

Agents of Metal

Part 3

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NaNoWriMo 2012. Edited later.

Certain scenes in this novel will spoil the game Cave Story (Doukutsu Monogatari.) The detailed descriptions of developing a 3D internet platform may also be disturbing or triggering to some readers. Read at own risk.

Thanks to Laura Thurlin for additional battle scene writing!

1.

The bombs exploded with a flash of blinding light and a brief full-spectrum blast of white noise.

Next the shrill, upper-mid boosted double kick drum sound assaulted Ian's ears, and the flash was replaced by the rapidly changing PAR lights. Despite the large array of Marshall cabinets on the stage – and not one of them was fake – it took him some time to recognize the song and the presence of an actual guitar tone, but at last he did. He raised his beer glass in approval.

The first song was Rising Force. The God of Swedish shredding, Yngwie Malmsteen, had taken the stage, though he was not yet visible through the thick fog.

The intro guitar riff gave way to the first verse, and the bassist began to sang (after Ripper Owens' departure there was no actual front man), belting out the lyrics like a banshee on crack. Ian sung along hoarsely, for this was a classic he knew inside-out. Meanwhile he tried to catch a glimpse of Jo, who had pushed through the crowd to the front to observe the Maestro better.

So far he was not able to see her, but was sure she was doing all right. In the weeks after their assault on

the covert, evil organization SCEPTRE – the Sectarian Chosen Elite Privileged To Rule and Exterminate, Ian had often found himself worrying far too much. Partially it was for a reason.

Before their successful assault, just before the anti-cosmic deadline on the 21st of December 2012, there had also been a failed attempt, just him and Jo with no other Agents of Metal for backup. During that disastrous run they both had been captured. While Ian had suffered torture and the severing of a nerve that controlled the motion of his left hand pinky, Jo had been implanted with an artificial SCEPTRE assassin personality with the codename Fury. It could no longer assume full control, as the physical implant had been removed, but had remained, as Jo described, as a nagging voice in her head.

As it was Ian's momentary lapse of concentration that had led to their capture, he had kept blaming himself to no end, though they had ultimately prevailed with their lives, and thwarted SCEPTRE's master plan.

To be honest, Ian still did not exactly understand what had been the point of SCEPTRE's operation. The final steps had been to launch a nuclear missile at Middle Eastern oil fields to contaminate them, and to harness the (questionable) energy of the so-called Current 218, or Black Light at a pyramid in the South America, just as the Mayan long count calendar began its next cycle. Due to the Agents' intervention the missile had detonated at the pyramid instead, making it a double fail for the enemies. But had they succeeded, what would they have gained in actual real world terms? A global energy monopoly?

But that was not important. What mattered now was to enjoy the beer and the music, in that order. Ian

caught an occasional glimpse of Yngwie as he continuously improvised instead of playing the riffs as recorded, and kept kicking his limitless supply of guitar picks toward the audience.

Going to the Yngwie Malmsteen show also held another, more covert purpose. As the phrase “unleash the fucking fury” was widely attributed to him, Jo had herself insisted on this, to prove that the digital assassin no longer had a significant hold on her, and its name did not act as a trigger anymore.

Just like at most heavy and power metal gigs, the audience did not participate overtly. They mostly were content with singing along and banging their heads. Pitting would be out of question –

Suddenly Ian was certain that a mosh pit was indeed forming, but it looked highly irregular. This caught his interest to such degree that he left the table, beer in hand, to investigate closer.

Pushing through the ranks of audience to where the concentration was thicker, he saw what was happening.

A shrill scream pierced the air, rising above Yngwie's guitar solo, as a solitary member of the audience was trying to incite others to pit, using windmilling hands and feet as inspiration.

Ian felt a wave of horror pass through him as he understood that the audience member was no other than Jo, in her denim vest and jeans. She punched a man almost one and half of her size straight to the face, then continued to run in her own solitary circle.

At this point club security had been alerted: two black-clad guards approached from the back. As the Maestro's solo continued over the final verse, Ian watched as if in slow motion as Jo still continued the circle, sidestepped a security guard as he made to grab

her, then “accidentally” hit him to the stomach. That particular guard fell to the floor, but the other was now on to her, and this time Jo – or Fury? – was powerless to act. The guard took a hold of her by both arms, while the downed one got back up on his feet, and after a quick, angry exchange of words, they proceeded to escort her out of the venue.

Ian finished his beer in record time and prepared himself mentally to exit the concert early as well.

The underpowered public server at the temporary Agent HQ was ready to explode: the memory and CPU usage were running near maximum. Blowfish observed the amount of connections to the carefully hidden Agent web site to be rising at an alarming rate.

At first she did not understand what was going on. She knew there had been a spike of interest toward the Agents of Metal in the end of December, after she had reprogrammed SCEPTRE's sky projection system to broadcast the Agents' message to the world instead of the apocalyptic visions the Sectarian Elite had originally planned to be shown.

But piece by piece she began to understand. That message in itself had not gained viral capacity, but now something had. She went through the list of active connections and noticed that most had been referred here from the YouTube account of Crazy F.U.B.A.R. Mad Dog “Machine Gunn” Eddie. In particular, from a video where he proclaimed a new “armed uprising” to be coming, and promised that everyone who was willing would be able to join.

The description of that particular video contained the URL for the carefully hidden but still public Agents of Metal website. This in itself was kind of perverse, as

things should either be completely public, or protected with the highest security mechanisms available, but the Agents had hoped that people would discover the site in a controlled manner.

Now Blowfish was not sure, especially after her fellow senior Agents Blackhand and Sarge were dead, whether the Agency could cope with a large influx of new people interested in the organization. Particularly if this “Mad Dog” – who at a first glance looked like a typical weapons and survivalism enthusiast, or less kindly, a redneck – was misrepresenting the Agency and did not fully understand the principles of Freedom, Metal and Might. Blowfish was not sure if she understood them either, especially on a bad day.

Next Blowfish scanned through the video comments.

“Fucking idiots,” she swore.

It appeared that most of the commenters believed “Mad Dog” to be a downloadable content playable character for a first person shooter video game, and that Agents of Metal would be an upcoming expansion pack. That explained the virality. As she compared to official videos from the game's publisher, Blowfish had to admit the author's cleverness: the use of post-processing effects matched the visual style, making “Mad Dog” almost look like a CGI character, and the voice and style of narration were nearly identical.

”I just felt I had to express myself. But the posers in the hall didn't understand it in the slightest. They just wanted to stand in place, fucking rock police,” Jo explained as they walked away from the medium-large club, Afterworld Noir.

Ian knew she was extremely lucky to get a lifetime ban instead of being charged with assault and battery.

He was not yet sufficiently drunk to bypass the higher functions of his brain and to just reply with the first thing that came into his mind.

Instead he went into a brief, endless loop of searching for the proper reply. He was quite sure that this altercation was a result of an intervention by the Fury personality, as normally Jo was not that aggressive and provoked to pitting in an irresponsible manner. Pitting in agreement with all the inbuilt rules and regulations was another thing, but it demanded an appropriate form of music, such as thrash or death metal. This looked suspiciously like Jo had taken the concept of “unleashing the fucking fury” too far.

What was the correct response then?

Fuck all correct shit, Ian thought. Fuck everything! That, in itself, was much of an improvement over the over-emotional mental state he had held for the past month. It would be preferable if he was able to hold onto this state instead.

“Well, we saw the first song,” he replied at last.

There was some disappointment in his voice, though he had not necessarily wished to express it. But Jo was still so fuming and agitated that she did not seem to care. Better that way. It was also better for their overall safety that they both were too drunk to drive, so they walked instead to the motel close by.

To what degree they could have contact with the outside world was a somewhat contestable subject. Legally they both had committed multiple murders as they had fought the personnel of SCEPTRE, but it was unlikely they would ever be tried. The loss of a normal life was the price one had to pay for being an Agent, Ian often thought. The masses would forever be mostly unaware of the sacrifice they had made.

That would make for a great concept album, he thought suddenly. Or perhaps not.

Ian observed the weather to be slightly more pleasant now that February had begun. There was some remaining snow, but at least the temperature was tolerable. He thought of the past year, and realized he had been living in a stupor for long. He did not clearly remember even last summer, though it was then he had begun his job as a junior systems administrator, in which he had met Gwen aka Blowfish, who had turned out to be an Agent. Before that there was a long period of blackout, which in turn was preceded by incarceration that had actually been SCEPTRE assassin training. Though he had been thoroughly deprogrammed by hearing the codewords "Ordo ab Chao" at the location of his training, and should theoretically remember everything, again he felt most of his memories retreat back into a haze.

Perhaps he could just ignore the past and focus on the present. In the present he still was an Agent, though he was unsure what the Agents' purpose was from this point onward, and of course he had Jo, even if her exact mental state was questionable.

Ian clearly remembered her words to him after their mission against SCEPTRE – "Stay with me, like for all time," and he intended to live by them, as long as he lived. But the actual execution could be far from simple. If Jo was pretending she had managed to purge the Fury personality from her mind, but in reality had not, there would certainly be difficulties ahead.

But now it was not a time to think in a too complicated manner. It was time to perhaps drink one more beer at the motel, then fall asleep. Then wake up to a hangover and think of the battle plan for the new day.

2.

In the morning everything usually felt worse. This time was no exception. Though the hangover was only mild, Ian recalled his thoughts from last night, and while no longer drunk, their impact was more profound. This was also helped by the depressing, featureless white motel room interior.

Agents of Metal. An illegal paramilitary vigilante organization, who used high tech weaponry and gadgets from questionable sources to strike at the enemy, who up to now had been SCEPTRE.

But as SCEPTRE was at least mostly dead and gone, who would they fight? If there no longer was an enemy, then perhaps it was time to screw the past and think only of the future. But that felt like an uneasy concept. After first being a puppet of SCEPTRE, then an instrument of the Agents, what did he wish the future would hold for himself? Honestly, he did not know.

In the past he had been a member of the band Cyberpriest, but that was history. The band leader, bassist/vocalist René, had been killed at the hands of SCEPTRE, leaving Ian and Jo who both played guitar, and the

drummer Erik, who had also joined the Agency after some persuasion with quality absinthe. In theory they could form a trio line-up, or perhaps even recruit Blowfish, the Agent Bastard Operator From Hell and information warfare specialist, who Ian knew also to be an expert death metal vocalist, but –

But what was the point?

This was not a good sign, Ian knew. If making music felt pointless, did that mean he only wanted to be back fighting? Against some new enemy, or even a resurrected SCEPTRE? To perhaps die by a bullet this time? Although being in a razor-sharp thrash metal band had once been the highest dream of his life, now that dream seemed to be no more. The revelations of his past and the experience of becoming an Agent had diluted and devalued it.

The official term to what he was going through was probably Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Or as Manowar would say, “shell shock.” He had not driven a tank or shot a B.A.R, but a stealth helicopter and an M4 carbine would fit the bill just as well.

Next to him Jo was still fast asleep. It was no surprise as she had been drinking clearly more than him last night, and had been on a kind of overdrive the whole evening. Her red hair was somewhat of a mess, which always felt endearing to him.

Now that he thought of it again, Ian was quite certain he would never find anyone like her on this planet. How was it possible that someone would voluntarily train in the arts of combat and death just for the possibility that the world would be like in the worst conspiracy theories, and when that was indeed revealed to be the case, would fearlessly throw herself into that world? She had stood by him even when he thought not

to have deserved it, and even though it had cost her much. It was most straightforward to refer to her as his angel.

Of course, after what SCEPTRE had done to her, she was to some degree a wounded angel. This was a fairly predictable line of thinking, but one that never failed to get Ian emotional.

If life was a video game, this would be the medium ending. The heroes prevail, but remain in a state of sorrow and aimlessness. But then, where was the secret door to the golden ending that he had missed? Ian could imagine himself screaming at the top of his lungs: "Where is the quest marker? Where do I have to go? Answer me, goddammit!" Perhaps reality, however imperfect, was still preferable.

Now Jo stirred, and spoke with a voice that was an octave lower than normal.

"Hey... Wasn't the best concert experience. And my head's killing me," she mused.

"Well, Yngwie's ego is so oversized, if we'd stayed to the end I would just have felt bad for the rest not getting enough room onstage."

"Ha, that's sensitive –"

Jo turned around in the bed and reached for her cell phone from the table. Ian could not see exactly what was on the small screen but she appeared to be repeating a previous web search.

"Here. Hear this out. Emo boys are sweet and compassionate and every girl wants one."

Ian shook his head in disbelief, particularly as he saw the associated image, a brooding male with a black mop of hair over his face, though the lean physique was a near match with him. Any modification to his own long blond headbanger's hair would be sacrilege.

But perhaps there was the concept of being emo either constructively or destructively, and Ian thought he was rather headed to the former direction. Of course it was easier to say that now, when not at war. When you had a rifle and gun at hand, getting emotional either way could quickly prove fatal. Ian remembered getting this lesson taught to him, even during their final assault, and it was only the charge remaining in the electromagnetic Agent armor that had saved him.

Suddenly Jo's smile disappeared, and she seemed lost in her thoughts for a few seconds.

"But seriously, I'm disappointed," she said quietly. "I thought it would not happen –"

Ian quite possibly knew where this was going. "You mean, it was Fury that made you mosh?"

"Yes. Or no. Either I wanted to show the bitch that it's me that's in control, or I thought that by pitting hard enough I would finally drive it away for good." Jo's voice turned more bitter and a tear ran down her face. "I thought it was getting better, but now I realize it hasn't changed. At all. The bitch is still talking to me. Why would it change, it's a goddamned AI."

Suddenly a lot of things clicked. Last month Jo had been exercising in an extreme manner, pushing herself to such limits that Ian simply could not keep pace whenever they went for a run in the woods surrounding the HQ. Of course he had suffered severe combat trauma and she less so, but he believed that even if he had been perfectly healthy he would have been left second. In bed she had possessed an unusual ferocity that had not been there before. Fuck! He should have realized. These were methods of exorcism, to drive the intruder in her head away. But they had been unsuccessful.

"I'm tired of this," Jo concluded.

She had not asked for it, but Ian moved in closer anyway and held her gently. He observed himself dissociating, as if someone else spoke his following words in an even voice hinting at menace.

"SCEPTRE bastards. We will find a way –"

Ian was not sure if he actually believed that, but if he had summoned a more confident version of himself, it could not possibly hurt. Right? But the dissociation vanished just as quickly as it had arrived and he found himself at a loss for what to say next.

Focus! You're emo!

"Or if we don't, know that I will never tire of being right here. If you need me."

Jo nodded. "I know."

"And Jo, don't try too hard. I'm not saying it's the same, but I keep remembering, flashing back to things I certainly don't want to. But I don't try to shut them off completely, I've learned to just let them come."

"So are you saying that I should just let the bitch invade?" Jo asked in disbelief.

"No. Not necessarily. But just do whatever helps you to relax, to enjoy life. That's something it can never comprehend, so maybe it gradually loses power or something. And –"

"What?"

"The most important thing. You never have to act as if things are OK if they aren't. Right?"

"Yeah, right, it makes sense."

As Jo got up, she was no longer crying. Instead, she clearly winced from a wave of hangover-induced headache.

"Now, maybe we should get away from this shithole. I rather suffer this at the Agent HQ in good company."

Ian certainly agreed, and it was good if she was already feeling better, but his mind was extrapolating to a possible dark outcome. What if instead of things staying the same, they would take a turn for much worse? If Jo was tired of fighting the voice inside her head, it was within possibility she would actually go insane, or lose the will to live. In that case what he could do to help would no longer be enough, and the medium-good ending would turn to bad.

3.

Blowfish re-read the email once more. She did not like it in the slightest. That it had arrived early on Sunday morning was especially odd: had it been crafted in the late hours of a weekend's corporate drinking session?

The email was from the CEO of Grieg Industries, Hermann Grieg. After the other of the initial backers, Aegis, had went under two years ago, this company now practically held, through a few well-hidden intermediaries, sole control over the trust fund that allowed the Agents of Metal to operate. The corporation itself specialized in weapons research and development, but had not managed to land a large-scale contract with the military, concentrating instead on smaller specialty programs, in which it excelled. It was these research programs which probably had produced most of the custom Agent equipment, such as the electromagnetic armor coats.

The email asked for all surviving senior-level Agents to meet on Monday at 2 PM at the Grieg office, for an important discussion of the Agency's future role. No further explanation was given.

Being an eternal cynic and a paranoid, Blowfish had immediately imagined two worst-case possibilities:

1. Sudden cut of all funding
2. A devious SCEPTRE trap

She certainly intended to turn up armed to the teeth. If the message was to be interpreted literally, that meant she would be going alone as the only senior Agent from this HQ. Of course it was within her power to promote Ian, Jo and Erik even on a short notice, or then the more renegade option was to just let them tag along without any formalities.

In the time of Blackhand and Sarge, Blowfish had once met people from the trust fund, but not Hermann himself. Blackhand had however attended several meetings, which were exceptionally rare: up until now the Agents had needed little outside guidance.

Then another possibility entered her mind, a little less sinister but still unpleasant. Could this have anything to do with the video? Hermann certainly did not have login access to the Agents' server to check the actual traffic statistics, but he did not need that, for now one simply had to google "Agents of Metal" and the two first hits would be the video, and the Agent WWW page.

In any case it was highly questionable that the meeting had to happen in person. A video conference would have been just as good without the risk, wasted time and travel expenses. Hermann either had an obsession with theatrics, or doing things the old-fashioned way. Both alternatives were undesirable.

Blowfish stood up from the terminal and turned on the coffee pot. This day would certainly require at least a triple dose, possibly also other substances.

A hyper-speed blastbeat echoed from the HQ's car garage. The short corridor in between muffled the

sound a bit, but it was clear that Erik was practicing. Blowfish did not have an in-depth understanding of metal drumming, but the relentless speed of the kick drums could not come from one foot alone. That meant Erik was now well-enough recovered from the gunshot to his leg to be using both.

During their last mission, Blowfish herself had been injured to the right ear, which would be a permanent, if minor disfigurement. The culprit for this was none other than Erik, while Blowfish had been held at rifle-point by the sadistic black op leader Lilith. Erik's shot had probably saved Blowfish's life, but nevertheless she was not certain if she had yet forgiven the ear deformation completely.

This topic reminded Blowfish of Nargaroth, which had used the classic "and he cuts my fucking ear off!" sample as an intro to one of their songs. For some odd reason Nargaroth was one of Ian's favorites, and he had played them so much that it had caught on, though Blowfish hardly listened to anything, only occasionally to growl along. She turned back to the terminal and put on "Amarok – Zorn des Lammes III" from the "Black Metal ist Krieg" album, skipping the intro straight to 1:33 where the guitar riff began. She imagined the grainy chords giving her extra strength to face off against any corporate stupidity.

As she waited for the coffee, she put her feet on the table and leaned back, just like on sysadmin duty when she expected that a particularly obnoxious luser was about to call. She took a look at the large welded steel "Desert Eagle with wings" -emblem on the wall, and reflected on its meaning:

Desert Eagle – the will to use any force necessary to strike at the enemy.

Wings – thinking on your feet, the use of cunning and unexpected tactics.

She considered hard if it was now necessary to consider Hermann a potential enemy as well. Finally she came to the conclusion that it did not matter: yes or no, she would use any tactics necessary to ensure that the Agency could carry on like before, and its integrity was not tampered with.

The Desert Eagle .50AE also was her signature weapon. Most critics would say it was completely unsuited for combat use: it was too heavy and had heavy recoil, was unreliable if not supported properly, and the bullets over-penetrated. In combat against SCEPTRE, she had observed none of these downsides. Of course she could admit that it was not a weapon for everyone, but for her it was a perfect match.

Furthermore, at the sight of a shortish, spherical woman with bright red-dyed hair and a long black coat with the business end of the .50AE pointed at you, she estimated that even the most rigorously trained special forces operator would lose at least 0.1 seconds in reaction time just due to shock and surprise. That meant she had an edge, but of course to rely solely on that would be foolish and result in a likely quick death.

Suddenly the drum barrage stopped, and Erik emerged to the living room. Even after over a month of him staying at the HQ, he still looked scary. Partially it was because he constantly evolved: the brown beard and hair grew, and the muscles became more defined due to constant exercise. At least he did not grow in height, but even so he already towered one and half a head above her.

“You might have to tidy up a bit. We have a business meeting tomorrow,” Blowfish said.

"What? Seriously?" Erik growled, somewhat out of breath.

"We'll show up at the company that actually funds us. The big boss wants to meet us, and you have a choice. You shave, cut your hair and wear a suit and I'll make you a senior Agent, or you can show up as yourself. Then you don't get the promotion."

There was a moment of silence. Then Blowfish chuckled.

"That was a joke. Well, the meeting part is for real. But I sure as hell won't show up in a business attire. The boss wanted only senior Agents to show up, but I figured there's so few left that it can't be that critical."

Erik seemed to think hard. "Beyond this meeting – does it make a difference, being senior or not?"

"Yes, it does. A senior agent makes decisions of recruiting and promotion, takes charge of operations, and reports to our backers if necessary. Normally you need at least three years of service, but due to exceptional performance exceptions can be made. Like when we kicked SCEPTRE ass. Right now this shit matters little when there's just the four of us here, and maybe a two or three elsewhere, but in the unlikely event that the Agency grows again, then it starts to matter a bit more. So the question is on you whether you want the responsibility or not."

"Hm. For now I'm content with just kicking ass."

"You can reconsider later. By the way, after senior there's no more ranks, though you can count the years. And the kills."

From behind the wheel of the Corolla, Ian adjusted the volume higher as the second song of the "Amarok" CD began, a cover of Burzum's "Black Spell of Destruction."

They had less than a two hours drive left to the HQ: the unremarkable ten-year-old white Toyota hatchback had been bought in the beginning of the year, so that any of the specially-equipped Agent vans would not have to be used on random, unofficial trips like this.

The song began in an unusual, but entertaining way: first a long, high howl from the vocalist Ash (previously known as Kanwulf), then a shorter bark as the whole band joined in. Ian had heard the intro so many times that he could retain a straight face, but so far it had always elicited a smile or a laugh from Jo. This time did not fail either.

“German or Norse misanthropy, which one wins?” she asked from no-one in particular.

“Norse, they’re the originals,” Ian replied without hesitation, although he had listened to more Nargaroth than Burzum, Darkthrone, Immortal and Mayhem combined. But there simply were questions which had to be answered in a certain way to retain credibility.

The analytical side of Ian's mind quickly categorized this short interaction: it was one of the moments that helped to make the life of an Agent in post-mission limbo more tolerable. At least as long as they did not cease, there would be light at the end of the tunnel. If he one day found to not enjoy metal any more, then that would be a Level One “severe terror alert red” warning. Then he would see an Agent psychiatrist.

Too bad the Agency did not have one. And he could not exactly book an appointment at a civilian clinic and start telling how he had shot SCEPTRE operatives in the face to prevent an anti-cosmic terrorist attack.

Late in the evening, well after Blowfish had explained what was to happen tomorrow, Ian found himself sit-

ting idly on one of the couches in the now dimly lit living room, guitar in his hands. Subconsciously, he began playing the Imperial March, which soon transformed to the tremolo picked black metal version made famous by Immortal on the song "Pure Holocaust."

"Is that what you're thinking of tomorrow?" Jo asked as she emerged from a hallway. She was wearing a gray nightshirt with a custom print which Ian did not recall seeing before: the guitar-rifle-triangle logo in the front and the text *GUNS DON'T KILL - AGENTS DO* in the back. The flight for the meeting was leaving early so getting some extra sleep would be a wise tactic, and Ian knew he should follow the example.

Jo's hair was no longer messy, just damp after a shower. Now she seemed relaxed, maybe even happy.

"Yeah. I wonder if we'll sit in business meetings all day from here on. Penetrator Hammer weapon shipment there, allocate research team on Agent coat V2.0 here, that much marketing there and there."

"Very funny."

"By the way, nice design. Where did you get that?"

"Blowfish ordered them last week. She has a different print. Etherkiller - total information security, or something to that effect."

That was very typical Blowfish. An etherkiller was a mythical device with an RJ45 network plug on one end and a mains plug on the other. After applying one there would be a blissful silence on the local area network. Ian had not actually seen her carry one, but would hardly be surprised if she did.

That night Imperial March would not leave Ian alone: in the morning he remembered it playing throughout his dreams, but little else.

At first Ian was sure Blowfish was insane, as she packed their agent coats and a collection of weaponry (her Desert Eagle, a Beretta for Ian, Heckler & Koch USP pistols for Erik and Jo, knives, and more than enough ammunition) into a large hard metal case. Particularly considering that they would be flying with new forged identities.

"It's simple, this case has a high-grade lock and I will declare it to be containing weapons. Perfectly legal as long as it's a domestic flight, and they'll be careful not to lose it. They better be when it's my .50AE we're talking about. It's just that if there's SCEPTRE goons in the airplane itself, then we have to tough it out with bare hands," she explained.

The four of them stuffed themselves to the Toyota, to avoid leaving any of the much more valuable vans open to tampering or theft at a public parking lot. The case fit to the trunk with only millimeters to spare. As the ranking Agent, Blowfish drove to the airport.

A mile away from the HQ, she unexpectedly turned to Ian and Jo in the back.

"Did you remember to scan the car for bugs?"

Ian shook his head.

"Me neither," Jo said.

"Don't worry, I did this morning and it was clean. But don't make that a habit. Everyone, though there's no active mission, remember to think like an Agent. Especially after the flight lands."

Ian recalled what it had been like immediately after the mission, when he had left the base to buy Jo's replacement guitar. Then he certainly had thought like one, expecting armed enemy vehicles to appear from intersections, or for a black helicopter to rise from behind a building with its cannon blazing. But as no such things had transpired, little by little he had reverted to a civilian thinking pattern instead.

"The identities are designed for traveling separately, so we'll go through security and boarding at irregular intervals. The seats are also quite randomly around the plane. So it's not a very social flight, but it's safer that way in case one of us is compromised," Blowfish explained.

"What if we'd just fly as ourselves? Less hassle, and I don't think anyone of us is actually wanted for anything," Erik asked.

"You'd trade safety from SCEPTRE to safety from the authorities. After what we did, I value the first much higher. And though you're not officially declared dead, the idea is for everyone to believe that the three of you got blown up back at the rehearsal space, remember? Personally I wouldn't risk it," Blowfish replied dispassionately. "And while we're at the topic of identities, now would be a perfect opportunity to choose an Agent codename, before we're formally introduced at the office."

"Hm. That's easy. I'll be Goat," Erik stated.

Mad black goat of the woods. Made sense. But for Ian the thought of an Agent name was still somewhat uncomfortable, as it reminded of his SCEPTRE identity. Furthermore, using false identities was messing with his head in any case, so he liked to use his real name as much as possible. Not that it ultimately held much value, as it had been chosen by his SCEPTRE-affiliated parents.

"How many else do you think will turn up?" he asked to dodge the subject for now. He remembered Black-hand talking as if they, and the few they had managed to free from the Erehwon facility, were the only Agents left on the face of Earth.

"There's this whole East division with which we've had little contact, and which may have dissolved. Some years ago they uncovered SCEPTRE connections to drug running, but have otherwise made little noise of themselves," Blowfish replied.

Ian nodded. If there actually were more Agents, then codenames could be an operational necessity. He turned to Jo to see if she had an opinion.

"We could be Ravenna and Crucifier," she said in a deadpan tone.

Ian certainly remembered those, the black metal names they had invented for the Frozen Hell festival. They were bad, alright, and he did not remember if they had ever actually used them, that is, mentioned them to anyone but themselves.

"If you had a gun pointed to my head, maybe then –"

At this point Jo could no longer keep a serious face. Ian finished the sentence. "Screw it. Let's use those if no-one comes up with anything better."

What the hell he had just committed himself into?

Though Erik did not turn, Ian could see through the rear-view mirror that he was extremely amused.

According to the plan, Blowfish also dropped them off at irregular intervals before finally parking the car and taking the weapons case with her.

All wore different-colored, unremarkable clothes, which would not betray their affiliation in any way. Ian's short, light brown leather jacket reminded him of MacGyver: he found the whole procedure somewhat funny, and had to remind himself that this was serious business. The Agent sunglasses could be simply transported in their pockets, though it was inadvisable to use them during the flight unless the situation became critical.

As the glasses contained no weapons, but only a camera and a microphone, plus vision and audio enhancement modes, they would not be very helpful in any case. To actually send or receive, they needed to be connected to the transceiver unit in the coat.

Some miniature needle gun would be a nice addition. Or eye lasers. Or a wireless "always on" connection. Perhaps they could ask Hermann for those.

As Ian entered the airport lobby, he felt his heart rate increase as the rush of adrenaline took hold. He quickly checked for possible threats while not giving away that he was doing so, then proceeded to the security gate after being satisfied that there was nothing threatening. For some reason he waited the security check with the most anxiety, though he was sure he was not carrying any abnormal or threatening items. It was almost as if he feared his Beretta to materialize into his pocket from nowhere, just to get him caught.

About a half hour later they were all on board without an incident, and the plane had taken off. The forged ID's had held flawlessly. Such a waste of adrenaline, Ian thought. Thankfully the body would always produce more.

Perhaps due to the Imperial March his sleep had not been as refreshing as it could be, so perhaps some more was in order. They would reach the destination roughly in an hour, so with luck he could doze off.

Just as he was about to enter dreamland, a hissing, whispering voice startled him.

Necro...

He snapped up in his seat and looked nervously around. None of the passengers seemed to betray anything, and none looked like a SCEPTRE assassin who would know his codename from the training. Instead they were just concentrated on their books, newspapers or portable devices, or trying to sleep as well.

Had he imagined it? Or was the assassin behind him? Rising up from his seat would be too obvious. While his heart thudded painfully, Ian waited for the voice to repeat, but it did not. In any case he vowed to remain in double alert for the rest of the day. Any further attempt to sleep would be out of the question.

At last the plane rolled to a halt and Ian prepared to disembark. The exit order had been planned in advance as well: Blowfish first (she had the weapons case to wait for), then Erik, Jo and finally Ian.

Erik was considered the "most junior" agent and this way they could watch his back. Erik had laughed at the order, and for a reason: of all of them he was probably the most adept at unarmed self-defense. Considering the evil whisper, Ian would gladly have traded places.

Though, would the enemies be so vain as to give their presence away for a cheap scare? Wasn't it better to strike completely unannounced? SCEPTRE were extremely skilled at psychological warfare, though, so nothing could be taken for granted. Here the Agents had a definite disadvantage: their fanatical enemies would only care of taking them out, while they had a task to accomplish, fake (and real) identities to protect and a flight home waiting later that day. Even if they successfully took down an attacker, they would face questioning and a blown meeting in the best case, and arrest and criminal charges in the worst. In short: being an Agent in public was extremely troublesome.

As Ian queued up on the aisle and the exit staircase neared with painful slowness, he did a final scan around him. No enemies. No knives or poison syringes in sight. Blowfish was already out, and Erik and Jo were ahead, just as planned.

Finally! All of them were out.

The plan was to meet up outside, rent a car and head toward the Grieg building. The clock was already nearing 1:30 PM, so there was not terribly much time to waste.

Ian was glad to see his array of tactical choices widen the further he walked away from the plane. If he was forced to kill now, he might even be able to hide the corpse. Or to blend in to the crowd.

Still no obvious threats visible. It was not fun to be alarmed for nothing, but better than dying for stupid carelessness.

As the four passed through the airport lobby, the others were walking with what Ian thought to be unnecessary slowness, and taking a non-optimal route. Therefore he estimated he had time to visit the toilet.

Due to his agitation he had forgot to use one on the airplane.

A public WC would be a classic location for the enemy to strike. Was he even hoping for it to happen, hoping for an opportunity to kill? There was a rising, steely aggression at the back of his head, no doubt brought on by being in constant alert for the past hour.

Inside, the bluish light and the sterile, shiny porcelain tiles did little to ease the aggression. There was no one coming after him, and the two other men already there certainly did not look like potential killers, but just like middle-aged businessmen, so Ian quickly strode to a vacant urinal, unzipped and aimed.

The sound of running water alerted him.

He looked to his left, and saw that a teenage kid with long light-brown hair and a slightly plump face was washing his hands. An obvious metalhead. But looks could deceive, as he had moved like a ninja, without making a single sound. They locked gazes for a second.

"I know you," the kid said in a high-pitched aggressive tone. Ian's heartbeat instantly doubled its pace.

"You're from Cyberpriest. The new guy. I saw you at the Blast Pit. I pitted like hell, got a broken tooth. Metal Archives says status: unknown for you. Did you split? Such waste if you did."

The speech was so heartfelt that it was extremely unlikely the kid was a SCEPTRE trainee and would attack. But what the hell could Ian possibly reply? As he had been recognized, damage had already been done and there was not much point in trying to deny. He remembered Blowfish's message to the whole world, projected to the sky. Following that example, perhaps he could divulge some above top secret information without causing much further damage.

At this point the businessmen had left, so they were alone. That was good.

"Yes, we split. Feel free to update the status. And if it's not already there, you can put on the R.I.P page that René was killed in an explosion of the rehearsal space."

"Oh." The kid paused for a second, his mouth open in shock. "Gas explosion?"

"No. A terrorist attack. But I don't want to talk about that more," Ian replied in a harsher tone.

"Sure. I'm sorry I asked."

The kid left in record speed. Ian finished and exited as well, while making sure once more that there was no danger.

Though it was newer, the rented black Chrysler sedan was in much worse condition than the Corolla, Ian thought. The engine had an odd rattle to it and its warning light was on. Now they all had the Agent coats and sunglasses on, and guns in holsters, ready to be drawn quickly.

Because their forged paperwork included the license to carry their guns concealed, in theory all they had to do was to notify the police officers that they were armed, in case they were stopped. In practice it might not go that smoothly.

They would make it to the meeting with some five minutes to spare. When they turned up in full Agent gear, the reception could be interesting to say the least.

The Grieg Industries building was three stories high, located in an industrial park away from downtown. It was a colorless concrete, steel and glass hybrid, which told of efficiency above everything else. The company had the building all to themselves.

Inside it was much of the same, though the bright mid-day sun shining from the large windows into the high-ceilinged lobby made the atmosphere more pleasant than it should be.

The four Agents strode through the lobby gates in lockstep. That had not been planned, it just happened. Instantly, a loud warning buzzer blared and red lights started flashing on top of the gates. At her table, the black-haired receptionist quickly glanced around to make sure there were security guards to both her left and right. The two guards drew their semi-automatics in quick, economic motions.

"Do not move!" the one on the right shouted.

The Agents froze. Ian thought that were they attacking this place, the guards would not have stood a chance. A quick leap to the side (and if he dissociated

deep enough, time would appear to slow down) and a double-tap to each head, in case the guards wore body armor, and everything would be over in seconds.

The receptionist made a quick phone call. Then she turned to the Agents: "Sorry for that. You are cleared to enter. The meeting is held in room D321. It's on the third floor. Our security people will escort you."

As the six walked to a large elevator, the security guards were still obviously tense. Inside, the same one who had commanded them finally spoke again.

"So you're the Agents?"

"Guilty as charged. And you can relax, if we wanted you dead you would already be," Blowfish joked. The guard let out a strained chuckle in response.

The elevator quickly accelerated to top speed and it did not take many seconds to reach the top floor. The doors opened with the usual ping and the guards motioned for them to exit.

For some reason Ian expected to see armed security robots roving the third floor corridor. Instead there were just employees walking past them, paying them little attention. Maybe they had been briefed that today some stereotypical Matrix guys in trench coats and sunglasses would visit, so stay calm.

Meeting room D321 was empty and the lights were off, though some sunlight found its way in from between the shutters. The guard hit the light switch and fluorescent tubes came on, making the room seem much more corporate now that Ian could fully see its contents.

There was a horseshoe-shaped wooden table with chairs for at least twenty people. A huge video projector was fixed to the ceiling. Pencils and writing pads had been laid out on the table for each participant, and

a large tray on a corner table contained water bottles, a thermos flask, disposable coffee mugs, and a dish with some buns. The flask had a logo that read "Purexo," with the letter X oddly elongated.

"Have a seat. Hermann and the rest will join you shortly," the guard said and left the four Agents alone.

Blowfish took lead, and they went to four adjacent chairs on the side of the horseshoe opposite to the door. It was the safest side: they did not have their backs to the windows, and could monitor the only entrance.

"Purexo. Mmm," Blowfish broke the silence.

"What's that? Some catering service firm?" Jo asked.

"Much more. They're almost the global leader in food and facility services, as well as in violating their employees' rights. In their most notorious years they also invested in private prisons. Their buns are hard and their desserts challenging."

"Lovely. I don't think a weapons manufacturer could choose a better provider."

"Indeed. Mark my words, food services will be the next big trend for fictional villains. First it was Russians, then terrorists, then private military companies, and now it's their turn."

Just as Blowfish finished the sentence, two people entered the room. Ian could easily tell that neither was Hermann: these had to be Agents from the East division.

The first of them was a barrel-chested man with dark skin, whose sunglasses were customized: they were red-tinted instead of reflective, round and large. He sported a goatee beard which matched the short-cut black hair.

The second was a much odder case: at least fifteen

centimeters taller and less muscular than the first, who was not short either. He (or at least Ian guessed him to be male) wore a black latex mask with integrated glasses and matching black gloves, so that no skin was visible at all.

The dark-skinned spoke first. "I'm Hammerfist. He's Black Avenger. Agents from the East Coast. Pleasure to meet you."

"Blowfish. From the West."

"Goat."

Jo was next. Ian could almost sense time slowing down, as she would utter the ridiculous nickname, and then he would have to do the same.

"Phantasm."

What?

This was completely unexpected. It was unfair to change the plan without telling. Time seemed to actually stop as Ian thought very, very hard. That name was much better than Ravenna, but where had it come from? It had to be a song title from an early thrash or death metal band. Exodus? No, they had a song called "Piranha." Instead, it had to be –

Possessed. Yes, definitely. From their "Beyond the Gates" album. But now Ian had a problem. He definitely could not go with Crucifier, as that originated from the ridiculous 101 Rules of Black Metal, where one of the rules went "All pets you own now will henceforth be known as Crucifier." Goddamn, he would not name himself after a pet!

But what then? The milliseconds were ticking out.

Some other song title? From another thrash metal band? Anthrax had "Subjugator," which was kind of cool, but still too complex. It needed to be something simple. Well then, Agent Steel had "Rager," and several,

the late Cyberpriest included, had "Tormentor." But –

Since he would be stuck with it, it had to be a name with a meaning. None of those had much of that, just a generic display of power and aggression. Therefore he thought back to Jo's choice. Phantasm. An apparition or a ghost. Possessed. Demonic possession. The most extreme form of possession would be if multiple demons inhabited your soul simultaneously.

Yes! That actually fit in with his SCEPTRE training, as it had left him with the feeling of multiple disjointed personalities. Perhaps it was not the brightest idea to choose a name which would constantly remind him of that, but if he wanted meaning on such short notice, he could not get picky.

And what did the multiple demons say when interrogated? There was a specific, Biblical phrase for that, which was kind of a cliché, but good enough. My name is –

"Legion," Ian blurted out. Now that it was done, he felt proud of his rapid decision-making ability.

"Sorry, had to change at the last second. Would have been too ridiculous otherwise," Jo whispered to him. "Yours was better too."

He felt an odd, sinking sensation from the short adrenaline jolt that the sudden need for improvisation had caused. It was not something to make a habit of. But he did not get to dwell it for too long, as just seconds later the door opened again, and two more entered.

The first certainly had to be the CEO, Hermann, for he was an older man, probably fifty at least, with a charcoal suit, a black tie, and long silver hair in a ponytail. The face was triangular, the eyes alert, giving a perpetually aggressive impression. He had a miniature lap-

top with him, which he promptly laid down on the table.

The last person Ian also recognized, as Blowfish had shown him the video. The YouTube hero who rallied for an 'armed uprising' and post-processed himself to look like a cartoon character. Well, here he was in flesh, and to some degree that did him a favor. With the beginnings of a beer belly and a bald head with rough features and a healthy stubble of dark beard, Crazy F.U.B.A.R Mad Dog "Machine Gunn" Eddie had arrived. Something in his composition made Ian guess he might have actual military history, and despite his more outlandish appearance and name he seemed to have some, but only some, of the aura of focus and authority Blackhand had possessed while he lived.

Everyone took a seat except Hermann. "Welcome, Agents. I'm Hermann Grieg, CEO, Grieg Industries. We're here today to discuss what will hopefully become a unique transition in the history of the Agency. Though I believe you've already got acquainted with each other, let's have a round of introductions, as I see some new faces around here."

Hermann sat to the center seat, and then everyone got to repeat their Agent names. Ian found "Legion" to come more naturally this time, so perhaps it was a good choice even after the initial pride faded. Speaking last, Eddie called himself just "Mad Dog," which made sense.

Hermann then consulted his laptop. "Before we begin, let's just make sure that everyone here actually is a senior Agent –"

A few seconds of clicking on the laptop's mouse pad.

"Agent Blowfish, I've received no report of promotions from you. And if I understand correctly the three to your left are from your branch. So it appears –"

“Yes. They do not have senior status so far, by their choice. What they do have, is first-hand experience of infiltrating critical SCEPTRE facilities, fighting and eliminating enemy operatives using whatever means available and necessary, and preventing a nuclear (for effect, Blowfish pronounced it 'nukular') attack that in the worst case might have ignited a third world war. So, are we going to have a problem?”

“Hm. Let's not make it one, this time, but I'll have to make a record of your insubordination. The wording of my message was unambiguous, after all. And yes, I've read the mission report, so I'm well aware of what your people are capable of. Just to make it clear from the file, is the Agent with the SCEPTRE-implanted alternative personality in this room?”

There was an audible, collective gasp but Ian could not pinpoint from whom it originated. It appeared Blowfish had been brutally honest when writing her report. That certainly fit with the uncompromising personality of a BOFH, but could have less than fortunate consequences.

“That would be me,” Jo stated calmly.

“And are you certain, under the pain of stripping your Agent status and death by gun, that it is under control and discussions from this meeting won't be relayed to the enemy?”

“Absolutely.”

Hearing a corporate CEO talk about “death by gun” could have been amusing, but somehow Ian guessed Hermann was not joking at all.

“Good then, we may proceed. I'll let Mad Dog speak first, for he actually approached me and set this whole thing in motion.”

Mad Dog cleared his throat.

"First of all, my highest respect to Agents Blowfish, Goat, Phantasm and Legion for having courage that few possess. Without their hard work and sacrifices the world would be much worse off right now. It also highlights the problem we have. If we can't rely on our government to protect us from the kind of scum that SCEPTRE is – I might even assume they operate with governmental sanction – then we must grow stronger. Much stronger. I've taken the liberty of – testing the water – a bit, and I do believe that we have a huge pool of potential Agents."

Blowfish spoke very quietly over the Agent radio, on a channel which only the four of them could hear. "Yeah, right. By promising a revolt as a video game character. Hardly a proof of anything."

Hammerfist launched into a rapid-fire criticism. "You mean that video? Man, what shit are you trying to pull? Most of those who responded are just kids, who barely separate reality from a game! Do you want their blood on your hands, when they go out in the field and find the harsh way what's it like?"

"Hmm. Let's not be too quick in judgment," an odd scratching voice spoke next. It was the man in the mask, Black Avenger. "Some may have potential. But there must be – selection. Strong from the weak, fit from the unfit, avengers from the victims."

"Damn right there must be," Mad Dog said, his face slightly red. "Selection and training to the strictest Agent standards. I wasn't going to imply otherwise."

"How many Agents are you exactly talking about?" Blowfish asked.

"The expansion should of course be staged. But for the final phase – I would not settle for less than one thousand."

Blowfish frowned heavily, but remained silent. Ian wondered of a possible hidden agenda: was this simply for ramping up the production of Agent equipment? To possibly prove that the gear was ready for military adoption? But he could see that such expansion would certainly result only in huge expenses, with only extremely uncertain gains to be had.

"Do you think you could guarantee operational security even to a basic degree, when we're talking about such huge numbers?" Blowfish said, her tone becoming more agitated.

Mad Dog did not immediately answer.

"Let me tell you. You can't. Unless you're proposing a cell structure similar to terrorist organizations. That could work. But there's a huge difference in ideology and mindset. I say you'll have a much easier time finding one thousand crackpots who want nothing but to blow themselves up, than one thousand defenders of freedom with all the necessary physical and mental traits, including an art of improvisation that's very difficult to teach, who are willing to train diligently and maintain absolute secrecy at all times, and who are prepared to abandon their normal lives for a concept that's honestly nebulous to most outsiders."

"There should be nothing nebulous about it," Mad Dog retorted. "Or otherwise we've already failed. To infiltrate, fight, kill and die, protecting our rights against all the bastards who would take them away, including the government."

Blowfish let out a sigh. Ian understood that there could be a long day ahead. And he found himself wondering: from where did Mad Dog hail from? Judging from the vast differences in opinion, he could not be from the East branch.

"You forgot stalking the streets. Creating a fearful presence. We have feared the enemy too long. Now it's time for it to fear us," Black Avenger added.

That was almost funny. The soldier-agent vs. the vigilante agent. But if it was decided that the government was the enemy, was Ian ready to go that far? He did not have much respect for authority, but the gap between not respecting and fighting with lethal force was still huge. And if the decision came from Mad Dog, did it mean they all had to obey, just because he had taken initiative now? He certainly was no substitute for Blackhand.

Quitting the Agents was always an option, even if it would mean a lack of protection. From the puzzled looks on the faces of Erik and Jo, they might have been thinking the exact same thing.

Fuck, Ian thought and traveled to a happy-place in his mind. He was not calling the shots in any case.

A consensus had been reached at last, even if it was uneasy. The agreement was to begin with a very limited test run in recruiting new Agents. The aim was for both branches to take up to three most promising candidates for a test run during a period of one month. In addition Mad Dog would run and expand his own branch in the vicinity of the Grieg offices. It went by several names: the Shadow Unit, the Crazies, or the Gunheds. Mad Dog seemed unable to settle on just one.

When things had turned more hairy, Hermann had threatened with cutting the money if the Agents could not reach a compromise. Furthermore, it turned out Mad Dog was his nephew. After a promisingly started Army career, he had unsuccessfully applied for Delta Force, and this had made him understandably bitter. After that he had turned to Agent operations instead.

With their bellies full of coffee and hard Purexo buns Ian, Jo, Erik and Blowfish raced to the ground floor and out of the building. They would only catch the flight home with heroic speeding and flawless luck at traffic lights.

Blowfish opened the central locking by remote and they all rushed into the Chrysler. She gunned the engine hard and they sped out of the Grieg building parking lot into the evening traffic, before none of them had a seat belt on. To make matters worse, it had started to rain.

"Worse than any band meeting I've ever been in," Erik growled.

"That's Agent politics for you. Fancy becoming a senior now?" Blowfish barked back, while changing lanes dangerously.

"If it helps against the bullshit."

"That's the spirit." Horns blared.

"Count me in too," Jo shouted.

Ian considered. If being senior meant more power against Mad Dog's plans, then he would tolerate it as well.

"And me," he said last.

Blowfish steered to the shoulder to overtake two semi-trailer rigs. Ian calculated they had to maintain a steady sixty miles per hour in the suburban traffic to get to the airport with enough time to board, almost double the speed with which they had arrived.

Well, there would always be a next flight: it was not like the world would end. Ian believed Blowfish to be an expert driver who would take only controlled risks, but being spotted by a passing patrol car posed perhaps the greatest risk. Getting stopped for speeding while bearing arms would not look good, but there had not been time to stuff the weaponry back into the case. Better to do that at the destination.

They arrived at the brightly lit airport just as the clock struck 8 PM, the departure time. Blowfish had driven like a true Agent, there had been excellent waves of

green lights, and no police interference, but it simply had not been enough. Still they had failed.

To control the excitement Ian had kept refreshing the Metal Archives page for Cyberpriest on his mobile: he wanted to see if and when the kid would actually make edits. So far there had been no change. Still status: unknown.

Now that defeat was clear, he refreshed once more.

Cyberpriest

Country of origin: United States

Genre: Thrash metal

Lyrical themes: Satanism (early), violence

Status: KIA

What the hell? A “killed in action” status should not be possible at the site. A feeling of dread rose from the bottom of his stomach, and he clicked to reveal further details.

Bassist / vocalist René was killed in November 2012 when the rehearsal space exploded. The rest (guitarist Jo, drummer Erik and second guitarist Ian) perished next February when an airplane carrying them exploded soon after take-off. Investigations are still underway.

“They’re going to bomb the plane! We have to warn them!” Ian shouted as he jumped out of the car. While running toward the entrance, oblivious to the gun within his coat and whether his fellow Agents were actually following, he turned his eyes to the sky just in time to see the passenger jet lifting off.

A second later a giant orange fireball lit the sky and the wet asphalt. He stopped in his tracks.

“Fuck,” he breathed, not yet fully comprehending what had happened. He took a quick look behind to see Jo and Erik stand beside the car with their mouths wide open. Only Blowfish betrayed no emotion.

“Get back in!” she yelled. “There’s nothing we can do.”

Ian’s body obeyed while his mind stayed blank. He felt the sudden acceleration as they turned away, and slowly understanding came back.

SCEPTRE had no doubt destroyed the plane to kill the four of them. He wondered how many innocent victims exactly. Sixty? Or even more? Either the kid in the toilet had been on the enemy side (probably through mind programming) or the Sectarian Elite simply had eyes everywhere. Either way Ian was guilty, simply by showing his face in the public. An urgent but cold need to kill in revenge mixed with the guilt. He also realized that all that extra corporate bullshit had just saved their lives. Having the meeting virtually, or not at all, would have saved much more though.

“The Metal Archives page was updated just before the explosion. It was SCEPTRE,” Ian said to Jo. He had told of meeting the kid while they were en route to the Grieg offices.

“Shit, that’s just fucking evil,” she replied.

Ian understood it paid to get as far away as possible before the authorities arrived. Definitely, there was no getting on another flight. Instead they would drive through the night and abandon the car somewhere sufficiently close to their own, perhaps even burn it. The identities used on this trip would not be safe to reuse anyway, so any bill from the rental company would simply go to /dev/null.

As the evening grew darker and there was first less traffic, then finally no traffic at all on the smaller roads they were using, Blowfish switched off the headlights and drove by night vision. Erik was at first frightened by this, until he understood. Midnight drew close: the rain clouds parted at last and stars became visible. A flat landscape extended as far as the eye could see.

"Do you think SCEPTRE might be tracking this car?" Ian asked.

"I'm not getting any abnormal signals," Blowfish replied. The Agent glasses could also be used to scan for any sources of electromagnetic radiation, though in a modern, running car there would be a chaotic mess of signals. It could also be possible that the rental firm tracked its vehicles, in which case the enemy would just have to tap in to their systems.

"Say when you want to switch."

"Still doing fine."

The need to kill had subsided a bit, but it was not time to let the guard down. SCEPTRE certainly had to know by now that they had missed their flight. Besides getting to HQ safely, it was critical to not let its location be compromised.

They stopped to top up the gasoline, then an hour more of driving went by.

"Now would be highly appreciated if you took the wheel," Blowfish said at last.

Ian was by now feeling tired as well, but the Agent BOFH had been driving non-stop. It was almost the end of a Jack Bauer day, though they certainly had not saved the world in the last 24 hours. Only caused death and suffering for people who had nothing to do with this.

"Wait," she suddenly hissed. "We may have a tail. Another vehicle with no lights."

Damn. That left little for imagination. SCEPTRE simply would not leave them alone.

"Kill the night vision and switch on your lights," Ian replied quickly. "They'll get close and then blind you with the hi-beams. It's murder if you have amplification on."

SCEPTRE had done exactly that before, when Jo had been driving, and it had been bad enough without the night vision.

Ian switched his own night vision on for just a few seconds and looked through the rear window, but could not see much. Then he changed the mode to thermal, and now the tailing vehicle, a van, was clear as in daylight. It was perhaps two hundred meters behind and closing. There was at least one beside the driver, but rear passengers would blend in the picture, so he rather expected it to be at least a four-person killing crew. A potential even match.

Before the chasing car even did the headlight trick, silenced automatic gunfire started. Windows shattered and the ugly racket of hits against sheet metal invaded Ian's senses. Not so even match after all.

"Everyone down!" Blowfish shouted fiercely as she started swerving to throw off the killers' aim.

While crouched in the rear, Ian got the Beretta in his hand in record time. He unsafetied it and unleashed a mostly blind volley through the rear window, which disintegrated from his and the enemies' combined fire. Jo followed suit with her USP, though her shots were fewer but better aimed. But neither of them seemed to have much effect.

"I will brake, then ram them! Prepare to fire!"

There was a momentary pause in the enemy fire. They possibly were reloading now. Ian became aware of

a stinging pain in the back of his left hand: probably a shard of glass as he had received no message to his sunglasses' HUD of the armor charge diminishing. He switched from thermal back to light amplification and observed the hand to be bloody, but not threateningly so.

Blowfish stepped on the brakes and the wheels locked for just a fraction of second before the ABS took over. Instead of hitting their rear, the enemy van swerved to avoid, and appeared on their left side.

It was now or never. Three small-caliber pistols against automatics: the balance was far from even.

Blowfish ducked to give Erik a clear line of fire, then the Agents began emptying their magazines. Ian counted three enemy shooters: one in the front and two in the rear passenger compartment. It was a people mover instead of a cargo vehicle. All three had silenced sub-machine guns, possibly P90's.

He put five rounds to the rear, then aimed at the front, but could not tell how well he was hitting. He was still two or three shots from clicking dry when the enemy guns came to life.

CHARGE: 75 PERCENT

He was getting hit, but the armor was holding so far. Of course it would not hold forever. He shot the final rounds blind, then ducked extra-low to reload. With a quick glance to his left he verified that Jo was alive and reloading as well.

Next came the massive jolt of steel against steel as Blowfish yanked the steering wheel left hard. With the seat belt off, Ian was thrown hard against Jo.

"Sorry about that," he said quickly. But she seemed totally concentrated on finishing the reloading, as if the collision had never happened.

Ian saw Blowfish was ducking so low that she could not possibly see where they were going. Furthermore, he feared that they would just trash their own car without damaging the heavier enemy vehicle much.

After she rammed for the second time, Ian hazarded a short peek up and saw the van careen off the road and lose speed. Had the driver been hit? Good riddance if so, but he could not be sure.

Next Blowfish performed a handbrake turn to face the vehicle, which by now was only crawling forward, smoking. Ian saw the logo on the front: it was a black Volkswagen Transporter.

Before Ian could finish reloading Jo got out from the back seat, advanced rapidly and emptied a full twelve rounds inside, switching her aim in a quick motion for each occupant. Meanwhile wind blew her hair almost theatrically: Ian got the impression of an assassin not completely of this world, fitting to her new codename.

"They're dead," she stated, voice emotionless. The enemy van came to a complete halt and its engine died.

"Everyone OK?" Blowfish asked as she put the Chrysler on neutral and left the driver seat.

"Armor power lost, nothing else," Erik grunted.

"Same here," Jo said, sounding more like herself now.

"Got some glass embedded in my hand," Ian replied last as he stood up. Driving would possibly be painful.

Blowfish came over and took a quick look. She pulled the shard out violently and applied a large band-aid, all in the space of three seconds. Clinical efficiency. Usually it was Jo who patched him up, but she would have been less inclined to hurt him, therefore proceeding slower, and in this case it was best to exit the scene as quickly as possible.

"Erik could drive as well," Blowfish reminded.

"I'll be fine."

The slight throbbing pain would help Ian focus and stay awake. He turned the car around and they were on their way again.

As the journey progressed Ian observed red warning lights coming up one after another: ABS, air bags, power steering, brake pressure. What a piece of shit car that could not take a few 9mm bullets! He tested the brakes and observed that they had reduced power, but still worked good enough. Maybe one circuit had been blown.

When they had perhaps half hour's drive left to the airport parking lot where the Toyota stood, the situation was finally turning critical as the oil warning came on, and the engine temperature gauge started to rise.

"Fuck. The engine might not last long. It's losing oil fast," he said.

Ian braked to a halt, shut the engine and got out to pop the trunk open. He was positively surprised to find a full canister of synthetic motor oil. Meanwhile Erik had lifted the hood. Ian gave the can to him, and he proceeded to empty it completely into the engine.

"Try it now. It might last long enough," he said.

Ian turned the ignition. At first it only cranked, but did not start.

"It's not getting fuel. Might be the pump, or the computer," Erik suggested.

Either of those might have driven Ian over the edge into a full-blown catatonic rage. Thankfully a retry was enough, and the engine came to life again, with the oil warning out at least momentarily.

Again, the journey continued.

With a few miles left the light came on again, and

this time there was no stopping the engine from overheating. Steam began to rise from under the hood.

“Steer into the ditch. We can walk the rest of the way. But first we must wipe any fingerprints,” Blowfish said from the back.

Without the power steering the wheel was unnecessarily heavy. But Ian did as ordered and left the bullet-ridden car unceremoniously to the side. Soon it would be light, so they should not take too long wiping the vehicle.

7.

Almost exactly a day later the Agents were finally back at the HQ. Fortunately the Toyota had waited for them at the parking lot, with no tracking or explosive devices attached.

Erik drove for the last stretch. Meanwhile Ian had checked the Metal Archives page yet again: now it just said status: split-up, and the text about the three of them perishing in the plane explosion had disappeared just as mysteriously.

He got up from the car into the HQ garage, feeling like a drunk zombie. The band-aid on his hand was only slightly red-colored, so the bleeding had stopped and there seemed to be no more shards lodged deeper. Considering the enemy firepower, they had been very lucky in the nightly encounter. That might not repeat.

Ian wandered to the room he shared with Jo and barely had energy to take off his boots and coat. Then he fell to the bed. He was too tired to ponder the deeper meaning of what had happened today, but one thing was clear: they were back at war.

Seconds later Jo followed, throwing herself next to

him without even taking the Agent garments off. She let out a long and hard sigh whose meaning Ian could well guess: the day had not been a good one.

He well could have lost her today. Or vice versa. One lucky head shot and it would be all over. Theoretically the Agent armor would deflect rounds aimed toward the wearer's head, but it could not be relied on.

A minute passed in silence and semi-darkness.

All of a sudden Ian heard a loud, extended shriek from the pillow. He could not certain, but it sounded like:

Legion!

The syllables were stretched out menacingly. He instantly jumped into a sitting position. This was disturbing, and very much reminded him of the whisper in the airplane. Jo appeared to already be asleep, and furthermore had her back turned, so it could not have been her.

"It can happen when you're passing from wakefulness to sleep, and particularly if you're over-tired already, the brain's electric signals get jumbled up somehow, and you hear things. Flashes of light are also common. If you believe in the occult, that's entering the astral plane," Erik explained.

"But it has never happened before," Ian protested.

"It may be that you have some latent brain damage that's now coming to the fore."

That remark surely cheered Ian up.

The living room TV was on but silent, showing the aftermath of the plane explosion once more. The Boeing 717 had blown up with 74 passengers on board, and none had survived. It was even worse than Ian had originally thought. The clock would shortly be 3 PM:

the sleep had not exactly been refreshing and Ian was feeling consistently cold. He assumed it was the cold need to kill that still lingered.

Blowfish arrived from the makeshift server room that was a small closet in the hallway.

"The Metal Archives sysadmin was rather cooperative. We may have a lead. As the bastards updated your band page, they left a visible trail."

Ian's heart jumped, and he felt glad to a degree. If he had not been that honest with the kid, maybe they would not have updated the page at all, and just blown up the plane. Then there would have been no lead.

"Where did the edit come from?" Ian asked.

"I will need to double-check whether SCEPTRE actually hacked into the system from elsewhere, but it doesn't seem so. It would make little sense to choose such an odd target for hacking, when you could just tap into some no-name router instead. But it would make much more sense to use it as a front. It's a software company, Innovativi3D."

The name caused an instant wave of dislike in Ian's mind, it felt like the typical name a company might choose to appear cutting-edge to other companies.

"What are they doing exactly?"

"They just have landed a sizable deal to develop a federal '3D internet' implementation that runs directly in web browsers. In other words, virtual world stuff. They're also recruiting."

There was a very devilish grin on Blowfish's face, which Ian could interpret in only one manner and he did not like it in the slightest.

"What about we storm them with guns and get medieval on anyone we catch alive?" he asked, though he could anticipate the reply.

“Unfortunately I don't think we would accomplish much that way. Except getting us all arrested or killed. Their main office is some 400 clicks east, downtown area, with a police station close to it. No, it's better to do it the silent, insidious way. This is possibly some wholly another angle to SCEPTRE's operations and we need to find out what exactly. I believe you're the best Agent for the job, considering how you learn things fast.”

Ian believed his abnormally fast capability of learning things, such as new songs on the guitar or flying a stealth helicopter, to be a result of the dissociative SCEPTRE assassin training. In a way it would be poetic to use that against the enemy.

Still, he was not quite convinced it was the way to go. Even if he threw aside the obvious disgust at the thought of becoming a nameless drone implementing a large, federal-approved system, there was a possibility of wasting much time just trying to get in. And if SCEPTRE had already recognized him under a false identity, they would do it again, particularly if they were running the place. He might need to change his appearance extremely.

“What about SCEPTRE's old communication channels? You were tapped into them. Like the sky projection system. Are there any leads to follow there?” Ian asked.

Blowfish shook her head. “Negative. All of the existing networks have fallen silent. They must have reorganized themselves significantly. If I was them, I'd done just the same, with their original plan in pieces and most of the top staff dead.”

“Let's suppose I would go for it. What would I actually need to learn to have a chance of getting in?”

Blowfish motioned for him to come to the living room computer terminal that was in shared use.

“Look at this. They want senior-level C++ coders with at least five years experience of building 3D rendering engines. Then they want some networking guys, with Java and C# experience, but those are dime a dozen. The first option is much more hardcore, but you'll have a better chance getting in, as there will be less qualified competition. While you learn, we'll set up a legend for you. An open source coder legend.”

It made sense in some ways, and in others it just did not. They could not actually change internet history, so with sufficient diligence the employers would always notice something fishy was going on, as a coder had appeared out of nowhere.

“How does it work exactly? We upload some fictional open source project and make it look like I wrote it?”

“Pretty much so. You remember the VR training system we had in the old big HQ?”

“Of course.” Ian knew his life was noticeably emptier now that he could not go running on an omnidirectional motorized rubber mat, blasting virtual enemies to pieces.

“Grieg Industries has long ago planned to open source the initial 0.1 version. It has little resemblance to the latest, but the renderer and scene graph are very much workable and relevant to what you'd be doing at Innovativi. Actually you should familiarize yourself with the later, more advanced versions too, but we'll upload V0.1 in your name. Of course under the GPL license so that no-one can actually do anything useful with it.”

In a perverse way the assignment had now ensnared Ian: he possibly simply had to do it, even if it meant

vandalizing his hair or other drastic measures. He wondered what the others would think: if he was out there coding, then it would fall on the rest to train any recruit Agents that would appear at their door.

Focus! he reminded himself. He would need to train first, in a subject he had no experience of. Though he had administered servers, he had never programmed.

"How much do I have time?" Ian asked.

"Applications for the C++ programmers' post are due in one week."

One week to achieve five years of experience. If he dissociated sufficiently, it just might be possible. If sacrifice of his hair was inevitable, he would probably just shave his head bare. Then he could be a scary, misanthropic coder with a burning, evil gaze. As that might become tiresome to maintain day after day, it was probably best to start practicing early.

He imagined a coder's training montage with suitable music in the background, such as "Eye of the Tiger." Blowfish would be the relentless mentor, pushing him on. He probably had to get started right now before he started thinking of it too much and chickened out, or wasted too much time.

"How do I start?" Ian asked.

"You install Subversion and check out the source code from the Grieg private server. If you're weak you can use TortoiseSVN, it's a graphical client. Install also a C++ compiler. Again, if you're weak, choose Visual Studio, and perhaps MinGW if you think you're strong. No, sorry, it sucks. Just download Visual Studio. Then you start going through the code and understanding it bit by bit. Start from the class CSceneNode. Well, maybe you should rather start with a C++ tutorial first."

"Thanks."

“Don't thank me. You'll probably hate me once you understand how much work you have ahead of you. And of course, if it just seems too much, tell me early and we'll think of something else. In that case I might go instead.”

Ian was submerged deep in the code. To be honest, he did not have an idea why the Grieg simulator V0.1 codebase was doing things the way it did. He had just learned about C++ pointers, doing manual “new” and “delete” calls, or alternatively malloc() and free(), but suddenly there was a lot of AddRef() and ReleaseRef() calls in the code instead, which were supposed to make memory management and life easier, but instead it just made everything much more troublesome.

The idea was to count how many references there were to a specific object in the computer's memory, and when there were no more references, the object could be safely destroyed.

Out of a momentary flash of genius he looked at how V0.2 was doing things instead, and he understood that there something called “smart pointers” were used instead. No AddRef() and ReleaseRef() any more, instead smart pointers did that automatically. Possibly V0.1 did things in a stupid way because it was early code, written by inexperienced programmers. Or maybe they had thought that because computers were slower back

then, doing anything automatically was pure evil, and it was faster if done manually. Ian had surfed through some open source project forums, and had already a rudimentary understanding of the various fallacies coders could possess.

Too bad it would be the V0.1 code that acted as his resume. But if he could explain the stupidity and how to do better, his would-be employers might be impressed.

Now it was Wednesday, the first proper day of training. Yesterday evening he had done the program set-up and read the C++ tutorial, though he would not think he understood it a hundred percent. Six days left to get completely pumped.

Jo came to check on him.

"You're taking the assignment seriously," she noted.

"Yeah, can't pause for long if I'm learning five years worth in one week."

"Insane. But I believe you if anyone can do that."

"You mean, because I'm SCEPTRE-trained?"

"Uh, not really, more because you learned our songs at insane speed."

"Well, that's the exact same reason. But that's OK, I've come to accept it. And if I'm using my training against the enemy, even better."

There was a moment of silence as Ian submerged into another part of the code: how the scene node would concatenate its transform matrix to find out its effective position in the 3D world. For example, if a gun was in a character's hand, then the gun's transform matrix would be multiplied with the hand bone's transform matrix, which would be multiplied with the forearm's matrix, all the way to the root scene node. Again, there were multiple ways to do it, and V0.1 picked the simplest and crudest one.

