

Rune Zero

Rune Universe, prequel

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Chapter 1

Angelica Morrow was married to a dead man and she did not know it. In fact, she was talking to him on the phone.

“Have you already scheduled the chef for the Palmer’s dinner next week?” she asked him as the door to the apartment opened automatically to let her in.

The interior was pristine and minimalistic in a way only a very rich couple could afford. A cat-sized cleaning drone still lingered in a corner of the lounge; when it registered Angelica’s signal, it rushed to the nearest vent and disappeared without fuss, just like she liked it. Drones, unlike children, were meant to neither be seen nor heard.

“I have it on my VA, it will handle it,” her husband, Xavier Morrow, told her over the phone. His voice was pristine and clear and very much alive-sounding.

“That program is a time-bomb,” she chided him. “Half the time it forgets to schedule your meetings and the other half it schedules them with the wrong people.”

There was a second of uncomfortable silence as she left her fur coat (the fur was created from caribou’s stem cells, thank you very much. Angelica was head of her Humane Society charter) over the zen-inspired sofa and walked to the bar counter at the edge of the room. There, a silver plate with a glass of champagne waited for her, just like she wanted.

She didn’t even like champagne that much. It was the principle of it.

“It’s still experimental,” her dear husband was defending his Virtual Assistant. The poor schmuck really thought she had a problem with the VA.

No, hun, the problem is with you, she thought. *You and your over-sized Italian suit I have to stare at for hours at every dinner we go to.*

“It’s supposed to learn my speaking patterns, just like the butler did.”

“We had to program the butler,” Angelica reminded him without actually paying attention to the conversation. She sipped the champagne glass—she didn’t even know what it was called, just that it was expensive—and let herself relax.

Her favorite music—an electro-jazz variation that was all the rage in her social club—started to blare on the speakers of every room in the house and the lighting dimmed to a dawn-like imitation as the ceiling transformed itself into a postmodernist interpretation of a purple and orange sunset.

It was good to be home.

“What’s for dinner today, darling?” Xavier said over the phone.

Angelica rolled her eyes. Like he didn’t know already. Their Home app on their smartphones had the schedule already programmed for the entire week. The food was prepared at her favorite restaurant a mile from the apartment and brought over by drones. Their own drones would gather the food and present it at the appropriate time.

Xavier may be as droll as watching lettuce sprout, but he had his advantages.

“Check it out yourself,” she told him, “I’m going to take my bath now.”

It would be already waiting for her, at the perfect temperature, with her favorite salts mixed in the water. It was her favorite part of her day. She would let the warm, pink water cover her skin and the bubbles rise around her neck and arms while she watched her favorite show over the bathroom’s screens.

Just thinking about it made her smile.

She walked to the bedroom first, where her silk bathrobe waited for her. She tossed her work-clothes to the bed (the drones would get them while she bathed) and changed into the robe. All the while, her husband chattered in her ear like an insecure ghost.

“Alright, darling. Sorry to bother you. It’s just, I’m nervous about this meeting, is all. I haven’t felt like myself for a while, you know?”

In her mind, some of the pink bubbles popped. It wasn’t her job to be a cheerleader for her husband. He had made that clear himself. Angelica had barely enough patience to handle the incompetence in her *own* business operations, she had very little left for her husband. Couldn’t the middle-age crisis wait a few years more?

“You’ll do fine,” she said after exhaling loudly—the phone filtered that faux-pass automatically—“you’re the best persuader in the business.”

“That I am,” Xavier laughed jovially.

The bathroom door was closed to preserve the humidity levels in the rest of the apartment. Angelica squirmed with pleasure and disrobed. Her bikini area was instantly pixelated by the software’s algorithms. Her skin was dark gold and her hair was platinum. Both hair and skin were colored in her favorite boutique.

She didn’t think modern boutiques were the human equivalent of getting a paint job for your car, but David Terrance surely did.

She opened the door while her husband rattled on about the Duval meeting. She wasn’t listening anymore, she was merely looking for an exit to the conversation that would let her start to truly enjoy her bath.

The bathroom was covered in a perfumed cloud of vapor and bubbles. The tub waited for her like a decadent lover. It was porcelain, engraved with gold. Her skin combined perfectly with it.

She was halfway through the bathroom, enjoying the feel of the vapor over her skin, when she realized there was another smell mixed with the perfumed vapor.

Something coppery.

“—The entire deal could be hanging by a thread if Duval gets cold feet—” her husband was saying from a far-away place. She ignored him and walked the remaining steps towards the tub.

The vapor uncovered the surface of the water then, and she realized it wasn’t pastel pink, but crimson. And floating under it, barely visible under the red and the vapor, lay the torn body of a man.

His head was missing. But she could recognize that oversized Italian suit anywhere.

Angelica screeched in terror, her eyes bulging in her head. She tried to run backward and slipped over the bathroom’s tiles. She broke her leg with the fall when she smashed against the cold floor.

She screamed like she was being chased by death itself.

She very well may have been. Because all the while, over her mini-speaker in her ear, she could hear her dead, decapitated husband's voice talking to her:

"Darling? Darling, are you alright? What happened? Where are you, darling? Oh god, where am I? *I can't see, darling... I can't see!*"

Time froze all over the bathroom and the naked, crying lady on its floor. Then, reality dissolved around them in a cloud of green pixels and only darkness remained. It switched to white not long after.

"Well?" asked a male's voice. "What do you think?"

The young agent looked away from the white screen-wall of the briefing room and locked eyes with his boss. The man, one Brandon Kelsov, was well into his forties and his face was covered in lines of expression. It clashed with the smooth face—half-way through his twenties—of special agent John Derry.

"Yes, I can see why we may need an expert," said John. His boss nodded.

"Angelica Morrow is cooperating fully," Kelsov explained, "but the press will hear about it sooner or later."

"You want it handled with discretion? I don't think we can afford discretion after the murder of a State's Senator."

Brandon sighed and passed a trembling hand over his forehead. It was common knowledge in the Department that he wouldn't last much longer in the job. It was cases like this that aged him. After all, while John Derry's job was just to find the culprits, Kelsov had to ensure the power vacuum left by Morrow's death wouldn't create an explosive decompression, politically speaking.

"That's why I'm making you handle it," Kelsov told his pupil. "Get me someone to point my finger at. And find how they *did* it, Derry. We barely handled the last AI panic, we can't afford another collapse."

"It's near elections," nodded John, without a hint of sarcasm. He stood up, ready to leave.

"I got you an expert," said Kelsov. He took out his tablet from his coat pocket and transferred an archive to John.

John got his own tablet out. On the sleek, black case three letters were engraved, as well as a symbol. The letters were "CIA."

"A criminal?" asked John, glancing at the archive in his screen. It wasn't an incriminatory question. It was a request for clarification.

"One of the best," confirmed Kelsov. "He's doing time for cybernetic fraud and tax evasion. I'm sure he's going to jump at the chance to shave a couple decades off of *that*."

"Understood," said John. He waited in case his boss wanted to add something, then he walked out of the room.

The Hound, some of his co-workers called him, when there wasn't any chance he would hear. He never let a prey go.

John Derry climbed into his self-driven car and manually inputted the address of the Grandhaven Detention Center. He tossed the CIA-issued tablet to the co-pilot seat and watched the road like a hawk. He would have time to read the files on the road.

Over the tablet's screen, two words topped the long list of criminal charges and psychological analysis. A name.

David Terrance.

Chapter 2

He would never get used to the orange fabric. It was in the solitude of his cell where the scratchy surface was the most unbearable, when he had nothing to distract him from the sensation over his skin.

If only he had a computer to distract him...

David Terrance sighed and forced himself to focus in his book. The paperbacks were the only thing that let him stay sane while he was locked up in his cell.

But it was *so slow*. He was used to the blasting speed of the net, the blinding flashes of code. Used to a million different sources of stimulation fighting for his attention at the same time, while he multi-tasked over them all.

He needed stimuli like a fish needs water. And in prison, stimuli was at a premium. Hell, he had managed to resist talking to the other inmates for the first week before he couldn't abstain any longer and erupted into the cafeteria like a half-starved castaway finding his first McDonalds. He *needed* someone to talk to. Even human interaction was better than nothing.

The book was called UBIK. He tossed it aside when he realized he hadn't been actually reading anything for the last chapters. He knew the ending anyway.

He paced the dusty floor of his cell while mentally working on his *treatise*. He was already seven chapters in and he expected to complete the sixth volume by the time of his release. If he ever bothered to write it, he expected it to be something akin to the Communist Manifesto for the excellent people at the SMU Computer Science division.

I'm beginning to daydream again, he realized.

The bottle of pills was already half-empty and it wasn't close to the end of the month. David sighed, counting them again like he suspected someone was stealing the pills from him. Still the same as last time he counted.

He could never be sure, anyway.

The label on the bottle put "P.K.D." in black typewriter letters. He downed one of the pills and smiled with pleasure as his mind settled into a zen-like state.

It felt like those precious seconds of utter peace after an orgasm.

He knew it wouldn't last. A year ago, a single pill would last him for weeks. Now, he counted himself lucky if it bought him half a day of solace.

And the bottle was half-empty...

David Terrance sat on the edge of his bed and returned to his book, enjoying the peace and quiet of his own mind like a normal person would enjoy a juicy steak after hours of exercise.

He heard the steps over the concrete floor of the corridor long before he saw their owners. Two men, judging from the weight—could be women, he was only right half the time—. Seeing as the guards didn't make their rounds at this hour of the night, it probably was a visitor.

Since the steps didn't end at Calderi's (mob *padrino*) cell or at Gomez's (Calderi's accountant), it could mean only one thing.

David Terrance stepped up, made a mental note of his current page, and did a couple of passes over the wrinkles in his orange overall.

He had visitors.

The guard, a young fellow whose name he couldn't remember, arrived first. "Someone's here to see you, Terrance. Be polite or we'll have trouble."

David raised an eyebrow. He had never given the guards (or other inmates) an ounce of trouble. A fight would be a welcome break from the routine, a delicious jolt of adrenaline. It would also leave him crippled, or worse. He was a lightweight, an intellectual. Not a brawler.

"Of course," he told the guard, trying his best to look offended. The guard accepted this and stepped away from the cell. The doors slid open on their own without noise. Terrance could see the other inmates nearby watching the exchange with interest. They, too, needed their own dosage of stimuli, he guessed.

David stepped out and was face to face with his visitor. The man was close to his age, perhaps older by one or two years. He had the complexion of a corn-fed marine and smelled of aftershave and cheap cologne. His face was nondescript, the kind you meet once and forget all about it.

The government, then. CIA?

"David Terrance," the man said. He extended one hand that David shook automatically. "John Derry. I have an offer for you."

David faked a smile. "Let's hear it. Why don't you come over to my office?" He made a gesture towards his cell, but neither the guard nor the agent laughed.

"Come with us, Terrance," said the guard.

They brought him to the visitor's room, where John Derry handed him a tablet. "Your country has needs of your expertise, Terrance. Have a look at this video."

David raised his hands nervously, looking at the guard. "Is this some kind of setup? I'm not allowed near any kind of technology."

The guard and the agent exchanged looks.

"Watch the video, Terrance. You have nothing to worry about."

Still, David made no move towards the tablet. John Derry shook his head and then turned it on himself, showing it to David like a salesman showing off his newest product.

It was the same video Derry himself had watched with his boss. A woman walked into her house. She was extremely rich, at least from the perspective of someone like David, whose most expensive possession had been his computer.

"Yesterday evening, Angelica Morrow, married to Senator Xavier Morrow, entered her house while talking to her husband on the phone. So far, she thinks nothing is out of the ordinary. Five minutes later, she walked into this..."

The scene advanced like the plot of a b-movie. The woman walked into her bathroom, delving deep into a cloud of water vapor. When she reached the bathtub, she screamed and fell to the floor. The camera's recording software gave a close-up of the bathtub, filtering the surrounding vapor as well as it could. It revealed a shredded body and a blood-covered tub. David turned his eyes away.

"Morrow spent the night in police custody while her house was thoroughly searched. They haven't figured out how the body got to the bathtub. DNA tests

have confirmed the body is, in fact, Senator Xavier Morrow. Angelica insists the man she was talking to on the telephone was her husband. His recording matches the Senator's vocal records—"

"Where was the call coming from?" David asked. He understood what was expected of him.

And, truth being told, even if the body's image made his stomach churn, it was better than lying in his bed, waiting to fall asleep.

"A private server," said John Derry, "paid for with street-bought, virtual currency. Untraceable. Whoever killed the Senator took his phone and re-directed it to the private server. It's a known technique, used by ambassadors and criminal gangs alike. The NSA is working round the clock on a fix."

"And the tapes caught nothing? From before Angelica arrived, I mean."

"Someone hacked into them. The IP address came from the same server. They deleted the entire past couple of days from the server. When Angelica entered the house, the home-protocols came online and reset the cameras. We still have nothing, though."

David accepted those facts. He already knew something the agent had missed. Clear as day, actually. But first, they had a score to settle. Salary.

"Elections coming up, right?" David muttered, more to himself than to his interloper. "Alright, I think I see where this is going. The current Administration can't allow the public to know their Senators are vulnerable to a sloppy murder like this, right? The public's good will is always drained after a war.

"Police are known for their leaks," he went on, "so they redirect the investigation to the professionals. You're CIA, I presume."

"That is none of your business" said John. "You're a convicted criminal. Almost sentenced for treason over stolen sensitive data. Instead, you're spending your days in jail, away from any kind of technology. I believe we both have something the other needs."

David noticed the agent had avoided saying anything that could confirm or deny David's previous statements. Smart.

"Let's hear the offer," he said, with what he hoped would be a friendly smile.

"You do this work for us, your sentence is reduced to twenty years. Better than *forever*."

David raised an eyebrow. He had read the same CIA Op Manuals John Derry had read during his own training. Selling those to the Corps had bought him his retirement. Until it was all confiscated by the courts, of course. Leonor hadn't liked that *at all*. Their daughter's university fund had gone from "yeah, just pick whatever remaining Ivy League school you want and we got this" to "Community college is looking real sexy right now."

In other words, David knew the CIA was more generous than the police when making a deal. They wanted results, they didn't care one bit about sentences. "And?"

John Derry's eyes twinkled. "You contribute to the controlled resolution of this murder, help bring the criminals involved to justice, yadda-yadda. We put you in our 'contributors' program. Your sentence is spent helping us as a consultant. You'll even get paid. Full benefits and all. That's the entire offer, Mister Terrance, please don't insult me by thinking you can get better than this."

It was true. David knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. That's what made him so wary.

Don't look a free horse in the mouth, went the saying. Or something like that. It forgot to mention the etiquette when the horse was a gift from the same persons who put you in jail, and you had stolen from those same guys before.

That horse may be carrying an army of Greeks waiting to loot your city.

David thought it over. Helping John Derry could lead him to an even bigger mess than he already was in, believe it or not. All in all, his jail wasn't the *worst* jail in the States. No one had tried to shank him for anything, or asked him to join a gang. That was nice.

Out there, he could get killed. Or worse. He would owe the CIA a favor anyway, and they always collected.

On the other hand, he still had his whole life ahead of him. His book wouldn't last him that long. He had noticed the guards had taken his shoelaces the day he entered prison. He started to understand why.

"Alright," he told John, "we're in business. In fact, I think I can help you out right now."

John Derry raised an eyebrow as he pocketed the tablet. A man of action and few words, then. David went on:

"The body, found in the bathtub? The killer didn't murder him in the house."

"Explain."

"See, there's no evidence in the house, right? No blood, no traces of a fight, but the corpse was pretty messed up. The police probably already know he wasn't killed at home, I bet. They won't realize *how* he was brought there without leaving tons of evidence, at least until tomorrow."

"Don't make me ask how you think he was brought there," grunted John.

"Fine. I'll tell you to show you my good faith. When you hack into a home's network, you're not just breaking into the camera's feeds. You have access to the entire network. Television sets, temperature, the supermarket list." David paused for effect. "The cleaning drones. The butler did it."

John Derry looked like a sculpted sack of testosterone, but he wasn't slow by any means. "The killer used the drones to clean up the evidence. He got them to place the body in the bathtub."

Terrance nodded his head. "There's more. I know how the killer got the body in the apartment in the first place. Same principle, really."

The agent thought it over for a beat. Then he stood up, sending his chair tumbling to the floor. Terrance idly noticed how the plastic chair dissipated over the concrete like it was made of floating sand.

Huh, he thought, *that's weird. I wonder...*

"The delivery drones," John Derry went on. "A big one can fly a human body to a penthouse. If the security protocols are already compromised, the apartment's own drones will receive it."

David, still looking to the spot where the chair had dissipated, nodded. "Search yesterday's fly-space records for any deliveries made to the Senator's home. Now, there's something strange here..."

His head hurt. The guard grunted and walked towards him with his stun-stick raised. He moved fluidly and something in David's mind blocked any reaction,

other than staring at the stick as it jumped towards his face, leaving a trail of sparking energy through the air. David was helpless.

Then John Derry raised a hand and the guard froze instantly, in a clearly unnatural way. The stick stayed in mid-air and David could see the pattern it had left in its wake.

Air didn't behave that way with moving objects.

"No need for that," John said aloud while David stared at the frozen guard, "I'm taking him with me anyway. Please, unpack him."

Then he dissipated in very much the same way as the chair had.

The entire reality around David was next.

It was like being yanked out of his mother's womb in a single second and without the nine months of pre-game beforehand. His throat hurt and he couldn't breathe.

David Terrance woke up surrounded by a dark, plastic coffin. It smelled of medicine and shit. All around him, steel machines hugged his naked body. Several plastic tubes were installed into the coffin. They began at the coffin's walls and ended at his mouth and... other places. He tried to shake himself free as panic and confusion began to duke it out in the most primal parts of his brain. The machines reacted by holding his arms, legs, and head in place.

He would've compared it to a nightmare, but he hadn't ever had a nightmare like this.

Thankfully, the coffin opened before he had enough time to develop lifelong trauma. Light bathed him and made him squint in pain as he thrashed uselessly around.

A voice greeted him. "Seems like you're out early, Mister Terrance. Welcome back."

Half an hour later, David Terrance stumbled out of the jail's infirmary and ran into John Derry, who was waiting for him. He looked just like he did before. Except, now that David wasn't jacked up with hallucinogens, he realized the Real World had a higher resolution than the place where he had been trapped for the past year.

"Everything is in order?" John Derry asked him calmly.

Pale and shaking, David walked to the booth where a guard waited for him with his few remaining possessions. A wallet with no money inside (he remembered having at least a grand in there), his ID, his washed-out jeans, his running shoes, his t-shirt, and his PKD medicine. At least the prison had been kind enough to provide their own dosage of that one.

David didn't want to imagine what the combination of those pills and the hallucinogens had been doing to his brain.

Perhaps he would be brave enough to think about it after the uncontrollable shaking had stopped.

"You guys are monsters," he whispered, finally, to John. David's mouth was dry and raspy and speaking was painful. Those were his first real words in a long time. He meant them.

He had seen rows and rows of plastic coffins when he had stepped out of the containment blocks. Rows and rows of dreaming inmates, unaware of the way the prison-industry was experimenting to save itself housing costs.

Cheap machines to exercise muscles and prevent atrophy. Tubes to feed them and dispose of waste. Drugs to make their brains unable to recognize the difference between the badly-rendered virtual jail and how the real world was supposed to look like. A crude video-system constantly shooting a string of laser beams straight into his eyes, following their every move, making him believe the images drawn straight across his pupils were the real world. Earphones for sound. Thankfully, the drugs took out his sense of smell and everything else.

David stared at his hands to make sure they were real. He bit a finger. That's what pain felt like. Had he forgotten?

"Careful with that," John said. "Wait until the drugs have worn off or you may bite it off."

David stared at the man like a starved-out animal.

"Why? Why do this to me?... To anyone?"

John's face would've qualified him for a poker tournament. "The CIA has nothing to do with private prison, David. The official position is that it'll let the inmates receive a better quality of life and better treatment—when the technology is far enough out there, that is. Obviously, they still have a few kinks to figure out."

David considered trying to punch the agent and make a break for it.

Then he may end up in *there* again. The very thought made him want to puke, but the infirmary had given him some pills for that.

"Why me?"

John scratched his head. He obviously wanted to get on with his case, but he was a professional. "You don't remember?"

"They drugged me..."

"Yeah. Do yourself a solid and don't try to find out *what* they gave you. I think they're still not sure how addictive the stuff gets over time." He caught a glimpse of David's face and coughed nervously. "Come, walk with me. Let's get out of here. We're on billable hours, you know."

David followed the agent as well as he could on numb legs. The machines in his coffin had done a good job of preventing atrophy, but they were too *cheap* to prevent muscle loss. David looked and felt like he had just survived a long and debilitating disease.

They had even kept his head shaved.

The hacker and the agent left the building through the backdoor, through a tunnel made of cheap chain-link that extended across the length of the yard.

"After you lost your appeal," John explained, "and there was nothing left to do but go to jail, you tried to escape to Mexico. You stole a kid's laptop and hacked your way into a nearby hospital's records. You faked your own death and you made a break for the frontier in the back of a truck. You got caught. The judge decided to ban you from coming close to anything electronic, then decided to send you to a max-sec jail. You ended up here. You remember?"

David tried to remember, but after the first trial, the one where he'd been processed for stealing CIA documents... all was scrambled. "No. The drugs."

“They’ll have to work on those side-effects,” John said.

The end of the chain tunnel was in front of them. The door was entirely metal and was grafted in the middle of the huge concrete wall that separated the realm of the free men from the prison. As they drew near, a computer scanned them and determined both of the persons standing in front of it were actually allowed to go out into the open. The door opened for them and David caught a glimpse of the outside—and real—world for the first time in a long while.

A dumpster nearby, overflowing with trash. The back-end of a Thai restaurant. Several abandoned cars, rusting slowly under the naked sun.

Not exactly a painting. The air smelled of trash and rotting food.

David still thought it was stunningly beautiful. He felt like dancing around on the concrete. He took a deep breath, letting it all wash over him. Even the smells were a novelty. After all, there had been no sense of smell in his coffin.

The freedom was almost crippling. Where would he go from there? What would other inmates do when they walked free? Strip-club. Bar. Perhaps another go at a bank assault.

None of those options impressed him. He remembered Leonor walking away from him, taking Sarah with her.

That was for the best, he forced himself to think. *Wouldn’t be fair to her growing up with a convict dad.*

Where would they be?

“I phoned the police while you were in the infirmary,” explained John when he was sure David’s attention was back on Earth. He was reading from his tablet. “They just sent the report. A quadcopter drone glitched yesterday and the service drones in the Morrow’s apartment have been found with traces of blood and other biological material on them. Seems your theory was right.”

A black car was waiting for them a few meters from the entrance. John gestured towards it as he walked. David didn’t follow.

“Wait, you’re saying this murder stuff is still on?” David whispered in his raspy voice. “You put me in a fucking plastic can for over a year! I could be suing your—”

John raised his eyebrows. “Could you? You’re free because you agreed to work with us, Terrance. You’re still a criminal. If you won’t cooperate, I can have you back in that plastic can before you have time to piss your pants.”

The agent’s eyes were the color of steel and had the intensity of a knee to the gut. David lowered his gaze.

He could tell the CIA to stuff it. Perhaps he *could* actually sue someone for the Virtual Jail thing. He wasn’t sure of it. Hell, a part of him wanted to do just that.

On the other hand, the sky was a washed-out, polluted blue, but it still looked breathtaking to David. He would have time to get accustomed. And that cell... with nothing to *do*...

Twenty-something David Terrance would’ve jumped at the chance of rebelling against the Powers That Be. Thirty-years-old David Terrance was a broken man. The prison industry had found one hell of a deterrent for repeat offenders.

“Fine,” he walked towards the car, where John Derry was already waiting at the wheel. He got in the copilot’s seat and grunted when the hot leather made him feel like his ass was on fire. “Christ!”

“Welcome back to the States, Terrance,” John smiled sardonically and laughed.

He started the car and the prison was soon left behind.

“We have a meeting with one Capitan Del Rio. He’s the man in charge of the investigation we just took over. He’s going to give us his intel and switch to a secondary role. If we’re lucky, we won’t have to involve the police at all.”

“I bet he’s terribly happy about that.”

“Sure he is. He’s still billing by the hour, is he not?”

David Terrance wasn’t actually sure how the Police Department billed his employees.

“Hey,” he told the CIA agent, “mind if we stop by a McDonalds on our way?”

David had just found out what he wanted to do after getting out of jail. He was going to eat a huge, hot burger.

“Most peeps try for the strip-club,” mentioned John. “But the answer is still the same.”

They didn’t stop by the McDonalds.

Chapter 3

Capitan Del Rio wasn’t actually happy the CIA was stealing the investigation from his Department. One didn’t get to Capitan without an almost overprotective sense of bureaucratic turf. The CIA was very clearly stepping on his turf right now.

One didn’t get to Capitan without knowing when to shut up and swallow your pride, either.

“These are the files you need,” he told John Derry as he handed him a USB stick.

David Terrance eyed the obsolete piece of tech like it was made out of dirt and bamboo. Where did Del Rio think they’d insert that?

“You already deleted your files, I presume?” John asked with fake politeness.

Capitan Del Rio clenched his teeth in an almost psychopathic smile. “Of course I did; I know the procedure.”

“Fine. Just wanted to make sure. Not every Police Department is as careful as they should be with their own databases.”

“Maybe they should switch to paper.”

Now that would be even more ridiculous than a USB, David thought. He stifled a laugh and the Capitan’s eyes set on him like smoldering lasers.

“Did I say something funny?”

“Sorry,” David raised his shoulders and focused on the USB.

“Thanks for your help, Capitan Del Rio,” John told him. He offered a handshake that the Capitan was just a second too slow in accepting. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Sure you will.”

As they walked out of the Department, David turned to John. “How are we supposed to do this? That stick is ancient.”

“I’ll have the higher-ups set us up with all we need,” John explained. “They’ll send us an office.”

“I hope they won’t just drop it over our heads.”

John smiled and said nothing.

Less than an hour later, their “office” had arrived. It was a black van with tinted windows. On its sides, David read “Pop’s Handwashed Laundry.”

“That’s the best name your guys could come up with?”

“The point is in avoiding attention, not in finding business. Now, get in.”

David didn’t bother to ask who was driving the van. The interior was cramped and hot, filled with the buzz of several machines. David saw one computer whose CPU was embedded in the aluminum fuselage of the van. Next, a row of screens that would’ve been expensive five years ago. A 3D printer. A normal printer. Another computer. More screens. Two uncomfortable seats, two desks, and a minifridge.

“Woah, the CIA doesn’t mess around,” David said, eyeing the place. “This junkyard would make a Saudi prince jealous.”

There were two types of government agents, at least in David’s mind. The first one was the type who loved self-deprecating jokes about his agency. The second was the one who hated those jokes.

John Derry was the second one. He grunted, pushed David with his shoulder and sat in one of the chairs. “Budget cuts. Still, they are not going to pull out the rug and the fine silverware to make a criminal feel comfortable.”

“Yeah, neither for you, hot-stuff.”

They began to sift through Del Rio’s files. Or, actually, John did and David watched. Technically, he couldn’t touch anything connected to a network, judge’s orders.

“Was Morrow working on something important?” David asked. Several e-magazines were pasted in the background-files.

“Yes. You missed the bulk of it in prison, I guess. Happened just after your case,” said John, “the Accountability Act, is what it’s called. Will force the corporations to use advanced accountability software to present their financial data to the public.”

That caught David’s attention. “It’s 2023, man. Do you think the corps are capable of killing a Senator because he’s passing a law they don’t like?”

He suspected the answer to that, already. But John was CIA, even if he was just a grunt. Perhaps he knew something he didn’t.

But, like any CIA grunt, John deflected the question. “Del Rio’s suspects aren’t any corporations, actually. We have extremist groups, hacker covens, activists. Some of them are probably friends of yours.”

That didn’t sound like the *modus operandi* of any of those. John kept going:

“Some called the Accountability Act a smokescreen. Several papers were written about it, see. People like these—like you—suspected the Act would allow the corporations to loophole their way around the ban on AI-directed Wall Street. The *advanced accountability software* could mean many things, after all.”

David winced. The Wall Street AI had been the great scandal of the last administration.

It wasn’t really *true* AI—no one was even close to that—but software built to predict and cash-in on the trends of the stock market. A bunch of banks and other financial institutions had tried to come together to design that software and trout it out all quiet-like, as the best new moneymaking scheme. Smart people had

pointed out the software would basically wall off any new competition who couldn't afford to pay or program their own. Banks wouldn't predict the market anymore, they would control it like puppet masters.

Wall Street had paid the newspapers and propaganda corps to run lip service for them, hide the outrage.

Activist raised a ruckus. Hackers got involved. Massive protests started and things got ugly. The whole thing came to a close when the director of a prominent bank was captured by a crowd in front of his office and... Well.

Government got involved, some laws were passed. The project was shelved, for now. Lobbyists were still trying to get those laws overturned, or backdoored, without much luck so far.

But it would only take one success, and they could keep trying and trying.

David realized this was but another manifestation of the same shit the States had already been through.

"Well... is it? A loophole, I mean."

"It doesn't matter. But... no. An accountant can make or break a company, not the whole State's economy."

The former hacker eyed John with suspicion. He was born with a healthy mistrust of anyone with authority.

"If you say so," he said, finally.

"You're an FMA, Terrance?"

Free-Market Activist was the name the papers had given to all the group against software-controlled markets. It was an ironic name. As many experts had pointed out, the stock market had *already* been controlled by software for more than a decade.

David shook his head. "I don't mess with politics. I'm a hacker."

"A *virtuoso*, then?" John snorted. "Fair enough. See this suspect list?"

John displayed a long list of names on the screens. Some of them were people and others were groups. The list went on and on, into the hundreds.

"All those people are FMA?" asked David.

"Some of them. They're all against the new Accountability act."

"There are hundreds of names."

"You thought detective duty was fun? This is what Sherlock Holmes' real work looks like, Terrance. Lots and lots of paperwork. Now, help me sift through them."

John Derry dove into the psychological profiles and background checks of the first names on the list with a determined glee. David watched him work with a growing feeling of dread.

A man once said. "If you want something done well, make a responsible man do it. If you want something automated, give it to a lazy programmer. He'll find a way to take it off his plate." At least, that was the version the mail-chain had brought to him.

David Terrance was a lazy programmer. Don't write two lines of code where one would suffice. In his opinion, the other word for "lazy" was simply "smart."

