

# **Agents of Metal**

## **Part 1**

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NaNoWriMo 2008. Edited later.

Any similarities or references to actual above top secret organizations, operations and fnords may *not* be purely coincidental. Read at own risk.

Many thanks to Lionel Gendre for co-creating the Agent concept and the Three Words!



# 1.

Ian felt it just before Gwen, the spherical lead systems administrator and BOFH of the BOFHs, actually opened her mouth to exclaim. In the space of that fraction of a second, the atmosphere of the server room had changed to something that was markedly wrong.

“Fuck!”

That harshly shouted word snapped him completely out of his stupor, already expecting the weekend, and back into hardcore action mode. He swiveled around in his chair and saw her looking intently at the flat-screen monitor of her main workstation.

But he could not yet deduce what had agitated her.

“Cut the power,” she yelled.

“What?” Ian could not quite follow.

“The fucking comms rack!”

Cutting off network access to the main servers and isolating each of the subnets in the building on their own was normally not healthy to even think about, no matter it was Friday. However, in the space of roughly five months Ian had known Gwen, he had learned that her judgment was better left unchallenged. It had never failed so far.

He reached out and yanked the power cord.

The led displays of the routers and switches in the network equipment rack died, and their ventilation fans slowed down to a halt. The droning hum of the servers and the air conditioning went on, but the change was clearly noticeable: the server room simply was not supposed to sound like this.

“We have a breach,” Gwen hissed.

“Is it bad?”

“Oh yes, my PFY, it most certainly is.”

PFY was a computer folklore term, meaning “pimple-faced youth,” or a junior systems administrator. Ian hated it somewhat when Gwen called him that, but took the insult silently in his stride. Though the response was apparently intended to lighten the mood, there was no mistaking the solemnity of her voice.

Ian let out a sigh as the initial shock faded. OK, someone had rooted one or more of the servers, gaining unauthorized superuser access, and as a measure of damage control they had just shut the whole network down. The angry calls would soon start: they would answer them in a sarcastic manner while restoring from backups.

It would be a long evening, but not much drama after all – Gwen had taught him the procedure, and he could theoretically do it all by himself. And that was exactly what puzzled him: she had to be a veteran of network intrusions, and certainly knew the drill much better than him, so why so severe a reaction?

A repetitive whirring and hacking sound, which was quickly increasing in speed and intensity, jolted him out of his thoughts.

It was coming out of the servers, in unison.

That was the answer.

This was not just an ordinary bad security breach.

Without warning, Gwen performed a cat-like leap across the room, her large form almost defying the laws of physics, bright-red dyed hair trailing behind her. She was going for the row of heavy-duty uninterruptible power supplies on the opposite table, delivering electricity for the servers.

She hit the table at speed: though her mass cushioned the collision somewhat, Ian knew it had to hurt. In a rapid succession she hit the circuit breaker on each of the UPS devices, shutting down the servers without advance notice. Then she turned to him, face in an un-decipherable expression.

“Firmware hack. Set the hard disks to suicide,” she gasped.

With just the air conditioning going on, the server room now felt positively eerie. As Gwen's words sunk in, Ian understood that this was another form of damage control, stopping the haywire drives before they could damage themselves beyond repair. But how they would proceed now was beyond him.

Hatred surged through his mind. It was not that he especially cared for the company or its business, but the thought of someone being capable of such a malicious act awakened something deeply repressed within his brain. He was fairly certain Gwen felt the same way – she was a known nihilist and misanthrope, who most of the time understood machines better than humans, and had by example instilled a caring respect of the hardware in him. She had to hate it when someone did something that awful to shiny, innocent server equipment.

“The night just became at least twice as long. Don't just sit there and stare at me, open up one the servers and pull out the RAID array,” she barked.

Ian set out to work, armed with a screwdriver sporting a star-shaped security bit. Meanwhile Gwen prepared her workstation for investigating the suspect hard drives up close.

It was then the server room phone rang for the first time after the network going down. Gwen answered in a rapid-fire, but not yet very impolite manner.

“It has to be the drive firmware. The sound was so deeply messed up, the shithead could not have done that by just hacking the OS to do out-of-control seeks,” she mused after finishing the call.

“I didn't know that was even possible, to reprogram the drives,” Ian said through gritted teeth – one of the screws in the drive array case had been ridiculously overtightened.

“Such a wonderful job, each day you potentially learn new ways how some asshole at a keyboard somewhere far away can make your life more miserable.”

Learning, though not in the sarcastic sense Gwen meant, was indeed what Ian had been doing a lot since starting at this job. He had practically known nothing of systems administration: growing his hair, practicing loud guitar playing and drinking beer had mostly occupied his time before that. However, either he had a natural talent for this unsavory occupation, or was just very good at catching up on new things fast.

It was not in Gwen's habit to offer any kind of praise, but he had on occasion seen a puzzled expression on her face after he had handled some task he theoretically should not have been capable of handling yet. That expression was praise enough.

Ian lifted the drive array onto the table next to the workstation.

The second call came in. Gwen answered again and

explained the outage, this time more curtly. Then she connected power and data cables to the topmost drive and typed in a command, so that her system would reinitialize and be able to use the newly connected drive – she was not going to waste time rebooting.

“Of course, it could –”

She froze in mid-sentence, holding her breath for a few seconds, then sighed in relief.

“Good. It didn't start to headbang again right away, which means it must be triggered by a program. I guess the fucker needed a way to test his attack but was too lazy to make it permanent – a 'final' version so to speak. So there might be hope of salvaging these drives.”

“Headbang?” The word evoked Ian's curiosity.

“That noise you heard was the read-and-write head banging itself to the extremities of its motion range, and even attempting to go past them. Very many times per second.”

Ian nodded in understanding. If you let the hard drive do that for too long, it would be a dead drive soon.

“Next step: we see if we can still pull data out of it.”

Gwen clicked the mouse a few times, and a window showing hexadecimal raw data came up on the monitor. Apparently delighted, she gave the “finger” to the distant adversary.

“You sucker, you fail!” she roared.

“That's 'yes' then?”

“It just doesn't compute, that if you're going to do an attack like this, you don't do it all the way. Of course all normal operations, like reading data, should be rendered useless. But this guy, I find his lack of evil disturbing. It's not even evil, just annoying. If we can read data, I'm fairly certain we can restore the firmware too. Now, let's get to work so we don't have to spend all

night here.”

While Ian set out to do the grunt work of reinstalling the original firmware to all of the afflicted drives, Gwen started going through network logs to find out where the attack had come from, and the kind of exploit used.

And answering more phone calls.

There were six main servers in the room – more were scattered throughout the building, but as they all had different hardware, they could not have suffered the same firmware attack. They would still have to be checked for intrusion, but their role was less important. They could wait until – tomorrow.

Gwen looked up from her monitor. “Listen, the attack came from that old industrial complex a few blocks away. They’ve been renting the space for a lot of new small companies, but all those use the same network, so I can’t pinpoint exactly who was responsible. In any case, it’s heartwarming to know it’s someone near you rather than half the world away.”

“Nice to know we have evil neighbors.”

“Just annoying and pathetic. How’s the firmware re-install going?”

“One array was hosed, but I’m down to the last of the working ones.”

“We’ll order a replacement.”

Gwen typed intensely for a while.

“Ah, there. I figured out the exploit. Going to write the patch in just a moment. Was a buffer overflow thing: I wouldn’t have cared to see those still pop up in 2012. Well, guess it’s better to get negatively surprised than not be surprised by anything.”

At last the progress bar on the last firmware copy operation reached hundred percent. Ian checked his watch: 7 PM. His surprise was positive – the night was

still young. The operating system reinstalls would be next: it would be faster, since all the remaining five servers could be set to reinstall and restore themselves simultaneously.

The clock was approaching 11 PM, as the restore was finally complete with minor complications along the way, and the patch for the vulnerability had been installed. Ian got permission to plug the network equipment rack back in. The blinking of green and yellow lights, that started almost immediately, was a welcome sight to his tired eyes.

“You go, I’ll check the remaining servers so that we don’t need to do that tomorrow. I like to live nocturnally,” Gwen said.

“Well then, have fun.”

Ian collected his black shoulder bag from the floor and left the server room. The three-story building was unlit except for the emergency exit lights and the street lights filtering in from the outside. And except for him and Gwen, completely deserted.

It was not until now that he realized how hungry and thirsty he was – the adrenaline rush of the network breach had lasted surprisingly long. He stopped by the soda vending machine in the lobby, but knew that the sugar rush from the drink would be short and unsatisfying.

He needed something alcoholic.

And indeed, the night was still young.

He exited into the raw and wet November gloom and headed for his one-room apartment. It was small and smelled chronically bad despite any ventilation attempts, but was cheap and close by.

Of course that would only be a pit stop – the bars

would follow. With luck there would be solid, harsh and aggressive live acts to bang one's head to.

## 2.

The musty odor was the first thing that assaulted Ian's senses as he unlocked and opened his apartment door. He stepped in and turned on the light. The place was in a relative disarray, the way he liked it.

Next he performed the ritual he almost always did when returning from work. He strapped on his battered black Charvel guitar, whose licensed Floyd Rose bridge was already way past worn out and unreliable. In front of the mirror he struck his best thrash metal pose, blond hair completely obscuring his face, and checked his current right-hand maximum picking speed by playing muted tremolo sixteenth notes.

He estimated the result to be roughly 190 beats per minute, which was not fully satisfactory, but acceptable after a grueling workday.

He had the habit of practicing regularly, but not necessarily the things that would make him a more well-rounded musician. There had been short-lived attempts to join some local bands, but the results had been disappointing so far.

Somewhere deep in his mind, there existed an elusive vision of a perfect Bay Area thrash metal band, and the dream of joining it. He could not exactly explain this

vision to anyone, but was certain of two things: he had not met such band yet, and would definitely know when he did.

Finished with the guitar for now, he put it down. It was 11:20 PM and time to hit the streets.

He had not eaten properly during the whole day, and decided against it now as well – alcohol assaulted an empty stomach more savagely, and right now he needed its maximum power. There would be two complete days to recover before his services were needed again, and that had to be more than enough.

The Black Shark was as good place as any to start the night. It was close by, the beer was cheap, the music loud though not live, and if it was not an abysmally bad night, at some point there would be a fight.

It was here Ian often met Lucas, the closest thing he had to a best friend. Lucas was not a musician, but appreciated roughly similar things in life, and so the two understood each other well. Ian no longer remembered when they had exactly met for the first time.

Through the haze – one could count on the smoking ban not being enforced in the Shark – Ian saw Lucas sitting at a corner table, seemingly concentrated on his beer.

Ian approached.

“Hey, Luc.”

Lucas lifted his gaze from the beer glass, grinning.

“You're kind of late. Long day at work?”

“Tell me about it.”

Ian went to the bar to get a beer of his own. He envied Lucas for getting such a false start, while he had slaved away in the server room. But then, Lucas was not a systems administrator. In fact, it was somewhat of

an enigma what he actually did for a living. He always referred to himself as a “consultant,” but Ian did not want to probe further, and frankly, was not interested. After all, work was something you just had to do, while life actually happened elsewhere. Though Ian imagined a consultant would be a rather boring person, which Lucas definitely was not.

Lucas had a curious habit of always varying his appearance. Sometimes he let his hair or beard grow, while at other times he shaved his head bare. Now his brown hair was medium length and growing, giving his gaunt face and deep-set eyes a respectable but slightly unsettling quality.

Beer in hand, Ian sat at the table. One sip of the cold liquid and he felt like a new man already. Heavy metal with a classic strong and high-pitched vocalist blared from the bar's speakers. Ian would have preferred something less classic and more aggressive, but it would do for now. He had to raise his voice to be heard.

“If you're interested, we had a most motherfucking attack today,” he almost shouted.

Matters of network security were not supposed to be discussed with outsiders, but Ian believed to always obscure enough of the details. And of course at least ninety-five percent of all workdays were far too boring and mundane to talk about, so it was not often the opportunity came along.

“And you had to stay until the mess was cleaned up?” Lucas asked.

“Right.”

“OK, then I see. I thought you and that lead admin were...”

Ian knew Lucas was not serious with the crude, beer-fueled insinuation: it was a calculated, integral

part of their camaraderie. Gwen was far too scary to even consider the idea, but he could understand that the concept of him locked up in the server room with that spherical woman could raise curiosity in people who did not have the whole picture.

"You got one dirty imagination," he laughed back.

"Back to the attack, then," Lucas continued. "You said it was motherfucking, so I take it wasn't your usual hacking attempt. Tell me, did it make you feel something?"

Lucas had a habit of being interested in the psychological. At times, when a bar fight broke out, they would have a long and curious conversation of what the participants might feel and think. It was perhaps slightly disturbing, but it certainly made him unique.

Ian took a long gulp from his beer and considered. What had he actually felt?

"Hatred. Strong hatred. You see, it was an attack to physically damage server equipment. The hardware's innocent, so it's natural to hate the asshole who would do such a thing," he answered at last.

"Yes, I can see that," Lucas mused. "Now, don't take this in the wrong way, for I speak strictly in a general sense. I don't mean you or your company specifically. I'm just intrigued. Isn't there always people using the hardware, and those people might not be as innocent?"

"That's true. And no-one is completely innocent, really. But to the BOFH the hardware is holy in itself. Except if it's terminally broken out of the box, then it deserves to die."

"Bastard Operator From Hell, right?"

The beer was already creating a pleasant buzz in Ian's head: he knew his language would become more inventive and philosophical while under the influence.

“Yeah. Bastard operator and thrash metal warrior, those are the roles I dual-wield.”

“You should be proud of yourself, for most people only have one role in their life, or perhaps not even that.”

“Well, maybe not so proud. I should join an actual band first. But, back to the attack once more, if you're not bored already?”

“Go ahead.”

Ian could have switched the subject, but the answer was so sincere, that he decided to press on.

“It's also about power. We, the sysadmins, hold conservative power. Like the police or military. In a way I'm in the wrong job, 'cos I don't really identify with that. But it's nice to just toy with the hardware. Anyway, by intruding, the attacker asserts power he shouldn't have. He has power without responsibility.”

“A loose cannon.”

“Yeah. And he can keep going on until caught, while the good guys just have to suck it up and clean the mess. It's always easier to destroy than to repair.”

“Interesting. But what can you do then?”

“Well, for starters I know where the attack came from. Actually, from this city.”

A devilish plan had begun to formulate itself in Ian's mind. But only now, by consulting his philosophical side, he knew the perfect justification for it.

“It's the industrial block not far from here,” he continued.

“Axis Precision Machinery?”

“Yeah. They no longer manufacture anything, just rent out the space. Has to be one of the companies there. Actually I don't know which, but I'd like to pay a visit anyway.”

“Don't they have guards? Dogs? Cameras?”

“Conservative forces all right. But now I'm the attacker. Power without responsibility. You interested in coming along?”

For a second, Lucas looked surprised. Then his grin returned, wider than before.

“So that's what the 'bastard' in your title truly means. I'd like to, certainly –”

Ian understood his reservations well. “If a consultant was caught trespassing, it wouldn't be good for his reputation.”

“You could say that. But say, you don't intend to get caught?”

“Do I look like it?”

Ian tried his best to look dead-serious and suppress the laugh building up in his stomach. The plan was ridiculous, and that made it so good.

Lucas considered for a moment.

“No, you don't,” he said finally.

“We have to get some gear at my place. It won't take long.”

In a wordless agreement they both finished their beers and left the bar. Ian would certainly have liked to drink another, but he knew the task ahead required some sharpness. There would be plenty of reason – and plenty of time – to celebrate after the fact.

If they were not caught first.

As they walked down the street, pushing their way past a loud-mouthed group who were in a far more advanced state of intoxication, Ian checked his watch yet again.

Now it was midnight.

### 3.

The conditions were not ideal. The city lights reflected from the cloud layer, making any intruders far more visible than on a cloudless night. Thankfully there was no snow. In addition to his short black leather jacket, Ian now wore dark gray denim pants instead of the blue ones he had worn earlier. Lucas presented more of a problem: though his long overcoat was matte black, his pants were light gray.

But it was not time to chicken out at this point because of such a minor detail.

Ian figured that in any case, it was safest to plainly stay out of sight, instead of just relying on blending in the shadows.

There could not be many guards: it was improbable that any of the companies at the block were military contractors or anything that demanded a heightened amount of security. Any such firm would not likely be employing a budding computer criminal.

Ian and Lucas rounded a final corner and the target came into sight.

The former Axis manufacturing plant looked grim and uninviting. A chain-link fence circled the block: inside there was a courtyard flanked by multi-store build-

ings. A lower building, that looked like a garage, stood in the center. Several harsh lights shone from the top of the buildings and lampposts inside the courtyard.

If they planned their route carefully, they could stay in the dark most of the time.

First they just had to get over the fence.

At least there was no barbed wire.

They crossed the street casually, then hid themselves in a mostly unlit spot on the sidewalk behind some bushes, planted to make the surroundings look less like a concrete wasteland. Now they were shielded from any onlookers from the opposite streets, but a guard looking from inside the block would still possibly notice them.

"How can we make this look less suspicious?" Lucas asked in a whisper.

"I don't think we can. Better just make sure no-one's looking," Ian replied.

"It will make noise, doesn't it? In movies it always does."

Ian observed the inner courtyard. Cameras, slowly panning back and forth, were placed on the building walls at regular intervals.

He could also see a guard in a dark uniform. Silhouetted against the courtyard light, there clearly was a nightstick hanging from his equipment belt. It was fairly certain he carried an electric stun gun and pepper spray as well.

A firearm was not out of the question either.

"Private security, that's the place to be if you've got sadistic tendencies. And it's a fast growing business because the word's out that the cops just can't handle the growing unrest," Lucas thought aloud, stare also fixed on the guard.

The night could get painful if they were careless.

However, they had the advantage of freely choosing their target. Practically, as long as they got inside and back out, the attack would be successful.

From the opposite side street came the approaching low rumble of a truck.

“Get ready,” Ian hissed. “That truck's so loud the guard can't hear us if we time it right.”

“I sure hope so.”

As the truck noise grew louder, Ian climbed first. The fence made a high metallic noise, as it buckled under his weight and struck against the posts, but in a few seconds he was on the other side.

Lucas followed, in a surprisingly fast and smooth manner.

They were both in.

But right now they were on open ground, so Ian motioned for them to move up to the nearest building.

However, there was a choice to be made. If they rounded a corner and went for the wall facing the direction they had come from, they would be lit. If they didn't and chose the other wall, there would be less light.

But there also was a camera.

“It won't see us if we stay flattened to the wall,” Ian assured.

“Hmm.”

For a moment that was agonizingly long, Lucas thought. At last he nodded in agreement.

As the camera turned away, they ran up to the less lit wall and flattened themselves against it, just as the camera started to turn back.

So far, so good.

Ian observed his heart pumping faster, adrenaline

mixed with slight intoxication. But it was not the same kind of rush he had felt in the server room. That had been emergency response. This was more stalking and deliberate. At least for the moment, he was the master of the situation.

Now the need to choose the exact target became acute. As they had come this far, he did not want to just take an easy way out.

The place had to be visible.

And he wanted to – match wits with the guard?

The garage-like building would be fine, he decided.

He motioned for them to continue further along the wall. This served two purposes: to get closer to the garage, and to get further away from the light.

The guard was circling the courtyard in a seemingly fixed route. What kept him going had to be the hope that one night he would catch someone and beat that someone up, Ian mused silently.

“We wait until the guard goes away again. Then we move, up to the garage,” he whispered.

Lucas nodded again. It took perhaps thirty seconds, but certainly felt a lot longer. At last the guard's route took him further away from the garage.

Ian checked that there were no cameras. They would be lit momentarily, but then they would reach the safety of the garage wall.

“Go!”

It was not the easiest task to move fast, but at the same time silently.

As he contemplated this, Ian stumbled –

And fell on the concrete.

The object that was in his jacket pocket made a metallic noise upon colliding, even though the leather softened the impact a little.

He cursed silently.

Looking behind, he observed Lucas had stayed wisely in the shadows. But it was clear the guard had heard the noise. Still, the mission – or the attack – had to be completed, even if there was only a few seconds.

Therefore, Ian took the object from his pocket. It was a can of black spray paint he had used to cover up imperfections in his guitar's paint job. That had taken only a tiny amount, so there was plenty remaining.

He set out to work in the most hurried way possible. There was no time for finesse.

In ten seconds the artwork was complete. The garage wall now sported a text in crude black block letters:

*YOU FAIL – THE BOFHS PREVAIL!*

As Ian pocketed the spray can, the guard came into view from the opposite side of the garage.

Now what?

You wanted to match wits, and now you got it, Ian thought. However, he had the advantage of darkness – the guard had not noticed him yet.

Ian ducked behind the corner.

“What the hell?” came the guard's gravelly voice. He had clearly noticed the artwork and would come for Ian next.

An unusual falsetto scream pierced the night. “Fuck the corporate scum!”

Lucas.

The voice came from the direction they had come from. He was backtracking. Clever guy.

Ian hazarded a peek around the corner and saw the guard looking around, confused. This was his chance. If he ran the opposite way compared to Lucas –

At least one of them would make it.

Ian took a quick glance at the route ahead. There were two more cameras: they might be looking at an unfortunate direction when he passed.

But rather the cameras than the guard, he decided.

At the far side of the courtyard, there was a narrow alleyway between two of the high buildings. If he made it into that alleyway, he could climb the far side fence out to safety.

He lifted up the jacket to cover his head.

And ran, not looking back.

"You won't get away!" the guard shouted.

But Ian ran on, letting his legs pump for all of their worth. Just as he got into the alleyway, a gunshot rang out. He felt a sting as a fragment of masonry loosened by the bullet struck his hip.

A firearm. The guard was not afraid to kill.

Ian did not even slow down. The next he noticed, the fence was already in front of him. He jumped forward, reaching out as far up with his hands as he could.

One more second and he was at the top. Lifting his legs over to the other side, he let go and landed clumsily and painfully.

Another gunshot. The sound of impact on concrete came from somewhere very close to him.

But he was already on his feet, running alongside the fence. There was no way the guard could see him now, for one of the high buildings blocked the line of sight.

As he ran, Ian considered the immediate future.

In theory the guard could come after him, but that would also be deserting his post. He could call cops, but it was unlikely that they would respond in any timely manner. By this time of the night they should already have a fresh homicide on their hands, and simple vandalism would not rank high compared to that.

Therefore, mission accomplished. If only –  
If Lucas got out as well.

That was the first thought that truly worried Ian this night. It would be wrong if Lucas got into trouble because of following him on such a ridiculous stunt.

Ian rounded the corner.

No sight of him. Damn.

There was no option but to continue running. He rounded another corner, and came back to the starting point, where they had observed the yard from behind the bushes.

“Psst,” a whisper came from inside the bush.

Lucas had made it. Covered with rotting leaves, he stood up into sight.

“Was a bit close, wasn't it?” he asked.

“I don't argue with that,” Ian replied. “By the way, nice anarchist voice impression.”

Passing from the exact center between two street lamps, to be as unilluminated as possible, they crossed the street to get away from the industrial block. Ian could hear a final muted curse from the courtyard. As the rush faded, his muscles felt suddenly weak.

Indeed, it had been too close for comfort.

“Much more exciting than the usual bar fight,” Lucas said, as they were a respectable distance away. “But, was it a success? I mean, you did the paint job, but did you feel like you successfully compromised the conservative forces?”

Again Ian had to think for a moment. Lucas could be a challenging friend.

“It was a multi-success.”

Ian did not necessarily want to reveal what he meant with that. Of course the intruder would get his message – if the graffiti was not already washed away as he

showed up for work the next time. But in Ian's mind, the meaning of the night had already mutated.

Delivering the message, or challenging the security at the site, were not as important as what he had learned of himself.

Theoretically he should have been far more scared.

But he had not. In the face of danger and unexpected difficulties, he had acted with almost alarming control. However, now was not the time to think in an unnecessarily complicated manner. It was time to drink the night away.

Next stop: Hades Club.

#### 4.

Hades Club was one of the biggest and baddest metal-oriented clubs in the city. To enter, one descended twelve meters underground to be greeted by the bouncer, who on most nights was Mr. O, a burly, bald man with a lunatic glint his eye. Most understood the name to be short for Ox. His real name was a mystery.

Inside, one arrived first on the balcony level, where another set of stairs descended to the lower floor. That was where the stage was, and where mosh pits and indoor wall of deaths primarily took place. Several bars on both floors kept the metalheads' thirst at bay. In the interior design, shiny metal and black alternated. Restrooms were marked with red, crudely hand-painted symbols of the female and male genitals.

The club owner, Harald, was another source of legends. A two meter tall Viking and biker, his primary solution to any problem was physical violence. There were tales of local racketeers who had tried to extract protection money from the club. The unfortunate thug would never know which weapon Harald would wield on that particular night. A baseball bat to the head was the light punishment, but something heavier or sharper was not out of the question either.

Ian and Lucas paid the entrance fee, while avoiding direct eye contact with Mr. O. That was supposed to bring health, luck and prosperity on one's visit. Another unconfirmed rumor told that the man kept a fully automatic rifle hidden within reach at his post.

They stepped in and surveyed the club. Both floors were more crowded than usual: the constant noise of conversation, clinking glasses and most importantly – live metal – was deafening. Tonight was a mixed crust punk and metal night: a mixed crowd was always more volatile and easier to provoke into outright hostility.

Ian knew that Mental Laceration, a four-piece band whose precise genre was hard to pinpoint, would just be finishing. The music contained definite punk influences, but odd time signatures and ultra-technical riffs pierced the song structures frequently.

"You're going into the pit?" Lucas asked, shouting.

"Maybe," Ian shouted back. Truth be told, the rough landings and being hit by flying masonry had made his body sore, and he did not necessarily crave more pain. Rather, he hoped to enjoy the music and sedate himself heavily, but could not outright predict that the maniacal urge to jump into a mosh pit would not take over.

They stole seats on the lower level, an optimal place where a bar was close by, but the stage was also in clear sight. Lucas went to buy two beers for both of them, while Ian submerged himself in Mental Laceration's last song.

The lyrics were supposed to be deeply symbolic, but at least in the live situation he failed to decipher them. The stick-thin vocalist, his chest bare, shouted the words with such rage that the PA system was distorting with a nasty buzzing sound. It was possible that the band's front-of-house sound man was just bad at his

job, for the Hades Club's sound system – a permanent, not rented installation – was supposed to handle excessive sound pressure levels flawlessly.

“Good night and fuck you!” the front man yelled as the final beats of the song collapsed in a cacophony of feedback and manic ad-lib drumming. Guitars were left in a random heap on the stage, the amps still powered on and squealing, as Mental Laceration walked off the stage. Random aggressive shouts arose from the crowd – Ian was not sure whether they expressed approval or disapproval.

Lucas arrived with the beers. While he drank with some moderation, Ian started outright with a long gulp. Being the mastermind of the operation at the industrial complex, he was supposed to be the thirstier one in any case.

“What's the next band?” Lucas asked.

“Cyberpriest,” Ian shouted in response.

He had heard of the band, but had missed them at each previous opportunity. A local outfit, they were supposedly playing an extremely aggressive, back-to-the-basics form of thrash metal and were rapidly making a name for themselves.

Ian still had not eaten anything during the night – the beer went from his stomach to his bloodstream rapidly. Normally his tolerance was higher, but this was not a normal night. Well, it certainly was more optimal if he could achieve with a few pints what usually took at least five.

Mental Laceration's minimal road crew expertly dismantled the band's equipment off the stage, and Cyberpriest took over. Ian noticed that the trio were trunking up their own gear – there were no roadies. The drummer particularly made an impression on him: a hulking

mountain of a man, with dark brown hair almost down to the waist, and a face heavily covered by beard.

The switch was fast and efficient: Ian had not finished the first beer completely when the band started playing.

The guitarist, wielding a bright red axe which was an ESP judging by the headstock, began with a simple but murderously precise tremolo riff, and the bassist/vocalist and the drummer soon joined in a classic “circus” thrash metal beat. In the front of the stage a mosh pit formed almost immediately.

Then the bassist, long thick black hair framing his square face, began to spit out the words.

*A sadistic cave of torture*

*Where no-one hears your screams*

*You have been chosen*

*To satisfy perverted needs!*

It soon became evident that this was Cyberpriest's take on the common song title, “Tormentor.” Ian knew some regarded it a cliché and bad taste for a new thrash band to recycle the much-used song name yet again, but he reserved judgment for each song individually. If a band could produce a worthy “Tormentor,” its future probably held other great things in store as well.

The pit intensified and spread out: some Hessians collided with the table they were sitting at. Fortunately not much beer was spilled. Ian loved the Hades Club for its chaotic, no-holds-barred atmosphere.

As the tale of the tormentor neared its climax, the guitarist let rip with a solo that combined atonal chaos with carefully placed phrases in the harmonic minor scale, and ended with squealing tremolo bar madness. The end result was aggressive, yet foreboding and evil: a perfect thrash metal solo in Ian's opinion.

However, he noticed the downside of the band having just a trio line-up: during the guitar solo the sound thinned out noticeably. Another guitar doubling the bassist's tremolo rhythm pattern underneath would have been preferable.

"Tormentor" finished to a roar of applause. The bassist/vocalist waited for the noise to die down, then spoke.

"Thank you! We are Cyberpriest. And the next one ... is not something we play every night. It's a cover of a Slayer song, Expendable ... Youth." The last words became a low growl.

Ian was not the greatest Slayer fan on Earth, and therefore not totally familiar with their discography – that in itself could be considered a mortal sin – but he remembered the song vaguely. Something in the title made him uneasy, he didn't exactly know what, and he decided to combat that odd sensation by getting a head start on his second beer.

The song started with a steady kick drum beat and a chugging guitar riff. Soon the drum beat changed into a fast double-bass drum pattern, while the guitar stayed constant. The drum barrage was augmented by rapid strobe lights.

As the strobe lights ceased along with the double-bass beat, and the guitar riff changed, the final flash left an odd hallucination in Ian's eyes.

It was his hand, holding an evil serrated knife, like in first person shooter games where only the hand and the weapon of the player character were visible.

A special forces weapon.

He most certainly had not held such weapon in his life, only seen it in movies and games.

He blinked and the image was gone.

“You all right?” Lucas asked.

It was then Ian realized that the odd vision had left his mouth open, face in a stupefied expression. It had to look worrying.

“Yeah. That second riff, it's just pure evil.” He knew it was a lame explanation, but Lucas seemed satisfied.

Thirty seconds later Ian no longer remembered the experience in detail, but only that something odd had happened, which probably was explainable by the beer, strobe lights and excellent thrash metal.

And of course their illegal nocturnal mission.

As the song proceeded, the red-haired guitarist would play both Hanneman's and King's solos, running first to the right side of the stage, then to left. The sound man enhanced the impression by panning the guitar sound accordingly.

As Ian's second beer glass was rapidly approaching empty, and Cyberpriest switched to an original song again, “From Hell to Eternity,” he started to imagine something far more pleasant.

As far as he was concerned, this band came closest to his impossible vision of a perfect Bay Area thrash machine. Therefore, he imagined himself on the stage as the second guitar player.

That thought in itself was worth of a third beer.

The spot he chose on the bar was delightfully devoid of customers: as most had their eyes fixed on the band, it did not take long to get one. Lucas, on the other hand, was satisfied with just two. Ian could guess that he wanted to keep his mind relatively sharp to analyze the music and the behavior of the crowd.

As Ian sat back down, the realist in him knew he still had much to learn, particularly in playing solos.

Lucas stood up from the table as Cyberpriest still played, this time an ultraviolent and totally breakneck-paced song.

"I think I've had enough for the night," he shouted.

"Yeah, it's been a long crazy-ass night."

"Hey, it was interesting, you know, the thing we did."

Consumed by his imagination, Ian almost no longer remembered the revenge on the network intruder. His mind was good, perhaps too good, in rapidly switching the subject.

"Just so that you don't get the wrong idea, it was the first time I did something that stupid. Maybe the last. But it sure felt good."

"It sure did."

With those words Lucas left the club.

Ian was left to concentrate on the few remaining Cyberpriest songs, and his beer, which soon became the fourth, then the fifth, until the club started to spin slowly before his eyes.

As the last call came, and a funeral doom metal CD was blasting from the speakers, he decided it was time to go. The band, Void, was local as well, and he had nothing against funeral doom, but in this case it was an unfittingly depressing way to end the night.

After all, it had been a victorious night in many ways.

In his state, the long stairs up to the street level provided a remarkable challenge, but he made it up at last. Mr. O grunted something incomprehensible as Ian passed him.

Of his journey back to the apartment he had little recollection.

In Ian's drunken sleep, the image of the knife returned. Like before, it was just a flash, but this time more dis-

turbing: he was holding the blade at the neck of a boy who could not be older than sixteen.

He woke up and fell off the bed.

The room still spun around. Something was rising from his stomach and he knew it was time to run to the toilet. On the way he hit his head against a wall corner, but the pain barely registered.

At the deadwhite throne, he vomited for a long time.

Cold sweat ran down his back and forehead, as the convulsions lasted long after he was empty. As always, afterward he felt weak but infinitely relieved. He washed his mouth thoroughly, then contemplated his relationship with alcohol.

Sometimes, he believed, the mind just had to be reset. And the hangover was like a ritual of purification as well: several good ideas had been born of that state.

Like the inspiration to start playing guitar.

Somehow, perhaps because of the image in his sleep, the memory felt troubling now.

He had been maybe twelve or thirteen? What he often told himself and others, was that he had witnessed an awesome metal band, and drank one beer too much. In the agony and shame the next day, he had decided to pick up the axe to emulate his heroes. To be the one that would inspire others to headbang and drink.

But how sure could he be of that memory? Had that actually happened? Or had he just invented it, because it sounded cool?

This paranoid train of thought, of questioning the validity of his memories, sometimes plagued him, almost to the point of possession.

## 5.

The next morning, the sun shone brightly, and hurt Ian's eyes through the crack in the curtains as he rolled out of the bed. There was a constant hammering in his head, but the punishment was comparably light: his body was still young and quick to recover after expelling the toxins. With age it would get worse, he had been told.

He was twenty-three now.

He fixed himself breakfast, then picked up and plugged in his battered guitar, like on many mornings before. He certainly remembered his vision, and hearing Cyberpriest play last night. Now that he had a definite goal to strive for, the guitar was no longer just a tool of self-expression. It would also be an obstacle if he would not master it to the level required to make his dream a reality.

It was funny how things changed.

The tinny, high-pitched distortion produced by his small practice combo amplifier was rather unsatisfying compared to the roaring tones he had heard in Hades Club. Of course he knew from many times before how a metal guitar was supposed to sound, but only now the difference was clearly obvious.

He would need better gear.

Money itself was not a problem – being a junior systems administrator paid rather well compared to his modest way of life. But he would be disgusted if he acquired a new guitar and a new amp, possibly an effects unit, and still sounded just the same. On the other hand, new gear might actually boost and inspire his playing.

He grit his teeth, concentrated to his utmost and attempted to play a blasphemous solo, similar to what he had heard last night.

With surprising precision, a biting stream of sixteenth notes came out, rising to a climax high on the guitar neck.

Ian was truly surprised.

Maybe it was a fluke, never to repeat.

Maybe he was at this instant just in the right state of mind. Or maybe some gate had just been unlocked and there was no going back.

He had verify this and try again.

This time, the notes started high, descending low into a palm-muted flurry. He depressed the tremolo bar heavily, until the licensed Floyd Rose bridge actually came momentarily loose from its posts, dropping the guitar's tuning even further.

He could not have believed he was capable of this.

But he was.

Encouraged, he unplugged the guitar, put on his street clothes and headed out into the stairwell. The hangover was still pounding in his head, but he tuned it out. He was heading into Axes 'n' Amps, the local instrument store, ready to check out some new gear.

Axes 'n' Amps was run by Axel, an old musician and guitarist himself. He usually dressed in black jeans and a

light blue flannel shirt, and conversed casually and equally with the musicians, well aware of his superior knowledge but not necessarily trying to impart it upon them.

The wooden walls were lined with guitars of the most common models and makes, and some more uncommon, like a Dreamweaver guitar that resembled a malevolent spirit full of cancerous growth drifting through the air. Amplifiers, PA equipment and drum kits rounded the selection.

Ian was actually somewhat scared of the place: musicians far above his league tended to hang out here.

He scanned the wall of instruments. There were high-end Jackson guitars with neck through construction and exotic graphic designs, as well as the more traditional Fender and Gibson models.

However, a guitar completely out of the left field caught his eye.

It was an X-shaped B.C. Rich Warlock, a guitar whose evil shape suited equally well a myriad of extreme metal styles. Of course some glam and heavy metal guitarists had used it as well, a fact Ian condemned but was willing to accept.

Actually there were two variations on the wall. A red one and a black one. Ian's initial instincts went for the black guitar.

Black was a color one would never get bored to. It was never actually wrong. However, it reminded him of his old Charvel guitar, broken and fixed several times, and never entirely functional.

For the moment he was unable to decide.

But he did not have to, yet. If the world made any sense, both would play identically.

The black one was closer to him, so he picked it up.

There was a rule in Axes 'n' Amps that if the guitar was sufficiently expensive, one would have to ask for permission to test it. But the B.C. Rich, though evil-looking, was not actually an expensive model. It had bolt-on construction and no binding on the neck.

Fishing a pick from his jeans' pocket, he tested the guitar acoustically. It responded well to his aggressive playing: the sound was bright and strong.

Just then, two figured walked into the shop.

A man with long wavy black hair and a redhead woman. The man just had a long leather coat, while the woman wore a blue denim "thrash vest" over her long-sleeved shirt.

For a while, Ian's mind was unable to make the connection.

Holy shit, was all he thought when he did.

The bassist/vocalist and guitarist from Cyberpriest.

A hundred thoughts raced through his mind. What was the best method to approach them?

Maximum arrogance, he decided. Go for the throat.

Putting the guitar back on its hook on the wall, Ian walked toward the two.

"Hey guys, I saw you last night in the Hades Club. The gig was excellent, but I think your sound needs some more thickness. I believe I might be your second guitarist."

He did not recognize the words coming out of his mouth as his own. But it had to be done this way, no question.

The two looked on in total disbelief.

"Who the fuck is this guy?" the guitarist asked. Her blue eyes flashed not so much in anger, but in a belittling curiosity that was even more maddening than outright hostility.

“Beats me. Haven't seen him before,” the bassist/ vocalist answered. There was a pause that felt to Ian like the moment before apocalypse, before planets collided and worlds shattered.

“Truth be told, he's the first who's good, arrogant or stupid enough to ask,” the man then continued.

The two retreated into a private negotiation with whispered words that Ian could decipher only partially.

“Was going to ... anyway.”

“Ah well, here goes nothing.”

The bassist/vocalist then approached Ian, a glint in his eyes that might have been hostile, or then only a reflection of a permanently hard and uncompromising personality.

“Well then –”

A pause, during which Ian understood him to be looking for the perfect demeaning nickname.

“We could set up an audition. But it's not for wimps and posers.”

The demeaning nickname never came.

Ian was surprised.

“You seem so hot-headed and sure of yourself, that it's better we give you some time to think. Besides Erik is busy with ... other things. Well, Monday 5 PM?”

Ian knew well that on Mondays a heap of boiling excrement was typically poured on him and Gwen: the day might become long. The intrusion would certainly demand more investigations and explanations before everyone would be satisfied. But when it was about fulfilling a vision, something as mundane as systems administration had to come second.

“I'll try to make it,” was all Ian replied.

“Fine,” the bassist/vocalist grunted. “By the way, I'm René. That six-string destroyer over there is Jo. Just so

that you know who is who when we're all giving you a hard time. If you make it in the first place."

"They call me Ian."

René, Jo and Erik. Ian guessed the intimidation was part of the game: it was not necessarily a reflection of the band members' true personalities. But it was a clear sign not to let one's guard down for a second.

René gave Ian the address of the rehearsal space, and then the two were gone. He was left alone in the shop with Axel, who eyed him with some curiosity. Had he heard the conversation?

Ian decided not to care.

However, now there still was the question of the equipment. The guitar, or both a guitar and an amp? Attending the audition with the measly practice amp he had bordered on the ridiculous. It would not necessarily be heard at all over a double-bass drum kit.

However, as far as he could remember, he had approached everything in his life by being true to himself. Or at least as true as he knew to be. The buzzing distortion was an integral part of his playing, one that had been honed over many years. He knew how the strings had to be plucked for each kind of blasphemous over-tone. With a new amplifier, everything would go out of the door.

Guitar only, he therefore decided.

But with that, the choice of color became a matter of life and death. It too would have to be chosen according to what was truer for himself.

In the end it was not too hard. Black represented stagnation. Of playing forever with the battered Charvel, never getting out on an actual stage.

Red was a chance to try out something new. He tried hard to convince himself that it had nothing to do with

the guitarist having a flame-red ESP, and trying to fit in with that. Of what he remembered, the color was not an exact match anyway.

He went back to the wall and picked the red one, carrying it to the counter.

“So that's your choice of weapon?” Axel asked friendly, but with an inquisitive undertone.

“Yeah.”

Ian shelled out the required \$650. He already had an extra-sized hard case, which could accept also an unusually shaped guitar, and the trip back to the apartment was not long. Therefore the instrument could be carried home out in the open. There was the possibility of a robbery in broad daylight – a guitar was not out of the question for a pack of junkies desperate for the next fix, but he decided to take the risk.

With the guitar, the set of tools that came with it, and a certificate of authenticity, he walked out of the store. Two fairly major steps on the way to fulfilling his vision had already been completed. Of course, the third and yet biggest one still remained.

René and Jo had not given Ian any pointers of what to rehearse – it was possible they were not the most methodical themselves. He decided to hit the Internet to see if the band had songs available online, and try to learn them.

There was just a slight problem.

His computer – if it could be called that – gave nothing but a blue screen when turned on. Well, it was time to become a systems administrator for his own needs.

Ian spent most of Saturday in getting the machine to work. It was hard to get online for checking solutions, when the computer would not boot up in the first place.

In the end he went for the brute-force approach. Just format and reinstall, and hope that it would work. On the first attempt, the machine blue-screened again. On the second, he found an obscure BIOS setting that made the machine stay up for long enough so that he got the operating system installed.

It was running in severely degraded performance, but to have it running at all was a triumph.

Not knowing whether it would run for long, Ian immediately searched for Cyberpriest's web page and downloaded all songs he could get his hands on. Then he hooked up his old cassette player and recorded them all on analog tape, just for insurance.

The rest of the day, not concerned with the songs yet, he spent getting to know his new axe. Though at first he feared it was too much a foreign object, the neck too odd-shaped and the body unbalanced, gradually it started to feel like a natural extension of his body.

As the evening turned to night, he opened a symbolic can of beer and lay on the bed, the TV open and showing a violent movie. On screen, the villain and the hero became mirror images of each other as they participated in a dance of death that would inevitably lead to the doom of the other.

When the TV started showing mindless late-night mobile entertainment, Ian drifted off to dreamless sleep.

## 6.

Sunday dawned cold and gray and rainy. Ian knew that if he did not begin now, he would never begin, and the audition would likely end up as an epic failure, the vision lost for who knows how long.

Thus, he fired up the cassette machine – the computer showed just a blue screen again – and began the arduous process of dissecting the songs.

The first epiphany was to realize Cyberpriest tuned down one semi-tone, as did many legendary death metal bands. Ian readjusted his guitar to match. He swore the Floyd Rose bridge was broken at first, until he understood that the screws did not have to be adjusted as heavily as on his old guitar.

For the most part, the riffs were something familiar: fast tremolo picking parts punctuated by simple power chords. It felt like home. However, there was always a tricky break or an extra measure with a different time signature thrown in, or something else to distract the casual-minded listener or musician, and in the end he had to constantly stay on his toes.

He did not even attempt to learn the solos. What he did was to figure out what the bassist – René – was playing underneath, and doubled that with his guitar.

After all, that was what he had originally decided the band's sound was lacking.

Solos would come later if new songs were made, with him as a member in the band, or if the guitarist would be willing to give up some of her solo spots.

Of course that was going too far too fast.

He was not yet a member.

As the day came to a close, he felt confident that he had most of the song structures down. There was the occasional devious atonal riff he had not mastered fully. But he judged that if the band was so anal and stuck up as to deny him membership because of a misplaced semitone, then he was better off without them, and they were not the band of his visions.

Monday morning, the server room. Climbing the stairs up to the third floor where their lair was located had usually not felt as unsatisfying. Ian knew it was bad karma and even childish: it would not do to burn bridges too heavily before he was sure he was in the band.

He steeled himself for the day ahead, and decided to be surprised if the phone would not ring all day, with outcries of lost time and money caused by the Friday's intrusion echoing throughout the building.

Business analysis and consulting was war.

Systems administration was war.

Though all equipment was operating normally, something in the server room still felt fishy as Ian put down his bag and powered on his terminal.

Then it hit him: Gwen had a large picture open on her workstation. Normally she only had several text console windows, showing the status of the network and servers.

As if guessing his thoughts, Gwen turned to face him.  
“You might want to take a look at this.”

Ian moved closer and saw that she had a video player open. She rewound the video back to the beginning and hit “play.” It was a grainy security camera video, black and white.

A man with a coat covering his head ran across the view.

It was him.

Silently, he damned himself in the name of all the lords of the underworld.

While he had been running away from the guard, he had already expected to be caught on camera. That was not a surprise. But to have the video be shown to him by Gwen was mortifying.

It was beyond shameful.

The video was not finished, though. The camera panned away to show another man running in the opposite direction, oblivious that he was on film as well.

Lucas.

Double fail.

Ian felt the warmth on his face – he knew it was red from shame.

“You probably wonder how I got this video in my possession?” Gwen probed.

“Doesn't matter really, but a bit, I guess.” Ian's voice was a stifled croak.

“I had a boring night after I finished checking all the auxiliary servers. So, I decided to do some hacking of my own in return. Wasn't too hard to get access to the surveillance videos of that lot. And this little gem caught my eye.”

Gwen paused for effect.

“Just that you know, it has already been wiped from

their network. However, this is the last time I clean up after you, so I'd recommend to be more careful the next time you go on your nocturnal escapades."

"Thanks."

"One more thing. Nothing to do with you or that video, but curious in any case. I dug myself a bit more into their network and got a master IP address list. Manually updated, very amateurish and old school. Anyway, the intrusion didn't come from any of the actual companies, but from the security firm that watches over the site. They have a few permanent machines at their security center. The attack originated from one of them."

Ian was fascinated.

"What's the name of the firm?"

"Prometheus Security Group. Can't find much info about them, must have been very recently formed."

"Weird name."

"Yeah, fuck them. And besides, the graffiti thing served them exactly right. I mean, I wouldn't have cared enough to do it, but it's fun to watch an idealistic PFY who has energy for such things. In time you'll become the grumpy old BOFH and then you wonder how someone else has the energy to spare. Such is the circle of life."

"If I'm a BOFH at that point any more," Ian had to retort, despite the compliment.

"Well, that's of course your decision to make."

The philosophical moment was interrupted by the phone ringing. Gwen motioned for Ian to take it and he hated every passing second of it.

As the calls would not stop any time soon, he started working himself into a rage methodically. The words became more clipped and his voice took on a harsh,

metallic quality. He was sure that at one point he caught Gwen looking at him rather approvingly, as if he was on an important rite of passage, doing well.

But of course neither would say anything. Such was their code of conduct.

Ian's rage brought him into such state of flow, that he was not aware of the time passing. When he finally snapped out, he noticed it was 4:15 PM. It would be cutting it close, as the rehearsal space was in the downtown, far from his circle of comfort. He would have to stop by his apartment to pick up his guitar and amp, then go by bus.

Theoretically, his work hours had been fulfilled.

Practically, systems administrators and IT people in general were always expected to work uncompensated overtime.

"Hey, I just remembered I have to go," Ian said.

Gwen looked at him in a way that was not exactly angry, but not very pleased either.

"You'll pay for it another time."

With those words, Ian was already out of the server room, heading for the stairwell. The elevator was always on the wrong floor and too slow anyway.

He hoped that the rage would translate into better playing. But most of all he hoped to be on time.

7.

Ian arrived at the place at five past 5 PM, sweating and heart racing from running with the guitar and amp the two hundred meters to the rehearsal space. It was a concrete “bunker,” an underground storage which now served as headquarters for several local bands.

In the low yellow light that highlighted the dirtiness of the walls, he knocked the door bearing the military-style stenciled letters “CYBERPRIEST.” There was a faint putrid smell in the air: he remembered tales of some bands who intentionally practiced with trash and rotten food around to get that extra drive. And of course the legendary black metal vocalist, who would inhale the stench of a dead crow before each gig.

That was perhaps going a bit too far. Or who knew – if that was essential to getting the right atmosphere and maximum performance, who was to say it was not right?

René opened the door, a chilling look in his eyes.

“You're late.”

Ian grunted in response and hauled his equipment in. Inside, the hard eyes of Erik and Jo joined in staring at him. From behind his massive drum kit, Erik seemed even taller and wider than in the club. He was wearing

a dark gray camo sleeveless shirt, which allowed his arm muscles to bulge fearfully.

Look at this bullshit, Ian's mind screamed. This confirmed his thoughts at the store. The intimidation, the grim and frostbitten stares had to be part of some mental game. But he could not help it getting on his nerves.

The alternative was not a pleasant thought.

Because if being five minutes late was the end of the world, or if this was Cyberpriest's permanent, normal mode of behavior, then they truly were stuck-up assholes.

However, he did not say a word, just searched for the closest electric outlet to plug in his amp in. He found one, lifted the tiny amplifier on top of Jo's half-stack, and plugged the 25-watt solid-state noisemaker in.

"You don't mind that? The sound will carry better that way. It's not terribly powerful," he said to Jo, who now no longer looked at him but was checking the tuning of her instrument. She still wore the thrash vest, but the frayed Morbid Angel T-shirt underneath revealed tattoos running the full length of her arms.

No response from any of them.

Fuck them!

Ian took his guitar out of the case and plugged it in. Adjusting the amp's knobs, he turned the distortion up to halfway and the volume and treble to maximum, figuring that was the way to get a sound that would be as loud and clear as possible under these sub-optimal conditions.

When he switched the amp on, an unearthly squeal of high-pitched feedback greeted his ears. He turned the volume knob on his guitar back to zero.

He repositioned himself further away and at an angle to the speaker, then carefully turned the volume

back up. This time, there was just the normal 60-cycle hum, no feedback.

He was ready to thrash 'til death, or at least as far as the circumstances would allow him to.

“So, what are you going to play?” René asked.

“Uh ... Tormentor?”

That was the song Ian knew the best, inside out, and it did not have those obscure chromatic riffs that he was afraid of. However, it started fast and continued fast. He had not warmed up. If his right hand wrist would cramp, then that was it.

“You mean our Tormentor and not Kreator's for instance?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that's fine by me.”

Erik counted to four, and Jo started the precise muted tremolo riff. Ian knew better than to attempt synchronizing to it immediately. He would come in along with the bass and drum hits, just before the circus beat madness began.

It was a terrible buzz-saw screech when Ian joined the riff. But he felt great: the trebly noise was loud enough to be heard over the din and accentuated the accuracy of his playing. Also, his wrist was coping rather well.

At least until halfway through the song.

It was then it started to feel as though on fire. Ian knew it was not the right thing to do, but he just tensed his right arm more, gnawed his teeth, and soldiered on.

During Jo's solo, he was already in severe pain.

But after that the song changed into a slower breakdown, and he could let his hand rest. Then there was just a short flurry of speed, and the song ended.

Indecipherable stares followed. Erik looked angrily

from under his heavy eyebrows, but Ian could not be sure whether he was angry at something or someone, or just in an agitated state after hard playing.

"Was rather OK, but you can't really play a whole gig like that," Jo said at last, referring to the tense playing.

"I know," Ian acknowledged simply.

Erik threw a drumstick to the wall, his anger flashing.

"He knows. Wo-oh, great news. But that doesn't help in any fucking way if he still plays like shit!"

"Erik, calm down for fuck's sake. Didn't you hear it, the playing was all right but the technique wasn't really – sustainable," Jo protested the outburst.

Erik shook his head. Meanwhile, René looked on like a quiet Angel of Death.

"I could have warmed up if I wasn't already late and if I didn't have to lug this piece of shit amp from the bus stop," Ian explained, anger rising in his voice.

"It's always more truthful if the conditions aren't that ideal," René mused. "Because in life shit always happens. But I had nothing against the playing either. Well, some other song? Far Beyond the Grave?"

Ian had to think for a moment. Recording the songs on cassette and practicing from there had made him mostly forget which song was which. He had to remind himself and count whether it was the second or third or fourth song he had downloaded.

Then he remembered.

It was the grinding one. It was not slow, but compared to the previous one, he could rest a bit. Of course the song was still far from easy: there were unexpected breaks and atonal passages which had been hard to figure out with hundred percent certainty.

"Fine by me," he replied.

Erik counted and off they went, starting with a low power chord and a wailing cacophony solo over the drum intro. Then the song picked up speed into a grinding triplet beat and never let down – except for the short breaks – for a whole five minutes.

When the song finished, Erik shook his head just like before.

“I still couldn't hear a shit of that tiny buzz.”

He was wearing heavy-duty yellow ear protectors.

“It went rather well,” René confessed. Jo nodded in agreement with him.

Ian was warming up now: he felt that if he had to play “Tormentor” again, this time he would not cramp.

“But of course, anyone can learn songs off the net, given enough time,” René continued. “I think we should teach you a song, a real old school one, right here and see how you handle it. It's the first song we wrote as Cyberpriest, and I'm not that proud of it any more. But from time to time it still kicks ass when played right. It's called Necrothrashing Desecrator.”

His voice went into a low growl when uttering the song name, as if he was speaking to the crowd.

Jo showed the riffs to Ian one by one, and he tried his best to keep up. At first, even in slow motion, they felt random and chaotic. Then he understood the pattern: all fingers of the left hand were used on adjacent frets of the guitar neck to create rapid chromatic passages. These fast sequences of notes alternated with evil, dissonant chords, produced by letting one string ring open while moving a fixed fingering pattern up and down the neck.

Ian could not fully digest the song structure, but noticed that if he followed the hands of Jo and René, he

would have enough time to switch to the correct riff, therefore cheating in a sense.

The song would start with René yelling the song title and the guitars starting the first sixteenth-note flurry in unison, without warning. When this fact sunk in, Ian was dumbfounded.

How was he supposed to know where to come in?

Cyberpriest truly did not want him to get off too easily.

Sixth sense, he decided in the end. Sixth sense and watching Jo's hands.

"Necrothrashing desecrator!"

Commence mad guitar riff.

The unison start went relatively well. Then Erik's blast beat started, and Ian realized one thing he had not gotten from Jo teaching him the riffs.

The song just became a whole lot faster. In fact, insanely fast. How the fuck am I supposed to keep this up? he thought.

Then he understood.

Even Jo was human after all and thus, cheating. She was missing notes every now and then, so that the sixteenth-note pattern became mostly a triplet pattern instead.

Once Ian followed this example, playing the song became manageable.

*Strike from the depths where the Satanas dwell*

*Strike against Heaven, make it into Hell*

*Hooves clatter and bring the weak fear*

*As total devastation of this world draws near*

*Necrothrashing desecrator!*

René was singing with a manic fury that was admirable, especially if he was not really proud of the song any more.

After the chorus, the song switched into the dissonant chords, then to Jo's solo as the fast riffs continued. In true old school fashion, the song had a solo after each verse. Jo indicated for Ian to play the next one.

As his turn came, he started high up from the neck for immediate shock value. The amp was so overloaded that what came out was mostly a high-pitched, indistinct noise. The solo mostly imitated the style of Slayer guitarists, alternating random chromatic and pentatonic sequences at a speed where all phrasing concerns or even synchronization between the right and left hand became mostly irrelevant.

Afterward Ian could not remember much of the solo, could not judge whether it had been good at all: he just continued to play the rhythm as the final chorus came, and banged his head.

The song ended with a guitar-wailing and drum-thrashing cacophony. René let loose a series of evil grunts and laughs, each successively rising in pitch.

When the madness was all over, Erik threw the ear protectors to the floor and wiped sweat off his forehead. Even he had exerted himself.

"You're in," René said after a short meaningful silence.

Behind him, Ian could see Erik frowning heavily.

"On one condition," Jo continued in a serious tone. "You must get a new amp. That one is truly beneath you. Can you afford that?"

Though the message was stern, and implied that for the next month he would be eating in a rather Spartan way, Ian was much flattered by the wording. It meant that she valued his playing good enough to deserve a better amplifier. That was something.

Of course, there was also the fact that the words

were most probably a pun on the liner notes of Immortal's legendary "Battles in the North" CD, where the band declared all of their imitators to be truly beneath them.

That meant Jo at least had a sense of humor.

"I should be able to," Ian replied.

"It's something better sorted out immediately," René said. "In theory you can still make it to the store before it closes."

"I have other things to do," Erik stated defiantly.

"You should try to bond with our new guitarist," René scolded him. "But anyway, I mostly meant Jo because she knows that shit. Dismissed."

Ian guessed the last word had to be some kind of inside joke, a way for René to reassert his position as the band's dictator, benevolent or not. He probably did not outright imagine himself as a military officer. Or who knew?

So, two of them had a sense of humor. Erik was still unconfirmed.

"We should be going," Jo stated flatly as she turned to leave the rehearsal room.

Ian followed.

Only now the truth fully hit him.

The third step had been completed: he was in the band that fulfilled his vision.

But rather than just feeling outright elation, his mind was somewhat split on the subject. A part of him still refused to believe he was in, another part told him to be very cautious and constantly on his toes, as band politics could be slimy and volatile matters.

That left the final part that wanted to scream at the top of his lungs and jump through the ceiling.

## 8.

They drove to Axes 'n' Amps in a green jeep that Erik owned, but rarely used for personal purposes. Therefore it was perfect for random band matters. Jo drove, and Ian took this as an opportunity to study her in more detail.

She was roughly as tall as him, had a somewhat athletic figure with wide shoulders and a rectangular face that was not as extreme as René's square head, but rectangular nevertheless. From her features Ian believed her to be slightly older than him – or then perhaps she had just been thrashing and drinking more extremely. The copper-red, mostly straight hair was not very long by Hessian standards, only slightly over the shoulders, but could still cover her face effectively during a blasphemous solo.

Personality-wise, she appeared roughly similar to his workmate Gwen. Probably not as misanthropic. It was somewhat rare even in 2012 to have a female guitarist in a thrash metal band, and Ian admitted to having a slight prejudice.

However, from the very short time he had known her, he thought they might get along.

He knew true horror stories of two-guitarist bands

where the axeslingers were constantly fighting and bickering over trivial things. Sometimes, the ego of a guitarist only allowed one of them in the same room. Sometimes it did not allow for the rest of the band at all.

Though he could not be certain, those nightmare scenarios seemed unlikely here. At least so far. The problems would likely come from other angles.

"You took the ... introduction rather well," Jo broke the silence.

"You mean the grim stares and shit?"

"Yeah. It's better to start that way and then go easier than the other way round."

Ian was pleased that Jo acknowledged the band's behavior to some degree. However, yet was not time to reverse the decision of being on his toes whenever he was in the same room with them. Or in the same vehicle.

With five minutes to spare, they stopped with screeching tires in front of Axes 'n' Amps. Ian knew Axel was mostly lenient toward prospective buyers, and let them stay to test the gear even after closing time.

As Jo went in to chat with Axel and do a preliminary check on the available equipment, Ian ran to a nearby ATM to make a rather heavy withdrawal.

"Well, what kind of amp you recommend?" Ian asked, out of breath.

"It's really up to you. Everything here that's all-tube and over 50 watt should be enough," Jo said.

Ian quickly went through the selection, unable to make much of a rational choice. There were some exotic boutique amps whose price tag was far beyond him, but he doubted they would bring anything extra to the rather heavy-handed noise he would be dishing out.

By chance he singled out an Engl 50-watt, 4-channel tube head that looked mean enough, and would not totally rob him. Under Axel's supervision, he took the remaining Warlock guitar, the black one, and plugged it into the head. Axel dialed in roughly two-thirds of gain on the lead channel and set master volume on "one" to not blast their eardrums outright.

"It should fit thrash, among other things," he said. "And then there's the lead boost channel, so you don't necessarily need an overdrive pedal."

As Ian struck the first power chord, he was instantly sold. Case closed. The aggressive snarl was light years ahead of the trebly buzz of his practice amp. There was no need to keep looking.

He and Axel negotiated the final deal with relative efficiency – he would take a used Marshall 4x12 cabinet along with head.