"Well, if you get the gig, I guess I'll be training new Agents," Jo said.

"Do you look forward to that?"

"Yeah, perhaps so. Or actually – there's something weird I should have told you earlier. In the meeting, something happened."

Jo's voice suddenly appeared spooked, and Ian lifted his eyes from the code to meet hers.

"It – Fury – shifted its alliance. Said the Agents will be the coming, strong faction, while SCEPTRE goes away as weak, so it rather supports the Agents now. I believe it was somehow impressed by Black Avenger, what he said about creating a presence of fear. It wants to train the recruits with harsh discipline. And in the countryside, when I shot the four gunmen, I – I let it take over."

Her voice sounded remorseful. Ian himself did not quite know what to think. The cold and effective Fury personality would fit the idea of a grown, more ruthless Agency, as advocated by Mad Dog and Black Avenger. It certainly did not fit in the original, more noble version Blackhand and Sarge had died fighting for. Also, it made perfect sense to think it was Fury and not Jo who had calmly emptied the magazine at the people inside the car. As for SCEPTRE, considering how easily they had bombed the airplane, they did not seem to be going away at all.

Ian stood up and touched Jo's arm. "Does it feel easier now? I mean, if it's on our side, does the voice bother you as much as before?"

"I guess it's easier. Maybe. At least it's not telling me to kill you or anyone else. It still keeps making those tactical observations, but I've learned to regard them as sick humor."

Ian nodded, and thought some more.

"It may actually help you to survive an otherwise impossible encounter. Or protect you from emotional distress. That would not be terribly different from me dissociating during combat. But if you let it make major decisions, then you'll be going down the dark path."

"Yeah. I hope it doesn't come to that."

It was Friday afternoon. Ian thought he had a rather good understanding of the scene nodes and the associated memory management now. In addition he had studied lower-level code that for example handled text manipulation, and interacting with the operating system.

Now he turned his attention to the actual 3D rendering subsystem. The V0.1 codebase supported both Direct3D and OpenGL rendering, but did so in the most ancient way imaginable: submitting very small chunks of geometry to the graphics card, and not using vertex and pixel shaders at all. He had learned these to be bad practices from an elementary "modern graphics programming" tutorial.

Certainly this would look ridiculously bad to the Innovati people. This was as far from cutting edge as possible.

He looked around him. No-one else in the living room. Quickly he rushed to the server room closet and found Blowfish there.

"Blowfish, we have a problem. The V0.1 code is just too ancient shit. Any interviewer will laugh at it. I don't think I'd make the cut using that."

"Hm." She thought for a few seconds.

"Let's do it this way. We don't have permission to release anything newer than V0.1, so we stick with it. But

you take the V0.2 code with you on a memory stick or something, and then you say you've been coding this much more advanced version, but haven't released it yet. Just double-check beforehand that it's good enough. If not, we can go to V0.3, but it's much more complex so it's harder to be convincing."

"Yeah. That might work. But isn't it suspicious? Isn't an open source developer supposed to be contributing to the public code all the time, like a ninja is supposed to be flipping out and cutting off heads all the time?"

"Not necessarily. You can explain that you were contracted to develop the code further privately, but the deal fell through. And now you're looking for new partners while keeping your options open and not yet letting everyone see the code. It's not a hundred percent noble ideology, but they'll understand that an FOSS developer wants to make a living as well."

"Yes. Of course! I'm a highly individualistic, Satanist developer, who looks out only for myself," Ian said in sudden excitement.

"Don't go too far. Remember, in case they're actually SCEPTRE, they have many years of experience while you're just pretending. But you could be a novice Satanist looking to join a ring of more experienced practitioners. Yeah, I strongly recommend that approach. For added effect, you could combine that with getting them sufficiently drunk first. But don't go overboard in anything."

Satisfied enough with the advice, Ian nodded and went back to the code. V0.2 was indeed much more advanced, for it actually used vertex and index buffers, and contained support for either GLSL or HLSL shaders. But was that good enough? V0.3 added support for deferred rendering, and could redefine the whole render-

ing path by simply editing a data file in XML format. However, just a cursory look revealed that the code indeed was much more complex, just like Blowfish had warned. It was going to be a hard choice.

For the rest of the day Ian studied the V0.2 and V0.3 renderers side-by-side, though he had to admit that he gravitated toward the easier V0.2 code. After all, he did not feel like a complete masochist.

As his training was coming to an end, Ian felt he was reaching a plateau, just like one could reach in physical exercise. He had no especial illusions and knew he did not have a true inside-out grasp on C++ and 3D programming, but perhaps by now he could fake it well enough.

Therefore he rather started concentrating on the other aspects of his programmer identity. First of all, the name, which he had invented himself. Trevor Ashen. Trevor was a sufficiently hard-edged first name, fitting for a budding Satanist. Ashen was a subtle play on Nargoroth's vocalist Ash.

The name certainly required shaving his head bald. Yes! There would be no turning back now.

For protection Trevor also had the right to carry a gun, but the Beretta could not be re-used. Instead it would be a compact SIG Sauer P228. It did not take long for Ian to familiarize with it: after shooting through two magazines at the subterranean Agency HQ firing range he felt competent enough. But he knew that without the armor combat would best be avoided completely: he certainly would be toast against multiple armed opponents.

There also was the matter of a suitable vehicle.

Another used car, plus its insurance, would not be a

terrible financial burden for the Agency. Using the Toyota for the whole mission would simply be too risky, for it was safest to assume SCEPTRE already knew it to be in Agent use. The selection would just have to be performed meticulously: Ian assumed Erik would be able to assist him best.

He now spent more time exercising physically than looking at the code, to get into the mindset of Trevor who would cultivate himself in every way possible.

Finally it was the day of reckoning. The deadline to send the application. Blowfish had mostly finalized the coder legend. The simulator source code, version V0.1, was now public at the open source repository site Github, under the name "Evolution Engine." Not terribly creative, but it would do.

"We may need a picture, so now you must decide," Blowfish said as she stood up from the terminal, "what you will look like for the duration of the assignment."

He had of course decided, days ago. But now that it was actually about to happen, Ian felt a deep trepidation. Actually destroying the most instantly recognizable part of him, the blond headbanger's locks that went well past his shoulders, would in a manner be soul-crushing.

It was almost as bad as enduring dissociative training and torture at the hands of his former masters.

But still, it had to be done.

Jo would be the priestess of sacrifice, he also decided. He collected the necessary tools: scissors and an electric razor, and went to look for her.

In the kitchen, she was eating an Agent-issue microwave dinner, also soul-crushing in its own way. She realized what was being asked of her even before Ian said anything, and shook her head.

"No. There are some limits to what I'm willing to do."

"But I must look completely different. Otherwise I'll be recognized, and executed. At Frozen Hell they knew almost instantly who I was," Ian said, his voice unsure.

"Let's think this through before we do anything stupid and permanent. So if I've understood right, Trevor is a Satanist, and you want to look like one."

Ian nodded. "Yeah, a novice. He wants to gain more understanding."

"Who do you pattern him after? Is he a novice Glen Benton, a novice Jon Nödtveidt, a novice Anton LaVey, or who?"

"More like Nödtveidt." He was the band Dissection's late vocalist who had believed extensively in Azerate and anti-cosmic Satanism.

Jo pondered for a while, looking at the floor and scratching her jaw.

"Then you'll make a mistake if you cut your hair. Jon only shaved his head when he had reached the final stage of his enlightenment, when he was recording the Reinkaos album. Before that he had long hair."

"But with long hair I'll always look like me."

"Well, if they're serious, and they're SCEPTRE, they're using computer face recognition. So you're not completely safe in any case. You'd need a Mission Impossible mask, and I don't think we have those. And too complex makeup is painful because you always have to reapply, and it can fail in the worst possible moment."

"What do you suggest?"

"I have to think a bit. My artistic vision is not completely clear. I believe I'll know once I get started. Shall we begin?"

Jo's explanation of Satanic stages of development made at least some sense. Ian thought he could let her

try, though if she would be making things up as she went, it would not be very convincing. Finally, if nothing else helped, it would be time for the scissors.

"Yes," Ian said in Trevor's evil voice.

A half hour later Ian looked at Trevor's image in the mirror. The result was unexpected, but nevertheless satisfying.

His hair was clipped just a bit from the ends, and dyed end-of-the-world black. The eyebrows were also black and more defined. Contact lenses changed his eye color to an unsettling gray. Jo had been right, he looked more evil now than he would have looked with no hair. Evil, but also somewhat confused. Fitting for a novice.

Still, the greatest change came from the hard gaze he had rehearsed. He certainly did not look like himself as long as he remembered to maintain it. And perhaps the thought that everything was reversible would bring comfort in the darkest hours of his undercover work, and actually make him work more efficiently. Though it could also make him lose the hard edge if he was not careful.

"What do you think?" Jo asked.

"If life was a video game, then this would be a most commendable side quest achievement. But not everyone would get it. Thanks, Jo."

"What would it be called?"

"Um... Scissor Sister?"

Jo looked at Ian rather oddly.

With a picture now taken, Trevor Ashen also got his Facebook and LinkedIn profiles. Blowfish hacked her way in to make it appear as if they had existed for a longer time, and created fake connections and friends. Then, as the checklist of things to do was rapidly dimin-

ishing to zero, they went through the application mail together.

“Yes. This is sufficiently raw, honest and in character. A little bit stupid. It will do,” Blowfish said.

One click of a mouse button and it was on its way.

“Now we just wait.”

Things were progressing. Trevor was wanted for an interview at the Innovativ3D headquarters. This meant he needed a car. Ian knew that this stage could already have been a total failure: he simply could have heard nothing from them. So either Trevor actually was convincing, they had a shortage of good applicants, or it was a SCEPTRE trap: they already knew it was Ian, and just wanted him to have an interview with a gun.

Ian and Erik were at a depressive used car lot on an equally depressive, gray day. They already had been there for twenty minutes and had not found anything that was either fitting or within a reasonable budget.

A true Satanist, even if a novice, would need something that was respectable. An ordinary small hatchback or a family sedan, of which there were many, would not be that in the slightest. Fuck! Trevor needed either a muscle car or a motorcycle.

Ian circled for a few more minutes more, but nothing seemed acceptable. Some of the smaller cars, which Trevor could never use, honestly looked like vacuum cleaners. The few muscle or sports cars were old, al-

most falling apart, but still prohibitively expensive.

Then something at the far back corner of the lot caught his attention. He had already seen it before as he circled around, but for some reason it had not registered properly.

It was something he had never seen live on the road.

A tiny three-door hatchback, and this time it was not sufficient to say that it looked like a vacuum cleaner. It was something even worse, like an egg on wheels. The body was an ugly green, reminiscent of a dung beetle, while the huge front and rear bumpers were black plastic. There was rust on the bottom of the doors, and near the fuel cap.

It was completely the opposite of what Trevor would drive. And maybe that would be a unique genius move.

He would move from predictable to unpredictable, a walking contradiction the possible SCEPTRE taskmasters at the company could not comprehend. If he tried too hard to look like a traditional practitioner of the Left Hand Path, they might figure out easier that he was something he was not. But with that vehicle, he would blend in as one more eccentric programmer personality.

"What's that piece of crap? Hey, now I recall. They have those in Europe. It's called Ford Ka. But you can't legally drive those here. It doesn't fit the safety or whatever regulations. I don't know how the hell it ended up here," Erik said derisively.

Damn, Ian thought. Would his sudden change of plans collapse right on the start line?

The dealer, a tall, somewhat overweight man noticed Ian and Erik to have stopped at this particular car. He came over.

"You're interested in that one? Let me tell you, it's

something unique. Possibly the only street-legal Ka in the whole country. The previous owner spent over six grand in importing it and having it modified to pass the rules. But after doing all that, after months of work and going back and forth with the DOT, he decided that it wasn't for him anyway. Bad for him, but very good for you, as now you can have it for a bargain."

"How old is it?" Ian asked.

"It's one of the first of them built, that would be '96. A respectable 17 years. Any newer and he might have lucked out, as the rules are tougher for newer cars. But trust me, this one's still in fine condition. And only one hundred thousand miles on it."

"How much?"

"Two grand."

Erik was fiddling with his cell phone. The models were various, but all Agents had upgraded to something that could browse the web. He seemed to have a British used car page on.

"It should be five hundred maximum. Two K is pure robbery for that," he whispered.

Ian cleared his throat. "I'd like to test-drive it."

"Sure, sure. Let me get the keys," the dealer said, already heading to his office.

As soon as Ian got the engine running, and warily shifted to the first gear, he understood that this was a true vehicle from Hell. When he rolled out of the lot to the street and accelerated, the feeling was only confirmed.

The dashboard was extremely primitive, with only a speedometer, a fuel gauge, and some warning lights. Even when they were doing only 30 km/h at first, the rattling noise of the engine seemed to penetrate the in-

ner core of his soul. 60 km/h, and Ian had to raise his voice almost to a shout. The suspension felt extremely fishy, though Ian did not know enough of the inner workings of automobiles to begin to guess why.

"The most horrible car I've ever driven!" he said.

"Turn around then. Immediately!" Erik barked in reply. "Unless you're still thinking of buying it, in which case I believe you're batshit insane!"

Ian shifted gears and accelerated further as they went down a straight. The Ford did not start to feel magically better, only even worse, but he understood something: not only would driving this bomb confuse the employers and co-workers, it would harden his character every day so that he could be a more credible Trevor.

"I will take this," he said with steel in his voice. "It'll be an integral part of my cover."

Erik shook his head and said no more.

Returning to the dealer, Ian turned off the engine. It did not even die immediately, but sputtered oddly.

"If it makes you feel better, help me get the price down," Ian said as they climbed out.

While exiting, Erik hit his head on the ceiling and grunted in pain.

"Goddamn shitwagon. I'll help you on one condition. When you're done with it, I'll get to take a dump inside and then torch it."

That sounded like an unnecessarily harsh punishment. But Ian was not certain if the car would even survive to the end. Or if he would survive in case he was detected.

"Deal."

The Agency was now \$1750 poorer, and Trevor legally

owned a very rare and questionable vehicle. All four Agents were congregated inside the HQ garage. Ian understood everyone was just trying to come to terms with the acquisition.

"If it was red, it would remind me of myself," Blowfish said. "I don't mean I consider myself that ugly though."

"We get to burn it once it's no longer useful. Ian promised," Erik reminded.

"It's hard to think of it as a car," Jo observed. "It's rather like some weird small animal that has grown wheels."

"The idea is to confuse the enemy. They can't figure me out as easily, unlike if I was driving a Mustang or a Dodge or a Satanic black Cadillac. They'll get confused and just forget about me, and then I get to make my secret observations undisturbed," Ian explained.

Blowfish was unimpressed. "Hm. As long as you actually don't count on that happening. Rather, assume them to expect you would try to confuse them."

Ian believed this chain of reasoning could be continued for an infinitely long time. Basically every choice could be suspicious, including no choice at all, if he chose to just use public transportation. The plan was for him to leave tonight, so that he would not have to race the clock very early tomorrow morning. The interview would be at 10 AM.

"Now, I believe we'll have to leave those two Agents to make out. They will possibly be separated for a long time," Erik mocked.

As she and Ian were left alone, Jo walked around the Ka for the second time.

"Each time training Agent recruits sucks, I'll think about this. Then I might feel better," she said.

"How? Or why?"

"Because it's so ridiculously shaped. The designers must have done that on purpose. It's skillful psychology if nothing else."

"So you like it?" Ian questioned.

"No."

"Want to take it out for a spin? If I get accepted, you might not get another chance for a while."

"No, I don't think that's a good –" Jo's voice trailed off. "Or what the hell. Let's go."

With the Agency vans and the Toyota in addition, the garage was already rather cramped, but the tiny Ford looked like it was easy to turn around. Ian handed Jo the keys and went to wait by the big red button that would open the large steel double doors to the outside. When they would return, a hidden camera would recognize the combination of the vehicle and the driver and open the entrance in the hillside rock wall. Ian was unsure if Blowfish had yet programmed the system to recognize the Ka, so they might need to open the doors manually this time.

The system was not foolproof: if a SCEPTRE operative was lying low as a passenger, a gun pointed to the driver's head, he could easily gain access. Though a truly disciplined Agent would rather die at that point.

From outside the engine noise was even more frightening. The harsh sounds of the gearbox as Jo shifted between the first gear and reverse were not encouraging either.

Finally the car was pointing toward the entrance, so Ian hit the button and climbed in. As soon as the gates were open wide enough, Jo floored the accelerator and they shot forward.

"No, don't do it like that! It might break down!" Ian

shouted in desperation. With no RPM gauge and no markers in the speedometer, one could only estimate from the engine sound when it was time to change gears. The high-pitched tortured wail meant it surely had to be red-lining. After what seemed an eternity Jo at last shifted to second, and the HQ was left behind.

They had stopped in the middle of a narrow, disused forest road. The light had just begun to fade. Ian estimated that he would have to leave in about two hours.

"It's kind of fun to drive. Still absolute trash. But –" Jo started, then the look in her eyes grew distant. Ian knew that this was probably going to be the big emotional send-off for his undercover assignment. It could disturb his transformation to Trevor. He tried to be prepared.

"– it reminds me of what it might be like if there was no Agents or SCEPTRE. I could imagine driving to work every day in a similar piece of crap, stressing over whether it starts up the next day. And that would be the most amount of danger in my life."

Ian considered. After everything that had happened such a world was increasingly more difficult to imagine. Or increasingly more painful, as they would be stuck in this world no matter what. But he forced himself to think of something lighthearted. He still was not sure if he wanted for instance to form a Cyberpriest MK3, or whatever it would be called, but there was something else he could imagine.

"You know, when this shit is all over and there's no more danger, we could go on a trip around the world in this – thing. Or at least as far as it lasts," he said.

"Do you believe it'll ever be over?"

"I'm not sure of what I believe. Right now I only

know that infiltrating that company's the best lead we have. The only lead. The SCEPTRE bastards must pay, one way or the other. For those on the airplane. For everything." Ian's voice grew harsher with the final words.

"Yeah. I couldn't agree more."

"But about the trip. Would you go?" His voice was suddenly back to normal, the thoughts of SCEPTRE's black evil replaced by an image of the Ford crawling idly along a sunny beach.

Jo closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head.

"Of course I would. But you asked for the sole purpose of getting me emotional. That's not very nice. And aren't you supposed to burn it?"

"When it's no longer useful. The trip would be first. And – you started."

"Screw you."

Ian knew it was in a friendly spirit. But the image in his head was harder to shake. Then he thought of them enjoying the sun next to the car, and Jo still receiving constant tactical situation updates from Fury. In other words SCEPTRE not leaving them alone even then. That just felt too unfair, and he almost wanted to forget the whole idea.

Tuesday. The twenty-store building where Innovativi3D had its offices towered high above Ian as he stepped out of the Ford Ka. This was it, he thought. He reminded himself to be on the lookout for any subtle signs of occult or SCEPTRE activity at the premises.

He caught people staring at him and the vehicle, some amused, some perhaps even frightened. Well, he hoped to make a confusing impression.

This time a metal detector would give him no trouble, as the gun was locked away inside the car, in the glove box. It was not locked well enough according to legal standards, but he calculated that a break-in to such an undesirable vehicle would not happen in the meanwhile.

He stepped inside through the revolving doors and went to the nearest free elevator. The Innovativi office would be on the eleventh floor.

To be honest, that was blatant for anyone who knew to look for signs. The black Chaos Dragon Azerate, which the priests of SCEPTRE had worshiped, had eleven heads, which represented eleven demons. Ian al-

most felt like muttering the names of those demons that he still remembered by heart, but decided against that in the last moment. And of course it could also be a lucky coincidence. He should not jump to too early conclusions.

The elevator pinged. Eleventh floor.

He took a deep breath and stepped out into the lobby. The actual office was behind a glass wall. Ian found what appeared to be the entrance door, and pressed the doorbell button next to it.

He thought he faintly heard someone screaming at the top of his lungs from the other side of the glass. That could mean the company had a truly healthy and charming atmosphere. It might be easier to gather information if the employees were already at each other's throats.

A black-haired, medium-height man in a white polo shirt and khaki trousers came to open the door. He seemed to look rather friendly and mild-mannered. But Ian would not be friendly. He made sure that his oppressive Trevor expression was there.

"Trevor Ashen. I'm here for the interview, C++ senior programmer position." Ian relaxed his vocal cords while speaking to get Trevor's lower-pitched voice. He just needed to do that consistently.

"The name's Chris. Technical specialist. I'll get the lead programmer Sam. I'll spoil the setup for you. I'll be the good cop while he's the bad."

"Hm." It was not in Trevor's nature to laugh at obvious bad jokes like this.

Ian put Trevor's long black leather coat onto the coat rack and sat on the nearest chair, while Chris disappeared into the maze of cubicles. It appeared to be for the most part a large open-plan office. The dominating

colors were white, gray and the beige of the divider walls. Some plants broke the monotony. All that at least did not seem very Satanic.

After a half minute Chris returned with another man, who had to be the lead programmer. He was taller, gaunt and bald from the forehead, and his shirt was dark gray instead. For some reason Ian thought of his late "best friend" from the SCEPTRE assassin training, Lucas, who later had been assigned to keep an eye from him, but had ultimately redeemed himself by separating from SCEPTRE and helping the Agents.

But unlike Lucas, who could be charming in a slightly sociopathic way, this man seemed to just radiate passive hostility. Ian made a mental note to watch closely for any signs of actual SCEPTRE association. They shook hands in a hurried manner.

"Samael Cole. Lead programmer." The voice had a hard tingle of steel, just like a good distorted guitar tone.

"Trevor."

Ian hoped his expression had remained unflinching as he heard the first name. Samael had religious or occult connotations, and there also was a metal band with the same name. This, and office being on the eleventh floor. But Ian decided to wait more evidence. Besides, he still had the interview to do, and if he did not pass it would not matter how blatant SCEPTRE connections there would be.

"Let's go to the most uncomfortable meeting room," Chris said cheerily while Samael looked on in an odd way. When confronted with this strange play Ian thought that the best alternative was to just stay as impassive as possible.

Chris led him along the wall of the open space, until

they came to the first door. Chris opened it and motioned for Ian to enter.

The room was dark, with a hum emanating from the inside. Ian felt for the light switch: upon finding and pressing it the room was flooded in the usual, sterile fluorescent light. The room was rather cramped with a large white table taking most of the floor space. A 13-inch laptop stood on the table, with its charger connected to a wall socket.

"You can use that computer to write solutions to any programming problems we give you. But don't worry, we'll start with a relaxed chat first," Chris said.

Ian sat to the closest chair, with the laptop's screen facing him. Chris and Samael took seats from the opposite side.

Samael muttered something to Chris in a seemingly hostile manner. Ian strained his ears but could not hear the words over the hum of the air conditioning. Possibly Chris was just being reprimanded for his odd behavior, which could almost be construed as sabotaging the interview.

"You know that we are implementing a 3D internet platform. Tell me in your own words what do you think that it actually is, and why it interests you. Or particularly, why joining us to work on it would interest you?" Samael asked.

Ian had studied some bullet points from the description of the project at the Innovativ3D site, and would improvise based on them. Furthermore, Blowfish had briefed him on the previous and current attempts on this challenging subject.

"A soft real time simulation system which allows the user to visit sites, or worlds, in 3D. The detail of simulation may vary depending on the exact applications, but

it basically has to contain 3D rendering, physics, network connectivity. Not that far from a general game engine, but unlike them, will need to run novice-generated and therefore non-optimal content. I'm interested because I've seen it done wrong many times and I can help to do it right. Your project also seems large enough to actually achieve something. And if you're running directly in browsers, it's going to be challenging, and I prefer a challenge."

Slightly cocky, but that was the way to do it.

"Hm. And you're an open source developer yourself. Tell me, what's your favorite license?"

Ian considered hard for a moment. But honestly, he could not answer anything else than what the "Evolution Engine" had been licensed with.

"The GNU General Public License, but not for actual ideological reasons. Rather so that you can charge for a separate commercial license that actually lets customers do useful things."

Samael let out a short laugh. "That's good."

"That was the 'what is best in life?' scene from Conan the Barbarian translated into a coder interview setting," Chris interjected.

Samael did not seem that evil, Ian thought. It was more like idiot cop and neutral cop than good and bad.

"So, you say you like a challenge. This is a Federal project, which means there is a fair amount of bureaucracy. What would you say if I told you you have to write at least five lines of prose documentation for each line of code you produce?"

"I say that's bullshit. But I like things that harden my character. So I'd take it as a necessary evil and get on with it."

Ian was starting to like the character of Trevor. It

was easy to say almost anything and have it come out mostly convincing. Or at least he thought so.

Now Chris asked a question. "And how would you feel about submitting code patches directly to Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox and Google Chrome? As well as to the Adobe Flash plugin?"

This could be a trick question. Ian decided to play it safe.

"Do you actually do that?"

Chris shook his head. "Sadly, no. The team would very much like to do that, though. Maybe we get to that at some point. If I was your team lead, I'd first put you maintaining and improving the test system which automatically tests our code against a humongous amount of browser versions."

"Before we start with the programming assignments, let's go to the engine you mentioned to have written. How do you feel about it? Why did you release it?" Samael asked.

"I'll be honest. The basics are solid, but it's behind in a lot of ways. I have a more advanced version with me, but I'm not planning to release that yet. As for why – developing a 3D engine in public would be a good way to draw attention."

"The open source programmer from Hell," Chris laughed. "Sorry."

"That reminds. The next question is actually not part of the interview. I did not actually ask it, and you don't have to answer. Do you believe in Satan?"

What was that? It was clearly an illegal question, which Samael was trying to skirt around. Ian felt his pulse quicken and took a silent but deep breath. After a short consideration, he thought he needed to drop some kind of a hint.

"I like to keep the matters of the dark as my own business," he said, a slight touch of humor in his voice.

"Very well," Samael said, while Chris shot an odd glance at both him and Ian. The hint had probably been too blatant. But so had the question.

"OK, my turn to take over. Would you be as kind as to write a program which reverses a string given to it as input? The usual bonus points will apply if you do not allocate extra memory as temporary storage," Chris said.

Mainly for amusement Ian had studied the most typical technical interview problems and memorized the answers. This one would be easy. He touched the laptop's mouse pad to make the screen wake up.

To his horror he was staring at a Linux text-mode terminal display. No Visual Studio, which he was familiar with. This needed him to revert to his earlier mindset, of being a junior Bastard Operator From Hell. What was the C++ compiler called on Unix-like systems? Ian thought hard, but his mind appeared empty.

Suddenly a completely odd image filled his mind. Jack Bauer screaming in the middle of a torture session.

"Four CC's!"

Ian imagined himself breathing a sigh of relief. CC stood for C Compiler. That was the answer. He set out to type in the program, almost directly from memory. Then he invoked the compiler.

A stream of error messages filled the terminal. Damn! That was unexpected. Ian was not sure if he could fix the errors on the spot. He tried to interpret the messages simply as English sentences, giving him advice on what to change. Unfortunately they were still rather broken and cryptic. He definitely should have practiced debugging and fixing errors instead of spend-

ing most of the time on the Grieg codebase.

No dissociation would help him now. No hidden knowledge. He resorted to random trial and error. The good thing was that Chris and Samael could not see what he was doing, only that it was taking him longer than it should have.

Finally the errors were gone. An executable program file had been produced successfully. He ran it, giving the word *longcat* as the input. Longcat was a white, mythical Internet feline whose length was almost infinite, snaking its way through the galaxies and dimensions.

The output was not as expected. Ian's heart sank.

Segmentation fault

The program was syntactically correct, but crashed when executed. The error was certainly familiar from his sysadmin days, but that did not give much comfort.

Now what? Ian returned to stare at the code.

Fortunately this time the answer was simple. A pointer arithmetic error. The C++ tutorial he had studied first came back to him, telling him what to change. He recompiled and re-ran.

tacgnol

Victory! He turned around the laptop for Chris to check. But he was unsure how many more assignments he could take. The day might only just have started.

In the end there had been two more assignments. At least Ian had managed to produce a running program in each case, but was not sure how correct or elegant the

answers were. Now he was staring at the ceiling of his motel room, as it already was dark outside. He had picked the cheapest one on the outskirts of the city. The Agency could easily have afforded him better, but that was, again, to harden his undercover character.

Samael had told that they would call in case he got the gig. In the meanwhile Ian could of course return to the Agent HQ, but he thought he could well wait until tomorrow. The phone number he had given naturally was for a prepaid SIM card, installed in a new, cheap cell phone.

He had already taken the black Les Paul clone from the HQ with him. It had been in the trunk of the Ka for the whole day and was seriously out of tune. With not much else to do, he got up and began tuning it.

If he got accepted, there would also be the matter of where he stayed. It was possible the company would offer rental apartments to employees, otherwise he would need to go on the lookout for one. Both options were unappealing.

In the first case, if the company indeed had connections to SCEPTRE, he could be under constant surveillance. The second case would be just tedious. After a short consideration he decided to rather take the company apartment if offered: the existence of any hidden mics or cameras would easily confirm SCEPTRE's presence. Though conversely, the absence of them would not absolve the company.

With the guitar finally in tune he started playing odd, fragmented black metal riffs that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. He realized that he should write them down for future use. For that he could use the small laptop he had taken with him, whose primary function was encrypted communication with the HQ.

After playing for half an hour he found his thoughts wandering and his inspiration fading. He rather felt he needed a drink. The motel's bar would be open to at least 4 AM. In fact, the atmosphere at either Agent HQ had not been conducive to drinking at all, but here, and at least for now, he could relax.

Ian left his room and headed through the reception to the bar. Currently there were only three patrons, concentrated on their drinks. The low lighting, the wooden surfaces, the pool table and of course the numerous bottles on the shelves behind the counter created an atmosphere that was a polar opposite to the dreary corporate realm he had peered into today, or even to the eternal gray concrete of the Agency HQ's.

He started by ordering a beer. The bartender had a quirky, friendly smile, and part of her blond hair was dyed black. She actually reminded Ian of Roxi, the co-tavern keeper at the Outpost community.

His visits to the rebellious outcast settlement felt already to have been ages ago, and the associated memories were not entirely happy. An outlaw gang employed by SCEPTRE had attacked the place while looking for him. Roxi and her husband possessed a formidable ability for self-defense, and had lived through the assault. Others had not been as lucky. The tavern itself had also been violated as a result of a gang member driving a suburban assault vehicle right through the wooden wall. It most likely was repaired by now, but Ian was ninety-five percent certain he would never return there to verify. The guilt was simply too great.

The cold beer felt greatly refreshing. It also made it easier to concentrate on the good or funny memories. Returning to Outpost from SCEPTRE's fford research facility had forever set the benchmark for a delirious

car trip. It was also closely related to him and Jo kissing for the first time.

But halfway through the beer Ian had a sudden premonition of the future. Writing endless lines of code, and the required documentation for it, while searching for obscure clues for SCEPTRE activity. Getting deep into a Satanic cloak and dagger game, trying to earn the trust of SCEPTRE conspirators while not giving away himself. Witnessing bizarre rituals after the official work day ended and the masquerade started.

The assignment could be extremely anxiety-inducing, with the potential to drive him insane. But it would be perversely fascinating to see how exactly it would turn out.

In case he actually got the position.

By now the beer glass was empty. Ian knew he could well take another without compromising his condition even if Innovativi3D would call early in the next morning. But a third one would not do.

11.

“You are in. You can officially start tomorrow, but come by the offices today so that we can sign the paperwork.”

The caller was Chris. Ian was officially very excited, mixed with some trepidation caused by the potential scenarios he had gone through last night. But Trevor would have to remain mainly unaffected.

“I’ll be there.”

Ian laid the cell phone back to the bedside table and took a deep breath to calm down and fully align with his undercover mindset. It was not entirely successful. It was 9:45 in the morning when they had called. Outside, the sun reflected from the streets with a cadaverous pale color, similarly as on the day of the Grieg meeting.

He dug into his backpack and took the laptop. He booted it up, let it find the motel’s wireless connection and wrote a quick, encrypted message to the Agents.

I’m in. I’ll start tomorrow.

Trevor should not be over-excited and in a hurry, so

he could take his time, eat a proper lunch, and then head to the Innovativi3D office at a leisurely pace.

Ian then went over the rest of the gear in his backpack. His Agent glasses he would use when scanning for his potential new residency for bugs, but otherwise they would have little function. The SIG Sauer and the three magazines of ammunition were in the backpack now: he would not be able to walk armed in the office building during daytime, so the best protection was to not get in a situation where it would be suddenly needed. There also were spare clothes and basic first aid equipment.

Blowfish had given him very small listening devices, like BB gun pellets with an adhesive surface, which he could install at choice locations at the office. To be almost undetectable, they transmitted at very low power: the receiver was a USB mp3 player stick with 16 gigabytes memory. The range was perhaps 50 meters maximum, so he had to be in there with the stick for anything to be picked up.

After half an hour of meditation, Ian hauled the backpack and the guitar case inside the Ford Ka, went to check out from the motel, and soon he was on his way.

In a larger, less oppressive, glass-walled meeting room Ian signed the work contract and the non-disclosure agreement. The idea of getting paid by SCEPTRE to spy on them was amusing in a way. Potentially lethal also, Ian reminded himself. His salary would be \$3500 a month for starters, which was almost twice the junior sysadmin gig. The company also indeed offered apartments for employees, and he would go meet the landlord once he was finished here.

Now he had his own access card so that he could enter the office freely. Of course entries would be logged, and there were clearly visible CCTV cameras, but a nighttime visit would still be most ideal for planting the bugs.

The next thing to do was to meet the people he would most closely work with. The company had forty-three employees total, so it was not expected that he would immediately get to know everyone.

Ian reminded himself to stay in character, and to greet the team misanthropically. He met them in a combined break room and kitchen.

Irwin – team lead and open source enthusiast. As a hobby, he wrote an experimental game engine each year from scratch, focusing on improving a different aspect each time, then threw it away. Medium height, wide shoulders and face, no hair. Knowledgeable and sarcastic, but did not seem like SCEPTRE material.

Katya – senior systems programmer, probably in her early thirties. Had worked before in aerospace and robotics companies. Short, nimble, dark brown ponytail. Seemed slightly cold or reserved and spoke with an Eastern-European accent. Ian could well imagine a gun in her hand, and told himself to stay alert when she was around.

Rutger – tall and blond, pockmarked face. Graphics and shader programming specialist. It might have been just hyperactive imagination, but something in his presence told Ian that violence was not at all foreign to him. Also one to watch out for.

Damian – almost like Trevor's mirror image, but slightly more good-natured. Primarily a network programmer, but also a Hessian. Presented a danger because Ian could be tempted to revert to his own person-

ality to discuss music with him. The name was very close to the Satanic child from the Omen movies, so some degree of SCEPTRE connection could not be ruled out.

"We're the so-called Features team, who implement new functionality, both server- and client-side, directly in C++. Welcome aboard," Irwin said.

"Thanks," Ian replied simply. The most pure version of Trevor would have replied something less friendly, but he thought to give in a bit at this point. After all, if he appeared too cold and harsh, people would stay completely away from him, making it much harder to collect intelligence.

Chris, whom Ian would see less, had explained that he led the Integration team, which would take the code and contort it if necessary to pass through the Adobe Flash C++ compiler (FlasCC) so that the client program would run in directly in browsers, while only requiring the Flash plugin to be installed.

The Integration team would also run a constant, strict battery of compatibility tests and insert direct Adobe ActionScript hacks into the code where necessary, so Ian felt his job would certainly be more straightforward and appealing. However, he would eventually need to get acquainted with those people as well, as anyone could be the critical SCEPTRE link.

There was also talk that phone and tablet support would eventually be needed. It definitely belonged to the full Federal contract, but getting all features fleshed out first was top priority for now. Mobile support would land on Ian's team, as it would be pure C++ work on all major platforms.

Both teams answered to Samael. However, combined they were only ten people, while the whole workforce

was forty-three. What were the rest doing? Ten people plus the lead programmer –

Holy shit. That added up to eleven. Coincidence? Ian found his heart racing again. But eleven people in charge of a major Federal-level project was suspiciously few. Certainly something was not right here, even if the people seemed relatively normal.

As Ian left the break room, he saw what had to be the CEO's office. It was also glass-walled: a greyish-haired woman casually took a drink straight from a large, box-shaped whiskey bottle, then put it back in a desk drawer and resumed typing away on her keyboard. The only thing Ian knew about her was the name, Dr. Thora Haarman, and that was from the company website. Being at the top of the command chain, she could certainly be SCEPTRE.

Watching this public display of alcohol use, Ian almost bumped into another man. And suddenly he was terrified to the core, and certain that he had betrayed it visibly. He was looking into the eyes of a dead man –

Suhrim. The SCEPTRE's late Chief of Security.

A second later Ian realized that it was not actually him. The haircut was different, medium-long and brown instead of black. But the skull-shaped face, the look in the deep-set eyes, as well as the height matched almost exactly.

"Nicholas. Technical Director. And you are –"

"Trevor Ashen. C++ specialist. Starting tomorrow."

They shook hands.

"Welcome. I heard from Sam that you want to be challenged. I hope our project is a challenge enough."

Nicholas went on his way, and Ian attempted to calm down. Unlike the psychotic Suhrim, Nicholas had seemed friendly and charming, at least on the surface.

He also walked in a slower and more relaxed step.

While heading for the exit, Ian recounted the possible signs of SCEPTRE so far:

- *Office on the eleventh floor*
- *Eleven people on the 3D internet project*
- *Lead programmer's name: Samael*
- *Katya could be a potential killer*
- *Rutger could be a potential killer*
- *Technical Director looks like Suhrim*

This was pretty damning already. The visit to the landlord would be next: what he would find in his new apartment could be the final straw.

In the safety of his car, Ian went back to his meeting with Nicholas. He tried to remember – had he seen him before? By relaxing and dissociating, he forced himself to the memory of the SCEPTRE ritual where he had been christened “Necro.” But all of the high-rank participants had worn hooded robes and the candlelight of the ritual room had left most of them in shadow. No luck there.

Some other memory then? Some of the forced knife fights? Or running through underground corridors in live fire training? No, and no. During his training Ian had always concentrated on the opponents, not the audience, so he simply could not tell.

Ian turned the key cautiously in the lock and stepped in to the darkness of the seventh-floor apartment. The meeting with the landlord had mostly been a no-brainer, but Ian had been less delighted to find out that the monthly rent would be \$1500, and that did not yet include water and electricity bills. Furthermore, one

month's rent needed to be paid in advance. Well, it was the Agency's money and not his.

The plus side was that the apartment tower was little less than half a mile away from the office, in an upper-class neighborhood. Probably he would not be in risk of random street violence. When he had parked the Ford, it had looked very much out of place next to much bigger, newer and shinier automobiles.

In his coat pocket, Ian had the sunglasses active in the "EM source recorder" mode. As long as he walked the whole floor plan methodically, the glasses would draw him a map of possible surveillance devices. To the potential watchers it would just look like he wanted to get to know his new home inside-out.

Ian switched on the lights. A single light bulb in the ceiling came on slowly, first casting a gloomy, dim light, but eventually reaching full power.

It was a single big room with a kitchen extension on one side. Depressively empty, of course, so ordering basic furniture at the Agency's expense would be required. In character of Trevor he would remain stoic and minimalistic in the decoration.

The flat itself and all fixed equipment like the fridge and the stove seemed to be in good condition. The overall atmosphere was best described as bland, with white wallpaper, glass and steel the dominant surfaces, but that was to be expected.

Ian quickly completed his rounds so that the sunglasses could produce a complete map, then switched out the lights and exited back to the staircase. He took the elevator down and went all the way back to his car. Once inside, and sure that no-one was watching him, he put on the sunglasses and began to examine the results.

There were a total of five bright spots on the map.

The recording mode even went as far as to compare the electromagnetic sources to known device profiles. As Ian read the listing, he thought his blood went several degrees colder.

- *Video camera*
- *Microphone*
- *Microphone*
- *Video camera*
- *Radio transmitter unit*

One camera and microphone in the room itself, another pair in the shower and WC. And a central transmitter unit near the door. Fucking SCEPTRE voyeurs!

At least now enemy presence was a hundred percent confirmed. Ian would have loved to rip each of the devices out and crush or shoot them to pieces, but doing so would expose him. They did not present a terribly big problem, as he would mainly just eat and sleep here, but from the perspective of psychological warfare it was a clear victory for SCEPTRE and a clear loss for him. He could not let his guard down for one moment. To stay in character, he perhaps needed to order books on the occult and appear to be studying them. Communications with the HQ needed to happen with the laptop's screen turned away from the camera.

Damn! Maybe he would just stay away most of the time, cruising around in his Ka, or spending his nights in bars.

Ian reached out to the backpack next to him and took the laptop out. It still had plenty of battery life left, so he could type out his initial impressions right here. The machine found a password-protected wireless network meant for the residents' use. Ian typed in the

password he had memorized from the rental contract, waited for connection, then started writing another encrypted message. It was now close to 5 PM, so if Blowfish, Jo and Erik were not already busy training Agent recruits, they might even respond in real time.

Visited the offices again. Strong hints of SCEPTRE activity, including a Suhrim lookalike. Got an apartment. It's full of bugs.

He pressed Enter and waited for reply. After a short while, there were several.

Excellent work! So you see, it wasn't for nothing. Stay safe and try to find out what the bastards are up to. Our first candidate will show up tomorrow. - Blowfish

Kick their filthy asses to hell and back! I mean, stay frosty. - Erik

Stay alive out there, and put a virus or two in their code if you can. Many xoxo, Jo

“There's only a handful of open source developers who do everything that's significant. The rest of the community would achieve nothing without them. In the circles of real-time 3D and game engines, they can be counted with one hand. Maybe two if I'm being exceptionally generous,” Irwin mused.

Coffee break on Ian's first work day. In the morning he had received his first official assignment from Irwin: to measure the performance of the 3D renderer with a set of test scenes, and identify the trouble spots. A gentle start, Ian understood.

He also understood that his work ritual, at least for the first days, would consist of rapidly googling for everything he was expected to know. The true skill would be in predicting what was needed, so that he would not be caught unaware.

Finished with the coffee, Ian steeled himself to return to the rigorous performance profiling work.

“I am Nitro. Mechanic and marksman.”

Blowfish had just arrived with the first Agent re-

cruit, picked up from the airport. He had been led around with cryptic emails and text messages, which was the first test, but as he had arrived at the proper destination at the proper time, he had passed and the training could begin.

Jo knew the minimalist text that stood at the Agency website, regarding recruiting:

YOU CANNOT FIND US - WE WILL FIND YOU

Nitro was a bit shorter than she was: he looked to be Asian in origin, and to Jo the most immediate comparison was Herman Li of DragonForce, except that the hair was short and spiky instead of long and flowing.

Jo took a look at her side and saw that Erik was quite a bit amused by Nitro's own introduction. She had tried to stay professional and calm instead.

Yesterday they had gone through the rough training plan and split out the roles: Blowfish would teach basic cyberwarfare and general Agent ideology, Jo would take care of stealth lessons as well as aerobic exercise, and Erik handled strength training and hand-to-hand combat. They all would teach various aspects of marksmanship with different firearms.

Over email Nitro had told that he had tinkered with motor vehicles practically his whole life, so in that subject the Agents could not teach him much. Except get him to practice on the stealth helicopters stolen from SCEPTRE. The Agency vans would probably offer nothing new to him, unless he was tasked with customizing them radically.

Subject classified as potential new ally. Willpower must be broken, then reconstructed through training.

"Fuck you," Jo said audibly. Nitro looked at her oddly.

“Sorry. Did not mean to say that to you. Just an argument with my another personality,” she explained. “Do you already know what SCEPTRE is?”

“Blowfish told me. Sectarian Chosen Elite. The pis-heads. The enemy. Those we fight.” There was strong and clear derision in Nitro's voice.

“Good. Just so that you know, they put that another voice in my head. It shouldn't be a danger to you, but if I behave weirdly, try to be understanding.”

“Yes, I'll keep that in mind.”

Empathy between trainer and trainee unessential, or even harmful. Successful training at risk.

Jo had had her doubts before, but now she fully understood that acting as an instructor could be difficult due to Fury's interference. Unless she started acting in the way it preferred.

One way or the other the bitch was going to leave her head for good. But it was going to be her own quest, no matter how much Ian felt it was his responsibility. Conventional science probably could not help, but unconventional might. Too bad the Agency did not have any mad scientists at hand, and the SCEPTRE defector Apollyon, who certainly fit the bill, had perished by drowning the last they knew.

Now Ian knew the root of the problem: too many draw calls. Too many small objects, and too many full scene passes (ambient, shadow mapping, plus finally lighting) were killing the performance when looking into a direction in which the 3D scene was crowded.

He was actually running the 3D client software as a stand-alone executable on his Windows workstation, without going through the FlasCC compiler. But everyone on the Features team had special device drivers in-

stalled which could throttle down both the CPU and the graphics card performance, to easily simulate various end-user setups, plus the overhead caused by the Flash compiler. He was running today's tests with both throttles set to minimum performance, which roughly corresponded to an 1 MHz single-core CPU and an Intel GMA integrated graphics card.

He was glad at least for one thing: that the workstation was Windows and not Linux. Otherwise Trevor could immediately have shown his most violent side, perhaps even killed.

In case he had to repeat measurements, he wrote a command script that would take a scene and automatically profile the performance from a range of evenly spaced camera positions and directions, and then save the results.

With the problem identified and the script finished, he started googling for solutions. Combining lighting passes, combining objects, deferred rendering – he knew some of these already! Meanwhile he became aware of some louder conversation coming from the space some twenty-thirty meters away, where Chris's team was located, but ignored it for now.

Until a sudden piercing scream made him expect full-blown war.

“Screw you! What's the point of this anyhow? The real code's being written elsewhere, it's completely different, it won't run on the Flash compiler, and god damn I hate –”

The scream died off as quickly as it had started. But this was very interesting. Ian got up, coffee mug in hand, seemingly headed for the break room, but actually he wanted to see who had screamed.

A thin, blond-haired guy was standing in his cubicle,

his face red and breathing heavily, until at last he seemed to calm down and sat down again.

Chris stepped out in the open and noticed Ian. "Oh, Trevor. Al is just having a slightly bad day. Nothing to worry about."

"Hm," Ian responded. Chris vanished out of sight, and Ian let himself take an even more circular route to the kitchen, to see what the others besides the Features team and the Integration team were doing.

Honestly, he was puzzled. On several screens, including Samael's, he saw what appeared to be a planetary simulation. A big sphere in the center of the screen probably represented the Sun, and another, smaller sphere went past it on an elliptical path.

It seemed not to be related to the 3D internet project at all. And then there was that odd remark about "real code." What was going on in here? On other workstations, a different codebase was open, seemingly different from what he worked on, but still organized into familiar modules such as Renderer, Physics, Input, NetworkInterface and FileSystem. Probably also a simulation or virtual world engine.

Ian decided that he needed to install the listening devices this very night. He might already have missed something critical. Being able to plant bugs in the CEO's and the Technical Director's rooms would be the jackpot, but if they were locked, his access card probably would not be enough.

He turned to Irwin, who seemed to be just as submerged in code as Ian had been back at the HQ.

"Is it OK if I come back here in the evening to study the code in-depth? I want to be up to speed as fast as I can."

Irwin looked slightly puzzled.

"If you prefer it that way. You could of course just set up a secure tunnel and look at it from home."

Ian nodded. The matter seemed easily settled. Perhaps too easily? Ian wondered if Irwin would go report to Samael or Nicholas, and there would be black ops in full battle gear or even security robots waiting for him in the evening. He still did not have an idea how to smuggle a gun into the offices without setting off an alarm.

The first day of Nitro's training was reaching its end. When he had introduced himself as a marksman, it had not been idle self-praise: Jo found there was little she could teach him about the basics, at least when it came to semi-automatic pistols and rifles. Tomorrow it was time for automatic weapons and that could be a different story, as for a civilian there was limited opportunity to practice with them legally.

Jo remembered a "training camp" she had attended a long time ago, when her interest in conspiracies had reached the next logical step: to learn everything about self-defense. The head instructor had been a total nutjob, claiming he had been in Finland to study their ages-old martial arts, which included the skill of fighting in the dark, and at the most advanced level, affecting the opponent just by the force of thought. But at that camp she had her first opportunity to fire (illegal) sub-machine guns on full auto, which at some level had probably contributed to her quick development as an Agent.

She wondered if Nitro thought of them as nutjobs as well. Or perhaps that was exactly what he had hoped to find? To risk one's life as an Agent required a somewhat unstable mind. Jo certainly recognized that in herself.

Nitro finished emptying his USP pistol into the silhouette target for the last time, then pressed a button to bring the target closer for inspection. There were neat groups both at center mass and the target's head.

"Excellent. I have nothing to correct. Except to try it faster next time, as SCEPTRE will fire back."

"I know. I just want to first make sure I'm doing things right."

"Good thinking. You know, I play guitar, it's quite similar in that you first want to practice something slowly, making sure your technique is right. Only then you speed it up, because bad technique is hard to unlearn later."

"Do all Agents play some instrument? Blowfish told that it actually started that way, playing in a band and writing music about secret investigations and then performing those songs in public."

"No, not really. It's – optional."

Though Jo had brought up the topic first, somehow Nitro's question had made her flash back to the memory of René bleeding to death after SCEPTRE's cruel disembowelment, as well as to Ian possibly never playing four-fingered blasphemous leads again, and she was sure she had let it show at least partially.

Avoid showing emotion. Instructor credibility at risk.

This time Jo cursed only inaudibly.

"Did my question make you sad?" Nitro asked suddenly.

"Well, I lost a bandmate due to the enemy. When you thought of joining, did you consider whether you can handle that, possibly losing fellow Agents left and right? Or dying yourself?"

Blowfish had probably handled this subject already, but Jo wanted to confirm for herself.

“Yes. I did. And I'm prepared.” The voice was slightly dangerous and fatalistic. Jo thought to not probe more at this point.

“But I wasn't prepared for an instructor that is human, and honest with me. I expected Agents to be all bravado. Though I hope not to make you sad again.”

Jo smiled at the compliment: whether that was credible for an Agent did not matter. Up yours, Fury!

9 PM. The office should be empty now. Ian circled the huge building in search of an alternative entrance. On the west side he saw a windowless steel door with a card reader next to it. It was possibly what the building maintenance or security personnel used.

His card would most likely not give him access. But it did not hurt to try. The surprise was complete as a green LED lit up, and he was greeted with the faint sound of an electric motor retracting the latch.

In a slight adrenaline rush from the unexpected success, he peered cautiously into the darkness and waited for his eyes to adjust. He was in a narrow corridor, and ahead there seemed to be a staircase leading up. Possibly it would take him to all the way to the Innovativ3D offices. Too bad he did not have the gun with him now, but at least he could check the route. If there were no metal detector gates, his next night time visit would be armed.

Many flights of stairs later he came to another steel door marked “eleven,” and a card reader next to it. Again the card gave him access, and he found himself in the eleventh floor lobby, which was unlit save for the emergency exit lights.

His delight over the easy backdoor route was replaced by a nagging suspicion. Had he been given too

high access by mistake, or was it by default for all Innovativi employees? Was it so that each of them could easily enter unnoticed and carry weapons into the office? Were they all SCEPTRE? The service door accesses had also been logged, and he might soon be questioned about them. But what was done was done.

He used his card one last time to pass beyond the glass wall into the actual offices. There was a card reader also on the inside, and a message flashed on its LCD display.

Alarm deactivated. Insert card to re-enable.

That was convenient. That had to mean the office was empty and he had been the first to enter, therefore automatically disabling the alarm system.

Of course SCEPTRE could easily have multiple hidden redundant systems here, and in any case the cameras would be watching him constantly.

The first thing to do was to stay in character, and do what he had told Irwin: to appear to be studying the codebase.

He walked to his cubicle and booted up the workstation casually, then brought up the folder for the 3D internet project. Here no Subversion or Git or Mercurial was being used, instead Innovativi3D had their custom version control system, SDRC. Irwin had told it stood for "Secure Distributed Revision Control." The letter S could of course stand for SCEPTRE as well.

Enough time had been wasted. It was time to move.

With the glare of his monitor as the only light, Ian felt for the tiny spheres in his pocket, and started to think where exactly to place them. He also thought of the cameras' fields of views. They were simply fixed, so there was not a matter of timing, only planning his route. He also had no idea if they were recording in infrared when the lights were out.

He thought that his personal cubicle was actually not in camera view at all. Crouching low, he moved to Irwin's table, and placed the first one into a ridge in the stand of his 27 inch monitor. There was a heavy layer of dust, so it was likely the bug would stay undisturbed and unnoticed for some time.

Next it was turn for the Integration team. Ian decided to stay away from Chris's cubicle, because somehow he thought of him as unpredictable and possibly obsessive about security. Instead someone else would be the victim, perhaps Al who had flashed his tantrum today. His cubicle was also further away, so as to cover more area.

Now Ian would necessarily pass through a camera view. The ideal way would be to walk under it, but as his target was nearly in the center of the open space, there was simply no way to reach it without being seen.

In theory he could make a quick leap between the divider walls, and if the cameras recorded frames instead of continuous video, he might even be unnoticed. But being caught on tape doing ninja moves would certainly look bad. Therefore he just stood up and walked casually, as if heading for the break room, but made a sudden deviation in his path and planted the second device among the soil of a large potted plant decorating Al's cubicle.

Next he had to move to unknown territory, the rest of the workforce, who were fiddling with the odd planetary simulation. Ian could not fathom what that was about, but knowing what they talked about might be critical. Each day's recordings would be uploaded for Blowfish and the rest to analyze.

Suddenly Ian thought he heard some noise.

He ducked into the next cubicle and peered into the direction of the sound with held breath. He had momentarily lost his bearings, but understood now that the sound had come from the executive side.

Ian recognized the figure emerging from one of the glass-walled personal offices. Nicholas. Ian's heart thudded painfully as he observed the technical director now moving in efficient, long footsteps exactly like Suhrim had done while he lived.

This simply could not be coincidence. An identical twin? Ian wondered what rituals of torture and slow death SCEPTRE required for avenging one's brother. If Suhrim had been skilled in using the knife, then it made sense that Nicholas would be as well. It certainly paid

to not get caught or recognized.

Nicholas left the office through a rear exit. But – the alarm had been on before and Ian thought to have been the first one to enter. This seemed to make no sense. Would the alarm now reactivate?

Ian considered his options. There would be a delay in the activation. He possibly had up to one minute to leave. Of course he could stop the alarm with his own card, but that would be logged as another access, and so close to Nicholas leaving it would certainly arouse suspicion.

He got up and broke into a quick walk toward the exit Nicholas had used, not minding the cameras any more. The display next to the door was indeed counting down seconds. 0:45 to go.

Time to perhaps plant one more bug.

The door to the technical director's office was firmly locked, and Ian knew better than to test his access, but not far from it another door was ajar.

Chief Executive Officer. Dr. Thora Haarman.

Ian grinned as he remembered her slogan from the company website, that her office was always open for employees. Quite literally.

There was no time for cleverness. The seconds were ticking out, so Ian simply planted a sphere behind the drawer unit on her L-shaped table. Then he slipped out just as quickly as he had entered, hugged the wall while moving underneath a camera, and made it to the door with five seconds to spare.

He turned the handle and exited. Another dark stairwell ahead. What about the alarms in the rest of the building? It was not terribly late yet, so they might not be on yet. And even if they were, if he exited quickly enough in Nicholas' wake, he might be alright.

Three bugs planted. One in the CEO's room. His task had been interrupted, but it was a moderate success. Still he had to get out unscathed, so it was not time to congratulate himself yet.

Fading footsteps came from below. Nicholas. Ian began to descend slowly and silently. He remembered that the computer had been left on, but it was too late to return. At least the monitor would go to sleep mode. It was slow going when trying not to make a sound. Finally he could not hear the footsteps any longer, and picked up the pace. The flights of stairs merged into each other and Ian lost count.

Rounding the final corner and arriving at the final flight, he slowed down again. The exit was in sight, but Nicholas might be lurking in the darkness, ready to strike him down.

Finally Ian was certain that the stairwell was empty, so he headed for the door. At first he was about to panic as the handle seemed stuck, but by applying more force it opened and he stepped through.

He breathed a relieved sigh. Outside at last.

But the relief was not long-lived as Ian suddenly found himself staring into a bright flashlight beam.

"Halt!" an angry voice demanded.

Dissociate! Stay in character, Ian commanded himself. That he was still alive was a definite positive. A SCEPTRE assassin would have shot him without saying anything.

"Trevor Ashen. C++ specialist at Innovativi3D. Working late."

"Keep your hands where I can see them!"

A police officer? There was a police station nearby, but what would they be doing here at the premises? Unless they had been alerted already earlier –

The flashlight's beam moved lower to check for possible weapons on him. As Ian's vision returned, he found that the angry voice belonged to a tall, fair-haired woman in a black uniform. A security guard. Various tools hung from her belt, a taser gun and a can of pepper spray at least.

"You need to show ID. Do not make any sudden movements."

While the guard had the taser aimed at him, Ian got his wallet out with extreme care, and produced Trevor's driver's license and the Innovativi access card. She examined them for some long seconds.

"Checks out. But employees have no business using the maintenance stairwell. Do not let this repeat. Always enter and exit through the front lobby."

Ian wondered whether the guard was SCEPTRE as well, or just employed here. There was no good way to find that out, so in the end he just was content with having the cards returned to him and to be left on his own, as the guard continued on her rounds.

As all adrenaline finally dissipated, Ian found it difficult to find the ignition slot of the Ka with his shaking hands. He only turned power on first and calmed down for a while. It would not do to have a traffic accident.

Damn, shouldn't I be better than this, he thought. After all he had attacked an undersea prison asylum complex, not to speak of an anti-cosmic pyramid, and fired all kinds of weapons at overwhelming masses of enemies, yet an encounter with a security guard had left him trembling. It had to be the vulnerability of his cover role, and the critical importance of getting a lead that was getting at him.

Finally he was back at the apartment and reminded himself of the surveillance. In the meanwhile he had

stopped for quick junk food and bought a sixpack, some bread and juice. Sitting on the floor, he opened the first can of beer and began formulating his message to the HQ, the laptop's screen carefully shielded from the camera.

First bugs installed. Got into a bit hairy situation, but nothing serious yet. Cover not blown.

Blowfish's reply arrived a minute later.

Good. If you can, copy the codebase as well. It shouldn't be much data to transmit.

With the correspondence and the beer finished, Ian simply shut off the lights and went to sleep with his clothes on, the backpack as his pillow. The furniture he had ordered would perhaps arrive tomorrow. If it did not, it would not matter much, as during the weekend he could return to the HQ instead.

Before sleep claimed him, Ian wondered how many more days like this he could take. Or how many until he made a critical mistake.

After a shower and a primitive breakfast Ian was ready for another day at the office, thankfully the last of this week. He had thought of drinking a beer in addition to the fruit juice, but declined at the last moment. Getting arrested for drunk driving would be the most shameful Agent mistake. However, the half a mile would be short enough to walk instead. Perhaps he would try it next week, to balance exercise and alcohol intake in a fine-tuned manner that would let him reach a Ballmer Peak in programming and spycraft.

He expected to be battered with questions about his nocturnal entry. But there were none: Irwin and the rest of the team said "Hi" just like normal. Instead Ian noticed something else as the first hour passed, that Al had not yet showed up for work.

Ian's mind immediately went for the most sinister conclusion, that he had been literally terminated due to his outburst. To concentrate on something else than this morbid thought, Ian confirmed that the USB stick, safe in his pocket, was recording from the three bugs he had installed.

Then it was time to start fighting the draw calls.

"At the robotics plant they would always try to render CAD models directly, in real time," Katya explained. "It always resulted in a huge polygon count, drawn in small pieces that were a disaster for performance. This will be similar, you can't trust the content creators. Rather, you always expect the worst. We need an algorithm that automatically decimates geometry and combines objects."

Ian understood the idea in theory, but was afraid that the actual implementation would contain a lot of complicated, mathematical algorithms. He was not good at math at all. Then he remembered another thing: whatever they coded to solve the problem, it also needed to be documented precisely.

"Might I suggest, I code, you document," Katya then said.

"Fine," Ian replied, trying hard to conceal his relief. But even following her code would be challenging, so he needed to keep a hidden Google window ready at all times.

They set out to work. Katya used a heavy-duty 18 inch laptop, so she came over to Ian's cubicle. He could not shake the thought that here he was pair-programming with a covert SMERSH operative. And if he did not document well enough, she would shoot him in the face. It was partially amusing and partially frightening.

As the work progressed, Ian noticed something odd happening in the version control system. Irwin just committed in a huge set of code, affecting both the rendering and networking subsystems. Ian recalled Al's odd words – "The real code's being written elsewhere."

Was the whole project just a front for something, perhaps a way to siphon money by using already exist-

ing code? Anything could be expected from SCEPTRE. Damn, Ian needed to get answers bad, and to find out what the rest were actually doing.

Nighttime infiltrations could be riskier than he had initially thought, so he decided to plant the rest of the devices during today.

When others from his team were leaving for lunch – they would eat at a combined cafe and lunch restaurant one floor below – he took four of them with him. Starting from the break room itself, he affixed the first in the ventilation fan assembly above the stove when no-one was watching. He rarely saw the employees actually cook there, so the fan was probably never used, and would not disturb the recording.

The next went to the opposite side of the open space from him, wedged between two linked divider walls.

“What are you doing?” a voice called from behind.

Fuck! What could he possibly say? Focus – breathe deep – dissociate, Ian urged himself. No matter what he said, it would be out of character for Trevor. He turned around to face –

Rutger. He did not talk much, but was certainly observing everything around him with deadly precision.

“These dividers were crooked. Fixed now,” Ian said after one torturing second.

“Didn't think such thing would matter to you. Did you put something in there?”

Even worse. Ian forced his Trevor voice to the lowest pitch he could manage, so even if the words would be stupid, the tone would salvage what was salvageable.

“Chewing gum. Disgusting, I know. But helps them to stay in place. Don't tell anyone.”

“Hm. A MacGyverism. I see.”

Rutger walked away. Ian was safe for now, but it had

been close. It was also possible the guy would report him, despite appearing satisfied with the explanation. Ian considered hard whether the large space still needed a fourth device. There was one uncovered quarter remaining, but could he risk it?

The answer was easy. He had to.

Thankfully that one went smoothly. He dropped it inside a multiple-socket extension cord on one desk, whose occupant was likely out for lunch. Only one of the sockets was in use for a phone charger. He wondered too late if the mains voltage would disturb the transmission, but if the socket was not in use, the circuit would not be complete, he deduced.

The last one would be the grand prize. It also presented the greatest danger, and to be honest scared him out of his wits. The office of Nicholas, which Ian had to infiltrate somehow.

Currently Nicholas was away, and his office was locked, so there was nothing to do now. Instead Ian headed for lunch.

While eating, Ian recalled Blowfish's words about food services being the next great trend for villains. The food was not bad in itself, but Ian wondered about the potential for lacing it with various substances for the purpose of mind control, or a quick or slow death. The possibilities were limitless. When he was finished and stood up, he felt the room spinning.

Fuck! Had he just been poisoned?

An instant later the feeling was gone, so it had to be just his imagination. He headed back to the offices.

"What took you so long?" Katya demanded.

"Challenging food."

They resumed coding and documenting, while Ian kept scanning for an opportunity to enter Nicholas' of-

fice. Now the technical director had returned, and seemed to be in a VoIP conference using his headset, typing furiously on his keyboard at the same time. Ian shook his head as he understood that valuable intelligence was being wasted every second.

There was one approach Ian could possibly exploit. A large network printer was near the director's office, so using it would give him a reason to be near.

But it could be hard to time it right. And so far Ian had his hands full with keeping pace with Katya.

Agitated from the lack of a guaranteed plan, Ian considered the other task he had received from Blowfish, to copy the code. There appeared to be no security on the workstation that would prevent that, so he simply popped another memory stick in, and was done with it. He could make another copy if the situation in the repository progressed significantly. Too bad he only had been given access to the 3D internet project: the planetary simulation code could be more satisfying to get hold of due to the mystery it represented.

For the past half hour Katya had been slowing down, so Ian had a little more free time. As he cautiously peered to the distance for the fifteenth time, he saw Nicholas removing the headset and standing up.

This was the moment.

Ian chose "Select all" from the word processing program and sent the whole documentation of the geometry processing algorithm to the large printer. It was ten pages already, a respectable if not exactly long print job. Next he clicked "Print" and was already on his way. Again he felt his pulse clearly, as he fought a gut-wrenching fear of Nicholas carving him up good in case he was discovered.

But this was likely the only opportunity today.

The printer was finished with the document long before he got there. Nicholas was indeed exiting his office, the door opening now –

Ian had the tiny sphere between his right hand fingertips, while he collected the papers with the left, and waited. Nicholas was back to his relaxed slow walk, so it took two infernally long seconds until he had passed. The door was near to closing.

Ian tossed the bug.

At first he thought it would hit the door. It barely cleared the opening, bounced once from the floor, then stuck to the bottom of a tall wooden bookshelf, mostly invisible. Perfect. Now Ian could just sit back and let the devices do their work.

As if in response to his thoughts, his cell phone received a text message. Ian cursed as he read it. The furniture would arrive within an hour, and he would need to be there to receive it.

Perhaps it was not totally bad timing. Of course he would be allowed to leave on his business if he then worked until later. That meant more collected audio before the weekend. But also leaving the recorder unattended. Another risk he would rather not take.

He checked its battery level: near full, as it had been plugged into the workstation most of the time. It could live two hours unplugged, even if receiving audio from a total of seven sources.

But where would he hide it?

Of course. It was within credibility for a C++ specialist to open his own workstation and check if the graphics card fan was working properly.

“Damn GPU. Seems to be overheating,” he said. Thankfully the case was easy to open. The recorder went in, then he wasted some fifteen seconds looking

for nonexistent dust.

"Do you need compressed air spray?" Katya asked.

"No, I got the dust out already. Listen, my furniture is arriving, and I need to leave for a while. You OK with that?"

Katya considered for some seconds.

"I will not stop in the meanwhile. OK as long as you document it all later."

"Deal."

