

A novel by Patrick Bay

# /sectionb



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**You can't spell espionage without ESP.**

## Compromised

A man clutching a leather messenger bag makes his way through the darkness of a public park. He's nervous and sweating, clearly anxious to avoid detection.

He glides along carefully in the misty night, sliding his Oxfords gently over the glistening grass, the trees overhead providing a cover of darkness. He's almost made it to the edge of the park when three black figures emerge from behind the final tree and stand to confront him.

The two silhouettes on either side are bulky and tall. Even as abstract shadows they exude brute physical strength. The one in the middle is roughly two thirds their size and it's she who first breaks through the curtain of shade and emerges into the light of the full moon.

She's porcelain. Her doll-like features glow white against the contrast of a fiery curtain of hair, framing a face of surreal beauty. A Ruby-lipped smile and a slyly raised eyebrow surround a pair of Ray-Bans which she removes as she advances.

As he gazes into her piercing coal eyes he suddenly understands that he's staring into swirling vortices of ravenous malevolence. A feeling of faint quickly yields to panic as the abyssal whirlpools begin to seep out of her eyes and out into the world, slowly blotting out the surroundings and reaching out to engulf him.

Sliding the bag into his tweed overcoat he clutches it close to him, looking around frantically for an escape. Seeing no better option, he spins around and prepares to run in the opposite direction.

Impossibly, mere feet away and blocking his path stands the same woman, her eyes pools of roiling black liquid. He stumbles backwards in shock, tripping, landing on his back, spilling the contents of his coat onto the wet grass.

As the woman approaches she leans in and grins. The smile cracks suddenly like a mirror and begins to melt into a creeping, grotesque, demonic mouth. As the horrific maw spreads across her face he scrambles madly away like a flailing crab, coming to a crashing halt on the legs of her companions. With nowhere left to go he curls up, whimpering and shaking, urine soaking through his pants.

"Okay, I think that's enough," says the woman, a mild and exotic accent woven into her words. Her sunglasses are back on and her features are almost normal, almost human.

Her two sidekicks bend over to gather the satchel and its contents, handing them to her. She flips through the documents, regularly nodding with satisfaction. After some moments she puts everything back into the messenger bag and squats down in front of her visibly calmer quarry.

“So,” she begins sternly. “Why don’t you start by telling us who you are, why you took these, and who the fuck you’re working for.”

The man on the ground stares up at her, his tear-streaked face slackened with fear.

“F-Feir,” he stammers.

“Fear?” she asks. “Like scared? Afraid?”

“N-no,” he stammers again. “F-E-I-R”

She chuckles mildly. “I already know that, Harold, and I gotta tell ya, I’m glad you’re being honest because I *really* would prefer not to have to drop by your place for another chat like this one.” She holds up his wallet and then casually tosses it toward him.

Rummaging through his coat’s pockets, he stares fixedly at the billfold in disbelief. He has no memory of losing it, no idea how or when she could’ve pulled it out of his zipped liner pocket.

“Harold!” she says abruptly, snapping him to attention. “I need you to concentrate because we’re very short on time. My other questions.”

“They said that you’d stolen some of their research. Some files. They wanted them back.”

“Uh-huh,” she acknowledges brusquely. “And who are *they*?”

He pauses again as he avoids her darkened gaze. Nearly whispering, he mutters, “the Academy.”

“Okay,” she shoots back with irritation. “A, you need to speak up and, B, what the fuck is the Academy?”

“I don’t know anything. Honestly,” he explains, fumbling nervously with his coat. “Maybe some kind of school. One of their people, some Asian guy, met me over lunch and offered me a bunch of money if I got them the files. Just walk in after hours and take them. I didn’t ask too many questions. It seemed like it would be easy. My job doesn’t pay great, you know?”

“Please. I’m sorry. I’ve never done anything like this before. I swear,” he continues, hands clasped in supplication, “this was nothing personal. I don’t know any of you. They never told me about you ... about your ... I never would’ve done it if I knew ...”

“But you would’ve done it otherwise?” she says, jutting her jaw forward. “You jackass.”

His head slumps in shame.

“So if I’m putting this together correctly,” she resumes, “you work at the library?”

He responds compliantly with an exaggerated nod.

“Okay, well that explains how *that* happened.”

She stands abruptly, reaches into a pocket in her long dark coat and spins around, putting a retrieved phone to her ear.

The conversation is quiet, brief, purposeful.

She spins back around and faces Harold again.

“Listen carefully,” she commands, pulling off her sunglasses. “Here’s what’s going to happen.”

## Brush Pass

Medic turns unsteadily into the park, hoping that the fresh air will help. He'd set out to drink, to drown, to smoke, to forget, to leave behind the mundane if even for a little while. So far it's been "mission (more than) accomplished".

In the same spirit he's decided to take a night stroll through the shifty public park that at any other time he'd avoid. The moon helps to illuminate the asphalt of the straight and narrow path on the tree-lined route, weakly lit by sparse and sickly yellow lights that barely hold back an encroaching darkness, one crowned with silhouettes of trees and squat industrial buildings. It's cold, wet, and unfriendly.

He plods hazily to a worn bench sitting by a dilapidated lamppost, quickly deciding against resting as he spots excrement smeared over the wooden planks, a sizeable pile of shit perched on one edge.

He trudges on.

Once or twice he thinks he hears a man sobbing from somewhere in the darkness. Or maybe it's an injured animal. It doesn't matter; he's not getting involved.

Soon he can see an avenue lined with parked cars and buildings, framed by the darkness of the park's exit. Soon he'll be back on a city street, heading toward an empty apartment. Soon he'll be back on the same, sad trajectory.

He sighs, swaying as he shuffles reluctantly into the inevitable.

Just then, three shapes emerge onto the path from the shadows.

The two large men instantly attract his attention. One looks like a mountain, maybe a boxer with a shiny bald head, cauliflower ears, wildly crooked nose, hands that look like anvils, and shoulders to lift them. The other one is a little shorter, paunchier, and sporting a Burt Reynolds mustache suggestive of someone who spends too much time watching 70s cop movies. Both men are dressed in long black overcoats exposing casually unbuttoned dress shirts. The look is professional.

Following close behind them is a petite woman. She's dressed similarly to the men but her clothes are tailored to suit her compact frame. It's hard for Medic not to notice the gentle sway of her body as she walks, the warm and smooth glow of her tan complexion, the way the straight line of glossy black hair frames her face.

Medic is just able to make out the trio's conversation as they approach.

"...amateur. And now we have to burn the fucking boo. God damn it!" The woman is visibly agitated as she slaps a leather bag against her thigh.

“Don’t sweat it,” responds rogue 70s cop in a surprising baritone. “We get another one. Just gotta put in the work, you know that. I’m more worried about who’s after us.”

“Yeah, but we just got comfy there,” says the woman, throwing up her hands in visible frustration. “A room all to ourselves, private entrance, free WiFi, free coffee...”

She pauses, head cocked in anticipation of an affirmation. “Dom? C’mon, dude.”

The boxer shrugs. “Yeah, but the thing is R–“

Instantly the conversation stops as all three of them notice Medic. The woman immediately picks up her pace, strides past the two men and in a few short moments she’s standing in front of him, hand on her hip, confident smile on her face.

“Have you heard this one?” she asks, casually. “Hinx minx, the old witch winks, the fat begins to fry. No one home but Jumping Joan, father, mother and I. Stick, stock, stone dead, blind man can’t see. Every knave must have a slave, you or I must be he.”

The incoherent words pass by Medic who’s transfixed by her intensely black stare. Not only is she beautiful but those eyes, those electric, magnetic, swirling eyes ...

He feels himself suddenly off balance. With a stumble and a deep breath he remembers how much he’s had to drink. Definitely too much. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” he slurs, slowly righting himself.

“Umm,” replies the woman hesitantly. “I was, umm, asking if you’re okay.”

Medic seems to remember something else but he’s not sure.

“Been better. You know, shit. Bullshit. Life. Death ... you?”

The woman’s smile broadens into an anxious grin. She moves closer to Medic, locking eyes with him once again.

“Really though,” she says gently, “You don’t look okay. You seem very tired.”

Staring into her eyes, Medic feels himself being tugged into their gravity for a second time. Recalling his previous effort, he somehow finds it easier to drag himself back into his own inebriated head.

He steps back and quickly glances her over; it all works together *really* well. Even that mild accent is kinda sexy.

He’s suddenly reminded that she’s not alone as her companions’ sizable shadows blot out the light, plunging their features into blackness. They don’t seem to have any sense of urgency in catching up to her, like they’re just spectating.

“Yeah,” responds Medic as he remembers the woman’s question. “I’m fine. Okay ... I guess. Been better.” He shrugs.

Perhaps under different circumstances he would’ve been more apprehensive when approached by an attractive woman and two huge silhouettes on a poorly-lit strip bisecting lonely industrial land. Tonight, however, is different. Tonight he doesn’t care.

The woman moves to meet his gaze again. “Seriously? You’re fine?” she asks, incredulous.

The eye contact makes Medic’s head swim lightly but by now he’s managing to stay mostly upright and in his own skull. This, he thinks, is what they must mean by “swoon”.

“Yes, thank you,” he replies with an awkward smile. “And you?”

“Huh,” is her only response as she slowly replaces her sunglasses. She pulls back into a contemplative stance as one of the looming shadows behind her asks, “This the one, you think?”

She turns around to face the shadows. “Could be. My shit ain’t taking so this could be our guy.”

“Cool,” says one of the hulking shadows as they step into the light. The military / cop guy walks by Medic on one side, the boxer on the other. “Maybe I’ll see you later,” says the boxer in passing, momentarily placing his hand on Medic’s shoulder.

Medic nods lightly, unsure how else to respond.

Now alone, the woman spins around to face him.

“Yeah, so ...” -she makes a clicking sound with her tongue as she extends a business card between the finger-barrels of a cocked hand gun- “gimme a shout.”

Her face now seems more subdued, more genuine. Still very attractive, though, thinks Medic as he snatches the card from her fingers.

“Who are you?” he asks as he takes the card.

“Well aren’t we impertinent?” she replies, hands on her hips. Pointing to the card she concludes, “All you need to know is on there.”

With a broad smile she walks past him and into the poorly lit murk toward her lollygagging companions.

“What the fuck?” slurs Medic quietly as he resumes walking.

He holds up the business card to examine it but before he gets the chance a disheveled man stumbles clumsily out of the shadows and onto the path, right about where the woman and her companions had first appeared.

Even though he’s quite close he doesn’t seem to notice Medic. Instead, the man looks around in a daze, his long tweed coat hanging half-off, a glossy dark stain running down the inside of his trousers. He wears a grimace of fear as he hobbles down the short distance to the path’s exit. Then, turning onto the adjacent sidewalk the man disappears out of sight behind a tall stone wall.

“What,” mumbles Medic imperceptibly, “the actual fuck?”

## Slash & Burn

Medic wakes slowly and painfully. He doesn't look at the clock but it feels like the better part of an hour has elapsed before he manages to roll out of bed, still fully clothed, and stumble toward the bathroom.

A sudden and powerful wave of nausea grips him as he approaches the toilet. Salivating and retching, he drops to his knees and plunges his head into the bowl.

The lengthy vomit provides some relief and Medic is finally able to stand up to have a look in the mirror.

Terrible. He hasn't shaved in weeks, his brown hair is looking like it was put together by a drunk and very angry bird, his puffy blue eyes look especially harsh in the redness of the searing hangover.

He steps back.

In every other way he's a very average and unimpressive guy – not short but not tall, not ugly but he's never been called handsome, not old but starting to feel it. His broadly generic looks have resulted in cases of surprisingly mistaken identity, so much so that he had at one time entertained the idea that he might have a lost twin brother or perhaps a doppelganger.

Today he wishes he was this other self. It's not so much the headache or the nausea as the return back to consciousness and his disaster of a life.

It begins with the realization that if he's going to be able to pay rent then today his finances have reached their limit. The severance money gave him a couple of weeks of "self-discovery" time but, alas, he's discovered very little except a preference for certain wheat beers.

The work-from-home software tester job was monotonous and uninspiring. He's glad not to be doing it anymore but it was reliable income and it broke up the isolation of the one-bedroom he shared with his cat, his only friend who died a week ago.

Next he's replaying the argument he'd had with his sister two nights ago. Their father's Alzheimer's had progressed and he and their mom could no longer cope on their own. Still upset over his cat, he and his sister had it out about his inability to offer anything to their parents' care. She finished by angrily pronouncing that she would assume the responsibility and that she didn't need to hear from him anymore, thanks. \*click\*

Medic doesn't think that was entirely fair but, if he's being fair, it kind of was. He'd let a lot of things slide for a little too long. He'd flaked on life a little too much. He'd been on autopilot, just coasting.

By mid-afternoon the hangover pain has subsided but the grief and doubt remain, filling every corner of his small rental with a bleak darkness that's punctuated only by sparse bands of gray light coming in through the windows. Medic sits on the couch, empty and spent, the miserable rain falling gently but persistently onto the panes outside.

Hours go by in solemn silence.

After a carelessly cooked and mindlessly consumed meal of toast and eggs, Medic strolls into the bathroom and turns on the taps to warm up the shower. He's moving mechanically, the same motions he's been going through for years, like muscle memory.

As he pulls off his pants and tosses them onto the laundry pile, a business card falls out of a pocket. He doesn't notice it as he steps into the shower.

About an hour later he walks out of the steamy, narrow bathroom, still towel-drying his hair and unable to see the business card on the bedroom floor. He only notices it when he takes another step forward, the card coming unstuck from the bottom of his foot and wedging itself uncomfortably under his toes.

He scoops up the small rectangle, not recognizing it as a business card until he sits on the edge of his bed and flips it over. He suddenly remembers the previous night's interaction.

Written on the front of the card in a bold but simple font are the words "The Handler", under which appear a random string of letters and numbers, beneath which is an even longer string of hyphenated letters, numbers, and symbols.

That's it.

Medic flips the card over.

Blank.

He blinks, no idea what it means, tosses the card dismissively on the bed, turns out the light, and leaves for the living room.

After a couple of hours of bad TV Medic returns to the bedroom and collapses on the bed, unaware for the second time that he's on top of the business card.

In the darkest, most silent part of the night, he wakes up laughing and drooling, vague and vanishing memories of a dream in which his deceased cat is telling him some joke. It's at this point that he feels a sharp jab in his lower back.

He turns on the bedside lamp and notes that the alarm clock reads 3:33 exactly. "Huh," remarks Medic as he pulls the card out from under himself.

He stares at the strange patterns printed on the matte surface, trying to make sense of them. He remembers the short, black-haired woman with the intense eyes. He remembers her two mountainous companions. He remembers the urine-soaked man. He remembers the narrow path.

Suddenly, he's gripped by curiosity.

Gliding gently out of bed and over to his workspace by the main living room window, he boots up his laptop, logs in, and opens up a browser.

His first search is for “The Handler” which pulls up over forty pages of results. None of them seem right. He revises the search by adding a few digits from the first random-looking line on the business card. There’s exactly one result.

The sequence of letters and numbers on the website seem to match those on the card exactly. Beneath them, only the words “GET ME HOT” appear on the otherwise empty page. He waves the mouse cursor over the page looking for hidden links but finds none.

Medic is now deeply intrigued. He decides that he won’t be getting any more sleep tonight so he goes to make some coffee, not realizing that he’s been holding on to the card until he reaches the kitchen. There’s no room on the crowded counters of the tiny space so he rests the card on the stove while he fills the kettle.

Letting the water run for a few moments he contemplates other searches to try. Any combination of the words on the web page with the details on the card might yield new results. This might just be the first of many clues. What kind of internet rabbit hole is this going to be?

Kettle filled and on the stove, Medic returns hastily to his laptop and starts trying out the search terms. The words “GET ME HOT” once again return way too many hits so he tries combining them with the cut-and-pasted line of cryptic text from the web page. This returns only the same result but, he thinks, maybe some of the other text on the card might be relevant.

Suddenly, he smells smoke.

He spins around to see translucent gray curls winding their way toward the ceiling from the stove. The source of the smoke bursts into a small flame as Medic sprints to the kitchen. The forgotten business card is on fire.

He simultaneously turns on the kitchen faucet while grabbing the flaming card, drenching it instantly in the lukewarm water. Satisfied that the fire is out, Medic turns off the faucet and examines the singed card. Most of it is intact and the text is still legible.

As he waves the card to air dry it, Medic briefly glimpses some brown smudges on its back. He stops shaking the card and looks closer. The smudges are actually writing – what looks like an email address.

“Oh,” he concludes quietly as he gazes at the card. “Get *me* hot.”

## The Handler

The chilly mist of the gray morning wraps itself around her as she stands leaning against the weathered brick corner of the building, legs crossed casually, coat unbuttoned, mobile phone in one hand, coffee in the other.

She taps out a response to Medic's email, starting off by chiding him for using his real name and ending with a reprimand for taking so long to write her. In between, she taps out something that she hopes will come across like a vague job offer, a meeting location, and a time.

She's curious about why the agency picked this guy; seems like just another lost, doe-eyed civilian. Then again, he figured out the card pretty fast so there's that. "We'll see," she says quietly to herself as she taps SEND, drops the phone into her pocket, swivels on her heel, and heads north.

She passes under the steel girders of the expressway, the overhead din of cars drowning out the engine of the dull gray sedan that's been tailing her. The driver is undoubtedly still slumped behind the steering wheel in the same way-too-casual way as when she spotted him last, his bad brown suit sticking out among his partners' black ensembles, all four of them looking out of place as their car crawled along the empty street. They had that same look when they were following her on foot.

She wants to bide her time but is doing her best not to be obvious about it. Pretending to take a call she'd recorded a video of her tails and sent it to Dmitri. With his "custom" tech he's trying to figure out who they are, maybe where they came from.

Noting the make and model of the car he responded to her email with an estimate of how long she can keep the vehicle driving around before it runs out of gas. Based on this he's come up with a plan, including a timed series of locations to visit, and he'll be in touch with his part en route.

"Sounds fun," she confirms as she heads toward the first waypoint. In about forty minutes she arrives and heads toward the large oak doors. The cathedral is filled with opulent silence.

She slides a pair of wireless buds into her ears, positions the small multi-directional microphone discretely into position, enables GPS, and opens an app on her phone. Moving slowly beneath the soaring architecture, she makes her way toward the apse and seats herself in one of the front-most pews.

Switching the app from CALIBRATE to MONITOR, she can now hear the sound of traffic from outside the cathedral amplified over the constant hum of the city beyond. Every creak of wood within the building produces a tolerably sharp scream in her ears, every

gust of wind on the stained glass sounds a ghostly whistle. This is the opposite of noise-cancelling.

She bows her head as if in prayer, closes her eyes, and listens.

In a few minutes she can't help but hear the heavy doors of the main entrance opening, followed by thudding footsteps that quickly terminate with the cracks and creaks of a settling pew.

It sounds like there's two of them and it sounds like they're eager not to be noticed.

She opens her eyes to confirm her predictions with the app and is pleased to see the machine agreeing with her: there are almost certainly only two of them and they're most likely at the opposite end of the building.

A quiet ding interrupts the amplified audio, telling her that a text message has just arrived from Dmitri. "No go. Too exposed," it says. That means that she has about twenty minutes to idle here before moving on to the next destination.

She closes her eyes again and listens intently.

About ten minutes later, a few quiet but discernible words echo into her ears. She grins with satisfaction, not because she understands any of it but because she got a recording.

Starting a new session, she sends the first audio file to Dmitri for analysis. Hopefully he can do something with it.

At the twenty-minute mark she rises, crosses herself, and slowly turns around. By the time she's facing the other way the hurried sounds of receding footsteps have been overtaken by the sounds of the city coming in through the closing doors. Her pursuers are gone.

She leaves the church and makes her way slowly through the streets to the old market.

The two-storey building would've been the shit for locals back in its time but it's now mostly geared toward tourists. She's been here often, knows the layout, and could use a nibble. A text from Dmitri lets her know that she's got some time.

Selecting the perfect croissant, she takes the opportunity to spot one of her tails in the reflection of the bakery's display case. He's dressed in a generic black suit and tie; tall, thin, looks Asian. She also notes that they make the croissants here with some kind of fancy butter. Goddamn if they're not excellent.

She spots the second tail in a mirror hung over a sink at the back of the smoothie place as she waits for her heavily customized order. He's pretty much the same as the first guy, just shorter. Her drink is handed to her and with the first sip she realizes that the addition of wheat grass was a mistake. She tosses the nearly full cup into a nearby trash bin and continues on.

Next she visits the Italian eatery on the lower level, ordering a veal sandwich and Brio combo which she enjoys leisurely at one of the tiny tables nearby. Looking around

occasionally she spots her tails engaging in loops of pointless produce selection, meandering window shopping, and directionless strolling.

Her final stop is at the Bee Hive where, in a pleasant twist, the samples are offered before she has to insist on them. At this point Dmitri texts her to let her know that he's finishing up; all she has to do is waste a few minutes enjoying the deep floral essence of the Tasmanian leatherwood honey. As suggested by the shopkeeper, she imagines the dark viscous nectar draped thinly over some bold cheese. Yes, she agrees; that would be terrific and she'll take the "sample size" please.

With the large tin of honey weighing down the plastic bag by her side she checks the time on her phone. Dmitri had texted her about two minutes ago to let her know he was done.

She leaves the market and heads to the Lion's Head.

She's been here before too. The darkened pub is long, narrow, and busy. A British-inspired decor lines the claustrophobic room. The old wooden floorboards groan beneath the patrons as the smells of age, smoke, and ancient fermentation permeate the air.

She heads slowly toward the back and down a sideways flight of stairs into the basement. At the bottom she grabs a broom that's resting against a nearby wall, takes the door to her right, and walks up another flight of stairs to a large steel panel in the ceiling. Pushing it open, she exits upward and into the alley.

Sliding the broom under the doors' handles she blocks the exit behind her, jumps onto the rusty fire escape that clings to the outside of the building, and climbs to the roof. Constantly checking to see if she's being followed, she walks gently over the row of conjoined properties to another fire escape and descends into a perpendicular alley.

Pulling her hair back with an elastic, she puts on a hat that she's been carrying rolled up in a pocket, removes her coat, flips it inside-out, and puts it back on.

Checking around her one last time, The Handler exits the narrow alleyway to join Dmitri at the designated rendezvous with a gift of honey.

## Ears Only

“So ... Brock, is it?” she asks, offering an outstretched hand in greeting.

She’s still mesmerizing with her hair pulled back, her smooth bronzed skin plunging into an elegant black turtleneck beneath a long black overcoat. His own generic blue button-down and rumply old brown blazer feel embarrassingly inadequate.

“Most people just call me Medic,” he replies meekly while shaking her hand. He doesn’t offer to share the reason behind his name reversal, figures he probably won’t need to.

“Yeah, cool,” she replies as they take a seat. “You don’t strike me as a Brock.”

And there it is.

As she speaks, the golden globes of the coffee shop’s lights swim over her deep dark eyes. In Medic’s mind the background ambiance of clinking coffee mugs, hissing espresso machines, and muted conversations evoke a feeling of some bustling old train station in some old black and white film. There’s a nervous energy in the air; possibly it’s just the coffee.

With audible melancholy he replies, “That’s what I’ve been told.”

“Don’t sweat it,” she assures him with a sympathetic smile. “Medic isn’t terrible, it’s just ... benign. But what’s in a name, huh?”

He nods, settling into his chair. “What about yours?”

“What it says on there,” she replies, nodding toward a duplicate business card as she places it on the table in front of him. “Obviously that’s not my real name but that’s what I go by. Not married to it, just an alias.”

“So, what,” he asks, “you’re some kind of spy or something?”

“Right into the deep end, huh?” she replies and takes a slow sip of coffee.

“I guess you could call some of what the agency does ‘espionage,’” she begins, curling air quotes around the word. “But really, we’re more of clandestine operations outfit. We do the *really* undercover stuff.”

“So you work for some government?” asks Medic, partially amused and partially irritated, feeling like he’s being pranked. Or worse.

“No. No governments. No corporations. No large groups of any kind, really. Unless it suits our purposes,” she explains flatly. “There’s just the agency and our little cell. I don’t know if there are others because, as I said, the organization keeps a pretty tight lid on things.”

“Wait. So what is it that you actually do?” he asks with an incredulous frown.

She pauses briefly as a stern expression creeps across her face.

“I should’ve told you off the top,” she says firmly, “that there are many things I simply won’t be able to tell you. Some are classified, some I just don’t know. Of the things I *can* tell you, some you’ll find out later and some you never will.”

She leans back and grins sheepishly.

“I know, right? How’s that for a cop-out? But, you know, the agency wouldn’t have recruited you if it didn’t think you were ready, so take that for what it’s worth,” she finishes, tipping her cup pointedly toward Medic.

“Hang on,” he demands. “Recruit? I didn’t sign up for anything. I never heard about any of this until now. I just came because you said there might be a job for me, that’s all. And you’ve barely told me anything.”

“Yeah, well, semantics,” she shrugs nonchalantly, pulling a thick envelope out of her coat pocket and plopping it generously on top of the business card.

“Here’s the deal,” she says, slowly drawing back her empty hand. “The agency is making an up-front offer. The compensation is a bit” – she wobbles the retreating hand – “eclectic, but it should should cover all your expenses.”

Medic instinctively reaches out to touch the puffy envelope, then quickly retracts as a strong feeling of doubt washes over him.

“Good instincts, but that’s yours to keep,” says The Handler reassuringly, nudging the envelope closer to him. “Trust me, you’ll wanna hold on to that.”

He sits, paralyzed by uncertainty.

“Look, I’m sorry but your old life is over,” she continues in a sympathetic tone. “Wish there was a better way to say it but now that you’ve interacted with us, twice, you’re basically persona non grata. Hopefully you don’t have too many loose ends to tie up but if you do then I suggest you take care of ’em fast.”

Medic is incensed. “Now wait just a minute! I didn’t agree to any–”

“Look,” she commands, leaning in and thrusting a finger into his face. “I’m not here to tell you how things are going to be, I’m here to tell you how things are. I’m just the messenger, get it? You can leave the envelope, that’s up to you, but I have better things to do than try to convince you of what’s right in front of you.”

“Whatever,” she says dismissively, briskly standing up and pulling on her coat. “I’ve had a really long day and I’m just not in the mood. None of this is for my benefit, just so you know.”

“Hey!” he exclaims as she walks by him toward the exit. “Can you at least tell me what that was the other night?”

“What? In the park?” she says, pausing mid-stride.

“Yeah. For starters,” he responds indignantly.

“Just me and my friends passing through,” she explains. “Intel told me I needed to have a business card on me, that’s all.”

Medic considers the highly unlikely claim. “That was random chance. If I’d been there five minutes later or five minutes earlier we never would’ve met. And I never walk that way, especially at night.”

She walks slowly back to her chair and sits down, hands clasped contemplatively to her mouth. “And your point being?”

“My point being, how could you possibly have known that I’d be there?”

“As I told you before,” she opens slowly and purposefully, “I didn’t know that you’d be there, just that at some point during that day I was going to meet someone matching certain parameters. I’d know that they were the right contact when they’d reply to the address on the back of the card. You did, and here we are. End of story.”

“But I discovered the email address by accident. I left that card on the stove. It wasn’t intentional,” protests Medic.

“And yet here we are,” she responds nonchalantly, arms open wide.

“I don’t get it,” complains Medic. “You toss a business card and envelope at me and I’m now a part of some secret organization and my old life is suddenly over?”

“Yes and isn’t it?” she asks with a cocked eyebrow. “Your life a Christopher Cross song these days? No rough seas? No choppy patches anywhere? Because when I met you the other night you didn’t seem too happy.”

Medic reluctantly accepts her observation with a tilted nod.

“So now that I’m down,” he says, confronting her gaze, “you’re going to give me a way out of my misery if I just do something for this agency of yours? Maybe screw someone over or blow something up?”

“Fuck no!” exclaims the Handler, face contorted with rejection. “Things like this envelope don’t come with strings attached, especially not *those* kinds of strings. We’re just pretty sure you’ll take us up on the offer in the same way we were pretty sure I’d bump into you that night.

“As for your circumstances,” she leans in and lowers her voice, “that’s the boat that most of us arrive in. The agency scoops us up when we’ve hit the bottom which, I know, sounds opportunistic but believe me when I tell you that it’s just a helping hand.”

She gets up again and fishes around in her coat pocket. “It’s an open invitation but only for about twenty-four hours. After that” – she shakes her head – “I’ll be unavailable.”

“Look, I can’t guarantee anything but in my experience choosing to work with the agency tends to improve your life in ways you couldn’t even imagine,” she states forthrightly, putting on her sunglasses and moving to the door.

Pausing with her hand on the handle, The Handler spins around and in a surprisingly bubbly tone yells, “Think about it!” before exiting the coffee shop.

Medic’s gaze returns to the fat object sitting on the table.

Deciding that it’s probably not going to explode, he grabs the envelope and puts it into the pocket of his blazer. This is something he’d rather look through in private.

As he stands to leave he notices The Handler’s card still sitting on the table. He’d almost forgotten it.

With everything safely stowed in the pockets of his jacket he strolls slowly through the coffee shop’s doors and out into the brisk neon night of the city. Within a few blocks, Medic begins to suspect that he’s being followed by a shabby gray sedan.

## Rendezvous

The Dockside Lounge is an anachronistic relic from some time in the eighties. Struggling neon signs and a heavy layer of greasy dust on the fake tropical decor are enhanced by faded and peeling posters for beers and cigarettes that haven't existed for decades.

The Handler leads Medic past a minuscule but packed dance floor, through a jostling crowd at the bar, along the periphery of the establishment's perennially popular pool table, and to a somewhat secluded semi-circular booth at the back occupied by two men and numerous shot glasses. She identifies the men as Dominic and Dmitri. They're both sitting beside stacks of bags and boxes. Medic remembers them from their previous encounter.

In stark contrast to his impressive bulk and battered look Dominic speaks softly, sometimes nearly imperceptibly. "Before you ask," he says, "yes, I used to fight. Still can." He finishes the tiny rejoinder with a nod, smiling with satisfaction as he sits back.

After a few uneasy moments, Dmitri breaks the din-filled silence hanging over the table. "I mean, me, personally, I was never cut out for a regular job. Last place I worked was an IT pit. Hated it. I know some people really dig that dungeon feel but not me. Why should I spend my days like a hobbit just because I happen to be good with hardware?"

"How long ago was that?" inquires Medic distractedly.

"Long enough," replies Dmitri with a nod. He extends a shot glass into the center of the table, inviting everyone to toast the remark. They do.

"So what do you do now?" asks Medic raspily as he recovers from the hit of overproof rum.

"A lot of the same stuff. Except now I work pretty much wherever I want. And agency work, it doesn't feel icky, know what I mean?"

"Sure," responds Medic hollowly, still feeling pretty shaken.

Dmitri's face shifts into a relaxed smirk. "Yeah, so anyway, I heard about what happened to you tonight. R—" he halts.

"Umm, *The Handler*," he emphasizes with mild snark, "told me all about it. Gray four-door? And there were four of them, right? All in black suits except the driver?"

"Yeah, I think so," responds Medic with increasing anxiety. "They followed me home. When I got there the door was busted and my place was trashed. I didn't even try going inside; left by the back entrance and peeked around the corner to see if they were waiting. Like you said, four people. Who the fuck are they? Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

“First, another shot,” instructs Dominic. Everyone at the table obliges.

“Now, to answer your question,” he continues as the burn of the drink subsides. “We don’t know.”

“We don’t know for sure,” clarifies The Handler. “But Dmitri was sharing some intel when you contacted me. From what we’ve been able to piece together, they’re some executive training outfit named Shindan Academy.”

“That means *new egg* in Mandarin,” interjects Dmitri. “We’re assuming they’re Chinese but they’re headquartered in Southeast Asia, at least according to their literature. There’s not much to go on except that they had an office here in town. That was our one and only connection. They’d scrubbed the address from their website but we were able to retrieve an archived copy.”

“Office was abandoned in a hurry,” says Dominic, sliding back into the conversation. “The receptionist told me that some men had come there that morning looking for it. Asian, maybe Chinese. One of their neighbours said they’d seen someone come out but didn’t get a good look.”

“Hang on,” says Medic, pausing the conversation with a raised hand. “How do you know it’s this Academy that’s been following us?”

“Oh, right!” says Dmitri, slapping his forehead with embarrassment. “I got ahead of myself, sorry. It’s mostly because of this,” he says, patting the stack of bags and boxes beside him.

“Nothing fancy, all off-the-shelf. A prepaid cellphone texted us its GPS position every few seconds. The Handler here” – he points sideways with his thumb – “kept them busy while I planted it. Then I just watched where it went. At the end of the day I could even confirm that they ended up where they started in the morning. Got lucky on that one. Used some recorded traffic cam footage.”

“Huh,” replies Medic with mild surprise.

“I tried to get some biometrics. Not very useful,” adds The Handler. “But I managed to record a few words that we determined were most likely Mandarin Chinese.”

“Used an online speech recognition tool for that,” explains Dmitri.

“So right now all fingers point to Shindan,” concludes The Handler, cocking her head assuredly.

Dominic leans in and taps a finger forcefully on the table.

“I feel I need to add that those guys were most likely just distractions,” he says with concern. “There’s a good chance that someone else was watching us nose them. Either that or this Academy is incredibly sloppy.”

Dmitri and The Handler both agree with small nods. “Nose is the opposite of tail,” explains Dominic, seeing the look of confusion on Medic’s face.

“Yeah but what the hell do I have to do with any of this?” asks Medic, a little more calmly now that the rum is working its way through.

“Place and time,” responds The Handler.

“Huh?”

“Basically wrong place, wrong time. Except in the agency we don’t believe in the *wrong* part. Not in cases like this,” she elaborates.

Now with even more questions, Medic decides to start with the one nagging him the most. “So, what, you’re agents? Like, secret agents?”

As he slowly surveys them, all three nod in sequence.

His face hardens into emotionless stone. “Who do you work for then? What is this agency you keep talking about? Why would the Academy want to come after you?”

“I like to think of us as a group of freelancers,” replies the Handler, “and the agency as a sort of guild that we belong to. It’s a bit more complicated but that’s the Coles Notes version. Our little cell is mostly around this table. We go by Section B, mostly cuz we think it sounds kinda apropos. Like my alias.”

Dmitri smiles and tilts his head in a gesture of simultaneous agreement and tepid disapproval. “Not *all* of us think this way,” he quips.

“You don’t like *The Handler*?” she asks.

“The Handler?” responds Dmitri. “It’s so awkward. Like, how am I supposed to address you? *Hello, The Handler, how are you?* It’s just weird.”

“You can j-”

She’s cut off by an irritated Medic. “Let’s just please focus on the current topic. Like what’s the name of your agency?”

“We don’t know,” responds Dominic. “If it has a name it’s a closely-guarded secret. But then again we *are* a clandestine organization of secret agents. Anyway, we only ever call it the agency or the organization.”

“Okay, so you don’t know who you work for. Fine. Can you at least tell me what you do?”

Dmitri takes over. “Hard to say exactly. We get all sorts of missions and intel from the agency. We decide which missions to choose, which intel to use.”

“Yeah, but what is it that you *actually* do?” asks Medic pointedly. “What are the agency’s aims? What are its goals?”

The Handler breaks out into lyrical laughter. “Dude! If we don’t even know the organization’s name do you think we’re going to know something like that?”

Medic frowns in profound confusion. “You mean to tell me that you don’t even know why you work for the agency?”

“Oh, we know why we do what we do,” she responds snappily. “And maybe we’ll share those reasons with you when we’ve gotten to know each other a little better. But you should know that whatever you’re thinking those reasons might be, you’re probably wrong.”

Medic shrugs his shoulders and nods his head in unconvinced surrender.

Dmitri breaks the sudden tension with, “A toast! A toast to reasons!”

A round of shot glasses is hoisted dutifully above the table and, in unison, tipped backward into open mouths. The alcohol is smoother, the mood lighter.

“Look, man,” says The Handler to Medic in a conciliatory tone, “it’s just that you’re new and we’re dealing with an unprecedented situation here. I’m just a little on edge, that’s all.

“As you can see”, she continues, pointing to the stacks of containers beside her partners, “we had to leave our boo in a hurry, just like you.”

“Base of operations,” whispers Dmitri into Medic’s ear.

“Ransacked,” she continues, seemingly unaware of Dmitri’s aside. “And they stole our stuff. Our research. That night that we first met we were hunting down the little rat who took it.”

“So *that’s* what that was about,” realizes Medic with audible surprise. “Who was he?”

“Some dipshit that worked in the building,” recalls The Handler. “Got in there after hours, took my material. He must’ve left the doors open because the place was turned upside-down when we got back there.”

“You think someone else got in there?” asks Medic.

“Must’ve. The guy we caught said that he only grabbed what he came for and left,” she replies matter-of-factly.

“How do you know he wasn’t lying?”

“So,” she answers slowly, a sly smile spreading across her face. “I think the best way to answer that might be to demonstrate. Show you a bit of the *modus operandi*.”

The Handler stands up abruptly.

“Pick anyone. Anyone at all,” she instructs Medic, pointing to the crowd around them. Medic takes a few moments and finally selects a tall man sidled up to the bar. A cocky confidence oozes out of every part of him, from the top of his perfectly styled coif to the bottom of his leather Italian loafers.

Swaying mildly, The Handler laughs out loud before responding. “Those kindsa guys are the easiest! Okay, great. So how much money should he give us?”

Medic doesn’t answer, unsure of where this is leading.

“Whaddya think? He’s got maybe five hun-red in his wallet?” she slurs. “How about I just get the whole wallet? Cool?”

“Okay,” nods Medic uncertainly.

“Cool,” she confirms, embarking on a slow and somewhat unsteady journey to the bar.

Medic watches her pull up next to the target and attract his attention. She looks directly at him as she speaks, almost like she’s carrying on a conversation except that it seems to be one-sided.

In a few moments the man smiles at her, which The Handler reciprocates. He reaches into his back pocket and hands over what looks like a black leather wallet, then turns suddenly in the opposite direction and leans over to get the bartender’s attention. Meanwhile, The Handler signals a thumbs-up toward the table behind the man’s back.

Medic doesn’t understand why she’s still hanging around at the bar until he sees that she’s being handed a cocktail, at which point she leaves. As she departs back toward their table the man remains seemingly oblivious to her presence, as though she’d never been there.

“Needed something to break up that awful rum!” she explains loudly as she approaches.

Sitting unsteadily, she plops the wallet on the table and takes a sip of her drink through the straw. “Mmm!” she exclaims enthusiastically. “The whiskey sours here are great!”

Despite his growing inebriation, Medic is dumbfounded.

“You can go through that,” she says, pointing lazily at the wallet. “Take what you want.”

“No thanks,” he replies.

“Cool. That’s cool, yeah,” she responds in a disjointed manner.

“So are you ready for the finale? No, ser-sly, dude,” she slurs again as she leans in close to Medic. “This is the shit that’ll keep you up at night. Okay? Dude” – she burps – “go over there and tell that guy that you think we found his wallet. Get him to come over here. Tell ‘im I wanna give it *\*hic\** to him myself.”

Medic looks around the table to see if he can spot any sign of an impending practical joke. There are no stifled smiles and, moreover, no one else seems particularly surprised by the challenge. Seeing no harm, he gets up and wobbles his way toward the tall man at the bar.

“Excuse me!” he says to the man as he gets near. “My friend over there thinks she found your wallet and said she wants to return it to you personally!”

The man spins around with a look of confused anger. The look is quickly replaced by a laser-focus at something over Medic’s shoulder. Medic looks backward to see that something is The Handler, smiling invitingly and holding up the wallet.

This time it's Medic that seems invisible as the man steps around him and maneuvers swiftly through the crowd to the group's table. Medic follows hastily, eager to see how The Handler resolves the setup.

The conversation has already started by the time Medic reaches the booth.

"... found it on the ground," says The Handler bashfully to the man as Medic slides into his former seat. "I recognized you by the driver's license. Hope you don't mind that I looked through it."

"Oh, no problem at all," says the man with a broad smile.

"But," says The Handler as she gives him back his wallet, "haven't I seen you before? Like, recently?"

"I don't think so," says the man genuinely. "I think I'd remember you."

"No, seriously," says The Handler sternly, dropping all semblance of coy. "You sure we didn't meet just a minute ago at the bar? *\*hic\** And I said som-n to you and you handed me your wallet and then or-ed me a drink?"

The irritation in the man's face returns as he pulls his head back in rejection. "What? No! The fuck are you talking about?"

"You *gave* me your wallet," maintains the Handler. "Then you or-ed me a drink. E-ryone at this table here saw it."

The man steps backward into the crowd, checking the contents of his wallet with one hand and signalling his unwillingness to continue the conversation with the other.

"Listen," he says as he recedes, "I don't know what you *think* happened but I promise you that we *never* met. Okay? But thanks for returning my wallet. Really, thank you."

And then he's gone.

The Handler turns to Medic with a cocked eyebrow. "Huh?" she prompts in a nudging tone, taking another sip of her sour.

Medic shakes his head slightly, unsure what to make of what he's just witnessed. "What was that?" he asks.

"That there," replies The Handler as she pushes the straw out of her mouth with her tongue, "is just a little taste. See, we're not " – she burps again – " we're not, umm, regular secret agenz."

"What she's trying to say," explains Dominic, "is that this is a skill most of us have, more or less. She's better at it but we can all do it. There's a good chance you can too, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"I dunno," responds Medic, the alcohol slowly dissolving his apprehension.

"Then let's drink!" yells Dmitri boldly, holding up another shot glass. "And think!"

They all take another shot.

## Exfiltration

Medic slowly regains consciousness as pain and nausea creep in.

With eyes still closed, he tries to remember the previous night. He'd been out drinking by himself, took an unusual shortcut through the park, met some odd characters, then crawled home and into bed.

Right?

No, wait; that was a few nights ago. What happened after that?

It takes agonizing effort for him to gather his memories into a cohesive timeline.

The woman with the captivating eyes, The Handler, she gave him her business card, he accidentally set it on fire which revealed an email address on the back. He used it to contact her and she responded with a time and a meeting location where she told him some uncomfortable things. Then he was followed back to his place by some strangers in a car, found his apartment broken into and torn apart ... and then?

Oh, right.

He didn't know what to do so he contacted her again and she told him to meet her at a grubby old bar down by the docks. There he was introduced to Dominic and Dmitri, the other two members of Section B. They all drank some strong liquor together, shared a convincing analysis of the situation with him, and The Handler somehow fucked with a random guy's mind in order to answer a question that Medic had asked her. She called it her "modus operandi". And they're all secret agents working part-time, it seems, for some incredibly nebulous organization known only as the agency. Then they drank some more.

Somehow he made it back home and must've collapsed on an overturned mattress. That explains the alien feeling of the bed beneath him. However, he can't account for the dull metallic clanks he hears at regular intervals, or what feels like a gentle rocking motion cradling the whole room.

He opens his eyes. The ceiling is much closer than he remembers and it's coated in some thick-looking glossy white paint. This isn't his ceiling.

He rolls over to have a look at his surroundings. He's in a white room with a series of sloping iron ribs that run up the walls into the alien ceiling. Spaced evenly between every third rib is a very convincing porthole window. Medic is amazed at the nautical feel of the room, the way it perfectly reproduces the inside of a ship.

It takes him a few moments to consider the possibility that this might actually be the inside of a ship.

As he sits up, Medic notes that the motion of the bed is independent of his hangover, and it's definitely not helping matters. "The toilet's through there," sounds The Handler's voice from somewhere to his immediate right.

He turns his head to see her pointing to an open ship door a few meters further to the right. Feeling the vomit churning in his stomach, Medic lurches over the slip-resistant floor toward the washroom. He stubs his toe on the raised lip of the opening and stumbles painfully to the stainless steel toilet bowl, arriving just in time.

At long last, having expunged everything in his guts Medic sits on the floor of the narrow washroom, exhausted. The smell of industrial disinfectant at this moment, at this level, is refreshing and welcome. He rests here for a bit.

Finally feeling more steady, he pulls himself up by the small steel sink beside the toilet. He's surprised to find a mug of black liquid and two small round pills of different colours sitting on the wide lip. Lifting the mug to his nose he confirms the presence of coffee and looks at himself in the small oval mirror above the sink.

He looks like the same old reheated shit he remembers, still dressed in the same clothes, but there's something in his reflection that feels more alert and vital than the previous time he'd woken up like this. It could just be the foreign lighting in here.

Medic sips on the warm and pleasantly balanced coffee, pondering his situation, staring vacantly at his image in the mirror while steadying himself on the sink.

He's on a ship, that much is certain. He doesn't know what kind of ship it is, doesn't remember how he got here, and has no idea where they're headed. He also doesn't have a clue as to how long he's been passed out. He's hoping that The Handler can provide some satisfactory answers.

Trusting that they're intended for his headache, he pops the pills on the sink with the next gulp of coffee and slowly makes his way back to the adjoining room.

Sitting at a small table bolted to the wall of the ship is The Handler. On the sturdy planks in front of her lies a plate of food, a small stack of file folders, an open laptop computer attached to a monitor, and what looks like a metallic breadbox with vents. Out of the box extends a loosely draped length of wire that disappears somewhere into the ceiling.

The Handler has her hair pulled into a ponytail, shades perched above her blunt bangs like a tiara, all of it creating an effect similar to the one he remembers. There's no jewellery or accessories of any kind and if she's wearing makeup it's not obvious. This is all put together with a crisp white dress shirt and pleated black slacks as she sits cross-legged and barefoot in a swivelling chair.

"Those pills on the sink are for the hangover," she says as she spins around. "Acetaminophen and Ibuprofen. Between those and the coffee you should feel better.

"Can I be honest with you?" she asks after a slight pause.

Medic nods plaintively.

“I think we overdid it a bit last night,” she divulges with a sheepish grin. “I spent some time over the bowl myself. Food helped a lot though.

“Here, have some,” she says, motioning toward the plate of food.

The meal consists of some fried bacon, a couple of poached eggs, a pile of baked beans, and two slices of toasted bread. With hunger greatly overshadowing the lingering nausea, Medic finds some napkin-wrapped cutlery tucked beneath the lip of the plate and digs in as eagerly as his diminishing hangover allows.

After a few bites he stops for another sip of coffee. “So, you wanna explain this to me?” he says to The Handler, waving his fork at their surroundings

“You don’t remember?” she asks with surprise. “You must’ve been really wasted last night. This is the Tenebra in some ports of call, the Rhosus in others. It’s a small trans-oceanic cargo vessel that’s been retrofitted as a private pleasure craft slash smuggling ship. We’re currently en route to Cape Verde.”

“Are you fucking with me?” asks Medic as forthrightly as he can. “And where the fuck is Cape Verde?”

“No, and off the western coast of Africa somewhere,” she replies calmly.

“Africa? What the fuck?!” demands Medic forcefully, causing his headache to explode. He clutches his skull forcefully with both hands.

“Dude, relax,” she says in a gently commanding manner. “You forget who you’re with.”

“What the fuck does *that* mean?” he says with subdued agitation.

“Don’t you remember last night? That douche at the bar? The wallet?”

In the daze and confusion of the morning’s hangover he had pushed The Handler’s demonstration to the back of his mind.

“Yeah,” he replies, a little more subdued.

“That’s how I got us this ride,” she explains with an exuberant flare. “The ship’s owner’s had a soft spot for me ever since our torrid love affair. Unfortunately, after much tragic deliberation we had to break it off, but he said if I ever needed anything, he’d be there for me.”

“So he’s in love with you or something?” asks Medic.

She throws her head back and heaves a loud sigh of frustration.

“Dude, seriously?” she says with annoyance. “I just told you that I did the same thing to the owner of this ship as I did to that guy at the bar.”

“And what exactly did you do to them?” he asks calmly, now pain-free enough to drop his hands.

“Okay, well, we’re skipping ahead a bit here. That’s fine,” she accepts grudgingly.

“So, not everyone is susceptible,” she continues. “You, Dmitri, Dom, for example. Doesn’t work on any agent as far as I know. But it works reliably on cocky jackasses. Maybe not for you but they’ll put their defences down for *widdle ‘ole me*,” she says, smiling sweetly and batting her eyelashes. “Then *BAM*” – she pounds a fist into her open palm – “I move in.”

He puts a forkful of eggs and bacon sideways into his mouth as he listens intently.

“The technique has a few nuances,” she continues. “It works best when they’re not expecting it, when they have no walls up. First impressions are crucial. You have to hit their subconscious right away. Instant, deep eye contact stuns people like deer in headlights.

“Then I just say some nonsense rhyme to add to the confusion and when I see on their face that their brain is farting I give them an instruction. Something simple and innocent at first in case I’ve misread them. After that I just have to use my imagination. And the meatier the head, the more they’re convinced that it’s all real, or that it’s all their idea, or whatever. There’s something karmic about it. Sometimes even satisfying.”

“So you hypnotize them,” summarizes Medic.

“Yeah. Like hypnosis on steroids.”

“Wait,” he says, pausing with the coffee mug halfway to his mouth. “Is that what you tried to do to me in the park that night?”

“Yeah,” she says, nodding with mild embarrassment. “If it worked I never would’ve given you my card. You’d never even know we existed. The agency communiqué explicitly stated that I wouldn’t be able to manipulate the target. I tried but you just staggered a bit.”

“Huh,” replies Medic, searching his own memories.

“So that guy that ran out of the park afterward, after you left, was that your work too?” he asks as he remembers the moment following their the encounter. “He looked really freaked out. Looked like he’d pissed himself.”

“Harold, that jackass. He tipped us off to all of this when he broke into our boo and took some of our research,” she explains.

Medic looks away as he tries to remember what the familiar-sounding word means.

Reading his cue The Handler clarifies, “Base of operations.”

Medic nods.

The Handler continues, “After he told us who hired him I wanted to make sure he didn’t fuck with us again any time soon. Funny thing is that I didn’t even tell him anything specific. Whatever he experienced was the creation of his own shitty mind.”

As Medic pieces together what she's been telling him he begins to understand why their circumstances don't seem as alarming to her as they are to him; she's probably been doing this sort of thing for years.

Then he starts considering the possibilities.

"So could I learn to do something like that too?" he asks with some enthusiasm.

"Dude, of course!" she assures him with gusto. "That's, like, basic training. We have a lot of ground to cover by the time we get to where we're going but this will definitely be a part of it."

At this Medic pauses a moment to reflect on what he's leaving behind him. Mostly just the apartment. Eventually the landlord will liquidate most of his belongings. Probably won't even begin to cover the rent and damage. Although he's still a little pissed at not getting a sober say in the matter, this radical departure from the tedium of his previous life is sort of welcome. Maybe even necessary. And the Academy came after him too. He's implicated whether he likes it or not. He's now a target.

"So if I were to come with you, what would the mission be? What would we be trying to accomplish?" he asks.

"We find out why Shindan is after us and put an end to it," she says confidently. "Your part in any of this is your choice, but it seems to me like this Academy business affects the whole Section. Right now you're the least equipped to handle it on your own, and you're already here, so it might behoove you to, you know, stick around."

"Just saying," she finishes, holding up both hands to surrender her suggestion.

Medic closes his eyes and pauses for a few a moments, deep in contemplation.

"Okay, so why are we going to Cape Verde? And where are Dom and Dmitri?" he asks, feeling a lot better than he had only a short while ago.

## Need-To-Know

Fast-forward a few days to the middle of the Atlantic.

Once he got his sea legs, the constant rocking of the ocean became just an annoyance for Medic. Early on he noticed that The Handler also got a little green in the face a few times. In fact, the more he observed her the more she descended down to his own level of physical ineptitude.

She'd tripped gracelessly a few times over the bulkheads. She'd spilled food and drinks a couple of times. She'd once worn a shirt inside-out. And there was that bright orange discount price sticker stuck in her hair for a whole day. It made him comfortable enough to start calling her Handy in private. She took it with a sarcastic smile.

Then again, there was one time when Lukas the leisure-suited, gold-chained, slick-haired Lithuanian burst into their cabin with a rifle in one hand, near-empty bottle of liquor in the other, demanding to know in muddled English how she'd convinced him to take his ship to some island off Africa.

She approached him slowly but steadily until she locked eyes with him and muttered an odd rhyme. She placed her hand on Lukas' shoulder and the Lithuanian immediately dropped into a somnolescent state. Then she instructed him on what to remember and how to feel about it. Satisfied and smiling, he retired woozily to his own quarters.

Medic was still standing there paralyzed when she spun around and walked past him with agitation, mumbling about needing a drink herself. He didn't call her Handy after that for a while.

But this incident also demonstrated the vulnerability of The Handler's skill; at some point the effect wears off. Also, as she'd mentioned, some people just aren't susceptible at all. And she has to be able to speak their language. She claimed that over time she'd gotten better at picking people out but it wasn't perfect.

In private, between her demonstrations and his own attempts to replicate them, Medic is told stories of when The Handler first started training in "the eye thing". In one memory she relates how she put animals to sleep through eye contact.

"I managed to get a bird to fall off its branch once," she says with a subdued chipperness. "It was kinda cool but also kind of fucked up. The bird hit the ground pretty hard and then stumbled around. Like, it was really dazed."

He also spends time getting acquainted with some of the equipment, like The Handler's workstation. An internet connection for the laptop is provided via the attached silver box which is linked to a satellite dish above deck.

“We’re not going to be pirating any movies with this,” she notes with a smirk, “but it can handle voice chat. And we have the web. Dom and Dmitri will be able to use it to signal us once they’re secure. We’re taking the slowest route so that they can get to our final destination first. Plus it gives us some time to work on some things.”

There’s no cell service but they carry their phones around everywhere they go. Through wireless earbuds the devices produce deep, slowly shifting tones. The audio is just loud enough to be heard over ambient sounds and Medic finds the wobbly background bass relaxing.

Sometimes the sound intertwines with the cycles of the ship’s engine, sometimes it mixes with the crashing of waves against the hull. The effect invites an attentive but silent focus, a sort of mindless observation. The audio must be doing something to him, concludes Medic, since every time he pulls out the earbuds his hearing is noticeably distorted.

It wears off quickly and The Handler assures Medic that this is normal. In fact, it’s a necessary preparation for the next step. “Is that for the badass hand-to-hand combat training you’re gonna give me?” he asks, half joking.

“Nope,” she replies with direct sincerity. “Dom handles that kind of stuff. I couldn’t fight my way out of a wet paper bag. Besides, the first part of being a secret agent is to remain *secret*. Violence and secret don’t mix well.”

In fact, there doesn’t seem to be much violence to the training at all. It doesn’t even seem to be training. There’s no schedule, no curfew, no early mornings. He starts when he feels like it and ends when he gets bored. It’s all very leisurely.

One activity involves trying to move a needle on the screen of the laptop by focusing his attention inside a small black device about the size of a fat memory stick. Another activity has him just looking at random pictures while wearing a brainwave monitor cap. For the most part, the pictures are benign and often boring.

Most of Medic’s and The Handler’s time is spent leisurely above deck, in their quarters, or exploring the ship. Sometimes they’re together, sometimes alone.

The boat isn’t very large or very pretty, basically just a converted cargo vessel that probably shouldn’t be out in the middle of an ocean. Inside there are numerous casino-like refurbishments matching Lukas’ aesthetic. Medic and The Handler agree it’s all pretty tacky and tasteless.

However, the discovery of two small, secret chambers containing the docked mini-subs “Second” and “Chance” appeals to The Handler when she accidentally stumbles onto them one day. She chooses to keep the discovery to herself.

The skeleton crew, a trio of Malaysians, take turns individually manning the bridge while the other two are maintaining the boat, eating, drinking, or gambling, sometimes simultaneously.

Mostly the Malaysians keep to themselves but one evening they invite Medic and The Handler for some food, drink, and a friendly game of poker. Their English is good enough to carry on a basic conversation, much of it laced with obscenities.

In between hands and bites of extremely spicy chicken with coconut rice Medic takes gulps of their harsh colourless hooch while trying to absorb the Malaysian pop music playing loudly in the background. It's not long before he's stricken with hiccups.

About twenty minutes into his bout, The Handler flops her cards on the table in exasperation and looks directly at him. "Put your mind into your solar plexus," she tells him. "Focus on it. Relax it."

"I don't know how," responds Medic.

She looks him dead in the eye, raises her knee, and stomps down on his foot. The Malaysians laugh raucously.

"Sorry I had to do that," she explains, "but *that's* focus. When you stop focusing on that, focus inside in the same way."

As the pain in his foot subsides, Medic does as she suggests and moves his attention into his solar plexus, blocking out all else, feeling every hiccup in detail. Now fully focused on the spasms in his rib cage, he breathes deeply while doing his best to ignore the fluttering sensations, like trying to suppress a sneeze. A couple of hiccups manage to get through but in short order the contractions have ceased.

