

Fast - Smart - Powerful

HAWK-EYE

Traffic

A.P. Atkinson

The Hawk-Eye Trilogy. Traffic - Family - Legacy.

HAWK-EYE TRAFFIC

By
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Chapter 1

He woke suddenly, shocked from the deep, dark, eternal blackness of unconsciousness. Pain exploded violently inside his head, pain so brutally agonising that it washed away all thoughts and memory. It wasn't the nice kind of pain you get from eating too many calzones. This was the excruciatingly awful kind, the raw pain of a million needles scraping at the inside of his skull, smashed against the bone by something powerful that seemed to be struggling to get out, thrashing around in blind panic to escape.

The fact that that something powerful might be inside of his brain might have been unsettling, if he'd had a moment to think of such things. Luckily, the unbridled wave of sheer agony kept such thoughts from his head with the more urgent and pressing matter of struggling to survive this inventive form of torture.

A burst of bright white light flashed on behind his eyes, bright enough to flood his imaginary senses. It sent a fresh wave of torment washing over him, through him, around him, and engulfed him in a crashing wave of fresh unpleasantness. He winced, grunted, and heard his own voice cry out somewhere in the distance. It felt like a whole universe away, somewhere deep inside, or far beyond.

He writhed away on the bed he seemed to be lying on, but at the same time, he wasn't on a bed at all—he was somewhere else. His reality melted from one solid form to another almost instantaneously, so fast that he had to hold on tight or risk being lost forever in the frantic journey.

The white light faded somewhat and he was moving; he was moving fast. He was going so fast, in fact, that he couldn't make out the shape of things around him. Brick and concrete were rushing by him in a blur, a brilliant splash of vivid colours as if someone had

taken an artist's pallet and smeared their fingers through it, dragging it on through his fractured mind, splashing a twisted image through his imagination.

Then, an explosion hit him, a sudden shock that sent his mind reeling back through the layers of darkness. White light again. Brilliant, dazzling white light so bright that he could feel it coursing through his veins until he was drowning in a tide of it.

He sat up gasping and he was nowhere; he could see nothing. The room was blackened, pitch dark, and there seemed to be no light — not creeping shyly in from behind a curtain, nor edging in from beneath a door.

He knew his face was frowning. He was sweating, his chest heaved, his breathing was laboured, and his heart drummed in his chest, feverishly pounding against the inside of his aching ribs. But he knew, somehow, that this was the world and he was back in it. It remained to be seen if he was better off this way.

His thoughts turned to where he was now, and how had he got there. He didn't know; he couldn't seem to remember anything, not where he was, not who he was, not where he'd come from.

Panic gripped him suddenly, and he found his head swivelling around, sending jagged shards of pain piercing through his temples. He was looking, desperately hunting for some clue as to his whereabouts, some vague anchor that might have been dropped in reality that he could cling to now, to find his way from the darkness that had once consumed him.

His fingers frantically traced to the covers below him. They were unusually coarse, almost hard beneath his touch. The fabric was old and was designed with durability instead of comfort in mind. He realised that he could hear his own breath, his heavy nervous panting breaking through the silence, echoing from walls not too far off. The

sheets were unyielding as he gripped hard at them, stretched tightly over a hard mattress beneath.

This was a medical bed. He didn't know how he knew that, but he knew it, nonetheless.

He swung himself to the side and doing so took a considerable effort. At first, his body resisted, but he marshalled all of his strength and drove himself to move. With relief, he felt himself dropping his feet to the floor.

The exertion sent a wave of fresh pain through his delicate brain and he grunted once more. This time, it was a sharp stab from each side of his skull as if some monstrous tormentor was jabbing clawed fingers into his head, fingers that met in the middle, tearing at his jumbled thoughts.

His left hand reflexively made its way to the side of his head as he grunted in pain. He found something alien, something not meant to be there. He felt a tape with the tips of his fingers, a square of material with a wire leading out. He grabbed and fumbled urgently at it while his right hand reached up to the other side of his head, finding another, just as he thought he would. He yanked them both off, yelping as the sticky things peeled away from his skin, tugging at his hair. He looked around some more, but there was still little to see, even though he was slowly becoming accustomed to this grim and featureless reality.

Who am I? His own voice roared inside his mind.

His eyes were adjusting now. He could make out shapes in the gloom, objects in the inky blackness. A tiny red light was off to the side—a gently throbbing LED, a pulsating beacon, perhaps on a table beside the bed.

He wasn't blind - he was relieved about that. But still, the pieces didn't fit together: he still couldn't make sense of all this.

What the hell was going on? This thought occupied every tiny fragment of his screaming mind, his brain was filled with it, and nothing else, except the pain, was bothering to register. He closed his eyes and waited for the maelstrom of confusion to pass before he could once again take control of his own mind.

This wasn't ideal, he thought, and a few random ideas wandered in and out of his head. "What had he been drinking last night?" he wondered. This thought was accompanied by an equally unhelpful desire for strong coffee and something with an unhealthy amount of cheese.

His feet found the floor and he quickly snatched them up with a sharp intake of breath. He heard himself hissing in surprise. It was cold, solid beneath him, and endlessly smooth. He put them down once more, gingerly, and braced himself for the shock. The coldness bit into the skin of his bare feet, but he could tolerate it. It was expected and the experience wasn't as raw and consuming as it had been initially.

He put his hand once more to his temple. The pain was subsiding, now a dull roar, like a river of rocks rushing against the inside of his temples and smashing against the sides. "Did rocks belong inside his head?" he grumbled to himself silently.

He stood up and groaned. His muscles felt weak and his legs barely supported him. The effort intensified the feeling in his head, but a few deep breaths helped him to manage it, to cope with how this world, which clearly hated him, actually was. He supported himself on the edge of his bed, and then stood at full height, testing the muscles, checking his balance.

He could do it; it was an effort of pure will but he would be able to stand, he felt almost sure. Walking was quite another challenge.

He gently put a foot forward, shifting his weight onto it, and found that it held – barely. He reached out one hand, keeping the other on his temples, massaging away the unpleasant gnawing sensation that was building up within. The pain had begun to slowly ebb away and now it felt more like a cloud of angry hornets buzzing around inside him.

He shuffled on, his right hand flicking around frantically, looking for a door, a way out, a clue to where he was; for anything that would help him to understand all this.

He hit something solid after a few, short, uneasy steps. He laid his palm flat against it. It was warm, rough and textured. The texturing was subtle, light even. Paint! It was a painted wall; satin paint on top of dusty, bare plaster. The muscles around his face pulled it into a smile.

He felt his way along the wall until the surface changed. He found a raised edge, colder still and smooth. It was metal, the edge to a door and perhaps a way out. He frantically felt around, looking for a handle, an opening, an exit of some kind. Answers might lie outside. Nothing could be worse than not knowing, than being trapped in the darkness, trapped in ignorance. Whatever was outside had to be better; it had to be worth finding out what was going on.

He found it, a cold metallic handle, long and smooth. He wrapped his fingers around it, slowly, deliberately and he pushed it down. The door clicked and he pulled it back towards him.

Light flooded in suddenly, washing over him, blinding him instantly like a crashing wave of water, deep and powerful enough to drown him in it. His eyes squinted automatically in response and his hand reflexively moved up to block it. He edged backwards away from the new searing pain that cruelly assaulted him.

He heard his own voice crying out, “Bloody hell!” His voice was low and thin and his throat felt raw and as dry as sand.

He pushed into it, willing himself forwards. The brilliance of the light blinded him once again, but he was free, free of the darkness, free of ignorance. Now he could find out where he was; now he would have his answers.

He smiled in spite of the pain, in spite of the light burning his eyes, in spite of not knowing. In spite of it all, he smiled, and he stepped out into the light. It just had to be better. The truth was better than ignorance.

His foot gingerly took a careful, tentative step forwards.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a low and powerful voice demanded. It was loud, grim and hostile, the voice of a man who had perhaps grown up drowning kittens; a man who was bottle-fed as a child; a man who, in all likelihood, didn’t enjoy romantic comedies.

He winced again as the voice shocked him. He recoiled away from it, and a fresh new pain stabbed at his temple. It took him a moment just to find some order in the chaos of this awful world that was lovingly caressing him with horribly violent assaults on his delicate senses. His eyes could barely make out the shapes: his mind was still reeling from everything, but he focused. He put a real and solid effort into concentrating, into understanding what was happening. He gave it everything he had.

What was happening, was that a gigantic, well-dressed man was poking a very large, well-maintained firearm directly at him, jabbing the muzzle hard into the side of his head, while a ridiculously powerful hand gripped him hard enough to snap the bones in his shoulder.

‘Ah,’ he thought to himself. ‘It is going to be one of those days.’

Norma Butler rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she looked over a circuit board. A circuit board should have recognisable components, a delicate network of tiny connections; it should be a circuit board. She discarded it angrily on the desk, glaring at it as if it had offended her in some inanimate way; as if it was a thing that had chosen to be everything it shouldn't be, and had done it with an entirely conscious will.

It was black, with additional black squares printed or stuck to the outside. It was radically unconventional, like everything else around her. She didn't like unconventional. She liked reason, she liked logic, and she liked it best when inanimate objects were what they were meant to be, and much less so when they were actually things they had no business being.

There was a certain way to how the world was meant to be, and she didn't feel unreasonable in expecting it to conform to the rules set out for it. She was not the sort of person to whom it would ever occur that maybe her rules were wrong.

She huffed in annoyance. She liked a puzzle, she liked unravelling a mystery. She took pleasure in finding solutions, in answering questions that others might never even think to ask. But this was different. This was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. It was asking questions of her, and she had no answers to give.

"Sir?" a grunting, growling voice called out from a short-range radio. It was so low and deep that she almost felt as if the radio was shuddering. "Madam?" it continued with awkward confidence, "Sir?"

She turned around, huffing again in even greater annoyance.

"I told you not to disturb me," she barked aggressively, her voice a shrill expression of frustration, aimed at nobody in particular, and everybody, all at once. She sighed, trying to calm herself with a few soothing breaths. Muttering, she said, "You're no more use with

theoretical research than I am at shooting unarmed prisoners. Why don't we both just stick to what we're best at? You stay in there and look aggressive. I'll stay in here and be frustrated at everything in this building."

She imagined the well-dressed man just standing there, his posture rigid enough that the brick wall behind him would have been slightly intimidated, if brick walls were capable of such things. Maybe one day they would, she pondered.

The voice said, "The prisoner, Sir. Madam."

She waited and rolled her eyes. Finally, through thin lips she snapped, "Yes, what about him?"

"He's awake, Ma'am. Sir."

Even without seeing it, she knew that his face never flickered. There was no sign of an expression, no sign of anything so trivial as a tiny fragment of humanity going on in there whatsoever. He was a stoic wall of professionalism and nothing more besides.

She stood up stiffly, shooting an angry glare at the computer before straightening her dull and unimaginative suit. Being angry at the circuit board actually made her feel better about things somehow.

It was time for a break anyway. Humans were nice illogical things and that would be a refreshing change from the electronic complexity of an entirely logical circuit design that stubbornly refused to make any sense whatsoever.

The pistol barrel pressed hard against his skull, as if driven by a force so powerful that, to the man who possessed it, actually having a gun might have been a mild inconvenience. It was oddly reassuring in a way that would have made very little sense, even if he'd had it explained to him with simple diagrams and cartoon illustrations.

It was a known quantity, a thing he understood. Having a solid metal death-delivery system poked at your head was a message that there was really no escaping from; there was little room for misinterpretation. It was a way that few people sent messages of deep affection, and invitations to weddings were rarely packaged in such a manner. It nicely answered all possible questions, and didn't pose any challenging conundrums. The gnashing turmoil on the other side of his bones was something else again. It was viciously unpleasant, and it was inside him. It was eating at his mind in a way that was quite unsettling, although slightly less unsettling than 9mm of open space, wrapped with high-carbon steel through which lead could come blasting through at speeds sufficient to empty out the entire contents of his skull onto the wall behind.

The contradictions on both sides of his head were, frankly, starting to annoy him.

If he could have chosen between the two with a coldly logical mind, he might still have taken the gun, but life had chosen for him and had chosen both at once, just for added spice. Life was like that sometimes, he thought, though he was hard-pressed to come up with a single other example, what with the whole memory loss thing.

"So," he began casually, trying to sound like all this was perfectly reasonable. His voice was hoarse and weak and it cracked at the back of his dry throat. "What exactly is this place?"

"Quiet," grunted the man.

"Sorry," he whispered under his breath. He turned his head very slightly and rolled his eyes around to the side as far as he could, to get a slightly better look at who might, or might not, murder him in the very near future. He whispered again, more quietly than before, "What exactly is this place?"

“Shut up!” The grunt was a growl this time, and it was accompanied by an angry little jab to the head from the muzzle of his pistol.

He winced as it brought the pain to a nice, sharp focus.

He said, a little more loudly, “I think we just got off on the wrong foot here.” He sighed to himself. “You seem like a fine, decent man who loves his mother, and probably gives money to charity. I was just wondering if you’d see fit to stop threatening to blow my brains clean out through the side of my head, and just explain where I actually am, if it’s not too much trouble, please?”

“It’s not a threat.” The man leaned forward and hissed darkly, his voice like iron dragged across stone. Their eyes met, and didn’t leave much doubt in his mind of his sincerity. “I really do want to blow your brains clean out of the side of your head.”

He swallowed nervously. He could see where this was going, and frankly, he didn’t much like it. “Were you the fat kid at school when you were younger, by any chance? Did your daddy give you a girly name? Did mummy not buy you the pony you always wanted? For the record, as soon as I’m in a position to buy you a pony, I absolutely promise that I will, and if it makes you happy, I’ll call you Rock, Clint or Max. You can choose.”

The man pushed the muzzle even harder, and the smooth metal grated at the bones of his skull. He winced again, since it wasn’t a pleasant sensation. He didn’t remember but he guessed that this had never been the last sensation he had ever hoped ever to feel. For some reason, an image flashed in his mind of waitresses.

“I’d shut up if I were you!”

“If you were me, I’d have the gun,” he said thoughtfully.

“Frankly, I think we’d both be better off.” He rolled his head round

again, just managing to make eye contact. “Do you want to try it? I think you’d be pleasantly surprised.”

He made a growling noise from the back of his throat, rather like the sound an industrial grinder might make if you threw a horse into it.

“So, just to clarify, are we friends by any chance?”

There was a rumbling growling noise, louder and less friendly than before. Then, this gigantic, insanely muscular man’s voice said sarcastically, “Does it seem to you like we’re friends? Does it seem to you like we’re going to enjoy a happy adventure together later on, saving the world from evil geniuses and fighting outbreaks of zombies or hoards of super-powered killers?”

“I think most friends just share coffee and pizza together,” he huffed. “I guess everyone has a different idea of fun, though. I’m not trying to say yours is any less valid. It might just be better for everyone if you lived in the pages of a comic book, where you clearly belong and would probably be much happier.”

“Keep talking and you’ll find out what I do for fun.”

At this point, Norma stepped round the corner, a woman who excelled at frowning and could roll her eyes upwards in disgust to a degree that most people would never aspire. Seeing the man cowering up against the wall with a gun pressed to the side of his head, she stepped up closer, crossed her arms and waited patiently while she decided exactly what precisely she was going to do. Whatever it was, it would be done with an exact sense of precision, she was sure of that.

Her expression was that of someone who was not particularly happy with doing anything patiently.

“So you’re finally awake?” she said and scowled at him accusingly, as if the situation was not ideal at all. Perhaps it would need to be remedied in the immediate future, in fact.

“Is that a problem?” he replied with a faint smile. “If it’s any consolation, I really wish I wasn’t. So far, no good has come of it.”

“Merv, he’s half your size, dressed in nothing but a hospital gown, and is clearly as weak as a kitten,” she said in the way a school teacher addresses her least favourite in class. “Do you really think the gun is quite necessary?”

Merv shuffled back very slightly. He withdrew the gun a small distance and seemed to ponder the question through the various layers of thoughts that rolled around inside his oddly muscular brain. Eventually, he pushed the gun hard back to his skull and said, “Yes, Sir. Quite necessary, Sir.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Wrong answer. Put the gun away, Merv, and escort the gentleman to a chair before he collapses or soils himself. I would remind you that he isn’t wearing any underwear, and there’s nobody except you to clear up any mess he makes.”

Merv reluctantly complied, sliding his weapon into a black holster at his side, and rolling his grey sports-jacket back over to conceal it. What kind of sport the jacket might be used for was reduced to, perhaps, the racing of horses and it certainly wouldn’t fit onto the average jockey. He grabbed the man’s upper arm, with a grip that could squeeze the brains out of a monkey, and dragged him upright.

He winced, clearly in pain. “Thank you. And you are?” he said to this very strict, very severe woman.

“I’m in charge,” she told him, narrowing her eyes and making a big effort to look authoritative. She huffed proudly. “For now, that’s the most important thing you need to know.”

He grinned weakly and said, “So it’s you that I come to with a complaint about the service?”

“That man right there—he deals with complaints for me. His answers are usually fairly brutal, but they do have a strong sense of finality to them. Nobody has ever appealed against his decision.”

He nodded awkwardly and raised his hands in a gesture of meek surrender.

“This is going to be fun!” he grumbled.

Chapter 2

“I apologise for any discomfort your treatment might have caused.”

Norma had sat in a chair opposite, and when she spoke, it sounded like she meant what she was saying—more or less. Telling the truth and meaning he could trust her were two very different things, of course, and the distinction was not lost on him.

He looked around, taking it all in. The room was sparse, at best. It was painted a neutral light grey colour, as if decorated by a man with absolutely no style whatsoever; or perhaps by someone with a rich and vibrant imagination who was completely colour-blind but, frankly, more likely the former.

The table between them was also grey and screwed to the wall. The surface was heavy and durable, but time had taken a toll and everything just looked a bit tired. He felt that the same could be said of Norma but decided to never express that thought, just in case.

The chairs were lightweight alloy things with grey padded seats and a backrest, which only reached about halfway up his back. It was far from comfortable, and didn't really even seem to be pretending to try.

She was dressed conservatively—so conservatively in fact, that whoever had made her clothes had quite possibly slipped into a coma and died out of sheer boredom.

“I'm guessing you people work for the government?” he said knowingly.

He cast an eye behind him to the door. It was closed, and had a frosted glass panel near the top. It was a solid-looking thing, heavy and secure, much like the walking blob of intimidating muscle that was lurking outside of it. He could see the closely-cropped hair on top of the creature beyond, could almost hear the grating sound of his

heavy mouth-breathing and the occasional noise of his knuckles dragging on the floor.

If she didn't want him to leave, then he wouldn't be doing so in one piece. Even if he could manage to unlock the door, the odds of getting past the hired-help were slim. His body still felt weak and numb, and he knew that he was in no condition for a fight. He didn't even know if he could fight. For all he knew, he was an author—or worse—someone who worked on proof-reading. He found the idea quite unsettling.

"We do, indeed, work for the government," she said with a simple nod. "Do you know why you're here? Have you any idea?"

He rubbed his head as if that might get it working. It still hurt, but not like before; the furious agony had died down to a dull ache now, almost faded to nothing. If he didn't think too much about it, the pain was easy to dismiss; his situation wasn't.

He wondered what drugs they'd given him and found himself frowning angrily. The image of a woman's face flashed into, and then out of, his mind.

"I was hoping you'd bring that up," he said. He sipped at a bottle of water and swallowed noisily.

"Go on." She waited for him to continue, staring at him thoughtfully, measuring, calculating, working it all out behind a pair of horrible little piercing eyes that felt like they were crawling around inside his brain. The muscle outside looked intimidating, but she was the real threat here, her mind was as sharp as a blade, and just as cruel.

"Well... no," he shrugged. "I don't know why I'm here, and now I think about it, I'm not entirely sure where I am, how I got here or, even more worryingly, who I am."

“Oh dear.” She frowned, and her shoulders sagged slightly—only barely noticeable, but he was watching closely for such things. She breathed a heavy sigh and tutted to herself.

He didn’t like what he saw, and his expression accordingly was of a man straining to come to terms with all this, hoping that he could, before his situation somehow managed to get worse. He knew he was in trouble. “I’m getting the distinct impression that this is rather more of a problem than I had hoped it would be.”

“Well, you see, I’ve invited you here to answer those exact questions for me. The fact that you can’t remember the answers does cause rather a problem for both of us.”

He nodded, and the corners of his mouth traced into a rather unrealistically optimistic smile. “So I’m free to go?”

She looked away thoughtfully, sighing to herself again, and not making any effort to disguise her irritation. “I’m not an unreasonable person,” she began, as if trying to convince herself of something she knew wasn’t true. “I need answers, you see. I must have answers, and whether you realise it or not, some of those answers are very likely inside your head.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but there really doesn’t seem to be much of anything inside my head. I literally can’t even remember my own name.”

“You will...” She smiled thinly, as if such a thing was an ironic certainty. She was keeping some of the details to herself for now, that much was obvious. “I am willing to go to quite horrendous extremes to get to the information locked up in that empty little head of yours. Just to clarify, I do mean to say that they’ll be horrendous for you, not for me.”

He didn’t doubt it. “Miss, you seem to have me at a disadvantage.” He leaned forwards, edging closer across the table,

but did so dubiously. He might not remember his own name, but he knew with an odd sense of certainty that he shouldn't provoke her. "At this point, wouldn't it make more sense to tell me why I'm here, at least? The least you could do is tell me what's going on, surely?"

"You're helping me with my inquiries," she told him, glaring back, her eyes locked coldly onto his. They were devoid of the warmth of human emotions; they were calculating, devious and cold.

He shuddered and leaned back.

"Then you help me!" he insisted. His elbow banged down onto the table and his palm rested on the top of his head for a moment. He ran his hand over his short, closely-cropped hair, and let out a deep, low sigh. "My head seems to be essentially vacant right now. You need to help me understand what's going on if you want anything from me."

"I need?" The faintest flicker of a smile fluttered on her lips. Her eyes reflected, for a moment, the merest hint of amusement.

"Please!" he sat up suddenly. He frowned darkly, his own eyes now cold and hard. "Who are you? What are you people?"

She looked away, as if the answer was something she wasn't entirely proud of. "I work for the government. You were right about that," she told him. She looked back with those dark, piercing eyes, but this time he held her glare, staring angrily forwards. "If that doesn't scare you, then you're a fool. It scares the hell out of me!"

"Which agency?" he said, growing increasingly frustrated. As he glared fixedly, she fidgeted slightly—not intimidated, but certainly unsettled. "Some ridiculous 'alphabet soup' of letters, that isn't quite sure what it's actually supposed to mean?"

She shook her head and scowled, not necessarily at him. "That's not relevant. This is all rather more complicated than that. It's a lot more complicated than you might think."

“Really?” he said sarcastically. No small degree of annoyance at the whole ridiculous situation was turning now to something a little more urgent. “I’m sitting in a room wearing nothing but a hospital gown, I’m feeling like I’ve been kicked in the skull by an epileptic donkey, I’ve got no memory, government agents have decided it’s fun to poke guns at my head, and the only person who seems to have a clue what’s going on needs my help to figure it all out. If you enjoy complicated, then I’d be happy to swap seats with you any time you like.”

“Your tone isn’t helping,” she said sternly, rebuking his fairly moderate outburst.

“Nothing about you is helping either!” he sneered.

She looked away and sighed. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “I can imagine how you feel and have the utmost sympathy for your position. I’m not completely heartless.”

“I doubt it,” he growled under his breath. “You do seem almost entirely and utterly completely heartless.”

“I can show you something,” she said finally, after contemplating it for several long seconds. She continued rubbing her chin.

He looked up to her; his expression was still fixed in a scowl, but he forced a reserved smile. “I’m wearing a hospital gown. If I stand up suddenly, I can show you everything.”

Just for a moment, a ghost of a smile flashed across her face, breaking through some of the tension between them.

“Alright!” She held a hand in front of his face, gesturing not to do the thing he’d just threatened to do. “There are rules. Follow the rules and we’ll have no problems. Don’t follow the rules, and I’ll leave you in a dark room with Merv.

“Agreed?”

He grimaced at the thought of it. "I don't remember anything, but I really don't get the feeling that I'm particularly good with rules," he huffed heavily.

"I'm sure the lingering threat of Merv will prove very helpful in that respect." Indeed, she seemed fairly certain of it. "I'm going to show you something in the next room."

She spoke with a certain gravity that suggested strongly that she took this very seriously indeed, and it was required that he felt the same way. She continued dryly, "This is something you will never be at liberty to discuss. It is something that you will take to your grave. You can decide just how much longer it is before that happens."

"You're really filling me with confidence now..." he grumbled.

She led him into a corridor. At the end was a pair of doors, painted grey like everything else, but they lurked ominously ahead with a singular looming threat. At the side was an access panel, shiny and new, made of metal and black plastic. A set of expensive-looking cameras were positioned above, but they were old and dusty. Everything seemed incredibly old and extremely dusty.

"I'm taking you in there," she told him. Her tone suggested that this held enormous significance of some kind. Even she seemed slightly nervous, if not actually afraid.

She lead the way forwards once again, and he shuffled along with her, casting a glance behind as the gigantic, monstrous form of Merv followed dutifully along, peering out from his ferocious little eyes, just looking for an excuse to scratch the itch of his dangerously psychotic tendencies. It didn't bode well for him.

He looked at those doors. Did he really want to see what was on the other side? Did he really want to know? He felt strongly that stepping through them would be going into a world he might never step back out of. Was he prepared to do that?

“Are you ready?” she asked, stopping just ahead of them. Her voice was ringing with the sound of severity. This was serious.

He took a deep breath and nodded.

He wasn’t, not really. What choice did he really have?

She stepped up and placed her hand on the panel. It flashed blue, and then a solid, burning red light switched to green with a click. There was a heavy metallic clunk as internal locks fell open.

She turned to look at him. Her eyes were dark, but her expression was unreadable. He had no idea just what was going on in her mind, and he wondered if she was any more informed about all this than he was.

“Inside this room...” she said and then paused for a moment, perhaps contemplating something deeply in the far-distant confines of her brain, “... is something that few people will ever know existed. I can’t even begin to explain how important this is, and how dangerous it could be in the wrong hands.”

Now he was worried. He felt a cold pang of dread. Fear traced up his spine, massaging his nerves with sharp, bony, dead fingers. He felt certain that his hands would be considered the wrong ones for anything to be in, for pretty much everything, by pretty much everyone.

“Alright!” he grumbled. “If you want to scare me, you’ve got the solid lump of violence behind me to use.”

“I’m not trying to scare you,” she told him softly. Her voice was low, respectful, and maybe even a little anxious. “This room scares me. This room scares me to death.”

He stared at her, trying to look brave, confident and at ease with himself. With a deep breath he said softly, “Is this the room where you had your personality removed?”

She ignored him. She closed her eyes for a moment, bracing herself. However scared he was before, it got far, far worse.

“This...” She took a deep breath, and pushed the door open. “This... is the Hawk-Eye.”

Chapter 3

He stepped inside, awe-struck, not knowing what to expect, not knowing what horrors would rise up to meet him. His heart fluttered; his chest heaved a huge, nervous breath as he finally edged his way cautiously through the door. He looked around, his eyes taking in every little detail of the huge, gloomily-lit space.

“What a piece of junk,” he said finally, turning to look at her with a smirk. “Is this it? A big room full of crap?”

She glared at him, thin-lipped and frowning, her arms crossed over her chest. “What do you mean, piece of junk? This is cutting-edge stuff!”

The room was the size of a warehouse, albeit a small one, with many large alcoves off to the sides. In the middle was a tower of computers on a raised platform. There were big black servers lining the edges, each taller than he stood, mixed up with smaller units, held in metal racking. It was all dusty, dishevelled, and looked abandoned. Parts were strewn across the bare concrete floor; black trunking packed with cables ran along the ground, snaking all over the place without any obvious or apparent design.

It was a total shambles: it was as if someone had pulled out some time ago, leaving only part of their work behind, and taking with them everything that was useful. If a giant mechanical life-form had taken a dump in a disused warehouse, this might be the result.

“What the hell is all this?” he asked with a shrug, one hand keeping his gown done up at the back, the other gesturing to the banks of equipment. “It looks like it hasn’t been used in decades. What kind of edge do you think it’s going to cut? It looks like it was bought in a second-hand shop thirty years ago. It’s like the scientific equivalent of a handful of magic beans.”

“Young man!” she growled at him, jabbing her balled fists into her sides angrily and staring at him with furiously flashing eyes. “This is the Hawk-Eye project centre. From here, the system has unlimited power. Unlimited power!”

“It’s junk,” he quite rightly pointed out, gesturing at it again. Some of it was still shrouded in original plastic, freshly delivered from the back of a truck. Other parts were covered in sheets while some were just left lying on the floor, their covers removed, and bits that were meant to be inside had spilled out everywhere. A few flashing lights occasionally blinked on and off around the room. Screens were dead, and nothing seemed to be working properly, in the few places than anything worked at all.

“Have you any idea what you’re looking at?” she said, pointing back to the hub—the raised platform which seemed to be the place where the old computers were most highly concentrated.

“Sure,” he said sarcastically, with an enthusiastic nod. “A scrap-merchant’s dream! It looks like the entire eighties was dumped right here on the floor in one go. We could probably make a fortune selling this crap online, because one thing I do remember is that there’s some seriously strange people on the other side of the internet.”

“This room is the control centre for the entire Hawk-Eye program!” she said again. Her voice was low and threatening, and her foot had begun tapping involuntarily. A vein in her temple was throbbing as she spoke. “This was the test station—from here they ran the entire program.”

“And... when was this?” He was grinning now, which seemed to annoy her even more. For this reason, he did it even more.

“Are you going to take this seriously, or not?” she yelled, her paper-thin veneer of confidence cracking for just a moment. She

struggled to regain some degree of dignity—some degree of control over the situation, even though she must have known it was futile at this point.

He looked at her, blinked momentarily, and then just stared, his expression neutral. “Probably not,” he admitted with a sarcastic smirk. “Certainly not any more seriously than I am now, I would think!”

She huffed in annoyance. “Let me explain what this all is,” she began, stepping towards the centre. Her low heels clattered noisily against the hard concrete floor as she unevenly made her way through the haphazard cables and the cluttered parts that had been discarded around the place.

He followed along, listening as she spoke, but not really taking much interest in it.

“This was an experimental platform for the Hawk-Eye project—a total surveillance package. It would create extrapolated video from external feeds. Naturally, it accessed any and all open and closed circuit video system, and any listening device, but there was more to it than that,” she droned on.

“Governments spying on people,” he said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. “I can’t begin to tell you how you’ve surprised me with that revelation. How very original. Was the second point of this experiment; to determine whether the moon comes out at night?”

“There was much more to it than that,” she hissed acidly, narrowing her eyes threateningly at him and turning on him sharply. “There was also a purpose-built range of unconventional networked camera drones that can all be very cleverly networked together.”

“I’m still not impressed,” he announced with an apathetic sigh. He looked around again and then said rhetorically, “Am I meant to be impressed? Was that the point?”

“There were satellites, aerial spy-drones, even mobile street-level vehicles,” she explained. “The system used all of these things — it brought them all together and created realistic, computer-generated video simulations of actual events, made up from all the data it collected. It could even learn for itself better ways to gather information.”

“OK!” he shrugged. “I get it. You were trying to create an Orwellian utopia. What’s any of this got to do with me?” He thought for a moment and then a quite worried expression came to his face as realisation dawned on him. “Has this got anything to do with me?”

“I’m going to show you a video,” she explained. “I hope it will go some way towards explaining why you’re here, and maybe jog that empty memory of yours.”

“Fine.” He frowned at her, somewhat intrigued. “Do I have to wear a special helmet or something? Is it like virtual reality?”

She gave him a caustic look, and pointed off into the distance. There in the corner of the room sat a tiny cathode-ray-tube TV set perched upon a rickety stool.

He grinned, and said sarcastically, “An old TV with rabbit ear antennas? That’s cutting edge stuff right there.”

“Just watch the damn video!”

■ FEED SRC:MX54312134 SEC PRTL RECON

Casey March drained the last of his coffee. It was bitter, strong, and would keep him focused until lunch. In that respect it was a lot like his partner. They sat together, enjoying their morning ritual of reasonable coffee and unreasonable conversation, which was only slightly more intellectually elevated than drawing on walls with a stick.

There were four of them in total, all sitting on plastic garden furniture in front of a stall, an open trailer in the middle of some piece of waste land that served hot, and mostly passable food and drinks.

Grant, the man who ran it, was no fool. He gave free coffee to police motorcyclists, and that guaranteed a steady flow of them, all day long and well into the night. A few free coffees bought him all the protection he needed.

He was too small to attract the interest of serious criminals, and the big, loud grumbling engines of the bikes, the blue lights, and the static hiss of the radios kept away the small-time criminals—the casual opportunists, high on whatever drug was doing the rounds of the neighbourhood that week.

Casey ran his hand over the spotless black and yellow paintwork of his new motorcycle. The yellow paint was covered in white and blue stickers, but still, there was no disguising what this machine was—it was fast, powerful, a new breed of pursuit vehicle. It was the future of law enforcement.

“You two should get a room!” his partner laughed. He was chewing on a hot-dog, and apparently saw no good reason to keep his mouth shut while he did so.

“I still can’t get over it,” he grinned like a child at Christmas. He had the expression of a man who had just woken up next to the girl of his dreams, and was too drunk to remember just exactly how that might have happened. “I’ve worked hard for this, Tom. I earned this!”

Tom stuffed way too much food into his mouth and laughed. “Yeah, I earned it too. I can’t even believe it—I mean, trusting us with the latest, greatest, experimental high-speed police pursuit vehicles. What are those guys on? Do they even know us?”

Casey shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "I can't believe we're getting paid for this. I would have paid them, and paid them good money too, just to ride one of these things; now they're just handing them over to us, and asking very nicely if we'd spend the day cruising around on them in exchange for a not-insubstantial monthly wage packet; with benefits."

"Loving the dental-plan already!" He broke into sudden fits of laughter and a lot of half-chewed sausage made good its escape through an immaculately manicured full set of healthy adult teeth.

Casey looked serious for a moment: motorcycles, especially fast ones, were serious business. "This should have happened years ago. I mean, cars and bikes are getting faster, and you just can't keep up on the big old motor-units. It's about time we were equipped with something quicker and better."

"Whatever you say, Casey," Tom agreed, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "It's all the same to me, man."

Casey tutted and looked him over as if a personal sleight had been made against him in some way. "It's an arms-race, and we've got to keep up. Right now, there's only eight of these in the whole city. In a year, there's going to be a hundred, I guarantee it."

"Experimental projects..." Tom balled his napkin into a crumpled wad and threw it towards the bin. It didn't go in - it just impacted on the surface. He gave no sign that he cared one way or the other. "You know where you and I differ, Casey?"

He nodded a thoughtful reply, and suggested, "I shower every day and had sex this week?"

Tom looked at him coldly, narrowed his eyes and pretended to be irritated. "All of these things and more; but the most important one is that I don't enjoy being a guinea-pig. I can see the point of a small group of elite motor-unit riders on these new machines, but I

don't want to be the one testing them. I don't like the daily review meetings, the weekly rounds of performance assessment paper-work, and I really, really don't like the mechanics following me around, growling at me for scuffing the paint on their new baby. I just like busting bad-guys; I like shooting people with tasers; damn, I love shooting people with tasers."

"But today, we're busting bad-guys from the backs of cool motorcycles. How great is that? Tomorrow—if all goes well—who knows?"

"Oh sure," he laughed and took a huge gulp of coffee. "I get a real thrill out of riding on the back of some high-tech, gee-whiz piece of junk that was slammed together on a production line somewhere in a Chinese village by underpaid child workers."

Casey took all that very personally, and said proudly, "These are American-made."

Tom just tutted and shook his head at him.

"They are. The base bikes are EBR 1190RXs. Our top police technicians have upgraded the suspension, added some extra power, and given us all the latest toys, but these bikes were made in America by free-men!"

"Free men?" Tom laughed. "Free men in America? Maybe the colour of my skin gives me a more enlightened perspective on the matter of freedom. If you find yourself in a position where you've got to work for a wage, you aint free, brother! Of course, we're on the right side of that equation, and that's no bad place for a man to be."

Casey grumbled at him and rolled his eyes. "Not this again! These bikes are all-American. They're high-performance, pushing out nearly 200bhp; they're light, they're quick, they have the latest GPS technology, all-round camera recordings, Bluetooth integrated

communications. They're just..." he stopped talking for a moment, his eyes latching onto the motorcycle. His gaze caressed every line, every curve, "They're just awesome!"

"You two should definitely get a..."

>>FEED SRC UNAVAILABLE<<

The playback stuttered and halted. Norma cursed, and began fiddling with the controls.

"Your 'cutting edge' technology seems to have cut out!" he noted dryly, forcing himself not to grin at her. He failed.

She looked up, glaring from under her brow before choosing not to answer. After a moment of quite severe scowling she got right back to her work of getting it running. "As you can see, the equipment hasn't been used in some time. I'm still working on configuring most of it."

"I can tell," he snorted. "Is there a point to all this?"

"You'll see," she told him sternly. "You'll see!"

Chapter 4

He leaned casually on the edge of the desk while the TV set showed nothing but static hiss. White noise crackled over the screen, and then an image began to flash on and off, a frozen image of two men talking, while really saying nothing.

“I know you’re trying to show me something, but perhaps there’s a more sophisticated way to do it?” he suggested thoughtfully.

Norma’s head popped up from behind a bank of equipment. She stared at him with interest, as if she’d heard something that she could finally relate to. She tried to talk but her mouth was full of cables. She tried to take them out with her left hand, but that was full of cables too. She flustered for several long, painful seconds while all he could do was watch and feel a little bit sad for her.

He glanced over to Merv, who stopped looking threatening just long enough to shake his head, huff noisily, and look away.

“What do you mean?” she said finally, spitting out numerous bits of plastic. “What more sophisticated way?”

“More sophisticated than this?” he said sarcastically, gesturing to the rusty and dented TV set. He shrugged. “Give me back my clothes, and I’ll make a pair of sock puppets that could help to tell the story,” he suggested, sounding impressively like he was deadly serious about it.

She glared at him angrily.

“Or you could just tell me what’s happening. I mean, I know that just telling the truth is a radical concept for anyone working for any government, ever, but it’s just crazy enough to work, don’t you think?”

“This is going to work!” she snapped at him angrily. “This is still the most sophisticated computer system ever built. At least that I know about.”

“That you know about?” he grimaced. “That sounds ominous. Do the Russians have a more powerful system? Did they find a way to harness the awesome power of wiring a pocket calculator to a digital watch? Is it powered by lemons?”

“Shut up or I’ll have Merv shut you up!” she told him angrily, returning the bulk of her attention to getting the computer working. There were grumbling noises and something that sounded suspiciously like a very long string of swear words.

“Merv, what do you think about all this?” he turned and perched himself casually on the edge of the desk. His confidence seemed to be returning, if it had been there previously, or asserting itself if it hadn’t. “You don’t look like you’d be particularly interested in computers—unless someone built a gun that fired them. But, presuming you’re capable of having thoughts about things you can’t punch in the face, what’s your take on all this?”

Merv just glared at him fixedly, clenching and unclenching his fists. He looked away and grimaced, muttering to himself threateningly in a tone so low that his teeth reverberated.

“I may have gone too far...” the man muttered with a slightly awkward smirk.

“Right!” She jumped up from behind a tower of ancient technology, grinning proudly. “Watch the TV—it should be working again now.”

“Should it not have been working before?” he added with a grin.

There was glaring.

■ **FEED SRC:MX54312134 SEC PRTL RECON**

>>RESUME<<

The radio hissed. Tom picked it up, stretching the hand-held unit from the base on the end of a curly black wire. The whole thing was tiny, small enough to be mounted on his shoulder, ahead of an armoured panel on his motorcycle racing suit.

“Alpha 4 responding,” he said, rolling his eyes as if the very idea of doing his job was little more than an inconvenience.

Casey looked on expectantly, keen for any excuse to jump onto the bike and ride headlong into the action. He was like a puppy on caffeine, as Tom had noted very many times before.

“Acknowledged!” Tom stood up and looked sternly at his partner. His usual good humour was gone, his face was dark, and his eyes stared emptily. “We’re on a call. You take the lead—I’ll provide backup.”

Casey punched the air, grinned widely, and turned to scoop up his bullet-proof carbon and kevlar helmet.

“Casey, listen!” Tom paused. The tone of his voice was cold; it carried a warning. “Casey, listen to me. Listen carefully.”

Casey was concerned, he’d never seen Tom worried about anything, except that one time when his ex had called him, about three weeks after the condom had split. “I’m listening.”

“We’re to proceed to the corner of Adams and Clarke. There’s a suspect there that we have to apprehend.”

Casey shrugged, not quite understanding the sudden seriousness—it just wasn’t like him. “OK. Apprehend the suspect! I can do that, it’s not my first time!”

“Casey, you don’t get it...” he said and looked away, averting his eyes. “You have to apprehend this suspect. You’re to take the

lead. He's on a motorcycle; you run him down. You can't let him get away. This is serious, Casey. You won't let me down, will you?"

Casey smiled awkwardly. Was something wrong here? "Tom, what's going on? Has this got anything to do with the man you were talking to earlier? Is this part of something we've talked about?"

His voice carried a grim sense of foreboding. "Just don't you let me down, that's all there is to it!"

The motorcycle was heavily modified. It had been quite thoroughly repurposed by police engineers to be ideally suited to the role of high-speed pursuit. The ignition was keyless—Casey had a small transmitter attached to his belt, and the bike responded automatically as he threw his leg over, the dash flashing to life instantly, saving several vital seconds in the event of an emergency, and looked pretty damn cool about it.

The dash was a large oblong box, feeding information back to the rider, entirely digitally. Above it he had a GPS display which showed him where he had to head, and two tiny additional monitors. One showed the camera view ahead, one showed the view from the rear, and naturally everything was recorded for evidence. He grinned happily as he clipped the helmet onto his head, fastening it firmly under his chin. It was tight, the padding pressing uncomfortably against his head.

On either side was a speaker. He could talk with his partner in full duplex, even at high speed and, once a pursuit had begun, a central controller would listen in, feeding information to them both. In the top left corner was a bank of glowing warning lights. One flashed blue—the communications system was activated, his helmet was recording, and he was ready to go.

He pressed the button and the enormous V-twin engine roared to life grumpily. This was his favourite moment. He sat on the bike, the barely contained power throbbing away below; pure violence harnessed in alloy, ready to be unleashed at his command. He was filled with anticipation, his muscles were loaded with adrenaline, his heart was pumping, his head was clear. He was ready. His partner had superiority, and he was duty-bound to wait for the command before he was allowed to begin.

He didn't.

He slipped the clutch, his toe clanking the bike down into first gear. He gave the throttle a twist—too much of a twist - and the back wheel spun, smoking slightly as he pulled away at way too fast a speed. The rate of acceleration clocked up on the dash quickly, alarmingly so, the numbers rolling by on the LCD screen beneath him in a tumbling blur.

He didn't care—he was away now, just the man and the machine, working together as one.

“So you're just doing it your own way now, Casey?” Tom's voice grumbled through the helmet communicator.

Casey smirked to himself. A corner came up; he changed down—the engine roared as he closed the off throttle, the bike slowed as he pulled to the edge, and he twisted it again, speeding out of the turn with a roar.

“You said I'm taking the lead,” he laughed. “You just worry about keeping up.”

“You just worry about not crashing into anything,” he told him severely. “And you just believe me, you goddam maniac, I'm already worried about keeping up.”

Casey was grinning as he pulled on the throttle. The road beneath was rolling past so quickly that it was just a dull grey mass,

seemingly solid and smooth. To the sides, the buildings, people, walls and objects flashed by in a blur.

The siren was wailing and blue LEDs were shining brightly from the bike, a warning to make way because he wasn't going to stop; not for anything. Traffic was parting to let him through, but he was on it so quickly the vehicles barely had time. The bike responded fast, changing directions with scarcely more than a thought. His fingers danced on the levers, the throttle flicked open, the clutch and brakes slipped. He weaved around solid objects as cars, vans and trucks pulled around, not knowing where the sound was coming from until he was on top of them, next to them, blaring away down the street ahead of them, leaving them bewildered, shocked and confused.

His heart pounded as he picked his way along the road. Traffic-lights changed to let him through. He was the king of the road; this was his road, his street, his world.

"We're hunting for a Japanese sports-bike," the voice joined the rush of the wind as it crept through the helmet, a dull roar that accompanied the sound of the growling engine. "It's red, twin exhausts on the back, and a black stripe. It's loud, big and it's fast. Not much to go on, but it's pretty much all we know — no further description at this time."

"He'll see me coming, then I'll know who he is!" Casey shouted into the mic.

He leaned forward until the chin-bar of his helmet brushed against the instruments. He would see him indeed, and hear him even before that. He was coming like a force of nature, judgment and justice made solid and wrapped in white stickers as it bore down on him inescapably.

He was coming.

“How far, Tom?”

Tom was behind, somewhere quite some way behind. He hadn't seen his lights, or heard his siren in too long a while. “You're there. You're on top of him. Less than 100 meters to contact with the last witness location,” the whiny little voice screamed through his ears.

His eyes narrowed and his hand relaxed on the throttle. The drone of the engine softened as the speed melted away. His eyes peered forwards like a hawk, scanning for his prey, focused and unwavering. He was aware of movement to the sides, picking them up from the very periphery of his vision, but never turning to take them in.

He was a hunter, and he was ready to lock onto his target.

“What did this guy do, anyway?”

“He asked too many stupid questions,” Tom told him sharply. “You're not his goddam lawyer, you're the cop that's going to bring him in. You worry about arresting him, let the suits worry about the charge.”

“That's a bit irregular...” he noted, but it didn't bother him unduly.

“He's a suspect—just arrest him,” the voice told him sternly. “We're not hunting down people with expired tax. This is the big time now. You signed up to a life-or-death outfit, so act like it.”

“This is control,” came a third and hitherto unheard voice from over the line. “Suspect is heading east on Broadway. Co-ordinates have been sent.”

A message flashed up on Casey's dash, revealing a map. The sat-nav system updated quickly. The red dot was moving away, but was still close by. He grinned and scanned ahead for a turning. He had him.

He flicked the throttle and she roared fully to life, shooting off as if the machine had been fired from some enormous cannon. The acceleration was impressive! He held on with his knees, braced his arms, and bent forward to stop the wind howling at his head. The numbers on the screen rolled by, as he accelerated faster and faster. He pulled down, leaning forcefully into a hard right turn. The toe of his boot scraped the ground as he fell into a wide arc, the rear tyre screaming protest, rubber chattering against the tarmac.

“Yeah!” he roared enthusiastically, powering out of the curve and unleashing everything the bike had inside it. In response, it flew up the inside of a row of traffic, growling like a wild beast. The siren wailed, pulsing its throbbing racket, screaming at everyone to step away. As he weaved, he powered in with the full force of the engine and leaned back on the brakes, plotting a course through the confused chaos he was creating.

And then, right in front of him, there it was.

The red bike was up ahead—twin exhausts, just as he’d been told. It made off, faster and faster as it raced off into the distance, pulling as hard as it could. It was prey and it was running scared. Nothing was more motivating than fear; it could wash away reason, clear out doubt, make a man capable of things he would never normally consider.

“Contact!” he reported.

Tom’s voice hissed back through the communicator. “Careful Casey. Don’t do anything stupid!” it warned.

The bike shuddered as his mirror caught the side of a car. A crashing sound followed as mirrored glass shattered and showered out from the black housing, bouncing and tumbling off his helmet visor. “Yeah, I’m being real careful,” he grinned.

He pulled through a gap between two cars and accelerated hard. The wailing siren screamed from all around him, as the engine roared even louder. “This guy is fast!”