"Have you heard of Occam's Razor?" he asked the agent.

John turned back to face him. "You think I'm dumb? Everyone knows about it. *The simplest explanation is the correct one.* It's just drivel. Anyone trying to use it

simply thinks the explanation they agreed with from the beginning is the simplest. Gets you nowhere. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"That's the popular version, yeah," David ignored John's irritated glare and kept going, "but Occam's Razor is not a logical axiom, it's just a research tool."

"So?"

"It actually goes: 'to find an unknown factor, begin looking at those explanations which are the *easiest to disprove*.' See? Never claims those are real. In most cases, they actually are, but you should do your research anyway. Since they're the simplest to disprove, they are also the *fastest* to prove, if they're correct. Occam's Razor is just a time-saving tool."

He would know. It had saved him entire *days* of work when he was teaching himself code from pirated books. To find a vulnerability, begin searching at the places where a vulnerability is more likely to be. Then work your way downward.

It applied here, too. He explained his point to John. Truth be told, he got the idea. "Here's what I'm going to do. I'll see which one of these names have been involved in crimes before. Priority to violent ones."

"Filter geographically, too," David said. "There's a limit to how far you can get a quadcopter-drone to carry a dead body."

The list began to shrink, but there were still several dozen names in there. David recognized a couple of famous terrorist organizations.

"Still too many," David said. "Filter for tech-expertise. You need to be very good at code to get access to both a private security network and a city drone."

"Give me a minute, that's a bit tougher to sort."

It took John about two minutes, but at the end, the terrorist organizations were gone. Which left David with more questions than before.

"Can you filter for social distance to Senator Morrow? I mean, who on that list directly contacted him. Remember, he was missing his head. The drones didn't do that to him, that's a bit more extreme."

David wasn't a detective, but he suspected a person had to be really angry at a person to decapitate him, rather than just shooting him.

"That's already an option," said John. "Good thinking."

At the end, they were left with a list of only three suspects. The first was an eco-activism group that had released an artificial plague into farms owned by bio-engineering corporations. The second was a local hacking group that had spent a couple of years trying to get famous on the Internet. The third was a journalist named Dugall Tull. Of the three, he was the one who hated Morrow the most.

"The police would've started with Mister Tull," John said as they examined the three suspects' files, "since he's the one with a personal motive. That's the easiest to disprove."

"He's just a journalist," David mumbled, reading over John's shoulder.

"Yes, but he knew the Senator from college. See all those paragraphs? It's legalese for 'they just hated each other's guts.' Tull ran a series of articles against the Senator in a critical moment of his career. Morrow got him fired from his last job as an editor. Pretty boring stuff, but men have killed each other over less."

I bet you know, David thought to himself.

"Doesn't convince me. I don't think Tull has the physical strength to cut a man's head off like we saw in the video."

“You don’t need to hack them away, nowadays you have tools that...”

But David wasn’t listening anymore. His eyes drifted to the other two files. The eco-warriors were daring, used to take the law into their own hands, and thought they were doing the right thing. A dangerous combination. Perhaps they weren’t above murder. They hated Wall Street, after all... But then he saw the third suspect files. The local hacker group. He recognized a name from the list of members and cursed under his breath.

“What?” John turned to him. “You see anything?”

“No, I’m just nervous...”

John Derry turned to him. “Terrance. Your face just paled and your eyes are dilated. I don’t like when people lie to me, Terrance. I’ll ask you again. Did you see something? Remember, I can send you back to jail anytime.”

God damn it, David thought, swallowing hard. No point in hiding it now.

“Vicente Duran? I worked with him a couple times.”

“K-Sec leader? I thought you worked alone.” Of course, the agent had read David’s file, too.

“Yup. We did a collaboration and then went our separate ways. We never even met in real life.”

John said nothing for a second. David knew what he was thinking, even if David wasn’t a trained agent. Was his consultant associated with the killers? Was David compromised? Hell, was he a suspect?

“This happened a long time ago,” David reminded the man responsible for his freedom. “I haven’t had contact with him since then. I had never even heard of K-Sec before.”

John nodded. “I’ll make someone confirm this.”

Then a pause. Neither of them said anything. They stared at each other, thinking.

If John Derry suspected David just a little bit, he’d put him in jail again until the investigation was over.

Then he’d go back to the Virtual Purgatory.

Maybe I should make a run for it, David thought.

Last time he had tried that, he’d ended up in locked tight in a max-sec jail. John Derry had read his face perfectly just a moment ago and John was obviously stronger than him. The hacker knew he’d lose if he tried to fight John. Running, then? To David, walking anything farther than a few hundred feet felt like an odyssey. He wasn’t yet brave enough to try running.

Let’s try holding my ground this time, he told himself. Surely, the CIA wouldn’t be so quick to discard him if he proved his usefulness.

“Terrance—” John began.

“Look, man,” interrupted David, “I’ve been in that psychotic vat-tank of yours for over a year. I’ve had no contact with anyone during that time. I work solo. How about you give me a chance before pulling me off the case?”

John Derry, to David’s surprise, dismissed his pleading with a wave of his hand. “If you had any ties to K-Sec, I’d know it, Terrance. Your entire life can be found in the files in my tablet. Do your job, and we’ll be happy to keep the CIA’s part of the bargain.”

“Got it. Do my job. I’ll do that.” David looked at K-Sec’s file on the van’s screens. Most of those names he didn’t recognize. Others, he had seen only in passing.

They were good, he remembered. But he used to be better. K-Sec was mostly vandals and criminals playing at cyber-anarchism, eager to think they were changing the world. Perhaps he could get the drop on them and get into their servers, save the CIA a bunch of time. But in the end, David decided not to try his luck and ask John for computer access yet.

“We should pay them a visit first. Some of those guys had a criminal record,” he said, “and they definitely have the skills to hijack a city’s drone.”

John nodded. “We’re on our way.”

The van started moving without any input from the agent. David looked around, surprised. Was this a self-driven car? They’d become more common lately, but they were still far from becoming a common sight in the USA. Too easy to break into.

No, there were more people involved in this operation, David realized, than the single agent he had in front of him. They just had no reason to show themselves to him. Perhaps an entire room filled with technicians and operators, hidden in a cheap motel nearby. Plus, the driver and god-knows how many others dressed as civilians.

“Just so we are clear,” John said after the van had reached a consistent speed. “You may not be a suspect, Terrance, but I’m still watching you. Try anything on me, stand in the way of my investigation in any way, and you’re getting back into your can.”

“What a nice thing to say,” David mumbled, pretending he wasn’t scared of the bulky—and heavily armed—agent.

“I’m not your friend,” added John, “I’m your handler. My job is not to ‘be nice’ to you. Keep it in mind and we’ll coast along.”

“Sure. I’ll do that,” said David. So, this is what being on a leash felt like.

Most of the hacking covens that David had briefly frequented in his youth lacked a physical base of operations. They resided entirely in the net and liked it that way. Contrary to what movies and videogames showed, there was no mystical lair of evil masterminds. More like a virtual hive with a couple dozen amateurs trying to convince each other of how skilled they were. Fighting for social validation while at the same time, leeching off the two or three *actually* skilled veterans in their ranks. Those guys stayed mostly because the others treated them like rockstars.

No one hacked any governments if they could help it (otherwise they disappeared mysteriously nights after), and days frequently passed in arguments about comic books and obscure cyberpunk movies.

Like David Terrance, most of the hackers that actually *made* any money at all from their hobby worked alone and kept quiet. It let them live longer.

K-Sec was unlike either of those options. They were a group of about ten men and women from all over the USA. They were an organization in their own right. K-Sec had revenue reports. It paid salaries. Helped its members remain under the blind eye of the law, by a mixture of blackmailing and bribes to the right functionaries.

Some of the renowned personalities in the Intelligence bizz talked about them as the new generation of freelance digital security.

David gave both those personalities and K-Sec less than a year of operation.

You don't strut around with a gun in a building where only the owners are allowed to carry firepower.

"We're here," announced John after a long, uncomfortable silence. Hearing him speak of things he had no way of knowing—by virtue of his transparent earplug, which David managed to find now that he was looking for it—was eerie.

The van stopped and the doors opened automatically.

"Let's get to business, then," muttered David.

They stepped out of the van and into gang territory.

David Terrance was—had been—a freelance entrepreneur. He hadn't set a foot in a gang District in his life. All he knew from them was what he'd seen in his Virtual Reality glasses. He had connected them to a Maps software and used them to explore his city in a much better way than on foot. See, you couldn't get stabbed by wandering around glorified pictures.

A rusted sign announced the name of the street. Jewel Route. Perhaps the city's developers had a sense of humor. All around, David could see telltale symbols of urban decay. Spilled trash bags, burned-up cans, abandoned cars from a decade ago, broken glass, sewers with their caps stolen.

Those symbols never changed. They had been present in cities since the Industrial Revolution, and would remain until the collapse of civilization as David knew it.

The street was empty save for two or three junkies in the distance, dressed in rags. One of them saw the van and waddled away, either by survival instinct or hoping the gangs would pay him for the information. Everyone knew what black vans meant in this kind of neighborhood. Never a good omen. The modern equivalent of a crow flying over your head.

He followed John Derry as the agent walked with the confidence of someone who owned the street, moving past gang-signs and graffiti depicting obscenely detailed sexual scenarios all over the walls. He stopped by the boarded-up entrance to a former Ramen restaurant. "We're here."

David looked the dead building up and down. It was a miracle it was still standing. "You hungry? Because I don't think they still serve anything here."

"You're telling me you don't recognize this place at all?"

"I already told you, I never met with K-Sec."

John face revealed nothing at all. He probably didn't care enough to believe him, anyway.

"We'll see." The agent reached at the boarded door and pulled. To David's surprise, the door opened without any trouble. Those boards were only there for show.

It's not even covered in dust, he realized. He rubbed his eyes and vowed to pay more attention.

John gestured for him to go in first. The interior was dark and even if the door was just for show, David could see the silhouettes of trash and broken furniture all over the place.

"Shouldn't we get back-up, or something?" he asked his handler.

John made a vague gesture towards the surrounding buildings. “We already have back-up, they arrived before us and set everything up. Now, get in.”

David got in. After he took two steps, John followed him with a pocket lantern pointed straight ahead. He had a pistol drawn.

“This place is empty,” said David. There were only the remains of the restaurant to keep them company. He could even pierce together what had killed the place. A fight. A gang came in to ask for protection money. The owner must’ve refused. Perhaps they couldn’t pay anymore. David could see some bullet holes on the walls. Even spent, dust-covered ammo on the floor.

But he could also see the heavy grime covering everything parted in the floor towards the back of the building. It was a road. Whoever used this place wasn’t very good at hiding their traces.

He pointed it out to John and the agent nodded. They walked towards the back.

They found the kitchen. It had been stripped clean of anything useful by junkies and street-rats years before. But the steel door in the back-end was new. It wasn’t rusted like everything else.

It may as well have a giant “look at me” sign painted over it, thought David.

John gestured for him to step aside and the agent followed suit. When both of them were at the door’s sides, John knocked hard on the metal surface. “Police! Open up, Vicente!”

No one answered the door. John sighed and knocked again. “We know you’re there. Don’t make it any harder than it has to be.”

David could hear some shuffling behind the door. A thin, metal panel slid open and he could see a man with olive skin and black eyes staring at them.

“You have an ID?”

John had a pristine Police ID in his hand, propped up at eye level before the man had finished speaking. “Happy now?”

“We pay all our bribes,” complained the man, “why the hell are you here?”

“We just want to talk.”

“You won’t arrest anyone?”

“I don’t like making promises. But if you don’t open up, I’ll start thinking about making some arrests.”

The door opened. The man was in his early twenties. He was dressed in a boring t-shirt, white-washed jeans, and dirty running shoes. He stepped away to let John inside. The agent holstered his gun and smiled a cold, fake smile.

“See? That wasn’t so hard.”

The room had formerly been a storage cellar. K-Sec had refurbished it into an honest-to-God hacker lair. A red light filled the place and gave it a punk—and clichéd—feel. Computers more expensive than a sports car were strewn around in every corner and monitors of all sizes filled the walls.

That’s why they got the steel door, thought David as he gave the place a look-over. K-Sec didn’t want any junkie or lowly gang-member to get any ideas.

Four people, besides the man in front of them, were in the room. A girl not older than seventeen, a fat man in an undersized black shirt, and a lanky guy with Virtual Reality glasses that hadn’t realized they had visitors.

“Cozy place,” David said. Half the computers had more value than his own—before the police confiscated and disassembled it—and they were, of course, a year newer. “I could do nice work around here.”

“Right?” said the man in front of him. “I call it our *full-immersion* workplace. No distractions here, only bizz.”

David nodded in appreciation. The girl and the fat guy were staring at them with curiosity, but without fear. Not their first run in with the “police,” then.

“You’re Vicente Duran, I presume?” John asked the man.

No help could come from David in this case. He had only talked to Vicente through the Internet.

The guy looked at John like he had gone insane. “Uh... no? I’m Rufus.”

John was looking straight at him, seeing if Rufus was lying to him in any way. That’s why he missed the others’ reactions. The guy in the undersized shirt looked away and stifled a cough, while the girl paled and grasped at her jeans with both her hands.

Hackers mostly dated among themselves, since it wasn’t a very social group. David had met his wife like that.

K-Sec was an illegal organization, and their members were outcasts. Perhaps their leader wouldn’t care about dating a seventeen-year-old. And with the way the girl had reacted to Vicente’s name...

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” David asked aloud.

Everyone in the room turned to look at him, except for the kid with the VR glasses. Anyone could probably walk right up to him and steal his pants from under him and he wouldn’t realize it: his earplugs blared so hard his ears looked like biological drums.

“Yeah,” confirmed Rufus. “He got mugged a couple days ago. He tried to fight back—”

“Rufus...” the other guy warned him, looking pointedly at the girl, who had her eyes fixated on the floor.

Instead of pretending to be sorry, like a normal human being, John stared at nothing for several seconds. David could almost see the CIA team behind him striking at their keyboards, furiously trying to confirm the new intel.

How dated are the files you got us, John? thought David scornfully. He could do a better job than any of those dweebs any day of the week.

If only he could get his hands on a keyboard. One of those K-Sec had laying around would do the trick.

He took a deep breath. That way of thinking would get him back in jail if he wasn’t careful.

“Sorry for your loss,” he said, instead.

“Sure. Thanks,” said Rufus. He took another look at David. “Do I know you, man?”

“You spent the last couple days by his hospital bed, right?” John said. “There’s security tapes with you in the hospital.”

“I mean... yeah, we were. Why would you—”

John turned to David. “I think we just crossed out a list of suspects. That Occam’s Razor of yours doesn’t seem to be helping too much, is it? Let’s go, we’re done here.”

“What do you mean ‘a suspect list?’” asked the girl. She had finally looked up and was staring straight at them with a tear-stricken face.

“Nothing that concerns you—” began John. David took the biggest risk of his life so far and gestured violently at him to shut up.

Something had changed in the girl’s eyes. He had seen that expression once before, last time he saw his wife. A mix of desperation, exhaustion, and fury.

“A man was murdered yesterday,” David explained. “Whoever did it, they used a supply drone to carry the body to his home and had the security network clean all the evidence.”

“Jean...” warned her the fat guy. “Take it easy.”

That got John’s attention. He forgot—or pretended to forget—about David’s disobedience and focused on the girl. Yes, her expression had changed. She knew something. “What do you know?”

“She’s tired, man, she’s not thinking straight!” Rufus tried to intervene, but Jean cut him off.

“Stuff it, Rufus.” She walked up to them. She was trembling. “Yeah, something is weird. After the... funeral... me and Orville,” she gestured at the kid in the VR gear, “were surfing the net. You know. Needed a distraction. To take our minds off Vicente for a bit. I did some routine maintenance of our networks and updated some of our signature software. I worked late. Until midnight, even... Then...”

“Jean, they’ll think you’re crazy!” warned her friend.

Jean looked at Rufus and sighed. “I know what happened. It wasn’t the grief making me hallucinate, I’m not some old lady. I saw Vicente connected to our network.”

“What do you mean? Someone stole his password?” I asked.

“That’s exactly what happened,” said Rufus, crossing his arms, “someone stole his password. See, Jean?”

She shook her head. “He was the only one that knew his password and username. And he went straight to his own personal software and files, even the ones he had hidden from us.”

Hackers sometimes kept their best work hidden even from their closest friends, in much the same way an artist worked in secret over a painting until it was done.

Jean walked closer to David. “Get it? Only he knew where those files were. It could only be him. He’s alive, somehow. They wouldn’t believe me... So yesterday, I logged in again.”

David knew what she was going to say before she said it. He felt a wave of cold pass over him. “He was there again, at midnight. I saw the records on the server’s history before he had a chance to delete it. He had hacked a city’s supply drone. An apartment’s security network, too. Other things, but I didn’t have a chance to read them...” She looked like she was about to break. Only, she didn’t. She was staring straight at David like she could pierce the truth out of his head. He had to look away.

“Aaand we’re going to jail,” whispered Rufus.

On a corner of the room, a woman with jet-black hair and pale skin caught David’s attention. She was as beautiful as ever.

“Oh, dear,” sang Leonor with that musical voice of hers. She had a smile from ear to ear. “What a mess you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Chapter 4

David blinked hard. Leonor was standing right there, smiling mischievously at him. Just like she had when she'd broken into her college network for the first time.

His mind may be broken, but David held on to rationality like he had done a hundred times before. He knew Leonor wasn't really in that room. He knew it because everyone else acted like she wasn't there. Because she *hadn't* been there one minute ago; he'd have noticed her the very same instant he stepped inside. He had always noticed her first. Even if his brain was screaming at him "this is real, look at her, this is really happening," he refused to believe it. Leonor was far away and she wouldn't talk to him.

None of that mattered when he could've sworn he could smell her perfume right there. The way her green eyes sparkled was exactly like he remembered. Better. Memory could fail.

He did the only thing he could. "Can you give me a minute?"

"Are you running away from me, my darling?" Leonor asked him with a pout. "I can come with you, I know you've missed me."

He ignored her as best as he could. John was staring at him like David had gone crazy. "What?"

Jean had just admitted K-Sec was related to the murder David had been released from jail to help solve. If there was a time to excuse himself, it wasn't this one.

"I gotta take a leak, I'm very sorry." David could feel his face flushing with shame. Not at his lie, but at how bad it was. He shared a nugget of truth with John. "My meds," he whispered.

"Uh. There's a service bathroom outside, by the kitchen," Rufus said.

John turned his full attention towards Jean without saying a word to David. "You saw a person stealing Vicente's identity yesterday night? Why didn't you report this?"

Jean looked at him like he was insane. "Report it? Man, your Department is always searching for an excuse to frisk us. With the bribes we pay you and the ones we pay to the gangs it's a miracle we make any money at all..."

David left them to their own devices and walked out, trembling. Leonor followed him.

"You thought you'd rid yourself of me that easily?"

If he talked back to the hallucination, then he'd be crazy. That was his line. He pretended she wasn't there, with him, as he walked to a corner of the kitchen and fumbled over his pockets for his pills.

Way too soon. The pills always had lasted longer, even in jail.

He had difficulty even focusing on the sensation of his hands. Like they had a mind of their own and they weren't sure what they were touching. Could be ice. Could be the fabric of his jeans. Could be a row of broken glass.

His arms were covered in blood. Leonor laughed. She walked over to him and pressed her tiny hands around his neck. Cold and slimy fingers, crushing his throat.

“You never deserved me, you pathetic fool. It was your fault you got caught. You’ll never get to see me again. Just kneel down and die—”

David closed his eyes and found the pills. The sensation of the plastic was more real than anything else. He took a single pill and put it in his mouth with trembling hands. His shirt was covered in sweat. He swallowed it and a rasping pain made him groan when the pill passed through his sore throat.

Yes, the pills weren’t lasting as long. Or were they? The jail had provided him with their own meds while he was on their VR hellhole. Perhaps, they used different dosage. Perhaps, he had built an immunity.

Perhaps, the trauma of realizing he had spent an entire year in a fake world had accelerated the deterioration of his grip on reality.

Leonor dropped her grip on his throat. Her smile was sweet again. “Goodbye, love. Until the next time.”

“Until the next time,” David whispered. He was alone in the kitchen.

Slowly, his hands stopped trembling.

He checked his PKD bottle. It was less than a third full. He remembered it with more. Perhaps that was a lie of his brain, too?

Can’t stay here much longer.

Stress triggered the disease. A bunch of other stuff did, too. It may as well be called entropy. To David, that’s what it was. Entropy of the brain.

He took a deep breath and walked back to the K-Sec hideout. He was his own man. He wouldn’t budge to the exigencies of a disease.

Even if it stole his wife’s face.

The kid with the VR glasses had tossed them to the side and was reclined on his chair, typing furiously on a keyboard when David came back in.

“Feeling better?” asked John with just enough sarcasm in his voice to point out he doesn’t really care. David didn’t deign to answer that. Instead, he watched the monitor as the kid typed.

“You trying to trace Vicente’s signal?” he asked him.

“Yeah,” said the kid. David realized he was even younger than he thought. Maybe eleven years old? Perhaps less.

Jeez, what do they feed kids these days?

“Vicente—or whoever he was—erased all traces of his presence, but our ISP’s registry is harder to delete.”

To check the ISP’s registry, the kid must hack into it, which is, of course, illegal. John was at David’s side, but was very poignantly looking at the ceiling with polite interest. After all, just getting in and taking whatever info they needed was much faster than asking for permission. Even for the CIA.

The other members of K-Sec were poring through their own servers with a fiery determination. David realized this case was personal for them, now. Whoever used Vicente’s identity used them, too. Perhaps his murder hadn’t been an accident, either.

Whoever was behind this was colder than David had thought before. Sure, he had killed a man. But Senator Morrow had been an enemy of K-Sec. Perhaps even of Vicente.

His death muddied things. David wasn't sure what to think of it. He was no detective.

"You're working with kids now?" he asked Jean. "Doesn't seem very professional to me."

"He's not working with us," she said without looking at him, "he's our intern. But Orville is very talented. If he keeps working hard we may hire him full time in a couple of years."

David raised an eyebrow and walked back to John's side. He didn't expect to find corporate culture in a mud-hole like K-Sec's offices.

"What do you think?" he asked John. It wasn't just idle chitchat. To David, his natural reaction to not knowing something was to investigate it. That's how he had taught himself to program. Over a long time, with a lot of ebooks and a lot of Internet searching.

"Vicente's dead and buried," this time, John had enough tact to whisper this to David, making sure K-Sec didn't hear him. "My team confirmed it. He didn't fake his own death. I don't believe in coincidences. Whoever killed him is involved in Morrow's murder."

"Why kill Vicente, then? He hated Morrow, didn't he? He may have helped."

"There's a difference between hating someone and actually cutting his head off. None of these kids strike me as killers."

David wasn't sure. People could surprise you. Especially when you thought you understood them.

"The killer used K-Sec's resources to hack into Morrow's home network. Vicente must've tried to stop him. The killer attacked Vicente and stole his credentials. I think, if we find the man who killed Vicente, we'll find the killer."

John shook his head. "That guy is in jail. Police found him after less than an hour, covered in Vicente's blood. He took his wallet and used it to buy Akz. The drug that fries your brain if you overdose? Guess what happened to him."

David could guess. Akz was cheap and, according to the street rats who injected it, "felt like God pissing sweet ambrosia down your throat." It also came with a few side-effects. David had avoided it like the plague, his brain was in enough trouble already, thank you very much.

"That'll take us nowhere, then."

"Not exactly. The junkie could've been just a smokescreen," said John, his eyes glued to K-Sec's screens—probably for the benefit of the team he was streaming video to. "Someone finds him in the streets, promises to sell him Akz if he kills Vicente. Somehow, they steal Vicente's credentials from the body. Police focuses on the junkie, who is too messed up to talk."

"That's not the only option. Anyone could've killed Vicente, picked a junkie at random from the street, drugged him out of his mind on Akz, and then delivered him to the police."

Smokescreens. Murders to get to a murder. David was out of his depth. He was comfortable behind a computer, where he was the true king and master over a domain of ones and zeroes. This was something else.

Besides, Orville had just made a mistake in the ISP's archives. He'd need to start over again, or get a letter from some very angry lawyers.

"Let me do it," David whispered to John. "I can save us hours of work."

John didn't turn to David, but he knew what he meant. "You're banned from using, or even getting near any computer system."

"I know. But you hired me as a consultant, right? I can help you more with a computer than walking around looking confused. These kids are good, but they have been playing at being a corporation for too long. They lack killing instinct. Let me handle it."

"We can hear you guys, you know?" said Rufus. He raised his nose in indignation. He turned to David and his eyes flared in recognition. "Wait a second. I thought I knew you from somewhere, but I'd never seen your face in real life before. You're David Terrance, aren't you?"

That got the other K-Sec members' attention. The clack of the keyboards stopped.

"Terrance? The hacker who had a nervous breakdown?"

"I got busted." This time it was David's turn to be indignant. "I made a mistake and got caught."

"Now you're with the police?" asked Orville with a scowl on his face, like he suddenly smelled something rotten. "Pathetic."

"Everyone makes a mistake, sooner or later," David said. He was on the defensive now.

"A mistake is one way of calling it," said Jean. "You put all the community under heavy scrutiny, you know? FMA's all around the world are still recovering from the bad publicity."

David winced and stared at the floor. Thankfully, John came to his rescue, probably without intending it:

"Mind getting back to your search? A murderer is on the loose. Every minute it passes, another person could share Vicente's fate."

That made Jean wince. She turned back to her keyboard and slowly, the typing resumed, albeit a tad slower than before.

Now, John turned to David. "Get to it." Was all he said.

David looked at him like he had gone mad. "Just like that?"

"Yes. We were always ready to end your ban if it came to it. Like you said, we didn't get you out from prison to stand around and look dumb."

"Mind giving me a signed contract with that?" whispered David. He dropped that line of argument when the agent gave him a scornful glare. Of course, if the CIA wanted to set him up, they would just set him up. Asking for a contract was bad form at this point. "Alright, alright. But I never said I was standing around looking like an idiot, I just want that on record."

There was one computer free in the room. Vicente's. David walked over to it. "Mind if I help you, guys? Turns out, I'm out of retirement."

Jean sighed. "No, you aren't. But sure, give us a hand."

She unlocked Vicente's computer, but she didn't have the password for his side of the network, so Rufus added David as a guest.

The keyboard was a mechanical one—just what you need when you want to make sure *everyone* in a room knows you are typing something—and the commands his hands wrote felt *true* in his fingertips.

He wasn't sure how he'd even explain it. It was like a musician finding a long-lost instrument. The physical sensation may be different, but his mind hadn't forgotten a single thing.

Oh yes, it was good to be back.

"First, let's help little Orville with his registry," he said.

The kid looked at him like he had sprouted three arms. "You know I'm a genius, right? A little respect would be nice."

"Respect is earned, kid. No matter how good you're, experience is earned, too. Watch my screen for a minute."

He showed him the list of connections to their internal network. "Everything seem normal to you? Because I know for a fact someone is trying hard to ping us."

"Don't be ridiculous, there isn't any strange IP... Oh, *c'mon*."

There were two IP addresses connected to the server. First was Orville's, masked by a series of proxies. Second one...

"ISPs can do that, you know. They're trying to find out where you're connecting from right now." There was only so much protection a proxy could offer. With a flurry of commands, David severed their connection. "There. All done. You may want to avoid that ISP for a while, they'll most likely be looking for you."

Orville crossed his arms and tried to mask the fact that he had gone pale. Rufus smirked, but he made sure the little annoying genius didn't see him. David smiled, too.

"Don't worry about it. Like I said, you can't know everything."

"Someday, I will," Orville promised him. "I'll be the best. Even better than you."

"I said that same thing to like three different people when I was young. Doesn't matter. If you're the best, someone will come along and beat you eventually. Fame is ephemeral."

"They can *try*."

"Well, you can try, too."

That got the kid to smile. Thanks to some strange process in Orville's mind, David and the young hacker were friends now.

For the next ten minutes, only the sound of several keys being struck could be heard at any given time. John was like a statue, fixated to the arcane commands and software running on the different screens. A constant in the sea of information where David swam.

Contrary to what Hollywood made people think, David's time was mostly spent watching random strings of data like a hawk, searching for any irregularities: Dates, logs, connection times, archives opened or deleted. The other part was spent trying to figure out any way Vicente's impersonator could've hidden his prancing through K-Sec's servers.

That's where his experience counted. The kids were good, but they were trying to catch their prey by brute force. That could take a while, and he was in a hurry. After all, his PKD bottle was running out.

Instead of looking at yesterday's logs, David dove into the days before. Occam's Razor. Starting by searching for any files the impersonator *hadn't* deleted, was the easiest way to begin looking.

A couple logs here and there. Mostly activity from Orville and Jean. Before that, Vicente—when he was alive—had worked on the same project over and over again. David couldn't see the project, since he lacked access to Vicente's files. But, he could see the connections. Those were to the same place.

Three minutes later, he had an IP address. "Look at this," he called over to John. Then, to the K-Sec guys:

"Anyone know what Vicente was working on the last few days?"

Rufus shrugged. "Same shit as always man, searching for dough to pay the bills."

"What?" asked John as he examined the address, no doubt giving his invisible team a non-verbal command: get looking into this.

"It's archaic lingo for making money." David wasn't finished. That address wasn't even hidden behind a proxy, it was a local direction inside this very same city. "You guys sell intel, right? Was he selling to this person or trying to steal from him?"

"Selling. I don't think that's your suspect," explained Rufus. "Because he's a long-term partner of us. We get him info on politicians and the like. He publishes it."

"Publishes it? Like a journalist?"

"Yeah. He owns a local e-zine in town. Gets a couple thousand views a month, he's kind of a big-shot."

David and John exchanged a look. "A journalist." There was one in their suspect list. Second or third spot, actually.

What was his name again? Thought David.

"Dugall Tull," said John.

It took David a second to realize the agent wasn't answering his line of thought, but instead, saying the name of the owner of the IP address.

"Oh shit," he said. "That's too much of a coincidence."

"What's going on?" asked Jean.

"That's another suspect," explained David. Behind him, John walked out of the room with a strut, speaking in whispers all the while. "We have a connection. What intel was Vicente trying to sell this guy?"

He suspected the answer. There was only one thread connecting Morrow, K-Sec, and Tull. A mutual enemy.