"Neat trick," says Medic after a hiccup-free minute.

"Oh, it's no trick," responds The Handler. "You can have a surprising amount of control over your body if you practice. Here, feel this," she says, grabbing his hand and placing it on her neck.

Medic can feel himself getting flush. It doesn't help that the Malaysians are leering. He looks down at the table, trying in earnest to focus on her pulse. To his untrained judgment it seems normal.

"Okay, now pay attention," she instructs.

Her pulse slows suddenly and significantly, beating at a sluggish fraction of its previous rate.

She speaks normally when she asks, "Feel the difference?"

He looks up to see that the expression on her face hasn't changed. There's nothing about her outward appearance that indicates a barely beating heart except for the proof at his fingertips.

After about twenty seconds her pulse returns to normal. "Body still wants that oxygen," she remarks and takes a deep breath. "If I did more practice I could probably improve."

"Why don't you?" he asks.

“Don’t wanna,” she responds with a shrug, picks up her cards, and signals the resumption of the game. The evening continues in high spirits through two duty rotations, virtually guaranteeing that whoever is at the helm of the ship is drunk.

The Handler takes note of this as she begins to form a disembarkation plan.

## Deep-Six

Although he finds it difficult to understand why, every day Medic becomes more comfortable with the whole situation, lingering doubt and questions subtly transmute into proactive involvement with the mission.

“Shouldn’t we be trying to get more info on the Academy?” he asks The Handler after a few days of growing restlessness.

The Handler holds up a pausing finger as she cranes her head forward, listening.

They’re standing at the bow of the vessel, its rusty and worn exterior a stark contrast to some of its sumptuously gaudy interior. Their donated Bermuda shorts and thin floral shirts waft in the hot breeze as they watch black clouds gathering on the horizon. Occasionally, flashes of lightning rip through the distant darkness followed at length by dull claps of thunder. After a few cycles of this she taps something into her phone and then turns to him.

“I leave that to Dmitri,” she finally responds. “He’s way better at hunting down info than me. I’m sure we’ll get a big juicy debriefing when we meet up.”

The Handler had already described how she planned to get them there.

The first half of their journey will end shortly with their arrival on the island of São Vicente in the Cape Verde archipelago. In response to Medic’s concerns about how they’d get into the country without passports, money, or a smattering of Portuguese, she said simply that she had it under control. Her confidence was very reassuring.

Once there, she continued, they’d “borrow” another boat to take them around the southern tip of Africa, up past Madagascar, through the Indian Ocean and finally land on to the western coast of Thailand. There they’d connect with Dominic and Dmitri and figure out next steps.

“We disembark tonight,” she says firmly, turning back toward the open door that leads below deck.

“How are we getting off the boat?” asks Medic, fluttering nervousness and jittery excitement suddenly wrestling in his stomach.

“One more hurrah with the crew,” she responds resolutely as she descends down the corrugated steel stairs. “I can’t get into the details right now. Just follow my lead when the time comes, okay?”

“What, you don’t trust me?” asks Medic with feigned surprise.

Having reached the bottom of the stairs she turns around to face him. “Trust you to *not* spill the beans when you’re drunk? Jury’s still out on that one. You know that you talk in your sleep?”

Immediately his thoughts begin to race from memory to memory. Could she have heard him talk in his sleep? What could he have possibly said? What about the dreams involving her?

The Handler decides to put an end to the turmoil building on his face. “Don’t worry,” she says, shooing away the concern with her hand. “Mostly just mumbling. Only time I understood anything it sounded like you were having an argument with someone, maybe a friend or family.”

“Oh, yeah,” says Medic with a heaving sigh of relief. “Probably my sister. We’ve been arguing about what’s going to happen to my mo—“

“*That* right there,” she says firmly, holding up her hand to cut him off, “is why you don’t get details. I mean, to be fair you haven’t really had any training but right now you just serve answers up on a silver platter. And you haven’t even had a drink yet.”

“But I could’ve been making that up,” shoots back Medic defensively.

“If it were true I could say the same thing but now you’ve confirmed that it wasn’t,” she says pointedly.

Feeling caught out, he struggles to unpack her sentence.

“Look, don’t sweat it, okay?” she consoles him with mild amusement. “We just haven’t covered this stuff yet and it takes some practice. Like the eye thing. We’ll have another couple of weeks once we leave Cape Verde but in the meantime, just please trust that I’ve got shit handled. I mean, it is kinda in my name.”

Wanting a comeback, Medic strains to remember any personal information he’d learned about The Handler. After some moments he realizes that he has none. He’s not sure he can even guess where she’s from, let alone how old she is or any of her history before they’d met. She had so far evaded such questions by alluding to or just outright stating her need to remain undercover. Anything she did tell him, she’d conclude, could therefore be a lie anyway. Although she’d given him no reason to doubt her, The Handler’s inscrutable language and their lack of shared history made it impossible to tell how truthful she was being.

Maybe that’s the point, thinks Medic, as they pass through the compartment where he’d first woken up, his cot and her files now gone but the equipment still up and running on the bolted table.

“On another note, your testing results have been confirmed and you’re eligible for an upgrade,” she says perkily over her shoulder as she walks through another opening in the bulkhead. She enters a narrow corridor lined on either side with crew quarters and stops momentarily in front of the door to her room. “Think of it as a higher security clearance.”

“Those were tests? If I’d of known I would’ve studied,” jokes Medic, standing in front of his own door.

“The whole point was that you knew as little as possible. I had to evaluate you ‘in the wild’,” she says, hooking her fingers into air quotes. “This is why I can’t always tell you stuff up front.”

“Huh,” he acknowledges. After a brief pause he asks, “So what can you tell me about now?”

“Well, right now we have about an hour to pack and scrub every trace of ourselves from these compartments,” she says, pointing around them. “Then let’s chat.”

Other than The Handler’s things, some duffel bags, clothes, a few towels, and a couple of sturdy raincoats, there’s not much to pack. They stack everything into large black plastic containers and lock their waterproof seals. Then they strip mattresses and pillows, using the linens to collect toothbrushes, soaps, combs, razors, and anything else they’d used or touched. They throw in their plates, cutlery, and cups. They chuck in books, pens, notepads, and any other loose bits they find. Finally, they tie together the corners of the sheets and surreptitiously toss the parcels overboard, watching them sink into the darkening wake of the ship.

The pair return below deck and sweep meticulously, then wipe down and chemically clean every surface they may have touched. Roughly fifty minutes later, they’re as done as they can reasonably be.

“The tests that I was running on you,” she starts, resting on one of the black plastic containers, “aren’t supposed to evaluate things like intelligence or mental stability. They’re supposed to evoke certain somatic responses.”

“Somatic?” asks Medic.

“Body,” explains The Handler. “It reacts to the outside world whether you’re conscious of it or not. We use these responses to build a profile. The profile allows us to customize your training.”

“I don’t get it. Were they some sort of physical fitness tests?” he asks.

“No, not at all,” she responds, shaking her head. “They test for natural abilities. You know, some people are faster runners, some can do math like a calculator, some can bring you to tears with their voice, and then there’s the stuff that us agents can do.”

“And what exactly is that? The eye thing?” quizzes Medic.

“No, not really,” she says, stopping what she’s doing and leaning against the wall. “That’s kinda my specialty but it’s not the only thing I can do. We both know that it’s just gussied up hipster Mesmerism, right? What I’m talking about” — she pauses, slowly raising an eyebrow — “is a little more underground.”

“Like what?” he asks, deeply curious.

“Walk first,” replies The Handler with a contained enthusiasm, “then run.”

“Huh?”

“One step at a time, Medic,” she answers with a final nod.

Medic decides to switch directions. “Okay, well can you tell me something about the agency then?”

“Like what?”

“Like how do you get assignments? And what if you don’t want them? And how do you get paid?”

“Okay,” she begins, “well, we get our mission intel through a thing we call *the pod*. We should probably give it a better name but you’ll see it makes sense. It’s a sort of giant egg thing. The outside is made of these panels that block out the world. Inside, without headphones it’s completely silent and without lights it’s pitch black. There’s a collapsible recliner kind of thing in there. Pretty comfy. All of it breaks down into a big briefcase which is with Dmitri and Dom right now.

“About not wanting missions, that’s not a problem,” she says, pausing pensively. “The agency has an excellent record in matching missions to agents. I’m not only talking about abilities but also desires. I *want* to take assignments. So I could only ever see myself rejecting a mission if I had something more urgent happening, but if I did I suppose someone else would have to take my place. Like I said, it’s hard to say.

“And what was the last question?” she asks Medic.

“How you get paid,” he reminds her.

“Oh yeah. We get paid in the same way we receive material support, phantom dead drops. We call them that because we’ve never once prearranged or planned one. We make the request and then they just show up. I’ve found them at the most random times and in the most random places. Sometimes it’s a hidden package or a box, sometimes just sitting out in the open. Kinda freaks me out, to be honest with you. I try not to rely on them too much. Besides, I have other ways to get what I need,” she finishes with a wink.

“So you’ve never met the people behind the drops?” he asks, perturbed.

“Never even *seen* anyone,” she responds with earnestly raised eyebrows. “Phantom.”

“Weird,” remarks Medic with a reflective frown.

He maintains the frown as The Handler explains how their initial encounter was essentially the same thing, a “phantom encounter”.

“I still don’t see how that’s possible,” says Medic, revisiting earlier doubt.

“Don’t know what to tell you, dude. The agency is capable of some crazy shit. You’ll just have to experience it for yourself,” she replies with a shrug.

Their conversation comes to an abrupt end as an alarm on The Handler's phone goes off, signalling the next phase of the "disembarkation" plan.

They follow the smell of spicy food to a small room in the ship's aft where the Malaysians have already set up the table, tin cups of hard liquor lining the edge, cards shuffled and waiting in the middle. "Don't get too trashed tonight," whispers The Handler to Medic as they sit down.

Another night of raucous poker is well underway. The crew imbibe heavily, cheered on by The Handler who has been secretly disposing of her own caustic drink beneath the table. She notes with satisfaction that the Malaysians soon have difficulty walking a straight line, and not just because of the increasingly agitated motions of the ship.

Medic hasn't been as careful with his drinking but he's sober enough to have noticed The Handler's sleight of hand. He's even more alert when she leans over and whispers instructions for him to follow, starting in five minutes.

The Handler quickly excuses herself to go to the toilet, putting on her best puke face for the laughing Malaysians. Medic buries himself in conversation and food until, to everyone's surprise, the crew member assigned to man the helm of the vessel stumbles in and pulls up a chair.

"Boss want drive ship," says the man with a heavy accent. The other Malaysians don't seem bothered by this sudden change in the roster and welcome him back to the table with a fresh cup.

At that, Medic folds his hand and invites the trio to keep playing while he goes to check on The Handler. She's just emerging through the disguised hatch of one of the submersibles wearing only simple black underwear as he approaches. "Here," she says, tossing a heavy plastic bag to Medic. "Put your clothes in there. Everything else is packed and ready to go."

"We're leaving now? From here?" asks Medic, an anxious confusion wrinkling his face.

"Yup," she replies distractedly as she examines a nearby control panel. "I convinced Lukas that he knows how to pilot the ship, that he *needs* to. Our friends should be tipsy enough by now to go along with it. Lukas will want to take his boat into port at full speed, which will be our diversion. Storm should help too. Meanwhile, we'll slip onto shore in his getaway subs," she concludes, pointing at both of the subs' hatches.

"Wait!" he says, panic swelling in his chest. "I have no idea how to drive one of these!"

"Relax," she says, grabbing his arms. "I've played with the controls a bit. Seems pretty simple. Watch."

The Handler climbs into "Chance" and invites Medic to look in. She demonstrates the power switch, the light controls, the acceleration lever, and the steering joystick. There's a headset slung over the headrest that connects to a simple panel with a few switches and a dial. Anything else, she assures him, they can figure out. "If Lukas can use them..." she finishes pointedly.

Medic's heart is pounding as he gets undressed, lowers himself into the cushioned seat of "Second", places the bag of clothes at his feet, and puts on the connected headset. He turns on the power, then the radio. With the "Channel 1" indicator active he says, "Hello?"

"Hey!" responds The Handler cheerily over the headset. "We lucked out on the first try. That's a good sign!"

"It is," he says weakly. The paralyzing onrush of reality, of what they're about to do, is pressing in on him.

"Medic, listen to me," she says calmly into his ears. "Just take a few deep breaths, okay? Close your eyes, forget everything around you and just breathe for a few moments. Slow and deep. I promise it'll help."

He does as instructed, haltingly at first but eventually building up to a slow and steady rhythm.

"Umm, Medic," she interrupts. "We have a problem. You'll want to close your hatch, like *now*."

He quickly opens his eyes and pulls down the clear hatch, locking it into place with the levers on the sealing ring.

Just at that moment, one of the drunken crew members stumbles into view, a look of startled surprise on his face as he recognizes Medic. The man presses up against the glass and knocks on it while mouthing muted words. Medic can't make out what he's saying but he doesn't need to.

The ship is rocking quite violently now and the increasingly agitated Malaysian is having trouble steadying himself.

"The only thing I haven't figured out yet," says The Handler over the headset, "is how to release these things. Hope we don't have to do it from out there."

Medic nods in agreement, unaware that she can't see him because he's already too focused on finding some way to release the sub. There are a few levers and handles that look like they open storage compartments or access panels. One prominently red lever to his left reads "EMERGENCY" which he assumes will release the hatch; *not* what he wants.

Suddenly, Medic hears a sonorous clunk and he spins his head just in time to see the top of The Handler's craft disappear into a violent spray of water. The splash drenches the Malaysian and the canopy of his own sub with churning seawater before the crew member manages to secure the opening with a sliding steel hatch.

"Did you do that on purpose? Are you okay?" asks Medic with an increasingly frantic tone.

There's no response.

“Hello?!” he asks again, panicked.

Silence.

The dismal possibility that maybe she’d abandoned him there begins to creep into his thoughts.

Breathing heavily, hands sweating and shaking, Medic pulls on each of the handles and levers in front of him, confirming that none of them release anything let alone the sub.

Dismayed, he takes a deep breath and thinks about what he can possibly do now. The thought of facing Lukas and his crew conjures up increasingly bad scenarios. His only chance might be to sprint up to the deck and jump into the ocean. The storm feels rough but at least they’re near the shore. That’s something.

Puffing in a deep breath, Medic grabs the “EMERGENCY” handle, pauses a moment to mentally prepare for the mad sprint, and yanks down. With a sudden jolt the sub drops out from under him.

He reconnects with his seat in a soft thud, landing awkwardly on a metal seat belt clasp that he hadn’t noticed before. After a moment’s disorientation, he looks out of the hatch to see only inky blackness and receding circles of light shining out from the ship’s bottom.

“Holy shit!” remarks Medic at his unexpected turn of fortune. Then he hears something that sounds like tinny, whispered speech. He scrambles around for the headset that had popped off his head during the sudden descent.

“–ear me? Medic? Hello? Dude, come on! Are you there?” a familiar voice intones urgently into his ear.

“Yeah, I’m here!” replies Medic with continued amazement.

“Awesome! I thought I lost you there for a minute! Hey listen, you gotta pull the emergency lever, okay? That’s the manual emergency release. You’ll get pushed down pretty hard so–“

“I’m out already,” he cuts her off, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“Oh man, my bad,” she replies. “I must’ve accidentally switched channels when I dropped. It took me a while to figure out what was wrong.”

Medic lets out a loud, cathartic laugh. “Okay, so what now?” he says as he calms down.

“Turn on your outside lights and then use the joystick to turn yourself around. Right or left, doesn’t matter, just try to keep it level. Keep spinning until you see another light. That’ll be me. Stay pointing at me and I’ll come to you since you’re closer to shore. After that we just need to put a little distance between us and the distraction”, she instructs.

Medic acknowledges, activates the external lights, and begins to spin his sub horizontally. For a while he sees only iridescent bits of marine detritus and occasional clumps of glowing aquatic plants move by.

Then, in the distance, he sees a sweeping beam of light that flashes briefly as it aligns on him. Immediately he stops his sub's rotation.

"I see you," she says jubilantly.

"Yeah, I see you too," he replies with a smile, subtly adjusting his sub's position to better line up with hers.

As Medic sits in the darkness watching The Handler's light approach he suddenly hears a dull crunch followed by a long metallic groan, like a giant rusty door being painfully wrenched from its hinges. The eerie sound seems to come from all around him.

"Good work, Lukas!" shouts The Handler triumphantly. "Let's not waste this opportunity. I should be there in a few seconds," she says to Medic, the shape of her underwater craft becoming more distinct.

## Undercover

Along with the heat and the tropical flora, Mindelo has the feel of some city in the West Indies. Surrounding it, the sharp crags give everything else the appearance of a barren wasteland. On the beaches, the volcanic rock metamorphoses into glistening sand that slides into a turquoise sea.

Sitting on a glistening beach and watching the dreamy image of the boats on the water through the liquid crystal display of a digital camera, Medic inhales deeply and slowly.

He and The Handler are relaxing in the shade of a pavilion off of Avenida Marginal, a sun-drenched road that traces the western limit of the city. They've explored a small part of the sprawl which extends east from there in a mix of colourful colonial houses, restaurants, and modern establishments. It was a nice change of pace from the previous night.

Their arrival on the island of São Vicente was treacherous but exciting. A careful trip around a rocky outcrop ended on the storm-whipped rocks of a large shipyard. They scuttled their mini subs as best as they could and dragged their cases over the jagged boulders while being savaged with salty spray.

Once on shore they quickly found shelter in an unlocked warehouse and dried off. The exhilaration of what they'd just accomplished quickly hit them.

"Holy shit!" said Medic exuberantly. "That was fucking nuts!"

"Yeah!" replied The Handler, barely containing her enthusiasm behind her beaming face. "That was the first time I'd ever done anything like that. Fucking nuts indeed!"

Medic was surprised at her answer. "This is the first time you've done that?"

"Yeah," she responded proudly. "This is how an agent's gotta work. Gotta keep it fresh, original, new. Do something really unexpected, especially on sensitive missions like this one, and especially since we're being targeted."

"That was," remarked Medic, pausing to underscore the rest of his remark, "pretty fucking impressive. You got us across an ocean" — he holds up a finger — "smuggled us into a foreign country" — a second finger — "and got rid of our accomplices." — finger three.

"Lukas was a scumbag," she added with a repelling squint. "Benny, Faisal, Mohamed, they were no angels either. They knew exactly what they were doing and who they were working for. They didn't care."

"Who?" asked Medic after trying unsuccessfully to remember the names.

“The Malaysians,” she explained with a hint of smiling derision. “You never bothered to learn their names? Dude, we were on that ship for over a week.”

He pursed his lips and shrugged. “I dunno. I guess I didn’t want it to get personal.”

“It’s only personal when they know stuff about you,” she said, slapping his shoulder.

He was reminded again of the solid secrecy that she maintained around herself, and of his own permeable openness. He didn’t like how it hung over him.

They wiped down and ditched the submarine containers under a pile of lumber, put everything else inside the duffel bags, and set out along the shoreline. By then the rain had become a wafting mist and their conversation had turned to the identities they would be using on this next leg of the mission.

She would be Handy Jayden, which she thought sounded mildly provocative, and he would be Hans Gruber, because why not. They’d flown in for a business meeting on a charter flight from Amsterdam the day before and then taken a ferry. Improper stowage and rough water meant that most of their luggage, along with their identification, was floating out there in the Atlantic somewhere. “Or whatever,” explained The Handler flippantly. “We’ll improvise if needed.”

After that Medic remembers sitting on some rocks as they watched the half-sunk wreck of the Rhosus / Tenebra bob helplessly up against the sizable yacht into which it had plowed. The storm was leaving but the waves were still high and the tug boats were having trouble separating the two vessels.

In the early morning light, Lukas’ decrepit ship looked like an aging turd pressed against the gilded porcelain yacht into which it had wedged itself. People lined the nearby beach, watching the surreal scene of nautical carnage amidst the tranquility of pleasure craft and small fishing boats.

The Handler expressed her belief that the vessels with boarding ladders pressed up against Lukas’ ship were probably marine police. The smugglers’ arrests must’ve happened while she and Medic were trudging over the long stretch of soggy beach toward the crash site.

With the sun firmly placed in the eastern sky and the dark clouds already just a thick smudge on the horizon, the duo picked up and walked into the city. There they were able to enjoy a free breakfast courtesy of the lost luggage story and some sympathetic hotel staff.

In the shade of the beach-side structure, with take-out containers full of “kitchen mistakes” and a small bottle of similarly smuggled grogue, Medic continues to look into the viewfinder of the digital camera. The extended lens is zoomed into a blue and white catamaran coming in to dock at one of the smaller wooden piers in the distance. Two people are standing on deck, a man in an all-white ensemble of cap, shorts, and short-sleeved button-down, and a woman in a billowing bleached kaftan, her hand holding down a wildly undulating, wide-brimmed sun hat, also white.

Medic snaps a picture and hands it over to The Handler who is lying in her back with a towel over her face, a loose and lustrous black ponytail poking out from underneath, flowery shirt clinging to her sweaty body. He tries not to let his gaze linger too long.

“What about that one?” he asks wearily.

She thrusts out her hand and Medic places the camera into her open palm. She brings it down to her face, lifts the towel, and squints at the image as she works the camera’s controls.

“What does that say? Honey Badger?” she says, zooming into the name on the side of the boat.

Medic takes the camera back and looks at the small screen. “That’s what I see,” he acknowledges. He then pans around in the zoomed image. “What about them?” he asks again, handing the camera back to The Handler.

She takes it and examines it intently, staring at the still image of the couple on the deck. “I think we can work with that,” she replies, pulling a corner of her mouth into a half-smile. “Boat looks comfy too.”

She relinquishes the camera and puts the towel back over her face.

With the current situation in the harbour, São Vicente’s authorities have now advertised the area as being off-limits but numerous people ignore the posted warnings. Some onlookers are propped up on their elbows to watch the unusual scene, some people are face-down on their towels and oblivious to the drama. Medic cocks his head to the side and stares off down the hot stretch of blinding sand as he ponders the next step of their plan.

“I’m still not sure if I’m okay with this, just taking from people, using them like this. Lukas, okay, yeah. But these people, I dunno. And this food here—“

The Handler yanks the towel off her face and bolts upright. “Gonna stop you right there,” she says with a calm that surprises Medic. “These feelings that you’re having are great but keep them in your pants, okay? This is how I get things done. If you don’t like it, there’s the door” — she shoots a thumb over her shoulder.

“And just for your information,” she continues with one eyebrow cocked, “the food we got this morning we got because I asked. That’s it. You’d be surprised how often the word *please* works.

“In any event, agents gotta be resourceful and sometimes that means putting their icky feelings aside,” she ends with a mock smile.

A moment of silence passes with only the sound of the lapping ocean surrounding them.

“So what now?” asks Medic, pointing the camera back at the people in white to watch them tether their small double-hulled yacht to the dock.

“We follow them and try to make friends,” she replies. “Keep an eye on them while I get our shit together.”

As she begins to pack, he tracks the two targets as they slowly make their way to the harbourmaster’s hut. After some time they emerge and begin walking leisurely along Avenida Marginal toward Medic and The Handler. By the time he looks over at her, The Handler’s packed everything into the duffel bags and is motioning for him to follow her.

## Honey Trap

After strolling leisurely along the ocean-side avenue, the couple in white turns west into the city, followed closely by The Handler and Medic.

The new arrivals walk a few blocks to a large public square with thick twisting trees and an ornate, permanent kiosk selling snacks. The couple turn left into a three-storey white and gray building as Medic and The Handler take a seat on a park bench opposite, beneath one of the square's voluminous trees.

The man and woman from the yacht can be seen lingering in the narrow entrance, their small luggage sitting beside them as they check into the hotel.

"I wonder what Prassa means," says Medic, reading the name running down the front of the building.

"Probably means poncey," comments The Handler cynically, wearing a quirky smirk on her face. "Hopefully we'll get to see for ourselves."

Medic nods and he leans back on the bench, hands clasped behind his head. A cool breeze blows over them and down the street as he watches the couple in the hotel through the glass facade.

After a long chat at the front desk the targets finally pick up their sparse luggage and head up through the glass-covered stairwell to the third floor. Disappearing briefly behind a concrete wall, they re-appear again in the adjoining room's balcony window as they draw back the curtains and peer outside.

"Won't they think it's weird that we're sitting outside their hotel?" asks Medic as he angles his face to avoid their direct line of sight.

"What's weird about a couple of tourists chilling outside their hotel?" responds The Handler, gazing up at the balcony with a broad smile and waving at the woman in white who is cheerfully waving back.

"Yeah, but, we aren't staying here," points out Medic.

"Except that they don't know that," she replies with a casual smile.

"Good point," he says with a slow nod. "So what's the plan now?"

"Now we make friends and convince them to take us to Thailand."

"When you say *convince*, you mean..."

"The eye thing, yeah. But this time there's two people so you're gonna need to get involved, put some of that training to use."

Medic shifts uncomfortably on the bench. “You sure I’m ready? I’m pretty nervous about this.”

“Just remember to have a fallback in case it doesn’t take and you’ll be fine,” she reassures him. “Plausible deniability is your friend.”

“Right, yeah, okay,” is all Medic can get out through his growing apprehension.

They sit on the bench for about an hour, going over their stories and Medic’s fallback. At one point a stray dog wanders over and The Handler encourages Medic to try to put it to sleep. The animal seems to relax in response to Medic’s droopy-eyed attempts but it’s not until The Handler gets involved that the canine lies down in the middle of the sidewalk and dozes off.

Before Medic has a chance to repeat his discomfort with the plan, they spot the man and woman heading back down the stairwell. The Handler and Medic scurry into the park and conceal themselves hurriedly behind a large tree.

Medic gets a better view of the couple as they emerge onto the street and head back in the direction from which they’d come earlier. The woman is now wearing a floral dress and subdued pastel slippers. The man sports a pair of navy shorts with a similarly coloured shirt and a pair of white runners on his sockless feet. Her golden hair hangs halfway down her back when it’s not being tossed around by the breeze. His balding head, ringed by trimmed gray hair, is unaffected by the wind. They’re both tanned, relaxed, and happy.

The Handler and Medic follow the couple to what they assume is another hotel. They pause at the entrance to the Chave D’Ouro to evaluate the situation. Seeing their targets disappear up a flight of stairs, The Handler decides that this is the perfect opportunity.

Medic’s palms are sweating and his heart is thumping in his chest as they enter the premises and take the same stairs to the second floor eatery. The establishment is a mix of modern steel and glass elements, African motifs, and bright paintings of the archipelago. The far end of the restaurant is completely open with only a sparse wrought iron barrier separating the room from the outdoors.

The couple are sitting at a small table near the railing, alternating between looking at the menu and the street scene below.

The Handler discretely requests that the host seat them near the target table and the host obliges, leading them to an empty table next to the couple. As they approach, The Handler raises her hand in greeting and smiles. They do likewise.

“If I didn’t know better I’d think you were following us,” says The Handler with a playful smile.

“I could say the same thing,” says the man in an accent that sounds Texan, a similarly mischievous smile on his lips. The woman joins in silently with an elegant smile and upraised eyebrows, cradling her head in her hands in a pose that suggests boredom.

Up close Medic sees age; fit, moneyed, pampered age. There are whispers of crow's feet and lines around their mouths, not severe but visible. Her hazel eyes are bright, vibrant, and confidant; his blue eyes exude the same characteristics. Their teeth look professionally maintained, hair looks expensively treated. An aura of privilege emanates from them.

Medic and The Handler are seated at their own table and presented with menus. Almost as soon as the waiter leaves, the man turns around and says, "Name's Victor. This is my wife Alessandra."

The Handler spins around and introduces their party. "Hi, I'm Handy and this is Hans."

"And no, before you ask," she continues, "we *do not* have matching engraved bathrobes. We decided to stop at the facecloths." At this she breaks out into laughter.

This is Medic's cue. He stands up and shakily makes his way over to Alessandra, hand outstretched. She gently slaps it away, stands up, and leans in to peck him on the cheek. Mildly shocked, he does his best to reciprocate before she pulls back. Sitting back down, her smile becomes surprisingly amorous.

"Uh, hi. I'm M—"

He catches himself and quickly decides that the double "m" would just have to come across as some weird speech impediment.

"Hans."

"It's very nice to meet you, Hans. I'm Alessandra. But I think you already knew that."

Her voice is a little raspy, the accent very generically North American.

"I did," replies Medic, stuck for words.

After what feels like an excruciating eon, he finally conjures up a topic for conversation. "So how long are you staying on the island?"

He knows he's already blown it. As a matter of fact, it seems like Alessandra's trying to use the eye thing on him and he's feeling a little exposed. He'll have to hope that The Handler lives up to her alias.

"We're not sure. We'll stay here for a while, I suppose," she replies, staring deeply into his eyes. "How about you and your ... wife?"

Ah, wait a minute, thinks Medic – this is basically the same as the training that he'd done on Lukas' ship. He already knows how to counter it. Maybe he could even use it to his advantage.

Taking a deep breath he drops his shoulders, lets his head tilt, and relaxes his stance. He can feel a smile effortlessly lift itself on his face.

"We're partners," he replies, reminding himself to give up as little information as possible. After all, that's what The Handler would do.

“That’s very progressive of you,” she says with those same upraised eyebrows.

“Oh yes,” he says, increasing his smile, “we’re very modern.”

Alessandra settles back into her chair with an intrigued smile just as her husband turns back. “Get a room you too!” he says, laughing. Medic is surprised to see that Victor doesn’t seem upset in the slightest. Looking back to Alessandra, he sees that her curiosity is still very much aroused. Looking over to The Handler, he sees that she’s wearing a wide grin and giving him two thumbs up.

This, thinks Medic, is definitely not according to plan. However, it looks like they might actually be able to pull this caper off.

## Escort

A heavy peach mist lies over the rice paddies as the black shapes of farmers in straw hats make their way through the glistening mud. Behind them, a wobbly yellow orb boils up slowly out of the eastern horizon. An idling water buffalo makes a surprise close-up as it flashes by in the window of the train car.

The sleeping berths have just been folded up and the three of them are now seated on the plastic benches underneath, The Handler and Medic facing Elvis. Humid heat pushes in on them from all sides.

“You know what this reminds me of?” says Elvis, pointing through the window.

Medic waits for an answer. None comes. “Oh, I thought that was rhetorical. No, I don’t,” he answers haltingly.

“Balinese shadow puppets,” concludes Elvis with a smile.

Medic waits for a while to see if Elvis wants to elaborate in any way. The young, fresh-faced Asian continues to smile silently but eagerly, as if waiting to be asked to do so.

“How do you mean?” asks Medic, testing the theory.

“Like the light, for example” bursts forth Elvis, confirming Medic’s suspicion. “Like a lamp in the sky, and everything’s a shadow. And the train adds the soundtrack. So cool.”

Elvis alternates his wide-eyed gaze between Medic and the scenery, inviting Medic to look again. Medic does and nods in agreement.

In truth, the nod is more of a courtesy. Elvis seems to be a nice guy but there’s also something a little off about him. Medic noticed this almost right away as they got acquainted on the dark Thai beach. The young man demonstrated good self-reliance, having just completed a small trek through the night jungle using only GPS. And he implicitly seemed to understand their need to sink Victor and Allesandra’s dinghy, even offering a helping hand before Medic or The Handler asked. In short, Elvis seemed capable, even experienced.

So this coy thing gives Medic pause. He’s not sure he’s got the patience for the withdrawn eagerness with which Elvis waits to be questioned, only to produce simple-minded answers at the end of it.

In fact, Medic is a little unsure of what to make of Elvis in general. He feels like he could easily be ten years Elvis’ senior, a feeling heightened by the young man’s deferential demeanour. But the spiky hair, the compact and powerful physique poured into a tight t-shirt bearing a pithy message, even the large brass belt buckle and complementary gilded sneakers, they all suggest a youthful confidence that seems to be either absent or suppressed.

“So ... when did Dmitri recruit you?” asks Medic, eager to get onto a new topic.

“Well, you know,” begins Elvis, flopping his head around to avoid a direct confrontation with the question, “it’s *technically* the agency that recruited me. Dmitri was my connection, so I guess in a way you could say he recruited me but that’s not *quite* right.

“But, yeah, I guess about a year ago,” continues Elvis. “I was on some subreddit and we got into a conversation. We ended up having a lot in common, decided to meet up one day, and you probably already know the rest.”

“Sort of,” replies Medic softly, uncomfortably aware of how little he knows.

“How about you?” asks Elvis with a thrusting enthusiasm.

“A few weeks, give or take,” replies Medic as he pulls back into his seat in feigned relaxation. “She got me involved.”

He swings his hand left and points at The Handler. She appears to be immersed in something on the screen of her mobile phone. After a few moments she perks up, lowers the phone, raises her sunglasses, and remarks, “Huh?”

“Just saying you pulled me into Section B,” repeats Medic.

“Oh, yeah,” she acknowledges with an empty smile.

She sits like that for a few moments before returning to her phone with a flat, “Okay, great.”

An extended and awkward silence follows.

“PK?” asks Elvis at long last, breaking through the omnipresent din of the train with an upraised eyebrow.

“Excuse me?” responds Medic, head cocked to one side.

“PK. Psychokinesis. Telekinesis. You know ... moving stuff with your mind,” explains Elvis as he lifts his fingers to his temple and squints in faux concentration. “That your thing?”

“Sorry ... what?” asks Medic again, shaking his head.

“Oh shit,” responds Elvis with a look of concern. “You guys haven’t–“

“No we haven’t,” cuts in The Handler as she lowers her phone. “Medic and me have barely covered the basics.”

Taking off her sunglasses, she turns to Medic. “This is some of that *more underground* stuff I was telling you about,” she says with nonchalant reassurance.

Suddenly aware of his own slackened disbelief, Medic quickly switches to his best poker face.

“Okay, hang on,” he says, raising both hands in objection. “You’re telling me that you guys are ... what ... psychic? Telepathic? You have, whatever you wanna call it ... *weird* powers?”

He can feel his blood pressure rising. For the first time in a while he’s feeling shredding pangs of doubt and uncertainty, questioning what the hell he’s doing here. Mostly, he realizes, he doubts her.

“See?” responds The Handler with mild exasperation. “This is what I was talking about. All of it comes with so much baggage. That shit needs to be unpacked before you even walk through the door. We didn’t get to do that yet.”

“You’re serious? Like, about the whole thing?” asks Medic, folding his arms defiantly. He can now feel his heart pounding in his chest as the floor drops out from under his perception. A lot of nasty scenarios and implications are running around in his head.

The Handler assumes a docile tone, looking up at him from a slightly bowed head. “Look, I’m sorry that this is getting dropped on you so fast but I promise you we’re not crazy or some new age hippie assholes. None of us would be working together if this stuff wasn’t real or effective. It just works in a way that maybe you don’t expect.”

Medic relaxes his posture but maintains a defensive stare. “Can you see into the future too? Can you guess what I’m going to say next?”

“Like I said,” replies The Handler, “it doesn’t work the way you might expect. No, I can’t guess what you’re going to say next and yes, sometimes with the help of the agency we can see into the future.”

“So why aren’t you all rich by now?” shoots back Medic.

“Well,” shrugs The Handler, “proper secret agents shouldn’t be flashy. Gives us away. Creates situations like the one we’re in. Besides, how do you know that some of us aren’t rolling in dough? Then again, do we need to be? Think about our trip so far; we haven’t needed money for anything. Well, our own money, anyway,” she concludes with a smirk.

Medic nods in silent agreement.

“Dude, come on,” she says as she assumes a tall, motivational posture. “We’re on a train bound for Bangkok to meet up with our secret agent buddies for a really critical mission. That view out there” — she points toward the window— “is spectacular and I don’t know about you but that banana rice thing we had for breakfast was outstanding. And this after traveling over oceans for weeks, which turned out to be memorable sometimes. You were there. And you’re here. Even if you don’t believe what we’re telling you, *and believe me you will*, isn’t that already pretty impressive? Doesn’t that count toward my credentials?”

A noticeably more receptive Medic nods once again.

“Thank you,” she says courteously. “And since there’s no point beating around the bush now, those tests you did on the way to Cape Verde were supposed to find if you excelled at anything.”

“Any psychic abilities you mean?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“You’re pretty average. Some abilities that you can probably improve with training but there’s nothing that stands out, nothing specific to focus on.”

“So you’re saying that I have some psychic abilities?”

“As much as anyone else, yeah.”

“As much as any agent?”

“As much as the general population, agents included.”

“So you’re saying that most people are psychic?”

“More or less, yeah.”

“And I’m just supposed to accept a claim like that at face value?”

“Well of course not. We just haven’t had a chance to cover the research yet.”

“Isn’t that just a bunch of junk science? If psychic abilities were real—“

The Handler cuts him off with an upraised hand. “You’re projecting your expectations about how they *should* work instead of focusing on how they *do* work. Keep the skepticism but like I said, leave the rest of the baggage at the door. Study the data. Try it out for yourself. Then judge.”

“Okay,” accepts Medic with a reluctant sideways nod.

“Okay, great,” confirms The Handler. “Well, I have to use the loo so please excuse me. Elvis, which way?”

“Oh, just down that way,” responds Elvis snappily as he points down the narrow corridor of the train car.

The Handler gets up unsteadily and wobbles in the direction of Elvis’ finger.

“It’s just a hole in the floor,” says Elvis as Medic turns toward him.

“What is?” asks Medic.

“The toilet,” responds Elvis with a mischievous smile. “It’s just a hole. Opens up right onto the tracks. You need some nerve just to take a piss.”

“Yeah, some nerve,” follows up Medic absentmindedly. Then, as suddenly as if concluding a thought he asks, “So do you have an ability? What’s your thing?”

“PK,” responds Elvis perkily. “Psychokinesis. Telekinesis. Whatever you wanna call it. Mind over matter.”

“And how’s that working out?”

“Great. Making great progress.”

“So you can move stuff with your mind?”

“Yup.”

“And how do you get started in something like that?”

“Psi wheel, probably.”

“What’s a psi wheel?”

“It’s a ... it’s kind of like a pinwheel. You cup your hands around it and focus on it to move. Once you can spin the wheel you start learning to change directions. Some people say this is just because of the heat from your hands or maybe your breath but good luck explaining it when it’s under glass. And after that you spin it without any hands at all.”

“And you can do that?”

“Yup,” responds Elvis instantly.

“Okay, well, I’ll believe it when I see it,” finishes Medic in a flat tone.

“Seeing might not be enough, though, right?” asks Elvis. “You know, because of people like her.”

“I thought we were immune to that,” points out Medic as her recalls the effects of The Handler’s special skill.

“That’s what I’ve heard too,” agrees Elvis with a weak shrug.

Another awkward silence passes with only the clacking of the train car filling up the void between them.

“You know what?” offers Elvis with a sudden assertiveness. “I think I saw a guy selling Singhas down that way somewhere. You want me to pick you up some?”

“Yeah, that might be a good idea,” responds Medic stonily, eyes fixated on distant thoughts and recollections.

## Siam Station

The Handler, Medic, and Elvis step sluggishly out of the tuk-tuk and into the still, humid heat of Bangkok.

Their trip from the train station had been a dizzying blur of chaotic traffic and dangerously sharp corners that threatened to flip over the motorized tricycle and its occupants. Medic felt as alarmed as Elvis appeared to be while The Handler wore an inscrutably calm, possibly irritated demeanour beneath her sunglasses.

The ordeal now behind them, the trio are standing on the sidewalk of a three-way intersection. Around them stroll throngs of people, chatting, smoking, laughing, drinking, picking over dubious street merchandise, observing. Dance music blares from multiple locations, the smells of sweet and spicy foods mix with diesel exhaust. Neon flashes intensely into the complex, sticky cacophony.

Elvis points to their immediate left.

“That’s Khao San Road!” he shouts with a weary enthusiasm. “It’s basically tourists and expats! Packed a lot of the time so we don’t have to worry about sticking out! And you won’t believe the shit you can get OTC!”

Before Medic has a chance to ask Elvis to explain the acronym, The Handler steps between them and says, “We can sightsee later! Take us to the boo!”

“Right!” responds Elvis as he spins in the opposite direction and walks down a darkened path, the entrance flanked by two squat white pillars. With the sensory assault of Khao San behind them, they enter the serene shadow of an alleyway. To each side, solemnly dark shadows of buildings loom against the faint illumination of street lamps.

Like a hazy and comforting memory, a feeling of familiarity comes over Medic. “What is this place?” he asks Elvis.

“It’s a wat. A temple. There’s tons of them in the city. This one has a really cool reclining Buddha,” responds Elvis in the same tired-but-eager tone.

Feeling the heat, Medic decides that his curiosity has been sufficiently satisfied and he walks on silently.

In a few moments they emerge onto another street, this one peppered with lively people, guest houses, and cheap hotels that spill out onto the avenue. Patrons sit on tiny tin chairs, tall drinks perched precariously on tiny tin tables, all packed maximally into spaces that leave just enough room for junior delivery trucks to pass by.

The trio walk for about half a block farther before turning right into the New Siam Guest House, an unassuming, dimly-lit establishment anemically promoted on a tattered orange banner placed behind a rusty and haphazardly constructed fence.

With reception at their right they walk past a small dining area checkered with cafeteria-style chairs and tables. An old, darkly tanned couple sit at one table eating what seems to Medic to be some sort of curry and rice. At another, an opened copy of the Bangkok Post obscures the upper half of someone that Medic believes, based on the lower half, to be a woman.

At the back they take a narrow flight of stairs to the third floor where they take a sharp turn, stopping at a door. Elvis knocks three times and announces loudly, "Hey, it's me, Elvis! We're here!"

The Handler shakes her head in obvious disapproval as she removes her shades.

The lock clicks and the door swings open.

"Well holy shit!" booms a deep and familiar voice from somewhere inside.

As Medic makes his way into the small room he's ambushed by the broad embrace of the voice's owner. "It's about time you guys made it! We were starting to think you were taking the long way 'round," exclaims a jubilant Dmitri, arms held aloft.

He's dressed in a dark tank top with khaki cargo shorts, lower pockets bulging with something. He's evenly tanned and his hair's a little shaggier but the neatly trimmed 'stache and dog tags hanging from a chain around his neck help to maintain that military look.

"Oh, were you in the army?" asks Medic, taking notice of Dmitri's accessory.

"Nah," responds Dominic from behind, slowly lowering the novel he's reading. "I'm more military than him and I've only ever done security."

Dominic's massive frame is sprawled leisurely over the modest bed in a Thai Red Bull t-shirt and black cotton slacks. Other than the beads of sweat lining his tanned baldness he looks the same as the last time Medic saw him.

"People are too obsessed with looks," explains Dmitri. "I just play the game sometimes."

Mingling questions about their trip with his own observations about Bangkok, Dmitri shows the newcomers the accommodations. Beside the work table is a stack of bags and cases to which the Handler adds her own equipment. After that they walk down one floor to a couple of rooms that had been reserved for them. Both are identical except for a tiny balcony in Medic's room that overlooks the alley where they'd entered.

Medic is now alone. The bag with his belongings by his feet, he sits on the edge of his bed pondering the events of the past few weeks. With a deep breath he remembers the feeling of ease and certainty with which they'd travelled. Then came the psychic stuff.

He recalls The Handler's complete lack of surprise as Elvis continued to detail his psychokinesis training.

As questions run through his mind, a nauseating mix of doubt, fear, and anger fill his body. Half of the feelings are directed at the members of the Section, half at himself.

His brooding is interrupted by a gentle knock on his door. “It’s open,” he responds rigidly.

The Handler opens the door and stands in the frame, a rare and friendly smile on her face, her piercing black eyes twinkling in the light of the balcony.

“I’m sorry,” she starts.

“For what?” asks Medic.

“For everything. For how you got involved, for the secrecy, for the life you left behind. We’re all used to a little weirdness but we’ve had training and time. You got dropped into the deep end without a life jacket. This mission, the speed at which we needed to leave, the circumstances under which we met, none of that was normal. Sure as shit wouldn’t have been the way I would’ve chosen to do things.”

“Okay,” acknowledges Medic incredulously.

“Look,” continues The Handler, her face dropping into a serious and forthright expression. “I know that this all seems a little fucked up.”

“A little?” questions Medic pointedly.

“Okay, yeah, a lot. We’re all still trying to wrap our heads around what happened. We don’t have much experience in counter-espionage to begin with and this just threw a wrench into the works. You’ve kept it together really well. Admirably, really. But I wouldn’t blame you for getting nervous, especially considering your”—she pauses to consider her next words—“*accelerated* introduction.”

“Yeah,” he responds, face distorted with doubt, voice marked with increasing sarcasm. “So what’re we talking about here? Psychic abilities? Mind over matter? *Spoooky* powers?”

“For starters,” she responds timidly, gently closing the door behind her. “Again, I’m sorry about the layers of secrecy but there’s a reason why we stick to the protocol. This situation is what we try to avoid.”

“Are you kidding me?!” bursts our Medic, arms flailing violently. “Oh my God! Are you people a fucking cult?!”

“Keep it down,” says The Handler with one finger over her lips. “Fuck. This is *exactly* why we stick to protocol. Guess I’ll have to do a Coles Notes version before your head explodes. Just chill and hear me out for ten minutes, okay? Please?”

Medic very reluctantly agrees.

## Eyes Only

“...until I see it for myself,” finishes Medic as he steps through the door of his room at the New Siam Guest House. Holding the door open for him is The Handler, shades atop a courteous smile. Both move casually through the muggy Bangkok night toward the lobby stairs.

They descend to find Elvis, Dmitri, and Dominic sitting at a small table with a woman that Medic has never seen before. He shoots a “who is that?” look at The Handler who responds with a shrug.

The woman is taller than everyone except Dominic. Loose blonde curls cascade over pale shoulders, casually framing an attractive but dour face. Atop her thin frame rests a plain black tank top. In her left hand she holds a slender cigarette, occasionally taking a drag and blowing the smoke over the “NO SMOKING” sign on the wall just above her.

Medic quickly remembers the newspaper-holding stranger they’d passed earlier. She’d probably observed them when they arrived, did who-knows-what-else in the meantime.

Dominic stands up and smiles warmly as Medic and The Handler approach the table, then introduces them to the woman.

“This is Mira. Mirabelle, actually, but who has time for that, eh?” he says with a sideways chuckle toward the woman. “Mira, The Handler and Medic.”

Mira produces a faint smile in acknowledgement.

“Pleasure iz mine,” she says with a thick, drawling French accent as she angles her light blue eyes at The Handler, then Medic.

The Handler responds first, pushing forward for a firm handshake. Mira grabs The Handler’s offering meekly with her fingertips and moves her limp wrist up and down a few times. She then retracts her delicate hand back to its position on the table as she takes another drag on her cigarette.

The Handler pulls her own hand back, a hint of derision on her face.

Choosing to forego a handshake, Medic nods at Mira who nods back appreciatively. As everyone shuffles their chairs to make room for the newcomers, Medic catches her flashing him a faint smile.

“Okay, so is this everyone?” opens The Handler assertively. “Anyone else joining us? Any more secret recruits we’d like to get off our chests?”

“And who exactly made you boss, Becks?” begins Dmitri in a calm but firm voice from across the table.

Jutting out her lower jaw, The Handler purses her lips in visibly stifled agitation.

“Oh, she didn’t tell you yet? Her *real* name?” asks Dmitri with an upraised eyebrow, catching Medic’s look of bewilderment.

Turning his attention back to The Handler, Dmitri waits for a response. The Handler remains silent.

“And *we’re* the ones keeping secrets,” he says in a mocking tone as he turns back to Medic. “It’s Rebekah. Rebekah is her real name. Miss Becks if you’re nasty. Becky among friends.”

The Handler, Rebekah, has removed her sunglasses to reveal an intense glare.

Medic isn’t sure what mixture of rage and shame her beaming red face represents but it’s obvious that the revelation has gotten to her. He waits for her to say something but she doesn’t.

“Why did you need to keep *that* secret?” he finally asks.

“It involves more than just me,” she responds in a heavily measured tone. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

“And did you all know this?” asks Medic as he looks around the table.

“Only as much as she’s told me,” responds Dominic.

“Until now I only know of anozer woman in ze Section, no name,” says Mira dryly while gesturing with her cigarette hand. “Elvis and Dmitri I meet ‘ere. You are only a little newer to me.”

“What he said,” says Dmitri, pointing at Dominic. “And what she said,” he finishes flatly, nodding toward Mirabelle.

Elvis adds, “Yeah, I didn’t know any real details about you until I met you.”

Dmitri and Elvis nod at each other in agreement. Then, focusing on Rebekah, Dmitri asks, “Haven’t you given Medic the crash course yet? You’ve been together for over a month already.

“At this rate he’s only going to be a liability on this mission. No offense,” he finishes with a sideways glance toward Medic.

“None taken,” responds Medic coldly. “You’re right. I barely know anything.”

He pauses to look around the table to confirm everyone’s attentiveness.

“Do you guys *really* believe in psychic powers? Like being able to read people’s minds, or seeing into the future, or being able to move things with your mind?”

Medic looks around the table again. This time he’s met by looks of puzzlement.

“Believe?” responds Dominic after some time. “That’s like asking if you believe that you’re sitting on a chair and having a conversation in some shit-hole guest house somewhere in Bangkok. Do you?”

“It’s real as far as I can tell,” replies Medic.

“That’s the answer,” finishes Dominic.

Mira cuts in as Medic is busy digesting Dominic’s point.

“Per’aps believe iz a problem,” she says, her words heavily saturated in French. “You want to say believe, I don’t care. I believe because I can see. And ‘ear. And touch. I believe because I am ‘ere. I believe all my life, since I am a little girl, and still today, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...”

Dmitri leans in toward Medic as Mira trails off to take another pull on her cigarette.

With a nasal laugh he asks, “You wanna hear something funny? If you’re anything like me you’re probably going to question how the fuck you’re doing what you’re doing, as you’re doing it. It’s like, you *can’t* believe it. How fucked is that?”

Medic turns his attention to Rebekah. She’s still irritated but calmer.

“You already know my answer,” she states tersely.

“Okay,” says Medic, acknowledging each member of the Section with a slow nod. “I think I need to be by myself for a bit.” He stands and pushes his flimsy chair under the table. His features are impenetrable.

The group watches as he takes a determined right at the front desk and heads toward the alleyway he’d recently entered through. In a few moments, they catch a final sight of him as he disappears from beneath the stark light of a streetlamp into the shadows of Bangkok.

“Zis is, how do you say ... ze dark night, yes?” says Mira after a long pause.

“Sure looks like it,” responds Dmitri with a look of concern.

Rebekah hangs her head to the side with indignation while Dominic and Elvis wear uncertainty on their faces. Only Mirabelle sits with the same calmness as she takes a final few drags on her cigarette. Then, stubbing it out, she stands casually and follows Medic into the darkened alleyway.

## Double Agent

Mirabelle follows Medic down a poorly-lit foot path hedged in between shanties and a narrow canal. She moves swiftly and silently beneath the conical spotlights. In between them she returns to a casual stroll that matches Medic's.

He doesn't show any suspicion of being followed but she maintains her distance anyway.

He's already stopped a few times, leaning on the canal's railing, staring into the water, sighing heavily while rolling his head contemplatively from side to side. A couple of times he seems to come close to spotting her as his eyes follow a passing stranger but he's quickly retaken by his own thoughts. Even the click of her lighter and the ensuing spark of flame don't seem to register.

Turning away from the canal and the raucous atmosphere of the tourist area they head further into the city.

Medic leads them to a nearby temple complex where he examines the large, ornate statuary. Mirabelle slips silently through shadows and behind angles, watching him. A very relaxed giant Buddha watches over them both.

Having circled the sanctuary a few times, Medic walks back out through the entrance and slowly makes his way back in the general direction of the guest house. Mirabelle's in tow, occasionally crossing the street to avoid detection.

Eventually they arrive at the other end of the Khao San district. Medic looks around for landmarks and, finding none, settles on plunging headlong into the crowd. Still gliding calmly along the pavement, Mira slips into the throng behind him.

A few moments later she spots him sitting on a tin chair at a small table outside a dense and lively establishment. Leonardo DiCaprio's face fills the screen as *The Beach* plays inaudibly on a grubby monitor mounted above a heavily worn bar, its dark surface covered with steaming food and drink orders. The walls are lined with empty liquor bottles, decorative compact disks hang suspended by fishing lines from the ceiling. Occasionally the CDs catch diamonds of light given off by a small, stationary disco ball hanging off to one side of the room.

"You will not order anything?" she asks loudly into his ear over the background cacophony of dance music and tourists.

A startled Medic looks over his shoulder to find Mirabelle standing there, black tank partially covering bleached cut-offs, smiling casually.

In his mild shock he struggles to formulate a response.

She shrugs off his confusion and offers him a small plastic lighter accompanied by what looks like a leaf-wrapped joint being held together with a red thread.

“More ‘onest zan cigarette,” she says.

Quickly hiding the items below table level Medic asks, “Is this legal here?”

“But yes,” replies Mirabelle as she eases herself into the chair next to him. “Iz a bidi. Tobacco. You can buy it anywhere.”

After a moment of hesitation Medic takes the small cigarette, lights it, inhales deeply, and launches into waves of convulsive coughing as an amused Mirabelle orders them a round of beers from a passing waitress.

“Strong,” he wheezes eventually through disoriented blinks.

“Like I say, iz ‘onest,” she intones and takes a drag on her own bidi.

By now the beers have arrived and Medic takes a thankful gulp.

“I don’t know what I was expecting to do here,” he says, putting down the bottle. “I don’t have any money.”

“Money?” she asks, twisting up her face to accentuate the question. “Why money?”

“Because money can buy things,” he replies with conviction.

“So,” she says, tilting her head to the side, “if you can get sings wizout money zis is maybe better, no? ‘ow do you say ... skip ze middul man, yes?”

“If I could do what The Handler does,” begins Medic before trailing off into his beer.

“Yes, I ‘ave ‘eard. It iz like ‘ypnosis,” she acknowledges. “Very small.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“It is a small sing. Zis ability is ze magie de scène,” — she pauses reflectively — “magic of ze stage. Like cards, and lapins, and ze” — she removes an imaginary hat and taps its rim with an imaginary rod — “magic stick ... la baguette magique. You know?”

“Wand,” replies Medic, recognizing her gestures.

“Yes. Magic wand,” she says, pointing at him while gripping her beer. The motion causes a single dollop of the fizzy golden liquid to flop out onto the table in front of her.

They simultaneously snort out brief bursts of nasal laughter.

“That’s how The Handler ... I mean *Rebekah*, made it sound,” affirms Medic. “I tried it in Cape Verde. Didn’t work.”

“What ‘appen?” she inquires.

“The couple we sailed with had an ... *open* relationship. Rebekah made the husband believe that they were having a great time. As for me and Sandy, well,” he smiles meekly to finish the sentence.

“Ah, I see,” she says with a measured nod. “And you did not enjoy it?”

“She was nice but it was awkward. And weird. The boat was small. Sometimes the husband would ... you know what? Maybe we can talk about this another time.”

“Okay,” she acknowledges with the same slow nod.

“So then we finally get here,” Medic continues, “and because everything isn’t nuts enough already, Elvis spills the beans on ... psychic abilities? That one’s a little hard to take, you know?”

“Yes, you already say zis before,” nods Mirabelle as she raises her drink to her lips.

“Yeah, I haven’t seen anything,” he says, crossing his arms. “All I’ve gotten is secrecy and vagueness. I feel like I’ve been conned but I can’t figure out why. Maybe I’m being set up. Maybe this is some Manchurian Candidate shit. I don’t have money, connections, secret knowledge. I definitely don’t have any special abilities.”

“You do,” she replies with a sudden burst of assertiveness. “Everybody do. A little. Like baby, very weak. For some people, maybe stronger. But everyone can be more strong, like running or ... ‘ow do you say,” she asks as she strenuously pumps an upraised fist into the air.

Medic studies her motions and suggests, “Lift weights?”

“Yes. Lift weights to make you more strong. More power,” she says triumphantly, slapping a slender hand against the mild bump of her flexed bicep.

“If you say so,” says Medic, shaking his head in surrender.

“Okay,” says Mirabelle with an accepting nod.

She finishes her beer, stubs out her bidi, and stands up.

“No more talk. Just look.”

She studies the busy street, a gentle smile curling up one side of her mouth.

Having found what she’s looking for, she crosses the busy thoroughfare to another tightly packed pub where a rowdy group of Europeans are watching a football game. Small groups donning matching team jerseys and scarves bubble on the periphery, arms over each other’s shoulders in drunken camaraderie.