The red bike took a corner, slicing the edge off and riding up on the pavement. He shot at full speed past a startled pedestrian, and the bike leapt back off on the other side, hitting the tarmac and skidding slightly, before pulling away hard.

“He’s good, too. This guy is really good!” Casey knew he sounded impressed.

Cars blocked his way. He slowed, and then pulled the front wheel up with a jab on the throttle. He hit the curb hard; the back end shimmied from the shock, but he carried on, managing to exert control and stay upright, fighting the bike, and the laws of physics, for dominance. Pedestrians were slammed back into the wall, shocked and surprised by the scene unfolding around them.

He came off the edge. For a split second, he was airborne, and then the back wheel caught the road, snatching and rolling around in a short, screaming arc. He gunned it, accelerating hard after the red bike. “He’s good, but I’m better!” he said as he grinned to himself.

Tom’s voice grumbled through the speakers. “Just catch him—don’t fall in love with him!”

“Or her—it could be a woman,” he shouted above the roaring noises of brutally powerful machinery, the noises he loved. “We could have beautiful, fearless children together.”

“If they looked like you, they wouldn’t be beautiful, but they would have to be fearless if they wanted to go out in public,” replied Tom, a faint sound of a snigger coming through the speakers.

“If they could ride like this guy, they could look like the elephant-man on a bad day, for all I cared.”

“Casey, if they took after you, that’s exactly what they would look like.”

Casey smiled, and cut it a little too close to a car. He made a nervous noise and muttered to himself. Concentrate! He pulled even harder. “I’m gaining, Tom. I’m getting closer.”

The red bike slowed suddenly. Smoke billowed from the back wheel, thick white smoke as it braked hard in the middle of the road.

Casey’s eyes widened in shock and he slammed on his own brakes.

The red motorcycle carried on. The back wheel spun, even more white smoke erupted everywhere, and the thick, acrid stench of burning rubber hung on the air. The back flicked around, cutting in a wide semicircle, and the bike launched itself in the opposite direction, pulling away through the gap the siren had made in the traffic.

“Damn!” Casey cried out. “This guy is really, really good.” He leaned in and turned as hard as he could, screwing on the throttle to catch up, to make up on some of the lost ground that his lack of preparedness has cost him.

“Don’t lose him, Casey,” Tom growled at him. “You don’t know how much is riding on this.”

“What is this, a test?” Casey grinned. “Is it a test?”

“Just catch him,” the voice replied. “He’s going to make a mistake sooner or later.”

“Don’t worry...” He slammed the throttle all the way open and the bike roared in anger, tearing along the road with reckless abandon. He ignored the risks and piled on everything it had to give, losing himself in the moment. “I believe in this project, Tom. The police deserve more of these bikes, not less. I’m not letting us down.”

There was no doubt, no thoughts of personal safety; all that mattered now was running this suspect down, pushing him until he had nowhere left to turn, driving him until he knew he was beaten.

He powered on. “He’s about twenty yards ahead,” he yelled into the mic.

They were close now. The roar of the other bike’s exhaust was added to his own; they were there together now, locked as a pair in this one deadly situation, their progress one, their risks shared between them.

Casey locked his eyes ahead. He saw the rider’s head bob down, the black visor of his helmet looking back in his mirror. “He knows I’ve got him.”

In what must have been a last ditch desperate manoeuvre, the rider locked the rear brake, slamming the back wheel into a skid. The bike spun right, the rear wheel sliding out as he approached a corner. He accelerated into it, hoping to make a fast turn.

Casey swung out to avoid him, locking his brakes at once in blind panic. His ABS wouldn’t lock the wheels though, and he kept on going, swerving around the solid object ahead. He didn’t swerve hard enough.

His eyes widened in horror as he plummeted headlong into the back wheel of the red bike.

The world went black for a moment, and then, he was tumbling through the air, weightless. His brain couldn’t work it out — there was just a blurring mess of colours; colours and fear; fear as his heart pounded in his chest and he was rolling helplessly through the air.

>>END FEED<<

The screen had gone black, only this time, it was meant to.

“Well...” he said, looked over to Norma.

She was grinning intensely, proud of herself for getting the video working, her veneer of professional detachment slipping momentarily so her inner-child, if she had such a thing, could show itself very briefly. Then it was gone and her face was once more pulled into a very professional scowl.

“That was pretty intense. I reckon we could make a lot of money selling that to one of those ‘funniest home video’ shows. I could almost smell the burning rubber.” He looked back at the computer accusingly. “It doesn’t actually smell of burning rubber, does it? I mean, it hasn’t caught fire or anything?”

Her grin vanished as she shook her head angrily. “Is that all you’ve got to say?”

“What do you want me to say? I still don’t remember anything.”

“I was hoping it would bring it all back; some of it, at least.” She seemed saddened, or as saddened as government agents were capable of being. The veneer soon slammed back into place, like a solid wall had been instantly erected in front of her.

“It hasn’t really answered any questions either,” he said, frowning back at her. “OK, so I’m this cop, Casey. I was riding some new, fast, super-bike for the traffic department, and I had an accident chasing some idiotic lunatic through mid-town traffic. So what? What has that got to do with me being here? What was so special about me, I’m just a cop, right? Obviously I’m an awesome, fearless cop who might be the finest motorcycle rider who has ever lived, but still, I’m just a cop.”

“Is that what you think you are?” she chuckled to herself, but there was something else, something like hatred in her eyes. It was sudden and accusing. She cast a look to Merv whose expression

seemed unreadable. He looked back from one to the other and began to worry.

“What?” he shrugged. “What’s going on?”

“You’re not a cop,” she told him flatly. She scooped up her handbag from the desk and began rummaging inside it.

He looked at her, flicked his eyes to Merv, and back to her again, confused and increasingly concerned. He had a bad feeling about this. “What, then?” he said warily, shrugging slightly. He had a growing impression that this was bad—very bad.

“You were riding the red bike,” she told him. She reached over and handed him a small mirror from her bag. “You’re a criminal.”

“A criminal?” he grumbled. “I don’t much feel like a criminal...”

He looked at his reflection, and it was like seeing his own face for the first time. It certainly wasn’t the man in the video—his face was quite different. He had dark, wiry stubble, unusually pale skin, dark and furtive brown eyes, and he looked like someone he wouldn’t want to play cards with. It could have been worse.

“So a criminal huh?” he said, discarding the mirror, and letting it drop the short distance onto the desk. He smiled weakly as she nodded back to him. “At least I’m sort of pretty. Kind of.”

Chapter 5

“So I’m the guy on the red bike?”

He sat on the edge of the desk, pondering all this thoughtfully, and where exactly that revelation had left him. It was not an ideal situation, as his life depended on the people around him not killing him, which did appear to have taken another step towards happening. This really wasn’t turning out to be a good day.

He did what he could to play it down. “He seemed cool, though, I have to say. I mean, the focus was on the cop, but I felt I was really the hero of the piece, and certainly the better rider of the pair. What happened to my bike anyway?”

“No. That’s not how this works.” She stepped a little closer to him, threateningly, her voice cold and stoic. She glared at him as if she really meant it, and he suspected she probably did, all things considered. “I’m not here to answer your questions. You’re here to answer mine, or had you forgotten that?”

Sounding considerably more confident than he felt, he replied, “Well, maybe you should have thought of all that before you injected me with... whatever chemicals you injected me with. It’s not my fault you scrambled my brains with your drugs, is it?”

Suddenly, a face flashed through his mind, the outline of a woman who smiled and then wasn’t smiling. The impression was drowned in darkness almost as soon as it had struggled towards the light.

“I didn’t inject you with any drugs, and your brain was quite thoroughly scrambled long before I got hold of it.” She spoke calmly, her voice carrying just enough threatening overtones to wash away any doubt that it was in his best interests to be listening. “I’m

offering you a choice. You are going to help me answer some questions, I hope you understand that.”

“You seem like too smart a person for me to need to explain that that’s not how choices are supposed to work,” he told her, backing away slightly, working his way further along the desk, and trying quite hard to look relaxed; which he wasn’t at all, and increasingly not so.

“Do I need to spell out the other choice for you?” She fixed him with a glare, a dark and vicious little look that women usually used on him when they wanted him to know that he really shouldn’t have talked to the pretty blonde girl that was flirting with him. Why that thought popped into his otherwise empty head he wasn’t entirely sure, but it didn’t seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. It gave him a deeper and unwelcome insight into just exactly what kind of person he might actually be. Why was he thinking of waitresses?

“Is it death and/or violence?” he surmised. It wasn’t a challenging piece of deductive reasoning.

She nodded slowly back to him. Of course it was, but it was more likely violence, violence, more violence, and then an even more violent death. The distinction was a subtle but important one.

“Then let’s just say that for now, I really want to help.”

“Yes, let’s say that,” she told him evenly, a not-so-subtle reminder that she had the upper hand, and would gladly use it to slap him senseless, or to slap some sense into him, depending on how such things worked.

“So, with that established, I should remind you that I can’t actually remember anything. I’m about as much use as Merv would be as a chess opponent.” He looked over to the hulking, threatening figure that didn’t seem remotely bothered by the inference. “No offence...” he offered.

“None taken,” he growled, his voice a low, horrible thing, the sound of grinding metal, of strong metal ground into even stronger metal.

He looked back to her and shrugged very slightly. “He and I are becoming friends, you know? I’m undermining your authority over him. I’m asserting my natural pack leadership and slowly cementing myself as the alpha male. You could be in trouble here when I finally take over, and he accepts me as his king.”

“I can’t help thinking that you’re just not taking this seriously enough!” she sneered at him aggressively, but by now he was convinced it was just tired façade and he’d seen through it.

“Taking what seriously?” he laughed. “I mean, what the hell is going on here? I don’t know anything useful; all I know is that if I stand up too quickly, my arse will be showing, and that I’m not a cop called Casey. That’s pretty much it—I hope it helps!”

“It doesn’t,” she told him with weary sternness. “That traffic cop named Casey—he’s in a coma. He’s suffering serious internal haemorrhaging, brain damage, and will probably never regain consciousness again, never talk, walk or respond to stimuli.”

“You should see the other guy...” he quipped.

“You are the other guy! And it’s all because of you!”

“Because of me?” He stood up angrily, all his predictions regarding the gown proving suddenly correct. Merv turned away suddenly and flustered like he was quite a lot more embarrassed than anyone could have predicted. “How is that my fault? He was chasing me—remember?—and frankly not doing a very good job of it, if we’re absolutely honest with ourselves.”

“He nearly had you...” she sneered.

“He had 40bhp on me, and the bike was 40 pounds lighter. That’s what he had. Even the crash was his fault. He went into the

back of me while I was sliding into a turn. He didn't react fast enough."

"That's your interpretation?" she almost laughed, but her brain seemed not to allow such frivolous use of her face.

He looked at her with the expression of a man who was taking all this as being utterly ridiculous, rather than the way she had intended it to go.

"In any case, I don't remember a damn thing. You tell me it was me—that I was riding that bike; you tell me I'm a criminal. Where's your proof? Your machine shows you one side of the story. Why don't we wind the video back and see what it actually was that made me such an important target? Let's see my side in all this!" By the time he finished speaking, his voice had become a yell, and his tone was just as accusing as hers.

Merv edged forwards dutifully, his hand twitching close to his side-arm.

"And you can back off too," he said with an angry roar, pointing aggressively at the hulking brute of a man before him. "Back away before you get something you don't like. Nobody thinks you're funny anymore!"

Merv took a reflexive step backwards in surprise, seemingly trying to assess the somewhat changed dynamic of the scenario unfolding before him. He blinked and glanced over at his superior.

Norma looked at Merv, shook her head, and held up her hand for him to back off. "I've got this, Merv!" she told him. Turning back to the man, she told him firmly, "And you can calm down!"

"Calm down?" he grumbled, smirking sarcastically. He unfolded his arms and rubbed his temples wearily. It occurred to him that the pain in his head was finally gone. Small mercies. "You want

me to calm down? Then perhaps you shouldn't wake me up in a world where everything is the complete opposite of calm?"

She blinked slowly, and turned to look at Merv. "I want a coffee, with milk, no sugar." Turning to the man, she said, "What would you like?"

The man looked at Merv, and then back at her. He was somewhat confused. "Coffee. I like coffee, I'm pretty sure. I don't remember how I take it."

"And would you like a coffee now?" she asked quite evenly, in an almost friendly way.

With a combination of surprise and suspicion, he replied, "Yeah, I'll take a coffee, I guess."

"Merv, two coffees. Bring his black, and fetch him some milk and sugar, in case he remembers how he likes it."

Merv hesitated. He looked at the man in the hospital gown, which had already revealed everything worth revealing, and much more besides, and frowned his massive, unwieldy eyebrows. "Sir?" he ventured, gesturing a nod towards the man who, despite the odds, still seemed to be perfectly alive.

"Now, please, Merv," she said more sternly.

He grunted and stalked off angrily, muttering to himself, perhaps something about punching bones so hard that they turned to powder.

"It's just you and I now," she told him, as the doors clicked shut behind the burly agent who was still grumbling as he went all the way out.

"If you're trying to play good cop-bad cop, then that generally requires two different cops, and one of them has to be good. If you're coming onto me sexually, then we have a much more serious problem."

She gave a measured little smile. "There's a lot going on here that you don't yet understand."

"I understand more than you think," he said, brimming with unrealistic self-assurance. He didn't know it yet, and could only suspect that this was a trademark trait of his, among other, even less useful ones. "I understand that there's a lot I don't understand, for instance." There it was. He frowned at himself and shook his head at how stupid that must have sounded.

From her expression it was clear she agreed with him.

"Why don't I just let you talk? It doesn't sound like I'm very good at it." When it came to early identification of what were his trademark traits, he was certainly proving to be in top form. He would eventually discover just how true those words were.

"I need your help," she said in earnest. "I don't need threats, I don't need Merv, I just need you to help me."

"Why should I?" He narrowed his eyes. "I mean, I do appreciate the coffee, I don't want to sound ungrateful about that. I'm pretty sure I really like coffee. I'm not even averse to helping you. It just..." He paused for a thoughtful moment. He sighed and said, "It feels like you're trying to force something that just can't happen. You're trying to squeeze orange juice out of a cabbage." There it was again. Comparing one's own brain to a cabbage rarely comes off well.

"Two reasons," she huffed. "I'm going to show you something. After that, I'll explain everything."

"Everything?" he probed knowingly.

"Well... Some other things."

He nodded, and the merest hint of a smile fluttered on his lips. "I don't seem to have much choice, do I? Not if I want that coffee, which I really do. I get the feeling that I like coffee; and pizza; and

bags filled with unmarked, non-sequential bills, I guess? What criminal doesn't?"

She led him back down the corridor to the room he'd woken up in. He flicked his eyes to her suspiciously as they came up to the door he had recently stepped out of into this nightmare. She walked past it, and then, as they came to a second door, she stopped and turned back to face him. She looked worried, concerned, sad even. It was hard to tell, since she clearly wasn't used to expressing, or even experiencing, deep emotions. She was more like a robot, a traumatised Siamese cat or, perhaps, a chair.

"In here is something I want to show you," she told him with a sigh. "I think it will help to explain why I need your help, and also why you don't really have much choice about it. This will explain why I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get to the truth of all this; why I'm willing to do anything!"

"I dread to think," he said and quietly dreaded to think.

She took a deep breath and entered the numerical access code. "Remember to show the proper respect in here please," she added as the locks clicked open and she pushed forward the door. It opened easily, the hinges squeaking slightly from their age. The lights flickered on, flashing for a moment, and then bathing the room in a soft white light. "Come in, please."

He blinked and just stared. "Is that...?" His words trailed off; he knew exactly what it was.

"That's Casey," she said sadly.

He was lying on a bed, hooked up to a bank of machinery. Monitors showed readings, lights flashed, a glass cylinder behind the bed pumped up and down with a series of tired sighs. Tubes ran into

his nose, cables ran to small round stickers on the side of his head and down across the length of his exposed body.

“OK,” he said, “I know this is probably a stupid question, but why have you got a motorcycle cop in a secret room in a secret government base full of broken things? Are you just collecting broken things?” He felt that this was a perfectly reasonable question, and maybe the only perfectly reasonable question under the circumstances.

“He suffered significant injuries,” she explained, more sadly than before.

He looked up at her, as she stood over the beaten, damaged man lying helplessly on the bed.

“There was nothing more they could do for him at the hospital, nothing more they could do for either of you. His brain has suffered a serious injury; his motor-control centre suffered internal bleeding. He’s paralysed. He’ll never regain consciousness.”

“Hold on... Either of us?” He frowned. That phrase didn’t sit particularly well. It didn’t sit particularly well at all.

She turned to look at him, took a deep breath and sighed heavily. “The technology I have at my disposal is not insignificant. I was able to repair your bodies quite easily, but the brain... That’s far more difficult. I did what I could, but there are limits.”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” He somehow knew he didn’t want to hear the answer.

“You’re dead,” she told him.

Suddenly, the battered remains of the man in front of him weren’t fascinating anymore. Something else had caught the entirety of his interest. A cold chill ran up his spine and he felt himself shudder. “Sorry...” he spluttered. “It’s a bit noisy in here. It sounded to me like you just said...”

“You’re dead!” she told him again, without the merest suggestion that she was exaggerating or telling anything less than the entire, total and absolute truth. “You were killed in the accident.”

“I don’t... feel...” he began awkwardly, stammering the words, as his brain reeled from the shock—his apparently dead brain. There was simply no way to finish the sentence he’d begun, and have it make any kind of sense at all, even if he was good at structuring sentences. He felt as if a cold hand with sharp claws was tracing up his spine, tearing raggedly at his exposed flesh. His head swam, sweat prickled at his brow and he felt that his strength was slowly ebbing away. “Hang on, I’m not dead!”

“You were declared legally brain-dead—your head injuries were so severe that you had no chance of ever recovering,” she explained, rather making him feel even more unsettled. “Casey was even worse off, of course. Even I can’t help him.”

He looked back at the cop, and then back to her. He frowned, trying very hard to remain calm. It wasn’t easy. “You’ll have to excuse me. I’m finding it difficult to focus on his problems right now. In fact I’m struggling to focus on anything other than the sad story of my own untimely demise.”

She covered her mouth with her hand. Whatever she was about to say, she really didn’t want to say it, like the very thought of it was difficult for her; and she didn’t seem the sort to find any great difficulty in controlling her emotions.

“I saved you,” she explained softly. “I brought you back so you could help me.”

“How?” he said, his voice not much more than a whisper.

“I injected experimental nano-technology into your brain. The same technology easily repaired your body, bringing you right back to the peak of health, but the human brain is still such a mystery to

us. My technology was able to repair the damage, and it stabilised your condition, but that's probably why you're having so much trouble remembering anything. It will come back as your brain is repaired—it will probably be better than new, actually.”

“Nano-technology?” he grimaced. The thought of anything inside his brain that wasn't originally part of it was slightly disconcerting—so slightly disconcerting in fact that he strongly suspected that he was going to throw up.

“It is only experimental technology,” she continued to explain grimly.

“Which means?”

“It isn't quite stable. It's not stable enough to recover Casey, for instance. It's having no effect on him, or at least not enough of an effect to make a difference to his condition.”

“So I have unstable technology sloshing around in my skull. That can't be good.” He knew it wasn't good. Her face had the expression of a person delivering bad news, and not bad news like something of no particular importance arriving a little late: this was more like something of incredible importance being lost forever after crashing headlong into a solid rock surface and exploding into a fiery ball of incredibly intense burning flames.

“It's not self-sustaining,” she told him hesitantly. “We will need to charge your brain up every 12 hours as long as you want to stay alive.”

“Charge my brain up?” he repeated with a sigh. “Well, that doesn't sound too bad...” he added with a bold overabundance of self-assurance.

“If we don't, you'll slip into a coma and die,” she added.

“I figured that much was implied...”

“But the technology will probably escape to safety and activate its emergency low-power mode long before that happens,” she continued further. “It will keep you conscious for up to three, maybe four weeks. During that time, your brain and body will shut down completely, probably within hours, and you’ll begin to decompose. You will be fully aware of this happening, and experience every single agonising bite as your cells are slowly devoured by bacteria. If we have your body cremated, it will feel no different to being burned alive, other than that you will still be fully conscious at the end of it—at least until the remaining charge runs out. And believe me, those three, maybe four weeks are going to go by very, very slowly.”

“Suddenly, helping out with your inquiries seems very much more the kind of thing I’d be very happy to do.” He grimaced. “So this is how the real threat works? I help you, or my half-metal brain runs out of my nose while I get to watch and stay awake long enough to fully enjoy the experience?”

“More than long enough.” She looked impressed at his grasp of the situation. “And that’s rather accurately put too. Without charging, you’ll most likely suffer an aneurysm severe enough to completely liquefy whatever is left of your organic brain.”

“I suspect I’ve drunk many things that could liquefy part of my brain—perhaps the entire thing—and still lived to discuss the matter.”

Much as he tried to make light of it, the sheer unpleasantness of all this was weighing pretty heavily on him now. He cringed openly and looked quite pale. This wasn’t sitting well with him at all, fairly unsurprisingly.

“Of course, if you’re satisfactorily useful, I can just give the command for the technology to deactivate itself, effectively

switching out the lights instantly and permanently. I'll even let you press the button."

After a lengthy pause, he said, "OK. I'll help you. You charge up my brain every 12 hours, and in return, I'll help you however I can." His voice was weak, hollow and he spoke without enthusiasm. He was wearily resigned to his fate; she held all the cards now, and he knew when he'd been defeated.

"You understand this isn't personal," she said, rather surprising him. "I don't directly blame you for any of this."

"Why would you?"

"I have to know what happened. I have to know the truth of all this."

Something was clearly troubling her. There was more to all this than she had told him. She worked for the government, so that had never been in doubt.

"Why is this so important to you? Why is it so important that you resurrect the drooling vegetable remains of a motorcyclist who rides a little too fast?" He gestured to the unconscious body before them. "Why is this man so important?"

She looked at him with a pair of sad eyes. There was a long pause, and then finally she said softly, "Casey is my son."

Chapter 6

“So when you told me that it wasn’t personal, what you actually meant was that...”

“...It’s very personal indeed,” she said, finishing his sentence.

That much at least made sense. He actually felt a little guilty for all the sarcastic quips and unhelpful remarks he’d been making the whole time, though he suspected they were as unlikely to lessen in quantity as they were to increase in quality. For now, though, he could think of nothing funny to say.

“I’m sorry about your son!” he eventually said with some reluctance, his eyes staring straight ahead at nothing in particular, and his head reflexively shaking at the injustice she must be feeling.

Norma nodded her head, as her lips formed a slight smile as a momentary acknowledgement of the sentiment. Her eyes fixed on him for a moment quickly, and then moved away, even quicker.

Snapping back to form, he picked up the coffee that Merv had handed him, and took a swig. He took a sharp intake of breath in surprise. “It’s still hot!”

“We were only gone a few minutes, and Merv never does anything very quickly,” she shrugged at him. “He normally needs orders signed in triplicate and a letter from his mother before he does anything outside of his remit.”

He looked over at Merv, who once again was standing guard over a tower of junk that nobody in their right mind would steal. “And what exactly is his remit? What exactly could the function of a gigantic blob of misshapen gristle be, in the grand scheme of things?”

“He protects things,” she said without really focusing properly on anything beyond her work. She was more interested in the bits

hanging out of the back of the main console for the time being. “He sometimes breaks things that other people are protecting. That probably takes him right up to his limits, I’d imagine; perhaps beyond, even?”

He couldn’t help but agree. “Merv, this coffee is pretty good, still nice and hot. Just how I presume I like it. How long were you standing there with it?”

Merv glanced to the pair of them, his tiny eyes flashing one way then the other. Norma also seemed to be waiting for an answer. “I don’t know,” he grumbled with a voice that could vibrate glass and give quite tolerant people headaches. “I couldn’t look at my watch without spilling the coffee on the table.”

They looked at one another for a moment, sharing a frown, a moment of mutual wonder.

“But there was a table,” she said to him, her brain being just too high up to look this far down. “I mean, you could have just put them on the table, right?”

Merv shrugged his ridiculously huge shoulders. They seemed so large that the effort of doing so probably required the consumption of at least half of a cow.

“And Merv, there is spilled coffee on the table,” the man noted curiously.

Merv shrugged again, thus sentencing an entire cow to death. “I had to check my watch.”

“I, for one, am sorry I asked,” she said, returning her attention to the large mess of cables.

“So... Black coffee,” he nodded to himself. “No milk, no sugar. I finally know something about myself. I mean, a name would be good, but at least we’re getting to the important stuff.”

“Yeah, I never could find out your name.” She looked up from her work, frowning and looking rather pointedly frustrated.

“You’re kidding?” He looked sarcastically shocked. “I wasn’t carrying a driving licence? That’s got to be a felony, hasn’t it? Do I strike you as the sort of person who would wilfully commit illegal acts?”

She glared at him for a moment. “Why don’t we ask my son, if he ever regains the ability to breathe without the help of a machine?”

He looked down and huffed, suddenly regretting his glibness. “I would never have wanted to hurt anyone,” he said apologetically.

“We don’t know that—we don’t know anything about you! Hurting people could be your favourite pastime, for all we know.” The facts were hard to contend.

“Maybe your technology has changed me in some way?” he suggested, having no idea what he was talking about. Somehow, the coffee inspired him. “I could literally be a different person now.”

“Unlikely,” she noted, concentrating more of her energy on the cables which seemed anything but fascinating to his untrained eye. “The technology is pretty crude really.”

“Crude, like in the way that my brain now needs charging every 12 hours like an old mobile phone?”

“Yes. Exactly like that.” She looked up thoughtfully, screwing up her face as she quickly and inaccurately worked things out in her head. “The nano-tech isn’t sophisticated enough to restructure personality traits, I don’t think. It’s mostly going to focus on the lizard-brain, repairing your motor-functions, co-ordination, that kind of thing.”

“So I’m still just me, but with more memory, and extra lizard?”

She nodded. He seemed to have hit the nail on the head, which was largely the reason for the predicament he found himself in.

“Casey has taken more widespread cranial damage,” she said dryly, looking as though such things concerned her about as much as her last parking ticket. “He’s got severe tissue damage to his upper cerebrum. He appears to have had a tear there.”

“So what exactly are you doing in there?” he said finally, more hoping to distract the conversation from his own guilt than to actually get an answer to his question.

“Me?” she looked up briefly.

He gestured to Merv who never did anything much beyond stand around looking menacing and breathing; usually through his mouth. “Yes, of course you! Who else?”

“I’m trying to fix it,” she said with a glower and pointed into the guts of the machine with a screwdriver. “It doesn’t work very well.”

“Well, it’s old. Really old.” He sipped on the coffee—it was really rather good. It was full-flavoured, strong, sharp and bitter. If it had been a woman it would have been... “Norma?” he said suddenly. “When did you build all this stuff?”

She looked up, her face taking on a stony severity. “I didn’t build this,” she snapped, snappily. “This was all built 30 years ago. I was a child. How old did you think I was?”

“I dunno.” He shrugged and looked away. He muttered under his breath, “Too old for me, I know that.”

“This was built by Doctor Henry Swaggert.” She returned her interest back to the cable, but it clearly had no interest in her. She sighed. “He was a certifiable genius. He conceived the project some forty years back. It took years to bring the technology together to make all this a reality.”

He looked around the dusty hall. “He must have been very proud.”

“He vanished about a decade ago. Just one day... gone!” There was a hint of regret to her voice; more than that, perhaps. “I was working under him. I was developing my nano-tech, originally designed to help people like you with debilitating brain injuries.”

“I’d like to thank you on behalf of every person who drives into walls at high speed while wearing inferior headgear.”

She glanced up at him beneath her eyebrow. “Not all of the people I was hoping to help were idiots who brought it all on themselves,” she said. “I was hoping to help people with neurological impairment due to diseases. One such condition killed my father.”

“I see...”

“I couldn’t get funding to pursue my work, but Henry heard about it, saw the potential and sought me out. He thought the nano-tech might be the ideal basis for high speed computers. You see, nanobites are tiny robots that are so small that they’re invisible to the naked eye. Mine aren’t robots in the literal sense—they’re actually a cluster of parts magnetically attracted to each other, which are controlled through three flat magnetic wave fields which can be varied in intensity and rotated. The parts communicate to one another with tiny high-frequency pulses. Theoretically, so long as the parts maintain their charge, they can carry out complex programs indefinitely.”

He stared, blinked once, and just carried on staring. “I heard and understood the word naked.”

She sighed to herself and continued, “Henry told me about the Hawk-Eye project, and that he was already well into working on the upgrade—Hawk-eye level-2—and even the development of a

theoretical third wave. He really was a great man, generations ahead of his time.”

“And during your negotiations, perhaps while you were working under him, did you have an unhindered view of the ceiling?” he asked slyly.

She glared at him, narrowing her eyes. “Watch yourself,” she told him.

He grinned back at her knowingly. “Just asking.”

“He happened to be a great man. The Hawk-Eye project was his dream. It could watch everything, know everything. No criminal would ever go unpunished, no murder would remain unsolved. There would never be another victim without a voice.”

“No secret left unknown...” He looked at her accusingly. He understood exactly what she meant.

“He would never have left his technology open to abuse,” she scowled, holding up a handful of the discarded remains of his system. “He worked for the betterment of all mankind. The project was to look over us, a benign force for justice, and a power for the greater good.”

“Sure it was.” He wasn’t convinced by any means and wasn’t shy about voicing his opinion. “And with all this money spent, and with the second project well under way, you still can’t even tell me my name.”

■ FEED SRC:DI93541675 UNSEC CC

Captain Bertoli stepped under a yellow and black tape, pulling it up over his head as he stooped below. Police officers were dotted around the scene; dark blue uniforms swamped the streets, taking witness names, reviewing statements. He patted his golden badge, firmly secured to his belt, and walked ahead, confident that everyone would

know his face in any case. Even were it not, he had the confident swagger of authority that identified him just as well as his shield.

“Detective Lucas!” he called out, making out the unmistakable shape of his colleague some way off.

The detective looked up from his waxed-paper cup of cheap coffee. He had a neatly trimmed beard, was overweight, and his skin was pale, dark around the eyes, and red around the face. He wasn’t the picture of health: he smoked, he ate red meat, he drank too much, and he gambled. You didn’t need to be a detective to work all that out when you looked at him: he wore it like a badge of honour.

Despite everything that he was, or wasn’t, he did happen to be Bertoli’s daughter’s Godfather, an honour bestowed upon him in greener times when both men were younger, lighter, and had some misplaced optimism left for the world. The world had seen to it that such things were thoroughly stamped right of them in a way that would never allow such childish concepts as hope to ever return.

“Captain!” He smiled thinly, and gave him a cursory nod. The effort he made was barely half what was required to draw his attention from the coffee in his hand. He rarely smiled any other way than thinly, and always without emotional warmth. In the last decade he had laughed cheerfully only twice; once was at his divorce settlement, and the other was when he was cleared of all wrong-doings after she had been hit and killed by a mysterious black car.

People were free to talk; people were free to whisper and draw their own conclusions. It hadn’t bothered him in the slightest and, after all, who had investigated this terrible incident? He’d often asked that very question after downing most of a bottle of scotch and there were rumours that more laughing was sometimes noted.

“Internal Affairs...” Bertoli said back to him. “Nice to see you out of your office during daylight hours. Shouldn’t your skin be on fire from exposure?”

“It’s just my colon on fire these days,” he said wearily, with a hint that he wasn’t being entirely sarcastic about it. “The doctor said I had to give up red meat, spicy food, alcohol...” he smiled even more thinly, “Let’s just say it was a long list, and I celebrated with a Mexican steak and extra Tequila.”

The Captain huffed knowingly and the corners of his mouth traced upwards, just the tiniest bit. “I have an ulcer. What do I care? I should have been dead years ago.”

“I’m head of internal affairs now,” Lucas began, sounding quite serious about it. “I can arrange to make that happen for you, you know? Just sign over ten per cent of the insurance and I’ll make sure it’s quick. Twenty per cent and I’ll make sure it’s painless. If you sign over thirty per cent, I’ll make sure it’s actually quick and really painless.

“You don’t want to know what I’ll do for fifty per cent.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. Staying alive is the last way I have of torturing my wife. Every day I come home at night is a living hell for her!” the Captain told him wryly.

“Ah!” He nodded knowingly. “It’s a shame I missed out on the long-term benefits of the beautiful sanctity of marriage.”

“They say everyone has a soul-mate out there somewhere!” he told him sternly. “Yours is probably feeling pretty damn lucky for dodging that bullet, right about now.” He looked him up and down, a friendly sneer on his unfriendly face.

They glared at one another for a moment. Lucas smiled incredibly thinly and nodded in agreement. “It’s good to see you, Eric.”

“And you, Geoff,” he smiled. The Captain stared at the crime scene, gazing fixedly at the tangled, charred mess before him. “But it’s not good news we’re looking at here, is it?”

Fire had engulfed the street. The twisted wreckage of something had hit the wall, destroying that something totally. Paramedics were standing by, but it was quite clear that they had arrived much too late to help anyone. Already, officers in white overalls were picking over the remains and there was an atmosphere of quiet dread.

“It’s never good news,” he said grimly. He sighed and forced a thin, fake smile over his lips and said, “That is kind of the point of our jobs, though, right?”

“What am I looking at?” said the Captain as he tried to take it all in, to make sense of the mess in front of him. “More to the point, why aren’t I looking at pictures of it in a report? Why did you call me here personally? What’s the point of all this, Geoff?”

“This report isn’t going to leave my office,” he frowned, and he looked back at him. “You had to see it yourself. I had to show you.”

He took a deep breath. He was too old for this—too old and too tired. “Show me what?”

He handed him a folder and pointed to the twisted remains. “That there is the wreckage of a police EBR 1190 motorcycle. I know you can’t tell, but that’s because it hit that wall so fast that we’re having to collect the remains up with a dustpan and broom.”

He nodded and sighed. “One of the new police high-speed pursuit motorcycles. They’ve turned out to be a brilliant idea, haven’t they?”

Lucas nodded in agreement. “What you’re looking at is the fourth one that we’ve lost in under three months. One rider was shot

down three weeks ago as he stepped out of a diner. His partner was using the restroom. We had no witnesses, no evidence, no motive. Now this.”

“Casey March’s crash wasn’t in dispute, was it?”

Lucas agreed with a nod. He sighed to himself and said, “No, but the other one we lost was suspicious, too. The rider was killed by a hit-and-run. Again, no evidence, and all my requests for additional information have hit dead-ends. Evidence is lost, stupid mistakes have been made by seasoned investigators. None of this adds up.”

Bertoli grunted. “And now this?”

“Mechanical failure, they’re calling it. Preliminary reports say a fire broke out in the on-board computer.” He sniffed and shook his head dismissively. He clearly thought that such things were ridiculous. “Seems a bit odd to me. That system has been in service for 7 years without a reported fault.” He took back the folder, which the Captain had yet to open. “This was Tom Banks—I think you know who his partner was.”

“What’s going on, Geoff?” he said finally.

“Exactly!” he nodded. “That’s a damn good question, isn’t it?”

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“It worked!” Norma looked more surprised than he did.

“I set it to find a recent mention of my son’s name. That’s what it managed to extrapolate.” She smiled, and it looked like she clearly didn’t do it very often, or had any particular talent for it.

“You’re spying on a police captain and the head of internal affairs? Next time you call me a criminal, I am going to remind you of this,” the man told her.

She looked away thoughtfully. “He was right about that one last question. What is going on?”

“You know what we need?” He looked at her, leaning forward so that his robe fell open at the back, forcing Merv to grumble noisily and look away. His expression was serious, he had something.

“What?” she frowned, waiting expectantly.

“Merv!” he shouted. “We need coffee—make mine without milk or sugar.”

Chapter 7

“I have to say I’m somewhat confused.”

“Go on...” she prompted.

“This shiny new, massive, wall-mounted HD panel is much better than the old rabbit ear TV set—no argument there—but the picture quality actually looks worse, if anything. Can’t we get the feed in 4K?”

“No,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’m having a hard enough job as it is, just getting the feed into the panel at all. You know they don’t ship out new televisions with analogue tuners anymore...”

The man shrugged, not much caring to keep up with the technical side of things. It seemed he was the kind of person who was more preoccupied with results, even if the results caused catastrophic brain injuries.

“Right now, it’s just connected to a camcorder pointed at the other TV set. If I can find an old VCR, though, I should be able to run the feeds through that—that’ll improve the picture quality slightly. We’ll be able to watch more than one feed simultaneously, and from a little bit further away.” She seemed somewhat more pleased by her ambition and achievement than perhaps the result warranted.

“A keen detective like you, I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” said the man. He suddenly became acutely aware that Merv was standing in his immediate proximity, a steaming mug in one hand, and a regular mug in the other, with notably less steam.

“Did you see him come in?” he said, aiming the question at Norma. He turned back to the insanely gigantic brute of a man who was now functioning in the capacity of a waiter. “How long have you

been standing there, Merv? You move like a ghost— the ghost of an African bull-elephant, but still...”

Merv ignored him. “Coffee’s ready. Milk in yours, Ma’am, Sir.” He turned his attention to the very poorly-half-undressed man before him, and continued, “The last of the milk went in hers, so I made yours without cream instead.”

Norma looked up for a moment, her head cocked to one side inquisitively. “Merv, that was either an incredibly stupid thing to say, or a phenomenally profound statement on the nature of choice. I just can't decide which it is...” With a dismissive shrug, she added, “I guess we'll never know.”

“Hold up,” said the man. “We have cream?”

“We do now—I had to pop to the store and get some.”

“I stand corrected...” said Norma with a shrug, returning her attention to a pile of coloured cables, none of which appeared to be the magic piece of wire that would solve all her problems.

“I think I’d quite like some cream, now I know that’s an option.”

“I’m not remaking it again,” said Merv, his voice gravelly and severe.

“No, no, you’d just need to... What? What do you mean, again?” he grumbled, rubbing his temples in exasperation.

“Do try to keep up,” said Norma, who was now shaking her head in annoyance. “He obviously threw the first cup away when he realised there was no milk. That’s why yours is fresh and steaming hot, and mine tastes like it’s been sat on the counter for 25 minutes.”

“That just raises more questions about the pair of you!” he said. “But, at least it proves that you do have some detective skills then.”

Norma looked insulted. “What exactly are you implying?”

He ignored her, instead turning his attention to the medical gown he'd been forced to wear. "Look, do you think I might get some clothes to wear at some point? Anything is fine—what did I arrive in?"

"Critical condition with a life expectancy of minus 30 hours," she said with a shrug. "You were expected to leave in a heavy polythene bag. I'm sure if you ask Merv nicely, he'll be able to accommodate you."

"You're really spoiling me," he said with a very misplaced smile. "I'm guessing that you don't get a lot of guests here?"

She sighed at him and waved a screwdriver around, even though there didn't seem to be any screws that needed screwing. "I don't think Merv has anything in your size anyway."

"Can't you send him out for something? I'm really cold, and all my best bits are getting a sneak preview. It just doesn't seem decent." He looked behind him. "Merv is getting excited now. I don't think anyone wants that."

"Somehow, I don't get the impression that Merv is interested in men," she mocked. "Do you?"

"I don't know!" he said with a shrug. "Have you ever asked him?"

Without waiting for an answer, which probably wouldn't have been forthcoming, he turned and yelled, "Hey, Merv! Are you gay?"

Merv narrowed his eyes, frowned, and tutted to himself. He opened his mouth and the horrible, grating sound reverberated from the back of his throat, "Yes."

"What?" he said, startled. "What, really?"

"Yes," he rumbled again. "I'm gay."

He looked at Norma in surprise, as she looked back at him in total shock. They both raised their eyebrows at one another, and then slowly looked away.

“So... Merv is gay!” she said softly. “Which is fine.”

He nodded. “It’s always the quiet ones you have to watch, isn’t it?”

“Which makes you safe, since you never seem to stop talking,” she joked, before suddenly covering her mouth, realising that it was probably offensive, or something.

“So then, why can’t he go out and buy me some clothes, if I’m so safe?”

She shook her head and frowned, looking away. “What did you mean a minute ago?”

“What did I mean by what, when?” he shrugged. “It’s really not worth listening to me—my brain’s half clockwork, and will run out of my nose if I don’t plug it in twice a day. The only thing I seem to know is that I like coffee, and that cream sounds nice.

“I’m not a hugely useful resource at the moment. I’m a bit like Merv when there’s nobody to punch!”

She looked at him with an unreadable, almost blank expression. “There’s you!” she reminded him.

“Fair enough!” he admitted.

“I’ll do you a trade,” she told him, the left corner of her mouth tracing upwards, her brow doing the opposite. She looked almost human with an actual expression on her face. “I’ll trade you some boxer shorts and a pair of socks, if you explain what you were implying when you commented on my detective skills.”

He grinned and sipped at his coffee. “Show me the underwear first, then we’ll trade.”

She gestured to her personal assistant, who wasn't thrilled at being her personal assistant. "Merv, go find him some clothes. Nothing fancy."

He didn't argue, debate, or even grumble this time. He just turned and lumbered off, his feet crashing against the concrete floor like an angry giant stomping a medieval village.

"And if you happen upon a VCR anywhere, bring that too," she shouted after him.

Once he was out of earshot, the man said, "So Merv's gay as well? Are you sure he wasn't only included because of diversity?"

"Careful—that's probably racist, or something," Norma retorted with some degree of uncertainty.

"It's nice to know I'm a prisoner of an equal-opportunities oppressor of personal freedom," he said cheerfully. "Now, I've kept up my side of the bargain. Are you going to tell me what you meant?"

"Well, all you're doing is looking for your son's name. We need to look into all the other aspects of this if we want to find out what's happening here—it's bigger than just one man. If someone really is trying to kill all the high-speed police motorcyclists, we need to see the bigger picture."

"That wasn't even worth a sock," she sneered at him.

"What's this all about anyway?" He took another sip of coffee, pondering the matter carefully. He peered at her, his expression difficult to read. "I mean, OK, he's your son. I get that. If I had a son, I'm sure I'd want to help him all I could too. What kind of people wouldn't help their own family?"

"Your point being?"

"Well, something about him must be incredibly important to warrant a government investigation, right?" he said thoughtfully.

“How did you manage to arrange all this? How did you get an agency to back you on a mission of this kind?”

She looked away and began fiddling with the cables again. It seemed to be her way of avoiding his direct gaze.

“Wait...” he said with a knowing smirk. He looked around; they were all alone. Still, he lowered his voice and said, “You’re off the reservation, aren’t you! This isn’t a sanctioned mission at all? Does your lumbering side-kick even know that?”

She glared at him angrily, but there was a little fear in her eyes. She looked around, huffing to herself.

“So that’s it...” He stopped smirking when he realised the potential ramifications, how it negatively affected him and the chances of his brain liquefying in the very near future.

“This is a sanctioned mission,” she told him finally. She tried to sound stern and confident, but she was flustered, uneasy, and it wasn’t difficult to spot. He spotted it accordingly, and without difficulty. “It just requires a rather charitable interpretation of my officially sanctioned mandate.”

He sipped again at his coffee. “I’m all ears.”

“I’m not actually a field agent,” she admitted, her eyes averted to the ground as if admitting some horrible truth to some horrible person who was about to do horrible things to her.

“If that was a secret, it was a terrible one,” he said supportively.

“I’m technically an engineer,” she admitted guiltily. “Well, a computer-science research project manager. Officially, I’m salvaging the remains of the Hawk-Eye. I’m meant to assess the project and see if any of the technology is still viable.”

He looked around. “Well, I could have done that. It’s junk! There, I just saved the tax-payers millions of dollars. You will be invoiced in due course.”

“My secondary mission parameter was to locate Doctor Henry Swagerty,” she continued. “He went missing under mysterious circumstances. It’s widely believed he was abducted by a foreign interest, although I personally believe he just wanted to escape the whole business—I think he was disillusioned with the entire thing. If I can find evidence of where he is or what happened to him, then we might still have a chance to find him.”

“But instead, you began an investigation into your son’s motorcycle accident?” He looked oddly concerned. “Don’t you think that’s rather a large diversion of resources? I mean, someone is bound to notice; the metallic slime you put in my head alone has to be worth millions.”

“Billions, in research terms,” she admitted with a shrug. “But it’s from my own, miscellaneous project stock—they’ll never tie the budget back to that. In real terms, the treatment probably cost no more than \$100,000.”

“Personally, that seems like a bargain,” he quipped, but he couldn’t help but feel nervous. Sooner or later, the government might decide they want it back.

“But there is a connection!” she said, holding up a finger as a grand gesture of triumph. It was accompanied by a smile—a measured smile to be sure, but still a glowing, iridescent sign that some kind of human spirit was alive and well inside there somewhere.

“Go on?”

“Well, the Hawk-Eye isn’t working very well yet—not that it ever really did, from what I hear. It was abandoned and forcibly

forgotten around 30 years ago, after all. Nobody was ever going to just stumble upon it. Henry was a genius—he hid the budget and location for this project exceptionally well. It took nearly a month just to find it, and I am extremely clever.”

“That must have complicated his daily commute.”

She huffed and looked away; she was getting quite used to ignoring him by now. “I managed to get some of it working straight away. The capabilities are way beyond what he officially claimed. I started looking for clues in the system as to what might have happened to him. I searched his name and found three possible connections.”

“I’m interested...”

“The first was a physics teacher living in Idaho who shared his name. The second was an ice-cream shop in Missouri that specialises in savoury flavours.”

“Savoury ice-cream?” he said, spitting out a mouthful of coffee in surprise. “We’re really a long way down the rabbit-hole here, aren’t we?”

She nodded, not that the cultural reference meant very much to her. “The third one was more interesting. Would you like to see the video?”

“Not really.”

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Police Commissioner Robert Blake had a very nice office. If you were to step into it, you’d be forgiven for thinking you were entering a room in the head office of a car dealership, possibly an executive retreat of a high ranking official who had made indecent amount of money selling prescription medication that didn’t work. It was overly tidy, as offices of people who did very little work usually were.

He sat in a gigantic leather seat in front of a carved wooden desk that was almost, but not completely, utterly tasteless. Behind him were pictures in frames of him shaking hands with important people who were smiling, but clearly not enjoying it; many gave the impression that they had washed their hands afterwards. On his wall was a series of motivational posters incorporating images of eagles soaring over mountain-scapes, a team of rowers on a misty river, a man standing alone in a desert, and a dog looking a bit sad. The accompanying platitudes were less motivating than the images warranted.

He looked angry. He wasn't, but he looked it. In fact, he was largely ambivalent about the whole thing. What thing it was that he was largely ambivalent about was another matter entirely, and as it didn't have a direct bearing on his lunch, he really had no interest in that matter either, since he didn't really consider any of this to be his actual job.

Such matters, as whatever these actually were, were easily delegated downwards.

His real role was that of police liaison to people with a vested interest. He ran it for them, made sure their needs were met, as they also did for him. The actual daily politics of the office was left to the auspices of more proficient and less highly-paid people.

The Captain, on the other hand, looked like he was under a considerable amount of stress. He wasn't, but he looked it. In fact, he was so incredibly, unbelievably, utterly and completely stressed that his doctor told him that there was a very real possibility that his heart would explode. He thought it was best to assume he was joking, even though the pains in his chest suggested otherwise.

“I’d like to know what your department is doing to address the situation,” said the Commissioner, with some more of his poorly concealed ambivalence.

He was a politician, not a police officer. He had never held a gun in his life; he had never shot an unarmed suspect, never harassed a motorist, and had never even eaten a doughnut when he should have been working. The horrible, vile truth of the matter was, that he didn’t even like doughnuts. He sometimes wondered if real police officers could tell.

