

Agents of Metal

Part 2

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May contain strong similarities to actual above top secret operations, organizations, fnords and trigger phrases, and the document may also have been tampered with. Read at own risk.

Dedicated to the memory of Urho, the fish king.

1.

At some point the fire had started.

There was total chaos. The locks of the wooden barracks had been blown apart by gunfire from shotguns and assault rifles, and the trainees were pouring out in confusion. But the primary target still lay ahead.

The administrative building. Where the identities and evaluations of the trainees were stored.

That was first class knowledge. If the Agents could bring that knowledge to the public, and cross-reference the records – mostly boys of young age – with lists of known missing persons, then they could prove the existence of SCEPTRE.

The Sectarian Chosen Elite Privileged To Rule and Exterminate. A ruthless secret organization with vast resources, unknown but sinister motives, and expertise in mind manipulation techniques.

It had been a perfect full moon night when the raid had started, but now smoke was blotting out the moonlight. And that was worrying. The riflemen in the four guard towers had been eliminated first, but out in the surrounding forest there could still be –

A sniper.

The sudden crack of a rifle pierced the night.

To his right, an Agent fell. The electromagnetic armor, combined with the traditional Kevlar, could protect to some degree, but if the round was of heavy caliber, the hit could have been fatal.

But where was the sniper? He panned left and right, but there was no immediate answer. Life and death, no time to lose. No way to freeze the passage of time and ponder.

Therefore, the answer was to go forward.

To hope that the sniper would not hit him first.

In essence that was blasphemy. To say that his life was more important than that of his fellow Agents. But what else was there to turn upon to? This raid had been messed up from the start. Though the objective was important, the mission had not been planned with nearly enough thoroughness. It was possible that none of the Agents would make it out of here alive. But if SCEPTRE's operations in this facility would be terminated for good, even that was something.

Therefore, forward. No time to lose.

The administrative building lay straight ahead, a concrete monstrosity built two stories high.

Another sniper shot cracked. A heavy caliber, at least 7.62. But fortunately, that was a miss. He glanced backward. There were still three Agents in full fighting condition.

They reached the relative protection of the concrete wall. Surprisingly, the doors were unlocked. No need to blow the locks with gunfire or plastic explosives.

A trap?

The hallway beyond was unlit, uninviting and grim. But from somewhere above came the faint yellow glow of fire.

"Night-vision goggles on," he grunted.

The Agents behind him agreed, nodding their heads, and with quick motions the goggles were strapped on. In the green-black light, the scene before their eyes seemed even more unreal. The laser sights of their automatic weapons – four of them total – cut like fearsome scythes through the blackness.

The documents they craved would be with high likelihood up on the second floor. Therefore, there was no choice but to ascend.

And it was possible someone was waiting. Someone with overwhelming weaponry and overpowering, total evil. But still, they were Agents. Agents of Metal, sworn to kill or die for Freedom, Metal and Might.

That would count for something. That had to count for something.

The stairwell was close to the entrance. They left the main hallway, climbed the first set of stairs and rounded the corner – a solitary black op in dark combat fatigues appeared, but was cut down by the silenced clatter of automatic gunfire. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Now they were on the second floor. There were office rooms both to the left and right: there was no telling where the next black op would appear.

He trained his weapon – a M4 carbine – to the right.

Unfortunately, that was the wrong choice.

From the left, a woman – definitely a black op too – appeared. A narrow face, short-cropped black hair. And her rifle trained as well.

Aimed straight for his head. No, lower. His neck.

There was a muzzle flash, a deafening report, and he was plucked from his feet. He fell, his vision tilted, even as his fellow Agents advanced and returned fire, but he was left behind.

Cold and dead.

The camera-equipped Agent sunglasses still recorded, showing a sideways view of the floor. The woman, the black op, was now far gone, disappeared to the maze of office rooms.

A shadow fell on the floor nearby.

Then there was an abrupt shaking motion and the recording cut to white noise.

“I was there too,” Blackhand said. So at least that much was clear. Blackhand had been there, years ago, when Ian had been rescued from SCEPTRE's assassin training camp.

Ian grimaced from the pain in his back as he rose to sitting position on the steel-framed bed. The wounds were from getting hit by grenade shrapnel during an encounter with black op troops last night.

The TV screen in the Agent infirmary was now blank: Blackhand had his full attention. The veteran Agent had also been injured on the mission, but not as severely as Ian. A bandage was visible from under the sleeve of his dark shirt.

“So, did you get what you were looking for?” Ian asked.

“The documents? Unfortunately not. SCEPTRE had enough advance warning to burn down everything in the administrative building. We only got the list of codenames from the guards' quarters. And –”

A heavy silence hung in the air.

“He was lost. John – or Ranger as he liked to be called – was gone by the time we got back to where he was hit.”

“The SCEPTRE got him?”

“Yes,” Blackhand said. “There never was a proper

Agent burial. The body was lost to SCEPTRE's hands.”

“Those bastards.” Ian's voice was filled with contempt.

“Indeed.”

“But of course it wasn't all for nothing. In addition to you, many trainees were recovered,” Blackhand spoke, his voice growing softer. “As a whole the mission was still a success.”

“So you just have to accept –”

“The loss of comrade Agents. Yes. There's no other way. Ranger was much liked, much beloved, but from that moment on we had to learn to live without him. That's the price we pay for waging our war against SCEPTRE.”

“Fuck.”

Ian had not exactly wished for the profanity to escape his lips. But this was all getting too much. This pompous war both in the past and the present, the Agents' mission...

It was all shit!

Ian no longer had any idea what he had gotten himself into. Just ten hours ago, he had been on the Agents' stealth helicopter, heading back for the headquarters after a near-fatal mission. He, Jo and Blackhand had recovered encrypted information from the bowels of a SCEPTRE underground hideout, Ian had killed their head of Security, codenamed Suhrim, and Sarge had arrived with the chopper to extract them just in time –

But what did all that mean?

Nothing?

Ian wanted to think no more.

Partially, he was ashamed of his own thoughts, of questioning the Agency. His wish to watch the recording had certainly been a mistake. Blackhand had men-

tioned of its existence earlier, the day before they took off, and Ian had not forgotten. Blackhand had not argued the wish of a recovering Agent and had fetched the innocent, shiny disc from the archives, after asking just once if Ian was a hundred percent sure.

Now Ian just wanted to sleep for a long time, though he was unsure whether sleep would come. Thankfully, Blackhand left the room without saying a further word.

Ian must have dozed off for a few hours: it was close to 6 PM as he woke up. The combination drugs used to boost recovery had a mild psychedelic effect in addition to the sedative one: the dreams had been incoherent, but not that much nightmarish. That was surprising, considering last night's mission.

And the recording.

The memory of the recording made his mind turn instantly sour. The disloyal thoughts and the guilt over them returned.

Ian understood now that those thoughts had possibly been on the back of his mind ever since arriving to the HQ and listening to Blackhand explain the Agency's history. But Ian had denied them, blanked them out, buried them under the initial shock and awe of joining. And there had been no real opportunity to reflect: the training, the preparation and then the mission had occupied him fully.

But now, until he got up to his feet again, there was plenty of time.

Was it that in the bottom of his heart, he disliked or even hated Blackhand? His uncompromising, stoic and martial persona. Was it that simple? Or something else? A sudden wave of paranoia flashed through Ian's mind. Had Blackhand been honest, by saying that no in-

formation besides the codenames had been recovered from the training camp? Did they in fact know Ian's true, pre-assassin training identity, but were withholding it? Keeping him in the dark just like SCEPTRE had done?

No, he decided. He was not allowed to go down that route. Madness waited for him there.

Jo entered the room almost soundlessly, wearing a black sleeveless shirt and gray gym pants. She smiled when she saw Ian awake.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Mostly like crap."

"You'll get better soon. The wounds are not deep."

Ian was thankful that Jo understood him to be referring to his physical injuries only, rather than his mental state. He did not want to bother her with that, at least for now.

"What about you?" Ian asked.

Jo came closer and sat on the edge of his bed. There was a large band-aid on her forehead and several more on her arms. Her eyes were hooded.

"Just scratches," she answered, sounding somewhat absent.

It was true that Jo's proximity made Ian feel instantly better: he could almost forget the paranoid and negative thoughts. He could almost forget that they both were Agents, and they both had taken lives. Evil lives, but still.

But it was clear she had had a rough night. Jo had been the least injured of the three, and therefore had expended the most energy on the return flight, taking care of both him and Blackhand until Sarge and Blowfish took over at the HQ.

Ian knew he could not currently do much in return,

but he wanted to do something. He sat upright again: this time the pain was not as great. A good sign, perhaps.

“You didn't get much sleep?” he asked.

“A couple of hours. Was kind of too excited after we got back here. The mission kept replaying in my head. And –”

“You worried about me.”

Jo nodded. “I knew there was no real reason.”

“You worried anyway. You're too kind.”

Ian put an arm around her and she moved closer, relaxing. Her red hair smelled of the insides of their stealth chopper – actually it was not theirs, but stolen from SCEPTRE, the tracking devices and anti-tampering mechanisms disabled with care. The greasy odor was not oppressive: on her it felt reassuring, even lovely.

She let out a sigh. “No. You're my own crazy Agent Hessian who never pushes me away. What else could I do?”

For some time, they sat in silence next to each other. Ian wondered if that remark was in comparison to René. Then he realized Jo might fall asleep any second, which he would not mind. If she could forget the mission and SCEPTRE's evil while resting against him, that would be roughly the best imaginable outcome now. But it was scary, too, to think how important she had become for him.

At first they had been bandmates, both trying to outshred and out-thrash the other with their guitars. Then co-conspirators and investigators seeking to solve a mystery which inevitably led back to SCEPTRE. Partly because of that their band – Cyberpriest – was now no more, their bassist/vocalist René cruelly killed by

SCEPTRE's hands, and their drummer, the over-man, motorist and gunbearer Erik angry at them, possibly for ever.

Finally the mystery had led Jo to an underground SCEPTRE laboratory facility. With no contact from her for hours, Ian had defied his wounds and followed her tracks, encountering heavy resistance in the form of lethal guard robots, and had at last found her inside a cell, therefore rescuing her if considered superficially. But he liked to think of it in another way.

It was Jo who had saved him down there. She had produced a profound transformation in him – the realization that though his past was set, the Sectarian Chosen Elite would not be able to dictate his future unless he himself allowed that to happen. That was priceless, and Ian would always remain thankful to her for that.

But now, though the future was uncertain, one thing was clear: there would be more missions, many more chances to die by the gun.

2.

It was 10 PM when Ian got up from the infirmary bed, against Sarge's recommendation to rest at least until the following morning. Ian was glad to not be hooked up to an IV drip: the drugs were administered as individual injections.

He felt miserable – cold, stiff and disoriented. His head swam and threatened with blacking out: he had to use the bed and a nearby chair as support first. But as that passed, he started to feel better.

The greenish, plastic-covered floor felt uncomfortable under his bare feet, and he could feel the breeze of air-conditioning blowing through the light fabric of his patient's uniform: a simple T-shirt and pants.

More appropriate clothing was a high priority. Then maybe some food and drink. He was pleased to feel hungry: that had to mean he was recovering well.

The injuries in his back were not the only thing that was healing: his side had a scar from an earlier bullet wound, and bruises in his chest reminded of a burst of 5.56 rounds that had slammed into his body armor.

Those rounds had been Suhrim's parting gift as his existence in this world ended.

He was not missed.

But it was frightening how much of a beating Ian's body had taken in less than a week's time. Even with the Agent armor and speed-healing drugs, how much more could a human take?

He knew he had to become much more careful.

The corridor outside the infirmary was dimly lit and devoid of life, except for the globe-like security cameras near the ceiling that rotated and zoomed constantly, looking for intruders. With only five Agents living in this large underground space, it was rare to bump into anyone just randomly.

Sometimes it felt good to be alone: the whirl of the surveillance devices calmed him. He laughed silently as he imagined himself as an evil overlord stalking the corridors of his volcano fortress.

It was definitely good to be back on his feet, too. The unpleasant thoughts from just some hours before had evaporated for now. Ian still remembered them, but they were insignificant, fading away. Of course he was an Agent of Metal, out to kick ass. But he would define his agenthood in his own way: he did not need to imitate Blackhand or anyone else.

By now Ian had memorized the corridor layout, and chose the fastest possible route to his and Jo's quarters. Jo had gone there earlier to properly sleep away last night's exhaustion. She would probably get up early: Ian on the other hand knew he would stay up well into the night. Day cycles could get a little weird in the HQ.

Ian opened the door with almost mock caution and stepped in. The room was not completely dark: low-level lighting stayed on at all times. Jo snored intermittently and mumbled something that seemed to rhyme.

Song lyrics?

The thought of lyrics made Ian remember a brief pe-

riod when his life had been much less complicated, less than a month ago.

When he had first joined Cyberpriest.

But so much had been revealed in so little time, and so many things had changed permanently.

Once you knew of SCEPTRE, the world would never seem the same. But everything considered, he definitely did not wish to go back to unawareness. And so, when the Agents had reappeared right after Cyberpriest's destruction, offering a chance to join them in the war against a common enemy, there had been little or no choice.

Now SCEPTRE was planning something major and nasty, and it was not far away any more. Tomorrow would be the first of December, and twenty-first was the date a SCEPTRE scientist had mentioned.

Twenty-one days.

To what?

Otherwise December the 21st was not any more sinister than any other day, but now it was 2012. The Mayan calendar would be completing a cycle, and there were predictions that the world would change in some major way.

There would possibly be a huge solar flare, the Earth's magnetic poles might shift, the fourth – or tenth – dimension might cross into the three existing ones, the planet Nibiru could be on a collision course, or perhaps extraterrestrials just invaded without warning.

Whatever it was going to be, SCEPTRE had chosen a most interesting day to coincide with their own plans.

Maybe the encrypted files they had found the night before would reveal something. Blowfish, or Gwen, their own Agent Bastard Operator From Hell, was probably in the server room even now, cracking at the data.

Ian needed to pay her a visit. But first, the clothes.

Some pain was inevitable as he put on a black, sturdier T-shirt, combat fatigues, some sandals, and a sweater. But he almost welcomed it.

Then he slipped out of the room as quietly as he had entered. Still no-one else on the corridors.

Along the way to the server room he stopped at the kitchen and warmed a microwave dinner. He wolfed it down quickly without reflecting much on the dull, synthetic taste. Though the meal was rather small, his stomach felt full: he had not eaten properly for a while.

Now he felt mostly alive.

In contrast to the corridors, the server room was brightly lit. Sure enough Blowfish was there, sitting in intense concentration, bright red-dyed hair glowing under the fluorescent glare. She alternated seamlessly between two keyboards and two monitors: bursts of rhythmic, focused tapping filled the air.

“Hey,” Ian said.

Blowfish turned to face him.

“You weren't supposed to get up yet,” she said, then turned back to the machines.

“It got boring.”

Ian could not have hoped for a better Agent systems administrator and all-around communications expert. The legendary, spherical Blowfish. Once they had been workmates, slaving away in a server room much less impressive, in support of corporate world domination.

Until she had revealed herself to be an Agent.

At their former workplace, the servers and network gear had always produced more heat than the air conditioning could expel efficiently. That was especially noticeable in the morning when one came to work.

But here it was almost too efficient: Ian was glad for the sweater.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I'm hacking several networks, universities and such – the larger the better – so that I can install a program to do distributed computing for us,” Blowfish replied.

“To try to decrypt the data?”

“Exactly. Originally I hoped that we could harness SCEPTRE's computing power against them, but they have reconfigured their systems significantly. I no longer know where to get in. So this is a faster alternative. We'd already need the results.”

“Can we get into trouble?”

“The traffic's being routed through so many nodes that even my mind boggles. I'd say we're safe. Just like when you downloaded the Nargaroth discography.”

“If you say so.”

Ian knew Blowfish could be relied on her judgment, at least in all matters of information warfare. And it was heartwarming that she remembered his illegal download, which he believed to have boosted his battle morale significantly.

He recalled the sole unencrypted file they had found on Suhrim's workstation. It revealed that SCEPTRE's secret plan was divided into four distinct phases, listed the parties responsible, and estimated progress where available. The guess was that the document had been unencrypted for the sole purpose of demoralization, to tell the Agents that they were up against a far larger machinery than they could possibly deal with.

According to the file, there existed three separate sub-groups within SCEPTRE: the science team, the black ops, and the priests. The priests were perhaps the most worrying: even more than the killers, the

ruthless black ops, they implied fanaticism and devotion.

Ian remembered bits and pieces of strange rituals from his assassin training. If the scientists devised the methods by which minds could be bent, then it had to be the priests who reinforced those with their own culture of occult reverence and fear.

Only one of the phases had a meaning so far, thanks to the loose-lipped scientist Apollyon.

The first phase had to do with fnords, audiovisual stimuli that would produce a certain, predetermined response in people.

It was certainly odd how the fnords could possibly work at all. Maybe they tapped to the collective subconscious, utilizing the unknown, primal fears within everyone.

But for what end?

The Agents needed the information badly. Otherwise SCEPTRE would certainly succeed.

“Wo-ho! Another fifty at our command. Quad-cores, so that's two hundred threads more to churn data,” Blowfish exclaimed. She seemed joyous, doing what she enjoyed most, even if the situation was grim.

But still, Blowfish was far from foolish or absurd. She knew what she was doing, at all times. Ian was not sure if he could say that of himself.

Ian decided to stay for a while: perhaps he could learn something more from her. In any case it was good to get to know the HQ network in-depth: how the subnets were divided, how the routers and firewalls were configured, and if there was a logic to the usual tangled mess of network cables. Who knew when and if he would be called to perform an emergency reconfiguration in the case SCEPTRE suddenly intruding?

As Ian settled down, he thought of Blackhand and Sarge. What were they doing now? Sarge could be in the armory, going over the equipment and doing repairs where possible. Some of the gear that had been on the mission was probably unsalvageable.

But Blackhand then?

Ian hoped he would be unwinding, maybe drinking a beer or two. Or did the man ever relent?

In a way Blackhand reminded Ian of their band-leader René. He had possessed an uncompromising artistic vision, while Blackhand was completely dedicated to the Agent cause.

To Freedom, Metal and Might.

In this context, Metal had to be interpreted with care. It was true that some Agents besides Ian and Jo had been musicians, and they had dreamed of changing the world with just the message they could put out.

But right now it was safest to think that the word just referred to flying projectiles of death.

3.

Saturday, the first of December.

Ian had stayed up until 3 o'clock in the morning, studying the Agent network obsessively and asking Blowfish some tricky questions while following her work. But finally he had grown tired and wandered off to get some shut-eye.

Jo had let him sleep rather late. Naturally, she had been happy to find him beside her instead of the infirmary.

Now they were in the forest surrounding the headquarters, taking a walk. It was only slightly past noon, and the sky, though bright, was covered with a layer of clouds. Snow fell slowly.

The pure, chilly air felt good in Ian's lungs. It definitely beat that of their underground hideout, even if the purification system was supposedly good.

The HQ was built into mountain rock, far above the sea level, so there was slightly less oxygen. He felt a bit lightheaded. It was probably a good place to exercise, but now they were keeping a rather subdued pace.

Had SCEPTRE not existed, Ian would probably have been content with just studying how snowflakes landed on Jo's hair. But now, there was a constant un-

easiness that took an actual physical form: the familiar knot in his stomach.

The thought of the approaching deadline did not let him go for a second. As well as the danger they might soon be facing.

“I talked to Blowfish,” Jo said. “So, it's just a matter of raw computing power?”

“You could say that. You get through trying all the combinations faster, and maybe you find the right one sooner.”

Somehow it reminded Ian of distributed computing competitions: trying to crack a code for sport, or solving a complex mathematical problem. Often the participants formed teams to see how far their combined horsepower would take them. But now so much possibly depended on the result, it did not feel like sport at all.

There were billions of possible decrypting keys, and only one or a few – depending how SCEPTRE assigned them – were correct.

Team Agent needed not just horsepower, but luck.

Plenty of it.

Ian wanted to think of something more pleasant to discuss, but it was hard to come up with anything. Now that Jo did not have to worry about him any more, the seriousness of the situation, their unfinished Agent business, had taken hold of her as well.

Of course there were things left unsaid, but they would inevitably lead to rather grim conclusions.

The simple reality was that all they could currently do was to wait. Blowfish could handle expanding their computing cluster, their illegal “supercomputer,” well on her own.

Or actually not only to wait. To prepare for war, too.

As Ian recovered further, he would participate in training exercises again. This day he certainly was not expected to.

"I've been thinking," Jo almost whispered, bringing Ian out of his stupor of thoughts.

"What?"

"If everything fails, if the Sectarian Elite succeed in everything they've planned, whatever that is –"

She paused for some seconds.

"– I'd still be glad that we tried, right?"

Ian considered. If they tried and failed, they would be quite possibly dead.

"Yeah. If I was still alive to feel glad," he said at last.

Naturally, there were options. At least one. To just forget about SCEPTRE and run away. But then, some day the past would catch up to you. Or you would be caught in the coming shitstorm, helpless.

It was still better to face it head on, right?

"And I mean, it's natural to be scared and shit – we don't need to pretend anything. At least between you and me. And we can talk about this stuff," Jo continued.

"Of course we can."

Though considering possible defeat was not pleasant, Ian was glad to hear that coming from her. In the back of his head there had been – no, still was – a fear that Jo was much more inhuman than him in her resolve, even though she had not gone through dissociative assassin training and he had.

If she was telling the truth – and Ian had no reason to suspect otherwise – she was a complete outsider to this whole Agents vs. SCEPTRE business.

Somewhat oddly, she had become interested in armed and unarmed self defense because she had thought the world to be like it was in the wildest con-

spiracy theories. As time had passed, she had gradually abandoned that belief as too childish, and turned to music exclusively.

Until the truth had been revealed to her.

"You just hope you're not scared when it's time to kick ass," Ian said after some thinking.

"True."

"True black metal?"

The joke was possibly quite lame, but it nevertheless brought a slight smile on Jo's face.

"Yeah. Nargaroth. Raahhh..."

Jo's imitation of Kanwulf's scream in the beginning of "Herbstleyd" – not the album version, but the shorter, more-to-the-point promo version – was quite priceless. Ian did not exactly know how to respond. Part of him was almost moved to tears from how she had made his day, again.

But now it was getting colder. Or at least Ian shivered, though he had the Agent leather coat on. He probably should not be staying outside for too long yet.

"I think we should be getting back," he said.

"Yeah. You don't want to catch frostbite in the wounds."

Turning in a a wide circle, they started back toward the Agent HQ. A lone raven croaked in the trees somewhere nearby.

It probably looked rather awe-inspiring here when the sun set, and even more so when the winter came for real. Short of actually going to Norway, it probably was the most ideal place Ian could imagine for composing a grim black metal album.

Erik's cabin would possibly be even better, but Ian wondered if he would ever see it. Erik probably never wanted to see him again.

In a way it was funny, possibly even wrong, to think of composing black metal when there were so much more serious things to consider. But anything to distract the mind during this tortuous waiting period had to be a good thing.

And if Ian just made it out of this alive, of course he would want to play again.

True Agent black metal?

Though Cyberpriest had been thrash metal instead, and he had sworn allegiance to that genre for roughly as long as he had played guitar, it was a possibility that could not be outright discarded.

Sunday evening. Blowfish had called a meeting.

All five of them were gathered to the recreation room with the data projector.

“We have a result,” Blowfish began.

Ian could not believe this. So soon? How was that possible?

“It was a low-level cipher. None of the other files have been cracked yet. What we have here is an archive containing a single JPEG picture.”

Low-level and SCEPTRE sounded like an odd, uneasy combination. Ian thought back to the unencrypted file. Was SCEPTRE leading them? Had they deliberately wanted the archive to be found and decrypted?

Blowfish connected a small, black laptop to a vacant VGA cable, and the black-and-white image came on to the large screen.

It was a eleven-sided polygon, inside of which was an eleven-pointed star. Strange symbols could be found on each of the points. In the center there was an inverted pentagram, with more indecipherable text surrounding it.

However, the text on the outer radius of the symbol was easily decipherable, even though the font was archaic. Ian scanned the words and felt like his blood was turning cold.

Molok, Beelzebuth, Rofocale, Astarot, Asmodeus, Baal, Belfegor, Abramelek, Lilith, Naamah, Satan. An occult symbol, complete with names of demons and devils.

“A hendecagram,” Blowfish said. “I had some time to research this, and turns out that within the system of the Qliphotic Anti-Kabbalah, those eleven names represent the eleven anti-cosmic forces, or the Wrathful Chaos. Combined, they form the eleven-headed black dragon Azerate, the anti-cosmic current 218. Two plus one plus eight and you get eleven.”

It was strange.

And it also reminded Ian of metal. Now when he remembered the connection, he felt more at ease.

Dissection. The band's late frontman had been part of the Misanthropic Luciferian Order, later renamed to Temple of the Black Light. The band's last album had contained lyrics with explicit references to Azerate and the current 218.

So, did SCEPTRE worship the same forces as he had? Or was someone on SCEPTRE's payroll simply a Dissection fan in secret? Of course, Dissection was not even the only band with Luciferian, anti-cosmic influences.

But as Ian scanned around, he found the others in the room were not as much at ease.

Right.

Whatever connection the anti-cosmic symbol had to SCEPTRE, it had to be taken seriously. If not for anything else, then for the further clues it could provide.

But still, somehow Ian felt that this was not the worst alternative imaginable. He remembered a night of lizards after some days of drinking, when he, unable to sleep, had made the mistake of scouring the Internet for anything he could find on the Illuminati. He had found material alleging that prominent Illuminati members and world leaders were actually shapeshifting reptilian aliens in disguise. In his condition at the moment, that had been the most horrible thought possible. It had haunted him in his restless dreams for a long time.

To have that confirmed as a fact by stolen top secret documents would have been far worse than evidence of the Sectarian Elite trying to conjure the eleven forces of chaotic evil.

“Everyone,” Blackhand said. “Try to search for whatever more you can find on this symbol, on that belief system. And make notes. So that when the next result arrives, we have a head start. If no-one else has anything more to add now, I suggest we all get to work.”

Ian could not say he had been very productive in his searches. Amidst random posts on occult web forums and esoteric YouTube videos, he had not found much of substance.

He sat in the kitchen with Sarge, the Agency armorer and occasional medic. Both were armed with similar mini-laptops as Blowfish had used. The machines were made of a durable but light alloy that was ideal for field operations, and according to Sarge, could withstand an extreme range of temperatures. Long battery life was a given.

The WLAN connection used a custom encryption algorithm in addition to an unusually large key length,

2048 bits. That should be secure enough, considering also that the signal would not carry very far underground.

Compared to Blackhand, Sarge was much more relaxed in both his appearance and behavior. Even in his darkest thoughts Ian could find no reason to dislike him. For the last half hour they had been going through bands, almost exclusively metal bands, that had some anti-cosmic references in their music.

“Take a look at this,” Sarge said. “These guys call themselves Black Dragon. Quite direct, don't you think?”

Ian leaned over to Sarge's screen: on it was the band's website. Their logo was a huge, chaotic mess: practically the only clearly recognizable elements were a large inverted cross in the bottom middle, and wings – or horns – on the left and right.

“Misanthropic and anti-cosmic black metal, they say. I don't think they've been together very long. But their first CD, Chao ab Ordo, is out now, and the tour –”

Sarge's voice grew distant. This was all too familiar. Ian felt like losing his balance, though he was sitting.

A trigger phrase!

In dissociative mind control based training, triggers were things that were planted in the subject's head through repetition. Pain was frequently used to enhance the memorization.

The purposes were various: to store certain memories for later recall, to cause obedience, fear or disorientation on command, or to make the subject switch to another personality altogether.

The triggers could be images, like SCEPTRE's symbol: the equilateral triangle which contained a circle and a dot within. Or then they could be words or sen-

tences, even specific sounds.

It was a bit similar to the fnords, with the difference that fnords did not need earlier preparation. Of course a planted, memorized trigger would always produce a stronger and more specific effect.

Ian was certain that the phrase *Chao ab Ordo* – “chaos from order” – was a trigger, planted by SCEPTRE at some point of his training.

But now the effect was gone as suddenly as it had appeared. He could think clearly again.

“What did you say, about the tour?” he asked, hoping Sarge had not noticed his abrupt reaction.

“It’s called *Three Veils Before Satan*. Started some time before the CD’s release.”

Details were unclear, but the Agents had performed counter-programming of their own after Ian had been extracted, so that he would not be a danger to himself or the society. And that was why he now reacted to the triggers with vague disorientation and unease whenever he encountered them, instead of the original, intended responses.

In theory the effects would get weaker the more he consciously processed his past and material related to his former masters, but it seemed they could still take him by surprise.

But this band? Could the album title be just a coincidence?

“I say this reeks,” Ian said, explaining no further.

“You mean, of SCEPTRE?”

“Yeah. If the band hasn’t existed for long, if it seems like they’ve come out of nowhere. They could be a fabrication.”

“Well, let’s see.” Sarge made a few clicks on the touchpad. “Next weekend they’re playing the *Frozen*

Hell Festival. It's two days of black, death and blackened deaththrash, or whatever. Sounds like fun for you and Jo, don't you think?"

"Perhaps."

The thought of a metal band as a SCEPTRE's tool was certainly repulsive to Ian. Either they were aimless puppets, following their masters' commands precisely, or then they were in on the conspiracy, spreading a twisted message with calculated malevolence.

Either way, their asses demanded a kicking.

The festival would have to be infiltrated, there was no question. Even if there would be no further results from the Agents' "cluster," it would be a good lead to follow.

It would also be healthy to get back the world for a while. Ian wondered: if the Agents spent too much time away from the people they intended to protect, would they not become too detached and inhuman to make sane decisions, ones that were actually for the good of the people?

Taken to the extreme, was it possible they became as twisted as SCEPTRE itself?

4.

It was too dark to see into every possible hiding place, to every unlit recess. But there also was too much light to use the night-vision mode of the sunglasses.

In other words, it was an Agent's nightmare.

The nightclub had multiple floors, like Hades Club in Ian's hometown, but this was like its bigger and meaner version. And somewhere, SCEPTRE operatives were lying in wait.

Rock music blared from the speakers.

At least there were no bystanders to hit accidentally.

Despite the emptiness, a disco ball still rotated in the ceiling, casting small lights all around: the tables, the bars, the checkerboard floor.

Ian moved forward in a cautious crouch. Suddenly, he thought he saw movement, betrayed by the rotating light.

He lifted his M4 carbine – he had sworn to never use unnecessarily small-caliber weapons on a mission again – and fired a burst of three toward the motion.

There was no suppressor on the weapon: the music was drowned out momentarily by much louder gunfire.

But he had fired at a ghost.

And given out his location.

Behind one of the bars, to the left, a door opened. Light shone from behind: probably a kitchen or storage room.

Next, a black op wearing a dark balaclava came through running, his Uzi drawn and already firing.

Beer glasses shattered as Ian ducked under the full auto barrage, trying not to lose grip on his own weapon. It was slightly unfamiliar still, and that put him at a disadvantage.

The Uzi fell silent: Ian estimated the attacker to have expended roughly half of his magazine. But before the black op could fire again, Ian already had his sights aligned and depressed the trigger.

The burst punched through the SCEPTRE operative's chest. He fell, firing the rest of his bullets to the ceiling, the sub-machine gun out of control.

But now from the floors above and below, more automatic weapons joined the chorus, as more enemies popped up from behind cover.

Truly, this was not just a nightmare. This was hell.

But at least he was not alone.

To the right of him, Blowfish was hiding under a table. Despite the terrible noise all around her, the splintering wood and breaking glass, she appeared to remain perfectly calm as she lifted her gun and took aim.

It was a Desert Eagle .50AE, her signature weapon.

The large handgun barked a massive, low boom, accompanied by a long flame from its muzzle.

Above, a black op collapsed against a railing, then lost his balance and fell to the stairwell below, screaming all the way.

Then he lay there silent.

But Blowfish was already on the next target: the Desert Eagle fired again, then yet again. It was just like

in the good old times.

Meanwhile Ian had crept to the cover of the bar. Now he fired burst after burst, but was not exactly sure if he was hitting. The enemy behind the railing had been an exception: like Ian now, most of them were behind heavy cover, and he practically would have to wait until they presented themselves to guarantee a solid and lethal hit.

Most of the black ops fired blindly, relying on the sheer amount of bullets they could unleash against the two Agents.

Ian fired one more three-round burst below, where a SCEPTRE assassin carelessly leaned out too far to the wide stairwell.

First mistake, last mistake.

The burst ate into the enemy soldier.

There was a momentary silence in both the music and the gunfire, and Ian could hear the satisfying gurgle of someone wounded to the throat.

He ejected the magazine and reached for the next –
As he realized something was wrong.

The gurgle was not coming from the fallen black op below, but rather from somewhere close to him.

Blowfish!

True enough, Blowfish was still there under the table, but had rolled over to her side. The Desert Eagle lay unused on the floor: she was clutching her neck, the hand slick with blood.

“Shit. No,” Ian muttered.

He slammed the magazine home, clicked the selector on full auto, and leaped over the bar while pressing the trigger with tremendous force and screaming at the top of his lungs. The star-shaped muzzle flashes lit the surroundings in a strobe-like fashion.

Considering his sudden pathos, and how dramatic the jump was, Ian almost expected the sensation of time slowing down.

Agent-time.

But no such sensation came.

Instead the leap was over fast: he landed to the floor next to Blowfish with painful speed. Ejected brass still bounced as he crawled closer to her.

At least he had not been hit himself, though the black ops had started firing the moment they had seen his suicide leap.

He tried to evaluate the situation quickly: Blowfish was still moving on her own, so her spinal cord could not have been severed. But the bleeding was still massive. Carotid artery?

He inched closer.

ATTEMPT FIRST AID?

CHANCE OF SUCCESS 35%

YES / NO

And this was where the simulation jerked him badly out of immersion. This was the reason that most of the time, they played by the rules that if any of your Agent comrades went down, they were gone for good.

To hell with it, he thought.

YES

A progress bar appeared in his field of vision, slowly inching forward. The black ops' gunfire did not relent, but if they did not actually come out of cover to get him, he would be protected for the time being.

Sarge had suggested that giving first aid could be improved by presenting a mini-game that demanded concentration. That might be in the next version if some-

one had the time to program it in.

Blackhand had dismissed the idea outright as childish. Blowfish had noted that the user interface subsystem did not allow too complex interactions besides moving and firing.

Given enough time, she could naturally rewrite the whole subsystem.

The progress bar reached the far right.

YOU SUCCEEDED

A bandage appeared on Blowfish's neck: the bleeding stopped. At this point it was down to her own choice and acting ability, how much combat capability she would possess after this near-fatal injury.

In the Agents' virtual reality combat simulator, each user stood on a motorized rubber mat that allowed movement in any horizontal direction. Upon an incapacitating hit, the system would "sweep the rug" from under you, and switch on electromagnets that prevented getting up, but once you were revived, you were free to move normally again.

"Back to kicking ass," Blowfish said as she reached for her gun.

Ian switched to another fresh magazine, put the selector back on burst fire mode, and took aim at the next black op. There would not be infinite respawn, so unless they ran out of ammo, the two had a good chance of clearing out the club.

Silence descended. Ian and Blowfish had prevailed at last. Ian was not sure what he had learned of this, if anything. But if nothing else, it was good to know that he had recovered enough to exercise again.

It was Tuesday now.

He removed the VR headset and found himself back

in the cavernous, black-walled, dimly lit room. In a cubicle a few meters away, Blowfish did the same.

“Was there a point to this exercise?” Ian asked.

“I don't know. You tell me. It was a random scenario.”

Ian pondered for a while. Even before his first Agent mission, he had reflected on being careless vs. being careful, and had found out that in the simulator, one had better chances by being almost too careful. And in the real world too, he definitely wanted to avoid getting hurt again.

But what if others were at risk? If he had to make a choice? Ian thought of Ranger's sunglasses recording, how the man had kept running forward even when his comrades were being picked by a sniper.

Of course, even under the crude simulation rules, had Ian failed to protect his own life, Blowfish would have “died” too.

So it was not necessarily blasphemy to value yourself higher. It was practical.

“I made an initial mistake. Then I compensated. But I have no idea how I'd have managed if you had been shot in the neck for real.”

“You will know when you face that situation. Or then you can use the FOE function on your Agent tool – Foreign Object Extractor. Removes bullets and stuff much safer and faster than an inexperienced medic,” Blowfish mused. “But you should know I view the VR training just as entertainment.”

Ian was slightly puzzled.

“So did you get shot – deliberately?”

Blowfish let out a short laugh. “I had forgotten how much it kicks. Maybe I enjoy pain.”

The virtual reality body-suits had inward-aimed actuators that would deliver blows, adjustable from soft

to dangerously hard, into the hit locations. But a blow to the neck or head would be too dangerous in any case, so the actuators stopped at shoulder level.

"You kind of have armor-plating of your own," Ian laughed back.

"Now that's naughty. I should slap you."

Here at the HQ Blowfish actually displayed a more open sense of humor than during the time they had been sysadmins. Ian did not object to that.

"But back to the subject, if you will," Blowfish said with a more serious tone. "I've come to believe that the best Agents have a natural instinct for handling nasty situations, and therefore this is mostly wasted time. For example, I went over the audio recordings of the Olympia mission –"

"And what did you find out?" Ian was curious.

"Blackhand. Remember? When he disarmed the trap in Suhrim's room, he talked about the old computer game. I'm sure he was referring to Wizardry on the Commodore 64. And he remembered it so that you had to walk along the shape of the pentagram."

"So? That was correct, wasn't it? He applied the same to SCEPTRE's symbol. You walked the triangle a few times back and forth and the trap mechanism stopped."

"But in the game that would have been totally wrong. You would have stayed in the prison room forever. To get out, you actually had to follow the map on the wall."

"Damn. But what's your point?"

"That there's no point memorizing things, drilling things over. Because you will always face something you can't prepare yourself for."

No point memorizing. Unless you could remember

something wrong in a strategically right way.

That was not exactly reassuring.

Ian swallowed. "But isn't it then – let's say you have a ten percent chance to survive something. Then comes another situation where you have the same. So odds are one to hundred you survive both. That's not nice."

"Can't fault your math. But the world's not nice. I thought reinstalling hacked servers taught you that. But anyway, since you've gotten this far, perhaps you have a better random number generator than most."

This discussion was getting rather weird. Sometimes Ian had to wonder if Blowfish had a twisted view of reality, turned sideways by too much exposure to servers and networks.

Ian turned to leave.

He needed a drink or something. Blowfish could well develop her theory of random number generation alone. But as he made it to the door, somehow she had read his mind and had teleported next to him. How did she do that?

Both of them stepped out into the corridor.

Before long, they were in the HQ kitchen, concentrated on their respective beers. They had not discussed anything more on probability, or even random number generation.

In fact they had not discussed anything at all.

But at least Ian had made a firm decision. He would not be logging any more time in the combat simulator, owing to what Blowfish had said. The Agent instinct was like a blade, he believed. If one tried to sharpen it the wrong way, one would just ruin it.

Of course, it certainly was impressive technology, both the software and the hardware. None of the

Agents had explained its origin exactly, but it had to be military.

Perhaps stolen from them?

Maybe at some point in time, he could return to it just for fun. If a day would come when there was no more need for a sharp Agent instinct.

5.

In the lobby of the Agent HQ, two large steel symbols dominated the far wall. One consisted of a triangle with a globe inside, a crossed assault rifle and an X-shaped electric guitar superimposed. The other was a giant Desert Eagle with wings.

Ian remembered that someone – possibly Blackhand – had talked about the “Sign of the Gun,” but could not remember which one of the symbols bore that name. Perhaps both?

In any case, the symbols were grandiose and slightly insane. It was the very insanity that made Ian like them. Even if the Agency itself could sometimes seem too self-important, the symbols communicated the very essence of it, stripped of anything unnecessary: kicking ass and taking names.

Now Ian and Jo stood in the lobby together with Blackhand. It was Wednesday morning, so there still was time until the festival, but it was Jo who had come up with the idea of an additional mission beforehand.

Blackhand was not very convinced, yet.

“We need alternate identities, right? Disguises. For SCEPTRE knows us, would recognize us, and we're supposed to be dead,” Jo said.

Blackhand nodded warily.

“So, this would be like a chance to test those identities in a way that would be quite safe.”

“Yes, but I don't understand the need to go on about it that way. There are other ways to test them just as safely, much closer to here. And if you need specialized clothing to the festival, Blowfish can get those for you, just name what you need,” Blackhand objected.

“Is it about budget, then?” Ian raised his voice. “I bet some of the stuff here is quite expensive. Compared, this would be like nothing.”

The operations of the Agency were made possible through a substantial trust fund set up by several wealthy benefactors. Those people – businessmen with fortunes so vast they could not be easily comprehended – had learned of SCEPTRE's existence, and put quite simply, wanted it wiped off the face of the Earth. Ian did not know the exact figures, but the Agents' cutting-edge military technology – some of it custom-made – could not have come cheap.

“No, it's not. But what's the point of acquiring something you will have no time to use? Believe me, if we want to stop SCEPTRE we'll be fully occupied until –”

There was rising disbelief, even anger in Blackhand's voice.

“Motivation. Even if there's no time to play, it makes the HQ feel more like home. That leads to higher morale, which leads to higher degree of ass-kicking and higher probability of survival,” Jo replied.

Silence. Slowly, a grin formed on Blackhand's mouth.

“All right then. But take no unnecessary risks. And remember that you must return with an Agency vehicle to get back in, so don't trash the one you take,” he said.

First step of the mission had been accomplished.

The joy was clearly readable on Jo's face. They were going out to buy some instruments.

Not just from anywhere, but from Axes 'n' Amps.

The changed appearances of Ian and Jo were taking form, under guidance of Sarge.

Ian had let his beard grow for the last two days, and his blond hair was now dyed brown. With aid of makeup, his face appeared now older, his forehead more creased.

Jo's hair was a sickly, pale blond, messy in its form, due to random application of various gels and hair-spray. Her lips were purple, and purple eyeliner had been likewise over-applied. Artificial freckles – a lot of them – completed the picture.

She looked funny, Ian thought.

“Understand that you won't stand up to close scrutiny. SCEPTRE must have both of you on high-priority watchlists. In the city, I'd say there's not much danger, but if the band has SCEPTRE contacts, there will be certainly be watchers and possibly black ops posted at the festival,” Sarge said.

Their false names were chosen, too.

Ian was now Duncan. Jo was Nikki. The Agency's high-resolution, multi-layer laser printer had spat out forged driving licenses for both of them.

Of course discretion was the key. Staying in low profile whenever possible. The false papers would not be used unnecessarily: purchases would be made in cash.

The matters of weaponry were rather easily decided: they would take the Heckler & Koch USP semi-automatic pistols they were by now very familiar with. Those could be fitted with silencers. A few spare magazines would be enough at the festival: if there was need

for sudden intensified warfare, then the enemies' weapons would be used as necessary.

The guns would be easily concealed under overcoats, and in fact Ian had carried the same pistol all through the "Seven Days of Pain" tour with Cyberpriest, so he knew it was nothing extraordinary.

Theoretically this first incursion to the outside world would not require weaponry at all, but an Agent had to be prepared.

Later, at the Frozen Hell Festival itself, there would naturally be security screenings, but if they wanted to investigate Black Dragon up close, they could not go through the public entrance in any case. The backstage area would have to be infiltrated.

Finally there was perhaps the most critical question: clothing. They did not want to attract attention by being too unusual, but not by being too normal either. The moderation of unusualness was the key.

Unfortunately the Agent clothes racks could not supply much of that, and therefore the upcoming mission was twofold: instruments for the headquarters, then proper wear for the festival.

But for now, to get into the city, they could use what they had had on them upon arriving to the Agent HQ for the first time: colorful garbs acquired from the anarchist community, the Outpost. Those would fit their visit to Axes 'n' Amps well, particularly if they did not buy overtly metal-oriented instruments.

The clothes held traumatic memories, but that would have to be tolerated. How René had at first fired Ian over the phone, had categorically refused to listen to Ian's warnings of the danger posed by SCEPTRE, then the second phone call, during which René had suddenly offered his apologies...

It had been pieced together by SCEPTRE.

And led Ian, Jo and Erik into their rehearsal space turned into a death-trap, where René waited, bound and already bleeding dry.

It seemed that there was no limit to the levels of cruelty to which SCEPTRE could descend. And somehow Ian guessed, almost knew – what they had experienced so far was far from the worst their enemies had to offer.

But now there was no time to wallow in the past.

The mission was waiting.

As Ian and Jo dressed up, the clock was already past 11 AM, and Ian remembered that when they had arrived, the trip had taken roughly five hours. There was not much time to shop today, but perhaps just enough.

They emerged to the corridor, where Sarge waited. He looked over them in an appraising manner, judged their finalized transformation. He grunted in approval.

It was time to go.

The three of them walked through the garage of the HQ, which was large enough so that their footsteps echoed noticeably. The walls had been carved out of rock, but the ceiling high above was steel: it was built of two pieces that could separate to allow for flying vehicles.

The pride of the Agents, the black SCEPTRE stealth helicopter, stood in the center, but it would not be used today. Ian for sure did not know how to fly it, and would be very surprised if Jo did.

Besides, it would attract unhealthy attention.

Rather, they would take one of the dark green vans that were positioned off to the side.

“Do all of these have the communications gear inside?” Ian asked, walking in the direction of the cars.

“No. The racks can be installed or taken apart quite

easily. Currently the comms are only installed in that one on the left,” Sarge replied.

“Good. Then we don’t take it. No room for the loot.”

Sarge shook his head: possibly even he thought of it as unnecessary to bring instruments to the HQ. Though, if Ian remembered right, Sarge had confessed to playing guitar occasionally.

There were of course other considerations. If the van got stolen, it was better not to give away free Agent gear as a bonus. Or if it got trashed...

Sarge gave Ian the keys. “There’s a few things. The van has a GPS navigator inside, but we have a rule –”

“You don’t program the location of the HQ,” Jo said.

“Exactly. Memorize it so you can find your way back here, but yeah. Just what you said.”

They climbed in and Ian keyed the ignition. The engine came to life without much protest, and he put it in gear.

Sarge waved his hand. “See you around, Agents. Oh, my mistake. Of course Nikki and Duncan.”

Ian turned the vehicle around and stepped on the accelerator. The van sped into the rock passageway which separated the Agent headquarters from the outside world.

At the end of the passage, automatic doors opened. Brilliant sunlight blasted their eyes: Ian had to squint as he put the driver-side sun flap down.

“Do you remember the location?” he asked Jo.

She peered at the GPS display, turned it to face her.

“Sure. Just put the pedal to the metal. I’ll beat you on the return trip.”

6.

As Ian drove, he found his mind wandering. The radio was on: right now a mixture of punk and metalcore floated in through one ear and out through the other. It fit their initial false identities well: until they would transform to true misanthropic black metal fans by a mere wardrobe change, Duncan and Nikki were omnivorous rockers leaning to the punkish side, perhaps not too bright, but out to make the world a better place.

The road conditions were good: at first there had been some snow, but now, as they had been heading southwest for a total of two hours, there was none.

At first Ian had speeded out of the excitement of driving an Agency vehicle, but had then forced himself to obey the limit. Getting stopped by police in their false identities would not be wise.

They had not talked much.

Ian remembered how Jo had said that they could talk about “stuff,” meaning anything, even the hard, painful, existential subjects. But that had not happened, at least not yet.

Then, was there any real need?

Ian was aware he kept most of his thoughts to himself. But there were reasons. He had found that he dis-

liked his own thought processes, how rapidly their direction would change, and how self-contradictory they were at times. The Agents were pompous bastards. The Agents kicked ass.

He blamed it all on SCEPTRE.

On his training. A dissociating assassin could switch personality at will or on command. The training had not reached its conclusion, and the Agents' damage control had helped to a degree, but still, everything considered, he was a broken soul.

In her own way, Jo had also helped him more than enough. He did not want to burden her further. The puzzle of his mind was for him alone to unlock and sort out: he was quite certain that she could not even theoretically unlock it for him.

The Agents certainly did not hold the answers, beyond the very basics. SCEPTRE might.

But it was possible that even SCEPTRE's data vaults no longer held the information of who he had once been. For security, for redundancy, for outright cruelty, there were many reasons to just push the delete button and be done with it.

It could be that the puzzle would never be solved.

And then there was one final, cruel possibility: what if even knowing who he had been, or remembering everything, would not put him at ease? What if it would open up just further depths of self-loathing?

That was a necessary risk.

Because for now, he sort of floated in the in-between, which was maddening. In fact he almost welcomed the thought of falling wholly into the abyss. Hell instead of Purgatory.

"I'm starting to get hungry," Jo interrupted his inner monologue. "Time for a pit shop?"

It was a good idea. They had last eaten sometime after 8 AM at the headquarters. Ian started to scan for the next gas station or inn.

Half past 4 PM, they made it into the city.

It had not changed much while they had been away. But still it felt like being transported into an alien world, and took Ian some adapting. A cacophony of sound and light, a constant stream of people going about their business – and anyone of them could be a SCEPTRE operative in disguise.

Ian forced himself to control the paranoia as he slowed down in the busy traffic.

Even if there were enemy agents, it was unlikely they would notice him and Jo by casual inspection. And surely SCEPTRE could not have unlimited manpower? There could be only so many of their operatives to spread throughout the country. It would make sense, though, to concentrate a couple more here, to wait for the rookie mistake of new Agents returning to check on their former home. Ian himself would certainly have done that.

But he did not think of this as a mistake. Instead, it was an act of defiance.

The concept of defying his former masters was an important facet of staying sane. And he knew Jo shared that point of view. If they were at some point going to reveal the existence of SCEPTRE to the public – the ultimate defiance – it was high time to start practicing with something small. Like simply daring to return to civilization.

“Turn right at the next intersection, it's fastest,” Jo said as they had stopped at a red light.

Ian had not actually driven much here, so it was

good to have a navigator. Axes 'n' Amps was not far away any more, but getting there faster still meant more time to choose their weapons. The store usually closed at 6 PM.

Ian wondered about the store owner, the veteran musician Axel, who was always pleased to share his knowledge. Cyberpriest had been regular customers, and he had to have heard of the explosion, the band's unfortunate demise.

Ian had not checked any message boards to see how the Hessian community was remembering the band. He had contemplated it once, but back then, had found himself unable to gather the required courage.

He was not aware of Jo doing so either: in any case they had not discussed it. Therefore he actually did not know how the published story of Cyberpriest's end went.

Erik could have shared the whole story if he wanted: SCEPTRE's trap, the Agents' appearance, his own get-away. Or if he had just disappeared as fast as he could without stopping to talk to anyone – his forest cabin was the most probable destination – everyone would believe he was dead too.

Somehow Ian believed the latter to be more like Erik.

In any case, it was interesting to see if they could learn anything at the store. Now Ian believed he was ready for that.

He pulled into the parking lot in front of Axes 'n' Amps.

They would find out very soon.

Of course, if they had just wanted to get instruments, they could have chosen any other music store in the city. And to be even more optimal, they could have cho-

sen any moderate-sized town much closer to the HQ. But this was an interesting opportunity to test how good their disguises were. If Axel actually recognized them, it could possibly lead to a heartwarming scene at worst.

It was too much of a stretch to imagine Axel being connected to SCEPTRE, to be working for them. Even him being coerced to monitor and report any appearances of musicians thought dead was rather unlikely.

And what could SCEPTRE do? Do a full-scale attack and level the store? Chase them all the way back to the HQ? Those alternatives were not entirely impossible, but would still attract too much attention.

No. Just no. There had to be some limits to paranoia.

"So, what's the strategy?" Ian asked. "Do we try to avoid his gaze, do we get intentionally close, or what?"

"I say we try to act like normal. If we're depressed, we're not finding any good bandmates, we're low on budget, and we write shit songs all the time, we could plausibly stare at our feet the whole time, but I don't think that's necessary," Jo replied.

Normal it was then.

They were going in.

Most of the same equipment was still on display as Ian and Jo walked in. The guitars hanging on the wooden walls, the amplifiers, a few drum kits, and a whole lot of speaker cabinets for both guitars and PA.

Or at least so it seemed on first glance: Ian did not consider himself much of an expert on gear. To some, the difference between for example an Engl or Peavey or Krank amp head could be reason for a holy war.

In one corner, a teenage boy was performing his not-so-great rendition of a Children of Bodom guitar solo.

The axe naturally had to be a Randy Rhoads model – bolt-on instead of neck-through, though, as it was certain Axel would not have allowed the boy to test the more expensive version without close supervision – but thankfully the all-tube half-stack was at a low volume.

“Remember to stay in character. This can be fun,” Jo whispered.

“Sure,” Ian muttered. To tell the truth, though his role was easy, he was not that interested of being true to the character of Duncan, he just wanted to get acceptable gear for the HQ, and to somehow discover if Axel knew anything of Erik.

Duncan played guitar. Nikki was a drummer. A bassist did not exist yet, but the two were going to get the gear beforehand. They were open to a variety of styles, but would gravitate toward punkish rock. From punk, actually, there was not that great distance to metal: an amp could be capable of metallic distortion, and a double-kick pedal for the drum kit would not be out of question.

Blackhand had given them a generous \$3000 total budget to spend, but that would have to cover everything: there would not be a second trip. The PA gear would be easy to mess up partially or completely, as in Cyberpriest René had taken care of it: neither Ian or Jo had needed to set up or adjust it much.

“I mean, the set cannot be just anything. You've got to be able to convey a message. A vision,” Jo started in an over-excited tone.

“Whatever you say.” It was natural for Ian to play the less excited one.

“Hey!” Jo suddenly pointed at one of the drum kits.

Ian turned to look and found himself staring in dis-

belief. The kit, which had been painted in a red-black gradient, was in fact named "Vision."

"We have to get that one. I don't care how much it costs," Jo said.

At this point they had attracted Axel's attention: he left the counter and came to them.

"How may I help you?" he asked in his familiar baritone.

"We're going to start a riot. No, a revolution. But we need gear to do it. I'm Nikki. That's Duncan."

Ian made a face. That was simultaneously both in and out of character: though Duncan was used to how Nikki frequently got over-excited, it still got on his nerves. And Ian himself just found the altered voice grating.

"If you insist on that Vision kit, then I need a proper Stratocaster, made in USA," he said, voice lower than usual. It hurt to speak that way.

"Get over that shit." Jo's voice rose with each word. "You've listened to too much Dire Straits or something. I don't want that thin sound. It's not punk. It has to be the double-coil pickups."

"Humbuckers? Well then. But then you get a double-pedal and learn how to play one!"

Ian admitted at last: this could be fun. They were probably driving Axel crazy and to early retirement, though.

At last the gear had been settled upon. All amplifiers were solid-state. The bass guitar was a black Yamaha, not terribly expensive, but still with active electronics. The Les Paul clone they had chosen, black as well, had powerful pickups and solid workmanship. Unfortunately two guitars had been out of the question.

The “Vision” drum kit with cymbals that were not-that-entry-level, plus a double pedal, would take care of the battery.

Finally there was the vocal equipment, consisting of cheap microphones and stands, two active 200-watt PA cabinets, and an eight-channel mixer. Plus the necessary cables. Axel had helped them to get everything required: puzzling over the signal path was a challenge for Ian and Jo too, not just their false identities.

As Ian was handing over the cash, a sudden odd expression appeared on Axel's face. One of recognition.

Ian had been discovered.

Then he understood the reason why: as Duncan had been arguing with Nikki at an ever-increasing pace and intensity, he could not have kept up with the changed voice, and had reverted to how he normally spoke. Add to that the close look Axel had taken, and the fact that Ian had been a regular visitor, even if only buying guitar strings and picks for most of the time.

But to be honest, Ian did not oppose. His mentor in musicianship and gear deserved to know he was alive.

“What is this, really?” Axel asked in a curious tone. “Ian? And of course that's Jo. Almost fooled me, but not quite. That's not a so nice thing to do, to let people think you're dead.”

It was near to closing time: there was no-one else than the three of them present. Therefore the revelation could be handled without outside interruption.

“It's kind of for a reason. And it's good for your safety too, to not let anyone know we were here,” Ian said.

Suddenly Axel's expression grew a lot colder.

“I see. To be honest, I don't want to know what you're involved in, and would also prefer that you don't

come back here again. I believe you got everything you need, Duncan and Nikki.”

There was nothing more to say. No chance to inquire about Erik now.

Ian and Jo loaded the gear into the van. Though the purchases had been successful, and would possibly bring many hours of joy at the HQ, a feeling of defeat hung in the air. It was not pleasant to know that the store they had visited for years was now permanently closed for them.

By all accounts that was a fail.

Not at all heartwarming.

Axel had brought the point across in a subdued way, but there was the similar feeling of bridges burning as with Erik.

“That went kind of smoothly,” Ian said.

“At least you told the truth. Now Axel knows to be careful if he gets any odd visitors.”

“You want to drive?”

“Yeah, if you don't.”

Ian handed over the keys, face still in a frown. At least the next phase of shopping would not involve anyone familiar.

After 6 PM, not many of the shops specializing in metal- or goth-oriented clothing and accessories were open. But a small store, “Inverno,” had not closed yet. An ominously inviting, flickering dark red light came through the door and the display windows.

The street was narrow and already packed with cars: Jo had to make another pass round the block and stop the van further away. It was not pleasant to leave so much gear unguarded, but they both were needed to

make well-informed purchases. At least the Agent van had darkened windows, so the instruments would not be visible to anyone looking from outside.

They entered.

A cadaverously pale shopkeeper greeted them inside. He had a bald-shaven forehead, but a healthy amount of goat-like black beard to compensate.

“Hi. We're tired of looking too colorful. I guess you can help,” Jo chimed.

“Yes, at your service.”

The voice was plain and oddly civilized, but the man's body language expressed a degree of disbelief and unease at the odd couple they were.

Though the voice of Nikki was by now starting to get on his nerves severely, Ian was glad Jo did most of the talking: he was still trying to swallow the defeat from Axes 'n' Amps. He just tried to focus on the objective: moderately unusual.

The room was cramped with racks of clothes: the task ahead was not small by any means. Unless they just picked the first barely acceptable choices.

The Agency had given Ian and Jo one grand to spend on the wear, which was rather generous. Ian found himself thinking of whether they could have cheated and acquired a second guitar by skimping with the clothing. But the receipts would have given them away.

A half hour later, they possessed coats and pants of black leather and PVC, bullet belts and armbands, and finally, to prepare for sudden artistic inspiration – corpse paint in both black and white.

The shopkeeper could not possibly have been a SCEPTRE servant, and in any case they would with high likelihood never meet again.

As Ian exited to the cold, damp evening – rain had started to fall – he found that his spirits had been lifted. When things were all put in perspective, it was not that great of a loss if Axel would never talk to him again.

With both hands full of bags, the two closed the distance to the Agent van quickly. There were no signs of enemy disturbance. Jo climbed to the driver's seat, and it was time to begin the return trip to the HQ.

7.

They had driven some thirty miles away from the city: the traffic was decreasing, and it would not be long until they left the comfort of lit roads and plunged into the deepening evening darkness.

Ian had found a radio channel that was playing – at least for the moment – demos of obscure metal bands. He lost himself in the stream of unusual song structures, different styles of harsh vocals, and aggressive drum beats.

But even demos had lost most of their underground charm: the ubiquity of digital recording setups and effects plugins made the songs sound mostly like their commercial counterparts.

“I could tell that you didn't like Nikki that much,” Jo said with some playfulness.

“Hmm,” Ian replied. As far as he was concerned, he could tolerate the false personalities the little time they were needed, but discussing them further now was unnecessary.

“Don't worry, now that we have clothes for the festival, I can adjust her. In the future, she will be very grim and misanthropic.”

“Yeah, that's an improvement.”

Ian let out a yawn and sunk deeper into the seat. A psychedelic black metal band, Elder Raven, was playing a slow, hypnotic triplet beat, and he could not help smiling. In the music there was a combination of being deathly serious and proficient, yet making fun of oneself.

As long as people like that existed, who would spend time and sweat to create such chaotic entertainment, that definitely was another reason to try to prevent SCEPTRE's insane plans, whatever they were.

"What are you smiling at?" Jo asked.

"This music."

Ian could not be sure if Jo appreciated the higher intricacies of black metal, and to tell the truth, even he considered himself just a novice in the genre. But she smiled back at him: apparently the point was that she liked to see him being able to enjoy life. Lately, those moments had not been that frequent.

The last hypnotic chord faded away.

"That was this week's Demo Dungeon. Now we return to our regular schedule of ultra-commercial and mass produced shit made just for the express purpose of robbing your wallets and emptying your souls."

The radio host had an odd sense of humor. In fact the whole station had to have a rather free-spirited policy, otherwise he probably would have been fired a long time ago. But was the station same as on the last trip? Ian could not be sure.

"This one then is from those anti-cosmic Canadian hotheads who just have released their debut album. Black Dragon and the title track of their CD: Chao ab Ordo."

Suddenly Ian was in full battle alert: his heart was racing, and he expected SCEPTRE ninjas to be jumping

through the side windows or onto the van's roof at any moment.

SCEPTRE would not leave them alone even on the radio. Damn them all to hell!

He reached for the pistol inside his coat.

Then sanity returned a bit and he understood there was no actual need to draw the gun. Hearing the album name the second time had caused only a slight disorientation, but that lessened impact might have been due to the adrenaline.

He looked at Jo and saw that she too had become more alert: the smile was gone. Now was a prime opportunity to check if Black Dragon had any overt clues of SCEPTRE involvement in their music.

In retrospect they should already have downloaded the album and listened to it in its entirety at the Agent HQ. But there was still time to do that tonight, or tomorrow.

A distorted guitar began a muted riff on Ian's side, then another joined on the other. A traditional thrash metal circus beat started, until it suddenly turned around into a hyper-speed blast. The vocalist began his shriek, and Ian did his best to follow the lyrics.

*A churning sea of Chaos
That contains all dimensions
Three Veils before Satan
Fly through to attain Gnosis
Tyrannic reign of Demiurge
Has chained us for too long
Order is inferior
While Wrathful Chaos grows strong*

From his limited research, Ian knew that anti-cosmic Satanism was heavily influenced by Gnosticism, and honestly he was disappointed in these lyrics. At least so

far they seemed to convey no great revelation: he could have penned them himself.

Slowly Ian's pulse returned to normal, and he could almost consider the music as mere entertainment, like the demos he had been listening to earlier.

It was of course possible that there was no SCEPTRE involvement, that the trigger phrase was a coincidence. That the festival would be a wild goose chase.

Signs of end times in the sky

When eleven dragon heads unite

Chao ab Ordo!

A Slayer-esque guitar solo started, as the blast gave way to the slower thrash beat again, then the song repeated the same verse-chorus structure again and ended.

"What do you make of this?" Ian asked.

Jo pondered for a while. "Quite standard, isn't it? Both the music and lyrics."

"Yeah, I'd say the same."

"It's kind of funny, if we got these costumes and make the festival visit all for nothing. If there's no enemy activity there for miles. At least we get to have fun. Maybe we'll have to get into as many pits as possible and bruise ourselves properly, then we can tell Blackhand and company how we fought SCEPTRE hard."

There was clear sarcasm in Jo's voice, but Ian did not find the thought funny. Wasted time while the fulfillment of SCEPTRE's plan drew all the closer. But then again, unless Blowfish's program had uncovered other clues, the festival was still the only potential lead to check.

What did the plan aim at? Ian had asked himself that a countless times, but found himself at a loss.

Now he had slightly more to go with. Fnords, mind-

controlled assassins and black ops, underground facilities, priests, worship of anti-cosmic forces, 21st December 2012. Those were the puzzle pieces. Now just to assemble them.

Fnords and assassins were just tools: they could be used for any purpose.

Priests hinted of belief. Belief hinted of purpose.

In its most militant and extreme form, anti-cosmic Satanism wanted to turn the universe into a swirling, random chaos, by channeling and unleashing the Black Light, the anti-cosmic current 218. To be honest, Ian did not actually believe in supernatural forces. Whatever SCEPTRE was doing, had to happen using conventional, physical means.

But still the date, connected to various cataclysmic predictions, did not leave room for pleasant options. In some way and degree, SCEPTRE was going to bring about the end of the world.

After Black Dragon, metalcore took over the airwaves. Maybe the grand master plan was to make everyone listen to metalcore and nothing else? According to Ian's belief system, that would not be far from the apocalypse. He chuckled silently at the absurdity.

By now they were driving on an unlit rural road: Jo had switched on the hi-beams. There was a pleasant warmth inside the van, but not too warm yet to risk falling asleep.

Just as absurdly, Ian thought that they could just drive away as the world ended around them. As a red spiral of Hell formed in the sky and nuclear pressure waves leveled entire cities.

After 11 PM the road was unmistakably climbing higher as it made its winding path up into the mountains: they were not far from the Agent HQ.

To reach the headquarters' entrance passage, one had to drive – as if on faith – toward a sheer rock wall, which would open if the hidden camera recognized the vehicle as belonging to the Agency.

Close to midnight, the wall was finally closing in before their eyes. Jo slowed down.

“I don't exactly bet my life on this thing working.”

Ian nodded in agreement. When Blackhand had been driving last time, he had not slowed down a bit, which had led Ian to initially believe that the senior Agent was going to kill them all.

When the van was roughly twenty meters away, the wall began to open up. Jo let the vehicle creep forward at a leisurely pace.

The two separate pieces of the wall, moved by heavy-duty hydraulic shafts, stayed open for two seconds.

Then they began to close.

“What the hell?” Jo gasped. She stepped on the accelerator and the van shot forward, engine revving in sudden rage. Ian was thrown against his seat.

They made it into the passage barely. Yellow ceiling lights came on, revealing the wide, slightly curved tunnel.

“To be a true Agent, you have to drive aggressively, it seems,” Jo breathed, still clearly agitated.

“I'm sure they were watching the camera feed and are now laughing their asses off.”

Soon enough the passageway opened into the garage. Jo drove past the other vans and the black helicopter, toward the far wall where the entry door was located.

“I guess there's no separate loading door for band gear in this place, so this is as good as it gets,” she said

as she reversed to the door, then braked to a stop. “So, end of the line.”

Jo killed the engine and they both hopped down: Ian went to open the rear doors. By the time he had them open, Blackhand, Sarge and Blowfish had all emerged into the garage.

“Was the mission successful?” Blackhand asked.

“Both objectives,” Ian replied, leaving out getting discovered by Axel for the sake of simplicity.

The five of them carried the instruments into an unused planning room, which the three Agents had meanwhile prepared by stacking the tables and chairs into one corner.

It was definitely too late to assemble the gear tonight: Ian felt quite tired, and he had not even been driving. It could well wait until tomorrow. By now, Jo staggered around like half-asleep too: rest was well deserved.

“I assume tomorrow you teach us all to play,” Blackhand chuckled as they were all preparing to go their separate ways.

“Sure,” Ian answered with a yawn.

In fact he was not completely sure if the Agent leader was actually being serious, but it was improbable. If Blackhand had nothing better to do, he would probably rather log more time in the combat simulator.

As they walked toward their room, Ian thought of how Jo had been mostly responsible of how the day had been successful, while he had mostly been grumpy. That should not repeat, he thought.

8.

The following morning, the situation update had been quick: nothing to report, no new files cracked and decrypted yet. No new anti-cosmic evidence uncovered. Therefore it was a perfect opportunity to set up the instruments now.

In the planning room where the gear had been moved to, Ian first propped up the stands for the PA cabinets, dropped the cabinets into place, and made the necessary connections to the mixer and the microphones. He powered on the system, pulled up the master fader, and let out a death grunt to one of the mics: the harsh yet bassy sound echoed satisfactorily in the room.

It was not that hard, after all.

Then he went to unpack the guitar and the bass, and positioned their respective amplifiers around the room – into a semicircle for now.

Meanwhile Jo assembled the drum kit. At first the individual drums and cymbal stands stood in random and unergonomic positions and directions, but iteration by iteration the situation improved. She checked the toms for correct tuning, by tapping the drum skins at each tuning screw, listening for differences in pitch.

“I don't really know what I'm doing,” she admitted.
“But Erik always did this.”

“Sounds alright to me.”

Ian was sure Erik would have made an awesome Agent. The tall, muscular drummer was a firm believer in preparation and survivalism: he had told of having a large supply of guns and ammunition stocked up for whatever disaster that might strike.

Ian was not worried of Erik's well-being: whatever SCEPTRE aimed to do, he if anyone would survive it. And of course he had no obligation whatsoever to have joined Ian and Jo. Their quest was not his. And he had every right to be angry at them.

To have Erik as an Agent, fighting by their side, would simply be good too to be true. Ian made a mental note to never dream of that again.

Jo unleashed an uneven double-kick beat. Without hearing protection, it was uncomfortably loud, especially the high frequencies of the cymbals.

They had not bought ear plugs at Axes 'n' Amps. That would have been unnecessary, actually, for the Agent firing range had plenty of those.

“I think I'm done,” Jo said. “What about you?”

“I'll tune the guitars and we're good to go. What tuning?”

Cyberpriest had tuned the guitars down one half-step, like many legendary metal bands did, too: Slayer and Decide to just name two.

“E-flat.”

If Jo wanted to pay tribute to their former band by using the same tuning, Ian definitely would not oppose. And the lower string tension made the guitars easier to play, too.

He took out a battery-powered tuning meter – that

they had at least not forgotten to purchase – and set out to tune the guitar and the bass. To be precise the neck, string height and intonation would have to be adjusted for the changed tuning, but for a quick test run that was unnecessary. They could do the thorough setup later.

“Done,” Ian said.

Possibly imitating Erik, Jo stared hard from behind the drum kit.

“What song?” she asked.

It could not be anything difficult, like “Necrothrashing Desecrator,” but something Ian could still manage after not playing for a while, and could remember even half of the lyrics to. Not to speak of what Jo could actually play on drums.

Of course, no matter how easy the song, both playing and singing at the same time would probably result in an epic fail, considering how Ian had not really practiced that ever.

“Tormentor? I might even remember the lyrics,” he said.

“Good then.”

Ian bent down to turn up the amp volume well over halfway, and checked that there was enough distortion. The Les Paul clone felt unnatural in his hands: compared to the Floyd Rose bridge in both of his previous guitars, it was harder to rest his right wrist against the strings to achieve the necessary muted, metallic sound.

But still, this one had been the best choice with their limited budget: a cheap Floyd-equipped guitar would wear out rapidly, going out of tune even after moderate tremolo bar madness.

Jo counted to four with the drum sticks, and Ian began the simple, but rapid tremolo riff.

He definitely was out of shape: even after only a few seconds, pain in his right hand became apparent. But still he was having a blast, and decided not to relent.

With a lethal frown on her face, Jo started an imprecise, evil-sounding version of the thrash beat. Ian could not help smiling: it was not that he was making fun of her, but because it was too awesome to see her thrash on the drums.

Then it was time to begin the first verse. Ian stepped up to the microphone stand.

*A sadistic cave of torture
Where no-one hears your screams
You have been chosen
To satisfy perverted needs!*

Though it hurt his throat, Ian was pleased enough with his hoarse death grunt. It was much different from what René's old-school thrash metal voice had been like. So far no missed words, either. But on the guitar Ian was only strumming the low E-string rapidly, completely forgetting the extra notes in the verse riff.

The riff moved higher up the guitar neck, while retaining the same fast pace.

*Every nerve will be used
To experience maximum pain
On the edge of life and death
As bodily fluids slowly drain!*

Next came the chorus, which contained sustained power chords over a slower, triplet double-bass drum beat.

Played by Jo, it was chaotic.
*Hanging from the chains
Toxins injected into veins
Suffer infernal pains
The Tormentor!*

Ian noticed to have swapped the second and third lines. Not that it mattered much.

But when it was time to return to the main riff and the fast beat, the song started to fall apart. It was simply impossible to get back into sync, back into the rhythm.

They ended in a cacophony of wailing feedback and crashing cymbals, slowly fading to silence. Jo made a face: Ian could not be sure how much she appreciated the humor of the situation.

Then, as Ian turned around to face the door, he noticed they were not alone. Sarge and Blowfish had appeared, and were clapping their hands.

“Uh, thanks,” Ian managed to say.

Jo said nothing, but her expression remained hateful. Musicianship was something she took rather seriously, and it seemed she did not appreciate the audience. But Ian knew he would not have managed nearly as well behind the kit: he had never played drums beyond testing how each piece sounded like, had never tried to practice actual beats. If they would continue play as a duo that included drums, this was definitely the line-up they should be using, and not the other way round.

“Yeah, sounds and looks like proper gear. I'll test it out some day. But I should be getting back to the armory,” Sarge said and took off. He probably understood that he had witnessed something he never was supposed to.

But Blowfish remained. And it was the first occasion ever in the time Ian had known her, that she looked unsure. Cautiously, she stepped from the doorway into the room.

“I would like to test the mic, if that's OK,” she said.

“Sure,” Ian replied.

Jo still said nothing.

Blowfish walked to the microphone stand, adjusted it so that it fit her height, inhaled heavily, during which her already large frame seemed to expand in every direction, and then –

She let loose a death growl that was something Ian had never before heard in his life.

It was in a class of its own.

Low and sewer-like, it was like the combination of a vacuum cleaner being supplied with too low operating voltage, and the tortured snort of some big and dangerous caged animal.

And it never seemed to end.

Ian was trying his best to suppress a laugh: the feeling was so hysterical that he knew that if he would start to laugh, he would collapse completely.

Behind the drum kit, even Jo seemed to smile vaguely. Or perhaps that was imagination, but at least the hateful face was certainly gone.

The grunt still went on. Ian estimated that it was a full twenty seconds now.