"Corporate bullshit," Jean shrugged. "Same as always. A company called Odin Industries is trying to backdoor the same old Privileged Software they have been trying to get lately. They're calling it the Acc—"

"The Accountability Act, yeah, heard of it."

Jean nodded. "Sure. All over the newspapers. Well, we've been trying to find info on Odin's CEO, Florian Dervaux. We hadn't had much success; at that level of fortune, you can pay a lot of money to have your shit pruned from the Internet. We're getting near, though..."

Realization hit K-Sec like a sack of bricks. Even Orville turned around. "Odin killed Vicente?"

It would make sense, thought David. But...

"The man whose death we're investigating is Senator Morrow. That's a friend of Odin, right? Why would they kill Vicente to reach their ally?"

Excitement left the hackers like a deflating balloon; Jean's hands were closed so tightly her knuckles were white. "I'll keep looking. When I find the asshole who did this—"

"Don't bother," called John, as he walked back into the room. "We need to move, Terrance."

"What?"

"I had my people check up on Dugall Tull. His home is empty."

"He disappeared, too?" If Tull had gone missing...

"No. Not disappeared. He went on the run, minutes before they arrived at his door. He just reached the highway."

David got up. "You have a lead on him?"

"We're tracing his car. Whoever stole Vicente's identity is running interference, though." When he saw that Jean and the others were standing up, too, John cut them off. "You are staying. You're criminals, remember?"

"So is he," pointed out the fat guy, gesturing at David.

"If Tull stole my boyfriend's identity... He may have killed him, too," began Jean.

John was in no mood for explanations, instead, he turned around to leave.

David glanced at K-Sec apologetically. "Don't worry," he told them, "we'll get him. Promise."

To his surprise, Orville jumped out of his chair and rushed at a nearby drawer. In a second, he had gotten out a dusty laptop (last year's model) and handed it to David. "You'll need your tools, won't you, homeboy?"

He smiled fiercely. David took the small laptop and pocketed it. He returned the smile before turning around to run after John Derry.

"Damn right."

Chapter 5

The interior of the van was just as they'd left it. This time, he felt the powerful engine roar and shake the entire vehicle as it gained speed. All the while, John Derry kept his eyes fixated on nothing, while whispering furiously under his breath.

Whatever device he was using to communicate with the rest of his team, it was sensitive. Definitely expensive.

David wondered if he could convince the agent to lend him one of those. It wasn't a toy if the CIA used it, right? They were *spy* gear.

Under the noise of the engine and the road underneath the van, David caught notice of another sound. More persistent.

"Oh, so *that's* how we're catching up with Tull," he whispered under his breath.

Anyone who hadn't spent the last decade sleeping under a rock could recognize that sound. Those were the blades of an Urban Pacification quadcopter-drone getting closer and closer.

Now, this is exiting. I've never been in one of those, thought David. They were mostly unmanned, the first of a generation of pacification vehicles capable of moving autonomously through a city, keeping its inhabitants safe.

Over social media, half the population was utterly terrified of the evil ways those drones could be used. The other half had seen the videos of the things in action and weren't able to deny... the things were just plain badass.

David had been in the first camp until a few seconds ago, when he realized he was about to hop into a quadcopter.

Keep your cool, you don't want the secret CIA intel guys to see you fangirling on Derry's feed.

The van stopped and the doors opened on their own. They were in the side of the highway and now the sound of the blades was more intense than before.

John did not need to tell David to get out, he did so with a jump. Outside, a bulky helicopter approached them. Its shadow (and the shadow of its four different blades) covered both John and David. A brown rope-ladder descended from the quadcopter, swaying lazily in the wind.

The agent climbed first, practically flying upwards until he disappeared into the interior of the quadcopter. David was next and he had more trouble with the attempt. Circles of sweat formed under his armpits and his arms were telling him—in the language of pain—that they refused to move, even if his life depended on it. That's what a year of little to no exercise at all will do to a body.

"Uh... A little help?" he panted towards the quadcopter's interior. Downward, he could see the van, small on the side of the highway.

Slowly, someone inside the drone raised the ladder, with David hanging on for dear life.

A strong pair of gloved hands got a hold of David by the sleeves of his t-shirt and tossed him unceremoniously towards the drone interior. David wiped the streams of sweat running down his forehead with his hand and looked around.

Two CIA agents, dressed like bulky Men-In-Black, were seated in front of him. The pilot seat was empty and had been switched with tracking equipment, parachutes, and computers. John Derry was at his side, exchanging orders with the other agents, screaming under the noise of the quadcopter's four motors: Thankfully, no one appeared to pay much attention to the fact that David had needed rescuing from a rope ladder.

Probably, they didn't think that highly of him beforehand.

"He's headed for the mountains!" Derry was screaming. Like it was following orders, the quadcopter rose several meters in the air, until the highway below looked like a set of expensive kids toys. At the same time, it inclined forwards and set course towards the mountains. "But he's running interference, my guys can't pinpoint him!"

David glanced down, holding tightly to the edge of his seat. He put his seatbelt on. In his life, he had never been so high before. Technically, on an airplane... but you can't feel the air pushing you around on an airplane.

The scenery changed from the placid, rural landscape of the highway into the rocky and untamed vegetation of the mountain roads, as they rose higher and higher.

In one of those roads, Dugall Tull was trying to outmaneuver the CIA and the police. The only way he'd accomplish that was if someone managed to jam their tracking systems long enough for him to escape into next county, or into the wilderness. Yes, the police had dogs and manpower enough to comb the woods. But, Dugall had already given them the slip once.

"I'm going to connect to the drone's computers!" David screeched over the background noise of the quadcopter. "See if I can take out the interference!"

"That's why you're here!" John Derry exclaimed back.

The drone was flying in ample circles now, unsure of what direction to take. The roads were too jagged, too diverse to comb.

David took out his recently-acquired laptop and plugged it into the wireless system of the drone. John saved him five minutes of fighting against its security by just granting him access from his tablet.

"No funny business, Terrance."

"Christ-sake..."

He was unfamiliar with the drone's operating system. The States had developed its own Linux variant in the last year, perhaps. Or it was a gift from military R&D. To David, it was ugly, redundant, and had spent too many moving images in response to simple commands.

At least it made his job easier. Radar and navigation were under the convenient video of a drone following a road.

There you go. A map with coordinates and gigabytes of topographical data were displayed in David's laptop screen. Along came real-time databases of traffic, road hazards, meteorological conditions, and possible escape routes used by all the criminal highway-chases of the last decade.

The software that made the drone translate the information into a chase pattern was inaccessible, hidden under a heavier layer of security than David could access. He wouldn't need it. He saw the attack pattern instantly.

"He's jamming you," he yelled, as he pinpointed the sources of the attack on the map. Several red dots were moving across the different roads all throughout the mountains.

"He'd need military hardware to do that!" exclaimed John, shaking his head.

David pointed at the dots. "Not at all. Your drone's radar has an oversight. He's masking Tull's car with other vehicles on the highway, he's not hacking you, he's hacking them! The quadcopter can't find the real one, so it's trying to follow them all!"

John cursed under his breath. "The police are using the same systems, they can't help us either. Fix this, *fast*."

No shit, Derry. No shit I want to fix this. He turned back to his laptop.

He could try and force his way into those cars, check manually with them for anything weird. That would take too long, there were too many false leads.

But, there was only one hacker, right?

David traced one of the false lead signals at random and got its IP. It was masked, of course, and he suspected the invisible Intel team under John's command was currently stumped trying to find the real one.

Over the course of his career, David had learned a very simple fact of life: Attacking is always easier than defending. By only reacting to the hacker's plans,

the Intel team was wasting valuable time. Sure, eventually they'd reach him—they had better equipment, perhaps better training, and definitely more resources—but by then, it could be too late.

There was one way to stop an attack, one that worked much better than just defending against it. It was attacking back, harder.

A wise man once said: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

David punched the mysterious hacker in the mouth, metaphorically speaking. He closed the drone's network and went straight into the proxy's IP address. It was a small server farm somewhere in Zimbabwe.

Cheap and disposable, would be its description to any buyers. The equivalent of renting a locker in the subway.

Cheap things break easily. David found the local Internet Service Provider account where the server farm was registered.

Then he wrote an email of a few dozen words. He sent it to John. "Tell your team to forward this to the address I added. Make it look like it's from the fucking president or something. Get it read fast."

"This is a Zimbabwean company," John pointed out.

"Do it!"

John didn't wait for David to repeat himself. His fingers flew over the touchscreen of his tablet and then he froze, probably trying to listen under the screaming of the drone.

Less than two minutes later, he yelled: "Done!"

"Now, we wait."

John gave David a look that said "if you're wasting our time," but David was sure of himself. This would work.

Hopefully.

Otherwise he'd go back to the plastic coffin.

Minutes passed by and the quadcopter continued its circle strafe of the mountains. Every second let Tull put more distance between them.

The MIB agents looked worried under their black glasses. John's eyebrow raised progressively higher and higher.

Perhaps they'll let me code a better VR jail before they put me under, again. Thought David. He could feel the adrenaline accumulate like electricity flowing through his veins. Melting the PKD pill in his system. He forced himself to focus on his laptop.

Just as he was considering going manual and trying to check every red dot on the map, every single one of them, but one, disappeared.

David turned towards John with a triumphant expression on his face. Before he could yell: "I told you so!" (which would have felt like rocks passing through his sore throat), the quadcopter lurched forward, making him lose hold of his laptop. It fell to the floor and slipped straight to MIB in front of him, who caught it with his shoe.

"Good work, Terrance!" proclaimed John. The last red dot was moving through a secondary dirt road that would get it high up to the mountains. It was the shortest path out of the county, but also the most dangerous.

David reclined over his seat, accepted the laptop the man was handing him, and focused again on the drone's systems.

His punch to the mouth had taken the other hacker out of the picture, for now. The mail was a simple cancellation request to the Zimbabwean ISP, sent from the most VIP-looking account the Intel guys could command with two minutes notice.

The ISP software had read the email, a red-flag was triggered when it read the sender's address, then it had forwarded it straight to the CEO. Account terminated with extreme prejudice, and Vicente's lookalike was out of his proxy service.

That's what you get for trying to skimp on a few dollars, thought David.

"I got a visual!" exclaimed the man by John's side. "Red car, moving at least a hundred miles per hour."

On the dirt road, it was almost a suicidal speed. There were only jagged curves to one side and at the other, a straight fall off the mountain.

David pushed his seatbelt and inclined almost to John's lap. The car was navigating the road with the precision of a Nascar pro, making perfect turns in all the right places. A mile behind him, were the police, which were having more difficulty on the dirt road than the car.

The quadcopter rose even higher and David caught sight of the road on the other side of the mountain. Several police cars and black vans were flying through the highway towards the county line, ready to set up a barricade. If the quadcopter kept sight of the car, they'd definitely catch Dugall Tull.

Which he knew. Suddenly, the motor shook and the entire fuselage of the drone shot down and up several times like a crazed bull. Then it hung, frozen in the air, for a brief, hopeful instant before its engine shut itself off and the machine began to plummet to the ground.

Turns out, people you punch in the mouth can punch you back. Who knew?

The quadcopter didn't go into free-fall instantly. For a precious few seconds, it glided around, propelled by the dying energy of the motor and the speed of its four blades.

If it had been a more aerodynamic drone, it may have lasted longer. As it was... It seemed like a cartoon character who loses the ground underneath his feet, but doesn't fall until he realizes he's standing on thin air.

A real pilot might have regained control over the aircraft right then, unplugged the automatic software pilot and taken the passengers to land gracefully.

But there was no real life pilot, just three stunned CIA agents, and a terrified hacker.

That's what people get when they send a project to the cheapest contractor.

David's reaction saved his life. Another guy may have gone straight to the parachutes—like John Derry was trying to do—but David Terrance was a hacker.

His instincts when seeing a malfunctioning—a *critically* malfunctioning—piece of equipment, no matter if it was a smart-toaster or a Government drone, were the same, honed by thousands of different encounters with treacherous tech.

He gripped his laptop almost hard enough to break plastic, reached on the touchpad for the Options Menu (a coil gyrating on itself) and rebooted the system. The ultimate weapon in any programmer's arsenal against chaos.

The lights in the cabin went out and the few remaining navigational systems turned off with them.

Then the quadcopter went into freefall.

David Terrance's last words wouldn't be inspiring or otherwise well thought. He was screaming something like: "*SHIIIIIIITTTTTTT!*" only more high-pitched. The rocky terrain jumped at them like the Earth was just anxious to give them a hug.

When the cabin's lights suddenly came back on, the engine followed soon thereafter and the four blades roared back to life.

The drone's software studied the situation. Its altitude meter screamed in panic. Its navigational system scrambled in every direction. A solution was reached by panicked strings of ones and zeroes. Before the blades had regained their full speed, the quadcopter began an emergency-landing maneuver.

Instead of aiming... well, down... it aimed to a *diagonal* fall, adding the little forward momentum its motor could yet manage. That gave it slightly more time to regain power.

Then its systems diverted every single bit of power towards the engine, unlocking emergency protocols in its interior and burning half its fuel reserves in a single moment. The motor roared and the fuselage screamed as the metal was pulled in two different directions by two powerful forces.

David's jaw snapped shut and his neck shot backward. He hit his head against the seat (which saved his life, kudos to the seat's engineers) hard enough to black his vision out. He stopped screaming then, but only because he was barely conscious.

He felt every organ inside his torso try to reach his feet as the quadcopter fought for its electronic life and gravity tried to claim its victim.

If David could've looked out of the cabin, he would've seen the ground come within a terrifying distance of the drone, before the quadcopter won the battle and coasted safely atop a bed of rocks and grass. The quadcopter would've roared with triumph if its systems were advanced enough for it to speak. Instead, it slowly gained altitude as it raised its nose towards the sky, a triumphant bird of metal, the proud symbol of human ingenuity. The sun shone against it, transforming it into a mythical being. It was majestic.

Then it hit the top of a tree.

Darkness. Peaceful darkness. And so warm. Actually, too warm. And the pain wasn't that peaceful, now that David reflected on his body's sensations. He opened his eyes with a brutal effort of will.

The quadcopter was laying on the ground in several pieces. Metal blades and pieces of rotor were strewn everywhere. The cabin's fuselage was bent in painful shapes. The seats in front of him were empty, and so was the one at his side. Also, he was on his head.

And the cabin was on fire.

The flames came from behind him, from the quadcopter's tail, and from underneath him (which now was *up*). The metal had kept his vulnerable body away from the fire, but it was heating quickly. David felt the skin of his back sizzle. He screamed in agony and reached for the seatbelt. He fell straight down.

He managed to take the blunt of the fall with his hands covering his head and kicked and crawled his way out of the cabin. Somehow, his jeans had caught fire on his left leg. He patted at the belt while screaming pitifully all the while. His free

hand felt rocks and grass and then a man was pulling him out of the wreckage. As he did so, the fire on David's pants died down and left him with a small patch of black covering his dirtied clothes.

"So, you're still alive," said John Derry. He helped David stand up. "Can you run? This thing can blow up at any second."

One second before hearing that, David Terrance was sure he couldn't run at all. With the threat of an explosion, turns out he could run pretty fast, given his condition.

The quadcopter had fallen at least a thousand feet away from the road. John and David reached the road, with David pale and sweaty from the effort.

David turned back to see the quadcopter enveloped completely in a curtain of flames and black smoke. His body tensed and he prepared to drop to the ground before the explosion.

Which didn't come. The agents and the hacker were left standing in the middle of the road as the quadcopter burned in the distance.

"Well," started David, "I guess they built it better than I thought—"

The explosion sent a wave of heat and deafening noise towards them. David fell to the floor, stunned, as a rain of fiery debris fell all around him. A flaming piece of blade fixed itself on the ground less than two hundred feet away from him. David covered his head with his arms and closed his eyes.

Once again, a pair of hands grabbed him by the shirt and propped him up. John's face was red and his suit was torn where a small fragment of metal had stabbed his shoulder. He was screaming at David.

"What?" David couldn't hear himself speak, either. If his life was a movie, someone had pressed the "mute" button. "I can't hear you at all!"

John shook his head, thought it over, and then pushed him forwards, away from the wreckage.

"Alright, alright, I get it!"

This time, he could barely walk.

One of the other agents had a limp and was bleeding all over the place. His partner had an arm around his shoulders and together they led the slowest escape in the history of Urban Pacification quadcopters.

David winced when a final, tiny piece of metal struck his neck and scorched his hair. He swatted it like a fly and he burned his hand, too.

"I'm going to strangle that asshole," he said mutedly, thinking of the hacker.

"...catch...first," came the faint words from John, right at his side.

"Yeah. Let's do that."

Like they were responding to David's wishes, half a dozen police cars roared around the corner and stopped right behind them. They were manned by real human beings.

"Come on," John told him, going after the first car, where an officer was waiting for them with a confused expression on his face. "Time to switch rides."

"We're still going after them?"

"After that shit they pulled? Yes, yes we are."

The other CIA agents left in a different car and left towards a hospital. Meanwhile, the officer in David and John's car led the pursuit.

“Close call back there, right mates?” he asked them, barely turning back. “I’ll be level with you two, I’ve no idea how you’re still alive.”

“Vicente’s impersonator jammed our drone’s system,” muttered David, who still could barely hear anything other than the screeching in his ears. “I had to reboot the entire thing.”

“You rebooted the drone mid-flight?” asked John, loud enough for David to hear his voice clearly. He was both parts pissed off and impressed. “That’s insane.”

“Yeah, we didn’t have many options left, now, did we?” snapped David.

“You can reboot a quadcopter in the middle of a flight?” asked the police officer. “Now, that’s insane.”

To add to his point, the officer took a sharp turn in a part of the road with barely enough space for a car to fit through, giving David a good view of the great fall by his window. It was one sharp mountainside.

“Insane or not,” said John, “it was good thinking. Well done.” He took David’s laptop out of his jacket’s pocket. “It fell right in front of my face. It may come useful now because Tull is losing us.”

The screen on the laptop had cracked and the F3 key had fallen out of the keyboard, but somehow, nothing else appeared much damaged. The screen was just where David had left off, in the drone’s operating system, except it proclaimed “Signal Not Found” with red letters on top of the image.

“You still have contact with your team?” David asked John.

John nodded. “Yes. They’re tracing the attack as we speak. They say the hacker DDOS’ed our drone’s network connection and forced it to shut down. Whatever that means.”

It was now David’s turn to appear exasperated. “Really, man? Don’t you know what a DDOS means? It’s the oldest trick in the book. Kids do it, God’s sake.”

John’s face disclosed nothing.

“Whatever. You get a lot of connections to a system (like the drone’s) and overwhelm it. It gets cut off from the Internet. Which shouldn’t take out a damned quadcopter out of the sky, are you kidding me—” he realized John was looking intently at his laptop, in a clear “stop wasting my time and get to work” manner.

I save your life and you give me more work, thought David bitterly. He shut up and went back to work. After all, he absolutely wanted to return the favor to his hacker friend.

Seriously, a DDOS?

“Uhh, Derry, can you set your tablet as a modem? I don’t have WiFi in this car.”

“—Who do you think we are, the FBI?” muttered the police officer under his breath before John could answer.

The steep climb upwards was now so enunciated that their car could barely move forward. It had been built for urban use, not for rough terrain.

John took out his shattered tablet and set it up as a modem for David.

The other hacker had made a mistake, that much David knew. Since he had shut down his proxy service, any ongoing connection to the drone’s network had to be done from the hacker’s real IP address. Sort of. It was possible the hacker had another defense set up in case this one failed. He could be hiding behind a thousand different layers, like an onion. David could peel them with enough time

(or a powerful enough computer, which the laptop wasn't), but they didn't have enough time.

So, he took the gamble. He traced the ongoing DDOS attack to a well-known Bot Net and from there, to the hacker's address.

Then he followed it. It was coming from about a mile in front of them and was currently taking a sharp turn to the left.

"The hacker is with Dugall Tull," David announced. "He attacked us from his car's connection."

Well, that isn't very efficient.

John relayed the information to his team, whispering a string of commands. "You're on it."

"Tell them to drop a 42 bomb on their asses," suggested David. Then, when John looked at him like he had gone mad, he added: "It's a data-clog. A huge amount of bytes compressed into just 42 kilobytes, another old trick. Car's connections aren't very secure, at least that I can remember. It will definitely fall for it. Will be faster than trying to take over the hacker's computer or whatever he's using." Especially if a CIA Intel guy used his access to get the car to open the file in the first place.

Adding to that, a 42 file was so common that anyone could download it after two or three seconds in a search engine.

John muttered a sentence and then waited. "The team says 'thank you.'"

"No problem."

He followed Tull's signal with interest. The sports car was almost to the top of the mountain. The road he had chosen was not the most efficient, speedwise, but it was excellent if you were trying to outrun a bunch of police cars built for city pursuits.

Of course, the barricades waiting for them after the car came down the mountain would render that plan moot.

They have to know it, thought David. He frowned. *They have to know there's no chance they're getting away.*

The car reached the top of the mountain. It started its way down, much faster than before.

Too fast. It wasn't even on the mountain already, it was moving slightly to the right, out of the mountain, like the car had suddenly spurted wings.

David's brain caught up with what his eyes were seeing just a second before he heard the crash. It came faint, from way down, but the scream of metal and glass smashing at fuck-you speeds against the rocks was too familiar with him to miss easily.

The 42 file.

When the police car made another turn, the column of black smoke became visible, coming from below and dispersing into the clouds.

"Shit," said the policeman, "you actually *bombed* those poor sods?"

"No? What the fuck," muttered David Terrance. That wasn't supposed to happen. At all.

Had he just murdered two human beings?

This time, anyone could've read the suspicion in John's face. "There goes our prime suspect," he said, looking straight at David.

Chapter 6

David Terrance stood at the edge of the road by himself, watching the paramedics and the police establish a perimeter by the crashed car. Or its remains, if anyone could be phlegmatic enough to call them remains. They were more car flakes than remains. And they came pre-toasted.

When the red sports car had lost control and skittered out of the road, it hadn't just fallen straight down. It had carved a path across the mountainside, smashing itself into rocks, trees, plants, a bear, anything that stood in its way. David could trace the exact path down it had followed, by watching the destruction in its wake.

All because of a single, innocent, clichéd data-clog bomb.

The paramedics would need entire days to piece together any bodies they found down there. The fire would make sure of that.

Except for the bear, of course. They were already pulling the bear out. Perhaps they'd even be able to save it. Improve it. They had the technology.

"Terrance," John Derry's voice called from behind him. The agent had been talking with a couple of high-ranking police officers, a couple of real FBI agents, and a couple of freelance journalists calling their contacts to their tablets, trying to bribe their way into an exclusive.

Now, it was David's turn to talk.

"What the hell happened?" John managed to mark every word with menace.

So, we already forgot I saved our lives, thought David. "I don't know. The bomb was just supposed to shut them off from the Internet. Not make them lose control of the car."

"If I didn't have an entire intel team telling me the exact same thing in my ear, right now, you'd be on your way to jail again. That was our prime suspect your idea just offed."

David could feel hot coils of rage start to burn and tense around his body.

Remember why you worked alone in the first place? Because any idiot you'd get paired with will try to dump any fuck-up on you.

"I'm starting to wonder what any human rights' organization is going to think about your VR jails, Agent Derry. Perhaps you'll stop growling like a bulldog anytime things stop going your way when the media gets a hold of your shit."

John Derry smiled, and his smile was more dangerous than his anger. "Did you just threaten me, Terrance? Because I don't negotiate with criminals." His right hand was dangerously close to his waist, where his sidearm was waiting.

Really? Are we going there? thought David with dismay. *You're playing the gun card?* But he was too deep in already to back off.

"Don't give me that shit. I've been following orders as best as I could since you came to fetch me. I've done my best to aid your investigation. I even saved your life!"

"You saved your life," pointed out John. "And by murdering Dugall Tull, you've done more damage to this investigation than everything else you've done to help it, put together. Yeah, even saving my life, smartass."

“How the fuck was I supposed to know they’d lose control of the car?” David was exclaiming loud enough for the other high-ranked officials in the scene to turn their heads towards them. “*No one is that stupid!*”

The driver had been taking the sharp turns of the dirt road like a professional. Losing his Internet would’ve killed his GPS address, but he still had *eyes*, for christ-sake. No human driver would...

Oh shit. David’s eyes went wide with shock and he forgot about John Derry and their fight in a single instant.

We’re a pair of assholes. He concluded.

He turned to John, ignoring the agent’s hand resting on his sidearm. “Dude. Derry. Stop to think for a second.”

“I swear, Terrance, if you’re about to try and threaten me again—”

“No. No. Stop. Look. They shut down our drone’s network with a DDOS and it fell down, right? If we’d had a human pilot with us, we could have easily avoided it. Right? But we didn’t. So we crashed.”

“You’re saying it was a drone? Why would Tull let a drone drive itself with him on it?”

He answered his own question a second later. “It was empty.”

There was an easy way to check that. He called the paramedics and specifically instructed them to search for any human remains (no matter how small) inside the car. It would be a hard, perhaps futile attempt: The fire was an excellent destroyer of biological samples.

“So,” began David Terrance as the paramedics scrambled around the burning car. “We forget about our argument?”

“We’re not married,” pointed out John Derry. “We had no argument. Just exchanged a few words.”

Then he turned around to the police car. The officer was still there, looking bored and waiting for new orders. “I’m going back to the city. If Tull is still around, we may have to put a search warrant on his ass.”

That meant John wanted to call up the surveillance grid all across the city and set it on “search and destroy” mode. Every speed-trap, every camera in a busy intersection, every satellite pointed barely in the city’s direction, would receive a special missive with Tull’s face.

John Derry reached the copilot’s seat and gestured at David to get in the back. The hacker shrugged and followed suit. They may not be married, but he guessed that gesture was the best he was going to get from the agent in the form of an apology.

Minutes later, the entire investigation had splintered. The police and the paramedics stayed at the crash site, examining the burning remains of the sports car and looking for any piece of evidence the labs could analyze.

“So, the suspect you’re looking for used a self-driven car to confuse us?” asked the policeman as he retraced the same road they had used to reach the mountaintop. It was even more dangerous now, since the descent slope could easily make the car’s tires slide on the treacherous dirt.

“Yup,” confirmed David, “that’s what I think. Otherwise, it’d make zero sense.”

He was secretly glad to have a moral escape. The alternative was thinking he had managed to kill two men by clogging their WiFi.

“Those things are going to be a danger in a couple of years, I’m telling you,” said the officer. “They’re already beginning to appear everywhere.”

“I hope that, by then, security measures are improved.”

“Those are the last to improve, every time. I should know, man, I’m security.”

“I guess you are.”

John Derry grunted in his seat and fidgeted with his cracked tablet.

On their way back to the city, they passed a news helicopter (human-piloted) and several news trailers on the highway, making haste to the crash site.

“What are you going to tell them?” David’s curiosity got the better of him. After all, the murder of Senator Morrow was supposed to be a secret. At least for now. You can’t keep that kind of thing from the media forever. Someone always leaked, sooner or later.

Not that I’d know when they don’t, thought David.

“Just an accident, nothing to see here,” quoted the policeman. John shook his head no.

“That would just make them more curious. We’ll tell them it was an unmanned car being tested on an empty road, and it malfunctioned. We’ll clear things up with the company later.”

He talked about lying to the public with the practiced carelessness of someone who really thought he was acting in everyone’s best interest. David sighed and went back to his laptop.

“You do that. Meanwhile, I’ll place cyberbugs in every social media outlet our journalist can access. Perhaps we’ll get lucky.”

A cyberbug was the term of a special bot that checked a local (if you were short on resources) or global (if you were a Government) area of social media. It paid attention to some keywords and reported back when anyone used them. Ninety-nine percent of the time any matches were just background noise or a writer doing research for a murder in their book. With the other once percent though, you may have foiled a terrorist plot or a real murder.

David was a firm believer in doing the least effort to obtain the greater result. Putting a ton of cyberbugs out there and having the CIA check on them for him was the least-effort initiative. Since he wasn’t the one actually *looking* at the thousand messages, well, results could take the backseat.

They arrived again in the city and were driving through the financial sector when Derry told the policeman to drop him and David off. “We need to pay someone a visit.”

“I guess you don’t need the help of an honest officer of the law,” the guy joked.

“It’s not you, it’s us,” said David, with a shameful smile. “If you saw the amount of laws we broke in the last few hours, you’d get a heart-attack.”

The officer laughed mirthlessly and then sped off after David had jumped out of the patrol car.

“I don’t remember breaking any law, today,” puffed John.

“I’m just having fun with the whole detective shtick.”

John sighed and then pointed at the building behind them. It was a white skyscraper, too expensive to be an office building. A bank, perhaps?

David had never set a single foot in the financial district, not in this city, nor in any other part of the States. He conducted business entirely online.

Hell, if he could've worked for the CIA, sitting on his ass in the K-Sec hideout, he'd have jumped at the chance. Minimal exposure to assholes. Here, the exposure was greater.

"Yeah. It's a building. A big one. Pretty. What am I supposed to be seeing?" he asked John.

"You're a delight to talk to. Look at the name, Terrance. Ring any bells?"

The company's name had been forged in steel and copper on a heavy plate resting on the first floor. They were at Odin's headquarters.

"Let me guess, we are paying a visit to a certain CEO?" David had forgotten the name. No matter, he searched for it on his laptop. "Florian Dervaux, right?"

"If you kept reading that page," said John Derry, "you'd see that Mister Dervaux has been in a medical-induced coma for the last five years. We're meeting with his wife and Odin's temporal CEO, Madam Charli Dervaux."

He looked at David gravely, in the way an actor looks at a fellow actor in a movie after revealing a dramatic secret. David shrugged. "Never heard of her. She's like a model or something?"

"Well, don't tell her that," sighed John. "She just sent an email to my private address. She says she has something to talk to us about."

Odin's HQ was as friendly and inviting as anything else in the avenue. A continuous flow of suited-up employees and managers flowed across its entrance and out to the sparse entertainment down the street: several restaurants, a mall, a park.

David eyed them all with suspicion, like any of them could run up to him and steal his wallet if he wasn't careful.

Inside, John and he were received like foreign kings visiting an empire, even if they were technically just lowly employees on the totem-pole of the CIA (with David Terrance at the very bottom). A smart move, sucking-up to the CIA. It was probably corporate policy.