“My department is doing everything it can,” said the Captain, clearly not quite entirely sure which specific situation he was meant to be addressing. He frowned to himself quite severely.

“The Mayor is mad!” He shrugged and shook his head, tutting. He sighed to himself—the Mayor was always mad about something, and had something of a penchant for creating the very problems he was mad about. “He wants results!” The Mayor always wanted results, and had something of a penchant for creating the very lack of results that he was angry about there being a lack of.

“He cut our budget seventeen times last year!” Captain Bertoli grumbled weakly. “What does he want from us?”

“He wants results!” the Commissioner repeated, actually sounding genuinely quite angry for once. Why wasn’t this understood, he wondered? Did he have to explain everything?

The Captain still didn’t seem to know quite exactly what it was they were actually talking about. He’d been summoned to the office for a weekly session of being moaned at by a man who largely had no idea what he was talking about and didn’t seem to care about anything beyond charity lunches.

“Where exactly would you like us to focus our attention? I mean specifically, Sir? If you had to pick a priority, what would it

be?” he asked. He managed to make it sound polite although the connotation was that it was anything but.

“Drugs!” he said if such things were entirely self-evident. “We are fighting a war on drugs, are we not?”

“I think drugs officially won that war back in the late 1980s,” the Captain huffed indignantly.

The Commissioner frowned, and looked at one of only two reports on his desk. He seemed confused. “Well, according to this, the war continues to rage strongly,” he grumbled moodily, sounding a little unsure of himself.

The Captain rolled his eyes and grumbled something to himself about needing a stiff drink and a cigarette. He didn’t even smoke. Or drink.

Unabated by such trivialities as facts, the Commissioner continued, “I’ve seen some worrying reports about this new designer drug on the streets of my city. What are we doing about it?”

It was the Captain’s turn to sound angry. “There’s no new designer drug on the streets. I’ve seen the reports—there’s no evidence that it even exists.”

He shuffled through the reports. “Big Bad Wolf.”

The Captain nodded—he’d heard of it, of course. Every officer in the city had heard the rumours. “We’ve investigated it and found nothing to suggest that it’s real. There are no witnesses to it being sold, no informants willing to tell us anything, no factories, no known suppliers... Until we find some evidence—any at all—it’s just an unsubstantiated rumour. It’s an urban fantasy.”

“The Mayor does not share your optimistic appraisal of the situation.” The Commissioner had a wry grin, that of a small man with more power than he could handle, but who was yet to realise it.

The Captain looked him up and down. His expression betrayed that he resented him; he loathed him. He was a career politician—he told powerful people what they wanted to hear, he had connections, old family-money, a changed surname, and a face that fitted in. He was born into this role regardless of any ability he may or may not have. He wouldn't have survived the first week at the police academy, even if he really loved doughnuts.

It was widely suspected that he didn't.

"These sorts of rumours get out from time to time," he sighed, trying to explain to a man whose mind was already made up. "Half the time it's a PR stunt. Someone dyes some crystal-meth blue, and they put word out that some new designer drug is hitting the streets. Works every time. It may come as a surprise to you, but drug dealers and their customers aren't usually the most reliable source of information."

The Commissioner frowned, suddenly offended and he began fuming to himself in thin-lipped arrogance. "I don't appreciate sarcasm, Bertoli."

"I apologise," he said, with an absolute absence of sincerity.

"Well, it's your lucky day, Captain," he said with a fairly large smile. He held up a second confidential report proudly. "Your budget just got increased."

Bertoli could have certainly used some luck, but he couldn't have expected it to be good, especially while he was sitting in this office. "How so, Sir?" he said suspiciously.

"The Mayor has authorised some new expenditure, so your budget has been extended. It's easily enough to cover some much needed new technology."

"Sir?" He reached out for the report, frowning to himself. His eyes flashed over the key points, before he looked up, frowning and

looking deeply concerned. He looked concerned, and deeply so. “What is this? New high-speed motorcycles with surveillance equipment, armoured cars, hollow-point munitions, spy-drones. This is military technology—it doesn’t belong on the city streets.”

“Drugs don’t belong on the city streets either, Bertoli,” he told him sternly. “If you’d done a better job, we wouldn’t need this equipment.”

The Captain glared back at him, scowling angrily.

“This new equipment and technology will help us track this new menace to our city. It will help to put us at the cutting edge in the war on drugs, and the fight against terrorist threats,” he told him smugly. “This is years out of date, we should have had it decades ago.”

“Right?” he grumbled. “If you say so, Sir!”

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“So what did that prove?” He really had no idea. It was nice to have something new to have no idea about for him to add to the pile.

Norma grunted and shook her head at him. “Well, the Mayor authorised the use of Hawk-Eye-related technology. That connected back to Henry.”

“30 year old technology!” he reminded her. “Does that help us now? How does that have any bearing on those of us who live in the real world?”

“Well, the real cutting edge of science is usually at least 50-60 years ahead of what the public knows about. It’s not unusual for classified tech to become declassified decades later and find its way into the mainstream,” she explained absently.

“Really?” He had some trouble with the whole idea of this, but let her carry on.

“So, once upon a time, way back in the annals of history, Henry invented all this cutting edge spy equipment?” he said, just recapping the story so far. “And now, decades later, it’s available on the internet, with a bulk discount, after being manufactured in China to a dramatically appalling standard. I don’t see the connection, if I’m absolutely honest.”

“Hawk-Eye still isn’t running at full capacity,” she shrugged. “But the system managed to find a link to Henry. I don’t know what yet. Maybe he is still alive somewhere? Maybe he’s back in the city? Maybe he’s got something to do with the Mayor? Maybe he’s refined the Hawk-Eye technology into something usable? Maybe that’s what he was doing all this time?”

“That’s not much to go on,” he told her.

She sighed, “Well I’ve got it scanning for him, but it seems like he set the system up to conceal all traces of himself. He was a genius, and he knew the computer better than anyone, since he built it himself. On top of that, the computer doesn’t think the way we do, it moves in mysterious ways.”

“And all I was doing was worrying about covering my own arse.”

Chapter 8

Merv's boxer shorts weren't a terribly good fit but, like Merv himself, they were better than nothing.

The VCR he'd found under a pile of laserdiscs was a perfect fit though. Norma set about working on the input parameters of the system, making a big fuss about how complex such things were and how anyone without a degree in advanced electronic-engineering would have no possible hope of understanding the sheer scope of what she was attempting to do. She then picked up a keyboard and began rummaging around in a box of cables and adapters.

He rolled his eyes, chuckled to himself, and went for a bit of a walk. The warehouse was quite large, with smaller storage areas situated along the side, filled with who-knew-what? He wandered from the central platform, carefully winding his way along the solid floor beneath his bare feet, avoiding the piles of tools, discarded equipment, and lines of trunking that seemed largely to go nowhere and do nothing. The lights, such as they were, were dim and inefficient. In that respect they were a good reflection of everything, and everyone else, around him.

The lights flickered, shadows danced around him like ghosts, haunting impressions taking form in the darkness, threatening to engulf him. He tried not to think about it, about what might be hiding in the darkness, about what there was yet to discover behind every sealed shutter, every padlocked door. For a moment, his mind filled with menacing gigantic silver robotic skeletons with glowing red eyes, of hideous teleportation experiments, zombies, advanced drones, super-soldiers, and men clad in powered armour. He chuckled at his foolishness; the world just wasn't like that.

It occurred to him that he really had no idea what the world was actually like. But, despite the specifics of his memory being missing, he somehow knew just exactly what constituted reality. With a smirk to himself, he realised he probably knew it better than anyone else there, in that ridiculous place.

One of the storage alcoves was open, so he meandered over to have a look inside. He glanced back to Norma who had her hands full, literally, with the keyboard and various plugs. He sniffed, grinned to himself and worked his way further along, edging casually towards it.

He found a large square button screwed to the wall. It was a light switch—that much was obvious—but it was industrial quality, brushed metal casing with a burnished finish. The switch itself was solid Bakelite, sealed in a waterproof rubber shield. It was nicely made, so at least the money had been spent somewhere, he thought, as he reached out to press it. It gave a very satisfying click, but nothing immediately happened.

After several seconds, a set of fluorescent tubes flickered gingerly to life. They flashed once, twice, and then they popped on, almost in unison, bathing the room in light. He looked back and shouted, “Has anyone actually gone through these rooms yet?”

“Don’t touch anything,” she shouted back with a muffled yell, at least one tool being held in her mouth as she spoke.

“Fine...” He grinned, snatching up an A4 clip-board that was hanging on the wall. It was a manifest of some kind and he actually took the time to read it. “Street-Level Utility Transport, Aerial Reconnaissance and Surveillance Equipment, and Passive Electronic Network Installation System.” He frowned to himself and quickly looked over it again. Out loud he muttered, “Someone missed a few details with these names.”

Inside the room was a heavy grey tarpaulin covering a large, and roughly oblong, object. Racking to the sides contained metal boxes, each sealed and locked elaborately; smaller silver ones and larger units were on the floor, some over a meter in length. He stepped in and nudged one with his foot. It was heavy-grade alloy, but whatever was inside was even heavier. The box refused to budge.

His attention was drawn back to the tarpaulin and he couldn't help but grin as he looked at it. He stepped back and took a glance outside—nobody was looking, and his curiosity was getting the better of him, not that he was resisting particularly hard.

He was getting the impression that his resistance to temptation was poor overall, as were other areas of his personality that other people thought showed a strong sense of character. He bit his lower lip, the sides tracing up into a smile. He had to know.

He reached down and flexed his fingers around the cover. It was dusty, old, and the coarse fabric had hardened over time. It was ragged and unnaturally dry beneath his touch. He paused momentarily, before yanking it off in one, hard, fluid movement. It fell to the floor noisily, lying in a crumpled heap at the side. He smiled broadly.

“Where have you been?” she grumbled at him, frowning but not sounding like she really cared all that much. It was more like an annoyed mother talking to a naughty child who had wandered off in a park.

“I found a car,” he told her enthusiastically, like a naughty child who had wandered off in a park, explaining what he'd been doing to an annoyed mother. “It's an old Nissan 280zx, 1982, painted black,” he explained excitedly. “No rust at all—it's like it's brand new! When I touched it, it felt warm, so I don't think it was made of

metal. It felt like carbon. The manifest describes it as an ‘Armoured Utility Vehicle’ disguised to look mundane. It launches self-propelled flying camera probes and lays little spy cameras as it drives around. The dashboard looked like the cockpit of a jet fighter!”

She glared at him, her eyes narrowed, and her lips thinned.

“I didn’t touch anything!” he told her earnestly, failing to sound even the tiniest bit earnest.

“You had better not!” she said angrily.

“Except the car, once. But I assumed you meant not to touch anything boring.” He looked back to the room—light was still spilling from it invitingly. He looked back to Norma and bit his lip. “I’m... going to go and not touch more things.” He discarded the manifest and scampered off to the other storage rooms.

Merv grunted and turned after him, but Norma held up a hand for him to stop.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “It’s actually quicker without him chattering away inanely.”

“When will he start remembering?” Merv said, his voice a rasping, grinding thing that made her feel like someone was stepping on her spine with spiked shoes.

“Soon,” she sighed. “Hopefully. That’s assuming he ever does remember. There’s no guarantee—the technology has only ever been tested on rats, and they all died; quite horribly in fact.”

The next door was closed and securely locked, but that wasn’t going to stop a man like him. He quickly looked around the floor and found a small piece of metal wire. He bent it straight as he knelt down, and carefully regarded the padlock; when the metal wire was straight, he made his attack. He poked it gently into the hole, twisting it upwards and then wriggling it around. When he pulled it out, the lock clicked

very softly from inside. He smiled to himself—a great victory had occurred, and it was accompanied with a swell of pride.

He put the wire in his mouth to free his hands and fiddled with the padlock, trying to pull the hasp free. It was still locked, completely, securely and absolutely locked.

Perhaps it was going to stop a man like him, he grudgingly admitted to himself; it was difficult to tell, when he wasn't at all certain what kind of a man he was.

“What will happen after he remembers?” Merv grunted, his gravel-laced voice barely more than a whisper.

She didn't look up. She said nothing for a moment and just continued her work, gazing down as if the wiring was simply fascinating.

“He killed my son,” she said finally, after a lengthy pause. Her eyes rolled up to his and he nodded that he understood. Did he, she wondered? Did his question have any bearing beyond simply carrying out his assignment to the logical conclusion? Would he hesitate from doing whatever he was told to do?

She looked away and realised that for him to do anything whatsoever, she would have to give that order. Could she? Even if she really, actually, honestly wanted him to die, would she be able to be an active participant in that act? What was really more concerning was that she was beginning to realise that she really, actually, honestly wouldn't be. She wasn't a killer.

Suddenly, there was a loud crashing sound from the other end of the room, which was a nice distraction from her disturbing lack of murderous intent. They looked at one another, Merv and Norma. “I hope you're not touching anything down there!” she barked aggressively down into the darkness.

“No, not touching anything,” he shouted back to her, his voice echoing around the bay.

“Wait here!” she grunted, throwing the equipment noisily back to the desk.

This room was the same size as before. In the middle were three smaller objects, each covered with a tarpaulin, just as the car had been. The lights flickered to life, lighting the bay grimly. Shadows danced around the racking as he stepped inside. One of the tubes died, flickered back on, and then died again, plunging a portion of the place back into the gloom. He looked around—there were spares, metal parts in orderly racks, equipment sealed in lockers. What he was looking at, he had no idea, as not much of it could be identified. It smelled of oil, the fine aroma of the highest quality lubricants.

The manifest for this room had fallen to the floor; his eyes caught it amid the gloom, and he scooped it up. He went to the first of the sheets and grabbed it.

“Don’t you dare!” she snapped at him, snatching the manifest from him and glaring down on him with angry, almost (but not quite) murderous eyes.

He dropped it to her grasp and reflexively spun around to face her. “I wasn’t going to!” he snapped, sounding utterly and completely unconvincing.

She stepped inside, huffing angrily. “I told you not to touch anything.”

“Was that a rule?” he said, grinning. “It felt like more of a suggestion. Have you been through these rooms? They could all be filled with scientific treasures. I mean, what are these things? Don’t you want to know?”

“When everything is running, we’ll find out, won’t we?” She grabbed his upper arm and gently pulled him away.

He turned to her and his eyes met hers, pleading, begging to just let him see one more thing. “Please? Come on, don’t you want to know what’s in here?”

“No,” she said firmly, but it didn’t sound all that firm and might well be subject to change with additional begging and pleading.

He gave it his best shot. “But... my memory!!” he tried. “It might help me remember something.”

She let go of his arm and closed her eyes, shaking her head at her own foolishness. Despite it all, she was a scientist; she also wanted to know, and her curiosity overwhelmed her just enough to consider giving in.

“Go on, then, but let me look through the damn manifest to make sure there’s nothing in this room that could end up with us lying dead in the middle of a smoking crater!” she grumbled.

His eyes widened. “Now I want to know even more!”

“Wait!” she told him sternly. She started peering at the clipboard while he collapsed into a grinning child-like expression of pure gleeful exuberance. It took some effort for him not to punch the air and shout ‘hooray.’

“Hydrogen-Electrolysis Research Platform for Electronic Surveillance.” She read it out and winced. “Whoever named this really needs to work on their acronyms.”

And then, as the cover fell to the ground, he saw it.

What he saw changed everything. It was as if someone had filled in the missing parts of his soul. He knew, but he didn’t even know how he knew, that his life would never be the same.

“Oh... My... God!” he whispered in awe, while he stared raptly forwards.

Chapter 9

“Oh my god,” she said, parroting his words, but meaning something quite different. She shook her head at him with the maximum amount of disapproval that any human was able to summon. It was a fairly impressive amount.

He stood awestruck, his lower jaw slumped open, his eyes fixed. He was leaning towards it, edging forwards very slowly, probably not even aware of his own actions. He was behaving as if his brain repairs had failed, even though nothing so far had scientifically proved them successful.

She rolled her eyes, both at him, and at it. When she spoke, it had been in dismay. She disapproved, and did so vehemently. It was a pointless thing, hopeless, a useless folly that had no place in the modern world. To her, such things were a relic of a bygone era where force and aggression had not yet been replaced with thought and reason; it was a time that was well behind them, and this monstrosity was borne from a mentality that was best forgotten.

“It’s beautiful!” he said, his voice barely a whisper. He tried to turn to her, but his eyes wouldn’t move from this glorious thing.

“It’s a bike,” she shrugged.

“It’s a motorcycle,” he corrected, although such distinctions made little difference. But, perhaps it did matter this time.

And what a motorcycle it was! No attempt had been made to disguise it—unlike the car, it wasn’t meant to be invisible, or even subtle, and it could barely have gone unnoticed. This thing was unique, styled outrageously, and without any kind of compromise. It was aggressive, bristling with a large, powerful motor behind matt black panels and bare metal trim. It was purposeful and elegant, in its

own way, but mean and savage all at once. It looked as if it could back up the threat that it was silently screaming at the world.

It stood long and tall on the suspension, a huge, hulking behemoth of raw power contained in metal and ceramic composites. The dim lights flashed across her body, glinting against her polished metal, her angular curves, her dark armour.

“I’m in love!” he said finally, and with absolute sincerity. These were not words he was used to saying, and somehow he knew that.

She pointed her thumb at it dismissively, and said gruffly, “It’s just a motorcycle.”

“It’s the most awesome motorcycle I’ve ever seen!” he told her, oddly defensive of it. “Not an ‘it,’” he said. “Such a machine can’t be an it - she is a her.”

“Men...” she replied, shaking her head and rolled her eyes. “What kind of mentality would think that crimes could best be solved using a fast bike, instead of methodical data collection, intelligent conclusions, and investigation of all potential leads?

“On the one hand, you have the full weight of logical inductive reasoning, and on the other...” She pointed accusingly at it. “You have that thing!”

“I’ll have it if you don’t want it!” he told her happily.

“It doesn’t belong to us,” she told him. “And it’s not going anywhere.”

He tried to look sad. “Can I sit on it at least? Could you get a picture of me sitting on it?”

“No!” She flicked out the lights and stalked back to the control center, shouting at him to follow.

He did, but sulked the whole way along.

“Can I at least see the manifest?”

She tossed it over her shoulder onto the floor. The wooden back scraped against the concrete and skidded, skittering off along the ground. He was a little surprised by her reaction, but picked it up regardless and followed along.

“Women!” he muttered, just soft enough for her not to hear him.

“I found something too, you know,” she said suddenly.

“I’m guessing it wasn’t a sense of humour?” That didn’t go down particularly well, and earned him a withering glare. He only withered a little bit, but it was still a net loss on his part.

“It was evidence, actually,” she told him. “The Police Commissioner hand-picked Casey for the pursuit unit. His was the first name chosen, in fact.”

“Is that unusual?” he shrugged. It did sound as if it might be important—maybe not as important as a really nice motorcycle, but important nonetheless. He nodded along, but the image of that machine was painted in his mind, and wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon. It probably never would.

“Somewhat. For one thing, his record doesn’t warrant it.” She shook her head sadly at the admission she was making to herself.

“He’s reckless, inexperienced. He never understood the importance of procedure, and never took the time to develop his full potential.”

“I like him more, all of a sudden,” the man laughed.

“Secondly, it’s the job of the motor-unit supervisors to select candidates for specialised missions or training. For it to come from the Commissioner is really quite unusual. It’s not unheard of, but it certainly isn’t common.”

She looked troubled—more so than usual. It didn’t make sense, not really. She frowned, and, after a lengthy pause, she added,

“Someone wanted him in that team; someone wanted him there for a reason.”

“He was clearly a good rider,” he said, gesturing to the monitor, despite it being blank at the time. “He has talent—real talent. Maybe that’s all there is to it? Maybe he was just the best rider on the whole force?”

She turned very slowly and deliberately to look at him, her attention clearly divided between him and her thoughts.

“Talent is just the beginning—it starts you on the path, but it’s hard work that gets you where you’re going,” she told him.

“Really?” he tutted to himself. It was obvious she’d said that before to someone else. It was a little too rehearsed to be a passing thought. “That’s me screwed, then.”

There was no coffee, and that seemed suddenly quite a pointed problem.

“What do you think is going on here then?” he ventured with a shrug.

“It’s way too early to guess,” she said, pausing to sneer at the very notion that she should jump to conclusions. “All we know is that the police seem to be adopting similar technology to that which Henry developed in the Hawk-Eye project. He left, talking about the next stage—level two—and he said he had ideas for level three. I can’t see how he could be implicated, or even involved in any of this. There’s something else going on here.”

“Then why would the police suddenly be given a budget for it now? I mean why now?”

She looked up at him. That was, of course, an excellent question. “Maybe it is simply about the war on drugs and the rise of domestic terrorism?” she said thoughtfully.

“I apologise for the Swiss-cheese in my head, but I don’t remember anything about that. Is it a serious threat?”

She smiled, but it was a dark thing to behold. “Goodness no...” She shook her head at his naivety. “It’s mostly just false flags and propaganda; a way of frightening the public into accepting a greater degree of control. Frightened people think they need the government’s protection, but it’s usually the government they need protection from.”

“Nice,” he frowned at her accusingly. “And you call me a criminal?”

“The police aren’t chasing me!” she reminded him, with a grim little glint in her eye.

He looked down thoughtfully and his expression changed. She shifted forwards with an oddly concerned, curious expression on her face. She had clearly picked up on the change in his mood.

He paused a moment longer, closing his eyes while he mustered the courage to finally ask: “Was I on drugs?” His voice was low and pensive, and the answer was one that clearly bothered him. It looked as if the question had been bothering him for some time.

He narrowed his eyes as if somewhere, in the twisted confines of his augmented brain, he was finally remembering something.

She looked over at him, taking in his expression, weighing it all up. It was obvious, even to her, that he wasn’t a man who was comfortable with the whole subject, and that didn’t fit at all with her preconception of him.

She had imagined him to be a very different kind of person, one she would never come to like, but she was coming to like him. She could tell that the thought that he was on drugs bothered him a great deal. What kind of criminal behaved like that?

“No, you weren’t. Your toxicology screen came back clean,” she said softly.

He smiled, relieved.

She realised that she hadn’t considered it before—a lack of drugs in his system simply made the job of repairing his brain that much easier; she had missed the human implications, as often she did. What did this mean?

“I don’t like drugs,” he told her, his face taking on a stony severity. “Sometimes, when you mention drugs, something goes through my mind. It’s a face, I think, but it’s just so clouded that I can’t make it out. I just don’t know...”

She listened intently and thoughtfully tapped the side of her face.

“I don’t remember specifics, but when I think about the idea, it makes me feel angry, hostile. I’ve dealt with them before—I must have.”

“So there is something going on in there?” she joked, but her glibness seemed inappropriate to her, as for once he was taking things seriously. Consequently, their reversal of roles wasn’t proving to be an entirely successful one.

“Drugs...” He looked up, his expression grim and determined. “Look up Big Bad Wolf.”

“And why would I do that?” She was uncomfortable being on the receiving end of orders, but somehow she found the suggestion curling itself around her mind. It was like a key in a lock, and someone was turning it.

“Please!”

She didn’t like this. He was childish, he was irreverent, he made stupid jokes that weren’t funny and he didn’t take things seriously. Now she found him motivating; they were connecting, two

minds with a shared purpose. Could the technology have changed him, could it have reshaped his brain in some way, turning him into a very different kind of person from what he had been before?

“OK,” she said finally. She began entering the search parameters, which was not an easy task. “Explain your thinking.”

He stood up. Reflexively, his hand went to the back of the gown, but his modesty was now preserved by Merv’s over-sized boxer shorts, suspiciously decorated with a series of cartoon animals.

“It may not exist, but what if it does?” he said thoughtfully. “It might just be political wrangling as you say—make up a new drug threat to justify new executive powers, just as you describe.

Whatever it is, it’s related to the increased police budget in this city. It’s the excuse they used to bring in the new high-speed motorcycles, and it’s the reason your son was sat on that bike in the first place.”

She glared, but while her eyes were pointing at him, her anger was aimed elsewhere. “All reasonable points,” she nodded. “And what’s in it for you?”

“I want to know the reason I was sat on that bike, just as well as you do. I want to know the truth, wherever it takes us. I want to know my name; I want to know what I was doing, why I was running, and what I was running from,” he said. “I need to know what kind of man I was.”

His eyes looked away for a moment, and he huffed a sad, shallow breath. “I need to know I’m not the kind of man you seem to think I am.”

The green light flashed and the black monitor filled with a list of green text. She smiled—it had found something. She asked softly, “And what if you are the kind of man I think you are?”

He smiled weakly and his eyes met hers. “I think I’d be proud to be a criminal in your world,” he told her faintly, but she knew he

didn't mean a word of it. "But there's no world where I'd be happy to be..." He paused thoughtfully and looked as though he was struggling to find the right word—one that truly conveyed the sentiment; one that matched exactly the concept in his mind. Finally he found it, "...a dick!"

The video was ready, but she took a moment. "I hope you like what you find. In my experience, people rarely do if they seek the absolute truth."

"That won't stop it being the truth, though."

She nodded in agreement and a smile flickered across her lips, a real one. "There's hope for you yet."

"And you?" he asked.

She paused, frowning in confusion as she looked back up from the monitor. "What do you mean? What about me?"

"Will you be able to handle the truth about your son?"

She looked as though such a question was ridiculous, but it troubled her—it had been troubling her from the very beginning. "I'm a scientist," she said firmly, but perhaps to convince herself before anyone else. "In my world there is only the truth."

"Then I think that maybe we both have a difficult road ahead of us."

She smiled again, very slightly, and looked up at the monitor to avoid his eyes. She bit her lip thoughtfully. She couldn't get his words out of her head. There was a difficult road ahead of them, perhaps even harder than what was already behind. Finally, she looked him directly in the eye and said, "Let's do this."

■ FEED SRC:MX01184955 SEC EXTRP RECON

Robert Trent was widely known to be not a terribly nice person. He wasn't exactly evil, but he was highly motivated, and he had a

worrying lack of concern for the needs of others. This was a dangerous combination, which had facilitated occurrences of the highest forms of unpleasantness to be visited upon the bodies and minds of others. This had earned him a reputation he was quite proud of—a reputation he had really earned, and one he truly deserved.

He was a man whose journey through life was etched on his face for all who knew how to read it to see. It was beset with heavy, dark grooves that were etched deep into his skin; a scar ran from his temple down below his left eye. His cheeks were large, thick and heavy bones, jutting beneath the skin, and his whole face had a craggy appearance, while his cold, dead eyes peered out grimly from his heavy brow. His hair was greying but tidy; he was a man who believed in attention to detail, a trait that had put him where he was, a place he was determined to remain.

His house wasn't exceptional—it wasn't meant to be. It was large, certainly, and well appointed; without question. Still, it was merely the house of a man doing well—it wasn't something that would attract a huge amount of attention. That was just how he liked it—it was carefully selected, balanced to be impressive to those who inhabited a lower rung on the ladder, but not to provoke jealousy among those on the same level. Those above would barely notice him—until it was too late, at least. It was all a game, and he knew exactly how to play it.

He sat back in his black leather sofa. Before him was a wrought iron coffee table, the surface made from toughened glass. It was discerning, handmade, and expensive. Like everything else around, it exuded quality and taste but wasn't that much different from the poor store-bought substitutes that could be had for a fraction of the cost. To those who knew no different, it would go unnoticed, just as he would himself.

“Mr Ramirez, can I get you a coffee? Iced tea, perhaps?”

Mr Ramirez looked around nervously, and rightly so. The entrance to the kitchen was blocked by a large gentleman, who wasn't really a gentleman at all in any way that counted. “I'm good, thank you, Mr Trent.”

“It's no trouble,” he assured him earnestly, politely even. His voice was as cold as ice, and sounded like a slice of lime squeezed directly into an eyeball.

Mr Ramirez smiled awkwardly and shook his head. “So how can I help you, Mr Trent? I appreciate you asking me here, and I'm happy to help in any way I can.”

Mr Trent sat back, spreading his arms over the back of the chair, dominating the room with his easy confidence. A wicked smile flashed on his dry lips. “You and your boys have been doing excellent work. You showed an increase in revenue of twelve percent this year. Your distribution network grew by over fifteen. That's no mean feat, and it didn't go unnoticed.”

“That's since I took over, Mr Trent,” he said proudly. He looked to the burly not-a-gentleman who seemed comfortably relaxed for now, leaning casually against a counter. “I trimmed the dead-wood, Mr Trent. I brought in some fine young talent, guys hungry for their share. I cut them in on the profits with a bonus. They never steal from me; they know I'm the best thing for them. Hard work brings rewards, you know?”

Mr Trent flashed a knowing glance to his associate and grinned. His associate grinned back, sharing a secret between them.

This wasn't lost on Mr Ramirez. “Is there any problem, Mr Trent?” He was starting to look nervous now. His eyes flashed back and forth; he was sweating and fidgeting awkwardly in his seat, trying not to show the extent of his concern. He was a man who

knew that he was swimming out of his depth, and he was swimming with the worst of the sharks.

Mr Trent clapped his hands together and beamed a happy smile. “There’s no problem that I know of, not with you at least.”

He relaxed slightly, but still didn’t seem quite convinced. “Then what, Mr Trent?”

“I have to ask you a question.” He narrowed his eyes. His expression betrayed a hint of amusement, but still there was an edge to him that made it clear that he was all business.

He nodded and shrugged, “Sure.”

“Mr Ramirez, you’ve done very well, but I still think we can do better. You would like to do better, wouldn’t you?”

His eyes flashed between the two men, back and forth. He wiped beads of sweat from his brow. “Sure, I’d like to do better. I’m always trying to do better.”

Mr Trent nodded in agreement. He was balancing all of this to keep the hungry, vicious young man on the edge. He wanted to toy with him before drawing him in. “I’ve seen that. I’ve been watching you closely. Mr Ramirez, I’ve been watching you very closely.”

“Good,” Ramirez said, and his expression made it seem that he knew it was anything but good. He shuffled in his seat and his back stiffened as a fresh flush of fear very obviously flashed over him. “Have I done something wrong, Mr Trent? If I’ve made a mistake, I’m certain I can fix it.”

Mr Trent grinned and sat back in his chair, relaxing again. “Not that I know of,” he told him with a casual wave of his hand. “No... I’ve chosen you, Mr Ramirez, to be the first one to bring a lucrative new product to a fresh new market.”

He smiled, relief clearly washing over him. “Thank you, Mr Trent. My boys and me, we won’t let you down. We can sell anything.”

“I know you won’t,” he replied evenly. “This is going to mean bringing in some fresh talent, but your cut will be bigger. This won’t be a problem, will it?”

“Not at all!” he replied happily, hearing all the things a man like him would have been listening for.

“So, you’re the right man for this job?”

Ramirez grinned back, his lips drawing up to show his diamond-studded front tooth and gold fillings. His nervousness was gone now, the usual cocky demeanour that comprised his more recognisable street persona returned and established itself with a passion. He leaned back in the chair, mirroring Mr Trent’s easy posture, and nodded to himself self-assuredly. “Hell yeah, s’in the bag, Mr Trent! My crew’s all over that shit!”

“That is good news.” Mr Trent nodded to the large gentleman behind him, who nodded back and wandered off into the kitchen. His face hardened. “There is just one tiny detail.”

“Whatever, man!”

“I need you to try the new product—just a little sample so you know the quality of the merchandise,” he explained, exceedingly calmly, as if this was nothing at all.

These words elicited a fresh wave of fear and the drug-dealer stiffened.

“Woah woah woah, no can do, Mr Trent. I is clean, you know what I’m sayin’! I stay off the shit, cos I gotta be in control, else someone gonna step all over ya.”

He looked over to the kitchen, and the big man was already on his way back and he didn't look like the type who might be ready to discuss it reasonably.

"It don't have to be this way, Mr Trent. My boys can test it real good—they know quality; we all know you got the best gear anyhow, no need for no doubts."

"This is exactly the way that it has to be, I'm afraid," he told him calmly, almost as if he was bored with it all. There seemed to be no choice in the matter, which must have been becoming painfully obvious to Mr Ramirez. There was no choice for him to make about anything—that privilege had been stripped from him the moment he had walked through the door.

"Mr Trent, Sir! You know I always got your back, but this can't be happening..." He turned behind him, his head swiveling wildly and his eyes wide with fear.

The man was now standing directly behind. From that close, the silver pistol in his waistband was immediately apparent and this lingering threat was becoming the focus of the drug-dealer's world. He had a small plastic tube in his hand, a black rod no longer than the average pen. He unscrewed the cap and stood waiting for instructions.

"Mr Trent..." he pleaded, squirming uneasily in his seat. He slapped his palms together.

"Oh, come on," Trent said with a vicious grin, his voice dripping with venom. "You sell this stuff, don't you? Are you seriously telling me that a salesman like you doesn't have any faith in his own product? Are you telling me you'd happily peddle this stuff to women and children, but think it's not good enough to use on yourself?"

“I’s clean, Mr Trent,” he pleaded. “Gotta keep my mind crystal.”

He felt the hand on his shoulder. It was a powerful grip: it pushed him down into the chair and was tight enough to send a shock of pain digging into his shoulder muscles. It was calculated to do exactly that.

“Take it like a man!” he told him, the decision quite obviously already having been made some time before. This was happening and there was no escape from it. Mr Trent made sure he gave exactly that impression.

“Mr Trent...” he pleaded. He was sweating, breathing wildly as he turned to focus on the tube. Under the cap was a short needle, already dripping with a sickly fluid—grey, murky poison that would soon be coursing through his veins.

“Everything has a price, Mr Ramirez,” he told him.

He tried to struggle, but the big man held him down. He wrapped his powerful arm around his neck, forcing him to the chair as he jabbed the needle into the top of his arm, straight through his white T-shirt. He gasped at what must have been only a slight pricking sensation. Within seconds, he started to relax. His eyes glazed over and his breathing calmed.

“Big Bad Wolf,” he whispered, gazing at the ceiling.

Chapter 10

He frowned at the monitor. “How long ago was that? From the slang, I’m guessing it was some time in the seventies?”

“According to the logs, five months ago,” she said, checking the time to confirm her facts—the computer wasn’t quite reliable enough yet for her very precise liking. “The dialogue was mostly simulated this time, based on a partial extrapolation of third party sources. It may have failed to accurately reflect the more nuanced intricacies of the modern urban vernacular. It was built and programmed in the 1980s by a rich, middle-aged white man, you realise.”

“You see, the Hawk-Eye simply knows everything, every conversation, every video-feed, everything that’s said, and all the things that don’t need to be said,” she explained. “It imagined the scene for us, filling in the details with its programming but, unlike human imagination, it’s accurate to the degree that we can accept it as fact.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and looked over to her, perching himself casually on the edge of the desk and looked irritatingly relaxed, as always. “Ignoring the shortcomings of rich, middle-aged white men in the 80s, at least we do know for sure now that there’s a new drug in town.”

“This is not definitive proof,” she said, holding up a finger and wagged it admonishingly. “It’s still an unsubstantiated theory for now. They could have injected him with drain-cleaner for all we know.”

“So what would you consider proof?” he asked with a sarcastic smirk, “Would you like a drooling, tweaked-up addict blundering in off the streets and offerig to sell you a bag of his new crap?”

“No, that would not be definitive proof, either. Proof would be...” Norma rolled her eyes as she struggled to find an answer for an uncomfortably long period of time before failing to concede the point. “At most, all this proves is that Casey was given the job to help combat this new drug. We don’t know any more than that, and we don’t have sufficient evidence to begin making wild presumptions.”

“Remember—you don’t solve crimes with fast bikes,” he reminded her with a sarcastic smirk, filled with an abundance of self-satisfaction.

She sighed and frowned deeply. He was starting to get to her. Despite her better judgment, could it be that she was beginning to like him? He was a likeable person, with an easy-going temperament, quick with a friendly smile and always ready with a pointed little comment. It would be difficult for anyone not to like him!

It felt almost like an assault, that this person, this enemy of hers was slowly attacking her on the most personal front, working his way slowly in through her raw emotions. She tried to ignore it. She shrugged it away, and continued getting to the point.

“That’s true, so why issue them at all? Why did the Mayor authorise this program?”

“Actually, that is a very good question,” he agreed with a frown, rubbing at his unshaven chin. “Of all the things this city needs, fast motorcycles doesn’t seem to be very high on the list of priorities.”

“To solve this problem, they need officers on the street,” she began thoughtfully, talking to herself as much as anything else, just getting things straight in her own mind. “It’s a hands-on policing problem requiring sound intelligence, and the manpower to act on it. What it doesn’t need, is a bunch of overblown motorcycles running

around causing more harm than good, with even more of the things held back in reserve. It's utterly illogical."

"So again, each answer opens up still more questions," he said finally, after giving the matter a proper thinking about.

"And the last thing in the world we need is more questions."

"Um..." He looked at her, his face frowning. He turned away sharply, he looked as if he was trying to think of something that was suddenly eluding him. His expression softened and he gazed around, blinking heavily. He frowned thoughtfully and droned, his voice shallow and hollow, "What's your name again?"

"What?" she sneered at him suddenly and scolded, "This is no time for one of your silly games."

"Seriously!" His hand went to the desk to steady himself as he began to sway drunkenly. He slumped and then straightened himself. He was clearly having trouble just keeping himself upright. "I don't feel so good," he told her.

He began to sway, gazing up into the dark ceiling, an empty black space with huge metal girders holding things together, jutting out from the emptiness. He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out and then he winced in pain before finally slumping to the floor.

There was nothing. Just darkness, and a single, solitary thought—a thought that blossomed quickly into many overlapping and interplaying thoughts, connecting with each other and forming themselves into a person.

Suddenly, light poured in through his eyes, and he sat up feeling alive, alert, and energised. He felt recharged. "Wow!" he said with a beaming smile. "What just happened? I feel alive, alert, and energised! I feel recharged."

He looked around, blinking and took a deep, cleansing breath.

He said, "Have I been recharged? Did my brain run out?" He paused and frowned for a moment in contemplation. "I mean run out of power, not dribble out of my nose. It didn't dribble out of my nose, did it?"

Norma sat on the edge of the bed and had the expression on her face that a patient least likes to see on a medical professional. "This was my fault," she explained apologetically. "Your brain needed charging. I miscalculated slightly. There's no serious harm done, but there have been unforeseen complications."

He shuffled quickly to the edge of the bed and sat up beside her. Complications... the word sounded grim. She had obviously meant it to have done just exactly that. She had used it to convey a certain impression, and one he wouldn't necessarily want to have conveyed. It was a word that nobody would want to hear when there was a large thermos-flask-full of experimental and untested technology sloshing around in his brain.

Still, for now, he felt like a new man. He couldn't help but smile.

"It's nice to know my brain is complicated, but honestly, I feel great. I don't think there's anything to worry about." He looked at his hands, holding his palms before his eyes. They seemed different somehow. He wiggled the fingers, watching with amusement as they moved slowly before him, crawling as they were with tiny bacteria eagerly awaiting a feast of rotting flesh that was sure to come any minute. He blinked a couple of times, but couldn't unsee what he thought he had seen. "What's the problem anyway? Does it involve complex words I won't understand?"

"I can give you the idiot's version, if you'd prefer," she said softly.

He stood up. His balance was fine—better than fine. He stood on one leg, then hopped to the other. “The idiot’s version might be best, unless there’s a level below that, ideally with pictures?” He put down both feet and rooted himself to the spot.

He was taking this all rather well, considering. He waited with a little, optimistic smile on his lips.

Norma stood up, huffing and sighing to herself. “Maybe a demonstration would be in order?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Perhaps an illustration with lots of things highlighted with bright red arrows? And crayons?”

“Put your left hand on your head, please. Palm down.”

He shrugged—it seemed easy enough, and he complied happily.

“Please don’t move it.”

He nodded, agreeing that indeed he would not.

She raised her hand, inside of which were three small, coloured balls. “Catch these,” she said as she threw them towards him without further warning, giving him no time to think or react.

He saw them coming at him. Two were red, one was yellow. They spread out around him into a triangle, sailing easily through the air. He looked at the closest one, then the other two. He wondered how he could manage to hold all three, but her hand was large enough, so his must be too, he reasoned. He went for the closest first, plucking it from the air. The next was far lower, so he reached down for that too before scooping up the last.

“Easy.” He smiled and held them out to her. “What do I win?”

“I couldn’t do that.” She seemed oddly sad, but a little impressed at the same time. “Merv tried six times; he couldn’t do it either, and his hands are like shovels.”

“No offence to Merv, especially if he can hear me, but I doubt he can tie his own shoelaces without help.” He took his left hand from his head and regarded her curiously. “What did that prove, exactly?”

“You might want to sit down,” she told him, her face severe and concerned-looking. She almost always looked like that, so the impact was somewhat lessened.

“I’ll stand,” he said, looking a little worried himself by this point.

“There’s been some damage to your brain,” she began haltingly, her voice low and serious. “Your motor-cortex has been severely eroded by the nanotechnology. There’s not much of it left if I’m honest. They’ve eaten into it, re-writing your biological anatomy, and augmenting it with an artificial structure as they go.”

Suddenly, he did feel like sitting down. He looked very worried indeed, massively concerned about the horrible things he was hearing. One thought flashed through his heavily augmented mind and he felt the weight of his concerns needed to be voiced.

He said quite softly and very clearly, “Will I still be able to have sex?”

“This is serious,” she told him with a sigh.

He nodded and said, “OK. But will I?”

“They’ve eaten away about two thirds of your lower cerebellum, which controls your physical controls, your reactions, your coordination. They’re re-initialising your brain, rebuilding parts of it.”

He held up his hand again, his eyebrows slumped quite sadly. “But I feel fine,” he said looking at his wiggling fingers as if they were betraying him somehow.

“At the moment, the technology seems to have formed a replacement—a new structure to replace what it’s taken away. It seems to be performing the same functions, but surprisingly, doing a far better job than the original parts it’s replaced.”

“That’s good,” he hoped, not seeing how it could be bad, until he remembered this was his brain they were talking about, his second favourite part of his body. He was still alive, at least, and was quite happy about that - for now, anyway. She actually hadn’t said that he couldn’t have sex, he thought to himself with relief.

“I don’t know how much further they’re going to go. I don’t even know if they’re going to remain in that part of your brain. They’re behaving quite unpredictably at this point, and I don’t think that I can control them.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Did I ever thank you for injecting this unproven and radically unpredictable technology into my skull? If not, would now be a good time?”

She said, quite sadly, “You’re welcome. If I hadn’t, you’d be dead. Would now be a good time to point that out?”

“So I may have a cancer eating away at my brain?” He breathed out heavily. “But I might not? But I might...”

“In a nutshell,” she agreed. “It’s actually much more accurate than the explanation I was going to give you.”

He thought about this for a good long time, which was actually only a matter of a few seconds. “It’ll be this is like the first chapter of a hero’s journey—me and my super-powers against the empire of villainy.” He shrugged, forcing a smile.

“You don’t have super-powers,” she assured him.

“No!” He held up a finger as he corrected her. “You don’t have super-powers.”

“You’re not getting me. You really don’t have super-powers.”

How was he not following the basics of all this? Perhaps the idiot's version wasn't idiotic enough? She very likely briefly wondered if they did have crayons somewhere.

"Come on, Norma, you could at least let me have this one! I'm sitting here dying—or already dead, depending on your perspective—I'll be a drooling vegetable by the end either way, and I don't even know my own name!"

"Yes, I know—it all must be very stressful for you," she told him. "What I mean is that I did some more work while you were charging up."

"Really, Norma, I'm touched at your concern. It warms my heart that you never left my bedside, horrified that your technology was having such a violent effect on my mind."

"It takes an hour to charge you up," she huffed. "I had other things to do, and my technology is perfectly capable of having a violent effect in my absence."

"Indeed." He rolled his eyes at her in bemusement. "So what did you find out? Maybe you could play the video back at double speed so I could save a bit of time watching it?"

"The computer projection suggests I could play it up 16 times faster, and you'd still be able to keep up."

He looked up with wide-eyed surprise. "Really? My brain is that fast now?"

She nodded her head, confident of the accuracy of her projections. "Well, your brain is definitely that much faster for about an hour after the end of the charge-cycle. The residual energy seems to help with processor speed, but it would reduce towards a more normal level as you run down, maybe to around 12 times faster. Also, you'd still be confused by long words."

“Con... fus... ed?” he asked sarcastically. “But, seriously, 12 to 16 times faster? That’s amazing. I could be the world champion of that game they play with the three cups and the ball for a dollar a time, where they beat you up in an alley if you win more than three dollars.”

She sighed. “Yes, so it was well worth the risks after all.”

He grinned at her. “So what have we found out?”

She pointed at the array of dilapidated equipment back out there in the control room. “Come with me and watch what I found!”

■ FEED SRC:MX99964954 SEC

The siren wailed as the car drifted into a corner. The steering wheel fought back, shuddering violently in his hand as he slammed the car hard, forcing it into a turn, where it was quite adamant about not wanting to go.

“Faster!” Officer Craddock yelled at him. “Faster!”

He pressed a button on the screen as the whole vehicle shuddered around. The map updated all too slowly, filling in one grid at a time at a frustratingly pedestrian pace.

“I’m going as fast as I... can.” He growled the words, his foot flat on the floor, burying the pedal deep into the carpet beneath as he glared fixedly ahead, watching with wide eyes for any moving obstacle that might pull out on them. “This is a car, not a goddamn space-ship.”

The city flashed by in a blur; brick buildings merged into an orange mass as they streaked past the window. He slammed on the brakes and the car lurched violently, bucking on its suspension as it banked hard into another sharp turn, the tyres squealing in protest.

“Just keep it up!” he yelled over the noise.

The siren screamed all around them, the edges of the window flashed blue, and the engine roared, screaming in front of them, dragging them along with it.

“How far now?” he cried, forcing more from the car than it was ever designed to give, and a lot more than he was comfortable taking from it.

“Too damn far...” Craddock growled. “Next left, second right and we’re there.”

“They better be right about this.” He spun the wheel, hitting the brakes again. The car lurched, the wheels skipped on the ground, screaming in violent pain as the speeding vehicle tried to break free of its line. Somehow, despite the speed, despite the abuse, despite everything, it held on and they just barely made it around the edge.

The rear tyre clipped the verge and they mounted the curb at too high a speed. The car bucked and they looked at one another, both fearing the worst. A hot flush ran through Officer Rhodes, but it settled somehow, against all the odds, and the car stayed true.

He slammed the accelerator to the floor and pushed it hard into the straight. He began laughing, hearing the sound of his voice over the din of the engine as it screeched and roared back at them.

“Right! Right! Right!” yelled Craddock as he slammed his finger against the glass, pointing to the last turn.

“Got it...” he muttered, slamming his hand against the wheel, wrenching it round for all he was worth. The car came to a shuddering halt, smoke billowing from the tyres as he skidded to a close. The doors flew open and both of them jumped out, their hands drawing their weapons reflexively, their eyes wide as they peered around.

A young Hispanic man stopped and stared. Several other people vanished, seizing their chance to get away before whatever trouble was happening saw fit to happen to them.

Craddock pointed to him but diverted his side-arm away, the muzzle lowered to the pavement. "You! A car, a bike? Headed off fast? Did you see anything?"

The man shook his head and raised his hands, clearly terrified and absolutely not wanting any part of any of this. He was well-dressed, young, not the kind of man to be involved in anything of this sort, not the kind of man to even be seen in a neighbourhood as bad as this was. He shrugged nervously. "Maybe it was nothing, but a bike, yes."

"A bike?" Rhodes screamed at him. "What kind of bike?"

He swallowed and pointed up the road, pushing down his fear. "Black bike, very fast. It went that way."

"How long?" Craddock held up his hand to his partner, a sign, a warning for him to calm himself down.