Mirabelle walks to the far end of the congregation, looks over her shoulder to ensure that Medic is watching, and swivels her head away from both him and the Europeans.

She begins to bob her head gently to the most prominent beat rising above the street’s din. After a few moments she begins to walk backward into the football fans. At first she’s moving fluidly between clusters of people frozen with focus. Suddenly they erupt en masse as the game takes a turn.

She bends forward and spins to her left, narrowly avoiding the thrusting arm of an outraged fan. By the time he notices that something’s twirled past him, Mirabelle has

emerged from the other side of the huddle with upraised arms, like a magician revealing a completed trick.

She continues to step backward as Medic looks on in disbelief.

Now Mirabelle has moved to a second bunch of fans who are staggering around in inebriated revelry, beers held aloft. The three men collide clumsily, sending the middle one's beer bottle arcing toward her through the air. Before either the bottle or the spraying beer have a chance to connect she fluidly side-steps both and continues backing up.

Any wandering attention is drawn to the shatter of glass as she emerges from the tight enclave, still facing the wrong way.

Nearly immediately she spins around a couple of surprised girls on the sidewalk. They have big spiky hair, lots of piercings, loose tank tops, and baggy bondage pants. Her sudden evasion stuns both of them.

Now standing back-to-back with one of them, Mirabelle contorts and moves her body to remain out of one of the girl's line of sight as the other girl tries, through increasing fits of laughter, to convince her friend that someone's directly behind her.

After a few moments of this Mirabelle stops matching the girl's movements and turns around. She offers what looks like a heartfelt apology to the pair, leaving the bemused friend looking even more delighted and her partner wearing an astonished smile as the three part ways.

Now walking forward, Mirabelle turns her head slightly to the side as though she's following the source of some sound. She bops slowly to a steaming food cart nearby and makes her way to a beefy tourist in a gaudy floral shirt and wide hat, crouching next to him as he waits for his order.

Finally receiving the skewered meat he holds it to the side, just above Mirabelle, and leans in to pay. As he extends forward, the skewer slips out of his grip and directly into her waiting hand.

It takes the man a moment to register what's just happened as Mirabelle stands up and returns his food to him with a congenial smile. The man is still staring at her with a deeply furrowed brow as she trots back across the street toward Medic.

"It iz not always for evil, huh?" she says with a broad smile as she plops back into her chair.

"That was incredible!" shouts Medic emphatically. "Like it was choreographed!"

"Oh my god I was so lucky," she explains with enthusiasm.

"Oh I think that was more than luck," he replies sternly. "That was unbelievable. The way you hid right behind that woman, and with your back turned ... that was the craziest shit I've ever seen!"

Mirabelle smiles and squints.

“I mean zat I can show you,” she clarifies flatly.

Looking lost and pulling back, Medic asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean zat ze situation didn’t ‘ave to ‘appen. Ze man didn’t ‘ave to srow ze beer. Ze ozer man didn’t ‘ave to srow down ze” — she searches for words — “*meat stick*. Ziz was all was lucky.”

“Wait,” says Medic, leaning in. “You mean you dancing around those guys, mirroring that chick, the skewer drop ... *that* wasn’t luck? You planned all that?”

Mirabelle shakes her head in mild indignation.

“Don’t be ridiculous. ‘ow would I plan it? *Why* would I plan it?”

“So you’re telling me,” says Medic as he inches a little closer, “that you were able to do all that because of your special ... *skills*?”

“Yes, zis is what I am saying,” she responds. “But if you don’t like zis word we can say anozer. As I say before, for me it doesn’t matter.”

With a troubled expression, Medic looks directly into Mirabelle’s hazel eyes and asks, “Do you really believe what you’re telling me?”

“Encore avec *believe*,” replies Mirabelle in a disapproving huff. “Yes, yes I believe. But do you believe? The eyes? The ears? Le cerveau?” She finishes by tapping a finger against her temple.

“I’m not sure what I believe anymore,” answers Medic, wiping the sweat that’s accumulated on his forehead.

“Of course,” she says with a firm nod, “ze body is maybe not always true. People are not always correct. Maybe ze world lie to you. Maybe like zat” — she motions toward the movie playing in the background.

He follows her gesture to the screen above the bar where Leonardo DiCaprio is being accosted by an insistent Thai man on a street very similar to one they’re on right now.

“Zis is Bangkok?” chuckles Mirabelle with derision. “Did you get offer to drink ze snake blood? I already been ‘ere many weeks and nobody offer to me any blood. I ‘ave even to find my own bidis.”

She lights another thin stick, takes a pull, then raises her eyebrows and shrugs.

“You make it sound like I shouldn’t trust anything,” opines Medic reservedly.

At this Mirabelle’s lips slowly extend into a broad smile.

“Almost,” she says, pointing at him with her bidi hand, “but some sings maybe yes. I sink maybe try and try and try, zen maybe you ‘ave more trust. Do you know my meaning? Like, many experience.”

Medic sits and stares vacantly into space, blinking occasionally.

Without warning his hand flashes up and darts toward her face. She instantly pulls her cheek just out of reach of the swing, then sits staring at him with an upraised eyebrow.

“Umm, you *did* say try,” he says sheepishly.

“Okay,” responds Mirabelle resolutely, “I give you one. *Only* one. Dominic can say yes, zis is generous.”

“I’m gonna take your word for it,” surrenders Medic with upraised arms. “I believe you.”

“Ah, you *can* believe!” she says exuberantly. “Maybe we celebrate, huh?”

As she tries to get the server’s attention Medic sits silently and alertly, taking in the experience.

“I’m starting to get a better understanding,” he says as the next two bottles arrive at their table, “of why someone might be after the Section. I have no idea how I can help, don’t know the first thing about espionage let alone whatever *this* is, but I’m willing to give it a chance.”

“I’m ‘appy to ‘ear zis, Medic,” she reassures him, offering him the neck of her beer.

They tap bottles and take long drinks.

“But Medic,” follows Mirabelle, “zis does not suit you. *Meh-dik*, it sound too French and we are too different. Also, ze agent should ‘ave a strong alias. *Meh-deek* is not very strong.”

“If you’re gonna say it that way then you might as well call me Brock,” he replies snappily.

“Brock,” she says as if tasting the name. “*Brrrock*. It sound more *aggressive*. Yes, it iz better.”

“I’m not very aggressive,” he points out.

“When zey learn zis it will be too late,” she says with a mischievous grin.

“Once we figure out who *they* are,” he points out again, returning the smile.

They continue to chat, drink, and smoke late into the night.

## Mission Creep

A lone beam of sunlight bisects the small eatery of the New Siam Guest House. Seated well out of the beam's path is Dominic, perusing a folded newspaper in one hand while bringing a small cup of black coffee to his lips with the other.

Today he's wearing a loose button down with a Japanese floral motif across it. Thin cotton slacks drape themselves comfortably over elegantly crossed legs.

A half-eaten piece of toast lies on a simple plate in front of him, some empty plastic butter containers on the side next to a knife, a small metallic teapot, and a decorated black tin.

"Good morning!" Dominic greets Brock jovially. "Wasn't sure if we'd see you again."

Angling toward a chair opposite him, Brock wears a pair of loose khakis, light brown cotton shirt, and a blue sun visor with striped white band he'd spontaneously decided to grab while strolling along Khao San the previous evening.

"Had my doubts," he admits as he takes a seat. "Mira and I had a good talk. Got some stuff sorted."

"Well it's good to have you here, Medic," says Dominic through a smile. "How're you feeling today? We're going to need you for the plan we've been putting together."

"Surprisingly good but I'm not sure—" is all that Brock manages to get out before Dominic interjects.

"Don't worry, don't worry," reassures the large man. "I know that you're new to this. You'll be with me and I'll be taking the lead, no extra skills required."

Brock thinks it over for a moment. Some words from the previous night resonate.

"Okay," he replies, "but call me Brock. It'll feel a lot less formal."

"Brock it is," confirms Dominic. "We'll do a full rundown of our intel and plan as soon as everyone's up. In the meantime, how about some coffee?"

"That sounds good," says Brock, surprised at his own upbeat tone.

Dominic signals the waitress and orders another round of toast and a coffee cup.

She brings the cup almost immediately and Dominic fills it with coffee from the teapot. "Indonesian," he remarks as he returns the pot to the table. "Kopi luwak. They import it here."

Brock takes a sip from the simple earthenware cup. Powdered grounds are suspended in the brew but the drink is otherwise pleasantly balanced. The fine grit lightly coats his mouth, leaving behind a satisfying coffee flavour.

"Very nice," notes Brock. "What did you say this was again?"

"Kopi lewak," replies Dominic with an odd smile. "Civet coffee."

"What's civet coffee?" asks Brock as he takes another sip.

"Civet's a type of cat," clarifies Dominic, the odd smile on his face broadening. "If you ask me it looks more like a weasel, but that's neither here nor there."

"It's indigenous to Indonesia, loves to eat ripe coffee cherries. It doesn't digest the beans though. Instead, it imbues them with certain prized qualities as it passes them through its digestive system. The locals swear by it. Export-quality product has the excrement with the green beans embedded in it. That's the top-shelf stuff, very expensive," he concludes, faced stretched to maximum.

"Oh," replies Brock as he gazes into his cup. As the toast arrives at the table he lifts his head and takes a large gulp.

"This coffee's the shit," he announces with a smirk.

"Ha!" shouts Dominic with delight as he thumps the small table, causing everything on it to jump. "Good! We're gonna get along just fine!"

"Weasel crap coffee. Nice one," chuckles Brock.

"Oh it's real!" replies Dominic with sincerity. "You can look it up. But that" — he points to the cup that Brock is holding — "didn't come out of a cat's ass. I'm open to new coffee experiences but I draw the line at that. This is a Sumatran. Same region, same coffee, far fewer feces. Here, try this," suggests Dominic as he slides the black tin across the table.

Brock spins the container around to reveal a brightly decorative flower and leaf motif around the words "Tasmanian Leatherwood Honey". Prying the lid off with his butter knife he spreads a thin layer onto the buttered toast and takes a bite.

"Mmm," he mumbles approvingly. Swallowing, he asks Dominic, "You some kind of a food connoisseur?"

"Mostly coffee," explains Dominic as he takes a sip from his own cup. "The honey's Dmitri's. Just handed it to me one day and said, 'Here, try it.' When I told him I liked it he insisted I keep it, called it *disgusting*."

"You guys go back a ways?" inquires Brock.

"Many years," responds Dominic. "Through Rebekah. We didn't know each other before that. He's a good man, very skilled at what he does."

"For some reason I'd assumed you were friends."

“Nope. But you do develop a relationship after you’ve worked with someone long enough. You get to know them, kind of like Rebekah. You may have started to notice some of her tendencies.”

“Yeah, I did notice. But maybe I wasn’t insistent enough with my questions. I won’t make that mistake again.” With a broad smile Brock continues, “So in that spirit, how did you meet Mira?”

“Showed up one day at my gym. I was volunteering there that night. She just strolled up and asked to go a few rounds. At first I didn’t know what to say. I mean, you’ve seen her. But she insisted so I got into the ring with her and started throwing light taps.

“Try as I might, I couldn’t touch her. I started going faster and harder and she just moved around everything I was throwing at her. I know I’m not in top shape but she’d duck and weave around every punch like I wasn’t even there. It started to look like she’d be in motion at exactly the same moment as my arms were, anticipating my moves.”

“I got a demonstration last night,” notes Brock.

“Crazy shit, right?”

“It was more convincing than anything I’ve seen so far.”

Dominic sucks in some air through the corner of his mouth in an uncertain hiss. “If I’m hearing you correctly, we’re not really sure what Rebekah’s psi skills are either. The hypnosis is useful and she’s much better at it than any of us but ultimately it’s pretty mundane. I’m sure she’s explained some of it to you?”

Nodding, Brock asks, “What about you, Dom?”

“Speak of the devil!” intones Dominic as a sudden shock jolts Brock’s body, a pair of unseen hands landing on his shoulders.

“Shit, dude, I didn’t mean to scare you,” says a woman’s voice from behind as Brock spins around. It’s Rebekah wearing a white blouse, simple brown shorts, and an apologetic look.

She takes a seat next to him as he calms down, plopping a plump leather bag at her feet.

“I want to apologize, again, about not filling you in on everything earlier,” she says. “I should’ve but, I dunno, I guess secrecy *gives me a boner*” — she looks accusingly at Dominic who responds with a gentle smile.

“Actually,” he says in an assured tone, “that was Dmitri’s term. But I agree, you do seem take the *secret* part of *secret agent* a little too seriously.”

Rebekah raises an eyebrow in acquiescence.

“You haven’t called me *dude* for a while,” interjects Brock.

“It’s been a stressful time,” she reminds him.

“I’d rather you call me Brock. I’m trying to grow into it,” he declares.

“Yeah, alright,” agrees Rebekah with a nod. “So what’s going on here? Breakfast?”

Spotting the black tin she asks, “Is that Leatherwood Honey?”

“Tasmanian, yeah,” confirms Dominic.

“You didn’t happen to get that from Dmitri did you?”

“As a matter of fact I did.”

“And did he tell you where he got it?”

“He mentioned something about ordering it from some online shop,” replies Dominic with a shrug. “Said he didn’t like it so he gave it to me.”

“Is *that* so?” replies Rebekah through pursed lips, jutting her tongue into the inside of her cheek as though she has some food stuck there. Her response puzzles both Brock and Dominic.

Then, pulling her mouth into something that’s neither smile nor frown, she clasps her hands together resolutely and says, “You know what? That’s fine.”

Perplexed, Dominic and Brock look at each.

Breathing deeply and wagging her head from side to side, Rebekah remarks, “I just need to relax more.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” notes Dominic.

A suddenly smiling and upbeat Rebekah asks, “How about some of that coffee?”

As the three of them continue to chat, eat breakfast, and drink Indonesian coffee, the rest of Section B slowly trickle down to the table.

Dmitri arrives first, a black bucket hat accompanying a black t-shirt and thin black pants, a slim laptop case in his hand. He’s well-rested and jovial.

Mira arrives next, moving slowly and sleepily, dressed in what appear to be the same clothes as the previous night.

Elvis is the last to arrive, chipper and sporting a neon orange t-shirt with fitted black jeans, a newly gaudy and ornate buckle ostensibly holding them up.

Orders of additional toast, bacon, eggs, sausages, waffles, banana pancakes, and orange juice are consumed with gusto. The black tin is passed around over breakfast with only Rebekah and Dmitri politely refusing to partake.

With the table finally cleared of everything except coffee cups and an ashtray, Rebekah hauls up the large leather bag from her feet and places it on the flat surface.

“So this is what they’re after,” she says as she unbuckles the fasteners on the satchel. She pulls out thick brown folders containing loose papers of various shapes and sizes, and passes them around the table.

“You’ll probably recognize some of these,” she notes as everyone flips through the collections. Everyone but Brock occasionally nod their heads in recognition as they read.

Bearing the name “CIVIE” on the outside, Brock is surprised to see what appear to be military documents in his folder, many of them stamped “SECRET”. They look hand-typed and photocopied with some dating back as far as the mid 1960s. Between these are old newspaper clippings and some hand-written notes. There are also a number of papers with internet addresses printed on them in organized groups. All of the information has to do with research into psychic abilities, or “psi” as some of the papers refer to it.

“What does civie mean?” asks Brock, tapping the name on the folder.

“Civilian,” replies Rebekah. “That’s basically public knowledge, either declassified or never classified. It doesn’t include all the research that’s out there, just what’s useful to us.”

“Oh,” remarks Brock as he notes the declassification notices on the “SECRET” documents. “I was getting worried for a second there.”

“That’s the stuff we’re least worried about. *That*” — she points at the folder that Elvis is holding — “is much more important.”

Elvis swaps his bundle of documents with Brock’s.

Now Brock is holding the “R” folder containing printouts of dated entries accompanied by charts, diagrams, and columns of categorized data. He doesn’t understand most of it.

“That,” explains Rebekah gravely, “is agency research. It really is secret. I think we all understand” — she pauses to look at everyone around the table individually — “that it doesn’t leave this group. I’d recommend hitting it after the civie file. After that the training manuals will make a lot more sense.” She points at the paperwork in Dominic’s hands, noting, “They’re in that folder over there.”

Dominic hands the “M” folder over as Mira grabs the “R” folder from Brock’s hands, explaining, “I don’t sink I see zis ‘hole one before.”

Dmitri places his “Ops” folder into the center of the table and extracts his small black laptop computer from its case. Flipping it open, he directs his attention at the device as everyone else pores over documents, occasionally discussing and exchanging folders.

Half an hour later, the folders are collected and sealed back within the leather bag. Dmitri has stopped typing and now sits attentively.

“I can see why someone would want to get their hands on this,” concludes Brock with astonishment. “If even half of this is possible...”

“It’s more than possible,” responds Rebekah. “Dmitri, Dom, and me have run plenty of successful missions with that m.o.”

Both men nod in agreement.

“Me too,” adds Elvis enthusiastically.

“Only a small one,” includes Mira in a casually indifferent tone.

“Missions, missions,” repeats Brock distractedly.

After a few moments he collects himself and asks, “So if I’m a part of all this then I should be able to have a look at these pods.”

Dmitri and Dominic both look puzzled.

“The ones you use to communicate with the agency? How you get assignments? Missions?” clarifies Brock.

“Just the one,” says Rebekah. “We have just the one pod. Dom?”

“Oh right!” responds Dominic in sudden recognition. “Of course. It’s with the other equipment in Dmitri’s room. I’ll give you the guided tour as soon as we’re done for the day.”

Satisfied, Brock sits back as Dmitri spins his computer around for the group to see.

He describes what he and Dominic had been up to for the past month. Almost immediately, they’d located the Shindan office in a shabby building in a rundown area of Bangkok. After a few of weeks of surveillance they were able to infiltrate it.

“Security was ridiculous,” notes Dominic.

“Hard to get in?” asks Brock.

“Hell no,” replies Dmitri. “Basically non-existent. They front as a small call centre with a shockingly high turnover rate. We cobbled together fake employee badges from photos we took on the street. There are only a handful of regulars there and they might as well advertise their daily schedules. All that and a little bullshit and we were in.”

“Aren’t they supposed to be a...” says Brock, making a paddling action with his hand as though he’s flipping through a card file. A moment later he holds his hand up and completes the question, “executive... something or other?”

“They’re supposed to be a lot of things,” answers Dmitri. “They’ve assumed a bunch of covers over the years. Always with the same name for some strange reason.”

He looks over at Dominic to continue.

Taking the cue, Dominic nods and says, “It turns out that the one thing Shindan did right was to keep their secret data offline, meaning on paper, and isolated in a locked room. This should include their client lists. We don’t have the key and we have no idea where it’s kept. But we found out that in case of an emergency, that room is to be evacuated. If we’re going to get any answers, that would probably be our best chance to get at them. “

“What kind of emergency?” asks Rebekah.

“Dmitri’s got that covered,” responds Dominic.

“A little bug in the call centre’s computers should give us some cover,” explains Dmitri. “Some minor wastepaper fires and well-placed laxatives may help. I’ve got a couple of other ideas to give us maximal time with the records but I’ll need to work out the details.”

“Once the plan is in motion we may not get another chance,” continues Dominic, “so we need to be prepared. I’m already known there so Brock and me would go in first.

“Dmitri also knows the staff so he’d watch near the entrance. Rebekah, Elvis, and Mira would be positioned around the area as lookouts. If the information we’re looking for is in motion before Brock and I can get to it then the lookouts would become chasers and we’d play support. Either way the files would be out in the open.”

There’s a silence around the table. Brock and Elvis have visible looks of concern. Rebekah is resting her head on her fist in thought.

“We still have plenty of time to tweak and rehearse,” assures Dominic. “After breakfast we’re taking a trip up the river to the district where the office is. We’ll look around the area discreetly and you can judge for yourselves.”

“We consulted with the agency on this,” notes Dmitri, “but the intel we’ve gotten so far is too general, too broad. We’re going to need Rebekah’s output to help narrow it down.”

“Why only Rebekah?” asks Brock.

“The pod needs time to tune into you,” responds Elvis cheerfully. “Or do you need to tune into it? I forget. Anyway, it won’t produce reliable output until it’s calibrated.”

“That sounds weird and vaguely terrifying but I’ll have to take your word for it,” says Brock with feigned disappointment.

Having returned the bag and laptop back to the room, the group reassembles in the lobby-cum-dining-room and heads out. They make their way past the temple that Brock and Mira had passed through recently and continue toward the banks of the Chao Phraya river. There they board two of the ubiquitous water taxis and head north.

Rebekah and Dmitri are aboard a colourful craft pulling away from the pier. In the boat following them sit Dominic and Mira with Brock and Elvis on the bench behind them.

Brock is thankful for the overhead canopy as the intense morning sunshine beats down over the sprawling metropolis, blinding reflections glancing off of the river’s small waves.

Despite the racket of the bustling waterway, the gentle rocking of the craft lulls Brock into a swaying sense of quietude. He takes in the the modern Bangkok skyline, the bustling and grimy streets, the tranquil oases of shady temples.

Soon they turn into a narrower canal lined with corrugated tin roof houses in front of which squat vendors on numerous long boats, conducting business and engaging in boisterous conversation. Brock is distracted by the sight of an exceptionally large and

dangerous-looking durian being passed around when Mirabelle sits up in her seat and turns around to face him.

She sits for a moment with a distracted look on her face, as though she's listening for something. Recognizing the look, Brock observes her with patient intensity. Only Elvis is unfocused as he swings a confused expression between them.

Suddenly Mirabelle bursts out, "Down! Get down now! Everyone, get down!"

She frantically motions for Brock, Elvis, and Dominic to get as low in the boat as possible. Uncertain why, they nevertheless do as instructed. A moment later, a pop like a loud firework can be heard from somewhere nearby.

It's not until the second pop, followed immediately by a high-pitched whiz and a sudden thudding burst of splinters at his side, that Brock begins to understand what's happening.

They're being shot at.

As though a light switch has just been flicked, a fully-formed plan appears in Brock's mind.

"Jump overboard and grab the boatfenders!" he commands.

Elvis is frozen, looking more puzzled than before. Another shot goes off.

"The tires on the side of the boat!" explains Brock urgently. "Grab the tires!"

The look on Elvis' face changes from confusion to uncertainty as he rolls over the side of the taxi. Mira follows as another gunshot is registered by the other passengers. Panic breaks out and they begin to leap into the river in mindless imitation. Dominic is last to go as Brock scrambles over the backless seats toward the engine.

The taxi is now drifting as Brock implores the cowering captain to accelerate. He does and they lurch forward as Brock pokes his head up over the lip of the boat, quickly scanning the opposite shore. He follows the gazes of the panicking crowd to spot the gunman, a tanned thin man wearing an unbuttoned blue shirt and shorts, head enveloped in a black motorcycle helmet, eyes hidden by mirror shades. He's wrestling with some kind of rifle, desperately trying to pull open some jammed mechanism. Behind him on a lean dirt bike and revving the loud engine impatiently sits a similar man.

Brock takes the opportunity to look over the other side of the boat. He's relieved to see Mirabelle, Dominic, and Elvis clinging tightly to the tires on the outside of the taxi. The taxi's other passengers are splashing wildly toward the nearest shore.

A little further up the canal the occupants of the first boat are also scrambling through the water. Among them are the bobbing heads of Rebekah and Dmitri.

Brock spins around and directs the captain to head in their direction as another round is fired from the opposite shore. Turning away from the wounded man he dives for the

bottom of the boat and waits, estimating how long before they reach Dmitri and Rebekah as echoing shrieks of terror fill the air around him.

The sound of another shot reverberates between buildings shortly before Brock pops his head up and over the edge of the boat. Confirming the distance, he turns around intending to demand that the captain stop the engine. Before he gets a chance the boat lurches forward as it suddenly decelerates. His hand off the accelerator, the captain is clutching his bloodied arm and grimacing in pain.

Brock shouts at Rebekah and Dmitri, instructing them to grab the same tires that Dominic, Elvis, and Mirabelle are embracing. They do so as Brock maneuvers himself to the tiller. There he pantomimes his intentions of driving the boat to the captain who temporarily releases his bleeding arm to point to the vibrating throttle.

“Everyone ready?!” yells Brock as he grabs the the wobbling rod.

A number of affirmative responses are returned and Brock turns the throttle as far as he can. Once again the water taxi plows forward and into the choppy waters of the canal. After a few moments he glances back to see that the assassin has jumped on the back of his partner’s motorbike and the two are speeding away in another direction.

Brock releases the throttle and aims the ship toward a nearby pier. As it approaches he studies the dock, jumps into the canal, and guides his group toward the ladder he’s spotted. They pull themselves wearily out of the water and assemble on the wooden boarding area.

By the time the river taxi taps the landing with a soft thud and the injured captain stumbles out into the gathering crowd, the members of Section B have disappeared.

## Going Gray

They travel in pairs, winding and zigzagging through the streets of Bangkok while casting paranoid glances around them. Brock walks silently with Elvis, Rebekah is with Dmitri, and Mirabelle with Dominic. At least one person on each team knows exactly where they're headed.

As the muggy morning sets in, the last damp couple arrive in a tiny, secluded temple courtyard with a large Bodhi tree growing through its centre. Taking one last look behind them, Rebekah and Dmitri take a seat on one of the stone retaining walls and wipe the sweat from their brows. Both of them are visibly jittery. An immobile Elvis sits staring stone-faced into the ground beside an anxious Dominic who is flanked by a pensive Brock. Mirabelle sits off to the side looking unconcerned.

"We have to go back," opens Rebekah assertively. "Everything's back at the boo. The bag, the equipment ... everything."

"Now wait just a second," counters Dominic. "We need to think this through. If they followed us along the river then they're probably waiting for us back at the guest house. They're probably ready for us at Shindan too. Fuck. This is a fucking nightmare."

"Yeah no shit," replies an exasperated Rebekah. "I mean, what the fuck? They're fucking shooting at us?!"

Brock leans forward slightly. "You've never been shot at before?" he asks with a calm that surprises him.

"No!" she answers with irritation. "Why would we have been shot at?"

"What she means," jumps in Dmitri, "is that being a *secret* agent implies not getting noticed, which includes not getting shot at. Up until now we've been pretty good at that. For the most part."

"Right, right," acknowledges Brock. After a brief pause he asks, "So what's next? What's the plan?"

"We don't have one," responds Dominic.

"Yeah, *this* is the backup," adds Dmitri. "This is the bug out plan, option omega."

"We didn't sink we need it," adds Mirabelle with a mild scowl. "Especially not even before we begin."

"Okay," acknowledges Brock. "Well, to me this looks like it's just a setback. If Mira's willing to scout we should be able to get back to the guest house to get our stuff."

The group considers Brock's suggestion.

“I don’t think we should all go,” interjects Dominic. “Elvis is probably better off staying here. And someone should stay with him.”

Elvis lifts his eyes slowly, nods gently, and returns his distant gaze to the ground.

“Mira?” asks Brock as he swings his head to look at her. “Can you do it?”

After a moment of coy hesitation she replies, “Yes, I do it. But first I need to find cigarette. Mine ‘ave too much water.”

“Sounds reasonable,” he replies and turns back to the group. “So after resupplying, Mira scouts ahead and signals the all-clear. While the bags and equipment are retrieved she continues to monitor the area. After that, everyone splits up and takes different routes back here.”

“We have a few prepaid cell phones back at the guest house,” adds Dmitri. “Until then Mira’s going to be on her own, okay?”

“D’accord,” replies Mirabelle laconically.

“Who’s staying with Elvis?” asks Rebekah with anxious urgency.

Noting her agitation Brock offers, “I’ll stay. You’ll be safer with them. And don’t worry about getting my stuff, I barely have anything anyway.”

“We’ll see,” she responds, standing abruptly as Brock hands her his room key. “Okay, let’s do this.”

The assembled retrieval team hurriedly leave the small courtyard while intently discussing covert scouting signals and recon timings, leaving Brock and Elvis alone in the steamy, muted din of the small sanctuary.

Brock takes a deep breath, inhaling the sweet fragrance of some hidden exotic flower carried on the hot breeze. Unseen birds trill a bright melody as drifting dust gives body to shafts of bright sunlight. Somewhere in the distance, a deep and gentle bell sounds.

Some time passes.

Finally, Brock turns to Elvis and asks, “How’re you doing?”

Shaking his head meekly as he struggles for words, Elvis finally responds, “Not great.”

“If it helps,” says Brock, “I’m a little freaked out too.”

“It doesn’t,” replies Elvis despondently.

“Sorry,” apologizes Brock. For the first time since they’ve met he starts to feel like he might be talking to the genuine Elvis, the one beneath the hokey persona.

More time passes.

Slowly recollecting himself, Elvis asks, “How did you do that anyway?”

“Do what?” responds Brock.

“The way you just took over, drove the boat, got us all to the dock. Like you’d been doing it all your life.”

Brock pauses a moment to reflect.

“I don’t know,” he concludes. “Automatic pilot, I guess. I just sort of *did it*.”

Quietly, Elvis notes, “Maybe that’s your thing.”

Brock considers the proposal. Another pause in the conversation passes before Elvis asks in a more energized tone, “So what made you come back last night?”

“A few things Mira said to me,” replies Brock, scratching his temple and wiping the collecting sweat from his brow. “I mean, it took a while on account of the language differences but we got there eventually.

“In Mira’s words, it’d be” — he produces air quotes and badly mimics a French accent — “*obscene and unscientific*’ not to expect the kinds of things we’ve encountered. It was her demonstration, maybe more her explanation, that brought me around. She suggested that I forget words like psychic or ESP. *Bullsheet*,” he concludes in another bad imitation of French.

“Oh?” asks Elvis alertly.

“Yeah. Forget language. Whatever *it* is, am I experiencing it? And is it reproducible?”

Elvis nods.

“But what is it that I’m experiencing?” asks Brock rhetorically. “What if it’s just a matter of being better at picking up subtle queues from the environment? Maybe the unconscious lends a helping hand, maybe the autonomic nervous system. Maybe it’s about having better access to untapped potential than the average person, so to speak.”

Elvis chuckles slightly. “Dmitri said something like that when we first met,” he says. “I got it right away. In martial arts we talk a lot about chi and energy flow. Being able to control a psi wheel was like, yeah, okay, I get it.”

“Can you do anything else?” asks Brock.

“Hang on,” instructs Elvis as he closes his eyes and pulls one hand back, palm facing Brock. After a few moments he reopens his eyes and with a sudden exhalation of air, thrusts the open palm toward Brock. A brief moment later Brock feels a dull and painless thud land against his shoulder, like a gentle blast of condensed air.

“Wow!” says Brock, holding his shoulder, amazed. “I felt that!”

“I shouldn’t have to use my hand,” replies Elvis reluctantly.

“If you say so,” says Brock, smiling dismissively. For a moment he lightly rubs his shoulder with mild astonishment and then, leaning in, asks, “Hey, Elvis, why are you here?”

“Dmitri asked me to come. Plus, adventure,” he replies with certainty. “My parents, they mean well but they’re stuck in some old ways and I just couldn’t live that kind of life. When Dmitri showed me what was possible it changed my world, you know?”

Brock nods.

“When he told me about this mission I was sure I was ready,” finishes Elvis.

“How’re you feeling now?” asks Brock.

“Not so ready,” responds Elvis with a pleading smile. “I froze out there. Completely useless. Fucking embarrassing, actually. You’re gonna have to give me some pointers.”

“As soon as I have some I will,” says Brock with a firm nod. “Bit of a newbie myself.”

Just then, he notices a shadow slide over the ground between himself and Elvis. Looking up he sees a stout, stubble-headed Buddhist monk, expansive smile accompanying a bright orange robe slung over one shoulder.

He looks like a broader and hairier version of the devotees Brock has seen around the city. With an upbeat tone and in flawless North American English the monk says, “Hey guys, sorry to interrupt but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.”

Brock and Elvis both stare silently at him.

“Oh, jeez, sorry!” exclaims the wide-faced monk, extending a hand. “Name’s Kevin.”

## Underground

It's around noon when the retrieval team returns, almost all of them hobbling into the courtyard under the weight of multiple bags and luggage. Only Mirabelle has a single suitcase, one on wheels that she's dragging behind her.

Opposite the group, the monk in the casually-worn orange robe is saying something quietly to Brock and Elvis.

The returning group place their bags warily at their feet as Brock introduces the man. "This is Kevin," he says. "He's offered to help us."

The team stare at the trio uneasily.

"Hi," says Kevin, offering hesitantly received handshakes. "Didn't mean to barge in on you like this. I was just sitting here in the temple when you guys arrived. Couldn't help but overhear, thought I might be able to help."

Rebekah pulls off her sunglasses and covertly casts an accusing glance at Brock.

"I told our friend Kevin here," responds Brock, disengaging with Rebekah's gaze, "about our investigation into Shindan. For the documentary. I told him about how dangerous things have gotten for us recently, how we suddenly have to walk around like" — hooking his fingers into air quotes — "*secret agents*."

"Scam call centres, huh?" asks Kevin as he rubs his hand over his stubbly head. "Jeez, I didn't realize they could be so ruthless!"

Rebekah raises an eyebrow and nods approvingly in Brock's direction.

Dmitri perks up, introduces himself, and takes over the conversation. With occasional cues from Brock he adds fake filmmaking insights, convincing statistics, and tells of harrowing first-person interviews with Shindan's victims. Dominic includes a confirming nod every now and again. Mira leans back, indifferent.

At the conclusion of the impromptu presentation Kevin stands shaking his head in disapproval. "That's terrible," he responds with concern, "and that they would shoot at you like that, out in broad daylight, in front of all those witnesses. Terrible. Know what? Me and the brothers have a little place not far from here. It's private, give you a chance to catch your breath."

"Can we have a moment?" asks Rebekah, holding up a finger. She shifts her focus to the group and with the same finger makes little circles in the air, signalling for a huddle.

Section B assemble a couple of meters away from Kevin who stands smiling patiently in the shade of the expansive tree.

“I don’t remember seeing anyone else here. Where the hell did this guy come from?” asks Rebekah rigidly, eyes shut tightly, one hand on her hip and the other squeezing the bridge of her nose.

“He was over there the whole time, just hanging out,” replies Elvis, pointing to a secluded nook camouflaged behind a crumbling wall.

Dominic pinches his lower lip reflexively. Dmitri scratches behind his ear. Mirabelle stands motionless.

Suddenly changing topics Rebekah asks, “You feeling better?” as Elvis turns back to face her.

“Yeah,” he responds, “but I’m not happy about how things went down. My reaction to them, I mean.”

“Actually,” says Dominic as he releases his lip and turns to Brock, “we could all use a few pointers. That was quick thinking. Thanks.”

The rest of Section B nod tacitly, including Mirabelle.

“I wasn’t thinking,” says Brock, blocking their attention with open palms.

“Still...” rejoins Dmitri, tilting his head sideways.

“Okay, well, you’re welcome,” accepts Brock with a meek smile.

After a brief pause Rebekah continues, “So what’s the deal with this Kevin guy? He seems shifty. How do we know we can trust him?”

“I don’t know that we can,” replies Brock, “but I don’t know that we have much choice at the moment. Besides, if he was going to try to assassinate us he’s already had some good opportunities. Like right now.”

“Something off about him anyway,” concludes Rebekah, trailing off into silence.

“What about the...?” interjects Dmitri, pointing a jumpy finger at his mouth.

“Grew up in the States, Denver I think,” takes over Elvis. “Basically American. Came here a few years ago for a family reunion and decided to stay.”

“And the Buddhist thing?” inquires Dmitri.

“Probably better you ask him yourself,” suggests Elvis. “But he seems alright.”

The rest of the group turn to Brock for a secondary affirmation. He delivers it with a nod.

Rebekah pulls herself out of the circle, turns toward Kevin, and with a deep sigh says, “Okay then. Lead on.”

The bags and luggage are redistributed and the group leaves back onto the streets of Bangkok. After a few minutes Brock motions for Rebekah to hang back with him. “How did it go back there at the New Siam?” he asks.

“Strange,” she replies. “We didn’t see anything suspicious. Doesn’t look like anything was tampered with. Dmitri wasn’t able to find any tracking bugs. Mira says she didn’t see any surveillance. Nothing. How is it that they can find us on random river boats but they can’t seem to find us at the hotel we’ve been staying at for, like, a month?”

Brock watches her ruminate for a few moments before she swivels and bows her head, as though arriving at a conclusion.

“Any ideas?” he asks.

For a moment the angle of her head reveals anxious eyes behind her sunglasses. She quickly yanks her head up to look at him, pulling her mouth down into a controlled, emotionless expression.

“No,” she replies bluntly.

“You doing okay?” he asks with concern.

“It’s nothing. Guess I’m still a little shaky from the river.”

Brock decides against prying further and they continue to trail silently behind the group.

Not long after, they arrive at a large, semi-cylindrical structure similar to an airplane hangar. The far end of the corrugated arch opens onto a canal and houses a number of ornate boats parked along narrow berths. To one side sits a small, elevated shed with grimy windows and rickety stairs, stacked boxes and containers blocking the underside.

The side through which Kevin leads Section B is packed with tens of mostly bald monks in saffron robes selling shiny trinkets from rickety tables. A few tourists are looking over the merchandise.

Coming to a stop, the Section take in their surroundings and occasionally exchange confused glances as their guide consults with a nearby monk. He soon returns with a broad smile and bearing a small parcel wrapped in paper, tied with a faded red string.

“Good news! Gary says we can use the storage space,” Kevin says enthusiastically, pointing to the dilapidated shack at the back. “And,” he continues, handing the parcel to Rebekah, “he sends you a good luck gift. His best tea.”

Rebekah accepts the package with a weak “Thanks” and an uncertain smile, then quickly turns her attention to the shack. She sets off anxiously while the rest of the group follow at a more leisurely pace. Kevin quickly overtakes them all, arriving first at the door of the tiny house. He fiddles with the rusty handle until, just as everyone arrives, it gives way.

The peeling plywood door opens into a dusty space filled with assorted boxes, cans, barrels, and chairs. In one corner a trap door with a thick wooden rope attached sits ajar. Brock pulls on the rope to reveal a precarious tin ladder leading down to a wooden floor. The ample daylight below the shack suggests that the area is open to the river.

With a single light bulb illuminating the busy room, the team quickly clear out a work area and begin offloading their baggage. Saying he'll be back soon, Kevin excuses himself and leaves.

"Gary," says Rebekah as she tucks the weighty leather bag behind some larger boxes, "and Kevin." Standing up and looking back and forth between Brock and Elvis she asks, "You guys buying this?"

They both shrug.

She shrugs back a surrendered acceptance and proceeds to unpack her computer equipment.

In the meantime, Dmitri motions for Brock to come over as he opens a large white plastic suitcase. "Custom made," notes Dmitri as he points at the contents of the sturdy luggage. Inside sit a number of stacked white panels with regularly spaced holes along their edges. A number of curved aluminum tubes sit alongside the panels. A few nylon straps poke out in random spots.

"What is this?" asks Brock as Dmitri pulls out the pieces and arranges them into groups on the floor.

"The pod," responds Dmitri with a smile. "What's Rebekah told you about it?"

"Not much. I'm going to need the full tour."

"I don't know if we have time for the *full* tour but let's get started," invites Dmitri, clapping his hands together and rubbing them vigorously.

In about ten minutes Dmitri has assembled the small, angular, egg-shaped enclosure. A hinge on one end allows the lightweight structure to open horizontally. Inside, the supporting pipes form a lattice across which nylon straps are secured to produce a sort of sparse hammock-style recliner.

Brock admits that he may not remember all of the steps needed to assemble the pod.

"Don't sweat it," assures Dmitri as he fastens the final panel into place. "Once you've done it once or twice it's a breeze. Wanna check it out?"

Brock nods, steps in, and gingerly lowers himself into the nylon straps. The seat is surprisingly comfortable, making him feel like he's floating just above the ground. As Dmitri lowers the lid, Brock is unprepared for the sudden, total, obliterating darkness. Even more surprising is the complete lack of sound. A moment later Dmitri raises the lid and helps him out.

"Without the electronics it's just a nice place for a nap," notes Dmitri as he retrieves what looks like a thick laptop bag. Opening it, he pulls out something resembling a flat panel fan with a sturdy arm supporting the blade assembly.

“Rotary subwoofer,” explains Dmitri as he straps the device securely to the metal pipes below the pod’s seat. Running a wire from the device through a small rubberized slit near the hinge he continues, “It produces infrasound, bass so deep you can only feel it.”

Dmitri rummages around in another bag and extracts a long strip of LED lights which he installs inside the bottom half of the pod, guiding the electrical leads through the hinge slit.

Next from the bag, a large headset with swivelling microphone and a small plastic square that looks like a keyboard’s numeric keypad are slung over one of the pod’s aluminum struts. Brock helps to pull their USB connectors through the rubberized opening.

From the same bag Dmitri pulls out two black bricks that resemble hefty laptop computer power supplies. He connects these to the light strips and the rotary subwoofer. Finally, he retrieves Rebekah’s laptop and connects it to the headphones, keypad, and the unconnected ends of the black bricks.

“This is where the magic happens,” concludes Dmitri as he boots up the laptop. “It runs the entrainment sequences and records our reports. Those are then fed into our neural networks which produce discrete intelligence outputs. We collate these, analyze them, and extrapolate a message.”

Brock blinks vacantly at Dmitri.

“The computer makes sound, light, and air pressure inside the pod vibrate at certain frequencies,” Dmitri explains at a noticeably slowed pace.

“Uh-huh,” nods Brock, still looking somewhat lost.

“It’s based on a very old musical phenomenon. Piano tuners, to do their job, had to hold a tuning fork up to one ear while listening to a vibrating piano string with the other. If the two tones weren’t perfectly in tune the difference between them would be heard as a sort of interference pattern by the brain, like a beat. Later it was discovered that, like a radio, the brain *tunes* itself to this interference pattern if exposed to it for longer periods. The pod works on the same principle, except that we have the benefits of modern technology.”

“So you’re tuning into like, what ... thoughts?” asks Brock with a slow and uncertain head shake.

“Active thoughts are sent, passive impressions are received,” explains Dmitri. “We record the impressions” — he taps on the headset’s microphone — “and feed them to a neural network uniquely tuned to the individual agent. Mine won’t work for you, yours won’t work for me.”

“What’s a neural network?”

“It’s a pattern recognition algorithm, a computer program. It looks at data like our experiential reports to find meaningful patterns in them and produce an output.”

“What kind of output?”

“Usually just a word or two. Alone they’re not that useful so we have to collate, combine all of our outputs and analyze them together. Obviously, having more tuned agents” — he nods at Brock — “is useful. Effectively increases our bandwidth.”

“And how sure are you that the collated output is accurate?”

“Pretty fucking sure.”

As Dmitri completes the automated tests on the laptop, Rebekah walks up and inquires if the pod is ready. With a nod Dmitri opens the upper half of the tiny chamber and invites her to step in.

“No stimulants this time,” she says as she lowers herself into the mesh seat and slips the headset over her ears. Listening intently, she hits a couple of keys on the numeric keypad before holding out a thumbs-up.

Dmitri closes the lid and turns to Brock, noting, “She’s going to be in there for a while.”

“What happens now?” asks Brock.

“We combine her output with ours to see if we can make sense of it,” replies Dmitri with a discomforted expression.

“What output did you get?” inquires Brock.

“Just a couple of words. I got *blue*, Dom got *red*,” responds Dmitri, still looking worried. “Pretty vague, right? They could mean almost anything.”

“And wouldn’t they be outdated now?” Brock asks earnestly. “I mean, in light of our present situation, shouldn’t we get some new outputs?”

“Doesn’t work that way. Time or circumstance have little effect on agency communications. It’s more about closing the loop, completing the action. Trust me, right now we need Rebekah’s output.”

Brock quietly accepts the explanation and moves a little closer.

“Hey, Dmitri,” he asks, head and voice lowered, “be honest with me. This, all of it, is pretty fucking weird, right?”

Dmitri smiles broadly. “Very. Very fucking weird. But also until recently” — he grins and directs Brock’s attention to their surroundings — “it’s been mostly positive.”

He moves over to join the conversation between Dominic, Elvis, and Mirabelle. Brock follows.

Over the next hour the group speculates on the two words, the planned incursion into Shindan Academy, and the misgivings they have about both.

At one point Kevin returns with a basket of warm food, bottles of chilled water, and news that he’s coordinated a diversion in case they’d been followed. He then explains how best to get through the trap door, down to the side exit, and into the alley unseen.

“What’re you getting out of this, Kevin?” asks Dominic bluntly as he unrolls a sticky rice cake out of its roasted banana leaf wrapper.

Kevin stands motionless, a look of puzzled amusement playing across his face.

“I had a dream about you guys last night,” he finally responds. “You know what they say about dreaming monks.”

With a look of increasing skepticism Dominic searches his memory. Just as he’s about to rebut Kevin’s statement he’s interrupted by a sharp alarm from the computer. Abandoning his reply, he and Dmitri open the pod and assist Rebekah out of the device.

She’s blinking slowly and heavily as she tries to focus her eyes, her movements disoriented and unbalanced.

“She’ll be fine in a few minutes,” reassures Dominic.

They place her on a chair and stand guard as she slowly lowers her face into her palms. She sits like that for a few minutes, breathing heavily and evenly. Eventually she sits up, more alert and sober. Dmitri hands her a rice cake and she bites into it silently.

“Urs rope,” says Mirabelle, breaking the sombre silence. “What does zis mean?”

Everyone follows Mirabelle’s stare to see the words “EARTH” and “ROPE” prominently displayed on the computer’s screen.

“Blue, red, earth, rope,” says Dominic vacantly as he’s plunged deep into mental effort. Dmitri holds his chin as he considers the new information. Elvis screws up his face as he mentally manipulates the words while Mirabelle stares pensively into a corner of the little house. Brock frowns in thought.

Suddenly, Kevin stands in the open door of the small chamber carrying a tray of glossy red cubes, a tin tea pot, and some worn tin cups. “Papaya and some hot water in case you want to try that tea,” he says, setting the tray down on a nearby barrel.

“What’s in this anyway?” asks Dominic, holding up Rebekah’s package.

“Just a sec,” replies Kevin as he hurries back out to the sales area. He returns quickly with Gary in tow. In front of the group Kevin asks the old, dark, sagging man a question in Thai. Gary’s response is translated back to the group.

“He says it has many herbs,” says Kevin. “I don’t know the English names. They’re supposed to help you ease your mind, find solutions to your problems.”

Dominic holds the package up to his nose. “Smells like dirt,” he remarks. Kevin translates and both he and Gary laugh. “That’s probably the mushroom,” says Kevin.

“Mushroom?” asks Dominic with concern. “What kind of mushroom?”

Listening to Gary, Kevin replies hesitantly, “Yeah, no idea how to translate that. He said they’re pretty small. Not very special except they” — he pauses to clarify with Gary — “become blue if you hurt them.”

“Blue?” asks Dominic with increasing confusion. “What kind of mushroom–“

“Oh no no no,” cuts in Rebekah through a mouthful of rice as she recoils with increasing alarm. “What’s the name of this tea?” she asks Kevin.

Hesitantly translating Gary’s response he says, “I’d guess you’d say blue underground tea. Or maybe blue soil. Something like that. Gary makes it himself. It’s very good quality.”

Gary produces a gnarled thumbs-up and adds a mangled, “Velly good!”

“How about blue earth?” she asks, meeting Kevin’s gaze with concern.

“Hey, yeah,” he replies, his face sliding into a delighted smile. “That works too. You speak Thai?”

Flatly ignoring his question she turns to Dmitri and asks, “Do any of those burners have internet access?”

“Yeah, but it’s crappy,” he replies, puzzled.

“That’s fine. Can you get me one please?” she asks tensely.

“Okay, that’s blue earth but what about rope and red?” asks Elvis while behind him Dmitri digs through one of the bags.

Rebekah points to the string around the package in Dominic’s hand.

“Oh shit,” replies Elvis with surprise.

Dmitri returns with a cheap generic Android phone. Pulling up the phone’s browser she performs a quick search.

“Like this?” she asks, flipping the phone over to show the screen to Gary.

The gummy smile embedded in Gary’s deeply creased face accompanies the vigorous, fleshy nod of his head. To make certain, a knobby finger points to the positively identified object on the screen. “Yeah, that’s it,” adds Kevin unnecessarily.

Dominic grabs the phone from Rebekah and reads the display’s contents. With a stunned look he slowly lowers his muscular arm, relinquishing the device to Dmitri.

“Oh ... no fucking way,” says Dmitri emphatically while staring at the phone, a look of intense apprehension taking over his face.

## Infiltration

The opened package lies on the upright end of the rusty metal drum, the paper wrapper containing a loose pile of dark and woody grounds. The blanched red string lies coiled nearby, one end terminating at the dented metallic teapot.

Through the murky window of the hut the shapes of two men in orange robes recede as they walk toward busy tables lined with baubles and curios. Inside the room, the flickering light of the dangling bulb illuminates six faces bearing varied combinations of apprehension, fatigue, and perspiration. The faces peer intently at the objects on the makeshift table.

“Psilocybe?” asks Elvis. “Isn’t that, like, magic mushroom?”

“Yeah,” replies Dominic, handing over the phone he’d been focused on. “In tea form.”

Elvis reads the information on the screen as Rebekah wipes sweat from her forehead.

“Remember how I said phantom dead drops freak me out?” she asks Brock.

“Umm,” he replies, trying to remember.

“Well I did,” she says before he gets a chance to reply. “And this is a fantastic example right here,” she indicates to the mound on the barrel with agitated sarcasm in her voice.

“Is this what you asked for?” asks Brock as he glances between Rebekah, Dmitri, and Dominic.

“When you’re formalizing the request,” explains Dominic with slow hand gestures, “you want to specify something vague. Too specific or too extravagant, difficult to procure in other words, and it’s unlikely to be fulfilled. I went with *something*” — he pauses for emphasis — “to help us achieve our mission successfully.”

“Same,” adds Rebekah while Dmitri adds, “Me too”, in near synchrony.

“So this is the help that the agency sent? Through Gary? And Kevin?” asks Brock with uneasy skepticism.

Mirroring the feeling, Rebekah raises a questioning eyebrow.

With empty abandon Dmitri replies, “Looks like it.”

“You can refuse,” adds Mirabelle insipidly, suddenly joining the conversation.

“You gonna take it?” Brock challenges her.

“Yes, no problem,” she responds confidently. “Before I ‘ave take zis and also ze *elle esse di*. Ze mushroom iz more fun. More laugh.”

“How long does it last?” he asks.

“Maybe about four or five ‘our,” she replies.

“Who else has taken this?” asks Brock, turning his attention to the rest of the Section.

Rebekah holds up her hand, followed by Dmitri. Dominic and Elvis keep their hands at their sides, visibly anxious.

“What should we expect?” asks Brock, addressing the experienced members of Section B.

“You perceive things a little differently,” offers Dmitri. “Like leaning slightly out of reality.”

Rebekah leans in and says, “Under other circumstances shrooms can be a lot of fun but right now” — she finishes by shaking her head.

“So, could be positive,” suggests Brock cautiously.

“Well, yeah, but also...” she responds, pulling her head back and throwing up her arms in a wide shrug.

“Tripping balls can be pretty disorienting, even incapacitating,” explains Dmitri.

Rebekah points vigorously back at Dmitri, expressing silent but enthusiastic support for what he’d just said.

“I’ve heard they can increase your abilities,” offers Elvis, fingers interwoven nervously at his chest, eyes fixed on the pile of tea.

“They might,” replies Rebekah. “They could also shut you down. We have no idea how strong these are, where they came from, what else they’re mixed with.”

“But isn’t this agency support?” asks Brock. “Maybe this is exactly the sort of help we need.”

The tiny room falls silent. A few fidgety moments pass as the muted chatter of the Buddhist market outside permeates the thick and sticky air of the dense space.

Suddenly, Rebekah slams her palm on the barrel, causing the items on it to jump. Her other hand straddles her forehead as her thumb and middle finger massage her temples.

“I can’t fucking believe I’m doing this,” she says in a low voice.

“Okay, I’m in,” says Brock with assurance.

Dmitri shrugs his shoulders and nods in acquiescence.

“Let’s do it,” adds Mirabelle, casually lighting a cigarette.

“I asked for this,” admits Dominic, “but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t shitting my pants right now.”

“So that’s a yes for Dominic. Elvis?” asks Brock, turning to look at the young man.

Elvis produces an unenthusiastic half-shrug and adds, “Not sure. Don’t think so.”

“And a *no* for Elvis,” finishes Brock.

With some hesitation, Dmitri picks up the wrapper and dumps its contents into the steaming hot water of the tin teapot. Replacing the lid he instructs, “And now we wait until it’s steeped.”

“In the meantime let’s pack our shit up,” says Rebekah hurriedly, already moving toward the pod. The rest of the team join her in dismantling the contraption and repacking their bags. Soon their belongings are arranged discretely along a shelf of the compact hut. Only the small bag containing the prepaid phones is left out.

The phones are distributed along with flimsy wired earpieces. Satisfied that each combo is working correctly and that group chat works, the devices are placed on the rusty drum.

“Obviously our timeline’s been *drastically* reduced so any sort of rehearsal is out the window,” starts Dmitri, hands cupped around a freshly poured cup of brown liquid, “but I say we go with the original plan, minus the distractions. Dom and Brock go into the Academy and try to get their hands on whatever’s in that locked room. Brute force it if you have to. Elvis and Mira’ll do wider area surveillance and give chase if the target’s on the move. Me and Rebekah will recon the main entrance.”

“I won’t know what to look for,” Rebekah reminds him.

“I’ll recon,” Dmitri corrects, “and Rebekah will run support wherever it’s needed. Don’t be shy to use those phones. Don’t be afraid to get creative. Let’s make this count.”

With solemn nods Section B raise their battered tin cups, clank them together above the makeshift table, and down large gulps of the murky brew. Everyone except Elvis grit their teeth and recoil in disgust. Moments later they repeat the ritual and finish the rest of the tea.

Brock and Dominic pull off to one side and begin going over their part of the plan.

“So what’s the office like?” asks Brock, feeling butterflies in his stomach.

“It’s pretty casual,” assures Dominic. “Mostly just a long corridor with a reception desk on one end, the secure room on the other, and a bunch of rooms in between. There are anywhere from ten to twenty cubicles in each room, usually full, except for the last one which is the boss’ office. If I had to guess I’d say they keep the key to the secure room somewhere in there.”

“That sounds pretty vague,” comments Brock with reservation.

“That’s the best we have,” explains Dominic. “But I wouldn’t worry too much, the place is lax. As I said, the employee churn means that they take on almost anyone. I’m pretty sure we could crap on the linoleum and they’d just pull us aside and tell us not to do it again. And if they catch us trying to open a door or two we can just say we’re trying not to shit on the floor.”

“So what’s their operation supposed to be? What does Shindan actually do?” asks Brock.

“You know what?” replies Dominic. “I don’t actually know but here at this location I’m pretty sure it’s some sort of phone scam. Maybe they’re just renting out the phone lines. It’s hard to understand what they’re saying in there.

“I usually flash my badge at reception and just walk in like I’ve worked there forever. Then I sit in an empty cubicle and listen to conversations or watch the office for a few hours. No one says a peep to me. Mostly I focus on the secure room and the regulars. There are three we’ve identified. Joanne, Victor, and the boss, Mister Cheng. Judging by their Mandarin we’re fairly sure they’re all mainland Chinese nationals. Otherwise there are no guards and I’m pretty sure the security cameras are fake.”

Checking the time on his phone he adds, “They should be heading home for the day any minute now. I’ll walk you in as a new hire. I don’t expect any trouble.”

Brock nods at the information as he takes a deep breath. “Hey, Dom?” he asks gently.

“Uh-huh?” responds the hulking man.

“You never told me about what you can do. You know, your skills.”

“Other than punching people and enjoying food I suppose I fancy myself a bit of a writer,” replies Dominic, face taut with seriousness. “I’ve got two buns in the oven at the moment. One’s a sci-fi number about a world where the population is controlled with orgasm implants. The hero figures out how to bypass theirs, hijinks ensue. In the other one the names and physical characteristics of people change completely from day to day but no one notices. Until one day someone does.”

“Sounds challenging. But I’m not talking about that, I’m talking about your *psi* skills,” clarifies Brock.

“Oh, that. Well I have” — Dominic moves his hands over his body in circular motions — “extended somatic control. Turning off pain, controlling organs, stuff like that. It’s probably why I first got into boxing. To a certain degree I can even do it to other people, help them relax or heal, that sort of thing.”