And suddenly he remembered how Blowfish had told that she liked to sing along to some death metal CD's. It had to have been an understatement: such near-perfect vocal technique and breath control did not come without diligent, focused practice.

Ian had never known the Agent BOFH to possess such hidden talent. In a way, that was a shame: all those long hours in the server room, and he had had no idea.

At last the growl faded away.

“That was ... something,” Ian said.

“I was thinking that I could try to be a vocalist. But I don't like to intrude,” Blowfish replied, still cautious.

“Sure, it's fine by me. You're not intruding,” Jo said.

“Yeah, and I get to concentrate on the playing. If you do two things at once, one of them suffers,” Ian added.

It was true: though the few verses of “Tormentor” had been fun, achieving a James Hetfield or Max Cavalera-like routine of singing and playing at the same time would take months, if not years to achieve.

“Anything we could play right now?” Blowfish asked. “Something familiar? I don't know that much, though –”

Jo's forehead got wrinkled again: Ian guessed she would not have liked to play until she had gotten more proficient, until she had practiced several hours on her own.

Ian wanted to say something to the effect that of course no-one expected her to play right away like a pro, but deduced that in the presence of Blowfish that was unwise: it could have led into violence of some degree, whether verbal, or actually physical.

“Metallica?” Ian asked, but regretted it immediately after, for he dreaded the thought of playing a standard like “Seek & Destroy” yet again. It reminded him of bad auditions, of several unsuccessful attempts to put a band together.

“No. That's not harsh enough,” Blowfish replied.

A feeling of relief.

“Slayer?” Jo suggested in turn.

That was surprising, for Slayer's drum beats belonged to the most crazy and demanding in existence. Of course short cuts could be taken while still keeping the rhythm.

“That's better. Angel of Death?” Blowfish asked.

Ian had played the song in the past, if for nothing else than checking his right hand wrist top speed. But it had been a long time ago.

"I probably don't remember half of the riffs," he said.

"It's OK, we'll see how far we get," Jo replied.

She counted in, hit the crash cymbal and kick once, and Ian started the fast tremolo riff. Officially, the song had a tempo of 210 beats per minute, and sixteenth notes at that velocity were far above his current playing stamina. He probably started even faster, but missed notes here and there: a familiar trick that had been used in Cyberpriest songs too.

As they all joined in, Blowfish substituted Tom Araya's long falsetto scream with a growl similar to the one she had unleashed before, though a little higher in pitch this time.

The double-kicks of the drum beat were all over the place, but Jo kept the tempo with even quarter notes to the snare and the hi-hat. Then, she was able to switch to a more standard thrash beat with no double-bass, and was visibly relieved.

Blowfish started to grunt out the lyrics: it was low and precise murder. Ian imagined that she would easily become a much liked frontwoman.

On the guitar front, Ian knew he was playing a lot of the riffs incorrectly, but did not mind.

They managed fine up until the slow-down section after the second chorus, during which his mistakes got so severe that it was no longer possible to know where the song was going: the beat turned upside down several times, and Blowfish could not find the correct place to come in with her vocals.

Reluctantly, they all stopped.

But it had not been bad for a first time, and the song was definitely a challenging one.

Afterward, Blowfish was red from exertion. Ian had read about "proper" death metal singing and knew she

probably used her stomach muscles heavily to direct the strain away from the throat.

“That felt good,” she confessed.

They most certainly had a vocalist now. Ian had no wish to go back behind the mic.

Jo got up from behind the drum kit, after loosening the hi-hat and the snare mechanism. It had been enough playing for now, it seemed: she definitely looked exhausted as well, with sweat running down her face. It reminded Ian of how she used to look after Cyberpriest shows.

He put the guitar down, turned the amplifier off, and noticed his ears were ringing. The room had hardboard panels on the walls, behind which was concrete: the acoustics were not pleasant at all, but rather seemed to amplify the harshest frequencies.

Ian had destroyed some of his hearing throughout the years of playing, but now his life could depend on some quiet sound alerting him to danger. Next time it paid to use ear plugs.

But now it had been appropriate not to. To feel the full power and rage of their new instruments at least once.

Of course it was possible that Blackhand was right, that there would not really be any more time to play. If the SCEPTRE files would start cracking left and right, if more leads came up, it could well be that this would be the last session they could manage.

But one session was still better than nothing.

“Theoretically, it's a simple mission,” Blackhand said. “Observe the band and see if they have any SCEPTRE connections. Or if the festival itself has. Of course, if there aren't any, it's straightforward. You enjoy the music at your discretion, then return to base. But if there are –”

Ian was slowly becoming irritated by the briefing, which was taking place in the Agent van. Blackhand was restating the perfectly obvious.

“Then it's your call how far to follow them. If there are any suspicious communications, try to intercept. And if you can do that undetected, the better. But don't take unnecessary risks. Abort if there is danger. I believe this war's only starting and the proper leads are still about to come up, so I don't want to lose you right in the beginning. Of course, I don't want to lose you at any later point either.”

They were slightly over thirty miles north from the HQ: the van idled in front of a gas station. Across the road there was a car rental, where Ian and Jo would acquire a vehicle for the trip to the festival, which itself was some two hundred more into the north.

It was now 1 PM on Friday: the metal mayhem was

scheduled to start at 4 PM and last well into the night. But Black Dragon would not play until tomorrow evening, so there was a good opportunity to just observe on the first day, go in unarmed as paying visitors. Then, on Saturday, infiltrate the backstage with guns at hand.

Even if the last-minute heads-up was not that pleasing, Ian was glad that they would not be responsible for the well-being of an Agent vehicle for the duration of the mission.

“Unless you signal otherwise, we pick you up from this same location, the same time, on Sunday. That should give you a head-start for recovering from any hangover,” Blackhand chuckled at his own joke.

Ian was not very amused, but nodded in understanding. Of course they would abstain from drinking if there were actual SCEPTRE asses to be kicked. But it seemed as if Blackhand believed this mission – like the previous – to be unnecessary from the start, and expected the two to be drowning the inevitable disappointment in alcohol.

On normal field ops the Agents could carry their full, satellite-based communications gear, which allowed a two-way audio and video feed back to the headquarters. But now Ian and Jo had with them only prepaid cell phones with Internet access. As a security precaution, cell phones were never used in the HQ, and the signal probably would not even have carried underground. In the case of any unexpected trouble or change in plans, they were to send email to a preagreed account, which the Agents in the home base would regularly check through an encrypted TCP/IP connection.

In any case, if help was hundred and fifty miles away, they practically had to manage on their own.

Actually, more than SCEPTRE and their firepower, right now Ian thought of possible trouble posed by the regular authorities: the prospect of being thrown into a cold county cell, the guns confiscated and the forged nature of their identities revealed.

“Good luck, Agents,” Blackhand said finally as Ian and Jo exited the vehicle.

Then the van sped away, leaving the two under the cold and bright midday skies. Their breath formed clouds: Ian's long leather coat was comfortable enough, but Jo's shorter and lighter jacket and plastic trousers seemed unfit for the weather. Of course, she had chosen the outfit herself and had probably weighted the pros and cons of looking the part of a grim and frostbitten black metal she-vampire.

The makeup of Nikki and Duncan had been reapplied. Ian had opted for no corpse paint yet and so had Jo, but it was still open what the evening might bring. In any case, the paint was stored securely in the backpacks they carried. The backpacks also held their pistols and ammunition, tools, and some hand grenades.

Now that Ian thought of it, he was not satisfied with his cover name. Though it had somewhat fit the earlier rocker persona, Duncan was not vampiric at all.

“Hey, should we have, like black metal names? In case someone asks. I would be Crucifier. You could be Frost,” he said to Jo as they crossed the road.

“Sounds good. Or what about Ravenna for me?”

“Ugh.” Ian scowled: the name was so bad it was good.

Crucifier and Ravenna, then.

If there was no SCEPTRE activity, maybe they could amuse themselves by provoking some dedicated death metal fans into a fight by overt black metal posturing.

“Let's see. Economy, two days, that will be \$110,” the clerk said firmly. “Please fill this. And I also need to see ID.”

Considering the depressive small-town surroundings: the dilapidated gas station, some stores and then the rental, he was dressed in an unnecessarily tidy manner, including a sharply pressed white shirt.

Ian filled the slip of paper with carefully memorized false information. Of course, as long as the basics checked out, it did not really matter what he wrote. Duncan and Nikki would not exist after this weekend.

The clerk eyed the driver's license for a seemingly long time, but as he handed it back, Ian realized it had only been a few seconds. He was not feeling anxious, but rather unnaturally calm and controlled.

In the state he was right now, others seemed to act much too slowly. That was the dissociated mental state of an assassin. Agent-time, then, was its extreme form: the sensation of time slowing down almost to a halt during combat.

Ian handed over the cash.

“Thank you. Here you go.”

Now, the keys were in his palm. The dissociation faded and left Ian with an odd sense of not being exactly there.

“Come on,” Jo said. It was now her who thought things were moving too slowly. Better that way. They exited, walked the short distance to the age-worn and angular, completely unremarkable gray Ford waiting in the yard.

Ian had a sense of déjà-vu, of the same things having happened before. Now he was behind the wheel of a sedan instead of the Agency van, but still, his thoughts

circled a previous, well-worn path.

The joy of yet another set of names, as well as renting the car without a sign of trouble, had dissipated. And he was left with a slow-burning negativity eating his soul. Probably brought by Blackhand's last-minute briefing, his dislike toward the Agency had returned with a vengeance.

And not only dislike toward them, but dislike toward himself for feeling that way.

So early on a mission. It was not a good sign.

He tried to think of Blowfish's awesome death grunt, how Sarge was always relaxed and cool, how even Blackhand was acceptable most of the time –

But it did not help much.

The burning dislike could possibly be some insidious backup programming by SCEPTRE.

At least Ian was glad to never have disliked Jo.

In a world of conspiracy, Agent warfare and anti-cosmic occultism, to have her stand by his side was something beautifully uncomplicated. Ian reminded himself to be thankful for that. In fact, he succeeded so well that he found tears forming in his eyes.

One of them fell down his cheek, and in his peripheral vision he saw Jo turn – she had noticed.

“What is it?” she asked softly.

Ian imagined himself at a mental crossroads.

He could open up at last, or then invent some very dumb excuse. Or perhaps shut up altogether. In hindsight, he could have prevented the tears by imagining torture, or by using the familiar phrase –

Focus! You're a killer!

But no, not this time. He would see where this would lead, if Jo truly meant what she had said. That they could talk about anything. If not, he could exact re-

venge by playing the role of misanthropic and sulking Crucifier to the maximum.

“You know how I question everything, what's real in my past and what's not. How the SCEPTRE training has left me broken. And how I'm so fucking emo sometimes.”

Jo nodded.

“But now I – doubt the Agency too. It just gets on my nerves sometimes, how grand and important it and what we're doing is supposed to be. I'm afraid that it hits right in the middle of action, when SCEPTRE are riddling us with gunfire and I just flip out and think 'fuck you all' and take off, not giving a shit any more,” Ian explained in a guttural voice.

“I see. But –”

Jo paused, as if to gather strength. “I'm still sure you wouldn't leave me in trouble. See, now that's me being emo.”

Ian kept his eyes fixed on the road. “Yeah, but only in so small amounts. It's me who always doubts. It's me who needs support. You could just keep going. You don't really need me. You never have.”

There was an uneasy storm of emotions inside him, gathering force. Each word had been harder than the previous, both in tone and to get out of his mouth. Now he probably did not want to speak even one word more. Or to look to his side.

He just wanted to drive forward like there was no tomorrow. The festival waited. SCEPTRE waited.

This session of revelations had not exactly ended well. Jo had commended him of never pushing her away, but now he had pretty much done exactly that. Ian turned on the radio and started fiddling with the station search.

Reception was not the best, but at last he found something suitably harsh. His gaze was harsh too, focused strictly on the road. That was in the character of Crucifier.

10.

A moderate-sized crowd had gathered outside for the Frozen Hell Festival. The doors were not open yet, though it was getting close to 4 PM.

The venue was a dome-shaped indoor sports hall, mostly snow-covered now but with enough of the gray concrete showing through to know it was no design masterpiece. For this weekend, the only sports it would be seeing would be mosh pits and walls of deaths, maybe some brawls.

And perhaps a gunfight between the Agents and SCEPTRE.

The sky was cloudy now: gusts of wind blew snow with them. Floodlights were already on around the hall, lighting it and the adjacent parking lot up harshly. But there should be still be routes around their beams, for opportunities to sneak under the cover of darkness.

Ian and Jo had arrived in quite good time. But before it was time to go in, they had to find a place to stay, at least for the Friday – Saturday night. They would miss the first band at least partially, but that would not be the end of the world.

Ian turned the car around in the not-so-full parking lot, and the mission location got left behind for now.

Even with the weekend coming, this northern city seemed unusually, even ominously quiet.

The motel room was theirs until Sunday noon. This time there had been no need to show ID, and filling the visitor card with Nikki's and Duncan's information was already becoming routine.

As soon as they entered, Jo took an electromagnetic analyzer from the backpack and scanned the pieces of furniture dutifully.

According to the device, the room was not bugged.

Following the rules of fieldcraft Blackhand and Sarge had taught them helped to relieve the anxiety, Ian knew. Unknown danger could still lurk at the festival, but at least they knew not to have compromised themselves right here because of carelessness.

"What's the system? Do we get wristbands?" he asked. In truth he could guess the answer, but wanted just something to break the silence.

"Yeah. Free going in and out throughout the day. Of course they check us each time. And no own drinks," Jo replied flatly as she put the analyzer away.

It was preferable that way: they could go in first unarmed, but even on the first day, if the situation demanded so, they could leave, get the weapons, and return for some serious infiltration.

Already as they drove back to the parking lot, Ian could see something was not exactly OK. The crowd in the front had grown larger, but stood mostly immobile.

A rumbling bassy sound came from the inside: it was half past 4 PM and the first band was well into its set.

The two exited and Ian locked the car.

Now he could see the situation with more clarity:

only one set of double doors to the hall was open, and people were being admitted in with painful slowness.

The wind had not relented. Already now it was colder than when they had arrived at the motel. It seemed that Frozen Hell would live up to its name.

Ian and Jo walked to the construction site hut that served as the ticket booth. At least that part of the arrangements worked fairly well: soon they were \$150 poorer, wearing white wristbands with the text "FROZEN HELL FESTIVAL" in a Gothic font.

The queue to the entrance was long and irregular, still not moving much. It did not matter much if they went into it now or a few minutes later.

Security personnel strolled around in an idle manner.

Ian guessed Jo would soon start to feel very much cold and miserable, if she already was not. Ian recalled his harsh words in the car: the least he could do to make up for them would be to wrap his longer and warmer coat around her.

But that would not be grim. They could be observed: now was not the time to break character.

Ian turned instead to the direction of the large poster on the wall, showing the program. Only Jo had studied what little info existed on the festival's home page, while he had researched more of anti-cosmic mythology instead. Therefore, Ian knew only Black Dragon and the headliners of each day.

The poster was mostly white, with an uninviting blue-tinted winter forest in the background. The text was black, with more of the Gothic lettering.

Seeing the names of the headliners brought a giddy feeling to Ian's stomach. For a fleeting instant, SCEPTRE was completely forgotten. Of course Nargaroht

would have been doubly as legendary, but these definitely were not bad either.

Now Ian cursed himself: why had he not thought about the headliners when he was feeling all negative during the trip here? He scanned the poster once more, trying to memorize all the bands:

FROZEN HELL METAL FESTIVAL

7th – 8th December 2012

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

Paradoxical Execution

Bloodfiend

Miasma Of Blood

Osama Bin Satan

Mental Laceration

Arterial Bloodspray

Absolved Of Life

Ex Inferis

ChaosWitch

Megatherium

Lord Crucifier

Pagan Monolith

Machiavellian Hate

Black Dragon

Torturator

Fée Verte

Mayhem

Immortal

Next to him, Jo gave a conspiratorial smile. “Most of those names are very kvlt,” she whispered.

If she was in good spirits and held no lasting grudge over his previous outburst, that was naturally good.

“Osama Bin Satan. Has to be true underground terrorist black metal. Mental Laceration, I’ve seen them once. I didn’t appreciate them then, we’ll see if they’ve improved,” Ian replied.

It was when Cyberpriest had still been a trio.

“Yeah, if we’re in yet when they start playing. But at least there’s no Blasphemer.”

The thought of Blasphemer surely brought back

memories. A four-piece black 'n' roll band, a legend in its own right. On the seven-day tour, there had been open hostility between Cyberpriest and them, mostly thanks to the bad blood between René and their vocalist Tyrant. Once there had been an actual fight.

But it all belonged to the past now. It was probably not a good idea to think of anything related to Cyberpriest for too long.

“Should we circle the outside before we go in?” Jo asked.

“Could arouse suspicion. Let's do that later when it's dark. Also, we'll get a pretty good idea of the layout from the inside.”

At this point Ian noticed something curious. Some people were abandoning the queue, heading away from the hall. They appeared to be going for another building, rectangular and two-story, some hundred and fifty meters away.

According to the large, lit sign which was perfectly visible from the distance, it was an indoor swimming pool. Why would grim metalheads get the sudden urge to go for a swim? But then, there seemed to be the same festival security personnel, in their orange vests, around that building too.

“What are those people doing?” Ian asked.

“That's the part which has raised the most amount of hate so far. There's no food or drink available at the venue. Instead it's being served in the lobby of that swimming pool.”

Ian shook his head. Either that was a display of very poor arranging skill, or a deliberate move to get the festival-goers as angry as possible. To pit more, to drink more, to get into a state where they would hurt themselves and each other.

He thought of SCEPTRE.

It would definitely fit their way of operations. Like the assassin training, where trainees had been humiliated and irritated, brought to the edge with any imaginable and unimaginable means available.

But no. He needed better proof of conspiracy.

“Wow. That certainly sucks. But shall we go?”

“To the queue, you mean?” Jo asked to confirm.

Ian gave a misanthropic nod and began to walk toward the queue's end. He did not want to attempt to jump it – he did not want to fight just yet.

Somehow he guessed that even with no SCEPTRE, there could arise plenty of opportunity to fight later. Though metalheads mostly were not violent by design. Instead of being a part of SCEPTRE's nefarious plans, the festival could just as well be a cruel sociology experiment unfolding before their eyes.

He and Jo settled to wait.

The rumble from the inside faded away. Paradoxical Execution had just finished their set.

Several minutes passed. The mass of people moved forward a bit, but there was no real sense of progress. Ian could not see the doors, but apparently people were still being admitted in. All the time, the impatient were leaving. Most of those who remained, grumbled heavily.

They waited.

They waited some more.

Jo began to shiver. Ian tried to position himself as to block the wind, but it was not easy: the direction kept shifting all the time. At least the excruciatingly slow forward motion still went on. The wall and the entrance were definitely getting closer, but it could still take another ten minutes at least.

Several more people left the queue.

Hateful chatter and some louder shouts still went on, but they were dying down, were becoming quieter and more infrequent, as apathy set in. But at least some Hessians used the situation in their full advantage: they drank their beers with no hurry in the world.

Frozen Hell indeed.

“Es ist Krieg,” Jo said as she started jumping in place, her breath pluming in the freezing air.

Ian could only nod in response.

In the end, the guess of ten more minutes was mostly accurate. At last the queue started moving faster, and Ian and Jo found themselves at the doors.

The security guards verified that the two had valid wristbands, performed a pat down, examined Ian's metal armbands with some hostile curiosity, but as they were not actually spiked or otherwise dangerous, could not find no reason to forbid entry.

Finally, they were in.

11.

The inside of the hall was dark, and not terribly warm either. As there were no counters for food or drinks, the only light besides emergency exits was the one coming from the stage, where the equipment of Miasma Of Blood was still being assembled. It was over 5 PM: the band was supposed to have started some time ago.

If the timetable was already lagging at this point, the lag would probably get much more severe later in the night. And that was worrying: local laws probably set a limit how late each day of the festival could last, so Mayhem could get the short end of the stick and have no time left to play.

If Ian missed them because of that, it was a good reason to start a small-scale war.

“Looks spartan,” Jo said, looking around.

“Tell me about it.”

As Ian's eyes got used to the dark, he could see the rows of seats circling the hall: somehow they too looked depressive. A few were sitting up in the stands, motionless and seemingly apathetic. Most of the crowd was gathered in the front of the stage, however.

Somehow Ian doubted that he would find any trace of SCEPTRE here.

Jo walked on, toward the stage, and he followed.

It was a comparatively long time since Ian last had the opportunity to just watch bands. Or at least a lot had happened in the meanwhile. He decided to take in every detail.

A large black and white backdrop sheet behind the drum kit displayed Miasma Of Blood's logo: the letters were like squirming worms, but still actually legible.

But behind that was another, larger sheet, colored in more subdued fashion: very dark gray on black.

Ian could not see its exact center, as it was covered by the band's sheet, but there most certainly was a large equilateral triangle. And a circle inside it.

That could mean only one the thing in the world.

Ian fought a light wave of nausea, as his pulse quickened because of the sighting. The symbol was still triggering. He forced himself to breath deep.

He leaned closer to Jo.

"SCEPTRE," he whispered. "Their sign is on the large sheet behind."

Jo betrayed no visible reaction, no shock. She nodded just a little.

Now there was no reason to question the value of this mission any longer. Instead, there was every reason to be alert every second.

The presence of the symbol here led to startling conclusions: not only there was an anti-cosmic band playing, but SCEPTRE had a hand in organizing this festival. And by displaying the symbol in public, they were giving a message of some kind.

But of what? And to whom? To all metalheads brave or masochistic enough to have arrived here?

In any case, it reminded Ian of the clock ticking to the 21st. Whatever it was, it seemed like their enemies

were preparing to make their existence known in one way or another.

“Let's be careful,” he whispered again. “Just enjoy the music, and grumble like everyone else. But at the same time, observe without giving away that we're observing.”

Right after saying this, Ian thought of something uneasy: a directional “spy” microphone could probably easily pick up their whispers, especially now when there was no live music. And hidden cameras could be watching the crowd.

Then, later, when they least expected, black ops could descend on them in an instant and slit their throats. Or a silenced sniper might take them out.

He definitely wished to have a gun at hand.

Mixed in the crowd, they would be less likely targets. But what if there were killers in the crowd?

The crew did not act like they were in especial hurry: now the gear was in place, and the sound check started as usual. The sound man took his time in adjusting the kick and snare, diligently sweeping through the mid-range frequencies with the EQ.

Then the guitar and the heavily distorted bass.

Finally, a very quick check of vocals.

At half past 5 PM the show started. Only half an hour late.

Miasma Of Blood turned out to be technical death metal. Not a bad start. A commanding and brutal sound blasted out from the PA, and the crowd inched closer. Several in the stands overcame their apathy and came down to the floor.

The bald, black-clad vocalist started his ultra-low grunting.

A mosh pit formed.

Ian and Jo got close to the edge of the pit, to a spot where there was a roughly equal distribution of people in all directions: they were obscured for the most part, and therefore safe.

Ian lifted his hand to the air, making the horn sign, let out a growl, and banged his head –

But it felt like he was acting. It felt like dissociating.

Jo had a somewhat easier role: she only had to look cold and grim, and could well stay in place. Ravenna did not perhaps appreciate death metal much, but waited for a truer genre to take over.

Ian decided to stay in place, too. A hateful metal police, his hands in a bunch after the initial surge of excitement: that was within credible.

He found himself anticipating the song structures: most of them were predictable, but that was not to say they were bad in any way.

But still, this could be a long night.

Of course, soon they would go to stake out the place, to locate the backstage and any good entrances they could use.

Just some more death metal first. There was no hurry.

As a double-kick beat started, accompanied by strobe lights, Ian became aware of a male Hessian in his peripheral vision, who was staring at him – or was he? – in an unsettling way.

The man looked roughly the same height and age as him, was dressed in a dark denim jacket, and had long hair too, jet black, but something in his eyes was not right.

Ian was quite certain that the man was a SCEPTRE trainee. Had he recognized Ian somehow, despite the darkness and the disguise?

Mental Laceration was still the same as before. The odd rhythm changes still took Ian by surprise, the vocalist was still stick-thin and insulted the crowd at every turn.

Trying to avoid giving away what they were doing, Ian and Jo walked around, surveying the venue. The security at the stage barrier was the quite the normal: usually at least two guards were on the lookout.

From under the stands there was a possible way in, though, if they timed it right. But going from the inside meant going without guns.

Not preferable.

During the gear change they sat above, watching.

Behind the stands, Ian noticed there were more of the large sheets with the triangle-circle-dot symbols on them.

Absolved Of Life was the first proper black metal act of the night. As the band started, Ian and Jo descended back into the crowd. Ian kept an eye for the black-haired Hessian reappearing, but he appeared to have vanished for now.

Each member of the band wore corpse paint, and the vocalist was dressed in what looked like burial sheets. His shriek was otherworldly, and his lyrics suicidal.

As I walk this grim path

The grave calls for me...

These lyrics inspired Ravenna to come closer to Crucifier and squeeze his buttocks. In response, Crucifier put his hand misanthropically around her waist, and then they just stood there, enjoying the tremolo guitars and the shrieks over at times slow and mournful, at other times hyper-blasting drum beats.

As the black metal set list drew toward its end, as the long and epic closing song titled “Final Winter – The Reaping” was being played, Ian found his stomach churning.

“What’s the next band like?” he asked.

“ChaosWitch is like – NWOBHM combined with a bit of everything. Black, death, some thrash. I listened to one song from them and it was quite unusual,” Jo replied.

“Anti-cosmic?”

“Don’t think so. The lyrics are mostly about pagan rituals and respecting the nature.”

“OK then. What about we go to eat at this point?”

“I don’t oppose.”

The last suicidal shriek faded out: Ian and Jo walked out, back into the freezing wind. It was already dark: in contrast the glare of the halogen floodlights was disturbingly harsh.

Ian was mindful of the possibility of a sniper.

There were no other high buildings around for a long distance, except the indoor swimming pool, their target. He scanned the roof quickly –

And noticed he could not see much.

At this point, the Agent sunglasses would have been much welcome, especially the light amplification and zoom functions. But they had been left back at the HQ. Could they have passed for civilian glasses?

Not really, Ian knew. The rims were too thick, and there was a cord for connecting into the radio gear that was usually concealed within the Agent coat.

Therefore they just had to cross the hundred and fifty meters distance while fulfilling the dual task of not being too easy targets, but not appearing suspicious either.

It was mentally grueling. Perhaps the worry was for no reason, but still Ian felt sweat running down his back.

Thankfully, at last they were at the entrance. There was another security check, less thorough, and they were admitted in.

The food was nothing to write home about. There were the basic, carcinogenic festival foods available: fried fish, kebab, meatballs, slices of pizza. It was just that one had to wait for it for a long time.

Any drinks had to be consumed here: they could not be brought back into the hall. One small bar served alcoholic beverages, and it was also highly congested with Hessians waiting their turn.

Ian clocked the waiting time exactly: seven minutes six seconds was what it took from the door until he could name his order. He ordered a large portion of kebab and rice, while Jo took two large slices of a pizza.

They sat to eat at a table in one corner, one that had no windows in the vicinity. Most of the lobby had large windows going from the floor to the ceiling, leaving those inside in perfect view. Ian knew safety was partially an illusion: a heavy round could still penetrate the masonry.

Their backs were turned to the wall so that they could keep an eye on the crowd. Ian made sure to look utterly disinterested, and Jo followed his lead.

"Lord Crucifier is old-school thrash," she said to lighten up the uneasy mood. "They split up like more than twenty years ago. But now they're playing here."

"Deserves respect," Ian replied, secretly amused by the coincidence with his codename.

As he was finishing up his meal, Ian kept scanning the ever-moving crowd, and was sure of not sighting

any more potential SCEPTRE trainees here. Just metal-heads of all ages, most of them frustrated by the slow service. The black-haired one had been an isolated incident, or then a false warning.

Just as Ian had finished this thought, the man in question entered the lobby.

12.

Ian felt almost like time freezing still. Agent-time. But not quite. The intense adrenaline surge compelled him to bolt upright from his seat. But barely, he managed to stay in place, hoping to have given away no reaction.

In her chair, Jo shifted just a bit. Could have been just a coincidence, and naturally, if only she noticed his sudden agitation, it was OK.

Ian had not told her of the Hessian. Of his suspicion.

The man looked around, seemingly unsure of what he wanted. Ian was aware of his heart pounding with almost painful force, as if everyone in the lobby could hear it. But perhaps the man just wanted to get drunk.

No such luck.

He turned and locked eyes with Ian.

They burned – not with malevolence, but with cold nothingness, something that Ian could well think of as the famous Black Light mentioned in anti-cosmic texts and lyrics.

It looked like the absence of any emotion. Definitely a SCEPTRE trainee, and possibly graduated as a black op. He was roughly five meters away, standing in place, but looked as if he would take a step forward any moment.

Ian had to do something.

“What are you staring at, piss-head?” he said roughly.

That could lead to a fight.

Which could lead to ejection from the festival area.

The stare lasted for two more seconds. Then, without a word, the man turned away and went to the bar.

“What was that all about?” Jo asked.

Ian motioned for them to rise. “Nothing. Some weird asshole.”

Back outside. Jo stared at Ian inquisitively, waiting for the proper answer that was yet to come.

“I’m ninety-nine percent sure that was a SCEPTRE trainee. Not like me, but one who finished the training. You saw his eyes too.”

Jo’s forehead wrinkled for an instant. “Do you think he recognized you? Knows you?”

“I wish I knew. I don’t remember any faces from my training, except –”

“Lucas? You told me of the flashbacks.” Jo’s voice was a mixture of curiosity and concern. She knew the subject was not pleasant.

“Yeah. Him and Suhrim.”

Ian had once thought of Lucas as his best friend, but later it had appeared that Ian had known very little of him. As teenagers, they had trained together under SCEPTRE’s control, had been forced to fight each other, and flashbacks of that fight had first alerted Ian of something being not quite right with his past.

Later, after Ian’s extraction by the Agents, SCEPTRE had somehow found him again, and assigned Lucas to watch over him. Lucas had been finally killed by the guns of Blackhand and Sarge in the Hades Club, but be-

fore that he had made Ian unknowingly swallow a tracking device. Thankfully it was now disabled, fried by the same EMP that had disabled SCEPTRE's explosive devices at the rehearsal space.

"Is there something we can do? Or something I can?" Jo asked.

"Nothing special I can think of. Just watch out, doubly so."

"If we meet him again, should we try to question him? Just very friendly..."

"We could probably kick his ass. But I believe he would never talk, and couldn't, even. The programming prevents him remembering anything SCEPTRE doesn't want him to," Ian answered flatly.

They were back at the hall entrance.

Suddenly Ian realized he had let his guard down. He had not scanned for possible enemies. Tomorrow that could be fatal.

But tomorrow they would have guns.

After the harrowing experience in the lobby, the traditionally-influenced metal of ChaosWitch was much welcome. The two guitarists would alternate seamlessly between harmonized leads and low, crunching rhythms, while the left-side one vocalized in a style somewhere between black and thrash metal.

Surprisingly, there was little or no Gothenburg in it at all, but rather the influences were directly from earlier eras: Iron Maiden, Venom, early Slayer and Death.

While the other half of Ian's brain followed the music, the other kept looking for anything unusual. Once or twice he saw someone who acted like he or she could have also been a trainee, but maybe it was just his imagination gearing up to the hyperactive.

"I'd like to have composed that," Jo said after a harmony riff that switched between several minor keys, creating an occultistic, yet beautiful atmosphere.

"I say you will compose much better shit."

A slightly uneasy silence followed. That implied a future which they might not have.

Following an extended solo in the last song, which consisted of both dual and alternated parts between the guitarists, the set list ended. A small, dedicated audience closest to the stage cheered wildly, while most stayed indifferent.

"ChaosWitch! ChaosWitch! We want more! We want more!"

Ian wondered how essential it was for a band name to have exactly three syllables, so that it was easy for the crowd to chant repeatedly. Cyberpriest had fit into that category, too. Two or four were also good, but left no room for pause and therefore risked the audience running out of breath.

By now the night was well over halfway, and Ian's earlier fear had been confirmed: the timetable was definitely lagging even more now. At this rate, it would be well past midnight when Mayhem would start.

Lord Crucifier was next. Old-school thrash. The equipment change still did not happen in any hurry.

"Seems like they don't even try to make up for the lost time," Jo observed.

"Yeah. It's odd."

They observed the gear setup for some more time.

"Should we check the outside now? So that we're ready for tomorrow. Now it's as dark as it gets," Jo said.

Ian nodded in agreement.

Back outside, there was slightly less crowd than when Ian and Jo had gone out to eat, but those who re-

mained were getting noisier. Some were digging out cans of beer from stashes buried under the snow, and drinking whenever security was not looking their way.

It did not feel out of place to be circling around the dome: several metalheads were doing just the same, drinking and cursing and urinating freely. With some care, the beams of the floodlights could be avoided.

They circled to the side opposite the entrance, where the transports of the bands stood: mostly vans, but at least ChaosWitch had a minibus: ornately decorated with flowers and pagan symbols.

Two security guards stood dutifully at the loading dock. There was no easy way in from the back.

"It's probably easiest to get in with stolen backstage passes," Jo said.

"From whom?"

"We'll have to look for the opportunity. But keep thinking of other ideas in case it doesn't work out."

Ian did not like this: the passes would be needed for the whole time they stayed in the backstage, and the original owners would no doubt notice soon after the theft. Or if the passes would be taken by force instead, it would raise all sorts of hell. But still, he could not think of anything better immediately.

Their scouting complete, they returned inside to the anonymity of the crowd. On the stage, Lord Crucifier was almost halfway to its set. Despite the musicians' age, they thrashed with ferocity, and a circle pit was constantly running close to the front.

Still, Ian could not find himself excited: the possible extreme difficulty of getting into the backstage troubled him. In a manner, open Agent warfare was easier than this subterfuge: go in with guns blazing, with all the tools and gadgets necessary.

It was almost funny: he had after all infiltrated two above top secret underground installations, had survived several gunfights, but here the orange-clad security guards, likely unarmed save for something very tame like pepper spray, suddenly posed a huge challenge.

“What are the last two bands? Before Mayhem, I mean,” Ian asked Jo.

Jo had to raise her voice over the thrash. “Machiavelian Hate is hateful death metal. Supposedly, there are NS influences in the lyrics. I don't have high hopes for that one. But then there's Torturator –”

There was joyful excitement in her eyes. “They're unholy alcoholic primitive black metal from Brazil. I don't think that's something you want to miss.”

Ian could not help a grin. For the moment at least, the trouble on his mind was gone. It sounded like there was an awesome show coming even before Mayhem.

As Lord Crucifier finished, Ian noticed the change in the atmosphere. More people were coming in now, even if the outside had felt deserted just less than an hour before. There was aggression and excitement: it had to be due to the headliner show getting closer and closer.

He wondered if there would be pig heads or something similarly evil on the stage. Hopefully.

But he definitely was thirsty now, and his senses were getting dull after all that standing. That was not good if SCEPTRE was present at the hall.

“Shall we go drink something?” he said.

“Some frozen beers? Grim...”

Jo still remembered, still had the energy to be in character. Ian mostly did not, at this point.

“Yeah.”

In reality, an energy drink would be a much better choice. But for anyone listening, they were – hopefully – just another pair of metalheads preparing for the first day's climax.

Outside again.

Ian chose a route that was as dark as possible – thermal imaging would still get them, though – and tried to blend in with others walking in the same direction.

This time too, they made it to the swimming pool lobby without incident. It was there Ian made a curious observation: people were leaving in large numbers right after arriving, clearly agitated. Swearwords filled the air.

Then he noticed the improvised signs – large sheets of paper – next to the counters.

FOOD AND DRINK SOLD OUT

“Screw them,” he muttered.

The idea of the sociology experiment returned to his mind: maybe the organizers wanted the crowd to truly riot before witnessing the awesomeness that was Mayhem. That would be a risky strategy, though: even without SCEPTRE's presence, someone could end up dead before the night was over.

Jo shook her head, disappointed as well. There was not much to do except to return to the hall and wait.

Machiavellian Hate was mostly like Ian had imagined: death metal stripped to its basics, with all the necessary elements but not much inspiration. There was not even the enjoyment of ultra-technicality: the songs all stayed within sane tempos. The vocals, though hateful, were in a middle pitch range, not sewer-like at all.

At least the instruments looked evil: both the guitarist and the bassist had X-shaped B.C. Rich Beast

models. Compared to the Warlock model Ian had once possessed, the Beast was more irregular, and thus perhaps more wicked-looking.

Jo spoke up close to his ear. "I've been thinking – Torturator could be the best candidate. If we have luck, they'll arrive soon to the festival."

Best candidate for stealing passes, Ian understood. Drunken black metallers might not be that careful.

"But how do you know they're not already here?"

"I don't. But it shouldn't matter. All we need is one lapse in their alertness. But anyway, I believe it's worth checking out. If it doesn't work out, then it doesn't."

Ian nodded. It was time for the second trip to the back of the dome.

“That's them,” Jo said and pointed at the new bus that had arrived, black in color.

They were crouching low behind a ridge of snow, before a downhill slope that led to the artist parking lot and the backstage loading area. There was no actual band logo on the bus, just a huge white inverted cross in the back that had no windows. Where the deadwhite throne on wheels was situated.

Ian imagined the smell. A drunken black metal toilet could not smell good.

There was a rather good cover of darkness. A single guard watched over the artists' vehicles, but did not seem especially alert.

“What's the plan?” Ian asked.

“There's two of us. Either you or me could do some kind of diversion, while the other gets inside the bus.”

“What if it's locked? Or even if it's open, the windows are too dark. I can't see if the band is inside or not. And we don't know if they already have their passes or not.”

“Think positive,” Jo whispered. “And have patience. We still have a lot of time.”

In the even colder weather, in the wind that showed

no signs of dying down, the idea of waiting was not pleasant.

"Aren't you feeling cold?" Ian asked.

"Yeah, but –"

Without further word, Ian wrapped his now open leather coat around Jo. "That is Crucifier the vampire spreading his black wings over you."

They waited some more, observing. The guard circled the whole parking lot: in theory he would be easy to avoid, but that had to coincide with the bus being ready for raiding.

Ian could see a faint light flicker inside the bus, then go out. It was not imagination. The band was inside. Now to just wait for them to come out, hopefully with their artist passes not on them, but still inside.

"Do you know if the artists are allowed to drink at the backstage area?" Ian asked.

"Should be. There would be mutiny otherwise."

"Damn." It would have been ideal for the band to be forced to drink on the outside. But then again, it was also possible that their passes were still waiting within the confines of the hall. Too much rested on guesswork. And there could likely be only one attempt.

One painfully long minute passed without anything happening.

Then, the door of the bus opened.

Now that the moment was here, it felt like it was too soon. They certainly could have spent more time in planning. But still, the tingle of adrenaline was almost pleasant: right now facing an alcoholic Brazilian black metal outfit felt just like the right level of Agent challenge to Ian.

Beside him, Jo was ready and alert as well. "I'll distract them," she said. "You go search the bus."

Ian made no protest: the blond-haired Ravenna would probably be irresistible to the hopefully already drunk musicians. Of course it had potential to get ugly, but now it was not time to worry if she could handle it. Him being caught red-handed inside the bus, or finding nothing there would be far more worrying.

Again, the Agent sunglasses would have been useful, to zoom in and see already now if Torturator had the passes hanging from their clothes. But no such option.

Three black-clad and long-haired men exited through the bus door.

“Is that all of them?” Ian asked in a quick whisper.

“Yeah. They're a trio. I'm going now,” Jo replied and started a walk down the slope.

Ian searched for the guard.

Where was he?

It was not good to have to guess, but Ian could wait no longer. He just had to pick a direction from which to circle around and approach the bus.

Left? Or right?

In the end Ian chose left simply because there was more empty space there, while the dome and the back-stage with their additional guards were to the right. If the guard came from the left, from behind some vehicle, there could still be an opportunity to hide.

Ian started a crouch-run to the parking lot.

He took a glance to his side: Jo was approaching the trio, hips swaying in an exaggerated manner. Truly vampiric.

“Hey guys – you look like you could be just what I've been looking for. You probably don't know how shitty it's up there?” Jo said as she pointed to the direction of the dome. “There's no more drinks at all. Can you imagine, how fucked up is that? Well, it was just some lame

flat beer anyway. But – if you'd have anything stronger, I'd be glad to join you.”

Ian was behind one of the vans now, looking at the backside of Torturator's bus. He saw the guard to be at the far end of his round. The timing would be tight, as he would pass the front of the bus soon after Ian could possibly attempt entry.

Jo kept her distance, forcing Torturator to come closer to her. Good thinking. The one in the front, a shorter, curly-haired man, possibly the band leader, raised a bottle in his hand.

“Sure. But of course we don't drink with anyone. With you we could make an exception. You could join us inside.”

That was not good. Ian had to make his move fast. Hopefully Jo could stall them or persuade otherwise.

He started another sprint, to the driver side of the bus now. The guard was emerging from the light of the loading area back to the darkness of the parking lot.

“You're not afraid of me I hope? I don't bite. But I see you were going to drink one round outside anyway, no?” Jo said.

Very good. Keep up with that, Ian thought.

The guard was still far, for now. Ian crept right along the front bumper, careful not to make a sound. Then he was on the door's side: the three of Torturator had their backs to him maybe a ten meters away.

From what he could tell, there were no passes on them.

Jo stood in a wide, aggressive stance. “But if I was expecting too much, sorry guys –”

Ian reached for the door handle.

“Hey, come on,” another of the musicians said in a slurred voice. “Sure we can drink one outside. It's not

too cold, and you can warm us up afterward..."

Ian pulled the handle slowly, very slowly –

It gave way. The door was unlocked. That was not entirely unexpected: the musicians had only come out for a short walk. But Ian had to open it very carefully. There was no telling how ungreased and noisy a Brazilian tour bus door hinge could be.

Jo and the men gathered into a ring, and the leader passed the bottle to her. That was the last Ian saw of them as he scurried up the steps to the belly of the bus, and closed the door behind him, still crouching low.

Thanks to the tinted windows, it was very dark beyond the front of the bus. Ian cursed the lack of a flashlight. But if the festival security were over-aggressive, they might not have let him in with it, saying it could be used as a weapon. And the band could have turned around and seen the beam.

His eyes adjusted, but not fast enough –

He just felt with his hands as he moved along the center corridor, searching for anything that felt like a laminated artist pass.

There, on a table.

Ian lifted the object in front of his eyes, but it was not an artist pass. A business card, it read "Fernando's Occulta and Magickal Corner. Rare and exquisite items and wear." An image of a goat inside a pentagram took up a large space of the card.

Funny, but uninteresting.

He moved on, hoping not to run out of time.

On another side, on another table, there were several objects that felt like similar cards. Something long and string-like was attached to them. Ian bowed down and took a look at one of them.

FROZEN HELL FESTIVAL 2012 – ARTIST / CREW

Jackpot!

The cards did not even have names or any other identification in them. Ian quickly pocketed two of them and left the rest on the table.

Now it was time to make his escape. Ian wondered what Jo was up to by now. The side windows were too dark to see through properly: he had to creep back to the front and look through the door to see.

They were still drinking. The bottle was passed from one of the musicians back to the leader.

Then Jo waved her hand, as if to say goodbye.

The men made a slow, drunken 180-degree turn.

Shit! They were coming back inside. This was definitely unpleasant. Ian had to hope for two things: that they would not find him, and would not notice the passes missing. Or if they noticed, thought up some rational drunken explanation for that.

If he was discovered, he could try to fight his way out. But security would certainly be alerted, his face would be remembered, so even if he escaped, tomorrow it would be impossible to attempt entry.

In other words: mission failure.

Only a few seconds to think.

Ian could come to only one conclusion: the dead-white throne. He would just have to hope that the men would head out again before getting the urge. And of course he could not lock the door: that would be an immediate sign of something wrong.

Rapidly, he crept to the back, and slipped inside the toilet. The door had been slightly ajar, so he had to leave it that way. Somewhat absurdly he thought of the band having fastened a thin string to the door to alert of intrusion, or having electronic surveillance inside.

Too much paranoia. They were drunken, lazy metal-heads, not covert operatives.

In the pitch darkness, all he could do was to listen to the footsteps of the band as they stepped back in, as well as to take in the smell.

It bordered on the sewer-like.

The band started conversing in a mixture of Portuguese and English, in loud, harsh, drunken tones. Ian could not understand everything, but they definitely were discussing Jo: how booze had been wasted on that black-clad bitch, who then had not even joined them inside.

Silence followed. Ian certainly was not at all pleased with the words, but there was nothing he could do in retaliation. He could not mess up or sabotage their toilet without making noise.

Then an even louder shout came.

Ian's heart skipped a beat. They were talking of the missing passes now. He tried to concentrate intensely.

One of band members was suspecting a thief, while the other thought that their roadie, Juan, had taken more than one pass in mistake. The leader's voice came last, calming them down, reminding how Juan was prone to doing odd things, like repainting a guitar with white skull art black, because the white reminded him of Jesus.

The voice of reason. Hopefully this time, his reason would be his undoing for the Agents' benefit.

One last angry grunt from the one suspecting theft.

Then Ian heard footsteps again. Were they coming closer? Was someone of them heading back here to throne himself, or was the angry guy going to search for the thief?

Thankfully, no.

The footsteps receded: the men were leaving for the second time. And that meant soon Ian could be on his way, the passes safely in his pocket.

He heard the bus door opening again, waited for a good ten seconds, then peered out. Through the windshield he saw Torturator heading to the loading dock. By all accounts, this operation had been a win, even though too much had depended on chance for comfort.

With a few quick steps he was outside, his footprints in the snow the only immediately visible sign of the infiltration. Of course he had left fingerprints inside, but if and when authorities got involved, the festival would hopefully be over, he and Jo far already away.

It took longer to find Jo than it had taken either to search the bus or wait for the men to exit. She paced back and forth along the wall of the dome, near to the entrance.

Ian knew he could have done nothing to speed up his exit. As he walked closer, she lifted her gaze and noticed him.

“Got them,” he said simply.

Instantly, her expression lit up. “See, what I said. Think positive.”

Ian knew her viewpoint had to have been worrying: to see the band going in and him not coming out. “Sorry it took so long. But let's head inside, to see if Torturator even get to the stage with two passes missing.”

The security guard had no idea what valuables Ian was carrying in his pocket as he patted him down once more.

“It tasted like crap,” Jo mused as they were inside. “Whiskey, probably, but then something else. Very thick, almost like tar.”

Ian did not exactly want to speculate on the contents of Torturator's bottle. Hopefully it was nothing actually poisonous.

“That was brave. I need to hug you for a long time,” he said.

“Come on. You took all the actual risk. Where did you hide, by the way, when they were back inside?”

“By the throne.”

“I see.”

During the incursion Machiavellian Hate had finished, and now it would only be the equipment change before they could witness the Brazilian black metal drunken masters in action. And then, even better, the legendary Norwegians.

SCEPTRE! Do not forget them, Ian reminded himself, and scanned the crowd around him.

No sign of danger.

They walked closer to the stage, to the likely location where a pit would form. Of course it paid not to get actually hurt, but legends were best witnessed up close. After Torturator would finish, everyone eager to see Mayhem would start piling up to the front, and this way they had a head start.

The successful acquisition of the passes was almost worth a beer. Shame there weren't any being served any more.

The emotion coursing through the crowd was mixed: some seemed exhausted and passive from the lack of food and drink, while others had only gained more strength and determination and anger. Definitely much more unstable than at an average metal festival.

Suddenly Ian wondered of the fnords: deprivation would likely make them more effective.

Were SCEPTRE going to inflict fnords on the unsuspecting audience? And when? Was that yet to come, or had it already happened? Ian remembered no special sensations, but maybe, with his programming, he was

immune: his triggers were different.

The equipment change was being performed with an uncharacteristic lack of urgency, even on the Frozen Hell scale.

Ian looked at his watch, which showed 11:25 PM now. Torturators were second to the headliner, so they were expected to play for an hour at least. Then there would be one last gear change, so Mayhem would start severely late.

"What do you make of this?" he said to Jo, not really expecting any answer.

"They're taking their sweet time, for sure."

Suddenly a terrible, harsh and metallic shout came from behind.

"Fuuuuck! Fuckers! No!"

Others joined the chorus. Ian spun around on his feet. It was hard to see what was going on: they would have to abandon their places in the front if they wanted to find out.

"Some heavy-handed Hessian angst," Jo observed.

Ian made the decision. The situation certainly had to be checked out.

"I'll go take a look."

Jo followed him as they made their way to the back of the hall, through the moderately thick crowd. It was definitely the most people they had seen gathered so far. There was a group of four wrestling on the floor, shouting in anguish. Those were probably the same who had unleashed the original screams. Security personnel were arriving: Ian decided to steer clear.

Others were fixed in place, staring at something on the far back wall. Was it a notice of some kind? Ian and Jo had to get closer still to see.

When Ian finally saw it, his heart sank.

The A2-sized paper taped to the wall, written in hurry with a black marker, read in large block letters:

MAYHEM CANCELED

“Damn,” was all he managed to say.

As he looked around, he could see another, similar paper. And then yet another. Three of them total, all carrying the same depressive message.

So this was it, then.

No Mayhem.

Now Ian had no especial wish to see Torturator either. His dream of witnessing a true legend had been crushed. Consumed by the sudden disappointment, he forgot even the artist passes in his pocket, and thought what could lift his spirits.

An all-out fight against SCEPTRE?

Perhaps, just perhaps.

Ian wondered if this cancellation had been planned by them from the start. It was a possibility.

“Let’s stay for the first Torturator song, OK?” Jo suggested. “It’s better than to end with silence.”

“OK,” Ian agreed.

They returned back to the front to wait, for the setup and the sound check to finish at last, for the black metal madness to start.

At last the roadies went away, the lights dimmed, and an intro tape started playing, low-quality title music from some old Hammer horror movie.

The crowd shouted, but it was not exactly a cheer. Chants of “Mayhem!” mixed with booing. To his left, Ian could see a fight break out, and this time security was slow to arrive. Total pandemonium was not far away. SCEPTRE or not, staying for one song only was probably a very good decision just for safety.

Bright red lights came on as the band took the stage.

The drummer counted in and a slow, imprecise blast beat started. The curly-haired one was playing bass guitar and singing in a rather impressive raven croak, but of course nothing could really impress Ian tonight.

He stood back as a violent pit started.

Fists, legs and feet were flying high in the air: those taking part used martial arts- and windmill-like moves to vent out their frustration. On stage, the Brazilians were giving their best, unleashing the most evil they could ever conjure, but nothing would be enough for this crowd. Their collective, hateful presence was forming into a fearful metal monster, with a will of its own.

The guitarist, who played a black Les Paul, unleashed a chaotic and dissonant solo. The lead guitar patch was much too loud and had a heavily boosted mid-range: it drowned out the drums and the bass guitar almost completely.

The sound man did little to rectify the situation.

“Euronymous played a Les Paul too. Those guys are imitating,” Jo shouted to Ian's ear. He nodded: Mayhem's murdered guitarist was a legend in itself, and could never be fully replaced. To make up for that, nowadays Mayhem used two guitarists live. Ian also understood Jo to be trying to cheer him up.

The song ended with a final, long raven shriek and an out-of-tune power chord.

“So, that was the one song. Now we can go,” Jo said.

For the last time tonight, Ian scanned the hall of possible SCEPTRE assailants.

Nothing.

Tomorrow could be a different story, though. During Black Dragon's show, if they got to see it, he half expected the triangle symbols in the background sheets to light up with an eerie glow, in tune with fñords blast-

ing out of the PA. If nothing like that materialized, then SCEPTRE were losers, missing a clear opportunity.

Some more fights were still starting, and shouts of disappointment still echoed around as they reached the exit.

The cold air and even the glare of the floodlights felt refreshing after the anticlimactic ending of the first day. Ian and Jo went straight for the car, which seemed undisturbed.

More worrying was whether it would start up after so many hours in the cold. Could the battery take it?

“I could drive too,” Jo suggested.

“It’s OK. I’m mostly over it by now,” Ian replied as he unlocked the doors.

They both climbed in and fastened seat belts. Ian turned the ignition. The starter motor turned at an appallingly slow speed.

“Not this too,” he muttered.

He waited for a while, then turned the key again. This time the engine managed to start up, though the starter still had given the depressive low sound.

As they were driving away, with the heater turned up to maximum, Ian started to put things in perspective. Backstage passes. Black Dragon. Infiltration with guns at hand. After all missing Mayhem was not that big of a disaster.

At first, the blackness of the motel room seemed absolute, as Ian opened the door just a bit at first after inserting and removing the key card. Slowly, he could notice the city lights filtering in through the shutters. There seemed to be no-one inside, so he went for the light switch.

Lights on. No black ops.

The backpacks had not been moved either, as far as he could tell. Still, it felt wrong in retrospect that their USP pistols had been left inside the room for the whole day, while they had been unarmed at the festival.

“What a day,” Ian said.

Jo followed through the door and closed it behind her. “Worst organizing ever.”

Ian noticed the room was rather cold: the radiator had been left into a pitiful “1” position. He turned the dial on full. Hopefully it would get warmer soon. Then he fell heavily on the bed. Jo did the same, falling next to him. In a way it felt odd: to stay at a metal festival almost to the end of the day, listen to so many bands, and to not get drunk at all. And mostly no headbanging either. There would be no hangover and sore neck muscles, which of course was a bonus.

But now what? At least he was very thirsty. He went to his backpack and opened a bottle of water, then drank for long. After having enough, he passed it to Jo. She rolled around and sat upright to drink.

Then Ian remembered she had not seen the artist passes with her own eyes yet.

“Ah, of course these,” he said and fished the two cards out of his pocket.

“Beautiful,” Jo said as she took one of them. “Still, we should avoid causing any unnecessary attention at the backstage. Would be best to find some place to hole up until Black Dragon arrive.”

“Agreed.”

While Jo went to take a shower, Ian checked his gun, left it cocked but safetied under the pillow. If SCEPTRE had noticed them, a surprise attack in the middle of the night was a possibility. Little by little, staying prepared and in a state of constant alertness was something Ian was getting used to again. It was his world now, the rules by which he had to play.

Satisfied, he kicked off the heavy boots and took off the coat. After being Crucifier for the whole day, he would certainly need a shower as well.

At some point the warm water ran out. Ridiculous or not, Ian almost considered if it was a sign from above or below. Nevertheless, it got him to think of his bad mood earlier. How it had been even worse than on the earlier trip, and how he had wanted it to not repeat.

It was perhaps not that big of a deal, but the next day held the promise of violence. Ian thought there shouldn't be anything unresolved between him and Jo. Without this little incident, he might have forgotten.

He exited the bathroom.

Nikki's – or Ravenna's – makeup was gone for now, so except for the hair, Jo looked just like how Ian had always known her. He sat down next to her on the bed, but for the moment did not quite know how to start. He just looked her in the eyes.

“Jo...”

Jo touched his face, a smile already forming on hers. It appeared that to her there was nothing unresolved.

“You wanted to hold me for a long time.”

Ian was conflicted: he found his heart suddenly heavy. He did not want to ruin Jo's mood, or this moment, so whatever he was going to say would have to wait. For a second he even thought of dissociating, but that would be severely wrong. In the end he just breathed in deep, reached out in a sudden motion and kissed her, perhaps harder than he had aimed for.

He could sense her surprise.

“Is that Crucifier?”

Ian got the words out barely, as a hoarse whisper.

“No. It's me.”

Jo seemed visibly moved by the answer, pressing herself against him a bit more, and the heaviness in Ian's heart began to dissolve into a warm rush instead. Of feeling short of breath. He recalled their second night at the HQ. Waiting for the mission, for the chopper preparations to finish. It was a fond memory, but somewhat chaotic. Compared to that, now he indeed hoped to not let go for long, and maybe that would be his wordless apology.

Ian could not exactly get sleep yet. It was almost 2 AM, but too many things still circled in his mind. Most of all SCEPTRE. It was good that there was no especial need to get up early: they should be well rested before head-

ing out for the second day of Frozen Hell.

Ian knew Jo was still awake as well. Her warmth against him was possibly the most calming thing in the world, but still he could not be completely at ease.

Finally it was she who broke the silence.

“I could tell something bothered you. And I could guess what. It's true that what you said in the car hurt. But – consider it past now.”

Ian felt foolish. Of course she had been able to tell. He recalled a NWOBHM song lyric very closely related to this. What the vocalist proclaimed in the song, he had failed. But it was settled now.

“Deal. I hope it will never repeat.”

There was silence just for a moment.

“Something else I wanted to say. Those hidden symbols at the festival. They made me remember something I'd forgotten for a long time. I could be wrong, but it's possibly why I started on this path – I mean, preparing for conspiracy.”

Ian understood that something potentially dark was coming, that might hinder sleep further. Possibly like Jo's own version of his SCEPTRE triggers. But he owed it to her to listen closely.

“I had to be very little at that point. Mom had invited some of her friends to the studio, and they were being loud, obnoxious and drunk. I saw a small part of it. They had red robes on, some very old-looking book, and an animal with them. Later I realized it was a black goat. It was probably a year before she left.”

Ian felt a twinge of nastiness. A ritual, most certainly, even if drunken and disorderly. Could it have been SCEPTRE? That was probably making too long-shot assumptions. They could not be everywhere.

“Around that time they started talking less and fight-

ing more. But they had a lot of problems anyway, so it's not like that one single thing was hugely significant. Anyway, years later, when I'd started school, the studio was doing poorly as Russ got less and less clients. I was reading stuff that wasn't exactly meant for my age, watched each episode of The X-Files, learned of cults, devil worship and ritual abuse, of the Knights' Templar, Freemasons and Illuminati, all the best stuff. So I guess I suspected Mom was in a cult, and they were causing trouble for the studio, because they were angry at us. Child's thinking. But it stuck somehow, and I think it got worse when I got on the Internet."

Jo's childhood was familiar to Ian, but still, thinking of it, and especially the way she had told of it now, caused his heart to grow heavy again. He pulled her closer, but was painfully aware of the limits of existence: no matter how much they comforted each other, loved each other, the past would never be erased. And the future could not be changed limitlessly either.

Only in the end when entropy, if not anti-cosmic chaos, triumphed over them like it triumphed over everything, would it all be erased.

Ian searched for the words. "Let's just say I'm thankful it got stuck, because otherwise I'd have been dead multiple times over."

"Yeah. I kind of guessed right, and I'm proud of it to this day."

There had to be some sarcasm in that, Ian knew.

"But let's try to sleep now, right?" Jo said finally.

Then it was silence apart from their breathing. And at some point dreams took over. Ian dreamed of the Sign of the Gun, shining down from the sky.

They had woken up late and skipped the motel's breakfast. Packaged sandwiches had been warmed up and consumed instead.

Now it was almost exactly noon. While yesterday had been bright at the same time, now a heavy cloud already hung over the city. As Jo was checking her pistol, Ian had the Agent laptop open, using the prepaid cell phone as a modem for net access.

"Arterial Bloodspray – no," Ian said. A few more clicks on the mouse pad. "Ex Inferis – no luck either."

He was browsing the line ups of today's bands to see if any of the band members were possible to impersonate. Just for the case that the security demanded to know who they were.

"Megatherium would kind of fit. But we'd have to wear matching corpse paint."

"There's a girl?" Jo inquired.

"Yeah, their keyboardist."

"Does she look even roughly like me?"

"You can be at ease. Should be close enough. I'm not asking you to wear a pillow under the jacket, or something," Ian replied. He wondered where the image had come from. Did some band he knew have a female,

blond, spherical, corpse paint wearing keyboard player?

“But we don't say anything if they don't ask?” Jo asked as if to confirm the obvious.

“Naturally not.”

Even with the identity issue sort of solved, today still posed several problems. It would be too risky and foolish to scout the backstage beforehand, so essentially it was going in blind: to not go in until it was actually time to observe Black Dragon. And then, there was no telling when the band would arrive.

Jo was behind the wheel as they circled the festival area. Unlike yesterday, now the noise would already start at 3 PM, one hour from now. Still there was the same amount of bands, and that meant longer sets. It made sense: today's bands were for the most part more famous. Fée Verte was a veteran stoner doom metal act and could be almost considered as co-headlining with Immortal.

And if SCEPTRE was behind the festival, which by now could not truly be doubted, then naturally they would want “their” band to have enough time to spread the anti-cosmic message.

Already people were lumbering around the dome. Yesterday's bad service and bitter disappointment just before the finale had not at least driven everyone away.

Ian checked the cell phone for email. So far there had been no communications from the home base. But now there was one new message.

Ian read it aloud.

“Been tracking Black Dragon's progress. Should arrive around 6 PM if they keep the same pace. Be prepared. -Blowfish.”

“Friendly of her to notify,” Jo said.

Ian wondered how it was possible to track the band's tour vehicle. Was Blowfish hacking into satellites or something? Well, she had her methods, and Ian certainly was pleased for the help.

And even that information would not make the day that much easier: now they knew when at earliest there would be possibility for action, but Black Dragon might just as well spend time elsewhere in the city before checking in at the dome. Their showtime was in any case closer to the night, possibly around 10 PM depending on how much the timetable would lag today.

“Let's see,” Ian began. “If we're going to pose as the Megatherium bassist and keyboardist, we have to go in early enough to be safe. They should play around 7 PM.”

“And then we hide. Some closet or something.”

“Yeah. The stakeout can become long, so what about we eat something, then do the paint-job, then return here,” Ian suggested.

“Sounds good.”

The food had not tasted much of anything, but served its purpose. Then it had been a quick trip back to the motel, where Jo had applied the black and white paint on Ian's face and vice versa. It was not perfect, but should fool the casual security well enough.

Thankfully Ian had remembered one important last minute detail: cutting off the audience wrist bands. Otherwise it would have been an immediate fail.

Now, at 5:35 PM, it was already dark and getting darker: the floodlights were on around the dome, and more crowd had gathered. Jo stopped the Ford at the far end of the parking lot.

“The real fun of the mission begins now,” she said. “You ready?”

Ian felt for the USP inside his coat, and checked the artist pass hanging from his neck. “Game on.”

He actually hated using such phrase the instant it was out of his mouth. It reminded him too much of some military thriller. He still rather thought of himself as a musician and a rebel instead of a soldier or covert operative.

They exited the car, then walked casually into the artist section of the parking lot. It was deserted of people: just a different set of vehicles stood there now, including an urban camo SUV bearing Osama Bin Satan's logo.

“Those terrorists seem to still be enjoying the festival,” Ian noted. He had checked out the band's homepage: the musical output most resembled grindcore, with some odd progressive influences.

In a way he was disappointed of missing today's first bands – and it was possible they would miss them all, including Immortal – but it was also pleasant to not be subjected to the substandard service.

Now they were past most of the vehicles and approached the loading dock and the two orange-vested guards. Soon it would be time to test the passes. And their appearances.

Ian felt uneasy with the adrenaline for some seconds, then sunk into dissociation: the world around appeared slow and predictable, while his senses sharpened. Violence would come naturally if needed.

It was a bit random when he was able to dissociate. It was easier if he was prepared, in control of the situation. Both when facing the black-haired Hessian and when searching the bus he had not reached that state,

but had felt more like just a human being: agitated, vulnerable, scared.

Dissociation also changed how he felt about people he knew. Jo was now just an ally, a comrade at arms. It was convenient for the time being, but also left an emptiness inside. And of course Jo had no such benefit: though she was not letting it show, each second she possibly worried far too much, and that could wear her out.

Ten meters to the guards.

Natural, but not overt eye contact. An overall disinterested attitude. That was enough: they were in without any question.

The backstage area at the dome was familiar, to an almost depressive degree: white masonry walls, bright fluorescent lights, thick heating pipes and electrical cabling in the ceiling. Of course the layout of corridors was different than the venues they had played at the “Seven Days of Pain” tour, but that was a minor detail.

Ian knew they did not have much time to take in the layout and figure out a suitable hiding place. Though the guards had suspected nothing, each passing second in the corridors raised the probability of bumping into a musician or crew member who knew they did not belong here at all.

Bumping into the real Megatherium bassist and keyboard player would naturally be the grand fail. Therefore it was safest to hole up somewhere until that band had played their set and left.

“Look,” Jo prompted Ian.

In front of them was a door bearing the sign “Black Dragon.” Ian tested the door quickly. Locked. Yet was not the time to enter, but it paid to remember the place.

Quickly, they explored the rest of the corridors: from where to get to the stage, what rooms the other bands would use. It appeared that also Fée Verte and Immortal had their own rooms. The rest would simply share the men's dressing and shower facilities.

Now, the only thing still unclear was the hiding place.

As Ian and Jo turned around, four men also wearing corpse paint appeared from behind a corner, headed for the common backstage room.

Ex Inferis, Ian knew. He waited them to get close – “Hail Satan,” he muttered then.

It was a calculated risk. The musicians nodded and grunted in a general positive agreement.

This encounter had succeeded, the next might not.

Fortunately, before meeting anyone else, they arrived at an electrical equipment closet they had missed on the initial round. How was that possible? During dissociation one should be able to take in every detail. But in any case, the closet had two clear benefits: no-one would probably check it during the night, and from there they might be able to cut the power if necessary.

Ian took the Agent Multipurpose Tool from his pocket. Among other things it could mostly easily open conventional or electronic locks. He positioned it near the circle-shaped lock and pushed one of the buttons on the tool.

An automatic lock pick came out, snaking its way inside the lock, then quickly forcing the tumblers into place one by one. Much faster than even a practiced thief could ever manage.

A light flashed on the tool, indicating that the task was complete. Ian pulled the door handle and it opened as expected.

It was pitch black inside.

But there was no time to waste: he opened the door enough for Jo to enter first, felt the inside wall with his hand and found something that closely resembled a light switch. In sequence he flicked the switch, went in himself, and closed the door.

A white fluorescent light flickered to life in the ceiling, revealing an extensive bank of green-painted large metal cabinets on the wall. On them various meters, fuses and circuit breakers were installed.

Most likely the central power junction for the whole dome.

Now just to wait in the comfort of this room. But for how long? As Ian and Jo had crossed the parking lot, there naturally had been no sign yet of Black Dragon's vehicle.

Ian felt the dissociation fading as this initial step had been accomplished.

It had been easy, too easy so far.

And then, suddenly he understood it was going to get even easier.

It was the classic method of infiltration, perpetuated in countless movies and video games: ventilation ducts. The vent grille was high up on the wall of the closet, but the equipment cabinets could be used for climbing.

There was of course the risk of tripping a breaker while climbing, arousing suspicion with a sudden power outage.

Ian pointed up to the grille. "I have a feeling that from up there, we can get all the way above Black Dragon's room. Then we just wait there quietly and observe when they come in."

Jo nodded. "Sounds good. But I bet it's hard to move

in the duct without making noise.”

“Yeah. It will make a hell of a racket.”

Ian remembered that from experience, from crawling in the ventilation ducts of SCEPTRE's underground maze beneath the Olympia center. Actually most of the racket had come from the black ops' bullets hitting the duct, but probably just moving without the gunfire was not the quietest thing either.

“Then it's probably best we move when there's a band playing.”

“Yeah, no objection there,” Ian said. “First we just have to get this thing open.”

Ian helped Jo climb on top of the cabinets to the grille, and watched her activate the screwdriver mode of her Agent tool. It did not take many seconds for the grille to come loose.

“I'm handing it down now,” she said.

Ian appreciated the care Jo was showing. Just as carefully, he took the grille – heavier than it looked – from her and laid it on the floor. There was no reason to make extra noise.

Then Jo climbed back down, and they waited for the bassy rumble to start, telling of the next set's beginning. The clock was a little over 6 PM: in theory Ex Inferis – the men they had passed in the corridor – should have been starting. But in true Frozen Hell tradition the lag was setting in, and it was closer to half past 6 when the sound of blackened death reached their ears.

It was time to climb up to the ducts.

In theory they could have already have missed some vital covert transmission Black Dragon had received in its room: if Blowfish was correct and the band did not waste any time, they might be in their room by now.

Again Jo went up first, then helped Ian to get up in turn. He wedged a foot into a crack between two of the electrical cabinets: combined with Jo pulling from above, soon he was above as well.

Infiltrating through the duct system did not, after all, make things that easy. Ian's sense of direction was mostly lost: it was hard to deduce in which direction Black Dragon's private backstage room was.

At first they ended up above the men's dressing room. If nothing else, it was satisfying to verify the method to be sound: peering down from the horizontal grille, it was easy enough to observe the room below.

Right at the moment, Megatherium was present, most of the band members drinking beers, including those Ian and Jo had impersonated.

And that was not good news: if they were not at all interested in seeing Ex Inferis play, they could stay in the room until the very last, until their own turn. If Ian and Jo moved now, the clanking sound would with strong likelihood give them away.

"What if we just back away?" Jo whispered.

"Might succeed, if we just do it with infinite slowness," Ian replied just as quietly.

Infinite slowness of course meant the trip also taking an infinite time. But Jo understood what he was saying. Not turning around, but crawling in reverse with painful slowness, they reached the previous T-intersection.

"The dressing room was opposite Black Dragon's door," Jo said. "So if we turn -"

"Remember that the layout of the ducts doesn't need to follow the corridors at all," Ian interrupted.

"Whatever. But in any case, there's really one chance,

left. Otherwise we're back where we started.”

Jo was very right. Ian wished to be dissociated again, for he was sure that in that state the maze of ducts would have appeared crystal clear. But for some reason he had not been able to return.

The next intersection, some fifteen meters away, was a four-way one. During the slow crawl, Ian had finally figured out where they should be going.

“We turn right now, correct?” he verified.

“Yeah.”

The first private backstage room they passed along the way belonged to Fée Verte, as far as Ian could remember. No-one was present, but on a table below was an unusually shaped bottle, containing a green-tinted liquid, along with similarly unusual glasses and a spoon.

“Absinthe,” Jo said. “Probably listed on their rider.”

Ian had never actually drunk the legendary beverage, but knew of its supposed bad, hallucinogenic reputation. That was probably simply due to the high alcohol content: it was easy to mess up one's head by just drinking a little.

Some more crawling, and they reached the last room. Because Immortal's room had been in the exact opposite direction, near the electrical closet, there was no other possibility than for this one to be Black Dragon's.

As Ian peered down, a cold dread went up his spine.

Similar to Suhrim's quarters in the underground part of the Olympia center, this room had been furnished all black with the aid of drapes and carpets. There was an orange glow: candles burning on a solitary black table.

If there had been some small degree of doubt before,

now there was none: this was ritualistic to the maximum, and could only mean SCEPTRE's absolute involvement.

Ian forced himself to calm down.

"This is the place. No question. Now we wait," he said.

They waited.

The rumble of Ex Inferis playing reverberated in the air ducts for a good half hour, then died down. Then there was only their breathing and the noise the duct made as they shifted position: cramps would easily set in, and it was impossible to find a comfortable posture.

It would be very unpleasant to have to spring into sudden action, Ian knew. No matter how much Agent instinct or ability to dissociate, cramped muscles would not just obey fast enough.

Ian was familiar with the band's lineup: Qemetiel was the leader, who played guitar and handled the lead vocals, Beliaal played drums, and Aathiel played bass guitar and provided backing vocals where necessary. A fairly ordinary trio setup, but it was worth noting that the members had named themselves after the three esoteric dark powers, or three veils before Satan.

In the images on the band's website, the both stringed instrument players appeared tall and thin, repressed aggression on their gaunt faces. They were supposedly brothers. The drummer was better described as heavy-set, though he was tall as well: more open and hard-edged wrath radiated from him.

Ian had positioned himself against the duct wall so that he could observe the door well. Meanwhile Jo had a good vantage point for seeing things directly below her.

Next, Megatherium took the stage in the hall. The symphonic and grandiose black metal compositions filtered through only as indistinct low frequencies. It was interesting, Ian thought: listened to in this way, the music was stripped bare. That could turn out rather monotonous if the bass just kept playing the same note while the other instruments provided all the embellishments, no matter how complex they were.

As Megatherium was well into its set, perhaps fifteen minutes, there came a rattling noise: the door was being opened.

Ian tensed himself for maximum alertness. Beside him, Jo held her breath.

Three men entered: two slender and one heavier. All wore black leather and denim and their hair was long in various degrees of brown, just like on the website. One of the thinner men had a backpack on him.

Black Dragon.

The way they moved instantly set off alarms in Ian's mind: instead of any kind of characteristic Hessian bravado, any drunken swagger, they walked precisely, efficiently and soundlessly.

Like soldiers. Or SCEPTRE assassins.

Hoping not to make a sound, Ian moved just a bit in Jo's direction, so that he could see better directly down.

Instead of traditional backstage antics, like going straight for the refreshments, the men arrayed themselves in a semicircle, while they remained standing. The one with the backpack opened it and took out a medium-size laptop, which he placed on the table.

He had to be Qemetiel, the band leader. He pressed the laptop's power switch, and the machine apparently resumed from standby: an image appeared on the screen within seconds.

There was no hope of reading any text from the screen: Ian and Jo were much too far away.

"The transmission is about to begin," the leader said as he clicked the touch pad, and something happened in the lower-right corner of the screen. Possibly adjusting volume. "Stand by."

That definitely was not how metal musicians should be talking. SCEPTRE's involvement in organizing the festival had been clear already yesterday, but now it was also confirmed that the band was far from normal.

The screen went black, then what appeared to be a video conference began.

Ian squinted his eyes to see more sharply: a full-screen image of a black-bearded man stared at the musicians. The closest analogy Ian could think of was the mad monk Rasputin.

The voice of the bearded man came from the laptop speakers. Ian could imagine him speaking with a low booming voice, but the small speakers made the sound tinny instead. At least it came across clear.