He shrugged again. "Not long. Less than minute, maybe. I really wasn't looking, sorry."

"A minute..." Rhodes dashed back to the car, running as fast as he was able. He didn't even holster the pistol, just tossed it on the seat and jumped in. Craddock slammed the door behind him and yelled, "Thanks!" as he did.

Rhodes buried the accelerator and the tyres lit up, spinning fast as the car pulled away unevenly in a plume of white smoke, the tail slithering as it surged away.

"This is Alpha-two-four. In pursuit, heading East on Banks way. Request assistance."

They took a moment, less than half a second to make eye contact with one another. "Faster, Rhodes!" Craddock mumbled.

“This is all she’s got!” he growled over the din of the engine, the clattering punishment of the chassis, the sirens wailing for all they were worth.

“I can’t see anything,” Craddock sighed.

Rhodes pushed harder and harder. They crossed a raised hump; the car shook, bottoming the suspension, and then there was a moment of clarity, of nothing as they sailed through the air effortlessly and endlessly smoothly before it smashed once more back to the road with a spine wrenching crash.

“I can see a mile ahead.” Craddock had a grim sense of finality to his voice and his tone was finally calm. It was over and they both knew it. “There’s nothing.”

“Goddamit!” Rhodes yelled angrily, slamming his hand against the wheel. He balled his fist and smashed his hand against the dashboard twice. “Not again!” he gave an anguished cry.

Craddock showed more restraint, but felt no different. “Every damn time,” he grumbled.

The car slowed, and he clicked off the siren. There was no pretending they were still pursuing the suspect. He was gone; gone long ago.

“Are these tipoffs good?” asked Rhodes in evident frustration.

“I don’t know. There have been dozens of sightings; that’s the third we’ve followed ourselves, but still we’ve got nothing. We never catch anyone, we never even get close.”

“We’ve got informants in place. We know they’re delivering the ‘Wolf.’ It’s just a question of time—we’ll catch these bastards.”

Craddock was a more seasoned man; he had experience on his side, and it told him a different story. “Sure...” he grunted sarcastically.

Rhodes glared at him accusingly as if he was the problem here. “You don’t think we’ll catch them?”

He shook his head solemnly. “Son, believe me when I tell you that I’ve never seen anything like this. We’re chasing ghosts here! We’ve never caught a user; we’ve never even seen a delivery, so we can’t even catch on to the sellers. We’ve never collected a single verified sample. Not once, not ever!”

“I heard they got a sample last week,” he said accusingly and frowned.

“All we’ve got is empty tubes that never test back as having anything in them but salt water. I’m starting to think there’s no such thing as ‘Wolf.’ I mean, maybe it was all made up to get us chasing our tails? I don’t know. I just know I’ve never known a police force out looking for a new drug like this before and come back with nothing. It’s never been heard of, man.”

“We’ll catch them,” Rhodes said with gritted teeth, his lips curled back into a snarl.

Craddock just stared out of the window as the neighbourhood rolled by. “Sure. Sure we will.”

>>END FEED<<

Chapter 11

“Where have you been?” she asked angrily.

He looked at her for a moment and wondered, had she really asked angrily, or was this just her normal demeanour? Was this just the way she was normally around everyone? Was she just poor at coping with stress? Was her grief at what had happened to her son manifesting itself as understandable hostility, directed towards him? Was she just a total bitch?

He shrugged and admitted without a shred of guilt, “I’ve been with the bike.”

“You’ve been with the bike?!” She balled her hands into fists and they jabbed into her sides.

He looked around sarcastically with an easy smile on his lips. He said, “Is there an echo in here?”

She glared some more until, eventually, he rolled his eyes and sighed, “I was thinking. It just helped to sit there looking at that bike. I keep thinking to myself, ‘If only I’d had that bike,’ as if there was something I’d remembered. Does that make it better? I hope it makes sense to you, because it doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“You stay away from her,” she said finally, as if her words should be the end of any conversation.

“Why?”

“Because I say so!” she snorted at him, again, making it sound as if the matter was closed.

“But she makes me feel-”

“I don’t care how she makes you feel! She’s dangerous, and I don’t want you going near her again!” She cut him off abruptly, pointing angrily back at the thing.

“But you don’t know her like I do,” he moaned. “I can see the good side of her, you just see the bad.”

“Oh, I understand her. I understand her only too well—you can take my word for that!” She frowned and waved the manifest at him. “I actually took the time to read this thing. Did you?”

He sighed and looked at his feet solemnly. He said, as if very sadly, “No, I never read an instruction manual in my entire life. I’m a man.”

“I read it while you were lying in bed having your brain charged up, an injury you got with a bike just like her. Is that what you want to happen again? Is it?”

Maybe she was just a bitch, he thought. It seemed the most likely explanation at this point.

She flung the manifest across the desk at him, and said, “Read it!”

He picked it up and looked back at her in irritation, tensing his jaw and fixing her with his angry-looking eyes. He wrenched the pages from the board and flicked through them quickly, showing off his new, rapidly operating brain. He grinned at his cleverness, showing off his minor victory at her, how the whole point of her argument had manifested as a net positive outcome.

Her face softened. “You can really read at that speed?” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

“Yeah,” he agreed, happy that he’d made his point.

“Well what do you think?”

He smiled awkwardly and rubbed his short brown hair, chuckling to himself. “Well... I don’t remember it. I mean, I can read that fast, but it was kind of boring. It was mostly numbers. I’m not really good with mostly numbers.”

“Except 36, 24, 34, I presume?” she said knowingly.

He shrugged and looked confused. His memory was not quite yet everything that it used to be, with more holes in it than the plot of a poorly-written 80s nostalgia science-fiction/comedy novel. “What is that—dinner? We’re having Chinese?”

“No, it’s... never mind!” she snapped. “What all those numbers, as you put it, should have told you is that the bike is very dangerous!”

“That’s what makes it exciting,” he told her, and from her expression it was clear that she’d never thought of it that way.

Her head slowly cocked to one side as she actually listened for once.

“It’s the thrill! I mean... it’s difficult to explain, but when you’re just a normal man, when you’re nothing special, then a bike like that can make up the difference. When you ride, it lets you feel important, just for a short time,” he told her with a happy smile. “You wouldn’t understand—you’re a genius, but us normal people, we’re just part of the crowd standing in the background. We don’t stand out; we’re not the main character in the story of our own lives; we’re all just getting by as best we can.

“Then you throw your leg over a fast bike. It roars to life, the engine throbbing beneath you. Then you go, speed like you can’t imagine, and you’re free! It’s your world then, and you can ride just as fast and just as free as you always dreamed of being. Suddenly, just for a while, you are special.” He sighed and looked away sadly. “You wouldn’t understand—you were born special, with your big brain and complete lack of ability to relate to normal people. Also, Norma, you’re kind of a bitch.”

“You’re right—I don’t understand,” she agreed, and her soft voice was laced with regret. She leaned against the table herself. “My son once told me the same thing—well, similar at least. We argued; I

wanted him to do more with his life, but he just wanted to be a cop, like his father. He just wanted to ride motorcycles and I never understood why; I never approved. It caused no end of trouble for us. The truth is, we weren't very close, especially towards the end. We argued almost all the time."

"I wish I could remember my family." He spoke softly himself and flashed a brief, sad little smile. "I miss not having a family. Did you have any others? Apart from Casey, I mean?"

She shook her head and smiled an empty smile back at him. "I married a cop. I was only twenty two and he was the man of my dreams. Within three years, that dream had become a nightmare. We were no good together, just as everyone had tried to tell me. I dated scientists after that— stuck to my own kind—but it was never the same. I hoped Casey would take after me, but no. He was always just like his father in every way that mattered."

"I'm sorry," he said weakly.

"I actually don't blame you," she said in a rare moment of uncluttered honesty for them both. "His father—Butch—he was the same way. First through the door, always the first into any dangerous situation. He was first in once when the man inside had a sawn-off shotgun and an eagerness to use it."

She stopped for a moment and took a deep breath. It was as if she was deciding whether or not to say what she had planned to say next.

She continued, "He died instantly, so at least I can be grateful that he didn't suffer. I was always terrified the same thing would happen to my son, and I always knew that one day it would, no matter what I did."

She sniffed to herself. "It wasn't you, it was him! And it wasn't really him, it was me. I should have been firmer; I should

have taught him better, driven him harder. It's my fault—I let him down. I knew what was coming and I let him down."

"Wow," he said finally. "That's horrible. I'm sorry about your husband. Was he really called Butch?"

She grunted something that sounded like 'Thanks' and rubbed the edge of her eye, sniffing and trying to make light of it, shaking her head and pretending to laugh it off.

"It's not your fault," he told her. "We are what we are. You can't control us; you can't change us. People have to be the people they are meant to be. Casey isn't finished yet. I mean, you gave me super-powers: think what you're going to be able to do for him!"

She laughed—only slightly, but it was a real laugh this time. Well, a chuckle at least, but it lit her up eyes as if there was a human in there somewhere, presumably deep inside, drowning in her awful personality. She wiped her eyes once again and sniffed more loudly. She looked at him, her expression difficult to read; her impregnable shell had peeled back, just slightly, and just for a moment, but it was something.

"So that's it then." She smiled an empty, hollow smile and sighed an empty, hollow sigh. "I've found the truth. Casey did it to himself, hurt himself doing the thing he loved. It's just as simple as that."

"I guess so," he agreed.

"So what's next then?" she sighed. "What's left after that emotional revelation?"

He looked confused and shrugged, as if the answer was obvious.

■ FEED SRC:SL86932475 UNSEC

"Revenge!" Lucas tapped on the report with an outstretched finger.

Captain Bertoli looked around cautiously. The diner they were in was quiet and nicely anonymous. It was in a nice neighbourhood in which there was rarely any trouble. Police cruisers patrolled infrequently and there was none of the furtive glances that people flashed at one another when they were quietly afraid. Police were rarely seen and more rarely still were they recognised. He was confident they wouldn't be seen, noticed or spotted for what they were. Still, all this troubled him, and the more they spoke about it, the more troubled he became.

"You don't know that," he replied, sipping on a very passable cup of coffee. "We don't know this is about revenge: we don't know what this is about."

Coffee at the precinct was bad—so bad that it had become a legend. Even prisoners refused to drink it, including the really nasty ones who didn't even seem to understand that criminal behaviour was generally frowned upon.

In the end, he had just given up on it and brought his own. He bought a brand new machine from a reputable store, and set it up in the privacy of his own office. He followed all the instructions to the letter but, despite all the odds, even that coffee turned out bad. Perhaps it was the precinct itself; maybe it was the constant pressure, the grinding anxiety of working with people constantly on edge, always living in fear for their lives? These were people who had learned to trust nobody, who had seen the darkest that mankind had to offer and knew just how low we could go.

"The problem is that we don't know anything."

Lucas sat back in the chair. He had chosen a booth, nicely tucked away in the corner where nobody could hear them; it also had the most comfortable seats. He slumped back in one, making himself

at home. He sighed and shook his head sadly and grumbled, “Well I can’t argue with that.”

They both grunted in agreement, a weary moan of resignation passed between them.

“This officer...” Detective Lucas tapped the report on the table. It featured a graphic depiction of a man who had been brutally gunned down. “Another off-duty officer shot and killed. Two shots to the chest, one to the head. Dead, killed on the spot. His wallet gone, to make it look like a mugging, and the weapon was a .38 revolver. It was the same in all cases.”

“Professional?” the Captain asked, but he already knew the answer.

“Someone is professionally executing police officers, and they’re doing it on our watch,” Lucas continued. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Never. If it’s not revenge, then they’re sending a message. Either way, it’s bad—really bad. It’s almost as bad as the precinct coffee.”

The Captain frowned darkly. With all due grimness, he said, “We don’t talk about the precinct coffee.”

He looked back down to the file and wished that this wasn’t happening. He was three years from retirement; he’d put in his time—more than his time, and had done more than his share. He was old-school. He’d got where he was with hard work, studying at night, putting in the extra hours to earn each promotion the hard way. He hadn’t jumped the queue with money, a fancy degree, or with the benefit of joining a special interest group who did questionable things to chickens in the privacy of a rented hall.

He had earned this job, and doing it had earned him some peace. It was the peace he wanted now, above anything else.

“Who could do this?” he rubbed his face, trying to wipe away the exhaustion, the unending horror of it all. “Who’s powerful enough to take on the police? Who’s bold enough?”

“That’s a good question,” Lucas sighed. “I don’t have answers yet, but I’m working on it.”

“And the victims?”

Lucas didn’t need to see the report—he knew it all too well. “The last one was Detective Silverstein. He was investigating rumours of this new drug, the so-called ‘Big Bad Wolf.’”

“Of course he was...” he said softly, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“They’re all connected,” Lucas grumbled. The frustration was obvious on his voice, and it was even more obvious that he wasn’t coping with it well. He was bad at coping, and the methods he used were bad for him. He looked as if life had looked at him and largely given up, and death hadn’t bothered taking him since there was just no challenge to it.

“I know,” the Captain agreed. “It’s getting worse. At first, officers were lining up; they were angry and they wanted to take on this assignment. Now, fewer and fewer officers want to get involved. The ones I assign it to don’t get results, either because there are no results to get, or they’re wilfully not doing their jobs. If it’s wilful, then I’m left wondering if they’re taking bribes or just too scared to get involved! The net result either way is that we know nothing.”

“I can tell you, the men are running scared! Even in my department, where we have nothing left to live for. Nobody wants to deal with any of this.” Lucas frowned: his own joke had hit a little too close to home. “When a cop is executed, everyone wants a piece of it. When five of them are, everyone wants to stay well clear. What can you say to that?”

Bertoli picked up the file. “Can’t say I blame them. This man had a family—a wife and two daughters. Those two kids will grow up without a father now, just because he asked the wrong questions; because I assigned him to ask the wrong questions. That’s on me.”

The manila file fell open. A picture of the officer was clipped to the top of the report.

“One more face to add to the many that haunt my dreams—the sort of dreams that wake me up in a cold sweat most mornings.”

“So what the hell are we going to do?”

He cringed. It was the one question he had no answer for. “I wish I knew.”

>>END FEED<<

Norma’s eyes rolled up to meet his. “You think I want revenge for my son? Maybe that would be a good place to start.”

He nodded. “This drug—that’s the place where we should start.”

“But where do you fit into all this?” She looked thoughtful for a moment, as if deeply contemplating something that really bothered her. “What were you doing?”

He diverted his eyes and sighed. Softly, he said, “I wish I knew. I must have had a reason to be there, I know that much.” He frowned, struggling to remember, but it was still hopeless. There was just nothing there in his mind, just a ghostly outline of a woman’s face that he couldn’t hold in his mind for more than an instant. “I can’t quite picture the memory, but I know there was a reason. I was running for something. I wasn’t scared—not of Casey, and certainly not the road. There was something I had to do, something that was important to me.”

“You’re remembering?” She almost smiled and almost meant it.

There was still a long way to go, but it was a start.

“Maybe I’m getting there?” he said.

Chapter 12

“This thing is even more impressive in slow motion!” he told her, his eyes going over the review of the motorcycle at a more normal pace than before—a pace his brain could actually keep up with, or at least the part of his brain that processed boring details. It wasn’t a large part, and was now mostly augmented with caffeine. “It has electronic traction control, variable suspension, and computers controlling just about everything! It adapts to its environment automatically; it senses what kind of terrain you’re on, and adjusts itself accordingly. This thing was decades ahead of its time—we’re not even close to catching up now!”

She wasn’t particularly impressed. She huffed to herself and gave him a scolding little glare out of the corner of her eyes. She said caustically, “It’s funny that you manage to remember motorcycle trivia with near perfect clarity, but details such as your name remain oddly elusive.”

He shrugged and pretended to ignore what she said, since he knew it would do a perfectly good job of annoying her. “Motorcycles have most of that now, of course. It’s just that none of it works properly.”

“Well, that’s not unusual,” she told him dryly, with the confidence of an enlightened expert. “Commercial technology isn’t designed to be perfect—it just has to be barely good enough to sell; enough to look good on a spec sheet. The benefits are extremely dubious—it’s just a triumph of marketing over common sense.”

“You don’t get invited to a lot of parties, do you?” he asked her flatly.

She shook her head. Indeed, it seemed that she did not.

“There were five of them originally,” she continued, not quite conversationally. “Only the one is left—all the other prototypes were destroyed or severely damaged; two of them killed the riders in the process. There’s one complete machine in there and the wreckage of two more, and some boxes of spares. You’re forgetting all that, as usual. That thing is a death-trap. That’s why the bike project was abandoned, and the last one was never ridden.”

He shook his head and sighed wistfully. “A peak power of over one thousand BHP, with an estimated top speed of three hundred and three miles per hour. It also has a very dubious booster system where it runs on an injection of hydrogen and a cocktail of chemicals I’ve never even heard of. With that running, it goes up to over one and a half thousand horse-power and can reach well over three hundred and seventy. Can you imagine what that would feel like?” He grinned to himself, trying hard to picture it in his augmented imagination.

“I can imagine scraping my son off a wall if he crashed at that speed,” she said evenly, coldly, unimpressed with all of this.

He frowned. “You really suck all the fun out of everything, don’t you?”

“Technically no, since doing so is actually fun for me,” she said.

He looked shocked and then grinned at her. “Was that a joke? Did you make an actual joke? Did you imply that you’re capable of experiencing fun? Is there a soul in there? I bet it’s screaming in agony, isn’t it?”

“Computers are fun,” she said without a shred of human emotion.

“I don’t think so.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, trying hard to imagine how her comment could be anything other than absolutely, totally and completely wrong. “I can’t imagine myself

pulling up on a customised laptop with a black enamel finish that has a subtle metal-flake that catches the light just perfectly. I doubt I would then have girls staring at me with that look in their eyes that says, 'I have very poor sexual morals and it doesn't matter if you don't believe me because I'm going to prove it to you.'"

"Is that all you think about?" she sighed at him judgmentally.

"Yeah. Bikes. That's it." He grinned.

"Well, some of us have other, more important things on our minds."

"Is my mind on your mind?" he asked. "Are you thinking about things like how to fix the technology in my brain before it decides to restructure my frontal cortex, turning me into a horrendous, emotionless robotic non-human?" he suggested hopefully. He added, but at a much lower volume that she wasn't quite meant to hear, "like you."

"No, I said 'something important,'" she told him with just the merest hint of a smile.

"I'm all ears," he grumbled.

"Well, I've got a bit more control over the system now," she said proudly, holding up a keyboard as if it was the very pinnacle of engineering excellence. It was an old-fashioned white thing that had yellowed alarming and was itself augmented with a considerable amount of caffeine. "I've found dozens of examples of the same kind of thing. The police can't find out anything about the Big Bad Wolf. They've not found a single sample to date. I've found reports of them obtaining the tubes, but the reports always come back showing inconclusive results."

"Maybe someone is hiding the results?" he suggested.

She nodded that, indeed, it appeared likely. “There’s something very odd going on here,” she said, looking thoughtful, about what, was already painfully obvious.

“Maybe some of your people made up the Big Bad Wolf thing, just to justify spending more on new weapons and equipment, just so they could spy on the population more? I mean, you said that’s the kind of thing you do, right?”

She rubbed her chin and looked as if she seriously considered the suggestion for a moment, before shaking her head and dismissing it entirely. “Doubtful. It’s not our style. A government agency would be more likely to exaggerate non-falsifiable claims about the dangers of an existing drug—they’d focus on the death toll of the supply chain, an increase in anomalous medical reactions, kids being targeted for peddling, a rise in crime in lower income areas—anything that people will just take at face value and never question the veracity of. In any case, we know the drug exists, because we saw the dealer forcing that man to try it.”

That was quite true and he tutted to himself for forgetting it. “Didn’t you say that was inconclusive?”

She shook her head as she stared at her monitor. It looked as if she’d seen something that had actually affected her in some way, something that had cracked through the stony facade of impenetrable indifference.

To him, the menus were a mass of jumbled words and numbers but, to her, they made some kind of sense; but what she’d seen, he could only wonder at.

“What is it?” he asked, sounding a little worried himself.

“Watch the screen. Let’s see if this convinces you that the ‘Wolf’ is real.”

■ FEED SRC:MX37914041 SEC RECON

Winnie was a low-life street thug, and he revelled in it. He didn't just come from a disadvantaged neighbourhood: he owned it, wearing his roots as a badge of honour. The way he dressed, his hostile attitude, the way he carried himself, it all added up to form his carefully sculpted image; it worked together to make his life just a little easier, as it earned him the respect he needed.

He was known for his temper—he had a reputation for the occasional violent outburst, for reacting too strongly to the tiniest slight against him. He frowned, he pouted, and he glared at passers-by and nobody ever stared back. You could tell, just from looking at him, that he was a powder-keg and was fit to explode.

He had grown up in poverty, and lived by his wits since he was a child. He knew how to talk with his fists—he'd learned that language at too young an age, and they were lessons he had learned well.

When he sat in a room, he dominated it; he sucked up all the air, and darkened the atmosphere with the grim shadow of his presence. He was a threat, a loaded gun on the coffee table, a grenade without a pin, a social justice warrior without anything to be offended by.

He sat in this house, quietly filling the space he occupied. He looked around, just sucking it all in. It wasn't too bad—it needed someone to tidy it up; it needed attention, and there was a strange smell—a sickly sweet odour he couldn't quite place. Still, it was actually surprisingly homely, all things considered. It wasn't at all what he'd expected.

“Yo, where's my coffee, man?” he yelled suddenly, without warning or provocation, just barking the words angrily at his host. He

was a guest in this house, but it was his now. He took it over as soon as he stepped inside; that was just who he was.

“Chill, mon,” Ramirez shouted back from the kitchen, his voice loaded with sarcastic amusement. “It comin’ n’shit. You is in a hurry? Got better place to be, yeah?” He chuckled, an ugly, rasping noise that sounded like a duck choking while trying to swallow a bigger duck.

“Depends on you,” he grunted and sat back, relaxing into a big, comfortable black reclining chair. It had pride of place in the room, and he’d taken ownership of it, seizing every opportunity to demonstrate his dominance over every situation.

“We is all friends here, just wanna make a good deal, don’t we?” he grinned from an alcove between the rooms. His teeth were gold capped, his face was thin and gaunt, and his eyes were black, hollow things, ugly and evil.

Winnie grumbled, “We better! You best not be keeping me waiting for nothing. You’ll regret that shit for sure.”

“Chill—we called you, man,” he told him. His eyes narrowed, and he nodded to himself knowingly. “I tell you this on da phone, ‘We want make a deal with you.’ We make a good deal with you, best in town, you’ll see.”

Winnie grumbled to himself and wriggled around in the chair. Ramirez was slightly built and Winnie was much larger. The chair wasn’t used to someone his size—not yet at least. It could happen.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang—a surprisingly normal thing, a piercing little electronic squawk that punched a hole through the uneasy silence.

Winnie frowned angrily as Ramirez stepped breezily from the kitchen. He grinned back at him, flashing his gaudy dental-work.

“Yo, relax man! It just my crew, that’s all. Everything gonna be groovy now. We sit down and talk, yeah?”

He glared at him angrily, but then he did everything angrily, so that was all to be expected. It was part of his charm, if anyone would have described him as having any.

Ramirez opened the door, a heavy thing lined with sheet steel that could presumably resist a police raid, buying them valuable time if the worst ever happened. Two more men joined them, slapping hands with one another and each flashing their greedy eyes about menacingly.

One was short, a fat little white man with an awkward tuft of ginger facial hair. The other was Mediterranean-looking, and seemed by far to be the more threatening of the pair. He was wearing a vest top, showing off an impressive set of muscles, and an extensive tattoo that snaked up his arm and touched on the base of his neck.

Ramirez pointed to each in turn. “This one is Daryl, that one is Crow.”

Winnie nodded, but didn’t get up. He growled as if issuing a threat, “Winston. My boys call me ‘Winnie.’”

“Well, we ain’t your boys!” Crow, the bigger man said, his voice was low and threatening and it rivalled Winnie’s. “Are we?”

“Easy, man,” Ramirez laughed, a croaking cackle of a thing as he led them to a sofa. “He is a guest, like, everything just cool for all these friends, right! Now coffee comin’. Sit yourself down.”

They didn’t need telling—social niceties were not high on their agenda, it seemed.

Crow fixed Winnie with a stare. “I know who you are!” he said. “Some of my boys had good things to say about you. Some of them... didn’t.”

“Some of them wanna watch their mouths,” he told him.
“People who say bad things about me don’t last long after.”

Crow grinned, and turned to Daryl.

Daryl smiled back, nodding as if he was impressed. Leaning forward, he finally said, “I gather you were acquainted with Paulie Calotta? The way I heard it, you broke his arm and his nose, and he’s pretty sizeable!”

“I knocked out three of his teeth, too.” He nodded, his eyes widening while his brow lowered, making him look even more threatening than before.

“Yes, well, that pock-marked, motherless scum was shacking up with an ex-girlfriend of mine. Your actions certainly brought a smile to my face, man,” he told him, and then he sat back, grinning widely. “I for one think we’re all going to get along just fine.”

“Well that depends,” he grunted back. “I’m a businessman. I’m here to do business, not make friends.”

Ramirez brought out a tray of gently steaming mugs of coffee. They smelled impressive, the fine aroma washing away the strange odour which had recently been tinged with stale sweat and too much testosterone. “Business, business... always on the job, this guy!” he laughed, pointing at the potential new addition to the team.

Daryl clapped his hands together. “Well, I say, let’s get to it, I’m not made of time. I’m led to believe you wish to join our crew? Am I correctly informed?”

“I keep saying, that depends on you,” he told him severely, as he nodded back in agreement.

“Absolutely.” He cast a glance to his colleagues. “Why don’t you start? What do you know about us?”

Winnie frowned. “What is this, an interview?” he said sarcastically.

Crow leaned forward, his mouth contorting into a snarl. “He asked you a question! If we’re going to work together, we gotta know we can work together. You get me?”

Winnie glared at him. Too much was at stake for him to lose his temper, no matter how much he might like to. He took a couple of deep breaths and calmed himself. He said, “Yeah, I can play your games for now, but I ain’t built out of patience.”

Crow leaned back, never taking his vicious little eyes from him as he did, staring him down aggressively.

With a sigh, Winnie began, “So this is the things I’ve been hearing; I hear you pay the best, your product is the best, you hire the best, and you’re expanding. Well, cards on the table—I like being paid the best, I like having the best product to sell, and I am the best you is ever gonna find.

“I’m the best you is ever gonna see.”

He leaned back and smiled. He’d made his point and had enjoyed making it.

“Good.” Ramirez sipped at his coffee, grinning happily. Noticing that Crow was glaring at him, he shrugged back, “That good, right?”

“And exactly what else have you heard?” Daryl’s happy smile had slipped from his face; he was suddenly all business too.

“I dunno, man. You got some new product, something fresh on the streets.”

Daryl nodded knowingly back at him as he continued, a cruel little smile on his cold little lips,

“Nobody knows how you done it. Word is it gets you high and keeps you clean. You can rock off this world, but you’re still cold and calculating, your brain still feels sharp as a knife.”

“Is that what they’re saying?” Ramirez turned to Daryl and smiled. The two shared a look as their eyes met.

Daryl turned to Winnie and said, “We have got something new — something that nobody else has, not yet at least. We have the world’s best delivery system, the world’s best protection, and the perfect supply. All we need now is customers, and we need them fast because this product is going to be a gold-mine!”

“Customers I got,” Winnie told him, grinning to himself and showing a set of huge, almost perfect, white teeth. The front one to the left was chipped, a souvenir he’d earned in the boxing ring some years before, something he was quite proud of.

“You do come extremely recommended.”

“Yeah, well, I needs to know more.” He kissed his teeth noisily. “If I’m selling for you, I need to know what you’re gonna do for me. How does your supply work? What protection do I get?”

Crow sat back heavily in the chair. He rolled his head back, his eyes looking up to the ceiling. “Man wants to know how everything works,” he growled.

“Yo dude! You got a problem with me?” Winnie snapped and glared at him angrily. He leaned forwards provocatively as he stared him down.

Crow smiled an evil smile, but stared straight ahead. “Just want to see what you’re made of, man.”

“Keep it up and you’ll see what I’m made of,” he told him, leaning back and nodding to himself. “You’ll see, and you ain’t gonna like what you see.”

“There is just one slight problem,” interrupted Daryl, holding up his palm as a momentary expression of caution flashed across his face.

“Which is?”

“The police seem rather keen to catch us, but we’ve all grown quite fond of not being caught,” Daryl explained. “Some of their boys got in our way, and, as things happen that way sometimes, they got back out of our way again. I can’t say it was a pleasant experience for them. The little boys and girls in blue got themselves hurt, so now they’re out for blood. Even our strong protection has limits.”

Crow nodded and grinned an ugly snarl. He said softly, “We love pushing them limits.”

“I ain’t scared of no police,” Winnie said with a grin.

“I wouldn’t imagine for a second that you were,” replied Daryl, with a knowing nod.

“You packing or what?” interjected Ramirez, as he fumbled at his back. From under his shirt he pulled out a Glock pistol. The frame was black, but the slide had been plated in gold. It was gaudy, ugly even, but it was a weapon that would get the job done. “Glock is it, man. It never jam, not never!”

“I’m packing,” he replied grimly.

Ramirez put his Glock down next to him, and leaned forward expectantly. “Lemme see, man! The heat define the man—lemme see what kind of man you is.”

Winnie looked him over. He was hesitant, but eventually, he reluctantly drew his weapon. “9mm Smith and Wesson,” he hissed. “Classic!”

“Sheeez!!” Ramirez grinned enthusiastically and held his hand out. “The old six-three-nine! That is a goddam classic. Lemme try that for size, man!”

Winnie frowned, and slowly, dubiously he handed it over. “It’s loaded man—live round in the pipe, safety on.”

Daryl began again, "It's not often we have trouble with the police."

"I can take heat."

"But we have protection, you see," Daryl explained, his voice level and authoritative. He spoke like a man in charge. "If they were to send a car after our dealers, we'd be gone before they arrived. If they tried to follow our deliveries, we'd be a step ahead. If they sent an undercover operative to infiltrate us... we'd know it."

"How's that?" Winnie looked impressed, and cast his eyes to Ramirez.

He smirked, pulled the magazine from the grip of the pistol, and racked the slide, locking it back and removing the round from the chamber. He placed the live round on the coffee table and grinned.

"We know everything," Daryl said. He stared at Winnie with a pair of knowing eyes. "We know."

Winnie frowned. He looked from face to face, shifting awkwardly in his seat. "And what is it you think you know?"

Daryl fixed him with a disarming stare, his lips just tracing up into a nasty little smile. "We know."

Winnie froze. Then he growled, making a big display of being angry and offended. "Damn, I knew you fools were playing. You're not the real deal; you're so full of it, the shit's coming out of your mouth now. I'm outta here man!"

Crow suddenly, somehow, had a pistol on him. It was a nonsense revolver; the muzzle was a huge, gaping thing. "You're going nowhere, pig."

"Pig? What did you call me?" He looked angrier than he felt. His heart sank in his chest, and his head began to swim as sweat prickled urgently at his brow.

“Calm down, Winston,” said Daryl. “We’re just going to ask you a few questions, and you’re going to answer us honestly. That’s all there is to this, now.”

“Look, you got this all wrong!” he insisted, pressing himself back in the chair.

“The rules of this game are very simple,” Daryl told him, very matter-of-factly. “First, we’re going to ask you some questions. Now, some of the answers I already know, so I’ll know if you’re lying—that’s how we’re going to test you, to see if you’re playing along, or if you’re trying to be a hero, trying to get yourself hurt. If you are lying, I get to cut off one of your fingers. We then continue until you have no more fingers left. Then, after we’re all finished talking, Crow shoots you calmly right up in the back of your head. If you’ve played like a good boy, he’ll be nice and quick about it. If not, then he’ll do it in such a way that you’ll spend... I don’t know... ten, twenty minutes watching your brains ooze out of your shattered eye-socket, while you flap about like a dying fish. It’s not fun, I gather!”

“I’m real good at that,” Crow told him. “I been practicing ‘specially for you!”

Ramirez nodded and held up the pistol. “I hope you don’t mind, I’m keeping this!”

“Dudes, you are so fucking wrong,” he shouted angrily. “My boys will fuck you up if you lay one hand on me!”

“Your boys in blue?!” Daryl laughed, and the others followed along, an ugly chorus of mean cackles that sent a chill up his spine. “I hear they’re dropping like flies. Word is, they’re scared of us, not the other way around.”

“Alright...” He still sounded angry, but his eyes were telling them the real truth. “You’ve had your fun. Let’s get serious now.”

Ramirez pulled out a pair of garden shears from his rear trouser pocket. He opened them wide, and then snapped them together three or four times, the metal blades closing with a jarring clunk. "I've not had my fun yet. It's coming though."

"You can't be serious." The angry facade slid away. He looked afraid, as beads of sweat ran down his brow.

"First question," said Daryl, looking very, very serious indeed. "I hope you were paying attention because I've got more questions than you've got fingers."

"Wait, wait, wait." He held up his hand. "Look, you got this all wrong. Just let me walk away, that's all. No harm done. My lips are sealed: it's as if none of this ever happened."

"No," said Daryl, sounding a little sad about it. "That's really not going to work for me, I'm afraid. You see, if you walk away, they'll just send somebody else. What I need is for the police to be scared. Scared police don't come nosing into my business—they stay away. I want police who take their bribes and shut their eyes, and the tools I use to make those kinds of police are bullets and gardening shears, and you're about to become something of an expert on the process."

"You want me to take a bribe?" he pleaded. "I can do that. I work for you now, that's cool. I work for you now, I'll be your eyes in the department. No problem."

"Sorry," Daryl shrugged. "I'm afraid my mind is already quite made up on the matter. I'm not the kind who changes direction too easily."

"You can't!" His eyes were fixed on the garden shears as Ramirez moved over and sat himself on the edge of his chair. He glimpsed back to the gun, the threatening little weapon pointing directly at him, all business. It was a plain and simple weapon—it

wasn't for show, it wasn't designed to look pretty, to be threatening, or to prop up a weak ego. It was a killer—cold, hard, and unashamedly so. A thirty-eight revolver, short and effective.

"I can!" Ramirez hissed at him. "And I want to do it too!"

He looked up to Daryl. He put his hands together and he pleaded, "Dude, I have kids, man. I didn't even volunteer for this assignment; I didn't even want it. I've got a son and a daughter, 2 and 4 years old. Let me just go home to my family."

Daryl shook his head. "Yes, they're playing at your local park right now. I have some associates keeping a very close eye on them. So let me tell you how this is going to work. Play nice, and your head has a nice neat hole in it before you're any the wiser. Play really, really nice, and I don't order your children killed, and your wife brutally raped by Ramirez here. They've already met, you should know—he began some repairs on your boiler last week, and is due back later today with parts. She'll let him straight in without question. She'll smile while she does it."

"No!" he cried out, a tear rolling down his face. "Just let me go. I'll leave town; I'll be a ghost. I'm done with this life, this job. I swear you'll never hear from me again, never even hear my name on the wind."

Daryl shook his head. "Let's begin. First question; what's your name, and where do you work?"

He looked at Ramirez, his eyes pleading, hoping to connect with some tiny sliver of compassion buried somewhere inside him. His mind raced, desperately hunting for a way out. Perhaps this was just an attempt to scare him—maybe they were going to let him go after all. He clung to that.

"Winston Martin. I'm based at the 12th Precinct." He shut his eyes, suddenly ashamed of himself. He felt Ramirez grab his hand,

and felt the hard, rough metal edges of the shears on his left index finger. They pressed down on either side, pinching against his skin. He gasped in horror and looked up, his eyes wide in fear.

Daryl shrugged. "Very good," he said. "You see, this is going to be fine. Painless, quick, and easy."

"Just let me go," he whimpered. "I don't know anything, I really don't. I'm just a beat cop. I got dragged into this two months ago. It was just a promotion, and I needed the money. Who doesn't need the money these days?"

"Question two," he continued. "How much do they know about us?"

He looked up, his spirit broken. "We don't know anything."

Daryl nodded at Ramirez.

He felt the blades closing. It was tight at first, and then wet and cold. Suddenly his hand erupted in pain as if everything bad in the entire world had exploded beneath the sharpened edges of the metal shears. He cried out in sudden, torturous agony as shock took hold of him.

He could hear Ramirez laughing, and another voice from Crow as they took perverse pleasure in the torment they were inflicting.

"That really didn't have to happen," said Daryl, pretending to be sad about it. Contemplatively, he continued, "I think I'm going to ask you the same question again, because I know you want to impress me. How much do they know?"

His voice was laboured, his breathing ragged. "I don't know much. I was told to come here, to meet you. They know you've got a new drug on the street. The word is that you guys are one of the suppliers. We got no evidence; we don't know anything, so they're recruiting new guys to find out."

“See,” Daryl told him. “It’s not so bad, is it? When you do your bit, we do our bit. We really don’t have to make this nasty for anyone at all, do we?”

“I’ll tell you anything you want,” he gasped. “Just don’t kill me.”

He felt cold now. Blood was spilling, pooling onto the tiled floor from the shattered stump of his brutalised finger. He shuddered; the pain was still sharp, angry in his fist. It felt like it filled his whole hand, throbbing with every beat of his heart. He was desperate for it to not happen again; he’d do anything, tell them anything.

“Let’s carry on,” Daryl said, as if he had absolutely no concern whatsoever. “How many other undercover officers are looking into this new drug?”

He closed his eyes, his head slumping forwards. He began sobbing softly as his mind caved in on him. “I don’t know,” he whimpered. The sharp end of the pain returned, exploding as the jaws tightened slowly around another finger and then clicked together, cutting through skin, through flesh and muscle, and then shattering bone, crunching and grinding his finger apart. It was worse than the first. Perhaps it was the anticipation, knowing just how awful, just how sickening the experience was going to be, and knowing it was coming again and that there was nothing he could do to stop it. He cried out, wailing at the top of his voice like a wounded puppy.

“Not such a big man now!” mocked Crow.

“It’s an act,” he cried, gasping for breath. For a moment, he felt like he was going to be sick, or black-out maybe. His head was swimming—he knew he was going into shock. “I’m just doing a job. This isn’t me. I’m a daddy—I just want to see my babies.”

“That’s not going to happen again, not in this life...” Daryl told him. He checked his watch. “Let’s move this along, shall we? We’ve got places to be, things to do and I’m not made of time. I’m sure Crow is anxious to blow a big fucking hole in your skull.”

“And then, you know what I’m going to do?” Ramirez whispered, hissing into his ear. “I’m going to cut off your nose with my kitchen-knife, and I’m going to send it to the 12th Precinct with a note telling them keep it out of our business in future.”

“He is,” Daryl agreed, with a happy little smirk. “You know, I wouldn’t have thought of that. It’s very creative; very clever.”

“Please...” he whimpered softly.

“So let me ask you again. How many undercover officers do you think they’re going to send next week?”

>>FEED PAUSED<<

“Enough!” He stepped back from the row of consoles and shook his head. “OK, what the hell are we into here?”

“This sort of thing isn’t unheard of,” she told him softly, almost apologetically. She was clearly rattled by what she’d seen but was managing her emotions better. “Do you see the importance of the Hawk-Eye now? I know some people believe in freedom over security, but this machine means that things like that never have to happen to people like him.”

“But this machine has been sitting here rotting for the last 30 years!” he told her angrily. “And what are we doing? We’re watching like some sad moron, living in his parents’ basement while laughing at shock videos on the internet. We should be doing something about this!”

“Like what?” She clearly had no idea what it was that he thought they should be doing. “Can I remind you that my remit is to

discover the whereabouts of Henry? This is something I've come across quite accidentally while investigating the events that led to my son's accident. That accident that you were involved in, I might remind you."

"So we're doing nothing?" He grumbled and looked away, finding the idea of making eye contact a trifle distasteful for the moment.

"I don't know what you think we should be doing."

"If that machine of yours is so powerful, maybe we can use it find some humanity in you. I certainly can't seem to find any."

Chapter 13

He wasn't happy and, unlike her, he had no problem with expressing such things, loudly and annoyingly, to anyone who was, or wasn't, listening.

"There's nothing we can do," she told him once again, increasingly annoyed that he didn't seem to be getting it. "The simulation was from events that happened five days ago. The man was killed; he's dead, and there's nothing we can do to help him. What we saw was nothing more than a visual speculation anyway of what might have happened, based on mathematical data, camera footage, electromagnetic pulses, radio waves, overheard conversations after the fact, and other stored information. We don't even really know how accurate it is. What we do know, though, is that it's a past event—it happened, and now it's gone."

It was a quite thoroughly logical argument, but he was not a thoroughly logical human; not many humans were. To him, that seemed like a stroke of good fortune; to her, exactly the opposite.

He crossed his arms over his chest defiantly. He told her, as if he had some authority there: "We can't just sit here with all this equipment and not do something to help. You say this thing has unlimited power, and that means we have a responsibility."

"With a lot of power, comes a lot of responsibility. I think I heard that somewhere!"

She smiled thinly at the ridiculousness of all this and wondered just how exactly he wasn't able to understand it.

"What would you have me do? None of this equipment ever officially existed—it's not even supposed to be here. From what I understand, most of it never really worked anyway. The computer, especially, was massively flawed, and proved to be totally

unreliable,” she argued. She glared back at him for a moment and then calmed herself. She wasn’t completely emotionless, despite her attempts to appear so. “Whatever happened with Henry, this is his legacy. It eventually evolved into our modern surveillance technology; it’s classified, and if we reveal it, then not only do we risk going to prison for doing so, but we also risk undoing all the good work he did in his life.”

“Good work?” he smirked at her. “Spying on people is good work, is it?”

“You’re trying to persuade me to do more of it.”

He obviously didn’t like it when people countered his poorly conceived arguments with slightly less poorly conceived rebuttals. He grunted and looked away.

“We could contact the police,” he suggested, suddenly turning back. “We could tell them what we’ve seen; we could make an anonymous call, help to lead them to these killers and get them off the damn streets.”

She looked at him for a moment, unmoved by his passionate, but ultimately flawed, argument. “The police very likely know where he was killed, but have been unable to act, either due to a lack of evidence or procedural problems. They sent him on this mission, after all. In any case, for all we know, you’re more like them than you are like the police.”

“I’m not like them.” He frowned at her angrily, his eyes burning with rage. “I’d bet real money that I’ve never cut anyone’s fingers off with garden tools and then shot them in the back of the head.”

“Says you!” A sad little smile flickered over her lips. “But we don’t know that, do we?”

“So what are we going to do?” he asked, his tone rather insistent that they do something, at least.

“You’re going to shut up until you remember something useful, and I’m going to do my job.”

“We should at least do something.” He turned to Merv who by now, wasn’t really taking the job of guarding him, or even of looking intimidating very seriously. “Don’t you think we should do something?”

Merv looked to Norma for a moment and shrugged, clearly not terrible keen on taking sides.

“Come on, what do you think we should do, Merv?” he insisted.

Merv shrugged again. “I could make a call and tell the police the address where the man was killed. If the police have been tied up with procedure, an anonymous witness would allow them to act.”

His face lit up into a beaming smile. “There you go!”

“Merv will do as he’s told, even if you don’t,” she grumbled, enjoying that small piece of authority she had over the situation. Suddenly, her eyes lit up. “Yes!” she yelled, plunging the room into surprised silence.

Several additional panels flickered to life.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! I’ve finally managed to bypass numerous vital safety protocol algorithms, speculative logic analysis rendering, and the ridiculously outdated dialect augmentation processor, all to set up multiple direct feeds straight from the consolidation input stack for tracked real time event diagnosis.”

She looked around the room at faces that were no less surprised and were now peppered with additional confusion.

“Now we can watch things as they happen, rather than waiting for hours or even days for the information to be compiled.”

“And what will we do with this new-found ability?” he asked pointedly.

She glared at him, and then seemed to lose all interest in arguing down to his level. “Let’s find out. There’s an operation in progress right now.”

■ FEED SRC:MX92153817 SEC >RTLINK<

Sergeant Barry Milton was the oldest of the pair, and by far the more experienced. Officer Thomas Collins was by far the more enthusiastic of them, but that didn’t go very far towards making up for his personal shortcomings, as an officer, or as a person. Collins was young, almost annoyingly so, and the son of a close friend of Milton’s. His assignment had been arranged for a very good reason, a reason that now seemed quite ridiculous as they sat there on their powerful, dangerous machines waiting for a call to action, an action that potentially could plunge them both into more danger than they’d ever faced on the streets before.

Around six months earlier, over a beer or two, there had been a long discussion about young Thomas, between the Sergeant and his father. He was a police officer, but not a particularly good one. He had a fierce tenacity, but had virtually nothing that resembled common sense, and almost entirely lacked a desire for self-preservation. His father decided, after he’d been shot for the third time, that this was becoming something of a problem, and that something needed to change.

Sergeant Milton had rather suspected that this was coming, and did what he could to get him assigned to his unit, since he was a keen motorcycle rider who was showing some promise in that regard.

“I love this job!” said Thomas, as he ran his hands over the grips, tenderly caressing the controls.

Milton regarded him with the look an older man gives a younger one when he knows precisely what's going on inside his head, since it used to be going on inside his own, and that was exactly what worried him about it.

"You said it was going to be boring, Thomas," he reminded him with a knowing smirk. "You said it was just going to be riding around giving speeding tickets to people who were having more fun than you were.

"I was wrong." He grinned inside his helmet, and rubbed his hands together expectantly. He wore a pair of black leather gloves, lightweight and strong, backed with carbon armour. "I thought that police motorcycle support was going to be dull. I had no idea I was going to be given a state of the art super-bike and a machine-pistol."

"It's not a machine-pistol," the Sergeant told him sternly. "We don't hand out machine-pistols. This isn't Afghanistan!"

He rolled his eyes and laughed. "Sorry, a 'selective fire' Glock 18 with lengthened slide and trick sights. It's still pretty damn cool."

There was no denying that. Only 4 members of the high-speed motor-units still remained. He wondered briefly if the experiment would be considered a success. He had no great desire to hand over the keys and be relegated back to a standard police cycle.

What they needed now was a victory—some great success to balance against their many failures. He hoped this was going to be it.

Sergeant Milton watched the electronic map, and listened carefully to the radio chatter.

Officer Collins fidgeted anxiously, clearly keen to get moving. "Do you think we'll see action?"

"In a sting operation like this one, you can never tell," he told him. "We've got a total of 10 undercover operatives out to buy Big Bad Wolf. As soon as one of them gets a hit, the whole lot of us will

mobilise. Being on support, we need to be ready, while hoping we won't need to be."

"You hope whatever you like, grandpa!" he laughed, his voice gratingly too high in pitch. The young man was very much the same way his father had been when he was young. "I'm hoping to slam this baby into full-power mode and chase down escaping bad guys."

He might yet get his wish, the Sergeant knew.

"Did you hear about the nose?"

Milton grunted an affirmative. "They won't get away with that. This time they've gone too far."

"So it was the nose that led to this? I figured... I spoke with Detective Cooper yesterday. He said he reckoned there'd be a big push. You can't just send an officer's nose to the police with a cocky note and expect to get away with it."

"A big push?" He chuckled to himself knowingly. "This is dangerous, son. People could get hurt on an operation like this. This isn't a good thing that we're involved in here."

He turned suddenly to face him, frowning inside his black helmet as if he'd been offended in some terrible way. "How is it not a good thing?"

"It's a desperate play," he began, knowing that an explanation would be pointless to an officer as young, fresh and inexperienced as he was. "The Captain has compartmentalised everything. It looks to me as if he doesn't trust anyone anymore. It looks to me like we're running out of options. If we don't catch someone today, if we don't start making a difference on the street with this new drug, then morale is going down the toilet and it's taking law and order with it."

