? Oh yes, *wasted*. Letting it drip down the drain... I do not know about you, Master Pietro, but that notion, it is oddly familiar in some way. Drip. Your life dripping... These words... I cannot seem to put my finger on it.”

“Then let us move on to something tangible, then.”

Master Theodore shook himself.

“Yes. Of course, you are right. Brother Holland has been lured by base temptations, frivolous worldly desires.”

“Chocolate, pornography, alcohol. It is all there.”

“Yes, and Alejandro has been feeding the fires of his lust,” said Master Theodore, “What was Brother Holland’s assignment? Did he have access to anything in particular?”

Master Pietro took out the touch pad and tapped about.

“Well... he was assigned to coordinate the investigation into the local politics in New Hampshire. And he observed Tsang-Tao’s takeover of AlumCo two months back,” he said, “His latest assignment was working alongside Brother Marcus and Sister Livella.”

“Brother Marcus? How well do you know him, Master?”

“Well enough, I suppose. He is cocksure, and he is as quick with brain as he is with his mouth. Not terribly good in the field, mind. I do know that he has trouble with Chen-sing Projection, and that he lacks the mental discipline to master Mental Stealth.”

“And Sister Livella?”

“I know not much, except that she was transferred to Canada or Alaska. I will need to find out more if you are interested.”

“I am more interested in what they were doing.”

“It says their task was to head up a scout around Pima County.”

“Pima? There is nothing in Pima of note. What the Devil are we doing there? Who sanctioned it?”

After a bit more tapping, Master Pietro came up with a concerned look on his face.

“As far as I can tell, *you* did,” he said. He showed Master Theodore his tablet.

“I did no such thing! Look! See? I was not even in Philadelphia that day!” said Master Theodore, enraged, “The bloody nerve... Alright, then what was the goal?”

“It says, ‘Observation of terrestrial area to determine its capacity for sustaining a central point of command’, my good friend. As if that is not a front for something. And,” he said, sucking in his teeth, “It required the use of a special equipment, among which we have camouflage suits. Signed and approved by none other than Brother Holland. I would wager those suits never made it back to inventory.”

The pair looked down at the body.

“Dead men tell no tales, huh?” said Master Pietro.

“We will have to get him looked at properly, thoroughly. Furthermore I think the time for silence is over, Master. First the attack on the Sanitation Facility, now this,” said Master Theodore, looking around the room for any remnant left by the killer, “We need everyone to be on the alert. We need eyes and ears.”

“Even if that means sacrificing the secrecy of our investigation?”

“Yes. If there are any polluted minds, no doubt they will already know what is afoot, so it is not as if this will warn them. The investigation will have to be conducted through traditional means, I am afraid. Our hand is forced.”

Master Theodore turned back to the doorway and walked out.

“And so,” he muttered, “We follow the trail. Come along, we must find this Alejandro. Leave the dead to the dead.”

## Chapter 13

*“Bloodshed as a motivator cannot be underestimated.  
What is more compelling?  
Legislation? Compassion? Hardly!”  
- Father Abraham*

“Two minutes to touch down, ladies. We all ready?” barked Simon through the intercom.

The squad yelled their assent. The drop ship zoomed low over a sea of suburban houses of Greencastle, Pennsylvania. It was a breezy night. The populace was asleep in their beds, with only the occasional dog barking at the passing ship floating across the sky.

“Remember, this one's got a lot riding on it. Live fire, multiple hostiles, fifty odd armed on last count. Lots of opportunity for getting it wrong! Otto, you're with me, Cass and Norbert, you're both coming up behind. Em and Lucas, you're providing support for the ground crew. Just keep the bastards busy while we dig 'em out from the inside,” said Simon, “Keep your bloody eyes peeled, and don't fire until I give the signal. If you forgot to go to the can, cross your legs or do it in your pants. Otto, what the Hell is that?”

Otto looked down to where Simon was pointing. It was his stun gun, holstered at his side.

“We aren't here to give them massages, yeah? You got anything lethal?”

“I've got my pistol as well. If necessary I can subdue without force and without noise.”

“Yeah, well if you want a silent weapon, go for a blade. If you want a ranged one, go for a gun. Screw that stun gun crap,” said Simon testily, taking the stun gun from Ottavio and tossing it into a crate, “If you're taking someone down, don't give them a second option, just drop 'em. A bullet in the skull is hard to argue with.”

“Sir.”

Norbert looked over at the two, but said nothing.

With all the grace of a swan the drop ship pulled to a stop, hovering a meter off the ground, silently whooshing, while the crew hopped off. It was a new design, the AePC-S, developed by the laboratories and workshops of Houston's subsidiary, RD-Tech.

Lightly armored and extremely quiet, it was not as fast or as capacious as the AePC-G, but it sailed silently and stealthily, perfect for the drop off without alerting the target.

A second and third drop ship pulled up nearby and soon the street was crawling with agents and grunts. They gathered around Simon.

“Listen up, because I'm bloody interesting and I don't like to repeat myself. This is going to be a smooth op. Fawkner's been running drug operations in this region for ages. He's got the surrounding population shitting their pants. What's left of commerce is crippled because they're either paying protection money, their staff are goofed up on gas, or they've had so much nicked there's nothing left to sell. In short, we gotta stop the bad guy.”

“Before we can dismantle the op, we've got to take out the king pin and we've got good intel that the bugger is located within the compound tonight, along with his two right hand men,” said Simon, “We take them out, the whole operation turns to crap, the region can recover and we can all give ourselves a pat on the back. Captain Jolimont.”

Jolimont, a heavily built, mustached man of thirty, stood to attention, “Yes, sir?”

“Captain, divide up your men into three, cover the South and Eastern gates and spare the rest to get Agent Lucas and Agent Emily up to their positions. They're your eyes and ears and must be protected at all costs. Don't move on the compound, but if you can take out any of the sods at a distance, be my guest. The main thing is to stay out of range, keep them busy and above all, don't get hurt!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Oh, and no one, and I mean *no one* is to let out a fart until my say so, right?”

“Yessir,” said the captain.

A member in the ranks broke wind noisily. A general snicker waved through Jolimont's men. Simon glared at them. He turned to his own crew, "Em, grab your gear and get going. Come on, mates, let's leave these pussies."

Emily and Lucas trotted off with a group of grunts and headed toward an old water tower to set up. The others headed a little way over to a grate covering a sewer.

"Geez, there's something evil down there," whispered Ottavio, sniffing the air, "Can't we skip the scenic route?"

Simon glowered at him, "You were at the briefing too, remember? Stop being a bitch and get down there."

He heaved it out of the way, and the four of them lowered themselves down into the stinking hole.

Cassandra crinkled her nose. It was dark, it was smelly and her foot was firmly entrenched in something uncomfortably yielding.

"You guys can sure pick a nice place to take a lady," she mused.

"If you like the atmosphere, just wait until you've tried the food," sniffed Ottavio.

"Gross. I think I'll pass on the braised beef," giggled Cassandra, "Considering you're standing in it."

Simon growled, "Knock it off! We're on the clock. Come on, Norbert, light up the tunnel, already!"

White torchlight flooded the chamber. A cluster of muttrats, feasting on goodness knows what, scampered noisily away.

Both Simon and Ottavio drew their weapons. Simon had a medium blade, well weighted for short, sharp thrusts at close quarters. Ottavio instead had a HK 17, suppressed with a flash guard and silencer. He held it at the ready, watching down the tunnel for any sign of movement.

A muttrat scampered past, missing its opportunity to run off with the others. Simon pounced forward and eagerly cleft its head off with a single stroke, barely breaking his stride.

The cat sized body wriggled and squirmed as the life bled out into the black sewer waters.

Cassandra winced at the bleeding mess.

"Was that even necessary?" she asked, side stepping the shivering carcass, still splashing in the shallow water.

"Should have pissed off with the others," mumbled Norbert.

"Shut up and stay sharp," said Simon.

The team trooped on a bit further until they stood next to an entrance point, complete with a slimy, rusted ladder.

"Righto, mates, this is the spot. Norbert, kill the lights. Otto, get your scrawny ass to the top and tell me what you've got," ordered Simon.

Although rusted on the surface, the ladder felt sturdy enough, if not a little slippery from the copious amount of biological matter growing on it.

He reached the top. A grill covered the way, which led to a courtyard, complete with a fountain, trees and flowering plants.

For a second Ottavio was impressed by the sight as the moon's rays sparkled lightly in the hissing fountain. A slight breeze rocked the leaves of the plants gently, creating an exuberant hush.

"Well?" asked Simon in the commlink.

"It's got a cover, firmly in place. Leads to a courtyard."

"Anyone about?"

"Not that I can see," said Ottavio, poking a mirror up through the grill and scanning, "Nope, nothing."

"Strange, it's supposed to be full tonight. Alright, makes it a little easier I guess. Have a go at the cover, yeah?"

Ottavio pushed gently on the grill, but it did not move. He heaved a little more, scared to push too hard lest it pop off violently, or squeak and alert a passerby. Still it did not budge.

Determined not to be shown up by a piece of rusted metal, he locked his leg firmly against the

ladder and pushed hard. A loud crack resonated down the hole and out across the courtyard.

"Damn it, Otto!" hissed Simon in the commlink, "I said have a go, not break the bloody thing!"

Ottavio stayed perfectly still, listening. A voice sounded above him, a little far off. It was rejoined by another. They had heard the noise indeed, and were investigating. Eventually two sets of footsteps echoed down through the grill.

"Eh, I heard something alright," said a gruff, male voice, "Wasn't a gunshot. I know a gun when I hear it."

"Well shut up and keep looking," said the other, slightly whiny voice.

"Look for what, but? It's not a gun."

"Yeah, you said that. Hmm, let me think. Oh, I know, how about you shut your hole and look for something that goes 'crack', yeah?"

The first voice sounded peeved, "Oh, all right smart ass. Well I know what goes 'crack', your skull under my fist!"

The second feigned a laugh, "Don't start stuff you can't finish, yeah? Remember you and Khrushchev? He wiped the floor with you!"

"That didn't count. Wasn't a fair fight. He played dirty. Went for the eyes and balls. He wasn't a fighter, he was a scrapper. Glad he's gone."

"Yeah, well whatever worked for him. Whatever happened to him, anyway? Haven't seen him for a good while."

"He's *gone*. You know..."

"No, I don't. What?"

"You're telling me you don't know?"

"No."

"You're having a lend, eh?"

"Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to feed you a knuckle sandwich?"

The footsteps stopped. The first voice lowered to a whisper, "I heard he tried it on with *her*!"

"Bullshit! He never did!"

"Shh! It's on the hush, right? I can't believe you haven't heard. Alright. Well Helmut told me the old dog got stuck into the juice, right, plonks on the bed out goes out like a light, while the missus, well, you know her. Eh? You know what she's like! Anyway, and Khrushchev thinks he's in with a chance, see, seein' as she can't say no and all that, and next thing he's going in to get himself some."

"Right!"

"And then Fawkner gets up and staggers in on the both of them going at it!"

A shrill whistle of interest sounded from the second body, "Suppose he did him there and then."

"Nah, that's the thing, see? He doesn't lose it or nothing. Well, he just wanders on past like nothing's wrong in the world, right, straight out of the room and hits the can. Khrushchev, well, he thinks he's still up on the grog and shit, and that he's got a free ticket, so he goes back to her, you know, second helping."

"Right!"

"Next thing, bam! Fawkner's put a harpoon through his kneecap, pinning him to the bed. A bloody harpoon!"

The second voice whistled softly, "Just like that, eh?"

"Just like that. Well, that's how Helmut put it, anyway."

"How'd he see it?"

"Ha! Don't tell anyone, but he was hiding a bit about, hoping for a crack hisself after Khrushchev finished up. Can't say I haven't thought about it, neither, but I'm not game. Apparently Fawkner had the sorry asshole *skinned*."

"Get out! Alive?"

"Yup. Guess you weren't here after all."

“Why not just put a bullet in him?”

“Dunno,” said the first voice, “Guess he wanted to show he's still top dog. Make an example and all that. Skinned! Oof, creeps me out. Ah, crap, there ain't nothing out here but mosquitoes and frogs and I'm gettin' bit. It was probably some punk kids and a fire cracker. And we're missing the game. Come on.”

Footsteps faded away, and the faint sound of a television could be heard, accompanied by whistles and mutterings.

“All clear,” Ottavio called through.

“Otto, please tell me you at least got that damn grill loose,” said Simon.

Ottavio inspected the grill. It was loose alright. The metal had not been moved in decades and the rust, dirt and salt that had built up had firmly sealed the edges with a solid crust. A crust that had now been fragmented and scattered across the courtyard.

“Yup,” said Ottavio, sheepishly.

“Well and good, mate. What did I tell you about keeping your implants under control, eh? Alright, when the coast is clear, you go up and keep me covered, and let me know when to come up.”

“Right,” said Ottavio, gently pushing the grill to one side.

It grumbled a bit but moved easily.

“Right, *sir*,” said Simon, “Norbert, you're bringing up the rear. Cass you stay close to Norbert. Otto and me do the fighting, yeah, you and Norb make a path and disarm stuff. Defend yourselves if you gotta, but don't poke your head out unnecessarily. Got it? Right? Too easy, let's go!”

Ottavio slipped out from the hole and rolled behind a bush, keeping his eyes and ears open. The game sounded particularly rousing. Whistles and hoots, dropped to jeering, a moment's silence, and then a loud roar.

“Poor sods,” he thought, “They've got no idea what's coming.”

Ottavio heard footsteps to his right.

“Hang five, sir, bandit returning,” he whispered.

“What's he up to?”

“He's heading this way.”

“Take him out. *Quiet*, this time.”

Ottavio watched the approach. Dressed in a leather vest and toting a banged up revolver, the ruffian's walk was a little out of step. Having come into a bit of extra cash, he had spent his ill-gotten gains on a bag of Whiz, the contents of which he had been repeatedly sampling. As he approached, Ottavio watched the glazed eyes as they darted about haphazardly.

“He's no threat, sir, just high.”

“Is he armed?”

“Yes, but...”

Simon hissed, “Then he's a threat. Take him out!”

The ruffian sauntered over to the bushes, a few feet from where Ottavio was crouching, and unzipped himself.

As he tinkled away, it dawned on his fuzzy brain that something did not seem right. In a haze, his mind informed him that it had noticed something interesting.

The stars? No. They were pretty, dancing around in circles as they should be, so that was not unusual. His brain fought harder. The bush? No, it was getting soaked in urine and its leaves were happily splashing liquid back onto his feet.

He turned slowly, trying his best to think. Urine sprayed on the cobbled ground, splashing noisily.

The game? No. The crickets? No. The grate. The grate had been moved! There was a big hole underneath it. Not that the hole was unusual, but the fact that he could see it without the obstructing bars was.

He staggered over to the hole, trailing urine, and looked in.

“Hello?” he called, leaning over slightly.

His eyes wiggled furiously as he scanned the darkness.

"Otto! Take that bastard out before someone hears him!" hissed Simon through the commlink.

Like a panther, Ottavio crept up behind him and grabbed his mouth, stifling a yelp. He pulled the head back and, with his right hand, expertly gripped the jugular, providing enough pressure to slow the blood flow.

Muffling and groaning, the ruffian fought back, grappling uselessly at Ottavio's vice-like grip, causing him to squeeze a little harder.

The victim's face went red, then purple, then he stopped struggling. Ottavio was left holding a limp body, which he carried over and tossed behind the bushes.

"Subject neutralized. Come on up, sir," he said in his commlink, "I reckon we've got a few guys watching television. We move now and we've got the drop on them."

In a few seconds Simon's head appeared. He took a defensive position and watched as Cassandra and Norbert followed. Ottavio replaced the grill. Simon looked at urine on the ground.

"That's not blood. Where's the body," he asked.

"In the bushes."

"There's no blood. Did you break his neck?"

"KO. Pinch the jugular..." said Ottavio, proudly.

"So he's not dead? Damn it, where is he?"

Ottavio furrowed his brow and motioned to the bushes. Simon took out his blade and drove it home into the ruffian's chest.

"That's taking him out," he announced, "You see Otto? He won't get up now."

"He was already knocked out," Ottavio protested.

Simon waved his blade menacingly, "If his heart's still beating, he can still get up. Now shut up and listen. We take out the guys watching the telly. Use that door on the right. Cass, check it out."

She looked for a second at the body, then approached the glass door. Inside was dimly lit by the lights of an indoor swimming pool. She scanned the outside expertly.

"It's clean," she said.

"Fantastic. Be sure to put that in your report."

"I was just checking for traps," she protested, "You don't think that they'd leave a..."

"That's great, really, just, ah, just open it, already," whispered Simon, his blade held lightly in front of him.

Ottavio watched him as he flipped it from hand to hand. He looked agitated.

"You OK, sir?" he asked.

Simon was practically dancing on the spot.

"Never better," he replied, "Cass, hurry up with that damn lock."

Cassandra was already at work. In no time she grinned to herself, twisted her shim and it clicked obligingly.

They were inside, circumventing the pool and heading to the rear area. The shimmering lights from under the water danced on the walls and roof of an illustriously appointed room.

The sound of the game was coming from the parlor, up three stairs and to the left.

"What's the call?" signaled Ottavio.

Simon indicated for him to scout the room and report back. Norbert stayed at the door, keeping an eye out.

Ottavio crept closer, pushing himself against the wall and lightly stepping up each step, stealing a glance in the room.

A huge screen dominated the other wall, silhouetting three figures on a couch, while highlighting two others to the side. Another was asleep, or passed out, in a recliner. All manner of obscene and poorly spelled words were plastered across his face and naked chest.

Drunk, hollering and having a good time, all eyes were fixed squarely on the action in front of them.

Football was being broadcast. Even throughout the wars, and the poverty and disease that

came with it, sport kept the human spirit alive. Even now, these drug dealers and pimps had put aside their violent, criminal natures to share time as people, as friends.

Ottavio felt a small pang of longing for the simpler time of his youth when he could hang out with his friends, get quietly drunk and solve the problems of the world on the shores of a beach.

Not that he regretted maturity, but sometimes, as now, he felt he had lost what is was to be with people, not as an Agent or as workmates, but as friends.

A controversially high tackle made the audience all yell and swear at the television in unison.

Ottavio relayed the information back to Simon, six hostiles, four seated, two standing, with at least three sidearms.

“They're mine,” signaled Simon, pushing Ottavio back.

Scowling, Simon readied his blade by his side and breathed heavily, eyes twitching. His eyes narrowed and his face started to turn red.

Ottavio, more than a little concerned, watched on as his body became a tense, trembling ball of muscle.

“Rrr-Yarg!” screamed Simon, launching himself into the room, hacking and slashing at anything that moved.

His blade flashed white, then red, as it danced from one body to another. Caught with utter surprise, his victims had hardly made a reach for their guns before they were gasping for air as their lungs filled with bubbly blood. The crowd on the television roared with delight, spurring Simon on.

Wild eyed, blood spattered and delirious with the taste of death, he jiggled around the room, searching for anyone that might be hidden.

He slashed the couch, stabbed the corpses, spraying even more blood around the room.

Ottavio slowly lowered his pistol and looked on, his shock played clearly on his face.

Before him was not Simon, the grumpy, fierce, gung-ho leader, but some kind of steroid-junky high up on gas.

Here was an animal, not a human. Here was a beast that relished in the power of taking a life, killing not to survive, but to fulfill some primal craving.

The bodies of his victims were his playthings, like a cat with a dead mouse he leered and prodded, hoping against hope that the flesh might be magically reanimated such that he could kill it again.

Ottavio turned away in disgust.

Norbert was standing behind him, watching over his shoulder with serious eyes.

“You disapprove, brother,” he whispered to Ottavio.

“It's not my place...”

“Cut the crap. I can see it on your face, man, and he will too. Don't let him see it.”

“But... Look!”

“I know, man, I know. Let him finish up. He won't stop until he's done. We'll cover the entrances, man, someone might well have heard or seen all that shit,” said Norbert and turned back to Cassandra. Ottavio followed.

“Hey!” said Simon, eventually popping back from the living room, “What gives? You were supposed to cover me, yeah?”

He was covered in red, none of it his own, from head to toe and panting heavily. He looked for all the world as if he had been running outside while it was storming tomatoes.

Ottavio tried to appear casual and shrugged.

“I *did* cover you,” said Ottavio, then added, “Not that there was any point.”

“Heh, yeah mate. Too right, I took 'em all out by myself. Did you see that? I had them bitches on the ground before they even knew I was there.”

“You could have let me know your intentions.”

Simon looked at him with narrow eyes, “Oh, jealous are we? Here's me, able to take out six armed men in the blink of an eye, and here's you, cowering in the doorway with your piss-ant pistol.”

“They were watching television.”

“Not any more.”

Ottavio scratched his head, wondering if he should press the point. He turned away to avoid looking at Simon.

“Hey? Something on your mind?” asked Simon, wiping the blood off his face with a towel lying by the pool, “Say it, then.”

He swished his blade in the pool, bringing it out clean.

What he wanted to say was that he despised Simon's blood lust, the way he defiled and disrespected the bodies, the way he reveled in taking their lives. Norbert caught his eye and gave him the slightest shake of his head. He thought of a different approach.

“It's Fawkner we want, not his goons. We could have let them be and slipped past. Or we could have cuffed them quietly. Or we could have gassed the room, knocked them out and secured them elsewhere, leaving no trace,” said Ottavio, “Now there's shit everywhere and it's only a matter of time before someone comes in here to watch the end of the game...”

“OK, shut up now,” hissed Simon.

Norbert interdicted, “He's got a point, but. We can't assume this is still a covert op.”

“Oh, man! Cass, you want to add anything? No? Nothing? Because it's obviously a committee we've got here,” said Simon, “So please, join in, don't be shy. Maybe I'll call the others and we can have a nice chat on the commlink!”

“I'm just saying that Fawkner is our target...” started Ottavio.

Simon wheeled, “And I'm sick of your crap. I'm calling the shots, remember? You don't ask questions, you don't be a little bitch, and you don't whine about how else we could have done things, you just say 'yes sir' and do it. Right? No disapproving looks, no 'let's talk about it'.”

The three remained silent as Simon absent-mindedly licked a drop of blood from his lips.

“Right?” he asked.

“Yes, *sir*,” fumed Ottavio.

He patted him on the cheek, leaving a red stain.

“Good boy. Norbert get in there, kill the lights but leave the television on, draw the shutters and set up a claymore on the doorway. That'll keep that secure until the cleanup crew arrive. We're going to go upstairs to the bedrooms, meet us up there when you're done. Otto, move.”

Ottavio took point, held his weapon up and paced lightly up the stairs, trying to shake the vision of Simon's indiscretions from his mind.

Instinctively he scanned the stairwell for cameras and sensors. None were evident. Fawkner must have felt safe inside his own compound.

At the top he peered around and found himself in a hallway, with two doors butting off on the left.

Ottavio spoke into his commlink, “Cass, we need some action on these doors. Norbert, when you're available, there's a junction box here. We might be able to get a tap into the security system.”

Simon came up behind him, “OK, for the last time. I'm calling the shots here, remember? Squad leader, me. Me is squad leader. You no leader, you grunt. You no speak. You do what me say, me delegate tasks. Have you got it yet?”

Ottavio rolled his eyes and turned to Simon, “Sorry, sir. I called it as I saw it.”

“Yeah, well next time, call it in to me, and I'll make the decisions, yeah? Cass, get to work on those doors.”

Cassandra knelt down at the first door and peered at the lock. A few twiddles with her tools and it turned with a click. She was about to give the signal, when she heard a movement inside the room. She hurriedly stood back, signaling a warning to Simon.

Simon tapped his ear. Cassandra nodded and took out a wirescope, placing it gently under the door.

“Two bandits, one female,” she whispered, “The other a male. Loading a shotgun.”

Simon signaled her away and stood on one side of the door, Ottavio on the other.

Norbert called via in his commlink, “Claymores are done. Where's that security box.”

“Hold tight,” whispered Simon, gripping his blade firmly, “And guard the bottom of the

stairs.”

“Yes, sir, I'm holding,” said Norbert.

Simon nodded to Ottavio. He grasped the handle and turned slowly. Wooden splinters splashed the hallway with an enormous boom.

Simon hurled himself back, covering his face from the shower of shards. A second round shortly followed, reducing what was left of the door to ruins.

“Go!” yelled Simon.

Ottavio kicked the door inwards and swung around into the room. Simon came in right behind him. In front of them was Fawkner, steroid enhanced, his hairy, tattooed chest bare, furiously reloading his double barreled shotgun with his free hand, his other was holding a semi-naked, doe eyed woman as a shield.

Ottavio held his pistol up, the cross hairs on his optical display showing a near perfect shot at Fawkner's head.

“Give it up, Fawkner,” demanded Ottavio, “This is Houston. Drop your piece and come quietly!”

“Eat shit!” yelled Fawkner, dropping two cartridges into the breach.

“Shoot, Otto!” yelled Simon as Fawkner slammed the breach closed.

Ottavio adjusted his aim and fired. The shotgun jolted out of Fawkner's hand, clattering to the ground and rolling under the bed.

Fawkner, now without a weapon, gripped the girl's neck in his bulging arms. She let out a faint sigh, but stood perfectly still, head lolling slightly to one side.

Her skin was pale white, like china. In fact, her features were so sculpted that if she had stood still, she would be as a life-size doll. Her lips were plump and full, her hair lightly wavy at shoulders length. Her breasts were firm, as was her rump.

She was a sex-kitten, designed to be as her master would have her. Everything about her was picture perfect, except her eyes.

They were glazed and dim. There was no light behind them, only a sad, sorrowful existence that waited impatiently for the freedom it desired. Inside the perfectly sculpted cage that was her body, lay a sweet finch, its feathers stained with tears, unable to sing, unable to fly.

“Back up, boys, or the bitch goes down,” he warned.

Norbert called through on his commlink, “Ah, I think we've got some movement down here. Those shots kind of woke a few people up. Can we get someone to draw attention?”

Simon called through his commlink, “Light 'em up, Lucas. We need some negotiation time.”

A thunderous crack sounded from over the sky. Lucas had pulled the trigger on his super-sized rifle and placed a round solidly through the chest of one of Fawkner's goons. In an instant a volley of assault rifle fire erupted out the front as the rest of Jolimont's troops emptied their magazines. The windows to the outside flashed as the night was interrupted by a hail of bullets.

Yells and hollers echoed from around the complex. The sound of boots stomping on the floor and doors slamming rippled throughout.

“Yup, that'll do it,” said Norbert.

“Let her go,” said Ottavio, resuming his aim at Fawkner's head. Fawkner, listening to the pandemonium outside, started to panic.

“Ease up,” urged Ottavio, “There's nowhere to go.”

“The hell with you, shit eater. Just wait till my boys come looking for me!” shouted Fawkner, gripping tighter, “We've got more guns than you can count, yeah, so I hope your ass likes the taste of lead.”

The girl continued to look on with blank eyes.

Ottavio kept at it, “They're not coming, so you've got two choices. Come quietly or - oh shit!”

Simon had sprinted forward, driving his blade deep through the bosom of the girl and into Fawkner behind her.

He drew it out, letting her fall to the ground. The cage had been opened, and, with a pained smile, the finch flew from its confines.

Fawkner stood, dumbfounded and clutching at his gushing chest. Simon spun a full circle and with a clean motion of his blade, decapitated him.

The severed head bounced on the floor and stopped near the wall, with Fawkner's face, screwed into a hideous gasp, staring back at them. The girl lay quivering as her vital fluids leached into the carpet.

Cassandra, peering through the remains of the door, was gobsmailed. She covered her mouth and turned back into the hall.

Ottavio lowered his pistol.

"What the hell was that?" yelled Simon, standing over the bodies and giving them a couple of jabs each. They were well and truly inanimate.

"What the hell was what?" Ottavio yelled back over the din outside.

"I said shoot, so you shoot his gun? Then you have a chat? Did you want some fucking tea as well?"

"I was negotiating!" said Ottavio in exasperation.

"Damn it all! We don't negotiate, we get the job done. When I say shoot, you shoot to kill! You've got them bloody optics, don't you?"

Ottavio pointed to the bloodied, prostrate body of the girl.

"Well, what about her? She's dead now!"

Simon wiped the blood from his blade and laughed dryly.

"Her? Mate, she was already dead," he said, "If anything, I just did her a favor. They do this thing to their girls, you know. A drug cocktail. Keeps them subdued, you know, obedient. Makes them do whatever they're told. If she'd been told to, she'd swallow razors."

"She could have been rehabilitated," said Ottavio.

"Or she could have grabbed the shotty and gone us as soon as our backs were turned. Now come on, quit bitching! We've got to secure the next room."

"What about the bodies? Fawkner was our main target..."

"He's not going anywhere. Let the cleanup crew deal with it. Now shut up and move! That's an order!" yelled Simon.

Ottavio followed Simon out the door, past a wide eyed Cassandra.

"And don't you start," snarled Simon as he walked by.

"Norbert, get on up here and tap into the box. I want to know where the rest of these bastards are," fumed Simon.

"Right," said Norbert, making his way up the stairs.

While he fiddled with the junction box, Cassandra moved to unlock the second door.

Simon sighed loudly, "Screw it, Cass. If anyone's in there, I'm pretty sure they know we're here."

He drew his revolver and blew the lock apart, kicking the door firmly. Before anyone realized, he had jumped into the room.

A series of shots rang out, several bullets whizzing by Ottavio's head as he turned into the door frame. Simon let out a yelp of pain.

"Bastard! Son of a bitch!" he screamed.

Like a banshee he let fly with a hail of expletives, curses and threats, barely drowning out the screams of his victims as he dismembered their bodies, limb from limb.

Again Ottavio watched a stomach turning display as Simon performed his foul acts of abuse.

"Bitch took a shot at me, got my arm," he panted, turning back to Ottavio, "But I made light work of her, and the other one. She won't be feeling so tough anymore! It's funny how losing an arm or two can take the wind out of their sails. Well, don't just stand there, patch me up, Cass!"

Cassandra moved in and took out a first aid kit from her side-pack. Simon winced as she cleaned and dressed the wound.

Ottavio stood guard all the while.

"Careful, yeah?" he said, inspecting the wound, "Ah, it's not so bad. Ow, yeah, just a graze. Otto, get in the hall and guard those stairs. Once Norbert's got a feed into the cameras, we'll mop up

the rest of these bastards. It'll be a right hunt.”

“Cassandra, are you feeling alright?” asked Ottavio.

She was indeed looking pale. She held her jaw firm.

“I'm fine,” she said curtly.

“You're not looking so good...”

“Yeah? Well maybe I'm just not used to standing in a room full of fresh body parts is all.”

“You're trained as an Agent, you've seen this kind of thing before,” said Simon.

“Not like this, I haven't! Damn it, sir, they... They were just girls. Did you have to...”

Cassandra finished dressing the wound and ran from the room, heaving her stomach contents in the hall.

Norbert poked his head in, looked at the carnage, and scowled.

“Cameras are online. We've got about forty men at the walls.”

Simon's eyes lit up. He swished his blade gaily, “Forty, eh? Finally, a challenge! Come on, guys!”

Norbert asked, poking his thumb toward Cassandra vomiting in the hall, “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, I know. She's ruining the carpet,” said Simon as he pushed passed him into the stairwell, “Let the cleanup crew deal with it.”

## Chapter 14

*“Of course knowledge is power!  
But did you know that ignorance is as well?  
My word, the things we can do if we do not have  
to consider the consequences!”  
- Director Tia Derouge*

After a hot shower, washing off the speckles of foreign blood out from his hair and off his skin, Ottavio retired to his room.

He was exhausted, more mentally than physically. His optical display told him as much. He ate a banana, was still hungry, and so ate another one.

Ali-Baba had lost his nut. For what seemed an eternity, Ottavio endured a series of lectures and gesticulations, interspersed with head rubbings, desk poundings and finger pointing.

Insubordination, he had said, was not tolerable. Ottavio's refusal to follow orders to the letter, and his continual questioning of his superior's commands were more than minor offenses, they were dangerous to every mission and counter to the goals of Houston.

Rather than praise his attempt to negotiate with the main target, his pusillanimous nature was deemed disturbing. No, he did not say disturbing... *vexing*, that was it.

Ali-Baba's face had been beetroot red at this point. Simon, beside him, had stood by scowling.

It was odd. Throughout the grilling, Ottavio noticed on more than one occasion Ali-Baba's eyes wandering down to his desk.

At first he thought he was going to whip out a gun from his drawer, as silly as that seemed, but more and more it looked like he lost interest in Ottavio and thought more about whatever was in there. At those intervals, Simon would take over the blasting and desk hammering.

Ottavio stared at the ceiling in his room, half expecting to see a frowning Simon staring back at him. Where had he changed? His earliest memory was that of a goofy troublemaker in the locker rooms, full of gung-ho, a goofy smile and practical jokes.

Tales of him jumping over lockers and under benches chasing new recruit Jason Evans around the showers with a wet towel epitomized the old, fun loving Simon.

Then he got promoted out and shipped to Houston's tactical department. Even then he had met up a few times and still seemed the same old jocular guy, ready with a laugh even if something was not particularly funny.

Now he seemed on some kind of power trip, eternally angry and spiteful. He did not really smile any more, well, not unless he was hacking a limb from a torso.

Maybe he was thinking about it wrong. Maybe it was himself that needed to change. After all, Ali did not have any issues with Simon's behavior.

If anything, he wanted Ottavio to be more like him, to kill rather than negotiate, to inspire terror rather than foster friendship, even though that was directly against Houston's public 'Hearts and Minds' policy.

He suddenly felt like an outsider. Houston had been his home, his dream, for so long, but now it seemed it was trying to mold him into something he was not.