\$1300 poorer, Ian was now the proud owner of gear good enough to seriously thrash the stages. He and Jo lifted the gear to the back of the jeep, and headed out to the rehearsal space.

The rehearsal room was empty and dark as they returned.

"Sometimes René stays here round day and night, working on new songs and world domination master plans," Jo told.

"He's dedicated, then."

"Very."

They placed Ian's new head and cabinet into a semi-circle with the other amplifiers.

"Don't forget that you have a lot of work now," Jo reminded. "You'll have to learn all our songs for real. Then we start making new ones."

“Yeah.”

Ian unplugged the trusty practice amp and lifted it off Jo's half-stack. Though it had served him without fail, it would never return to this room again. It would still be useful at his apartment, but he guessed he could tolerate its sound much less from here on.

“It sucks to lug that thing and a guitar onto a bus. I could give you a lift.”

“Thanks.”

They packed the little amp and Ian's guitar to the jeep. Jo drove through the evening traffic with far more speed and risk-taking than was strictly speaking necessary. First proper rehearsal would be at 6 PM on Wednesday: that left slightly more time for unexpected BOFH-work, of which Ian was positively surprised.

Before they separated, Jo gave him an user name and password for an “above top secret” section on Cyberpriest's web page. That section contained mp3's of all their songs, and some hastily scribbled notes to aid him in learning.

Damn, Ian thought.

That meant he had to fix his computer again.

He was not pleased.

Ian worked himself into a rage while learning the remaining songs and returning to those he had already played. When he investigated the notes, he realized there were several small details he had initially missed.

Having to learn so much in so little time – there were fifteen songs total – made his anger grow. He was not sure where the anger was directed at: toward himself, the band, or the songs. And he was not sure if learning them all to the next rehearsal was actually expected of him: he had forgotten to ask.

But it never hurt to be over-prepared.

There was also the Slayer cover – he remembered something odd had happened when he had heard it in the club. But now, as he learned the riffs one by one, they had no especial effect on him. The song title was still somehow repulsive.

As Tuesday night turned to Wednesday morning, and his eyes started to feel heavy, he had to admit defeat of not having each and every song down to perfection yet. But he was close.

The atmosphere was different as Ian entered the rehearsal space on Wednesday. The grim stares were gone. Of course no-one was exactly a paragon of happiness or joviality either, but that was not to be expected in an extreme metal band. That would have felt false, actually.

“Hi guys,” he said, while lifting the guitar case inside.

They all nodded or grunted something.

That was a start.

René looked up from his bass fretboard and cleared his throat. He was apparently going to say something important.

“Now that we're a four-piece band, we shouldn't allow ourselves to be limited any more. Of course we have to make the old songs work to their full potential, and make sure Ian learns them inside-out, but we should broaden our scope and start writing new shit as soon as possible. I wouldn't necessarily even call it thrash metal any more, but rather war metal.”

A silence followed. Neither Jo or Erik challenged René's vision outright.

Ian was a bit puzzled. Several bands had used the term with equally vague meanings. But he hoped René

knew what he was talking about, and that his version of “war metal” would kick serious ass.

Ian switched his amp to standby, took his axe, and started warming up his right hand, as he knew break-neck speeds would soon be expected of it.

“But I guess no-one's exactly inspired to write a new song right here, right now. So let's go through some old shit instead,” René continued. “Now that Ian's got that slight ... gear upgrade, it probably sounds a hell of a lot better. Tormentor?”

He winked at Ian, in theory good-spiritedly, but with a sadistic undertone. He wanted to see how Ian would handle the torment today.

The difference was clear already as Ian struck the first power chords, but even more so when the rapid-speed thrashing riff started. Each note came through loud and clear, which also made it possible to keep his playing more relaxed.

He made it to the end without any major difficulty.

“Unlike last time, now I could hear some shit,” Erik commented, nodding with satisfaction. “Sounded good.”

Although Ian had waited for positive response from Erik, now that it actually came it irritated him. Erik's words took him right back in time to the audition. Ian fumed silently, knowing well that his mental response was mostly irrational.

They played more songs until roughly two hours had passed. At that point, no-one of them had the edge and peak energy level required to make the songs justice. René's throat was getting hoarse as well. After all, it was an extremely physical form of music. So, they called it a day.

“I say this session is worth drinking to,” René said as he put down his bass guitar. “I believed for a long time

that a second guitarist was not necessary, and more adventurous music would actually result from having just Jo around. But I certainly think we sound much more powerful now.”

Erik grunted in agreement.

Ian looked closely at Jo, for René's choice of words made him remember the archetypal two-guitarist horror stories again. He wanted to see if he had misjudged earlier, if there indeed was some jealousy.

But, he could not see her face betraying anything of that sort. That in turn left the possibility that she just hid it well, in which case she would be a much more complex and difficult personality than appeared at first sight.

From Ian's suggestion they sat with beers at hand in The Black Shark. The beer was making each of them talk more openly – Ian hoped to hear revealing pieces of information that would get him up to speed with the band's history.

“I used to be horrible,” René said. “I was so anal, so scared of anyone twisting or stealing my song ideas. I was like the mother of all dictator band leaders. I guess I still am to a degree, but I'm learning.”

“I remember the first time when I suggested a small change in a riff. I believe it was for Necrothrashing Destructor. The scream that came from René was like a jet engine going off. It was unbelievable,” Jo related.

“I used to dictate solos too, note for note. Some of the shit I wrote was truly embarrassing, very formulaic and very boring.”

Solos were a matter that still somewhat alarmed Ian. Though he he had improved, he was not yet up to the level he – or the band – wanted. Jo had mentioned that

she could give him a few lessons, but he did not know what to expect of them.

In his opinion, solos were something highly personal and the skill and theory of playing them still elusive. The few moments of enlightenment that had led to major improvements, one of them very recent, had practically been random and not at all related to practicing more or to practicing differently.

“Jo, on the other hand, I don't know what to say about her. She just holds her own and thrashes like a maniac,” René went on.

“Yeah, sometimes so much that I forget what song I'm playing,” she replied in a way that suggested not being comfortable with the compliment, no matter how subtle it was.

A moment of silence followed. Ian did not want to talk about himself, and naturally there was no-one who could have talked about him.

“Well, that leaves Erik, who still hasn't spoken much. I believe he needs much heavier medication before he opens his mouth. But anyway, Erik's the one of us that wants to be a true Nietzschean over-man,” Jo said while poking Erik with her shoulder.

“You shouldn't speak of things you don't understand,” Erik said, beer foam in his beard. “A fool would easily think it's just about working out huge muscles and feeling superior to everyone. Well, I guess it's also that, but what it really is – it's being able to let go, to not need faith or certainty in anything existing, and to create your own morals.”

That seemed like a worthwhile goal, Ian thought. However, did creating your own values and morals mean that you could for example decide that killing someone else was perfectly OK? He was not fully cer-

tain of the philosophical implications, and did not want to ask for the risk of making a fool out of himself.

Therefore he just drank his beer instead.

As did Erik: in fact, he was already onto his second.

Jo had already finished her second and was clearly in an unusually jolly mood.

“Of course he's not only a philosopher,” she continued. “But also a genuine survivalist. He once told us he has enough weapons and ammo stashed at his forest cabin to survive through World War Three. That's where he disappears if he gets bored or angry during a rehearsal, and while René fumes like crazy, we can't be sure when he will return, if he will. And we can't go after him: he hasn't told where the cabin is, and probably never will.”

“Survivalism is not a matter of laughs. I naturally hope that I never have to use that stuff. But if and when I have to, you'll be sorry for not being prepared yourself when you had the chance.”

It was then Lucas wandered into the Shark as well. He looked surprised: it had to be from seeing Ian in new company.

“Hey, good to see your face around. Well, do you remember Cyberpriest?” Ian asked him.

Lucas nodded cautiously.

“Here I am now, as their second guitarist.”

Lucas stayed reasonably calm. “Years of hard work pay off at last?”

“Maybe, or then it just took me this long to learn how to be arrogant enough.”

“Is it the band of your visions, then?” Lucas asked.

Though Ian's vision had been intensely private, at some point, in some deep state of intoxication he had apparently shared it.

“Yes. It doesn't get truer than this. Though we're not really going to be thrash metal any more. But war metal instead.”

“Hey, that's classified yet,” Jo interrupted with a frown that was open to interpretation: it could be humorous, or then deathly serious.

“No, it's not really,” René said in a bellowing voice most of the patrons in immediate vicinity had to hear.

“I don't mind if the word spreads. That just creates more pressure for us to actually produce the war metal of our dreams, something that's above and beyond anything imagined. I mean, I don't want just a god damn mosh pit, I want a fucking battlefield!”

René was obviously crazy, drunk, or both. But Ian understood that if he was that passionate about his own vision, then greatness would possibly come out of it. Or a catastrophic epic failure. But either way was infinitely better than safe, dull mediocrity.

Ian knew another possibly still classified piece of information, one that he wanted to share.

Lucas, however, reacted first.

“Well, I see you've got some interesting things going on here,” he said. “But you don't necessarily need me.”

“No, you're not going anywhere,” Ian protested. “Not at least until I tell you that on Tuesday next week, Cyberpriest is returning to Hades Club and you'd do well to come watch us play.”

Lucas was taken by surprise, again.

“Never could've guessed it would be that soon. I mean, don't you have to rearrange the songs for two guitars? Sounds crazy. But yeah, I will be coming, I swear that on my left testicle.”

“Wise decision. Better be there then, or we come at night with rusty scissors!” Ian exclaimed.

Lucas shook his head and a slight grin spread on his face. Then he was gone.

The rest of the week went by in a blur. There was another rehearsal, the second-to-last before the show. Ian was by now completely familiar with all existing Cyberpriest songs. To the rest it certainly was an unusual pace of learning, but they were not complaining. He could start adding his own nuances, chord inversions and harmonies to the songs, which further deepened the band's sound.

René had expressed some initial disapproval, but soon accepted Ian's creativity, and even went as far as to say that Ian already possessed the concept of war metal and was on the same wavelength as far as the development of their music was concerned.

The odd thing was that René himself had not given any concrete musical examples so far: Ian had just been going by his instinct.

On an otherwise quiet Sunday afternoon, Jo made good of her promise and tried to transfer some of her knowledge in metal soloing to Ian. There they were in the Cyberpriest concrete bunker, both half-stacks turned to a bare minimum master volume, most of the tube power wasted.

She succeeded to some degree, Ian thought, for as their session was nearing its end, he felt like he already had a better command of the whole fretboard, a better grasp of how to build a kind of a "story" within the framework of a solo.

However, it surprised him how much more diverse musician she actually was: in Cyberpriest – at least in the current songs – she only ever got to show her most

aggressive side. Though she seemed almost ashamed when he caught her playing something slower and more melodic.

“It's nothing,” she said, then continued with some mad, breakneck speed blasphemous playing again.

Now Ian could finally be certain she did not harbor any hidden resentment for him joining the band and stealing away the sole guitarist spotlight. But he had also been right that there had to be more to her than the straightforward hard-thrashing, hard-drinking guitar action girl she appeared to be. That short melodic passage and the look on her face that went with it had confirmed it.

In a way it was funny: she was the band member he had spent most time with so far and was most comfortable with – Erik was still scary, and René felt like a boss or something – yet he knew least of her.

## 10.

On the eve of their show, Hades Club was not as packed as last time, but this time it was full of dedicated metal-heads, eager to pit hard but not necessarily to put up actual fights. Cyberpriest would hit the stage after Beautiful Flowers, a brutal newschool thrash band, and Intestinal Parasite Disgorge, a mixture of medical death metal and grindcore with a severe self-destructive attitude.

Ian felt a pleasant, yet frightening buzz at the pit of his stomach. To make sure he was in the proper condition to play, he had kept his consumption to one beer. This was the night of his introduction to the Hessian public: though during a show unexpected things could always be wrong, the expected should be kept firmly in control. Therefore there were new strings on his guitar, properly stretched to remain in tune.

He knew he should have had a backup guitar, but had not wanted to take the Charvel with him. Who knew if it would have brought bad luck.

The backstage room was a dirty mess, full of obscene graffiti. An indescribable smell lingered in the air, and he did not want to speculate on its specific ingredients.

Each of the band members was preparing in his or

her own way: Erik doing air-drumming, Jo running complex scales up and down the guitar neck, and René humming along, doing the occasional unexpected death grunt that would make Ian's neck hair stand in attention.

The noisy performance of the bands before them carried to the backstage. Extreme speed and aggression ruled the night, and they did not want to be any worse.

The thrashing set list of Beautiful Flowers reached its cacophonous climax: recorded music continued as the band started to tear down its gear.

"Frightened?" René asked Ian.

"No way," he said, the answer roughly fifty percent truthful.

In lack of better things to do, Ian too picked up his guitar, and started a warm-up routine. It was not terribly methodical, but better than nothing.

Before long, Intestinal Parasite Disgorge started their barrage of heavily down-tuned noise and infernal grunting. Apparently feeling somewhat bored already, René and Jo both opened another bottle of beer, while Erik remained alert and sober.

Ian went over to him.

Throughout the rehearsals, though there had been a single compliment, Erik had remained somewhat hostile or at best indifferent toward him. Ian was sure nothing he would say could possibly change that, at least overnight. But he wanted to try connecting with him in some way.

"You guitarists have it easy, you can drink a lot more," Erik said.

"Yeah, playing drums must be a lot more physical. You can't do it if you're drunk out of your mind," Ian replied.

“Some actually can. Maybe I could as well. But I'm not risking it, at least tonight.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, it's the first show we do as a four-piece. I'd rather want it to go well.”

“Fully agreed on that.”

Ian settled down in between the band members, still holding his guitar.

No more words were spoken as the grindcore set continued on the stage. Ian knew that some bands had all sorts of elaborate pre-show bonding rituals, and was glad Cyberpriest did not have them.

As far as he was concerned, it was sissy bullshit.

At last, the final down-tuned chord faded out to nothingness, and Intestinal Parasite Disgorge started removing their equipment. There was a friendly agreement between the bands that they would only replace the snare drum, cymbals and guitar amplifier heads – this greatly simplified the logistics.

Soon, that band was finished and entered the warmth of the backstage.

That meant it was Cyberpriest's turn to go.

Ian felt a surge of adrenaline. He picked his amplifier head by its handle, while his other hand gripped the guitar.

They all rose up and navigated the short maze from the backstage to the stage. Jo carried her amp head and guitar too, while Erik had his hands full with the snare and the cymbals stashed inside a couple of bags. René had it easiest with just the bass guitar to carry – the bass amplifier was from Beautiful Flowers, and it was OK that all bands tonight used it.

The stage was yet dark as they entered. Without wasting much time, everyone began to set up one's per-

sonal equipment.

Ian had some trouble finding the proper places to insert the both ends of the speaker cable. However, once that was sorted out, he powered the head to standby just like at the rehearsal space.

He adjusted the settings of the amp's lead and lead boost channels to how he thought they should be, as well as checking out the tuning one last time with a battery-powered tuning meter. Then he handed the tuner to Jo. Neither of them used a multi-effects unit: they just relied on the channel switching functionality of their amps.

Theoretically he was now ready to thrash.

Erik took a longer time to install his snare and cymbals, and to adjust the drum kit to his liking. René had been ready all along, getting impatient and agitated.

But before long, they all were ready. The amps were on, with just the guitar volumes turned to zero. Harald himself climbed on stage to announce the band.

“From the sewers, from the concrete bunkers of the underworld comes the thrash juggernaut, the death-dealing hammer of war. Cyberpriest!”

The crowd roared.

Harald walked off, the lights switched on, and Jo started the “Tormentor” riff. They had decided to play it somewhat safe and start with the already established crowd favorite.

The rest joined in, the circus beat ricocheting off the walls and tearing the place apart. Already a few seconds from the start Ian could see a mad, sweaty mosh pit breaking loose in the crowd.

His wrist was handling the speed fine. It was already becoming routine, not keeping him constantly on the edge anymore.

Then it hit, the thought that had not yet entered his mind. Was Lucas in the club?

Ian tried to scan the sides where the tables stood, as it was improbable Lucas would venture close to the front, but was not able to concentrate in the thrashing madness.

The verses went by at lightning speed, followed by Jo's solo. The song slowed down to the breakdown: as the stage lighting became more constant, Ian scanned the crowd again.

This time he saw him. Standing there in the middle with his hands in a bunch, in a classic rock police pose, was Lucas.

He had made it here.

Ian could skip cutting off his best friend's left testicle.

The song ended and René addressed the crowd.

"Thank you! As you may see, we have a new guitarist, here on my right side. Say hello to Ian!"

The crowd roared again in response.

Next, they kicked off with "Hate Beyond Hate," a mid-tempo number. As if on a hidden cue, Jo went over to the stage center, and Ian joined her. They headbanged in unison along to the beat. René began to spit out the hateful words like a man possessed.

Though this song was broodingly evil for most of its length, it contained a complex four-part solo section where the tempo went up, and the guitars would trade solos.

Ian started with whammy bar madness, climbing from the low end of the fretboard up to the high octave. Jo continued with a skilled sextuplet run which descended slowly and determinedly in the middle octave range, each note sharply picked.

Ian followed and made an epic mistake: his right hand tremolo-picked another string compared to what his left hand was fretting. However, he was sure no-one in the crowd realized, and salvaged the situation by continuing with a chaotic artificial harmonic pattern.

Jo's second solo was the final one: it was a Deicide-like run from the depths of Hell, concluding with tremolo bar insanity of her own.

The four on stage, all of them were possessed. A thrash metal unit playing as one, striving to transfer this possession to the crowd. The crowd did not, however, need much encouraging: despite the moderate tempo a circle pit had formed.

But everything had to end, and so did this song. The crowd shouted like there was no tomorrow. However, the end of the set was yet distant. René announced the next song.

“Yeah, fuckers! We pick up the speed with the next one. This one is Far Beyond the Grave!”

Erik counted the song in. The song started with the low power chord.

However, the difference was that this time Jo was playing the chord, while Ian supplied the blasphemous chaotic solo.

Then the song picked up speed and they were all locked in the triplet beat. Soon René was shouting out the words in rage, telling the twisted tale of a soul trapped between two worlds.

Ian happened to look into the crowd again. A pit was still going on, Lucas was still standing in roughly the same position, and –

Two figures in black descended the stairs to the stage level. They seemed somehow out of place, somewhat ominous. The song thrashed along for another

verse and another chorus.

Seconds after Jo had started her solo, there was a flash of light in the crowd. Ian thought he had heard a bang over the stage noise.

The crowd parted near the light source. The solo still continued.

Then René seemed to notice something was not right. He stopped playing. Erik followed, with Ian's power chord and Jo's wailing high note hanging in the air.

The crowd finished with its splitting maneuver.

Lying in the middle of empty space, in a small but yet spreading pool of blood, was a body.

The show was clearly over now. Ian could not believe it, for by design metalheads were not violent. Had it been some drug related killing? It was very much possible the two figures in black had been connected, or even been responsible.

As the music had ended, screams of horror became audible. Harald and Ox appeared, keeping the crowd at bay. Harald had a baseball bat with him as insurance. Cops had no doubt been called and would soon appear.

Ian propped his guitar next to his amp and stepped down from the stage. Some morbid desire within made it imperative for him to see the corpse.

Also, he could not see Lucas. Where had he been when the killing had occurred?

There were no crowd members between Ian and the body: he closed the distance quickly. The lighting had frozen to a full bright white, which the blood reflected in a deeply disgusting way.

When he finally could take a good look, his heart almost stopped. The body that was lying in the pool of blood was Lucas.

Suddenly, life had a new meaning. Or actually, a lack of meaning. Joining the band and playing supreme thrash metal with them in the rehearsals, and on the stage for almost three whole songs, meant nothing to him now.

His best friend was dead.

Dead, never to return.

Ian sank to the floor and wept. He was alone, as alone as one could be.

René and Jo and appeared, sensing that the victim had been close to him. Erik followed close behind: he was just angry that he show had been cut. But Ian shrugged them all off. He did not want their company.

Then the homicide detectives were there as well. They were interviewing the crowd members at random. Ian got a moment with them too, and told of the two men in black he had seen descending the stairs. He had a deep belief that it would not do much good. Of course, now the men were nowhere to be found.

Ian went straight to the bar and ordered a double whiskey. He downed it in a record time and planned to continue with limitless a barrage of beers.

Before he could get properly started, René approached him once more, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“That was terrible. Was it –” he probed, much too carefully, so that it only disgusted Ian.

“He was my damn best fucking friend.”

“I'm sorry, Ian. I truly am.”

Ian just stared into his beer, with a firm decision that he would speak no more during this night. Having digested the fact that even he, the mighty band leader and dictator, could do nothing to help, René walked away.

That was how Ian wanted it.

Alone in his sorrow.

Submerged in the alcohol.

Free of distractions, he returned to his drink. Soon, courtesy of beer and shots of hard liquor interleaved, he floated on a stream of darkness, going deeper into the abyss of his mind.

In that abyss, a kaleidoscope of images returned. The images were for the most part unclear, but they talked to him. He saw the vision of the knife return once more. There he was again, holding the blade against the neck of the young boy.

It was only now he realized who that boy was. It was Lucas, sweat trickling from the pores of his face, pleading for Ian not to kill him.

What the fuck was this?

Here and now, in the depths of his drunkenness, Ian questioned his memories, his whole existence. How in hell was it possible that he was having visions of almost knifing his best friend to death, yet that friend had been killed by gunfire this very night?

He relived all of his paranoid thoughts, but now they were amplified a thousandfold. Somehow the whole world had conspired against him: had confused his mind with weird and frightening memories, had let him taste success and hubris first and then, as a balancing act when he had least expected, had struck in the most cruel way imaginable.

Right at this moment the meaning of life had escaped from him.

To find it again, he would need to search very hard.

Just as he was on the very edge, of drinking that one more beer or shot that would lead to total catatonia and then to who knows what, he decided to take a hundred and eighty degrees turn.

He would search for the will to live.

Search until he found it or died trying.

If not for anything else, then to relive this moment, to relive his pain a countless times again. And if he had enough strength, to search for those responsible for the death of Lucas, and to make them pay intensely.

Ian's last conscious thought was a hope for his guitar to somehow end up back at the rehearsal space, or at his home. After that, the film was cut – he could remember nothing more.

## 11.

The hangover was something unimaginable, something not of this world. The last pounding of the hammer was nothing compared to this. Somehow Ian managed to check the watch that was still attached to his wrist: it read 5 AM. He tasted something funny in his mouth and smelled something funny as well.

Then he realized he was in his apartment, on his bed with all his clothes on, and had vomited hard all over the bed.

An alarming thought hit his mind. If it was 5 AM now and the hangover was already completely intolerable, how bad would it feel when he would get up for the day?

That was a thought best left unexplored. It would hit him when it hit him, but before that there was nothing he could do to help it.

However, there was something he could do to make his immediate future just a little more tolerable.

He already felt something rising to his throat, something thick and bitter. The second wave of vomit.

He tried to make it to the WC, but as he rolled out of the bed, he found his legs would not just carry. The distance was far too great.

The second wave would have to go on his floor.

The convulsion started, the viscous matter already traveling upward into his mouth, and then out of it.

There was nothing he could do.

Abandoning all pretense of self-control, and trying to control the accident, he just let go. The vomit traveled in a great arc through the air before splashing on the floor, on top of his practice amp and TV, on his carpet and everything. He did not care much of it. The relief was just too great.

After the convulsions were finally over, he fell back asleep on the floor.

It was much later when Ian woke up again. His skull felt like it would split open any second – any movement, no matter how tiny, brought unbearable pain. However, little by little he forced himself to rise up from the floor. His heart hammered like crazy: he seriously considered the possibility of a heart attack.

The time was 2 PM.

A distant, nagging thought entered his mind. It required some time to take a coherent form.

He should have been at work, enduring the lusers and tending to the hardware. The thought was so ridiculous that it made him laugh, silently but bitterly.

It hurt to laugh, not only because of the headache, but because his throat felt like sandpaper. All the alcohol had left him quite dehydrated.

Though it felt unpleasant somehow, he forced himself to drink several glasses of water.

Then he surveyed the apartment.

When he did, he wished he was dead.

Vomit covered practically everything. Throwing out the sheets and the mattress was no big deal – he could

not bring himself to wash them – but for example the practice amp was much more of a dilemma. Vomit had embedded itself in the grille cloth covering the speaker: cleaning it would require a heroic effort.

However, giving up and discarding it would not be a pleasant choice either. He owed the trusty little amplifier better than that.

Now he also remembered why the room had gotten in this condition in the first place. A terrible sorrow and emptiness reigned in the back of his head, but for now, it was kept at bay simply because the immediate situation at hand was so disgusting.

Next, he managed to check his cell phone: there were several calls and text messages from work.

He had no recollection of the phone ringing.

Then he understood: at some point during the night he had already anticipated what would come, and had put the thing on silent.

Fuck them – he would not call back. He trusted Gwen to have understood the situation and have explained it to the others: if the PFY was unreachable, then he was, period.

He noticed his guitar case was not here: the rest of the band had likely brought it back to the rehearsal space. In fact, attempting to bring it here could only have resulted in a total failure: most likely he would not have reacted to the doorbell at all.

Well, it would wait for him patiently there in the concrete bunker. The thought of having to see his bandmates again felt almost as pleasant as having to see the server room again. He had gotten his dream, and it had turned into a nightmare: he did not look forward to playing thrash metal in Cyberpriest, or to playing anything, at least in the immediately foreseeable future.

But what did he look forward to, them?

He was not sure.

Then a thought crystallized within his brain. It was the same thought he already had at the bar, after coming to a halt in the process of drowning not only his sorrows, but also himself in the alcohol.

The thought was simple and beautiful.

To search for those responsible for killing Lucas. To not stop, until he had found the guilty ones by whatever means necessary.

He almost shivered, for this thought was accompanied by a methodical calm and coldness in his mind. He remembered never feeling like this before –

No. That was not true.

Actually, a part of him felt like entering a perfectly natural state of mind. A state in which he functioned the best. Like coming home.

But if it felt like coming home, what did that make of him? Once more, he remembered the blade-related hallucinations, and realized that somehow they and his current state of mind were connected.

Normally, it would have been a frightening thought.

But he was already over the edge, in foreign territory, and things could probably not get much worse from some more soul-searching.

Therefore, he allowed himself to probe the depths of his mind. The vomit and cleaning the apartment did not concern him immediately any more: he would have to go through this mental puzzle first, and see what it would add up to.

The first conclusion was that something in his past just did not add up.

He had never had that sort of frightening flashbacks or hallucinations before, as triggered by Cyberpriest's

Slayer cover, but was familiar, even from years back, with the paranoid feeling of not being sure whether his memories were real. However, in the past it had always felt insignificant, and had passed quickly.

He had at times discussed with Lucas – jokingly – the possibility of false memories, and whether it would be easy or hard to recognize them. Back then, they had reached the cynical and not very profound conclusion that whatever made you feel happy and content was OK: it did not matter if it was actually real.

He remembered that his childhood had been happy – the time before drinking, girls and playing guitar had entered the picture. Those were not bad, evil things – quite the opposite, but somehow, at some point, he had gone over the edge and a fight over something trivial had gone bad. His victim had been badly hurt, and he had been sent to juvenile penitentiary. That was maybe in the age of fifteen.

After his release he never contacted his parents again, and drifted for some years. Meeting Lucas and getting into the systems administration job had brought some stability into his life.

The flashback with the knife could theoretically have been from the juvenile prison. But he was fairly certain that Lucas could not have been an inmate there. They had met only later, and Lucas had been an intellectual, reserved person, no doubt similar also in his youth, so why would he have been incarcerated?

Yet, it was his young face and throat the blade had been pressing against.

Of course, here was an impossible failure of logic: if he had met Lucas for the first time only later, how could he have known what his young face looked like?

Something definitely did not add up.

There were several options.

Maybe he was insane. That could explain everything, but would not a truly insane person deny his condition?

Another was that he had indeed met Lucas in the juvenile prison, but had forgotten or shut that memory away, and when they had met again neither would want to remember the bad past. It was within possibility that they had been knife-fighting while “Expendable Youth” blasted in the background, and that would explain why the song had felt vaguely uncomfortable and triggered the flashbacks.

However, that did not explain one thing: the feeling of cold, methodical calmness he felt now. As an inmate one lived from day to day by wits and instinct, but this was different.

Also, the industrial block infiltration with Lucas had been similar: being in far greater control of a dangerous situation than he should have been.

Ian's mind raced in a circle for a while, chasing its tail. There were no satisfactory answers. Until one question penetrated through like a lightning bolt from the sky.

Had he been trained to function like this?

To be cold and calm, to move efficiently without being detected..

Had he been trained to be a –  
Killer?

But where? And how? And by whom?

It made little sense. Though Ian admitted to having paranoid feelings, he did not want to outright give in to conspiracy theories. He remembered reading stories of mind-programmed killers from the Internet. Usually, these tales were connected to Satanic ritual abuse and the Illuminati, which did not give them much credibil-

ity. But somehow, somewhere in his past had to be the key to unlocking everything. If he could reach and turn that key, then all these things would become clear.

He realized that his task had just become twice as hard.

Not only he had to bring justice to Lucas – the police certainly could not be expected to handle that – but he would also have to somehow find the truth of his past and his memories. If his flashbacks were to be relied upon, that forgotten past would also include Lucas.

Otherwise, if he was not already, he would surely go insane at some point.

The soul-searching was finished for now.

During that, Ian had mentally shut off the hangover – but now that the conclusion had been reached, the pain and hammering returned in full force.

But the feeling of purpose, no matter how cold, gave him strength. Therefore, he ignored the pain and the pounding of his heart, and dived into the task of getting rid of the vomit at last.

First, he showered and changed into gym clothes, which were expendable in case they too got messed in the process. Next, he carried the blanket, sheets and mattress out and into the alleyway trash bin. He was wearing only a T-shirt and the gym pants, so the cold air and rain assaulted him savagely. But they felt vitalizing in all their rawness.

Of course he could buy new bedclothes, but decided not to, at least for the coming night. Sleeping on a bare bed would harden his mind. It was not as much self-punishment for drinking too much and messing up his room, but preparation for the investigations that lay ahead.

He returned inside, put Slayer and Kreator on, and

began the merciless scrubbing of the floor and all objects that had suffered vomit splashing on or inside them. The simple, mechanical task further focused and purified his mind: he noted with delight that thrash metal had not become intolerable for him, though in the back of his mind it would from now on be forever associated with the death of Lucas.

Finally, it was all done. Even the practice amp and his wristwatch, which now showed 5:30 PM.

Theoretically, he could still accomplish much during this day, but was not at all sure how he should begin. In the end, he decided to go out to eat: the irrational part of his mind already dreamed of encountering and interrogating potential suspects, but the rational part just said he had a stomach to fill, before suffering total weakness and catabolism.

As Ian walked the twilight streets, the cold misty rain still falling down and soaking his clothes, he had the distinct sensation of –

Being followed.

No, that was the wrong word. Rather, being observed. Likely it was just hypersensitive paranoia, born from his thoughts earlier on that day. And of course, there were perfectly legitimate, not at all sinister reasons to be observed, that had not been there before. He was the second guitarist of Cyberpriest now, after all.

Still, he made a note to be extra cautious.

If Lucas had been killed because of their “infiltration” – one possibility Ian could not outright leave out – he would naturally be the next target.

He also made a decision.

Though it was disrespectful, he decided not to attend Lucas' funeral. He did not really know Lucas' family or

other friends: the guy had simply never spoken much of them. Rather, he would pay respect by nailing the killers.

Besides, attending could be hazardous to health.

The next workday did not begin pleasantly. Gwen understood Ian's vanishing act without much drama, in fact it appeared as if she already had made the connection with the murder, probably from seeing it in the local news. True to her misanthropic nature, she did not offer much in the way of condolences: truth be told Ian preferred it so.

However, Gwen was not Ian's immediate superior, but instead it was one balding Gorman Smith. Whereas Gwen was spherical and legendary, Gorman was just average and boring in everything, looks and personality alike, to a maddening degree.

Now Ian was sitting in his office, receiving first hand evidence that at least today Gorman was capable of producing some level of emotional reaction, though on most days he was not.

"Of course we understand your loss. You could have had a day or two off, naturally, if you just had asked. But becoming completely unreachable for a whole day is something we can't afford from anyone on our team. If we had known, we could have made ... arrangements, but now Gwen just had to work double-duty. Considering how hard she works already, I just don't think that's

right. I don't think anyone in this building thinks so. Though right now I'm not so sure of you. Well, do you think it's right?"

Ian steeled himself to not answer, to not betray any kind of reaction. Gorman's voice rose in pitch.

"Damn it, sometimes I just don't understand what's going on in your head. You should answer when your superior asks you something!"

Gorman breathed heavily for a moment. This was getting interesting. Ian twiddled his thumbs and waited for what would come next - likely something that would give good laughs later.

"You obviously have some issues. A drinking problem? Drugs? Sometimes your eyes are bloodshot, or otherwise just plain weird looking. If you don't want to be here, it's not like we're forcing you. But since you've stayed this long, I suppose you do. And therefore I'm giving you a warning, Ian. A most severe warning. If this happens ever again, it's grounds for termination."

In fact Ian would have gladly welcomed getting the sack right now, for that would have meant more time for investigations.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"That's all. Now just get out of my sight," Gorman said, obviously relieved that he had managed to deliver the necessary lecture.

Ian made it up to the server room. As usual on quieter days, Gwen was immersed in the multiple console windows on her workstation display, ignoring him.

That meant she had no outright pressing tasks for him. Thus he began his investigations.

Internet searches on Lucas turned up mostly nothing worth mentioning: he was listed as an employee of

Raven Consulting. The name amused Ian slightly, for ravens were usually a staple of black metal lyrics, but searches by the company name turned up nothing that would warrant a murder, either.

Ian admitted to being lost. The impression he had got from conversations with Lucas was now confirmed: he had been a private person, and had avoided putting revealing information of himself online the best he could.

Therefore, the search had to become more physical.

Ian would break in and search Lucas' apartment.

But the day was still far from over. Before that, he would have to endure hours in the server room. In the meanwhile it did not hurt to consult Gwen.

“Do you think it could have been the security firm, because we did that ... revenge thing?” Ian asked. “The guard had a gun and was not afraid to kill.”

Gwen stared at him coldly.

“You should leave those questions to the police.”

“But you know these days the cops are as good as nothing. And I mean, if it was those security fuckheads, they could be after me next.”

Gwen's expression softened just a bit.

“Well then. Consider that the exploit came from the security firm's IP address. Someone there is a wannabe hacker hothead. So they themselves are very aware of being guilty, and know they deserved what you did – we already went over that. Then, consider that I erased the security recording that had you and your friend on it. Lastly, consider that the club was a place he did not normally go to, right?”

“Yeah. He practically only went there with me.”

“But this time he had come to watch you play. How did you tell him to come to the club? By phone?”

“No. We met in another bar and I told him there.”

“So, that rules out phone surveillance, which would have been unlikely in itself. All these things considered, I think the security firm had nothing to do with it,” Gwen concluded.

“That means I'm not in danger?”

“I didn't say that.”

Ian thought hard. The security firm would have been too obvious, too easy. Somehow he had the nagging feeling that the reason for the killing went much deeper than a harmless prank.

There was also the option of no reason at all.

Random violence.

That felt even more unsatisfying.

As the final hour of the mostly quiet day began, his phone rang. It was René.

Knowing that personal calls were anathema to Gwen, Ian went to the storage room to talk. Spare hardware parts and software packages filled the shelves from the floor to the ceiling, and the odor – there was an acute lack of ventilation – reminded of his apartment.

“Ian, I know it's still too soon and I feel wrong to ask, but would you be up for a rehearsal? There is possibly a small tour coming up, and we should get at least one proper war metal song done.”

Ian considered René's words, laughing inside his mind. Of course a normal person would assume that another normal person would still be consumed by sorrow, and therefore unable to play.

However, he had by now established to himself that he most certainly was not a normal person.

Of course he could play along to get time for his investigations – he would have liked to search Lucas'

place tonight. It would be easy to pretend he was indeed still stricken by grief.

But something warned him away from doing that. Burning bridges. Karma.

“Yeah, I think I'm able to come,” he replied.

Contrary to what Ian had felt the day before, the idea of a rehearsal felt almost refreshing. Of course, in his changed state of mind there was no great passion for anything else than his investigations. It was possible his vision had been irrevocably lost.

But in any case it would be a welcome distraction.

For being immersed day and night solely in the mystery of Lucas' death would get unhealthy soon.

However, as soon as he got inside the rehearsal room, he understood he had made a mistake. Erik got into a mad rage as soon as he saw Ian, and stood up from behind his drum kit.

“Was it a drug killing? Was your friend a fucking junkie? We didn't even get to play three whole songs, all because of him! Fuck him, fuck you. Why did you have to bring him along?” he shouted.

This was too much for Ian. Red hot anger flashed before his eyes, and he took a long step toward the drum kit, ready to kick Erik's ass. Erik was physically much stronger, but he had –

Before Ian could finish this mental evaluation of his chances, René was in between them.

“Stop,” he said simply. “We don't fight in here. Erik, in the name of the black fucking goat. There are some things you don't ever say to a fellow metalhead, and especially not to a fellow band member. You just crossed several lines. Now fucking apologize.”

Ian felt like disconnecting from the immediate real-

ity. Like Gorman's lecture, this was turning too funny. He observed one part of him still fuming angrily, wanting to get at Erik's throat, but on the whole he was already calming down. The drama was unneeded.

"Actually Erik's right for the most part. Except Lucas was not a junkie," Ian said, voice trembling. Despite the insulting tone, Erik had cut to the heart of the matter.

"I don't think this will be much of a rehearsal, though," Ian added and turned to leave.

Now he could finish the thought that had been interrupted earlier. Erik was stronger, but he had cold methodical expertise.

What?

Suddenly Ian was scared of himself. Would he have been content with just kicking Erik's ass?

Despite the scene just seconds ago, suddenly he did not want to leave. He was afraid to, for outside he would be alone with himself. Here at least he had three people that would watch over him, each in their personal way. Even Erik with his hostility.

He turned around to stay. Just for a second, his eyes locked with Jo's: she was shaking her head in a weary way that told "Been there, done that." It was not exactly empathy, but somehow reassuring.

Surprisingly, as they picked up their instruments and began to play, the tension in the air turned into collective creative energy.

Three hours later, after a session that was long by their standards, they had one brand-new war metal song finished. The first one ever. It was titled, appropriately enough, "The Art of Killing," though "A Moment of Hate" had been the working title.

The song contained several sections, some relentlessly thrashing and some slower, but all of them much

more involved and technical compared to previous Cyberpriest material. The “hit potential” was preserved by having fairly straightforward vocal lines in contrast to the music. In the end it was a combination that everyone was pleased with.

When he had been prompted for ideas, Ian had responded in an automatic way. His mind had been elsewhere. But apparently those ideas, for example twisted minor harmonies on top of standard power chords, had been good enough to be included.

They called it a night and packed up their gear.

“Listen –” Erik began in a rough voice as they were all leaving.

“Apology not necessary,” Ian said. “I learned something of myself because of your outburst.”

“But like René said, I was far over the line. If anyone had said something like that to me, I’d have kicked his butt to hell and back. I’m just saying, the next time I go that far, hit me hard.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ian promised after some consideration. He hoped that when – if – that moment came, he could control himself and would stop at just hitting.

And not go on to the art of killing.

Erik smiled conspiratorially at him, the first time ever.

It had not been a bad evening after all.

As Ian walked out of the concrete bunker into the night air, and all of them went their separate ways, he figured how he could make the night even better.

He would search Lucas’ apartment tonight.

Depending on how much it took time, he would be moderately or severely sleep-deprived in the morning, but he did not care. After all, Gwen lived nocturnally

without much difficulty. And it was constant, not just every now and then. But then, was she on something?

However, there were several unknowns. The first was whether he could get inside the building at all.

Fortunately, the ground floor entrance code was still valid. Ian had last visited Lucas perhaps two months ago. It had been a brief visit, and they had went on to some bar as usual.

He stepped inside.

The eight-floor residential building in the downtown was quiet and dark. Ian trod carefully, trying to keep the noise to a minimum. He took the elevator to the sixth floor, where Lucas had lived.

Ian was dressed completely in black, wearing a wool cap over his head. However, all the black in the world would do him no good if someone switched on the lights while he was breaking and entering.

Though Lucas' apartment was many classes above his, the locks were similar. In a fit of paranoia concerning losing his keys, Ian had prepared a "bump key," which had all the teeth filed down in a specific way.

The state law recognized it as a burglary device. But that had not stopped him. When inserted into a lock short of the final notch and then bumped in with force, it would jiggle the pins clear of the lock cylinder, and if luck and right timing were with you, the cylinder would turn and the lock would open.

Just for fun Ian and Lucas had tested the key on their respective doors. With some practice it had actually worked, surprising them both.

But tonight it would be used for deadly serious business.

Ian hoped that he would be as fast as back then. He had to be finished before anyone else appeared in the stairwell. Thursday had just turned to Friday: it seemed the occupants were of the more boring nature, those who wanted to sleep diligently before the last workday.

Good for him.

He inserted the bump key in the dark, going just by feel to not push it too far right away.

Then, he pushed and twisted the key hard. The brief metallic noise echoed rather nastily in the stairwell.

Fail.

The lock did not open.

Ian pulled the key out, ready to repeat the procedure. Next to him, the elevator woke up to life. It started going down – someone was coming. His heart seemed to jump up to his throat.

The next thing he knew, the stairwell lights came on.

Damn.

He fumbled with the key and dropped it. It bounced on the floor, stopping just short of the stairs.

He knelt rapidly and picked it up. Time was running out: he could not afford to fail again. The key went into the lock again, short of the final notch.

In the light it was somewhat easier.

Sharp push and twist. The noise was louder this time. Even with the elevator still running, it felt loud enough to wake the whole building up.

Submerged in desperation, Ian did not realize right away that the cylinder had turned.

When he did, he twisted the key some more and the latch opened fully. Quickly, he pulled the door open and stepped in. Then, he closed it behind him with intense concentration, keeping tension on the inside door knob so as to make zero noise.

It did not entirely succeed, but the sound of the door closing was not much louder than the noise of using the bump key in the first place.

There he was, inside the dark confines of Lucas' apartment.

To be honest, Ian had no idea what he should be looking for. With gloved hands, he flicked on his flashlight and let it play around the two-room apartment. Compared to his, it was neat and clean. Almost too much so. Like he recalled, there was not much in the way of furniture: a bed, some armchairs and a rather large TV.

Propped up against the bed was a black briefcase.

It had a combination lock.

Ian knew he was not respecting his dead friend very much: in fact it was terrible desecration, but the briefcase just had to be opened.

He wondered whether he should open it here or take it to his own home. How long would it take to open one? Certainly, if he had to go with brute force, it would make noise. And that already made the decision for him. At his home weird noises were commonplace throughout the night: no-one ever complained.

Plus, spending even one second more than necessary in this foreign place meant more risk.

Of course, smuggling the briefcase out was not entirely risk-free. Under his jacket it would make a ridiculous bulge, and the sight of a black-clad man with long hair and a wool cap carrying it around would not be

free of suspicions either. Thus he just hoped that the residents would still be sound asleep.

Before leaving, Ian checked one more time for missing anything obvious, like a laptop computer hidden somewhere in the rooms.

But he came up empty. Therefore, time to go.

He checked through the spy hole that the stairwell was dark again, and opened the door, again as much without sound as possible.

The red led display next to the elevator read "4." Going by tactile sense, he found the call button and pressed it, prepared for the torturous wait of the elevator ascending two floors.

It truly felt like an eternity.

At last the elevator arrived with a ping. He stepped in and pressed the ground floor button. As the elevator descended, he let out a sigh. The break-in was almost over.

The ride came to an end. Anxious to get out of the building, he opened the elevator door with too much force. The door made a horribly loud noise as it banged against the ground floor wall.

But it did not matter any more. A few quick steps, and he was already out on the street, carrying the briefcase that possibly held who knows what secrets.

Ian certainly hoped those secrets would explain the death of Lucas.

Of course Ian was already prepared for a heavy disappointment. It could just as well hold completely boring work-related documents.

He hopped onto a bus and rode home. It was true the bus driver would recognize him later, but walking all the way at this time of the night would have carried the much greater risk of getting mugged. It was a madness-

inducing thought: losing the briefcase this close would practically have necessitated suicide.

Or at least hurting himself very badly.

Thankfully, the ride and the short walk to his apartment were both uneventful.

Sleep could wait. The mystery of the briefcase had to be cracked the very same night. Owing to his paranoia, Ian began his task with only a small table-top lamp lighting up the immediate work area. His gloves were still on, and the curtains were drawn.

Instead of caution, he went straight for the violent approach, and prepared himself with a large screwdriver, a chisel and a hammer.

However, the first strike between the lid halves made him realize that the noise was just too loud, too clear. It was not a problem in itself, but everyone still awake in the house would hear that he was doing something unusual. Therefore he needed background music.

From a drawer that had not been opened in many months, he found the perfect piece for this occasion.

A tape containing Deicide's first album.

Grinning with satisfaction, he put it to his cassette player and dialed the volume well past halfway. The tape was already worn and the sound quality had suffered, but most importantly it still sounded insane. If he timed his strikes to the beat, the case-cracking operation would go largely unnoticed.

Ian dug deep and hard with the chisel and hammered without remorse. The briefcase was not heavy, but still durable, and endured for a long time.

Finally, it began to give way. He gave it a final, brutal twist, and the latches came loose. In fact, the locking mechanism just disintegrated.

The case was open.

Inside was maybe a half-dozen of A4-sized papers. Ian shut down the music before looking at them.

When he took the first good look at the documents, his head began to swim with nausea. The whole room appeared to spin around all of its axes. That normally happened only when severe intoxication was starting to wear off.

But now he was most certainly sober.

On each of the papers, there was a black symbol that drilled deep into his subconscious, bringing something very repressed and very evil to the fore.

It was an equilateral triangle with a thick outline. Inside was a circle of equal thickness, and a solid black sphere in the very middle.

On the surface there was nothing evil about the image. But for some reason Ian felt like possessed when looking at it. He felt as if all his willpower was draining away, and had to concentrate very hard to not run away screaming. He observed that his breathing was shallow and rapid, while his pulse was going out of control.

What was happening made no sense.

Had there been poison gas inside the briefcase? Or was it an expected reaction somehow? Did the symbol act as a trigger, like the song had done?

Ian forced himself to look at the symbol and to control himself. Unknown, nameless horrors screamed like banshees at him from the hidden depths of his brain, but he kept his stare fixed.

Slowly, his breathing and pulse returned to roughly normal. Even then, his heart kept skipping a beat once in a while, which worried him.

He tried to rationalize what the symbol was about. With some imagination it could be an abstract version

of the “Eye in the Pyramid,” a staple among conspiracy theorists. The eye had its more mundane uses too, like inclusion on the one dollar bill.

Was this about the Freemasons or even the Illuminati then? Had Lucas stolen their classified documents and got himself killed?

That was too easy, too unsatisfying. To get his mind off the symbol, Ian decided to focus on the text.

There still was the nausea, although less severe, and the irrational and fears creeping up to his consciousness remained, but he had them under control for now.

First he skimmed through the papers rapidly. The text made little sense at first: it was scientific language and unnecessarily difficult words were scattered about liberally.

However, like with the symbol, he forced himself to focus, and little by little it started to make sense.

It was about a testing procedure for human physiological and psychological responses to stimuli known as “fnords.” The text mentioned the importance of having fresh test subjects: the test battery would not be reliable if repeated on the same person.

Some sections of the text had been made unreadable with thick black marker.

That could mean only one thing: the documents were classified, and the copy at hand had been meant for someone who did not possess full clearance.

However, the papers did not seem like they had come from any government agency. Declassified CIA or NSA documents, for instance, had a certain formatting.

So that did point in the direction of an external clandestine entity, like the Illuminati. Ian could feel the call of madness, the call of conspiracies haunting him.

What was he getting into?

There was one explanation he considered for a second: it could have been an elaborate, but harmless and stupid prank. Maybe Lucas had planned to unload the documents on some unsuspecting co-worker and scare him or her stiff.

But the symbol and its effect then?

That did not fit at all. That explanation could just be discarded ruthlessly.

Finding the briefcase and the documents had just opened up more questions, instead of answering any. Even the origin of the documents, or whether Lucas had been killed because of them, paled in comparison to the most pressing one on Ian's mind: how did Lucas have such documents in his possession?

It appeared that in the end, Ian knew very little of his deceased best friend, of what he had truly been doing in his life. It now made perfect sense that Lucas had only told about his work in very vague terms. In lack of better words, he had been a man of secrets.

Somehow, it cast a dark shadow over his memory.

There was one final explanation.

What if the documents had been planted at Lucas' apartment after his death? If it had been expected that Ian would break in and find them.

What would be the purpose in that, though?

To mislead him? To drive him crazy?

So many scenarios, possibilities, and questions. And so few answers.

But now Ian's head felt heavy: he needed the sleep badly. It was close to 3 AM.

His mind was in an agitated state: it took a long time to fall asleep. When he finally did, the obscure symbol and the unknown horrors associated with it haunted and chased him.

He woke up in a sweat at 5 AM and was not sure if he ever wanted to dream again. However, after half an hour, sleep mercifully claimed him again and this time there were no more nightmares, until the waking nightmare of the alarm clock ringing and having to get up.

Replacing a server motherboard in a zombie-like state between sleep and reality was not exactly Ian's idea of entertainment.

In fact, it was only his body that felt half-asleep. His mind was still on hyperactive overdrive, racing in circles around the mystery of the documents.

He kicked the server's chassis: the machine showed just a black screen when powered up.

"You piece of shit, boot yourself!" he raged.

"That's no way to treat hardware," Gwen remarked, having just arrived from her rounds back into the server room.

Ian knew it was not usual for him to be this excitable. His mind had not had the chance to rest properly, leading to uncharacteristic anger. Gwen was definitely going to suspect something.

However, she said nothing.

Trying to control himself, Ian checked the wiring and the CPU being properly seated one more time. Then he said a prayer to the dark gods of server hardware.

Finally he pressed the power button again.

This time the self-test display appeared properly.

After getting the motherboard replaced, more work

awaited: because of an obscure exploit possibility, all hardware and software firewalls in the building would have to be updated.

It would be a moderately long day.

The day was unusual in the sense that Ian and Gwen left work at the same time. Usually Gwen would always be immersed in something when he left. She would stay long into the evening even if there was no pressing work remaining, apparently delighted by the company the servers kept her.

They walked in silence across the company parking lot.

By now, 7 PM, it was already as dark as it was going to be. There were a few cars left: even with the weekend coming, some analysts and consultants were working a longer day than the IT department, which was a miracle in itself.

Apparently to cut electricity costs, not all the lamps were lit. This left several dark areas on the ground.

As they passed one of the cars, Ian heard a sound just at the threshold of his hearing – probably the rustling of nearby bushes at the edge of the lot.

Without advance warning, Gwen pushed him forcefully down to the ground next to the car.

The next thing Ian registered was a muted spit from some distance away: a split-second later one of the car windows shattered.

Silenced gunfire!

He was still rather uncomfortably pinned down by Gwen's mass. She motioned for him to keep quiet. But making a sound was the last thing on his mind. Rather, his mind was already racing silently.

Where was the attacker? Or attackers?

Ian watched in amazement, as seemingly from nowhere, a large handgun had appeared in Gwen's right hand. It glinted a silvery color under the parking lot lights.

It was a Desert Eagle. He could read the engraved text on its side – it was the heaviest .50 caliber model.

Right at that moment he realized how little he actually knew of his workmate. Of course, he was glad of her hidden skills – had it not been for her, he would surely have gotten himself shot. He would now be lying on the cold asphalt, lifeblood oozing out of him.

Gwen rose into a kneeling position and fired once. The noise was deafening, and the muzzle flash was much longer than Ian could have imagined. Due to its mass, the pistol recoiled in an unusually long, soft motion.

But unless she could see perfectly in the dark, it had to have been a blind shot.

Out of the darkness came a stifled cry of pain.

Perplexed, Ian took a closer look at Gwen, realizing that because the sight of the large gun had been so awesome, he had not paid attention to the light amplification goggles that had appeared on her face.

In the very next second several muted shots rained on the car in revenge. Gwen was forced to duck into cover.

How many attackers?

Though the events and revelations before had been some kind of preparation, Ian could still not fully believe this was actually happening.

But as Gwen came out of cover again to loosen a few more deafening shots, he did not have any other option than to start believing.

“I got lucky with the first shot. But now I can't see

the bastards any more. It's just green noise," she hissed.

That was very reassuring.

She then took a smaller firearm from inside her jacket and handed it to Ian, who was still sprawled on the ground.

"You know how to use one? Distract them and force them to move."

Ian was surprised by Gwen's commanding tone. She practically assumed he could use the weapon. He did not want to disappoint, but –

A quick look at the pistol made some hidden, blocked knowledge come back to him. Unlike the Desert Eagle, which was widely known thanks to movies and games, this weapon was much less glorious.

But not at all less usable. In fact, it was much easier to handle, and it would definitely kill.

It was a Heckler & Koch USP .45 with a threaded barrel to accept a silencer. To his surprise and horror, Ian knew precisely how to operate one.

He flicked the safety off and racked the slide. As if guided by an outside force, he rolled so that he could extend his hands past the car's front bumper, while still keeping low to the ground.

Then he fired several times in succession, blindly.

In the direction of fire, beyond the parking lot, there was a park. Ian knew it was very irresponsible to shoot, for bullets could travel far and innocent people could get hurt.

However, the same force that had just taken control of him told that it did not matter. Only his own survival mattered.

More muted shots came in response. Ian could hear bullets whistling as they flew close by, some impacting with the ground. The last one made an uglier sound,

like tearing something. He felt a hot sensation across the length of his right arm, which had been topmost when he had fired.

He rolled back to the safety of the car.

Had he been hit?

Safe from immediate danger, Ian inspected his right arm. The leather of his jacket was torn for almost the entire length of the sleeve, but there appeared to be no wound.

He had got lucky.

Two meters away, Gwen's weapon boomed twice.

No more shots came. There was just a heavy silence that hung in the air, along with smell of gunpowder. Was that the end of it?

"Got them," Gwen said at last. "There were two. Now we must go, we don't want to be here when the cops arrive."

"Do you want the gun back?" Ian asked, not sure of what else to say. At least that was a logical thing to ask.

He was on his feet again and had mechanically put the weapon's safety back on: his conscious mind had not yet fully processed what had just happened.

"No. It's now yours."

To further support her words, Gwen gave him three spare magazines. Seeing the extra ammunition jerked Ian completely back to reality. He felt weak. Gwen had just shot two attackers dead, who in turn had been trying to –

Kill him? Gwen? Or both?

And he had helped her by handling a semi-automatic firearm quite expertly as well. He had no conscious memory of ever practicing with one.

It was unbelievable, but there was just no way out.

This was his reality, and he had to accept it.

Gwen removed the goggles from her eyes, and they started a jog out of the parking lot, keeping to the darkness. After a few minutes Ian could hear the wail of sirens coming from the distance, getting closer.

Unanswered questions circled in his mind. Gwen had said there had been two attackers, but there had been no time to check the corpses. Were they the same as in the club? Had Lucas thus been avenged already?

Somehow Ian doubted it would be that easy. He was sure the real questions and mysteries only lay ahead. He had now all the more reason to be puzzled of himself as well.

They had been on the move for maybe ten minutes as Gwen turned to him.

“We should find some place to have a chat,” she said.

Despite her round and non-athletic appearance, she was not in the least out of breath.

They sat in a quiet corner of an all-night café. Gwen had explained that she chose the place specifically for not having a metal detector at the entrance.

The interior was a pleasant, atmospheric red, and the lighting subtle. Or so Ian at least thought a normal person would evaluate the place. To him it was unsure whether anything would be “pleasant” ever again.

However, the coffee was welcome for refreshing his mind and raising his alertness, if for nothing else. While they had jogged away from the scene, he had pondered whether he would have survived if thrust into the same situation again, but this time alone.

Probably not.

Gwen spoke in a low, unremarkable voice that would blend into the background noise.

“First of all, you have to understand that what I’m about to tell you may leave you unable to ever function normally again.”

That sounded like a great start.

“I believe I’m already in that jam,” Ian replied.

As far as he was concerned, nothing had been normal ever since the first hallucination or flashback. Paranoia, possible false memories, a symbol that caused ex-

treme nausea, skill of handling firearms that should not have been there. All those were far from normal.

As Ian considered further, he came to the conclusion that the abnormal things had started even earlier. Why, for example, the strong desire to infiltrate the Axis industrial block? A normal BOFH or PFY would have made a counter-attack through the network.

He had wanted to test his physical stealth skills. There was no other explanation.

Learning to be a systems administrator from zero so quickly, or learning the Cyberpriest songs at an unusually fast pace, could be taken as abnormal signs as well.

Something was definitely not right with him.

He just hoped Gwen would shed some light on that, no matter what the consequences.

“Let's start with simple things first – what happened tonight. That was an attempt on our lives by SCEPTRE.”

Though he understood they sat here to discuss utterly, deathly serious things, Ian could not help a slight grin as Gwen recited the letters – obviously an acronym – one by one. Was that not the organization James Bond fought against?

“It's probably not their actual name. But we nevertheless call them by that title. Sectarian Chosen Elite Privileged To Rule and Exterminate. A ruthless secret organization.”

One word caught Ian's attention. Who we? But then he focused on the acronym again, and the impression it made on him. The ruthless elite who wielded a scepter of power, killing people as they saw fit. Though he was not completely sure of the connection, the symbol in the documents – the sphere inside the circle inside the pyramid – probably represented the organization.

“Did they kill Lucas too?” he asked. “I found some

documents from his place –”

Gwen remained silent and took a sip of her coffee. Ian thought this to mean that the question was too obvious to be answered. Or then the nod of her head as she leaned forward to drink was the “yes.”

“Now that you know who we’re dealing with, we can move on to the not so simple things,” she continued. “But remember my warning.”

Ian was puzzled. He had almost been shot today. How could mere words be as harmful, or even more?

“You are a survivor of SCEPTRE’s assassin training program. You never finished the training, you were extracted before that.”

The words took some seconds sink in fully.

When they did, Ian felt as if the floor had been pulled from under him. The symbol returned to haunt him, the café spun and wobbled before his eyes, and he thought he would black out. There was a feeling of constriction in his throat, and blood rushed in his ears like a waterfall.

He felt like he was going to be very sick. To vomit right in his coffee cup.

It was the truth he had in a way expected all along, but still nothing in the world could have prepared him to actually hear it. The confirmation of his worst nightmares, and the most extreme conspiracy theories.

He had been trained to kill, then made to forget about his training?

There was no doubt that the training had happened during the period he remembered as being incarcerated in the juvenile facility.

But had there been more?

Which part of his life was real and which was not?

Ian wanted to sink through the floor. To simply cease

to exist. He hated SCEPTRE from the bottom of his heart. For if a hacker could erase computer records or even destroy hardware with the press of a button, they were doing the same thing with human minds.

It was unbelievable. Unforgivable.

But his hatred was mixed with heavy despair: he knew it was ultimately powerless. What could he or even Gwen with her Desert Eagle do against such force? Such organization had to be vast, probably going all the way to government level or even beyond, pulling strings from behind the scenes...

There was no limit for his paranoia. The room still spun around. Gwen had probably been very right when she had said he might not be able to ever function again.

But there was one word he latched onto after the most intense shock had faded.

Extracted.

Who had extracted him? As if sensing the question on Ian's mind, Gwen continued.

"There exists a rather small group that opposes SCEPTRE. We call ourselves the Agency, or simply Agents. Several years ago, a team raided the training facility you were held in. Practically burned it down to the ground. Most of the training subjects died or went missing. They got lost in the surrounding woods or attacked the Agent team, who were forced to defend themselves. But you were one of the few who were successfully extracted."

Ian was not sure whether he should feel lucky or not.

"There was of course, the matter of your training, or should I say programming. I don't have the full details, but I understand that a kind of counter-programming was necessary to free you from SCEPTRE's grip. If

you've felt irrational effects like hallucinations or nausea when in contact with triggering material, it's because of these two kinds of programming fighting in your mind."

Things had just become a bit clearer.

"So, you are an Agent?" Ian asked.

"Guilty as charged."

"And you've been keeping an eye on me?"

"Actually, no. Or for a very short time actually. Even in the Agency, though we're not fans of bureaucratic bullshit, information flow has to be controlled, because of the security risks. The risk of getting caught and interrogated by SCEPTRE, for instance. Therefore, I was unaware of who you were, until -"

"Until I and Lucas did that ... thing?"