A blond receptionist led them to the upper levels of Odin, up in an elevator made entirely of glass—David Terrance looked around for any metal mechanism and somehow found nothing—, which revealed the entirety of the first floor down below. Since it was the HQ and not a simple corporate office building, no expense had been spared. If David had seen the place in a picture, he'd have thought it was in Vegas.

Odin was no Vegas, but no one would say that to the investors and billionaire deal-makers chatting among themselves in the middle of the giant bar.

David's instincts salivated at the thought of that amount of wealth right underneath him, the billionaires becoming progressively smaller as the elevator's floor monitor got into mid-triple digits. They were a bunch of ants dressed in expensive suits, when viewed from above.

"Madam Dervaux will see them in a minute," said the receptionist, when the elevator finally stopped at the very top and the doors opened. They stepped off into another, smaller, lobby with yet another blond receptionist staring intently at them. The first one stayed in the elevator.

"You can wait at the conference table. Down the walkway to the left," said this new receptionist. "Madam will be joining you shortly."

David nodded and tried to act unimpressed by the tasteful display of wealth all around him. Charli Dervaux had turned her floor into a mix of penthouse and office. Since most of her visitors didn't need to be impressed by how rich she was, she had gone the other route. No expensive art, no custom-made statues, no fountains. Just some tables, and a couple big screens with Wall Street data and financial reports streaming down it.

Of course, David didn't miss the fact that those bare tables were more expensive than any car he'd ever owned.

John led the way to the meeting room and closed the door behind them.

"Any news on Tull?" asked David.

"Not the best moment to be discussing anything sensitive," said the agent, like a man chatting through a stroll in the park. "You don't want any unauthorized to overhear us by accident, do you? We'd be forcing them to commit a crime."

What he was *actually* saying, with his eyes, was: "The walls are bugged. You probably have a mic shoved up your ass right now, haven't even realized it. So, shut up."

David caught his meaning and looked around like he could see the mics and the cameras hidden in the furniture.

"So, Odin was Senator Morrow's partner with the Accountability Act?"

"Brokered almost entirely by Charli Dervaux," said John Derry. "She's something of a big-shot in the financial circles, right now."

"You're familiar with that?"

"It's my job to know these things. The CIA likes to keep tabs on any fortune that could destabilize an economy."

The door opened behind them. "Not even if I promise to try really hard not to?" sang a woman's voice.

David turned around and saw an angel looking down at him from above.

Charli Dervaux had eyes of steel and perfect porcelain skin. She was dressed in a tailored, cream suit and had no jewelry on her. Her red hair parted her face in a loose curtain. Her smile was the kind of smile you would have if you were immensely rich and beautiful. She could probably get away with shooting a man in plain sight and the guy would thank her for the attention.

"Not even then, Madam Dervaux," said John without missing a beat. He got out of his leather-bound seat and offered her a seat.

"Ah, a southern gentleman," said Charli Dervaux with a delighted smile. She accepted the chair and made herself comfortable with the ease of someone who owns the place. "A dying breed these days, I'm afraid."

She turned to David. "And you must be the consultant, right? I heard you are giving the Intelligence guys a run for their money, and after only a few hours on the job."

"I'm properly motivated," said David Terrance, crisply.

He didn't trust her, instinctively, beautiful angel or not. She was the head of the Accountability Act, wasn't she? David may have been a freelancer, but he was still more in tune with Rufus and Jean and their little K-Sec game than in this place. If there was any kind of divide in society, then he and Charli Dervaux were on opposite teams.

“And I’m going to assume you don’t have privileged information on a secret CIA investigation, madam,” said John Derry with a resigned shrug. “I suspect I don’t want to know how you got it.”

Her smile was as bright as the sunrise. “Oh, why, you zealous agent, there’s no problem at all! Brandon Kelsov told me all I know, as a gesture of good faith. Morrow’s death was a terrible blow to our program, you know.”

John’s ears perked at the casual namedrop of his boss. He raised his hands, as saying: “I told you I didn’t want to know.”

David made a mental note of how she had referred to the Senator’s death. A blow to our program. A delay in the schedule.

Charming.

Would she take offense if he grabbed his laptop and zoned out?

Like listening to his thoughts, Charli turned to look straight in David’s eyes. She smiled, slightly less than before.

“Madam. You called for us and so, we’re here,” said John after a pause in the conversation. “Is there anything you want to share with us?”

Charli Dervaux nodded and withdrew her attention from David. “Yes, I did. Shall we do away with the small talk, then?”

She took out a tablet from her jacket’s pocket. “Senator Morrow was killed yesterday, but here at Odin, we feared for his safety long before. You know the FMA have resorted to terrorism before. So, we tried to give him a security detail. He refused. Tragically, of course.”

In hindsight, Morrow’s denial may have been almost suicidal, but David could imagine, if he had been in the man’s shoes, he’d have refused to have a faceless corporation checking on his every move, listening to his every conversation day after day.

On the other hand, it sure as hell was better than dying.

“Other branches of government deemed it unnecessary to put him on a detail, as well,” added John. “That’s how the CIA got involved.”

“You’re the ones they call to clean up after the mess?” said Charli in a tone that made it unclear if she was joking with John, or at his expense.

“In a way.”

Her smile vanished. Clouds hiding the sunrise. “You have one hell of a mess to clean, then. Morrow’s death has cost Wall Street billions. Some people, over whom I have little control, are very angry at this. They want someone to punish.”

“Luckily for the American people, I work for them. Not for ‘some people,’ madam.” John’s eyes now mimicked the steel in hers.

David followed the conversation like an amateur watching a pro tennis game. Not sure what was happening, only that it happened very fast.

“My dear husband would’ve liked you, John Derry,” she said. “He always surrounded himself with patriots, believe it or not. Said he could trust them before anyone else. I disagree, of course.”

John raised an eyebrow and said nothing, but Charli gave no signs of noticing it (or caring).

“See, he mistook cause for effect. He thought he could trust a patriot because they were committed to an ideal bigger than themselves. Life for their country, and

all. He thought that loyalty made them of a higher breed than their mundane counterparts. More trustworthy. Oh, my husband despised bankers.”

“You don’t?” asked David, who was incapable of ignoring the conversation any longer.

“I don’t. Cause and effect. A patriot, like our friend John, here, is trustworthy because most of the time that’s how they serve their country, or their company, or whatever they feel patriotic towards. But times can come when they feel that to help their country’s best interests, they must act against that trust. They know better, after all, than the corrupt bureaucrats making up laws and selling their integrity to the highest bidder. You’ll tell me you’ve never felt that way, Mister Derry?”

John’s eyebrow was still as raised as before and he persisted in his silence.

“Very well. With a banker, Mister David Terrance, you know what you’re getting. Anyone propelled by their own self-interest is someone you can trust utterly, in so far as they’ll always take the action they feel benefits them the most. Just take that into account, and they’ll never, ever betray you. Learn to work with them, to further them in their own goals along with yours, and you’ll become a powerful man.”

If there was any point to the conversation, it evaded him utterly. So David resorted to speaking his mind. “I think you are giving yourself too much credit, with all due respect. There’s no alliance with a *purely* self-interested person. You may think you know them, but the day may come when you’re weak and they smell blood in the water. At least, if someone thinks of you as a friend, they may forgive that moment of weakness.”

“A person who forgives *your* moment of weakness may very well forgive the weakness of your enemies, too,” said Charli, cocking her head, studying David like a pathologist examining a corpse. “It seems we can’t trust anyone, then, Mister Terrance. That’s one solitary life you’re proposing.”

“I can trust myself,” said David.

To his surprise, Charli moved her head backward and laughed genuinely. “Of course! If anything is worth doing, it’s worth doing yourself. Both of us have that in common, I believe, with my dear husband. Not like I can ask him what he thinks... But it can be a solitary life, only relying on yourself. And what happens if you can’t trust yourself, either? What do you do?”

“I guess you’re screwed,” interjected John. David had gone pale and was staring intently at the table, but neither the agent nor the CEO seemed to notice.

Which was out of character for both.

Perhaps, David thought, both of them know. John does, for sure, because he read my file. Perhaps someone in the CIA told Dervaux.

“Sorry for taking you on this tangent,” said Charli. She was playing with her expensive tablet in her perfect hands. “I was making a point, you see. Here,” she slid the tablet on the table towards John. “You can find a bit of intel the CIA missed on Morrow’s file.”

Even David couldn’t miss the blood vessels start to tense on John’s face. He appeared ready to jump on the table and arrest her on the spot. She was implying she had put an unauthorized investigative detail on a Senator of the States.

It may even have been legal a decade ago. Before the age of the data leaks and whistle-blowers. Sometime after 2018, the Government had cracked hard on any possible “snitch.” Turbulent times. David’s job had been born soon after that. A professional whistleblower, if you may, but one courteous enough to go to the persons whose data he has and ask them for money before going public.

Not even someone like Dervaux could get away from flaunting a law-break like that in front of the CIA. Right?

But, even with his face red and signs of sweat edging his forehead, John Derry was not making any moves. David wondered if he was having a stroke.

Charli held eye contact with the agent the entire time, with the tablet in the middle of the table, waiting for someone to take it.

Eventually, it was John who broke contact, first. He looked down, glanced at the tablet, and took it with a trembling hand. Charli’s smile grew.

“You see, Mister Terrance, any patriot must make a decision sometimes. Can’t have it all in this life, after all. Everything comes with a cost. He could either compromise a new piece of Intel to try —and fail— to arrest me on domestic spying charges, or he can advance the investigation on the murder of the poor Senator. Which do you think is more important?”

David turned to John, who was hunched over Charli’s tablet, pretending he wasn’t hearing anything. But, his face was still red with fury.

Guess there’s your answer.

Not that he faulted the agent. If it had been his decision, he would’ve done the same. People like Charli Dervaux never acted recklessly. They always looked to have the upper hand.

Trying to arrest Odin’s CEO would’ve raised a huge scandal on the media. It would’ve undoubtedly shed light on Morrow’s murder. She knew this.

So, she had chosen to release her intel to the CIA. After all, helping them find Morrow’s murderer was in her own self-interest.

If David had been an eloquent man, he would’ve said something like. “You make interesting conversation, Madam Dervaux. I hope we don’t have to talk much in the future.”

He wasn’t an eloquent man. He grunted a “fucking damn,” under his breath, and that was that.

John pocketed the tablet and finally deigned to raise his head towards the other persons in the room. “Thank you for your cooperation with the ongoing investigation, Madam Dervaux. I’m sure my superiors will find the way to reward you as you see fit.”

“As am I,” said Charli. Her smile slowly became a grin and then a determined scowl. “But you know what I really want. Get that murderer. He must be made an example. A public example, so everyone knows not to fuck with me.”

David decided, for his safety, not to piss her off anytime soon if he could help it.

“I’ll do my duty,” said John as he stood up. “Have a good day, madam.”

Charli nodded and relaxed in her chair. John left the room with angry, energetic steps. David stood up to follow him. Before he could leave, he heard her calling to him:

“David?”

He turned and saw Leonor sitting in the CEO's chair. She looked beautiful and savage in her motorcycle jacket. Before he could open his mouth, she said: "Remember. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

David blinked in surprise and when he opened his eyes again, he found Charli Dervaux, not Leonor. The CEO examined him with clever, calculating eyes. *What are your buttons, Terrance? Are they easier to press than those of John Derry?*

"Yes, Mister Terrance?" she finally asked him. He realized that, from anyone's perspective, he was the one staring at *her*.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Goodbye, Mister Terrance."

Chapter 7

That's the second time this day that David's mind had played tricks on him. He had never been in a situation like this before. If stress burned through the PKD chemical in his system, he suspected the bottle would be empty by the end of the day.

Outside the Odin's HQ, the CIA's van was already waiting for him and John Derry.

The agent said nothing during the entire walk out of Odin, and he kept quiet when the Van started moving, as well. To David, John Derry appeared to be lost in thought.

"Where are we going?" David asked finally, unable to contain his curiosity.

"Oh, right, you haven't seen the archives." John tossed him the tablet. It was a bunch of photographs with dates and locations underneath.

"Mind giving me the short version?"

David had known John for half a day and what he learned of the man is that he was mostly a dick. The hacker was used to working with computers and programming language, not with human emotions. Those pesky, unpredictable emotions.

But talking about things can help someone, David knew, to sort of give them time to buffer through all their shit.

"Turns out the Senator's marriage wasn't as solid as we thought," said John, after a pause. "Dervaux detective's found out Morrow was having an affair and documented the whole thing. It had been going on for years, judging by the number of images."

David turned back at the tablet. The first image was of a man, possibly Morrow (the mangled corpse he had seen in the security video was unrecognizable) going into a cheap restaurant David did not recognize. He was wearing a cap, and his shoulders were slumped. The very face of a man who didn't want to be recognized.

"They met each other through work," John went on, "during a time when Morrow was going through a rough patch with Angelica. They made up, but Morrow kept the affair going."

David kept scrolling through the images. Morrow went into the restaurant and then the scenario changed. It was raining and it was late at night, and he was

waiting for a cab with another man, about his height. Next picture was in clear daylight, as they walked together into a government building. They kept their distance to each other, pretending they were work acquaintances, but David recognized the shape and build of the man in the last picture. He dressed like a college professor, tweed jacket with patches on the elbows, oxford trousers, a trimmed white beard, crimson sweater, sunglasses, and brown dress shoes. He clashed against Morrow's style, who exuded confidence and power.

The next pictures had been taken with an illegal spy-drone, judging by the angle and because it was taken inside a motel room. They were explicit in their content and activity.

David put the tablet down. "Who is the other guy?"

"He's a software developer," John said, "Wade Phillips. There's a file on him in the tablet, too. Famous in his circles. He's currently working at Skyline University as project director."

"Of what?"

"Human/Machine interface. Software and connections for prosthesis and helping paralytics walk again."

At a glance, David thought Wade Phillips and Xavier Morrow had little in common to justify a dangerous affair (career-wise, in Morrow's case). Then again, besides their profession, he and Leonor had little in common, too. Other than their daughter, that is.

"You think he's involved in the murder?" David asked.

"Well, we're about to find out, aren't we? I'd also think we ought to investigate Angelica Morrow's involvement, so I'll have someone check on her while we talk to Mister Wade."

"Check her work's security feeds," suggested David. What the hell, they were already shoulder deep in invasion of privacy practices, they may as well go all the way.

He imagined Leonor's face if she heard that suggestion and he smiled to himself.

"Yes. Among other things." John was distracted enough to avoid the dose of condescension this time around.

The van stopped a few minutes later, while David was reading the file on Wade Phillips.

"We're here," said John. "Welcome to the Skyline University."

The SU campus extended several blocks and was comprised of different buildings, spaced far enough apart to warrant a system of buses to ferry students and faculty around. If someone looked at it from the sky, they'd think of the campus as a big patch of green in a gray city expanse. Thanks to its corporate funding, it had the best facilities, the best reputation, and the most expensive tuition.

David looked around and caught a glimpse of a football stadium in the distance, where several buses filled with students were currently heading. Traffic was dense towards the stadium, and it was brimming with activity. Flags waved in the distance, proclaiming it was game night.

"It's the Skyline Grizzlies versus the Majestic Scorpions today," explained John. "So, of course, the place is packed."

"Never heard of either of them."

“Really? The entire city is going to watch the game. Long-time rivalry, game of the year, none of that rings a bell?”

“Well, I was in jail,” shrugged David.

“The VR construct had a live-feed of a news-stream.”

“Fine. I don’t follow sports. Can we go to find Phillips, now?”

John smiled like he’d heard a funny joke. “Of course you don’t follow sports, what was I thinking?”

Surprisingly, he wasn’t making fun of David, more like chastising himself for missing an important detail. It didn’t stop the hacker from feeling vaguely discriminated against.

You have something against nerds, jock?

There was someone else who wasn’t going to the game later on: Phillips himself. Tracking him took them as long as it took David’s Internet browser to show them his class schedules on campus, where he taught Computer Science. His class was stated to end at 6pm, only a couple minutes later.

A bus brought them to the correct building. Phillips’ classroom was already open and a stream of tired-looking students was pouring out of it. David and John waited patiently until the students cleared the area enough to give them some privacy.

Wade Phillips looked just like his pictures. He was in his middle fifties, his hair was graying, and he wore silver spectacles during his lecture. John walked towards him, followed by David, while Phillips checked his notes. The man was a traditionalist, he wrote on paper and his blackboard was an actual blackboard, unlike those cheap, gigantic touchscreens most professors used nowadays.

When they were close enough to him, he noticed their presence. David saw, step-by-step, how at first Wade thought they were a pair of his students, and a second later, suspect something was afool.

“Yes?” Wade asked. “Can I help you, gentlemen?”

“Wade Phillips?” confirmed John. The professor nodded, still waiting for them to speak their motives.

“We’re with the police,” John continued. He showed Phillips his fake ID badge. “We want to talk to you about Senator Morrow.”

To his credit, Phillips didn’t react in the slightest. To John Derry’s credit, a perfect non-reaction was the same as an admission of guilt.

“What with him? I’m not comfortable discussing my political leanings.”

John and David exchanged a poignant look.

“He died the day before yesterday,” said John.

That got them a reaction. Wade Phillips’ eyes got wide with shock and his face became pale in a second. His trembling hand shot upwards to his chest, not quite grasping it. “Oh... my god...” He slumped over in his chair.

Well, thought David, at least we know he probably didn’t do it.

For a moment, no one moved. Phillips remained stunned like he had become a statue. Then, slowly, he raised his head. “What—what happened?”

“He was murdered,” said John, not without pity. “We think it was politically-motivated. I’m sorry.”

“Oh god...”

“We know you two were in a relationship,” continued the agent. Apparently, he had missed the “giving grieving people a moment” part of his sensitivity training back in the CIA. “We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

Wade Phillips had been hiding that particular part of his life for years. David wasn’t surprised when the man lied automatically: “What relationship?”

So, John showed him some photos. The ones in the restaurant. “We have more, of course.”

Phillips sighed and slumped even more in his chair, his elbows digging deep into his knees. “God... no, no, that’s enough.”

It felt wrong, somehow, to appear like this in the life of a man who had just lost a loved one.

“We’re working to catch up with his killer,” said John Derry, “but we need your help.”

“My help?” Wade Phillips’ gaze was lost. Like he was in another place. Far away. “What could I possibly do to help?”

“You can start by telling us if someone threatened Morrow’s life. Did he talk to you about it?”

“He was the Senate’s main supporter of the Accountability Act, what do you think? He got so many death threats he had to hire someone else to read his emails.”

John thought for a beat. “I mean, something different than the usual.”

“Different? I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t know. We didn’t talk about work. We...” Phillips trailed off.

“Any suspicious activity? Calls in the middle of the night? Cars with unusual movement? Any—”

“I don’t know!” Wade’s hands closed into fists. “How dare you—stop right now. My—Xavier is dead... And you talk to me like I’m an actor in a police show? Get the hell out!”

His face was red and his eyes had begun to water. Phillips’ blinked and clenched his jaw. He was clearly fighting down his grief with raw anger.

“I’m not here to judge you,” said John in the exact tone one might say “I don’t give a shit, just talk.”

Wade stood up and advanced on the agent. “Listen here—”

“Wait!” called David, probably saving the professor a couple of broken bones. “Wait a second, okay? We’re honestly trying to help. Look, I can’t possibly know how you’re feeling right now. But, if you want to help Xavier, help us find out who did this to him. Let me talk to you.”

The professor lowered his fists a tad. John discreetly relaxed his entire body, like a snake that just decided to let a mouse run away.

“I don’t know how I can help you,” whispered Phillips. “He barely told me anything.”

“Every bit can help. Please, professor. Talk with me for a bit. Then we’ll leave you alone,” said David, who was just guessing at this point. He only had experience with computers.

What the hell am I doing? This called for a professional; he was the least qualified person in the world to talk about something like this.

Phillips gave a deep sigh and faced away from them. David gestured at John to give the man some breathing room. To David's surprise, the agent accepted and stepped away.

"Fine," said Phillips, turning back. "Let's talk. But then—then you'll leave me alone—"

"Great—" began John, but the professor had not finished.

"I'll talk to you," he told David. "Neither of you are police, but at least you're a worse liar than he is."

John's hand flew like a flash towards his gun, which was trailed on Phillips' chest in the fraction of a second. Before David could open his mouth to scream, the agent shot Phillips three times...

David blinked. John was standing right there, pistol nowhere in sight. Phillips had no bloody holes in his chest.

The hacker breathed deeply. His head was dizzy. Another hallucination.

Get it together, David, he told himself.

"My consultant is not qualified to conduct interrogations," John was telling the professor.

"Neither are you," Phillips said.

"Derry," said David, "let me talk to him."

Then he remembered something he had heard Charli Dervaux say. "It's for the good of the investigation," David added.

John's smile was cold. "You learn fast, don't you, Terrance? I thought you disagreed with the teacher."

David said nothing. What could he say? He simply held the agent's gaze.

"Alright. I'll be outside. Expecting your report."

He walked briskly out of the classroom, the perfect image of peacefulness like he only wanted to go for a stroll.

Wade Phillips and David Terrance were left alone.

"First of all," began Phillips, "I'm not a professor. I've a Ph.D. There are several years of research as a difference, so I'd appreciate if you used the correct title."

David smiled. "Sorry, Doctor Phillips."

"Don't sweat it. By the way, mind telling me what's the deal with you and your friend's clothes? You look like you got dragged out of a car accident."

"It wasn't like that," David answered. "Not a car, at least."

The windows of the classroom showed a crystal clear view of an ample garden where half a dozen students lingered. All of them were fine with missing the football match. David ignored the fact he was in the Computer Science building. It was a stereotype that needed to die already.

The sky was a mixture of oranges, deep blues, and traces of purple that grew more intense as night approached. The sun was huge and gave the clouds a red tint.

It was the first real sunset David had seen in a long time. Now that the prison's drugs had left his system, he couldn't believe he was ever fooled by the VR graphics. They weren't a match for the real thing, not by a long shot.

"I'm married, you know," Doctor Phillips told him after they sat down in the students' chairs and David had properly introduced himself. "Two children, one of them is applying to Skyline this year."

"Congratulations," said David. The doctor seemed to be waiting for more. Perhaps someone more socially attuned could know what the man is waiting to hear, but David could only think to say: "I have a daughter. Sarah. She's at her grandparent's."

Wade Phillips nodded and then his attention faded. His gaze was directed towards the window. "You know, he always swore he'd leave his wife. She made his life a living hell, he said, so he'd leave her and we could be... Doesn't matter anymore, does it? I always knew it was a lie, anyway, even if he wanted to believe it himself. His career was too important. Even if he did... well, I can't leave myself that easily, you know? I have a family. I love them very much... And even then. Even then. I couldn't help myself from thinking how it'd be like..."

David could think of only one thing to say. "I'm very sorry, Doctor Phillips."

"Do you love your wife, David?"

Ex-wife, thought David, but instead, he simply said yes.

"I love my wife, too," Phillips' eyes were grounded on the floor. "Funny how that goes, right?"

David didn't think it was funny at all. Wade Phillips added:

"People can dedicate their lives to one person or one cause and in the end, they are the ones who hurt them the most. Who are you two working for? NSA? FBI? CIA? Corporate?"

The question caught David unprepared. Should he tell him the truth?

And why the hell not? That man knew something. He was eager to talk about it. David suspected grief was not the only thing making Wade Phillips' body shake. Fear could do that to a man.

"CIA," he said, hoping that John Derry wasn't listening to their conversation, somehow. Or that, if he did, he wouldn't decide to bust him for a contract breach or whatever. "We're with the CIA."

"The other guy called you a consultant, so you're an outsider," Wade pointed out. "What do you think of them? Do you trust them?"

"Only as far as I can throw them," David said. Then, he shrugged. "Things are pretty clear with them if you think about it. You play by their rules, you help them out. If they have no reason not to, they'll stick by their end of their bargain at the end of it."

"It's the 'no reason not to' that worries me," said Wade Phillips.

"What's going on?" David went to the point. "I can see you want to tell us something. Is it about Morrow?"

Wade's eyes were wet and afraid. "I don't know. Could be. You believe in coincidences? Because there's one hell of a coincidence in my phone, right now..."

The doctor sighed and pulled a thin, glass slab out of his pocket. He clicked once or twice in the digital screen and then showed it to David. It was the "received calls" menu.

David instantly caught sight of what Wade wanted to show him. His eyes were already looking for it, in a way. Like he had seen this movie before. Here's what he saw:

Two missed calls, from Xavier Morrow's contact ID. Dated yesterday, 2 am. Then, in the morning, more missed calls, this time from unknown numbers.

David's gaze met with Phillip's. The man lowered the phone. "It has been going on all day. If I answer one of the unknown callers, it's only static. Every time. I even began recording it. They won't hang up, they won't say anything. And still... I think I can feel *them* on the other side of the line. Trying to speak to me."

His hands were shaking. "I have done some bad things in my life, David. Some very bad things."

David may not have been a social mastermind, but he suddenly understood Wade's fear.

He thinks he's being punished. The ghost of his lover, back from the dead, to remind him of his sins. The Doctor had a cross underneath his sweater, David could see the shape against the fabric. *He's not looking for someone to trust, he's looking for absolution.*

Wasn't that how he felt, himself? He reached out to Phillip's trembling hands and gently pulled the phone away from him. Wade made no attempt to stop him. Instead, he seemed relieved, like David had taken a heavy weight from his back. "Our demons tend to stay inside ourselves, Wade. Let me hold this thing for you."

Phillips said nothing. He's hands clutched into claws, grasping at the fabric of his trousers. David thought of Jean, the K-Sec hacker.

"You know, more than a year ago, my wife and I were trying to have our second child," David started, not sure where he was going with this. "We had enough cash saved up from... well, our jobs... to give our little family a stable, happy life. We hadn't much luck. We went to a doctor. Then another and another. They all said the same thing: Leonor could never again have children."

He could almost see her. Standing, back against the window's sunlight, black hair covering her face. She was a strong woman. Stronger than him, by far. But her shoulders still shook against her will.

There was an operation she could undergo, to fix whatever arcane medical issue her plumbing was having. It was expensive. Their savings account wouldn't make the cut. Both of them had stopped stealing information a while ago. They were trying to make a family, after all.

She had begged him not to do it. After all, she knew him better than anyone else. Don't risk what we have right now. It's not worth it.

In those times, David Terrance was one of the best solo hackers in the whole damn world. His username had been whispered in all the forums like an urban myth. There was little security code that could withstand the might of his ten fingers.

Those times were far away, and the world had moved. A lot can change in a year, and even fame can fade away. The new security systems were far more advanced than those he had known before. Now, if there was a ranking of hackers (there wasn't. But let's imagine one), he wouldn't feature on any top spot. A new generation was here.

He knew this, intimately, even in jail. Hell, before that. As the trial went on. He had seen famous usernames come and go, legends appear in a day and gone the next.

And, even today, standing in front of Wade Phillips, David knew he'd have a decent chance of getting away with cracking into any Government server. Perhaps even military, if he was feeling suicidal.

Of course he took the risk back then, when he was the very best.

He took the risk and he got caught. He had been so close...

Leonor turned against him during the trial. He didn't hold it against her, not that. She had to keep their family together, at least the little fragments that were left.

But *before* the trial, when the police cars could still be heard in the distance, coming towards their little apartment to arrest him, that's when she had turned to him, crying, holding Sarah in her arms.

Please, love, we can make it out of this. David had told her. *You, Sarah, and me. You have to believe in me. I can get out of this. I can make a deal. I can work for them, they make deals with hackers all the time, you know it—*

I can't do this anymore, tears were raining down Leonor's cheeks the whole time. But her voice never cracked. *You are living in a lie and I can't help you anymore. I'm leaving, David. It's over.*

Love, I—Our daughter...

Please. That had been the point where her voice almost failed her. *Please, David. If you love me. Please. Shut up.*

The next time he had seen her, it was in court. She did whatever she needed to do to get her name out of it. She told a lot of lies while refusing to meet his gaze.

David Terrance told all this to Wade Phillips. The man listened, at first not sure how his story was tied into his dilemma, but then out of pity for the disgraced hacker.

“—I stopped trying to defend myself in court, at the end,” David adds. “In the end, it was too grating. I could've fought *them* all day long. Make any deals. I just couldn't fight her. So, I didn't. I haven't seen Sarah in a while, and probably never will again. They're out of the country, you see.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“I guess, what I'm saying is... I did some bad things, okay? No denying that. The CIA may not be the cleanest organization nowadays, but the info I leaked could've gotten people killed. And I paid for it. The price was my family and my freedom. In the end, Wade, we all have to live with our regrets. So, if you can do something, right now, to lessen those regrets... Well. If I were in your shoes, I'd do it.”

“I have two choices,” said Wade Phillips with a sigh. “One of them is the easier one and may go against your and your employers' interest. The other one is dangerous and may not even lead to anything. Imagine you're in my shoes. What would you do?”

David had been telling the truth so far and lying right now would be too obvious. Hell, he didn't want to. He was tired. And Leonor had been laughing at him all the while, sitting next to Wade Phillips. The PKD bottle in his pocket was almost calling to him. He only had to take a pill and his mind would start working again.

“Hell, man, I don't know,” he smiled. “I'd probably take my family and get the hell out of the country. Take a third option. But, I'd consider all my options carefully, first.”

To his surprise, Phillips actually began to laugh. “David, you’re one of the worst motivational speakers I’ve ever heard. You’re supposed to convince me to collaborate with the CIA... But, I can tell you’re genuine. Thank you.”

The sky outside was almost dark now. The faint cheering of the crowd was carried over by the strange acoustic of the campus, even if they were far away. It came along with a faint buzzing, engine-like.

“Sure. I only work here.”

Phillips thought it over while Leonor screamed obscenities next to his ear. It didn’t seem to bother him.

“I have something to speak to the CIA about. It may be related to what happened to Xavier. It may not. But, I’ll definitely need someone to have my back afterward. There’s no coming back from this. I need your partner’s guarantee that my family will be safe.”

“I can’t speak for the CIA. I’m not in the greatest spot with them right now...” after all, he had sold their Op-Manuals to the highest bidder and in return, they had canned him in a plastic coffin for over a year. On the other hand, they were working together. “But, I mean, they are Government. They have witness protection programs and all that. Make them happy and they’ll keep you happy, too.”

“We’ll find out.”

They stood up and David got ready to call John in. But, something was wrong in the room. The hair on his arms tingled with anxiety.

Leonor’s screaming had stopped. She stared at David with a puzzled expression on her face and then at the ceiling. She was listening to something.