“Rebekah showed me something like that. A thing with her heart. Did she teach you?”

Dominic laughs and says, “No, I taught her.”

“Ah, okay. So were you always able to do that?” asks Brock.

“As far as I can remember. I never thought anything about it until one day I brought it up with some friends. Just a casual remark. They all stared at me like I’d been knocked in the head too hard. It wasn’t until I met Rebekah that someone was open to the idea, let alone someone with documented suggestions to improve it.”

Brock nods and inquires, “How did you two meet?”

“Outside a hospital. I was getting a check up after a nasty K.O. Doctor told me in no uncertain terms that my career was finished. I’d already been thinking the same thing

but that didn't make the news any easier to take. I was at the main entrance getting some fresh air and sulking when she walked by. She said something like 'You look like you're having a bad day' and I said that that was an understatement. Then she said she might be able to help, handed me her business card, and walked off."

"Sounds familiar," notes Brock, lifting his eyebrows. "Did you have to set yours on fire too?"

"No," chuckles Dominic. "That was special just for you."

"Like the instructions we received for the tea?" asks Brock, pointing at the teapot. "Those were somewhat vague, subject to interpretation."

"Sure," replies Dominic, "but you have to admit that they were quite specific at the same time."

Brock agrees with a nod.

"And this is the first time we've been under the gun like this. Usually we set the parameters ahead of time and produce multiple outputs for any given request. In your case, for example, when I asked for identifying details I received '*immune path*' and '*dark doctor*'. Pretty good, right?"

Brock considers the word combinations and nods as he recalls the circumstances under which they'd first met.

"For Rebekah's first session her neural net produced '*invisible name*,'" continues Dominic. "In the next one she got '*business card*'. We weren't sure if we'd be receiving a card or giving one so she prepared a couple just in case. Nothing fancy, just lemon juice. Dmitri had the idea to include the internet hint after his own neural net spat out '*help online*' and '*bee stone*'."

Brock raises a confused eyebrow.

"*Bee-rock*," explains Dominic with an amused smirk. "Not obvious at first but when you emailed Rebekah your name we were, like, 'That's our guy!'"

"Oh," intones Brock with mild surprise. "But how do you know you've understood it correctly? What if you'd gotten it wrong?"

"That's pretty much guaranteed when you're starting out," responds Dominic. "That's why Rebekah's net is the most precise, she's been training it for a lot longer. Dmitri's needs some work. Mine's somewhere in between. Every iteration improves the results, produces clearer, more exact, more direct outputs. But it's also very individualized.

"I mean, there are some commonalities between us but the same transcriptions will produce radically different results when run through each others' neural networks. I understand the functioning on a conceptual level but Dmitri knows more about how it's implemented technically. I'm basically just a power user, if you know what I mean."

“Sure,” accepts Brock, “but I still don’t fully understand what you’re communicating with.”

“Neither do I,” admits Dominic. “Rebekah’s been working with the agency the longest and she doesn’t know much more than we do. At least that’s what she tells us.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” asks Brock earnestly. “I mean, not knowing who’s in charge or what they want?”

Dominic pauses a moment to reflect and then replies, “Doesn’t bother me. Probably because I’ve never detected any hierarchy, as far as I can tell. My access is equal to Rebekah’s even though she introduced me to the agency.”

“But probably my biggest reason for not worrying about the agency’s motivation is that for me it’s been beneficial, positive. I’m talking physically, emotionally, spiritually.”

“Okay,” acknowledges Brock. “But aren’t you even a little bit curious?”

“Of course I am,” replies Dominic with a warm smile. “My current theory is that the agency is some kind of sentient entity that we tap into, a part of the Jungian subconscious. After all, the pod” — he points at the case on the nearby shelf — “is just a souped-up meditation chamber with a microphone and an electronic pattern finder strapped to it.”

“Jungian?” asks Brock.

“Carl Jung. The psychologist. Hung out with Freud I think.”

“Ah, that guy. So what you’re saying is that it’s some sort of a ... what ... supernatural entity?”

“No, not really. I like to think of the agency as a vast covert intelligence network that extends outside of space and time. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were people like us on the other end of the line. Maybe it’s even us from another time or dimension.”

Brock grins, suddenly finding humour in Dominic’s face as it blurs with the slow movement of his head.

“I don’t know about you,” says Brock, addressing Dominic while slowly examining the dissolving features of the small hut around him, “but I think I’m starting to feel those mushrooms.”

Dominic is also starting to see small aberrations, the edges between light and shadow shimmering with uncertainty, details of objects separating from their backgrounds and gently shifting around. He also finds this amusing.

“I think we should get going,” says Rebekah, standing up slowly while examining her outstretched hands.

Slowly they all agree, pocket their phones, and gather around the hatch.

Suddenly, the hut goes completely silent. It takes the Section a few moments to realize that the mild din from outside has ceased. Curious, Rebekah inches up to the dirty window to see what's happened.

Standing directly in the middle of the entrance stands a deeply tanned man with a wide-brimmed hat, dark glasses, black leather vest, black leather pants, pointy black cowboy boots, bare arms outstretched, hands clutching two of the largest handguns that Rebekah has ever seen. The customers are rigid with fear while the orange-robed monks hold their stances.

"Where is Section B?!" screams the armed man.

A few moments of frozen silence pass.

"The Section! Where are they?!" he yells again.

At this point all of the man's targets have gathered around the small window to witness the commotion outside. The menacing man repeats his question in what sounds like Thai and is again met with silence.

From somewhere on the sales floor a voice begins to chant rhythmically.

A thunderous explosion goes off as the leather-clad man fires a warning shot into the vaulted ceiling above. Again he bellows something in Thai and follows with, "Last chance! Where are they?!"

The rhythmic chant resumes.

Inside the hut everyone's already back at the open hatch and making a quiet exit downward. "Impeccable timing," notes Dmitri to no one in particular as they step cautiously into the adjoining alley. "This again," mumbles Rebekah as part of an incoherent sentence.

In the hangar the chanting has suddenly ceased. A second later, all of the monks flip their tables on their sides in near-perfect synchrony, sending all of their wares flying toward the gunman. Diving behind the tables, the monks immediately begin to crawl toward the canal.

Although none of the merchandise reaches him, the assassin is caught off-guard by the seemingly rehearsed nature of the maneuvers. A moment later he recovers and looks around, his gaze coming to rest on the elevated shed at the back. Firing one more explosive round into the air he scatters the remaining tourists as he advances. Kicking at any tables in his way, he moves swiftly toward the small structure.

Splintering the door down with his boot and leaning in with his guns, the man enters the small space. There he finds a dark barrel over which hangs a bare light bulb. On the drum's rusting end sits a flimsy teapot and six tin cups. Surrounding this are dusty shelves piled with more barrels, boxes, bags, and stark shadows.

The man places the edge of his hand against the teapot, looks around, and spotting the trap door he lets out an agitated, "Tch." Then, holstering the massive weapons

somewhere inside his unbuttoned vest he turns and heads hastily back through the vacated market. By the time he arrives back at the street, Section B have vanished into the dusky city.

A few blocks later Brock turns to Dominic and asks, “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Sure,” replies Dominic vacantly. He’s momentarily stopped by a large sidewalk planter, enthralled by a flower emerging from the leaves of its sinuous tropical plant. Upon closer inspection, the flower seems to have a goofy smile on its face.

Dominic bursts out laughing, explaining between breaths what he’s seeing, and quickly inspires Brock to join in. Pretty soon they’re both doubled over with tears streaming down their faces.

“Hoo!” exhales Brock, straining to pull his face into sobriety. “We gotta straighten up. This is life and death. For real.”

He lets out a stifled snort, barely containing another bout of laughter.

With his tongue pressed into his left cheek Dominic is having difficulty stifling his own giddiness. He stands up straight, hands in his pockets, and curls his tongue over his smirking upper lip. “Serious,” he adds, biting his lip to suppress a giggle. “Serious business.”

Through the smeared neon and flashy whirl of Bangkok the two men continue to their destination, chuckling and occasionally breaking out into fits of boisterous laughter. The other members of Section B are also making their merry ways toward their positions around Shindan headquarters. Within ten minutes they’ve all communicated their arrival.

“This is the place,” says Dominic, looking up at the shabby mid-rise across the street. Up near the third floor, among a nest of electrical wires and coaxial cables is a row of barred, soot-darkened windows. In one pane sits a small square sign with two glowing Chinese characters on it. “Shin. Dan. New. Egg,” he explains, pointing at the emerald symbols.

Brock watches Dominic’s comically deformed finger slide between the rivulets of neon green light. The shadows between the iridescent ooze morph into dark green vines that snake silently up the side of the building. Soon the entire facade is covered in translucent green leaves that billow like sails in a subconscious breeze.

Dmitri and Rebekah are standing nearby, monitoring the psychedelic contours of the main entrance. Farther away at each corner of the building stand Mirabelle and Elvis, both occupied with their own surroundings.

With a deep breath, Dominic and Brock walk to the front doors, yank them open, and disappear into the building.

“We’re in. Everybody stand by,” says Brock over the group chat.

“Good luck,” responds the sincere voice of Rebekah, the noise of a loud motorcycle cutting in at the end.

The two men make their way up the stairs to the third floor and approach a large desk guarding a long and uninspiring hallway. As Dominic had described, the Shindan office is just a series of soulless rooms connected by a drab strip of stained beige carpet and harsh fluorescent lighting.

The far end the passage terminates at a single door with a sturdy lock above a similarly sturdy handle. At the near end, behind the desk, sits a pert and pretty blond receptionist. She greets them with a smile as they pass by without a glance or a word.

Dominic immediately pulls Brock into a room and an empty cubicle. Ducking behind a brown partition and whispering, the ex-boxer lays out what he knows about the boss' office and then lists a series of likely spots where he thinks the key might be kept. With the key Brock should be able to access the secure door while Dominic keeps the receptionist occupied. It's unlikely that anyone else will care.

When Brock asks why he isn't the diversion instead of Dominic, the large man explains that he's about as familiar with the last office as Brock is but also that, "I can shoot the shit about office stuff."

As the large man checks out the hallway, Brock studies the slowly shifting texture of the high-traffic office carpeting beneath his feet. He pulls himself away just in time to see Dominic give him a thumbs-up and then disappear into the passage. Brock pokes his head out and briefly watches the bulky man walk back to the reception area. Turning in the opposite direction, Brock makes his way swiftly toward the final office and the locked door.

The walls wave gently like boat sails in a light breeze. The overhead light has become warmly yellow and comforting. The heads visible over the tops of cubicles resemble dark ocean swells and bobbing beach balls. Although it's probably just some office equipment, Brock even thinks he can hear a seagull.

Despite the relaxing atmosphere of the hallway he's immediately filled with apprehension as he jiggles the handle on the final office door. It's locked. Brock presses his face up to the frosted glass side panel but is able to see only swirling darkness inside. He tries the handle again, pushes the door, pulls it, and pushes it one last time. Gritting his teeth, he turns down the hallway to see if he can get Dominic's attention. The imposing figure is leaning against the front desk and facing the receptionist, away from Brock.

Running his fingers through his hair, Brock focuses back on the door and ponders what else he can try. Leaving a hand on his temple he leans his elbow to the side and against the door of the secure room. To his amazement, the door swings gently open into a pitch black space. He briefly examines the door's handle and discovers that it rotates freely. The door is unlocked and open.

Gliding his hand blindly up and down the inside wall he quickly finds the light switch and flicks it on.

The sterile white room is empty except for a few paper boxes sitting haphazardly in the corner and a bare steel shelving unit pushed up against one wall. An air conditioning vent in the ceiling makes a slight hissing sound as it spills cool air into the small space.

Brock enters, looks behind the door, examines the hollow boxes, and inspects the empty shelves.

Running his fingertips down the sides of his face to produce an elongated grotesque, he considers the Section's predicament. A moment later he throws his hands up and slaps them on his thighs in bitter acceptance. He turns out the light and gently pulls the door closed behind him.

Glancing down the hallway, Brock's worried demeanour catches Dominic's gaze as the other agent nears the reception area. With an apology, the large man disengages himself from the conversation and takes Brock aside. There the newest member of Section B discretely describes the situation. More than once Dominic looks intently at the security door at the opposite end of the hallway as Brock reports his dispiriting findings.

Having confirmed the situation a third time, Dominic stands with his hand wrapped around the back of his head, the other on his hip, a look of uncertainty on his face. Beside him Brock holds his hand over his mouth, squeezing his lips together anxiously. The small reception area is unnervingly quiet.

Suddenly remembering the mobile phone in his pocket, Dominic pulls out the device and broadcasts a request asking if anyone was seen walking out of Shindan after he and Brock went in. In quick succession Section B respond that they haven't.

"What now?" asks Brock.

Dominic responds with an uneasy shrug.

They stand facing each other with the all-permeating humidity pasting their shirts to their backs.

Suddenly, a cheerful female voice punctuates their grim desperation. "Hey!" says the voice from somewhere just beyond their peripheral vision.

Spinning around, Brock and Dominic are surprised to find the receptionist standing unnervingly close to them, smiling broadly, eyelashes batting at them from behind red-framed glasses.

"Maybe I'm totally wrong here," begins the bespectacled young lady in a muted tone, her bright pig tails and ruby red lips accentuated by her fitted yellow dress, "but it might interest you to know that they left about half an hour ago."

"They?" asks Dominic, mildly detached.

"Boss. Joanne. That other guy, what's his name..." she trails off into thought.

"Victor?" offers Dominic.

“Yeah. Vic the dick. All of them emptied the mystery room” — she points down the hall to the secure room — “and got the hell out of here. Told me to finish out my shift. Pretty sure they’re not coming back. Also pretty sure none of us are getting paid.”

“Sorry, and you are?” asks Brock.

“Umm,” she responds, visibly pondering the question, “Hope, I guess. Doesn’t really matter.”

“Okay, Hope,” says Dominic impatiently. “Do you happen to know where they went?”

“Sure!” she replies with an agreeable smile. “One sec.”

Hope walks perkily back to her large black table, sits down, wiggles the computer mouse around, types some commands on the keyboard, grabs a pink sticky note from under the desktop monitor, and writes down what’s on the screen.

Brock discretely mouths a silent “What the fuck?” to Dominic.

With ebullient energy she peels off the sticky note, stands up, and bounces back to the confused duo. The bright paper is deposited into Dominic’s large hand with a wink.

“Hope that helps,” she says cheerfully.

Blinking with disorientation Brock asks, “Wait ... why are you helping us?”

“Oh, I don’t care what happens to this place. My job here is done,” replies Hope effervescently. She leans in and looks at both of them, placing her index finger just below her left eye and pulling down her lower eyelid. “Looks like you guys are just starting your shift,” she says with an oddly mischievous smile.

Then she quickly backs away, pointing finger guns at Brock and Dominic and playfully pretending to shoot at them while maintaining the same odd smile. “See ya!” she finally shouts, spinning around, pushing her handbag behind her back, and strutting out of the office before they can gather their thoughts.

With a bewildered look Dominic glances first at Brock and then at the pink paper in his own hand. With a very similar expression Brock alternates his focus between Dominic, the exit, and the note.

“What, indeed, the fuck,” says Dominic in a troubled yet slightly amused tone.

## Shindan Academy

“You’re sure that you didn’t see a woman in a bright yellow dress walk out of the building?” asks Dominic.

Rebekah and Dmitri shake their heads.

“And no one like that walked by you?” Dominic asks Mirabelle and Elvis.

They both shake their heads and shrug.

The handwriting on the small pink sticky note in Dominic’s hand is hasty and sloppy. It reads, “hualanpong northestern – siam shipjin car 3 dep &30”

“What the hell is that supposed to be?” asks Rebekah, tilting her head. “The letter next to the one that looks like a ‘p’ next to the thing that looks like a ‘q’.”

“Is that even a letter?” asks Dmitri.

“Could be,” acknowledges Brock.

As the group continues to gaze at the mysterious note, Elvis pulls out his phone and punches some information into it. A few moments later he looks up to address the Section. “I think I have something.”

He proceeds to tell them that “hualanpong” probably stands for Bangkok’s main train station “Hua Lamphong”, that “northestern” is most likely a misspelling of “Northeastern”, and that “siam shipjin” is in all likelihood a mangled version of “Siam Shipping”.

“So maybe that’s car number three then,” states Brock, still engrossed in the note. The other agents, noticeably under the influence of Gary’s mushroom tea, look up and slowly nod in agreement.

“Yeah, that’s probably what the ‘car’ means,” says Elvis with a hint of sarcasm. “Which would make the departure time about an hour from now.”

“Where do you get that from?” asks Brock.

“Right here,” Elvis points to the sticky note. “The ‘dep’ means departure and the ampersand-looking thing here is an eight. It’s just so badly written.”

“If you say so,” says Brock, pulling his face closer to the note.

“Seems like a good assessment,” notes Rebekah with a forthright nod.

“It’s the only one we have,” adds Dmitri.

“Wow. It iz cool, huh?” observes Mirabelle with wide eyes.

“As long as it takes us to what we’re after,” responds Elvis soberly. “Are you sure you can’t tell us anything more about this Hope woman?” he asks, abruptly turning to Brock and Dominic.

Taking a few moments to reflect, Brock replies, “Nope.” Dominic shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders.

“It doesn’t really match the outputs,” observes Elvis.

“Outputs?” asks a befuddled Brock.

“From the pod,” clarifies Elvis.

“Oh ... right,” replies Brock, turning his attention back to the gently swaying world around him.

Observing the distracted state of the Section, Elvis reluctantly assumes the lead with a silent nod. “What’ve we got to lose?” he asks the group. “Let’s go to the train station.”

Lively and enthusiastic faces tilt up to meet his gaze. “I love ze locomotive,” remarks Mirabelle with surprisingly joyful candour. Dmitri agrees with a vigorous nod.

In no time at all they’re stepping out of two taxis in front of a large white building fronted by stout columns. Looking up at the central portion of the stately train station Brock asks, “Doesn’t this seem familiar?”

Seeing the arching roof of the building Elvis responds, “Yeah, like that mushroom monk market.”

Brock allows the words to percolate for a moment and then bursts out laughing. Soon everyone is infected with guffaws except Elvis who ineffectively repeats, “Guys, it’s really not that funny.”

Eventually they settle down as he encourages the formulation of a plan.

Working through occasional snickering and various distractions it’s decided that Rebekah, Dmitri, and Elvis will try to access the tracks and find the train. Rebekah because she might be able to “convince” their way back out if needed, Dmitri because there might be electronics involved, and Elvis because there should be a sober lookout. In the meantime Mirabelle, Brock, and Dominic will be the eyes, ears, and helping hands on the other side of the wall.

“This is probably going to go down as one of the craziest nights of my life,” remarks Rebekah with giddy nervousness as the six of them turn left at the corner of the large building.

“I though it was escaping those colliding ships in subs during that tropical storm,” suggests Brock.

Before Rebekah has a chance to comment, Elvis cuts in with swollen admiration, “Whaaat? You guys escaped in submarines? That’s some legit super spy shit. When did *that* happen?”

“On our way here,” responds Brock. “Wasn’t so cool when we were in the middle of it.”

Having considered which event had more impact Rebekah finally answers, “Now that you mention it, every day is so uniquely fucked up that it’s easy to forget how fucked up the day before was. Guess I’m gonna have to start a top ten list or something.”

After some time they arrive at a widened area of the tracks guarded only by a sole, upturned security camera and a brick wall. There they align on a dark and isolated portion of the barrier, a gap in the barbed wire clearly visible above them. A quick inspection reveals that the leafy plants hanging down from this gap obscure a break in the wall.

Elvis pushes aside the leaves and makes his way over the damaged barrier, inviting Rebekah and Dmitri to follow. Making it to the other side and satisfied that Dmitri’s improvised comms system is still working, they duck unseen into the angular shadows of the train yard. A cricket sounds somewhere nearby.

“I’m going to get as high as I can,” says Dominic, breaking the momentary silence.

Brock looks at him with an upraised eyebrow. Mirabelle tilts her head to the side.

“Situational awareness.”

Confusion is added to their faces.

“To get a view over that wall,” Dominic explains with a coy smile.

They share another chuckle before Dominic departs into the narrow street across from the wall.

Mirabelle turns to Brock and says, “I sink zis time we should go apart.” She motions in opposite directions along the wall.

“Okay,” agrees Brock. “Meet back here in five minutes?”

“Maybe ten,” she replies. “Five zere, five back.”

With a thumbs-up Brock turns around and begins to walk back from where the group had come. Mirabelle is continuing farther down the tracks toward an overhead pedestrian bridge.

An uneventful few minutes pass.

Suddenly, Rebekah breaks through with a whisper over the group chat, “So ... we’re between two trains with lot of container cars. The numbers on them are all over the place. And most of them are locked tight. So there’s *that*. Then, it looks like they have security walking around here so we don’t have much time to hang around. If you have any suggestions then we’d be happy to hear ’em.”

A moment later Dominic’s voice is broadcast to the group. “I’m almost on the fourth floor of this hotel’s staircase. They have windows on every landing so hopefully I’ll be able to tell you where your security’s at.”

“That’ll help,” whispers back Rebekah. “Yeah? What’s that?” she continues.

Nearly simultaneously, Brock, Mirabelle, and Dominic squint their eyes in confusion as they try to comprehend Rebekah’s last communication.

“Come again?” asks Brock.

“Sorry, I was talking to Dmitri and Elvis. We’ve got some ideas,” she responds.

“We’re probably looking for containers that can be loaded onto ships and trucks,” adds Dmitri in a hushed voice.

Quietly Elvis adds, “And the car number might be its position from the end.”

Dominic cuts in, “I can’t see where you are. Can one of you wave your phone at the building behind you?”

“I can do one better,” replies Dmitri. “One sec.”

A few moments pass in silence. Then, without warning everyone’s phone buzzes.

The Section glance down at their screens to see that they’ve received text messages. Opening up the messages they find a pair of coordinates.

“Plug that into a search and look at the map in the results,” instructs Dmitri.

They do as he says and quickly zoom in on the exact spot where he, Rebekah, and Elvis are hiding.

“Okay, this is great,” says Dominic as he orients himself using the online map. Gazing out of the window he reports, “I don’t see anyone around you at the moment. Wish I had binoculars.”

“Oh well, what’re ya gonna do?” comments Dmitri. “At least we’ll have Elvis keeping an eye on things behind the train.”

“Behind the train?” asks Dominic.

“The part you can’t see,” explains Dmitri. “From your angle,” adds Elvis.

“Gotcha,” confirms Dominic as the three agents on the other end of the line embark on their tasks.

Within the next few minutes Brock and Mirabelle have turned around while Rebekah and Dmitri are approaching the ends of the parallel trains.

“I don’t see any shipping containers on this end,” whispers Dmitri.

Rebekah adds, “Two containers on my side. Except... hang on...” — a few seconds elapse — “one of these has Chinese writing on it. Looks like Chinese. The other one looks like a wall of fruit. But no writing though. Wait...” — a few more seconds elapse — “No. It’s not fruit. It’s more like metal.”

“That’s probably what that is,” notes Elvis. Then he asks, “Dmitri, do you copy?”

“Yeah, totally,” responds a nearly imperceptible Dmitri.

Dominic scans the length of the train yard from the fourth floor window and finds the two shipping containers near Rebekah. Circling the area and seeing nothing he swings his gaze back in the opposite direction, coming to rest at the approximate location of Dmitri. There on the opposite side of the yard are two railway security guards.

“You guys are about to have company,” cautions Dominic over group chat.

“I see them too,” includes Elvis in a breathy voice.

The two guards walk casually down toward the two trains. Dominic notes that despite their somewhat military-looking attire they don’t seem to be carrying firearms. He also judges that as long as Dmitri and Elvis don’t dally they shouldn’t have a problem out-walking the security.

In the meantime Rebekah comes in over the group chat. “Guys, good news bad news, ” she says in a slightly winded whisper. After a muffled grunt of exertion she adds, “Good news, I’m pretty sure I found the right container. Bad news, I don’t think we can get into it.”

A few more strenuous sounds are broadcast over the chat before she goes silent.

Some moments later Dmitri’s quietly energized voice announces, “This thing’s locked tight. Even if we had a big bolt cutter we would need to get past this metal cover. A welding torch might help.”

“I don’t see any way in,” notes Elvis. “No rust, no cracks, no openings. The lock is massive and like Dmitri said it’s under a thick steel hood. Getting in there with a big bolt cutter would be impossible. Dom, what’s the status on those guards?”

“Taking a stroll,” replies the large lookout. “I’d say you still have about two minutes. But that’s not your only problem.”

“Why?” asks Elvis with quiet concern.

“Train leaves in a little over twenty minutes if I’m reading the clock right,” explains Dominic, squinting at his screen.

Elvis checks the time on his own mobile phone and purses his lips with concern.

The tension grows as the trio in the yard push, pull, and prod the container for a way in. After a minute and a half Dominic interrupts, “Security’s getting close. You should probably start to leave soon. Like, maybe now.”

By this time Brock and Mirabelle have returned to the breached section of the wall.

“I see nussing,” opens the French woman as she lights a new cigarette.

“Same here,” says Brock, looking around one last time.

A few seconds later, Dmitri scuttles over the wall and flops over to the other side. Next, Rebekah scurries awkwardly over his back and drops down inelegantly. Finally, Elvis’

hands appear on the bricks and he quickly straddles the barrier, then stumbles into Rebekah and Dmitri.

Without hesitation they immediately exit the area.

“We’re fucked,” says Rebekah sullenly. Dmitri nods lackadaisically. Elvis juts out his jaw tensely and looks skyward. The dismal atmosphere hangs between them all.

Joining them hastily from his hotel stairwell perch, Dominic suggests, “Why don’t we hop on the train?”

“How far? And for how long?” asks Dmitri.

“And, assuming we somehow don’t get caught, how do we get into the container anyway?” adds Elvis.

Dominic shakes his head in reluctant agreement and the group falls silent. The sound of an idling diesel train engine echoes off of the walls behind them. A couple of spindly motorcycles and one compact delivery truck drive by.

“Dude, are you okay?” asks Rebekah dejectedly, breaking the group’s murky emptiness. They look first at her and then at Brock.

He’s stopped and is staring across the street, apparently at something very interesting. All they see is a hotel’s grimy delivery entrance surrounded by small dumpsters and green plants. Two black security cameras are set into the dirty tile wall next to a large black door, a couple of short and heavily weathered statues flank its frame. The unimpressive sight is common in Bangkok.

It’s only when Dominic places his hand on his shoulder that the junior agent snaps back to attention. Brock swivels his head back and forth a few times, the focus of his attention having evidently disappeared.

“Oh, hey,” he says, nodding distractedly. “I was just... I saw something... something kinda trippy over there.”

“What’d you see?” asks Rebekah, head cocked to the side. Dominic and Dmitri also take an immediate interest. Brock is a little taken aback by the attention.

“Umm, well, I saw this, like, chicken guy,” he says haltingly and uncertainly.

Rebekah nods at him sternly to continue.

“Okay, well, suddenly everything was red. Like the street lights suddenly all turned red and the hotel light was red and, like, everything ... just red. Not scary red. Not like blood or anything. More like red-light district red. You know ... like strippers, hookers, that kind of red. Anyway, then this chicken guy appeared out of there,” explains Brock as he points to one of the worn statues beside the black door.

“Chicken guy?” asks Dmitri.

“Yeah, sort of,” continues Brock. “His beak was all fucked up but his head looked like a chicken. He had these wings ... they might’ve been attached to his arms, I dunno. Anyway, his legs looked like big chicken legs. Basically he looked like a chicken. A big, blinged out chicken guy.”

“Blinged out chicken guy?” inquires Dominic, blinking with concentration.

“Yeah, you know, gold-rimmed sunglasses, gold rings, gold bracelets, big fat gold clock hanging on a big fat gold chain around his neck. He kept pointing at it, like, ‘Yo, check this out’.”

Rebekah purses her lips and says, “Yeah, time’s running out. Chicken guy was on to something.”

“But just before I turned my head,” says Brock, ignoring her bitterness, “he did something weird.”

“Okay,” says Dominic, gesturing for Brock to keep going.

“He reached behind his back,” says Brock, furrowing his brow in mild confusion, “and pulled out this really small missile. Like a toy. Maybe it was a bomb, I dunno.”

“A bomb?” asks Dmitri with mild alarm.

“Yeah,” replies Brock. “He held it up to make sure I saw it” — Brock extends an open palm as though he’s holding a bottle of wine — “and then he flipped it over and dropped it.”

“And?” asks Rebekah.

“And it floated down like a leaf. Just sort of” — he tilts his hands from side to side — “glided down to the ground and disappeared.”

“That’s it?” she inquires with shrugging dismissal.

“That’s it,” confirms Brock.

“Okay, yeah, cool,” she says with overtly sarcastic acceptance. “Chicken man laying bombs. Fantastic.”

“Dropping bombs,” Brock corrects her halfheartedly.

“Fine, dropping bombs,” she follows up. “Unless those bombs can blow off that container’s doors within the next twenty minutes it doesn’t mean shit. That train’s leaving and we have no way to get inside.”

No one utters a word during the long and hollow silence that follows her words.

“Wait,” says Dominic, unexpectedly piercing the funereal atmosphere.

“Now, hang on just a second. Wait, just, one, second, ” he says with deliberate slowness, pressing a hand to his mouth as a smile creeps out slowly from under his fingers.

“What? We bomb the train?” asks Rebekah in disbelief.

Deeply pondering her suggestion, Dominic fails to answer.

“Where the hell would we get explosives?” she continues. “And within the next twenty minutes? Who here would even know what to do with them?”

Dmitri and Elvis both shrug their shoulders. Mirabelle raises an eyebrow.

“Assuming by some miracle that we have all that, what next?” continues Rebekah rhetorically. “We blow the doors off and then we only have a few seconds before we’re rushed by security. Unless we have a helicopter on standby there’s no way we’d make it out of here. Every single part of this idea is completely crazy.”

The smile has now crept completely across Dominic’s face and he’s pointing a finger at Rebekah. “Yeah,” he says, slowly receding back into his thoughts, “cops everywhere. Everything locked down. Nothing gets in or out.”

A moment later he reemerges from his reverie and turns to Brock with a beaming grin, saying, “That could work! I think we can actually do this!”

Brock frowns, unsure what the large man is getting at. As Mirabelle takes a sideways drag on her cigarette the agents of Section B lean in closer, eager to share in Dominic’s revelation.

## Blowback

The crimson lights of the Royal Thai Police strobe over the nighttime scene as foot patrol, canine units, and several bomb disposal personnel scour the train yard. At one carriage the brilliant light of a welding torch emits sharp sparks as it cuts into the thick lock of a shipping container.

“That’s them there,” says Dominic, pressing his finger up against the fourth floor window of the hotel’s staircase. Shifting his gaze in the direction indicated by Dominic, Brock spots a gray sedan standing behind a sturdy fence on the opposite side of the tracks.

A man with a strict hairstyle and colourless business suit is standing outside the front passenger side. He’s sprawled over the roof of the vehicle, watching the yard. In the driver’s seat is a woman wearing a black t-shirt, her glossy hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. She’s sitting tensely with her hands in the ten-and-two positions, staring straight ahead. Behind her slumps a large man with wispy hair and a shoddy dark suit draped over his thin frame. A precarious cigarette made mostly of ash dangles loosely from his lips as he leans out of the rear passenger window. All three are wearing identical black sunglasses.

“Sore thumbs,” comments Brock. “I take it that’s the boss in the back?”

“Yup,” confirms Dominic. “Mister Cheng. Joanne’s at the wheel. The other guy’s Victor.”

“I imagined them ... different somehow,” remarks Brock. “Smarter, I guess.”

Dominic nods at Brock, directing his attention to Rebekah who has suddenly appeared among the growing crowd of onlookers on the opposite side of the tracks. She slowly makes her way toward Victor, momentarily studies him, then abruptly rams into him from behind.

Brock watches her offer an animated apology to the man who replies by angrily waving his hands around, then dismissively shooing her away. She backs off with a gesture of surrender as Victor returns to his vigil. Soon Rebekah has disappeared around a corner and out of view.

“Oh man,” says Brock with a sheepish grin, “I almost feel bad for them.”

“Except that they tried to kill us,” says Elvis, holding up a reminding finger.

Sitting on a step nearby Dominic cautions, “We don’t know that for sure.”

Brock and Elvis nod lightly in agreement.

“But they’re involved somehow,” adds Dominic.

They nod again.

It's nine-thirty by the time Rebekah returns to the landing and takes a seat on the steps near them. Hotel patrons and even some staff have now gathered around the window to watch the tense scene outside and to exchange theories.

Speaking with some difficulty to a middle-aged Japanese man and a wrinkly retired German couple, Mirabelle shares her belief that this is all part of some elaborate espionage operation involving a hoax bomb threat to access secret information being transported in a train car. She points at the dark automobile across the tracks and describes how an improvised trap is about to be sprung on the three foreign agents.

Mirabelle's wacky story receives hearty laughs, followed by a lengthy period of silent inactivity, after which the tourists excuse themselves and leave.

Shortly thereafter Mirabelle, Brock, and Dominic watch as the gray sedan is approached by several edgy police officers. Victor turns around to face one cop, answering his questions with negating hand movements. Mister Cheng steps laboriously out of the car to confront the second officer, choosing to do so with welcoming arms and a conciliatory smile. Joanne is now completely rigid and gritting her teeth as the third policeman motions for her to step out.

Suddenly, the car lurches forward just as the officer nearest Joanne lunges out of the way. By the time the sound of screeching tires arrives at the fourth floor window the car is fishtailing out of its parking spot.

A second later and with the smoke of burnt rubber still thick in the air, the dark vehicle comes to a crashing stop in the back of a small blue delivery truck. The sound of smashing metal takes another moment to reach the hotel and by then Joanne has thrown the car into reverse. She guns the engine again and the tires on the car spin uselessly, the effort serving only to jostle the newly attached truck amidst the cloud of acrid smoke. After a few seconds of futility she releases the accelerator, turns off the engine, and sullenly steps out of the car.

Two additional officers have now arrived from the train yard and one of them pounces on Joanne while the other two shout commands and aim their weapons at her. In the meantime, Mister Cheng is on his knees, hands locked behind his head and facing away from the drawn gun of his uniformed interlocutor. Victor is splayed out on the ground, one hand pinned at his back under the knee of the other officer, the other holding a cell phone that at a distance looks very similar to the ones that the Section are using.

Rebekah is now standing at the window of the hotel watching the takedowns with a pleased smirk. "That one was a freebie," she says to the glass.

"Pretty bitchin'," remarks Elvis. "I don't know that I'd be able to sneak a phone into anyone's pocket, straight or otherwise."

"Yeah, that was slick," includes Brock with genuine admiration. "Oh, and look" — he swivels his head — "we even get dinner with the show!"

Dmitri has just arrived at the landing holding a tightly tied plastic bag stuffed with a number of Styrofoam containers in one hand, in the other a large tray of assorted drinks with straws.

“Did you remember to wipe your prints off?” asks Dominic, grabbing one of the drinks and immediately taking a long pull on the straw.

“Dude, of course,” replies Rebekah cheerfully. “Used a piece of newspaper to hold it. And I made sure it was still dialed in to the cops.”

“That probably wasn’t necessary,” says Dmitri, setting the food down on the low window sill. “As long as the phone’s on the police can triangulate it. That’s why I didn’t turn it on until we were in position.”

“I see,” replies Rebekah nonchalantly.

“I just don’t understand why they came here,” says Brock.

“From the moment they tangled with us everything about Shindan’s been slipshod,” suggests Dominic. “They were probably acting on paranoia.”

“They may have a point,” notes Rebekah.

“Yeah, but the way they did it,” replies Dominic. “All three of them rolling up like that and looking so conspicuous. No precautions. It’s just so obviously bad. And what about the suits? They didn’t even try to look like tourists. Sunglasses at night didn’t help either.”

Looking him in the eyes Rebekah puts on a broad, mischievous grin and slides on her own sunglasses. He rolls his eyes and holds up the drink tray. “I got Coke, Sprite, some kind of fizzy orange, and water,” he says, offering her the beverages.

Over the next hours the agents compare the progress of their sobriety as they slowly drift back to normalcy. During the process the chicken pad thai, spicy coconut curry, and tasty fried rice hit the spot. Then, having finished they take turns leisurely walking around the neighbourhood to assess the ongoing situation.

By about midnight the police presence has been significantly reduced and only two cops guard the shipping container. It’s been cleared of any explosives, then resealed with only a few thick zip ties and a police ribbon. At the far end of the tracks three more officers patrol the gated exits to the street beyond. The car that Joanne was driving has long since been towed, its occupants driven off in cuffs, the debris swept up.

The operation to retrieve Shindan’s records resumes.

This time it’s Mirabelle hopping over the yard wall with Dmitri and Elvis. In addition to their mobile phones they’ve also taken along a pair of sturdy scissors that they borrowed from the front lobby of the hotel. Once in position, Mirabelle and Elvis take a few moments to mentally prepare and then the trio split up, Dmitri taking the top of the container and Elvis with Mirabelle gliding together along it’s side.

Moments later the pair are leading the two puzzled cops to one end of the container while Dmitri slips down the other side, directly in front of the re-secured door. With a few quick snips he removes the zip ties and official police ribbon, gently lifts and rotates the large vertical latches, pulls open the sizable metal door, slips inside, and closes the opening behind him.

The creak of the hinges attracts the attention of one guard who manages to get only halfway before Elvis and Mirabelle lure him back. The cat-and-mouse game continues for a couple of minutes as the two agents scurry and dodge between train cars, leading the bewildered police on a futile chase.

In the meantime, Dmitri reports that most of the container is inaccessible — but he's found a locked file cabinet with Shindan's name near the entrance. "Looks like it might've been put here after everything else was packed," he says with whispered optimism. "If I can get one drawer open then the others should be easy."

Outside the container the visibly shaken police abandon their posts and walk uncertainly toward their colleagues at the other end of the yard. In a few moments they're pointing back at the train and acting out their bizarre experiences. Finishing their performance they try to convince their fellow sentries to help them investigate. Some hesitation follows before the other officers agree to leave their posts to help out.

"Dmitri, grab whatever you can and get the hell out of there now," says Rebekah with urgency over the group chat.

With a vigorous motion, the tall door of the container swings open, blocking the view of the startled guards. Dmitri emerges holding a weighty paper box sealed with wide plastic straps. He scrambles off the edge of the train, over the couplings of another, and dashes madly toward the wall with the heavy container held awkwardly in front of him. Mirabelle and Elvis watch helplessly from the shadows nearby, trapped between the train and the sight lines of the approaching police.

"Run! Run!" shouts Rebekah, giving voice to the Section's collective anxiety.

"Whadya think I'm trying ..." responds Dmitri breathlessly.

In a few moments the box is tossed over the wall. Dmitri's hands follow and the large man slowly hoists himself up. With one heaving effort he pulls himself over, grabs the slightly crushed container, and continues running past the hotel.

Three of the officers have gathered around the open end of the container while the other two continue cautiously in Dmitri's general direction. "I don't think they got a look at you," Rebekah says over the group chat.

"Good," acknowledges Dmitri, still winded.

She watches Elvis and Mirabelle dash toward the opposite end of the yard and away from the preoccupied police. There the agents search frantically for a way over the tall fence.

Rebekah spots a cage embedded into the fence, barred security doors sealing the two ends of the structure. "Guys, I think I might've spotted a way out," she says. It doesn't

take long before Elvis and Mirabelle locate the potential exit but before they have a chance to examine it Brock nervously broadcasts that two of the pursuing officers have turned around and are heading in their direction.

With few other options the two agents quickly decide to leap into a nearby guard booth, crouching down below the tiny hut's flimsy windows and pressing their backs against its particleboard walls. In the few seconds before the two officers arrive at their location the hushed but panicked voice of Elvis says, "We're stuck in the guardhouse."

Watching with deep concern from the fourth floor landing of the hotel Rebekah ponders the situation. Standing beside her, Brock and Dominic shift uneasily, deep in their own thoughts. Within a few moments the two guards have taken up positions near the exit while the others continue their search around the opened container. Poking up slowly from inside the tiny structure Mirabelle takes a cautious peek at her surroundings. Ducking back down she silently gestures her assessment to Elvis; they're unnervingly close to the two officers and making a dash through the gates would end badly.

Suddenly, Rebekah snaps her fingers as an idea forms in her head. "Brock, would you say that you respect me?" she asks forthrightly.

His uncertainty is palpable as he answers, "Yeah, sure. Why?"

She responds, "Good. Then you won't mind slapping me around a little bit."

"Oh?" he asks, curiosity piqued.

## Kompromat

“Are you sure you want to do this?” asks Brock with concern as they approach the scene of the Shindan takedown. A small oil slick occupies the spot where Joanne’s car sat.

“Yeah, just don’t hit me too hard,” replies Rebekah resolutely. “Make it look real, just not *too* real.”

They walk a few more meters and then just before turning the corner they pause. “Okay, let’s make this convincing,” she says, spinning around to face Brock. “Elvis and Mira, we’re about to start. I have no idea how long we can keep them busy so be ready to run.”

A moment of nervous silence passes before Rebekah nods at Brock, then turns around to face the street. He takes a deep breath and they both round the corner.

“You fucking bitch!” he screams at the top of his lungs as he grabs her hair from behind. She advances and pulls away into the street, causing her head to jerk back as Brock maintains his grip.

They tussle loudly, stumbling slowly into the middle of the street, shouting obscenities and accusations at each other. She lands a few blows against his body, causing him to lose his grip on her hair. As she stands up, his open palm swings around and connects solidly with her face. The sound of the slap reverberates down the street.

Brock freezes and stares at Rebekah as she holds her face with both hands.

“Jesus,” he whispers out of the side of his mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you that hard.”

She holds her head up, one hand over her cheek as tears stream down her face and says, “Ow, dude. That *really* fucking hurt.”

“It was an accident,” says Brock surreptitiously, still frozen on the spot.

“It’s okay, it’s fine,” she replies wincing and rubbing the spreading redness on the side of her face. “Maybe we should’ve rehearsed this. At least it’ll be more convincing this way. I’m okay, let’s keep going.”

“Okay,” says Brock, suddenly reminded of why they’re there. Glancing around quickly he sees that the two sentries in the yard have left their spots and are watching them intently from behind the iron fence. In the window of the tiny guardhouse behind them Brock can see slight movement.

Suddenly, Rebekah screeches an ear-piercing, “Fuck you, asshole!!” and begins to lash out wildly at Brock.

He screams back and once again grabs the back of her head by her hair. Her hands hold his at the wrist, covertly guiding them and herself downward into a compromising pose.

The two guards jump into action and quickly make their way through the double gates of the caged entrance while being cautiously observed by Elvis and Mirabelle. As the police officers approach the rowdy fight the two agents quietly follow, first securing the inner door and then opening the outer one, just as they'd observed. Finally, they scurry away from the altercation and disappear into the shadows of the darkened street.

Rebekah catches a glance of Mirabelle and Elvis making their getaway. She turns her head away from the quickly approaching officers and in a very controlled volume says, "They're good, they got away. Time for phase two."

Brock relaxes his hold on the struggling woman as she comes up to face him. Half of her face is still red from the slap but her expression has transformed into a smiling and devious provocation. She flings her hands around his neck and pulls his face close to hers, her head rolling around in an imitation of a passionate kiss.

"Grab my ass," she instructs, breathing heavily between sensuous groans. He pulls her close to him. With a slap he clasps one cheek firmly in his extended hand and pulls her writhing body even closer. She lets out a hoarse moan. Soon Brock feels his hardness pressed tightly up against her sinuous shape. For a brief moment their lips meet and then she wriggles gently away.

He looks deeply into her eyes and is met with the fixed stare of a vulnerable animal. Beneath his firm grip a rigid shudder runs up through her body, ending with an unfocused quiver in her eyes.

Just then one of the approaching officers shouts something in Thai. A strong tugging feeling, like being pulled along with an oceanic wave, draws Brock away from his contact with Rebekah. For a moment he feels like he might be losing consciousness but he quickly recovers and looks to his left. There he sees the two cops approaching. A moment later the farther officer disappears behind the approaching shape of his partner.

At this point Rebekah peels herself off and begins to hurl guttural insults at the oncoming cop – angry accusations about his virility and his ability to pleasure a woman.

Brock looks on in motionless silence, grateful hands crossed over the zipper of his pants. He leans left and right, squinting and trying to spot the other cop. The man seems to have vanished.

The other officer's demeanor quickly changes from one of concern to one of irritation and he begins to shout something while motioning for the two agents to clear the area. Rebekah gives the officer a middle finger and without looking back she grabs Brock by the arm, pulling him behind the corner where they'd started.

"Dude, we just broke into a locked storage container with nothing but a phone and shitty scissors," she says smiling brightly and running her fingers through her glossy hair. With wide eyes she finishes, "How fucking unreal is *that*?"

Brock smiles and nods uncomfortably in acknowledgment.

“Oh,” she says, looking down and seeing the source of Brock’s unease.

“If it’s any consolation, I also had a good time tonight,” she continues with cheerful aplomb. Then she bends over in front Brock’s crotch, raises her hand to her brow, swivels the digits outward in a mock salute, and in a gravelly drawl says, “You did a good job today, soldier. At ease.”

With a concluding nod at Brock’s erection she stands back up. As they wait for him to recover they offer excited congratulations to Elvis and Mirabelle over the group chat.

“You really saved our bacon back there,” says Elvis. “That cop didn’t look like he was gonna budge.”

“Yes, iz very good,” injects Mirabelle with an unusually positive inflection in her voice.

Brock catches a glimpse of mild confusion on Rebekah’s face. “I think getting them both out of there together was a fluke,” she says with a correcting nod. Brock agrees with his own.

“Both?” asks Elvis in a tinny voice.

Suddenly, Dmitri’s voice pops into the group chat. “Sorry to interrupt the celebrations, folks,” he says jubilantly, “but you’re all cordially invited to the after-party at the omega tree.”

Dominic’s laughter comes in over the group chat.

As they all make their way to the shady courtyard their spirited casualness changes to elation. By the time they get to their destination they’ve enthusiastically reviewed the night’s improbable events and are burning with anticipation to examine the contents of the bankers box.

“A busted up paper box?” asks Elvis, pointing to the misshapen container using a small bundle of extricated papers.

Looking up from a document he’s holding Dmitri replies, “Hide in plain sight. If there’s one thing I’ve learned is that electronic info is so much more vulnerable than hard copy. Best security is to keep only physical records.”

“But in a paper box?” follows Elvis with with suspicion.

“It was in a locked file cabinet,” says Dmitri with a minuscule shrug. “Then again, that thing popped open with almost no effort.”

“I rest my case,” confirms Elvis.

Suddenly Dominic shifts forward. “Hey,” he announces, holding up the piece of printed paper he’s been examining, “I think I might have something here.”

“Here, have a look,” he points a finger at a spot in the document. “That’s the address of our old boo, where we got robbed.”

“Right, yeah, the library,” says Rebekah, scanning the sheet intently.

“And this looks like it could be the client,” he says, sliding his finger to the top of the page. “An *A C Heinrich*.”

“Who the hell’s that?” asks Brock, leaning in to examine the name. As Mirabelle does the same she notices that Rebekah seems to have involuntarily recoiled.

“Everyting iz okay?” asks Mirabelle.

Rebekah is ashen. Her features appear to have sunken inward, the glimmer in her dark eyes has changed to panic, her mouth is hanging open.

“Rebekah?” says Dominic. The whole group puts down their papers to focus on her.

Her mouth moves slowly as though she’s trying to make words but nothing’s coming out. Terrified, she glances quickly around the group and then, arms outstretched for support, begins to back away unsteadily.

“Rebekah?” repeats Dominic with concern. “What’s going on? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“I ...” is all she manages in reply, all the while moving away from them.

Elvis now steps forward and asks, “Are you okay? Do you need a doctor or something?”

Still retreating, she shakes her head and puts up one hand to stop him advancing.

“Then what is it?” he asks with urgency. “What’s going on?”

She closes her mouth tightly and shakes her head one more time before turning around and briskly walking into the shadows of the courtyard, then out onto the street.

“What the hell’s going on, Rebekah?” shouts Dmitri as Brock runs to follow her.

In the early morning quiet of the small courtyard, Dominic, Dmitri, Mirabelle, and Elvis stare at each other, dumbfounded and speechless.

“For fuck’s sake, Rebekah, wait up!” Brock shouts after her as he hurries down the lamp-lit street. In a few moments he’s overtaken her and he spins around in front of her, blocking her path.

She comes to a stop with a stomp, hands clenched in tight fists.

“Look,” he says assertively, “I don’t know who or what this *A C Heinrich* is but you obviously know *something*, and seeing as how we’re *all* involved, how we’ve all come all this way, how we’re all getting shot at, I think we deserve something more than just a silent freakout.”

“You deserve more than me,” she responds quietly through clenched teeth.

“What the hell’s *that* supposed to mean?” asks Brock, frowning.

“It means we’re in danger because of *me*,” she replies fearfully. After a long pause she says, “Probably best if I don’t say any more. I shouldn’t have even said that. I ... I need time. Time alone. I need to think.”

Brock slowly runs his palms upward over his face, through his hair, and down the back of his head. Holding his hands around his neck and tipping his face skyward he takes in a long, deep breath. He slowly releases the air from his lungs, drops his shoulders, and says, “Okay. I trust you. I’ll be back at the tree when you’re ready.”

“I don’t ... I can’t guarantee anything,” she says, distraught.

He walks past her, holding up an open hand to signal the receipt of her message. Soon he’s disappeared into the thick contrasts of the dense city street, leaving her alone. She buries her face in her hands.

Approximately half an hour passes. The omnipresent hum of the city builds along with a peachy swell in the eastern sky. The birds in the tree of the tiny courtyard begin to chirp excitedly.

With a solemn face Rebekah plods through one of the crumbling entrances and plops herself beside Brock.

They’re alone.

“Where is everybody?” she asks.

“They left. Didn’t say when they’d be back, just that they’re going to get our stuff,” he replies sleepily.

“Hmm,” she replies with a nod. “If I can walk away so can they.”

“Yup.”

“Well, I’m back.”

“And?”

“And I thought it over and you’re right, you guys deserve the truth. I’m just having a real hard time with it. It’s a lot, you know?”

“Okay. No need to rush,” he prompts, leaning back and closing his eyes.

“I’m not sure where to begin,” she says.

“How about you start with whoever this *AC Heinrich* person is?” proposes Brock lazily.

She hesitates reluctantly for a moment.

Finally she answers, “It’s not a person. It’s *people*. The *AC* stands for *Arti* and *Cornelius*.”

“And who are *Arti* and *Cornelius Heinrich*?” he asks dreamily.

“My mom and dad,” replies Rebekah flatly.

“What?!” exclaims Brock, springing bolt upright.

## Black Op

“... why it’s called deterministic,” Dmitri says to Elvis with a huff, bags piled under both arms. “That’s the only way I can think of to tell us from the machines these days.”

Labouring under his own load, Elvis asks, “So people get more like thirty percent and computers get twenty-five?”

“Yeah,” replies Dmitri, “on average, over time, if it’s a genuinely random one-in-four choice. But you’d need to run thousands of trials. Maybe tens of thousands.”

“What happens if someone scores less than twenty-five?” inquires Elvis between breaths, hands curled around the numerous shoulder straps criss-crossing his body.

“That’s something too,” responds Dmitri, sweat trickling down his face and over his mustache. “Basically any sizeable deviation from the odds, you’re probably looking at a human.”

“Or a psychic machine,” injects Elvis, head down.

“Yeah,” acknowledges Dmitri, slowly pulling the straps off of his shoulders. “Perish the thought.”

The group has arrived back at the courtyard. Dmitri and Elvis gratefully plop their bags onto the cracked concrete ground. Dominic and Mirabelle follow behind, ending their own conversation as they unburden themselves.

“I wasn’t sure if you guys were coming back,” says Rebekah dejectedly, sitting spent and hunched on a stone, head drooping down into her hands. Brock is reclined beside her, head rolled back, mouth slightly open, fully asleep.

“Figured we’d kill two birds with one stone,” replies Dominic, easing himself onto a nearby perch and wiping his glistening head with a dark cloth.

“How so?” asks Rebekah sullenly.

“If you weren’t gonna tell us anything,” he explains, “then we’d just ask the agency. Pick up our stuff while we were at it.”

“You were gone a while,” says Rebekah quietly, slowly lifting her head, revealing bloodshot eyes. She mumbles, “Same place Mister Hand-Cannons found us. Brave.”

“No more than sitting here,” replies Dmitri flatly.

She considers his words and after some time nods, noting, “So I guess the agency spilled the beans.”

A sudden ray of brilliant sunshine pierces the humid haze over the top of the courtyard's east wall. From somewhere in the trees a bird acknowledges the appearance of the light with a complex and joyful trill. A gentle breeze ruffles the leaves, bringing with it the scents of a new day.

"Your folks, yeah?" asks Dmitri, fanning himself with a few papers from the box.

"Yeah," confirms Rebekah without affect, sagging back into a downcast posture.

"Ruh-bek-ah Hain-rik," says Mirabelle to herself slowly, mouth stretching around the words.

Rebekah shakes her head and shrugs. "Yeah, so now you know."

"I don't get it," says Elvis as he rests against his pile of bags and containers. "What do your parents have to do with anything and why would they be trying to kill us?"

"They founded the agency," responds Rebekah distractedly, "and they aren't. They wouldn't be."

Everyone draws back in puzzlement at her words.

After a few moments of visible inner torment Rebekah bursts out, "Fuck! I *knew* this seemed too obvious! I was so fucking careful. No one knew. No one."

"Your parents *founded* the agency?" asks Elvis on behalf of the perplexed group.

Dominic and Dmitri lean in with assertive nods while Mirabelle leans back, arms crossed in anticipation. Brock continues to sleep soundly.

"What?" asks Rebekah, snapping out of her mental maelstrom with a vigorous head shake. "Oh ... yeah. I'm sure I told Dom and Dmitri some of this."

"I don't remember ever hearing this about your family," responds Dmitri.

"Yup," includes Dominic, nodding in stern agreement.

"Well, I had good reasons didn't I?" asks Rebekah in meek defiance.

"Hang on," interjects Elvis with an upraised index finger. "I was under the impression that the agency has, like, *always* been around. How could your parents have *founded* it?"

"I don't remember," replies Rebekah despondently, "They told me a bunch of times but I didn't really pay much attention. I was a kid, then I was a teenager, you know?"

"How long has it been since you've seen them?" asks Dmitri with an acknowledging nod.

"Years," she replies dryly. "We barely communicate and when we do it's over disposable channels."

"Meaning?" inquires Dominic.

“That they’re used once and thrown away. The channels, I mean,” she explains. “A one-time code for encryption and a one-time email for receiving. They have to be premade so we only have so many.”

“I’m thinking that right about now might be a good time to use one,” states Dmitri assertively.

“Just keep in mind that we don’t really know what this paperwork says,” counters Dominic, reaching into the misshapen bankers box and holding up the seemingly incriminating page. “Let’s translate it before making any assumptions.”

Dmitri concedes with a tilted nod and the conversation goes silent.

The growing heat and lack of sleep are starting to take their toll as the members of Section B alternately nod off. Only Rebekah continues to sit and stare fixedly ahead, deep in thought, arms around her legs, chin on her knees.

An hour later even she has fallen asleep.

As the sun rises higher above the east wall of the courtyard it outlines two figures, their shadows splayed out over the slumbering group.

Brock is awoken by the unnerving feeling of a foreign presence nearby. He squints painfully against the blinding light of the morning sun, trying to define the source of the intrusion. After a few moments he can make out the black shapes of the two people. They’re both clean-cut East Asian men with similarly parted black hair and wearing what look like casual black-and-white naval uniforms of a kind that cruise line employees might wear. Both men are smiling.

“Ah, good morning!” says the nearer one, springing forward over Mirabelle and Elvis with an extended hand. Brock gives it a brisk shake and the man quickly retreats back to his original position.

“Can I help you?” asks Brock, sitting up and blocking the savage solar rays with his hand.

“Well, sir, I actually think we may be of assistance to *you*,” responds the man in a mellow baritone, his elegant English tinged with a Japanese accent.

The conversation has roused Elvis and Mirabelle who observe groggily through half-closed eyes.

“Oh? How can you help us?” asks Brock reservedly.

“Not to be too blunt about it,” opens the man, hands extended in a gesture of offering, “but we are probably your best option to get safely out of Thailand and back home. At this point the police will certainly be looking for you as, it seems, may be some others.”

“Hold on,” says Brock, halting the man with an extended palm. “*Who* are you again?”