He dozed precariously in his chair, visions of Ali-Baba's red face, screaming, loomed before him. Simon floated in from behind him, and drew his sword. He gracefully swung at Ali, lopping off his right hand, before cutting again and taking off his arm.

Simon jumped back and moved to the other side of Ali, merrily slicing away, laughing happily as a child playing with new toy.

Ali, too, smiled eerily as Simon's blade disfigured his features. Ottavio shielded his face and turned away in disgust, only to see Penelope standing behind him, watching the sanguinary scene with dark, impassive eyes.

Penelope. A knock sounded at the door. Ottavio sat up, cracked his stiff neck and rubbed his

eyes. The knock sounded again. He buzzed the intercom. It was Norbert.

“Yeah?” he asked, opening the door.

“You need to come with me,” said Norbert. His snarly tone was not present, or at least somewhat lessened. That put Ottavio on guard.

“Look, if you've come to lecture me about orders, you can save your breath, Ali's already done that. Repeatedly. I'm going to bed.”

He made to close the door. Norbert put his foot in the way.

“Listen, man, there are times when you've got to sleep, and times when you've got to listen to a brother. You can stay here and sulk about Ali, or you can come with me and learn a little something,” he said, “Make a choice, man. For once in your life, make a choice.”

Ottavio sighed. In truth, Norbert had him a little spooked. He seemed so sincere. It was not the normal, sullen Norbert standing there.

“Alright, I'll bite,” he said.

He followed Norbert down the hallway, wondering what all the urgency was. They got to the main elevator and took it to Maintenance. The air had a mixture of chlorine and kerosene tainting it.

“Did Simon set this up?” asked Ottavio, tensing himself for a fight.

“Shh! That way, end of the hall, where the light's out. Go in that room, I'll be in just after. Go!”

At the end of the hall was a door, as Norbert had pointed out. Convinced he was about to be hazed, Ottavio burst into the room, ready to fend off an attack.

Instead, he found a collection of mop buckets, bottles of cleaning fluid, a broken down maintenance robot and some dirty overalls. He wheeled around in case anyone had come in behind him. There was nobody there.

Presently, Norbert came in, closing the door gently behind him.

“Listen brother, I know you don't like me and for what it's worth, I don't think much of you,” said Norbert.

Ottavio watched him suspiciously. What a way to start a conversation.

“Well, thanks. I'm glad we had this chat...” he began.

“Shut up and listen!” growled Norbert, “Just... shut it for half a minute, alright? I got us in here for two reasons. First, it's the only place I know that ain't bugged. Second, I've come to realize a thing or two about you. I saw you in there today. I know what I saw. You've got the implants like the others, but you ain't like the others.”

“Who, Emily and Lucas?” quizzed Ottavio, worried that Norbert had spoken more than five words to him in a row without including a condescending remark.

Norbert sighed, “The others before you. Didn't I tell you to *listen*?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Then listen,” said Norbert.

Ottavio began to wonder if Norbert would finally get to something worth listening to, rather than just berating him and telling him to be quiet. He remained silent all the same.

“I've had the displeasure of working under Simon for several months before you came along. Before then he's had two buddies. You're going to ask me who, right? Doesn't matter, man. They're dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yup. Well, kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“Come on, man! First had some kind of brain hemorrhage. Was halfway through a mission, was in one of those fits and dropped to the ground like a sack of spuds. Some kind of aneurysm, they said. Implants didn't take properly. You listening? They put it down to some kind of *incompatibility* between the body and the hardware. At least, that's what the official report said.”

Ottavio began to feel worried. He thought about the lecture that Doctor Jung had given, about all the gizmos and sensors and adapters inside his skull. He began to feel a little queasy.

Norbert scratched his head, “And the second guy, well... He was a real piece of work.

Practically bathed in blood every mission, even on recon. If something moved, he'd kill it. Like Simon does, only worse. You think it couldn't get worse, but man! Like he had, I don't know, rabies or something. No control, just stabbing and hacking. He only lasted a few sorties outside of training, but. Had to take the son of a bitch down myself."

"What?"

Norbert cleared his throat, "I took him down. The silly son of a bitch was going mental, shooting this and stabbing that. What Sim did today, what you saw, was nothing by comparison. Blood and guts everywhere. Only he didn't stop. Just kept slashing and hacking away... killed Tanya and Thomas before I could even get a shot away. Took five rounds in the chest just to get him on the floor."

Norbert's eyes wandered off to broken maintenance robot. Ottavio, for the first time, saw that there was a human underneath Norbert's cracked skin.

"Who were they? Tanya and Thomas?" he asked.

"Agents. My old team."

"What happened to them?"

"Thomas. He was a good fella. He lay there bleeding all over the place. He was holding his throat with his right hand. That bastard took off his other one. He held on tight, but it didn't do any good. He just sprayed until it stopped. And Tanya... Shit!"

He covered his eyes and leaned back. Recovering, Norbert looked at the floor. He breathed deeply, shuddering.

Ottavio was not sure what to say.

"So, he's dead?" he asked.

Norbert shook his head, "They'd like you to think that. I thought he was but, no. No, actually he's not. Of course, Houston will say he is. Killed In Action. But he wasn't dead. Even after I slugged him with five shots, the bastard still wouldn't stop. Left me with this."

He lifted his chin, indicated a long scar running down his neck.

"Trained to go for the jugular, you know. Almost got it too, if I hadn't pulled back in time. Simon sunk a few tranqs into him, finally settled him down. Aborted the mission, evacuated back to base, never saw the sod again. All that bullshit about being a hero. A hero!"

"But how is he still alive?"

"Houston said he was dead, so he's dead, right? But he was still kicking when I last saw him. That, and I've seen a couple of reports indicating that he, ah, look man, just trust me, I think the bastard is still around, somewhere. I looked at the logs."

"You what? Norbert, you could..."

"Get my ass kicked, I know. But listen, man, that's the other reason why I got you here. Look."

Norbert moved the robot out of the way and lifted a hatch in the wall. A series of data junctions were revealed.

"So you've hacked into the garbage disposal? Good going!"

"It's *supposed* to only be hooked up to the maintenance network, but I fiddled a bit. For the last while, I've been doing some snooping."

Ottavio asked cautiously, "What kind of snooping?"

"Don't worry, man. The benevolent kind. The kind that opens my eyes to exactly what's going on around here. And I need you to help me now."

"Whoa, back up ten feet. What kind of help are you talking about?"

Norbert licked his lips. He was getting nervous.

"Look, man, I'm onto something. Something called, 'Assisted Compliance Surgery'. I don't know what it is, alright, so don't ask, but all I know is, you don't do surgery on something that's dead."

"You found his file?"

"Yeah. I found his file. But it ain't just him. Funny thing is that term cropped up on a few Agents, all MIA or KIA. Again and again, ACS. Do you see where this is going? Agents go on

missions, they come back in a body bag, and suddenly they've been scheduled for surgery!"

Ottavio did not know what to say but he thought he had better say something to express his shock.

"Hell," he finally came up with, "Simon never mentioned."

"Of course he wouldn't. Neither would Ali. Houston will deny it all, and everyone is none the wiser. Just another day at the office. Send their families a ham and move on. I've seen it happen a couple of times, and my, er, research tells me it's happening all over the place."

Norbert took out a console from his backpack.

"And then the next thing I know, we've got replacement Agents joining the team. Emily, Cassandra, Lucas and yourself."

"And I'm supposed to be replacing the wingman role, is that it?" asked Ottavio.

"Yeah, man. You got history with Simon, maybe they think you'll get on. But, like I said, you aren't like the others. That's what I saw today. I saw your face when Simon was in his fit."

Ottavio stayed silent. Was this a test by Ali?

"You don't revel in the killing, do you?" pressed Norbert, "You haven't got that zeal."

Ottavio went a little red. It was not like him to get caught out by a question. He did not need to answer.

"Hey, chill. Don't look so worried," said Norbert, "I'm not here to put you through one of Miss Penelope's psychobabble hypotheticals, yeah?"

"So what am I really here for?"

Norbert thrust the console into his hand. Ottavio looked at it warily.

Norbert explained, "I've temporarily mocked out the security for your personal files. Thing is, the last time I went poking around, someone figured it out, set up recursive trackers. I can get in, but those things will be onto my trace within ten seconds."

"So?"

"So I need you to keep them busy with a false lead. Buy me some time. Your hacking mod is activated, right?"

"Only at the basic setting. I'm supposed to get an upgrade later on."

"Can you hold a node? Can you apply probes?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Can you or can't you?"

"Yes."

"So stop whining and hook yourself in. Wait for my go."

Ottavio lowered the console. "Seriously? You want me to help you breach security? I might as well start filling out my resignation now."

If looks could kill, Ottavio would have been a stain in the janitor's closet there and then.

"I have put my balls on the table, man," Norbert said coldly, "If you're such a chicken shit pansy that you can't even help a brother when it affects you..."

"What if I screw it up? We'll both be caught. We'll be fired."

"Fired? Fired? Are you listening to yourself? Shit! Houston ain't going to fire you, man. If you think you're still 'employed' and under a contract and all that tosh, you're one gullible mother. They *own* your ass."

Ottavio's blood ran cold through his veins.

"That's not funny," he said,

"Do I look like I'm having a giggle? It doesn't matter, man! If you don't find out what's what, you'll end up like all the others. Sooner or later, you'll be in a body bag on your way to surgery for God knows what," said Norbert, grabbing his console back, "You know what? Screw this. Screw you. I try and help a brother, and this is the shit I get."

"No, wait," Ottavio rushed, catching him by the shoulder, "Alright. How much time do you need?"

Norbert turned back around. "Get your God damn hand off my shoulder," he ordered.

"How much time do you need?" Ottavio asked again, a little more desperately.

“When we start, you keep going until I say stop,” he muttered, “You get that? You can't chicken out, you can't screw it up.”

“Just tell me what to do.”

Norbert smiled.

“Glad to see you've come to your senses. Hack into the network node seven oh four. That'll bring out the dogs. Just make sure you keep jumping from node to node before they lock onto you. If you're too slow, they'll work their way back to this console, and we'll have to bug out ASAP,” he explained, “You got all that?”

Ottavio took a deep breath. He slid his finger to a receptor on the console. Instantly his hacking module took over, and his optical display reorganized itself to display a network topology.

“Shit, man, what's up with your eyes?” asked Norbert. Ottavio was wide eyed. His irises had widened to a point where his pupils looked like black, gaping holes.

“Nothing. It's the optical display doing its thing,” replied Ottavio.

“Shit, you don't need to use the console? Well, can you see Node seven oh four? That's where they set up their trap. As soon as you tap that, start playing leap frog. Keep them anywhere away from five five nine.”

Ottavio targeted the node and let the hacking module work its magic. In a few seconds, the readout showed a scroll of data about its contents, something about an Agent Boris.

“Who is Agent Boris?” he asked.

“Shut up and start hacking away from that node,” hissed Norbert, tapping at his own console, “I'm going in.”

Ottavio began to hack at Node nine one. He was eighty percent complete when his display warned him of an impending security breach. He moved to Node nine one and closed off the port.

The breach was avoided. Norbert looked over at him, scowling.

“That was too close. You need to move faster than that, man. Come on, move to three two three! Now!”

Ottavio targeted three two three and began hacking.

“Try a different algorithm, man. That's a Hub. String based security. Try a Fleischman probe on it!”

Ottavio did so, and hacked into it successfully. A branch of nodes opened up before him.

“Hey, scramble that port before you close it off, alright? That'll force them to reroute through another one.”

One by one, Ottavio hacked his way through the network, taking note of the various locations he passed. Many were uninteresting, containing nothing more than air-duct maintenance routines or the roster for the mess. Others were a little juicier, holding memorandums and notes about missions, shipments and financial dealings.

“You done sightseeing? Those trackers aren't far behind, man. See? They've already adapted to your tricks. You've got to keep two Nodes ahead of them!” said Norbert, “I need more time on this!”

Ottavio pressed on, sweating with the effort. His hacking module was consuming a fair amount of power. He was not sure, but it felt as if his head was getting hot. He began to sweat harder.

“Keep it up, man, I'm almost through!” said Norbert, “A little more... there! Oh, man! Don't stop, whatever you do, don't stop!”

“What have you found?”

“Ali's report to the Board.”

“What's it say?”

“Shut up and keep hacking! Whoa, not there. That's the central core. You can't hack that without lighting the place up.”

“I haven't got much of an option,” said Ottavio, “They're closing from three points.”

“Then backtrack... shit! OK, Otto, give me whatever you've got. Just make sure you scramble your signature before you pull out!” he urged, “Come on...”

"They're onto me in fifty seconds, max!"

"Stick with it!" said Norbert, furiously pounding his console, "I almost got this! Oh my God..."

Ottavio watched the progress of the trackers on the topology. He had created a bit of a lead but now had nowhere to go from the Node he had tapped into.

He hissed, "Norbert!"

"A little more... Just a little more!"

The security breach alert began to flash. Ottavio had no time left.

"I'm starting egress, I hope you got what you were after!" he said, getting ready to yank out the port.

Norbert cursed, throwing down his console, "Damn it! Damn you and damn this piece of shit!"

Ottavio pulled the cable from the junction box and let go of the console. His optical display returned to normal.

It has taken a lot out of him. He slumped down and caught his breath.

"Shit! Someone knew I was in there. They were encrypting the files as I watched."

"So... you're saying that after all that, you didn't see anything? That's great. That's super awesome."

"I never said that!" said Norbert, picking his console off the floor, "I didn't see much, but I saw enough."

"Like what?"

"Like you're not producing satisfactory results. Like someone wants you to be as *combat effective* as the last two," said Norbert, "Like those in charge are not seeing their return on investment. ROI. If you get my drift."

Ottavio frowned, "I don't."

"They're talking about a lot of money getting put into you. You've got every mod in the book, and then some. Only, they're not switching them on, not yet," he said, "There are questions against your loyalty, your willingness to follow orders to the letter. That includes killing on command."

Ottavio's eyebrows furrowed. Norbert was scaring him. He was talking like Ottavio was some kind of machine rather than an Agent, like he was a development or a project.

"That's not what Houston..."

"Oh come on, Ottavio! Don't you get it? Read the damn writing on the god damn wall, man! They want a team of super warriors. A bunch of bloodthirsty, cold hearted killers that they can drop behind enemy lines and expect complete extermination of the problem. Scorched earth, no man left standing. Armageddon kind of shit. That's you, Ottavio. That's who you're supposed to be. That's Simon, and Boris and Raphael."

"No. That's not me."

"Exactly, you're *not*! And that's pissing them off big time!"

Although it was a conclusion that Ottavio was avoiding, he finally admitted to himself that Norbert was making sense, even if it was in a strange, Norbert kind of way.

He held up his hand, "So, I'm supposed to kill like Simon did today? It's despicable, I mean, what I saw... That's not even part of training. I mean, whatever happened to *assess, negotiate, disarm, immobilize, eliminate*?"

"*ANDIE* is for recruits and grunts, Otto. It's for making the public think we're humanitarians first and pit bulls second. Here, in the secret squirrel service, they like to skip all the bullshit and cut to the *eliminate* part. It's not written down anywhere, and you won't get taught it, it's just, um, encouraged. Redden would have a field day if they got hold of any official documents concerning it, so you're not going to find any," said Norbert, "You won't get it in training, but they teach it to you anyway. They screw around with you."

"No. No way. I can't do what Simon did today. I'd sooner quit."

"You really think it's that simple? *Berserker*. That's what they called it in the files. It was the same in Simon, and the same in Boris."

“What is it?”

“What does it do? It's some piece of shit software in your head that hypes up your epinephrine, increased reaction time and other stuff, and puts you in a blind killing frenzy. That's what it does.”

“A *killing* module?”

“More like a slaughtering module! But when they downloaded yours, someone goofed up. Either that or they sabotaged it.”

Norbert's eyes were serious. Then again, when were they not? Ottavio tried to read him, looking for any sign of humor, but he found none. One half of him wanted to dismiss it altogether, but the other half, the sensible, annoying half, clung to Norbert's words like a raft. He fought for anything to put the idea into shambles, but came up with nothing.

“Who sabotaged it? Why wasn't it downloaded?”

Norbert leaned forward and tapped him on the head.

“It's still in there,” he said to Ottavio, “It just hasn't been switched on, or something. I don't think anyone had realized up until now. After seeing you in the field, the way you didn't follow Sim into his frenzy, well, I think they put two and two together.”

“Who?” asked Ottavio, “Who was it that turned it off?”

Norbert shrugged, “No idea. That's what I was looking through before it got encrypted. Just looking at the log files of the mods downloaded, there's a line in there saying something about the Berserker module installed, then it's got *deactivated* next to it. Either someone doesn't want you to succeed, or they don't want you to kill.”

He looked at his watch in concern, “And we'd better go. You leave first, get back to your dorm and make a coffee. If anyone asks, you went to maintenance to clear your head. You didn't see me here, and I sure as shit didn't see you.”

“Was there anything else? Anything at all?” Ottavio pleaded.

“What I've already said, that's it. You're pissing people off, Otto, important people who pay the big bucks. You want to know more, you figure it out for yourself.”

“Yeah, well, thanks. Really, thanks, Norbert. I guess you're not as much of a dick as I thought you were.”

“I wish I could say the same,” smirked Norbert, “But you're still as much of a dick as I thought you were. Just watch yourself, yeah? You haven't got as many friends as you think you do.”

Ottavio checked if the hall was clear, made his way to the elevator and took it to his room. He sat back in the chair and closed his eyes.

He decided that he was right in following Norbert. It was liberating. It was cathartic. He had been given an option and chosen the outcome.

All his life, it seems, he had been floating through, being pushed this way and that, everything working him toward some kind of predefined conclusion that everyone but him knew about. His time at Houston was no different.

It really did not matter what his personal thoughts were. In the Houston conglomerate, he was neither an individual, nor a person. He was an Agent, a construct, a machine that produced an outcome predefined by mission parameters.

But why the Hell would Houston want him as some kind of crazed assassin? It certainly was not in his nature.

If anything he preferred to settle things using non-violent means, then non-lethal. His history showed that. As far as candidates for blood thirsty murderers, his name would not even rate.

Perhaps he was not such a good agent after all, and that he was failing in his career. He had always had positive debriefings. Up until now, that is.

The rules had changed, it seemed. Changed with this whole Adaptation stuff. If someone had turned off his Berserker module, then that someone was on his side. Or they were trying ruin his career. But who? Who would have the ability to sabotage the surgery, or the download, or whatever it was that they did, without it being detected?

Doctor Jung, of course.

It was an obvious conclusion. He oversaw the whole administration of the procedure. If anyone had privileged access to software modules, it would be him. He oversaw the lot, including the calibration and follow up checks.

So the next question was, why? What would he have to gain? A pacifist, perhaps. No, he was far too proud of his work on the weapons development. Working for a rival agency? Kind of like a double agent, or a spy, keen to see Project Adaptation fail while pushing out secrets. Unlikely, but at least plausible. Spies do not go around wearing tuxedos and drinking martinis, after all.

He could be a member of the Luddites, bent on bringing the progress of technology to a crawl. It would be very farfetched, considering their common weapon of choice was a spray can. That and Doctor Jung could not function without an electronic device within two feet of him. The rival agency idea seemed to fit the best.

He was not 'combat effective', Norbert had said. That sounded suspiciously like Doctor speak. He decided to keep an eye on Doctor Jung from now.

And Ali. Next to Kepler, he had the most sway in the branch. And, from the way the debriefing progressed, he had Simon as his lapdog.

And what about Em, Lucas and Cass? Could he even trust them anymore?

Life just got a whole lot more complicated. Ottavio pinched his nose and squeezed his eyes shut until stars fluttered on his retina.

When he first ventured to work for Houston he thought it would be glamorous. Saving communities in far away, isolated places. Kudos, grins and pats on the back as he made the world a better place, one problem at a time.

Heck, he had even entertained the idea of retiring behind a desk, shaking hands and overseeing major operations after he moved up the chain.

He was tired, exhausted really, but there was no way he was going to get to sleep now. This bitter taste of reality was hard to swallow. He washed it back with the rest of his coffee and changed into his gym gear, determined to teach the punching bag a lesson it would not soon forget.

## *Chapter 15*

*“The pride of man ensures his immediate dominance,  
and his eventual demise.”  
- Master Vanessa of Spain*

It had been four days since Ryan had left the sanitation facility in a bloody mess and he was growing anxious.

The Brotherhood of the Vigils, he knew, would be scouring every bit of evidence imaginable and mapping out possible conclusions. The murders of those within the sanitation facility would have outraged the Masters.

There was no telling what they might do, Fundamentals or no. No doubt they knew he had a hand in it, not necessarily that he committed the act, but that he was involved in some way. That was given.

The real worry was if they figured out the finer details, a task for which Master Theodore had a special talent. They had agents everywhere, access to communications and surveillance, and now that several brethren were dead, Ryan troubled, they would most certainly tap into their vast resources, track him down and destroy him.

Where the bloody hell was Abraham, anyway? He tried to calm himself down by moderating his breathing.

He picked up a glass and poured himself a small amount of whiskey, added a squeeze of lemon and sat on a chair. As an Acolyte he was denied alcohol.

A clear head at all times. Moderation comes with experience. All of that nonsense. He sipped it and coughed noisily. Perhaps it was not all that it was cracked up to be.

He looked out over his balcony to the city of Richmond below. Thousands of people scurried around like ants, doing this and that, keeping their minds occupied with frivolous thoughts of pleasure and excitement.

Ryan gazed, trying to imagine the sheer scale of waste, waste of time, waste of life, which was occurring every second of every day in every inhabited city in the world.

He looked over to the white bell tower of Saint John's Church. Centuries ago, a man had spoken strongly within the walls. Passionate and rousing, he spoke of liberty. Liberty or death.

And here were the fruits of his appeals.

Cinemas played films to gaping audiences, replacing cold reality for a warm gush of fantasy. Bars and clubs dished up alcohol to help the older generation forget the horrors of the war and to the younger generation to feed their self-obsession.

Games stole time. Gambling stole money. Needles quietly filled veins with narcotics, destroying minds and souls, leaving nothing but vacuous bodies to wander about and until they died with stupid grins on their faces.

The great creation of man, of humanity, was happily poisoning itself into oblivion. From humble beginnings it had defied all odds, pushed out of the muck and developed civilization, society, religion and politics.

It had conquered mathematics, delved deep into the physical realm, and even deeper into the spiritual.

It had asked and answered many questions, often leading to further questions, always in an attempt to sate the hunger for knowledge. Whether it was to find God, to find food or to find peace of mind, the questions were asked and pondered over.

For with knowledge comes security, a basic desire of the animal. And security man had attained.

And this was the result of such security: Computers performing untold trillions of calculations every second for the sole purpose of alleviating man's need to think. Wars indiscriminately obliterating lives as opposing sides developed better, faster, more effective ways of stopping hearts.

Virtue, honor and sanctity had been sold off for a handful of notes or a shot in the arm or half an hour of sex.

“Liberty or death?” Ryan asked himself, “If this is what freedom looks like, perhaps the latter is not such a bad alternative.”

Disgusted, he turned back to his apartment. His quarters were modestly appointed. A chair, a bed, a desk and a television. The bathroom was sanitary, if a little run down. He liked it that way.

As he sat on the bed, he pondered his situation. He was here because he had shown his loyalty to Abraham, who had revealed a greater plan for the salvation of the slobs down below.

He would save them. He would help take their souls from the jaws of slovenliness and help lift them up to the heights that humanity demanded. He would drag them kicking and screaming into the light.

He would be Ryan, the Enlightened.

Some would come willingly, those who were worthy, and others would stay behind. Those he would leave gladly, for they would do nothing to further intelligence, or art, or design, or technology. They would be left to wallow and die in their filth.

The door buzzer sounded. Ryan stood up quickly and moved to the intercom.

“Yes?” he said, squinting at the distorted image on the intercom display. A metallic mask hid its face completely, with black orbs covering his eyes.

“Who is it?”

A voice crackled, “Father Abraham is waiting.”

“I asked who you were,” said Ryan.

The figure did not respond. It turned and moved out from the view of the intercom.

Ryan bit his lip. The hotel door offered very little protection. If it was a trap then he would already be dead, so he decided to open the door.

The hallway was empty. It was only a small hotel, run by the Jovic family. It had been in the family for over six generations, seen several wars and depressions, along with booms and celebrations.

The rooms had been redecorated over the years, some had their bathrooms replaced, others the flooring. A fire had burnt down the eastern wing leaving charred walls and a permanent smoky smell as a reminder.

The walls had seen much, and now they looked on with mild interest to see Ryan, robed in brown, following a figure dressed in gunmetal gray armor walking down a hallway to the door at the end, number seven forty one.

The helmet buzzed, “You go in here.”

“He is in here?” asked Ryan.

“You go in here,” came the response.

Ryan hesitated, then opened the door and walked into the room.

If Abraham was in there, it would not do to keep him waiting too long. The figure closed the door behind him, holding guard outside in the hallway.

Inside was dimly lit, enough to see by, but not enough to make out the wallpaper. A terminal sitting on the desk glowed softly so, after a quick look about the empty room, Ryan sat down in front of it.

He looked at a message on the screen, “*Please scan your finger for verification.*”

Ryan placed his index finger onto the scanner. It blinked red as his unique identity was photographed, reduced to a series of calculations and matched against a database. In the blink of an eye he had been verified.

“Welcome, Ryan. Father Abraham will be with you shortly. Please wait,” said a husky female's voice.

A little hour glass showed, draining and flipping itself. After two minutes, Ryan began to grow impatient.

He looked behind him to the door, then the walls. Why did they bring him in here? Why could Abraham not meet him in his quarters? Surely it was not a matter of security, or they would have

chosen a remote, unpatrolled location in the borders of the wastes.

He looked back to the screen. The hour glass animation was still flipping away.

He breathed out roughly.

"You're impatient, my son," came a voice, fatherly and warm.

The hourglass disappeared to be replaced with a symbol, similar to an upside-down 'Y' inside a triangle.

"Abraham?" asked Ryan, staring at the screen.

"Yes, Ryan. Although my family always refers to me as *Father* Abraham. I'd expect you to do the same."

"Uh... of course, Father Abraham. I am sorry for the offense," said Ryan quickly, his cheeks flushing red.

Father Abraham chided him, "There's no offense, my son. Your lapse was not one of impertinence, rather of ignorance. Your impatience, however, is disturbing."

"I am not impatient, Father."

There was a slight pause.

"Let me clarify something for you, my son. Lying will only bring you into my disfavor. I've been watching you for the last while, and I know when a boy is impatient. Right now, you *are* impatient. Now my question is: what's causing this?"

Ryan sucked his lip. Father Abraham worked differently to Master Theodore.

"I am sorry. I am impatient," he relented.

"Very good," soothed Father Abraham, "Now we must discuss why."

"Why? I am not sure."

"So think. Search within yourself."

"I guess I thought that, after my release, I would have been brought back into the company of other members."

"You don't like your accommodation?"

"The room is fine, and I thank you. Do not think that I am being disrespectful. It is just that," Ryan thought hard about his words.

He sensed that Father Abraham was one who got straight to the point.

He decided for a harder approach, "There is much that can be done, and I am doing none of it. I have been in my room for four days now. The only interaction I have had is a masked man bringing me food. Surely I can be of more use than..."

"Hush, my child, hush now," said Father Abraham, "It is good that you have spoken your mind so freely. Continue to do so. Now let me give you some information, to help with your plight. Firstly, you've been kept in isolation for several reasons, not least being that the Vigils are hunting for you over land and sea."

Ryan sniffed, "I would expect nothing less."

"They're perturbed, dangerous. We have taken measures to cover our tracks, but we can't be too careful. Our strength isn't as great as theirs, yet, and so if you were to be uncovered we'd be forced to feed you to them to save the rest of the herd. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Father Abraham. I would do the same in your position."

"I do not need you to validate my decisions!" growled Father Abraham.

Ryan bowed, "Again, I am sorry."

Father Abraham continued, "I want your attention, not apologies, son. To continue, your position in our Order is still being debated. While I certainly do have the final word, I'm listening to counsel before I make my decision."

Ryan scratched his chin, "But... have I not shown my allegiance?"

"Yes. Yes you have. Your actions are certainly compelling. But allegiances can be feigned, my son. Hypocrites and liars are everywhere. Fact, you see, is cheap. It sparkles brightly and it's clean and keeps scientists and economists happy. But truth, that sticky, mucky stuff, truth is what I hunger for."

"There is nothing more I can say? Nothing I can do?"

"It's out of your hands now. I have so much to ponder. You see, you could be seen as a liability, a weight that drags on the Order. On the other hand, you could end up being our most useful Director. There, now, don't concern yourself with what I must do. If you are to be part of the Order, so be it. If you are to be destroyed, that will be arranged."

Ryan sat up in his chair.

"Father Abraham," he urged, "If there is anything more that you need to be convinced of my intentions, you must tell me!"

"Don't think to order me around, my son..."

"That was not my intention..."

"And do not interrupt!" boomed Father Abraham.

Ryan remained silent.

Father Abraham continued, "We all have our place in this world, Ryan, and you may well have a place among us, but for now you must wait for my decision. Be joyful that you are still within your faculties and have been saved from sanitation. Be thankful that I did deem you worthy to have the opportunity to join the Order."

"Yes, Father Abraham."

Ryan rubbed his temples.

"Very good. Now, is there anything you wish to know?"

Ryan took a breath.

"Did anyone die getting me out?" he asked, hoping Father Abraham would not be offended. He was not.

"Ah, a pertinent question. We did lose a couple of men. They were but robots, Ryan, mindless, unthinking humans. Their souls had left their bodies quite a while ago, no great loss."

Ryan stared at the screen.

Father Abraham continued, "Don't shed a tear for them, Ryan. Shed tears instead for your former captors. I knew some of them in my youth. Petroclus was a strong man with a good heart. This world is worse for his loss."

Ryan was silent.

"You do not agree?" asked Father Abraham.

"I cannot say, without lying, that I agree," said Ryan, finally.

"Why? Because he was your captor? That's a very childish way to see the world, and very selfish. His life existed before yours, and he performed many great deeds."

"How can I judge a man on his actions if I have not witnessed them?"

"You cannot, so don't judge him! It's a basic human function to judge someone. It's one of the defining features of our intelligence, the ability to make decisions based on incomplete information. And while this has made us grow and kept us safe, our prejudices can often do us more harm than good."

"I cannot do away with them..."

"Of course you can't. They are built into your brain and exercised daily. But you can control them. You must control them. Listen, my son. Your instincts and prejudices are tools, instruments that sway your judgment. And some people know how to influence them to make themselves appear differently to what they really are. Which is why I must examine you closely before I can make a decision about you."

"How long?"

"As long as it takes, my child. Until then you should keep your strength up, exercise your body, keep your mind trim. You shall be summoned within a few days, one way or another."

"Yes, thank you Father Abraham."

One way or another? The vagueness worried Ryan.

"And thank you for your time and efforts, Ryan."

The screen went blank and the terminal shut down. Ryan was left alone in the room, thinking about what to do next. It had been a leap of faith, trusting in Father Abraham and turning his back to the Vigils.

Ha! The Vigils. He scowled to himself. They had raised him from a child to follow their pathetic ways. So much time spent discussing hypothetical situations, thinking up silly idioms to remember.

Instead of actually interacting with the real world, instead of making a tangible difference, his time had been wasted like the rest of the cattle walking the streets below.

They were powerful. Immensely powerful, but so ill used. All their resources sat idle while they discussed what to do with them. Information from all corners of the globe streamed in to be analyzed across Chapters worldwide, filed and categorized to add further confusion to the discussion.

As an elephant in a circus, they paced obediently about their stake of Fundamentals, tied to it with a flimsy cord of self-imposed moderation, as the crowd jeered and the tent fell about them.

They were a joke. An ancient joke that could never reach the punch line.

## Chapter 16

*“There is too much riding on this.  
We can't afford to have any more setbacks,  
the Board's talking about reallocating funding!”  
- Commander Ali-Baba, Houston Corps*

Miss Penelope stirred her tea and sat down at her desk. Ottavio waited patiently on the other side.

The clinking of her spoon against the cup echoed lightly, competing only with the occasional hum of the air conditioning vent. He felt uncomfortable. She had such a presence.

Hers was not aggressive, nor violent, nor physical, not like Ali-Baba or Simon. They dominated a room by displays of strength. Shouting, flexing, using implied threats.

Miss Penelope was different. Indeed, she could be terse when necessary, but her voice, her face, her demeanor, it all remained so sterile. Clinical. Like she knew that she did not need to hound anyone for attention, that it was her right and privilege whenever she decided to speak.

She put the spoon down and looked up at Ottavio.

“I have been watching you in training, and in the field. Impressive work. Very impressive work. For the most part.”

She had added 'For the most part' for Ottavio's benefit, he knew. To remind him that she was not going to let go his insubordination.

“Thank you, ma'am,” he replied.

“You seem to work well with the team. Among the various reports I see consistent patterns. Your team members find you reliable, your goals are achieved.”

“Thank you, ma'am.”

“I do have concerns,” she said.

Ottavio sank inside. This was the moment when Miss Penelope would let fly with her take on Ottavio's questioning of orders.

“Ma'am?”

“Tell me, what do you think of Simon?”

The question took Ottavio by surprise. His eyebrows jumped, then furrowed.

“As a leader, ma'am?”

“Yes. And please feel free to tell me anything. This meeting is in confidence,” said Miss Penelope in what would almost pass as sincerity.

She flicked a piece of dust from the desk. It floated gently to the floor, disappearing on the mottled gray carpet.