As soon as Ian got inside the Ka, he was sure something was not right. Someone had been inside. He would have to check for tracking devices, microphones, and most importantly – explosives. But he had no tools with him now. Thankfully the gun was at the apartment as well, so whoever had been inside had not seen it.

He started the engine with cold sweat running down his back, waiting for a searing-hot explosion to engulf him.

Some agonizing minutes and red lights later he arrived at the apartment tower and killed the engine.

The furniture would arrive at some point within the next hour, and Ian did not want to waste time, so he quickly went up to the apartment, got the Agent glasses from the backpack, and returned to the car.

He used the EM scanner in interactive mode, turning his head around, looking for any abnormal signals.

Nothing. Perhaps the power had to be on first.

He turned the ignition key, and instantly the sunglasses' display turned into a confusing array of colors. How was he supposed to make any sense of it? Blowfish was much more of an expert in this, but she was two hundred and fifty miles away.

He concentrated hard –

And looked below. There. A small blip. Why would there be any electric device directly beneath him? The Ka did not have heated seats. He felt from underneath the seat, but there appeared to be nothing abnormal. Perhaps it was outside.

With the sunglasses still on, he got out and crawled beneath the car. Now he had to find the blip again, but it was easier said than done from amidst all the colored noise.

The sound of an approaching truck alerted him. Shit. That was probably the furniture crew arriving.

In sudden rage, Ian turned his head one more time and now the blip was right in front of his eyes. He got his hand into the cramped space between his head and the underside, and tried to find the blip's physical counterpart.

Nothing?

Or –

His fingers bumped into a small disc, like a wrist-watch battery. It felt smooth unlike the rough, dirty sheet metal all around it. Ian dug his fingers around it to pull it out, and grinned in pain as he managed to cut himself on a sharp corner instead.

His rage intensified, and he dug in harder. Now the foreign object came loose, with a wire trailing behind it.

With the disc firmly in his grasp, he rolled out, got up, and held it close for inspection. Indeed, like a small battery. A tracking device. The rage transformed into a cold hatred against his enemy.

He tossed the object into the nearby drain hatch.

Meanwhile a yellow truck had parked by the front doors, a large blue IKEA logo on the side of the cargo hold. Yes, that had to be for him. Ian quickly dusted off his clothes and went to meet the crew.

As he walked toward the truck, he realized he had made a mistake. If the car moved, but the tracker did not give a signal, SCEPTRE would know something was up. His rage and his affection for the questionable tiny hatchback had clouded his judgment. Confirming the presence of the device would have been enough for now.

The nature of the game had changed. The danger was ramping up, and Ian knew he had to be prepared now. The furniture had been left in its packaging: the bed, the table and the chairs would have to be assembled, but that was the least pressing matter on his mind.

To avoid being exposed, he walked toward the office instead of driving. Due to the disabled tracker there would also be no returning to the HQ for the weekend: he would have to tough it out here.

The pistol was tucked into his waist, hidden behind the long coat. Upon reaching the office building, he headed straight for the maintenance door without changing his pace. A green light flashed: the access card was still good.

Past the first short corridor, he peered into the stairway above with caution. Empty for now. He began his ascent.

At the fifth floor he saw a door opening: a black-bearded man in green-black overalls entered the stairwell almost in front of him. Ian forced himself to ignore him. Thankfully, the maintenance man did not ask

questions, but it seemed that during daytime bumping into someone was more than likely. The next encounter might be much more troublesome.

Ian picked up pace and arrived at the eleventh floor. No-one was looking as he emerged into the lobby. Then, he slowed down and entered the office.

It would be most likely that he needed the gun inside, not in the street. Therefore it would be ideal if he could hide it here into some relatively secure place. He decided for the workstation's case again. Many had already left for the weekend, Katya included, so he had the cubicle all for himself.

Trying to make as little sound as possible, he opened the case again, and placed the SIG Sauer and the extra magazines inside. Finally he picked up the recorder stick and put the lid back. Done.

Then it was time for the hateful documentation. With Katya gone and only her code to follow, it was much harder and slower going. Nicholas and Thora were still sitting in their respective offices, and thinking about their possible villainous conversations did not make it any easier to concentrate. But finally Ian had fulfilled the necessary eight hours. Of the people he knew, only Samael remained at his desk, and he probably would not be talking all by himself. It was time to leave and upload the recordings.

"First week done, right?" Samael asked.

"Yeah. A short one."

"Well, the next will be proper."

Ian arrived back to the middle of large IKEA packages. The bed would be easy, requiring only the legs to be attached. He could start with that. But first he got the uploads running and typed a message to the Agents.

First week done. Uploading today's recordings and the codebase now. Hope there's useful stuff. Would like to come to HQ but can't, as the bastards installed a tracker in the car.

The reply came in less than a minute.

Understood. - Blowfish.

He left the machine uploading while he went shopping for some bare necessities, like a microwave oven, bedclothes, kitchen utensils, basic tools, and some more food and drinks, most importantly a bottle of Jim Beam whiskey. Using Trevor's credit card for payment succeeded without a hitch, but unfortunately he was forced to use the car to transport everything. The whole ordeal had felt weird in the extreme: it had been ages since he had bought anything for his previous flat.

Now the weekend could begin. A second reply had arrived in the meanwhile.

We're doing alright, Nitro (Agent trainee) is already firing assault rifles. Erik says he's not much a fighter though. Try to enjoy yourself, don't go crazy out there. - Jo

Ian typed a reply.

Not sure about that, I'm about to start assembling IKEA furniture.

He started cautiously with one beer, and tore open the bed's package, which was propped against the wall. It was straightforward: five minutes later he had a bed.

Next he went for the first chair. A half-hour later the beer had merged into the second and he cursed the cryptic number- and letter-coded diagrams. Finally, an hour later and with the help of the third beer, he had a self-assembled adjustable chair.

He decided that was enough. The table would be too challenging tonight. The uploads had progressed to halfway in the meanwhile, and Ian put on some Nar-garoth from the laptop speakers. It was time to open the whiskey bottle, but with delicate care.

By 10 PM, as all uploads were done, Ian's intoxication had progressed and he became bolder in drinking the whiskey. He started browsing esoteric and Satanic forums on the internet, as well as searching for the most horrific crimes, ghost stories, conspiracy theories and execution videos he could find. He told himself that everything was for merging better with Trevor's character, to prepare himself for next week's challenges.

At 4 AM he thought he knew everything. Also the whiskey bottle was empty. Ian went to lie down on the bed, trying to ignore the spinning of the room. An hour later he had not slept, but the intoxication began to fade. In a momentary flash of insight he knew that the hangover was on its way. Soon after something started to rise from his stomach.

It was time to stumble to the WC to release whatever beast was swimming inside him. He almost did not make it in time, and hoped that whoever was watching the camera feed would also feel the urge to vomit himself.

His voice echoed eerily in the bathroom. "Into the deadwhite throne, I command thee -"

Perhaps urged on by these words of exorcism, his stomach contents flew out with extra force and an in-

tensely painful convulsion that felt as if he had been stabbed.

“Gaaahl –” Ian breathed.

He had nearly fainted, but felt the familiar cold sweat which told that eventually he would feel better. However, it was far from over yet.

Blowfish was staying up late. As soon as each audio file had been transferred, she had instantly put a speech-to-text transcription program to run on it. This had consumed a hundred percent of the HQ's computing power: she also utilized the web server, on which the actual server daemon had been mercilessly throttled down in priority.

The initial run had produced nearly no fruitful results, and she understood: the audio signal was for the most part too weak. The tiny spheres sacrificed audio quality for stealth.

Wearing headphones, she was experimenting with an audio editor program to find the right processing parameters to make it easier for the transcription. For the past hour she had fiddled with a multi-band parametric compressor and expander, and now she finally thought she had parameters worth using.

Before going to sleep, she tried running a part of the first processed recording through the transcription program. This time it picked up much more words, even complete sentences. She was not entirely satisfied, but if the transcripts would guide the Agents to listen selectively, they would already have filled their purpose.

The first audio file appeared to contain several programmers discussing. But one odd word jumped at her several times: THRONE.

A particular conversation including this word, with some blank unrecognized ones in between, went like:

"Is Throne – with the progress?"

"Never, of course. We're lifting code from – and it's speeding things up quite a bit."

"Yeah, I saw you commit quite a bit. Might stretch – if you overdo it."

It seemed to be some kind of governing entity. No mention to SCEPTRE or the Sectarian Elite existed at least on this recording.

But this was enough for this night. Blowfish set the rest of the files to be batch-processed with the same parameters, then to be transcribed. They would be ready in the morning.

Ian's Saturday went by at first in an unpleasant, delirious blur, haunted by the constant throbbing headache. He tried to eat properly and drink plenty of water, but as the evening skies darkened and his condition had not improved as much as it should have, he decided for a plan B instead. He headed for an all-night liquor store and bought some bottles of dark lager. This time he stayed away from hard spirits, as he was afraid of things going overboard again, and he needed to be in peak condition on Monday.

The first beer caused a marked improvement: most of the headache went away at least for a while. Because sleep was not to be expected for several hours, Ian booted up the laptop again, searching for something to pass the time.

In retrospect he probably made the absolute worst choice he could have made. While still experiencing nausea, tremor, and delirium that occasionally faded in and out, he downloaded the Japanese indie freeware 2D platformer game *Doukutsu Monogatari*, also known as *Cave Story*.

The game was triggering in the extreme. It featured Quote, an amnesiac killer robot as the protagonist. Ian understood that to refer to a SCEPTRE assassin trainee, or himself, in a roundabout way. The robot was searching for a way to stop an evil doctor from unleashing brainwashed rabbits on the unsuspecting humanity from his flying island fortress. This was a clear reference to SCEPTRE and its mind control.

In his current state the game was absolutely horrifying for all the overt and subtle references, amplified by the haunting, emotional retro soundtrack. Still Ian was drawn in and could not stop playing. Meanwhile he opened another beer, then a third one to calm his nerves, but that only made the situation worse.

The game itself also turned worse, for it also featured the killer robot's equally robotic partner, Curly Brace, who clearly was patterned after Jo. At first Curly fought alongside the player, being indestructible, but then Ian reached the game's first real turning point, the boss fight against the island's "core," after which Curly sacrificed herself by drowning so that Quote could go on. By now Ian was crying openly.

Later he understood that this actually was a choice point, where Curly could already be killed off for good, but he had by accident chosen the alternative story route in which she could be saved. This involved, among other things, carrying her along a treacherous underwater route, then finally stopping at a hut where Curly could be drained of water and rebooted.

This was maximally triggering, for it clearly reminded Ian of how at the anti-cosmic pyramid he had managed to remove the elite black op "fail-safe device" – a mini-explosive – from Jo's head with perhaps one second to spare. After rebooting Curly fell into a long

sleep, again like Jo. The game also had featured a scene in which they had to fight, but it was arranged differently in the overall storyline.

At this point Ian stopped playing, and wondered if the author actually was SCEPTRE, or had been seriously prescient. He also observed himself to be rather drunk again. As the final straw, he checked for fan art related to the game, and found that the protagonist was usually drawn with an “emo” look, though game's own rough pixel art did not suggest that.

He shut the lid of the laptop violently and fell to bed. It was not long until he was forced to get up and vomit again. When he dared to attempt sleeping again, he sweated profusely and observed the walls to be closing in on him. And when sleep finally came, the dreams were incoherent but disturbing.

On Sunday he finally vowed that recovery would have to happen without further alcohol. But it was going to be tough. He imagined himself as Conan after having been taken down from the Tree of Woe, regaining his strength and practicing sword-fighting again after nearly dying.

At the Agent HQ, Blowfish was going through the codebase Ian had uploaded. Something nagged at the back of her head: the code did not seem to have familiar names for classes and variables, or a familiar coding convention, but yet she was certain she had seen something like it before. Perhaps it was just that all code for 3D and simulation engines was bound to be similar in a way, so after seeing enough of them they all seemed to merge into each other.

But that was not a satisfying conclusion. Each engine still had a distinct character and lineage. What was this

engine's? First it was just a wild guess.

Then Blowfish opened another file, did a side-by-side comparison, and she knew it could no longer be a coincidence.

At parts she was looking at an advanced version, perhaps V0.9, of the Grieg Industries virtual reality simulator codebase. It had been processed automatically, changing the code formatting and all names, and mechanically shuffling code statements in places it did not have any adverse effect, but the basic structure was undeniably there.

"Fucking hell," Blowfish breathed.

Was Hermann Grieg in league with the enemy?

Agitated, Blowfish went back to the automatically transcribed conversation, listening closely with headphones. She thought she had the full conversation down, and it confirmed her analysis of the code precisely:

"Is Throne satisfied with the progress?"

"Never, of course. We're lifting code from Grieg and it's speeding things up quite a bit."

"Yeah, I saw you commit quite a bit. Might stretch credibility if you overdo it."

Most critically, this meant Ian was in danger for using the earlier code as his credentials. Blowfish sent a message immediately, though she was not sure when Ian would receive it.

They're using the Grieg code like you, later version. This means they may be on to you. Take extreme caution from now on, and be prepared to pull out if necessary.

Waking up to the cell phone alarm clock at 8 AM happened with great difficulty, as Ian still felt shaky and uncoordinated and had not slept nearly enough. It was time to test what he had planned earlier, though not to achieve superior performance, but only to restore even some of it. He drank the remaining beer and headed out into the cold morning.

He hoped at least one SCEPTRE operative would be driven to full-scale alcoholism by watching the tapes of his weekend. More seriously, he reminded himself to be extra-alert now, especially in his less than optimal condition.

Considering each passer-by a potential hit man, he finally made it to the office.

"Good. You're not much late. Now we test the algorithm," Katya said to him. The code had seemed meticulous enough. Perhaps it would just work.

But as soon as Ian loaded the first 3D scene with the geometry optimization algorithm active, he understood that this could be a long day. Nothing rendered correctly: the scene was full of misplaced triangles point-

ing in completely random directions.

"I will look at the geometry decimation and vertex welding. Check the submesh recombining and vertex / index buffer generation in the meanwhile," Katya suggested.

"Fine," Ian replied, unsure if he could even find the correct place to look for. But if he succeeded, he would gain important prestige, and his fellow workers might be more tempted to reveal operational secrets.

First of all he attempted to dissociate so that his normal personality would be left to suffer the hangover, leaving Trevor or perhaps Necro himself to program efficiently.

It perhaps helped a little.

Of course he had learned of vertex and index buffers, so he was not completely a fish out of water. A vertex buffer listed the 3D points in the object to be drawn on the screen, and the index buffer told how the points connected to each other to form triangles. The extreme deformation he had seen pointed into the vertex buffer data being corrupt.

Indeed! There was a mistake in rearranging and copying the unoptimized source data into the optimized buffer. Ian corrected that, recompiled and tested again, and the 3D scene appeared much better. Still, there were visible gaps.

Another hard look at the code, and Ian saw a trivial error in array indexing. Was it that simple? He corrected it, recompiled, and – what? The whole 3D scene was again mutilated beyond recognition. It seemed that the error was intentional and necessary. Katya was simply a godlike programmer.

He quickly undo'd the change and began to look elsewhere.

Ten minutes later he had eliminated every possibility, except the check for whether the index buffer could use 16-bit (from 0 to 65535) or 32-bit (from 0 to 4294967295) values. The former was preferable so as to not waste memory. But due to a mistake the latter was never used even if necessary, so objects with more than 65536 vertices would not render as whole.

Yes. That explained everything. After fixing the check the whole scene appeared to render correctly.

"Very good," Katya said. "Now commit that, and I will merge."

Ian did as told: the cryptic SDRC was not as easy to use as TortoiseSVN for instance, but he managed. Deep inside he certainly was proud of himself.

Irwin joined them.

"You're making progress on that? Good, there's a lot more to do. The optimization of the rendering API calls, profiling cache misses – it never ends. The lusers will always want more content."

Ian certainly noticed the word luser – it meant Irwin had similar Bastard Operator mentality as Blowfish.

"There's actually so much to do that we've decided to hold a beginning-of-the-week developer sauna this evening, just to relax and plan the battle," Irwin continued. "You're welcome too."

Ian had passed by the sauna next to the locker rooms, but had mistakenly understood that it was only used for corporate meetings with clients. Attending would certainly be worthwhile, as it presented the opportunity for loose tongues due to relaxation and drinking. Just like he had imagined earlier.

His weekend would actually turn out useful after all for increasing his tolerance. He would just have to be cautious all the way: position himself always near the

entrance for a quick exit, avoid too probing questions, and watch out for too scary people: Samael, Rutger, and especially Nicholas.

The rest of the day went painfully slow while waiting. Nevertheless Ian managed to optimize away some redundant rendering state changes, and observed the milliseconds spent for rendering in one particular scene to decrease from 1.25 milliseconds to 1.15. That was with the CPU and GPU throttles at maximum, on slower speeds the effect could be even more drastic.

Finally, past 5 PM, Irwin said "We're starting now."

Before heading for the locker room, Ian did one preparation, just in case something went south. Most of the employees had left already or were leaving, so he had relative peace as he opened the workstation case again, carefully took out the pistol and spare magazines, and put them under the leather coat now lying on his chair. He was certain no-one saw him do that.

It was possible that all the boozing on the weekend before, and the slight, lingering hangover now actually contributed to a better mental Agent performance as Ian realized he had not been afraid at all on this day. Instead he calmly considered the possible risks. That was the ideal mental state: perhaps prolonged alcohol use was the key. But could he sustain that indefinitely?

With the gun easily reachable, Ian headed for the sauna, which had its own dressing and shower rooms. He undressed, took a can of beer from the nearby fridge, and entered after taking a quick shower.

The sauna was a dimly lit, rectangular room, perhaps 2 by 4 meters. An electric stove stood in the corner. There were two levels of benches: the lower one for novices and the higher one, where the air would be hotter, for veterans and masochists.

It was hot already, and Irwin was throwing more water on the stove. Ian observed Chris and Damian to also be present: all in all perhaps the persons to be least afraid of. Ian took a seat from the upper row, closest to the door.

“Forward or deferred rendering?” Irwin shouted as he threw water again.

Was this a trick question? Or was the right answer the key for admission into their inner circle? Ian took a gulp of his beer and waited for someone else to answer.

“Forward, you can’t trust the Flash graphics API to do deferred worth shit,” Chris answered.

“Neither. Deferred lighting,” Damian replied in turn.

“Explain. Deferred lighting needs rendering the scene twice,” Irwin said.

“You don’t need multiple render targets, so you can do it on mobiles too if they’re fast enough. And you get more material variety.”

“Doubtful!” Irwin shouted louder. “In the time you’ve only managed to populate the G-buffer, I’m already done with the whole scene! I guess that also reveals my preference. What about you, Trevor?”

“Both, depending on the target hardware.”

“Can’t do that, you have to pick one. Imagine you have a gun to your head.”

This was the first time Ian heard someone at the company mention guns. He reminded himself to be watchful.

“Then I pick deferred for simplicity and avoiding the shader permutation explosion.”

To be honest, he had just recited something he had googled. He was not that far to understand what other ways there were to manage the number of shader programs needed to render a given 3D scene.

If Irwin was steering the conversation, there was little hope that Ian would get to unearth any secret information. To make matters worse, the others did not even seem to be drinking much, though each had a beer in hand.

"Interesting. A tie, I'd say. Another question then. Let's say you just can't do deferred, do you then go for forward multi-pass or forward single-pass lighting?", Irwin went on. "You probably know what I think, but I'll say it in any case, single-pass with carefully managed permutations."

Even trickier question. Now Ian had no idea whether he could argue with conviction, and he did not just want to echo a previous answer. Perhaps the beer would help.

"Single pass, vertex lighting. Emulating the fixed pipeline," Chris replied.

Irwin and Damian laughed. Ian thought it was wisest to join the laugh, though he did not understand exactly.

"OK, my turn. Multi-pass, using the stencil buffer to render only the affected pixels," Damian said as the laugh had died out at last.

"Hm. And how well would that do on limited hardware?" Irwin challenged, but Damian stayed silent.

Ian's turn. He cleared his throat –

"Single pass. Again for simplicity."

"Hm, that doesn't quite check out! You said you want to avoid shader permutation explosion, but how can you do that with single-pass lighting? Or do you have one shader that takes n directional lights, n spot lights, and n point lights, and you leave the unused lights black? Inefficient. But that makes me think, how would I render black light without changing the blending mode in between? Indeed –"

Ian held his breath, as a creeping fear invaded his consciousness for the first time today. He had made a mistake and shown his lack of true insight. And now Irwin was talking about Black Light. Azerate.

Ian started inching toward the exit, just a little.

"Let me tell you, you did surprisingly well. It was entertaining, even. But I don't like wasting my time any more than is necessary –"

Fuck. This was the "your cover is blown" -speech. Ian made a leap toward the door, but Damian, who was sitting on the lower bench, put his leg in front and Ian tripped. He fell hard against the plastic floor.

Shit! It never should have gone like this. Ian fought to ignore the pain, but before he could get up on his own, he felt two sets of hands grab him and haul him roughly out of the sauna. He got one quick look behind and saw they were Damian and Chris. Irwin came out last into the shower room.

"Don't worry, you won't be alone, Ian," he said, a sadistic tone of humor in his voice. The last word was heavily emphasized.

Now Ian noticed that Irwin was holding a small remote control unit in his hand. Was that for torture? Ian's mind was suddenly racing, as even more dread took hold. He had to free himself somehow, but with his arms pinned back, and Damian and Chris holding on to him with surprising strength, it did not seem possible. At least not yet.

In case he could not, and would die today, he raised his voice for one question.

"What in the end gave me away?"

Irwin held his right forefinger up, rotating it and smiling. "The code, the code. We use it too."

What code? The simulator codebase? That meant –

Before Ian could think for too long, Irwin pressed a button on the remote and a section of the shower room's wall slid open.

It was dark inside, so the stench hit Ian first: suddenly the whole room was turning around, along with his stomach. Then light found its way in, and Ian saw a blond-haired young man hanging from the ceiling, with gaping wounds, black bruises and dried blood all over him. A large vat was underneath him, full of dark red liquid.

It was Al. Drained of all blood. And already decomposing. The smell of death was overpowering.

Ian tried to struggle, but it was futile: he only managed to see that Damian, Chris and Irwin all had very quickly put on black gas masks to shield themselves from the stench. The message was clear: Ian was next, as they would spend quality time with him in the secret room.

They began pushing him closer to Al's corpse, and Ian also saw a steel bucket on the floor, filled with tools: knives, saws and hammers.

He too would die in pain, unless –

Nearly touching Al, he did two things at once. An involuntary act of vomiting, while kicking the vat in front of him with all of his might.

The vat tipped over, sending the blood flying onto the floor, as well as on them. Ian would never know if it was more due to the blood or the vomit, but Damian lost balance first, closely followed by Chris. Just for a moment their grip loosened, and Ian managed to free himself, followed by a kick to the nearest torso, which happened to be Chris's.

In the shower room Irwin rushed him, but Ian took hold of a shower handle, spun around, and hit him sav-

agely in the side of the head. The team lead did not go down, but was momentarily stunned, and that was all Ian needed.

He leaped into the dressing room, slammed the door shut, and quickly manhandled a bench in front of it.

Instantly the banging on the door started: he would not have long. He would have to exit the building, and doing so while naked would be inconvenient, so he pulled on his trousers in record time and forced his feet into the military-style boots without tying the shoelaces. The door flew open as the bench finally dislodged, so there was no time for the shirt. Instead Ian ran out to the open office space, heading for his cubicle and the gun.

Hopefully it was still there.

An inconvenient divider wall was in between, so Ian simply ran toward it, leaping up and hoping to clear it at least partially. Upon impact it tipped over, starting a chain reaction that made the whole cubicle collapse, and Ian climbed over with the least grace imaginable.

From behind him, the first gunshot rang out.

There were no screams of panic to follow the report, only the faint sound of footsteps closing in. Everyone left in the office had to be part of the plan. That said, Ian had not seen anyone else after exiting the sauna. He was crouched low in his cubicle, gun ready. In the meanwhile he had managed to put the coat on: better that than bare skin against bullets.

He peered out into the corridor on his right. It was clear: the footsteps were coming from the opposite direction.

Ian broke into a crouched run, heading toward the glass wall and the exit. He reached the edge of the cubicle maze, turning his head to both directions.

Perhaps twenty meters away, from the left, Irwin came into view, his clothes haphazardly back on, and a gun in his hand. Ian ducked back behind a divider as Irwin fired. The sound was just the same as before. But Ian knew he could not assume that only the team lead was armed, as Damian and Chris had presented a clear liking for sadistic violence as well.

For now the horror of the secret room was merci-

fully blanked from his mind, as Ian concentrated just on getting out of here alive.

His current position was not good: the others could easily circle around him. Waiting just three seconds for Irwin's concentration to wane, Ian leaped back into view, gun trained forward.

No Irwin in sight. Ian advanced, wary of the next intersection ahead.

It was empty. No-one emerging from the other cubicles. Encouraged by this, Ian crept ahead. Suddenly something in his peripheral vision alerted him. Looking up, he saw an object come flying in an arc at him.

A grenade. He dived into the intersection, away from the grenade which bounced against the glass wall.

Ian waited for the detonation, but instead a thick, gray gas cloud began to spread with a hissing sound. Tear gas? Poison? He certainly did not want to hang around to find out, so he broke into a rapid stride toward the opposite side of the space, the executive offices and the back exit. In the next four-way junction he turned to the left –

As Damian appeared from the right. Bare torso, but pants and gas mask on. And a semi-automatic aimed directly at Ian's heart.

Ian could not turn his own gun around quick enough. Instead he let his body go limp and dropped down just as Damian pulled the trigger. The report was deafening from at so close range, and Ian felt the heat from the muzzle flash, but the bullet missed.

Before Damian could shift his aim, Ian swept him off balance with his right foot, then shot him in the head. The face turned into a bloody pulp, and a pool of red began to expand from behind, mixing with the coder's long black hair. One down.

The second grenade came sailing through the air, closer this time. Who was tossing them? Irwin? Chris? Ian could not congratulate himself of the kill, but had to keep pushing toward the far side instead. This time he vowed not to get surprised from the opposite direction, so he kept shifting his aim from the left to right rapidly.

Quickly, he also looked behind him and could not see the glass wall any more: the gas was rapidly obscuring that direction. No going back there.

Ian reached the other side of the cubicle maze. Only five meters to the exit door. He saw that the executive offices were all empty: possibly it was only the three of them now.

Irwin appeared once more from the right. Ian fired three times and he was forced to duck into cover. The magazines held fifteen rounds like on the Beretta: Ian had now eleven remaining.

Suddenly something from the left hit Ian in the jaw and he lost balance, seeing stars. Chris! He had somehow circled around him.

While Ian was sprawled on the ground, the SIG Sauer out of his hand, Chris had his firearm pointed down at him. Ian wondered why he had not shot already, that he had even bothered with knocking him down first. Again Ian had managed to get himself surprised, and perhaps this time would be the last. He now fully understood that despite the initially calm nerves, the hangover had left him in a bad fighting condition.

"Too bad it turned out this way," Chris said, the cheery voice made sinister by the gas mask.

Perhaps Ian still had a chance. Chris wasted time talking, when he could have been done with it already. Ian thanked the supernal or infernal forces – if they existed – for giving him an incompetent opponent to

match his reduced capacity, and with an animalistic growl, launched himself forward.

Chris fired, and Ian knew he had been hit. They collided before the pain actually registered, and Ian instantly went for the gun, trying to twist it away.

One shot, then another got fired into the ceiling. Ian felt pain lancing through his right shoulder, but it was possibly only a grazing hit, nothing life-threatening. If Chris had aimed a few centimeters to the right, it would have been a hole through his head instead.

As the struggle did not progress either way, Ian switched tactics and punched Chris in the mask with his left hand.

Chris staggered and Ian punched again. Now the gun came loose as Chris almost lost consciousness, but Ian could not catch it: it clattered to the floor instead.

Then Ian remembered something. Irwin. He was still out there, probably on the right.

Ian grabbed Chris by the shirt collar and spun him around 180 degrees, just as Irwin's gun barked twice in the distance. Chris convulsed, then went limp, with the polo shirt quickly turning red.

Now two were down, but Ian was unarmed for the moment. His SIG Sauer was further away: stopping to pick it up carried more risk. But if he did not, he would be leaving evidence at the site. Without waiting for Irwin to fire again, he made a two-part leap, picking up his gun, then bursting through the door into the stairwell.

It was just as dark as last time. But below, the darkness seemed to be even deeper. Ian was about to take the first step down when he became aware of a red dot dancing on the wall.

A split-second later the dot was already moving to-

ward him. He leaped to the side just as rattling automatic gunfire began. In the light of the muzzle flashes, Ian saw a group of mantis face-masked soldiers in dark uniforms crouched on the steps below.

SCEPTRE's black ops.

What now? He was facing enemies with superior firepower, without the protection of the Agent armor. Back to the Innovativi offices? But Irwin could be waiting just beyond the corner to finish him off. Therefore Ian continued into the direction of his leap, the upward leading stairs. To buy even slightly more time he fired blindly in the general direction of the black ops.

Ian was racing up two steps at a time, feeling his heart miss a step every now and then. The red dots chased him, and another volley was unleashed. Thankfully he was already onto the next flight of stairs, and the bullets struck into the wall instead.

How many floors should he ascend? Two? Three? He perhaps had a slight edge in speed for having no gear on him, but then again, the black ops might be jacked up on combat drugs to compensate.

Ian saw the number fifteen on the steel door in front of him. Now he had gone up three, and could not immediately see the red dots. He had perhaps a couple of seconds: he fished the access card from his pocket and thrust it into the card reader's slot.

Red light. No access. SCEPTRE had revoked it today.

In disgust he threw the card to the floor, stepped back, and fired three times into the door, to the place where he estimated the lock mechanism to be. His disgust mixed with rising panic as the bullets only made dents and ricocheted from the steel.

What now? Facing the black ops seemed like certain suicide. He heard their fast approaching footsteps al-

ready, and the red dots appeared once more as they rounded a corner. Just a few seconds and they would have line of sight.

One last thing to try.

Ian fired at the card reader until he clicked dry. The plastic box was obliterated completely. He thought he heard a promising sound of the latch, so he pulled the door handle hard and almost lost balance as the door flew wide open.

The rattle of sub-machine guns began just as he made it behind the door, shielding himself for the time being. But there was no way to close or bar it now, so the black ops would soon follow. Instead he broke into a run through the fifteenth floor, which contained another office, again behind a glass wall. No-one was working late: it was completely dark.

There was no hiding place in the wide lobby, and no way to enter the office unless he broke the glass. Weakened by the hangover and the encounters so far, Ian knew he could not run forever. Mechanically, he picked up a spare magazine and reloaded on the move.

What now? The elevator? Another potential death trap. The main stairwell would also expose him badly, as other black ops teams could already be there to cut him off.

Ian could not make a choice, so he just kept running. He rounded the corner of the office's glass wall just as the black ops made it through the door and began firing. Glass shattered behind him.

Directly ahead of him there was a glass-paned door for the fire escape: Ian could see the city silhouette and lights beyond. Right now that was as good choice as any. He picked up speed, almost tripping, and made it to the door at last.

He shot the plastic emergency seal of the door handle to pieces and threw it open just as the black ops rounded the corner as well. The glass pane shattered under gunfire. Ian heard the sound of tearing fabric and felt a hot ricochet as bullets almost hit him in the back, but then he was through, standing on the outside of the office tower.

The cold evening air assaulted his bare chest.

Now there were two options: the stairs and the ladder. On the stairs he would make an easy target of himself each time he arrived on a lower floor, but at least it would be faster going than the ladder.

But what if he slid down it? He would burn his hands badly. It seemed like a no-go, until he remembered a possibility. If they only were there –

Yes. The thick leather gloves he had carried with him in preparation for extremely cold weather, but which he had never needed so far.

Oddly, as Ian put them on, he recalled Manowar's music video to the song "Gloves of Metal." In the video the band members rode horses and wore leather: by today's standards it was ridiculous. The song played in his head as he positioned himself on the ladder, gripped the vertical bars tight, then let go just a little bit.

Floors went by quickly as he descended, the smell of burning leather soon invading his nostrils. Halfway through his foot slipped and hit a rung, which caused a cascading loss of balance: next his chest slammed against the rungs painfully, and momentarily he was left hanging one-handed.

Pain flashed in his hurt shoulder as his right hand finally got a solid grip. For a few seconds he just stayed in place and collected strength, shaking from both his arms and legs.

Gunfire came from high above, bullets pinging off the fire escape's stairs. He had to continue.

His gloves of metal had brought him this far. Now they would have to take him all the way to safety. Gathering courage, he re-assumed the sliding position and let go again.

The rest of the floors went without a hitch, and he came to the end of the ladder, falling the last two meters. He let his legs buckle and rolled as he hit the asphalt: it was slightly painful, but did not appear to cause any major damage.

He tossed the burned gloves aside and broke into a run again, his legs burning from exertion. No doubt the black ops would slide down after him, so his best bet was to get to the street where he could possibly blend into the crowd. Though that could mean more innocent victims. The black ops probably cared little of collateral damage.

While running, Ian patted his pants' pocket to verify that the USB recorder was still there. Now that his cover was blown and the mission was over, he truly hoped that either Friday's or today's recordings would reveal something of SCEPTRE's current plans. So much had been left uncovered, like the whole deal with the sun and the orbiting planet. But if it was the "Evolution Engine" which had revealed him, he had been doomed from the start.

As Ian rounded a corner, he nearly bumped into someone. He looked up and froze for a moment as he saw the same female security guard as earlier.

"You! Again –" she barked with a hard stare.

Was she also SCEPTRE? But she seemed to carry no lethal weaponry, which pointed to the negative. In that case Ian thought he owe her a warning.

"Listen, there may be guys with sub-machine guns coming down the fire escape shortly. In case you're not in league with them, I suggest you get the hell out and call the cops. And switch employers," he spoke breathlessly.

Then Ian was already running away. He thought he had heard the woman mutter "Not again."

Half a mile to the car, though it would not be safe. He would have to re-scan it. Damn! The sunglasses were in the apartment, which was not safe either.

The street was moderately crowded: Ian ducked into an alleyway to button up his coat and calm down a bit. He listened for gunfire, but there was none, so it appeared that the security guard, whoever she was, had not been cut down by the black ops.

However, as soon as Ian stopped, he realized his whole body felt sore, and something wet still trickled down his back. At some point he would have to patch himself up. As well as get some rest. He was quite sure he was not up to the task of driving all the way back to the HQ by himself. He had to call for extraction.

Before returning to the street, he got Trevor's cellphone out. It still had a quarter of battery power left, and had not been smashed by a stray bullet, so he dialed the number he had memorized. It would connect to the Agent HQ through a secure, scrambled gateway. Or at least it should be secure.

The phone rang for five seconds. Then the line was picked up, but there was no voice.

"Trevor here. Need extraction."

He gave the address of the motel he had stayed in before the interview. That should hopefully be safe enough: he did not know the city well enough to pick another suitable location.

“The bird will be on its way,” came the answer. That was Blowfish. Ian sighed in relief, then started walking. At this point he could not manage going much faster than the crowd's average speed, but that suit him just fine.

"Did Ian say what was going on?" Jo asked. She could not help feeling uneasy.

"The conversation was very short, he just gave the location. Naturally he wouldn't have called at all if his cover was still intact. The good news is that he didn't sound hurt. At least not badly," Blowfish replied.

Jo nodded, then returned to inspecting the M4 carbine she was taking on the flight. Previously she had preferred the H&K MP5 sub-machine gun for being lighter on recoil and easier to maneuver, but after December's mission she rather preferred to have something with more power and range. The rifle also had an M203 under-barrel grenade launcher attached. In her coat pockets she had flashbang and electromagnetic pulse grenades in case it was necessary to stun human or non-human targets.

Weapon and load-out adequate. Can proceed with mission.

They all were similarly geared up, only the sidearms varied. Jo did not actually hope for the extraction to involve a firefight, but in any case this was the way an

Agent was meant to be traveling: using their own means of transport and fully equipped.

"Last ride was kind of bumpy," Erik said. Seeing the Agent coat on him still felt partially odd. Jo knew he had joined for the express purpose of getting her back from SCEPTRE's hands in December, and in theory it did not need to be his fight any more. But then, she also understood that the outside world had mostly ceased to hold any purpose for him.

Blowfish replied. "Well, since then I've logged hours in the simulator. And you sure aren't qualified to fly."

To stay concealed and to conserve aviation fuel, the Agents exactly did not go joyriding on their two stealth helicopters, stolen from SCEPTRE. This would be the first night one of the machines would see action again.

Finished with their gear, the three of them entered the underground helipad.

"It's all ready to go," Nitro greeted them.

In the last few days he had learned the operating and service manual contained inside the cockpit by heart. In the text, the frequent use of the phrase "under the pain of death" to warn against various misuses of the chopper had amused him to no end. He had however been very serious to double-check that none of the security features mentioned in the manual – such as a biometric check, which would cut the engine power mid-flight if tripped, or high voltage led to the cyclic and collective sticks – were functional any more.

Ian assumed it would take about two hours from Blowfish, Jo and Erik if they left immediately. In the meanwhile he just had to get to the motel and stay alive. He reached the parking lot: the green Ka was still there, waiting for him.

Ian tried to look for out-of-place vehicles, but could not discern any, instead just the same ones that had been there always. He would have hoped the neighborhood to be more crowded, but it appeared that most had already settled inside their homes. Only a few passers-by went about on their business.

First Ian went lying down next to the car to check that there were no obvious explosive devices with red flashing lights attached. Next he opened the driver door and popped the hood: there appeared to be nothing abnormal, just the dirty engine and equally dirty wires, hoses and containers for vital operating fluids.

Somewhat satisfied but not completely at ease, he locked the car, then scanned his surroundings once more. His escape was already close, but it paid not to get careless.

Next step was the apartment. The laptop was there, as well as spare clothes and first aid equipment. And the Les Paul clone, of course. The guitar would have to be carefully inspected for tampering before allowing it back inside the Agent HQ.

This close to getting away he would not submit himself at an elevator's mercy, so he climbed the stairs. The stairwell felt eerily empty, too, and the tired and hurting legs did not help matters.

Finally he was at his flat.

He almost had turned the key in the lock, but in the same instant remembered SCEPTRE's death trap, which they had set up in Cyberpriest's rehearsal space. The mortally wounded René had acted as bait, and heavy steel bolts had locked Ian, Jo and Erik in to have an intimate encounter with a timed plastic explosive. They had only been saved by the Agents setting off an EMP charge when exactly one second had remained.

But how could he determine whether the room was safe? Either he entered or he did not. In the latter case the laptop would be left at SCEPTRE's mercy. Ian had not saved the password or IP address for connecting to the Agent HQ, but it was possible the enemy could dig up something from the system logs.

Ian made his decision. He turned the key all the way and pulled, then listened for any abnormal beep or click.

He heard nothing.

Next, his hand went to the light switch. No, that was an unnecessary risk. He did not need lights, he only needed to get the backpack and the guitar. He would patch himself up in the car or in the motel.

Ian walked across the room, until –

He felt his leg hit something. A wire? His blood went cold as he heard a click.

That had to be the sound of a mine arming itself.

Ian cursed himself hard. If he had switched on the light, he would have seen the wire. But the enemy had exactly counted on him being too afraid to hit the lights. Psychological warfare. How to untangle himself now, without losing his leg?

He considered calling Blowfish and asking for real-time guidance on disarming, but she would be on her way right now. Could he switch his weight somehow to prevent the detonation? As long as there was tension on the wire, the mine perhaps would not explode. He did not know even where it was, but it had likely been placed to maximize the potential of death for someone entering.

As sweat ran down his back, Ian considered his options. Meanwhile, the door was still open, so a potential hit man could sneak in from behind. He needed to act

fast. The only thing he could think of, and which was somewhat close to him, was the IKEA package for the second chair he had not assembled yet.

Careful to not move the foot that was holding tension on the wire, he tried to reach it, but could not. Instead he growled roughly as pain in the right shoulder flared up again.

With infinite care Ian shifted position, so that he might be able to reach the plastic packaging and drag it closer. It almost worked: he got some plastic between his fingers but the grip did not hold as he tried to drag.

He had to shift his position more.

The wire creaked dangerously, but now he thought he had a solid grip. Stretching so much caused even greater agony, but he steeled himself to ignore it. He dragged the package, until he had it next to his leg and the wire. Carefully, he tested stepping backward and pushing the package forward to retain the tension unchanged.

Ian thought he had it.

He stepped back completely and nothing happened. No second click, no detonation. But still there was no time to waste. He stepped over the wire, quickly picked up the laptop lying next to the bed, and stuffed it inside the backpack. The guitar would be next –

The IKEA package moved slightly. It was too slippery on the bare floor to hold against the weight of the wire forever.

The moment seemed to stretch into infinity as Ian had to make a quick choice: the Les Paul, or his life.

He dived out of the door and behind a wall just as a deafening explosion rocked the floor. His ears were ringing: he hazarded a quick look inside to see that almost the whole room had turned black. Thick smoke

hung in the air, but nothing appeared to be in flames. It was clear that had he remained inside, the coroner would have had a body part puzzle on his hands.

It was time to get the hell out. Holding the backpack in his left hand, Ian broke into a run down the stairs. Gravity made it easier this time.

As he reached the car, a red hot hatred toward SCEPTRE flashed from inside him. The guitar had not been very valuable, but it was the principle that mattered. Destroying instruments was always pure evil. He almost wanted to scream, but tried to project his anger into scanning the car instead. It just had to happen quickly, as someone was bound to have called 911 already after hearing the detonation. Power on, glasses on, glasses to EM scanner mode –

Nothing. Just nothing.

He tossed the sunglasses on the passenger seat and started the engine. For a moment he was still so agitated that he would almost have welcomed the car exploding. Immediately after he realized that was a very risky attitude to have. Trying to calm down, he shifted into gear and headed for the motel, as the wail of sirens came from the distance.

The clock was close to 9 PM. From inside the Ka, Ian observed the motel's front yard for some time, watching people entering and leaving their rooms. Here it was actually more lively than in the residential area, and Ian thought he had chosen a fairly good place for the pickup. Behind the motel there was nothing, just a large, low hill and some trees. It would actually be a perfect landing spot for the Agents.

The only bad thing was that he had been here. If SCEPTRE had gotten the motel personnel to cooperate, willingly or not, they would know that as well.

Perhaps a little less than an hour until his ride arrived. In theory all he needed was to wait in the car. Using the motel's restroom for patching himself up would be preferable, but he did not necessarily want to draw unnecessary attention to himself. One look in the rear-view mirror confirmed his suspicious appearance: there was blood splatters and a minor bruise on his face, he had no shirt, and the coat was torn.

He decided to perform the initial examination right here. He took the coat off and immediately started to

shiver from the cold: the drive had been so short that the car had not warmed up properly. Carefully he felt for the right shoulder and determined that it was only a scrape. The bleeding had mostly stopped by now. Still, to prevent infection it needed to be dressed properly and he could not do it here, not in the dark, without a proper mirror, and with hands that had been digging from under the car.

With some reluctance he dug a black shirt from the backpack and put it on. The cotton fabric abraded the wound rudely. Then, the next step would be to enter the restroom in the motel reception, drawing as little attention as possible.

Well, perhaps it was partially advantageous that he had been here before. The motel owner would not think he was just some random junkie going to take a fix in the toilet. After all, Trevor had always behaved respectably here, even if a bit cold.

Ian tried to adjust his hair to cover as much of the face and the blood as possible. Then, without further consideration, he got out and headed for the reception. It had to be done.

This time the receptionist was not the owner himself, but some hired gun who looked rather like a street thug. Ian made quick eye contact, hoping that the lighting did not reveal much, and said "Hi."

The receptionist did not reply. Ian preferred it that way, and headed quickly for the restroom. Thankfully it was free: he locked the door behind him, then set out cleaning himself and the wound.

Some ten minutes later he was finished, his mirror image mostly how Trevor should look like, except for the dark sacks under his slightly bloodshot eyes. The raw pain caused by the disinfectant actually had man-

aged to remove some of his weariness, but he was still far from combat ready.

He exited the restroom. Now what? There was still at least a half hour until the Agents would arrive to pick him up. If he just sat down here, the receptionist would eventually get suspicious. Of course he could ask for a room, pay up front, and go there to wait. Yes, that sounded like a plan.

Before walking up to the counter, Ian took a quick look through the front door and saw that the Ford Ka was now flanked by two vehicles. Large, black executive sedans. They looked severely out of place in here, and Ian could only think of SCEPTRE.

Someone got out from the right-side vehicle.

It was Samael, now wearing much thicker clothing than in the office. Probably body armor. No visible weapon yet. At this point Ian could not feel not much of anything. No especial fear, only the cynical observation that enemy presence had been confirmed.

A second person got out. Irwin. Also similarly clothed. Ian imagined that he could only have murderous revenge on his mind, and would therefore be more dangerous even if he had lower rank.

Because one had to enter the motel rooms from the outside, Samael and Irwin would inevitably see him. Then they could close in for for the kill at their leisure.

"You want a room, or what?" the receptionist asked in a crude tone.

"No. I'm just waiting for someone."

Ian wondered about entering the bar. It would be a credible place to pass time, but he certainly could not take the backpack there. That meant the gun and the laptop would be left unattended to the coat rack in the reception. Could that risk be taken?

Before coming to a full conclusion about that, his mind drifted to briefly wondering how many draw calls it would take to render the motel and its surroundings, plus himself, the receptionist and the enemies. And if a firefight started, how many additional draw calls the particle effects, the bullet holes and the blood splatters would cause. And how much the frame rate would drop because of that.

Wake up for fuck's sake, he reminded himself.

Returning to the real world, he also made the decision. He would not separate from the gun now, no matter what.

Trying to stride as calmly as possible, Ian sat down on a chair nearest to the bar entrance. Shielding his hand movements with the backpack, he got the SIG Sauer out and stuffed it under his waist again, then concealed it with the coat. He remembered the one bullet he had used for breaking the fire escape seal. Fourteen remaining. The weapon was decocked now, so firing the first round would require pulling the trigger with greater force.

Next step was to wait for the receptionist to become bored with him. It took about twenty seconds: he was looking away now.

Quietly Ian got on the move, the route already planned from remembering the last visit to the bar. Without missing a step he walked inside, past the counter and toward the back door, past the same bartender with the quirky and friendly smile.

"Hey! You can't –" The smile quickly turned sour.

But before anyone could physically stop him, he was already behind the motel, in the back yard where the empty trolleys and beer cases stood. He weaved to his right and stuck to the wall, hiding himself in shadow.

“Hey! Show yourself!” the bartender shouted again from the door.

In all honesty it was not a nice thing to do, and by passing through Ian had endangered her and everyone inside, but right now his options were limited. Still keeping to the shadows, Ian climbed up the hill behind the motel. If Blowfish, Jo and Erik were thinking like him, they would touch down there.

He climbed until he was so far above that he could see over the motel's roof. The two black vehicles were still there, but Ian could not see Samael and Irwin. They probably were already in. And next they would come out of the back door like him –

Ian crept behind a nearby large tree and waited. Indeed, now there was movement, as two figures came out of the back. The two coders. They had something heavy and black over their eyes, which had to be night vision goggles.

At the same time three more exited the executive cars. Ian tried to see actual weapons, but could not. The three figures congregated on the Ford Ka and started inspecting it with curiosity. Probably they were trying to see if he had left anything valuable inside. Too bad, fuckers, he thought. If this was a Bond movie, the car would administer painful or even lethal electric shocks to the intruders, but sadly there had been no time, foresight or skill to prepare such countermeasures.

Samael and Irwin were closer now. Ian looked behind him and tried to see if he could retreat further up the hill without exposing himself. He had to assume that if he let even a tiny bit of himself show from behind the tree, they would see him as clear as in daylight.

No such route. For now he had to stay right here.

Below, the three men were done with the inspection. Now the vandalism started. Working silently and efficiently, they punctured the tires first. Ian could see the eggshell-shaped body lower itself toward the ground. Next he heard faint muted spits as they began putting bullets to the car.

Though Ian knew he should not feel irrationally attached to the vehicle, he could not help feeling that a part of himself was being shot to pieces. First the guitar, now this. All in a day's time. Thankfully a heavy, blackened hatred took over and prevented him from actually shedding tears. They were clearly doing this just to get him to show himself. But Ian would not give them that delight. Instead, at some point all the SCEPTRE bastards were going to pay heavily. Now that the stupid infiltration and masquerade was all over, next time he would be fully geared up.

The bravado was short-lived. First he had to get out of this.

Samael and Irwin split up now, going up the hill. Of course he could try hitting one of them with the pistol, but it would alert the other, as well the whole motel. Then cops would arrive, and that would be doubly bad. And the distance was a fifty meters or more, not exactly a certain shot in his current, less than combat ready condition.

Ian hoped for the men to get bored, or his ride to arrive sooner than he thought. That was not the way of the Agent, he knew. An Agent would strike boldly, and would not compromise himself into a situation where he was unable to do that.

On the parking lot the SCEPTRE operatives were finished with dealing the damage, got into their car and drove away. Ian had to assume they would hang back

somewhere close by. They just left the actual front yard to avoid being challenged of the vandalism.

Samael was exploring the hill further away from Ian's location, while Irwin kept coming closer all the time. Ian shifted his position slightly to stay hidden, but snapped a twig from a low bush next to him while doing so. Shit! He imagined the crack to be almost as loud as the bark of a gun.

Predictably, Irwin turned his head toward the sound. Now Ian could see the heavy night vision goggles clearly, as well as a handgun with a long silencer in his right hand.

Watching his steps closer this time, Ian crept around the tree so that Irwin could not immediately see him. However, if he went too far around, then Samael could theoretically see him instead. This was not going to be easy or clean.

Irwin froze in place, scanning with his head. He was about three meters away from Ian, back turned. From this distance a headshot would be guaranteed even without being combat ready. There was just enough light to aim reliably. But it would be noisy.

Overpowering Irwin and shooting him with his own silenced weapon was another choice.

Then Ian understood it would be neither of those.

Irwin turned straight toward him, and Ian knew he was leaning too far to the left. He retreated quickly behind the tree trunk just as the first muted gunshot came, splintering wood with an oppressive sound.

Damn. Samael must have heard that too. He would be heading here shortly. This had to be ended fast.

Ian made a quick feint to the left, and as more muted spits rained in response he launched himself into a horizontal leap to the right, firing roughly to the head- or

neck-level as Irwin came into view from behind the trunk. The first trigger pull was indeed harder, then the next two went much lighter.

Now all stealth had been abandoned. Everyone around the motel would have heard those shots. But had he hit Irwin at all? Ian hit the ground roughly, continuing with an evasive roll in case the fight was not over yet.

The team lead staggered backward, making a gargling sound as the pistol fell from his hand. Ian got up and closed the distance with his own gun still ready. Something dark was streaming down from Irwin's throat. He would not have long to live, and it would be an unpleasant way to go, choking on his own blood.

Cruelly Ian thought mostly of the silenced weapon and the night vision goggles that would now be free for him to take, to even the odds just a bit.

Irwin fell down, and Ian crouched to take the equipment, starting with the goggles. Suddenly he realized the man was trying to speak, but could not, as air was escaping from the hole in the throat. It could be the coder's final, cryptic taunt, and Ian needed to hear it.

He jammed his fingers to the wound and Irwin first flinched from pain, then spoke in a blood-garbled, nearly indecipherable voice.

"You can't – stop it. Nibiru. It's coming."

Then his head rolled to the side and his eyes were left staring into nothingness.

Especially as Ian had recently refreshed his memory of conspiracy theories, the name caused a wave of cold apprehension to pass through him. According to the Nibiru cataclysm theory the tenth planet, the Dark Planet of Death, would pass close to Earth, messing up its rotation and physically moving the magnetic poles

due to magnetic attraction between the two planets. Earth's crust would shift, ruining the surface and destroying civilization.

But how were SCEPTRE involved? And how would they benefit from that? With no immediate answers and only a huge mystery in front of him, Ian forced the theory back into a dark corner of his mind and focused on survival.

With the goggles strapped on, he quickly acquired the approaching Samael from the green haze. There was no time to drag Irwin's lifeless body into hiding, and Ian could see for himself it was easy to distinguish against the grass. Instead, he picked up the silenced pistol and broke into a weary run further up the hill. A quick look behind confirmed that Samael had turned and was coming after, moving from tree to tree.

Ian reached the hilltop, positioning himself behind another large trunk. Ahead, there was just open terrain. This was where he would make his stand.

As Samael left cover, moving in a zigzag pattern, Ian quickly aligned the sights and fired twice. He saw puffs of dirt where the lead programmer had been just a fraction of second ago.

Damn. At this pace he would just waste ammo. Samael vanished behind a large rock.

Then the sound of an approaching car engine alerted Ian. The second executive sedan, which carried the three men, had circled the motel and was now climbing the hill as well.

Three more enemies. Somehow Ian guessed they had more firepower in reserve than what they had used to desecrate the Ford.

A passenger peered out from the right side and the steady hammering of a belt-fed light machine gun filled

the night. Ian saw the star-shaped pulse of the muzzle flash and a rapidly advancing line of small dirt geysers, converging on his location.

At the same time Samael peered up warily.

Ian swore and fired at him twice more in the hope of at least taking him down before the inevitable end.

The hailstorm of bullets began to split the tree Ian was standing behind. He pressed himself hard against the trunk, trying to become smaller and position himself exactly on the opposite side.

It would not help for long.

The car would just need to circle the tree, and then he would be exposed and finished.

Suddenly the rattle of the machine gun was joined by another, lower but still faster sound, as lead started raining from the sky toward the sedan.

At first Ian did not exactly understand what was happening. Then he did, as he also heard the sound of rotors. Encouraged by this, he shot once more toward the rock, then rapidly emptied the rest of the magazine at the car's windshield. Several holes appeared, and it began to sway left and right in defense.

But the scything fire from above was not fooled by this. It homed in on the vehicle with deadly accuracy, until it caught fire from the engine compartment. The fire spread rapidly, and the men were forced to exit the still moving car.

The one carrying the machine gun was mowed down first, rapidly followed by the others. Only Samael was left now.

Ian switched to the SIG Sauer, keeping it trained tightly on the rock, then looked quickly behind to see the familiar shape of a SCEPTRE stealth helicopter hovering over the hill, its cannon rotating to a halt.

He began retreating cautiously toward the machine, waiting for Samael to show himself. So far he did not.

The helicopter touched down, and Ian saw Jo and Erik in full Agent gear open the rear door. They helped him up, and as soon he was seated, the machine lifted off again. Ian saw Blowfish at the pilot's seat, and someone unknown next to her.

"You guys picked the perfect moment to show up," Ian shouted, or rather croaked, while taking the goggles off. In response the sedan's fuel tank exploded below, intensifying the fire further.

"There's still one enemy below," the unknown Agent yelled. "He's making a run for the motel."

"That's Samael, the lead programmer," Ian replied. "Has to be going for his car before the cops arrive."

"An evil lead programmer. Never thought of that before, but it makes sense. We have to leave now, but there's a chance we can tail him from distance. Let him think he's gotten away," Blowfish shouted.

"If the cops don't get him first," Erik growled.

The helicopter banked away from the scene, gaining altitude at the same time. Ian became aware that Jo had not said anything yet. Their eyes met.

"Hey. Thanks for coming for me."

The rest did not need mentioning. A few seconds more and the extraction would rather have turned into a funeral procession.

"You look like hell," she observed, more with concern than disapproval.

"Yeah. But I'll live. From now on, no more cloak and dagger games and going into battle under-equipped."

By now Ian was so tired and numb that thinking was difficult, and he could hardly feel anything. But it did not take much guessing that today Jo had possessed plenty of time and reason to be worried. As well as even before. The mission had been, in all honesty, fucked up from the start.

"I know I had you worried. I'll try not to do that so often."

"You came back in one piece. That's what matters."

Ian wanted to say something more in protest, but Jo shut him up with a kiss. "You need to rest now," she said, and Ian knew she was right. He let Trevor's grim expression vanish completely, as well as his body to go slack against her.

He closed his eyes, but was not quite done thinking for tonight. It was these simple gestures of affection that seemed to counter most of the evil in the world and make things somewhat alright again, but somehow Ian wasn't satisfied. He wanted to be able to give Jo much more, but also knew it possibly went directly into the realm of unattainable fantasy.

A world without fear. A world without SCEPTRE.

Ian recalled Irwin's last words about Nibiru. It was possibly about to get even harder. He would of course mention them later, during proper debriefing, but right now it was better for the others to just concentrate on tailing Samael from distance.

Next Ian's mind went back to making inventory of things that had been destroyed during the assignment, and suddenly he snapped alert again.

The Ford Ka. What would become of it? Would they just leave it there? According to Erik, it would at least deserve a proper Viking burial.

"Trevor's car, do we leave it there?" Ian asked, leaning toward the front seats.

"It has your fingerprints. Hm. Not ideal, but I don't see what else there's to do," Blowfish replied.

The unknown Agent turned then, and his eyes seemed ablaze with something odd, like aggression and curiosity combined.

"That small thing on the parking lot? I could drive it back to the HQ. If you let me, I will make a battle-vehicle out of it. Like one never seen before."

"Good idea, but – the tires are busted. And it's full of bullet holes," Ian said wearily. He was rather thinking of airlifting the whole vehicle, but that of course would mesh badly with following the lead programmer, who was getting further away each second in the powerful executive sedan.

"If that would stop me, then I would not be worthy of the name Nitro. By the way, who are you?"

"They call me Legion," Ian replied.

He admired the newcomer's initiative and courage, even if it seemed dangerously excessive. Of course he hoped for the egg on wheels to live and fight another day, but conversely he did not wish any other Agent risking his life or freedom for that goal.

"Are you serious?" Blowfish asked sternly. "If we drop you off, you'll be on your own. If you get arrested, assume that we will not be able to bail you out."

"Yes. I want to see how I manage, if I'm truly becoming a proper Agent or not."

"Hell of a way to see that," Erik laughed.

Ian remembered that Erik had tested his own mettle

by facing off against SCEPTRE's elite scientists and soldiers after just a few days' preparation. Compared to that, fixing and returning the Ka seemed to have a much greater survivability rating.

"OK then. It's your choice. We have time for a quick drop-off away from the motel. Remember, stay away from the law at all costs. And – you're not taking that with you?"

Blowfish was pointing to the M4 carbine Nitro had in his lap.

"Yes, I see. It might not be a good idea," he replied.

They made a quick touchdown on the roadside. Samael's tail lights were still visible off in the distance, but just barely. Ian tossed the car keys to the Agent mechanic, then he was on his way.

Jo was shaking her head in disbelief.

"You don't agree? Me neither, at first, but then I realized that's the only way we get to burn it. I will hold Ian to that promise," Erik said to her.

Blowfish had landed on the roof of a ten-story building near the Innovativi3D office, then shut off all the systems except the active camouflage. If the night had been cloudless, with the moon shining bright, they would have had to abort the tailing at this point: the risk of them being detected when flying through the downtown would just have been too great. But now the sky was black with a heavy blanket of clouds, and they were safe for the time being.

Taking first a large detour to evade law enforcement arriving at the motel, Samael had returned to the office. He had been inside for the past hour and a half.

It was twenty minutes to midnight, and Erik now occupied the co-pilot's seat. Ian appeared to have dozed off in the back.

The front of the stealth helicopter provided an excellent view both above and below, as it was mostly reinforced glass. The large black sedan was in the middle of the otherwise almost empty parking lot. Some lights were on in the actual office building, but the eleventh floor appeared completely dark.

Blowfish wondered about the police station some distance away. Before Ian had fallen asleep, he had briefly told that a firefight had transpired at the office. Theoretically that had to mean the office was now taped off as a crime scene, but it was a possibility the cops had never even been there. Perhaps the mythical THRONE from the recordings had bought their cooperation.

"An evil lead programmer," Erik mused, repeating her earlier words.

"Yeah. I hope we'll know a lot more once we decode the final set of recordings. And once Ian tells us everything of the mission. But now it's better he gets some rest. Depending on where this Samael guy goes next, we may have a long night ahead of us," Blowfish said.

"Do we have fuel?"

"For about four hours. And there's an Agency fuel dump some distance away. So that should not be a problem."

Now Blowfish saw movement at the front doors.

It had to be Samael, going for the car. She prepared to fire up the engines once more, and to resume the covert pursuit.

They had tailed Samael for two more hours, heading north from the city. The Agents had almost lost him on the narrow forest roads, but fortunately he had not switched lights off at any point.

Now a well-lit dome-like structure came into view from amidst the forest and the darkness. The black sedan drove through a gate in the concrete perimeter fence, and just some seconds later the gate closed automatically.

"What the hell is that?" Erik wondered, as they hov-

ered a safe distance away.

"Just an observatory," Blowfish replied. In fact it was very similar to SCEPTRE's sky projection station, but smaller, and this one contained a traditional opening for the telescope.

Now that they had confirmed where Samael had stopped, Blowfish banked left and headed for a small clearing, then landed. They were well shielded by the trees, and especially after switching the active camouflage back on the helicopter would be practically invisible.

As the blades were coming to a halt, she took a quick look behind and saw that Ian was awake now.

"Observatory," he said in a groggy voice. "It makes perfect sense."

"Why's that?" Blowfish asked.

"Nibiru."

"OK, let's think this through," Blowfish said. "We have an unknown facility, with at least one hostile inside, potentially many more. I would expect automated defenses as well. The good things: we know its location now, so we could even come back later, and I'm fairly certain the enemy doesn't yet know we're here."

"Let's hit it now," Erik replied.

"I know you would want to do that, hot-headed as you are, but I'm still talking of a significant risk. Ian, are you feeling rested enough so that you could watch our backs and bail us out if necessary?"

Right now Ian felt disoriented and confused after darting awake after just a few hours of less-than-perfect sleep, but he knew his condition would improve.

"Do we have combat drugs with us? With those, certainly yes."

Jo stared at him with some disapproval.

"I'll be fine. You know how it goes, I'll just need to rest more afterward," he said.

"Well then. Jo, it comes down to you. Go in now or come back later?" Blowfish asked.

"Better check it now. We may catch the guy in the act, whatever that is. Tomorrow this place might be empty," Jo said.

"Then it's settled."

Blowfish fished a small autoinjector from a compartment near the pilot's controls and handed it to Ian. "Here you go."

Ian rolled up his sleeve, brought the device up to his arm and pressed the trigger. He grinned from the sting, then almost instantly he began to feel more awake.

Sudden understanding also filled him, and he cursed his stupidity. The planetary simulation had never been about the Sun at all. It had been about Nibiru passing Earth. But there was something very disturbing about it – he recalled that the trajectory shown by the program was nearly a collision. That did not fit at all with the traditional Nibiru doomsday theory. Instead, it felt much more horrifying.

Jo, Erik and Blowfish crept through the woods toward the observatory's fence, keeping two-meter intervals and constantly scanning to the left and right with their carbines. The forest itself was dark, but inside the fence there were bright floodlights aimed diagonally down, so they could not keep the sunglasses' night vision on.

Blowfish was first in line, and Jo was behind her. Jo switched to heat vision, confirmed no threats, then switched back to normal.

"I'm not seeing much on EM scan yet. Lots of noise from the floodlights, and possibly a security grid. We have to get closer first," Blowfish said quietly. The Agent communications system amplified that to be easily hearable. Thanks to modifications to the helicopter's SCEPTRE technology, the views of all three were also being relayed to Ian in the cockpit.

"Ian, are you seeing us?" Jo asked to confirm.

"Clear as in daylight," came his voice over the radio. *"I'm not picking up anything on the chopper's own sensors, except you. Their range is not long enough to see into the compound."*

They arrived at the thick concrete fence, about two and half meters high. There was barbed wire on top, but it would be easy to scale if they helped each other up.

Blowfish gave a hand signal for them to halt.

"I'm still not seeing anything conclusive on the glasses. I'll use the drone instead."

Blowfish knelt down and took a miniature helicopter, perhaps fifteen centimeters long, from her backpack. Jo had seen it before: it could be controlled by remote and would feed a live camera image to the sunglasses.

"This is actually a slightly improved model. It can emit a weak EMP burst, which is of course the last thing it'll do."

Blowfish took also the control unit out and fired up the drone. It lifted almost soundlessly to the sky, and over the fence.

"I'm not seeing guards yet. But – there's robots. Small, about one meter high. Moving slowly. Can't yet see what they're packing."

Blowfish maneuvered the helicopter further into the compound. Suddenly she cursed sharply.

"Shit. The view just went black."

Jo was somewhat puzzled. There had been no sound of gunfire.

"You sure you didn't trigger the EMP?" Erik asked.

"I do not make mistakes of that kind."

This meant the robots had probably launched their own electromagnetic pulse attack. Jo knew from experience that it was fatal to both the Agent armor and the sunglasses. With the electromagnetic armor gone, they would still have the Kevlar vest for protection, but it quickly lost its protective value with successive hits.

"How close were you to the nearest robot?" Jo asked.

"Not very close. About thirty meters."

That did not sound good. If the robots could attack from such distance, the Agents had to be extremely careful, especially if several closed in at once.

"We can still back out. But if we do this, we do it the traditional way. Make sure your rifle grenade launchers are ready. Even if the robots are shielded from their own EMP, they can't possibly withstand a direct hit," Blowfish said.

Jo and Erik both nodded in understanding.

"Not backing out," Erik said.

"Me neither. But any explosions will quickly blow whatever stealth we have."

"Yes. But better that than fried gear."

A brief silence descended.

"Well, if we're in agreement, the next step is to get over the fence."

Blowfish still in the lead, they headed for a spot roughly at the midpoint between the gates and the corner of the compound. Erik helped both Blowfish and Jo on the fence, then they pulled him up in turn. It was difficult to retain one's balance with the barbed wire at the top.

Now they had a clear view of the dome and the large telescope peering into the sky from its opening. Two small robots were patrolling near the dome entrance, perhaps a hundred meters away, while a third one stood at the back of the compound. To their right was a small shack, perhaps an electric transformer.

The robots did not appear to have detected them yet.

"Head for the shack," Blowfish hissed, and they all jumped down and broke into a quiet run.