“Ah,” replies the man, stepping forward slightly. “I’m afraid that we don’t use real names. I invite you to call me by whatever name you like, or if you prefer, I can suggest one.”

“Okay, pick one,” instructs Brock.

“Very good, sir. Call me OpOne. One because I’m the the captain and Op because I’m also an operator. Of the vessel.”

“Very inventive,” observes Brock with mild sarcasm.

“Yes,” responds OpOne through a pristine smile. Pointing at the silhouette next to him, he continues, “which would make this fellow OpTwo”.

The other man steps forward into the light, smile beaming, and bows his head briefly before returning to his shaded spot behind OpOne.

“Okay, good, good,” repeats Brock, nodding his head mechanically. “Well that really clears things up.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I misunderstood your question,” responds OpOne with deference. “Were you asking who we are as an organization? Or perhaps you wanted to know how we came to be hired for this voyage?”

“For starters,” nods Brock.

“Ah, yes, well, unfortunately neither myself nor the rest of the crew know the identity of the client. The firm we work for, a sort of international shipping concern, goes to great lengths to maintain the anonymity of our customers. We are paid handsomely and take precautions to remain as ignorant of such matters as possible. It’s better for everyone involved.”

“So some anonymous person, or people, hired you to get us out of Thailand?” asks Brock incredulously.

“And back home. Yes, sir,” responds OpOne. Behind him, OpTwo nods cheerfully in agreement.

Brock looks at OpOne askew and demands, “Oh? Where’s *home*?”

The Asian man pulls a mobile phone out of his pants pocket, makes a few gestures on its surface, and flips the display toward the agent. “Here, I believe,” adds OpOne, his finger extending partially over the map on the screen.

“Why?” asks Brock pointedly.

By now everyone but Rebekah has woken up and are paying attention to the exchange.

“The client’s intentions are unfortunately not something I’m privy to,” responds OpOne calmly, almost as though he’d rehearsed it. “As for myself, well, as I mentioned, the remuneration is generous.”

“And how did you find us?” asks Brock in the same direct manner.

“We were given approximate information about where to find you. After that ...” says OpOne as he steps aside and invites his colleague to come forward.

"I forrow you," opens OpTwo in much rougher English, flashing a friendly smile around the group.

"You spied on us?" asks Dmitri, rising suddenly from his hitherto silent recline.

"Yes, I spy," replies OpTwo, slowly shaking his head with disapproval. "You make too easy. Need better technique."

"Apparently," notes Dmitri with a concerned frown.

"I see some probrem," continues OpTwo. "I see *bang bang*" — he lifts his hands up to imitate holding a rifle — "at river. I see ze Shindan. I see ze train. I see ze Thairand porice." With increasing severity he concludes, "Today, here, very dangerous."

"How do we know you're not just another problem?" asks Dominic, now fully alert.

"Thank you," says OpOne to OpTwo, ushering him back to his original spot.

"If I may be blunt for a moment longer," says OpOne, turning to Dominic with directed sincerity, "I would suggest that we would have had ample opportunity to engage in *problematic* activity while you slept. I can assure you, sir, that our sole priority is to get you home, safely, and in comfort."

Dominic shrugs his shoulders noncommittally. "We'll need some time to think this over," he says, looking over at Rebekah.

"I understand," accepts OpOne with a genial nod. Holding out a few business cards he offers, "Just call that number when you decide. It's toll-free and I have the other end." With his other hand he holds up his mobile phone and waggles it a few times. "We've been instructed to stay in port for a few more days but, and I say this with all due respect, given your position I would recommend not waiting too long."

Brock grabs one of the cards and examines it. Only the word "MERLE" and a telephone number appear on the simple surface. "Déjà vu," he remarks quietly to himself.

Seemingly completing his thought Mirabelle remarks, "I sink I know zis," as she examines her own card. "In French, Merle is, 'ow do you call zis?" —she pauses contemplatively— "oh, oui, ze black bird."

"Very astute!" responds OpOne enthusiastically.

"And what exactly is the Merle?" asks Brock with a prompting tilt of the head.

"A luxury yacht," responds OpOne with continued confidence.

For the next few moments the only sound that can be heard is the tense and uncertain flicking of the third business card between Dominic's twitchy fingers.

"Again, the number is toll-free from any phone," says OpOne, breaking the silence with a snappy dip of the head and then exiting the courtyard. OpTwo follows suit.

The members of Section B watch the two crew of the Merle leave just as Rebekah begins to stir. For many lethargic moments she struggles to peel her sleep-encrusted eyelids open. Finally, in a raspy whisper she asks, “Did I miss anything?”

Dmitri laughs out loud. “Yeah, a little bit.”

As the sun rises higher, the Section convene over late breakfast procured from a nearby street vendor. The sticky rice in banana leaf and warm soy milk add a sense of calm to their deliberations.

After about an hour the decision is made; Rebekah will burn a one-time conduit to her parents using the satellite uplink. She warns, however, that they may take some days to respond so in the meantime Dmitri will call OpOne and arrange for Section B to get out of Thailand.

As the rest of the team scout for unobstructed lines of sight to the necessary communication satellites, Dmitri convinces a shopkeeper to let him use her phone. Her dark and weathered face watches intently as he dials the number, a mostly toothless grin signalling her approval.

“Hello?” he says into the phone a few moments later. “Yes, we decided to take you up on your offer ... yes, it is ... okay, yeah, I know where that is ... and what? ... why are we going there? ... oh, wow, that’s gonna be ... really? ... yeah, okay, I get it. I understand. I’ll let the team know.”

“Khop khun krap,” he says in his best Thai to the old woman, hands her back her phone, and wanders off toward the rest of the team with a look of mild apprehension on his face.

Dmitri rejoins Section B on a bridge over a wide river where they are setting up the communication equipment. As he angles the small satellite dish up toward the clear blue sky Brock inquires, “So what’s the news?”

“Good. We’re set to meet a couple of Blackbird’s people a few blocks away from our old guest house,” explains Dmitri. “From there we’re going north into the jungle.”

“I thought we were leaving by boat,” asks Brock, puzzled.

“We are,” confirms Dmitri, “but we can’t just waltz on down to the port and hop on. There’s customs and security and all that.”

“So how are we getting there?” inquires Brock.

“We’re being flown in,” responds Dmitri, eyebrow raised provocatively.

## Dead Drop

The rendezvous point is near the same temple complex in which Brock had spent some time recently, erroneously assuming he was alone. Given OpTwo's revelations the Section don't bother splitting up and instead head wearily to their destination as a group.

They're met there by a darkly-tanned man with a serious expression pressed deeply into his face. A loose floral button-down hangs off of his thin frame like the cigarette dangling limply from his lips, worn brown cargo shorts and grungy blue flip-flops completing the ragtag ensemble. After some slow back-and-forth it becomes apparent that he speaks only Thai, understands maybe five English words, but seems to know what's happening as he motions them into the back of his songthaew while impatiently dragging their baggage behind him.

They lazily acknowledge his entreaties and plod behind him under the weight of their own bags, lack of sleep, and steamy heat. Sitting gratefully under the shaded canopy of the minibus they don the best disguises they can muster; sunglasses, hats, upturned collars, and downward gazes.

The vehicle lurches forward into the dense Bangkok traffic.

The group spend most of the trip gripping the metal railings and looking over each others' shoulders from the narrow benches lining the sides of the small transport. Occasionally they exchange wide-eyed glances as the songthaew engages in narrow misses and death-defying escapes while aggressively speeding along the city streets.

After some time the structures around them grow smaller and more decrepit until finally they're overtaken by lush green vegetation interspersed with tiny rural shacks made of earth, wood, and corrugated tin. Sometimes a smiling occupant stands outside, waving at them.

Eventually the dirt road becomes treacherous and the songthaew slows to a crawl as it maneuvers over deep, rain-carved crevasses and large boulders. Sometimes the minibus is brought to a stop while the driver gets out to plot the next few meters of terrain. A few times he asks for volunteers from the team to help guide him as he slowly eases the vehicle over the chaotic geometry.

The songthaew finally comes to a full halt as the chasms in the eroded path become too extreme for it to navigate. The driver motions for the team to grab their bags and follow him.

His flip-flops move gingerly over the jagged surface as he leads them forward. To everyone's relief the packed-dirt road reasserts itself after a few minutes and then begins to narrow. Soon the team is walking single file behind the driver who is forging ahead with grim determination.

They can't tell how long they've been walking like this. Somewhere between the clinging heat, shrill jungle noises, and vicious insects, Section B lose track of time. That's when they suddenly emerge into a small clearing.

The vegetation in the circular patch has recently been hacked down, evidenced by cut bright green stalks sticking up out of the ground. In the middle sits a sparse pyramidal structure made of long bamboo poles. A large black dinghy is positioned in the center. The puffy edge of the craft is lined with sturdy-looking anchor loops to which are tied thick black nylon ropes. These lead to the top of the structure where they're attached to the bottom of what looks like a very large double-headed carabiner.

"Giant hanging plant," remarks Brock, the sweltering heat culling the enthusiasm of his observation.

Except for a quiet grunt of acknowledgment from somewhere in the group, Dmitri's fatigued smile and droopy nod are the only indication that anyone has heard, or that they care.

The driver turns around and with one hand hanging off the back of his neck he shoots a triumphant grin at the group. Tatty cigarette gripped tightly between yellow teeth he extends a thumbs-up with the other hand.

Exhausted, the group drop their bags at their feet.

The driver looks around expectantly, obviously unsure how to proceed. After a couple of minutes he begins to shift around nervously. Finally he yells something in Thai.

Almost immediately another voice returns his summons and in a few short seconds its owner emerges from the thicket to their left. He looks similarly aged to their driver but he's a little taller and pudgier, balding on top, and in his casual brown slacks and crisp white shirt he would cut a more professional figure if it weren't for the gold-rimmed aviator glasses and bright sarong slung casually over one shoulder.

"Welcome! Hello!" he exclaims as he waves enthusiastically at the group.

The members of Section B manage to blurt out an apathetic response. At this the newcomer plants himself wide-legged in front of them and assumes a broad, toothy smile. Swiveling his head from face to face, he nods and occasionally includes a spirited, "Hello!"

"Okay!" he says, clapping his hands together in conclusion. Turning abruptly to the leery driver he says something while simultaneously gesturing toward the team's baggage. Then he points up to the top of the bamboo structure while delivering more instructions to the increasingly taciturn man.

After being shown a demonstration of the double carabiner's hoisting mechanism, the driver grudgingly acquiesces and the pair proceed to load the Section's baggage onto the lowered hook. Securing some of the larger items requires the use of bungee cords, ropes, and zip ties found conveniently arranged on the floor of the dinghy. Eventually the bags

are all covered in a black tarp, secured, pulled up, and suspended just below the top hook to create a dark and lumpy canopy.

Job complete and ostensible agreement fulfilled, the sweaty driver waves a hasty goodbye and swiftly beats a retreat back along the dirt path toward his waiting vehicle.

The team are once again approached by the grinning greeter.

“Okay!” he bursts out, sunglasses leaping on his face as he bounces over to the dinghy.

“You,” he says, pointing variously at each of them.

“Here.”

He sits down between two of the numerous handles lining the side of the boat. Tightly clasping the grips he turns to the Section and shouts, “Good!”

Then he jumps into the middle of the craft, crosses his legs, and plunks down onto boat bottom.

“Here!” — he bellows and slaps the material beside him — “Bad!”

He then jumps up and loudly slaps his own ass. “Bad!” he repeats.

“You!” he says again, this time reaching down into the vessel and pulling out a black life vest. Looking them each in the eyes to make sure they’re following him, the man demonstrates putting on and securing the flotation device. He then retrieves a black square package from the floor of the craft, extracts a black poncho from it, and uses it to completely cover himself.

“Good!” he shouts from somewhere inside the tiny makeshift tent. A moment later he emerges, still smiling.

“You,” repeats the man assertively to each member of Section B.

“Airplane,” he states, undulating his hand palm down as if it were gliding out of an open car window on the highway. With his other hand he points to the dinghy, then upward to the hook, then draws a straight line through the air to his hand-plane.

Removing his glasses to reveal dark, bloodshot eyes, the man continues to maneuver his flying hand while his other hand, palm up, moves in underneath.

“Water,” he explains, moving the lower hand in a circular motion.

“Boat,” he continues, extending the fingers of his airplane hand as he drops it down into the water hand, bringing them together with a startling clap.

“Okay!” he finishes with renewed zest, a hearty thumbs-up, and an enthusiastic nodding that communicates pride at having delivered an effective presentation.

Section B does not respond.

Without pause or concern the man quickly restores his aviators and moves around to the back of the bamboo structure. From behind the boat he retrieves a squat Styrofoam cooler, carries it around the craft, and places it gently in front of them pronouncing, “Food!”

He removes the lid to reveal a couple of stacks of plastic-wrapped triangles and eight plastic water bottles. Replacing the lid the man stands up, brings his hands up to his forehead as if in prayer, and bows deeply. With an unexpected suddenness he stands back up and with one final, “Okay!” he begins to walk back toward the same clump of jungle out of which he’d emerged.

“Wait!” shouts Dominic urgently. “What time is the airplane coming?!”

The man turns around and after some minor contemplation attempts to formulate an answer. Eventually he responds with, “Sleep!” while swiveling one arm down to a horizontally extended one, as if mimicking a closing clapperboard.

Dominic blinks uncomprehendingly for a few moments.

“I sink ‘e mean night,” offers Mirabelle in a lifeless monotone.

Dominic acknowledges with an even less energetic, “Ah.”

At this the instructor nods, smiles, and quickly exits the area.

“How long until nightfall?” asks Elvis to no one in particular as he rummages inside the cooler.

Reaching reflexively for his mobile phone Dmitri responds, “About an hour.”

Elvis pulls out one of the cellophane-wrapped triangles and begins to peel it open. In a few moments he’s gotten to the contents which he holds up to his nose.

“Ham and cheese,” he judges, dark eyebrows sloped outward in disappointment.

Rebekah is next to extricate a disfigured sandwich and a soft bottle of warm water from the cooler. Standing in the lengthening shadows of the surrounding forest she unwraps her meal and examines it. The cheese could be processed American, glossy and soft. The ham looks similarly processed, so much so that the oddly pink circle might not actually contain any pig.

Scratching her hairline she nods defiantly and resolutely bites off a large piece. She continues to nod as she masticates, visibly considering the flavour and consistency of the thing in her mouth.

Concluding that she’d chewed enough, Rebekah painfully and slowly swallows the large wad followed by a sizeable swig from the squishy plastic bottle.

“I mean,” she says eventually with a lingering grimace of discomfort, “it *probably* won’t kill us.”

Seemingly convinced by her review, or maybe too tired and hungry to care, the rest of Section B plod over to the cooler to retrieve their own portions. Then, resting on vegetal stumps, standing in the cover of tall plants, or sitting on the shaded edge of the dinghy, they consume their soggy ham and cheese sandwiches, washing them down with tepid water infused with the taste of malleable plastic.

Clearing her second bite, Rebekah is the first to break the silence of the repast.

“What,” she says assertively, then pauses to massage her eyebrow with a tense hand. Slowly and sullenly pulling down the side of her face she finishes, “the hell are we doing here?”

A few moments of silence pass. Then with a gentle aplomb Brock responds, “Living the dream.”

Rebekah bursts into laughter, eyes shut tightly, firmly holding her sandwich as it flops around with her abdominal contractions.

As her reaction peters out she wipes the tears that have been welling at the corners of her eyes. Suddenly assuming a dour tone she looks Brock in the eyes.

“I’m really sorry,” she says with a raw, honest, vulnerable softness. Meeting the gazes of the rest of the group she continues, “to all of you. I had no business leading you into any of this. I really have no business playing secret agent. I’m a fraud.”

“Oh, Becks,” responds Dmitri with a saddened and disappointed waggle of the head. “Let me start by assuring you, and I think I’m speaking for everyone here when I say, that nobody thinks of you as a leader.”

Her eyebrows furrow slightly as she looks around the Section, seeking either denial or confirmation. Some of the group allow the claim to percolate for a few moments before unanimously gesturing their acceptance.

“We’re all big boys and girls here,” continues Dmitri, looking at the team around him, “and we’re here of our own volition. Well, maybe not so much Brock” — he shoots an inquisitive glance at Brock who returns a non-committal shrug — “but anyway, this situation with Shindan is now an existential threat for all of us. And besides, as crazy as things are, I’m kind of enjoying this. I’m sure I already mentioned it but I’ll take what we’re doing now over a nine-to-five any day.

“And before you sell yourself short,” he continues without waiting for Rebekah’s response, “it was you that put me on this path. I don’t know what sorts of skills a *real*” — he curls his fingers into air quotes — “secret agent is supposed to have but between them and you, I’d put my money on you any day.”

Without asking for further explanation Rebekah frowns and reluctantly accepts the possibility with a shallow, sideways nod.

“It could just be that,” adds Dominic as he replaces the cap on his bottled water, “we picked this up as adults and as outsiders. You’re basically the opposite so maybe, because of that, you take yourself a little too seriously.”

Rebekah motions with her head again, this time more assuredly.

“Can I add my two cents?” interjects Brock with a patient readiness.

Nodding her assent he continues, “I think you’ve managed to keep your secrets quite well, all things considered. Playing a role, as you put it, seems like it’s part of the job description. And if nothing else, some of your m.o.’s gotta count for something. Like commandeering those subs back in Cape Verde.”

Rebekah grins involuntarily at the sudden and vivid memory. After a few moments she recovers, sits upright, and bobs her head with singular determination. “You know,” she says with renewed vigour, “that paper with my parents’ name on it really fucked me up.”

“You don’t say,” remarks Brock with mild sarcasm.

Rebekah responds with her own weakly sarcastic smile and then continues, “They’d been warning me about stuff like this since I was a kid. It never materialized so I just laughed it off, just like I did with their precautions. And now, suddenly, because of my negligence my parents might be involved in something really dangerous. I’ve hidden information from you guys” — she shakes her head in slow disbelief — “and I probably gave someone information that I should’ve kept to myself.”

“Live and learn,” responds Brock with a half-smile and upturned eyebrow.

“Yeah,” she acknowledges and passes into silence.

The sun is illuminating the tops of the surrounding trees when Elvis breaks through the growing din of the darkening jungle. “Is anyone else kinda freaked out about how the plane is supposed to get us out of here?” he asks with audible concern.

“Yes,” responds Mirabelle with genuine interest. “I sink if ‘e fly ‘ere and pick up ze boat,” she says, pointing up at the large carabiner above the dinghy, “we will crash into ze trees, maybe get kill.”

Looking around the small clearing Elvis agrees, “Right? How is a plane even going to be able to attach to that hook let alone pull us out of here in one piece? I don’t get this.”

“It does seem strange,” admits Dmitri as he looks around, trying to figure out how the feat will be accomplished.

About half an hour later a deep purple dusk settles into the sky above Section B as they wipe down and tidy up the site. Not long after, the sound of a flying engine can be heard dimly in the distance.

Wearing tense expressions, Section B sit along the edge of the dinghy, grasping the handles from beneath black ponchos, preparing at any moment to execute a planned bail out if the extraction begins to feel sketchy.

Soon the incoming sound resolves itself into the chop of large blades. Section B exchange open-mouthed expressions of comprehension as a helicopter appears overhead, spraying the area with a vicious downward gale and a harsh white spotlight.

From one side of the hovering aircraft a darkened figure tosses down four sturdy cables that terminate in closed hooks. The man above waves at the group, then makes exaggerated hugging motions as he interlinks his arms.

Understanding his directions Brock, Dmitri, Elvis, and Dominic use some of the supporting bamboo struts to snap the dangling cables into the giant carabiner. Then they pull away most of the remaining poles as the helicopter picks up the slack on the cables.

A few moments later the agents of Section B are huddled inward into the black dinghy, black ponchos obscuring their presence as they're pulled up and out of the clearing.

From there they quickly accelerate, the boat skimming the tops of trees as they glide over the darkened jungle canopy. Suddenly emerging over inky water, the watercraft is lowered to within a few meters of the ocean's surface as the helicopter continues to drag it through the spraying sea foam.

Finally, in the distance, distorted lights begin to flicker on the surface of the water. As the helicopter approaches, overboard lights flood the water and illuminate the ghostly underbelly of the Merle and a speedboat floating nearby.

## Legend

Golden reflections of the rising sun ripple across blazing swells as they glide past the incandescently white Merle. A couple of seabirds circle overhead in wide, lazy arcs. A single puffy white cloud hangs casually on the horizon. From all sides come the whooshing churn of water, the fresh briny smell of the ocean, the gentle sway of the waves.

Brock leans on the vessel's railing as he takes in the pleasant morning, smiling a soft smile of satisfaction.

The previous night had not been as agreeable. The flight in the dinghy was a roaring white-knuckle ride made worse by the fact that they were all dead tired. But the airborne part was a mere annoyance compared to the way they were literally dropped off at their destination.

As it was released, the dinghy struck the face of a wave and sent its occupants flying. Brock was ejected backwards into the water while Rebekah went forward into the vessel just as another wave slapped the boat. She hit the bottom at the same moment as it was rising to meet her backside, connecting with it in a way that she would later describe as smashing into a concrete floor.

The rest of the Section managed to hold on without sustaining much injury although Mirabelle had to make a last-second leap to one side to avoid the crashing canopy of baggage that suddenly dropped toward her. Her reaction was serene, almost rehearsed.

The crew of the Merle jumped into action immediately, getting everyone onto the yacht in minutes. On the way the Section was supplied with heartfelt apologies for the rough voyage, fragrant terrycloth robes, and warm cups of a soothing floral tea. The dinghy and its baggage bundle were brought onboard just as quickly and the newly-boarded passengers shown to their quarters.

No one took up OpOne on his offer of a nightcap. Most of the Section didn't bother stowing their bags in the compartments of their cramped accommodations. The small but comfortable bunks and gentle rocking of the boat proved too irresistible.

Brock continues to reminisce to the rhythm of the ocean when suddenly Dominic's voice pierces the tranquility from somewhere over his shoulder.

"Tiny rooms, huh?" asks the large man as he rounds Brock with a broad smile. He's holding a small saucer and dainty cup filled with what looks like black coffee.

"You said it," replies Brock unsteadily, still recovering from the mild shock. "Like a bed with a door."

"Ha, yeah, right," chuckles Dominic and takes a sip of his dark beverage.

“Where’d you get the coffee?” asks Brock.

“Oh, you didn’t see it downstairs?”

“No,” replies Brock, shaking his head.

“Well c’mon.”

Dominic leads Brock down the narrow flight of stairs to the main deck. Tucked in just beneath the stairs is a small, stainless steel serving table. Two steaming holes in the surface await rectangular warming trays while the the third is covered with a gleaming silver cloche. Next to the warming area is an ornate coffee service with two spouts. The service is surrounded by saucers, cups, spoons, tea bags, sugar, cream, and alternatives.

“This wasn’t here before,” remarks Dominic as he lifts the large argentine cover to reveal neat stacks of croissants warming underneath.

After a test of what turns out to be the intricate service’s hot water nozzle, Brock pours himself a coffee from the other spout and then carefully balances a croissant across the top of his cup as he makes his way back to his observation spot. Dominic refills his own cup, grabs a croissant, and follows after.

Leaning on the railing the two men watch silently, their gazes focused on the brilliant splashes of sunlight undulating on the surface of the ocean. They take occasional sips of their coffees and nibble on their crescent pastries. The birds circling overhead watch keenly for any falling scraps.

Brock bites his croissant down to a nub before noticing the interested parties above. He flicks the remnant outward, expecting it to be scooped up from the water. Instead, one of the creatures instantaneously shoots down and snatches it out of the air. Impressed by the maneuver, Brock involuntarily raises an eyebrow.

“Not bad,” judges Dominic as he notices Brock’s expression, “but I think Mira might do better.”

Recalling Mira’s demonstration outside the packed Khao San bar, Brock nods with an acquiescing frown.

“You know,” he says slowly, “I don’t think you ever told me what it is that you’re able to do. Your *powers*, if I can use that term.”

“I did,” responds Dominic with a mild smirk. “You might’ve been a little high at the time.”

“Oh, umm,” mumbles Brock, embarrassment animating his face.

“Somatic control. I prefer just Somatics,” interjects Dominic mercifully. “Extended control of the soma, the physical body.”

“Like being able to control your heart rate,” suggests Brock as bits of recollection filter back to him.

“Like being able to control your heart rate,” confirms Dominic. He finishes the last of his coffee, allowing it to linger for a moment on his tongue before finally swallowing it.

He continues, “I’ve read that if you’re very advanced you can even mimic being dead, at least for a little while.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” asks Brock with genuine interest.

“I imagine it’s a lot like holding your breath,” responds Dominic, shrugging. “If you were to pass out, your autonomic nervous system would take over. But with this level of control you probably wouldn’t let it get to that point.”

“Sounds useful,” remarks Brock with muted enthusiasm.

“I’ll teach you a few things,” responds Dominic, “but I think it’d be best to focus on getting you up to speed with the pod first. The more intel the group gets, the better. You know the drill.”

Brock nods. After a few moments he says, “I actually think I know more about the pod than I do about you. Personally, I mean. Take Dominic, for example. Is that even your real name?”

“Yeah, well,” says Dominic with a sideways pout, “we haven’t had much time to get properly acquainted. But if you’ll indulge me for a little longer, I’d rather discuss my curriculum vitae in front of everyone. That way we’re all on the same page and we can avoid another Rebekah situation.”

Brock recognizes the jab and chuckles out loud.

It takes another hour and a half for everyone to make their way to the main deck by which time fresh fruit, bacon, eggs, sausage, toast, and pancakes have made their way to the buffet area. A small table has been set up nearby with six chairs surrounding it. The table is covered with a pristine white table cloth. A colourful bouquet of flowers sits perkily in the middle.

The rest of Section B is already seated at the table, eating, and engaged in lively conversation when Rebekah approaches, limping slightly and yawning with a dreamy smile.

“Sleep well?” asks Dmitri with caffeine-fueled liveliness.

“Very well,” she responds, releasing a satisfied sigh. “I needed it.”

“Breakfast is over there,” he says between bites of cantaloupe.

Rebekah voices a quiet, “Ah,” and heads toward the food.

Just then, OpOne descends down the same stairs Dominic and Brock had used earlier.

“Good morning!” he says cheerfully. “I trust that you all had a good night’s rest?”

With the exception of Mirabelle who has finished her meager meal and is now smoking a cigarette, everyone nods a positive reply.

“And the clothing was well cared for? The facilities are satisfactory?” continues OpOne.

They inhale the scent of pine and lemon hanging around their bodies. They remember the all-in-one soap in miniature bottles along the wall of the tiny washroom and recall the minuscule shower head that trickled mostly filtered sea water, except for a brief fresh water rinse at the end. They run their hands over their clean clothes, the same ones they’d worn yesterday, laundered and left outside their rooms on hangers while they slept.

Yes, they nod. Satisfactory.

“I’m very gratified to hear this. Now, I don’t want to interfere with your enjoyment of the voyage but since we had such little time last night let me just provide you with a brief introduction and then you can get back to it.

“So, there is no place that is off-limits on the Merle. However, we ask that you refrain from entering staff areas such as the bridge, the engine room, and so on. We are quite intent on preventing accidents but we would be happy to provide you with a tour should you wish.

“Next, our travel itinerary is somewhat longer than it would be if we were sailing direct. This is necessary in order to avoid detection. I trust you understand my meaning. But don’t worry,” he smiles mischievously, “we have more than enough supplies on board.”

Most of Section B pull up vague and weak smiles in response.

“Good!” continues OpOne. “Finally, lunch is served at noon, dinner is at six, and the crew begin to bring breakfast out at eight, as some of you may have noted today. If you desire anything else in the meantime please don’t hesitate to ask any one of us.”

With this, OpOne takes a deep bow and ascends back up the stairs.

“Melon’s great,” says Dmitri as he places another finished cantaloupe rind on his plate.

“It’s all pretty good,” agrees Elvis as he cuts a triangle out of his single pancake, maneuvers it around on the plate, heaps butter and syrup on top, then quickly lifts the dripping portion to his mouth.

“Hey, guys, listen,” announces Dominic. “Brock and me were talking earlier and he pointed out that we’ve been playing our cards pretty close to the chest. In light of recent events” — he nods at Rebekah — “I thought that maybe I could help to level the playing field a bit. Everyone okay with that?”

The Section agree with lackadaisical, slightly puzzled shrugs.

“Okay,” begins Dominic resolutely. “So my name’s Dominic Venona.”

“Italian?” asks Mirabelle, a curl of grey smoke escaping from the corner of her mouth.

“By name only,” he responds with a look of mild regret. “Lots of relatives back in Italy but my parents were sort of non-traditional so we didn’t hold on to a lot of the culture. I never saw them set foot in a Catholic church or bowl bocce. I mean, my folks can still put

together a pretty mean lasagna but I guess for them Italy wasn't in their blood. That was probably why they left."

"Have you been back?" asks Brock as he spoons some scrambled eggs into his mouth.

"No," responds Dominic. "I was born years after my parents moved and we never really kept in touch with the extended family. I'd basically be a tourist in Italy at this point. I don't speak the language, they don't speak mine. It'd be awkward."

"Hmm," acknowledges Brock with a mouthful of egg.

"So growing up my family was basically just my parents and my brother," continues Dominic

"Tony?" asks Rebekah expectantly.

"Yeah, Tony," replies Dominic. "My younger brother."

"Right," notes Rebekah, furrowing her brow in recollection. "He drives a truck or something doesn't he?"

"Yeah, long-haul. The Pork-Chop Express. We grew up on John Carpenter films."

"Cute," responds Rebekah nonchalantly. "What about your folks?"

"Just me and Tony for a long time now."

"Oh," stammers Rebekah uncertainly.

"It's okay," assures Dominic, "my folks lived good lives. My mom had me and Tony pretty late in life so they were settled by the time they had us. We weren't wealthy or connected or anything but I never felt like I was wanting, like I was missing out. Tony and me had a pretty good start in life.

"I know that being a truck driver isn't everyone's definition of *success* but Tony'd loved trucks since he was a kid. Fact that he's making a living at it is my definition of success. I'm proud of him.

"As for me, I dabbled and worked odd jobs but couldn't choose just that *one* thing that I wanted to devote all my time to. When you introduced me to the agency" — he nods at Rebekah again — "that all changed."

"What'd you decide?" asks Elvis as he pushes aside the remnant of the pancake and begins to smear butter on a triangle of lightly toasted bread.

"Huh?" responds Dominic, nakedly confused by Elvis' question.

"I mean," clarifies Elvis, the greasy bread in his hand flopping around as he makes his point, "what did you decide to devote all of your time to?"

"Oh," replies Dominic with amusement, "that's not what changed. What changed was that I no longer felt a need to devote my time to any one thing."

“Ah,” notes Elvis as he sinks his teeth into the saturated toast.

“I’ve learned not to try to anticipate too much, not to set plans in stone,” explains Dominic. “Mostly because it’s a huge waste of time. I’ve changed my mind about a few things. The whole secret agent thing, for example. It seemed like a joke. Psychic spies? Supernatural missions? Coordinated by an agency ‘from beyond?’” — he gesticulates air quotes.

“I don’t think I ever used those exact words,” retorts Rebekah, pausing the examination of a banana she’s been holding.

“Sure, okay,” accepts Dominic, “but something like that. Just seemed like a pulp novel that took too many liberties with the plot.”

“But then you read the dossier,” says Rebekah triumphantly, tipping the partially peeled fruit at Dominic.

“Yes and no,” he counters. “The research helped, especially the stuff on Somatics or whatever names it goes by in the literature, but in the end it was the first mission that clinched it.”

Preempting the question building on Brock’s face, Dominic continues, “If I was going to pretend to be a secret agent then I decided I was going to be an agent for good. It was with that intent that we got our first intel. *My* first intel. It put us at a street corner where an old lady was selling vegetables. A couple of minutes later some asshole walked up and started screaming at her, slapping her, stomping on her goods.

“The whole thing happened out in broad daylight, plenty of witnesses, everyone just stood there gawking. Some people even took videos. That’s the first time that the word *secret* made a lot of sense. I put on my surgical mask, as was the fashion of the time, and put my fists to good use.”

“Cleaned the guy’s clock with one punch,” adds Dmitri with a bright smile. “Fucker deserved it.”

Dominic continues, “Short mission but it brought home what Rebekah’d been saying. She might’ve even undersold it a bit. Since then I’ve wondered if helping that old woman might not have been the only objective. In any event, it was one of the most fulfilling things I’d done with my life until then.”

“Gainful employment didn’t do it for you?” asks Dmitri with mild sarcasm.

“Schlepping in a warehouse and working night security had their perks,” explains Dominic in full seriousness. “Gave me freedom to come up with plots, characters, arcs. I thought about lots of stuff. Pay was lousy though. Bouncing and construction paid better but gave me less mental freedom. As for boxing, I just wasn’t good enough for any big money gigs. Then I got too old and concussed. In any event, exchanging my time or blood for a few pieces of green paper never really seemed worthwhile. Tony and me used to talk about this a lot, about what life might’ve been like if we’d gotten more than high school diplomas.”

“And?” asks Dmitri before taking a sip from his ornate coffee cup.

“We concluded that he’d still end up driving a truck and I’d still be just as flaky. I don’t think any nine-to-five would’ve ever satisfied me, even if I had a job like yours.”

Dmitri blinks for a moment and then asks, “A job like mine?”

“Yeah, didn’t you work in online gambling or something?” inquires Dominic.

“Thing about that is,” responds Dmitri slowly, “I’m pretty sure I was working for Russian organized crime.”

## Bezopasnost

“Wait,” says Brock with a perplexed expression on his face. “What do you mean you *think* you worked for the Russian mafia?”

“I don’t really know, not for sure,” replies Dmitri, hoisting his shoulders up into a shrug. “But I know enough Russian. And when I heard the new boss’ bosses calling themselves the *new security committee* it just left me with a bad feeling.”

“I don’t underst-” begins Brock before Mirabelle abruptly cuts him off with, “Kah Geh Beh,” while pointing vigorously at Dmitri with her cigarette hand.

“Yes, precisely,” replies Dmitri with an acknowledging smirk.

“What?” asks Brock, thoroughly confused.

“KGB,” clarifies Dmitri, his smirk extending into a mirthless grin. “You know, old-school Commie state security. Iron curtain. Soviet agents. Assassins. Blackmailers. Extortionists. Organized crime under a state banner.”

“Oh. But aren’t they long gone?” asks Brock with pointed interest.

“Nah, they just change names. The *revolution* never ends, comrade. You might’ve heard the old expression about selling the capitalist the rope to hang himself with?”

Without pausing for a reply he continues, “Well, that rope could just as well be an online casino.”

Brock shrugs in a whatever-you-say gesture.

“All I can say,” continues Dmitri forthrightly, “is that with all the stories from the old country I had good reason to be a little paranoid.”

Brock raises an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Maybe I’m just too sensitive,” clarifies Dmitri with a pout. “Anyway, I bumped into Rebekah right around that time and we got to talking. Eventually I asked her who she worked for, she said she didn’t, explained how she pulled that off, and then she showed me. I was duly impressed and agreed to help build a prototype based on some of the research in that bag of hers. Once I understood the underlying concepts, the pod pretty well just built itself. The only real challenge was sourcing cheap and plentiful components, and that wasn’t really a big challenge.”

“You added the neural network stuff,” nods Rebekah, pointing a recently licked coffee spoon at Dmitri. “That was completely your baby. I would never in a million years have ever thought of that. Didn’t even know such a thing existed until I met you.”

“So, wait, what were you using before the pod?” asks Elvis eagerly, leaning in, hands clasped and elbows on the table.

“Pen and paper, mostly,” responds Rebekah, gazing upward into her memories. “I’d manually jot down repeating themes of the day, then connect them to my morning recordings. It was clumsy and slow and easy to make mistakes.”

“What did you do for entrainment?” asks Elvis, perching his head atop his arm triangle.

“Binaural beats through headphones and a strobe. I’d shut myself into the bathroom with my phone and an old voice recorder, do a session, transcribe it later. Worked great except for all of the work and the errors. The pod makes it so much easier and more reliable. Also more comfortable.”

“Yeah,” interjects Dmitri, “we gotta get Brock started on it, like, yesterday. And Elvis could probably stand to train some more.”

“What about Mira?” asks Elvis, releasing his arms and folding them on the table.

“Her net’s getting close to the ceiling on recognition already,” responds Dmitri. “If we do much more training we risk reversing the score, making it less accurate.”

Keeping her eyes on her cigarette as she taps it over a small black ashtray, Mira nods courteously in Dmitri’s direction.

“In any event,” continues Dmitri, “once I started working with the pod I noticed that I could hear, or maybe a better word is *perceive*, subtle sounds, like a muffled radio playing in another room. Sometimes it was conversations, sometimes music, sometimes singing, sometimes a mix. I could never pick up on what was being said or sung. The music was disjointed, not really music but more a collage of musical motifs from a specific era.”

“Sounds intrusive,” observes Brock.

“It’s not. I have to relax into it, *allow* it in. Like I said, it’s subtle. And it’s not really something new. When I was younger I had experiences like it, usually late at night, but I always just chalked them up to booze, drugs, tiredness. Now I just ease into it.

“I’m still exploring how it works but so far it seems to act like an early-warning system. When something is about to change around me, the signal changes. If it’s music then it’ll suddenly switch up styles, or if it’s a conversation it suddenly sounds like two different people, or more people, or fewer. You know, something noticeably different.”

“That sounds like what Mira does”, suggests Brock, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs.

“Not exactly,” replies Dmitri. “With me it’s just a vague warning and it doesn’t always happen. Not sure what sets it off. Mira’s different, more precise. What she’s doing is more like *sensing* the future.”

“*Communicating with the future,*” corrects Dominic as he reaches for his coffee. “With herself, to be precise. Based on some of our testing anyway. My theory is that her future self sends back a signal, a feeling in her muscles telling her how to move.”

“Like magnet,” cuts in Mirabelle, once again tapping her cigarette over the ashtray. “I relax and it pull me.”

“A sort of self-actualized causal loop,” continues Dominic. “I used to think that her nihilistic front was a put-on but maybe it’s what makes it possible. Maybe that sort of emotional flatness is what’s needed to cut through the noise.”

“Flat nihilist beetch,” interjects Mirabelle slowly, head cocked sideways, cigarette held up between the fingers of a limply upraised hand.

The table goes silent.

“Zis I ‘ave not ‘eard,” she says at last with a courteous but affectless smile. “From ozer people ozer sings, but not zis.”

“I didn’t call you a bitch,” notes Dominic abruptly.

Switching to a slyly giddy smile Mirabelle replies, “But I do not care if I am beetch.”

Leaning into the conversation Elvis asks, “So how far forward can you actually see? Erm, *feel?*”

“Maybe four second,” replies Mirabelle with a gentle shrug, her smile dissolving back into her customarily detached expression.

“That’s a long time,” muses Elvis. “But what happens if you don’t follow through? Or what if something interrupts you before you can send yourself a signal?”

“What ‘appen when somesing never ‘appen?” she replies nonchalantly. “I do not know. Zere is still much mystery for me.”

“And this is all still a working theory,” adds Dominic. “But we’re starting to see overlap in what we can do. Our abilities, I mean. Not just that we can all do these things, more or less, but that they might actually just be one thing or, at least, somehow related.”

Brock considers the statement for a moment. “Not sure I follow you,” he says at last.

“Well, Dmitri needs to relax and open up while listening for the signal. Mira needs to soften up while paying attention to the pull. Elvis needs some time to ease into his state but he also needs to control the flow of his energy while he’s in it.

“Correct?” asks Dominic as he gazes over at Elvis.

Elvis nods back affirmatively.

“I need to be calm and simultaneously focus my mind in order to *get into* my body,” continues Dominic.

“The pod is built around the same idea. Or am I wrong about that?” he asks again, this time swiveling his head toward Dmitri.

“Mostly right,” responds Dmitri with a sideways nod.

“As for you and Rebekah,” continues Dominic, turning to face Brock, “I don’t think we fully know what you’re good at yet and we know that Rebekah does that staring trick, which I’m sure requires focused quietude.”

With this Dominic looks expectantly over at Rebekah.

“*Confidence*,” she replies with a cocky head nod. “*Confidence* is probably better. And shorter.”

“Sure,” confirms Dominic assertively. “As long as we all understand it the same way, we don’t need to argue the nomenclature.”

“And as Becks points out,” adds Dmitri, “there are more aspects to it, more variables to consider.”

Rebekah casts a long and intense side-eye at him just as he turns toward her.

“Confidence, Becky! *Confidence!*” announces Dmitri cheerfully in response.

She recedes slightly. The daggers shoot out of her eyes at a slower rate. The slits through which they emerge are a little less sharp.

“Okay, seriously, is there something going on between you two?” asks Brock, waving a butter knife between Rebekah and Dmitri.

Dmitri turns his beaming face toward Brock and, relaxing it, he explains, “A long time ago Rebekah told me some things in confidence and swore me to never reveal them unless I thought she was overstepping certain bounds.”

“Kinky,” notes Brock with an overly stern face.

“There was alcohol involved,” includes Rebekah with a weak sneer.

“Self-administered,” counters Dmitri with an upraised eyebrow. “And as I recall, I wasn’t the one pushing it.”

Shooing the conversation away with her hand Rebekah responds, “Yeah, well, whatever.”

A warm ocean breeze enters from behind her and winds itself through the group before exiting back out to sea. After some time Brock turns to Dmitri and asks, “So I take it you’re Russian?”

“Originally, yeah,” replies Dmitri, nodding in confirmation. “We *took a permanent family vacation* after my father had an unpleasant run-in with state security. Me and my brothers didn’t know the real reason for the trip. Probably for the best, in hindsight.”

Continuing his questioning Brock asks, “How many brothers do you have?”

“Two,” notes Dmitri. “One older, one younger. Maybe one day you’ll get to meet them.”

“And your dad, what did he do to attract the attention of the KGB?”

“He was a merchant marine so he traveled internationally and he had opinions about the state. One day he didn’t come home as expected and my mom nearly lost her mind looking for him. Eventually she found out he’d been *detained* for interrogation. Nearly a month later they released him. No charge but plenty of threats and a few bruises. That’s when they both made secret plans to escape.”

“Huh,” exhales Brock with slight bewilderment. “Did they think he was working for the other side or something?”

“A dissident working for western powers, yeah,” confirms Dmitri. “Of course he wasn’t but they didn’t need any evidence to disappear people, just suspicion. Family members were automatically scrutinized too, in case his *weird* ideas rubbed off on us. For all I know we all might’ve ended up behind bars or in some work camp at some point. I’m sure there’s still a file on us out there somewhere.”

“And now you’re a secret agent with a super-secret agency,” states Brock directly. “Ironic.”

Dmitri pushes out a singular laugh and follows it with a gently amused, “Yeah.”

“Except I don’t get any totalitarian vibes from the agency,” he continues after a brief pause. “Or from any of you. Well, maybe Rebekah a bit.”

He turns to her, a shit-eating grin spread across his face.

“Har har,” she replies sarcastically. “Knee-slappers aside, I still don’t really know much about my new friends Mira and Elvis here. Yeah, okay, we’ve had some adventures together but how do I know they’re not somehow connected to the assassination attempts? Or to Shindan? I’m not saying it would be on purpose, like consciously, but still...”

Elvis responds to her statement with a wounded expression. Mirabelle’s face stays exactly the same.

“I’m not accusing anyone of anything,” explains Rebekah, “I’m just saying—“

She’s silenced by Mirabelle who asserts, “I can say my story. I do not care.”

Stubbing out her cigarette into the crowded black ashtray she leans in slowly.

“Mirabelle Saint-Juste,” she announces lazily, lolling her head from side to side as she examines the dying tobacco embers. Lifting her head up to look at no one in particular she says, “I sink maybe my family ‘ave kill many many people.”

## Deuxième Sûreté

“My mozer,” begins Mirabelle, “say zis to me. Zat maybe we are relative to Louis Antoine de Saint-Just.”

Section B stare at her blankly.

“You know Maximilien Robespierre maybe?” she asks hopefully as she taps a newly lit cigarette over the small ashtray.

Their expressions morph into ones of puzzlement.

“La Révolution française? ‘ave you ‘eard of zis?” she inquires, gnarling the English portion with slight irritation.

Brock recognizes the name and responds, “The French Revolution? Wasn’t that a long time ago?”

“Over two ‘undred year,” she acknowledges. “Ze men are famous because zey ‘ave kill many people in” — she makes a chopping motion with her cigarette hand — “ze guillotine.”

“They were executioners?” inquires Elvis with a serious frown.

“No,” replies Mirabelle, “ozer people kill but zey give order. After ze révolution, zey ‘ave become big government official. If you give zem problem, zey cut off your ‘ead. If zey do not like you, zey cut off your ‘ead.”

“I see,” notes Elvis with a slightly more grave expression.

“But I do not know if it iz true,” she continues. “It iz just somesing my mozer say.”

With a mischievous smile Brock asks, “Do you feel like chopping people’s heads off?”

She stares into Brock’s eyes as she takes a long drag on her cigarette. Holding the smoke casually and unhurriedly in her lungs she finally exhales and allows her pucker to slide into a sly grin.

“Usually,” responds Mirabelle at last, “no.”

Turning back to the group she resumes, “So maybe zis is my ‘istory. It iz a little like to learn zat maybe I am relative to ‘itler.”

“That seems extreme,” doubts Dominic, head held at an angle.

“Maybe,” she responds meekly. Then, shrugging away his analysis she continues, “It does not matter. I am not like zis. I do not want to kill anybody.”

With upturned eyes Mirabelle pauses to reflect on her last statement. After a moment of consideration she corrects herself, “*Almost*. But do you know? Ze Révolution inspire bose fahzers of America and ... ‘ow to say ... les Soviétiques. Now ze country are enemy.”

“American fathers?” asks Dmitri, waiting intently for an explanation.

Mirabelle raises her eyebrows, takes a drag, and explains as she exhales. “You know, Jefferson, Franklin, men like zis.”

“Oh,” realizes Dmitri, “you mean the Founding Fathers.”

“Yes,” she acknowledges tersely.

“Okay, yes,” he responds with a pensive smirk, “but we can read about them in history books. I think we’d rather hear about your mostly homicide-free life.”

Looking around the table he’s met with tiny nods of agreement.

With the attention now back on her, Mirabelle acquiesces.

Gazing downward and resting her thumb against her lower lip she begins, “Zere is not many sing to say. My fahzer leave my mozer when I was young girl. I stay wis her and after zat we argue for long time. One day I say no more, I am finish, and I leave. I travel in Europe for a little time and zen travel to Nors America. After zis I meet Dominic, I meet you all, and end of story.”

“Whoa whoa,” rebuffs Dmitri with an upraised hand. “You’re leaving out a couple of things aren’t you?”

“Comme quoi?” she responds.

“Like where were you born? How did you grow up? Where did you travel in Europe? Why did you go there and what did you do?” he says pointedly.

“So many sing,” responds Mirabelle, visibly taken aback.

Holding up her hand, thumb tucked and fingers extended, she begins, “One, I am born near Paris. Number two” — she uses her other hand to hold down a finger — “normal, maybe, like everyone. I go to school, I have some friend, sometime we are in trouble. Number sree” — she holds down another finger — “I go to Belgique, umm, *Beljeom* ... Germany, and zen Czechia. Finally I like Prague so I stay a little. Number four” — another finger is folded over — “I go to many party, talk wis many people. Some of zees people are ... maybe I should not say exactly ... zey ‘ave business to sell product for party.

“One time somesing ‘appen and I must use ze *special dance*. Zey see me and zey want to give me job. It is somesing like security for delivery. I say yes and so I ‘ave more money. But after some time I feel ze *ennui* so I say I want to ‘elp wis ship for Nors America. Zey say yes and I go. But I do not ‘elp. I feel I am finish so I leave. I travel many week, see interesting sing, eat interesting food, sometime talk wis interesting people. Zen I see Dominic fight in ze *gymnase* and suddenly I feel I must go inside. ‘e is surprise when ‘e meet me, I sink?”

She looks to Dominic expectantly.

He responds with a nod and then states, “*Surprised* is one way to put it. Couple of guys were watching us and accused us of rehearsing it like some kind of practical joke. I’d probably think the same thing if I was in their shoes.”

“After zis,” continues Mirabelle, “Dom tell me many sings about ze agency. Strange sings, I sink. Zen ‘e show me” — she makes circling motions over her chest — “ze *Sou-mah-teeks*, and I sink, yes, ze agent is pretty cool. I want to try.”

Signalling his intention to talk, Elvis raises his hand. The rest of Section B silently turn to look at him, faces frozen in anticipation. As the deep wrinkles between the brows of his lowered head relax, he angles his gaze upward to meet Mirabelle’s.

“I just want to make sure I understand this correctly,” he begins, an agitated nervousness stiffening his neck, “you were running security for drug dealers? Am I getting that right?”

“I do not say drug dealer,” responds Mirabelle, unperturbed.

Dragging his head upright Elvis retorts, “No, you didn’t say it. But, I mean, what other kinds of *party products* would require security and secretive overseas shipping?”

Pulling a corner of her mouth back, Mirabelle shrugs.

“Well isn’t it possible that some of your old associates are who’s been coming after us?” proposes Elvis, eyebrows raised to accentuate the obviousness of the question.

Mirabelle squints and purses her lips as she ponders his suggestion. After a few moments her eyes widen and with a resolute shake of her head she replies simply, “No.”

“It seems like something we should consider,” continues Elvis. “Maybe it’s not even someone you knew directly, maybe a riv—“

She cuts him off assertively, “Maybe it iz Rebekah mozer and fahzer, or maybe it iz you?”

“M-Me?” stammers Elvis. “I don’t ... what do you mean?”

“Some sing in your life,” she explains. “Maybe some people. Maybe you do some bad sings and now ze people want ze *vengeance*.”

The French pronunciation of the final word takes a moment for Elvis to decipher. When he finally does, an involuntary look of astonishment splashes across his face. “Vengeance? Against me?” he blurts out, the absurdity of her statement contorting his features.

She cocks her head gently forward in wordless confirmation.

“No way!” counters Elvis emphatically. “No. I never hung out with drug dealers or ex-KGB casino guys. I mean, you guys all had colourful lives and, you know, props and all, but my life wasn’t like that. I’m a first gen Vietnamese kid. And an only child. I know it’s kind of a cliché but there were expectations on me. Between helping my folks in the

restaurant, studying, and sports, I didn't have much time to get into trouble. One time I got arrested in high school for trespassing on school property. That's it. Just a stupid prank."

"That's more than I ever accomplished," interjects Brock solemnly, his mouth extended into a tight and mirthless smirk.

"I'm not proud of it!" exclaims Elvis, rejecting the intimation with upraised hands. "And my folks were *really* disappointed. That's worse than if they were mad."

Gazing attentively at Elvis, Rebekah leans forward and asks, "So how were you able to peel yourself away to join our happy little expedition?"

"I was having a really hard time trying to figure out how to tell them that I didn't want to study medicine," he recalls wistfully. "They really wanted me to be some kind of doctor. I sorta caved. I couldn't stand to disappoint them. But then thinking about doing that for the rest of my life I'd start to panic. I just didn't know what to do so I went online for help."

A few members of Section B groan audibly.

"I know," acknowledges Elvis. "Ninety nine percent of the advice sucked but if I hadn't posted anything then I never would've met Dmitri."

"And Dmitri's one percent helped?" asks Rebekah with interest.

"No," replies Elvis, turning to Dmitri and shrugging apologetically. "I mean, maybe. The things we talked about got me to think about the problem differently. And he helped to back the cover story that I eventually came up with."

Dmitri accepts the recognition with a gentle, closed-eye nod.

"I told my folks," continues Elvis, "that I was being interviewed for a paid internship with a medical equipment firm. I created fake business cards, letterhead, a whole company profile. Dmitri donated one of his burner numbers and a P.O. box."

"It didn't bother you to lie to them?" asks Rebekah, still engrossed in the conversation.

Elvis raises his eyebrows and replies, "No. It didn't bother me at all. I figured I could always burn the whole thing if I thought I was going down the wrong road, tell my folks the offer fell through somehow, and get back to becoming a doctor. At least I would've *tried*. Then Dmitri offered me a free apartment and some ... what did you call the money?"

He turns his head inquisitively toward Dmitri.

"Walking around money," replies Dmitri dryly.

"Hang on!" interrupts Rebekah sharply. "Is *that* why you wanted me to get an extra safe house? And all that extra cash? That was for Elvis? You told me you needed it for some secret agency mission."

"Yup," replies Dmitri calmly. "That was true. I just didn't provide all the details."

Rebekah lets out an exasperated sigh. Then, changing her demeanour to its previous state she turns toward Elvis and asks, “So you were already living in the city when Shindan hit us?”

“Umm,” replies Elvis unsteadily, “yes, and, I guess, thank you. The place was great. It’s a shame they trashed it.”

Rebekah replies with a flat, affectless smile.

“Okay,” chimes in Mirabelle, “we ‘ave know a little more about everybody. But maybe not so much Brock *Muhdeek*.”

Taking the cue, Brock takes a moment to collect his thoughts and then launches into his own story.

He talks about his sister, his ageing parents, his dead cat, his lackluster life, the feeling of squandered opportunity and passive surrender. He describes his long and steady descent beyond the borderline of mediocrity, right up until the moment he first encountered Section B.

He pauses to formulate a summary to his narrative and then slowly concludes, “You all know that I had my doubts about the Section, the agency, the stuff I was hearing. And I suppose that a decent secret agent should have a healthy dose of skepticism.”

The other agents of Section B agree with varying nods.

“But,” he finishes, “I can’t deny what I’ve experienced in the past few weeks. It’s been scary, thrilling, intriguing, weird. Rebekah was right when she said that my old life was over. At the time I thought it was some kind of a threat and now, well, I don’t really know what exactly this is but it’s definitely not the shitty dead end I was on track for. I’m glad to be here, now, with you guys.”

The group returns soft, genuine smiles. Even Mirabelle appears to be mildly touched by his words.

As the breakfast conversation peters out, napkins are placed onto the table and chairs are pushed back. While preparing to disperse Mirabelle and Elvis exchange a shared admiration for French baguettes, hers with butter and brie, his as a base for bahn mi sandwiches, and they walk off discussing Vietnam’s French connection. Dominic and Rebekah leave in the other direction as they discuss Shindan’s possible connections to her parents. Mirabelle, Dmitri, and Brock head silently toward the sleeping quarters to fetch the pod.

## Clearance

“I’m a little nervous,” admits Brock as he stares fixedly at the white enclosure.

“Perfect,” replies Dmitri while attaching a final cable from a laptop computer to a port at the back of the pod.

Mirabelle observes quietly from a chair against a wall, leaning back casually with another lit cigarette held loosely in one hand.

“There has to be feeling in the request,” continues Dmitri as he stands up to face Brock. “If you’re bored, sleepy, distracted, you’re not gonna get a good result. That is, if you get one at all. Do you meditate?”

“No,” admits Brock. “Never appealed to me.”

“Shame,” remarks Dmitri, “but never mind. Since this is your first session you’ll only be taking this thing out for a test drive. Once we know how you react we can start training your neural net. For now you should concentrate on that request. Maybe some piece of information you want, or some material support, or some assistance you need. Use that jittery energy to piggyback it on.”

Brock considers the directions for a moment and finally replies, “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Focus on the request,” instructs Dmitri, “at the same time as that anxiety. Strong feelings are like the fuel. Don’t reject them or try to push them away.”

Brock does as advised and closes his eyes.

“Who’s after us? How did this all start?” he questions silently while mentally replaying the events of the past few weeks. A mixture of doubt and hope ripples its way across his nerves as he lands on some of the more exciting memories.

“Okay,” interrupts Dmitri after a few minutes, “let’s get you into the pod.”

Brock’s eyelids shoot open with mild a start. He follows Dmitri to the pod’s mesh recliner, steps into the enclosure, and slowly lowers himself into the seat.

“Comfortable?” asks Dmitri.

“Umm, yeah,” replies Brock after brief consideration. “So what do I do now?”

“Put on the headset and then do as little as possible. Relax. Let go. Concentrate on the vibration. We’re going to be entraining your brainwaves to a deep sleep level so your biggest challenge will be staying awake.

“After that, try to say out loud what you’re experiencing but keep in mind to *describe* rather than name, use adjectives rather than nouns. Agency responses tend to be symbolic, representational, so don’t assume anything. Analysis happens later.”

“What kinds of response should I expect? What if it gets a little too intense?” quizzes Brock as he adjusts the headset.