Ottavio thought for a few seconds before saying, “I think he's perfectly adequate. He's, um, willing to take input from others, but ultimately once he's made a decision he runs with it.”

“Is this a quality you admire?”

“Yes, ma'am. A leader can't be two ways about something.”

“And what about a subordinate?”

Ottavio sucked his teeth involuntarily. So he was about to cop another bollocking.

He tensed himself and replied, “A good subordinate follows orders from a superior without question, ma'am.”

“Textbook, Ottavio. Ah. I suppose you think I have brought you here to add to what Commander Ali-Baba has already put forth? Well, I did not. It would serve no purpose. What is done is done. But I do wish to ask an important question in relation to your resistance to follow Simon into battle.”

Ottavio straightened himself. He might as well get his two cents in.

“Ma'am, if I may?”

“Ugh. I have not yet asked the question, but go ahead.”

“Ma'am, at no point did I refuse to follow orders. I was under the impression that our mission was to capture Fawkner, and I worked toward that goal. I was attempting negotiations when, I understand now, I should have dispatched him immediately,” said Ottavio.

“Hmm. Well, that does partially actually answer what I was going to ask. Tell me, do you believe that Fawkner should have been killed?”

“He did fire off two rounds through the door and threatened the life of a non-combatant.”

Penelope shook her head, “No, that is avoiding the question. Were you or any of your team under such a threat that violence was the only option?”

“Had negotiations failed, he might have killed the hostage...”

“Damn it, Ottavio! I have dealt with politicians, statesmen and lawyers all of my life. I know tosh when I smell it. Answer me straight. Do you, in hindsight, personally believe that Fawkner should have died that day?”

Ottavio was a little shocked by her outburst. It was the loudest he had ever heard her voice. A few strands of her hair had escaped from their rigid bond and fell lightly around her face.

He scratched his head, “Well, ma'am, I guess the answer is no.”

“You guess?”

“No. He didn't. I had disarmed him. Fired a shot, knocked the shotgun right out of his hands. Between Simon and myself we could have dropped him easily and cuffed him. Worst case would have been a round in his leg.”

Penelope carefully pushed the fallen hairs behind her ears.

“So in this respect, it would seem you chose to follow your own feelings over those of your superior. No, do not interrupt, I have heard everything I need.”

She made some notes on her console.

“Yes, ma'am,” said Ottavio, biting his tongue.

“On a change of topic, it would seem that you have taken well to your enhancements?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“There have not been any issues? Anything that might compromise your performance within the field?”

“No, ma'am.”

“Not that you would actually say anything if there were, I know,” said Penelope, giving him a sideways look, “But we are keeping you monitored. Doctor Jung informs me that there was a misalignment of the optical display...”

Ottavio hurriedly interjected, “It was only a slight misalignment, that's all. It took a couple of minutes to recalibrate. Plus the Doc uploaded some advanced targeting software module, and activated a Lock Picking module like Cassandra's. She'll begin training me on it tomorrow.”

“So you like being a machine?”

“W-What?” said Ottavio, exasperated, “What does that mean, ma'am?”

“Exactly what I said. With all of your fancy gadgetry and software, are you content to leave your humanity behind and embrace life as a bunch of cogs?”

Ottavio was flabbergasted. What sort of meeting was this? He fought for words, any words, to help him. His mouth flapped around.

“When you signed up for special duties, did you think that Houston would perform such a radical operation on you?” she pressed, looking him square in the eye.

Her voice changed. It sounded distant. It was an angel whispering from heaven, “*Have you accepted your lot?*”

Ottavio felt strange. He wanted to lie. He wanted to nod his head sharply, agree and move on, but his throat would not let him.

It growled involuntarily, “No.”

“No?”

Ottavio listened as he spoke his mind freely, “I'm pissed. I came here to be an Agent, to aid humanity, to build a career, to help people rebuild their lives after the war. Instead I woke up and got told that my brain had been hijacked, and that I had a bunch of wires and fiber optics inserted

into me. If I had half the chance I'd rip this shit out of me and go back to peace keeping duties.”

“Thank you for speaking openly, Agent Ottavio,” she said in her cool, normal voice, “It is refreshing to hear a bit of truth every now and then.”

Ottavio blinked. Had he just said that, or did he think it? Miss Penelope did not look alarmed. She was tapping on her console, making notes about this and that.

She sipped her tea silently.

Eventually she said, “You are to go on another mission shortly. I know very well that you think you are ready for anything. You have amazing capabilities, Ottavio, and I am not merely referring to your altered body.”

“Ma'am?”

“You are not a normal agent. I have seen firsthand that your approach to situations is anything if not... measured.”

“I guess that...”

She tented her fingers, and stopped him, “Do not interrupt. I am not here to blow smoke up your ass, Agent. Now, Simon. Simon goes in with guns blazing, the body count is always high. He has slaughtered innocents and enemies alike. He uses his implants to great effect. I believe you have witness this first hand?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Your face speaks volumes, Agent. Nevertheless, despite what you think, he has completed many missions successfully, albeit with a mess in his wake.”

She sipped more tea, “Lucas, on the other hand, waits like a stone, hoping to get as much information as possible before making a decision. Even on the assault on Fawkner's stronghold, he fired but two rounds, both perfect hits, mind, but only two solitary rounds. We analyzed the video. He could have eliminated at least ten of Fawkner's men in that time, which would have ended the assault earlier and afforded less risk.”

“Lucas is careful, ma'am.”

“Yes, he is. Very careful. Too careful. Inaction can be just as bad, if not worse, than the wrong action. Which is why he will never be anything more than a sniper. But you have a different attitude altogether, Agent. You are not impetuous like Simon, or careful like Lucas. You have an understanding of *balance*.”

She sipped her tea again. The scent of Ceylon wafted to Ottavio's nostrils. For a second he found himself wishing that she would offer him a cup. She did not.

“Tell me, *Ottavio*.”

Chills rippled up his spine as she said his name. What was this power she had over him?

“Tell me, why did you sign up to be an agent for Houston, hmm? Was it for the excitement and adventure? Guns and technology? Tell me.”

Ottavio thought hard, pondering not only her question but her motivations. Such a strange meeting.

He said, “Frankly, ma'am?”

“Yes. By all means. This discussion stays within this room. Be as frank as you will.”

“I signed up because I thought that Houston Corps were making a difference, and I wanted to be part of it,” he said, “There is just so much that needs to be done after the war, so much cleaning up. I don't trust Redden, and Tsang-Tao are all military, I don't care what they say. I just don't trust them. Or the others. Well, I guess Riverstone seems benign. But they don't actually *do* anything, do they?”

“No, they do not.”

“Which is my point. Houston Corps actually gets things done. I remember they led the geothermal scheme in Uganda. They took a ruined state with desperate people, and turned it into the powerhouse of Africa.”

“Indeed,” Penelope's eyes lit up, “That was one of our finest efforts. The standard of living was dramatically increased, plus the government was stabilized for the first time in decades. We stopped the deaths of thousands, and were able to resettle the refugees back into their own land.”

“And the radiation clean-up efforts with the waterways. That APIS...”

“APIS,” corrected Penelope.

“Oklahoma practically glowed in the dark before that thing. It was supposed to be a joint effort, but Redden and Riverstone were both dragging their feet on it, but Houston went ahead anyway and developed that, um...”

Miss Penelope was only too happy to oblige, “The Automated Particulate Stabilizing Irrigation System.”

“I joined just after that was built. You know, join the guys who were doing things. I wasn't a humanitarian tree hugger or anything. I guess I just wanted to help America out of the shit hole it was going down.”

Penelope took a biscuit from a tin and munched thoughtfully.

“Yes, I have read through your file. First a role at Philadelphia as a field operative working among the deformed, moved to a post in Wisconsin as a peace-keeper during the riots. Noted achievement of negotiating peace between a couple of the clans. Accepted a role as a field agent in intelligence a few years back, and now here you are. I take it, then, that you are loyal to the Entity?”

“Yes, ma'am,” said Ottavio quickly, happy to have an easy question.

“Or are you loyal to the ideals?” Penelope stared into Ottavio's eyes.

He fought with every neuron not to turn away. It was like she was searching her way through him.

“Ideals?”

“Ideals, man. The whole thing about forwarding humanity.”

Ottavio was stumped. He did not have a quick answer for her.

“Here, let me ask you a question and I *order* you to answer honestly. Let us say, purely hypothetically, that you go on a mission to Colombia. Do you go?”

“I... of course, ma'am. If that's what my orders are.”

“The territory is hostile, but militarily secure. On this mission you are ordered to capture the water purification plant that services a large village.”

Ottavio looked at her questioningly. “Is the water storage of strategic benefit?”

“You have been given an order. Do you follow it, Agent?”

“Of course, ma'am.”

“Of course. You are a loyal agent, after all. Very well. You infiltrate the plant, suppress the resistance and have secured the water supply. Now let us say that insurgents within the population of the village stir up trouble. You are ordered to infiltrate the village and kill the insurgents. Do you?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“All eight of them? You do not even know who they are. They could be women, they could be merely teenagers. Answer now.”

“Well, I would... killing may not be the best way. If they could be captured, persuaded to see our cause, um,” he avoided her eyes, “If they were openly hostile or were armed, I would not hesitate.”

“You have been ordered to kill them, Agent.”

“Houston wouldn't...” he began, but thought better of it. Norbert had opened his eyes. Of course Houston would.

“Yes, ma'am, I would,” he said, pushing his chin forward.

“Hmm. We shall continue. You assassinate the insurgents by night and return to the water purifier. The next morning, aggrieved by their fallen comrades, more insurgents come. They spend the week rallying the villagers against Houston Corps, supplying them with arms. They take up the weapons, they protest and light fires. They accuse the occupying force of corruption and greed. Neighboring villages follow suit. If the rebellion continues, the area will drown in chaos, Houston will lose its footing in the area. You are ordered to halt the water supply, thus threatening the population into submission.”

“I... yes, ma'am.” Ottavio was concerned now. Where was this all going?

“So you would, and so you did. The water supply has been cut off. The village cries out for help from its neighbors. War is imminent. If the pocket of villages falls, Tsang-Tao, who have been nursing the region for years, will move in and be labeled heroes, gaining valuable resources, public favor and a strategic position in Colombia. You are ordered to let the water flow again as a sign of goodwill.”

“Of course, ma'am...”

“But as a further measure you are ordered to secretly poison the water supply, thus destroying the rebel village as a sign to others not to defy the might of Houston Corps.”

“Poison?”

“Are you going to follow the orders, agent?”

“That... would be, ah, that's mass murder. And murder of innocents, ma'am. Houston would never sanction...”

“I ask again, will you follow the orders? Answer honestly!”

Ottavio frowned as he thought. Orders were orders, but did that extend to blatant destruction of life? He was an Agent, an employee. But he was also human. Hypothetical or not, this was bullshit questioning.

“No,” he said quietly.

Miss Penelope sat back and sipped her tea. She eyed him for a good while.

“On what basis?”

“I just, I mean, I couldn't, ma'am,” said Ottavio, “Houston would never...”

Penelope raised her eyebrows, “Could not, or would not? Ah, I suppose that is a little unfair. Let us move on. Say now that you have refused, and Simon has been ordered to do it. Do you stand by or attempt to dissuade him?”

“Well, um, he would go right ahead anyway,” stumbled Ottavio, “I doubt he'd listen to me in that instance. But I guess, I, ah, would state my case.”

“Yes. Something tells me you would have done so a few cases back. That was just a hypothetical, agent. You have not breached any company policy in answering honestly, so relax and listen. The company can change. People can change. Ideals, however, are timeless,” said Penelope, “Which brings me to my original question. Are you loyal to Houston, or its ideals?”

Ottavio was stumped. Miss Penelope eyeballed him, before tapping on her console.

“Do not bother to answer that question, Agent. You already have,” she said, “Tell me, do you know what caused the Seven Border War?”

Ottavio shrugged, “The invasion of Austria by the Slovenians?”

“Yes, yes, that is the recorded history, the start of it. But, ultimately, what caused the War? No, I will tell you. It was man's basic unwillingness to question what is clearly wrong in the face of well-established *facts*. It was the population allowing itself to be led by the nose to perform acts of violence for no other reason than because someone in power told them to.”

Ottavio sat silently, listening carefully.

“Throughout history, Agent, people have suffered and died at the hands of others manipulated through politics, religion or, in the case of the Seven Border War, science.”

She sipped her tea again, looking at Ottavio through her thin spectacles, “What was the reason given by the Slovenes for the invasion?”

Ottavio replied, “It was about the genetic mutagens found in the river Mur in Slovenia which were alleged to have come from up in Austria. There were deformed children and animals all across the news. I remember, because it was the first official case of, what was it, synthetic impregnation of DNA outside of a lab.”

“Very good. And what was the reason cited by Austrian officials for the contamination?”

“That the Slovenians had themselves caused the spill and were trying to use it as an excuse to garner sympathy from its neighbors and eventually invade and grab the northern territories.”

Penelope smiled, “Which is what was reported, to the letter, well done. You get a gold star. Now, the big question, who was correct?”

“The Sl... Ma'am?”

“It is a simple question, agent. Who was correct, Austria or Slovenia?”

“It, ah, was never established. The toxin sites that Slovenia suspected were destroyed during the invasion.” said Ottavio, frowning his eyebrows.

“By whom?”

“Well, ah, Slovenians said that the Austrians sabotaged them to avoid global scrutiny and...”

“And the Austrians said the Slovenes had reduced them to a pile of smoldering ash so that the invasion justification could not be refuted. So from Austria's point of view, Slovenia was aggressively lying to gain international approval for its military campaign. From Slovenia's perspective, Austria was poisoning its river and waterways in an act of open terrorism. Neither side was correct,” said Penelope.

Ottavio's eyebrows furrowed further. “But obviously one was telling the truth, and the other was lying.”

“Obvious? The truth is far from obvious.”

Penelope sighed deeply. For a second Ottavio could see the gentle human living underneath the crisp ironed shirt and pulled back hair.

“Agent, if there is anything you should understand it is that nothing is ever black and white. What if, for instance, I were to say that they were both telling the truth?”

“But, you said neither was correct.”

“So I did, but both sides were telling the truth. Their factual claims were incorrect, but their version of events from their own points of view were not falsehoods.”

“So... there was a third party, then?” asked Ottavio, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

She nodded gently.

“But it was never reported...”

“On the news? In the paper? Pah! Media is just a way to feed the sheep their fodder, Agent. Baa! The true history, the real facts, are far more complicated. But enough of this. I did not bring you in here for a history lesson,” said Penelope, straightening herself up and putting her tea to one side, “They spouted talk of patriotism, loyalty and *ideals*. Austria held theirs, Slovenia did the same. People on both sides died for them and because of them. For each was justified, each state was wronged. Each was in the right.”

Ottavio acquiesced, “I remember that, after a while, with all the allegations, it got real hard to tell who was right and who was wrong.”

“Right and wrong can be very fuzzy sometimes, and sometimes things can seem very clear cut, even when they are most certainly not. You can take from this what you will.”

Ottavio shuffled in his seat. Already his brain was racing at a million miles per hour.

“You will be tempted, on many occasions, to decide for yourself what is truth, what is fact, what is right,” she said, “All three can be the same or different at once. But as an Agent, under the leadership of an appointed Agent, being Simon, what you deduce is not relevant to mission success.”

“Yes, ma'am,” said Ottavio, his head beginning to ache.

“Houston has invested a lot of time and money on the enhancements that went into your body. I do not think I need to highlight that they will not accept anything less than complete and utter submission. Your thoughts are yours and yours alone, but unless they are in line with company directives, ignoring any notion of the ideals from which they are purportedly derived, you would do well to keep them to yourself.”

Ottavio looked concerned. Before he could speak, Penelope continued, “Free will, agent, is not an attribute openly admired here. Initiative and thinking outside of the square, indeed, but as long as they achieve the goals as laid out in your mission briefing, nothing more, nothing less. You do not have enough information to make any decisions above the tactical, and even then, your leader's commands have priority over your own misgivings.”

Miss Penelope certainly had a way with words. This had to have been one of the strangest bollockings that Ottavio had ever had.

He nodded solemnly, “Yes, ma'am.”

“To that end I have been requested to personally remind you that any defection or dealings with a rival body, be they of the other main Entities or of any number of their subsidiaries, will not be looked upon favorably. Furthermore the Board in their wisdom have recently decided that insubordination, in extreme cases, can be viewed as an act of defection,” she said.

She silently sipped some more tea. If there was an art of drinking tea, she had perfected it.

Ottavio filled the void made as her pursed lips met the cup, “I am no traitor, ma'am.”

“So you say,” she said, putting the cup down, “Even so, the Board can be very quick to judge. And then there is the issue of reprimanding you. The problem lies in that termination of your employment is not much of a stick. With so much technology and time invested in you, why, there is no chance that they would merely terminate your contract.”

Ottavio did not like the way she said 'terminate'.

“The Board could not let their work go waltzing into the hands of a rival Entity, free thinking and vengeful. Hence the need for the sensory deactivation code.”

Sensory deactivation? His stomach dropped an inch. He noticed that the once-green square surrounding Penelope's face had turned yellow. He tried to remain calm but the panic showed plainly on his face.

Penelope explained, “Doctor Jung explained how the neural interface works, yes? In essence most of your sensory nerves have been hijacked, with data being read from and to them constantly. Well, in an extreme event of, for instance, defection or gross misconduct, an auditory or visual code can be delivered to an operative that will cause the processor to pollute or cancel the signals to the brain.”

“Leaving me, what, blind?”

“And deaf. Also incapable of standing, maintaining balance, posture or operating weapons. I have not experienced it myself, but I have been told that the sensation is rather *unpleasant*,” she cooed, “Agent, you look angry. Are you angry?”

“I'm bloody livid.”

She put her cup down and looked at Ottavio's horrified face. She was watching him carefully, like she was expecting something from him. Her hawk eyes never left him as she prodded him.

“Do not be alarmed,” she soothed, “The chances that the code can be issued by mistake or by an enemy is so remote it is virtually impossible. Also, it is reversible, so that if anything were to happen, or if there were to be a *misunderstanding*, you can be assured that your senses would be restored without damage.”

Ottavio was beside himself. He fought for composure, breathing deeply and in shaky gulps. He may have just been emotional, but it seemed like the room about him was turning red.

“Damn it!” he burst, gasping for air. Something was coming over him. Miss Penelope's features seemed to warp in front of his eyes. He closed them and shoved his fist into his mouth.

“Do you feel in control of yourself, agent? Do I need to call security?” she asked, seemingly unperturbed.

Ottavio pushed his seat back, and thrust his head back, panting, “No, *ma'am*. I might be pissed but I'm not about to do anything stupid.”

Little by little he relaxed. The room stopped spinning and the redness went away. He blinked a few times and looked up at Miss Penelope offering him a tissue. He wiped his mouth.

“I'm good. I'm sorry, ma'am, I don't know what happened.”

“Are you upset that you made a spectacle of yourself?”

“I'm more alarmed about the fact that Houston has me by the balls, ma'am. That, and I wasn't told about this before signing up for surgery. Defection, I mean, protection against defection I can get, ma'am, but how far would that reach? Using my initiative? I mean, what's to stop Houston from deactivating me...”

He stopped himself. Deactivating? What was he, a robot? A piece of machinery? He looked hard at the desk, trying to control his rising anger.

“I understand completely that this comes as a shock. And that you have concerns regarding the intentions of Houston, but be assured that the sensory deactivation code will only be issued

under extreme situations, and only if a select few, myself being one, approve of the order.”

Ottavio sat brooding in silence. It was tantamount to blackmail. Penelope appeared satisfied with whatever she was after. She let him sit for a while as she tapped a few notes into her terminal.

She looked up at the dark face before her.

“I do hope that there is no animosity, agent. You have been blessed with the opportunity that few will ever realize, but as with all things there is a trade-off. In your case this really is not an issue, I am sure, since from your records you have proven yourself a loyal employee.”

Ottavio lowered his shoulders. She was right, after all. He was advanced far beyond imagination, for which he was grateful.

He formed the words carefully, sidestepping the expletives he longed to use, “There is no animosity. Not to you, ma'am, not to Houston. I should have known they'd have contingencies. It's just that, well ma'am, that...”

Penelope's eyes widened. She could read his thoughts openly.

“That by the existence of this sensory deactivation code, you will lose your ability to make decisions? Your freewill, as it were?”

“That... just about sums it, yes, ma'am.”

She straightened up, pushed the hairs from her face and looked him square in the eyes.

“Agent, listen to me very carefully. Your compliance with all orders issued is not optional. Understand that, as an employee of this company, you have the duty to perform all tasks requested of you to the best of your ability, regardless of your personal feelings, convictions or beliefs. Failure to perform will result in your termination and prosecution,” she said authoritatively.

She leaned toward Ottavio and added softly, “And as a member of the human race you have the duty to perform according to your personal feelings, convictions and beliefs, regardless of the tasks you have been set. Failure to do so will result in the loss of your humanity and soul. It is a fine line we walk, Ottavio, it takes incredible balance and strength to get it right. The choices you make are what define you, not the orders you follow.”

Ottavio looked up at her, intrigued. A small smile crept to her lips which she quickly banished.

She shuffled some papers on her desk, “Now go. You have wasted enough of my time, and I have more pressing needs to which I must attend.”

## Chapter 17

*“It must be amazing, bein' inside the TV.  
Them bad guys never get away with nothing!”*

– *Pan, McMinnville*

It was a lonely existence for Pan. His father, Patrick Dougal, had been a survivor in McMinnville. The war had been declared over, the Chinese forces had been all but driven back with peace treaties signed, but several sleeper detachments in and around the area and had kept their orders to carry on regardless, sustaining the devastation and atrocities of the Hanean war.

Assured that the war was over, and that American forces would take care of any remaining threat, he and his wife remained in McMinnville, thankful that the war had not reached their town.

During the middle of one night, the Chinese detachments launched simultaneous attacks, moving with lightning speed through the Oregon area, shelling and bombing as they went.

He had lost his wife, and his mind, that night under sustained mortar fire. She had been standing by the window, watching the goings on, when it exploded under a mortar round, sending shrapnel and glass throughout the room.

While the rest of the town was evacuated, he stubbornly remained in his home with his child. Desperately he clung to the only thing that made any sense.

Pan was only a toddler then, unaware of the world around him, unaware of how it had changed from cinemas and bars to hunting out rats for food and fighting other survivalists for fresh water.

He grew up under his father's care, learning how to hunt, how to conserve his rations, how to tell if water was fresh or diseased.

They had a television and a rusting refrigerator that only worked when the sun was shining, since they were hooked up to a small cluster of solar panels that Patrick had rigged up.

The house was full of the appliances scavenged from other buildings. There were fans and motor parts and tools. There were clothes and shoes.

Sometimes Patrick came across a can or two in a pantry missed by other scavengers. Sometimes he would come home empty handed.

It was himself and his son versus the world. It had taken everything from him and he was convinced that, given time, he could take it back, piece by piece.

And that was just the way things were. At least until the rags moved in.

Driven away from the more populous areas, the gangs lived on the outskirts, close enough to launch small raids for food, weapons and, of course, drugs.

Concoctions of steroids or amphetamines were brewed up by their cooks. Since every raid would bring a different batch of drugs, it was a bit hit and miss. Some nights were subdued, others were revelry.

Some nights were pure mayhem, if a cook managed to hit a good combination. Cares and morals pushed to one side, the rags would celebrate with an orgy of violence, blood, sex and destruction until the drugs ran out and the effects wore off.

In those times all a survivor could do was to barricade the door, keep his head down and wait it out, for days on end sometimes.

It was on one of these occasions where Patrick had been out gathering water from a water tank he had found hidden under a collapsed wall in a small timber yard.

The feed-in pipe from the roof was still intact and had been reliably collecting run off water. For two days he had successfully returned with several containers of mostly clean water.

On the third day of his trek, armed only with a makeshift slingshot for killing small animals, he was no match for the crazed rags that had wandered in during the night to shoot up in the derelict shops that had lined the streets.

Pan, thirteen years old at the time, not that he was counting, watched on from his hiding place

as the mob took turns at breaking his limbs and fingers, punching his face and snapping his ribs.

Incapacitated, bloodied and in unspeakable pain, they rammed a sock into his mouth, brutally beat and sodomized him, then strung a rope around his neck and hauled him from a gable of the McMenamin's Hotel.

Throughout the rest of the night, while their livers frantically processed the drugs, they practiced their martial arts on Patrick's lifeless body, whooping and yowling all the while.

Pan, powerless and scared out of his mind, watched his father all through the night. He never took his eyes from his body, even though by then it was little more than a broken red bundle of meat dangling from the gable.

On that night, Pan inherited his father's insanity. For hours he looked on, hoping and praying that he would come back to life, take the noose from his neck, pick up his water can again and come back to the shelter, just as he had always done.

He did not. Instead he slowly swung in the faint breeze blowing that night, what was left of his face frozen in a ghastly look of pain.

Pan did not know the word for cowardice, but that was what he felt. He wanted to kill every one of them, to bring his father back, to make things the way they should be, but he could not.

His legs would not move, his watery eyes remained fixed on the scene in front of him, and there was nothing he could do but silently cry.

It started to rain, lightly at first, then heavier, as if the night sky was crying with him. The pools of blood were diluted and washed away, and the ground turned into a sodden mess.

One by one the rags, tired and coming on a downer, moved on.

The sun came up to reveal empty syringes and discarded hypo-tubes on the ground, and Patrick's broken, empty body, abused and disgraced, still dangling like a hunter's quarry from the hotel.

Pan had no more tears left in him and his legs came back to life. So he grabbed his father's knife and crept out.

It took a while to crawl up and cut the rope, and even longer to haul Patrick's body back to the shelter. Pan was fit but not very strong, and dragging and rolling his father's mass through the grime and mud only made things harder.

He finally got the body to the shelter, covered in mud and dried blood, and rolled it inside.

He stared at his father's face for hours, looking at it from this way, from that way. He blinked, he looked away and looked back again. He walked from the room and walked back in again. But it did not matter what he did, he could not see his father.

It was his body. He had watched the whole scene. Nobody had swapped it over.

It was broken beyond belief, but it was definitely his father's body. He would know it anywhere. But Patrick, his dad, was not there.

Frustrated, he got some water and cleaned off the muck from the face, and stood back.

It did no good. His father was simply not there. He whimpered and looked back outside to the hotel, in case he had missed anything, but there was nothing there, either, only mud and pain.

Resigning, he opened up the door to the basement and rolled the body down in anger. He locked the door, never to open it again.

And that was the way things were for Pan. He lived his years as his father had once shown him, hunting muttrats, finding water, watching and learning from the faint images on the television.

He kept safe for several years. He deftly avoided the various gangs of rags that moved in and out of the area. He avoided other survivors that came traipsing through. A young hermit, he craved company but had none.

He tried talking to the various appliances, but that was just silly. The television only talked to him, it would not listen to what he had to say. The only reasonable response he ever got, was from himself. Very soon, he was his own best friend.

Then, one gloomy and raining day, he noticed a ship flying through the sky. It was not too strange, since there were often things of that nature flying overhead, going here or there. But this one was different. This one was stopping.

He watched as six strange people came out from it, and walked into the McMenamain's Hotel. The ship flew away again, without them.

"They must be varmints. Up to no good," he said in a distinctively older man's voice.

"Nah," he said to himself with a young rag's attitude, "You don't know that. They could have stuff on them, you know, good stuff."

"Well, what are we to do? What?" he asked in a timid voice.

"Sneak up on 'em. Grab of their gear and git!"

"Or rush 'em and stick with yer sticker!"

"Either way," said young Pan's voice, "I can't sit and do of nothing. I can't! I can't!"

"Don't worry at it lad," said his old man's voice, "We've got your back."

Determined not to have the same feeling he once had, that feeling of cowardice, Pan conferred with himself and agreed to confront these strangers.

His legs were working, he had a weapon this time, and there were no tears to blur his vision.

And he had his new friends to help him.

## Chapter 18

*"I cannot see it, therefore I do not understand it.  
I do not understand it, therefore I fear it.  
I fear it, therefore I hate it."  
-Brother Oscar of Kyoto*

"No more ghosts?" asked Ottavio to Lucas.

"No," Lucas muttered, and stayed with his eyes glued to his scope.

Ottavio shrugged. Lucas was in one of his moods again. He had not spoken for over an hour, and had moved only to allow blood to return to his knees.

Ottavio stayed quiet and kept watch in the other direction for ten minutes. They were well guarded from view, up high on a balcony covered with sheet metal.

"Seems pretty quiet out there," he said, battling to be heard over the wind and rain, "Anything move at all?"

Lucas grunted a short, "No."

"Not even a muttrat?"

There was no response. Ottavio had used up all of Lucas' powers of conversation.

Rain beat hard against the brick walls, the pattering of a thousand mice scampered across it in waves. The storm had hit quickly, bringing with it a howling wind that sang a duet with itself.

After another ten minutes of watching sheets of rain wave over the cracked bitumen below, Ottavio tried again.

"Kind of a crappy assignment, this one. Sit in a shelled out lump of concrete for hours watching other shelled out lumps of concrete on the chance that some local might poke his head out from a shelled out lump of..."

"Otto!" hushed Lucas. His head did not move from his scope.

Ottavio resigned and sat down on a broken pillar. It had been six hours since they had landed in McMinnville, Oregon.

They secured the area quickly, given that there was no resistance, which annoyed Simon.

The McMennamin's Hotel building was chosen to use as Command Central as it was by far the sturdiest and tallest structure left after the town had been heavily shelled years back.

Cassandra and Norbert were investigating the internals of the building, Simon was on lookout at the south, Emily was busy getting the communications working in the west wing, while Lucas and Ottavio were on lookout at the north east.

Ottavio stared out over the jagged structures about him.

Once upon a time, a time when people were carefree, the streets here would have been packed with people shopping and talking, having coffees and looking at each other out of the corners of their eyes or from underneath dark sunglasses.

He tried to imagine the scene before him. A lady there with a baby in one arm, holding a toddler with her free hand, waving down a taxi to take her across to the other side of town. A man in a suit taking his work home from the office, thinking about dinner that night and seeing his wife. A group of school children walking down the main street after school telling dirty jokes and laughing themselves silly.

It was all there in front of him: noisy, chaotic, human.

Emily's head popped up in front of him.

"Hullo Otto! Hullo Lucas!" she chirped.

Ottavio fell backward, his illusion ripped away and replaced with Emily's contagious smile. Instinctively he had drawn his pistol.

Embarrassed at being caught off guard, he holstered his weapon and frowned at Emily.

"Geez! You could get shot doing that, Em," said Ottavio.

Emily grinned back, "And there's nobody I'd rather be shot by..."

Ottavio picked himself back up as Emily pulled herself out of the crawlspace.

He asked, "How did you go with the comms?"

"Ah, they're fried good. I've found a couple of knick-knacks and whatnots that I could probably rig together, but it wouldn't be encoded. Still, if the occupation team has the smarts to bring an encoder with them, it'll do the job just fine."

Ottavio smiled, "Well that's a shame. I was hoping we could stay here for a day or two longer."

"Who says we ain't? I ain't got it done just yet, and even once that's done we gotta wait for an occupying team to move in to relieve us. And even then..."

"Yeah, we'll probably get shunted onto another ghost hunt, eh Lucas?"

Lucas remained silent, rain dribbling over his helmet, soaking him to the bone but still he did not move. Lightning crackled off in the distance.

Ottavio pointed his thumb at the supine body.

"You know, sometimes I feel like poking him just to make sure he's still alive," muttered Ottavio, "I hope I never have to go up against him. So what are you doing up here in the hive of activity. Deslink Comm Terminals not enough to keep you occupied?"

Emily stretched, "I needed a break."

She winked mischievously at Ottavio, "Cass is all chatted out. And Norbert's being a cranky shitty-ass, as you can expect, Simon's asleep and..."

"Simon's asleep?" asked Lucas, turning around sharply.

Emily's grin nearly cracked her face, "Ha! See? He's still alive, Otto! Naw, he's wide awake and he's been trying to download maps of the area, but the storms are making it impossible for the wireless to get anything faster than a trickle. The stupid satellite protocol is great for high speed comms, but useless if there's a breath of EM interference."

Lucas harrumphed and went back to his sight.

Emily shrugged and turned to Ottavio, "You wanna help me whip up some grub?"

"Sure... Uh, hey Lucas, will you be okay by yourself here for a bit?"

Lucas didn't stir.

"Ah, leave him be," whispered Emily, waving her hand in his direction.

She and Ottavio made their way down the manhole into the dry, warm interior, down the various hallways and stairs into the bowels of the building.

Emily prattled on as they went, "There's some gear left over down in the scullery, some pots and an electric stove. Don't trust the water to drink, but we can use it for the heating. Always prefer warm rations to cold. It ain't cooking, I know, just warming up a can of road-kill, you know."

Ottavio grinned to himself and nodded at the appropriate moments.

He liked Emily. Always in a cheerful mood, even when she was not, trying to put a positive spin on miserable circumstances with her unbridled country-girl humor.

"So what's up with laughing boy?" she asked, when they were out of earshot from Lucas.

Ottavio shrugged and said evasively, "Not entirely sure."

Emily looked at him sideways as they walked on, "Not entirely sure? You two are like peas and carrots, boy, so don't go telling me he ain't told you nothin'."

Her country charm was being poured on. She smelled gossip, and she wanted in.

"Well, I mean, he's got a bit on his mind..." Ottavio mumbled coyly, "He's under a bit of stress. It's the new enhancements."

Emily stopped in her tracks. Ottavio bit his lip, kept walking for a few steps, but finally stopped. He turned around to see Emily standing with her hands on her hips, her eyes wide with the smell of answers.