"Precisely. It was unusual behavior from you, so I started checking out things, requesting information from other Agents. And here we are now."

"Thanks. For checking me out. Otherwise, I'd probably be dead now, if you hadn't been alert."

"Well, you should remember that you're still in danger. We both are. In fact, we both should disappear for a while."

Ian considered this hard. Being in Cyberpriest endangered the whole band and made him a very easy target. But was he ready to abandon everything and everyone?

That depended.

How soon until SCEPTRE would try again?

That was a question he knew Gwen would not be able to answer. But there were others she possibly could. Ian could have asked of Lucas again, about the documents found at his place, but that was not what he most wanted to know about.

In a way it felt wrong, but the mystery that now surrounded himself had just taken over in importance the mystery of his dead friend.

“How did SCEPTRE find me again? Did they keep track of me all the time, even after I was extracted?”

“Again, I don't have all the information. But I know that you, like the other trainees, had a tracking implant which was removed. Of course they still had all their files on you, so eventually the likelihood of some of their operatives spotting you was just too great. It would have happened sooner or later.”

No escape for the formerly brainwashed. Great.

“However, there's one thing you must understand: SCEPTRE is not all-powerful. There is nothing mythical about it. Compare it to an international crime syndicate, if you will, not to an all-powerful, all-seeing entity like the fictional Illuminati. Of course, they still operate very efficiently, in almost total secrecy, but –”

“But what?” Ian was intrigued.

“Well, I have spoken too much already. Don't take this as an insult, but the truth is that I can't trust you fully, because your original programming might be re-turning. But we'll keep eye on you. When the time is right, some Agents will get in touch with you again. But until then ... you should be going. Remember what I said. Disappear. There's also one more thing you can optionally do. You might even like it.”

There was a glint in Gwen's eyes that did not resemble an Agent, but rather the BOFH Ian had known her as.

“You should make sure that no-one at work will miss you.”

For a second Ian was puzzled. Then understanding spread through him: he was sure his eyes glinted just

the same. He turned away and left.

Ian fulfilled the “optional task” by remote access from an Internet café on the other side of the city. The company website front page was now defaced, replaced with the PFY's declaration of boundless frustration and hatred.

Now it was certain no-one would miss him.

But as the fun part was over, reality set back in. No matter if he had been trained to be an assassin, he was scared out of his wits as he stalked the city streets at night. The world would now forever look different to him. Danger could lurk anywhere, the malicious eyes of SCEPTRE following him wherever he went.

He realized he was scared, because he had no control. Previously he had always had it, and that was why he could have felt calm and coldly effective. But now the next attempt on his life could be just around the corner – or maybe nothing would happen for years, until one night he would feel the cold metal of a gun press against his neck and know it would be curtains.

That thought drove him crazy.

After an elaborate set of detours and false routes through the city, he went back to his apartment. This was to check the documents again: maybe he had

missed something the last time.

He noticed the apartment door was slightly open.

Instinct took over: he dug the gun out and flipped the safety off. Then, with utmost caution, he stepped into the darkness inside.

The curtains were not drawn, and light filtered in from the large window. The layout of the apartment was not complex: there were not many places for an intruder to hide. At least there was no-one silhouetted against the window.

Satisfied of the lack of immediate danger, he turned the light switch and closed the door behind him.

It was a mess.

The whole place had been turned upside down.

His old guitar had been broken from the headstock and the Floyd Rose bridge forcibly removed, leaving its posts badly bent. The practice amp had been mutilated: the speaker hung loose by its wires, with many incisions to the cone. To further the insult, the power cord had been cut from the amp's end, and the individual wires bared, as if tempting him to take the easy way out and electrocute himself.

The black briefcase and the documents were nowhere to be seen. This was clearly a message from SCEPTRE.

It was psychological warfare.

Ian could not tolerate the thought of spending the following night in the desecrated room, not even with one eye open and the gun under his pillow. He took a large backpack and a sleeping bag out of a closet, checked them carefully, making sure there were no explosives or listening devices planted within. Finally, he stuffed the sleeping bag and some clothes inside the backpack, and left.

It was a good thing that he already had a key to the rehearsal space. He would sleep there, what tiny amount of sleep his mind would allow this night. With luck René would not be there composing his next masterpiece.

This time the route Ian took was even more elaborate. Finally, he could be hundred percent certain that he had not been followed.

In the night, the concrete rehearsal room complex felt eerie and uninviting. There was not just the unknown trouble on his mind, the lingering threat of SCEPTRE, but the real possibility of violent drunks or junkies breaking in.

Out of some reason Ian remembered stories of haunted rehearsal spaces: they would become suddenly and mysteriously cold, strange noises would be heard, or a door would slam itself shut. He almost laughed. How happily he would have preferred being a paranormal investigator, instead of a partially programmed assassin on the run from his masters!

He turned the key carefully in the lock and opened the door just a little.

The lights were on.

It was René, totally immersed in playing his bass guitar. In Cyberpriest he always used a pick for maximal speed, attack and evenness of tone, but Ian noticed that now he was playing with his fingers, in a percussive style reminiscent of Steve Harris.

“Hi,” Ian said, trying to sound as natural as possible.

René looked up. “What brings you here this late?”

“Well, there was ... some water damage at my place and I thought I could sleep here?”

“Sure. I try to play as silently as I can.”

“Are you composing a new one?”

“I am. Like you can hear, this is something different. Something almost heavy metal-influenced. But it's just the beginning. Next it'll start to thrash. Hard.”

Ian was glad his new guitar had been here, and therefore not part of SCEPTRE's damaging intrusion. The destruction of the old Charvel had been almost symbolic: so had his old life been destroyed, too, in just the space of a single day.

If he had not entered Lucas' place...

No. Making up alternate scenarios and realities like that would get him nowhere.

But then, was it right for him to continue as a member of Cyberpriest, as if nothing had changed? Because of him, danger would surely come to René, Jo and Erik. The morally superior choice would have been to leave the city completely, to abandon at once all ties to his former existence.

The problem was, he was not morally superior.

He was not ready to face the world completely alone.

Of course, in the case SCEPTRE attacked, he vowed to protect his bandmates to the best of his ability, gun in hand. The bastards would get at them only over his dead body.

If he gave everything in that case, he could consider himself moral enough.

Then Ian remembered something else.

The tour René had spoken of. If it was still going to happen, it would be the perfect opportunity to get away from the old surroundings for a while. And hopefully away from the clutches of SCEPTRE.

“René?”

“Yes?”

“About that tour. When will it start?”

“Ah, Seven Days of Pain. Seven gigs on successive days, they've all been confirmed. It starts on Monday. But man, it will live up to its name and not just because of the harsh schedule. If I had known I wouldn't fucking have signed us up. The organizer sort of betrayed me by not telling.”

“Why is that?” Ian asked. It was very unusual to see René hesitant of anything.

“There's this band, Blasphemer, that's also on the tour. Mostly they're OK guys – Lord Obskurius, Satanakhia, Koprologist. Nothing wrong with them. But the vocalist Rob, or Tyrant as he calls himself nowadays, used to play guitar in our early incarnation, before Jo and Erik came along. Well, he actually couldn't play and still can't – that's why he switched to vocals – but he tried, hard and long. To this day he claims that I stole his best riffs and perverted the band's direction. And naturally I haven't forgotten some things he did either. There's bitterness and there's hate. Expect to see a fight during the tour.”

Ian nodded in understanding.

It was certainly interesting, but band politics did not matter, really. The bottom line was, he only had to survive two more days and then he would get away for a while.

He just had to be very careful in the meanwhile.

After this brief chat, while René continued to play acoustically, Ian spread out the sleeping bag on the floor. It was hard and cold, and every now and then there was an unpleasant cold draft from somewhere. Maybe that was evidence of the place being haunted?

Still, it beat staying in his own upturned home.

In a fit of decisive madness Ian came to the necessary conclusion that he would never set foot in the

apartment again. SCEPTRE had tainted it and possibly installed impossible-to-detect cameras and microphones.

He had a gun, some ammunition, clothes – more could always be bought – a guitar, and most importantly, the best thrash metal band in the world, that was about to go on tour. What more could a mind-programming victim ask for?

These comforting thoughts in his mind, he tried to fall asleep for the first time.

He failed.

But he kept trying, and succeeded finally for a grand total of four hours.

As he woke up, René had left. Ian was feeling cold and miserable. His nose was running. There had not been outright nightmares, but he remembered being haunted by anxiety-inducing thoughts and dreams, repeating several times over in his sleep.

Not many seconds from waking, he already recalled SCEPTRE and everything that had happened last night. And the night before. And Lucas.

To ease his misery even slightly, he powered up his half-stack and let out a flurry of chaotic, imprecise and unsatisfying guitar playing that rattled the concrete complex at the ungodly time of 8 AM.

Damn, he thought. Can't I even play any more?

Free from any societal constraints, Ian could now organize his time just as he wanted. There was only one rule: do not let SCEPTRE follow him to the rehearsal space.

Heading out to the city, he got himself a new leather jacket to replace the one with the torn sleeve. He also

ditched his cell phone as a precaution, and bought a prepaid one. He called René – giving the explanation that his old phone had drowned – and found out that the only rehearsal before the tour would be on the day before kick-off.

Therefore, he had one full day for investigations. He made a mental note to sleep properly the night before and come to the rehearsal early: his sloppy playing that morning had indicated a severe need to reacquaint himself with the guitar.

For the most part, Ian still remembered the contents of the vanished documents. He wondered about the test subjects the papers had mentioned – would they come willingly? Judging from how SCEPTRE operated otherwise, it was unlikely.

That meant they had to be abducted off the streets. Probably persons no-one would particularly miss.

Ian still did not have an exact, systematic method to his investigations. He decided to scour the city mostly at random, particularly its seedier, more unknown and uninviting side. Maybe something would come up. Maybe he would catch SCEPTRE red-handed.

He decided, somewhat morbidly, that he would not avoid any confrontation with his enemies. He might even go as far as to actively seek for them, if that did not put others in danger. That way he could be in control, even if the odds were stacked impossibly against him. If the end had to come, he hoped that it would come sooner rather than later. Of course, if they would not let him off that easily, if they would not just kill him...

Then things could get rather unpleasant.

As daylight started to fade, Ian kept walking around, scanning the fences and walls for posters of missing persons. There were some, as there always would be in a big city, but of course it did not prove much. There were many other reasons for people to disappear besides ending up as SCEPTRE's experimental subjects.

Before long it was dark, and the uglier side of the city was already firing on all cylinders. Ian witnessed a drive-by shooting between two rival gangs from the distance of ten meters. The wail of sirens came much later, when the perpetrators and witnesses had already disappeared. Only the body remained.

Ian felt somewhat guilty as he made his way past the drunks, junkies and prostitutes. In the middle of real and evident problems, among a thousand unhappy tales, he was chasing after the sectarian chosen elite.

Of course his tale was no less real either. However, it seemed that SCEPTRE would find him, but not the other way around.

A feeling of futility crept into his mind: though he now had freedom to spend his time practically as he wished, so far his new investigations had turned up no results.

Frustrated, he decided to climb up on a rooftop to see whether the city would look different when viewed from above. He found a large trash bin, from which he could jump onto a ladder, and up he went. The building he climbed first was not terribly high: only four stories.

Mostly, the city was just a lot of lights, some of them stationary and some of them moving. He did not seem to get any better feeling for its pulse from above.

He jumped a small gap between this building and the next, equally high, but it was a dead end. Then he noticed a fire escape on the side of a much higher, ten-story building. He climbed the ladder down, then went for the fire escape.

Where the stairs ended, there was a ladder that took him to the roof.

From here, he could see a lot further away. But right now the cityscape did not interest him much.

Because his eyes had met a most odd sight much closer.

A group of people, six in total, had gathered on the rooftop. They seemed to be doing just what he had been attempting to do: observing the city from above.

Ian dismounted the ladder rather clumsily and noisily. Almost as one, the group turned to stare at him.

There were five men and one woman. They did not make much of a fashion statement, but all had dressed warmly: Ian got the feeling that they had prepared to stay the whole night here here, watching.

They also were armed.

Ian spotted brass knuckles on at least two. One displayed a sawed-off shotgun prominently, and he was sure there would be hidden handguns and knives.

An unusually tall, bald man in a long dark coat stood apart from the rest: his presence was commanding and

he appeared to be the group's leader. However, he stayed silent, while a shorter, bearded man in a silver quilted jacket fired off a question, or rather a demand, the shotgun in his hands.

"State your business!"

"Seemed like a nice view, but I didn't know it was already occupied. Don't let me disturb though. Tell me – are you perhaps Agents?"

Right after Ian had uttered the word, he knew he had made a mistake. Existence of the Agents was classified knowledge and not to be spread around carelessly. And these people had to be something completely else.

"A joker, I see," the bearded man replied, keeping the shotgun close. "No, we're not agents."

The bald tall man spoke in a moderately silent, calm voice, that forced Ian to concentrate.

"That's right. We just watch over the city. I'm Vadim."

"Or rather, the Watcher," the bearded man explained in reverence.

"I guess you see a lot during one whole night," Ian said.

"You could say that. Of course, what we see is not something we discuss with outsiders. Now, would you please leave? During the night, things you don't want to get involved with may happen," Vadim replied.

This was getting interesting.

"What would it take for me ... to become an insider?" Ian hazarded to ask.

The group looked at each other in puzzlement. Ian knew he was a nosy stranger to them: they were thinking up a strategy for getting rid of him most painlessly. Or maybe painfully. He was prepared to draw his gun if things came to that.

Finally the bearded man spoke.

“You must prove that you are doing good for the city. Something for the betterment of everybody's lives. Details are up to you. We will be watching.”

That was surely cryptic enough. However, Ian understood the group to be some kind of vigilantes: he was certain that one way to satisfy them, to make things better in their eyes, was to beat up some unsavory person. It was within possibility this group had seen something related to SCEPTRE's activities, and therefore the challenge might be worth taking up.

“Well, I'll see if I'm up to your challenge,” Ian replied, as he mounted the ladder again and started to descend. It was pointless to try to talk more: he would need to meet their conditions first.

It did not take Ian long to encounter a situation where he thought the challenge could be satisfied. Two junkies, a male with short spiky black hair and a female with a thin blond mullet, were harassing a boy in his late teens, probably a metalcore fan, who had ventured into the wrong part of the city. The kid was unusual for having a switchblade of his own, but still the situation seemed unfair: he was not holding it too expertly, and the junkies had to be armed in some way as well.

“Fuckers!” Ian shouted to grab attention and control of the situation.

The junkies turned to face him.

The boy moved to retreat, but was still keeping an eye on how the situation would unfold.

The two rushed Ian: a knife had appeared into the hand of the male one, while the female wielded a far more evil weapon: a used syringe.

Ian definitely did not want to get a sting from that.

It was a long time since he had fought: mosh pits did

not count. He was not sure if any SCEPTRE hand-to-hand assassin wisdom would come to him at the last moment.

Therefore, he just went for brute force, and aimed a kick at the head of the male junkie, who was in the lead.

The kick connected.

However, the junkie did not even flinch much. Instead, his expression just turned angrier, as he grabbed Ian's foot, which retreated much too slowly after the kick.

Next, he twisted savagely and Ian lost his balance, dropping to the sidewalk. The landing was hard and painful, but Ian was thankful the twist had not dislocated anything.

Now was the female's turn to rush, syringe held high. Ian rolled away at the last possible moment as she lunged and hit her – with both fists held together – into her back. She fell to the ground and stayed there long enough for Ian to kick the syringe away.

It fell through a sewer grating.

“You'll die for that,” the male one snarled. Ian rushed forward to grab his knife-hand, but missed, as the male sidestepped cleverly. The punishment for the mistake came immediately after: a slash across his chest.

At first he felt nothing, then the sharp pain made evident that the junkie had drawn blood.

Now Ian was truly mad. But behind the mad anger, behind cursing himself for not keeping his jacket zipped up was also the cold lake of fear, the knowledge of his mortality. The sooner the fight could be ended, the better it would be for everyone's safety.

He did not want to kill either of them, or did he? Forcing himself to calm down, he planned his next move.

The junkie was too satisfied with himself, and never saw Ian's headbutt coming. It did not stagger him much backward, but left him stupefied long enough that Ian got a strong right hook in.

The male went down, knife clattering away useless. Ian stepped back into a defensive stance, waiting for the next attack.

Stunned and disarmed, the junkies got up, each trying to get support from the other. There probably was not going to be a next attack.

"Had enough? Now get out of my sight, scum," Ian barked.

The kid had wisely disappeared in the meanwhile.

The junkies saw it fit to comply. They staggered away, struggling to keep their balance.

"Next time you'll face the Watcher himself!" Ian shouted after them, hoping that this added touch would please the group.

Then, he inspected his wound.

The blood had stained his shirt nastily, but the cut was not very deep. Some antiseptic and bandage from an all-night drug store, and he would be all right.

But even that could wait. He was not bleeding to death. Body aching moderately, he traced his way back to the tall building, and climbed the fire escape and the ladder again.

To his astonishment, the roof was now empty.

There was no-one to tell him how he had done: the group had vanished as if they had never been there. Below, the city just went on, the noise and traffic never stopping.

Disappointment, burning disappointment. Ian was sure that somewhere a SCEPTRE operator was watching all this, laughing.

He called it a night. The struggle with the two junkies had drained his strength: he had not eaten much, and it was already past midnight.

Following an elaborate route, only stopping quickly midway at the drug store and then downing a hamburger on the opposite side of the street, Ian made it back to the rehearsal space. This time it was dark and empty, everything mostly the way he had left it.

Sudden paranoia struck him.

Mostly was not good enough.

As he looked more closely, a rational explanation came to him. Jo's half-stack was the object that had moved the most, and the knobs on the amp head had been adjusted. She had been here, optimizing her sound and its position relative to the other instruments.

Paranoia subsided: Ian accepted this line of reasoning. He had the feeling that a SCEPTRE operative would have either trashed the place completely, or been cautious to not move anything, to not leave any sign of the visit.

He took off his shirt and prepared to use the primitive first aid equipment. The disinfectant caused a raw, burning pain as he applied it over the chest wound. It reminded him to be more careful in the future. The bandage came next. Ian was not particularly proud of the rather crude end result, but it served its purpose.

Then, there was not much else to do than to roll out the sleeping bag again, turn off the lights, and hope that sleep would claim him faster this time.

By now Ian was feeling rather unclean, so he decided to wash himself in the questionable facilities provided by the bunker. There was only cold water, and all the grime and rust in the washroom rather reminded him of horror movies.

Shivering from the cold afterward, he guessed that he was a bit cleaner now, though he necessarily did not feel that way.

He looked at his image in the cracked mirror. His hair was messy in a way that looked rather metal. But more disturbing was the nasty bruise in his jaw from hitting the sidewalk. That might need some explaining. Well, fighting should still be a Hessian's right, even if he was in a band about to go on tour?

His life had become rather spartan. He was completely free – but to do what? Stalk the streets day and night, searching for obscure clues? He could not deny missing his apartment, his former life. But he kept reminding himself that the former life was gone now, never to return.

Like Lucas.

Ian's thoughts of his friend turned into a direction he had not yet consciously considered, though it had been

in the back of his head ever since Gwen had explained things in the café.

At the time of his death, Lucas had possessed SCEPTRE documents. And his face had been in Ian's flashback.

The flashback had to be from the assassin training. There was no other explanation. Therefore Lucas had also been trained. They had fought against each other: all trainees had been "expendable youth."

Lucas had been a part of SCEPTRE.

It was a vile thought, defiling and tainting his memory.

However, that was still an incomplete conclusion. After all, Ian had been in SCEPTRE's grip as well. Yet now he was free, sort of. The question was: had Lucas been extracted similarly halfway during his training? Had he, at the time of his death, been investigating his former masters?

Had he been an Agent too?

That was what Ian wanted to believe. However, just as well Lucas could have completed the training and been on SCEPTRE's payroll, if programmed operators actually were paid, that is.

In that case, Ian had been fraternizing with a hated enemy, in league with those who had stolen his life.

Disgusting!

Unthinkable!

To get the unbearable thought out of his mind, Ian returned to the band room and attacked his guitar fiercely. He played until his fingers almost bled, but yet there were still hours until the rehearsal.

He had quickly regained the speed and dexterity which he had feared to be lost the day before. However, it felt as if his fingers were just playing on their own,

with no connection to his mind, not to even speak of any connection to his heart.

Somehow it was fitting. It was a continuation of how the last rehearsal had felt, when he had given song writing input in the same manner: mechanically and automatically.

Of course it was disappointing.

But could it have been any other way?

Was not being in the band now nothing more than a cover job for what he was truly doing: disappearing from SCEPTRE, and investigating the new hidden world that had opened up before him?

Thought in the worst possible way, it was a double betrayal toward his bandmates: not only was he possibly bringing danger at their doorstep, but was not into the music with all of his heart and soul either.

However, quitting would also have been a betrayal. A more severe one, one that would be perfectly visible and leave the band in trouble. René's vision of war metal needed two guitars, after all.

Also, if he remembered right, all the band expected of him was to play well. Anything else was a bonus.

He should be able to manage that. If anything else would not help, having Jo on the other guitar would kick his ass into gear, force him to give his best.

Now that Gwen had turned out to be an Agent and had gone into hiding, Jo was the sole woman in his life. Ian laughed at the funnily phrased thought. Levity relieved the fear of death, or how did the movie quote go?

Though Gwen had been scary and misanthropic, being around her had always been reassuring in a way. Lusers had not been able to get at his throat, because she had been standing in the way. SCEPTRE had not shot him dead, because she and her Desert Eagle had

been there, dealing them justice in lead.

But now he had to get by without her.

He and Jo were on their way to developing into a similar team, but of course only as far as being in the band and playing music was concerned. He had hoped to learn to know her better, but in the current situation it felt dishonest: in return he could not tell much of himself.

There were simply too many things he could never tell her. Too many things he could never tell anyone.

As the rest of the band trickled into the room, and the rehearsal began, Ian's fears were mostly confirmed. The feeling from before returned, more severe now. It was like having an out-of-the-body experience: watching from the outside as his fingers moved and played.

Ian remembered the term from conspiracy-related texts: he was dissociating. Using the mind's ability to dissociate, or to even switch into another personality altogether, was supposedly one of the key facets of mind programming.

Probably those texts were right.

From what he could tell from the others' reactions, he was not betraying anything unusual. They were satisfied with his playing, and that was enough.

They wondered about the bruise though.

He could have told that he got it in a mosh pit. But in his current state he did not want to spend the extra energy the lie required.

"Was in a fight," he therefore stated simply.

René showed them the song he had written two nights before. Ian was glad that he had a head start from having heard him compose: it was not the simplest one.

This time René did not ask for input: he was back to his old habits, a dictator hammering his unyielding vision through. Ian did not protest: as far as he was concerned, the song was good, or even excellent. He would gladly play it onstage.

Jo had a severe argument with René, though.

“Too much Iron Maiden,” she said.

But she had to yield in the end. Otherwise, the quarrel could have lasted forever, with René not giving an inch.

Finally they could play the song all the way through.

*Scan the silenced battlefield*

*Sort and dissect of what's left of me*

*Reassembled to bring yet more pain*

*Start over as memories are drained*

The song was called “Salvageable Bodyparts.”

They played through all of their older material too, making sure everything was down to near perfection for the tour. During the Slayer cover, Ian forced himself out of his trance. He focused intensely on all the riffs, waiting for them to trigger further revelations of his training.

During the final chorus, as he was straining and concentrating almost to a breaking point, it happened.

The story continued.

Lucas' young face, begging for mercy. That was the familiar part. Suddenly, an angry grin appeared in place, and he twisted Ian's knife away. The face leaped closer, filling his field of view.

Then the vision was gone again.

Soon, the rehearsal wound down to its inevitable conclusion. They were prepared.

“We should be good to go now,” René said. “Just remember, no-one gets into a fight or gets killed in the

meanwhile. We don't want to mess this one up. The pain starts tomorrow, but the first date's easy because it's on home turf."

Hearing this, Ian's heart sank. Home turf meant there would be no escape at first.

"I mean, if the world doesn't end, this time we should get to play the full set at Hades Club. I'll have a chat with Harald and Ox to be extra cautious just in case," René promised.

This encouraged Ian somewhat.

"We should have guns on stage," Erik said. "If there's killers in the club, we'd just kill them first."

Ian could not be sure whether he was joking or serious.

René and Erik made to leave for the night. Curiously, Jo remained, wiping the strings on her guitar and packing up miscellaneous gear unusually slowly.

That meant she wanted to have a chat with him.

She had probably noticed something.

Ian was not pleased with this development.

"Hey, you played OK, but try to be a little more enthusiastic onstage, alright?" she said as the others had left.

"Yeah, sure," Ian replied.

Was that all?

"I heard from René that you slept here. I understand it's rough with the water damage and shit. And Lucas of course - no-one gets over stuff like that in a moment. I don't think I could be very enthusiastic right now if I was you."

"Thanks. Of course I know thrash should be played with conviction. I'll try my best."

I'll try my best to dissociate in a way that looks convincing and metal, Ian thought grimly.

“That’s a nasty bruise, by the way. I actually didn’t think you’d get into fights, but it’s good to know. Because if Tyrant gets into his usual mad rages, we probably have a fight on our hands at some point of the tour.”

Had that not already been discussed? It was rather irritating to have it pop up again. But in a way it was interesting to see that Jo apparently liked to have a fighter in the band. If she only knew, Ian thought.

“There was a point in my life when I wanted to know everything about unarmed and armed fighting. That was in addition to playing guitar at least four hours a day.” She shook her head. “I guess I was a bit crazier then than I’m now. I mean, of course fighting is something one wants to avoid. Bones get broken, people get hurt or killed. But I wanted to be prepared.”

Prepared for what? Ian did not exactly understand why Jo was telling him this. But now he was getting his wish of knowing more about her, whether he liked it or not.

“Shit, just tell me if I’m boring you,” she interrupted suddenly.

“No, it’s interesting.”

“But I guess you think it’s not quite normal?”

“For a girl, you mean? Not necessarily. My workmate for example, she has a Desert Eagle.”

To be completely truthful, Ian would have had to tell that Gwen was actually an ex-workmate, and the gun had saved his life in an actual firefight. But maybe in this case the truth could be bent somewhat.

“I’ve fired one once. The recoil was a bit much for my taste, but I guess it’s OK if she’s heavily built,” Jo mused.

Ian could have smiled, but controlled himself at the last moment.

“Anyway, that was in a time when I believed a little

more in various things than I do now," she continued, expression thoughtful.

Ian could relate to this. Just a few days ago he had believed in a set of completely different things than he did now. Actually he did not exactly know what he still believed in. Metal, friendship and working as a systems administrator had all gone through a rather severe loss of value. Metal he certainly hoped to not be permanent. He wanted badly to enjoy the raw feeling of playing again, of hearing a new ass-kicking CD for the first time, of headbanging and moshing. SCEPTRE could not be allowed to take that away from him permanently.

"What do you believe in now?" he asked.

"Well ... music, guitars, myself."

It was not a boastful reply, but rather cynical.

"I mean, sometimes you just get so disappointed in stuff. And in people. When they're unable to decide or to do anything. When you find out that it's just easier to just do things by yourself and your way."

"What about the band?"

"Well, didn't I damn myself already? Anything I say can be used against me – René might have a recorder running."

Jo laughed, but then her face got serious again.

"It's true the band's mostly an exception. Sometimes it's trouble on the opposite side of the scale: everyone has so strong will, so there's bound to be clashes. I say that's easier to deal with, though."

Silence.

Ian thought she still wanted to say something more, but as the pause went on and got almost awkward, he knew there had been enough confessions for now.

"I guess I should be going. You will sleep here again?" Jo asked.

“Yeah, I’m kind of used to it already. Guess the apartment will be fixed by the time we get back from the tour.”

It was out of his mouth so quickly. Ian did not know why he had uttered another lie, one that built on top of the original lie he had told René. There had been no actual need to embellish the story further.

And somehow lying to Jo felt worse.

“Well then, see you in Hades Club,” she said, lifting up her guitar case and exiting.

Of course Ian had no intention of sleeping for a long time. The night had only begun: it was time to meet the rooftop group again, if they were anywhere to be found.

That the tour was starting made no difference.

Darkness enveloped the city. The angry shouts, the wail of sirens, even a few gunshots pierced the night. The lack of hope, the senseless violence, Ian could imagine SCEPTRE feeding on those.

He had known of vigilante groups, but still, actually seeing one last night had been a profoundly life-changing experience. It was not exactly comforting to think about what they did: beating up bad people to make the city a better place. But it was nevertheless heartwarming to know that there still existed people, who believed in something that eagerly.

Once more, he climbed up to the same rooftop.

No! he thought, as the roof came into view. It was empty, just like when he returned from completing his challenge last night.

What the fuck had he done wrong? Which part of the ritual had failed?

He was rapidly going beyond desperation and anger.

It was then he heard a whistle, carrying faintly

through the night air.

He looked around, not sure where the sound came from. To his left, he saw a construction site, the skeletons of buildings towering even higher than the roof he was on. He focused, squinting his eyes, and was quite sure he saw human shapes standing on the scaffolding.

It had to be the group.

But they surely did not make it easy for him – scaling the unfinished building was going to be much more dangerous than just climbing a fire escape.

A couple of times it had been close: he was sure he was going to lose his balance and fall, but in the end Ian made it up to the scaffolding without injury.

The man in the silver jacket greeted him.

“Good, you found us again.”

“Was a bit harder this time,” Ian grunted, his breathing still rapid. Right at that moment, he truly hated the group for making him go through the hoops.

“You need challenges in life to not become soft. By the way, I'm Roman.”

“Ian.”

“Well, we saw you did something last night that proves you could be a worthy apprentice. Of course, an expert could have handled the situation faster. Vadim probably would have needed nothing but words. But all things considered, you did well for a novice.”

Ian wanted to spit upon hearing this evaluation.

All he wanted was the information. Whether this group had seen something out of the ordinary.

“So, would you consider me insider enough to tell me something of your observations?” he probed.

“Theoretically, yes.”

“Well then. I know shit goes on every night in this

city, but have you perhaps seen something that doesn't happen every night?"

Vadim stepped out of the darkness and closer to him.

"I don't truly know what you're looking for, so bear with me if I disappoint. But I think this ranks as unusual: for roughly two months, a motor gang has roamed the streets. It doesn't happen often, though. There's a convoy of motorbikes, pickups, SUVs – you name it. To me, this is odd. Because, a motorcycle gang for instance, their pride would not allow them to ride anything but bikes, no? But these people – they break in and loot stores at night, then load it on their trucks. Efficient but crude activity," he explained in the characteristic quiet and thoughtful voice.

"Is that all they do? Steal stuff?"

"Mostly, yes. I'm not hundred percent sure of the connection, for it could be coincidence, but apparently sometimes there have been people killed or missing after they've made their appearance."

Ian certainly was not disappointed. There was a definite possibility of the gang not being what they appeared to be.

"Thanks, that information's exactly what I was looking for. Who knows, maybe I'll join your group some day. But not now. See you around," he said as he started the long trip back down.

He looked behind his back exactly once. There was puzzlement, perhaps even anger. Vadim seemed to display neither, and just stood stoically in the middle.

This was a clear win: not just the information, but Ian had also managed to good-spiritedly insult the group, to have a slight payback for his troubles at last. He had to fight his excitement to avoid falling.

There was still one day to survive before the night

and the show at Hades Club. After that the tour would begin for real, leaving the city – and SCEPTRE – behind.

However, now that the investigations had suddenly proceeded, now that he had a lead, leaving the city felt actually counterproductive. He would have wanted to stay to see what more he could find out of the gang, if they still operated here. But of course there was no way he could betray Cyberpriest now.

It was the first time ever Ian had been on stage long enough to actually play an encore. The brutal past 45 minutes had flashed by quickly. The last time had left the small but aggressive Cyberpriest fan base hungry: the front of the stage had been one sweaty, twisting mass of flesh, thrashing and pitting and shouting out the lyrics as if there was no tomorrow.

There had been no SCEPTRE assassins, nothing suspicious in the club at all. Not even a proper fight.

Ian had found that the adrenaline and the feeling of risk, the possibility of messing up royally, had helped him focus. Most of the time he had not felt like watching himself play, but had participated and banged his head to the best of his ability.

Rob - Tyrant - and his band Blasphemer would hit the stage afterward: they had made their brand of drunk and evil old school black and heavy metal known before Cyberpriest had achieved much notoriety, and thus deserved at least theoretically speaking the headliner status.

So far René and Rob had not fought. But this was only the first day of pain.

Cyberpriest had played the two new war metal

songs too. Crowd response had been mixed, because old school thrash was always more immediate and easier to latch to. But with time, they would accept. With time they would worship, René had said.

Now, they all emerged back from the backstage maze. Ian, René and Jo plugged their respective stringed instruments back in, while Erik took his seat behind the drums.

They would play one more song.

René addressed the crowd.

“Those in the back, this is your last chance to redeem yourselves as true fucking thrash metallers and jump into the pit! This is –”

“Necrothrashing Desecrator,” the front of the crowd roared in unison.

Mercifully, Erik would now actually count the song in. The synchronization of this last song was not to be left in the hands of a psychic connection that either was there, or was not.

Four hits into the crash cymbal.

Time to thrash. Time to kill.

The mad unison guitar riff blasted out of the guitar amps. Some of the sound echoed back from the club walls. Ian found he and Jo were not in perfect sync, but there was not much error: rather, it made the beginning sound more old school and evil.

The blast beat started and like always, the tempo went up. Right now Ian felt like a madman: in the state of peak performance and being maximally warmed up, he made a decision to play even the sped-up riff without missing any notes.

At that crazy moment, the impossible became the possible. Precise sixteenth-note tremolo at 240 beats per minute.

Jo looked scared by this feat, and visibly tensed her playing to keep up.

René almost did not have to sing: the front crowd was vomiting out the lyrics at a frightening volume. Heads literally banged against the stage barrier. In the madness, Ian caught a glimpse of a bald Hessian bleeding from the forehead.

That made him want to take his shirt off, tear the stained bandage away and expose the chest wound. Dedication – blood – metal!

However, he controlled himself for now, because the song switched to the dissonant chords. He could not free his hands without the song sounding severely messed up.

Jo's solo came. She lifted the guitar neck up and unleashed a barrage of pure, molten thrash metal lead playing, which however climaxed in an almost neoclassic way, surprising those who were expecting traditional whammy bar madness.

*Back from the dead with soul left in the dark*

*Enlightened by eternal Satanic spark*

*Fighting God's angels grinding all to death*

*Bringing to Heaven Satan's molten breath*

*Necrothrashing desecrator!*

René sang the Satanic lyrics with such conviction that he could have written them on very same day. Perhaps it was an act, but what had been written had been written, and that was it. Changing the lyrics of an existing song was unthinkable in any case – against the unwritten metal laws.

Ian played the next solo, a hyper-speed pentatonic run, which he suddenly transposed a half-step up the neck, so that the melody sounded more chaotic and atonal than it actually was.

The last chorus came.

While singing like a man possessed, René played the bass riff two octaves higher, using so much force that the strings could get torn off any second. It sounded like a sub-machine gun clattering and spitting out musical death.

Near the end, Erik would switch from the blast to a clinically precise double bass drum beat. The kick drums had been triggered, but Ian was sure they would have sounded just as even and punishing if using just the microphone sound.

The final repeat of the song's main riff signaled the beginning of the big cacophony ending. This time it was longer than in all their rehearsals: the feedback squeals, René's demon growls and laughs, and the drum artillery strikes lasted well over a full minute.

And so, the first Cyberpriest show Ian got to play all the way through, ended.

They stopped by quickly at the backstage, after removing their gear from the stage and carrying it near the loading door. Having roadies would definitely have helped, but at least now there were four of them to share the burden.

On the tour, Cyberpriest and Blasphemer were not sharing any equipment: the conflict between René and Rob complicated things for all of them. There were of course practical and gear-safety matters behind as well: Blasphemer were notorious for spilling drinks on stage, especially into any instruments, amplifiers or other gear that happened to be in the way.

At the backstage Tyrant himself was already quite drunk. The rest of Blasphemer – Lord Obskurius on bass guitar, Satanakhia on drums and Koprologist on

guitar – were not far behind either. All of them were wearing black leather, corpse paint and plenty of spikes and chains. Tyrant had more body mass on him, while the rest were of the tall and thin variety. The instruments were rather traditional: a black and white Flying V and a Thunderbird bass. Good choices for black 'n' roll, or whatever their music was, but not for much else, Ian thought.

An even more unpleasant smell than usual emanated from the room: the band had been burning incense as a ritual preparation.

“Ah, it's like an insect's buzz, aggressive perhaps but so insignificant,” Tyrant belittled Cyberpriest's sound. “Evil is lacking completely. That's what we have in spades. Drunken black fucking heavy metal, how much better can it get? I say: it simply can't.”

“Just grab the beers and we'll leave,” René instructed his bandmates.

They quickly checked the two 12-packs – a part of their arrangement with Hades Club – for tampering on Blasphemer's behalf. Satisfied that there appeared to be none, they left the room unceremoniously with the beers in tow, and went to pack up the gear.

The plan was to start driving east toward the next show immediately. The distance was not too great, but leaving already ensured that there would be not be panic, that they could check out the next venue well beforehand.

Throughout the tour, they would travel with a light gray, slightly rusty van that René owned. Most of the heavy gear – the amps and the drum kit – would be loaded into a trailer, along with Erik's motorcycle that he planned to use for recreational driving during the tour.

René drove this night as they headed out of the city. That left Ian, Jo and Erik free to drink to their heart's content. It was not until the city lights had already been left behind, when Ian remembered SCEPTRE. Playing the show had been so much pleasure that he had forgotten everything truly evil momentarily.

Metal, of course, was a good kind of evil.

But in any case, now he was at least theoretically heading out of harm's way. Most of the "Seven Days of Pain" tour happened in small towns, where running into SCEPTRE operatives was unlikely to say the least.

The van was pleasant enough to sit in and drink in, but fortunately they had not planned to sleep in it during the tour. At the end of this night, they would be checking into a motel some hundred and twenty miles away.

However, there would be longer stretches of driving later on the tour. From what René had told, the van could not be trusted to a hundred percent: there were some obscure electrical problems that could appear from time to time.

Ian decided to keep his consumption mostly to a minimum, and observe the state the two would get

themselves into. This time he did not want to get into any exceptional state himself. Truth be told, the last time had been somewhat of a wake-up call.

Of course the situation had been exceptional then.

Lucas' death had required a heavy reboot of his brain. But now, after the dangerous, hidden world of SCEPTRE had been revealed, Ian knew he had a duty to himself and those around him to keep sharp and alert.

Jo and Erik wasted no time in opening cans of beer. Ian followed with some reluctance. He decided that two would be the absolute maximum tonight.

After spending so much energy, Erik looked less scary, almost mellow. It was clear he was satisfied with the gig, like they all were.

It had been one hell of a show.

As for Jo, Ian had to admit she looked rather pretty, her face flushed and hair messy from the sweat and headbanging. That was something he had not considered before. At least not consciously.

For some time, they drank in silence.

"Those Blasphemer guys, they're so much beneath us," Erik then said in a low growl. "They look stupid, cannot play, cannot write songs. René, I don't get it why you still get so worked up of that Rob pisshead."

"It's him who always starts the fights," René answered sharply from behind the steering wheel.

The sudden anger in his voice was so evident, that the answer did not sound very convincing.

"And he can't even decide what the fuss is all about. Sometimes he says his band is so superior and more evil, that we have no right to exist. But I can see he's clearly bitter and envious of what Cyberpriest has achieved after him. He talks about how, if I hadn't kicked him out, we'd have made decisions together and

combined the aggression and evil that's so important to him. And well, then there's the accusations that even recent songs like Far Beyond the Grave would have riffs copied, riffs that he originally made," he went on.

"But you know that's bullshit?" Erik probed.

"Of course I know. There's not a single note copied in the new songs."

"So then, why do you bother? The over-man would just shrug his shoulders, and leave those clearly beneath him wallowing in their own stupidity. In their own urine and excrement."

René did not answer.

"Maybe it's secret homosexual love that goes unanswered," Jo said playfully, after a long gulp from her beer.

"That would explain many things. Their onstage posturing, it's just gay," Erik replied, more aggressive.

Somehow, Ian would have liked to see Blasphemer's act, to see how much the negativity was warranted. He had probably seen them some night, but did not remember for sure. It was possible he confused them with some other black metal band.

"But if you're trying to be evil, isn't the overt posturing necessary?" he asked.

"Yeah. If you're just trying to. But if you truly are evil, then it isn't. There's a big difference," Erik replied.

Just then, Ian was alerted from the discussion by the honks of several car and motorcycle horns, coming from behind the van. He looked out of the window to his left.

A long convoy of vehicles was overtaking them. Ian could not see clearly in the dark, but there appeared to be a pickup truck, two SUVs with their roof-mounted lights, some jeeps and several chopper motorcycles.

The convoy was not displaying any overt hostility except for the honks, just passing them.

But Ian found his heart was racing.

This had to be the motor gang Vadim had told about. Truly, it was an unusual sight.

But what were they doing now? Going into another town because the previous had been getting too hot? Could the gang be under SCEPTRE control, abducting people for their sinister purposes among the stealing and vandalism?

It was a possibility.

“Scum,” René spat audibly, after all the vehicles had passed. He could not be suspecting anything sinister, but seemed rather only concerned for the immediate well-being of them, the van and the gear in the trailer.

Somehow Ian had the feeling that he would run into the gang again soon enough.

He had looked forward to observing long drunken philosophical discussions between the band members. But now that expectation had suddenly evaporated. His mind was racing among the circles of conspiracy and paranoia again, and he tuned out their chatter.

Until Jo bumped into him with her shoulder and forced him back to reality.

“Hey, why so grim suddenly? Erik and me are rather enjoying the night, aren't you?”

She was noticeably under the influence, already.

It was only then Ian realized that thinking of the gang, and what they possibly represented, had caused a heavy frown on his face.

He cursed himself bitterly in his mind.

He should not be revealing anything. Additionally, it was not nice to waste such a moment that might not repeat any time soon.

Cursing did not help much. He took a hard gulp of his beer. It was not optimally cool any more, but the slightly unpleasant taste was fitting for what he felt now.

If he could, of course he would rather relax and enjoy the ride, than dwell on evil conspiracies.

But then, maybe he could?

Could he consciously dissociate so that SCEPTRE would go away from his mind for now? That was what his mind had been trained to do, after all.

But was it wrong to do so?

Right now, he decided it was not.

He concentrated –

No, concentrating was the wrong word. He relaxed, let go, and sunk through layer after layer of his mind, until there existed just a state of delightful emptiness where SCEPTRE did not exist.

That was dissociation in the best possible sense. To be sure, he took another sip of his beer, which somehow tasted better in his altered state of mind.

“Not grim any more,” he said.

“Good,” Jo responded. “But what got your goat in the first place? Did our not so politically correct discussion of Blasphemer perhaps offend you?”

“No, it was not that,” Ian said. “If I told you, you would never believe. And it's classified information as well.”

“What, the whole 'If I told you I'd have to kill you' thing?”

“Not exactly that. But more like, if I told you, you might be unable to ever function normally again.”

Ian could not remember where those words had come from. And though just at the moment he wanted to reveal all his secrets to Jo, he did not have the

faintest idea of what he could actually tell her, because he simply did not remember. He only knew it was something classified.

Indeed, this was dissociation.

Jo smiled, obviously intrigued by the words.

“And what the fuck could that be? That sounds like you're quite messed up in the head after all, like the rest of us. I thought you were kind of serious all the time. Maybe you should just drink more, to bring out that side more often.”

Ian laughed slightly at the rather odd evaluation. He was already going somewhat out of control, though the amount of beer had been minuscule so far.

Erik had been sinking into a stupor, but rose back into a more aware state.

“Jo is trying to guide you to the dark side. Rather, what you should do is to seek out the over-man in you, exercise your body and mind, and then, the next time you get royally pissed, you will reach a higher state of enlightenment. That's what I'm doing right now. But if you try to skip the preparation, you'll just destroy yourself.”

“You should write that down. Some day those words might become song lyrics,” René remarked from behind the wheel.

“Bah. I leave the lyrics to you, Herr Kommandant. I just supply the thunder and hellbattery,” Erik said.

Ian wondered if the band's drunken discussions would always happen at this kind of wavelength. No, that could not be the case, for at The Black Shark this level had not been reached. But obviously this was a special occasion. Maybe it would only happen after a successful show.

But Jo looked so happy right now that Ian wanted to

hug her, or kiss her, or something. In the end he went for the hug, because he feared a violent response otherwise.

“What was that for?” Jo asked.

Ian had to think for a few seconds.

“For not making much sense. And helping me enjoy the ride.”

The surprised expression lingered for while. Then she smiled again, apparently satisfied by the answer, and finished her beer.

At last, when they arrived at the motel, Ian remembered only vaguely the limit of two beers he had set for himself. But he was not so sure whether he had complied.

Well, at least he could walk rather straight and did not feel like vomiting immediately.

Only in the morning Ian noticed how decrepit the motel actually looked, though in the night when they arrived, it could have been a five-star hotel for all he cared.

But it had served its purpose of providing four walls and a ceiling under which to crash out. Now it was time to hit the town, to get something to eat, and to eventually scout out the place they were supposed to play, come nighttime.

The club, Iron Star, was roughly as decrepit as the motel. Ian could not fathom that there could be enough metalheads in the town to actually warrant a show, but if the organizer had said so, then he would believe.

Blasphemer arrived at the club shortly after them. They walked sluggishly, likely in a heavy hangover.

"Look who's here," Rob bellowed. "René and his crew of decidedly non-evil sycophants. We've come to blacken this place up properly, to smear the blood and the shit and the guts after your sterile, hospital-clean wankery!"

René looked at him, murder in his eyes.

Tonight might well end up in a fight.

Cyberpriest finished staking out the place quickly. René or anyone of them did not know the owner of the

place too well: therefore they decided it would be safe to trunk up the gear and do the soundcheck only later. Otherwise, the risk of sabotage by Tyrant's crew was too great.

The third band on the tour, starting each night, was Fecal Discharge, a terroristic noisecore unit. Ian and the rest had missed their show at Hades Club, but tonight they would be watching. Maybe their anarchistic noise output would shame both Cyberpriest and Blasphemer, leaving any further arguments futile.

Following Blasphemer, the trio arrived at the place, a vacant stare on their faces that told they were stoned out of their minds.

However, René had told that as soon as the show began, they would suddenly become sharply focused.

But Cyberpriest were all finished here. There was no reason to stay, for Rob would only try to agitate them more, and stir up a fight.

It was time to check out the small town some more.

The town itself was, truth be told, not much worth checking out. In a few minutes they had already seen everything there was to see.

But it was the community just outside the town that caught their attention.

It was called the Outpost.

It was a community of anarchists and free-thinkers who wanted to be free from constraints of the normative society. They were mostly independent, with their own diesel-powered generator supplying electricity for the mixed collection of buildings, mostly makeshift cabins that made up the place.

Colored light bulbs on wires that hung suspended in the air gave the place a suitable, psychedelic atmos-

phere. Ian guessed that in the summer the place could be rather lovely. Now, with the winter coming, it definitely was not.

Dominating the place was a wooden tavern, where moonshine apparently flowed freely each night. He had to admit that despite the time of the year, that one building looked very inviting, as if from another era.

In a bizarre twist of coincidence, the chief anarchist and thinker in this place, Logan, affectionately also known as Snake, was actually Rob the Tyrant's little brother.

René was not too happy about that, and had therefore been against visiting the community in the first place. But Ian, Erik and Jo had voted against him.

They met Logan in his cabin, which contained an impressive array of computer and radio gear, apparently for communicating with other rebellious individuals and keeping up to speed with any nasty things the government might be cooking up.

"Ah, Cyberpriest. I've been following you through your web page. Excellent old school thrash metal," he said.

Logan looked like a tall, malnourished pirate, with his long black curly hair and somewhat unusual, flamboyant clothes. All that was missing was an eye patch.

"You should come to the show," Erik said. René stayed further behind, keeping completely silent.

"Don't know, there might be a fight or something," Logan replied cautiously.

"Hey, but you look like an old pirate or something. You should feel home at a club fight. And most of the time there won't be one. Just some good-spirited pitting," Ian said, surprised that he was feeling so talkative: usually he was not, in the company of strangers.

“We'll see about that.”

Ian made a mental note that it might be worthwhile to interrogate Logan on all matters conspiratorial. He might even have some information on SCEPTRE, perhaps not even realizing that he had.

It would possibly require getting him sufficiently drunk first. Well, that should be no problem. However, it could not be done now. After the show it would be more appropriate, if they would return here once more.

They left Logan's cabin, and investigated briefly the rest of the community. There were groups of people, sitting around bonfires, playing guitar and singing songs both obscure and traditional. Ian did not quite know what to think of the place. On the other hand, there was idealism and energy. But he could also see the flip side: the all-consuming feeling of despair when idealism ran out. After all, living in conformity was always easier.

The four stuffed themselves back inside the gray van and drove to town. There were still hours of waiting before the soundcheck, and not much to do. Ian thought of how much of the tour still lay ahead. “Seven Days of Boredom” might be more appropriate than “Seven Days of Pain.”

“I know it's long before showtime. But no heavy drinking now. One beer and that's it,” René ordered the band sternly.

“Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,” Erik replied.

The soundcheck did not require much of a mental effort. The club PA was poor, and there was not much that could be done about it. The sound man for the tour, a somewhat plump and bearded fellow called Billy, had finished with setting up the front of the house system,

and was now fixated on the monitors. In theory he was impartial to all of the bands, but at least René had a strong paranoid feeling, and had announced an intention to keep him under close surveillance.

They played “Tormentor” for the soundcheck. It sounded passable: Billy did some adjusting of the master EQ, and that was it. Ian wondered if it was a slight feeling of superiority from everyone, both the bands and the sound crew, of not having to do one's best in such an insignificant location? Such pride could prove disastrous at the worst possible moment.

But no, he decided. It was just that the sound was far from optimal, and there was no point stressing over it. As long as they played as usual, and the beer flowed, it could be a good night.

Ian sat at an empty table in the back, and listened through the messy soundcheck of Fecal Discharge with a genuine interest. Jo came to sit at the same table.

They had not had a proper chance to talk since last night. Suddenly Ian was in a paranoid mood: the hug had been a clear violation of the 101 rules of metal.

“What do you say? In a way it's relieving to have no real competition, but also rather dangerous. One might get complacent.”

Ian was relieved of the turn the discussion had taken.

“Yeah, it's not very skillful. But interesting in a way. I mean, who would like to name themselves Fecal Discharge?” he replied.

“Beats me. But if the music most represents that, then it's the only choice that makes sense.”

“Right.”

Soon after Jo stood up, and went to pester Erik and René instead. Each of them drank up their allotted one

beer and waited, mostly bored after the entertainment in form of the soundchecks ceased.

As the light outside faded, the crowd started to pour in slowly. The fears from before were somewhat confirmed: most did not look at all like proper metalheads, but more like troublemakers instead. But every once in a while there was an individual in leather and spikes, which lifted their spirits.

Finally it was showtime.

Fecal Discharge's set was chaotic and noisy. The reaction of the crowd was indecipherable: there were shouts after each song, but it was hard to tell whether they were approving or hateful.

After listening for three full songs, Ian and the rest went to the backstage to wait. It was even filthier than in Hades Club. Though they were not exactly demanding or elitist at all, it was still disappointing.

There were no Blasphemer members at the backstage, a welcome surprise. They had to be boozing outside.

Soon, Fecal Discharge had already finished. There were angry shouts from the crowd: apparently the band had been disappointed of the audience, and had cut their set short. Their setup was not complicated, but their crew – compared to Cyberpriest they actually had two roadies – still took their time dismantling it.

At last, after a tortuous wait, the stage was clear.

The four of them went onstage, assembling the gear quickly in a state of rage brought by the laziness of Fecal Discharge's crew. Here, there were no strict time limits to setting up, or even for the length of the sets – except that each band had to play for half an hour minimum, which Fecal Discharge had barely exceeded – but yet it paid to be swift, for the front-of-the-stage crowd

was in a rage as well.

There was already some routine in the four-member version of their setup procedure: it did not take long until they were ready to thrash.

Ian could sense the general ambivalence or even negativity in the place. There were not enough bars in the club: people had to wait too long to get their refreshments.

Somewhat appropriately, the first song would be "Hate Beyond Hate."

However, just as they played the first chords and the first drum hits, they all could sense that something was wrong. No sound echoed back at them from the club.

There was no sound coming from the PA.

Ian looked to the back, where the mixer desk was located. Sure enough Rob was there, pinning Billy to the ground and controlling the master fader.

This was unbelievable. Pure hatred flashed through Ian. Now he understood why a fight would be inevitable on this tour. This could only be described as ridiculous, childish sabotage.

Soon enough, club security appeared – at least there was some – and the suddenly apologetic Tyrant was herded to the backstage. Ian knew Rob was lucky to not be ejected from the club instead, which would have left Blasphemer to play instrumentally.

Billy re-assumed command of the mixer, Cyberpriest started the song again, and this time it went properly.

Given the circumstances, the set had been as successful as possible, though that was not saying much. Still, René was fuming with hatred in the backstage room, as Blasphemer and their one-man crew had left to prepare their show.

It was not just aimless hate, Ian noticed. René was already formulating a plan.

"We don't sink to their level. We let them play undisturbed. But after that we hit them, and we hit them hard. Rob's the primary target, but if he fights, the rest will have to fight with him, so we must be prepared to deal with them all. Who's with me?" René asked.

There was no immediate response from anyone. Ian did not know how he was supposed to react. He was already over cutting the PA sound in the beginning, and wanted to wait for more transgressions before forming his final opinion of the necessary course of action.

"If it's an absolute must, then I'll be," Erik said at last, his voice dangerous. "But are you a superhero or a ninja?"

"Both, if you want," René replied. "But we must kick their asses hard. There can be no failure."

"I'm in," Jo said.

“Yeah, count me in too,” Ian said last.

Hidden in the crowd roughly in the middle of the club, they waited for Blasphemer's set to end. There was uncertainty whether Rob and company would go to the backstage to drink their beers, or head straight to the bar for hard liquor shots. In either case, surprise was essential: waiting at the backstage, for example, would have made it too easy for the targets to notice Cyberpriest's intentions.

Ian thought the band's choreography and poses were somewhat hilarious, especially when considering their drunken demeanor. However, the music was raw, evil and traditional, and thus to be taken fairly seriously: there were traces of early Venom and Bathory, for instance.

“They're not as drunk as usual,” René remarked. “They might even suspect something.”

“It's an optimal style of music if you live for the booze. You can fuck up pretty badly and no-one notices,” Jo said.

Ian had to admit that there was something attractive in Blasphemer's music. The riffs were not anything special, but the song structures were efficient, the vocal rhythms catchy. The fuzz-like low distortion produced by Lord Obskurius' bass, combined with the higher, crunchy tones coming from the Gibson Flying V handled by Koprologist, made for a powerful wall of sound.

Tyrant was an uneven vocalist: at his best moments he sounded powerful and demonic, but he clearly had to spare his strength, and would at times sing in a muffled and unclear raven croak for several verses.

Of course, on the whole the band's output was still rather unchallenging and unintelligent on many levels.

There was no choice between them and Cyberpriest, really.

“Let's try to provoke them into attacking,” René refined their strategy. “If that fails, which is unlikely, then we just have to hit first. But in any case, it's imperative that we don't let them kick our ass. That would be a severe shame.”

“A shame worth of seppuku?” Erik asked.

“Yeah. Everyone, don't underestimate them.”

As an encore, Blasphemer played Nifelheim's “Black Evil.” Though the response had been lukewarm throughout, this caused the few spikes-and-chains metalheads in the front to go nuts. A moderately-sized pit ensued, then died.

The song was short, but the band extended the abrupt ending into a tortuous cacophony, playing random noise on their instruments for a good two minutes, while Tyrant shrieked and grunted madly, seemingly going to swallow the microphone at any moment.

“Fuck you all,” he addressed the crowd at the very end, apparently not joking, but genuinely disappointed by the mostly lackluster response. In return there were several insulting shouts, and beer glasses and bottles flew to the stage.

René made an evil grin, as the four of them pushed through the crowd closer to the stage.

“He just made our life a lot easier,” he said.

Ian understood: if they had to fight Tyrant and his mates on the club floor, not many in the crowd would be coming to their aid. He felt almost sorry: Blasphemer's night had not been their best, and it would be followed by an ass-kicking.

He hoped that the band would be provoked to at-

tacking – in fact he made a decision to stay out, if the situation required Cyberpriest to attack first.

He tried to drive himself into a rage by thinking back to how cutting off the PA had felt like.

It was not terribly successful.

Having finally put their instruments down, the four of Blasphemer disappeared to the backstage. Their roadie lumbered on stage to tear down the equipment, not showing any measure of hurry.

“Here we go then,” René rallied his troops.

Looking as angelic and innocent as they could, they walked casually past the club security guard standing at the front barrier. As soon as they were past, they quickened up their pace. Ian walked last in the group.

They entered the backstage room.

Tyrant, Lord Obskurius, Satanakhia and Koprologist were alone. Beers had been opened: the instrumentalists made mock death-grunts, while Tyrant stood silent and brooding.

“Quiet!” he shouted, yet oblivious to the visitors.

Then he lifted his gaze and noticed. They all noticed.

Heavy silence and hatred hung in the air.

“Well well. You gave the superior performance, so you wouldn't have needed to cut the sound at all,” René said.

He had placed his words perfectly and hit a raw nerve. That was all the encouragement Tyrant needed. Like a mad bull, he threw down his beer, put up his fists, and rushed toward René.

The rest of the band followed, though they made sure to put their beers down carefully to the backstage table.

Jo and Erik took up defensive positions at René's left and right side respectively. Ian stood behind them and

readied himself as well, though the three would take the initial attack, and not leave much for him.

Tyrant shouted madly as he tried to do a running headbutt. René sidestepped, and the man ran straight into Ian, colliding brutally.

Ian almost lost his balance, but managed to stop the momentum and shove Tyrant back. The vocalist smelled foul: the aroma of sweat and bad breath imprinted itself in Ian's brain, and would linger there for some moments.

A sudden rush of adrenaline flowed through his veins: the question of whether there was anything for him to do was now null and void.

Now all Blasphemer members were on top of them.

Total chaos. Four against four.

As Tyrant had been shoved back toward René, he took the opportunity to uppercut him savagely. The punch connected: Ian saw blood running from René's nose as he reeled.

Not long afterward, the fight had deteriorated into a wrestling match. Ian had his hands full with Satanakhia, who was much stronger than he initially appeared to be. To his left, Jo had Lord Obskurius pinned to the floor, and headbutted him in the prone position. She grinned with her teeth visible, face in a murderous frown.

As René was still out of the action, gathering his strength a few steps away from the melee, Erik fought with Tyrant and Koprologist simultaneously, rolling with them on the floor and growling like a man possessed.

Satanakhia broke free from Ian's grip and hit him in the jaw. The attack was unexpected, snake-like.

Ian saw stars.

In a sudden flash he saw a vision of a cage, in which a similar free-for-all group fight was going on.

Another flashback.

The memory was hazy, but he knew that the cage walls were to be avoided.

Before he had time to wonder why, the sight of a fist flying toward his face again brought him back to the situation at hand.

A trained assassin should fare better than this, Ian thought. His reflexes took over just in time: he blocked Satanakhia's punch a split-second before impact, gripped his arm, and twisted it to the ground.

Satanakhia yelped from pain.

Then Ian got the chance to return the punch to the face, grabbed the drummer with both hands, and threw him away. He crashed into the single table in the room.

A beer can had fallen to the floor from the force of the collision, its contents pouring out. Satanakhia reached for it wearily, the expression on his face signaling that he had had enough.

Ian's mind flashed back into the memory, and now he remembered why the cage walls were to be avoided. They had been electrified.

It had been another method of assassin training.

This fight was not quite as sadistic.

But still it raged on, vicious and sweaty in its own right. René had recovered and wrestled Tyrant away from Erik.

"He's mine," he raged.

Lord Obskurius managed to gain the upper hand and threw Jo away from top of him. Her head hit the wall and she slid to the floor, stunned.

With no other opponent for the moment, Ian rushed headlong into him while screaming bloody revenge, and

started to pound him severely.