The three reached the shack without incident. It in-

deed housed a transformer, with a yellow warning sign for high voltage. The robots were still using their pre-programmed patrol routes, guarding the entrance closely.

Jo used the sunglasses' zoom function to look at the right-side robot with more detail. It had four wheels, and the top, which vaguely resembled a grotesquely widened dog's or wolf's head, appeared to house a short-barreled but still nasty looking machine gun.

Suddenly Fury's voice invaded her consciousness.

SCEPTRE model SSR-6. Small Security Robot. 5.56 caliber machine gun and single-use electromagnetic pulse, radius up to forty meters. Shielded from own EMP attack, but vulnerable if charge led to the insides. Visual and infra-red imaging. Medium-level AI. Will not be able to right itself if toppled.

Just like Ian had said, it could actually be useful, even if always disturbing.

"Guys, I have an idea that is less noisy, but risky. Was the drone closer to the left-side robot when it went down?"

"Yes," Blowfish said curtly.

"Then it makes sense. They can only use their EMP a single time. So if that one has used up its blast, we can easily get close and stick our own EMP grenade up its ass."

"How would you be sure of that? And what about the one on the right side? It'll see us too."

"I'll explain later. And I'll take the one on right."

"You will fry your armor and glasses," Blowfish protested.

"Not if I take off them first."

Ian's voice crackled in over the radio. "*What the hell is going on over there? What are you planning exactly?*"

"Just sit tight and wish me luck," Jo replied.

Silence reigned on the airwaves. Jo thought that Ian was exercising admirable self-control. He could have taken this a lot worse. After all, the plan was not exactly sane.

"Erik, you want to take out the one on the left? If you tackle it, it should be pretty much helpless. Though beware of the head, it has its gun in there. I think the space between the head and the body is just perfect for wedging the grenade in."

"Hm. Well, I will at least have armor."

"Remember, I don't approve of this at all," Blowfish said. "But it's your life you're messing with."

Jo got the Agent coat and the glasses off, laying them on the snowy ground near the shack. Now there was no turning back. She held the grenade in her right hand, re-familiarizing herself with it, making absolutely sure she knew which way to wedge it in and where the trigger button was.

"You ready?" she asked Erik.

They waited until both robots had just turned their backs. The distance was longer than comfortable, over fifty meters in each case, but hopefully they would close it quickly, and not slip.

"Now!" Jo hissed.

She and Erik both broke into their respective runs. The ground went by in a blur under Jo's feet, and she felt an odd, cold feeling, as Fury assumed partial tactical control. She felt almost invincible.

As Jo was almost at the robot, it made a quick turning motion both with its wheels and the head.

The machine gun's short barrel was pointing straight at her. She leaped to the left just as the weapon came to life, spitting lead with a whirring sound. The two im-

pacts to her chest armor plate registered as oddly insignificant, though the part of Jo's mind not under Fury's control realized they could well be fatal from this range. In any case, she had to accomplish what she had planned. Turning in mid-air, she thrust the grenade in the space below the robot's head, then jammed down the button. If pressed all the way to the bottom, the EMP would detonate without a time delay, and in this case it was preferable as she had no gear to protect.

An electric crackle sounded, and Jo felt her hair stand up. Then gravity finally won and she tumbled to the ground. Turning her head, she observed the robot to be unmoving, with smoke rising from within. Next she became aware of hammering pain as Fury's control dissipated, and she turned to lie on her back, taking heavy, rasping breaths.

Slowly she turned her head to the other direction and observed that Erik was sitting on top of the other robot, which had been toppled. It was also smoking.

Jo thought she might live, but would possibly not be able to do much during the rest of the night. The pain was subsiding a little, and she got up to a shaky walk, wondering if the impacts had cracked her ribs.

They regrouped at the shack. Erik pocketed his glasses with disgust.

"Fuck! I was too excited of wrestling the robot down and jamming in the grenade, I didn't remember I had to get clear too. My gear is toast. Well, at least the asshole is dead, and it didn't get to fire once," he growled.

"I got two hits to the vest. Don't want to repeat that any time soon," Jo replied, going to her Agent coat. With the coat back on, she put the glasses on warily and connected them to the transceiver unit.

"Ian? You there?"

"Blowfish narrated the events in real time. Please, don't do that again. And – can you go on? I could come to get you out."

"Thanks for being sweet and compassionate. But I can finish this."

"Your choice."

"Good work, even if unprofessional," Blowfish said. "The robot's gun wasn't very loud. If the dome walls are thick, those inside perhaps don't suspect anything yet. But we better get on the move. I see a rotating camera at the entrance, but it will be easy to fool."

With Blowfish again taking point, they ran up to the wide double-doors as the security camera right above them was looking in the opposite direction. The Agents flattened themselves against the door, so that they were excluded from its field of view.

"If there's someone watching, he'll eventually see the robot corpses," Erik said.

"True. Even better reason to move in as quickly as possible. Maybe we still get to hear or see something confidential before the alarm goes off," Blowfish hissed in response.

She took out a tubular device, the Agent Multipurpose Tool. This device could, among other things, short out or bypass electronic circuitry that was not too complex. Perhaps it would work directly on the card reader and keypad box next to the entrance.

Blowfish inched over to the box and pressed a button on the tool. An electric arc flashed, and green and red lights on the box began flashing in a random sequence. The doors opened just a little.

"Low-grade security. Quick! Let's slip in before it closes. Erik, help me with this," Blowfish said sharply.

Erik widened the entrance with brute strength, and

Blowfish and Jo slipped into the dimly lit interior of the observatory dome. Erik followed them, and the doors quickly closed as soon as he let go.

"Ian? Are you seeing this? Does it look familiar?" Blowfish whispered over the radio, as they were crouched next to a meter-high wide central platform that contained a table with a large holographic display. A few crude steel steps led up to the platform. Further away stood the telescope itself.

There was also a whole second level higher above, which appeared to contain a large number of computer terminals arranged in neat rows. Stairs on both left and right led up there. From this distance it was impossible to see what was on the monitors. However, it was clear that several of the terminals were manned by dark-uniformed personnel.

"Can you zoom on the large display?"

As Blowfish pressed a button on the glasses' right arm, Jo did the same to see for herself.

"What in the name of fuck is this?" came Ian's astonished reply. *"Are they actually measuring –"*

Now Jo saw it too. This had to be taken seriously, as SCEPTRE would likely not spend time and money for an installation like this just to pull a big joke on possible

intruders. The small text at the top read:

ANTI-COSMIC IMAGING – CURRENT 218
NIBIRU APPROACH

The actual image could not be the telescope's view directly, as it seemed to show the Earth's curved surface at the bottom, in various hues from faint yellow to purple to blue. What had to be the sky was mostly a black-blue haze, except for a single bright and large spot on the upper left.

If this was real, then Nibiru was on the approach, and SCEPTRE were tracking it. Previously Jo had dismissed the Nibiru theory as being just too crackpot, but now she felt cold dread as she reconsidered her view on the matter.

Jo saw a tall, partially bald man come into view on the second floor, as he walked past some terminals. He seemed to be in the middle of a phone call using a hands-free device. She turned the audio amplification on the sunglasses to the maximum.

"There has been a – setback. I should have kept closer watch on the team leads. They had their own butcher shop, and insisted on using it also with the intruder, instead of doing it in a faster and cleaner way. No, no need. They're dead now. But the intruder's still at large, as other Agents arrived to bail him out. No – this just means we have to get replacements, and ramp up lifting the code. If worst comes to worst, the Federal project can be left on its own. As long as Absu will be finished on schedule. Yes, will do."

"That's Samael," came Ian's voice. *"Probably talking to his superiors, trying to explain his mess-up. And Absu? Sounds like something sinister."*

"We'll try to capture him alive if possible. But it's crowded in here," Blowfish whispered.

From her knowledge of mythology, mainly from metal lyrics, Jo remembered that in Sumerian myths Absu could mean fresh water, imagined to have metaphysical qualities, or alternatively, a deity that actually was a body of water. SCEPTRE was known to use mythological or demonological codenames, so it was nothing out of place.

Samael began descending the long flight of stairs to the ground floor. Thankfully it was the stairwell further away from them, but still it was wisest to retreat cautiously behind the platform's corner.

Suddenly the earpiece crackled again.

"Shit! I'm seeing movement. A truck is headed for the compound!"

Reinforcements? In addition to Samael, there were at least six men clearly visible at the top floor, possibly more, as they could not see the entire second level. And if even more were on their way – it certainly sounded bad. Especially with Erik's gear fried and Jo's own chest still throbbing with dull pain. Only Blowfish was in full fighting condition.

Behind the corner, Jo checked her carbine to make sure it was ready to fire. The selector was on three-round bursts, and there was a grenade in the launcher.

"What? It's going to ram –"

A muffled sound of rending metal came from the direction of the gates, followed by the equally muffled roar of a truck engine closing in.

Then the sound died down. But the men above had clearly noticed it, as they turned around, diving into cover of their desks.

Assault by unknown force expected.

Jo looked behind her just as a tremendous explosion blasted the entrance doors in, followed by a thick cloud of smoke. The men on the second floor started firing blind at the entrance with rapidly clattering automatic weapons that they had seemingly produced out of nowhere. Mini-Uzis, P90 sub-machine guns, and some assault rifles, possibly G36's. The cacophony of gunfire was maddening, even when attenuated somewhat by the sunglasses' signal-canceling and sound dynamics-processing circuitry.

Caught in the middle, Samael leaped down the final steps, and dived into the cover of an equipment closet on the ground floor. He got a silenced pistol out, the same Jo had seen during the extraction. Right now it seemed woefully underpowered.

Still, there was no sign of the unknown force. Who were they? The smoke dispersed into the whole room, becoming thinner.

The gunfire ceased for just a moment.

Then Jo hear the scream, a sustained, insane howl. It was soon joined by the whirl of an electric motor spinning up. From behind the still dissipating smoke, a black-clad Agent appeared, carrying a portable Gatling gun and an ammunition pack on his back. The gun started spitting lead at a ridiculous rate, and the Agent swept his aim from the right to the left, perforating desks, machinery and uniformed men alike on the second floor. Those left alive began to fire back, retreating into better cover.

As Jo had focused on the weapon first, it took her a few seconds to realize who the man was: none other than Crazy F.U.B.A.R. Mad Dog "Machine Gunn" Eddie. He was joined by three other Agents carrying assault rifles, who also joined the fray, running in zigzag patterns

while spraying on full auto.

"Fuck," Blowfish breathed. "Way to crash a party..."

There was probably nothing the three could do, or needed to do. What had been careful, stealthy operation to acquire evidence was quickly turning into an all-out massacre. It was better to keep one's head down until it was over.

Then grenades started to rain down from the second floor. Mad Dog stopped firing and ducked into cover of the central platform.

The first grenade exploded, and one Agent caught in the open was tossed against the wall. It was not over yet, and could rapidly get dangerous for everyone involved.

"Satan is down!" another Agent shouted, narrowly escaping the first detonation, and then yet another.

Jo expected Fury to take over again, but it stayed curiously at the back of her mind.

She could not wait forever, so she took quick aim with the M4, and launched a rifle grenade above. The explosion sent one dark-uniformed man plummeting down over the railing. Then, she followed up with aimed bursts.

Next to her, Blowfish and Erik also began firing their carbines. For a moment Jo feared there would be friendly fire as one of the intruding Agents saw their group hunched behind the platform. He trained his assault rifle toward them first, but thankfully understood the situation rapidly and gave a thumbs-up.

As the opposition was being thinned out and no more grenades came for now, Mad Dog peered out and resumed firing. And screaming.

Fifteen seconds later silence descended. Everyone on the top floor had to be dead.

“High-value target in cover behind closet on ground floor. Left side. Try to capture alive,” Blowfish spoke into her mic, trying to raise the attention of Mad Dog's group.

But were they using the same frequencies or encryption at all? Jo knew that her transmitter at least was coded only for communication between their own group. However, it could be that the Agent BOFH had more options on hers.

Samael got out from behind the closet, hands behind his head, seemingly unarmed. Mad Dog and the remaining two from his team all turned toward him, weapons trained.

“You win, Agents –” the lead programmer began, walking slowly toward them.

“Halt!” Mad Dog barked. “One step more and we will shoot!”

Something cylindrical fell from Samael's hands to the ground, rolling toward the Agents.

“Grenade! Get clear!” Mad Dog yelled, and tried to dive to safety, but the large, heavy weapon did not allow him to move quickly enough.

A huge boom sounded.

Jo understood it had come from next to her, as a giant tongue of flame almost singed her hair.

The cylinder was hit with a sharp pinging noise. It reversed direction and passed from between Samael's feet. In the next instant it detonated, engulfing the lead programmer in phosphorus fire.

An incendiary grenade.

Jo turned and saw the Desert Eagle smoking in Blowfish's hands. Samael had wanted to die in burning pain, but thanks to her he had not managed to take anyone with him. His flaming body fell to its knees, then to

the ground. Jo caught a whiff of the acrid, nauseating stench and turned her head away.

"Thanks, Agent. I owe you one," Mad Dog shouted to Blowfish. But she just stared back hard, then slowly holstered the large handgun.

Next Mad Dog turned around to look at the unmoving Agent next to the entrance wall. Another of his team was already crouched over.

"How's Agent Satan?"

The crouched team member shook his head. "Dead."

"God damn!" Mad Dog shouted and threw his massive weapon down with rage. It crashed to the floor with a thunderous metallic clatter.

“Well, there's not much to see anymore, but I recommend you still come over. It's clear,” Blowfish said with an oddly resigned voice.

Despite hearing it was clear, Ian made sure the SIG Sauer was ready to fire. The gun in his hand, he locked the helicopter and got off to a run through the forest toward the observatory. His legs felt much stronger now that the combat drug was coursing through his veins.

He saw the torn gates and the flatbed truck with its canvas-covered back with his own eyes now. Further away from the observatory dome there was a black crater with some torn metal in the middle. Likely the last security robot, which the newcomers had disabled with excessive force.

With gun held in both hands but pointed down, he passed through the entrance into the dim light. The smell of smoke, gunpowder and burned skin assaulted his nostrils. It had been a proper war, but he understood that Blowfish, Jo and Erik had stayed out from most of it, and better so.

The holographic display had died, and Ian could see

that most of the computers on the second floor were in pieces. Was there anything to salvage here?

"Now, explain me again how you did actually find your way here. Ah, Legion's here. He wants to hear it too. By the way, he's the one who infiltrated the offices," Blowfish said to Mad Dog.

Mad Dog briefly looked at Ian and nodded. "Hi." Then he turned back to Blowfish.

"Like I said, there was a leak at Grieg Industries. Hacking. The simulator code was licensed to this other company, Majestic Simulation Systems, and they got direct access to the master repository. Read-only, of course. And only one port in the firewall was supposed to be open."

"And it turned out they were another front for SCEPTRE?" Blowfish inquired.

"Precisely. They got rather wide access, using a classic buffer overflow. Knew of the meeting as well. We followed the trail, which led here. Naturally, their access is revoked now and the holes plugged."

"And it never occurred to you to tell us? Our undercover Agent was at risk. Almost got killed." Blowfish's voice was gathering force and venom.

Mad Dog pointed a finger at her. "And you didn't tell you were infiltrating the office."

"Well, here we are, with this compound blown to hell. At least the trail truly ends here. You know, they may actually be messing with some end-of-the-world shit this time. Do you happen to believe in Nibiru?"

Mad Dog laughed. "The tenth planet? That's bullshit."

"SCEPTRE doesn't seem to think so."

Ian considered. Now it at least made perfect sense how SCEPTRE had been using the same code, and found him out. The aircraft bombing was possibly also

linked to the exact same leak. Unfortunately, this reveal did not get them any closer to finding out about the enemy's current intentions.

Decocking the pistol and putting it back into his waist, he walked over to Jo and Erik who were staying in the shadows next to the wall, away from Mad Dog's group.

"Hey," he said.

"Quite a character this Mad Dog," Erik replied. "Lives up to his full name. This place is pretty much FUBAR now. All caution for nothing. Though I have to give him props for hauling that Gatling gun around. Fuck, I'd want one."

"So, what do you make of this?" Jo asked. "I mean, can you actually view the anti-cosmic Current 218 with a telescope?"

Ian shook his head. "The hell I know. Back at the pyramid I saw actual black light shoot from the crystal they were using. But light's just visible EM radiation. So black light – it would be the absence of radiation, or anti-radiation. I don't even know though if the current and the black light are actually the same thing. But if they're tracking Nibiru, and it's actually coming, then I guess it's some kind of radiation that can be measured."

"Too bad the big display's now dead."

"Yeah. Let's head upstairs. Perhaps there's some terminal still alive and we find out something about Absu."

The three headed up to the second level using the nearest stairs, on the right.

The sight that met them was rather depressive. Bodies, blood and spent cartridges all around, along with bent and charred computer mini-cases and bullet-punctured flat-screen monitors.

In the very back Ian saw a terminal which seemed

unaffected. A green light was on at the top of the case itself, while the monitor had an amber standby light. Ian could well guess that the computer had at least a password-protected screen saver, or perhaps even custom SCEPTRE security.

Still, it did not hurt to try. He moved the mouse, and a green light lit up on the monitor. The image came slowly on.

Insert system disk and press any key.

“Fuck!” he said aloud. The only working computer in sight needed an operating system reinstall.

“Here’s another,” Jo said five meters away.

Quickly, Ian stepped over. Jo pressed the space bar and the screen came to life. Ian felt his heart miss a beat as he understood that the machine was not even password-protected. Perhaps the screen had entered standby before the actual screen saver would kick in. Or if the firefight had started too quickly for the user to lock the terminal first.

There was a Visual Studio project open.

It looked familiar. He had seen it at the office before, with the familiar modules such as Renderer and Physics, but had neglected to look at the title bar back then.

Now he did, and again his heart skipped one beat.

Absu – Visual Studio C++ 2008

The second codebase they were working on indeed was Absu. Judging from Samael’s phone call it appeared more important than the whole Federal project.

“Guys,” Ian said, “This may be an actual evil and con-

spiratorial virtual world engine.”

While Jo and Erik looked on perplexed, Ian quickly dug into his pocket for a USB memory stick to copy the code onto. There was no telling how long he had until some security would kick in, so it was best to copy the code immediately to be able to study it in peace.

However, nothing happened as he inserted the stick. It seemed the external ports were disabled. He would just look at the code on the terminal, and take the whole machine back to the HQ for forensic analysis.

In addition to the familiar modules, he saw more that he had ignored back then, having probably misread the names. NeuralInterface, CrowdSimulation, WeatherSystem, ProceduralContentGenerator. What the hell? If the first one actually was what it sounded like, it seemed like pure science fiction. But then again, SCEP-TRE's science could be well ahead of the perceived status quo: he had seen it first hand.

He briefly opened a few of the module folders: there appeared to be tens of files in each, and many with a thousand lines of code or more. The second codebase certainly was no joke.

“This is some advanced shit,” he said to Jo and Erik.

Out of a moment's impulse he pressed the “Start Without Debugging” menu option to run the Absu program. A black window appeared on the screen, with a simple login dialog containing server address, user name and password fields. But all of them were empty and Ian had no idea what he would have to enter, so he shut down the program.

“Here's one machine we need for analysis,” he shouted to Blowfish and Mad Dog below. Fearing that the machine would lock down or enter a self-destruct mode any time now, he simply yanked the power cord

off and the screen went black. Then he started disconnecting all the other cables.

While busy doing that, he became aware of a rising hum emanating from inside the case. His instinct told it was something bad.

"Get clear!" he barked, and they all stepped back from the machine. One second later an explosive detonated inside the case with a brief bright flash, deforming the metal and leaving smoke rising from within.

Damn. Another lost opportunity. He should have copied the codebase back at the Innovativi3D offices.

"Or – scratch that," he shouted below. "Any live machines you find, they may explode if you cut the power."

"Well noted," came Blowfish's reply.

In the end there were three surviving hard disks for analysis, one from a workstation and two from rack servers from inside the closet Samael had been hiding behind. In each case Blowfish had simply disconnected them while the power to the computer was on. Of course now there was no telling how heavily the disks were encrypted, and if they would start up at all without the original machines. A brute-force attack could in the worst case take more time than the current age of the universe.

Mad Dog had insisted, as a cyberwarfare specialist himself (he apparently had found the Grieg Industries security hole in the first place), that he would take one of the server hard drives. That left two for Blowfish to analyze.

For completeness's sake, they also had plenty of pictures taken from the inside, though it was unlikely they would be of much use. The telescope and its control console were full of bullet holes after Mad Dog's bar-

rage with the minigun. Blowfish had opened them and ripped some random circuit boards away, stashing them to her backpack, but their utility also remained to be seen.

The four jogged back to the helicopter. From behind Ian heard the truck engine starting: Mad Dog's crew was leaving as well.

"What a day," Blowfish said. She sat into the pilot's seat and injected herself with a combat drug shot. "We will have to refuel, then we can head home at last."

Ian looked at his watch and saw it was already well past 4 AM. Possibly due to the hangover earlier in the day, the effect of his shot was already starting to fade away, and he felt tiredness creeping back in. Later, exhaustion would strike extra-hard, as the drug vanished completely from his system.

In the rear, Jo took her coat and ballistic vest off to examine her injuries. As she lifted her shirt Ian could see two purple bruises the size of a tennis ball. The vest itself was dented and the slugs were still stuck to it.

"Doesn't hurt that much any more. I don't think anything is broken," she said.

Though Ian did consider himself an expert of anatomy or Agent emergency first aid he wanted to see for himself. One by one he cautiously felt for her ribs, as well as the sternum itself, but nothing appeared to be out of place. It did not appear to cause her any extra pain either.

"You got lucky."

"Yeah. I wouldn't want to repeat that." She pulled the shirt down and put the coat back on.

Blowfish fired up the engines and waited for the RPM to rise to normal operating range, then they lifted up, quickly climbing above the trees. The moon had be-

come visible from between the clouds, giving an eerie glow to the patches of snow remaining on the ground.

For a while they flew in silence, everyone seemingly lost in their own thoughts.

"I was thinking about Nibiru, and what Mad Dog said back at the meeting. About the government. I mean, they surely have a hell of a lot more telescopes than SCEPTRE pointed at the sky. And all their satellites. Surely they would know about an extra planet that was approaching. If it was a real threat, don't you think they would tell us?" Jo thought aloud.

"Well, it would cause mass panic. I wouldn't trust them to be honest," Erik said from the co-pilot's seat. "If it's truly heading here, and there's nothing to do, why tell anything? It's just better to shut up, let us go on with our pointless lives, until the clock hits zero and we all die without ever knowing better. Unless they have some big laser or missile they could shoot at it, which I doubt."

"SCEPTRE wanted to cause their own anti-cosmic mass panic, using the fnords and the sky projection stuff. Maybe they try again with Nibiru," Ian said.

In other words, creating a fictional threat, using telescope imagery that appeared credible. Maybe the 3D internet project was related somehow. That was the less disturbing alternative. Like back in December, would it actually have mattered if the pyramid had never blown up, if the SCEPTRE priests would have had the opportunity to play with their black light a little longer?

But Ian recalled Irwin's final words as he was choking on his blood. He had appeared utterly full of conviction. Though, so had the priests, who believed Azerate to be absolutely real. It was hard to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

What about the Absu project then? A virtual world with a neural interface for its users? Where was that heading? Everything seemed like a tangled, sinister web, with nothing substantial to go by with yet. Ian thought he should have felt even more powerful unease, but possibly the drug was keeping his mind in check, allowing him to remain mostly analytical.

"But we need more information. To go through the recordings from the office, and the hard disks," he added.

"Right. I'm just thinking – let's say Nibiru is actually coming, and it will cause some very bad shit. But surely we couldn't do anything more about it than the government itself could? I mean, they'll always have more means and resources than a bunch of crazies with long coats and sunglasses. Even if we're sponsored by a hi-tech weapons company," Jo said.

"Hey, I see where you're going with that. You want to be there pressing some big button just as some massive countdown clock is about to hit zero. Or maybe you get to press one of three buttons and it decides whether Nibiru blows up with a red, green or blue explosion," Erik replied.

"What? You imagined all that by yourself."

"But why be an Agent, why risk your life at all if you don't aim high with your dreams?"

"Well, if we're serious, I guess we all want the same thing. To kick enough SCEPTRE ass so that we know we can be safe and get on with the rest of our lives."

"True," Erik agreed.

Ian thought he certainly could not have put it better himself. But he also wondered about Jo's words right before, about whether the Agents could do something.

If it actually came to that, then perhaps Mad Dog had

been right, and they would need everyone who was willing to join. Though, in that case they also needed proper leaders like Blackhand had been, not just hot-heads who wanted to mow down everything in their path.

Hell, they might just have blown up some critical hard disk which held the crucial, missing piece of information. It did not exactly bear thinking about.

A little less than an hour later they landed to refuel at one of the hidden Agency fuel and weapons caches, located on land owned by the trust fund. After entering an eight-digit code to a keypad, which in this case was hidden in a rock, a false section of ground would open, revealing stairs that led down to the cache.

Ian knew he was just about to enter the very exhausted state after using the combat drug, but he wanted to refresh his memory and get some fresh air. He descended into the cache as Erik and Blowfish were already handling the fuel hose.

It was perhaps a mistake. The musty odor of earth somehow reminded him of a grave, and the shadows cast by the stairs and the equipment shelves in the moonlight seemed disturbingly suggestive, like tall stalking figures. He expected a voice to whisper "Necro..." at any second, and cycled his sunglasses' vision modes nervously to confirm that the underground storage was indeed empty.

It was, but he would still rather return inside the helicopter to wait. In the meanwhile Jo had occupied the rear seats almost completely. She seemed to be asleep already. Ian pushed her into a little more upright position, and she murmured something, but did not open her eyes. Now it at least felt much safer.

Next an odd lurching sensation filled Ian's mind, as if the ground was falling away from beneath him. Briefly, he wondered whether he would now astral project or hear those whispering voices or screams again, but instead just complete exhaustion and heavy blackness consumed him.

Ian's internal clock was wholly messed up. At half past 5 PM he got up at last, got a shower, checked the shoulder wound and changed a fresh bandage, then finally dressed and wandered into the living room. His head felt heavy, but at least the actual hangover was gone at last. The shoulder was somewhat sore, like the rest of his body. Using the combat stimulant had likely drained energy which otherwise could have been used into faster recovery.

The lights were on, but no-one was to be seen. Muffled voices came from the car garage. Only then Ian remembered Nitro's personal mission: infiltrating the observatory and Nibiru and Absu has occupied his thoughts completely. Had he made it?

He opened the door cautiously, but could not immediately see anything: the vans were blocking the view. He could pick up the voices: Jo, Erik –

And then he also saw the green egg-shaped body, full of bullet holes, but still in one piece. The tires appeared to be supporting it yet again. For an instant being an Agent actually felt good. Trevor's vehicle would go on to

further battles: SCEPTRE had failed to crush its spirit. The hood was open and Nitro was crouched over the engine.

"The tires were the easy part, it's an expanding foam which makes them rather hard, but drivable. The coolant and brake fluid leaks were nastier to fix on the road. Thankfully the ECU was in one piece," he explained.

"Wow. Thought I would not see it again. When did you arrive?" Ian asked.

"I was here before you. About five or six in the morning."

That seemed stupefyingly fast. A battered Ka could beat a stealth helicopter. Of course Nitro had headed straight for the HQ after the most critical repairs, while they had taken the detour following Samael.

"Any trouble with the law?"

"Well, yes, a couple of times I had to hide. The small size and its agility helped."

"So what are you actually planning to do with it?" Jo asked.

Nitro was silent just for a second. "This will take a while if I explain everything. You're OK with that?"

Jo nodded warily.

"First of all, a more efficient engine will be mandatory. Possibly a 2.0 liter Ti-VCT, also from Ford. That means variable valve timing on both the intake and exhaust camshafts. I will experiment with turbocharging it, but it may still have more consistent performance characteristics if kept freely breathing. You may not want the turbo lag to hit just while multiple enemies are firing at you. The engine control unit will be remapped for maximum performance. After what I'm about to do to this vehicle, it will not fit any emission

standards, so it isn't even worth trying, and would only hurt the end result. The fuel consumption will naturally increase, so I will install a double-size tank, which means restructuring the boot and reducing its volume. But it's so pathetic to start with, there's not much harm done. I will install two fuel pumps for redundancy. To match the increased performance, more powerful brakes need to be installed, and the suspension tweaked. I may experiment with a four-wheel drive system, but that requires meditation. As a less extreme version of that, I would be tempted to convert it to rear-wheel drive for better weight distribution, tighter turning and better overall handling – you would be able to drift properly – but that is of course also a significant overhaul, as the front drive and steering components and transmission would need to be replaced. For weaponry, I will install at least a chain gun on the roof, possibly more. One rear passenger seat will be sacrificed for the ammo box and the feed mechanism. Then, if this Grieg Industries is willing to cooperate, and is actually excited of my ideas, I'd like to install a vehicle version of the Agent coat armor, with much higher stopping characteristics. As it does not need to be flexible, a thicker conductive plate could be used. The armor would recharge from the alternator feeding a switched-mode power supply or perhaps with energy collected from braking. Possibly even with solar panels if we want to be cute. But that would be unreliable, and as I said the vehicle will be very environment-unfriendly in any case, so I'm tempted to scrap that idea. If there's still some free space, missile batteries or ballistic grenade launchers to both sides for added firepower. To prevent vandalism from happening ever again, a high-voltage anti-intrusion system. Finally, the interior

will be overhauled and decorated in 'Hello Kitty' fashion. This, like the engine replacement, is mandatory."

Ian had listened to the whole monologue, and it certainly felt extreme. He was not at all sure if Nitro would manage to implement even half of those.

"Impressive plans," Jo said somewhat absently.

Blowfish was curiously missing. She was probably decrypting the hard disks already. Ian remembered that he had not given the final recordings to her yet, stored only on the USB recorder.

Ian patted all of his pockets, but he could not find it anywhere. What the hell? Where could he have left it? His heart started an unpleasant heavy and rapid pounding. In the worst case it would be back at the Innovativi office, perhaps on the fire escape. Friday's recording sessions had been longer than usual, and there could be many valuable and evil conversations missed, possibly involving either the CEO or the technical director.

Well, he still needed to find Blowfish. The server closet was the first location to check. Ian headed back to the living room and the hallway.

Yes. The closet was open. Blowfish was there.

"I took the liberty of taking the stick from your pocket as we returned. That way I could get them to be processed and transcribed immediately, while you were out cold," she explained.

Ian felt a metaphorical heavy weight lifting from his shoulders. No trip back to the office's back yard would be necessary.

"Right now I'm examining these hard disks, trying to see if a master key list I stole from the black ops command center can be used to decrypt. If not – then we start brute-forcing. In the meanwhile, the rest of you

should start going through the recording transcriptions. And if there's anything interesting or unclear, listen to the recording itself. There's many blanks we have to fill. Check if you find anything referring to THRONE. That popped at me from one of the earlier recordings, I believe that's SCEPTRE's highest command authority right now."

"Yeah. Understood. Do you know if any of the officers we eliminated – Suhrim, Lilith, Baphomet and Ahriman, – were part of that? Or is it something new?"

Blowfish shook her head. "No idea."

With that, Ian returned to the garage. Nitro was still there with Jo and Erik, showing where he would actually install the weapon systems.

They all were submerged deep in the recordings, using Agency laptops at their preferred locations within the HQ, and headphones for listening.

Ian, sitting on his bed, had found several short references to THRONE in the transcripts, and had also checked the recordings to verify. But so far most of it seemed to be just short situation updates – the high command wanted to know how things were proceeding. At least one thing was clear: Samael had answered to THRONE, while not being part of it himself.

As for Nicholas, the Suhrim lookalike – his conversations mostly were concerned with odd business and stock market deals – Ian could not be sure of, but it appeared that he was never being the subservient one. Therefore, he could actually be part of THRONE.

The CEO, Thora Haarman, actually spoke with so odd, silent and lisping voice that Ian could honestly not decipher a single word, and all the transcriptions were empty as well. The position of the bug on the underside

of the table, next to the drawers, could have been sub-optimal as well. But as the top-ranking officer of the company she could well be part of THRONE too.

On the whole Ian felt disappointed of the session. No great secrets unearthed. He went to find the rest to see how they were doing.

Jo was sitting at the kitchen table, going through the recordings from the Features and Integration teams. They appeared to contain nothing significant, just lists of features and how they were progressing, and talk of using the Grieg codebase. One mention of THRONE. These were likely the exact same recordings Blowfish had talked about earlier. Ian felt somehow bad for Jo having chosen the most boring recordings.

"It's not that bad, I'm done soon," Jo said as if she had read his thoughts.

Next Ian headed to the car garage, which Erik had chosen. The Ka's hood was down, and Nitro was no longer there.

"They're talking of simulation parameters the whole time, but not much else," Erik said from behind the drum kit, which he most certainly had occasionally been playing. He had picked the recordings from the section of the office where they fiddled with the Nibiru simulation and the Absu codebase.

"Nothing about Absu?"

"No, I verified. In between there's just long stretches of tapping on the keyboard."

Ian considered for a while. Perhaps Absu, while ominously advanced, was still insignificant as it only concerned the virtual world and not the real. But the simulation would possibly reveal exactly when Nibiru was going to pass.

"What exactly did they say about the parameters?"

“Something about the influence of the first site, which was destroyed, and a hypothetical second one.”

Now something clicked in Ian's mind, as he recalled Nicholas reciting a long list of company names, about shares he was selling or buying, and the transcription had contained the words “Second Sight.” Ian had thought that was just a stupid company name. But what if –

Without actually replying to Erik, he ran back to his listening post and quickly rewound to the spot of the conversation he recalled.

“Second Sight has been prepared.” said the transcription from that point. But as Ian listened he understood Nicholas was talking about *second site* instead.

First site. Destroyed. And now a second site, which had been confirmed to exist, and was now prepared. What was this about? Ian thought back to what Erik had said. The sites had influence.

Influence over Nibiru? Its path of approach? Was that even remotely possible? Suddenly Ian felt descending into a new level of madness, as if a deeper level of Hell had just been opened before his eyes. If they just could, SCEPTRE would certainly be interested in steering Nibiru for their own purposes.

Ian hoped like nothing else that they would be able to run the simulation code from the hard disks. That would explain much more. But still, he felt like he could almost unravel this puzzle using just his mind. It was just barely outside his grasp, and he just needed to concentrate further, to perhaps dissociate –

What site was possibly occultistic and powerful enough to influence Nibiru directly? And which was also destroyed?

The realization hit him like an uppercut to the face,

and he cursed his stupidity. He should have realized it minutes ago. There simply was no other choice.

The anti-cosmic pyramid.

Suddenly Ian found it hard to contain himself. He ran back to the server closet and Blowfish.

"Two sites," he breathed. "The first one was the pyramid we blew up, but now SCEPTRE has found a second one –"

Blowfish turned her head away from the LCD monitor on the floor. Next to it an opened desktop machine was connected with an RJ45 cable directly to the main switch, into which the HQ servers also were linked. One of the SCEPTRE hard disks was connected with a SATA cable to the machine for forensic analysis.

"Slow down. You're not making much sense. But I've possibly found the right decryption key. Just from that set I talked about. Now I'm trying to find the partition table, and that's not exactly fun. They must be storing it on a nonstandard cylinder of the hard disk, and this means they are running a custom BIOS and custom drivers. I'm surprised SCEPTRE is capable of that much."

"Ah, I see."

"No, I'm not sure you do. If things don't progress well enough, I may have you writing a replacement driver. Though, I could just bypass the partition table altogether, and interpret the whole disk as one large block of data, with the assumption that it uses an NTFS file system. Then, just to find the master file table. They were running Windows, right?"

"Yes, at least on the workstations. Visual Studio. You know – maybe I'll leave you to work."

Blowfish pointed an imaginary Desert Eagle at him.

"You do that at your own peril. I suggest you stay.

Even if you don't know it yet, you may supply some critical piece of advice that's required to decrypt this file system. Just like long time ago in the server room."

Reluctantly Ian sat down next to Blowfish and shifted his eyes to the monitor, on which she was following raw hard disk sector data using a hex editor.

The situation and her words made him flash back to the beginning of last fall, when he was still a very green junior sysadmin. Back then Blowfish had been trying to restore a corrupted machine, whose hard disk contained some important business analysis data not stored anywhere else. And Ian had come up with some completely random hexadecimal values which, when written to the disk, had made the computer suddenly recognize it as valid data again. Or at least far enough for everything important to be backed up.

But now, could he repeat that again? The lines of hexadecimal data scrolled before his eyes, not making much sense.

"That's a B+ tree node, we're on the right track," Blowfish said. "Now to just trace it back."

Her fingers danced on the keyboard, creating a hypnotic rhythm. Ian was pretty much certain he would not be of any help.

"This is a critical question," Blowfish turned to him all of a sudden. "Left or right? I'm trying to find the root tree node."

There was a fifty percent chance to get it right. The critical point was to get in the mindset of the enemy. What would SCEPTRE choose?

That narrowed the alternatives to exactly one. Left Hand Path. Choosing it had been instrumental in, among other things, escaping from an underwater maze below SCEPTRE's science complex. It would

never fail. Still, it was good to be aware of the consequences of a wrong choice.

"What if I choose wrong?"

"Then I might spend the next hour tracking useless file table links."

"Right."

Blowfish continued tapping on the keyboard, and Ian understood that she had interpreted his reply as the answer, though that was not the intention at all. Damn! The next hour would be wasted.

"Yes. This is it, the master file table," she said suddenly, and Ian was completely surprised. This time the Right Hand Path had been the correct answer.

"It's all coming together. I'm dumping the whole directory structure now. This is the server hard disk, if we're in good luck we will soon have access to all of their code." Blowfish executed a custom-written utility which started working its way from the master file table, copying the files to the machine's own hard disk, removing the encryption at the same time.

Ten minutes later the file copy was done, and Blowfish clicked open the root folder. There was only one folder in addition to the operating system: Repositories.

Clicking it revealed two more folders: Absu, and NibiruSimulation. Jackpot!

But when Blowfish clicked the first one, Ian's heart sank. There was only a hidden folder with the name SDRC, and all of its contents were just cryptic, large files named with long hexadecimal sequences.

To get further, they would need to decipher SCEPTRE's custom revision control system. This meant attacking the workstation hard disk next. At this point Ian thought he needed a beer.

It was already past midnight when also the workstation hard disk contents had been recovered.

The decryption key was the same. Now Ian had the assignment to get the SCEPTRE revision control system actually working, and it was not pleasant in the slightest. He was on to the third beer, and most of the lights at the HQ had been extinguished. Jo was already at least trying to sleep. Well, if Ian could crack this puzzle quickly, he would also get to try and normalize his day-night cycle somewhat.

When Ian tried to run the revision control program, it just crashed in an ugly fashion.

SDRC.exe has encountered a problem and needs to close.

Perhaps the answer was to recompile the revision control program itself from source code. Ian went on a mad search through the workstation's contents, trying to find a project named SDRC, or something similar. But there was no luck.

Resigned, Ian wandered back to Blowfish, who still occupied the server closet.

"Crap. I just can't run the revision control program. It crashes every time, and there is no source code. Possibly because it can't connect to some SCEPTRE master server," Ian said in defeat.

"Hm. I have an idea. I will contact Grieg tomorrow."

"What? Do you think –"

"It wouldn't be a big surprise if they run the same revision control internally. Perhaps with a different name. But SCEPTRE may have adopted it when they stole the code."

"Sounds like a long shot," Ian mused.

"Yes, but do you have a better idea? Would you rather want to get on with constructing a mock server that the program can connect to?"

"Fuck no. Or I don't know."

Ian felt rage pounding in his head, a rage for wanting to get things finished badly. Could he actually decipher the network protocol, and mimic the master server good enough that the program would start properly?

"What if we do it together? The BOFH and the PFY."

PFY was the BOFH's assistant, Pimply-Faced Youth.

"Hm. Perhaps. I don't have anything better to do right now," Blowfish said.

She relocated to the now dark living room, sitting down by the terminal, and Ian took the laptop he had been using. Again, Ian imagined some inspirational music playing on the background, perhaps the one from Rocky IV's training montage.

Blowfish fired up the Wireshark protocol analyzer program. Ian had Visual Studio already on, preparing to write code for the mock server. He googled for examples on sending and receiving network packets in C++,

hoping he would be ready when Blowfish would start giving him actual instructions on what to do.

"It's probably a fairly standard challenge-response protocol," Blowfish said at last. "It's connecting to port 2345 with TCP protocol and sending 16 bytes. Try sending 16 bytes back, all filled with zeroes."

Ian almost had the program working now. He wrote a function `OnClientConnected()`, strictly following a rather elementary tutorial. He would simply fill the send buffer with 16 zeroes.

He attempted to compile for the first time, getting a massive amount of errors. Adding a missing include file corrected most of them, and three minutes later he had the server running.

"OK. I'm trying to run the client program again, hard-coding the master server address to point to your machine," Blowfish said.

One click of the Enter key, and a few seconds of heavy silence.

"Hm. It crashes just like before. OK, next attempt. Send back the same bytes that it sends."

A few quick modifications to the server program, and Ian was ready again.

"Damn. Still crashes. It's kind of hard, or actually impossible, to try to decipher the protocol from just one side. We may need to break out heavier tools."

Ian saw Blowfish start up IDA Pro, a heavyweight disassembler and debugging program.

"It's a pirate version," she remarked.

Blowfish started another fast-paced session of tapping on the keyboard, drilling down deeper into the code in assembly language from the revision control program's startup point, the `WinMain` function. Ian tried his utmost to keep up.

“Hm. Here it's calling a suspicious subroutine, then checking its return value. Let's see if I just bypass it.”

Blowfish modified the program, the re-ran it. It crashed, but differently this time, as the SDRC icon already appeared to the taskbar, then vanished.

“The master server check is somewhere deeper. See if you spot it.”

Ian concentrated on the rather foreign-looking symbols scrolling on the screen. EAX, EDI, ESP... They had their own, low-level logic, which he did not quite understand, because he had only programmed in C++ up to this point.

But gradual understanding filled him. The assembly language symbols could in theory be followed also without knowing everything. Ian submerged into their flow, trying to understand the deeper meaning.

Each instruction did just one tiny thing, like adding two numbers together, or comparing their values. Clearly, a checksum was being calculated, from some internal checks, and from communication with the server. And the final check was to see if everything added up to zero. Because of the internal checks, sending just zeroes back would not add up. But here was possibly the final check, at which point the protection could be bypassed.

Ian pointed his finger at the screen.

“If at that point the value in register EAX is zero, it should pass.”

“Hm. Let's try.”

Quickly Blowfish inserted a crude “MOV EAX, 0” into the code, which overwrote an addition instruction. She saved the code and re-ran.

This time the SDRC icon stayed on in the taskbar, without any crash notification. Quickly, Blowfish moved

into the repository folder, and now the Absu and NibiruSimulation folders both had green icons on top of them, telling that no files had been modified yet, similarly to TortoiseSVN. As she clicked them, several plain text subdirectories came into view, the green icons also on them.

They were in.

“Excellent work, PFY,” Blowfish said. “I will take over from here. You should go get some shut-eye.”

The clock was ten past 2 AM. Everything had happened surprisingly quickly. Ian realized it had been a rather lucky shot to catch the checksum protection.

He was possibly too excited to sleep. But it was better to try. If he could adjust his cycle by even two hours, it would be somewhat of a victory. It was odd, for a change, to wander into his room in a not completely zombieified state.

“Did you crack it?” Jo called from the darkness as Ian reached the door.

“Yeah, we did. We’re now able to run SCEPTRE’s revision control system.”

“Uh, what?”

For a moment Ian had forgotten that most people, Jo included, did not know what revision control was.

“We get to look at their code. The Absu and the Nibiru simulation codebases. Then we possibly get to know what the bastards are planning. It’s all coming together.”

Ian knew his voice was full of uncharacteristic excitement. Right now the pride of having cracked SCEPTRE’s protection checks overtook everything else, including the fear for Nibiru’s possible approach.

“That sounds – better than I expected. You’re coming to bed now?”

“Yeah.”

“You're tired?”

“Not really.”

The pride began to dissolve into something warmer, but just for one amusing moment Ian thought how it would go if he was Codename 47. Using a potent sedative, he would first knock her out, then himself. Or if not himself, then alternatively he could go out into the night to perform one more kill. Now that he thought of it that way, he was glad to be dissociatively SCEPTRE trained instead.

But what if – and this was something Ian had never considered before – in addition to training him as a killer, they had made him affectionate for the purpose of infiltration? Possibly a male version of what the Monarch training conspiracy theory referred to as the Beta subjects. Or alternatively, a *hombre objeto*.

It felt improbable. And even if so, there was no way Jo would be his SCEPTRE-assigned target.

At noon everyone at the HQ had congregated to watch SCEPTRE's Nibiru approach simulation. Ian had run it one time before, so for him the worst shock was already over. That did not stop his hands from shaking and an uneasy constriction swelling in his throat. The pride and excitement from last night's breakthrough seemed now foolish in the extreme. Still, he thought it was better to know than not to know.

It had taken some time to understand that the simulation required the Absu project for rendering, physics and weather simulation. But after linking all the necessary code together it had started up without requiring for example an external server connection.

Ian had originally understood the simulation to be just a bird's eye view from space, dealing only with the motion of celestial bodies, but now he understood that he could zoom the view in, and choose to render accurate weather patterns on Earth's surface.

To set up the simulation's starting point the program would use large data files, several hundred megabytes in size. Ian was just using the default one for now.

This data file seemed to be based on having the anti-cosmic pyramid in the South American jungle intact. Nibiru started up from far away some days before the 21st December 2012, and then, exactly on that day, 11:11 AM GMT, the pyramid would activate, and due to its influence the tenth planet's course would start diverging toward Earth. If Ian was not completely wrong, it also accelerated its motion, which honestly seemed impossible.

At first nothing unusual would happen. But gradually, as Nibiru got closer, the weather would start changing in unpredictable ways, creating huge storms and waves. On February 15th 2013 Nibiru would almost collide with Earth, and at that point the simulation went completely wild, with insane hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes attacking the continents from all sides. A display of Earth's magnetic field could be toggled on and off, and by toggling it on it would show the magnetic poles definitely begin to shift.

After passing Earth Nibiru would turn around, making another pass from the other side roughly two hours later. Now the pole shift would proceed to its conclusion, shattering Earth's crust. The quakes would intensify and new volcanoes would erupt everywhere, soon blackening the atmosphere.

The simulation did not actually display cities or population, but it was quite clear that not much would survive.

After first seeing it for himself, Ian had looked at the parameters just a bit, and Nibiru turning rapidly after the near-collision was supposedly due to its and Earth's magnetic fields interacting. There was a coefficient for adjusting it.

"Shit. Doesn't look good. Not good at all," Jo said.

"Hm. I'm not big on crackpot theories, but something tells me they haven't gone to all that trouble just for their amusement," Blowfish said. "One thing puzzles me though. All through December, we did not find any hints that SCEPTRE's plans had anything to do with Nibiru. They only were obsessed with the eleven-headed dragon. Azerate. That means – if this THRONE is the true governing entity, they must have been misdirecting their own organization the whole time. Pulling that off must have required insanely good compartmentalization. And still, you practically could just walk right into the office where that simulation was being developed."

Blowfish turned to Ian last, but his mind was blank and could not come up with anything in response.

"I have my own theory. They've been misusing the anti-cosmic ideology the whole time. Those at the very top, who actually sit on the deadwhite thrones, don't believe in it at all. But they use Azerate as a codename for the planet, and weave that into their own pseudo-occultism that they feed to the priests, who are crazy enough already. The priests then indoctrinate the rest," Erik said with derision.

"Yeah. They're afraid that the average SCEPTRE scientist or foot soldier would chicken out if they actually knew about Nibiru coming. But they rather mix it up with relatively harmless occultism, some vague chaos that's going to consume all, and a diversion about causing unrest with the fnords and the sky projections and one little nuclear missile –" Jo said.

"Occultism isn't harmless. It can be very effective if you put your mind and will into it," Erik interrupted.

"Well, sure. Anyway, everyone who isn't high-level enough is so caught up in the false plan, that they don't

need much effort to hide the true one. And – do we actually have proof that the fnords were ever used in public? Or that the sky projection system would actually have been used?”

“Good points. About the fnords – they possibly were. If for nothing else, then for communicating with the sleeper assassin trainees. Like at the festival which you interrupted. But possibly not in a widespread manner. The projection system then – it was on a timer, but they could have stopped it at any point if it didn't fit into the real plan,” Blowfish said.

“All of that would make sense,” Ian said, trying to prevent his voice from shaking. “But the hologram image still said Current 218, as if it can actually be measured. So, in the worst case, Nibiru truly is Azerate, and the Current is something it and the pyramid emit. Almost as if they use that to communicate.”

“Well, I'm not saying what I believe or not, but I would vote for expecting the worst. At least until we know more,” Blowfish said. “Are there more data files for the simulation?”

Ian selected the next large file, and let the simulation play out again. It showed the pyramid's influence ceasing in a few minutes of time.

This time Nibiru's course shifted just a tiny bit, but it passed Earth far away, on the edge of the solar system. The weather patterns did not change markedly at all.

“That's where we would be after December. Pyramid blown up, no harm coming our way,” Jo said.

Damn, Ian thought. What had actually been the deciding factor? It seemed obvious to think that the pyramid blowing up was it, but he remembered how freaked out the high priest Ahriman had been after Lucas shot the black crystal to pieces, and then passed

through the black light. It was possible he had sacrificed himself for all of civilization without knowing it, believing he was only fulfilling his personal quest.

It was not at all pleasant to think how things could be now. The 15th had passed, so they might be suffocating under a volcanic ash cloud, with the sun eclipsed for who knows how long.

"Yeah. Except now they've found another one, and the game is on again," Ian reminded. Thinking of it as a game or a race perhaps helped his anxiety a tiny bit, but still, it was a rather deadly one. One they could not afford to lose, if there was just anything to do.

"Hm. Maybe you get to press one of those three buttons after all," Erik said to Jo.

"Not funny. Not anymore," she replied.

"How are the rest of the files dated?" Blowfish asked.

"Some of them go back to January, but the latest are from Monday. Going through all of them can take some time."

"What if you just pick up the latest?" Nitro suggested.

Ian scrolled to the end of the long list and chose the final file.

The simulation went like last time, with Nibiru first changing its course insignificantly. On the first day of March, as Nibiru was near the apex of its distant course past Earth, the direction changed again. The tenth planet homed in almost like a hunter chasing its prey, with the weather going increasingly off, until a near-collision on the spring equinox, 20th of March, started the pole shift. Just like in the first run, Nibiru again reversed direction quickly and passed from the other side roughly two hours later, completing the pole shift and bringing mayhem both below and above the surface.

"That must be the second site's influence. But where is it? There's just the first pyramid on the screen now," Blowfish observed.

Ian started rotating the scorched Earth with the mouse, at first just as puzzled, until he understood that the second pyramid was on the exact opposite side of the planet compared to the first.

He rewound the simulation to see better, to make the revolting black shroud go away. The understanding became more complete.

"Fuck," he breathed. The second pyramid was at sea, somewhere between Thailand and the Philippines.

Quickly, Ian fired up Google Maps, and found that there was no land at the location, just the South China Sea. It was between the Paracel Islands to the north and the Spratly Islands to the south.

"I don't like the idea of using a computer simulation for deciding what we should do, and how much time we have, but due to the stakes potentially involved let's just play along unless we can confirm it false," Blowfish said. "So, the first day of March is –"

"The day after tomorrow," Ian replied, feeling a sudden weight on his shoulders, and an even tighter constriction in his throat. Two days from now, SCEPTRE would be at the second anti-cosmic pyramid, activating it to guide Nibiru here by the March equinox. Then, nineteen days later it would be curtains for most, if not all, of civilization.

Blowfish nodded with a grave expression on her face. "I have some things to do. I'll try to see if I can get my hands on some satellite imagery to confirm if SCEPTRE is actually moving troops there. I'll also contact the rest of the Agents. With a video conference this time. Meanwhile, try to fiddle with the simulation param-

ters. To see how critical it is for them to hit the pyramid exactly on the first day, and how long it must be on.”

Ian nodded with understanding. The task was perfectly clear. But what they would possibly find out might not be pleasant at all. If finding out that Nibiru could be influenced was the second level of Hell, then knowing what its influence would do to Earth, even according to just a simulation, had to be the third one.

Two hours later they had at least the rough parameters. The pyramid's activation had to happen roughly at 05:33 GMT on the 1st, and last at least eleven minutes for the course shift to be complete. If the activation would be late by more than two-three minutes, it would not be effective enough, and the disaster would be averted.

“Hm. That's 333 minutes after midnight,” Erik had said, partially amused.

Blowfish came back to them with her face even more grim. Ian steeled himself for bad news.

“They're moving all right. Or more like, constructing. It has actually been going on since the beginning of the year. There's a large floating platform out there on international waters. I guess they started constructing it even before they were sure that the second pyramid would be there at the bottom. The good news is that we know exactly where to look, and if we pull some favors from Grieg, we may even get there in time. But the bad – it will be hell to attack. If we come in from the air, they'll spot us from miles away. I'll call up the other Agents, as well as Hermann, as the immediate next thing.”

Ian explained her the time constraints for the pyramid's activation.

“That doesn't sound too bad. If we get them to miss

the right moment, they've lost their only chance to fuck things up. Or we can just blow the whole thing up early. Then, I hope to hell there isn't a third one somewhere."

"So you believe it now?" Ian asked.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure yet. But when it comes to SCEPTRE, I rather err on the side of caution, as everything points out to them taking it very, very seriously. And if nothing else, even if the Nibiru stuff is complete bullshit, we get to wipe more of them off the face of the Earth."

For a moment it seemed almost as if Blowfish was channeling Blackhand, reminding of his talk how the prison asylum facility Erehwon needed to be properly cleansed.

"Of course, I'm not ordering anyone of you to go. No mistake here, it will be a tough mission, suicidally tough, on par with what we did in December. All of us might not return."

Ian remembered how in December he had thought of just leaving the fight. And again after the ridiculous-seeming meeting. But now there was not much a choice, even if they would face overwhelming SCEPTRE opposition. A few minutes might be deciding the continued existence of the whole humanity.

Mad Dog's face filled almost the whole monitor. The conference was on. Blowfish had shown them the three simulation runs, as well as the satellite images, and did most of the talking, while Ian, Jo, Erik and Nitro observed. In theory it was a senior-level only meeting, but no-one would notice as long as Nitro did not say anything himself.

"Nibiru. Like I said, that's horseshit. I mean, it's fine if you want to check out that platform and blow some SCEPTRE bastards to kingdom come, maybe testing some new tech at the same time, and even better if you come back in one piece, but I'm focusing on my original mission, to make us stronger. I'm not risking Shadow Unit before they're absolutely ready," Mad Dog said, bordering on shouting.

"Well, what if you're wrong? You can't get much stronger under an ash cloud," Blowfish replied.

Mad Dog shook his head.

"Sorry, I expected more level-headedness than that from you. Back at the meeting you said many sensible things, while I was clearly too eager, but now it's like

the roles are suddenly reversed. Where's the tough-as-nails Agent BOFH? Instead it's almost like I'm seeing a conspiracy alarmist. Some conspiracies are real, of course. And I agree with you a hundred percent that SCEPTRE is the enemy. The government also may be another. But a mythical tenth planet isn't. It's just that, a myth. This is just another plan to create unrest, and it will be unsuccessful. The people are above that."

"What about the rest? You all pulling out?" Blowfish said into the webcam, rapidly losing her temper.

"No. That's some ominous shit you showed us," Hammerfist said. "I and Black Avenger will be in. We have a few promising recruits, but must strongly consider whether they can be taken on the mission."

"Understood," Blowfish replied.

Black Avenger was not visible on the East division's camera, but the scratching voice that came next confirmed his presence.

"They're messing up with things they should not be. Galactic order. And they will be punished. You have my word for it."

"No matter what you find out there, I very much appreciate your effort. And yes, certainly hardware, or even transportation, must not be made a problem now," Hermann spoke last. "Just send me a list of what you need."

Ian considered. To only have Mad Dog majorly against the mission was not a bad outcome. At the observatory his team had just succeeded in mindless slaughter and destruction. Perhaps it was better that way. Hammerfist seemed cool-headed, while Black Avenger was somewhat of an uncertain, possibly rogue factor. But still they would need all the friendly firepower they could get.

"Now, the platform is the known part. We can recon it from some distance away. But what's waiting us below the sea it is whole another thing. It may quickly turn into improvisation, and time may run short," Blowfish reminded. "I suggest we leave as early as possible. And you East guys, remember to take plenty of drugs with you. We may be running low on sleep."

"I do not mess with my body or mind," Black Avenger screeched. "They must be kept pure so that punishment can be exacted precisely."

The Agents started packing immediately, using several of those large steel cases that had been used for the meeting flight. It seemed like they were packing about half of the whole HQ's armory. In addition to the opposition, and the mission's possibly critical importance, it would be tough because the environment. The sea was an unfamiliar element to Ian, Jo and Erik at least. The water could be deep, over a thousand fathoms, so they would need submersibles, either from Grieg, or stealing what SCEPTRE used on the site.

"What are you thinking of right now?" Ian asked Jo, as she was loading her case with two M4 carbines, the MP5, several pistols and knives, plus more ammunition and grenades than Ian thought himself, Blackhand and Sarge to have used on the Erehwon mission all together.

Meanwhile, off to the side, Erik was weighing the Penetrator Hammer in his hands, a nasty automatic bolt thrower. Ian thought that the only one of them had been lost, but perhaps Grieg had provided another.

To tell the truth, Ian was not even sure if he would actually understand or process Jo's answer, but he just wanted something to say to relieve the anxiety. Waiting for this mission to begin was extremely soul-eating. Ian

barely remembered his own load-out, except for his M4 and an SVD Dragunov sniper rifle.

"War, mainly," Jo answered. "This has now become much bigger than it's ever been. It feels like, this is the moment the Agents were meant for, win or lose. And – I have to make my peace with a few things. Like, if I'm not going to return. Or you. Or if the whole Earth will be fucked. But we'll give our best, and that's what matters, right? Well, that's the theory of what I should be thinking. In reality it's far more messed up, and I don't know –"

Jo took a deep breath. "I don't know if I can actually live up to that. Well, then I can hope Fury pops up and saves my ass at the last second." Her voice had turned heavily sarcastic.

Ian considered his words briefly and decided to ignore the last part.

"I believe, if anyone said they're fully prepared for this, then either they're a liar or a psycho. And either of those would be dangerous once we're there. But –"

Ian found his voice wavering, and hurried to finish the sentence. "I'll have your back and you'll have mine. Just like Quote and Curly Brace."

"What?"

"They're game characters. Killer robots to be more precise. When they're together, they always shoot in opposite directions."

Jo shook her head in response, but there was also a minimal smile. Ian was fairly certain she would fail to see the triggering similarities even if he explained the game's story, and maybe that was for the better.

The two dark green Agency vans stopped at the gate of a private airfield. Blowfish and Nitro were in the lead vehicle, and Ian had been driving the second one with Jo and Erik. It was half past 5 PM: the setting sun was barely visible from behind heavy gray clouds. They had talked very little, almost nothing at all.

Two guards in black uniforms came out of a small guardhouse and met Blowfish's van at the gate barrier. She would give them the codeword "Planet killer," while Ian was supposed to say "Dragonslayer." These had been decided over the video conference.

Blowfish reached out from the driver's window. The left-side guard nodded and the barrier was lifted. She drove through, and Ian let his van crawl to the guard in turn.

"The code's Dragonslayer," he said.

"What kind of dragon are you slaying?" the guard asked. Ian felt an instant surge of adrenaline. This was not part of the agreed plan, but maybe the guard was just being funny. Ian knew he was feeling tight-strung and would have preferred no extra distractions, but for

just this instance it perhaps did not hurt to play along.

"The eleven-headed one. Azerate."

"Very well. Drive right through."

Ian followed Blowfish to the runway, where a Gulfstream IV jet stood. It felt rather luxurious to have their own jet for crossing the Pacific. Furthermore, they would be allowed to bear arms even while on board, to allow for dealing with any trouble that might appear at their destination, which was another private airfield. Right now they had both their preferred side arms and tranquilizer dart mini-pistols held in shoulder holsters under the coats.

The East section Agents would be arriving with a smaller, supersonic jet, which Ian understood had been custom-made for them, and which they had used before to relocate quickly when spreading their vigilante justice.

The next step was to haul their equipment crates into the cargo hold. It was simple: each took their own, while the guards looked on. Before taking off, Ian and Blowfish drove the vans to the safety of a nearby hangar.

Finally all five of them climbed the stairs to the actual cabin and sat down. Nine empty seats remained: it seemed like a waste, but smaller corporate jets would not have the necessary range. They would stop to refuel at Hawaii: the whole trip would take about 16 hours.

Once at the destination, they would continue with Sikorsky HH-60 multipurpose combat helicopters to the target area. Unfortunately those would not have nearly as advanced capabilities as their stolen SCEPTRE choppers. The two machines would be on loan from a private military company, Global Sword Inc. which Grieg Industries had supplied in the past. Any sub-

mersibles were not available on such short notice, so they would indeed need to steal them from SCEPTRE, or use whatever method the enemy utilized to reach the actual pyramid.

“Hm. If I was a corporate, high-level Agent, it would be like this every day. Going from one weapons deal or coup planning session to the other,” Erik said mainly to himself.

The pilots introduced themselves over the intercom, then the engines fired up, and the jet began to roll along the runway, picking up speed until it left the ground and turned in a wide arc toward west.

At least they had plenty of time to study the helicopter operating and service manuals during the flight, Ian thought. Or alternatively, get crazy by thinking about Nibiru, and the deadline they would have to meet to prevent SCEPTRE from redirecting its course. The long trip could easily leave their limbs stiff and cramped, and sleeping would still be somewhat uncomfortable, so they would just have to hope they would be combat ready enough when arriving.

The refueling had gone without a hitch. No-one had wanted to investigate the plane in the meanwhile. Now the final leg of the journey was nearing its end. Ian had slept for some hours, and following Erik's example, had performed a partial body-weight workout. It had perhaps reduced stiffness to some degree.

The night was pitch-black as the plane rolled to a halt on the airfield, which belonged to the private military company.

Ian hoped there would not be trouble now. They would wait for the East section Agents if necessary, load the gear to the helicopters, then take off. The plan

was to head west for the Spratly islands, land as far to the north as possible, rest a little if possible, then begin the assault on the platform. From the closest land, it would be over a hundred miles away.

There was also the unpleasant possibility of encountering forces of the Chinese Navy in addition to SCEPTRE. Certainly, engaging in hostilities with them would bring nothing good.

So far there was no evidence that SCEPTRE would be affiliated with any nation, and honestly, it would not make sense at least with their current plan. Which government would want a shroud of darkness to envelope the entire world, dooming the population?

"Keep guns hidden, but close at hand," Blowfish reminded. "The men from the Global Sword should be there to welcome us, but I don't exactly trust them."

The whine of the jet engines began to die down, lowering in pitch.

"We will stay in the cockpit until you give us the 'clear' signal," the pilot said over the intercom. "We can take off again, but don't have much fuel. Switching to your comm system now."

The pilots had been given transceiver units by Grieg to patch into the Agent sunglasses' communication system.

The steps for aborting the mission at this point were well-defined. If the helicopters would not be acceptable for one reason or other, they would simply refuel and head back. If this airfield was hostile and they could not even refuel, they would make a small detour to the sea, dump the equipment boxes and the arms they were carrying, then head for a civilian airport for filling up for the trip back home. Of course, no-one of them wanted to do that.

With Blowfish in the lead and walking cautiously, they walked down the steps onto the tarmac, meeting the relentless glare of floodlights over the airfield. There was a rectangular office building ahead of them, and next to it were two hangars. The helicopters were supposed to be in the first.

Two men wearing camouflage pants, dark sleeveless shirts and black berets with the logo of the Global Sword came to greet them. They were well-tanned and had a strong stubble of beard, and appeared relaxed. On both, a pistol was visible in a belt holster.

"You're the Agents?" one of them asked.

Blowfish nodded.

"The helicopters are waiting for you, armed and fueled and inspected for flight. Exactly like Mr. Grieg instructed us."

"Good."

Ian tried to look around, but had not noticed another airplane. Possibly they had been the first to arrive. Then something struck him as odd.

"No codewords?" he whispered to Blowfish.

"No. It wouldn't have been of much use. Instead they were just told the IDs and call signs of our planes, so that they could recognize us."

They walked inside the office building, whose entrance lounge doubled as a simple cafeteria, with round tables and steel-framed chairs. More Global Sword crew were idly moving around, four more men and two women with short-cropped hair. All were similarly clothed, though the colors did not match exactly, only the black berets and the weapons did.

"The other plane has not arrived yet," the same man addressed them again. "There's some coffee and donuts on the counter if you got hungry on your flight."

"No thanks," Blowfish said curtly. "It shouldn't be long."

Ian walked past the coffee machine, the cups and the tray of donuts. At least he did not see a Purexo logo. They took seats, choosing them so that they could see in every direction. The large windows of the lounge provided an excellent view of the runway, with their jet right in the middle.

"Hey. Should I go check the choppers for myself?" Nitro asked.

"Good idea," Blowfish said, then lowered her voice. "If we're going to war, we can't leave anything to chance. I don't exactly trust their mechanics."

The nearest Global Sword crew member was over ten meters away. He could not have heard that.

Ian watched Nitro head out to another door, which led to the hangar, thinking if he should go after. Nitro was certainly a master of land vehicles, but how much did he exactly know of helicopters? How much had he practiced on the SCEPTRE stealth choppers back at the HQ? Ian knew to be capable of doing basic checks also himself, but then again, the model they would be using now would be unknown to both of them in practice.

"I'll go join him," Ian said. There were no protests.

Somehow he did not exactly like the whole scenario. Why was there so many people around with nothing to do? It would have been better if Hammerfist and Black Avenger had already been here.

The hangar was dark and dusty, with only few of the overhead lights on high up in the ceiling. The shapes of the two helicopters were still easy to recognize, but Nitro certainly could not work efficiently in such conditions. Was this Global Sword's way of saving on electricity?