"Do you hear me, brothers?"

"Yes, Ahriman," the leader replied.

"I wish you luck in delivering the message to all those who have congregated. I expect nothing but excellence from you, and I have faith I shall not be disappointed. Remember, you are in part paving the way for the glorious anti-cosmic moment that is not far away any more."

Ian felt an intense wave of coldness and apprehension pass through him. Ahriman had to be a SCEPTRE

priest, giving his underlings faith and courage.

But what did it mean, all who have congregated? Did it mean the whole audience, or something else?

“We will not disappoint you.”

“Then, there is no need to speak further for now. But in due time I'll see you again, to hear how you have done. Hail Azerate!”

“Hail Azerate!” the three men replied in unison.

The screen cut to black, then the operating system desktop appeared again. The guitarist/vocalist pressed the power button again to shut the computer off, then closed the lid. Next, he took a bronze-colored metal chalice, into which he placed a small, black, pyramid-shaped object. He took one of the candles to set the pyramid alight.

An exotic odor started to fill the room. Burning incense. The men sat down on the floor into meditative positions and started chanting in muffled tones.

“Dies irae, dies terminus. Undecim ut unus. Molok, Beelzebuth, Rofocale, Astarot, Asmodeus...”

Ian guessed the chants to be in Latin. And now the men were reciting the eleven names he had seen on the decrypted symbol, the hendecagram.

“Lucifer Illuminatio Mea! Chaosatanas!” The tones were no longer muffled, but rising in urgency.

Then, Ian was alerted by a sound much closer to him.

A steely, tortured creak. The sound of the ventilation duct straining under their weight.

The three men looked up, abandoned their positions, and seemed to reach for something inside their jackets.

“Get your gun ready. This might turn ugly,” Ian whispered to Jo.

Then, before either he, Jo, or the three men below could react, there came a much louder sound of rending and twisting metal, and the duct began to tilt. The grille was part of a shorter section of the duct, and the seams holding it to the sections before and after were giving way.

It had not been meant for two people to lie inside for a prolonged time.

Next it gave way completely, and that happened incredibly fast: as gravity took over, Ian and Jo were ejected onto the floor, right into the middle of the three men.

The landing hurt, a lot.

The immediate thought in Ian's mind was not even the three possibly armed men, but whether he had broken any bones.

But he pushed even that thought aside as he reached for his own pistol, while simultaneously rolling to the direction of the table. Because that succeeded, he could not be majorly hurt. But soon he might be.

In a quick uninterrupted motion he flicked the safety off, turned around, and squeezed off four shots, mostly unaimed.

The silenced spits coincided with four dull thuds to the rear wall. No surprise: each was miss.

Time to start aiming, he thought bitterly.

Jo was rolling away too, the USP in her hands and firing. It was only now Ian had time to verify the band members were actually armed: both the drummer and the bassist held ordinary semi-automatics, probably nine millimeter, while the guitarist/vocalist had a bigger, odd-looking firearm: it was like a pistol, but on top of it was a large horizontal magazine.

From Sarge's briefing on weapons Ian knew what it was: a Calico M950, basically a sub-machine gun in pistol size. The magazine could hold up to one hundred rounds.

Jo fired again: the bassist jerked abruptly sideways, then gripped his right shoulder. Not fatal, but he would not be shooting for a few seconds.

Ian dived off to the side, then aimed for the man with the Calico, the biggest threat for the time being.

But too late: the odd pistol was already firing, the full automatic muzzle flashes and rattling noise filling the room. Bullets ate into the carpeted floor, just centimeters away from Ian. Ignoring this, he willed himself to align his sights rapidly on the leader's chest, then pulled the trigger twice.

The rounds struck home: the man staggered backward on his feet, the rest of the burst going wide into the wall behind Ian, then into the ceiling.

The bassist was still out of action, but the burly drummer was tracking Jo, who by now was on her feet, diving toward the left rear corner.

She twisted around mid-air, fired twice, but missed.

Before Ian could take aim at him, the drummer let off a shot. The report was followed by an ugly, tearing sound, and Jo seemed to fall the rest of her jump in an uncoordinated fashion.

She did not get up, at least for a second –

Sudden dissociative coldness in his heart, Ian used this second to aim for the drummer's head. No matter how deeply he was SCEPTRE, he was spending too much time gloating over his hit, and that would be his undoing.

One muted spit: a small hole appeared in his throat, from which blood started to spurt. Ian had aimed

higher and was displeased with his inaccuracy, but this would still do.

The drummer clutched his injured neck, then fell on his knees. The pistol dropped onto the carpet.

Jo was still not up, but it mattered little for the immediate future. The leader had taken hits to his chest, but stayed on his feet, and was now taking aim again.

A bullet-proof vest?

Ian rolled to his right, but he was running out of room.

The bassist, too, seemed recovered enough to be firing again. If not right now, then in the next few seconds.

Two targets. Whom to choose?

The Calico still posed a greater threat, and if the leader wore a vest, he was not injured besides some bruises.

Ian made his decision.

He aimed at the guitarist/vocalist, right below the estimated bottom edge of his vest, then let off shot after shot in a quick succession while allowing the gun to aim higher each time. If he did not run out of bullets first, he would finish with the man's head.

A total of five rounds hit the man, the last and highest to the collarbone height. That had to be above the vest.

He fell heavily, but now Ian's gun clicked dry, the slide left in the open position.

Wrath and need for retaliation in his eyes, the bassist was going to fire at this very instant. Ian ejected the empty magazine, rolled back to the left while fishing frantically for a spare, though he knew he could never get it in place soon enough.

It was then one more muted shot sounded.

Something bloody mushroomed out from the front

of the bassist's head. His still intact eyes seemed to gaze into the distance for two more seconds, then he fell, dead.

Jo was half sitting, half lying on the floor, her arms extended far in a firing position.

As all of Black Dragon were down, two certainly dead and one soon if not already, dissociation started to fade from Ian's mind.

"Are you hurt?" he asked Jo in a whispering rasp, though the volume of his speech mattered little after unsilenced gunshots: security would be on its way.

"At least not bad."

Ian crouched next to her to investigate. The left sleeve of her jacket was badly torn. There appeared to be blood, but not much. Possibly only a grazing hit. It did not require immediate attention.

But their escape certainly did.

"The laptop, should we take it?" Jo asked as she got up to her feet.

It probably contained more encrypted files, possibly ones that would never get decoded in time. It could also contain a tracking device. Still, it was potentially too valuable to be missed.

"Let's take it to the motel at least."

Ian took the machine under his left arm and surveyed the room quickly one last time: the duct was indeed grotesquely bent, in a diagonal V-shape now. A last gurgle came from the throat of Black Dragon's leader, then he too lay silent and still.

In addition to the laptop the backpack was tempting, but could possibly be dangerous. The laptop could not have a very powerful explosive device inside, but the backpack could contain anything. And right now there was no time for a thorough check.

Ian did not want to speculate on what law enforcement would say: had he and Jo acted in self-defense against the three, or had they actually perpetrated murder? A skilled and ruthless SCEPTRE lawyer could certainly make things appear in the worst possible light.

But in all honesty it mattered little: this was war, and they did not intend to be caught.

Now that Black Dragon was eliminated, their anti-cosmic message would fail to reach the intended audience. How big of a dent would that be in SCEPTRE's plans? Ian knew it was not wise to get over-optimistic: safer to think it mattered little, if at all. A shame they could not remain to see how the rest of the festival would go now.

Well, they would catch it later on the news. And on the YouTube videos.

"Shit," Ian muttered as a sudden unpleasant thought crossed his mind. There was no low rumble now: was it just a pause between songs, or something more final? It was possible that Megatherium had been told to stop and the dome was already being emptied, all due to the shootout.

"What?"

"I don't want to be responsible for Immortal getting canceled as well."

Ian opened the door just enough to get his head out, and peered first to the left, then to right.

The corridor appeared to be empty –

“Hey, you!” came a rough shout from the left. A security guard had appeared from behind a corner.

The guard would not be lethally armed, so Ian hoped he and Jo could just outrun him, instead of resorting to gunfire. Something like the tranquilizer needle guns they had used before would have been a nice compromise, but multiple pistol-shape objects would have been too hard to conceal under the clothes, particularly Jo's jacket, therefore the minimal loadout.

Ian slammed the door fully open.

“Go! To the right!” he shouted to Jo, who was right behind him.

Then he sprinted as fast as he could. His muscles were still stiff from the waiting, and the rough landing onto the floor still hurt, but he just had to will himself on.

He looked over his shoulder, saw Jo lag behind somewhat: in addition to all that, she had been wounded.

“Come on,” he muttered.

From behind came a sudden gunshot.

A bullet whistled past Ian's head.

Not lethally armed?

Ian understood to have severely underestimated the security at the festival: most if not all guards had to be under SCEPTRE command, and they had appeared non-threatening only as long as there had been no need for sudden, effective violence.

But now there was. The two escaping Agents would be stopped at any cost.

Ten meters ahead there was an intersection.

Ian weaved sideways while running, as another bullet flew past.

"To the left, to the stage!" he yelled, while at last slamming a fresh magazine in place and racking the slide.

Twelve rounds to go again.

Now, since so much more potential opposition waited, it paid not to be as careless as inside the room. Each shot would have to count. He only had two more spare mags.

Thankfully Jo had gained speed by now. In addition, she unleashed two shots into the guard's direction, forcing him to duck onto the floor.

There were two good reasons to turn: the intersecting corridor was the most immediate way to block the line of sight, and cutting through the stage and the audience would perhaps make the guards less eager to fire.

But as soon as Ian made the turn, he knew things would not be getting easier. Two more guards stood at the stage entrance, already drawing their guns.

"Take the one on the left!" Ian shouted behind his back: Jo was just turning as well.

She had successfully eliminated the bassist with a wounded arm, but that fact could not be relied upon: the range was now much greater. Ian mentally prepared to deal with both.

He took aim at the right-side guard. The orange vest probably actually contained Kevlar, so it was safest to go for the head.

Two muted gunshots, and the guard fell backward, his throat or skull punctured. It did not matter which.

There came two more muted spits from behind, but the left-side guard seemed unaffected. His pistol muzzle still tracked the nearing Agents.

Jo had to have missed.

In a rapid motion, Ian shifted his aim to the left, to the second guard's head. No harm done, he would take out them both, he thought with grimness.

He squeezed the trigger just as the guard's gun spat fire.

Right after, Ian felt and heard the impact in his right leg. First there was no actual pain, but he staggered and almost fell –

While trying to keep his balance, he watched as the guard slid down the far wall, his head leaving a trail of blood.

Both guards in the front were down.

But what about the one coming from behind? Right now, that was more concerning than his leg. Ian spun around, his gun ready, though his aim was as shaky as his balance.

Then he saw the first guard also lying down, on his stomach, at the intersection. Jo was just turning around, her gun extended. Her eyes locked with Ian's.

"Thanks," Ian breathed. He realized how his orders had been flawed, as the original guard could easily have

shot them both from behind. But Jo's improvisation and alertness had saved the situation.

"No problem. Are you hit?"

Now Ian could observe his leg. Only the fabric of the pants had been torn, the bullet had not actually nicked his flesh. He had been lucky this time.

"No. Let's go before more arrive."

They launched into another sprint down the corridor, toward the blackness of the stage area. No music echoed at them, and there seemed to be no lights either: Megatherium had in fact been forced to cut their set short.

Damn, Ian thought, but not because of the prospect of Immortal getting canceled. The shootout in the backstage room had been two minutes ago in the least, so clearing the dome of audience might be well underway, leaving more room for hunting. And if the stage lights had been cut, SCEPTRE could use night vision in the dark hall, while Ian and Jo had no such advantage.

Out through the way they had come could have been a much better option after all.

As Ian emerged onto the hastily abandoned stage, the guitars propped against the amps instead of being put back to their stands, he felt a sudden hard hit to his right foot, lost balance and fell head-first to the hardwood floor.

His jaw took the impact and he saw stars.

Something – or more probably someone – had tripped him. His pistol had fallen out of immediate reach, and the Black Dragon laptop also lay on the floor some distance away.

He did not have to wonder for long, as he was grabbed from his collar.

That someone turned him around to lie on his back. Ian was staring into the face of the jet-black haired Hessian he had met earlier, the one who had to be a SCEPTRE-trained assassin.

Ian felt the weight of the assassin press down on him: he struggled but could not move much. Though they were of roughly equal height, the man appeared much heavier and more muscular. Now he wore night vision goggles, masking the consuming emptiness of his stare.

“Who are you?” Ian asked with a choked voice, though the man was not strangling him yet.

“I'm in no obligation to tell. But I know you, Necro.”

On Ian's insistence the Agents had revealed his former codename from the assassin training. It triggered bad memories, and apparently SCEPTRE still used it at every opportunity to taunt him.

Now the assassin's hands closed tight around Ian's throat and the actual strangling began.

“Ian!” came a high yell from behind. Jo.

“Shoot the fucker!” Ian rasped with his last breath.

“I can't! I'm afraid I'll hit you!”

This was bad. Ian had to get clear of the man somehow. But the longer he would remain in the choke-hold, the less strength he would have. Ian kicked with his feet, trying to hit the SCEPTRE assassin's back. But no luck. Then, summoning all his strength, Ian rolled around, so that the attacker was now below him.

He knew that was an even worse position for Jo to shoot. He headbutted the man twice, but the choke-hold remained: the only response was a cruel smile.

Ian then tried to dig his own fingernails to the hands choking him, but he knew the pain he could afflict in that way was just minimal.

Already, he felt his strength fading.

“Actually, perhaps I’ll be more satisfied if you die knowing. I’m Azazel,” the assassin snarled.

The name Azazel had many esoteric meanings. In modern Satanism leaning to Gnostic tradition, he could be interpreted as a bringer of forbidden knowledge, knowledge that the Demiurge wanted to keep hidden from humans.

All that research into anti-cosmicism helped Ian little now. But perhaps his assassin training would.

A principle memorized through painful hand-to-hand combat sessions suddenly flashed into his mind: the use of any body part as a possible weapon.

His position was ideal for what he had in mind. Lying on the floor, it would not have been possible.

He kicked hard with his feet, propelling his lower body high into the air, then twisted his legs so that his knees would be the first to impact on landing.

Hitting the floor would be extremely painful that way.

But he intended to hit the assassin's crotch.

Still too satisfied from revealing his name, he did not see it coming. His mouth opened wide in pain as Ian's knee struck, but still there was no scream. Possibly he had been conditioned to betray no audible reaction. The grip around Ian's neck weakened for a fraction of a second –

And that was all Ian needed. He rolled clear.

“Shoot now! To the head!” he shouted, while reaching for his gun in case Jo missed. The assassin was also moving –

A single muted shot.

Ian turned to look: the assassin now lay still, a small crimson dot in his forehead above the goggles.

One shot was all Jo had needed.

Now it was time to even the odds somewhat, in case more enemies waited in the hall. Ian gripped the dead assassin's night vision goggles savagely and managed to get them off him.

Quickly, he strapped them on, then looked around.

And the situation became a bit more clear through the green-black haze. Many were indeed leaving, but just as many stayed in place, both near the stage and further away, apparently protesting the premature end to the festival.

No immediate danger. No snipers on the stands, just people leaving. In the meanwhile there also had been no guards coming from behind.

"We go now!" Ian hissed.

"The laptop," Jo shouted back.

Ian had almost forgotten.

"You can take it. Then, we jump the stage barrier!" he said. There was a two-meter gap between the stage and the fence, where security stood during the shows: it was not too hard to get across, considering how the stage was higher.

Ian gathered speed for the few steps there was to take, each of them almost a jump in itself, reached the edge of the stage, and leaped forward.

Beside him Jo did the same.

Ian let his legs go loose before impact: at least this landing hurt less than when falling from the duct. He rolled, was back on his feet, and scanned the other side of the hall.

Satisfied that no-one was pointing a gun at him, he broke into a run, weaving through the remaining crowd. A quick look behind confirmed that Jo was on her feet too, running.

As he made headway, Ian became aware of a chant emanating from the crowd, low and zombie-like. When he realized what it was, it was almost like they were congratulating him for the escape so far. And it was utterly horrifying.

“Necro, Necro, Necro, Necro...”

There were several SCEPTRE assassin trainees among the crowd. No telling how many, but they all seemed to recognize him despite the disguise. It was like being right in the middle of a nightmare.

“Jo! Run as fast –” Ian began, but before he could finish, a shrill scream from behind came in response.

Jo's voice.

It was then he stopped, and entered Agent-time.

The transformation was so sudden that there was no time for fear or worry to register, just the cold, urgent need to kill.

His wrists already locked into firing position, the pistol extended far, he turned 180 degrees to see a group of the SCEPTRE trainees gathered around Jo. Two of them, one male and one female, were restraining her, while the remaining four just stood, still chanting in rhythm with the others.

It was probably an illusion, but Ian's brains registered the chant slowing down and lowering in pitch, becoming more demoniacal.

He took aim, starting from the leftmost head.

First muted shot. The SCEPTRE trainee began to fall, but Ian was already shifting his aim to the next. Second shot. More careful now, as next in line was the female one gripping Jo. Third. Same for the male one, a little up as he was taller. Fourth shot. Jo was free by now, so those remaining did not require as much attention. Fifth. Sixth.

All down. Each shot had blown a head.

The Agent-time dissolved. Jo had hit the floor when released from her captors' grip, but was now getting up again, reaching for the fallen laptop. The six SCEPTRE trainees all lay dead, six pools of blood spreading from the backs of their heads.

But the chanting of "Necro" went on, thanks to the trainees still remaining in the hall.

Jo was back on her feet, and not a moment too soon: security guards burst out from the back, their weapons up.

It was time to run again.

As if a trance had been broken, the trainees joined the chase, still chanting. Ian fired the remaining shots behind pretty much blindly, then changed magazines again. One more spare to go.

He understood now with perfect clarity: the trainees had been given instructions to arrive at the festival, so that Black Dragon could give them some message – possibly further orders – through their music and lyrics. Now that the band was dead, SCEPTRE would have to transmit those orders through other means.

Jo caught up to Ian: she too had fired her magazine empty, and was now changing, the laptop held tight in her armpit in the meanwhile.

"Thanks," she breathed. "It was so sudden how they overpowered me. But how did you do that? It was like two or three seconds and then they were all down."

Ian no longer remembered the episode precisely. "I have no idea."

They reached the exit: now several sets of double doors were open, allowing for the crowd to pour out faster. Ian took the goggles off so that he would not be blinded by the floodlights.

A security guard turned around and challenged him. "Stop right there!"

Ian responded by crash-tackling him, then followed with a solid right hook to the guard's jaw as they both were down on the snow. The hit hurt Ian's hand, but in the next second he was back on his feet again, running for the car.

SCEPTRE? Or not SCEPTRE? He had seen no gun, so he was pleased not to have killed. Though it was a degree of hypocrisy: he had not actually seen guns on the group of six trainees either.

Ian kept looking both ahead and behind for armed opposition. But he could see only regular festival-goers all around: Hessians walking away in disappointment, most cursing aloud.

Suddenly it almost seemed as if what had happened inside was a feverish dream.

But the bullets had been real enough.

From behind the corpse paint it was impossible to

tell if Jo was going pale from blood loss. But as she could keep up the pace just fine, it probably was not serious – like they had originally concluded – and inspecting the injury could still wait to the motel.

Across the mounds of snow, they closed the distance to the car. While Jo unlocked it, Ian scanned for the group of guards and trainees that had given them chase inside. But still no-one in sight.

Damage control, probably.

SCEPTRE wanted to keep attention to minimum, and they could not possibly kill every audience member not in on the conspiracy. And still, some of them had to have seen some of the firefight and the chase inside. News reports in the aftermath, whether official or unofficial, would certainly be interesting.

“Are you OK to drive?” Ian asked.

“Right now I drive better than I shoot. It doesn't hurt much.”

They went in, Jo threw the laptop to the back seat, and fired up the engine – now it started better as it had been only a few hours in the cold. The headlights came on, she switched to reverse, and backed up violently with the wheels fully turned. Only a few seconds later they were heading away from the dome.

By 8 PM Ian and Jo were back at the motel. Both of them had been scanning the traffic, looking for anyone on their tail, but yet again there had been nothing.

Ian took his gun out as he prepared to enter their room. The corridor was only dimly lit, so there was no risk of getting blinded as he put the SCEPTRE night vision goggles back on.

He opened the door forcibly, swept with the gun from the left to the right.

Nothing. It was empty.

He removed the goggles and flicked the light switch. Jo took off her jacket, wincing as it was time to pull off the torn left sleeve.

Her arm was almost completely covered in red, but most of the blood was already caked. Ian took a closer look to see the actual wound: the skin had been ruptured – not even all the way down to the muscle – on a length of approximately three centimeters. It was not bad: some disinfectant and bandage now, then healing-enhancing drugs later at the Agent HQ, and she would be just fine.

Like Ian's torn pant leg, it was a lucky hit. It could easily have been much worse.

“Let me clean and wrap it up,” Ian said.

“OK,” Jo sighed with some reluctance. Ian understood she would probably have wanted to do it herself, but relented for now.

“What about the laptop?” she asked as Ian went to his backpack for the medical supplies. “You said that we'd take it at least up to the motel. Do you intend to begin cracking the files right away?”

“I'm no Blowfish. But I was thinking of removing the hard disk. It can't really have a bug or tracker on it, while the rest of the machine might well have.”

“Clever. So what about I open the machine while you patch me up. I still have one good hand.”

“All right. That saves time,” Ian admitted.

It was probably wisest to spend the least possible amount of time here, as it was only a couple of hours' drive all the way back to the HQ. Sleeping a second night here would just be an unnecessary risk: it would be foolish to assume SCEPTRE would not follow them here one way or another, given enough time.

Ian knew the Agent Multi-Tool was too crude to open laptop screws with: Jo took a small ordinary screwdriver from her backpack instead. Then she sat at the bedside table, the computer in front of her, waiting to be treated.

“We start with the bit that hurts,” Ian said as she was already opening the hard disk compartment screws with her right hand.

Jo winced a second time as Ian applied the disinfectant: he would have wanted to do something else as an apology, but she was in the middle of a delicate operation. As Ian set out to dress the wound, Jo removed the even smaller set of screws holding the hard disk mounting tray in place. Finally, she pulled loose the SATA connector: the drive had been successfully separated.

Jo put the disk to her backpack.

“If we only had some C4, we could blow up the rest of the machine now,” she said.

“We could microwave it,” Ian suggested.

“Do you think that would kill any bugs on it?”

“Probably not. Or I don't know. But at least it would sparkle nicely.”

There was a smile on Jo's corpse-painted face, and of course there was every reason to be glad: they had just fought several guards and assassin trainees, had eliminated a SCEPTRE metal band and prevented them from spreading anti-cosmic message, had recovered valuable evidence, and most importantly, had escaped with their lives.

Now that the festival was well and truly over with, the paint could of course be washed away. It should be, actually, before coming to contact with anyone: any witnesses would remember two paint-faced individu-

als running and shooting, and it would be important that no further sightings existed.

Soon it would also be time to ditch the clothes, no matter how grim they were. Ian almost let out a laugh as he remembered the evolution of their false identities and disguises.

However, the laugh died quickly as he saw bright light behind the shutters.

Vehicle headlights. SCEPTRE had followed them.

“Get down!” he shouted.

In the next instant, the heavy rattle of automatic gunfire began.

Amid deafening noise, the motel room was rapidly turning into a chaos of splintering wood and flying glass fragments. Countless jagged holes appeared in the wall, from which the glare of the headlights started to shine through.

Ian was on his stomach, crawling toward the door with as much speed as he could manage while still keeping low. The corridor beyond would offer some more protection.

There was no pause in the firestorm: the enemy had to be using belt-fed machine guns.

Jo was flattened to the floor too, fierce rage on her face.

“The grenades!” she shouted. “We’ll have to thin the opposition somehow!”

Both backpacks held fragmentation and incendiary grenades. Both could be useful: shrapnel would wound enemies up to a fifteen meters, while the incendiary grenades could set vehicles on fire and inflict extremely painful high-temperature burn injuries.

But first they would have to reach the backpacks. That meant even more crawling on the floor, with the risk of getting hit by bullets or fragments flying around.

Jo was still closer to the window and her backpack, while Ian's was propped against the bed next to the wall: only three meters away, but right now it would take ten seconds or more just to get there.

"Toss me yours," Ian yelled back. If Jo had packed similarly as he had, there would be two frags and two incendiary ones. That would have to be enough.

Jo rolled around, reached for the backpack, and then – as the relentless gunfire still was shredding the room to pieces – threw it to Ian's direction. It was risky: she had to extend her hand to the line of fire.

The backpack sailed through the room, then caught to the edge of the bed, but fell at last to the floor, only a half meter away from Ian.

As Jo was now crawling toward him, Ian turned and reached for the pack. He opened it hurriedly, fished for the grenades, and stuffed them into the pockets of his coat and pants. He also felt a small box-shaped object: the laptop hard disk. Had it been damaged in the fall?

"I'll take the hard disk too!"

"Be my guest!"

Ian pocketed the drive, then continued toward the door. He knew that to pull the handle, he would have to expose his back partially.

Suddenly, the gunfire stopped. An eerie silence fell.

And Ian realized something even worse was likely going to happen.

"Get out of the room now!" he shouted as he sprang to his feet, yanked open the door, and dived to the corridor.

Just as Jo came flying through too, there was a sharp hiss from the outside, and a second later the whole room was engulfed in an yellow fireball, accompanied with the earsplitting noise of detonation.

A rocket-propelled grenade.

More shards of construction material came raining from the room and from the ceiling of the corridor: Ian felt something sting his cheek, but the damage just had to be ignored. He found the concussion to have disoriented him somewhat: as he ran, he hit first the left-side wall, then the right. Jo did not fare much better, but at least they both were still alive for now.

Then, the rattle of machine guns started again, as the corridor was now being ventilated in turn. The row of holes appearing to the wall chased them, and they were forced to dive into safety.

Now there were roughly ten meters remaining to the exit door. Ian could hear screams of panic, screams of agony from the other rooms: collateral damage was inevitable and there was nothing they could do, except to try to take out the SCEPTRE gunners as quickly as possible.

They crawled again.

Ian did not exactly look forward to reaching the exit: as soon as he threw the first grenade, the enemy would know quite exactly where to fire next. His USP pistol was ridiculously underpowered compared to the machine guns, and he was not at all sure if Jo even had her pistol any more, or if she had left it inside along with her jacket. In any case, the grenades would have to be thrown accurately where they hurt the most.

Ian reached the door first, peering through its glass.

In the light of the moon that just at the moment was not obscured by dark clouds, in the glare of their burning room, Ian saw two pickup trucks with machine guns mounted on the backs.

On both vehicles a gunner manned the weapon, and there were at least drivers on both, but in the darkness

Ian could not be sure of additional passengers. Just for a moment he remembered his dream about the Sign of the Gun: the moon was right now his sign.

The attackers had no combat fatigues, no helmets, nothing that appeared military-like, just ordinary wintertime street clothes in dark colors.

Ian understood now: like before, SCEPTRE had paid a local gang that was crazy and hateful enough to do the dirty work, to shoot up the motel for them. The gang had likely been given a large amount of cash, and just as likely the hardware, too.

It was a good degree of deniability.

Again, there was a pause in gunfire. The gunners were probably letting the barrels cool down.

"Two vehicles," Ian whispered to Jo. "It's best if we hit them at the same time. I can take the one further away."

He handed one fragmentation and one incendiary grenade to her.

"Three, two, one, now!"

As Ian uttered the last word he pulled the pin of the first grenade, the cylindrical incendiary one. He rapidly judged the needed strength to reach the far away truck, then threw. The cylinder sailed in a beautiful arc through the air.

Jo's apple-shaped frag grenade came next.

The incendiary grenade hit the truck and rolled under it. With a sizzling noise, a white-hot flame erupted.

This was followed by the concussive boom of the frag grenade near the other truck: the gunner was caught in the shrapnel and fell.

Then the final two grenades came flying.

Ian's frag flew far from its mark: it was lighter than the incendiary, and he had applied too much strength.

The fifteen meter damage radius would be mostly, if not completely, off the truck.

The final incendiary grenade landed on the back of the nearest pickup. Before the grenade detonated, the driver managed to jump into safety – almost. The back of his jacket now burned with white phosphorus fire.

But the gunner further away remained standing, and even as the truck on which he stood was rapidly catching fire, he turned the machine gun toward the door and opened up.

The grenades had not been quite enough.

As the door glass shattered from gunfire, Ian ducked back into safety next to Jo.

“What now?” she asked.

“Do you have your gun?”

“Yeah, it's with me.”

“Try to distract those that remain, while I try to get closer,” Ian explained.

“I'll do that. Be careful.”

Jo positioned herself right on the edge: it was a relatively safe spot, because the hail of bullets was coming almost parallel to the wooden outside wall and would lose most its energy while tearing through it.

Still, she had to extend her gun out to actually pose a threat, and that was not risk-free.

Ian moved into a low crouch next to her, gathering strength –

The gunfire ceased for a second.

Then he leaped, hoping the firing would not resume before he reached the cover of the burning nearest truck. He heard muted shots from behind: Jo was laying suppressive fire.

Ian hit the snow and rolled until he was level with the front tires of the truck. Along the way, he caught a

glimpse of the driver writhing desperately on the snowy ground, trying to put out the flames that had by now – judging from the agonized sound he made – spread to his flesh.

Then came an explosion as the fuel tank of the far away truck ignited.

But a moment after, the machine gun fire started again: during the latest pause, the gunner must have removed the weapon, then jumped to safety.

Ian could not see the driver of the second truck: if not injured, he could be out in the gloom somewhere, ready to move in for the kill. Not to speak of possible other passengers.

The motel yard was not a safe place at all, yet.

Ian circled the burning pickup, keeping a respectable distance, for it might blow up soon as well. Finally, the remaining gunner came into view: walking stiffly while firing the heavy weapon, he almost reminded Ian of an indestructible Terminator robot.

But he was quite destructible.

The man probably did not have a vest on him, or who knew? It was better to be certain.

Crouched low, Ian took aim, and did the same as he had done with Qemetiel: several successive shots, each aimed progressively higher.

The last maybe blew a head, or then not: what mattered was that the gunner fell and did not move anymore.

Right after the nearest truck exploded.

Ian was still dangerously close when it happened: he felt the intense heat wave against his exposed face and hands.

Scanning left and right, he tried to see if any more attackers were remaining. At least there was no more

gunfire on either side: Ian took a glimpse behind to see Jo changing mags in the doorway.

Then he heard hasty footsteps on snow, disappearing off to the distance.

The second driver was escaping. And that did not matter: he was not a priority. To get away was much more important, for more enemies could be arriving any moment. SCEPTRE black ops might be observing the situation from further away, estimating if more force would be necessary.

Authorities might also have been alerted already.

Ian peered to the direction of their rented car: they had left it off to the side and it might just be undamaged.

"I think we got them all," he yelled at Jo. "We should take off now."

The magazine change finished, Jo emerged to the yard, gun extended and still cautious. But without the jacket and just her plain black T-shirt on, she would be freezing even faster, so that was another reason to be going.

"Do you have the keys?" Ian asked.

"Yeah. But we'll have to see first if those guys did something funny to the car."

Sabotage? That, or a tracking or explosive device fastened to the underside. Ian ran up to the Ford, then lay down to see. Naturally there would be no convenient blinking red light to tell.

But he still had his Agent tool, and flicked its light on. Jo joined him in the inspection, and Ian let the cone of light travel all over the dirty underside.

There appeared to be nothing extraneous. Jo did not notice anything either.

"Seems clean," Ian said as they got up. "We ride?"

“We ride. And if we get company, I’ll just imagine that I’m Yngwie and it’s my Ferrari. But you do the shooting. You can use my spare mags if you need, I should have at least one.”

As Ian and Jo entered the car, the owner of the motel came running from his own house some hundred meters away. He was armed with a double-barreled shotgun. But he was late to the party.

“There are wounded inside,” Ian shouted harshly to him. “Call 911!”

Then they were already speeding away. At least the owner did not shoot at them.

Ian did not want to even consider the idea of staying: there would be paramedics and police arriving, and even if it had been in self-defense, the guns without permits, grenades, and fake ID’s would be downright unpleasant to explain.

The Ford sped through the moonlit countryside. Again, the road was icy: Ian was actually a bit scared as the car fishtailed in the curves. Jo seemed to keep it in control, but was in some degree of rage.

She was determined, possibly too much so. Still, Ian did not want to tell her to slow down. The sooner they would reach the Agent HQ, the better.

Instead, he focused on keeping a lookout for anyone on their tail. As there appeared to be none, he settled down to send a quick email to Blowfish and company:

Returning home already. Got evidence, but did meet some resistance. Come meet us if you can.

He hit the “send” button.

Then, he reflected on the attack at the motel, and even the earlier events: how Azazel had stared at him, but actually attacked him only much later. How long had SCEPTRE known of Ian's and Jo's presence at the festival?

Now it was impossible to tell.

But it was clear SCEPTRE were masters of psychological warfare, too: anyone fighting them would easily become his own enemy, because he either fell into a false sense of security, like had almost happened at the

motel, or then being constantly alert and paranoid would gradually sap his mental and physical strength.

As they were driving through a hilly section of the road, Ian thought he saw something at the crest of a hill, behind.

Delusions. Paranoia.

Whatever it was, it was no longer there when he looked again. He did not even want to bother Jo for confirmation: her gaze remained steadily on the road ahead as she turned the wheel in small precise motions, almost mechanically.

Another uneventful mile, closer to the HQ.

It was getting close to 9 PM: they had roughly two hundred remaining.

"Let's swap at some point," Ian said.

"I'm doing fine. Besides -"

Ian knew Jo's point even before she said it: he had to stay on the passenger side, because right now he was a better shot. But in the halfway point at latest it would be wise to change.

Driving off the road would be a terribly anticlimactic end for an Agent mission. Or hitting oncoming traffic. No SCEPTRE needed at all, just a slip in concentration after a long stretch of fast driving in the dark, and under not-so-good road conditions.

Suddenly hi-beam headlights lit up somewhere close behind.

As if thinking of SCEPTRE actually summoned them.

The Ford veered to the left, then back to right: Jo had been temporarily blinded by the glare in the rear view mirror.

Then, also the gunfire started.

Ian understood now: the driver or drivers had been using night vision and driving without lights on. They

had kept their distance, stalking their prey, and now they closed in on the kill.

Several unpleasant noises of bullets impacting sheet metal filled his consciousness. The old Ford would not take much of this, and would certainly protect him or Jo for long.

Ian quickly glanced behind: he could not identify the vehicle yet, but the star-shaped muzzle flashes told that the enemies were firing bursts with assault rifles. There were two shooters, it seemed.

They had to be stopped quick.

"I can't see much," Jo yelled, then flicked the mirror to the right position. Ian hoped it would help at least a bit.

Then it was time to respond with force.

Ian unfastened the seat belt, then snaked his way to the rear seat, while keeping low. He had almost a full magazine to go.

The next burst shattered the rear window.

At least there was no scream of pain from Jo: the steering did not go wild either. But on the next burst she might not be as lucky.

Ian used the butt of his pistol to clear enough of the window to shoot through.

Now the vehicle was so close that Ian could catch a glimpse: it was a fairly ordinary-looking sedan in a dark color. The shooters were peering out from the side windows.

But the headlights were blinding him: as he looked again, he only saw their intense beams.

He wished to dissociate, to become a more effective killing machine, but the enemy had caught him unaware. He would have to do this without any help from his assassin personality, or personalities, if many had

been installed during the training.

The lights would have to go first.

Firing pretty much blindly, Ian estimated their height, then unleashed shot after shot, starting from his right and going to the left.

The left-side light went out.

The shooters started firing again, the muzzle flashes blinding and disorienting him even more.

Something sizzling hot passed very close to his face. But Ian just kept firing: finally the other light was extinguished too by a lucky hit.

He was fire now and ducked back into the cover to reload.

"That's much better," Jo breathed from the front. Ian hazarded a peek forward and saw her almost horizontal in the driver seat, with just the hands kept above the line of fire.

"It's not over yet!" Ian shouted in reply and felt sudden sideways acceleration as they entered a steep curve. Still, gunfire kept coming from behind, resulting in more frightening impacts on metal, and breaking both side mirrors. The enemy had probably just strapped their goggles on again.

Back in action with a full magazine, Ian popped out of cover as soon as there was a pause in the firing. The red rear lights and the moon now illuminated the enemy vehicle rather well. One shooter was fully inside, reloading, while the right-side one still peered out.

He fired a burst, but it went wide.

Ian decided to take him out first, before he would fire again. It was simple: you miss – you fail – you die.

Rapidly, Ian aimed at his upper torso and squeezed the trigger three times. The three muted shots all hit home.

The shooter fell back inside, unmoving.

Ian shifted aim to the one on the left: he was finished with reloading and was extending his rifle out of the window in anticipation of a kill.

Ian fired just as a bright muzzle flash filled his field of view. Next came a harsh impact: he was jolted back and saw a sudden, consuming blackness.

As consciousness slowly came back, Ian was gripped with total dread: where he had been hit? Had Jo been hit as well? Was he still in the car, with SCEPTRE still in pursuit? Or was he already in the hands of enemies?

There was an intense pain in the back of his skull, lesser pain everywhere else, and Ian understood to be lying in the rear passengers' foot compartment. The angular shape of his pistol throbbed hurtfully in his back: it had fallen beneath him.

First he felt his head all over, but there appeared to be no blood. Then he went on to examine the rest of his body. The torn fabric on his leg alerted him at first, but then he remembered it was the old hit.

Finally he came to the conclusion that he had not been wounded at all. But what had happened then?

As he looked up, he saw trees zooming by in the side window. They were still in motion.

With some more pain he dragged himself onto the back seat. He still felt like he might faint again: a loud, unpleasant hissing filled his ears. He turned to peer out of the shattered rear window, but saw no sign of the chasing vehicle. It was as if it had never existed.

Suddenly Jo turned to look behind. "Sorry about that. There was a tree fallen on the road and I had to brake. Guess I braked kind of hard. Did you hit your head bad?"

“I don't know,” Ian answered. There was no immediate telling if the concussion was mild or severe. “What happened to the enemies?”

“They weren't as lucky. They crashed right into the tree trunk and went flying. The car probably ended up sideways in a ditch.”

Somehow Ian thought that would not stop SCEPTRE yet. They probably had not seen last of the chasers.

He collected the pistol from the floor and tried to remember. Three shots to the first shooter, one probably to the other. Eight rounds remaining.

With pain still throbbing in his skull, he felt for the last spare magazine – Jo's – in his coat pocket. It was still there. That amount of bullets had to be enough.

“We have kind of a problem though,” Jo said. “The car's leaking fuel. I don't think we can make it to the HQ.”

“I sent email before the car showed up. They should be coming to meet us,” Ian replied. He was surprised how well he could remember things despite the hit to his head. Maybe it was not that bad at all.

Jo smiled. “That's great. Now let's see how far we get.”

The fuel tank lasted for about twenty miles more: it probably had been hit several times.

The engine died: Jo switched to neutral and let the car roll as far as possible, but at last they stood immobile. Without the engine running there would be no heat, and furthermore the rear window was shot to pieces. Waiting for the Agents to come to the rescue would be unpleasant, potentially even fatal.

Jo had a defeated look on her face: she had been too glad too early.

“How far to the HQ?” Ian asked.

“About hundred and fifty.”

Assuming the Agents had left the HQ the instant they had received the email, it still meant almost two hours of waiting in the freezing night.

Ian tried to not let his own depression show. He thought of the Mayhem song “Freezing Moon,” which fit their current situation quite precisely, but it did not amuse him much.

“Let's think positively. If more SCEPTRE troops appear, we can ambush them and take their vehicle,” he said.

Jo nodded in reply, but there was not much conviction. It was possible that because she had been driving, she blamed herself for not driving fast enough to evade the enemy. But that was unnecessary: Ian could blame himself just as well for not killing the shooters fast enough, for letting them hit the fuel tank.

“I think it's better if we leave the car. We can surprise them better from behind the trees. It's getting colder in here anyway,” Ian went on.

Ian climbed out first and Jo followed. There was a large pine tree conveniently located by the right side of the road, some five meters away.

“That looks good,” Jo said.

“Agreed. Let's hole up there, and let Crucifier spread his wings around you again.”

“Hm.”

They both took cover behind the tree, staying right next to each other so that Ian's coat could fit around them both. There was no telling how soon SCEPTRE would arrive – if they would arrive at all.

Only two minutes had passed when they heard the sound of an engine, coming closer.

From behind a curve, another dark-painted sedan arrived without lights. Right now, that was a sure sign that Ian and Jo could fire upon it with impunity, as long as they did not disable the vehicle itself.

However, it appeared that the car was not slowing down at all. It was now little less than a hundred meters away.

"They suspect something," Ian hissed as he let Jo free. "Hit 'em hard and hit 'em now!"

The curve was long, so the as long as the car was rounding it, Ian and Jo could hit it easier. But near the Ford the road straightened, and the enemies could pick up speed. Then it would be too late.

Ian took aim at the windows: at this distance, and at a moving target, it was useless to try to aim specifically at those inside.

He also knew that there was no time to reload. He would have eight shots and no more. He cursed for not switching mags when they had still been driving.

Then, both he and Jo started raining muted gunfire on the car.

In response, the passengers started spraying on full auto. Assault rifles again, Ian could tell from the sound. He flattened himself to the snow, knowing that he would lose at least a second trying to reacquire. But better that than to be dead.

He fired the remaining shots, then the dead man's click came. Jo appeared to be empty too.

Now the car was almost upon them. It seemed to lose control, then slammed violently into the Ford.

Acting on reflex, Ian was already ejecting the spent magazine and reaching for the final spare as he ran toward the vehicle.

Its engine still ran, but it was unmoving for now.

Ian racked the slide and was good to go again. Jo should have no more spare mags, and a quick look behind confirmed she was staying in cover.

Ian took a quick look inside: it appeared the front passenger was trying to remove the incapacitated driver from behind the wheel. In the rear, another was regaining composure, going for his rifle again.

Either of those could not be allowed to happen.

Ian closed the remaining distance, jumped on top of the car's trunk, and then as if in a trance, as if his body was not really his, fired the whole magazine in quick succession through the rear window and the roof.

Twelve muted spits.

A silence fell.

Ian felt an odd vertigo as he considered the brutality he had just displayed. Of course those inside had been SCEPTRE, armed and dangerous, but still it had felt more like an execution than actual combat. And what was to come next was not pleasant either.

Jo came running from behind.

It was only now Ian realized that she could have been seriously wounded by automatic gunfire. But honestly, the thought had not even crossed his mind as he had been focused on the enemies. A degree of dissociation, most certainly.

"We'll have to remove them. Then see if the car still moves," Ian said.

They opened all four doors and quickly set upon the grim task of hauling the bloodied corpses of the three SCEPTRE operatives, all of them dressed in black combat fatigues, out of the car and into the cover of the woods. Trails of crimson were left on the road: there was no way the scene could be fully erased, and honestly there was no need.

If things worked out, they would be far away before long.

Finally the macabre work was complete.

“Could you drive now?” Jo asked.

“Sure, I trust my head to be OK enough. And it shouldn't be long until we run into friends.”

Suddenly Jo looked anxious. “That reminds me – if we drive a SCEPTRE car, how do we know they don't shoot at us?”

“Well, it's not like the car exactly says SCEPTRE in big letters, or something. But still –”

Ian remembered how the stealth helicopter had been painstakingly stripped of its tracking and anti-tampering devices. It was very likely the car was at least phoning home all the time, if not more.

“Yeah, it's not exactly a good idea to drive it for any longer than we need to,” he concluded, and sat down into the bloodied driver seat. Actually there was blood all over the insides of the car.

Jo moved in to sit beside him, displaying a blank expression. No apprehension or disgust, just nothing.

Ian reversed for a short while to dislodge the car from the Ford. The steering felt shaky, there were some odd noises, and the dashboard was full of red warning lights he did not want to even think about, but the maneuver succeeded well enough.

Then he put the automatic transmission into the “drive” position and off they went.

Less than an hour from commandeering the enemy vehicle, there were headlights up ahead. It could be the Agency van coming to meet them: there had not been much other traffic since the encounters with the two SCEPTRE cars.

Ian slowed down and flicked the lights on and off. As far as he knew, there was no agreed-upon set of codes between Agents to use in cases like this, but that felt right enough.

The oncoming headlights too flicked off, then back on.

A quick wave of paranoia came over him: what if there was more SCEPTRE coming instead? Well, there were the assault rifles inside the car, but now Ian did not feel much like fighting anymore. Jo looked exhausted too: she had not said anything for the last part of the trip, just stared out of the window.

The oncoming vehicle stopped. Ian stopped.

It was indeed a van. Behind the wheel there was Blackhand.

Ian had never been as glad to see him as now.

They both rolled down their respective side windows.

“This is a SCEPTRE car. We're coming over,” Ian said.

He killed the engine and jumped out, rounding the van to its rear doors. Jo followed, still pretty much catatonic.

Both Sarge and Blowfish had been riding along in the rear compartment: it was the vehicle that contained the full set of communications equipment.

“Good to see you again, Duncan and Nikki. Or are you them anymore?” Sarge said in a friendly, yet curious voice.

Ian did not feel much like joking at this point: he knew he sounded weary, possibly even unfriendly. “We'll fill you in on that later.”

Blowfish looked unusually grim. A clipped “Hi” was all she managed, then she turned back to a terminal on the left-side communications rack.

Sarge left to sit in the front instead. As soon as Jo was in, Ian closed the rear doors.

The van performed a quick three-point turn, then started speeding toward the HQ: the SCEPTRE car and whatever tracking devices it had were left behind.

Ian and Jo both sat against the dividing wall between the front and rear compartments. Only now Ian could fully appreciate how relieved he felt to be in safety, in completely friendly company. There had been far too many close calls: after the festival, SCEPTRE had wished for their death badly, and had not been afraid to use whatever force necessary.

“Our cluster was discovered,” Blowfish said suddenly, roughly, as they had been driving for some time. “The computation client is now listed as malware in all major anti-virus programs, and a CERT advisory has been issued. Put simply: we no longer get any results. And what’s more fucked up is that we didn’t get anything noteworthy besides that one lousy JPEG. Just some maps and schedules of the places we’ve already visited.”

Now Ian understood perfectly her grim mood. But he also remembered the hard drive they had extracted. Suddenly much rested on it.

“We have something. A drive from Black Dragon’s laptop. If it still works, it might help,” he said.

“We’ll see,” Blowfish replied, then turned back to the terminal once more.

Next Ian turned to Jo, inched a little closer.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

Jo took some time to respond. “Glad it’s over.”

The voice was scary in how empty it sounded. Of course it was perfectly understandable: the day had been rough on any Agent standards, and they had been

close to death too many times to count. Now, if not before, Ian understood that her resources certainly were not limitless either.

"We're home soon," he said. It was simple and obvious, but again, he just wanted something to say. He also kissed her on the cheek, and Jo seemed to relax a little, which was possibly the best Ian could hope for right now.

Ian was not actually aware of the time passing: it could have been minutes, or then hours. But at last the van stopped. He was jolted out violently from his dreamlike state and felt suddenly terrified: this was the end of the road, and beyond a prison gulag or a firing squad or something equally unpleasant waited.

Absurdity! He came to his senses and understood that they had arrived at the Agent HQ.

Blackhand opened the rear doors.

"It's best you get some rest now. The debriefing can wait until tomorrow," he said.

"But the hard disk can't," Blowfish said. "Where is it?"

Ian reached for his pocket, and for a second he felt absolute horror. The drive was gone!

He patted all over his coat violently, until he understood it was in the other pocket. He handed the small drive over to Blowfish and hoped the Agent BOFH would now be satisfied.

"I'll get to work on it immediately," she said.

Ian had wondered it before, but the thought crossed his mind again: maybe she actually was on speed. Then again, she had not been running and driving for her life, or attending a festival with the worst service practices ever.

“By the way, too bad Mayhem's show got canceled. Supposedly there were issues with payment. That thing's already developing into a meme of its own, and if I understood right, it's not even the first time something like that happened.”

Ian was now truly puzzled.

Since when did Blowfish follow metal news?

But now, there was not much for Ian and Jo to do except to find their quarters while their legs would still carry. Ian helped Jo up from the van's floor, and they headed through the garage and the lobby.

In Ian's dream the hard disk haunted him. He was with Blowfish in a particle-free room: they both were wearing surgeon's outfits, and the drive lay on an operating table, the platters visible. Ian handed Blowfish miniaturized tools according to her precise instructions. Meanwhile they kept monitoring the pulse and blood pressure of the hard disk: whenever Blowfish did something wrong, the measurements spiked, going wildly either too high or too low.

He woke up with a start and found himself in the server room. He had no idea of how he had ended up there, but was pretty sure that Jo was now sleeping soundly in their room. Blowfish looked up from behind a smoking soldering iron.

“The power connector was broken,” she said. “Quite an easy fix. I'll hook this up right away and try to pull data off it, but you should really be going to bed.”

Ian saw it fit to comply: his head felt very heavy. It would possibly be an early wake-up with the debriefing waiting, and somehow he guessed Blackhand would not show much understanding if Ian told that he had been operating a hard disk.

In reality Blowfish had done everything.

“Thanks to you, the puzzle is now starting to assemble itself,” Blackhand said. “The video conference you witnessed proves that SCEPTRE priests do indeed exist, and that they are adamant about spreading their anti-cosmic ideals. But now, let's move on to information warfare. Blowfish?”

They had gathered into a planning room again, and not even into the one with the band equipment. It was Sunday morning, and Ian had predicted right that he did not feel especially well-rested. Jo was more of her usual self after a good night's rest and a quick check-up of her wounded arm: if nothing else, that at least made Ian glad to some degree.

The corpse paint had finally been washed away, and in addition Ian and Jo had used roughly matching hair dyes to restore the original colors. It definitely felt better to look like yourself again.

“Black Dragon's laptop held no valuable files in itself,” Blowfish said. “But what it contained was still worth more than gold. Decrypting keys. Now we have decoded roughly a quarter of the material that was on Suhrim's workstation, and more will come once we match more of the keys.”

Ian's heart jumped, because he remembered how many chances there had been for the laptop or the hard disk to be simply forgotten. Not to speak of the violence the devices had endured on the way here. But he could feel satisfied, perhaps even happy –

No. Happy was not the right word at all. Thing they would uncover from the files would certainly not be happy. There would be grandiose, mad plans either to enslave the world, or to unleash anti-cosmic Hell, or something in between.

“What's in those files, then?” Jo asked.

“In addition to the uninteresting stuff: security notes, maps and schedules of places we already know, like the fnord research lab – there's a shitload of image files in very high resolution. For the most part, they contain more of the Qliphotic symbols and text, scanned in 24-bit color from some worn and old-looking pages. And some of them stored in uncompressed BMP format to add insult to the injury.”

Possibly straight from the Qliphotic Kabbalah itself, Ian thought.

In a way it was disappointing, if most of the material turned out to be easily available from elsewhere. But by encrypting it heavily, SCEPTRE had led the Agents to waste time, had led them to believe it was something unique and essential.

“Some of the images look like they could be referring to SCEPTRE's four-phase plan. It's possible that they've chosen to implement some ancient occult prophecy, and that's why there seems to be a coincidence. But the language's just too esoteric for me. There's clearly some Hebrew and Latin, but I'm not really a translator. I've only picked up a few words and phrases here and there,” Blowfish continued.

Not that encouraging, Ian thought.

“Like we know, Phase One are the fnords,” Blackhand said. “But it was long unclear how they would be used. Blowfish said to me that 'preparation' and 'faith' were among the words she encountered. So I think, they want to destabilize minds on a large scale, lead them to believe – how should I say this –”

“That the end of the world is coming?” Ian guessed.

“Roughly like that. Or more precisely, to be receptive to whatever comes next. Naturally, it ties into the 2012 predictions and prophecies. It would make most sense to reinforce the existing beliefs: if you for example believe in a coming polar shift, or aliens, then the fnords will amplify those. It's a bit hard to believe it will actually work, but I wouldn't bet on them not working,” Blackhand went on.

Ian thought back to Apollyon and his fnord research, and to the documents Lucas had possessed: experiments on people no-one would miss, to see how well the fnords worked, and how they needed to be adjusted.

“From there we get to Phase Two. Blowfish, would you be kind?” Blackhand said and turned off the lights.

“This image definitely isn't Qliphotic at all,” Blowfish replied, pressed a key on her laptop, and the ceiling data projector came to life. The picture was a high-resolution map of the world, with eleven locations marked all over.

Ian wondered if the amount had some practical meaning, or if it had been chosen just to fit with the anti-cosmic system.

“Somehow these places are the next step once the fnords have been deployed and the people are ready,” Blackhand said. “But we haven't yet found anything

that would tell the exact purpose, and it's not sure we will."

Ian felt uneasy. Perhaps spreading some poison to the air? If the fnords sounded comparatively harmless – after all people believed in various odd things even without them – then this definitely was something else.

"As you can see, one of the locations is quite close to us. Roughly six hundred klicks northeast," Sarge pointed out.

"And that brings us to the next point," Blackhand said. "Some of us should definitely check out the nearest of those locations. But then, the rest – Ian and Jo, have we ever told you of a place called Erehwon?"

Was that from some movie? No, the spelling was at least different. But it was quite clear that it was Nowhere in reverse.

"I don't think so," Ian replied.

"That's the codename of a rather special SCEPTRE facility. You can think of it as a combined prison and insane asylum," Sarge said. "I've been there once – mind you, not as a patient – but getting captured Agents out. It's kind of an unpleasant place."

"What he said. It's mostly under the sea. Now we have several reasons to hit that place again, and that's exactly what the rest of us should be doing," Blackhand said.

As Ian listened to the description, another wave of apprehension hit him, and he almost convulsed at the thought: a SCEPTRE asylum prison. Torture of the inmates was a given. He looked to his side: Jo was uneasy as well.

"First, we need any Agents we can get, to finish this war or die trying. We'll set everyone still alive free, and anyone who's sane enough can join us. Second, it's one

of the few high-level SCEPTRE facilities we know. We're quite sure it's still in use, as the prison's too extensive to relocate just like that. And from there we should get to know the rest of their high-level nodes of activity, like the command center for the black ops. Its existence has been hinted in coded transmissions, so it's not like the black op teams are just individual cells working in isolation. Hopefully in addition to the locations, we can steal some high-level access cards," Blackhand explained.

"Didn't we already get those from Suhrim? Those access cards?" Ian asked.

"Yes. It's true we can use them for re-sequencing, to create some completely forged SCEPTRE identities," Blowfish replied. "But I wouldn't rely solely on that. Now it's over a week since his death, so they definitely have shut down his access. And if they're clever enough, they'll be able to shut down the derived identities too, once they find out what's going on. But by getting more from Erehwon, we can stay a few steps ahead of them."

Blackhand paused.

"Finally, in all the history of the Agency, we've only had one certified occultist. Years ago, she was captured and is being held at Erehwon. We're quite positive they haven't killed her, because she is a valuable asset even for what they are planning. So, if she's got any of her sanity remaining, we believe she'll be able to fill us in on SCEPTRE's master plan. And she should be able to translate those images a lot better than anyone of us can," Blackhand said.

"Does she have name?" Jo asked.

"Nastassja."

That reminded Ian of something. Oh yes.

“Nastassja in Eternal Sleep,” he muttered. It was a Darkthrone song. Then he realized he had muttered loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Yes, we certainly hope it has not come to that yet,” Sarge replied.

Jo let out a quiet laugh, which betrayed her knowing the song as well, at least by name.

“Now that we know what we're up to, we have to decide who goes where. I've thought of one possibility, but feel free to object,” Blackhand said.

“Checking out the marked location is, or at least should be, more of a quiet infiltration job. There's a high possibility that those eleven locations are connected with each other, or into SCEPTRE's main network, so hacking or other information warfare may be necessary.”

That did not leave much choice but Blowfish. She allowed herself a small, but still proud smile.

“Then there's the matter of who goes with her. And conversely, who goes to Erehwon. That place will be nasty for certain. We'll need a lot of firepower just to get in, and then to get out alive with all of our comrades aboard. Sarge knows the place already, so he can't really exempt himself, or what do you think?”

Sarge laughed. “Yeah, I'd like to choose the quieter job. Well, not really. I prefer to rock 'n' roll.”

“I will be going to Erehwon in any case. SCEPTRE needs to be taught a hard lesson for violating Geneva Convention, and I want to play a part in that,” Blackhand continued. “That leaves Ian and Jo. I know you like to work together, but in this case, it's probably better we split to two and three. So either of you accompanies Blowfish, and the other raids Erehwon with us.”

Ian thought of the not-so-pleasant choice.

What Blackhand and Sarge seemed to be telling, in between the lines, was that Erehwon could be suicide. And considering that, the choice became clear: he rather wanted to die himself. It was selfish, he knew. A dead Agent would not mourn. But it also made sense in other ways: it was him who SCEPTRE had tainted and broken, while Jo was still an outsider in comparison.

His death would bring a circle to its completion.

Jo dying would just make no sense.

And even if they both survived, it would be right for her to get the easier mission now. Whatever she and Blowfish would find at the location could not possibly be as bad as an undersea prison complex.

"I'll go to Erehwon. It's good for you to get to know Blowfish better," Ian said to Jo.

She stared back with some disbelief. It was likely she had been thinking just the same thoughts. But Ian had made his choice, and at least she did not want to outright challenge it.

"Well then, that's settled. We don't have that much time until the day SCEPTRE has mentioned, so we'll take off tomorrow. But let's spend this day preparing as well as we can," Blackhand said.

"We'll take off?" Jo wondered aloud. "There's only one helicopter."

"True enough," Blackhand replied. "Erehwon's in the Gulf of Mexico, so I think it's not wrong if our team takes the chopper, while you have to drive."

"I actually prefer going by land," Blowfish said. "Flying machines tend to come down, especially if a conveniently placed EMP generator goes off. A car just stops."

Ian was in the Agent armory, choosing his loadout. He had seen Blowfish and Jo exiting: because they had car-

ried, not dragged their equipment canvas bags out, their equipment had to have been comparatively light.

The Erehwon team might not have such luxury.

“What I noticed at the festival was that almost all of those assholes wore a vest. Well, it was the same at Olympia back then. And I guess Erehwon is not going to be at all better,” Ian explained to Sarge with slight bitterness.

“You would be right,” Sarge said with a fatherly tone. “We’ll be loading up with armor-piercing rounds as a standard. That means you won’t always need to go for the head to have some effect. Then there’s some of the more exotic varieties, like incendiary or poisoned rounds...”

Poisoned? That sounded evil.

But in warfare against such powerful enemy as SCEPTRE, they had to use every possible advantage.

“And of course we use 5.56 caliber as a minimum. Well, not for the pistols, but a pistol is a fucked up weapon anyway, unless you take something like the Desert Eagle, like Blackhand and Blowfish always do.”

“Except that I’ve never fired one seriously,” Ian remarked. Despite the theatrical value of the weapon, and the fact that both of those two had used one to save his life, he had no especial wish to take one with him. “It’s probably not a good idea I start now.”

“Do as you wish,” Sarge said. “Me, personally, I won’t be skimping on the firepower. Take a look at this.”

Sarge went to one of the racks and took out an unusual, heavy-looking weapon. It resembled roughly a machine gun, but something in it looked more wicked.

“This – is called the Penetrator Hammer. It essentially fires steel bolts at high speed. It’s not the lightest, but packs some serious punch.”

Steel bolts actually reminded Ian of the security robots in the fnord research facility. In any case, it was better to be on the giving rather than on the receiving end.

“Do you want to try it out?” Sarge asked.

Ian nodded with uncertainty.

The firing range, which was spacious enough to allow practicing with live explosives, was next to the armory. Sarge took the weapon and several large magazines containing twenty bolts each, and Ian followed.

As they arrived, Sarge switched on the lights. The sheer size of the room was still surprising each time.

“I’ll go first just to give you an idea,” he said. “The kick’s rather heavy, so I advise you to be prepared for the worst, then you can be pleasantly surprised that it wasn’t so bad after all.”

He pressed a button on the wall that made four ordinary circular targets pop up. They were some fifty meters away, Ian estimated.

Then Sarge inserted a magazine, pulled the heavy charging handle, lifted the weapon at shoulder height, and opened up.

An unholy rattle filled the air, reminding Ian of SCEPTRE’s security robots. The weapon did not fire as fast as an assault rifle or sub-machine gun: like primitive black metal, it was slower and more deliberate in its evil.

After Sarge was done and the magazine was empty, each of the targets had been utterly pulverized.

“Now you try. It’s not so different from any other weapon. The magazine release is there,” he showed Ian.

Ian released the spent magazine and slammed a full one in with exaggerated force, then pulled the handle with just as much excess.

“You don't have to do it that hard,” Sarge commented, then he pressed the button on the wall again.

Four fresh targets appeared.

Ian took aim at the first one: the iron sights seemed primitive, but then the gun itself did not carry much finesse either.

He braced the weapon as well as he could and pulled the trigger: as the Penetrator Hammer bucked in his grip and began to spit out the bolts, he almost felt like his shoulder would dislocate.

The first target was pulped to nothingness. Ian estimated to have fired five or six bolts.

“Wow. I think that's enough for me. I'll stay with the M4, thank you.”

“It will grow on you,” Sarge remarked.

As Sarge still remained at the range, Ian returned to the armory once more to double-check his loadout. It seemed satisfactory: he lifted the large black bag and left.

The day turned to evening, and the wait for the missions to begin grew already intolerable. Ian knew Sarge and Blackhand were practicing in the simulator: they had expected him to join, but he had already decided against it days ago.

Meanwhile, to speed things up, Blowfish had written a search program that was trying to match the rest of Black Dragon's decryption keys to the coded files. She remained in the server room.

It was not that Ian exactly looked forward to leaving for Erehwon, but as that had to be done anyway, he rather wished for the moment to already be here.

He did not look forward to the goodbyes, either.

Later in the evening Ian wandered to the planning

room with the band equipment, picked up the bass guitar, and sat down to play. He had never played much bass, but wanted to learn in what he understood as the “true” fashion – plucking the strings with fingers instead of a pick.

He had to start with very basic patterns, going slow.

Some time later, Jo wandered in too: she picked up the guitar, they turned on the amps and started improvising, creating some completely odd riffs and song structures, though still mostly using the key of E-minor for easy reference.

Ian switched to a pick to keep up with her: after that, playing the bass became mostly like playing a guitar with thicker strings and bigger frets.

After being more animated earlier in the day, during the briefing and the equipment loadout, Jo was now mellow to the point of appearing sad. They let a sustained chord ring out, turning at last into feedback despite the moderate volume.

Ian turned to Jo as the squeal still went on.

“If there’s anything – you can talk to me. I probably can’t actually help you, but I can listen.”

Jo took a deep breath, muted the strings, and let the breath out before she spoke. “That’s the same thing I said to you earlier. But now I’m not so sure any more, what good just words can do. Maybe they only make things worse, make you weaker. I wish I could do the same as you, to dissociate.”

“Don’t wish for that,” Ian cautioned. “I mostly can’t control when it comes and goes. When it wears off, and it always does, I’m just like anyone again. Weak, scared, pissed off –”

“You can’t really promise that you’ll come back alive from Erehwon, right?” Jo switched the subject.

Ian knew there was no point trying to go around the obvious truth.

“Right. I can only promise I try my best.”

“That’s enough,” Jo sighed. “Of course I can’t ask for more. Sometimes I think how much easier it would be if I didn’t give a shit: if I didn’t love you, if I wasn’t capable of worrying about you, if I didn’t need you. But I do.”

Ian thought back to the festival mission and felt torn up. He could not think of anything else but to hug Jo softly for a while. He also thought to say something, but everything he came up with got stuck in his throat. It was almost as if the hug just amplified the bittersweet feeling instead of relieving it.

Ian felt ashamed for the thought right after, but he seriously considered the idea of just staying like this, close to Jo, as SCEPTRE’s anti-cosmic deadline came and went.

Why were they needed to fight?

Why someone else could not do that instead?

The answer was simple: only the five of them were aware of the enemies’ plans. As far as he knew, they were the only Agents in active service. And there was no-one to turn to: the authorities would only laugh at them, or arrest them.

Ian hoped for the Sign of the Gun to light his way tomorrow.

Only once they were actually underway Ian understood how grueling the Erehwon mission would be. It would take over ten hours of flying to get to their destination. Thankfully both Sarge and Blackhand knew how to fly the stealth helicopter. Considering that, Ian felt himself somewhat of an outsider.

Blackhand was behind the controls now. Like on the previous flight, they flew low and near the maximum airspeed.

Naturally, no flight authorities had been notified.

The distance was a little over two thousand kilometers: if just considering the maximum range, one refueling would be enough, but it would not be wise to reach Erehwon with low fuel, and therefore two made more sense.

“We – or the trust fund actually – owns the land. There are close to twenty of them all over the country,” Blackhand explained through his helmet microphone.

He was talking about the weapons and fuel caches used in Agent warfare as necessary. They were not actual, full-scale Agency HQ's: the affectionate nickname was “dump.”

They would be refueling at those caches.

Ian recalled the takeoff: compared to last evening, the actual goodbye had been more business-like, something that was over with thankful speed. He did not actually worry about Jo, at least not yet: Blowfish would certainly take good care of her. Anyone wanting to harm them would have to get past the Desert Eagle's muzzle first.

The timing was quite good: they would reach Erewhon under the cover of darkness, then fly away to the morning light.

Through some rough sketches he had drawn, Sarge had explained the layout of Erewhon in the morning before they had taken off.

One first entered through a lighthouse, then passed through a long underwater tunnel – it was large in diameter, and there were electric vehicles down there for closing the distance.

At last one then arrived at the prison facility itself, which consisted of three large floors, full of confusing corridor mazes, depressive solitary confinement cells, and some treatment, research and office areas.

According to Sarge, a large part of the effect of being confined there was the knowledge of isolation, the knowledge of the tonnes of water above you. SCEPTRE could leave you to die, or flood the whole facility, and no-one in the world would know, no-one would come to your help.

As they had been flying for a little over three hours, they touched down to a sparse forest. As it was more to the south already, there was no snow. That combined with the trees whose leaves mostly lay rotting in the ground made the place seem desolate and eerie.

“This is the first dump,” Sarge said as the rotor blades slowly came to a halt.

“Everyone, be careful,” Blackhand said as he removed the pilot's helmet. “It would be easy for SCEPTRE to find these stashes if they only find out about the fund. Land ownership is public data.”

Suddenly, the M4 carbine next to Ian felt much reassuring, not to speak of the Agent coat with electromagnetic armor. Glad of the existence of both, he gripped the weapon tight as he exited the rear compartment.

He watched Sarge walk over to a tree that looked even more rotten than the rest: it stood grimly upright with only one short and withered branch. Possibly hit by lightning.

Sarge put his hand inside a hole in the trunk and pulled: a hinged section of the trunk opened, revealing a keypad behind. He keyed in a long sequence of digits, at least eight of them, and a low rumble started.

Some ten meters away from them a false square of ground began to split in two, revealing concrete stairs going down to the depths. Blackhand and Sarge went below first, weapons ready. They had night vision on: Ian switched to it as well and followed.

The musty smell was like that of a basement, just much stronger. He saw racks of weapons, shelves filled with boxes of ammunition, and spare sets of Agent armor.

Plus a large aviation fuel tank.

Blackhand turned on the lights, then connected a thick long hose to an outlet in the tank, and handed the other end to Sarge, who went to fasten it to the helicopter's end.

“Ready,” Sarge shouted from above.

Blackhand turned a valve on the tank and pressed a switch: a heavy-duty electric motor came to life and fuel started flowing to the chopper's tank.

The whole procedure took several minutes to finish.

“You can do it next time,” Blackhand remarked to Ian.

Soon they were airborne again, the opening in the ground closed again so that no-one could tell of the dump's existence without actually knowing. Sarge had now taken the controls: as far as Ian could tell, he flew even faster and more recklessly.

The Agent van was comfortably warm at least, Jo thought. As was the Agent coat. During the Frozen Hell festival, she had had enough of coldness for some time.

She had her Agent sunglasses raised on to the top of her head: it was a sunny day, and she wanted to see the rays of the sun without them being digitized and altered by the glasses. Blowfish, on the other hand, had kept the sunglasses meticulously on as she drove: combined with the stern expression on her face that had stayed constant during the trip, it could make one suspect she was downright unfriendly.

Of course she was not, Jo knew. Perhaps odd was the most fitting word to describe her. A sysadmin for life, creating and destroying networks with the tap of a key, presiding over the well-being of servers, it was probably easy to become a bit odd in the process.

Jo had attempted some small talk about information warfare. But Blowfish's answers had been so curt, always just a few words only, that at last Jo had just quit attempting to maintain conversation.

The mission was quite clear, too, in the way it was unclear: until they actually reached the location, there was little to do in the way of preparation. Except to be prepared for everything, which was roughly the same as to be prepared for nothing. Or was it?

"It's best if SCEPTRE never knows we were there," Blowfish reminded.

A classic stealth mission.

Their equipment, too, had been tailored for that, not for all-out warfare: Blowfish had her Desert Eagle, they both had silenced MP5 sub-machine guns for killing, tranquilizer needle guns for not killing, and finally tools for breaking and entering, as well as some electromagnetic pulse grenades.

"It's kind of hard in the winter," Jo replied. "Unless we can conjure a snowstorm to cover up the tracks, or we get lucky."

"We have to be creative. One thing is pretty much sure: there will be extensive electronic surveillance."

They had entertained the idea of the location being fully automated. And in the very least, because there were eleven of the sites around the world, there could not be too extensive of a crew.

Then, Jo turned to other thoughts.

Was she was changing somehow? Wanting to enjoy the sun was unusual. Was it that she expected death or Armageddon to be just around the corner, and therefore she wanted to enjoy the simple things in life as long as she still had the chance?

That felt fatalistic and grim. It was not good preparation to an Agent mission.

Was it better to think about anti-cosmic Satanism then? Jo could openly admit she did not think very highly of it. It was perhaps some kind of a defense mechanism: if you could not cope with your life as it was, then you thought about Wrathful Chaos consuming everything, and felt better.

Was that like any religion?

Even metal music could be interpreted as a religion

of sorts: you banged your head and listened to the harsh vocals, power chords and double-kick barrages, and felt better.

That was worrying. If she was analyzing the music she loved in such negative, self-deprecating way, then she was indeed changing, and for the worse.

But back to the topic of anti-cosmicism.

Of course, if SCEPTRE believed to benefit of the anti-cosmic forces in some way, it was scary.

Those forces could not actually be real, but if most in such a large organization – or cult – shared the belief, they definitely would have the power to shape reality. Simply by using the real-world resources they had.

It was an unpleasant topic. Maybe it was best to not think of anything and just enjoy the ride. There were several hundred miles to go still: at some point they would switch, and behind the wheel it was easier to think less.

It was also tempting to think about Ian.

He was flying southeast, then he would enter that forbidding prison facility and likely face overwhelming opposition. Before that they could of course use the Agent communications gear to stay in contact, but that would be against procedure. Not staying in touch was not a big deal, but he had to make it back alive. Because otherwise there would be hell to pay. Agents were never granted permission to die. Jo knew this line of thinking was absurd.

Under the darkened evening skies, the mission zone was at last getting close. Jo had driven for the last stretch, and like she had imagined, concentrating on the road had kept too much thinking at bay.

The road was climbing up to a large hill, still covered densely by the forest, but getting sparser as they went forward. That was bad, she knew: up there they would be exposed easier.

Blowfish eyed the GPS device.

“This is the place. The map's not that accurate, but this is the only possibility in the vicinity,” she said with determination in her voice.

Jo nodded.

They rounded a curve, still climbing upward. Through a patch of even sparser forest a clearing and some kind of an installation came into view against the dark sky.

“Stop and zoom with the glasses,” Blowfish instructed.

Jo did as told: she put the Agent sunglasses on at last and activated the zoom function. Buttons on the rim allowed to adjust the zoom, and Jo went right for the maximum magnification.

A little more than half a klick away, the facility looked like an observatory, fenced in with chain-link and barbed wire. Lights shone from lamp posts at regular intervals both near the fence and closer to the dome as well.

“Before we go in any closer, I’ll do a passive scan for surveillance devices in the perimeter. Don’t kill the engine, it won’t take that long,” Blowfish said.

The Agent van was inconvenient for the divider wall between the front and the rear: she needed to get in the back to activate the scanners. Blowfish exited, opened the rear doors, and finally slid the in-between window open so that they could converse.

“Scanning now.”

A couple of taps on the consoles.

“EM radiation coming from some three hundred meters away. Motion detectors, I bet. And I wouldn’t be surprised if there are infrared sensors too,” Blowfish explained.

“How can we beat those?” Jo asked.

“We just move slow. And we have white-painted foil blankets that we can use to cover ourselves. But if we get discovered, we still have the needle guns. Remember, the drug causes memory loss. If there’s no inconvenient change of shift, no new guards coming in, the bastards will just wake up after a few hours with no idea what happened. And of course they don’t want to talk about the lapse in security, because it’s their fault. Knowing SCEPTRE, they would face execution.”

Jo remembered the scientist Apollyon talking about how he would be executed right away without a prolonged interrogation session, if the security breach had been severe enough. That was why he had actually wanted to help her and Ian.

So, if it would appear that a great number of guards were responsible for letting a breach happen –

Then they all would be simply executed.

But the guess was that there was only a small crew on the site. And the best way would be real action, to strike like a flash and leave nothing but smoke, Jo thought. It always worked the best. At least in the movies.