However, he noticed a strange sensation, as his target slid away from under him just a moment after. Jo was back in action and had grabbed the bassist's feet. Ian ceased the pounding, glad that his guitarist partner in crime appeared to be mostly OK.

It turned out that Lord Obskurius did not want to put up much of a fight any more: Jo stopped the violence toward him as well, after kicking him literally in the behind.

That left Tyrant and Koprologist.

Erik now rolled on the floor with Koprologist alone. The guitarist was nimble and did not allow himself to be easily pinned down. Once in a while he managed to punch Erik, but the blows were insignificant. It was just a matter of time before the anger would boil over, and the full force of the over-man would be unleashed.

Next to them Tyrant, his face red with hate, had René held in place with his greater mass, and was moving in to strangle him.

Ian and Jo stood up, watching.

"Should we help him?" Ian asked.

"It's personal. Only if the situation goes very bad."

Tyrant's hands closed around René's neck and started to choke. How bad was bad enough? But Jo's stern gaze made it clear that Ian was not allowed to make a move yet.

Suddenly, Tyrant's eyes went wide open, and he howled in pain. It appeared René had grabbed his testicles, which was made possible by the singer's flexible black spandex pants. René followed with a series of rapid punches to Tyrant's head and body. The vocalist fell off him, not in the mood to fight any more.

Koprologist and Erik still struggled.

Erik glanced to his side to see René victorious. Apparently, for René to finish first was an assault on his pride, and therefore –

The over-man's wrath was let loose.

A low animal growl rose from the pit of Erik's stomach, as he first headbutted Koprologist once, then again, and finally grabbed him by the collar of his spiked jacket. Erik lifted the tall, thin musician on his shoulders, spinning around a few full circles, then threw the man onto the table with tremendous force.

The table disintegrated from the impact. The rest of the beer cans flew around the room, and the foaming liquid splattered all around.

Now the fight was over.

“We will gladly kick your ass as many times as necessary,” René said coldly. “So, no more sabotage, no more childish stupidity on this tour. Do we have an understanding?”

Rob, still on the floor, muttered something indistinct.

Blasphemer's roadie came in, apparently alerted by the comparably louder noise of the table breaking up. Ian expected him to look horrified or even surprised, but rather there was just a subdued look of understanding on his face.

Possibly, that meant Rob had a practiced habit of making enemies, and incidents like this were not exactly a rarity.

“They started,” René said, just in case.

No-one of the Blasphemer members protested or contested this. They had to be humiliated to the core.

René nodded for his band to exit the room. There was nothing more to be done here. Spared from any battle damage, Cyberpriest's pristine 12-pack stood in the corner of the backstage room, but as if by a com-

mon agreement, no-one of them made a move to grab it.

Let those poor bastards drink it while they lick their wounds, Ian thought. He had no doubt that they would, though it was not theirs.

René left to drive the van up to the loading door, while Ian, Jo and Erik started moving the gear closer to be loaded up. It was only now Ian became aware of the ache in his jaw and the rest of his body. Tomorrow the pain could be worse.

Jo appeared suddenly disoriented as she was moving her speaker cabinet: she had to pause for a while. It was probably a mild concussion from hitting the wall.

She caught Ian staring.

"I'm all right, really," she snapped, clearly displeased.

They could have been hurt worse in the fight.

However, Ian knew the way things had went had been fortunate for more than just one reason: preparing for the fight had forced them to keep Blasphemer under close watch the whole time, and to move quickly when they had ended their set. Otherwise, gear sabotage would have been a real possibility, considering how easily provoked Rob had been.

Of course the main point was still that Rob had been given a hard lesson. Time would tell if he had actually learned anything from it.

Ian contemplated René's earlier words of Lord Obskurius, Satanakhia and Koprologist being basically decent guys. Nevertheless, they had fought alongside their leader rather eagerly.

But had the situation been reversed, had he been in their shoes, Ian came to the conclusion that he would – should – have been just as eager.

All for one and one for all.

René arrived with the van, and hit the switch that opened the wide loading door.

The four of them lifted the gear unceremoniously out of the club: the amp heads, cabinets and the drum kit to the trailer, guitar and bass cases inside the van.

Then it was time to leave Iron Star behind. Hopefully for ever, Ian thought. In the yard behind the club, there were groups of people moving around and shouting drunkenly, some fighting. In Hades Club or even in The Black Shark there was some kind of order and familiarity to it, but here it felt unknown and menacing out of some reason.

Because of Fecal Discharge's short set, it was not even midnight, just slightly past 11:30 PM.

As they arrived at an intersection and turned right, away from the club, a sudden gunshot from behind pierced the night.

Ian almost jumped in his seat. SCEPTRE?

No, he decided. Had to be some drunk with a gun. Still, it was a lucky coincidence that the noisecore unit had been displeased with the crowd.

Ian's thoughts returned to the new flashback. He noted with satisfaction that the memory had not overpowered him: revelations of his bad past were already becoming standard fare, it seemed.

Still, it made him shudder, for he thought of how many more were suffering similar inhuman training, just now?

Rather than staying another night at the motel before continuing further to the east in the morning, the three of them managed to convince René to head back to the Outpost community.

But just barely.

“The deal is simple,” he said. “If this Logan guy says even one word against us or in support of Rob, we’re off. Or if he doesn’t say anything, but does something nasty to our gear in secret, then I’ll have your asses and never listen to any suggestion from any of you ever again.”

Under the right conditions René was a master of paranoia too, Ian thought. But then, blood was thicker than water. The pirate-like anarchist had been friendly, but things could change.

In the night, the multicolored lights of the community looked rather inviting. There were still some people outside, but most had already disappeared inside their cabins, or were spending the night in the tavern.

After parking their van, they decided to hit the tavern first and sample the moonshine.

“Let’s hope there’s no methanol in it,” René said, apparently suspicious of the whole place now, not just Lo-

gan. "I don't want to play the next show blind."

In addition to the tavern keeper, there were maybe ten people inside, sitting on long wooden benches that matched the wooden tables. Animated conversation filled the air.

"I'm Roxi. Wayne would be here too but he has a bad cold," the middle-aged woman introduced herself as they walked up to the bar. She had dyed part of her short blond hair with a variety of colors that matched the light bulbs outside, and her clothes were colorful as well.

After a short conversation, it appeared that Wayne, her husband – and a man with a legendary belly according to her words – was mainly in charge of the tavern and the production of the moonshine. But despite his illness, the good stuff would not be running short tonight.

They bought one bottle to be consumed among the four of them, and went to a vacant table. René relaxed a bit after they all had settled down and taken the first round from the bottle.

"Sharp, clear taste. Expertly brewed and distilled," Erik judged the drink.

The liquid warmed Ian's stomach pleasantly. He did not plan to get especially intoxicated this night, for he remembered the interrogation he had planned.

If he happened to bump into Logan, that is.

Ian was not sure, whether visiting him again in his cabin would be appropriate at this time. Of course, he was the master anarchist and free-thinker in this place, and therefore expected to provide anarchist support just like BOFHs were supposed to be available at almost all times. But still.

"I forgot to congratulate you all. It was an expert ass-

kicking. Thanks, guys," René said.

"It's all worth it if we get to play the rest of the tour without incidents," Ian replied.

"You never know. But the message has been given."

"When you threw Koprologist onto the table and it broke, was that the over-man in action?" Ian asked Erik.

Of course it had been. There was no other way.

"One facet of him, yes."

As he digested the more complex than anticipated reply, Ian realized now that Jo had been unusually quiet on the ride, and now here as well, and that got him worried again. She had hit her head quite nastily. But he was afraid to ask anything because of the risk of incurring her wrath.

Why it had to be so difficult, he thought.

Why we all had to be so hard-assed all the time?

After all, the band was almost like a family: it was natural to feel worry and affection toward each other, if the situation demanded so.

But that was not metal.

It was then Jo spoke, launching into a rapid-fire analysis.

"It would simplify things for everyone involved, if you could admit that it's in fact the only facet. As far as I understand, everything you do aims to show that you're the end-of-all badass."

That was somewhat unusual coming from Jo: usually she was more playful when it came to Erik. Maybe hard liquor made her serious? But Ian could put his worries aside for now.

"Interesting theory. But you got one thing wrong, my dear. I don't aim to show anything, for I don't give a shit what anyone else thinks," Erik replied.

Ian tried to dissect the reply: was it a truthful an-

swer? He could not tell for sure. Then he happened to look at the door and saw a tall, black-haired man walking in.

Logan.

Not wasting much time, the anarchist walked up to their table, a friendly expression on his face.

This is getting almost too easy, Ian thought.

“Hey there, I’m pleasantly surprised to see you return,” Logan addressed the whole band.

“By the way, it’s already on YouTube, cutting off your first song. Apologies for my brother. He truly is a jerk at times. I hope the rest of your set was all right. But you should check out the comments. He’s being condemned left and right, even by hardcore Blasphemer fans. He really messed up this time.”

René smiled briefly, a genuine warm smile Ian had never seen from him before. But then, the matter being discussed was warm only in the sense of warm hatred, revenge and blood.

“No need for you to apologize. Things have been ... sorted out. Will you sit down?” he said.

Logan sat at the table, producing a second bottle of moonshine from his coat pocket. At that point it was clear that the rest of the night would be trouble-free.

Barring a sudden apocalypse or a full-scale SCEPTRE attack, of course.

“We should drink the bottles in order,” Erik said, handing the already opened bottle to Logan.

The anarchist did not object, and took a medium-length sip, while Ian pondered interrogation strategies. He would have to start with things that were mostly common knowledge, and as the rest of the band were present, had to be extra cautious.

The motor gang was the perfect subject to start with.

Then there was the matter of pacing: Logan should drink himself into an optimal state. Not too little, but not too much either. Ian waited for another round, but made sure to drink only a little himself.

"Hey, last night, when we were driving here, we saw this long convoy. Jeeps, motorbikes and so. Speeding and honking like crazy, they passed us quickly. Would you happen to know anything about them? To me they looked ... criminal, possibly," he said to Logan at last.

Logan's expression became cryptic. Ian wondered whether this had been a good idea after all.

"I know what you're describing. And yeah, I would agree that they're criminal, for as far as I know they drive around, stealing and doing ... other stuff. We've had good luck so far, to not have them turn up here. But it's such an ugly subject for a lovely night like this. I'd rather discuss something else."

So far it matched with Vadim's tale. That "other stuff" was well worth probing into, though judging from Logan's reluctance, it would likely require him drinking more first.

"What other stuff do you mean?"

Jo had taken the initiative.

First Ian felt irritated. This was his interrogation. But then he realized that she could in fact have much better luck than him.

Logan let out a resigned sigh.

"Well, there have been bodies in the gang's wake. However, my personal theory is that they don't actually intend to kill."

Jo looked intrigued by the answer. Ian decided to just stay back and listen for now.

"Self-defense, then? Someone tries to go vigilante on them, but meets an unfortunate end?" Jo asked.

"In some cases, perhaps. My theory is that they're attempting to grab someone, but the attempt goes south. The victim resists too much, or almost gets away, and the situation escalates too quickly. They're forced to kill to not leave witnesses."

The conversation had taken a rather interesting turn. So far it was still familiar ground, but it was good to confirm Vadim's information from another source.

"So they're kidnappers, then?" René interrupted.

"No, not in the traditional sense. I've never heard that they would post a ransom notice. It's odd activity, and it seems they always try to mask whatever else they're doing by a flurry of looting. In fact, the whole gang is odd. Too much out of Mad Max or something. I would go even as far to suggest it's an elaborately constructed group, serving hidden purposes of the government or some other entity," Logan said.

Ian felt a chill go up his spine.

"What kind of people are they grabbing?" Jo asked next.

"Don't take this as gospel. My sources on this are vague. But I understand they're people no-one would really miss. Like drug addicts for instance."

Ian glanced to his side and saw Jo had been visibly alarmed by these words. What was going on?

Despite the reaction, her voice stayed even. "Do you know if they have, like, a fixed base of operations?"

"Unfortunately, no. I know only that they pass the town fairly often. Well, you get to several places through that route, so it's understandable. I think that if they had a base, it would have been found out and raided already. By the cops or some well-meaning people."

The last words were in a sarcastic tone. Well-mean-

ing people who liked to take law into their own violent hands, Ian understood.

"Thanks for your insight. You can get back to happier subjects now," Jo said.

Ian was no longer interested in further interrogations for now, at least in the presence of others. Jo had already done much of the work.

Ian exited the tavern to see Jo standing alone some distance away. René and Erik were still inside, drinking the moonshine with Logan. The clouds were gone now, leaving the stars visible. That also meant it was going to be a cold night.

The discussion had indeed taken a turn toward more pleasant subjects: the last Ian had seen of René was him standing up and making a frightening impression of a high-pitched power metal vocalist.

That was unusual. But if René could disconnect for a moment from the heavy burden of being Cyberpriest's dictator, especially in the company of Tyrant's brother, more power to him.

Neither Ian or Jo had drunk much, however.

Ian walked up to her.

"I guess you want to know why I joined your discussion of the gang?" she asked.

"Maybe."

"Of course I could also ask why you started to question Logan in the first place."

"You could."

Ian remembered the drunken ride away from the city, remembered how back then he had been ready to reveal anything and everything.

Was he ready to tell now?

Did Jo remember what he had said then?

He remembered how he had used Gwen's words. It was information that could shake one to the core, leave one unable to do anything. And not only that: knowledge of SCEPTRE could be directly dangerous to one's health.

But it was such a tangled mess, he did not know where and how to begin.

"Well, since I'm already in the habit of speaking more about myself than you are, I'll begin," Jo said.

Ian was disappointed in himself for letting the initiative slip away. But for now, he was also relieved. His turn would come later.

"I have this friend. Devin, or Dee. A cynic like me, maybe a bit worse. Well, he does speed, sometimes other stuff, and has been doing for years, so he's sort of riding a downward spiral. But he's always been a smart guy and always been capable of taking care of himself. Last week ... he just disappeared. I haven't been able to reach him. It's not typical for him at all."

Ian felt uneasiness rising as Jo went on.

"Of course there could be a thousand explanations. Some violent, some not. But somehow, when I heard you talk about this gang, I latched onto it. I know it's probably desperate, clutching at straws, trying to find reason when there might be none. But I knew you wouldn't have been interested if there wasn't anything in it. You're still trying to find out about Lucas' death, right?"

"Yeah..."

It was not an outright lie. But the whole thing was so complex - Lucas, SCEPTRE and his own past. Ian no longer knew for sure what he was aiming at himself.

"So, if you're looking out for this gang too, I think it'd be smart to join forces."

Ian did not know what to think. Jo seemed too willing to dive into danger she did not have a clear idea of, into something that was far greater than they could handle even with joined forces.

He had to warn her somehow.

“Listen. It might be dangerous. Very dangerous.”

Suddenly Jo's eyes lit up with fury.

“What? You have the sole right to risk yourself? I should just stay in the safety of the tour van, or on stage when I'm flanked by you guys for protection. Maybe participating in a little band fight once in a while, but even that while carefully watching out for my pretty little head? Right?”

The sudden vitriol in her voice was amazing.

“No, I don't mean like that at all,” Ian replied.

“So? Explain then, but be quick about it.”

Jo stood in a wide, aggressive stance with hands on her hips, eyes still aflame. It reminded Ian of some fictional heroine he could not exactly pinpoint.

He took a deep breath, still unsure of the order he should tell things, so that they would make sense even remotely.

Then he just plunged in, voice quiet and wavering.

“There are things you should know about me. My past, my whole life – I don't know which part of it is real and which is fabrication. What I do know is that at some point, probably in my late teens, I was trained to become a killer. It was dissociative training, and left some side effects in my mind. For example I couldn't have learned your songs so quickly otherwise.”

Jo's expression mellowed as some of the anger went away, but so far she was not shocked either.

“Let's assume you're not bullshitting me. So, who trained you? The government?”

“Not likely. It's an organization whose exact, real name I don't know, but you can call it SCEPTRE. Sectarian Chosen Elite Privileged To Rule and Exterminate. Lucas had some secret documents in his apartment at the time of his death. Documents that hinted at some kind of experiments, and the necessity of getting test subjects for them. I believe those were SCEPTRE's documents. As for the test subjects – that's possibly where the gang comes in.”

“OK, let's still assume you're not making this up. Dissociative training. I've read about such things. The MK-ULTRA project for instance. So yeah, it could be.”

“You might wonder how and why can I be telling you this? That's the catch, I never finished the training. I was extracted, or rescued, whatever word you prefer. Those who got me out – the Agents – did some counter-brainwashing, so that I would forget about the training. But it all started coming back to me. It actually started to come back when I heard you guys cover Expendable Youth. Apparently that was the theme song when we were trained to fight hand-to-hand.”

“Hmm.”

“For a long time, the official version in my mind was that I served in a juvenile prison, where I got for beating up another kid into hospital. After my release – my rescue, that is – I drifted for years. It's all unclear and hazy. There are still pieces missing.”

Jo stared into the ground, lost in her thoughts. Ian had no idea whether she had believed a word.

“Listen, it doesn't matter whether you think I made this up or not. All I want to say is that I believe this danger to be real. It's frightening even to myself. It's not some stupid protection thing. In fact, if I had to choose one person to fight the world, to fight SCEPTRE along-

side me, I don't think I'd choose anyone but you. But I don't want anyone to get hurt or killed because I didn't warn them of the danger. Just so that you know, I seriously considered leaving the band when I found out of myself. But then, I'd have been completely alone."

There. Now it was out of him.

Jo looked up and their eyes met.

"Interesting. I mean, you're probably out of your mind. In a hard, proper way, not just like René or Erik. Did you drink much of the moonshine?"

"No more than you, I'd say."

"OK, then it's not that. But that you want to fight the world with me? Could be like the most convoluted way ever of admitting that you have a crush on me, or something. I mean, I remember the hug, even if I don't remember much else from last night."

That could be interpreted as a blow below the belt. Ian tried his best to not make that show.

"But, there's just one but," she continued.

"I'm listening."

"If you're not making up the documents, then we definitely should try to seek out the gang. Considering everything I've heard from you and from Logan, I have a weird feeling that Dee might have been taken by them. Whether he's alive ... I don't want to guess. But I know I'll blame myself if I don't follow that lead to the end."

"But for now there's no more leads. We don't know where to find the gang," Ian said.

"We could talk to Logan once more in the morning, before we leave."

Ian did not know whether that would do much good. But it was as good suggestion as any. However, it was getting rather cold: he started to wander off in a random direction. Jo followed.

“By the way, I know I was kind of hard on you,” she said. “Not just now, but also earlier.”

Ian stayed silent. He had talked so much, so let her do the explaining now.

“The loading door. I wasn't all right, I felt like passing out. But I didn't need to snap out at you like that.”

Ian understood that coming from her, that had taken courage. There was a warm, almost fuzzy feeling inside him, along with some sadness. It was possible Jo had been so quiet because she had felt bad about snapping out at him. Though it was nothing, really, and in a way it had been well deserved. His stare had been alarmed. He would have hated a similar stare coming from anyone.

“No problem. Does it still hurt?”

“No, I'm fine now.”

They walked in silence back inside the tavern, where the drinking was still going on. René was talking something totally incomprehensible, apparently thinking he was not only the king of Cyberpriest, but king of the world.

In the morning, Ian and Jo visited Logan in his cabin. He had already booted up his whole array of machines.

“For now I don't have any pointers for you. But I'll look into the matter. Of course stopping those road pirates would be in everyone's best interest. Like I said, we've been lucky that they have not showed up here yet,” Logan said.

Ian imagined the gang speeding round and round amidst the Outpost buildings, destroying everything in their wake. It was not a happy thought.

“But I hope you understand this is not child's play at all? Those are dangerous people,” Logan added.

They both nodded.

Then it was time to pop the clutch already. It was the third day of pain, and the next show was a good two hundred miles away. Jo was behind the wheel for the day. As they left the community, she burned rubber.

“You're not Yngwie and it's not a fucking Ferrari,” René said in an anguished voice from the back, just loud enough to be heard.

Ian made a mental note to watch her closely: would she behave differently toward him, now that he had unloaded his dark secrets? Any normal person should definitely be scared and suspicious.

So far he had not noticed anything. Maybe she just did not believe. He could certainly be satisfied with that. Of course, there was the possibility that she was not exactly normal either. In fact normal was a vague and pretty much useless word, Ian concluded.

## 24.

The third and fourth days of pain had not been anything unusual. The venues and towns had been slightly bigger, the percentage of metalheads more satisfactory. For now, Tyrant had kept himself at a distance, sulking quietly. Everyone had settled into a routine: driving, trunking up the gear, doing the soundcheck, showtime, tearing down and going to sleep at some odd place.

Now was the fifth day.

The fifth show would take place in much bigger and impressive settings than the previous. Even Hades Club paled in comparison.

The Olympia recreational facility, just outside another bigger city they were driving toward now, contained both a theater and a casino. There were also meeting rooms, a swimming pool and a gym: business meetings of the rowdier kind were often held at the place. A four-star hotel just next door completed the picture.

It was puzzling how the “Seven Days of Pain” would make a detour at such grand surroundings. There was the slight, undesirable odor of corporate sell-out. But apparently, if noisecore, thrash metal and black 'n' roll were in demand here, and a proper Hessian crowd

would gather, instead of just suits, naturally they could not refuse.

Ian wondered not just about the place, but what a longer tour would do to a person's psyche. After only four days, he could never understand how for example the World Slavery Tour could have taken place without permanently destroying everyone who had been a part of it.

Of course, there being no off days explained something. On a longer tour it could never do. This was not just a tour, it was a condensed thrash metal survival course.

But the end of the tour was not anything to look forward to either: it meant going back home, back to where SCEPTRE could find him for sure.

For now, the electrical problems of the Cyberpriest van had been the height of drama: any time when they were driving happily, power could just cut off without warning. So far, they had survived by randomly fiddling with the ignition and the wires underneath.

"If it's just the ignition, a superhero would definitely have replaced it already," Erik said to René. The two sat in the front of the van.

"Just. Shut. Up," René replied.

He was at the end of his rope, and it was still about six miles to the venue.

The power cut off again.

René was already well-practiced in on-the-fly circuit repair. With a few rapid movements of his left hand underneath the steering wheel, the lights came back on, and the vehicle started responding to the accelerator once more. He did not even need to key the ignition again – the motor had not stopped completely yet.

Speaking of electricity, Ian had noticed too late that

he did not have a charger with him: his cell phone was now dead. But they stayed close together all the time, so there was not much need for it.

The remaining stretch went without incident. It was 5 PM, the light already fading, as their van pulled into the guest parking lot.

With its glass and metal walls, and a hundred or so lights on the outside, the building was impressive, almost scary.

"I don't know where the fuck the loading area is supposed to be. I'll go ask, wait here," René said as they all exited the vehicle.

Ian had an odd feeling about the place. A shiver of cold went through him.

SCEPTRE?

It was a possibility he could not discount, and decided to be extra aware.

"I guess this is the biggest venue we've ever played," Jo said. "Let's see how Blasphemer manage to stink up the place. I bet the backstage will be shiny now, but less shiny when the night's through."

"Didn't Tyrant talk of blood, shit and guts? I'll be disappointed if I don't see all of those," Erik replied.

Ian noticed how Jo did not betray in any way that she was thinking about the gang, her friend Dee, or the investigations she was going to perform if she just got the chance. On the two days prior, they had only talked about those subjects when they had been alone.

They both were now withholding information from René and Erik. Partners in crime.

René returned.

"OK, now I'm wiser. Let's go."

They climbed back into the van, and drove round the

building to the inner courtyard, where a familiar-looking loading platform waited for them.

Blasphemer and Fecal Discharge were already there, or at least their vehicles.

A security guard stood by the entrance, not looking exactly friendly. But before anyone had time to say anything, a smartly dressed attendant appeared.

“You are Cyberpriest?” he asked.

The four nodded, and the attendant gave each their artist passes, then vanished promptly, as if wanting to avoid prolonged exposure to dirty Hessians.

With no-one around but the guard, there was no good reason to linger outside any longer. René led the way.

The backstage hallway did not look unusual yet. Harsh lighting and thick ventilation ducts snaking along the ceiling. It could have been any club.

But here, separate rooms had been arranged for each band. Erik pointed at the “CYBERPRIEST” sign.

“Look at this, suddenly it feels like we're kings. But now we don't get to see if Blasphemer live up to their words and defecate at their backstage,” he mused.

“It's not out of the question that they break into our room to do something funny,” René cautioned, despite the two previous shows without an incident.

The four looked inside their backstage room.

Indeed, it was unusually clean. There were no obscene graffitis, no signs of rockers or metalheads ever having been there. Towels and refreshments had been laid out for the night in a business-like way.

“This is not very metal,” Erik said simply.

Any attitude would have to be supplied by them, and hopefully by the crowd later in the night.

The place itself did not exude any.

To work themselves up to a rage, they went back to the van to haul the gear in, and to prepare for the soundcheck. Along the way Billy passed by, seemingly not very enthusiastic of the venue's spirit either.

Justifiably, Blasphemer and Fecal Discharge had queued up for soundcheck before them. Noisy guitar sounds and cavernously reverberating drum hits filled the big theater. Having set up all his gear, Billy was at the mixer console, adjusting it methodically as he was making early judgments of the overall sound.

Finally Cyberpriest's turn came. To challenge themselves, and trying to ensure the rage would last until showtime, they played "Necrothrashing Desecrator" at an extra fast tempo. Ian had trouble keeping up at first, but he pushed himself on brutally until it became easier.

Just for macabre fun, he imagined SCEPTRE torturers giving him electric shocks if he did not play well enough.

Under Billy's expert treatment, the sound tightened up noticeably already after the first chorus. The sound system, once brought under control, was probably the best they had heard so far. The monitoring was top-notch as well: everyone could hear all the instruments they wanted.

With his long guitar cord, Ian jumped down from the stage to listen from the audience's perspective, and was almost blown away by how pure and metal it sounded. There is something good in corporate sell-out too, he thought.

René did not do all the usual manic grunts in the end: he was sparing his voice. Ian had noticed that he

did not sing with nearly as much aggression as in the beginning of the tour: the restless schedule was taking its toll on all of them.

Well, maybe not Erik. He still pounded with all the ferocity of a mad black goat of the woods, like he could last for a thousand days.

Now all that was needed was just a metal audience.

When the sound check was over, Ian went to check out the rest of the place. It was still long until showtime. From the outside the building had looked big, but on the inside, he realized, it felt colossal.

Though the theater was yet closed for others than the band and their crews, elsewhere the whole place was buzzing with people.

Ian knew better than to enter the casino. In fact, it did not interest him at all, or at least so he convinced himself. He had lost enough money on slot machines and by playing cards with fellow metalheads. Even Lucas had severely robbed him once or twice.

The usual rule applied: one beer maximum. René was a relentless, almost heartless dictator, but it was true that their music was demanding. The other bands on the tour were warning examples.

And Ian had made the decision to stay alert –

Suddenly, his head started to swim.

He had thought to be already over it, but apparently he was not. He had noticed an almost unnoticeable detail in the wall of a spacious lounge that connected the theater and the casino. In only one of the shiny wall panels, there was a shallow indentation, which formed the symbol he had last seen in Lucas' documents.

The equilateral triangle. The circle. And the sphere in the very center.

SCEPTRE.

As the wave of nausea subsided, Ian remembered that he had been in this building before, during his training.

Had it been live-fire practice, chasing the other trainees inside twisting corridors in a delirious, unending deathmatch? Or something else? He was not completely sure, but that did not matter.

What mattered was that this place was evil.

He remembered that from somewhere in the building, a secret passage could be triggered. It was connected to the triangle symbol.

Was it this very panel?

Ian searched with his fingers, looking for some kind of hidden detail that could unlock the passage. Meanwhile he glanced nervously for anyone coming. Just for the moment, this side of the lounge happened to be empty.

But he did not find anything either.

It had to be some other panel, also fitted with the symbol. But where?

The whole situation felt like descending into sudden madness. In his desperation, Ian tried to dissociate again to relieve the mental overload.

He was a metal musician about to play tonight, nothing more. The worst conflict in his world was the enmity between Cyberpriest and Blasphemer, or alternatively, trying to observe the metal rules. There was no SCEPTRE. He had served time at a juvenile penitentiary, instead of –

It did not help.

SCEPTRE. Training. Fnords.

He had to force himself very hard to not scream aloud.

Calm down, he ordered himself.

Focused again, but still looking warily to left and right, he left the lounge and entered the gym facilities. There were people moving around in their exercise clothes: Ian knew he looked badly out of place.

It was like looking for a needle in a hay stack. The second symbol, the one with the secret passage, could be practically anywhere.

Then he remembered. The gym had not been there during his training. It had been built later. The passage had to be in the original part of the building, with the casino and the theater.

He left and traced his way back to the first symbol. Maybe some occult number would tell the required number of steps to reach the other, and the correct direction to take.

It felt so desperate.

He focused hard.

Focused on the gun in his hand. On the footsteps. On the maze of corridors. On the smells. He replayed the fuzzy and fragmented memory of the “deathmatch” in reverse.

Until he came to the entrance.

There was a sterile smell, which in the context of the memory was sickening. It could be a restroom, or a cleaning equipment closet. But a closet would too small for the kind of entrance he remembered. The restroom, then. The one near the casino. Yes, now he was sure of it.

There was only one final question.

Male or female?

Oddly, he decided it had to be the female one. A moment later, the reason crystallized in his mind, and there was no doubt about it any more: in his time the

assassin trainees had been predominantly boys, and SCEPTRE would not have missed any opportunity to humiliate them. It was another method of control. Of course there would be an executive entrance to the corridor system elsewhere, or in fact many of them, but he remembered only the “servants' entrance” so to speak.

Without hesitation, he entered the female restroom.

In front of the mirror, there was a young woman in a rather expensive-looking dress. Maybe, if Ian angled himself just right, he could pass for a woman with his long hair and less than muscular physique. Maybe, if she did not turn...

No such luck.

From the expression on her face, there was no doubt she had recognized him properly. Thankfully she did not scream.

“Fucking pervert,” she snapped instead and left the room, furious.

That humiliation was a small price to pay for the now unrestricted access to the room: none of the five stalls were occupied.

Which one? Or was it any of them at all?

The one in the middle, he was sure. He went in.

Locking the door behind him, Ian knelt beside the toilet seat, or deadwhite throne as he liked to call it. The symbol had to be somewhere behind the seat, hidden from plain sight. He examined the porcelain panels with his hands.

The indentation. There.

He gave it a sharp push with both hands. It gave way soundlessly. Next came a quiet electric whir as a section of the back wall, slightly less than one meter wide, descended until its top was level with the floor, revealing a dark corridor behind.

Ian's heart jumped for a while, missing beats in a predictable sequence. He felt cold sweat of apprehension on his skin.

However, now that he had gotten this far, there was no option but to enter. The intrusion had no doubt been noticed: on a monitor somewhere, a SCEPTRE operator knew he was going in.

Steeling himself, he entered the corridor. It was slightly angled downward.

As he was maybe two meters in, the corridor lit up, no doubt activated by a motion detector. There had to be surveillance devices everywhere.

Now Ian no longer remembered that he had a show to play. His mind only screamed SCEPTRE in big block letters. Even staying alive did not necessarily matter. As he jogged further down the white corridor, the sense of apprehension passed, and suddenly he felt dangerously calm.

No matter what would happen, he had reached one goal he had actually thought very hard or impossible. He had found SCEPTRE before they had found him. He felt for the USP pistol hidden within his leather jacket: it had always been with him since receiving it from Gwen.

He was in control.

The feeling of control turned slowly into creeping dread as Ian realized he had no idea where of he was going. It was a maze of corridors that all looked alike, and were lit alike.

However, now he knew he was not going downward any more: the hallways leveled out. Still, he had to be at least one floor underground. In a vain attempt to get comfort, he gripped the gun hard, harder than was beneficial in case he actually had to respond to a threat.

There were doors at irregular intervals: all seemed to have either a card- or key code lock next to them. The doors had no actual language on them, only alphanumeric sequences. The card-lock door labels always had a letter in the beginning, while the others could be anything.

Cameras were a common sight: Ian patiently waited for them to turn away before passing, or flattened himself to the wall. However, he had a nagging feeling that they were only for the show: the real cameras might be hidden.

He figured he had been maybe a ten minutes total down here in the maze, but it already felt like an eternity. There had been no encounters, no sign of life at all.

That made the place even more haunting. He started to harbor paranoid ideas: what if lights would suddenly go out, what if the corridors would fill with poison gas, or if guard robots armed with high-powered lasers would suddenly appear out of hidden trapdoors?

It was childish, he knew, but he needed the mental exercise to keep himself in some degree of control. Panic or total catatonia were the other options.

Then, suddenly, there were footsteps up ahead.

Clinical, almost machine-like. The corridors echoed to such degree that he could not pinpoint the footsteps' exact direction.

Ian searched with his eyes all the doors in the immediate vicinity. But there was none left mercifully open for him to duck inside. He just had to guess the rough direction of the sound, and duck into a side corridor, if he did not want to become exposed.

This is unfair, he thought.

He had already gotten this far. But this far into what?

Ian had to admit that it made no difference as long as he was just wandering in the corridors with no clear goal.

However, there was also a simple, delightful and sadistic alternative: he could just kill whomever was approaching. He almost felt stupid for not considering it before, for feeling such panic about the footsteps.

After all, he had a gun, so why not put it into use?

He was sure a SCEPTRE operative or a fully trained assassin would display no hesitation in his place.

He checked the gun, switched the safety off.

There was just one problem. The pistol was not cocked. If he pulled back the slide to ready it, it would make a distinctive noise that the approaching person would surely notice.

To hell with it, he thought. He was going to guess the direction wrong anyway. Let whoever was coming notice him, to come to him.

He racked the slide. Now he was ready to fire.

Sure enough, a man came into view from behind a corner on the right. He looked like a businessman, with a gray, unremarkable overcoat, black trousers, glasses and hair combed back.

But under the gray coat, there actually was a white garment, almost as long.

A scientist's coat.

A SCEPTRE scientist!

As they had played with his mind – or at least devised the instructions to be followed by the trainers – just as mercilessly as a malevolent hacker would root and cripple a server, it was only fitting that his first SCEPTRE kill would be a man of science.

Of evil science, no less.

There was also a distinct bulge in his clothes. Ian would not be killing an unarmed man.

The man had not turned toward him yet as Ian took aim, coldly and methodically. Aligning the iron sights was something he had not done for a long time, as back at the parking lot he had just fired blindly, but the procedure came back from muscle memory fast enough.

He depressed the trigger.

The shot echoed loudly in the corridor.

The man was maybe a thirty meters away. Ian could not see, but could imagine the blood spurting from the exit wound in his back. It was a solid hit to the torso.

The man's feet buckled under him –

But the SCEPTRE scientist, or whoever he was, was not going to die just yet. In fact, he seemed to be reaching for his own gun.

Ian readied himself for a second shot, aiming now for the head. He observed a total lack of emotions inside. This was what he had been trained for. He had never graduated, but apparently his training was still good enough to take at least one SCEPTRE life.

The man finished fishing out a medium-large object from his white coat's pocket.

Now Ian realized it was not a gun.

It was a grenade.

Some dark recess of his mind identified the cylindrical shape. It was not just an ordinary fragmentation grenade that would shred his body with flying steel, but something far more vicious: an incendiary one.

Ian cursed aloud. If time truly slowed down in a situation like this, he could imagine his voice pitching down and turning demon-like. But was that bullet-time, or Agent-time? He cursed, not only because he was with high likelihood going to die, and die in burning pain, but also because the man could have in his possession access cards or some more classified SCEPTRE documents. Now the man was going to blow them all away, to incinerate them along with himself.

It could not be allowed to happen.

Thirty meters away, the man went for the pin.

Less than a meter away, Ian's finger went for the trigger and gave the final push.

The gun bucked in his hand again, spitting lead.

The man's head jolted back, something red and gray mushrooming out from behind. The grenade clattered to the floor harmlessly, the pin half-pulled but still holding.

Ian almost sank to the floor with relief, but controlled himself. There was no reason to be overjoyed.

The two shots had been heard, no doubt.

Not only heard, but captured by microphones and analyzed by superior computers, which SCEPTRE just had to possess in a place like this. And hidden electric eyes had probably seen it all.

Soon there would be more.

But not quite yet, and maybe a ten seconds were all Ian needed for now. He sprinted, practically leaped toward the corpse, and started examining the pockets with no respect whatsoever.

Almost instantly he found several credit card-like items, which he repossessed. There was no identification on them: most probably they were just impersonal access cards.

But it was a start: with luck they would open some of the mystery doors he had passed, or those that lay ahead.

In addition to those, the man possessed nothing of worth to Ian. No secret documents. There was a 9mm pistol and one spare magazine, but Ian figured to be already armed enough. Besides, the barrel of the scientist's weapon would not accept a silencer.

If only Gwen had given him one!

Back then he had been in so much confusion, that he had forgot to ask. Maybe Gwen had not had one either. But with a silenced weapon, the rather one-sided shoot-out would have been much less noticeable.

For a moment Ian entertained the thought of wearing the man's clothes. But then, as he turned him around, he noticed the large hole and the great amount of blood.

It would not be a good disguise.

Besides – and now he was suddenly so glad that he remembered it – he was going to play a show tonight, and needed his own clothes.

If he made it out alive.

Just then, he heard one more sound. It was a ping that came from ahead, close by.

The sound was like one that an elevator made when it stopped. More scientists or guards coming out of an elevator? Did SCEPTRE use ordinary elevators in their hidden complex? That thought felt almost ridiculous, but of course it made sense to use standard equipment even in such secret surroundings. Ian lifted his gaze to scan the corridors ahead, to possibly decipher the direction of the sound.

His heart sank. The next intersection, maybe another thirty meters away, was a T-junction. End of the line.

There was no time to move the corpse out of sight. And the floor was already hopelessly marked with blood and brain matter.

He just had to move himself out of sight.

The sound of a door sliding open came next, followed by footsteps in a military-like rhythm. The heavier sound of several pairs of combat boots. Guards, most likely armed.

No, guard was a wrong word.

Suddenly a much more scarier word pierced through his brain, forgotten vocabulary from his training. The rank the very best assassin trainees would achieve.

Black op.

A team of SCEPTRE black ops had come out of the elevator to hunt him down, to kill him like a trapped animal.

Ahead had to be a dead end. If he was very audacious, if the dead end was circular in just the right way, he could circle so that the team would not see him.

But if it failed, it would be suicide.

Therefore he decided to retreat, back to the several

locked doors he had passed earlier. With some luck the cards from the scientist would open at least one.

And with some more luck there would be no-one inside.

The footsteps grew louder. Now Ian knew they were coming out of the T-junction, from the left. It was not long before the team would turn and spot the corpse.

And him.

Ian quickly rifled through the access cards, careful not to fumble and drop them. All of them had the number one on them, but different letters.

The number could be a security clearance level. For quick access, he ordered them alphabetically by the letter. There was an A, B and E.

Not long now.

He could not retreat very rapidly because the sound would betray him. Hugging the wall, he crept back to the first door on the left, a white one.

B-41M, read the door.

Fairly obvious, he thought in relief, and inserted the card marked with B. A green light lit in the reader and there was the short noise of an electric latch opening.

He grabbed the metal handle and pulled in a sharp motion, using as much force as he judged safe. The door opened soundlessly but tortuously slowly on its hinges.

It was pitch black inside.

As soon as the gap was perhaps twenty centimeters wide, he quickly snaked through the opening and closed the door behind him. The latch clicked shut audibly – he hoped it had not been too noticeable.

But now, he had no idea whether the black ops had seen him. He could hear the footsteps through the door almost as clearly as when standing in the hallway. They came yet closer, then stopped.

The black ops had to be at the corpse now.

Ian listened, cursing his own breathing and heart beat for making the task harder.

There were muffled, clipped words. A lone speaker, probably the one examining the body. The low-pitched voice was not displaying any overt emotions. No cursing.

With great caution – though he was not sure what exact danger could lurk in the pitch darkness, maybe a man-eating plant or bared high voltage wires – Ian felt for the light switch.

There was something.

But was it a light switch, and not an alarm trigger for instance? Or poison gas release?

Only one way to find out.

He pressed the switch: fluorescent lights came on in sequence, a dim amber glow at first, then bright white.

It was a meeting room of some kind.

Actually it looked rather boring, with a long white table, chairs arrayed around, and a data projector hanging from the ceiling, upside down.

But on the table there were a couple of A4-sized papers. More secret SCEPTRE documents. Luck had not abandoned him yet.

Of course, he would still have to make it out of here, a task that could be much harder than just stuffing the documents inside his jacket, neatly rolled.

Mesmerized by the papers, Ian had almost forgotten about the black ops. Now, he focused again on the sound of boots roving the corridors, each step reminding him of how close he could be to discovery.

The black ops had to be informed of what kind of access his victim had possessed. Therefore, it would be a matter of elimination, a matter of not having to try too

many doors –

He could not wait forever.

There was no knob on the door on the inside, instead just a button that would open the electric lock. Ian hated this: he could not control the force he applied to open the latch soundlessly, but would be at the mercy of the electric mechanism, and the predetermined amount of noise it made.

He pressed the button, swallowing and gritting his teeth, which made the sound disappear in his ears. But the black ops would certainly have heard it if they were close enough.

He pushed the door open for a centimeter or so, and peered into the hallway, into the direction of the corpse.

His blood almost froze from the sight.

Standing in the hallway, maybe a twenty meters away, still concentrated on the corpse while the rest of the black ops searched, was a very evil-looking man.

He was dressed in a black uniform that resembled one commonly used by corporate security guards. That was the ordinary part, not in the least bit evil, except perhaps for the sub-machine gun, a Mini-Uzi that he carried on a sling.

The truly evil part was the face.

He had deep-set eyes, like Lucas, but to a power of two, so that the face resembled more of a skull than an alive and well person. There was short-cropped black hair with a receding hairline, almost charming in its own way. But the mouth and the eyes formed a cold, frightful expression that radiated total, Satanic malevolence. In his neck was scar tissue, probably from a burn injury.

Ian closed the door again and let out a sigh.

There was no way he could get past the man unno-

ticed. Maybe, just maybe he could manage to fire first. But the man's cronies would be alerted, sub-machine guns ready. The combined firepower would shred him to pieces. And then there was something completely else.

Ian was afraid of the man.

Not just afraid, but frightened to the core. If he would get close, into eye contact, Ian was afraid that his willpower would just melt away.

The man was not a stranger. He had been present at the training exercises. And the tortures.

The sight of this man made more memories return. Ian fought another wave of nausea. It was not as bad as seeing the SCEPTRE symbol for the first time, or when Gwen had told about his past, but still it hit him pretty hard.

Ian could not remember the tortures exactly, only vague snapshots of pain. But one underlying concept was perfectly clear: whoever failed in the training, would be tortured.

For example, when Lucas had overpowered him in the knife-fight, there had been severe pain afterward.

Some had died from the punishments, which included electric shocks, branding irons, asphyxiation and pain-enhancing drugs to name just a few. And even the rest who lived, some of them started to fail more and were tortured more, forming a vicious circle.

Ian snapped back to reality.

To escape this room and the maze of corridors – but how? There was no other exit from the room. No door to an adjoining room, for instance.

Up in the ceiling, there was the grille of a ventilation duct. The classic escape route.

Ian judged that the grille was big enough for him to

enter, but it was so high up that he would have to stack at least two chairs on the table to reach it. And the metal-framed chairs would make a terrible racket if they tipped.

But there was no other way, unless he wanted to brave the hallway, the very evil man, and those under his command.

Therefore, he went from plan into action.

First one chair, then another. So far, he attempted to be quiet. And so far it was successful. Now he just had to climb on the topmost chair to pry the grille open.

The chairs shook terribly as soon he was on top of them. He reached with both hands for the grille, pulling and tearing with force.

The metal cut his left index finger: he felt a sharp, but not very forceful pain. Blood dripped on the white table, leaving a mark of his visit.

Then the grille gave way, so surprisingly that Ian lost his balance.

It clattered from his hands to the table, making a metallic noise which mixed with the heavier thud of his body hitting the table as well. The collapsing chairs joined the chorus.

Short of firing a gun, there was no better way to announce his presence.

“God damn!” he hissed in frustration.

The black ops would enter the room in a matter of seconds.

Ignoring the pain, Ian stacked the chairs again in record time and pulled himself up to the duct, pushing with his feet to give him more momentum. The stack of chairs collapsed again, but it no longer mattered.

He was in the duct.

Quick footsteps approached.

From up above, Ian watched the door swing open with force. Four black-uniformed men rushed in, the evil-looking one in the lead.

All had silencers screwed on their weapons.

“Up there,” the man croaked with a raven voice.

The voice felt familiar. Ian understood that not just his neck was scarred, but the vocal cords also. Permanent damage in the line of SCEPTRE duty.

Ian knew what would come next, and started speed-crawling along the duct, not caring of the noise he made, not caring of hurting himself.

Four Mini-Uzi's began their muted clatter in unison. Metallic impacts came dangerously close to him: he could feel something sizzling hot on his clothes.

However, it was lucky that the duct was not directly exposed, but above the ceiling panels. The black ops could not directly see where they were firing, and the bullets had to pass the ceiling first.

They would probably still have enough kinetic energy to kill, so Ian did not slow his pace.

If he had not totally lost his sense of direction, he was going deeper into the complex, back into the direction of the T-junction. Some distance away, the ventilation duct made an S-shaped turn, then continued in the original direction. Now the men had even less chance of hitting him.

So far, so good.

But naturally they would try to guess where he was going and intercept him there. Running was much faster than crawling.

Ian had traveled maybe fifty meters total, and looked down through another grille.

There had to be the elevator where the black ops had come from. However, he decided not to risk dropping down from here: he did not have the slightest idea of the layout of the floors, whether he should – or could – go up or down.

The muted sub-machine gun fire started again, tearing holes into the duct, the impacts much louder than the noise of the guns themselves.

The men were onto him.

That too made the decision easier. He would just have to go on, hoping to lose the pursuers further along the way. He hastened his crawling once more. Already, his knees hurt badly and his heart hammered on overdrive.

It was no fun being hunted by SCEPTRE.

The duct made a ninety-degree turn.

Even deeper into the complex? Or toward an exit? There was no way to tell. Ian could have given anything to be teleported away from here to safety. The theater stage, or the clinically clean backstage room were just distant memories now.

For some reason he was suddenly worried of whether he would make it to the show on time, before Fecal Discharge would leave the stage. It felt patently absurd to worry about the show when his life was at risk.

But it was a distraction, and helped to combat the panic that threatened to overtake at any moment.

The panic was understandable, as right now he had no great degree of control. His life was practically in the hands of this ventilation duct system that he did not know at all.

There was a four-way intersection.

Which way to take?

Would any occult number sequence help him? Or did SCEPTRE even use occult numbers? He could have sworn they did, but could not dig up any memory to support the fact.

He had taken a ninety-degree turn to the left, so if he turned right, he would continue to the original direction. That idea felt as good as any: of course it was the most predictable one, but the hidden complex could not go on forever. Somewhere the corridors had to end.

But then, where would he end up? At a dead end?

Being underground without a clue where to go was not far from being buried alive.

He had went on for another fifty meters. No, much more. He was already becoming numb to the pain and the routine of crawling. More like a full hundred meters. There had been no more down-facing grilles for a while, and it was becoming dark.

He arrived at a T-junction. The edge of the world.

But it was not just a T-junction: there was also a vertical grille in the duct wall.

Behind the grille, there was a narrower conduit with

walls of masonry. Some weak light came from its other end, where a heavy metal grating blocked the way. Ian strained his ears: from the other end he could hear the faint gurgle of running water.

A sewer?

Possibly.

Ian turned around in the duct junction so that his feet were facing the grille, and kicked hard.

It loosened instantly, tipping over into the narrow conduit with an unpleasant clang. But it was far from the loudest noise he had made down there, and being stealthy mattered now far less than just getting out.

Ian knew the grating at the other end could be much harder to get loose. Legs were stronger than arms, so he did not turn around again, but went into the conduit in a sitting-like posture, legs first.

Soon he had to bend into an almost horizontal position: it was slow and uncomfortable going. The masonry scraped his hands and legs relentlessly, and his head slammed into the ceiling a few times by accident.

But at last he was at the grating.

Again, he kicked hard, with both legs.

It did not move. It was maybe rusted shut.

He kicked again, straining to reach some hidden power reserves.

This time the grating came loose just a bit from one of its edges. He kicked for a third time and it fell on concrete somewhere below, then bounced and splashed into water.

Ian peered out of the hole: the drop to the ground was not great, less than two meters total. It was indeed a sewer, with dark, dirty water running in a channel that was flanked by concrete walkways on each side. There were light bulbs at regular intervals in the arched

ceiling: it was rather gloomy, but bright enough to move without the danger of falling into the water.

The smell was not pleasant. In fact, it was disgusting.

He dropped carefully down, letting his legs go loose to not hurt himself unnecessarily upon landing.

However, he misjudged his forward momentum and almost fell to the water on impact. His left hand went below the water surface. And that was the hand with the cut! He wondered what kind of infection he might now get.

But worrying did not help now.

Ian rose and started walking in the direction of the water flow. Ahead, there was a bridge that crossed the sewer, with corridors starting from both ends and going off to unknown directions.

Sudden paranoia entered his mind: he was afraid that the black ops would appear on that bridge any second from now.

Therefore, he started running.

Not long into the run, his foot slipped in a puddle of liquid on the floor. Before he had properly realized what had happened, he was flying through the air. Slipping had twisted his torso slightly, giving unexpected sideways momentum.

He plunged head-first into the sewer water.

Maybe it was slightly more pleasant than hitting the hard concrete. But not much.

Not soon after Ian had climbed out of the dirty water, he noticed a ladder on the wall. An escape route from this underground prison at last.

He was wet, his clothes and hair were dirty, and he knew he stank in an unholy way. But still, it was a much welcome surprise.

He climbed the ladder quickly and came to the manhole cover at the top, the last obstacle between him and freedom. It was heavy: he went into desperate rage as he pushed and strained against it with his shoulder, while holding on to the ladder rung.

Finally, it gave way slightly.

Ian grunted aloud to vent off some steam, to vent off his rage. He got his hand around the edge of the manhole cover and lifted it further, sliding it out of its place.

Shivering from the cold and the wetness, he emerged from below onto the street. There were cars zooming past: no doubt some driver had noticed the odd sight, but thankfully there were no pedestrians.

Ian checked his watch: the strap had come loose and he had almost lost it the sewer. The time was slightly past 8 PM. Fecal Discharge would be starting their set in less than half an hour.

Where was he? How far from the theater?

He looked around to recognize the surroundings. Then it came to him: it was the wide street leading to the city itself, and the lights of the recreational facility were only maybe a five hundred meters away to the other direction.

It was a total relief.

He would easily make it in time even to see Fecal Discharge's set.

But now that this relieving fact had been established, paranoia crept up again. Would he be admitted back inside? Had the cops been alerted? Of course, SCEPTRE was an evil organization, but still he had been trespassing, entering places he definitely should not have been in, and had killed a man.

Would he be arrested?

In the end, that would be a relieving alternative. Far

worse would be if SCEPTRE for instance was now holding René, Jo and Erik hostage.

Not wanting to consider even worse scenarios, Ian started a jog toward the lights, not only to keep warm but harboring the absurd belief that the sooner he arrived, the less time SCEPTRE would have to do their evil work.

Of course it was childish: SCEPTRE had likely been alerted the moment he entered the passage behind the toilet seat. And definitely when the scientist's body had been discovered.

Ian reached inside his pockets. The access cards had been lost in the dirty water, but the grand prize was still there – the documents held within his inside breast pocket. He pulled them out: they were moderately soaked, but still legible.

Satisfied, he put them back inside. They would have to be examined later. He was scared that they would again have some kind of debilitating effect on him, and did not want to lose control or trigger any more memories for now.

He reached the building. So far, nothing suspicious: no guards or black ops roaming the grounds. Still he did not want to risk the front entrance – the inner courtyard and the loading bay felt much more inviting.

Inside the backstage area, the world felt fairly normal despite his adventure deep into the bowels of SCEPTRE: their gear was still there waiting to be lifted up on the stage, the sign was still on their backstage room door.

Of course, that proved yet nothing. He would be not relieved until he actually found his bandmates.

A security guard walked toward him. Taken by surprise, Ian felt his body go weak for a second before

combat instinct returned. He hoped to have shown no visible reaction.

“Been putting your war-paint on, eh?” the guard, probably in his thirties, remarked sarcastically. That sounded like the height of friendliness after being chased down a ventilation duct by sub-machine gun fire.

Ian grinned in return. Very likely not SCEPTRE.

Next, he peered inside their room.

Nothing.

The beers and the towels still waited patiently to be put into use.

Fecal Discharge had not yet begun. Therefore, he decided to shower himself, to get at least his skin and hair clean. The clothes would still be a problem, but he could play with his chest bare, showing the wound that was by now mostly healed.

It was possible some bacteria had entered, and he would get truly sick. Just in case, he made a mental note to stop by at a drug store to get some prescription-free antibiotics.

The shower certainly felt refreshing. Standing under the flowing water, Ian heard the first beats of noisecore filter into the backstage.

He dried himself and put the sewer-soaked clothes back on. The feeling was still nowhere near clean, but slightly improved.

The rest had to be watching the show. Or held hostage by SCEPTRE. Soon enough he would find out.

The three sat at a bar on the side of the theater, watching the show with disinterest and forlorn gazes, apparently having given up hope of Ian ever reappearing.

Tremendous relief.

But of course going missing without any explanation was not exactly something they would be happy about.

As he walked closer, a last paranoid thought went through his mind, something totally not of this world: what if his bandmates had been replaced with false clones, while he was away?

"What the fuck? You look and smell like you've been diving inside a dumpster," Erik started the conversation.

"Close enough. I swam in a sewer," Ian replied.

René just sat there, staring. His brow went into a slight frown at first, then a more severe one.

Finally he spoke.

"I don't give a shit where you've been, but I hope you understand that disappearing like that is not OK, not in the slightest? I tried to call you, but of course your phone's dead. We searched for you fucking everywhere."

Ian nodded.

"Have you been drinking? Or doing some shit? Trying to score more shit from odd places?"

"Fuck no," Ian responded defiantly, the best he could come up for the moment.

"We'll see about that," René concluded and said no more.

The treatment had not been as bad as Ian had feared. He knew that by playing exceptionally, he could save some face. In fact a large crowd had already gathered. It was better not to mess up this night.

"Junkyard war metal, now that's an idea. Maybe we all should go find some trash bin to dive into," Erik mused, some humor in his voice.

With his peripheral vision, Ian saw Jo just focusing

on the noisy show. She had avoided getting involved in the situation at all. Ian thought she might have some clue to what he had been doing, but decided against discussing it now. Instead, he returned to sit at the bar. He had not drunk the one beer yet, so now was high time.

But even as the cold drink soothed his throat, the suspicious thoughts kept returning.

There had been no cops, no security guards giving him any kind of trouble. It was as if the below-ground adventure had never happened.

Naturally SCEPTRE wanted to hide the existence of its secret corridors below the building, as well as the fact that they had tried to kill him not just with automatic gunfire, but with an incendiary grenade as well. The scientist's body would probably be disposed of with the authorities never knowing.

However, it was hundred percent certain SCEPTRE was watching him even now. He remembered his earlier thoughts: how there might be no sign from them for a long time, no warning, until one night he would stare into a gun muzzle or feel it pressed against his back.

Finally, there was the question of what he himself had become, or would continue to become.

Now he definitely was a killer, not just trained to become one. It had been sort of self-defense against an armed opponent, but still.

Was it unthinkable that a real killer would take the stage playing thrash or war metal? In fact, despite the aggression of the music, René's newer lyrics were intelligent, always questioning the use of violent force and searching for mental balance and peaceful solutions in the face of overwhelming conflicts. How could Ian honestly try to support that message with his playing, after

what he had done?

It felt so wrong and schizophrenic.

How he felt about Jo at times was another example. How could a cold-blooded killer be allowed to feel all warm inside from something as simple as her smiling at him? Of course, she had practiced with firearms. She wanted to perform investigations of her own, to possibly risk her life. Maybe a killer recognized a would-be killer?

No, he was getting sidetracked.

This was not about her, but about him.

It was like there were several personalities inside him. That was the heart of the matter. Dissociation, again. But what was the real personality then? Or at least the dominant one?

Of course, everything had been set into motion much earlier: his training had been inside him well before he had joined the band, well before he even had met Gwen.

And Gwen had turned out to be an Agent. A killer, too.

Killers or killing everywhere around him. In his past and the present. Probably more of it in the future. It was like a nightmare he wanted to wake up from.

But there was no escape.

Suddenly Ian remembered his words to Jo, that no-one should get into danger because of him not telling them. If he did not warn René and Erik as well, he would be a big fat liar. But the moment had to be right. He did not want to risk the show any more.

It was an experience Ian had feared, had expected – playing in a state of almost total dissociation. No matter how he had attempted to psych himself up beforehand, it had not helped.

Not even imagining torture.

There he was onstage, in his sewer-encrusted clothes – he had at the last moment decided against playing bare-chested – and in front of him, the theater was packed well over halfway of its capacity.

He would have wanted to give his best.

He could observe that his playing was passable, and the crowd seemed mostly satisfied. But there was no fire, no rage. His mind was completely elsewhere.

He had hoped for Jo to kick his ass in a friendly competitive way, but to his horror had observed that she too was playing in an impossibly subdued way, not like usual when she was headbanging like there was no tomorrow.

Ian could understand it all too well. She too had possible investigations on her mind, and was probably imagining what he had been doing during his vanishing act. He maybe should have told her. Now it had to wait. But then, they would go over the documents together.

An interesting dilemma: if one was playing at a place that was actually a front for secret SCEPTRE activity, was it better to know or not to know the truth, just for the sake of performance? For him, knowing did not help. Erik and René of course played like always, giving their best, and then some.

While his body was playing by rote memorization, Ian's mind was free not only to dissociate, but to proceed on the dive into the depths of paranoia.

Would SCEPTRE attack during or after the show? He was certain that with his little semi-automatic that had been immersed in a sewer, no less, he could not do much good against overwhelming firepower. At best he could thin their ranks, sacrifice himself while possibly allowing for the rest to escape. In fact, that would be the only acceptable outcome if victory was not possible.

He recalled how Erik had fantasized about bringing guns on stage. Right now Ian hoped it to be reality. Erik had talked about being prepared, had been stocking ammunition at his forest cabin for a possible cataclysm.

Did he actually have weapons with him on the tour?

The mandatory encore came and went, “Tormentor” this time, for “Necrothrashing Desecrator” had been played earlier at an almost sloppy, out-of-control speed. There had been cheers, even roars, there had been overturned seats and pitting, and the show was by no means a failure on the whole.

But still it had been disappointing.

No-one of them could deny it.

Of course there had been no SCEPTRE attack. Of course there had not been anything out of the ordinary. They had to be watching – waiting. With cold, calculated and vengeful patience.

The four entered the backstage room. Rather than feeling proud of seeing their name on the door, Ian thought the sign to be measuring and judging them: a reminder that they had not actually been worth the Cyberpriest name tonight.

At first there was just silence. Or rather, the low hum of the air conditioning. René was not actually angry – at least not yet – just puzzled in an unsettling way.

“Can someone tell me what the fuck is happening with this band?” he asked, opening a can of beer. “Of course, it's the fifth fucking day with no break, and this was not the most inspiring of places, but still I wonder. Many things.”

He paused to take a gulp.

“Especially our axe-wielders. Actually not especially, but exclusively. Ian. Jo. Aren't you interested in thrashing any more? Are you in fucking love or something? Will you go all 'Cold Lake' on me?”

Everything considered, referring to Celtic Frost's blasphemous “commercial” album was almost too much for Ian. He did not deserve that. Jo did not deserve that.

Should the truth be told right here and now?

Ian decided he would have to try.

He looked to Jo for any kind of conspiratorial sign, but could not find any. At the moment her face was completely unreadable.

“Did you know that there's a secret underground complex under this building?” he asked, not addressing anyone in particular.

“Do not change the subject. Right now I'm not amused by any conspiracy shit,” René snapped back and almost spilled his beer.

Well, he had tried.

But had he tried hard enough?

“So you went there while you were away? Then you exited through the sewer and got yourself all shitty?” Erik asked suddenly.

“Exactly.”

Ian tried to read Erik's face carefully. On it, there could have been just the tiniest shred of belief and understanding.

“For fuck's sake. I'm just witnessing the complete decline of Cyberpriest. I never knew this day would come,” René said, total defeat on his face.