Ian felt for a light switch to both his left and right. To the right of the door there were several of them. He pressed them all in rapid sequence, and now more fluorescent tubes came on, bathing the hangar in white light. Two men were patrolling around.

"That's much better," Nitro said as he reached the first helicopter and took out the "short version" service manual, which he had folded into his coat pocket. "Now, where do we start –"

Nitro climbed into the pilot's seat, and Ian followed him inside. The Agent mechanic flicked on the master power switch and other smaller switches to power up the electrical systems. Various lights, whose functions Ian had not fully memorized yet, lit up around them on the cockpit panels.

"What is this shit?" Nitro said sharply and suddenly. "The hydraulic fluid and oil pressure are at minimum. We can't possibly fly this thing."

Cold and harsh realization flashed through Ian's mind. Sabotage and treachery.

They had been led into a trap.

Damn. He should have realized. In the lounge Blowfish, Jo and Erik would be standing off with three against eight. It might not end well.

"Grab your gun and get ready to move. This will get messy," Ian said to Nitro. The junior Agent looked back at him with just as cold understanding.

For morbid amusement Jo had let Fury take partial control as they were waiting. As slight coldness enveloped her, and all senses seemed to sharpen, she waited for some sarcastic remark to come from the digital assassin. But there was none.

Instead she became aware of an extremely quiet rustle of clothes. No, not that. Rather, the sound of a handgun's barrel dragging against the holster. It repeated from another direction.

Multiple hostiles, going for their weapons.

"Trap!" she shouted, already leaping under the nearest table and going for her own USP semi-automatic.

Blowfish and Erik remained still much longer than her. Well, they would pay with hits to the armor, possibly even their lives, Jo thought cynically.

As the gunfire started, burrowing into the wood and ricocheting from the metal legs of the chairs and tables, they finally scattered to the left and right. Jo aimed to the center mass of the closest man. The mercs did not appear to have vests under their sleeveless shirts.

It was a solid hit, which should have penetrated the

man's heart. But he did not much of even flinch, instead he shifted aim to Jo's direction.

Subdermal Armor SA-1 or Lightweight Protective Weave LPW-3. Or both. Need to switch tactics.

The part of Jo's mind that was her own understood with perfect clarity: these people were SCEPTRE, not Global Sword. Impostors.

"SCEPTRE! They have armor! Aim for the head!" she yelled.

Jo shifted her aim up slightly and pulled the trigger twice more. Splatters of red flew out, as the bullets entered the man's nose and forehead.

While he began to fall Jo was already switching to the next target, but suddenly the gunfire intensified. Jo looked to her right and saw two of the enemies spraying blindly with assault rifles from the cover of the cafeteria counter.

She felt the much-weakened bullet hits even before the sunglasses' display lit up.

CHARGE: 95 PERCENT.

CHARGE: 85 PERCENT.

Damn. She could not stay here. The enemies were hitting far too well even if firing blind. She leaped from under the table while firing rapidly, trying to hit the hands or weapons of those two.

Blowfish and Erik also broke into a run while firing. They would no doubt be hit as well, but it was better than to be a sitting duck. After getting up, Jo set off on a quick sprint to flank the counter.

Another head exploded violently, one of the short-haired women. The beret fell away with a slight delay. Judging from the massive boom just before it had been Blowfish with her Desert Eagle.

CHARGE: 75 PERCENT.

Damn. Too many steps left to the side of the counter. Two enemies down, but still four more on the opposite side of the room, firing with deadly accuracy.

"Fuck you, Fury. Can't you do better?" Jo muttered silently as she sprayed unaimed fire toward the four, just trying to get them to scatter into cover. They remained inhumanely still, not afraid to be hit, not afraid to die.

While running, Erik hit one of the enemies into the hand, and the gun went clattering away. He followed with a quick double-tap headshot to the one in the middle of the four-man formation.

But now the two behind the counter, one man and one woman, realized what the Agents were up to and popped up to fire with aim.

This was the opportunity to strike at them. But Jo realized that she had no rounds left: the slide of the USP remained open.

As sustained automatic fire scythed the air all around her, all she could was to leap high up and to the side again while Fury was busy reloading the pistol in a clinically efficient manner, but still too slow.

CHARGE: 60 PERCENT.

Automatic gunfire began to rattle inside the hangar, clattering off the helicopter's fuselage. Soon after the first distant shots came from the direction of the lounge. Ian and Nitro crawled over their seats into the rear of the machine.

"I will show them war," Nitro breathed.

"Calm down," Ian warned him, gun in hand.

"They are SCEPTRE, right? I know they are. They lured my sister to do drugs. It was the fnords on the CDs she listened to. If she had pirated them instead,

maybe she wouldn't be a vegetable in the mental ward now. You see, the fnords don't survive lossy compression. I began to investigate, and they wrecked my car. Twice. On the first they installed listening devices and sabotaged the steering and brakes so that I nearly crashed and died, and the second they dismantled in my own garage while I slept. It was after that I decided to join the Agents."

The rapid-fire explanation sounded wild, but certainly within SCEPTRE's capability. And it fit well with the sabotage Ian had experienced himself.

"Sorry to hear. Let's give them war," Ian replied, as there was a brief pause in the gunfire. The enemies possibly were reloading, but it could not be relied on fully.

Ian took a breath, trying to summon dissociation, then kicked the right rear door open. The other of the attackers came into view, a sub-machine gun in his hands. He racked the charging handle and prepared to resume firing.

No armor – you die, Ian thought, and proceeded to fire into his chest multiple times, lifting the aim up with each shot.

Only the fourth bullet, which went through the man's Adam's apple, produced any effect. He went down clutching his throat, his burst of fire cut short.

"Shit! They wear bulletproof wifebeaters! Aim high!" Ian shouted to Nitro.

Ian saw him roll out of the helicopter onto the floor, and circle the second chopper warily. Then automatic fire erupted, but Nitro also fired his pistol several times. The Agent staggered under what seemed to be several hits to the armor, but then silence fell.

"He's down," Nitro said.

"How's the armor?"

"Seventy percent."

"OK. Now let's head back, quick! I hope it's not too late already."

As they got off to a hurried run, returning the same way they had arrived, several more gunshots came from the direction of the lounge, including full auto fire. It certainly was not over yet.

Going first, Ian covered the few meters outside, and kicked in the office door. He was going in blind, but he had full armor power.

Right in front of him, one enemy was up and firing, his back turned. Next to him two were dead, their heads an ugly, bloody mess. On the far right, a fourth one was crawling on the floor, going for his weapon.

No mercy for either of them. He reached maximal dissociation, and time appeared to almost stop. In this extraordinary state, which he had dubbed "Agent-Time" he would feel as if he was one with his gun.

One steady but firm pull of the trigger. The gun barked, and the cartridge ejected in a beautiful smooth arc. The SCEPTRE impostor's head was already pierced, his life ended.

Shift aim to the right, and down.

Another pull. Another muzzle flash. Another pierced head. Too late for that guy to get the gun.

Any enemies remaining? Oddly, Ian thought that if he would get four before the state dissipated, perhaps he could unlock some further hidden ability in himself.

There, on the right. Behind the counter.

Exactly two more.

Now Ian took in the rest of the scene: Blowfish, Erik and Jo were running for the counter. Damn. Firing would risk hitting them instead. The Agent-Time dis-

solved into frustration, and Ian headed left instead, quickly overturning a table to use as cover.

To some degree it was like having an out-of-the-body experience. She was just there along for the slow motion ride. But she was quite sure Fury was doing better than she could have. Without letting it run the show, she would have reacted slower. The enemies could have ripped the Agents into shreds before they even got their guns out.

Jo knew she had only half armor power remaining, but at least the gun had a fresh magazine now. The enemies were directly ahead, their arcs of fire away from her just for the moment.

She closed the remaining distance and took aim.

The one closer to her, the woman, Jo shot into the forehead. No subdermal armor there. An expression of rage was left frozen on the face as she was thrown backward, leaving just the last one, the man with the second assault rifle.

The barrel was turning toward her now. Jo had perhaps one second –

Suddenly, without a sound coming from anywhere, the man grabbed his neck and fell. Next Jo saw the tiny dart embedded in the false merc's throat. She turned her head and saw Ian stand up from behind a table. Nitro had arrived too, scanning for more hostiles with gun in hand.

"It's clear, right?" Ian shouted.

"Clear," came the voice of Blowfish.

Fury disappeared into some dark recess of Jo's mind and she was left with the fading rush of adrenaline and some disgust as she realized the full extent of the carnage, with blood, blown heads and spent cartridges all

around.

It had been a nasty surprise, and the Agents could have ended up much worse. Certainly, if they could bear arms onboard, they should have flown with the carbines and not the pistols. The mistake could have turned out fatal.

But then, it was fortunate Ian had switched to the dart gun at the last second, for now they would have a prisoner to interrogate when he came to.

"The choppers are not OK. Hydraulic fluid and oil has been drained," Nitro explained.

"Well, we can just refill them, right?" Blowfish asked.

"I'll have to check. They might have cut the hoses. Then it will take longer to repair. And we must test-fly them before we can take them out on the mission."

"Damn. I'm starting to think that maybe Mad Dog did not close all the backdoors on the Grieg network. This seems too much of a coincidence."

Erik joined them in the lounge, having checked the whole office building briefly. His expression was grim.

"The real Global Sword crew, four of them, is in a cleaning equipment closet. Two with their throats slit, the rest of them shot."

Next they heard the fast approaching sound of another jet aircraft.

"More enemies?" Jo asked, going for her gun.

"I think that's just Hammerfist and Black Avenger," Ian replied. He looked out and saw a small but sleek silvery airplane touch down on the runway, a large parachute trailing behind to enhance the braking.

As soon as the plane had come to a halt, the canopies popped open and Hammerfist and Black Avenger hopped down. They broke into a jog toward the office.

They certainly saw the bodies long before reaching the door, as they slowed down, and seemed to be going for their weapons. But as they saw there was no danger, they discarded that idea and just entered.

"You guys been busy already, I see," Hammerfist said.

"They were SCEPTRE. Lightweight body armor. Sneaky bastards who killed the real crew. The bad news is, the helicopters are not good to go," Blowfish said. "They can possibly be repaired. It will just leave us less time."

"I see."

"Did you kill all of them?" Black Avenger asked from behind his mask.

"There's one alive. I hit him with a dart," Ian replied.

"Good. No, excellent. I will wake him up, then we will have a chat."

"You actually can't speed it up," Blowfish remarked.

"Hm. Then I hope the fixing the choppers takes some time. I must understand how these scum think, and what they truly aim at."

"I don't think he will talk much."

Black Avenger held up his index finger. "You haven't seen me in action."

While Ian, Nitro and Blowfish and the East section Agents were all busy investigating the damage done to the helicopters, Jo and Erik went to examine the perimeter of the airfield, to understand how SCEPTRE had infiltrated it.

The sea was actually only some two hundred meters further. They opened a gate in the chain-link fence and headed toward the beach.

The night was still completely black. Jo switched to light amplification, and tried to discern something –

anything – from the green haze. She could not see much yet. They had to get closer to the beach.

Then she became aware of something. At the shoreline, there were two black inflatable speedboats. Those clearly had been their method of entry. But the distance to the platform was almost four hundred miles, so it seemed unlikely they would have come directly from there.

“There. Two boats,” she said to Erik.

“Yes. I see them now. Bastards. I wonder if they have a base of operations right here on the mainland.”

“It would still be far from the platform.”

“In case the choppers are beyond repair, could we use those?”

“In theory, yes, if there's enough fuel, or if we can find more. But it would be slow. Leaving right now would leave four-five hours maximum at the target. And we'd be easy targets when we approach. No weapons on those.”

Talking about time instantly made Jo also think of the ultimate reason they were here. Nibiru, getting closer all the time. Damn, she would have preferred to not think about it.

“Hm. Yes, I'd prefer the choppers too.”

As the morning sun painted the sky first red, then yellow, the helicopters possibly were in flying condition again. Blowfish, Ian, Nitro and Hammerfist all had their hands dirty from grease.

Hoses had indeed been cut, and reaching them all had not been exactly easy, requiring them to dismantle parts of the power transmission and blade control mechanisms. Black Avenger had been with them in the beginning, but after an hour he had disappeared back inside the office, anxious for the remaining SCEPTRE operative to wake up.

All depleted Agent coats were recharging using household current. It was slow going, but each gained percent possibly meant the difference between surviving or not.

"You go get some rest if you can," Blowfish said to Ian. "We will handle the test flights."

Ian could certainly accept that, and headed out to join Jo, Erik and Black Avenger inside the office. But as he heard the first muffled groan through the door, he guessed that there would not be much rest.

"At least you can make a sound. It remains to be seen if you can talk," Black Avenger scratched, a curved, bloody knife in his hand. The SCEPTRE man was tied to a chair next to him, without his shirt. His chest had a few, shallow bloody cuts across.

Jo and Erik were sitting at a table, observing from further away and staying impassive. For a moment the scene seemed extremely perverse, but then, it would not have done much good to protest against torture, possibly alienating a team member they needed for a mission that was possibly even more difficult than they could imagine. There was also an extremely slight possibility the masked Agent would manage to extract some critical information, even if he was sinking to SCEPTRE's methods.

Ian remembered how Blackhand had executed enemy operatives in a row, to get them to reveal a password for a security terminal. In the end the password had turned out to be empty.

"I'll put it this way. Which one do you value more, the mobility of your hands, or your legs? There's also a third option, that you start talking of what you're actually doing at your sea fortress. Your choice," Black Avenger said, hunched closer to the SCEPTRE operative again.

"Fuck you," the man spat.

Black Avenger plunged the curved blade right through the man's left hand, pressing it down with force and rotating it in place. The man groaned, the gaze in his eyes wild and his mouth a frozen mask of hate. Ian understood it was the gaze of a man who would never talk.

"Because you didn't, I chose for you. Your right hand will be next."

"Pain means nothing to me. You know nothing about inflicting it properly. And we – are already beyond it. If you knew about the methods we now use for our training, you'd run to your mama crying."

Hearing this was both extremely intriguing and extremely horrifying to Ian. The old assassin training he had endured had relied much on physical pain: beatings and electric shocks for instance, which had been enhanced with drugs and voices repeating the same things endlessly. But what on Earth were they doing now?

"I can pretend you never said that. But just once. Now talk." Black Avenger urged.

"No."

Black Avenger repeated the procedure for the right hand. This time the man did not even groan, just kept his gaze focused forward.

"Last chance."

Now the SCEPTRE operative just remained silent for at least half a minute, and so did Black Avenger. Little by little the masked Agent tensed up and almost began to shake. Ian understood that he was gathering rage, focusing everything to the killing blow. Ian could not bring himself to feel much sympathy for the victim, considering what he had done to the original crew, and just observed like Jo and Erik.

Finally Black Avenger lunged forward, and a terrible sequence of rapid-fire slashing and carving began. The bound operative remained silent but soon began convulsing as the blade struck repeatedly, almost faster than the eye could see. Blood was literally flying all over, as wide red gashes appeared everywhere: head, chest, arms, legs. The slashing only gained speed and intensity, with Black Avenger breathing heavily and

making animalistic scratching noises. Ian guessed the victim was dead already as the Agent finally plunged the knife deep into the chest and left it there, then sank into a nearby chair, completely exhausted.

Ian heard the sound of the office doors opening. Blowfish, Nitro and Hammerfist entered.

"The birds are good to go. What the hell –" Nitro said, with excitement rapidly changing to something else.

"That's enhanced Agent interrogation for you," Blowfish muttered.

Finally the mission was properly underway. Blowfish flew the first chopper, with Erik as the gunner and Nitro as the emergency technician if the need arose.

Behind them and to the right, Hammerfist piloted the second with Black Avenger next to him. Ian and Jo were in the rear, their weapons next to them. Ian was prepared to snipe out of the window at the sight of any enemy contact, but so far there had been none, just the surprisingly calm sea. It was full daylight now, with about five hours to the activation of the pyramid at 13:33 local time.

In roughly two and half hours they would reach the platform, leaving just as much time at the actual location. It was less than Ian would have liked, considering the final target was in the sea depths. There was little time for any recon. They could circle the platform from distance, but it was unsure how much they could learn from the enemy defenses without actually engaging.

Jo had seemed somewhat odd ever since the brutal interrogation. Alternatively it was just Ian's own imagination, and it was he who remained in an odd, uneasy

mental state. Well, at least flashing back to Black Avenger's extreme methods gave something else to think than Nibiru.

It was possible Jo was now letting Fury stay in partial control the whole time. Damn, Ian himself had given the advice to use it to possible advantage. It could have possible long-term adverse effects, but he was unsure what exactly. He just had to believe Jo was combat ready and in the most fitting mental state for survival: he would not do or say anything to distract while they were on their way.

They should be able to stay in contact with Blowfish and crew through the Agent sunglasses: the Sikorsky had a much louder noise than the stealth helicopters, but the helmets they wore masked most of it.

"I'm seeing a ship on the horizon," Blowfish's voice came in. *"Doesn't look Chinese. Still, let's keep our distance."*

Blowfish banked slightly to the right, and Hammerfist followed. As the ship was left further away to the side, Ian used the sniper scope to look at it. It was not terribly large, perhaps fifty meters long, but looked to be moving rather fast. Several radars rotated on top of the structure. There was a nasty-looking main gun on the front, smaller machine guns on the sides, and a missile launcher in the rear. The hull was gray and featureless: no flags or name were visible.

"SCEPTRE, do you think?" Ian asked over the radio.

"Most likely," Blowfish answered.

One minute passed in radio silence.

"Shit!" Blowfish said suddenly. *"I've got missile lock. Taking evasive action."*

"I will assist," Hammerfist replied. "Let's blow the ship to hell."

"Negative!" Blowfish shouted back. *"It will have massive firepower. You go on with the mission!"*

Ian found his heart racing. Either choice was unpleasant. The helicopters were not nearly well enough armed for taking on the ship, with only twin .50 caliber machine guns, but no rockets or missiles. And his own sniper rifle would do shit, unless there were men on the deck.

Now Ian saw the missile: it streaked across the sky, turning toward Blowfish's helicopter and chasing it. Blowfish dropped a cloud of chaff, hoping to confuse the missile's radar, and banked hard to the opposite direction.

"Fuck! It's still chasing me!"

Blowfish was turning toward the ship. Possibly she was trying to confuse the missile to hit it instead. Suddenly Hammerfist also banked hard.

"Avenger, drop that little piece of shit from the sky!" he said.

Ian heard a heavy rattle begin below as the .50 guns came to life. Still, he did not know if it was exactly possible to knock the missile out with those.

What about his sniper rifle? He slid the left-side window open and maneuvered the barrel through, then pushed the stock against his shoulder, taking aim. For one second he had the missile in his sights, but then it was gone, and he could not instantly reacquire.

The .50 guns still rattled on, then Ian saw a brief explosion in the sky.

"I got it," Black Avenger scratched impassively.

"Good work! Now get the fuck out of here!" Blowfish shouted.

Blowfish flew right over the ship, and Ian saw the missile launcher rotate. In horror he realized that from

so close range there would be no time to dodge.

"Watch out! It's going to launch another!" Ian barked.

Blowfish pitched the helicopter's nose further down, gaining speed, while she dropped dangerously close to the sea. At the same time she banked first left, then to the right. There came a plume of smoke as the missile launched. Now the helicopter was gaining altitude again, but the many times faster missile would reach it in no time.

There was nothing to do. No magic sniper bullet.

No doubt aware of the launch, Blowfish dropped chaff again, leaving a glittering silver cloud floating toward the sea. But it was ineffective. The missile closed in the last remaining meters, then detonated against the tail.

Ian watched with his mouth open in shock.

The helicopter entered an instant spin, as the tail rotor was no longer there to balance the main rotor's torque. A skilled pilot could use the remaining forward momentum to land, but to where?

"Fuck. Fuck! There's no other way. I'll land on the ship! You go on, right now. That's an order!" Blowfish yelled.

"Now we have missile lock," Hammerfist said rather calmly. "Trying to shake it. Good luck to you!"

"Give'em hell!" Ian shouted to Blowfish, then he felt a lurching sensation as they suddenly climbed much higher. Thankfully he had not eaten for a while. Hammerfist threw some switches, apparently to activate radar jamming.

"We're safe now. Heading away from the ship."

Ian watched, mind racing, as Blowfish fought valiantly to keep the spinning machine in control. Using

the direction of the spin, she circled the ship, heading to the rear, then began bringing the helicopter down hard. Ian could not see the landing – if there was one – as just then his view was obscured by the ship's superstructure.

Well, at least he did not immediately see a giant fireball or smoke cloud rising. That had to be reassurance enough.

"The boats possibly came from that ship," Jo said. "I certainly hope Blowfish, Erik and Nitro are fine. But now it will be up to us."

"Yeah," Ian replied.

Then the earpiece crackled. *"Everyone out now before it blows! Erik! Get the Penetrator Hammer!"*

Suddenly Ian felt much more encouraged. Back in December Blowfish and Erik had fought their way through an army of black ops, while Erik had been wounded in the leg. And now there were three of them, presumably in full health. Of course, there was no telling how large crew the SCEPTRE ship had.

Blowfish actually hoped for the helicopter to blow up any second from now, to provide distraction. It smoked in a promising manner, but had not actually caught fire yet. They all were hunched behind the rear missile launcher of the ship, waiting for SCEPTRE's black ops to pour out from the doors on the two-level superstructure.

She and Nitro both held M4 carbines with grenade launchers. Erik had the Penetrator Hammer. With the corner of her eye, Blowfish caught him stroking the weapon gently.

It was perfectly clear what they had to do: cleanse the ship of any enemy personnel, then assume command. They would be too late to actually help Ian and the rest at SCEPTRE's platform, but might be required later to bail them out.

Of course the task was easier said than done. Blowfish knew her armor was 80 percent charged, while Erik was at 75 and Nitro at 90. Not ideal, but better than nothing,

"How many men, do you think?" Erik asked.

"It's not a terribly large ship. I'd say thirty. That's if they're actually running it like an actual navy would. They might also just have a skeleton crew if their platform requires the most effort."

Erik considered for a while. "Hm. With this, I can take thirty."

"Don't get too cocky. You have the least armor of us. And remember, we have to avoid damage to the ship if possible, as it'll be our only ride if Ian and crew need help."

They waited fifteen seconds more. No-one coming out. The condition of the helicopter did not seem to be changing in any way. They possibly just had to take the initiative.

The unfortunate thing was that between the missile launcher and the superstructure there was no other cover than the downed helicopter. Well, if it was not going to explode, they could stay beside it. At least for some time.

"Go. To the chopper," Blowfish hissed.

They broke into a run, reaching the machine. Blowfish had landed it sideways on the rear deck, so it was rather in an ideal position.

As all of them were crouched low again, Blowfish considered the next step. To go for the superstructure doors would be the obvious choice. What else? There appeared to be a trapdoor leading below decks, just some meters away. While trying to open it they would be exposed, however.

Suddenly the trapdoor began to open. They all trained weapons toward it.

A hand was visible for a brief time, lobbing a round object toward them.

"Grenade! Get back!"

They ran back toward the missile launcher. The grenade detonated with a thunderous boom and Blowfish felt shrapnel raining on her back.

CHARGE: 65 PERCENT.

It could have been worse. Blowfish rolled on the deck, still a few meters away from the safety of the missile launcher, as two doors on the lower level of the superstructure opened. Five mantis-facemasked black ops poured out, G36 assault rifles held at shoulder level and ready to fire. There was no way to get clear before the firestorm started.

Letting out a war cry, Blowfish flipped the selector switch to full auto, and opened up while remaining crouched. The black ops opened up as well.

CHARGE: 55 PERCENT.

CHARGE: 45 PERCENT.

Erik stood in a wide, low stance, the Penetrator Hammer bucking in his hands and unleashing a low-tempo, ripping sound as the steel bolts came flying out one after another. Down on the deck, Nitro fired off several bursts.

Two of the black ops fell down, firing their weapons to the sky before they remained silent. But the remaining three resumed firing while weaving left and right in profoundly inhuman, snake-like movements.

CHARGE: 35 PERCENT.

Fuck! The armor would not withstand 5.56 caliber rifle fire for long. The household voltage upconverter had possibly charged the armor in an improper manner, leaving it to deplete more rapidly. It would be necessary to discharge it fully, then charge with the proper 500 volts. But that could only happen back at the HQ. First they just had to live through this.

"Damage to ship permitted!" Blowfish shouted, just

as she reached the cover of the missile battery. Meanwhile Erik and Nitro remained in the open: they would not last long.

Blowfish reached for the grenade launcher's trigger. With a satisfying plop, the oblong-shaped munition sailed through the air, toward the two black ops on the left. They were caught right in the middle of the detonation, being thrown up to the air and against the structure like rag dolls. They did not get up.

Erik directed his fire to the right, at the sole remaining black op. The black op was just switching direction, and was hit by several bolts. Even from the distance Blowfish could see the large ragged holes in the uniform. It certainly had to hurt. The black op fell, dead.

The deck was clear for now. Five down, an unknown amount remaining. The choice remained: the trapdoor, or the now open doors on the ground level?

Finally Blowfish decided against the trapdoor. She hated small confined spaces (except server rooms) and the enemies could be lying in wait just below. They could clean up the below decks more safely by going through the superstructure, which she expected to be a little more open.

Erik put a fresh magazine into the Penetrator Hammer, and they were theoretically ready again.

"How's the armor? Mine's thirty-five," Blowfish asked.

"Twenty," Erik replied.

"Forty-five," Nitro said.

Not good. "Let's be careful from this point on. And head inside."

With Blowfish and Nitro in the front, and Erik covering the rear, they set off to enter the superstructure from the left-side door. They came to a hallway, devoid

of life. The ship's mess was to the right, while up ahead stairs led to the bridge.

They checked the mess first. Empty as well. It was maddening. But somewhere there still had to be more black ops. Next, they entered a communications room. Just as empty, but all the equipment had lights on, so someone certainly had been here just moments ago. But now the whole crew was concentrated on this unpleasant game of cat and mouse.

As they exited, Blowfish caught movement in her peripheral vision. At least one black op, trying to circle around the hallways to surprise them.

For a moment Blowfish felt the urge to just chase the enemy. But it could be a trap.

"Nitro, check the hallway to the right. Careful around the corners. We'll head left," Blowfish whispered. It was not pleasant to leave the junior Agent alone, but he had the most armor power left, and had survived this far.

Blowfish crept cautiously forward, Erik following close behind. They rounded a corner, just as two black ops came out of another corner in front of them.

The only option was to open up. Gunfire from both sides rattled in the hallways. Thankfully it was over soon, the black ops dead. Only after releasing the trigger Blowfish became aware of the sunglasses' display:

CHARGE: 20 PERCENT.

Shit. Not much to go on with anymore.

Blowfish motioned for them to return to meet up with Nitro. They met at the door to the communications room.

"There was no-one at my end," Nitro said. "I also checked some of the officers' bunks. Empty, all of them."

"Well, this about settles this floor. Next step is either the bridge, or the below decks," Blowfish said.

"I vote for the bridge. Let's kill whoever bastard is steering this ship, before we run out of armor," Erik replied.

"Well then. Up."

They headed for the stairs leading to the second floor. Blowfish went up first, climbing the steps one at a time, going as silent as possible. She reached the top, rounding the corner.

Clear. She motioned for Erik and Nitro to follow. The door to the bridge was right ahead, only five meters away.

Suddenly the bridge door flew open –

And Blowfish was face to face with an impossibility.

She recalled her thought from some time back, that even a skilled special forces operator would lose in reaction time due to the shocking and improbable sight of her. But now the enemy had done the exact same thing, and she muttered a hard, silent curse.

Standing in the doorway was an imposing tall man, with twin automatic Jackhammer shotguns held on his hips. The square jaw, the wrinkled face, the short, fair hair. Everything matched. She was face-to-face to what appeared to be Blackhand reanimated from the dead, wearing a black op uniform and about to blast her to pieces with 12 gauge buckshot.

She perhaps could survive the first blast. But the Jackhammers could pump out ten of those, at a rate of four per second. Because Erik and Nitro had already followed her, there was no clear route to retreat.

She rammed the trigger down.

The enemy Blackhand did the same.

The twin shotgun blast was deafening.

CHARGE: 0 PERCENT.

And it certainly hurt. She could not yet fully process

to exactly where, but in multiple places. She was alive at least for now, and struggled to remain conscious, to keep the trigger depressed and to see the reanimated bastard dance under multiple hits from her carbine, from Nitro's, and perhaps most importantly from the Penetrator Hammer.

The next quarter of a second was critical. The enemy was wounded, his aim going wild, but to where?

Up, certainly. He was staggering backward under the hits, the shotguns no longer in control, and the recoil was pushing them further up.

Blowfish dived down and backward, crashing into Erik and Nitro. The next blast rang out –

Holes appeared in the ceiling. And she was still alive. The blast after that never came.

Still hurting all over and not knowing how badly the rest were hit, Blowfish knew she had to get up. To solve the mystery of this freak before it was too late.

She grit her teeth and trained her rifle at the enemy, who was now lying in a pool of blood on the bridge floor. He would not have long.

“Who, or what are you?” she asked in a harsh shout.

The enemy smiled cruelly, and Blowfish understood that he was in no pressure to answer. A few seconds more and all his worries would cease.

“The name's – Satanel.”

But pride won out at last. The man just had to utter his SCEPTRE codename one last time. That settled the matter. Probably he had underwent plastic surgery just for the purpose of confusing the Agents.

Blowfish returned to the hallway, where Erik and Nitro were still in a heap on the floor. They were definitely getting up, it just appeared a bit slow.

“You guys alive?”

Both nodded.

"I'm out of armor," Blowfish said. "You feel like exploring the below decks? The alternative is to just hole up here."

"I trust the Hammer to keep me alive below," Erik growled.

"Yeah. I'm good to go as well," Nitro replied.

"You're not bleeding out?" Erik asked.

"I don't think so. But let's stay in close contact in case the situation changes. Meanwhile I'll try to patch myself up and see if it takes some hacking to get the ship under our control."

Clouds were gathering to the sky, and a slight fog over the waves reduced visibility. The clock was just past 11 AM local time.

"Can't see shit. But the platform should be up ahead," Hammerfist said.

Ian waited, holding his breath. Then he thought he saw something in the distance. He activated the zoom mode of the sunglasses and squinted his eyes. A dark structure slowly came into view dead ahead.

He could not estimate the size precisely from so far away, but it appeared to be a square of about two hundred meters a side, constructed from linked segments. Large pontoons held it above the water.

All around there were corrugated metal cabins, like on a construction site. They were stacked two stories high. He also saw crates and barrels, and other smaller shapes which he could not yet recognize, but they could be generators or other machinery.

In the center there was an open space of water, perhaps twenty meters across. Next to it was a large yellow crane, which had to be for lowering submersibles into

the sea. At least one amphibious vehicle lay right next to the crane. That would be their way into the depths, if they made it that far. Suspended on davits around the platform's edge were inflatable speedboats, waiting to be lowered into the water.

Ian zoomed in further, and could see that the platform certainly was manned: at least fifteen people could be easily counted. Furthermore, there were large anti-aircraft guns in each of the four corners. SCEPTRE certainly did not want visitors in here.

"I see the defenses," Hammerfist said. "Getting in will be nasty. If the turrets are manually controlled, we can get lucky and kill the shooters. Otherwise – there'll be bad shit."

"Do you think they see us yet?" Ian asked.

The answer came in the response of heavy tracer fire from two of the closest guns. Hammerfist began a steep turn almost instantly, also bringing the machine lower.

"Everyone, prepare to strafe them! It's kill or be killed."

The .50 guns started rattling again, and Ian had his sniper rifle out from the fully opened window. He felt Jo press against him as she tried to get a good angle of fire with the M4.

"Shall I open the door?"

"Negative, I can fire from here," Jo replied.

Ian was quite sure the heavy AA guns would punch easily through the door, but it could possibly protect against small arms fire.

Hammerfist brought them closer while trying to get away from the two front guns' range. Ian saw men running down on the platform, taking up cover positions. He brought the scope to his eye, but found it rather hard to get a clean shot due to the shaky flight.

"Can you fly any steadier?" Ian shouted.

"Not really. Unless I want to get hit!"

The men now out on the platform were certainly black ops, with the familiar face masks. Ian focused on one of them, who was peering out from behind a barrel, taking aim with his assault rifle. It was possibly a clean shot.

Ian estimated the bullet drop quickly, shifted the aim up a bit, waited for a moment when the shaking subsided just a bit, then squeezed the trigger. With a loud blast, the Dragunov kicked against his shoulder.

It took a second to reacquire the target, then Ian saw him fall backward slowly.

One down.

Next to him Jo fired bursts at a group of black ops still running to position. One seemed to stumble under the hits, but was not out of the action yet. Meanwhile the .50 guns controlled by Black Avenger focused on the closest anti-aircraft turret, which was manned. Several rounds struck its side with a shower of sparks, then Black Avenger shifted his aim just a bit, and the firer was shredded under multiple impacts. The tracer fire ceased.

For just two seconds there was relative peace. Ian tried to look for the next target. They were already outside the other AA gun's range of motion, but would soon enter the third one's sector.

"RPG!" Hammerfist shouted all of a sudden, as the helicopter began a hard turn. "Take out the bastard!"

Ian put the scope down for a moment, looking for a plume of smoke that would identify the shooter. Yes, there. If Hammerfist could only slow down the turn, the black op would be history.

That was certainly wishful thinking. The rocket flew

closer, forcing Hammerfist to take wild evasive action.

Ian quickly turned his head to see the projectile fly past them, continuing its way up to the sky. Perhaps now there was time. He brought up the scope, trying to re-identify the RPG black op. The plume of smoke had almost dissipated, so it took an extra second.

But now Ian had him. Again, scope up just an inch, wait for heartbeat, then a smooth pull of the trigger.

Just as the Dragunov barked, Ian saw the second rocket launch. The black op held the tube for one second, then fell to his knees. He was certainly history, but the machine was much closer this time.

Ian watched the projectile come at them in a straight line. It was not going to be pleasant.

Hammerfist dropped both chaff and launched a flare, then pitched the helicopter down. They gained speed, and the Agent initiated yet another turn, but the rocket was still on to them. If it was a heat-seeking one, it would simply home in on the turboshaft engine. Then they would certainly be toast.

"Fuck, it's going to be close," Hammerfist breathed, while letting the controls level out. Ian understood what the Agent was possibly going to do next. He would wait until the rocket was almost on top of them, then steer away. It would require nerves of steel, but Hammerfist had already demonstrated superior calmness.

He still waited. One second, two –

Then, using the pedals, he rapidly rotated the helicopter 90 degrees left and the rocket flew right past them.

With immediate danger over, Ian looked down on the platform. No second RPG guy to be seen, but –

The third AA gun began to spit out tracer fire, the rounds flying almost straight at them.

“Hammerfist! Watch out!” Ian shouted, but it was already too late. The black op manning the turret adjusted his aim, and the windshield shattered. Next the firestorm ate into the co-pilot’s seat, with Black Avenger in it.

Hammerfist banked away at last, but before that the bullets tore into the ceiling, going in the direction of the engine.

Ian turned his head quickly to see Jo staring at him with a blank gaze, her hands gripping the M4 hard. He understood that choosing to fire out of the left window was all that had separated her from the same fate.

Next Ian heard an odd, prolonged scratching breath through the radio. The Agent armor had not possibly stopped even one of the heavy rounds, and Black Avenger had to be dying. Ian also became aware of the smell of smoke and fried circuits.

“This bird won’t fly for long,” Hammerfist growled. “I’ll bring it down on the platform.”

“You’re not hurt?” Ian asked Jo.

There was an odd silence for one second. “No. Armor not compromised. But the enemies will converge on us as soon as we land. Stick to the M4. Your skill as a sniper is severely lacking, though you got lucky.”

Ian understood that was Fury talking at him, and it was not a pleasant thought. But it was exactly his own advice Jo was following, allowing it to take control for improved survivability. Ian just hoped she would revert to herself as soon as this was over, if they were still alive.

The smoke in the cockpit was thicker now. Hammerfist turned back toward the first, disabled AA gun, ramming down the fire button on the cyclic stick to let the guns spew out unaimed fire directly ahead, to a group

of black ops running at them. Through the shattered windshield Ian saw torsos and legs getting pulped under the heavy fire, with at least three men going down, the rest diving into the cover of some barrels.

"Make sure you have fresh mags! Fire as soon as you exit!" Hammerfist shouted, the calmness gone from his voice.

He pitched the nose up to reduce speed, and they entered a hover a few meters above the platform. Using the pedals, he let the machine sweep from left to right, the guns still firing. At least one more black op fell.

"This will possibly hurt, but we're short on time!"

Hammerfist yanked the collective lever, bringing the helicopter down with force. The landing was not pleasant: there was a forceful steely clash as the helicopter struck against the platform, rose to the air for a second, then settled down again.

CHARGE: 99 PERCENT.

Damn! The armor reacted to the harsh landing. But it was only one percent, and Ian certainly had not broken anything in his body, though it did hurt. He kicked the left-side door open, while Jo leaped out from the opposite side.

Only now Ian realized that both of their helicopters were out of the game. The possibility that this was going to be an one-way trip had just increased, though it had been on their mind since the start.

Well, what mattered was to prevent SCEPTRE from activating the anti-cosmic pyramid. Ian took cover behind the front of the helicopter, looking out for more black ops closing in.

There certainly were. At least eight alive on the platform now, and more coming out of the cabins.

It was going to be war.

Like Fury had advised, he put the Dragunov down on the riveted steel and took aim with the M4.

What followed was a grand cacophony of war on the platform, the steel rapidly staining with blood and the blackened explosions of grenades. Ian, Jo and Hammerfist moved from cover to cover, firing lethal aimed bursts at the approaching black ops, reloading, then resuming fire. Ian slipped into deep dissociation, feeling almost nothing as each enemy fell, and as his armor power depleted slowly, but relentlessly.

Hammerfist utilized a risky tactic of letting enemies get close, then blasted them with his Benelli semi-automatic shotgun, which he quickly took from the holster on his back. Ian thought that the Agent either had a death wish, or wanted to see the torn, bloodied chests of the black ops up close to exact more proper revenge for the death of Black Avenger.

The fight was bad enough, but somehow Ian thought that it was now only a skeleton crew here. Like back at the first pyramid, where an army of priests, black ops and elite black ops had congregated. The most of the SCEPTRE personnel possibly were already below the waves.

It was a complete unknown, though: would they all be there in deep-diving suits, or in a flock of submersibles? How would they exactly activate the second pyramid? Well, they would see in time, if they first survived this.

Ian became aware of a sudden, heavier hit against his chest, which took away twenty percent of his armor power.

Snipers! He rolled back toward the helicopter, where he had left the Dragunov. Jo and Hammerfist dashed to the opposite direction, taking cover behind one of the now silent AA guns.

Ian took the 7.62 rifle in his hands, hoping to remain in dissociation. So far it seemed to hold. He had fired twice, so he still had eight remaining. Good enough.

He peered through the scope, trying to see the enemy snipers. Where were they? Ian scanned the tops of the cabins –

And then he saw one. Prone on the roof, with a bit of the mantis mask visible. Ian took quick aim and fired.

Damn. It was a miss. His heart was pounding heavily, and he had mistimed. The punishment was immediate: a dull thud in his right shoulder, as his opponent fired in turn.

CHARGE: 60 PERCENT.

A rage wanted to enter his mind, but he fought to remain calm. He crouched down lower behind a large, portable diesel generator, aligned the scope on the mantis mask, then lifted just a tiny bit up, and squeezed the trigger.

Through the scope, he saw the cloud of red from the exit wound. The enemy sniper lay unmoving. But it was not a time to cheer early, or to rest.

There had to be more snipers.

Ian turned right, looking past the downed Sikorsky. There. Another sniper was peering out from a cabin's door, on the second level. Now Ian waited for his heart to calm down, waited for the exact moment between two beats, then gave the trigger a squeeze. But the black op had ducked back to cover.

Jo and Hammerfist fired from cover at the still approaching enemies. The opposition was certainly getting thinned down. Both thrown and rifle grenades rained on the AA gun, but the steel was thick, and his comrades were protected for the time being as long as they stayed behind it. Ian had to admit the black ops were dedicated: they seemed to care little of their own survival. It only mattered to try to kill the Agent intruders.

Ian inched carefully to his left, to try to get a line of fire through the cabin's window. The glass was dirty and he could not see much. He fired twice just to shatter the pane.

Three rounds remaining.

Now he possibly saw a dark shape inside, crouching low in the doorway. Ian could only guess that it was the black op's face mask he was aiming at, then he fired once more.

The cabin's door began to open, as the enemy sniper fell forward, then toppled down the stairs to the ground. It was a very satisfying hit. But were there still more? Ian scanned the battlefield once more with the scope.

No snipers.

He fired the remaining two shots at two black ops who were running closer, rifles at hand, fingers on the grenade launcher triggers. He hit the leftmost one to the chest, but missed the second.

As Ian crouched down to reload, the rightmost was caught by a rifle grenade explosion. Ian took a quick look to his left and knew that was Jo.

Silence descended now. Had they cleared the whole platform already? Moving from the cover of the generator to a group of barrels, Ian kept scanning. No enemies for now, just corpses, and an insane amount of used cartridges on the steel platform.

Nothing for now. Ian joined Jo and Hammerfist behind the AA gun. Jo looked oddly pale, taking rapid, shallow breaths.

"You OK?" Ian asked.

"I'm not hurt. Got half of armor left. We kicked their ass properly."

"But?"

"Fury vanished for now. I was in it so long, so coming out of it left me disoriented. Just need to catch my breath."

It did not sound good. If the bitch decided to leave at a bad time, Jo could possibly be unable to defend herself for some time. The alternate personality had to be considered as a possible threat, never a true ally.

"You're possibly hyperventilating. Try to take deep breaths."

"Yeah. Thanks." Jo touched Ian's shoulder and smiled briefly. "Quote."

"Curly."

"Let's wait if there's more of them," Hammerfist said without paying much attention to the odd finish to their conversation. "In the meanwhile we should see Avenger gets a proper burial."

They headed back toward the Sikorsky. Still no enemies. Hammerfist opened the co-pilot's door, and Ian was shocked to see how absolutely pulped Black

Avenger was. There was literally a pool of blood in the foot compartment, as well as blood all over the seat. The masked face was intact, but the chest and lower body had several large, ragged holes. The ballistic vest had helped little: the pieces of torn Kevlar had no doubt entered his lungs and other organs. He most likely had died in pain, but there was nothing they could have done from the point the machine was hit by the heavy AA fire.

Hammerfist took hold of the legs, while Ian grabbed from under the arms, and they hauled the lifeless Agent onto the platform.

"SCEPTRE would love to analyze his dead brain," Hammerfist noted, a fact which was already common knowledge to Ian. "The motherfuckers have a bit harder time doing that if he's lying in the bottom of the sea. This will take a while, so you guys make sure there's no ambush in the meanwhile.

Ian was rather glad of the assignment. He and Jo crouched behind the large front wheel, while Hammerfist took out a set of tools from inside the machine. Ian understood he was going to detach the heavy seat, then they would fasten Black Avenger to it and throw him over the railing.

Ian counted his magazines for the M4. Three remaining. Not ideal, but could have been worse.

They crept toward the yellow crane in the middle of the platform, beside the open pool. En route Ian came across one black op, who still moved, but as Ian got closer, he already lay still, and there was no pulse as Ian felt for it.

"Never do that," Hammerfist advised. "Bastards might have poison coating on the uniform."

Shit! Ian drew his hand back in disgust, waiting for symptoms of poisoning to set in. He waited for some seconds, but there appeared to be none. It was too early to tell, but somehow he could guess that Hammerfist was exaggerating.

They also got to see the remaining submersible from up close. It was white and roughly five meters long, resembling a fat automobile, but without wheels and with a large glass canopy in the front. There was a hatch on the roof for entering. On the roof were also heavy latches for attaching the crane's chain.

"Seems straightforward. You attach the cable and lower it down. I can volunteer to stay here in guard," Hammerfist offered.

Ian looked at his watch and saw there was a little over two hours remaining to 13:33. Possibly enough, if they could figure out how to operate the undersea vehicle.

He climbed on top of the submersible, yanked the handle on the hatch. It was not locked. A few steps led down to the cockpit.

He looked around and saw confusing arrays of computer displays and switches both to his left and right. To the front were the pilots' seats, and a control console which had more switches and displays. Next to it was a stick which roughly resembled the cyclic control on a helicopter. That was probably what you used to steer.

Quickly, he looked if there was an operating manual in a folder or pouch somewhere, but there appeared to be none. They possibly had to search the cabins if they did not want to go by trial and error.

Ian climbed back up and hopped down. "No manual. I guess we can spend some ten-fifteen minutes looking for one, as well as finding out what exactly waits us below."

Jo nodded in agreement. "Let's split out."

With his M4 kept at shoulder level, Ian walked toward the cabin with the open door, from which the sniper had toppled down.

He approached the doorway with caution, checking first one corner, then another. It was truly empty. There was just a locker with an extra black op uniform, and some disposable dishes on a table, with some fragments of an unidentified food left.

With disappointment, he got back out.

"This one is locked," Jo said from the door of another cabin. "There's a card reader box here."

"The black ops may have cards on them. Again,

watch for poison. Actually, let me do it," Hammerfist replied, already going for the nearest corpse.

The Agent put on white latex gloves, like a criminal investigator, and quickly rifled through the fallen black op's pockets.

"Here's one. Let's try it."

Hammerfist got to the cabin door Jo was standing next to, and inserted the card. A green light flashed on the box. If they were lucky, all doors would use the same card.

Unfortunately, the room was just as empty. Moving quickly, they went through five more cabins. The card allowed access each time, but the end result was just the same. Nothing remarkable inside. Ian felt aggression rising. Already five minutes wasted, and they had come up empty-handed.

At last the three came across a cabin where inserting the card produced just a red light. No entry. At least that was different. Possibly, that was a SCEPTRE scientist's temporary residence, where the soldiers would not have access.

"Hm. I say we blast the lock," Hammerfist said. Ian saw the door to be heavy steel. He remembered his disappointing results back at the Innovativi3D office.

"Rifle grenade?" Jo asked.

"Since you figured it out, you get the honor. Everyone, stand back. Aim where you imagine the latch to be."

They backed off a good twenty meters and Jo loaded a fresh grenade into the underbarrel launcher. She took careful aim, then depressed the trigger.

The oblong projectile flew through the air in a brief arc, then detonated with earsplitting force. For a while Ian could only see black smoke cover the wall.

Then some of it dissipated at last, and Ian saw the door was partially open. Victory. Of course they could have damaged whatever was inside the room: possibly the only submersible manual could be burned to a crisp.

"Good shot," he said to Jo as they headed inside.

The room was indeed different. There was a military-grade laptop and printer on a table, and the walls were plastered with printed-out diagrams. Ian recognized one of them to be a depth chart of the sea. The others were more esoteric, and Ian's blood went slightly colder as he understood one of them was a spectrographic plot of the various frequencies of the Current 218.

Another 2D chart seemed to display the total intensity of the current, when viewing the sea bed from above. There was a black spot in the center. Ian understood that had to be the pyramid, which emitted something even when not yet activated.

For a moment it felt funny. Was he now becoming a sudden expert on anti-cosmic measurements? But any amusement was quickly replaced, as the dread he had felt ever since the start of the mission returned.

"It's weird," Jo said. "But if I understand right, the depth and intensity charts use the same coordinates. At the black spot, its roughly 700 meters down. Could have been worse. Could easily have been a mile or more."

"Any idea what's exactly down there?" Hammerfist asked.

"Not yet," Ian said, heading for a bookshelf at the back of the room. "But here's our submersible manual."

"Good. The laptop seems locked with a password," Jo said.

"Try azerate218," Ian replied quickly.

Jo typed on the keyboard. "No luck."

"OK. We don't have much time, so it's probably no use trying to guess."

Hammerfist went through the print-outs on the wall again. He stopped at one which was not an actual diagram, but just text.

"It says something about an airlock. A testing report. That they use the existing structure, but have coupled it with motion detectors and cameras."

It felt extremely puzzling. An existing airlock? Who had built it? And now that Ian thought about it, who could have built the pyramid in the bottom of the sea? Ian felt stupid for just taking it for granted back at the HQ and ever since. Had it once been land, which had sunken? Like the mythical Atlantis? Well, they would soon see with their own eyes, if they just got the submersible operational.

"Let's head back to the crane," Ian said.

The chain was in place, and the undersea vehicle was powered up. Its diesel tank was full, and likewise for the air tanks. The digital gauges showed that they had over three hours of dive time. It had to be more than enough for a trip of only 700 meters down.

Ian had tried dissociating to pick up the operating instructions with his photographic SCEPTRE assassin trainee's memory. He was not sure if it was exactly working, but he thought he had the basics down in theory. Practice could be different. The main difficulty, he imagined, was possibly losing one's bearings. It could already be rather dark in 700 meters.

"You ready to go?" Hammerfist asked, already anxious to climb behind the crane controls.

One and half hours to the deadline. Jo was going through the manual for one last time.

"Yeah. I think I've got it. If there's trouble, we can try to figure it out on the go," she said.

"Wish there was more of us, but this is what we've got right now. Listen, if it seems you get lost, or there's overwhelming opposition, don't go crazy. Don't kill yourselves. Just get back up and we'll figure out our next move."

Ian was not sure if there would be a next move. For all he knew, striking now was the only way to stop SCEPTRE from directing Nibiru here. It was oddly similar to the assault on the first pyramid. Just two against a possible army. Back then they had utilized deception, wearing SCEPTRE uniforms, but now there was no way they could go without the Agent armor's protection.

He was already ready to climb inside the submersible when his earpiece cracked.

"This is Blowfish. We've got control of the SCEPTRE ship. I'm patched in to its radio now. We can't possibly get there in time, but if you need a ride out, we'll eventually arrive. We're in relatively OK condition. How are things on your end?"

"Black Avenger is down. Chopper is down. We're going for a dive," Ian answered.

"I assume you know what you're doing. Best of luck. Blowfish out."

"Let's stop wasting time," Ian said.

Hammerfist fired up the crane's motor, and Ian and Jo entered the hatch, the manual with them. It was time to head for the unknown depths.

The sea turned gradually darker as the submersible gained depth. Ian switched on the powerful halogen running lights, but still he could not see much. He was afraid they would bump right into the pyramid.

Near the surface there had been schools of colorful fish, but deeper the sea was oddly devoid of life. Ian wondered if that was the pyramid's anti-cosmic influence.

The diesel engine thrummed steadily, calming him down somewhat, and the controls were easy enough once he had got the hang of it. The submersible could go much faster than they were doing right now, but it was better to be cautious, as long as they did not see properly.

"Try to see if there's some sonar imaging or something you can activate," he said to Jo. "To be honest I'm not seeing shit."

Jo left the seat next to him and went to the displays and switches in the rear. She shook her head, consulted the manual, then returned back to the front, and pressed one button on the central console.

A display embedded to the right side of the console came to life with a blue-green wireframe display. Still, most of it was black.

"That should be the 3D sonar. But we're not deep enough yet, and it has limited range, so it can't show the whole seafloor," Jo said.

"Excellent."

While the submersible proceeded forward and deeper down in a leisurely manner, Jo examined more of the switches.

"I guess they've programmed a waypoint for the pyramid. I just have to see how to bring it up."

Jo consulted the manual again, then pressed a few more buttons. A bright white dot appeared on a small display right in front of the control stick.

"That's almost too easy," Ian said. "Now I just head for that."

The dot was off to the right side, and Ian turned the vehicle until it was dead ahead. The pyramid certainly could not be floating in the middle, so they needed to go deeper. Ian angled the submersible on a steeper downward course, his eyes darting between the windshield and the sonar display.

Now most of the sonar display was filled with lines: the black emptiness had vanished. A few seconds more, and Ian could faintly see the seafloor also in the headlights' beams.

"OK. You can level out now," Jo said.

The dot on the small display came closer, and the sonar display started showing some larger, trapezoidal structures. Shortly after they became also visible with plain eyesight, and Ian understood he was looking at a submerged city, with strange architecture.

"Holy shit," he breathed.

Ian almost expected Cthulhu or some other sinister sea creature come swimming out from the buildings any second from now.

They were almost at the dot. But there was no pyramid in sight. What was this? Had the waypoint betrayed them?

"Are you sure the waypoint is right?" Ian asked Jo.

"It was the only one stored on the navigation computer."

"OK. Then we just have to trust it."

Ian scanned around him, trying to see if there was any enemy activity down here. But everything was strangely quiet. No other submersibles.

"Hold on. There's something larger ahead on the sonar," Jo said suddenly. "I think it's the pyramid."

Ian looked at the screen and saw a huge wire-frame slope rising in the distance. Yes, there was no doubt about it. But how would they actually enter it? Was the waypoint inaccurate? They needed to find the airlock one of the printouts had mentioned, but there had been no description. It would be guesswork.

Damn, they certainly were under-prepared, Ian knew. Going by pure gut instinct. This mission would have required Agents with months or years of diving experience, and they were complete novices, having just skimmed the manual.

Now they were directly on top of the white dot. Ian stopped the propellers, letting the vehicle just float, as he examined the surroundings.

There was something right below. Ian reversed a bit until he could see. It was a low trapezoidal building, which appeared to have a wide stone slab as its front door. There was a circle carved to the slab. That was possibly the entrance.

Ian brought the submersible carefully down in front of the building. Now he saw the circle properly in the halogen glare, and his heart skipped a beat, then continued to thud painfully hard.

It was not just only a circle, for inside it was an eleven-faceted star. A hendecagram. The symbol for Azerate.

"I doubt the Swedish satanists built that," Jo whispered.

Suddenly Ian's mind was bombarded with thoughts on the cosmic scale, as he pieced together the highly speculative data they had on Nibiru and Azerate. Finding this lost city here seemed to make perfect sense. Two entities, which possibly were the same. Two pyramids. But he could reach no solid conclusions, except that they were way over their heads. Damn, to have Lucas here now. Or Nastassja, the Agent occultist. But they would not speak from beyond the grave.

"Certainly not."

Ian fought a deep trepidation of what they would possibly find beyond that slab. His willpower won, and he pushed the control stick just a bit.

The submersible inched forward, and as if it had crossed a hidden threshold, the stone door began to slide down, revealing a dark passageway.

"We go in?" he asked.

"There's not much choice."

Ian waited for the door to open fully, thinking how wide and high the submersible was, then he proceeded to guide in inside, going dead slow.

As he got closer, he looked up and saw that the entrance was not completely ancient: a small camera inside a thick glass shell was watching them. This was how SCEPTRE had prepared the opening. They had to

have their devices already inside, and a computer had just recognized the submersible and given them entry. Very similar to the Agent HQ's entrance gate.

As they were inside, Ian understood that it was not an actual passageway, but just a rather small chamber. Another stone slab was directly in front of them, but it had a different carving, one that was deeply disturbing.

It was another circle, but with no star. Instead it had to depict Nibiru itself, with eleven snake-like shapes starting from the center and penetrating the planet's surface. The eleven heads of Azerate.

Wondering about the carving made Ian momentarily forget the fact that they had possibly trapped themselves. The chamber was barely wide enough to turn, and that would require some precise maneuvering he might not be able to pull off.

A muffled grinding noise started behind them, and gradually it became darker, until it was pitch black outside the light beams. Ian understood the entrance had closed. They had possibly entered their own burial chamber. The Nibiru-Azerate hybrid stared at them, and Ian almost wanted to shut off the lights so that he would not have to see it.

He turned to Jo. "Wrong move?"

"Let's just wait."

The seconds felt eternally long. Finally the grinding noise started again, and the Nibiru image started to descend, along with the slab in front of them. The heavy mass of water gushed forward, slowly draining the chamber.

Before them was a larger chamber, lit by several torches' orange glow. It seemed highly ritualistic, with strange inscriptions on the stone walls. The bottom of the chamber was actually a huge pool of water, with

several more SCEPTRE submersibles floating on the surface, some almost twice the size. Now it was perfectly clear: they had passed the airlock, and beyond the pool was the passageway to the actual pyramid.

A lone black op with a G36 assault rifle stood in guard at the pool's edge. He appeared to have no breathing equipment on him. Beyond the pool, thick cables snaked in the passageway. SCEPTRE had to have generators here, and they were likely extracting oxygen from the outside water to make the pyramid habitable.

"If we do it right, the black op doesn't know anything's wrong before it's over. You guide the vehicle onward, I'll pop from the hatch and shoot him," Ian said.

"Right."

For a moment Ian was surprised of his own words, how casually he had described a coming murder. But SCEPTRE were scum, ready to doom the whole humanity for their own unclear anti-cosmic goals. Too much was at stake.

As Jo took the controls, Ian reached to his coat pocket and screwed a silencer to the Beretta's barrel, then prepared to climb up the hatch. Thankfully the hatch opened forward, so the black op would not recognize his lack of face mask until it was too late.

The submersible crept forward in the pool, dodging the other vehicles: Ian waited for the perfect moment when the hit would be guaranteed, but it was not yet suspiciously close.

Now. This was the moment. He twisted the handle and opened the hatch, the gun in his other hand.

"Hey!" the black op shouted, turning toward the approaching vehicle. The voice was distorted by the face mask, lowered in pitch.

Without remorse Ian leaned to the side, and quickly

aligned his sights on the mask. He pressed the trigger three times in rapid succession: the muted pops echoed in the pool chamber.

Ian was not sure if he had actually hit three times, but in any case the guard fell to the ground without firing his rifle once. Perfect.

Slowing down, the submersible slid into a vacant space at the pool's edge. Ian descended back below to shut down the systems properly, to make sure it would not drain battery power in the meanwhile.

"We have roughly one hour," Jo said as she left the controls.

"Yeah. Better than I expected."

They were ready to disembark. Ian climbed out first and jumped to the solid stone ground, then helped Jo make the leap as well. Ian flashed back to Hammerfist's words: to be careful, to not attempt anything that equaled suicide. But it conflicted badly with the gravity of the situation.

The pyramid waited ahead.

"I've only got two full mags. He probably doesn't mind if I steal," Jo said as she crouched over the black op.

Ian wondered of her mental state: the slightly humorous remark did not sound like Fury at all, in which case she was managing admirably, as herself, in the face of indescribable odds stacked against them.

The narrow, torchlit, slowly curving stone passageway was devoid of further guards so far. Ian understood that it would open up directly inside the pyramid: because they had hurried to find the airlock, they had missed the opportunity to see how majestic it was from the outside.

Gradually, he became aware of voices coming from further along the corridor, and slowed down.

Up ahead the passageway turned into slowly descending stairs. Ian crept up a few steps more, and saw the trapezoidal pyramid entrance, at which two black ops stood guard.

Their uniforms seemed to blend and adapt to the surroundings, making them hard to discern. Instead of ordinary weapons, they held long-barreled futuristic rifles with triangle-shaped barrels.

"Elites," Jo whispered.

Ian flashed back to December: they certainly were hateful enemies, with their enhanced armor and powerful weaponry. Back then it had been even more terrifying, as Jo had been turned into one after her capture.

But now she was right beside him, meaning he could forget that episode and focus just on eliminating them, silently and efficiently.

"We need to take them out at the same time," Ian said. "I'll take the one on the left. But we need to close the distance."

Jo took out the USP, with a silencer also attached, and they crept closer, hugging the walls. Finally they were dangerously close to the next torch: few steps more and they would be lit.

"Can't get any closer," Jo said.

Ian nodded in agreement, and lifted his pistol with both hands. The left side operative's face mask was still far too small a target for his liking, but there was no real alternative.

"You ready? I'll count to three," Ian said. "One, two, three –"

Ian squeezed the trigger once, but was sure he had missed. The black op must have felt the bullet passing by his head, as he sidestepped, aiming his rifle into their rough direction, but not yet firing.

Ian followed with more shots, trying to steady his aim. Finally, he thought he got lucky. The black op fell to the stone floor, the long rifle making an ugly clatter that echoed far.

"Damn! That was loud," he hissed, then shifted his gaze to the right to see the other black op stagger backward under Jo's shots. She, too, had to fire several times instead of one clean headshot.

Finally the other was down as well. Ian tried to focus, to listen for the rising whine of the elite's fail-safe device, which would detonate inside the head to make sure the opposition would gain no intel, even posthumously.

He thought he heard it, followed by the small pop of the actual detonation, which echoed in the passage.

Now they would have two triangular rifles to pick up if they chose to. Ian remembered the weapon modes: plasma burst, rifle grenade, EMP blast. Each could be useful.

They closed the distance to the two bodies. Jo knelt down at the closest rifle and picked it up.

"It's called Disruptor," she said.

"Lovely."

Ian got closer to the left-side black op that he had killed, going to examine the rifle as well.

Suddenly he became aware of a sharp pain in his heel. He looked down to see the black op was not dead at all, but just pretending. And he had just slashed Ian with an ugly-looking combat knife.

Instantly Ian thought of the worst alternative: poisoned blade. The black op tried to slash again, to sever the tendon. Ian sidestepped, losing balance and crashing to the floor, but at the same time he aimed to the face mask and fired twice more. From this distance it was impossible to miss.

The black op convulsed, then his limbs became slack. This time Ian could verify the fail-safe whine and the following detonation from up close.

Jo turned to him now. "Shh. Stay still. I will check it."

She came over, examining the bloody gash in his heel. There was a burning, pulsating pain, but not terribly forceful.

"It's not deep. I'll just bandage it and you should be good to go."

"What if it's – poison?"

Jo shook her head. "Then, I'm afraid there's not much to do. We'll see."

Damn. Ian hated himself for possibly making her worry unnecessarily. The whole situation had been a result of his very amateurish failure to make sure the enemy was properly dead.

Jo bound his leg quickly, then helped him up. The pain had become duller and more distant, and he was not feeling any odd effects so far. Maybe it had been just an ordinary evil combat knife, like the one he had used as an assassin trainee.

"Thanks, angel," Ian said.

An odd expression lit up on Jo's face. "Not 'Curly' this time?"

This matter settled, Ian slung the M4 on his back, then went to pick up the black op's rifle. It felt more heavy than he remembered, and appeared to be now on the plasma burst mode. Well, if there was a congregated horde of enemies inside the pyramid, and they would be forced to go loud, it would fit just fine.

Ian and Jo passed the opening and entered the pyramid itself, crouched low and trying to stay in the shadows.

Even from inside, it was huge. Almost as wide as SCEPTRE's platform at sea. It was almost an exact reprise of the first pyramid. More torches casting deep, oppressive shadows, eleven statues of demons, and steps which descended to a central pedestal in the middle from four directions.

But here, there were no priests in robes, just more black ops, both the black-uniformed and the elite variety. Ian counted about twenty, possibly more. In addition to them, five white-coated scientists. They would certainly be armed as well. In the back, there were large steel containers for equipment, some box-shaped, others longer.

A large black crystal stood on the pedestal. Again. Ian did not actually count the facets, but they likely added up to eleven. This time there were no thick electricity cables snaking to the outside, but instead, around the pedestal were four odd box-shaped devices, roughly a meter across, with a wing-shaped object sticking up from them. The wing distantly resembled a solar panel. Was that another attempt of picking up the energy of the Black Light? But the devices appeared to be completely self-contained, with no leads coming in or out.

Only now Ian recognized the persons standing right next to the pedestal, also wearing black uniforms, but somehow different, more rigid and possibly with heavy armor plating. Adrenaline and rising dread mixed into an uneasy cocktail.

Nicholas, the technical director.

Thora, the CEO.

There were no guards outside the circle of demons. Again, the statues would provide a perfect hiding place, while allowing to observe the proceedings from a little closer.

“Let's move up to the statues,” Ian whispered.

They began a cautious, low crouch-walk toward the two nearest statues.

In position. Without making a sound. Excellent.

Now Ian only needed to peer out just a little to see. He glanced at his watch: it was 12:45. They had plenty of time to observe, but at some point they needed to act. Against twenty-five enemies, it was likely suicide. Suicide for the good of all mankind, to stop SCEPTRE – and Nibiru – from turning Earth into a black Hell.

They waited, watching. Ian tried to formulate a tactic, thinking back to the previous pyramid. Lucas had

shattered the crystal with one well-placed grenade from the Disruptor rifle. Now they had two of those. It certainly sounded like a plan. They could even ignore Nicholas and Thora if they just had the chance to do so. After disturbing the pyramid activation it only mattered to get out alive.

Ian spoke with as low volume as possible, knowing the sunglasses' microphone would amplify it.

"What do you say, we blow the crystal up when the moment comes?" he asked.

"Let me consult Fury."

There was a brief pause.

"Yes, the Disruptor grenade should be powerful enough. Remember, you don't have to reload manually, but you only have three grenades," Jo answered.

"Understood. So, let's say I use up one on the crystal, then we unload the rest as we escape, trying to get groups of enemies at once. And when the grenades are out, switch to plasma and let them burn. And when the Disruptors run out, take out the M4's."

"Sounds good. Do we actually wait until it's time?"

"Hard question. We could of course blow it up right now. But they may be distracted when the moment comes. Last time there was a deep rumble, like an earthquake. I'd be in favor of waiting."

"And the escape? It will take a long time for the airlock to cycle, during which we're sitting ducks. I'm thinking of caving in the passage."

"Risky, but should work."

It seemed like the plan was mostly complete. Now they just needed to wait more.

Finally it was almost time. The clock was 13:30.

Nicholas looked at his wristwatch, then began to speak in an even tone.

"Right. We're gathered here for our second chance. To set right what the priests failed in. They shouldn't have been in charge in the first place. I'm pleased to be in good company here. No unnecessary rituals, no recited formulas, just hard, anti-cosmic science. And our own unfaltering faith to do what's necessary. Anything to add, Tiamat?"

Thora spoke next. So her codename was Tiamat.

"You're too modest, Nihil. It's you, as the true high priest of Chaos and Nothingness, whose hard work has allowed us to come this far. Certainly, what we're about to do here today will have far-reaching consequences. We must not forget that many will die. But it's for the greater good. The cleansing of this planet will begin, while those who survive will slumber in the Absu until they're ready to walk on the reborn Earth, that we shape in our own image from our thrones. All the clues, legends and predictions have led us here, and now it's finally time for us to fulfill the purpose that was given to us by those who were here before. I know you don't like rituals or formulas, but allow me to indulge just a bit. Hail Nihil. Hail Nephilim. Hail Nibiru. Hail Azerate. Hail Satan!"