And she knew that unlike at the festival it would not be “mission failure” even if they got discovered. As long as they understood what these eleven locations stood for, and got back alive without too severe injuries, it would be a victory.

“Let's get the blankets out,” Blowfish said from the back, more excited. “It's already dark enough to move.”

“What about the van?” Jo asked.

The engine was still running.

“Yeah. I almost forgot. Let's hide it behind some trees.”

Jo put the van on reverse: peering into the side mirror, she backed up under the cover of a suitable group of tall fir trees.

“That will do. They will not notice it until they specifically come looking for it,” Blowfish said flatly.

Jo turned the engine off, took her backpack from behind the driver's seat, locked both of front doors, and joined Blowfish in the rear. Jo had not actually looked into the rear compartment yet, and was somewhat surprised by the two large white piles on the floor.

“Those are the blankets,” Blowfish said.

At least they were light, Jo observed. The blankets would not slow them down, instead the pace would be determined by how fast they dared to go.

“We can run the first two hundred meters or so, be-

fore we get into the devices' range," Blowfish noted.

And so they ran.

But that part was quickly over. Then onto the crawling with the blankets over them, which was even slower than Jo had imagined at first.

As her mind wandered, she started to think whether Ian had any paranormal mental capabilities, with the dissociating and everything. Maybe he could affect the thoughts of some of the guards. Or maybe not. The possibility of remote viewing for military purposes had actually been researched by armed forces of several countries. Here, and in Russia at least.

Jo had decided not to call Ian during their respective missions, but now, suddenly, it felt imperative. She pressed the quick-connect button on her sunglasses. It was a private channel, with none of the other Agents hearing.

The hissing noise told that the communicative channel was open. Ian was listening.

"Ian? Jo here. Where are you now?" Jo whispered.

"Still in flight," came the reply, surprisingly clear.

"We are at this installation. Could you affect some of the guards to not notice us when we're coming in?"

"What?"

"Never mind. It was just an idea I had. Probably it doesn't work, but you could still try it. Concentrate on an observatory-like dome."

"Like the Frozen Hell dome?"

"No, smaller."

"I can try. But I promise nothing."

"That's all right. Stay alive."

"Likewise."

Jo cut the connection. She had no idea whether Ian had believed a word, or would actually try to concen-

trate on the guards, but it had been good to hear his voice.

In truth, it was almost like they had been drunk.

Suddenly Jo hoped for nothing more than an occasion to get properly drunk when these missions, and SCEPTRE's plans, were all over.

Control yourself! Jo ordered herself, and focused on crawling again.

Blowfish was getting ahead of her.

"Don't go too fast," Blowfish cautioned. "The motion detectors can still get us, if we're moving too quickly."

Jo slowed down again.

There were at least still four hundred meters. The chain-link fence was growing larger before Jo's eyes. And behind, the dome. Suddenly she was wondering, why so unimaginative? Why always a dome? Did SCEPTRE have an obsession on them, besides the triangles?

Ian, Blackhand and Sarge were closing in on the second dump. Then it would be only two more hours in flight and they would arrive at Erehwon.

That sadistic facility.

Filled with captured and abandoned Agents.

Filled was probably an overstatement. Most of the Agents would probably have died already, due to the poor conditions and the cruel experiments and tortures.

They landed, and this time Ian helped Sarge with refueling the chopper, while Blackhand stayed inside the cockpit.

"What was that communication?" Sarge asked as he activated the pump.

"It was Jo," Ian replied. No reason to try to hide the truth, though it had been against Agent procedure.

“Missing you already?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. They were at their target area, and what she asked was quite weird. But it was nothing important.”

Actually there were two possibilities: either Jo was losing it, or then she was feeling much better and humorous again. Like her usual self. For the sake of his own sanity Ian settled on the latter.

Five minutes later the refueling was complete.

“What’s the cache code? In case I have to enter it myself,” Ian asked as the noise of the electric motor died down.

“It’s 23409825. That’s the same in all of them.”

Ian tried to remember the numbers. Two – three – four – zero... He probably had it down.

After they had disconnected and unrolling the refueling hose, Ian tried his hand at entering the code on the keypad in the tree trunk, to close the dump entrance. Everything here was very similar to the first cache, and he wondered if the tree was not a real tree at all.

At first, he failed. In place of the last digit, he had entered six instead of five. But now he remembered.

On the second attempt the code was correct. A green light flashed on the keypad and the two halves of the entrance began to close.

Ian and Sarge climbed back into the stealth helicopter. Blackhand had meanwhile moved back into the pilot’s seat and started the rotors: now he pulled up on the collective lever, and up in the air they went.

“We’ll hit the place fast and hard,” he spoke harshly over the intercom. “The place will be completely cleansed of SCEPTRE black ops. It will be as if they never were there.”

To a degree it was just bragging, Ian thought.

But it was also gearing them up for the inevitable, lethal combat that lay ahead. As long as you stayed aware and cautious, it was actually better that you believed that you could do anything.

And right now Ian believed they could do anything.

If not anything else, if things got desperate, they could use their under-barrel grenade launchers, raining death on multiple enemies at once. Not to forget the Penetrator Hammer: though Ian had not personally liked it, he had high hopes for it being lethally effective in Sarge's hands.

Jo and Blowfish were now at the fence, in an almost completely dark spot where they were equally far from the nearest lights. Beyond, the dome awaited. While peering out from under her blanket just a little, Blowfish pressed a button on her sunglasses.

"These can also measure EM radiation. Much less sensitive and much less range, but enough for this."

A pause.

"Like I thought. The fence is not electrified. At least not right now."

Jo had considered the possibility, and somehow it struck her as odd for SCEPTRE to not use every security measure they could.

But then, by not being so overtly forbidding, the facility would actually be less inviting for illegal entry.

"Do you have the bolt cutters?" Blowfish asked.

"Yeah."

While still keeping herself under the foil blanket, Jo reached for the heavy-duty bolt cutters in her backpack. She started cutting an incision in the chain-link fence, creating a flap through which both she and Blow-

fish could fit through. The tool had rubber handles, so she was not afraid for electricity being suddenly switched on. Afterward, the cut part could be bent back into place: with casual inspection the guards would not notice anything, unless they got very close.

It took some time, but at last the incision was finished.

Jo bent the fence, went through first, and Blowfish followed. At least there were no sirens blaring outright: as far as they could tell, the blankets had protected them from SCEPTRE's electronic perimeter surveillance. There was still almost two hundred meters of snow until they would reach the dome itself. It was time to start crawling again.

The hours had passed: the lighthouse was close ahead. In perhaps two minutes, it was time to land. Blackhand had been flying for the whole last part of the trip, even against Sarge's insistence that they should have flown equal time.

Now that SCEPTRE's presence was near, Ian gripped the M4 hard again while he sat alone in the rear compartment.

He felt slightly shaky as adrenaline coursed in his veins. It was like being half-dissociated. Now it was no longer about whether he believed they could do anything, but about actually doing those things.

Ian knew that by now Jo and Blowfish should be well inside the dome. But they would take care of themselves. It was the Erewhon mission that had him nervous.

He looked at the black canvas bags lying on the floor of the rear compartment: in addition to the Penetrator Hammer, Sarge had some plastic explosives with him.

Blackhand would also be taking a M4 carbine, his gold-plated Desert Eagle, and then a heavy Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle with him. He was the oldest of them, so in a way it felt unfair that he was carrying so much. But the man himself had made the choice over his equipment, and was in a good shape.

"I've been thinking of the return trip," Sarge's voice came in from the front. "If there are too many Agents that we liberate, we may have to secure additional transportation from the enemy."

In line with his earlier thoughts, somehow Ian doubted that would be the case.

"If you're thinking of flying transport, forget it," Blackhand piped in. "Remember how it took several days to disarm all the anti-tampering devices on this chopper. It wouldn't be nice to have one go down right in the middle of flight, or have it feed high-voltage current through the cyclic and collective sticks, so that you couldn't let go, until your heart just stopped. But trucks would be more like it, even if it's then several days until we can get everyone back to the main HQ."

Main HQ. Ian had almost forgotten. In addition to the caches, there were more Agent headquarters scattered about the country.

Touchdown.

"OK, everyone. We're going in. Get your stuff, watch out and stay low when you exit. The first thing to check are the surroundings, then the lighthouse itself. I bet there's at least one sniper," Blackhand said, as he was flicking all the necessary switches in a row to shut off the engines and disconnect the rotor, and to activate both the active and passive protection measures.

Ones that once worked for SCEPTRE, but were now subverted to act for the Agents' benefit.

Ian checked his personal loadout for the last time. The Agent coat itself, of course, with the electromagnetic armor loaded to a hundred percent charge, the sunglasses, then the M4 carbine with a total of five extra magazines all loaded with armor-piercing bullets, high explosive grenades for the under-barrel launcher, then his USP pistol and the spares for that, and finally an assortment of more exotic hand grenades: flash-bangs, white phosphorus incendiary, and electromagnetic pulse. Two of each, and even that was getting quite heavy.

But it felt good to be well prepared.

Just for this passing moment, he almost welcomed war.

"I'm not seeing anything," Sarge complained.

"Switch to thermal imaging," Blackhand said. "And scan in every direction."

The feeling of being an outsider had returned, as only Blackhand held a weapon capable of accurately taking out long-range targets. Of course Ian knew that later, down in the facility, the firepower of all of them would be needed.

They were some two hundred meters from the lighthouse, lying low behind the cover of bushes. Ian checked his watch: it was nearing 10 PM, and completely dark by now.

Then, he flicked on the thermal mode of his sunglasses.

The lighthouse itself showed as black-blue, barely visible against the dark horizon. But up at the very top, where the rotating light was mounted, there was a dot of orange.

Definitely a human.

And in this God-forsaken place, that could only mean a SCEPTRE marksman.

"I see one at the top," Sarge confirmed.

"He's mine," Blackhand snarled and slipped the large

rifle from his back into his hands, then put down its bipod. Then there was silence except for the wind that howled intermittently, as the veteran Agent took careful aim.

At last Blackhand squeezed the trigger: a lone shot, loud and powerful, echoed for a long time in the night air.

Ian confirmed that the shape appeared to fall on the floor of the lighthouse top, and did not move again.

And he wondered: would it have been better to use a silenced weapon? It seemed almost if Blackhand also wanted to make a statement by being loud: the Agents are here, and they are going to kick your ass. Ian just hoped that audacity would not cost them their lives.

"I will cover you," Blackhand said. "Go for the doors and breach them."

Sarge got up into a low, crouched run, and Ian followed. Down a rocky path, they moved toward the lighthouse. Waves splashed against the rocks down below: it was better to watch one's steps. At least the light amplification helped, a lot.

They reached the weathered concrete wall and a set of rusty steel double doors.

There was no lock on the doors: Sarge tried to open them, but they moved only a centimeter with a loud clank coming from the inside.

"Barred from within," he said.

"You have the plastic explosives, right? We've already been loud, so it doesn't really matter how loudly we breach it," Ian replied.

"Yeah, I do, but I'm thinking of something else. You might want to stand back in case –"

Sarge reached for the Penetrator Hammer on his back. He took a good five steps back, aimed at the level

of the door handles, and opened fire.

The first bolt struck against the doors: sparks flew. With each further hit, jagged black holes started appearing.

Then, the rattle ceased, leaving just a wisp of smoke coming from the Hammer's barrel. Ian estimated Sarge to have fired ten rounds or so.

"- of ricochets," Sarge finished.

He tried the mutilated doors again. This time they opened without protest, except for the rusty creak they made. The inside latch had simply been cut off by the bolts, if not obliterated altogether.

"It's open," Sarge spoke to his radio mike.

"I'm coming," came the reply from Blackhand over the comms.

In little less than a minute he joined them at the base of the lighthouse. They all stood flattened to the wall, weapons ready. Blackhand now had the M4 in his hands instead.

"Ian, you go first," Blackhand said. "Sarge, cover him."

Ian lifted the carbine on his shoulder and let its barrel sweep back and forth as he entered the blackness within the lighthouse. As he passed between the doors and the Penetrator Hammer's barrel, he did not feel exactly safe.

The sunglasses could not create light from nothingness, so what he saw inside was mostly green noise. Though he still could clearly see a spiral staircase going both up, and then down into the bowels of the earth.

He flicked on the thermal mode, to make sure no black ops could take him by surprise. But no, no-one alive in here.

"Do we go up or down?" he asked.

“I'll stay in guard here. You guys first check the sniper at the top, see if he has anything useful. Then, all of us go down,” came Blackhand's reply.

Jo and Blowfish had stayed low in the darkness for two hours, observing the dome with all of the operating modes of their sunglasses: zoom, thermal scan, light amplification and frequency shifting, EM radiation. It had started to snow, and that was convenient: soon the tracks of them crawling in here would be covered, as would the Agent van under the trees.

The blankets kept their body heat inside, so staying and observing had only been unpleasant for the muscles getting stiff and cramped. Jo remembered waiting at the festival: it would have been so much easier using these. Of course white blankets would not have been grim at all. Well, perhaps they could have been painted a shiny black instead.

During all this time, there had been no guards on the outside. Whatever crew was there, they all were staying inside the dome. But the walls were too thick to detect anything with the sunglasses.

Along the dome wall, there most definitely were cameras. It would be hard to get to the wall without being detected, but maybe with good timing it would be possible. The EM radiation scan had been inconclusive, but there definitely was electrical activity in addition to the lights and cameras: the grid of motion sensors continued even inside the perimeter.

The combination of the cameras and sensors was worrying: tricking the cameras was best done while moving fast, but then they would likely trip the sensors.

Suddenly the rumble of a vehicle alerted Jo. It was coming from the forest, getting closer.

“Don't move,” Blowfish cautioned her. “Sounds like a jeep. It will come into view soon enough.”

The road and the gate in the fence were to their left, a little less than a hundred meters away.

Soon enough, the vehicle – a dirty-looking and snow-covered jeep – appeared from the cover of the trees and into the clearing. It stopped at the gates, which opened automatically.

Then the jeep continued, until it disappeared behind the dome. The hiding spot was inconvenient for not seeing the actual entrance, but moving closer would have meant crossing into the light beams, potentially causing detection.

The engine kept running.

There came a sound of the car doors being opened, then closed again.

The engine revved up once more, and soon the jeep was heading in the opposite direction, away from the dome and back through the gates, which opened up again for the vehicle to pass.

“I believe that was a change of shift,” Blowfish said. “Let's wait just a while, so that the new guards settle into a routine, and then we make our move.”

Jo nodded from under the blanket.

Ian and Sarge descended the spiral staircase, after having examined the dead black op sniper at the top. In addition to a combat knife and some extra ammunition, the pockets of the man's combat fatigues had yielded exactly one useful item: an access card marked P.

P for Prison, it had to be.

The SVD Dragunov lying next to the man had simply been left there. The three were armed enough already, and inside Erehwon it would not be of much use in any

case. And Blackhand probably hated Russia-made weapons.

If they could get through at least one set of doors with the card, without having to actually blow their way through, it would be much more inconspicuous. Of course SCEPTRE had probably already been alerted by the sniper shot and the rattle of the Penetrator Hammer, especially if there were listening devices around the lighthouse.

But still, if they did not make any further noise, the opposition could be caught off guard down the line.

There had been no security controls at the top, just the control panel for the light beacon itself. But the heavy-duty lamp had been shattered, probably years ago, and there was no power.

On the way up Ian had considered the possibility of the supposed SCEPTRE marksman being in fact someone who had just climbed up to appreciate the view from the abandoned tower. The decision to kill had been made rather lightly, without seeing any actual weapon on him.

That was not good, he knew, to be thinking like that. It was like going soft. His dissociation had to be fading.

Focus!

Be violent! Be aggressive! Show hate!

Ian almost let out a laugh as he remembered the 101 rules, which did not exactly help him to get back into a killer's mood.

Some weeks ago, he had used the 101 rules as a guide for proper conduct as a band member. It already felt like an eternity ago.

Indeed. Cyberpriest. René's disemboweled corpse.

That was better. That was just the right mental association to make. Ian suddenly felt very cold inside and

slipped back into dissociation.

They reached the entrance level, Blackhand peering out of the doorway with his carbine raised. The Barrett rifle was now on the floor next to him.

He turned as he heard their footsteps. "There's no movement out there."

"Seems you're going soft at last," Sarge chuckled and pointed to the .50 caliber rifle on the floor.

"It is a bit heavy," Blackhand admitted. "I don't think I will need it insider the Erehwon proper, but in the tunnel it might still come handy."

"How long is it actually?" Ian asked. Maybe Sarge had told, but Ian had forgotten by now.

"Roughly two and a half clicks. It descends first, going under the rock except for the very end that opens up and connects to the facility itself, which is anchored to the seabed with heavy cables."

Anchored? Did that mean the prison could actually be moved?

As if guessing Ian's thoughts, Sarge explained further. "Though it's theoretically possible, I don't think they have ever moved it. The prison certainly should be there now. With their plan in full action, I don't think they want to waste resources just to tow around captive Agents."

If Ian had not been dissociating, he could have felt apprehension at the idea of opening the doors at the far end of the tunnel, just to find seawater rushing in. But then, the doors surely would not open due to water pressure. So, no actual risk.

"Let's go already," Blackhand said.

He picked up the Barrett again and the three of them started descending the stairs below ground level.

Ian swore it was at least fifty meters already: the stairs never seemed to end. There was still total blackness, so they kept the light amplification mode on.

Sudden blinding white assaulted his eyes.

A surprise attack? A flashbang? But there had been no deafening sound.

He closed his eyes quickly, then reached for the glasses' mode switch button. Carefully, he squinted: now he saw the world black-blue. Thermal mode. He pressed again, and normal vision returned.

It appeared that lamps in the walls had come on.

Motion or proximity sensors.

The same thing had repeated in other SCEPTRE installations: the lights switched on when one came far enough. It was probably for the convenience of their own personnel, but it also likely meant that SCEPTRE had advance warning of the Agents' arrival.

Ian saw the bottom: ten more meters and they would reach the concrete floor. There was another set of double doors, much larger than the entrance to the lighthouse. A keypad with a card slot was located next to them.

Did one need both the card, and then an access code?

They all gathered at the doors.

"Last time, there was no code lock," Sarge said. "They've upgraded their security."

"We can try the Agent tool, simply fry the electronics," Blackhand replied.

It was a good suggestion: there was no knowing how long the code was, and it would be likely that each access attempt would be logged. Maybe after enough wrong attempts high voltage electricity would be fed to the keypad.

But suddenly Ian had an idea. Actually two ideas, but the simpler, more obvious one was worth attempting first.

“Can I have the card?” he asked Sarge.

“Sure.” Sarge handed him the access card.

“What are you thinking?” Blackhand asked. “You can't possibly know the code.”

“I have two possibilities in mind. If either don't work out, you can be my guest and fry the lock,” Ian replied, then stepped in front of the keypad.

With confidence, he inserted the card to the slot, then tapped three digits.

Two – one – eight.

Current 218. Azerate.

A green light blinked on the panel, and there came a sound of an electric lock opening. Blackhand nodded in acknowledgment, then reached for the door handles, opening the doors just a bit.

“Just so it won't close on us. Stay alert, guns at hand,” he hissed.

Ian took his USP pistol and unsafetied it. Somehow he guessed that overwhelming firepower would not yet be needed.

Blackhand let the doors open wider: even brighter, fluorescent light came in from the opening.

It had to be the tunnel.

Inside, there was a solitary black op standing guard. Like the ones they had met at the Olympia underground, he had a helmet with a mantis-like face mask. He was turning at the sight of the door opening, reaching for his own assault rifle – a H&K G36, Ian recognized.

But before he could turn fully, Ian pulled the trigger twice, sending two .45 bullets through the mask. The

black op went down without a sound, except the rustle of his clothes as he crumpled to the floor.

The Barrett and the Penetrator Hammer in their hands, Blackhand and Sarge moved through the doorway, and Ian joined them.

He observed the kill to have had little or no effect on his mental balance: it was the state of full dissociation.

Before their eyes was the tunnel leading to Erehwon.

Its profile was a semicircle, roughly ten meters across. Ahead, the tunnel descended, but did not curve yet. The walls and the ceiling were sheet metal, a dull gray under the bright lighting.

There were no enemies in sight.

On the sides, there were cart-like vehicles painted a bright yellow. There were two black plastic seats in the front, a safety bar above them, and simple controls: a power switch, a steering wheel, and accelerator and brake pedals.

The back of the cart was low and flat, roughly one and a half meter wide and long.

As Ian looked around more, he understood why: propped against the walls there were cube-shaped steel cages with the same dimensions. Those could be lifted up and fastened onto the vehicles' backs for transporting prisoners.

At the beginning of the tunnel, both on the left and the right, there were also several panels with heavy-duty electric outlets.

"The carts run on electricity. Those are the re-chargers," Sarge pointed out. "But before I forget: if that first code wouldn't have worked out, what would you have tried next?"

"Three one one," Ian replied. "Three veils before Satan, and then eleven for Azerate."

“Hm. You're starting to think like them.”

“Don't forget that for all intents and purposes, I am them. Trained by them at least.”

“You shouldn't think that way. For all intents and purposes you're an Agent,” Sarge remarked.

Blackhand stepped closer to them.

“We shouldn't need more than one vehicle,” he said. “Unfortunately one of us has to drive, and that means he doesn't get to kick SCEPTRE ass with both hands.”

“I think the Penetrator Hammer can come handy at the other end, if not sooner. Therefore I'd like to be a passenger,” Sarge said.

“The Barrett will, likewise. So, that points at you to drive, Ian.”

Ian did not feel disappointed at all. If the older Agents wanted to ride shotgun, then he would trust them to shoot straight, while he drove like a demon.

He chose the nearest vehicle, hopped into the seat, and pressed the starter button. The electric motor came to life without protest. Sarge climbed next to him: it was not easy to find a comfortable sitting position with the Hammer in his hands, but he angled himself sideways and managed half-good at last.

Blackhand climbed onto the back.

“This surface's sort of rough, so I don't think I'll slide off that easily. Still, try not to take any curves too hard,” he said to Ian.

Ian made sure that his pistol was easily within reach, tucked under his belt, then laid his hands on the wheel and pushed down on the accelerator with caution.

With a quiet whir, the vehicle gained speed. He looked behind to confirm that Blackhand had not fallen. Satisfied, he pressed the pedal more, and the cart accelerated some more, but quickly Ian found that

they were already going at the maximum velocity. There was no speedometer, but he estimated they were traveling at some twenty miles per hour.

They had waited for ten minutes now, and Jo was growing anxious. The new crew inside the dome – there was no telling exactly how many, but she remembered hearing only two of the jeep doors being slammed – had to be somewhat comfortable by now.

“We get moving?” she asked Blowfish.

“Ideally, I would still wait some more. But it will take time to reach the dome. Yeah, we can get moving.”

Jo recalled their evaluation of the surroundings: cameras, and probably sensors.

The cameras along the dome wall panned left and right in an agonizingly slow motion, which in itself was good: it left enough time to stay out of sight of a single camera while approaching the wall slowly.

However, the cameras all appeared to be in sync with each other: when one was looking right, so was the one next to it.

That made it much harder to keep out from their combined field of view. They could try a zigzag path in time with how the cameras turned, or then just try to move through as dark spots as possible, but it was not going to be pretty. It was hard to judge the cameras' exact cones of vision.

If Jo and Blowfish had luck, maybe those inside would not be looking at the right monitor while they moved in.

Somehow Jo almost wanted to trigger the alarm, so that they would have the excuse to move in fast and hit the crew hard. But it could be dangerous to the point of being fatal.

“Do we still keep the blankets?” she asked.

“Yes. Even if we move quicker, they make us harder to detect.”

Blowfish thought for a few seconds. “Let's wait until the cameras start turning right again, then go straight ahead. That way we don't have to pass into the light. As soon as we're past the lamp, we veer right, until the cameras switch direction. Then we move left too, and we should soon reach the wall. Finally we just creep along it and none of them should be able to see us.”

“Understood,” Jo replied. She certainly could not think of a better plan.

It sounded simple enough.

But how fast could they move?

“I'll go first and try to judge the proper speed. Stand by,” Blowfish hissed.

The cameras were almost at the left edge of their motion range. Then, they cameras stopped.

“Now.”

Jo clutched the blanket tight and got up to a half-crouch. Ahead of her Blowfish rose similarly, and started a cautious low jog forward.

Jo followed.

At least they were not illuminated. The cameras could not have any supernatural capabilities, and the white of the blankets blended nicely with the snow that had fully covered the ground by now.

“Now, start going right,” Blowfish whispered sharply. They were making good progress. Almost too good – Suddenly, a wail of sirens started. It seemed to come from everywhere – the horn was probably on the dome roof, but the sound echoed back from the trees.

“Shit,” Blowfish growled.

They had been discovered.

Was it the cameras, motion detectors, or the heat signatures they had given off? There was no telling, and it made little difference.

Then, from amidst the wail, a different sound came. A low whirring of electric motors. It too seemed to come from all over the installation.

Jo took a look on her right and saw that a hole was opening up in the ground. From below appeared a thick vertical pole, probably metal.

“Don't stop. Run up to the wall. Fast!” Blowfish snapped, compelling Jo to look in front of her again.

Directly ahead, a similar hole had appeared, and likewise, a metal pole was coming up. As it turned horizontal, supported by a meter-high steel leg, and started tracking her, Jo understood what it was.

An automatic Gatling gun with six rotating barrels.

The electromagnetic armor could protect for some time, but the continuous, high-velocity impacts would rapidly drain the power, and then it would be just the vests standing between the bullets and their flesh.

Blowfish dived to the ground almost in front of the gun. Jo hit the ground as well. Now, that gun could not possibly aim low enough to hit them.

But the others could.

“The EMP grenades,” Blowfish barked. “Throw them now and try to nail as many as possible!”

Jo remembered the primary radius to be ten meters.

She had to hit quite accurately.

Blowfish already had a grenade in hand. She turned around while still lying on the ground, and tossed it to her left, to the direction of the first gun Jo had seen.

Almost simultaneously the guns whirred to life, picking up speed –

And then the air was filled with lead. In addition to the one close to them, at least three automatic death machines were firing on their last known position.

Jo reached for the first grenade from her backpack and tossed it pretty much randomly.

A faint electric crackle sounded as Blowfish's grenade detonated. The gun close to it stopped firing.

Jo heard the sound of something ripping: the Gatling rounds were eating into her foil blanket. Then she felt an impact in her chest, not terribly forceful, but still startling.

The familiar, alarming text lit up on her sunglasses' heads-up display.

CHARGE: 85 PERCENT.

After tossing the grenade, she had stayed too high: she should have flattened herself to the snow again. But if one of the guns was onto her, she could not dive now, for the fear of the next round entering her head.

She just had to freeze in place.

More impacts came.

CHARGE: 70 PERCENT.

CHARGE: 55 PERCENT.

CHARGE: 40 PERCENT.

The armor was draining fast: the rounds certainly were powerful.

At last came the second electric crackle, and the impacts stopped: her grenade had taken out the gun.

But to the far right of them, another remained. It

was turning quickly to acquire. Jo reached for a second grenade from her backpack.

It was then Blowfish did something startling: she got up, and the gun next to her immediately started turning toward her. But she gripped it forcefully, almost like wrestling with it, and as it spun up to fire, it was now pointing at the gun on the far right instead.

Both guns fired at each other: sparks flew from the impacts. In addition, the far away one had to be hitting Blowfish.

Which gun would break down first? Or would she get a fatal hit before?

Jo could see that Blowfish's left hand was bloodied, but she held on to the gun grimly. It was impossible to tell whether the blood was due to the wrestling match, or an actual bullet hit. In any case, her armor had to be draining rapidly. And the gun could not last forever either.

Jo prepared to toss the second grenade. There would be no time for another, so this throw had better be well-judged.

But before she could act, the support post of the far away gun simply snapped in two, and the gun itself fell to the ground, lifeless.

Blowfish still held on to her gun, mouth curled into a vicious grin expressing rage.

"There's just this one left. It'll hit us if we go any further. Toss that grenade down its hole, then we'll have to get clear," she spoke rapidly.

Jo pressed the button on the grenade, knowing they had about five seconds. She threw it with little force, just enough to go down the hole.

Blowfish spun the gun around a final time, to get its aim as off from them as possible. Then she jumped

away, rolling on the ground. Jo got on her feet, trying frantically to get clear of both the primary and secondary EMP blast radius.

The final electric crackle came, and the gun was dead.

No further text lit up on Jo's sunglasses: she had made it far enough.

They reached the dome wall. The cameras had certainly picked them up while they were fighting the guns, so it was no use trying to avoid them further. The only things that mattered were to get inside as fast as possible, neutralize the crew, and shut off the alarm.

Now that immediate danger was over, Jo suddenly felt dizzy as she caught her breath while flattened against the wall. She felt the chest plate of her vest: there were some minor dents, but the armor had deflected the bullets well enough.

But Blowfish then?

"Are you OK?" Jo asked. "How's your armor?"

"Thirty-five percent. We'll have to come up with a battery upgrade, or something. Ah, you mean that scratch. It's nothing. But now we have to get inside, and fast, before they call in reinforcements!"

The tunnel leading to Erehwon had been devoid of life so far. Ian kept the pedal to the metal, but still it felt like going much too slow.

About one and a half miles total. The other end could not be far away any more.

After the initial descent, the tunnel had been straight for a long stretch. Now it started to ascend slightly. And then Ian saw them off in the distance: the similar yellow vehicles parked on the sides, the steel cages, and the recharging stations.

As well as the double doors that would open up to Erehwon itself.

"We're arriving," he remarked.

"Good," Blackhand replied. "Everyone, stay alert. Sarge, keep that Hammer trained on the door. There's no other place for them to come through from."

Ian heard Blackhand turn in the rear. Then, the long barrel of the Barrett rifle appeared in between the seats.

Ian squinted his eyes: was there a black op at the far end? There appeared to be none, unless he was crouching behind one of the carts.

As they were about two hundred meters away, the doors started to open. Ian felt his heart jump, then it settled again. Even with adrenaline surging, the cold dissociation kept him calm for now. In fact he had stayed focused and dissociated for a remarkably long time now.

He actually wondered if that could cause any ill effects.

One hundred fifty meters, and the doors had opened wide enough so that Ian could see a team of five black ops behind, their rifles trained.

A thunderous boom came from next to him, and the black op in the very center fell, hit by a .50 round.

The others to his left and right opened full automatic fire. They were surprisingly good shots: the steely pings of bullets hitting the cart proved this.

Sarge opened up with the Penetrator Hammer. Blackhand fired again as well.

Ian felt sudden dull impacts in his shoulder and in his chest, and his sunglasses' heads-up display came to life.

CHARGE: 80 PERCENT.

He swerved to the left.

“Keep it straight so I can hit them! Your armor can take it!” Blackhand roared.

While wearing the Agent coat, one could take full automatic fire up to a point, without being actually wounded. But there was always the risk of a bullet hitting the neck or the skull. Theoretically the armor would deflect possible head shots to some degree, but Ian had little wish to verify it.

Ian knew he had almost no chance of hitting at this distance, but still he wanted to do his part. While keeping his left hand on the steering wheel, he reached for the USP with his right, aimed roughly at the group of black ops, and started firing away.

At least one more of the enemies had fallen. Blackhand fired a third round, then a fourth, and Sarge was changing magazines on the Hammer.

Less than one hundred meters to go.

Another black op fell.

But more impacts came, courtesy of the remaining two, hitting the cart. How much could it take?

Next to Ian, Sarge grimaced in pain, and his aim went off for a while. And to top it off, another round slammed into Ian's chest.

CHARGE: 70 PERCENT.

Enraged by this, he fired off the remaining rounds until he was dry. He was not sure, but possibly he had hit one of the black ops.

At least the man stopped firing for a while and was falling on his knees. But the last standing one took something from the ground, then put it on his right shoulder as he was still kneeling.

“A bazooka!” Ian shouted in recognition.

He swerved wildly to the right, knowing that he

would throw off both Sarge's and Blackhand's aim, but not getting hit by the rocket was a top priority.

The rocket launcher fired, and with a wisp of smoke trailing behind, the rocket came flying toward the cart. From so close, it took only a second to reach –

A detonation came from the left, very near, and the cart was thrown off to its side. The concussion blast caused Ian to see stars, but he still held on to the steering wheel as the vehicle traveled with only the right-side wheels for a while, then tipped over completely.

Thankfully there was the safety bar. Otherwise Ian would have been crushed under the falling vehicle. Through blurred vision, he saw the text on his sunglasses:

CHARGE: 50 PERCENT.

“Fuck,” he cursed. Only half of armor power left for battles inside the actual prison.

As the cart came to a grinding and sparking halt, Ian still had no idea where Blackhand and Sarge were. At which point had they been thrown off? How seriously were they hurt? While lying upside down, Ian reached for his carbine, put the selector on burst mode, then prepared to unleash vengeance.

At the doors, the last black op threw the spent tube away, going for his assault rifle again. Ian turned upright, took quick aim at center of mass and fired two bursts before the black op could.

Almost at the same time, from somewhere on the left, came the distinct bark of the Barrett. And on the right, the Penetrator Hammer rattled for a short time.

Blackhand and Sarge.

Even in dissociation, Ian could feel moderately glad of his comrades in arms being unhurt enough to fire. Through his sights he saw the black op flail under the

simultaneous impacts, then fall to the floor. His corpse would be a bloody mess.

The second-to-last black op tried to get up, but was met with more of the Hammer's steel bolts, as it rattled to life again.

Then, a silence descended at last. Ian turned around to look at his comrades. Blood trickled down Blackhand's face, and Sarge's coat was torn from multiple places.

"That was fucked up," Sarge remarked. "But I'm OK."

"Me as well," Blackhand said. "But let's get away from this tunnel before more come."

"Yeah. We're exposed here. Erehwon itself is really a maze. So at least we have better chances to hide," Sarge agreed.

Weapons ready, the three entered through the double doors. The maimed cart was left lying upside down in the middle of the tunnel, a huge black scorch mark some distance away from it.

The sirens still wailed over the dome installation as Jo and Blowfish reached the entrance. The door was solid steel with no window. Jo felt more focused now, though her hands still shook a little.

There was a keypad and card lock next to the door, housed in a small metal box.

"I'll try to get it open. You scan the inside," Blowfish said and was already reaching for the Agent Multi-Tool.

Jo flicked on thermal vision. If she tried looking through the wall she saw nothing, but peering through the door revealed two faint blue-red shapes that stood out against the black that surrounded them all over.

"I see two inside," she said.

"When I get this door open, I can't fire immediately, so it's mostly your call what to do. It would be better if we could just put them to sleep, but I won't fault you for offing them instead."

Having said this, Blowfish pressed a button on the tool, while keeping it close to the metal box. An electric arc buzzed and crackled for an instant.

"It's trying to act tough," she growled.

Jo considered: with two bursts from the MP5, she could probably kill the two inside quickly. The needle

gun required much more care, but then, instead of corpses for others to discover, there would be two SCEPTRE operators who did not know what had hit them or the base.

She made her choice.

Meanwhile Blowfish pressed the button for a second time, but the electronic lock was still not co-operating.

“Fuck. I’ve wasted enough time.”

She reached for her Desert Eagle. “I’m going to blow the bolt. Be prepared. I’ll give you three seconds, then if any inside are still standing, they’ll get some .50AE.”

Blowfish aimed at the estimated place of the bolt at a near point-blank distance, and pulled the trigger three times. Three thunderous booms: a five-centimeter radius of the door was utterly obliterated.

She kicked in the door, and gave a sharp “Go!” as Jo was already moving, the dart gun held at shoulder level.

Jo quickly took in the scene before her eyes.

The insides of the dome were dimly lit with lamps only high in the ceiling, but more light came from the many computer monitors all around the large room. Banks of equipment cabinets, unknown in their purpose, stood both in the middle, and off to the sides.

In the very center there was a large, white, pillar-like device. Possibly a transmitter of some kind. It appeared to be telescopic in structure: it would be raised for the actual transmission.

Red lights flashed, telling of the still active alarm.

On the left, in front of a monitor, was a man in blue technician's overalls. He was turning toward her with a gun in hand. On the right was another, similarly dressed. But he was still only going for the gun held in his belt holster.

Easy enough. Left side first.

Fortunately the distance was not that great. It could not be even a full twenty meters. Jo aligned the small sights on the tube-like barrel of the needle gun, then pulled the trigger.

A muted pop, much quieter than the silenced USP.

She had aimed for the upper torso, but could not tell immediately whether it had been a hit or not. Depending on the individual, the drug could take some seconds to take effect.

In reply the man fired, the lone gunshot somehow more startling than the barrage of Gatling fire from multiple simultaneous sources before.

But Jo was already diving to the floor and shifting her aim to the right. The right-side technician now had a firm grip on his weapon, but –

He was too late.

Satisfied with her aim, Jo pulled the trigger a second time. Middle of torso, no unnecessary risks taken.

Then she glanced behind to see Blowfish enter, the Desert Eagle up. Jo hoped for her to not fire prematurely.

Jo shifted her gaze back to the left: the first man was clutching his neck, his legs giving way. The effect was as intended, but she had certainly not aimed that high. She understood that her hands still shook: it had been a lucky hit. Had she missed, the man would certainly have had time to fire again, and then yet again.

A quick look to the right confirmed another hit: the second one could not resist the drug for long either and fell to the floor.

“All clear,” Jo said as Blowfish caught up to her.

Both of the blue-clad men were now satisfactorily lying on the floor, out cold for at least a few hours. Of

course it was not really satisfactory until Jo and Blowfish could turn off the alarm, and fast.

But how?

The monitor the left-side man had been standing at was promising. Jo ran to it and found it was not locked: there were several active program windows on the computer desktop.

“Take a look at this,” she said.

Blowfish ran to the terminal and took hold of the keyboard hungrily, almost shoving Jo aside.

Jo observed her to not use the mouse at all: instead she used alt-tab and other key shortcuts to navigate the several programs quickly.

In truth Jo had no idea what Blowfish was doing.

“Shit. No. Not that. Yes. More like that,” Blowfish breathed, still tapping the keys at a rapid pace.

The red lights shut off and the alarm wail ceased. The silence was much welcome: Jo sighed with relief.

“Reason code 106. Rat infestation inside perimeter, causing sensors to go off,” Blowfish said with a grin.

Rat infestation. That was sweet as a ninja.

“I still have to go through the logs and replace the video recordings so that they don't show us running around. Plus, if possible, I'll disable the sensors for our return trip. It all will take some time. I suggest you find another free terminal and try to find out the actual purpose of this place. And when I'm done, we can move the crew to more convenient positions.”

Jo felt somewhat uneasy with the task: she had been hacking SCEPTRE computer systems before, back at the fnord research facility, but then there had been no actual risk.

What if she would now set off the alarm again by digging into wrong places?

She ran around to the terminal where the other man had been standing. It was somehow amusing to see a standard Windows operating system in an above top secret facility, but that was understandable: SCEPTRE did not necessarily have the desire or resources to write their own above top secret OS.

But the amusement faded quickly. What now? This computer was locked: the security console had been a one-shot lucky break.

It was then she saw a yellow post-it note partially visible from under the keyboard. She reached for it: the text in uneven block letters stood:

AZERATE777

Certainly the password for this terminal, and very much to the point. Was there a mandate in SCEPTRE to use only anti-cosmic passwords until the plan was complete? Though as far as she knew, 777 was not an anti-cosmic number.

But was it upper or lower case? Making the wrong choice could have bad consequences.

Jo took a deep breath, then pressed Ctrl-Alt-Del.

From the unevenness of the letters, she deduced that the operative in question did not like to write much by hand, and lower case letters were even harder to write in such unrefined style.

Therefore, the actual password could still well be in lower case. It was worth a shot.

azerate777, Jo typed, and hit return.

The desktop appeared. Epic relief.

Her guess had been correct.

However, unlike the terminal Blowfish had operated, this machine appeared much emptier. There was not much more than the operating system files, and an unfamiliar application for secure communications in text,

voice, and video.

Jo certainly had no interest of fiddling around with the communications package: it would be too easy to raise network-wide suspicion. But as she returned back to My Computer, she noticed a network share mapped as Z, and clicked it.

Hopefully the password had been permanently stored.

Success! The folder structure of the network drive came up without protest.

Many of the directories seemed to have just random-generated names. It would take minutes to go through them, and Jo did not know where to begin. But one of the directories, simply named "test_transmission," caught her eye. It was probably something left over by careless bastard operators.

SCEPTRE bastard operators would naturally always be inferior to Agent bastard operators.

At least to Blowfish.

And so, like Jo had thought, this place was definitely about transmitting something. But what exactly? Taking over television and radio transmissions, replacing them with SCEPTRE's fnords and propaganda?

She opened the directory, and found a single file named "index.txt." Her blood definitely felt like going cold as she read it.

```
; Sky projection master script file  
;  
; Put each file to be played back, or a command, on its  
; own row. DO NOT put two or more on the same row.  
; Unicode paths are not guaranteed to work reliably.  
;  
; Available commands (refer to generated docs or
```

*; code for details): delay <x>, adjust <x,y>, loop, end,
; download <url>, shutdown*

This text was followed with a list of file names.

Jo re-checked: those files no longer existed. But sky projection? Somehow that sounded much more ominous than just hijacking TV or radio.

She returned to the previous directory level with the seemingly random folder names. She chose one of them at random, and found that there too was an "index.txt" file, but in addition there were several video files.

She double-clicked one of the videos.

The image was all red, with red clouds forming and dissipating again. Then, a spiral formed in the middle, out from which a legion of black demons with long, thin wings started to pour. From the side another group appeared, shiny and white, angels apparently. Soon, the black demons started slaughtering the angels in large numbers, while fire and brimstone kept falling. This went on for several minutes, repeating with some variation.

Viewed from the 19-inch flat-screen monitor, the video appeared almost humorous. But then Jo imagined it actually projected to the sky, to an audience already weakened by SCEPTRE's fnords, who were expecting something to happen on the twenty-first.

She returned to the root level again, and chose another directory. Again, it was full of video files. She clicked one of them: instead of a hellish, Biblical battle in the sky, this one showed a large alien mother ship gliding soundlessly and ominously, then staying in place. Green lights on the ship's hull turned on and off with a slow, hypnotizing frequency: though the whole sequence had to be painstakingly rendered on a com-

puter, still it felt uneasy and suggestive, and Jo was glad to shut the video off.

Afterward she felt out of breath, her pulse racing.

Maybe that was her particular poison: after all, she had grown up watching *The X-Files* and studying conspiracy materials, much of it alien-related as well.

Fnords and end-of-the-world videos for everyone. Whatever you believed in, SCEPTRE would kindly amplify that belief, then project a fitting video in the sky.

It most certainly was a fiendish plan.

And it was not even everything. There were still phases three and four, yet unknown.

“Blowfish! When you're done, I think you should take a look,” Jo almost yelled. The sound echoed back at her from the dome walls.

“Shh! Keep your voice down. Though the guards are down, they might remember hearing loud voices,” came the hissing reply.

Should not the drug cause total short-period memory loss? But it was better to be safe. Two more minutes of tapping on the security console followed, then Blowfish came over.

“I think we now know what these eleven locations stand for,” Jo said with a quiet solemn voice.

Blowfish looked at the several open folders on the screen. “Five-second executive summary, would you be kind?”

“Apocalyptic visions projected into the sky.”

The bodies of the five black ops had been quick to search. More of the access cards marked P, like on the lighthouse sniper, magazines of 5.56 ammunition, and grenades.

“Blowfish told that we should take as much as the cards as possible. Though the access level is same, the signature is different. It will help in the re-sequencing,” Blackhand said.

The cards were light and did not take much room, so all the same, Ian thought.

They stood at the bottom of a large rectangular room, which contained steel stairs that connected the three levels of the Erehwon facility. It was darker than the tunnel: the only lights were at the very top. On one wall was also the wide door of a cargo elevator.

There had been a camera here, right past the doors, but it simply had been shot by one Penetrator Hammer steel bolt.

Now that they were past the tunnel, Ian thought he felt a slow, barely detectable swaying motion, as the submerged facility was being rocked by sea currents, tugging against its anchor cables.

He almost thought of becoming sick, but was that

because of the motion, or because of seeing all the bullet holes on the corpses, and the pools of blood beneath them?

Of course, a dissociating assassin should not feel sick at anything. Ian tried to get back into the right mental state, but it seemed lost to him right now.

The adrenaline surge was fading.

Suddenly, it was not just the corpses that made him uneasy, but the thought of being so far from home, far from Jo, possibly dying in this cursed place, or becoming a prisoner himself, trapped beneath the waves and being subjected to myriad tortures.

The walls were rough concrete, contributing to the general depressive feeling. But were there actual erosion marks, caused by trickling water over a long period of time? Did this place leak?

Control yourself!

To get his mind back at ease, Ian tried to focus on the facility itself, to what Sarge had explained.

The lowest level, where they were now, contained the prison cells. It made sense: the cages could be transported right through the double doors, while still riding on the carts.

Also, it was darkest at the bottom, which would serve to amplify the fear and unease felt by the prisoners.

The second level housed some treatment rooms and laboratories, storage areas, and then the security center. The third and topmost floor contained living quarters for the permanently stationed crew, as well as office rooms for administrative work.

From the stairwell, a wide main corridor started on each floor, and continued to the other end of the facility. But countless side corridors would branch off to the

sides. Making sure that the place was cleared of enemies was easier said than done.

"We have one thing working for us," Sarge said. "Remember, the tunnel is the only way to get in or out. We can bar these doors, and then work through the floors and corridors methodically."

"Cleansing this place properly," Blackhand joined in, righteous wrath in his voice.

"And they don't really have an army down here, because the cells are secure enough. Of course, more black ops could arrive through the lighthouse. But then they'll have to blow the doors, and we'll hear that. We can set up proximity sensors to alert us," Sarge said.

Listening to the confident voices of the senior Agents was reassuring. They knew what they were doing. Ian could not slip back into actual dissociation, yet, but that was not essential: with those two by his side, he would survive without. Now he recalled distantly how he had harbored thoughts of dislike toward Blackhand, but it was like a bad dream of the past. This definitely was the best possible Agent line-up for storming the facility.

"Which floor first?" Ian asked.

"Well, there's the automated security, which we have to watch out for. The first priority would be to disable it, so that means hitting the second, with the guard center," Sarge answered.

Ian remembered what Sarge had told about the security systems: cameras everywhere, ceiling-mounted automatic turrets in the cell areas, remote-controlled shock collars around the neck of each prisoner, the usual stuff. It was exactly what he would have implemented himself, had he been the evil overlord of this place. But there was something Sarge had not told.

"Are there robots?" Ian asked.

"There were none when we visited last time, but SCEPTRE might have upgraded. It's better to be prepared for anything," Sarge replied.

That was alright, Ian thought.

Dissociated or not, he was prepared.

Sarge took a small, black rectangular device from one of his pockets, and fastened it to the wall some distance away from the double doors. Apparently one of the device's surfaces was adhesive.

Then he pressed a button on it and a red light started blinking once per second.

"This is the proximity sensor. It alerts us through our comms, in case anyone comes through.

Ian heard the steady beep in his earpiece.

"It's now me it's tracking," Sarge said. He moved further away, and the beeping ceased.

"Too bad we don't have any remote- or proximity-controlled detonators so that we could set up a proper trap. But this will do. Now we just have to bar the doors somehow.

"That's where the Barrett comes in," Blackhand said. There was some relief in his voice: it was a good excuse not to lug the twelve-kilogram rifle inside the corridors.

Blackhand removed the magazine, pulled the charging handle to eject the last cartridge inside, and wedged the long barrel through both of the large door handles.

He then pulled on the handles: they did not budge much, and it did not seem like the rifle would fall off easily.

"Should be barred good enough," he said, took the M4 carbine in his hands and readied it for firing.

Ian did the same.

Two M4's with armor piercing rounds and then the Penetrator Hammer. Should be a good match against the remaining black ops.

With Blackhand leading the way, they all went onto the steel stairs, climbing cautiously up.

“Good call. That freight elevator's slow and nasty,” Sarge said. “But there are more elevators and stairwells further along, so we have to watch out for anyone popping out.”

On the second level there was another camera, turning to face them. The black ops definitely had known long ago they were arriving, so it mattered little whether they walked into its field of view, or blew it to pieces.

But the latter felt more satisfying. Ian lifted his M4 and fired a quick burst of three. Sparks flew from the camera: it was disabled.

And then, they were at the second floor entrance: a set of steel doors, with wire-reinforced glass windows. Possibly armored glass. A familiar keypad lock with a card slot stood on the right side.

“Now, no more anti-cosmic codes. I will fry this one,” Blackhand said.

Ian did not protest.

Blackhand took the Agent Multi-Tool in his hand and gave the keypad lock a total of three jolts. Finally smoke came from inside, and with it also the sharp sound of the lock opening.

“Sturdy bastard. But not sturdy enough. Sarge, how do we proceed?”

“The security center's right at the end of the main corridor. First we just hit it hard. Then we can hole up inside and defend ourselves, if necessary, while we fig-

ure out how to shut down or take control of their systems.”

“OK then. Guns ready, and kick SCEPTRE ass,” Blackhand encouraged them all, and gave the doors a push: they opened up, revealing a brightly-lit corridor beyond, somewhat reminiscent of a hospital ward.

Oddly, Ian was reminded of the recording he had watched in the Agent infirmary: side corridors branching off to each direction, possibly concealing danger. It paid not to think of whether they could fare better, or if someone of them would be left behind cold and dead.

Guns trained, they advanced. Another camera greeted them inside, and Blackhand shot it.

A fifteen meters in, and no sight of enemies yet. Far away on the other end Ian could already see the security center: a windowed hexagonal or octagonal structure. He could not be sure, for he did not yet see the whole of it. And he could not see either whether there were anyone inside.

As he peered around to his left, he saw a sign on a door: *ECT ROOM 1*.

Electroconvulsive therapy? Not nice.

For some reason, Ian suddenly thought of Jo in a hospital gown, receiving prolonged ECT sessions and becoming even more apathetic than after the Frozen Hell mission.

Fuck! How could such image even enter his mind? Jo was far away from here. Ian shook his head to dissolve the thought.

They advanced some more.

Then, without warning, an ugly noise came from the ceiling close ahead. A trapdoor opened, revealing a black-painted turret that quickly descended, then started to turn toward the Agents.

“Crap! To the side! EMP grenades out!” Sarge shouted.

Sarge and Blackhand dived to a corridor on the left, while Ian leaped to the right instead. As he was still flying through the air, he decided for a much quicker course of action –

While aiming his rifle up into the ceiling, he pulled the trigger of his under-barrel grenade launcher.

A high explosive grenade launched with a low whump and a plume of smoke, and in the next second came a deafening explosion.

The turret simply ceased to exist.

Pieces of the ceiling panels rained on Ian as he fell to the floor.

CHARGE: 45 PERCENT.

Despite the protest of the armor, he got up without feeling much hurt. To his left, Sarge and Blackhand were also getting up. Sarge eyed Ian with angered disbelief.

“Fuck. You could have killed us all,” he said.

“I don’t like the EMP grenades. Had I fumbled, I’d have my armor sucked to zero and my glasses blinded.”

“And if you fumbled with the rifle grenade, you’d be chunks of meat instead.”

“Cut it off. The turret is disabled and that’s what matters,” Blackhand said. “We move. But use the EMP grenades for the next one.”

Ian thought a bit as he reloaded the under-barrel launcher with another HE grenade. He had been caught unaware because he had understood there to be turrets only on the prisoner level. But that seemed not to be the case.

“Are these bastards everywhere?” he asked.

“Last time they weren’t,” Sarge answered bitterly.

“They clearly have upgraded.”

They moved past a four-way intersection, peering both left and right. No black ops yet. Another camera was methodically disabled along the way.

“They might be setting up an ambush further along the way,” Blackhand said.

Nods from Ian and Sarge.

It paid to not lose concentration for a second.

Another door, on the right this time, read *DENTAL OPERATIONS*. Ian was puzzled: what kind of dentist work would be performed here? Likely it was a form of torture.

Now they were roughly at the halfway point. The security center stood at the end, closer now, but still as if a elusive treasure. A mirage.

Just as Ian was too concentrated on the goal, a noise came from the ceiling again.

A second turret.

He cursed: now there were no convenient side corridors to duck into.

He dived backward, while reaching for an EMP grenade from his pocket. Better to play by the book now: with nowhere to duck, an explosive grenade could be fatal.

As he hit the floor, the turret had already descended, and acquired them quickly. It whirred to life: high-velocity fire filled the air, sweeping from the left to the right.

Before Ian could press the button on his grenade, another came sailing through the air from behind. He could not tell whether it was from Blackhand or Sarge.

The grenade hit the turret directly, then fell vertically down. The ceiling was only three meters high, so the gun would be caught in the primary burst easily.

On his back, Ian crawled away with desperation, as he heard impacts first on the floor next to him. Then, the following bullets struck his chest plate, slowed down by the armor, but still the hits were nastiness-inducing.

CHARGE: 35 PERCENT.

CHARGE: 20 PERCENT.

At last the relieving crackle of the EMP came, and gunfire ceased. Static noise appeared on his sunglasses, but disappeared after a second: the Agent equipment had survived.

Still lying on the floor, Ian turned around to check on Blackhand and Sarge.

"I'm out," Blackhand said with a grimace.

"Ten percent here," Sarge replied.

The Agent coats of both were now resembling sieves. But at least neither of them appeared to be bleeding. It was just time for them all to become much more cautious, but also more effective.

Hit the enemies first and do not get hit yourself.

A few seconds and they all were up again, sprinting toward the end of the corridor.

Finally Ian could see the whole of the security center, as the main corridor's end opened up into a small lobby, from which more corridors branched off. It was an octagon with angled windows. They also were reinforced glass, through which he could not see clearly. There were some black shapes inside, which might just be chairs, or then SCEPTRE soldiers.

The entrance door, or doors, had to be on the sides. There was no door on the side facing them.

Blackhand and Sarge spread out, crouching behind some conveniently located wood-and-steel benches. Ian crouched low as well, to Sarge's side.

In the far corner of the lobby, a fifth camera was turning back and forth.

"Let's not shoot it yet," Blackhand whispered.

"If there's anyone inside, they must have seen us advancing down the corridor long ago," Ian said.

"True. But right now they don't see us. We have time to plan our attack."

It was then a beep invaded Ian's ears.

The proximity sensor.

"Shit! More coming from the tunnel. We have to take the center now!" Sarge hissed.

"Wait -" Blackhand cautioned, but too late.

Sarge was already on his feet, the Penetrator Hammer swaying in a wide arc as he ran toward the octagon.

Suddenly Ian knew with certainty that the doors were on the left and the right sides. Because from both sides, grenades came flying through.

Ian could do nothing but to stay in place. He had twenty percent armor left. Blackhand had zero.

Sarge veered to the left side as he ran. He would be partially shielded from the explosion of the right-side grenade, but would take the full force of the left one instead.

With ten percent armor charge remaining.

Chances of survival were not high.

Sarge still ran: it seemed like he was still oblivious to the grenade that now rolled on the floor. There could not be even two seconds left on its fuse.

Maybe out of empathy and horror, Ian slipped into Agent-time as he watched. He would see Sarge getting pulverized in disturbing slow motion.

Then, unexpectedly, Sarge jumped into the air and turned the barrel of the Penetrator Hammer to face back the way he had come.

To face the grenade.

He pressed the trigger, and steel bolts came flying with the characteristic low rattle.

That was insanity! The grenade would surely detonate early if hit by the bolts.

A glancing impact sent the grenade rolling into the side corridor, where it detonated, raining shrapnel back into the lobby.

From the right side came the second detonation.

Sarge might just have survived.

Ian observed his extreme dissociation to not have faded away yet. And suddenly it became clear: it actually did not matter whether or not Sarge lived.

But as long as this state lasted, this was the perfect

opportunity to storm the octagon.

There was an amplified clarity in Ian's perception as he sprang up to his feet and headed to the right. Of course, dissociation could not make his legs actually go faster, or his rifle to fire more rapidly, but he could plan each action with deliberation, almost as if pausing time.

Blackhand shouted something. His voice seemed to slow down almost grotesquely. "Ian! We may –"

Ian passed the grenade's scorch mark in the checkerboard floor. Then, he was at the right-side door. It was still open, revealing the insides of the security center.

Except for the doorways, a table circled the whole room, following the walls. On this long table, there was an array of computer terminals, CCTV monitors and switchboards. Some equipment cabinets stood in the middle, a messy arrangement of wires pouring out from them. All over the room, swivel chairs were strewn around.

From behind the cabinets, three black ops peered out, G36 rifles in hand. They had the usual combat fatigues, but no face masks, just short-cropped hair, and grim, hard expressions.

"– need them alive!" came the end of Blackhand's shout.

Ian was already firing, but aimed his rifle lower at the last instant, trying to hit the legs of the black ops instead of their torsos.

His M4 lit up the room, ejecting shells in a continuous motion. The selector was on full auto: Ian had no idea when he had switched, but it mattered little. Fabric was torn and blood spurted out from each impact to the black ops' lower bodies.

Ian then shifted his aim higher and to the side: at their rifles.

His brain seemed to calculate precisely how much the barrel would lift with each shot, and how much he would have to compensate. Sparks flew from the rifles as they were torn away from their owners' hands.

Still in slow motion, Ian observed Sarge to be getting up on his feet on the opposite side, the Penetrator Hammer ready.

Ian ceased firing, then lifted his left arm up to signal Sarge not to fire either. He understood what Blackhand had meant: the black ops might require interrogation, in case the security terminals were either locked or too hard to figure out.

Then, the extreme dissociation started to fade, and left Ian with almost as extreme exhaustion: with the threat neutralized, he felt the urge to just sink to the floor.

Blackhand and Sarge joined him inside and closed the two doors.

“Wow. Zero percent now. Kind of a close call. I wonder if the cart rechargers could be used on our armors. But they're a long distance away,” Sarge remarked.

His hands were bloodied, but apparently it was not serious. He made no move to get medical supplies for now.

The three wounded black ops scowled with pain on the floor next to the cabinets, but uttered no sound. It was the same as with Azazel. Somehow Ian was almost thankful: if the enemies themselves wanted to appear more inhuman, it made things easier.

For whatever that would come next.

Blackhand strode over to the terminal on the side that faced the main corridor, and tapped a few keys.

"This one's locked out," he said roughly.

He turned to face the black ops.

"It's good there's so many of you. We will play a game, and each one gets his turn."

Ian felt a chill go up his spine. This would most definitely not be pleasant.

"I'm sure you do all kinds of sophisticated stuff here. Your scientists tell what in which sequence to apply the tortures, I mean treatments, so that they are the most effective. But me, I'm in bit of a hurry. Therefore I'd like to keep this simple. I'll start from the left and proceed to the right. Each of you gets a chance to unlock that console. Refuse, and you get a bullet through your head. Try something funny, and you get a bullet through your head. That's simple and fair enough, don't you think?" Blackhand spoke in a dangerously calm voice.

None of the black ops betrayed a reaction of any kind. None of them moved.

"I don't think you need more than three seconds to decide," Blackhand said and moved near the leftmost soldier.

"It will do you no good even if you managed to unlock the security terminal. Your settings can be overridden – remotely," he spat, then laughed a short bitter laugh.

Remotely? That was odd, if this was the security center of the whole facility. Maybe someone on the third level then, a warden or something, Ian thought.

"Just for your information, I'm not counting yet," Blackhand said. "But now I am. One –"

The black op made no further sound, no further move.

"Two."

Still nothing.

“Three.”

Blackhand waited one more second, then pulled the trigger without flinching. The black op's brains were sent splattering against the equipment cabinet. The man himself slumped to the floor.

Ian winced from the report: he was glad it was not him who had to pull the trigger. The remaining black ops were startled too, but it was just a reflex: the next second their impassive behavior resumed as if nothing had happened.

Blackhand trained the rifle on the one in the middle.

“Next. You get just the same three seconds. One –”

Somehow Ian understood the futility of this whole charade. The black ops would face interrogation and execution from SCEPTRE instead if they helped.

“Two.”

“Three.”

Gunshot.

Ian was looking away by now, but Sarge seemed strangely interested: Ian could tell he kept close watch on the unfolding play.

“The last one. Now, a lot depends on you, don't you think?” Blackhand said. “You know the drill. One –”

“I'll unlock the console,” the black op said with a hoarse voice.

“Good. But no tricks. I'll be watching you. Sarge, help him up.”

Sarge moved in to support the wounded soldier and helped him reach the security terminal. Blackhand stood close by, the rifle aimed at the enemy's head. Then, as soon as the black op was standing at the keyboard, Sarge moved back aside and took the Penetrator Hammer in his hands again.

“I will restart the count now,” Blackhand said.

The black op started to tap the keys.

“One.”

Ian wondered: was he actually going to help them? Did a black op's deep mental conditioning allow that even theoretically?

Suddenly Blackhand screamed.

Faster than a snake, the black op had turned around and rammed a combat knife into the veteran Agent's left bicep.

It had been too quick to comprehend. But in the next instant the Penetrator Hammer came to life.

Hit from close distance, the black op's torso was completely pulped. He fell against the table, and then came a fizzling electric sound and a shower of sparks as the next steel bolts – traveling through the hole in his back – hit the flat-panel display in front of him.

“Cease fire!” Blackhand roared in a mixture of anger and pain.

The black op was now lying on the floor. The destroyed monitor and the keyboard, as well as the table, were all covered in gore. A pool of blood began to spread beneath the body.

All three chances had been used up, and the only thing they had managed was destroying some computer equipment. And getting Blackhand hurt.

Perhaps it was a lesson: never trust SCEPTRE.

Ian wondered: how long until the new arrivals at the tunnel would reach the security center, and storm it in turn?

“I'll patch up Blackhand,” Sarge said with surprising calmness, considering the kill just seconds before.

Focus! Ian urged himself. He wanted to be just as calm. Right now, the only escape was to dissociate – not

into the mindset of a SCEPTRE assassin, but to his former role as a PFY. Pimple-faced youth, or a junior systems administrator.

“OK,” he said in a forced tone. “I’ll swap the monitor and keyboard for working ones, then I’ll contact Gwen. She should know what to do.”

It was not normal to use Blowfish's real name during an Agent operation, but the situation was already so much beyond normal that the only way to overcome it was to not think of it as Agent warfare, but as an IT support problem.

Those could always be solved, right?

Ignoring the corpse and the gore the best he could, Ian ripped loose another flat-panel display, and another USB keyboard. It was possible that even the other terminals in the room would allow just the same security access, but the one in the front would allow the best view into the corridor at the same time, to see when the reinforcements would arrive.

Now the replacements were in place. The locked-out security console display reappeared. The machine was none the wiser of the destruction and defilement its peripherals had met.

Then to contact Jo and Blowfish.

Ian pressed the connect button on his sunglasses, but there was nothing. Then he understood: the radio signal would from the Agent communications satellite would not carry to an undersea facility, or vice versa.

They were on their own.

Jo and Blowfish hauled the second operator into the comfort of a toilet stall. The first had been propped into his chair near the console. It was preferable for the men to wake up separated from each other.

They were almost done in here, Jo thought.

Or did Blowfish have other ideas? At least all the tracks of their arrival and presence had been wiped out to the best of the Agent BOFH's ability.

Though certainly not terrified, Blowfish was not at all pleased of what she had learned. As they emerged back into the large main room of the dome, she stood in place, seemingly lost in thought.

"Eleven as one," she whispered to herself.

Jo did not exactly understand. Blowfish had never considered the spiritual nature of SCEPTRE's plan, but had concentrated on the purely practical matters instead. So why that sudden change?

"If all the locations are linked, we should be able to install a delayed logic bomb," Blowfish muttered.

And then it became clear: she was in fact thinking in practical terms.

Blowfish went back at the security console, tapped some keys and brought up some windows, then ran up to the second one Jo had unlocked.

“Yes. It's a possibility. This will take a few minutes more. Actually perhaps half an hour. But we'll still be long gone before the men wake up. You OK with that?”

“Yeah, I'm OK,” Jo replied.

In truth she was not pleased with the concept of waiting: up to now she had been occupied, but a half hour meant a lot of time to think.

Blowfish pulled a chair under her, and after some minutes of searching around, opened up a text file containing program code. Jo decided to join her and try to understand at least part of it.

For the most part the code looked cryptic. Jo was familiar with the basic concept of programming, of telling in very small increments what the computer was supposed to do, but there her knowledge stopped.

But by looking at the rather meaningless words and characters, she could occupy herself.

Blowfish lowered her voice to explain. “This is the driver program for the transmission antenna. It's a high-powered laser that will project the video image up to the clouds. The simplest thing is to actually make it output pure black all the time. But I'll install a timed check. Before 21st December it will work flawlessly, in case they decide to test it.”

“Can you upload the changed code to all the locations from here?” Jo asked.

“We'll see soon enough. Of course I have a little problem in that I can't really test this. I can hack the code, but I don't have the slightest idea of how I would actually fire up a transmission. Probably I wouldn't want to, even if I knew.”

“You don't want the extra destabilization of minds on your conscience?”

“Not that really, but SCEPTRE would certainly take

notice if there was an extra transmission early. Then they would double-check everything.”

“Yeah.”

Jo looked at the code, and now when Blowfish had explained, at least the altered part made some sense:

```
if(tm_mday >= 21 || tm_mon != 11 || tm_year != 112)
    memset(buffer, 0, width * height * components);
```

“In case you think I made a mistake, months are in range of zero to eleven, so eleven is December. And the years are counted from 1900,” Blowfish clarified.

Then she compiled the program: there were zero errors, but a lot of warnings.

“SCEPTRE are lousy coders,” she almost laughed. “Those warnings are all due to them.”

Jo grinned in response. If this trick worked, it would be a huge victory. A huge part in crippling SCEPTRE's plans.

“Now I'll try to install the altered driver. I'll reboot to be sure. If it works out, I'll then see how it can be distributed to the rest of the locations.”

Jo stood up: there was nothing that exciting to see from this point onward, at least for a short while. Her thoughts flashed back to Ian and the other mission. Would he return alive?

She got a sudden flash of insight.

If not, she would will herself to become a total killing machine. The revenge would be terrible, and no SCEPTRE black ops would be spared. No weapons would she let unused.

It was a partial lie, she knew, to decide something like that beforehand. But the cold determination made her feel better.

In the end it had been Sarge who had come up with the solution. And it was so simple that it was not even funny. Though the security console had been locked, it did not mean that there would have to be a password with actual characters in it. He just pressed enter.

Ian shuddered as he remembered the sequence of executions, while all Sarge had needed was to press return at the login prompt.

The guards most certainly had breached SCEPTRE procedure with their “password,” but maybe that told of the extreme boredom that prevailed in Erewhon, as all important SCEPTRE activity happened elsewhere?

Well, at least the black ops were dead now, and could not surprise them later. Blackhand's knife wound had been bad enough.

The wound was now properly dressed, but any hand-to-hand combat for him was out of the question, and he probably would not be much of a marksman either for the rest of the mission.

They all were now at the front security console.

“The turrets are all disabled now. But kind of shitty that we blew up the cameras along the way,” Sarge complained.

From what Ian could tell with his own eyes, no-one from the tunnel had not yet entered the second level main corridor. The proximity sensor had beeped for some time, then shut off, probably riddled by bullets.

“What about the cell level?” Blackhand asked. “The cameras should still work there.”

“Right. Checking,” Sarge said and clicked a few times. To the left of them, several CCTV monitors came to life, showing a row of cell doors.

“They're working. And then there's –”

A diabolical grin spread on Sarge's face.

“You asked about the robots, Ian. I’ll give you robots.”

There were now four small windows on the desktop, showing just blackness. A fifth window displayed a diagram of a four-legged robot and some text.

“Apparently these are called the Sentinels. They’re like a cross between a spider and a guard dog. Or what the hell, they’re robots, so it doesn’t really matter what they are. But they’re equipped with 7.62 machine guns, heavily armored, and still quite agile. I’ll press this button and they come out of their cages on the first level.”

Sarge clicked once more and a shaft of light appeared on the bottom each of the window, growing larger. Holding doors for the robots were opening.

“There’s just one thing. We can’t assign them to attack their own. But they can be put to manual control.”

Four robots, and there were three of them. Someone had to multitask. Or maybe they would not need all four?

“See if you can get the other consoles unlocked,” Sarge said. “It’s kind of hard to control them all with just one keyboard.”

Ian found the Agent armorer displayed much of the characteristics of a BOFH, even if for more directly operational matters.

Blackhand moved to the right and Ian to the left: they all were at their respective consoles. Blackhand grunted in disgust as he pressed return to unlock.

“Don’t feel bad. You put on a great show,” Sarge remarked.

Blackhand did not reply.

Ian got his console unlocked too.

“You ready? I’ll reassign the windows now. Ian, do you want two?”

The logic was probably that a dissociating assassin could multitask easier. Right now he was not dissociating, but he would do his best.

“Fine.”

Sarge clicked a few times more, and Ian got two robot control windows on his screen. Then Sarge concentrated on the CCTV monitors again.

“I see them now! At least three black ops checking the cell level. And more are probably headed up here. Let’s hope the robots can climb.”

If they could mow down the reinforcements without leaving the security center at all, it would be a definite plus. Right now further direct combat without much protection from the Agent armor, and with Blackhand hurt, could amount to them all getting killed.

Ian clicked the leftmost window active: his instinct was to press the W key to move the robot forward, and it turned out his instinct was right.

He moved the robot out into the corridor, then rotated it. The field of view was wide, almost resembling a fish eye: it took some seconds to get used to.

The robots of Blackhand and Sarge were moving too, slightly behind.

Ahead of them, the black ops were roving the corridor, checking for intrusion, unaware of how their own security had been hijacked.

“Left mouse button fires?” Ian asked.

“Should be,” Sarge replied.

It was almost disgusting, how easy it was going to be. A complete slaughter.

Ian took rough aim, then pressed down the mouse button. The machine gun on the robot came to life, but there was no sound being transmitted back. The view just shook in time with the gun firing.

By now also Sarge and Blackhand were firing, and the black ops danced macabrely in place under the multiple impacts. They never stood a chance.

As all the enemies lay unmoving, the Agents let go of their fire buttons. Ian felt uneasy with the power he suddenly had. It was like a video game, but all wrong. But what choice there was? It was kill or be killed. If the Agents could use this passing opportunity to even out the impossible odds, could that actually be wrong?

But now Ian wished to be dissociated again, to not come out of it until the 21st passed, and they would either be dead or victorious.

He reminded himself that the remaining black ops – their numbers unknown – could pose much stiffer opposition. He also thought of the captured Agents in their cells: they had to be going mad with fear, with gunfire rattling just outside.

“We move up now?” he asked.

“Leave one robot on the first floor,” Blackhand said. “But the rest, let's move.”

Ian clicked the right-side window and steered the robot into the corridor. Then he activated the left again, joining Blackhand and Sarge.

“Let's not all go in one group,” Blackhand said. “Sarge, where are the other stairwells?”

“Turn around, then some fifty meters forward, and the closest one should be on your left.”

That left Ian following only Sarge's robot.

They reached the now open double doors leading to the entrance stairwell. Ian tilted up the robot's head to see the stairs ahead: he hoped it would have some degree of artificial intelligence. Otherwise the climb could end up as an epic fail.

No black ops on the stairs. Where were they?

Were they not taking the main stairwell?

"Damn!" Blackhand exclaimed. "I was climbing, and my screen just cut to black."

"They probably ambushed your robot. That means they'll come out of some side corridor closer to here," Sarge said.

"Where exactly?" Blackhand pressed on, anger rising.

"I'm not a machine. I don't remember the exact corridor layout."

"Damn. Ian, continue climbing. Sarge, be ready with the Penetrator Hammer in case you see them coming. I'll take Sarge's robot," Blackhand said and left his console.

What had seemed like one-sided slaughter some moments before, now felt much more like war again.

Ian reached the second floor: it had been shaky going, but at last he was there. He moved the robot forward to the double doors and turned. Unlike on the first floor, these doors were closed, and the electronics fried courtesy of the earlier forced entry.

"How do I get these open?"

"Try just pushing on them," Sarge answered.

Ian rammed the W key down aggressively, though he knew the force he used made no difference in how the robot would react.

The robot legs reached the left-side door, then started to push against them. Little by little, the door gave way, and Ian felt a primitive satisfaction, almost as if he was bending and exploiting the rules of a game.

But still it would take several seconds.

He panned to the side and saw that Blackhand had joined him: the other robot was pushing on the right-side door.

In the next moment, roaring gunfire started outside.

Several rows of circular, irregular scratches rapidly appeared on the armored glass, and though it protected them for now, it became impossible to see what exactly was happening outside.

Only one thing was clear: the black ops had arrived.

At last the doors were open, and the two robots entered the corridor. Through his robot's camera Ian saw a group of four at the other end, dressed in black, firing at the security center with all the firepower they had.

The black ops. Could he hit them at this distance?

Maybe if he could see better.

Ian quickly hit the maximize-button on the window, but it did not make the image any sharper: instead the pixels just got larger and blockier.

He cursed.

Somewhere behind him, the Penetrator Hammer joined the cacophony of gunfire.

"Sarge! Remember you have zero armor!" Blackhand shouted over the din.

"I know!"

Ian pressed down the fire button, but did not know if he was hitting at all. Probably not: the gunfire hitting the octagon's windows went on undisturbed.

At least the robots crept forward all the time. But their four-leg walk was so slow compared to the distance: Ian wished for a turbo button.

No such thing.

The Hammer ceased to fire. Then Ian heard a maga-

zine being released and felt relief: at least this time it was not because of Sarge getting hit.

Ian kept firing in prolonged bursts, though he had no idea how much ammunition the robots had. Of course not limitlessly. Next to his robot, Blackhand's only walked forward, being conservative.