“Well, I see kind of an inequality here. You're allowed to talk about superheroes and ninjas, but I should just be straight-faced all the time. And when I'm not, it's suddenly the end of the world,” Ian replied.

It was a calculated move, trying turn the situation around as if he had been joking all along. He had no idea whether it would succeed. Or if he even wanted it to.

“In fact there's a very clear explanation. Me and Erik, and Jo up until today, always play at one hundred and ten percent, with fucking passion to spare, so we can talk about whatever the fuck we want! And the thing is, I know everyone of us except you from way back, so yes, damn well there is inequality. I don't actually know you, so you could be out of your mind for real. Or whatever your problem is,” René vented.

Hearing these words were relieving in a way.

Of course it could be just anger talking, but still. Having the band break up from the inside because its leader could not take people sometimes playing at less than full blast, could not take into account the members actually being human, would of course be a sad tale. But things like that happened.

It would be infinitely more relieving than the band breaking up, or even getting killed, because of Ian's SCEPTRE connection.

"Shit, one less than stellar show. There will be more. It's not the Karmageddon," Jo said.

"You too, you didn't answer my question."

René was on the edge, but did not let it boil over yet. In fact Ian hoped for a total explosion that would cleanse the air.

"Well, let me ask you one. You seriously think that me and Ian conspire behind your back? What about the possibility that he's still trying to find out who killed his friend and why, because the cops don't seem to be able to do that nowadays. And one person close to me has gone missing and I'm trying to do some private eye shit too. And naturally it doesn't touch you or Erik in any way, so we keep it to ourselves. Satisfied with that?"

That was rather elegant. The rising fury and velocity of Jo's voice toward the end only added to it. Ian wanted to thank her immediately, but that would have been too suspicious.

He would just have to thank her later.

"Whatever. Well, two shows left, guys. It's not long any more if war metal and thrash no longer tastes good," René said and stood up.

It was time to go.

Ian looked around: no-one of them was in the mood to sit through Blasphemer's set. In any case, he had tried. If René did not want to listen, then that was that.

He could not be forced to understand.

"I'll be watching you," René threatened, as they loaded up the gear.

Then, at last they were speeding away from the place. Away from SCEPTRE's influence. Ian secretly pat-

ted the documents in his pocket, and was very pleased that no-one had wanted to spend the night in the hotel next door.

That could actually have proved fatal. Though the show had been undisturbed, he doubted SCEPTRE would have passed that second opportunity to strike.

After all, he had violated some kind of hidden sanctum, had returned to one of the locations of his training program. Probably not very high-level, but still.

It had been a frightening but important step.

They stopped at a motel thirty miles away from the city, not as decrepit as the ones before, but still not exactly inspiring.

Ian had taken René's threat seriously and waited patiently until the bassist/vocalist was sound asleep in his room. Then Ian got out of his room, into the motel's bar.

Sure enough, Jo was there. The atmosphere was cozy and welcoming on the surface, but like everywhere where he went now, the undercurrent of paranoia followed him. Meeting a co-conspirator in secret did not exactly help.

"Wow. After tonight I sure feel like drinking," she said wearily. There was an empty shot glass in front of her, and the bluish light painted her hair dark blue.

Ian sat down. It was still at least an hour until last call. If he wanted to get properly wasted, there was plenty of opportunity remaining.

"Thanks for your defense speech. I couldn't have managed half as good," he said.

"Well, I didn't think of it as a defense. I don't think I or you need to defend ourselves. But sometimes, René's just so paranoid and hot-headed, he thinks of everything in the worst possible light. I wanted to hammer

some sense into him, but don't know if it succeeded.”

“Worst possible light? I believe the truth is much worse.”

“So, what you said –”

“The truth. I was inside an underground complex. SCEPTRE – operating under the casino and the theater. I escaped just barely. And I got these.”

Ian took the documents out and laid them on the table. The expression on Jo's face screamed: Holy shit.

Or something very similar.

In an instant the weariness was gone. It was possible she had not truly believed until now, but now she would have no choice. The soiled but still readable documents all bore the triangle-circle-sphere symbol.

The sixth show, played at another small club in another small town, had been better, if not especially noteworthy. But still, a somewhat odd atmosphere lingered. Wary and cautious, with a possible new explosion waiting underneath.

Naturally there had been arguments and outbursts before, even in the past before Ian. In time they had been resolved or forgotten, or even turned into a new war metal song. But was this different? Was this somehow more permanent?

After his period of quietness, Tyrant was becoming more vocal and more audacious with his insults again, along with his growing level of constant drunkenness. Maybe the lesson was fading from his mind. On a longer tour, a second fight might have been unavoidable. But there was only one more show remaining.

Tearing down the gear, driving to the next town, getting some sleep and something to eat, going for the sound check and setting up, by now it was down to a perfection. Robotic perfection.

Ian thought he had enough practice of that to last for a very long time. In any case, now Cyberpriest was on stage for the seventh and last time on the tour.

They were mostly back at or at least very close to their usual level, the standard that had been set on the very first day of pain at Hades Club. It helped matters that the last venue, Blast Pit, was a proper metal club. It was a proper metal audience too: shouting, thrashing and pitting hard.

René no longer spared his voice, now that there were no shows coming up after this one. He played so hard that he actually bled onto the pick guard of his bass guitar.

Ian thought that he had found an interesting balance between dissociation and participation. From time to time, he still sunk to his paranoid thoughts, but never forgot to play hard. And mostly did not forget to headbang. Having Jo on the other side of the stage definitely helped. Just like before, the murderously precise playing and constant headbanging served as strong motivational forces.

And though it was not that often, it was not strictly one-sided either: at times he would play something that was the unquestionable essence of thrash and metal, giving her playing a boost in turn.

Now, the tremolo cacophony finale of “Necrothrashing Desecrator” climaxed, ending with a final unison hit of twin power chords, a low E bass note, the snare and the crash cymbal.

It had been a very good 45 minutes. But for their part, the “Seven Days of Pain” were now over.

“See you next time, all right! And watch out for some high-octane war metal coming as soon as we get our asses to a studio one bright fucking day!” René shouted to the crowd, who still demanded more.

Without further fanfare, they turned off the amps

and started moving the gear off the stage.

“A roadie or two would not exactly hurt,” Erik grunted.

Was the over-man relenting at last?

As Ian disconnected the power and speaker cables from his half-stack, he searched his thoughts.

He felt – what? He surely had to feel something, but could not find words to describe it. Satisfaction? Relief that it was over now? Or dread of what would come next?

Would he have to talk to René again, to try to convince him once more of the existence of SCEPTRE and the danger they all lived in now, especially after his below-ground intrusion?

But it was a real possibility that like before, René would just think he was going out of his mind, or even worse, taking drugs. What could he say differently to actually make René believe in him now? Ian had no idea. A repeat attempt could possibly just make things worse.

And then, there was the matter of the documents.

They had turned out to be maps.

Few of the sheets had actually described the underground corridor maze, a whole two levels of it, while one represented an outdoor area, with possibly some kind of a bunker-like facility entrance. The outdoor map was in such scale that it could not describe much of the surroundings. The location seemed like a small valley, which could be anywhere.

Potential lacks in security and surveillance had been marked on the sheets. Apparently he had stolen the notes of a SCEPTRE security meeting.

“Logan has to see these,” Jo had said in the bar.

Her enthusiasm and determination were scary.

Still, Ian could not deny it felt good to have at least someone who was on the same wavelength with him, up to speed on the situation. She had to be scared to some degree, but did not let that show.

The final leg of the tour had taken them south, then back toward west: they would be passing Outpost on the return trip. It was the perfect opportunity to hop off: between them, René and Erik could manage getting the equipment back to the rehearsal space just fine.

Of course there would be suspicion.

It would not sit well with René, probably not with Erik either. But it would not be a long visit: Ian and Jo would be back by bus the same night.

Finished with the gear, the four headed to the backstage. It was a shared room: Blasphemer were there, totally concentrated on the consumption of alcohol. Though liquor made him more hostile up to a point, it seemed Tyrant was now too drunk to acknowledge Cyberpriest's presence, not to even speak of offering any sarcastic remarks.

As if celebrating the final show early, the four of Blasphemer were downing vodka straight from bottles. But at last, they left the room to prepare for their own performance.

"Shall we stay to see how they mess up their show?" Erik asked.

No-one protested outright.

Beers were opened: little by little, a pleasant feeling started to spread around. Despite everything, Ian could not deny pride mixing with all the other emotions: he had completed the grueling tour, probably with the best band and the best bandmates – even René considered – he ever knew.

SCEPTRE could not take that pride away from him, even if they stormed the club right at that second and ended his life with flying lead.

"It's over now, guys. You all did great," René addressed the three finally. "But it's the last time I go on a tour with no off days. I'm too old for that shit."

He appeared relaxed and satisfied, and made a point to not reference the Olympia show and its aftermath in any way. Just for a moment, that felt false and wrong to Ian. Maybe the compliment was in fact a veiled admonition? But just as quickly the feeling disappeared: there was just the pride, the beer, and the expectation of Blasphemer's gig.

Strictly from an entertainment standpoint, the decision to watch Blasphemer's show had been spot on. Musically, it was definitely unsatisfying. But that was not the point.

It was the most drunken set from them yet.

They had not just been drinking at the backstage, but each of them was taking a gulp of the hard stuff after each song, and sometimes in the middle.

Satanakhia performed an interesting feat of holding a blast beat with just his feet: one on the hi-hat and the other on the kick drum. Meanwhile, his both hands were occupied by a bottle of whiskey.

The stringed instrument players did similar, though less impressive tricks of just playing random open strings at tremolo speed, while taking a sip with the left hand.

Tyrant lumbered and stumbled like an angry frost giant who had been awakened in the middle of a Norwegian snow storm of the century, and was pretty pissed off about it. Once in a while he remembered to sing.

Everyone in Cyberpriest was in excellent spirits as they exited Blast Pit. As per tradition, René had made the sacrifice of staying mostly sober so far.

“OK, now I understand a bit more of your relationship with Rob,” Erik confessed. “The animosity, even the fight, all those were necessary, so that we’d be prepared and in the right mood to witness that legendary show. You had it planned from the start. Maybe even together with him.”

René grinned at the absurd joke.

Ian did not want to sour the night by telling of the intentions he had for tomorrow yet.

Apparently, neither did Jo.

But now they were ready to pop the clutch, and head out for a place to stay the night. Outpost itself was rather far away: as the shows were through, any grueling late night stretch of driving was unnecessary. But an inn a little over a hundred miles away would split the distance suitably between this day and the next.

“I’ll ride the bike,” Erik said. “I’m sober enough.”

At first Ian was taken completely by surprise. That was insanity! But he looked around, and saw no outright expressions of disapproval from the others. Then he realized Erik had not been drinking that much more compared to René, probably not anything after leaving the backstage.

They opened the trailer and Erik led the shiny Harley-Davidson cautiously down to the asphalt, using the opened-up back wall as a ramp.

Then the 500cc motor rumbled to life, and he was on his way, long hair flowing in the wind from underneath his helmet.

René had not said anything, but the chilling, eerie quiet had told Ian everything there was to know. They had told of their plans in the morning, back at the inn: it was clear the bassist/vocalist had not liked dropping them off in the slightest.

Though the day was cloudy, a biting cold wind blew through the Outpost community as Ian and Jo stood on the side of the road, watching the van drive off into distance. Erik was in the vehicle as well: the nightly ride on the bike had been enough for now.

“Well, let's go find Logan,” Jo said.

In a way Ian understood where René was coming from: even if there were no ulterior motives involved, dropping them off threatened the unity of the band. Just by an almost insignificantly tiny amount, but it still did. Technically the tour was not over until they all returned home. After that each of them would have been free to go their own ways.

But wasting that time would have made little sense.

It was puzzling, though, what René actually was afraid of most. Of him or Jo actually performing covert investigations? Of him possibly being an addict or a head case, or both? The reason that amused Ian most in

retrospect was the one René had told first in his outburst: the suspicion that the two would be conspiring to turn Cyberpriest into a musical mockery, while being involved with each other.

Why would it always have to be that way? Of course history knew warning examples. But Ian imagined that would rather require and inspire more extreme musical output to counterbalance, like grindcore.

However, he and Jo were just a very efficient guitarist team, nothing more. And maybe from now on, an investigative team as well.

Ian wondered about Jo's friend.

If SCEPTRE was involved, and it was two weeks already, somehow he could not imagine him being alive any more. They would have sucked him dry, then disposed of the corpse.

Of course, he did not want to hint anything even remotely like that to her. It would have been tasteless and unnecessary. Ian imagined that hope, no matter how improbable, kept her going.

Jo had made the point of being disillusioned, cynical. But it seemed there were many sides to her as well. Only a kind soul would perform investigations to rescue her junkie friend. That was almost a too sweet, too beautiful thought.

Ian had to deliberately think of something else.

They found Logan in his cabin again. Where else? It was only early in the afternoon, but he was already submerged in several online conversations, displayed on different monitors of his impressive computer setup.

Conversing with other anarchists, most likely.

He turned around with his chair as they entered. The chair was hi-tech, too: it had an unusually large amount

of levers, to allow for dialing in the optimal position for a long stretch of anarchistic planning.

"You're back. Been making any progress?" he asked.

"We found some documents. Maps actually. You could take a look," Ian said.

"Let's see them then."

Ian wondered how Logan could find it perfectly normal that the two of them would just burst in with classified documents at hand. Or maybe not perfectly normal, but at least there was no outright bewilderment.

Ian put the sheets into an unoccupied space on the desk, and Logan studied them for a good half minute, keeping silent. Finally he turned to the two again.

"Where did you get these?" There was tension in the voice.

Ian hesitated.

"Well, tell him. Maybe he won't believe. I think I didn't believe at first, either," Jo prodded.

"An underground complex below the Olympia casino and theater. You know the place? I think two of those sheets actually describe the maze I was in," Ian replied at last.

There was a silence, shorter this time, as Logan went through the documents once more. Then he spoke in a changed, unsettling voice. Still tense, but much lower, almost a vocal fry.

"For the sake of both you and me, I'd hope that you'd have forged these documents. You know, some of the people I know are quite obsessed with these things – trying to prove the existence of the Illuminati or some similar organization – and could well do something like that. But somehow I believe you aren't that kind of people. So, I'll just have to ... congratulate you for being the first I know to actually have proof of the existence of an

occult conspiratorial entity. The connections are just too strong. Olympia – Mount Olympus, the gathering place of gods. The triangle, or actually the pyramid. The eye in the pyramid.”

It was a visible transformation on Logan's face: he was overcome with some emotion, possibly reverence mixed with fear.

“I don't know which option I'd hope for more. That you're completely aware of the danger you're in for possessing these, or that you'd be blissfully ignorant.”

Ian did not need a lecture on the concept of danger. But still it was chilling to confirm the risk from someone outside the circle that included him, SCEPTRE and the Agents. Glancing at his side, he could not say Jo looked actually frightened, but she was certainly puzzled.

Suddenly a sound alerted him, silent and insignificant at first, but growing louder.

Motors. Several of them at different pitches.

Closing in from the distance.

Ian peered out of the window of Logan's cabin and saw them. The convoy, the same that had passed them on the night of the first show, was coming from the opposite direction than from where he and Jo had arrived. The big, cumbersome SUVs, the pickup truck and the jeeps were in the middle, flanked by the motorcycles.

In daylight it was a fearsome sight.

"We have visitors," Ian hissed to Logan. "Seems the motor gang has finally targeted this place. Is there any way to warn the community?"

Without flinching, Logan pressed a key on the nearest computer keyboard, then grabbed a microphone from under the table.

"Attention! We're going to have visitors with less than good intentions. It's up to you whether you want to stay and fight, or just get the hell out of here. Being undecided is not recommended. If you choose the first option, make sure you've got plenty of ammo, because this may turn into a siege. Also check that the safety's off, before you try to fire. Logan, over and out."

The sound echoed back inside, coming from a loud-speaker on Logan's rooftop.

Ian was amazed how calm and collected Logan had

sounded. Then he realized that the anarchist was going to use a trapdoor hidden under the carpet to escape the fight, and hide in the safety of his cellar.

"You're not going to make a stand yourself?" Ian asked, the metallic tone of anger in his voice.

"A slingshot would not do much good, and I'm afraid I don't have anything more powerful," Logan replied, as he was already descending the ladder.

Ian decided it was a lost cause to try to change Logan's mind, took his pistol out, cocked and then re-safetied it. He did not want to blow his own leg off.

"I'm not armed either. Hope most of the residents are," Jo said as she noticed the gun.

That had to be the first time she saw it.

"This might turn into a bloodbath," Ian replied grimly.

The gang was not on top of them just yet. Ian headed out of the door to check out what the situation was like, and Jo followed close behind.

How many would just be running away?

Amazingly, not a single one.

It seemed they all were going to fight and possibly die for the community. Men and women, boys and girls alike were brandishing semi-automatics, revolvers, or shotguns, ready to deal death on the intruders.

"Anyone has a weapon to spare?" Jo shouted.

"Check in the tavern," an older man with long white hair shouted back.

Ian looked at Jo briefly: on her face was an expression of steely resolve. It was almost as if she had looked forward to this.

The convoy was closing in fast as they sprinted inside the wooden tavern.

The awesomely plump and bearded man in a blue-

black flannel shirt they encountered inside had to be Wayne. In his hand was a long-barreled revolver, a Colt Peacemaker.

“A bad day coming! Very shitty in fact. But if we stay strong, we may yet make it better. I take it that you're going to fight?” he bellowed out to Ian and Jo.

Then he saw that Jo was unarmed. He pointed to the bar in the back.

“There, Roxi is loading a shotgun. You can take it and show 'em!”

Roxi stood up from behind the bar and tossed a pump-action Remington at her. Jo caught it from the air.

“Thanks. But does that leave you anything?”

Roxi grinned as she took another weapon from under the counter, an AK-47.

“Not a crippled one, it's fully automatic,” she said, and handed Jo a handful of extra 12-gauge cartridges.

From the outside came an explosion – the gang had to be using grenades. The fight was not going to be pleasant.

In the next moment the noise of engines was all around, and the shooting started. Ian, Jo, Wayne and Roxi all ducked as the tavern windows were raked with automatic gunfire.

On the outside, shotgun blasts and single shots from pistols and revolvers joined the chorus. The community was mounting a fiery defense.

Suddenly Roxi's AK-47 did not feel like overkill in the slightest. In fact, every single resident should have been armed with one: maybe then they would have stood a good enough chance.

Ian switched the safety of his USP off, Jo pumped the Remington, and from behind the bar came the sound of the Kalashnikov's charging handle being racked.

It was time to shoot to kill.

Jo dived to the nearest half-shattered window and cleared a hole to shoot through with the butt of the shotgun. Wayne positioned his great mass cautiously to the front door, and opened it just a bit. Then he fired three shots from his Colt.

Not wanting to be outdone, Ian took a chair and smashed another window. Of course, the holes should not be too big, because then the risk of grenades finding their way in would become too great.

The gang members had sort of a uniform: they all were wearing gray urban camouflage pants. On their upper body, the clothing varied: there was for instance leather and denim in various colors.

Ian fired a shot toward a passing motorcyclist, but missed. Well, he still had two full spare magazines, but it paid to not waste ammunition. Not only that, each miss would give the other guy another chance to hit him.

Roxi had disappeared to the rear of the tavern, apparently for shooting out of the back door. Soon, Ian could hear the AK-47 clattering on full auto.

But barely moments later, he could also hear a shrill cry of pain. Roxi retreated back to the safety of the tavern, bleeding from her arm.

"Roxi!" Wayne shouted with terrifying volume.

"It's not bad," she answered through gritted teeth and switched magazines. "But if you want to feel all caring, you could bandage this!"

Jo fired two shotgun blasts in close succession, and a motorist went down. Quickly, she retreated back to the safety of the floor.

But several cyclists still remained. And then there were the heavier vehicles. Ian doubted that they would

actually have bulletproof windows or armor plating. But still, they represented a greater risk, because –

He swore.

It was as one of the drivers had read his thoughts.

A SUV rammed itself against the tavern wall and plowed its way in by raw force. There was a terrible noise of wood splintering, as the tables and benches broke and were cast aside.

Wayne got out of the way of the vehicle barely, leaping to the floor and then rolling to the side.

However, he could not get out of the way of a table, which landed on his massive body. He let out a low roar of agony: the table was right on top of his belly.

There was murder in Roxi's eyes as she opened up with the AK-47, shooting a long burst through the windshield, going from the left to the right. The driver and the passenger wriggled in their seats under the several impacts, then lay still.

From the opening left by the SUV, Ian could see the battle a bit clearer. Chaos reigned on the “main street,” or what most resembled one. There already were bodies of fallen defenders, and the motorists took apparent delight from running over them: sickening crunches resulted, and in some cases more moans of pain.

A pickup truck circled among the buildings: on its back a broad-shouldered, muscular bald man brandished a M-60 machine gun, holding it with one hand and feeding the belt with another. Despite the cold weather, he wore a sleeveless black shirt, and his round face was red with aggression. He fired at anything and everything that moved, except his own men, while grinning like a lunatic sadist.

From further away came the sound of glass shattering, followed by the rushing hum of flames. In addition

to grenades, the gang was using Molotov cocktails to torch the buildings.

It was all going rapidly to hell. The smell of smoke came in from the windows and the gaping hole in the wall.

Ian took careful aim and fired: a motorcyclist went down, the bike tipping over to its side. The Molotov cocktail that had been in the biker's hand fell down and shattered: if the man did not get up and away, the flames would consume his own body.

Some kind of poetic justice at least.

Jo fired at a passing jeep, but did not hit anything vital or critical: the buckshot just impacted into the side of the vehicle.

Ian shifted aim, going for the same target. He had the driver's head in the sights: the jeep was now coming straight at the tavern. If the windshield did not deflect the bullet significantly, it was going to be a lethal shot.

He squeezed the trigger. The pistol barked and he saw a hole appear in the windshield. The jeep careened off to the side, crashing into a pole which fell, bringing down wires and lamps with it. But the impact was powerful enough to stop the jeep: its engine died, as the now-dead driver no longer pressed down on the accelerator.

Now Ian saw the pickup truck turning again: the bald man with the machine gun turned with it.

The man opened up with his weapon.

Ian realized too late that he was still exposed. Initially there was no pain, just the kinetic energy of the impact at his side.

Though he wanted to resist and continue the fight, somehow his brain just gave the command for his legs to give way. As a last conscious action before he fell, his

hand went to the wound and he felt something warm and moist through the shirt.

His own blood.

He heard a rough shouted voice from the outside.

“Buzzsaw, I think you nailed him! Ha!”

Then he blacked out for a period he was not sure of.

There was still gunfire from nearby: the fight was not over yet. The shotgun barking once, twice. Then the repetitive sound of new cartridges being inserted. That had to be Jo.

Now, there was definitely pain. Ian felt something being wrapped around his lower torso.

“You were lucky. The round went straight through and did not puncture your lung.”

That was Roxi's voice.

Ian looked up and saw a fresh bandage on her arm. She had to have done that all by herself, for as he gazed to his other side, he saw Wayne still pinned down by the table, still groaning in pain.

The shotgun blasts ceased, and Ian was left on his own for a while. He saw Jo and Roxi lifting the table off Wayne's body. With the combined strength of the two, it went quickly. Slowly Wayne got up, apparently relatively unharmed, and reached for the Peacemaker that had fallen to the floor next to him.

“Bastards,” he growled.

Gunfire resumed, as did the explosions on the outside. But before one of the explosions there had been a low, loud belch of a rocket launching.

So the gang also had bazookas.

Wayne fired a few shots, a vengeful mask of wrath on his face, and the AK-47 rattled again its characteristic tune. Ian took a look at Roxi: the pained frown told that

firing full auto with a wounded arm was not exactly a good idea.

She also shook her head in disappointment. It seemed she was not hitting much.

Now it was getting quieter on the outside. There was less exchange of gunfire, less variety of weapon noises. While the automatic weapons of the gang members – mostly sub-machine guns besides the one 7.62 machine gun – still fired bursts, only very irregularly did a shotgun or revolver bark outside the tavern.

Were the gang finishing off the residents? Or had they already succeeded? Were Wayne and Roxi the only ones left? Ian felt like he had to get up, to turn the situation back in their favor.

There was a sense of responsibility, a sense of guilt. If the gang was under SCEPTRE's command, then they had come for him alone. He was ultimately responsible of the destruction of the community.

It was a dreadful thought.

He tried to rise, but his body wouldn't let him. His vision threatened with blacking out again.

In a moment Jo was beside him.

“You have to take it easy. We'll finish this...”

Somehow, her voice sounded like faltering, like she did not believe in her own words. Her hand came to touch his cheek: it was a calming and sweet gesture, but inappropriate for the moment.

He wanted to be kicked in the ass hard so that he could get up and fight!

The imagined kick gave him some strength. Groaning but ignoring the pain, he forced himself into a sitting position. His head was still below the window level, so there was no immediate danger from the bullets.

From the opening in the wall, a flying object came in.

Still less than alert because of the wound, Ian did not recognize it in mid-air. But when it shattered on the wooden floor, and the flames started to spread out, there was no longer any question.

“A fucking Molotov in my tavern!” Wayne shouted. “Quick, we have to put out the flames. With anything!”

“We don't have anything! I say we have to get out!” Roxi snapped back.

Ian knew she was right.

In a moment, the tavern would be a raging inferno, and smoke would enter their lungs. The SUV would start burning as well, emitting further toxic fumes from the tires and the plastic parts.

“I'll check the vehicle! Maybe there's an extinguisher. But you get out!” Wayne bellowed.

“How do you think mad pyromaniacs would have an extinguisher in their assault vehicle? You're wasting time and killing yourself!” Roxi yelled with rising anguish.

Wayne did not answer, just gestured for them to leave. Then he went to the back of the SUV, further away from the flames, and started rummaging.

Ian got on his feet with some help from Jo. It felt odd, uncoordinated. And it hurt: while standing, he had less chance to find a position that did not cause undue pain. But the pain told him he was alive and conscious: he decided to intentionally focus on it, to welcome it.

They exited through the back door. On the way Ian caught a glimpse of the moonshine distilling equipment, carelessly hidden in a storage closet. It would be sad if it got destroyed too.

“Ha! Found one! Going to join you in a –” Wayne yelled from inside.

The last word was cut off by machine gun fire.

Roxi turned to stare back in absolute terror, but the tavern was already so full of smoke, that there was no chance of seeing what had happened inside. If they wanted to stay alive themselves, they could not allow to stop or to mourn.

A little more than thirty meters away from the back of the tavern, there stood an undamaged cabin, which could provide protection.

The immediate way ahead was clear: at the moment the gang members were roaming mainly in the front of the tavern, and in between the buildings on that side.

Ian still held the pistol, though he severely doubted he would hit anything with it right now. Just trying to keep up with Jo and Roxi was challenging enough.

Actually, it was too challenging. He could not keep up. The women were already nearly there, while he was still in the middle of the road, exposed.

The sudden oncoming sound of a motorcycle alerted him. A motorist had turned away from the “main street” and was coming straight at him.

Leading with the gun, Ian spun around –

But lost his balance, and fell with the wounded side hitting the ground first. He lay sprawled on the ground, the burning pain renewed. Now he certainly did not need to consciously focus on it: it filled his mind without asking.

The gun had fallen out of reach.

Suddenly, the approaching front wheel of the motorcycle was at the exact center of his attention. A second later, the sub-machine gun in the motorist's hand shared the focus.

The motorist took aim.

Deafening automatic gunfire filled the air. But also a shotgun blast. The motorist's head snapped back, gun aimed up to the sky and firing out of control.

The wheel still approached, already tilting to its side along with the rest of the motorcycle, but nevertheless heading for Ian's body.

He rolled away at the last second.

The lifeless driver fell off just as the bike passed, and the bike itself followed meters later.

Finished with the roll that had amplified the pain even more, Ian looked into the direction of the cabin. Roxi and Jo knelt there, both the AK-47 and the shotgun smoking. Roxi looked like she was going to pass out, if she had to fire even one more round.

Ian was not sure who had actually hit the motorist, or if both had, but right now it made little difference.

He decided he owed his life to both of them.

But more vehicles were circling around the tavern to the back. Another SUV and a jeep. Ian scrambled up to his feet, and closed the rest of the distance to the safety of the cabin.

From behind came the sound of a bazooka launching. He dived the last meters, but it was unnecessary:

the rocket went wide of both him and the cabin.

This time Ian made a point to land on the unhurt side.

While lying on the ground right next to the safety of the cabin wall, he looked behind to see a gang member peering out from the SUV's open roof window. In clear disgust, the man threw off the spent bazooka tube and reached for some other weapon.

You miss, you fail –

Ian rose to his knees while simultaneously turning 180 degrees, and took quick aim. The SUV was not far, but his hands still shook from almost dying just a few seconds ago.

To improve his not so good chances of hitting – or maybe not – Ian squeezed off several rounds.

One of them hit home. The bazooka man slumped back inside the vehicle, a hole in his upper chest.

You die.

The men inside the jeep opened up with their sub-machine guns in revenge. Ian rolled to cover, joining Jo and Roxi.

“They have kind of superior firepower,” Jo said.

“I've noticed,” Ian replied.

Jo seemed to think for a moment.

“Can I borrow that?” she then asked Roxi, who still clung to the AK-47 almost if hypnotized.

“Be my guest. But it's empty, you have to reload.”

Roxi handed over the assault rifle and a single spare magazine.

“That's the last 30 rounds.”

Jo released the spent magazine, inserted the new one, and yanked the charging handle. Ian observed that this did not happen with practiced routine: she had probably never actually used the weapon before, but

had to have studied pictures of it, because her hands went to right places.

She caught Ian looking.

“World.guns.ru teaches you wonderful things.”

With the rifle prepared, Jo went to the opposite corner of the cabin, ready to fire when either of the vehicles would pass by.

But she was warned off by another hailstorm of gunfire raking the cabin.

“Shit.”

The gang knew where they were, and could keep them exactly there, with not much chance to fire back. All it took was another bazooka rocket or a Molotov cocktail, and they would be forced on the run again.

Things did not look too good.

The residents had either been killed, or had retreated inside their cabins, realizing the opposition was too stiff. Wayne had probably died inside his tavern.

Thus, aid was not to be expected.

With not much else to do, Ian happened to look at the small hill some three hundred meters away from the community.

There was a motorcycle on the hilltop.

Dismounting from it was a man.

The man took a long object from his back. Then, slowly and carefully, the man descended into a prone position.

Soon after, a loud rifle shot pierced the air. It sounded distinct, superior in a way.

From much closer came the sound of shattering glass. Ian peered out from the shelter of the cabin, and saw the SUV now accelerating wildly, its driver's side window broken. The car turned back to the “main street,” then tipped over into the middle from the mad

acceleration and the sheer centripetal force, the engine still running.

Another loud shot came, then yet another. Ian looked in awe to see both men inside the jeep be picked off one by one.

"Looks like the cavalry has arrived," Ian shouted, still puzzled himself. Who was that man?

"What?" Jo asked. She had been flat against the cabin wall, still concentrated on the disappointment of not being able to fire, and had therefore missed the show.

"There's someone with a sniper rifle picking off the drivers!"

Yet another rifle shot. It sounded like a motorcycle fell immediately after.

Ian took another good look at the battlefield. The gang was now down to the pickup truck with the machine-gun sadist – Buzzsaw, he remembered the name, one jeep, and one last chopper motorcycle.

The pickup truck slowed down ominously, then stopped. Both the driver and passenger doors opened, and a tube-like object came out.

Ian realized to his horror that the driver had to be on to the mystery rifleman, and was going to end his streak of heroism with a bazooka rocket.

"Look out!" he shouted at the top of his lungs into the direction of the hill.

But the voice could not possibly carry.

The disposable bazooka fired.

A trail of smoke followed the rocket. Ian could only observe as the man on the hilltop noticed just before impact, and leaped forward to roll into safety –

And then the rocket hit the motorcycle and blasted it to a thousand pieces.

There was no telling what degree of damage the man

had sustained. He was still rolling down the hill, as the men inside the remaining jeep started firing controlled bursts with their automatic weapons, trying to hit him as he descended.

Heroism did not pay.

Thinking cynically, Ian realized that this could be a chance to turn the tables and finish the battle. If the brave man died, they would mourn him later, like they would mourn Wayne.

"We should hit them now!" he shouted.

Jo nodded in understanding.

"Do you want this back?" she asked Roxi.

"You keep it, if I can have the shotgun – it won't kick repeatedly!"

Ian switched to a fresh magazine. He still had to have a few rounds remaining in the previous – each held twelve – but for what he was going to do next, he could not afford a dead man's click in the middle of it.

Then they all came out of the cover, Ian from the right side, Jo and Roxi from the left.

The last motorcyclist had driven one full circle around the tavern and headed for the cabin again, coming in from the right.

A controlled anger burning in his brain, Ian wanted to drop him badly.

He ignored all external disturbances, and entered a mental state where only the gun and the target existed. He took careful aim, almost delighted.

Again, he fired several rounds after one another.

The first hit was into the torso. A second later, the next one shattered the motorist's visor.

The man had to be dead before he hit the ground. The motorcycle traveled straight for an incredibly long time, then crashed into the cabin.

The jeep turned around. Ian observed both the driver and the passenger to have their sub-machine guns out, ready to fire any second.

At him.

He leaped sideways, knowing that it probably would not help much. At the same time he fired desperately at the jeep.

None of the bullets hit.

But then, from the side came a hail of AK-47 fire. Ian was intensely focused on the jeep and could observe almost in slow motion as the driver's head exploded.

The passenger did not fare much better. His gun hand twisted obscenely from a round tearing itself through the arm, then more hits followed to his side. His heart or lungs would most certainly be punctured: he would die while drowning in his own blood.

Jo had just saved Ian's life again.

There was still the matter of the pickup truck. Buzzsaw was still on its back, and turned his weapon toward the direction Jo had fired from.

Just then a shotgun boomed.

The burly man let out a high yell of pain, apparently hit by some pellets, and leaped fluidly off from the back into the cover of the passenger's side. The shotgun fired again, as did the Kalashnikov. With just one target to focus on, Roxi and Jo were tearing up the pickup truck.

Next, Ian saw an unexpected sight.

The driver, dead or at least seriously wounded, was unceremoniously shoved out of his seat onto the ground.

Jo was out of ammo, and before Roxi had time to pump the shotgun and fire again, Buzzsaw gunned the engine and made to escape with the truck.

Roxi fired her remaining cartridges, but the vehicle

was already speeding away, and the buckshot hits to the truck's back were mostly harmless at that distance.

Buzzsaw, who probably was the gang leader judged from the heightened insanity he had displayed, had got away, and there was nothing they could do about it.

However, it was time to focus on the bright side. The rest of the gang had been utterly defeated with the help of the sniper rifle-wielding mystery hero.

Ian turned to look into the direction of the hill again. To his surprise the man was alive, just getting on his feet. He limped clearly, hit at least in the legs.

But now, as Ian could take a long look without fear of gunfire coming from behind, he realized something. The waist-length brown hair and beard could only belong to one person in the world.

Erik.

Despite his limp, Erik could pass for an over-man as he held the long scoped weapon in his hands. It was a M21 military sniper rifle, using the 7.62 NATO cartridge, with an impressive magazine capacity of twenty rounds.

"I saw the gang going the opposite way when we were driving home. Considering how you were talking of weird things lately, I decided to check it out. Though René was mad for me deserting him too, I took the bike anyway..."

Erik's voice trailed off. The two-wheeled vehicle had obviously been a beloved one, and now it was destroyed, disintegrated by a direct bazooka hit.

"I don't think I can ever thank you enough," Ian said.

"A new motorcycle would certainly be thanks enough," Erik replied thoughtfully.

"I think I'll decide right here and now to never make fun of you again," Jo joined in.

"Are you badly hit?" Ian asked then.

"I think it's just some shrapnel from the explosion. Though it still hurts like crap. The bastards were too bad shots to hit me."

"To hit the over-man."

“Exactly, Ian, exactly.”

“Where did you keep the rifle? I never saw it inside the trailer,” Jo asked.

“In the van, below the rear seats. You just didn't know where to look. René didn't know either. I think he'd have willfully thrown me off if he had known.”

Slowly, the four walked to the center of the Outpost to survey the carnage and the aftermath.

Snow had begun to fall.

Amazingly, the damage was less than what they had expected: only two of the cabins had burned down completely, though more had certainly suffered partial damage.

The people who had retreated inside the buildings and whose injuries were not too severe started coming out, relieved that the brutal fight was over.

Of course, there were bodies. At least six from the community had died, among them the white-haired gentleman who had guided Ian and Jo to get weaponry from inside the tavern.

That reminded Ian: he turned to look at the tavern, which should have been burned to the ground.

It was still standing there.

Roxi had apparently been looking into the exact same direction, and started running toward the building. Only seconds after disappearing inside, her shrill shout came through the cold air.

“He's alive! Wayne, you mad bastard! But we're going to need an ambulance!”

That made Ian smile: beside him Jo was smiling as well. However, in the next instant his mind went sour – ambulances meant other authorities would not be far behind. The police would come to investigate.

This battle had been strictly in self-defense, but he

was still holding a firearm he did not have a permit for. Somehow he did not imagine the AK-47 being a properly registered NFA item either. And who could know if the cops were connected to SCEPTRE, corrupted by them?

Ian wanted to hide.

He remembered Logan, who had to be still hiding inside his cellar. Ian could go down there while the cops investigated.

And of course, they needed to see Logan again anyway, to see if he could shed some more light on the documents now that this distraction was over. Maybe this time he would say something useful instead of just being stupefied by the occult connections.

However, the gang members' vehicles were an even more pressing matter. They would have to be searched before the cops arrived, for there could be valuable evidence leading to SCEPTRE's trail.

"Erik, you should get yourself patched up. And get some moonshine if you like. I'm sure Roxi is glad to help you with both," Ian said.

There were thanks from the survivors: Ian, Jo and Erik were obviously regarded as heroes.

But Ian knew better: it just had to be that SCEPTRE had ordered the gang to attack this place. They had torn up things here, stirred up royal trouble just to get him. Guilt ruled his mind. He remembered the sarcastic words of congratulation aimed at Buzzsaw: "I think you nailed him! Ha!"

"How do you think the gang found its way here?" Jo asked, almost reading his thoughts. However, there was no accusing tone in her voice, just curiosity.

"We'll know better after we search the vehicles," Ian replied. "By the way... Jo, thanks for being so awesome."

Jo nodded, without saying anything.

Of course any sane person would assume that saving his life twice on the same day was more than enough reason to be thankful. And indeed, there was that too. However, what actually made Ian's day was the complete lack of accusation Jo had displayed. She probably guessed perfectly well why the gang had arrived, even if she wondered how they had picked the moment so perfectly. But to not support his guilt trip in any way was too kind of her.

They decided to start with the SUV lodged inside the tavern. That allowed them also to check out on Wayne.

The big man sat on the tavern floor, a bloodied bandage wrapped around his left thigh, coughing every once in a while. He had to have inhaled quite an amount of smoke, even if the hole in the wall had served as quite good ventilation.

"Perfectly fine fire extinguisher," he laughed, the large red cylinder still next to him. "And you didn't believe me."

Roxi stood next to him in mock disapproval.

Erik sat on a rare undamaged bar stool, and was enjoying the moonshine while waiting to be treated. He had his pants rolled up to his knees: there were indeed several nasty shards of metal that had lodged themselves into his flesh.

The SUV inside did not turn up anything unusual. Neither did the any of the jeeps. In each car, there was some drug paraphernalia inside, but Ian and Jo weren't interested in that in the least. Leave that to the narcs if they decided to turn up in addition to homicide, Ian thought.

Additionally, they found CD's of white supremacy bands. Well, that proved the gang had bad taste and bad ideology, but did not connect it to SCEPTRE in any way either.

The tipped-over second SUV was the last vehicle to search. In retrospect it was sheer laziness: because it presented the most trouble, they had gone through all the other vehicles first, even the motorcycles which did not have much places to hide things.

But now it could no longer be avoided.

Two ambulances had just arrived. That meant cops would follow soon. The laziness could turn dangerous if they could not finish this last one fast.

"Maybe I could climb inside from the window," Jo suggested.

But the driver's window was high above and closed.

"Hmm. I suggest we just try to right it first. You can do your acrobatics stuff if it's too heavy."

Ian had to grunt and grin from the pain that flared up once more as soon as they started to push on the car. However, just as he was on his limit and could not take any more, the SUV moved. They pushed some more, and soon after its center of gravity took over and handled the rest.

The car landed on its tires with a rough noise from its suspension, bouncing back in the air once, then settling. The passenger's side had been dented badly by the impact with ground.

However, the driver's side was perfectly good to get in from.

Ian's gaze focused on the curious device fastened in the center of the console. It looked like a GPS navigator, but when he took a closer look and turned it on, he realized it was something completely else.

A tracking signal receiver.

Somehow Ian was glad that Erik was not there to see Logan climb out of the cellar of his cabin. He feared that by Erik's standards, such an act of cowardice would have necessitated a forceful ass-kicking.

Ian was still not sure of what he thought about it himself: mostly it did not matter. They had managed without him, and hiding had not been completely risk-free either: if Logan's cabin would have suffered a torching, things would have gotten rather hot for him.

Outside, the police had arrived. Some local troopers only for now. As this cabin was at the far end, the policemen would not make their way here immediately. Theoretically, only the gun had to be hidden.

Logan examined the tracker intently, while Ian and Jo looked on.

"I think this is custom-made. Yeah, definitely. You can't buy this in a shop, anywhere. Hmm. If I turn it on, the tracker dot is right in the middle."

He pressed a button on the device.

"Ah. Now it shows distance to target. What? It's close."

Ian did not like the direction Logan's investigation was going. Not in the slightest.

"Ladies first. Jo, could you move a bit. Like into the corner."

Jo did as ordered.

"No, it's not changing. You're bug-free. Ian, you next. Retreat slightly."

Ian backed a good two meters. Logan's eyes lit up.

"By the gods! It's you."

Then his expression suddenly became much more solemn, as if he was ashamed of his cry of excitement.

Again, Ian felt disoriented. He was sure all color had just drained from his face. Just when he thought the paranoia could not go any deeper, a whole new level had been revealed to him. He was being tracked!

It was outrageous.

Ian wanted to cry aloud to the heavens, or to the infernal masters below, but knew neither would help him in the least.

"That's how those shitheads found me," he said in a grim voice.

Then he thought about it more. Not just the gang, but SCEPTRE on the whole had possessed the ability to keep track of his every movement. When had it begun again? Gwen had told that the Agents had, long ago, removed a tracking implant from his body.

"There's a piece of gear that might help find the device," Logan said. "I suggest we start from your clothes."

Ian stripped naked, not ashamed in the least. He just wanted to get into the heart of the matter. The heart of darkness.

Logan shut down his whole array of computer equipment.

"We want to minimize interference," he explained.

Then, he went over the pieces of clothing one by one, using an electronic analyzer that could detect a wide range of electromagnetic radiation.

"This detector should be sensitive enough. I'm fairly positive it's not in your clothes."

Next, he went over Ian's body in a similar fashion. When Logan held the device near his stomach, the analyzer started to beep.

"It appears ... at some point you have swallowed a bug of the electronic kind."

Blasphemous! This time Ian had to shout, to let out

the steam before he exploded from inside.

“Those fuckers! Fuck! Whoever fed me that, I'll feed him lead!”

He sank to the ground slowly, then started dressing up, feeling the futility and powerlessness welling inside him and quickly replacing the boastful anger.

“Can we get it out?” he asked quietly.

“Well, I'm not a doctor. I'd rather not try it,” Logan answered.

“Then I'll just have to let SCEPTRE track me wherever and whenever they wish to. Fucking great.”

Ian stood up again.

“We should get back to the documents then. The maze pages are of course clear. They're handy if I ever return to the place to kill everyone,” he went on.

He was not sure himself if he was joking or serious.

“But the outdoor one is more interesting now. It's like a valley, right? If you scan the page, can you find the place from some map database or something?” he asked.

“Theoretically yes, if I manage to hack into a high-detail, closed geographical database that includes also classified locations, and if I have enough time. But somehow I get the feeling that you two can't give me much,” Logan replied.

“I have a more immediate idea,” Jo said. “It's snowing just so that I can follow the tracks of the pickup truck, but the tracks won't get covered too fast. With luck that guy will lead me right to their base, if they have one.”

Ian was not at all pleased with the suggestion. But he remembered how Jo had exploded last time when he had suggested that she should avoid risk, and did necessarily not want a repeat of that.

“You're wounded, and so is Erik. So it only makes

sense that I do this. And besides, you'd be noticed because of the transmitter," she continued.

Ian considered hard for some seconds, then spoke. If she had to explode, then so be it.

"If you find anything, like their base, or run into SCEPTRE, you must promise that you only observe. You don't go in, right? If you find something, just make sure you remember the location. Then we'll raid it together. Maybe we can get some backup from here."

Ian regretted the last sentence right after it was out of his mouth. He simply could not bring any more danger and suffering to the occupants of this community.

"We'll do that," Jo replied.

She sounded completely honest, but right now Ian could not trust anyone. And then, of course she had the right to do whatever she pleased. Cynically thinking, if she broke her promise and got herself killed, it would only be her fault.

It was an unpleasant line of thinking, but Ian also knew that no-one, not Jo or anyone else, had prevented him from doing his rooftop investigations, or going below ground in the recreation center to find SCEPTRE there.

They were equals, right?

Just as they played roughly equal amounts of rhythm and lead guitar – though Jo played both with more skill – they had an equal right to risk their lives for something they believed in.

The snowfall had ceased. The tracks of the pickup truck were clearly visible in the light layer of snow and in the bent, frozen grass. So far, so good, Jo thought as she drove hard.

The escaped machine gun man she had nicknamed Bruno in her mind, because it felt more fitting than Buzzsaw, had decided to go off-road. The ground was rising slightly, but was still easy enough to traverse: the trees, rocks and boulders were few and noticeable.

Cold air came inside from the broken side windows.

Jo had taken one of the gang jeeps: she was glad the police had not followed in pursuit.

Taking it, she had tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. It had certainly aided matters that the homicide detectives had been slow to arrive, and were still waiting for the forensics expert, so they were questioning the community again in the meanwhile, not trusting the interrogation the local troopers had already done.

Considering that they had arrived into the middle of the chaotic aftermath, it was possible the jeep simply had been overlooked. After all, there was no unified color code for the gang cars. The residents' vehicles, some of them shot to bits as well, made matters more

confusing.

Of course the detectives should have noticed the bodies inside the jeep.

And if they had taken a truly good look, they would have seen the one remaining disposable bazooka lying on the floor right behind the front seats.

The macabre part had been to drive off with the dead gang members still inside. She had dumped them some distance away from the community. That was definitely tampering with evidence, but well, so had been taking the signal receiver from the SUV.

They had been the men she had shot with automatic gunfire. She had never killed before this day. Jo could remember particularly the head exploding: her hands had shaken some time after it, as well as after removing the bodies, but otherwise she felt relatively undisturbed. Was that something to be worried about?

Turning into more pleasant thoughts, she could not suppress a smile as she thought of the destructive device behind her. Otherwise, she was not particularly well armed. She had taken the shotgun and ten extra rounds, all that had remained in the tavern. The AK-47 would have been better: Ian had told it was most certainly illegal, but the lack of ammunition was the more acute problem. The sniper rifle could also have been one possibility, but Jo had not wanted to even consider Erik's reaction if she hinted at borrowing it.

Not after what had happened to his bike.

A second, more sarcastic smile appeared as she also recalled what she had promised, to only observe whatever location the gang leader was driving to.

In that case she would not have needed any weaponry.

She had made up her mind: if the location had any

such whiff that Dee might be held inside, and if it looked like she would have a fighting chance, then damn right she was going in.

After all, most of the gang had to be decimated now. Maybe even all of them except the escaping man. But then, where would he be running to?

Back into SCEPTRE's waiting arms?

Jo was not sure what to think of SCEPTRE exactly. She had seen the documents, had seen how distressed Ian has been, had witnessed the tracking device signal coming from within him. But still –

Who were they? What were their aims?

Realistically thinking, that was mainly Ian's thing to deal with. The guy had his own demons, his own reasons.

A lot depended on what she would find.

If this turned out to be just a wild goose chase, then she would have to resign, cease looking for Dee. Ian would then go on to do his own thing, whatever it required.

Somehow it was a depressive thought.

Because –

Jo knew it was perhaps childish to think so, but somehow Ian had brought with him a glimpse of the world as she had imagined it a long time ago. A world of conspiracies and hidden evil, but also one where a single person or just a few could make a difference.

When she had understood this world did not actually exist, she had turned to music exclusively.

But now she hoped she did not have to let go of the world of her imagination yet again. It was a frightening world, but it called out to her, demanded her to make a difference.

She was aware that if it was real, it could kill her.

The incline steepened. But still, she could see ahead clearly: the ground appeared to contain no hidden hazards. She pressed on the accelerator harder.

The jeep engine groaned high and loud: it was not a stealth vehicle by any stretch of imagination. Jo knew the pickup had a considerable head start, but kept herself alert in case Bruno had decided to make a sudden stop for any reason.

It was already getting dark, as Jo realized she was about to reach some kind of crest: the incline flattened out again. She slowed down.

At the top, there was still no sight of the pickup truck.

Next to a larger boulder on the left, Jo stopped the engine and climbed out, then studied the surroundings with greater care. The tracks still went on, descending into a small valley ahead.

At the bottom, less than half a mile ahead, was a fenced compound with a small trapezoidal bunker-like building in the middle. The place certainly felt desolate and foreboding. After all, it stood in the middle of nothing.

The pickup truck stood next to the fence.

Jo could not see from the distance whether Bruno was there. She had to get closer, but it had to happen on foot. The jeep was simply too loud.

She went back inside the jeep to get the shotgun. She had to be prepared.

At first she walked, then jogged down, trying to keep boulders between her and the truck. She understood now why the place made her feel so uncomfortable.

It made no sense to build such a big compound with only one small building, unless –

The bunker was only an entrance to the main part of the compound, that was located underground. It did not feel like a place for a looting, pillaging and drug-abusing motor gang. It could not be their base.

However, from what she understood SCEPTRE to be, it would be just perfect for their activities.

Even while jogging, she shivered as she thought of the possibility of people being held underground against their will. Ian had told of the first set of documents, those that detailed human experiments.

She thought of Dee. Could he be there, or have been there? Only the first option held the remote possibility of him being alive. But it had been long already. Too long.

If only she had found the place earlier!

If they had followed the gang with the tour van, when they first appeared, they could have won time.

Jo knew she was too hard on herself. Finding the place at all had been a result of luck. Bruno had driven here, but why?

Now there was only two hundred meters to the truck.

She could recognize a shape sitting in the driver's seat. It had to be him.

Just as she made the decision that she should get even closer, there came a buzzing sound from the air, rapidly approaching.

A helicopter.

Jo tried to judge the direction of the sound. Possibly, it was coming from up ahead and left. It was hard to tell, because the predominant direction was still just "above."

A ten meters ahead there was a larger rock. She leaped to it, crouching and flattening herself against it,

just as the helicopter, colored in an ominous black, came into view from behind the hillside.

Jo felt her pulse go up like never before.

The helicopter descended, closing in on the pickup truck, the few trees swaying in the downwash.

Bruno got out of the truck.

The helicopter completed its landing.

Just a few seconds after it touched the ground and shut down, a single person jumped out of it. A man in black, slightly taller than Bruno, who was not exactly short either. The man walked up to the truck with long, militaristic steps. Only three meters remained between the men now.

Jo knew it was a secret meeting of some kind.

She tried to think like Ian. He would probably decide the man to be Bruno's SCEPTRE contact, or employer. Now there was an even stronger reason to get closer. However, discovery would with high probability mean getting killed.

Not just secret, but a dangerous meeting, she decided.

She inched cautiously forward, again going from rock to rock, careful to not snap any branch, to not make any noise for that matter.

Inadvertently she kicked a small stone loose.

She thought her heart would stop. At the moment the impact sounded like thunder to her. She froze.

Slowly, she realized the men were too focused on each other to notice. She started moving again, even more watchful now. Twenty meters away from the men she simply was not willing to get any closer.

Earlier, Bruno had said something she had not been able to catch. But she hoped to hear the rest of the conversation clearly.

Judging from his body language, the man in black was not pleased. Jo saw that he had a high, skull-like face, with short-cropped dark hair.

"You were under strict orders to not make contact again. And definitely not here. Do you understand at all the risk you have caused? You could have been followed," the man spoke.

The voice was startling, not only because the words striking straight home, but because it was so unearthly, raven-like. Amused for just a split second, Jo imagined the man fronting a grim and frostbitten black metal band.

Then she mentally slapped herself for not keeping serious. This was a most serious situation.

"But the task got done. Just with a terrible price. My men –" Bruno replied.

"Your men! All they are is scum of this earth. And you, you are not much better. Besides, you're a lousy liar too."

Bruno seemed surprised and defeated.

"Are you so ignorant to believe I wouldn't have a backup tracker? In the last two hours, I've observed the mark moving rather effortlessly for a dead man. Unless the community is dragging his corpse around in some strange ritual, which I frankly don't believe, you have failed the assignment. And in any case, you completely failed to abide by the agreed communication and secrecy protocol."

So the attack had been about getting Ian, and him only. Though the destruction and loss had been terrible, the enemies had failed. Jo remembered how angry and frustrated he had been before she left, but he was safe for now. And recovering.

Now Bruno looked not only like a broken man, but

also frightened and desperate. She understood that his life was cheap and had just gotten a whole lot cheaper.

"I still got men left. If anything happens to me, I've instructed them to reveal this place, and everything -"

"No, you don't. I know they're all dead. And trying to threaten me only makes your situation worse. Much worse. You should be tortured in a prolonged manner, but to be honest I don't have time or interest for that. Therefore, Dutch, or Buzzsaw if you like, consider yourself fired."

So Bruno was actually Dutch. Jo could live with that.

Faster than she could realize where it had come from, a silenced pistol had materialized in the hand of the black-clad man.

Dutch did not try to get away. Leaning against the truck, there was no good direction to dive into.

Two muted shots came from the pistol: he started to slide down, then fell to his side, and did not move any more. With the same efficient stride as before, the other man climbed into the helicopter, powered it up, and lifted off.

"Holy crap," Jo said aloud after the chopper had already disappeared behind the hills.

She came out of hiding and went to the corpse.

There was no especial idea in her mind of what she thought to find, just the compulsion to search it.

Nothing more than the usual turned up: a wallet with a driver's license, keys to the truck as well as some others, and a cell phone that was now switched off.

No secret documents or access cards.

There was now only one thing she could do, even though the dead man had not been of much help: to get inside the bunker, whatever it took.

There was no sign of the fence being electrified, or other warning signs. It was as if whoever had built the complex understood well that any grand and threatening signs would only encourage breaking and entering.

The double gates were locked by a hefty padlock and chain. It would have been tempting to scale the fence. Jo could have tested it first with some metal object. But she did not want to rely on that, because who knew when electricity, if there was any, would be triggered. She wanted to take no chances. To help matters, she decided that any subtlety could be forgotten.

In that case, the perfect instrument for unlawful entry was in front of her.

The pickup truck.

She could wreck it for all she wanted, and that would still leave the jeep on the hilltop for getting away.

However, before she set out to work, she peered beyond the gates at the bunker itself. There seemed to be a heavy steel door set in the concrete wall, but the opening was not wide enough for the truck to be used as a battering ram in that case too.

Next to the door there was a small box: it could be a keypad or a card lock. She possessed neither an access

code or an access card, so her initial thoughts were right: excessive force was going to be the only viable option.

She thought for a while.

Was this defeat?

No, she decided. It would just require some wasted time. She cursed her lack of foresight.

She started a quick jog up the hill.

Back at the top again, she was feeling rather exerted. Covert operations were tougher than merely running around the stage and headbanging, she realized.

Despite the gloomy surroundings and the rapidly falling darkness, Jo grinned as she opened the back door of the jeep. Yes, it was perfect. Of course she would only have one shot.

To speed up things, she drove the jeep downhill.

After arriving at the bottom with her new equipment, Jo pondered on which of the cars would actually break the gate better, but came to no fruitful conclusion. Therefore she decided to stick with the original plan.

Using the pickup truck as the disposable battering ram was logical, because she had already driven more than a hundred miles with the jeep and found it reliable enough.

She put the truck on reverse and lined it up with the gates, backing as far away as she could. At roughly a hundred meters away there was a larger rock behind, and she could go no more.

Theoretically it should be enough.

She put in the first gear and floored the accelerator. The wheels spun for a short time, kicking up snow, then the truck lurched forward and started racing toward the fence, picking up speed all the time.

At thirty miles per hour she switched to the second gear, not so much for sparing the engine, but to get even more acceleration.

Soon after the truck hit the gates.

It was a nasty, heavy impact, accompanied by the screeching and tearing sound of metal on metal.

However, the vehicle did not stop. It just dragged the gates with it, still going on.

She had made it past the fence.

Jo stepped on the brakes, the tortured engine still running. While still inside the safety of the truck she double-checked, using the hi-beams, that there indeed was no activity, no life within the compound.

That was correct. The fenced area was as dead as it could be. Satisfied, she turned the ignition key to the off position, and stepped out.

Now she understood that the heavy chain holding the gates together had held, but instead the gates had been simply torn off from their hinges.

The trapezoidal bunker was about ten meters wide and four high. She confirmed her earlier sighting, that the narrow steel door was the only entrance. The bunker was only meant for people to enter, not vehicles.

She did not even want to try hacking her way in. It would be a pointless waste of time. Making the extra trip up to fetch the bazooka had been wasteful enough.

In retrospect, having the bazooka with her in the pickup truck while ramming the gates had been somewhat risky. But she was still alive, and the destructive device seemed intact enough.

Jo removed the pin and extended the bazooka to full length. As the tube extended, the sights also flipped up automatically.

In theory, aiming was not harder than looking

through both sights and seeing that they were aligned with the door. She walked back to what she judged a safe distance and stood with the bazooka on her right shoulder.

As per operating instructions memorized from the Internet, she checked the backblast area, but grinned to herself as she well knew that she was alone, and there was nothing valuable behind, in fact nothing at all but the fence.

She pulled the handle that would allow the trigger to become operational.

Now the door was in her sights, a clear line of fire.

This was the one shot she was going to get.

Carefully at first, not knowing how much force was exactly needed, she pressed the trigger in front of the rear sight.

The sound of the rocket launching was like a short mini-thunderclap. Jo could not help but to admire the smoke trail: it was beautiful.

A split-second later came the explosion, a bright flash where the door stood.

A direct hit.

It took a long time for the smoke to evaporate before she could see anything, to see whether the door had withstood. It was all black.

Then she understood she was looking at the blackness beyond the door.

Success!

She went inside the pickup truck for the last time, took the shotgun, and stuffed the extra cartridges inside her pockets. Now she was as ready as she was ever going to be. Though the bazooka was useless now, she let it hang from its sling on her back. If not for anything else, then simply to look tougher.

Cautiously, the shotgun at ready, she walked closer to the opening. The door had been blown off and now lay on the bunker floor, twisted and blackened.

Jo studied the room inside the bunker. There was light coming from the side: a single light bulb set in the wall, protected by a metal grille.

So, the place was powered up. Possibly by an own generator, because there had been no electric poles at least for thirty miles.

Unless it was common procedure to leave the lights on at an unused secret complex, the place had to be occupied.

To her right was an elevator, but it had restricted access in a similar way as the bunker entrance itself: there was a slit for an access card to be inserted.

So, no luck there. To be honest, allowing herself to be possibly trapped inside an elevator at a top secret installation was not exactly a pleasing thought in any case.

On the left was something far more reliable and primitive: steel stairs descending down.

Though it meant more exercise, she took the stairs gladly. As she descended, there were more light bulbs set in the concrete wall along the way down.

The steps were too many to count, but Jo judged to have descended a good thirty meters below ground, when she came to the bottom of the stairwell. Here, the air was stale: a musty, wet stench hung in the air. Ahead there was a similar elevator door: it was the end of the road for the automatic ride as well.

But more interesting was the bigger door on the other wall of this entrance lobby, as she thought of it. It was a total of three meters wide, metallic and shiny. It

seemed out of place compared to the dull concrete walls and the low level of lighting.

However, she was puzzled: here was no switch, button or key card lock of any kind. She stepped up to the door. Nothing happened: it was not triggered by a motion detector either.

Then she looked up and understood that she was with high probability being observed: up in the ceiling there was a security camera.

Sudden anger flashed through her – to come all the way here, smash the gate and blast the entrance door to nothingness, just to be watched and ridiculed by someone looking at a security monitor.