"If he's got troubles with th'daptations, he shouldn't be on a mission," she warned.

"No, no. It's not that, Em. I mean, I can't say much but... it's personal, okay?"

Emily's face became serious, "Otto. It's you. It's me. If there's something wrong, I wanna know about it."

"It's nothing."

"If it's nothing, then you can tell me. What is it, something happening downstairs? Something wrong with his tally-whacker?"

She wiggled her index finger.

Ottavio laughed and shrugged, "I don't know what to tell you, Em."

"Oh..." She wiggled her little finger.

Ottavio rolled his eyes.

"Just leave it, Em," he warned.

"Will Simon want to know?"

Ottavio cursed under his breath. Emily had him now, there was no way she was going to let up.

"You're good at the whole intelligence gathering stuff, eh. Alright, but not a word of it to anyone, right?"

"Not a word," said Emily, smirking with satisfaction, patting Ottavio on the shoulder, "Come on, tell me on the way."

Ottavio followed.

"He came to me after the mission in Wheaton. Said that he's been seeing things."

"Things?"

"Strange things."

"Strange thing?"

"Yup."

"Like..."

Ottavio scratched his nose.

"Like..." she repeated, jabbing him in the ribs.

Ottavio drew a breath. There was no way Emily was going to take the hint.

"Ghosts," he finally said.

Emily's eyebrows popped up like a toaster, "Ghosts?"

"Shh! Em, not a word, remember?"

"Right, sure, sorry honey, but you got to admit, that one's a little out from left field, yeah?" she said, quieter, "You said *ghosts*, right?"

"Yup. And knowing Lucas, if he said he saw something, he isn't lying."

Ottavio turned into the kitchen. He hoped the change of room would mean a change in conversation, "Hey, you weren't kidding. This place looks pretty well kept up."

Emily headed over to an old water heater and drew a pot-full of gray water.

"Yeah, it's a bit scruffy, but it'll do. So, are we talking headless horsemen? Kids in white sheets with holes cut out?"

"Em!"

"Ha! Sorry, boy. But really, how and what? You can't just leave it at that. Come on, we've got a couple of days to kill in this hole! You can either tell me now, or you can tell me tomorrow."

She fiddled with the stove top, hooking it up to her power supply. Ottavio scrounged through the ration pack and handed a few cans to Emily.

"You know I'm gonna get it from you one way or another. And I've got a variety of ways that I'm dying to try out," she added with a wink, "So, like, did he see them in his dorm?"

"No. During the mission."

"And they looked like..."

He sighed, "Not entirely sure. He said he saw them on thermal, a couple of figures. Walking along, human, apparently. He said he couldn't make out features, as if they were in suits, so he changed over to visual. But when he switched optics, they weren't there anymore."

"Could it have been a mistake? I mean, thermal's not one hundred. Nah, don't answer that. I know, I know, it's Lucas. He doesn't make mistakes."

Ottavio nodded, "And I think that's what's got him buzzed up. And he's worried that if the tops find out, they'll suspect an implant rejection or corruption, and he'll be tainted goods."

Emily whistled dryly and placed the cans into the water.

“That's strange,” she whispered, looking past Ottavio.

“Yeah, it's strange. I thought it might have just been a glitch...”

“Shh!” She punched him in the arm.

Ottavio looked up. Emily was pointing to the door on the far wall.

Her hand dropped down and unhooked her sidearm. Ottavio did the same, looking carefully to figure out what Emily had seen or heard.

The door led to the hallway connecting the kitchen with what used to be a grand dining area, complete with piano, fish tanks full of guppies and a staircase leading up to the rooms.

Now half of the ceiling had collapsed upon it, revealing the intimate, grimy details of bedrooms above. At the other end of the hallway were the stairs down which they had come.

Ottavio tightened his grip and looked. Nothing stirred.

His vision enhancement system kicked in and highlighted potential areas of concern.

Dust was dancing just outside the doorway, its barely perceptible shimmering digitally enhanced. Someone was there, breathing, hiding next to the door frame.

Another puff billowed through the dust.

Ottavio signed this to Emily with a hand gesture. She nodded and gestured back for him to take position behind a pile of moldy rice bags.

Step by step he made his way over, dodging pots and lids scattered on the floor. Whoever was there would know that he had been detected, and had only three options.

One would be to flee, either to the dining hall or up the stairs.

The second would be to do nothing and hope that no one would investigate.

The last option was to reveal their location and confront the two agents. Ottavio braced himself for the third option, but after a minute it did not eventuate.

He decided to prompt a response. Signaling to Emily his intentions, he called out, “Who's there?”

After a few seconds a young voice, male, called back, “Nobody.”

It tried to sound confident but was tremulous, shaking.

Ottavio smirked, “Nobody?”

“That's right, nobody!”

“Nobody, huh? Well, Mister Nobody, what are you doing here?” called Ottavio.

A shuffle of feet sounded in the hall.

“We live here,” came the reply.

“You live here?”

“That's right! This is here our burrow!”

“It's alright, I'm just visiting. I needed to use this kitchen...”

“It's *our* kitch-in! We found at it! It's ours,” interrupted the voice, trembling, “And if you're a-cooking stuff in at there, then that's ours too.”

Ottavio played it down, “Alright, hey, it's *your* kitchen. I should have spoken to you first, eh? But it's not like I could ask. I mean, you weren't around.”

The voice was silent for a few seconds, deciding what to say.

“Get out at it,” it said, eventually, “I got a gun, you know. I got a gun. We all do got guns.”

Ottavio rolled his eyes, signaling to Emily to call the situation in to Simon. She nodded and ducked down, whispering into her commlink.

Ottavio kept the voice busy, “OK. You've got guns. That's not a nice way to treat a guest, you know. I'm just cooking up my meal. A guy's got to eat, yeah? So let me cook and then I'll be heading off. Alright?”

There was a murmuring outside. A different voice piped up, it sounded older, grisly.

“You ain't going a-nowhere, dude. There's more of us at here than there is there of you. We got the guns, and this is of our patch.”

It sounded like a very real threat.

“So just you lower your piece, right, an' then we'll figure out what is where.”

Emily listened attentively at her ear-piece, then signaled Ottavio to keep talking. He did so.

“Look, I didn't come here to make enemies, but I'm not lowering my piece, especially if I don't know who I'm talking to.”

A different voice responded, sounding like a rag, “Ere, no way, man. I'm hungry, yeah? I'm tired, yeah? I'm liable to pull yer eyes from out their sockets and roast 'em for dinner, yeah? Toast I will. I've eaten a human heart before, you know, yeah? It tastes like...”

“Chicken, yeah, I know big guy. Come on, talking tough isn't going to get us anywhere. It'll take a lot more than a few idle threats to get me running,” said Ottavio, unhooking a flash-bang grenade from his belt, “Look, if you really had the guns and the numbers you would have stormed in, guns blazing, but you clearly don't. Your best option is to show yourselves and we can talk like civilized humans. You know, without the threats. What do you say? No guns, just talk.”

Silence. Simon called in to Emily. She motioned Ottavio to hold on the grenade, and continue with the talking.

Ottavio pursued the silence, “I know what it's like out here, and, hey, you know what? I'm sure you would appreciate a feed. I've got enough for you, I reckon.”

The old man's voice returned, “You got no idea what it's like at, scoundrel! Every day it's the same darn thing. If we ain't a-dodging around in the 'stute looking fer rats to chew on, we're a-jumpin' outta the way of varmints. We can't remember of the last time we had a decent sit down with a full of belly.”

Ottavio took this as an opening.

“Alright then, let's make a deal. You've got my word that, so long as I'm here, you can share what I've got, and I'll keep an eye out for anything nasty so you can all relax for a bit.”

Silence.

“How about that?” he prodded.

“Mmm, I dunno, buddy. Sounds like you could of be givin' us a wind up,” came the timid reply, “And, like, how do I know you aren't about to drop us as soon as we nod off, eh?”

“Believe me, if I wanted you dead we wouldn't be having this conversation right now,” said Ottavio.

Strangely, he felt a squirt of adrenaline and his heart start to beat solidly. He steadied his breathing and concentrated on his negotiations.

“Whaddya say? Dinner's waiting,” pressed Ottavio, “That is, if it's not overcooking by now.”

It was the grisly voice again, “Alright, stranger, let's say you got of something good going. What's our promise that you won't be pulling a fast one an' triggering us down at the moment we're a-stepping in?”

Ottavio shrugged. “You've got my promise. That's about as good as I can give,” he said, adding, “And you've also got my promise that if *you* try anything funny I've... got funnier things.”

He blushed as he heard the words trickling from his mouth.

Emily clapped her hand around her mouth to suppress a giggle. In training he had been taught how to diffuse situations, not talk tough. His words appeared to have the desired effect on their target, though.

“A'right. Ah... A'right,” came the rag's voice, “If you've got anything of good, we'll talk it. Feelin' peckish, you know. We're coming in at it, yeah? So, I won't shoot at it, and you won't shoot at it, yeah?”

“You've got my word,” said Ottavio reassuringly.

Little by little a mat of brown hair crept around the corner.

It was followed by a pair of wide hazel eyes, fighting their way through a thick layer of muck.

After scanning the room for a good few seconds, and then looking intently at Ottavio, the rest of the body followed.

“Where's the rest of you?” asked Ottavio, watching carefully the figure before him.

A pile of cloth, dirt and old rope wrapped up the lanky body of a young man, not more than seventeen years of age. In his right hand he had an oversized slingshot, crudely fashioned out of the remnants of a spring leaf from the suspension of a utility.

It looked makeshift but effective.

“We're the rest of us! We're all here, at it! Got me any food at it?”

“Easy, buddy. You want to put that thing down?” said Ottavio, pointing to the slingshot and resting his hand close to his own pistol.

Pan shook his head, “It's my piece, yeah, a man's gotta have a piece to get by in these parts.”

Ottavio looked sideways at Emily, who let out a chuckle.

“Ere, who's this? And who are you?”

“Ah, Otto, put your gear away,” she laughed, walking over to the boy, “I'm Emily, and this is Otto.”

“Hey kid,” said Ottavio, grinning a little. He felt relieved that the situation did not deteriorate, and slightly proud that he managed to talk it down.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, “Oh, hey Simon.”

Simon appeared like a mist out from behind the boy, his short blade drawn and held at the ready. The boy turned sharply and stared at Simon in terror.

“Aw, gawd! This is where you do me, ain't it? It's just like the TV, this is the part where...”

“Shush up!” said Simon, pushing the boy out of the way and walking toward the stove, “You wouldn't be worth the trouble. Is that food ready yet?”

Ottavio said, “It's under control. This guy's just protecting his patch.”

Simon was seething, “So this is what you bring me in for? A runt with a slingshot? Hell, he's only four foot tall...”

“And yer goofy lookin',” said the old man's voice, “Don't know if I like of your sort, saying mean things about a man's height. I got my eye on you.”

He watched enviously as Simon fished out a can from the stove, listened intently to the sound of the can being opened, and sniffed the air hungrily as steam poured forth from the orifice.

The voice changed back to the original young male's voice, “You promised grub. Where's the grub at, then?”

Ottavio jumped in, “It's coming, it's coming. So what's your name, then?”

“Pan.”

“Pan? Like a ... pan?”

“No. Not like Apan, like Pan.”

Ottavio shrugged, “Pan it is then. Alright, what's your fancy? We've got yellow, green and brown.”

Ottavio opened up a can and winced, “Make that, brown-gray.”

“We'll be having whatever you're having, on account of it might be a trick. If we choose at the yellow one, it'll be poisoned, right?”

“Pan, listen to me. I'm not here to hurt you. None of us are.”

“Everyone's out to hurt us. That's why we've got this!”

Pan held up his slingshot with pride.

Emily whistled in admiration, “That's a fine piece you've got, sonny.”

“And we've got a dead aim, too! Pyah!” he mock fired at invisible rats about the room. Simon looked over, grunted, then returned to his meal.

Ottavio laughed lightly, “I can see you're handy with that thing.”

“Damn right!”

“You ever hit anybody with it?”

“Naw. Just rats and cats and dogs and anything I can eat. Can't eat a person.”

“No, I suppose not.”

Ottavio looked at the little bundle of cloth and smiled. It was remarkable. He had been on peace keeping duties, drug and arms raids, and all sorts of reconnaissance missions. He had faced all sorts of scum, and had met many brilliant people.

But here, in the edges of a pokey, demolished town, he found a little bag of youth worth protecting. Here was validation for his time at Houston. In front of him stood a human, proudly doing his best to survive in a hostile world.

Innocence lay behind the mud and dust that coated his skin. He would never amount to

anything, not in the current climate of Portland.

It was not his fault that he was born here. History would never record his actions, never lay tribute to his bravery, but, to Ottavio, he was a symbol of everything that was worth fighting for: Youth, innocence, humility.

“You got family, Pan?” he asked, kneeling down to be eye level with the youngster.

“What's that?”

“A family. You know...”

For half a second, Ottavio could not respond. It was such a simple question, asked by an innocent mind, and he did not have an answer for it.

Biologically, his own family was no longer around. He had some relatives in Newport, perhaps, but he had not been on leave in so long, he could hardly remember what they looked like. Perhaps family was not about genes, anyway.

Houston was where he spent his days and nights. The people within the walls, the team he went on sorties with, those in the mess hall at meal times, were they his family?

“I dunno. Can you eat a family?”

“Ah ha, no. No, you can't eat them, Pan.”

“Well if you can't eat it, what's the point of having one? Some sort of weapon, then?”

Ottavio looked at him closely. He was not joking. Ottavio wondered how long this boy had been wandering about by himself.

“Never mind, hey. Say, do you know anyone around here?” he asked.

Pan shook his head, looking longingly at the cans that Emily was fishing from the water. He started to scratch himself nervously.

He looked at Ottavio, the young punk's voice coming to the front, “Listen good, yeah. Anyone we see is after our blood, yeah, ain't got no point in talking, yeah? I do well enough to keep out of sight!”

Ottavio scruffled his head, “Well, you're safe here, bud. I'm not going to let anyone or anything hurt you, you hear?”

Pan stopped scratching himself for a second.

“You promise it?” he asked, “For real?”

“I promise. You take it easy. Go and talk to Em. She's a good cook. Makes cans taste like a meal. Go on, she'll help you out with something to eat.”

“Otto,” called Simon.

He walked over to the bench where Simon was seated on an old milk barrel.

Simon, already halfway through his meal of protein supplemented curds, spoke through mouthfuls to Ottavio while Emily showed Pan how to open his can, “So... You making friends with that tyke?”

“Well, he's harmless. Poor kid must've been out here since he could crawl. Hasn't got family, hasn't got friends...”

“Still thinking along this... hearts and minds thing bullshit, huh? It's not going to help our mission... God, they can give me robo-legs but they can't even whip up a decent feed.”

Particles of food escaped his mouth in an arc as he talked.

Ottavio countered, “I don't know about that. I mean, we're here to establish a command central, which will be used as a base of operations while Houston sends in the Reno crew to clean up this place. He's exactly the kind of civilian we are doing this for. If anything, he embodies Houston's philosophy.”

“Hell, you sound like a regular media guy... 'Embodies Houston's philosophy'? Where'd you get that kind of tosh?” Simon emptied his can and wiped his chin with his sleeve.

“Look at him! If there's anything worth fighting for, it's standing over there.”

“Cut the sob story crap. He's just a rag that hasn't had his crack for today.”

“We don't know that. Look, I'm just saying he's here now, and we have a duty to protect him.”

“Shut up and listen for a second. You've got a duty to follow orders, and I don't remember anything about telling you to share our rations with some dirty rag. What are you gonna do with this

one now? We can't have him hanging around here if anything goes down, eh. You going to baby sit this critter?"

He opened another can. The contents did not look any better than the previous.

Ottavio stood back and looked. Pan appeared a harmless, if not slightly crazy, adolescent trying to carve his way in a hostile world.

"I'm not sure, Sim..."

"Sir," said Simon, without looking up from his meal.

"*Sir*. I'm not sure. He's here now, and it's not like we can just ask him nicely to vacate. He's a local. That could be useful. If anything he might could have information relating to the lay around here. He says he hides from others. Could know the location of various gangs around here."

"Any more than our detailed satellite images? Don't think so."

"And how long will they take to download? Last I heard the storms making transmission sticky."

Ottavio looked over to Emily. She looked like a mother cat, roughly cleaning Pan's face and hands while he hungrily shoved spoonfuls of amorphous goo into his mouth.

She tried to slow him down, warning him of the dangers of indigestion. Her words were no match for the years of hunger he had endured.

Ottavio caught himself smiling. Simon was not.

"Alright. How about this. We could put him up in the laundry downstairs. That had a secure lock on it..."

"And leave him unattended? Not bloody likely. For all we know, he could have a radio on him. Sent as a scout by some gang of rags out there."

"Come on, I hardly think..." Ottavio began.

"I don't *care* what you think, Otto. I thought you'd figured that out by now. I'm in charge of this op, so you can stop the whole thinking bullshit."

"Yes, sir," said Ottavio, dutifully.

The two sat at the far end of the kitchen, Ottavio leaning against the wall, Simon scooping mouthfuls of slop.

Emily giggled as Pan told her about the muttrat he caught the other day. He exaggerated the size. He acted out his hunting style. He made sound effects when he fired his 'gun'. Ottavio smiled along.

"It was this big, I tell ya, this big. I saw him scampering across the back of the 'stute, you see, and I crouched low. He moved pretty fast, but I moved faster. Didn't I tell you my aim was good? Well, I knocked him right on the noggin," he babbled, "Took him down in one hit. Pow! Then I ate him. But I saved a bit of it for the morning. I know how to make a fire, you know."

Ottavio laughed quietly to himself. Simon scraped the bottom of his can and threw the empty on the table.

"Bleed him out," he said quietly.

"You what?" Ottavio blustered with start.

Pan looked over, sensing something was amiss.

"I ain't causing no bother am I? I mean, I can leave you guys to it if it's causing bother," he said, "But I like being here. I like you. I want to stay here, if I can. Only you've been so nice, so n-nice..."

A distant memory of his father, the last one of kindness he could remember, swam up into his confused brain. The smiles, the smell of food, the clinking of cutlery. His eyes welled up in tears.

"Oh, there, now!" said Emily, giving him a hug. The warmth of her embrace only fueled his grief. He sniffled and snorted, shuddering with emotion.

He pulled back and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Emily found a clean cloth in her knapsack and wiped him clean. He sat on a bucket and drank some water she gave him.

Ottavio's mind was racing. Perhaps he had misheard. He had not.

Simon returned to Ottavio, "Mate, if he's from around here, and he knows the ins and outs of this place enough to get past Lucas, you and me, then he's dangerous," whispered Simon, "And I

won't let this mission be compromised because of some snot-nosed little tyke who we can deal with quickly and easily, right here and now."

"But he..."

"You take him downstairs, out the back, next to a dumpster, I don't care, right? Just do it quick, do it quiet, get rid of the body then get back here. You got your knife?"

Emily looked over and saw the expression on Ottavio's face and knew immediately what was being asked of him.

She looked imploringly at Simon. Pan munched on like a rabid dog, scraping at the sides of an empty can and cutting his fingers on the rim.

"Don't, Em," mouthed Simon, pointing his finger sternly, "Otto, go."

Ottavio tried one last effort.

He leaned forward and hissed, "Sir! I promised! I said nothing would harm him. That-That I'd protect him."

Simon snapped to Ottavio's face, "Well you shouldn't have promised something you couldn't deliver. Besides, you used it as a card to diffuse a potentially hostile situation. You have gained his trust, now the situation is in our favor, and he is in our power. Well done, congrats, you earn a pat on the back. Now get on with it and don't screw it up."

Ottavio closed his eyes. His stomach shrank as his heart grew.

"Sir, I... I have to object."

"Object? What, are you going to keep him as a pet? Damn it, Otto, flush that turd or I'll do it myself and have you on report for insubordination!"

"Hey," said Simon, "You eaten? Good. I want you to go with Otto here and show him where you get in and out of this place. Gotta make sure it's safe, yeah?"

Ottavio rose slowly, a sick feeling creeping down to his legs. Pan, feeling more spirited after the meal and having made a new set of wonderful friends, real friends with faces and smiles, walked happily out with him and down the hallway.

Simon watched them leave, then turned to Emily. He got in before her mouth could open.

"I don't want to hear it, right? You've got your orders, you follow them out. Now go and check on Bert and Cass, I'll send down Lucas for a feed when Otto finishes."

Emily's eyes darkened, but her features remained firm. She hesitated, her brain filled with words and feelings.

She swallowed and stopped rinsing the cloth she had used to clean Pan's face, letting it fall into the dirty water.

"Sir," was all she said, before marching out of the room.

She looked back and watched Ottavio and Pan slowly making their way in the opposite direction.

"I got a lot of ways to come at it, I do! There's the hole two floors down, and there's the window over past the tables, and there's the tunnel where the fans are. You know that fans? I know them all!" said Pan, excitedly, racing around Ottavio like a puppy with a new toy, "I know where to get water, and where to hide at it from the varmints, and where the rats nest up."

Ottavio stopped walking.

"Wait up," he said, "You said something about where to hide from varmints. Do they come in here often?"

The old man's voice returned, "Yeah, what's it to ya?"

"Hey, is that Pan?"

"No, it's not Pan!"

"So, who am I talking to now?"

"Old Man Fender, you snapper. Show some respect! Now, what do you care about varmints. You ain't one of them, are ya?"

"Do I look like one?"

Pan squinted up at Ottavio.

"Nope, but ya can't be too careful in these parts."

“So, those rags, er, varmints, do they stop by often?”

“Oh, every now and then, lookin' for anything old we may have found lying about in the waste. They'd rough us up if they ever caught us, but we're too fast and sneaky. So they take our gear, but we know where to hide the good stuff at it. 'Ere,” the voice changed again, “You ain't thinking nothing about quizzin' me on the where's of me gear, eh?”

Ottavio tried a smile, but only succeeded in a grimace, “No, no I'm not really interested in anything you might have...”

“Aw, I see. Not even for a trade, then?”

“I'm not sure I'd have anything worth trading. But, hey, we'll discuss that later. Come on, take me to the tunnel.”

Ottavio's stomach turned a circle, his mind imagining the possible ways he could perform the deed. He tried to think of something else, anything else, but he drew a blank. Every step sounded in his ears. He could hear the rain beating harder outside, ready to wash away the memory of his little companion.

They ducked under some beams, Pan in front tugging on Ottavio's shirt.

They went down a tiled, dimly lit staircase, through a fallen door to a chain of small rooms filled with old pipes, a broken generator and several furnaces.

The walls were smattered with roughly painted slogans pertaining to the various groups that had traveled through and stayed in the building, along with nonsensical tags, exaggerated phallic murals, and threats to the reader. Molding mattresses, needles and drug paraphernalia littered the ground.

“Come on, then, can't stay 'ere too long, eh. They stay the night 'ere, they do.”

“Who does?”

Pan pointed to a symbol of a knife being stabbed through a hand painted in white.

“Them,” he said, “And they don't like it no one else being in here when they're here at it, eh, and if they're coming tonight, they'll be 'ere soon...”

“Aw, crud! Simon,” said Ottavio into his commlink, “Simon, come in. Hang about here for a second, Pan.”

“Mills, not Pan.”

“What...” began Ottavio, but Simon's voice came trickling through to his ear, “That was quick. Hurry up with the body, because I need you back here to relieve Lucas.”

“Simon, we might have a situation.”

“Ah, Hell! Can't you handle a simple tyke?”

“Listen, information has come to light that this place is not entirely uninhabited.”

“Spit it out, mate,” said Simon, impatiently.

“Pan says he's seen rags spending their nights here. There's all kinds of shit down here. Apparently they'll be back soon.”

“How many?”

“How many stay here, normally?” asked Ottavio to Pan, who was looking about nervously.

“I don't like it here.”

“Pan! How many?”

“Umm... can't say for certain, more than a hand, sonny,” Fender was back, holding up a handful of fingers, “They spend a lot of time making noise and jumping about, and we spend a lot of time hiding and not bein' here.”

Simon barked, “Otto?”

“At least five, maybe ten or more by the number of mattresses here.”

“Alright. They got weapons?”

“Huh?”

“Pan...”

“Fender.”

“Fender, are these guys armed?”

Pan stared vacantly at Ottavio.

“Do they have knives or guns?”

“Fer sure! But I got a piece!”

“Right. Simon, there's a good chance they've got guns. And,” said Ottavio, picking up a small tube and examining it closely, “From the looks of it they're up on 'roids.”

“Cheers, Otto. Now hurry up and get rid of that fink and get your ass back here!”

Ottavio looked woefully at Pan, the nervous bundle of cloth that he was, and his heart sank into his knees.

“Come on,” he muttered, “Show me how you get outside.”

The two squeezed past a pile of broken plaster and twisted metal, under a canopy made of rusted bed frames, and down a hollowed out tunnel into the cold evening air.

The rain was still powering down, creating a sheen in the low light and turning the gray concrete to an ominous gun metal. Ottavio looked sadly at Pan. His visual display showed a bright green square around his face as he excitedly pointed out parts of the town.

“There is the water hole. There's the 'stute over there. And over there is where I go a-hunting...”

Ottavio touched the hilt of his knife. In training he had been taught to hold it correctly, firm but flexible. He had been drilled on various techniques when it came to applying it to the enemy.

He knew exactly what the knife would do, how easily it would meet with flesh. There would be resistance as it went through layers of skin, flesh and tendon, as it scraped past bone.

“Pan...” said Ottavio, closing his eyes.

“...For the rats and the frogs, although the frogs aren't good to eat, except for their legs. And you can pop the eyes...”

“Pan!” Ottavio pushed his knife back into his scabbard and grabbed the boy by the shoulders.

“Listen to me! Mills or Pan or whoever else is in there, I need you to listen now, very carefully!”

The urgency in Ottavio's voice brought Pan behind the soft eyes.

“Yes?”

“Pan. Don't say another word, just listen.”

Pan nodded, scared. He shuffled his feet, ready to run. Ottavio waited until he was sure Pan was listening.

“I don't know exactly how to put this so you'll understand, but I'll try. You have to try and understand. You coming in here was a big mistake, do you understand? A big mistake!”

Pan shook his head in bewilderment.

“But I live here,” he said, “*You* came here. Was it the food? Because I can get more food. I know where to find the big ones...”

“No. No you just can't live here anymore, get it? This place, it's not your home any more.”

“What? Let me go! You're not getting my stuff!” he screamed as he struggled against Ottavio, who held him firm, “I knew you was a varmint the moment I saw you!”

“Pan! Please, listen! It's going to get very dangerous around here for the next few days. Your stuff won't be touched, but you'll need to find somewhere else to sleep. There will be more men, many men who will come in here soon. No, not the ones who paint on the walls, different ones,” said Ottavio.

He could see his point was slowly sinking behind Pan's various facades by the tears creeping into his eyes.

“These men, they... they don't like sharing their stuff, and they now consider this whole building theirs. If they catch you, they will kill you. Do you understand? They won't just take your stuff, they won't just rough you up. They will kill you!”

Pan stood transfixed. Ottavio shook him lightly by the shoulders, “Pan! You can't let yourself be seen around here. Go! Run! Don't come back, do you hear? Not even to get your things. Go!”

Pan made to leave, but quickly turned and ran back toward the entrance. Ottavio drew his combat knife, caught up Pan and pushed him against the wall, his knife placed on his neck.

“Damn it! Pan, you're not getting it!” he panted, “This isn't a game. This isn't playing hide and

seek. I... I was sent down here to kill you. And if you go back in there, Simon will kill you.”

He relaxed his grip and lowered the knife. Pan trembled beneath him.

“Please, just go. Leave now. If I see you back in here, I won't have any choice... please.”

Ottavio stood back, letting Pan scramble away off toward a set of shacks. He waited until he could no longer hear his shrieks from over the rain.

“Simon,” he panted, “It's done. I'm coming back in.”

“Roger that, Otto. Took your time. Meet back in the kitchen pronto.”

When Ottavio returned, he found Norbert sitting on the bench tucking into green mush.

“Hi Norbert,” said Ottavio.

“Hi yourself,” returned Norbert, almost cheerfully, “Just telling Simon that we've nearly got the Communication Unit up and running. If we can get a decent source of power we could have it up sooner, otherwise we've got to rely on the Bulldog.”

“Well, I did see an old generator downstairs near some furnaces. Not sure what kind, could be gas, but that might help.”

“Yeah, cheers, I'll check it out after.”

Simon stood, arms crossed, “Yup. Another thirty six hours of sitting in this hole, and then we'll be relieved by the OTF. Gotta do a thorough security sweep first, but. Can't have any more little surprises.”

He cracked his knuckles loudly and looked squarely at Ottavio, “So, we might have some rags on the way, then. Should provide a little entertainment for the evening. I've been hoping for a bit of action. Any ideas how that turd got past the perimeter?”

Ottavio scratched his chin, “Ah, yes. There's an alternate entrance point hidden behind a cluster of rubble. He could have easily crept in without setting off the proximities.”

Norbert interjected, “So you've put a proxy near that entrance, I hope?”

“Yeah, that's covered now, L5.”

Simon checked a sensor readout on his wrist and grunted in approval.

“I'll just be getting back to it, then,” said Norbert, taking a can with him, “No point gas bagging about here. Cass will be finished in about an hour, she reckons, then it's time to try a connection with the satellite.”

He hopped off the bench and swaggered out into the hallway, Ottavio turned to follow.

“Hey Otto, wait up,” called Simon, “You heading up to relieve Lucas? Good. Before you go... how'd you do it?”

“Knife, upper lungs,” said Ottavio, without turning around. He knew his face would not stand up to his scrutiny.

“Uh-huh. Good way to go, won't make a sound,” said Simon, “That's how I'd do it.”

As quick as a flash he whipped out Ottavio's knife from his belt. Ottavio turned around slowly.

“Did you have time to give it a good scrub on the way back then, hmm?” growled Simon.

It was immaculately clean, not a trace of blood.

“I gave you an order. An order! This is not a bloody democracy, mate, it's not a committee.”

Simon pushed his face into Ottavio's, their noses separated by an inch of air and a gleaming metal blade.

“I have you in my team because I find you reliable. You're a good mate, but that doesn't count for zilch out here if you won't toe the line. When I give an order it's because it's something that needs doing.”

He expertly flipped the knife around and passed the handle to Ottavio.

“I'm filing you up for report as soon as we get back. Now get out of here,” he growled.

## Chapter 19

*“Combat effectiveness is governed by many factors,  
not least of which is the subject's own moral compass.  
This module helps, um, remove that hindrance.”  
- Doctor Gerard Jung*

“Otto, come in. You know that Proxy L5? It's going off. Whereabouts are you right now?” called Simon through the commlink.

Ottavio's stomach sank a little.

“Damn it, Pan!” he thought to himself.

“In the lav, Sir, nowhere near the basement.”

“Well, zip up, meet me at the stairs, mate, I think we've got company. Norbert, grab Cass and head to the kitchen and wait for the all clear. Anyone comes in, you shoot. Lucas keep your eyes peeled for any movement on the street.”

Norbert radioed his assent.

Cassandra's voice crackled in the commlink, “Can it wait? I've just disassembled the auxiliary unit, got a fist full of wires. Leaving now will put us back at least two hours...”

“How long will it take to make it safe?”

“Eight minutes, sir.”

“You've got two. Then get your ass back to the kitchen.”

“Sir.”

Ottavio ran to the meet Simon at the stairs. Simon came back from the stairs to meet him on the landing.

“Keep it quiet, mate. I think they're kind of busy, they don't know we're here.”

“They? How many?”

“More than one. I dunno, lots. Ah, L4's just gone off, they're in the laundry area,” whispered Simon, looking at his wrist console, “Now listen carefully. These dudes are up on roids, buzz and all sorts of shit. They are *not* to be negotiated with. They are to be *eliminated*. Dead. As in, not breathing. As in hearts stopped. No life left.”

“I get it.”

“We're going to go in, neutralize the threat and get out again. Have I made myself clear?”

Ottavio nodded, “Crystal.”

“Do you have any problem with the word 'neutralize'?”

“I got it, sir!” he hissed.

“Good boy. Norbert, you guys in the kitchen yet?”

“Not yet, sir, just helping Cass tie off some loose ends...”

“God damn it! Norbert, haul ass to the kitchen already. I can't be everywhere. Bunch of clowns,” growled Simon, “Now, Otto, no crap this time. Follow me.”

Ottavio drew his pistol from his holster, turned off the safety and followed Simon's lead down the stairs.

One level down and the noise from below had gotten louder. There were hoots and yowls as the gang of rags shot themselves up with a concoction of medication.

“Yah, do it for me, man!” yelled one.

A squeal was heard over the din.

“Ha, little bugger's trying to get away. Poke him, man! Make him move!”

A raucous cheer went up as a strangled yelp gurgled its way out to the stairwell.

More hooting followed as the sickening sound of a rib bone crack under a fist brought out another squeal.

Pan. It sure sounded like him. Ottavio's heart began to throb steadily.

They went down another flight of stairs.

Simon held his hand up and paused at the bottom.

"There's your little bastard," he grunted, pointing to a beaten and naked wretch being hoisted to the ceiling by his neck, red blood on his chest and naked loins glistening in the light of lanterns placed about.

His face had been bashed to a pulp, the rest of his body brutalized and abused.

Surrounding him were nine rags, drenched from the rain, their own sweat, and Pan's blood, clapping their hands and laughing sadistically.

One was pulling at Pan's legs, choking him further, only to lift him up again to let him breathe and prolong his pain, and their pleasure.

They yanked Pan again, making him gargle and wretch as he fought for another breath of air, while they laughed and slapped and punched him.