The young man shook his head, sneering in the face of experience. "Not if I can help it."

The Sergeant gave him another of those looks. He admired his enthusiasm—it reminded him of himself when he was that age. The difference was that when he was that age, nobody had given him an insanely fast motorcycle and a machine-pistol; and with the wisdom of hindsight, he was rather glad that they hadn't. He watched for a moment as the young man absently fiddled with the controls.

They were parked up, sitting outside a coffee stand on their motorcycles in readiness. They were backup for whatever might happen. A small, elite team of trusted officers had been brought together without prior notice.

It was unconventional, but he was ready. He looked at his hands. He was sure they were trembling. He could feel it in his chest, the tightness of adrenaline, the lightness in his head.

Then it happened. There was a static hiss in his ear, and then the report buzzed through his helmet.

“We’ve made contact.”

Just three little words, but three little words he’d hoped not to hear.

He knew this was going to be bad, he just had that feeling.

Collins turned to him. The message had been restricted to the higher ranking officers, but it was clear he’d received a message of his own. His back stiffened, he sighed to himself and sat up, stretching out in the saddle.

“They’ve made contact,” he told the young man, who grinned widely at the news.

Collins’ hand went to the start button, but he withdrew it immediately, hovering anxiously. “What does that mean?”

“It means one of our officers has been offered the Wolf. It means we’ve got a chance of catching one of these dealers, maybe

even a supplier.” On his electronic map, a red dot had begun to flash. It was only three blocks from them. They could be there in minutes.

“Are you excited?” the young man asked, but this time there was something else to his voice, muffled though it was through his lightly-armoured helmet. It wasn’t tinged with youthful exuberance or wild enthusiasm. This time it was darker. Realisation seemed to have settled in. He was sitting on a powder-keg of electronically contained violence with a wheel at each end, and at his side was a fully automatic sidearm with a lengthened barrel and optical sights.

They were prepared beyond what would, or even should be expected, from a routine police officer patrolling the city streets. They were predators, and they were hunting something vicious and dangerous. Moreover, they were not winning this battle.

His voice was tinged with fear.

“I’m not excited,” said the older man. “I’m ready to do what has to be done.”

“Yeah,” he nodded solemnly. “What has to be done? I thought I’d be keener, but now I find that... I’m nervous.”

“Good.” The Sergeant smiled. “Those are the kinds of feelings that keep a man alive.

“Contact down. Repeat, contact down.”

The message chilled him to the bone. He shut his eyes and hoped.

“Control to AMU4. Black motorcycle sighted, heading north from contact. Intercept.”

This time, the younger officer had received the same message. The maps updated automatically. They exchanged a look.

The Sergeant’s motorcycle was the first to start. It roared to life, breathing heavily from a small carbon-fibre exhaust. “Let’s roll,” he grumbled, clicking it into gear and pulling away hard.

Both motorcycles began to scream. Blue and red lights lit up the machines, as brilliant forward illumination helped to clear the way from unwary road users. A piercing, shrill siren pulsed from under the plastic hump that replaced the passenger seat.

“This is AMU4. We are in pursuit.”

Buildings flashed away to his side, brick and concrete melting into a blur as the speed built and built, as he twisted on the throttle, going faster and faster.

‘Officer down’ meant he had been killed—it had to. The voice on the communicator was solemn; it carried the weight of strained emotions. There could be no doubt.

This had gone wrong—very wrong, and another police officer had died. It wasn’t too late for one of them to join him.

He could hear the drone behind him. Officer Collins was in formation, right where he should be as they picked their way injudiciously through the traffic. They pressed on, touching a hundred miles per hour as he passed up through a line of cars. The echo of his engine pulsed through his helmet. For a moment he smiled—it was exhilarating, exciting even, to be going so fast, to be so damn heroic.

They weaved through a row of cars. The line broke up as they flashed through it, tearing along as fast as they dared, and they dared to ride fast—they were chosen for that very reason.

“Left! left!” he cried out, his eyes darting down to the map. He slipped down a gear, and pulled across the lane. With a twist of the throttle, the engine roared once more and they pulled into the turn.

Up ahead, he saw it. “AMU4 to control. We have visual contact with a black motorcycle. We are in pursuit.”

The reply was almost instant. “Confirmed AMU4. Engaged active tracking. We are recording. Good luck AMU4.”

Seeing that machine washed away all thoughts of restraint, of self-control. He abandoned himself to the moment as the bike went faster and faster; it shuddered under him as he accelerated harder and harder along the all too narrow streets. The road melted around him, an endless dark grey ribbon stretching on to infinity, smooth and seamless. There was only him now, him and the target.

Suddenly, he was overtaken. The surprise shocked him out of his adrenaline-fuelled imagination and kick-started his rational thoughts. He wondered what was going on as the yellow machine streaked past, the engine screaming angrily.

“AMU4-2, Pull back! Stay in formation!” he barked into the helmet mic. The speed had swept him away, the thrill of the chase, and the same emotions had overwhelmed his young colleague, his good sense now nothing more than a distant memory.

The black bike slowed into a corner and roared away, vanishing for a moment, obscured behind a row of buildings. As they swept around, he caught it again, but it was pulling hard and slipping away from them.

Collins was on it, making better progress; he was keeping pace even as the Sergeant was losing ground.

“I won’t lose him!” the determined voice shouted through his speakers. The voice was barely recognisable over the rush of the wind, the howl of the engine.

“Pull back!” he barked angrily, shouting as loud as he could.

His order went unheeded. The black bike slowed again. He flicked his brake; the force of them bit hard and the bike slowed alarmingly. The black bike banked steeply, turning into a side street, at an almost hard right-angle. He was going too fast still. He pressed hard on the rear brake, wildly, unreasonably hoping to safely make the turn.

Up ahead, it was too late—Collins had committed to it. The scream of his bike rose in pitch; he had thrown down another gear and banked over for the corner, but he was still going way too fast. There just hadn't been time for him to react to what was happening.

He couldn't look away. It was as if it was happening in horrible slow motion. It was fascinating, but grimly so.

The yellow bike caught the curb, and caught it hard, slamming into the verge. It wobbled, rolling around; the front went limp, the back lifted from the ground. It crashed down hard, throwing the rider off onto the sidewalk. He rolled through the air, finally hitting the ground, bouncing and skidding along until he slammed into the wall of a building with a sickening, gut-wrenching crash.

He heard the squeal of his own tyres as he locked up the brakes. He had overshot the corner by several meters.

He threw the side-stand down quickly, jumped off the bike and ran as fast as he could. His chest heaved, his head spun. "AMU4 to control," he gasped breathlessly. "Officer down! Officer down!"

He stood aghast. The motorcycle was lying in the gutter, a sickening mess of jumbled wreckage peppered with shattered yellow plastic. Officer Collins lay at the side, not moving, but a low, heavy groan was sounding from inside the helmet.

He closed his eyes sadly. "AMU4 to control. Request urgent medical services. Now!"

Chapter 14

The three of them looked at one another. From their individual, unique perspectives on the matter, it appeared they were thinking the same thing. It was obvious from the accusing look in their eyes, from the way they stood, from the expectant silence.

“So it happened again?” she said softly, without the weight of any emotion that carried on her voice. She had once again removed herself from all that, hardening herself against the world. When she spoke, it was with a calm tone, too calm, and seemed wildly out of place with what the situation demanded. “Another AMU rider down, possibly killed in action chasing another supplier.”

“Another?” he frowned at her defensively. “We don’t know for sure that I’m a supplier. We don’t know what I was doing.”

“It’s clear what you are,” she told him, her eyes looking away in disgust. “How terrible it is that there are more of you, that there are other people riding around who don’t care who they hurt.” She looked saddened; her eyes seemed to redden almost immediately, and took on a glassy sheen. “More people just like you, who don’t seem to care who they kill.”

“You think that I did that?” he cried out angrily, although he had to admit, it did seem likely. He seemed to be finding the whole idea more disturbing than anyone else.

“You’re a criminal,” she said simply, and with more conviction. “Merv is going to escort you back to your room. I don’t want to hear from you again, until you remember something useful, which is pertinent to my investigation of why my son is lying in a bed with cranial damage that he’s unlikely to recover from. I should never have let you leave the interview room—that was a terrible lapse of judgement on my part, and I apologise for it.”

“I didn’t do that,” he told her sternly, his voice taking on the assuredness of a man who knew such a thing beyond the shadow of a doubt. He had to wonder how he could be so certain of such a thing, and yet, certain he was.

Logical deduction and simple reasoning did nothing to diminish the fact that he was certain, and for no reason that made good, if any, sense at all.

“I know I didn’t do that. I hate drugs, this one in particular. I don’t know why, but the mention of its name sends a chill crawling up my spine,” he said without humour, not a ghost of sarcasm on his voice.

“And this is proof of what?” she asked, and it was her turn now to sound amused. But, beneath her shell, she seemed more saddened by all this than anything else. She behaved as if a chunk of her soul had been scooped out, leaving her even more cold and aloof than usual.

“It’s a memory of something...” he told her. “Where’s your proof that I’m wrong?”

“Lying in a bed in ward one, not expected to make a recovery.” She smiled a humourless and empty smile. “Anything else to add?”

He narrowed his eyes and sighed. “There’s a girl. It’s an image I keep getting. She’s the key to all this, I think.”

“A girl?” Norma looked torn between wanting to believe him, and thinking that he was lying; suspecting he would simply say anything to stay in the control room. Even he wondered why he would want that, which just raised further questions.

“I need to find her,” he added.

After a long moment of contemplation, she said, “How do I know anything you say is true?”

“What have you got to lose?”

She sighed and turned away. She distractedly began pushing buttons, and green text flashed onto the black monitor as she did.

“You need to give me more than just ‘a girl’ to go on.”

He screwed up his face and rubbed his temple, desperately trying to remember. “I don’t know anything else,” he said wearily. “I just see black hair, brown eyes. I get a strong sense that I need to find her.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because I don’t know anything.” He glanced over at the room along the edge of the building, and pointed to it. “It’s that bike. I keep thinking, ‘If only I’d had that bike’, but I don’t know what it means. Whenever I think of that bike, I think of her. That video made it even stronger.”

“I don’t trust you,” she told him pointedly. “I’ll search the day of your accident for a female-related incident, but it doesn’t mean I believe what you’re saying.”

“You mean like a death?” He shuddered at the thought of it for some reason. A part of him must have remembered something.

“Unless you have a better idea?”

He didn’t, and he shook his head solemnly in reply.

“It will take some time—there’s a lot of information to sort through - manually, I’ll add.”

“Maybe this would be a good time to order pizza?” he suggested dryly. “I’m pretty sure I think that people who have anchovies or pineapple are the cause of all the bad things that happen in the world.”

She looked up and tried to look angry, but her expression softened as she seemed to realise that she was also fairly hungry. Perhaps he was just too damn hard to be angry at.

“We’re not ordering pizza,” she told him haughtily.

“Chinese food? Ever since you mentioned those numbers, I’ve had a taste for sweet and sour.”

She rolled her eyes and began sarcastically, “Sure, I’ll phone the local take-out and see if they can deliver some fried rice and ribs to the abandoned secret government bunker that’s concealed cleverly in the back of a warehouse just down the end of their road.”

“Can I get noodles instead?” he shrugged, as if he hadn’t picked up on her sarcastic tone at all.

She glared at him. “Merv will escort you to your room and lock you in it. When he returns, you will eat what he deems appropriate.”

“You’re locking me up? Really, Norma?”

“Really!”

There was a sudden bleep from the console, and a line of data flashed on the screen. “We have a new live feed marked ‘pertinent’.”

“Can I see?”

■ FEED SRC:DL08220745 SEC >RTLINK<

Captain Bertoli popped a pair of ibuprofen tablets into his mouth, and swallowed them with a swig of strong, almost cold coffee.

Lucas frowned and sat back. The booth had become their own. Whenever they met, it was there. This was their new office, away from the prying eyes of the department, the ears turned towards them, the gazes that looked their way; and the really awful coffee. They were suspicious of everything now, and to some degree, even of each other.

“Well, that went horribly wrong.” Bertoli swigged another shot, draining his cup. He held it up to attract the attention of the waitress. “If you’ve got any more ideas on ways we could kill or maim more officers, I’d love to hear them.”

Lucas remained in thoughtful silence. “What do we know?”

“I know I’ve got two more officers down,” he huffed wearily. “One detective Cooper—he asked for the new drug on the street, and they took him to a dealer who shot him twice in the chest. He bled out before the EMT could arrive. His wife is expecting a baby girl in two months.”

Lucas seemed oddly unmoved. “Another one... I’m getting tired of all this. It’s got to stop. It’s just got to stop.”

“Nobody knew about this operation until one hour before,” he began, rubbing his temples wearily. “Just as you advised, I picked key trusted individuals, I used cascade management, I compartmentalised the information. There’s no way that word could have got out. It can’t be an informant on the inside.”

“What else could it be?” Lucas grimaced at the prospect. He didn’t want to believe it—neither of them did. “There’s just no other explanation—they know everything we’re doing before we even know it ourselves. Someone is feeding them information.”

Bertoli looked away sadly. “One of our AMUs took a spill. They chased down a rider on a black motorcycle with no plates. It was clean, no distinguishing marks, we can’t even make out what kind of machine it is from the video footage. The younger partner lost control, and slammed into a wall in a tight corner. That earned him a broken arm, three broken ribs, a concussion, and a new-found respect for the speed limit.”

“Great,” he said sarcastically. They stopped for a moment, sat back grumpily and paused their conversation.

The waitress poured them both a fresh mug of coffee. “Anything else?” she asked politely.

“We’re good for now, thanks,” Bertoli told her, though he was really anything but good.

She walked off, flashing them a cursory, and not entirely genuine, smile.

Lucas watched her walking away To the Captain it looked as if he was briefly trying, and failing, to imagine her naked. He sighed to himself. His mind was elsewhere, and such things were actually long behind him. "He'll live then?"

"He'll live," he grunted. "He's off the AMU, though. Damn fool broke ranks to chase down the motorcycle. We got it all recorded, of course, so we can't even cut him some slack. He'll be lucky to be diverting traffic when he gets back."

Lucas sipped at the coffee and winced, unprepared for how hot it was going to be.

Bertoli looked up to him, sipping his more judiciously. "You know?" he said, with all the earnest overtones of a man who really meant what he saying. "I'm done. I just don't know how to proceed. I don't know how we're coming back from this. I'm clean out of ideas, Geoff."

"What the hell is this Big Bad Wolf, right?" Lucas stared out of the filthy window to the streets outside. Passers-by meandered along on their way to who knew where. Maybe one of them knew; maybe the key was right out there somewhere.

"I don't even want to know anymore," he admitted. "I'm ready to leave this to younger men with fire in their bellies and long futures. My fire's gone out. I'm ready to buy a fishing boat, and slowly listen to the musical sound of my arteries hardening."

"We're not beaten yet!" Lucas said defiantly.

"Maybe you're not..."

>>MUTE<<

“At least he’s going to be OK,” he said, somewhat relieved. “The motorcycle rider.”

“Lucky him,” she told him. “It could have been much worse, don’t you think?”

He ignored her pointed sarcasm. “What about the black bike?”

“What about it?”

“Didn’t you trace it? Can’t you follow it with your equipment? Isn’t that what all this stuff is for?” Had nobody else thought of this, he wondered?

“I’ll compile the data...” She pressed some buttons, but her heart didn’t appear to be in it. A line flashed on top of the screen and she read it off. She touched a few buttons on the keyboard as he watched intently. More lines appeared, but nothing that made any sense to him.

“I’ve got something, I think. Female-related incidents around the time of your arrest. I’ve sorted the data to prioritise events closest to the time and locale, along the projected course you were following.”

“How many?” he asked grimly, almost afraid of the answer.

“Two murders, three overdoses, a rape, eighteen shop-lifting arrests, two domestic incidents, five street brawls, nine charges of soliciting...”

She went on, but he stopped her as something resonated with him. “Overdoses?”

She looked up, and caught the concern in his eyes and reacted as though she must have believed that it was real. “One was hospitalised, two died on the scene.”

“Show me.”

“I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that I’m the one in charge here,” she huffed at him, and began processing.

“Why overdoses, anyway?”

“This has all got something to do with drugs, hasn’t it? I was desperate to find her—maybe I was trying to help her; maybe I was delivering the drugs that killed her?” He didn’t know, and the frustration of his ignorance was weighing heavily on him.

“If you were her delivery boy, she’d be alive,” she pointed out, coldly logical to the last.

Two pictures flashed on the screen. One matched his description of the girl he had been talking about—she had long dark hair and brown eyes. “Do you remember her?” she said.

He frowned, and just stared at the screen for a moment. He nodded slowly. “I think maybe I do.”

Chapter 15

“Who is she?” he asked sadly. For reasons he couldn’t seem to quite get his head around, he felt as if a piece of him was missing, torn out by what he was seeing in that picture on the screen.

It was a police mugshot—not the best of a person, and not a person at their best. It was her, whoever she was, and whatever she might mean to him. There was no doubt in his mind that it was her face he’d been seeing in half-remembered glimpses.

Unfortunately for him, doubt wasn’t the only thing absent from his mind.

“Caroline Marks,” Norma read from the screen, breaking the spell the picture had over him. “Overdosed on heroin and barbiturates. She was a known user; drugs were found at the scene. No suspicious circumstances were recorded; the police are not seeking anyone else in connection with her death.”

“Case closed then,” he said angrily through gritted teeth. It was empty, so empty, and so very cold. “Another statistic. Another dead user that nobody will ever care about.”

“You really feel that you remember her, don’t you?” She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. She said, “It might surprise you that I find myself hoping, against all logical reason, that I might be wrong about you, even in some tiny way. It certainly surprises me.”

He threw an accusing glare at her, opened his mouth to speak as his cheeks flushed angrily, but he said nothing, rather bucking the trend.

“It says there was no toxicology screening,” she continued.

“So?”

“So they never tested her. She might have been using Big Bad Wolf for all we know. We don’t even know how to test for it at this point, so even if they had tested her, they could have missed it.”

He folded his arms across his chest as he calmed himself down. Suddenly, he was curious. “You think she was using it?”

She sighed, and held up a hand for him to slow down: he was jumping to conclusions, as he seemed to do all too often. “It fits, but we don’t have evidence one way or another. I’m not making wild presumptions. This is just a lead for now—nothing more.”

“What do we know about her?” he insisted. “Who sold her the drugs?”

“This might come as a terrible shock to you,” she began sarcastically, “but drug addicts rarely file that kind of information with agencies whose job is to protect them. Maybe that’s what’s wrong with the world?”

They both looked at one another incredulously for a moment.

“Norma, I need pizza. I mean, like really, really need a pizza.”

She huffed. “We’re not getting...” she paused, sighing at him. She fixed him with her very finest disarming glare, before saying, “Merv, go and get a pizza.”

Merv grumbled, and turned away sighing, holding his hands up in mock surrender.

“Come on, Merv, I promise to play nice. Take me to my box and lock me up!”

“Just cuff him to the table,” she called out, giving him a slightly dirty look that told him she was backing down, but that she had still won.

He turned to face her; his eyes widened, a smile on his lips, but a cautious one nonetheless. “Thanks, Norma,” he said, sounding

a little surprised at her display of compassion. "I promise to be nice, but I can't promise not to be annoying."

"I don't have any cuffs," Merv grumbled. "I could break his legs a bit, if you like. It's no trouble."

He turned to him, glaring into a pair of tiny, vicious little eyes that flashed back at him. "I hope you're not joking. If you're joking, then this is even more concerning."

"I doubt he's joking—I once saw him break someone's legs - he did seem to be enjoying it," Norma assured him, hoping to relieve him of the troublesome burden of not knowing. "Just give me a gun," she huffed.

He handed her a Glock, which looked tiny in his hand but fairly impressive in hers.

"Is it loaded?"

"There's no safety," said Merv, pointing his fingers at the man's head. "Pull the trigger and he dies. It's very simple to use."

"I know how to kill someone," she protested. "I work for the government, you know."

"Can I have cheese and..." He frowned and screwed up his face trying to remember. Suddenly something came to him and he cried out in minor victory, "Vegetables. I don't eat meat."

"What are you, gay or something?" asked Merv, mockingly.

Norma's expression turned to one of confused horror, as several of her base social instincts crashed head-on into each other. The fallout wasn't pretty. After a moment, she turned to face him with an ashen white face, flustering. "That's offensive, Merv..."

"What?" Merv shrugged, not really seeing a problem with all this. "I like meat."

"I'm a health freak," the man said assuredly, smiling happily about it. "I'm certain of it. I don't eat meat."

“Health freaks don’t like pizza,” she told him, raising her eyebrow curiously.

“I didn’t say I was good at it...” he said with a shrug. “Only boring people hate pizza. Do I strike you as boring?”

“Ma’am? Sir?” gunted Merv, his low and menacing voice punching through her thoughts as she began concocting a suitably sarcastic retort.

“Merv? Yes?”

“What do you want on your pizza? Sir? Ma’am?”

He seemed an oddly inappropriate choice for the role of going out for fast food. It was like asking a privately owned corporation to run the most widely influential bank on the planet, a lying felon to be the next president, or asking an American to explain irony.

She looked at the man with a wry smile. “Double meat, please,” she said happily to Merv. “If they have any baby animals, or anything especially cute, then that will be fine. Just chop it up and stick it on there.”

Merv seemed perfectly happy with that, and slunk off to perform this appallingly menial function without further grumbling.

“He’s going to bring back a handful of magic beans. You know that, don’t you?”

“He may surprise us,” she frowned. “He seems to be good at that lately.”

He nodded and sat down.

She sat down, too, and began, slightly apologetically: “There’s nothing on her death, I’m afraid. She died alone—no video feeds, no CCTV, no recording devices... There’s simply no information to build an extrapolation on. The Hawk-Eye can’t make any kind of simulation. Her last moments are gone. That doesn’t help us, but at

least she passed from the world with the dignity of an anonymous death, if that's any consolation."

He nodded that he understood. "Who was she, Norma? Why was she important to me?"

"I don't know how we can answer that from here!" she said, after a lengthy pause.

He sighed. "She's the key. I know she is. I know she's important."

"I'll tell you something else that's interesting, though," she said, changing the subject quickly—displays of emotion clearly made her feel uncomfortable. "I traced the black motorcycle; I traced it for another two blocks. Then it went into a dead zone—no cameras, no satellite feed. Nothing. It just vanished; it was never picked up again."

"A dead zone?"

She nodded. "A place under a bridge, for instance, where several cameras aren't working. There's thousands all over the city. Normally, it wouldn't be a problem—vehicles are picked up again in a matter of seconds. Street-level pursuit was why the HERPES motorcycle project was created. It meant we could track objects more successfully if everything else failed. Of course, that was a long time ago—it's rare now that anyone can get by without being tracked by something for any length of time."

"Unless you happen to be a black motorcycle that's being pursued by the police," he noted dryly.

She raised an eyebrow. "I did say it was interesting."

"Who has that level of sophistication?" He looked away, shaking his head at this puzzle in which none of the pieces fitted together. "I mean, drug dealers are just local criminals—they're never this organised, are they? I actually have no idea..."

“Generally speaking, government agencies usually aren’t this organised,” she admitted. “It’s a wonder criminals are ever actually captured at all, if you actually get right down to it.”

“Caroline Marks?” He bit his lip thoughtfully. “Is there anything you can show me about her?”

She began looking through the complex menu on the screen. “I’ll see what I can find. I’ll run a cross-check to see if I can find any action from her that’s linked to drugs.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

The computer beeped at them. She turned and viewed the information on the screen. “Another lock,” she said distractedly. “I’ve got it searching for various keywords...”

“What is it this time? The police captain bought a fishing boat?”

“Cooper,” she grimaced. “The murdered officer. The computer has finished compiling the video.”

“OK,” he said expectantly. “Are we watching?”

She fixed him with a disarming look, sighing to herself. “This isn’t going to be pleasant,” she told him. “We know he dies.”

“Everybody dies,” he said grimly.

■ FEED SRC:MX48599368 SEC PRTL RECON

His name wasn’t Detective Benjamin Cooper—he was Ben, Ben Baxter, 21 years old, a loser whose own mother had thrown his sorry arse out on the street. He’d been stealing since he could first remember, not that he cared to remember too far back. The reason he had been stealing in the first place more or less took care of that.

He had an arrogance about him, and he’d lost interest in the world. His humanity had slipped through his fingers years ago, after

the first tiny taste. He was just a man out for himself now, a lone wolf in a dog-eat-dog world.

He'd been in town for two weeks; he'd found his way around, but he hadn't found his way in—not yet.

Ben reminded himself of the cover story. He was naturally slim and spoke with a strong, inner-city accent. His commanding officer had helped him put together a new personality from bits and pieces of things that were real to him. The end result was some bizarre pastiche, a grotesque caricature of himself and some people that he'd known, blended together into this horribly twisted reflection of who he could so easily have been if fate had guided him down a different path.

It was disturbing how easily all this had come to him, going along with an outright fabrication. He'd become this character, worn it like a glove, and it had become real to him—so real that it sometimes felt, for a moment, that this was the truth of who he really was.

He'd gone out with several other officers. They'd lived their covers for the day, got under the skin of their roles, and learned to slip behind the mask, even believing their own lies.

Gone from his hip was his service weapon. He was allowed a beaten-up little .38 revolver. It fitted his character, they told him. It was a cheap thing with the serial numbers machined away. It was retired from the evidence locker, a piece of a puzzle that once made up the story of a life and death struggle. Abandoned due to lack of evidence, such weapons were recycled back into service as props for undercover duty.

It was better than nothing.

He strode along, his nasty little eyes flashing about. If people bumped into him, he'd turn on them like a hungry dog. If they

looked, he'd go after them. He was a loose-cannon, the man nobody wants to see on the street, the man everyone tries to ignore. He saw women turning away, he saw men conspicuously checking their phones to avoid him.

People went out of their way to stay out of his.

He sniffed, wiping his arm under his nose. His hair was thick, matted and black, and it clung to his neck uncomfortably. He'd grown a goatee beard, but it was a pathetic, wiry little thing, an excuse for itself and a sorry one at that. He was dressed for the part—he was the part; he was Ben Baxter.

His phone rang, one of two he'd been issued. One was red, the other black. His orders were to keep the black one. The red one was going to ring. When it did, he would follow the instructions, pull out the sim and destroy it. He was then to throw away the phone—discard it immediately into the nearest dustbin.

It was exciting stuff—unusual, but certainly exciting.

A voice on the phone had told him what to do and he'd done it. He was to buy drugs, see if he could get offered 'Big Bad Wolf', but take no personal risks in doing so. He knew exactly what he had to do.

He came up to a street corner. He pulled a box of cigarettes from his pocket and headed over. Two young men were there, chatting to a very attractive young lady who wasn't dressed for cold weather.

"Yo. Got a light?" He didn't make eye contact with them, and made sure the question was a demand. One of them huffed at him and handed him a blue plastic lighter, peering at him with suspicious eyes. He sucked hard on it as it lit, and made a big deal of blowing out the smoke. He offered the box to the man, who shrugged and took one.

“Can you fix me up? I’m new in town, in from the South. I’m finding my feet, you know?”

The man looked him up and down. He was a big guy, well-muscled, and looked as if he knew how to be a threat to people. “Fix you up?” he said severely.

Ben stood his ground, puffed on his cigarette, and looked as if he owned the world.

“What do you need bro?” the big man asked.

He laughed, a wheezing chuckle that edged into a cough. “Yo, I need some time out, man. This town is hard, and I need to forget about all that for a time.”

He grinned knowingly. “Girls? Gear? You got cash, I take it?”

“I got some, man,” he nodded, and laughed to himself at a little joke that was only funny in his own head. “I ain’t no Rothschild, but I don’t freeload neither.” He smiled but it wasn’t friendly. His teeth were yellow, blunt little things. He was too young for them to be that stained with nicotine. “I ain’t looking for no complications, just some pills or some shit. What’s good here?”

The other man began paying interest. The girl stepped back dutifully, but her eyes measured him up, scanning him like the cold, hard professional she clearly was.

He was doing everything right. His story was good—he was nobody. He wasn’t aiming high, just looking to score; let them come to him. Don’t look desperate, don’t mention the new stuff; if they smell pig on you, you’re as good as dead.

“I know a guy,” he told him, puffing on the cigarette. “He’s the man to go to.”

“Cool,” he agreed.

The man grinned. "There's a finder's fee, course, but you're no freeloader, right? No problem for a fine, upstanding citizen like yourself?"

"How much?" He looked away, as if checking the horizon for dangers. Was his cover holding? He sucked on the cigarette and tried to relax. He forced himself to look angry, rather than scared.

"I do you a favour, you do me a favour?" he told him. "What you get, I get? Deal?"

He shrugged. "Just one hit? I can do that. That's damn reasonable—the boys down South want your gold teeth for the time of day."

"How do I know you ain't a pig, boy?" the other man said. He was older, his face was sunken, and his darkened, sunburnt skin hung limply over his bony face. His eyes were ugly, sullen things, and he looked like he'd kill you, just to see if you'd die. "I smell pig."

He relaxed; he didn't smell anything on him. He was careful; he'd given nothing away. This man was trying his luck, just trying to rattle him, just hoping to scare him if he was a cop. It did occur to him that he actually was and he was, accordingly, a little scared.

No, not a cop, he was Ben Baxter. He was everything he hated in himself, given this nasty little form.

"Ask him directly if he's a cop!" said the girl, in sudden realisation. "If he's a cop, he has to tell the truth!"

The man ignored her, as he continued to eye Ben up and down.

"You want to search me?" he laughed. "Cops is too well paid to be living in this neighbourhood, bro."

"You packing?" he glared at him.

"Yeah, I got a piece. I mean, you never know when your good fortune is going to run out. It's no good for me to go around relying on meeting fine gentleman like your good selves." His lips twitched

up into a smile, a smile that was shared by the first of the men who flung the half-dead cigarette on the floor.

“Well, you won’t mind me holding it for you then...” he said. “For your safety, of course.”

He looked around furtively, craning his neck as if checking the distance for police. “Sure. She’s my lucky piece, though—I ain’t never had a bad day with her close by.” He handed over the old revolver—a Smith and Wesson model-ten with a snub barrel, made from blued steel, but the finish had rubbed away quite badly and the metal beneath had started to rust. Still, the action was sound. It had been tested quite thoroughly and declared safe.

The man took it. “Name’s Jose. This here is Clint.”

He looked impressed. “Clint.” he nodded. “That’s a real man’s name. My folks weren’t so considerate when it came down to business. I’m Ben, Ben Baxter.”

Clint looked less impressed.

“It’s a couple of blocks over,” Jose told him. “Rules are simple—your mouth stays shut, no questions. They ask you questions, you answer them. You look bad, then I look bad, so you best not look bad, ‘cos I don’t wanna look bad.”

“I got it,” he nodded. “I got it.”

He had it. It wasn’t his first time undercover. He had a young face, and looked angry most of the time. He’d been used before for jobs like this. He knew the routine well enough to play his role. Ben Baxter wasn’t new to any of this. He wasn’t intimidated; he knew to buy what he was looking for, pay up on time, and keep his mouth shut. He knew his job. He knew who he was.

They walked the two blocks. Jose walked beside him, not quickly, but not taking time to enjoy the view, either. Ben noticed that people noticed them. Jose had a reputation. He was known, and

he was respected—that was clear. Clint hovered behind; most of his attention was focused on the girl, but he was present.

She was no fool, either.

The silence dragged too long. “Just say, for instance, a man was looking for a girl? You know a way to hook that man up? Just for instance?”

“Everything costs money. If you’ve got money, I know a way you can get anything you need.”

He laughed coldly. “Yeah, about that...” he began, “what about if I need money?”

Jose looked at him, measuring him up. He seemed to like him. “If your face fits, then who knows? Who knows?”

That was a step in very much the right direction. He flicked out the cigarettes and offered one across. “Hey, I been told I smoke too much. You wanna smoke too much too?”

“You do smoke too much,” Jose told him with a little smirk. He handed him back the little disposable lighter, but declined himself.

“You want to live forever?” he said nonchalantly. “Everyone dies.”

Jose smiled and grunted “Yeah, but there’s ways to die, and then there’s ways to die.”

“I’m going out on a bed of money, my blood 90% cocaine, and my funeral attended by 200 beautiful female mourners, all trying to roll into the casket with me.” He grinned his ugly little yellow smile as they came up to an alley.

Jose made a hand gesture to Clint, but Ben wasn’t quick enough to make it out. In any case, Clint stood by the alley, leaned back and made himself comfortable. His girl draped herself on his shoulder and they began talking about nothing in particular.

Jose led them down the path. It was a narrow thing, red brick buildings on either side. Large square dumpsters were staggered along the way and black metal escape ladders were screwed to the walls. He followed along. It was close now; he forced himself to remain calm. Play your role, he thought, play your role. You're a small fish in this big pool; you're not going to let yourself drown.

Jose turned to him as they came to a rear entrance. It was a pair of painted black wooden doors with no signage. He knocked three times, twice more, and then three again. He turned back.

"Mind your manners, Ben," he told him with a very serious look on his face. "These guys didn't pass out of no gentleman's school. They ain't your friends; they do business, you get lost. That's the whole limit of our relationship."

"I get you," he assured him, puffing on his cigarette. "You ain't calming me down any, man. I'm here to chill, and you're making that hard."

The door opened. A face came from behind and stepped out into the light. Ben was nervous now. Not terrified; not yet, but this was it. Nobody had got this close. Maybe it would come to nothing, maybe these were just some low level guys dealing weed with too heavy a hand. It had been heard of...

"Jose?" he said, in a manner that wasn't terrifying, but wasn't welcoming by any means. "What you need?"

Jose nodded to Ben. "New boy in town, looking to score."

The man turned to him. He was huge, fat certainly, but a fair bit of it was muscle too. He looked like an ageing boxer who had stopped training, but not long enough ago to be entirely safe company. He was well-dressed in a blue shirt beneath a dark, graphite grey suit. It looked like quality, and if quality was a thing

you could form into a shape and wear, then this was it. “And you are?”

“Name’s Ben,” he said, just starting to sound a little nervous. He could see inside the doorway: it was dark and gloomy, but he could see movement. There were people in there, more of them. “Just looking for something to take the edge off. What’s good?”

This wasn’t good at all. This should be a house in the suburbs with a suspiciously high fence, a rented piece of office space with powerful dogs barking angrily.

“What’s good?” he laughed, but it was an empty laugh, one drawn at his expense by a man who thought he was less than nothing. “We’ve got new things, we’ve got old things. I got things you’ve never seen before.”

He was in danger of overplaying his hand, and decided caution was the best path forwards. “I like to keep it simple, you know. What do you recommend?”

The burly man looked at his colleague, an unspoken question passed between them. Jose nodded.

“I’m going to rip your life wide open like a wolf shredding its prey,” he told him darkly.

Ben was startled. He backed away, flushing instantly in fear. His hands went up in submission, as sweat poured down his greasy hair. “What? What?” he gasped.

They laughed again. “Wolf is new on the streets, best thing in this town, cheapest, cleanest gear you can get. You’ll be rolling off the sky, but sharp as a knife the whole time. You could go and perform brain surgery while you feel as if you’re floating in the clouds.”

“Dude!” he gasped, banging his hand on his chest. “Dude, I thought it was my last day on this planet. You scared me good, man.”

This was good, he assured himself. That looked real. It looked real because it was—his reaction was pure fear, a surge of real-life adrenaline. He'd forgotten his job, his briefing, his training. It was all about survival. He'd pulled it off. He'd looked as if he had no idea what they were talking about. It was happening - they were selling him the stuff.

The burly man sent a text. "So, you want it?"

"Sure, sure," he breathed nervously, his voice tinged with anxiety. "I'll try anything once; twice maybe."

"It's on its way."

Now he had to call it in. He had to send the alert. Under his collar, folded under the fabric, was an electronic contact. It was sewn in, invisible, but when he squeezed it, it would send out a pulse, an emergency short range signal. They'd know he'd been successful.

It wasn't hard. He reached round to the back of his neck, as if massaging the stress away. It looked natural, it looked seamless. He'd done it a hundred times in front of a mirror. Probably twice that many times.

"How much?" he gasped.

"For you?" The man smirked cruelly. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" He frowned. Did they know? He felt a fresh pang of anxiety.

"First time is free," he said calmly. "When do you want it for?"

He looked around. He didn't understand this at all. He shrugged.

The man grunted. "How long till you get home? The Wolf is time-locked. I can set it to go off in an hour, a minute, a week next Tuesday. It's up to you. How long?"

This didn't make sense. He looked confused, and it was real—this made no sense whatsoever. "An hour, I guess."

"Two minutes," the man told him. "It will be here in two minutes, set for one hour."

"That's..." he stammered, what was there to say? "That's amazing. You can do that?"

"I can do anything," he told him darkly, and at that moment as their eyes met, Ben believed it, because this man believed it. There wasn't a doubt in his mind about it.

The door swung open and another man came out.

Ben grinned. He was about to be given the Wolf. He was the first. After weeks of unsuccessful police work, he was the first to crack it, to take a sample back to the lab.

The man looked him up and down, drew a pistol and pointed it at him. He took a long drag on his cigarette and tried to look calm. Another test; more of their games. It was never a comfortable feeling, having a pistol pointed directly at you, but he wasn't alarmed yet. He'd stayed in character: he'd done his job.

"Just give it to me, already," he grumbled.

The gun cracked twice. At first he didn't feel anything. The noise startled him. The cigarette was gone, dropped from his fumbling fingers. There was a ringing in the air, but no pain. He was cold, cold all over, and suddenly felt very weak. He was dropping, dropping to the ground.

He felt the hard, grim reality of the floor as it slammed into him, forcing the air from his lungs painfully, jarring his mind back to the world with a yelp, a sorry little sound.

He lay there, gasping, a horrible, grisly rasping noise like a heavy liquid being sucked through a straw. Someone was making a noise, a low, strangled voice as if someone was breathing, gurgling,

drowning in blood. For a long while, it never occurred to him that it was his own voice - that all this was happening to him.

As it did, there was fear. Cold, dark reality set in, filling him with terror. He was swimming in darkness by then; the pain was taking hold, but he was floating above it, just watching as his body melted away into dust.

“Cop...” he heard a voice say.

“Dammit, Jose. I ought to have you shot for this.”

There was an argument, a protest.

“Clear it out, code white.”

By then, even the sounds had melted away into nothing.

Chapter 16

He looked at her, as she looked at him.

His tough words, his belief that he could stand to watch another man's death, feeling nothing while coldly observing, had come to nothing in the end, of course.

"OK, that was pretty bad—I didn't like that," he admitted as he sighed and turned away. He rubbed his temple and just tried to think, to clear the jumbled mess of thoughts that were jabbering away inside his head.

"Do you think that this is what happened to Casey?" she said after a lengthy pause. "I mean, was he set up and killed?"

"I don't see how." He considered the idea briefly but it didn't seem to fit. The image of the video ran through his head; he recalled the crash with much easier clarity than he thought he would have; the mental image was crisp, clear and remarkably detailed, like re-living it rather than remembering. He compared it to the memory of the more recent crash, and was surprised to find that even that was crystal clear.

His memory seemed to be near perfect, except that all the personal detail were completely absent, and in that respect it was essentially useless.

"No," he said finally. "Unless Casey was investigating 'Wolf' previously, in which case, it's something that we don't know about. The crashes, in both instances, seemed accidental."

"But they can't be coincidental." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "We're missing something here."

"In my case, most of the structure of my lower brain; in yours, I'm honestly afraid to guess." He tried to make light of it, but his grin was not a convincing one, and any comedy he managed to wring out

of it was lacklustre at best. Comedy-wise, this was generally the case.

“You’re wrong about the girl,” she said finally. She bit her lower lip, a thoughtful gesture she’d recently picked up from watching him.

He frowned curiously, letting her explain.

“You’re the key to all this. Understanding how you fit into it will help explain what’s going on. It all comes down to you.”

“Me?” he pointed to himself. “I’m not that important, surely?”

“You’re the connection to the Wolf drug,” she said calmly without a hint of accusation. “You’re the answer to what Casey was doing there in the first place. We need to understand you to see how everything fits together.”

“Norma, I need to know the truth every bit as much as you do. For myself and for Caroline.” His voice was full of remorse for things he didn’t know he’d done, for assumptions he was making about the sort of man he had to be. “I need to know what I’m responsible for, and I need to put those things right.”

“I believe you,” she said softly. She looked at him for a moment and her logical veneer slipped very slightly. She liked him—she couldn’t help but like him. He was a person who was difficult not to like.

That stuck in her mind like a thorn, knowing the damage he may have caused, knowing what kind of person he actually was, or at least had been, before her technology had set to work on his brain.

She had to know now; she had to know just exactly what he was. She wanted a resolution to all this; she wanted to know with a degree of certainty whether she hated him or not, and that depended on the answers they were both looking for.

“So let’s find out who you are, shall we?”

Merv returned to find them working on the computer, her inputting search terms, and him going through details on another remote console. To him, it all seemed rather confusing, her being his immediate superior and him being a prisoner, wearing only a hospital gown with cartoon underwear beneath it.

“Pizza,” he grunted with his ludicrously low voice.

The man stood up suddenly, a big smile on his face. “I am so hungry, I could eat a horse. No offence—I’m not saying you are a horse. It’s just that you’re very large and clearly not very intelligent. I’m implying that you’re like a horse, that’s all. None taken.”

“Leave Merv alone, or I’ll give you to him for Christmas.”

Merv just grumbled and brought over the food, his broad shoulders more than adequate to take a few jokes at his expense. He was difficult to offend, like anyone who knows themselves well enough to have nothing left to prove.

The man frowned to himself thoughtfully as it suddenly occurred to him: “What is this anyway? Is it breakfast, lunch, dinner? What time is it out there in the real world? This isn’t the actual real world, is it?”

She shrugged. Without windows, and the rather odd omission of a clock to the central computer, she’d also completely lost track of time.

“Breakfast.” Merv’s expression was almost one of surprise to find that he wasn’t the only, or even the most, idiotic person in the room at that time. “It’s around 8 a.m.”

The man said incredulously, “Then where’s the coffee, Merv?” He looked utterly serious.

Merv was moved to protest, but Norma’s expression also seemed to be expectant in terms of that being a problem. He grumbled again, put down the pizza, and slowly loped off to the

kitchen to make them both another mug of coffee, weakly grumbling to himself about not going through years of intense conditioning to waste his time becoming a heavily armed waiter.

“Norma, what do you think he’s got on his pizza?” he asked slyly.

She frowned to herself and he could tell that she hadn’t really considered it, and wasn’t sure why anyone would.

“Do you think it’s sausage?” His lips traced into a grin at his sarcastic innuendo.

She smiled back for a moment. “Leave the poor man alone,” she told him. “He could sue you for sexual harassment in the workplace, but it’s more likely that he’ll just punch you so hard that your head will resemble a sock full of loose teeth.”

“Right,” he agreed. “It’s not like mine has nipples, or that yours comes with a side of computer chips.”

“Very good. I see what you did there.” She dismissed his joke and threw open the pizza box. “You know, it would help immensely if we knew more about this drug.”

“Wolf? Well, what do we know now?”

>>END FEED<<

They stood just staring at the screen. The general feeling was that all this was oddly confusing.

He chewed on a slice of pizza and pointed at the screen with an expression of incredulity. “That was us. That was us about 5 minutes ago. Why did the computer show us that?”

She frowned, and swallowed a bite of double meat pizza. She didn’t even like meat particularly.

“I searched for you and references to Wolf, and this was what it gave us. It’s only a computer; it doesn’t make intelligent choices—

it just compiled the most recent reference. Rather stupidly, that was us, discussing pizza about 5 minutes ago, but I would remind you that you did stand around and watch the whole thing, so that does throw open the question of who is the most stupid, and rather suggest an answer.”

“So the government spent billions of dollars to let your ex-boyfriend develop the technology to see ourselves eating breakfast from an exciting new angle? Is that correct?”

She nodded. “Essentially, yes. But it does have other more useful functions, as you know, and as I keep trying to explain, he wasn’t my ex-boyfriend.”

“But think of the commercial applications. We can now see how our hair looks from the back; we now know to a degree of digital accuracy that those pants do indeed make our arse look fat. We are living in a time of miracles, or at least we were in the 1980s, when this thing probably seemed like a good idea to someone.”

Merv grunted, “I do have sausage on my pizza. I like sausage.”

“I know you do,” he said sympathetically. “I shouldn’t pick on you, it’s not fair. It would be like a fight between you and a very sick chicken who was armed only with a single wooden chopstick.”

Merv didn’t really seem to understand the implications of any of that, and just took another bite, glaring at him angrily, possibly thinking about giving him a chopstick and letting the chips fall where they may.

“OK, I have more details on Caroline Marks,” she said as the data flashed up on the screen. “Not much to report—she had a record of drug use going back a long way. Wait...”

“Wait?” He sipped on some coffee. “I don’t wait very well. I have an artificially over-clocked brain, consequently my patience

isn't what it used to be! Possibly. There's no way to really tell since my memory isn't what it used to be either."

"I have a data compilation," she told him. "I don't know the content. It might be disturbing."

He sighed, and tried to be dismissive. He felt a tightness in the pit of his stomach, but did his best to ignore it. He nonchalantly grabbed another slice of pizza and shrugged, "Do it." As the screen flashed on, he felt more nervous than ever.

■ FEED SRC:MX99579374 SEC PRTL RECON

She was a huddled mess. She lived behind a force-field—an invisible web of rejection of all things. It kept everyone out. It kept her alone, safe inside the world she'd built in her own mind. The outside world was hostile, aggressive; it was cold and dark and painful and it had hurt her just too many times, and in so many horrible ways.

She had learned to escape, to vanish inwards into a world of her own making, a world she could control. It was a world where things were acceptable, a place where things were safe.

But she did exist across two worlds, and in the outer one, she had learned how to, at least, shut the worst of it out. She frowned; her face pinched up into an expression of anger, of hatred. She looked unkempt as she shuffled along. Her clothes were old, baggy things that she wrapped around her. She wore a man's jacket, several sizes too big. The sleeves stretched down to her fingers, the hem was halfway down her thigh, and she wrapped her arms around herself, her hand clasping at her shoulders.

Inside here, she was invulnerable; the world was out there and couldn't reach her with its hate, its pain and its violence.

The connection between the softness of the world in her mind and the hardness of the world outside was her body, and sometimes

that connection needed maintenance to sustain it. She was hungry; she'd awoken starving, her stomach growling at her, rumbling away like an alarm clock, dragging her from a dream.

She didn't look into mirrors anymore, but she glimpsed her reflection in a shop window. She was pale and slender and her cheeks underlined her sunken and blackened eyes.

The world was peeling back the layers. Eventually, it would find her; it would get all the way into her inner world and destroy her final hiding place. She knew it with a grim sense of finality—it was coming for her and there was nothing she could do to stop it, except hide. She could only hope to hide and stretch out every last moment until the end. But the time when it would come for her was not today. It was one day in some far off future; for now, she had somewhere to be safe.

Suddenly, the outside world attacked. There was a voice over her shoulder, a touch on the top of her arm. She reeled around angrily, spitting threats to keep the world out, keep it away from her, from the soft, vulnerable place into which she'd retreated.

"Back off, get away," she spat angrily at the intruder. Her eyes widened angrily and her arms became weapons. She looked up to his face as it looked down on her.

It was full of pity for a moment, but then it hardened into an accusation. It lived in another world of its own and was afraid to let her darkness in, quite rightly so.

"Carol..." He looked her up and down. "I was hoping to run into you."

"Detective," she sneered with a nod—not a friendly expression, but such a thing had not been worn on her face in so long a time that she couldn't remember when it might not have been.