In a fluid continuous motion she pumped the shotgun, aimed it to the ceiling and shot at the camera.

Sparks flew from inside: its chassis had not withstood the 12 gauge buckshot, and had been punctured in several places.

It could not be operational any more.

But for what came next, Jo was not prepared in the slightest. She almost jumped as the wide door started to open with a heavy whirl of an electric motor. Both the top and bottom parts slid open, creating a hole that started from the middle.

Instinct took over, and she stepped to the side to remain out of sight of whoever or whatever appeared from the other side.

As the door was fully open, she waited with patience. Nothing happened at first.

Then, there was a clicking and whirring of servos, a much lighter sound than the door opening. And a clank of metal –

Footsteps?

Jo could see the shadow first, appearing in the harsh

rectangle of light coming from the other side.

A tall robot, roughly shaped like a human skeleton.

Was that a security guard of this place? Its head resembled mostly a metallic goat skull: therefore she nicknamed it "cybergoat."

It was uncertain if and how the robot was armed. There were some ominous holes, a few centimeters wide, in its shoulder assembly.

Mini-rocket launchers?

The arms and hands also had odd reinforced parts that could possibly conceal some other weapons.

But Jo was not about to let it show its firepower first.

Instead, she pumped the shotgun, took aim at the mechanic creature's head, for she guessed it would contain the most sensitive parts –

And fired.

Not just once, but three times, the last hits going lower between its head and torso. In total the robot was hit by a massive cloud of buckshot: it made a quiet whining sound, then collapsed forward, lifeless.

But it had already made it past the big door to the lobby: free of obstructions, the wide top and bottom parts started to close again.

Shit, Jo thought. The chance to get in was expiring fast.

Then she realized the bazooka could still be of use. Freeing herself from its sling, she propped the tube against the side of the opening, into the groove in which the door parts slid, and waited.

The massive door halves pressed on the bazooka tube, crushed it a bit, but then the electronic mechanism apparently noticed the obstruction and the motor shut itself off. Now she was free to climb over the bottom half to the other side. But first she reloaded the

shotgun, so that she had eight rounds again. That left six as spares.

She hoped that if she met more of the security robots, they would go down with one carefully aimed shot. Or two at maximum.

Then she hopped onto the bottom part, and launched herself quickly to the other side. The door demanded some respect: if it wanted, it could have crushed her without thinking twice.

She landed somewhat clumsily on the floor and was immediately mesmerized by the sight before her eyes.

The contrast to the concrete stairwell and lobby could not have been more extreme: she was in a shiny white corridor, lit by several fluorescent tubes both in the ceiling and the walls. The air was no longer stale, but almost clinically pure.

The corridor was roughly twenty meters long: beyond it was something even more astounding.

It was a tall, circular room, maybe fifty or sixty meters in diameter. The walls were similarly white, and the lighting conditions were just as bright as in the corridor.

It was as Jo had stepped into the future: an odd place in some odd future time.

Was this a SCEPTRE laboratory?

The sterile-looking interior design left Jo no other alternatives, at least for now. It certainly was not a hide-out for a simple motor gang, no matter how well equipped. Just the lighting in this place had to require some serious power.

A circular walkway with a metal railing went around the outer edge of the room.

But it was only when she stepped out of the corridor and onto the walkway that she understood just how

vast the room actually was. She was at the very top, but the room extended roughly the same length below as its diameter. There were several levels, several circular walkways that went on to the bottom.

Ten floors in total? The floors were connected by stairs: there were three stairwells, spaced equally so that they were one third of the full circle apart from each other.

In the center of the room there was a smaller cylinder that likewise went all the way from the bottom to the top. At the top there seemed to be windows: they were dimmed and reflective, so that Jo could not see beyond them.

An observation or control room of some kind?

The topmost level had just the walkway, but starting from the next floor there were small, narrow doors, with an even smaller square-shaped window in them dotted along the length of the walkway, maybe twenty on each level.

She could think of only one thing.

Cells.

This had to be a place for experimentation on captive human subjects. Jo felt a shiver of disgust, and did not even try to fight it.

She remembered the odd word Ian had mentioned: fnords. Apparently, those were stimuli of various kind that could provoke the right pre-planned response, if the stimulus had been prepared in the right way.

And ensuring that meant a lot of tests.

A lot of test subjects.

However, just as she was about to get too submerged in her thoughts, trying to guess the exact nature of the experiments, she was jolted back to awareness by noises coming from below.

She peered over the railing to see. More of the cyber-goats, coming at her from the lower floors.

Fucking hell!

Suddenly the situation was looking rather dangerous, rather uncontrollable. The robots marched fast with their metallic clanking footsteps, climbing the stairs. Whatever they were armed with, soon they would be close enough to fire.

She took a quick look around.

On the topmost level, there was a retractable bridge connecting the circular walkway and the central cylinder. Right now it was fully retracted: no immediate luck.

Jo ran to the beginning of the bridge, looking for any kind of controls, even for a lock box she could try to short-circuit.

No luck there either. There simply were none. The bridge was either remotely or automatically controlled. And it was grimly apparent that it was not going to retract just to let her pass.

For less than a second she contemplated the gap. It was more than ten meters across: not even a gold medalist in long jump was going to make it. And below waited a fifty-meter plunge to the death.

She would just have to fight the goats.

Perhaps, if she got to the bottom and could enter the central cylinder, she could get into shelter. Perhaps there even was the mystery to this place.

The first cybergoat emerged onto the top floor.

It seemed almost to hesitate for a moment as it looked at her. The servos whirred in short, rapid movements: it was fine-adjusting its aiming.

That was the sign for Jo to run. In any direction.

Next an ugly sound filled the air, like the repeated blows of a hammer striking against a metal anvil. It was

not at the rapid speed of a machine gun, but more like four per second.

As she ran, Jo understood that the security robot was firing some kind of projectiles at her.

Steel bolts?

She did not even want to consider what such things would do upon contact with human skin. The goats definitely had orders to kill on sight.

Sudden determination, sudden rage came from somewhere deep within her. It was even stronger than when fighting the gang at the Outpost.

If she was going to die, then she was going to.

She certainly understood the hopelessness of the situation. But the point was to not let it overcome her. At the very least she would take as many of the mechanical beasts as she could with her.

Jo started to turn in a wide circle, while still running. She could see the bolts as shadowy streaks as they passed through the air.

It was then she noticed something.

The robot was not tracking her very fast. The bolts were several seconds behind her.

She did have some kind of chances after all.

Now, she was almost facing the cybergod. With a shout of rage, she launched herself into a low diagonal leap through the air, hoping to keep below the robot's line of fire.

At the same time, she fired the shotgun. The cloud of buckshot hit the goat mostly at its chest plate, probably not doing much damage.

She pumped the shotgun, the noise echoing in the wide space. Just before landing at the feet of the robot, she fired again in a steep upward angle.

That was a hit at almost at point-blank range: the

pellets were still thickly concentrated as they hit the robot's neck.

The head was blown off from the force of the impact, leaving some thick wires dangling. The goat fell backward, limp and inoperative.

Dead.

Jo let out an exhausted and relieved sigh, got up on her feet, and readied the shotgun for another shot. Six rounds remained under the barrel, and six more in her pockets.

She counted eight more robots climbing up. Now it was high time to start conserving ammunition.

There was still some degree of shock from the encounter. Jo's whole body shook. Though she had decided to be determined, she could not fight the hard-coded responses of her nervous system. After all, she was not a trained killer, not even one with unfinished training. Just a metal guitarist with some practice and knowledge of firearms. No metal guitarist should ever have ventured so far underground.

There was the thought that she could go back into the corridor, back through the heavy door, and up the stairwell. Out into the fresh outside air, out of danger.

But no. She had to see this through. To see whether Dee was held in this place.

She sprinted to the first stairwell ahead to get to the floor below, the first one with the small doors all around. The white-painted stairs made a steely racket as she descended, reminding her more of a factory than a high-tech laboratory.

Two more goats were ascending from the other two stairwells. But they were still a good distance away. Therefore, she decided to take a look through one of the doors in the wall, through the small square glass pane.

As Jo got closer, she saw how the pane was reinforced with a grid of thin steel wires, spaced a centimeter apart.

Then, she also saw what was inside.

The cell was also painted a shiny white. There was a mattress on the floor, a curved, futuristic-looking toilet in one corner, a slot in the wall, now closed with a metal lid. On another wall there was a large flat display and next to it a headphone jack, into which large black closed-design headphones were connected.

The occupant of the cell was clad in a fluorescent orange jumpsuit, long greasy brown hair framing his angular face. Physically he looked to be in a mostly OK condition, perhaps somewhat malnourished, but his mental state was indeterminable: now he rocked quietly back and forth on the mattress.

Suddenly Jo hated this place and its creators so much, that she almost forgot about the cybergoats still hunting her.

Forcing herself to control the emotion, she snapped back to the immediate reality.

There was a third robot coming from below, headed for the nearest stairwell. With cold determination that bordered on malice, she positioned herself out of sight, so that the goat would climb to her level with its back still turned.

The other two were closing in too, but still not close enough to fire. It was going to be tricky, though. The third goat was climbing much too slowly. Did it sense the trap?

No, she decided.

Jo fired as soon as the skull-like head came into view, the barrel almost touching the metal. The mangled and punctured head launched clear of the rest of the body,

flying several meters through the air. The robot collapsed lifelessly on the stairs.

The other two started to fire. Bolts pummeled the wall dangerously close to her.

While returning fire blindly, she jumped over the stairwell railing, almost right on top of the fallen goat. It was sprawled forward on the stairs. She had at least a good fifteen seconds before the two closed the distance.

Something made Jo decide to turn the cybergoat around, to examine it. It took some effort: the metal limbs almost caught to the stairs did not help matters.

But finally the robot was lying on its back.

From up close it was a fascinating sight, but she was not particularly interested in the technology that made it possible to build an automated war machine of this kind.

Rather, there was something that caught her attention in the cybergoat's chest: behind a clear plastic cover, there was a chip of some kind. It was not connected to the robot's insides. Yet the robot carried it wherever it went.

There was one possibility that came to her mind.

There had been no controls for the large door in the concrete lobby, or on the other side either, yet it had opened when the first goat had stepped close, possibly alerted by the shotgun blast.

If the chip contained a RFID tag or some similar technology, that possibly made the door open.

So, if she took the chip, could she pass for a robot according to the place's security system? That could be a huge advantage in getting inside the inner cylinder.

But how to get the chip without breaking it?

There could not be much time remaining now before the two goats would have a clear line of sight again.

Sudden violence was often the best option. It had helped Jo in several unrelated scenarios, involving hardware and people alike.

But then ... there was also just the option of opening the lid of the plastic casing.

She quickly examined the sides of the plastic rectangle, until she found the latch. With just minimal force, it opened. The chip held between her fingers, she got on her feet and sprinted down the stairway.

Just as the two robots opened fire.

Jo ran while reloading the shotgun. The chip was now safe in her left front pants pocket. Currently, there were no more robots on this level, but at least five still roamed the floors below.

More could be inside the central cylinder.

If she got that far.

She wondered if there were humans controlling the facility at all. Of course, there was the room at the top, but it could be deserted.

Still too many floors and goats to go. Jo felt out of breath, and lactic acid was burning her muscles. It was true that she had at least once in her life imagined, how it would feel to infiltrate an above top secret facility such as this.

Now she knew.

Another cybergoat appeared from the stairs below, taking aim. But her finger was already squeezing the trigger. The shotgun barked and the robot was pelted with buckshot, just as something flew from two of its shoulder holes.

The flying objects missed Jo barely. It was then she understood what they were, like small arrows on a string.

They were taser darts.

The goats had switched tactics: now they were trying to get her alive. But why? Had a computer somewhere decided that? Or an actual person?

Somehow it felt more ominous.

She could maybe keep fighting if hit by a single metal bolt, at least until she bled to death. That would be a warrior's death, proud and with boots on. But being hit and incapacitated by the darts would hold no pride whatsoever.

Enraged with this thought, she fired again from closer range. It was not a hit to the head, but still damaging enough for the machine to decide it was not worth it to keep fighting. It shut itself off and fell to the floor.

To be fully prepared, Jo reloaded again. Now there were no spare cartridges remaining. Eight rounds to go, and then she was empty.

It was on the second-to-last floor that Jo ran out of ammunition. To conserve it, she had been trying to avoid the robots as much as she could, destroying them only when there was no other option.

But now the three remaining ones, including the two she had run away from several floors above, ganged up on her – ready to fire the darts or whatever else they were planning any moment from now.

One more cybergod patrolled the floor below.

Below, there were also the inviting, curved doors of the inner cylinder, which the chip might even open.

So close, but so far away!

There came a short hiss of air, as the two nearest goats fired their darts. Prepared, Jo ducked under. Both pairs hit the opposite robot, then clattered harmlessly off the metal skin.

She could not wait any longer.

The drop to the floor was – what? Four or five meters. If luck was with her, she perhaps would not break any-thing.

First, she tossed the empty shotgun below.

Then she hopped onto the railing and shifted her legs to the other side. While gripping the vertical bars hard, she let her legs hang down and her hands slide to the lowest possible position, until her wrists were level with the walkway. The cybergoats looked on, puzzled at the maneuver. But they would not be fooled for long.

She let go.

Thanks to the way Jo hung from the railing before dropping down, the fall became only three meters. She relaxed her muscles in preparation to the impact.

The landing was less than graceful, but at least it did not hurt much. She rolled forward, then got up, going for the shotgun lying two meters ahead.

The cybergoat noticed her.

The empty shotgun could still be used as a striking weapon. It was much better than trying to fight the robot with bare hands and legs only.

But still it might not be enough.

Jo had a tactic figured out. Assuming that this goat tried to get her alive as well, she would let it fire its darts, then rush it.

Theoretically she could also just run past it to the circular doors. But what if they would not open?

Quickly, she glanced up. The remaining three robots on the level above were going for the nearest stairwell. In any case, soon there would be four instead of one.

The robot fired its darts and Jo leaped to the side.

However, it had anticipated the move. Did the goats learn as a kind of collective consciousness?

One of the taser darts missed completely, while the

other got stuck to her leather jacket. The circuit was not complete, but still, the object was repulsive. She wanted to be rid of it. As she yanked herself away with force, the barbed dart came loose.

However, she was not sure whether the goat could fire another pair of darts, and how soon. With the shotgun held sideways in her hands, she started a sprint toward the robot.

Here goes nothing, she thought.

As she got closer, the robot suddenly pointed its right arm forward. There came a hissing thwack.

Jo felt a slight tremor in her hands.

Then she looked at the shotgun and saw to her terror that a needle-like object had embedded itself to the wooden stock.

A poison dart?

The goats were indeed not to be underestimated. She remembered looking at the first robot, and noticing all the odd protrusions in its arms. Because they had only used the bolts and the taser darts so far, she had completely forgotten about the other weapons systems they might possess.

That thought gave Jo a sudden rush of adrenaline, a white-hot anger, and she just decided to hit the robot hard and fast before it had the chance to use any of its weapons.

She launched herself up to the air, trying to meet the robot's jaw with the shotgun.

Impact.

The robot's head was jolted back by the savage blow. But quickly the servos compensated, and soon it was staring at her with its electric eyes as if nothing had happened.

Next she swung the shotgun as if it was a baseball

bat. The cybergoat dodged, then hit her with a metallic backhand to the jawbone.

The hit was probably not anywhere near the robot's full strength, more like a sweeping motion to get rid of an annoying, puny intruder. Still, Jo tasted blood and felt dizzy, as she was flung to the floor. The actual pain came only a moment later.

More thwacks came from the robot's arms, and she rolled frantically, not exactly sure of the right way, trying to dodge the needles fired in rapid succession.

A part of her mind almost longed to be hit so that it would be all over.

But yet, it was not. She had not been hit.

As the goat stopped firing momentarily, possibly to reload a fresh magazine to its internal weapons, Jo got back up on her feet. She glanced around: the three robots were in the stairwell and about to hit the lowest floor in any number of seconds.

If she was to succeed, this battle had to be ended fast.

What did she have besides the shotgun, which had already proved quite ineffectual as a melee weapon?

Nothing.

Actually, that was not true, strictly speaking.

How would the goat react to –

Jo dropped the shotgun and kicked it toward the robot. Then she quickly opened and took off her jacket, and with it in her hands, leaped toward the robot for the second time.

As soon as she judged the distance to be right, she flung the cloth over the cybergoat's head.

Now you can't see, so how do you deal with that?

The blinded robot let itself be toppled, with Jo on top. She reached for the shotgun and started pummel-

ing the goat's head and neck with brutal, repeated blows. In response, the robot hammered her back painfully.

She knew she could not take the beating for long. Besides, there was the real risk of internal injury.

But then, the feeling of helpless rage transformed into a blow that was more savage than those before: from below there came the sound of something snapping. The battery on her back ceased, and the robot lay still.

Jo removed the jacket and observed the cybergoat's neck to have been broken. There were exposed wires: the metal spine had snapped fatally.

Almost with a tiny bit of sadness in her thoughts, she got up and headed for the curved door at the base of the central cylinder, the empty shotgun still in her hand. Pain throbbed in her back: she managed barely a half-jog.

But the three robots were closing in, so there was no option but to keep on moving.

Of course, if the door would not open, she would be practically toast. She wondered whether the goats would still keep to non-lethal tactics after seeing her kill one of their kind with such brutality.

Jo reached the door at last.

Nothing. But then, she had expected an instantaneous response.

After one second there came a beep from within, and the electric door started to open, sliding into the likewise curved wall.

Success! The chip had granted her access.

But not a moment too soon, for at the same moment the robots stopped, preparing to fire. Jo wedged herself through the opening as soon as it was wide enough.

Taser darts clattered to the metal door behind her.

Inside there was a circular staircase leading to the top, as well as an elevator. Right now she did not look forward to climbing fifty meters of stairs. But could the elevator be trusted? And were goats actually allowed to ride an elevator, too?

It was not a good moment to get too doubtful.

As Jo got close, the elevator door slid open. There were two buttons inside: an up arrow and a down arrow. However, now the three robots were already pouring in. She hit the up arrow and hoped that the door would close quick enough.

Not quite.

One needle flew in from the opening.

But she had already ducked into the elevator's corner. The door closed, and the upward ride began with a sudden feeling of acceleration.

The glistening needle lay on the floor. Jo did not even entertain the thought of touching it, but had to wonder what kind of toxin or sedative it contained. How quickly would it have granted oblivion, if it hit home?

The end of the line. The top of the world. Or at least the top of the central cylinder. The elevator door opened again, and Jo stepped out.

Just like she had imagined, it was a circular, brightly lit room. The windows she had seen earlier overlooked the entire laboratory. Monitors and keyboard consoles filled the circular desk, which was a light wooden color in contrast to the sterile white all around.

Crouched in front of one of the consoles, apparently in intense concentration, was a man in a scientist's white coat.

Couldn't be any other dress code, Jo thought.

The man turned as if sensing her arrival. She looked above, and noticed that a security camera had broadcast her approach perfectly well. No need for the scientist to have a sixth sense.

The man had a red, circular beard and some red hair, but mostly he was bald. Jo was somehow reminded of the other man, who had shot Dutch the Buzzsaw, but the scientist's face was much less skull-like, not nearly as evil.

Above his left coat pocket, the man had a small name tag. There was a small version of the triangle-circle-sphere symbol, and the word Apollyon.

To intimidate, Jo racked the empty shotgun. The noise should frighten most normal people.

Of course SCEPTRE people did not necessarily have a tiniest shred of normal in them. If you were called Apollyon, the Destroyer, or Angel of the Deep, you did not necessarily fear such mundane things.

But she had to try.

"Where is Dee? Devin? Is he held in this filthy place?" she asked, deliberately placing her voice to contain harsh upper-mid frequencies, to bite directly into the man's consciousness.

"I don't know what you're talking about, young lady. And why wear out the mechanism of a perfectly good, but empty shotgun?"

The improbable calmness of the voice made Jo angry. In fact she was certain her face flushed red with hate. She wondered: if this less evil man was called Apollyon, what name did the skull-faced executioner carry?

But then, interrupting her thoughts, the scientist made an almost imperceptible motion, reaching for the underside of his desk.

At the opposite ends of the room two small trap-

doors opened, from which two spider-like security robots quickly strode out, making high-pitched clinking sounds with each step.

“Bastard,” Jo hissed.

She sprinted forward, aiming to tackle the scientist, to use him as a human shield against the spiders, anything.

From the spider robots came a soft whirring noise. She glanced sideways to see a small dome on top of the other robot rotate.

But she had to keep going.

She leaped forward as something flying hit her both legs, digging inside the cloth. The hits came from two separate directions.

The next thing she knew was the blasphemous pain of a high-voltage, low-amperage current, designed to leave her unable to move.

The scientist jumped out of the way to avoid being jolted himself.

Jo hit the floor hard, but compared to the pain just before, the impact itself barely registered. She tried to get up, but found her muscles powerless: the movement was barely a few centimeters.

“Yes, I believe that will do,” the scientist muttered, apparently pleased. “I would almost wish to congratulate you for being the first intruder in this facility ever. And my apologies for the robots being in lethal mode in the beginning. Running these experiments is precise, and therefore tiresome work, so at times the concentration can lapse.”

She tried her utmost to form the words “fuck you,” but found herself unable to make a sound.

It was a defeat. A total fail.

From her lying position, Jo observed the scientist to

roll up one of his coat sleeves. Strapped to his wrist was a similar device as the cybergods possessed on their arms.

“But for now, good night.”

She felt something hit her side, a pin prick, and found that the oblivion was indeed quick and deep.

Lights out.

Darkness had fallen hours ago. Ian found himself pacing the tavern floor repeatedly. He was certain Jo had taken a cell phone with her, with the battery at full or near full capacity. Still there had been no contact.

The SUV, like the rest of the gang vehicles, had been removed by the police after the crime scene investigation was complete. Now the big opening was covered with a tarpaulin to keep the cold wind out. Wayne had been trucked off to hospital because of the bullet wound and smoke inhalation, and Roxi had gone to escort him and to get her arm wound treated. That meant Ian, Logan and Erik had the nearly wrecked tavern all to themselves.

Mourning the loss of his motorbike, Erik consumed the moonshine in a controlled way that would not actually make him lose consciousness yet, but kept him heavily sedated nevertheless.

Roxi had hidden the booze stockpile, the distilling equipment, as well as the AK-47 cleverly before the cops had arrived. She had also treated Erik's wounds expertly. Ian had no choice but to admire her resourcefulness and courage. On the other hand, Erik's mental condition at the moment was far from admirable.

“If I had tipped it over, it might still be in one piece. Or if I had taken the rocket hit instead. The over-man should have survived that. Or if I hadn't, then I wouldn't have been one...”

The drunken monologue was not pleasant to listen to. It circled around the same paths over and over, similarly to how Ian walked in circles physically.

“It's possible we made a classic mistake,” Logan said suddenly. “There might not be a base station anywhere in the vicinity of the location, or there might be actual electronic countermeasures. It doesn't necessarily mean anything has happened to her. Still, we should have given her the satphone.”

“That's assuming she found some 'location' in the first place,” Ian said bitterly. “Shit, should I just go after her?”

But he knew it would be a futile attempt. It was now completely dark and the snowing had resumed: both Buzzsaw's and Jo's tracks would be hopelessly covered by now.

Logan did not answer, he just sat, looking thoughtful. Ian knew the anarchist had a search program running, though simpler than originally envisioned. Instead of trying to illegally hack into some non-public detailed geographic database, it just pulled completely public data, starting from the Outpost and expanding the search radius from there, trying to crudely match the map page containing the small valley. However, the further it went, the slower it would get.

The algorithm had been quickly put together in a high-level scripting language. Minus points for that. But still Ian was thankful for Logan's efforts: somehow he had a nagging feeling that if the place was anywhere in the vicinity, it was there Buzzsaw would have headed.

And therefore Jo as well.

Logan had also changed Ian's bandage to a fresh one and Ian had taken an antibiotic just in case, flushing it down with moonshine. He felt fairly all right now, at least for just existing: sitting or standing, or doing some walking around. But he certainly did not feel like fighting or otherwise exerting himself for quite some time to come.

Somehow, though, he felt that was exactly what he should be doing instead of sitting around here. There was no way he could deny the constricting feeling in his throat and chest. It was almost debilitating him and certainly driving him insane.

He could not deny that he was almost sick from worrying about Jo.

Just at the moment he could not give a damn about unearthing conspiracies or uncovering more hidden truths about himself. He simply wanted to see her face again, and hear one more word from her. Even if she would just tell him that he was a head case who alone was responsible for leading SCEPTRE here.

Was that being in love?

Ian did not care what it was. He just knew that he had to see her again, or else. And not just that, he made a firm decision that should she come bursting through the tavern door right now, he would just have to kiss her hard, no questions asked, no 101 rules of whatever metal genre considered.

But it could be that no matter how long he waited, she would not burst into the tavern.

Ian cursed quietly and sat on the nearest bench, one of the few that had survived in one piece, though not without some battle damage. One third of the top was missing.

It was then Logan's cell phone beeped.

"It has found a match," he said.

Ian's heart jumped. Right in that instant he was jolted out of his thoughts, already considering what this turn of events implied, what actions it would require.

That was much better.

In his cabin, Logan programmed the location into a GPS navigator device. Using that, it was nearly impossible for Ian not to find the place, even in the dark. Of course, following it blindly could result driving into a rock, a tree or a lake.

Logan handed the device to Ian.

He knew it was rather generous letting him use Logan's four-wheel drive pickup.

"The thing is, you can always buy a new bike, or a new truck, but never a friend like your Jo or Erik. Of course I would appreciate if you brought the car back in one piece. Actually I doubt you have any difficulty in that, just watch out for bazooka fire," Logan said and grinned. "And of course, watch the fuel gauge."

"Will do. Your help is much appreciated," Ian replied.

Somehow he had the nagging feeling that Logan believed nothing truly bad had actually happened, that perhaps Jo had run out of gas on the return trip or was just performing extended reconnaissance. But to argue about it further would have been just a waste of time and energy, and in any case Logan would sit in the comfort of the cabin, while Ian drove throughout the night.

"One more thing. We don't repeat the same mistake, so you take the satellite phone with you. That way you should be able to reach me from anywhere outside. The battery should be full, but like with the navigator, you get more juice from the lighter if necessary."

The satellite phone looked almost like an ordinary cell phone, it was just a bit sturdier and contained a longer, thick antenna.

There was of course the question of weaponry. Ian had the pistol and some ammunition, but the destination and what would be found there was a complete mystery.

He cursed for not stocking up on the gang members' automatic weapons and ammo. They had been taken away by the police.

It would have been good to have Erik on his side in this, but Ian knew the over-man was just in too deep stupor to be anything else than a burden and a danger for everyone involved. In fact Ian was not sure if Erik was even aware that Jo had left to follow Buzzsaw on her own. If not, then let him be blissfully unaware.

If things went well, all three of them would head back home tomorrow. Then Erik could be properly briefed on what he had missed.

And if things did not go well –

It was the case Ian did not want to consider.

“See you soon,” he said as he stepped out of Logan's cabin.

“Good luck,” came the simple reply.

Outside, Ian climbed into the truck, put the navigator into its mounting bracket, and started the engine. The device showed ninety nine miles to target.

He zoomed out the map, and checked once more that the place truly was in the middle of nowhere. It made no sense to even try to use the roads. Rather, he would head right off to the open terrain.

He put in the first gear and lifted the clutch.

It was not a horribly long way, but in the dark and

over uncertain terrain it was not exactly a trip to look forward to.

Still, it had to be done.

There was also one maddening possibility on his mind: what if Jo had gone nowhere near the location on the map, but had followed Buzzsaw in some completely other direction? Much rested on assumption. Too much for Ian's liking.

It was already past midnight when the GPS showed less than a mile to the target. Ian had tried to balance between speed and being careful: there had been some smaller rocks which he had ran into in the dark, making the truck tilt and shake nastily.

The ground had been rising for some time. In the dark it was hard to get a clear picture of the contours of the terrain.

But as he drove even closer, the rise slowly flattened out, then the ground started to fall. There was no doubt now that he had found the valley.

Ian considered what level of stealth he should be utilizing. But in any case he needed light to see where he was going in the first place.

The constriction in his chest had never really left. It had been so much easier doing investigations for himself only.

That was the price of caring about someone. That was why dissociative killing machines were not supposed to care. He tried to think positively, hope that being worried would make him more alert, give him an edge. But he was not so sure that would be the case.

He let the hi-beams stay on. If there were sentries on lookout, he had already been discovered by now.

A fence appeared from the darkness. Ian turned the

truck to get a better picture. Right after he also saw the jeep Jo had driven away with, with its broken windows.

His heart rate just doubled.

She had to be here, somewhere.

Not far from the jeep there was Buzzsaw's lifeless, snow-covered body lying on the ground. A wind had apparently blown and swept some of the snow away, so that the big man was recognizable.

What had happened here?

Ian ran through all kinds of scenarios in his mind, but could not come to any precise conclusion. Rather, he was just glad it was not Jo lying there. If she had killed him, more power to her.

It seemed so quiet and strange out here.

If there was a sniper, or any automated defenses, Ian should have been dead already. Yet there had not been so much as a sound, except the engine of the truck he drove.

Playing with the lights more and driving closer, he saw that the gates had been broken through, and that the gang pickup stood inside the fence.

By all rules of logic, it had to have been Jo breaking in.

Next Ian noticed the bunker.

He drove through the opening, past the pickup truck, close to the small building. In the hi-beams, he saw the bunker's empty doorway clearly. There must have been a door, possibly a heavy steel one, but now it was as if it had never existed.

Or actually, there it was, lying on the bunker floor, twisted.

Jo's handiwork again?

Naturally, the next step was to go inside. There was no question. But the satellite phone would not work

without a sky above. If he wanted to contact Logan about his discoveries so far, it had to happen now.

He shut down the engine, but let the lights stay on. Then he climbed out to the starlit night, phone in hand. Soon, the phone booted up and found a satellite link. Ian pressed a quick-dial key that would connect him to Logan.

“Logan,” came the reply, loud and clear.

“It's Ian here. I'm at the location. There's the jeep Jo used, and signs of her breaking in.”

“Is it a bunker?”

“Yeah. Quite a small one though.”

“If I guess right, it's just the entrance to some kind of an underground facility, that could be who knows how large.”

“Don't we all love underground facilities.”

“Listen, I think we should alert the authorities. We can assume this is the place where the gang transported all of the people they snatched. There's possibly a large number of them still alive.”

Ian's initial, instant thought of a response was a firm negative. Authorities could mean SCEPTRE. Instead of a rescue team, or theoretically honest police detectives, there could just be an exterminator team. Black ops.

“Ian?”

But then, it was true that if Logan was right, there was no way to transport all the people possibly held inside without relying on the authorities and their resources. Since Jo and now Ian had found this place, were not any survivors inside under their responsibility?

Ian knew he had thought of this, somewhat selfishly, as a trip to find Jo and get her safely back, nothing more. But it was not that simple.

Even she had went in in the hope of finding her friend. And then there was the more practical matter of possibly requiring backup. Jo had went in alone, but that did not necessarily mean Ian had to repeat her steps exactly.

"Yeah, do like you find best." Ian answered at last. He knew his voice was not the most convincing.

"Take care. And don't do anything foolish. No, actually scratch that. If that's what it takes, then do exactly that, by all means."

Ian hung up. Somehow those last words felt rather encouraging. Logan had already made up multiple times for disappearing inside the cellar.

Ian took a flashlight from inside Logan's truck, tossed the satellite phone in, switched off the headlights, and finally locked the vehicle.

He checked his pistol, left it cocked but safetied. Earlier, he had redistributed the rounds so that he had now a full twelve-round magazine, and a single spare that contained ten.

Not much, but that had to do for now.

He was going in.

The flashlight had proved to be rather useful, for the stairwell had been dark from the top to the bottom. Ian had noticed the lamps on the walls, but they had all been off.

All the way through there had been an odd feeling of familiarity. No actual flashbacks – he was certain he had never been in this place before, but the sensation of descending deep below was not new to him.

At the bottom Ian saw a most odd sight: a skeleton-like robot made of metal. And with a head resembling a goat, no less. Did that thing represent security in this place, in this facility?

It was most certainly disabled, hit by buckshot.

Jo again? Ian felt proud of her.

He noted the multiple openings and protruding parts, which likely were its weapons system. In fact they could not be anything else.

But then there was the matter of the large steel door in front of him, split horizontally into two parts. It was closed, and he saw no controls that could open it.

Frustrated, he kicked the security robot. Though it was rather heavy, it slid a little bit closer to the big door.

Ian's surprise was complete as the door started to

open from the middle.

Had it been the robot?

Its proximity? Some kind of sensor?

But that did not matter now. What mattered was that he had just been granted access. He stepped in through the opening, because he had the nagging feeling that it could close again any second.

Behind, there was a dimly lit corridor. There were florescent tubes in the ceiling and walls, but they were off: instead there was faint blue light coming from lamps placed at the edges between the walls and the floor.

Night time lighting in a secret underground complex?

Something in the place suddenly made Ian feel like he had to be very cautious. Anything could lurk in the dim light.

Ian reached the end of the corridor, and saw a cylindrical room expanding several floors below. On every level except at the very bottom, a circular walkway went round.

Just what was this place?

The shiny clean walls, that glittered even in the low lighting, screamed "laboratory" to him.

And not just any laboratory. SCEPTRE laboratory.

Wrath against his former masters flared up again, stopping just short of overcoming the compulsion to find Jo.

In the center of the room stood a smaller cylinder, but still going up the entire height of the room. At its top, there were windows: dimmed, but there was clearly light coming from behind.

Ian figured that to reach and enter the inner cylinder was a very good bet. But how? It seemed that first he

would have to make it all the way to the bottom.

As he looked over the top floor walkway railing, he saw that he was not alone.

Slowly marching and keeping watch, there were three skeletal robots on different levels, similar to the one he had seen at the bottom of the stairwell.

But that was not all.

In addition, there were several small – spiders? Spider robots? It seemed that way.

And at the very bottom there was yet another kind of robot, bigger. One equipped with tracks. Actually two of them.

Of course, those were just the functioning robots.

Lifeless skeletal robots lay on most of the levels. Ian could not help a warm feeling rushing through him. Jo had kicked ass, and kicked it hard. But because he had not run into her yet, he had to go through the less than pleasant scenarios: either she was hiding somewhere from the remaining robots, or had been –

Killed? Caught?

The imaginary knot rose up to Ian's throat, and he swallowed hard at the thought.

Focus! You're a killer!

He forced himself into a grim line of thinking. To keep himself functional, he had to prepare for and assume the worst. Then anything else would be a positive surprise.

He dissociated, until within his mind there was just the hard core that had been trained to live for killing, and killing only. The other part that played guitar and displayed affection was driven to exile.

Only time could tell whether that exile would need to be permanent. In fact now Ian wondered why he had not dissociated earlier, for it made him feel so much

more at ease.

Dissociated, calm and in control. That was the way to do it. He decided where and when he would meet the mechanical opponents, not the other way around.

He flicked the safety off, then considered tactics. In the darkness, he could possibly avoid many of the robots altogether. An electric eye, even when aided by light amplification technology, would not be as sensitive as a human one. Of course, they could have other senses.

Ian started a jog toward the nearest stairs leading down. The first skeleton robot was two levels below, but there would be one spider to be encountered – or avoided – first.

He decided he had to see what the spider was capable of. Know your enemy. It whirled around the instant his foot came to rest from the stairs on the floor.

How? How exactly had it sensed him? Sound? Slight trembling of the floor?

It started walking rapidly toward him, making a tinny clatter which in other circumstances could have been amusing.

But Ian knew he had to be prepared for anything.

What kind of weapon would it possess?

The answer came rather fast, as the spider launched something through the air from a small dome on its top.

He jumped instinctively to the side, dodging the flying objects successfully. Only then he could actually take a look at the projectiles that now lay useless on the floor.

Taser darts. Nasty, but not very surprising.

Is that all you have?

Overcome by a sudden need for sadism, Ian set out to chase the rather helpless robot. It tried to run away,

but was not fast enough, especially with the taser wires trailing behind it. He jumped and stomped it multiple times with his foot, until it moved no more.

He was disappointed that there were no removable weapons on it that he could take and use. But on the whole it had been a success. No need for gunfire yet, and now he knew how the spiders attacked.

Next step was the floor below, and the skeleton robot.

In the low light it did not seem to detect him at all. It just walked in a pattern. When it had its back turned, he took the risk of bypassing it entirely and headed for the next stairwell.

On the next floor, Ian took a more careful look around and saw the indentations in the walls, the small doors at regular intervals.

Holding cells for experiment subjects? Likely. But now was not the time to dwell on it further, but rather to eliminate all robots that posed a sufficient threat, and proceed to the bottom.

Below, there were more spiders.

They would possibly detect him, but could be ignored from a purely practical viewpoint: the robots were far away, and could not likely navigate stairs well.

Rather, he descended until he met the next goat-headed robot. That one, unfortunately, was guarding a stairwell ahead. The one directly below him could not be used, because a spider was waiting close by.

Ian lifted his gun, judging that like on a human, the spine would be a most vulnerable place, one where a hit could spell instant incapacitation.

He aimed, satisfied that his hands were steady. The wound in his side was almost of no inconvenience while dissociated.

He squeezed the trigger –

There came just the audible click of the firing pin, but the cartridge failed to ignite.

The robot noticed the sound and turned around, the several holes in its shoulders looking rather threatening now.

Swearing, Ian racked the slide to clear the jam, as he dived to the side at the same time. It was surprising that it had not happened earlier, considering that the pistol and all the magazines had been submerged in sewer water.

He waited for the robot to fire –

Instead of taser darts flying, there came an ugly, raw hammering sound as the robot shot heavy projectiles at him. If they were bullets, they had to be of an insanely large caliber.

They would pulp his flesh hard.

Ian landed on the floor, rather helpless for the time being. The trajectory of the bullets turned toward him and he rolled, trying desperately to get away from the hot flying metal. Judging he was far away enough for a second or two, he stopped to aim quickly. There was no time for precision.

The gun barked in his hands twice.

The robot stopped its barrage, hit in the neck. For a moment, for a second it was just suspended in a fixed position, a whine emitting from within. But then its legs gave away and it fell to the floor, crashing hard.

He lived for now.

But it had been close.

Suddenly Ian became aware of pain fading in: it did not take long until it was pure searing agony. His other hand went instinctively to its location, his right arm.

A projectile had nicked his flesh.

Blood dripped from between his left hand fingers. Though it had not been an actual penetration, just a deep scrape, he was bleeding rather severely.

In desperation he took off his jacket, ripped a crude bandage from his shirt, and tightened the strip of cloth around his right arm. The cloth quickly became bloodied, but it was the best he could do right now.

Now things did not look that bright any more.

Because of the noise, all remaining robots had to be in high alert.

But still it was no time to slow down, though the pain and loss of blood did their best to ensure just that. There were limits on how even a dissociated mind could tell the body to ignore damage.

Ian started a jog down the stairs, trying to judge a speed he could keep up without the fear of passing out. It was not just the question of speed, but how well could he shoot now, with a wounded stronger arm?

Two floors below another spider robot waited. It could be easily avoided. Ian simply kept jogging forward, until there came a short hiss from behind him.

God damn!

Too late he understood that because he ran slower now, the spider had caught up on him.

Two taser darts dug into his right thigh.

He spun around mid-air right in the middle of a step, his gun turning toward the spider, held in both hands.

Slowly, much too slowly.

Ian fired a total of four times, ignoring the hammering of recoil against his wounded arm.

Then there was a much greater pain. He let out a cry as high voltage electricity coursed through the wires to his leg.

But then, it stopped.

In no more than half a second it was all over. The spider lay on the floor, sprawled on all eight legs, not moving or jolting him any more.

Ian rolled slowly on the floor, gasping for air.

So his gun arm was still good for some shooting.

He shifted his weight to be able to remove the barbed darts. It took some digging, some effort and suffering – especially with his wounded right arm – but finally they came loose. In fact, he had to use so much force that the wires came also loose from the spider's end. With a suspicion that they could serve some sadistic purpose, he decided to pocket the wires and darts.

If he ever got to see a human behind this.

If there was any.

Though the shock was over, Ian's legs shook badly as he rose into sitting. It had been short, but how much had it drained his muscle power? How good were his legs now? He decided to rest for a few seconds on the floor and only then try to get on his feet.

When the shaking had lessened somewhat, he risked getting back up. He could stay upright, but jogging could be forgotten now. A limping, dragging walk was the best his aching muscles could give him, though his brain demanded much more.

Maybe it would get better given a few minutes. Or maybe not. Thankfully the next floor went without an incident. The spiders were too far away to pose a risk.

The final remaining skeletal robot was next, as Ian descended yet another flight of stairs. He definitely did not want a repeat of the last encounter.

He crouched in the stairs, waiting patiently. There were five rounds remaining in the magazine. Not a time to switch yet.

The robot came into view.

To be sure, he aimed at the neck and shot three times. The recoil made him wince each time. The robot let out a characteristic whine and fell: three had probably been overkill.

Now all that remained – if not counting the robots he had passed on the upper floors – were one more spider, and the large ones at the bottom.

Crouched next to the fallen robot, Ian released the magazine, took out the spare one, put the two remaining cartridges into the spare, then inserted that one and cocked the weapon.

Now he had one full magazine. Easy enough.

When the click would next come, there would be no need to despair, no need for a frantic change, because then he would simply be out of ammunition. For good.

Next floor. The last spider. Take no chances.

Just after it noticed him, he shot it twice. Its electronic life ended abruptly.

Ten rounds remaining for the large ones.

Ian noticed he could walk again without limping. He even tried a jog for a short distance. That meant his legs were recovering well.

But something else was not really OK.

He still felt an ugly wetness running down his right arm: he was still bleeding. Could he even fire ten rounds before passing out either from blood loss or from the pain of the recoil?

Now he was at the bottom floor, and quickly ducked into cover behind the stairs.

The two larger robots, roughly two meters tall and wide and three in length, seemed almost curious. As if they were actually examining the floor, and not just patrolling. They spun around in place, rotating their

tracks in opposite directions, went forward for a small distance, then repeated the whole procedure. They were surprisingly agile: the motors had to be powerful.

So far, it seemed like they had not noticed him yet.

Ian saw that the lowest floor did not contain any cell doors. Rather, there were big hatches, now closed. They were certainly the right size for those two to have come out from. However, there were more than two hatches, so did that mean that even if he managed to defeat or bypass the two, there would be more?

He shuddered at the thought.

He tried to form a battle tactic, but found he had not much to go on. Besides, his reasoning was getting dull from the lost blood as well.

The robots could be armored, so that his pistol might have no effect at all.

Had he come this far to lose?

Like with the first spider, he had to make the large robots show their might, show their weaponry in some way. Preferably while not risking his own skin.

But what did he have? Suddenly he got an idea.

Though it meant some lost time, he cautiously backed up to the floor above, and took the lifeless spider robot under his arm.

Next, he tossed it over the railing in a high arc, hoping that it would cross the large robots' line of sight.

There came a short whirl as one of the large robots turned sharply to track the flying object. A circular hatch opened in its roof: with improbable speed, a rectangular tube-like device appeared.

The device turned on its axes to align with the flying spider robot, which had by now reached its apex, and began to fall.

There was a blast of noise and smoke from the tube.

A projectile with exhaust fumes trailing it streaked through the air, and a split-second later an explosion shattered the spider to pieces, spreading starburst all around. The sound of detonation echoed long after the impact. A bitter smell of smoke reached Ian's nostrils.

A mini-missile.

OK, now he knew it. These robots were seriously lethal. But how did knowing that help him?

Next the robots turned toward him: he had only managed to announce his presence. The second one also erected its missile launcher.

If the end would come now, it would be mercifully fast. However, the robots seemed to just look at him, instead of blasting him to oblivion.

Then he understood: for the safety of the cells and

the experiment subjects within, they had been programmed to avoid explosive damage to the upper floors.

He might be safe as long as he stayed up here. But to enter the central cylinder there was no option but to traverse the lowest floor.

Then he got a mad idea.

The robot closer to him was near enough that he could leap on top of it. Maybe he could force it to fire on the other robot, or maybe the other would fire at him, not caring that it would also destroy one of its kind?

It was certainly risky.

But if he was going to do it, he had to do it now, when he still had the strength and courage.

Ian leaped off the railing. For a moment it seemed like he was not going to make it. He had misjudged, and the robot was too far.

Touchdown.

He landed just on the edge of its roof. Had the robot moved a bit? Now it turned almost angrily in a narrow arc, and he had to hold on grimly while trying to get a better foothold. He clawed with his hands to reach the missile launcher.

Finally he had a firm grip, and waited for the sound of the other one firing: that would be the moment to get off his ride. It was then he noticed that the launcher he was holding on to was turning right toward him.

Would the robot fire at a point-blank range? Did it have a self-preservation instinct at all? Now Ian certainly hoped that the other robot would fire first.

He saw the four muzzle holes – the launcher was nearly aligned – and tried to veer off to the side so that it would have to re-acquire.

But it did not help. Just a couple of degrees now –

Then, from further away came the blast.

He let go, trying to land to the side and away from the deadly tracks.

A deafening explosion came from next to him. For a moment he heard nothing, then there was heavy ringing in his ears. A rain of sparks landed on the floor, some hitting and burning him briefly.

The robot next to him was immobile. He looked up to see that its missile launcher had disintegrated.

But was the robot dead?

With terror Ian noted that the tracks came back to life, turning, hunting for him.

He got on his feet and started to run away, almost losing balance. He tried to swerve wide, as more missiles would certainly follow.

And indeed, the other robot launched one more. Not sure of its exact height and trajectory, he just dived to the floor. The missile flew over him, exploding as it hit the opposite wall.

How many missiles would they have? There were four holes on the launcher, but would they reload afterward? Ian could not ponder this for very long, for from behind came an evil crackling and whooshing sound.

Suddenly he felt a wave of hot air coming at him.

He spun around to see the damaged robot using a flame thrower that had popped into sight from behind a panel on its front. The column of flame approached him rapidly.

He could not possibly get away in time.

Still, he had to try. Not even on his feet yet, he rolled away. But it seemed the nozzle of the flame thrower tracked him relentlessly, turning to match his position.

The undamaged robot launched yet another missile. Immediately after, Ian observed the launcher disappear

below its roof. It was reloading.

But that was not of immediate concern: he could feel something splash on his back as he still rolled away.

Something flaming.

His jacket was on fire!

With a sudden strength boost from panic he struggled onto his feet, started running in a wide arc while trying to get the burning jacket off, almost lost his balance, but compensated at the last moment.

Next, the burning piece of clothing was in his hands. He tossed it unceremoniously away – it landed somewhere between the two robots.

Now Ian knew that if damaged, the large robots would just switch to their flame throwers. Or possibly to some yet unseen weapon.

Frustrated, he took his gun out as he still ran, and fired three shots at the flame-throwing robot. The bullets just struck sparks as they clattered harmlessly off the armor plating.

It truly was a battle he had no chance of winning.

These were not just robots, they were tanks.

The second robot's missile launcher popped up again. It would have another four shots.

Still trying to keep a respectable distance between him and the long jets of flames, Ian skirted the central cylinder. He came to the curved doors that showed no sign of opening, even though he was right in front of them.

There were no buttons or locks, nothing.

Now, the undamaged robot tracked him, the missile launcher aligning.

And suddenly he realized that maybe violence was the answer after all. The flame-throwing robot was still far away, so he forced himself to stay in place, an appar-

ently suicidal move, then waited for the flash of smoke from the launcher tube.

As it came, he leaped off to the side, with all of the strength his legs could produce.

Another explosion witnessed from very close range rocked his world. Sparks showered in every direction, and a good portion of the central cylinder was now covered in a cloud of smoke.

Ian could not yet see whether his plan had succeeded. The robot still tracked him, eager to fire another missile.

He just had to dive blindly into the smoke.

Dashing madly forward, he tried to guess the location of impact – the best place to attempt entry. Of course, there was the possibility of the doors being undamaged.

It was simple: in that case he would have to worry about nothing more. Not about what waited at the top. Not about finding Jo.

Because he would be dead.

The smoke evaporated a bit. He saw a ragged opening in the middle, just large enough to dive through. Turning sideways, he forced himself in. The jagged metal cut his exposed arms, and tore his shirt in several places, but he ignored the pain.

As soon as he was through, he leaped off to the side, not concerned where he was going to land.

Right after, the next mini-missile flew through the opening. Ian covered his ears and curled up into a fetal position on the floor.

Even so, the impact was thunderously loud as the missile hit the opposite wall. Something burned his skin again: sparks, or actual hot metal fragments, he did not care.

He only waited for everything to end.

But at last, as no more detonations came, fighting instinct returned. The end would come if he stayed here, but the top of the cylinder was still to be explored.

Ian forced himself on his feet, and started the long climb up the circular staircase. It seemed to sway in every direction: he knew he was close to passing out. A buzzing noise entered his consciousness, but he ignored it, forced himself to take one step after another.

At his pace, it went on for minutes.

He tried to look at the bright sides: here the large robots would not be able to get to him, and he still had the gun with seven rounds remaining.

Hopefully more than enough to handle anything that waited at the top.

Ian reached the last few steps. Somewhere in the middle he had started to feel slightly better. He was relieved to note that it had been the explosions that had disoriented him and brought him close to fainting, not the bleeding. In fact his right arm bled only a little now.

Still it was not time to be overjoyed yet.

He came up to a circular room with a circular desk, monitors and keyboards filling it. For some odd reason his mind flashed back to the server room.

But instead of Gwen as the master BOFH, here a red-haired, almost bald man in a white coat presided over the equipment.

A SCEPTRE scientist, Ian understood with perfect clarity. If necessary, the man would be interrogated with overwhelming violence and force.

At the moment he was busy with a video conference. In the largest monitor there was the image of a gray-haired older man talking.

Ian froze, hoping to not have disturbed the man yet. He might hear classified information, if he could just listen. But a quick look around confirmed that he would certainly be compromised soon enough.

A security camera was on its way to turning toward

him. And on the floor, two spider robots waited. The question returned: how did they detect him?

Infra-red was one more possibility he had not yet considered. He was certainly warm. But he decided to listen for as long as he could, then spring into action.

“– breach procedure,” the older man spoke on the screen.

“I’m not opposed to.”

“We’ll send a team –”

That was all Ian heard before the spiders’ mechanical legs came to life.

He had been noticed!

He decided to take the spiders first.

His gun came up almost as mechanically as the robots moved. A quick motion to the left, two squeezes of trigger, two barks of the gun. Then repeat to the right.

The man turned in surprise. He cut the video feed.

However, Ian noted to have acted too hastily. The spider on the right was still active, hit only glancingly, or not at all. Its top rotated, and in the next second it launched its darts.

There was no room to dodge to the side. The darts came flying toward his chest.

Not again.

But there certainly was room for Ian to launch himself backward, back to the stairwell.

As he did so, he fired once more at the robot.

The taser darts flew past him as his body arched, going horizontal in the air first, then diagonally downward. He realized too late how tremendously hurtful it would be to hit his back on the metal steps.

Impact. Ian groaned aloud. But he remained conscious, lying on the stairs. The pain was just right: it actually helped him focus.

He kept the gun trained upward as the scientist appeared, brandishing an odd wrist-mounted weapon.

“This device fires a needle of powerful neuro-relaxant. Unconsciousness follows potentially in less than a second, and lasts several hours. Alternatively you can surrender your weapon.”

“And this pistol fires .45 ACP rounds that will tear your internal organs, and leave you bleeding to death. First comes the temporary cavity, which stretches your insides, then a permanent cavity remains. Do you want to take a bet with that?”

Ian did not know for sure where the words had come from. Somewhere from deep within his brain.

Not convinced, the man made a motion to flick his wrist.

Ian shifted his aim in a snake-like movement and pulled the trigger one more time.

Following the report, blood spurted from the man's hand, and his face twisted in agony as he gripped the wound.

“The next one will go through your heart,” Ian said grimly. “Unstrap the wrist-gun and toss it aside.”

Hesitating at first, the scientist complied.

Ian got up to his feet.

“Now we'll have a pleasant conversation. But first I have to ensure that you aren't going anywhere.”

The scientist seemed to be slightly scared by these words. Maybe he thought Ian was actually going to cripple his legs? But it could be just a trick. Ian decided to take nothing for granted.

Now he could allow himself to take a good look at the man for the first time: next to the familiar symbol, his name tag read Apollyon.

That sounded demonic enough.

Ian set out to bind the man to a chair from his arms and legs, using first the pair of taser wires he had stuffed to his pants pocket. Not satisfied yet, he knelt down at the second dead spider robot, yanked its wires loose as well, and used them to reinforce the restraints.

Finally, he ripped the scientist's coat sleeve and bound the hand wound crudely but tight. It would not be of advantage to allow him to pass out from blood loss.

He smiled harshly, pleased for now. Apollyon, or whoever he was, was held securely in the chair. Ian spun the chair around to disorient and nauseate him.

"We start off easily. No answer, or a bad answer, may lead into additional holes appearing in your body. Do you understand?"

The scientist nodded.

Suddenly Ian snapped out of dissociation. He recalled his words just seconds before: they felt strange, uncomfortable. The whole situation seemed strange.

What was he doing?

How far would he need to go?

But Ian forced himself to go back. The hard, trained core reappeared and took control – the interrogation had to be finished. He could guess the probable sequence of events, but this was a chance to get more certainty. If the man could be trusted, or be coerced to become trustworthy enough.

"A young woman came to infiltrate this place. Is that correct?"

No immediate response.

"It's an easy enough question. It doesn't compromise your position in any way, yet. If I was you, I would rather answer than get myself a new orifice. Yes or no?"

A reluctant nod came. That was a start.

“Where is she now?”

Silence. Maddening silence. Ian pressed the barrel against Apollyon's slightly round belly.

“A stomach wound will not be immediately fatal. But I promise it will hurt.”

The scientist swallowed. Was that fear? But slowly a sarcastic grin appeared on his face.

“There are one hundred and sixty holding rooms in this facility. You will be busy for a while.”

The answer implied things that Ian's normal self could have interpreted as relieving. Maybe that Ian would just have searched all the rooms happily, certain that soon enough he would find her and everything would be all right in the world. But not his current mindset.

It was clearly non-compliance.

He pulled the pistol back and placed it on the man's forehead instead, holding it one-handed. He increased the pressure gradually.

“I say that's a bad answer. Try again.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Ian did not like where this was headed. He was not sure he was in control any more.

“You can't really kill me, because you wouldn't know how to unlock and operate the security console. And then you wouldn't know how to get to her. Correct?”

“Enough of this bullshit. What do you want?” Ian exploded.

“Nothing. I know you have nothing to offer me. You can't protect me from my superiors, who will execute me when they learn of my failure to contain this intrusion. But it makes no difference, for Phase One is well under way, practically complete. Everything is ready for severe excrement to rain on the world on December

twenty-first. For the beginning of a new age.”

Startled, Ian eased the pressure slightly.

“You aren't making much sense,” he said, but made sure to remember the intriguing words later.

“Put the gun away. Leave the drama to people who are actually trained interrogators and torturers. You aren't one. You're just a foot soldier. Put it away, or I won't speak one word more.”

Now Ian understood that pressing the gun to the man's forehead had been a mistake. Because then the only threat he could realize was to actually kill the scientist.

But the man seemed to accept death as inevitable.

With reluctance Ian let the gun fall to the side.

“Good decision. I certainly can't fault you. A most spirited young woman, yes. Should be listed under U for Unknown. And should be unharmed, if there were no AI glitches during transportation. The console password is majestic666. No caps. It and the remote control should be easy enough to operate.”

Though he was being helpful – or at least pretending to be, Apollyon's confidence was maddening, insulting. Ian wanted to aim the gun at his head again.

But then the state of dissociation started to melt away again, and this time he felt no reason to fight it. If the scientist was telling the truth, Ian had got everything he wanted, and there was no need for further interrogation. The hinted secret master plan was of no interest to him before he could verify with his own eyes that Jo was here, and that she was unhurt.

But if Apollyon was lying –

Then Ian was not sure what he would do. But something extreme. That thought did not actually come from his dissociated killer's mind. It was disturbing. He

wanted to be above hurting and killing, but did not know if that was possible.

To get something else to think about, he went straight to the biggest monitor on the desk, and the keyboard next to it.

Majestic666.

No, the scientist had said no caps. majestic666.

The login screen disappeared, replaced by a menu system. Ian wanted to navigate it without further help from the scientist. He had already shamed himself enough by trying to be a hardcore interrogator.

OK. The first choice.

Archive, Current or Security?

Current. But Security was something he certainly needed to come back to.

A matrix of closed-circuit camera images appeared on the screen. They were ordered alphabetically by names of inmates.

Live video feeds from the holding cells.

In addition to the name, above each video image there was also the identification code for the cell. It seemed that floors were encoded by numbers, while a letter indicated position within a floor.

The images were depressingly similar, in black and white: minimalistic small rooms, each occupied with either a male or female subject clad in a jump suit. Most were actually sleeping, while some rocked back and forth, seemingly caught in a loop. Then there were rarer cases, like some doing shadow-boxing against imaginary opponents, or scrawling a message on the wall.

No experiments were actually taking place at this time. But still the facility was making its occupants insane day and night.

Ian cursed SCEPTRE hard as he scrolled through the

images, disgusted but mesmerized at the same time. At last he reached the letter U.

Subject: Unknown. 6-C.

The image was grainy and unclear. However, he could tell that the shape lying on the bunk was clad differently than the rest: instead of the single color of the jump suit, the top was dark and the bottom lighter. The head – or hair – was somewhere in between, medium-dark.

It could be Jo.

But in what condition? Dead? Drugged or otherwise asleep? Bored out of her wits? Ian felt his heart skip a beat as he considered the alternatives.

He thought he saw the shape move slightly. But it could have been a video compression artifact. He had to get down there to know.

What else there was? Yes, the remote. Quickly, Ian searched the desk and found a rectangular object with an LCD display and some buttons. That was it, probably.

And then there was the Security menu. That was mostly a no-brainer.

*Bipedal protection units – disable.*

*Arachnid protection units – disable.*

*Heavy protection units – disable.*

The names were rather disappointing, uncreative. Finished with the console for now, Ian turned around to stare hard at Apollyon.

“Found her?” the man asked with apparent innocence.

Ian's voice was low as he spoke.

“Pray that I don't return alone. Because that means a second session will begin, and it won't go well for you.”

The scientist fell silent for a moment.

“There's a shortcut if you like, where the desk ends. Looks like a window but it's actually a door to a bridge. Wait for it to elongate, but don't fall down.”

Sudden anger racked Ian's brain. Why was Apollyon being that helpful? Was he leading Ian into a trap? Or was he just proud of his fortress and wanted to show around?

In any case Ian wanted to punch him.

Then he settled for something more rational: he tipped the chair to its side. The scientist grunted as the chair fell.

With mobility limited even further, he should not be able to reach the desk to reactivate the defenses.

Ian considered for a moment, whether to take the downward route he already knew. But he could not help curiosity, and walked to the spot where an indentation in the window went all the way from the top to the bottom.

As he approached, it slid open.

“The remote acts as an ID tag also, so to speak,” Apollyon remarked.

Shut up already!

A wave of dizziness came over Ian as he stepped out. Only a meter and a half away was a drop all the way to the bottom. There was a railing here too, but still.

Then he noticed a gap in the railing, which had to be the place for the bridge. As he walked over to it, another piece of machinery activated, and one half of a bridge began to protract. The second half extended from where he had started, the top level walkway circling the outer cylinder.

Ian looked down: all the remaining robots, including the large ones, were immobile. Was it going too

smooth? That thought made him remember what the gray-haired man had said over the video link.

“We’ll send a team –”

Even now it paid to be fast.

Theoretically, authorities were arriving, but the best option was still to vacate the place as soon as possible, with Jo in tow. He crossed the bridge, then sped up to a jog.

Next question: did the floor numbering go from the bottom to the top or the other way around?

Ian headed down to the first stairwell ahead of him. On the level below, the first one with the holding cells, he looked for any signs in the doors.

What? None?

Then he understood that a number and a letter lit up in green on the remote's LCD screen as he approached. The one he was at now was 8-I. Two floors below then.

He descended the next two flights of stairs.

Which way now? He first started going clockwise, ending up at 6-J. Wrong way. It did not make much difference, but still he turned around on his heels.

6-E.

6-D.

6-C. There.