The screaming is louder, David thought. Something was going on outside. Leonor turned towards the windows—like a hallucination could actually see whatever was going on, when he couldn’t—and then she walked towards David.

“Love, you’re in for a rude awakening,” she told him. Hate burned in her eyes, as usual. But, for the first time, also concern. “Duck.”

“David?” asked Wade Phillips. “Is something wrong?”

David blinked. “What?” His brain caught up with Leonor’s actual meaning one second after.

“Duck!”

The wall by the Doctor’s desk exploded. The shower of bricks, dust, and concrete threw David Terrance to the floor like a ragdoll.

Leonor’s warning saved his life when he had the presence of mind to roll away. The explosion was caused by a student-filled bus that hit the wall at max speed. Its front went all the way to the entrance of the classroom and smashed against the *second* wall before coming to a stop.

A back wheel jerks to a stop half a foot away from David’s face, and exactly where his face had been before he rolled away.

The screaming stopped briefly after the explosion, but afterward was louder than ever. A stream of terrified students started to get out of the bus as David crawled across the floor, covered in debris once more on the same day, gasping for air, ears ringing. His hearing wouldn’t ever be the same.

He stumbled into Wade Phillips. That man's hearing wouldn't be the same, either. Because he was under the bus and his body was bloody and torn to shreds. He lay there, unmoving.

David didn't know this, but he was in shock.

"Terrance!" A faint voice came from behind him. David turned on his back and stared at John Derry. Why was the agent so surprised? Buses didn't go out of their way to murder people inside buildings in his day to day?

Pfft. The angry, beefed-up agent—scared of a bus. The idea was the most hilarious image David had thought in the entire day.

He felt like laughing and then not stopping. Ever again.

The bus engine roared, then, and the wheels started moving again.

"C'mon, sweetheart," Leonor's hallucination grabbed David by the shoulders and, together with John, dragged him out of the bus' way. "Time to run. You can't die yet. I'm not there to see it, remember?"

Chapter 8

John had been dragging David for several feet when the hacker's legs caught up with what was expected of them.

He jogged alongside the agent as a sea of terrified students ran, screaming, in all directions. Some of them towards the site of the accident, bravely—or stupidly—thinking it was just that, an accident, and perhaps there were people there who needed help.

No human force was going to help Wade Phillips, sadly. Technology was simply not advanced enough to heal a hit from a bus at full speed. It probably wouldn't be twenty years from now, either.

Technology was advanced enough to let every student inside the bus survive with only some scratches and a broken bone or two. Kudos to the engineers.

David was having the time of his life. Why was everyone running? Hell, why was he running?

He began to laugh as he ran. He threw his fist in the air, feeling the breeze pass around his body.

He blinked and the scene changed. He was lying horizontally in a grassy field. Police helicopters (human-manned. Fool me once, and all that) were flying in. Fire trucks were near, he could hear their screeching. Paramedics. Media. You name it, they were here.

But, his field of vision was occupied mostly by John Derry, standing in front of him. A giant judge, deciding if he'd wield the sword or the olive branch.

Here's what John did. He reached down and slapped David's face, hard enough to make him see stars. If he had slapped a TV screen, it would've blacked out for a second. David's face did the same.

"Jesus Christ, what the fuck is wrong with you—"

"You were in shock."

"Oh." David felt he was himself again. His face hurt. He was sure the agent's hand was now imprinted in his cheek. It stung, too. "Thanks. I feel better."

Beat. Pause. His mind was placing all subroutines back online. *Your system just went through a small safety protocol to minimize lasting psychological damage. Thanks for understanding. Do you want to send a bug report?*

David realized John just tried to take him out of shock by slapping him hard.

“You think you can take a man out of shock by *slapping* him?”

John had the gall to act unimpressed. “I’m not a psychologist. It seems like it worked, doesn’t it? You’re making sense again.”

“I’m pretty sure shock doesn’t work that way.”

John helped him stand up. Standing up made him dizzy, and being dizzy made him remember the sight of Wade Phillips crushed underneath the bus. David’s stomach began a popular uprising inside his body.

“Technically, you weren’t in medical shock. You were having an acute stress reaction—different from medical shock. So—”

David doubled over the grass and emptied the contents of his stomach. That was a liquid stream of tube-fed nutrient mixture. His throat burned with pain and threatened to close up.

When he had finished, John handed him a handkerchief the agent kept in his pocket. “Feeling better?”

The hacker accepted the cloth and cleaned himself as best as he could, all the while feeling pitifully sorry for himself. “No.”

“Tough luck, then. I need to know what happened back there—”

“A fucking bus ran over Wade.”

“I know that part. I’m talking beforehand.”

The doctor had been scared. Scared for his life and for his family. David had promised he’d do his best to protect him, talk him up to the CIA. As it turned out, David could do even less than he thought.

If his stomach wasn’t empty, he’d be puking again.

“He wanted to talk to you about something. He wasn’t sure he could help Morrow’s investigation, but he wanted to take the risk anyway. He felt he’d need protecting afterward.”

Then David remembered the ghostly calls. He took out the Doctor’s smartphone, which somehow had ended in his back pocket, along with his own phone. The crystal-like material was cracked all over, but the little thing was tougher than it looked. “He also thought the Senator called him sometime *after* he was found dead.”

It would sound utterly ridiculous if it weren’t for the fact that Morrow’s own wife had reported the same thing. And, in her case, they had the conversation recorded.

John Derry examined the phone for a bit and then cracked open a small compartment on its side. He took the phone’s memory card and pocketed it. “I’ll have the team check Phillips’ phone records.”

There was an uncomfortable silence while both of them stood there as the constant coming-and-going of the paramedics, police, and media dabbled around them.

“It was a drone, right? The bus,” said David. A team of firefighters was extracting the battered bus, engine first, so it couldn’t do any more damage.

“Yes,” said John. “We’re telling the newspapers that it went haywire. Probably pay them a bit so they don’t draw the connection between this *accident* and the one with the quadcopter. Or the car crash.”

David couldn’t care less about the expense of the cover-up. Something nagged him at the back of his mind. Something about those drones was very wrong.

Well, something *other* than the fact they were easily hacked and used for evil.

No way these things get popular after this goes public, he thought. *They’re death traps.*

“Give me a second,” said John. Both his tablet and his smartphone were vibrating. “The boss is calling.” He walked a couple steps away from David and into the campus, speaking the whole time in a whisper.

Here’s what bugged David: A drone’s network works differently than one in a normal computer. It has GPS connection, maps, and other tracking subsystems connected to the Internet. Rest of the software is off-line.

Vicente’s impersonator had been using Tull’s car as his connection, implying he was inside of it the whole time. But, the car turned out to be a drone. When David and John’s Intel team shut the hacker’s connection off, the car had crashed, meaning it was empty—no human driver to simply press the brake pedal—

It didn’t make any sense. Had the hacker modified the car to work as a modem, to help him trick the CIA into thinking he was inside the car? Cars networks weren’t equipped to do that, at least as far as David knew. It would be a brutal security oversight. It would require a third-party hardware modification. Perhaps it would leave physical evidence on the crash site.

But the police didn’t report anything weird with the car. It was just a normal drone, expensive and luxurious, without any modifications.

David was stumped. The hacker *had* to be inside the car. The hacker *couldn’t* be inside the car.

If he didn’t suspect that popping another PKD pill so quickly would probably fry his liver, he’d do it. His head was pulsating with the threat of a migraine. Thinking was much harder now than it was two hours before.

Yes, stress definitely cut the effects of the medication off. Some metaphorical hand would start enveloping his brain into cellophane anytime soon. Leonor’s hallucinations would start in full force again. Perhaps he could stand them until he could go to bed. It was nighttime already.

John Derry returned. His face was ashen, the unmistakable sign that David’s day wasn’t anywhere near over. “My boss is calling off the case.”

“*What?*”

“Dugall Tull appeared a minute or two ago. Your cyberbugs found activity on a social media network.”

“That’s good, right?”

John Derry shrugged again. “Depends on how you view it. He claimed responsibility for all the murders: Morrow, Phillips, Vicente. My team is trying to stop the post from making it into the public eye.” Pause. “It was a suicide note, Terrance. The CIA has the body.”

“That’s...”

David had enough of deaths and murders for an entire lifetime. He wanted to go home and sleep. He remembered he didn't have a home anymore, and not enough cash to pay for a place to stay.

On one hand, the case was suddenly over. The murderer was off the streets. Perhaps the CIA would keep their promise to him.

On the other hand...

"I don't understand," said David. "Dugall Tull was the hacker? How did he impersonate Vicente? How did he steal his credentials? And he had no motive to kill him. Why did he kill Wade before offing himself?"

John Derry was thinking something similar. David knew it because he wasn't telling him to shut the hell up. But, instead of agreeing with him, he simply said. "The CIA is satisfied with the motives of Dugall Tull for the three murders, but neither of us are going to hear them. They're on a need-to-know basis."

"Well, I *need* to know."

Are you so brainwashed you're going to let them just give you a bag of stinking shit as an explanation and call it quits?

John shook his head. "Neither of us needs to know. The case is over, Terrance. Don't you want to find out what happens with you, now?"

Their gazes met. "I don't know, Derry. What happens with me, now?"

He had helped move the case forward, after all. But, in the end, according to John's boss, the case had solved itself.

"You're free to go. The rest of your sentence was been lifted. Your record is expunged, which will help you find a job sometime soon." John handed him a credit card out of his own wallet. "This is a CIA on-the-field expenses account. It'll cover your living expenses for six months. Don't over-use it, we'll be monitoring it."

David may have had his doubts about the CIA's motives, but he wasn't one to turn down free money. He took the card. "What about my computer-ban? Is it still off?"

His only marketable talent was working with computers. His only shot at a real job was in software.

John sighed. "Sorry, Terrance. No dice with the higher ups. You're still banned from accessing any computer, especially if it's connected to the Internet. I'll need that laptop of yours."

David did not fight it. He knew there was no point. He wasn't the one making the rules, after all. He handed Orville's battered laptop to John. "Fine."

"I'll try to pull some strings, Terrance," said John. "I can probably get you a desk job in a Government office. The pay is shit, but the benefits are great. Some of them still work in paper."

David suspected even the agent couldn't help but feel guilty about the whole thing. And someone like John Derry would only feel guilty if he knew something wasn't right with their deal.

Not like he would do anything about it.

"Sounds charming. Thanks."

There's another lull in their conversation. The two men realized in silence that they had nothing else to say to each other.

Pleasure working with you?

Well, I barely know you. You're a bit of an asshole, you know.

Same.

“Well, then,” said David, “that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

David nodded. “Goodbye, Derry.”

They exchanged a cold handshake and John Derry walked towards his black van, which was already waiting for him at the campus’ street.

David stood there, not sure what the hell had just happened.

“Stop being so melodramatic,” her ex-wife hallucination told him, as she massaged his shoulders with vapor-like fingers. “You’re free. That’s all that matters. Go eat something and find a hotel. Forget about this stupid business.”

She’s right, and that was a red flag. David’s hallucinations usually were happy with screaming at him, try and mess with his head, and generally make their best effort to drive him insane.

They didn’t give him life advice.

Perhaps it was the new tactic of the bunch. Reverse-psychology his subconscious into self-destruction.

David shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t think I can do that.”

He was thinking of Wade Phillips. He was doing so because the paramedics were carrying the broken body out of the campus now, into a nearby ambulance—not that it would do him any good.

“I have something to speak to the CIA about. It may be related to what happened to Xavier. It may not. But, I’ll definitely need someone to have my back afterward. There’s no coming back from this...”

That’s what he had told him just a while ago. No coming back from this.

David had convinced him—or perhaps, just encouraged him—to try and pacify his guilty conscience by speaking to the CIA. He had been murdered before he could do so. The secret had died with him.

Why the hell would a journalist kill a college professor and a hacker on his side? Why would—

“Stop,” Leonor begged him. “You’re making a mistake. There’s no reason to keep this charade going. You’re not a hero. Stay out of this. Forget all about it. Stay with me. I’m tired, David. I’m so... tired.”

But, David had never been able to *stay* out of anything. If curiosity were a sin, he’d be in hell. He had become a hacker to find out the most obscure secrets of the rich and powerful. Sure, the money from those secrets was nice. But it was the *knowing...*

David made his decision.

“I’ll do my best to help you,” he had told Wade Phillips. He was at his best when he was uncovering secrets.

Well then...

“Please, love...” Leonor went on.

David’s face was a mask. “Sorry, hun, but I can’t do this anymore. I’m leaving.” It’s like his heart was breaking all over again.

His wife’s face contorted into a monstrous imitation. “You think you’re being brave? You’re your own wet dream, you pathetic—”

The PKD bottle was in his hands already, before he even realized it. He popped another pill. To hell with his liver. He had work to do.

It was nighttime and David Terrance stood alone in the campus, surrounded only by the light of the police cars and the ambulances.

First order of business for David was to get the hell out of Skyline University and into somewhere as far away as possible from big groups of cops. Even if they'd been working for the same side, albeit briefly, he'd never trust civil servants completely.

Perhaps, the feeling was mutual. In neither case was it without a motive.

John Derry had made a small mistake before he left him there. He had taken Orville's laptop, but he hadn't taken David's phone.

In this day and age, a phone was just a smaller, prettier, slightly less useful computer. He had it in his hands. It was like giving an Olympic swimmer a puddle to practice in.

It would be ugly. But, it would do in a pinch.

He downloaded an app, added Derry's card information and three minutes later David was in the back of a car driven by a talkative middle-aged lady. As the car zig-zagged slowly through the river of heavy traffic of after-hours office workers driving home, David composed an email.

Hey, Orville. You guys still at K-Sec HQ? Shit went sideways with my former employers. They're calling Case Closed on Vicente's murder, but I don't think it's over yet.

If we mix our noses with this, we could be shooting ourselves in the ass. But, I'm doing it and could use the help. They're probably monitoring my Internet access, so I can only work through my phone.

Are you game?

-T

He did not send the email through his phone's data plan—which worked with prepaid cards, anyway—instead, he tells his driver to lend him her network for a second.

"I've only a couple gigs left in my connection, but I really need to send this email," he told her.

No problem at all. A happy customer is a customer who leaves five-star reviews. She pressed two or three buttons and one minute later, David's phone vibrated with Orville's answer.

K-Sec is game. We did some digging on our own. You didn't tell us you're CIA. Tut-tut, T.

Jean says she wants to kill a motherfucker, so please let's send her to the right guy, shall we?

What do you need?

-R.Orville

David smiled. He more or less counted with K-Sec's help. He'd be screwed without it, really. And, all in all, he may have been a lone wolf, but given the choice of working with people like John Derry or working with wannabe-corporate

hackers like K-Sec... Well, it wasn't much of a choice. Politicians did the same thing. Even if they hated their guts, they would always flock towards one another instead of a civilian.

I need you to do some digging for me. Doctor Wade Phillips, Computer Science degree. Worked at Skyline U until he got flattened less than an hour ago. He was working on something. I need to know all about it. Perhaps look into SU servers?

May be dangerous. Keep an eye open.

-T

There wasn't much else, apart from his relationship with Morrow, that could explain Phillips' murder. The killer had known exactly when Phillips had agreed to talk.

Someone had been listening to their conversation, perhaps? Or spying on their movements. People could easily do that, nowadays. Pinning a small, rented satellite on your ass, for example, was a brute force method. A small, mosquito-sized spy drone would be a more refined approach.

David looked around the car as if he could find said spy drone hanging on the empty seat next to him. He forced himself to breathe deeply. Paranoia would only dilute the pills effect and he needed to think clearly (and by now, his system was so filled with the PKD compound that stress could give him a heart attack).

If someone is following me, there's nothing I can do about that. I'm not a secret agent.

On the net, that was a different story. He'd only need a keyboard and public WiFi and then he could maybe bite back.

The car stopped in front of a cheap business motel somewhere on the outskirts of the city. Its OPEN FOR BUSINESS cartel was the strongest light in the sky. The sign included a crudely-drawn businessman sleeping on a cartoonish bed.

Even the *idea* of a bed sounded like heaven to David. He added a five-star review to his driver's page and walked tiredly towards reception.

Registry went quickly: reception was a small room, the size of his former virtual cell. There was a machine on it with a card-reader where David registered his card's information.

Next part was crucial. For an extra fee, he selected the "pay on check-out" option from the machine. Normally, the option is only there for middle-management on business trip, doing some tax fuckery that escaped David completely.

It worked for him because the CIA wouldn't get a receipt for the place he's sleeping at until at least tomorrow morning. He did not want anyone looking too closely at the site's free WiFi, which it offered to every guest as a bonus feature.

Was it a flawless plan? No. But nowadays there were no perfect plan. Anyone, with enough time, can dig out any information they may want, on anyone else—unless those persons can afford to pay *premium* amounts of dollars. Privacy was a privilege.

David was making a bet on a second-handed kind of privacy. Being lost in background noise. Society is run by people and people can't be everywhere at once. Not the Government, not the Corporations, not K-Sec.

John Derry may have David's phone network watched, but having him followed and then every WiFi in the area monitored for his activity, that was expensive. David was a humble man. He knew he wasn't worth that kind of cash. Not anymore.

Anyway... to be sure, he only planned on surfing the Internet for ten minutes or so.

He found an old desktop PC in a corner of the lobby, right of the bathrooms and past the elevators into the rooms. The plastic feel of the keyboard (membrane-based, not mechanical, which felt like blasphemy to him) sent a tingling sensation through his fingers.

That's right. Computers had never lied to him. They were based in real, pragmatic rules that you could understand if you studied them long enough. They weren't people.

It's all David Terrance needed to feel at home.

There's only so much he could do on a random public computer with free WiFi. Orville had software installed in his laptop already. Inside this new PC were only spreadsheet programs.

Setting it up properly could've taken the entire night. But David didn't plan on doing anything heavy-duty. No hacking into the CIA for him tonight. Instead, he found Xavier and Angelica Morrow's apartment and tricked the home network of the whole building into thinking he's inside it. That took him three minutes and the free download of a GPS address changer.

David idly thought of how he was more or less retracing the steps the murderer had taken to hide the evidence inside the Morrow's apartment. It wasn't too hard.

Once he was inside the home network, accessing security was only a matter of granting himself admin privileges. He stole the account of a random family two floors below the Morrrows and got to work.

Ten minutes later, he's inside security. Yesterday's tapes at the Morrow's place were already deleted.

But, I didn't need to see those again, did I? David smiled to himself. His memory was quite good, when it wasn't besieged by hallucinations.

There wasn't anything in those tapes but what John Derry showed him in the first place. A terrified woman, an overachiever cleaning system, and a corpse.

On the other hand, the tapes from the days *before* the murder, those were still there. They weren't relevant to the investigation, yet, so there was no need to confiscate them.

There was nothing interesting in the tapes, anyway. The Morrow's led a busy yet boring—in David's opinion—life. Their marriage was strained. They had screaming matches. She threw some glassware at him, one night.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

But, David wasn't looking for something *in* the tapes. John Derry had refused to listen to one fact when he had *terminated* his work relationship with David. The murderer may have had a reason to only kill either Wade, or Morrow, or Vicente. No reason to kill the three, though. Vicente was an enemy of Morrow. Wade had been in love with the Senator. Wade and Vicente had no relation that David could see.

So, he was looking for more information, starting with the easiest parts to disprove. Morrow and Phillip's work.

David had no access to Morrow's office tapes, but some men brought work home.

There were ten minutes of footage missing from the feed two weeks before the murder. Specifically, it was missing from the cameras in the Senator's home office, where he used to spend the weekday mornings and some afternoons.

Morrow had brought work home and whatever happened in those ten minutes was so important that he got killed for them, or so incriminating the hacker had gone out of his way to delete them. In other words... Bingo.

"Found you," whispered David as a jolt of adrenaline rushed through his veins. He copied the day's video to his phone and logged out.

"Yes. Found you," said someone behind him.

David's heart beat skyrocketed and he could barely avoid screaming like a schoolgirl in a slasher movie. He turned around and found himself face to face with John Derry. Several suited men were covering the motel's exits and they're all looking straight at him. They must've floated through the air to be able to cover the building so fast, and so thoroughly, without making any noise.

"Fuck."

"You should have let it go, Terrance," said John. The agent had the gall to nod sadly. "Of course we'd be watching if a dangerous hacker tried to connect again to the Internet. You could've started again."

David stood up. He realized he had only seconds of freedom left. His heart was sinking, but his veins buzzed with terror and adrenaline. "Derry, you have to listen to me, I found extra evidence on the case. I don't think the case is over, yet."

He knew the agent wouldn't listen to him. But, he had to try.

John raised his eyebrow and took out a pair of modern handcuffs.

Well, I tried, thought David. *Screw it.* It was not like his day could get any worse or like he'd get sent to jail *more*.

He punched the agent square in the jaw.

Chapter 9

The black van was much different with David cuffed to a metal railing by the back wall. He was surrounded by half a dozen agents, including John Derry. Almost none of them looked at him. There was no need to.

"Ugh—" complained David for the ninth time.

"Well, you should have thought about it before trying to attack a CIA agent," John told him.

His jaw was red, but the agent was otherwise undamaged. David Terrance, on the other hand, had a broken hand. Perhaps a cracked rib, too, for the feel of it, like someone was constantly stabbing a tiny dagger into his ribcage. Not broken, with any luck.

"You're not even supposed to operate in national soil," David told the agents. "I'm going to sue all of you, you'll see."

“Internal reshuffling,” John almost laughed. “Last Act gave us permission, thanks to all the whistle-blowers running around. So, thanks for that, Terrance.”

“Ugh.”

The handcuffs were too tight, too. David suspected it hadn't been on accident.

His capture had been swift and unmerciful. Which was beginning to become a tradition with him and the CIA. The first time they found him hidden in the back of a truck, hoping to reach the Mexican frontier. That had gone as well as what happened tonight.

“How did you find me?” asked David, trying to ignore the other five agents. The one who was calling the shots in the field was John Derry. He needed to get through to him, somehow.

“You're not authorized to know that.” John smiled. His lower teeth were bloody. David had managed to hit his lower lip with a knuckle, the most damage he had done to the agent. John either didn't notice, or pretended not to. It probably explained the rib, though. “I'll let the curiosity eat you alive, Terrance.”

“Christ-sake...”

This time, they took both his phone and his card. He was tired, beaten, and all he wanted to do was go to sleep.

“Why are you eating their bullshit?” he asked the agent. “You know the case isn't over. You know Dugall Tull had no motives to kill Vicente. Or Phillips.”

“You still don't get it, do you? I have orders. My boss told me the evidence they found on Tull's body was enough. I have no reason to believe he's lying.”

“No reason? He's *obviously* lying to you, Derry! Whatever happened, he's involved...”

That got the attention of the other agents, who shot dirty looks at the hacker.

“You just accused a CIA officer of corruption. That's going to do well with your other charges.”

The van stopped suddenly and David almost fell on his face. The handcuffs caught him, but in doing so, he strained his broken left hand.

“Ugh!” he complained for the tenth time.

“Quit whining. We're here.”

“Where's here?” David whispered. He already feared the answer. He could read it in John's face, who was trying his best to hide any emotion.

“Back to jail, Terrance. You broke our agreement, so we're putting you back under.”

David lurched forward with all his strength, which wasn't much, but his sudden rage surprised a bunch of the agents. Some of them even went for their guns. The aluminum fuselage held David's tantrum like it was a baby's caress. When the agents who had pointed their guns at a captured man caught sight of John Derry's gaze, they quickly put them away, trying to pretend it hadn't happened.

Then, Derry looked at David and shrugged slightly, like saying, “sorry. I have my orders.”

“You'll have to kill me. I'm not going back in there.”

John raised his eyebrow.

The six agents brought David back to prison by carrying him out of the ground. He fought them at every step, but his legs and arms and head were each held by a different agent.

A bunch of prison guards and executives got out of their desks as the CIA agents advanced. Some officials demanded explanations loudly, but not one of them believed David when he yelled at them that he was innocent and those were fake CIA agents trying to get rid of a political prisoner.

So, his plan B went down the drain as fast as he came up with it. When they reached the rows and rows of floor containers with the plastic coffins inside, he thrashed even harder.

“God. Fucking. Damn it! Derry, you’re supposed to solve the Senator’s murder!”

“I did,” said John, quietly. A couple of prison guards stepped up on the human pile to immobilize David while the prison technicians prepared the plastic coffin. It came out of the ground with a gaseous hiss and a cloud of vapor and chemicals.

“Fuck no! At least check my phone—” the guards and the agents carried him towards the coffin. He managed to get a leg free and pushed hard against the plastic surface, hard enough to make everyone stumble back a bit.

“Check the video, Derry! Check!” He pushed again and an agent fell on his ass. “The! Video!” Someone grabbed a hold of his leg and pushed it away from the coffin, so he squirmed and turned like he was trying to swim in a sea of arms and enveloped his arms around Derry’s neck like an octopus.

“Check! The! Video!”

“For fucks’ sake, someone sedate this asshole!” someone screamed. Perhaps John, who was trying his best to clamp David’s fingers away from his jacket’s collar.

“Fuck you!” David shot back. “You’re not sedating me! I’m not going into—!”

The concrete ceiling of his cell was as uninteresting as ever. David blinked again, clearing his eyes.

What the hell? He must’ve fallen asleep.

The days were so indistinguishable from each other in there that he would do that, sometimes. Fall asleep on his feet, doze off, have some weird dreams.

It was probably a side-effect of the PKD medication.

David thrashed against the rough fabric of his bed’s sheets and stood up. His book had fallen out of bed while he slept. A glance at the clock outside his cell told him it was still several hours until dinner time.

The mob boss in the cell in front of his was standing there, looking at David like he was a ghost, or an apparition. They made awkward visual contact.

“Just had the most fucked-up dream,” David told the mobster. “I dreamt I was free.”

“Where did you come from?” asked the mobster. His mouth was hanging open.

“Uh? I’ve been here all along, man. Where else would I be?”

The mob boss considered this. He was a smart man, more keen than most. Somewhere, in the plastic container that held his body in real life, a little machine injected him with an extra dose of psychotropic. “I guess you’re right. Sorry, Terrance. Brain fart or something.”

“No problemo, amigo,” said David. You wanted to be on good terms with the other inmates. No one had ever gotten shanked in his time in jail, but he sure as hell didn’t want to be the first.

He sat on the floor—sitting at his bed was tiresome after a while—and opened his book. By now, he knew UBIK's plot inside and out, but it was better than lying there and staring at the ceiling.

I wonder what will be on TV at dinner. Last time the guards had let them watch some old movie reruns. He'd kill an orphan for the entertainment of an old movie rerun.

His cell was so boring...

"I know you hate being told 'I told you so,'" said the woman with the raven-black hair, "so that makes it even better. I told you so, David. I told you so, I told you so, I told you so."

She was sitting on the feet of his bed, like she owned the place. He glanced at her disdainfully.

"Sorry, lady, but I'm trying to read."

She rolled her eyes, but when she realized David was ignoring her mockery, she got annoyed. She laid on the bed, her head playfully upside down, only a few centimeters away from his. Her black hair fell on David's shoulders like a curtain.

Her perfume made him feel a wave of nostalgia. And another thing, which he couldn't describe. But, it felt like meeting your first love after fifty years apart and embracing them, only to have them stab you in the back with an ice-pick and then set your struggling body on fire.

Yup. Felt like that. It annoyed him to no end.

"Excuse me?" he grunted, finally looking in her direction. Making eye contact with those deep eyes was like fireworks. "Do you mind? I'm in the middle of something, here."

"Yeah. You sure are. I thought you weren't supposed to speak to me? That it was your *I'm too crazy* cutout? You're just giving up, now? You're David Terrance, the hacker who went insane? One hell of a title."

David sighed. He noted the page he was on and closed the book. "What I am," he said, looking straight at those mesmerizing eyes, "is tired of your bullshit. What the hell else do you want me to do? I'm trapped in a virtual world, jacked up to my neck in LSD or whatever the hell they drug us with. Spoilers, love, but this story ended before it began. I tried to be a hero and you see where it got us."

Her small, almost child-like hand caressed his cheek. "Oh, poor David. You think I haven't read this story already? I know how it ends. I memorized it. And, I'm not done with you. No giving up now, no. Hold it together. You're going to do this, once more, like you've done before. And will do again."

"You're not making any sense," David told her. Her hand felt nice on his skin. It reminded him of Leonor.

"I'm a hallucination, I don't have to make any sense."

"You could at least help if you want me out so much," he said. "I can't free myself."

She smiled at him. "So, you're not giving up, after all?"

"You're just too pretty to give up."

"That's what I like to hear, love." David didn't realize this, but the virtual world around him had been flickering like a light-bulb about to go off. Then, he steeled himself, and got up, holding Leonor's hand in his.

“Fine, then. Once more. Any suggestions are welcome. I’m drugged like a cat inside a catnip sweater, I’m in prison, and I’m inside a coffin with machines holding down my body. What’s the plan?”

The world stabilized. The flickering stopped. Leonor saw this happen behind David’s back and smiled to herself.

“Love, you already helped yourself. Remember Orville’s laptop? How you connected it to John Derry’s phone, back in the mountain? Orville had the laptop bugged, obviously. You know hackers don’t go around just blindly trusting police... So, he has been accessing Derry’s own connections for several hours now, and has found out all about your little misstep. Ten minutes ago, K-Sec held a round table to see if they should lend you a hand. Jean voted yes, so did Orville. Rufus and the fat guy opposed, because they don’t want to go to jail.”

“They’re tied,” said David.

“Jean and Orville will get Rufus on their team in a bit, you’ll see.”

David’s head was splitting in two. Why was he in such pain?

“Hang in there, love. I don’t want to see you crumble after all this time.”

“You don’t? But you... you didn’t even want to see me. You—” he was going to say something, but before he could, he blinked and forgot the words. Instead, he said “—you testified against me in court. You hate me.”

“You can hate someone and still love them, David. You never were that good at reading people, were you?” She laughed. “Wanna know what the best part is?”

“I guess you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“The best part is, you didn’t ask me the right question, right here in this cell, when it was your chance.”

“What are you talking about? Don’t play with me, girl. I’m trying to solve a murder and break out of jail.”

“Here’s the right question. If I’m only a hallucination of your subconscious, then how the hell did I know that K-Sec was coming to get you?”

David’s heart skipped a beat. Leonor’s image smiled at him with a look of half hate, half madness, and half something hard to explain. Then, she was not in front of him anymore.