“What can I do for you? Am I being arrested for something? Are you detaining me?”

“I can,” he told her, looking like he meant it.

She mumbled and growled softly to herself as he continued.

“I tell you what I’m going to do.” He looked at her fixedly, and, just for a moment, that look was black. “I’m going to detain you in the diner over there on the corner. I’ll detain you just long enough to buy you breakfast.”

She stared up at him angrily. Men always wanted something in return. The thought exploded in her mind urgently, bringing a fresh wave of anger. She looked fixedly into his eyes as her temper hardened into a preparedness to defend herself.

But he wasn’t like that. He was bad, sure enough, but he wasn’t like the worst of the others. He wasn’t one of the ones who had driven her from the outside world, a place where she could never again return.

“You can buy me breakfast,” she conceded weakly. “And in return, what do you want?”

“Well, we can talk,” he told her with a shrug.

“We can talk,” she agreed. “That’s all—just talk?”

“That’s all,” he assured her.

She hated him; she hated them all, but she didn’t hate him as much as she hated everything else. In another world, and in another time, she might not have hated him at all, but it wasn’t another time, and the world was always what it was.

The diner was nothing special, but somehow it had that odd uniqueness about it, that something intangible that made it just perfect to some people. It had that effect on her; it was comfortable, welcoming and it fitted.

She couldn't afford to go there often. She rarely had money unless she'd delved into the horrors of the other world. Sometimes she did that—she still had to eat, she had to protect her reality somehow. On those rare times that she did, she would come to the diner for a meal. She would eat slowly, drink the coffee, just be alone and untouched; just be herself. The diner was part of her inner world.

Sometimes he brought her here. It wasn't the same, but it was still good enough. He wasn't like the others, even if she treated him with caution, even if she kept him away.

"You look like shit," he told her.

She shrugged and looked away. It didn't matter how she looked out there, in that world. Nothing mattered out there, nothing but his words—they carried all the way inside.

"You have a face for radio yourself," she answered.

He smiled and nodded, "My mother loves me, what else matters, right?"

She shrugged a reply.

The waitress stepped up behind, and Caroline cringed. "Can I take your orders, hun?"

The detective faced life with confidence—he didn't need a menu: he was a man who dived in to see how deep the water was. "I'll take pancakes with sausage. Do you have hash browns?"

She nodded and smiled, "Best in town."

"Sure," he laughed. "I know that's true as well. Give me two sides of that and a coffee."

Caroline looked around nervously. "Same," she said.

He sat back in the booth, making himself comfortable. He stared out of the window for a moment lost in his thoughts. "I got to ask you some questions," he told her. "Let's get this over and done with so we can enjoy our breakfast, like normal people, huh?"

She looked at him, scowling angrily, before she nodded in weak acceptance.

“Wolf,” he said softly, shaking his head. “I’ll pay you the going rate for any information you can give me. Same as always—I’ll take anything. We’re getting desperate these days.”

Money. It was the lifeblood of the outside world; in hers no such measure of violence existed. “I don’t know anything.”

He looked at her sadly. She caught it, and it made her uncomfortable under his gaze. “I wish that was true, but it’s not.”

“A person can get killed for talking about... that,” she ventured cautiously, her voice lowered. “Nobody talks about it. I heard about a man on 12th. He told the police what he knew. He told them, and the next day he died—the police right along with him. That thing protects itself too well. Nobody is going to talk about it.”

“I know,” he agreed. He knew only too well. “But I need to ask. Anything you can tell me will help.”

She needed the blood. The blood of the world kept her connection to it alive. She had no choice, unless she wanted to do the other thing. That was worse, that was so much worse.

“I took it,” she admitted. “It’s like nothing else. It cleared my head; I felt sharp, as if I could do anything, as if I could just go out and show the world where it had all gone wrong. But I felt euphoric, too; it was like flying, but flying completely clean. It was perfect: it was the way I want to always feel.”

“I’ve heard that,” he sighed. “What else? Please, give me something.”

“My dealer got it for me. He wanted me to try it—he got it for me, a sample, just to try it out.”

The detective huffed and struggled to remember. “Jones, right?”

She nodded. "It's not like other drugs; they don't give it to you. You go to it. He said it was free the first time, so I thought I'd give it a try. I mean, what do you have to lose when it's free, right?"

He didn't answer.

"He took me to this place. They asked how long it would take me to get home. I said about 20 minutes. They set it for 25 and jabbed me in the arm. They said it would kick in after that long—I was to go home and enjoy it, that's all I had to do. They were right. It just exploded in my brain. It was like the sky after a storm, just blue and warm and clear. I've never felt anything like it."

"Did you do it again?" he asked, glancing over to the waitress, who was already pouring the coffee.

"Sure," she shrugged weakly, ashamed to admit it. "Who wouldn't? It's cheap, and it lasts for hours. Most things are just cheap."

"Can you tell me about the place you got it?" he asked, looking like he already knew what was coming—they all knew the stories, and they knew them all too well.

"It was some guy. It was a portable-cabin round the back of a construction yard. It was nothing special. There was a gate around the back; nobody would have seen us coming or going. The guy was dressed well, shaved head. I wouldn't want to date him."

"That's it?"

She nodded. "Jones texted ahead. He said they don't carry it—it's delivered to order."

"Delivered to order?" He chewed his lip. "Who delivered it?" She shrugged again.

"You know I can't pay you for this. I need names, I need a lead. You find me something, and I'll get you paid."

She scowled angrily, even though she already knew all this just as well as him. "You don't arrest Jones."

He laughed. "We're not arresting Jones. That idiot is better than having a whole string of informants. He's like shining a torch into the darkness."

"I need money." The thought of having to do what she'd have to do made her shudder.

He grunted and took some notes out of his wallet. He counted out thirty, screwed it up and handed it to her.

She snatched it up carefully, pulling her hand from his as quick as she could, careful not to let the skin touch for too long a time.

"I can get you into a rehab program, help you off the streets."

She shook her head. They wanted to take her world away from her and it was all she had left.

>>END FEED<<

He looked away sadly; watching it had been difficult. He knew her, he was sure of it. But this wasn't how he knew her. It was just the ghost of what was left of her. He had known her when she was better than this, back when she had been a whole person, he was sure of it. "So she was an informant," he sighed.

"It seems so," Norma agreed. "It looks like maybe that's what got her killed. For all we know, she really did just die from an accidental overdose. There's no way for us to tell now."

"So she is connected to the drug. Which means I'm connected to the drug."

"Which means Casey is connected to the drug."

"Norma," he said darkly. "I need to know if it was me that killed her."

Chapter 17

He was quiet, and that wasn't like him. In fact, it was the polar opposite of what he was like.

Norma watched for a moment while he sat, his head slumped into his hands. "Do you need a coffee?" she asked, bordering on sympathetically.

Merv stepped forward and put his hand on his shoulder. "There's more in the pot—I can get you one."

He looked up from one to the other, startled by one, outright shocked by the other. Awkwardly, he ventured, "Um, sure. Coffee would be great actually. Breathing is giving me mild chest pains from the amount I've already had, but too much is never enough, right?"

Merv nodded, nodded again to Norma for permission, and then headed off on his self-appointed task.

He was left moderately confused, wondering just exactly what had happened to the people he knew; the only people he knew that he knew.

"I've been thinking..." interjected Norma, breaking him out of his train of thought. "It's time you had a proper name. I can't just keep referring to you as 'That Idiot,' or '#1634.' all the time"

"You've been calling me #1634? What does that represent?" he frowned.

"It doesn't represent anything, really. It's just an utterly meaningless designation I started using in my notes from around the time when I set the nanobites on you; because the last thing I wanted was to give you delusions of grandeur, to make out like you were a real person... with human dignity, and rights," she told him, perhaps with a hint of wry sarcasm, and perhaps not. "It was the number of living organisms they'd injected into you, but could I equally call

you #16, since that's how many survived, in one form or another. See? It's meaningless."

"I don't know if I'm entirely happy with you being my doctor," he said thoughtfully. "Mind you, it has a certain quality to it. #1634, eh?"

"I'm not calling you #1634." Norma thought for a moment, before realisation of a simpler and far better idea hit her. "You know, Merv's been calling you 'Red' this whole time; because, you know..."

"The colour of the bike, right?"

"Um.. sure," said Norma. "I'm sure it's that."

"Red... Yeah, I like that—I like that a lot. But what kind of Red am I really? Are we talking... a deep Carmine Red, or do you have more of a subdued Venetian Red in mind?"

"Merv had you pinned as an Oxblood Red," said Norma, shaking her head. "You two should get a room."

"Just 'Red' it is then."

He looked away in silence for an awkwardly long moment.

"I've been thinking too," he said, closing his eyes sadly. "I killed her, didn't I?" The weight of the evidence did seem rather overwhelming and it was crushing down on him, a burden that he didn't think he was going to prove strong enough to bear. "I'm a murderer. Someone shot her up and made it look like an overdose, and that someone was me. I was running from the scene when Casey picked me up."

"We don't know any of that," she told him firmly. "The records show that you were riding towards her, not away."

"I'm a drug dealer, then; maybe I was on my way to deliver the fatal dose, the one that ended her life." He was guessing all this from what

little they knew, but it sounded eminently reasonable, and perhaps slightly better than deliberately killing such a fragile young thing.

“You never got there,” she reminded him. “It couldn’t have happened that way.”

“Then I had to have been running from the murder scene. I must have literally killed her, murdered her, and was trying to escape—I turned and headed back, avoiding the police. That’s even worse—I’m not just delivering this poison: I’m the one who deliberately murdered her. Either way, I’m a piece of crap, and that’s comparing myself to you, which makes this even worse.”

“Then why draw attention to yourself?” She shook her head. “I’m not ready to accept that just yet. We need more evidence, and we need to avoid jumping to conclusions.”

“There’s no other explanation,” he said sadly. “Thank you for trying, but we both know it. We all know what I am.”

“And what is that?” she challenged him. “A slightly annoying speed-freak with a talent for self-pity?”

He sighed. “I’d prefer if you would consider me a hilariously charismatic caffeine-addict with a severe pizza problem.”

“I can’t see how anyone would consider you charismatic.”

“I won’t fight you, Norma,” he told her softly, breathing a heavy huff to himself. “I need to be punished for what I’ve done. I expect you to make sure I get exactly what’s coming to me; I deserve the worst the law has to offer for what I’ve done.”

“I’m a scientist—I deal in proof and evidence, not guesswork and hearsay. I was also unaware of your qualifications as a detective. We don’t know enough to make these presumptions about you yet. No jury in the world would convict you on the evidence we have right now; maybe one in Texas...”

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Did you trace the bike? The red bike... Who was it registered to?"

"There were no plates," she grumbled. "And before you ask, the events that led up to your crash began in a dead-zone."

"That more or less proves it then." He was crestfallen. He slumped into growing depression as his final hope was dashed. "The delivery riders always start or end up in dead-zones, don't they?"

"It's not absolutely evidence," she assured him, but even she was losing what small sliver of faith she had in him by now, and it came as no small surprise to her that she was trying to defend what little she had left.

"Can't you trace the bike back to the start?" He sat up; it wasn't quite hope that was showing on his face, but not far off. "Where was it staying, what house? What garage? Who owns it?"

"I believe I can, now that the system is working more reliably." She began typing on the keyboard; letters, words and sentences appeared in green on her monitor. She looked up. "I think I have an answer."

He held his breath. Some small part of him still clung to a tiny, minuscule, minute fragment of vague, shallow and empty hope that he wasn't right about himself. It could still be true.

She began dolefully. "Peter Baker. Multiple arrest history."

"Drug dealer," he guessed.

She nodded. "I'm sorry. Yes, you were."

He looked broken; it was a blow that he was struggling to take.

"It doesn't mean you can't make up for what you've done. I mean, the girl, Caroline. She didn't just wake up one morning and find herself dead. That is to say..." She cursed her lack of tact. "She didn't just one day decide to become a drug addict and throw her life away. Something must have led you both to where you ended up."

You can put that right, now that you know about it, and now that you're willing to do so."

She was right of course but, for now, he was in just the proper mood for self-loathing, and lashings of it.

He began to wallow in it all. "Peter Baker," he said sadly. "It's the name of a corporate spokesman, a low-end chef, or maybe a man who sells houses. It doesn't even sound interesting. I couldn't even manage to be an interesting drug-dealing murderer."

"Well, you were selling an amazing new product that even the metropolitan police are scared of," she suggested, before realising she'd rather missed the mark with that one.

"Now we know who I am, search for a relationship between me and Caroline. Please—I need to know just how big a piece of shit I really am. Drug dealer or murderer?"

"Or both!" she reminded him with a flourish and then quickly looked away.

Merv handed him a cup of coffee while she began the search. He put his gigantic hand on his shoulder in what was probably meant to be a supportive manner, but felt more like a violent assault.

"I once pushed a man's eyeballs right back into his skull with my thumbs. His brain made a popping sound, and then red and black slime ran out of his nose until he died. It wasn't very quick. You'd think it would be quick, but it seemed to take ages. You should never do that while wearing a white shirt."

Red just looked at him, slightly shocked and utterly confused.

"Thanks," he said, guessing that that was the expected or required response.

"We all do things we're not proud of," Merv's voice rumbled away, rattling Red's teeth. "To make up for it, I sent his widow some

flowers. I also slept with his cousin. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Red turned to Norma. “Merv is frightening me,” he told her.

“He used to frighten me, until I realised he’d literally do whatever I told him to do, and then he just didn’t frighten me anymore.” She looked up thoughtfully. “Then, I realised that if anyone in authority told him to kill me, he’d do that too without a second thought, just because it was his job. Then he frightened me all over again—probably a little more, if I’m honest. Oddly, now I know he’s gay and makes excellent coffee, he doesn’t frighten me once again. It’s strange how things work.”

“I once had to assassinate a woman with a coffee cup,” he growled, somehow failing to smile as intended.

“And now he frightens me again,” she said, earnestly.

“Maybe we’ll discover that you remind him of his mother and he won’t frighten you anymore,” Red suggested hopefully.

She thought about this for a moment and found it oddly reassuring. “Merv, do I remind you of your mother?”

Merv shook his head slowly.

Red shrugged an apology to Norma. “Sorry,” he said, and then turned to Merv. With little more than idle curiosity, he asked, “How does she differ from your mother, then? Is your mother quite nice? Does she make excellent brownies?”

Merv shrugged his massive and oddly misshapen shoulders. “She’s different because nobody ever ordered me to assassinate Norma with a coffee mug,” he said with a coldly dispassionate tone that plunged the room into horrified silence. He added, “Yet.”

“And now, I’m even more scared than before,” she grumbled, staring at him wide-eyed, almost afraid to blink.

“Bloody hell, Merv!” he exclaimed. “You’re either the world’s most terrifying joker, or I need to get a gun, presumably a very large gun.”

“A gun won’t help you,” said Merv with a shrug, trying once more to grin. It was a dark thing to behold.

Red shook his head and said, “OK, next time, I’m getting the coffee for him.”

Norma’s face took on a hard expression. “The feed is ready.”

“Good,” he agreed. “Let’s do this!”

“Listen... I want to say something before we watch this,” she told him, taking a moment to clear her thoughts and to take a deep breath. “This is who you were. You’ve lost your memory, and your brain has been altered. You’re not the same person anymore. This will be hard to watch, but it’s the past, not the future. The future is yours to write; this is a new you and you can write a new future.”

“I’m ready,” he said again.

“You’ve changed,” she told him. “I’ve seen how this has affected you. I hope you come to realise that change in yourself.”

■ FEED SRC:MX48759338 SEC PRTL RECON

There were two men.

One was short, swarthy and grim. He was dressed in a white T-shirt which was remarkably clean, and black jeans that were remarkably not. He walked along down a backstreet, the other beside him, following along from his lead.

They were in no particular hurry. Wherever they were going, it seemed it was of no huge consequence to either of them.

The street was small and narrow. It was little more than an alley, an access to the back of ugly suburban houses, shoddily

manufactured cubes of brick and plaster, devoid of anything but functionality.

The other man was dressed much better; his clothes were expensive and he carried himself with no small degree of style.

“This has to be done today,” he said. He looked at his shorter, swarthier counterpart and checked his watch. “In precisely two hours. Two hours precisely.”

“No problem,” he shrugged. “For the amount you pay, nothing will ever be a problem.”

The more civilised of the pair grinned back at him. “I like you. I like your lack of emotional involvement in things, the flexibility of your morality, your utter rejection of everything that normal people hold to be sacred. It’s a positive trait in our line of business, although if you tried to date my sister, I’d have your mother sent a necklace made from your teeth.”

“Thank you,” he said, not really understanding what he’d just heard, not really needing to, and not really caring either way. “She’d like that.”

“Her name is Caroline Marks.” He handed the swarthy man a small bag.

He snatched it greedily as if he was worried it would be taken back if he didn’t. He frowned. “This looks like heroin. I thought this was about the Wolf?”

He chuckled to himself, and slapped him on the shoulder playfully. “You can’t overdose on the Wolf—you couldn’t even die trying.”

“You don’t want me to just have her shot? I know some guys, man, it’s no trouble. If you want to make sure it hurts, that’s no extra charge. Some guys I know even give a discount for that.”

He shook his head firmly. "No. No messages, just a nice, quiet, easy little demise that draws absolutely no attention." He furtively looked around, but the streets were comfortably empty. "That heroin will give her a guaranteed overdose. All you have to do is have someone give it to her. Just arrange for that, and make sure nobody else uses that gear, unless they want to die right along with her. The streets are a rumour mill—they'll do the rest of our work for us."

"Done," he said with a grin. "Nothing is easier."

"Take care of it now. She has to expire in... just under two hours. The address where she's to die is in the bag, as is the exact time she has to do the dying at. The place is one where many of her type go to kick off from this mortal coil, so just make it look natural" He looked away more thoughtfully. "She's got a big mouth, and needs to leave this world before she opens it again."

"She's gone, man," he told him. "I know just how to..."

He held up his hand and cut him off. "I don't want to know. I don't want to even hear about it. That's why we have this comfortable little arrangement. So I tell you what has to be done, and those things magically get done; and along the way, nobody gets sent necklaces made from body parts that stop anyone from having anything to smile about."

He nodded in agreement, perhaps realising he was in danger of overstepping the mark, and a lucrative mark at that.

They came up to a gate as they sauntered easily along the way beneath a clear blue, and largely cloudless, sky. It was a tatty metal thing with an inlay of wire mesh. He yanked it open and it clattered, metal against concrete as it dragged along the ground.

"It seems I have work to do," he grinned.

The well-dressed man nodded to him. "Don't screw this up. She dies in 1 hour and 56 minutes, at that precise address. Just make sure she gets hold of that bag today."

"No problem," he assured him.

"Mr Baker," he said as the man stepped over to his big red motorcycle. "Nice and quiet now."

He put his finger to his lips and whispered, "Shhhh." He chuckled to himself and nodded. "She'll never know what hit her."

>>END FEED<<

"Hey!" shouted Red excitedly, his arm outstretched as he pointed urgently to the monitor. "That's not me!" He looked a combination of shocked and relieved. With a wide smile, he said, "I'm not Peter Baker!"

Then the wider ramifications made more of an impact on him. "Hey!" he shouted again. "They murdered her. She was killed deliberately!"

"They silenced her—they knew she was an informant," agreed Norma. She struggled to conceal a smile of relief herself, and when she looked at him, there was much less disgust in her eyes: in fact, there was almost none.

"But how did they know? Someone on the force must have told them she spoke to the detective. The detective wouldn't have done it—he seemed like a decent enough guy."

"And this still doesn't explain how you're involved, or how you ended up on that red bike," she said thoughtfully. "But I do still have a number of ideas about that. I can't help feeling we're getting close to the end now."

Chapter 18

The relief that he wasn't that particular drug dealer had lightened his mood. It didn't prove he wasn't just some other drug dealer, but for now he was content with that one small victory, since it was essentially all he had.

Still, none of this helped to diminish the ugly facts in any other regard.

"They murdered her," he said. He rubbed his temples and turned to Norma, a look pleading for support, advice, more coffee, or additional slices of pizza.

It was the same expression he used for essentially every need he had. She presumed he didn't have sex very often.

"I have to say, I'm impressed," Norma told him. "These people are behaving like an incredibly organised secret agency. It takes a lot of skill and talent to pull off what they're doing."

"You're impressed?" He scowled accusingly back at her, annoyed by her misplaced respect.

"Well, they couldn't manage to assassinate J.F. Kennedy without leaving enough evidence to keep documentary filmmakers going for decades. When the twin-towers came down, a BBC journalist reported the collapse of tower 7 while standing in front of it, while it was perfectly intact. That gives you some idea just how inept most secret agencies actually are. They leave footprints, evidence, and usually tons of it. They rely on the assumption that the public are idiots, and that they think that they're honest, which is so utterly ingrained that it allows them to behave with impunity.

"This drug has been on the streets for months, available to the public in a commercial capacity, and yet the police haven't managed

to secure a single sample, a single witness, nor arrest a single dealer with any charges they've managed to make stick."

She gave him a wry little almost smile. "Yes, I'm impressed."

He nodded—he had little choice but to concede the point. His mood deflated somewhat, from the already not entirely elevated state that was slowly becoming his new version of normal. "Are you saying we can't defeat them?"

She looked at Merv, a slightly worried expression on her face. She sat down in the chair and huffed. For a moment her back throbbed angrily at her and she began to remember just how tired she was. She stretched for a moment and marshalled her thoughts, blinking away the aching sensation that was gathering at the back of her heavy eyes.

"Red, we're not trying to defeat them," she told him solemnly, and with a possible hint of sympathy. "My personal interest is in finding the truth about what happened to my son. My interest has extended to include your identity, and the connection to Caroline Marks, since they're closely related. Beyond that, we never set out to take on the most sophisticated drug operation I've ever seen."

"I don't even remember who she is," he began sadly. "But some part of me knows she mattered to me. I can't tell you what a relief it is to find out that I wasn't Peter Baker—it gives me hope that I'm not someone I'll come to hate."

"But I started this with the plan of finishing it. Caroline deserves justice; those who put her in the position she was in need to pay for what they've done. Don't you feel the same about the people who did this to Casey?"

She sighed. "You did this to my son. How would you like to pay? Cash or cheque?"

His mood deflated once again. He looked like a child who had unwrapped a Christmas present and found a pile of school-books. He turned to the gigantic tower of muscle and gristle behind him, “Don’t you want to see justice done, Merv?”

He looked down, averting his gaze. “I take orders from my commanding officer. I’m assigned to protect her, that’s all. If she orders me to take action, I will do so happily and without hesitation.” He looked to Norma and gave her a small nod.

She smiled back at him. “I think that’s Merv’s way of telling me he’s been cooped up inside too long and he needs some exercise. He’s just not cut out for pizza delivery.”

Red smirked, but all this didn’t address his issues. “I need to see this through. We seem to have all the tools at our disposal.”

“Then why don’t you tell me how we proceed?” she offered.

He thought for a moment. “We have his name now—Peter Baker. We can find out how he lost the red motorcycle. That should tell us how I came by it.”

She met his idea with a thoughtful nod of agreement.

“We know of several places where people have been sold drugs. We could try to find out who is delivering them, and where they’re coming from, maybe?”

“I can search for those things,” she agreed. “And what about Peter Baker? He might have killed this woman, but someone else ordered it to happen. Are you satisfied with seeing justice done against just him, or do you want to go further.”

“Further,” he told her darkly, without a moment of hesitation. “If we go further, then we’re accepting that the person directly responsible for the act isn’t the only person who needs to be punished for it. That helps me out when you get angry about your son.”

It was her turn now to have her mood darken. "I've told you before that I don't blame you. But I do share your desire for justice, or more accurately, revenge against whoever is actually responsible. If I was content to blame you entirely, then I would have just let you die in the hospital. I take a larger view of things."

"Lucky me!"

"I have something," she frowned. "It's not what I expected, but it might be interesting."

■ FEED SRC:DL22987531 SEC >RTLINK<

Geoff Lucas took his seat in the booth. The booth had become theirs over the course of their meetings, and as time went on, even the chair had become his own. He liked to sit near the window where there was a bump in the seat, a pleasant little indent that fitted him just perfectly. It gave him a nice view outside and let the light come in just right, enough to lighten the dark mood inside which he perpetually existed.

As he'd got older, he'd increasingly become a creature of habit. It seemed unavoidable, even natural. Young men would run around exploring the world, until they learned their place in it, and eventually staked their claim and built a life for themselves. His life, as was true of many older men, was ready to collapse since he felt that he'd comfortably outlived it.

The little indent in the chair, the view from the window, the cheeseburger and fries, with extra pickles and no tomatoes. That was all his, part of the claim he'd staked. Silly though it was, it was all a part of his routine, the little things that made what was left his life just barely tolerable.

What was even sillier was that Bertoli had similar preferences. He had picked a part of the bench seat opposite, angled slightly and

facing towards the counter. He rarely sat anywhere else, always moving to his comfortable little spot. They were growing old together, that much was quite certain.

Bertoli was late. He sometimes was—not often, but sometimes. He made his own schedule but things changed at the last minute. Such were the requirements made upon him.

Lucas ordered a coffee. He had had a bad morning, so he ordered a slice of pie to go with it, in the hope that it might go some way towards cheering him up. The waitress had begun to ask him what he'd like, but he cut her off and asked her to surprise him. He was just in the mood not to know. A pleasant surprise would be a welcome thing right now.

He stared vacantly out of the window. In his mind, he ran over the conversation that was to come. He'd run it through his head a hundred times before, always different, but always the outcome was the same. It would break him, destroy his old friend, but there was no avoiding it, either. They had to do it; this was going to happen, and it was going to happen today.

He was roused from his meandering thoughts by what he wrongly assumed was his order. He turned with a smile to find Bertoli taking his usual place opposite him. The smile suddenly felt massively misplaced.

"This is becoming all too regular," he grumbled, sliding along the bench seat and finding the familiar, comfortable spot that was his own.

"I needed to talk with you," Lucas told him. He looked away again—this wasn't going to be easy, and he took a moment to himself to prepare for it.

“I’m not complaining,” he grunted, finding that perfect spot and settling into it. “The coffee’s good, the food is better than you’d expect, and the peace and quiet is welcome. It’s just the company...”

Lucas smiled and nodded. “It’s not just the company.”

Bertoli gave him an angry glare. “Let me guess, you’ve got more good news for me?”

Lucas nodded, and his face took on a stony severity. “This is bad. This is very bad.”

“I’m going to need a coffee before I hear this, aren’t I?”

The days of good news were over—they had both known that for some time. Whatever was left to say between them was never going to be good again, not while they worked for a living.

Captain Bertoli looked thoughtfully out from behind a pair of tired eyes. Many times he had said about how he missed the streets and the days before, when he had worked on them. On the streets, death was always lurking, ready to catch the unwary. A missed gesture, a moment of distraction, and any day could be your last. But it was honest, it was uncomplicated, and it was nothing more than it was.

It was having children that had changed everything for him. He had bowed under to his wife’s demands to build a career. In fact, he had never wanted to leave the streets, never aspired to anything greater. He felt it was his place and it felt as if it was where he truly belonged. He didn’t go home to his wife and family at night after work: he went home from them, every morning.

But those days were gone and they weren’t coming back. Everything he’d seen since had robbed him of a little more of his innocence. The streets were uncomplicated—it was a war between them and us, and he knew where the lines were drawn. As he’d climbed the ranks, the lines shifted, they moved and danced around.

As politics became embroiled in his work, he'd seen all too clearly just how complicated things actually were and how, in essence, they were purely governed by stupid, greedy little people with stupid, greedy little agendas; just like the streets, but so much darker and so very much worse.

There was no going back from that; innocence, like respect, was hard to earn, easy to lose, and once lost, it was gone forever.

Their coffees arrived together, along with a slice of apple pie. For some reason, Lucas wasn't hungry now—it just looked greasy and had too much sugar in it. It would make him fat, unhealthy and slow. He'd had too much of that already.

"Bertoli," he began, almost apologetically. "I have something to say; it's not going to be easy to say, and it's not going to be easy for you to hear." Lucas glanced one more time out of the window.

Bertoli narrowed his eyes. His old friend wasn't one for dramatics; if he was saying such things, then he meant them, he would have known it only too well. "Go on," he said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"I've been following evidence and pushing leads, and I have found something... something I wish I hadn't found." He shifted in his seat—it didn't feel comfortable any more. "It's about the Wolf—I've been investigating the delivery network. They're using motorcycles; we've managed to prove that the deliveries are all being done by motorcycle."

Bertoli nodded. He had guessed that much.

"You see, for some reason, the dealers never have the actual drug with them. We presumed it was so they could never be arrested with it, and it was all done for their protection. Now I think they're protecting the drug itself. The people dealing it seem to actually be expendable.

“We’ve managed to prove that all the deliveries have been made by motorcycles, and I have evidence of that now. When a buyer arrives, they deliver the package directly to the dealer, and then move on. The quickest way to do that is by motorcycle.”

“OK. I’ll buy that.” Bertoli nodded and sipped at his coffee. He had that look on his face of a man who knew there was more—who knew something bad was coming.

“Bertoli, I’ve got something horrible to tell you—something really, really awful.”

For a moment there was a flash of brilliant white which was gone in a fraction of a second that lasted an eternity; and then the world was forever draped in blackness.

Bertoli nodded and sipped at his coffee. It took him a moment to process what had happened. He had looked up momentarily. He was just letting him speak for now, but the questions were piling up. Then he saw a green dot, a pinprick of light. He was sure that’s what it was. He noticed it, but his brain didn’t make sense of it all—not at first.

Now his thoughts had caught up. There was a shattering sound; the glass splintered out with a loud, bursting crash. Lucas’s head did the same. His whole body shook, just once and he grunted, a sort of heavy, annoyed sighing noise as his eyes bulged. His head lurched to the side, and then he slumped loosely to the table. His head smashed into the woodwork, the side of his skull now a dull, wet, bloody mess. Glass tumbled from the window frame as the whole pane crumbled and showered around on both sides.

Bertoli reacted slowly. He pressed himself back into the chair, gasping in abject horror. Confusion gripped him, disbelief followed.

It took seconds—long, dithering, painfully slow seconds for it all to sink in.

He'd been shot. Someone had put a bullet through his old friend's head from outside; the dot had been a laser-sight, targeting the victim, and he'd been murdered. Then came the more immediate issue - he could well be next.

Bertoli finally reacted. He rolled to the side; his pistol was in his hand, which actually slightly surprised him since he didn't remember drawing his service weapon at all. He barked loudly into the stunned silence of the other patrons, "Get down! Get down now!"

Chaos erupted from all around him. Screaming broke out, and the air was thick with blind panic as people began cowering under tables or hiding behind whatever makeshift cover they could find.

Bertoli risked a look. He gingerly put his head out from behind the end of the chair. The street was clear; people outside had heard the shot and gone to ground. He could hear a siren in the distance—he knew that backup was coming.

His free hand scrambled for his police badge. "Police!" he cried out. "Everyone stay down and stay calm. We're not in any danger now. Help is on the way."

He didn't know if he believed it, and perhaps he shouldn't believe it. Perhaps the sniper was still out there, but if a second shot was coming, it was likely it would have come already.

The muzzle of his weapon edged forward. He pushed it out, brandishing it nervously. He'd not handled a firearm in a hostile situation in more years than he cared to remember. He was rusty; he'd grown soft in his office, away from the streets with their lingering threat, their violence and menace.

He edged his way forwards. Outside was still quiet, calm, and eerily silent. People were sheltering; they had got themselves out of

harm's way, their natural human drive towards self-preservation had seen to that.

He looked at the body. His face was empty, the muscles were slack. It was as if he was a machine and someone had simply turned it off. His eyes stared blankly out. One was bloodied, red and swollen, the other looked empty, as if it was nothing more than a piece of coloured glass. It was as if it had never reflected emotions, never looked out from a human soul. Blood was pooling on the table, running freely from his nose and mouth. The bones of the skull had shattered as the bullet had ripped through his head.

He had intended to take his pulse, but there didn't seem to be much point. There was no question that he was gone.

>>MUTE<<

"What the hell?" Red rubbed his head, slightly shocked at what he'd seen.

Norma looked more shocked than he did. "I think you're missing the point."

He shrugged at her, realising only from her words that there was something he hadn't noticed.

She said to him very slowly, "Do you remember what Lucas was, what department he worked for?"

He shook his head and frowned.

She looked away. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Chapter 19

“That was a professional hit,” said Merv, breaking the silence.

Red looked at him and smirked. “You don’t say much, big guy, but when you do...”

“When he does, he’s absolutely correct,” Norma added in agreement.

“That was a very professional attack. Moreover, it was designed to make a point. They could have easily silenced him in a number of ways, but they want the police in fear. Doing this ensured that nobody will want to investigate the drug; nobody will want to be next to have a bullet through their brain.”

“This is bad.” Red shook his head sadly. “The police are powerless—these people are taking over the city and nobody can stop them. What’s next?”

“Exactly,” she said. “It feels like this is just the beginning of something.”

“What are we going to do?”

For a moment they all looked at one another. Norma opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again without saying a word. Then a bleeping sound from behind her captured her interest, and she was grateful to have that to escape to.

“The computer has found something,” she said softly. When she looked back from the monitor, her face wore a darkly troubled expression.

Red waited for her to continue, while Merv stepped forward expectantly. There was a rare moment of silence.

“It’s made a connection,” she said solemnly. “There are two videos ready to display.”

“Norma, are you ok?” Red asked, but it was clear she was far from it.

“You may have missed the point behind what detective Lucas was saying, but I didn’t,” she explained, swallowing hard. “He was investigating his end of the drug situation. He discovered it was delivered by motorcycles.”

Red and Merv looked slightly confused and exchanged a troubled glance. Neither was sure where she was going with this.

“Let me show you what I mean.”

■ FEED SRC:MX48837484 SEC PRTL RECON

Commissioner Blake sat opposite the mayor. He was not a pleasant man; he was not a good man. He was not a man that anyone who knew him would have any respect for. He was a career politician, a mask that someone else wore. He was a puppet who spoke the words other people thought. He had no real power, no real function beyond following the orders of very rich and very powerful people. He did it well enough to be ignored.

The restaurant was expensive—too expensive even for the commissioner to visit regularly, but the mayor had a personal account. The benefits of having absolutely no morals were obvious, and he was the kind of man that revelled in such things. He believed it made him superior, despite the actual inference that he’d never emotionally progressed from early childhood.

Soft piano music played in the background, gently setting an exact ambiance. It was beautifully decorated; the furniture was stylish, and the staff were some way beyond excellent. The smell of the food lingered on the air, wafting out from the kitchen with the promise of something good to come.

The menu was merely a formality—everything on it was perfection: everything was exquisitely prepared by seasoned experts

who had invested their lives to bring this quality to those who could afford the best; to those who could afford to pay for the privilege.

The wealthy elite would laugh, patting themselves on the back for their cleverness in convincing people to spend their lives paying off loans they'd built up, so they could become trained and qualified to better serve them.

It was exclusive. The clientele was selective. Requests for reservations were called in, and an offer of service was called back, but only to those deemed worthy of patronage. This was where the wealthy, the elite, went to shun the poverty that they caused with their greed and avarice. No part of such things was permitted to enter which might spoil the enjoyment of their meals.

Commissioner Blake had been there three times, always as a guest of the mayor, as he was on this occasion.

"So, Robert," Mayor Tony Viscori began, as if he were dictating a message. "How is everything going in your office?" The bulk of his attention was fixed on his lunch. He cut a piece of veal with his silver cutlery and ate it greedily.

The commissioner briefly wondered if the mayor even liked veal. He imagined, not unreasonably, that he simply enjoyed the cruelty of it. He snapped up, however, alert and eager to respond to the question. "We're making good progress with the changes you wanted."

"I've heard a mixture of reports—some good, and some bad..." He glared at his inferior. His fork made a sound as it fell to the edge of a fine china plate. His entire attention was now focused on Blake. "I don't like hearing bad things, especially not from the police department. Elections are coming up, and I run my campaign on a 'law and order' platform. There are hungry people in the wings

who would kill for my job. I would kill for my job, come to that, and I don't say such things lightly, Blake."

"I know that, sir," he agreed, nervous under the angry gaze.

Suddenly, his interest returned to the meal. "The new budget measures. Tell me about them."

Blake wasn't sure if he should eat or not. Perhaps he should seem relaxed and confident and just eat along with the mayor while discussing it like friends having lunch together, or maybe he should offer his undivided attention and play the role of an employee? He began cutting a piece of chicken, opting for his choice to fall somewhere in between the two.

"We've fully deployed the observation drones and the additional radar equipment on key points. The data analysis is proving problematic—it's a lot of adjustment, but the technology is already proving useful." His rhetoric was well rehearsed, though he had no personal experience and no deeper understanding of it. "The 'advanced motorcycle units' have been largely successful. We've now got 35 of them, but only 3 are routinely deployed. The others are on special assignment, as you know."

He paused nonchalantly to eat a forkful of chicken. The mayor didn't even appear to be listening at this point.

"The ammunition upgrades are in place. Officers are now armed with the new hollowpoint rounds, and team leaders report that the feeling on the ground is overwhelmingly positive. The armoured vehicles are on standby, and some key personnel are field testing a hand-gun variant—a fully automatic version of the standard sidearm. SWAT teams have begun training in their usage. Again, the feedback is that they're all welcome additions."

The mayor grunted a reply that more or less implied his satisfaction. "And this drug situation?"

“The new designer drug?” Blake cut a piece of food, pretending to be comfortable doing so. “I think the situation is under control.”

“Keep it that way,” he said through a mouthful of half chewed meat. “I like you, Blake, but any of us can be replaced—you’d be shocked at how quickly and easily.” He swallowed and finally looked over at him. “My job is easier if you do yours. Let’s keep doing what we’re told, and keep everything under control for the people upstairs. Frankly, this whole thing scares the absolute shit out of me.”

The commissioner shrugged. “The finer details are a little above my pay grade.”

“Do yourself a favour and keep it that way. I’ve learned the hard way that my soul was bought and sold a long time ago. Just keep your head down and don’t ask questions—that’s my advice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll probably be in my office in a few years. If you’re considering it, and I bet you are, then I’d recommend early retirement instead, if I were you.”

Blake frowned and smiled at the same time, as if he’d heard a confusing joke. Life was often a confusing joke.

>>END FEED<<

“I don’t get it,” said Red, looking back to Norma with a curious frown. He looked over at Merv and shrugged. “You?”

“Getting things isn’t my strong suit,” he grunted, his baritone voice reverberating around the large and mostly empty space.

“This is bad,” she told them both. She sighed deeply and rubbed her temple. “I know how they’re delivering the drugs; I know how they’re getting away with it. I know how it’s being done.”

Red shrugged. “How?”

She looked away, her expression one of someone who knew they'd been beaten. She began tapping on the keyboard, and her screen danced with complex information that wouldn't have made sense to anyone but her.

"If I'm right about this, then we're wrong about everything," she said, gripped with concern.

Red looked to Merv, who gave a tiny shrug back. "Norma, what's wrong?"

She held up a finger for them to stop talking. She was focused; the screen, the information, had become her whole world. She shook her head. The numbers flashed on the screen; the data was simply too complex for a human to interpret as the massive network of mainframe computers chewed it all over, made sense of the senseless, brought order to chaos. Still, she understood enough. She could see a pattern and it seemed to be confirming her fears.

"With the information we've just seen, I've got new research avenues to explore. I think I've finally found the answer I was looking for." Her eyes were red, her brow was set into a frown. She sniffed, rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, clearly fighting back a flood of powerful emotions.

"Norma, what's wrong?" asked Red softly, stepping up beside her.

"Watch!" she said simply as the video came to life on the screen.

■ FEED SRC:MX89337461 SEC PRTL RECON

Peter Baker roared up to the corner. His bike skidded to a halt as he slammed on the brakes too late, quite deliberately. The back stepped out slightly, but not enough to put him in any danger. It skidded, squealing impressively.

He unclipped his helmet and hung it on the front mirror of the large, red, litre-class Yamaha sports motorcycle, as he stepped off of it. He gave it a last, lingering look as he stepped away from it. A thing of beauty: it was fast, powerful, exciting, and quite lovely to look at.

It was little more than a toy to him, despite it all. Next week, something new might come along, be it a fast car, a woman, a new pistol, and that might be the focus of his attention for a short while. He was fickle; life passed him by without him feeling any great need to involve himself in it too deeply.

That attitude, in part, had made him rich. He simply didn't care—not about things, not about people, only ever about himself. He had found early on that he was capable of things that gave other people pause. He never hesitated, because he had no conscience about the harm he might cause. He had found he was the sort of man that could kill with impunity, and that certain other people valued that highly.

He stepped into the lot, swaggering like he owned the place. In his mind, that was more or less true. It was a piece of wasteland with a coffee-stand in it—nothing particularly special about it, but it did have one thing that nowhere else in town had.

Two police officers looked up as he went to the counter, cut into the back of an old trailer. He said to the man behind the window, "Coffee, milk, two sugars." He was careful, as always, not to be polite.

He turned to glare at the officers, fixing them with a challenging stare and a crooked smile.

Tom stood up, clearly the elder of the two. He said something to the other, and held out a hand for him to stay put.

He approached the counter himself and stared straight at Peter, their eyes locking together, both challenging the other to look away first.

“Thomas,” grinned Peter. “I hope you’re keeping well.”

“I’ve got no complaints,” he admitted, although it sounded pretty much like one. “What brings you to this wonderful neighbourhood? Slumming it?”

“Business,” he told him, dropping the facade altogether and getting right down to it. “It’s time. I’ve been told that today’s the day for your little protégée.”

“Good,” Tom shrugged. “He’s ready, he’s a good rider. He aced the training and hasn’t put a foot wrong on the bike so far. He’s a good kid.”

“Is he on-board?”

Tom nodded. “Sure, he’s been approached; the basics have been explained. Casey is on-board with the whole thing. He’s ready for the special detail.”

“Right. Right.” His face shifted into a smile. “You know how it is—I’m told there needs to be a test.”

“A test...” He rolled his eyes. “This is ridiculous—there’s no test you can put him through that comes anywhere near to the training or the real-world experience he’s already had. What is it with you people and your damn tests?”

“Look at me,” he said, snapping angrily. “Do I look like the man in charge? Do I? I’m just telling you what I’m told to tell you, so you just do what you’re told to do.”

“What’s it going to be this time?” he grumbled, wearily resigned to the facts of the matter which were not about to change any time soon.

“I have a little surprise,” he told him playfully. “You’ll know it when it comes in. I’m going to kill three birds with one stone. I have two other little problems I have to solve today. I figured I’d wrap them all up together into one nice, neat little package.”

Tom frowned at him. “You do that. Casey is ready.”

“He better be, man. He better be.”

Several minutes later, Peter Baker was seated on his bike. His heart was pounding, the anticipation was flowing through him. His job was exciting and he enjoyed it, every second of it. He heard the noise, a rumble in the distance, and he smiled. He grinned to himself. It was time.

The rumble grew louder as it came closer. It went from a rumble to a drone, and then the unmistakable thumping roar of a motorcycle engine. It pulled up next to him, black with a red stripe, tidy but nothing too special, and certainly no match for his own.

He nodded in satisfaction at the lightly modified super-twin racer. It was a good commuter, fast enough in town and cheap, but not a motorcycle to get under your skin. It was a bike built for expediency, and built down to a cost.

The man riding it got off as the engine was killed, plunging the machine into silence. He unclipped his helmet and whipped it off, frowning angrily as he made his way over.

“Who the hell are you?” he said, spitting the words at him accusingly. “What the hell is this about?”

Peter held up a hand for him to stop. “Sorry,” he said.

He did stop, but just for a moment, staring in mild surprise.

Peter whipped out a small white smartphone and fiddled with it for a few moments before putting it back into his pocket. He

pushed himself up from the bike and stood up straight. He was just slightly the shorter of the pair. "Mr Marks, isn't it?"

He nodded. "That's me. What's this about? What's going on with my sister?"

"Yeah," he said, feigning an expression of sympathy. "This is about your sister. Sorry to say she's in a sad state, Mr Marks. I guess you have to know that already."

His face hardened and his hands clenched into fists. "What the hell do you know about it?"

"I know she has certain proclivities. She likes to use substances upon which the law frowns. This isn't news to you, I'm sure."

Marks looked as if he was holding his temper, but only just. "No, it isn't news. Now where is she?"

"Well, that's just it, isn't it?" Peter looked up at him darkly. "You've been asking a lot of questions; you've been going around town making a bit of a nuisance of yourself to people who don't have the time or inclination to deal with such things. These aren't the sort of people who solve their problems with a polite request. You're about to find that out in a way that you're not going to like."

"Get to the point," he snapped.

"You want to find your sister; you want to help her, right?" He grinned, but there was darkness in his eyes, deep pools of it into which he'd long since drowned.

He nodded that he did—of course he did.

"I'm going to give you both a chance," he began, looking as if he was fighting back the urge to laugh. "But just one chance, and not really much of one at that, if the truth be told. You see, I deal in information. What I've heard on the best of authority is that your sister has been given rather a lot of drugs, and a very, very strong

dose besides. It's more than enough to kill an adult elephant in a matter of minutes.

"To the best of my understanding, your sister isn't an adult elephant, is that correct?"

His hands clenched, his face remained twisted into an angry glower.

Peter held out a piece of paper, offering it to the angry man. "On here is her address. It's not far, but then... she's a junkie, and she's holding a bag of junk. I don't think it's going to take long before that stuff is flowing through her veins, but you never know — you might make it there in time."

"What do you want?" he said through gritted teeth.

With enthusiastic bravado, he said, "I want you to be a hero, Mr Marks. I want you to go and save her. I want you to ride through this town on your lovely little motorcycle and see if you can get there before that beautiful poison takes your sister to hell on a cloud of fluffy bliss."

"You piece of..." he began, his arm coiled back reflexively as he leaned forward, grabbing him by his crisp white T-shirt, ready to punch him to the ground.

"No!" he called out, smiling up to him as if this was all highly amusing. "You're on the clock, Mr Marks. Time is running out for both of you. Your sister is dying as we speak. Do you really have time for all this right now?"

For a moment, he paused. Then his fist connected with the other man's face, landing directly on his brow and tearing open a wide gash along the side of his eye.

He yelped in sudden pain and slumped to his knees.

"I'll make time," he growled at him. "If she dies, I'll be coming back for you."

He turned, half in panic. His eyes were on his bike as he fumbled in his pocket for the key. Then he saw the key sticking out of the big, red Yamaha. “Yours is faster!” he said, throwing his leg over and firing the machine to life. “I’ll be back for you later, and it’s you that isn’t going to like it!”

Behind him there was soft laughter. “Good luck, Mr Marks,” he shouted as the big red motorcycle roared away.

>>END FEED<<

Red looked at Norma, and she looked back at him. He swallowed hard and she wiped a tear from her eye.

“She was my sister,” he said softly. He could hardly believe it, but at the same time, he knew it was true. It was as if his world had finally fitted into place. He wasn’t a person he hated. He wasn’t a person anyone hated.

“And Casey was one of them,” she sniffed, doing her best to hold herself together. “All this time I thought he was the victim... it was him that did this to you. I’m so sorry, Red—you were innocent all along.”

He wiped a tear from his own eye. He leaned back on the desk, staring at the floor for a moment, trying to make sense of it all as the thoughts and emotions churned away inside him. “They killed my sister. I was just trying to save her, right?”

She nodded back to him.

“What’s going on, Norma? I don’t understand any of this!”

She looked away, wiped her eye with her hand and snatched some tiny measure of control back from her emotions. She stood up, breathed heavily and began, “Geoff Lucas was the head of internal affairs. If he was investigating the drug, then it had to be from inside the police department. When he discovered the motorcycle

deliveries, it had to mean that it was the police themselves delivering the drug. He must have found that out and was killed for it.