Then came the familiar sound of a rocket being launched.

"Shit!" Sarge shouted. Ian took a quick peek behind and saw him diving to the floor, the Penetrator Hammer sliding ahead of him.

"Get the fuck down!" he went on.

Ian hit the deck, keeping the mouse in his hand and the left button depressed.

An explosion rocked the security center as the rocket hit. Shards of reinforced glass rained on them. Not reinforced enough, Ian thought.

With the corner of his eye he saw a large jagged hole that had appeared in the front window. The next rocket would go right through and detonate inside.

If Ian thought positively, the robots were about half-way through. Now they could possibly begin to hit the enemies. But it was getting dangerous to control the robots now that the window had been breached, and gunfire rained through.

Here goes nothing, he thought, and got up to his knees so that he could see the screen again and reach the keys.

He and Blackhand started firing at the same time. Ian thought of the possibility of the robots' rounds hitting them instead of the black ops. It was not at all far-fetched. Then, he could see one of the soldiers fall. A hit at last!

Now that he knew where to fire, he adjusted his aim

methodically, sweeping from one side to the next. It would not be long until it was all over.

The black ops launched a second rocket.

The sound brought with it the cold certainty of impending death.

There was no time to get emotional. Burning disappointment was all Ian felt: he had started scoring hits too late. There was no way to get away from the room before the second explosion.

All he could do was to keep firing to the last. He could see the plume of smoke through the robot's camera –

Then there was a detonation.

Ian closed his eyes, expecting a searing agony as everything inside would burn.

Seconds passed.

But slowly, he accepted the fact that he was not burning. Only his ears were ringing hard.

He had not been hit by the rocket explosion.

The cacophony of the black ops' weapons had ceased, but there still came the sound of bullets hitting the octagon from further away.

Then Ian realized he was still holding the fire button down. He let go, and now the only sound was the even, shrill tone in his ears.

“It went high,” Blackhand said. “The rocket hit the ceiling in front of this room.”

The black op firing the bazooka had to have been hit just at the moment of launch. A split-second later, and the Agents would be no more. It was a scary and a humbling thought.

But now, were there any more arriving? Or was that all of the reinforcements already?

Ian restored the left-side window to normal size and

switched to the right-side, rotating the robot around. Everything was still quiet in the first level corridor.

“Let's stay for a few minutes, observing,” Blackhand said. Ian could only agree fully.

Blackhand led his robot forward to the four-way intersection and scanned carefully. Ian let his robot go past, right up to the lobby. He rotated to see the left corridor: nothing. Then the right: nothing either.

Still it was not fully reassuring: it was not an exaggeration to say that each floor was a maze.

But at some point they had to come out, to actually liberate the prisoners, and then search for data on any other high-level SCEPTRE facilities.

Not to speak of eventually escaping.

Minutes passed, and both Ian and Blackhand explored more of the second floor corridors: still nothing.

“We should get moving and hit the cell level,” Sarge suggested. “If the Agents held there are at all sane, they'll be able to watch our backs. We can arm them with the black op G36'es.”

Blackhand nodded with caution.

“Let's just open all the cell doors first,” Sarge said and headed back to the front console. Luckily it had mostly survived the two rockets: just the upper-left corner of the LCD held a patch of black pixels.

A couple of clicks, and the cells were open. Ian verified this by looking at the CCTV monitors still showing the first floor.

“Ah, and then the collars. Let's hope that I disable them all, instead of shocking everyone.”

A pause. Then one more click.

“Done,” Sarge said with relief. “It should be safe to use the Agent tools to take them off.”

“Good,” Blackhand replied flatly.

They all headed outside to see with their own eyes the four bullet-riddled bodies. With a wordless agreement Ian, Sarge and Blackhand each took one of their rifles and a couple of spare magazines.

"Has to be the stairwell from where they came," Blackhand pointed at a door on a side corridor some distance away from the lobby. "That's the quickest way to level one, right? But let's watch out in case there's some still lying in wait."

The three went to the stairwell and descended with caution, covering the space with their weapons. Ian remembered the black op's odd words: "Your settings can be overridden remotely." Did that mean the turrets or even the robots they had controlled could become a danger again?

There were no black ops, just Blackhand's disabled robot. It lay upside down in a corner, blackened and lifeless, apparently hit by a rifle grenade.

Blowfish got up from the terminal in the dome room.

"As far as I can tell, we're all done now. The protocol's designed so that each of the ten other sites will accept the altered program, when uploaded by a super-user. After the upload, I erased all logs and the altered source code," Blowfish explained. "But we'll only see on the twenty-first if it actually works, or if they found it out."

"Couldn't we leave some kind of access channel open? So that we could check it from our HQ?" Jo asked.

"We could set up a back door, but that would have a much greater risk of detection. Still, good thinking, just like a junior Agent BOFH. You and Ian would both make fine BOFH's with training. Too bad you're occupied with other things."

Other things that involved going into places with guns blazing, Jo knew. Of course it would be so much safer if all Agent warfare happened at the information level.

"One final thing," Blowfish said. "I'll program a ten-minute delay into the security grid. After that, the cameras and the sensors and the guns activate again. Ten minutes should be enough for us to get the hell out of here."

Jo nodded and thought for a while. Was there anything they had missed?

"What about the gun that broke in two?" she asked. "Should we remove it?"

"No. There was a rat infestation, and two of the guns shot each other to pieces while trying to acquire multiple fast-moving targets. It's all in the security log," Blowfish answered, barely serious.

"Awesome."

Blowfish tapped the security console keys for the last time. "We're done. This time I mean it. Let's go."

The cold night air felt refreshing, as the insides of the dome got left behind. Jo collected her foil blanket from the snowy ground, and Blowfish did the same. They headed for the flap in the fence, bent it first wide enough for exit, then back into place after they were through.

Not even a full three minutes, and they were clear of the perimeter, outside the range of the sensors.

The forest felt inviting, but that did not mean it would be safe. Jo kept flicking between thermal imaging and light amplification, scanning left and right with the MP5 held in one hand, until they arrived at the snow-covered Agent van.

"I'll scan for tampering," Blowfish said, then bent

down, moving slowly around the vehicle.

“Nothing, at least as far as the EM scanner tells.”

Jo still wanted to do a pure unaided visual check, to check for blinking red lights on the underside with her own eyes. But there was nothing.

It was time to stash the blankets into the rear again, climb in the front, and start the engine. Then to drive almost four hundred miles through the night and into the dawn, until they would return to the HQ, tired but much wiser.

The three Agents reached the main corridor of the first level. Seen with Ian's own eyes, it was much darker and grimier than he had thought. He swept his carbine to the left and right, but there was no opposition in sight. Beside him, Blackhand and Sarge appeared similarly cautious at first, then relaxed.

There were open cell doors on both sides of the wide corridor. Ian's second robot stood immobile in the middle.

Ian caught a glimpse of the insides of one cell: a windowless small bunker, maybe two meters wide and three long, with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a spartan mattress, and a toilet seat. A rank smell emanated from within, even across the corridor.

Not a pleasant place to spend many years in.

Sarge let out a sigh of sudden disappointment.

“Damn. I forgot to check which cells actually contain living occupants,” he said.

“Don't fret. We'll do this the old-fashioned way,” Blackhand replied, let his M4 fall back on its sling, dropped the extra G36, and clasped hands around his mouth.

“Agents in this rotten place! You have been liberated!

This is Blackhand speaking. Follow my voice to find us! This message will repeat in ten seconds," he yelled in a medium-pitched, powerful voice.

A pause. Ian's ears no longer rang as bad, so it was almost quiet.

"All Agents -"

Ian looked in both directions. Was anyone listening?

Then, three people got out from their respective cells, slowly and warily. They wore gray, featureless jump suits. Not even fluorescent orange like in the Ford research facility.

The first Ian got a proper look at was a tall, thin man with dark complexion and black dreadlocks. Perhaps in his thirties. "Mad Locust," he shouted, or tried to shout, but the long confinement had made his voice just a croak.

Then a muscular medium-height man, mostly bald, but with some blond hair on top of his ears. Probably older than the first. "Ripper," he said gutturally.

And last, a taller-than-average woman, with almost colorless long blond hair. Her face was lined, but it was hard to tell whether that was due to age or the imprisonment. "Nastassja," she almost whispered.

The occultist.

Three liberated Agents in total. That was not bad, Ian thought. That meant eight Agents to oppose SCEP-TRE, if they all survived back home.

All three had collars on their necks as expected.

"We'll get those off as first priority. Then one more precaution, and finally you can arm yourselves. Do you feel like bearing guns?" Blackhand said.

Each of them nodded, Nastassja more cautiously than the men.

"The collar is now safe to remove, just unscrew all

the screws you see," Sarge instructed Ian and Blackhand, as they all got their Agent Multi-Tools out.

Sarge removed the collar from Mad Locust. "Here you go." Meanwhile Ian worked on Ripper, who was making scary faces throughout the procedure. Finally Blackhand got Nastassja's collar off.

"Now that this is sorted out, next we have to disable any tracking implants. Can't take the risk of SCEPTRE tracking back to the HQ," Blackhand said. "Do any of you have pacemakers or such?"

All three shook their heads.

"Then we're good to go. Sarge, would you?"

Sarge took out an EMP grenade from his pocket and handed it to Mad Locust. "Stand in a tight group and press the button after we get clear. It won't hurt you in any way, but any bugs will get fried."

Ian, Sarge and Blackhand walked to a distance of twenty meters as the inmates grouped close together. That should be safe enough.

"Now you can press it," Sarge said.

With some hesitation Mad Locust pressed the button, and after a few seconds, the familiar sizzling sound came. He dropped the used-up grenade to the floor.

"Man, it got hot!"

Now only the final step remained: the distribution of rifles and ammunition. The sound of three charging handles being pulled almost simultaneously echoed satisfactorily in the corridor.

Again, Ian almost welcomed the thought of battles to come, until he remembered how little armor charge he had remaining. Blackhand had none and was wounded in the left arm, and Sarge had none either. And then there were the three just liberated inmates, who could not actually be in a good fighting condition.

It just paid to be cautious, to search the top floor fast, and then get the hell out.

Their group of six climbed the same side stairwell up to the second floor. So far, it was the fastest known route to the relative safety of the security center.

As they all were inside the octagon, Blackhand spoke. "We still need to check the top floor for intelligence. Anyone who wants to stay here can do so. But observe the hole in the window: it will not be completely safe if more enemies appear. If any do, you can take control of the security robots through those terminals. If anyone of you has played murder simulators – the controls are just the same. And the robots are armed. All I ask is for you not to shoot us."

The former inmates all let out a short laugh.

"I want to go with you," Ripper said, murder in his eyes.

Ian wondered how mentally stable the man actually was. Could he be trusted not to fire on them during a combat situation? What if he just wanted to let rip on anyone?

But then, extra firepower could mean the difference between life and death. And it was Blackhand who would make the call, not Ian.

"I'd rather stay," Nastassja said.

“Me as well,” Mad Locust replied last. “We’ll keep the robots on guard.”

“Do we hit the same stairwell?” Blackhand asked Sarge as the two plus Ian and Ripper exited the center.

“Actually, there’s something I want to check. Let’s take the right corridor away from the lobby first,” Sarge replied, sounding somewhat uncertain, even confused.

Ian did not like this at all.

They passed directly in front of the camera, but as it was now being watched by Nastassja and Mad Locust, it did not matter. The side corridor was not that long: roughly forty meters. Before long they were at a corner.

“We are now at the right far corner of Erehwon,” Sarge said cryptically, almost reverently. “This was not here the last time.”

He pointed at the door on his other side: the metal appeared shiny, not dull like on the rest of the doorways. It certainly was newer.

“Is this a good idea?” Ian asked. “Maybe we just should go back the way we came.”

“I’ll go first, so if there are black ops in ambush, it’s me who will be riddled with bullets first,” Sarge replied.

Sarge opened the door slightly: it appeared to be unlocked, and Ian caught a glimpse of another stairwell, going both up and down. With the Penetrator Hammer held against his shoulder Sarge then crossed fully over, letting the door close behind him.

Five seconds passed.

Then Sarge’s face came peering through. “It’s empty. But certainly new construction. Everyone, come on! We’ll reach the top floor quickly, and can surprise anyone remaining there.”

Reluctantly, Blackhand stepped closer.

Ripper grinned, and seemed to squeeze the grip of his G36 so hard that his fingers whitened. Ian considered the possibility of accidental discharge, but noted then that the man's index finger was not inside the trigger guard.

No need to worry. Ripper obeyed proper weapons handling procedure, even if he looked slightly mad.

They entered the new stairwell. Ian peered down and thought he saw two flights of stairs, which would mean that they descended deeper than the cell level. For just an instant, that was frightening. But it could have been a mistake of his brains, misinterpreting what his eyes fed them. And in any case, the direction was up.

The climb was quickly over, and without an incident. Sarge got to the top first and looked out through the door, which was unlocked as well. No need to break out the multi-tools.

"It's clear," he whispered.

The four emerged into the top level corridor, into a similar corner as one floor below.

"Now, there's quite an amount of office rooms and living quarters. But we probably don't come here ever again, so the search has to be fairly thorough. Do you agree?" Sarge asked Blackhand as they had settled into a formation, two guns covering each direction.

"Yes. It has to. Without knowledge of where the rest of SCEPTRE high level facilities are located, we're honestly screwed," Blackhand replied, speaking to the newcomer Ripper more than anyone else. "And when I said we need to cleanse this place properly, I meant it."

Ripper nodded in satisfied understanding.

There was a door close by: it was as good choice to enter as any. It led to a large, square office area, split

into cubicles by divider walls. Roughly half of the ceiling lights were on: some of them flickered.

Ian wondered how much administrative overhead three inmates would actually require. Surely this whole floor was overkill. But then, Erewhon had probably been much more crowded in its glory days. Thinking of it, they had not seen even one scientist here, just the black op guards. Now, if SCEPTRE was nearing the fulfillment of its plans, this place perhaps would not be needed at all –

That was a worrying thought. What if SCEPTRE would blow up the tunnel while the Agents were still inside?

Blackhand led them with hand signals so that each would search his own quadrant of the room. It was quiet, militaristic, and efficient. Ian had the odd feeling of being observed, and then he understood why: another camera stood in the corner, high up on the wall.

There were workstations running, their monitors turned off. Ian turned one on and tried the return only-trick again, but it did not work. He tried “azerate” too, for good measure, but the machine did not let him in.

There were no documents that looked noteworthy. One clearly detailed food and drink transports to the facility, another listed the treatment schedules in the various level two rooms, but there were no papers that would tell of other SCEPTRE high level facilities.

“Not much here,” Ripper said with disappointment.

“There's plenty remaining.” Blackhand replied flatly.

They moved to the next room, with a similar layout. It was darker than the previous: only two fluorescent tubes were on, near the door they had entered through. The rear of the room was almost unlit.

Ian put the glasses in night vision mode, but the

lights near him became much too harsh that way.

Thermal, then.

He nearly let out a sound in surprise. In the back of the room, amidst the blue of the tables and divider walls, was a red-yellow shape. A human. The shape appeared to be crouching behind some cover.

Should Ian just open fire? The bullets would probably travel through the divider walls. It had to be a black op, crouching in ambush.

“Stay where you are, Agents,” came a sudden female voice, calm but cold. The shape stood up quickly, then sidestepped.

Ian flicked back to normal vision: in the little light that reached the rear, he saw a woman in a dark blue uniform. She had short-cropped black hair and a narrow, lined face.

The same as on the recording. The same who had killed Ranger.

In her right hand, she had a bullpup assault rifle, pointed at the Agents. In the left, there was a small black box with a green light on it. Her thumb hovered above the box.

A detonator?

For the tunnel?

Ian took a quick glance around. Blackhand, Sarge and Ripper all had their weapons trained on the woman, but no-one made a move yet.

“When I press this button, all security will revert to the original configuration, and the console passwords will be randomized.”

“Who are you?” Sarge shouted roughly.

“I might as well tell. Lilith. Commander of the Black Ops. Though you should remember –”

Ian's blood went cold.

Sarge should remember what? Her? Ian recalled how Sarge had been here before. Was it related to that?

“Or actually you shouldn't. But it will all come back to you now. All I need to say is: Wotan mit uns.”

A terrible scream erupted from Sarge's throat.

The woman was already fleeing, running through a doorway in the rear, but now the Penetrator Hammer joined Sarge's anguished yell, bucking in his hands as it fired at Blackhand and Ripper on full auto.

Brainwashing!

Blackhand fell as he took at least two hits to his side. Ripper dived into cover and was perhaps still unhurt –

Ian ducked as the barrel turned his way now, the lethal steel bolts flying so close that he could feel the air moved by them.

The scream still went on, only gaining intensity.

Then came a single different gunshot, and the roar of the Penetrator Hammer stopped.

Ian turned to look: Sarge fell to his knees first, then to the floor. Judging from the bloody mess that his face was now, he had been shot to the head.

Blackhand was half-lying on the ground, the M4 carbine extended in his right hand. His face was twisted into a heavy pained frown, his eyes closed for now. A single ejected cartridge rolled on the floor.

Ripper emerged from cover, face completely unreadable, his rifle trained on Sarge's unmoving body.

Blackhand opened his eyes and spoke bitterly. “Flash programming. A short, intense trauma, during which a command is drilled into the mind. I thought it was fiction, an impossibility, and I thought it was a bullet wound when Sarge returned, years ago –”

He shook his head. “Shit. I should never have taken him on this mission.”

The full realization took some time to take hold.

Sarge was dead by their own guns.

There was a terrible emptiness inside him as Ian considered this. The Agent armorer had been subjected to a SCEPTRE brainwashing technique, so that he would become their tool, so that he would attack his own.

This mission had just taken a new turn into the depths of Hell, if it already had not been bad enough.

Blackhand turned to look sternly at Ian. "This wound is not as bad as it looks. Ripper should be able to treat it. But you Ian, chase that bitch down and shoot her dead. Go!"

Ian stood in place for a second, conflicted.

Then, before he could fully process it, his legs were already obeying Blackhand's command, the words giving him a forceful boost that replaced the apathy with sudden rage and a burning need for vengeance.

He opened the door, arriving back in the brightly lit corridor maze. Quickly, he scanned left and right: no other enemies, but to his right he saw a glimpse of the blue-clad woman, disappearing behind a corner.

He launched himself into a sprint, rounding the corner –

And saw a door ahead of him closing. Lilith was escaping the same way they had arrived on the top floor. The new stairwell.

Ian slammed his shoulder into the door, entered the stairwell and took the first steps down two at a time, almost flying. Below, Lilith was already almost two full floors ahead of him.

Ian gripped the railing with force as he rounded the landing and prepared to descend the next set of stairs. By now it was clear: the stairs did not end at the first

floor, and the black op commander was descending below the cell level, heading to the unfamiliar newly-built part of Erewhon.

She disappeared through the door at the bottom.

Roughly five seconds later Ian was at the end of the stairs too. He had gained on the woman on the way down.

Ian reminded himself of the possible danger. Being overexcited to nail Lilith would possibly get him killed. There could be more black ops. And if she had reactivated the security, he would have to watch out for turrets and robots as well.

With caution he peered into the doorway. The door was still closing slowly, and all Ian needed to do was to apply a little pressure to keep it from closing completely.

Beyond, there was a large cavern: an underground train platform. There were two monorails ending into bumpers near the door, but curving and extending into black nothingness in the other direction. Only the platform itself was lit by white fluorescent lights from above.

The rails had to be going into another tunnel built into the sea floor. But to where? To other SCEPTRE facilities?

Lilith was sprinting into a small train car, perhaps five meters long. The car was painted a bluish gray, with a single white line running its length in the middle.

She turned around just in time to see Ian come out of the doorway, and loosened a prolonged burst from the assault rifle. Bullets hit the concrete platform close to Ian: with limited armor power, he had no choice but to duck back into safety.

“This, I believe, is where I get off. Have fun,” Lilith said in a loud voice, the words echoing in the cavern.

Before she climbed into the train car, she pressed the button on the small black box and threw it down. Two seconds passed, then the car accelerated with unbelievable fluidity, almost without a sound. Now Ian understood it was actually levitating on top of the single, wide rail.

Quickly, it vanished off into the distance.

Ian considered the box lying on the platform, still blinking. Maybe he could press the button again to override the override –

As he made his move and came out on the platform again, he understood to have made a mistake.

On the second rail, a train car was arriving.

Yet another set of reinforcements. Black ops.

And the ugly electric whirl from above told that not just one, but two turrets were descending from the ceiling of the platform.

Cursing bitterly, he aimed into the middle of the turrets and pressed the grenade launcher trigger.

An explosion rocked the platform. As the smoke cleared, Ian saw a large part of the ceiling to have disintegrated into black nothingness, the reinforcing wires embedded in the concrete showing through.

But the turrets had survived.

Just as relentless as a few seconds ago, they tracked him and spun up to fire. It appeared that only a direct hit was enough.

There was no time to reload. If he wanted to live, it was time to run.

As he dived through the doorway, two streams of gunfire from behind urging him on, he caught a glimpse of the second train car decelerating.

More enemies arriving. But now Ian was back in the stairwell, heading up again.

“Blackhand! Ripper!” Ian spoke hurriedly into his microphone as he ran. “Lilith got away by train, the security's reactivated, and there are more black ops coming from the rear stairwell. I say we join the rest at the octagon, before we're all toast!”

The words had been instinctive and without much thinking. But now Ian understood it was the only way: Nastassja and Mad Locust had no radio gear on them, so they could not be warned beforehand.

“Agreed,” came Blackhand's alert voice, with no sign of protest.

Ian would have hoped for Blackhand to contest his idea, to say that no, they would search and cleanse the place just as planned. But this meant that Blackhand clearly understood how bad the situation was going, and had possibly reached his personal limit: wounded again, much worse this time, and with Sarge dead.

On the positive side, at least the situation had suddenly become much more clear: the only objective that made sense anymore was to get out. Fast.

As Ian sprinted up the stairwell, he reloaded the grenade launcher. He had lost count of how many remained. Well, when he ran out, he still had the two EMP grenades to take out automated security with.

If he had not bled to death at that point.

He almost missed the second floor, going instinctively straight for the third, where Blackhand and Ripper still were, perhaps. But they would just have to make their own way to the security center.

Suddenly Ian was glad of the radio blackout to the outside: if Jo would get real-time situation updates, she would surely go crazy out of worry.

Though, what if she was dead? No Agent mission was without risk. He had not concentrated on the guards when she had asked him to.

Well, he would see.

Ian understood to be dissociated to some degree. Otherwise such healthy cynicism would not have been possible, and Sarge's death would have been much more on the forefront of his mind as well.

He exited the stairwell to the second floor side corridor. Some forty meters, and he would reach the lobby and the octagon. He wondered if some kind of counter-

measures had activated in the center itself. Noxious gas, or high voltage through the keyboards?

Soon he would see that, too.

Ten meters in, he was alerted by a sound from above.

A turret. Damn.

He rolled, turning around while still curled into a ball, and saw the trapdoor opening almost directly above. It was too late to ponder if he was too near and would be turned into gibs, so he just fired the grenade.

From so up close, the explosion was like death itself. Ian closed his eyes as something hot, possibly mangled steel, rained on him. There was the copper taste of blood on his lips.

He got up and almost immediately crashed into the wall: the detonation had left him dazed, and again his ears rang. An odd humorous thought occurred to him: after all, playing metal was not as bad for the ears as actual warfare.

But no humor, no dissociation could dissolve the actual hurt. Yet, he had no choice but to run.

Of course, those minor scratches and bruises were nothing compared to how Blackhand had been hit by the steel bolts.

At last he reached the octagon.

He saw Mad Locust open the door for him, and dived directly in just as a twin barrage of gunfire started coming from the main corridor.

The two robots Ian and Blackhand had left there.

As long as they stayed low inside the security center, Ian, Mad Locust and Nastassja would be relatively safe. But what about Blackhand and Ripper?

It depended on which stairway they chose.

By blowing up the turret, Ian had cleared the rear

corridor. But the new reinforcements would likely come through that route.

It seemed like no option was truly safe.

Still on the floor, Ian fished for another rifle grenade and reloaded his launcher. He felt his pockets for yet another, but there appeared to be none left.

The last one, then.

Then he saw, through the hole in the front window, how the next moments were going to play out.

And it was not going to be pretty.

Holding the Penetrator Hammer one-handed now, Ripper appeared from a side corridor close to the robots. Blackhand was still nowhere to be seen.

Ripper at least had used the same stairwell through which they had originally descended on the cell level. Even from afar, Ian could confirm that the man was red from the face with rage.

And he would need all his rage to face the robots.

Like a mad force of nature waiting to be fully unleashed, he strode slowly forward as the two spider-dog hybrids were still firing at the security center, oblivious of him so far.

Somehow it reminded of Erik.

He walked right into the middle of the robots, but instead of raising the Hammer to firing position, he did something with his free hand, then stood immobile for a few further seconds.

Suddenly, the machine guns shut off. The robots' legs gave way and both of them collapsed to the floor.

It was then Ian understood: Ripper had used one of Blackhand's EMP grenades. And because he had no mission-critical electric devices on him, he could safely stay in place while letting the grenade unleash its power.

Now Blackhand appeared from the same direction, almost dragging himself forward.

“Run!” he shouted. “The black ops are coming in from the back any moment!”

Nastassja and Mad Locust were on their feet, using both exits of the octagon to run in the direction of Ripper and Blackhand. Ian turned to look at his right, and at the end of the side corridor, he saw the stairwell door burst open.

A group of black ops came through, rifles ready.

They were not firing yet, but they had probably seen the Agents exit.

Aiming through the doorway Mad Locust had exited through, Ian rammed the trigger down and sent the rest of his magazine down the corridor.

At least one black op went down. The rest, it seemed, retreated back into the stairwell.

That was Ian's cue to run. He sprinted, almost slid through the turn, and was on his way down the main corridor while reloading and cocking his carbine at the same time.

Theoretically, if they now exited the exact same route they had used on the way in, there should be no more automated security. Then, there was of course the possibility of yet another group of black ops coming from the lighthouse tunnel, trapping them in the middle.

But it was a necessary risk to take.

Both Nastassja and Mad Locust supported Blackhand as they continued along the corridor. Beneath his coat, there was a large bandage wrapped above the waist: it was already bloody. Blackhand's skin appeared paler than usual, which meant shock from blood loss was not far away.

"Where's one of you? The dark-haired one?" Nas-tassja asked.

"Dead," came Blackhand's flat response.

Ian kept peering behind: as they were roughly half-way through, the black ops arrived in the lobby. They opened fire immediately.

As Ian fired back, another long burst, he felt two impacts: one on his left arm, one on his upper torso. His aim was thrown off: the next bullets went to the ceiling.

CHARGE: 10 PERCENT.

CHARGE: 0 PERCENT.

The electromagnets would protect him no more.

In desperate rage, he made a quick decision: to rain death on multiple enemies at once.

Without much aiming, without actually performing any ballistic calculation in his head, he pointed in the direction of the lobby and launched the last rifle grenade.

Whump!

It exploded near the front of the octagon, probably wounding at least some of the black ops. At least their fire ceased for a moment.

Then Ian took a look next to him and saw Ripper sprawled on the floor, both legs of his jumpsuit torn and blood all over the checkered tiles.

"I will punish them. You go," Ripper snarled with pure hate as he reached for the Penetrator Hammer that had fallen out of his grip.

"We can –" Ian began. Right at this moment, he did not want another Agent to sacrifice his life for him. After Sarge dying. It was almost as if the Hammer brought bad luck to anyone wielding it.

"Go, or we both die!"

Something in the voice held a terrible certainty, and

Ian understood that it was better to comply. As his parting gift to Ripper he emptied one of his coat pockets, which held the incendiary grenades.

"Thanks," the wounded Agent said as the cylindrical objects clattered to the floor next to him.

Then the rattle of the steel bolts filled the air, and as the black ops returned fire in turn, Ian fired over his shoulder while running and weaving to catch up with the rest.

Thankfully, there were no more impacts.

When the four of them were almost at the exit, Ian could hear the distinctive sound of white phosphorus igniting. He did not want to look back to see if Ripper was in fact performing an act of self-immolation.

Only as they were through the doorway, heading for the stairs down, Ian hazarded a quick peek. It was not possible to tell exactly what was happening: the whole width of the corridor was now filled with the intense light of the incendiary grenade – or grenades – burning.

But it was quite certain that Ripper would not be joining them any more.

Not a word was said as they all descended, Nastassja and Mad Locust still supporting Blackhand. He just pointed where to go.

When they were almost on the ground level, Ian remembered the last robot, left in the cell level corridor. There was no telling where it was now, but it would be too late when they actually met it.

Therefore he took preventive action: an EMP grenade.

He pressed its button and threw it down the corridor, through the doors that had remained open since the arrival of the first reinforcements.

Ian could see the grenade bounce once, then disap-

pear from view. From some distance away came the faint electric crackle.

Hopefully the last robot was disabled now.

Without pause, they went through the wide double doors to the tunnel, Ian in the lead.

No black ops in sight. Next, Ian looked into the left-side corner at the beginning of the tunnel, and froze in horror.

The last robot had left Erehwon itself to wait here. Its head turned until the barrel of its machine gun and the eye of its camera were both staring him in the face.

Then it opened fire.

With mad desperation Ian dived forward and down to get under the robot's line of fire. The noise of its machine gun filled his ears, and something brushed his hair: it had to be the stream of bullets.

He hit the robot's side at speed, shoulder first, and was almost stunned from the force of the impact. Flesh against steel was not a fair competition.

Now he was on the concrete floor, right in front of the robot, but what could he do? He looked at its underside, trying to find anything he could grab, anything vital to its operation –

But the underside was completely smooth.

Next, one of the legs lifted in the air and hung directly over him. He rolled to the side at last instant as the leg smashed to the ground with force. Had he been lying where he was a second ago, he would have been impaled.

But now the robot was moving away from him, so that the lowest possible angle of its gun would be enough to reacquire.

It was completely hopeless –

Then came the distinct sound of a powerful handgun being discharged multiple times.

A Desert Eagle.

Pings of bullets hitting steel plate, the sound of shattering glass, seven impacts in total. Then silence and the acrid smell of operational smoke.

Ian turned to look behind and saw Blackhand with the gold-plated Desert Eagle in his hands. His expression was a mixture of a conspiratorial grin and a pained frown. A peek to the side revealed the robot disabled, its legs lifeless and its eye shattered.

"Thanks," Ian said simply, still out of breath.

"We have to get moving now," Blackhand replied.

"We take two carts?" Mad Locust asked.

Blackhand nodded, and Ian certainly agreed: this was not the time for anyone to ride on the back of a cart.

Ian stopped to listen for two seconds: were the black ops coming from the rear of the facility, or had Ripper managed to get them all during his last stand?

He heard no footsteps, only the hum of the ventilation and the lighting, and the faint ringing in his ears. A look back inside Erehwon confirmed this: no-one coming through the first floor corridor, or from the stairs.

So it was time to go.

He sprinted for the closest electric cart and turned it around to pick up Blackhand. Without a word he entered the passenger seat, then holstered the Desert Eagle and took the M4 in his hands again.

Mad Locust climbed to a cart on the other side and Nastassja prepared to ride shotgun.

Then they all were on their way.

The tunnel appeared deserted. No black ops so far either ahead or behind. It could have been faster going, but eventually they would reach the other end. Though

Ian was still alert, the slow ride appeared almost relaxing compared to the running and fighting before.

“Escaped by train,” Blackhand mused, referring to Ian’s hurried radio comment while he was running up the rear stairwell. “So there was a train platform in the back of Erehwon that we knew nothing about?”

“Yeah. The tracks seemed to vanish far into the distance. Has to be another undersea tunnel,” Ian replied.

“Perhaps.”

Blackhand said no more: they rode on in silence.

Three hundred meters in Ian suddenly heard a loud, low rumble over the steady whine of the electric motor.

What was that?

Next the whole tunnel shook, while the rumble still went on. Something was definitely wrong.

He took a look behind and felt pure terror.

The Erehwon end of the tunnel had been detonated: amidst a cloud of black smoke that was now dissipating, sea water poured in. Now the rumble was drowned by the higher-pitch roar of the huge water mass.

Ian’s suspicions had been right: the whole facility was expendable to SCEPTRE now. Its final purpose would be to give the escaping Agents a burial at sea.

He pushed on the accelerator, but to no effect: they were already traveling at top speed.

The surging body of water had to approach faster than twenty miles per hour. It would catch up to them, throw them around like dolls, and then, if they had not yet been beaten to death against the tunnel walls, they would float in the darkness of the undersea trap, desperately searching for the way out, but would not find it before running out of air: at last their lungs would fill with water, bringing first burning pain and then oblivion.

“Blackhand! We kind of have a problem,” he yelled.

The senior Agent nodded in acknowledgment. There was no fear on his face, instead an almost impossible look of determination that was only amplified by the paleness of his skin. The determination to get clear at any cost.

Somehow that gave Ian strength.

“We need to get this thing go faster,” Blackhand shouted back. It was not unnecessary to speak up: the roar was already much louder.

Mad Locust and Nastassja were riding right beside them: thankfully they had not fallen behind.

“There has to be a governor, which protects the engine and does not let it run too fast. But now that only hinders us, and kills us if we don't disable it! Keep going: I'll open up the dashboard and see what I can do!”

Ian wondered: what if the electronics were somewhere under their seats, closer to the engine itself?

Blackhand would not have time to rip the whole cart apart to save them.

Judging by the sound only, the water was definitely gaining on them. Ian fought the urge to look behind and tried his best to concentrate only on the tunnel in front of him.

With the corner of his right eye, he saw Blackhand taking the Agent tool and using its motorized screwdriver to quickly open up the underside of the dashboard. The screws and the cover plate were discarded somewhere behind.

“How does it look like?” Ian asked.

“Messy!” Blackhand yelled back.

Ian wished he had not asked. But he would speak no more, he would let Blackhand concentrate.

Perhaps fifteen seconds passed: the carts were still

traveling side-by-side. And the roar was still getting louder. The other end of the tunnel was getting closer all the time, but too slow.

"I think I've found it. Mad Locust! Nastassja! Prepare to stop when we do and hop on!"

There was a look of total stupefaction on their faces: Blackhand had surely lost his mind.

He then turned toward Ian: "I have to disconnect a wire, and that will kill the engine. Then you restart it as soon as I've made the bypass and the rest are aboard! You should find the accelerator much more responsive, but try not to fry the engine!"

Ian grit his teeth and waited for the inevitable stop as if it was an execution waiting to happen. Well, at least he did not have to immediately respond to it, like Mad Locust would.

"Pulling it now!"

Blackhand pulled with force, and power disappeared immediately. The whine died down and the cart started to decelerate. Mad Locust reacted well, applying brake to stay level with them.

"Shit," Blackhand muttered, crouched low under the dashboard.

Ian was alarmed. Was something going wrong? Was the cart never going to come back to life again?

They stood in place. There was only the roar of water, fast approaching. Ian already felt tiny droplets spatter on the back of his neck.

Then came a rustle of the jumpsuits: Mad Locust and Nastassja were climbing onto the back.

"Go go go!" Blackhand yelled.

Ian pressed the starter button, and without listening if the engine was actually on, pushed the pedal to the metal.

The acceleration was impressively sharp. Blackhand had done it! But not a second too soon: Ian could see water on the floor, trailing ahead of the cart. A small wave soaked his hair, bringing the smell of salt.

“Craaaaap!” came Mad Locust's voice.

“Hold on,” Blackhand barked firmly.

Ian felt hands grab his shoulders, slide down, then settle behind his back to grip the seat. They traveled on at the new top speed, barely evading the roiling mass of water.

Now Ian observed that Blackhand was still crouching. “What is it?” Ian asked.

“A connector broke. I have to hold the power wire in place. Hope that my hand doesn't shake too much.”

Ian swallowed hard.

The motor was clearly straining: he could smell ozone. But how could he slow down? They would need some time at the other end to get through the doors. Had the black ops left them open or closed?

In time they would see.

Two minutes passed as Ian drove in as straight line as he could. Bit by bit the roar of the water got left behind, but not far. With luck they could have perhaps ten to twenty seconds. And of course then there were the stairs, and possibly darkness.

As if darkness was summoned by thinking about it, lights suddenly went out in the tunnel. The headlights of the cart were low-powered and aimed downward: the beams reached only perhaps twenty meters ahead.

Ian groped furiously for the mode switch button of the sunglasses.

After a second he got the night vision activated. Now the beams were almost too bright, but still it was better to see the whole tunnel in front of him.

The engine hiccuped suddenly.

"You're running it too hot! It will seize if you don't back off," Blackhand said grimly.

Ian eased off the accelerator just a bit. Hopefully that was enough. The engine still ran irregularly for a few seconds, but then returned to roughly normal.

And then, the other end came into view.

The doors were closed.

"I will shoot a rifle grenade," Blackhand shouted. "I only get one shot, but that should be enough. Try to drive right in but brake before we hit the stairs!"

Ian saw him steady the M4 against his shoulder, while still holding the wire. He would have to fire the grenade one-handed.

Of course they would have to get much closer first, but not so close that they would get caught up in the explosion themselves.

Two hundred meters –

One hundred –

Fifty.

Ian wondered if Blackhand was never going to fire.

Whump!

The grenade flew, arcing and tumbling in the air almost beautifully. The sound of detonation was just as beautiful in its raw power.

As the smoke cleared, Ian saw the grenade had hit the double-doors dead in the center, forcing the latch to open.

The doors had not opened very wide though: the cart would collide with them. Hopefully that collision would open them up more, instead of just sending them all flying.

"We're going to crash into the doors! Hang on!" Ian yelled at the top of his lungs.

He took a last look behind: the wave had not gone anywhere, it was still chasing them viciously. It was only about ten seconds that they would have after stopping, thanks to him having to drive slower the rest of the way.

Then, the doors were right in front of them.

Impact.

The jolt was unpleasant, as was the noise.

But they all stayed on. The rear wall of the stairwell was fast approaching: Ian applied brake forcibly, then switched light amplification off: the bright lights that had activated when they had come in were hurting his eyes.

Even before they had stopped fully, Mad Locust and Nastassja hopped down and scooped Blackhand up from the passenger seat. Ian climbed over the dashboard and headed to the stairs right behind them.

The roar of the water filled his ears again, getting louder each second.

At the stairs now.

They were perhaps ten steps up when the wave came crashing in. The yellow cart was thrown viciously against the wall, and then the lights went out in the stairwell.

Nastassja stumbled in the dark, but Ian caught her before she could actually fall. Then he switched night vision on yet again and continued the climb.

The churning water still chased them with its rising level, but much slower now: they could keep the pace fine. It was rather a test of endurance now: the climb certainly felt much longer than when they had arrived.

Slowly, Ian began to see faint light coming from above, through the lighthouse doors he, Blackhand and Sarge

had left open, and the black ops had not closed. It felt already like an eternity ago, and Sarge would never join them on an Agent mission again.

Earlier, Ian had already imagined the reunion after the respective missions of the two teams. Whether they both were a total win, a semi-win, or a fail of some degree. But now it would certainly be much different. He could never have imagined that a trigger phrase had been implanted in Sarge's mind, and that Blackhand would have to shoot him personally.

Now other questions remained.

Had Sarge given away the Agent HQ location to SCEPTRE? Or installed some fiendish trap that would activate later?

Honestly, there was no way to tell.

But it was too early to even think of a reunion. They certainly were not out of danger. At the lighthouse door, Ian and Blackhand both scanned with all of the operating modes of their sunglasses.

As far as they could tell, nothing.

Ian exited into the night. Moonlight filtered through the clouds, creating a desolate feeling that reminded of Norwegian black metal. He definitely was tired, aching all over. It seemed each successive Agent mission would bring the participants closer to the limit.

He checked his watch: it was just past 11:30 PM. Relatively little time had passed inside Erewhon. Of course, the return trip would certainly be long.

Now it was only a three hundred meters to the helicopter.

If it was still there.

It had been concealed with bushes to the best of their ability, away from the actual road leading to the lighthouse, but it was possible the reinforcement team

had found it and sabotaged it, or perhaps even blown it to nothingness.

Ian felt his heart skipping, as he scouted ahead on the path, the carbine ready to fire at anyone unexpected. If the chopper was gone, they would be well and truly screwed.

He was relieved to note the familiar formation of bushes in his light-amplified field of view. And behind them, the black fuselage of the helicopter appeared to be intact.

"Help me get these off," he said to Mad Locust and Nastassja.

As they set out to remove the bushes Blackhand sat on a nearby large rock to catch his breath. It was clear that he would need medical assistance, and quite urgently. There were supplies on the chopper, better than those they carried with them, but still, Sarge had been the most experienced field medic of them. Could either Mad Locust or Nastassja fill that gap?

And besides, who would fly the helicopter now?

"Let's get airborne," Blackhand breathed. "I believe I could fly until we get well clear of this place, or up until the first dump, but I'd – rather –"

He never finished the sentence as he slumped against the rock, unconscious.

Ian let out an audible "Shit."

Then there was an awkward silence.

"Who's going to fly?" Ian asked at last.

Mad Locust spoke warily. "I've flown a chopper once in my life. Though it was nothing like this. Much older, used in crop dusting."

"That's a lot better than me. I've never flown anything in reality. I think we have a pilot." Ian replied.

"Let's get him on board already. The wound must be

severe. It's a miracle he held up for that long," Nastassja said, crouched over Blackhand.

Ian sat with Mad Locust in the front. With some luck they had found out how to fire up the engines and engage the rotors. There had been no pre-flight check to speak off: as soon as the engine RPM had reached stable levels, they had lifted off.

Now Ian was trying to figure out the navigation computer so that they could find out the heading and distance to the closest equipment cache.

Luckily there had been no airborne SCEPTRE assault, and no missiles launched at them from the ground.

At least so far.

Nastassja was in the rear, trying to keep Blackhand stabilized.

Ian pressed some random buttons on the navigation console: now the waypoint display showed an estimated flight time of two and half hours, and the direction was northwest.

That had to be the correct waypoint. Or at least correct enough.

"Thanks," Mad Locust said over the helmet radio.

Mad Locust's flying was OK enough, once he had gotten used to how the helicopter behaved. Ian tried to

take note of what he was doing: the hard part of flying a helicopter, or flying any airborne vehicle, was that everything affected everything. The interaction of the cyclic and collective sticks decided whether the chopper would go up or down. Then there were the unpredictable winds to take note of, so that it was close enough to black arts.

If the Agency had a flight simulator, that Ian could certainly use, even if he was not going to participate in simulated combat again.

But now the navigation thing was sorted out, so Ian could occupy himself with something else.

"How's Blackhand doing?" he spoke into his mike.

"I'm re-examining the wounds," Nastassja replied with a soft, emotionless voice. "The bolts went right through: a lot of tissue and many veins were torn. He's still losing blood. I'm going to see if I can clamp them shut for now."

The situation did not sound good, but Blackhand if anyone had fighting spirit. If nothing else, then his hate for SCEPTRE would keep him hanging on.

Next, Ian pressed the connect button to patch to Jo.

The satellite communications system took some time to connect, during which Ian wondered if it was ever going to.

"Ian?" came Jo's sleepy voice.

"We're out of Erehwon, flying back. You alright?"

"Me and Blowfish are both just fine. Even some armor power left. Driving home. How about your team?"

"I'm OK. Let's talk more later. And drive safely."

"Fly safely."

They cut the connection. Ian was sure he could not have hidden the deep weariness and emptiness that came not just from the mental and physical exhaustion,

but from losing fellow Agents. But Jo had not inquired more, at least for now. Let the bad news come later.

He sighed and leaned back in the co-pilot's seat. The helmet was slightly uncomfortable and did not allow a total resting position, but at least he could try to sleep. At least he could close his eyes.

The journey home was still long.

Each time Ian came close to falling asleep, something made him jolt awake almost violently. He turned left and right, scanning for unseen enemies, checked the radar for incoming blips, but there was nothing.

Had SCEPTRE let them get away for now?

Any black ops left alive had to have exited through the rail system before they detonated the charges at the Erehwon end. And so, unless another group had been silently observing the departure of the helicopter from the lighthouse, they could believe the Agents to be sleeping with the fishes.

But even if no attack came, just the trip back to the HQ would be grueling enough.

On the third attempt, Ian finally slept a bit. But then, it was already touchdown at the first dump. He felt groggy as he climbed down. Possibly it would have been better to not sleep at all.

At least he was thankful to himself for asking Sarge the cache code.

Sarge! He should not have thought about him, because now the sadness for the fallen Agent came from the background to the fore.

"We refuel now?" Mad Locust asked.

Before Ian could reply, Nastassja slid the rear door open. "Do you have blood for transfusion here?"

"We'll see," Ian replied. He hoped that Blackhand's life would not actually depend on its availability.

With night vision on, Ian searched for the tree with the hole and the keypad inside. He swore it took almost a minute: Mad Locust and Nastassja had to be growing anxious.

At last he found it, pulled the secret hatch open and entered the code.

23409825.

Rote memorization of things was one of the more mundane traits of a dissociating assassin. The relieving green light blinked, and the entrance began to open up.

Blood would imply a refrigerator that kept running all the time. And it would have to be restocked periodically. Ian was certain that the three active Agents could not have been driving around the country doing that. Perhaps some from the trust fund, who were sufficiently in on the secret?

Ian descended below ground and flicked the light switch on.

"While we refuel, you probably know best what to look for," he said to Nastassja while heading for the fuel tank.

It was interesting to see how well he and Mad Locust could perform the refueling without the help of a senior Agent. Together, they unrolled the hose.

"Yes, this looks good," Nastassja said suddenly from the rear corner.

Ian sighed in relief. He connected the pump's end of the hose. He was glad to be only taking care of a machine, not a patient.

"Say when ready," he yelled to Mad Locust.

"Ready," came the reply almost instantly.

Ian hit the power switch on the pump and the motor started, the low rumble almost soothing.

He thought of how a certain kind of black metal blast

beat, particularly if combined with excessive mastering that made the whole sound “pump,” could be called washing machine-like. This was not far from it.

In a few minutes, everything was done and the cache closed again. Ian went to the rear for a change: Blackhand was still unconscious.

Nastassja had only taken one of the plastic blood packs containing Type O negative, the safe choice: she explained that the blood had to be used within a half hour of being taken out of storage, and it could not be administered fast.

Already after half an hour, Blackhand's skin color started to look slightly healthier. It seemed that him staying alive until the HQ would not be a problem.

Mad Locust would be logging a lot of flight hours, though. And that could be problematic.

As the night dragged on and was turning to morning, Mad Locust's flying definitely became more erratic. The touchdown to the second cache was much harder than the first: Ian was afraid the landing gears would shatter.

Blackhand was jolted awake by the landing.

“What was that?” he grunted angrily.

“Last stop before home,” Ian grinned. He was certainly glad to see Blackhand conscious.

“That's no way to fly a stealth helicopter. I'm going behind the controls as soon as we've refueled.”

“No, you're not,” Ian protested.

“I agree. Even if you're feeling better now, you could black out again. And if you were behind the controls –” Nastassja joined in.

“We'll see about that. But first, there's something you should see.”

Blackhand reached into the pockets of his pants. He took out a folded paper, unfolded it and placed it on the rear compartment floor.

“When the black ops were closing in on the third floor, me and Ripper quickly searched one more office room. I found this.”

Ian took a look.

It was a map of an extensive complex of buildings. The height lines implied that it was high up in the mountains. It also had a regular grid with latitude and longitude readings.

“All it takes is for one in SCEPTRE to be careless. But the map is actually the rear side of the paper,” Blackhand said, and flipped the paper over.

The other side contained handwritten notes about experiments on personality implantation.

Ian felt sick at the thought.

Apparently it had been tested on Erehwon inmates. Had it been tested on the three they had liberated? Could Nastassja or Mad Locust be trusted at all?

But for now Ian was unable to sustain paranoia.

“Notes of a SCEPTRE scientist. The building complex has to be their main science laboratory. There, down in the valley –”

Blackhand pointed into the center of the map. “There appear to be anti-gravity reactors. That and personality transfer – certainly weird things that they’re researching, but they don’t interest me primarily. More interesting would be if we could reach the black ops’ command center through that complex. Erehwon can not possibly be the only high-level SCEPTRE installation reachable by those train tracks.”

Ian nodded, though it was only theory so far.

As he looked out of the side door, now he thought he

saw the dawn over a new world. The battle was far from over, but at least now he knew where they would hit next. With Sarge gone, he had been prepared to mark Erehwon off as a total fail, to dive into the depths of despair, but again Blackhand had lifted him from the very brink.

Ian also admired Nastassja's resourcefulness: just some hours ago she had been spending time in a solitary confinement cell, but she had just pushed the horrors aside to care for Blackhand. Both of them exuded the very spirit of the Three Words.

And Ian realized that as long as there were people like that, SCEPTRE could not win completely. Even if all aboard this helicopter would be killed by their guns.

Suddenly the side door was shoved open.

It was Mad Locust, and there was an odd expression on his face.

"I've been thinking –" he said in a solemn but uncertain voice. "Is there still the policy that as long as you haven't seen the Agent HQ, you can go?"

Ian turned to look at Blackhand.

Anger and disappointment were clearly readable on the veteran Agent's face. Even if that was the policy, he was not happy about it.

"Yes," Blackhand replied curtly.

"I can help you refuel the second time, but then I'd like to not come aboard any more. I'm sorry. But I've kind of – seen enough, if you understand?"

Even if Blackhand could not, Ian certainly understood. He had been close to the same line of thinking himself. And there was no telling what Mad Locust had exactly endured during his stay at Erehwon.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Blackhand said roughly. "You would freeze to death in that jumpsuit

before reaching civilization. We'll take you closer to the HQ, but you don't have to fly if you don't want to."

"But you can't –" Ian protested.

This was getting ridiculous. Blackhand did not have to prove himself by flying while seriously hurt. Even if Mad Locust would not be joining the cause anymore, even if he was tired, he should still be the pilot for as long as possible. Ian would personally see to that.

"I'm not flying. You are."

“As long as you follow what I say, we’ll be OK. It’s not the simplest thing on Earth, but it isn’t brain surgery either. Concentration is the key: when you’re flying this thing, you can’t afford to let go for single moment. Remember that and it’s alright,” Blackhand said to Ian.

They both wore helmets, sitting in the front.

“First, familiarize yourself with the controls. Don’t be afraid to ask. Right now there are no stupid questions.”

From watching Mad Locust fly Ian already knew the controls apart from each other, as well as their purposes. After the initial shock he was not actually overwhelmed at the thought of flying the helicopter: SCEP-TRE’s assassin training had at least one true benefit, the ability for him to learn unnaturally fast.

“I believe I’m up to speed with them. I think we should just get this thing started,” Ian replied.

“Fine.”

Blackhand told Ian what switches and buttons to press, what gauges and displays to read, to perform the takeoff sequence properly. Done right, it was slightly more complicated than how they had done with Mad Locust.

The turbo-shaft engines roared to life and the rotors started turning.

“Now we open up the throttle and wait until the RPM has stabilized,” Blackhand said.

They waited. Finally no red warning lights remained on the cockpit displays, and all gauges were within safe ranges.

“Push up on the collective, but very gently, until you feel the lift.”

Ian did as told, and they were in the air. He was flying!

At first the helicopter threatened to come back down, but he increased the lift a bit more. They climbed into an altitude of roughly ten meters.

“Now pull back until we reach a steady hover. It may not be easy at first. There's partial computer assistance – it should find a dead zone.”

Ian eased back on the collective. The altimeter settled: they were hovering.

“Next, try using the foot pedals to rotate, until the heading matches the waypoint display. But not too hard.”

Gently Ian pushed on the left foot pedal, and the helicopter started to turn. He missed the exact heading on the first attempt.

“It's good enough,” Blackhand said, but Ian used the other pedal to turn back, until the whole degrees matched.

“Now we will learn how to get forward. Push on the cyclic stick, and the blades will start to create forward motion. At the same time the nose will pitch down. But remember, start slow and easy! Note also that you may need to adjust the collective to maintain altitude.”

Again, Ian followed. He chuckled as he was sure that

in SCEPTRE pilot training, each step would be done under the threat of torture upon failure. But such were not the ways of Agents. Blackhand was a good teacher.

The chopper started to move forward, slowly at first. Ian pushed more on the cyclic, adjusted the collective to compensate, and now they were flying at a respectable speed.

“Those are the basics. When we fly low, you of course have to watch for obstacles, like power wires, all the time. We can take it a bit higher this time, as we’ll be flying through little populated areas anyway.”

In a way, flying the stealth helicopter was exhilarating. But Ian knew also that he was very much on the edge, reaching the end of his personal rope. He had not slept properly for almost 24 hours, and it was his first flight. There was also no telling if Blackhand would lapse into unconsciousness when he should be giving instructions.

He did look pale again, or was that just paranoia?

No, it wasn't. Blackhand's head slumped from side to side regularly, though he always snapped back to being fully awake, at least for now.

The navigation computer showed a little less than twenty minutes flight time to the HQ. It was becoming light: soon the helicopter would be rather easy to detect with naked eye, no matter how it had radar-defeating capabilities.

“We should drop off Mad Locust now,” Blackhand said. “Those are town lights nearby: he can walk just fine. And that gets us to the art of landing.”

Landing was mostly about entering hover again, then decreasing collective a bit until the chopper had landed. Winds near the ground could make it trickier.

Ian chose a large field for the landing. No obstacles in sight for a hundred meters in each direction: it did not matter if they drifted a little.

No matter that he tried to increase the lift a bit before the touchdown, it was rough. Not as rough as Mad Locust's last landing, though: Ian could take some pride in that.

Mad Locust waved his hand as he exited the rear compartment. Of course his jumpsuit and the lack of any papers could present trouble, but Ian was sure the former Agent would be resourceful enough to deal with that. The G36 rifle and its ammunition were left, on his own accord, on the floor next to Nastassja's weapon.

Then it was takeoff again, and nose toward the HQ.

At least this was a much preferable way of losing an Agent, instead of one getting killed by SCEPTRE's or their own guns.

As ten minutes remained on the navigation computer, Ian wondered: what was the helicopter equivalent to driving toward the hidden entry tunnel at sufficiently high speed?

Better ask Blackhand, he knew.

"Hey, what do I do once we're above the helipad?"

There was no reply.

Ian looked to his side and saw Blackhand limp and unmoving in the co-pilot's seat, head slumped to the right.

Shit.

Well, Blowfish was the next best candidate to answer. Ian pressed the connect button on a console on the right side of the instrument board.

"Ian, is it you?" Blowfish's voice came over the radio.

"Believe or not, I'm flying the chopper. And I wanted to ask: how does one get in to the HQ from the air?"

There was just one second of surprised silence.

“It’s easiest if I open the helipad doors manually. Hold on.”

Ian managed the last few minutes perhaps due to the anxiety unearthing some more hidden power reserves. But even then, it was cutting it close. He also recalled that the opening in the garage floor was much, much smaller than the field he has landed on.

He did not want to scrape the rotors against the walls, but would see how well he did only after he tried.

From the air, the contours of the terrain did not seem that familiar. But the navigation display showed almost zero distance: he had to be there.

And then he saw it: on the top of a rocky hill there was a flat section that could only be the two-piece roof. As he flew closer, the halves began to separate.

Ian settled into a hover above the garage entrance, waiting for the roof to be fully open. When he was certain it was, he eased back on the collective very slowly, and the chopper began to descend.

They were now level with the roof.

Proximity warnings lit up on the instrument panel: by following them, he could perhaps judge how to adjust his position to not collide.

It was certainly not pretty. He rotated in place with the pedals, pushed the cyclic stick both back and forward, and still he could not get all the warnings to go away. He just had to guess if he was coming in properly.

Soon he would know: if he would get the ugly scrape of rotors against the concrete walls, or not.

A few more seconds of descent. No collision so far.

Finally, only a few meters remained to the garage floor. Ian increased the lift, so that nothing would

break, hardware or Agents.

Touchdown.

Ian let out a long sigh. He saw black spots before his eyes: only now he fully understood his level of delirium and how dangerous it had actually been to be flying.

He did the start-up procedure, or as much as he remembered of it, in reverse. The engines shut off, the rotors started to slow down.

Ian removed the helmet, opened the pilot-side door, and almost fell directly to the floor. On the ground he stumbled and hit his right knee nastily, but the pain barely registered.

Then he felt Jo's arms around him, and understood that this mission was truly over. She kissed him all over his face: there probably was dried blood, but she did not ask anything about it, at least not right now.

And right now he certainly did not feel like explaining what had happened to Sarge. Or even to Blackhand. He heard the rear door being opened, then hurried, heavy footsteps closing in: Blowfish had arrived and would take control of the situation.

"Blackhand is hurt! Let's get him to the sick bay now!" she shouted. "And where's Sarge?"

Now it would all come out. Shit.

"Dead," Ian blurted out almost on reflex.

“You should have told me over the radio. I would have been able to handle it.” Jo’s voice contained a degree of disappointment.

“Yeah, I know. Well, next time then,” Ian replied.

“I hope there won’t be a next time. I mean, someone of us dying.”

“Of course.”

They had slept until 5 PM on the Tuesday evening. Maybe this was finally like finding the proper day cycle of an Agent. But honestly Ian still felt groggy. Sleeping a few hours more would not have hurt.

Jo had recounted her adventure at the sky projection dome, and Ian had likewise told of what had happened inside Erehwon, ending with Sarge’s death. Right now he hoped this was the end of that particular subject, and he certainly did not feel like arguing.

He remembered being very excited in the hours of dawn, excited of the coming raid to the SCEPTRE science facility. But now, as he sat on the edge of their bed, gazing off into the distance, he was not that sure. Possibly it had only been delusions brought on by sleep deprivation.

The raid would have to happen soon, but unlike the

Erehwon mission, whatever the Agent line-up would be, they would be going in blind except for the overhead map that showed only rough sketch of the complex and the surroundings.

And even after two more missions, though some light had been shed on SCEPTRE's plan, he was not any closer to finding answers to his other quest – who he was actually, or had been.

Could the science facility hold answers? Personality implantation – could he in fact be a wholly implanted, fabricated personality? It felt like an uneasy alternative, but then, Ian was sure that by now no unearthed secret would shake him much. Like Mad Locust, he had possibly seen too much.

And did it even matter if he would find the answer to the puzzle of his mind?

Yes, it still mattered. To have the peace of knowing.

Either he had been someone fairly OK before SCEPTRE had twisted him, or then he just had been twisted from the start. A natural assassin.

Ian found himself still intrigued by the persona of John “Ranger,” and how he had died getting Ian out of the training camp. It probably was a good idea to ask Blackhand about him: they had to have fought together for a long time.

But still, that was just sidetracking: SCEPTRE's plan and deadline were still the main things to be concerned of. And though much had been achieved, it seemed there was just gray, misery and evil immediately ahead.

A funeral fog in every direction.

Mission after another, maybe a merciful bullet in the head, or then capture and a living hell after that.

Then, somewhere very far away, the light at the end of the tunnel: the possibility of actually beating SCEPTRE.

TRE at their own game, crippling their plan at least partially, if not completely, and escaping while still mentally and physically intact to some degree.

Though he had dismissed it previously, Ian found himself entertaining the thought of skipping directly to the escape. Realities pointed against it: SCEPTRE would just find him again, like it had already done. But Mad Locust seemed to believe he could survive as an ex-Agent.

Still, it was something worth discussing with Jo. Ian had come far enough to dare to do that. For a final second, he gathered courage, then turned to her.

“Jo, have you ever considered just – taking off? Just you and me,” he asked warily.

She looked at him in an odd, uncertain way.

“I'd be lying if I said the thought has never crossed my mind. But –”

“Yes?”

“I think I'd be ashamed for the rest of my life. Which might be short, by the way. To know of the conspirators, of all their plans and how they hurt people – and then just run away from it. So, if you'd take off, I don't think I could join you. I'd just have to go on, with Blackhand and the rest, fighting to the best of my –”

That was settled then. No need for her to go further. Ian crawled over the bed and reached for her shoulder.

“Shh. Don't be afraid of that happening. If you want to fight, then I'll fight too. We'll give SCEPTRE hell.”

Through gray, misery and evil.

Through the fire and flames.

The four Agents in active service had gathered near Blackhand's bed in the infirmary. Freshly bandaged and with an IV drip going into his arm, hatred and con-

tempt for SCEPTRE nevertheless burned in his eyes. Jo and Blowfish had just finished telling of their mission at the dome.

“Those bastards. But good work. If they don't find out of your mischief in time, it's a major blow to their plan,” Blackhand said.

“It's better to assume that they do find out,” Blowfish cautioned.

“Naturally. We must never become complacent. But to tell the truth, I didn't think such thing was even possible, to project images into the sky. I'd read of staged Armageddon speculations, including sky projection, but believed them to be just that – speculations – conceived by total nut cases. Now it seems like that's only the beginning,” Blackhand went on.

“Too right. There's still phases three and four, which we have no idea of,” Jo replied.

“Not exactly,” Blowfish said. “I've finished matching all the decryption keys from Black Dragon's laptop to Suhrim's files. Not everything was decrypted, but a lot more was.”

Of course. Blowfish, who almost never slept, who kept the information warfare front in perpetual motion.

“And?” Ian asked. “What did you find?”

“A lot more of those Qliphotic image files. First I thought them to be completely worthless, as you can easily get the whole Qliphotic Kabbalah as a torrent. But then I started to see a pattern. All of them weren't just original pages scanned from the source material, but had actually been created from scratch to resemble them. By SCEPTRE. I isolated those 'new' pages, and that's where Nastassja comes in.”

“I have just started to translate: it's a mixture of He-

brew, Latin and Enochian. Enochian is a synthetic occult language, in case you didn't know. It's slow going, and the end result is still rather esoteric and poetic. But the descriptions of SCEPTRE's four phases have been repeated time and again," Nastassja spoke in her characteristic soft voice.

Ian swallowed in anticipation. SCEPTRE – or at least Suhrim personally – had used an occult language to encode their operational plans. Crazy!

"Here are the short versions. I'm still working on the longer descriptions. Phase one – the preparation, or laying down the foundation for Wrathful Chaos to grow. Phase two – faith into reality. Phase three – the Bringer of Satan's Wrath. And finally phase four – the arrival of the Black Light, the dawning of the anti-cosmic Aeon."

Ian felt his head swimming: the descriptions could be trigger phrases themselves, or then touched repressed memories close to actual trigger phrases. Had the plan been so long in development that he had been drilled with the code words already in the assassin training years ago? It was possible.

"I can see a clear picture forming," Blackhand said. "Phases one and two create the illusion of the world about to end, while the final phases are somehow about a power shift into SCEPTRE's hands, made easier by the illusion. Of course that esoteric stuff doesn't exactly give much to go on by, but we'll know more as we hit more SCEPTRE facilities. And it's from inside them where we stop the plan in its tracks, not from here."

Nastassja went on. "I also found who are responsible for implementing each phase. But I understood that's familiar information to you?"

"Yes, from a plain-text file meant only to taunt us," Blackhand said. "But go on, it's good to verify."

“Phase one shall be conducted by the wise men. Phase two shall be realized in unison by the wise craftsmen, and the knights. Phase three shall be the exclusive territory of the knights. Finally, phase four becomes reality through the wise men and the priests, but not without Azerate itself, the very current 218.”

“That fits,” Blackhand said gravely. “The knights are the black ops. And it means that phase three will be exclusively a military operation. And as such, it's the most imperative of them to understand fully and prevent from succeeding.”

“What about the final phase?” Ian asked. “After Satan's wrath has been brought down. It's odd that wise men – or the scientists – are involved.”

“And somehow the way they say it, the dawning, sounds almost positive to me. It doesn't sound like they want the whole universe to be sucked into chaos, like the most extreme anti-cosmic beliefs do,” Jo added.

“Good points,” Blackhand replied. “Remember that the SCEPTRE sub-groups may have greatly differing world views. Each has its own definition of power. To the black ops it's certainly military might. To the scientists it's knowledge and the prospect of technological advance. And to the priests it's their faith, spreading it as far as possible. Though they've all agreed on the same plan, it's possible that each expect to benefit from the phases in different ways.”

“So? What are we exactly going to do? You at least must concentrate just on getting better,” Jo said.

“It's clear that Nastassja should continue the translation. Blowfish is probably needed in assistance, and to keep the HQ functional now that Sarge's gone. I believe – that leaves you and Ian to infiltrate the science complex, to learn what you can, and to discover the where-

abouts of the black ops' command center, or if there's a direct route there from the complex. I know it's a lot to ask, especially considering how little intel we have to assist you. Still we may not have much choice if we want to prevent the third phase," Blackhand replied.

Ian eyed Jo closely, but could not be sure if she displayed any reaction besides a simple nod. But then, it was completely predictable that it went down this way: they were right now the Agency's sole military arm, with most skill in combat and infiltrations.

"It's a long trip to the north," Blackhand continued. "According to the latitude and longitude readings, it's near the Canadian border. I checked, and there's just enough of our fuel caches to get you to the destination: they're sparse up there. Ah, and of course it means you – or at least Ian – have to practice flying before you get on your way. And not just flying, but also familiarizing yourself with the chopper's weaponry."

As the others left, Ian still remained in the room, sitting next to Blackhand's bed.

"I wanted to ask about Ranger," Ian said. "Though I never knew him, I owe much to him. Like I do to you, and everyone who was on that mission."

"You owe us nothing," Blackhand said. "Instead the Agency owes much to you for risking your life to our cause. But it's true John was a very dedicated Agent. Certainly one of the best. And still –"

Blackhand stopped, as if the subject was getting him emotional.

"I believe that in the end he was driven by sorrow. It shaped him to dedicate himself to the Agency, to train and fight intensely. And still it wasn't enough, because he was killed. You, in fact, have things much better.

You're driven by positive things, like the wish to be free after all this. Or your love for Jo. Or am I oversimplifying?"

"Let's just say I have my demons too," Ian replied.

"All right. Anyway, I believe what caused him to initially join was the emptiness left by the death of his wife and very young son."

"SCEPTRE? Were they involved?"

"As far as I know, no. Just a car accident. A cruel statistic," Blackhand said flatly.

"How did he find you, then? Or the other way round?"

"He actually stumbled on a live-fire exercise we were conducting in the woods. Almost got hit. We had no choice but to explain who we were. He was intrigued and hooked in no time."

Ian thought he knew enough now. He stood up.

"Thanks for your time."

"I have nothing but time now."

Ian knew Jo and Blowfish were waiting for him in the server room. Something about the access cards.

"The cards you got back from Erehwon were an excellent find. I should now be able to combine their privilege level with Suhrim's, but with new, completely unique signatures, so that SCEPTRE can't really know it's their dead head of Security that still haunts their system and gives us unauthorized access. An advanced form of re-sequencing," Blowfish explained.

"What about the codes? You encountered a lock that had both the card slot and a keypad, and so did we," Ian said. "The card's useless if you don't know the door code."

"Actually it's not a door code. Think of it like the PIN

code to the access card, to protect against simple theft,” Blowfish replied.

Instantly, Ian felt much more positive.

That meant only one code per card, which should be easy to crack, even by brute-forcing.

“And when I make the cards for you, you get to choose your own number. Three digits only, I believe.”

Even better.

“I think I’ll choose 666,” Ian said without much thinking.

“777 for me,” Jo said.

Close to midnight, Ian and Jo went to the Agency garage. It felt slightly eerie, with just them around and the black helicopter in the middle. As they had slept late, it was a good opportunity to go on a short practice run under the cover of darkness, and perhaps to even test the weapons.

First they had to refuel. Hidden behind a trapdoor in the floor, there was a similar fuel tank and pump as in the equipment caches.

“You think you want to try?” Ian asked as the aviation fuel was being transferred.

“Maybe.”

Ian knew it was not exactly a good idea: he was still very much a novice. A novice about to teach someone who had no flight experience at all.

Wrecking the chopper because of that would certainly be a fail without equal.

The refueling done, they climbed in and put helmets on. Ian tried to recall how to fire up the machine. He had been rather tired when Blackhand had shown him: even a dissociation-capable mind had limits.

At last it came to him: the sequence was perfectly

clear. He flicked on the necessary switches, pressed the starter, opened up the throttle levers, and the turbines started their rising whine.

Soon, the rotors were slicing the garage air. Before he lifted the machine up, Ian punched an eight-digit code into a keypad below the radio communications panel: 74185296. Blowfish had told him the sequence, which was rather easy to remember compared to the cache code.

The sequence would cause the roof to split up and stay open for one minute.

The widening shaft of moonlight that fell on the floor told that the roof was opening. Ian waited until it was fully open, then lifted the machine up. This time it was rather smooth: he congratulated himself secretly.

Blackhand had given him a checklist of things to familiarize himself with: the radar, the electronic and conventional countermeasures, and then the weapons systems themselves: the chain gun, the missiles and the rockets.

The chopper rose toward the roof, and then they were clear, with half a minute to spare.

"You've flown this thing for three hours and nothing more? How you're doing looks fully professional," Jo commented.

"Looks can be deceiving."

Avoiding the treetops, Ian flew slowly in a wide circle over the HQ. Then, he started trying more aggressive maneuvers.

So far, so good. But it could be a different story when under enemy fire.

Selecting the rockets, Ian locked on a lone grim-looking tree on a snowy plain that was painted blue by the moon, and depressed the trigger on the cyclic stick.

In a rapid sequence, twin rockets launched: one from under the left wing and one from the right. Three seconds later the tree was utterly obliterated in a fireball which momentarily lit up the surroundings almost like daylight.

"Hmm, perhaps I let you be the pilot, if you don't mind," Jo mused.

"It's fine. Would you check the countermeasures and stuff with me though? Just the flying itself occupies me enough for now."

"Sure."

The different radar modes, chaff, flares and electronic jamming. That was at least enough for starters. As they both were satisfied, Ian turned back toward the HQ: he would punch the same code in when close enough, then land inside.

On Wednesday Ian woke up earlier: 2 PM. He was somewhat disappointed to be already losing the preferable Agent day cycle. Though the coming mission would restore that somewhat: the idea was to fly during Thursday morning and midday up to the last “dump,” sleep and refuel, then continue to the SCEPTRE science complex as night approached.

Today he would still practice flying more. Maybe two short flights. It was important to not over-exert himself: too much would be like too much time in the combat simulator, dulling his instinct down.

Then there was one more matter: the loadout.

Without Sarge the Agent armory felt empty, almost haunted. Jo appeared solemn as well as they raided the shelves of ammunition and grenades, and cleaned up and oiled their weapons.

By now Ian was as familiar with the M4 as he was with his USP pistol. He tested the carbine on the firing range with the suppressor attached: it did not feel that much different, but would give the edge of a quiet take-down at a distance.

Jo insisted on taking the MP5 instead: it was something she was more familiar with.

“Are you sure you can manage without the stopping power? We had to pump the black ops with quite much lead back at Olympia,” Ian said.

“These rounds are armor-piercing, so it's still an improvement.”

Off to a side shelf stood a few boxes with poisoned 5.56 and nine millimeter rounds – there was a symbol of black skull and crossbones on a green background. Despite Sarge's encouragement, none had actually used them on the Erehwon mission. And somehow Ian did not want to take them this time either – maybe the subconscious fear was that if they had them, then SCEP-TRE would have too.

“The foil blankets were quite convenient at the dome,” Jo said. “We should take them now as well. There's probably motion detectors and such when we're getting closer.”

In addition to them, they loaded their bags with as much grenades as they could sanely carry, and made sure the Agent tools, as well as their communications gear, had fresh batteries.

Though it felt somewhat like wasting serviceable equipment, they also took completely fresh Agent coats and bulletproof vests. There were many unknowns that awaited, so it was practical to ensure that at least the gear would not be a problem.

Finally everything was sorted out.

This was the last stretch of flying to the science complex: they had woken up quite refreshed inside the equipment cache some time after 8 PM, eaten canned food, and now it was nearing midnight as they flew over rising, rocky terrain, most of it covered by snow.

Through the helmet microphone, Jo whistled a tune Ian could almost place. She caught him staring.

"Where Eagles Dare," she said. "Shouldn't you keep watching the ground instead?"

Of course. The Iron Maiden song made perfect sense, for the mountain complex could also be entered via cable car. For them, it was practically the only way of entry, because landing right onto a SCEPTRE helipad inside the main complex was not really a sane option.

"Yeah, I should."

It was true he had been keeping an eye on Jo, perhaps unnecessarily much. He still recalled the Frozen Hell mission, after which she had been uncharacteristically apathetic and tired. It was funny how things could swing from one extreme to the other: some time ago he had been afraid of her being too superhuman. Of course, during an Agent mission it was preferable for both of them to be superhuman, if at all possible.

Ian pressed a button to patch in to Blowfish back at the HQ. Under the cloudless December sky, the satellite took little time to connect, and the digital reception was flawless.

“Ian here. Closing in on the place. Would you suggest a place to land?” he said.

Ian could almost sense Blowfish thinking hard on the other end, checking the satellite maps on her eight-core main workstation. Then her voice came in and told a set of coordinates, slowly enough for Ian to punch them in as a waypoint on the navigation computer.

“That’s a small flat plain less than a mile from the cable car station,” she explained. “Though the chopper will be hard to conceal.”

Ian wished the helicopter to have a chameleon function, to adjust paint color to match the surroundings. But there was no such thing. Maybe a more advanced SCEPTRE model was needed for that.

Twenty minutes later they touched down on the plain. Moonlight and snow made everything, including them, stand out quite clearly: on the plus side enemies could not surprise them as easily either.

Almost by reflex, Ian cycled through the vision modes of the sunglasses. No movement in any direction.

The road leading to the station was a few hundred meters away, but rocky hills broke the line of sight to the station itself. That was good: they could approach with caution without being noticed.