“Expect nothing. Or maybe it’s better to say expect anything. As for freaking out, it’s never happened but you can just push open the lid from inside. There’s good air flow in there, no latch, and even if you somehow get stuck inside, the insulating panels will break if you push on them hard enough.”

“So just chill, wait to see what comes to me, and then describe it?” confirms Brock.

“Yeah. Ready?”

Brock nods and leans back.

Dmitri gently lowers the lid, plunging Brock into total blackness and absolute silence. For a few moments he sits there, taking in the experience. The mesh recliner is as comfortable as he remembers but this time he notices that the inside of the pod has a mild, almost undetectable scent, like a mix of lavender and pine.

Without any visual or auditory cues the tiny space might as well not have any internal dimensions. Brock extends one hand outward and, feeling the reassuringly warm tile on his fingertips, retracts his hand to its previous position.

Slowly the inky nothingness reaches over and enfolds him.

A deep vibration begins to build all around him, reminding him of the auditory signal that Rebekah had him listen to as they traveled to Cabo Verde. *Binaural beats*, he reminds himself as the sensation builds. The low rumble reaches through his limbs and into his body, gently shaking every internal organ, benignly beating on his bones. It feels like the molecules in his head are losing cohesion, as though they’re being painlessly vapourized.

“This feels really fucked,” he manages to say through muddled sensations.

“Looks like that’ll be your upper limit,” responds Dmitri through the headset, his voice distorted by the low frequency in the pod. “I’ll back off the amplitude.”

Brock’s head almost immediately re-assembles itself. “Better,” he reports.

“Great. Now don’t forget,” returns Dmitri, “relax and let it come to you. Describe, don’t name, and don’t leave anything out. Be detailed.”

With that Brock is plunged back into the pulsating void. The frequency is pleasant and he allows it to permeate his being. It begins to feel like it’s sifting him up and out of his dense, porous body, positioning him about a foot above it.

There he floats, enjoying the calm sensation of the omnipresent vibration. Even his thoughts become fuzzy and begin to decohere within the signal. Slowly, everything dissolves.

A timeless moment later he begins to perceive some sort of dim object far off in the distance. He studies it as it floats toward him, becoming larger and clearer.

"It ... it looks like a photograph," he says, somehow remembering both how to speak and what he's supposed to say. "A rectangle. A plane. Four corners, Sharp. Some kind of complex design or picture on it."

He pauses a moment as the image becomes larger and more defined.

"It is a picture. A photo. The picture looks like a building, an office building," continues Brock. "I know I'm supposed to describe but it's so clear ... it's a photo of a building. Black and white. At the bottom is a cracked surface. It looks like a road. Above that is another horizontal patch with vertical dividers every so often. This looks like a sidewalk. There's a vertical stick in it with a circle attached to it at the top. Looks like a something you'd lock your bike to.

"To the right of that there's this horizontal strip in front with vertical lines at regular spaces. You can see through it. The strip seems to be attached to vertical columns. It's exactly like a fence. At one point there's something like a gate with two panels. This time there are diamond patterns on the panels, which are also see-through. At the top of this gate thing are three connected circles. Behind that is an open area that appears to have a kind of elevated section, like a platform. On the face of the building are many evenly-spaced rectangles which look like windows. The ones on the right have inside panels pulled down at different heights, like sun shades.

"The windows facing me, above the courtyard, have three horizontal dividers and two vertical ones. Wait ... those are just on the first floor. There seems to be some narrow horizontal divider, like a ledge. The next row of rectangles above that are smaller, by about a third, and have only two horizontal dividers. The next row up is pretty much the same. The left part of the building, next to the courtyard, is closer.

"On the inner part, though, above the courtyard, there's a design that sits between the windows. It looks like three squares, one within each other. The design is as wide as the window. The pattern repeats all the way to the top. In the corner, where the right and back part of the building join, is a long vertical strip with windows all the way down. They also have regularly spaced dividers but are much bigger. Through the glass are diagonal lines that look like a staircase. There are what look like neon lights over doorways on each floor.

"At the bottom, about in the middle of the first row of windows, is a dark grey strip and below that another window with a thick white rectangle inside it. Inside of that is a small white rectangle. This one's horizontal and it looks like it might be stuck there with a piece of sticky tape. Like a notice stuck to a window."

Brock takes a moment to silently examine the image.

"On the right section of the building are two black boxes stuck to the wall. They're about a quarter of the way up the windows, between the first and second, and third and fourth windows. They look like fixed lights for the courtyard. And on the left section of the building, about flush with the top of the right window, erm, *rectangle* is a small white

protrusion that's bent, like a goose neck, and ends in a shiny black ball. It looks a lot like a security camera. What else? Oh, the face of the building looks like large bricks. But they're clean and smooth, like you'd find on government buildings or banks. The wall on the right that faces the courtyard looks like it could be poured concrete. Pretty sure this is an office of some kind."

"You're analyzing too much," cuts in Dmitri, sending a mild shock through Brock's system.

Instantly the image is lost.

Brock sits in the darkness for a moment trying hard to regain his relaxed focus. Instead he finds that he's becoming increasingly agitated. Feeling the heat emanating from his head he remarks, "I don't think I have anything else for today. Can we get me out of here?"

Within seconds the vibration ceases and the lid is opened. Brock tries hard to focus on Dmitri's features as they hover over him but his perceptions are still synchronized to the pod's frequency. As he moves closer to Brock, waves of distortion wash over Dmitri's face like interlocking ripples on a pond.

"Give me your hand," Dmitri instructs Brock, his voice choppy as though it's coming through rotating helicopter blades. Even Dmitri's palm seems to be pulsating as Brock extends his own to grasp it.

In a few moments Brock is up and on his feet, though barely. The distortion in his ear isn't limited to just sound and he finds himself tilting unsteadily. As he stumbles around, Dmitri rushes in behind him with a collapsible chair and guides him into it.

Sitting slowly and unsteadily on the small chair, Brock recalls Rebekah's after-pod technique and allows his head to hang down while cradling it with his hands. He sits like this and stares at a single point on the floor as his perceptions slowly steady themselves.

A minute or so later Brock feels centered enough to sit back up and take a deep breath.

"Kicks like a mule," he professes through a weak smile.

"Your descriptions were a little more..." notes Dmitri, pausing to consider his words, "concrete than we'd like but for your first session you did pretty good. How was it in the pod? What was the experience like?"

Brock considers his questions for a moment and then responds, "I kinda felt like I left my body but not in a bad way. Overall it was nice. Relaxing."

"Sounds about right," says Dmitri with a smile.

Recalling that Mirabelle was in the room, Brock spins around to see if she's still there.

He's met with a pouting nod of approval as she slowly gets to her feet. "It sound like maybe pod will 'ave good use for you," she posits as she glides toward the door.

Unplugging the cables from the back of the pod Dmitri suggests, "I'm gonna break this down and then head up to the deck. You go on ahead if you want."

Uncertain, Brock swivels his head between the door and Dmitri.

"We can review how to put the pod back together and operate it later. It's not that complicated," assures Dmitri, his back to Brock as he focuses on the dismantling process.

Brock decides at last to follow Mirabelle back to the deck while pondering the meaning of the crystal clear photo he'd just experienced.

"Hmm," concludes Dmitri to himself inscrutably.

## Cutout

Rebekah, Elvis, and Dominic are hunched over something at the breakfast table as Brock approaches. For a moment his line of sight is blocked by the flowers that had been pushed to one side but he can soon see the sheet of paper that they're focused on. As he gets even closer he sees a handwritten list of names. Their conversation is well underway.

"... I don't think so," states Rebekah with a mild grimace as she stares down at a name above Elvis' finger. "He has motive, yes, but I can't imagine how he could've gotten out of that mess so fast. And he'd have to find money and hire the shooters. And find us. I just don't think so. Not him."

She looks up and meets Brock's surprisingly serene gaze with one of eager welcome.

"Dude," she addresses him hopefully, "what do you think? Come, sit down. You were there. We need your input."

"Think about what?" inquires Brock as he glides onto an empty chair, pushing the floral obstruction in front of him aside.

"Lukas," she responds, her face frozen in anticipation of his imminent recollection.

"You know," she says at last, "the first boat we took. The trip across the Atlantic. Cabo Verde."

"Oh, right!" bursts out Brock as the memory comes crashing back into his brain. "The thing in the harbour," he recalls while very slowly crumpling one hand into the other. Then he makes a low, groaning sound as his hands compact tightly together.

"Right," she confirms. "That thing. That guy. You think it could be him coming after us?"

"Lukas?" replies Brock as he considers the possibility that the lanky Lithuanian is having them followed, shot at, and now smuggled out of Thailand in relative luxury and comfort. Lukas would've had to have somehow gotten out of custody in Cabo Verde, tracked him and Rebekah to Thailand, and there have made all of the ad hoc arrangements to come after them in the span of a couple of days.

"That's a tall order for a guy like him," notes Brock after some deliberation. "He seems like the type that could hire hitmen, the type that might have those kinds of connections. You know, seedy. But everything else, that seems unlikely. And this boat that we're on right now, that doesn't make any sense at all. I don't think it's him."

Nodding in agreement, Rebekah places an "X" next to Lukas' name as Elvis' finger moves to the next name on the list.

“Victor and *question mark*?” he asks as he reads it aloud.

“Yeah, Victor and ... what was her name again?” asks Rebekah as she looks up at Brock, her irreverent expression anticipating an answer.

“Allesandra,” he replies in a reserved tone. “Sandy.”

With a tender but curiously curled smile she nods and exclaims, “Of course! Sandy. Rhymes with Handy. How could I forget?”

She crosses out the question mark, writes Allesandra’s name above it, and draws an arrow downward to indicate the word’s proper placement in the list.

“Victor and *Allesandra*,” reads Rebekah, gazing up at Brock with the same mischievous smile. “What about them?”

He winces slightly as he evades her gaze. “Maybe, I dunno,” he says with soft but firm avoidance.

Noticing Brock’s unease, Elvis discretely shoots a questioning look at Rebekah. In response, she gazes downward and shrugs deferentially toward Brock.

“What happened on that ship?” asks Elvis, his brows knitted with concern as his eyes flick between Brock and Rebekah.

Pulling his face into a mask of grim determination Brock responds, “It’s ... it’s not important. Let’s just forget that part, okay? Yeah, I guess they have a reason to come after us. I mean, we ditched them off the coast and they were probably nabbed by the cops. Handy here” — he jabs his thumb toward Rebekah — “has a thing for impelling ships dangerously close to the shore.”

“That may be true. Or maybe I’m just not that creative,” she retorts with a subtly taunting demeanour. “But I don’t remember hearing any original ideas from you.”

“Yeah, well,” he says, momentarily lost for words.

Regaining his composure, Brock continues, “Okay, look, I don’t think it’s them. They could probably spring for a boat like this but there’s no way they’d be able to arrange it all so quickly. Or at all. I’d bet they’re still sitting in some Thai prison cell right now.”

“Hold on a sec,” intercedes Dominic. “You guys just reminded me of something. I’ll be right back.”

With that he stands abruptly and trudges toward the rear of the ship.

Abandoning her teasing coyness Rebekah notes, “We covered our tracks pretty good. But maybe our boat washed up on the beach and somebody found it. And once they remembered what actually happened maybe the cops believed Victor and Sandy. That’s two big maybes.

“On top of that it still wouldn’t give them time to set all *this* up,” she concludes, pointing to their present situation with a swirl of an her index finger.

“Okay, so who’s next?” asks Brock, eager to continue down the list.

Putting another “X” on the paper next to Victor and Allesandra’s names, Rebekah reads the next line on the list.

“My parents,” she says flatly.

Then, with determination she states, “So we can just forget about that. There is *no fucking way* that my parents are trying to kill me, or us. And even if they had the money, which I’m certain they don’t, they wouldn’t be spending it on a ship like this. Definitely not my dad, that’s for sure. Also, why would they send Shindan after us?”

“Maybe ... *maybe*,” she continues with emphasis, “this is a setup. Maybe someone wants us to think that my parents are involved.”

“Why?” asks Elvis earnestly.

Beneath furrowed brows her black eyes move from side to side as the question rolls around in her mind. Eventually she shrugs uncertainly and replies, “To scare me?”

“You’d think that they’d be more obvious, like sending you scary surveillance photos of your folks, or their home address, or something personal,” suggests Brock, “not have you find their initials on a Chinese form stuck in the back of a box in a locked train car, found by sheer luck and heading for who knows where.”

“Good point,” she agrees resolutely as she places an “X” next to Cornelius and Arti.

His own words spark a dim recollection in Brock’s memory; something Rebekah had said about there not being wrong places or times when the agency is involved but just then Dominic returns with an opened laptop computer. “I thought so!” he announces triumphantly.

“See here,” he says, jabbing his finger at the screen. Rebekah, Brock, and Elvis crane their necks to view the display. There, in a web browser, is an article from the Bangkok Post from a few days prior. Dominic is pointing to a headline that reads, “Two Americans arrested in breach of territorial waters”.

“I *thought* I remembered reading that around the time you guys arrived,” he remarks, nodding at Rebekah and Brock. “They don’t name the couple, the boat, or where exactly they were picked up but apparently they ignored warning signals and just parked their ship on a sandbar near some public beach. When the cops boarded the yacht the woman was freaking out claiming they’d been hijacked. The police thought that the guy might be on something.”

Rebekah and Brock both scan the article intently and then sit back to consider what they’d read.

“What are the chances of something like that happening once, let alone twice at around the same time?” asks Brock almost rhetorically.

“Uh-huh,” agrees Rebekah. “Unless they work like lightning and have some connections outside of their circle of crypto bros, it wasn’t them.”

“Crypto bros?” inquires Elvis, still in earnest.

“Cryptocurrency speculators,” she explains. “Like Gordon Gekko with a keyboard.”

“Who?” asks Elvis, his face contorted with confusion.

She abruptly ends the topic with, “Never mind. Point is, we can safely rule out Victor and Sandy.”

At this point Dmitri arrives from below deck and the agents of Section B quickly get him up to speed as he settles into a free chair. Shortly afterward, Mirabelle emerges from somewhere at the front of the Merle and saunters casually over to the group where she eases into a chair and her traditional pose of detachment.

With everyone assembled, Rebekah brings up Mirabelle’s former associates. This time the rebuttal is more definitive.

“I do not believe it is zem,” responds Mirabelle. “Zey are much more personal. If zey want to kill me zey want me to see zeir face, to know it is zem. If someone else see zen good, good for business reputation. Zese people ‘ho come after us now, zey don’t even say ‘ello. Also, I do no steal anysing. I do not report ze old partner to police. Ze most detail I share wis anybody is now, wis you.”

Rebekah accepts this with a nod and adds an “X” beside “Mira’s *friends*“.

“Who are all these people?” asks Brock, pointing to a previous series of names on the list that had already been eliminated.

“All the people we think might have a grudge against us,” explains Rebekah. “Before your time.”

“And this guy?” he asks again as he spots a name without an “X”, pointing at it with two fingers. “Should I know him?”

“Maybe,” responds Dominic. “We were after him that night we first met in that park.”

“Howard?” reads Brock with an exaggerated inflection at the question mark.

“We think so?” answers Rebekah with squinty-eyed uncertainty. “Librarian. Kind of forgettable.”

Dominic nods in agreement.

Dmitri signals his inability to add any more details with a shrug.

“I remember him now,” recalls Brock. “Peed himself.”

“The very same,” confirms Dominic.

“He complained about his shit librarian salary,” remembers Dmitri. “He was probably telling the truth. I don’t think he could fund something like this trip.”

“And can you imagine someone like that hiring overseas hitmen?” posits Rebekah.

Doubting the possibility of such a scenario, Dominic, Dmitri, and Brock acquiesce.

With an “X” next to “Howard?”, Section B continue down the list.

Shindan and possibly the staff of the Merle are thrown into the debate as the originators of the plot against them but too many crucial questions remain unanswered.

The Section automatically fall into a hushed discussion about arbitrary topics when one of the Merle’s staff appear through a door, offering them a light lunch of chilled meats, cheeses, breads, spreads, and alternatives. The group eat mostly in silence, then sit and digest.

As the afternoon slips into a glassy sunset, the names on the list are reviewed again, a couple of new possibilities are included, and additional details are revealed. After some time Brock comes to realize that a large proportion of the names on the list were affected directly by Rebekah. Often it was at the behest of, or in aid of, others; but not always.

Nevertheless, with only a handful of exceptions the infractions don’t match the severity of the reprisal. Within those few exceptions, it’s almost certain that the individuals in question were likely in police custody when the reprisal was already in motion. The timing doesn’t work out and for most of the remaining names on the list it wouldn’t have been plausible because of a lack of funds, a dearth of experience, a perceived absence of necessary connections, or some other grossly limiting factor.

Another hush falls over the conversation as evening refreshments glide out on iridescent trays, the otherwise imperceptible Merle staff beneath them only momentarily visible as they block the blinding sunlight with their bodies.

A few chilled drinks later the inconclusive conversation turns to Brock and his first experience with the pod. As details are shared and compared between agents, Dmitri grabs the idling laptop computer and slips off below deck with the vague intention to “check on something”. Nearly fifteen minutes go by before he returns.

“OCR software’s finished downloading,” he explains as he takes his seat again. “Now we can find out what that document says, the Shindan one with Rebekah’s parents’ names on it.”

Without a pause Rebekah eagerly rushes off to dig out the document while Dmitri installs his software. The predominantly Chinese text on the retrieved form is photographed using a mobile phone and the images transferred to the laptop. There the OCR software converts them into editable symbols that Dmitri translates using an online service. The satellite uplink is slow and the processes of analysis and discussion even slower.

Eventually, however, the entire document is translated. Even though some of the results are ambiguous there’s little doubt that A C Heinrich were Shindan’s clients, paying the organization a surprisingly meagre amount of money in order to obtain the papers in

Rebekah's messenger bag. A promised "included photo of target" is missing, the remaining instructions are sparse, and they don't mention what Shindan was supposed to do with the stash once they had it in their possession.

In the face of these new facts Rebekah reluctantly reveals that some of the documents in the bag contain the one-time pads that she uses to encipher her communications with her parents. "They're encoded into the text," she explains in a hushed tone. "You have to know what to look for. But my parents have their own copies so why would they hire someone to steal mine?"

Brock suggests to her, "Maybe somebody else did, to lead you to them. Like you said, maybe someone's got it in for your folks. You could just be collateral damage. Between low-rent thieves, people with more guns than sense, and a little planted evidence" — he motions toward the translated paper — "you could be enticed to contact your parents to find out just what the heck is going on."

"So you're saying that we're ... *I'm* ... playing right into *their* hands," states Rebekah, prompting him to confirm the correctness of her statement with a tilt of her head.

Brock nods.

"So we're back to square one," she rebuffs. "I'm pretty sure my parents don't have any enemies and no one I can think of would go to all this trouble just to find out where they are. If someone wanted to come after me ... well, here I am!"

For the second time in one day Dmitri acknowledges the statement with an agnostic, "Hmm."

## Surveillance

With pastries and coffees in hand, the next morning Dominic and Brock meet on the opposite side of the ship to observe the sun as it rises in the same spot it had set the night before.

“They told us they wouldn’t be going straight,” notes Brock.

Looking up at the circling seabirds Dominic adds, “And they meant it. I don’t think we’re much farther away from shore than yesterday. But as long as they keep this coffee coming” — he takes an aspirated sip — “I’m willing to be patient.”

As the caffeine perks up his interest Brock launches into a series of questions on coffee tasting technique, after which the discussion turns to pastry, then winds its way to Somatics. Brock eventually gets Dominic to agree that everyone in the Section might benefit from the same offer that the ex-boxer had recently made to him; namely, some training in the subject. It’s also agreed that the earlier this training begins, the better.

“Attendance will be mandatory,” quips Dominic with a crooked smile. “Anyone who doesn’t participate gets the silent treatment.”

“Even Mira?” quizzes Brock.

“Anyone except her,” corrects Dominic. “I don’t want to get on her bad side.”

“And Rebekah?” follows up Brock.

“She’ll be the one meting out the treatment!” responds Dominic with gusto.

They both chuckle and continue bantering until the rest of Section B assemble for breakfast, where the previous night’s somnolescent insights are mixed with food. Unfortunately, the ensuing discussions throw doubt on all the newly-formed theories about their pursuers.

After the meal Brock prompts Dominic to issue his group invite for that afternoon, which in turn prompts the other agents to offer training in their own specialties. Only Brock declines, explaining that he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to be teaching.

Once again, Section B split up. Rebekah, Dominic, and Elvis head for the satellite communication equipment while Dmitri, Mirabelle, and Brock make their way toward the pod.

Fulfilling his earlier promise, Dmitri guides Brock through assembly and operation of the small structure while Mirabelle observes from a distance. His curiosity sated, Brock steps into the tiny enclosure while Dmitri works the laptop controls from the outside.

He starts off with a test of the “enhanced” entrainment technique, in case it works better. A gently flashing strobe is added to the other stimuli inside the pod while various colours are cycled through. The pattern is then repeated with continuous lights.

Rather than being helpful, Brock finds the approach distracting and he voices his preference for the total blackness of his first session. Dmitri turns off the pod’s internal lights and reminds Brock of the need to refrain from analysis.

With Mirabelle watching over his shoulder, Dmitri stares intently at a word-picture combination in a window on the laptop computer’s display. Brock’s voice can be seen within an undulating waveform in a small area of the window. A transcript of what he’s saying is scrolling in above that and above that is the progress of the neural network’s learning process, what Dmitri calls the “backpropagation algorithm”.

Every few moments the word-picture changes as Brock continues to describe his experiences. The things he describes are not as clear or precise as the previous day’s photo but there are unique and defining descriptors accompanying each item displayed on the laptop.

Both Dmitri and Mirabelle nod and smile approvingly when a change on the display corresponds to a shift in Brock’s narrative.

At lunch the training session is ended, the neural network is backed up, and after a noticeably quicker recovery Brock follows Mirabelle and Dmitri back to the main deck of the ship. Another meal is consumed alongside conversation and speculation.

Rebekah reports that her parents haven’t yet responded. Dominic exalts the thinly sliced Italian cold cuts. Elvis expresses a vague unease at their situation. Dmitri opines on improvements to the pod while Brock picks his brain about how best to improvise the technology should they become “podless”. Mirabelle listens to everything with a relaxed aloofness.

The afternoon is kicked off by Dominic who guides the other agents through an introduction to Somatics. He instructs them to focus on specific parts of their bodies to learn “by feel” how to control muscles that they didn’t think they could control. He extends this lesson to a discussion on training peripheral vision and other neglected sensory inputs that could, in his opinion, come in handy.

Dmitri takes over to teach Section B how to “hear through sound”, which he clarifies as the perception of intelligible signals within the seemingly random interference of environmental noise. They all clear their minds, close their eyes, and take in the sounds of the vessel, being told to listen, “as though you’re listening to a soundtrack through headphones. Try not to get too hung up on any one part. Once you can take it all in together, I mean *really* take it all in together, you’ll be able to hear new sounds in the mix.”

The gentle hum of some machinery in some other part of the ship reverberates around them, mixes with the wash of the ocean, and combines with the stress creaks of the ship in a way that, for some of them, produces a strange and unexpectedly musical motif not

unlike what Brock remembers from his voyage on the Tenebra/Rhosus some weeks earlier.

Elvis follows with tips on using the psi wheel, a simple device with a piece of tinfoil balanced precariously atop a vertical pin embedded in a rubber eraser. He demonstrates easing into the correct mental state, spinning up the wheel, and reversing its direction — even with the contraption under a glass cover. Rebekah has some success with the technique but the meager effect leaves her noncommittal. Brock has a similar result which he similarly shrugs off. Dominic and Dmitri seem able to masterfully control the spin but only without the presence of the covering glass dome. Mirabelle appears to be able to affect the psi wheel at a distance, with or without the dome, but up close the delicate device doesn't respond.

The French woman finishes the afternoon with mostly unhelpful instructions for the team to “relax”, “feel it”, and “don't get 'it'” as she moves silently between them and whacks them on various parts of the body while they stand with their eyes closed.

Drinks, dinner, and more conversation follow until eventually everyone retires for the night.

The next morning Brock and Dominic meet at the same spot as they had on their first dawn aboard the Merle. Once again the sun is rising as it had on that first day. For the third time in as many days the two men imbibe morning coffee, eat breakfast food, and digest mutual speculation about their present circumstances.

Eventually all of the agents of Section B assemble for breakfast and exchange a dwindling number of explanations for their current plight. Then, once again, they split up.

As previously, Brock spends the morning training his neural network with Dominic while Mirabelle observes and smokes. In the meantime Elvis, Dmitri, and Rebekah receive and decrypt the anticipated response from *The Handler's* parents, the details of which are shared over lunch.

“Hired Shindan, sorry,” begins Rebekah, soullessly intoning the reply from her mother and father. “Great danger. Meet here soonest.” She then reads off a couple of lengthy decimal point numbers.

These are quickly recognized by Dmitri as global positioning coordinates and plotted on a map. Expressions of mild disbelief are exchanged between Dmitri, Dominic, and Rebekah as they examine the destination. After some silent prompting from the other half of the Section, the rattled trio reveal that the designated rendezvous point is less than a block away from their old base of operations.

“Right around the corner from the library. How fucking *fucked* is that?” states Rebekah indignantly as Dominic and Dmitri nod their heads in solemn agreement.

Brock and Elvis are visibly taken aback by these new revelations. Mirabelle remains aloof.

“And they hired Shindan,” continues Rebekah, eyes closed, one hand on her forehead, the other pointing to the laptop’s display. “Says so right here. That’s their one-time pad. Either they sent that message or someone got to them. Either way, this is so fucked.”

Accepting the logic of her conclusion, the agents of Section B sit in silence and ponder the ramifications.

As they do so, Elvis becomes transfixed by the flowers on the table. He leans in to examine them more closely, spreading the bouquet apart with his hands and maneuvering his head to examine the arrangement from different angles. Gripping the stalk of one of the delicate Baby’s Breath plants he leans even closer, his eyebrows pulling into a knot of tight concentration as he looks at the tiny flower.

“What—” is all that Rebekah gets out before he silences her with a finger held sternly to his own lips. Holding the minuscule bloom between his thumb and index finger he gently pulls the plant halfway out of the vase and tilts it intently toward Dmitri.

The larger man strokes his mustache as he inspects the source of Elvis’ concern. After a few moments Dmitri purses his lips and mouths a silent “fuck”.

He stands and motions for the Section to follow him, then leads them silently to the ship’s stern.

Having walked as far back as they can he wordlessly signals for them to move in close together, lean up against the railing, and face the ocean. Turning to the waves, he begins his explanation at a volume just above that of the hum of the Merle’s engines and the swish of the water.

“Microphone,” he says, worry creasing his face. “We’re being listened to. Probably cameras around here too.”

“I thought so,” responds Elvis with a disappointed head shake. Rebekah echoes the sentiment by plunking her hand on top of her head and staring distantly at some forlorn vision. Dominic’s jutting jaw and knitted eyebrows reflect a deep and involved cognitive effort. Mirabelle appears entirely unconcerned as she tosses the butt of her cigarette into the water. Dmitri observes, “We are really not very good at this espionage thing.”

This elicits a few weak laughs.

His eyes squinting against the sun, Brock suggests, “We let our guard down because they made it so easy for us. Nothing we can do about it now.”

No one refutes him.

“But,” he continues, “that doesn’t mean that we can’t improve our m.o. moving forward.”

“Like handing each other handwritten messages in brush passes?” asks Rebekah, shifting into a sarcastic affect.

“Exactly like that,” responds Brock enthusiastically.

Rebekah opens her mouth to protest but, failing to come up with a valid objection, closes it and accepts with a shrugging pout.

The Section decide how they'll signal each other whenever they want to exchange messages, a process that will initially happen in the relative privacy of the ship's rear. A few emergency codes that can be written or uttered in a hurry are rehearsed.

It's agreed that written messages will be burnt and scattered in the wind if possible, mangled and disposed of in other ways if not. Until a "clean room" can be found, brief spoken exchanges are best done at their current location.

"Public" conversations will be limited to inane topics until the Section can decide what disinformation should be fed to whoever is surveilling them. At the same time it's decided that the agents should continue to follow their regular routine so as not to arouse suspicion.

Drawing the meeting to a hurried close they retire to yet another afternoon of exchanging skill-enhancing tips and lessons. This time their verbal deliveries are reserved and more drawn-out as the group takes the opportunity to surreptitiously look for additional eavesdropping devices.

A couple of tiny wireless microphones are discovered behind the room's furniture and a glossy dark bubble stuck to the wall near the door is determined by Dmitri to be a wide-angle wireless camera. The Section quickly enact their undercover meeting protocol to formulate their next steps. The discussion runs late into the night.

At Rebekah's insistence it's agreed that she will use her "influence" to get OpOne to divulge or possibly help to discover the locations of all of the bugs on the ship, maybe even get some info on who might be listening on the other end. The other agents will continue their covert search of the ship in case this approach doesn't pan out.

The next morning both Brock and Dominic express mock surprise upon discovering that the Merle is sailing almost directly into the sun, its flying escorts gone. "It's as if," remarks Dominic under his breath, "everyone onboard suddenly knows where we're supposed to go."

Brock agrees with a sideways nod.

The rest of the morning is an echo of previous days, as is lunch and the afternoon that follows. It's in the evening that Rebekah decides to activate her plan and she requests a private conversation with OpOne, away from his crew and hers. He agrees with a courteous smile.

Brock glances over just as she's delivering the last line of her rhyme.

"... you or I must be ... a ... *sleep*," she finishes, maintaining intense eye contact with OpOne.

He stands and stares at her, expressionless.

"Close your eyes," she instructs gently.

A sudden smile shoots up on OpOne's face as he tilts his head. "Why should I close my eyes?" he asks.

"You haven't blinked for so long it's making my eyes hurt," she answers almost immediately, laughing.

"I see," he responds as he gently pulls a pair of sunglasses from his pants pocket and puts them on. "I hope this makes you more comfortable. Now may I ask you another question?"

"Sure," she responds, a grimacing smile pulling back her expression.

"What was the meaning of that strange poem?" he proceeds, a stark row of teeth bisecting his face.

"I made a mistake," she explains, her face still tense.

He cocks his head to the side and insists, "I don't understand."

"I thought you were a contact. That was the rendezvous phrase. I messed up," she says, her eyes widening temporarily as she ends her confession.

"Why would you think that I was your contact?" he inquires, his head tilting to the other side.

"I was told that the contact would be helping us out. And you're helping us out and I just assumed, I thought, maybe ..."

She pauses for a moment, drooping with disappointment.

"That person is not me," responds OpOne, pulling himself back up to a courteously erect posture. The setting sun glints off of the polished lenses of his sunglasses.

"I should've known," she says, still despondent. "I mess things up all the time, make the wrong decisions, trust the wrong people. I bet you already know all this."

He shakes his head mildly and says, "I was unaware of your extended history."

"No," she says assertively, leaning forward and tugging on her ear lobe a few times. "I mean you *know* all this."

OpOne looks at her for a moment and finally offers, "Perhaps you are referring to the surveillance devices on this ship?"

"Umm," she says, momentarily taken aback by the unexpected directness of his question. "Yes, that is actually what I'm talking about."

"I was told not to discuss them unless specifically asked," he admits in a candid tone. "I hope I have not been too liberal with my interpretation of these instructions. You see, I am under as much supervision as yourselves. I know that this equipment is onboard but the numbers of units, their types, or where they're installed, I do not know."

“Would you tell me if you did?” she asks, the futility of continuing the conversation dawning on her.

“Begging your pardon for repeating,” he explains, “but I am paid not to know.”

“Right, gotcha,” she says, shaking her head in defiant acceptance.

“Will that be all?” he asks, raising an eyebrow from behind his sunglasses.

She pulls her face into a flattened expression of adequate satisfaction and nods.

A few moments later she’s back at the table and receiving intensely expectant looks from the Section.

Gazing at the sky she nonchalantly poses her hand in a thumbs-up gesture and quickly conceals it, using the thumb to scratch her ostensibly itchy jawline.

Observing her, Dmitri involuntarily produces an audible “Hmm?”

## Disinformation

“You see my problem here,” says the stern man sitting across from Section B. His bright orange turban hugs his head as it moves around to punctuate his words. The dark brown eyes set into his wide face stare at them intimidatingly, his tied and tucked beard lending a further gravitas to his countenance. The striped epaulets and Port Authority insignias on the shoulders of his dark blue uniform brim with officialdom.

He’s behind a large and expensive-looking desk, rocking casually in an opulent executive chair, his name tag illegible in the reflection of the stark light of the bare fluorescents overhead. Every so often the name “N. Singh Khatri” becomes visible on the small plastic rectangle before once again disappearing into bleached obscurity.

The Section stare at him silently. For the most part they’ve changed back into the same clothes they’d worn when they met at the Dockside Lounge except that the garments have been laundered, pressed, and imbued with a gentle soapy scent by the crew of the Merle.

Rebekah is donning her sunglasses and a scowl. Dmitri and Dominic are both wearing inscrutable expressions while Elvis sits beside them looking visibly worried. Seemingly unaffected, Mirabelle leans back in her rickety folding metal chair while Brock leans forward, listening attentively from his own sparse seat.

Some moments pass without comment.

“A number of deep sea fishing boats,” continues the weighty official, “just happen to cross paths at the nautical limit with a ship that appeared to have been traveling very erratically since leaving the coast of Thailand. By itself that’s very odd.

“But,” he continues, “even more odd is that our security cameras don’t show any passengers boarding these fishing boats, yet we see all of you disembarking. None of you seem to be properly dressed for fishing, there doesn’t seem to be any proof that any of you actually fished, and your guides seem to know shockingly little about you. To make matters worse, none of you seem to have any means by which to identify yourselves. Can you account for any of these things?”

More moments of silence pass.

“If that’s to be your answer,” he says, “then I’m afraid you leave me no choice but to hand you over to higher authorities. This is a very serious matter.”

“Look,” responds Elvis nervously, “I think you should know—“

Immediately Rebekah silences him with an outstretched hand as she leans toward N. Singh Khatri. “How many explanations will it take for us to walk out of here?” she asks, a mild dismissiveness running through her question.

“My dear,” he responds with a smirk as he leans back to reveal a swollen belly, his uniform stretched across it, “you haven’t even offered a single explanation.”

“So,” she responds, her head cocked to one side, “how many, *exactly*, are we talking?”

The rotund official shifts his weight forward and stands up. He waits there a moment, head held back, blankly staring down his nose at Rebekah. Then, slowly, he rights himself and brusquely motions for her to follow him.

“Fine,” she responds, rising to her feet to follow the large man. She makes a slight detour to his desk, caressing the surface with her fingers, at times slowing down to linger.

The only one not following Rebekah’s movements is Elvis who is momentarily startled from his inner morass as the door to the adjoining room slams shut behind her. He quickly retreats back to a downcast pose, a nervous energy animating his limbs.

The small room falls into a dejected silence, prompting Brock’s mind to wander for some scrap of information that may help their current situation.

He’s immediately taken to his most recent memory on the Merle where OpOne told them that everyone at the port had either been paid off or diverted by those who had been paid off. The Section would simply have to transfer to various chartered vessels as local fishing enthusiasts for the final leg of the trip. Everything was set, nothing to worry about. So it was with some chagrin that the Section were detained by the Port Authority the moment they stepped off their boats.

Brock reaches farther back in his memory.

They’d spent a considerable amount of time looking for surveillance devices on the yacht. Individually they would walk through areas while casually filming the environment on their mobile phones, disguising such actions by pretending to be reading something on them or using the devices to write down observations. When that seemed too obvious they would resort to simply using their eyes and relying on memory.

All of this information would then be relayed to Dmitri for further analysis and, if warranted, a covert personal examination by him. Using a small handheld device with a couple of short antennas he scanned for wireless signals. Using direct observation he and the team traced out potential closed-circuit lines.

Eventually they determined that a small chamber toward the stern was bug-free, as far as they could tell, so that’s where they would hold most of their exchanges. As a secondary option, their old location on the aft deck of the ship would be used. At these meetings they would plot false stories and misdirections which would be casually revealed in front of known snooping devices around the ship.

Among the foremost of these false revelations were references to Section C along with reverential allusions to Section A, and hints at the existence of Sections D through Z. It was hoped that these stories would either distract or dissuade whoever was coming after the one and only Section B.

This phantom threat, considers Brock, may be the main reason that they're now being detained.

His mind rewinds even more to the point when Rebekah came back to their table after her interaction with OpOne. Her effort to gain the cooperation of the Merle's captain seemed to have failed, yet when she returned she surreptitiously flashed them that curious thumbs-up.

She would later go on to explain that, "He was able to look away. He put on his sunglasses. He knew what I can do and he was ready for it."

"So you can't manipulate him," objected Elvis. "I don't get how that helps us."

"That helps us," she explained calmly, "because it eliminates certain people from our list of suspects, because my targets always forget me. I get them to make up something or imagine some other person to explain what's happened to them, to make me vanish from their story."

"Maybe someone remembered," retorted Elvis.

"I don't think so," she said, shaking her head decisively. "I know you haven't gotten to see much of my work but my targets focus very hard on avoiding any memory of me. Sometimes they get all pissed off if someone even suggests what really happened. They don't just *not* remember, they push back hard against remembering.

"Then it must've been someone who covertly watched you," concluded Elvis.

"Could be," she added reflectively, "but I'm usually discreet about when and where and how I work. I don't advertise my m.o."

"Dockside," interjected Dmitri almost immediately, holding up a finger and an eyebrow.

"I'm *usually* discreet," she reiterated, "but if anyone was watching then I don't have a clue who it was."

"We were all a little off our faces that night," recalled Dominic, bringing the topic to an end.

This is also where Brock decides to stop. He gazes over at the sturdy wooden door and wonders how Rebekah's negotiation with N. Singh Khatri is going.

Behind the door Rebekah is doing her best to appear irritated at the corpulent man's demands. It had become obvious that he had already been paid but wants more. His motivation is simple. "If I'm going to be taking this sort of risk," he explains with a calm arrogance, "I'm not going to do it at a discount."

"Oh, so you've done this sort of thing before?" she asks, detaching a bill-sized blank paper sheet from the small notepad she'd snatched from his desk. A few moments earlier, in her own special way, she had suggested to him that she was actually holding a large stack of bills. She reassured him that he was in control and that every choice was

his own. She told him to just be himself. Then she continued to go along with the scenario as it played itself out.

“Look,” he says with a softened forcefulness, “I don’t have time to sit here and count individual pieces of paper.”

Rebekah pauses breathlessly.

“Just give me everything,” he continues, leaning back on the expansive leather couch. Surrounding him, the opulent wood furniture, ostentatious statuary, and gaudy paintings seem to add to his girth as he settles into the seat’s squeaky cushions.

Taking a moment to recover, Rebekah places a rubber band around the middle of the notepad, fans the loose end of the stack with her thumb, and with an agitated sigh says, “This is fifty thousand dollars. It’s everything we have. Are you seriously going to take *everything* we have?”

“That is my one and only offer,” he says with a satisfied smile. “Take it or leave it. And don’t think too long because the federal police are already on their way.”

She slaps the blank notepad onto the marble top of the sumptuous coffee table between them, repositions herself on the uncomfortable stool beneath her, and directs what she hopes is a pissed-off pout at the blackmailing official across from her.

He smiles, picks up the notepad, and flips through the free end while examining it with slightly glazed, unfocused eyes. After a few moments he rocks himself to a standing position, stuffs the hallucinated money into the inner pocket of his jacket, straightens out his uniform, and glares at her.

Rebekah returns his gaze expectantly.

“Go,” he says at last. “Take all your shit and leave as quickly as possible. If I see any of you here again you will not get the same offer. Am I making myself clear?”

She nods vigorously and heads for the door.

On the other side she’s met with the inquisitive stares of Section B. Without affect, she approaches until they’re within earshot, quietly notifies them that, “It’s handled,” and continues toward the exit. They stand and silently follow her, exchanging glances of curiosity as they walk past two nonreactive sentries posted just outside the double doors.

Finally, having gone through another set of steel doors and down two flights of stairs, the group exit the building where they find their belongings in a pile next to a minivan emblazoned with the Port Authority logo. They instantly recognize the vehicle as the same one that had transported them here earlier. The uniformed driver who had been behind the wheel is nowhere to be found.

“Let’s grab our stuff and get out of here before he tries to spend some of that fifty grand I gave him,” instructs Rebekah with newly-found levity.

“Where’d you get fifty thousand dollars?” asks Elvis earnestly, visibly surprised.

Rebekah shakes her head and turns her attention back to the tiny hill of bags and containers.

“I don’t get it,” protests Elvis. “Seriously, were we carrying that cash on us the entire time?”

Mirabelle chuckles and says to Rebekah, “You know? I sink I like you little more.”

“What?” asks Elvis again, entirely flummoxed.

“Oh, Elvis,” says Mirabelle as she addresses him with surprisingly matronly pity. “Ruh-bek-ah did not give ze fat man money, she give ‘him fifty souzand reason.”

“Actually, it was probably closer to a hundred,” clarifies Rebekah, her head turned just enough to expose a smirk.

“Ah, oui,” responds Mirabelle, slyly reflecting the other woman’s smile. “Or maybe less. I see some of ze reason are already gone.”

“Probably,” grunts Rebekah, now engaged in getting various shoulder straps to sit comfortably on her small frame.

Elvis stands rigid and speechless, perplexity freezing his ability to move or talk. All he can do is shake his head in confusion.

“You see,” explains Mirabelle to Elvis, “so actually we did not pay ‘im so much.”

He shakes his head more vigorously.

“You ‘ave not see,” she continues, “when Ruh-bek-ah take ze bloc-notes. Zis is ze money she give ‘im.”

“I don’t know what a bloc-notes is!” retorts Elvis with growing agitation.

“But ‘ow does Ruh-bek-ah know?” she responds with a gentle playfulness. She angles her head toward the other woman and asks, “Do you know zis word?”

“Never heard it before,” responds Rebekah, adjusting some buckles and still facing away from Mirabelle.

“But you know zis sing, yes?” asks the French woman again.

“Of course,” responds The Handler, turning around with a faint smile. “And now I know another name for it.”

Mirabelle turns to Elvis with an upraised eyebrow and says, “You see? She know, and I know, and I know she know, and she know I know. But you don’t know. Elvis” — she shakes her head disapprovingly — “you must do better.”

With this she strolls over to the diminishing pile of luggage and begins to pick out items to carry. At the same time, Rebekah walks past with a number of bags slung over her shoulders.

“It was a notepad,” she remarks as she lumbers past him.

“How was I supposed to know that?” he shoots back, now openly irritated.

Rebekah stops, slowly spins around, and cocks her head to one side. “How did Mirabelle know?” she inquires.

“She saw it,” he replies indignantly. “I didn’t.”

“Exactly,” she states, nodding bluntly in agreement. “She saw it because she was observing and you didn’t because you were too busy splashing around in a puddle of your own anxiety. I like you, Elvis, but you should try to get a handle on that. Doubt and fear can disable you, and believe me you don’t want that in a crisis. You know I’m speaking from experience here.”

With a finalizing nod she turns back around and walks toward the assembling agents of Section B.

Elvis is left standing alone and feeling a little dejected.

## Ofnisid

A hawk or possibly a falcon circles high overhead in the nearly cloudless sky. Towering trees shoot up around Section B, brown needles and green moss pad the ground beneath their seated bodies, sweet scents of pine and tiny forest flowers permeate their small circle. Muted sounds of faraway animals occasionally waft in on the slightly chilly breeze.

“Money, ideology, coercion, and ego,” explains Rebekah, stretching out her legs as she leans backward into her propped-up bag. “Old but reliable.”

“How could you tell?” asks Elvis, reclined near her in a similar position.

“I mean,” she says with a brief nasal snort, “the guy just reeked of it. You must’ve picked up on it. Just a little bit?”

“It was hard not to notice,” he admits. “I guess what I mean to say is how were you so sure he wanted more money?”

With directness Rebekah replies, “If he was serious about turning us over to the feds then why would he drag us into his office like that? Just us and him? He should’ve put us in a holding cell or some secure area until the big boys arrived.”

“Huh,” remarks Elvis, “and you don’t think he’s called them since?”

“He’d have to explain how we escaped,” opines Rebekah. “Questions would have to be answered. Evidence would have to be concealed. Security footage would have to be scrubbed. People might have to be silenced. That’s a lot of work.”

“It would never occur to me to think that way,” he observes forthrightly.

She cocks her head to one side, a corner of her mouth pulling into a curious smile as she asks, “In what way?”

“Like, *devious*,” he says, a direct but vulnerable honesty in his eyes. “To plan stuff like that in my head. To imagine these scenarios and use them to my advantage.”

“How do you do that?” he continues, squinting.

“Me?” she asks, visibly taken aback.

“Uh, yeah,” responds Elvis cautiously. “You know, the way you got us out of there.”

“*Devious* isn’t how I’d put it,” she responds haltingly. “Observant maybe?”

“I didn’t mean it to come across that way,” he reassures her pleadingly. “I actually kind of admire that about you. I want to be able to do that, to have that kind of attitude.”

“You might want to reconsider,” replies Rebekah coolly. “Actions come with reactions. You know” — she points to herself with her thumb — “personal experience. And there

are usually other ways to get what you want. You'd be surprised at how often the word *please works.*"

"But not this time," notes Elvis.

"Not this time," she confirms with a genuine smile. "I've dealt with people like that before. Worse, actually."

"So how do you get that kind of confidence?" he asks genuinely.

"Practice," she replies with a wink.

Just then Dmitri stands from the nearby tree stump he'd been occupying and motions for the team to come over. They do so at a leisurely pace.

The communication equipment is partially obscured by dense ferns but the tiny dish rises above them and aims upwards, past the deciduous seedlings and soaring trees and into the clear blue dome above. The open space on the side of the hill provides an expansive vista of mixed foliage pressed up against the lapping turquoise waters of the Pacific.

The Port Authority buildings are visible, as is the main road along which they'd recently walked. After only a few minutes they'd stopped and decided to formulate a strategy rather than walk aimlessly. Simply getting off the road also seemed like a good idea.

The brief hike through the cool climate of the forest was relatively comfortable, at least when compared to their Thai jungle trek. Nevertheless, the climb up the hill was not without some effort as numerous gnarled roots and overgrown bushes impeded their way. In spots the loose earth beneath their feet gave way, causing them to slip backwards, sometimes landing them on their asses. In the end, however, the secluded spot proved to be the ideal location for the satellite uplink and a little breathing room.

"Okay, so we basically have two options," opens Dmitri, pointing to the open browser windows on the laptop's screen. "One, we fly. Two, we take a train."

"Bus won't get us there?" asks Dominic, placing the novel he'd been reading page-down on the ground between his feet.

"Nope," replies Dmitri. "Not across the whole country. There's a loose patchwork of regional buses that might get us there but nothing that runs direct."

"Maybe wis ze car or truck, on ze road wis ze 'and," offers Mirabelle, rocking her outstretched arm up and down, thumb pointing upward.

"Hitchhiking?" confirms Dmitri.

She shrugs halfheartedly, seemingly unsure if this is the correct word.

"All of us as a group? I don't think so," he responds. "And individually, or in pairs, who knows where or when each of us might end up."

Dominic adds a nod of agreement.

“If we’re taking a plane then won’t we need some ID?” asks Brock, partially distracted as he rummages through his duffel bag.

“Not for domestic flights,” replies Dmitri. “But that wouldn’t be our main problem anyway.”

“What’d be our main problem?” asks Brock, his attention split between Dmitri and the contents of his bag.

“When we ditched our IDs we also got rid of any form of payment. We don’t even have any Thai Baht to exchange. Everything’s floating out there in the sea somewhere.”

“Couldn’t Rebekah do that thing again?” inquires Brock, mostly immersed in his task.

“To get us tickets? To get us on a plane?” she cuts in, a squint of uncertainty in her eyes. “Maybe, but I really couldn’t guarantee it. Security is pretty tight and there are many possible points of failure. For me, I mean. We’d need a back-up plan. Or two.”

“Train trip might come with a little less friction,” proposes Dominic.

“Also it can be nice,” adds Mirabelle with a dispassionate gentleness.

“But longer,” cautions Dmitri. “We’re looking at about a week of travel time. It’s not ideal.”

Finally having found what he’d been looking for, Brock pulls a rumpled brown blazer from the bag, holds it up by the shoulders, gives it a good shake, and puts it on. Now warmer, he wriggles in satisfaction as he sits back down to rejoin the conversation.

“Rebekah,” he begins, turning to face her, “do you think your parents are careful about security? Like, if they set that rendezvous point, would they just be standing there waiting for you?”

“That’s so stupid for so many reasons,” she responds, her rejection imbued with derision. “No. They wouldn’t do that. They’re smarter than that. They’re smarter than me and I wouldn’t do that.”

“Okay, so as long as they stay safe then our time of arrival isn’t so important,” he offers. “They just have to be patient.”

She acquiesces with a mild shrug.

With that the focus of the discussion turns to nearby train stations, ticket costs, and travel amenities. The ideal route promises to be picturesque, the dining sumptuous, and the accommodations plush. Section B soon find themselves giddy at the prospect of returning back to their initial point of departure in locomotive luxury.

The correctness of their action is accentuated as they locate a mercifully close railway station, near enough to walk to, and with a train scheduled to depart not long after they get there — if they saunter casually. With spirits further uplifted, they re-pack their bags and bound effortlessly back down the hill.

Even though the train station is “nearby”, the journey ends up being over an hour long, draining some of their energy en route. As they walk, the rugged nature around them gives way to suburban neighbourhoods that soon yield to a modern urban environment.

Taking a brief break across the street from their destination, they review their plan. Rebekah will go in to get their tickets. Using her standard m.o. she will do so either directly at a ticket counter or with the help of a “sympathetic” traveler. There seem to be plenty of marks to choose from.

Wearing her sunglasses and a cat-like smirk she enters through the tall entrance of the palatial stone building, the heels of her shoes clicking confidently on the stone floor of the stoically ornate space until she disappears into the crowd.

As they lean on their luggage and wait for her to return, the Section discuss their hopes for the upcoming trip. In his enthusiasm, Brock’s hand brushes up against a lump in the pocket of his jacket. It’s the same lump that had pushed dully into his side, a bulge he’d assumed was just some awkwardly packed object inside the bag he’d been carrying.

Reaching into the pocket he pulls out a thick, misshapen envelope that at first he doesn’t recognize. Staring at the small paper parcel he makes a concerted effort to recall what’s in it and where he’d obtained it.

Noticing his sudden abstention from the conversation, Mirabelle points to the object in his hand and asks, “What is zis?”

Momentarily snapping back to attention he replies, “I don’t actually ... I’m not sure.”

“Maybe ze Merle people ‘ave put it in zere?” she suggests.

“It seems familiar ...” Brock trails off, again searching his memory.

“Shindan?” posits Dmitri uncertainly.

A few moments later Brock straightens up and exclaims, “Oh, right! Rebekah gave this to me when we first met.”

He rotates the sealed envelope in his hands. “I never bothered to open it. Actually, I forgot about it. Things got pretty crazy. Jacket’s been in my bag for the whole trip. I didn’t even think about it until we got here.”

“Looks pretty full,” notes Dominic, raising his eyebrows at the thick item in Brock’s hands.

“Yours wasn’t like this?” asks Brock.

“My what?” responds Dominic, genuinely puzzled.

“You didn’t get one? She told me it was to ... what was it again ... cover my expenses or something like that,” prompts Brock.

“I got some *walking around money*, but that was from Dmitri,” observes Elvis.

“From Rebekah, with love,” Dmitri reminds Elvis. “And that right there” — he wags a finger at Brock’s envelope — “is probably something similar. Why don’t you go ahead and open it?”

Brock does as instructed and rips the edge off of the envelope, spilling the contents onto the solid case of the pod container. A bound stack of one-hundred dollar bills spills out of the pouch followed by a number of lottery tickets, blank plastic proximity cards, bus station locker keys, and a few intricate keys that seem to include electronics.

Dominic picks up one of the lottery tickets and examines it closely, holding his chin in contemplation. After a few moments he lets out a, “Hmm,” and returns the paper back to the pile.

“You know what this is?” Brock asks Dominic.

“Most of it, yeah. And the rest I can guess,” he replies, a look of disappointment on his face. “Leaves me with a few questions for our Handler.”

“Has she been knocking over lottery kiosks? Robbing bus stations?” inquires Brock with whimsical concern.

“Something like that,” responds Dominic with a waggle of the head.

“So, what ... is this stuff, like, *hot* or something?” continues Brock, now with some genuine concern.

“You’ve seen her work so you probably have some idea,” explains Dominic, “but it’s best if she tells you about it herself. Honestly, I’m just guessing here. All I can say is that I recognize some of this.”

“Good call,” adds Dmitri as he returns one of the tickets that he’d been holding. “Let’s get her side of the story.”

“Okay,” accepts Brock hesitantly before slowly returning the contents back to their envelope and putting it back into his coat pocket.

“Hold on!” erupts Elvis with alarm. “Does that mean that my *walking around money* was gotten illegally?”

“I wouldn’t say *illegally*,” responds Dmitri. “More *morally questionably*.”

“But even then,” posits Dominic with upraised palms.

“But even then,” parrots Dmitri in agreement. Turning back to Elvis he advises, “Like Dom said, we don’t really know for sure so Becks will have tell you all about it, in her own words. I’ll add my own two cents after that.”

“But rest assured,” concludes Dominic, “we’ve all benefited from Rebekah’s *largess*. We’re all in the same boat.”

“Wouldn’t that just make us a criminal organization?” retorts Elvis, still visibly upset.

“I mean ...” trails of Dominic as the logic of the proposition registers. His eyes wander off as he struggles to find a convincing counter-argument.

Just then Rebekah returns toward them at great speed. Every few steps or so she looks over her shoulder, each time increasing her pace. In her hand she holds what appear to be a number of printed tickets. On her face she wears anxiety, her hastening body is stiff with tension.

She barely looks to see if there are any oncoming cars as she crosses the street. The best she can do is to produce abrupt and spasmodic movements accompanied by wide-eyed looks at Section B.

Initially puzzled, they watch her with increasing concern. By the time she’s close enough to hiss, “We need to get the fuck out of here right now!” most of them have instinctively begun to clutch at the handles of their bags. They exit the area hurriedly and head to a secluded section of a nearby park. There they catch their breath as Rebekah explains what happened.

“Robert fucking Morris! Every single one! Can you believe that shit? And they sold it to him!” she rages, viciously shaking one of the train tickets in the air.

“What did you tell this Robert?” asks Dominic as he gazes at another ticket in disbelief.

“I made up six names and told him to get tickets for them,” she says, exasperated.

“What *exactly* did you tell him?” reiterates Dominic.

“I told him the names and then said, exactly, *go to that counter and buy tickets for these people.*”

“You didn’t specify that the tickets have to have these people’s names on them?” he questions.

Eyes closed and shaking her head she replies, “I didn’t think I needed to.”

“So then what happened?” asks Dmitri.

“He was at that counter a long time,” she says, now more despondent than angry. “The ticket lady in the booth looked really confused. Who knows what the fuck he was telling her.”

“And she ended up selling him six tickets for six different berths, all on the same train, all under his own name,” suggests Dmitri.

“As you can see for yourself,” she says, slapping the corner of the ticket in her hand. “I didn’t know until he handed them over and by then the lady was pointing us out to security. Apparently this kind of thing” — she shakes the ticket again — “arouses suspicion! I’m not sure how much of me they saw but I’m probably on some camera so it probably doesn’t matter.”

“So the train is nixed,” assumes Brock with a sigh.

“Unless one of you want to give it another go. I’m not showing my face there again, not for a while,” states Rebekah.

“And no plane,” adds Dmitri. “Doesn’t leave much.”

“No it doesn’t,” agrees Dominic.

Lighting a cigarette, Mirabelle takes a long drag and proposes, “Maybe we ‘ave to be a little more *assertif*.”

“You mean like carjack a minibus?” chuckles Rebekah.

Mirabelle responds with a non-committal shrug.

Before Rebekah has a chance to challenge her, Elvis interrupts with an eerie calm, saying, “Actually, you might be on to something.”

## Asset

“How about your brother?” Elvis asks Dominic.

“Tony?” responds the sizeable man. “You mean, like, transport us in his truck?”

“Yeah, why not?” confirms Elvis.

Dominic considers the idea as he gazes at nothing in particular.

Rebekah is consumed with destroying the erroneous bus tickets in her hands and methodically distributing the torn pieces to the rest of Section B for disposal. Shortly afterward they take excursions in opposing directions to distribute the incriminating bits in trash cans, storm drains, and other places unlikely to attract much attention.