“The discussion between the mayor and the commissioner confirmed it. They have a number of these high-powered motorcycles on a special assignment, and now we know what that special assignment is. Police riders are being tested and recruited. They’re delivering the Wolf around the city themselves, working for who-knows-who and for reasons I can’t even guess at. The dead riders must have refused and they were killed for not becoming a part of it.”

“This is insane!” Red took a deep breath, trying to clear his head. “Police working with criminals?”

She scoffed at his naivety. “It would hardly be the first time, I’m afraid. It’s way more common than you’d think.”

“And this is why my sister is dead?” He shook his head sadly. It had all started to make a sick kind of sense.

“And this is why my son is lying in a hospital bed,” she agreed. “I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am. He was part of it; he was guilty all along. The very thought of it never even occurred to me until I saw that video. When I knew the police were involved, it all made an ugly kind of sense.”

“You’re not to blame for any of this,” he told her firmly. Frowning to himself, he added, “And my name is Marks?”

She sighed and looked away to the monitor where she’d already accessed his details. “James Marks.”

He grimaced and made a noise from the back of his throat. “James? That’s a terrible name—I sound like a butler. I’m sticking with ‘Red’, if it’s all the same.”

She smiled back weakly. “You know,” she began hesitantly. “This changes everything.”

“I know.”

“You’re not going to take your revenge against Peter Baker,” she told him decisively.

Even more decisively, he replied, “I think you might be wrong about that.”

“Red,” she began, with an expression on her face that he’d never seen before. It was a grim look, an expression of stalwart fortitude. Whatever she said next would carry the weight of complete assuredness. “You’re going to take revenge on the whole damn lot of them; and I’m going to help you.”

He nodded, and broke into the first real smile he could remember.

“Now you’re talking!”

Chapter 20

Red insisted against it, but Norma asserted her authority and demanded that all of them got at least four hours of uninterrupted sleep and, those that needed it, made sure their brains were full charged up.

He had resisted bravely, but the resistance weakened until it was eventually replaced by a complacent shrug as he ended up doing exactly as he was told, arguing that his freshly upgraded brain probably didn't require sleep any longer. It did. He was asleep before any of them, and snoring much more loudly besides.

Norma slept fitfully, and finally gave up after two and a half hours of restless tossing and turning. She spent some time on the computer, setting it a new program to follow, and then she went to Casey's room. She sat there for a while, just watching him while the machinery went about its work of keeping him technically alive. She just watched as his chest rose and fell and he appeared to be breathing.

"Casey," she said, shaking her head sadly. "How could you get involved in something like this? I raised you better than that, didn't I? Your father was a good man, decent and honest, and me..." her words trailed off as her eyes glazed over, moistened with tears.

"What have you become?"

She finally stood up and turned her back on him.

Red woke up and decided it was time for a walk. His feet inevitably lead him to the most obvious place, a place where a little part of his thoughts had been dwelling for some time. Now, it was his sister that occupied the greater part of his thoughts—her face, her eyes. He could see them clearly now, from when she had been younger, before

she'd stepped onto the path of destruction that had killed her, the unstoppable juggernaut of her addiction.

He didn't know if he remembered it—he suspected he didn't really. It was more like an imagining, a fantasy his mind had cooked up for him based on the images he'd seen. Reality wasn't an absolute anymore, not with the Hawk-Eye creating it for him on demand.

Sleep hadn't helped much either. He had hoped it might have refreshed his memory, brought back some of the things that he'd lost, but in that respect, nothing had changed.

He went through the door to the Hawk-Eye room and was surprised to see Norma sitting there working at the console.

He paused, and then said, "I'm sorry, I thought you were meant to be sleeping."

She smiled weakly. "I can't sleep. I tried, but I've just got too much on my mind. Working helps."

"What are you working on?"

She pointed to the monitor, even though it wasn't the center of the system. "I've programmed it to extrapolate data fragments. I think I can use it to track the police motorcycles. I think I can work out where the delivery vehicles are going."

"If only there was something we could do with that information," he said wryly. "Unrelated to the present conversation, I've been thinking about the bike, about the HERPES." He frowned, grimacing at the name. "Someone around here really needs to work on their acronyms."

She laughed. "I don't think cool names were very high on their agenda. What would you prefer—Black Thunder? Road Wolf? Cavalier Rider?"

"They're not bad," he said, seemingly impressed. "I actually like all of those."

“I’m not letting you use that bike,” she told him flatly, rejecting even the merest suggestion of him riding it. “There were five of them, and now there’s only one complete prototype left. People died riding those things—they’re just too fast for a human to handle. That’s one of several thousand reasons why the entire project was shelved.”

“But my brain...” he argued.

She looked up at him for a moment. An eyebrow was raised. “What?”

“My brain processes things faster than anyone else alive. My reactions are quicker, more accurate... If anyone can ride that bike, Norma, I can!”

“No,” she said, inadvertently nodding as she rolled her eyes. She bit her lip thoughtfully. “You think you could really ride it?”

He grinned. “You know I can really ride it!”

“If—and that’s a very big ‘if’...” she said thoughtfully, sounding like she was already convinced, but was trying to pretend to herself that she wasn’t. “If we could track the deliveries, then that is the only machine in the world that would be able to keep up with the AMU motorcycles. But what good would that do us?”

“I could disable them,” he suggested, perching himself on the edge of the desk. He smiled at the thought of it as the idea seemed to light up in his mind, washing all the darkness out of his mood.

“Every delivery bike I can knock out is evidence. You could get the police on the scene, I could force the drivers off the road, the police collect the samples... We could turn the tide against them; we could help fight back against the drug dealers.”

She rubbed her chin. “It’s just you and I, you know. That’s it. We can’t take on a whole network of violent, highly-organised criminals with just a fast bike and an above-average computer.”

“A bullet is a tiny thing, but if it gets you in the just the right place, it can kill you.” His argument was difficult to refute. “We also have Merv; wars have been won with less.”

“You know, if we could disrupt their delivery network,” she began thoughtfully. “It could cause them to behave irrationally. The data could lead us back to where the drug is being supplied from.”

“That sounds like the place the bullet needs to hit.”

“I can’t send you out to do it.” She shook her head sadly. “It’s too dangerous; it’s too irresponsible. You’re just a civilian—you’ve got no combat training, no experience, and we’re talking about plunging you into a violent confrontation with potentially dozens of officers armed with fully automatic weapons.”

“Well, who am I?” he shrugged. “What’s my background?”

She chuckled to herself that neither of them had shown any concern over that up to now.

“Look me up.”

She brought up his details and flashed them up on the screen.

“James Lawrence Marks... I trained as a marine, but was kicked out for discipline issues - that doesn’t sound like me, does it? I mean, I’m usually so well behaved.” He suddenly looked horrified as the terrible realisation hit him. “My middle name is ‘Lawrence!’ At least it wasn’t ‘Colin or Peter,’ I suppose.”

“You’re going to argue that you do have combat experience, aren’t you?”

He nodded slowly. “Well, I clearly do. I have military training, training that’s superior to that of the police. I also have a really cool motorcycle, and more importantly, brain-damage that’s turned me into a super-powered force for justice.”

She rolled her eyes up and sighed noisily. “You do not have super-powers. You have a technologically induced form of highly selective brain cancer.”

He shrugged. “Same thing.”

She pointed at him like a parent telling off a slightly annoying child. “I’ll think about it, but I’m not promising anything. I’ll run simulations and decide what’s safest, and what action is most likely to work.”

“OK,” he said. “That seems reasonable, and not at all uninteresting. I’m going to go and play with the bike—make sure it still actually works, and sit on it, and make revving noises and stuff.”

“Just behave yourself. If it’s got a button marked ‘fire’, then don’t press it. OK?” She didn’t appear to be joking.

“There is just one other thing... I’m not your prisoner anymore, am I?”

She looked at him with sad eyes, and shook her head. “No, Red. You’re not my prisoner anymore.”

“Then can I get some clothes?”

She smirked. “Merv is out shopping now. I think it might be an interesting social experiment to see just exactly what he comes back with.”

“Thanks, Norma.” He smiled warmly. “He’s probably going to bring me back a T-shirt made entirely from Glocks, and a whole bag of mixed holsters, isn’t he?”

In many ways, Merv didn’t disappoint.

“It’s great to wear clothes again. I almost feel like an actual person.” He slapped Merv on the arm. Merv growled happily or laughed angrily - it was honestly quite difficult to tell, and perhaps

the distinction was too subtle to notice. “And who doesn’t love to wear a T-shirt that tells the world that I’m ‘gay and proud?’”

“I am gay and proud,” he said.

“Yeah but...” Red began forming the explanation in his mind, but really, if such things needed explaining, then the explanation really wasn’t going to work either. Consequently, he gave up before starting.

“Work on the bike, Red!” said Norma. “Arguing with Merv is like sports. It will leave you exhausted, and is ultimately pointless.”

Red laughed. “Who doesn’t like sports?”

Norma pointed to herself, as did Merv.

Red looked shocked. “Merv, how can you not like sports? You’re just a mountain of testosterone with bones in it? What are you, ga...” He stopped and frowned thoughtfully. “Oh, right.”

“Red, while you were getting yourself dressed in clothing that announces your sexual preference and attitude thereto to the world, I found another video which I’m sure you’re going to find fascinating.”

“Great,” he said sarcastically, “there’s nothing I love more than being fascinated by things.”

■ FEED SRC:MX00038856 SEC PRTL RECON

The motorcycle roared along the test track. It was hard to gauge the speed, but there could be no question that it was fast—incredibly, unreasonably, and quite utterly ridiculously fast. It came to a chicane—a mess of cars posing as obstacles for it to dodge between. The rider changed down a gear, the machine growled angrily, and roared as the power was laid on.

It flew along the test road, plummeting straight into the back of the first static car, exploding into a cloud of shattered debris.

Bits of metal and plastic showered down, as did the rider, mostly in one chunk, but quite obviously not entirely.

>>END FEED<<

“Sweet!” said Red, glaring at her.

“That was the third prototype. Interestingly, the second is still here—it never made it out of the warehouse. It lost traction on the way through the door, spinning out and catching the rider on the post. He only ‘broke’ his left arm and leg, caused \$3,000,000 damage to the motorcycle. The wall was apparently fine. According to the file, he now works in a regional office, since his left arm and leg are said to no longer exist in any meaningful way.”

“I still want to ride it,” he said with a wild grin. “Maybe even more so!”

She frowned at him accusingly and told him sternly, “It’s dangerous, Casey!”

“Red!” he corrected. Then he realised what that little mistake had really meant. Their eyes met for a moment, and then they both looked away from one another awkwardly.

“OK,” he began. “I promise to be careful, alright?”

“I’m still thinking about it,” she grunted. “I’ll let you know what I decide.”

He smiled at her. “You can’t change what I am, but you can help me be it!”

Chapter 21

Red pulled on the locker, but it was sealed—probably locked to prevent anyone stupid getting at the contents, and, in that respect, it was working perfectly. He rattled the hefty metal door, but it stubbornly refused to budge for him. “Dammit,” he grumbled, as he turned to head off in search of tools.

There was a sudden violent crashing sound. Red recoiled in surprise, shielding his head with his hand. He looked over to see the stubborn door folded neatly in two, crumpled and smashed as Merv pulled it out, wrenching what was left of it straight off the hinges after punching it clean out of the frame.

“My god, what do they feed you?” said Red, as the discarded door clattered to the ground noisily.

“Meat,” he rumbled. “I eat lots of meat. I’m not a delicate little vegetarian; like some people.”

“I’m sure there are people that would find that offensive,” said Red, trying to look like one of them. “I’m sure there any countless logical arguments I could use to explain why my diet is better than yours, but there’s really no arguing with results, is there? I have super-powers, and I can’t punch a door clean off its hinges.”

“Because you’re a delicate vegetarian,” he explained deeply, his just ridiculously powerful voice rattling around the small room.

“Merv, can I ask you a question?” he ventured, after pondering something for a moment without really thinking about it.

“No,” he growled.

“I’m going to anyway, Merv.”

Merv did something that might have been a smile, of sorts”: he rolled his oddly muscular eyes. “I know.”

“Merv, what the hell are you doing here? I mean, seriously, you are a force of nature. You could take a normal man, roll him up into a ball, and play basketball with him. You could then make him thank you for doing it. Why on Earth are you guarding a computer engineer, who frankly has severe emotional problems and is probably clinically insane?”

“When you roll a man into a ball and play basketball with him, there’s lots of paperwork to do,” Merv said, in his version of ‘thoughtfully’. “I hurt people a bit too often. I have a bit of a temper, and can’t always control myself very easily. Often, not at all. There’s a lot you don’t know about me; most of it isn’t very good.”

“We’re friends, right?” Red said dryly.

Merv made an ambiguous half nod, half shake gesture, and his eyes weren’t giving much away either.

“I think I got this detail as a punishment.” His voice was still heavy and filled with power, but it did seem to have softened slightly, or else Red’s eardrums had burst and he was just used to it all now. “I didn’t care—I’ve been doing this job long enough to know it doesn’t really matter. Nothing does. We just protect money; we make sure it flows in the right direction, to the right people. Nothing else matters to anyone, and that’s the truth of it all.”

“My god, Merv,” he exclaimed with clear astonishment. “That was insightful and intelligent!”

Merv shook his quite average-sized head. “And you’d know, wouldn’t you—‘cos you’ve always been the smartest man on the whole damned planet. You had it all figured out, so I ain’t gonna go giving you no advantage by letting you think different, am I?”

Red grinned at him. “You’re no fool, are you?”

“Listen, Red. What we’re doing here, what we’re up against, what we’re taking down... It’s important; it means something. It matters! We have to see this through.”

Red grinned at him. “So you’re in then? You’re in all the way.”

Merv nodded. “I’m in all the way.”

Red briefly considered making a funny innuendo about it, but decided against it, as the mental image proved to be quite distasteful.

Norma put in the finishing touches to her program. It seemed to be working; the computer seemed to have adapted well to the new information.

“Norma, I found clothes!” shouted Red, rousing her from the world of cold, logical precision to the world of, well... Red. “I found them in a locked cabinet, but nothing is really locked when you have a Merv.”

She looked up to find him grinning like an idiot, and wearing a black armoured racing-suit over his baby-pink T-shirt. It was matt black with bullet-proof external carbon armour strategically formed on key points, and metal panels braced the joints.

“Look at this stuff. It probably cost more than my house, if I have a house.” He looked away and frowned curiously. “I wonder if I have a dog. In which case, who’s feeding it? What if I have a cat?!”

“You look a bit silly,” she told him.

He waved his finger admonishingly. “Oh no, I actually look less silly. When I sit on the bike making revving noises and pretending to ride it in this, I look silly; but, when I do it wearing a bright pink gay T-shirt and tight jeans, I look utterly ridiculous.” All this was tough to argue with. “I think it fits rather well with my new super-powered persona!”

“I don’t know where to start with all this,” she huffed wearily.

“I do—I was thinking Street Fox, Fire Wolf, The Venomator, Highway Hero, or maybe Auto Human-Hawk-Thing?”

“Merv, please kill him if he makes up another heroic name for himself,” she asked politely, but it didn’t leave much doubt of her sincerity.

Merv crossed his arms over his gigantic barrel-chest. “Can do!”

“He can’t catch me, I have super-powers,” Red told her.

“So far, the only manifestations of your superhuman abilities have been to collapse on the floor, before soiling yourself, and catching little rubber balls,” she reminded him.

“Sleeping Ball Whisperer...” he mused thoughtfully. “No, I don’t like that for so many reasons.”

“My friends call me ‘Ball Whisperer’,” Merv grumbled jealously.

They both looked at him in horrified surprise.

“You have friends?” Red frowned.

“This is all well and good, but does the bike work?” she said, waving her hand, trying to get the situation back to the point—some point, and at this point, any point.

“It does. I even found a button marked ‘fire’, but I didn’t press it, just like you said. I read the instructions though, which I seem to remember is a first for me.”

“And?”

“You’re not meant to start motorcycles in an enclosed space. We both coughed a lot. That’s why I read the instructions.”

She looked at the pair of them as if they were both highly offensive, a smell that shouldn’t be smelled coming from a place that shouldn’t exist.

Red continued excitedly, like a puppy on caffeine. “It’s armed! It has an electric rail-cannon thing that fires high-impact or high-penetration rounds, which should be huge fun to fire. It has trip wires that deploy from underneath. It can spread little metal things that burst tyres, fires flash-bang grenades, and can disable people with a high-powered water pistol that has electricity running through it.

“Personally, I think the water-pistol is a step too far.”

“You know you can’t fire any of those things without the computer here letting you, don’t you?” she told him with a self-satisfied smirk.

His expression hardened. “Yes, I know. They can only be deployed by a remote operator. I think that’s highly unfair, and was hoping you’d add a manual trigger for me, considering you know how to do the boring stuff.”

She shook her head and seemed quite firm in her decision.

He huffed in annoyance, “Well it’s still a cool bike and it runs. It purred like a kitten.”

“I coughed,” Merv added.

“We did forget that running bikes indoors makes you die. But the important thing is that we do know that now. Mistakes have been made, and lessons have been learned.”

Merv nodded, Red did also.

She covered her face for a moment and muttered to herself, “I can’t believe I’m working with those two idiots. We’re all going to die.”

“Norma!” Red looked suddenly very serious, despite wearing a bright pink T-shirt, nearly killing himself with exhaust gases, and sitting on a heavily armed super-bike making engine-noises quite recently. “That bike is the ultimate toy, and I think we can all agree that I’m the ultimate big kid. Big kids need to play, Norma.”

She looked at them both, weighing it all up, considering every option. The simulations had suggested it might be possible, even if it probably wasn't.

"If I decide to let you out, it's on my terms. I'm in charge; you do as I say, you obey the rules, and you follow commands."

"Sure, sure..."

He began hopping from foot to foot, grinning widely. He would agree to anything, almost literally anything, to be allowed to ride that motorcycle.

Norma had wanted revenge, but revenge had given way to redemption. Casey had become embroiled in something dark, something awful and twisted, something that subverted his father's memory, something that tarnished the very name he carried.

She had to put that right. Could he do it? Could he ride that thing against trained officers, against police who were hardened and ready to fight? Would the motorcycle be enough? Was any of this really her choice to make?

She owed him just as much as she owed herself. This man, whom she'd assumed to be her enemy, was the injured party, the victim of her son's mistakes.

"Listen carefully." She leaned forwards and took a deep breath. She regarded them both sternly. "Safety first. We'll test the motorcycle to make..."

"Yay!" Red punched the air excitedly, turned round, and gave a slightly unwilling Merv a high five. He ran off back to the motorcycle to begin dragging it out and making final preparations.

"... sure everything is working properly, and that you can really handle it," she muttered to herself. She turned to Merv, who somehow looked excited himself and was edging back towards the bike. "You too, Merv?"

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied. “The bike is cool. It has a gun on it.”

“Go and play, then,” she told him.

“Ma’am!” He looked down bashfully, which was a very odd sight when it came from a gigantic monstrosity that was built from a mass of solid, sweaty muscle. “There’s also a car with guns on it. I was thinking that maybe I could help...”

“Merv...” She shook her head dolefully, but she knew when she was beaten. “Go play, Merv.”

He threw his leg over and sat on it for a moment, just sat. The helmet was black, all black. The visor was dark, but oddly things seemed to come into sharper focus when he closed it. The picture of the world seemed brighter, more defined, more real even.

The controls before him were surprisingly basic. He couldn’t actually find any instruments but it had lights which flashed and danced up and down the center. There seemed to be no logic to the layout. He had to look down to find anything—nothing was at eye level. Then he realised he wasn’t meant to see it—he was meant to see ahead; the distractions were kept from him. He could find them if he needed them: otherwise, they were tucked neatly away.

It was built for speed and nothing else. Your eyes pointed forwards, because to point them anywhere else meant a sudden, violent, and violently sudden death.

He put his hands on the rubber grips. That did it! Doing so caused a surge of adrenaline in his chest. He felt the burst of anticipation, the motivation, the sheer excitement of sitting on a machine that was capable of so much.

Could he ride it? Would he? He grinned to himself. There was only one way to find out, and that was just about to happen. He said softly into the helmet, “Norma, can you hear me?”

“I hear you fine,” the reply came back, perfectly crystal clear. “It’s your last chance if you want to back out.”

He smiled. “Not a chance.”

His thumb flicked up a cover, underneath which was a yellow and black button marked START.’ He’d pressed it before, but this time it was different; this time he was taking her out. His head swam with pure exhilaration.

“Norma,” he said. “I’m ready. Just exactly how the hell do I get out of here?”

“Nothing at all is going to go wrong with this, is it?” the voice grunted sarcastically through the helmet, reverberating through his skull. “Follow the lights.”

With a flicker and then a flash, yellow marking lights appeared from tiny embedded points along the floor, leading him into the darkness. His visor adapted automatically, lighting the way. He grinned again—this was going to be even better than he thought, as he assumed so few things in life were.

He pressed the button and she roared to life. The exhausts spat behind him, the vibration shuddered through the machine, and then it smoothed out into a purr. He flicked the throttle, testing the power. She spat a blue flame and vibrated softly again. It was pure violence, insanity locked into a metal casing. It was a disaster trapped in a moment, chaos given form in a frozen millisecond of horror. It was everything wrong captured in a tiny fragment of what was right. He was in love, and, for right now, the bike was his world.

He felt the clutch—it was oddly smooth, light and free, even after all the years she’d waited for him to find her. He pulled it all the

way back, and clicked her down into gear. There was a satisfying clunk from the box, rather louder than he thought it would be.

Now he really felt the pressure. All of the power, all of the fury, a bomb, a nuclear explosion, life and death was all contained beneath his fingers. Letting the clutch out would free it all, would channel that turmoil to the back wheel, releasing everything she had.

He was oddly clear-headed. It was going to happen, and it was going to happen now.

“Norma...” he smiled. “I’m going out. Tell Merv he’s not as annoying as I first thought. And you... always remember that sometimes, I thought you were OK, but only sometimes, and not for very long.”

“Try not to kill yourself,” she told him.

“Ha!” he laughed, very slightly nervously. “No promises on that score.”

He gingerly let out the clutch.

Chapter 22

Norma ran diagnostics, frantically setting the computer to do things it didn't want to do against the occasional protest as it hiccupped irrelevant data on various monitors.

"Merv, any luck with that car?" she yelled out, her shrill voice echoing around the cavernous halls.

"No!" a roar returned, the sound of rocks being shattered with dynamite. "It won't start. It doesn't actually seem to have an engine."

She sat back down in the command chair heavily. She'd found a great chair in a locked up storage area and adopted it as her own. She'd arranged the consoles and the stations into a semicircle facing the wall where the feed panels had been arranged. She was now the heart of the operation—everything the Hawk-Eye knew, it was feeding directly back to her. She was the mind of the machine.

Sadly, she was in control of the mind of a machine that didn't seem to actually know anything.

What it specifically didn't know was how to start a motorcycle. "Report," she instructed through the dictation-mic that trailed from an ear-piece off to her left ear.

"I've kicked it, I've shouted at it..." Red replied. "It just cut out—it won't start at all. One minute, it's all vibrations and barely contained craziness, all bottled up violence flowing into the back wheel, and the next moment it's as docile as a hamster in a plastic wheel."

She shook her head, and glanced over to the monitor where she could see the computerised extrapolation of him in the street, standing beside the inert and heavily-armed super-secret motorcycle.

"Do you think maybe it ran out of petrol?" He rubbed the front of his helmet thoughtfully, looking quite utterly ridiculous, as an old

woman walking a dog walked past him, staring in wide-eyed wonder at the bizarre sight.

“It doesn’t run on petrol,” she told him. “I won’t trouble you with the finer details of what it does use for fuel, but suffice it to say, it’s best if you avoid crashing it unless you want to leave a crater the size of a city-block behind in your memory.”

“Well, that’s just one more good reason to avoid crashing it, then,” he shrugged inside the snug-fitting carbon/kevlar weave armour.

The old woman stepped back and asked very politely, “Do you need some help, deary? I always have my mobile telephone on me for emergencies.”

“Thank you, ma’am, I think we’re going to be fine.”

She couldn’t see his smile behind the black visor.

“We’re just having teething problems with the finer points of the technology of a highly advanced secret government project to use super-vehicles to spy on people.” He leaned forward, and put his hand to the side of the mouthpiece as if whispering. “I have super-powers!”

She looked at him as though he was a complete idiot.

Coincidentally, Norma glared at the screen with almost the exact same expression, but it shifted quickly, and firmly, to anger where it seemed set to remain. “You don’t have...” she began, but then cut herself off and got her anger back on track, as it should be. “You can’t go around telling everyone about the bike.”

“Right...” his voice laughed through her earpiece. “And it will remain a closely-guarded secret when a three-hundred miles-per-hour shit-storm flies through the city, blowing up drug dealers on police motorcycles with machine guns and missiles, will it?”

“You’re starting to annoy me,” she told him, but in truth, this wasn’t the start of anything.

“Can’t you call the AA? We are registered with them, right?”

“We can’t call a recovery service,” she yelled loudly down the mic. On the monitor, she watched as his hand clamped to the side of the helmet as he flinched in sudden surprise. Just then, some information came up on the main screen. “Alright, I think I’ve got it.”

“Amaze me,” he told her.

“The power flow is disrupted, that’s all,” she said. “It’s programmed to cut out if it doesn’t get a coded signal from me every ten minutes. The computer here had forgotten that. I’m programming it now to begin sending it again. It should be back up and ready in a few seconds.”

“Great,” he replied, throwing his leg over and flicking back the cover for the start button. “Nice to know that I’m not the horrible failure you think I am, and have been accusing me of being for the last twenty minutes.”

“I don’t remember saying anything derogatory. At least, nothing that wasn’t true.”

He froze for a moment on the motorcycle. “Norma,” he said finally.

“Yes?” she replied.

“Send the damn signal. I’ve got a job to do before my brain needs charging up again.”

“Go, go,” she said, waving her hand at the monitor.

The machine roared to life and headed off down the street. Flames crackled from the tail as it sped along, leaving a trail of white smoke hanging in the air from the spinning tyre.

“I’m going to have to recalibrate the traction control,” she grumbled.

“It’s working fine, as far as I’m concerned,” he shouted through the intercom. “I’ve set it to ‘cool!’”

He grinned to himself, as he gently added power. The acceleration was like nothing he could have imagined. The bike pulled so hard he had to hold on tight or risk being torn straight off the back of the thing. He had to hang on to the bars with his hands, rest the small of his back against the step in the seat, and grip with his knees to avoid being left behind as the power fired the thing along the road like a rocket.

Unlike a sports-bike, it was higher, slightly taller, and poised for quick handling. He came to a line of traffic and touched the brakes. They were amazing! The speed melted away making the rear end feel suddenly light. The tail lifted up, but did so controllably – just - and he never felt that he was in any danger of losing it out from under him.

Still travelling at well over the speed limit, he weaved through the vehicles with ease. His sharpened reactions and quick reflexes worked to keep up with the challenge of keeping him moving, guiding the motorcycle effortlessly around the obstacles. Once clear, he opened the throttle—just a little, but sending even more power to the drive.

It responded with a howl. The engine growled and the front of the bike snatched upwards, powering along with the front wheel skipping in the air. Stuttering plumes of blue flames spat a jagged trail behind him and the rear tyre screamed in pain, as the wheel began spinning against the tarmac.

“Bloody hell...” he mumbled happily, totally impressed and utterly in love with the sheer visceral delight of riding something that had this seemingly limitless, unbelievable power. Even he, with his artificially sharpened brain, could barely control it, but he could control it, and barely was still just good enough. It was more than any other living human could ever hope for and it made him finally special.

However, he knew he couldn’t relax for a moment. It demanded everything from him, threatened him with its power, taunting him with the knowledge that one careless moment could cost him control, and it would be a moment he’d never come back from.

“Any problems?” Norma’s voice came through his speakers.

“There is a slight problem, yes,” he reported grimly.

Her voice sounded tense, alarmed even. “What’s wrong?” she asked urgently.

“There’s an occasional noise. It’s like a high-pitched whine; like a moaning sound that’s very distracting when I’m trying not to let my utterly insane motorcycle kill me, which it does seem totally set on doing.”

“I’m trying to help you!” she grumbled. “And, for the record, it’s not your motorcycle—it belongs to the government.”

“Presumably I am a taxpayer!” he presumed reasonably. “I would like to formally accept this bike in exchange for the taxes I have paid up to this point. Consider the debt paid in full.”

“That’s really not how taxes, debts, payments, motorcycles, arrangements, or anything in the world actually works,” she told him.

“I’ll leave you to sort out that side of it. I am never giving this thing back—I’m leaving you to sort out that side of it as well.”

“We’ll discuss that matter later, if you’re fortunate enough to survive the next hour, which I calculate is highly unlikely.”

It oddly didn’t darken the mood, since he was travelling fast enough to die instantly if he made the tiniest of mistakes, on top of a machine that was powered by a poorly-contained fuel cell that effectively served as a gigantic bomb.

“Don’t die, got it,” he said. “Sorry, was it don’t die, or do die? I’m not terribly good at remembering things.”

“Red,” she began more seriously. “I’m sending you the directions. They’ll appear up on the projection screen on your visor.”

“Like a head-up display?” he said, with the enthusiasm a child might have if it was handed a puppy while a caffeine-drip had been hooked up to its veins for the last three hours. “I have a head-up display?”

There was a noise like someone sighing wearily. “It’s called the ‘Visual Acuity, Graphical Interface & Neural Augmentation system.”

“Eeewww,” he cringed. “Someone really needs to work on their acronyms.”

“We can all agree on that. I’ve tracked the first of them to this point. You’ll need to deal with at least four of them before I have enough data to project where they’re coming out from. Do you understand?”

“I understand four,” he said with a note of sarcasm. “That’s all the fingers on one hand without the little stumpy one that sticks out from the side, right?”

There was some more, even angrier sighing. She tried again, using the simplest words she could probably think of. “This computer makes guesses based on data. If you can track four of them, I think the computer can work out their course projections. You

understand that means you have to make contact with four different bikes. You understand the ramifications of this?"

He dropped the sarcasm, the tired wit, and he got right down to business. "Norma, I'm ready."

"Red, I just need you to track them - that's all." Her tone was clear.

"But it's not a problem if I defend myself, right?"

"No problem this end," she agreed. "You can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs."

He nodded as the world rushed by, melting into a blurred tapestry of shapes and colours. "I'm going to take them out, Norma," he told her, unapologetically.

"Understood."

"We're in agreement?" he sounded surprised.

"They'll know you're coming," she told him, her tone grim.

"That won't matter," he said with grim determination. "They can't stop me from coming. They can't stop me at all."

"Red!" she said finally. "Do try hard not to die. Remember you're not an egg!"

"Yeah, I got it this time."

He opened the throttle as far as it would go. After a few seconds, he almost wished he hadn't.

Chapter 23

Officer Davison was on special assignment. He didn't care for the implications of it, he didn't care for the designation, he didn't care for the duties he was performing. None of all that mattered to him. Very little of anything mattered to him, and he was actually rather proud of this fact.

What he did care about was the benefits—a guaranteed pension of \$100,000 a year for life, a large lump sum, a very interesting bonus structure, and several daily doses of Wolf, absolutely free, for as long as he wanted it.

What he did was exciting; it was an exhilarating job, weaving through traffic with impunity at any speed he chose to do it at.

Who cared for implications?

If a civilian called him in, the call would be blocked. If, for any reason, the normal police did learn of his activities, he would be able to retreat behind a veil of respectability. He was protected; he was living a charmed life. He was living the ultimate charmed life.

His motorcycle was black, dull and featureless. It was an EBR 1190, upgraded by very expensive specialists with uprated suspension and power, disguised to look bland, to be difficult to describe, even if you really tried. But it was no ordinary machine, and not much would be able to keep pace with him, not much would even be able to get close. His training was also excellent—he could wring every ounce of power out of it, and he knew how to release the machine's full potential. He was confident, proud: he was a man with nothing in the world to fear, and everything in the world to gain.

Every morning, he started his day with a shot of Wolf. For now, it was cheap, that might be true, but it wasn't going to stay that way for long. His supply, however, was guaranteed, and was

guaranteed for as long as he cared to use it. In fact, it almost seemed that it was a requirement of the job. They were quite strict about it, offering a morning shot quite forcefully at first. Not that he minded: he was hardly going to object.

It cleared his head. It was as if his brain was being massaged away, as if he was floating free, but free in a world of blissful clarity where he could function perfectly, the best and happiest version of himself.

It all made perfect sense—the motorcycle, the job, the drug, his life. It all worked together to make everything reveal its true purpose to him. His thoughts came to him easily, his mind was receptive—under control, but free to go beyond his ego. All around him the colours seemed brighter, the sun seemed warmer, and the breeze seemed fresher.

The lights ahead were red and he stopped. His motorcycle wasn't particularly loud; few people ever noticed it. He put his left foot to the floor and sat up straight. His delivery was less than a mile up the road, then he'd return to base, and wait for another job. He wouldn't wait long; none of them ever waited long.

He smiled. It was all such a simple pleasure.

He looked over aimlessly, the buildings around him, the birds chirping in the trees, the warm sun lighting his way, the ferocious armoured black motorcycle poised aggressively at his side, the black-visored helmet turned so the rider could stare at him, digging into his very soul.

He was shocked and recoiled suddenly. The machine was angular, powerful looking, black all over with armoured panels, a long drooping nose, a weird crackling engine that ran unevenly, spitting the occasional flame from behind the tail.

“What the hell...?” he mumbled to himself nervously.

The rider pointed to him, sending a fresh pang of shock to course through his veins. An electronic voice boomed out heavily from the machine. “Surrender now—you won’t get a second chance. Run, and I’ll be forced cut you down before I let you hurt any civilians. This is a serious warning, and I urge you to take it seriously. I have super-powers.”

Norma slapped her hand over her face and groaned. She muttered, “Bloody super-powers. For his sake, I hope he dies out there today because if he doesn’t, he’s going to wish he bloody had!”

Officer Davison was confused - to put it mildly. He sat, just staring at this monstrous thing, not quite knowing what to do, not even quite knowing what to think. Then, in his oddly clear, but strangely muddled mind, it was obvious—there was only one thing to do. The light was red, but he twisted the throttle anyway. The engine roared and the bike pulled away, skipping slightly, but powering forward for all it was worth; tyres squealed in protest, the rear snaking as the rubber struggled to find more grip.

His chest was tight, his heart was thumping like a hammer, his head was light, and it took an effort to find any clarity in his thoughts. He looked in the mirror—there was nothing; the man on the black bike had done nothing at all. The threats were all empty.

He began to laugh at his own foolishness. How could he be so ridiculous? Nothing was a threat to him, nothing!

Red watched as he raced away. Beside him, was a small grey family car.. “I thought he’d do that,” he said cheerfully, his voice still amplified through a public announcement system built into the bike. Beside him, a small, blonde child was staring raptly out, his eyes wide with wonder His parents, in the front of the car seemed more

interested in looking anywhere else. “Watch this, kid. Now you’re really going to see a show.”

He leaned forwards and said, “Pursuit mode.” The machine responded. A small screen popped up at the front to divert the wind, the engine re-calibrated for maximum power, coughing bright blue flames raggedly from behind. The armoured side panels extended outwards to trim her for a more aerodynamic performance. He rolled on the throttle. The bike exploded with a roar; meter long blue flames shot from the tail and the machine was gone, growling like a wild beast as it accelerated like something sleek being fired from something big, ugly and anything-but sleek.

This time it was faster. The head-up display showed him edging up to 200mph, then past it. The acceleration still seemed harder and harder. The faster it went, the harder it seemed to pull, endlessly onward. The world vibrated, streaked past as the bike launched itself headlong into the fray.

The growling, rabid monster pulled easily alongside the police rider. He looked over. He wasn’t wearing a smoked visor, and his horrified expression was plain to see. He hunched down behind his fairing and opened up his bike, urging it on in sheer panic.

Red grinned to himself. He’d caught him in seconds, and his own bike’s real strength was in manoeuvrability. This other man had no chance of escape.

A voice came through his helmet, “Let him run. He’s likely to head back to base if he thinks he’s lost you. I’m tracking him now.”

“But I’m just starting to enjoy myself!” he grunted and touched the brakes. The back wheel locked easily, and the bike skidded along the road, the tail beginning to overtake the front, so he pulled it up sideways along the highway.

A few cars saw him. The drivers gaped from behind their windscreens, stunned by the sight of the powerful, threatening machine. “Can I go now?” Red asked. “Can I stop the bad man now?”

There was a momentary pause. “He’s turned in; the data is being processed. He’s all yours.” As she finished speaking the map in his visor flashed the direction. “The responsible thing to do is to let him go. We don’t want him hurting anyone.”

“Don’t let him hurt anyone,” Red said, grinning to himself. “Confirmed.”

The motorcycle roared suddenly, flames lashing out as she tore off. The front wheel lifted to the sky as it accelerated along faster than any other motorcycle ever built, or at the very least, any other motorcycle that was still in one functional piece.

He leaned in. The bike easily wafted around the tight corner, even at speed. ‘Urban Pursuit’ flashed in his helmet. The bike trimmed itself again, cutting high end power to deliver low down grunt, to throw maximum torque to the back wheel. The armour pulled itself flush with the bike and the screen ahead of him vanished. He grinned—it was like a child’s toy; it was like a fantasy, every dream he’d ever had had come true and he was riding along on it.

He weaved into another hairpin bend. It was too tight and he had misjudged it. He gripped hard and rolled back on the throttle. The front end lifted, the wheel edging effortlessly from the ground. He hit the curb at high speed; the back shuddered and the bike leapt, landing a few meters later on the other side, clearing the pavement completely. He laid on more power. The back wheel spun, firing the bike round the last of the corner, edging her back around and turning in a wide, screaming drift.

“Norma, I love this bike. Can men marry bikes?”

“You don’t strike me as the marrying kind,” was the calm answer that came back at him.

“If this thing can make me a sandwich, I’m sold,” he laughed.

“That’s sexist!” a grumbling voice grumbled.

The black motorcycle was up ahead. He was gaining fast.

He accelerated up, catching it easily, and then sat at its side.

He turned to face him, the pair riding along a wide stretch of back road at nearly 100mph. “Pull over,” he told him loudly.

The bike wobbled, edged over to the side and slowed down.

Red frowned—that was too easy; where was the fun in that?

The man suddenly had a pistol in his hand and he brandished it wildly, waving the fully automatic weapon around as he rode along, still way too fast to have any hope of controlling both.

Red reacted quickly. He saw the finger, saw it bearing down on the trigger, and slammed on the brakes. There was a crackle of gunfire, a roar of bullets tearing through the air around him, ahead and past him.

His motorcycle weaved controllably under the braking force and he manoeuvred himself behind, into his blind spot. The officer was lost in panic and accelerated away hard, firing indiscriminately.

Red growled into his helmet, “Target that asshole before he hurts someone, Norma.”

He accelerated himself; the bike wrenching at him as it launched up behind his enemy. Another crackle of gunfire issued, this time from his own bike. The flaming electrically-launched projectiles tore into the rear, shredding the tyre in a controlled burst that sent a cascade of sparks and flames from the target.

The bike wobbled suddenly, lurching around in a violent arc. Red watched; it was almost in slow motion as his mind raced to full speed.

It tumbled to the side as the metal wheel slid along the road, no rubber between it and the ground. It crashed, drifting along the surface as the rider tumbled, rolling over and over, catching and being thrown through the air before landing in a crumpled heap with his legs twisted into a wholly unnatural set of new angles.

Wreckage was strewn along the road—plastic, metal, twisted remains of the bike in parts too small to recognise. He skidded up and stepped from the bike, slowly, deliberately.

“I warned you,” he told him, his voice booming from the speakers. Switching back to intercom mode, he said, “Norma, where’s the Wolf?”

“The computer projects it’s on his person. There’s a ninety-two percent likelihood it’s in the outside pocket on his left leg.”

He bent down and ripped the velcro cover open. Inside were two black tubes, both capped, and a small piece of electronic machinery attached with a dial that was calibrated in minutes.

“Got it!” he said triumphantly. He got up and looked back as the man moaned and rolled around, grunting and breathing heavily, squirming in agony on the floor.

Red’s voice boomed from the bike, “If you ever get super-powers, feel free to call me for a rematch. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m off to do the exact same thing to every single one of your friends.”

Norma grunted, “Super-powers...”

Chapter 24

Norma shifted between monitors.

“Norma, what do I do now?” the voice came through her ear, a shout mixed with the rush of speed, wind and horrendous degrees of over-excitement.

“Working on that,” she told him. “The computer is sending you on manoeuvres. Follow the path it sends you on for now. It will avoid routine patrols and attract the least interest from observation systems. It’s taking you through the holes in the surveillance grid to keep the police from having any interest in you. It’s also keeping you away from coffee-shops.”

“Norma, don’t we want the police to take an interest in us?”

She sighed, “No, Red. We’re a surgical team. We’re going in, cutting out the cancer, and moving off. We can’t survive a fire-fight with the whole city’s police department.”

“Honestly,” he replied thoughtfully. “I think I can.”

“You can’t!” she yelled angrily. “And don’t start all that again.” She sent him a new set of coordinates. “Head to this location to drop off the Wolf for analysis.”

“Shouldn’t I just give it to the police or something?”

She could imagine him shrugging, his expression just bordering on a grin as he deliberately antagonised her.

“Just do it.”

She turned her attention to a separate monitor.

■ **FEED SRC:DL58837434 SEC >RT<**

Captain Bertoli looked up as there was a knock on the door. “Enter!” he called out from behind a stack of papers.

The murder was still foremost on his mind. He couldn't get it out of his thoughts, his dreams; his very soul had been darkened by it. That image of the face of his friend, lifeless and hollow. A bullet had shredded his brain, ripping the life out from the side of his head in a fraction of a second, and it had all happened right in front of him as he mindlessly sipped on a cup of coffee.

How fragile was life that it could be squashed so quickly, so easily, and so thoroughly that no-one could possibly have any defence against it?

One moment he was a living, breathing person; then he was just gone, and a mound of empty biological garbage fell to the table, the lifeless husk inside which his friend had existed. He shuddered as those empty, dead, glassy eyes filled his mind, indelibly etched in his mind.

The door flew open with surprising force as his assistant almost ran in. She was usually the voice of reason—the calm, quiet one in the office, his anchor to sanity. She was the first to laugh at him when he went to yell at a junior officer. She grounded him when the ground was too far below for him to look down and see it anymore.

He frowned—this time she was agitated, worried, even alarmed, and her expression told him something was urgent, and very, very wrong. He stood up, startled and motivated to action, even though he didn't know what action and had no idea why any of this was motivating him in the first place. For some reason, his hand went to the drawer where he kept his service weapon.

“Captain, something happened!”

“What happened?” he gasped.

She was breathless, having run from her desk. “A motorcycle crash in the edge of the suburbs on the North side of town. I've got

witness reports of two black motorcycles. One chased the other through downtown traffic just a few minutes ago. Then there were reports of gunfire, automatic weapons.”

“Get to the point!” he yelled impatiently.

“Sir!” She never called him ‘sir’, even on his birthday. “One of the bikes crashed. When police arrived on the scene, they reported that the bike is registered to the police department. It’s listed on detachment to a ‘special duty assignment’, but we can’t find any record of it.”

“That’s impossible—I handle the assignments.” He shrugged, and pointed to his desk where the department allocation folders were kept.

“Sir, reports say that the second motorcycle took down the first with automatic weapons fire. The rider was Officer Davison—he was officially retired on medical grounds months ago, but the emergency teams recovered his updated Glock 18 service weapon from the scene.”

“What the hell is going on?” he shouted impotently, his hand cradling his head as if the weight of all this would rip his mind apart. For some reason, his thoughts were dragged back to Geoff Lucas, but this time he thought of the message, to the thing he was trying to tell him just before it had happened.

“And, Sir, you had a call from the Commissioner’s office,” she said dolefully, as if this part was actually the worst of the news. “You’re to meet him on the corner of Wells and Verne in 20 minutes.”

He looked at his watch. “What the hell?” he grumbled.

“20 minutes,” she said. “They were very firm.”

>>MUTE<<

Norma flicked a switch and nodded with a certain satisfaction. Her message had been received, and everything was working as it should. Her faked message had gone unnoticed, the deception having proven a success. She glanced over to the big screen, checking the location of the motorcycle.

“Red, I’m detecting a contact heading your way.”

“What do you mean, ‘a contact?’” his voice came back. “Do you mean like a date?”

She yelled down the mic, “No, I do not mean like a date. I mean I’m tracking the other special assignment motorcycles as best I can and one is heading straight for you.”

“Good.”

“No!” She slammed her palm to her forehead in exasperation. “These people are heavily armed, they have fully automatic weapons, and are clearly not afraid to use them. One of them is only seconds away from contacting you. I’m plotting an avoidance vector now.”

There was laughter.

Red pulled the brake and dropped the throttle, pulling the bike to a noisy standstill. He listened for a moment, and heard the quiet, but unmistakable, drone of an approaching vehicle, something fast and mean. He looked around. He was on a quiet road, wide and straight with numerous small back-streets going nowhere in particular. In the distance, he noticed an industrial structure, an old steel mill or something similar. It was perfect.

“Norma, this thing has an off-road mode, right?” he asked hopefully.

He could hear her huffing, tapping on keys. “It has seven different core off-road modes including one that is self-adjusting.”

He grinned to himself. “That one, that one.”

He watched as the other rider came closer, and he flicked the throttle. The bike wasn’t in gear, but the engine responded, growling to wakefulness and blowing blue flames, violent angry breaths from her tail. He knew that would be enough to get his attention.

He clicked her into gear and let on the power. The rear wheel spun freely, burning out on the road and sending out plumes of white smoke as she accelerated in a weaving line forwards. He let the power off slightly, and then hammered it on. The skidding stopped and the motorcycle raced away from the smoke, accelerating fast towards the mill.

The gates were hanging open; it was long since abandoned, as too much was in this city. The economy had been too aggressive and was paying the price now, although it was those that could least afford to do so, who were doing the paying, as too often happened.

“What are you doing?” Norma growled at him through the helmet.

“I’m taking this guy out of the equation. If he’s as crazy as the last one, he’ll be shooting wildly. I’m not going to let him hurt anyone; I figured I’d take him somewhere where there’s nobody to hurt.”

“There’s you!” she reminded him.

“My suit’s bullet-proof, right?” He waited for a response that never came. “Right?”

“There’s no remaining record for the suit. Maybe, maybe not. All I’ve been able to find is that it’s designed to be worn by the designated ‘Piloting, Engineering and Navigational Input Specialist’—that’s you, by the way.”

Red grimaced—that did put a tiny extra complication into his plans. “Oh well. I’ll assume it is, just to be on the safe side.”

“You and the rest of the world have a very different idea of what constitutes safe.”

He pulled up, letting the revs drop to a tick-over speed. Sitting, quietly rumbling to herself, the bike seemed quite manageable, tame even. It seemed like any other motorcycle that you could buy in an ordinary dealership, while chatting cordially over a mug of terrible coffee, rather than some fire-breathing beast that had so far killed or maimed anyone stupid enough to go near it.

The other motorcycle gingerly made its way along the road, the old path that led from the road to the mill offices. He stopped dead in his tracks as he saw Red sitting in wait.

He deserved a warning. “Surrender, and I’ll let you hand yourselves over to the police—the nice police who, according to the news, like shooting unarmed suspects and getting away with it, not the other police that deliver drugs around the city.”

Norma’s voice came through the speakers in his helmet. “Red, you are really bad at this part of it.”