He and Jo made a last check of their equipment: everything appeared to be in order. They unsafetied and readied their weapons, both silenced, and headed for the road.

Off in the distance, the lights of the cable car station came into view. Jo dropped on her knees, scanning with the glasses.

"There's EM interference ahead. Could be sensors. Better to take the blankets out," she said.

Ian dug into his backpack to take the white foil blanket out: Jo did the same.

"Now we basically crawl slowly with these on top of us, and hope we are slow and cold enough."

They kept some distance away from the road as they approached the station. Some two hundred meters more, and the guards could be seen: black ops wearing white winter gear. There were two patrolling outside, and a third inside a small guardhouse by the gate.

There was a fence with barbed wire at the top. And signs with a lightning bolt at regular intervals.

It was electrified.

"Any ideas to get in?" Ian asked. "An EMP grenade would probably overload the generator."

"Yeah, and it would also shut down the lights, and possibly harm the cable motors. Let me think. Of course we could wait for a vehicle, then hitch a ride," Jo replied.

"If a vehicle comes."

"Yeah, that's the bad thing. We don't know anything of the schedules here."

"Of course we can wait some time. Like for a hour at maximum," Ian suggested.

"Sounds good enough."

The waited, creeping closer to the fence all the time. Just fifty meters away there were convenient mounds of snow to lie behind. Combined with the blankets, it made them almost completely invisible, except for a very close inspection.

Somehow Ian was reminded of the Frozen Hell festival. But now the stakes were much higher than just getting a backstage pass.

He kept checking his watch at close intervals. At 0:35 AM, the rumble of a vehicle approaching alerted him.

“Get ready,” he whispered to Jo.

“Do you have a plan?”

“If it's a big truck, we can enter its back when it stops by the gate. Naturally we have to eliminate anyone in the rear.”

“If we have to do that, we'll get discovered quickly,” Jo replied.

“Then we have to kill everyone at the station too.”

Ian knew to be dissociating at least partially, and could therefore talk about killing openly without feeling too squeamish. He almost forgot Jo could not dissociate. But then, she had other means of coping, like becoming filled with rage.

But now was not time to ponder such things.

Only getting in alive mattered.

The vehicle came into view as it rounded a corner. Ian felt elation: it was a full-size truck, four headlights piercing the darkness. Perfect for getting in.

The gates began to open already as the truck was still approaching. That made things a little harder. They would practically have to abandon the cover of the blankets at a right moment, then make a run for it.

“We just have to hop in while it moves,” Ian hissed.

Jo nodded from under the blanket.

The truck slowed down a bit as it neared the fence. As soon as its rear was level with Ian's hiding place, he sprang forward, the carbine up and ready for killing. On the opposite side of the road he saw Jo do the same.

The rear of the truck was open and dark: it was a typical troop transport with a wind-resistant canvas over the whole back.

Ian flicked on night vision while turning to face the rear. Then he leaped up with all his strength.

The green noise revealed no black ops inside, just empty benches on the left and the right, and a storage box roughly half a meter wide near the front.

Perfect!

He landed inside with a little more noise than he had hoped for. Jo had not jumped yet, so he reached and helped her up: at least her entrance was soundless.

From the opening, they could see the fence and the guardhouse be left behind: they were in.

It was somewhat odd that a truck carrying just a single box of cargo came here at night, but Ian certainly liked how things had turned out.

Now to just exit at the right moment.

But Ian had no idea where the two patrolling guards were right now, and if there were more inside the actual cable car station. That was suboptimal, and possibly dangerous.

The truck stopped.

“What now?” Jo whispered.

Of course they could wait. They could wait until those in the truck cabin reached the facility itself, leaving only the station guards to deal with.

“Better to play it safe. Let's wait here and see how things develop.”

Next, there came the sound of the truck door being opened, then approaching footsteps.

No such luck.

“Get ready: wait until they're inside if they haven't seen us yet,” Ian said.

Instead of feeling panic, the sudden danger made him slip into full dissociation. His rifle was up, aimed at the estimated head level of anyone entering the back.

“Right side is mine.” he clarified, assuming there would be two.

A solitary black op in white appeared. Had to be just the driver, going for the box. There was no weapon in his hands right now, but he carried a G36 on a sling.

The bad thing was that he had the mantis face mask. Night vision.

He halted as soon as he turned toward the rear, going for his rifle –

A muted burst from Jo's MP5 cut through his head before Ian could react himself. The driver slumped against the truck's rear, then slid to the ground.

“Well done,” Ian breathed. “Now we move and take them all.” He was already on his feet.

As soon as he touched the ground, he observed to slip even deeper, until time slowed down: it was Agent-time with the Sign of the Gun staring down at him from the sky. Or actually just the moon, but still it was more than he could possibly ask for.

He was one with his gun.

One with the spirit of Agenthood, almost if it was a collective consciousness.

A burst of three from his M4 shattered the guard-house window and hit the side of the guard standing there. The next burst went through his head.

The two remaining guards opened fire, the unsilenced assault rifles rattling into life, but Ian was already rolling on the snow, and Jo dived into the opposite direction: they were not easy targets to hit.

One more burst from Ian's rifle, two more from Jo's sub-machine gun, and all the black ops were down.

Silence descended.

Dissociation faded away.

Again, it felt like the end of an out-of-the-body experience. Now Ian found his pulse racing, though the danger was already over.

Or was it?

With caution he crept toward the cable car station, and Jo followed. It was a simple but large wooden cabin, with a separate fenced-off transformer next to it. The high voltage line that followed the road ended there.

The station itself was dark now: Ian flicked light amplification on and peered inside. No-one there, just the large electric motors and wheels for the two separate sets of cables.

The left-side car stood at the station: the right side one was presumably at the science complex end. The facility itself towered high in the distance, well lit.

Of course it was risky to go via the car, to let oneself at its mercy.

Ian did not entertain the thought of getting stuck in the middle, with a deep gorge below. If only he could transform into a black raven and croak black metal verses while flying away, but he could not believe to be capable of that even in the deepest dissociation.

“We take the car now?” Jo asked, whispering.

“There's not much choice.”

Quickly, they jogged up to the platform. On the car, there was the card slot and keypad lock. First chance to test their new access.

“You want to to try yours?” Ian asked. Maybe it was a subconscious thing: Jo's code 777 could bring better luck than the Number of the Beast.

“Fine,” Jo said, inserted her card and typed the code.

The car door opened without protest. Lights came on as they stepped inside. There were simple rows of seats on both ends. On the wall in the middle stood a console with three buttons: forward, backward and stop.

Forward it was.

The car lurched into motion, rocking at first, then settling. It was unnerving. Under dissociation it would have been easier.

How long until security at the complex would find out something was not right at the guard station? But there had been no choice but to eliminate everyone.

Minutes crept on as the complex and its lights came closer. They passed several pylons, climbing higher all the time.

“Do you think they'll be waiting at the other end?” Jo asked.

“We'll see. Better to prepare for that.”

And then, suddenly, the insanity of it all hit Ian in full force: just the two of them going inside a complex full of SCEPTRE personnel. It felt like the walls were closing in: so far away with no backup. Though the communication line would likely work, Blowfish and Blackhand could do very little from the HQ to help them.

They would just have to be very careful right from the arrival. Hopefully there was a high scientists-to-black ops ratio. Of course the scientists could be fatal to underestimate too: Apollyon for example had wielded a nasty wrist-mounted dart gun.

And there would definitely be automated security.

Well, if death had to come, hopefully it would come fast, in combat.

Ian wondered how Jo felt right now: she seemed to be calm but alert. Still, he did not want to ask anything,

anything that could be interpreted like questioning or undermining her abilities. It could bring bad karma.

Finally, the car started slowing down as the station at the other end was near. Unlike the almost charming log cabin, this was a concrete behemoth instead. Ian gripped his rifle hard, as he prepared mentally to meet enemies right after exiting.

At least the car had not stopped in the middle.

If no-one had checked on the guards in the meanwhile and found them to not be answering, SCEPTRE could be thinking they were the truck driver with the storage container.

Or then they had let them come this far, setting up an ambush. The possibilities were maddening.

End of the line.

They would see.

“OK, this is it,” Ian said. By a subconscious impulse, he grit his teeth as he prepared to disembark.

Next to him, Jo nodded wordlessly.

As they stepped close, the car door opened. The platform right outside was riveted steel, slightly icy. Unpleasant cold winds howled around.

At least the wind would partially mask their footsteps.

Scanning left and right, mindful of a camera watching at the corner of a nearby wall, Ian left the platform with a few quick steps.

No black ops, no reception committee yet.

He remembered the map, the rough layout of the buildings, but practically they could try any one of them. Their meanings were completely unclear. It just paid to choose a route that was well in cover.

Ian and Jo both passed underneath the camera, so that it could not possibly see them. Rifle in hand, Ian peered around the corner.

Beyond was the first courtyard, brightly lit. Some thirty meters away was a promising two-story building, not very large, but with a just as promising door.

The only problem was a black op standing in guard.

“Let's see if he goes away. Keep watching the other way,” Ian whispered.

After a minute, the guard indeed left his post, crossing the courtyard and vanishing from sight into the dark.

Again, it was almost too perfect.

Ian signaled for them to move.

It did not take many seconds to reach the door. Ian inserted his card into the lock, keyed 666 in without hesitation, without any thought of the bad luck it might bring.

A green light flashed and the door unlocked.

Ian pulled it open, revealing a comfortably lit and empty small lobby.

The insides did not look outright like a laboratory at least. Some office facilities perhaps. Corridors branched off to left and right, and right in front of them, stairs went up to the second floor.

SCEPTRE's presence was also clear: the dot inside the circle inside the triangle stood proudly on a wall.

By now, it had little or no effect on Ian. That particular trigger had lost its power.

Next to the symbol was a metal plaque, probably bronze, with the words *SCIENTIA POTENTIA EST* etched into it. SCEPTRE obviously were proud of their science.

But the choice of route was completely arbitrary. Ian had no idea of where they should be going.

He did a quick check with heat vision: it was not likely to see human targets through the thick masonry walls, but it did not hurt to check.

Nothing. The second floor at least could offer a possibility to observe from above.

“Up?” he whispered to Jo.

She did not protest.

They went up to the stairs, reaching a glass-walled catwalk. Below they saw the first-floor corridor to which they would have ended up had they chosen either the left or right branch.

Suddenly Ian became aware of something that made him extremely uneasy. He could not exactly tell what it was, but it seemed like he was losing his concentration fast.

Though they had not seen anyone in the building so far, it certainly was not good news, particularly if the cause was unknown.

A nerve agent in the air?

Some hidden fnord or trigger?

Low-amplitude electromagnetic radiation of just the right frequency?

The possibilities were endless.

Ian went for the nearest door he saw, opposite the catwalk. Maybe inside he would feel better. He already felt like the walls were closing in, like his vision was narrowing.

Quickly, he inserted the card and typed in his code again. The electric latch retracted, allowing entry. Ian pushed the door handle and entered, and Jo followed.

It was a square-shaped room, not as brightly lit as the lobby and the catwalk. There were three other entrances to the room, one on each wall.

In the middle there was a pedestal, on which an odd, heavy-looking and tube-shaped object lay. It was mostly painted in shining chrome: the tube surface had ridges running the entire length, possibly for cooling.

It most certainly was a weapon.

Much wider than a rocket launcher, but not as long. It looked like it was very unwieldy to carry. But that

had to translate into awesome firepower. Ian looked below and saw the writing on the side of the pedestal:

GAS-FIST MK2

Maybe this whole building was a weapons museum, with various experimental weapons on display?

Ian stepped closer. It felt like the odd feeling was subsiding now. His vision was returning to normal.

“Watch out –” Jo started.

Suddenly, a shrill alarm sounded, which was joined from behind by the sound of the electric lock bolting itself shut again.

“There's security beams. Visible on IR,” she finished with a sigh.

Consumed by sudden panic, Ian ran to another door, inserted his card and typed in the code extra-fast, but now just a red light blinked.

They were locked in.

His lack of concentration had led him to step into the invisible beams, activating the alarm.

A weary “Fuck” escaped his lips.

They waited. Ian did not want to look at Jo: he caught just a glimpse of a defeated look on her face. Then, as he was somehow compelled to look again, it had gone away: an expression of rage took hold instead, and she gripped the MP5 hard while taking cover behind the pedestal.

Inspired by this, Ian lifted his rifle, scanning around each exit. Eventually some of the doors would open. It was just a question of which one. If they got it right, they could open fire before their enemies did, thinning them down.

Or perhaps they would not open?

What if poison gas would now be fed in, or the air would be sucked out?

The possibilities were too various to enumerate.

Ten seconds more, and then came the sound of all four locks opening in quick succession.

Black ops poured in from all the doors. There had to be at least fifteen of them. Most had assault rifles trained at Ian and Jo, then some wielded more exotic-looking weapons, but still rifle-like in appearance.

There was no sane possibility to fight.

Of course, if Ian wanted just a quick release, he could go for the trigger of his M4, and it would be all over in seconds: his armor depleting to zero and his body – soon a corpse – dancing under multiple impacts from every direction.

But he owe Jo to not do that.

Instead, it seemed the black ops wanted them alive, at least for the time being.

And Ian knew what that implied: interrogation, which basically equaled torture. Then captivity, another stretch of mind programming, or being experimented upon. And then, the freedom of death far down the line, long after SCEPTRE's deadline had passed and their plan had succeeded completely. Possibly years later.

Shit, shit and shit!

It never should have come to this. But now it had.

“Put down your weapons and drop on your knees, hands behind your heads!” came the stern command from one of the black ops.

With the corner of his eye, Ian saw Jo slowly drop her sub-machine gun to the ground, then kneel.

There was no choice but for him to do the same.

Ian remembered the previous time he had been asked to put his gun down: that had been in the company of Agents. In company of friends.

But now there were just enemies all around.

With just the same slowness as back then, he put the carbine on the floor, then dropped down, hands behind his neck.

“Do not move, or we will shoot. What comes next will not harm you,” the same black op said.

One of the black ops wielding a long, futuristic triangle-barreled weapon lifted it up, took aim at Ian –

Then pulled the trigger.

An electric crackle sounded and white noise filled Ian's ears for an instant. For an equally short instant he saw the flickering, glitching letters:

CHARGE: 0 PERCENT.

Then his sunglasses shut to black.

It had to be an electromagnetic pulse rifle. A second crackle came: Jo's gear was now disabled as well.

“You may take your eyepieces off now. But no tricks.”

With disgust, Ian ripped the sunglasses off and threw them to the floor. If the black ops took that as aggression and shot him, then let it be so.

But no shots came.

After a few seconds of oppressive silence, there came the sound of two pairs of boots stepping into the room. The black ops gave way, and the newly arrived SCEPTRE officials moved closer to Ian and Jo.

The other Ian recognized instantly. Lilith, in her blue uniform, looking at them with contempt.

The second wore a scientist's white coat and black trousers underneath. An older man with a long thin nose and receding gray hairline.

It took some time, but Ian definitely knew him too.

He had seen him on Apollyon's terminal at the fnord research facility, during a video conference. And now Ian recalled more of it: the man had talked about send-

ing a team, which had never materialized.

"I believe we've never met before. Baphomet, head of Science," he said in a deep voice to both Ian and Jo.

It seemed that high-ranking SCEPTRE members were too vain not to reveal their codenames.

"The other is Lilith, the black ops' commander," Ian breathed quickly to Jo.

"Silence! You will speak only when asked to!" That was the same black op who had given orders earlier.

The two SCEPTRE officers entered into a conversation with whispered tones. It was not possible to follow: only a few isolated, possibly misheard words here and there.

They had to be discussing which one got which prisoner. Being left at the scientist's mercy had to imply experiments. And Lilith implied – execution?

No, could not be that easy. Interrogation first.

Ian felt cold sweat run down his back. His heart was working overtime. No dissociation would help him now when waiting for the judgment to come. Now that he was panicking so extremely, he would not reach any altered state, unless SCEPTRE would induce it by psychoactive drugs.

At last Baphomet and Lilith separated.

That meant a consensus had been reached.

"You, young lady, can be glad to be coming with me," Baphomet said in a mockingly charming voice. "Lilith, on the other hand, doesn't play nearly as nice. Stay strong, young man."

The black ops separated into two groups: the ones led by Baphomet grabbed Jo and hauled her off to the door opposite she and Ian had originally entered from, while the others, Lilith in the lead, blindfolded Ian and took hold of him roughly.

He was led out from the room and already lost the sense of direction: he could not tell which exit it had been. Then through some corridors, through some turns. Descending stairs, but still inside.

The dread was absolute in his mind. It was heart-rending to be separated from Jo: what would Baphomet do to her now? Then, there was the question – no, the fear – of what acts of sadism Lilith would be capable of. Would Ian too be “flash-programmed” through some unbelievable searing agony, with all memories of capture then erased, and then he would be let loose to betray the few remaining Agents?

Somehow that would be too merciful. It would have to be something much worse. And soon he would find out exactly what.

Now he was led outside: he could hear the wind again. Intentionally or unintentionally he got tripped, stumbled and fell, hitting his teeth against the ice.

The pain was rather minor. It was nothing, really. He was lifted back on his feet forcibly, and the motion continued.

They were outside at least for a minute, possibly going all the way to the opposite end of the complex.

Finally, from ahead came the sound of some heavy door opening with a creak. He was led down some stairs – no, actually shoved down them. He fell, rolling down the metal steps while still blinded. At the bottom he hit his head again, this time harder, and saw only black.

Ian woke up from cold water splashed onto his face.

He found himself in a dirty, dimly lit basement room smelling of heater oil, and then something else: perhaps dried blood and sweat. The smell of fear. He was stripped from the waist upward, strapped into an odd reclining leather chair with a headrest.

Metal restraints held both his arms and legs.

As his vision returned more, he saw Lilith putting down a steel bucket. He turned his head around as much as his position allowed: he could not see behind, but he guessed there were just the two of them in the room.

Then Ian saw the several trays of equipment arranged around the room: glittering surgical instruments, small bottles and syringes, and electronic devices roughly the size of rack-mountable guitar amps or effects units. He became doubly alarmed when he noticed the electrodes fastened to his chest and head, the wires going to the devices.

“Those are for monitoring your brain and heart activity,” Lilith said as she probably saw his horror. “So that I know how far I can go. Though conventional methods have mostly lost their interest on me, they are

still good for warming up.”

The voice was frightening for being so calm and analytic besides the permeating coldness. Ian tried to struggle against the restraints, but found out quickly it was futile.

“Where did the other bastard take Jo?” he had to ask, though it was not the wisest thing to do.

“You should respect men of science more. Without them, you would have no guns to fire, no helicopters to fly, no electromagnetic armor to save your hide when you aren't fast enough. But it doesn't hurt to tell you: into his laboratory wing.”

“What is he doing there?”

“I'm afraid you used up your one free question. Now, from this point on only I ask the questions, or there will be consequences.”

Ian swallowed. A few seconds followed in oppressive silence.

“I know that you are Agents, and that you stole files from our former security chief before you killed him. What primarily interests me is what you have learned from those files, and the other incursions you have perpetrated, besides breaking into Erehwon. But -”

Lilith held up her right index finger.

“I have no wish to know right away. First we have to get comfortable with each other: there's plenty of time. Like I said, we warm up, and I introduce what I have in store. When we get to the actual questions, we can then repeat.”

With that, she opened a small metal box of equipment lying on one of the trays, and took out two additional electrodes, wires trailing from them.

Ian felt his pulse go up. The session would begin with electric shocks.

Lilith attached the adhesive electrodes to Ian's both arms, roughly at bicep height. The wires went to another device, with a rotating dial, a LCD display, several switches and a button. She flipped the first switch and the display came to life, along with a green power led.

“Now I will pass direct electric current through your heart. Yes, I can hear you thinking. It's pointless and dangerous: a skilled interrogator would use other places on the body, which are much more painful and entirely risk-free. But, like I said, we are just warming up. And I want to see if I still have the touch. If you die, then I've lost it.”

In time with the final word, Lilith depressed the button on the device, while rotating the dial right with her other hand.

Ian screamed and arched his back in the chair as the electric current passed through his upper body. The pain was blasphemous in its intensity, and he felt his heart seizing, until Lilith at last released the button and he fell back onto the chair.

“Ah, of course, I forgot several things. You really should have something in your mouth so that you don't bite, or choke on your tongue. But the EKG still looks perfectly fine. A healthy young man. It's only the start, though. I must remember to contain myself, because the heart develops scar tissue each time current passes through it. I want to save most of the permanent damage for much later, when we're actually talking operational secrets.”

That was not relieving at all.

Lilith reached inside another box and took a red rubber bit, which she forced into Ian's mouth. It made his jaw and tongue basically immobile.

“That's much better. Now we go again.”

Only a mumble could now escape Ian's lips as Lilith sent another shock through him, turning the dial further to the right this time. His back arched so far that he was afraid of his spine breaking.

Then, the shock was over.

As Ian was trying to catch his breath, he could feel his heart still beating in an irregular fashion, until it at last returned to roughly normal.

"It's not usual for me to be this absent-minded," Lilith said and took several wide leather straps, which she used to secure Ian's torso against the chair. "Forgetting this would not have been good when we continue further. We are only getting there."

This time, Lilith let the seconds pass, not telling when she would apply the next shock.

"The waiting is always the worst, isn't it?" she asked.

Several more seconds passed.

Then, suddenly, Lilith gave him the strongest shock so far: now Ian was sure his heart would stop permanently. It lasted for many long seconds, then even more, until he at last went unconscious.

As consciousness came back, Ian found himself aching all over his arms and torso. The leather straps and the extra electrodes had been removed, but the bit still remained in his mouth.

Lilith leaned closer.

"That was a good introduction, no? I would not like to return to that, for it's so unimaginative, but we will see if I feel differently tomorrow."

Of course: the torture could last for days if she desired so. As Ian was now fully conscious, the understanding of being completely at SCEPTRE's mercy also returned.

The hatred and fear caused by that were equal.

Or perhaps the fear just won.

There were not many secrets the Agents had that SCEPTRE did not know already. Perhaps the successful compromise of the sky projection program. But could he keep that secret under prolonged sessions? He was not sure. But at least he could be glad of one thing: if Baphomet had taken Jo, even if for sinister scientific experiments, then she probably would not be used for leverage in this interrogation. That would be too much – to watch her suffer as long as Ian did not talk.

“Next I’d like to try something more sophisticated. Chemicals can be used for so many things. Truth serums, pain amplification, personality alteration –”

She reached for a bottle that held a light blue liquid.

“I don’t want to spoil the surprise by telling what this does. But soon enough you will find out for yourself.”

Lilith tightened a strap on Ian’s right arm, so that the veins became visible. Next she took a hypodermic syringe, filled it with the contents of the bottle, pushed the cylinder a little to take the air out, then injected him with the full dose.

Ian expected a burning pain traveling up his arm and the rest of his body, but only a slight tingle materialized after the actual sting. Was that all?

Ten seconds passed with only the tingle spreading.

Then, without warning, his head began to swim. It was like during the trigger episodes, but amplified to the nth degree. He felt his mind being sucked out of his head and transported to some alternate, alien dimension.

He still saw the room before his eyes, but it was meaningless to him. He knew it was not real. His vision

began to blur as his eyelids seemed to have stuck open: he could not blink.

But in reality, in the real reality, he was standing – or sitting – in complete darkness, in complete silence.

In this world, there was no sensory input of any kind. And that was not the worst part. The worst part so far was that he was not himself.

He was a B.C. Rich Warlock guitar.

Left alone in complete blackness. The entire universe was just this blackness and him. There was no Jo who would come to play him, to whom he could sing with his six strings, because she did not exist.

He wanted to scream, but of course, the guitar could not actually speak, or scream. It could only hold all the pain that was building up inside with no chance of release.

He had no sense of time. It could have been just seconds, minutes, or even hours. Passage of time did not matter in this world. Only the anguish and the blackness all around mattered.

Suddenly he found that it was not all black.

And it was still one notch more frightening.

The light was coming from below, and it was first red, then yellow.

The black floor beneath him was dissolving, revealing burning hot lava below. He tried to move, to remain on a patch of solid floor as long as possible, but of course a guitar could not move by itself.

After a tortuous wait, at last he fell into the lava.

And the pain of burning was even worse than the emotional pain that had been building up.

Truly, this was Hell.

He sank into the endless roiling, hot liquid. The thick polyurethane finish started to burn first, releasing a

noxious chemical vapor. The Floyd Rose bridge quickly became red-hot, and the strings melted away. The wood began to blacken and warp, then burst into flames. There was a cool spot inside him, and he tried to transport his consciousness to that spot, but slowly, even it started to heat up.

There was no escape.

Then he woke up from the illusion, sweating profusely, heart racing even faster than in between the electric shocks. He was very glad to be Ian, strapped into a SCEPTRE interrogation chair.

Now he understood: certainly SCEPTRE could not know have engineered a specific drug just to make him imagine he was a guitar. Instead, the chemicals in that injection had the ability to twist and amplify one's subconscious into something unimaginable.

"Was that interesting? I certainly believe so," Lilith said, then leaned in again and took the rubber bit out from Ian's mouth.

Did that mean that now he was expected to talk?

"While you were – experiencing, I received a call. It seems my attention is needed, and I have to cut this session short. So, as unfortunate as it is, I believe we have to start with the actual questions right now."

Ian was not sure what to think. If the session would be cut short, it would mean a chance to rest, but it could also mean an impending execution. Maybe he could try acting as if he had much more vital information to reveal, though in reality he only had very little –

But if Lilith discovered his charade, the punishment would certainly be severe. Possibly immediate death.

"Like I said earlier, now we're talking about possible permanent damage. The choice is completely yours. I understand that you play guitar."

Ian felt nauseous as he understood: everything so far had been only temporary, even if still unbearable. Lilith took a scalpel in her right hand, letting it gleam under the single lamp in the ceiling.

“Again, I’m getting ahead of things. What we’ll be doing next is not about pain, and it’s certainly not about useless struggling. Let me calm you down a bit.”

Another injection, administered to roughly the same location.

As it took effect, Ian felt his head go heavy, his thoughts to slow down. Certainly there would be no Agent-time in his current condition. It was possibly a combination of a sedative and a truth serum.

Ian tried to move his hands, as if he was playing guitar, but found that they mostly would not obey his commands.

“I see that you’re well prepared. Now, it’s time for me to reveal the rules of the game. Your leader Black-hand likes to play games as well, right? I’ve watched all the surveillance videos of your Erehwon intrusion – even the ones captured by hidden cameras,” Lilith said.

The calmness did not leave her voice for an instant, even though she had to be referring to the black ops getting executed one by one.

“It’s simple. I ask you a question, and if you don’t answer, or answer unsatisfactorily, I will cut the nerves of your hands, starting from left hand ulnar. It controls your little finger and part of the ring finger.”

That alone would be a severe detriment to his playing.

Ian swallowed hard with fear: even that took much more effort than normally.

Could he betray the Agents to avoid being maimed? Or did he even have anything worth telling? What if

even revealing the sabotage was an unsatisfactory answer? Lilith held all the cards.

Then, Ian made a selfish decision: he would answer each question truthfully as long as it did not compromise the Agents too badly. And he would try to win time.

He was sure the Agents would never execute him for cracking under torture. But would Jo detest him then? If in the same situation, would she refuse to talk no matter what, and expect Ian to do the same?

"We start with easy questions. First one. Have you decrypted any of the files you found from the security chief's office at the Olympia center?" Lilith asked, letting the scalpel hover close to his hand.

He nodded. "Yes."

"How you have decrypted them?"

That was a bit trickier: to confess to breaking the law. But to hell with it.

"By using unauthorized distributed computing."

"Yes, I've read the CERT advisory." For the first time, there was sarcastic humor in Lilith's voice, which quickly vanished. "Anything else? How did you proceed after your program was discovered?"

"We found decryption keys from a laptop that we stole from your band, the Black Dragon."

"Very good. If you continue cooperating that well, I may have no need to damage your hands. But then, what have you found out from those files?"

"Mainly images of occult nature."

"Be more specific." The scalpel came closer.

"We know that they are from the Qliphotic Kabbalah."

"Anyone with modest knowledge of occultism could have deduced that. But I would be disappointed in you,

the Agents, if you hadn't deduced more. Try yet again.”

Ian paused, swallowed again. This was getting nasty.

“We found out your double-encryption trick. That you encode messages by creating images that look like they are from the Kabbalah. We've translated some of it and know the descriptions for all the phases in your plan.”

“Name them.”

Ian could not remember exactly. He hoped that what he remembered would be good enough.

“The preparation something. Faith into reality. Bringer of Satan's Wrath. And then the anti-cosmic dawn.”

“It seems you're not making this up. Good then. Off to a different topic. I'm now aware of three missions conducted against us. The Olympia center underground, the festival, and then Erehwon. Anything else I should know about?”

This was where it got truly hard. Could he just make something up?

Well, actually he did not have to, yet.

“Apollyon's fnord research facility. We freed the subjects and called in authorities.”

“That's ancient history. And you were not an Agent at that time. Try again.”

Now the scalpel almost touched Ian's wrist.

Ian knew he was sweating from his forehead, ever since the second injection. But was he now sweating more, in a way that revealed he was withholding information? He tried to stall for time.

Lilith frowned. “I don't have all day. Besides, this scalpel is very sharp, so I could cut you by accident.”

“We stole a stealth helicopter -”

The instant the words were out from Ian's mouth, he

knew to have made a mistake. It was something he had not been personally involved in: he did not know how long ago it had happened.

Lilith's expression did not change in any way as she made a quick cut on the side of Ian's left wrist. The blade was so sharp that no pain registered immediately.

Then the bleeding started.

The blood dripped to the leather hand rest, then down to the floor.

And though the pain was not even severe, and dulled further by the sedative, Ian knew the blood to have a great symbolic meaning: the loss of motion to one and half of his fretboard hand fingers.

"Trying ancient history again? I warn you, from now on I will cut a further nerve each time you repeat that mistake."

Now Lilith was getting agitated at last, the calmness dissipating.

Shit. Maybe there was no choice but to reveal.

Ian grit his teeth, almost shut his eyes: the shame was unbearably great, but it had to be done.

"I wasn't there, but Jo and another of us sabotaged one of your sky projection domes," he said with a trembling voice.

"I want you to be very careful of the specifics. Are you sure it was just one?"

Ian thought of saying something about the great distance between the locations, but of course Lilith would know the places were networked. Trying to fool her would cause loss of yet another finger.

"No. Actually all of them, by uploading -"

It was then the lamp in the ceiling shut off, as well as the lights on Lilith's monitoring and torture devices.

Absolute blackness.

Then Ian understood that also the restraints – held together by electricity – had come loose.

As Ian sprang out of the chair, he could see light stream in from the corridor outside: the door was opening.

Someone was helping him escape!

Who? Could Jo have gotten free? Considering how many black ops had been guarding her, that was unlikely.

The leap fell short and he stumbled: the drug still coursed in his veins, inhibiting his every move and thought. And furthermore, the torture had left him weak.

For the moment he was a very dull Agent blade.

He got up and swung powerlessly at Lilith, silhouetted against the light, but she sidestepped easily. And she still had the scalpel.

Focus! You're a killer!

Some degree of dissociation came upon him: it was weak, but better than nothing.

He understood that right now his best weapon was his head. The drug did not affect the head muscles as severely, so that he could talk easier.

He turned and lunged at Lilith again, but this time with his teeth. She did not evade fast enough: he bit deep into the scalpel hand. She let out a short yelp and

the blade clattered to the floor.

It would have been better to wrestle it from her, then slash her properly, but at least she was unarmed now.

Ian followed with a head butt to what he estimated to be her solar plexus: she stumbled against the equipment trays, knocking one over.

But now was not time to revel in power: it was time to escape. He could not keep up using his head only: he would soon make a mistake and then Lilith would overpower him.

Ian broke off into a run toward the light, as fast as his sedated legs could manage.

He almost collided with the door frame, but pushed against it with his hands at the last moment, and managed to slip out of the opening.

In the corridor, he was met with a feeling of total surprise.

Just outside the door, with a heavy red wrench in his hands, stood Apollyon, also wearing a laboratory coat. The red hair and the beard were just the same as when Ian had last seen him.

Why did he help him again? It seemed to make no sense.

“Apollyon? I guess I owe –” Ian began.

“I'd prefer if you said Wolfgang instead,” the man replied in his characteristic calm, sarcastic voice.

“OK, Wolfgang. Thank you. I guess we run and you explain later.”

“Yes. We definitely run.”

Apollyon led the way in the maze of low-lit basement corridors. Black electric cables snaked in the ceiling, and the walls were dirty dull gray tiles.

“After I was arrested, it didn't take long for SCEPTRE

to take hold of me again. Just two days behind bars and they sprang me. But that wasn't a change for the better," he explained.

"They interrogated you?" Ian asked, out of breath.

"Not really. There was no need, for hidden cameras and microphones in my lab had recorded everything. How I had been over-cooperative. And as you might remember, I wanted it that way – unless they'd torture me just for fun."

"So it's actually called SCEPTRE, your organization?" Ian had never heard this confirmed from an actual member.

"Oh yes, it is. We also call ourselves the Chosen Elite, or just Elite if we're in hurry."

From behind came the sound of running footsteps, of black op combat boots. And the voice of Lilith, now a shrill shout echoing in the corridors.

"Find them!"

Apollyon took a hopefully misleading turn to the left, that circled back toward the interrogation room. Ian could barely keep up with him: the drug faded all the time, but still not fast enough for Ian's liking.

"Instead of killing me right away, or hurting me at all, they put me on punitive duty here in the science complex. Doing measurements on some crowd control drugs. That's totally out of my area. And the veiled threat was that some day I would just be executed, out of the blue, but I wouldn't know when – except that it would be sooner if I didn't work hard."

The idea reminded Ian of Nineteen Eighty-Four. The uncertain execution date was also what he had imagined to be in store for himself if he just ran from SCEPTRE without fighting. He could feel almost sorry for the man. But not quite.

“That's fucked up,” he replied.

“We need to descend to the sewers. Just have to make this detour first.”

Right now Ian was open to any idea. Sewers sounded better than anything his drug-riddled mind would come up at the moment. And he was not even sure of what he was aiming at himself. He of course should try to reunite with Jo, to get her out of here too, but that would require going back into the complex above ground, to search through the many buildings.

Without the Agent gear, no less.

He was certain that the black ops would not try to capture him for the second time. Both him and Apol-lyon would be shot on sight.

He also recalled the loss of concentration, the uneasy feeling before walking right into the IR beams.

Possibly it was either EM radiation or sound waves of specific frequency, emitted throughout the buildings. Either it caused unease naturally, or the response had been programmed into him. Infiltrating the rest of the complex while remaining alert enough for combat could actually be impossible to him.

But then, if he left Jo in trouble, what would that make of him? Traitor, coward, weakling, false Agent, all the bad names imaginable and unimaginable.

So far the light dissociation prevented him from going further into the actual heart-rending thoughts of what would happen to her now. But he knew that sooner or later the fears, the angst and the self-loathing would strike in full force.

Now, the black ops were fooled for the time being, but they were still roving the corridors, so at some point luck would just simply run out, if he stayed here for too long.

Ian caught a glimpse of one of them, armed with an assault rifle. In his current state, no armor and bare chest, the black op certainly felt much more fearsome than any SCEPTRE soldier he had met before.

Thankfully the black op did not notice.

At a four-way intersection they had previously passed by going straight ahead, Apollyon turned right.

“This way to the sewers.”

For some time, they ran wordlessly. The black ops seemed to be left further behind.

“They got Jo too. She was with me assaulting this place,” Ian broke the silence. She was a risky subject for his sanity right now, but Apollyon could know something valuable.

“Baphomet, the head scientist, took her. Do you have any idea what will happen?”

Apollyon shook his head. “Nothing pleasant, I’m afraid.”

“Tell me.”

In truth Ian was not sure if he even wanted to know. But it was too late to turn back now.

“Baphomet’s been researching personality transfers. Either from another person, or artificially constructed personalities. The latter has not yet succeeded.”

Even through dissociation, Ian’s heart missed a beat. It was beyond cruelty. To have Jo’s mind erased or replaced somehow, to have what made her his angel become lost forever.

“Back then he was going to send a team to get her directly out of my lab, breaking the normal chain of dealing with intruders. But he’s my superior –” Apollyon mused further.

Ian recalled the video conference yet again. It fit perfectly. But still, why? Of course Jo was an exceptional

person, but what made her an exceptional test subject? But right now Ian wanted to leave that particular subject for a while, if he only could. As long as they were trapped down here, thinking about her helped little.

Some more corridors, and they arrived at a heavy door locked with a padlock.

Apollyon swung with the wrench a few times, until the low-grade lock just came loose. They entered, and the scientist barred the door with the wrench. Hopefully that would hold off the black ops for a while.

They descended a set of steep steel stairs into the actual sewer canal.

"I'd like to let you in on a secret," Apollyon said. "This is where my escape plan ends. When I saw you being taken for interrogation, I decided to cut the power and set you free so that you could take over from this point onward."

Ian shook his head, puzzled. As he thought of it more, his puzzlement only grew, until he decided just to disregard it. The whole situation was already way beyond screwed up, so the worst they could do was to get themselves killed.

Anything else would be an improvement.

The arched canal was low and narrow, and the smell was nauseating: waste mixed with the odor of chemicals. There were low-power light bulbs mounted to the walls behind some hemispherical grilles: their light painted the otherwise colorless concrete yellow.

Ian listened for footsteps. At the moment there appeared to be none.

Black ops coming or not, they had to get moving.

The walkways on the sides were so narrow to move along, that it made more sense to wade in the canal itself. The water was little above knee height.

Ian started to shiver. Upon noticing this, Apollyon took off the lab coat and handed it to him. The scientist still had a black wool sweater himself.

Wearing the coat helped things just a bit, though it quickly became wet and soiled. "Thanks," Ian said.

"Don't thank me yet. Of course I want to keep the mastermind of our escape warm."

"To tell you the truth, I have no idea how to get out," Ian said.

It was better to not give any false illusions to the discredited SCEPTRE scientist, no matter that he had helped.

Still, Ian took the lead like Apollyon expected: they waded further in the sewer. It seemed to be gently sloping down. There were no actual intersections, just pipes that fed into the canal coming from above.

Then, a large drop was ahead, leading to some dark waters below. The lights and the constructed sewer canal also ended there: ahead it seemed to be just a natural cavern.

Compared to the quiet gurgle of the sewer, below Ian heard a louder sound of water running. It was possible SCEPTRE's sewer simply emptied to an underground river.

Where would the river end up?

There was no telling. The current could take hold of them in the dark, possibly crushing them against rocks. Or then there could be submerged sections so long that they would drown.

A potential cold, watery grave.

But were there any options?

"Do you feel like going down there?" Ian asked to confirm. Though he did not actually shout, his voice echoed eerily in the rock tunnel below.

“We saw no junctions. And we don't want to go back to be hunted by black ops. So, the answer is yes.”

Ian took a deep breath and hopped down, sliding along the mass of falling water. The angle was steeper than he had thought: almost vertical. Still, better than jumping directly to the emptiness, then splashing down to the river.

Apollyon followed, plunging into the water next to him. It was much colder here than in the canal.

Just like Ian had feared, a current started carrying them forward. However, the current was not that strong: one could rather easily swim to the sides, but trying to go against the flow would be pointless.

The light of the sewer was left behind: soon they were traveling in complete blackness.

But as Ian's eyes adjusted, he found that there was some faint green luminescence on the rocks: at least he could clearly see they were still going forward.

And he still heard Apollyon treading water next to him.

“Perhaps, just perhaps I would rather be compiling measurement data on the next batch of an improved riot control – or riot causing – agent,” the scientist growled.

It echoed more than before: they were possibly in a larger space now. The current slowed down.

Suddenly Ian became worried: what if there were junctions in the underground river? Which one would carry them to the surface, and which one would just lead deeper below?

There was absolutely no telling.

It was so hopeless that a rage started to form in Ian's mind. He felt his thoughts becoming primitive: even Jo and SCEPTRE were partially forgotten.

It was just him against the forces of nature.

As he was past the larger space, the current picked up speed again. Directly ahead there was a change in sound.

As it came closer, Ian saw barely what was causing it: a two-way fork in the river.

“Let's take the left-side one!” Ian shouted, and started swimming to his left. He believed the Left Hand Path to be the correct choice now: after all SCEPTRE believed in anti-cosmicism and Satanism extensively.

There was no reply.

Had Apollyon vanished into some earlier junction Ian had missed? Or had the scientist just drowned already?

Ian almost felt like he would have to go back to search, but of course it would be stupid and even impossible against the current. He would just exhaust himself rapidly and accomplish nothing.

“Apollyon!” he shouted again.

Still no reply.

Now Ian was well past the junction. That was a choice that could not be undone: he would just have to see where the river would take him.

Then the luminescence started to fade, and the flow became even stronger. The rocky tunnel was narrowing down further: here it would be easier for the water to erase any self-illuminating growth.

Confused by the dark, Ian hit his head against the rocks.

The pain caused him to shout in rage. It was a terrible distorted yell from the pit of his stomach that never seemed to end.

Now the tunnel angled down. Ian felt with his hands carefully: as rocks brushed them, he could confirm the

clearance above was rapidly diminishing. The current was still picking up more speed. Ian took his lungs full of air, as he guessed that soon the passage would submerge completely.

He was right.

Trying to exhale as slowly as possible, he struggled against fast approaching obstructions hidden within the watery blackness: horizontal curves, uneven ceiling and bottom, even loose rocks.

Several times he was hit: arms, legs, head, back. He lost count. He wanted to scream in rage again, but that would be unwise: wasting his breath.

Maybe if he shouted while submerged, some underwater monster or demigod would hear him and help him?

It was completely childish, he knew.

Tumbling in the current, he drew his arms around his head for protection. Getting knocked unconscious by a blow to his skull would be certain death.

Suddenly, it seemed there was light coming from ahead.

The underground part was about to end?

And maybe also the submerged part?

Ian swam up, broke the surface, and took a deep breath of fresh, cold air. Right now that was the most delicious thing imaginable in the whole world.

But delight turned to sudden horror as Ian heard the unmistakable roar of a waterfall ahead of him. He could also see the exit now – the night sky and mountains were clearly visible.

He screamed again: rage became mixed with fear, the voice even more distorted now. It took only a couple more seconds for the current to carry him to the exit, to the waterfall.

Then he was ejected into the night air.

Ian took a look down while tumbling: it was the steep valley right in the middle of the science complex. There were probably several hundred meters to the snowy ground. Gravity took over: soon he would be going almost exclusively down.

Rage dissipated at last: it turned to a feeling of complete powerlessness, to accepting certain defeat.

He fell.

She opened her eyes and could tell that something most certainly was not right. Her head felt unusually warm, almost hot, and a headache throbbed with each heartbeat. Everything felt as if in a slow-moving haze: she was in a room, there was bright light, and there was a human shape in front of her, moving closer, but that was all her unclear vision could tell.

Correction. Things certainly were right.

Just as they were intended to be.

Her eyesight sharpened, and almost as if a switch had been thrown, the headache was left in the background, becoming insignificant and forgotten. She looked sharply to the left, then right, and observed to be strapped onto a metal table, now nearly vertical. Of course, soon the straps would be unnecessary.

She took in the features of the person in front of him. An aged, gray-haired man. White lab coat. A hawk-like face with a long scratch on the right cheek, the blood already dried.

He spoke in a deep voice. "Greetings. We shouldn't have met yet, at least in person. I am Baphomet, head scientist. Can you tell me who you are?"

She hesitated for a moment, searching for the an-

swer. Then it came to her. Yes, there was no confusion.

“I’m Fury.”

“Excellent. We need only one more precaution and then you can be set free. Or unleashed, if you will.”

After these words the scientist touched the scratch on his face fleetingly, almost subconsciously. Had she done that? But it did not make sense. He was an ally. They both were SCEPTRE.

An odd thought came at her without warning.

Unleash the fucking fury.

But it felt right.

Baphomet took a rod-like object resembling a screwdriver from a nearby table with a white-painted top. Then, from a transparent plastic box also lying on the table, he picked up a small metal ball, roughly one centimeter in diameter, and attached it to the tip of the rod. As a final preparatory step he applied colorless lubricant to the ball from a small bottle.

Then he came closer.

Fury did not feel alarm: she knew what was going to happen next, and agreed it was necessary.

Holding the tool firmly in his right hand, the scientist pushed the ball against her left nostril. She could feel the coldness of steel.

It was good.

It was necessary.

Baphomet pressed a button on the rod and it started to extend, pushing the ball within her nasal cavity. There was pain, but it was unessential: she shut it off.

At last the object reached its destination. A final sharp painful sensation came as it attached itself – with small metal legs, Fury knew.

Baphomet pressed a second button on the tool, then withdrew it.

She was prepared now.
She was complete.

Ian still fell. He saw the ground coming closer: below in the valley there were four large funnel-like objects, partially snow-covered, but the metal still glittered in the moonlight. They were arranged in a grid: each funnel was at least fifty meters wide.

He wondered grimly whether he would actually hit them, or just the rocky ground next to them.

But either way, he would be dead.

Suddenly, an odd sensation came: the deceleration of his falling motion. Almost like when an elevator slowed down its descent.

He was over the funnels now, falling more gently, almost as if levitating.

He also felt unusual warmth all around him.

For a moment he considered whether he had entered a hallucinatory state: a futile episode of Agent-time just before the inevitable end.

Then he remembered and understood.

Anti-gravity research.

Though he had no idea how they could possibly work, the funnels had to be anti-gravity reactors. Slowing down was not a hallucination.

As he still fell slower, the surface of one of the funnels was now only a ten meters beneath him. It was getting almost unbearably warm, and there was a low electric hum coming from below.

Microwaves, possibly? Were the reactors producing those as a byproduct?

He hit the metal slope feet first. Despite the slowed-down descent it was not that gentle, and he was knocked over, rolling down the slope painfully. The lab

coat did not give much protection against the steel and ice.

He was rolling down to the center.

If that was the source of the anti-gravitation, then also the heat would be stronger there. That was not good. He could almost feel the water dissipating from his soaked clothes: it was being boiled away.

Having his insides boiled too would be a horrible way to die, much worse than to be crushed by the impact with ground. At least that option was pretty much instantaneous.

If he was not imagining, he already felt nauseous.

Suddenly his mind filled with a mixture of panic and fighting instinct that replaced the catatonic expectation of death. He had to get up!

Halfway down his feet caught a radial ridge in the funnel's surface. It was a hurtful impact, but it slowed down the rolling motion. As he was thrown over the ridge, he reached for it with his hands now, grasping for the icy surface.

It was perhaps futile. It was possible his grip would not hold. The surface scraped his skin: the pain gave him strength.

The rage came back.

He clutched with all of his strength, and observed his left hand little finger to just stay in place, while the ring finger moved just a little. Lilith's surgery had been brutally effective. But on his right hand Ian had four good fingers.

He managed to stop the motion.

After that, getting up was a lot easier: the slope was not that steep. Fighting the nausea, he ran up in a half-crouch. He could not afford to slip and fall for the second time.

The clothes definitely were dryer now.

The top was still far away.

But the anti-gravity was helping him, almost pushing him up the slope. Ten more seconds and he saw the level ground of the valley in front of him. He practically leaped away from the funnel, then rolled on the snow, cooling himself down.

In the process he got himself wet again.

Could he go back to the edge of the funnel to dry the clothes in a controlled fashion?

No, he decided.

Besides the risk of the microwaves frying him from within, he simply had to get away. It was open ground: too good opportunity for a SCEPTRE sniper to nail him. Some distance away, in the opposite direction of the high mountain slope and the science complex, he saw a forest.

Cover.

That was what he needed to reach, to have time to plan a proper course of action.

He probably had been noticed already, and black ops in snow fatigues would be dispatched. At least the white coat made him blend better.

Damn.

Then he remembered Apollyon.

As Ian ran, he kept looking around, but there was no sign of the scientist exiting through the waterfall. Maybe, if he had taken the right-side junction instead, he had ended up drowning. Or he had possibly gone under even earlier.

Those were grim thoughts and Ian felt some sadness: the rogue scientist had helped him much, first in the fnord research lab and now here. Had it not been for him, Ian would still be sitting in the interrogation

chair, perhaps already dead after he had given up all valuable information, after betraying the Agents to the maximum.

But now, worrying over Apollyon's fate was replaced by thoughts of Jo. Ian almost wanted to scream again, but from anguish, not rage.

But that would be giving up his position.

He was a hundred percent guilty, not only of bringing about their capture in the science facility, but of everything that had happened before. The demise of Cyberpriest, her being caught up in the whole SCEPTRE business.

It was beyond abysmal.

Ian knew the only chance for redemption, for any peace of mind, was to find her at whatever cost. But he certainly remembered Apollyon's words, as well as the notes on the backside of the science complex map. Personality implantation or transfer. If she was alive, it was possible she would never be the same.

Then she would never kiss him again.

She would never play guitar with him again.

Instead, if she had been turned into a SCEPTRE's slave, she would just attack him like any enemy. An Agent to be eradicated, to be put to death like a sick dog. And he could not really fight back. He could not hurt her like an enemy.

Ian knew he desperately needed something else to think about. Otherwise he might just lose it completely. He tried to focus, tried to dissociate, but nothing helped. Thoughts of worry turned into strong physical unease: constriction in his throat, in his chest, in his stomach. It was almost like returning to the drug-induced hallucination, but this time he could not wake up.

He reached the cover of the forest at last. No sniper could see him from the science facility now. Even IR vision could not possibly carry that far.

The thought of heat reminded him: he was certainly freezing with only the laboratory coat over his bare torso in the frigid winter night. If SCEPTRE would not find him and kill him, exposure certainly would.

He thought of contacting the HQ at last, filling them in on what had happened –

But it was a stupid thought that simply deserved to die from the start. His communications gear had first been disabled, then stripped away from him.

He had nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

The only thing he could think of now was the stealth helicopter. But it was far away on the other side of the gorge they had crossed by the cable car. Was it even possible to reach it by foot? And even if it was, it certainly had been noticed by now, either blown up or repossessed by SCEPTRE.

But what else did he have? He searched his mind hard, but could not come up with anything.

You are empty, was all he could think of.

Snow began to fall slowly.

Ian sat on a large rock, listening for crunching footsteps of black op squads. If they came after him, there was an almost infinitely slight possibility of ambushing and overpowering one, then taking his weapon and armor.

No footsteps. No-one after him. Even the hum of the anti-gravity reactors was indistinguishable from the ambient noise, from the intermittent bursts of wind that blew snowflakes against his face.

He did not want to get up and move. What good,

what difference would it make now? He had not realized it before, but this certainly was the end of his rope.

There was no point in trying anymore.

His kills at the cable car station flashed through his mind: they had achieved nothing. He returned to a familiar thought of how Jo would have deserved someone much better, instead of a half-finished, dissociating killer.

"I failed, Jo," he said in a quiet, bitter voice.

Then he began to weep.

The tears mixed with the falling snow, and he hoped that going numb from hypothermia, then falling to permanent sleep, was not far away.

Ian woke up from catatonia to the feeling of being observed. To hell with it, he thought at first. Whoever was watching should have the decency to let him wither away in peace.

If it was a black op, he should already have been fired upon.

Apollyon, then?

Finally, curiosity won. There was a quiet rustle, and Ian turned to look. A figure in a white combat uniform, but no face mask, was standing some fifteen meters away.

Ian's eyesight was still hazy from the tears and the snow, and for a split-second he hallucinated of Jo.

No. Could not be. He blinked, and that particular hallucination was gone. But he felt like descending into madness when he realized who the figure was. The man had a gaunt face, with eyes set deep. Right now he was almost bald.

Lucas, or Reaper, back from the dead.

Ian blinked for a few times more, but the apparition did not vanish or turn into someone else.

Ian's first instinct was that if Lucas was real, he would have to be killed again. Do not let a hateful SCEP-

TRE operative live. The sudden, surging hatred washed away Ian's wish to freeze to death: now he felt like burning inside instead.

Lucas had no weapon in his hands, and did not show any intention of attacking. But then, had he summoned reinforcements? Would black ops appear from behind the trees any second?

"Ian. Good that I found you before you froze. We need to get moving," Lucas spoke.

He was being friendly? It was like Apollyon, but taken to ridiculous extremes. No sense whatsoever.

"What the hell is this? Explain!" Ian shouted back.

If black ops would hear his yell, it did not matter. Hatred clouded Ian's thinking. This man was responsible for too much.

"There's too much to explain right now. Come with me and I'll explain as much as I can once we're safe. I'm listening to the SCEPTRE tactical network – they have picked up a disturbance in the anti-gravity field. Have no doubt, they'll be coming here eventually."

Ian got up from the rock.

"How can I know you will not kill me? Or turn me in?"

Lucas grinned.

"I'm not really good with people, at least after my – resurrection, shall I say. There may be no way to convince you. You just have to take a chance."

Warily, Ian got closer. "I will break your neck if you try anything."

"That's much better than just sitting on that rock," Lucas replied sarcastically.

Ian made a decision to kill or seriously maim Lucas if he would speak even one sentence more about that moment of emotional breakdown on the rock. But Ian

could not shake the truth that it felt good to be back in action, to feel hatred and rage instead of apathy. In a way he had to be thankful to Lucas just for that, even if he later turned out to have betrayed Ian yet again.

“Let's pick up speed: it's good for you,” Lucas said, jogging in place.

Ian found that his legs, though stiff, could still carry him: he ran after Lucas, who was heading further into the forest, and caught up to him rather easily.

“Your helicopter has been hauled away to be dismantled and examined for forensic evidence,” he explained. “But I have my own transport close by.”

Ian could not deny curiosity. On his back Lucas had a G36 assault rifle like most of the black ops, but he had made no move to point it at Ian, even after he had threatened with violence. If Lucas was leading him into a trap, it certainly was an unnecessarily long-winded way to go on about it.

If Lucas was listening to SCEPTRE radio traffic, yet had not called in reinforcements, if he had his own transport, he had to be a rogue operative.

They came to a small clearing and Ian saw it: a much smaller helicopter with a thin, sleek fuselage. It appeared to be covered in snow and ice, like it had been frozen for days. How could such a thing fly?

“Active camouflage,” Lucas said. “It adapts to the environment. It also can fly much faster and much longer than the model you have been using.”

Lucas jogged up to the chopper and opened the rear compartment. It was also noticeably smaller than on the other helicopter: two people could fit inside comfortably, and three seemed like the maximum.

He tossed Ian a backpack. “Inside are some spare clothes and a gun. You should change out of those,

they're soaked."

"Thanks," Ian said with reluctance.

"I'll go to the front to get the machine started. Join me when you're done."

Ian changed inside the rear compartment. There was no second set of snow fatigues, just a dark gray sweater, black pants and a black overcoat. No bullet-proof vest. But there was a Beretta with a silencer attached, and a few magazines. Ian checked that the safety was on, then tucked the gun under his waist. Not feeling wet and cold was certainly an improvement, and it was interesting that Lucas had trusted him with a weapon.

Ian exited and joined Lucas at the co-pilot's seat, putting the helmet on. The cockpit was almost entirely glass and gave an excellent view of the surroundings. The engines were already whirring to life: as soon as the RPM was within acceptable range Lucas pulled up on the collective, and they lifted smoothly in the air.

"You have to be understand one thing," he said. "I was here at this complex only by lucky coincidence. It was my current target for search."

Ian understood: had Lucas not been here, it would have been curtains. But what was he searching?

"Where are we going?" Ian asked.

"Where would you like to go?"

Ian considered. Now that his mind had stabilized somehow, he could actually start planning his actions. He could see faint glow on the horizon: dawn was breaking. It was now 14th of December, exactly one week to SCEPTRE's big day, the anti-cosmic dawn.

Of course there was a lot to be done. Jo was perhaps still at the science complex. Then there was the black op headquarters, location still unknown. And possibly

so many other enemy facilities.

Ian found himself not caring that much for the deadline anymore. The Bringer of Satan's Wrath still sounded ominous, still evoked fear in him, but if he had to choose between stopping it and trying to reunite with Jo, he would gladly choose the later.

At first he imagined Jo hating him for such decision, if she would still be herself, or if she could be restored somehow.

But no, she could not hate him for that. Instead –

Ian felt tears forming as he remembered how kind and wonderful she had been, even when he had not exactly deserved that.

He imagined an absolute, wrathful vengeance should she be dead or irrevocably lost. That stopped the tears and gave him some strength, even eased the constriction in his chest a little.

Lucas woke him up from the reverie. “Well?”

“I would like to turn this complex upside down. Then raze it to the ground. Don't ask. But I guess the two of us against all of the black ops here isn't a good idea,” Ian spoke at last.

“It's about your partner, right?”

Ian turned to look at Lucas murderously. He would not discuss Jo with him.

“You might be surprised how well I understand. Once I was working with an assassin to whom I got much too close. With my luck, bad things happened. After that, I swore to never get close to a comrade at arms again, and to work alone if I could.”

That was not very reassuring, and Ian did not feel like offering condolences: if he tried, they would only come across as forced and unnatural. Therefore he just nodded in acknowledgment.

“But you are right that it's not a good idea. Not only because of the odds, our lack of firepower, but –”

Lucas paused.

“Did you feel anything unusual while you were inside the science facility?” he asked.

“Yes. I felt uneasy and unable to concentrate,” Ian answered at once. It was good if Lucas would shed light to that mystery at last.

“That figures. It's a trigger, a specific ultrasound frequency, that prevents you from being effective in places that are above your clearance.”

Ian wondered. That implied each SCEPTRE assassin trainee would have his duty station, or at least the final clearance level, already chosen during training. At Erehwon he had felt nothing unusual. Maybe he would have become an Erehwon guard if he had graduated?

“And I think it's time we do something about it. On us old-school trainees, there's a hidden trigger that undoes all the other triggers and frees the mind. It's normally never used, but is put there for emergencies – like if a superior SCEPTRE officer needs to be replaced. I've already freed myself. But that requires some conditions to be satisfied. The trigger phrase – yes, it most certainly is a phrase – has to be uttered in the place where the training and programming was originally conducted,” Lucas explained.

“But that place is burned down to ashes,” Ian replied. “I've seen the recording of my training camp burning.”

“It doesn't matter. As long as the place is right, and the memories of being there are triggered, it should work. At least it worked on me. So, hold on, we're going to the Lake Tranquil Re-Education Facility.”

While they flew toward the ruins of the training camp in daylight – Lucas flew tirelessly and almost like a machine – he explained a few further things. His “death” had not been just a trick – the bullets from the Agents' guns and the pool of blood Ian had seen had been a hundred percent real.

“I'm an experiment: only a few like me exist,” Lucas explained. “I have nanomachines in my blood that give me abnormal regenerative abilities. After I had been fatally shot, my body shut down, and to the authorities I looked dead. As far as conventional medicine knew, I was dead. But the nanites kept feeding my body with oxygen, until the wounds had been repaired enough so that circulation could be safely restored.”

Ian sat with his mouth open in amazement. He forgot the cold, bland but high-caloric canned battle ration he was eating to fill his painfully empty stomach. SCEPTRE was far more ahead in science than he could have imagined.

“I woke up inside a mortuary drawer, and I can tell it wasn't pleasant. What surprised me was that SCEPTRE had not stolen my body, had missed that opportunity to destroy me permanently. But with their plan drawing

closer, I figured I was no longer important. And yes – after I woke up, I felt even more disconnected from the organization I had been serving. Though I had always felt that way to a degree. You see, the nanomachines are for the most part incompatible with mind programming. Trauma-based programming isn't very effective when all damage heals quickly, when you know you're different from the rest, to whom for example branding is a huge, terrible thing, something to avoid to the last. Therefore I always was a loose cannon to a degree, feared and kept on minor assignments. Still I was an asset, a test subject to be observed if nothing else. But I assumed that eventually I would still be eliminated, when no longer needed. The Agents just came first. In a way I'm thankful."

Ian felt himself relaxing gradually: what Lucas told made sense. Of course he still was a former SCEPTRE operative, and his treachery toward Ian still hurt. Those were not things that could be forgotten or forgiven quickly. But if Lucas had willfully abandoned his former masters, just because he could, was that so much different from the Agents freeing Ian by the way of counter-programming? Who, in fact, had more of an own will?

"What do you intend to do, then? After we're done at the camp?" Ian asked.

"I've been stalking around the SCEPTRE facilities, moving like a ghost, using forged access just like you do. By accessing files much above my clearance, I've found out about their plans. It's the final phase that interests me."

"The anti-cosmic dawn. What is it, really?"

"As far as I understand it's real, not just faith or metaphors. On the twenty-first, the anti-cosmic Black

Light hits the Earth and I want to be there when it happens. But I don't know the place yet, and that's what maddens me. The masters keep the knowledge from me, though I if anyone should be entitled –”

The voice grew in pitch and fury, then stopped suddenly. It was almost scary how agitated Lucas was becoming.

And of course it was also scary to think of the Black Light, the current 218, as something real. Could chaos truly come over the world when the moment hit, even without SCEPTRE helping? And was Lucas content with just witnessing the anti-cosmic moment, or was there something else? If he felt entitled, was it because he had been altered by the nanotechnical experiments?

Ian found himself pondering so hard that for a moment the thought of arriving at the camp, of deprogramming himself, was completely pushed aside. As was thinking about Jo.

“It's simple,” Lucas said. “I want to join you, because I know you're uncovering SCEPTRE's plans yourself, so that you can stop them –”

“How do you know?” Ian suddenly snapped. He had told Lucas nothing of that kind.

“As I said, I was listening on their network. Lilith was summarizing what she had learned from you.”

“OK, I can accept that.” In truth it was not pleasing at all to know that Lucas had heard Lilith's post-torture report, but it was wise to set emotions aside. It was wisest to think of Lucas as someone who would help only as long as it fit his own goals, just like it also was the other way around.

“So, what was I saying – the place of anti-cosmic power. Together we're more effective combing through the SCEPTRE facilities, searching for clues, and finding

that place. If it turns out that I'll help to bring about the downfall of their plans, I won't have any bad conscience. Now that I'm supposed to be rotting in a grave, now that I've stalked around without permission, they will shoot me on sight just like they'd shoot you."

There was nothing to disagree about, really. Of course it was another matter whether Blackhand or Blowfish would ever accept an experimental, rogue SCEPTRE assassin joining their forces.

They flew in silence for the rest of the way.

Two hours later the small stealth helicopter touched down near a partially frozen lake. Ian did not remember that lake from his training, at least not yet.

It was of course convenient for SCEPTRE to conceal its assassin training facility as a "tough love" camp, of which many had been shut down. Even the name had been chosen appropriately.

Or maybe SCEPTRE was in fact behind the most of the camps? The extravagant tuition fees for what often amounted to just isolation and torture would be an excellent way to fund their acquisitions and research.

Lake Tranquil Re-Education Facility, indeed.

Ian spat on the snow with disgust as he and Lucas made their way away from the lake to the actual camp. The fence with barbed wire on the top still existed, as well as the metal plaque with the facility name.

But the guard towers were now just burned and fallen skeletons, as were the wooden barracks. The concrete administrative building still stood, but in place of the windows there were just empty openings. The roof had collapsed.

As Ian walked closer, flashbacks interrupted him, so intense that at times he had to stop.

The forced fights and weapons training, the endless runs and other exercises. All with the promise of torture for under-performing. And then the actual process of mind programming, which usually implied pain in itself, sleep deprivation with repeating whispering voices, and occult rituals.

Watching the facility on video had been nothing, but actually being there again was entirely something else. Ian wondered if returning here was a mistake. He had to concentrate hard to not turn away.

"I know it's not pleasant," Lucas said in a calming voice.

At last confidence and rage won: Ian just steeled himself and made a frowning war face, as the two marched forward.

Finally, they stopped in the center of the courtyard.

"This should be good enough. Your barrack might be better, but we'll retry there if this doesn't work," Lucas said. "Prepare yourself. It won't be pleasant, but afterward you'll feel better."

Ian took a deep breath.

Then Lucas spoke the words, articulating clearly.

"Ordo ab chaos."

Hearing them was like a lightning bolt from the sky.

Ian dropped to his knees and screamed as he remembered everything of the training at once. The programming was unraveling, all the triggers activating and then deactivating themselves, the layers of mind combining into one. It was like being dissociated and not dissociated at the same time. A whirling chaos inside his brain, which never seemed to end. The voices of his trainers repeating maniacally.

"Chaos ab ordo."

"Ordo ab chaos."

“You shall henceforth be known as Necro.”

The only rational thoughts, which passed quickly, were the fear of whether he could actually become insane as a result, and whether becoming free was worth that. Then the whirlwind continued, only growing in power.

All the memories at once.

All the agony at once.

How he had first met Lucas at the facility. How they stole and stashed extra food under the pain of torture and permanent disfigurement should they be discovered. And how he always recovered quickly.

Outside the forced fights, they had been friends. As much as SCEPTRE trainees could be.

Then the memories went even beyond the training, to his childhood, of which he had not known what was real and what fabricated.

Oddly, it turned out that nothing before was fabricated: only the replacement of the time spent here with fictional time spent at a fictional juvenile penitentiary.

He remembered himself drinking beer and watching Skull Revenger play old-school speed metal, then deciding in the hangover after to start playing guitar.

He remembered his almost over-nice and supportive parents, and then something repressed: how food at home always tasted odd compared to when he had eaten out or at friends.

There was no doubt. His parents had been SCEPTRE, feeding him chemicals in preparation of the assassin training. Then, it probably had been an intentional overdose which had led him to injuring the other kid – Marcus – and into the subsequent incarceration.

He expected to feel a great deal of hatred at his parents.

But there was none. Perhaps pity instead.

The whirlwind of his thoughts was slowing down, and the confusion was now being replaced with enlightenment. Now he knew he would not become insane.

Though the day was cloudy, he almost expected divine light to shine on him from the heavens as the revelations were nearing conclusion. No, actually not divine light. The light from the Sign of the Gun.

Then, the sun came through from behind the clouds.

It was almost like a sign.

He got on his feet, feeling disoriented and exhausted, but in a good way.

The world seemed somehow changed. Yes, SCEPTRE's plans were still in motion, the anti-cosmic deadline was approaching, and yes, Jo was still in the enemies' hands. But – he was free from the programming. SCEPTRE's triggers no longer held any power whatsoever over him.

That was worth something.

Of course all his combat skills remained, as well as his unusual mental traits from the training. Ian found now that he could dissociate at will: to become more alert, to push worries aside.

He could also exit at will.

Still, he could not enter the most extreme dissociation, Agent-time, whenever he wanted. He tried, but simply could not.

It would require actual danger, an extreme situation.

For now Ian chose to remain moderately dissociated. In the company of Lucas it was a good choice: it was better to be alert and cautious in case he tried anything funny. Though Ian was quite certain he would not, if only considering how he needed the Agents' help to

find out and reach the anti-cosmic location.

It was also better to worry about Jo only moderately. Though there was something about that choice that put Ian at unease: he had never been dissociated for an extreme period of time, but now that he could, what if it would become permanent with time?

It certainly was not a normal state of mind.

It would be terrible to reunite with Jo only to find out that he could no longer feel anything. If he could only imitate what he had formerly felt.

But he knew to be getting ahead of himself. It was time to worry about that much later.

Lucas turned to look at him.

“So? Judging from how you screamed, it seemed like something happened,” he said.

“Something certainly did,” Ian replied, still feeling out of breath. “Now that my childhood traumas are all sorted out, I suggest the next step is the Agent HQ, to see how welcoming they are of you. By the way, what time is it?”

He had lost his watch when being stripped for the interrogation.

“It’s 1315 hours.”

“Good. With the speed of your machine, we’ll reach the HQ while it’s still light. I could fly this time.”

“You have to be careful. It has a lot more temper than the one you’re used to. We’re kind of low on fuel, also. I’ve been refueling at SCEPTRE depots, but they’re usually guarded, so it’s always a bit hairy.”

Ian grinned.

“The Agents also have fuel caches. And those should have no SCEPTRE black ops running around.”

They walked back to the chopper.

Inside, Ian put the pilot’s helmet on, then tried to re-

call the locations of the dumps. Before leaving for the science facility he had memorized them all, and they came back to him without much difficulty. He switched on the power, then punched the nearest location as a waypoint to the navigation console, which was roughly similar as on the larger helicopter.

Then he looked for the switches to flick, buttons to push for start-up. They were in different places, but not much different.

“Like I said, careful,” Lucas said, almost afraid, as the turbines were picking up speed.

Ian felt like laughing: to have the nano-enhanced assassin scared. But out of respect he suppressed the laugh. He waited until everything was green, lifted off, then started turning the machine while still climbing.

“Wow,” he breathed, as the helicopter reacted with unpredictable aggression.

It definitely was not going to be smooth at first.

Within a few minutes, he had learned the habits of the smaller chopper well enough to be able to fly safely from point A to B. Of course aerial combat would be a different question, but he had not trained for that in any case, and hoped there was not anything like that waiting in the near future.

Some time after 2 PM they touched down at the dump. Ian punched in the code and found healthy paranoia gripping him. There never had been enemies waiting inside, but each time could be the first. He felt vulnerable without the Agent sunglasses.

“Do you have night vision?” he asked Lucas.

“Yes.”

“Then you get to go in first. Keep your rifle ready.”

Lucas nodded in understanding, put the goggles on

from one of his pockets, then took the G36 in his hands. Ian was thankful he did not crack any jokes on how Ian had been so sure then, but paranoid now.

The square trapdoor was now fully open. Lucas went for the stairs and vanished below.

Ian crept slowly to the edge, gripping the Beretta.

"It's clear," came the voice of Lucas.

Next the lights went on.

In dissociation Ian felt no especial relief. After descending the stairs, he went immediately for the armor rack. He took off the overcoat and the sweater, replacing them with an Agency-issue vest and coat.

Finally he took brand new sunglasses and connected the communications cord.

It felt good to be dressed like an Agent again.

And more importantly, now he could contact HQ at last. To prepare them for the new visitor.

He pressed the connect button.

"Blowfish," came the clear voice almost immediately. "You've been out of contact for a long –"

"Believe me, shit has happened," Ian replied. "I'll be returning to HQ shortly. I just want you to be mentally prepared for Lucas aka Reaper also coming with me. Also, I hope the defenses will not fire upon a smaller helicopter."

"What?" There was clear disbelief.

"There are good reasons for everything. I'd like to not waste time now."

Ian cut the connection. Blowfish was not going to be happy, but then Ian could have spent a lot more time to explain, and still have received a negative reply.

He and Lucas connected the hose and started the pump.

"One more thing," Ian said. "Do you think there are

tracking devices on your chopper, or have you disabled them all?"

"I disconnected some suspicious things, then let an EM scanner run overnight, while I left all systems except the engines powered. By morning the batteries were halfway depleted, but the scanner hadn't picked up anything. It should be safe," Lucas replied.

"Good."

At 4:30 PM the Agent HQ was at last before their eyes. Like on the larger helicopter, in the middle of the cockpit there was a standard numeric keypad for transmitting code sequences. Ian keyed in the code for opening the roof, then led the agile craft down the opening.

They touched down and he killed the engine.

As soon as he exited into the garage, he had a feeling of reliving the past. He was staring right into the muzzle of Blowfish's Desert Eagle.

He let his gaze wander and saw Lucas similarly covered by Nastassja, who was armed with a shotgun. Only Blackhand was not on the welcome committee.

"Either of you, do not do anything sudden," Blowfish said coldly.

It took a lot of explaining before Blowfish and Blackhand were even remotely satisfied. Blowfish had scanned, then re-scanned both Ian and Lucas as well as the helicopter for any bugs. But everything had come clean.

In fact Ian was honestly surprised for Lilith not putting a third tracking implant on him while he had been out cold. Well, maybe she had been too satisfied with the interrogation.

Blackhand looked at Lucas sternly in the planning room. The senior Agent was not supposed to be moving much yet: even with speed-healing drugs, recovery would take some time, and there was the risk of infection. His beard had grown.

“I will keep a close watch on you. I will kill you for the second time if you give me even the slightest reason. Then I’ll burn your body.”

Ian almost winced from Blackhand being so harsh. But Lucas just took it all in and simply nodded.

“I hope to give no reason.”

On the other side of the table, Nastassja shook her head, clearly appalled with the display of aggression. Earlier, she had been interested to hear Lucas talk

about his expectations for December 21st, especially of the thought of the anti-cosmic current hitting a specific place.

After Blackhand had understood that Ian was not under SCEPTRE influence, he had offered his honest condolences for Jo's capture. Still dissociated by choice, if only to tolerate the cross-examination, Ian had not been moved much by that. At least the man had not blamed Ian much – in fact not at all – for falling into SCEPTRE's trap, and even for revealing the sky projection hack. Instead he was just glad to know it could not repeat, thanks to the complete deprogramming.

“Now that everyone's on level terms –” Nastassja spoke with subdued sarcasm. “Would you, Ian and Lucas, be interested of what I've translated in the meanwhile?”

“Yes,” Ian replied curtly.

Lucas nodded for a second time.

“I've decoded more detailed descriptions for the phases. There are actually several texts that deal with the same thing, but I'll go with the first of them for starters,” Nastassja explained.

“Go ahead,” Ian said.

Nastassja began to read from a slip of paper.

“Phase one: long before the actual Moment, with the aid of the hidden signals, fear is amplified in the minds of those who believe, and created in those who do not. Phase two: just before the onset of the Moment, great signs in the sky reinforce what has begun: as enough people believe, their faith will have the power to shape reality, and to strengthen the forces of Wrathful Chaos, as the three Veils begin to open.”

Three veils before Satan, Ian knew: Chaos, Emptiness and Darkness. Or like Black Dragon's members

had named themselves, Qemetiel, Beliaal and Aathiel. But faith to shape reality? If enough people believed in the end of the world, would it come for real?