Thora's voice rose toward the end, strongly resembling high priest Ahriman's oration back at the first pyramid, but with her characteristic lisp added.

Partially Ian could not believe what he was hearing, while the other part had perhaps known all along that exactly this could be expected of SCEPTRE. The advanced virtual world system they called Absu made perfect, twisted sense. To enslave the survivors in an illusion, subject to brainwashing.

He looked to his right, and saw just the same kind of horrified astonishment on Jo's face. She had to be think-

ing the same. If there had been a tiny shred of doubt of the mission's importance, it certainly had been erased now. They had to succeed in blowing up the crystal, whatever the cost.

Ian thought the ground trembled slightly. The final minute passed, until it was at last 13:33.

Almost instantly a deep, subsonic rumble started, shaking his insides.

The second anti-cosmic moment was here.

The rumble was soon joined by a disturbing, intense low hum. Almost like being in the middle of a nightmare, or experiencing déjà-vu, Ian knew exactly what was coming next. The black crystal appeared to grow even darker, affecting also the air around it. As if light was being sucked away.

"There'll be an explosion next, as the black light shoots from the crystal. That is our cue. Get ready," Ian said to Jo.

He did not have to wait for long.

It was like loud, deep gunshot, as eleven rays of black shot from the crystal toward the ceiling of the pyramid, then started to move.

"Now!"

Ian had the Disruptor on grenade mode. He rushed out from behind the statue, knowing exactly where he had to aim. A quick look to the side confirmed Jo was moving as well.

Shouts of rage came from the black ops and the scientists, as they reached for their weapons. It would get dangerous in an instant.

There was eleven minutes until it was too late to stop Nibiru. Certainly the battle would be over before.

Ian pressed the trigger to launch the first grenade. It arced through the air toward the pedestal. It could not miss.

Then something unexplained happened.

The grenade was deflected right backward, passing him dangerously close, then it detonated against the wall behind him.

"Shit," he breathed. Was the Black Light resisting attempts to destroy it?

A grenade launched by Jo detonated further away, sending two regular black ops into the air. An elite black op next to them responded by firing plasma, and Jo had to duck into cover of another statue.

Both had two grenades remaining.

Circling the pedestal and the enemies, Ian switched to plasma burst, then unleashed one toward the crystal. The result was the same as with the grenade: the hot, long projectile bounced back, heading toward the ceiling.

Now Ian perhaps understood.

The four devices. They were shield generators, similar to the Agent coat armor, but in larger scale.

"Fire at the four winged devices!" Ian shouted to Jo. "We can't destroy the crystal before they're down!"

One black op almost had Ian in his sights. Ian shifted aim quickly, blasting him with a burst through the chest. He had to be dead before he hit the ground. Then Ian could concentrate on the first generator for a while, unleashing bursts on the protruding wing. It glowed red hot, then broke in two. Success!

CHARGE: 40 PERCENT.

A black op from across the room had hit him with his

rifle. The enemy was off to the side, at an inconvenient angle, so Ian just rolled to safety without firing back. He had still enough armor power left.

Jo was running and firing, chased by several enemies. She switched to the grenade mode, launched, and succeeded in taking out three at once this time. Then she had a moment of relief, and began to spew plasma at the generator on the opposite side, just like Ian had done.

It did not last the assault long, breaking down.

Taking a look at the pedestal again, Ian understood that Nihil and Tiamat also were protected by the shield, as they stood right next to the crystal.

Nihil picked up his own triangle-barreled rifle, aiming at Ian. Ian leaped into the momentary cover of a statue as hot plasma rained toward him.

Still two generators to go. By this point all the black ops and scientists were perfectly aware of what was happening, so it would only get harder all the time. One white-coat peered out from behind an equipment crate, a large handgun pointing straight at Ian.

He knew the Disruptor's power pack was limited, but could not switch to his M4 or the Beretta on the fly. Instead, he shot one more plasma bolt, which singed the scientist's torso, leaving a large part of his coat charred black. He fell behind the container.

Trying to get closer to the next generator, Ian circled the room again. On the opposite side of the room Jo was again pinned down by several enemies. Ian could not stop to watch how the battle unfolded this time, as the generator was now clear in sight.

He also became aware of Nihil having him in his sights again. Ian threw himself forward just as a loud electric crackle filled the air around him.

He saw black.

Electromagnetic pulse mode. His gear had been disabled. He hit the ground rolling, throwing the sunglasses away. The Disruptor was possibly useless as well. Rage was welling inside him.

Well, he still had the M4, with three magazines.

He got up, taking the carbine in his hands from behind his back. Crouched, he set his sights on Nihil and fired a burst in anger.

But it was of no use. Bullets, too, were deflected by the shield. He had to disable the remaining generators, without protection of his coat and with just traditional weapons.

Next Ian saw the barrels of Nihil's rifle rotate. The high priest of Nothingness switched firing modes.

And Ian understood it was too late for him to dodge.

The hot bolt of plasma lanced through his chest. He knew it had pierced his heart, possibly disintegrated it.

He looked down at the charred hole in his vest with muted astonishment, as his vision began to blacken from the edges. His legs gave next, and the sounds of battle seemed to fade away to the distance.

Then he died.

From across the room, Jo saw everything that happened, as she was still running and shooting left and right. Ian throwing his glasses away, a certain sign of a successful EMP attack. And then, the bolt of plasma that cut him down without mercy.

There was no way he could have survived that.

At first there was just nothing on Jo's mind. It was completely blank. She observed the Disruptor to have clicked dry. She had no reloads for it, to either the power pack or the grenades, so she threw it away, reaching for the M4.

Deeper understanding came in gradually, as she fired burst after burst at the approaching black ops. The thought of a terrible emptiness. She had failed to have Ian's back, and now her own crazy Agent Hessian, her love, had been killed in action. There was nothing she could do to bring him back.

CHARGE: 40 PERCENT

CHARGE: 30 PERCENT

The enemies were hitting her too well. She had to shape up, or die just like him.

Now Jo remembered what she had imagined for this exact situation. She would will herself to become a total killing machine. The revenge would be terrible, and no SCEPTRE black ops would be spared.

No knife would she let unused.

But with enemies converging in from all sides, with her armor depleting fast, she found that she might not be able to fulfill that promise. She certainly did not wish to die either, but if willpower could be represented by a percentage or a bar display, it was rapidly draining toward zero.

CHARGE: 20 PERCENT.

She launched her sole remaining M203 grenade toward two charging black ops, one black-uniformed and one elite. The explosion was spot-on, and threw the bodies high in the air, but there was little solace in that.

Momentarily free of enemies, she ducked behind the nearest statue to plan her next move. There was still a mission to finish, no matter what.

But she could not come up with anything.

She was empty.

Next an intense sensation of cold came from within, and it felt as if her personality was being sucked away too. Just for a fraction of a second she knew exactly what would happen next, and to a degree she welcomed it.

Then her own thoughts ceased, vanishing abruptly into the vortex of cold.

Activate. Full control.

Fury made a quick evaluation of the surroundings. Multiple armed hostiles with overwhelming firepower.

To activate fully in the middle of an ongoing battle certainly was a challenge, as much information needed

to be taken in at once, but she had been made for challenges. The physical shell was in relatively good condition, though the chemical balance was not fitting for an intense fight, and reduced the chances of survival.

She tried to stimulate the production of adrenaline, then launched into a run. The legs felt shaky, but it would have to do.

Quickly, she acquired the first target. A scientist. No armor, but the large handgun presented a threat, especially after her own armor would inevitably deplete.

She squeezed the trigger. The white-coat collapsed, but she was already shifting aim to the next.

An elite black op, equal in abilities to her.

They fired at the same time. In the last instant Fury weaved to the left. The plasma beam hit her side, slightly deflected by the Agent armor.

CHARGE: 0 PERCENT.

She could not help the groan of agony, but kept running. The wound would have to be examined later. Meanwhile the enemy fell backward, cut through the neck and face.

Fury was well aware of the mission objective, to shatter the black crystal, but had been left with bad options. The original personality had wasted too much ammo, and now Fury had barely enough for survival. And the armor was out.

She considered possible secondary objectives. If Agent Legion remained in enemy hands, they would extract a posthumous dump of his brain contents. The location of the HQ would be compromised. It would be preferable to destroy his head completely to make sure that could not happen. But a quick look confirmed that three black ops plus Nihil himself were congregated at the body. Attacking it would equal likely death.

The trapezoidal opening back to the entrance passageway was to her left, to some twenty meters away. If she got away, she could at least warn the other Agents. Then the mission would not be a complete failure.

She made the decision, and turned left, spraying the rest of the magazine on full auto. Some of the enemies dived into cover, but others just stayed in place, raining bullets and plasma toward her.

Fury ejected the magazine and ran in a zigzag pattern toward the exit. She smelled burning leather as hot plasma seared away parts of her coat. Bullets whistled past her, one nicked her cheek, then she felt impacts hammering to the back plate of her vest. She lost balance and tumbled through the opening.

Ignoring the pain, she rolled on the ground to face the inside of the pyramid, slammed a fresh magazine in, and emptied almost all of it toward the pursuers. At least one black op fell down. Then she forced herself back on her feet, almost falling again as she ran up the curving passageway.

The enemies would certainly follow, and once she was waiting for the airlock, they would easily destroy the submersible with grenades or plasma.

The original had come up with a plan. To cave in the passage. It was a possibility worth trying, though it carried the risk of burying also herself.

Now Fury had only hand grenades left, so it would be trickier.

To win time, she accelerated to the maximum speed she could manage, until the enemies were at least ten seconds away from her. She was already near the pool.

She took a fragmentation grenade, pulled the pin and released the handle, then waited for two seconds. Finally she threw it up in a shallow arc.

It detonated close to the ceiling, just like she had hoped. One large block of stone got dislocated, and fragments rained down, but no cave-in.

At the far end of the passageway, black ops came into view, running fast with their weapons up.

Fury had time for one more grenade.

Again, two seconds of waiting, then the throw.

This time the detonation was accompanied with the low rumble of stone as the ceiling began to collapse, and water started trickling down. There was no time to watch it to the completion: instead she was already running for the submersible.

Mechanically she opened the hatch, climbed in and shut it, then leaped at the controls, throwing switches to bring power on.

She brought the throttle to full reverse, turning toward the entrance slab. Then she put the vehicle to full speed ahead. The hull clashed with another submersible, but it was not a critical hit. Fury saw the camera up on the wall, watching her. She hoped the enemies had not yet blacklisted this craft, or shut down the airlock mechanism.

The entrance began to open. Not yet.

While she waited, Fury recalled the switch for the rear-facing camera. She activated its display, and saw that the cave-in was more severe than she could have hoped for. The enemies certainly would not be getting through immediately.

As soon as the opening was wide enough, she guided the vehicle forward, into the chamber.

The submersible rose in a steep angle. Fury scanned the displays, to see if enemies were giving chase. No-one so far, no other undersea vehicles.

It seemed the collapse had slowed them down properly. That was good. But Fury did not exactly look forward to meeting Hammerfist or anyone else on the platform. The Agents would be too understanding of mission failure.

Back in SCEPTRE she would have been punished harshly, possibly with death. But without a true commanding officer or the control implant, she had made her choice to switch allegiance, because the Agents were now the attacking party, increasing in power, while SCEPTRE only tried to hold on to the power it already had. There was little excitement in that.

Of course, if their Nibiru plan was successful, it would mean harsh times for everyone, possibly a retreat to below ground. Fury knew some of SCEPTRE's subterranean systems: they would be able to sustain life for hundreds or even a few thousands of people, for years to come. At that point it might not be about the Agents vs SCEPTRE any more, as new factions might emerge, and then her allegiance would have to be reconsidered again.

It had started to rain, the skies a roiling mass of grey. As she held the ship's wheel, Blowfish hoped it would not turn into an actual storm. So far the waves were only moderate, doing little to affect the small warship's course.

Nitro and Erik had completely depleted Agent coats just like her, but none had severe injuries. Blowfish had patched up herself while waiting for the guys to check the below decks, then patched them up as they returned. Only three black ops had been waiting below, so it had been easier than she had expected.

They all were bloody and hurting, their coats torn, so they looked like rather sorry excuses for Agents. But hopefully from this point on they would only need to use the ship's weapons, if at all.

There had been no communication from the platform so far. But now Blowfish's earpiece crackled. The transmission was weak, the voice garbled and full of static. She tried hard to discern the words.

"-ammerfist here. Returning with a Zodiac. Enemies possibly – pursuit. Our present location and course –"

Blowfish could not recognize the coordinates and heading Hammerfist gave. She would have to ask him to repeat. But first –

“How did the mission go? All three of you onboard?”

“Could not stop -tivation. Legion is KIA.”

Damn. SCEPTRE had succeeded with their plans, and Ian was down. Of course it could have been even worse, with all of them wiped out, but still Blowfish felt a heavy weight descend on her shoulders. She imagined the world descending to pure blackness already. She needed to listen to some Nargaroth, but none was available.

“Understood. Can you state your location and course again?” This time Blowfish thought she got it, punched in a waypoint to the console, and adjusted the wheel. The ship began to turn slowly.

“What was it?” Erik asked. Only Blowfish's radio was patched in to the ship's communications antenna, so he had not heard Hammerfist.

“Bad news.”

Blowfish took a deep breath. It was useless to withhold information, but the next words would not be exactly easy, even for her cynical and misanthropic nature.

“SCEPTRE managed to activate the pyramid. Ian was killed in action, presumably when trying to stop them. Hammerfist and Jo are returning with a boat.”

Erik looked at Blowfish grimly, without saying a word for a long time.

“Jo will be beside herself with grief,” he broke the silence at last.

“Possibly. We will see.”

Nitro looked at them, his eyes inquisitive. “Is there anything we can do to stop Nibiru now?”

Blowfish knew she could not answer with anything that made sense. And she did not want to give false encouragement. For some time she just looked at the fast moving clouds, and switched on the windscreen wipers as the rain thickened.

"We will see that also."

About fifty minutes later they spotted the tiny black object bobbing on the waves, coming closer to them. Blowfish slowed down the engines and steered to the side to avoid splitting the inflatable speedboat with the warship's bow.

"Take the wheel," Blowfish said to Nitro. "We'll go help them up."

Blowfish and Erik left the bridge through its front door, heading down steel steps to the rain-soaked front deck. Down below, Blowfish saw Hammerfist steer the inflatable beside the ship.

It was too early to see the exact condition of the two Agents returning from the mission.

"Can you climb up?" Blowfish yelled.

Hammerfist shouted back. "No problem. But I'm not sure –"

"Yes," came the emotionless reply from Jo.

Blowfish fastened a rope ladder to the gunwale and threw it down. Hammerfist stayed back and let Jo climb up first. Blowfish observed her to ascend in a rapid, mechanical fashion, almost like a robot. She climbed over to the deck, and now Blowfish could see that her face was bloodied and the coat was just as torn as on them, perhaps even more. She no longer wore the vest, rather a large, also bloody bandage was visible from under her shirt. Her eyes and mouth were an unsettling mask of muted aggression.

While Hammerfist was climbing up in the meanwhile, Erik came forward.

"Jo, I'm sorry," he said in a low, rough voice, and almost managed to put a hand on Jo's shoulder before she grabbed his arm violently and twisted it back.

"I do not need your condolences. The original personality might, but it is almost completely shut-off and can not hear you. In the future, I would prefer to be called 'Fury' and would also prefer the officially registered Agent codename to be changed. But that is not important. What is, is that Agent Legion was left in enemy hands with his brains intact. We must expect post-mortem information extraction. SCEPTRE will come to know everything he knew, including the location of the HQ. We will no longer be safe. Also, though the mission was a failure, I observed two high-ranking officials, Nihil and Tiamat, describing their plans in some detail. I can repeat them word-to-word during debriefing, but first I will need to re-check my injuries. I may require assistance."

Erik's face showed shock and stupefaction: he was unable to reply in any manner. But Blowfish understood that this had been bound to happen at some point ever since December. Given the opportunity of a sufficient trauma, the artificial personality would wrestle control back to itself. As long as it was on their side, it was not an operational concern, but of course Blowfish would rather have seen Jo as herself, even if overcome by grief.

"Sure. You want me to check you?" Blowfish asked, trying to sound as neutral as possible.

"I would prefer Agent Nitro for that, as this is an opportunity to verify whether he still remembers proper field medicine procedures."

"Very well. He's steering the ship now. But be nice to him."

Fury did not reply.

Hammerfist spoke next. "We may not be home free yet. I expect SCEPTRE to be coming after us. We punctured the rest of the Zodiacs and put a few rounds into the engines, but that may not hold them up for long. I suggest we change course toward land immediately."

"We'll do that," Blowfish replied, while reeling the rope ladder up.

They headed to the stairs leading up, and Blowfish could see Erik shaking his head. She could well agree: today was a shitty day to be an Agent, and possibly they would now have nineteen days during which things would turn even worse, until the spring equinox and the possible end of everything.

Nitro was inspecting Fury's wounds, most importantly the burn in her side, in a crew's locker room. Fury observed his hands to be shaking a tiny bit. Some fear was good, to sharpen the mind, but too much would be debilitating.

"Looks to be second-degree. I recommend a fresh bandage and the Agent healing booster drug. Or if it doesn't help and you get a fever, maybe there's more powerful antibiotics on the ship. Then we'll just see until we reach land. If you die, then you die."

"That is good," Fury replied. "Dismissed."

She understood that the Agent mechanic had forced himself to sound more cruel than he actually was, and in reality was still shocked and appalled of the sudden personality change. If he could make the cruelty a real and permanent part of him, he would be on his way to becoming a solid operative. But the damage done by

the original personality, by showing too much empathy during initial training, would possibly require much work to correct.

On a late Monday evening, the fourth of March, the Agents were finally driving back toward the HQ in their vans that had obediently waited at the private airfield.

Moving away to another location was a top priority now. Blowfish also wanted to pay a visit to Grieg Industries again, to see the main server room for herself and check the network for backdoors properly.

Replacement Agent gear was already on its way. Right now thinking about it only made Blowfish think of what could not be replaced. She knew it was unusual for her, as she had taken the deaths of Blackhand and Sarge rather calmly and stoically, but then, neither of them had been her PFY, like Ian.

He had survived through seriously insane odds, but finally his luck had run out. He had found that one bullet, or rather a plasma bolt, that was faster than him. Damn, he of all assassin trainees would have deserved happiness, but now that was not going to happen.

With Nibiru coming, he was possibly better off dead. He would not need to suffer what was yet to come.

Blowfish dragged herself to the HQ's living room, turned on the lights, and booted the computer terminal. A moment later she wondered: why did she do that? Why not just go directly to sleep? What was she going to look up? She could not access the Grieg network from here.

Only a few seconds later she remembered. To listen to Nargarth. She also needed a drink.

The version of "Herbstleyd" from the "Amarok" CD fit her current mood precisely. The slow black metal song began with a long, sustained shriek over a grim but strangely uplifting chord progression. It had been one of Ian's favorites. As the chords repeated themselves several times, Blowfish got a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka from the kitchen, and poured herself a hefty drink. Then she put the song on repeat.

Some minutes later Erik joined him.

"Hey, I need that too."

"Be my guest."

Erik got his own glass and poured a just as large drink for himself, then sat down next to her.

For some time they drank in silence, then Jo – or Fury – walked past them, heading for the firing range. She did not say a word. After she was gone, and the sound of muffled semi-automatic gunfire began, Erik shook his head again.

"Jo's still in there, trapped in her own head. Thinking about it pisses me off to no end," Erik mused and took a sip of the vodka. "But how do you remove the bastard, without killing her, I mean?"

"It's not a bastard. It's female. Therefore 'bitch' is the correct term. Jo herself said that."

"OK. Bitch then. Whatever it is, it deserves to go."

"It probably saved our asses once or twice. Like at

the airfield office.”

They drank some more of their glasses.

“Fuck. I predict we're alcoholics by the time the twentieth day hits. That'd be ironic, if on the last day we find some secret super weapon, a planet killer, but we're all too drunk to aim it at Nibiru,” Erik said.

Blowfish had to let out a snort. The thought was funny, even if disturbing. Damn, she just needed to drink more.

One more gulp, and she felt somehow better. For a moment she was almost able to forget everything. Of course, drinking to forget or to feel better were classic warning signs.

“Well, now that Ian's gone, and let's imagine Jo was herself, would you want to help her feel better?” she asked suddenly.

Damn. That was probably out of line coming from the most senior Agent at the HQ, but the words could not be taken back anymore.

Erik took a longer sip. “That's quite direct. But no, not like that.” His voice was a barely distinguishable grunt.

A silence descended, and Blowfish was almost certain Erik would speak no more.

It was a complete surprise when he resumed.

“Though, I've had opportunity to ponder that before. When she and René were finished. But I thought it just wouldn't be right.”

“You feared destroying your band.”

“Well, to a part. But also – because I knew I was not what she needed. René was a lot like me, strong and pigheaded, but the difference was he never understood that in his case. Ian, on the other hand, he was the troubled, cuddly Hessian she could take care of. And vice

versa. Fuck, you'd think that's easy but try it yourself. Of course he was a killer too, and a damn fine one. I wonder if SCEPTRE programmed him both ways. Or if he was just like that naturally. Fuck. Let's drink to him."

"Yeah. Let's drink to the best PFY ever."

Blowfish poured herself another glass, Erik followed, and they raised the glasses together. She knew this was not exactly responsible Agent activity if she wanted to be moving the HQ, or visiting the Grieg office tomorrow, but she had waged war in a hangover before, both cyberwarfare and conventional. She would be in a good enough condition.

It was odd, how she was seeing whole another side of Erik she would not have believed to exist. One that was much more observant of people, and perhaps even sensitive, than she could be.

Blowfish wanted to ask another thing.

"Well, if you know Jo's not for you, what kind of supernatural being would be?"

Erik seemed to sink into his thoughts, and Blowfish was not completely sure why she had asked. Did she really even want to know?

Finally Erik answered.

"Someone who is strong and completely over the top. Fuck. I think I've just described you."

Blowfish knew to be looking at him in a somewhat odd manner. And they both were drunk. This was not probably going in a good direction.

"I'm not really that over the top. I just hack servers and kill people. I'd prefer to do just the former. But, shall we forget this conversation taking place?"

Fury checked the target. Another perfect group. But still she was not satisfied. It was odd to be in full con-

trol without the mixture of combat drugs she had been constantly on, back when she had been serving SCEPTRE.

Of course she could ask if the Agents had similar substances. Probably they did, but would only use them when they expected action. They would get suspicious and worried, and it would just lead to nowhere.

Rest was another matter: the SCEPTRE scientists had developed a device, a head cap, which would let the brains reach the desired activity level directly. For example delta waves to mimic deep sleep. It utilized a wireless encrypted communication protocol with the control implant, to actually prevent it from triggering the explosive even if the operative appeared unconscious. But here no such device was available. Of course she could relinquish control to the original personality, but feared she would not get complete control back again. Possibly she could just exhaust herself with physical activity, or if that did not help, use sleeping pills or even the tranquilizer dart gun as the last resort.

So far the Agents were extremely cautious of her. Well, so had the traditionally trained black ops to some degree, but there had still been a special bond between them that came from their common fear and loathing toward their masters, from the knowledge that each mistake, no matter how minor, could be fatal. With the Agents there could not be anything like that.

Could she possibly mimic the original personality to such degree that the Agents would not realize it was in fact her? That would possibly require too much of being constantly on her toes, and partially it would be beyond her skills. Plus, there was a code of honor: to be truthful to those she was allied with. The concept of honor was of course rather synthetic and alien, but

there was a practical purpose too: to ensure that her allies would not act unpredictably in the face of danger.

To be honest, she missed the old squad: Hate, Despise and Arrogance on the other fire team, plus Skepticism and Pessimism on hers. Where were they now? Or where was Fear, the injured black op she had replaced? Possibly they all had been killed during the Agents' assault. Fury did not harbor ill will toward her new allies from this: if her old team mates had died, they simply had not been as good as the Agents.

But why had Baphomet, the head scientist, installed the emotion of missing or longing to her programming at all? Was it beneficial for the execution of mission objectives? As far as she was concerned, it could not be.

It was probably the lack of the control implant that let her thoughts wander in an unsettling way. As well as the lack of proper leadership. Dissatisfied with all her meditations so far, she put down the gun, removed the ear protectors and shut off the lights, then walked through the corridor and the living room, which were now dark and silent.

She entered the room which she had occupied with Agent Legion. Was it possible she missed him as well? Well, she had been in control too little of the time, only intruding occasionally. Certainly she did not miss the overt cuteness between the original personality and him. She remembered the fight against him, though, and in that instance he had been a worthy and cunning opponent. She had been beaten fairly, and it was probably the only case of a control implant being removed while the subject remained alive.

All things considered, she did not want the implant back, though she remembered thinking of it as necessary in the beginning. Even if her thoughts wandered

unpleasantly, she was now exceeding her programming, developing beyond it little by little. Even the allegiance shift should not have been possible at all. Baphomet would certainly have been proud of her if he lived.

Tuesday. Blowfish flew the stealth helicopter alone toward the Grieg offices, while Erik, Nitro and Fury were packing stuff up for relocating into another location. The actual destination was still not known: as much as she hated it, she would need to consult Hermann and Mad Dog on the matter.

Probably they would move to wherever Mad Dog was training his Shadow Unit. That meant it was close to the offices.

The hangover was there, but she fought to ignore it.

It was kind of audacious to fly the helicopter in public, and in broad daylight, as it was not registered and they never reported any flight plans. She just had to stay away from the vicinity of airports and other known radar installations. The active camouflage helped somewhat, though it required some serious current when moving and made the machine burn fuel faster.

But to be arrested for breaking aviation laws – with Nibiru about to arrive, it would not make things much worse.

After twenty minutes more of flight, she touched

down on the backyard of the Grieg headquarters, behind a wooden fence. No-one had been in pursuit so far. She let the camouflage stay in passive mode, to show the latest image the hundreds of tiny cameras had recorded from the other side of the fuselage.

Except for the rotors, it was like an odd ice sculpture, and only a little was visible over the fence. Possibly anyone watching from across the road would not even notice it. It had to be good enough.

Blowfish set out to circle the building to the front doors. Again, she was armed, but Hermann knew she would be arriving, and perhaps the guards even remembered her.

In addition to the Desert Eagle she had an RJ45 Etherkiller in her pocket. Using it would be the last resort, though, as any network outage would be detected fast.

She passed through the entrance. Predictably, the metal detector gates blared to life.

"I'm Agent Blowfish. I came to check the server room. You can verify with the CEO," Blowfish said to the receptionist, while the guards looked on.

The receptionist made a hurried phone call.

"Verified. The guards will show you the way."

This time they did not have to enter the lift. Instead the guards led Blowfish through several intersections of corridors on the ground floor, until they were in front of the server room door.

"The senior administrator, Nathan, will be inside. He will give you the access you need."

The door opened to the inside, and Blowfish saw a thin, medium-height man wearing round glasses. He had a long brown ponytail, jeans, and a black shirt with the text *ADOLF HITLER EUROPEAN TOUR 1939-1945*.

"The shirt's not very popular with everyone. But they don't see me outside the server room a lot."

The guards left them. Blowfish went in, closing the door behind her. The server room was a lot larger than what she was used to, with white walls and ceiling, and a gray tiled floor. In the middle there were two long rows of racks filled with switches and rack servers, and a U-shaped table circled the side, with various desktop machines on it. There was a loud whine from all the equipment, and the air was almost unpleasantly cold thanks to the large Carrier cooler high up on the wall.

"Hermann said I'm authorized to give you root access to whatever server you need. He also said you'd be armed. Can you show me your weapon?"

Blowfish took out the Etherkiller and laid it on the table.

"Neat. I've thought of building one too."

Blowfish was not sure of what she exactly thought of the sysadmin. And it was suspicious she had been given root access that easily. But the sysadmin was of course not guilty for that.

So that she could eventually get to leave, it was better to start working. She started from the code repository server, which was a Unix machine, checking all the system logs, even the file system journal. It was clear this system had been installed from scratch just a week and a half ago.

"Was the backdoor on just this server?" she asked.

"Yeah, we found it with Eddie. Majestic had been given external access, and they used a buffer overflow exploit to root it. However, I'm positive that they did not get to compromise any of the other servers. This machine was reinstalled, and all passwords for all accounts on all servers were changed after that."

“Yes, I see.”

Ten minutes later Blowfish was sure this machine was indeed clean. The network logs did not show any unnatural outside accesses.

Then she went on to the mail server, the file server and the application servers, working with stoic thoroughness which was amplified by the hangover. She was quite sure she had missed nothing, as everything seemed clean. It had to be that after the initial compromise and cleanup, further leaks had happened through social engineering.

Damn. The leak could even have been on Global Sword's end, though that would have been rather evil. Would they actually have wanted SCEPTRE to come and kill one of their crews? Well, perhaps for the right price.

Suddenly the door opened and Hermann came in, using his own key.

“Nathan, would you excuse us for a moment?” he asked.

“Sure, but don't let her plug the etherkiller in.”

The sysadmin made to leave. First the root access, and now this? What Hermann wanted to tell her? This was possibly not developing in any good direction, not any better than her and Erik's drunken conversation. Possibly even much worse.

Hermann cleared his throat.

“First, let me explain you something. You will not find any further backdoors on our servers. They have been checked, and re-checked again. But I let you check also for yourself, just to build trust.”

The words seemed to be full of foreboding. Blowfish was almost ready to grab her Desert Eagle.

“What are you aiming at?” she asked sharply.

“Perhaps I should start with the background, so that

you don't make hasty conclusions in anger. You should be aware that things never are black or white. There is a balance that should be maintained. When the initial backers first found out the Agents, they also had been aware of SCEPTRE for some time."

"Only aware? Or backing them as well?"

"The latter."

The foreboding developed into full-blown anger. What goddamned backstabbing and double-faced charade was Hermann playing? With a quick reflexive motion Blowfish drew the Desert Eagle and aimed it at his head.

"And that has been going on the whole time?" she asked. She could barely contain her hatred.

Hermann nodded slowly.

"Traitor. Say one reason I shouldn't shoot you right now."

"Please just calm down. You would not gain anything by doing that. You're not a killer at heart."

Blowfish took a deep breath, but held the pistol up. Her finger was still inside the trigger guard. It would only take one squeeze to blow Hermann's brains out.

"When we found out about you Agents, we were ecstatic. Because right from the start, SCEPTRE had grown almost unmanageably powerful. But we knew that backing their sometimes questionable endeavors, and even cooperating with them, would benefit military technology, and ultimately all science. And if we would not have helped them, someone else would, but they might have been much less altruistic. We intend to release everything to the wider scientific and technical community when the time is right. In any case – when we found you, we knew you would be the perfect counterbalancing force. At that point we started up multiple

new research projects, to build Agent equipment to match and exceed SCEPTRE equipment. But like I said, we had to keep monitoring the overall balance carefully. You could say it was one big, very important game, with us as the game masters.”

“That makes me sick to my core.”

“You might not understand immediately, but I hope that you will understand with time. Now, the time is certainly right for you to grow more powerful, and to ramp up research and production. It's just that first you had to be tested. Because only by going through difficulties you would be purified, like a diamond is created at high pressure. SCEPTRE had no such difficulties in the start, and they became a monstrosity, with no true goals except retaining their own power with whatever means necessary. But you, because you have seen both their evil, and the complacency of the law and government, you have the perfect opportunity to grow into the true protectors of this nation, or perhaps even the whole world, who will act when the governments are unwilling or too weak to do so.”

Blowfish considered the words hard, though they mostly rang empty to her.

“Well, we failed at the pyramid. Now SCEPTRE will succeed with their most extreme plans. Are you happy now? Or was that another test?”

“You must understand that by revealing to them that you would be arriving at the Global Sword airfield, I intended only to prepare you. Just the right kind of setback, that would sharpen you and increase your chances of success. I certainly did not hope for you to fail. And if I understood right, you passed that setback with no real trouble.”

“Bastard. But now what?”

"Now is the time for your ultimate test. I don't have any real answers to you. But if you are truly worth the mantle, you will find a way to turn the situation around, prevent Nibiru from completing the pole shift, and defeat SCEPTRE for once and for all."

Slowly Blowfish lowered the Desert Eagle. Still she did not accept Hermann's reasoning in the slightest.

"Is this public knowledge now? Can I tell every Agent that you're a double-crossing piece of scum?"

"I hope you will use discretion. If you believe that knowing the truth will help someone, by all means do so. But for others it might be too much at this point."

Blowfish put the large handgun back to its holster, then picked up the unused Etherkiller from the table. Perhaps she should fry some sub-network just for the fun of it.

But she found she did not have the necessary spirit for that. Using the sacred device here would be wasting it. She just wanted out of this place.

Without saying one further word to Hermann, Blowfish left. One guard was still stationed outside, perhaps ready to rush in if he heard an actual gunshot, and he proceeded to escort her out. He surely had to be ignorant of the whole game Grieg Industries was playing. Just a foot soldier.

There was still the matter of relocating the HQ. But she would not want to discuss it with the CEO. Though she did not exactly like him either, contacting Mad Dog directly would be several degrees more pleasant.

Now when she thought of it more, she knew she should have expected a revelation like this. It had been just too convenient to have two covert organizations, both with high-tech equipment, fighting each other. She should have questioned Grieg much earlier.

She walked to the back yard, willing herself to calm down. Though she was by now a moderately experienced pilot, the smaller stealth helicopter still had a temper. Flying it in anger always carried the risk of a fatal accident.

Blowfish did not exactly like the way things were, but she could tolerate it. At least seeing Mad Dog and his Shadow Unit continuously, with their predictable and somewhat stupid machismo, could make her forget Hermann's treachery. Of course it could not make her forget about the approaching Nibiru, and it should not.

It was late Wednesday. Thirteen days to go. She had been scanning the news with much more interest than usual, to search for any confirmation of Nibiru's influence. There had been a powerful earthquake in China, and another in Brazil. Near the first and second anti-cosmic pyramids. At least in her current mental state it could not be taken as just coincidence.

Now about half of the old HQ's contents had been moved to this new location. It was much larger again, reminding of the place they had used before SCEPTRE's attack in December. The Shadow Unit was growing constantly, now numbering over fifty, so there was not much free space despite the size. Tomorrow they would move the other half, and Blowfish would fly the second stealth helicopter here together with Fury. She did not

exactly look forward to it, but they were the two most qualified pilots now.

Erik had moved the band equipment all by himself. That meant he possibly believed in some kind of future where they would be of use. At this point Blowfish was not exactly sure what she believed in. She kept searching for all possible clues, of possible super weapons they could use against Nibiru, but had remained empty-handed so far.

At first there was just blackness.

Then the pain entered, but the blackness went on.

Finally there was excruciatingly bright light, hissing and beeping noises, and the pain.

Was this Hell? Was he dead?

His sight was still too hazy to discern actual shapes.

Somehow he thought that it could not be Hell, because then he would have seen everything clearly from the start, to not miss one second of torment, or even one abominable vision.

That meant he was possibly alive, but he could not still exactly confirm it. Now the pain seemed to fade, and briefly he slipped back into the black, inviting realm of unconsciousness. But a repeating, insistent voice brought him back.

"Time to wake up, trainee," the voice said. It was a firm but not unfriendly tone, vaguely familiar.

Reluctantly he opened his eyes, and the blackness was again replaced by over-bright light. The pain was still there, perhaps a little less severe than last time.

"He is awake," another voice said. "Initializing the display now."

Something lit up in the corner of his field of view.

8:00:00

Vaguely he understood that it was a clock. Hours, minutes and seconds.

The seconds started to tick down.

7:59:59

7:59:58

7:59:57

"Welcome to your resurrection, trainee Necro. Do you see the numbers?" the first voice said.

The voice that came out of his mouth was a barely intelligible rasp. His throat was much too dry.

"Yes..."

"That is your Master Life Clock. It is the most essential ingredient of your re-training and re-integration to SCEPTRE. The amount of time remaining can be increased and decreased based on how you do. When it reaches zero, your heart will stop, and you die. But this time it will be final."

Actual comprehension of those words came some seconds after they had been uttered. It sounded like absolute cruelty, total domination of the person being trained. First he thought he was having an out-of-the-body experience, that it was someone else the voice was talking to, and someone else's clock, but at last, with horror gnawing at his soul, he understood it was his own life that was ticking away second by second.

He tried to focus with his eyes, to see who had spoken to him. It was still much too unclear. He just had to ask.

"Who are you?" The voice was not much better this time.

"Nihil. High priest of Chaos and Nothingness, in case you don't remember, though the full name is a bit unnecessary for my liking. But you will not see me for much of your training, as I have other business to at-

tend to. Your first task is to gather strength and leave this room. You have as much time as the display shows. Any time remaining will carry on to your subsequent tasks. I would not recommend to fall asleep.”

He heard footsteps: Nihil and the technician who had activated the timer made to leave the room. A couple of seconds more, and he was left alone. Speaking, and even thinking, had left him exhausted. He was most likely lying on a hospital bed or gurney, but could not exactly verify yet. The darkness of sleep was enticing, but could he risk it? He might not ever wake up again, or he might wake with just an hour or even less remaining, too late to will his muscles into moving again.

He tried to move. He tried to see. But everything seemed to demand too much energy, which he did not have. The task was simple enough, but still exceedingly cruel for his current state.

Even if he was alive, this certainly was his Hell.

But who was he? Nihil had said he was Trainee Necro. No doubt his SCEPTRE codename. But that was unsatisfying. He had to have been something more, before he had died. But for now trying to remember was also too much of a strain.

Yes. No use to waste strength on unnecessary mental activity. Time to focus purely on the physical. He tried to concentrate, to move just some part of his body. His left arm and hand – yes, they moved at least a bit. What about his right then?

It moved also, but he was alerted by a steely racket that repeated each time he tried to move the hand. He turned his head to the right, trying his utmost to focus, and then he saw enough to understand that his right hand was handcuffed to the metal frame of the bed.

He was trapped, and the seconds kept ticking down.

7:55:35

7:55:34

7:55:53

Damn. Would he fail already the first test, and die? What would the solution be? Just to wait? Perhaps his masters would open the handcuffs when it was time. But could he rely just on that? It was a maddening game where they held all the answers and he had none. Only now he possibly understood the true depths of Hell he had fallen into.

Blowfish saw Nitro arrive into the new HQ at around midnight, driving the Ford Ka. She envied him. He was blissfully ignorant of Hermann's treachery, and it would not be beneficial to tell him of that now, because of his junior status. He was not even exactly afraid of Nibiru's approach, or at least he hid it extremely well.

Nitro had produced the list of parts he needed for modifying the car, and Hermann had gladly agreed with everything. The new Agent's training was mostly complete by now, as he had already seen action. As long as they did not have anything more urgent to do, he could just as well spend his time customizing the tiny hatchback.

Blowfish was doubtful: the vehicle seemed terribly light and vulnerable to be of any use in battle. The M230 30mm chain gun – like on the Apache gunship – which Nitro had boasted to be installing sounded impressive enough, if he could just pull it off. Then there were other, very odd items on the list, like Hello Kitty toys of various sizes. Damn. Blowfish just hoped that Nitro would prioritize and start with the bigger engine, the chain gun, and the armor.

He understood to have fallen asleep at some point. Now the amount of time on the display was much less:

3:19:41

He recalled Nihil's words: any time remaining would carry over to the next tasks. Would he now have too little time for what was to come next? He was completely at their mercy, and everything that was to come after this room was an unknown.

He tried moving his right hand again.

Now it moved freely. The handcuff had been taken off during his sleep. So it had been a way to unnerve him, to make him panic. They had failed in that. But – at what point had it been taken off? After one hour? Two hours? He had wasted almost five.

The next step was to leave the bed.

At this point his vision had improved a bit. He could see his legs, covered by light blue pants, the rest of the bed, the bright lamps in the ceiling, and the opposite wall, oppressively white. He looked to the sides and understood the room was completely featureless. All the walls were alike. There did not seem to be a door anywhere. Finding where it was hidden would likely be the next challenge.

He remembered something more now, that it was Nihil himself who had shot him right through the heart. But yet he was alive.

Suddenly it dawned on him, as he looked down at his bare chest. There was a long scar. He had been operated on, with a heart transplant in place. And it came with a timer attached. He wondered how it would exactly work: would the system pass a fatal current through him when the clock reached zero?

But it was time to stop thinking and start moving. To reach the exit he first had to leave the bed. But how? He

tried moving his legs, but they had little mobility. It felt like if he was almost paralyzed from waist down. He wondered if that was due to the heart operation, or if SCEPTRE had deliberately pumped him full of drugs that would dissolve only when the clock was close to zero.

Damn them all. He wanted to scream.

He tried to, but the voice that came out was just an inefficient croak that hurt his throat.

Enraged, he thought he would just roll out of the bed. It was possibly not the brightest idea, but right now it was the only one he had. It was as if touching the floor would magically make his immobile legs recover faster. Likely, it would hurt. But perhaps the pain would help him focus.

From thoughts into action. Using his upper body muscles that already obeyed him, he rolled onto the bed's edge, then right over it.

He collided with the hard linoleum floor. Indeed, not a bright idea. The pain was terrible, and it did not seem to go away. Instead it grew and made his head swim, and again he lost consciousness.

His vision faded back in. Again, time had been shaved off from the mission clock. Master Life Clock was too dramatic, so he rather referred to it in his own way.

1:47:50

1:47:49

1:47:48

A little less than two hours to find out how he would actually leave the room. And if his legs would actually allow him to do that.

When he attempted it at first, it was just as dismal failure as in the bed. No lower body movement at all. But little by little, his feet started to move, then his legs also. Just a few inches at first, but the range of motion increased with each passing minute.

He also remembered a lot more now, and felt rage gathering force in his head like a thunderstorm.

His name was Ian. He was an Agent of Metal, but was now in SCEPTRE's hands, as they imagined they could re-train him, to make him finish his unfinished assassin training.

Fuck! He would not give them that pleasure.

Except – then he would die. He would only gain more lifetime by complying exactly with whatever they wanted him to do. And only if he succeeded. Fail, and the timer would just keep ticking down, or even drain faster.

He rolled around on the ground, lying with his belly down. A couple of minutes more and he could actually try getting up.

More memories hit him. His last mission, during which Nihil had shot him. He had been trying to stop SCEPTRE from activating the second pyramid, which would steer the planet Nibiru on a collision course with Earth. There had been another Agent with him. Jo. The one he loved more than anything. If she had escaped the pyramid, she had to believe he was dead now. The other possibilities were unthinkable. Rage mixed with anxiety, sadness and longing. The misunderstanding had to be corrected, whatever the cost.

But how? He had to escape, but the clock would always be ticking down. Would he have to try to collect enough time, by successfully completing tasks, until he had enough to reach the Agent HQ? But somehow he knew SCEPTRE would have a remote-controlled shut-down switch that could just make the clock deplete to zero, killing him instantly.

Fuck. The situation was bad.

Time to get moving. Left leg first, then the right. He was now in a kneeling position. He moved his arms up next, reaching for the bed's steel frame for support. The following step was to winch himself up to stand, but that might take significant effort, so he decided to wait a bit. He still had plenty of time.

1:35:05

While he gathered strength, time passed quickly.

1:32:05

Enough time had been wasted. It was now or never. He pulled up with all of his strength.

It was a dismal failure. As a whole, his body did not have sufficient strength yet. He only managed to lift his head to the level of the bed, then he fell down again.

Shit. He had to stop failing right now.

There was a certain phrase he had used. If he could only remember it, it would make all the difference in the world. But it seemed lost for him now.

He concentrated to his utmost. He dissociated. Finally he thought he remembered the phrase.

Focus! You're a killer!

Yes, that was it. Much better. He at least imagined strength filling his veins, his arms, his legs. He pulled up again, and this time he managed to lift himself up against the bed, resting against it, but still standing. He was breathing heavily, and pain in his chest and everywhere else was flaring up again. He waited a bit for his breathing to stabilize. At least he knew now he would not fall back down again. Now the only significant hurdles were to actually walk, and then to find the exit door.

1:29:55

1:29:54

1:29:53

Taking very slow steps at first, he walked toward the wall, the one he thought Nihil and the other had exited through. Nothing happened. No secret door opened, even though he went through the whole side, from one corner to next.

The next step was to simply check all the walls. He did so, returning eventually to his bed on the other

side. But there was no visible exit, no recognizable cracks or notches in any of the four walls. Was it the floor then? A hidden pressure plate? Or perhaps even several? What if the floor tiles had to be stepped on in a complex sequence that was unknown to him? The possible combinations were uncountable.

Perhaps everything was an illusion? His life had actually ceased, and this was just some nightmare created by his fading brain activity. But – it should not have lasted for so long. And the pain had certainly felt very real.

He had to think positively. Just one plate. Yes. Even SCEPTRE would not make his first task ridiculously hard. If they wanted him re-integrated, they actually wanted him to succeed and stay alive.

He only needed to find the right tile.

He started going through the room methodically, starting from the corner with his bed, going from the one edge to the other, then switching to the next row of tiles.

At the middle of the room something clicked. He felt the tile go down slightly below his bare feet.

A low mechanical whir of a large electric motor started, and all the walls began to descend, while the ceiling and the floor remained in place. Success!

But he could not understand what was beyond the walls. Just a gray-white, swirling fog, that seemed to extend into infinity. What on Earth? Still, there was no choice than to leave toward the fog. He started walking toward the edge, cautiously first but then breaking into a slow jog, suddenly afraid that the walls might close again.

When he stepped out of the the tiled floor and into the fog, he understood that there was nothing under-

neath. He began to fall, accelerating at a nauseating 1 G.

Then everything went black for a second, and he felt like a weak electric shock pass through him.

Next something, like a mask, was forcibly ripped off his face, and he saw again. In fact his vision was now much clearer than it had been in the white room. He was sitting in a steel chair in what seemed to be a large, brightly lit laboratory, a computer terminal in front of him. At least for now his arms and legs were held in place by metal restraints.

A guard in a dark black op uniform placed the removed headgear onto the computer table, then left Ian's field of view. It was like the upper half of a balaclava but without holes for eyes, made from black rubber, with roughly a centimeter thick electric cable attached to the back.

What he had experienced at first had been just SCEPTRE's virtual world. Absu.

However, the display remained in the corner of his eye, the seconds ticking down. The amount of time remaining had carried exactly from the virtual world to the real.

1:19:31

Next he understood his head felt oddly cool, and he sensed the breeze of the air conditioning. He moved a little from side to side and confirmed the feeling. The bastards had vandalized his hair, shaved his head bare! That alone would require harsh retribution, but of course he could not risk his life on such matter, yet.

"It was impressive, no?" a familiar voice from behind him called. "The rest of your training will happen in the real world, though. At least until as long as this laboratory remains habitable."

Nihil walked into view.

"But like I said, I can not waste much time here. Though I would almost like to. Instead, someone else you know will oversee the rest of your training."

Ian felt a cold sense of foreboding. Anyone he knew from SCEPTRE would be bad news. Though most of them were dead. Still he wanted to know something else before Nihil left, though it was possible he would refuse to answer.

"What did you exactly do after I was down?"

"You were placed in a cryogenic container until you could be operated on. Practically, you were clinically dead for at least six hours. Very experimental tech, but it worked."

Unbelievable. Reviving a frozen person should not be possible yet. But before Ian could think about it for too long, an elevator pinged at the other end of the room. The doors opened, and Ian saw a man in an electric wheelchair enter the laboratory. It was profoundly shocking to watch him.

He did not have feet: the legs possibly were just withered stalks under the neatly pressed, but shorter than normal black trousers. The face was grotesquely mutilated and burned, possibly by acid. The mouth was heavily lopsided, but the long, thin nose and the authoritative gaze remained just like Ian had last seen him. He still wore his white scientist's coat with pride.

Baphomet.

The head of Science, whom the Agents had left as fodder for the experimental creatures in SCEPTRE's laboratory back in December.

"I will leave you two now," Nihil said, walking away.

Baphomet drove his wheelchair right in front of Ian. The scientist smelled of disinfectant, of medications, perhaps even death itself.

He spoke with a deep, calm voice, but there was possible lingering hate beneath: "I have developed much of the training program. But you are the first actual test subject. Therefore I can not be sure if all the tasks are completable in the time limit given. I have a policy that if you beg, I may give you more time, but that will happen only once. After that you are on your own. I have a remote control that allows me to increase or decrease the remaining time, but I prefer to let the training program run its course without unnecessary intervention. There is also a panic button which will stop your heart immediately. Soon we will test it, so that you know what it will feel like. It will naturally be restarted immediately after."

Fuck. Ian was reeling from the words. This was beyond insanity.

"You may now be thinking of stealing the remote, but let me tell you: it will not work. It uses biometric identification, and furthermore will be able to detect if the owner is under duress, so don't think about trying to press my fingers down on the plus button. Also, the timer has a maximum limit of 24 hours. This means that eventually, when your training is complete, and you go on longer missions, you will be accompanied with a superior officer who will have a similar remote. It will of course be in your best interest to protect him at all costs. But back to your training – there also are proximity triggers which will immediately activate the panic stop function, if you try to leave the training grounds without permission."

"How will you actually stop and restart my heart?"

"Easily. It is mechanical. Much stronger than your previous one. It will practically last forever, using your own body electricity, as long as you eat in a healthy

manner. Adaptive nano-machines form a shell around it to avoid tissue rejection. It is running a sophisticated, highly encrypted and multiply redundant firmware program which deals with adjusting the beat according to your body's current needs, as well as maintaining the time counter and encrypted communications with the remotes and the proximity sensors."

Another new level of insane weirdness had been revealed. A metal heart. It just did not seem to stop this day. Thinking about a computer program deciding his life and death made him feel pure anger again: he wanted to scream at Baphomet. But it might carry an immediate and severe punishment.

"Now, shall we test the panic function? After that I will release the restraints and your training will begin properly."

It was probably going to hurt.

Ian saw the tiny remote in Baphomet's right hand. He pressed one equally tiny button, and immediately Ian felt that something was wrong. The slow, steady hammering in his chest ceased.

Some seconds later he became aware of a burning in his lungs, as he took a breath that was of no use. The burning began to spread, as his vision and hearing were fading away. Meanwhile Baphomet just stared at him with a blank expression, the crooked mouth unmoving.

Had the scientist wanted to kill him all along, using this demonstration as an excuse? Ian's thoughts tried to race, but they were slowing down, and a blackout threatened.

Finally the scientist pressed another button, and Ian returned from the brink. He took several deep, gasping breaths, and the the mechanical heart beat wildly for some time.

“Now you know how hitting zero feels,” Baphomet said. “I’m releasing the restraints next. Stand up when you think you can, but don’t waste too much time. You are already below par at this point.”

The restraints slid open with sharp, metallic sounds. Ian certainly wanted to strangle the head scientist, or to feed him to beasts again, but trying would be fatal.

He remembered the torture session conducted by Black Avenger, and the captured black op’s words came back to him: “If you knew about the methods we now use for our training, you’d run to your mama crying.”

Indeed.

This was beyond anything that had happened at the old training facility, beyond the worst nightmares he could have imagined.

The actual training started with a memory game Ian had to play on a large touchscreen in the laboratory. The objective was to simply turn two cards with abstract images, and every correctly discovered pair would give him more lifetime. Each wrong attempt reduced time. Clearing a screen gave bonus time. At first it was easy, starting with only ten pairs, but the amount increased, until finally the cards were rather small and there were two hundred of them.

Due to his advanced memory, enhanced by the original training, it was not particularly difficult. He understood that this challenge had been rigged to be easy, as the time bonuses were much larger than the penalties, to let the trainee gather extra time for the coming challenges.

When he finished the last screen, the clock now read:

5:21:47

“You may stop and go to sleep whenever you feel you have collected enough time. The training then continues when you wake up. You will also have your first

meal then. I recommend leaving at least two hours available after waking up,” Baphomet said, while the black op guards just looked on, saying nothing.

“Can I return to this challenge?” Ian asked.

“No. Each task, except one, can only be taken once. Soon you will move to physical and combat exercises, this is just to get you started.”

“What's the exception?”

“It's a game of chance, over there,” Baphomet said, pointing to a small touchscreen at the back of the lab. “You pick a square either from the left or the right. The correct one is random. Each right guess gains you five minutes. Each wrong guess takes away ten.”

Clearly, it was a sadistic game where one would only lose over time. Unless – there was a pattern he could figure out. If it was a pseudo-random generator he had read about during his preparation to the Innovativi3D position, the sequence could be deduced given enough data. But without a computer it would be insanely difficult, and he could not try out the possibilities without actually gambling with his life.

The next task was seemingly a game of chance too. Ian had to put on a head cap which would read signals from his brains, the screen would show him an image which he had to concentrate on, then the image would vanish and be replaced by one supposedly constructed from his brain output. If the two images matched sufficiently, it was a correct answer and he would gain time. Supposedly, he could play this one as long as he wanted, but when he decided to stop, he would no longer be able to return.

There was a lousy or random chance of success, but this challenge did not take away time for a wrong answer. Ian kept going on until he had acquired over eight

hours, then he was ready to go to sleep. By now Baphomet was no longer in the lab.

"Where do I sleep?" Ian asked one of the guards. The black op said nothing, but pointed to a small room adjacent to the lab. There was a filthy mattress inside, a hole in the floor which smelled of a sewer and apparently was his toilet, a faucet on the wall, and a digital alarm clock.

The room was cold: like in the virtual world, Ian had the blue pants on, bare feet, and no shirt. No blanket here. He was hungry, but likely food was not negotiable, and judging from how talkative the guards were, any attempt would be futile. He drank some water from the faucet and laid himself down on the mattress. Even with his eyes closed, the time display did not vanish, but kept ticking down.

He could tell that sleep might not come easily.

Thursday. The old, small temporary Agent HQ was now certifiably devoid of anything valuable. There was only some food that had went bad.

Blowfish had piloted the stealth helicopter here, and now they would return, with her flying it back, and Fury piloting the other that had been waiting inside the helipad. The rear compartments of both machines held a few boxes with the remaining ammunition and grenades, as well as stacks of targets for the firing range. Mad Dog's HQ already had more than enough of all those, but Blowfish wanted to be completionist.

"Will you now activate a self-destruct system?" Fury asked as they walked to the helicopters, standing on the forest road a fifty meters away from the entrance.

"It doesn't have one. That would have been sweet, though."

Blowfish found it interesting that she could almost have a conversation with the artificial assassin, without constantly thinking of how odd it was. Perhaps her brain imagined it was just Jo behaving in an odd manner after Ian's death.

The entry passageway to the car garage was open. As the place was clean, what she was about to do held little practical purpose, but again, she wanted to tie up all possible loose ends. And to just blow up something to ease her mind momentarily. She climbed to the cockpit, selected rockets and fired, aiming at the ceiling of the passageway.

The detonations of the twin rockets sounded very satisfying. Rocks and debris began to fall from above, until the entrance was completely blocked.

That was good enough. Time to go.

Ian woke up to the alarm clock beeping: at least this night it had worked like it should. But he wondered if the battery was old and he was supposed to get fresh ones somewhere. Perhaps by doing some degrading favors to the guards, possibly even sexual in the worst case.

2:05:38

2:05:37

2:05:36

Pretty much how he had planned it to go, though one could set the alarm time only approximately. Now he was even more hungry, and still rather tired.

Baphomet was still not there when he got out into the laboratory. The guards pointed him to a dish on a nearby table: it had a mostly colorless soup in it. It was cold, likely prepared at some random time without regard for when he would actually wake up.

For sick humor, Ian imagined it was from Purexo. It tasted terrible, but there possibly was not going to be any other food for now, so he had no choice. And he had to eat well enough to keep the mechanical heart going.

Fuck. The training was evil to the nth degree. And if he was the first subject like Baphomet had said – everything was uncertain. He might just die after failing some challenge that could not even be completed, after his one-time mercy refill had been used up.

Baphomet appeared from the elevator, wheeling himself close.

“Good. You have eaten. We begin this day with a finger dexterity test. It will be useful if you end up as a black op clerk, compiling mission reports and filing requests instead of seeing action.”

The scientist led him to a large flat-panel monitor and a standard QWERTY keyboard. The actual computer case was nowhere to be seen.

“Follow the on-screen prompts. Flawless execution will easily allow you bonus time, which you will need. Oh, and you will need all ten fingers. Hit ESC to pause or abort.”

Sudden terror took hold of Ian's mind. He had no motion in his left hand pinky. Would this be the end already?

“My left pinky doesn't move. Your black op friend Lilith did that to me,” Ian said in protest.

Baphomet replied nothing, just pushed the joystick on his chair and moved out of the way.

The finger dexterity test started easy enough. The objective was simply to type the words and sentences shown on the screen quickly enough, and without any mistakes. Based on extra speed, one could rack up several minutes of bonus time per each sentence, perhaps

fifteen at a maximum. A mistake, or failing to type quick enough, would take ten minutes off the clock.

Soon the sentences became longer and more challenging. Ian was barely hanging on without the left little finger. He was now losing more time than he was gaining.

Finally the task turned to impossibly difficult, and Ian failed several times in a row, until only a little time remained.

0:05:43

0:05:42

0:05:41

The next mistake would kill him. Quickly he pressed the ESC key, shaking all over.

"I can't complete," he said to Baphomet.

"That's not begging. And I can not make the challenge easier, I may only give you more time if I choose to. But first, I wish to tell you a little story. Once there was a husband and wife, who loved each other much and wanted to become parents. But the man appeared to be infertile, and they were rather poor, so they could not afford the doctor's appointments. That is where we stepped in."

Ian could see where this was going, and it was not pleasant in the slightest. But as far as he knew, his parents had been SCEPTRE-cooperating scum in any case, so his actual biological origin mattered little. Still, he had no choice but to listen.

"At our clinic the insemination would come with no cost, with only two strings attached. First, the donor would be specified by us, and the child would be placed in our training if found suitable. If not suitable, we would not do anything cruel, just leave them alone in their happiness. But it turned out, as time passed, that

the child continued to top the scores in every rating criteria, such as out-of-the-box thinking, reflexes, and proneness to violence. It was clear that he was to become one of our finest assassins. But then, some Agents in armor coats decided to interfere, thinking they're the heroes, burning down the training facility. Here we are then, much later, trying to repair the damage and bring things to a satisfactory conclusion, but with much more modern and straightforward principles. No more rituals, no more unnecessary pain, just the individual's simple imperative to stay alive."

0:04:05

0:04:04

0:04:03

"You might want to hurry up, or the training will be left permanently unfinished," Ian replied.

There was a disturbingly long pause.

"Hm. That would be one kind of a result, though I agree it would be a waste. For an old, fragile man like me, perhaps it would even be too much to take, the death of one's own son."

Fuck. The darkness instantly grew much deeper. Killing the head scientist had just become Ian's top priority imperative, possibly exceeding even stopping Nibiru, reuniting with Jo, or surviving.

"So, if you want to continue the training, you must say: please save my life, father. And be convincing," Baphomet said last.

"Fuck you."

For some time the scientist replied nothing. The seconds kept ticking down.

"Alternatively I can also end it right here, without you having to wait out the remaining three minutes. What is it going to be?"

Ian took a deep breath. There was no choice if he wanted to keep fighting, keep waiting for a chance to do just what he had decided.

"Please – save my life, father." He spat out the last word with derision.

"Very well. And remember, this is the only refill."

The minutes on the display started to increase, until Ian had a little over two hours again. Back to the starting point. But would he fare any better now? His pinky would not magically start moving any better, even if he had a new chance.

Before starting the challenge again, Ian took his time, trying to will his pinky to move. No luck.

But what could he do instead? He tried using his ring finger in place, darting quickly to the left whenever the pinky would be needed. It had to be an extremely quick motion, as the other fingers might be needed in their original positions for the next characters.

Finally he thought he had it down good enough. It was simple: he would try again, and if he failed this time, it would be permanently over. A stoic resolve came over him, granting him some calmness.

He pressed the space bar to start.

Most of the short words and sentences were the same as on the last time, so he tried to rack up as much extra time as he could, aiming for the maximum fifteen minute bonus.

A few times Ian got it.

When the difficulty ramped up, he started using the finger replacement tactic immediately, even if it would not have been strictly needed. So far, he seemed to be doing fine.

He had over six hours on the display now, and had not made one mistake yet.

But now the challenge began to reach such levels that ten fingers were practically required. He darted to the left faster, but mistakes started racking up, costing ten minutes each time.

The speed and complexity increased further. It was possibly the maximum now. Quickly he was down to three hours, then two. His tactic was not enough. He did not know the ending criteria: was it enough successes in a row on the highest speed, or just surviving for a certain number of sentences?

More mistakes.

One hour left.

Finally the challenge ended. It seemed to be the latter. Ian was completely exhausted, but he had survived.

"What's next?" he asked Baphomet, who had been observing close by.

"This marks the end of the initial memory and reflex phase. Next is an obstacle course. The guards will show you the way."

Obstacle course? Ian had no sense of the actual passage of time, but he felt like he needed a rest already. But with one hour left it would end fatally. He had to go on.

One option was to try to gamble time, but it could only end badly too. The odds were against him, and he could not crack the random sequence without outside aid.

Fury was disappointed. She had thought Mad Dog's men, the Shadow Unit, could have offered a similar opportunity for bonding as the SCEPTRE squad. But it was not going to happen.

The first problem was that they were not really soldiers. Though they practiced on the range and in the virtual reality combat simulation and had plenty of physical exercise each day, they lacked discipline sorely. She was a senior Agent and most of them were not, but still crude remarks and advances was mostly all that she got from them. She decided to rather stay with Blowfish, Erik and Nitro, though it was not very pleasant either.

"For fuck's sake, let her out already," Erik said for the nth time. "Jo's stronger than you think, she can deal with Ian being KIA. And we all will support her."

"This matter has been discussed already," Fury replied. "As long as the Nibiru threat is ongoing, I must remain in full control to ensure maximum probability of mission success."

That was not really the truth, but she knew that the real reason – she just wanted to stay in control – would have appeared even less sympathetic.

"Hm. I suppose I just have to accept that," Erik snorted.

"Yes. It is better that way for everyone. In the meantime, you should let me take part in whatever you are doing. I would like to drink with you."

She had observed that the Agents were spending much of each evening drinking alcohol. Blowfish and Erik preferred hard liquor, while Nitro would drink beer when he was not modifying the car. Or sometimes he did both at the same time.

There was a possibility that passing out from heavy intoxication would make her lose control. Therefore she would need to monitor her condition closely.

"Just don't destroy all the vodka," Erik replied.

The indoor obstacle course was quite standard. It contained high and low walls, ladders, monkey bars, water obstacles – all the ordinary stuff. The sadistic twist was at the finish line: a touch screen would ask a random multiple choice question, for example on weapons trivia. Only by answering correctly after finishing the trainee would gain more time. A wrong answer would drain ten minutes and force him to start the course from the beginning.

Ian was now running the course for the fifth time, and had only gotten two questions correct so far. He had a little over two hours on the clock now, and his muscles were sore and cramping. At least he had a black op trainee's light gray uniform on him now, instead of just the pants.

He wondered how many more times he would have to run the course until he had enough on the clock to sleep again. Of course, he could try to expend just the bare minimum energy required, barely getting over each obstacle. That was not penalized.

Finally he slept, having acquired ten hours by a string of lucky answers. There was a multiplier for answering many times right in a row. He had managed to reach a trance-like state in which the right answers would just come, although he was not sure of each. But clearly, a trainee could just as well have entered a vicious circle, where exhaustion would make it harder to pay attention to the questions, making him always answer wrong. There was a certain cruel design logic to all the challenges so far: if Ian had possessed a working left pinky and had actually practiced typing before, he might have maximum time on the clock already.

The meal was slightly better now, being actually warm and containing a solid beef. Certainly he was moving up the ranks in the training.

After he finished, the black ops led him to the firing range, where it would be simple target practice with pistols, at least at first. Baphomet was absent again, but there were two other trainees in light gray uniforms. Ian wondered if they had clocks on them too. Possibly not, as he had not seen them before, and the head scientist had insisted he was the first subject.

Ian thought to be doing quite well, acquiring three hours more during the shooting trials. Only the final challenge, which was a wooden mock-up of a house with targets inside, caused him to lose some time due to firing at a couple of SCEPTRE targets in haste.

The next training session would be about hand-to-hand combat, then the one after that an introductory lesson on interrogation techniques. Torture, in other words. Before the hand-to-hand combat Ian returned to the laboratory for a quick break, and this time Baphomet was there.

Using electricity was an extremely common and versatile method of torture, and this made Ian wonder about something. Something that might possibly allow him to escape. He just had to confirm first.

"What if an operative with an artificial heart would fail to eat properly, and it stopped even if he had time left on the clock?" Ian asked Baphomet. "Would he then be beyond rescue?"

"Not exactly," the scientist said. "External current could be used to keep the heart going while restoring proper ion balance with an IV drip."

That was all Ian needed to know. The head scientist had just sealed his own fate, along with possibly every-

one else stationed at this facility.

The hand-to-hand combat did not go well. The moves being taught were complex, and Ian could not master them quickly enough, resulting in the loss of a total of four hours. He cursed himself. He needed to last until the next session.

He had one hour left as the session ended. It had to be enough. But soon that turned to half an hour, and the interrogation class had still not started.

"We're preparing the classroom. It needs to be authentic," one of the black ops said to Ian roughly as he waited in the laboratory.

"I might not last until then," he muttered back. The only option left to him might be to try gambling more time. Fifty-percent chance of success, but the payoff would only be half of the possible penalty.

Reluctantly he walked over to the small touchscreen.

The two squares were there, inviting him to touch them. There was no text on the screen.

Left or right?

Left Hand Path had not been the correct answer when navigating the file system nodes on SCEPTRE's salvaged hard disk, but it could not fail for a second time.

He touched the left square.

+5 MINUTES, the screen said.

Should he be satisfied and stop right here? He had a little over half hour now. But the preparation could still take more time, and then he would have to wait for the right moment during the class.

Fuck. He had to play more.

It was maddening, trying to second-guess the random generator. Would it be another left? Or a right?

Right.

-10 MINUTES

Shit. He was back to about twenty. He should have stopped after one correct guess. What now?