"Looks like they can do what you can't," muttered Simon.

Ottavio's heart pounded through his chest. His optical display altered slightly.

Gone were the distractions of internal readouts, replaced with emphasized images of the hostiles, their range and threat level. His breathing became stronger as fizzles of adrenaline shot through him.

Another moved in, freshly shot up with steroids, and used Pan's body as a boxing bag, breaking yet another rib, finishing up with a kick to his groin.

Whimpering, gagging, choking, Pan fought through his suffering to gasp another breath.

Something inside Ottavio snapped.

Everything appeared as if in slow motion. His heart beat in drawn out thumps, echoing in his ears and up his throat. The world around him shrank away, leaving only himself and the gang before him.

Simon's voice trailed off into the distance, feeling like a memory that never happened. His pistol raised, he ran into the room and unleashed hell.

His optical display changed. The red squares around the assailants grew thicker, more bold. Faces, chests and joints became digitally enhanced, presenting distinct targets upon which to train his weapon.

Firing off three quick rounds, all piercing the skull of an onlooker, he aimed for the beefcake grabbing Pan's legs and unloaded the rest of the magazine into him.

His body was void of life before it even hit the floor.

Simon swore and ran in from behind, slashing at a surprised rag, taking off several fingers before driving the blade through his chest.

Another swung a fist-blade, catching Simon across the torso. It cut through his vest and down to his skin, but barely drew any blood.

Simon retaliated with an uppercut to the chin, snapping his neck back and dropping him down cold.

Ottavio ducked behind a pillar as two of the faster gang members drew their weapons and opened fire.

He reloaded with a magazine of Shredders, wishing nothing more than the utter annihilation of his enemies and the freedom of the struggling Pan.

Several shotgun blasts sounded, turning the pillar into a cloud of dust and rubble.

Ottavio broke from cover and ran to the next pillar, firing his pistol with surgical accuracy as he went, painting the walls with the insides of his victims as the Shredders worked their magic on the soft tissue and bone.

An electric thrill buzzed through him as he watched the blood rain down in slow motion.

The remaining four turned and ran, but not before Simon caught one in the arm with a throwing knife.

He stumbled, giving Ottavio enough time to turn and unload three more rounds, sending a red spray out the passage way at the retreating rags.

He ran after them to the exit but stopped short, clutching his chest, feeling instantly weak and shivery.

Deflated, his optical display returned to its usual, clinical style. Time and space returned back to normal.

His head spun a little, and he leaned against a wall to catch his breath.

Ottavio turned back to see Simon cutting Pan's lifeless body down from the roof.

It crumpled to the floor in an untidy heap, a little shell that once bound his youthful spirit. He walked over and looked at the beaten and bruised body as it lay naked on the floor among the rest of the corpses, his heart unsure of what to think.

"Well, so much for that little skirmish," said Simon, stabbing the rest of the bodies methodically.

He finished up and slapped Ottavio on the back, "Nice work. That's showing 'em how it's done! I knew you had it in you, I knew it! Ha!"

Ottavio said wearily, "Had it in me? I-I don't..."

"A buzz, yeah? A full on buzz! Woo!" whooped Simon, dancing with vigor, "Aw, man. After all that, I could do with a bite to eat."

He pulled away as Ottavio vomited noisily.

Wiping his mouth free of vomit and blood, Ottavio looked at the mess.

What had he just done? He had felt powerful, immensely so, yet at the same time he felt sickened. The rage he experienced, the unbridled desire to hurt and obliterate, it felt wrong. Very wrong.

Simon slapped him on the back again, "Don't worry about all that, mate, the cleanup crew will take care of it. Good job, good job."

Ottavio looked up at him in confusion. This slaughter fest before him was anything but a good job.

"Only you've got to learn to share the love a bit. You wasted far too much ammo on that one guy. You could have easily dropped another three the way you were emptying that mag. Which is why I tend to go for a blade, you know. It's clean, it's precise, and it doesn't run out of ammo. Woo!"

He pumped the air, excited to see the familiar pile of body parts, and smell the copper-like taint of blood in the air.

Ottavio did not know what to think. Was this what he was or was it the work of the Berserker module that Norbert had told him about? He shook his head and wiped his face again.

The body of Pan stared back at him. His innocence still clung to his bloody face, pulverized and bruised as it was. He was only a teenager, yet he had struggled for a lifetime.

The spirits of the town dared to look out from the walls of the ruined hotel and examine the scene. They had watched the town fall. They had watched Patrick's murder. They had watched Pan as he grew, confident that he would not have to suffer as his father did.

They watched on now, as Ottavio's form stood over him. If they could shed tears, they would have done so.

Ottavio bent down and closed his eyelids, wondering how many people had just died with him.

Simon waved his hand, "Ah, don't sweat it, mate. You'll get the hang of it. And just as a reminder, the next time you want to go diving head first into a combat situation, a little warning would be good. You know, verbal confirmation. 'Tally-ho' or something. Hell, I'd settle for a head nod..."

An explosion sounded from upstairs.

Simon looked at Ottavio, then his wrist console, "Ah, crud. L1 and 2 have gone off, and that would have been the claymore in the dining room, come on!"

They ran to the stairs.

Simon barked orders in his commlink, "Guys, get yourselves armed and ready, we're hot! Hold in the kitchen, stay clear of the windows and guard the doorway. Lucas get down here with short arms, the perimeter has been breached!"

"Yes sir, heading down now," came Lucas' response, "You want I should call in reinforcements?"

“No. We just kicked their asses down here. We can do it again up there. Norbert, you back or what?”

“Yes, sir,” said Norbert, “Here with Cassandra. Is Emily with you? She's not answering her comms.”

“Negative,” said Ottavio.

“I'll go and grab her.”

Simon, in a jog, replied, “The Hell you will. You just stay in the kitchen! We've got this covered.”

Lucas met up with Simon and Ottavio as they hit the top of the stairs.

“Let's go!” yelled Simon, running toward the kitchen.

Their boots thundered through the hall as they pelted toward the annex.

They met Cassandra inside, pistol at the ready. Emily was not there.

“Where's Norbert?” asked Simon.

“He's gone after Em. She's at the auxiliary unit!” said Cassandra, looking behind her. Norbert was just leaving the hallway.

“Norbert! Get back here! You and Cass stay put in the kitchen, we'll go. Otto, Lucas, get in there and guard L2!”

Lucas ran on to the double doors that led to the western wing of the building. They had long since fallen from their hinges, having been riddled full of holes from shotgun blasts and borers.

Inside was a dancing hall, surrounded by broken chairs and tables, mud and vegetation whose spores had floated in from the broken ceiling.

On the remains of the stage crouched Emily, working at a bunch of wires linked up to an array of blinking devices. Simon and Ottavio came racing in behind Lucas.

She looked up in annoyance.

“Hey guys, you couldn't be a little quieter, you think? What's cracking?”

Ottavio ran across the broken glass on the dance floor and took up a position guarding the entrance to the north, the location of the L2 proximity sensor.

“Hey, what's going on?” she asked.

Simon paced over to her, “Come on, Em! We're leaving!”

As he grabbed her arm, the stage disappeared in a flash of light, accompanied with an ear piercing explosion.

Ottavio covered his searing eyes, scorched from the detonation of two flash-bangs. He ducked down instinctively.

When his hearing and sight started to return, he saw a team of rags pouring in from the northern entrance.

Trying his best to focus, he let fly with a few rounds from his pistol. Two rags dropped messily, and another screamed in agony as a bullet ripped through his thigh. Lucas had drawn his sub-machine gun and was picking off rags as they scrambled through the doorway.

Simon had scooped up Emily and was pulling out across the stage, back toward to the safety of the kitchen.

Several rags had taken shelter behind some of the grand marbled pillars, and were hurling grenades back at Lucas and Ottavio.

The explosions rocked the room, throwing dust and shrapnel about, adding to the confusion.

Unsafe where he was, Ottavio ran from cover and fell back. A volley of bullets chased him as he jumped, ducked and rolled behind a pile of tea trolleys.

Shells pinged and sang as they whizzed past him. Lucas, happy for the distraction, put several grams of lead into three of the aggressors, dropping them like skittles.

His efforts were rewarded with a hail of bullets, several flying a little too close above his head.

“Cover me, guys!” grunted Simon, hauling Emily's limp frame out from the room.

“Pull back!” he yelled, running back to the main complex, “Pull back and guard the double doors!”

Lucas provided cover while Ottavio sprinted a retreat to the doors. He reciprocated the cover, dropping another rag while Lucas ran back.

“You go, guard the hall,” said Ottavio to Lucas, cracking off a round at a rag that broke cover, “I’ll rig up a couple of mines to guard the path. It’ll slow them down a bit.”

Lucas nodded and tottered down the hall, turning into the main area and taking up a defensive position while Ottavio set about laying the traps. He finished up and ran back to Lucas.

“We’re clear,” said Ottavio in his commlink, “You want us to hold the entrance way or make back to the kitchen?”

“Shut up for a second! Em’s been hit!” shouted Simon, “Cass, what’s she looking like?”

“She’s not good, sir!” sobbed Cassandra, her voice sounding warped in the commlink, “She’s losing blood, I can’t stop it. It’s her liver! Norbert, put pressure there! No, No! Put your hand there!”

A cold chill rippled through Ottavio’s veins.

“Bloody shit, Norbert, call in that medic!” yelled Simon.

“Already done, sir,” said Norbert, “ETA is ten minutes, but the storm’s going to make the landing hard...”

“Alright, Otto, Lucas, pull back to the kitchen and guard the hall. If anything moves, I want it dead!”

Ottavio and Lucas alternately guarded the other’s path as they worked their way back to the kitchen. The rags, however, did not approach.

“Damn it,” came Cassandra’s voice, “Damn it! I’ve only got one blood pack left. Norbert, how long?”

“Seven minutes, Cassandra,” said Norbert.

“That’s about four minutes too long,” she whimpered, “Hold this. Come on, Em, stick it out! Just a bit more, babe. Hold on girl, just, hold on! Damn it, why won’t the needle go in?”

“You’re missing the vein,” insisted Norbert.

“No, it’s collapsed,” yelled Cassandra, “She just doesn’t have enough blood! For fuck’s sake, come on, Em!”

## Chapter 20

*“Exercise strengthens our bodies,  
Thought strengthens our minds,  
Struggle strengthens our humanity.”  
- Father Abraham*

Ryan was performing push-ups when the door opened, silently.

He had spent his time doing as Father Abraham wished, keeping his mind trim and his body toned. It would do no good to ignore his counsel, and he had nothing better to do, anyway.

He had long thought about what he would achieve. He would start locally, under the guidance of Father Abraham, of course, to rid the world of the cholesterol that clung to its arteries.

He grunted, ignoring the pain in his arms. His mind was too preoccupied.

No longer would he feel ashamed to be human. Instead, humanity would come to revere him as their salvation, as the one who turned it all around. Ryan, the Savior.

He would bring them back from the brink of self-destruction. He would preach to them, and they would listen. They would come to realize their errors, and a new age of blissful enlightenment would arise.

A form walked without noise from the doorway to the bed and stood above Ryan's sweating body.

The sound of a pistol being cocked reached his ears.

He heaved his body into an ungraceful spasm as he endeavored to turn his torso around to face the source.

Two dark eyes glared down at him, eyes that saw beyond the superficial layers of human defense, and into the very heart.

He was not sure whether to speak, fight or wait. The gun that had been cocked was not pointing at him, but at the bed. A strong female hand held the grip lightly but surely, an expert in such matters.

He turned back to the eyes. They were set in a beautifully carved face, framed by black hair and wrapped in smooth, dark skin. For a moment Ryan found himself lost in a bubbling sea of fear, curiosity and wonder.

“I am Kahira, your handler,” she said.

It was a shame that her voice did not match her looks. Too many cigarettes had passed their treacherous chemicals through her lungs, rendering her voice rough, grating.

“I've been sent by Father Abraham to assess you. Understand that my time is precious, so I will not repeat myself.”

Ryan continued to stare at her, keeping the gun in his peripheral vision. Kahira watched him for a few seconds, as he panted on the floor, before holstering her weapon.

“Get up,” she said, standing straight and placing her hands behind her back, “Speak only when asked. Give your thoughts honestly. I will commence the evaluation.”

Ryan stood, panting from his workout. He fished around for a shirt to put on.

“Remain as you are,” ordered Kahira.

Considering she was armed and he was not, he obeyed.

“You have questions, I know,” she said, “It's natural. Know that whether you get them answered or not is none of my concern. Sit on the bed.”

He did so. She pulled up a chair.

“The Directors have philosophies different to those of the Vigils,” she said.

“I know. That is why I am here.”

“Be silent and listen! A member with a different viewpoint from the standard is not only dangerous to us, he would be dangerous to humanity, for in causing grief to the Directors you may cause grief to the wider cause. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” nodded Ryan.

“Good. As such, I wish to see how you view the world, and if the Vigils have polluted your mind too much to recover.”

“I can assure you they have not.”

“I shall be the judge of that. Answer me frankly, answer truthfully. Don't pretend to know what I am looking for in your answers, just speak what's in your mind. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“I'll begin. In what way is humanity more important than insects?”

Ryan tilted his head back. So many ways.

He chose his words, “Capability in thought, in actions. We can dominate our environment rather than let it dominate us. Insects, by contrast, are diverse to cope with different, but specific environments. To that end, an insect cannot alter its environment for the betterment of its kind, for doing so would destroy any specialization it has toward that environment.”

“So you say that an insect is less important than a human because of its relationship to its environment?”

“Well, yes. That and that we are more complex. We can understand and conceive of a great many things. We can appreciate the world around us. We have abstract thought, and debate and discussion.”

“Communication, then? Intelligence? Cats are intelligent creatures, are they not?”

Ryan nodded reluctantly.

“Are cats more important than humans?”

“Certainly not!” said Ryan.

“Why? They are intelligent. And they can manipulate, to an extent, their environment to suit themselves.”

“But man is rational.”

“And so he is. So let us concentrate on our two cases, what is more worthy of life, a cat or an ant?” she asked.

Ryan dabbed his head with a towel, pensive.

“A cat.”

“Why?”

Ryan scratched his chin, “There are many ants. The loss of one ant is insignificant compared to the numbers...”

Kahira interjected, “So it comes down to numbers, the importance of life?”

“Well, it is not that, I mean...”

“So say what you mean!”

It was a good thing that Ryan was sweat-soaked from his workout, because he was starting to perspire heavily.

What did she want him to say? All this nonsense about ants and cats. It smelled too much like a lesson from the Vigils.

“The cat also has a longer life, can perform more tasks, and interacts with the world.”

“Any other reasons?”

Kahira took out a smooth, white cigarette and lit up. The smell of smoke trickled into Ryan's nostrils.

“Intellectual capacity. A cat can be taught. An ant only follows instincts or pheromones, blindly performing a predefined task.”

Kahira smiled darkly, “Have you ever tried to train an ant?”

Ryan laughed, happy for any break in the seriousness of Kahira's appearance. She continued to stare as her smile drained away.

Ryan stopped laughing with a cough.

“Er, no. No I have not,” he admitted.

“So on what basis do you place your authority that a cat can be taught, whereas an ant can't?”

Ryan thought it through.

"I do not," he said at last.

"Yes, you do. You must have a basis otherwise you would not have arrived at the decision to bring it up," stated Kahira, taking another drag.

She puffed out a lungful and leaned closer, "So let's hear it."

"Well, I, um, I have never seen or heard tell of an ant being trained. They are small, unintelligent creatures. Each ant performs in the same way, does the same thing as all the other ants," said Ryan, scowling, "They are not *individuals* and cannot be treated as such."

Kahira nodded, sucking slowly on her fumes. The end of the cigarette glowed briefly, before returning to a mottled gray. She spoke, letting puffs of smoke issue as she did, "An ant lives as part of a society, but the society is stagnant. Yes, it exists, and it grows, and it shrinks. It does what it must to in order to survive. But the society never progresses. As you have mentioned, each ant behaves like the next one, and the one before it. Nothing is ever different. No adaptation to a sudden change is foreseeable, since that would require a different behavior, something that an ant is incapable of doing."

Ryan smiled inwardly, glad that he had made the obviously correct choice.

"The cat is an individual, and is smart. It has the intellectual capability to learn, to figure out ways to catch its prey," continued Kahira, sounding disinterested with having to have the conversation, "It can catch birds and mice and insects, and it can live off scraps, or befriend a human for food."

"But the cat is less worthy," said Kahira, tapping her ash on the floor.

Ryan's stomach did a twist. His disappointment showed on his face.

"Why?" he asked, needlessly.

"The cat is selfish. It's a destroyer. It will find the easiest path, and take it to the detriment of its character. Yes, it's intelligent, but only to the amount it needs to be in order to find a better way to do less. Cats are domesticated, lazy and greedy."

Kahira closed her eyes and cracked her neck. Ryan took the opportunity to dare and look at the rest of her body. She was trim, muscular. The definition of her deltoids showed up plainly in the evening sun coming through the window.

She went on, "The ant, the ant knows its place in the society. It is a builder. Its actions are for the group, not the self. It may not be capable of individual thought, not that we know of, but in terms of its contribution to sustaining life, it is just as important as the ant behind or in front of it."

"If part of an ant's nest is destroyed, or relocated, the workers continue to perform their duties in order to bring the nest back to a point of stability, in much the same way a body heals a wound not to better the original limb, but return it to its original condition. If this flow of thought is followed, it can be shown that the ant's nest is, in and of itself, an organism, a sentient, intelligent being that adapts to its surroundings not through individual endeavors but through all parts working in cohesion."

Ryan ventured a remark, "Ants? Cats? Are you not a Vigil?"

Kahira squinted through the smoke. She stubbed out the cigarette on the end of the bed.

"I'm not a Vigil. Their ideologies are not so different from ours, at least from first principles."

"They believe in stagnation, inaction..."

"They believe in balance!" hissed Kahira, clearly annoyed, "They are the ants! They keep the human organism in a state of stasis, relying on past methodologies to keep the status quo. They regulate and stifle, metering out advancement as they see fit so as not to upset the grand Fundamentals. We, however, we seek to push the pendulum."

Kahira pointed to the window. Ryan came and looked.

"Outside, in the streets and in the alleys, in basements and in bars everywhere there are people. People with ideas. People with imagination. These people are repressed, Ryan. They can't further their dreams into realities for lack of money, lack of resources, lack of... of power," said Kahira.

She turned back to Ryan, "Tell me, now. Why? Why do they not have power?"

"They lack power because they lack motivation. They are but cattle, chasing fodder and

sleep,” huffed Ryan, “Their most glorious achievements are determined by how much they own, or how many others they have had sex with.”

“Certainly not all of them...?”

“As good as!” said Ryan, standing up and starting to pace.

Kahira leaned back and watched. Ryan thrust his finger in the air as he paced, “Show me one achievement, one advancement to the human race that was not ultimately conceived from greed or lust or hatred.”

Kahira prodded him, “But certainly there's still a motivation, otherwise these advancements would not have taken place?”

“Yes, motivations. Powerful motivations, coming from the base self. Lust, money, food, sleep, fame, pride. Invent something to make life easier and no one has to work anymore. They have machines that do the thinking for them. Sure, they have been made by human hands, inspired by human minds, but they are used to stunt the very brains that created them!” yelled Ryan, losing his cool, “It is a sick joke. We are not animals, yet every step forward drives us back to our slovenly roots!”

Kahira sighed, “That's a very bleak outlook on the situation, Ryan, but I am afraid it's very close to the truth. The human organism must not just thrive, it must move forward, it must better itself, but it cannot do so while it sits idly, wallowing in comfort.”

She gestured for him to sit back down. He did so.

“It is a sad state of affairs, a being with such potential, such amazing ability still chained to the sub-ideal state of animalism. In many ways your words ring true, that every step forward is used to plunge us further down the slippery slope of progress. But what can be done?”

Kahira looked at him steadily.

“Answer me,” she cooed, “What action must be taken to halt the slide and bring humanity back to life?”

Ryan looked up, sweating still. Kahira matched his gaze easily.

“It must *want* to live. It must struggle again. Laziness and greed has taken hold,” he said, “Cut out the dead flesh and leave it to rot! The healthy minds will fill the void!”

“And how many healthy minds did you destroy, Ryan? Derailing the train, killing indiscriminately. Is that a human trait?” asked Kahira, pointedly.

Ryan's face went pale.

“I did not wish to kill them, but as with a cancer, some good tissue may be cut out with the bad,” he muttered.

He brushed off some ash that had fallen on his arm, sighing, “It is the price that must be paid to purge this earth of the dead heads.”

“I wonder, are *you* willing to pay the price? If it came to it, would you sacrifice yourself to pay for the resurrection of humanity?”

Ryan wearily nodded.

Kahira smiled briefly. “I will take you to Father Abraham. You will meet at last.”

“When?”

“Now. Put on a shirt, clean yourself up. Show him the respect he deserves,” said Kahira.

She stood and walked to the door. Ryan watched as the light from the window played across her defined arms.

“And Ryan? Do remember to tell the truth.”

## Chapter 21

*“You tamper with things you don't fully understand  
so that you can turn a buck.  
Just because you can do something  
does not mean that you should.”  
- Luddite Gorman Gosling*

It was a chilly room. Not to the point where Ryan was shivering, but definitely uncomfortably cold.

He felt like a schoolboy outside the principal's office, eagerly listening for any betrayal of what lay in store for him behind the closed doors. Kahira sat opposite him, bathing in the blue smoke of a thin cigar.

She met his gaze for a moment before blinking away and taking another drag.

“Those things will kill you, you know,” said Ryan in an attempt to spark conversation. Kahira blew a lungful in his direction.

“No. When I die, it will not be by some insidious cancer,” was all she replied.

Ryan shrugged, wrapping his arms a little tighter around his torso.

“What is with the heating in here? Did someone forget to pay the gas bill?”

“You will do well to dispense with the jokes before you meet Father Abraham; he isn't known for his sense of humor. But in response to your question, the heating is maintained to an optimal level that keeps this facility safe from thermal detection with respect to its surrounds,” she said, as she tapped her ash on a nearby pot plant, “It's relatively close to the surface, meaning that any overhead surveillance would spot it immediately if it gave off even the smallest amount of heat.”

Ryan considered this, “But the heat would need to be redirected somewhere, it cannot just vanish.”

“Quite right, child. Other facilities of ours sink the heat further down into underground chambers or to other factories within the area. Factories make quite a lot of heat, anyway, so a little more here and there is undetected. This particular compound is unique in that we have a constant supply of water to keep the temperature moderated. The volume of water is so great that the difference in temperature between the incoming and outgoing water is less than a degree. Quite clever, no?”

Ryan was about to agree, when the giant metal door slid open with a low rumble. Kahira stood up and snapped to attention.

Ryan followed suit. Plumes of mist wafted through, further chilling Ryan's skin, so that it came up in goose bumps. Kahira ushered him inside.

As he walked in, Ryan could not help but notice two glistening sentry guns through the fog, tracking his movement. They would be primed and ready, should he try anything, to take him down in a heartbeat. He began to shiver a little.

“Cold, is it?” came the voice of Father Abraham through the mist, “Please pardon the fog, it will shortly clear. I have been considering getting an air blanket installed over the entrance way, but I do not have that many outsiders to warrant the hassle. Come inside, it's warmer further in.”

The metal door slid closed behind him and the noise of air pumps sounded. The fog cleared quickly, revealing a solidly built man with a neatly trimmed crop of dark hair combed to the side. His dark blue suit stood out starkly against the surrounding chrome and white piping that lined the walls. Ryan's surprise flashed across his face.

“Ha! You thought I would be different, yes? That I was a graying old man, with a long beard and a stick, yes?” laughed Father Abraham, mockingly bending over and hobbling.

Ryan, mindful of where he was, nodded, “In fact, yes.”

“Good! I see that from our last discussion, the notion of truth has grown somewhat. This is good. I cannot abide liars, child,” said Father Abraham, “Liars and thieves.”

“Thieves, Father Abraham?”

He nodded, “Liars and thieves fall into the same category. Both will shun the honest path, the harder path, for that of a quick reward. That represents animalism, a devolution. Do you agree?”

“Yes,” said Ryan, not wishing to offend any more.

“Hmm. Clearly you do need more time with the whole concept of honesty,” scowled Father Abraham.

“But I do agree!” implored Ryan.

“In only the time it took for me to explain my connection between liars and thieves, you managed to form a strong opinion about an abstract topic? Either your mind works dazzlingly fast, and can skip the laborious contemplation required to delve into the nuances of an argument, or you are, indeed, a liar.”

Ryan was silent. Even in the cold he felt his armpits moisten.

Eventually he said, “Father Abraham, in response to the previous question, of whether I agree with thieves being the same as liars, and that theft is a devolution, I will need to think more upon it.”

Father Abraham smiled. He patted Ryan on the shoulder, “Very good, boy. Thinking before you talk will take you a long way. Now, walk with me.”

The pair ambled along. Kahira followed up at the rear. It felt a little less cold the further they walked along, up a large hall lined with hissing plumbing and pipes, whirring machines and buzzing consoles.

“What do you think of this facility so far, child?”

Ryan measured his answer, “From what I have seen, it is nothing special. I gather it is underground, thermally camouflaged and, I would guess, away from the general populace of, well, wherever we are. Although I confess that I am still a little groggy.”

“Yes, I apologize for the sedation. I trust you are not feeling too unwell?”

“Fine enough to walk.”

“Well and good. It is merely a precaution, nothing to worry about. Any effects will wear off. Now, this facility is just one of many, child,” said Father Abraham as they walked along, “One of the many placed strategically around the world. But no, you would be wrong in guessing that it has been located away from the population. In fact this particular installation is located in Vernon, right under the industrial area.”

He paused to place his hand on a scanner. It turned green, and a door in front of them slid open.

They continued into a small control room overlooking a wide, open area. Below them, engineers in white hats and coats pattered about here and there, taking readings and measurements, writing on clipboards, chatting to each other.

“They all require resources for their upkeep: power, water, air, food. If we were to hide them away in a desert, the logistics would be a nightmare, detection a certainty. So, we have incorporated them into existing structures and factories, sapping off only what we need so as not to raise suspicions. This, before you, is the heart of the water treatment complex for the entire city. This portion is built into the rock and clay next the facility.”

Ryan's brain jumped a little and his heart began to race. He wondered if he should dare question Father Abraham.

“Does that not mean you, I mean, this facility, is stealing?” he asked.

Father Abraham looked at him sideways, “I admire your courage. Yes, it would be classed as stealing, or thievery, if we did not own the resources that we were appropriating. But this belongs to us. We bought it, we operate it, we own it.”

Ryan looked out over the engineers. “These people are all Directors?”

“Ha! No, my boy! They work for Grünsfeld Power, APC, or Valley Water or whatever the company is called. But we own the company,” laughed Father Abraham, “These little workers could never be Directors. They are too busy, preoccupied with dreams of holidays, of families, of *success*, whatever that may be. At the end of the week, they get their pay check, drink themselves silly and

came back in on Monday to boast about their antics over the weekend.”

Ryan studied the scene before him. They certainly looked like ants, doing this and that, following yellow lines painted on the floor from valve A to filter B, bumping into each other periodically, briefly chatting before moving on.

“They cannot be changed, can they?” asked Ryan.

Father Abraham waved his hand and sighed, “No, no they cannot. Well, individually, perhaps, but even then only some would respond positively to molding. The vast majority, I can assure you, would laugh and call you a fool. No, but then, we do not *want* them to change, do we?”

“Why not?” asked Ryan, genuinely curious. He had always seen people as unworthy, thirsty for change, crying out for discipline.

“Because they have their place. Theirs is not to question, but to work and dream. They love their bondage. It keeps them warm, proves that they are needed. If they understood the futile nature of their lives, well, they would just as soon end it as come back to work on the Monday,” said Father Abraham.

He pointed to a worker studying pressure reading.

“Look at him,” he said, “I dare say he spent the better half of his life in an educational facility, safe from the ravages of the wasteland and the poisonous effects of radioactivity. He studied hard, worked his way through and finally, in the prime of his life, has succeeded in being the one who gets to record numbers off a machine in a treatment plant. If he works very hard, and is a loyal subject, he will get to be the one who *watches* the one who reads the numbers off the machine. That is his dream. Do you really think you can take it from him that easily? Would it do any good?”

Ryan shook his head, “No... I mean, I do not know.”

“Let me tell you, it would not. He has nestled his roots into the fantasy of self-importance so deeply, that extrication would destroy him. He is best left where he is. In his current role, at least, he is being somewhat productive.”

The trio watched the scene, each lost in their own thoughts. It was fitting, thought Ryan. He always imagined life as water, flowing and ebbing, being excreted by one only to be drunk another.

And here he was, watching millions of lives being filtered and stored, purified and diverted. Of the waters that rained down from the heavens, how much of it flowed unimpeded through the drains and out to the sea? How many of these workers failed to see their own lives dripping from their wet, sagging bodies?

Kahira coughed. Father Abraham looked at her with annoyance, then he smiled.

“Ah, yes, thank you, daughter. We must retire. Kahira will take you to your quarters. Please do not leave them until you are summoned. Apart from this small request, I bid you welcome, and please, make yourself at home.”

## Chapter 22

*“We all must make decisions with incomplete knowledge.  
The courage we display when doing so  
is what defines us.”*

– Master Penelope of Harrisburg

Masters Pietro and Theodore were looking at a console, deep in concentration. They had spent hours reviewing security footage of the Vigil's compound, looking for anything that might give away the identity of the killer.

Several cups of tea later, all they had come up with were a pair of stiff necks.

“The footage yields nothing. Brother Holland enters his room, the door remains closed until the following day when we arrive. Nobody enters or leaves, and only a handful of people walk the halls. So let us, once again, place what we know together,” said Master Pietro.

Master Theodore sighed. It was not like him to be impatient, but the death of one of his own, coupled with the complete lack of evidence was bearing down upon him.

“If we must,” he resigned.

“Brother Holland was killed by having the blood drained from his body. This would take some time, and skill, to perform,” said Master Pietro, “We know he had alcohol and chocolate and pornographic magazines, indulging in worldly pleasures. We know he was in correspondence with an unknown Alejandro de Feres regarding his infatuation with Sister Gertrude. Furthermore, Brother Marcus was at the sanitation facility and is now missing. While we might presume he is dead or taken, quite possibly by this Alejandro character, we might equally assume he has much to do with all of this. Until he or his body is found, and perhaps even afterward, we cannot rule him out as a suspect.”

He tapped his chin.

“If we put his disappearance to one side for a second, what if we concentrate on the draining of the blood?”

“Hmm. Well, to me that sounds like someone who had a grudge, and who had been reading too many books on autopsies,” harrumphed Master Theodore.

He poured some more tea.

“Sister Gertrude, or even Sister Ping, first come to mind. If Brother Holland's lust had been manifest into something more than urges, either might well have serious cause to despise him.”

“Sister Gertrude, we have seen from the footage, is never near the dormitories. So can we truly suspect Sister Ping?” asked Master Pietro, taking a biscuit.

“For the sake of moving this discussion forward, let us say yes. She knows the books of the library, and has no doubt read many more of them than anyone else.”

“It is also somewhat ritualistic, like a blood sacrifice,” mused Master Pietro, “The positioning of the body to stare up at the ceiling, or the stars. Two holes to let the blood... I have heard of it before, I just cannot think of what it is.”

“Move your mind away,” instructed Master Theodore, “Sometimes you can be so close that your nose tells you one thing, and your eyes another. Speak of something else.”

“Very well, but I know I shall not rest until I remember. Now, the assault on the facility. The uniforms. How can we not recognize them? Is there a military force on the planet that we do not know about?”

Master Theodore shook his head. There had been no insignia, no identifying traits. The weapons used were standard across many organizations, again nothing special.

“I think, Master Pietro, that the armor cannot be put to any known force. Special Operations branches do have a tendency to send their troops in undecorated, but something tells me this is neither Government nor Entity related.”

“Do we have an unseen enemy, then?”

“We do.”

“Hum. The assault was orchestrated with the help of Brother Holland, of this we can be certain. Searches of rooms have come up empty, but that is not to say that more of these latent cretins are not among us.”

“Yes. And the assault was performed with precision. Definitely trained troops with details of the facility. If Brother Marcus is guilty, and I know you highly suspect that he is, he could have provided such information.”

Master Pietro frowned deeply, “Ah yes, Marcus. I know I should still consider him my brother until proven otherwise, but with all my heart I believe him to be our greatest traitor. His disappearance is too coincidental, too convenient. Brother Holland, we know, is guilty, and by mere association I declare that... *Voodoo!*”

Master Theodore nearly dropped his tea at Master Pietro's exclamation.

“What, man?”

“That is what I have seen before: Voodoo. Ha, you were right. Sometimes the mind needs to be a bit distracted. It is an obscure religion, a sect, based in black magic, that placed a great emphasis on ritual, symbolism and biological sacrifice,” said Master Pietro in excitement, “Bloodletting was one of the rituals, I remember, along with posturing and being in a state of, of rapture.”

“Voodoo...” mused Master Theodore, “Black magic, yes?”

“If I am not mistaken, yes. Why?”

“Hum. Master Pietro, how does a magician make himself appear inside a locked cage?”

Master Pietro smiled, “You are on to something, you rascal!”

“I might be. But how does he do it? His assistant shows the audience that the cage is empty, locked securely, then covers it with a shroud. When the shroud is removed, the magician is miraculously inside the cage. How?”

“A trap door?”

“Hmm, does not help us in this instance. There is only some small plumbing and ventilation access points to any room in the dormitories, and the rest is solid concrete and stone. Ruling out any strange laws of physics, then, the only other way he can do it is if were in the cage in the first place.”