But Nastassja was not finished. "Phase three: the Bringer of Satan's Wrath is unleashed on the Holy Land and its surroundings: there will be a terrible detonation. This will further the turmoil of minds and speed up the coming of the Chaos, as well as ensure the anti-cosmic power will gain the respect it deserves. Phase four: at the onset of the anti-cosmic Moment, at the hidden location, the current 218 of Azerate will be unleashed. This limitless power, this Black Light, will be tapped into to further a new age, one that is free from the tyranny of the Demiurge. A new order through Chaos is reached."

Blackhand looked grim. "I've thought of it for some time, and believe I have a practical interpretation for all of that. Basically, in this age, nothing less than a nuclear detonation can be described as 'terrible', do you agree?"

Ian nodded reluctantly. "Guess so."

"I believe that SCEPTRE aim to detonate a powerful nuclear device in the Middle East, so that a large area, one that also contains oil fields, will be rendered unusable. Depending on how they set it up, who will be seen as the guilty party, a war could ensue. Meanwhile, they believe to tap into some power source to gain immense benefit. If there will be shortage of oil, they could become immensely rich and powerful. The only problem is – I believe their power source is nothing but a myth and a hoax. This 'current 218' cannot be real. They will only cause chaos and disorder and gain nothing."

Lucas frowned in disagreement. He at least wanted to believe in the Black Light.

It was possible he believed in nothing else.

“There's not much else we can do than to hit the science complex again, this time with everything we got, and see if we can get to the black ops high command. And to the anti-cosmic location, if necessary. But we'll do it close to the deadline, when SCEPTRE possibly have become complacent, too sure of their success already. In fact we should have done that in the first place, instead of sending you and Jo only,” Blackhand spoke.

For a moment, Ian thought of just the bare realities. And he agreed: it was clear that when he and Jo had entered the science complex, they had never stood a chance, just the two of them. Even if he had not sprung the trap. Capture or death would only have come later.

Now they had four of them in fighting condition.

It was unsure if Blackhand could recover in time to fight, even in a theoretical best case, and using as high doses of the Agent healing drugs as remotely safe.

It was also unclear how much Nastassja would like to take part in actual infiltrations and Agent warfare, and Blowfish preferred war without bullets as well. Somehow the four of them might still not be enough to reach the command center, and to stop the detonation from happening.

If they could even stop it from there.

And then, Ian would have to try to find Jo – which honestly was something he could not risk others' lives in, and Lucas wanted to reach the location where the anti-cosmic power would be tapped into.

Unless things fell into place in the best possible way, at some point they would have to separate. If they were not already, at that point the odds would truly become impossible.

Ian searched his mind for an answer. He came up with just one, but it was honest insanity. It could never work.

Still, his mind kept returning to it, tormented him with the thought of failing again because he had backed away, had been too scared to try when he had the chance.

To try to repair burned bridges.

To try to recruit the only man who would be insane enough to be of help in this situation, if he only wished to, which of course was a huge stretch in itself, a fat chance.

The mad black goat of the woods.

The over-man.

Erik.

But by now Ian definitely was tired.

Too tired to think how such insane feat could possibly be accomplished. It was past 8 PM now: he had gone almost exactly 24 hours without sleep, during which he had flown, infiltrated, had been captured, tortured and interrogated by SCEPTRE, had escaped and almost frozen himself to death, had been deprogrammed, and finally endured through another interrogation, this time by his own people.

That was enough for one day.

"I believe I need some sleep," he said and got up from the table. None of the Agents protested that.

Dragging his feet, he got to his quarters.

It felt terribly empty, now that he was alone.

He thought of sleeping somewhere else, like on the couches of the recreation room. But it would not be much of an improvement.

He got rid of the Agent coat, vest and sunglasses, killed the lights, threw himself on the bed, and sunk

into full dissociation. But then, he quickly found sleep would not come, as he was too alert. But without, he kept thinking of Jo. It was almost like an impossible equation.

Finally, after many hours of turning around, sleep mercifully claimed him.

The dreams were odd and incoherent, mostly about his training. Lucas morphed into Jo, but somehow Ian's mind refused to wake up and end the nightmare. He needed the rest too badly.

As Ian woke up, he did not feel especially well rested, but still somehow relieved. He could breathe freely.

Then, just five seconds from waking, he remembered that Jo was gone, captured. At once he felt much more tense, and slipped into dissociation just to tolerate it.

Then, more rational thoughts took over.

He had decided that he would have to try to contact Erik, to win him over. The over-man would likely be sulking at his cabin, and of its whereabouts Ian had no idea. Could high-resolution satellite intercepts reveal the location? Or could they just hack into some classified geographic databases?

Perhaps.

But then, Ian thought of a much more ordinary solution. One that involved no hacking, just talking to one person who might just know the location. Or then he might not. In any case, it would also be a chance to repair yet another burned bridge, if such thing was possible.

And Ian knew that as long as he did not linger here for too long, he had just enough time. It was Saturday morning, slightly past 6 AM.

He would be returning home once more.

To see Axel, keeper of Axes 'n' Amps.

Ian stopped by the server room to see Blowfish adjusting the security configuration. On her secondary monitor something unusual for her was open: a video editing program.

She did not look exactly cheerful.

"I've added Lucas to the security database," she said. "We have to assume Jo has revealed the location of the HQ, and therefore I'm putting the defense systems to constant, heightened alert status – now."

She clicked the mouse almost theatrically. Then she turned to look at Ian. "Why are you up so early?"

"If you have no objections, I'll head back home once more to do some more recruiting. I honestly don't believe we stand a chance as of yet, but if I succeed in what I'm planning, we might just have."

Blowfish frowned. Ian knew to have unloaded several unpleasant statements.

"You're not thinking of any more rogue SCEPTRE assassins?" she asked.

"No. No SCEPTRE connections whatsoever. But I might be away for some days."

"Don't take forever. Remember, Friday is the deadline. On Wednesday, or early Thursday in the very latest, we have to take off. If you're not back by then, we'll just leave without you."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Ian exited, glad to not have to do the trip without the Agents' permission.

In the corridor he was alerted by a low, mechanic whirring sound from above. Indeed: the HQ was now in permanent high alert, so automatic turrets similar to those at Erehwon had descended, panning back and forth.

It was not exactly soothing. What if there would be some glitch? It would actually be rather relaxing to leave the HQ again.

Before heading for the garage, Ian went to the kitchen to stock up on microwave dinners for the trip. For now he wanted to avoid any unnecessary interaction with people: the meals could well be eaten cold.

Nastassja was there, deeply submerged in her work, using an Agency mini-laptop.

“Hi,” Ian said.

Nastassja looked up: her expression was weary but calm. Either she had woken up early, or had stayed up all night. “I’ve translated one more piece, which is sort of crucial for the mission. Want to hear?”

“Sure.”

“It’s about the exact moment of the Black Light hitting the Earth, when the cosmic and anti-cosmic dimensions are aligned right after thousands of years of coming into the correct resonance. They go on about it in a poetic way, but simply put, it’s 11:11 AM Greenwich Mean Time on the twenty-first.”

Ian felt a wave of cold go through him.

But it was good to know the exact time before which they had to be done with everything.

“That’s some shit,” he replied.

Without further word from either, with Nastassja back in total concentration on the Qliphotic images, Ian warmed up and ate one of the dinners. Then he left for the garage. He had no weapons with him, only the Agent coat and the sunglasses. Even the vest had been left on his bed. He hoped that having so little equipment would not be fatal. But it was important to appear as non-violent as possible.

Again, he took a van without the communications

rack, and soon he was heading out through the exit tunnel once more. Axes 'n' Amps would be open on Saturday at least until 2 PM, and now it was not even 7 AM yet, so he would arrive well in time.

Almost out of habit, he turned on the radio, tuned in the same metal channel he had listened to previously. The host was talking about the epic fail of Frozen Hell, including the group suicide of Black Dragon.

Suicide?

How twisted SCEPTRE were? It seemed like they wanted to hide the fact that the Agents had ever been there.

But to have it come out as a suicide certainly required corrupt policemen and forensic investigators, possibly even mass brainwashing.

The host made a joke about anti-cosmic bands tending to have a higher fatality ratio than others, then put on a Black Dragon song in remembrance, followed by Immortal's "Battles In The North."

After the initial shock, Ian could listen almost with amusement. It was true that Agent warfare had kept him so occupied that he basically did not know almost anything of what was happening in the rest of the world, the consequences of their missions included.

Ian pulled up to the parking lot in front of Axes 'n' Amps with a few minutes to 1 PM. He had stopped only for a short break to relieve himself.

Hopefully the store was rather empty by now.

He wondered of the optimal state of dissociation. He would have to appear friendly enough, but with no dissociation at all, he might actually break down while explaining everything to Axel, and that might not evoke much sympathy from him at all.

As Ian exited and locked the vehicle, he rehearsed quietly how he would possibly begin, but could not come up with anything he was truly satisfied with.

He would just have to improvise.

He entered the store.

Axel was in negotiations with a customer: Ian could wait. He nodded to Axel, who seemed not to notice him, then went to look at the guitars, trying to appear roughly normal.

On the wall, there was a flame-red neck-through ESP like the one Jo had been playing, before all their Cyber-priest gear had been blown to pieces.

Ian's mind formulated a thought that the dissociative part censored almost immediately.

No. Don't get ahead of yourself.

The order of operations was clear: convince Axel. Find and convince Erik, if at all possible. Then the final mission. Nothing outside of that mattered yet.

Finally the customer left the counter with some large plastic bags, apparently satisfied.

Ian walked up to Axel, eyes locked with him.

"I told you to not come back," Axel said without much emotion. "Leave before I call the police."

"You should understand something," Ian began.

OK. This was it. Do or die.

"If you think I went underground, if I appeared here in a disguise because of being mixed up in something criminal, you're completely wrong."

Axel looked up with slight surprise, but not much conviction yet.

"Tell me, what did you suspect of me?" Ian asked.

"I don't know. Drugs, mafia, owing money to some shady types -"

Ian shook his head and spoke with as much compas-

sion as he could manage. “You have known each of us for a long time, and some even longer. Me, René, Jo, Erik. You know we wouldn't get mixed up with such things.”

“It doesn't matter really. I know your rehearsal space was blown up, and you yourself said that it would be best for me to not speak of you ever having been here again. Whatever it is, I have to value my life, as well as that of my customers.”

“I won't stay long. I have no idea whether you believe, but me and Jo – we're actually fighting to prevent some very nasty shit happening less than a week from now. If you've ever read or heard of the Illuminati, our enemies could be compared to that. They were fully responsible for what happened to the band.”

Axel frowned. “I see. If you're not bullshitting me – why did you come alone now?”

Ian swallowed and his voice grew lower. “Jo was taken by the enemy. I hope to get her back, but basically only I remain. And then Erik. It's actually Erik I want to talk about. I need to warn him –”

That was actually a lie, but Ian figured – it was better not to talk about recruiting.

“Hold on for a second,” Axel said, more surprised now. “Erik's actually alive?”

“He was alive when I last saw him. But I guess he left without telling anyone he was. Like you know, he's a survivalist. He can manage well on his own, living in the woods and hunting for food. But these enemies – they're truly nothing to fuck with lightly. I believe they will find him eventually and do something nasty.”

Axel stood in stupefied silence for two seconds. Ian did not want speak directly of SCEPTRE yet, but he would, if necessary.

“What do you want, then?” Axel asked, voice rising.

“If you happen to know, I'd be very thankful to know where Erik has his cabin. So that I could go warn him.”

“How can I know you're not the enemy yourself? How can I know you don't go there to kill him?”

“So you do know?” Ian pressed on.

“Answer my question.”

A metallic harshness appeared in Ian's voice. It was the same as when answering several IT support calls in succession. “The enemy wouldn't have to ask. They can find it out with satellite surveillance. Or if they asked, they'd first pump you full of drugs and point a gun at your head. Or hold a blade to your hand. See: this is what they did to me.”

Ian demonstrated how two of his left hand fingers no longer had full motion. Axel shook his head with sadness.

“It's a place called Rocks Falls,” he said quietly. “We joked about it with Erik. Rocks fall and everybody dies. A small forest town. The cabin's somewhere close, but I have no idea where exactly.”

“Thanks,” Ian said and made to leave.

Axel shook his head again. “I don't think I helped you much.”

At the door Ian remembered something and turned quickly around, the Agent coat billowing like a cape.

“I almost forgot. If Erik was angry with me, what would you suggest to calm him down? A present or something.”

Axel pondered for a while. “I could not think of anything else, than Czech absinthe. He likes the raw taste when he needs to mess up his head completely. I honestly don't understand why. I would prefer Swiss or French, or rather none at all.”

Ian nodded. "Thanks, again."

Then he exited. At least this part had been a success, and now he knew everything necessary. Or at least as much as he could find out from Axel. The rest was left up to chance.

The town had been easy enough to find: Ian had just entered it on the GPS navigator. A little after 4 PM, as the light was already fading, he drove slowly through the quiet main street. In most of the buildings, lights were on, and the place appeared rather cozy.

Ian thought of how blissfully unaware the residents were of SCEPTRE.

But still, they had been subjected to the fnords, like almost everyone. If the Agents failed, they would catch the apocalyptic visions projected to the sky. If faith truly held power, they would in part contribute to the coming chaos.

He snapped back to more practical thoughts. He could of course stop someone on the street and ask, but it would arouse suspicion. Erik had to be well-known here: it was an ideal place to shop for supplies. Close enough, but still far away from the rest of civilization.

Maybe he would return to ask if he at first did not find the cabin on his own.

After leaving Axes 'n' Amps, Ian had bought a bottle of Djabel absinthe, with seventy percent alcohol by volume. The label was red, with a devil on it: it certainly felt fitting for Erik. Ian was glad to have let his beard grow again: the clerk had not asked for ID as Ian had appeared old enough. He had his own driver's license with him though, which in fact was a severe breach of Agent procedure: any proof of real identity was to be left at the HQ during missions.

He hoped that the bottle – a token of goodwill – would help Erik forget his animosity. He might not even be home, Ian knew. The cabin was just the most logical possibility, but over-men did not need to operate by rules of logic.

The town itself was left behind, and the road made a slight turn. Soon the forks started both to the left and right, leading to individual cottages, camping areas, and such. Somehow Ian thought that Erik's cabin would be far from any road. But where? There were many square miles to search.

It could be hopeless.

After some time of driving, Ian killed the engine and got out, just listening.

As he had waited for three minutes, the sound of a powerful rifle being fired echoed off from the distance. Ian instantly thought of Erik. Of course it could be anyone out hunting, but still, it was the best clue he had so far. It was worth trying.

He activated a little-used function on the Agent sunglasses: tracking of a sound source's direction. At a long distance it was unpredictable due to the echo and the wind, but it could show roughly the way to go, and it would remember the direction unerringly. There was no danger of walking or driving in circles.

Then he just hoped for the gunshot to repeat.

After two more minutes, it did. The sunglasses' display lit up, showing a bright circle in the direction it had estimated. There was no guess for distance: it was apparently too far or too unclear.

Ian jumped back inside the van and started driving, keeping track of the circle. The road twisted more as it climbed up and got narrower, and the forks got left behind. It also became rocky.

More gunshots came, moving a bit, but still confirming the overall direction.

At last Ian came to a small clearing, beyond which the road – if it could be called that – was only suited for jeeps or all-terrain vehicles. The rocks seemed too scary to navigate with the van. After all, he had to get back to the HQ with it.

Ian got out, took the plastic bag with the absinthe, and headed for the rocks. Even on foot they were treacherous enough – he almost slipped, which would likely have resulted in breaking the bottle, if not his ankle.

There appeared to be a path, which he followed. He estimated that it went on for at least a full mile, twisting deeper into the forest.

Then, behind one more turn, he caught a glimpse of something green. Erik's jeep was green, right?

Before he could move closer to confirm, he felt something cold pressed against the right side of his head.

The barrel of a rifle.

“Don't – move,” came the heavy low growl of Erik.

Without a further word, without listening to any of his explanations, Erik marched Ian at gunpoint inside the log cabin, then ordered him to sit down. The smell of wood was pleasant, and Ian could understand how relaxing it was here, far away from all the people and noise, but he certainly had hoped for a different kind of reunion.

Even Erik flat-out shouting at him in anger would have been much more preferable. This was too harsh, too reminiscent of the war he was participating in.

But then, in a way he deserved this for intruding.

“How did you find this place? I told no-one,” Erik demanded angrily. He still looked the same: the dark brown hair as long as ever, the beard possibly grown even more. And absolutely fearful physique.

The M21 rifle with the telescopic sight still pointed at Ian, so he chose his words with care.

“Axel told me of the town. Then I followed your gunshots.”

“What's in that bag?”

Ian reached for it, but quickly understood his error.

“No. Not you. You only tell me what's inside, then I take a look,” Erik grunted.

“Czech absinthe. A present for you. I thought you might appreciate it.”

Erik looked cautiously inside the bag. “Why? Is this a bribe? Why did you come here to bother me? I can see that you've become like the weirdos who busted into the rehearsal space. And like I told you then, I want nothing to do with you. As far as I'm concerned, you alone are responsible for everything.”

Ian sunk into further but not complete dissociation, to be able to better analyze the situation with emotions put aside. It was interesting if Erik did not actually blame Jo anymore.

It could be used for advantage.

It perhaps was wrong to think of advantage at this point. To lure Erik, his former bandmate, into certain death with him –

No. It was not like that.

Ian would tell of the situation and of the danger fully, without pulling any punches. Then Erik could make his own decision. But to even get to that point in the first place might require trickery.

And absinthe.

“You know, I've thought of the exact same thing,” Ian began honestly. “I am responsible for everything.”

Erik did not let the rifle go down.

“Are you playing tricks with me? Reverse psychology? Are you trying to make me guilty somehow?”

This could be difficult. Ian shook his head.

“No. Not like that at all. I simply came here to ask for your help. Even if you may have little or no reason at all to help. But in the very least, I hope that you would listen. And I hope you put that gun down.”

Warily, Erik lowered the M21, but still breathed heavily.

“Don't try anything. Remember that I could probably kill you with my bare hands without breaking a sweat.”

“I'm aware of that.”

Now it came down to a binary choice. Was it better to start with SCEPTRE's anti-cosmic insane plans, or to tell how Jo had been lost to their hands?

Each had advantages and disadvantages.

Ian knew that if it had not been just idle, derogatory banter, Erik likely regarded him as weak. To admit that he had let both himself and Jo be captured would reinforce that impression. But focusing on the enemy at first, how strong and insane they were, would give better context. After all, even an over-man could fight against SCEPTRE and lose, but that would not necessarily mean he was weak. It simply meant that he had picked the wrong fight.

Ian remembered how Erik had talked about self-preservation, which had sounded like a roundabout way to chicken out. Of course Ian could never mention that, unless he wanted to incur a lot more of Erik's wrath.

But Erik had also heard the Agents explaining a lot of SCEPTRE. So it was not like starting from scratch.

Ian just had to wear down Erik's defenses.

“You remember SCEPTRE? Those bastards, whose henchmen attacked Outpost, and who set the trap for us,” Ian asked.

“I'll never forget,” Erik said grimly.

“Well, while working with those weirdos – Agents – we have uncovered a lot of where SCEPTRE is aiming at.”

“Well, where?”

“They have a plan to bring chaos on the twenty-first. When the 2012 doom prophecies are supposed to be

fulfilled. They're going to use that day for their own advantage, and have also borrowed from anti-cosmic Satanism for inspiration.”

Erik looked alarmed.

It seemed like Ian had found a right string to pull.

“Anti-cosmic as in Dissection?”

“Yeah. Eleven heads of Azerate.”

“Fuck,” Erik spat. “Just so that you know, I have the utmost respect for Dissection. As far as I'm concerned, Jon was an over-man who lived and died according to his own beliefs. It takes strength to wish for complete chaos and anti-cosmic illumination. But this –”

Erik paused as if to gather his anger. If he was getting angry at SCEPTRE instead of Ian, it was much better.

“If those clowns seek inspiration or justification from an esoteric, Gnostic-Satanic system they never can actually understand, it's a travesty. The 2012 prophecies have nothing to do with Azerate.”

Ian was not exactly sure of that, but he did not want to contest Erik. Let him continue, to vent his steam.

“Any more idiocy I should know?” Erik asked.

“I don't have the complete details yet, but SCEPTRE aim to create unrest by planting fnords to mass media, music and such – you remember the underground place me and Jo were in.”

Erik nodded.

“Then they're going to project end-of-the-world images into the sky. Next, they detonate a nuke in the Middle East. Finally they're going to tap the anti-cosmic current 218 at a secret location. Supposedly that's to replace oil as an energy source.”

Erik stared in disbelief. “You're not making shit up?”

Ian made an exaggerated honest face. “I am not.”

“Holy motherfucking cow,” Erik almost laughed. “I need to get drunk right now. Those idiots. I never believed such stupidity could exist. Of course, if they actually got their hands on a nuke, it's bad, but the rest of it, they've got everything completely wrong. As far as I'm concerned, anti-cosmicism is ultimately about your inner strength. You awaken the Black Light within yourself.”

Ian knew that Erik was probably mixing things up with his own over-man beliefs. The research Ian had done pointed at anti-cosmic Satanists actually believing in a literal chaos that would consume the Demiurge's imperfect creation.

But none of that mattered now. As Erik had said, it was time to get drunk.

Erik took the rifle, removed the magazine and the chambered cartridge, and finally put the weapon and ammunition away to a wooden cabinet with barred windows and a heavy padlock.

Then he went to a kitchen drawer and took out an exotic-looking spoon with holes in it.

“Will you get the absinthe?” he asked.

Ian complied with pleasure: a warm feeling started to spread within, even through the dissociation. It was still possible Erik would not actually join the Agents, but even to drink with him meant the world to Ian.

Erik took two ornate glasses and placed them on the table. “I'll prepare yours first.”

Ian was honored, but said nothing as he sat down: he understood that a ritual was about to begin. Erik filled a carafe with cold water and placed it next to the glasses and the absinthe bottle.

He then seated the spoon over the glass on Ian's side, put a sugar cube in it, then poured absinthe in the

glass so that the cube got soaked. Next, he ignited the cube with a match: the alcohol on it burned with a blue flame as the cube started to melt, bubbling.

Some of the flaming liquid fell to the glass, igniting also the rest. Erik let it burn for a while, then poured water to extinguish the flames, dropped the cube in and stirred.

Ian waited patiently as Erik repeated the procedure for his own glass. When he was done, Ian compared: roughly an equal amount of water had been added to both.

“Now we drink,” Erik growled.

The bitter taste of alcohol and herbs mixed with the sugar was a new experience to Ian. He felt an unusually strong burning sensation as the liquid traveled down to his stomach.

This is heavy shit, he thought.

It took a long time to finish the drink: Erik was done when Ian was only halfway through. But he certainly wanted more. At 5 PM, the evening was only very young.

He had not been drinking properly since the Cyber-priest tour, and his stomach was rather empty. Therefore the potent alcohol attacked his nervous system with force. Still, he knew it was better – no, essential – to let Erik become more drunk.

They were well onto the third glass now, Erik going faster again. Ian could observe his head swimming, like when under the influence of SCEPTRE's triggers, as well as his perception becoming duller, but this was for a lot healthier and mundane reason.

“Fuck SCEPTRE,” Erik spat in between mouthfuls. It was perhaps the third or fourth time he had said that.

Ian wondered whether it was time to make a further move. To up the ante. No, that was bullshit. This was not any cloak-and-dagger game. He was forming a serious bond with Erik, something that had never materialized to this degree before. Even if Erik did not join the Agency, the memory of this session would remain in Ian's mind, giving him strength and courage.

"You know, I was rather foolish to accuse you. Of course it's those assholes who are guilty. But back then I also spoke to Jo just as harshly. Why didn't you bring her with you? The three of us drinking would have been three times as legendary," Erik spoke.

Now Ian could explain.

"There's a slight problem," Ian said with calmness only dissociation could bring. He had not yet slipped out of it, at least not completely. "During our last mission, both me and her got caught. I managed to escape with some outside help, but she didn't have such help. She's in their hands right now."

"Shit."

"It was due to – Well, I could have done much better, but in the end it was a hopeless trip in any case. At least I'm glad that neither of us died outright."

"Shit." Erik's voice was heavier than last time. "And is that where you need my help?"

"Not exactly that. I understand it's my responsibility to get her back, if at all possible."

"What? I don't understand. Of course it's mine too."

The voice became angrier, but contorted in such way that Ian suspected Erik was actually going to burst into tears at any moment. The over-man, no less.

Then Erik's voice straightened again. "What I'm about to tell you and show you next is of highest clearance, or how do you Agents say?"

“Above top secret.”

Erik took a long gulp of the absinthe.

“Above top secret it is, then. I mean, it must never leave this cabin. You see – you actually pulled a fucking cunning and evil stunt when you never told me that Jo had gone inside that underground place on her own. Of course I would have followed too, if you had just told. But no, you had to go there on your own, and nearly got killed from what I remember. So, for the second time, that's not going to repeat. I'll join the Agents if that's what it takes.”

Ian felt startled. That would be too good to be true.

Another gulp of absinthe, and Erik's expression became distant and strange: it was still wisest to wait and see.

“Now, I'm going a long way back in time. And this is especially above-above top secret. When the classic Cyberpriest trio line-up with me on drums was first formed, Jo was quite down on herself. Later I understood it was because of her and René breaking up. In any case, I wanted to do something to cheer her up, but couldn't, really. Back then this game had just come out, and before they were sold out, you could get these –”

Erik got up and unlocked the weapon cabinet with drunken swiftness. Ian actually wondered if he was going to get a gun. It was scary to think of him shooting around in that condition.

But what would that have to do with any game?

When Erik turned around again, it was something most unusual, something Ian would never have expected of him. In his left palm, Erik held a small plush cube with a pink heart on each side.

“This is a Companion Cube. I wanted to secretly leave this somewhere where she could find it. Like on

the top of her amp. She could have thought it was from René, but that would not have mattered. But I never gathered the courage, and then she cheered up on her own. Now it's like, fuck me for not being brave enough then."

Ian did not know what he could say in response.

"Like I said, this is not to be repeated to anyone outside. Under the pain of physical damage. Right?" Erik asked.

"Right," Ian confirmed.

Then he spoke in turn with drunken confidence, but was at the same time afraid of his own words, afraid of not being able to fulfill them. "Store that in a safe place. It'll be needed. We will get her back or die trying."

"So it shall be done," Erik replied.

Sitting on the table, the cube then watched the rest of their night of drinking. Ian pushed it further away from the glasses and the bottle, so that it would not become soaked accidentally.

Their discussions became even more strange and esoteric, mostly revolving around SCEPTRE, Azerate, and the true meaning of the three Veils. But still it seemed like Erik insisted on joining the Agents.

At some point Ian could no longer follow: he just passed out.

If the drinking session had been extraordinary, then so was also the hangover. Ian got up at somewhere around 10 AM just to go out and vomit. In the process he hit himself against every surface of the cabin that was possible to hit. But he reached the throne in time.

Meanwhile Erik was snoring heavily on the floor: he was strong enough to hold it all inside. Ian understood that to be one of the many virtues of the over-man.

Ian drunk water, lots of it, before he dared to even attempt sleeping again. The headache was splitting. Dissociating made it vanish to the background, but then his other senses, including hearing, became more acute to a painful degree. With ear plugs it might have been tolerable, but there weren't any in sight.

At last Ian found Erik's heavy duty ear protectors. They made the snoring mostly go away, but finding a comfortable position for the head with them on was simply not possible.

Finally Ian just gave up trying. He knew his neck would protest later, but it could not be helped. He drifted off to restless sleep.

It would soon be 3 PM. Maybe it was time to get up. The

headache had subsided a little, but still Ian felt drained. Every action, no matter how small, caused his heart to throb alarmingly, and his chest felt unnaturally warm.

Erik got up, grunting something incomprehensible. Ian quickly took the ear protectors off before Erik could see him wearing them.

"I didn't snore that heavily that you would have needed those," Erik growled with a voice that was an octave lower than his normal.

Apparently he had ninja-like senses, or had looked at Ian with eyes half-closed, while pretending to be asleep.

"You did," Ian retorted, his voice also lower.

"Fuck you."

Ian knew it was nevertheless rather good-spirited: there was no need to be actually worried of getting Erik angry.

With measured slowness, Erik got up and fixed himself some bread. Ian followed suit. He wondered how much Erik remembered of last night's discussions, and if he would now deny ever wanting to join the Agents.

But inquiring anything would have to wait until they both got their bodies somewhat stabilized.

Some time after 4 PM, Erik was becoming more active, more like his normal self.

"We should go hunting," he said roughly.

"What will we hunt?"

"Ducks. There's a lake nearby."

Somehow the idea of guns and hangover did not resonate well with Ian. But he decided that it was best to play along. Erik took two shotguns from the cabinet, a Remington and a Mossberg. The Remington, which Erik himself took, looked much more like a hunting weapon,

but the Mossberg, with its angular stock and all-black finish, seemed to suit a special ops mission better. Perhaps out of irony Ian got to use that one.

Though Erik had more energy by now, he did not walk very straight yet. Accidental discharge was a possibility, and Ian made a note to watch out.

After fifteen minutes of walking in the chilly air they got to the lake. But there were no ducks.

Erik snorted in disgust. "Damned demonducks."

Just to be sure, Ian put his sunglasses on and tried out the vision modes. Nothing on any of them.

"Hey, I want to try those," Erik said.

As an Agent, Erik would be using them in any case, so it was best to start the familiarization early. Ian handed them to him and explained the vision controls, but cautioned against pressing any of the communication buttons. Of course, with the cord to the radio unit disconnected, they would not do anything.

Erik cycled through the modes.

"Neat shit. So if I was to join, I would get ones like these?"

"Naturally."

"Hell yeah. That's the way."

Suddenly a duck flew overhead. Ian had no idea where it had come from: his senses were still struggling even with the most basic information.

While still wearing the glasses, Erik turned in a rapid fashion and fired his shotgun.

The duck fell.

Ian wondered: if Erik was that good shot even in a deep hangover, he would be a priceless Agent.

As the evening got darker and they ate roast duck, Ian started feeling more like alive. He and Erik had not

talked that much, but perhaps there was nothing further to discuss. Mostly out of habit and convenience Ian remained in constant slight dissociation.

“What's the Agent organization like?” Erik asked suddenly. “Who decides what to do?”

“Well, we all have a say, but we do have a leader, Blackhand. In most cases there's been no need to contest his decisions. I'd actually like to compare him to René. But now he's recovering from pretty serious wounds, so I don't know if he joins us when we go kicking SCEPTRE ass.”

“I see.”

“The next in the chain of command probably is – if you remember her – this shorter woman, Blowfish. She's also our systems administrator, so she does all the hacking and computer stuff.”

“Hm.”

That was just a snort: it was impossible to tell if it was positive or negative. Ian wondered how well Erik and Blowfish would get along. Perhaps not at all, or then extremely fine. But any middle ground seemed unlikely.

“We could leave for the HQ tomorrow morning. They said to me to be back by Wednesday, so there's plenty of time for you to get familiar with all the stuff. And – maybe we should not drink that much tonight,” Ian suggested.

“Fine by me.”

Ian caught Erik still eyeing the bottle of absinthe. It could be a hard promise to keep.

As Sunday midnight was drawing near, the medium-size SCEPTRE assault and troop transport helicopter was approaching its destination. Unlike the smaller stealth choppers, the approach of this one would be easily detected, but it did not matter.

The Agents would be trapped inside their mountain hideout: there were only two ways out, and both could be taken under control easily.

There were two teams of elite black ops. The first consisted of Hate, Despise and Arrogance, all of them veterans with several years of service under their belts.

The second had originally consisted of Skepticism, Pessimism and Fear, but Fear had sustained an injury during a live-fire training session.

That meant Fury would be replacing him. And so, it would be her first actual mission.

She had no especial doubts. But she could sense how the others were skeptical or even afraid of her. Of course Baphomet had explained it quite well: she had been preloaded with an extensive database of past missions and training exercises, and so could skip the training which would take the others months, if not years.

But all the tests had come out green. There was nothing to prevent her from being just as elite as the rest.

For this mission she had been required to access the memories of the original personality, the one who's body she resided in. Baphomet called this "shared context," and it certainly was convenient.

The corridor layout of the HQ and the locations of all important rooms were now clear as day to her, thanks to that.

As were the important targets inside: Blackhand, the leader, who should be wounded and therefore inside the infirmary, Blowfish, the systems administrator, and then Nastassja, an Agent liberated from the now-lost Erehwon facility. An occultist.

Blackhand was to be captured for interrogation.

The rest were to be eliminated with extreme prejudice.

During the access, the original had tried to wrestle back control. The implant had responded with what amounted to electroconvulsive therapy. Afterward the attempt had not repeated. Fury understood now that the phrase *unleash the fucking fury* was not her own thinking, but she nevertheless liked it.

She checked her weapon, the triangular-barreled rifle, once more. Actually it had three weapon systems in one: a directed electromagnetic pulse generator, a high-intensity plasma burst, and then a high explosive rifle grenade launcher.

It was called the Disruptor.

It would be used on operations requiring excessive violent response against both human and non-human targets. The downside to it was the heavy weight of the batteries: combined with the grenades, one could not

carry many refills.

Hate and Skepticism, the team leaders, carried G36 assault rifles instead to provide more conventional fire support.

The helicopter hovered above the HQ roof now.

"What's the code to open the roof?" came the pilot's voice. His codename was Satanel.

"Seven - four - one - eight - five - two - nine - six," Fury answered. That was the last important piece of information she had accessed.

Some seconds passed.

"It's not opening," Satanel replied. "They must have changed it. Hold on."

There came the swoosh of missiles launching from both wings: first one pair, then a second. A total of four muffled explosions sounded from below. Fury could see from the large side door window how they lit up the forest.

As the helicopter turned around, she saw how the roof had been blasted to charred pieces. A wide opening was visible from behind the cloud of smoke.

"This bird's still too big to fit inside," Satanel said as they were hovering lower. "And besides, there might be defenses. You have to use ropes. Stay alert."

A couple of seconds, and the doors on both sides of the troop compartment were open. The six all rappelled down, controlling the descent with one hand and holding the weapon in the other.

As soon as they were down, alert indicators lit up on the HUD of Fury's face mask.

"Two turrets!" she shouted.

Automatic guns inside the garage came to life, locking on the nearest two. For the moment, that meant Despise and Fury.

Fury was already on her feet, rolling, then aiming the Disruptor upward. It was on EMP mode.

A single blast was all that it took to silence the turret for good. Now she had 90 percent remaining on the battery: she could feel how it had warmed up from the intense current.

Despise was not as lucky: she too fired an EMP burst, but had been unmoving while doing that. Just as the second turret became disabled too, the remainder of the stream of bullets cut through her right shoulder.

"I'm hit," she yelled over the radio.

"You'll live. Hit the morphine if necessary," came the voice of Hate. "Everyone, watch out for more of those bastards. Move on!"

The teams moved on to the garage door that led into the lobby corridor. Arrogance fired a plasma beam which disintegrated the lock. With caution, he opened the door – the metal around the former lock was still red hot – and moved into the corridor.

From the crackling sound through the radio Fury could tell that Arrogance had fried one more turret inside the corridor.

They all moved in.

"As soon as we reach the lobby, we split up," Hate explained. "My team will search the server room and its surroundings. Skepticism, Pessimism and Fury, head for the infirmary. We'll regroup after we're all done."

Fury wondered if being sent to the infirmary was a test, to see whether she could handle confronting the original's commanding officer. Of course that would not be a problem at all. She did not intend to disappoint.

Her team moved quickly, disabling more turrets along the way. Those never quite had the time to respond, especially when the black ops just ducked out of

the way, then fired the EMP bursts. It actually seemed like bad tactics from the Agents to leave the guns visible and scanning: if they had been invisible at first, they could actually have surprised the three.

But Fury did not mind the mission being easy, at least for starters. It might still become more difficult later on. The cameras they did not even bother with: it actually was an agreed-upon tactic to advertise their presence openly. To show the weak Agents that the black ops were coming.

“Entering the server room now –” came Hate's voice. “Shit, it's a trap! Everyone out!”

Next, the sound of a sizzling explosion filled the air-waves.

But it was not followed by any flat-line indicators or frantic shouts of the wounded. Hate's team had survived unscathed.

Fury reached one of the infirmary doors and waited for the rest to reach the other.

“Ready?” came Skepticism's voice. “One, two, three, now!”

They all burst inside.

Fury took in the scene: on one of the beds there clearly was Blackhand. He was awake. Sitting on a chair next to him was Nastassja.

Unfortunately Fury was further away from them. Skepticism and Pessimism would likely take credit for killing the occultist, and possibly also for apprehending Blackhand.

The Agent leader's face was suddenly frowned with alert as he turned around, reaching for something under his pillow.

“Watch out – going for a Desert Eagle I think,” Fury said. She was still closing the distance.

On the other side of the room, Pessimism fired a plasma burst.

It went right through the chair Nastassja was sitting on, entered her back, and exited through the chest. Fury could see how the woman's mouth went open from shock, then she fell forward onto the floor, a huge burning hole in her body. She did not move after that.

"SCEPTRE bastards!" Blackhand shouted, firing the gold-plated Desert Eagle. The black op face mask compressed the volume level of incoming sounds: the ear-splitting gunshots became rather puny.

Fury dived to the floor as a bullet, then another, flew overhead. The following four went to the direction of Skepticism and Pessimism who also were diving to safety.

Pessimism was late and caught a round in his leg. He fell, blood spurting from the wound.

Fury knew that the .50AE model held seven rounds in the magazine. Blackhand therefore still had one. But now she was close to him, pointing the Disruptor at his weapon hand.

He stared back with total, muted disbelief. Perhaps it was recognition, even despite the face mask. But that made no difference. Everything would be over soon.

"Drop the gun," she commanded. Through the mask, her voice would be distorted in a frightening way. "You can be interrogated with a severed arm, but there's no reason for it to come to that."

Skepticism was now also beside the bed, his G36 trained at the Agent as well. "Yes. Drop it now."

"You - will never get me," Blackhand snarled with a low dangerous voice.

Then, before either of them could react, he rammed the large pistol into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

There was one last muted boom, and brain matter mushroomed out from the rear of his skull to the nearby wall. Then he slumped onto the bed, his muscles making a few last involuntary spasms.

"Shit," Skepticism said.

Blackhand. Oh no.

"Quiet," Fury hissed just above the hearing threshold. Unfortunately her radio was transmitting: the digital signal processing would equalize the volume to a hearable level.

"What was that? Who are you talking to?" Skepticism demanded.

Fury cleared her thoughts quickly, fought against the sudden minor nausea that had appeared.

"Nothing," she replied.

If this was a test, she had almost failed. It was not a good sign, and Skepticism would suspect something. But from this point onward, Fury made the decision to steel herself and betray no reaction if anything like that happened again. The others could not be allowed to find out the exact nature of her personality: Baphomet himself had pointed that out. Her appearing out of nowhere and skipping the training had to be bad enough in the eyes of the others.

"Status update: occultist killed. Blackhand dead by suicide. One of us injured. Will be done soon," Skepticism spoke over the radio.

Somehow Fury had the feeling that the veteran Agent would not have cracked under interrogation. Therefore he had only saved everyone's time by killing himself. The way how he had done that was still unfortunate, though. Baphomet had told that mind contents could be extracted even posthumously, but that required the brain to be intact.

“Take care of Pessimism,” Skepticism ordered.

Fury went to examine the black op's leg wound. The bullet had gone straight through, but had not severed an artery. He would live.

“Administer morphine,” Fury said to him. The black op did just that, using the control buttons on his glove, and though Fury could not see his face through the mask, he seemed to relax visibly. With clinical efficiency, she then bandaged the wound and helped the man on his feet.

“Can you walk?”

“Yes,” Pessimism answered with suppressed rage.

Suddenly the radio crackled to life, with Hate giving his status report in an angered tone: “They're holed up on the firing range, launching RPG's at us! Have wounded one, but that bitch is still up!”

The last sentence was followed by several explosions.

“We'll go help them,” Skepticism roared.

But before they could, one more radio message came through. It was Satanel. “The orders, straight from Lilith, are to pull back. Blackhand is dead, so rest of the mission is unessential. We're leaving in one and half a minute!”

“What in the name of fuck,” Skepticism swore, off the radio so that the voice could only be heard through the external amplifier. “Why don't they let us wrap this up properly?”

But Fury knew that SCEPTRE high command was not to be questioned. Execution would easily result from insubordination.

“Acknowledged. Pulling back,” came the voice of Hate.

“Pulling back,” Skepticism admitted finally as well.

Then it was time to run already. Just one minute fifteen to lift-off: SCEPTRE pilots were notorious for not waiting. Fury and Skepticism both supported Pessimism on the way out.

They reached the transport helicopter, hovering over the still open garage roof, with twenty seconds to spare. Hate's team appeared a few seconds later. While all six still held on to winch-lines, the medium-size chopper was already heading away from the Agent HQ.

It was 8:45 AM on Monday morning when Ian and Erik left the cabin. Erik had left the jeep there with some reluctance, but Ian assured that it or the cabin would be no priority for SCEPTRE. That was quite different from what he had told Axel, and honestly he did not know what the actual truth was.

In any case it was good to be driving with no hangover. Erik had drunk some whiskey as the Sunday evening turned to night, but not much: now he appeared to be a hundred percent alert.

Ian had left his Agent communications unconnected since giving the sunglasses for Erik to test, but now, while driving, he connected the cord again.

Almost immediately, the voice of Blowfish came in. She sounded unusual: tired, agitated and worried at the same time.

“Ian? Are you there? Have tried to reach you constantly. Some shit has happened. If possible, try to get here as soon as you can.”

“What is it?” Ian asked sharply.

“Just enjoy the drive for now. You will know once you arrive.”

Blowfish cut the connection. Ian thought of it hard

for some seconds. Shit could only mean SCEPTRE. This was not good.

“What was that all about?” Erik asked in turn.

“I don't know. We'll see when we get to the HQ.”

Some time before noon they arrived at the Agent HQ. Ian could instantly tell that something was off: the entry tunnel had been left open. It felt apprehensive.

They drove in.

As soon as Ian reached the garage, he noted that the small helicopter was not there. He braked to a stop and stepped down to the floor with caution. Next, he looked up and saw a jagged opening where the two-part steel roof had been.

“Shit,” he muttered.

It was clear that the headquarters had been attacked.

Blowfish came through the lobby corridor door which now just swung limply on its hinges, a gaping hole where the lock had been.

“We had a run-in with black ops,” Blowfish explained. “Came in with a chopper after blasting the roof into pieces. I left the tunnel open just in case they dispersed some chemical agent that the sensors don't pick up.”

Ian knew he stood with mouth slightly open from shock.

“What exactly happened inside? Did anyone –”

Blowfish shook her head.

“Blackhand and Nastassja are both dead. Lucas was hit, but he will survive.”

Upon hearing this, Ian wanted to fall on his knees, but he grit his teeth and forced himself to stay collected. He slipped into full-strength dissociation.

It was a hell of an introduction for Erik, he knew. Well, things could only get better, at least until the mission.

“Does this happen on a regular basis?” Erik asked in a rough voice.

“This place has never been attacked before,” Blowfish responded flatly. “By the way, what's your name? I might know, but just want to be sure.”

“Erik.”

“You still intend to join after seeing and hearing this?”

Erik nodded.

“Welcome aboard, then.”

Like Blowfish had assumed, Jo had to have revealed the HQ location. Ian was quite sure of what he had said during his interrogation, and except for the very start, the rubber bit had been in his mouth during the times he had been out cold.

Who had told what did not matter much at this point, though.

In the improvised security center – a few laptops on the kitchen table – Ian watched the surveillance recordings.

Incendiary grenades set by Blowfish had gone off in the actual server room: the loss of the precious machines had to be a huge impact on her pride, and the trap had not even killed or wounded any of the black ops.

Ian saw two teams of three with somewhat odd-looking uniforms – as if the color kept changing – roving down the corridors with mechanical precision, disabling the ceiling turrets rapidly with EMP blasts from their triangle-barreled rifles.

He saw Blowfish and Lucas taking refuge at the firing range, carrying as much weapons – including RPG's – with them as humanly possible. He understood how lucky they had been in that the black ops had been called off.

And finally, he saw what had happened in the infirmary. First, the execution of Nastassja, performed from behind in cold blood, then Blackhand firing almost the whole magazine and wounding one of the attackers, and finally his suicide.

In deep dissociation Ian could not feel actual sorrow, only coldness that ate at his soul. He knew mourning would come later.

He replayed the scene, not to watch Blackhand kill himself all over again, but to look at the black ops themselves.

There was an odd exchange between two of them. It was as if one of them – the one who had first ordered Blackhand to drop his weapon – talked to himself, then the team leader chastised him for that.

Ian replayed it once more.

And now he understood that the first one was actually female. The voice was heavily distorted, but still, the higher pitch could not be mistaken. The black op uniform was kind of loose, but then, he also saw that the body shape was familiar. The final piece of evidence was some curly medium-dark hair hanging from under the helmet.

The coldness in his soul just got deeper.

He was now absolutely sure: that black op was Jo.

There were of course the relieving aspects too: she was alive and had not personally fired upon any of the Agents. But still, it was way beyond blasphemous.

“This place can't be used as an HQ anymore,” Blowfish said as they all were gathered. Lucas was sort of semi-conscious, his chest bandaged and some blood showing through. Ian hoped the nanites to be working overtime.

“Therefore it's better we start moving immediately, even before Erik familiarizes with the Agent gear. There's a smaller base some distance away to the east – a half day of driving. And much less of flying.”

Ian looked at her with surprise.

“I moved the chopper during Saturday night. It's cloaked under some nearby trees,” Lucas said weakly.

Ian sighed with semi-dissociated relief. At least they still had flying transport. Then something odd and almost inappropriate came at his mind. It was eerily similar to how he had worried of Cyberpriest's gear after René's death.

“The black ops – did they enter the room with the instruments?” he asked.

Blowfish shook her head.

“Good. Then we know the gear hasn't been tampered with. We can – we have to take it with us.”

She shook her head again, but did not actually protest. After all, she was a death metal vocalist of considerable skill, and Ian knew she would enjoy having actual PA gear to practice through, if they only were still alive after their final assault on SCEPTRE.

It was not exactly likely.

But still they had to prepare for that possibility. It would be bad karma to abandon everything besides just the bare essentials. The highly classified Companion Cube that had been left in the safety of Erik's cabin held a similar purpose: it waited there for a happier future.

“Do we blow up this place after leaving? Like in the

movies?" Erik asked.

"As a matter of fact we do," Blowfish replied without much emotion.

Erik gave a thumbs-up. It seemed he was soaking in the Agent spirit just as effortlessly as he drank absinthe.

At last the two vans had been loaded. The one with the communications racks was now their mobile armory: the rear was filled up to the ceiling with spare sets of Agent armor, weapons, ammunition and grenades. Erik would be driving that one.

Ian had loaded the other van with all of the band gear and everything that had come loose from the recreation room. The little computer equipment they had left was also there, inside a large, padded steel container. But he would not be driving that one. Blowfish would, while watching over Lucas in the passenger seat.

Finally it was Ian's job to fly the smaller stealth helicopter to the new base. Its rear compartment had been stocked up with anything extra: medical supplies, food, drinks, clothes.

Ian thought for the final time: had anything vital been forgotten?

No, he decided.

The third van, as well as the bodies of Blackhand and Nastassja, would be engulfed in the explosion, but that could not be helped.

They all climbed into the vans: Ian next to Erik just so that Erik would take him to the chopper. The engines started almost simultaneously, and they drove through the tunnel for the last time, the vehicle driven by Blowfish in the lead.

As they were a good fifty meters away from the rock face, Blowfish stopped.

Ian stepped down to see what she was doing. She opened the rear doors of Erik's van and rummaged through the weapon pile to the left-side communications rack.

"Blowing up now," she stated.

She powered up the rack and entered a long code. Finally she hit return. A low rumble started immediately, and the ground around them began to shake.

Ian saw pieces of rock falling in the tunnel, small at first, then larger. The sequence of detonations lasted about twenty seconds in total. At last silence descended, the ground shook no more, and the tunnel entrance had been completely blocked by larger boulders.

Ian spent a moment of silence out of respect for their former hideout and those left inside.

Blackhand and Nastassja, you kicked SCEPTRE ass hard. We will finish this, he swore to himself. Then he started walking toward the disguised helicopter.

It took most of the Monday evening to settle into the new, smaller HQ. There was a similar retracting roof and a tunnel to drive into – only much shorter.

Ian had arrived first with the chopper and landed inside the small, rectangular helipad. The car garage was actually separate here, connected to the helipad by a short corridor.

There was no lobby as in the larger base, only a large living room-like area, with one symbol on the wall: the Desert Eagle with wings.

Then, a corridor on the left branched to a small kitchen and a few personal quarters. The corridor on the right led to the armory, a firing range, and a sick bay, all much smaller than in the previous.

There was no separate server room. And certainly no combat simulator. But one could live here.

“I’m recovering fast,” Lucas said to Ian in the kitchen. “It’s just that while I heal, I’m feeling fairly weak. I expect to be ready for war late Wednesday.”

“Good to hear,” Ian replied.

Closer to midnight, getting sleep was not exactly easy. Fallen and captured Agents kept turning up in Ian’s thoughts even in dissociation.

Tuesday began with a tactical meeting. Blowfish played back both Ian's and Jo's sunglasses recordings from the science complex.

Ian found them uncomfortable to watch: at each step he kept thinking of how it could have been performed more optimally. But that was not the point. The point was to learn for the next assault.

"The cable car's actually a huge risk," Blowfish pointed out. "And unless they're totally drunk on their expected victory, they're ready for us. I'd say it's more unexpected to assault the main complex directly, using whatever arsenal the chopper has."

"Yes – it has quite some. If there's a reduced amount of black ops present, our chances are good," Lucas replied. He already looked much more alive than yesterday.

After this decision had been made, they went over all of Nastassja's notes, trying to find some missing, vital piece of information they had not yet discovered, or had previously overlooked.

There was not much to speak of, except something she had been going over on Sunday, before the attack. On that specific text, the Bringer of Satan's Wrath was described as flying through the air.

It had to be a missile. Specifically, an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Erik was now familiar and practiced with all of the functions of the Agent gear. Later in the day he and Ian went on a run in the woods around the HQ, then spent some time on the firing range.

In the evening Erik interrogated Ian of all the past Agent missions, of what to be prepared for.

"There are two ways we can do this. You can watch

the recordings on your own, or ask me questions. But I don't want to watch any more recordings myself," Ian answered.

"Well, you just tell me. Is there booze around here?"

Ian went to the kitchen and found a half-full bottle of vodka salvaged during yesterday. They poured shots, and he started by describing all the human and non-human opposition he had met, all the weapons and tactics both the Agents and SCEPTRE had used, everything he could remember. The session lasted long into the night.

By Wednesday Lucas had mostly recovered, and joined Ian and Erik for a run around the base. Blowfish joined them for a final lap as well.

"We're like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," she said as they ran.

Ian could only agree. But who was who? Pestilence, War, Famine and Death. All of them could be War or Death, naturally. Blowfish at least could not be Famine, Ian thought.

As they returned to the base, it was time to start planning the time of final liftoff, as well as their load-outs. Ian felt the adrenaline already, the tingling in his stomach. Dissociation kept everything unnecessary at bay for now, but he remembered his earlier concern: how safe would it be prolonged?

By now he could also sleep while dissociated.

"The problem is that we only know where the science complex is, so it would be ideal to be conservative with time. There's no telling how far away the black ops' command center is from there. Then there's also the secret anti-cosmic place. I actually hope we don't have to go there at all, just stop the missile and be happy," Blowfish said with slight sarcasm.

“What about the underground train system? Lilith left Erehwon with quite some speed, and that was also what Blackhand was talking about,” Ian suggested.

“If it's safe enough to use, of course it's good,” Blowfish said. “Especially if there's just one big button to push that takes us there.”

“That reminds me. What about the access cards?” Ian asked.

Blowfish frowned, thinking. “We'll just do the same as last time. Suhrim's access plus the Erehwon guards. Generate new random seeds, and they should appear different enough. It's probably best if we all choose the same PIN code for clarity.”

“What would that be?” Erik asked.

“What would you suggest yourself?” Ian challenged.

Erik thought for three seconds.

“218, obviously. Azerate.”

The same code as the lighthouse sniper had. But Erik had not known that. It was almost if he was going into the SCEPTRE facilities just to lecture them on proper anti-cosmic Satanism. As well as on being an over-man.

Blowfish turned to look at Lucas.

“It won't take me long to encode the cards. But the time of takeoff should probably be for you to decide.”

“We could take off right now. As long as I don't have to fly at first, the recovery will probably complete during the flight,” Lucas said.

“But recovering leaves you weak?” Blowfish asked.

“It's true.”

“Then I'd say we get one more night of sleep, and leave early on Thursday. Like 5 AM. Remember, we're closer to the complex now and have a faster helicopter. It should leave almost –”

"The time zones," Ian noted.

"Right," Blowfish said. "The anti-cosmic moment is Friday, 3:11 AM our time. It's actually closer than one would think. Still it should leave something like sixteen hours once we arrive. We'll be in enemy territory for the whole time, and it's hard to stay alert for so long, even with stimulants. Sixteen hours until victory or death, I say that's fair enough. Anyone opposes?"

It was unusual to hear Blowfish talking about victory or death. But Ian knew: one way or another, things were headed for some kind of conclusion.

A silence followed, which had to mean approval.

Ian had one more thing to say. "Just so that everyone is aware, I'm pretty sure that Jo was one of the black ops that attacked the old HQ. That means we might come across her. I'll try to take her down without killing if I can. But of course I can't ask the same of you."

Nods of understanding.

"How do we recognize it's her?" Erik asked.

"Look for red hair coming from under the helmet. But you might not have time when fired upon."

"Shit. Any safe ways to take her down?"

"I'd use the needle gun. We can try to reason with her once she wakes up."

Erik grunted with approval.

Then, the loadouts were to be settled. It was rather simple: take everything they could sensibly carry. Erik would take the M21 rifle with him, and Blowfish would not leave her Desert Eagle, but in addition they all had the M4 carbines. Ian had found the Beretta to be just as comfortable as the USP, and the magazine capacity was greater: fifteen instead of twelve. In addition he took the tranquilizer needle gun, and Erik did as well.

In the end Blowfish took the poisoned 5.56 rounds. Ian felt relieved: he still did not want to handle those. Knives, grenades of every variety, medical supplies and combat drugs completed the selection.

In theory they were now prepared for the final war.
For the coming of the anti-cosmic dawn.

The four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – the name had stuck – had been flying mostly in silence. Lucas was behind the controls and Ian sat at the co-pilot's seat. Lucas had explained that he no longer felt the nanomachines working: by now he was fully recovered from the bullet wounds to his chest.

Ian did not know how many hours exactly he had slept. Though he had gone to sleep early, it had been a restless night and he had felt mostly zombie-like at 4 AM when the alarm had rang. He had considered taking some combat stimulants immediately, but knew how their effect was deceptive: one always had to pay by becoming even more tired later.

They flew northeast: the morning sun had appeared from behind the horizon, painting the snowy valleys below a mixture of yellow, white and blue. It would have been preferable to approach the science complex earlier, under the cover of darkness, but that would have meant Lucas being in less than full battle condition.

In broad daylight, they would be detected.

But the response plan was simple: they would fire hard at any defenses, until no defenses remained.

The refueling along the way had been quick: in fact the tanks had still been half-full, but it was better to be prepared. Now, as the clock was 11:15 AM, they were closing in on the complex, only slightly later than they had estimated. Lucas had flown restlessly and fast.

There was some light fog, making visibility slightly worse. Clouds had also swallowed the sun. But finally, the cable-car station and the pylons came into view, followed by the mountain peak containing the facility itself.

“So, this is it,” Blowfish said.

War.

The thought felt almost inviting, though of course it was reckless: there was no telling the strength of the defense force they would be facing.

Lucas pitched the nose of the helicopter further down and they gained velocity.

“Guards at the station,” he said coldly. “They’ve noticed us. I’m opening fire.”

He depressed the trigger and the chain gun started to spew hot death, blowing geysers of snow. The bullets ate into the two white-uniformed black ops: they were cut down while running, long before they could fire back.

But simultaneously, a signal flare was launched into the air from behind the cabin housing the cable car motors. There had to be at least one more guard. If not before, now at last the main complex knew of the airborne intrusion.

They flew past the cabin and the third guard came into view. Ian knew the chain gun could rotate to acquire him: a second later he, too, was pummeled by the stream of bullets.

Lucas let the nose go up so that they could climb to-

ward the peak where the actual science buildings stood. It was then that several warnings lit up on the instrument panel.

“SAMs,” he snapped.

Surface-to-air missiles.

Ian could see at least two plumes of smoke coming from the peak up ahead.

Lucas banked left hard and activated countermeasures: electronic jamming and flares. At least one of those should be effective.

He dived into the gorge below, circling the peak. Ian could not do much but watch: now there was just gray rock and snow zooming past on the right side. The warning lights still blinked.

“Still on our trail,” Lucas breathed.

Ian wondered: the flares should have worked in case the missiles were heat-seeking, and jamming should have taken care of remote- or radar-controlled missiles. Perhaps they were shielded?

He fought physical nausea: dissociation could not help against the G-forces, the sense of balance getting thrown off. It probably was easier for Lucas as he was piloting and could anticipate each move.

Ian saw the two dots on the radar right behind, closing in fast. Soon Lucas would have to do something. But it seemed like he was waiting for them to get even closer.

Then he did something.

He pitched the nose hard up so that the machine came to an abrupt standstill. At the same time it rose higher just as aggressively.

The missiles were too slow to counter this move: they shot past from below.

A determined look on his face, Lucas pressed the

trigger down. The left-side missile was hit by chain gun fire: it caught fire and started arcing below. Then Lucas tapped another button with his index finger: switching targets. Similarly, the right missile was caught by an extended burst and fell from the sky.

They had survived so far. But would more missiles come as soon as they climbed up?

Lucas pitched the nose down again, increased lift, and they came up from the backside of the peak, opposite the cable car line. Ian could see the valley with the anti-gravity reactors below.

In the center of the rear courtyard there was a missile launcher truck, turning toward them. That had probably launched the earlier missiles.

More taps on the weapon controls, and a rocket was sent streaking toward the truck.

Meanwhile the buildings came closer. Ian could now see more black ops both on the ground and in the guard towers: some of them prepared hand-held missile launchers.

It was going to get nasty soon. If countermeasures were not at all effective, they certainly could not shoot down all the missiles.

The missile truck disintegrated in a fireball.

They flew over the courtyard dangerously low, the chain gun wiping out at least three more guards. Then Lucas rose up again and sent another rocket toward a guard tower. The black op and his missile launcher were sent toppling below by a solid hit to the tower's top.

More warnings lit up.

Somewhere another soldier had loosened a missile successfully. If it was for example the classic Stinger model, it would seek by IR.

Possibly thinking the same, Lucas dropped flares while bringing the chopper to momentary halt and using the pedals to turn around, then brought the nose down and started going forward again.

Two black ops were dead ahead: the chain gun came to life once more. One soldier was hit immediately, then Lucas switched targets, but the second had meanwhile disappeared into the cover of the missile truck's blackened skeleton.

They would worry about him later.

There was at least one more occupied guard tower: Lucas launched a third rocket toward it, while banking away to the right. Seconds later, a fireball told of its obliteration.

But the missile lock lights still stayed on. Where was it? Had the flares worked or not?

Ian looked around, trying to search for a trail of exhaust. The battlefield was quickly getting more chaotic with smoke all around, so it was hard to see.

There was at least one, spinning out of control.

But that could not produce the lock-on warning: there still had to be yet another.

Lucas performed aggressive turning maneuvers just in case, trying to shake the predator he did not see either.

It was then Ian understood.

From behind the ruins of the missile truck, the second black op peered out. Next to him was a spent missile launcher.

The second hand-launched SAM was coming at them from the side. It had missed and undershot them at first, but had now turned around.

"Lucas, watch out –" Ian said with rising voice.

In response, Lucas dropped down with the collec-

tive, turning at the same time.

That probably saved their life.

From behind came an impact and the sound of an explosion, and the chopper started to turn even more wildly.

“Rear rotor,” Lucas hissed.

Without the rear rotor to counterbalance, the machine was spinning out of control. Ian saw the look of hate on the face of Lucas: while turning the cyclic stick, he also depressed the trigger furiously. The chain gun sang, mopping up any black ops still alive – including the one that had launched the fateful missile.

Had Lucas not dropped down and turned at the last moment, the missile would have hit the main rotor or the engines instead, and that would have been fatal with much higher certainty.

The helicopter had now turned 180 degrees around, going toward the cable car station and passing a low building in the middle.

Soon after the building it hit the ground at an angle.

It was a heavy jolt, and a nasty crunching sound came from below. One of the landing gears probably broke from the impact.

Lucas released the trigger at last.

They bounced back up in the air, and he wrestled to keep the chopper in control, decreasing lift all the time. After five long seconds the machine settled down, plowing snow in its wake.

“Everyone out now!” Lucas yelled.

“Guns at hand,” Blowfish added.

At first it sounded counter-intuitive, but it was possible that the helicopter had caught on fire, and therefore it was wisest to exit, even into the sights of any black ops still standing.

Ian unbuckled the seat belt and threw off his helmet, holding his M4 in one hand while pushing the right door open with the other. Then he rolled onto the ground, scanning around through the sights.

The first thing he observed was the wailing siren.

Erik and Blowfish slid the rear door open and came out as well. Erik had the scoped M21 rifle in his hands, the carbine on his back for now.

Though the immediate situation could be described as grim, their chopper smoking and disabled, the sight and thought of Blowfish was awesome: there she was, with the bright red hair trailing behind her heavy form, the M4 loaded with poisoned 5.56 rounds. Any other rounds would not fit an Agent BOFH, really.

Lucas came out last, crouching low next to the machine.

But were there enemies left?

Ian caught sight of one black op. A sniper in a guard tower next to the cable car station, aiming at them –

But Erik was faster. The report of the M21 echoed in the air, and the sniper was thrown against the back railing, against which he slumped motionless.

Ian scanned ahead. From a building perhaps fifty meters away, a white-coated scientist came running, brandishing a triangle-barrel rifle.

Ian remembered his earlier thoughts: do not underestimate any of the enemies. He knew there were at least two nasty functions on the weapon: the EMP blast, and then a plasma beam. The one that had cut right through Nastassja.

The scientist could not be allowed to use either.

Ian aimed down his sights and let off a silenced burst of three. The man caught them all in his torso, toppling backward. As he fell, his rifle discharged, the

plasma burst melting snow and leaving vapor rising in the air.

Thankfully it had not come at their direction.

Now the only sound that remained was the steady wail of the siren. It was clear the whole complex was in high alert after their overt assault.

Ian considered: in a way things had just become much simpler: no helicopter, so unless they managed to hijack a replacement from here – and he had not seen any – the only way to get to other SCEPTRE facilities was through the train system. Of course there was no telling if the science complex was even connected.

Their eventual escape would still require transport. But that was in the distant future.

He also recalled they were on the first courtyard again, the one he and Jo had crossed after leaving the cable car. Should they enter also the same building again, being more careful now? Or was that like bringing bad luck for the second time?

Ian remembered the odd weapon, the “Gas-Fist.” Was it still there? Could it give an advantage? At least it would be very heavy. But Erik could probably handle it without much difficulty.

On this courtyard there were three buildings: that smaller, two-story one, the low one they had flown over, and finally a taller, wide building.

The low structure looked like a vehicle garage. That would not be very interesting, at least not yet.

But maybe it still was best to start from the smaller of the remaining two. Just to gauge the amount of opposition inside.

“Any ideas?” Blowfish asked. They all were huddled at the helicopter: the tail still smoked, but had not actually caught fire.

"I'd comb that smaller one first. If not for anything else, than to get over the trauma of being caught there," Ian said.

"Let's just be careful. If we go in pairs, the another could be on thermal vision all the time, checking for beams," Blowfish replied.

Scanning for more enemies, they crossed over to the two-story-building. Blowfish inserted her card to gain access.

Inside, at the lobby, they split up: she and Lucas chose the left side ground floor corridor, while Ian and Erik took the stairs up.

No encounters so far. Inside, the siren was quieter.

Suddenly, from the far end of the second floor catwalk, a lone scientist approached. Despite the alarm, he had not noticed the intruders yet.

Unarmed?

No. He had a wrist-gun.

"That's the tranquilizer dart gun?" Erik asked.

"Very good," Ian whispered back.

Getting hit by its darts was now almost as bad as being shot dead: several hours shaved off the mission clock.

Erik raised his rifle and shot the scientist in the head.

Then, they crept along the catwalk to the other end: Ian pocketed the man's access card. The access code of course was unknown. Below, Blowfish and Lucas roved the first floor cautiously.

Ian inserted his own, forged access card to the nearest card lock he saw, and typed in 218. The lock opened. Before he stepped inside, he activated thermal vision.

There was a pedestal like in the room he had got

trapped, but it was empty. IR beams just crisscrossed the floor. The room was not worth entering.

Ian returned to normal vision, then motioned for Erik to return to the beginning of the catwalk. Ian opened more doors along the way: one of them contained the triangle-barrel rifle, but somehow he hated the idea of carrying that weapon. He rather used what he knew to be proficient with.

Now, at last, they were in front of the Gas-Fist room.

“Try if your card gets you in,” Ian said.

Erik inserted his card and keyed in the code: his access was just as good as Ian's. It seemed SCEPTRE was too caught up in its anti-cosmic plan to tighten security here, even after the first intrusion. The alarm did not seem to matter either.

“What's that?” Erik asked. Ian was not through the doorway yet, but could guess that Erik was eyeing the unusual weapon with interest.

“Careful. Switch to IR vision. There are security beams in each of these rooms.”

Erik did as told, then stepped over the beams until he reached the pedestal with the Gas-Fist.

“We don't know if picking it up sets off the alarm too,” Ian cautioned. “I'll stay at the door just in case.”

“But there's already an alarm,” Erik protested.

“Yeah, but when I crossed the beams, the room itself also locked up.”

“I'll take that risk. This is too good to be left here.”

Ian shook his head. If Erik was going to lug around the sniper rifle, the carbine and then that one, it would probably be too much even for him.

Erik lifted the tube-shaped weapon, testing its weight.

“Wow.”

No lockdown. But how the weapon would be used? What did it even fire, or use for ammunition? Reluctantly Ian got inside the room as well, and noticed a cabinet on the far wall, something he had missed last time because of the uneasy feeling brought by the ultrasound.

If the sound generator was still on, now it had no effect at all. It felt good to be free, even if the task ahead was still enormous.

Carrying the weapon in its sling now, Erik went for the cabinet. There were large drum-like magazines.

“Definitely looks like ammo,” he said.

Erik loaded one into the Gas-Fist, and green lights instantly flashed to life on the side of the weapon.

“Holy shit.”

Then he stuffed three more into his coat pockets.

“Think you should leave something so that all that weight doesn't wear you down?” Ian asked.

“Might be a good idea.”

Erik reached the pedestal again and laid down his M4 with all of its magazines. “Something in return for the SCEPTRE bastards.”

Right after it seemed like gunfire came from somewhere on the first floor. Were Blowfish and Lucas in trouble? Ian and Erik exited the room hurriedly.

As they were on the catwalk again, Blowfish's voice came in to Ian's earpiece. “We've searched the first floor. Found nothing really, except one scientist. You done?”

“Yeah. Erik found something. You'll see.”

Half a minute later they reunited at the lobby, then headed out.

The four crossed half of the courtyard back into the cover of their downed helicopter. It actually was good in how it split up the battlefield: otherwise the whole wide expanse would have been much more frightening and dangerous to cross.

No more enemies after the two inside. SCEPTRE was possibly letting the Agents' paranoia grow.

The next target was the wide and tall building, three stories high. It had double doors in the middle: otherwise the ground floor had no windows. A security camera stood directly above the doors, watching.

With the siren still wailing, it was an easy decision to just blow it to pieces. Ian did that with pleasure, with one silenced 5.56 bullet.

Finally they reached the doors. Ian and Erik flattened themselves against the wall on the left side, while Lucas and Blowfish went to the right.

Blowfish was closest to the card lock, so she inserted hers. The lock clicked open and the four moved swiftly inside.

There was a much larger, dimly lit lobby, again with a similar plaque looking at them from second floor walkway, proclaiming how knowledge itself was also

power. Maybe this building held actual laboratories?

Suddenly, there was a gunshot from above: the bullet caught Erik squarely in the chest.

A sniper!

Erik staggered: the hit should only have drained his armor power. Ian looked up and saw a black op with a mantis face mask, a long sniper rifle sighted down. Ian fired a burst at him –

In the next instant Erik also fired the Gas-Fist.

The sound was heavy and low: Ian saw the gleaming, large projectiles streak through the air. The black op was thrown against the rear railing of the walkway, then fell right over.

He landed on the ground floor with a heavy thud, but seemed to be still breathing.

Ian had probably missed, but Erik had not: the black op had caught two Gas-Fist projectiles in his chest. They were like two-pronged metal saucers, embedded deep. He had an unusual-looking uniform: its color seemed to match the ground next to him. Adaptive camouflage, like on the upgraded stealth helicopter?

But before Ian could wonder about it for too long, a rising whine caught his attention. It seemed to come from behind the soldier's face mask.

As the whine reached its peak, a small detonation came, like a primer cap being struck. The black op's head snapped oddly sideways, and blood started to spread from underneath the back of his skull.

A bomb? But if Ian understood right, it had activated while the man had been still alive. However, now there were other things to consider, like Erik's well-being.

Meanwhile Blowfish and Lucas were covering the left and the right, looking for more enemies to appear.

"You OK?" Ian asked Erik.

"Yeah. It says eighty percent left," he answered.

A twenty percent hit. That meant the round had been heavy, at least 7.62. The weapon itself had not fallen.

A few seconds of silence followed.

No more black ops materialized during that time.

"We're sitting ducks in here. Better to move to higher ground," Blowfish said.

They headed left, for the nearest stairs. From those they could reach the second floor walkway, and then there was also a similar one on the highest, third floor.

Ian remembered something: the black ops caught on video during the Agent HQ attack had also worn similar odd, adaptive fatigues. And one of them had been Jo. Therefore, they should be extra careful before shooting anyone wearing that kind of uniform.

"That black op was somehow different," Ian said to no-one in particular as they climbed.

"Yeah. Elite black ops," Lucas answered. "They wear the adaptive armor."

"He had a bomb in his head?" Ian asked.

Right after the words were out of his mouth, he felt powerful unease even through the dissociation.

"Elite black ops always do. It's called a 'failsafe' device, implanted through the left nostril. It activates when the EEG falls to coma level, or when the black op dies. That's to prevent any compromise at enemy hands, including posthumous brain dump. In fact it's not even exactly safe for elites to sleep naturally. Instead they stay jacked up on combat drugs, then use brain wave stimulation to rest safely," Lucas explained.

This was very bad, Ian understood. Jo had a similar thing in her head.

Ian and Erik could both throw the needle guns away

in disgust. They were useless, for they would only kill her. Ian felt an abyss open up before him. Jo might never become herself again, but saving her even physically could already be impossible.

Right now the thought of the Companion Cube sitting back at the cabin became intolerable. It would have been better if Erik had never shown it. Even better if it had never existed at all. Ian wondered if it was possible to fall into catatonia even while dissociated.

Possibly he was not far from that right now.

He observed as if through a haze as they reached the top floor, rounded a corner, and cut down two more elite black ops armed with G36 rifles.

CHARGE: 85 PERCENT.

The realization of being hit came only much later, as the black ops were already down, the whine behind their face masks rising.

Twin detonations.

Ian knew that right now he was a danger both to himself and the three Agents beside him. He had to straighten out. But how? He was already in maximal dissociation. There was nowhere else to go.

He forced himself to focus on each step, on the gun in his hands, and how it swayed as he walked.

Little by little, he started to feel better. He had to.

They entered a large office room. Ian tried not to think, why to even go to the trouble? If they wanted to reach the train system, should they rather search from below? But mechanically, he flicked through the vision modes.

No-one in the room –

Not exactly. From the rear, a scientist appeared.

He was seemingly unarmed. Maybe this one should be taken alive? But no such chance. Erik already had

the Gas-Fist up and fired. The saucer projectile severed the scientist's neck.

Of course Ian could not blame Erik. The mission was highly improvisational in nature, and they had not agreed on any rules of engagement, just fired at everyone in sight.

Ian longed for Blackhand to be in command.

But then, the veteran Agent had also been adamant to just cleanse Erehwon properly. But at least he had found the map of the science complex.

Now they would have to find a just as valuable lead.

"Hey," Ian said. "Should we try to take the next one alive?"

"I don't think they will talk," Lucas replied instantly.

"We can try. Just one. But if he doesn't talk, no mercy for the rest," Blowfish said. "And remember that I can't fire, really."

Ian remembered. Poison rounds.

At least they had plenty of time until the anti-cosmic moment. If they did not get killed first, they could search the whole science complex methodically. It was nearing 1 PM now.

The next rooms contained some strange scientific equipment, left running. The labels on the doors were strange as well: *ENERGY PURIFICATION*, *RESONANCE HARMONIZATION*, *FORCIBLE POWER DIRECTION*. But no outright Qliphotic references.

In another room there was a miniature eleven-faceted crystal, with a laser beam going into it, refracting as if from a prism. A miniature experiment for tapping into the current 218?