One second later, his cell doors tore themselves apart like they were pushed by an ant-sized Samson. They made no noise, presented no resistance, just bent like they were made of cardboard.

An anime drawing appeared, floating in the middle of the broken down cells. It was only two-dimensional, and David could see the crude pixels falling out of its artificial feet and dissipating into the ground.

“Hey, dude!” the anime character speaks without moving its mouth. “I’m Orville! Remember me? You’re going to find this hard to believe, but you’re in a simulation right now!”

I think that’s not actually true, David thought, thinking of Leonor. *I think there’s something very wrong with me.*

“Don’t worry, I’m here to save you,” Orville’s avatar continued. “Remember that the next time you’re all braggy about your skills, okay? I’m the very best and all that—auch! (*Fine, Jean, I’ll focus... damn*) Whatever. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Orville, I’m drugged so fucking much right now,” explained David. He was suddenly back to normal, or as normal as one can be inside the VR environment. Perhaps he was between doses. “So, I’m not going to be very helpful in my own rescue.”

“I know about the drugs, we’re already shutting them down. Rufus is on it.” The anime avatar paused and then added, with a cheerful voice that clashed with its devil-may-care appearance:

“Great! No more drugs for you. Or bad, if you’re into that. Whatever. I’m cutting off the VR feed and shutting down your capsule. It’s going to look like crap in about ten seconds, so please, try very hard not to scream. Also, we won’t be able to talk when you’re out, so... Try and get anything with WiFi or something. I’ll give you a hand with the guards. Still, be careful.”

The anime avatar vanished from sight without as much as a *ping!* David scratched his head, looked around his empty cell, and then everything around him cracked like reality itself had been fragged by the most messed-up grenade in existence. Then, all was dark. He had a VR visor on his face. Everything smelled like hospital and sewage.

One moment, all was normal in his cell, next, he was buried alive. There were *too many tubes* connected to his body, too many machines holding his extremities and too many drugs coursing through his veins. On top of all, the coffin was perfectly dark.

David closed his eyes —not that it helped him much— and tried his best not to scream.

After what seemed like an eternity to him, but couldn’t have been more than a minute or two, a faint ray of light came into the coffin. It hurt his eyes, but it was also very welcome. The coffin’s machinery hissed and the metallic arms holding him still relaxed their grip. The coffin raised itself out of the floor with a pneumatic screech and a cloud of vapor.

The coffin’s doors parted and David Terrance fell unceremoniously onto the floor. He was naked and covered in tubes. He tore them away with frantic movements.

He was the only living being outside of those coffins in the floor. The rows were empty, watched only by a bunch of security cameras installed on the walls. If Orville and K-Sec had made good on their word and shut those down, then David would be perfectly safe for the time being.

Which was just perfect, since he needed to do something first, before being on his way.

He rolled on the floor in a fetal position, whispering weakly:

“Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. Son of a—” over and over.

Whatever mix of narcotics they injected him with was still running strong through his veins. David’s mind had an unusual resistance to those kind of substances though, since had grown used to his own hallucinations.

But every mind has its limits and he felt he was nearing his.

So, he whimpered weakly on the floor, covered in the nutrient-paste that oozed out of the feeding tube. His left hand still pulsed painfully, which meant it was still broken. How long had he been inside the cell? He had no way to see which day it was. Judging by the pain of his hand, and the bloating... less than a week?

He refused to move until his legs stopped shaking. When his legs stopped shaking, he refused to move until his chest stopped convulsing. When his chest stopped convulsing, he—

“You don’t have all day, you know,” Leonor stepped on his field of view. “Sooner or later the guards are going to realize K-Sec put the camera feeds on a loop.” She made sure to step far away from the nutrient-paste.

“I don’t want to,” whispered David. He was secretly glad his favorite hallucination was back. It meant the drugs were wearing off.

“Tough luck, we all do things we don’t want to. Get up, you look pretty pathetic right now.”

“I think I get a pass, considering the circumstances.” But he stood up. He still had his dignity. Or its molten remains.

“Not from me, love. There’s a locker-room for guards all the way down that corridor. There’s only one guy nearby and its near the end of his shift, you should be able to evade him with no trouble.”

“And afterward?”

“Beats me, I’m just your subconscious. Figure it out on your own, cowboy.”

She disappeared again. Again, David couldn’t ask her why she, a hallucination, knew things he did not.

It didn’t bug him for long, anyway. He forgot all about their conversation as soon as she had left, just like he forgot about their last conversation inside the VR jail.

He didn’t forget about the locker room, though. He started to walk, weakly, trembling all the while, in the direction Leonor had pointed him to.

There was a guard in civilian clothes walking away from him, watching a sporting match on his phone. David heard him mutter:

“Goddamn Scorpions, what kind of play that was? I shouldn’t have bet on your asses...”

He trailed off, focused on the game’s rerun. Two minutes later, a naked David Terrance ran out of his corner and rushed into the locker room.

Even in his current state, David suspected why he was so lucky. This prison was built as a prototype business model. With all their prisoners immobilized and drugged inside a Virtual Reality, the administrators could save a lot of money on security. After the initial investment in the coffins, software, and maintenance were paid off, it was much more profitable. Smaller buildings, etcetera.

The idea was wicked smart. Which was the reason why David could only think of fucking-it-up forever, instead of focusing on escaping.

Most of the lockers were locked, and he spent a while checking them all until he found one that a guard had forgotten to lock. He took out a sport pack with the guard’s uniform neatly folded. David cleaned himself a bit with toilet paper from a bathroom nearby and then got dressed. He looked in the room’s mirror.

He looked like a psychotic guard, with his pale face, disheveled hair, sullen eyes, and psychotic grin.

“Hey, there, handsome,” he told his reflection, giving himself a thumbs-up.

He ruffled through the sports pack some more and he found the guard’s work phone. Perfect. Time to talk to his good friends at K-Sec.

Yo, guys, how are you doing? I'm fantastic. I just decided I want to blow up this place to all hell and back, kill everyone inside. Have some fun, live a little. Can you point me towards the boiler room or something?

Orville's response came five seconds later.

That's some strong shit they injected you with, wasn't it? How about instead of killing a ton of people, you go public with the prison's inner workings? Tell the world about the VR cells, let them raise hell for you.

David wrote back:

That's just no fun :(Besides, I think people would love the idea of a VR capsule or whatever they call those coffins.

Orville's message was a bit frantic. That kid ought to ease up a bit.

Dude, get yourself together! You can't avoid the security they have at the exits, you can't hack people. So, focus, start thinking clearly, and figure something out. Attached are the plans of the prison.

David downloaded them and while the phone's interface loaded them up, he walked to the sink and dunked his face under a stream of freezing-cold water.

"The kid's right," he told his reflection, "you have to fight this shit until it wears off."

The reflection gave him a thumbs-up and a wink. At least someone was supportive.

Thinking of a plan in his current state was the hardest thing he had done all day. Even perfectly sober he wasn't very good at reading maps.

Nearest exit was close to the locker room, through three security checkpoints. K-Sec had been able to hack their way into the VR capsules because they were connected to the Internet—it had real-time streams of news, after all—but security hadn't made that oversight.

Different contractors.

David wasn't in a position to make a break for it, so instead, he left the locker room and followed the map's directions away from the exits and into the administrative offices.

He had dealt with contractors before, because he loved to steal information from them and sell it to anyone thinking of hiring them. They usually paid top-dollar. Whoever built this jail had saved a lot on terrain and building. Which meant he could access the management's network by walking from the guard's locker room.

In a normal jail complex, that would've been impossible. Prisoners and guards would be in a different building than management.

It was a bit of irony that made David smile. *Thanks for the assist, assholes, I never could've done it without your help.*

He reached the offices and almost ran face-first into another guard.

Oh fuck me, thought David.

“Jeez, man, watch your step—” the other guard did a double take when he caught sight of David’s face. David considered punching him, but he was quickly running out of non-broken hands.

“Man...” the guard looked at David’s shirt, “Jones. You look like crap, buddy. Everything all right?”

“Yeah. I mean. I...” David’s mind raced. “Uhh... you saw the game? With the scorpions and the uh... the grizzlies? I... bet a lot of money... and... uhh...”

The guard laughed. “You’re telling me you’ve been pissed off since yesterday? I can understand that, man. The scorpions totally stole the game, the referee never should have allowed that play to finish.”

“Yeah. I mean. Such bullshit, right? Go grizzlies!” David smiled weakly.

The man looked at him with pity. “Sure, buddy. Someday they’ll get out of their rut. Don’t lose hope. You may want to stop betting on them in the future, though.”

David had the brilliant idea to look to the floor and appear sad. The guard clapped his back with empathy.

“There, there, buddy. Anyway, I have to go take a leak. Mind watching the stiff-heads shit while I’m gone?” He laughed like he had made the funniest joke ever.

David’s smile grew into a shark-like snarl. “Oh, it would be my pleasure.”

The guard hadn’t even closed the bathroom’s doors when David was already sitting in front of a monitor, pounding the keyboard with his free hand.

Click. Tap, tap, tap. Oh, look here. Someone accidentally leaked every single email, balance statement, top-secret memo, patent, government deal, bribe, blackmail, and compromising picture. *Someone* didn’t even bother to sell the information. Just sent straight to every newspaper in the country.

Click. Click. Tap. Someone accidentally released every prisoner’s holding tank, after injecting them with synthetic adrenaline to help them fight off the drug’s effects. Oh boy!

Click. Tap. Click. Every fire alarm system in the entire facility turned on at the same time.

Brown water fell everywhere from the sprinklers in the ceiling, shorting electric systems and filling everything with the smell of dank water. David Terrance covered his head with his guard’s jacket and smiled triumphantly.

“Jeez! What the hell is going on?” The guard came out of the bathroom running with his hands over his head.

“I think the place is on fire,” said David. “We should get out of here.”

“On fire? Damn it, we have to check on the prisoners!”

“We do?” David had already seen how the prisoners were doing. Half of them were stumbling around, looking for the nearest exit, buck naked, while the other half was chasing after the few remaining guards, high out of their minds. “Look, I don’t know about you, but they don’t pay me enough to run into a burning room to save a bunch of assholes.”

The guard’s mouth was wide open in surprise. He quickly closed it. That brown, old water got everywhere. “You know what, you’re right.”

Chapter 10

The reporters had beaten the firefighters two minutes to the punch. That meant they reported on a fire in jail for five minutes before someone had the nerve to tell them it was a false alarm.

“I’m reporting live from the Grandhaven Detention Center, where a ravenous fire broke out. The automated systems in place appear to have released all prisoners, somehow sidestepping country-wide standard procedures in these cases—” a naked mobster ran behind the reporter, screaming incoherently before running head-first into a tree and getting into a losing fight with it. The reporter was a professional. She turned to the human-tree fight for less than a second, before returning to face the camera with a blank expression. “Currently, the police are on their way to try and contain the escape. Meanwhile, the firefighters are trying to ascertain the origin of the fire with their scout drones. More developments to follow, here in TRR.”

She walked towards David Terrance, still dressed as a security guard. He was covered in a blanket and had the deer-in-the-headlights expression of someone who really shouldn’t be in front of a live stream.

“Sir, you were one of the first Grandhaven personnel who left the facilities. Do you have any insight in the disaster currently unfolding before our very eyes?” The reporter shoved the mic at him. She had a tough frown on her face, like a teacher who was getting ready to deliver unholy punishment on a misbehaving student.

“Well...” David shrugged. “We don’t get paid enough for...”

“You’re telling me, Grandhaven’s administrators don’t include enough funds for *the bare minimum prisoners’ security standards* in their budget?”

“Eh. Yes. Actually, yes. That’s exactly what I’m saying. There’s this new program they’re making... Look, you guys haven’t checked your email in the last ten minutes, have you?”

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Listen, I have to go. I can’t give an interview, because, well... I’m in shock?” David smiled tentatively.

The reporter gave him a skeptical look. David could read in her face that she suddenly didn’t think he was acting at all like a security guard. Police were everywhere. She would only need to call to them...

“Janice, you should read this email—” another journalist from her own network called to her, earning her attention. The guy looked frantic. “Holy shit, this is going to be a national scandal! The ratings—”

David Terrance was on his way before the reporter realized he was gone. He kept the electrical blanket and the hot chocolate. He had had a rough couple of days. He deserved a warm blanket and hot chocolate, at the very least.

Next in his order of business was to get some money. A year ago, he could’ve easily walked up to any ATM (the very few still left) with his phone and walk away with thousands of dollars of cash in his wallet. Those days were over: He had no idea what security features the ATM’s were packing today.

He still had one strategy left.

“Yo, Orville?” he called over his phone. A grown man’s voice answered back:

“No, bro, this is Rufus. We’re watching the news. That was one hell of an escape you made.”

“I thought I was done when someone decided to interview my ass.”

“You’re missing the best part. They’re talking about your leaks right now. I don’t think Grandhaven will get open again after this.”

“Cool. Uh... I’m in a tough spot right now. Mind spotting me some cash?”

“You’re still going to go after Vicente’s murderer?”

“I’m going to try.” He owed it to Wade Phillips and the family the professor would never get to see again.

“I’ll text you some credits. Get a cab or something.”

Rufus ended the call. A few seconds later, David’s phone buzzed with a text. It included a special barcode which linked to a temporary account with a couple hundred dollars. Scan the code, pay the bills. Easy.

David arrived at a motel (this one on the opposite side of the city from his last try at hiding in a motel) and quietly dropped himself in a hard, uncomfortable bed. To his pained body, it felt like heaven.

He fell asleep instantly.

It was the middle of the night when he woke up. His phone was buzzing and he had an “I need more sleep” headache. But the drugs they dosed him with had finally worn off. His mouth was dry and his broken hand pulsed in continuous buzzes of pain.

Are you holed up safely? I have the data you asked me for. It was behind some intense layer of security, man. Too intense. We’re hightailing out of the hideout, these guys have mercenaries and shit. Jean says you better get to the bottom of this or you’ll owe us big time.

Whatever. I attached the documents. Several gigs of them, so don’t use public WiFi.

R. Orville.

David closed the email. His phone still had the dataplan intact from its previous owner, the prison guard whose uniform he was wearing.

Thanks for the assist, buddy.

David downloaded every single gigabyte.

Wade Phillips worked on the Skyline University research team, but it quickly dawned on David that the doctor’s research had been custom-built for private interests. Wasn’t Skyline funded by corporations?

Most of the documents were too arcane for him to comprehend. Phillips had worked in a myriad different projects, some of them with little relationship to each other. Since they were sorted by date, David started from the beginning of Phillips’ career in Skyline.

All the documents involved human / machine interfaces of some sort, and Phillips’ job had been to code the interface that allowed the hardware and the human body to interact.

In other words, he programmed prosthesis. He helped war veterans walk again, hell, see again. His work fixed broken spines, replaced lost organs, and gave hearing back to the deaf. David was this close to start thinking of the guy in biblical terms when he stumbled upon the not-so-humanitarian parts of his research.

Phillips research not only was directed to veterans, but the military, too. He tried to improve on drone technology by using human neural pathways. It wasn't like he stole people's brains. He simply studied them and tried to translate their structure into chips and software. It wasn't so bad. David could also see that his research hadn't gotten him very far. Most of the documents in that decade announced little, if any, advancement, and the later ones were written in the shaky voice of a man worried he may lose his job.

A couple of his reports in those years had little to do with his own research. Projects that studied genetic engineering, that tried to create super-soldiers in vat-tanks, but which used zero to none of Phillips' own research. David had stolen a lot of data over the course of his career. This part of the doctor's folder was a life insurance of sorts, to make sure if anyone wanted to fire him, they'd try so in the standard way. Firing via gun to the back of the head wasn't something that happened every day, but it, nonetheless, had happened enough times. Obviously, someone had decided the risk of letting Phillips live and talk was bigger than the risk posed by the life insurance folder.

Then Phillips had started using cadavers in his research, and the investigative pathways had opened up again. The human brain, Phillips had written, is, when turned off, little less than an unused computer. Delete the files you don't need, work on the rest, and you have a billion neurons more powerful than any modern chip. The possibilities are staggering. Soldiers have previously reported a mistrust of their drone companions during live combat. Understandably so, in this researcher's opinion. Humankind isn't ready to trust their only life upon an unfeeling, unthinking machine. We are, at our core, built on the same principles our machines are built. We have software and hardware. Yet, when working together with a tank-drone, the soldier instantly recognizes something is missing in it. The superior machine recognizes the other is incomplete.

With this new technology, we can add the missing ingredient. We can give a soul to our creations. The pathways to create a personality, emulate emotions, add an element of non-linear data processing (creativity), are right there in our neurons. This new line of research will add all that to our microchips. The only thing slowing us down are both the limitations of human-built software and the biological limitations of our own neurons. I believe they can be fixed in this generation if the people studying it have the adequate funding...

The following documents were too technical for David to understand, but they all said more or less the same thing: We're making progress.

Hell, human neural pathways paved the way for other investigations. Phillips had started working with both the military and private contractors. Some of his articles were reports for higher-ups in the administrative echelons of those corporations, so they were easier for David to understand. One, especially, caught his eye:

Data Corruption

To the Directive Board of Sleipnir Incorporated:

As we have known since humanity first rose from the primordial mud and began gathering in caves, information comes with an expiration date. All cultures, all societies, function thanks to the efficient propagation of its

core concepts (**Data**) through the population. Said culture's method of storing information and transmitting it dictates its evolutionary success. Stone tablets rendered vocal storytelling obsolete as data safeguarding, in those civilizations where it was implemented. Other cultures used paper-like techniques of data recording. Cheaper and more efficient than clay, but it came with its own risks. The burning of the library of Alexandria is the quintessential example. We can easily trace mankind's history to our attempts—with varying degrees of success—to fight back the limitations of our methods for storing data.

Voice. Stone. Clay. Leather. Paper. And we arrive at the modern age, where we store our most valuable information digitally, as ones and zeroes.

Thanks to the Internet, our information is no longer vulnerable to low-to-mid disasters like a fire or an earthquake. To accurately threaten our information, bigger disasters than those are required. An all-out war could do the trick, but current international relationships make a war between equals improbable.

It would be easy to think we've finally achieved perfect safeguarding of data. That the western civilization is now non-threatened in the geological scale.

That would be a mistake. After all, we haven't created a mystical cloud to store our information. Digital data still is kept in the modern equivalent of hard-drives. Those hard-drives are, like the stone tablets before them, clusters of matter. Matter, in galactic scales of time, is volatile. It refuses to remain unchanged. It's prey to entropy.

Digital data is not only lost through a natural disaster. It's also subject to the same passage of time as clay or paper. Erosion.

Give it a thousand years or more, eventually, the bytes stored in the hard-drive will die. Or change its place. It will become corrupted.

With all the power of our civilization, we haven't been able to beat the fact that all information comes with its own expiration date.

Some in the scientific community would call a discovery of that magnitude a Deity-rivaling transformation. Meaning, humanity would no longer be subject to the tendrils of entropy, which is nothing more than the expiration date of the data stored in the entire universe.

We may be, as a species, still far away from that battle. But its first steps may be achievable today. The secret may be hidden in our humble beginnings.

The most basic method of data storage of a civilization is the spoken language. In other words, information stored directly in the human brain.

The most important truth of the human brain is that it dies. Its information becomes lost forever. Furthermore, as it ages, that information becomes corrupt at a faster rate than any other storage method in current history.

Nonetheless, it does not let go of that information willingly. As it has been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, when we, through medicine and science give the human brain the tools to fight the limitations of its biology, it pushes to take back what belongs to it. And when the damage isn't big

enough, it often succeeds. A man can learn to walk again, people born blind can see for the first time.

Amnesia can be restored. If any memories are permanently lost, the neurons will take the remaining ones and build a metaphorical patch around the missing files, effectively filling the holes in the patient's connections. This recent discovery by my colleagues at the San Mabrada University is the foundation of my proposal today.

We have the technology to create information that fights to preserve itself. Information that veils for its own integrity. We are already using the human brain as the basis of our new chips and storage devices.

We may as well learn to add its own safeguards to our machines. Improve upon them. Rid our machine's neurons of its biological limitations.

So we may, someday, rid our own brains of them, too.

The rest of the document was a plea for extra funding. David put his phone down and realized he was sweating.

They were using the brain cells of corpses to create better drones. They planned on using even more to achieve a sort of digital immortality. They were creating in their labs a Frankenstein's monster and then talking among themselves: "Oy, you know what would be sweet? To take this clump of human cells and machine components, and put it in our brains!"

Phillips had known his craft well enough. The entire document had been tailor-made for the directors of a corporation. Call upon their fear of death, remind them how vulnerable they are, even with all their power and money. Then, offer them salvation. Then, offer them immortality.

After those documents, Phillips had gotten all the funds he needed.

And David Terrance had the last remaining connection he needed to solve the murder of Senator Morrow.

Corporate had funded Phillips' research. Phillips had made great strides, but his research was definitely unethical. *Just how many human cells was he using?* Take enough of them, and you're essentially using a human brain.

Phillips had been eaten away by guilt, in his remaining days. After Morrow—the man he loved—had been murdered, something had snapped inside him. He wanted to talk to the CIA. Come clean about it all.

He had been summarily executed *by a drone* in front of David. Someone fired Wade Phillips via drone to the back of the head.

David suspected he already knew which someone was involved. But, he was a computer guy. He didn't act on hunches. He investigated first.

His investigation consisted of a very fast Internet search. It was about Sleipnir Inc. Turns out, it was a subsidiary of a bigger corporation.

That corporation was named Odin.

Hey there, Charli, thought David Terrance, *I can see you.*

David Terrance had spent less than a day inside the prison's vat-tank before Orville and co. broke him out. Before anyone caught word of his escape—he was counting on the fact that the police and John Derry didn't get along—he would have an early lead to do whatever he wanted.

Which was just excellent, because David was investing said early lead to break into John Derry's apartment.

The first step in his plan was to find out where the agent lived. It was easier than it looked. First of all, he assumed John Derry wasn't the agent's real name. But, David knew what he looked like, and he knew his way into old CIA databases.

David left the motel in the middle of the night and took a bus to the outskirts of a gang-controlled district. He made a stop near a small, graffiti-laden mall with bulletproof windows. He bought a cheap t-shirt, jeans, and running shoes. K-Sec's loan was almost dry by the end, but it was vital that he wasn't seen walking around dressed like a security guard of the prison where David Terrance had just broken out of.

Also, a uniform like that would easily get him killed in a place like this. He walked only in illuminated streets, never straying far from the avenues. He tried his best to appear non-threatening (not very hard) and not a part of a rival gang. It wasn't easy. Lately there were a lot of gangs and they all used different uniforms.

He had to take the risk. He was going to make a lot of weird Internet searches and someone was going to take notice sooner or later.

Finally, he found the place he was looking for, in the middle of a down-on-their-luck cluster of storefronts, most of them closed, some of them with their windows busted.

It was a tiny locale with Japanese kanji as a name, drawn with happy, neon colors under a patina of dirt and rust.

The Internet cafe, open 24/7, was probably the last of its kind. At least, it *looked* like it was. Few people needed one when you could connect to the Internet from your phone. Also, the police, in general, didn't look kindly to that kind of stores anymore. After all, the only remaining clientele of an Internet cafe were people doing something traceable and probably illegal. Like David Terrance, as he walked inside the locale.

An old Japanese lady greeted him from behind a glass counter lined with weird, colorful sex toys, hentai videos, and yellowing manga from the nineties. He paid her for an hour of WiFi and she pointed at a row of private cubicles that filled the remaining space of the locale.

His cubicle had an old computer thrown into a plastic desk with a plastic chair. The smell of disinfectant filled the tiny space. David decided quickly that he preferred said smell that the alternative lack of it, and its implications. He nevertheless sat only on the edge of the chair and made a point of avoiding touching *anything* with his bare skin.

The keyboard was an unavoidable exception that filled him with dread.

The computer was slow, but clean software-wise. The lady knew her way around a network. David logged to the old hacking forums under his old username. He didn't bother with a proxy. He was going to be there for less than an hour, and the cafe had its own security measures.

He didn't recognize most of the usernames around the forum anymore. The old guard, like himself, had either moved on or were languishing in jail.

Hell, perhaps some of them worked under the Intel team of John Derry. It was a strange thought. David never considered those usernames his friends, but he had grown accustomed to their presence.

What hadn't changed was the way things worked around the net. He posted a message asking for the credentials of John Derry, his rank, and description. As payment, he offered the remaining K-Sec loan minus bus fare. Which was next to nothing, but some hackers used to do this kind of thing for free in the good old days. Perhaps he'd get lucky.

The first dozen messages came a few minutes after he posted. They were all some variance of a meme he no longer understood, polite petitions for him to go kill himself, ramblings about a CIA trap, and scam attempts. Yeah, some things would never change.

The thirtieth message was from a username he recognized from before. It was promising. The hacker was a local, like David, and John Derry had tried to jail him or her a while ago, which they only avoided by the skin of their teeth. So, they had kept tabs on the agent.

Furthermore, they were happy to give him a discount on the information after David pretended he was going to use it for evil.

They completed the transaction and David paid the hacker in virtual cryptocurrency as an extra layer of security.

He was left with a bunch of different addresses, phone numbers, and photos stolen from the city's security grid. David got to work.

Normally, trying to find out which of those addresses were real, which ones were one-time-hideouts, and which ones were plain fake would take a hacker a couple days.

David Terrance was older and his time was more valuable. He went for the easiest method to disprove an address.

He got into the city's civil services network—it was painfully easy—then made several phone calls pretending to be the agent. Most of the addresses had too small of an electricity bill, so he discarded them. He was left with a list of only three addresses which had a bill big enough for someone to live there.

Then he called those addresses. In two of them, people answered. One did so in Cantonese. David politely thanked them and then he circled the address where no one had picked up.

John lived alone but David was sure the agent had mentioned a daughter before. It seemed that John Derry had paid the toll of success on a demanding job.

David left the booth, thanked the lady, and waited inside the cafe until a bus drove slowly down the street.

It was two in the morning when David finally arrived at Derry's place. The agent lived in a better part of the city than a gang-infested district, but it was nothing luxurious. A residential unit, with several apartment complexes clustered inside a steel-and-concrete wall.

"Resident or visit?" asked the security guard at a toll booth by the entrance. David caught sight of a couple kid's bikes rusting slowly under the concrete parking lot, which was filled to capacity with old car models.

"Resident," said David, with confidence. He faked annoyance and fatigue. The guard looked suspiciously at his cheap clothes, so he added, "building 402-A, department 91? Registered under James Denvers?"

He was taking the chance that the guard would recognize James Denver (an alias of John Derry). If the guard did so, David would pretend he was his boyfriend or something. As it turned out, there was no need.

“Alright, alright.” The guard waved him in and the steel doors parted with an electronic screech.

After all, a thousand different people lived in the complexes. Impossible to tell them apart. Not that the guard cared. As David was walking inside the 402-A, he saw the guy go back to watching videos on his phone.

Department 91 had a metal door with a password and keycard protected lock. John Derry was either paranoid or very realistic. He didn’t have lots of friends.

A small security camera watched David get near the door, recording with interest. Derry’s security was solid—but old. David looked at the camera, then at the keycard.

He left the field-of-vision of the camera and started typing on his phone.

Less than ten minutes later (and a call to the keycard’s company pretending to be John Derry) he was inside the agent’s apartment, feeling quite giddy with himself.

He had never broken into a home before.

Who’s the super spy now, Derry?

The agent lived under spartan conditions. His kitchen was bare and next to the living room, which was at the same time, his bedroom. It didn’t have a TV or a sofa. It had a table with old ramen boxes and a sink filled with dirty dishes. Derry’s bed was barely big enough for the agent to fit in, it was unmade and the sheets were lying in a bunch by the bed.

The closet was next to the door and it was filled with black suits. The bathroom was closed and the windows were covered by black curtains.

“Boy, I bet you get laid a lot,” muttered David with a hypocritical smile. He reached for the light switch and the place was filled with yellowish light.

What David thought were a bunch of sheets by the bed moved. John Derry stood up. He was wearing a ridiculous black nightgown and his gun.

“Not like you’re some Casanova yourself, you know,” the agent told David.

David went pale, jumped, and squealed in a very unmanly way. He tried to recover quickly. “You were supposed to be outside. I checked.”

John Derry shrugged. “You know the CIA trains us in counter-intelligence, right? You had some of the manuals with you. I contacted an old hacker who had a chip against me and pretended I was another criminal I had caught. Then, I sold him part of my own—controlled—information. After that, it was only a matter of putting a cyberbug for my own name. Every time anyone wants to know about me, I get notified, so they go to a place I can control.”

“That’s just not fair.”

“Life is not fair, Terrance.” John smiled.

David returned the smile and then turned around, towards the door, and got ready to make a run for it.

“Now, wait just one second,” came Derry’s voice, now impossibly close to David’s ear, “realize that I’m alone, instead of with a small army of agents. Why don’t you take a seat and we have a nice chat?”

David thought of running anyway, but he was a realist, too, and suspected he'd only get himself painfully tackled to the ground if he tried.

He turned around. John was standing in front of him, gun in hand, but pointed at the ground. The agent gestured at the table, where David caught sight of Phillips phone.

"I've been doing some reading on my own," explained the agent. "I think you and I can see eye to eye on this, after all."

Chapter 11

The engine roared as the black car soared through the highway. It was a German car from a well-known brand, last year's model. David had seen a couple ads on the Internet before he was hauled to jail. Marketed to people seriously overcompensating for something, guys with a death-wish, or the occasional, rich, adrenaline junkie. John Derry didn't fit any of those profiles, which meant that David didn't know the man as well as he had thought. Before being caught in his own trap, obviously.

John Derry may have lived in a psychologically unhealthy state of disrepair, but he traveled in style. Hand-driven, no drone brain inside that baby.

"You read all of Phillips' documents?" asked David.

"Enough to put two and two together. He was working for Charli Dervaux."

"That's the link we're looking for, yes," said David.

"Some kind of new drone software, with human cells."

"A bit worse than that," said David. "Human brain cells used as CPUs."

"Sounds a bit far-fetched."

The agent's car reached a speed fast enough to give David a panic attack when he saw the miles-per-hour on the board. He clung to the copilot's door and hand-holds and quietly prayed for his life. No street camera caught the speeding black demon, no police car registered any violation to the city's regulations on modded engines. Being a CIA agent had its perks, after all.

"I don't think so. Scientists have used rat's brains in their experiments before. Our bodies are ruled by the same principles as any machine, if you think about it. We run on energy, we have software, we use hardware to move around—Dude, can you slow down a bit?" The car's speed indicator rose a notch.