Master Pietro scratched his ear. He shrugged, “So... then the assassin must have been in there the whole time?”

“Yes... yes, I dare say you are right. But for how long? We have examined the footage days before and nobody has entered or left apart from Brother Holland.”

“And the only way in or out of that room is via the door. Let us, then, examine the door, and not the people. Master Pietro, if you will, rewind the section to before Brother Holland last entered the room. Yes, keep going back... a little slower... more...”

Several minutes went by as Master Theodore sat eagle eyed on the screen.

“Stop! There!”

The two looked closely at the console, their hearts beating in unison. Even though it was hard to make out, the grainy footage unquestionably showed Brother Holland's door open, apparently by itself, and then close again.

“Personal powered camouflage,” mused Master Pietro, “Which means it was a Vigil, or an ex-Vigil. No other corpus has that kind of technology yet. Well, now that we know what we are looking for, it explains a lot.”

“So, the assassin entered his room a good four hours prior. When did he leave?” asked Master Theodore.

After an extensive search, playing and replaying the video, they came up with nothing. The door had remained firmly closed after Brother Holland's return, all the way through Brother Alexis's repeated knocking, right up to when Masters Theodore and Pietro entered the room.

They played for a few minutes afterward while the forensic team sealed off the area.

Master Pietro scratched his head, “Even though the assassin was cloaked, there would be no

way the forensic team would have missed him. So, again, how did he leave?"

"Ha! Ha ha! Well, perhaps it was when two doddering old fools opened the door to investigate, hmm?" said Master Theodore, "Think about it. The perpetrator could have slain Brother Holland, performed the positioning and ritual and had plenty of time to recharge the cloak. Then he makes his exit while all eyes were on the room."

Master Pietro groaned, "Brilliant. So we have a murderer that we cannot identify, Holland is dead, Marcus is missing, Alejandro is unknown and we have nothing to lead us to the whereabouts of Ryan. But what we can say is that the assassin is or was a Vigil. Could we suspect his has something to do with..."

"Isaac? I am without a doubt. The words that Ryan spoke... His followers were cleansed, but only those that we found."

Master Pietro tapped his palm, "That could be the problem. We found no more, and gave up looking. What if they did not disband? What if we started looking again, what would we find?"

Master Theodore leaned back in his chair and hummed. Master Pietro paced. Brother Tyrone knocked at the door.

"Come," said Master Pietro.

"If I may, Masters, the dinner is about to be served in the hall," said Brother Tyrone, bowing slightly.

Master Theodore looked up, "Hmm? Oh, very good, thank you, Brother. Say, before you go..."

"Yes, Master?"

"Brother Tyrone, you and Sister Karras took part in compiling a history on the Vigils, no? In particular, those that left the Brotherhood?"

"No, that was not me, Master, that was Brother Tung."

"Ah, well, Master Pietro, I think we shall have to have an in-depth chat with Sister Karras and Brother Tung. If anything, the clues we have derived so far may well help us in deciding who our assassin is."

"I am sorry Masters, but does this concern the death of Brother Holland?"

"Indeed it does, Brother," said Master Pietro, "Do you have anything that might be useful?"

"Well, not exactly. I mean, I might."

"Oh, out with it, Brother!"

"It is that there are rumors regarding, um, Brother Marcus and that he might be involved. They have grown worse ever since his disappearance. They are saying..."

Master Theodore held up his hand.

"Brother Tyrone," he said, "Be calm. Rumors are beasts best slaughtered in the womb. Until the outcome of the investigation is released, you would do well to contain such rumors to yourself. You have heard the story of the Worm of Lambton?"

Brother Tyrone thought, then shook his head.

"I am afraid I have not, Master. Is it available in the library?" he asked.

"Surely, or you could look at any number of versions online. But allow me to ease your mind. Brother Marcus is still to be considered a Brother," said Master Theodore, looking at Master Pietro, "Until such time as any guilt has been undeniably demonstrated on his part. Now let us sup, for I am old and growing older, and my stomach is empty and growing emptier!"

## Chapter 23

*“When the Devil comes for his pound of flesh,  
pray that the butcher is open.”*

*- Me-Ann Ming*

“Damn it all!” shouted Ali-Baba, smashing his fist on the desk in frustration, “She was a good agent, an excellent agent. How did this happen?”

He stared at Simon, who met his gaze.

Simon cleared his throat, and said, “We were taken by surprise, sir. Our outer sensors picked up the intrusion...”

“How many were there?”

“Twenty four bodies counted by the cleanup crew. Probably twice that all up. They had made their shelter in that building, it was only natural that they would want to defend it...”

Ali-Baba shook his fist, “But you, you are *unnatural!* You are designed to be able to take on this kind of threat single handed! Where were you?”

“I was with Agent Ottavio, a wing over and downstairs by a hidden entrance. We had successfully defended ourselves against nine of them when the claymore and sensors went off. By the time we got there, the assault was beginning. They used flash-bangs, submachine guns and grenades.” said Simon.

An infuriated Ali-Baba turned to Lucas.

“And what about yourself, eh? You were to keep an eye on the surroundings. Any chance you happened to let slip by forty odd ruffians, hmm, and failed to report it in? Asleep on the job again? Ghost hunting?”

Lucas looked straight ahead, drilling the wall with his eyes.

“I was not in a position to have witnessed their access to the site,” he hammered out, “They came in through a service entrance, well shielded from my point of view.”

“So, no movement at all. Are your implants working correctly? Do I need to send you back to Doctor Jung to get recalibrated or something? Really, tell me, I'm all ears!”

“My implants are functioning correctly, Sir. I was simply not in a correct position to have line of sight.”

“Let me spell it out for you Agent. So far your track history is bullshit. A handful of proximity sensors are currently a more effective means for site protection, both with accuracy and cost.”

Lucas remained silent. Ali did not require a response.

“How in God's name am I supposed to send a crack team up against those of Tsang-Tao, or hit strategic targets in the Southern Regions if they can't even handle a bunch of fucking street thugs? How indeed?”

“They had some formidable weaponry...” started Simon.

Ali-Baba turned on him in an instant, “*You are* formidable weaponry! You have been designed from the ground up to be effective in both assault and defense. It was your duty to keep your men safe. It was your duty to destroy anything that threatened their lives. So now we are down an agent, we haven't got comms online at McMinnville and Houston's pumped several billion dollars into a three ring circus, complete with trained monkeys!”

He held up his finger at Simon.

“Alright, I understand that you had an incursion downstairs to take care of. So why didn't you move your crew back to a safe point until the incursion had been dealt with? Are you deaf as well as stupid?”

Simon began, “I did, Sir. I mean, I ordered them to retreat, but Agent Emily remained at her post.”

“Why did she remain?”

“Her commlink must have malfunctioned, sir.”

“Did you call your team back before you dealt with the first incursion?”

“No, sir. They were only a small force...”

“But large enough to distract you from your duty, Agent, and now Agent Emily is dead!”

Ali-Baba sat down to calm his nerves, rustling through a few leaves of paper making a mess on his desk. Cassandra and Norbert both held the jaws firm at the mention of Emily's name.

Tears were no good in the presence of Ali-Baba, even if they were for a close friend.

Simon ventured, “If I may, sir?”

The captain sighed angrily, scrunching a piece of paper in his fist.

“What is it, Agent?” he said.

“There was an intruder that we captured prior to the invasion,” said Simon, carefully.

Ali-Baba looked up. A lump formed in Ottavio's stomach.

“What kind of intruder?”

Simon, glad to have something to divert Ali-Baba's wrath, elaborated, “A child. A teenager. Must have lived there, probably one of the rags.”

“And what became of him?”

“After interrogating him, I decided he was too much of a risk and had Agent Ottavio destroy him,” Simon smiled inwardly and added, “Which he flatly refused to do.”

Ali-Baba turned to Agent Ottavio, his eyes like daggers.

“Is this true?” he asked.

It was true, of course. Worded any which way, he had refused to kill a child as ordered. Ottavio thought it best to be honest,

“Yes, sir, it's true. I could not bring myself to kill an unarmed civilian.”

“But you were ordered.”

“To commit murder.”

Ali-Baba rose slowly.

“So, what you're telling me is that you refused a direct order. You let a rag go and warn the rest of his crew and suddenly, to everyone's surprise, they launch a raid?” asked the captain, dumbfounded, “You disobeyed an order and endangered the entire mission because you felt bad about killing some useless lump in the middle of nowhere! I can't believe what I'm hearing? Insubordination! A multi-billion dollar bunch of morons!”

“If I may sir?” asked Ottavio.

“No you bloody well may not, Agent! You... I'm speechless. Damn it all! Get out all of you. Not you, Simon, I want a word alone.”

They filed out to the room.

Norbert looked sadly at Ottavio, gave him a reassuring slap on the shoulder and walked off down the hall. Cassandra held back tears and hustled off to the toilets to freshen up, not looking at anyone.

Only Lucas walked along with Ottavio back to the dormitories.

“He sold me out! He totally dropped it on my shoulders,” growled Ottavio.

“So, what, he's supposed to take the fall?”

“Geez, I thought you'd back me up.”

“You really cocked up, Ottavio,” sniffed Lucas, “They're going to want your balls for this one.”

Ottavio fumed in silence. Lucas continued, “You questioned Simon's orders! You didn't follow through! What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that Pan knew the layout of the building, that he would have been good to quiz about possible dangers, points of access, you know, exactly the kind of thing that would have helped us in that mission,” said Ottavio, “And if Simon had put his ego aside for a couple of seconds...”

Lucas shook his head, “You can't think like that, Ottavio. You don't get to call the shots, Simon does. It's a chain of command, and things don't work if the chain isn't linked properly.”

“Yeah, I know, I went through basic training too.”

“Obviously you don't know! Because if you did you would have obeyed without question, you would have eliminated that kid and stopped him from warning the others,” chided Lucas, “And we would still have Emily here!”

“But we don't even know if he did warn them. From what I could tell he didn't have anything to do with the rags, and, if anything, he was shit scared of them,” said Ottavio, “Hell, they strung him up by his neck and used him as a punching bag! There's no way that kid would have anything to do with the raid.”

“You don't and did not know that. Nor did Simon. The best course of action would have been to do as ordered...”

Ottavio interrupted, “And kill a kid? No, the best course of action would have been to properly interrogate Pan. Heck, I installed that extra sensor in the lower entrance as a direct consequence of him.”

“And look where that got you. Look, you can run through various outcomes until you're blue in the face, the fact remains that you were insubordinate, you questioned your commander and your actions have led to the death of a valued operative.”

Ottavio hung his head, “And friend.”

Lucas scowled at him for a few seconds, before leaving him standing in the hallway by himself.

## Chapter 24

*"We don't need to think about hunting for food,  
which means we can think while eating it."*

*- Wisdom of the Vigils*

The mess hall was buzzing with conversation, some personal, some superfluous. Master Theodore sat opposite Brother Tung and Master Pietro. He dabbed his mouth to remove a morsel of stew.

"A fine meal today," he said, putting his spoon down and taking a swig of water.

Brother Tung rubbed his bald head, as he always did after a meal, and nodded, "I agree wholly. Now, if you will, please ask me what you need to know."

"Ah, of course. Thank you, Brother Tung. I understand that you have compiled a history on ex-Vigils. Those that left the order or were sanitized?"

"Yes I have, Master Theodore, alongside Sister Karras. It has taken the better part of four years to study each of the cases."

"Could you tell me, do we have a complete history on all of the subjects you studied?"

Brother Tung rubbed his head again and thought. The two Masters did not interrupt.

"Well," he said, "I do remember that several had holes, missing portions. They were sent to be sanitized, but never arrived."

"Never arrived?"

"Missing records. For example, the Sanitation order was given, the member was shipped but no log of their arrival can be found at the other end. And if memory serves me right, others were considered fit by assessment and returned."

"And so, Brother, there are potentially ex-Vigils out there, for which we cannot account?"

"Indeed. Many were tracked down, but the whereabouts and movements of others remains a mystery. Sister Karras is in the process of compiling a dossier on them."

"Good, good. Now, I do not expect you to remember off the top of your head, and I will ask you to look into it further, but, if I may, do you remember anything about voodoo," asked Master Theodore, "Or anything related to it, such as black magic, bloodletting, ritualistic behavior, that sort of thing?"

"Well, let me think," mused Brother Tung.

After a bit more head rubbing he shrugged and said, "That does not ring any bells straight up. Voodoo, you say? Like the dolls and zombies and all that?"

"What did you say?" asked Master Pietro.

"That it does not ring any bells..."

"No, no. The other bit about dolls and zombies."

"Oh. Well, it is just from my childhood stories. I learned about how a practitioner would use an edifice of a person, include a personal item with it and invoke harm by hurting the edifice," said Brother Tung, "It was called a Voodoo Doll."

"And the bit about the zombies?"

"Ah, that is a little fuzzy. I think, and this is only from memory, that zombies can be conjured up, enacting the wishes of the conjurer. Similar notion, I think, to a golem, only that the golem is made of clay, whereas the zombie is actually a person," said Brother Tung, "Why?"

Master Pietro clapped his head, turned to Master Theodore, and announced, "It is a taunt. The perpetrator wishes to tease us. Brother Hol..."

He looked at an expectant Brother Tung. The cat was well and truly out of the bag now, so he continued, "Brother Holland was looking upward, to the sky. If I remember correctly, 'Look at the stars. Innumerable as they are, we shall paint them all in red in tribute to our master. We shall bring forth an army, neither alive nor dead, and teach man the value of his blood.'"

"The words of Isaac... So, Brother Holland was turned into a zombie?"

“Not exactly. But look at how he was positioned, void of blood. His skin was sunken and haggard, his mouth was pulled back and his eyes bulged out of their sockets. If he did not look like a zombie from the stories, I do not know what does. You see, teach man the value of his blood.”

“It appears to fit,” acknowledged Brother Tung.

“Hmm. Let me make another suggestion, based on what you said. 'Neither alive nor dead', perhaps it is referring to Assisted Compliance Surgery?” suggested Master Pietro.

“Yes, I can see how that works. But the surgery is still governed by the will of Houston, which is regulated by the Board, by laws and by popular opinion. It is granted on a case by case basis and can only be performed by specialist surgeons. Even then the public knows nothing about it,” countered Master Theodore, “If the message is alluding to it, it could imply that there is a fast way to mass administer it to the public, some way to...”

“Wait, wait, wait. Master Theodore if you will humor me. If I recall, Isaac's end game was the reduction of cities to a chaos and that it would be administered by some kind of mass administered signal. Interrupting the brain's processing.”

Master Theodore's jaw hung half open. He slapped his own forehead, “The Hyde Pattern! Master Jacob would know more, but you are correct! Our top minds analyzed samples of the signal, deemed it as having little more than a mild hallucinogenic effect in most subjects. We thought the whole thing was too unpredictable to have any chance of success.”

“But what if it was not? What if it had more merit than was granted?”

“In that case, if it has been made potent, we are in greater peril than I can imagine. Who is behind this, who is developing it, how far they have progressed, how it is distributed, we must find answers to these before they can deploy it.”

Brother Tung interrupted, “I am sorry but do I need to be hearing any of this?”

Master Pietro waved his hand in annoyance, “What? No. Perhaps. For now. But stay a while, Brother, and please do not interrupt. I have lost my train of thought. Where were we?”

“The signal. Who, what and how?” asked Master Theodore, then answering himself, “That we cannot know until we talk to Master Jacob. That, and we must revisit any information we have regarding the Hyde Pattern, anything at all!”

“I would think that our efforts should be spent on locating and observing any scientists, biological or EMF engineers qualified for such an endeavor,” suggested Master Pietro, “Such development cannot go unnoticed, we just need to look in the right place.”

Master Theodore nodded in agreement, “Yes, that is a wiser policy. Our network is broad enough. I will compile a list of observation requirements and contact our brethren elsewhere.”

The pair resumed pondering while Brother Tung bowed his head and waited, nibbling discretely at a biscuit. A short while later, Sister Lovelace came scuttling up, asking for audience.

“Of course, Sister, sit down with us,” said Master Theodore.

“I will not, thank you both, but I will tell you of the latest correspondence from our Master Penelope,” she replied.

“Speak, then.”

“She says that Houston's newest is about to be scheduled for Assisted Compliance. Master Penelope says that after the incident at McMinnville, the top brass will have no other option but to concede to Commander Ali-Baba's request. It is a matter of days.”

“Hmm, thank you Sister. I cannot imagine such a report would go without a suggestion on her part?” asked Master Pietro.

“Only that she strongly suggests an extraction to pour even more cold water on the Project. She believes that she can persuade him to leave. She says she will abide with whatever decision is made,” said Sister Lovelace.

She bowed and left them.

Master Theodore scratched his head, “Houston's newest? It makes sense, I guess. They have invested much. They cannot risk to lose him, not their star attraction, and certainly not before they have demonstrated his full potential. Whether or not he would be an asset or a liability, that can be debated.”

“If liability he be, it would be but a trifling matter to dispose of him. As an asset, however, he could be powerful indeed.”

“Do you think he could be persuaded to join us?”

Master Pietro nodded, “If not, then at least we could keep him out of the reaches of Houston. Hmm. Master Penelope wants an extraction. We cannot insert a team...”

“No, not without revealing ourselves. We would risk much and gain little. He must choose to leave, and quickly, and if Master Penelope believes she has his ear, I am convinced that she is the person for the job.”

“And then?” asked Master Pietro, “Aid him discretely as he wanders in the wastes? Or perhaps we take in the outsider?”

Master Theodore closed his eyes and pondered. Master Pietro sat by, waiting for his decision.

“If we do nothing, we will lose this opportunity. She informed us that he has a balanced mind and a generous soul. The more I think about it, the more I believe that we could use a man of his talents.”

“I agree. With the murder and the assault on the Sanitation Facility, we need someone like him on side. Preferably more,” said Master Pietro, “But too many would be like herding cats.”

“Like cats, indeed,” said Master Theodore.

“Would any follow?”

“That would be up to Master Penelope. If they did, it would be an even greater blow to the Project. But one at a time is good fishing.”

“Hmm. True. But Houston may then retaliate in force, hunting them down. If we provide sanctuary, that could lead them to us. If we do not, the opportunity is lost.”

Master Theodore sighed deeply. Sanctuary within the bosom Vigils was a privilege not granted lightly. Anonymity was one of their strongest defenses.

“Houston has kept them as secrets. Letting him wander the world unguided would be tantamount to setting a lion among lambs. Lures of power and greed would corrupt them.”

Master Pietro nodded, “It grieves me greatly just to think. The balance would be thrown. Whichever Entity snaps him up would bend him to their will, as Houston has. Convinced of the strengths of Project Adaptation, they would begin, in earnest, their own campaign, putting us back at square one.”

“Or worse, since we would be battling this abomination on two fronts. Or more.”

“Then the race would begin, and the victor would swallow the lesser. They could strike without fear, destroying governments with impunity. There would be no opposing force to right them. An entire army could be crippled by an unstoppable strike team infiltrating and destroying the command,” said Master Pietro, pushing his fingers together.

“Then again, he is but one man,” said Master Theodore.

“One man, for now, but there will be others, others like him, others more advanced.”

Master Theodore rubbed his chin thoughtfully, “Unless Houston's Adaptation project is halted.”

“And so we have come full circle. In order to halt the Project, we must use this opportunity to steal their prize. This matter is settled, except for the original question of what to do.”

Master Theodore nodded his head, “Of course. Thank you. On the one hand, we risk so much in losing him. On the other, if we let him into our custody, we risk exposing ourselves to Houston and to the world.”

“Must I remind you of our fallen brethren? We are already exposed!” warned Master Pietro, “We have a blade leveled against us and we are debating what kind of arm wields it!”

“That we are, Master Pietro, that we are.”

Master Theodore and Master Pietro both fell silent. It was worrying, the predicament they were in. Inaction was not an option, that was clear, but what to do, what to do?

“We must send a transport. If Master Penelope can convince him to leave, then there is no need for any violence. I feel it in my bones that something big is coming. Providing him sanctuary will put us at risk, so we should house him safely until we decide what is to be done.”

Master Pietro agreed, “Capital. So if I may ask, Brother Tung, have you seen Sister Hanifé today?”

Brother Tung looked thoughtful, “Yes. Yes, she was speaking with Brother Pompelmo in the gardens regarding his return from his campaign in Moscow.”

“Could you send for her? We must talk at once to Master Jacob about the other matter. She can find us there,” said Master Theodore.

Brother Tung rubbed his head and stood up, “Certainly, Masters. But, since all this is very compelling, may I ask a question? You spoke before of the assault on the remote facility, and only this morning I overheard that Sister Alim of the armory said that the inventory count shows that a camouflage suit is unaccounted for,” said Brother Tung, “Is there something we should know?”

Master Theodore sighed, “I suppose. I was hoping against hope that my learned Master Pietro would be proven wrong, but it is sadly not the case. If you could, please inform everyone at all Chapters that Brother Marcus is to be considered a traitor. If anyone comes in contact, or has any idea of his location, we are to be informed immediately. Yes, to answer your next question, he is suspected of killing Brother Holland along with orchestrating the assault and breakout of Acolyte Ryan at the Sanitation facility.”

Brother Tung's eyebrows furrowed before he bowed and left to issue the message. Master Pietro watched him go before turning to Master Theodore.

“Are you sure that was wise, letting everyone know our suspicions before they are concrete?” he asked.

“Our hand was forced. Besides, the rumors are growing too strong. Too many questions are being asked,” Master Theodore rubbed his temples, “Plus I am too old and too tired to hold up a facade. We need all of our minds to work together, and if some of those have already been corrupted, so be it.”

## Chapter 25

*“There is no room in this Entity  
for Agents who defy the chain of command.  
You simply don't have enough information  
to act outside the scope of your assigned task.”  
- Houston's Agent Handbook*

It had been two days since the funeral.

Emily's parents had been flown in to view the body, giving her some dignity before the implants were hastily, and messily, removed.

All due care had been taken during insertion, but surgeons were expensive, Emily's implants more so, and a dead body could not complain. She lay in the coffin with gloves covering her hands and long sleeves covering her arms to hide the long slice running to her shoulder.

Her official cause of death was electrocution.

“As a consequence of this unexpected incident,” said the Houston Corps representative, “We will lobby to have new safety interlocks installed on all portable generators, so a tragedy like this never has to happen again.”

The liver wounds were discretely altered to appear as electric burns and her involvement in the mission was never mentioned.

The team had been given leave to pay their respects from afar. Watching a sealed box being lowered into a musty hole from two hundred meters away did not have the effect Ottavio thought it would have.

He, and his companions, had been forced to find their own way to grieve for their friend.

“It's insane! I lost a friend too, I put my ass on the line to save her, but everyone's acting like I killed her,” said Ottavio.

He was sitting in the canteen, sharing a meal with Cassandra.

“Not everyone,” said Cassandra.

“As good as. What I just don't get is why Simon insisted on getting rid of Pan, and why Ali agrees with him. If we'd held onto him, he would be safe, he wouldn't have had a chance to run into those rags, we could have quizzed him about points of access... I just don't get it.”

Cassandra poked at her meal a little more. It was something that resembled pasta, but it could easily have been a stew. She decided not to wonder.

“What is your obsession with him, anyway? He was just some kid,” she asked.

“He needed our help, Cass. And I promised to protect him. He was, I don't know, he was one of the good guys, you know? If he'd been given a chance to grow up, he'd be one of us, fighting to make a difference.”

“That's a pretty big call, Otto. You only saw him for a bit.”

Ottavio pushed his plate away, “Sorry, Cass. I thought you'd get it.”

“Otto sit down. Sit down!” she hissed.

He lowered himself back into his seat and stared at his plate.

Cassandra leaned forward, “What do you want me to say, huh? That you did the right thing? That Em's not dead because of you? Because I'm not going to say that. It's what happened, alright, and there's no getting away from it. OK, that kid might not have been one of the rags, but he could have told them about us all the same. They could have caught him, he would have blabbed.”

Ottavio brooded silently.

Cassandra continued, “That's not to say that I hold you solely responsible. Yes, I agree that keeping the kid...”

“Pan.”

“...would have been the preferred option. I also agree that if Simon ordered *me* to kill a kid, I would not be able to go through with it. I'm not a killer, Ottavio, and I know that neither are you. But this is hardly the occupation to exercise your moral standards. You are employed to follow

orders, not make decisions.”

Ottavio slumped in his chair.

“I didn't sign up to kill innocent children, Cassandra, I signed up to save them. All this bullshit we're told about Houston's policy on humanity is getting harder and harder to swallow.”

Cassandra nibbled a little on her gruel. It tasted just as it looked.

“How can they call this 'Pasta Al Forno'? I swear they've taken yesterday's leftover Texan steak and wrapped it in soggy paper.”

Ottavio snorted a laugh, in spite of himself. Cassandra shoveled another mouthful in.

“It's not so bad, if you try not to taste it,” she said.

Norbert came over and sat down next to Ottavio, letting his tray drop noisily.

“Same old crap,” he grumbled.

“You took your time,” said Ottavio.

“Had to get my sensors tweaked.”

Ottavio glowered. Norbert's implants had been operating fine for months.

“You had to give a report, didn't you?”

Norbert said nothing. Cassandra shuffled in her chair. Ottavio looked up at her, but she suddenly found the tiled roof interesting.

Ottavio looked to her, “You too?”

Cassandra looked down, then to the side, and said, “Yeah. I told them only as much as I saw, which was you, Sim and Lucas doing your best, and when Em...”

Norbert put his spoon down and rubbed his temples. The three remained silent, each wishing their plate would somehow empty itself so they could finish up.

The clattering of knives on plates from all around continued, despite their somberness.

Norbert broke the silence.

“I found out what the Assisted Compliance Surgery entails, man,” he whispered.

“Assisted *what?*” asked Cassandra.

“It's pretty drastic. I read through a bit of the mumbo jumbo. Didn't understand half of it, but the bit I do understand is pretty clear. The patient has their cognitive ability unimpeded, has full motor control and all that. They pretty much look and act like anyone else.”

Ottavio shrugged, “What's so drastic about that?”

“It goes on to mention that they lose the ability to form complex decisions, to think in the abstract. Free will, man, free will is what I'm talking about. They've figured out how to take it away. The patient becomes a robot. A slave. They ask you to do something, you don't even get the option of thinking twice, you just do it.”

Cassandra held up her hand, “Just slow down a second. Who's doing this? Redden?”

“Houston!” said Norbert, looking about, “And I can see why. You know how I said all the brothers that have been marked for this ACS have been MIA or KIA? Well you only need to look at their records to find out the link. Each has been reprimanded for insubordination, or went off the rails, or went AWOL.”

“Damn,” said Ottavio.

“Yup. You don't toe the line, you disappear, you get ACS.”

“I know I shouldn't ask, but...”

“You're on the registry, under the insistence of Commander Ali-Boob, cosigned by none other than Agent Simon.”

Ottavio poked at his food. He felt like throwing up.

“I told you to watch yourself.”

Ottavio looked to Norbert, then Cassandra. Somewhere out in the kitchen a tray crashed to the ground, followed by hoots and jeers from the staff.

Norbert hurriedly finished off his plate and stood up.

“Don't say I didn't warn you. I don't mean to rub it in, but, you're damaged goods, man,” he said, “So pardon me if I keep my distance.”

Ottavio and Cassandra watched him go. She turned back. “OK, spill it. What the hell was

that?"

Ottavio tried to smile it off.

"Cass..." he began.

"Don't bullshit me, Otto. He wasn't kidding around. Norbert never kids around."

"No, he wasn't kidding. But you can't tell anyone. Alright? Alright?"

Cassandra nodded. Ottavio leaned in.

"Apparently there's only one way with Houston: their way. I didn't follow protocol. I didn't murder on command," he explained, "Hell. You saw Simon. You saw what he's capable of. That's what they want me to be."

Ottavio fumed a little.

He gave up avoiding what was an obvious conclusion, "And, damn it, I think I am."

"What the hell are you talking about?" she whispered, sad, confused and hurt.

"You didn't see it. The guys downstairs at the hotel. The ones that were beating... the one's before the main assault. I... I did things. Things like Simon did!" he hissed, "I butchered! I actually loved it! I-I danced in their blood!"

"I don't understand," said Cassandra, tears welling in her eyes.

Ottavio slammed the table with his fist. Cassandra jumped back.

A few eyes looked over, then resumed their meal.

"Cass, they've screwed me up! They've put some shit software in my head, it made me do it. I never wanted to, but it turned me into Simon! I don't know how it began. I just saw Pan being tortured, and then next thing I know, I'm knee deep in body parts. I lost it. I was like a madman!"

"But you're alright now? Right?"

"No. Well, now, yes. But what if something triggers it off? I'm not safe. I'm a monster! I know what I did, I remember doing it, but it wasn't me!"

He pushed his fists into his eyes, half to hold back the tears, half to hide his shame from the world.

He breathed carefully, calming himself down. Cassandra leaned over and put her hand on his arm. Her touch melted him.

Quietly he shed hot tears for Emily, tears of grief, tears of shame. They came trickling out from under his hands.

"Dry your eyes, princess," said Simon, marching over, muscles on show under his singlet.

"Not now, Sim," said Cassandra. He snorted in response.

"Where'd you work last, anyway? The marshmallow factory? Shit, mate, did Jung upgrade your Pansy module?"

Ottavio lowered his hands.

"Damn you, Simon" he said, "Just give it a rest."

He unashamedly cleared his face with his napkin.

"That's damn you *sir*, you whelp."

Simon dropped his plate on the table with a clang, sat down and poked at his food. Ottavio, looked at him from under his eyebrows, while Cassandra resumed scouring her dish for anything that could pass as food.

Simon dropped his fork, "Bloody Hell, this is stuff is mushier than you, mate!"

"Relax Ottavio," said Cassandra, "He's just trying to wind you up."

"What, you taking orders from her now? Let's see if you can follow them better than you follow mine."

"Killing Pan would not have stopped the attack," said Ottavio, his face flushing red, "We were there to protect our team, not kill boys."

Simon pointed his fork at Ottavio, "You're right about one thing, mate. We were there to protect our team, and to do that, you were supposed to follow orders. But you couldn't, because you're soft. Or stupid. I'm still trying to figure out which."

"Just because I didn't see fit to kill an innocent child..."

"One of my team is dead, Otto! We lost the mission! We had to withdraw without getting

comms up. We look like a bloody shambles, and I'm the one getting my ass chewed out by Ali," growled Simon, "And all because you thought you knew better! You're not here to make decisions, you're here to do whatever I bloody well say!"

He resumed shoveling gruel into his mouth. Ottavio tried his best to settle his heart.

Cassandra pushed her chair back a fraction. It may have been just her intuition, or perhaps some implanted subroutine, but she had a nagging feeling about what would happen next.

She looked at Ottavio. His face was fixed like cement. His jaw muscles were locked as he fought to contain his rage.

She looked carefully at Simon. Slops of food fell to his chin. Intermittently he would wipe it on his arm without missing a beat. She could see he was not tasting what he ate, only going through the motions. He was eating only to kill a bit of time before...

"Pass the salt," he ordered.

Ottavio remained like a statue. Only his jaw moved as the air in front of him froze to ice, "Get it yourself, *Sim*. We're not on a mission."

She knew it would make no difference, but she reached out to grab the salt in a bid to appease Simon.

"Leave it," he said, calmly, "I asked him, not you, *princess*."

The remark grated on her, made her push her mouth out. She sat back in her seat and waited. This was a situation that could not be defused.

It would result only in one outcome, one that did not involve her. She moved her seat even further back.

"Pass me the damn salt," he said again, stopping his eating and holding his fork as he would a combat knife.

Ottavio refused again, "Go to Hell."

"You see, you're just not getting this whole taking orders business. You're an employee. I'm your boss. You don't toe the line, you get cut off. You toe the line, you get a nice little bone. Carrot and stick stuff. Pretty simple really. You understand?"

"I understand a lot more than you think."

"Really? Do you understand what's going to happen if you don't fly straight? Of course not, otherwise Em would still be alive, and not six feet under playing a hotel to worms."

Ottavio bit his lip. A red sheen fell across his eyes.

"What, cat got your tongue? No smart ass remark? Gonna be a good little doggy and sit when I say?" pushed Simon, "Shaking in your boots? Geez, Cass. You might want to put some distance between yourself and this cream puff, you might catch fairy disease."

It felt as if Ottavio's heart would break out from his rib cage, reach over the table and strangle Simon.

"Just one more," he thought, "Come on, you son of a bitch, just have one more."

Simon obliged.

"Should be you in that hole, not her."

Ottavio launched forward, knocking the fork out of Simon's hand while at the same time landing a solid fist square on his jaw.

Not caught completely by surprise, Simon rolled out of his chair and flipped himself to his feet.

"That's the way, you little bitch!" egged Simon, "Get it out of your system."

Ottavio could not hear him. Enraged, he leaped over the table and rolled to the other side as Simon sent a volley of kicks in his direction.

Cassandra moved well back, knowing better than to interfere.

Ottavio sprang to his feet and came at Simon again, sending a right hook that, had it landed, would have sent Simon sprawling.

As it was, Simon grabbed the approaching fist in a millisecond, twisted it behind him and followed up with an elbow to Ottavio's chest, a palm to his chin and left hook that left him dazed.

"Come on, big boy!" yelled Simon, bouncing on his toes.

By now the guards, scientists and administration staff were standing up and watching the scene unfold, unsure of which way the action would spill.

Simon kicked out Ottavio's legs, leaped into the air and came crashing down to him. Ottavio was too fast, however, and rolled out of the way of Simon's knees.

They both hauled themselves up again and crouched, facing each other, one wanting death, the other humiliation.