There was no actual "open" button on the remote, but Ian figured a big horizontal bar would activate things. Just as his finger hovered above the button, a weird thought crossed his mind: what if it was a facility-wide self-destruct sequence start button instead?

Well, then SCEPTRE were idiots.

Ian pressed the button, and the holding cell door slid open. His heart hammered so hard that he wished to still be in the dissociated killer's state.

There on the low bunk, or rather just a mattress, was Jo. Ian scrambled up to her and nearly lost his balance. She lay on her side, eyes closed, breathing slowly but steadily. It was this last realization that made Ian almost pass out of relief.

Now he no longer wished to be dissociated.

Jo's leather jacket had gone MIA at some point. The Morbid Angel T-shirt, though it had been frayed before, was now torn from multiple places. There were several bloody scratches and bruises on the arms, as well as one on her jaw. But still she looked remarkably serene. Ian could not help thinking that here was a wounded angel who had fallen down to earth.

He expected a red hot hatred to consume him any second. SCEPTRE's robots or that weird Apollyon guy had no doubt hurt her: those bruises could not have appeared all by themselves. And because she had not reacted in any way to him almost crashing to the floor, she had probably been hit by that – what was it? Powerful neuro-relaxant. But for now he could not bring himself to feel any hate, not even anger.

SCEPTRE were insignificant bastards. Jo had kicked their ass hard, almost succeeding all by herself.

Of course he felt something. All of his emotions he could not even identify. He bent down from his crouch to get closer to her, and felt his eyes get misty. He was sure his dissociated killer's persona was laughing at him from somewhere in the back of his skull.

That persona too was insignificant, disposable.

It was partially the relief he felt, but also the compassion and sadness for what she had gone through, for the wounds she had suffered. He felt like he had to do something, but had no idea of exactly what. The rational part of his mind reminded that a person in a drug-

induced sleep did not feel any pain, or probably not anything else for that matter, and therefore did not need any comforting.

In lack of any better ideas he just embraced her, getting lost within his mind. But a nagging dilemma dragged him back: for the mission to continue she would need to wake up, yet she felt and looked so peaceful that he wanted to stay right there and not do anything more to disturb her. In his current mental state the dilemma was so overpowering that – shit – he understood he was going to cry for real.

He wished for René and Erik to see him now.

To focus, he remembered what he had promised himself back at the tavern. Well, she had not come bursting through the door, actually he had, but the idea was the same.

With slow deliberation he pulled on her shoulder, so that she turned face up, and kissed her on the lips.

It was an improbably gentle kiss, but considering the situation it had felt the most appropriate. A sort of non-solution to the dilemma.

Nothing happened. What had he expected? Fairy tales did not translate well to reality. It was possible the relaxant's effect would continue for hours.

Well, he could wait.

Or actually – he should not forget the team.

But even then, still he could wait. They would just have to leave the premises soon. If he had to carry her out, it would be romantic in a way, but probably also incredibly painful in his current state. Hopefully the remote also granted elevator access.

It was then Jo smiled in such a way, even before opening her eyes, that Ian could not help suspecting a setup.

“Hey, you got here too,” she said.

Her voice was somewhat hoarse, probably from thirst.

“I was dreaming of something – a Warlock guitar? Then it kissed me and I woke up.”

Ian was not sure if he had heard right. But hallucinations were understandable, as the day had been long and full of lethal danger.

Jo rose into a sitting position and winced slightly.

“Are you all right?” Ian asked.

“I think I should be asking that from you instead.”

Ian looked down at his arms and the rest of his body, and understood: he had to look frightening with all the burn marks and the blood, some of it already caked. If she was a bruised angel, then he was a demon who had went through a meat mincer in Hell.

“I’ll live,” he replied.

“Yeah, me too. Guess I got my ass handed to me properly, though.”

Jo looked defeated while saying that. That in turn made Ian feel less than great.

“It took courage to get in here. I’m proud of you,” he replied, reaching for her cheek. The thumb smeared some blood on her face: it was not necessarily the effect he wanted.

“But it was rather foolish, don’t you think?”

“Not at all. I saw that you kicked ass hard.”

Jo looked somewhat uncomfortable. Ian recalled that she did not necessarily like being complimented. Then, gradually the expression softened, and turned into a smile.

“I’m kind of glad you followed, though. But – it looks like you’ve been crying?”

Ian swallowed hard.

“Well, you looked so –”

He could not finish or explain. It was a multi-fail. But apparently Jo understood, for her smile widened.

“Come here.”

Before Ian could react, she kissed him hard. He could have felt angst from from being a dissociated half-trained assassin, who necessarily did not deserve to feel or to receive love, at least from someone like Jo. But in that moment he decided, that in fact he did. The sectarian elite could not be allowed to control not only his past, but also his future, of what he was ever allowed to be or feel. Whether that decision would come to haunt him later, was a question for another day.

“You know, it's funny, you showed me a world I only believed to exist in my dreams or imagination. Or actually, I hadn't believed in it for a long time,” she said.

“But it's a world of misery and death.” His voice was hard and serious. Perhaps too hard.

“I know. But I've seen that a single person, or just a few like you and me can actually make a difference. Don't you think it's awesome?”

Indeed, Ian had no choice but to agree, even if reluctantly. And it was then Jo started to make a lot more sense to him: here was someone who had willingly practiced the combat arts he had been force-fed, who had been willing to seek out danger all because of a belief, of a vision. But she had lost it until now. That was a thought, which almost made his eyes get misty again –

Focus! You're a killer!

“It is,” he replied at last.

“But shall we check out of this cell and see whether we can find Dee? Last I checked, the scientist who runs this place wasn't very cooperative,” Jo said then.

“We can do that.”

They could perhaps just afford the delay before they headed out.

Jo got up to her feet, somewhat disoriented.

“Wow. Still feels a bit funny.”

Ian was certainly happy to catch her in his arms, but was immediately reminded that he was not exactly at his most nimble either, and almost lost balance himself. Still, it felt like everything was all right in the world, even if they were deep inside an underground SCEPTRE facility.

They crossed the bridge back to the control room. Ian noted with some satisfaction that Apollyon was still tied to the chair: he had not attempted escape or even moved much in the meanwhile.

In retrospect, leaving the man conscious had been a rather big risk.

“I believe you found that I kept my word?” Apollyon asked.

Ian grunted something indistinct. Whether Jo had been “unharmed” was up to debate, but he had not felt hate or anger then, and was not about to start now. But he did not want to tolerate this indignity either.

“Shall I gag him?” he asked Jo.

“Not yet. He might reveal something.”

They went to the main console, and Ian took the keyboard first.

“It lists the inmates by name. You can scroll the list like this,” he said, demonstrating.

“Interesting. Let me try.”

On Jo's face Ian saw an almost scary determination. She was a woman on a mission, continuing exactly where she had left off. There was no discernible rage yet, but he guessed it might appear later. Surprisingly,

instead of going through the Current list, she switched the console to Archive mode.

From the huge list, Ian understood that it displayed all experimental subjects held in the facility ever. The list went well over a thousand. The whole thing had to be a much larger operation: the gang had only been a part of it.

Ian noted that Jo went over the letter R with more intense concentration. Then she turned to Apollyon.

“What happened to these people, listed in the Archive?” she asked.

The scientist hesitated before answering.

“Well, what happens after the experiment battery on an individual is fully complete – I'm pleased it's not my responsibility at all, and in fact I don't know exactly.”

Jo's expression hardened: Ian caught her mouthing the word “hypocrite,” but there was no actual sound.

“Both the Security department and my superiors insisted on installing an incinerator here, but I won that argument – I was fairly positive that even a minimal trace of the odor of human ashes might make the subjects unnaturally restless, and cause skewed results. We might have thought the stimuli to be more effective than they actually were, and set ourselves up for a bitter failure. And yet it would have been me who paid the price.” Apollyon went on.

“Basically this guy wants nothing more than for SCEPTRE's rain of shit to be successful, and this is the first phase. That's what he told me,” Ian said.

“Correct. Though I used the word 'excrement.' But it's winding down. You'll see that only roughly one fourth of the cells are occupied. We have saved the less significant tests last. However, some of them take longer than usual.”

Ian was puzzled again. Why was the scientist telling about the experiments so openly? But then – the man believed he would be executed anyway.

“In case you haven't noticed, it's not just winding down, it's over. The authorities are coming. And I wouldn't be so sure you get the mercy of execution by your sectarian masters. I rather think you'll rot in jail,” Ian said.

Apollyon contemplated this in silence.

At the console, Jo switched to the Current list. After skipping quickly through most of it she turned to Ian, face beaming.

“I found him! Richardson, Devin. 4-N. You know where that is?”

Ian nodded. He found this surprising but uplifting: her mission was successful too, then. But two weeks? Of course the man himself had said that the final tests would take longer than usual.

Now Ian understood Jo's logic: she had wanted to check for bad news first by searching through the Archive. She seemed to think for a moment.

“Now, we can't trust the cavalry to know how to work this console. But if we press this 'Open All' button here, everyone will be happy, we can go get Dee, and never have to come back here,” she said.

“No, you shouldn't do that,” Apollyon replied in a hurried tone.

For the first time he sounded and looked actually frightened.

“You see, this is a carefully controlled environment. The subjects get what they need, like food and drink and well, whatever they need, in return for participation: listening and watching and reading and smelling the material in which stimuli have been hidden. Every-

thing in moderation. But if this cycle is broken, those who remain are more than enough to tear this place apart, as well as to tear us apart – they make no distinction between villain and hero. It will be total chaos and mayhem. Cannibalism is within theoretical possibility too. In your shoes I'd consider twice.”

Apollyon's words sounded almost like a full-scale zombie apocalypse was about to begin. Ian could picture a horde of escaped experiment subjects: some lumbering slowly around, some sprinting, hopping and climbing walls with incredible speed, but all of them hungry for revenge and flesh.

Then he remembered that Jo's friend would be among the horde. If she could read his thoughts, she might not be pleased.

"Are you afraid of cannibals?" she asked.

"From what I saw, the people looked quite mellow. And they're alive."

"Not cannibal corpses, you mean?"

Ian nodded.

"Then we open the cells and get this over with."

Before Apollyon could protest further, Jo selected and confirmed "Open All."

Now it was done. Even through the observation windows, the sound of every cell door opening in sequence was epic: like a slow machine gun.

"If you have luck, the police and search-and-rescue units get here before your patients reach the top," Ian said to the scientist.

Apollyon frowned, trying to break loose of his restraints.

"We should change the password," Jo suggested.

"Good idea." Ian wondered why he had not thought of that in the first place, before leaving the scientist alone.

Using both hands, Jo typed in a long sequence of complete gibberish.

"It will ask you to repeat," Ian said. He was not sure if SCEPTRE computer systems would follow conventional logic, but it was a strong guess.

Jo typed in the exact same sequence again. Now the console – including the robot controls – would be locked from both Apollyon and the inmates.

"Two-handed tapping," she said. "Michael Angelo Batio."

"Hmm. You would have needed four keyboards to make him justice. But, any last words to our friend before we leave him?"

Jo considered for a while.

"Were the robots trying to kill you the whole time?" she asked Ian.

"Yeah." His mind flashed back to the encounters, especially the one with the large robots: he was very lucky to be alive.

"For me, they switched to annoying tactics after the beginning. And why didn't I get to fight the ones with the tracks?"

"It's standard nighttime procedure in this facility: the heavy protection units come automatically out at night. The sound of the tracks keeps up a suitable base level of paranoia," Apollyon answered.

"I sort of get that. But the other thing I don't."

"There's a simple policy. For the first intruder in any

given facility, capture and interrogation can be done at discretion, to determine how the intrusion was possible in the first place. Though usually the facility director will be interrogated more heavily: there is a rule which says chemicals are mandatory, and survival is not guaranteed. I actually hope my lie detector test reveals so bad transgressions that I will be executed before the session proceeds very far. But, back to the point, from the second intruder onward there are strict orders to kill on sight."

"But in that case you fail," Ian said. "You gave me an option to surrender."

"I would have killed you."

"Hmm." Ian was not sure whether to believe. Apolylon was a weird man: there was no denying it. And furthermore, there was a lack of evil that was disturbing: what was a man like him doing in SCEPTRE?

It was simple: had there been some other person as the facility director, such as the skull-faced one, both Ian and Jo could have been dead by now.

Ian and Jo descended to floor four, as the atmosphere was still relatively peaceful. Some of the subjects had started wandering around, but most still waited inside their cells.

Silent, brooding hatred lingered within Ian's mind from the thought of SCEPTRE exercising complete, self-proclaimed liberty to control and destroy minds.

It was a subject he had thought of before.

As they passed each floor, they shouted words of encouragement to the inmates.

"Those who don't realize it yet, you're free to leave this disgusting place. Free! Understand that?" Jo yelled.

She held the remote: now that the cell doors were all

open, it had no other purpose than showing them where they were.

They arrived at cell 4-N.

There, sitting on his bunk in a brooding, slouched posture was a young man with short light-brown hair, a goatee and several facial piercings. His eyes seemed to stare out into nothingness.

Jo went in front of him.

“Dee? Remember me? Jo here. You're free, everyone here is. You can come with us.”

Dee growled in a deep voice, baring his teeth.

“Dee? Devin?”

Jo put her hands on his shoulders, but had to back off, as Dee lunged savagely and snorted. More animalistic growls, grunts and hisses followed.

Ian could not do anything but to look on as Jo tried her best, but she was not reaching her friend in any way.

Finally Jo shook her head in defeat and exited the cell.

“I give up,” she said.

“Maybe he'll recover in time,” Ian replied.

“I don't know. I only know that I need a hug.”

As they hugged, Ian glanced to the side, and saw Dee still sitting in the same kind of animalistic trance. Ian had expected Jo to be consumed by a terrible rage, but her admission of defeat felt even more devastating. A tear fell off from her cheek to his shoulder, but he was afraid of smearing her face with even more blood, and therefore just let it be.

He thought he heard actual words coming from Dee's mouth. They were a raspy hiss, barely decipherable.

“End has come. Spilled gore.”

Some degree of chaos started to erupt throughout the facility. It was still far from the mayhem and cannibalism Apollyon had envisioned: there was just a strong feeling of despair and aimlessness about it. As if almost no-one of the subjects realized that they were actually free to leave.

Of course, leave to where? This place was in the middle of nowhere. It reminded Ian of when Gwen had told of his rescue: some of the extracted trainees had got lost in the woods. Here it seemed all of them would get lost. Ian truly hoped for the authorities to arrive soon. Of course there were a few spare vehicles, but for over forty people, that would not be of much help.

Ian and Jo held on to each other as they climbed to the topmost level. Both in theory and practice they had achieved so much during the day, but still it felt like it had ended in a defeat. In a semi-fail.

Ian could only barely remember that a SCEPTRE team was supposed to be arriving. Somehow he had started to doubt that. He just felt very tired: of course he wanted out of the facility, but there was no dead-serious urgency about it any more.

They exited into the night, which had become cloudy by now. Ian wanted to check what time it was, but noted that his watch had been smashed in combat.

"It's about half past two," Jo said as she saw him looking for the non-existent object.

That did not sound too bad, Ian thought. Or actually it did. It would possibly be almost 5 AM before they would be back at the Outpost. Thankfully the keys to Logan's truck were still with him.

Ian opened the truck, and got the satellite phone out. It had been a very good idea not to take it with him be-

low: it would have been a prime candidate for getting smashed as well.

“Logan will probably hate us for calling at this time,” he said.

“No, I don't think he will,” Jo replied.

Ian booted up the phone: this time it took it longer to find a satellite. But finally it was ready for use.

He pressed the quick-dial to Logan.

“Logan,” came an unbelievably sharp voice. Had the anarchist been taking something to stay alert?

“Ian, back on the air.”

“Did you get the girl?”

The words came so quickly, that by the time Ian had reached the logical conclusion that he wanted to hurl severe insults at Logan for using such phrase, he had already opened his mouth to reply something else.

“She's here if you want to speak with her.”

“I trust your word. Any sign of authorities yet?”

“None that I can see.”

“It figures. After I called, I actually hacked into the emergency response network to see whether they were taking it seriously at all. Of course, it's kind of hard to believe that in the middle of nowhere there's a secret bunker where people are being held. So, they only took it seriously after I – well – encouraged them a bit. They should be on their way now.”

“When you called them, how many you said would be down there?” Ian asked.

“A hundred.”

“Well, it doesn't hurt to over-estimate. It's more close to forty.”

“OK. But you must be anxious to leave already, so we should hang up now, right?”

“You could say that.”

“Drive safely. When you arrive, there's an empty cabin next to mine that you can use.”

Ian hung up the connection. Somehow the word “empty” sounded ominous. He did not know for certain, but it could have meant that the residents had died in the fight.

“We can watch at the hilltop when and if authorities come,” Jo suggested.

“Yeah. And with the lights out so that if it's SCEPTRE instead, they won't see us.”

Right after saying this, Ian was not so sure of his words: SCEPTRE would certainly have light amplification gear. But he had already decided that the sectarian elite probably would not be arriving.

Still it was a good idea to stay hidden: Ian had no wish to be debriefed or interrogated by anyone. Jo could not have either. It would simply take forever. It was much better if it seemed as if they had never been down in the facility. The authorities would know perfectly well what to do with Apollyon and the experiment subjects without any help from the two.

It felt bad to leave Dee there, but there was not much of a choice. Their combined medical expertise was not much, and Logan was not a skilled psychiatrist either.

Ian and Jo waited. During the short drive to the hilltop they had turned the heater on to full blast, but it had not had time to warm up yet. It was cold. But to maintain stealth, the engine had to be turned off.

There came the distant sound of helicopters. Jo rolled the driver side window open to hear better, though that meant more cold coming in.

Soon, several search light beams illuminated the area. Flying vehicles with flashing lights arrived in the

valley and started to land. In the search light of another helicopter, Ian saw that there seemed to be proper insignia on them. There was a red cross on one – and another seemed like police. No, not just police, a SWAT team.

It appeared Logan had pulled some heavy trickery.

“Seems genuine enough to me,” Ian said.

“Yeah. They’ll take care of it.” There was still some resignation in Jo’s voice.

“We ride now?”

“We ride.”

They took turns driving: now the heater was actually making the inside of the truck rather comfortable. It was still a long way until dawn: unless they took much longer than anticipated, it would still be dark when they got back to the community. But the headlights were good and the route already familiar, so there was no especial risk. And there was no reason to go at breakneck speed.

It was Ian's turn behind the wheel, and he felt mostly like a zombie. He turned the heater down to halfway to stay in some degree of alertness, and increased the radio volume. After some station-surfing, hearing actual metal from the speakers lifted his spirits considerably: the late-night DJ seemed dedicated enough to the cause.

They had talked something, mainly to just keep awake, but Ian could not remember all of it.

Jo had told what it had been like to be raised by her father Russ, a musician and owner of a small recording studio. Her mother had left when she had been just a few years old. Russ had been rather encouraging in whatever Jo had wanted to do, music included, but had also been – though never violent – prone to long bouts of depression, drinking and silence.

It was this mental absence that had made her seek various activist groups, as well as to plunge deeper into conspiracy research. That phase had died a slow death when every group she joined turned out disappointing.

Now Jo and Russ had not met for six years.

One part of their conversation had stuck particularly in Ian's mind. It had nothing to do with her childhood though.

“Jo?”

“Yes, what?”

“Can I ask you one thing? What's Jo short of? It's short of something, right?”

There was a rather long and odd silence.

“It's Joan. But now that you know, I don't want to hear about it.”

“Hmm. That's still quite short. I had expected something longer. But – just if you hadn't figured, I love you, Joan.”

“You too. But like I said, shut up.”

According to the GPS, there were now less than twenty miles left. It was then Ian heard a song on the radio that made him want to stop the vehicle. It was not a genre he usually cared much about, but the beautiful piano melody and the lyrics caught his attention.

He did not just want to stop, he had to.

He stepped on the brakes, much harder than what would have made sense.

Jo was jolted rather rudely against the safety belt.

“What?” she asked. There was no actual agitation, just tired puzzlement.

“Listen to this.”

It was “Dawn Over a New World” by DragonForce. Somewhat fittingly there was some very faint light on the horizon: it could not be actual sunlight yet, but

rather street lamps of the nearby town reflected into the clouds.

Ian knew DragonForce took occasional inspiration from video games of the 16-bit console era, mainly of the fantasy variety. Still, he was now absolutely certain that the song had been written about him and Jo. And not only that, but about the battles on the previous day and this night.

“So? It's flower metal,” she said, unsurprised.

“Pay attention to the lyrics.”

“I sort of get it. But for you to do a hard stop just for that – something's not exactly right with you. If they play Through the Fire and Flames next, can you promise you don't hit the brakes again?”

“Promised.”

Jo let out a long sigh and apparently fell asleep.

Ian noted that a faint smile remained on her face: that was a good note to end the night on. He listened up to the end of the guitar solos, which were remarkably similar to what he had heard her play one day in the rehearsal room, then turned the radio off.

It was somewhat relieving to note that Logan had not actually waited for them to arrive: the lights were off in his cabin, like in the tavern and also the rest of the community. Otherwise, it would have been too guilt-inducing. But the multi-colored lamps outside still shone on.

Logan had, however, drawn a big and solid arrow to the snow, to mark where Ian and Jo should be heading.

Ian killed the engine and listened to the silence.

It was not actual, complete silence: there was Jo's slow, even breathing, the ticking of the car clock and the ticking sound the engine made as it cooled down.

The time was 5:10 AM.

It had been twenty insane hours.

“Hey, it’s the end of the road,” he said and bumped Jo’s shoulder. She seemed hard to wake up: it would have succeeded with sufficient aggression, but right now he did not want to follow that part of the 101 rules.

Of course they could not stay in the car forever.

Ian got up from the driver’s side, and searched the front of the cabin. There was a smaller arrow pointing under the snow-covered doormat.

There was the key.

He unlocked and opened the door. Light filtered in from the window: he could see obscure shapes inside. One of them looked sufficiently like a bed, and there appeared to be blankets next to it on a chair-shaped object. The room had clearly been warmed up at some point during the night: it was barely pleasant enough.

Ian knew he did not have many minutes of strength remaining to stay awake himself.

He left the door open, went back to the truck, and opened the passenger side door. He shook his head: Jo was still perfectly unaware the ride had ended. It was almost the exact same dilemma as before. But due to the distance, this time the solution was easier.

Ian unbuckled her seat belt, put his arms under her legs and armpit, and lifted her out of the vehicle, careful to not bump either her or himself against anything painful, then kicked the passenger door shut.

She did not feel especially heavy, but then he understood that he had to be by now almost completely numb. He would not necessarily get an advance warning until his muscles just would give in, and they would collapse into a heap on the ground. It was slightly scary.

He navigated to the bed-like shape inside the cabin

and put her down. Now he felt odd, almost weightless. There was still energy left for perhaps a half minute at maximum, if luck was with him.

Maybe it had been an unnecessarily cute thing to do, but it was done now.

Ian tossed a blanket over her and pressed the central locking button on the truck key. There was an orange flash from the outside. It should be locked now. Next step was the cabin door. That too, he managed.

But as he turned around his foot slipped and he had an unplanned meeting with the floor. He was too tired to get back up.

It was perhaps not much more pleasant than waking up into a hangover, but at least the almost full-body ache was something new compared to a hammering in the head and the urgent need to vomit.

Then Ian noticed that something was odd, something was most certainly not as it should be.

He had a weak memory of the sensations of cold and hard. Of the floor. Logic would have dictated those sensations to have remained, but now there was just warmth instead.

The surface beneath him mostly resembled a bed. There was an actual blanket on top of him. He sensed movement next to him, something tickled his face and then he felt something warm and soft press against his lips briefly.

Ian opened his eyes and saw Jo's face hovering close to him. The almost pained expression was somewhat at odds with the kiss.

"I couldn't leave you there. Ian, don't do things like that to yourself, because I can't take it," she said.

He smiled at her, but was actually frightened, because he could say exactly the same thing about not being able to take it.

From behind the haze in his mind, coherent thoughts and memories returned. Now he remembered why there was pain, and understood better the reason why he was so frightened.

If it took so little for her to melt his heart, he was seriously concerned of his ability to dive back into the web of conspiracies and mysteries that surrounded him. SCEPTRE with their symbols and fnords had not left him unable to function, but it was well within possibility she could.

But then, did he have to dive into anything?

Yes, most certainly. He had seen first hand what Lucas' documents had been about, but was not any closer to understanding how he had come to possess them, or why and by whom he had been killed.

And there were still blanks left in his mind.

Also the Agents had promised to contact him again, something he had almost completely forgotten.

Another frightening possibility was that Jo would insist to follow him on further investigations. If that was what she wanted, it would be mostly futile to try to change her mind. He remembered the scary confident look on her face, her words about making a difference. Now, after seeing with her own eyes how SCEPTRE operated, it was unlikely she would just stop at seeking out her lost friend.

OK. So that was his reality.

Fighting it would only get him nowhere.

"It's slightly past noon. Feel like getting up?" Jo asked. Ian remembered that they had theoretically promised to be back yesterday. René had to be going raving mad by now.

"Have to. If we plan to get back home any time soon."

Also, the bassist/vocalist had to be warned about

SCEPTRE right now, even before they started preparing their return. The previous attempt had ended in a failure, but this time Jo could back up the story a hundred percent.

Miraculously Ian's prepaid cell phone had survived the battle, while sitting in its pouch. The plastic had severely cracked, but it powered on just fine when connected to Jo's compatible charger.

Ian dialed René, not at all knowing what to expect.

As René answered, his voice was dripping with sarcastic wrath.

"Well well, Ian. Erik already called yesterday and explained what you have been up to. He sounded like he was very drunk. Now here's the thing: instead of one, it seems there's three of you who are going crazy. Three who I can't necessarily trust. So you were in a brawl –"

"Not a brawl. A gunfight."

"You can call it what you like. If you feel like heroes, good for you. But remember that you're still in the band. Shit, I can't believe I have to say this, but I do. If you think you can just randomly risk your life whenever you feel like it, I believe either you should seriously re-evaluate your priorities, or I'm going to need new guitarists and a new drummer."

"Listen. Whatever Erik told you was only the half of it. Me and Jo were at an underground facility –"

"Again? What the fuck is that underground fetish of yours –"

The constant ache helped Ian focus his anger. He exploded over the phone.

"Fuck you! Now you listen. She can back up everything I say – I can give the phone to her next. And I don't care what you think, I'm calling just to let you

know that you are in mortal danger. Open your door to no-one, arm yourself if you can. We have met people, or actually a whole organization, that is not to be fucked with."

Ian wondered whether it was better to tell about the transmitter inside him or not.

Right now he decided it was not. René had already had much to digest. But yes, the transmitter's removal was a top priority. Actually Jo might have one on her as well now. They should definitely check with Logan again before leaving.

When René spoke again, his voice was chillingly cold, and in perfect control.

"So it has come to this, then. I can't afford to have as out-of-control people in the band as you. You're a bad influence on everyone else. Right now, consider yourself to no longer be in Cyberpriest. And no, I have no need to speak with Jo now. Rather, I want to talk to her face to face. As well as to Erik. You can tell them that I'm waiting, but I'm not going to wait for long."

René disconnected.

"Shit!" Ian exclaimed.

"What is it?" Jo asked.

"Well, effective immediately, I'm out of the band."

"What?"

"That's what René said. He wants to see you and Erik."

"Damn. We must try to talk some sense to him. Or simply beat sense into him. Somehow I knew this might happen. But listen, let him cool down a bit and begin to regret his own words. We first get ourselves comfortable, then head home."

Ian could not truly bring himself to disagree, even considering the danger SCEPTRE represented to René,

especially if he was still not believing any of it.

After they had washed themselves, changed into some warm and colorful but not very metal clothes generously provided by the Outpost people, after Ian had got some fresh bandages on him again, and they had eaten a proper meal, existence started to feel a little more human and less zombie-like again.

Jo spared the torn black T-shirt though.

"I'm going to wear this on stage and say that I had this on when I fought the sectarian elite," she said.

Ian could not help but to admire her defiance. He understood it was an important part of their mission, an essential part to keeping their sanity: to defy SCEPTRE both mentally as well as physically.

Now they were in Logan's cabin: he was using the EM analyzer again.

"I still see only one signal. You're clean," he said to Jo, as he turned off the analyzer and knelt to switch on his communications array again.

Ian was somehow surprised. Apollyon had missed a clear opportunity. If the scientist was not already safe in the hands of the police, SCEPTRE would no doubt make him pay hard for this negligence too.

It did not make much of a practical difference though, if they moved mostly together now.

The bug, the parasite in him, was disgusting just to think about. Digging it out would require not just a doctor, but a surgeon, right? The removal would be a scary procedure. But it had to be done. Soon.

Just before 2:30 PM, Ian and Jo met Erik in the Outpost tavern. At the moment he was not drinking, just sitting thoughtfully in a corner.

They sat into the table.

"I bumped into Logan. He told me of what I missed. If even half of it is true, you both have found the over-man within yourselves," Erik said. The tone was serious and respectful.

"Thanks ... I guess," Ian replied.

"But watch out around René. He is very serious about not liking band members get too close. I thought he was just fucking around with you earlier, but he actually fumed about it for several minutes after we dropped you off."

"It's kind of a non-issue now. Ian's been fired," Jo said. Erik looked like he had been hit with a sledgehammer.

"For Satan's sake. Kommandant's losing it," he said with a quiet seriousness. "I wasn't going to drink any more today, but that decision needs to be seriously re-considered."

Jo turned to Ian next.

"I probably should have told, because it may explain things a bit, at least when it comes to me. Before Erik joined the band, me and René were together. It was not for very long, and we both decided it would lead to nowhere. It was after that I mostly started to believe in myself only."

Ian nodded with sudden enlightenment, but was also somewhat disappointed. As the newcomer in the band, he would always get to know about classified things last.

Except that he no longer was in the band.

"I believe neither you or René ever told me directly either, but I could guess, sort of," Erik said. "But now, do you still believe in yourself only?"

That was probably a trick question. Or was it?

“Well, I believe in us three,” Jo answered. There was a slight, but nevertheless proud smile on her face.

It was completely unintended, but the first connection Ian made from this was the somewhat grim fact that all three of them were killers now. In self-defense – if his ex-bandmates had not committed actual murders before – but still.

But then, were they all significantly less human for that? A police officer or a soldier might have to kill in the line of duty as well. If one knew of SCEPTRE, was it not one's duty to oppose them with any means necessary, even if not sanctioned by any government entity? Even if it meant operating outside the law?

In a perfect world violence would end at mosh pits.

But an imperfect world had brought them together.

The interesting question was, to what degree Erik would join the cause, if any?

“Well then. The bus goes by in ten minutes. We probably should get ready to go, so that we don't have to wait for another hour. So that you get to see René before he posts an ad at Axes 'n' Amps for your replacements,” Ian said, returning from his philosophical thoughts.

Jo locked eyes with him. They burned with sudden anger and disbelief.

“What? Are you implying you aren't going to see him? That you don't want to kick his ass? Of course you come with us. Then we set a simple ultimatum. Either you get to stay, or we all leave. The difference being, he doesn't kick us out, we walk out. It's time René understands it's not just his band.”

“But don't you forget SCEPTRE now? And the transmitter? I'm starting to doubt how responsible it's for me to stay in the band.”

“What transmitter?” Erik asked.

It was only then Ian understood that Erik had no idea. Apparently Logan had only told about the investigations at the underground facility, not anything else.

“Well, obviously we have to get it out. But don't forget that those weird assholes must want me just as well. And Erik was there to butt-kick the motor gang, who worked for them,” Jo said.

“It's true,” Ian admitted, though he had not necessarily wanted to. “We have been marked long ago. SCEPTRE must have kept its eyes on us ever since I joined.”

“Therefore it's even more important we stick together and stay alert. And we should start referring to the organization openly in our songs. That would make them think twice about making us disappear or arranging an accident. Because with that they'd be proving their own existence,” Jo continued.

“This is weird shit, weirder than I thought,” Erik confessed.

Was he scared? Could the over-man be scared?

Ian thought of Jo's suggestion. There was a certain kind of beautiful integrity to it. However, it rested on the assumption that SCEPTRE wanted and needed to stay hidden.

He remembered Apollyon's words: “Everything is ready for severe excrement to rain on the world on December twenty-first.”

Now it was already the end of November.

It was possible that SCEPTRE, whatever their aims were, did not need to stay hidden much longer. But whatever the case, just thinking did not help much at this moment. Getting back to the city would.

“Guys, the bus is soon here,” Ian reminded.

The three stood up and left the tavern. A mournful

feeling lingered: they would probably not be returning here for quite some time.

They sat in the back of a Greyhound bus, headed for home. Estimated arrival time was 5 PM. Erik had actually dismantled his scoped rifle and carried it in a rather innocent-looking black canvas bag.

There had not been much conversation. Then Jo turned to Ian and spoke up.

"There's something I forgot to tell back in the car. I kept remembering it and then forgetting it in the next instant. Could be an after-effect of the tranquilizer, or just because I was too eager to discuss cute nonsense. I saw Buzzsaw's death. He was definitely the gang leader, by the way. He was waiting at the gate to the compound, as a black helicopter arrived. I watched from behind some rocks. Out stepped a tall man with the most skull-like face I'd ever seen."

Suddenly Ian's blood ran cold, and Jo's voice grew distant. The whole world seemed to disappear far away. He was quite exactly sure who she meant.

The evil face returned to haunt his mind.

"Something wrong? You are pale."

"I may know who you're talking about," Ian replied.

He looked at Erik sitting on Jo's other side. There was a frown on his face: he was listening and following intensely too.

"Oh. Anyway, it was this man who put two bullets into poor Buzzsaw with a silenced pistol, then took off just as quickly as he had arrived."

"I believe the same man was present when I was trained. And I saw him in the corridors beneath the casino and theater," Ian said.

This time Jo was transfixed, as was Erik. A silence

descended again.

“Guys, you're obviously up to your neck in something very deep. And one of the virtues of the over-man is the instinct for self-preservation. Naturally, I will continue to supply hellbattery for as long as required, but I hope you don't hold it against me if I decide not to follow you on any further ... adventures,” Erik said in a low voice.

“Well, everyone has to make his own decisions. I just hope that you never forget how you saved our asses back at the Outpost. We would not be here otherwise,” Jo replied.

It was close to 5 PM, close to the city, and already rather dark when Ian's cell phone rang.

“It's René,” he said, looking at the display.

“Mark my words, he's already regretting that he was so hot-headed. He'll be practically begging you back if you act as if you took his words seriously,” Jo replied.

“I'm not so sure about that.”

Ian pressed the answer button and lifted the phone up to his ear.

“Ian.”

“René here. Sorry for being so rude, I don't know what went into me. By all means, come along with Jo and Erik. Let's discuss our future on friendly terms.”

“René? You should be aware that I'll be prone to totally disobeying the metal rules –”

There was just a repeating beep. René had terminated the call without listening.

“That was strange. He just cut the call, thought I was going to warn him of what to expect,” Ian mused.

They had relative luck with the bus schedules: it took only twenty more minutes to reach the rehearsal space. Though Erik still cursed for not having the green jeep with him now.

They descended to the bunker.

Jo was the first to fish the keys out from her pockets. Ian was glad to note that they were yet another item that had refused to go missing on the long off-road and underground adventure. But did he still have his keys with him?

He was still frantically searching his pockets, when she got the door unlocked and pulled it open.

It was dark inside. Some light came from the corridor, but it was only enough to see the vague shapes of the amp cabinets standing in the room.

René had returned all their gear to their proper positions all by himself. That was dedication.

The three of them stepped in.

“René’s not here?” Jo asked no-one in particular.

From the darkness came a sudden muffled reply.

By reflex, Ian reached for the light switch. The lights came on just like each time before. However, the sight before his eyes was something never seen before.

René was sitting at a completely unusual location: on Erik's drum stool, which had been propped against the bass cabinet. He was dressed in a simple black T-shirt and dark blue jeans: no characteristic leather, no denim vest.

The reason for his muffled reply became clear: his mouth had been taped shut with glossy gray duct tape. And it was then Ian looked below, and saw the cords which held him securely to the stool.

One word flashed through his mind.

SCEPTRE.

Before he could react, before he could move, his brains also took in the rest of the sight.

The bottom of René's T-shirt seemed wet and sticky with some substance. Right below his belt a dark discoloration, darker than his pants, was spreading as well.

His eyes were glazed, staring off to distance, and his face held an expression that was much too peaceful for the situation. His mouth made yet another mumbling sound.

In the next instant something lit up in red on top of Ian's half-stack.

It was a black digital clock, and the display read:

00:30.

Now Ian remembered something puzzling about the call. Of course the sound quality over a cell phone was still far from perfect. But at points René's voice had shifted in pitch abruptly. That could not be caused simply by bad cellular reception.

Most likely the sentences had been constructed from René's previous calls, calls that had been recorded.

Ian had remembered it too late.

They all had walked right into a trap.

The door behind them slammed shut, probably driven by an electric motor. From above there came a sound of bolts locking in sequence: a fiendish modification.

The room had been prepared in advance.

The last puzzle piece became apparent: on each wall there were rectangular packs of plastic with wires going into the timer unit. To hinder instantaneous discovery, the color of the packs and the wires matched roughly the color of the wall.

Plastic explosives.

By using René as a bait, who had been maimed in some yet undetermined but likely severe way, SCEPTRE had lured them to be blown up in their very own rehearsal space.

The digital timer started to tick down.

Jo sprinted up to René.

She ripped the duct-tape off with force, with no regard to the pain it would cause.

“René? What did they do to you?” she asked with anguish in her voice.

0:28.

0:27.

So far there was no answer.

Meanwhile Ian scanned the room for any possible exits besides the door. Unlike in SCEPTRE's underground maze, here there was no ventilation duct to save them. No windows either. The door that had let them hone their art of metal in privacy now held them firmly inside what was to become their final resting place.

It was corny, but Ian could not prevent the thought entering his mind: they would rest in pieces.

He looked behind: Erik was closest to the door. He had not said anything yet, but a heavy frown had devel-

oped on his face. He turned on his heels, apparently to test his might against the metal bolts.

His right side going first, Erik collided with the door with all the strength he could muster.

0:25.

0:23.

What?

“Erik, stop! It goes faster if you pound the door,” Ian shouted.

“So it's better if we just wait to die?” Erik shouted back in rage and disbelief.

“I'm thinking!”

“You two, shut up! René's about to say something,” Jo snapped.

René's mouth opened long before any actual sound came. He seemed to be having trouble with forming words.

0:18.

0:17.

0:16.

“So sorry, guys. They came for me – I should have listened. But I'm glad I finally realized it's not just my band, it's ours. I'm so proud of what we all achieved as Cyber –”

His voice trailed off and his head slumped to the side.

“Must be heavy painkillers. He can't be proud of us being blown to hell,” Erik noted angrily.

Jo said nothing as she lifted Rene's shirt up. A red bloody mess with something hanging out greeted their eyes. The stomach wound was deep, having been carved with exquisite skill and sadism: the intention of inflicting maximum irrecoverable damage while still letting the victim live long enough.

The nature of the damage mattered little now, though. There was no time for it to matter.

But its signature did matter.

Seeing the blood made Ian flash back to the training once more. This method had been demonstrated with a live victim. It was an advanced technique, something to be learned later, but the purpose of showing it early was to harden the trainees.

The man with the skull face had demonstrated it personally.

0:04.

0:03.

Erik took a few steps back.

0:02.

While a low animal growl erupted from his throat, he accelerated to the highest velocity he could reach in the minimal distance, then sprang up to the air and toward the door.

“No!” Ian shouted.

The yell was theatrical, but in the end completely futile. To die one second sooner made no great difference.

0:01.

Erik's shoulder was perhaps five centimeters away from impact, when Ian felt something weird inside.

As if something immaterial had passed through him.

An electric sizzling sound came from the digital clock, and its display simply shut off to black.

Erik crashed hard into the door and fell, groaning with pain. At the same time there was a metallic sound from above him.

One second passed, then two.

They were still alive.

“One more time,” came a muffled shout from outside. A deep male voice.

Erik gathered strength for a moment, then got up and gave one more try with his other shoulder. It was more like a push than another full head-on collision.

The door flew open to the outside.

Marching in a row, three black-clad people walked into the room. They all wore dark, reflective sunglasses. The two men were medium-tall: in their middle was a shorter, plump woman with bright red hair.

Due to the clothing and the glasses, the recognition was not instant. But then it came like a hammer to the face.

“Gwen?” Ian asked.

“The name’s Blowfish,” the familiar voice answered.

Agents.

The Agents had finally appeared, saving his life as well as Jo’s and Erik’s in the process. And what there was left to save of René.

But how?

“Hmm. My watch stopped, too,” Jo said.

Of course. An electromagnetic pulse.

Now Ian noted that all of them were heavily armed: underneath their long black trench coats, an impressive variety of holstered firearms could be seen. He also noted something completely unrelated. Something about the way the men had moved into the room.

They were the same two black-clad shapes he had seen entering the Hades Club the night Lucas had been killed. Relief turned suddenly into Ian’s blood running cold. Terror was only one part of it.

The urgent need to kill was by far the dominant one.

He reached for his USP .45, which still had –

Exactly one bullet.

But like with the oddity of the phone call, again he had remembered too late. The gun was already in his

hands, held in a threatening stance against the three intruders.

One bullet against three.

You fail.

You – die?

Ian found himself staring into the muzzle of Gwen's – or Blowfish's – Desert Eagle. If he made it out of this alive, it was an experience he never cared to repeat.

“Put the gun down to the ground, slowly,” she ordered.

If he wanted to live, there was no choice but to comply. He tried to judge the proper movement speed that would not be interpreted as aggression. Almost infinitely slowly, he let his support hand fall down, and knelt to put the pistol down to the floor.

Then he stood up with hands pointed to the ceiling, though he had not been ordered to do that.

Now he could take in the features of the two men with more clarity. The man on the left was clearly older, possibly close to forty. He had a wrinkled, square-jawed face, and short sand-colored hair. The expression was stoic and martial.

The other man looked to be in his early thirties, with darker and slightly longer hair, some roundness to his features, and overall more relaxed demeanor.

Now Ian was also free to speak his mind. If the Agents would shoot him just for that, then he no longer cared.

“You killed Lucas,” he growled.

Completely ignoring the accusation, the younger man joined Jo in inspecting René's wounds.

The older man stood in place and stared hard at Ian.

“The man you knew as Lucas was a SCEPTRE assassin by the codename Reaper. Though he was not tasked with actual assassinations for quite some time. Instead, he worked as a courier. However, that was by all accounts not his prime assignment,” he spoke calmly.

Ian felt like the rug had been pulled from under him again. How many times this day already, he had lost count. Being realistic, he should have locked on this interpretation right away, instead of harboring more optimistic scenarios.

“What was it, then?” he asked.

“He was tasked with seeking out and keeping track of trainees we had managed to extract. From the point he found you, you became his prime assignment.”

Now it was all perfectly clear. Their friendship, or Lucas' side of it, had been fake to a hundred percent. Suddenly Ian's emotions took a hundred and eighty-degree turn. He regretted not killing Lucas himself.

“But why ... why didn't he simply kill me long ago?”

“There was an additional side to the assignment. To see whether any Agents were in contact with you, or would come to contact you. We were watching him as well, and eliminated him when he was dangerously close to finding out Blowfish was one of us.”

Ian pondered hard. The cold rational side took over the emotional.

“Did the network attack have something to do with this?”

Now Blowfish spoke.

“Very good. All the connections took some time to

find out, but finally it became apparent that Prometheus Security Group is connected to SCEPTRE. One of their fronts. Back then I didn't want to confuse you more, but it was apparently a test to see how you would react. To see if your training would come out in some way. Possibly to see how feasible it would have been to re-integrate you into SCEPTRE.”

It all made sense now. Ian cursed internally how much the sectarian elite had unknowingly controlled his life, even after the extraction. He remembered the naive feeling of rebellion and excitement, when infiltrating the industrial block. If only he had known it all had been just as expected, part of a pre-orchestrated plan.

“It's nasty work, Blackhand, nastier than I thought. Organs have been removed, veins and arteries clamped shut so that he wouldn't bleed to death instantly. But to save this guy I'd need an operating theater. No, screw that. We'd need a proper surgeon instead of someone with field medic training, not to speak of transplants,” the other man interrupted, tension in his voice.

The words almost passed right through Ian, as if he was watching some kind of play unfold. He knew he was dissociating. But in the back of his mind he knew the truth: SCEPTRE had done unbelievable physical damage on their band leader, their René. It was hopeless: the only variable was how soon the scythe would claim him.

“Shit. I don't feel pulse any more.”

“Sarge, you did your best,” the older man replied flatly.

René was dead.

By all accounts, Cyberpriest was no more. Its brain and heart had both been ripped out. Ian did not truly

know what he felt right now. Relief, almost? An unstoppable force, a predictable set of events had been put into motion when he had joined, and now it had reached the inevitable conclusion. Cynically, his mind turned to other observations.

Blackhand. Sarge. Blowfish. Interesting names.

From somewhere far away he could hear a sob, a jagged gasp for air. That was Jo. If she could get right into mourning, good for her. But within his brain a whirlwind of countless different thoughts and emotions went on. It would take much longer for him.

Right now the whirlwind stopped on accusation. Not toward himself yet, but the Agents. Even if it had been inevitable, this route had to be explored. To see how the Agents would react if for nothing else.

"You could have saved him if you'd come here earlier," Ian said with a gravelly voice that hurt his throat.

"Actually it was very much by luck we even got here at all, and had time to set up the EMP generator. We nabbed a lightly encrypted SCEPTRE transmission that detailed very vaguely what they were up to. Your vocalist was transported here at the last instant before you arrived, while the room had been prepared earlier. But still too late for us to find out," Blowfish replied.

Ian looked to the side and saw Erik standing in quiet anger, taking everything in.

"Do you know if you have a transmitter on you?" the man known as Sarge asked.

"As a matter of fact I do. Somewhere in my stomach," Ian replied.

"Then it's clear how they knew the right moment," Blackhand said.

Sarge stood up and took out a device similar to what Logan had used to scan for electromagnetic signals. He

turned it on and studied the display for a while.

"I see nothing. No signal coming from you or anyone else. The pulse must have fried it too."

Now Ian understood what he had felt. At the moment it had been destroyed, the bug had given him a mild electric shock on the inside. There would be no need for a bloody operation. SCEPTRE could track him no more! Even considering everything else, that was cause for celebration. But yet he was curious.

"Blowfish told you Agents took one transmitter out when I was extracted from training. So how did I get one again?"

"By now the technology is very miniaturized. It could have been put into a drink. Do you use alcohol? Did you drink together with Reaper – I mean Lucas?" Blackhand asked.

Ian nodded. Yes to both questions.

"When sufficiently intoxicated, you wouldn't notice anything. If you like to drink tequila and swallow the worm, it could have been inside one."

Tequila was not on the very top of his list, but he would never have opposed when offered. In fact he remembered at least two occasions of drinking it with Lucas. And swallowing the worm was a very metal thing to do, naturally.

So that was clear then. What else?

Ah yes. A rather irrational feeling arose from Ian's mind, but it could not be avoided.

He felt a deep sadness for the electronic audio gear, especially the fried tube half-stacks that would never again produce a sound.

Their band leader was dead and he worried about amplifiers. It was blasphemous, he knew. But once all the wildly circulating thoughts had been picked up and

processed, maybe then the whirlwind would settle.

He was interrupted before he could pick another.

“We have spent long enough here. SCEPTRE may return to check the results at any moment. Not just Ian, but all of you should come with us. You all are in danger. This room must be re-prepared as well, but that doesn't take long,” Blackhand said.

Talking about danger was completely unnecessary: Ian wanted to show all of aggression, anger and hate. As if they did not already know!

“Fuck you! Fuck all of you. I'm not coming,” Erik stated with sudden hateful defiance and a deep hoarse growl. “I suppose this is some clock-and-dagger, some if-you-have-seen-this-you-either-come-with-us-or-die stuff, but I don't give a shit. I will kill you black-clad bastards with my bare hands if I have to. René was right after all.”

He pointed at Ian and Jo. Jo was by now on her feet as well, face completely blank. Despite the one sob, she had not been crying. It was almost as if she had learned how to dissociate.

“It's you two lovebirds who are completely and hundred percent responsible for his death. Fuck myself for not shooting you instead, when I had the village on my scope! Maybe those conspirator assholes would have left us alone then, we would have found true over-man replacements, and conquered the world. But now it will never, ever happen, thanks to you! There is nothing for me here or anywhere with you. So unless those three Matrix weirdos want to push their luck, I'm out of this place. Permanently! Good bye!”

The Agents made no movement to stop him: none of them betrayed a reaction of any kind.

Erik stormed out of the room.

“So, you two are coming?” Blackhand asked.

Ian stood motionless, his mind drained of any rational thoughts or emotions. Jo made no reply either. Maybe the lack of an outright negative was the best “yes” both of them could manage at the moment.

“Well then. Guys, help me with this.”

Taking some small devices from their backpacks, the two men set out to methodically work through the plastic explosives on the wall. Meanwhile Blowfish disconnected the wires from the timer unit, and replaced it with a fresh one. She powered it up: a digital countdown clock appeared on the display.

She adjusted it to exactly one second.

“It’s not active yet,” she hissed, apparently to reassure.

Now Ian understood: the men were replacing the fried detonators on the plastic packs. They would blow up the room after all of them left.

“We know it’s not perfect. If they risk to do a thorough check, SCEPTRE will notice that the detonators and the timers have been switched, and there’s not enough of organic matter to account for four,” Blackhand said.

“But at least there will be a boom, and that means the world for me,” Sarge replied with some humor in his voice.

Ian wondered about this. René’s already mutilated body would be mangled and charred beyond recognition, if not blown to pieces. It felt terribly disrespectful. But for the man himself, whether there was an afterlife or not, it probably did not make a lot of difference.

“What about the guitars?” Ian asked then. “We’d only have to replace the electronics. It’s a shame to destroy good instruments.”

Again, he knew it was totally inappropriate to worry about gear at such occasion. But Jo at least reacted in some way: she lifted her eyebrows. Maybe in disbelief, but it was better than nothing, better than the blank stare.

"If I was you, I wouldn't take a chance with anything in this room. Any electronic devices they may have installed are of course dead, but if I was them, I would have smeared the instruments with a slow-acting poison," Blackhand replied.

Well, that was that then. The words certainly made sense. Nothing from here could go with him.

The Agents were finished with the explosives now.

"We are ready to go," Blowfish said. "Our vehicle is not far from here. But we have to be careful. Ian, pick up your gun. We just have to trust you not to shoot us."

As soon as Ian did that, Blowfish also tossed him two extra magazines. He changed magazines mechanically, and pulled back the slide. The safety was still on.

"Do you bear arms? Ever used a semi-automatic?" she asked Jo next.

Jo nodded cautiously.

"Here then."

Blowfish handed her a similar USP pistol, and two magazines as well.

"If you decide to join us, you'll be trained in the use of much more. But I believe this will do for now, now that there's five of us."

Ian could see that the Agents had not saved them just to offer a new chance to disappear. Naturally they would also be recruiting. Now that it had come to this, he was not completely sure. He and Jo and Erik had acted heroically on their own, out of free will. But the Agents, even if they fought SCEPTRE, seemed to be a

structured institution built on violence.

Did he want to join them?

But did he really have a choice?

The Agents did a final check of the room, then everything was set. There was nothing more to do here. All five of them walked out to the corridor, and Blackhand, last of them, closed and locked the door.

As they walked to the street, Ian had one more question.

“Do I have a codename?”

“If you join, you both can choose one later,” Blackhand said. “It makes no real difference though, because in Agent business we never use either real or code names over insecure channels. You do have a SCEPTRE codename, but we thought it would have been disrespectful to use it.”

Ian shuddered. But he needed to know.

“Tell me.”

“The name may be triggering, so prepare yourself.”

“I’m as prepared as I’m going to be.”

“From the documents found at the training center during your extraction, it was Necro.”

Uttered in this context, the word caused another flashback to hit his brain. A ritualistic environment. Darkness, candles, blood and knives. A robed figure speaking in a hissing voice.

“You shall henceforth be known as Necro.”

Ian was shocked back to reality, glad that the flashback had been only brief.

He definitely did not want to use that name.

It had been through even more horrible events, but much of the puzzle had arranged itself for now. Still, there were unknowns remaining.

Who had extracted him? He could have asked, but

considering that he had pointed a gun at the Agents, he felt like he had already asked too much. Blackhand at least was old enough to have been involved. Sarge was just on the edge. He would have been a very young Agent at the time.

And there were even more profound questions.  
Who and what had he been before the training?  
How much of his memories were real?

The short walk to the Agents' unremarkable dark green van had been without an incident. There had been no sign of SCEPTRE, as the five had walked with their weapons hidden. The few passers-by had been totally oblivious to who they were.

Blackhand climbed to the driver's seat, with Sarge next to him. Ian, Jo and Blowfish went to the back.

The back of the vehicle was like a miniature, mobile version of Logan's equipment array. It was filled from the floor to the ceiling with computer, communications and monitoring gear.

If the mood had not been so grim and tense, Ian would certainly have let out a cry of excitement upon seeing it. And suddenly it made sense: this was like another, mobile server room for Gwen to watch over.

She had to be an Agent communications BOFH.

Now they were one block away from the rehearsal bunker.

"Far enough yet?" Blackhand asked as he drove. The large sliding window between the front and rear compartments was open, so that they could hear each other clearly. "Fire when ready."

In response Blowfish pressed a button on the con-

sole. From behind came a low muted rumble.

René's desecrated body, their guitars and amps, Erik's drum kit, they all were gone up in flames now. SCEPTRE might think they all were dead, though there was no certainty. But the symbolic meaning was much greater: there was no going back to the past now.

Their band was permanently gone. Ian's vision of the perfect thrash metal unit was now shattered, blown to pieces. There was a similar emptiness within him as when Lucas had died, but less intense.

Now, if they chose to join, the Agents would be their new and only family.

He and Jo sat on opposite sides, on seats built on top of the left and right rear wheel compartments.

There was silence.

Now Ian's blame for himself finally took over. There was not much else to think of immediately. He recalled Erik's hateful words, every last of them.

"Say so if you hate me," he broke the silence.

"You know I can't say that. I don't hate you," Jo replied, frowning heavily. The voice itself was unreadable, mostly devoid of anything resembling emotion. "Either we both are equally guilty, or only SCEPTRE is."

"But which one is it?"

"Don't make this harder than it already is, OK? I don't know. I don't know and I don't want to talk about it now."

Now there was a trace of anguish and pain. Ian knew it was not nice to probe, but he believed that the sooner she could reconnect with emotions, the better. Even if he was a dissociating creep himself, he did not wish anyone else to be. Especially not Jo.

"I'll tell you if I one day figure it out," she spoke with a softer voice. "Now I just know we have to stick to-

gether, because it's us against the world. Us and those Agents if we can trust them.”

Blowfish grunted in almost silent disapproval. The Agents' trustworthiness was not to be questioned, it seemed.

Those were comforting words, but there was also a gloomy side to it. Ian's sense of justice demanded Jo to be angry at him: she had not just lost a band leader, but a former lover too. Even if it had been a long ago, and they had disagreed almost of everything. But yet she was not angry. What was wrong with her?

There was a shadow of death that hung over them. Death and SCEPTRE. Even the Agents were a shadowy, lingering presence, not necessarily healthy at all. They were just as covert and military as their enemies, though the similarities ended there.

Now Ian realized how foolish he had possibly been. There was no going back ever to the fairy tale moment they had shared inside the fnord research facility, or what had come immediately after. The innocence was gone, permanently. Now there would be blood, fire, death and hate until the likely possibility of either or both of them getting killed by SCEPTRE's guns.

Or until the very unlikely possibility that they could strike a major crippling blow against their adversaries, so that they would be out of risk.

With grim determination, Ian decided that they would just have to make best of the possibly little time they had left. Joining the Agents would be offer some kind of protection, better weapons possibly, and SCEPTRE could no longer track him, so it was not completely hopeless.

“Where are we going?” Jo asked, jolting him out of his thoughts.

“Outside the city, to be sure SCEPTRE is not in pursuit. Then, at a suitable spot, you’ll have to decide if you want to join the Agency. If not, you will never hear from us again. If you do, we continue to our headquarters,” Blowfish replied.

A sudden paranoid thought crept into Ian's mind. How sure could he be of these three? Were they real Agents, or was the Agency real at all? What if they were just another arm of SCEPTRE, taking him and Jo out to be executed at some remote location?

It was perhaps ridiculous. But somehow he decided that until he could be completely sure otherwise, he had to prepare for every possibility. At least they both were armed.

The van had stopped in the middle of a forest road, a little outside the city. No pursuing black vans, helicopters or any other signs of sinister SCEPTRE activity had been detected.

Now was the moment of decision. Or execution.

Ian remembered Erik's crude Matrix comparison. It was perhaps not exactly fitting when it came to the Agents themselves, but if this was not an execution, then it definitely was the red pill or blue pill-moment.

“So what will it be? Join us or not?” Blackhand asked from the driver seat. There was some faint warmth in the voice, perhaps for the first time Ian had heard.

The friendliness could be a trick, he reminded himself.

“We can't reveal the headquarters to outsiders: before that we have to be certain you are coming along for good,” Sarge added.

Ian was willing to go for the affirmative. But his hand was not far away from the gun under his coat, in case it

indeed was a trick.

"I want to know one thing," Jo said.

"Yes?" Blackhand said, turning to her. He probably had to strain his neck painfully.

"Well, in this band that's no more, it was quite a big deal to not show affection. Anti-fraternization rules is the official term I believe. I want to know if it's the same with you."

Ian had completely forgotten about this aspect because of his paranoia. But yes, it definitely was a good point. Ian wanted to hug her for it.

"On a mission an Agent needs to stay sharp and focused, or she is a danger to herself and her comrades. We don't oppose anything that helps to give strength and courage. Conversely, an operative needs to tune out anything or at least most of what's negative and distracting. If you manage to do that, then there's no problem," Blackhand said.

That was good to know. Of course it was still a tall order to obey to the letter.

"I'm in then," Jo said.

"Me as well," Ian replied.

"Then it's settled. The ride continues," Blackhand said and stepped on the accelerator again.

It turned out to be a long ride into somewhere far away from civilization. They were headed north, turning onto smaller and smaller roads. At least they were roads.

Forest, specifically pine trees, was all that they had seen for a long time. The roads were also climbing higher into rocky terrain.

It was close to 10 PM when Ian looked through the separating window, and saw nothing but a sheer rock wall coming at them in the headlights.

Suddenly his heart leaped again. He had forgotten about the thought of an execution, that had in retrospect been nothing but ridiculous, but –

Had Blackhand lost his mind?

Was this a group suicide instead?

The wall of rock came closer. Soon the vehicle would crush itself, throwing them all forward. Blowfish would be thrown to the dividing wall, while he and Jo would both hit their heads into the hard steel communications equipment racks. It was not a pleasant thought.

But what could he do – jump out from the back? Was there even time for that?

Sarge seemed to be perfectly fine with his comrade's driving: he made no move. The front seat belt would not help him much either.

Just as impact seemed imminent, the wall in front of them separated: it simply split into two. Ian saw the brief glimpse of large hydraulic shafts opening up the passage.

“That's fucked up,” he breathed.

The van disappeared into a black tunnel carved into the rock. Yellow lights came on in the ceiling. Ian looked out of the rear windows to see the passage seal itself off again.

This was almost too much. It was not normal even for black-clad Agents to drive straight into an automatically opening passageway. That only happened in comic books or movies.

The odd impression only intensified when the van stopped and they all stepped out. It was a large garage built into the rock, brightly lit by fluorescent tubes on the walls. There were two more similar vans off to the side.

In the center of the garage stood a slightly larger, black machine. A helicopter.

“Welcome to our headquarters. In the case you're wondering about that thing, it's a stolen SCEPTRE stealth chopper. Sarge and Blowfish have worked on it quite for some time to make sure it's safe to operate, to ensure there's no high-voltage security devices, and that it no longer broadcasts its location to the enemy. We're getting close to test it,” Blackhand said.

Ian looked up to the high ceiling: it appeared to be steel, built out of two pieces that seemed like they could separate when needed. Not only a garage, but an underground helipad. Very neat.

This place had to mean that the Agents were actually rather organized and rather well off. They were not some poor rebels operating out of the gutter.

Jo took some deliberate, slow and long steps, hands in her pockets, as she took in the place. Nothing on her

face betrayed the horrible events earlier in the day. Though no longer suspicious of the Agents, Ian was not sure if he was exactly that overjoyed yet. After all, it was the headquarters of a paramilitary and covert organization. Somehow that made an uneasy and direct connection to his assassin training.