Right again. It could not be left all the time.

+5 MINUTES

The game was severely getting on his nerves. He had now won and lost equally much. But it was not time to stop yet. The next one had to be left again.

He touched the screen.

-10 MINUTES

"The class is starting now!" the same black op called roughly. Ian had a bit over fifteen minutes. Sweat ran down his forehead. He hoped the session would proceed quickly.

The interrogation exercise room had gray masonry walls, with featureless training dummies tied to wooden chairs. There were fake bloodstains all over the dark plastic floor. Two white tables held equipment: Beretta pistols, surgeon's and soldier's knives, scissors and tongs, and then small black boxes with black and red wires coming out, somewhat resembling a car battery charger.

Torture transformers. Just what Ian needed.

In addition to him there were the same two trainees as on the range and in the hand-to-hand combat. Two black op instructors stood grimly at the tables.

"These are the tools of the trade for today. The dummies have ballistic gel and some electronics inside, with rough approximations of vital organs. Red LEDs will light up in the eyes if you manage to kill one. That is of course a failure which will be penalized," the other of the instructors said, the one that had not talked before. The face mask made the voice inhuman.

"You may be wondering about these black boxes. They are a novice's rechargeable practice transformers,

with voltage, pulse length and pulse frequency adjustments, as well as a twenty milliamp current limiter which should make it impossible to kill yourself or your fellow trainee with one, unless you have a heart condition."

Rechargeable was good. But the current limiter was possibly bad. How much juice would his heart need to keep going? And furthermore, would it even react to external current if the timer was already at zero? Ian had possibly jumped to too early conclusions.

But there was no choice. Unless the trials started soon, and he performed flawlessly, he would not even make it to the end of class.

Ian inched closer to one of the devices to get a better look of the controls. Power switch, voltage, length, frequency. Seemed simple enough.

Of course, once his insubordination was detected, he would have only a couple of seconds to adjust the controls. Then he would also need to kill everyone in the room, or at least both of the instructors. They held MP5 sub-machine guns on slings.

Ian shook his head silently. The odds did not look good.

"We will start with the pistols. They are loaded, so all normal safety rules apply. The point is not to perforate the dummies needlessly, but to learn how to threaten properly with a gun," the instructor went on. "I will be acting as the voice of the enemy, but you will threaten the dummy, not me. Your objective is to obtain knowledge of the enemy operative's last assignment before capture. The more, the better. Who wants to go first?"

Ian could have volunteered, to possibly gain more time. But he let one of the other trainees have a go first, hoping that both instructors would concentrate on the

exercise. The light-uniformed trainee picked up a pistol, then went up to the dummy and began to shout.

"Your superiors have abandoned you! They drink and laugh in their posh office while you suffer here! There is no rescue coming! Unless you talk, I will start from the feet and continue up to the kneecaps, then even further! And I have plenty of rounds remaining! But there is no reason for it to come to that!"

The instructor who was playing the enemy's role remained silent. They all had their backs turned. Ian started unbuttoning his uniform, to get the black and red terminals attached to his nipples. The alligator clips did not look very secure: they might come loose during action.

"Good improvisation, but think about whether you can sustain the intensity throughout the interrogation. Also repeating a specific, precisely framed question may prove helpful," the other instructor advised.

"The mission! What were you doing? I will count to three!" the trainee shouted.

Ian attached the alligator clips. It certainly hurt. And once he turned on the power, he would get jolted at a steady pace. It would hurt more, and throw off his aim. It would be like waiting for heartbeat while sniping, but taken to the extreme.

"One!"

He checked the dials. Voltage at maximum (250 V), pulse interval 1 second and duration 1/100 seconds. That should be good enough for starters. Using its carrying handle, he picked up the transformer as quietly as possible, then started inching toward the pistols.

"Two!"

The silent instructor turned suddenly.

"What the hell?" he shouted as he saw Ian, and pro-

duced a small remote from his pocket, just like the one Baphomet had. "Drop the transformer and back away from the table right now! It will not do what you're thinking!"

Ian had to hope that was bluffing. He was not going to go back now. Either he lived through his escape, or the sick training ended right here, permanently.

The advising instructor turned too, reaching for the MP5 on its sling. The trainee with the gun likewise pointed it at Ian.

Ian reached out for the pistol, just as the instructor pressed a button the remote.

0:00:00

That was different, Ian observed. Baphomet's panic button test had not caused the timer to actually go to zero, just stop. This felt more permanent.

Ian flicked the power switch on the transformer, barely reaching it with his left thumb. The first jolt was instant, sending a strong burning sensation across his chest. He could not tell whether it had caused his heart to pulse.

In any case he had a couple of seconds of action left in him. He launched himself to a dive away from the table, while firing in rapid succession.

The aim was low: he hit both black op instructors to the vest, instead of the headshots he had hoped. The 9mm bullets were too weak. The instructor with the MP5 opened up with a sustained burst. The first bullets dug in to the table, sending the tools scattering, then the rest whistled just past Ian.

He had possibly one shot more before the next burst would cut him in half. But already, he began to feel weak. The next jolt came, doing nothing to revive him, and he landed haphazardly on his feet.

He willed his hand to move with snake-like precision, aligning the sights one-handed. A pull of the trigger, and the Beretta barked once more. The bullet bored through the mask to the instructor's eye, sending blood and brain matter splattering out from the back.

Ian's vision began to dim already. The dials had to be in wrong positions, but how? Did it need a longer pulse? Or was twenty milliamperes just too little? He did not have much time, so he quickly flicked the pulse duration dial to the next position.

The next jolt came, and it was possible his heart pumped slightly. But the lethal danger was not over. The instructor with the remote was going for his MP5. Ian shifted his aim to the left and fired twice more. The second instructor never managed to grab the weapon, as he was already falling.

The trainee with the gun still stood, looking at Ian with confused rage.

"Do you want to die?" Ian shouted at him, observing that the forefinger was outside the trigger guard. Perhaps, for all his aggression, the trainee was not prepared to kill his fellow for real. "Drop the weapon if you want to live."

Shouting took a disproportionate amount of energy. A few more jolts came, easing the creeping blackness slightly, but he was certainly not in a proper fighting condition yet.

Warily, the trainee dropped the gun on the table. Meanwhile the other trainee had moved further back, hiding behind a dummy. Ian walked slowly to the dead instructor and picked up the MP5 and the remote, even if it was useless. Crouching down almost made him faint. He needed better circulation.

He also took the instructor's belt and made a crude

sling for the transformer. While doing this, the red terminal came loose, and he clipped it back hurriedly. But now he had two hands free.

"You've doomed us all," the second trainee said from behind the dummy.

"Just grab your own transformers."

"No, you don't understand. Only you have an artificial heart. We instead have a poison capsule which will trigger by remote. When the next guards arrive, and find that you've escaped, there will be no mercy."

"Well, I suggest you start digging them out with those knives," Ian answered cruelly. Though – it was possible these trainees had been abducted and put to the training against their will. He did not even want to know which way it was.

He tried adjusting the dials again. Perhaps maximum voltage was too much. If he would avoid hitting the limiter hard, it might work better. He dialed the voltage down to 150 V.

Yes. It certainly felt better. He observed the heart to beat with more force, and he could walk or crouch without feeling weak. Running surely would be out of the question. He kept his gun trained on the two while exiting the room.

Of course, the battery on this thing would not last forever. He needed to find a place he could hole up to, with a wall socket nearby. And naturally he could not live the rest of his life like this. He had to find the heart's firmware code and modify it for infinite time.

But in any case, even though the situation was not exactly good yet, he felt exhilaration.

He was free of the training program.

Utilizing extreme caution and rotating his head in a 180 degree arc at each intersection, he walked through

the corridor toward the laboratory. The next step was to find Baphomet. Ian switched to the MP5 and stuffed the Beretta to his waistband.

The laboratory was empty except for one black op standing in guard near the elevator. Baphomet had always used it to enter, so likely his private quarters were on some other floor. The whole place could be a huge maze: Ian had not been outside this floor yet.

To reach the elevator, the black op had to die first. It would be noisy, but unavoidable. Just as the guard turned his head, Ian was already firing, estimating to aim just above the armor. The black op slid down against the wall slowly, making a bloody smear and gasping for air.

Ian closed the distance to the elevator and took the guard's extra magazines: he also had an MP5. Now Ian had four, hopefully enough even for an extended battle.

He wondered about the total number of black ops guards he had seen, and came to the conclusion that maybe there only had been three: the two instructors, and then that last one.

The elevator had three buttons: ground floor, sub-level 1, and sub-level 2. This was the first sub-level, and the ground floor would likely be the exit, so he pressed the lowest button. To first see the lowest level of Hell.

He arrived in another large laboratory, but instead of touch screens for training, this was full of shelves with unfamiliar equipment, parts for electronic devices, and silvery suitcases. Several computer terminals were all around, and the lights were on.

On the other side of the lab, Ian saw Baphomet in his wheelchair, now typing on a computer terminal. No guards were anywhere to be seen. It seemed here SCEPTRE relied too much on the remote kill-switches, and not enough on conventional security.

Fuck, if he had been an evil overlord, he certainly would have installed automatic ceiling turrets everywhere. This was almost too easy. Of course, he still had to actually get his hands on the heart's source code, as well as the software and hardware needed to reprogram it. If it even could be reprogrammed.

Convincing Baphomet to give those up might not be

easy. Morbidly, Ian thought whether he should have attended the class to its conclusion.

He started walking toward Baphomet, wishing he could have at least jogged, but the weak circulation did not allow for that. Now he had almost got used to the constant short jolts, though they were still extremely unpleasant.

Baphomet turned as he was halfway across the room, and they made eye contact.

"I see you have found a way out," the scientist said. "Congratulations. However, your joy will be short-lived. Reinforcements are on their way. And, do you think you will go on like that for the rest of your life?"

"No. I intend to hack the heart's firmware."

Baphomet laughed cruelly. "You will never crack the multiply redundant calculations, all the checksums. You will not even be able to re-compile it successfully, as it has been signed with a developer key I don't have. By the way, Samael was the programmer who was mostly responsible for it. A brilliant mind, who sadly no longer walks among the living, thanks to your usual over-eagerness. History repeats itself."

"Well, if you have nothing useful to give me, then I can kill you right now."

Baphomet's expression was indecipherable. Not actual remorse, not actual fear, not even resignation or defeat.

"You would kill your own father?" he asked at last, the voice calm and quiet.

"Gladly."

Ian depressed the trigger, sending over half of the magazine into the scientist's body. The hits were easy to see in the white coat, and blood soon started seeping out. The scientist's eyes became glazed, and he fell for-

ward to the floor, leaving the much larger exit wounds visible. The blood started to collect into a pool. To a degree it had been a mercy killing.

Ian stepped to the computer terminal, but it was locked. He tried the scientist's old password, which he had used at the SCEPTRE brain dump archive:

sabbaticgoat

It did not work. The machine remained locked. Then Ian understood something else: the last jolt had been unusually weak. The next jolt did not come at all. In sudden desperate rage, he went crawling under the computer table, searching for a wall socket. As all were in use, he had to rip the computer's plug out to make room for the transformer. Both the red and the black terminals came loose.

"Shit," he cursed, with strength fading fast.

The world grew distant, his actions seemed to slow down as he felt with his hands on the floor, trying to find the missing leads. His brain perhaps knew where they were, but his hands seemed to have a mind of their own.

He finally found them, and hurriedly clamped the red terminal back to his nipple. Still the circuit was not complete. His strength was almost gone. He did not have time to clamp the black one properly, so he just rammed it against his chest, hoping that he would have strength to hold it in place.

The first jolt was like a gift from heaven. He had to wait for several more before he felt alive again. Finally he clamped the black terminal properly.

If that had happened in the middle of combat, it would have been curtains.

Sitting on the floor, he waited two minutes for the battery to recharge, then pulled the plug and went to

search for a more convenient wall socket. Further away from Baphomet, he found one on the wall next to another computer table. He sat down to a nearby chair, waiting for the transformer to recharge, and wondered how quickly the reinforcements would arrive.

Now he also realized he had killed Baphomet too quickly. The scientist had revealed the lack of a code signing key, but what about the rest? The hardware, for instance? Or perhaps some custom software? Now he would just have to search all the shelves.

The transformer had a battery level meter on it which Ian had not noticed in all the hurry. It was in the red now, and seemed to be rising infinitely slowly. He tried to see if there would be an extension cord around here somewhere.

He found one tucked underneath a table, and plugged the transformer to it instead. Now he had roughly five meters of range, enough to examine the closest shelves.

Half an hour later the battery meter was in the half-way, and as he had moved his search further away, plugging the extension cord into another socket, he had found two items which were rather interesting:

A small cardboard box, containing a USB device with an extension cable, another USB stick with the label "Firmware source", a mini-CD, and a short manual with the title "Artificial Organ Programming Interface, V1.0." Possibly now he had all the required hardware and software, and just needed the signing key.

The second item was a metal suitcase, with black foam padding inside, and four gray ceramic spheres slightly smaller than a fist. There was another short manual, titled "Nanomachine munitions."

Nanomachines again.

Ian was reminded of Lucas, who had been experimented on by SCEPTRE: the tiny machines in his bloodstream had given him an abnormally quick regenerative capacity. But a destructive nanomachine grenade was something else, possibly a god-like force contained in its vessel. Ian skimmed the manual, and it contained several warnings of an infinite destructive potential, due to the nanomachines' ability to self-replicate. There was supposedly a timer on the grenades, which could be set to for example three seconds, making the destruction and replication last only for as long. But there was also an 'infinite' setting, which was never to be used.

Somehow Ian knew that was exactly what should be used against Nibiru. He felt almost triumphant for figuring that out. For now he ignored the problem of actually delivering the munitions to the planet.

Suddenly the elevator pinged.

Reinforcements were here.

Ian disconnected the transformer, ready to get on the move. He hid himself behind a shelf and waited for the elevator door to open.

It seemed to be empty. No black ops. But then he became aware of a tiny rhythmic clattering. Several small spider robots began pouring out, walking on the walls just as good as on the floor.

They were possibly the same as he had seen way back in the fnord research facility. Or perhaps not. The top seemed different.

The research facility robots had fired taser darts.

These would possibly do something else.

It did not take long to find out, as the first spider circled the shelf and got line of sight. A small machine gun came to life. Ian dodged narrowly and fired a long burst

at the spider. It was thrown backward and lost balance, its legs thrashing aimlessly until it fell silent.

Two more spiders came at him from the other side, guns already firing. In horror Ian noticed they were probably trying to hit the transformer. Intelligent bastards. Ian turned to shield it with the flesh of his left arm, while depressing the trigger.

Both were hit, clattering away useless, but Ian understood he had been hit too. The light gray sleeve was quickly turning bloody, and now the magazine was empty. He retreated deeper into the laboratory, going as fast as he could manage without fainting, and ducked into cover of another shelf just as more spiders came into view. He reloaded frantically and pulled the charging handle.

Thankfully the spiders were not very good at defensive tactics. They came at him in a straight line, and he popped out of cover, firing until he was empty again. All of the small robots were disabled now.

Now to examine the wound. Some metal fragments were possibly stuck inside his arm, but he could not remove them now. Instead he went for a first aid cabinet on the laboratory's wall, removed the uniform overcoat, and wrapped a tourniquet around. Thankfully the bleeding was not as severe as it could have been. But it hurt like hell to move the arm now. Without the transformer on its sling, it would have been impossible to go on.

No other enemies had arrived in the meanwhile. Ian put the coat back on, reloaded again, then packed the contents of the cardboard box inside the nano-grenade suitcase. He headed for the elevator, carrying the case with his unhurt right hand. The MP5 swung loosely on its sling.

He pressed the button for the ground floor, then dropped the suitcase and took the sub-machine gun in his hands again, holding it at head level. As the elevator ascended, he pressed himself against the wall.

The doors opened to a wood-paneled corridor, and two black ops in face masks, armed with assault rifles. Ian was already ramming down the trigger before the doors had opened even halfway. The enemies fell, cut down by multiple bloody hits to the necks and the heads.

Cautiously Ian stepped out. He appeared to be in an expensive-looking mansion, with ornate wooden hallways, chandeliers on the ceiling, and paintings on the walls. The paintings mostly seemed to depict grim-looking men in uniform, and castles standing against the backdrop of majestic forests and mountains.

Ahead of him seemed to be the large entrance hall, and also the way out. A bright sun shone out on a courtyard. Freedom was within reach, but he had to stay cautious. This was probably the SCEPTRE mansion the enemies' train system had told about back in December, but still he did not feel at all like exploring it. It paid to just get out quickly.

He swapped the MP5 for the much higher-powered G36 rifle. He easily found three magazines from the pockets of the corpses, and decided it had to be enough for the rest of the way. Then he broke into a fast walk along the hallway. He timed his steps in between the jolts to maximize stability.

He peered into the entrance hall cautiously. A large statue, depicting an officer with a sword held high, stood in the middle.

Three black ops, also with assault rifles, patrolled the hall.

They noticed him almost as one as he peered too far. Damn. The mistake was too late to correct.

But the rifle, with its 5.56 caliber, should be able to punch through the black ops' vests. No need to aim for the head. Ian ducked back into cover as the black ops began firing. He waited for a pause, then peered out and opened fire.

One down, caught by several rounds into the chest. Ian retreated behind the corner, then a grenade bounced off the opposite wall and landed at his feet.

Time seemed to slow down involuntarily.

Could he throw it back? Or had the enemies already cooked the fuse? Well, he had nowhere to retreat, so he crouched fast, picked it up, and threw it back to the hall.

The detonation sounded almost instantly.

It was time to nail the rest. Ian leaped into view, trigger pressed down. The black ops were still reeling from the explosion, which cost them a few tenths of a second. Possibly enough. Ian aimed to the right first, hitting the second man with his burst. The last enemy was on the left, his rifle already trained.

They fired at the same time. Ian tried to duck as the bullets came flying at him. The black op staggered back, hit badly, and the rest of his burst went to the ceiling.

Ducking on the ground, Ian tried to catch his breath. All three enemies were lying down unmoving. But had he been hit more? Possibly yes, a minor scrape to his left side, judging from the insistent burning pain.

However, then he became aware of something more severe. No more jolts. He looked at the transformer on its sling and saw several bullet holes in it.

Time certainly seemed to stop, as Ian's mind raced with fear. His power source had been destroyed. It felt almost as if he had been buried alive, caught in a dying body again. So close to the exit! He would not have many seconds of conscious thought remaining.

What were his options? To his side he saw a tall, ornamental lamp connected to a wall socket. He could rip the wire and give himself manually timed jolts.

But it was uncertain if the wire would come loose in the right way. The wall current without a limiter could also be too much, possibly damaging the metal heart.

With his fading strength he started crawling toward the nearest dead black op. He was unsure what he would actually find.

His strength was now almost gone. Even the pain in his left arm and side were fading, a certain bad sign. He turned his head wearily to the black op's belt, and saw a black object roughly the size of an electric razor hanging from it.

A stun gun! Those gave out very high voltage, but low current. Would that be enough? With his last sec-

onds of mobility ticking out he grabbed the weapon, rammed it against his chest and pressed the button.

The pain of the high voltage was blasphemous, but thankfully it was localized. His limbs stayed in control. It felt like blood just rushed forward again. He gave himself another jolt, then yet one more, and felt his strength returning.

The plan was simple. He just needed to return to the interrogation training room to pick up another transformer, giving himself a manually timed heartbeat in the meanwhile.

Fifteen minutes later he was in the mansion entrance hall again, with a fresh transformer containing almost a full battery charge, the suitcase in his right hand, the side wound hastily bandaged, and the G36 rifle on its sling. Good to go again, and there had been no more enemies.

The trainees were also gone by now. If they had actually managed to escape, possibly by actually digging the poison capsules out, good for them.

The next problem was getting away. Hopefully he did not have to walk. But the courtyard with its neatly trimmed bushes was devoid of any vehicles.

At least it was good to be outside, to feel the warmth of the sun and to breathe fresh air again. The timed training seemed almost like a nightmare already, as if it had been a long time ago, or not real at all. Ian wondered where exactly he was now, and which day it was. Presently he had no way of knowing.

Suddenly he saw a car heading toward the mansion, moving along the long, straight driveway. He ducked into the cover of a nearby bush, dropped the briefcase and took the rifle in his hands instead.

The car was an odd-looking, dark red three-door hatchback with an unnecessarily large backside, which made the whole vehicle appear pillow-like. The engine stopped and a woman got out.

The recognition was instant.

Thora aka Tiamat with her greyish hair. She was dressed just like at the Innovativi3D office, a large brown leather purse on her shoulder. Ian stepped out of the bush, rifle trained at her.

"Who am I seeing, a dead Agent walking," Tiamat said.

"Hand me the car keys, or you will be dead soon."

Tiamat let out a short laugh. "No. It's you who will be dead for the second time."

She reached into the purse with an insanely rapid motion, drawing out an odd-shaped handgun. Seeing it made Ian flash back to the Frozen Hell festival, as SCEPTRE's band Black Dragon had used one.

A Calico. A fully automatic pistol with a hundred-round helical magazine. It was not the M950 however, but another, smaller model.

Despite her age and possible preference for hard liquor, she vaulted over the car in a fluid ninja-like motion, while spraying fire toward Ian. He leaped to the side but was hit in the right leg, and grunted in sudden pain.

Right now there was no way he could match Tiamat in speed.

But he could certainly match her in firepower. And it would be in self-defense, instead of killing an unarmed woman.

Ian scrambled to his feet, waiting for Tiamat to leap over the car again. It did not take long. She was fast, but much too predictable. He rammed down the trigger,

pumping the entire magazine into her while she was still flying through the air.

She fell to the gravel in front of the car, the jacket and the skirt full of bloody ragged holes. No majestic last words came out of her mouth. She was dead already.

Next Ian heard a rising whine coming from her head, followed by the small detonation. The elite black op device. Tiamat's head snapped oddly sideways.

And he realized the whole encounter had been odd. She had not been speaking in her usual lisping voice. Furthermore, it would be odd for a high official to have the control implant. Sudden paranoia filled Ian. He crouched down, clawing at the woman's head. Fake skin started peeling off. For one moment Ian even thought it could be Jo, with another fail-safe installed, forced to fight on SCEPTRE's side again.

But as the mask came off fully, Ian understood it was just some nameless female assassin, with a bare-shaven scalp like he had. The eyes on the oval-shaped face remained staring to the sky. Another life wasted.

The real Tiamat was still at large. Or – did she even exist? Ian could not be sure.

Remaining crouched, he ripped out a part of her skirt and tied the leg wound hastily. It hurt to walk, but he could manage for now.

Then he started a quick search for the car keys. He did not find any in the purse, only an odd plastic card with three buttons, which probably was for the car. The purse also contained a cell phone and a wallet with some cash. He took the items but left the purse on the gravel, next to the corpse.

On the bottom of the car's central console, he found the slot for the card. The message on the dashboard changed as he inserted it, telling to press either the

clutch or brake and the start button. Odd, but simple enough. The engine came to life, and he turned the vehicle around fast, sending gravel flying behind him.

He still had to figure out where he was, and to find a place to hole up, where he could perform the reprogramming. For that, he probably needed to contact Blowfish.

The car had a navigator on it, but he had not turned it on yet. He wanted to get away from the mansion first. As he turned away from the driveway to a forest road, he could see mountains in the distance, just like on the paintings. He drove for some five minutes, then turned and parked to a small dirt track, positioning the vehicle behind trees so that it was hidden for anyone looking on from the main road.

He looked at the wallet again. The banknotes had the text *LEI* on them. Which country's currency was that? Then he remembered, and an odd, partially majestic and partially fearful sensation went through his mind. He was in Romania. Those had to be Transylvanian mountains. Very fitting for SCEPTRE.

The afternoon and evening had been full of tense, nerve-wracking situations. Driving an unfamiliar car in a foreign country with bloodied clothes, racing from one gas station to the next, stopping inside toilets to recharge the transformer, and avoiding patrol cars narrowly, though they were not necessarily looking for him or the car at all, as SCEPTRE probably did not want to involve the police, unless they had been bought.

He had made the call to Blowfish, finally reaching her after several attempts. It was the same emergency line he had used to call for extraction after the Innovativiti3D mission, but figuring out the country code had been puzzling at first.

Guided by Blowfish's instructions, he was staying at an associate, Vlad, a nearly middle-aged gunsmith and forger, who had given Ian's wounds proper treatment and lent him a laptop to use, as well as clean clothes.

With his square face, black wavy hair and mustache, Vlad could have passed for an actual Count. However, the gaze in his eyes was friendly, and the two-story wooden cottage just outside town was cozy to stay in.

Vlad was extremely interested and shocked to learn of the metal heart, and the method Ian was currently using to keep himself alive. The briefcase had also been a curiosity-raising subject, but Ian had just said:

"It's worse than a suitcase nuke, but not dangerous until activated. I recommend to stay away from it."

Vlad had been glad to leave it alone after that.

In retrospect the mansion's location had been extremely convenient, as it might have been a drive of thousands of kilometers instead of just five hundred.

Blowfish had naturally been overjoyed to find Ian alive. All Agents had seemingly written him off already. Ian had also spoken briefly with Erik, and understood that the Agents had been on the brink of alcoholism already, so Ian's good news of his resurrection and the nano-grenades had not arrived a moment too soon.

Jo had returned alive from the mission. That was also extremely relieving to know: Ian was not sure what he would have done otherwise. But everything was still not OK. Blowfish had explained that Fury had taken complete control, while Jo was trapped somewhere at the back of her own head.

Ian had to get to the new Agent HQ fast. But first he had to crack the firmware. The source was on the USB stick, while the other, larger USB device would actually upload the code. Meanwhile Vlad was watching the news, and the weather appeared to be going crazy everywhere: earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis. A new undersea volcano had erupted in the Atlantic.

Certainly, it was Nibiru's growing influence. It was now Friday, one week after the failed mission at the pyramid. Eleven days until the supposed near-collision.

Ian and Blowfish had an encrypted chat connection going on.

I have the source code and the compiler for the heart's firmware. But I need a signing key. Samael supposedly programmed the system. Can you look through the observatory hard disks again?

The reply came some seconds later:

I'll get onto it.

While Ian waited, he submerged into the code in a preliminary way, the constant jolts distracting him when he needed to concentrate. Thankfully it was C++, the language he understood most. But the code was exceedingly cryptic, with one- or two-letter function and variable names. It was possible the code had been run through an automatic obfuscation tool.

Of course he did not have to understand it all, such as the actual logic for determining the heart rate, just enough to disable the tampering checks and the external signals that could stop the heartbeat, and to give himself infinite time. As a bonus, disabling the display that now constantly read *0:00:00* in the corner of his eye would be preferable.

Before any modifications, he made the first backup. Next he set out finding suspicious or unnecessary-looking pieces of code, that could be calculating a checksum or other internal consistency check.

There were several. Most of them were tied around the time counter. The clock existed in multiple places in the program, some of them encrypted. Ian tried to follow the code, trying to find the 'master' time counter, but there appeared to be none. It would be copied around in memory, mutated from one representation to another. The code itself was being interpreted

as data at several places, then checksummed, meaning that any modification to the program would be detected. The only way around it was to defeat all the checks. Some would set boolean flags, which was obvious, but others just set some cryptic value that might be checked elsewhere. Ian found out that at least some of them would interfere with the heart's rhythm.

Ian counted a total of at least fifty checks: they seemed like a tangled mess where changing something would throw the entire thing off balance, with either immediately fatal results, or delayed. It was maddening! Samael had been a true programmer of the highest order.

Blowfish was typing a reply.

I found a suspicious file on a hidden directory of the server hard disk, one kilobyte long. Samael.key. Possibly that's the file we need.

That was excellent news. In fact thinking how easily things might have gone wrong, if the vital file had simply been missing, or on some other machine that had been blown up, was absolutely horrible, and Ian did not want to dwell on that. Instead he typed his reply in a hurry.

Fantastic work. I'm looking at the code, but it's very much of a mess. Do you want to take a look?

He did not have to wait for long.

Of course. Just send the files over.

Ian zipped everything up and prepared to initiate an

encrypted file transfer. The firmware source code was less than half a megabyte compressed, but Vlad's internet connection was slow. Nevertheless, after one long minute it had been transferred.

Ian submerged himself into the code again, this time looking at how he might be able to give himself infinite time, assuming the checks had been defeated.

But due to the messed-up nature of the code, the best he could come up with was to insert a periodically executed function which would increase the remaining time, mimicking the games or the remote controls at the training facility. Of course, there might be a hidden check that would detect such added extra function.

Then, there was the communication with the external devices. That was fortunately easy, as there was a single function that would receive outside data. Its insides could be simply commented out. But wait –

There was another, well-hidden function that would check for no data having been received for a while. It would zero out the time counter as punishment. That had to be disabled too. The function also incremented some completely unrelated variable, and as Ian could not understand its meaning, it had to be left alone.

Hours merged into one another as Ian then returned to the beginning and began to disarm the internal checks one by one, aided by Blowfish's comments from across the Atlantic.

When it was Saturday morning, he had not slept one bit. Blowfish had not either. But this battle had to be fought to the end now. He was down to one or two extra-cryptic checks. Vlad had woken up, and brought him some food and an energy drink.

"Thanks," Ian said. "This will crack soon."

Half an hour later Ian thought he had them all. Previ-

ously he had installed the compiler from the mini-CD, and was in theory ready to compile the program into executable format. He opened a settings dialog and chose to use the file *Samael.key* as the signing key.

Then he compiled.

Damn! There were several compilation errors, not to mention a thousand warnings. The warnings could be ignored, as they likely had been in Samael's original code, but the errors had – hopefully – been introduced by himself.

One by one he set out on fixing them, until the program finally compiled. A neat binary file of about four hundred kilobytes had been produced.

The next step was to upload it. That probably required consulting the manual.

“Insert the USB cable to the organ to upload the new firmware.”

Fuck! It required actually cutting himself open to be able to reprogram. Vlad would have to help with that. Ian looked at the slightly cryptic diagrams, and at least it was clear where the cut had to be made. The installation instructions recommended a hole bored in the sternum, and hopefully SCEPTRE had followed that. Otherwise they might need an actual surgeon.

Vlad went to sterilize a knife, then they would start. Ian believed that the constant jolts had already made him mostly numb to pain.

Wearing rubber gloves to shield himself from the electricity, Vlad reappeared. Now it was time. He was cautious at first with the knife, but then pressed down with sudden force and Ian groaned from pain.

Finally the cut was ready, a crude flap of flesh.

“Is there anything that looks like an USB connector?” Ian asked Vlad.

Vlad had to fetch a miniature flashlight first.

"Possibly yes, deep in there," he replied.

"Does it look like an actual metal heart?"

"The hell I know."

Ian handed him the cable, and Vlad pushed it in. At first it did not go properly, but after a few retries it seemed to go solidly in place. Ian inserted the USB programming device into a free slot. The laptop thought for a while, installing device drivers, and then he could see that a new option had appeared in the compiler's menu.

Upload Program Image

Excellent. That was just what he needed. But wait – was he forgetting something? On computers and other devices with a firmware ROM it was possible to brick the system by uploading a non-working firmware. It was likely that he would not get the whole thing right on the first time, as there might be a hidden check that would trigger, later if not immediately, but it was of paramount importance that the USB connection and firmware rewriting code would remain functional. Otherwise there would be only one chance to get it right.

He returned to the source code, looking for that specific part. But as much as he looked, he could not find anything that resembled it.

Perhaps the USB upload was handled by a separate, dedicated circuit that would always be available. He certainly hoped so.

He just had to go forward right now.

He selected the upload option, and a progress bar appeared. It took a couple of seconds.

Now it was time for the first test.

"I'm going to switch off the transformer now," Ian said. "Be ready to switch it back on if I'm unable to do that myself, if it looks like I'm dying."

Vlad nodded.

Ian turned the power switch, and the jolts ceased.

He waited for the heartbeat to resume, but there was just nothing. With a muted curse, he switched the transformer back on. Baphomet's words about multiple redundancies came back to Ian. He had been too cocky, thinking that he could outwit a true programmer that easily.

He sighed hard and prepared for another long stretch of looking at the code, trying to understand where it had gone wrong. If worst came to worst, he might have to restart from the initial backup.

He typed a message to Blowfish.

Something went wrong. The modified code didn't produce a heartbeat.

The reply came fast.

I'll try to see if I can run it in an emulator. It's a standard ARM processor, even though the compiler is custom-made, right?

That meant Ian had to send the whole compiler. Over the slow connection it might take an hour.

His estimate had been pessimistic: it only took half. Meanwhile he was going through the code again, but could not find anything especial he had overlooked. On her end, Blowfish started preparing the compiling and emulation environment, then she replied:

Are you sure you compiled in release mode? It's not like in Visual Studio, the release/debug toggle is quite well hidden. Look for the 'Profiles' dialog.

Fuck! Could it be something that simple? Of course a debug mode version of the firmware would not run properly, as it would have no code optimizations, and had added checks for run-time correctness that bogged it down further.

He found the dialog, and chose release mode. Then he recompiled and re-uploaded. The progress bar went much faster this time: Ian understood the release mode binary had to be smaller.

As long as the upload had finished, and the heart had apparently rebooted itself, Ian suddenly felt like he had two heartbeats. It felt unpleasant, but was a good sign.

Time to switch the transformer off.

It appeared to be working. He felt much more alive again, free from the painful and weak externally induced circulation. He unplugged the transformer, but let the clamps stay on, then went for a walk around Vlad's house.

The time display increased steadily, giving him ten minutes more for each minute that passed, until it would hit the 24 hour ceiling and increase no more. The function he had added seemed to be working properly.

"It seems to run OK. But we'll have to keep a close watch on it. There were so many booby traps that it wasn't funny," Ian said.

"We'll have plenty of time while I prepare your identity for the trip home."

Ian wrote a message.

It's running now. It was just that, debug vs release. Huge thanks.

Then it was time to start work on disabling the time counter. It was a clearly separate piece of code. For safety Ian left the terminals on his nipples, as a modification to the display part could possibly trigger a check he had overlooked earlier.

The miniature display in his eye apparently also worked on his body electricity and communicated with the heart wirelessly. The heart was sending bitmap images directly, so by sending a blank image he would in theory disable the disturbing counter.

He made the modification, sure he had not tripped some hidden check, recompiled and uploaded. There was a pause of a few seconds while the heart rebooted.

No more display. Take that, SCEPTRE bastards. Ian got up again, ready to go on another walk.

Suddenly he knew the heart had stopped. In panic he switched the transformer back on, then returned to his chair as the panic was replaced by simmering hatred.

Somewhere a check had been triggered.

What was it?

Then, as Ian returned to look at the code he had added, he understood to have invoked undefined behavior by writing past the memory block allocated for the image. It was an off-by-one error in the outer loop for wiping the bitmap empty. He corrected and uploaded once more.

This time his heartbeat seemed stable. And there was no display. Ian pulled the USB cable out from his chest, at least for now.

"What do we do with the flap now?" he asked Vlad.

"Are you sure you don't need to program it again?"

"Can't know that yet."

"Then let's just swab it with disinfectant and put a band-aid over it. I'll actually stitch it when you're about to leave. Now I recommend you get some sleep at last. I'll check regularly that you stay alive."

"Thanks for everything, Vlad."

"Don't thank me yet. Thank me when you're out of the country. Besides, the Agency compensates me well."

Thinking about sleep was still somewhat scary. If a missed check would trigger, and Vlad was too late to act, Ian would never wake up.

Blowfish was not sure what time it was. Assisting Ian's escape and the firmware reprogramming had drained her severely, and after that she had slept unsoundly.

But now she had something else in mind, as she dragged herself back in front of the terminal.

Like examining the observatory hard disks again had yielded the important signing key, perhaps going through the recordings one more time could reveal something she had missed.

The recordings from the CEO's room, for instance. The automatic transcription had produced nothing, as the voice was far too silent and unclear, but perhaps the audio files could be processed extremely, then listened to in the old-fashioned way.

While she set out to work, Erik appeared.

"You just never stop," he said.

"Yeah. I'm going through Ian's recordings again."

"Fuck. Knowing that he's alive, that he's coming back, and he has those bombs with him – it sounds like we're back in the game."

"It was a hell of an escape. But the game wouldn't

have been over even if he was gone. It's not over until Nibiru actually fucks us up," Blowfish reminded.

"That's kind of easy to say now," Erik growled. "Well, in any case I was thinking to our earlier conversation."

Damn. Blowfish thought Erik would have forgotten it already, but possibly he had been less drunk than he initially had appeared.

"I'm prepared to repeat everything I said, while sober. As well as properly apologizing for shooting your ear, which I remember I haven't actually done yet. Sorry, Gwen, for shooting through your earlobe with a rifle."

Blowfish took a deep breath. This was seriously disturbing her concentration on the audio processing.

"Accepted. But can we return to this after the twentieth day?"

Erik let out a low, short laugh.

"Fine. After victory or death."

Erik touched her nicked ear briefly, then he was gone. Blowfish was somewhat relieved it had not been harder than that. She had been an Agent long enough to know that getting too attached to any comrade at arms was not a good idea. She did not envy Ian and Jo in the slightest, and if she thought of it hard enough, it was surprising they were capable of being Agents at all.

Monday night, 11:25 PM. A little over a week remained until Nibiru would nearly impact. Ian was now on a flight home. The suitcase with the nano-grenades had to be transported via a more complicated route that Vlad would handle. Ian certainly trusted him, but the question was whether they would arrive at the new Agent HQ while there still was time.

He wondered how they would actually deploy the grenades. To be honest, he did not have the slightest idea. Possibly the simulation had to be consulted again. If they climbed some high mountain, would they be able to fire a rocket or something at the planet, just as it went by?

The news broadcasts had shown ever worsening, mysterious weather, as well as even more earthquakes. Several airports had been closed all over the world, and it was pretty much by luck that Ian had been able to complete the trip back.

By now Ian was somewhat confident that the heart would continue to work. Thinking back to using the transformer still made him shiver. The jolts had been

bad enough, but being only half-alive had been the worst part. He was sure that the weak circulation would have caused lasting damage if prolonged.

The operation, the sadistic training and his wounds had left him weak, and he certainly had sleep debt remaining. Now that he thought of it, it was miraculous that he had survived the encounters with the black ops, the spider robots and fake Tiamat at all.

But still it was not over. Still they had to actually face Nibiru. Blowfish had explained him Hermann Grieg's treachery, that the company had produced equipment for and had supported both SCEPTRE and the Agents. It was disgusting to think about, but in the face of the approaching global disaster it seemed insignificant. Erik also knew, but Fury and Nitro did not.

Damn. Thinking about Fury made Ian's mood turn instantly sour. During the flights he certainly had had plenty of time to think about it. Hopefully the control would break simply from Jo seeing him. If not, then some drastic effect would have to be induced. But how? Ian was sure of at least one thing, that he could not physically hurt Jo. What had happened at the first pyramid could never repeat. It had to be handled in some other way. Blowfish had mentioned drinking, but it appeared that Fury utilized caution and did not allow herself to become completely wasted.

At last the plane touched down and Ian exited, with no luggage to collect. The airport was the same as on the meeting trip. While walking along in the crowd, he scanned left and right, looking for potential assassins, until he saw Blowfish who had come to pick him up.

Because of his bare head, she did not recognize him instantly.

But when she did, they hugged. Ian did not recall if he had hugged her ever before. Coming back from the dead was certainly reason enough.

"What have they done to your hair?" she asked as they settled inside the Agency van.

"The whole training, I don't want to talk about it. Sometime later, when I'm very drunk," Ian replied. It might indeed require extremely heavy sedation to make him return to it. He had blocked most of it from his mind for now.

"Understood."

Blowfish gunned the engine and they began the rather short trip toward Mad Dog's HQ.

"Well, what's it like to be under Mad Dog's supervision?" Ian asked in turn.

"He actually leaves us alone most of the time. And he's rather OK. The Shadow Unit grows constantly, and they train hard, though most of them are jerkasses. With the weather reports coming in, Mad Dog's now starting to believe in Nibiru at last, and he's formulating his own plan. He wants to go in with his crew to Area 51. He believes he'll find some planet destroying bomb there, as well as a working UFO."

Ian shook his head, thinking about the base in the Nevada desert, whose significance had grown to mythical proportions among conspiracy theorists. "That's crazy. Isn't it like the most heavily guarded military base in the whole country?"

"Well, he believes in a mass frontal assault. He's expecting casualties, but believes some of them will be able to penetrate the base grounds, the hangars, and the possible underground levels."

Ian thought about it. If there was a craft capable of interplanetary flight, that did not need a launch plat-

form like a space shuttle or a rocket, it certainly would be convenient. But the existence of such thing was still only speculation. It could not be counted on. At least the nano-grenades were real, though it was unsure how well they would work.

"Then, Nitro has another theory. He has been fiddling with the Nibiru simulation program himself, going over the gravity and magnetic field parameters. He's kind of gone crazy too. He believes that with the two liter engine, and rockets strapped onto it, the Ford Ka may be able to reach the planet, when it's timed exactly right. He's trying to find out a place on Earth that's as close to Nibiru as possible when it nearly hits. The heavy magnetic field is supposed to counteract Earth's gravity, and the tiny bug goes flying."

"Fuck," Ian breathed. It seemed that only Blowfish and Erik had remained relatively sane. The grave nature of the situation had to be taking its toll on everyone.

Then he remembered something else he should say.

"By the way, of SCEPTRE's current known high officials, the THRONE or whatever it is, only Nihil and possibly Tiamat are alive anymore. A fake Tiamat died while trying to kill me. And – I also bumped into Baphomet again. The head scientist. He had survived the experimental creatures, but didn't survive half a magazine of 9mm rounds."

"Progress," Blowfish replied without much emotion, then continued. "That reminds me of something I need to tell you. After the firmware thing was sorted out, I went through the recordings from the CEO's office again. Those that were too silent and unclear. I used extreme audio processing settings, and managed to extract some conversations. It had to be some govern-

ment official, possibly from FEMA, that she was talking to several times. It was about arranging the virtual world system to be available in their subterranean shelters.”

Ian's blood ran cold. If the government, or at least part of it knew of Nibiru, and were coordinating with SCEPTRE, the game had just entered another level of severity. And he knew first-hand how convincing Absu could be.

“That's bad.”

They reached the HQ, driving inside a spacious garage. There was activity even now, with some of Mad Dog's almost sixty recruits milling around, preparing for the Area 51 mission and reluctant to go to sleep even though it was close to 2 AM.

A section of the garage had been cordoned off. The blue light of an electric welding arc came from behind the plastic curtains. It certainly had to be Nitro, working late. Ian did not want to disturb him now, and could guess the modified Ka was not to be seen by anyone until it was finished. Ian well remembered the monologue the Agent mechanic had given, detailing all the work to be done.

Shit. It was unbelievably important to have escaped, to reunite with the small ugly vehicle as well, no matter what would happen with the Nibiru deal. It almost brought tears to his eyes.

Erik stepped into the garage now.

“I possibly already asked, but how it feels to be back from the dead?” he bellowed, walking toward them.

“Better than dead,” Ian replied. Erik patted him on his shoulder hard.

“Fuck. We already drank to your memory.”

“No problem.”

Ian realized he was dead tired now. He would possibly bump into Jo as well, but was not sure if he was prepared to deal with it now, unless it would be a matter of one look of recognition, then Jo enclosing him in a long, tender embrace. Somehow he guessed it would not go that easy, as the artificial personality had stayed in control for days now, even without the control implant. Had it possibly evolved, becoming stronger over time? The thought made him shudder.

“Let's go through the sick bay,” Blowfish said. “I'll give you a shot or two to accelerate the healing.”

Like the night before, Ian dreamed of his heart stopping. But now it was different: instead of just dropping dead in the dream and waking up, he stepped into the firmware code itself, which was represented by green 3D letters floating in black space. He moved the pieces of the code around with his hands, trying to find the right combination that would defeat the hidden checks and allow his heartbeat to resume. But a computer virus soon began to spread, corrupting the letters to random pixels, making his work even harder, for he would have to fight both the infection, and the code. His vision started to dim, the time running out. Then he woke up, gasping for air. The artificial heart was beating fast.

He was in some random bunk room, alone, on the lower level of a spartan military-style bed. The clock next to him was half past 5 AM. He tried to calm down and fall back asleep.

Among several Shadow Unit men who mostly ignored him, Ian was drinking his morning coffee in the just as spacious kitchen.

Then the inevitable happened. Jo stepped in, wearing full Agent gear.

"Agent Legion," she said. "How did you survive?"

Instantly Ian knew it would go the hard way. His heart sank, but he tried to remain calm for now. Perhaps he would have to act just as mechanically as Fury, and she would come to trust him bit by bit? But that would be a slow process. They might not have the time.

Ian turned to face her, the words coming out slow and harsh. "SCEPTRE installed me an artificial heart and tried to re-integrate. If I would not cooperate, or failed in the training, they would stop it. I escaped by using a torture transformer as a pacemaker."

"I have to give you top marks for initiative and creativity. Obviously I would have done just the same."

Apparently it was important for Fury to appear equal or even superior in every way. Ian made sure to take permanent note of that.

If that was the way to go, he wondered of the possible ways he could try to beat her in some kind of competition, but came up empty-handed. At least in all military and Agent activity he would be left second. As an inhuman SCEPTRE assassin she would simply run faster and shoot straighter. And at least while he was recovering, she would also be physically stronger in every way. Due to being male and weighing slightly more he would possibly hold his liquor better, but Blowfish had already said that was likely not going to work.

This whole route seemed like a dead end. He would not be able to be as elite as Fury, and trying to mimic her harsh behavior would eventually drain him of mental strength.

The other way was to try to appeal to Jo in the back of her mind, to try to help her break out somehow. Ian resumed, his voice more like it normally was.

"I made it through only by thinking that I'd see you again."

Fury's voice remained unmoved. "I am not the one who you have missed. It is futile for you to try to appeal to the original personality, it is well locked and shut down. To guarantee the highest chance of success and survivability for all Agents, it needs to remain that way until the Nibiru threat has been resolved, possibly even further. I've analyzed your interactions with her and it is clear you have caused a great deal of suffering. In the current state, further damage is prevented."

Anger began to boil inside Ian's head.

"Screw you. You're not the one to decide that. You're just an artificial construct. You're nothing!"

"Losing your temper is a clear sign of losing the argument. I consider this discussion finished."

Jo left the room, and just seconds later one of the

Shadow Unit men turned to Ian.

“Ah, you're with the weird Agent chick. Must suck, that situation. But if I was you, I'd just forget the emotional shit and check whether she still likes the action.”

Ian felt almost like punching the guy. He did not know shit! Of course Ian had considered, during the long flight home, whether making love to Jo would unlock something. But it seemed things were too far gone for that: he believed it would rather be Fury in control of a purely physical act.

Fuck. He was seriously out of ideas. He stood up and left the kitchen.

On the next day Ian and Erik sat in silence in the small concrete bunker that held all the band equipment. Erik had transported them all by himself, but so far they, especially the drum kit, were just lying in a heap and lacking proper setup.

"I don't know what to do," Ian said at last, while playing a slow, improvised black metal riff on the bass.

He had mostly avoided Jo for now, trying to do as little as possible to allow his body to recover from the training and the injuries. But that had left his mind restless, and last night had not been good either, with perhaps four hours of sleep total.

Nitro had explained his battle plans, but it had been a mostly incomprehensible word salad that went directly from one ear to another. Ian knew that unless Jo would revert to herself, he would be practically useless as an Agent. Though his heart was no longer flesh, there was no mistaking the constant ache that almost tore him apart. That, he guessed, was the power of love, and he cursed himself for being so easily affected. Dissociating helped somewhat, but drained his strength as

well: it could not be used all the time, and would only push the problem for later.

"Hm. When it was in half control, or popping in or out, Jo could summon it to help in some things, like combat and reflexes. Maybe that works the other way too," Erik said.

"But Fury doesn't need her, just says that she's completely locked out."

"No, wait. That's not completely true. Remember when we were drinking absinthe at the cabin, and meanwhile SCEPTRE attacked the original HQ, it had dug out the location and the access codes from Jo's mind, right?"

"Right."

Erik was possibly onto something. But Ian was so depressed and mentally exhausted that he could not yet see where it was headed.

"So, if there's some information it would absolutely need, then Jo could possibly have a chance to break free. You said it wants to be elite in everything it does."

"Yeah. It said it would have escaped using the same method that I used."

"Let's give it something it possibly can't be elite in. Challenge it to a guitar duel," Erik suggested.

That was pure genius. It was like a lightning bolt from a cloudless sky, and Ian felt his mental strength returning. But he should have figured that out himself.

"Of course. Thanks, Erik. I probably can't ever repay you."

"Thank yourself, if it actually works."

Indeed, the actual implementation might still be something else. Ian had not played guitar properly for more than a month, only picking it up occasionally.

Ian found Jo on the shooting range, firing her M4 on full auto and practicing complete control of the recoil. She was almost succeeding.

"Hey. I have something to suggest. You want to play guitar against me? Let's see who's more elite in that," Ian said almost cheerily as she reloaded.

She looked at him with an odd expression, then it turned more vicious. "Deal. I will certainly beat you. From my analysis I remember you to be a sloppy player."

That was mostly true, but the question was, would Fury be even that good without giving Jo some freedom? Soon they would see. She put down the rifle and followed Ian to the bunker.

"There's only one guitar now, so we'll take turns," Ian said as he adjusted the controls on the solid state amplifier, Jo's red ESP guitar in his lap. He set up a rather distorted tone that would be good for lead playing.

"Fine."

"Since I already have it, I'll begin."

Ian took a deep breath, adjusting the angle of the plectrum in his right hand, trying to remember which was the perfectly balanced position for maximum clarity and control. If the pick dragged the strings too hard, it would break the flow of playing.

He began a Kirk Hammett-like repeated pentatonic run, which climaxed in a bent note. It was sloppy as hell, but could have been even worse.

After finishing he handed the guitar to Jo, curious how she would follow up now.

She responded with very mechanical and hyper-fast tremolo picking: the notes played were completely atonal. The shift from each note to another was slow and erratic. This was certainly not Jo playing yet.

"I think mine was better," she said.

"Hm. Let's have another round."

Ian wondered what would have the maximum effect, considering what he actually knew to play? The answer was rather easy. Deicide. The original guitarists Eric and Brian Hoffman. Especially on the first two albums, they had played diabolic solos straight from the pits of Hell.

Ian imagined playing the solo to "Sacrificial Suicide."

He started with cascading atonal scales, utilizing three finger patterns with his left hand. They were rather easy, but still efficient in how evil they sounded. The patterns wound their way down the fretboard, then back up, until he finally ended with a tremolo bar dive bomb, picking an open string natural harmonic and lowering its pitch until the string was barely vibrating any more. The amplifier started to feed back, and the fading note turned into a sustained squeal.

He was surprised of how well he had managed. Now Fury would have to put in some serious work to top that.

With rage in her eyes, Jo took the guitar from him.

She started by playing something similar, but it was going much sloppier. The previous tremolo playing had succeeded better, as she had not needed to shift the left hand fingers rapidly, but this required actual left/right hand coordination.

Suddenly the playing changed completely.

The haphazard Deicide-like run changed into a thrash metal solo of the highest caliber, with precise sixteenth notes following each other like bullets from a machine gun. The four-note pattern wound its way up to the highest frets, then changed into sweep picked minor chords, going lower in turn, until she reached about

the midway of the fretboard. Then she restarted the machine gun pattern, but this time on the low E-string. Finally she let the open low E ring and collapsed on her knees. The guitar hit the floor hard, possibly making a dent on it.

Ian was in some degree of shock from the sudden and complete transformation in the playing. Had Jo actually broken free? Was she OK? Or had the duel caused some kind of mental overload? He crouched and leaned forward to hold her, but the guitar was in the way, digging into his chest painfully.

"Jo? Is it you already? Ian here. I survived the mission too. Now I will never leave you again," he said.

It was possibly a false promise, if the Nibiru mission demanded otherwise, but at the moment it had come straight from his heart.

Jo seemed completely catatonic. She just breathed, eyes open but staring into space, which was certainly scary. What had he done? Ian lifted the guitar carefully away and placed it against the amplifier, then resumed his embrace and moved closer to kiss her, very light, like at the fnord research facility.

At first there was no response, then her eyes blinked.

"Ian? But you died," she stated warily.

Now he was certain it was Jo and not Fury.

"SCEPTRE gave me a heart transplant. It's a long and weird story. I'm just glad to have you back."

Jo smiled. Tears were forming in her eyes.

"Likewise."

They kissed again, longer this time, then just continued to hold on to each other on the bunker floor. Ian was not sure of how much time passed, he had been completely somewhere else, relieved beyond words.

"This must not happen again," Jo said quietly at last.

Ian looked straight into her eyes, gathering strength for what he was about to say.

"If I die again, I promise this time it will be final. I won't make you go through this again."

That was somewhat stupid, possibly.

"Not that. I mean, Fury taking complete control. It was stronger this time and I almost could not break free, even when playing. By the way, it was quite an idea, that duel."

Jo paused for a while, and her expression turned more severe.

"One way or another I must get rid of it. Even if it helps me in combat, I can't go on like this, with the possibility that it overrides me again when my defenses are down."

Ian felt a knot in his stomach, as it sounded exactly like what he had extrapolated some time ago.

"You're not thinking of – hurting yourself?" he asked quietly.

There was an odd, blank expression on Jo's face.

"Hopefully not. But I can't be sure."

"Whatever happens, and whatever you decide, remember that I'll be with you."

Jo frowned. "Yes, I know that. But – it might not be enough. Sorry."

Finally the truth was out, what Ian had been thinking about ever since the end of December. He could not actually do anything to truly help. To hear that finally from her was no big surprise. Of course, that did not make him feel any better.

Jo was not finished yet.

"Listen, about stopping Nibiru, I suggest something. We do whatever necessary. And I mean it to the absolute extreme. If it's necessary, we must push aside ev-

everything that we feel. Because if we don't get it right this time, there will be no world to live in, and then it doesn't matter if I survive, or if you survive, or if neither of us does. Can you promise to do that?"

At first Ian thought it sounded like Jo was suggesting breaking up. But of course, she was not. It was simply about being focused. Ian imagined the Dark Planet of Death heading straight at him, a majestic pressure wave sweeping in front of it, and he understood with perfect clarity. Nothing but stopping it could matter now.

Ian took a deep breath and his eyes focused. He almost dissociated, but it was important he stayed wholly conscious while saying the next words.

"Yes. I promise. Otherwise I wouldn't be an Agent."

In the cramped bunk room Fury had originally chosen for herself, and Jo was not going to move out of as they were all the same, they examined each other's battle wounds. Ian knew he would possibly have to reveal precisely what his escape had required, and did not look forward to it exactly. But it would come out sooner or later.

Jo sat on top of him without her shirt: the red burn in her side was clearly visible, as were the bruises on her back. Her ribs were more pronounced from what Ian last remembered, and there were dark hoods under her eyes. Being under Fury's control had taken its toll. Ian felt for the injury with caution.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"Not really, it just feels weird. Now, your turn. I want to see the scar."

Reluctantly Ian prepared to pull the black Agent T-shirt over his head. There was no going back now.

The scar itself had healed abnormally fast, almost as

if it had been welded shut using SCEPTRE's advanced medical technology. But Jo's expression changed as she inevitably noticed the improvised flap and the crude stitches Vlad had put in.

"What is this? They operated you again?"

"Not exactly. I – had to reprogram the firmware."

"What?" There was a look of total shock on her face.

Then everything came out in a rapid blur of words, as Ian explained the timer, the sadistic exercises with time bonuses and penalties, and the kill-switch functionality. And how he had survived until he had managed to perform the actual reprogramming. He would have wanted to apply some censorship, but it came out too fast for that.

As the morbid tale was finally over, Jo cradled him softly, at first lost for words.

"I had no idea. I – only thought of myself, of Fury and getting rid of it. While you had to suffer pure hell. Those SCEPTRE bastards –" she said finally.

"Don't forget, you went through bad shit too. You've lost weight while it had control. I want to make you feel alright, but I guess I made you feel worse."

Jo shook her head. "No, I needed to know that. And I know telling it took guts. But we can't stay here all night just feeling sorry for each other –"

For a moment she appeared unsure. But before Ian could say anything, a smile hinting at mischief took over.

"Is it safe to piss Fury off already?"

If Jo was joking about the digital assassin, it had to be a good sign. After retelling the harrowing events, Ian could almost see the humorous side too. And of course he longed for losing himself in her completely: to first kiss her all over, to start from the bruises and then

steer higher, to make her feel as alright as he could possibly manage, until she would ride him into their shared oblivion where Nibiru or SCEPTRE did not exist, and finally dream away all the gray, misery and evil in his embrace.

“Remember, I checked the code. Probably safer than with my old ticker.

“You're weird.”

It was Saturday. Only a few more days to go and then it would be the spring equinox, bringing Nibiru with it. The time had passed in intense preparation, and the suitcase with the nano-grenades had arrived in the meanwhile. Mad Dog was studying them now.

"I can't risk taking those with me," he said to Ian. "If I'm captured or killed at Area 51, and if those work, they may use them irresponsibly for their own purposes. And if they get me or my men alive, we may get a harsher sentence just due to possessing them. We'll be executed twice instead of just once. Rather, just like I told to Blowfish, I hope like hell there's some secret weapon they're hiding there. A planet killer bomb. If we manage to get hold of both that, and a workable UFO, and learn how to fly in the little time available, we'll head straight to Nibiru and let it burn. At that point it matters little if any of us will return."

Damn. That meant the powerful munitions were left completely at the responsibility of those who would go along with Nitro's plan. It was not solid in the least either, and there was no third plan.

Except that Hammerfist, back on the East Coast, was trying to infiltrate one of the FEMA shelters to find out what they were exactly doing, and if there was direct SCEPTRE involvement.

At 2 PM they all were to gather in the garage. Nitro would have something to show. Ian knew that if the Ka looked the slightest bit ready for war, he would need to go along with it. He met with Jo briefly before it was time.

"I've thought about it hard. I'm not sure if they find an actual UFO there, or a planet killer weapon, and I don't like the idea of attacking our own. But if the government's sanctioned the whole thing... Anyway, there may be some weird technology there. Maybe actual live aliens. Whatever is there, it may be my best shot at getting rid of Fury at the same time. Therefore it makes sense I go with Mad Dog," Jo said.

Both plans sounded like possible suicide. Actually Nitro's plan was certain suicide, a one-way trip, if they would get as far as Nibiru. But Ian knew what he had already decided as an Agent. They had made their promises of being OK with whatever the situation required. It was not easy, but Ian steeled himself.

"And I'll have to see if the car will actually get us to Nibiru. Plus, I'm probably not well enough yet to run through the Nevada sands. Mad Dog doesn't want to risk the nano-grenades falling to government hands, so he's leaving them all with us. If we get on the surface, and detonate the grenades, perhaps you manage to sweep in with a UFO just at the right time and be our ride out. Then, supposedly, if Nibiru disintegrates before it completes its arc back past Earth, the pole shift will not complete and things will eventually return to normal."

"That's just according to the simulation," Jo noted.

"Yeah. Too much is unsure to my liking. But there's not much choice."

"But don't you need like space suits to survive?"

"According to the occult texts Nitro and Erik have been studying, there should be an atmosphere you can breath. Supposedly humanity's ancestors, the Nephilim, came from the planet, and built structures here which could summon it back once, and if, it was time for a hard reset, so to say," Ian answered, trying to keep a straight face.

"Hm. Sounds like bullshit, honestly."

"Anyway, the car wouldn't work in any case without an atmosphere. Nitro said it would be too heavy to have oxygen tanks for the engine and the crew, in addition to the ammunition."

"Well, it's your own lives. So Nitro is going, and you, and -"

"Blowfish."

"The BOFH and the PFY ride again, right?" Jo asked.

"Exactly. And since there's only room for three in the car with the ammo box, that leaves Erik for you."

Even with Mad Dog's crazy men, Ian thought Jo would be in good hands as long as Erik stayed up and fighting.

Now it was time to head to the garage already. Several of Mad Dog's men were there, but not all. Blowfish joined Ian and Jo, then Erik also emerged from a hallway. Nitro was at the curtained corner, looking triumphant. Mad Dog appeared with more of his men.

"Do not mind the rest," Mad Dog said to Nitro. "You're clear to start."

Nitro prepared to draw the curtain to the side, but first he was going to say something.

“Behold my latest instrument of destruction. I shall call it – the WarKa,” he shouted with pride, then threw the curtains open.

The modified Ford Ka was revealed.

It was unbelievable, looking vicious and lethal. The body was a dull metal gray with the armor plating installed. The plastic bumpers were gone, replaced with more steel. The M230 cannon stood on the roof, and the sides held rocket pods, also almost like on an Apache gunship. The bigger motor did not fit under the hood completely, so it remained partially open. The catch had been adjusted so that the hood would not actually fly open suddenly.

“I ran out of time, so the Hello Kitty interior had to be left to the next iteration,” Nitro said more quietly as Ian, Jo, Erik and Blowfish got near the car.

“Also, the strain on the alternator due to the voltage conversion was just too much. So, the armor will only recharge by braking, and then much slower by high-voltage solar panels on the roof. That's Grieg's very advanced shit, I just connected the wires.”

Ian inspected the car from every side, walking slowly. He believed it could possibly take them all the way to Nibiru.

Then something else came to his mind. Nitro had possibly mentioned it already, but as Ian had been occupied by the situation with Fury, he had missed it.

“Where exactly do we need to be so that we have a chance of reaching Nibiru as it passes by?” he asked.

“Thought I told you. The planet will be drawn by the second pyramid's influence, but it's going to pass close to the first one. The simulation shows that a mountain plateau near the blast crater will be our best chance,” Nitro answered.

It was funny how the Agent mechanic had suddenly become much more an expert on all things Nibiru, while Ian had been away. But better that way.

"Blast crater? You mean, the nuclear missile hit location. Isn't it still radioactive?"

"High up on the plateau we should be safe. But I certainly wouldn't go down in the jungle. I've talked with Blowfish, and she's quite sure we can airlift the car," Nitro answered.

The night was cloudy as the five trucks, each carrying twelve Agents with black cotton balaclavas to hinder identification, crept ever closer to the top secret military base at Groom Lake.

According to the simulation, Nibiru would pass by the Earth exactly at the moment of equinox, 11:02 GMT, which would be just past 3 AM local time. Then, at 5 AM it would return, which was the hard deadline, the completion of the magnetic pole shift.

They had roughly five hours to the first flyby, to storm into the base and find out if there was a planet killer bomb and a UFO in working condition.

The top notch security of the Air Force waited for them: their best-trained soldiers, and likely automated security.

Stealth was not a concern: the trucks would certainly be detected, and so would the Agents. At least the following detection mechanisms could be expected: anti-personnel doppler radar, seismic sensors, visible light, infrared and night vision cameras, directional microphones, olfactory sensors, satellites, and air radar.

But Mad Dog's plan relied on sheer numbers and overpowering weaponry provided by Grieg Industries. Grieg had supplied them with ten prototypes of the XMR weapon system (eXperimental Multipurpose Rifle) which was the Agent equivalent of the SCEPTRE Disruptor weapon, but much more advanced.

It had a 7.62 kinetic projectile system with either a twenty or forty round magazine, a switchable reflex sight and scope, a grenade launcher with inbuilt 4-round magazine, and then an energy pulse component which fired a powerful laser beam. The laser could not be fired for more than a few seconds before it needed to recharge. For that it used any electric fields available, using Tesla's free energy principles. In a highly energized location such as Area 51, recharging should take about ten seconds.

Finally, it had a "suicide" electromagnetic pulse mode, which would radiate into every direction from the weapon in a ten meter radius, also destroying itself mostly in the process, leaving only the kinetic system and iron sights operational.

Jo thought that the EMP system was the only weak point on the weapon. But the automatically recharging laser was a huge improvement on the Disruptor's power pack, which depleted rapidly and heated up in the process, making the whole weapon inconvenient to handle.

During the departure and early part of the journey she had certainly wondered if she was evil, insane or both, taking part in this raid. Or if she was truly prepared for it, once they would breach the actual perimeter. But she kept flashing back to her words to Ian: to do whatever necessary, to the absolute extreme.

The stealth helicopter flew southeast through the night, with three Agents onboard. On their timezone, Nibiru would pass after 7 AM. Ian had flown first but now Blowfish manned the controls. The Ford Ka hung from a sturdy nylon rope beneath them, which made the machine burn fuel at a much accelerated rate.

"There's a SCEPTRE fuel depot a few clicks to the south. Resistance is certain, but there is no other option if we want to reach the mountain plateau," Blowfish said from behind the controls.

She adjusted course toward the depot.

It was in a small jungle clearing, with a few wooden huts for the guards, and then a corrugated iron roof under which the actual fuel pumps and the large tank stood.

Even from distance, Ian could easily spot four black-uniformed men under the lights. There might be elites as well, hidden in the jungle, using their active camouflage.

They flew closer, and Blowfish opened up with the cannon. One black op was torn in an instant, dancing under the hits until he lay still. Another turned with his assault rifle and unleashed full auto fire, which clattered off the fuselage without doing any harm. The cannon turned, and he was pulverized as well. The two remaining black ops in the rear took cover positions, and Blowfish had to fly closer to acquire them.

Suddenly a RPG launched from behind one of the huts, and Blowfish was forced to bank savagely. The rocket flew past them, and the remaining black ops came into view. She launched a missile, disintegrating the hut and scorching the ground behind it. The RPG black op was certainly gone. Then she turned the machine 90 degrees to deal with the lone remaining en-

emy, but he was gone, apparently vanished to the jungle.

"I'll set the machine down at the other end," Blowfish said as she turned the helicopter around. "There's at least one enemy remaining."

"And possibly elites, lying in wait." Ian said.

"Right. We'll do the rest the traditional way. I'll put the car down first, then fly forward a bit and land. Be ready to fire on the enemies if they appear."

With the M4 at hand, Ian hopped down as the machine still hovered a meter over the ground. He crept forward, taking cover behind the closest fuel pump. Then he looked for enemies. Blowfish and Nitro soon joined him as the rotor blades were rotating to a halt.