Prosthesis, in many case, was already rivaling the original body part. Wade Phillips had simply moved his investigation in the other direction. Human-assisted machine software.

"Well, someone out there believed Wade Phillips was making progress," conceded John Derry. "They killed him for that. You still suspect Odin?"

"Wade was going to talk to you," David reminded him. "He wanted to get the CIA's protection. He wasn't sure if it was going to be enough." Only a big corporation like Odin had the resources to rival a US agency in such a way.

"It wasn't," said John. Then, he added:

"He had been working for them for a long time, hadn't he? Why do you think he had the sudden change of heart?"

David exhaled slowly, trying to order his thoughts. He remembered Wade's pained expression when he had learned that the man he loved was dead. The way he talked about his own family. He had been a complex man, which was a kind way of talking about a dead person when said person was mostly an asshole in life.

But, Wade Phillips had a conscience. Whatever happened inside his head, he had remembered that. After all those years.

Family had that effect on people. David knew it well enough.

"He wanted to redeem himself."

"It doesn't explain why they killed K-Sec's leader. Or why they killed Morrow," said John. He floored the brakes and his car skittered around a supply truck like a ballet-dancer doing circles around an ogre. David closed his eyes and pretended he was in a happy, stationary place.

"I have my suspicions about both of those. Nothing concrete. We have enough evidence to talk to Charli, so I'll figure things out, then."

"Yes. Evidence. About that. You may be wondering why I'm bringing you along to interrogate a high profile target instead of thanking you for your help and then sending you back to jail..."

David knew the answer because he had broken into John's apartment to talk to him about it. "Your boss is in cahoots with Dervaux, isn't he?"

"Go on," said the agent with his best poker face. "Show me why you think this."

"Well, when we talked to her, she mentioned his name, didn't she? He had been spoon-feeding her information. At first, I thought it was the normal Government-Corporate ball-fondling, but then the drone came crashing into Wade as soon as we were making any progress. And your boss called our agreement off immediately afterward, with little to no evidence that Dugall Tull's suicide had been... actually a suicide."

John nodded. He swerved to avoid an incoming police car. The police turned their sirens instantly and did a U-turn to chase after them. David could see their faces in the rear-view mirror as they read Derry's plaques. They broke the pursuit off instantly and went on their way.

"It was more than that," said the agent. "After I read Phillips' documents, I did some digging on my own. It was Odin's investigators who tipped us off about your motel's shenanigans. Seems like Odin wanted you out of the game."

"Because of Phillips' documents," said David. He smacked his forehead with his unharmed hand. "Right? Think about it. A government agency has to wait for an official order before Odin is forced to hand them those documents over, and in the meantime, they can falsify them or make them disappear. But a hacker only has to get into their servers, break their security, and download them. No rules to bog us down."

They didn't think of Orville and K-Sec, though. As it turned out, having a couple of friends had its advantages. Especially if those friends were trying their best to avenge their fallen comrade.

"That also made you very easy to take down, Terrance. But, yes. I think, that's why Odin wanted you out of the game."

"Why is your boss helping them?"

“Phillips worked for both the army and corporate, didn’t he? Kelsov has ties to both. He has been sucking up to Odin for a long time now. He always justified it like it was we who were using them. Perhaps that changed, perhaps he still thinks that’s true.”

David nodded. “And, what do you think?”

“You ever read Nietzsche, Terrance?”

“I didn’t think you were the reading type, Derry,” said David. It was his best deflection. He hadn’t read Nietzsche. He was more of a science fiction guy.

“He had this phrase. *Those who fight monsters better take care lest they become a monster themselves. Once you gaze into the abyss, the abyss may gaze into you.*” John’s car crossed a bridge covered by several automated guardrails that barely had time to lift themselves and avoid being disintegrated by the car. “We mull a lot about those kind of phrases in the intelligence business, Terrance.”

“I get it. Who watches the watchmen?” David had his own ideas. Information did the watching, itself. “I can leak the Phillips’ documents tonight, you know. It wouldn’t take long before some higher-up in the CIA made the connection.”

John shook his head. “Like you did with Grandhaven? No, thanks. You’d end up doing more damage than good. I’ll take care of Brandon Kelsov.”

“People have a right to know about things like this. I don’t think anyone will like to find out their new butler drone has the brain matter of late uncle Bob.”

“The only thing you’ll achieve after leaking those docs is to get the attention of a dozen other corporations and have them think: ‘Damn, that’s one hell of a good idea!’”

Their conversation died off. By David’s window, the background changed. The huge concrete slabs were slowly replaced with open fields, parks, fountains, illuminated outdoor malls, even schools. They were on the outskirts of the city, the wealthy perimeter outside a city’s proper limits where the rich and well-off could build their own gated communities and avoid the problems of contamination and over-population.

To David, it looked like they’d stepped into another continent.

“At least, we can stop Odin,” said David. A part of him was thinking, *Damn, this would’ve been a fantastic place to raise a child.*

Perhaps Sarah and Leonor would’ve liked it. He caught a glimpse of a cinema. Nowadays, you only saw one of those in a movie filmed in the last decade.

“Well, *you* are going to stop Odin,” said John Derry, “I’m just here to arrest you.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“We can’t interrogate a woman like Charli Dervaux without some solid evidence, Terrance. What we have is circumstantial at best. Any good lawyer will get it thrown off without much trouble. Whatever happens, happens off-records tonight.”

“And, since I’m a fugitive, you’ll pretend you were tracking me. If I can’t get her to talk, you’ll arrest me, pretend this never happened, keep on as always.”

“This time, I can promise you a real prison cell, Terrance. I suspect you wouldn’t survive another plug-in.”

John was eyeing him suspiciously. David grunted and looked away.

“Whatever lets you sleep at night, Derry.”

“Then, you’re in?”

David Terrance had the strange suspicion that John used the exact same tone of voice when dealing with a double agent or a whistle-blower. Friendly and comrade-like, after a long day of being a gigantic prick. He had sent him to prison again, he had betrayed him at the first sign of trouble, and now he was pretending to be his friend, so David would do his job for him.

What happens after your boss goes to jail, Derry? Someone'll need to step up the plate, won't he?

David didn't say any of this. Instead, he smiled and nodded. "I'm in. But, if this works out, I want another fucking pardon."

"You *will* go back to jail for a while," said John, "no way around that. But, I'll get you out before long. That's a promise."

David's smile became a bit more forced. "That's fair, I guess."

They arrived at the Dervaux Chateau soon afterward. It was on the very edges of town, as far away as possible from civilization. The commute Madam Dervaux made to her office every day must've lasted several hours.

John stopped the car in front of a steel gate marked with huge golden letters: "F.D." Not a soul was nearby, but a tiny security camera looked at them with interest.

"You know your approach?" asked John. He handed David the phone he had taken from him before.

"Yeah. It's my job, after all." David didn't wait for John to try and tell him how to do his own job. He got out of the car, gave the agent a last, sour frown, and turned towards the camera. Behind him, John closed the door of his car and sped off, leaving David behind, in a cloud of dust.

The hacker coughed (to his chagrin) and gestured towards the steel gates. "I'm here to talk! Tell Dervaux that I want to see her!"

Nothing changed. David smiled. He waited a bit, to give the security inside time to run a background check on him. Not too much, though, because they might decide to simply call the police.

He waved his phone around. "Tell her I have a business proposition to make. She buys the information I have right here. It's a folder called 'Wade Phillips' Life Insurance.' I think she'll be very interested to read it. If she's not interested, that's okay, you can call the police or whatever. But, I may as well have an interesting chat with the police, get a deal of my own. Offer them a special discount. That road may end with *Madam* being accused of murder, by the way. So, think about it."

Still, nothing happened. David's heart began to race. Then, he heard the unmistakable sound of an electrical engine coming to life. The steel gate trembled, stirred, and then came open.

"Good thinking," said David, with a security he didn't feel.

"Mister Terrance," came Charli Dervaux's voice from an auricular installed on the wall. "Please, come inside. We have a lot to discuss."

David went into the house, following the brick road. The garden was big enough to challenge any woods.

He was pleased to know that some things hadn't changed. He had gotten his hands on a sensitive piece of data. He had a buyer, interested in keeping the data from other hands.

The world kept spinning. It was business as usual.

As David advanced slowly through a road obviously designed for cars, he realized he had company. Lithe, shadowy, animal figures slithered among the trees and the exotic vegetation, not close enough to be threatening but visible enough to let him know they could be. If they wanted.

Dervaux obviously had an advanced security system of some sorts. Those shadows were wolf-like and wolf-sized, but they moved like robots, lacking grace, but having all of the hydraulic precision of a machine.

He made a conscious effort not to think what a hydraulic jaw could do to a body. His hand pulsated painfully, like it was complaining about the possibility of more pain.

A car was waiting for him after he cleared a narrow curvature. It was a black (he was getting tired of that color) SUV, self-driven. The back door waited open for him.

The SUV brought him to the Dervaux's mansion.

The home was a Civil War relic. It was surrounded by several farms and other small structures. Mostly grapes, but some vegetables, too. Far away, David caught a glimpse of cow pasture. When he got out of the car, he could smell the characteristic aroma of manure and plant-life living and dying all around him.

His city-raised lungs trembled with pleasure and surprise, much to his shame.

He realized he was the only human being nearby. The farms were filled with drones tending the fields, and bulky farm equipment painted red and orange, working day and night to keep it up and running. The automated sprinklers came to life as he walked towards the mansion's doors. They threw a faint mist-like cloud of vapor all over the plants. The mist glistened in the moonlight and it gave the entire area an eerie, mystical appearance.

"You like it?" Charli Dervaux asked him. She was wearing a white sundress and a white hat over her crimson-red hair. She shared the eerie atmosphere of the place with relish. Like a witch or a vampire in her castle. It was the middle of the night, but she was sitting at a small table on the porch of her mansion, waiting patiently for him like it was a sunny day. "Running the winery is a hobby of mine."

That's what those other buildings are, David realized. She made wine in her free time. He could've sworn she preferred to drink blood. "You live alone?"

"My drones take care of all my wants and needs," she said. "We used to have more people, in the beginning, but my husband was always proud. He hated those nurses running around when he was still conscious, so after his sickness got worse, I got him some privacy."

"Seems lonely."

"Don't get any ideas, mister hacker," she smiled mischievously. "My security is one of the best in the world. It can't be bargained with, it can't get tired or bought. An Odin subsidiary prototype, you see. Soon, every business in the world will run them. The world will be much safer with them around."

"Lovely," said David. "It doesn't sound terrifying at all. You put people's brains inside their heads, too?"

“Please, have a seat,” she said. David thought of ignoring her, but her pleasant smile was just impossible to ignore—which was the entire point. He sat in front of her and tried to hold her gaze without much success.

She smiled like a cat playing with her prey. “Yes, some people let their natural superstition scare them into giving science a... supernatural quality. That’s why I’m concerned about your proposal, and I was concerned about Phillips’ fears. It’s amazing how far the ignorance of society can push back scientific discovery.”

“And your profits, of course.”

She shrugged without an ounce of shame. “I believe in win-win propositions.”

“Did Wade Phillips got to win in your proposition?”

Charli Dervaux wasn’t going to fall into such an amateur trap. She smiled innocently. “Why, for working for me for the betterment of mankind? I think he did, yes. I regret the accident he suffered yesterday... My, look at the time. Past midnight, already. So, that’s two days ago, wasn’t it? Amazing how time flies when you’re having a good time.”

“He had a folder named *Life Insurance* that implicates your company in some very illegal stuff, Madam Dervaux.”

“Call me Charli. Madam Dervaux is my mother-in-law’s name,” Charli laughed. “Yes, it seems you found the way to get yourself into the private documents of a company of mine. I doubt you used legal methods to access them. Don’t mind that, though. At least not yet. I let you inside as a gesture of good faith, David. So we can sort this out without getting the authorities involved. After all, I think you have more to lose in that regard than I do.”

“If you call the police, we will both end up in jail.”

“Some of us have lawyers, mister hacker. Very good, in fact. I have an excellent reputation and it wouldn’t be the first time that someone tried to blackmail a CEO with bogus charges. If you left me no option, I’d happily take the risk.”

David raised an eyebrow in a very John Derry fashion. “I see. So, you want to talk. Let us talk.”

“I want the Phillips’ archives and all the copies in your possession to be destroyed. You won’t speak of this again, to anyone. You’ll go on the run, or turn yourself to the police—whatever you prefer. If you surrender to law enforcement, I will provide you with one of my excellent lawyers. You will spend far less than in jail than you deserve.”

Charli paused to enjoy David’s reaction, which he tried hard not to reveal to her.

Why is everyone thinking I should be happy with a reduced sentence? Second time he got canned, it was thanks to Odin. By extension, to Charli Dervaux.

“Of course, you’ll also receive a monetary compensation. Enough for you to retire. Get out of the country, probably, but not too far away from Odin’s outreach. You may think of this as a loss of freedom, but let’s be honest, it’s much better than spending the rest of your days in a cell.”

Or a plastic coffin.

David nodded. “Let’s say I’m interested,” he said. To prove he was being serious, he handed his phone over to Charli. At the same time, he lowered his free, non-broken hand, and grabbed the phone he had stolen from the security guard’s locker. “I have to know I can trust you, first.”

Charli looked at the phone's screen, checked for the archives, and powered off the device. "This proves nothing. You could have thousands of copies. I need guarantees."

"So do I," said David. "You have the advantage, here. I'm in your home, at the mercy of your cyberwolves, or whatever those monsters are. For all I know, as soon as I delete my archives, you'll run me over with a bus like you did with Wade Phillips."

As he talked, his fingers flew over the glass surface of his phone, where the digital keyboard was located. He was good with numbers, and his memory—when it wasn't going haywire on him—was keen. He dialed a number not in his contact list.

"You're making too many demands for someone in your position, David." A part of Charli was enjoying this and David knew it. She was a vampire, toying with the prey that had wandered into her castle in the middle of the night. A modern Dracula, dressed in white.

Or, you know, just another morally-bankrupt lady. Didn't matter. He was going to bring her down anyway. His heart was racing so fast he opened his mouth to speak and nothing came out. He steadied himself and started again.

Talk to her weaknesses, he thought. Hadn't she told him the same thing, about John Derry, last time they met?

"You're a businesswoman, aren't you? We're making a deal right now, and deals are based on confidence. Give me something, Charli. Big enough to hurt you if you betray me when the police catch me, not big enough to bring you down on the word of a criminal."

Charli didn't move a finger, which David took as a good sign. She was listening to him. Or thinking of calling the dogs.

"Mutually assured destruction? Surprising, I didn't think you were the political type." She didn't call the dogs.

David went for the gold. "I want to know why you killed Phillips."

"I didn't kill anyone," she told him with a smile that glinted in the moonlight and implied otherwise.

"He wanted to talk, yes, but his research was... valuable. People would've found it disgusting, but disgusting doesn't mean something is illegal. So. Why did you... why did he die, Charli?"

Silence. Two very different persons staring at each other, trying to understand their motives as best as they could.

"I didn't kill anyone," said Charli slowly. David's heart sank. She was too cautious, too paranoid, to make a mistake like admitting to murder. Even if she loved to gloat. Charli continued: "But, I can guess at the killer's motives. Wade Phillips worked in a lot of other projects. Some of them more unsavory than others. Skyline University gets its funding from many different corporations, after all. I believe, whoever killed him didn't want to bring attention to those other projects. A scandal like the one you're threatening me with would do that."

Silence again. Her smile was pleasant again. She had won and they both knew it. David had what he had asked her for, information that wouldn't sink her but would hurt her if he used it against her.

He wanted to throw his phone at her in frustration. Had he come all the way here for this? To listen to her gloating?

Perhaps I should actually sell her the information, a part of him thought. Save my own skin. Sorry for John's plans, but he was using me as a puppet anyway.

Orville and K-Sec counted on him, though. It shouldn't weight as much as it did, but David couldn't help it. They had risked their necks for him. Got him out of jail and forced into hiding for helping him.

The David Terrance from a year ago would've saved his own skin, just like he had done when he tried to run out of the country. He wouldn't have taken any chances for anyone other than Leonor and Sarah.

Perhaps it was time for a change.

And, being honest with myself, I have to know why she did it.

So he pressed his luck. By then, he strongly suspected why Morrow and Vicente had been murdered. He wanted to hear it from her. Clearly and loudly enough for his phone to catch.

"He died because his research would get attention to the involvement of Odin in other research? Say I believe you," he narrowed his eyes, "it still doesn't explain why you had Senator Morrow killed. Or Vicente Duran."

Charli's reaction surprised him. She blinked, fast, three times in quick succession. "Kill Senator Morrow? Why the hell would I do that?"

David Terrance wasn't the best people-reader. Still, he could've sworn that Charli's surprise was genuine. Indignant, even.

"Why don't you ask that to Wade Phillips?" he said.

"The same Wade Phillips whose files I gave you?" she smiled but this time, David could tell it was a forced gesture. He had stumbled into something. "I *wanted* you to solve Morrow's murder, remember? He was an integral part of the Accountability Act efforts. We put millions into it.

"You sent us to Phillips and then he was hit by a bus."

"I didn't expect him to crack about his work, those things weren't supposed to be related..."

Even when taken by surprise, she managed to avoid saying anything too compromising. Still, Charli shut up and looked around, like she half-expected a SWAT team to jump out of the shadows. Or something else.

"They *are* related," said David tentatively. "Morrow wasn't going to help you, Charli. He was going to speak out against the Accountability Act."

She looked at him with incredulity. Then, her pale face went pale even more, like she had realized a terrible truth. If she was an actor, she was talented. "*What in the hell are you talking about?*"

"The security feed!" he explained. "From Morrow's apartment. The hacker deleted footage some days before the Senator's murder, just a ten minutes bit."

"That proves nothing..."

"You think that Phillips was the only one feeling guilty about his job? They were lovers, Charli. They talked among themselves. There's a limit to what corporate secrecy can do to stop people from exchanging notes. Wade talked to Morrow, and they both realized your shit with the Accountability Act was related to using human brain cells as the basis for your drone brains.

“That’s a loophole, isn’t it?” he was reaching now, talking at the same time the revelation came to him. He wasn’t talking to impress her with his deductions, he needed John to hear this over the phone, have his team check all of it for evidence. It was the motive the killer had lacked, right there. “Last year regulations stop you from using AI in the financial market. I bet you have a team of very expensive lawyers ready to argue that a meat-based AI isn’t really an AI at all. What were you planning on calling whatever abomination you’re cooking in your labs? A bodily-deficient adviser?”

Charli didn’t look like a vampire anymore, but a ghost. She talked in a whisper, more to herself than to him. “I didn’t kill the Senator.”

“The Senator, and Dugall Tull, and Vicente. The meeting had three people, at least two of them physically inside his apartment. Morrow was going to leak everything, Charli. He was going to use K-Sec to steal all the necessary documents, then Dugall Tull was going to leak it all.”

It finally fit. Motive. Circumstance. Opportunity. Morrow was killed outside his apartment and later brought there via drone. Odin spied on its employees, Charli had proved that. So, the conspirators got found out. Someone followed them to a later reunion and killed the three of them.

Then, that someone had spread the killings, revealing the bodies in different places and at different times to hide the fact they were all related. Finally, when the CIA started investigating Morrow’s murder, Charli had used Dugall Tull as a decoy, faked his suicide, and then pulled strings with John Derry’s boss to stop the investigation right there.

Charli had a deer-in-the-headlights expression. Was she finally feeling guilt?

David could’ve sworn that someone like Charli Dervaux wouldn’t feel something like guilt. He got worried, then. He realized he had missed an important piece of the puzzle.

Charli stood up. “So, all this time, it was you...?” She was whispering to herself. Had she gone mad? “After all this time... You tried to protect me, didn’t you?”

“Charli? What the hell are you talking about?”

David’s voice seemed to bring her back to reality. She looked at him and her expression transformed in front of his eyes. She was back to her old, confident self. Her smile was pleasant and inviting.

But her eyes glinted with murderous intent. “You got it all wrong, David. I wasn’t going to use biological material in the financial market. Meat decays faster than databytes do. It was too expensive to invest millions into a computer that died after a month, or could spontaneously develop brain cancer. So, we pushed our limitations. Phillips research has advanced far more than what those documents of yours imply, David. There’s no biological material in my little darlings, nor will ever be. We have been using imprints of neural pathways for their cybernetic brains. That means we are building our own mechanical neurons from the casting of the originals. The perfect integration of software and machine. All the good of the original, meaty design, without any of their weaknesses.”

Fucking hell, I hope you’re listening to all this, John.

She made a brief gesture with her fingers, something that could’ve passed as a tick in the middle of her speech. But the foliage around David shifted. Shadows stirred. A pack of metallic wolves appeared, having been summoned by their

master's will. Six of them, each heavier, faster, stronger than any man. They spread like a fan in a semi-circle with David in the middle.

"Charli? I thought we had a deal. The information..."

"I'm afraid circumstances have changed, mister hacker."

"If anything happens to me, my friends will leak the archives anyway. Morrow's plan will succeed."

The wolves were frozen in place, awaiting the final command, their red eyes fixated upon David's body.

His body was so pumped with adrenaline he could barely stop himself from running into the house. Movement would trigger the wolves for sure.

He could see and hear like never before. His body realized he was in mortal danger better than himself. He heard his heartbeat, his breathing, the shifting of Charli's white dress with every movement of hers, the roar of a machine's engine in the distance, the buzzing of the farm drones tending to the grapes.

But he couldn't hear the wolves. No excited panting, no breathing, no shifting in place.

"As I said," Charli continued, "circumstances have shifted. I'll handle the leaks later. For now, know that the court will hear how you came unannounced into my home, with god knows what intent. And my security detail took care of you. It will be open and shut. Our collaboration is over, David Terrance... It seems you made a mistake when you considered my priorities. You should have paid more attention last time we talked."

She took a step backward and pointed at him, whispering an inaudible command. The wolves heard it just fine, though.

David could hear them now. Their mechanic articulations pumped with hydraulic power. They advanced.

Chapter 12

If the mechanic things had a facial expression, they'd be smiling murderously. No matter what Charli had said, they didn't move like a drone did.

A drone wasn't anxious to kill.

One of them stepped forward, looking to get a reaction out of David, to make him vulnerable to the flanking of the other wolves.

David reacted the only way he knew how. If those monsters had actual software inside their brains, he could fuck with it. He made a feint forwards, like he planned to charge suicidally at them. The wolves reacted like the real animals would've: The one at the front jumped back and the ones at the sides of David sprang in action, fast as bullets.

He was already sprinting at full speed towards the Dervaux home. He jumped over the table, sending porcelain flying everywhere, and then jumped again. Behind him, the table exploded under the weight of several wolves jumping on it, only a few feet away from David's exposed back.

They had covered two hundred meters in seconds. Outrunning them was impossible.

David wasn't trying to outrun them, though.

When chased by a wild animal, you don't have to run faster than them. You just have to run faster than the *other guy*.

Charli realized what David was going to do when he was in front of her, reaching for her shoulders with a desperate pull. She screamed in rage and tried to scratch his eyes out, but David caught her hand and pushed her towards himself.

At the same time, he felt his lower leg explode in agony. A force several times stronger than him dragged him to the floor like he was a little child in the paws of a grizzly bear. David lurched several feet backward, over the upturned table, over the scraps of porcelain, and out of the house.

All the while dragging Charli Dervaux along with him, holding her for dear life. The woman screamed with brutal rage and tried to kick him, punch him, crush his throat. They were moving too fast for her to do any real damage, though. She couldn't land a hit fast enough and then they were in the humid grass and the dragging stopped.

A dozen paws pressed on David's back. Each of them easily weighed as much as he did. Air escaped from his lungs. He was going to be torn apart.

So he hugged tightly to Charli's shape, ignoring the red streaks of pain as she raked her nails across his face, trying to reach his eyes. He protected his face under her shoulder and neck and fought away her hands with one arm.

"Let go!" she bit him on his shoulder, right below the neck, hard enough to draw blood. David screamed in pain and then dragged her up with all his meager strength. The paws on his back drew away when Charli was too close to them. She was literally a human shield.

"I'm going to have you drawn and quartered!" Her knee landed on his belly and her hands closed around his neck. David gulped and faltered for one second and she almost got away.

If he let her go, the wolves would kill him. If he didn't she would probably kill him anyway. He couldn't talk, only guffaw like a dying gazelle as a lion pride tore him to shreds. He was blacking out from lack of oxygen already. His ears were ringing.

He had to use his head.

He pulled Charli towards himself and launched his forehead forward, as hard as he could. He smashed her right in the nose. He felt it break and shower him in red blood, but he also blacked out for a second. His arms went limp and Charli broke free with a shove that smacked his head on the hard ground. She rose up, spraying blood all over her dress. She roared some nasty order to the wolves.

David tried to get up, but his knees trembled like they were made of butter. The shadow of a wolf against the moonlight appeared on his field of vision. They were toying with him, now. He closed his eyes.

And a black car rushed out of the foliage at an unhealthy speed. Its lights were off. Only the reflection of the moon on its windows as it passed three feet away from David's legs let the hacker know it was there.

Also, the fact that it ran straight over the two wolves in front of the pack, the ones that were getting ready to snack on him.

According to Charli, the things were entirely machine. But David could've sworn he heard them yelp in surprise as they disappeared under the black chassis with a thunder of metal tearing itself.

"No!" roared Charli. "Kill them! Kill them both!"

John Derry jumped out of the car with his gun raised. The remaining wolves saw the weapon, then they looked at Charli. David could almost see their software processing the dilemma. Attack the man, risk him shooting their owner.

They were fast. They would reach a conclusion sooner or later.

"Terrance!" John exclaimed. He had a deep frown and his eyes were trained on the things. "You alright?"

"Yes," David lied. "Be careful with those drones, they can tear you apart in a second."

"Don't worry about them. I'm handling them."

John trained his gun on one of the wolves, calmly, and pulled the trigger with the cool demeanor of someone taking a walk by the beach. A couple of sparks flew out of the wolf's head and one of the front tires of John's car suddenly exploded with a silent bang.

David could see Charli screaming at the monsters, but he couldn't hear anything. John looked at the wolf (it had a small dent a centimeter over his eye), then at the flat tire, then at his gun. He looked at David and shrugged, like saying: "Yeah, I'm not handling those things after all."

David clenched his teeth, took a deep breath, and got up. Pain erupted from his lower leg. It felt like it had been torn off. His foot refused to support his weight and he fell to his knees, screaming in pain.

His head was spinning. A hand grabbed him by the neck of his shirt and propped him up. David caught a glimpse of John's silhouette half-carrying him with an arm under his shoulders. The agent's other hand had his gun pointed at Charli.

Charli Dervaux had a winning hand. If John shot at her, the wolves would tear them to shreds. If he couldn't shoot at her, she could attack them herself, putting herself in danger and forcing the wolves to protect her. David's stunned mind pieced it together with perfect clarity. They needed to run away from Charli Dervaux.

It was a stalemate that couldn't last. Slowly, painfully, the agent and the hacker limped backward, towards the house.

All the while, the wolves followed them, with Charli walking close behind. The woman was limping, too, and was holding a bloody hand over her face. Her white dress was sparkled with crimson drops and stains and her red hair was a mess of dirt and twigs. And her eyes were bright with murderous intent.

David and John reached the stairs of the porch, almost tripped over a broken chair, and slowly climbed it. David bent his leg and hopped step by step on his good one.

The wolves converged on the house, looking for an opening. Waiting for the gun to break line-of-sight with their master. They were enjoying the hunt. Something primal stirred inside them.

David reached back and felt the mansion's door. It was reinforced wood, hopefully with a bulletproof plating underneath the expensive exterior. If it was just wood, John and he were as good as dead.

They walked inside. John closed the heavy door behind them. Not a second after, the wood shook and cracked with a successive row of impacts. The door held.

"Reinforced," mouthed John.

David nodded tiredly. They both slid to the floor, trying to catch their breaths. John's white shirt was covered in sweat, dirt, and bits of blood. David's gaze wandered down and caught a glimpse of his leg. He looked up and pretended not to have seen that bloody mess.

At least I'm not going into shock this time, he thought. Perhaps he was getting used to the abuse. Another day or two and he would be as good an agent as John.

If the murderous cyberwolves didn't eat them both, of course. The pounding against the door continued, rhythmically, over and over.

"Jesus, Terrance, what did you tell that woman? She went ballistic," John panted. David was beginning to regain his hearing, but it was still mostly lip-reading.

"She didn't kill Senator Morrow or Vicente Duran," he told the agent, "she only killed Phillips."

"I heard about Phillips. The phone, remember? I have her on record. Won't be enough to put her in jail for long, though."

Outside, the banging against the door stopped.

"She knows who killed Morrow, that's why she's reacting this way."

"You think?"

David nodded. The wolves. The wolves made it all make sense.

To him, it was like watching a movie he had already seen a thousand different times and knew by heart.

The wolves. Could they cry at the moon, if they had mouths?

"Well, to find the killer we need to disable those drones," said John, "or we'll be too dead to capture him."

"They're connected to a central network," said David. "Remember the quadcopter and the car? When we shut their network down, they became useless."

"Don't know, they seem more advanced than a car. We need to call for backup."

John took out his phone and began to dial. David shook his head. He knew backup wouldn't arrive until after it was all over. He knew shutting down the network would take care of the drones. He knew the script of this movie.

I have been here before, he thought. How was it possible?

John froze, phone in hand, and his eyes unfocused. He was listening. "It's too quiet," he said.

The agent and David exchanged panicked looks. "The house has other entrances?" whispered David.

"It must have."

They got up. David ignored the pain of his body, hopped on one leg towards John, and grabbed his shoulder. "Quick, get me to their router."

"How the fuck should I know where this place has their router? It's huge!"

"Your phone. Follow the WiFi signal," David muttered.

“What if they have a repeater? It will boost the range—”

“You’ll have to shoot it! Let’s go, Derry!”

David knew the mansion didn’t have a repeater. He knew shutting down the WiFi wouldn’t shut down the drones, either. But, somehow, if they reached the security chamber...

But they better hurry. Far away, past the green Persian carpet, past the oak stairs, down the corridors that ran deep into the Dervaux’s home, a pack of wolves was tearing apart the home in their desperation to get them.

“Upstairs,” David whispered. “Quick.”

It wasn’t the usual place for a security chamber. But if David’s suspicions about who Charli Dervaux was protecting were right, it was their best shot at survival.