"You should've passed the salt, pussy-boy," snickered Simon.

Ottavio was too enraged to comprehend. A guttural growl emanated as he charged Simon again.

Expecting him to go high, Simon swung at his face, but Ottavio dove in and caught him about his midriff.

With the momentum, Simon lost his breath, Ottavio swung him about like a plaything and threw him up and over the crowd and onto the bain-marie.

Perturbed that they were now between the two combatants, the crowd hurriedly moved away.

Simon cursed, picked himself up and turned around to see Ottavio charging through the tables and chairs towards him.

"Alright, you bastard," called Simon at his approach, "Let's see what you're really made of!"

He grabbed a serving knife from behind the counter and rolled it between his hands.

"Yeah, you wanna see some blood, don't ya!" he laughed, "Don't mind if it's your own?"

Ottavio, through the haze of madness, realized he was without a weapon.

He lifted his fist and brought it crashing down, like a boulder, onto the end of the table. The top flew off, revealing the stump that was firmly bolted into the concrete. Two kicks later and the stump, and the concrete to which it was attached, was leaning to one side.

Summoning his immense strength, he wrenched it with an almighty crack from its home, turning it into a rather solid, albeit makeshift, club.

The show of strength impressed the crowd, and had Simon more than a little worried. He looked at his own serving knife, and knew that it was time to call off the show.

He signaled to a waiting team of armored guards who immediately let fly with a volley of tranqburrs. Containing fast acting local tranquillizer, they were excellent in taking down targets live without running the risk of overdosing.

He ducked and weaved, running toward Simon with unbridled fury, dodging the burrs as they sailed by, but several peppered his chest, arms and legs.

He lost feeling in his hands and limbs, bit by bit, until he collapsed to the floor, unable to regain balance.

Within seconds he was writhing on the floor, snarling and cursing.

"Nice job mates," said Simon, looking at the crowd, "I had him of course, but it's better to play it a bit safe, yeah? Get him in restraints."

Cassandra watched on as Ottavio was lifted into a stretcher.

She went to remove a couple of burrs that were lodged in his skin, but Simon caught her hand.

"Leave 'em," he warned, "If you know what's good for you."

"They've already administered their dose, Sim."

He ignored her and waved the men off. Ottavio groaned, paralyzed.

"Nothing more to see, folks, so push off," Simon said, surveying the room, "And get someone in here to clean up this mess. It's a bloody pigsty in here."

## Chapter 26

*"We'll miss you, our little Emily.  
You brought such happiness to our lives,  
with your laugh, your smile, your face.  
You won't be forgotten, my sweet, silly sister!"*  
- Amy Forge

Emily stood before Ottavio. Her hair was not tied back, ready for duty, but hung lightly down to her shoulders.

Her normally happy face was coated in a fine layer of gray dust, with two dark streams of tears running their way through to her chin.

This was not Emily the happy-go-lucky girl from the country. Her face was melancholy, her body broken.

A grimace crept over her mouth and she looked down at her side.

Ottavio followed her gaze. Dark, almost black blood spilled from her side, staining her vest, her pants, the tiles on the floor.

"I'm sorry, Em," he said, but his voice did not reach her ears. She continued to look at the wound in wonder. She poked at it, unsure of what it was. Her fingers came up, covered in blood.

"Em, let me help! I can stop the bleeding," he called.

Oblivious to his presence, she undid her vest and dropped it to the floor. She hoisted her shirt to get a better look at the injury. It was dark blood, issuing from her liver, lethal.

"Put pressure on it! What are you doing?" called Ottavio, walking clumsily toward her.

She was brushing the blood away. It fell off like red snow, revealing a crisp separation of skin. It was thin, flat. It looked more like a knife wound than a bullet wound.

"Em, leave it alone, don't open it! Just put pressure on it!" he screamed, "I'll get Cass, just hold on."

Finally she seemed to notice his presence.

"Ottavio? Look at me, I'm hurt!" she said, sadly.

"I know, Cass is on her way. Keep pressure on it."

"There's no time. Not for me, anyway. You will follow soon."

"What do you mean? Come on, Em, we're getting you out of here."

He reached over to help her, but she brushed his hand away lightly.

"No, Ottavio. There is no time. You have to choose, and when you do, you have to trust in the Lady."

Ottavio started to panic. Emily's face became pale as her fluids leaked onto the floor.

"Lady? What lady? Emily, stay with me!"

"Penelope. Trust Penelope!"

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, her legs buckled and she collapsed in a heap to the floor.

Ottavio woke.

He was soaking in sweat and his muscles were tense. His arms and legs were strapped down, and his head was in a clamp.

His mind thought back to when he awoke from Adaptive Surgery, when he was so disoriented, he did not even know who he was.

This was not like that. He felt, apart from a little uncomfortable in the restraints, quite normal.

"Hello?" he called.

"Ottavio," Miss Penelope called softly, "I need you to wake up now."

This was strange, because Miss Penelope's voice was modulated very carefully at all times, always at the same clinical pitch and volume. This sounded friendly, *sincere*.

He looked over to see Penelope standing a few feet away, hands clasped. In her white laboratory coat under the harsh lights, she seemed an angel.

“Ottavio, remain awake. I will be frank and concise. They are sharpening the ax and your head is the one on the block. The McMinnville incident, it was a setup. No, do not speak, but listen. We have not the time for chit chat.”

Ottavio held his questions within and nodded assent. He was a captive audience, in no position to argue.

Besides, she had a look in her eyes unlike anything that Ottavio had seen before. It was a mix of consternation, of fear, but, above all, of a concerned friend.

Miss Penelope took a step closer and continued, “The incident with Simon was planned. He was there to cause you to react, to display, without a doubt, your lack of control and your failure to follow orders. Do not feel ashamed, they would have gotten a rise out of you, one way or the other.”

“Why would...?”

“Those on the Board feel that the only way to move forward and ensure that their investment is secure, and to avoid any embarrassing repeats, is to remove the contributing factors of the incident, namely your insubordination.”

“But I...”

“To this end, they intend to reduce your faculties of free will. It is an intrusive and radical procedure, leaving only a few pathways in your mind for independent thought. Neurons dealing with debate, decision making, consequences, these are stripped. No more insubordination, you see, you will blindly follow the whim of your commander. Your humanity, Ottavio, is at stake.”

His blank stare irritated Penelope, “Perhaps I have not made myself clear enough, and I am running out of time. Very well, a quick history lesson then: Fifteen years ago a squad was sent to intercept a shipment of drugs bound for Tibet. It was a relief effort, organized by a branch of Tsang Tao, to aid after a devastating strain of Ebola broke out among the population. Houston wanted to intercept the shipment, divert it and then make the delivery itself, thus embarrassing Tsang Tao and winning favor with the population. A double blow. Of course, the plan would only have worked if the general populace had no idea that the drugs had been intercepted. It was a covert operation, kept well away from the snooping media.”

“The mission was a success, the drugs cache was intercepted without raising alarms. But two of the squad members found out what the mission was really about, that they had just stolen vital drugs from those who desperately needed it just so Houston could score political points, and, naturally, they had misgivings. They raised their concerns with their commanders, threatening to bring it to the attention of the divisional overseers, after which they were silenced.”

“Silenced?” asked Ottavio.

“Silenced. Not killed, mind, since that would have raised questions and gotten rid of two very capable operatives. No, they were silenced. They were two of the many, many candidates put through Houston's Assisted Compliance Surgery.”

“Sounds euphemistic.”

“Do not play coy. I know you already know about it. Norbert needs to be a little more careful in covering up his tracks when hacking the system. ACS sounds innocuous, but it is Houston's way of clamping a chain around your neck. Your physical faculties remain intact, however your personality, your ability to think critically, to judge, to empathize, Ottavio, all of it is removed,” said Penelope.

“How the hell can they do it?”

“I do not know, I am not a neurosurgeon, but I have seen the results first hand. One of them, Agent Maxwell Ingles, was a model Agent. His humanitarian record was second to none, the pin-up boy of Houston in San Francisco. A brief tiff with superior saw him reported for insubordination. A few more incidents later, and he was registered for ACS. He has gone on to be one of Houston's best agents, if by 'best' one means the highest body-count, the most ruthless attitude to mission success.”

Ottavio shook his head, “I don't think I've ever heard of him.”

“No,” said Penelope, “You have not, nor will you meet him. He, like the rest of the ACS candidates, tend to disappear and form secret squads. But this does not alter the truth. Houston Corps as an Entity has performed some terrible, terrible crimes to protect its interests. And you,

Ottavio, are in direct contrast to its interests.”

“What... can I do?” asked Ottavio, slowly grasping the severity of the situation.

Penelope leaned in, saying, “You are a human being. You have an intellect that is capable of astonishing feats, amazing, really. Yet, for your whole life you have let someone else do the thinking for you, happy that someone else has more information, is better informed, and therefore more apt to make the call.”

Her soft words screamed in Ottavio's ears. It was as if she was reading a story of his life.

As far back as he could remember, choices were made for him. He had been directed this way and that, being led by the nose, told to follow orders without question.

Many times he had grown angry at his lack of control. Many more times he inwardly sighed and accepted it. That was the way of the world, after all.

“The scary part about decisions is that we must live with the consequences, however terrifying they may be. You want your freedom, Ottavio, your soul cries out, and yet you are chained down by your own notion that any decision you make would be the wrong one. You are scared.”

Ottavio remained silent. He wanted to tell her she was wrong, but she was not. He wanted to say that he was not scared, but in truth he was. There was nothing to say, so he looked at her.

Penelope drew closer, “You can exist, Ottavio, you can float through this world and be buffeted by the forces around you, being blown this way and that. And you will exit this world in much the same way, leaving no impression upon it, swallowed by the maw of nothingness. Or you can survive, develop and grow if you make choices. Meaningful choices.”

“What choice, ma'am?”

“You must trust me.”

“Of course I trust you.”

He was shackled down, after all, in no position to argue.

“No. I do not mean in just words,” said Miss Penelope, “Do you remember when I spoke to you about saving yourself if the time came?”

Ottavio nodded cautiously, “Yes. You said if it came to saving myself over saving another, I should choose myself.”

“And you probably thought that only applied in the field of duty, yes? Well it applies right now, Ottavio. I need you choose to give up everything you think you know about Houston and trust me. After all this is over, you can do whatever you think is best, but please, I implore you, for now, trust me completely.”

Ottavio, his world starting to melt about him, closed his eyes. Trust in the Lady. Trust in Penelope.

He nodded, “I trust you.”

“Good. First things first, break your restraints.”

He looked down. Steel fibers in the straps glistened in the light. He heaved and tugged, but there was no budging them.

“I can't, ma'am,” he relented.

She looked at him with scorn, the old Penelope had returned.

“Agent, I order you to break your restraints,” she hissed, “And I would not ask such a thing if it were not possible. Time is wasting!”

Summoning his strength, he grunted and shook. His muscles threatened to tear away from his bones as he pushed them, and their myopic actuators, to the limit.

The gurney creaked and groaned and trembled. He gritted his teeth, wrenching at the cords. They moaned, but held.

He puffed to a stop, “I... can't!”

Miss Penelope shook her head slowly, “I understand. Here, this might help.”

She tapped a sequence on her touchpad. It squealed in Ottavio's ears.

His body shivered as a wave of electrical energy swept over him, through his bones, through his stomach and down to his toes.

The sensation disappeared as quickly as it came. On his optical display came the words, '*Deep Muscle Actuators – Activated*'.

“There. You should have...”

“Deep Muscle Actuators, huh? Could have used them a while back.”

“Quite. Now, for the last time, Ottavio, break your bloody restraints!”

Invigorated, powerful and determined, Ottavio gave it all he had. The steel belts pinged like a choir as they stretched to their limit.

Gripping harder, encouraged by the noise, he pulled with a steady force, his muscles fairly popping out his skin.

“Just a little more,” whispered Penelope, her eyes wide.

The gurney shook, the bars bent and with a tear the restraint on his right arms gave enough for him to ease it out.

It was only a short time before his left was freed, then his feet. He fumbled with the clamp on his head, fairly bending it out of shape to get it off.

“It does have a locking pin on the side, oh, never mind. It will add to the scene,” she said, watching him tear it off.

She looked at her touchpad, “And the time is almost upon us.”

“Time for what?” he asked, massaging his wrists.

“For you to accost me. Knock me down, Ottavio.”

He was confounded, “Ma'am?”

“Do not question me, trust me! For the next few minutes, your life is dependent on one thing, and that is doing exactly as I say, without question.”

“You want me to...”

“Strike me down.”

“Then what?”

“Then take my pass, unlock that door, then walk to up the corridor to the exit. There are two guards posted. Do not harm them permanently; they are good men. From there proceed up the stairwell to the mess hall. Turn right, go through the dormitory block to the western entrance, and go up the stairs to the upper level. The cameras will be deactivated along that specific route for a limited time. Do not deviate from it, do not stall or go back for any personal belongings. There is nothing here that you can bring with you, nothing you need. Do you understand?”

Ottavio paused, then nodded slowly, waiting for the punch line.

“There will be a service elevator waiting to go to the surface. Get in, and key in the code seven-five-three-one. This will override front end security for five minutes, allowing you to reach the surface undetected, no cameras, no sentry guns. At the surface you will see a truck waiting. Get in, get your head down and hold on.”

Ottavio's jaw dropped. “You... want me to defect? To desert?” he managed.

Penelope's delicate eyebrows furrowed.

“Ottavio. I am asking you to trust me. You are not defecting, you are saving your life,” hissed Penelope, looking at her watch, “And you do not have any time left. They will be coming for you shortly, and the cameras will be deactivated in exactly one minute from now. Remember, seven-five-three-one, the service elevator at the western entrance of the dormitories. Walk casually but quickly, and do not stop for *anything!*”

She stood erect, holding her head high in her usual demeanor, and took a measured step away from him. Ottavio watched his optical readout as the seconds ticked by. Less than a minute.

She watched him, waiting for him to strike. If he did leave, Houston Corps would assume he had defected to one of the other Entities, there would be no return, no apology.

Twenty seconds had passed. His brain tore itself apart, trying to make sense of it all. This was Penelope, a woman of utmost seriousness, a mind he trusted to be logical, clinical, telling him to abandon everything he had.

She was telling him that the powers of Houston Corps wished to turn him into a zombie, strip him of his free will. First the implants, then the mind control.

They wanted to create a robot. A damn biological robot.

Thirty seconds to decide. It made sense. That was their plan all along. He was a guinea pig, the first of an army of super-human warriors, unthinking, uncaring. And now that he was not following straight he was to be *rectified*.

Perhaps defection was not such a bad idea. Any of the other Entities would be more than happy to snap up a former Agent of Houston, especially one with top secret adaptations.

On the other hand, they would be more liable to dissect him and examine his advanced implants than risk using him out in the field.

Crap, ten seconds left. Time to decide. Time to choose.

“Damn it, Penelope!” he cursed.

Run, basing his future on her words, or place his trust in a faceless entity that could crush him like a bug.

“Choose!” she yelled.

He got to his feet. His legs felt a little light, slightly unreal.

He took a breath, apologized and caught her neatly in the stomach, then the chin. She collapsed roughly to the floor, out cold, very genuinely hurt.

Snatching her pass, he walked out the door.

The hall was empty. Two guards. There were supposed to be two guards posted. He looked behind him cautiously, continued down the corridor until he came to the door at the end.

Penelope's card worked fine, the door swung open, and Gus, the first of the pair on shift, turned to meet him, “Hullo Miss Pen...”

He never got to finish. Ottavio grabbed his shoulder, clasped his hand around his mouth and pulled him into the corridor. His cry was muffled as he fought Ottavio's embrace.

In response, Ottavio squeezed his neck lightly and, as the oxygen level to Gus' brain dropped, he fought less and less until he stopped struggling altogether. Ottavio left him on the floor.

“Aw, geez, Gus,” complained a voice from the hall, “You can't just walk off like that!”

It was Ranjid, back from his toilet break.

Ottavio appeared from the doorway and caught him a solid uppercut, putting his lights out. He picked up the limp body, put it next to his partner and closed the door.

He reached the stairs, took a breath and scuttled up.

“No going back now,” he muttered to himself, walking as if on auto-pilot.

The camera in the corner blinked steadily as he walked past.

He kept his eyes forward. Each step down the hall echoed his intentions. Each doorway he crossed screamed their suspicion.

“Relax, damn it,” he told himself, “Breathe!”

He turned into the mess hall. Seated guards barely looked up as he passed, busy as they were trying to enjoy some time off their feet.

The clanking of cutlery against metal plates mixed with the low murmur of private conversation drowned out his own nervous footsteps.

He made a beeline for the door on the other side, relieved to be leaving the rows of shining black armor to their meals.

“Otto!” called a voice. He opened the door, pretending not to hear, and walked through.

Cassandra came through the door behind him and grabbed his shoulder.

“Otto, wait up!” she said, “I didn't expect to see you.”

Miss Penelope's words were at the forefront of his mind. Ottavio did not break his stride.

She persisted, “Are you alright? You weren't supposed to be here. Otto, are you OK?”

“I'm fine, thanks Cass,” said Ottavio, “I have a few things I need to do, so if you don't mind...”

Cassandra had to hustle to keep up, “Ali gave us firm instructions that you were off site, not to be contacted. He said it was 'regrettable', you know. He sounded pretty serious.”

“It's all good, Cass. Probably a miscommunication...”

“Ali doesn't do miscommunications, Otto. Hey, slow down! Why won't you look at me? Otto,

what's gotten into you?"

Ottavio kept his pace and grunted, "I don't know, Cass, I really don't know. Everything is up in the air right now, and I can't be here when it comes down."

"So, what? You're leaving?" she laughed.

Her face dropped. His silence said it all. Cassandra scuttled in front of him.

"Oh my God, you're going to leave, aren't you?"

Ottavio did his best to gently push her aside.

She resisted, "No, no, you can't do this Otto. You can't! Whatever is in your head, forget it. It's not worth it."

He made no indication of stopping.

"What? OK, now you're beginning to freak me out. Why would you want to leave, anyway?"

"Please, Cass," said Ottavio, walking away with effort. She raced back in front of him.

"They won't let you go, you know, you're worth too much. This isn't the kind of job you can just up and leave when you feel like it."

Ottavio side stepped her.

"Cassandra," he whispered, heading up the stairs, "Do you think I don't know?"

"Obviously, otherwise you'd be heading in the other direction!"

"You shouldn't be talking to me Cassandra! I'm toxic. Persona non grata. This is serious shit."

"You're damn right, it is!" urged Cassandra, brushing her hair out from her face.

A pang of loss ripped at Ottavio's heart, knowing he would have to leave Cassandra as well. Up until that point his mind had quietly ignored exactly what he would be leaving, and Cassandra brushing hair from her face brought it home.

"Listen!" he said, "They're going to fry my brain. I'm marked down for ACS. If I stay, this is the last you'll see of me."

"Oh come on, Otto! Just listen to yourself, that's just being paranoid. I know what Norbert told you, but what if he's wrong? And you're scaring me."

Ottavio grabbed her arm.

"This isn't paranoia," he hissed, "And I need you to let me go."

Cassandra struggled her arm free. Ottavio continued up the stairs with Cassandra hot on his heels.

"Ottavio stop. Just stop! Think about what you're doing!" said Cassandra, trying to keep up, "This isn't your average nine to five. Ask for some leave. With all the stress you've been under... Look, if you try to walk out without clearance, they will shoot you. They won't ask questions, Otto, they won't stand for any shit. They will *shoot* you dead. Just stop already!"

He shook his head, the picture of Miss Penelope in his mind beckoning him to leave spurred him on. Trust her, he had to trust her.

"I am so sorry, Cassandra," he uttered, squaring his jaw and hastily trotting up the stairs and to the lift.

Cassandra did not let up.

"Look, I'm pissed about Emily, more than you can imagine. But I don't blame you for what happened, really!"

Tears crept into her eyes.

"Otto, please! I just lost Em, I can't lose you! Hell, if you get in that elevator, I..."

"Enough!" shouted Ottavio, fighting back the surging well of emotion building up inside of him, "Cass... let me go!"

Cassandra put her hand on the closing elevator door. It obligingly swished back open. She stood there in front of him, bewildered, sad and utterly void of words.

Ottavio placed his hand gently on hers.

"Cassandra," he whispered, "This is not the end. I will be back, I know it. But for now, you have to stand back. I'm not irrational and I'm not crazy. I promise you, I would never do anything to hurt you."

"You already have..."

An alarm pierced through the air.

Head of Security Kepler's voice came over the public address, "*Attention all staff and security! Attention all staff and security!*"

Cassandra jerked her hand back in a panic.

"*Agent Ottavio Manieri is to be brought to the Security Department immediately!*"

"Well, that's me," sighed Ottavio, hitting the elevator buttons and staring mournfully at Cassandra.

As the doors closed, she let out a whimper. Mouth open in disbelief, she stood a while, watching as the elevator's progress readout propelled Ottavio up to the surface.

The alarm bleated in her ears again, shaking her out of her stupor. She wheeled and ran back to her dormitory.

She was dry of tears, having spent them on Emily, now she wished for some more.

Visions of Ottavio being seared by plasma blasts danced in front of her. She brushed them aside furiously, but, like a disobedient child, her brain brought them back again and again.

She sat down on the bed, then stood and walked over to her coffee machine, waiting for something, anything, to break her vicious thoughts.

Suddenly the alarm stopped, drenching her room in a grave silence. Had he been killed? Perhaps he had come to his senses and returned, and was about to cop a grilling from Ali-Baba.

Yes, that was a fitting scenario. Silly Ottavio and his paranoid ideas. She tried a giggle, but it did not work.

Ottavio was not silly. Nor was he paranoid. That would be Lucas. Or Simon. Or even Emily. Not Ottavio. He was always so, normal, so balanced.

Her door slid open, revealing two armored members of security.

Cassandra started, but was silenced by the guard on the left, "Agent Cassandra Whithers? Come with us. Now, please."

## *Chapter 27*

*“A garden cultivating trust  
needs constant vigilance.”*

*- Wisdom of the Vigils*

Ottavio found the truck a bit crude and uncomfortable. Not that he expected a limousine, but a padded seat to help out with the rough terrain they were going over would have been a welcome addition.

He had been in the back for nearly half an hour. At first he had thrown himself in and ducked into the corner as it sped off, expecting a hail plasma rounds to come crashing through and tear the vehicle, and him, apart.

Five minutes later, he dared to lift his head and peek out of one of the tiny windows at the back. Since then he had been thinking hard about his situation.

Without a doubt, he had screwed up. Big time.

Based on the words of a woman with a clipboard, he had flushed his promising career as a special front line Agent for Houston irretrievably down a very smelly toilet.

Why did Penelope do this to him? Ideas floated in and swam around his mind. He swatted at a few of them. The whole thing had been a test of his loyalty to Houston.

Or Penelope was really a plant by another Entity to get him to defect. Or she planned on selling him and his adaptive implants to a black market dealer.

Nothing seemed to be the truth, so he decided to worry about his present condition.

Who the hell was driving this truck, anyway? He tapped loudly on the metal sides of the truck, to no response.

He tried again, harder, but the vehicle rolled on. Giving up, Ottavio wedged himself in the corner and planned his next move.

Whoever was driving was in league with Penelope. And he did trust Penelope, mostly.

Everything had happened like she had said, the cameras, the disabled turrets, the truck, so obviously she still had a plan for Ottavio.

There was really nothing left to do but wait and see what came next. And waiting was a viable option. At least for now.

After another bumpy twenty minutes the truck pulled up to a stop.

Ottavio got to his feet and stooped, watching the door like a hawk. Several scenarios, mostly involving fighting, whizzed through his head, but he need not have worried.

The doors were opened casually by a small woman in a dirty gray jumpsuit. Her face was olive and long. A fine crop of brown hair sat neatly on her head. A yellow box glimmered around her on his optical display.

She stood patiently as he got out and stretched his legs. The darkness of his enclosure, a garage it seemed, made him squint a little, but his eyes soon adjusted.

He checked his optical overlay, noting that he was a good eighty kilometers west of Houston's Special Operations Headquarters. It was a fair distance but not nearly far enough to make Ottavio feel safe. Somewhere in India might do it.

“Where am I?” he asked the woman. She closed the doors with a slam and slid the bolt into place.

“You are in a garage, Ottavio, where you are safe from the prying eyes of those that wish to do you harm. I can tell you no more, yet, for we must first deactivate any tracking modules or listening devices you may have on you,” she said.

“I haven't got anything on me,” protested Ottavio.

The lady smiled dimly, “Not that you are aware of, in any case.”

She produced a slim rod and waved it about Ottavio's body. It squealed as it passed his chest.

A couple more passes and she marked a spot on his chest with a black pen.

"There, now hold still. This will hurt but only for a brief period."

She replaced her rod and took out a thermic scalpel. Ottavio pulled away.

"Please," she said, "The jammer can only do so much. I have to get this out of you before they crack the code."

Ottavio hesitated.

"Who will crack what jammer, now?" he asked.

"Houston is tracking you via this link inside your chest. The jammer installed in the vehicle is designed to disrupt their signal, making it appear that you are miles away from this location. But the jamming code only makes it appear like you are moving. Any data analyzer worth their weight is going to twig that your movements are too unnatural. They will eventually interpolate..."

"Alright, I get it. Just hurry up and get the bloody thing out of me," huffed Ottavio, undoing his shirt and looking away.

The scalpel dragged across his skin leaving only a small, red line. The smell of burnt flesh wafted to his nose.

Ottavio looked down. He was genuinely surprised, "Huh?"

"Blast. Hold on, I am going to have to apply more pressure," said the woman, beads of sweat forming about her brow. After a few more strokes she made it down to the sub dermal layers.

"They didn't mention that I had that synthmesh. I thought Simon was the only... Ow! OK, now it's beginning to hurt. I thought he was the only one with, ah, steady on!" said Ottavio, "Geez, you go digging around inside a guy's chest with a scalpel and you don't even tell him your name."

She looked up briefly, a little annoyed.

"Hanifé," she said, and busied herself again with her task. After a bit more slicing she managed to make a small incision. She checked again the location of the implanted module with her rod and, satisfied, inserted a pair of forceps into the wound.

A bit of grunting on behalf of both parties produced a small disc.

"Geez, that's going to leave a mark," grumbled Ottavio, inspecting the damage.

Using a nearby rag, he mopped up some of the blood. He turned his attention to the disc.

"They didn't mention anything about a tracking device, either."

Hanifé snorted, "I think you had better get used to the idea of being ill informed."

She walked to the driver's door and handed the disc over to someone inside.

"Open that door, will you?" she asked Ottavio.

He obligingly heaved on the garage door behind him, flooding the room with light.

It had once been a quiet residential street. Row after row of pretty houses had lined a pleasant black strip. Memories of gardening, waving and baking still floated about, although they now mingled with the cold ravages of war.

The truck roared to life, reversed and sped off down the street.

"Hey, wasn't that our ride?" he asked Hanifé.

"Yes, it was. I am glad you are so observant," she said, deadpan, walking back inside the garage.

Ottavio analyzed her face, trying to get any kind of indication that what she just said was intended as sarcasm.

He followed behind, trying a different approach, "So we're walking now?"

"No. We wait here for a small time. That disc needs to be brought far away. The movements are still being recorded, Houston will have sent out a team to retrieve you. Only they will not find you," said Hanifé, "Of that you can be sure."

"I'm not sure of anything right now," said Ottavio, more to himself than to Hanifé.

Hanifé smiled and sat on a paint can.

"Believe me, I can understand your position," she said.

Ottavio blustered, "Understand? What the hell is there to understand? I don't know you, you don't know me, I don't know where I am or what I'm supposed to do next! I've got Houston hunting me down, thinking I've defected, and all because I listened to *her!*"

Hanifé let him rant.

“She said *trust me*, so I did. I trusted her. And now what? I run? I hide? Like an animal?” he went on, “I should have just done that kid over, like Simon said. Em would be alive, I’d still be employed, and none of this stuff would have happened.”

“And the innocent child would have been dead, with the blood on your hands, and your soul would have been poisoned with his blood,” pointed out Hanifé.

It struck a nerve. Ottavio raised his fist and punched the wall, leaving a hole in the plaster and woodwork.

A few more punches, a few more holes, and he calmed down.

“You’re right,” he panted, “I know. And so was Penelope. But what was I *supposed* to do?”

“Exactly what you did do, and nothing else. You were forced between following orders and following your heart. Which is why you are here.”

“I don’t have time for bullshit philosophy...”

“It is not bullshit!” snapped Hanifé. Her sudden change in tone made Ottavio start.

“We all make decisions, and we all must live with the outcomes. Like I said, I can understand completely,” she said, “My story is brief, if you will listen.”

He flopped down next to her. He was not going anywhere, anyway.

“The Lady Penelope was right to get you out of there. She did the same for me. I was a spy for Tsang-Tao a few years back. Espionage, counter intelligence. I was the one tapping into conversations and wheeling my way into the lives of top members of Redden. I was good. Too good. I started turning my talents around.”

“Initially it was for the challenge. The intelligence I uncovered out in the field came far too easily. Flash a bit of skin here, make the right comment there, and people will start to trust you. They tell you things. After a while, I found myself listening in on my superiors. Then theirs. Soon I worked my way up to the top brass. Well, Tao, with all their wonderful predictive software, realized that I knew many secrets, and that those secrets, in the wrong hands, could bring down several key members.”

“I don’t suppose you’d care to share?” began Ottavio.

“Ha! No, nothing that would be of interest to you. Besides, those members have either been replaced or managed to bury their involvement in a web of lies – no. And it does not relate to my story.”

“So what happened?”

“As soon as they suspected me, they hauled me into the Pit.”

“The Pit?”

“The Pit. It was a place... where we held and interrogated criminals. Starvation, electrocution, debased tortures of the most hideous kind. It was... simply horrible,” said Hanifé, looking at him with sad eyes.

Ottavio understood what she was driving at. He thought he had better move her along.

“But you escaped. How?” he asked.

Hanifé broke into a soft smile again.

“The Lady Penelope,” she said, looking off into the distance as she recalled the moment of her liberation, “She came for me. Security failed, my cell door slid open, just like she said it would. I ran. I ran hard like she told me. Trust in the Lady Penelope.”

Ottavio scratched his head. The box around Hanifé pulsed a slow green.

“Who do you work for?” he asked finally, “Now, I mean. And Penelope?”

“Look,” hushed Hanifé, pointing to the doorway, “Over the top of the roof, do you see it?”

Ottavio did. His vision enhanced a series of black dots in the sky, revealing a squadron of AePCs flying at top speed.

“That’s them, isn’t it, Hanifé? That’s them hunting me down.”

He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Come away from the door now. The chance of them picking up an image of you from this distance is remote, but not impossible, and their software improves constantly. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

Ottavio chuckled, "Thirty three percent and forty eight percent respectively."

Hanifé looked at him sideways, "A simple yes would have sufficed."

"That was supposed to be a joke. You see, these implants in my eyes tell me, or show me rather, the body's... Oh, forget it. Yes, miss, I could go a bite. If I'm going to be hunted down and killed, it may as well be on a full stomach."

Hanifé scolded him, "No! You are not to be killed, nor should you feel sorry for yourself. You have been saved. The Lady Penelope thinks you are worthy enough for her attention, and so you must rejoice! You are free, Ottavio, and you will be safe soon, you will see. Now come, I have food."

She led him inside the house. The paint was peeling off the walls and ceiling, the furniture had been destroyed by insects and vermin.

Dust sprinkled about them as they walked to the kitchen. On the bench was a canister of a pleasant, meaty soup. Soon they were both satisfied.

"What will happen to the driver?" asked Ottavio.

Hanifé replied, "Brother Alistair? Oh, he will ditch your tracker somewhere special and drive off. As the jammer moves out of range, your apparent position will become more focused, and Houston will send in their jackals."

"I just can't believe it, you know?" said Ottavio, "I spent my best years at Houston. They put me on the front line, modded me up. Now I'm a criminal... Hang on, he's your brother? I mean, you two don't look anything alike..."

A ripple of laughter filled the kitchen.

"No, Ottavio, no, he is not my brother, not in the biological sense. All shall become clear to you soon. Suffice to say that we share a common house."

"A flat mate?"

"Something like that," she said, shrugging, "I am being deliberately evasive, as you have probably guessed, about my allegiances. You have a right to know, and as I promised it will come to you soon. For now, please be content to endure us a bit longer. The second transport will be here soon, and in that time we must be ready."

"GT United?" guessed Ottavio.

Hanifé shook her head, "It is not an Entity, Ottavio. I doubt very much you would understand if I... wait, what is that?"

There was a slight scratching noise coming from the other room. Ottavio and Hanifé poked their heads out and listened. It was coming from the front door.

"Someone's outside," he huffed, walking to the door, "Your buddy?"

Hanifé ran in front of him and pushed his shoulders.

"Hush! I cannot be them, they are too early," she whispered, "Here, take this."

She passed Ottavio a P-67 pistol.

"Thirteen armor piercing rounds pre-loaded. Do not fire unless I say."

Ottavio nodded. She sidled up to the side of the door, taking out and cocking her own pistol.

"Who goes there?" she called through the doorway. There was no response, only a faint scratching noise at the door.

"Get down!" she cried, throwing herself back and pulling Ottavio with her.

The door splintered in a ball of flame. Shaped charges fixed to the other side made short work of the flimsy wooden door.

Ottavio's reflexes kicked in. He rolled over to see figures in shining black armor carrying machine pistols storming through the flaming breach.

He peeled off two rounds at the first intruder, hitting him squarely in the chest and neck.

The bullets passed through cleanly, spraying a rich red cloud upon the men behind. He scrabbled wildly at the neck wound, impeding the progress of his companions.