Possibly. At least it was something else to think about, instead of the bomb in Jo's head.

They descended back to floor two.

At a T-junction a scientist appeared, brandishing the triangle rifle. Ian, Lucas and Erik all opened fire, aiming at his legs. As he fell, he swept with a plasma burst from the right to the left, and as far Ian could tell, it hit everyone. It was scary to watch the armor power diminish smoothly. When the numbers stopped, they read:

CHARGE: 60 PERCENT.

Never underestimate a scientist.

But this one was still alive. Bleeding heavily, but alive. They probably had at least one minute before he passed out from blood loss.

Blowfish came forward, M4 pointed at the man. Ian wondered how she would handle the interrogation.

"I have poisoned rounds in my rifle. They will give you a slow, painful death. But if you cooperate, we'll tie up those wounds. Now, how do we get to the black ops' command center?"

"Ha!" the scientist spat. "Weak Agents."

Sharply, he bit something in his mouth, and foam started coming out as he went limp.

"Cyanide," Blowfish said with sore disappointment. "OK, now that we know, it's time we become much more pre-emptive again. My armor's seventy-five, how about yours?"

"Seventy," Lucas said.

"Fifty-five." Erik's rough voice.

"Sixty," Ian said last.

"Can we reload those while we're here?" Erik asked.

"We could, using any electric outlet, but it's slow. More voltage than single-phase, and you risk blowing up the whole armor," Blowfish replied.

The few remaining rooms on floor two were quick to search: more laboratories, purpose unclear. The ground

floor contained just storage rooms with a lot of crates and obscure machine parts, then a large cafeteria, empty now.

No more encounters either. It was possible that everything interesting was on the second courtyard.

As they were climbing down, Erik motioned for Ian to fall behind. "What was it all about when we went up? You became strange, even let yourself be hit."

"You let that happen as well."

Ian knew that was low. He regretted it instantly.

"Fuck you. No, really."

"OK, it's very simple. Whenever you see a black op in adaptive armor, it could be Jo. And you heard what Lucas said."

Erik's expression went odd just for a second. Then the steely, determined gaze returned.

"Understood," he grunted.

They caught up to the rest and went outside, crossing past the garage building into the second courtyard. It contained three long two-story buildings, two on the left side, and a third on the very far end.

Ian squinted his eyes to observe the one guard tower still standing, but it was empty. No-one on the ground either. He understood that the personnel here had to be very much a skeleton crew.

It certainly made sense: all research had already been done, and most were preparing either for launching the missile, or for the big anti-cosmic moment at the so far unknown location. Of course, those who remained might still have nasty surprises waiting.

As soon as they entered the first building on the second courtyard, Ian understood that they should have been searching here in the first place.

Above ground, the building appeared just as mundane as those on the first courtyard. But here, the stairs led below.

Below ground level, the lighting was much different: the corridors were bathed in an eerie bluish light. Thick pipes went along the walls and ceilings, there were carts with odd measuring equipment left everywhere, and a constant electric hum permeated the air.

This had to be the place where actual evil SCEPTRE science was conducted.

They crept with stealth, avoiding security cameras along the way. The temptation to just destroy them was great, as the siren wail had still not ceased. It carried even below, though quieter.

But it might be advantageous to not alert personnel in this part yet.

There was a long corridor running in each direction. Ian and Lucas went forward, toward the far end of the complex, while Blowfish and Erik went the other way.

No enemies yet. After two minutes, Ian and Lucas

reached their end: a locked, heavy steel door. Ian unlocked it with his card, but as soon as he opened the door a little, he was quite sure that what lay beyond was not worth investigating.

He had been there before. This was the basement where the interrogation had been performed. The same gray tile walls, and the dim lighting.

"We should go back and join the rest," Ian said.

They started the long way back.

"We've found something," came Blowfish's voice over the radio. "Some kind of a hub. Seeing more enemy activity here, just observing for now."

"We're coming," Ian replied.

Three minutes later they joined Blowfish and Erik in observing a circular part of the corridor system. They were crouched low behind some heavier equipment. More corridors branched off from the circle.

Blowfish motioned for everyone to be quiet.

A minute of waiting, and a scientist walked past, going counter-clockwise. A half minute more and another appeared, going in the same direction as well. They did not seem to be in any especial agitation.

Then no more came for a while.

"Are they leaving?" Ian asked.

"Could be. That would point into the train station, if it exists, being in that direction." Blowfish replied, pointing right.

Blowfish dug something from her pocket. It looked like a dragonfly: a miniature helicopter.

"Remote-controlled. Has a camera on it," she said.

"Nice," Erik half-growled, half-whispered.

Next Blowfish took a control unit, like for an RC toy. She pressed a power button and the little helicopter started humming almost soundlessly.

The helicopter's camera display appeared on Ian's sunglasses, superimposed in a corner.

Blowfish manipulated the controls and the helicopter lifted into the air. She let it hover close to the ceiling, so that anyone walking in the corridor would not notice, unless he looked straight up. The hum of its rotors was mostly masked by the background noise.

She let it fly a full circle, relaying live image to the sunglasses. Each of the corridors it passed sounded like a jackpot in itself: *EXPERIMENTAL LIFE FORMS, ARCHIVES, PROCEDURES, TRAIN SYSTEM*.

Indeed, they should have headed straight here right after picking up the Gas-Fist.

The helicopter returned: Blowfish shut it down and put both it and the control unit back to her pockets.

She almost grinned. "Which one first? I'm tempted to go directly for the Train System."

"What is that Archives?" Ian asked.

"I understand it means the personality archives. Brain dumps of both the alive and the deceased," Lucas said. "The archival procedure is kind of nasty. When you read the brain with a low-powered laser to create a three-dimensional output file, it always causes some damage and degradation."

Ian thought of Jo. If a foreign personality had been planted in her head, the original might just be archived there. Of course, knowing SCEPTRE's cruelty, there might just as well be no backups.

"I'll check it out," he said with quiet determination.

"You can do that, but take no unnecessary risks. Shoot on sight," Blowfish said. "Experimental Life Forms sound like best left alone, but the rest of us should check the train platform."

So it was decided.

Ian switched to a fresh magazine on the M4, then got up. The archives were best reached through the clockwise direction. He passed under a camera and walked roughly one fifth of the circle. As he reached the junction for Experimental Life Forms, he stopped to listen.

Footsteps.

He waited. A scientist came into view. The decision was simple, but evil: a bullet through the head.

No. That would leave a trail of blood.

Quickly, Ian switched to the needle gun instead, and shot the scientist into the neck. If the needles would be useless when encountering Jo, at least they could be put into use now.

He then dragged the limp body into a nearby alcove, behind a tray containing a heavy spectroscopic analyzer.

No-one else in sight. Good.

Then it was time to continue along the circle. The branch for Archives was next, and Ian entered.

The corridor felt tortuously long. To avoid all the cameras, he had to constantly switch from one side to the other. And still, those could be just for the show. The real electric eyes might be hidden.

There were some side corridors, but Ian guessed them to be unimportant.

Finally, a door was in front of him. *MAIN ARCHIVE*, the label above it confirmed. Ian inserted his card, keyed in 218. Green light: it appeared that Suhrim had been cleared for this room as well.

Before his eyes was a brightly lit, amphitheater-like room. Instead of rows of seats, here banks of computer equipment were arrayed in concentric semicircles. Rack servers, switches and hard disk units, all with their lights blinking.

It was noticeably cool: the air conditioning had to be effective. But the combined hum of all the machinery in the room was certainly loud. It was probably not healthy to spend all day here.

Most importantly the room was empty.

On the lowest level there was a terminal with twin displays. Ian wondered: if it was locked, how to access it? Beyond *azerate218* or something obvious like that, the password might be just anything.

He closed the distance, then moved the mouse slightly to bring the displays to life. The login prompt read *baphomet* for the user name.

The most evil scientist.

He had apparently been the latest user.

Ian tried to remember. As part of researching the anti-cosmic, he had also dug up information on other demons and devils. The most famous image of Baphomet, the so-called "Sabbatic Goat," had been created by the occult author Eliphas Lévi. In its hands were the Latin words *solve* and *coagula*.

The dissociative mind was certainly helpful.

Each of those words was well worth trying. Then *azerate218* last if nothing else helped. There was just the question of how many attempts the system would allow.

First, just return.

No luck.

eliphas

No luck either.

levi

Now the login prompt started to respond slower. His attempts had certainly been logged, and soon that account might lock out altogether.

It was now or never.

sabbaticgoat

Unbelievable win! The desktop appeared. In addition to My Computer, there was just one icon on the desktop, ominously named *Construct*.

Ian clicked it.

A fairly standard, empty gray program window came up. Ian selected *Open* from the menu. A dialog came up.

Open files of type:

All files (.*)*

Construct dumps (.dmp)*

Ian chose the latter. There were directories for each letter of the alphabet. Actually most of them were empty. He was rapidly becoming agitated, and switched to the command prompt instead to rapidly list all files.

z:

cd \construct

*dir /s *.dmp*

He was disappointed. Most of them seemed to be co-denames with no especial meaning. There were less than fifty of them total. Nothing that seemed to point at Jo.

Of course there were some rather interesting ones.

azazel.dmp

suhrim.dmp

Azazel was the trainee he had fought at the festival. But Suhrim had allowed himself to be backed up as well? That was evil: maybe Ian should delete the file so that he could never be resurrected.

He listed the files again. Had he missed something?

ranger.dmp

Ian felt his heart skip a beat.

The body had been lost to SCEPTRE's hands, he remembered. So was this where the Agent had ended up, as a posthumous brain dump? It felt disrespectful.

But what would happen if Ian would open it? He returned to the dialog, double-clicked *ranger.dmp*. Soon he would find out.

There was a substantial delay before the program reacted in any way. While he waited, Ian opened Task Manager and saw all the eight cores working at near full capacity. The memory usage was over 4 gigabytes, still increasing.

Finally a face appeared on the screen.

Was that Ranger? John?

He had a square, rather handsome face, though bald. The simulation included no hair.

Ian then noticed a webcam on top of the left-side monitor. Was this two-way communication with a dead Agent? Was such thing even possible?

But – could he perhaps find out something important?

“Who is this? Certainly not Baphomet. Has he sent someone else to torment me?” a disembodied, hollow voice came through the speakers.

Now that the face actually spoke, Ian felt sinking even deeper into the twilight zone. It had to be trickery, he told himself. It was not possible to dump brain contents of the dead.

“No. I'm an Agent,” Ian replied quietly.

“Agents are infiltrating this facility? Finally? Good. Destroy everything. Especially the memory dumps. It's blasphemy. Though I know it's not actually me, I don't want to exist this way.”

“Listen. I have some questions –”

But now that Ian thought of it, he did not have any. He could ask of SCEPTRE's plans, of the locations of their current facilities, the failsafe devices on the elite black ops, but if it had been years ago when he had

died, how could Ranger possibly know about those?

Deep down Ian just wanted to obey the command of the Agent mind construct.

“Or actually I don't. But – I just wanted to say that I was a former SCEPTRE assassin trainee, with the code-name Necro, and your team freed me that night from the camp. I appreciate very much what you did.”

The eyes on the face lit up. “That night I died? Lake Tranquil Re-Education Facility?”

“Yes. Precisely.”

“And now you're an Agent. That's good to know. So not everything was wasted –”

The simulated voice trailed off. Ian did not know how to respond. At least he did not want to tell of the newer developments, like SCEPTRE's anti-cosmic master plan, or Blackhand's death. Somehow he had a feeling that the bits on the rack servers' hard disks could actually have a connection to the Agent's soul, wherever it was, or if it was at all.

“Now I will do what you asked,” Ian said.

“Do that.”

The eyes went shut, as if already expecting death. Ian closed the program and let out a breath of relief.

Then he returned to the command prompt.

cd ..

rd /s /q construct

Delete directory and all sub-directories.

Ian left the command running: removing all of the large files from the network drive might take some time. Of course there might be offline backups, through which the torture of mind constructs could continue. But that was for some other Agent to sort out. Maybe this whole place would be destroyed at some point.

Suddenly he became aware of being observed and

spun around. Higher up, behind a railing, stood Baphomet. It had to be him: the hawk-like nose was unmistakable.

“I see you've been digging in the archives,” the head scientist said. “Looking for something specific, perhaps?”

Ian let his gaze travel down: Baphomet appeared to be unarmed. But his right hand held a shiny CD case.

“I have a rather interesting construct file here. It's actually not on the network drives yet.”

Before Ian could react, before he could draw any of his guns, Baphomet broke into a run.

It was a mad, delirious chase through the Archives corridor, heading back into the circle, then down the Experimental Life Forms corridor. Why was Baphomet going there? Would he unleash a mutant or something to his aid?

Along the way, Ian came across another scientist: as he drew his wrist-gun, this time Ian just shot him between the eyes with the M4. He was still falling to the floor when Ian was already past him. The unique look of horror on the man's face would haunt Ian long after. But that would be in the future: it did not matter in the present.

Ian's mind and heart both raced. Was it Jo's backup mind construct? Or a despicable trick? An ambush? Or both?

Ian let off a burst just as Baphomet vanished behind yet another corner. Of course, the head scientist should rather be taken alive. Without explicit and detailed instructions from him, mind contents could probably never be restored.

Ian realized that alerting backup was also a good idea. "Blowfish! Lucas! Erik! I'm chasing Baphomet to the Experimental Life Forms area! If you can, come af-

ter us!"

There was no immediate reply. Then a voice came on the earpiece. Blowfish.

"Acknowledged. We don't have high enough access level for the train platform anyway!"

That was bad. But Baphomet's access card, if they got it, might possibly work.

Ian came to a high cylindrical room. The light there was almost blinding in its brightness. On the bottom, around the circumference, there were steel doors with barred windows on them. Cages?

Baphomet was climbing steep stairs to an observation platform, behind which was a door and a long window, both with reinforced glass.

Had to be a control room of some kind.

If Baphomet would get there and lock himself in, that would be bad.

Ian let loose another burst, but was running too fast to aim accurately. The bullets just struck sparks on the steel stairs, after Baphomet had already passed that particular location.

He was at the door now, inserted his key card –

Calm down and observe the code, Ian ordered himself. He shifted direction so that he could see past Baphomet's right hand as he keyed in his code.

All the digits were on the lowest row of the keypad. Right – left – left. 311.

Baphomet entered.

Ian let out a laugh, not feeling defeated any more. It was the code he had come up with at Erehwon, but never got to try. Three veils before Satan. Then Azerate's eleven.

Now just to get Baphomet out of there.

Hopefully Ian's own access was enough for that.

His laugh froze as the bright lights shut down and were replaced by a rotating red alarm light, the beam sweeping past Ian each second. The door he had entered through came down with a heavy metallic thump: he had been locked in.

An emotionless synthetic voice announced: "Warning – lockdown – experimental life form cage opened."

Ian looked at the row of steel doors. One of them was opening slowly.

From behind came a low, vicious snort. Ian instantly recalled Blowfish's death grunt, how he had compared it to a dangerous caged animal.

Now he would see one for real.

An experimental dangerous caged animal, no less.

Adrenaline pumping, he switched the M4 to full auto. Whatever the animal, or mutant, it could not possibly withstand two-thirds of a magazine.

Now Ian saw it, as the cage was almost fully open.

It was like a giant pig. In the alarm light, its hairy skin looked mostly black. It had to weigh a ton or more: it towered a full two meters high.

It picked up speed, then charged, roaring all the way. Ian had no time to aim. He could only duck to the side, and even that was in the last second.

The animal was unbelievably fast.

But now, he unleashed the remainder of the magazine at it, aiming for the mouth. The animal was hit once or twice, but then it was already dodging to the side. The rest of Ian's burst missed.

He ejected the magazine with disbelief, took out a spare. But before he could slam it home, the animal was already turning toward him, attacking again.

Ian finished and pulled the charging handle just as the front legs struck his chest.

He fell on his back.

CHARGE: 40 PERCENT.

Ian was thankful for the armor: otherwise that first blow could already have been fatal. He held on to the carbine with one hand as the animal reared, letting out a low roar.

He knew he might not have more than this chance. He swung the M4 from behind his back, put his left hand under the barrel for support, then rammed down the trigger.

The roar changed pitch as thirty bullets dug into the animal's belly. Ian could feel its blood splatter in large droplets on his vest and face: it was good the sunglasses protected his eyes.

But still it was not done for. The front legs descended now, hunting for Ian's head. He rolled to the left, tried to get clear. If the animal fell on him with its full weight, he would be done for, armor or not.

He felt a heavy blow against his right shoulder.

CHARGE: 25 PERCENT.

This could not go on for long. He rolled back to the right, then crawled backward while digging his combat knife from its sheath. The animal still towered over him, planning its next attack.

Its head came down: Ian could see the huge teeth now, and was almost overpowered by the sulfur breath. But instead of overpowering him, the smell filled his mind with sudden rage.

That was all he needed.

Gathering all of his strength, he rammed the knife between the eyes. Then he crawled back a few steps more, as the animal finally fell to the riveted floor, dead.

Ian breathed heavily for a few seconds before he even wanted to consider getting up. The bright lights

came back on, and the computer voice spoke: "Lock-down deactivated. Standby for the recycle sequence."

His earpiece crackled to life with Blowfish's voice again. "At the door now!"

"You should be able to open it," Ian replied hurriedly, then released the spent magazine and replaced it with a full one. How many more remaining? A few. And when he ran out, he could start borrowing Blowfish's poison rounds.

Blowfish, Erik and Lucas all burst into the room. Now just to get into the control room before Baphomet could release another mutant pig. If there were more.

Still shaking from the fight, Ian climbed the stairs, inserted his card, and keyed in the code. The green light blinked reassuringly.

He twisted the handle, holding the M4 in his other hand. Baphomet was cowering in the corner of the control room. In his hand was a remote control.

The synthetic voice came back in. "Recycle sequence commencing."

It was potentially something evil.

"Watch out!" Ian shouted behind his back, and saw the floor in the center of the room fold itself open. The giant animal's body slid down, then vanished. Thankfully all three Agents were on the edge of the room instead, heading for the stairs as well.

Ian turned his attention to Baphomet. "The remote. And then the CD. No tricks."

Baphomet considered in quiet for some seconds.

"Don't take forever. I don't have the patience for that," Ian stated flatly.

One more second, and Baphomet threw the remote and the CD case onto the floor. They slid along and stopped at Ian's feet.

It seemed the remote was for the cage doors. That at least was good. It might still come in handy.

But the CD was something else.

It was a demo of a black metal band, Jörmungandr. The cover depicted a tree on a grim black and white landscape, the text red.

“True, it's not a construct dump, but at least the first letter matches,” Baphomet said.

The arrogance!

“Have to say that I'm proud of my achievement, though. First artificial personalty implanted into a human brain.”

Ian felt sudden red hot hatred flash before his eyes. He threw the CD case down with such force that it shattered.

Next, he took hold of the scientist and hauled him roughly out of the room, down the stairs and into the middle of the circular floor. The recycle sequence had finished by now: the floor was level again.

But after he was done with that, he just felt suddenly and enormously tired. Maybe now was the time to jack up with combat drugs already.

Somehow he knew those would not help.

And maybe there was no backup of Jo's mind.

It certainly felt more logical that way: if you were about to convert an enemy to your ally, why to make a backup so that she could be restored? Had Ian been a SCEPTRE overlord, he certainly would have not.

He gave the remote to Blowfish. There was no button to trigger a manual recycle: if there had been, maybe Ian would have pressed it to send the scientist tumbling down. But anything else was unnecessarily complicated. Let Blowfish whatever she wanted.

“Did you search him for cards?” she asked.

Ian shook his head wearily.

Lucas seemed to understand Ian's disappointment and filled in: he went to Baphomet and quickly rifled through his pockets until he found the precious access card.

"The code's 311," Ian said.

"Good," Blowfish said. "Then we have everything we need to impersonate this fucker."

Erik spoke up. "That was an awesome beast. I would have wanted to test myself against it, and to help you. Too bad the door was locked by then."

Though he wanted, Ian did not have the spirit to reply anything. He just walked out of the room, back to the corridor. The rest joined him, and Blowfish pressed each of the cage release buttons in sequence. Immediately the door behind them shut itself. Ian turned to see that the red flashing had started again.

A few seconds passed: then the hissing and spitting noises, stomping rapid footsteps, and the screaming started.

But the Agents were already walking away.

Before returning to the train platform, the Agents headed for the Procedures area. One further scientist came at them: he was cut down with excessive force, both with poisoned 5.56 rounds and Gas-Fist projectiles, as Blowfish and Erik strode in the lead.

"Pick yourself up," Lucas said to Ian, as they walked some meters behind the two. "Whatever it is. What did the scientist say or do to get you in that state?"

Ian was not sure how much he wanted to tell Lucas. After all, he had chased after something very foolish, something that could not have been real.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine. But right now you're a risk to us. Walking like a zombie into what could be the next ambush. Do you actually want to die?"

"Do you?" Ian asked harshly.

"Actually, yes. But only after I witness the Black Light. Go through its very blackness, if at all possible."

After this exchange, silence fell. Ian kept wondering how serious Lucas was with his words. If he was, completely, that did not spell good.

The Procedures area was simply depressive: medical equipment, both standard and obscure, operating ta-

bles with restraints, workstations with large detachable hard disks. It was obvious that the personality implantations and brain scans happened here, but that in itself did not help much.

Ian came across a transparent plastic box, inside which several metal balls resided.

"Those are the failsafe devices," Lucas explained.

Ian held one in his fingers. It looked innocent, but it had to contain sophisticated circuitry inside. As well as the explosive: small but powerful enough to kill.

"Can you disable one?" he asked. He did not actually expect Lucas to have an answer.

"Well, you remember the rising sound it makes. You have that much time," Lucas replied.

"What about an EMP or something?"

"Despite the size, it's well shielded. Perhaps you could confuse it. But I believe it always resets, and then the countdown always starts again."

Ian thought about that. It was better than nothing. He observed his willpower return a bit, and understood something: it was the dissociation that was draining him. It was like going without sleep for a long time. At some point he would have to snap out of it just to let himself recharge.

But now they were all done. Except for the short discussion with Ranger's brain dump, and Baphomet's card, not much had been discovered here.

Ian looked at his watch: it was just over 2 PM. Still over twelve hours until the deadline. The lack of hurry at least was a good thing.

Of course the train trips could still be long.

Two elite black ops with triangle rifles patrolled at the concrete platform, as the Agents crept down the stairs

leading to it. Baphomet's card had indeed allowed them access. Here it was very much like at Erehwon, down to the turret slowly turning in the ceiling. But here it was only a single one instead of two.

Ian did a quick check: neither of elites had long hair, so neither could be Jo. Of course she could have been forced to cut it short in the meanwhile, but somehow Ian suspected that the black ops had more important things to do.

Ian took out an EMP grenade.

"I'll take out the turret. Fire at will in three, two, one, now." he whispered.

During "two" he had pressed the button on the grenade.

During "now" he threw it hard against the floor. The grenade bounced high into the air, detonating near the turret.

The turret fell motionless, disabled.

The black ops, too, were caught at least in the secondary blast radius. Their adaptive armors flashed erratically for a second, then became a solid black.

At the same time they were being riddled with assault rifle and Gas-Fist fire from behind Ian: both fell rather quickly.

The Agents strode to the platform. There was no further danger: the ambush had been brutally effective.

Ian wanted to check something.

He waited five seconds.

It was then the whine of the failsafe devices started, followed by almost simultaneous detonations. The EMP had possibly delayed it five seconds, or then the black ops had only become truly incapacitated now. It was hard to tell.

Lucas picked up one of the triangle-rifles and all the

spare magazines he could find: rectangular battery packs, four of them total. He only had the M4 in addition, so the total weight would not be too much.

“How do we call a train?” Erik wondered aloud.

There were two of the monorails disappearing into both directions, but both were devoid of any train cars.

“Maybe we have to wait,” Blowfish mused.

Keeping close watch on the stairs, they settled to wait.

Ten minutes passed.

Then twenty.

Then half an hour.

What if everyone at this complex who needed and had clearance to leave, had already done so, and there would be no more cars arriving? Or then, if all the train cars were elsewhere, and if the trips took a long time, then they just needed to wait more.

Finally, after forty-five minutes, there was light at the end of the tunnel.

“Quick, into hiding,” Blowfish hissed.

They huddled into a tight group under the stairs. From there it was quite an ideal view at the arriving car, but all of them could not fire at the coming passengers safely. And then there was the matter of not damaging the car itself, which might be their only ticket out of here for a long time.

The car stopped at the platform. Like at Erehwon, it was no longer than five meters, shaped like a bullet from both ends.

The doors opened.

Ominously, the car was empty.

“Let's take it before it leaves,” Erik growled.

They sprang up from under the stairs, going for the open doors. The car seemed to wait patiently.

Inside, there were eight spartan seats, four on each side, and vertical bars to hold on to. On the whole the car was rather featureless: the interior was painted in a similar yellow as the Erehwon prisoner transport carts. Both in the front and the rear, there was a control console with a touch screen. Next to it was the familiar keypad and card lock: it seemed one had to verify access once more before being allowed to ride.

But then, how would the console operate? If they did something wrong, could the whole car become a death-trap? The idea of traveling underground for a long time was not exactly reassuring. Would there even be enough oxygen? What if power cut out?

However, there was no other method of transportation for now, so this had to be trusted. Ian walked up to the front console, inserted Baphomet's card, and keyed in the code 311.

The touch screen came to life with a beep, showing a simple diagram of the track system.

SCIENCE (YOU ARE HERE)
EREHWON (UNAVAILABLE)
BLACK OPS TRAINING
BLACK OPS COMMAND
EXECUTIVE MANSION
VOLCANO RESORT

Lucas seemed disappointed upon seeing these. Ian understood that he would have liked to see the anti-cosmic place of power directly. But Ian was fascinated: Executive Mansion sounded like a lovely place, as did Volcano Resort. Maybe on some later mission, if such came.

“Black ops command?” Ian asked to confirm.

"Definitely," Blowfish replied.

Black ops command it was, then.

As soon as Ian touched the screen and made the choice, the display changed:

BLACK OPS COMMAND

ETA: 7 HOURS

HAVE A PLEASANT JOURNEY

"Seven hours?" Blowfish asked in disbelief.

Of course it was good to gather strength, but the arrival would be closer to 10 PM. That would leave little more than five hours to the actual moment. There was also no telling how much earlier the sky projections would start, or when the Bringer of Satan's Wrath would actually launch.

The doors closed and the train car picked up speed. The acceleration was almost not of this world, and it never seemed to end. The Agents were nearly thrown to the floor. Ian gripped the nearest vertical bar hard, then settled down into a seat.

Seven hours. He had better spend it well.

Besides resting, there was one thing he definitely should do now, while he had the chance.

"Guys, I'm about to do something," he spoke with a low deliberate voice. "I'm coming out of dissociation. I've been in it for too long, and it's wearing me down. But when I come out, there's no telling of what happens."

"You might start shooting at us?" Erik asked.

"No. Not like that. Just think of our absinthe drinking session. But amplified tenfold."

"Hey. That's classified."

"OK, OK, I'm not going there."

Ian gathered courage for a few seconds.

Then he started to ease out of it, and his fears were confirmed: after so many days, after being so used to it, it was going to be hard.

Everything that had happened in the past week came back at him, starting from Sarge's transformation and death. Then, the capture and the subsequent torture and escape, Apollyon's uncertain fate and Ian's breakdown in the forest. And finally the black op raid: how the lives of Nastassja and Blackhand had ended, and how Jo had played a part in that.

All the pain and sorrow and senseless violence.

The tears were impossible to stop, and the nausea was turning his stomach upside down. He felt an irresistible urge to vomit, but knew that inside the car it would not be a good idea. If at all possible, he owe the others to fight it.

Perhaps it was merciful that he was also tired: in less than half an hour, he was asleep.

“Time to wake up, Agent.” Erik was tugging at him, gently first, then more harshly.

At first Ian was not exactly sure where he was. Then he understood: the train car.

He felt somewhat rejuvenated. But the general unease on his mind told him that it would be much better to dissociate again. Maybe now he could take it for the rest of this mission.

“How long to go?” he asked while slipping back into the preferable mental state.

“Fifteen minutes,” Blowfish replied.

Ian started to stretch his muscles: he felt stiff after sleeping in a sitting position. Then, almost mechanically, he checked his weapons. Everything seemed fine enough. The remaining minutes passed slowly: it was almost like riding into one's own execution.

Finally the train car started to slow down.

“Everyone, guns ready,” Blowfish said. “Remember, this is home turf for the black ops. I'd expect a lot stiffer resistance.”

The platform came into view: a solitary enemy patrolled back and forth. Not Jo either, Ian observed. In fact not an elite at all.

There was complete freedom to kill.

Before Ian could react himself, Lucas launched a rifle grenade as soon as the car doors opened. That had to be the third functionality on the triangle rifle.

The soldier was thrown against the back wall by the force of the explosion, his body terribly mutilated.

As soon as they were out, a familiar turret descended. Lucas fired another grenade in quick succession: the platform was now clear.

Then, he spent a while testing all the operation modes of the weapon. It turned out that the barrel rotated according to which one was active.

Finally, after test-firing all modes, he settled on the plasma burst.

They strode up the steep spiral stair case. As they got up, Ian began to feel the oppressive cold dampness of the air. It was as if they had arrived to a wholly different place on Earth.

They came at a closed door of steel, which was slightly trapezoidal in shape. On this side there was no keypad, just a button to open the door.

Ian hated those: there was no way to control how fast the door would open. They would possibly expose themselves.

“Let's stack up on both sides of the door. Then I press it, and we peer out, very cautiously.”

It felt good to be mostly in control again and even somewhat rested. The combat stimulants would not be needed at least yet.

As soon as all four were in place, Ian leaned out and pushed the button.

Outside, the sky was dark. A large walled compound, lit up by bright floodlights. Off in the distance Ian could see a trapezoidal concrete bunker. As he peered out

more, he saw several more of them.

So, this was the black ops' command center. At least it looked roughly as uninviting as possible. And the air outside was even more cold and damp. Where exactly they were?

"I believe we are somewhere in South America," Lucas said. "Quite close to the southern tip."

"Patagonia, perhaps?" Erik suggested.

Ian remembered something about Patagonian myths. Odd tales of witches who could fly after they spat out their intestines, among other things. In any case, it was a fitting place for SCEPTRE's operations.

But they could not linger in the doorway forever. No matter what waited outside, they had to confront it.

The dark and the floodlights were a bad combination: again the night vision became unusable. Thermal would be better, but its range was not unlimited.

As Ian got out, he caught a glimpse of something large moving. He waited some more seconds and it came into view fully: a bipedal robot, perhaps a whole ten meters tall. Larger than anything he had seen before. He peered into another direction, and another came into view.

This was doubly bad.

What weapons they could possibly use to combat such monstrosities?

Grenades, perhaps.

Better was probably to avoid them altogether.

Another question was whether either Suhrim's or Baphomet's access would be enough here.

All four were out now. They inched along the wall of the building they had come out from: it was a smaller trapezoid. To their left there was another, larger one. For now the tall robots were marching the other way.

“We try that building?” Ian asked.

Nods.

They ran in a low crouch to the entrance.

At first Ian inserted Baphomet's card to the box next to it, and pressed the three digits.

Red light.

It seemed scientists were not welcome. Well, then his forged access based on Suhrim's would have to do. Otherwise they were practically finished as soon as the big robots would turn.

Own card. 218.

Green light.

However, the momentary relief faded as Ian found himself staring into an elite black op's face mask. This one was female: Ian froze as he thought the height and the head shape to look familiar.

She fired her G36 without hesitation.

Ian had no time to evade.

Before the first round hit, he could at least confirm the soldier was not Jo. The hair was short.

CHARGE: 10 PERCENT.

CHARGE: 0 PERCENT.

The third round that hit Ian's vest hurt a lot more than the previous two. Now his EM armor was out.

Ian's own carbine was also firing by now, but the aim had been thrown upward, bullets flying to the ceiling of the entrance corridor.

But from behind came the low repeating sound of the Gas-Fist. The first projectile hit the black op's chest, the second and the third together severed her head.

Ian ducked low as he saw four more elites turn around deeper inside the bunker, weapons ready. While he fired aimed bursts at the group, a powerful energy beam from behind cut into them as well.

Lucas.

It did not take many seconds before all four inside were neutralized.

However, vengeance came in the form of a rifle grenade launched at the last instant. As Ian was lying low, it went right over him, but Lucas, Erik and Blowfish would not be as lucky.

The grenade detonated.

Ian rolled around immediately to check the damage: all three were lying on the ground, rising up with painful slowness. Maybe, just maybe their armors had protected them. But even so, next time they certainly would not. Of course, had Ian been standing instead, with no armor power, he would have been dead.

The Gas-Fist lay in front of the group, oddly twisted. There were no lights on it.

Likely it was beyond repair now.

And the robots were going to turn any second.

Ian scrambled on his feet to help his comrades up. From up close they were a sorry sight: their Agent coats torn, blood running down their faces.

Together, as a chaotic mass of clothes, flesh and weapons, they hurried inside the bunker. Ian closed the door just as there came a sound of a rocket launching. In the next instant, the bunker floor trembled from the nearby explosion.

The robots had to be taken seriously.

The insides of the bunker seemed like some kind of a communications control room: lit displays filled all the walls and several tables.

And then it hit Ian: the four black ops. Any of them Jo? It would have been impossible to see in time: the plasma burst fired by Lucas had punished them all equally.

Thankfully none of them was.

This confirmed, Ian could turn back to the Agents.

"The grenade hit the Gas-Fist head on," Erik breathed, still in a rage.

"Better so than it hitting you," Blowfish replied.

"Yeah, but still. It's the same as when my bike was destroyed. Flesh repairs itself, steel does not."

Ian shrugged. Certainly this was deep philosophy of over-men, above mere mortals.

"Are you all roughly OK? Like no-one's going to die in the next minute?" he asked.

Nods and silence. That had to be good enough.

"Anyone have any armor remaining?"

Heads shaking. And that was bad.

Ian went to the nearest console he could find. The good side to this surprise attack was that none of the black ops had managed to lock their terminals.

With the keyboard and the mouse, he could quickly switch between different SCEPTRE live video streams, including camera feeds at this compound.

Those were not encouraging: in addition to the robots, a group of black ops – almost twenty – was moving out from the largest of the trapezoids. That was possibly the command bunker itself. Perhaps from there, the launch of the Bringer could be prevented.

First they just had to get past the black ops and the robots, then storm the bunker itself. With no armor power remaining.

And Jo could be any of the enemies.

Those thoughts felt like death.

Next to the largest trapezoid, there was a helipad. A black stealth helicopter, the smaller variety, stood on it. It would possibly be their ticket out. But that was distant future.

Near to the helipad stood also a lone missile truck, similar to the one they had destroyed at the science complex courtyard.

“Blowfish, take a look at these screens,” Ian said. Hopefully the Agent BOFH would have ideas.

Blowfish joined her on another console, while Lucas went to a third. Only Erik remained standing, possibly still devastated by the loss of the Gas-Fist.

“If we could take control of the robots, it would help,” Blowfish said.

Like back at Erehwon. But somehow Ian guessed it was not going to be that easy. Before they could plan any further course of action, a voice came over the bunker intercom.

Ian certainly recognized it. It was Lilith.

“Agents in the communications bunker! You are being surrounded, you are outnumbered, and there is no escape! However, two of you may redeem yourself, and effect your full re-integration into SCEPTRE, pending of course evaluation, conditioning and re-programming. This means you, assassin Reaper, and assassin trainee Necro. Kill the other Agents, then surrender. You have exactly thirty seconds. Fail to comply, and you will be obliterated. The countdown starts now.”

Ian noticed a camera on the wall, watching them.

He lifted his M4 and fired a burst: the camera no longer existed.

The voice came back in. “Unfortunately, as we now have no way to verify your compliance, we must assume that you failed the task.”

It was possibly only a ten seconds, even less, before the black ops would reach and storm the bunker. Ian noticed Blowfish was still tapping one of the keyboards, intensely concentrated.

“Prepare to fire in case some get through the door,” she shouted.

Some?

What was she planning?

Ian and Lucas both readied their weapons. Erik hesitated a few seconds, then knelt down, took the M21 from his back, and peered at the door through the scope.

Ian took a quick look left: one of the video feeds was focused on the missile truck. Suddenly the four long missiles on its back all lit up: they launched, trailing individual arcs up to the sky, then headed back down.

Blowfish had made another Agent BOFH intrusion, one that might just save their lives. Hopefully all the missiles were conventional.

Right now, Ian concentrated on the door: he would see the aftermath later if he lived. From outside came four huge detonations, no more than a second between each.

The door burst open.

Two elites appeared, triangular rifles ready. Before Ian could fire at them, a crackle sounded, and his vision went black.

EMP!

At the same time Erik's M21 barked.

Ian had no time to rip the sunglasses off, and there certainly had been no time to check the identity of the intruders. He just had to fire blindly, hoping it was enough. He kept the trigger depressed, waiting for a round or energy beam to cut through his chest or head.

The M21 also fired several times.

At last Ian clicked dry and a silence descended. He took off the sunglasses, and observed there were no further injuries on himself or anyone else.

“This is useless too,” Lucas said and threw the triangle rifle to the bunker floor. He did not have glasses either.

“Think positively,” Ian said with light sarcasm.

“The robots are very dead,” came Blowfish's voice. “As are most of the black ops. The rest, perhaps four in total, are regrouping at the command bunker.”

At least now there was some time to think again. It was possible Lilith was here at this very compound: this time she could not be allowed to get away again. The opposition had been thinned down considerably, but still it was not going to be easy.

Even through the dissociation, having to constantly check whether each black op was Jo or not, was getting at Ian. The two latest intruders had not been.

Now he scanned through the video feeds one more time. There was one he had missed. A pyramid in the middle of a jungle. Mayan, possibly.

“Hey,” Lucas said with surprise.

Ian believed they thought the same: this could be the secret anti-cosmic place. Now just to find its coordinates, and Lucas could fulfill his quest.

On the video feed, a large group of black ops stood in guard. Probably closer to fifty. Some of them, at least ten, had to be the elite variety: their uniforms seemed to blend with the surrounding foliage. Ian found that he could zoom and pan the camera view.

A group of robed people entered the pyramid now. SCEPTRE priests, certainly. It was a possibility Ahriman was also there.

Two of the elite black ops followed the priests inside, so that they had their backs turned while marching. At this point Ian made an observation: he zoomed with the camera to the entering group to verify. The left-side elite black op had something hanging from under the helmet.

Curly hair.

Ian could not be a hundred percent certain, and by now the black op in question had vanished inside, but at this point it would be too odd of a coincidence.

He had possibly found Jo.

As far as dissociation allowed emotions, he was both glad and not glad at the same time. Now they could fire at anyone here at the command center with impunity. But then they would have to get past fifty black ops to reach the pyramid and her.

Lucas would want to go there in any case. He was willing to die for the Black Light. But the others – Ian could not honestly take their lives on his conscience.

The next moments would be interesting, Ian thought in a detached way. To see who would go where.

Detached thinking certainly meant the dissociation was deep. But there was something worrying: he had not entered Agent-time ever since returning from the camp ruins.

Was that lost to him now? What if he needed it, but could not reach the state?

“We have better chances to take the main bunker now,” Blowfish said close to his ear, startling him.

“Any other weapons we can use remotely?” Ian asked.

“Afraid not. We have to do this traditionally.”

Erik turned at them, M21 ready. “What are we waiting for, then?”

By now only Blowfish had working sunglasses: she had been far from the EMP blast. It was indeed going to be very traditional. Then there was the matter of access to the main bunker: would Suhrim's be enough? Of course they could kill all enemies first and worry about that later.

"Let's head out," Blowfish said. "Check your weapons."

Ian put a fresh magazine in, and then they all were leaving. Blowfish peered first through the opening, scanning with the glasses. "One coming this way from the left. Patience –"

Erik had his knife out.

As the black op came into view, Erik lunged forward and slit the soldier's throat, then held his mouth shut while he fell. It was a brutal and evil surprise kill, but those would now be necessary.

Possibly three remaining now.

Blowfish went fully outside and rounded a corner. Beyond the view would open up to the helipad and the main bunker itself.

Ian followed, rifle held high.

"Two between the helipad and the command center. Let's try to get to the helipad first," Blowfish whispered.

Then they all ran as silently as possibly, staying outside the floodlight beams. There were four huge craters on the ground, the remains of two fallen robots, and about fifteen black op corpses scattered around.

Arriving at the helipad, the Agents crouched at a corner: this allowed an excellent view of the remaining enemies.

Suddenly a sharp and heavy sniper shot sounded.

Erik caught a round in his right thigh. He fell against

the diagonal wall of the helipad, grunting in pain.

“Shit,” Ian breathed.

The third enemy was somewhere behind. Ian turned quickly, but found that his bare eyes could not help much in the darkness, especially when combined with the floodlights' glare.

Then he thought he saw something. On the roof of one of the trapezoids, not the communication center but the one beyond, there was movement. A hundred and fifty meters away, perhaps.

Ian lifted his rifle, squinting and peering through the sights. He let off a total of three bursts. It was hard to tell if he hit.

In the next instant, another round struck the concrete next to him. Was that the dying sniper's last revenge?

Ian waited a few long seconds.

No more shots.

Therefore he had to assume only two remained. Those in the front.

“Erik, how bad is it?” Blowfish asked, crouched over him.

“I hope I don't have to run much –” he growled.

“Let's end this now,” Ian said through gritted teeth.

“Agreed,” Lucas joined in. “On my mark. You take the left one. One, two, three –”

The rifles of Ian and Lucas both spit out a burst, and the two black ops ahead fell. The way to the main bunker was now clear.

“I'll go check the door,” Blowfish said. “Cover me.”

She ran to the door of the large trapezoid, while Ian and Lucas kept scanning around. Erik was still lying low, recovering from the bullet hit.

Ian could tell Blowfish was now trying her own ac-

cess card, but as seconds passed and the door did not open, it could not have been enough.

They needed stronger access.

But from where?

Suddenly the door opened. Someone inside?

"Blowfish! Watch –" Ian yelled, but his voice froze mid-sentence.

In the beam of the floodlight situated behind the large bunker, Ian saw that a blue-uniformed black op had come out, holding a bullpup rifle to Blowfish's head.

Lilith.

"Everyone! Drop your weapons. You have until I count to three, then you'll see how well your sysadmin can perform hacks and intrusions without a head!" she shouted, the voice nevertheless controlled.

"One."

Ian froze in place. Lilith would interpret any sideways movement of his rifle as aggression. Then Blowfish would be history. And besides, Lilith held Blowfish in front of her: hitting the Agent BOFH was more than likely.

Now if ever Ian wished for Agent-time.

"Two."

Lucas seemed frozen as well, though his rifle pointed in the generally right direction.

Gunshot.

Ian saw Blowfish fall toward the ground.

No. Shit. This could not happen –

Then he understood the gunshot had come from very close by. From Erik's M21 rifle. There was no telling if he had actually hit anything.

But now, Lilith no longer had a hostage.

It was time to open up properly.

Ian aimed at Lilith's center of mass and rammed the trigger down. Next to him, Lucas did the same. The black op commander was hit with an absolute cloud of lead: she fell, firing her rifle aimlessly up in the air.

By all laws of logic, she was dead. But Ian did not feel much of anything at all. Very little satisfaction. Just an all-consuming coldness in place.

Blowfish had fallen on the ground, but was already getting up.

Erik got up as well, using the helipad for support.

"You shot me," Blowfish yelled at him.

Then Ian saw it: blood ran down the right side of her face. How badly was she hit?

"Quick, everyone inside while it's still open," Blowfish went on. "It's clear!"

Ian and Lucas helped Erik inside and put him down on the closest chair they could find. This bunker resembled the communications center, but was much larger. There were big radar and map displays on the rear wall.

As Ian got a closer look, as he saw Blowfish examining Lilith's pockets for anything valuable, he understood that Erik's bullet had nicked her right ear. Even one centimeter to the right and she might have been dead. But she seemed to be over it already.

Half an hour later the wounds had been treated well enough, and Blowfish had performed a preliminary examination of the computer systems at the command bunker. The latitude and longitude of the anti-cosmic pyramid had been found on a terminal that displayed the coordinates of each camera feed.

"It definitely seems like they've hacked into some – military system. The connection's been routed through

many nodes and I can't tell exactly. But probably it's a missile silo in Russia. The problem is that now it's locked out again: I actually have to wait for the launch sequence to start before I can attempt to stop it," Blowfish said.

"When does it start?" Ian asked.

"11:00 AM GMT. Eleven minutes before the anti-cosmic moment. The launch countdown itself is one minute."

Eleven again. It made sense in a twisted way.

"What about the sky projection stuff? We have to assume your hack has been found and removed."

"Don't worry about that. I've got it covered. I can access that network from here and redo the hack as many times as necessary. There's a working C compiler on this machine," Blowfish explained.

That at least was relieving.

"So, do you think Jo's at that pyramid?" she asked then.

Ian considered. His heart certainly wanted to think so. It also wanted to think that the failsafe could actually be stopped. His mind was not sure of either.

"I'm not a hundred percent certain. But Lucas is going there anyway, so I'll be going with him," Ian replied, and looked behind to see Lucas nod. There was an odd, absent look on his face. Most unlike him. He probably had been serious earlier and was preparing to meet the anti-cosmic Black Light.

"Well then. You should take a look at the chopper: it should be fast enough to reach that place in time. You probably need to do some bypass shit. There can be biometric identification. But Lucas has done that before, right?"

"That's true," Lucas answered.

“Would like to be going with you,” Erik said. “But right now I believe I’m only good for sitting around.”

“Don’t forget shooting,” Blowfish said. “Right now I’m not picking up anything, but that doesn’t mean more black ops won’t arrive here, either by air or by the train system. I’d be surprised if they don’t try to re-take this bunker.”

Ian considered. Though it was now quiet around the compound, things might get very unpleasant later.

Blowfish went on. “Before I forget: Ian, you should take my sunglasses or you’ll be cut off from us. I can patch into the Agent comms system from this bunker.”

“Isn’t that evil?” Ian asked. “To contact Agents through a SCEPTRE system?”

“It is, in a way. But it’s just temporary. After we’re done, all circuits will be re-scrambled. It’s not like SCEPTRE can find us better afterward just because of that.”

Blowfish gave him her sunglasses: it turned out that was not enough, as also the main transceiver hidden within Ian’s coat had been burned by the EMP. They also had to swap Agent coats.

Finally, with a simple “Good luck” from both Blowfish and Erik, Ian and Lucas exited the bunker into the cold damp late evening air.

“Fifty black ops at the pyramid,” Ian said. “It’s suicide.”

“Might be,” Lucas replied.

“Do you think we could pass as black ops, if we took their weapons, armor and the head gear?”

“It’s worth trying.”

It was 2:35 AM, an almost cloudless night with the moon shining high, as Ian and Lucas finally got the jungle clearing with the pyramid in sight. Of the trip north, Ian had flown the first two hours, then Lucas had taken over. They both had injected combat stimulants to stay alert: Ian sensed his heart thudding heavier than normal and felt somewhat tight-strung.

They had managed to scavenge black op fatigues and face masks – the standard, dark variety, not the adaptive elite uniforms – that were not suspiciously dirty or bloody.

For some time they had debated whether a standard black op was allowed to carry the triangular-barreled rifle. In any case Lucas had taken one, while Ian was armed with a G36. Ian also had flashbangs with him, in case incapacitating groups of enemies for a short while was necessary. The black op uniform pockets were much less numerous than on the Agent coat: he could not have chosen several varieties.

Disabling the biometric identification and the most important anti-tampering mechanisms on the chopper had taken some time, despite Lucas having experience. At one point Ian had wondered whether they would

make it, and true enough, they had cut it somewhat close.

Ian could not tell if there were exactly fifty black ops any more, but in any case, when viewed from above, several soldiers were still patrolling around the site. The lack of formation would make it easier to blend in.

Off to the side there was a collection of construction site huts: thick electricity cables snaked from the pyramid to them. Ian understood those to be the scientists' domain: the power of the Black Light, if any materialized, would be transferred through those cables to be analyzed by the men in white.

The scientists probably were not allowed inside the actual pyramid. Right now, ritualistic fires burned around it: it seemed like an unhallowed place.

Certainly fit for witnessing an anti-cosmic event.

Or creating it?

Ian could not be sure of what he believed himself. It was possible that the priests were perpetrating a hoax on the scientists. Or vice versa. It was impossible to tell. But as long as the missile was stopped, and if the sky projections never materialized, probably anything that happened here would not matter. Except getting Jo out of here safely, of course.

Lucas landed among some trees – by performing a powered-off autorotation to be more stealthy – a two hundred meters away from the clearing and the black ops. There probably was an actual helipad closer, but they had no idea of the landing procedure and possible code words needed. It was wisest not to try their luck.

It was also best to avoid any face-to-face or verbal contact and to look as unimportant as possible.

Standard black ops just doing their jobs.

Ian had the sunglasses underneath his face mask

and also carried the transceiver unit from Blowfish's coat, allowing him to stay in contact with her and Erik as necessary.

Of course there was the danger of even one EMP burst from Jo or any other black op, or an accidental discharge from Lucas: if the glasses or the radio got disabled, then Ian would be cut off.

He made a final check of his gear. As far as he could tell, everything was OK.

They walked into the clearing.

No suspicion so far from the few soldiers around.

"Probably only elites are allowed inside," Lucas noted.

"Yeah. But all the elite uniforms were disabled or torn in some way."

"True. We just have to make our way in when no-one's looking."

Circling around idly, they waited for a moment when no-one was watching the pyramid entrance. Then they slipped inside, into the shadows within.

More fires burned inside the pyramid, casting an orange glow all around. There was a smell of incense: the overall ambiance reminded Ian of Black Dragon's backstage room.

From four directions, stone steps descended to an altar in the middle: on a wide pedestal, also of rough stone, a large eleven-faceted black crystal stood. It appeared to be polished to a shine.

Outside the steps, eleven statues of devils and demons were arrayed in a wide circle. Ian could remember and recite all the names in his mind: Molok, Beelzebuth, Rofocale, Astarot, Asmodeus, Baal, Belfegor, Abramelek, Lilith, Naamah, Satan.

Moving in shadows and crouched low, he and Lucas hid behind two of the statues.

Three priests in red robes were standing at the altar, reciting anti-cosmic formulae in muffled voices. Ahri-man with his majestic black beard clearly stood in the middle. Was he a SCEPTRE high priest? It looked that way.

In the rear, two elite black ops stood in guard, both holding the triangle rifles.

Ian zoomed with the Agent sunglasses and was now absolutely positive that the left-side one was Jo. The curls of the hair could not be replicated with such accuracy, or it would take a huge coincidence.

"The one on the left is Jo," he whispered to Lucas. "Let me deal with her. Do not fire anywhere near her under any circumstances. Understood?"

"Understood," Lucas whispered back.

"And – whatever happens when the clock hits zero, it will probably create confusion. Then it's easier for us to make our move."

Lucas nodded silently. Then, they waited. It would not be long until the moment.

At 3 AM, Ian's earpiece came to life with Blowfish's voice. "The missile launch countdown's starting. Shit, one minute to try to stop this. Isn't exactly funny. Wish me luck."

One minute passed.

"Damn! Couldn't hack it – it's launching now. Don't worry, I'll think of something..."

Ian could feel his pulse go up. He clenched the gun tighter as droplets of sweat started to form on his forehead. Dissociation and combat drugs were not fully helping to fight the anxiety.

And still, it would probably become yet worse.

Seven minutes later there came a slight earthquake. Or did Ian imagine it?

Ahriman began to speak in a booming voice. Back at the black ops command center Ian had not seen an actual video feed from within, but it was likely that the speech was now being broadcast within SCEPTRE facilities. Otherwise there would not be much of an audience: only the priests, an elite black op guard, and then Ian, Lucas and Jo.

“Brothers! Soon, the event we have waited for thousands and thousands of years will come to its fulfillment. The ten cosmic dimensions will at last be aligned right, only to be usurped and extinguished by the eleventh one, the anti-cosmic dimension. Azerate! As the eleven dragon heads unite, as the Wrathful Chaos grows, as the current 218 hits this very place and this very crystal you see before your eyes, then the three Veils before Satan – Chaos, Emptiness and Darkness – begin to open. And we – we shall channel the Black Light! The imperfect, tyrannical creation of the Demiurge will start to unravel as we enter a new anti-cosmic and chaotic Aeon. The Aeon of Azerate. The Aeon of Satan! Hail Azerate! Hail Satan!”

The priests on left and right of Ahriman joined the speech for the four final words. But it was clear that Ahriman was the leader, the high priest.

Ian looked at his watch just as it hit 3:11 AM.

Suddenly a much more powerful rumble came. It felt like the floor was actually shaking now. A low, intense hum filled the air.

“Holy shit,” Ian breathed quietly.

He took a look at the crystal: it seemed to be sucking away the light around it, creating a deeper blackness than its own color.

Ian did not know such thing to be possible. What was happening? Were the scientists' devices creating such illusion?

"Hail Azerate!" the priests repeated.

Finally there came almost an explosion, like a sonic boom, and eleven narrow beams of black light shot skyward from the crystal. They started to rotate, dancing around almost randomly.

That was the cue for Lucas to jump out, screaming madly and firing plasma bursts around.

"Intruder! Impostor!" Ahriman shouted.

The elite black ops came to life, aiming their triangle rifles in turn. Jo seemed to act with total, clinical precision.

Ahriman and the two other priests pulled large black handguns from under their robes. They were not Desert Eagles, but possibly custom-designed instead.

So far Lucas was not hitting anyone: Ian could not let him just get slaughtered. And it was possible he might hit Jo despite his promise. This battle had to be brought under control somehow.

Ian got up running from behind his statue as well, the G36 in hand.

Lucas somersaulted high in the air as he spewed hot plasma around: the height and force were so extreme that Ian could never have believed him to be capable of that.

By now Jo and the other black op were firing at Lucas, also using the plasma burst mode. One burst hit Lucas in the side, leaving a ragged smoking hole in the uniform. It had to be a severe burn, but he did not even slow down.

Seeing that the other intruder was covered, the priests turned to aim at Ian.

As they loosed the first shots, Ian dived to right, opposite to where he had come from, while firing an extended burst. The left-side priest fell backward and did not get up – at least not immediately.

Ahriman ducked behind the pedestal.

Ian hit the ground, setting his sights on the right-side priest now. He was turning the handgun toward Ian and fired just as Ian leaned reflexively to the left.

He could hear the heavy bullet whistle past his right ear. That was too close for comfort.

But now Ian's sights were aligned: he pressed the trigger and the priest caught at least three or four rounds in the upper torso. He staggered under the hits, but did not fall.

Instead, he fired again as Ian was still on the ground: Ian could hear the fabric of the black op uniform tear on his right side.

A minor pain came through the dissociation: the bullet had at least scraped the skin.

It was getting dangerous, even without considering Jo and the other black op: they were still fixated on Lucas, who still ran around the room.

Ian took aim once more: the next burst caught the priest in the neck. Now the handgun clattered to the stone floor and the priest fell, clutching the wound. The priests except Ahriman should be out of action now.

Ian knew he had now used well over a half of the magazine. While he got back onto his feet and broke into a run again, he changed magazines.

Better to be prepared.

Ian was surprised by a hot plasma burst traveling past him at very close distance. He could feel the air heat up, and as he looked ahead, he knew Jo had fired.

Lucas performed one more high somersault, while

he seemed to fiddle with the weapon controls.

Switching modes.

He launched a rifle grenade, hitting the crystal squarely in the center. The explosion shattered it: a spinning vortex of pure blackness formed in place.

Now Ian truly did not know what was happening. That vortex could not possibly be man-made: it almost seemed as if laws of physics did not hold any more.

The vortex grew slightly.

"No!" Ahriman screamed from cover. "You're ruining everything!"

Lucas launched another grenade, whose explosion engulfed the second black op. He was thrown through the air and slumped lifeless near the rear stairs.

Over the chaotic battle, Ian had no chance to hear whether his failsafe activated.

Screaming madly again, Lucas dropped the rifle and jumped right through the vortex. Black flames seemed to consume him. He came through from the other side, the uniform burned and falling off him in large charred pieces, raw burned skin visible.

Meanwhile, Jo fired at Ian again –

And this one was a hit.

Involuntarily, Ian let out a cry of agony as the plasma burst singed his left arm sleeve. As the fabric fell off, Ian saw a red burn beneath.

He had to close the distance and disarm Jo somehow. The next hit could be even more dangerous.

Could he fire at her weapon?

It was risky, but worth a shot.

Ahriman popped out of cover, handgun ready, but did not seem to know whom to fire at.

Ian took aim: Jo was running too, so they were almost circling each other, getting closer all the time. He

fired a short burst, estimating her velocity –

The 5.56 bullets almost threw the long rifle from Jo's hands. She still held to it with one hand, but was clearly surprised and slowed down a bit.

That was the sign for Ian to switch direction and lunge directly at her. He held his rifle sideways and hit her jaw with it.

Jo was thrown backward.

But on the other side, Lucas was not satisfied yet.

He turned in a wide circle, smoke rising from his clothes and skin, and jumped through the black vortex for the second time.

This time skin peeled down to muscle. To Ian it was a horrible sight, and Lucas screamed, but it seemed more like from pleasure or rapture than from agony.

It was as if he wanted to unite with the Black Light, no matter if it burned him. Ian wondered: how the nanites would repair that damage?

Right now Ian and Jo were wrestling on the ground, their weapons out of reach. Jo's teeth were showing in an expression of fierce, total rage: Ian knew she would try to bite him.

“Weak Agent,” she snarled in between attempts.

Ian could not think of a response: she seemed too far gone yet. Instead, he caught a glimpse of Ahriman as he got some determination at last and fired several times at the approaching Lucas.

Jo tried to punch Ian in the face, but he twisted away at the last instant. Then, he got another look at the other two.

Lucas had caught several rounds straight in the chest, but did not miss a step: instead he tossed the high priest cruelly aside as soon as they came to contact.

But then his steam ran out and he fell on his back. His almost-naked body still smoked.

Jo launched another punch, and this one was a solid hit to the left cheekbone: Ian saw stars. He rolled away to gather strength, while at the same time trying to reach Jo's rifle.

Ahriman got up weakly, extended his gun toward Lucas, and fired once more before seemingly passing out.

Lucas spasmed: one more nasty hit to the torso.

He turned slowly to his unhurt side, then lay unmoving.

Ian reached Jo's rifle and tried to remember: which way to the EMP burst mode from the plasma burst? Left? Right? Left, he decided, and pressed the button to rotate the barrel in position.

Left Hand Path.

But by now Jo was on top of him, pushing the weapon away, hammering blows into his torso and some to the jaw. Ian knew he could not keep up with this much longer. His strength was already fading.

In desperation he called her name.

"I don't get you. I'm Fury," came the reply.

No reasoning with her. But this fight had to be ended.

Ian only had a slight theory, how. If he either had misinterpreted, or had chosen the wrong weapon mode, Jo would certainly die.

Ian got one last look at Lucas: he grinned and gave a thumbs-up. He had fulfilled his quest – to pass through the Black Light. Had it not been for Ahriman, he could have lived.

The thumbs-up was the sign.

Not the Sign of the Gun, but good enough.

Now Ian would have to fulfill his own.

Ian gathered all his remaining strength to a single powerful blow. A right hook. It struck Jo in the jaw, and its force caused her to also hit the back of her head against the stone floor.

She stopped moving for a second –

And now, as far as Ian could tell, he entered Agent-time.

The whine of the failsafe device started. Jo's EEG had entered a sufficient level of unconsciousness.

He did not have many seconds.

He ripped off her face mask, partially dislodged already, reached for the rifle and swung it around, rammed it hard against her nose, then pulled the trigger.

If it was the grenade mode, they both would be dead.

If it was the plasma burst, she would get a gaping hole through her head, killing her instantly.

An electric crackle sounded.

Directed EMP, the right choice. Ian saw noise in his sunglasses' vision. He hoped they would not fail now.

They did not. The noise vanished. The whine stopped.

He had a couple more of seconds now.

As the whole world still seemed to go slow, he reached into his pocket for the Agent Multi-Tool, held it against Jo's left nostril, and pressed the button marked FOE.

Foreign Object Extractor.

Instantly, the tool started to extend inside her nasal cavity. The failsafe was still silent. One, two, then three seconds passed, appearing much too slow. The tool still extended its arm.

Then, to Ian's horror, the whine started again from the lowest frequency. The device had survived the EMP.

One more second.

The Agent tool gave a loud crunch, and a green light lit up on it with a beep. Ian yanked back with force.

The extended tool and something spherical came out, blood trailing behind. Ian tossed the whole tool behind his back. It flew in a rotating arc through the air, then the device at its tip exploded, like a small charge. The tool itself fell to the stone floor.

Ian let out a long sigh as the Agent-time dissipated. Also the dissociation began to fade.

With the dissociation almost gone, Ian felt a terrible sadness from the hurt he had caused Jo, both just moments before, and from the moment since they had gotten caught in the science complex. And perhaps ever since they had met.

He cradled her with one hand as blood still ran from her nose. She was still unconscious.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

With his other hand, Ian reached for the triangle-barreled rifle, slowly as if in a dream. He was certainly tired now, but that did not mean danger would also stop conveniently.

Ahriman's face came into view from behind the stone pedestal. Meanwhile the black vortex appeared to be growing smaller, as if already dying down, the hum and the vibration subsiding.

"You bastards – you ruined everything. Thousands of years in waiting and preparation – all for nothing," the high priest lamented.

"Don't move," Ian replied as harshly as he could manage, while pointing the rifle one-handed.

Suddenly Blowfish's voice came over the radio.

"I couldn't stop the missile, but I reprogrammed it.

It's going to hit the pyramid in a few minutes. If you're still there, I suggest you get the hell out!"

There were gunshots coming from the background. It seemed like the reinforcements had arrived at the bunker.

As the words sunk in, it felt like insanity.

The nuclear missile was coming here.

Blowfish and Erik were probably being riddled by automatic gunfire right now, so it seemed like a mad last second decision: to take out as many SCEPTRE troops as possible without much regard for Ian, Jo and Lucas.

Now what?

Ian's imposture had probably been revealed, and the black ops outside would certainly notice him exiting. Alone a fast or stealthy exit might have been possible, but he could not leave Jo behind.

The flashbangs? Could they help?

And maybe some acting?

As Ian hurried to leave, dragging Jo along with his free hand, he still pointed the rifle at Ahriman. But was Jo coming to? Was she actually supporting herself a bit? Ian thought so.

"I suggest you swallow your defeat and get out of here if you can. Your Bringer of Wrath is coming," he shouted to Ahriman.

The high priest did not respond, he only gazed with muted disbelief.

Now Ian was at the entrance and dropped the rifle just before he emerged to the outside. He hoped that his voice would appear convincing enough through the face mask.

"This black op needs medical attention. There was an impostor inside. He's still there!"

Ian did not want to actually mean Lucas with this, but he just needed something to say. Next he started walking, half-dragging and half-carrying Jo.

He got maybe a ten meters from the entrance when he heard weapons being readied and lifted into firing positions.

At five meters he had dropped the first flashbang as quietly as he could. He counted the seconds to zero.

Two –

One –

Then he ran, plugging his right ear with a finger and pulling Jo closer so that she would hopefully shield his left ear.

The flashbang detonated. Even with plugged ears, it sent waves of nausea through him.

But he had to go on. More than two hundred meters to the chopper: with Jo in tow, it was going to be painful. Bullets already whistled past him: some of the black ops had to be firing blind. He dropped a second flashbang, then a third. Now he no longer bothered plugging his ears, he just ran, trying to go even faster and weaving in between the trees as more bullets came from behind.

At last, exhausted, they got to the helicopter.

The pilot's side was shielded from the pursuers, so he circled over, opened the door and shoved Jo in, then climbed in himself.

Had he been hit? Had Jo been hit? He could not worry about that now.

Pulling the door shut after him, he powered the machine up, while bullets kept hitting the armored fuselage and windows.

He pushed the throttle straight to maximum and watched the dark shapes of SCEPTRE soldiers come in

closer from between the trees, muzzle flashes lighting up the jungle.

Ian did not even wait for the RPM to properly stabilize as he was already pulling up on the collective. The chopper lifted to the air unsteadily.

As the machine rose over the level of the tree canopy, he saw a burning streak in the sky, arcing and coming closer.

The Bringer of Satan's Wrath.

They had to get away right now.

Ian pitched the nose as far down as he dared, while still keeping upward lift. He banked away from pyramid, toward the direction where the missile was coming from, hoping that the machine would be fast enough to escape ground zero and the pressure wave.

Thirty seconds later came the colossal detonation.

A nuclear blast.

The surroundings were lit up like by a sun, or several suns. Ian closed his eyes and held on to the cyclic stick as the whole helicopter shook. They were still climbing, and as soon as the light outside his eyelids subsided, Ian hazarded a look behind.

A big, gray mushroom cloud was forming.

The anti-cosmic pyramid, Lucas, Ahriman and the priests, plus all the black ops and scientists there were no more.

It was then Jo opened her eyes.

To Ian's horror, she started clawing at his face and wrestling the cyclic, trying to turn the helicopter back toward the mushroom.

"Jo, stop! It's me, Ian!" he shouted desperately.

Then he understood that he still had the face mask. It would be a normal reaction for Jo to attack a black op.

Letting go with his other hand for a second, he tore the mask off. Even now there was no telling whether recognition would come.

But the clawing stopped at last.

"Ian?" came Jo's unsure voice. She touched his cheek with what seemed like extreme caution.

Ian wanted to stop flying and just hold her tight, but he had to keep going until they were well clear of the radiation zone.

At least he could take a long look. The confused, much too beautiful expression was most certainly Jo.

"I – don't completely understand what was going on. There was this – device in my head, which made it so that I couldn't be myself, couldn't get control back," she spoke.

"Don't worry about it now. Are you even remotely OK?"

"My nose and jaw hurt like crap, and I feel so tired. Is that normal?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Sorry, Jo, for everything."

"Why? Why would you need to be sorry? Wasn't that a nuclear explosion?"

"Yes."

"A SCEPTRE facility blowing up?"

"Sort of, yes."

"And – you got me out of there?"

"Well, I had some help. But – just rest for now. We can talk about this later."

Not many seconds after Ian finished the sentence, something unusual happened in the skies. They lit up in rainbow colors dead ahead, and also further away on the horizon. A text in large all capital letters started to scroll vertically.

ON 21ST DECEMBER SCEPTRE (SECTARIAN CHOSEN ELITE PRIVILEGED TO RULE AND EXTERMINATE) TRIED TO BRING ABOUT THEIR VERSION OF GLOBAL ANTI-COSMIC CHAOS, INCLUDING APOCALYPTIC VISIONS PROJECTED TO THE SKY, AND LAUNCHING A NUCLEAR ICBM FOR THEIR OWN SINISTER PURPOSES. NEEDLESS TO SAY, THEY FAILED. FREEDOM, METAL AND MIGHT, FOREVER.

- AGENTS OF METAL

The message then repeated from the beginning.

Now Ian understood what Blowfish had been doing with the video editing program. The visuals were crude, but it brought the message across. Ian felt proud of her. But – could she and Erik possibly be alive?

They both were wounded, with no armor power left, against what had sounded like an army of black ops firing at them.

“That’s poetic,” Jo said.

Ian did not reply: he just stared at the vision, choked up by the thought of him and Jo being the only Agents alive at this point.

Suddenly, hiss and crackle in his earpiece alerted him.

“Seems you made it, as I can still connect. Well, we kicked the asses of the first wave. Leaving the bunker now!”

That was Blowfish.

Those two were not out of it yet, but the situation update sounded promising. Of course, once they were on the run, they would have no way to contact Ian for some time.

He and Jo flew in silence for a minute. Gradually Jo’s expression turned thoughtful.

“Ian, just that you know, it is still there. This – Fury.”
He understood. The artificial black op personality.

“But I don't think it can take control away from me anymore.”

Ian knew himself to be smiling. In addition the radio contact just before, he could not have hoped for better news.

It took some time before Ian actually got permission to return with the stealth helicopter to the smaller Agency HQ. With precise instructions from Blowfish – sent over SCEPTRE radio systems again – he first disabled the tracking devices, then monitored with the sunglasses that no extra signals were being transmitted. For the most part during this, Jo slept off the accrued debt from the time she had been an elite black op.

At last they had arrived, by which point Blowfish and Erik were already there. The two had escaped by using the train system, then stolen yet another helicopter, so now the Agents had two. Fitting them both inside the small helipad was problematic.

Now it was Saturday. Ian, still quite tired and hurting, was behind the wheel of an Agency van, racing against the clock to perform a necessary transaction.

In any case the world had not ended.

He recalled the vortex of black light: as far as he could tell, it had been something not of this world. It was almost a shame that the crystal and the pyramid had been destroyed in such a hurry: the current 218 could in fact have been a limitless power source. But

still, if it was the manifestation of anti-cosmic Chaos, it was possibly best left untapped.

Thinking of their final mission, Ian felt nauseous when he considered everything that could have gone wrong. And when he thought of all the lives he had taken, even if they had been SCEPTRE. He wished to dissociate so that the unease would go away, but steeled himself against it. He wanted to be able to live without that crutch.

As he drove, he kept seeing SCEPTRE jumping at him from almost each intersection.

He wondered when or if that would go away. Never?

Or was it actually better to remain paranoid?

Even though SCEPTRE had been revealed to the public and the sub-group leaders had all met their fates, the Agents might not be safe yet. It was best to just lay low for a while.

Furthermore, Ian was still worried about Jo. If the other personality still existed within her mind, it was not exactly heartwarming. And so far she kept sleeping quite massive amounts of time. She had not wanted to see a doctor, which felt like she was trying to be unnecessarily tough. There was after all the possibility of some kind of permanent damage.

But right now Ian did not want to think too much of unpleasant things.

The transaction would soon be done with.

Jo was not exactly sure of the day when she woke up inside the Agent HQ. It was early, but was it still Sunday? No, actually it had to be Monday now. And that meant the 24th, Christmas Eve. Did Agents actually give presents to each other? Well, soon she would know.

She sort of felt weak as of yet, but certainly better than yesterday. She put on some pants, but remained barefoot. The floor was warm enough.

Looking for threats.

No, not this shit again.

No threats detected. Can proceed to the corridor. Target possibly present.

As she exited the room, she heard loud animated conversation. This HQ was much smaller, so it did not take many steps to reach what amounted to the living room area.

Ian, Blowfish and Erik were all there: the “Christmas tree” had been made of some Agent sniper's ghillie suits, propped up with a coat stand. Small colored light bulbs were strung around.

Target present. Stand by.

The TV was showing a news channel, the scrolling text at the bottom endlessly repeating.

“Like always, they'll deny everything,” Erik said.

It was honestly unbelievable to have Erik at the HQ. Now he was an Agent as well, and appeared to harbor no grudge neither toward Ian or Jo. Erik had been wounded in his right leg, but in time he would recover. In time he would play double-kick drum beats as if nothing had happened. For now he was retraining to use the left foot exclusively: him practicing in the garage had filtered into Jo's sleep.

Yesterday she had played guitar – the black Les Paul clone – a little. That had made her remember how Ian's left hand had lost motion partially. Earlier that day she had noticed something odd about it, and at last Ian had revealed. It was unsure to what degree the severed nerve would recover.

Now Jo took one more look at the tree and the floor: it appeared that otherwise the presents had already been distributed, but one large item remained: something that looked suspiciously like a guitar case.

As he noticed her entering, Ian turned around.

“Merry Christmas, Jo. That one is for you,” he said.

It was probably something far too much. This was not really necessary.

She knelt down and tore through the wrapping.

Indeed, a guitar case. Opening the locks and lifting the lid revealed an ESP guitar, just the same model she had been playing in Cyberpriest, finished in flame red.

Yes, it truly was too much.

Then Jo noticed the truly unusual feature: a small, fluffy cube with a heart sewn in each side was hanging from the low E-string tuning peg.

And that was like absolutely, enormously too much. Jo had no idea how she could take it.

“Ian, you really didn't have to –”

He smiled conspiratorially.

"Of course I had to."

Jo noticed his eyes were getting wet. At times he truly was emo, but that in part made him. Without that he wouldn't be the essence of Ian.

Target emotional state optimal. Resistance will be light. Proceed to eliminate with extreme prejudice.

Not now. This was not fair.

"Shut up," Jo growled with sudden bitterness. "Just shut up already and leave me be."

The next she knew, Ian wrapped his arms around her, a sad look of understanding on his face. He knew it was Fury haunting her.

"I truly am sorry, Jo," he said in a strained voice. "It was my fault that led to everything –"

"No. You can't blame yourself with the way things turned out. I mean, we're alive. That is something," Jo replied, trying to summon reassurance.

"But what can I do, then?"

Jo shook her head. Did Ian want to blame himself to feel purpose? If it truly was like that, it was unhealthy.

"It's not complicated. I guess at times it might not be the easiest thing, but –" She too felt tears forming.

"What is it?"

Jo took a breath. "Just stay with me, like for all time."

They embraced each other almost painfully hard. "Of course I will," Ian answered, the words barely audible.

As they kissed, the voice of Fury kept demanding for the elimination that would never come, kept telling how Jo should have had poison on her lips. But at last it seemed to give up. Jo understood now what Ian had meant by saying that he was broken. Now, in a way, she was as well. And that would cast a certain kind of sadness over them, one that would possibly never go away.

But of course they were not just broken souls.
They were much more.

Jo observed the news channel to be describing, yet again, a nuclear detonation in South America, as well as odd aerial phenomena that had been seen all over the world on the December 21st. She felt definite pride.

They were Agents of Metal.