They arrive back at their starting spot at different intervals. By the time Brock returns, the rest of the team is discussing the best location in which to once again set up the satellite communication equipment. It’s decided that Dominic will call Tony, albeit using a circuitous route since he can’t remember his brother’s number.

They leave the park, walk down a road to a secluded section of public land, and push through the overgrowth to reach a quiet spot by the ocean. There they set up their gear; a quick operation, almost routine by now. Tony’s company is quickly found through a search engine and their dispatch contacted.

“Tell him it’s a Little China situation,” stresses Dominic as he prepares to hang up the rarely-used satellite handset. Disconnecting, he looks up at Section B and indicates his uncertainty with a shrug. Similar gestures are echoed in response and with nothing else to contribute, the Section sit in the rays of the setting sun watching gilded fire shimmer on the surface of the water.

“Anyone else starving?” asks Elvis, holding his hand over his stomach, a mild grimace animating his face.

“I could use a bite,” responds Dominic.

Dmitri, Brock, and Rebekah all answer simultaneously, making only their affirmative head shakes intelligible in the crosstalk. Mirabelle expresses her indifference with raised eyebrows and a pout.

“But we don’t have any money,” notes Elvis dryly, “and I’m a newbie when it comes to theft.”

“Are any of us good at stealing stuff?” asks Brock as he looks around.

Everyone refuses the connotation with small gestures except Mirabelle who again raises her eyebrows in a noncommittal expression.

An uncertain moment later Dmitri suggests, “Maybe we don’t have to steal anything.”

Section B wait expectantly.

He pulls the laptop computer out of its travel bag and connects it to the satellite uplink. A few seconds later he’s searched for “free food”, “food banks”, and “homeless shelters” in the area. Most locations are closed but a few appear to be accessible. Although they’re within walking distance, none are a short walk.

“Still,” notes Rebekah, “that’s a solid plan. Let’s get going.”

“Someone needs to stay with our stuff and mind the equipment in case Dom’s brother calls,” points out Dmitri.

“Makes me the best man for the job,” admits Dominic, hoisting up a hand.

“Afraid so,” notes Dmitri, partially distracted as he orients himself using the map on the the computer.

Within minutes, everyone except Dominic head into the city and toward the indicated locations. The bald man sits alone among the baggage and leans back, relaxing in the dwindling heat of the sun as it inches its way into the western horizon. Occasionally he glances over at the satellite handset to make sure it’s still functioning.

It’s well after dark when the rest of Section B return sporadically with swollen plastic bags. Brock and Mirabelle are the last to arrive and to get up to speed.

“So he said no?” Brock asks Dominic, brow furrowing in curiosity.

“Yeah,” responds Dominic. “Tony’s hauling a load on the east coast right now. It would take him at least a week before he made it out here, and that’s if he left today, which he can’t.”

“So where does that leave us?” continues Brock.

“He’s getting in touch with his buddies to see if one of them is close by and willing,” responds Dominic.

As the conversation is taking place, Elvis extracts the contents of his plastic bags and begins distributing them. “These ones,” he explains to the group as he points at a few of the plastic containers, “have some kind of chicken curry with rice. And these ones” — he points at other containers — “have some kind of spinach soup.”

Holding up a number of his own bags, Dmitri adds, “We have a bunch of other stuff. Some beat-up produce, frozen bread, frozen cold cuts, probably thawed out by now, some vegan deserts, yogurt, instant noodles, granola bars, fruit cups, canned ravioli, a few other things. Most of it’s past the best-by date but the people at the shelter say it should be fine.”

“They say,” injects Rebekah with mild sarcasm.

"I nominate Rebekah to be the designated food tester for the Section," suggests Dmitri wryly.

"Just because I did it that one time?" she asks, recalling the soggy sandwich she'd consumed as they awaited their helicopter extraction.

"Because you're so skeptical," he assures her with a spreading smile on his face, "and so small. If you're poisoned, your body is the easiest to carry to a doctor. It's just logical."

"Nice," she concludes, a mirthless smile accompanying a slow nod. Simultaneously amused smirks appear on a few of the faces of Section B as they reach for their food.

The donated meals are devoured quickly and nearly silently as darkness begins to creep in around them. Within moments of his final bite, the trill of the satellite phone causes Dominic to sit up with a start. He reaches abruptly for the receiver and presses its glowing green button.

"Tones?" he says expectantly. "What's the word?"

After a few seconds of silent head nods he continues, "Okay, yeah, that's great. That's exactly what we're looking for. And you told him how he's getting paid?"

For a moment, Brock's face wrinkles with confusion but he quickly remembers the thick envelope in his coat pocket. He removes it and holds it out inquisitively in front of Dominic. The large man casts a quick glance at the item and produces a single confirming nod, then turns his attention back to his brother saying, "Thanks again for setting this up. I owe you. All my best to Meghan and Lance, and Tones ... love ya buddy."

Grinning, he disconnects the call and places the receiver on top of the satellite equipment.

"His name is Mike," explains Dominic. "For some reason he's hauling an empty trailer across the country so it works out. One of us is supposed to meet him out there on the road in about an hour."

"How much does Tony know about us?" asks Rebekah with a sudden coldness.

"What, you don't trust my brother?" retorts Dominic with jovial sarcasm.

"It's not that," she replies flatly. "It's just that we were getting shot at not too long ago and none of us know why. If my family is implicated then who's to say that they won't come after yours?"

"Shit," notes Dominic, the suggestion slackening his features. "I didn't really tell him much. Told him about you" — he looks pointedly at Rebekah — "and Dmitri. A little about Mira. I didn't go into much detail. He had no idea I'd left the country."

"Can't you call him back to warn him?" asks Brock.

"I'd have to go through his dispatch again and he's already had to jump through a few hoops to securely set up our meeting with Mike," laments Dominic, the creases on his forehead deepening. "Every time we talk is another opportunity for that security to be

compromised. Until I can give Tony some solid intel, something specific to warn him about, I don't think it's a good idea for me to call him again."

Rebekah nods in solemn agreement. Mirabelle cocks her head to the side, eyelids sliding down approvingly over hazy blue eyes. Dmitri produces a tiny pout of accord. Elvis produces a downcast nod.

Brock scratches the back of his head, turns to Rebekah, and holds out the bulky envelope. "I ... we," he begins as he glances over at Dmitri and Dominic, "have some some questions about this. Where it came from, how nervous I should've been about carrying it around, that kind of thing."

Pulling up her eyebrows she breathes out an, "Oh, *that*."

After a brief pause she continues, "Most of it came from convenience stores around the city. You know, the usual modus. I made them think I'd *won the lottery* and I didn't know what to do with all my *winnings* so I started putting them into lockers and safe boxes, then other places. Inside the stack" — she points at Brock's hands — "is a list of locations to go with the keys."

"How much money is there?" asks Brock with mild surprise as he thumbs through the bound bills.

"Thousands," she admits. "I didn't really count it."

"And you gave it to me because you didn't want to get caught with it?" he asks again in a playfully accusing tone.

"No, that's not why," she replies forthrightly. "I was careful. I made sure that security footage got deleted, always wore a disguise, always wore gloves, always worked late at night when the clerks were sleepy and no one else was in the store. I gave you the package because I thought it might help to persuade you, to show you that I was being serious. Things were moving fast and I didn't have time to convince you of the actual truth so I made up a little lie about where it came from."

In a casually flat tone, Elvis includes his own observation. "Even if she slipped up and got caught," he conjectures, "what crime would she have been charged with?"

Slightly surprised, Rebekah replies, "Umm, yeah. That's probably true."

"So what's with the lottery tickets?" follows Brock.

"Like I said, the convenience store clerks believed I'd *won the lottery*," she recounts, "but sometimes they had no money so they gave me tickets instead. Kind of ironic now that I think about it. Anyways, I ended up with a small stack of them. The losers I threw away but the winners I kept."

Cutting in, Dmitri inquires, "So there's more? More than what Brock's holding, I mean."

"I hid caches around town and snuck the locations into the agency research," she responds, pointing to the leather messenger bag propped up nearby. "The coordinates

are disguised as wrong results in equations or what look like meaningless numbers. The remote viewing data has more details about where exactly to look. I don't know how many packages are still out there but at least I know where they're supposed to be."

Looking between Dominic and Dmitri for additional questions, she receives none. Both men's curiosities seem to have been satisfied. The moments of silence that follow indicate that the matter of the envelope appears to have been settled for everyone.

"Lucky I forgot about this thing," Brock says at last, patting the bulky package, "otherwise it could be drowning in salt water right now."

"You still believe ze luck?" Mirabelle asks him with a look of genuine amusement.

"I don't know," he says. "It feels like luck."

"But it need you to make it 'appen," she points out with a sly smile. "Even if you forget, you do it. You make your luck."

"I guess," he admits.

"Zis is 'ow I feel," she says, pulling back into a casual recline.

"What if your feelings are wrong?" asks Brock.

"When it 'appen I can tell you," she responds, narrowing her eyelids and pulling down the corners of her mouth into a smiling frown.

Chuckling, Dominic stands up and announces, "Well, I'm going to meet Mike. At this point no one knows exactly who I'm with so unless I need your help it's best if you hang back. The less exposed you are the better."

Section B agree but Rebekah wonders if perhaps Mirabelle should accompany him as backup. Dominic points out that, "He's only expecting one of us and I don't want to risk spooking him. Maybe if she hides in the bushes ..."

"If somesing will 'appen I must be close," retorts Mirabelle. "In ze bushes, I maybe arrive too late."

"Better if I just go alone," determines Dominic.

According to a hastily improvised plan, if he's taken hostage Dominic will try to place some markers to guide them toward his location. If he doesn't return within ten minutes, Section B will either come for him or to follow those markers.

Taking possession of the lumpy envelope, the imposing man trudges off into the darkness. In the meantime the rest of the group take the opportunity to clean, pack, and prepare for a quick departure.

It only takes a few minutes before Dominic comes wading back through the tall weeds and extended branches, empty-handed.

“Mike seems okay,” he summarizes. “Wants to know as little as possible, thinks it’s safer that way, so he’ll only be dealing with me. We have the trailer to ourselves but we’re going to need to hike around weigh stations.”

“What does that mean?” questions Brock.

“Transport trucks are sometimes required to be weighed along highways,” responds Dominic. “If Mike gets the signal we’ll have to haul our stuff around the station using a side road or something, then hop back on later.”

“Are we that heavy?” continues Brock.

“We’d show up as extra weight in the station logs and that could lead to questions. So would an extended inspection.”

“Right,” accepts Brock with a conclusive nod.

At that, Dominic leads Section B on a slightly different path through underbrush, into a group of prickly pines, and between dense clusters of deciduous foliage. At times the darkness in front of them is nearly complete and the short walk effortful as they struggle to pull both their food and their baggage through the thick plant life.

After a few minutes they emerge onto the shoulder of the sparsely-lit park road. They quickly spot the rear of the waiting semi-trailer to their right, doors hanging open, hazard lights engaged. The powerful machine to which it’s attached occasionally whines and hisses as its air-brakes release pressure. The diesel engine idles with a patient rumble.

Soon they’ve hopped into the back of the spacious container and unloaded their belongings. At the far end they find some rolled up blankets, an electric lantern, a bucket with a lid, a few rolls of toilet paper, and two flashlights. Dominic pulls the doors in behind them and then bangs three times on the wall nearest to the cab. Shortly afterward the doors are fastened from the outside with loud metallic clanks. A few moments after that the truck and its cargo lurch forward into the night.

## Sleeper Cell

The voyage is long, languid, and mostly monotonous.

Mike drives throughout the day, pulling into rest areas only to relieve himself and to buy food for the road. Dominic is the lead on any Section B day excursions which are brief and regimented, focusing mainly on washroom visits, disposal of garbage, and a cigarette or two enjoyed solely by Mirabelle.

At night the vehicle's trailer door is unlocked and as Mike retires to the sleeper cab, Section B are free to roam the grounds of the truck stops. Aside from grimy toilets, fast food, and tiny variety stores, there's usually little to see. The constant roar of highway traffic is the only thing to listen to. If it wasn't for some engrossing reading, courtesy of Dominic, waiting for their equipment to recharge at the station's outdoor outlets would be insufferable.

Section B soon refer to the trailer as the "jail" and their outdoor excursions as visits to the "yard".

Inside the "jail" they've hung some of the supplied blankets to make dividers, used others to line the floor, then created cushioning using the contents of their bags. The pod is set up at one side, the computer equipment nearby, and a makeshift toilet is at the far end for inter-stop emergencies.

During the journey the Section continue to train and give each other advice. Hours are spent in the pod and the agents' outputs are recorded on paper, sealed in a plastic pouch, and placed inside Rebekah's leather messenger bag. The results are casually discussed but no definitive conclusions are drawn.

Sometimes the group plays cards. Sometimes they nap. Sometimes they read or listen to downloaded music. For some variety they try different combinations of their donated foods, washing them down with truck stop tap water.

On the second day they find a ten dollar bill on the pavement and decide to splurge for a bottle of instant coffee, whitener, and sugar. Taking the first sip of the concoction from a vigorously shaken plastic bottle, Dominic provides a single descriptor: "Atrocious."

On the third night Brock discovers Mirabelle standing outside the truck stop's tiny variety store, peering intently at the front door.

"What'cha doin'?" he asks playfully as he approaches her from behind.

Without a pause in her concentration she replies, "Making ze plan."

"To do what?" he asks again.

"To get some cigarette. I 'ave no more," she explains, still staring.

Looking around the vicinity to see if anyone else is within earshot, Brock continues, “And how’re you going to do that?”

“I will take zem,” she replies flatly.

“You mean, like, steal them?” asks Brock cautiously.

“Yes, like zis,” she confirms.

“Okay,” he accepts with an uncertain but acquiescing nod. “Well, do you need a lookout or something?”

“No, I am okay,” she says, tucking her shirt into her pants with one hand while breaking into a rhythmic stride towards the entrance. It’s only then that Brock notices the chunk of brick that she’s holding behind her back with her other hand.

“Uh oh,” he intones ominously.

He watches her bob into the variety store and calmly ask the attendant something. With a smile he, spins around and grabs the keychain at his waist to unlock a sliding metal panel behind him. Opening it, he reveals tight stacks of cigarette boxes. Brock barely registers the simultaneous flight of the brick leaving Mirabelle’s hand and heading into the far corner of the store.

The glass display in the corner shatters beneath the brick, sending the case’s fragile items plummeting to the floor. The attendant’s head swings towards the cacophony just as Mirabelle reaches around him. The timing is so precise it’s as if she’s working a clockwork mechanism in the man’s neck. By the time he’s returned his distracted gaze to the shelf of cigarettes, she’s grabbed handfuls of packs and dropped them under her shirt, the height of the counter blocking the purloined products from the clerk’s line of sight.

Seemingly failing to notice the missing cigarettes on the shelf the attendant re-locks the metal panel, looks at Mirabelle with consternation, holds up a pausing finger, and makes his way toward the damage.

Raising her hands to indicate that she’s no longer interested, Mirabelle quickly exits the premises.

Smiling casually and extracting a pack from her shirt, she peels open the plastic wrap and walks past Brock into the deep shadows of parking lot. Shortly, all that can be seen is the spark of a small flame followed by the receding dance of an incandescently red point.

The following evening brings another memorable event.

It’s nearly midnight and Section B are sleeping when the latch on their trailer door produces a slight squeak. A few moments after that the hinges produce a similar sound as the door is opened. A tall shadow slips silently into the container, pauses a moment, then turns on a small flashlight.

Rebekah is the first to stir as the beam of light hits the cloth of her tiny partition. Bleary-eyed and disheveled, she rises and stumbles to confront the intruder.

The stranger lets out a hushed, “Whoa”, as Rebekah approaches him.

“I didn’t know there were people crashing in here,” says the shadow in a placid voice. “It’s cool, it’s cool. I’ll just see myself out.”

“You can’t leave yet,” responds Rebekah, smiling sweetly. “I don’t even know who ... I mean ... it’s just ... I’ve been stuck in this trailer all by myself for days.”

“All by yourself?” he asks, shining his flashlight behind her into the container. She moves to block it and draw his attention back to her with a demure slink. “Yeah,” she replies softly while biting her lower lip. “Just me.”

“Weird way to travel,” he states.

“Roomier than a bus and cheaper than a train,” she explains with a coy grin as she makes her way toward him.

“Okay,” notes the man with an incredulous tone. “So where’re you headed?”

“Big city,” responds Rebekah as she moves in close to him, her illuminated face fully consuming the beam of light.

By now the members of Section B have groggily but silently made their way to a few concealed spots behind the cloth partitions. There they crouch and kneel, observing Rebekah’s exchange, ready to jump in if needed. Only Mirabelle remains reclined, listening to the exchange in silence.

“And why,” he continues, his youthful features now visible in the light reflecting off of her face, “are you going to the *big city*?”

A torn blue jean jacket covers a black t-shirt out of which emerges a lean and clean face topped with a shock of blond hair. A pair of emerald green eyes examine Rebekah with interest.

“More *exciting* there,” she replies playfully, now almost pressed up against him.

“That so?” he asks with an amorous smirk, his head tilting. She tilts her head to match his, looking intently into his eyes.

“Yeah, you know, hijinks ... hinx, minx, as the old witch” — she winks, craning her head forward a little — “and the fat begins to fry. But someone’s home with Jumping Joan, father mother and I.”

The man lets out a breathy, “Wha...”, before being swiftly overtaken by Rebekah.

“Lock, stock, stone dead,” she continues, placing emphasis on certain syllables. “Blind men go deep. Every knave will have a slave, you or I” — she slows her pace — “must ... be ... a ... sleep.”

As she trails off, the man stands unmoving, his smile slightly faded, eyes vacant and unfocused.

“But I like to relax too. Don’t you like to relax?” she asks him tentatively.

“Yeah,” he responds with loose detachment.

“We can relax now. Together. Don’t you want to relax with me?” she asks again.

The man responds in the same way.

Rebekah begins describing her own feelings of ever-deepening relaxation, then inviting him to join in. Her words guide his focus slowly from the top of his head down to his feet, the man’s slouch increasing as he complies. Eventually he’s standing limp and bent over, like a rag doll being held up by its neck.

Completing the hypnotic induction she instructs, “Staying nice and relaxed, why don’t we stand up straight, open our eyes, and look around?”

With a lazy smile he does as she suggests.

“You never told me your name,” she states gently.

“Harry,” he replies blissfully.

“Do you have some ID to back that up?”

“Sure. Here.”

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a wallet that’s connected to a loose chain terminating at his belt. She pulls out a few plastic cards and examines them in the ambient light of the flashlight. After a few moments she puts them back and returns the wallet to Harry.

“Now that I’ve given it back, now that’s it’s safe, you can forget that you gave it to me and told me your name, right?” she inquires.

“Right,” he acknowledges with an unquestioning nod.

“Will you forget?”

“Yes.”

“Good. So why don’t we try waking up for a few moments, like fully waking up. But when I put my hand on your shoulder” — she reaches upward with her hand and rests it on the denim — “like this, we’ll go right back to this amazingly relaxed place, okay?”

“Okay.”

“So now when I count to zero we’ll wake up...”

She commences the countdown and in moments Harry is wide awake and seemingly unaware that the interaction has taken place.

“How do you feel?” asks Rebekah.

“Great,” he replies, the aroused smirk returning to his face. “Especially since you’re here.”

“Hang on a second,” she says as she takes a step back, “you don’t even know my name.”

“So why don’t you tell me?” he prompts with an increasing slyness.

“Now why would I do something like that, Harry?” she responds, slowly shaking her head and pursing her smiling lips in disapproval.

“Wait,” says Harry, his face becoming pensive and troubled, “how do you know *my* name?”

“I know *a lot* about you Harry,” she explains, grinning broadly and stepping forward. “You’re twenty-one, for example. And you live at number two Hollow Oak Lane, right?”

His eyes narrow to slits. “Have we met before?” he asks.

“No, Harry, we haven’t,” responds Rebekah confidently as she places her hand on his shoulder, “and you’ll wish we never had.”

His body instantly goes limp.

“Open your eyes,” she demands. “There’s something you need to see.”

He opens his eyes and stares blankly at her.

“Look at my face,” she instructs. “Isn’t it strange? Look at how it’s shifting and changing. Should a face do that?”

He blinks a few times and furrows his brows as he tries to understand what he’s looking at.

“Do you see?” continues Rebekah. “My eyes don’t look human. And what’s wrong with my mouth?”

Harry’s eyes widen with apprehension as he processes her suggestions.

“Are you looking, Harry? Do you see?”

“W-what the f-fuck?” he stammers fearfully as he steps away.

“And now you can’t even move because your feet are stuck to the floor,” she commands. “Do you see what I can do? Do you *under ... stand.*”

With a look of shock, Harry tries unsuccessfully to lift his legs and nearly falls backward with the effort.

“And now,” says Rebekah resolutely as she closes the distance between them, “I need you to really look. Over there” — she points into the darkness of the trailer behind her — “are the others. Do you see Them? Do you see their eyes and their teeth? Can you smell

something awful? What is that? Do you hear those strange sounds? What's wrong, Harry? What's *wrong*?"

It only takes a few moments for Harry's eyes to bulge in horror. Dropping the flashlight, he attempts futilely to scramble away from Rebekah, letting out a choked whine as he perceives the suggested malevolence appearing out of the shadows behind her.

Picking up the flashlight, she watches him grow increasingly frenetic as his face contorts into a grotesque mask.

"They're gone," she says after a few moments, dispelling the apparitions with a wave of her hands. "But I can always call them back. You won't forget that will you?"

He shakes his head vigorously, spittle foaming through his clenched teeth.

Bending down once again and making direct eye contact with him, Rebekah says, "Okay, calm down, calm down. You're safe, *for now*. Just listen closely because here's what's going to happen."

Before releasing him, she instructs him to run as hard and fast as he can away from their trailer. Should he look behind him he will see the darkness and its inhabitants chasing after him. And if he tells anyone about what he experienced here tonight then those same entities will find him because, after all, if she knows where he lives then so do they.

Harry does as instructed and sprints madly away from the trailer, hops over a fence into a neighbouring farm field, and runs into the darkness beyond.

The rest of Section B, with the exception of Mirabelle, emerge from their hiding spots and thank Rebekah for her quick and effective response. "Still not calling you *The Handler*," notes Dmitri to her afterwards, "and couldn't you have just told him to forget us?"

"And when he remembers?" she explains. "Because eventually he will. Better that everyone thinks he's nuts or messed up on drugs when his memory returns, don't you think?"

"What about that *awful* smell you were talking about?" he asks, ignoring her rhetorical question with a wry smile.

She pauses for a moment and with a flattened expression concludes, "About that ... I mean ... I think we can *all* use a good shower after this trip."

Following the encounter with Harry, and other than having to lug their stuff along rural roads to bypass a couple of weigh stations, the remainder of the journey is uneventful.

Eventually, after driving late one night the truck comes to a stop near their destination just outside the city limits.

As usual, after a few loud bangs on the door Dominic hops out of the trailer to have a hushed conversation with Mike. From inside, only the venting air-brakes can be heard.

At length, Dominic returns and says, “Mike wants to talk to us all. Wants to ask us a question.”

“I thought we agreed to a protocol,” notes Brock. “We don’t see him and he doesn’t see us.”

“He’s already seen us,” explains Dominic. “He thinks it’s only fair if we see him.”

Dmitri shrugs noncommittally and Mirabelle is similarly indifferent. Elvis, and Brock acquiesce with uncertain nods. Rebekah expresses an uneasy, “Oookaay.”

With no other objections, Section B make their way out of the trailer. On the thin strip of gravel between the parked vehicle and the ditch, a large silhouette stands and waits, interrupting the city skyline behind it.

Mike is bulky and burly, a short but thick man with a thick beard and thick eyebrows. The sleeves on his red lumberjack shirt are rolled up, revealing a detailed tattoo of a truck on one forearm and a design that looks like a map on the other. He’s wearing sturdy black boots, spacious denim coveralls, and on his head sits a red-and-white baseball cap into which the words “Freedom Convoy” are stitched. He looks like a disillusioned Santa Claus who’d gone rogue, lost a few pounds, and assumed a new identity.

“Am I gonna regret this?” he asks in a husky voice, looking from person to person.

“We’re not here to screw someone over or blow something up if that’s what you’re implying,” replies Rebekah, bending slightly as if pushing the claim forward with her body.

“That’s good,” remarks Mike, “but what I mean is, will my knowledge of you come back to bite me in the ass?”

“I don’t see why,” assures Rebekah with a mild shake of her head as she pulls back into a casual stance. “Unless our colleague here” — she motions to Dominic — “told you something he shouldn’t have. Or maybe you saw something you shouldn’t have?”

“Not something I was plannin’ to do,” Mike explains to Rebekah. “The first time I just happened to be up and stretching my legs when I saw this young lady” — he points to Mirabelle — “help herself to some smokes. The second time, I heard a commotion in the trailer. I stood outside listening to some woman talk, I’m assuming that was you, and then some guy bolted out the back. The next day your buddy Dominic told me what’d happened.”

He pauses for a moment as he pans from face to face. Then, with a grin he finishes, “Impressive.”

Reaching into his pocket to pull out of wad of cash, most likely the same one he’d been given as payment for the transport, he peels off a few bills and offers, “Here ... to get you into the city at least. I’d take you all the way but everyone’s watching everything down there. Maybe I’m just being paranoid but I’d rather not take the risk.”

“We completely understand,” says Rebekah, promptly snatching the bills from Mike’s hand and stuffing them into her pants pocket.

“Okay, well,” responds the burly man, slapping his hands against his thighs, “I guess that’s that. There’s a gas station back down the road there, should have a phone if you need to call a cab or something. Hope you guys find what you’re looking for, just remember to keep me out of it when you do!”

Laughing out loud, Mike turns around to leave but suddenly spins back around, reaches into the pocket of his coveralls and exclaims, “Almost forgot!”

He pulls out a business card and holds it out between his middle and index fingers for Rebekah to take. “In case there’s something else I might be able to help with.”

Brock watches the exchange and notes with mild amusement that the card only has a generic email address on it.

With this, Mike makes his way toward the driver’s seat of the truck and Section B gather up their bags. Soon they’re on their way to the gas station as Mike’s truck recedes into the early morning mist.

At the gas station they search for a pay phone but, finding none, they persuade the sleepy clerk to call them a couple of taxis. One of the bills Mike has given them is broken on packaged foods and caffeinated drinks which are consumed over a discussion of what story to give the taxi drivers, should they ask. Not long after that, the “film crew whose vehicle broke down” cram into the waiting taxis and ride off in the same direction as the truck. The twinkling lights of the city are now set against the peachy haze of the eastern horizon.

They arrive a couple of blocks away from their destination, pay their fares, pile their baggage onto their shoulders, and solemnly march the short distance to the destination provided to them by Rebekah’s parents.

The rays of the eastern sun are punctuating the concrete and glass angles of the city around them as they round the final corner.

“We made it,” notes Dmitri with an exhausted sigh.

Like Dmitri, Brock has been walking with his gaze down, his focus on simply putting one foot in front of the other. Setting his bags at his sides, he finally lifts his head up to see where they’ve arrived.

“Holy fucking shit,” he stammers in a tired whisper, shocked eyes staring out from beneath a deeply furrowed brow.

## Kryptowährung

Section B exchange uncertain glances between the edifice and an astonished Brock as he stares at the side of the building.

“How the fuck is this possible?” he asks dumbfounded, addressing no one in particular.

Attempting to understand Brock’s reaction, Dominic cranes his head forward and offers, “Probably built like any other building, brick by brick.”

“No,” Brock cuts in curtly. “It’s ... I know this building. I saw it before, in the pod. This was the building in the photo ... this *exact* fucking one.”

“Could you have seen this building before?” inquires Rebekah cautiously.

His face beaming with amazement, Brock turns to her and responds, “Maybe. But out of all the buildings I’ve ever seen in my life why this *exact* one?”

Joining the conversation with concern, Elvis asks, “You saw *this* building?”

“Yeah, this one. Full detail, clear as fucking day ... like here, now,” confirms Medic, pointing to the building in front of them with both hands.

“Wasn’t that your calibration session?” injects Dmitri. “I remember you going into a *lot* of detail. We might still have a recording of it.”

“That’s probably not necessary right now,” asserts Dominic. “What we should do is congratulate Brock on the deflowering of his agency cherry.”

The members of Section B offer Brock gentle commendations while briefly recalling similar experiences.

“Except,” adds Dmitri, “as you’ve seen, the intel we get is usually more vague. If your result can be reproduced then the neural net might be completely unnecessary for you. This could be your ability, your exceptional skill.”

Still somewhat enthralled by the experience, Brock smiles cautiously at Dmitri’s suggestion.

“It’s a shame I didn’t treat it like a standard session and record your intent,” continues Dmitri with a look of mild regret. “Do you remember it?”

Brock shakes his head with disappointment.

“It’ll probably come back to you at some point,” interjects Dominic, nodding his head reassuringly, “but right we have no idea what’s in this building or where we’re supposed to go once we’re inside. Unless Brock has something on that too?”

Noting the expectant look on Dominic’s face, Brock shakes his head a second time.

“Okay, so,” resumes the large man, “I don’t think that this is something we should be winging.”

After asking for an explanation of the phrase, Mirabelle joins Section B in agreement.

A quick group huddle is followed reconnoiter of the building’s perimeter. Once completed, it’s decided that Elvis and Dominic will stay outside to guard the Section’s luggage and to keep a lookout. The rest will enter the building and, barring any unforeseen problems, proceed to methodically search it for any useful information.

A time limit is set, after which it will be assumed that something’s gone wrong. In the event of such an occasion, a rendezvous point is set for a subsequent regroup. There is some apprehension in both groups as they split up.

Outside, Elvis crosses the street and begins a slow patrol around the building while Dominic leans up casually against its most inconspicuous and unmonitored corner, the Section’s baggage stacked up behind him.

In the meantime, the other group is moving through the huge, gilded, main entrance doors of the imposing structure. Their footsteps echo on the marble floor of the ornately cavernous lobby as they glide through mixed odours of office supplies, ancient tobacco smoke, and industrial cleaning products.

A frail-looking old man wearing a bulky blue shirt topped with droopy epaulettes pokes up from behind an imposing marble slab at the far end of the lobby. His ill-fitting peaked cap pulled down, and seemingly engrossed in something behind the reception counter, the elderly security guard takes no notice of the group.

Spotting an electronic company directory hanging prominently on a nearby wall, the team make a decisive turn toward it. There, Dmitri scrolls slowly through the list of suite numbers and associated names as he, Rebekah, Brock, and Mirabelle examine them.

About halfway through the information, Rebekah removes her sunglasses and asks Dmitri to pause. A smile slowly pulls itself across her face as she leans in to examine an entry.

Satisfied and pulling back she says, “Okay, thank you.”

“Did you see something?” asks Dmitri.

“Maybe,” she responds, still smirking. “Let’s go through the rest just to be sure.”

Dmitri continues scrolling and, without further interruptions, they quickly reach the end of the list.

“So?” inquires Dmitri, making expectant eye contact with Rebekah.

She restores her sunglasses and replies, “Three oh three. If I’m wrong then we just continue with the plan, but I think we should try three oh three first.”

Dmitri quickly scrolls back up to entry 303 which is accompanied by the name “Schatz, Liebling, & Tochter”.

“What does zis mean?” asks Mirabelle, echoing the question on her fellow agents’ minds.

“I can’t tell you that now,” replies Rebekah.

With visible reservations, they tacitly accept her proposal and make their way toward the wide staircase to the left of the reception area. As they cautiously approach the slouching security guard, they discover that his posture and slow, rhythmic breathing are due to his being fast asleep.

Trying their best to move stealthily past the napping man, the group begin their ascent up the stairs.

After only a few steps, a croaking voice calls out to them from behind.

The agents freeze mid-step and slowly turn their heads toward the source of the sound.

Apparently having suddenly come to consciousness, the aged security guard raises a speckled hand and points to Rebekah with a bony finger. “Miss! Just hold on there!” he instructs.

A friendly but concerned smile forms on her face. “What seems to be the problem?” she responds with artificial demureness.

Some few tense and uncertain moments pass as the old man rises shakily from his chair and makes his way to the base of the stairs. “Just hold on,” he repeats with a rasp as he shuffles to the bottom step, then waves them back downstairs with a skeletal hand.

“You don’t need to walk up. There are elevators around the corner here.”

“Oh!” replies Rebekah, relieved surprise melting the unease in her smile. Regaining her composure, she thanks the kindly guard for his thoughtfulness.

“I keep telling them that they should put up some signs,” continues the old man as he leads the agents to a small alcove on the other side of his desk. “But then I guess I wouldn’t have a job, huh?” he concludes, pointing to the two elevators with a laboured laugh.

Thanking him again, the agents of Section B board one of the cramped lifts and ride it to the third floor. There, signs on the walls lead them directly to the end of the hallway and a nondescript black door. Compared to the signage around the entrances of the other offices, the small silver plaque etched with number 303 is the only prominent element on the otherwise unassuming portal. The dim overhead lighting being maintained by a struggling fluorescent tube adds to the sense of mystery.

Mirabelle offers to be the first to enter, reasoning that she stands the best chance of avoiding any traps.

“No,” declines Rebekah. “This one needs to be me. But thanks anyway.”

Mirabelle shrugs and steps aside.

Moving in, Rebekah knocks on the door, pauses, and turns back to face the team.

“If something ... *bad* ... happens to me,” she whispers haltingly, “you guys need to get the hell out of here, okay?”

“Aaaaand?” Dmitri confronts her, rolling his hand forward to coax more out of her.

Removing her glasses, Rebekah looks at him with genuine confusion.

“Avenge your death!” he hisses back sharply.

The nervous anticipation in the air is temporarily dispelled as Rebekah stifles a laugh.

Taking a deep breath she whispers back, “Yes, avenge my death.”

Standing up, she confirms that everyone’s ready, then turns around to face the door. She knocks three more times and waits.

There is no response.

She knocks one more time, followed by a longer wait.

Still nothing.

Briefly turning around to flash an “I don’t know” shrug to the team, she places her hand gently on the handle and pushes down slowly. The door opens almost noiselessly, the gentle click of the latch producing the only sound.

Rebekah pushes on the door and as it swings inward, a small and darkened room is revealed. Some dim illumination is provided through the slits of horizontal window blinds at the far end, enough to make out some basic shapes inside.

In the middle of the space sits a small, round table on which sits what appears to be a very old personal computer, monitor, and keyboard. A single chair is lying on its side on the wooden floor near the table. On the dark ceiling appears to be a fluorescent light fixture, not unlike the one in the hallway. The walls seem bare.

For a few seconds the team stand breathlessly, staring intently into the obscuring shadows.

“Hello?” inquires Rebekah into the murk.

Again she receives no response. Tilting her head and pursing her lips with determination, she slowly advances.

After a few moments, her eyes have adjusted and she’s found her way to the blinds. There she quickly finds the lift strings and hoists the blinds up, plunging the room into cheery outdoor light. Taking a few seconds to examine the inside of the tiny suite, including behind the door, she concludes, “I don’t see anything else. This is it.”

Dmitri is the second person into the room and quickly moves in to examine the ancient machine on the table. Motioning for everyone else to step back, he pushes the power button on the monitor.

The beige CRT monitor takes some time to warm up, eventually coming to life with some faintly flickering scan lines and a green ">" prompt. A gently flashing block cursor next to the prompt waits patiently for input.

"This might be antique," remarks Dmitri as he examines the similarly beige keyboard and dull metallic case beneath the display. "The keyboard and screen are commercial but very old. The companies that made them don't exist anymore. The box though," he points to the case, "looks custom. Everything's welded shut in the back. Nothing we can connect to even if we had the right cables, which we don't."

"What about this?" asks Rebekah, pointing to the prompt.

"I have no idea what that is," he responds with a head shake. "Could be the OS, could be an executable, maybe this is just a terminal for some other system."

"I don't know what any of that means," she remarks wryly.

"Only one way to find out," he replies, raising his eyebrows.

Leaning in, Dmitri types "help" on the keyboard, lingers for a few moments over the "ENTER" key, then presses it with an audible click.

The cursor glides across and down as it prints out the help screen:

**commands:**

`/admin`

`/sectionb`

`/shutdown`

"I'd guess that second one is for us," observes Brock as he points to the command list.

With a nod, Dmitri looks around at his fellow agents and asks, "Shall we give it a try?"

With unanimous agreement, he types in the command, then forcefully taps the "ENTER" key.

This produces a "password:" prompt on the following line with the same pulsing cursor at the end.

With frustration, Dmitri inquires, "Anyone have a clue what *that* could be?"

Rebekah responds with a "no", Mirabelle shrugs, and Brock shakes his head.

"I guess we're just guessing then," Dmitri states flatly. "Maybe Rebekah?"

"I already said I don't know," she retorts.

"I mean *Rebekah* as the password," explains Dmitri.

"Ah," Rebekah nods in comprehension. "Your guess is as good as mine."

He types in the password, presses "ENTER", and a new message is displayed:

**incorrect - 2 tries left**

**hint: the most likely result of a fair coin toss**

“Shit,” remarks Dmitri as another “password:” prompt appears beneath the new message. “I don’t know what this’ll do when we run out of tries. We need to discuss this before I type anything else.”

After a brief discussion in which even Mirabelle participates, it’s decided that the next most obvious password is either “heads” or “tails”. It’s decided that either answer being equally likely, they might as well choose by alphabetical order.

Dmitri types in “heads” which produces the same message, this time warning of only one remaining try.

A further discussion ensues and the group decides on the only other possible option: “tails”.

Dmitri types the word on the keyboard and pauses hesitatingly over the “ENTER” button. “This is it,” he cautions. “Any final guesses? This is the time to speak up.”

As his index finger begins to move downward, Rebekah shoots out an outstretched hand and exclaims, “Stop! Wait! Just ... wait.”

As Dmitri retracts his hand, Rebekah does the same, putting her index finger to her lips as she descends into contemplation. A few times she absentmindedly repeats the word “password”, putting emphasis on the second syllable.

Eventually, she assumes the same determined look as when she first entered the room and offers, “I think it’s *face*.”

“Face?” repeats Brock, clearly baffled.

“Yeah,” she explains. “One day when my father was showing me some new coins he was adding to his collection he asked me a question like this. In his riddle the answer was the edge but it’s the same thing.”

Brock shakes his head in continued puzzlement.

“If you flip a coin it’s very unlikely that it’ll end up on its rim, the edge, right? Most likely it’ll end up on one of the two faces, either heads or tails.”

Brock acknowledges the obviousness of the answer with a simple, “Oh.”

“So the most likely result,” finishes Rebekah, “is a face.”

“I hope you’re right,” expresses Dmitri as he backspaces through the previous word and types in “face”.

“So do I,” she says with concern as he finishes typing. With one last uncertain pause and a final glance of confirmation around the group, Dmitri presses “ENTER”.

With this a new message appears beneath the prompt:

## **come to boathouse**

Beneath this a new prompt appears asking to “confirm (Y/n)?”

At this Rebekah produces an audible laugh, visible relief replacing her worry. “I know exactly where this is!” she rejoices, a wide grin on her face.

“*Finally* we know something,” says a similarly relieved Dmitri. Brock and Mirabelle both nod in approval.

Dmitri turns to Rebekah and inquires, “So what now?”

“Now we go to see my parents,” she replies, smiling. “It’s too far to walk but we can get some more taxi money from one of the stashes. I’m certain I left a few around this area but the bag will know for sure.”

“Should I confirm the message then?” asks Dmitri, his hand over the aged keyboard.

“Yes and then let’s get out of here,” she confirms cheerfully.

He hits the “Y” key followed by “ENTER”, which is followed by the response:

### **destroying...**

Shortly after that the screen goes black, leaving them staring at distorted and darkened reflections of themselves. A few moments later, Dmitri pulls the blinds back down and the group exit, leaving the room as they found it and closing the door behind them.

Back down in the lobby they say a final thank-you to the helpful security guard and, with the exception of a nonchalant Mirabelle, they exit the building with upbeat strides.

“By the way, it’s sweetie, darling, and daughter,” states Rebekah as they walk along the sidewalk, the unprompted nature of her remark causing Brock to squint with curiosity.

“What is?” he asks.

“The name of the company in three oh three,” she explains. “It’s German. My father’s called me that since I was a kid.”

“Why did you have to hold off telling us that?” inquires Brock.

“It’s not as if we haven’t been listened in on before,” she continues, “and I wasn’t going to say anything inside that building.”

Brock accepts the explanation with a nod.

Around the corner, Dominic and Elvis are filled in on the news. From there, Section B retire to a more private spot nearby so that Rebekah can show them how to decode some of the documents in her messenger bag.

A location is quickly extracted and Dominic volunteers to retrieve the nearby cache.

A few minutes after Dominic’s departure, Brock makes a sudden announcement. “Now I remember,” he proclaims, drawing the remaining Section’s attention.

“What’s that?” prompts Dmitri.

“My intent. Before the pod. I wanted to know who was after us.”

Suddenly realizing the implication of the recovered memory, Brock plaintively shifts his attention to Rebekah. “I’m sorry,” he says regretfully. “Maybe I’m misreading it. Maybe it’s someone else in that building.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” she acknowledges resolutely, then falls into silence.

Soon afterward, Dominic arrives and reports a successful retrieval. The small cylindrical parcel is placed in front of the group, the remnants of the dirt in which it was buried brushed away, the numerous layers of insulation ripped off, and the rolled-up contents counted. Rebekah assures them that there’s more than enough cash there to get them to the “boathouse”.

With their earlier ebullience somewhat blunted by Brock’s latest revelation, Section B hail two taxis, pile as much of their luggage into the trunks, the remainder at their feet, and depart on what they hope is the final leg of their long journey.

## Navel Intelligence

Out of the city's limits, the taxi cabs make their way past ever shorter and sparser buildings that lead to ghostly suburban subdivisions, then finally onto a dusty and uneven country road running between tree-lined farm fields that spill into overgrown ditches.

After a few minutes the vehicles make a sharp turn at the end of a row of tall hedges that terminate at a blue and white mailbox. The cars roll over a small culvert and come to a gentle stop at the end of a short gravel driveway. Rebekah pays the cabbies as Section B exit the vehicles and pull their luggage out onto the stony path.

Hidden behind more thickets, the two-storey blue and white house is well disguised to casual observers.

Small and cheery flower beds line the front of the structure and the sloping southern view opens into an expansive view of an ocean-like lake some distance away. The lightly hazy atmosphere surrounding the property makes the distant body of water nearly indistinguishable from the sky above it.

Serene rural windows and gently sloped grey roofs line the otherwise nondescript house. The only exception is an odd wooden shape projecting northward from the second level of the outer wall. Upon closer inspection, the shape seems to be that of a heavily weathered wooden mermaid, the kind that might appear at the bow of an old sailing ship.

From the driveway, Section B can see part of a large backyard extending outward to a picturesque wooden fence beyond which lies a spacious field studded with rows of beige corn stubble. Birds chirp happily from somewhere in the trees accompanied by the soothing rustle of a cool and gentle breeze.

"That's the boathouse," explains Rebekah, pointing to the building with an upraised palm as she moves toward the front stairs. "You guys hang back."

"We'll avenge your death," offers Dmitri as he watches her move toward the elevated entrance. She shoots back a weak smile of recognition.

In a few moments she's knocking on the front door and glancing back at Section B with apprehension. Shortly after that the door swings open and a pair of tanned, feminine arms reaches out to engulf Rebekah and pull her into the open doorway. A few moments later, Rebekah's own arm comes back into view, waving reassuringly at her fellow agents.

They observe the mostly obstructed interaction for a while longer, after which Rebekah re-emerges with a suppressed grin. Following her are two similarly sized and grinning individuals.

The engulfing arms belong to an elderly but elegant Indian woman wearing an orange and yellow sari slung casually over one shoulder, her black and silver hair pulled into a bun at the crown of her head. A pair of delicate reading glasses are slung around her neck on a thin golden chain, matching the slender bracelets on her wrists. In a number of ways, her mouth and hair resemble Rebekah's.

The younger woman's jawline and eyes, however, are reminiscent of the ageing man standing on her other side. Of a similar stature, his thinning white hair is granted gravitas by a well-maintained handlebar mustache and a piercing black-eyed gaze. Atop his brown patched sweater sits a crisp white collar from which emerges a dark bow tie. Below, the ensemble is completed by pressed brown slacks and dark, well-worn loafers.

With Rebekah standing between them, their mutual resemblance is undeniable.

"The princess and the professor," she proclaims to Section B. "These are my parents."

"I'm not so dainty as she suggests," offers Cornelius with a thick German accent emerging from beneath his jovially bobbing mustache.

"And I haven't taught in years," adds Arti, her words imbued with a refined mix of British and Indian. With a gracefully authoritative movement, she gestures for the Section to come inside.

Following her instructions, they drop their baggage at the door, introduce themselves, and quickly take in their new surroundings. The interior of the house borders on sumptuous.

The entrance opens directly into a large, well-lit, modern kitchen suitable for multiple people to prepare large meals. In the middle is an angular table that extends around a stove, a tiny sink with a tall spout, and a sizeable work area.

Whisks, spatulas, tongs, pots, pans, colanders, and a variety of other cooking implements hang suspended next to a dome over the central stove. Two ovens dominate the far wall and another stove is installed nearby. A second sink sits immediately to the left of the entrance.

"Could do a cooking show in here," whispers Dominic as he looks around.

To their immediate right is a darkened passage beyond which lies an even darker room. The next door to their right appears to lead into the basement, which is also imperceptibly dark. The final doorway to their right emits a warm and inviting radiance.

Peeking inside, they spot a wooden interior of rich mahogany, mellow oak, and vibrant cherry cabinets, all lined with quaint display pieces, books, and decorative tableware, most appearing antique, and most bearing distinctly seafaring elements.

The wooden floor is covered by a detailed area rug with a marine motif, much of which is obscured by a dark and stout coffee table, low slung leather recliners, and a warm brown couch wearing a quilted blanket of muted colours.

Behind the couch hangs a large reproduction of an old and intricate nautical chart. A wooden ship's wheel hangs next to it. In a free corner of the room, a model schooner rests inside a sizeable bottle mounted on a lustrous hexagonal side table. Nearby, a small window is covered by a velvet drape bearing what appears to be a naval logo incorporating an anchor.

Recalling the northern appendage to second floor of the house, Brock turns to Rebekah's parents and remarks, "You must really like boats."

"Not really," replies Cornelius with a gentle shake of the head. "Zis is not our house und most of zees sings are not ours. Vee haff an old arrangement wis ze owners, you see. Rebekah may remember meeting zem. It would haff been a long time ago but I knew she would remember *ze boathouse* where vee spent so many summers."

As Brock nods his understanding, Cornelius concludes, "But your observations are correct. Ze owners enjoy sailing ven zey can. Zat is vhy vee can be here."

With that the Section are hustled back into the spacious kitchen area where they're ushered into a number of chairs around the oddly shaped table.

Before taking his own seat, Cornelius exclaims, "I cannot beleif zat you haff gotten mine dotter home safely to me!" Adoring tears well up in his eyes as he holds up Rebekah's face with both hands. Her cheeks grow red, a suppressed grin producing visible tension at the corners of her mouth.

Pursing her lips, Arti adds a dignified yet vigorous nod. She gazes slowly around the angular table, absorbing the features and demeanour of every Section B agent. Then, with a deep breath she pulls back her chair, stands up, and with outstretched arms exclaims, "This is worth celebrating!"

With that she takes a few steps and begins to fling open the kitchen's numerous cabinets, pulling out assorted jars and boxes.

Seemingly within moments, Arti has prepared a dish of sauerkraut and sausage, described as an "out of a jar and into an air fryer recipe". This is accompanied by a microwave-thawed Chana Masala dish with a side of flatbread, prepared at some time in the past by Cornelius as "practice". Various packaged snacks find their way out of the expansive pantry and bottles of alcohol quickly follow, enlivening the already cheerful atmosphere.

With everyone engaged, the tale of Section B's adventures is freely and sometimes rambunctiously shared. Only Mirabelle leaves the conversation a few times to take a break, her lit cigarette remaining visible through the glass of the main entrance door.

Listening mostly in rapt silence, the elderly Heinrichs inject occasional questions with Cornelius taking a special interest in the pod. They express genuine sympathy when Elvis talks about his own parents but most of the time Rebekah's folks stop only to nod at something they already knew or to shake their heads disapprovingly upon learning of their daughter's excessive alcohol and/or drug consumption. Her only response is a sheepish smile.

Further personal perspectives, biographical snippets, and personal observations are sprinkled liberally by the agents throughout the narrative, painting for Rebekah's parents a detailed portrait of events right up to the point when Section B arrived at the house. Only a few stories are strategically omitted, usually those involving only two people and potentially compromising details.

When the otherwise rich accounts come to a natural lull, Rebekah poses the question that's been lingering on the Section's minds.

"So what's the deal with Shindan?" she asks, her mouth a flat horizon bisecting her face.

"Oh meine Liebe!" begins her father with exasperation. "Vee sent zem to vatch over you!"

"Your father is correct," acknowledges Arti in a measured tone as she wipes the corner of her mouth with a napkin. "We had both received intelligence that something terrible may happen to you and naturally we became worried."

"What intelligence?" insists Rebekah, still reserved.

"We began," begins Arti, "to receive the same message from the agency, over and over again. A single word ... *danger*."

"Zen dreamz," continues Cornelius, "Bos of us. Ze same vuns. Sree nights in a row. Somvun was running away vis zat bag you always carry vis you. Zey had stolen it."

"And then you were being shot at," adds Arti, "on some sort of large canoe."

"We did get robbed! And we got shot at!" reports Rebekah loudly, adding, "On a boat!"

She pauses for a moment.

"But ... so ... what actually happened? With Shindan, I mean."

"Your father," says Arti with a sideways nod to her husband, "decided to hire an *affordable* investigation firm. Someone to keep tabs on you and report to us if anything suspicious came up. Unfortunately, it seems that they didn't fully understand our instructions, or perhaps the people carrying out the assignment were misinformed."

"Or maybe incompetent," suggests Dmitri.

"Quite possibly," agrees Arti. "In any event, when we told them of our suspicions..."

"Yes?" cuts in Rebekah, her prompt infused with anticipation.

"...they somehow concluded that we *wanted* them to steal the bag," finishes Arti. "To make matters worse, it took us some time to discover all of this. We first suspected that something was amiss when, without notice, we suddenly lost all contact with them. They went dark, in other words. It was a couple of days later that we learned that they had vacated their downtown office and disappeared."

"That would have been around the time when we went dark and tracked them to Thailand," confirms Rebekah. "But what about the Bangkok assassins?"

“*That*,” assures Arti calmly, “was precisely what we were trying to prevent. I’m afraid to say that anxiety clouded my own better judgement when it came to employing Shindan but I’m certain that we never mentioned *anything* about assassinations, weapons, or anything of the sort.

“It’s clear that this grotesque affair began with the theft of your bag, as the intelligence predicted, but beyond that we’re no nearer to any meaningful answers. To borrow that tired old expression, it would appear that we’re all in the same boat. And if it wasn’t for Rose we wouldn’t even know most of what we now know.”

“Rose?” inquires Dominic.

“Ja,” responds her father, “she has been a great help. Among ozer sings, she helped arrange for zat small office wis ze computer. If you haff been to ze Shindan headqvorters in Thailand zen perhaps you have already met her?” he suggests.

As the Section exchange quizzical looks, Cornelius mentions something about additional details, grabs a mobile phone from a nearby counter, and excuses himself to the adjoining room.

A brief and muffled conversation follows, after which he returns, stating, “I haff called her und she is on her vay. She is eager to meet you all.”

With Arti and Cornelius’ enthusiastic coaxing, the impending arrival of Rose fades into the background as Section B are introduced to the remainder of the house.

Upstairs, via a staircase running parallel to the one to the basement, are numerous bedrooms in which the agents plant their bags. With scenic landings and comfortably quaint views, not to mention an expansive backyard willow tree that cozies up to an outdoor hot tub, the location could easily provide side income as a rural Bed & Breakfast.

Cornelius and Arti leave the Section to settle in with a few warnings about the house’s water supply: it’s minarelized, limited, and probably not safe for drinking.

Some time later, having used the special hard water soaps and fluffy towels provided by their hosts, most of Section B have showered and wandered back down to the welcoming yet busy environment of the maritime room. As they enter, simple but engaging jazz music is emanating from speakers hidden somewhere in the cozy environment.

Rebekah is the last person to make her way down and into the midst of conversation.

“So you haff zis pod vis you here?” Cornelius asks Dmitri.

“We do,” replies the larger man as he takes a sip of amber liquor from a small snifter. “We can take it out for a spin if you want.”

“Perhaps I will take you up on zat!” exclaims Cornelius with upraised eyebrows. “I recall Rebekah experimented vis somesing like siz, only more basic” — he glances at her as she nods her head in agreement — “but vee use ze old-fashioned vay.”

“Meditation?” inquires Dmitri.

“Sometimes,” responds the older man. “Sometimes dreamz. Sometimes synchronicities. Mostly vee use a Veeja. Back in ze olden dayz vee would use more voo-voo approaches but over time vee found such mesods too limiting. At ze time some of our compatriots called us navel gazers but, you know, siz is silly ... all I ever found zere vas lint!”

The statement elicits mild chuckles from the assembled group.

“How do you record the intel?” continues Dmitri.

“Alzo ze old-fashioned vay,” explains Cornelius. “Vee use pencil und paper, vich vee always have on hand, und vee have established some codes to hide ze information in case someone should become too nosy.”

Brock raises a finger and asks, “How did you set all this up. I mean, do you have any training or education in this?”

“Only what the agency indicates,” replies Arti before Cornelius gets a chance to answer. “We pick up what we need here and there. As I’m sure you appreciate, our approach is quite unique and in many ways unprecedented so, at the risk of sounding smug, we’re more likely to write the textbook on the subject rather than learn it from someone else.”

“Yeah ... the agency,” acknowledges Brock. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. And who are your *compatriots*?”

“Naturally you vant answers,” notes Cornelius. “Especially wis your extraordinary experience in ze pod. Well, you know, it’s a long story.”

“I’m all ears,” assures Brock. Agreeing, the rest of Section B settle back to listen. Only Rebekah leans forward, keen on recovering some of the hazy parts of her memories.

“Very vell,” acquiesces the older man. “I’ll try to skip ze minor details but still, our involvement vis ze agency goes back qvite a few years.”

## Agency

“I belief it vould haff been some time in nineteen seventy or zo, about a year after vee first met. Arti und me vur discussing ze problems of humanity. You see, vee are both children of ze so-called post-var period, which was of course before Vietnam und all ze rest,” begins Cornelius.

“This is why we resisted having a child for so long,” includes Arti. “We didn’t want to subject our son or daughter to what we ourselves had experienced. During the Second World War my father was killed fighting for the British and Corni’s father went MIA on the German side. Both of them were quite zealous and eager to destroy the enemy.”

“Our union is difficult to explain to such people,” continues Cornelius, gazing lovingly at his wife. “Despite ze evidence, zey still belief in ze righteousness and superiority of zeir ideologies. Sadly, ze same cycles of mizery und horror are set to repeat. Very little haz been gained from ze lessons of history. Very little has been learned.”

A brief but grim silence follows.

Breaking the lull, Brock glances over at Rebekah and lightheartedly notes, “If nothing else, at least we’ve learned where the accent comes from.”

“My accent?” she asks with genuine puzzlement.

“Yeah, sometimes you have an accent,” confirms Dmitri with a head tilt to Brock. “Comes and goes. It’s the way you pronounce some words, how you emphasize certain syllables, your intonation. It’s rare but it’s there.”

“How come no one’s ever mentioned this to me before?” she asks, mildly taken aback.

“I assumed you knew,” explains Dmitri. “Besides, it never seemed important.”

Rebekah silently accepts his clarification with a slight nod and raised brows.

The matter seemingly being settled, Brock turns to her parents, offers an apology for his wry interruption, and asks them to continue.

“Qvite alright,” resumes Cornelius with a warm smile. “I vas only going say zat Krieg und Politik sind Scheiße ... *var und politics are shit*. Nationalism is for veek minds und ze naïve azzume zat ze second vorld var vas ze final vun, zat finally humanity had emerged from its stupor.”

“Indeed,” adds Arti. “Yet what could one or two people possibly hope to achieve against such overwhelming forces? Stern words are no match for tanks and bullets but what does that leave? More violence and destruction cannot be the answer. As Corni points out, history has made this abundantly clear.”

“Ya, zis is precizely vat vee vur discussing ven ze agency first became known to us,” interjects Cornelius. “You see, vee vur valking srough an antiquarian book store at ze time. I recall zat ve had bose simultaneously said somesing like, ‘Zen vat hope is zere?’, und zen it happened.