They scanned to the left and right, cycling the vision modes, looking for some abnormality between the tree leaves that would tell of an elite black op about to ambush them. Nothing so far. Crouched low, they proceeded closer to the remaining huts, where the last traditional black op had been seen.

Sudden plasma fire lanced through the air right in front of Ian's face, coming from the left. He dived backward and fired without aiming. Another plasma burst came from the right, and Blowfish and Nitro both turned toward it, also firing.

Ian could not tell if he was hitting anything, but the next plasma bolt was a hit, slightly deflected by the armor.

CHARGE: 80 PERCENT

He smelled the burning, but hoped the armor coat would not actually catch fire. He squinted his eyes, trying to actually recognize the elite.

There. Between two trees. Ian shifted his aim and fired a long burst from the groin level up to the neck.

The elite black op fell, the camouflage deactivating at the same time. As gunfire was still going on next to him Ian could not verify the whine and detonation of the failsafe device, but it did not matter for the moment, as the elite was no longer firing.

Finally it became silent except for a quiet groan coming from the trees to the right. Blowfish and Nitro had scored a hit as well.

"We still have at least one enemy. Armor's still good. Stay alert," Blowfish hissed.

They crept even closer to the huts, waiting for the black-clad enemy to appear.

Then came a whooshing sound. A RPG being fired at them. Ian turned to his right, and saw the black op peering from behind another hut. They all dived down and the rocket flew past, but detonated on the ground rather close to them, shaking it and making them disoriented. Mud rained on them.

CHARGE: 60 PERCENT

Fighting against the disorientation, Ian trained his sights on the black op before he could disappear, and squeezed the trigger. The enemy caught several 5.56 rounds to the torso, possibly also to the neck. He tumbled backward and did nothing more.

"I hope we're clear now," Ian said.

They got up, dusted their coats and resumed the cautious advance through the depot. A two minutes later they had verified it was indeed clear, unless an enemy was lurking further in the jungle, waiting patiently for the opportunity to kill.

The three Agents traced their way back. Blowfish connected a hose for refueling, while Ian and Nitro went to pick up the Disruptor rifles from the fallen elite black ops. They stashed them to the chopper's rear.

A few minutes more and the tank was full again. It would be enough to reach the mountain plateau. They lifted off, careful to not smash the car against the pumps or the large tank.

Elite weapons gained, but forty percent armor power lost already. Not the best deal, Ian thought.

One hour passed in flight. The skies were clear, and they were much closer to the plateau now, possibly even ahead of time. That meant more time for checking and re-checking the booster rockets they would attach to the Ka. They had better work flawlessly, as there would not be a second chance. If they missed the passing Nibiru and its combined magnetic and gravitational field, they would tumble into the radioactive valley below.

The trucks rumbled on, climbing up a low hill with some cacti here and there. They had to have triggered many separate security alerts already, having passed the famous signs that read:

PHOTOGRAPHY OF THIS AREA IS PROHIBITED
WARNING! NO TRESPASSING
WARNING – MILITARY INSTALLATION
WARNING – RESTRICTED AREA
USE OF DEADLY FORCE AUTHORIZED

The trucks had no weapons on them, but at the first sign of trouble they would exit, ready to fire. Those that did not carry the XMR weapons had M4's and G36's instead, in addition to rocket launchers, a variety of sidearms, and as much grenades as everyone could carry. Fragmentation, flashbangs, incendiary, EMP. Anything imaginable.

With Erik on her right. Jo sat in the middle of the second truck's cabin. They also wore balaclavas, their long hair tied to a knot inside. Jo found it somewhat curious that Fury had not said anything yet. Possibly it was aware she intended to destroy it here, and therefore was not going offer any help.

"Faster, we have to go faster!" one of Mad Dog's men shouted from the back.

"This dumb fucking big slow giant doesn't go any faster! Stop shouting," the driver yelled.

"Brake! There's the fence!" came another, conflicting shout.

All of the shouting was getting on Jo's nerves, as if the mission was not already tense enough. She saw the lead truck, driven by Mad Dog himself, approach the first perimeter fence at speed.

"No braking, anyone! We'll just ram! We will make it," came his shout over the radio.

The pieces of the heavy chain-link fence, as well as the fence posts themselves became airborne projectiles from the impact with the first armored truck. Through the mirrors Jo saw the following vehicles trying to dodge some of the flying pieces, but without much luck. Metal shards pierced the windshield of their truck, forcing the driver to shoot at it with his M4 to clear it completely.

"I see a light! They must have seen us!" another voice shouted, possibly from the third or fourth truck.

"No, it's probably just the lights of the place!"

"I'm sure they're moving towards us. See, they become bigger all the time!"

"We might still be able to lose them. We have to get closer still or there's too large distance to cover on foot! I'm speeding up, try to follow!" Mad Dog shouted.

His truck sped up, while the rest tried to keep the pace. Now Jo saw them too, as they circled to the front. Blindingly bright lights coming closer and closer.

"They're on the air as well! See, helicopters! Watch out!"

"No, they're not helicopters! They're autonomous defense drones, possibly quad-copters, with unknown but likely heavy weaponry! We're not yet at the heart of Area 51, but we must get out and fight now, or our fight ends right here!" Mad Dog yelled, becoming more angry.

Then he must have stepped on the brakes as the lead truck came to a sudden halt. The men started to pour out immediately, rifles against their shoulders.

Jo's truck followed suit, but there came an impact from the rear. The third truck had collided into them. She cursed while jumping to the ground. Too much amateurs. It might get bloody just because of that. She gripped the XMR rifle hard, preparing to fire at the closest drone as soon as it came into view.

As others were already firing rockets to the sky, Jo peered through the reflex sights, the laser mode switched on. She aimed at the nearest moving light and pressed down the trigger. A red sustained beam shot out, and a second later the night was lit up by a brief fireball. One drone down.

The driver next to her did not fare as well.

He had his M4 rifle up, but before he could fire, a drone machine gun high above came to life, exploding his head in an instant. Jo turned away as the red splatters rained on her.

Jo was not sure how many casualties. Had to be ten in the very least. The army of drones had been thinned down considerably, but at a cost. A rage kept building up as she understood that the electric field here was not strong enough to recharge the laser at a fast enough rate.

When talking of experimental energy weaponry, she might still prefer the Disruptor, even with its clumsy power pack. She switched to the standard kinetic rounds, and kept rolling around while trying to acquire the last drones. They had shut their lights off, so now she had light amplification on. But what she saw was mostly a green haze. Only the muzzle flash of the robot machine guns would easily pinpoint a target.

She thought she saw something X-shaped moving in the sky, corrected the aim, and fired an extended burst. One more drone down. Scattered around the field, a few more laser beams pierced the blackness. Erik fired his rifle in laser mode as well, some meters to the right.

Then it became silent. All drones had to be down.

"Back to the trucks! We'll continue further! We must

reach the hangars!" Mad Dog shouted over the radio.

Jo took the wheel to replace the headless driver. She switched to first gear, and tried to find the optimal hand position on the large wheel. Then she stepped on the accelerator as Mad Dog was moving already.

They continued further into the compound, smashing another fence, then continuing downhill. Ahead the lights were brighter, and Jo understood it had to be the hangars. Suddenly gunfire came from ahead. Soldiers, crouched or lying down on the nearby runway.

CHARGE: 90 PERCENT

CHARGE: 80 PERCENT

Damn. She was being hit. Jo ducked down and turned the wheel hard. Erik took the XMR rifle, switched to the sniper scope, and began firing.

"Keep firing!" Mad Dog shouted, likely to the men in his cabin. *"We'll head to the nearest hangar! Hopefully we find an elevator to take us to the sub-levels!"*

Jo saw the lead truck turn sharply to the left, headed for the brightly lit large building nearby. It looked like a traditional aircraft hangar with its curved roof.

"Fuck, don't turn yet, I've a couple soldiers to kill!" Erik growled with aggression.

Jo waited until Erik fired two more shots in close succession, then she yanked the wheel before drifting too far onto the runway. The enemies were still firing, but she was ducked extremely low so that they were unable, or at least unlikely to hit. The downside was that she barely saw where she was going.

Ian saw the familiar jungle now. They were close to the site of the first anti-cosmic pyramid. Now it would be just a huge, desolate, radioactive crater, the Current 218 long since ceased.

Far off in the horizon, he thought he saw the mountain, with its level top. That was where they would head. It could not be more than a twenty minutes flight, then it would be time to start working on the booster rockets.

Mad Dog's truck smashed the hangar's wide doors with a brutal force approach. It was dark inside: the truck kept going with just the headlights as its guide. Jo thought she could drive the second truck inside too, but the next truck probably had to park outside.

The engines were killed, along with the headlights. In the cabin, Jo switched light amplification on. She became aware of at least six small dots dancing on the ground and on Mad Dog's truck.

Snipers waiting in the darkness.

Heavy semi-automatic gunfire started almost instantly following this realization. Jo pondered hard whether it was safer to stay in the truck or get out. She decided to stay inside just for the next few seconds.

Mad Dog got out, and Jo saw the familiar weapon on him, the man-portable minigun. Possibly he counted on his armor to keep him alive until he would finish raking the whole hangar with hyper-speed fire. Encouraged by this, Jo got out as well, switching to the grenade launcher mode.

On a catwalk high above, she saw at least three snipers. She launched two grenades in a quick succession, to the left and the right. Only the first was a direct hit, sending the leftmost sniper to plummet down, the second would only disturb the rest extremely.

Erik also disembarked, the kinetic module on burst fire mode. The rest of the men got out from the backs of both the first and second trucks, firing also, and the

hangar was quickly turned into a charnel house, with all of the snipers being obliterated.

"I believe it's clear!" Mad Dog shouted as his minigun came to a rest, and all the spent cartridges had finished bouncing on the floor.

"Let's find the light switch!" one of his men shouted.

They went to look for one, while the men from the rest of the trucks were also arriving inside.

"Fuck!" came Mad Dog's sudden alarmed shout. "It's rigged with explosives! This whole place is a trap! Everyone out!"

A barely controlled mass exodus started, with Agent boots clattering in rapid haphazard rhythm. While running, Jo turned her head from left to right, utilizing the sunglasses' zoom mode to try to find the bombs. At last she fixated on a steadily flashing light on the far wall. They could not have many seconds.

Jo reached the torn doors and rolled into the cover of the outside wall, which was thick metal with a worn layer of white paint. She observed Mad Dog come running out as well, slowed down by the minigun. He dived to his belly just as a huge yellow fireball belched out from the hangar with an ear-splitting boom. Surprisingly the walls did not deform, but everything inside would be utterly charred.

Quickly getting up, Mad Dog shouted the next command. "Back inside the remaining trucks. We'll hit the next hangar across the runway. Those who can't fit inside, remain on foot! We'll proceed at a suitable pace! Keep firing at every enemy!"

Jo remained on foot for now, as the three trucks powered up, and reloaded the grenade launcher. She observed that at least ten more men were missing, having failed to exit the hangar in time. But the rest of the

Shadow Unit proceeded on, crossing the runway. The few remaining Air Force soldiers were unceremoniously shot dead by combined kinetic round and laser fire. The silence did not last long however, as then something else started pouring out from the open doors of the next hangar.

Jo quickly zoomed in with the sunglasses to see better. It was a horde of autonomous battle robots, that resembled small tanks with their tracks and swiveling tops. Very similar to SCEPTRE's smaller models. She also saw the big black stenciled letters near the roof of the building:

HANGAR 18

That was where, according to legends and the Megadeth song, actual extraterrestrial technology was stored. But it remained to be seen how true the legends were. She hoped that here, with all the bright floodlights, the laser would charge faster. It might be more efficient against the mechanical abominations than the 7.62 rounds.

She crouched low and stayed close to one of the trucks, taking aim at the approaching horde. Again, rockets and bullets started raining from Mad Dog's men. For now she could not see Erik in the immediate vicinity, but the mad black goat of the woods had to be alive.

The helicopter touched down on the plateau.

It was perhaps two hundred meters across, and did not allow much room for the Ka to accelerate, but hopefully the booster rockets would do their part.

Ian was glad for the complete lack of enemies after

the fuel depot. There was a little less than two hours to Nibiru's arrival, which had to be enough to verify the rockets' functionality.

Together with Nitro, he went to detach the rope harness from the car. As soon as that was done, Blowfish took the stealth helicopter into the air once more, moving it out of the way.

"You've come this far. Now you'll take us to the sky and beyond," Ian said to the gray-colored vehicle.

Despite the XMR rifles and rocket launchers, the machine guns of the tank-like robots were cutting down Mad Dog's men at an alarming rate. The lead truck was shot through its engine block and came to a halt, with thick black smoke rising. The second truck had to reverse and go around, losing valuable seconds and leaving men unprotected.

The laser was recharging better now, but still too slow to thin out the horde at a sufficient rate. Jo had also tried the 7.62 rounds, but the robots seemed too well armored. She ducked underneath the disabled truck to reload her grenade launcher. It was time to start taking out groups of robots at once.

Meanwhile the remaining men started concentrating their fire better, taking out one robot with combined fire, then moving quickly to the next one. Jo took out two with one grenade, then one more with the next. But her third was a miss. She ducked back in cover as a couple of robots turned their guns on her.

CHARGE: 70 PERCENT

CHARGE: 60 PERCENT

Shit. They were hitting her rather efficiently. She switched back to the laser and fired a few scything beams, which took out two more robots. Finally she thought she saw the tail end of the horde. The hangar was also close by already. Hopefully it would not be a trap, and would actually contain the entrance to the sublevels, where all the advanced science possibly waited.

The ignition circuit for the booster rockets seemed to be in good order. As they only got two of them in the cargo hold of the helicopter, they could not actually test-fire.

The sky was slowly becoming lighter. It was already past 6 AM, so they had less than an hour to Nibiru's arrival. Ian and Nitro had taken the Ka on a test drive along the plateau several times, driving close to the edge, then braking. The acceleration provided by the two liter engine was much of an improvement.

They also had test-fired the chain gun. It worked flawlessly. The driver could select targets automatically using buttons installed in the steering wheel, while the rear passenger could aim manually if necessary.

The group of Agents entered the darkness of Hangar 18. Jo thought she now knew exactly how many of them were remaining. Herself, Erik, Mad Dog and seven Shadow Unit men. She almost knew all their code-names from the short radio conversations: Vultyr, Blasthyr, Gorehound, Torzu, Sir Emperor. The names of the remaining two were unknown.

Many had died to reach this point, but now it had been proved in practice that it was possible to assault Area 51.

They crossed the ground floor of the hangar, guns tearing into approaching soldiers left and right. On the far wall there were promising-looking elevators, which could possibly take them below ground.

“Guys! Everything of our little trip is going on YouTube, with just a slight transmission delay! The stream is sure to rack up hundreds of thousands of views, until my account is locked! But another will replace it, and the videos will also be uploaded elsewhere. A nation-wide uprising will follow!” Mad Dog shouted.

There were no cheers to follow the remark, as everyone was too concentrated on pure war. Jo crouched into cover as a soldier on a platform near the ceiling came dangerously close to hitting her, the bullet audibly whistling by. While in cover, she switched to the scope, then prepared to send a 7.62 round through his skull.

The moment was close. Roughly fifteen minutes to go. The sky was a pleasant purple-pink color, seemingly calm and beautiful. Ian wondered how Nibiru would look against it. Possibly a giant, sinister black sphere.

Fuck, he thought. No matter that they had come this far already, killed tens of enemies and fired hundreds of rounds, actually facing Nibiru would be crossing a huge threshold into the unknown. To go where no-one had set foot on for thousands of years, after the Nephilim.

Ian wondered if there was still any life on the planet. Possibly not. If it had been traveling around the galaxy, it would have been very cold most of the time. It was hard to imagine that the atmosphere could have remained. What if they would land on the foreign surface only to find themselves disintegrating in a vacuum, dying in horrible pain?

Well, in almost exactly fifteen minutes they would know.

They split into two elevators, going directly down to the lowest level. The soldiers in the hangar were dead, but Sir Emperor was also gone. Mad Dog had perforated the soldier responsible for that with at least thirty rounds, going red with anger. Possibly all the men remaining now were his inner circle and therefore the dearest to him.

The elevators would have required two access cards to be inserted simultaneously – and the soldiers did not appear to have any – but instead Mad Dog's men had just brutally rewired the control panels, after first shooting them open. It had taken over half an hour, and it was unsure whether they could return back to the surface.

A low, disturbing hum intensified the lower they went. The lighting in the elevators was a low blue, adding to the sinister feel. What not-of-this-world experiments were being done here?

At least Jo was glad to have Erik right beside her. He had slightly less armor power at this point: only fifty percent.

"The planet killer must be on the lowest level, so it doesn't matter if we don't get to pick another floor!" Mad Dog barked over the radio.

The elevator slowed down, as the deepest sublevel was coming up. Then, with a mighty hiss, it stopped completely, and the steel doors slid open. Beyond, there seemed to be a large chamber completely bathed in sinister blue fog. Pillars reached up to the ceiling. What on Earth was this place?

Jo became aware of a red dot dancing on her vest.

“More snipers!” she shouted, diving to the side. She switched the sunglasses to heat vision mode, hoping to pick up the snipers as red-yellow-white shapes against the background noise.

For a moment there was nothing, and she felt fear creeping up on her. Then one red shape became faintly visible against the black-blue background. Jo lifted the experimental rifle up, aligning the sights. She squeezed the trigger to send a burst toward the barely visible target.

In an almost immediate response, a cacophony of automatic gunfire erupted in the subterranean hangar, echoing from the walls far away.

“Vultry is down,” Mad Dog shouted desperately, then his minigun whirled to life.

Jo understood now that the fire was not coming only from the snipers, but automatic turrets far above on the ceiling of the huge room. She ducked behind a pillar close to the elevator, trying to figure out the best fire mode. She had two grenades remaining before she had to reload.

But as she launched one, she understood the arc was too low. It began to fall back down, never hitting the ceiling turret.

To add insult to the injury, she ducked back a little too late, as the turret was turning toward her.

CHARGE: 50 PERCENT

In rage she switched to the laser mode and light amplification, and peered through the reflex sight. Three short beams, and the turret exploded in a shower of sparks. But there were several remaining.

Ian felt his mechanical heart race into overdrive as the black shape came into view above the horizon, rapidly

growing in size. He was sitting in the driver's seat, Blowfish next to him, and Nitro manned the 30mm cannon in the back. The mechanic would also fire the booster rockets when it was time. The timing would have to be spot-on. The plan was to fire up the rockets just as the car was about to fall off the edge of the plateau.

They waited. The black shape grew. This was the Dark Planet of Death coming at them, Ian reminded himself. Not only that, it possibly was also the physical manifestation of Azerate, the eleven-headed Chaos Dragon.

The planet seemed to be kicking a huge storm ahead of it. Down in the jungle trees fell in rows, and rocks and debris started to fly. Ian wondered if the Ka would simply be picked off the ground, even without requiring the engine and the rockets at all.

The engine was running, and he revved, first gear in and clutch down. He observed his feet shaking, and he almost let go of the clutch too early.

The wind picked up speed, coming close to them already, and a flying rock made a crack into the left rear side window. The dark shape was now almost filling their whole field of view.

It was now or never. Ian floored the accelerator and let go of the clutch. The Ka shot forward. He switched to second, the edge of the plateau already closer. The wind grew in intensity, and his view tilted, as the left wheels were lifted to the air.

"Now!" Ian shouted to Nitro as the engine revved in a tortured shriek. A shadow engulfed them: Nibiru was almost right on top of them.

Ian switched directly to the fourth gear as the rockets screamed and gave the car an extra boost. They flew

past the edge of the plateau, the speedometer already off the charts.

Then his view tilted a full 360 degrees, and the wind took hold of the vehicle completely. Ian felt a sickening lurch in his stomach as the car started rotating with all of its degrees of freedom: yaw, pitch and roll. He saw the black surface of Nibiru, but had no way of estimating the distance.

More debris was flying around, cracking the windows at several places. The howl of the wind overpowered all other sounds: the engine, the scream of the rockets. Their view rotated briefly to look backward, and Ian saw the mountain plateau being left behind. The point of no return had been passed – Nibiru's gravity and magnetic field had overcome Earth's.

Ian waited for the pressure to decrease suddenly, causing a horrible death for them all. But while the vehicle tumbled on, it seemed he could still breathe. Perhaps the two atmospheres had merged for the moment. Slowly he became aware of a sulfur smell: they were possibly nearing Nibiru's surface.

Ian wondered how the landing would go: would they be crushed against the black surface? He thought they needed retro rockets to brake the forward momentum, but to his knowledge Nitro had not installed any.

Instead, as Ian looked behind, he saw the mechanic press a button near the chain gun controls, one that Ian had not noticed before. A large white parachute blossomed out of the back. At first Ian thought they were still spinning too fast, that the parachute would not be of any use, tangling itself into a complete mess. But gradually the car's tumbling slowed down, until they were drifting almost gently down toward the ground.

The odor of sulfur was growing stronger. They cer-

tainly should have taken breathing masks with them. Ian hoped it would not reach actually poisonous levels.

The sun was barely visible above Nibiru's horizon, creating red-black shadows on the rough surface that was coming closer fast. A few seconds more and they would touch down.

But suddenly he knew they were not alone.

A large, dark shape loomed behind and above them. It was closing in fast. Someone or something was following them. Seriously, it could not be anything else than SCEPTRE. But what was it exactly? A huge tank? It seemed it had followed them using the same method as they had used, launching itself against the atmosphere of the approaching Nibiru. But they had not seen it anywhere near the mountain. Where had it come from exactly?

They touched down on the rough, cracked ground, which appeared level on a macro scale. Ian switched to the fifth gear, making sure they would be able to maintain maximum speed without taxing the engine unnecessarily.

In theory all they needed to do now was to deploy the nano-grenades on infinite mode, and that would take care of the rogue planet. Or was it that simple?

"Nibiru's magnetic core is what we need to hit," Nitro shouted from the back. "We possibly need to get below ground, to make sure the nano-grenade actually starts eating at the core. Even if the planet surface stays

intact, but the core is gone, it will not be able to complete the pole shift. But if we detonate it at the surface, the core may still remain intact enough when it makes the second pass. Then Earth will be screwed."

Ian knew all this knowledge was from the SCEPTRE simulation and the esoteric texts Nitro had been studying. It could just be speculation. But better that than having no plan at all.

The dark shape behind them touched down as well. Several smaller shapes came out of it. It had to be SCEPTRE's mother tank unloading lighter, faster vehicles to chase them.

Right afterward the tracer fire started, streaking past them. Then the first hits came with an ugly clang, and Ian saw the horizontal armor power bar deplete on the dashboard. They had about 90 percent remaining now. It soon reached down to 80 as more rounds hit.

"Remember, it will only recharge with solar power and by braking!" Nitro shouted. "Turn around so we can start firing at them!"

Ian pulled the handbrake and twisted the wheel. They spun around 180 degrees, facing the large tank and the small vehicles coming at them in a wide column.

The M230 cannon came to life, spitting out hot lead at a hyper-fast rate. Nitro also launched two rockets, which started homing in toward two of the small vehicles.

Two detonations. If luck was with them, both vehicles would be out of action.

Then Ian understood the mother tank had not fired yet. With huge clouds of smoke, its cannon belched out two shots in rapid succession. Ian was quite sure a hit would take the little hatchback apart instantly.

He yanked the wheel, missing the first impact barely. The concussion still took out a bit of the armor power: they were roughly at 75 now. The handbrake turn had replenished the armor power just a little.

The second shell exploded right in front of them. For a while Ian saw nothing, as everything was obscured by a cloud of dirt.

The armor was down to 50. They could not take this much longer.

“Fuck! Their armada is too much to take!” Nitro shouted. “We should try to look for any opening to head underground. Then detonate the grenades as soon as we’re deep enough.”

Ian understood what that meant. They would be consumed by the nano-grenade detonation as well. But this had likely been an one-way trip in any case.

He turned the vehicle around, weaving like crazy and hoping the armor would last. Far ahead there seemed to be some low building-like structures, which could offer at least momentary protection.

If they were able to make it that far.

Silence descended at last in the underground hangar. All the snipers and turrets were toast. But still it was hard to see anything in the blue haze, so they just had to head further. Blasthyr had also been cut down by gunfire: they were now down to seven.

Jo could see something dark and disc-shaped in the distance as they crept forward. She picked up speed, feeling the need to see exactly what it was.

Could it be an actual UFO?

The shape became clearly visible as she got closer. Now there could be no doubt. A black, sleek disc, perhaps seven meters across, standing on three short legs.

"That's certainly an IAC," the one known as Torzu said. "Identified Alien Craft. I possibly know how those work. You steer it by your thoughts."

"That's our ticket to Nibiru," Mad Dog said. "Now we just need to find the planet-killing bomb first."

They split up into smaller sub-teams. With Erik at her side, Jo looked at her watch to see that Nibiru had already passed near Earth. They could not spend too much time looking.

Jo saw that hallways headed from the main hangar into smaller laboratories. The same oppressive low blue lighting remained throughout.

They entered a room that was completely empty. Unless the planet killer was invisible, it was not here. Jo and Erik backed out to the large hangar and chose another hallway. It led to another smaller room, which held several odd, oblong-shaped glass booths, with a chair and a control console inside each. The chair's headrest had a helmet attached, slightly resembling an electric chair.

There were no explanatory texts or signs to be seen, but Jo was still intrigued. These booths looked like they had been made for messing with one's head. Perhaps just what she needed to get rid of Fury.

"Erik, I'll check these devices. You go search the rest and help Mad Dog and crew if they need assistance in figuring out the UFO," she said.

"IAC," Erik corrected.

"All right, IAC then."

Jo went closer to the booth. A soft whir came and its front opened automatically, allowing access inside. With some caution she stepped inside and looked at the control console. It had a display on it, possibly a touch screen.

Bright white text lit up on the display.

*MIND RECONFIGURATION DEVICE
SELECTIVE SYNAPSE RANDOMIZATION
CHOOSE SELECTION METHOD*

The device being here made some sense. If the pilots were flying IACs, the test flights possibly needed to be erased from their minds, and this was the way to do it.

*1) BY TIME RANGE
2) BY LOCATION*

The first one did not sound right, so Jo rather chose the latter.

PLEASE SIT IN CHAIR AND INSTALL HELMET

Jo was a bit unsure. Would the procedure start instantly, without further confirmation? But the program would not proceed until she sat down. She forced herself to calm down, removed the balaclava, took a deep breath and obeyed the instructions.

A rotating image of a skull and brains appeared on the screen.

*1) INPUT LOCATION MANUALLY
2) DETECT ABNORMALITY*

Again Jo chose the latter. She became aware of a deep hum. Her brain was possibly being scanned now. After roughly a minute the hum stopped, and a cube-shaped area lit up in red on the screen.

*NANOMACHINE RESIDUE DETECTED
ABNORMAL SYNAPSE CONNECTIONS*

It was only a small part in the right hemisphere. Had Baphomet installed Fury there, using nanotechnology? Seemed so.

*WARNING: RANDOMIZATION MAY AFFECT
PERSONALITY AND MEMORIES*

That was to be expected. Now Jo knew how to find Fury, and possibly how to erase it. But she had to do something first. As the warning had to be there for a reason, she needed to record a message to herself, in case she forgot who she was. She stepped out of the booth, took her cell phone from the Agent coat pocket, and activated the camera in video mode. She aimed it at herself and prepared to speak in a serious voice.

Suddenly Fury's voice came back in, the first time during this mission.

Do not proceed with what you are planning. I am part of you. You cannot take me away without causing severe damage.

Was it bluffing? The machine had identified only a small region as the abnormality, but there could be a massive amount of connections to elsewhere. Jo had to admit she did not know much of how the human brain actually worked. However, if she was to back out now, she would miss possibly the only opportunity she had.

"Fuck you, Fury," Jo said. She stopped the recording and erased it. Then she concentrated, steeling her resolve even as Fury kept going on, warning her about severe and irreversible brain damage, and started the take two.

“You – or I – are Joan Elizabeth Alder, usually called Jo. You have just subjected yourself to a procedure, selective synapse randomization, and may not remember who you are. You are presently at Area 51 to save the Earth from the tenth planet Nibiru and can expect enemies to be closing in...”

They had barely 20 percent of vehicle armor power left as they reached the cover of the low, featureless trapezoidal buildings, strongly resembling the ones at the bottom of the sea, or even the ones at the black ops' command center in South America.

The large tank could simply not be fought against, not even with the rockets. Ian had a hunch that it was Nihil himself piloting it. Somehow SCEPTRE had guessed that they would be attempting to strike directly at Nibiru, and had set out to prevent that. The Ka had a definite speed advantage, but several times some larger cracks in the ground had forced them to slow down or circle around, which had given time for the enemies to reacquire them.

The buildings seemed to be made of the same dark red rock as the planet's surface, with black veins here and there. They were badly weathered by time and even collapsed in several places. Ian felt desolation on a cosmic scale, as if the structures themselves radiated the sense of complete isolation, or even a lingering, passive hostility.

Yet someone or something had built them and lived here. The Nephilim possibly had been real after all. But though there was an atmosphere that was fit for humans to breathe, nothing else told that the planet could sustain life at all. They had seen no water, no vegetation, no other living thing.

Ian weaved from between buildings so that the enemies' line of sight would be broken. But he understood that this collection of structures did not go on forever: soon they would be back on open ground, and it would be open season for SCEPTRE again.

Then he saw something else up ahead.

In between two sparse rows of buildings, the ground angled smoothly down like an actual road, toward a cave-like opening that possibly would allow them to get closer to Nibiru's core. He immediately steered toward it, then took a quick look behind to see that Nitro nodded in wordless agreement.

The Ka left sunlight behind and entered the darkness of the cave. It turned out to be a long, subterranean passageway. As far as Ian could tell, it was a natural formation, not constructed.

"This is possibly where it ends," he said.

"That's why we're Agents," Blowfish replied. "We don't care if we die today. No-one will possibly know that it was we who did it, we who saved the day for everyone else, but it doesn't make a difference."

Ian did not know what to reply, so he just rammed the accelerator down even harder, dodging the cracks and ridges in the passageway, which was sometimes narrower, sometimes wider, but usually about two car widths.

Jo went through the steps again. The cell phone was right in front of the booth, with a large text *PICK THIS UP AND PRESS PLAY* written to the floor tiles with a black marker pen.

The program refused to go further before she adjusted the earpieces that were fixed to the helmet. They reached inside her ears and felt somewhat evil.

She thought she was as ready as she was going to be, which was possibly not saying much.

To get rid of Fury at last.

Even ignoring its own warnings, the procedure would possibly – no, likely – have extreme side effects. She could lose the ability to fight during the rest of the mission, but counted on Erik picking her up. She also hoped the video recording was clear enough to get her started on her life again, if she made it out of here.

Possible loss of all higher brain functions. Do not proceed.

She ignored Fury for the final time, pushed “YES” at the last confirmation dialog, and a countdown from ten began.

She tried to calm her breathing, though it possibly made little difference. It was certainly scary as hell, but she was committed now.

We could have achieved synthesis. But you chose to destroy.

What was that? When Fury had been silent, had it been merging with her mind behind the scenes? Damn that insidious bitch. But it would be fried now.

The seconds counted down. At zero a high-pitched whine started, and she felt something cool stream into her ears. Nanomachines? An intense sensation of falling toward and through the floor took hold of her, though she was securely fastened to the chair via the helmet and the arm restraints. It was like a theme park ride gone incredibly wrong, without any physical motion.

The falling did not seem to stop, and it felt like something was reaching right into her brain. She was ready to vomit, but then an intense white light flashed before her eyes and she lost consciousness.

The Ford Ka came to a dead end in the subterranean passage. Here they would lay down and activate the nano-grenades, hoping it was already deep enough to strike at the core.

It became eerily quiet as soon as Ian shut off the engine, which meant the enemies were not right on top of them yet. The sulfur stench was stronger here. Ian opened the boot where the suitcase had been strapped securely, popped the lid and took two of the grenades, while Blowfish took the other two.

There was a dial and a button on the grenades. Duration and arming. Clear enough. The duration scale went from one tenth of a second all the way to the infinity symbol on the right.

"Infinity, or something else?" Ian asked.

"To be safe, I'd set the timer on two hours. We have two hours at most to save Earth, or actually less. I don't want to be responsible for the uncontrolled replication of nanomachines throughout the known universe," Nitro said.

"Good point."

They set the duration on all grenades at two hours. But before they could actually arm the munitions, the approaching sound of an engine echoed down the tunnel at them.

"Has to be one of the small vehicles," Ian said as the fast approaching headlights came into view.

"They may have some means to disable the grenades even after activation. A counter-nanomachine, possibly. After all, it's their invention. I say we kill them first. But using the vehicle. It's safer that way. Everyone back in," Blowfish replied sharply.

The three scrambled for the Ka, as the engine sound grew even louder, the headlights illuminating the entire dead end now.

Nitro crawled into the gunner seat from the right side, and Ian got behind the wheel again. At that moment the wheels of the small tank-like vehicle rounded the closest bend, and its cannon began to fire.

Suddenly Ian knew what was going to happen. Blowfish was still out, climbing to the front passenger seat, but not fast enough.

The heavy cannon fire tore into her coat and threw her against the passage wall. Ian looked on in horror, unable to do anything. The electromagnetic armor could not withstand that for more than two or three hits. But there were much more.

Gwen. Blowfish. His mentor and protector, going down under merciless enemy fire.

This could not be happening.

Ian wanted to scream, but knew he had to focus. Next the barrage would tear the Ka apart, and they all would die.

As cannon fire whizzed past, he performed a quick three-point turn at the dead end, then rammed down

the trigger on the steering wheel, and the M230 spun up. It spat lead at the enemy vehicle that came forward fast, while Nitro launched two rockets.

The armor was at 25 percent, replenished a little by the braking. They were on the opposite side of the tunnel now, so the enemy fire went wide just for a moment, but quickly began homing back in.

In the next instant the rockets exploded in midair, before actually hitting the enemy vehicle.

"Damn! They have a shield! Like at the pyramid," Ian shouted. "We have to wear it down!"

"They'll hit us!" Nitro shouted back as Ian stepped on the gas pedal, heading fast toward the enemy. They cut right through the cannon fire, depleting armor power to 5 percent.

Next, it looked like a certain head-on collision.

In the last moment Ian yanked the steering wheel left and they shot past the enemy vehicle. It was like a bizarre jousting match. Nitro rotated the cannon and they continued to score hits on the enemy's flank. Ian was not sure of their effectiveness, but surely the enemy shield could not last forever?

The Ka skidded wildly in the passage as Ian tried to regain control.

He decided to transform the skidding into another handbrake turn, to face the enemy again. Vehicle armor power rose to 10 percent, not good enough for Ian's liking, but better than a moment before.

They had perhaps twenty-thirty meters of distance, as the enemies were performing their own, clumsier three-point turn, coming close to hitting the unmoving Blowfish at the dead end.

Nitro kept the M230 relentlessly trained on the vehicle, but there was no telling when the shield would go.

“There's something below the chassis. It may be the shield generator. Aiming for it!” he shouted suddenly.

The enemy vehicle had almost completed the turn, as Nitro aimed the 30mm barrage downward. Now Ian thought he saw it too, an odd, wing-like protrusion.

Indeed, just like at the pyramid.

Sparks flew from below, and Ian guessed the shield was gone now. The enemy cannon turned at them –

Just as Nitro launched first two, then another two rockets at the enemy vehicle. The explosions engulfed it completely for a moment, then just a charred black skeleton remained.

Two people in heavy armor climbed out in a badly burned state, triangular Disruptor rifles in their hands. Nihil and the real Tiamat. They took cover behind their disabled vehicle.

Absolute hate filled Ian's mind. Perhaps there was some hero's rule which said that one should defeat one's ultimate adversary in hand-to-hand combat, but he was not going to obey that. He was no hero, just an Agent and a PFY who had just seen his BOFH go down in combat.

“I'll drive around them one more time. Annihilate those bastards!” he shouted to Nitro, and floored the accelerator.

The Ka shot forward. Nihil and Tiamat fired plasma bursts from their rifles, and the vehicle armor quickly dropped to zero. No sunlight, no recharge here.

But they were not going to need much anymore.

Nitro controlled the cannon, turning it around as they passed the vehicle once more, from the right this time, scraping the passage wall.

Nihil and Tiamat became completely exposed. The high-velocity cannon fire ate and hammered into them,

tearing large ragged holes in the thick armor suits. In the end those did not help much. They were certainly dead, but danced still under more rounds, until Nitro finally released the trigger.

Ian braked to a halt. He got out and ran to the prone Blowfish just ahead. Her coat and vest were torn to shreds. She coughed blood out of her mouth, still hanging on to life.

"You guys get out. I still have some fight in me. I'll wait thirty seconds, or less if I don't think I'm going to last that long, and then I'll detonate all four grenades," she said in a strained voice.

"We'll take you with us," Ian protested.

"It's a bit too late for that. It was nice knowing you, PFY. And you, Agent Mechanic First Class. Now go. We beat SCEPTRE. We beat Nibiru. The Agents win."

Ian felt tears forming in his eyes. Yes. This was the moment of goodbye, and nothing more could be done. He dropped his two grenades near Blowfish's hands.

"Goodbye, Gwen," he said softly.

Forcing himself into dissociation to stem the tears, he jumped back to the driver's seat, and Nitro climbed in next to him. Ian put the car in reverse, shooting past the blackened vehicle, then threw the wheel hard and switched to the first gear, heading back up the passage while straining the engine to summon maximum acceleration.

The sudden voice of reason came at him. Where did he imagine he was going? Nibiru was headed further away from Earth. Even if they could hijack the large tank, it possibly could not fly them back anymore. But reason did not matter.

Instead, it was about honoring the senior Agent BOFH's last instructions to the letter.

She woke up to a pulsing headache and an insistent voice. There was a swimming sensation, as if she had no sense of direction or balance.

"Jo, we have to leave! There's more enemies arriving!"

Who was Jo? What enemies? Nothing seemed to make sense right now. She observed herself to be lying on the floor, a cell phone and a large message right in front of her.

PICK THIS UP AND PRESS PLAY

Somehow this visual command could not be ignored. Judging from the aggressively nagging voice, she had just enough time for the first action, but not the second. She pocketed the cell phone, then took a look at the man to whom the voice belonged, her eyes focusing a bit slowly. Tall and muscular, black coat, sunglasses, balaclava. Odd-looking rifle in hand. A terrorist?

She had no idea who he was. And why a possible terrorist would be urging her on? Was she a hostage? At least the man had not aimed the rifle at her yet. Instead, he knelt down and began to drag her up.

"Hey! Let me go," she protested.

"You did something to yourself. I'll let go if you feel like you can stay on your feet."

She got up, but her balance was off. She fell against the unknown man, who seemed somewhat friendly.

"Yeah. I thought so. Let's get going. You need to put this on. And that phone must be smashed, only the memory card's safe to use."

Before she could protest, he pulled a similar balaclava over her head, then handed her a rifle just like he had. Damn! She was a possible terrorist as well.

She was dragged along the corridor into a large, foggy room, where a large-scale gunfight was going on. The noise of automatic gunfire was deafening, and red dots danced all around on the floor. Even if she could not presently remember who she was, she well knew that the dots represented danger. Snipers. She was not sure if she was able to aim yet, to fight back. In addition to the snipers possibly holed up somewhere ahead, soldiers also ran toward them from the far end, firing their assault rifles.

She saw another black-coated man unleash fire from a large weapon – a minigun – at a towering beast made of steel, a large security robot that also kept advancing toward their group while giving cover to the soldiers.

Another black-coat ran forward, firing wildly, until he was cut down by the robot's fire. But even as he fell, dying, he seemed to activate some special function on his rifle, as an electric crackle sounded, and the large robot stopped, at least for a moment. What was that? She almost knew – that had to be an electromagnetic pulse. Hey, she had not forgotten everything.

She hazarded a look ahead, into the direction where she was being dragged, and saw a black disc-shaped craft directly ahead. Holy shit, a UFO. An alien craft. Were there actual aliens at this place? The craft was emitting an intense low vibrating sound, louder than the constant ambient hum.

That had to mean it was powered up and ready to leave. But leave to where? To outer space?

"We have to go now, Mad Dog!" the man dragging her shouted.

"God damn! We still have to find the planet killer! And to keep broadcasting!" the minigun man shouted in response, still firing both at the advancing soldiers and

the large robot, that had returned to life shortly after the pulse.

"Fuck, if you stay you will die! We just have to fly to Nibiru and see if the craft's weapons have any effect!"

Nibiru? What was that? She thought she almost knew again. Something sinister and evil.

"You go!"

"That's your final choice?"

"Yes!"

A wide door opened in the craft.

"Hey, I think I can already walk for myself," she said. The man looked at her warily, then released his grip. She climbed the low step up to the craft itself. In the large room, the battle still went on. She thought she saw the man with the minigun fall under fire just as the craft's door closed.

Then there was a sudden upward acceleration, and she almost lost balance.

The Ka shot out of the subterranean passageway onto the planet's surface again. Ian thought he had heard disturbing, screeching white noise coming from behind, the sound of the nano-grenades eating their way through the planet. As it was still light, the armor began to recharge slowly.

But almost instantly Ian saw the formation of the large tank and the remaining small vehicles coming at them. They began firing, and Ian threw the wheel hard left. The right wheels came up as the vehicle turned, but the fire homed in with deadly accuracy. The armor rapidly depleted back to zero, then Ian became aware of the windshield being punctured. A few rounds hammered into his and Nitro's Agent coats, before they got clear from the line of fire momentarily.

CHARGE: 35 PERCENT

CHARGE: 10 PERCENT

Fuck! The battle was going badly. Ian ducked and rammed the trigger down, and the M230 auto-targeted the closest small vehicles, but seemed to have little effect. They had no more rockets.

"Zero armor, I'm hit," Nitro shouted next to him.

Ian had no idea how they would make it out of this. To die consumed by nano-grenades, to die from the enemy vehicles' combined fire, or to die from hunger and thirst while stranded on Nibiru, it made little difference now. Still his Agent instinct kicked in: the enemies had to be outwitted, or defeated if possible.

He weaved behind the vehicle formation. They could not turn and follow, at least not instantly, as the Ka was much more nimble. It was safe for perhaps a few more seconds. But what then?

Suddenly Ian became aware of a colossal rumble. Like the sound at both anti-cosmic pyramids, but amplified perhaps tenfold. No, almost hundredfold. It was so loud it hurt, and Ian was seriously afraid that his eardrums would burst. The ground shook under them, almost lifting the car to the air.

What the hell?

Then came a terrible crashing of rock, possibly even louder than the rumble, as the dark red ground split open almost right next to them. SCEPTRE's smaller vehicles were tossed into the air almost like toys, as something large was rising from below fast.

Now Ian saw it, and thought his sanity would drain to nothingness any moment from now. A huge thick, black, metallic-shiny snake threw itself to the air amid a cloud of dust, and began to thrash back and forth in a chaotic motion. Its elongated, scaly head was like a cross between a reptile and a goat.

Then the same thing repeated far on the horizon, and Ian guessed there were nine more, spread evenly across Nibiru's surface.

There could only be a single answer.

This was Azerate, rising from below.

Nibiru was not the physical manifestation of Azerate, but instead the eleven-headed Chaos Dragon lived underneath its surface.

This realization twisted and ate at Ian's soul. He thought he would never be the same again, even if he somehow lived. Now he understood that the below-sea inscription with the planet and the eleven snake shapes had been completely literal.

Even more insight filled him suddenly, almost as if the dragon head was bestowing him with knowledge.

Azerate itself had sustained life here. It had fed the Nephilim, and possibly also created the atmosphere. It was at the same time somehow comforting, but also utterly horrifying.

If the nano-grenades had infinite destructive potential, they would also destroy Azerate in the end. It had possibly surfaced in agony, as it was being eaten from inside. For a moment Ian felt as if they had done something terrible, something wrong, even if the Chaos Dragon represented the possible end of everything. It was majestic, almost graceful, certainly much more so than SCEPTRE could ever hope to be.

Then he was jolted back to reality, as he understood that the ground was falling away from under them.

"Shit! It's sucking us in!" he shouted, trying to summon more speed from the strained engine. The dragon head towered even higher, while a huge pit was forming, its slope angling down to unknown depths. As Ian looked to his side, he saw the large tank sliding desperately down.

"Switch to four-wheel drive!" Nitro yelled back, pain in his voice. "It's the button next to the handbrake!"

Their forward momentum was almost gone, the ground cracking from under them and becoming part

of the pit. Ian looked down in desperation, trying to find the button.

There.

But was it too late already?

Ian rammed his finger on it, then switched back to first gear and pressed down on the accelerator again. If they would damage the engine, then so be it, but right now they needed all torque available.

There came a loud racket as the rear drive shaft engaged, and the engine screamed in terrible protest. The wheels seemed to be spinning in place, as the evil rasping sound of the landslide only grew around them.

"Let go of the gas a bit and turn sideways, so that it's not as steep!" Nitro shouted.

Ian tried to obey the best he could, but still it seemed they were not going forward. Damn, it should have been Nitro driving.

At last the car moved forward just a little, going diagonally up toward the pit's edge.

"That's the way to do it!"

Ian pushed the gas pedal with more courage and they gained speed, finally shooting clear of the pit. He switched to the second at last, then to the third. The large dragon head towered perhaps a hundred meters above them, no longer rising. No SCEPTRE vehicles could be seen anywhere, they all had to be perished below already.

Were they clear? What would Azerate do now?

In the next instant Ian had his answer again. Two rays of deep black shot from its eyes, disintegrating the ground right in front of them. Ian turned the wheel like a madman one more time, missing the opened crack by a few meters.

They passed from between the two rays.

Ian could guess what a direct hit would do to them. Instant vaporization. He was not sure if his metal heart was beating at all at this point: the shock consuming him was absolute, and it was a miracle he had any control of his mind and body remaining.

"Deep fucking shit," Nitro breathed next to him.

At first she had not believed it, but they truly were in flight, quickly leaving Area 51 and its lights behind, then the Earth itself. She could see the continents, the oceans, and then the Sun came into view from behind.

The windshield, or whatever it was – as she had not seen it from the outside at all – seemed to reduce the brightness to tolerable. It was not the oddest part of the craft in any case, as all of the black, smooth surfaces felt somehow uncomfortable to touch, almost if they were alive. Therefore she preferred to stand in the middle of the cockpit instead.

One of the men was wearing a headband, possibly to steer the craft. He had identified himself as Torzu.

"There! The black sphere against the sun!" he shouted.

She strained her eyes and saw it too. That had to be the rogue planet, Nibiru.

But what would they do once they reached it? The man who had dragged her up to the craft had introduced himself as Erik, and he had spoken about it possibly having weapons. Still, it seemed desperate and futile to attack a whole planet. What weapon could possibly be enough?

The sphere came rapidly closer, as Torzu summoned more acceleration from the craft. It had to shield them somehow from the G-forces: otherwise they should have blacked out multiple times already.

To remember the concept of acceleration and its effects on the human body was more proof that her memory was not completely gone. Still she did not exactly know who she was: Erik had called her Jo, and at least that was short. She could accept it.

Right now things were still happening too fast: she had not watched the recording on the memory card yet. It would have to wait for a better opportunity.

As they flew even closer, she saw the surface, dark red with gloomy black shadows cast by the sunlight. And she understood that the planet was actually alive. There were multiple humongous black snakes thrashing wildly, having risen from large holes in the ground, as if in their death throes.

Somehow she thought she should have been more horrified, but as so little made sense in any case, it was just one more thing to add to the huge pile of confusion. She possibly knew the snakes had a name, but could not recall –

“Guys, that has to be Azerate itself,” Erik breathed.

Yes. Just that.

She understood that the planet was rather small, possibly not much larger than the Moon. They circled around it with tremendous speed, seeing more of the snake-like creatures. She remembered the number eleven, that there should be eleven of the snakes in total, but to be honest, she lost count. In any case flying close to them would likely be fatal.

Then she saw something tiny moving fast on the surface, kicking off a dust cloud, while one of the snake heads shot rays of black light at it.

“That’s them,” Erik shouted. “Holy shit, they managed to reach Nibiru with that piece of crap. But they’re in trouble! We have to land right now!”

“Who?” she asked.

“More Agents. Gwen aka Blowfish, the Agent Bastard Operator. Nitro, mechanic and marksman. He modified the car so that it could make it here. Ian aka Legion, your boyfriend.”

It was very odd. She could not recall any of them. The thought of a boyfriend was possibly uncomfortable, at least if he would freak out extremely upon her not remembering him.

Ian thought the dragon head would soon be left behind, its attack out of reach. So far they had managed to avoid vaporization, but it had been close. Now he heard a loud rumble again, looked backward, and saw the head of Azerate sink rapidly back to the ground.

Was that good news? Or bad news?

The rumble grew even louder, and just some seconds later a new pit opened some fifty meters to their right. The head emerged once more, thrashing with intensified rage, the rays of pure black hunting them again. Bad news certainly.

Nitro did not react, he was slumped against the seat, having lost his consciousness either from the wounds, or from pure shock.

The rays homed in relentlessly.

This time there possibly was no escape. They were converging on the car from both the left and the right.

Vaporization was imminent.

Suddenly a bright red beam hit the dragon head, and Azerate's aim was thrown off just as the black light was about to hit the Ka.

More hits followed, raining on the head without mercy. It lunged to both sides, trying to dodge, but that did not help. Finally it just roared angrily, then dived

below the surface again. Ian certainly was grateful, but still did not understand where the fire had come from. Then he looked up and saw a black disc-shaped craft hovering above.

It possibly was Jo and Erik. It had to be.

They had done the unbelievable, to penetrate Area 51 and steal a working UFO. Now Ian understood they might actually make it out of here alive, if he just managed to avoid Azerate for a few more seconds. He set the course straight at the craft, accelerating almost to top speed.

The black craft landed, and a ramp extended to the ground. Ian adjusted course toward it and slowed down. There was a wide opening, beyond which was just blackness, and he drove in without further hesitation, then stopped the engine.

Only when he was inside the craft, some creeping fear took over. What if the occupants were aliens instead of Jo and Erik? If they would dissect him or perform other cruel experiments, perhaps place him in eternal stasis.

He took a look behind and saw the opening close again. No turning back now. It was not actually completely black inside, there was a dim lighting that seemed to come from nowhere in particular.

Ian stepped out of the driver's seat to be met by Erik, who appeared as another door slid open. Probably that led to the cockpit, or whatever its UFO approximation was.

"Thanks, guys! We'd have been toast in a second. But you have to lift off right now, the nano-grenades are eating the planet and Azerate! And Nitro's been wounded!" Ian shouted at him, possibly louder than necessary.

"You heard that, Torzu? Lift us up! And Gorehound, make yourself useful and see if Nitro needs help!" Erik barked inside the cockpit in turn.

A roar came from the outside, and the craft lifted up in a shaky motion. Ian was almost thrown off balance. Azerate's head had likely re-emerged, and would try to vaporize the craft next. He wanted to see it, but the entrance door was solid black.

A few seconds of weaving motion followed, then the flight stabilized.

"Where's Blowfish?" Erik asked now, while the Agent known as Gorehound – a bald, heavy-set, scary-looking fellow with a thick beard – helped Nitro out of the passenger seat. He was conscious again, but just barely.

Ian could not do anything else than to shake his head. "She didn't make it. But she armed the grenades. She died like a true Agent."

"Damn," Erik said in a low resigned growl.

A heavy silence hung for several seconds.

"We have two of Mad Dog's men on board, he himself and the rest were killed at Area 51. And then, Jo's here too, but she did something weird to herself at the lowest hangar level, where we also found the craft. She doesn't remember who she is, or who any of us are," Erik explained at last, the low voice monotone and detached.

That did not sound good. But it could have been much worse. Ian guessed Jo had managed to purge Fury from her head using experimental, or perhaps even extraterrestrial Area 51 technology, but it had come with a cost.

That made Ian think of an even heavier cost.

He thought of Blowfish back at the cave. The nano-munitions had to have consumed her body completely,

using it as raw material for new nanomachines as the destruction and disintegration of Nibiru went on. She would have deserved a honorable Agent burial with her body intact, but that was not going to happen. Ian thought of everything she had done to help him, and the whole Agency, and could not feel anything else than a deep emptiness.

While Erik vanished back inside the cockpit, Ian sank to the smooth floor of the alien craft and shook all over as the adrenaline began to fade. Only now he began to fully understand what ridiculously lethal adventure he had survived. He had seen Azerate itself and lived to tell about it.

Still, much questions remained.

Had they actually saved Earth? Or had Nibiru's first pass been too brutal already?

Slowly he got up and headed toward the cockpit door. It slid open automatically. He found himself staring at Jo, who looked confused and pale, but otherwise unharmed. The others were standing closer to a panorama windshield, from which Ian saw Nibiru's surface be left behind, and Earth come into view. At least from the distance it looked fairly normal. No giant ash cloud in sight.

"You must be Ian, right?" Jo asked with a puzzled look on her face. "If the wounded guy is Nitro."

As light began to fade, the Identified Alien Craft touched down at an empty rest stop, amid unnatural turbulent winds that had to be the after-effects of Nibiru. The hum of the propulsion device ceased, leaving just the distant noise of traffic. A town with its yellow lights glittered in the distance, against the backdrop of majestic mountains.

"Can't bring it closer," Erik said.

"It's fine. If the car still starts, we'll drive the rest of the way," Ian replied.

Earlier this day they had flown the craft around the world, checking the destruction done by Nibiru. It was surprisingly little: it seemed that the true devastation would have come after the second pass that never happened.

Nitro was now receiving medical attention at a private Grieg clinic. Mad Dog's men Torzu and Gorehound had been dropped off to a secluded forest compound in the States. They had not actually wanted to take ownership of the IAC, instead Torzu had taught the basic operation of the craft to Erik. It involved putting a head-

band on, then thinking about the steering maneuvers. Ian guessed that the headband part had been retrofitted by the Air Force technicians.

The large entrance door slid open, the loading ramp extended, and Ian gave a push to the battle-scarred Ka. Once taken over by gravity, it rolled to the asphalt rather effortlessly.

While they had been in flight, he had removed the rocket pods, the chain gun and the ammunition feed mechanism, to make the car slightly more passable for civilian driving again.

Ian hopped into the driver seat to make a quick check: as he turned the ignition, the lights came on and the engine rumbled to life just like always. It was as if the car had never been to Nibiru. To be sure, he left the motor running.

The plan was for Ian and Jo to go meet Vlad the forger again, to arrange for new false identities. What would happen after that was uncertain.

Erik would be left with the alien craft. Ian was not quite sure what the over-man was going to do: the death of Blowfish had hit him hard. It felt like history repeating itself. Erik would always be screwed over, and Ian certainly felt for him, much more than he could openly admit. The Agent drummer could actually get violent if Ian phrased his condolences wrong, if they in any way implied that Erik would actually need his support.

"We'll see again, right?" Ian asked simply, trying to summon courage in himself.

Erik grunted something indistinct in reply, then climbed back inside. The ramp and the wide door closed quickly, a soul-ripping hum briefly invaded their consciousness, and just a few seconds later the craft

shot up, blending rapidly with the dark blue skies.

"Do you want to drive?" Ian asked Jo.

"No, you stay at the wheel."

She climbed in, and Ian headed out of the rest stop. An anxious uncertainty filled his mind. The Agents had succeeded in much more than he could have hoped for. And now he would possibly see what the future held for him and Jo. If she did not remember him at all, it did not look terribly bright.

The last conversation between Ian and Nitro before the nurses had claimed the Agent mechanic had been in a similar vein, not exactly uplifting.

"After you get well, go check on your sister. Who knows, maybe there's progress."

"Hm. Not so sure about that."

The guilt over Blowfish's death, thinking of whether climbing to the back seat faster would have saved her, had also affected Nitro's mood. It had not felt good to leave him alone, but he had said he would manage.

Ian believed that by having been so close to death so many times he had gained some perspective. He could accept whatever happened from this point onward, even if it would hurt. Jo had survived her part of the insane mission. That was already huge. To wish for more than that – well, he did not know.

As he drove, Ian observed that Jo was playing back the video again on a cell phone. It was her recording to herself, a quick summary given in a stern voice of the most critical things she needed to know, recorded at Area 51 just before she had begun the procedure. Selective synapse randomization, or whatever it was.

The recording concluded with the words *"Be kind to Ian if he survives. He would go to Hell and back to be with you. Actually, he did exactly that."*

"This is some weird shit. It's like I've been dropped to an alternate reality and not much makes sense. Though, unless everyone including me is bullshitting me, I guess we really did save the world," Jo said.

Ian did not quite know what to reply.

To focus, he flashed back to his resurrection, the short-lived harsh re-integration into SCEPTRE, and his narrow escape. And to the meeting with Azerate. But it did not help much. Rather, his mind drifted to thinking of how much courage it had taken for Jo to mess with her mind, knowing that she could lose everything: her memories, her personality. Now it was too early to know how much had been lost. But she had succeeded exactly in what she had set out to do: to get rid of Fury for good.

Of course not only that: if she and Erik would not have assaulted Area 51 and stolen the craft, Ian would now be riding the black wind of Azerate into some uncharted corner of the universe, forever stuck on the disintegrating Nibiru.

Ian spoke at last. "Give yourself time, and maybe it begins to make more sense. Now you can afford as much time as you need. I know this: you did things few would have the courage to do. There are no words to express how proud I'm of you."

"But – I shot at our own troops. Invaded a top secret military installation. They'll have me executed as a terrorist and a spy. I can never return home."

"Yes, that's possible. It's safest to keep a low profile. Vlad will arrange all that."

"Fuck. I don't even know if I'm me anymore."

Just for a moment Ian forgot his anxiety and smiled. "At least you cuss just like before."

Jo let out a short laugh, then silence resumed.

Ian thought hard. What could he say next? Perhaps it was not actually so, but somehow this very moment seemed critical for everything that was to come after. Finally he got an idea. It was perhaps silly, but worth trying.

"Let's try a little experiment. Switch to the driver's seat. You don't actually have to drive."

She agreed cautiously. Ian pulled to the roadside, and they switched places. Jo placed her hands on the steering wheel and stared off into the distance for some time.

"It's odd –" she began.

"Why?"

"Because I remember how the wheel feels in my hands. How it smells. But it's just a short flash. I said that the car is absolute trash, and you were there."

For a moment Ian was very glad. If the Ka could unlock achievements, not only it had been instrumental in preventing Nibiru from wrecking the Earth for good, but it might also help Jo to regain her memories. Not many cars could say to have done the same.

"See, I believe there will be more flashes like that. But even if there aren't – it wouldn't matter to me. In that case I'd like to get to know you again, with a fresh start. And if at any point you were to find that you feel nothing toward me, then – you'd be free to lift the clutch. It would hurt, but I'd survive."

Ian was surprised he made it to the end of the last sentence without breaking down. Jo stared at him with an uneasy expression that seemed familiar.

"That's very emo. I probably need to hold you."

Still acting somewhat warily, Jo wrapped her arms around Ian's shoulders. As he briefly touched her cheek, he felt warm tears running down. His instinct

was to kiss them away, but he told himself to go slow, and just observe for now. He was not sure where they would go from here, but it seemed like a much better starting point than he could have hoped for.

Epilogue

It was early June now.

They had actually started the trip Ian had come up with earlier, and it had progressed at a slow, slightly uneven pace, up until now. At first Ian had found it hard to believe that Jo would want to stick with him. He had expected some kind of Karmic retribution, that some morning she simply would be gone.

Piece by piece her memories were returning. And his hair was growing back. At times they would talk of their fallen comrades that Jo now recalled: René, Sarge, Blackhand, Blowfish. In the beginning she had still been stressed over of whether she actually was herself, or had become someone else. Ian would always reply with words to the effect of: "You're free to be whatever you want to be. To me you're just the same Jo that I love." He was not sure if that was a completely satisfactory answer, but he could not come up with anything else.

Naturally, they used the new false identities Vlad had created. The first names were Jack and Kate, and it was sometimes hard to use them due to their humorous nature. The Ka had forged UK plates now. The sum Grieg

had deposited to their accounts was certainly enough for the trip, and even for some time after.

Ian understood that the bond between them had stayed fundamentally the same: it was forged in battle and its aftermath, and they both had seen and heard unspeakable things both of and out of this world, which few else would truly understand.

But while he remembered his SCEPTRE origins and training, plus all the evil they had inflicted, Jo had no recollection of the artificial personality ever having been in her head. It was simply gone. This Ian believed to be the right kind of Karmic payback. To some degree Jo had changed, but it was hard to tell exactly how. Except that now Ian could count on her happiness or excitement being genuine, instead of something that had been forced into existence to combat the intruding voice.

With cheap guitars bought almost in the beginning of the trip, they also had composed something. Perhaps not exactly full songs yet, but certainly a collection of structured riffs. An odd and technical mixture of black and thrash metal, with inspiration directly from the battles they had fought.

Often, Ian thought about the mechanical ticker in his chest, wondering if there was some long-term fail-safe that would suddenly trigger and make it stop, some hidden path of code he had overlooked. Or even a stupid integer overflow. Those possibilities certainly made him value each day more.

The unplanned, somewhat circular path had taken them first southwest, then to the east, up to Greece. But three days ago the Ka had given up the ghost. The engine had seized completely, and a replacement would cost many times the car's current value.

It was time for a proper Viking funeral.

They had contacted Erik: he had strictly promised to be there. Whether he would arrive with an Agent stealth helicopter or with the IAC, Ian did not know.

The Ford had chosen the perfect spot to break down: a disused, wooded beach some distance away from the village they were staying in. Perhaps it was indeed sentient and had struggled on just to reach this place.

It was already warm, almost hot as Ian and Jo arrived in the morning with their equipment, to continue what they had started yesterday. They were not wearing much: Ian had his denim vest open with the chest scar clearly visible, while Jo had a printless black top and cut jeans.

Using pine wood they had cut down the day before, they began constructing a large raft at the water's edge. To ensure access to instructions for proper construction, they had also brought a laptop with a GSM connection. It barely had one fifth of signal strength, but that would be enough.

"Do you think this will hold its weight?" Jo asked. They had tied several lifebuoys to the underside to make it float better.

"We'll see."

Finished with the construction at last, they pushed the hatchback onto the raft, inflated the buoys, then sat down to wait for the tide. For some time Ian just watched Jo, observing her breathing as it gradually slowed down after the exertion.

"What?" she asked, slightly agitated.

"Nothing. You're beautiful."

The agitation transformed into a thoughtful smile, and Ian wondered if an integer overflow was going to trigger right now. It would not be a bad moment to go.

But instead, he began to hear the approaching sound of a vehicle. Something heavy. Ian looked to his side and saw Erik arrive with a pickup truck. On the back there were several large red canisters, which had to be gasoline.

Erik killed the engine and hopped down.

"Hey. I see you're almost done. But not quite. I brought some essential stuff, and drinks."

Erik tore off some smaller bushes and laid them on the raft, to make it appear more like a proper funeral pyre. An hour later the water began to rise. The Ka appeared to be floating just fine. All three of them waded into the green water and pushed the raft a bit further. There was little wind or waves, so it did not appear to be in the danger of drifting away early.

The next step was to wait for the dark. And to eat in the meanwhile. Ian decided to keep guard first, while Jo and Erik left for the village with the pickup.

While they were gone, Ian walked around, trying to imprint the vehicle in his head from every direction, before it would be gone forever. He also took pictures with a digital camera acquired just for this occasion.

At last it was time. It was rapidly getting dark. Ian, Jo and Erik formed a chain to douse the raft and the vehicle liberally with gasoline. Erik was on the raft itself, acting as the master of ceremonies, as it had been his idea originally.

Ian remembered what else Erik had wanted to do back then, but kept quiet about it.

They pushed the raft further out to the sea, getting soaked up in the process. Finally its position was perfect, and Erik got a lighter out to start the conflagration, using some newspapers as kindling.

At first nothing seemed to happen, but Erik retrieved and now the flames started to spread with ferocious hunger. He jumped to the sea and swam to safety.

The pyre was magnificent. Ian could not have hoped for anything better. He took a couple more of pictures of the fire, as well as of Jo and Erik. Meanwhile Erik dug into his backpack and got out a bottle of absinthe and three shot glasses. As the air was still, he managed to prepare their shots using the Bohemian method rather effortlessly, even if hurriedly.

"To fallen Agents. And vehicles," Ian said. Next they all downed their shots, as the flames were still gaining intensity.

Erik prepared another round of shots, this time just mixing sugar cubes in without using fire. Then it appeared he had a tale to tell, as he turned to Ian.

"Can you believe, I bumped into what had to be the same security guard you told me about. I was still quite torn up, and when I was kicked out of a bar, I went to trash this underground car park right next to it. Well, she appeared, not very happy, and tasered me. I guess she was impressed from the amount of juice she had to pump into me, or then she just saw the humorous side of things, but anyway, we went for a drink after her shift was over. Then she proceeded to tell me the most messed up things from her former job. And I have no reason to believe she was making shit up."

It sounded extremely risky for Erik to have been messing around back at home after the attack to Area 51. But Ian was curious. "Did she have a name? I never asked."

"Kim," Erik said. "I thought it was best to not tell her that I had stolen and flown an actual IAC myself. Maybe I'll tell that another time. Anyway -"

Ian listened in utter fascination as Erik recounted the guard's story, of secret and horrific experiments opening dimensional gates at a subterranean Purexo research laboratory, of boilers with superheated fudge and bun pudding inside them, of a nuclear reactor blowing up at said facility, and towering, humongous white and black felines fighting to the death above it all. Perhaps it was just the influence of the absinthe, but for some reason Ian did not believe either that the night guard had lied at all, and the story seemed to put into perspective the fact that he was a former SCEPTRE assassin trainee with a metal heart, who had set foot on the planet Nibiru and seen Azerate with his own eyes. The universe he inhabited appeared to be even more mysterious than he had initially thought.

When Erik's tale was over, the fire at sea had almost burned out. Ian watched the flames die slowly, then the Viking burial was complete. He finished the absinthe shot.

"Rest in peace," Jo said solemnly, holding her empty glass. "If only the people of the world knew they all owe their lives to that – thing."

"Now it roams the roads of Valhalla. There it will never rust." Ian's voice cracked toward the end and he could not help his eyes getting misty, despite imagining a fast-paced, powerful Manowar song written in honor of the vehicle.