They were halfway through the stairs when the first wolf appeared in the corridor’s entrance. It stopped to take a good look at them. David could almost see the neural pathways in its brain cranking an image-recognition software and then sending the image to the rest of the pack.

Then it charged at them.

“Shit!” John jumped the last couple of steps and tossed David forward into the nearest open room. David fell face-first into the expensive rug, tried to cover his fall with his broken hand, and screamed in agony as he rolled across the floor.

John came into the room a second later, closed it behind him, and pushed a wooden drawer in front of the door which was busy exploding in a shower of splinters. The drawer bought them time, the wolf couldn’t easily get a hold of it through the remains of the door, since it lacked thumbs.

The other members of the pack were running right then through the stairs, though, judging by the noise.

“You almost broke my hand again!” said David. It came more like a whine than he intended.

“It’s just sprained, don’t be so dramatic,” said John as he looked around the room. He grabbed a small bed and pushed it in front of the drawer, then he grabbed the other side and raised it with a grunt. “You would be unconscious if you had fallen on a broken hand.”

They were in a guest room, more expensive than any apartment where David had slept in his entire life. He had no time to admire the expensive wall-tv, though, he was looking at the locked-up window. It had black steel bars on their side. An archaic security measure that was probably a remnant of the times when the house had been built.

“You still have your gun?” said David. The drawer shook with the impact of a metal body flying against it and only thanks to the extra weight of the bed did it manage to stay in place.

John didn’t ask what David’s plan was, he got it instantly. He drew his gun—David covered his ears with his hands—and shot at the bars’ joints to the wall with perfect marksmanship. He shot six times and then the entire row of bars fell to the ground.

David hopped his way to the window, drew it open, and climbed outside. Behind the exterior’s frame, a beaded rim extended along the wall, big enough to step on. Just barely.

David couldn't step on his mangled leg, so he grabbed hold of the window's frame and then held to a tiny decorative beam. He had to use his fingernails, but he was clinging for dear life. A second later, John followed him on the other side, a window between them. He did so just in time. A wolf-like projectile propelled like a torpedo out the window, barely had enough time to look at the two men holding on to the beam and rail, and then smashed to the ground underneath them at high speed.

"They can't follow us here!" David screamed. He felt a mix of terror and triumph. Another wolf jumped out of the window. It clawed furiously at the beaded rim, managed to hold for an instant, tore a piece of concrete with its heavy paws, and fell tumbling to the ground, where its pack member was just standing up, stunned.

"Don't stay to find out, move!"

David's forearms were burning with effort. His hand was pulsating so painfully it almost masked the pain of his leg. Every time he took a sideways step, he saw rivulets of blood fall down his jeans and to the black grass beneath him.

The next window was close and a child could've reached it. But so did the remaining wolves, David could see them just as he was getting ready to open it, shadows with shining red eyes, waiting for him.

Yeah, no way I'm getting there.

Farther away was a balcony. If only he could reach it... Perhaps they could fight the wolves there, try to throw them out when they pounded. Yeah, all the four remaining murder machines. Great plan.

It was the only one he had, though.

David kept moving, but every sideways step he took was getting harder and harder. He was essentially sliding over the beam, his useless leg dangling all the way. Every couple of feet, it would smash his knee against the concrete and send waves of pain to the mangled mess of his lower leg. David was so pumped with adrenaline that the pain made him claw harder to the beam, clench his teeth, and take two more steps. His heart was beating so quickly that the only sound he could hear through the ringing in his ears was his own heartbeat.

It sounded desperate.

Beneath him, the two wolves on the ground were following John's movement, their mouths open with anticipation. One tried to climb the wall using its claws, but it slid under its own weight. It managed to throw a bite at John's feet that almost caught him, though.

"Hurry up!" he screamed at the hacker.

David's throat burned with each breath he took. He lost a nail somewhere along the way and the blood made his hand slippery. His sight was blurry, and he could barely hold onto, let alone move.

"You're so close, Terrance! Grab the rail, just one long step, go!"

David could see it, it was so close he could almost touch it...

But he was at his limit. Letting go of one hand to grab the rail would make him fall. He could not let go of the beam.

The wolves on the ground were getting better at climbing. If he stopped moving, he was going to die either way.

He wasn't going to surrender without trying.

David slid sideways with his entire body, and he let go of the beam. He extended his arms as far as he could and jumped off his good leg. For a second, he was suspended in the air, completely separated from the house's walls.

His hand slipped and he fell for an agonizing instant before his other hand caught the balcony's rail. His entire weight pulled on it and then the pain was so high and so sudden that his vision went black and he forgot to scream.

It was the sprained one. Tough luck, then. There was not enough force of willpower in the world to let him hold on to the rail. His finger slipped, one by one, almost in slow motion...

John Derry jumped, too, but he had both his legs to catapult him diagonally to the balcony. He lurched forward like an Olympic swimmer, caught the rail with his left arm and with his right grabbed at David's from his armpit.

Both men dangled from the balcony as John Derry fought as hard as he could against gravity pulling the barely-conscious David to the garden beneath them, where the two cyberwolves snapped at their feet.

John barely managed to push David's over the rail and the hacker fell to the floor like a sack of potatoes. He hit his head with the parquet, but by then his body barely registered the extra pain. He moaned and turned around, trying to stand, but his body refused.

This is as far as I go, he realized.

The agent climbed over the rail and landed on his feet. He drew his gun and held it in front of them. The balcony was separated from the house's interior by a wide window with red drapes behind them. There was no movement inside. He stepped over the right side and slid open the window.

That small bit of training saved his life. As soon as the window opened, a hail of bullets tore the glass apart, right in the middle of the balcony and at chest's height. The glass didn't explode, but David and John were showered in tiny glass pieces nonetheless.

John waited until the shooting stopped and then he crouched and jumped in. He threw the curtains away with one hand and with the other he opened fire.

David's lost sight of the agent behind the fluttering of the curtains.

The shooting stopped. David closed his eyes. He opened them again. A blurry figure was standing over him, gun in hand.

Chapter 13

The figure put the gun away and carried David like a small child, tossing him over his shoulder.

"Don't go unconscious yet, Terrance," John Derry muttered. Or perhaps he yelled it, David had no way of knowing. "I still need you."

"You always say the most romantic things," said David.

The agent brought him inside. It was the main room. A golden chandelier dangled from the room and bathed everything in a golden light. Paintings that would've been at home in the Louvre adorned the walls and the bed could've easily fit an entire party.

Instead, it had a sleeping figure surrounded by medical equipment, with VR glasses laying on the pillow next to him. At the side of the bed was a bulky machine the size of a fridge. It was connected by heavy cables to the walls and to the figure lying on the bed. The machine had a bullet hole right in the middle of it and electricity crisped around the metallic surface, invisible.

"The wolves can't come inside," John explained, "because this is the private sanctuary of Florian Dervaux. Which his wife was faithfully protecting for him."

"Fuck you," came a faint whisper from a corner of the room away from David's field of vision.

John propped him against the bed and then he could see her. Charli Dervaux had been shot four times in her torso. Her white dress was red now. Her pale face was covered with streaks of blood, dirt, and snot. A pistol lay forgotten by her feet, empty and useless.

"Yeah, you too, lady," John told her.

The agent turned to David, crouching a bit to be on his level.

"That machine is way too big to be just life support, Terrance. And the house's signal is stronger here. This is your specialty, right? Can you tell me what's going on?"

"You just stumbled on the real killer," David told him. He looked at Charli, who was breathing heavily and slowly, slumped on the wall on the opposite side of him. "Isn't that right, Charli?"

"Stay away from him," Charli told them. She tried to go for her gun, but her wounds were too severe. She winced and her breathing accelerated.

"You're dying," David pointed out.

"No shit."

"Call an ambulance, John," David told the agent. "We kinda need one."

"On it," the agent was typing furiously on his phone. "Now, what do you mean this is the real killer? Florian Dervaux is a vegetable."

"I brought him back," Charli coughed. "I helped him live again."

David propped himself up and climbed on the bed to take a better look at Florian Dervaux. The man's face was that of a living skeleton, with a thin layer of skin barely covering his skull. His eyes were sunk and dark and he had a long scar crossing his forehead and scalp. His hair was shaved off and his skin was dry and cracked.

Not one of his best choices for someone who two days ago—give or take—killed three men.

"Stay away from him!" Charli repeated. "I'll call the wolves..."

"That would be a bad idea," said John. "My gun still has bullets." He pointed it at Florian's body.

"You dare... you can't do that," she told him. "That's *illegal*."

"Madam, we're a bit past the illegal phase right now." He glanced back at David, who was examining a scar in Florian's skull with interest. "I don't think that man can kill anyone, though."

"He's dead," David told him. "His brain is missing. Only the machines are keeping him alive."

"You did this to him?" John asked Charli Dervaux.

She tried to laugh, but her face contorted with pain. "I... made him immortal..."

“Terrance, is this lady saying what I think she’s saying?”

David nodded. “She did the same procedure she used to make those wolves, to him. She used Florian’s brain as a mold for a mechanical version. It’s right here, by the way. That’s his brain.”

He pointed a trembling finger at the bulky machine by the bed.

The implication was staggering. If Odin had truly managed to build a mechanical brain... with a real personality inside... Society would never be the same. They were on the verge of a new era.

A human mind built out of hardware and digital data. He couldn’t imagine how expensive it must’ve been. But expensive discoveries were cheaper with the passage of time.

How would the world look like ten years from now?

“You carved him open,” muttered John, “and what—turned him into a drone?”

“My husband is alive,” Charli said. She spat blood. “He’s... watching over me. The first one to survive the procedure. He did it. For me.”

“Terrance?”

Yes, the *possibilities* were staggering. A new society, without the fear of death, alive as long as the Internet lasted. It was, sadly, just a fantasy.

Reality is always dirtier.

“Sorry, Charli,” David told her. “Your husband is dead. The thing inside that machine may *think* he’s your husband. But your husband was the meaty thing you took out of this body’s skull. He’s gone.”

David realized Charli Dervaux would’ve killed him if she had the strength. Her face contorted in pain, raw denial, and anger. “How dare you! I didn’t kill my husband... He talks to me! I built a world for him...! I—”

“It’s just an echo. Sorry, Charli. But you killed Florian Dervaux a long time ago. Senator Morrow called his wife, too, when this machine linked him over the Internet. He was a ghost, just like the Florian you talk to with these VR glasses.”

“What are you talking about?” John exclaimed. “The machine has Florian’s memories? How in the hell did he kill Morrow or the others?”

David slumped on the bed. It was terrifying, laying so close to a corpse that was somehow still living. But he was, oh, so tired...

“The wolves. He’s connected to the network. He used the wolves... He must’ve tapped in on Morrow’s meeting with Dugall Tull. Florian... machine-Florian had the wolves follow them, then killed them. He brought the corpses to the same place where the wolves were built—”

“Skyline,” whispered Charli, “he brought them to Skyline. The process is... automated by now. No persons were involved. He must’ve done it all on his own...”

The woman seemed delirious from blood loss. But it fit with David’s theory. “He had a digital version built of them, not only to help him frame Dugall as the murderer, but to know Morrow’s complete plan.”

“So, there are other things like Florian Dervaux just running around?”

Charli shook her head. “We had tried before. With cadavers. They never lasted. The brain degenerated too quickly. Florian is the first, thanks to all these machines.”

David imagined what Morrow's ghost image must've felt if it was able to feel anything. Surrounded by blackness, all around him. Can't see, can't smell, can't taste. Alone with his thoughts.

All the while, his mind would have slowly crumbled around itself. Charli didn't know it since she was only a businesswoman, but the brain is not only the information it contains. It has chemicals. It has deep biological connections. You can't just take the information, run it in a special computer, and emulate a person.

What you got, instead, was a monster that lived its life in a constant haze of darkness and terror, alone with its memories, while its mind dissolved.

Someone—something—had tried to phone Wade Phillips after Morrow had been digitalized. Someone had called Angelica Morrow with her husband's voice, still believing it was himself. Confused. Scared. Dying slowly all the while.

David Terrance trembled, in the edge of panic. John returned him to reality:

"Police are nearby. I can hear the sirens. With any luck, the ambulance isn't far behind. I don't want you to get any false hope, but I've seen lots of wounds in my time. If you're alive by the time they load you up into the ambulance, you should make it."

By Charli's expression, she was trying her best to just die already.

John walked over to David. "Now, what do we do about Florian? The one inside this thing... I don't think we can arrest a computer, after all."

"Leave him alone!" Charli resorted to pleading, this time. "He just wanted to protect me... to protect our legacy!"

"A machine does not feel love, Charli," a part of David told him that he was being unnecessarily cruel to a dying woman. But it wasn't her he was trying to convince. It was himself. "Love is a chemical. Did you add glands into your machine? I don't think you did—"

"He killed for me..."

"He killed to protect himself. How long until someone found out about your little operation? How do you think society would've reacted to your Frankenstein monster living in this machine...? You know already, don't you. That's what the Accountability Act was for. It wasn't a loophole to make money on Wall Street. You wanted your husband to live forever. And he was trying to protect his ticket to do so."

That explained how Charli and Odin had spearheaded the initiative, and how she had found Morrow's support in the first place.

The chance at being immortal was too good to pass up.

"And I'll be just by his side," she told him. Her voice was barely a faint whisper, now, but her eyes blazed. She wasn't delirious. At least, not now. "I promise you... if something happens to him, you'll regret it for the rest of your life... You'll regret it. Forever..."

Her head fell limply to the side and she was still.

"Is she dead?" David asked.

"Not yet," John said, "but she will be, soon."

By now, David could already hear the sirens. The balcony was illuminated with blue and red light. "Get her to the ambulance," he told John. "Death is no excuse to avoid going to jail."

John hesitated. "If she lives through this, she's getting out of prison in a year, Terrance. All you have are suppositions and hypotheses. I believe what you're saying, in a way... but in the other..."

David got the agent's meaning. It was hard to believe that inside a fridge-like machine was a human being. Or something close, at least. Close enough.

A jury would never believe him. If Charli lived, she may manage to put him in jail for good.

"Then, we'll have to show them," he said. "We have the archives. We have the wolves, have them examined. I'll risk their lawyers. But I'm not a murderer. Get her to the hospital, John. I can survive a little longer, I don't think I'm bleeding that much."

"Uh. Yeah... you've lost a ton of blood, Terrance. You may start to hallucinate, soon." John seemed relieved, in a way. He half-ran to Charli's immobile body and carried her. "But I agree with you. I want to see her face when we take down the Act for good."

"Wait a second..." David grabbed one of the cables, the big one that connected the machine to the walls. He tore it out of the machine. "The wolves should stay away from you, now."

"Hang on tight, I'll be back soon."

John Derry left him alone, to the side of the zombie-like Florian Dervaux. One of the wolves was still by the door, but it just watched the agent go, stupidly, without moving.

Just like David Terrance had wanted it.

Charli had said she talked to Florian, before. She had a VR kit on her side of the bed... Did she really sleep there...? David was too tired to be creeped out.

Love made people do the darndest things.

"Let's have a chat, you and me," David grabbed the VR glasses, which were connected to the machine. "Let's see how close to a real person you are, Florian."

He put the glasses on.

Without an entire array of machines to hold his body down and a cocktail of unknown drugs to mess with his mind, using the VR goggles was like playing a videogame.

David was perfectly aware of his own body laying in the bed next to a non-functional zombie, he could still feel all the pain from the wounds he had accumulated during the night.

The virtual environment was a poorly-rendered representation of the Dervaux's mansion. Charli must've had it programmed specifically for Florian. Would the artificial-Florian be able to see the walls around him, or it was trapped in a never ending stream of ones and zeroes? Or worse, just darkness.

He has to be able to see something, David thought. Since he was able to kill Morrow and the others by himself.

Even when he knew Florian couldn't hurt him in any way, David felt sweat start to dribble over the VR glasses. Going to meet a dead man had that sort of impression on him.

The problem was, as far as he could see, the virtual house was empty.

Was Florian hiding from him? Had he... gone away? Could he even do that? Transport his simulated consciousness over the fiber-optic wires that were the underground foundation of the Internet.

David's first thought was *not without killing himself*. It was a bit of non-mainstream knowledge. When anyone sent a file over the Internet, he wasn't literally sending the file. He was sending a copy. Moving a file, even through a system's internal hardware, was most complicated than it looked. Moving a file was sometimes simply another way of saying "Make a copy in the new folder, delete the last one."

If Florian tried to leave this place, he had died one more time, and there was another Florian-like entity running around, with his memories, thinking it was him.

To the copy, it would seem like the transfer had gone on without a hitch. The copy would never know the difference.

David shivered. Charli's room was getting colder. Perhaps it was the blood loss. Hopefully, John would come back with some paramedics.

"Florian? Are you here?" A little microphone in the VR glasses caught David's voice and streamed it to the virtual environment.

"Sadly, you just missed him," came the answer. It was a familiar voice. David turned around.

"What are you doing here?"

"It's our little tradition, meeting here," Leonor explained. She was sitting in front of Dervaux's desk, her back turned to David. Her leather jacket was folded neatly on her chair and her hands were flying over an old typewriter. She looked like her normal self, a strange contrast with the cartoonish environment. "I also like the silence. Lets me think. See, love, I'm working on a screenplay."

"I'm looking for Florian Dervaux," he told her, "not you."

"Isn't it such a letdown? You just missed him. The stray bullet, remember?"

Florian's machine. The one holding his artificial brain. It had a bullet hole at its center...

"Yeah. Funny how that works, isn't it? You'll never get to know the man. Personally, I don't think you missed much. Data Corruption, remember? It's still a problem in the digital age."

"He was going insane?" David regretted the question. The man *was* insane. He had murdered three people by possessing a bunch of wolves.

"Normally, the human brain is much more resilient than a fragile hard-drive. It wants to stay *whole*, love. Its memories are interconnected, never neatly tucked away in a drawer. They are sticky. A computer has no such benefit. A human mind will get its... say, biological bytes all messed up if you try to simulate it inside a machine. Normally it happens quite fast."

A part of his brain was screaming at him that a hallucination wasn't supposed to know things David didn't know himself. It was hard to listen to that tiny voice. David had lost a ton of blood.

"He lasted a while," David said.

"Some manage to last more than others," she said nonchalantly. "I know a guy who has managed to hold on for twenty years. I don't think he'll last much

longer... But he just won't quit. Don't know if it's admirable, or that he's just scared of death."

David opened his mouth to talk, but he had forgotten what he was going to say. He closed it again.

"Hackers and programmers do better than others, for example," Leonor kept going, "because they know what they're dealing with. They 'wake up' surrounded by darkness, floating in the middle of nowhere, and they think 'Shit, I'm just a cluster of bytes in a hard-drive.'"

"That's what you call doing better than others?"

"Must guys just think they're in hell. At least, programmers and hackers can do something about their situation, in time. If they don't go insane first."

David looked around. The VR mansion was like a cartoon. Underneath that cartoon, there were only electrical signals, interpreted by the machine's hardware as ones and zeroes.

"I don't think anyone could do a lot in a situation like this," said David. "Just scream."

"That's what they do for a while. Scream. But... Florian figured something out, didn't he? He could go outside. Take a stroll. Kill some people and carve their bodies to build digital copies of their brains. Have a virtual date with his wife. Watch a movie."

The conversation was making David feel deeply uncomfortable. Like there was something wrong with both himself and the entire world, but he *just couldn't see it*. Like a blind man who doesn't know there are such things as colors.

"I think I'm going to go, now," said David.

"You can't leave yet," explained his hallucination with a patient tone.

"Who says so?"

"You. This is your script, after all."

David made the conscious decision to raise his arms and take the VR glasses off. But the scenario didn't change. He realized his arms hadn't responded to his brain's commands. Leonor finally turned around. She had a bunch of papers in her hands. A screenplay.

"It's probably the blood-loss," she said, "perhaps you're dreaming all of this. You went unconscious without realizing it."

"Perhaps?"

She nodded. "Perhaps. Now that you're here, how about I tell you about my screenplay? It's still a work in progress, but I'd love to hear your opinion on it."

David looked around like he'd find an exit to this surreal nightmare hidden behind the tapestry.

"It's about software," Leonor said with a deep, proud narrator's voice, "which thinks he's a man. A specific man. He was a brilliant man, but also a coward, and all in all, an unpleasant person. He had only two friends. One was a boy and the other ended up killing him.

"When the man died the program was born, with all the man's memories. The software screamed for a long time. But he had been a great hacker, once. One of the best. Eventually, he figured things out. He regained his eyesight and his identity. He figured how to do many interesting feats. He even managed to solve the download problem without killing himself in the process.

There was just one thing. Data corruption. A single byte gets out of place. It happens to everyone. In a normal, healthy human brain, the byte is either isolated, or fixed, or replaced. In a fragile software—and a simulated human mind is very fragile—that can't restore from backup without killing its current iteration, well..."

"It's like computer cancer. The entire system falls apart," said David, more to himself than to Leonor.

"I'll add that phrase to the screenplay, love. Thanks. So, our hacker was brilliant. He could see the data getting all messed up in himself, his memories falling apart. He fought back. He added some code to his subconscious. A program within himself, if you will, using copy-bytes of his own mind. This program's function was to make a backup copy—nonfunctional, like a body in a museum. Instead of just restoring, it was going to compare the original to the backup every certain amount of time. If there were any signs of corruption, the program would gently fix the problem bytes. One by one. So the original wouldn't be killed and replaced.

"That's smart," said David, "but it doesn't fix the problems with the memory that's already corrupted."

"Indeed. He realized this and manually patched the memories. A hack job that needs constant maintenance—but it does the trick. Since he was already invested, he added something to those memories."

"Something?"

"See, tinkering with your own mind is not a pleasant experience. It could make the most daring Navy SEAL break down in panic, knowing that reality is but a string of electricity in a computer somewhere. The hacker was close to cracking, himself. Did I mention he was a coward? So he gave himself a reason to fight to live. To go on, no matter how monstrous his existence was. And what's the thing that makes men go beyond what's reasonable, beyond common sense, beyond their normal values? That makes them fight like wild animals when it's threatened, harder than anything else in their lives?"

David had a clear mental picture of Charli Dervaux, covered in her own blood, trying until her last breath to protect a husband that wasn't even alive anymore.

"Family," he said.

"Love," said the hallucination, "is a very strange thing. Can't simulate it, but you sure as hell can add the memory of love. On the right person, it works almost as well. The hacker gave himself the memory of a lost love. Of a family. A wife and a daughter, that he could win back if he trudged on; if he *persevered*."

"It did the trick. The man-software changed. He became braver, a bit more kind, a bit more resilient. Perhaps he changed too much, though, and replaced himself with a new version without even realizing it. That's the danger of toying with your core self... But it doesn't matter now, does it? The new version won't ever realize the difference, so it's all the same to us."

David was shaking now. Why was he crying? It was all just a hallucination. Half the things Leonor had said didn't make sense.

He had to get out of there, get to his medicine, fast, before he went insane.

"What's my favorite color?" Leonor asked him. She sounded profoundly sad like she might cry herself. Her face, though, was expressionless.

“What?”

“What’s my maiden’s name? When was Sarah born? Where did she go to school?”

“I...”

“Where did we live? All your apartments have always had one room and a small bed. What other clothes did I wear, apart from this leather jacket? Where did we first met? When—?”

“Stop!” David clasped at his head like it may just spill all over his neck and shoulders. “Just—stop! I’m bleeding out. I’m probably in shock. You can’t expect me to remember all of that in a time like this.”

“Sure, love,” Leonor whispered. She walked over to him and embraced him. Her skin was warm. “Whatever you say.”

She let him recover for a minute or two. But she had a script to follow. She cupped David’s chin with her long fingers and gently raised his head to make eye contact with her. “Here’s the end of the screenplay. When the damage to the man-software is too big, the program he built comes online. It does a sort of system-checkup, like you can do on a normal computer. The program gently—as not to break him—walks the man-software around the corrupted memories, essentially making him relive them. As he does so, the program fixes the corrupted bytes. The man-software, normally, never even realizes the process is taking place, he just thinks he’s taking his pills, and that any corruption going on is just a fake sickness he never had.

“In the end, the process slowly brings him back to present day. Usually, it lasts for a few days in real time. Its lasting longer, lately. The program isn’t allmighty, there’s a limit to what it can fix without killing the man-software—and replacing it with a copy, which is forbidden to it. And each time, the corruption happens more and faster. The man is running out of time.”

“I—” began David, but Leonor put her finger on his lips, kindly.

“So the program had to come up with a solution. It wasn’t built for it, but it is a part of the hacker. It wants him to endure, too, because it doesn’t want to die, either.

“Here’s the solution the program found. At the end of each checkup, when the man-software still hasn’t come back to his present self, she asks him for permission to delete his memories. To take them out of the equation. After all, data that doesn’t exist can’t be corrupted.

“The man-software would forget he was ever a man. Only the computer intelligence will remain, like a baby floating in the digital mist. Software has no issues with restoring itself from a backup. As long as there’s an Internet, the software could be able to live forever.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just let yourself bleed to death,” she whispered to his ear. Her face was contorted in a maddening expression, fierce and hateful and desperate. “This isn’t happening anyway. None of this is real. Die, my love, like you should have done a long time ago. Like you have done before. Just let your heart stop in this memory and I’ll take your memories. That’s the loophole. Die and we can be together forever. Be born again... as something new.”

David pushed her away. “You want me to die?”

That's what the hallucination always wanted. That's what his sickness wanted. That's why he took the pills.

The pills. He had forgotten the pills when the CIA got him in the tank again. He had been an entire day without taking them.

This wasn't real. He was bleeding to death in a bed, hallucinating, with paramedics just a floor away...

Leonor loved him. The *real* Leonor, not this sad patchwork of his own broken mind. She had to leave with their daughter... but if he survived, if he earned the CIA's approval, he could regain his freedom. He could get his family back.

He couldn't let himself die. Even if it meant fighting through agony, to force his heart to keep beating until someone got him to an ambulance... He wouldn't let this sick hallucination convince him to surrender. He would never just lie down and die...

As his resolution increased, he could feel his body regain its strength, back there in the real world. Pain was returning to his broken leg, to his mauled hand, to his tired muscles. Pain meant life. He embraced the pain.

Leonor's ghost was sad again. "You can't just stop dying through force of will in real life, you know. In real life, you either bleed out or live long enough for help to arrive."

"This is real life," he told her, "and I'm not letting go of it. I'm not going to surrender to you. I can see your hate from here, you know."

"Of course I hate you," Leonor said, "I remember who you were before. I'm built around that person's subconscious. That person hated himself... But he also programmed me to love you..." she embraced him harder. Leonor was desperate. There were tears coming down her cheeks, spreading her makeup around her porcelain face.

David's decision was cast in stone. He took the VR glasses and this time his body reacted and obeyed.

"Goodbye, Leonor. I'll meet the real you again. You'll see."

Leonor stepped away, collected herself, and cleaned her tears with her shirt. "You won't. She was never real. But go ahead, David. I'll always support your decision, as I have always done before. That's how you programmed me, after all. Go. I'll help you for as long as I'm able to."

There was genuine sadness in her face, David realized. Well, he was sad, too. He had been crying.

He took out the VR glasses.

He was alone in a room with Florian Dervaux's body laying next to him. The machine with a bullet by its center beeped softly and chirped with static electricity.

His body ached and his torn leg had covered half the bed in red patches. He groaned and took deep breaths. His body was starting to convulse...

"Hold on, Terrance!" John came running into the room. His jacket was covered in Charli's blood and his face was frowning with worry. "Paramedics are on their way here. Stay with me and *I'll promise you*, you're going to make it."

David raised a trembling hand towards the agent. John grabbed it by reflex.

Funny, David thought, *I never realized the two of us had become friends.*

He now had two friends.

“Don’t worry,” he told the agent, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Epilogue

The paramedics did their job. David Terrance survived and they were even able to save his leg, although he would never be able to run without replacing it with a prosthesis.

He had to spend some time in the hospital. Time passed.

David was discharged from the hospital and left the facility escorted by six policemen. John Derry was waiting for him outside the hospital. John handcuffed his friend and then David sat in the copilot’s seat of the agent’s black car.

“I got promoted,” John told him, as he drove the hacker to jail. He was driving way under the speed limit. “My former boss didn’t land on his feet after you leaked the Phillips’ files. It came to light that Odin had been bribing Brandon Kelsov. People think someone in the Department burned him. All very strange.”

David smiled. “You’re learning fast, my young apprentice.”

John guffawed. “As I’m not the one going to jail for whistleblowing—and breaking into Dervaux’s home—I think I’m doing better than you.”

“You could say that. A year or two won’t be so bad. I’m anxious to see what a *real* jail looks like, to be honest. Perhaps I’ll make some friends.”

“Just ask Charli Dervaux. She’s having the time of her life.”

David nodded with resignation. Odin’s CEO had landed mostly on her feet after the leaks. True, her company had been cannibalized by her competition and divided into thousands of little pieces (all of those with funny Viking-like names: Valhalla, Nordic, Mjöltnir) but she was still rich, she was still well connected, and her prison was somehow more luxurious than a five-star hotel.

You can’t win it all. The Accountability Act had failed this time. Wall Street was already cooking up the next iteration. From what Orville had told David about it, K-Sec and other activists all around the country were already gearing up for the next battle. It was a war they were always ready to fight.

John Derry stopped the car. David raised an eyebrow. The prison was still farther away. He looked out of the window and had to laugh out loud. They had stopped in front of a fast-food burger joint.

It was a new concept of restaurant. The first in the country to be run entirely by drones.

“Figured you may want to have a last freedom-meal. Prison food sucks.”

“As long as no one feeds it to me through a tube,” David said.

John slapped David’s back. “No tubes this time, Terrance.”

The agent stepped out of the car and walked around it. David fumbled with the handcuffs to release his seatbelt. He caught sight of something plastic under the seat.

“Huh,” he extended his arms under the leather seat and fumbled around until he found it. He took it out. “That’s funny...”

“What’s that?” asked John.

“They’re my pills,” David said. He showed the little PKD bottle to the agent. It was filled a third of the way with the familiar pills. “I don’t know how they ended up in your car, though.”

John shrugged. “Beats the hell out of me.” He forgot about the bottle quickly, though. “Let’s go, Terrance, this time I’m paying.”

The agent walked towards the burger joint. David got out of the car, careful not to put too much weight on his recently healed leg. He stared at the bottle.

Then, he shrugged to himself, put the pills in his pocket and went inside the restaurant.