“At zat immediate moment a book dropped from a shelf in front of us, just right zere”, he says, motioning to the floor in front of him. “It landed open to a specific page. I picked it up und zere next to my sumb vur ze vords ‘Agency of Exterior Intelligence’. You see? So vee immediately purchased it und read it cover to cover,” continues Cornelius.

Arti jumps in, saying, “During that period Corni was studying the more esoteric works or Carl Jung and in India the idea of siddhis is quite common, so one could say that we were both receptive to the book’s concepts. However, it had simply never crossed our minds to consider them in this context.”

“*Siddhis?*” interrupts Dominic.

“In the West they would be called psychic, paranormal, or perhaps magical powers,” explains Arti. “Siddhis are traditionally considered byproducts of yoga practice but they can manifest spontaneously. Synchronicity also plays a large part in the process. Had we been sitting in that spot, in that book shop, the answer to our question would quite literally have dropped into our lap.

“Between the subject matter and the manner in which we received it, we felt that we simply couldn’t ignore such providence. So, after some further research, we gathered together a small group of like-minded friends and decided to perform something like a *séance*. We didn’t call it a *séance* but having little else to go on at the time we opted to use similar methods.

“During our first session the twelve of us sat around the table for approximately an hour before the first tap occurred. We were all somewhat incredulous yet, try as we may, we couldn’t explain how the sound had been produced. It seemed to come from somewhere in the middle of the table top, from inside of the wood itself. After a few minutes it happened again, then again, and quite soon there was a regular tapping.

“After some time the sound grew to a loud crack, as though the wood were splitting. We understood then that we needed to refine our approach so we came up with a simple protocol for answers to our questions” — she picks up an ornate tea cup from a side table and takes a sip — “one crack for yes and two cracks for no. We soon realized, however, that our binary code would be unsuitable for more complex questions and so we asked about better alternatives. The loudest and most persistent response came at the suggestion of using an Ouija board, so we acquired one for our next meeting.

“As the first inquiry under our revised approach we asked the *entity* to tell us its name. With our fingertips on the planchette the answer was quickly spelled out. There was some skepticism in our group so we decided to ask again but this time we would try something more convincing. As before, the planchette began to spell out A – G – E at which point we all lifted our fingers.

“To our collective astonishment, the planchette continued to move by itself to complete the word ... N – C – Y. Two of our group became so alarmed by this that they left immediately. The rest of us stayed on.

“Our early efforts were somewhat clumsy but we were soon receiving useful intelligence. At that time we didn’t call the information we received *intelligence* but much of that initial communication urged our group to adopt the ways and vocabulary of espionage, spies, and that sort of thing. It was clear that if we were to cooperate with the agency then we would be involved in something clandestine.

“In fact, there was a direct insistence that we learn to operate in secret. Being ignorant of these topics, we availed ourselves of any materials that we could find. The agency also provided some direct intelligence, thus providing the experience of real-world encounters as I’m sure you’ve all familiar with by now.

“Reportedly on the day of Rebekah’s birth, one of our inner circle contacted the agency and received the reply GREETINGS AGENTS. They never revealed what they had asked but the truth is that by then we were all quite confident in our *training*, as it were, so the designation stuck.”

“Of course,” cuts in Cornelius, “vis zese revelations vee had hoped zat Rebekah would be gifted vis some sort of *enhanced* abilities. Alas, over time her psychic skills proved quite average. Academically und assletically alzo. But vee did notice her hypnotic ability early on, ja? Vis animals und her peers und so. So vee researched ze topic soroughly und consulted vis a number of professionals.”

“I don’t remember that,” notes Rebekah with a furrowed brow.

“You weren’t there, dear,” explains her mother. “We didn’t want to unduly influence you so our associates analyzed recordings of your demonstrations. Surely you remember us taking those.”

Rebekah squints, pulls her head back, and responds, “I do but I didn’t know this was why.”

“All I can tell you,” concludes Arti, “is that we did what we thought was best, out of love. That, and you were ... are ... truly exceptional.”

At this Rebekah presses her lips tightly together, then slowly relaxes the corners of her mouth into a gentle smile.

“Hey Dmitri,” says Dominic suddenly, tossing his head toward the reclined man, “what’s going on? You look worried.”

Everyone looks at the larger man whose hands are clasped in front of his mouth, both index fingers extended over his mustache. Deep lines are etched into his forehead, a look of concern holding his face in place.

As Brock leans in to deliver a follow-up question, he’s immediately stopped by Dmitri’s upraised finger, delivered at lightning speed at the end of an extended arm. Without any

visible changes to his demeanour, Section B's technical lead remains resolutely receptive to something that no one else seems to be aware of.

After a few moments he finally breaks the silence. "Something's off," he states coldly. "Something doesn't *sound* right."

Everyone in the room remains still as Dmitri stands up and slowly tilts his head from side to side. "It sounds like it's coming from somewhere..."

Pausing with his head turned toward the upper-level stairs, his body slowly pivots until it's lined up with his gaze. He glides to the foot of the staircase and stands there for a few moments, face turned upward, then confirms, "It's definitely coming from up there."

Attempting to break through Dmitri's attention for a second time Brock asks, "Can we give you a hand? Help you look for ... *it*?"

"Nah," responds Dmitri, still rigidly focused, "you guys are too deaf and too loud. Just try to keep it down down here."

With that he moves silently upward and into the darkness of the second floor.

"I don't like the sound of that," jokes Elvis with an expectant look.

Mirabelle responds with unsmiling, closed-eye acknowledgment. Cornelius exhales a chuckle. Rebekah rolls her eyes.

It takes Brock a few seconds to register the jest but with the moment for a response quickly fleeting, he decides it's best to just turn his attention to Rebekah's parents. "So what *exactly* is the agency, some sort of ghost or something?" he inquires, glancing between Arti and Cornelius.

"Not qvite," responds Cornelius. "Haff you ever hurd of a Tulpa, or perhaps an Egregore?"

Brock juts out his lower lip as he searches his memory. "Never," he says eventually.

"It iz a sot projection," explains Cornelius. "In Tibet it iz said zat if an experienced Buddhist monk concentrates long und hard enough he can produce a living being, anozer human, from mere sot alone. An Egregore is somesing similar but it iz created by groups. Zo, perhaps Egregore is more correct."

"I think that for our purposes this definition is sufficient," expounds Arti. "However, while our own entity appears to have a broad capacity to provide accurate intelligence, it also seems to have little ability to produce direct physical effects. A planchette seeming to move on its own, while amazing and even alarming, is a simple and negligible feat for any of us to produce with just our own fingers."

"Agents provide agency for ze *agency*, ja?" adds Cornelius. "Und in return vee get invaluable intelligence. Sometimes even some small assistance."

“Phantom dead drops,” interjects Rebekah, temporarily nudging Brock’s memory back to their transatlantic voyage and subsequent encounter with the hallucinogenic mushrooms.

“Ja, exactly,” acknowledges her father. “It is a complementary relationship. Vee are a little in its vurld, it iz a little on ours.”

Brock’s expression is one of contorted confusion as he faces Cornelius. “I thought that you didn’t know that the agency existed until you read the book, or had the séances, or whatever, but Rebekah told us you created it.”

“*Founded* it,” Rebekah corrects him.

“Created, founded ... either way, how is that possible?” he presses.

“We are not entirely certain whether the chicken or the egg came first, so to speak,” explains Arti, “but as you have experienced for yourself, the agency appears to operate beyond space and time. It could be that it contacted us in the past in order to ensure that, through our efforts, we created it in the future. It’s an unusual concept and perhaps we are giving ourselves far too much credit but the fact remains that our circle took those necessary first steps.”

Brock pulls his head back and raises an eyebrow at the suggestions.

“At the very least we *do* know that we are not the only ones to achieve such a contact. Some years after our initial communications a group of amateur enthusiasts recreated our early experiments. Their aims were different but they were nevertheless able to intentionally produce a fictional entity, what they called a *ghost*, with which they likewise communicated.

“Based on their results it was proposed that such phenomena may be the product of the participants’ own innate abilities or subconscious minds. At our serendipitous book’s suggestion we have been considering this possibility for some time. It remains at the heart of the dispute behind the agency’s nature.”

“Perhaps ozers have made more progress in siz area,” remarks Cornelius in closing.

Brock sits and blinks for a few moments before finally inquiring, “So since you can’t be sure, how can you trust that the agency isn’t manipulating you for some ulterior purpose?”

“One can never be fully certain,” notes Arti. “Life comes with no guarantees, especially not in the realm within which we operate. We must, each of us, rely on our own discernment, which itself relies on accumulated experience. Unless you know of some other way?”

With a brief and polite head shake, Brock ends his line of questioning.

Just at that moment a loud knock sounds at the kitchen door.

Wasting no time, Cornelius hoists himself up and makes his way to the adjoining room. A few clicks follow as the front door is unlocked and flung open with an audible whoosh accompanied by a delighted, "Aah!"

The door is abruptly slammed shut and Cornelius ushers the newcomer into the company of the silently waiting room.

She's not tall but not short, about a foot taller than Cornelius, Arti, or Rebekah. She stands casually, the bottoms of her legs sheathed in motorcycle boots held fast with thick silver clasps, worn and fading black jeans above them. A dark red t-shirt peeks out from inside a leather motorcycle jacket, its geometric gray and black panels separating along its open zipper as she leans on the door frame. Over her shoulder, slung confidently by its straps, is a matte black helmet.

A shock of short platinum hair is swept to one side across the top of her head. Dark, assertive eyebrows and well-proportioned hazel eyes sit placidly on top of a gently sloped nose that terminates in an attractive smile. Her austere boyish look is offset by alluring eye make-up, red lips, and small hoop earrings.

"Hey," she says, greeting eyes darting from agent to agent, individually tossing her head at each member of Section B in acknowledgment.

She receives quiet, mumbled responses in return.

Her eyes quickly lock on to The Handler. "You must be Rebekah," she states bluntly in a voice that could be suited to radio or voice-over work.

With a stern look, Rebekah responds, "I must be. And *you* must be Rose."

"You got it," responds the newcomer brazenly. She shifts her attention to Elvis and comments, "But I don't think I know everyone else here."

Elvis responds with a simple recitation of his name.

With a nod, Rose moves on to Dominic and Brock. "Hang on ..." she pauses for a moment, "you guys look familiar. Yeah, I remember now ... Shindan? Bangkok?"

Both men look uncomfortably uncertain.

"Receptionist," she explains. "I ran into you right as I was getting the fuck out of there. C'mon, you must remember..."

Brock and Dominic continue to look at each other, perplexed.

"Yellow dress?" she clarifies. "No? Maybe it was the glasses. Okay, I get it, you guys were both a little pie-eyed. You'll have to explain that to me some time but, okay, so I handed you the details of Shindan's getaway, yeah? My hair was different then."

Suddenly realizing who she is, Brock blurts out, "Oh yeah! You told us where Shindan was shipping their records. The Post-it with the train info but ... didn't you say your name was Hope?"

“An alias, yeah,” she confirms with a bright smile.

With Dominic still looking confused, Brock asks, “But why were you there? Where did you get that information? Why did you give it us?”

“I was there,” she expounds, “to find out what happened to the contract between Rebekah’s folks and the people they hired to watch her. I’m assuming you’ve been told the story about what happened?”

Most of Section B nod affirmatively.

“Okay, so then you know why I tracked Shindan to Thailand. Getting into the organization was easy and getting at the intel was even easier. Seriously, the place was ridiculous. I was given full access to all of their systems upfront, didn’t have to hack or break into anything. They fucking handed me their passwords and office keys,” she observes with a smile.

“So I knew what was going on there. Even if most of the employees were shady, for Cheng and his little minions to ditch them like that is a total dick move. Besides, you guys looked like you needed some help and I guess I felt a little sorry for you. The clumsy way you’d been scoping the place,” she says pointedly at Dominic, “you and another guy ... plumper ... mustache.”

At that moment, Dmitri returns from his investigation of the second floor and pauses to look at the newly arrived woman.

“Him!” exhorts Rose, pointing at Dmitri.

“What?!” he retorts with shock and confusion.

“Shindan,” she repeats. “Both of you” — she motions to Dominic — “just walked by me with those fake-ass IDs so many times. Never said anything. I don’t even think you even noticed me.”

Dmitri and Dominic look at each other with uncertainty.

“If I’d have given a damn,” continues Rose, “you would’ve been busted so fast.”

With some astonishment, the newly-returned man introduces himself. “Dmitri. Nice to meet you again, I guess.”

“sup?”, she responds. “Rose, a.k.a. Hope. Best fucking receptionist Shindan ever had.”

Even before finishing her sentence she turns her attention to Mirabelle. “Good thing I didn’t turn you guys in,” she notes, her tone becoming slow and mildly amorous.

Mirabelle replies with a gentle, possibly coy smile. “Mirabelle Saint-Juste,” she identifies herself.

“Wow ... French,” acknowledges Rose in faux disbelief. “That is un-fucking-real. You are very attractive, did you know that?”

Without affect or hesitation Mirabelle, responds, “If you say so.”

Rose tilts her head playfully and affirms, "I do."

Dmitri intercepts her focus with his outstretched hand. "Sorry to cut the introductions short but we have a problem here," he notes, drawing the Section's attention to his closed fist. He opens it to reveal a thick, coin-like object sitting in his palm.

"GPS tracking tag," Rose says to Dmitri. "Cool. Who're we tracking?"

"We're not tracking anyone," he responds. "We're the ones being tracked."

"Oh shit," observes Rose.

## Safehouse

As night wraps itself around the home, a hazy mist settles over the surroundings giving them a surreal and dreamlike quality. In juxtaposition, a focused discussion is taking place inside by the clear light of electric lamps. The tension in the “boathouse” is palpable.

In a brief aside it’s decided that the personnel at the Port Authority were the likely culprits behind the placement of the tracking tag, most likely as the Section were being grilled by N. Singh Khatri.

Dmitri shakes his head in disappointment. “I had plenty of time to scan our luggage in the back of that damn truck,” he complains, recalling the idle hours that the Section had spent in the back of Mike’s 18 wheeler.

“We’re gonna need to work on our OPSEC,” offers Rose.

Rebekah responds, “Trust me, you’re not the first to say that, but right now we have bigger worries. There’s no reason to think that they won’t keep trying to kill us.”

With a look of surprise, Rose asks Rebekah to explain. The Handler obliges and quickly summarizes the two mystery assassination attempts in Bangkok.

“Damn,” responds Rose. “Sounds like you guys had a more exciting time over there than me.”

“That’s one way to put it,” observes Rebekah with mild sarcasm.

At this point the discussion quickly turns to immediate options.

As ideas are tossed around, Cornelius and Arti insist on consulting with the agency. The most expeditious method for that purpose is decided to be their ancient Ouija board, which they retrieve from a small cupboard nearby.

Fearing an inadvertent psychokinetic influence, they regretfully invite everyone but Elvis to join them. The young man retires to the upstairs level, remarking that it probably wouldn’t make any difference anyway.

The Henrichs make their way into the dim space adjoining the kitchen and with the flick of a wall switch the sparse room is illuminated. It contains two gauzy curtains covering two tall windows, an empty display case placed snugly against a far corner, and a circular table resting in the middle of the room. The illumination comes from a single incandescent light bulb suspended on a bare wire over the wooden tabletop.

As Mirabelle leans casually against a door frame and observes, Brock, Rose, Rebekah, Arti, and Cornelius gather around the table. The worn Ouija board is placed on the surface between them. With the table full, Dominic volunteers to lean against a wall and just

watch. Dmitri decides to join Elvis on the upper level explaining that, “We could really use a second opinion.”

Each person at the table places their index finger on the planchette and looks on in anticipation. Without hesitation Arti asks the *agency* to provide them with actionable intelligence on their adversary.

Nearly immediately the small pointer begins to move slowly across the intricate surface, spelling out “AGENTS”. With more assertiveness it continues to produce “PREPAREHERENOW”.

Noticeably anxious, Arti asks for directions behind the imperative to *prepare*. The board spells “BOOM” then reiterates “PREPARENOW”. Pressed for further information, the Ouija board alternates between “BOOM”, “PREPARE”, “HERE”, and “NOW”.

While this is happening, Elvis and Dmitri hurriedly assemble the pod in one of the upstairs rooms. The electronics are quickly up and running and the agents begin shortened sessions. Not much later their neural nets begin to produce similar results as those of the Ouija group: “DANGER”, “GUARD”, “FIRE”, “HOUSE”, “BOMB”

The two groups gather back in the nautical room to discuss the results. Based on their gathered intelligence, specifically “HERE” and “GUARD”, it’s determined that a retreat would be ill-advised. However, when it comes to better alternatives, the room falls into silent contemplation.

Rose is the first to offer suggestions. “We need to make sure they can’t see us, at least not easily,” she says. “Night vision is easy to get and we don’t want to be sitting ducks. On the flipside, I don’t suppose any of you are armed?”

“Are you kidding?” asks Dominic forthrightly.

“You don’t know if you don’t ask,” she replies just as directly. “Okay, so we’re gonna need to improvise. What do we have around here that’s flammable or explosive?”

“Zere’s a shed on ze edge of ze property,” notes Cornelius. “Zere’s gazoline zere for ze lawnmower.”

“Right,” recalls Rose. “And doesn’t this place have an oil furnace?”

“Ja,” he acknowledges. “Ze tank iz in ze basement. But ... are you suggesting zat vee blow up ze house?”

“It matches the intel,” she responds, “and it might give us a chance. Maybe our best one.”

Looking around the group she prompts, “But I’m open to other suggestions.”

The group continues to ponder the problem but other than a few unlikely booby traps there are no better ideas. Cornelius and Arti grow increasingly apprehensive as their options grow thin.

Eventually Cornelius concedes, “Vell zen, if vee are to proceed in zis direction zen I must call ze owners. Such a plan cannot go ahead wizout zeir express approval. But, my goodness, vat vill I tell zem?”

The rhetorical question delivered, he once again excuses himself from the conversation to make his phone call. The rest of the group immediately begin discussing the construction and execution of their countermeasures.

By the time the itemized checklist is ready, Cornelius has returned with a solemn nod of confirmation. The plan is moving ahead but he insists that, “Zere are a few sings zey asked us to save. Vee must honour zis request.”

While Cornelius and Arti set about gathering the owners’ cherished items, Elvis and Mirabelle line the lawnmower shed with tin foil followed by heavy curtains, towels, blankets, pillows, any other shock-absorbing materials they can find. It’s generally agreed that this may help to thwart electromagnetic and optical scanning equipment while hiding the heat signatures of whatever is inside. They also believe that it’s their best bet for surviving the ensuing oil tank explosion. It’s given the impromptu name “bunker”.

As this part of the plan comes together, Rose locates a toolbox and uses its contents to disassemble the shed’s lawnmower. The spark plug is located and the wire leading to the plug is spliced together with a long electrical cord. The setup is tested a few times using the mower’s ripcord.

In the meantime, Brock carries a couple of sturdy and nearly full fuel canisters from the shed to the culvert at the foot of the driveway. On the way he spots a sleek, muscular, matte black motorcycle with a prominent Triumph logo parked on the gravel.

“Nice ride,” he remarks, tipping his head toward the impressive machine as Rose arrives to join him.

“Right? She’s the inspiration for this little *surprise*,” she replies as sets down the toolbox in front of her, flips the lid open, and begins to fish around inside.

“How’s that?” inquires Brock.

“I learned as much as I could before I got her. After that I took her apart, reassembled her ... I don’t even know how many times. This thing here” — she nods toward the canisters — “should do what a basic internal combustion engine does, just with a lot more fuel.”

She extracts a roll of electrical tape from the toolbox, dangles the spark plug by its attached cord into the mouth of one of the containers, and begins to seal the joined pair into place. At the same time Brock wedges the second gas can between the rocks of the culvert and piles more rocks on either side.

The canister with Rose’s handiwork is carefully wedged in beside its twin and the cable connected to the spark plug is carefully fed back to the ripcord assembly behind the shed. More rocks are placed around the improvised device after which one final trip is made to cover the electrical cord over with dirt, gravel, and leaves.

“I don’t think it’ll destroy any cars,” cautions Rose, “but if they’re standing on top of that thing then maybe it’ll collapse the pipe under them. It should at least keep them from coming in or leaving. Which reminds me...”

She quickly makes her way over to her motorbike with the toolbox and removes the license plate, then proceeds to strenuously push the machine over the lawn toward the shed. There the vehicle is rolled out of view and covered over with branches.

In the house, Rebekah and Dominic are busy placing blankets and other coverings over the basement and first floor windows. The results are patchy and ugly but the aim isn’t to completely block all light, just to hide the the presence of a subterranean fire for as long as possible.

Working alongside them, Dmitri pushes newspapers, wooden items, books, and loose papers beneath the heating oil tank. A few rusty nails and a hammer are placed nearby, ready to be used to pierce the large container when the time comes.

During his search for other flammable items, he discovers a couple of squat propane tanks beneath a covered barbecue. These are removed and one is wedged under the oil tank, the other between the tank and the wall.

“Insurance *definitely* won’t cover this,” says Dmitri to himself as he inspects the setup.

Having decided that the Section don’t have enough time to perform a thorough search of their luggage, nearly everything that they brought with them, including the pod, will have to stay in the house and face destruction.

Only the valuable contents of Rebekah’s leather bag are extracted, carefully examined, and placed into a black briefcase found in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Dmitri proposes that he hold on to the case, arguing that he’s as a good a candidate for the job as anyone. After all, he states, Rebekah had taught them all the relevant codes in the file.

“Not all of them,” she cautions, “but you know enough. Keep that stuff safe.”

He accepts with a solemn nod.

After swiftly washing up, everyone changes into clean, well-inspected clothes and heads to the kitchen for a quick meal. During the hasty dinner, Rose takes the opportunity to show everyone the wireless surveillance system she’d set up around the property at the behest of Arti and Cornelius.

“I did it before I left for Thailand,” explains Rose. “If we hang the router out a second floor window we should be able to get a signal by the shed,” she advises as she cycles through the live video feeds on her mobile phone. “See? The cameras are good in the dark and we’ve got all four directions covered, so unless they parachute in or tunnel under the house we should be able to see them coming.”

Shortly after finishing up, everyone evacuates to the “bunker”. There they’ve set up four folding aluminum chairs, the only ones they could find within the tiny structure.

Mirabelle stands smoking calmly off to the side. Rose leans against the door frame of the tiny hut, watching the cycling surveillance video on her phone. Brock stands and observes the footage next to her. Dominic idles nearby watching the main driveway while Dmitri examines the shadows of the shed for a place to temporarily hide the briefcase. Elvis is performing a closed-eye breathing exercise in his seat next to Rebekah who is staring silently into empty space.

“Zey are not happy,” recalls Cornelius, explaining his recent phone call as he settles into a chair next to Arti. “Not at all. But I haff told zem ze situation und zey understand zat zis is now very likely much larger zan just us, a matter of life und des perhaps. A rendezvous has been set once vee haff lost our pursuers. Before zen, vee must do our best to identify zem. Zis vill be tricky.”

A few moments later, Rose alerts everyone to what she is seeing on her phone’s screen. They look like headlights, more than one set, approaching their location from the south.

“Zis is certainly unusual,” analyzes Cornelius. “Vee are lucky if vee haff sree cars on zis road in a veek.”

“We should take our places,” states Dominic. “Mister and missus Heinrich, where are the matches kept again?”

“You should find matches and a barbecue lighter in the drawer next to the sink,” instructs Arti. “The bottom one next to the entrance.”

“That’s fine,” accepts Dominic.

Having earlier assumed the role of the fire starter, he now prepares to head back to the house, mentally rehearsing the next steps. Elvis prepares to accompany Dominic as an early-warning lookout. He can run pretty fast, he argues.

“Here,” says Rose, handing her phone to Elvis, “you’ll need this more than us. The cameras rotate once every ten seconds but you can skip each one by swiping like this...”

She demonstrates the action on the device as Elvis observes.

“How come this one’s all black?” he asks, noting one camera that shows nothing but darkness.

“Hmm,” she ponders. “It was fine just a minute ago. Maybe something’s blocking it, a leaf or something. I’ll go check it out.”

“Be right back,” she assures the group as she walks past them and in the direction of the field. Her silhouette is swiftly dissolved into the shadows.

“No lies, I’m shitting my pants a little,” admits Dominic, looking around at the group. “If something happens to me...”

“No,” Mirabelle interrupts him abruptly. “I will go. I am able to escape more easy. Zis is much better idea.”

Dominic gazes at his protege with concern. "Mira, we can't ask you to go in there. We don't know what we're dealing with here. These people could..."

"You can't ask," she cuts him off a second time, "but I will tell. I am ze best in all ze Section for zis mission. You know siz. And I am ze best at using a lighter."

She pulls a small, green, plastic lighter from her pocket and dangles it from her fingers.

As Dominic begins a wordless rebuttal, Brock chimes in. "She's got a point. We've seen her in action. If anyone can just waltz their way back out of there at the last second, it's Mira by a mile."

Dominic falls silent. After brief consideration, he nods a reluctant assent.

Without hesitation, Mirabelle affirms with an, "Okay," spins around, and begins walking toward the house. With a look of determination on his face, Elvis follows.

The pair exchange some hushed words on their way back to the house and then split up, Elvis heading to the bottom of the gravel driveway and Mirabelle to the rear entrance of the house.

"Fuck," intones Dominic as he watches them go, visible lines of apprehension etching into his face.

At this, the remaining group move into the shed. Brock pauses a moment as he begins to close the doors behind him. "Rose is still out there," he says, gazing out into the murk.

"She knows how to knock," assures Cornelius as he helps to pull in the door, abandoning the foggy backyard to the sounds of crickets and rustling foliage.

Elvis takes his position at the end of the driveway and peers intently down the country road. It seemed a lot less menacing when they'd arrived on it, now it's just looming, alien darkness.

The zoom on the security cameras make the faraway headlights seem closer than they are but Elvis can now observe the occasional twinkle of the approaching beams with his own eyes. He simultaneously swipes through the cameras, watching for additional signs of movement on the periphery.

In the basement, Mirabelle smokes another cigarette as she waits for Elvis' word. As she exhales, she looks coolly at her surroundings and remarks, "Ça va être le feu."

Inside the shed and illuminated by the beam of a slim flashlight, a worried Cornelius questions Dominic. "Are you sure she will be safe?" asks the older man. "She does not look very assletic or strong."

"Mira's neither," explains Dominic, "but I'm pretty sure she can actually dodge bullets if she wants to. Elvis, though, might be another story."

"He'll be okay," remarks Dmitri. "That kid is athletic and strong. He just needs to make sure he gets away before any bullets start flying."

“How about Rose?” he says, turning to Arti and Cornelius.

Arti smiles and notes, “I assure you that she is capable of taking care of herself. Consider, for example, that the Bangkok operation was almost entirely her doing, from planning to execution. She was already quite astute when we met her but working with the agency has, to put it in her own words, *expanded her horizons.*”

Despite the assurances, the conversation slips into foreboding silence.

Outside, Rose is trying to find the wireless surveillance camera. She recalls having zip tied it to the old wooden fence at the edge of the property but the lack of light is making her search extremely difficult. She is feeling around the cracked wood of an aged post when she suddenly hears a crunch nearby.

She instantly ducks, freezes, and begins to breathe as shallowly and silently as possible.

Peering out in the direction of the sound, Rose spots a dim red point of light moving through the mist. It’s bobbing up and down at about knee level, slowly and silently making its way toward the house.

Hoping that she hasn’t been spotted, she quietly backtracks to a fallen tree trunk and lies flat behind it, occasionally popping her head up to confirm the direction of the slowly-vanishing red dot.

“Shit shit shit,” she mouths silently as she watches it move.

By the culvert, Elvis is also starting to feel increasingly anxious. The approaching headlights have stopped in between the road’s liberally spaced street lamps and then, about few seconds ago, the vehicles went dark.

In the grainy surveillance camera feed, Elvis is able to make out two black SUVs from which emerge at least four shadowy figures dressed in bulky clothing, hoisting up what look like carbines or maybe assault rifles.

He instantly breaks into a sprint toward the house.

Shoving the front door open, he scrambles downstairs where Mirabelle stands, unhurriedly finishing her cigarette. “They’re here,” he exclaims, “and they’re armed! Like, with guns!”

“Zen it is time,” responds Mirabelle with a nearly imperceptible smile.

She tosses the cigarette butt to the ground and grinds it out with the heel of her shoe. Then she extracts the plastic lighter from her pocket, leans down, and places it beneath the most prominent wad of newspaper peeking out from beneath the oil tank. With habitual abandon, she flicks the flint wheel.

Nothing happens.

She tries again. Then again. And again. Still no flame.

“Hmm,” she intones calmly as she examines the lighter.

With evident agitation, Elvis asks, “Is it not working?”

“It iz strange,” she answers. “I ‘ave just use it.”

She holds the lighter up to one of the low-hanging basement lights. Deeming the fluid level in the small device to be sufficient, she shakes it vigorously and then flicks the wheel again. There is still no flame.

As she continues in vain to try to start the fire, a nearly panicked Elvis runs up to the first floor. There he begins a frenzied search through cupboards and drawers for matches, lighters ... anything that could start a fire. Suddenly remembering Arti’s words, he searches the bottom drawer nearest the main entrance.

He manically rips the contents out of the wooden receptacle but finds nothing even remotely useful. In a desperate flash of inspiration, he turns on the elements of the main stove and runs back to the basement to grab a stick, a wad of paper, anything flammable.

Continuing unsuccessfully to try her lighter, a mildly confused Mirabelle watches him swoop in, snatch one of the twisted newspapers from the pile, and wordlessly dash out with it.

Back in the kitchen, Elvis paces restlessly as he waits for the electric elements to heat up, all the while mindlessly squeezing the mass of paper in his hand.

Suddenly, the lights around him go out. The power light on the stove is also dark. Looking around him in disbelief, Elvis notes only a dim glow coming from the basement.

The blackout is clearly limited to just the first floor of the house. He’s fairly certain that it’s probably just a tripped breaker but he also knows it might be a fuse, meaning he might need to find a replacement. Before he can even worry about that, though, he’ll first need to find the breaker box.

“Fuck me!” he cries as he runs back downstairs for a third time. “No matches and no lighter and now the power’s gone out! We can’t even use the stove!”

Mirabelle stands up and with an eerie calm and responds, “My lighter also seem to ‘ave finish. So maybe now we ‘ave problem.”

“No shit!” bursts out Elvis with agitation. He begins a frantic search for the breaker box as Mirabelle watches him with detachment, feebly continuing to try her lighter.

“Elvis,” she says after a few moments, “zis is bad time for joke.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” replies the young man indignantly, sweat trickling from his brow.

“You make fire,” she pronounces, pointing to the compressed papers he’s been mindlessly squeezing.

He gazes down and notices a thick curl of smoke rising from the end of the wad.

“What the... ?” he asks in a dazed shock.

“Quickly,” instructs Mirabelle, holding up a closed fist and blowing air over it through puckered lips.

Elvis does as she demonstrates and very soon a small flame jumps up from the bundle in his hand.

“Okay, now...” she continues, pointing to the kindling beneath the oil tank.

Understanding her directions, Elvis urgently makes his way to the pile of flammable material and begins to set the edges on fire.

“But ... how?” he questions as he moves.

“Maybe,” posits Mirabelle as she uses a hammer to drive one of the nails into the large container, “if you can move things vis your mind zen maybe you can make fire vis your mind also.”

Elvis freezes for a moment, his mouth stuck in a “W” as he ponders her suggestion.

“We keep going, yeah?” she urges him forward.

With a vigorous nod, he recovers and resumes setting fire at key points as Mirabelle continues to hammer nails into the tank. With Elvis’ task quickly finished she begins pulling the nails out. The viscous red liquid inside the oblong drum spills out onto the floor and slowly inches toward the flames.

In a few moments the entire area has erupted into a fierce inferno while the pair hurriedly make their way back upstairs and out through the rear door. Just as they prepare to sprint across the backyard toward the shed, a man steps out of the shadows to block their path.

He’s dressed all in black: black boots, black cargo pants, black flak jacket with numerous heavily laden black pockets, black gloves, black helmet, black goggles, black paintball face mask, and two black crisscrossing bandoliers holding a variety of black equipment. He looks like something out of a first-person shooter and he’s holding a menacing looking rifle with an impressive scope mounted on top, both pointed directly at them.

“House will go boom,” states Mirabelle, looking at the man as she juts a thumb over her shoulder.

“Well then you’ve made a stupid fucking mistake, haven’t you?” responds the man, his voice robotically disguised by some device in the mask.

A second, similarly equipped man appears from around the corner of the house. He’s holding a slightly smaller but no less menacing machine gun, also drawn and ready.

“Elvis, do you remember what I say to you?” she says, maintaining eye contact with the first mercenary as she swivels her head in Elvis’ direction.

“Yeah,” he responds firmly.

Not far away, Brock is peering through a small opening in the blankets lining the shed. He watches as the two men converge on their targets.

“What’s happening?” whispers Rebekah over his shoulder.

He turns around and responds, “Fog’s making it hard to see but it looks like two soldier-looking guys. Special ops maybe, with big guns. I dunno. They’ve got Elvis and Mira.”

“Let me have a look,” she insists.

As she begins to navigate her way through the cramped space, a sudden and deafening thud slams into the side of small structure, instantly knocking it over and burying its inhabitants under corrugated tin, plywood, foam insulation, and torn fabric.

With ears ringing, Dominic is the first to recover from the explosion. Seeing that Brock is also stirring, he whispers, “I need to check on Mira and Elvis. Keep everyone quiet and make sure they stay put, okay? We have no idea how many more of them there are out there. No sense in all of us getting caught out.”

Brock hisses back a confirmation and the ex-boxer begins a slow and careful process of covertly extricating himself from the rubble. In a few moments, he’s silently slipped out from beneath the flattened wreck. Crouching, he looks around.

The fog is mixed with thick and oily smoke. It’s nearly impossible to see more than a couple of meters in any direction but occasionally visible tongues of flame allow Dominic to orient himself. Still crouching, he slowly begins to move toward the fire.

Three steps in, an assertively robotic voice behind him commands, “Just stop right there! Stand up and hands up, nice and high where I can see ’em.”

The sound of a cocking mechanism and the metallic tinkle of a round being chambered causes Dominic to freeze.

“Ain’t got all day, sunshine,” directs the voice again. “I said stand up and hands up! Now!”

Quickly stealing a glance behind him, Dominic does as instructed. He’s immediately chastised for his brief transgression. “Don’t ever fucking turn around unless I give you permission, got it?!” demands the voice.

“Got it,” responds Dominic loudly and resolutely. “I’m ready to comply.”

## Sanitized

Dominic stands upright, hands firmly and visibly raised, head twisted slightly, disfigured ear held attentively high.

A moment later, a loud wooden crack accompanies Rose's strained voice as she yells, "Now!"

By the time Dominic has spun around, the black-clad mercenary behind him is bent over and stumbling around, the splintered end of a hefty branch spinning away into the shadows. Rose is holding the other end of the branch, striking a samurai-like pose with her decisive follow-through over the adversary's back.

Dominic immediately moves in, retracts his arm, and as the mercenary's head swivels upward the former boxer delivers a brutal uppercut. The heavily equipped man is lifted into the air by the force of the crushing blow, his head snapping backward as his arms flail out like a rag doll.

The seemingly lifeless body flops backwards onto the ground.

A few uncertain moments pass.

Shortly, loud snores begin to emanate from somewhere in the crumbled heap.

They straighten him out, pull him back into the cover of the misty darkness, and examine his equipment. Finding a number of coiled zip ties in one of his utility pockets, they decide that it's wise to restrain the man.

Finished, Rose steps back and remarks, "That should do it."

"We're not done yet," states Dominic, pointing toward the blazing structure.

She returns an uncertain but acknowledging nod, then gestures for him to lead.

They slowly begin to make their way back, past the destroyed shed and toward the blazing home. Five shadowy figures are visible in the bright light of the fire as they approach. Two standing silhouettes are facing each other and three bodies are casting long shadows as they lie on the ground.

Suddenly a brief burst of automatic gunfire erupts, the strobe from the rifle's muzzle temporarily illuminating the stark surroundings. In the same instant, one of the silhouette's head jerks back and the dark shape rigidly topples backward. Only one shadow is left standing.

Without much pause, the spectral form begins to approach Dominic and Rose. The shape quickly resolves itself into the familiar form of Mirabelle, walking with calm purpose and lugging an assault rifle in her right hand.

Within seconds, she's tossed the weighty weapon into the dancing shadows beside her and continues on, stride unbroken. "I sink zere will be more," she says with placid urgency as she approaches.

Rose examines the scene in front of her with astonishment. Dominic's look is one of concern.

"What happened to Elvis?" he asks Mirabelle.

"e is okay, I am sure," she responds reassuringly. "I 'ave tell 'im to lie down in ze grass."

Looking over Mirabelle's shoulder, Dominic spots one of the bodies on the ground. It slowly stirs, rises to its knees, then breaks into a sprint toward their location.

In a few seconds, Elvis has reached the gathering agents. He's covered in soot and debris but otherwise he looks much the same as he did as when he left them.

No one has a chance to question the young man as the corrugated tin flaps of the collapsed "bunker" begin to stir behind them.

Tossing the debris aside, the first to emerge are Brock and Dmitri, followed by Rebekah and her parents.

"Padding worked," comments Brock as he examines the remains of the shed.

"Yeah," adds Rebekah. "Did everyone make it okay?"

Her question is answered with several nods of acknowledgement.

With everyone seemingly unharmed, they quickly regroup. At Mirabelle's continued insistence, the first thing they do is review Rose's surveillance system.

As suspected, one of the vehicles is slowly making its way to their position.

Handing the mobile phone to Brock, Rose rushes to the location of the lawnmower's ignition motor. Once there, she finds that she can barely see amid the thick, billowing mixture of fiery smoke and dense fog.

Squinting against the acrid clouds, she begins blindly grasping around her, suddenly conscious of the fact that this is the second time this evening that she's doing this. She turns frantically toward Brock's general direction and shouts, "How much time do we have?!"

Quickly conferring with the group, he answers, "Maybe a minute!"

"Dammit!" she yells back.

"What's the problem?" asks Brock insistently.

"The ignition's gone!" she responds. "The engine! The starter! I can't find it!"

Brock, Dominic, and Dmitri rush in to assist in the search for the missing motor. In a few moments it's located a short distance away, part of its extension cord torn and hanging lamely to one side.

As the rest of the group gather around them, Rose and Dmitri quickly examine the starter. They conclude that the device appears to be undamaged but, they warn, the only way to be certain is to use it.

With anxious seconds ticking away, Rose frantically patches the lengthy extension cord, twisting the copper wires over the motor's exposed terminals with her bare hands. The job is ugly but, she explains, "it only needs to work once."

Finished, she grips the plastic ripcord handle.

"Showtime," says Brock with a nod as the ominous shape of the vehicle approaches the culvert.

All of the SUV's lights are off. Its glossy black paint gleams in the light of the burning house as it glides silently closer. The same bright reflections cover its windows, hiding the occupants inside.

The tension mounts as Rose watches the vehicle approach the turnoff to the driveway. Finally, deciding that the car is in the perfect position, she violently yanks the cord.

Nothing happens.

Jutting her lower jaw forward and shutting her eyes, she forcefully tugs the cord a second time.

Almost immediately, a bright flash and mighty *bang* from the culvert expand into the night. Rose braces herself for the blast's impact but the shock wave is not nearly as severe as the house explosion; more like a strong gust of wind.

A breathless moment later, a metallic *thud* follows from the end of the driveway.

Opening her eyes, Rose surveys the area.

The smoke has temporarily cleared, allowing her to see that the vehicle has been plunged nose-first into the collapsed culvert. Thick flames lick up the sides and over the hood of the dark SUV, revealing only one mercenary struggling to free himself from the driver's seat.

Brock immediately rushes to the scene, leaps over the ditch to the tilted car, and begins to pull strenuously on the driver's side handle. In moments he's joined by Elvis and Dmitri.

After some effort, they manage to force open the deformed door and free the injured party, pulling him away from the burning vehicle. Propped up between them, the driver hugs his rib cage with one hand. Behind him he drags a badly twisted, possibly broken leg.

Having reached a safe distance from the flaming wreck, they gingerly place the man on the ageing asphalt of the rural road. Noting that they have things under control, Brock leaves the trio and cautiously makes his way back over the rocky ditch to rejoin the rest of the group.

“How many more of you are there?” asks Dmitri, gazing at the wounded man insistently as he and Elvis search him for weapons.

With his mask now removed, the scruffy middle-aged mercenary grimaces in pain but says nothing.

Sternly, Dmitri asks again, “How many?”

Moving his injured leg with his hands, the man groans slightly but continues to stay silent.

Turning his back to the mercenary, Dmitri whispers sideways to Elvis, “I’m not waterboarding the guy so ... any ideas?”

Without responding, Elvis moves in close to the man on the ground.

“We know there are at least four of you and by my count three are out,” says the young agent to the stricken mercenary with an assertive coldness. “At this rate there isn’t going to be any of you left to answer our questions. Do yourself a favour ... tell us how many of you are left?”

Once again, the grounded man painfully repositions himself but remains mute.

“This is fucking serious, do you understand?” continues Elvis. “Do you understand what you’re dealing with here? Have you seen what my friend back there did to your two buddies? She did that and she could barely lift the gun. And this guy here” — he motions with his head toward Dmitri — “hasn’t even done anything yet.”

Dmitri’s face freezes. For a few short moments an expression of uncertainty hangs on his features. By the time he realizes what Elvis is up to, the injured man has tilted his head up. Just as their eyes meet, Dmitri assumes his coldest, hardest, most merciless look.

A few more moments pass without an utterance.

“Can’t say we didn’t give you a chance,” states Elvis, slapping his thighs in surrender. He stands up, turns, and prepares to walk away.

Just then the man mumbles, “Wait.”

“For what?” asks Elvis, slowly spinning back around.

“Five ... there are five of us,” the mercenary responds through gritted teeth in a halting Australian accent. “Just five. Not enough, yeah? You win, okay?”

“Not okay,” replies Elvis sharply. “What is your beef with us? Why the hell are you trying to kill us?”

The man on the ground shakes his head. “We’re not trying to kill you,” he states. “There’s a bounty on your heads, yeah? Living heads. We’re supposed to bring as many of you in as possible.”

“Oh, okay, bounty hunters. Nice. Very honourable,” continues Elvis with disdain. “So where are you supposed to take us? And why? Who sent you?”

“I don’t know,” says the injured man softly.

Suddenly, Dmitri explodes, “Like fuck you don’t know! Where are you supposed to take us?!”

“I really don’t know,” replies the bounty hunter, a sudden muscle spasm causing him to grimace with pain. “We’re supposed to send a text when we have you, then take you to wherever they tell us. None of us know where, yeah? I’m telling you the fucking truth.”

“Who hired you then?” demands Dmitri, slightly more calm.

“I don’t know,” responds the man again.

“So we’re still playing this fucking game?!” shoots back Dmitri, quickly reverting to a menacing posture with clenched fists.

The injured mercenary holds up his hand and implores, “Listen, mate, I really don’t know, yeah? Cryptocurrency, deep web, all that shit. Fuck, I don’t even know what my team looks like. Never even heard their real voices. I was told to be masked up and ready to go when I met them, yeah? Compartmentalized ... need-to-know.”

“Why?” interjects Elvis.

Glancing uncertainly between Elvis and Dmitri, the man responds, “I don’t fucking know, yeah? They’re well organized, I know that much. Deep pockets, too.”

Tilting his head to the side, Elvis asks, “So how much are *they* paying you?”

“Twenty grand to show up,” answers the defeated man, “and then a hundred grand to bring you in.”

“A hundred thousand to capture us?” replies Elvis, slightly astonished.

“Each,” details the man. “Split five ways that’s twenty grand a head. If we managed to get all eight of you we’d each make off with a hundred and eighty-grand. Someone’s keen to get their hands on you, yeah?”

“Yeah, ” observes Elvis. “So what if you didn’t manage to get all of us? Let’s say we fought back.”

The man looks down, shrugs, and states, “That’s why we have the guns.”

After a brief moment of silence, he gazes up at Dmitri and continues, “At worst, I figured maybe you and that Dominic guy would give us some trouble. The rundowns said...”

“You know about Dom?” Dmitri cuts him off, his face momentarily slackening.

“Yeah,” says the flagging man. “You’re Dmitri. This guy here” — he motions with his hand — “is Elvis. We were given files on all of you.”

Dmitri returns to his strict demeanour and asks, “What else did you learn about us?”

As the injured man exposes what he knows, the rest of the group stand some distance away and behind the house, examining the two dead mercenaries lying on the lawn.

Perhaps the best view of their deaths was had by Mirabelle who describes how the first man was killed when a flying piece of lumber smashed into his head, cleanly cracking both his helmet and his skull. She explains how she moved her head out of the way of the hurtling projectile at the very last moment which, by her estimate, made it impossible for the man to react in time. Thanks to a quick dive and a slight dip in the terrain, both she and Elvis were able to avoid most of the blast’s destructive power.

The gruesome sight of the mercenary’s shattered head splayed out on the grass appears to confirm Mirabelle’s story.

Continuing her recollection, she details how she was up and relieving the mercenary of his weapon so that by the time his partner recovered from the blast she was already holding the rifle at the ready.

Mirabelle then describes how she watched the second man for a moment but, when he raised the muzzle of his gun, she had no choice but to react. “‘e want to kill me,” she explains calmly.

“But how did you know how to fire the gun?” asks Brock.

“You know. I just ... *feel*,” she responds with an indifferent nod. “Also, I ‘ave see some gun when I travel. I understand a little ‘ow zey work.”

This claim is attested to by the uneven holes, cracks, and missing splinters in the other mercenary’s facial coverings, blood slowly oozing out and into the lawn beneath his head.

Brock nods and falls into solemn silence.

The gloomy scene is interrupted by the loud snore of the third mercenary as Dominic and Rose drag his limp body over the wet grass toward the group. His hands are bound behind his back.

Rebekah immediately inquires, “What happened to him?”

“The old one-two,” replies Rose as she drops the man and makes an alternating punching motion with both hands. “Mostly two,” she continues, motioning toward Dominic with a fist.

“Team effort,” nods the large man soberly.

“Okay, looks like you guys got this,” observes the short-haired woman, “so I’m gonna run and check on my bike.” Receiving eager gestures of approval, she once again

disappears in the general direction of her camouflaged motorcycle and the all-consuming murk of the backyard.

A few moments later, an audible series of metallic clacks can be heard coming from a slightly different direction. Before any of the group have a chance to question the source of the noises, two more mercenaries emerge from the thick atmosphere, guns drawn.

“Back up!” barks the first man in another robotically disguised voice. “On the ground! Face down! Now!”

Arti and Cornelius struggle to lower themselves but eventually join the rest of the group on the grass as demanded.

“Hands behind your heads! Feet crossed!” continues the bounty hunter as his partner moves swiftly to zip tie the group’s hands and feet, starting with Dominic.

With the group restrained, the two men gather just out of earshot and appear to exchange some words. Seemingly finished, the first man approaches, hoists his gun up, and motions with it toward Dominic.

“Two of you are missing,” states the robot voice. “Elvis and Dmitri. Where are they?”

“Who?” asks Dominic, craning his head up to look at the armed man.

At this the mercenary pulls up the butt of his rifle and swings it down over Dominic’s head with a thud. The large man’s face is plunged into the dirt where, for a moment, it remains motionless.

After a brief effort he stirs, then lifts his face. There’s blood running down over his eye from the fresh gash above it.

The mercenary pulls back and swings his weapon around, pointing the muzzle at Dominic’s head. “I’m not fucking around!” he yells. “If we leave here with one less of you that’s fine by me! Where are they?!”

Observing this, Brock feels a sense of overwhelming helplessness and panic build up in his chest.

Suddenly he recalls some of Dominic’s training.

As he concentrates on breathing more slowly and deeply, the sense of frenzy begins to congeal into a feeling of electricity at his solar plexus, like a gathering ball of lightning. With one big breath he momentarily feels like he loses consciousness, as though he’s been swept away by a temporary wave of anesthesia. He can’t identify the feeling but it’s oddly familiar.

As he recovers, Brock watches the second mercenary move to reposition himself, disappearing out of his sight line behind the closer man. A few moments pass but the obscured man doesn’t reemerge on the other side.

If the farther man is standing, observes Brock, he would need to be contorted in an extreme pose in order to remain hidden behind the foreground man. If he's moving, it can only be toward the still-blazing building — or down into the earth.

Within seconds and seemingly for no reason, the first mercenary stands and quickly retreats backwards.

His line of sight no longer blocked, Brock observes that the partner is nowhere to be seen. Momentarily taking his eyes off the scene, Brock's stare is met by Rebekah's wide-eyed expression as she silently mouths, "What the fuck?"

The singular mercenary now appears more nervous, shifting around uneasily, head swiveling back and forth.

"Know what?" he pronounces in his artificial voice. "Fuck this. I'm just gonna cut my losses. Two of you are coming with. The rest" — he shakes his head with indifference — "can stay here."

Quickly scanning over the prone group, he selects his targets.

"Mom and pop Heinrich," he announces. "I'm gonna cut your legs loose. When I do, you'll follow my instructions to the letter or your lovely Rebekah gets it in the back of the head. Got it?"

They both do their best to nod affirmatively.

The armed man extracts a large, serrated blade from somewhere inside his jacket and uses it to cut the ties around Arti and Cornelius' ankles. Yanking the couple up by their bound arms, he forces them to stand with their backs to him. Then, shoving them forward with his sideways rifle he commands them to, "Walk!"

As the trio nears the flaming culvert, the hostage taker spots his injured associate splayed out on the other side. Seeing the approaching group, the supine man yells out, "They've got my guns! One of them is hiding in the di..."

At this, Dmitri pops up out of his hiding place in the shallow roadside trench and points his recently acquired assault weapon at the retreating mercenary. "Yeah, the ditch!" he shouts. "And I've got his fucking gun so let them go!"

"Not on your life, chief!" retorts the kidnapper, pulling closer to his bound quarry. "You even know how to use that thing?"

Dmitri doesn't respond but keeps his weapon trained on the mercenary. He watches the man move carefully sideways over the gravel driveway with Arti and Cornelius pressed closely together, forming human shields.

As they approach the ditch on the other side of the burning car, a shadow flits between the slats of light formed by the nearby hedges.

In the blink of an eye, Elvis emerges from the darkness and into clear view of the still-raging inferno. His arms are held stiffly in front of him and in his hands he holds an impressive-looking pistol, its barrel aimed at the back of the mercenary's head.

"Freeze! I've got a gun!" demands the young agent. "Drop it!"

The soldier of fortune slowly raises his hands, lifts his weapon aloft, and then tosses it casually to the side.

Dmitri moves to close the distance between himself and the man while doing his best to motion for Arti and Cornelius to move closer. As he gestures, he temporarily loses his grip on the rifle.

The mercenary uses this moment to lunge for his own discarded gun. Before he lands, the weapon is snatched up by Dominic who has suddenly appeared from somewhere behind Elvis.

Understanding that he's been defeated, the masked intruder drops to his knees and puts his hands behind his head.

"Not like that," demands Dominic, training the man's own weapon on him. "Face down, on the ground. You remember."

As the man descends to the earth, the ex-boxer pulls a few zip ties from the back pocket of his pants and kneels on the mercenary's back, securing the man's hands tightly behind him.

As this is happening, Rebekah and Brock arrive on the scene. "The other guy's over there," indicates Dmitri, pointing to the injured man on the road.

Clutching some freely shared zip ties, the newly arrived duo hurry over to him as the closer man is searched. In short order, he's relieved of a sidearm as well as a daunting knife. Dominic quickly commandeers the large blade to free Arti and Cornelius.

Now a short distance away, Cornelius rubs his freed wrists. Among the interplay of stereoscopic lights from the house and vehicle fires, his face grows suddenly stern.

"Zere is somesing I must do," he insists and walks briskly back behind the incandescent house.

He reappears a few moments later with Mirabelle who is taking a long and mellow drag on her cigarette. Cornelius' concern seems to be alleviated.

Once again the group come together to recover, review, and plan.

Out of earshot of the three surviving mercenaries, Cornelius explains why he really returned to the backyard. "Zey don't know about Rose," he begins. "I wanted to ensure zat remains ze case. Alzo to sank her for setting us free."

"Why do you think they don't know about her?" asks Brock.

“Vell, I don’t know for sure,” Cornelius admits. “But, you see, I never introduced myself zo how did ze man know our names? He asked where vur ze ozer two, remember? He said Elvis und Dmitri, ja? But sree people vur missing at zat time.”

“They have files on us,” adds Dmitri as Elvis nods in agreement, “and the busted-up driver back there also mentioned that there are eight of us. They could both be lying but I think Mister Heinrich is right.”

“Ja,” replies the elderly man, “zo Rose vill take her motorzycle to ze edge of ze property und zen over ze neighbour’s field. Vee vill meet her on ze road on ze ozer side of zat field.”

“Is that a good idea?” questions Dominic. “One of these three” — he motions in the general directions of the downed mercenaries — “is gonna hear the engine. And the other one could still be out there somewhere.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” assures Cornelius. “She vill be valking her motorzycle by her side. She has alzo a vepon vis her but I sink zat ze ozer man has gone a long time ago. Anyvay, she vill be careful.”

Satisfied, Dominic urges the group to take a few deep breaths before continuing the discussion. They do, and their first decision is to find the keys for the remaining vehicle. These, along with a cheap mobile flip phone, are quickly located in the pockets of the attempted hostage taker.

A search of the phone is delayed as Dominic, Dmitri, and Brock travel stealthily down the dark country road to retrieve the second SUV. In the meantime, the destroyed “bunker” is rummaged.

The three agents promptly return with the vehicle and without incident. The rest of the group pile themselves and their retrieved belongings into the roomy SUV with Dominic at the wheel, Dmitri in the passenger seat, and Rebekah with her parents filling the second row of seats. Brock, Elvis, and Mirabelle sit in the rear row, snugly but comfortably.

Soon the vehicle is departing down the sparsely lit country road, an encroaching darkness pressing in on either side. Black trees hang ominously over the receding taillights as they make their way slowly down the straight and narrow path.

Just before disappearing into the distant mist, the red lights make a sudden and sharp left turn, then vanish entirely into the uncompromising night.

END OF BOOK ONE

## Epilogue

They sit slumped on dilapidated benches outside the central train station at the southern edge of downtown. It's a grey and early morning.

Arti leans into Cornelius as both of them doze silently. Dmitri is slouching, haggard face barely moving as he occasionally nods off. Next to him and in a similar state sits Dominic, his head wrapped with gauze.

At the curb, Rose leans on the seat of her Triumph, fatigue regularly pulling down the hand in which she's holding her mobile phone. Nearby, Mirabelle leans against a rough stone wall, the cigarette held between her lips producing curling smoke that drifts gently past her sleepy eyes.

A short distance away, Elvis and Brock are having a slow and tired chat as they rest against some ornate stonework.

"Crazy night," observes Brock with eyes nearly closed. "All of it."

"Yeah," agrees Elvis, his voice almost a whisper. "I don't know what to think."

"I don't think any of us know what to make of this situation," assures his fellow agent with middling energy.

Elvis responds, "That's not what I mean."

"Then what do you mean?" asks Brock, turning his head to look at Elvis through narrowed eyelids.

"I mean Mira. I think ... I mean ... I think she killed that guy."

"Yeah, she did," acknowledges Brock, eyebrows raised with some effort.

Elvis looks at him with droopy-eyed directness.

"Like, maybe *murdered* him," he explains. "I don't think he was going to shoot her like she said."

Returning his head to its previous position, he continues, "But everything happened so fast. Maybe I'm wrong. I only just looked up at the last second. I just don't remember seeing him pointing his gun at her. Or maybe I did? I dunno."

"Huh," is Brock's only vocalized reaction as a look of mild concern crosses his face.

"Did you ever see her do anything like that?" asks Elvis.

Brock wearily shakes his head. "No, not like that. But I did see her do something ... *questionable*."

“I wonder about her,” concludes the young Asian man.

“Me too,” admits Brock. After a few moments he asks, “Why are you telling me this?”

“I guess I feel like I can trust you,” replies Elvis. “Kind of like talking to a doctor, you know?”

“For fuck’s sake,” snorts the other agent, slowly shaking his head in amused disbelief.

“What?” asks Elvis, his puzzlement momentarily betraying his lethargy.

“Never mind,” replies Brock Medic, settling back into an exhausted acceptance. “It’s a long story.”