But he decided not to let that show. He owed that much to his new hosts.

Blackhand motioned for the exit door on the far wall.

“Shall we go in? After all, there's more to this place than the garage.”

After a short walk down a corridor, maybe twenty meters, they came to another door that opened up to the HQ lobby.

The first thing that struck Ian's eyes was the big symbol high up on the wall, made of steel and painted with shiny chrome.

Or actually two of them.

It seemed that the Agents too were fans of triangles.

On the left, there was an upright equilateral triangle with a globe inside, an assault rifle and an X-shaped electric guitar crossed on top of them. On the sides of the triangle stood the proud words:

*FREEDOM, METAL, MIGHT.*

On the right, there was a triangle standing on its tip, also equilateral. Inside was a giant Desert Eagle pistol with wings.

These symbols definitely required some explaining. As if reading the puzzled expression on Ian's face, Sarge spoke up.

“The full name of our organization is actually Agents of Metal, or alternatively the Metal Agency. The early Agents were musicians.”

“Inspired by early metal music hinting at the con-

spiratorial. It all started in the eighties," Blackhand added.

"I decided it was best to not tell the full name right away. I thought it might have led into too great confusion or agitation, considering your musical background," Blowfish explained.

"You'd have saved minutes of hesitation if you had told right away," Jo said.

"Well, are you musicians then?" Ian asked.

"Sometimes I like to grunt along to some death metal," Blowfish confessed.

That was news to Ian. Actually, the immediate image in his mind was the spherical, leather coat-clad Agent fronting an extreme metal band, driving the crowd into a mad fury of pitting.

"Perhaps sad to say, but me and Sarge are not. We're only interested in the rather direct activity of intelligence and warfare. The early Agency was different, but times have changed," Blackhand said somewhat ruefully.

"That's not strictly true. I play the guitar occasionally. Though I'm piss-poor at it, and can't for the life of me consider myself a guitarist," Sarge replied.

Steel and military gray dominated the color scheme in the lobby. Corridors branched off in several directions. It seemed like the whole place, not only the garage, was truly large.

Ian sniffed at the unusually pure air. With rock all around, he would rather have expected something stale.

"We have quite good filtering systems here," Sarge said. "Not only to make sure we don't get ill from bad air, but to keep any chemical or biological agents out. This place can't withstand a ground-zero nuclear blast,

but it should protect from radioactive fallout in case it comes to that.”

Ian could not hide being impressed.

“I will have to give you the full history and mission statement lesson tonight,” Blackhand said. “It will take some endurance. But let's take the tour first.”

“This place seems big. Are there many of you here?” Ian asked.

“Well, there's the five of us you see. Blowfish doesn't stay here all the time. She still tries to maintain some degree of normal life.”

So large headquarters, and there had only been three before he and Jo came along? It did not seem to make much sense. Ian knew his surprise was visible.

“In the past there were more. And of course, there are a few other Agency sections and headquarters through-out the country, as well as in certain other countries. This is the largest base, though. But SCEPTRE is vicious in its attacks: there's no point trying to hide that we have suffered severe losses, and there's not many of us left. Most have been killed, but we know for a fact that they also have Agents in captivity. It's not a pleasant fate. Sorry for being so grim, but I think it's important to be realistic about what you're getting into,” Blackhand continued.

“Well, we already have a pretty good idea,” Ian answered just as grimly.

“Very good then. Off on the tour.”

They circled through several planning and conference rooms, the security center or server room that was much more impressive than what Ian had seen at work, the kitchen which was mostly stocked with an array of microwave dinners, a recreation room which contained

a high-definition data projector, and finally the living or dormitory quarters.

That was the “soft” part of the tour. The size of the place was slightly unsettling, considering the lack of Agents. It was unsettling purely from a security viewpoint too: if the place was breached, it would be hard to root out all the intruders. That was a fact Blackhand, Sarge and Blowfish acknowledged as well. Automated security in the form of cameras and auto-turrets, that could be activated to fire upon targets that did not match the security database, would help somewhat.

The hard part started with the armory: it contained a veritable arsenal of semi-automatic, automatic and heavy weapons, grenades, as well as sets of body armor.

“We use a kind of unconventional armor,” Sarge explained. “It detects incoming bullets and deflects or reduces their velocity with a strong magnetic field. I think it's great in addition to Kevlar, but I wouldn't rely solely on it.”

The firing range was next: it was large and spacious enough to allow safe practicing for example with barrel-mounted grenade launchers. Conventional or robot-drone targets were available. The drones had thick armor so that they could be reused, but naturally a grenade blast would necessitate a replacement.

Somewhere between the soft and the hard was the Agent infirmary. It contained a number of hospital-like beds and gurneys, and medical gear ranging from simple first-aid equipment to surgical tools, EKG and EEG monitors and a defibrillator. Combat drugs, some for enhancing reflexes and endurance, others for speeding up recovery, were stored within steel lockers, and a heavy-duty refrigerator contained blood for transfusions.

Though it had been intended just as a tour, Sarge did not want to waste the opportunity of a quick medical check-up on the newcomers. Jo's bruises did not warrant much attention, but upon seeing Ian's arm and side wounds, he grinned nastily.

"I would recommend a generic Agency Grade II Booster to speed up the healing," he said.

"What is that exactly?" Ian asked.

"It's a combined anti-inflammatory and recovery-enhancing drug, as well as a painkiller. There's a mild psychedelic effect as well, but for most it's rather stimulating."

There was still a dull ache in Ian's body, and the wounds, though not that serious, were not pleasant to think about. After some consideration, he came to the conclusion that he did not oppose an Agency-sanctioned opportunity to get high.

"Go ahead," he replied.

Sarge took a colorless vial from one of the lockers, and injected Ian with a double dose. The kick was almost instant: warmth spread through his body, and he saw odd flashes at the edges of his vision, accompanied by a ringing in the ears. However, this passed quickly: the ache was now greatly reduced, he felt stronger already, and his senses seemed to sharpen to almost painful acuteness.

He could get addicted to this, he thought.

The most awesome part was saved for the last: a virtual reality training simulator.

It was a large, black room divided into small cubicles. Each contained a motorized rubber mat that allowed the user 360 degrees of movement freedom, so that it was possible to run or walk as far as the simulated world spanned. The user would wear a full-body

suit that detected movement, along with goggles that displayed the world.

Scenarios could rather easily be constructed with the aid of a computer: it was like a first person shooter game taken to the nth power.

Ian and Jo had to test it, there was no question. They found themselves inside an urban mall with several SCEPTRE opponents. In minutes Ian was defeated: the mat rolled under him so that he lost his balance and fell, the goggles' display turned red, and the ugly sound of a flatline filled his ears. As his vision faded from red to black, he watched Jo's virtual version hold off valiantly against multiple opponents with automatic weapons, until she too fell to the ground.

It turned out that actuators in the suit, except for the head, delivered a greatly lessened simulation of impacts, accompanied by disgustingly loud crunches and thuds: the breaking of virtual bones. The actuator strength could be adjusted from barely noticeable to dangerously strong.

"You're of course more careful in reality," Blackhand commented as the session ended. "That's what everyone says."

Ian and Jo nodded weakly.

"It's late already. Tomorrow we all can try it, as well as to go work out on the range. We'll also get to your findings then. But for today, just the history lecture so that you have something to think when you go to sleep."

They settled into one of the planning rooms, and Blackhand cleared his throat.

"The Agents of Metal got started almost thirty years ago, when a group of care-free musicians and rebels inadvertently bumped into the activity of the organization we now know as SCEPTRE. Fearing for their lives,

they started to train in secrecy, and swore to enlighten the people of the things they had witnessed, following the principles of the Three Words: Freedom, Metal and Might.”

“Metal is created in Freedom, and in turn its ass-kicking Might shall give power to the masses. I always forget how it goes exactly, but something like that,” Sarge said.

Blackhand continued. “However, much of the message went unnoticed: they played in obscure bands that did not get recognition. But more were recruited, and the sections that exist now – or actually the remains of them do – were founded. It was always a fine balance: how deep we could probe into SCEPTRE's activities, and how much we could make known to the public. And on the opposite side: how much SCEPTRE was willing to make itself visible when striking against us. It was an invisible war.”

Ian could admit being fascinated. But so far he could not see how the Agents could have built extensive hide-outs such as this. Maybe that was yet to come.

“Things changed a bit when a few rich, powerful individuals with anti-conspiracy beliefs discovered us. In SCEPTRE they had found evidence of the hated enemy of their nightmares, the real Illuminati of present times, working behind the scenes and twisting the truth. And in us, they had the champions who could and would oppose the enemy. Therefore a trust fund was set up, one which we use even today to make it possible for us to operate, to equip ourselves.”

Now the practical side certainly made sense.

Ian looked at Jo: she did not seem bored either. It was interesting, though, if she had been in several activist groups, yet the Agents were completely unfamil-

iar to her. But then, it was a secret organization: they probably had masked their identity whenever they had spread the message, instead of advertising themselves openly.

“But as the Agency grew, so did SCEPTRE. We don't have the exact figures, but it could be compared to a large crime syndicate like the Mafia, or several of them combined. As our infiltrations became more audacious, they started to retaliate with more strength and cruelty. The principles of the Three Words had to be abandoned just for us to survive. Secrecy took precedence over spreading the message. And even then, the heavy losses continued...”

There was an unmistakably sad undercurrent in Blackhand's tale: mistakes had been made, too much boldness had caused the fighting to escalate from invisible and secret to almost open warfare. Maybe Ian was extrapolating too much from his own pessimism, but he got the feeling that the Agents had used up their chance to make a difference, and SCEPTRE had grown almost unmanageably powerful.

“Our mission statement is simple, and still the same: to uncover SCEPTRE's activities and plans, and oppose them by whatever means necessary. And with discretion and judgment, spread the information to the public,” Blackhand concluded.

The need for careful consideration was not hard to understand: above top secret information could easily do more harm than good, Ian knew. It could cause general hopelessness and paranoia.

Like it had almost done with him.

Ideally, the revealed information would be something concrete, that people could actually use to better their lives and to strike out against SCEPTRE person-

ally, if at all possible.

It definitely felt like they were about to take part in something big. But how much more difference he and Jo could actually make? It remained to be seen. At least now they would have better possibilities and equipment than ever before.

Later, past midnight, Ian and Jo had settled into one of the dormitory rooms. It was not mandatory, but to feel more like proper Agents, they had changed into all-black Agency-issue clothing. The underwear was comfortable enough, but the color reminded of the inevitable grimness of the battles that were to come.

In the faint blue artificial light that stayed on at all times so that the occupants were able to navigate the rooms, they lay on top of a bed that was wide enough to be comfortable for two. Ian was unable to get sleep, and Jo was awake as well. The arrangement had evoked some fun: in Cyberpriest it would never have done.

It had been yet another insane day, and almost everything had been turned upside down again. Ian's mind was restless.

"Shit. I was thinking about René," he broke the silence.

"Me too. Can't help it," Jo whispered back.

"How his one beer before show-limit sounded like the absolute height of dictatorship. But he was only thinking of each of us, that we'd give the best we could."

"Yeah. And he went through an amazing development, just like he told you. In the beginning he was an absolute control freak. Like the world had never seen. Not a single note could be played without him approving it. It's too sad how it all was broken, left incomplete. I don't think I'll ever get fully over it."

At first Ian's thoughts circled back to revenge. The burning need for SCEPTRE to pay. But it was not appropriate right now. Ian considered his next words, searched for something encouraging.

"We'll have to make sure he didn't die for nothing. And that we carry on what he started."

Ian could not be completely sure himself what he meant with that. Would the message be spat out by guitars, or guns? Or both?

"Right," Jo answered, but the voice was not full of conviction. Even in the minimal lighting Ian could see unease on her face, as if she was struggling against tears. That felt wrong to Ian: it was not as if she needed to prove something by holding anything back, like she had no doubt done earlier.

Ian moved closer. "Hey. You can let it out."

For a split-second he thought he might have misjudged and Jo would respond violently. But instead she turned to rest her head against him, and Ian felt the shoulder of the Agent T-shirt get damp from her tears.

"I know," Jo managed to say at last.

Ian replied with a kiss on her forehead and felt overcome with the exact feeling he had thought of as foolish just hours before. Of course it was not foolish at all. Of course he would love Jo with all the strength he could summon. But the contrast was almost perverse: how in here, between them, everything was alright, or as alright as it could be given the circumstances, but outside – or in the programmed recesses of his mind – where SCEPTRE lurked in wait, it was all pitch-black wrong.

“We know something of your investigations from following the news and the Internet, as well as covert SCEPTRE transmissions,” Blackhand said. “Still it would be good to hear from you directly. Mention anything you find worthwhile. Names, dates and places are especially critical.”

It was morning, and they sat in the same planning room Blackhand had delivered the history lesson in. All five were present.

Ian started by telling about the documents he found at Lucas' apartment, and his rooftop investigations in the city, how he found out about the motor gang. Blackhand waved him quickly on to more interesting things: he seemed to already know where this would lead up to.

Next was the adventure below the Olympia theater, and the second set of documents. When Ian mentioned the skull-faced man, Blackhand's gaze became intensely focused.

“That has got to be Suhrim. SCEPTRE's current head of Security.”

Connecting the name to the face evoked some fear in Ian, as the memories came back again. He repeated the

name several times in his mind. Suhrim. So SCEPTRE members, at least the more important ones, were prone to naming themselves after evil spirits. Interesting.

“Do you have the documents now?” Blackhand asked.

It had been good foresight that Ian had trusted Logan with them for the time he left Outpost to go after Jo. Otherwise, they would likely have been burned with his jacket. He unfolded them and laid them on the table.

Jo narrated the fight at Outpost, as well as her adventure inside the fnord research lab. The description of Buzzsaw's murder did not raise much emotion in any of the Agents, not even that the killer was Suhrim. It was all part of his job as the head of Security.

When Ian continued the tale and mentioned the date Apollyon had told, December twenty-first, there was a visible commotion. Each of the senior Agents shifted position in apparent discomfort.

“You happen to remember what year it is?” Sarge asked.

“2012,” Ian replied, completely dumbfounded. Why were they asking such thing?

“December twenty-first, 2012, is the day when the Mayan calendar completes its thirteenth cycle. Various world-changing or even cataclysmic events have been predicted to happen, including a full-scale end of the world. It seems perfectly fitting that SCEPTRE would use the date for their own nefarious purposes,” Blackhand explained.

“So, do you believe it's the end of the world?” Jo asked.

“I speak only for myself, but I don't believe in an alien invasion for instance,” Blowfish said. “But I have firm belief that if they can, SCEPTRE will milk the day

for all of its worth. In information warfare terms it could mean a mother of all hacks and intrusions. Complete, global denial of service. I don't mean that's necessarily what SCEPTRE is planning, it's just what I would do if I was them."

"Did Apollyon say anything especial of the day?" Blackhand probed further.

"He said that everything is ready for severe excrement to rain on the world. That Phase One of their plan is complete," Ian replied.

"That sounds bad," Blackhand said. "Very bad. They definitely are up to something complex, something properly staged and planned. We must find out what."

The determination in his voice was absolute.

"Right now we have an unique advantage," he went on. "In the past, SCEPTRE has never been limited by time, so they've had the luxury of relocating their operations and bases, making it appear as if they've never existed. Often we would search some location we had received a hint of, only for it to turn up completely empty. But now they have a deadline. That means the success of their plan is paramount, not staying hidden."

He paused to let the words sink in.

"I believe our order of operations is simple. Blowfish and Sarge, continue work on the chopper. If we can get it ready to fly tonight, it would be excellent. Ian and Jo, hit the training program, as well as the range, but don't over-exert yourselves. I recommend that you start with the 9mm sub-machine gun to get used to burst and full auto firing. It's easier to control than an assault rifle, not to speak of being much more compact and easier to hide. And get the full Agent gear from the armory, so that you get a feel for moving in it. Ask Sarge if you need any assistance. With anything. And get some sleep

in the afternoon if you can. If it all goes well, we'll hit SCEPTRE this very night."

Blackhand had a way with being motivating. But still, Ian was puzzled.

"Where will we hit SCEPTRE?"

"Now that we have the maps and you know the way, we'll get to the Olympia center at night, and this time we'll do a very thorough investigation. It probably is Suhrim's current base – the maps have security audit markings in them. We'll search the place, including his personal quarters, for any evidence we can find on their plan. To see if there's more to it than the fnords. And we'll also search for any access codes and information that will help us in our further attacks."

Ian did not have to be told what that meant.

A possible chance at instant revenge for what the skull-face had done to René. A wave of cold went over him, but it was not fear, it was grim expectation of an encounter that could only have a fatal outcome.

Who would die, could only be decided by fate. But someone would, that he was sure of.

Of course he could not be sure that it was actually Suhrim who had carved up René, because many had been trained in the technique itself.

However, he did not know or remember anyone else in SCEPTRE who could have been capable of such perfectly planned sadism that the whole trap had encompassed and required.

There was also the question of whether René would have liked to be avenged with gunfire and blood and death. Judging from his lyrics, probably not. But in a way it was karma. Suhrim, or whoever had done it, had it coming. And it did not need to be premeditated, cold-blooded murder. Likely, when they infiltrated the place,

there would be heavy gunfights. They would have to defend themselves.

Jo got up first, and Ian followed. There was a lot to do today, and the sooner they started, the better.

“Shall we begin with the range?” Jo asked.

Though he mostly followed thrash and related genres only, Ian was a Nargaroth fan in secret, and it meant the world to him that she had just said “shall we begin” – one of their song titles.

“Definitely. It's real weapons we'll be using when it comes to it. Or actually, let's get the armor first so we see if it makes it harder to move and shoot,” he replied.

Ian knew that they could naturally not learn everything about being an Agent in one day. But hopefully they would learn enough, and in any case they would not be starting from nothing. After all, they had kicked major SCEPTRE ass without any Agent equipment or training. Despite that, it paid not to become proud or complacent.

That could have lethal consequences.

He did not actually remember whether his unfinished training had included fully automatic weapons. But he would find it out soon enough.

They flew low and fast to the south-east, toward the Olympia recreational complex. The preparation of the stealth helicopter had been successful at last, or at least so Sarge and Blowfish had assured. Even under the pain of death, should an unnoticed lethal security feature suddenly activate.

However, it had taken twenty-four hours longer than anticipated. Blackhand had not been happy, but Ian knew it was fortunate: that had translated into one more day of recovery, one more day of training. After two more injections of the Grade II Booster, one on each day, he felt OK enough to fight again.

Sarge was behind the controls. The co-pilot's seat was empty – Blackhand, Ian and Jo all sat in the rear. Blowfish had remained at the Agency headquarters to guard it and to be prepared to unleash her skills of information warfare if needed. They all had lightweight communications gear, which would allow them to converse as if she was right next to them.

The time Ian and Jo had spent on the range had been mostly successful. The H&K MP5 sub-machine guns had been easy enough to learn how to operate, and when firing in three-round burst mode, it was almost like tak-

ing a single shot: the recoil would only cause minor shifting of aim if the weapon was properly gripped.

Fully automatic mode was naturally harder to control, but that meant wasting ammunition anyway.

On Blowfish's permission Ian had downloaded Nargarth's entire discography from the net. Agency network traffic was routed through several dummy nodes, so the risk of the base being discovered because of that was minimal.

He was certain that listening to the "Herbstleyd" album in its entirety had prepared him for war properly. Jo had not exactly understood what the whole fuss was about, though.

The Agent armor and clothing were interesting to say the least. They were mostly black: only the ballistic vest was of a deep dark gray color. The experimental electromagnetic armor was actually integrated in both the vest and the pants, as well as in the long leather overcoat: hidden electromagnets spaced at regular intervals in the fabric would theoretically deflect incoming bullets at least partially. The control unit was hidden in the belt, under armor plating of its own.

Except for the vest, which was of Level III protective grade and therefore rather heavy, the clothing did not feel much more cumbersome than equal street clothes.

The meaning of the Agent sunglasses had become apparent too: they could be configured for a variety of tasks including light amplification and reduction, as well as infra-red thermal vision. The radio microphone and earpiece were embedded, and the glasses could send a live video feed to other Agents or to the headquarters.

When wearing that equipment it almost felt that nothing could go wrong. But in the heat of a gunfight

the gear could become a curse, the controls suddenly hopelessly complex to use. That was why using them should be honed down to reflex and instinct.

Ian and Jo were not yet at that point.

To get as much time on the real gear as possible, but admittedly also because of their defeat on the day they had arrived, they had mostly avoided the VR training program, even against Blackhand's suggestions. They had went through two scenarios, one on each day, and with extreme caution they had persevered against the simulated opponents with minor simulated wounds.

It had not been fun in the least. But then, were real gunfights either?

However, Ian was certain that he had not been as cautious in Outpost or inside the experiment facility. There had been no time to be. Maybe in time they would understand how things learned in the simulation would have to be adjusted to apply to the real world. But for now, the VR-assisted training had just felt counterproductive and demotivating.

Like psyching oneself up the wrong way.

The four had more than enough weaponry on them. Blackhand had an M4 carbine with a scope mounted on the top, as well as a Desert Eagle similar to what Blowfish used, but gold-plated.

Ian and Jo had their USP pistols and the 9mm sub-machine guns, all now equipped with silencers, and as many extra magazines as they could carry without becoming unduly slowed down. Something else would definitely happen before running out of ammunition.

Sarge would not hopefully see action, as he would act as a pilot also on the return trip, and watch over the helicopter while the three were away, but he had a pistol and a sub-machine gun as well, plus throwing stars.

Each of them also had a sort of a mini-pistol that fired tranquilizer needles that would cause memory loss in addition to unconsciousness. The magazine was small: only five rounds. This weapon was to be used on all non-SCEPTRE targets.

As they got closer to the place, the three distributed grenades liberally among them: mainly fragmentary ones and flashbangs. There was also a more exotic variety – a grenade that would emit an electromagnetic burst, frying any electronic devices.

“It's a shame we're so electronic ourselves. Otherwise we could use these with abandon. The primary burst radius is ten meters, but it's safer to stay a good twenty away,” Blackhand said.

Soon, the roof of the Olympia complex came into view in the darkness. It was lit twenty-four hours a day.

The time was 0320. They were going in.

The landing on the rooftop was rough: all three in the rear were nearly thrown off their seats. It was the first time Sarge flew this particular kind of machine, and the winds at the top were unpredictable.

“Sorry about that,” he grunted.

Blackhand slid the side door open and got out, closely followed by Jo and Ian who came last.

“I'll stash the bird not far away, then I'll wait. Call me well in advance when you're coming out,” came Sarge's voice through the communications system.

With those words, the black helicopter lifted off and the three were left alone. They were not actually at the top of the world, even of the world they could see in the immediate vicinity: the hotel actually towered higher, and off in the city there were even higher skyscrapers. But still, the feeling was majestic.

First actual Agent mission.

Infiltrating a SCEPTRE facility.

One that Ian already knew, but now he would no longer sprint around in fear and confusion. He would be well armed, and at least in theory calm and in control.

There was a small shed with a metal door, that would lead down from the roof. As Blackhand got close, he took out a curious ten-centimeter long tubular item from his pocket.

“This is an Agent Multipurpose Tool. It can act as an automatic lock pick, among other things.”

He positioned it right next to the lock. With the press of a button, a thin rod extended from within. There came a short series of clicks, and in a matter of seconds the lock was open.

“Neat,” Ian said.

They all went in.

It was dark: everyone had to switch light amplification on. Ian was still the last in line, and closed the door behind him. Then he found that something was odd about his vision: he only saw blue-red-yellow shapes in front of him, rapidly disappearing below.

That was thermal vision. Damn.

It was true that the controls could be confusing.

He pressed a button in the arm of his sunglasses for the second time, and now he got the correct mode. He caught up to Blackhand and Jo as they descended several flights of stairs. The Agent boots were designed for silent movement, but still the footsteps echoed uncomfortably loud in the stairwell.

As they arrived at the bottom, there was light coming from the corridor, so the amplified vision was no longer

necessary. Blackhand observed cautiously, standing next to the glass-paned door.

"I see a security guard," he spoke in a whisper. "No automatic weapons – should not be a black op. Of course he can still be working for a SCEPTRE subcontractor, but for the purposes of this mission, he's non-SCEPTRE. Who would like to take him?"

"I can," Jo said.

Blackhand held the door slightly open, while she took aim with the small needle-gun. As the guard passed, she fired a precise but risky shot to his neck.

The guard went down after a few seconds of muted surprise. He would wake up close to the break of dawn, with no memory of the attack.

Ian searched his thoughts hard: this had been a non-lethal hit, but he knew he was not allowed to have problems with any of his comrades actually killing, Jo included.

Otherwise he would be unsuited to be an Agent.

Now he understood the difference: back at the Outpost they had been strictly reacting, strictly acting in self-defense. But an Agent would often need to hit his enemies first, before they noticed in the first place.

They all got out of the stairwell, and moved the guard inside the pitch-black comfort of a nearby cleaning equipment closet.

Next the three moved through the corridors, careful to stay out of sight of the security cameras, headed for the place Ian had indicated: the female restroom in the lounge. There the almost invisible triangle symbol would be found.

There were no more guards on the way. Either they were on their rounds elsewhere, or SCEPTRE was being deliberately light on security personnel.

The restroom was empty but brightly lit, with just the same sterile smell of cleaning agent as before.

Ian thought of the possibility of hidden cameras. It would be rather perverse, but any secret entrance had to be monitored in some way. Possibly, when they stepped in here, they had already triggered a silent alarm.

But he knew of no other option. Leading the way, he went to the middle stall.

There a most depressive sight met his eyes: there was new paneling in the back wall, slightly different in color. The triangle behind the throne was nowhere to be found.

“Shit,” he whispered. “Things just became a bit more complicated.”

Even if SCEPTRE was facing a deadline, they still had enough time and manpower to be constantly changing their facilities. Now that he thought of his solo intrusion, it was a perfectly obvious response from them. The place had probably not been used for training for a long time, and the humiliating entrance was strictly speaking not necessary any more.

They would have to find another way in.

While Ian and Jo spread out the corridor system maps to the restroom floor, and began studying them, Blackhand contacted Blowfish back at the headquarters.

"We may have a problem. Can you get and transmit the blueprints for this place? If you can, search for anything on the ground floor that could be a route underground," he said over the communications link.

Meanwhile Ian was concentrated on the first underground floor map. He tried to remember how the layout of corridors had been in reality, tried to identify the place he had entered from. The difficulty was that the maps did not show any of the Olympia ground level, just the underground part.

He thought he had it.

"This part has to be the restroom entrance, where we are now. And this seems like another entry point. But which direction is it?"

"The casino, maybe?" Jo suggested.

Just at the moment Blackhand got an incoming call. He listened in intense concentration.

"Blowfish's not sure, but seems like in the casino executive quarters there could be another entrance."

Ian and Jo both grinned.

“OK, let's go, but watch out. Where money's being handled, there's also better security,” Blackhand said.

They exited the restroom back into the dimly lit lounge. The casino entrance was a wide arch, with a heavy chain suspended by black steel posts in front of it, to make it clear that the casino was closed for the night. Blackhand stopped to cycle through his vision modes.

“There are IR beams. But they're easy enough to bypass. Just crawl low through the arch.”

Blackhand went first, and Ian was last again. As he crawled slowly and methodically, paranoia over the exact height of the lowest beam tormented him. Blackhand had not told that.

But he looked satisfied as they all had crossed over to the other side. There should be no alarm – yet. However, there were more cameras, which had to be meticulously avoided.

Though the tables were devoid of cards and chips, and all the slot machines were switched off, the multi-colored lights all around still blinked on, as if to proclaim SCEPTRE's might.

SCEPTRE and gambling. Somehow it was perfectly fitting, but that did not make it any more of a pleasant thought.

The multi-purpose tool opened yet another low-grade lock, which was electronic this time. A bright electric arc came out of the tool and the lock box was shorted, allowing entry to the executive facilities.

There was a similar low, pleasant lighting as in the lounge. However, in front of them there was a dilemma: in the corridor ahead there were two cameras panning in such a way that both could not be avoided.

“Can we just shoot them?” Ian asked.

“There has to be someone manning the casino security center. They will notice when the signal goes out. Jo, will you wait here and stand guard while we hit the place hard and fast? In fact we should have done that right away,” Blackhand said.

Blackhand and Ian backed out of the executive facilities, into a stairwell that should take them up to the security center. To know where they were going, Blackhand had the building blueprints superimposed on the display of his sunglasses.

There was one more camera to avoid, but that was easy enough. Soon a steel door was in front of them, with another card-key lock next to it.

“This should be just as easy,” Blackhand said, as he put the tool next to the lock box. “Be ready with the needle gun.”

Ian wondered what they would do, if the guard was an actual black op. Would they shoot him to the head after stunning him first?

The first electric arc crackled.

A disapproving red light lit on the box.

“Damn. Let's try again.”

Blackhand moved the tool even closer, and pressed the button again. This time, following the second arc, sparks flew from the card slot. Immediately after he gave the steel door a harsh shove.

It opened.

From the opening Ian saw a black-clad guard, similar to the first, sitting at the security monitors. The small gun went up as Ian took aim. He pulled the trigger smoothly and the almost silent spit came –

No reaction from the guard.

Ian had missed. At so close distance! Unbelievable.

He adjusted the aim and took a quick second shot. This time, it was a solid hit to the torso. The gun, although small, certainly had enough power to penetrate both the black cloth and the guard's skin. After just two seconds the guard fell from his chair to the side.

"There's no-one watching any more, at least in this part of the building. You can hit the cameras now," Blackhand spoke to Jo.

They exited the security stairwell just as quickly as they had entered, dodging the single camera again. Ian scanned Blackhand's face for disapproval regarding the missed first shot, but could not find any.

With the cameras blown to pieces, the three could now cross the corridor without trouble. Blackhand led the way, the blueprints still on his glasses.

"It should be right about ... here."

One last door, one last application of the Agent tool, and they were in a expensively furnished office, with leather couches and a heavy oak table. There was a workstation on the table, but it was not of interest, at least right now.

For on a wall in front of them, the indentation was subdued but still unmistakable: the triangle, the circle and the small sphere.

This had to be the second entrance. The executive one.

Ian went to the symbol and examined it intensely. It was much larger than the one in the restroom, so there probably was a precise spot to apply pressure on.

He decided the sphere would be a good choice.

He pressed it with three of his fingers, and it gave way a few millimeters.

There came a click, then a low rumble. The wall with

the symbol rose slowly, revealing a dark opening behind.

He waited for Blackhand and Jo to get next to him, then stepped in. Like before, almost immediately lights came on in the descending corridor.

They were in the maze again.

But this time they would not get lost, and hopefully there would be no need for a sewer exit.

The corridors were eerily empty and quiet again. Because the lights had switched on, it was within reason that if not already before, at least now SCEPTRE had been notified of their presence in the facility. But there was no choice, if they wanted to find out about the mysteries of their enemies, and to possibly confront Suhrim.

A surprise attack could come at any moment. That was maddening: the adrenaline overflow and staying alert all the time were going to make Ian sick any time from now.

“Ah yes. You can bring up the corridor maps on your displays,” Blackhand reminded.

Actually having the maps with them and unfolding them on the floor had been unnecessary, archaic. Except for the case of sudden sunglasses power outage or an EMP burst, naturally.

Wasting no time, they navigated the corridors to the elevator that could take them to the yet unexplored lower level.

No surprise attacks so far.

Of course there was a myriad rooms to be explored even on the first level, but the lower one contained one room that was of top priority interest. Usually the rooms in this maze were designated by a letter and a

sequence of three alphanumeric characters, but the interesting one was simply called S-20.

S could stand for Security. The number had a more esoteric explanation.

“The twentieth of the fifty names of Marduk, the Babylonian god, is Suhrim,” Blackhand had explained.

This was according to the Simon Necronomicon, which was widely understood to be a hoax, a false grimoire. But that made no difference. If SCEPTRE thought that version of Necronomicon was good enough to take inspiration from, then it simply was a solid lead. None of them expected to find actual Sumerian demons roaming down in the maze.

Right now there was a more practical question: would the elevator be booby-trapped in some way?

As Blackhand pressed the call button and the sliding door opened right after, Ian knew that they would find out in seconds.

Again there was not much of a choice.

According to the maps, there were no stairs leading to the lower level. SCEPTRE had to have a rather good faith in their machinery.

The elevator turned out not to be an express way to Hell of any kind. The three exited on the lower level perfectly safe and sound.

The corridors were just the same, similarly brightly lit. Still there appeared to be no-one in sight.

Actually there was one difference. On the floor next to the walls there were small circular gutters, about three centimeters in diameter. At regular intervals there were holes in the gutter, dropping down to black emptiness.

A part of some automated defense mechanism?

There was no time to dwell on that thought for too long. They started the trek toward room S-20, situated on the other end of the floor.

A whirring sound coming from an intersection caught their attention. They all froze: Ian and Jo with their sub-machine guns on the ready, Blackhand gripping his M4 carbine.

A robot came into view.

A security robot!

It was roughly to their waist height, with a dome-shaped top and a circular eye that looked to be made of glass. It seemed to almost glide on the floor, but there

probably were just wheels underneath.

They all opened fire. Sparks flew from the impact points on the robot's flank: it did not seem to suffer or slow down much.

It had to be heavily armored.

"Hit the eye!" Blackhand shouted.

The robot turned toward them. Ian leaped to his left in preparation for some yet unknown attack, but there was not much room for dodging in the corridor.

He remembered his paranoid thought from the previous trip: what if guard robots armed with high-powered lasers would suddenly appear out of hidden trapdoors?

It was no longer paranoia, it was reality.

Did this one have a laser on it?

Next came an ugly plucking sound, roughly like a tennis ball being launched by a machine. But instead of a single shot, the sounds came almost at machine-gun speed.

Jo and Blackhand dived to the side too, still firing but to no great effect. The air was now thick with some high-velocity flying objects, coming at them.

Steel balls!

The robot fired in a wide arc from left to right. That made all their dodges completely useless.

Ian was hit first. There came a humming sound as the balls impacted with the armor: it had to be the electromagnets activating. Maybe the balls got slowed down a little, but still it hurt, definitely.

Next thing he knew, the balls also got under his feet somehow and he lost balance, tripping and falling to the floor. A complete disgrace.

Some text lit up on his glasses' display:

*CHARGE: 90 PERCENT.*

So the miracle armor was not unlimited, and this disgraceful but not so dangerous hit had already shaved ten percent off. Great.

Next to him, Jo and Blackhand had not fared much better: they were on the floor as well, groaning with pain. Jo's sub-machine gun had fallen out of reach. Some balls were left on the floor, but most actually disappeared to the gutters on the sides as they rolled.

Was there no vulnerable point on that bastard? Not even the eye?

While still sprawled on the floor, Blackhand got his Desert Eagle out, lifting his arms and chest up to be able to take aim.

The robot let out another whir, still standing in place. Next came an even uglier, higher and rattling metal sound, as it launched a different rapid-fire attack, this time from right to left.

Blackhand's pistol barked twice, recoiling heavily.

Right after he was hit with something that threw him backward even on the floor. A short but heavy yell of agony escaped his lips.

But the rattling had ceased.

The robot was disabled – its eye had cracked, smoke rising from behind. So .50 AE was at least enough. Maybe it was time to start practicing with the unwieldy semi-automatic.

First they just had to live through this mission.

Ian took a look at the new kind of objects on the floor. They were short, thick metal arrows. Flechettes. Just as nasty as the bolts fired by the fnord research facility robots, if not nastier.

Slowly and painfully Blackhand got back up.

"The armor ... works ... perfectly," he said.

"You sure you're OK?" Jo asked, reaching for her sub-

machine gun.

“Well, none of them penetrated my skin. But now, if there will be more, we can take no more chances. Take out the EMP grenades. Of course, watch out for frying your own gear.”

They got off to a jog down the next set of corridors. Blackhand was noticeably slowed down by the hits, at least for a while: Ian and Jo had to adjust their speed to match.

Just before entering a four-way intersection, they paused. Blackhand peered to the right and Jo to the left. Ian kept watching the forward direction, a grenade in hand.

“Two more coming from the right,” Blackhand said. “I think they’ve noticed us. Be ready. Let’s not be wasteful: one grenade first. Ian, will you?”

They waited a few seconds in tense expectation.

“Now.”

Ian pressed a button on the odd-shaped, rectangular grenade, and tossed it to the right-side corridor. Then they all sprinted backward to make sure they would not be caught in the secondary radius.

A faint crackle sounded. Ian had imagined a circle of white lightning spreading from the point of detonation, but nothing like that materialized.

Cautiously, they peered out to the intersection again. The two robots stood motionless, unceremoniously disabled.

“Perfect,” Blackhand remarked. “Now, we move out.”

They went on, getting ever closer to the mythical room S-20. From two side corridors, two more robots came out. Jo tossed one grenade to the left, and Blackhand threw one to the right. The robots' electronics did not survive.

But now they had only one more EMP grenade remaining.

Finally they arrived at the door, located at a dead end. There was not just one, but two card-key slots next to the door. Apparently Suhrim took his personal security issues very seriously.

If it was his room after all, that is.

They checked the door: as expected, it was locked. Blackhand seemed to sink deep into his thoughts.

"Any ideas what to do now? Could we use the last grenade?" Jo asked.

"Might work, but that would likely destroy any computers inside. And the information possibly held within is what we're primarily after," Blackhand replied.

Not Suhrim himself, did he mean?

Ian remembered the card keys he had lost into the sewer long ago. But no, those would not have been of use, they had been marked A, B and E. They would need at least one marked with an S, and then, what else?

"Do you have more than one Agent tool?" he asked. "What if we jolt both holes at the same time with two tools?"

"I do have a spare. That's at least safe, maybe not very effective though. My tool is almost out of juice. Still, it doesn't hurt to try," Blackhand said.

He handed Ian the spare tool.

"One, two, three, now!" Blackhand said, and they both pressed their respective buttons, while holding the tubular devices next to the two slots.

Electricity crackled.

An infuriating red light blinked on the box.

"Mine's out now. I'll contact Blowfish for ideas," Blackhand said in defeat.

Right then they were alerted by a whirring sound coming out of the far end of the corridor. From behind a right-angle bend, three security robots appeared, closing in slowly but methodically.

There were only seconds before the volley of balls or flechettes would start.

"The last EMP grenade, who has it?" Ian shouted, aggression rising.

"I have," Jo shouted back.

"Toss it now!"

Jo pressed the button and threw the grenade toward the formation of robots. Right then the rain of metal balls started: all other sounds were drowned by the repeating low plucking.

In fascination, Ian watched the rectangular object sail through the air in a mostly horizontal arc. To his horror it impacted with a ball mid-air, and its flight was cut short. It landed a little less than ten meters away from him.

Inside the primary radius.

He noticed too late that Blackhand and Jo had already dived to the safety of the corridor's end, even past the S-20 door.

The good news was that the grenade was probably close enough to disable the robots. The bad news was that there was simply no way, no time for him to get clear.

Still, he had to try. He leaped back just as a very loud sizzle and crackle filled his earphones.

Then he saw nothing but black. Robbed of vision and momentarily deafened by the noise, he just sensed the impact with the floor.

His Agent gear had been electronically disabled. He ripped off the now useless sunglasses from his eyes.

The three robots stood disabled in the middle of the corridor. Ian looked around from his lying position and saw Jo and Blackhand at the end of the corridor, sprawled on the floor as well.

"It flashed green," Blackhand said suddenly.

"Quick, go for the door!" Jo shouted.

Still rather confused, but ready to obey anyone who knew better, Ian sprang to his feet and reached for the door handle close to him.

He yanked it.

The door opened.

The inner sanctum of S-20 was open for them to enter.

The lock had been momentarily confused by the EMP blast, but would there be anything inside that still worked?

Blackhand and Jo got up, joining him at the door.

"That was one hell of a toss," Blackhand said.

Ian could only agree. Even now that his gear was out of action, even if everything inside was fried, it still was a success. Had it not been for the grenade, they would have been pummeled with flechettes from three different sources simultaneously. Their combined armors could not have lasted long.

"But I disabled your gear, right?" Jo asked Ian.

"Don't worry. How's your power levels?"

"Sixty-five," she answered.

"Forty," Blackhand said. He had not dived as far, and had also suffered the flechettes before.

All of them were still in fighting condition, Ian with just no functioning Agent gear.

All of them entered.

The contrast to the shiny white corridors could not have been more extreme: everything in the room was shiny black. Ian, Jo and Blackhand could each see their own reflection in each wall.

Now there no longer was any question.

Only Suhrim could possibly like to work in this kind of environment.

There were some couches on the sides. Directly in front was a black table, on which a black desktop computer sat, whirring happily and completely oblivious to the pulse.

The computer was not locked at a login screen: the desktop was visible.

Ian noticed that on the floor, there was a large version of SCEPTRE's symbol. Each side of the triangle was roughly four meters long, but it was partially obscured by the computer desk.

Blackhand stepped closer to the computer.

It was then it happened.

The display went black, and the door slammed itself shut. An ominous, crunching sound came from the ceiling.

Another death trap?

Ian looked up and noticed that the ceiling was full of small holes in a seemingly random, but still repeating formation. Shiny objects began to descend out of the holes.

Steel spikes!

As soon as the spikes protruded fully, maybe a good twenty-five centimeters, the crunching sound started again, and the ceiling began to descend.

Now it became perfectly clear why the computer had not been locked.

The “login screen” was physical. If you did not know the correct entry procedure, you would get yourself impaled.

Even Blackhand looked worried.

“Shit,” he whispered harshly.

Jo opened up a link to Blowfish back at the Agent headquarters.

“We have a slight problem,” she said.

Total dread locked up Ian's mind. He had to think of something. But what? How would the trap be reversed? Was it a password typed on the keyboard? A password could have millions of combinations. Or was it something completely else? Cold sweat ran down his back, and his heart went into overdrive.

The spikes were still more than two meters away, but they descended without mercy, without pause. At least it was an imaginative and rather medieval way to meet one's end, compared to automatic gunfire for instance.

“It's a room with descending spikes,” Jo told over the link.

Ian thought of a simple answer. Maybe they could all go hide under the table? Would the trap mechanism be strong enough to crush it? Would Suhrim want his com-

puter to be crushed as well?

No, yes, yes, he thought. There was no whir of an electric motor. Instead, the mechanism had to be hydraulic. Hydraulic arms could have plenty of strength.

Suddenly Blackhand's eyes lit up.

"Quickly! Move the table so that the triangle is fully accessible. Try to mind the computer cables if you can," he shouted.

Ian was completely puzzled of Blackhand's aims, but did not have a better idea, and was thus ready to obey again, without question.

Together, they moved a couch out of the way and pushed the table to its place. The power and Ethernet cables still held with enough slack in them: the computer would be usable if only they lived.

The spikes were getting closer. Soon they would have to crouch. Blackhand positioned himself on the triangle line, and started pacing as he spoke.

"Long ago I played this computer game. You could get stuck inside a prison room, with no apparent exit. But if you walked along the pentagram in the correct direction ... then suddenly the room grew to multiple times of its original size, and you could find an exit."

Ian was still mostly confused.

"I just have to find the right direction. Clockwise or counter-clockwise. Or the right combination," Blackhand went on as he walked, or actually jogged, more frantic now.

The spikes were half a meter from their heads. They all ducked. Blackhand still paced along the triangle, switching direction rapidly.

"No, no and once more no."

What if his idea was completely wrong?

Well, they had weapons and grenades to end their

lives quickly. It would be betraying the medieval nature of the trap, but being true would matter little at that point.

Suddenly, a louder crunch came. The ceiling started to rise instead, and the computer desktop came back on.

“Two times counter-clockwise, two times clockwise, that did it,” Blackhand explained.

Ian let out a sigh of relief.

“It's all sorted out now,” Jo gasped to Blowfish and cut the link. Ian helped her up: it simply felt almost too good to be alive.

“Be glad that SCEPTRE, or at least Suhrim, seem to be old school computer game fans,” Blackhand said as he went to the computer.

Ian and Jo gathered next to him. They searched through the directory structure, but could only find encrypted information in addition to the system files. Finally Blackhand opened a short memo on the desktop, the only unencrypted document on the whole computer.

There were nine simple lines of text.

*Phase I – Science (95%)*

*Phase II – Tech.research + BlackOps (100%)*

*Phase III – BlackOps (??%)*

*Phase IV – Science + Priests (??%)*

*Weak Agents! This document contains actually no valuable information. Its only intention is to demotivate you, as you understand how grand the Plan is. Prepare to be eradicated, and know that the Plan will go on undisturbed after your inevitable and painful death!*

Phase One was at least clear: fnord research. Or better said: its methods were clear, but the purpose was still mostly elusive. That left three more phases, which were complete mysteries. Grand was certainly not an overstatement.

"The guy is too sure of himself," Blackhand said. "Now we copy everything we can find. But we don't use the network. That's too unreliable, and could lead SCEPTRE to find our HQ."

Blackhand took an eight gigabyte memory stick and put it into a free slot.

"I certainly hope it doesn't blue screen because of the USB driver," Ian said. It was a situation he had encountered at work far too many times.

Blackhand selected all the folders with encrypted files and initiated the copy. A progress bar appeared, far too painfully slow. But all they could do was to wait, if they wanted to return with something else than empty hands.

"Do we have the processing power to decrypt those?" Ian asked.

"That's something for Blowfish to worry about later. It'd be ideal to steal SCEPTRE's server time to do exactly that," Blackhand replied.

Finally, the copy was complete.

"I believe the search has been thorough enough for now. The other rooms or above-ground facilities can't possibly contain anything as significant as this. Therefore, if no-one objects, I say it's high time we begin the exfiltration phase," Blackhand suggested.

Ian nodded. Even though they had not encountered Suhrim himself yet – it was uncertain whether they would, on this night – he did not want to spend any more time than necessary in this underground maze.

Not after what they had just barely survived.

Jo seemed to share this opinion.

The three made sure they had full magazines on their weapons, and exited the room.

No more security robots roamed the corridors. Instead, soon after exiting they came face to face with a squad of five black ops, wearing mantis-like face masks and carrying Mini-Uzi sub-machine guns.

Immediately upon contact, automatic guns on both sides came to life, filling the corridor with a cacophony of silenced and unsilenced gunfire, muzzle flashes, ejected brass and bitter gunpowder smoke.

Ian let out a scream he did not know to be capable of, as he flicked the selector to fully automatic mode and let rip. Next to him Jo did exactly the same, only the pitch of her voice was higher.

Blackhand opened up with careful bursts from his carbine. He seemed to be in total control. Ian understood it to be experience: this was not the first time he was cutting down SCEPTRE soldiers.

Three black ops fell to the ground, two with bloody holes in their chests: even their body armor could not protect forever. On the third, a lucky hit had went right through the middle of his face mask. But two more still remained.

Grenades came flying from them, and the Agents were forced to duck into safety: Ian and Jo to a left fork, Blackhand to the right. Explosions followed by flying shrapnel rocked the maze.

It was time to pay back with grenades of their own.

“Go straight for the frags – the black ops’ face masks might well protect from a flashbang,” Blackhand roared.

So, fragmentation grenades it would be. A second

wave of detonations shook the corridor, then a silence descended.

Cautiously, the three came back to the main corridor to see the black-charred walls and the bodies lying in a heap. The next intersection had been further away: the two remaining black ops had not had a chance to evade.

It was only now Ian noticed the pain in his torso: he had been hit by at least one round, but the ballistic vest had held for now.

Jo and Blackhand were visibly shaken too.

"Mine's twenty-five," Jo said, referring to the armor power level.

"Twenty here," Blackhand replied.

The message was clear: soon they would be just as unprotected as Ian. The next encounter had to be taken much more carefully.

They were close to the elevator, fresh magazines again in their weapons, peeking out over the final corner. A solitary black op stood in guard in front of the elevator.

There was no feeling of mercy now.

Before Blackhand could react himself, to suggest a course of action, both Ian and Jo had fired off a burst. To not have to slowly and methodically chew through the chest armor – Ian vowed to definitely take a heavier caliber weapon on the next mission – he aimed at the neck, while she aimed even higher, directly at the mask. Both bursts hit home at least partially: the black op was dead before he hit the ground, his neck and head a bloody mess.

All three went into the elevator. Blackhand pressed the upper floor button.

The paranoia about the power cutting right in the middle was absolute in Ian's mind: so close to freedom,

but still so far. To combat the sudden panic, he flicked the selector switch on his weapon constantly.

“Don't do that, or you'll wear it out,” Blackhand reprimanded.

Thankfully, the power did not cut. They reached the upper floor, and the door slid open with a pinging sound.

Staring at them was one more black op.

Before Ian could even think, he had pulled the trigger. It turned out that the selector had remained on fully automatic: the SCEPTRE soldier was cut down by a whole twenty-seven rounds, dancing in place until Ian's weapon clicked dry.

Ian let out a sigh, took another fresh magazine, pulled back the charging handle, and switched back to burst fire mode. Blackhand had the perfect opportunity to chastise a careless junior Agent again, but did not take it. He probably figured that the internal shame was enough.

The three all leaped out of the elevator.

“Let's try to avoid the most obvious route, the same we came from,” Blackhand said. “If we go in a zigzag pattern, we might avoid some of the squads.”

It definitely did not hurt to avoid further encounters completely, if at all possible.

They turned at the first intersection. Evading the same corridors they had traveled last time, the first floor appeared promisingly empty now.

Right past the third turn, a team of four mantis-faces appeared out of the next intersection, kneeling down and opening fire. Luck and probability could only last for so long.

As gunfire erupted, Ian and the rest ducked back into

the previous corridor. However, in the next instant came a low plop, and an oblong flying object ricocheted off the wall, rounding the bend as well.

A grenade from a under-barrel launcher.

“Back!” Blackhand yelled at the top of his lungs.

That meant: back into the gunfire.

All three dived back into the sights of the four black ops, just as the grenade went off.

From up close the boom was thunderous: right after the clatter of gunfire was just like an insect's buzz. Hot metal shards rained on the backs of their coats: those would probably take the rest of Jo's and Blackhand's armor power.

But Ian felt a sharp sting of shrapnel in his back.

He had no armor power whatsoever.

That had been a penetrating hit.

Screaming from pain, he fell to the floor right in the front of the four SCEPTRE men.

Trying to ignore the hurt, Ian fired blindly, burst after burst, hoping to score at least some hits before the black ops could adjust their aim lower – the first object in the line of fire would be his unprotected head.

He truly should have stayed on fully automatic.

More gunfire came from behind him: both the other MP5 and the M4 carbine fired prolonged bursts.

It was total chaos and mayhem. Hot death filled the air. Ian felt something sting his left arm as well, but still he fired on, until the gun was empty again. He did not even look if there were enemies still standing.

At last there was silence.

He was wounded, but alive. But who else was? Slowly, he turned around while still lying on the floor.

“Zero percent,” Jo said from a low crouching position. “So that's what a hit at zero percent feels like.”

The front of her vest was severely dented, the coat was punctured in several places, and blood ran down her face. But apparently that still meant being in rather OK condition, the whole situation considered.

What about Blackhand then?

The senior Agent lay slumped next to the wall on the opposite side of the corridor, groaning low and hard.

Had he been seriously wounded?

“Ha! I have one percent. Remember to work on the VR simulator more,” he managed to say at last, while getting on his feet. His face and hands were bloodied as well.

On this night, it paid not to run into even one more fight.

That thought caused sudden anxiety to pass through Ian's mind. Was Suhrim here at this very moment or not? Neither possibility was very pleasant: either they would have to meet him in a severely decreased battle capacity, or there would be no chance of retribution. The evil man from his past would remain at large.

With full magazines yet again, but not much strength any more, they rounded more corners, passed through more corridors. It seemed that at least the first wave of black ops squads was over. None of the three gave any thought to avoiding the cameras' field of view for now. Their infiltration, as well as the battles, had already been recorded by several electric eyes.

It was much slower going than on the way in. The pain in Ian's back just below the right shoulder throbbed with every step, and he felt blood running down to his waist. He certainly hoped that he could make it to extraction before needing urgent medical attention.

That scenario could prove fatal to them all.

Finally the corridor started to rise, and they were at the casino side entrance. This part of the journey was over, but they still had to get out of the building.

Before they stepped close enough to actually trigger the door mechanism, Blackhand spoke into his microphone.

“Sarge, now would be a good time to go get us.”

Blackhand listened for a short while, and nodded in silent agreement. Then he turned to consult Ian and Jo.

“What exit would you recommend? Something inconspicuous if you will, and preferably not high above.”

“The backstage loading area,” Ian said.

“That leads to the inner courtyard,” Jo added.

“Make it the inner courtyard,” Blackhand spoke on the radio, not questioning the advice at all.

Quiet and far away marching steps echoed to their ears as they crossed the empty casino. More black ops, certainly. But from which direction? Possibly the gym. There was no way to be absolutely sure. The three tried to keep up the pace, to make it to the loading dock exactly at the moment Sarge would touch down. He had given an ETA of three minutes.

Now there was no sense in paying attention to the security beams. Blackhand, Ian and Jo leaped over the chain fence next to the entrance arch, not exactly gracefully. There was no alarm: either it was silent, or the black ops had turned it off to not distract the ongoing hunt.

They went through the lounge to the theater.

The huge hall was dark and silent. Ian could only barely recognize the outlines of the rows of seats to avoid tripping over.

The empty stage was dark as well. Only in the very back, a green emergency exit light glowed. The most straightforward route to the backstage, and the loading area, was to climb the stage and exit from the back.

At last he could recognize the direction of the footsteps: they were coming from right behind, and getting

closer. It was a good reason not to linger.

Just as Ian pondered this, the stage lit up in multiple colors. A single tall man stood on it, wearing black and brandishing a sturdy, short-nosed weapon.

Suhrim.

The weapon in his hands was the paratrooper version of the M249 squad assault weapon, or a light machine gun. Normally Ian would have thought of this weapon as almost beautiful, but in Suhrim's hands it became as evil and infernal as the man itself.

The skull face seemed to smile, and in the next instant their group of three was blinded and exposed by two heavy-duty spotlights.

Suhrim opened fire just as they all dived into the cover of the seats. A sinister laugh echoed through the theater hall. Ian understood that the man was likely wearing a hands-free wireless microphone.

“Run, trainee! Remember the knives, the cages, the electric shocks and the brandings. Remember them all and feel how your sanity and willpower drain away to nothing! Remember how cowardly you escaped into the weak Agents' waiting arms and never became complete. From this night you truly shall henceforth be known as *Necro*, but the name takes on a completely different meaning. In the past it held the promise of the lives you would take away in our name. Now it simply means that you will be a lifeless, mangled, rotting corpse!”

The hailstorm of 5.56 bullets tore into the rows of seats. Crouching desperately on the floor, Ian switched his weapon to fully automatic and fired a blind extended burst from cover.

“Not even close, trainee! You have forgotten the art of death, and for that you'll pay a heavy price!”

Ian glanced to the other side: he could see the silhouettes of Jo and Blackhand, also crouched behind seats. Jo fired similar blind bursts, with only the gun barrel appearing above the seat level.

Blackhand popped out of cover more bravely and fired an actual aimed barrage with his M4. Suhrim fired again, and it seemed like Blackhand took a hit: he retreated to cover in an abrupt, uncontrolled motion. But Ian could not be sure.

“Your savior is getting sloppy as well,” the taunt came from the speakers.

Right after Suhrim's voice faded, Ian heard Blackhand's groan of pain, and there was no doubt any more. The Agent had possessed one percent of armor power at the time of the hit: the electromagnets could not have helped much.

Jo fired yet another short burst, but it went wide.

Suhrim gloated on the stage, walking back and forth in between his bursts of fire as if he was a performer. It was a maddening display of arrogance.

It had to be put to an end.

Ian wondered whether he could wait for the hundred-round box to run out, and nail the man when he switched to a new one. But he remembered the footsteps, getting ever closer. The reinforcement black op squads might be only seconds away.

He figured he had maybe a half magazine left. That had to be –

Enough?

No, he thought. At this point nothing could be left up to chance. While still crouched, he pressed the magazine release, dug out a full replacement from the recesses of his coat, slammed it in, and cocked the weapon savagely.

Then, he took one more look at his comrades. Jo was rising up, trying her luck at an aimed burst like Black-hand.

Suddenly there was automatic gunfire from behind.

Jo spun around as four more mantis-faced black ops emerged from the back of the hall. She reacted quickly and fired at them instead before ducking back down. The black ops were forced to take cover, diving in random directions.

“Feel free to kill the old Agent and the woman on the left,” Suhrim barked. “But the one on the right, I’d like to reserve the finishing touch.”

His speech finished, Suhrim resumed firing. The arc of fire scythed from right to left. Some bullets ate into the left wall, then the barrage started coming back to the right again. Back toward Ian's position.

It was now or never.

Ian shut off all the emotions from his brain. He went into the deepest dissociation he could manage. He could not be sure, but he believed to enter Agent-time.

In the strobe light of Suhrim's machine gun, that seemed to slow down now, he rose to a higher crouch. His gun came up, the front and rear sights aligned. He aimed for the torso, hoping that the recoil would lift the barrel higher and that the final bullets would cut right through Suhrim's head. There was no telling what kind of armor the SCEPTRE security chief wore, but at least his head was exposed and unprotected.

Ian depressed the trigger, and his MP5 spat muted death, just as the firestorm of Suhrim's bullets cut ever closer to his position. The seats next to him were torn and pulped, and then there was an intense pain as the bullets hammered straight into his chest.

His last thought, before he saw just black, was the

hope for his finger to hold the trigger down long enough so that the gun would go dry.

So that all potential for death would be expended.

Whether he lived or died, made no difference.

As long as Suhrim died.

Slowly the sound of automatic gunfire returned and vision came back in. Ian sensed movement. He was too weak to try to move, he could only look at the floor which zoomed rapidly past him. At first it was tiled and shiny: the corridors of the Olympia backstage. Then he felt a vertical shift, and the tiles gave way to wet asphalt, glimmering in the lights of the inner courtyard.

They were outside.

Suddenly the asphalt came closer, and he touched down to rest on it. Flashes of light and gun barks came from somewhere very close now. A silenced MP5 still clattered, but there was also a heavy, lower boom: a Desert Eagle.

Then he was lifted up again and the motion continued. From above came the sound of helicopter blades, rapidly descending.

There was a painful jolt as he was lifted higher above, then came to rest on rubbery floor. It had to be the rear compartment of the stealth helicopter.

Sarge had returned to extract them, just in time.

A set of heavy boots passed dangerously close to his face. It was Blackhand, climbing aboard last. He slid the side door shut behind. Jo was already there, having climbed in first to lift Ian up.

The rear compartment tilted in multiple directions as the stealth chopper lifted off and turned in place. Next came the whine of high-velocity gunfire: Sarge was using the chain gun to eliminate the remaining

black ops. Finally there was a heavy lurch as the helicopter started moving forward, still climbing as well. That was too much for Ian, and he passed out again.

When Ian came to once more, he found himself to be stripped from the waist upward. He was sitting on a seat in the rear compartment of the stealth helicopter. They were still in flight. His first thoughts concerned his chest, which throbbed painfully: had Suhrim's burst of rounds penetrated it?

He could see no outright evidence of that.

It was massively bruised, but there was no blood, no new bandage. The vest had held even after several hits without the protection of the electromagnetic armor. He shifted slightly in the seat and found that there was something on his back instead, covering the part where a piece of shrapnel had lodged itself in. Part of his left arm had also been wrapped. There was a strong smell of disinfectant in the air.

Jo sat next to him, smiling as she stroked his forehead and hair gently. She still had caked blood all over her face: that could only be the sign of a true Agent.

"You'll be OK," she said.

On the opposite seat Blackhand sat, also bloody and stripped and bandaged. He would live as well. He gave a thumbs up and grinned as he spoke.

"You shot Suhrim very dead. Several hits to the torso, neck and one right between the eyes. We took his access cards, of which there were several. Through meticulous computer algorithms, they can be used to make forged high-level SCEPTRE identities in the future, even after they disable Suhrim's access. And of course the memory stick with the encrypted files is safe in my pocket."

Unbelievable relief took over Ian's thoughts. René had been avenged. The most evil person Ian knew from SCEPTRE, the one that had presided over his training and haunted and tormented his mind, was no more.

He looked outside: it was still completely dark. This time either, it was not really a dawn over a new world.

But an important strike had been made. A message had been delivered: the Agents were a force to be reckoned with, not just some weak rebels in exile. Vital encrypted information had been stolen, which could be deciphered given enough time and resources, possibly SCEPTRE's resources that would be used against them.

This was a good starting point.