Ottavio pulled Hanifé back into the kitchen. One of the remaining intruders fired wild bursts of lead after him as the other struggled to wipe obscuring blood from his visor.

Plaster and paint flecks showered the pair as they ducked behind the wall in the kitchen. The

oven, having outlived the ravages of war and years of neglect, finally succumbed to a persistent stream of bullets, and fell noisily to the floor.

Poised, Ottavio looked at Hanifé, who was crouching next to him, holding a flash bang grenade.

“Do it,” he mouthed. Hanifé skidded the grenade into the next room and ducked back behind the wall, covering her ears.

A bright light flashed, a stunning crack sounded and Ottavio hurled around to see the black clad men retreating in confusion toward the garage entrance way.

Four well placed rounds saw them crumple uselessly to the floor. A creak on the stairs behind him alerted Ottavio to another presence.

Whirling, he drew his gun up to face the threat, only to have a strong fist belt his pistol away.

A round buried itself into the roof as his gun sailed over to the other side of the room. Another fist caught Ottavio across the face, spinning him around with its momentum.

He stumbled backward, narrowly avoiding another crushing blow.

His aggressor launched off the stairs at Ottavio, knocking him down. The full weight of a solid mound of muscle sat on Ottavio, stealing his breath momentarily.

The flash of a blade swinging down brought him to his senses.

He grasped the wrist with his left hand and squeezed with his inhuman might. The grisly crunch of cartilage moving against bone sounded, outdone by the yelp of the man on top.

The knife dropped onto the floor, with the razor sharp tip narrowly missing Ottavio's ear.

With amazing strength Ottavio pushed with all of his might and hurled the massive hulk off his chest, slamming him soundly into the wall opposite.

Dazed and confused, he did not see Ottavio bearing down upon him like an enraged bull.

Ottavio plowed into him with his elbow, led with a fast jab to the head, followed with a solid punch to the stomach and a neat upper cut to the chin, shattering the black helmet and knocking the surprised assailant unconscious.

Panting, Ottavio danced on his feet, wide eyed, scanning the room for signs of another threat.

There was none so he ran back to the kitchen.

“Who the hell was that?” he panted, “Did you piss off the neighbors or what?”

Hanifé pushed past him, checking the bodies on the ground. She stopped short of the large black hulk sprawled out on the stairs.

“Well, do not just stand there,” she muttered, feeling for a pulse, “Give me your knife.”

Ottavio paused and frowned. Hanifé sighed loudly, “Come on, Ottavio. This one is only unconscious, not dead.”

Ottavio remained where he was. He kept his knife sheathed.

“He is unarmed,” he protested, “Can't we just tie him up or something? They might have some cuffs on them.”

“He is a danger to myself and to yourself. He must die. Besides, you had no problem killing the others. Do what must be done.”

“That's different. They were a direct threat. This one has been subdued,” said Ottavio, “Killing him now would be murder.”

“It would have been self-defense a few seconds ago, and we do not know when the rest will arrive.”

“The rest?” asked Ottavio.

Hanifé nodded, “Yes, the rest. This was clearly a forward raiding party, designed to subdue or otherwise distract us while the others catch up. Someone must have noticed your getaway.”

Ottavio held his hand up, “Wait up, I hear an engine.”

Sure enough, the sound of a diesel engine was rumbling closer. Ottavio sidled up the window and looked out. Down the street came rolling a van, dark and forbidding.

Hanifé looked as well and smiled, “Good. Our ride has arrived and not before time. Be ready to leave. Grab these bodies, and that live one and put them in the back with you. You can kill him on the way.”

The truck pulled up neatly into the garage. In two trips Ottavio hauled the bodies in bundled them into the back like sacks of potatoes. The last groaned as he dropped it down.

“Oh, shut up,” he muttered, and closed the door behind him.

Hanifé scrambled into the front and they were away down the street.

It was more comfortable than the last ride. There were a couple of seats bolted to the side, for starters, and there was an open metal grill separating the front cabin from the back.

Hanifé turned to face him. “We may have cut this a little fine, I am afraid,” she said, “Ottavio, this is Brother Janus. Hold on tight. And take care of that one if he comes to.”

He looked back through a portal window in the rear door. Ramshackle houses drifted past as they sped through the suburb, turning right here, turning left there.

Ottavio kept his eyes on the side streets, expecting an AePC to come swinging down to drop off troops, or to find a road block bristling with guns and vehicles.

Just as they were about to swing another left, a silver transport rolled into view.

“We got someone behind us, guys,” said Ottavio.

“All good, taken care of, but thank you all the same,” said Brother Janus.

The engine roared a little higher and the truck raced over the empty streets. The silver transport turned left as well.

“Hang on, chaps!” yelled Brother Janus as he took the vehicle over the remains of a car park. He dodged among empty, burnt out shells, missed black piles of melted plastic and ash and launched up a ramp to the second floor of the car park.

“Wait, you're going up? What if they block of the exit?”

“Then we will need to clear a path, boyo! Sister, does this one think before he talks?”

She rolled her eyes, “Just keep your eyes on the road.”

The silver transport reached the top of the ramp and turned to follow them through.

The pillar up in front of them exploded in a cloud of dust. Part of the roof slumped, causing the truck to swerve dangerously past the next pillar.

“Damn it! Those sods are using cannons! Well, two can play at that game!” laughed Brother Janus, “Sister, if you would do the honors?”

He flicked a couple of switches and a panel flipped up in front of Sister Hanifé. The truck lurched as she launched back a volley of plasma.

“Keep her steady, Brother!” she called, fighting to train the cross hairs as Brother Janus heaved the truck around a concrete barrier and into the dark bowels of the shopping mall.

The mall had been home to squatters for some time. Safe from the rain, full of interesting finds, it had been a natural attraction for the survivors left destitute after the war.

A little citadel, it had established a quasi-society of squatters and drifters, each claiming the empty shells of shops as their own, each doing their all to protect their meager belongings and live what passed as a life.

It was into this delicate microcosm that Brother Janus drove his transport. Squatters scrambled out of the way as the vehicle tore around their makeshift tents and slipped and raced along the cracked floor.

Brother Janus flashed his lights and sounded the horn.

“Come on, you lot, move it! Move it!” he yelled.

Crowds of derelicts, huddled around flaming barrels, watched the show with interest as the silver transport burst in after. They scrambled for their lives as it fired its cannons. They huddled against barriers as it smashed through their beds.

The silver van launched volley after volley of cannon round, tearing the walls to pieces and raining concrete down on the frightened people.

Brother Janus pulled on the handbrake and flipped the truck to the right in a perfectly executed turn. They were headed to what used to be a food court, a ring raised over the dining area below.

“Hang onto your butts, people!” yelled Brother Janus.

Ottavio gripped his hand rail tight and braced his feet against the floor. Sister Hanifé did the

same.

The truck skidded a sharp right, smashing noisily into a pile of mannequins. Brother Janus gunned the engines, threw the truck forward and launched it through the barrier.

It sailed cleanly over the defunct fountain in the center of the court, and bounced, skidded and bumped on the floor below.

The silver transport screeched to a halt over the breach and hurled a few more rounds at the tail of the truck as it disappeared out through the glass doors.

Brother Janus laughed, "Well, Sister, what did you think of that, then, what? Do I still have it, or do I still have it?"

She ignored him, but kept her eye on her targeting console for any sign of another transport.

Ottavio looked through each window, trying to see if there was anything else following them. The streets, however, were empty.

He started to relax but then suddenly lurched backwards from the window.

Like magic another van had materialized behind them. Ottavio started, but Sister Hanifé chuckled softly, "Relax, Ottavio. That is Brother Hisham."

"Brother... Where the bloody... How did he..." faltered a bewildered Ottavio, wide eyed with amazement, "Who is Brother Hisham?"

"Brother Hisham is our diversion. Brother Janus, if you would engage the cloak," said Sister Hanifé.

The driver tapped a button on the dash. The engine pulsed, revving higher to deliver more energy. A dark, hazy cloud fell over the window out from which Ottavio was looking.

In the van behind, the driver made a motion with his hand and pulled away to the right, driving off deeper into the suburban wreckage.

Ottavio simply stared through the gloomy haze in wonder.

"Are we... cloaked? As in invisible or something?"

"Yes."

"Oh," said Ottavio.

He sat back to ponder his situation as the van hummed through the streets. Cloaked vans, black armored bad-guys, Penelope's imploring look, Cassandra's tears. It really was all too much for one mind to comprehend at once.

A grunt to his side drew his attention. On top of the pile of bloodied bodies, the lone survivor lifted his head wearily, taking stock of his condition.

Another grunt and he heaved a body off himself, rolled off the pile, landing at Ottavio's feet.

"Ottavio boy, if you would be so kind as to keep our friend subdued, good chap," called Brother Janus, "The last thing I need is you two having a bit of rough and tumble back there."

Ottavio reached forward and pulled off the helmet. Underneath was a bruised and bloodied face, scarred and dazed, staring back at him. His bald head looked recently cropped.

"Who are you?" asked Ottavio.

It seemed the best question to ask. With a bit of coercion, he might even get an answer. Heck, even a grunt was better than all the evasion Sister Hanifé had given him so far.

His captive grunted. Well, perhaps a grunt was not enough.

He tried again, "Who are you?"

The man's face screwed into a ball. He let out an incomprehensible shout and lurched at Ottavio.

He expected some kind of hostile reaction and deftly avoided the lunge, grabbed his arm and twisted him around. He took him by the neck and pressed him to the floor of the van.

"Now," he said, applying torsion to the arm, almost twisting it out of its socket, "Who the Hell are you?"

Half words, saliva, moans and sighs, a general mess of disjointed babble, emanated from his mouth. Wild eyes feverishly rolled into his eyelids and back out, looking for all the world like a rabid dog.

"Stop the games, pal! Start talking or I start playing rough."

“You are wasting your breath, Ottavio,” called Sister Hanifé from the front.

“Why?” he called back, annoyed that she broke his attention.

“Because this one is incapable,” she said, “This one is a shell of a human. Ask away. He will not answer, not because he does not want to, but because he has not the faculties.”

Ottavio looked down at the writhing hulk beneath him, confused.

“He's mute?” he asked.

“He has been ordered not to talk. Whether he wants to talk or not is not his decision. He is a mindless drone. Stripped of his individuality and free thought. The only words he can speak are those he has been programmed to speak. He has been built to follow orders, carry out commands, never question...”

Ottavio looked over slowly. The van rocked a little as the driver navigated over the remnants of a free-way. Sister Hanifé met his eyes with her own dark orbs.

He did not need to say it, but did anyway, “This... is what Houston had in store for me.”

Sister Hanifé nodded, “You would have become the perfect Agent. Able, loyal, unquestioning. As it is, Houston already planned this for you from day one, but the Lady Penelope was able to delay it.”

“So he is from Houston, then. They're already onto me!” said Ottavio.

Hanifé shook her head, “Yes. And No. Here.”

She tossed him some cuffs.

“Enough with the mysterious stranger bullshit already,” growled Ottavio, slipping the cuffs on the captive before sitting him back upright.

The captive drooped his head, muttering incoherently. Ottavio finished up and sat back on his seat.

“I'm really not in the mood for crap right now.”

“Nor am I, Ottavio. I was merely validating your observations in turn. Yes, he is from Houston, as is evident by the tattoo on his neck. You did not notice? Have a look. There. But no,” she said, “They are not onto you. These grunts have been appropriated by and operate for another party.”

“Who? And tell it to me straight.”

“How much longer?” she asked Brother Janus.

He hummed, “What? Oh, I would say a good ten, maybe fifteen minutes to reach the port. If there are no disturbances along the way. And if the route has not been altered.”

She sighed. “I suppose I can indulge you. Ottavio, let me tell you first that you have been lied to.”

“And I'm supposed to be surprised?” he scoffed. He rested his foot against his groaning captive to keep him in place.

“Perhaps. That is up to you. I can tell you the truth now, and you can react to it whatever way you wish. Now do you wish me to proceed?”

Ottavio, out of words, merely shrugged.

“Yeah,” he sighed, “I've got some time to kill.”

“Houston is rotten, rotten all the way to the top. Presidents Gherig and Kallam? Blood thirsty monsters, responsible for the slaughter of thousands of lives, indirectly for hundreds of thousands. President Gherig has been waging his personal war against Tsang-Tao for years. The ideals and the goals they put forward as their 'mission', of freedom, peace and prosperity, are nothing more than fluff. I can see from your expression that you do not agree.”

“No, I don't. You're sounding a lot like a Luddite fanatic.”

“In what way?”

“I don't know. What about the APSIS? That saved the lives of millions.”

“Yes. Yes, it did, according to projections. But it is, in effect, just another facet of one of their many crimes. Before you contradict me, let me explain. The radioactive pollution that their wonderful machine cleaned up, from where did this come? Houston told us where, from barrels of waste spilled from ruptured subterranean dumps. How did the dumps rupture? Movement of the

earth's crust, they said. The engineering faults of a prior generation, shame upon them, shame. How could they be so vulgar, so backward as to unsafely dump waste into the waters, into underground caverns? Well, it was such a plausible explanation, so neat and tidy, someone to blame who was not around," said Sister Hanifé.

Ottavio adjusted his footing. He started to feel like he was being lectured.

"All of the world's scientists nodded their heads in agreement, and those that dared question were shunned and vilified. After all, did it really matter the source? No, it only mattered that there was something wrong, an explanation, and that someone could come along and fix it. People were scared. An invisible killer, a legacy from the past."

Ottavio's head tilted as he digested this idea. He said, "I'm not convinced. I mean, why bother? Why spend billions then developing a solution if it's just a front?"

Sister Hanifé grew serious, "Why, indeed? It is a poignant question, Ottavio. *Why* is still the reason Houston operates today. *Why* is the reason you are the way that you are. *Why* is the reason they have the public's full permission to experiment and play with humanity with almost no restraints. By gloriously saving the world and gaining their trust, they have been given a blank check to do anything they need in the name of saving the human populace. By making up a marvelous concoction of lies, they caused hysteria. By blaming mistakes made by others in the past, saying that the dumps were not made securely in the first place, they ensured that nobody alive could refute it."

She pushed the targeting console away.

"And by pointing to a hazardous source at the depths of the oceans, where only a handful of specialized vehicles had any chance of survival, they kept the problem contained, unquestioned. The alleged billions that were spent in a supposed humanitarian effort, even if actual, would be nothing compared to what they have attained," she said.

The van rocked on. Trees whizzed past the windows. They were entering a more lush area, forested and green. It made a pleasant change from the skeletal houses of suburbia.

"The mutated fish..." said Ottavio.

"Props. Classic smoke and mirrors. A few key scientific claims here, a couple of half-truths there. Geiger counter readings for the cameras, some doctored satellite imagery. All of it designed to get the public crying out for a cure. And there it was, all ready to be shipped out and turned on."

"So, there was never any danger? The whole thing is a farce?"

"There were never any radioactive dumps. Well, there is a small pocket of benign waste material located close to the Pacific region, but it is intact and secure. The California and Oklahoma sites were fabricated."

"What about overseas?"

"Hong Kong? Lusaka? Perth? All fakes. Every one close to either a natural cavity, or some uninvestigable man made structure. Now, do not get me wrong, the APSIS does indeed work, and it has been cleaning up radiation for many years now, radiation that is leached into the waters at regular intervals depending on how much the world needs reminding of the good that Houston has performed."

Brother Janus interrupted, "Do not forget, my good Sister, the other boon that came with the APSIS in the form of sanctioned foreign invasion. Whoops!"

The truck jolted as Brother Janus skidded around a hulk of metal lying in the middle of the road.

"Eyes forward, good Brother. Yes, Ottavio, after the success of their Pacific and Oklahoma campaign, countries were practically begging for Houston to investigate their own radioactive concerns. Lo and behold, Houston is given permission create and maintain facilities on foreign soil."

Sister Hanifé smiled, "You will need convincing, of this I am sure. And why not? You have lived your life believing you were working for the right team, the good team, the team that saved humanity."

"So I should have worked for Redden?"

“Pah! Ottavio, you sound like a naïve child. I am sorry, I did not mean to chide. Redden is Houston. Houston is Redden. They are just two fingers of the same hand,” said Sister Hanifé.

He shook his head, “No way.”

“Yes way. It is much easier to rule from behind closed doors, you see. Redden is seen to be at odds with Houston. Like competitors or bitter rivals. And it is always just that little bit behind, always playing catch up. If a scapegoat is needed, Redden is blamed. If kudos is granted, it gets passed to Houston,” said Sister Hanifé, “In this way, the population happily backs the winner, proud that they chose the right one. Like a hero in a long running story, Houston always comes out on top. A few small victories for Redden here and there, just to keep things interesting, but in the end Houston will save the day. There are no checks, no balances, only a single Entity with different faces, self-governing and growing more powerful by the day.”

“Alright. So, what about these goons?” asked Ottavio, nudging his foot, “You said that Houston hasn't found me, but they're from Houston. ACS, right? So who sent them?”

The captive grunted.

Sister Hanifé nodded her head, “That is an excellent question, and one we hope to answer by analyzing the, ahem, samples you have collected.”

“Samples? They're not samples!”

“They are void of humanity, they have lost anything in them that...”

Brother Janus interrupted, “I am terribly sorry to break up your little powwow, but we are about to about to enter the decontamination area. If you could inform our guest on the correct protocol, Sister?”

The van pulled into a gravel path into the trees, slowing to a crawl inside what used to be a pig sty.

The pigs and farmers had long since gone, but the faint stench of it all lingered about the place. It was a blessing that Brother Janus had the vents closed.

Sister Hanifé held up a finger. Ottavio looked at it.

“One. Do not wander off. Follow me or you will be destroyed,” she said.

She raised a second finger, “Two. Do everything I ask, and nothing less. Complete cooperation is vital to the next few minutes of your survival.”

A third finger rose, “Three. Do not speak to anyone. You are not trusted, and have no place here.”

She looked him in the eye, “Yet.”

The van reached the end of the row of pig pens and parked over a large grating on the floor.

A clunk sounded, then a constant whirring, and the van rapidly descended. Ottavio clung to the side of the van to steady himself.

“When we stop, I will let you out of the back of the van. You will follow behind me to a chamber. There, we three shall undergo a decontamination process. Although you see nobody, there will be many forms of suppression aimed directly at you at all times.”

Ottavio nodded his comprehension, “Suppression.”

The whirring slowed, the van did too. It stopped with a metallic grunt and sat still in a bath of darkness.

Sister Hanifé moved to the back of the van, opened the doors and helped Ottavio out.

So this was freedom. It did not feel anything like he had expected. The air was the same. Gravity was the same. And, to boot, there was the familiar sound of someone telling him exactly what he must and must not do.

Now that he was not being hunted like vermin, now had time to think, his mind began to pick up the pieces.

There, in the underground cavern, underneath a disused pigsty in the middle of the wastes, he felt a deep sense of regret. In the blackness of the cavern he could see Cassandra, her face hot with tears, pleading for him to stay.

He made up his mind. At the first chance he had, he would go back for her. And Lucas. If Houston really was the big bad wolf that Sister Hanifé made them out to be, then they, too, were in

trouble.

Sister Hanifé clicked her fingers in front of his face, breaking his thoughts.  
“Follow me closely,” she ordered.

## Chapter 28

*“Nothing is so sobering  
as a cold dose of the facts.”*

*- Wisdom of the Vigils*

It felt sterile, Ryan's room. It was clean, well lit, comfortable surely, but sterile.

There was a hum. Not the hum of humanity or busy streets, rather the audible and palpable hum of electric lighting mixed with air conditioning.

The temperature was reasonable, if not a little chilly, but it did mean that heavier clothing was a pleasure to wear. Art pieces adorned the walls, doing their best to hide the drab grays and whites.

He stared at a mirror on the desk, not for vanity, nor was he making himself presentable. Ryan was just looking. He had seen that face so many times before, questioned it, talked to it, and looked deep into its eyes.

He saw the face of the savior of humanity. Ryan the Savior.

It was proud, noble. It shone with accomplishment. He had defied the Vigils, cut the umbilical cord so to speak, defeated his oppressive ring masters.

The face had shown its power in facing up to what needed to be done. It had remained poised as the hands it commanded destroyed the maglev system.

Nobody could have questioned that it was determined. Nobody could have doubted the loyalty to humanity that day. He had made a hard decision and stuck by it, even though it went against his most ingrained sense of morality.

That face staring back brought in a team of trained operatives hundreds of kilometers, armed and deadly, to extract it, and the body to which it belonged, because it was important.

Special breeds of people are born among the hordes, diamonds in the coal, wheat among the chaff. He was one of them, he was special. He would accomplish great things.

A sickening feeling tickled his stomach. Without a second thought, he banished it, and ruminated back on the day.

Little people. Little ants. They scurried around, they were busy, they were self-absorbed, but they were insignificant. But he was significant. Not that he cared for them, but he could lead them into the future. That was his destiny.

The feeling crept back. It was annoyed at being ignored, and now, with the silence of the room, the chill in the air, it grew in strength.

Ryan the Savior? More like Ryan the Conqueror? He was stunned by the thought that came blurting out to the fore.

Rulers are hard to miss. In general, they are adorned in the finest clothing, command armies, rule on high. Forever they had to guard themselves against selfish enemies.

The people they ruled over constantly criticized them. It was a thankless task. No, that is not what he sought.

Those little ants, they would not thank him for his efforts. He was just another face in the crowd.

He had caused such chaos, and yet, and yet he was Ryan the Unknown, Ryan the Faceless. No history book would detail his biography. The Vigils would have struck him from their records, abandoning his history with them.

Master Theodore was a fool to think he would be suitable for their ways. He was not a Vigil.

While at first he enjoyed observing and recording, being unseen in the crowd, he quickly grew frustrated at their insistence on planning. So many wasted opportunities. All the resources and power in the world, and for what? To be wasted on mooncalves.

He had never asked to join them. It was thrust upon him. What choice could he have made, given the options of joining the Vigils, or remaining in the wallows of the wastes?

Master Theodore had saved his life, it was true, Ryan could not deny that, but he had squandered his years. As he practiced his mantras and learned his place in the Brotherhood, that for the rest of his life he would remain invisible to the world, his anger grew.

Then Marcus, Brother Marcus back then, had spoken to him. Ryan recalled his words as he gazed at the mirror.

He spoke of a better way, a different way. He spoke of making decisions as they became necessary, rather than in hindsight.

Great ideas were born of struggles, history proved it. Chaos, he said, was natural, inevitable, but *controlled* chaos, that was something only a human could create.

Shocked, Ryan had come away from Brother Marcus with such mixed feelings. Everything he had said made sense, but, at the same time, it was at odds with the concept of moderation, of preservation of life, of eliminating chaos.

In short, it was against everything that had been rammed down his throat since he was nine.

Up until that point, he did not think that he had a choice. He was an Acolyte, and would remain so until he became accepted as a Brother, or had his memory erased, or died.

But Marcus had shown him a new choice, a path to be something more than a faceless relic cast in the walls of the cellars of time.

The nagging sensation in his stomach became pronounced. It became uncomfortable to sit, so he stood and walked to the wall.

He pretended to admire the reproduction of the Monet there, attempting to lose himself in the colors. It did not work.

His mind did everything to ignore it. He thought about Father Abraham, and whether he had plans for him. Of course he did, otherwise he would not be here.

Conclusion reached, his mind grappled for something, anything else. He thought about Kahira, and whether she was attractive. She was, very, but he could not think of her as a sexual object now.

Content that it was winning the battle, the sensation persisted. Why would he even think about Kahira that way? She was too old for him, and she would never consider him as attractive, surely.

And now he was thinking like a teenager, a mere boy letting his hormones and fantastic thoughts run rampant. He was losing control over his mind.

Frantically, Ryan took a book from the shelf and flipped to the first page.

The words refused to be read. They danced about under his eyes. He swore and closed it. Perhaps the television. Perhaps the internet. He could lose his mind for just an hour or so. Perhaps he could drink.

But no, for then he would be like the very people he despised.

Those slovenly masses who wiled their hours away in front of screens, lost in a man-made fantasy, eager to reach the end of their existence before accomplishing anything.

How scared they were of living! How they ducked away and absorbed themselves by ignoring the beast that was eating them alive. Why did he care about them? Why did his mind continue to think of the masses? Those pathetic ants!

The nagging sensation stopped abruptly. It had led him, kicking and screaming, to this point, and so sat back and watched. Ryan collapsed back into his chair and looked again at the mirror.

He shrank back as he noticed the eyes staring at him.

They were not of Ryan the Savior, nor Ryan the Conqueror.

These were the eyes of Ryan the Murderer.

Blood was on his hands. He had justified it over and over in his mind. The struggle had to recommence, people needed to suffer to feel life. How many lives he had saved by killing... *murdering*.

No! He was not a murderer!

But he had done it. He had killed indiscriminately. He had done so with a heavy heart, with regret for the lives that were so abruptly terminated, with sorrow for the families of those who would be left to grieve. He had performed the deed without malice. That had to count for

something.

They were just people. There were more, so many more of them. All of them, self-absorbed wretches, lost in their own lives. So why did he care about them? The question rattled back and forth as he pushed it away. Each time it came back to the fore. Why did he care?

Ryan had detached himself from society a long time ago. To grow, to become more than human, he needed to let go of the basic desire to love and to be loved.

It had been a conscious decision of which he reminded himself every day, determined not to let his the inner animal take control.

But it had never gone away. Buried, ignored, scorned perhaps, but it had never left him. And now it was back, with a friend called Conscience.

He lowered his head into his hands and let tears gush from his eyes. Tears of sorrow. Tears of regret. The first tears he had spilled for nearly ten years.

He was human, after all. That was why he cared.

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## *Afterword*

Thank you for reading *Adaptation – Part I*. I truly hope that you enjoyed reading, as much as I have enjoyed writing it, but, really, the story is only just getting started. The stage has been set, and both Ottavio and Ryan will need to face the consequences of their choices. Things certainly cannot be left up in the air, as it were.

Join me in the rest of *Adaptation*. As a taste, here is the start of the next leg of Ryan's path:

*“We have two paths that we may choose:  
Struggle up the mountain to join the stars,  
Or slide back down to the jagged rocks.”*  
- Father Abraham

Grow and decay. A paradox, each must precede the other for life to continue. Given any point in time, there will be equal amounts of each, growth and decay, as a carnivore feeds off the carcass of an herbivore, or as bacteria thrive on the rotting remains of an eagle, long since fallen from grace.

Ryan wondered, as he stared at the ceiling, whether the amount of life in the universe was a constant. Energy, he reasoned, could not be created, nor destroyed, merely manifest itself in various forms. Momentum, too, could be shown to be constant in a system.

Life, that surging, rippling, bubbling stuff, could behave the same way, surely.

It never stopped moving about and rearranging itself, giving the illusion of limitlessness. But Ryan knew better. He could see behind the shroud. With life came death to make way for yet more life. Grow and decay. Grow and decay.

Humanity, then, was an attempt at monopolizing the share of this thing called Life over other species. That sounded trivial. Perhaps it was.

Perhaps the virtues of humanity, its society and art, were merely tools developed to further its advance, in just the same way as tigers had claws and bulls had horns. Growth.

But horns only grew because of the need to defend a beast from a foe with teeth. Now that the foe had been vanquished, humanity would certainly lose that which it had fought so hard to develop.

The arts would atrophy, religion would wane, society would crumble, and man would recline into a technologically induced slumber, content that it had won its battle in this small pocket of the universe. Decay.

Life was unfair. It had to be. He looked down and found that he was clenching his fist.

Ryan got off the bed, shaved and washed his face, daring to look in the mirror. His eyes stared back, steeled and ready. No longer did he care for the lives that he had slaughtered.

Brother Marcus was right. Brother Holland was right. Father Abraham was right. To be as strong as he needed to be, to be the man to change history, he had to do away with his conscience. What was it, anyway? Yet another tool to aid people to get along with other people, to stop societies from imploding.

He was better than that, stronger than that. His conscience did not rule him. In the society he would build, there would be no place for such absurdities.

So long ago he had thrust it to the bottom of his stomach, covered in gastric juices and other biological stuff, where it belonged. He could do it again. Father Abraham would be proud to call him his own.

He would be a Director, he would be brave enough to save humanity, and he would show the *Vigils* the error of their ancient, outdated ideologies.

It was time to grow up, he decided, it was time to leave the child behind and experience life as an adult. Puberty was not all that great, anyway, what with the hormones and emotions and strange ideas.

If there was some kind of definitive moment defining when he began walking as a man, he had not experienced it yet. He did not feel that age was a true guide. What were years, anyway?

Nor could it be some cataclysmic moment, otherwise every child would need to experience it.

It was his birthday today, not that anyone knew, and he had always thought that when he reached his twentieth milestone, he would feel magically different, transformed, like a moth from a caterpillar.

Only he did not feel that way. He felt like he did yesterday, which was pretty much how he felt the day before that.

He slumped. It was, then, merely a gradual transition from one to the other. Like a pot slowly warming, there was no exact point when it left warm and reached a simmer. He wondered if it was possible that he might never grow up, that, due to circumstances or lack thereof, he would remain in his adolescence forever, waiting for the chance to prove his mettle.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, he got dressed and walked to the door of his dormitory. Enough time had been wasted wondering about things that could not be answered.

The door hissed and blew cold plumes of mist about him as the humidity in his room touched the chilly air outside. Thermally camouflaged, the main areas of the Directors' stronghold were kept cold with respect to ambient temperatures making it appear like an innocent subterranean waterway to any nosey satellites or geoscanners.

He marched along, chest out, feeling the icy chill against his neck. He resisted the urge to tighten his jumper, preferring instead to let the cold remind him that he was not subject to fearing the elements. He was above such base concerns.

Kahira, her dark, smooth face contrasting against her white pullover, came up stealthily behind him and matched his stride easily. She had long legs, a tall frame, and she put it to use. Against her he looked and felt very much like a child.

“So, you've emerged at last. You had better not mistake this as a holiday resort, boy!” she scolded, “Time flows within these walls the same as it does on the outside.”

“I was lost in contemplation. Sorry, Kahira, I did not know that I was on a schedule otherwise I would have readied myself earlier.”

Kahira lit up a cigarette and directed Ryan along the corridor. A few strange faces here and there watched as they went.

“There is no schedule, at least not yet. Father Abraham has expressed his desire to meet with you again before you are formally introduced to the rest of the family. But that doesn't mean you can lie about all day until required,” she said.

“Of course. I keep my mind trim, and my body taught.”

She wheeled, “And you can keep your silly Vigil idioms to yourself!”

On the other side of the coin, Ottavio wakes up to his situation:

*“A secret grows when its roots are covered.”*

– *Wisdom of the Vigils*

Ottavio felt tired. Extraordinarily tired. His muscles and myoactuators protested painfully as he lowered himself onto his arms and crawled wearily into bed.

He thought back over the day, of Penelope and Cassandra and the escape, of Sister Hanifé, the assault at the house and the chase through the suburbs.

Out from the transport he had been put through some kind of decontamination area, allowed to wait in a holding cell, complete with an auto-turret for company. Finally he had been brought through a long hall, led to a small room and instructed to sleep.

He did not need to be told. Gladly he took to his cot, covered himself roughly with a blanket and closed his eyes. His optical display faded quietly as he lay back, trying not to think and yet thinking of everything at once. Within a few minutes he was in a fitful asleep.

His dreams were violent. They were full of faces and eyes looking back at him. Some he

knew, some he did not. As he turned away from one, he was presented with another.

Ali's beetroot red cheeks were swallowed by Cassandra's own mournful eyes. Simon pushed her out of the way and clenched his fist in rage.

Simon! He dominated the scene, swearing and cursing as he flipped his blade this way and that, keen to take Ottavio on in a fight. He pranced about, advancing on Ottavio, pushing him further down a flight of stairs.

At the bottom was a basement, with Emily tied up, bloodied and beaten, hanging over a pile of rags. Emily's body was messily rendered to pieces by Simon as he danced this way and that, laughing at each lunge of his short sword.

Ottavio turned away in horror to see Lucas, far off, looking through the mass of faces, sporting his super sniper rifle. He frowned with disdain, fired and caught Ottavio square in the chest. He fell backwards in pain, thrashing about in the sea of people who were milling about him.

He turned back around to see Cassandra hanging in Emily's place, pleading for Simon to stop as he took his blade to her throat. Blood trickled from her side as everyone watched, some cheering, others howling, others crying.

One face did not scowl, or cry, or snarl. One face stood out from the throng.

One face, Miss Penelope's, watched him with a divine serenity, a beautiful calmness. She breathed, and as she did blew away all round him, until there was nothing left but herself.

"Trust in the Lady," said a voice, distant but clear.

He awoke with a start. Sister Hanifé was standing before him, holding a tray. Her face did not betray anything of what she was thinking.

"You have slept enough, I think," she said.

"How long?"

"Long enough. Now take this and eat it," she said, handing the tray to him roughly, "You will feel refreshed."

She was right. He ate a plate of warm stew, followed by a long drink of fresh water. It made a change from the calorie and protein controlled dietary supplements he was fed back at Houston. The taste, for one, and the presence of real vegetables for another.

His optical display noted the slow increase in available nutrients.

"Thank you," he said, finishing off the bowl, "Really, Hanifé. Thank you. I know you risked your neck out there."

"Reserve your thanks for the Lady Penelope if you are ever blessed to see her again," she said, "For it was she who brought all this about. You are now safe, in my care. And now I will tell you what you wish to know. Here."

You can get *Adaptation* in parts, 1 through to 6, or as the compendium with all six volumes. Visit your favorite bookstore, online platform or [www.jtyrrell.com](http://www.jtyrrell.com) for more.