The motorcycle rider was unfazed, which surprised nobody. He accelerated along, his exhaust roaring.

“Yay, jousting!” Red enthused, and accelerated out towards him. The two motorcycles headed towards one another, both edging along the center-line, aiming straight at the other.

“Red!” screamed Norma, partially shielding her eyes.

The rider veered off suddenly to the left, just seconds before contact. Red saw it, reacted quickly, and pulled himself in the opposite direction, missing him by way too close a margin for her taste. He slammed the brakes, turning the rear wheel around in a tight loop so his nose was pointing straight at the rider.

The tables had turned.

The police rider was now the prey. The aggressive black monster was behind him, growling and roaring and spitting fire. Red opened it up; the wheels shuddered on the cracked and broken concrete path. Still the bike went faster and faster, passing right by the other bike. The police rider looked around startled, confused as to just exactly what was going on.

Norma's voice came through. "I'm confused as to just exactly what is going on!"

"Imagine how he feels," agreed Red, barking above the din of the engine, and the rumble of the wheels against the uneven floor. He saw an opening—a missing delivery door in the remains of a large building. The walls had crumbled long before, and the plaster was showing the aged brickwork beneath. "Off-road mode. Self-adjusting off-road mode. Whatever mode is best for broken concrete floors with weeds growing out of them, mode. Norma, a little help?"

She huffed, "You're not very good at this bit either."

He took the bike headlong into the smashed concrete. He pulled the nose up, and the bike shuddered as she climbed a short bank of stairs; then he roared into the remains of the building, the echoing trumpet of his engine bellowing all around him.

The other rider skidded to a halt, toppling over and almost losing control of his machine. He kept it up and sat back, drawing his weapon. Only a foolhardy or very skilled rider would be capable of taking that kind of motorcycle on that kind of terrain.

Red looked behind him, and said, "Stealth mode." Nothing happened.

Norma spoke with a stern, angry voice. "There's no such thing as stealth mode!"

He grumbled a reply, and then reached down and scooped up a rock. He coasted along; the bike made little noise when it wasn't

running at higher speed, and it would be hard for the other rider to pinpoint his position. He threw the rock into a wide gap where a window had once been.

Suddenly, there was a bark of gunfire; bullets tore into the plaster, dust kicked up around him as the pistol sent out a shuddering stream of hot metal. “I want missiles, Norma,” he shouted.

“You only have flash-bang launchers,” she reminded him. “They’re non-lethal: they’re intended to stun only.”

“I think we’ve already identified two serious design flaws here. No stealth mode, and no high-explosives. When I get back, you’re going to have to work on that while I work on a 4-cheese pizza and a bucket of coffee.”

“Sure—if you get back,” she replied sarcastically. “Maybe you could fire stealth missiles at him?”

He saw another window behind the first—it had a plank of wood leading up to it, and was still glazed in filthy sand-covered glass. “Get the machine-gun primed. Fire just as I hit the ground, and aim to hit just in front of him—I want to spook him, not hurt him.”

“Wait...”

He didn’t wait at all, and nobody was terribly surprised about that—the bike roared back to life. He accelerated along the path, the cracked and crumbled floor. He hit the plank, tucked himself in, and then he was flying through an exploding, shattering cloud of smashed glass. His brain raced; he was flying through the air, sailing along from the building, heading towards the police biker, but from a long way behind. The engine roared, seemingly reducing from a whine to a drone as the world around him slowed, his brain processing it at impossible speeds. It went down further to a growl, a thumping and pounding rhythm of individual explosions, until he felt almost as if he was sitting still, just floating in mid-air listening to the rhythmic

bang, bang, bang of the engine as it pulsed beneath him, the world almost stilled to a near motionless scene.

Things swam back to normal, his reactions now primed for the landing. The bike crashed to the ground, a jarring crunch as the rear suspension almost bottomed out, but the computer adjusted and took the sting out of it, if only just. The tail swung around in an arc, bringing the nose to bear forwards, kicking up a grey cloud of dust rather impressively. If he didn't have super-powers, he certainly gave a good impression of someone who did.

His gun crackled, much louder than the service pistol. Experimental military technology tore up chunks of concrete, sending dust, chips of solid plaster and brickwork exploding into the air, lashing forwards with glowing blue beams of electrical discharge. The officer responded, turning away and riding off, dashing away as fast as he was able, swerving around in panic.

"Norma, this is great!" he said with a ridiculous amount of enthusiasm. "I doubt I've ever had this much fun—I doubt anyone has! The world would be a better place if everyone had an unstable government prototype to play with and a headful of rat-murdering technology."

There was groaning, right on cue.

"I forgive you for everything, Norma. Even the coffee, which was horrible, by the way. Tell Merv I still love him, though, but not in a way that justifies this T-shirt."

He chased after the police bike, which wobbled along, unable to tolerate the rough road surfaces. He made the best speed he could, gazing behind him periodically, seemingly scared, erratic, and weaving wildly. Red followed dangerously closely, clearly having an easier time of it.

The rider pushed harder and harder until suddenly he lost control. The front stopped; he went into a hole, and the bike cartwheeled over, throwing itself into a roll, crashing on and on until it came to rest in a heap, a tangled mess of weeds off some meters in the distance.

The rider sat up, clutching his arm. He turned to run but collapsed to the floor, crying out in pain and holding his leg.

“He’s still got the gun!” Norma warned.

“Yes, thank you for stating the very obvious,” he said sarcastically. He flicked on the speakers and broadcast loudly, “Throw away your weapon. Chuck that thing into the bush over there, or something!” It still didn’t sound very heroic, much less super-heroic.

The rider just stared.

Suddenly, there was a crackle of gunfire. Red recoiled in surprise, but realised it had come from his own motorcycle.

The man dutifully complied with his previous command, chucking that thing into the bush over there, or something, for all he was worth.

Norma interjected, “You’re welcome!”

Red rode up closer, stepping off the bike threateningly. The rider just stared up at him. His visor had smashed off, and his eyes were filled with terror as he gazed up.

“Drop the Wolf,” Red told him, pointing menacingly. “Or you’ll see how a real predator comes in for the kill!” That was much better—that was the kind of thing an action hero should say.

The man fumbled with his one good hand and threw out a single tube of the drug. Red snatched it up, and stood over him, the sun glinting from the edge of his helmet, the armour stretched over him like an external wall of muscle. He looked imposing.

“Just so we’re clear - I’m the wolf, not you. You’re more like a lamb, but a lamb that deliberately hurts people with a fully automatic weapon, while riding a cool motorcycle!” he said. Realising it had all gone a bit wrong, Red added, “Nobody likes you.”

Norma sighed, “And now you’re gone and ruined it, right on schedule.”

Chapter 25

Norma wished that they'd been slightly more forward thinking in the 80s. Sure, they had secret military bunkers, particle beams, padded shoulders, robots from the future coming back to do who-knew-what and computers that could do just about anything you could possibly think of. They had anything you could possibly want, unless the thing you wanted was a touch screen interface.

After tapping the monitor for the fifth time, she remembered this inconvenient truth and reverted to the keyboard to enter instructions like some kind of primitive savage. "You need upgrading," she growled to the computer.

"You upgraded me already," Red replied through her earpiece.

She looked up to the ceiling and sighed to herself. Her life had taken an alarming turn for the bizarre.

"Not you," she explained. "You wasted a lot of time there—I need you at the location I just sent in two minutes."

"Norma, that spot is nearly five miles away," Red protested. "I would have to average about a thousand miles per hour. This thing has a turbo-boost, right? Can it fly?"

She rolled her eyes and wished she was somewhere by an ocean, sipping cocktails while the waves crashed gently against her feet. Ideally, the ocean was made entirely from cocktails and she would soon be drowning in it.

"You would have to actually average around one hundred and fifty miles per hour, and yes, it does have a turbo-boost, so to speak, but, sadly, it doesn't fly. Are you sure you can handle it on full power, though? It's already insanely fast, as it is."

"Why are you even asking me that question?" he laughed through her earpiece.

She released the lockouts and the status switched the system to available. “You have boost at your discretion—it comes on automatically when you hit full throttle. It’s not a turbo though, it’s a direct injection of fuel mixed with some kind of liquid propellant. It gives a significant power increase—very significant. Once the valve is open, the fuel container is exposed, and it turns the bike into a bomb. It’s literally the worst and most dangerous piece of engineering I’ve ever seen.”

“Sounds like fun!”

She sighed to herself. “Don’t crash at those speeds, Red. You’ll really damage the bike.”

He was already riding at 180mph.

“I haven’t even hit full throttle yet.” He frowned behind the black visor, fairly intimidated by the bike already, and suddenly very, very much more so. “Well, let’s see what you can do, shall we, sweetheart?”

He held on tight, and focused his mind. The world slowed down around him, and the roar of the engine shifted to a gentle thumping sound, in time with his own heartbeat, each explosion in the engine was a single event and he could feel each one ripple through the machine. He wrenched the throttle open, briefly pausing to wonder just exactly what this was going to be like. He imagined an enormous rush of power, a surging, wafting wave of crashing performance that he would surf along on top of, at near impossible speeds.

It was nothing like that.

The bike lurched, the back wheel spun faster suddenly, the rear skidded out as the computer struggled to control the grip. The bike lunged, accelerating unevenly; his shoulders were wrenched

painfully, as if an over-zealous masseur was snapping them off backwards, to better facilitate beating him around the head with them later. His neck muscles tensed; his head felt as if it was being blown off backwards, torn off by the rushing wind and sheer brutality of the acceleration. He didn't feel as if he was riding it, more like he was being dragged along behind while struggling to hold on. He hit two hundred and fifty miles per hour and it was still lunging, coursing along, unevenly bursting with power, as the computers compensated, as the wheels found traction, as the weight of the bike held it to the ground, but only barely, only ever just barely. He could hear the roar beneath him, the insane rush of wind all around.

It was as if he was in the centre of a bubble. The world rolled around him, coming up fast as he weaved his way along. He focused hard, even harder than holding on. He came to a bridge, weaving between cars as they staggered along at ridiculously slow speeds.

It did what he told it to do. He wrenched it to one side, then the other. He could react in his mind, but his body was slow to follow his instructions.

He was barely making it. Two hundred and eighty miles per hour... three hundred and ten. Numbers came and were left some way behind as the bike raced on.

He could hear the sound of his voice as he yelled in sheer exhilaration, absolute mastery over the forces of stupidity, mixed in equal parts with total blinding terror. When she hit three hundred and twenty, he stopped counting. The bike kept pulling and pulling, yanking at him, driving itself onwards and onwards, forever endlessly scrambling for more.

His mind was filled with this sight as the world became a jumbled mess, an explosion of colours, of horribly awful colours. Things were flying around him, past him, through the world that

blurred and streaked by. From amidst this total chaos he remembered the words that had been spoken to him: ‘It comes on when you hit full throttle.’”

For a moment, it made no sense; just a moment, as seven blocks of buildings came and went in the blink of an eye. Then he wondered why he’d even thought of them, before it dawned on him. He closed the throttle. The growling, roaring, wailing insanity died down instantly to growling, roaring, wailing silliness, a place which was much more comfortable, and infinitely less life-threatening.

The blue flame, like a solid beam of light trailing behind him settled back into a stuttering flicker. The speed melted down to a soft and gentle one hundred and eighty miles per hour, and all was right with the world, for now.

Her voice had been speaking through the speakers, “... but I don’t think it’s properly calibrated yet, so it might be best not to try it until we know for sure.”

Hot sweat prickled angrily at his face, and he grumbled back to her, “I know that now, don’t I?” He checked the map—he was right where he needed to be, and several seconds early. He slammed on the brakes and the bike slowed, squealing on its tyres until it came to a stop at the corner of Wells and Verne.

He waited for a moment, gasping for breath, utterly terrified, totally drained. The words ‘High-Speed Pursuit Mode—Activated’ flashed on the screen in front of his visor, as the front screen popped up, and the fairing panels adjusted.

He grumbled, “Looks like a few things aren’t quite calibrated properly, Norma. You might be one of them.”

“I think I’ve got it now—are you ready for a test?” she asked sarcastically.

“Where the hell did you send me?” He looked around. There was nothing there. The blocks were deserted, crumbling. It was a place long since abandoned. A car opposite was the only thing around. Beside it, a familiar-looking man stood staring at him, just gazing raptly at him without moving in the slightest. He stared back in return.

“Captain Bertoli is directly opposite. Give him the Wolf. Just say everything I say through the speakers—don’t say anything yourself, you’re horrible at it.”

“I’m horrible at speaking?” he grumbled, flicking the throttle and dragging the rear round in a sliding semi-circle. “You’re horrible at calibrating things, and that’s actually your job. Speaking is just a hobby to me; I’m not meant to be any good at it.”

The bike roared over and skidded to a halt immediately before the Captain. He looked alarmed, as he stared with wide-eyed wonder, backing up to the car, his hand hovering over the grip of his service-weapon.

Red got off the bike, which cut out as soon as he did so.

“He can’t hear me through your helmet intercom, so just repeat my words and they’ll play through the bike speakers.”

“OK, sure, right, got it, I’m not a complete idiot, you know!” Red’s voice echoed loudly from the motorcycle.

“What the hell are you supposed to be?” The Captain’s hand drew closer to his pistol.

“A friend,” Norma prompted.

Red shook his head. “I’m...” He paused for a moment thoughtfully. “Black-hawk, rider-man.”

Norma shouted, “Stop doing that!”

Red cringed and banged the side of his head three times. “Thunder-rider? Super-heroic Captain-Man?” He tried again, failing quite spectacularly.

The Captain stared at him, his hand moving further from the gun, and his head cocked to one side curiously.

Norma barked, “A friend. Tell him you’re a friend.”

“I’m a friend,” Red repeated, the voice booming all around them but sounding somewhat sad. He slumped exaggeratedly, his head hanging sadly. “I’m your friend.”

“Have you got anything to do with the motorcycle chases going on in my city?” he asked angrily.

Red shrugged. “Apparently, it’s not your city; even though you pay taxes, it still belongs to someone else. That doesn’t mean I’m ever going to give it back, right?”

Norma shouted angrily, “Tell him you’re trying to help!” Her voice was piercingly loud and painful.

“I’m trying to help,” he shouted, slapping the side of the helmet with his hand and shaking his head. “Oh god, I’m just trying to help. OK? There, I said it.”

“Tell him you’ve got the drugs,” Norma said a little more quietly.

“Sure, right.” He snapped up, standing straight, and reached into his pocket. “I’ve got some drugs, would you like some?”

“You’re trying to sell me drugs?” The Captain looked stunned, the situation all the more ridiculous for his badge being clearly evident, attached to his waistband. Adding a somewhat redundant comment, he said, “I’m a cop.”

“I know who you are—I saw you drinking coffee on the monitor, right up to the point where your friend’s head exploded.” He shrugged and Bertoli just stared in amazement. He held out the three

tubes, offering them to the Captain. “Here’s some samples of the Wolf.”

“Wolf!” The Captain drew his weapon and pointed it at him.

Red looked at the pistol and shrugged, “I think I’m bulletproof. I mean, I think we’re pretty sure.”

Norma huffed loudly. “Say these exact words, ‘The drug is being delivered by police high-speed motorcycles.’”

“This stuff is being delivered by police motorcycles. The quick ones, but not the quick-enough ones, if you know what I mean.” He smiled to himself.

The muzzle of his weapon pointed down for a moment. “What are you saying?”

“Sorry!” Red put his hand to the side of where his mouth would be on the helmet, as if sharing a secret. “Police motorcycles are delivering drugs around the town,” the speakers bellowed, the sound echoing around the empty buildings. “You can’t catch them, because they’re working within your own police force. Here’s a sample for you—now you can prove what I’m saying, right?”

The Captain flinched before reaching out for the black tubes, dubiously snatching them up, and keeping his eyes fixed on Red, clearly wondering just exactly what the hell was going on. “This is Wolf? You’re helping? Who are you? What’s going on and whose side are you on?”

Norma said, “Only give him two. I want one to test myself.”

Red took one, and held the other two out. He shrugged apologetically, “Sorry, I need one for the woman back home. She’s the boss—you know how it is, right?”

“Are you saying my entire police force is riddled with corruption?”

“Am I?” his voice boomed. He listened to Norma’s reply. “Yes. I’m afraid I am. Hopelessly rotten to the core, like just about every police force and government agency in the country.” He hit his head again. “Sorry, I was only meant to say the first part out loud. Sorry, it’s my first time. I’m bound to make a few mistakes.” For a moment, there was silence. Then he turned and took on a more aggressive posture before yelling at himself, “It’s OK to make a few mistakes on your first time!”

“But if my whole police force is corrupt, how do I know who I can trust? My best friend was shot right before my eyes. There’s nobody left that might not be involved in this thing.” His eyes flushed with anger.

All this happened with fortuitous timing as a large, black, menacing van pulled up from a back road parking just at the side of the two, the tyres skidding on the dark grey tarmac as it pulled to an exuberant halt.

The Captain and Red waited, primed to react, and then as the Captain raised his weapon, Red realised bitterly that he didn’t have one himself.

“Design flaw three...” he muttered to himself.

The doors flew open, and a dark, shadowy, menacing figure stepped out. It unfolded into the hulking mass of, “Merv!” Red cried out.

“Red!” He nodded back. With this, they both suddenly looked at one another and then to the Captain.

From behind his blacked-out visor, Red added, “I called him ‘mauve’, because that’s what we do. We use colours as code-names, to protect our secret civilian identities.”

“I’m mauve,” Merv said colourfully, and not noticeably any different to how he pronounced his own name. “Come with me if you want to live.”

Red stepped back to the bike. He turned and to the Captain and said, “Sorry about the conversation—there’s voices in my head. I’m not crazy... it’s just the voices, the ones in my head.”

The bike roared to life, huffing a tinge of blue flame.

“If you don’t mind, there are police motorcycles delivering drugs all round this city. I’m going to go and kill them now.”

The Captain drew a breath and opened his mouth to speak. Merv’s gigantic hand on his shoulder stopped that before it started.

Red waved his hand dismissively. “I know it’s technically illegal, but it’s just so much fun.”

The Captain looked at Merv, and then back to the black-armour-clad-motorcyclist. He was lost, quite thoroughly lost.

“Captain, you seem like a good guy. And look how cool this motorcycle is; just look at it! I love this stupid, crazy thing. I promise to only hurt bad guys.” He paused thoughtfully. “Don’t hold me to that, OK?”

It roared off down the street, growling, spitting, roaring and snarling away.

Merv sighed. “I think I love that stupid, crazy thing, too.”

Chapter 26

Norma stared at the monitor. The Hawk-Eye was now tracking multiple signals. The computer had learned how to find the delivery motorcycles, and was locating them more and more reliably. She frowned as she rubbed her forehead nervously. This was all a terrible idea and she was left wondering why she had gone along with any of it.

“Red, we have a problem,” she said, monitoring the very same problem, and trying to work out just how dead he was soon going to be. It was anywhere upwards of totally.

“What a refreshing change!” came the reply, his voice light and filled with optimism despite the fact that the computer had him logged as travelling at one hundred and thirty seven miles per hour through the city back-streets on a potentially lethal contraption that was proving to be horribly unreliable.

“Merv is taking the Captain to the police labs to begin testing the Wolf samples. I have multiple targets moving to intercept him.”

“Is that van one of our toys?”

She nodded, and then realised he couldn't see her face. “Yes, it's armoured but not armed. It was designed to be a mobile tracking unit. We couldn't get the car started so we had to use the van instead. Honestly, I don't think Merv was going to fit into the car anyway.

“The AMU riders have pistols, but the police chatter suggest they're mobilising heavier weaponry to stop him. They've militarised the police; they can respond with armoured trucks now, and it looks like they intend to. This is getting out of hand, Red.”

“Why would they bring in heavy weapons to stop their own Captain?” Red was evidently confused as to how the real world actually worked.

“The corruption goes all the way up,” she began. “Obviously! In any case, they might have been told he’s been abducted; they may not even know he’s involved. We don’t know what’s going on — there’s just too much information for me to handle right now!”

She looked up to the panel. “A more urgent issue is that five motorcycles are converging on your position. They’re coming for you, Red!”

“Good,” he said as if he really meant it. “We’re ready for them, aren’t we, girl?”

Norma frowned angrily. “Don’t you call me ‘girl’ ever again, do you understand?”

“I erm,” he stammered haltingly. “I wasn’t actually talking to you...”

“Oh, well, that’s alright then, I guess...” She thought for a moment. “Actually that’s worse.”

“It is what it is, Norma.”

She nodded, but it seemed to her that what it was was the first indicator of severe mental illness. She found it confusing, feeling that they had already moved many stages beyond that. “I’m sending you a map. It’ll show you where they are in relation to you!”

Red slowed down; the bike vibrated angrily like a ferocious dog being pulled back from a dying animal it was enjoying noisily mauling to death. He checked the map; sure enough, they were coming. He decided that it was best to play this game on his own terms instead of playing it the way they wanted to, whatever that might be.

He slammed on the rear brake. The bike snarled as the back wheel locked and skidded round in a wide arc, before he powered off

into a side road. His eyes flashed up to the map as he blasted through an alley.

A bystander looked horrified, and pressed himself up against the wall in shock as the black monstrosity ripped past him, a blurred flash of velocity that left him with a ringing in his ears and a fun story he'd be telling over a beer later that evening.

"Sorry!" Red muttered, winding through the metal trash containers, his fingers hovering over the brake lever just in case.

"I see what you're doing—you're clear all the way," said Norma.

He powered on, streaking along to the exit. He hoped she was right. He gave himself over, trusting her judgment completely.

As he exited the alley, he pushed down with all his weight on the rear brake. The bike skidded, skipped and slid around before he piled on the power, turning into the open road, blasting power to the spinning rear wheel.

Up ahead were two black motorcycles. They were riding in formation, and making a good speed—too fast to be a pair of ordinary riders out for an afternoon trip. They were just too good: they had to have been professionally trained. It had to be them!

He dropped his speed to a crawl to creep up on them, a stealthy hunter for once.

"Norma. Tell me about these trip wires I'm carrying."

"Trip wires..." she repeated. He heard the sound of keys clicking and the electronic bleeping sound of an old computer. "You're carrying two on each side. They're a small carbon rod with a titanium self-stabilising dart fired from the inside. The rod is powered by a solid rocket motor, triggered electronically, and has a kevlar line trailing from the rear. The whole unit detaches once

launched. It's a brilliant piece of design—if you hit the wheel, it should disable a motorcycle easily.”

“Disable motorcycle,” said Red with a grimace and a sigh. “Thanks—that was the bit I wanted, but I do appreciate the extra insight into how your mind works.”

“You're welcome,” she snapped grumpily.

“Get ready!”

The two were in formation still, riding along beside one another, barely three meters apart and staying in absolute pace with each other. He was impressed; it was an excellent display of efficiency. They rode like a pair of police riders. They had discipline; they had skill.

“Norma, confirm they're AMUs,” he asked, one final time.

“Confirmed. Those two black motorcycles are definitely registered to the Metropolitan Police Force. They're listed as being under special assignment.”

“Then let's make their assignment even more special!” he grinned, and flicked open the throttle.

The bike dutifully roared and spat itself along in a vicious burst of acceleration. He noisily stopped himself right between the two, slamming the front brake way too hard so that the bike lifted herself, the tail rising up high in the air. They turned to look in stunned surprise. He could see their faces through the visors. Their eyes met. They were shocked, and very confused.

Their formation broke up, and they instinctively wobbled apart, distancing themselves from the sudden threat. Each quickly began fumbling for their sidearm with their left hands, as they were trained to do.

“Norma, Now!”

There were two whooshing noises and a two streaks of red lights flashed out from beneath the motorcycle. The wires lashed out behind the metal projectile and, guided by lasers and a tiny camera, each found their mark and flew straight between the spokes of their front wheels.

It happened in an instant. The wires were spun into the wheel hubs, the bolt snapped back, the casing was pulled in the other way, and both at once, the wires pulled taut.

On both sides of Red, the other bikes leapt into the air. Both of their front wheels had simply stopped turning in an instant. Their back ends reared up uncontrollably. They toppled, upended and crashed, smashing hard into the ground.

The one to his left rolled and rolled, plastic and metal shearing off and exploding around each time it connected with the road, the rider rolling off away from it.

The other jumped high into the air and smashed down hard, crashing the motorcycle into a nearly unrecognisable mess of shattered machinery.

Red had braked already, the carnage all safely ahead of him. He watched with a certain satisfaction, despite the bulk of the work being done remotely by Norma, assisted by targeting computers.

“OK, Red. That was pretty damned impressive.”

“Damned right,” he agreed, swelling with pride. “You know, Norma. We make a great team.”

The air, suddenly and without warning, split with a crackling sound. The ground beneath him chipped, and clouds of dust kicked up in the distance. Someone was shooting at him. He reacted quickly by slamming the throttle open and picking his way through the wreckage at full speed. “Thanks for the warning, Norma!”

“This thing isn’t perfect, you know!” she told him sternly.
“There’s one behind you, two more converging.”

“Brilliant,” he grumbled. The air cracked again and he heard the sound of bullets whipping by, a little too closely for comfort.
“He’s firing, Norma. We’ve got to take him out quickly.”

“I can deploy tyre-busters...” She didn’t wait for permission. The tiny metal pieces launched, dozens of them landing on the road, skittering about with pointed little razors jutting up in all directions, designed to shred the rubber of anything that rolled over them.

Two more shots whizzed past him. There was a sudden blow to his shoulder, followed by a dull ache. “I think I’ve been shot,” he grunted, winded by the force of the impact.

“Red, are you OK?”

He began swerving left and right to offer a more difficult target. “Affirmative! I think we can conclude that the suit is indeed bulletproof. It’s not pain-proof though.” His shoulder was in agony. He flexed it, but it was difficult to move. It was numb and unresponsive, his muscles were burning, tight, and felt heavy.
“Dammit, that really hurt, Norma.”

“He’s still coming,” she told him. “The ‘shredders’ didn’t work.”

“Guns!” he suggested angrily.

She replied, with a mixture of confusion and concern, “He’s behind you. You’re heading in the wrong direction for guns.”

He snapped the throttle all the way, completely open. The world around him exploded into chaos. The bike weaved violently, scrambling for more grip, but there was never enough. Flames spat, growling noises echoed around his skull, colours faded into a streaking blur as the bike launched itself into the distance, boosted all

the way up to full power. As soon as he was able, he backed straight off; the few seconds had put enough distance between them.

He locked the back brake, and spun the bike around to face the oncoming target. "Get him, Norma!"

His cannon barked as the bike appeared over the crest of a hill. It was a precision strike that obliterated its magnesium-alloy front wheel. It shattered, slamming the front of the bike to the ground and launching the rider straight over the top while the tarmac ground devoured the machine, chewing it to pieces until what little remained slithered to a halt.

"Move!" Norma barked at him.

He didn't think: he didn't wait. He responded automatically, launching the bike forwards and accelerating hard away, back directly from the way he came. More gunfire crackled and shots ripped past him, whizzing along and cracking the air.

"Two more behind you," she told him. "Wait, make that three."

"Norma, I'm coming up on the shredders I dropped." Now it was Red's turn to sound concerned. "The shredder that you dropped."

"Your tyres can't burst, but be on the safe side—ride on the opposite lane."

"Safe?" he grumbled as another bullet whizzed by. "Riding into oncoming traffic while three psychopaths fire automatic weapons at me is safe now, is it?"

"Just do it!"

He just did it, weaving straight into the path of an old truck. The sound of its horn filled the air. It swerved at him as he went round to the other edge, just narrowly making it through. He blasted the throttle, and the bike lurched forward as the speed rose alarmingly. He backed off and cut in front of an oncoming car, just

onto the proper side of the road, barely in time to avoid being clipped by it. Behind him was the sound of emergency braking and the angry blowing of horns.

“Ha, still alive!” he said, sounding a bit surprised.

He checked the monitor. Two motorcycles were following some way behind, but the third had dissolved into a cloud of shattered plastic fairing.

“The shredders got one of them!” Norma reported. “But we only had one load of them. The only other rear facing weapon is an ultra-bright strobe, but it’s only really effective at night.”

“A torch?” he grumbled at her. “Two murderous killers are trying to wipe me off the face of the planet with automatic weapons, and you’re telling me that I’m armed with a small flashlight?”

“If you used it at night, it would be highly effective. It would blind them long enough to force them to stop.”

“Do you think they’d mind waiting then?” he suggested sarcastically. “I could do with a mug of coffee, actually, and a nice sit down.”

There was the sound of someone who didn’t appreciate his sense of humour right now.

“You know what, Norma. I’ve got an idea. I’m going to press my advantage.”

She seemed confused. “And what advantage exactly do you have with a torch, versus two machine pistols?”

“Just plot me a route into traffic.”

“Traffic?” She sounded even more confused. “Into traffic? You want me to take you into traffic?”

“If you don’t mind, please.”

Chapter 27

Norma didn't approve, which more or less meant that the decision was made. The bike surged and seethed into the heart of the city, as two black sports-bikes followed closely behind, pushing themselves up to every one of their limits to keep pace.

"Traffic is going to get denser towards the city-center," she warned, knowing he wasn't going to take any notice of her.

"I'm gambling that they won't use their weapons in such a public place, but won't be too keen letting me get away either," he told her, not quite explaining what he thought he was doing.

The sound of her sighing came over the helmet speaker. "So you're going to push them into making a mistake?" she grumbled. "What if the mistake is that they hit a pedestrian, or ride into the front of a glass-fronted coffee shop?"

"Did somebody say coffee?" He pretended he didn't care, but the thought had occurred to him.

He accelerated, pulling the bike hard around a car that was pulling out from a side-street. His average speed had dropped now, but his bike still handled faster than the advanced police motor-units, and his reactions massively surpassed their own.

He was in his element, and he was satisfied he had taken them out of theirs. He powered on, pulling the front of the bike up to stand on its rear wheel. He hoped that a show of bravado would invite the same from them. That was what he wanted now—he wanted them angry and not thinking; he wanted them ready to take chances.

The front wheel came down heavily and he accelerated harder, widening the gap. Cars and trucks lined up in front of him. He weaved past the first, accelerating wildly into the gap between two lines of traffic. He pulled it back, skidded the rear end out, and cut

off into a side road at a hard right-angle, kicking up a plume of rubber-smelling white smoke.

They followed much slower into the corner, and had started to lose ground. He heard the roar of their distinctive engines as they came up behind, powering on for all they were worth.

It was working.

He pulled away from them again, making them push too hard to keep up.

A green car swerved in from a corner. The driver looked absolutely horrified as he caught sight of the speeding bike. Red capitalised on it, pumped the powerful brakes, and turned in hard behind the car, while its horn blared impotently. He pulled left and rode directly into oncoming traffic. There was a constant wail of sirens and horns as metal boxes of all sizes and shapes swung around in blind panic. He cut into a gap and roared away, the two others following, now closely behind.

One made it through, roaring after him on full throttle; the other clipped the front of a van. The bike spun around and was flicked into the path of an oncoming truck, shattering instantly into a blaze of metallic debris.

“Got one!” Red yelled triumphantly.

Norma shouted back, “Have you got any idea how dangerous this is?”

Of course he knew, and if there was any doubt, the tinkling sound of bits of police motorcycle raining down on the tarmac was a stark reminder.

“He does!” said Red flippantly, instinctively tilting his head towards the fallen officer. Still, as dangerous as it was, it was still an improvement over being shot at by someone who was good with their fully-automatic pistol.

He saw a red light up ahead, and a row of stationary traffic leading towards it. Perfect, he thought to himself.

Time slowed down as he came to the junction, The sound of his own engine beat in his ears, exploding once, twice, three times in single, perfect, pounding crashes that pumped a crackling, hissing flame from the rear. A row of vehicles was ahead, moving. He saw his gap—it was small and closing, but it was his gap!

He aimed between a blue Ford, turning right, and a grey Chevy that was heading straight. He blasted the throttle. Bang melted into bang, the crack of the engine quickened. It beat faster, louder; the sounds melted back into the roar of the engine, and then the bike exploded forwards on full throttle, jamming the front wheel up into the air as she coursed along savagely into the space.

He was through.

He heard it behind him as he braked, the unmistakable twisted screaming shriek of metal shearing, the skidding scream of rubber on tarmac, the dull thud of an impact, and then the smaller, sharper sounds of pieces skittering to the floor. He turned quickly enough to see the rider slam into the ground, rolling along the floor as horns blazed at him, as brakes were slammed on, as panic gripped everyone in sight.

But it wasn't time to relax. Not yet.

"You're being tracked by two AMUs, genuine ones this time," Norma told him.

He hit the accelerator and released the madness. "We'll play nice with them, won't we?"

"We will, but we also have a more serious problem! Merv is in trouble!"

She looked over the monitors.

“Three motorcycles are on him. He’s being pushed into an ambush with an armoured car. SWAT is set up and they have heavy weapons which will pose a threat to the vehicle; a significant threat. In language an idiot can understand, that means that the armour can’t stand up to the hail of bullets their weapons are capable of delivering.”

“Plot me a route!” Red replied.

She finished tapping on the keyboard. “Already done!” The computer projected that Merv would run out of options within two minutes. She closed her eyes, weighing up what few options she had left.

“Red, Merv is running out of time. I’m activating the hydrogen boost to run at full power on the bike again. It’s to use at your own discretion.”

“Right!” he replied. “Wait, full power? What have you been giving me so far?”

“About half,” she told him. “Almost half.”

“Norma,” he said with absolute certainty, “I love this bike. I love this bike so damn much.”

“Red, there’s no point trying to save one of you if the other one dies trying. Do you understand?”

Red was silent for a long moment. Then his voice came back, as sarcastic as ever. “I understand, Mum!”

“You’re impossible!” she yelled angrily, but she was smiling and Red would know that.

Boost.

It was going to solve all his problems in one go. The police AMUs were on his tail, running quite efficiently. He was confident

that they wouldn't draw their weapons, and was therefore more focused on the task ahead of him rather than the problems behind.

He had a feeling that this was going to be how the rest of his life would be, if it had been any different up to now. He wondered briefly if there would be much up ahead, since there didn't seem to be much in the other direction—not that he could recall, at least.

Boost might solve all his problems with a little more finality than he would have preferred if he couldn't focus entirely. If he could, it would get him to Merv, and the AMUs would have no chance of keeping up.

He swallowed hard. He was nervous, and there was no point denying it to himself; himself was the one person who really, really understood what there was to be nervous about.

His stomach was fluttering, and his head felt light with expectation. Full power was to be taken seriously, and taking things seriously was something else that he seemed to be really bad at. "OK, baby. Let's go rescue that big, dumb lump of gristle."

He took a deep breath and twisted the throttle.

The world exploded around him. Buildings were gone, replaced by streaks of endless brick and concrete. The road below smoothed away to nothing, shone at him, dazzling him as the world shook, rocked and rolled around violently. The motorcycle did everything but stay in line. The back twitched, the frame flexed, the engine screamed in agony, and a streak of blue flame stretched out behind him endlessly. The muscles in his shoulder seemed to catch fire, the effort of holding fast in the saddle making it burn as he pulled hard to stay connected to the machine.

The bike streaked down the highway. He saw cars and slowed them down in his mind. The agonised wail of the engine melted away to a rhythmic series of bangs, explosions, still too close together to

count. The cars passed to the side, the bike bucking wildly as he passed, shimmying from the displacement of the air coming off of them. A bridge blazed by with a whoosh, another, and then one more. He backed down, the bike rocked again, the world fell back into some kind of order, some kind of sense, as the blur of colours melted back into recognisable shapes.

He was sweating, his heart pounding, and his legs felt numb. He doubted he would be able to stand without embarrassing himself. The suit was wet and hot inside, and he hoped it was just from sweat!

“I’m on top of Merv,” he reported. “I’m going in, Norma.”

“Good luck!” she said. She sounded worried, and that didn’t fill him with an abundance of confidence, either.

Merv swung the wheel, wrenching the van off to the left around a tight corner. The motorcycle fell back, but there was a crackle. Powdery white residue flicked off the glass as bullets ricocheted against the sides.

“You’re sure they’re police?” said the Captain who was strapped fast into the passenger seat, his voice just the wrong side of a scream.

Merv grunted; it might have been a reply. He was concentrating on not hitting anything, when hitting things was rather what he was better at. “Hold on!” his heavy voice called out as the van swung violently the other way, screaming the tyres back around a corner.

“Just stop the van! I’m a police Captain. I’ll order them to stand down.”

Merv looked at him and smiled. He did something that might have been a laugh, or perhaps an attempt to dislodge a kitten he’d accidentally breathed in through his nose. It was difficult to tell.

The black motorcycle pulled up beside. The rider held his weapon to the window. For a long moment, both Merv and the Captain just stared at him. Would the glass really hold up to a point-blank rattle of fully automatic gunfire? Merv winced and waited to find out.

There was a crackle of shots; bullets whistled outside, accompanied by the unmistakable sound of cracks from a series of sonic booms. The bike was shredded into pieces, plastic dissolved away in a shower of explosions and sparks. It wobbled into the van, and was gone into a cloud of silvery pieces of twisted wreckage.

Merv grunted, "What the...?"

Another motorcycle pulled alongside. The unmistakable black helmet, the form-fitting armoured suit, the insufferable roar of the utterly gibberingly-insane engine... There could be no mistaking what it was. Merv broke into the first happy, relieved smile of his entire adult life.

"Red!" he yelled, punching the air. He could almost see him grinning away inside the helmet, behind the blacked-out visor.

The Captain looked utterly horrified and whispered, "Did he just kill that rider with an automatic cannon?"

Merv nodded happily. "Sit back, you're going to see a real show!"

"How many?" Red asked.

He was confident now. He'd mastered the bike; she was tamed, he'd broken her spirit, they'd been to the limit together and now he owned her.

"Two riders, one armoured car with an entire SWAT team around it. This isn't good, Red."

"Prime the cannon, Norma!"

“The cannon is empty,” she told him. “You know that thing is a motorcycle right, not a bus. It only holds a few hundred rounds.”

“Norma, we need to have a serious talk when I get back. A talk with long words like ‘disappointment’ and ‘dissatisfaction.’”

He racked his brain. If he remembered rightly, he had only two trip-wires, four stun-missiles, and a special kind of torch left at his disposal. He couldn’t in good conscience count the water pistol as a proper weapon, and resolved that one day, when he was old and grey and lying on his deathbed, passing the keys to a younger, even more annoying descendant of his, he would proudly tell him that the water-pistol had never been fired.

“Where are the motorcycles?” he asked. With that, bullets whipped past his head angrily. “Never mind,” he began cheerfully, “I found them.”

He twisted the throttle, but not all the way: he was in no rush to do that again anytime soon. Two black motorcycles were on his tail. A crackle, and then a second burst of automatic fire issued from behind. He ducked and he swerved, making a more unpredictable target, hoping to keep them from fixing their sights on him.

“Norma,” he began angrily. “What kind of mentality builds the fastest motorcycle you can possibly imagine, one that can get ahead of anything, and then puts no weapons on the back end of it? I mean, was this thing designed by a crack team of idiots and then outsourced for production in China?”

Norma replied impatiently, “I didn’t design it, or build it.”

“Don’t worry, I think I have a plan,” he told her with a sense of growing urgency, as a cluster of bullets whipped by his head. One just managed to graze the helmet, catching him off-guard and furnishing him with a refreshed understanding of the need to do whatever he was going to do, much more quickly.

He made a hard turn, the kind of hard turn that causes a cloud of white smoke to erupt from the tyres as he locked the bike into a sideways skid. He powered out of it inside another plume of white smoke, and the bike shot out, as if fired from some gigantic weapon. The two aggressors slowed and took the corner as fast as they were able, which seemed quite pedestrian from where he was sitting.

Red glanced behind him. The effort of twisting sent a whole new shot of pain surging through the back of his impacted shoulder. He grunted in discomfort, but it only made him more determined. He slid down a slip-road onto a highway, and then held back, allowing them to catch him up a little. Not too much though, not enough to bring him into range of their weapons. He powered on into a long underpass, and they followed closely behind.

As soon as he entered the tunnel, the sound changed. He heard his engine all around him, echoing, bouncing around, louder and distorted by the arched roof. He laid right off the power, letting the bike coast along so they could catch him up. He freewheeled at lower and lower speed, edging to the center of the road towards a split in the lane, where the path went off in two directions. He had to time this perfectly. He waited. He waited. He waited a little more.

They were bearing down on him fast, he had only seconds. “The strobe, now!” he shouted to Norma. He twisted the throttle urgently.

The engine roared suddenly, filling the tunnel with the sound of the mighty power as it exploded through the rear wheel. Even he was disoriented by the sheer suddenness and violence of it. He veered off down what he hoped would be the less obvious direction as the powerful, blinding strobe light flashed away behind him, pulsing so brightly that it would blind anyone looking directly at it. He pulled away, slammed on the brakes, and turned around. He

headed back the wrong way, into oncoming traffic. He jumped up on the central reservation and back down the other side. The two motorcycles had crashed into one another, utterly robbed of their senses when they needed them most. They weren't badly injured, but were no longer a threat. It was good enough.

He roared away, the tunnel ringing to the sound of his engine as he pulled the front up and wheelied along the road, just for the hell of it.

Merv was trapped and he knew it. He'd finally been shepherded into a road by the snapping dogs, the police that had been circling for the last few minutes. It was a road from which there was no escape, the road that led directly back to the rear entrance to the station, around the docking yard where the concentration of heavy weapons was at its very heaviest.

"They're just police," the Captain protested. "They're not going to open fire on us."

Merv pulled over and brought the van to a halt. Between him and the precinct house was an armoured car. On top was a machine-gun emplacement—a heavy weapon, too heavy for urban law enforcement, and it was already trained on them.

Merv didn't know much, but he knew enough to know that that thing was going to punch holes straight through the armoured van in a matter of seconds. He had always liked having longer than a matter of seconds to live.

All seemed lost.

"I'll just get out," Bertoli suggested. "I'm sure they won't fire on me: they know me. They'll just escort me to the precinct so I can have the drug tested. They're cops—everyone out there wants this as much as I do."

The SWAT team was brandishing weapons, special weapons at that, and were using tactics besides. Someone yelled through a bullhorn, "Captain Bertoli, you are under arrest. Throw out your weapon and surrender or we will open fire on your vehicle. You will not get a second warning."

"...the hell?" he frowned. "What's going on? I thought Lucas was paranoid. I mean, I knew he was paranoid, but at least I thought he had the decency to be wrong about it."

"They want you dead," Merv told him. "They'll do anything to protect the Wolf." He didn't know why; it meant nothing to him one way or the other. It was simply enough for Merv to know they were his enemy.

Two police cruisers had blocked the road behind him. Merv looked in the mirror, hoping for a miracle, but none was coming. Just exactly what was he supposed to do now?

"Just exactly what am I supposed to do now?" Red grumbled as he skidded, slid and drifted around a corner, powering on into a straight that he roared along at more than three times the speed limit.

"The mission is over," she said sadly. "We can't breach that kind of weaponry. It's time to come home."

"But Merv?" Red gasped.

There was a long pause. "Merv knew the risks. The fact is, I wouldn't let him risk his life to save yours either. I'm sorry Red—we've broken them, their supply network is shattered, but we've lost Merv in the process. He would understand."

Red snapped angrily, "I won't... I can't accept that."

Norma sounded just as broken herself. "If you have any better ideas, I'm open to hearing them."

Red slipped through a gap in traffic, almost brushing his elbows against two car mirrors as they swerved in panic to avoid him. "I'll get back to you."

Norma rubbed her temples. She was logical, she was cold, she knew when to be dispassionate. This was that time. Merv was gone, that much was certain, but she had the data now. The computer had already begun working on the program. Within minutes, she would know where the Wolf was really coming from.

"Red, the computer is working. It's calculating the source of the flow of Wolf. It has located all of the supply units, and is working out the delivery routes back to wherever it's being produced."

Red sighed, "We paid too high a price." His voice was weak and hollow.

She couldn't argue with that, and just looked sadly away, thinking of how she could have done better, how she could have made this work. She blamed herself, another weight to add to all of the others she carried within her.

"Come back, Red," she told him. "I need you. We need you for when we extrapolate the source of the Wolf. This isn't over yet."

"But Merv," he grumbled. "Don't we still need Merv? What if something needs punching?"

She looked at the screen and sighed. This was just one more thing to blame herself for; another sleepless night, another face etched into her weary old soul.

The program beeped that it was finished. The results had finally come in.

"Red, we have the location." She checked the monitor, then stood up suddenly in shock, in horror. Her hand covered her mouth, her face drained to white. Her heart was pounding, she was confused,

her mind spun with the weight of the new information. “Red...” she whispered, frowning.

A voice called from behind her, “What took you so long?”

Chapter 28

Red sat by the side of the road. “Norma? Norma?” he banged on the side of the helmet, hoping that might help in some utterly unscientific way that she would never approve of. It didn’t even make much sense to him. “Norma, can you hear me?”

Without the link to the Hawk-Eye base, the weapons were offline; and worse, the coded signal that kept the bike moving was also switched off. He had well under ten more minutes before the motorcycle died for good. He began to panic. The entire police department was looking for him, and was motivated to shoot to kill. He had found that he much preferred being alive.

He was all out of tricks and, frankly, he could really use a coffee!

“Norma!” he shouted into the mic. It was no use. It was dead, really dead. There was nothing. No feedback, the head-up display in the helmet was down, the computer had been completely cut off. He was alone, vulnerable and alone in a city that wanted him dead, and seemed to want it quite badly.

Then it hit him. He wasn’t alone, and he had one option left, even if the price to pay was a high one indeed. A choice was still a choice.

Norma was dumbstruck. The computers fell silent one by one, closing down with a clank as the fuses shut themselves off. “I don’t understand,” she said weakly.

He stepped forward from the shadows. She already knew exactly who he was, as hard as that might be to believe. She began edging away, shaking her head and finding all this too hard to accept. But it did make sense, albeit a horrible, ugly kind of sense.

“Where were the drugs made, Norma?” he asked, his voice a low, rasping noise from the back of an old throat.

“Here...” she said softly. “They’re being sent out from somewhere in this building complex. What’s going on?”

“I thought you’d have figured this all out by now,” he laughed, an ugly, condescending laugh. “A clever girl like you should be smarter than this. I’m disappointed in you, Norma.”

“I thought you were dead.” She jumped nervously in surprise as she backed up into a chair. She almost fell, feeling behind her for something to cling to her. Her head was reeling; nothing was right anymore and her life felt as if it was being torn apart at the seams. “Doctor Swaggert. We all thought you were dead. I mean, I hoped you weren’t, but we all thought...”

He grinned. His teeth were a row of perfect, white pearls. He hissed coldly, “Do I look dead?”

She pleaded, “What’s going on? Why did you leave? What are you doing here now?”

He pretended thoughtfully to rub his chin. “I never left,” he told her, a nasty little smirk on his face; the expression of a man who knew something he could hurt you with. A little power in the hands of an even smaller man. “Let me tell you, though, you have been a serious thorn in our side. Congratulations, by the way. You’ve done some sterling work today. All this planning was brought down by a mildly autistic computer scientist and an idiot on a bike.”

“Please!” she was lost. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

Red noticed the clock on the lower part of the dash. It was reading that he had only three minutes left. He hadn’t noticed it before, but it was flashing amber now, and heading to red. It was the countdown to the cut-out. When ten minutes ran out, the bike would signal up to

the base and ask for coded permission to keep running, only this time it wouldn't get it. It would assume the worst; it would lock itself up; the engine, the computers, the weapons would all be closed down, inert and safe, and this time there would be no way to get them going again.

The motorcycle would be useless, and he would be trapped out in the open, exposed, vulnerable, and almost certain that nobody would have had the foresight to sign them up for AA membership.

There was only one hope, one way for him to get out of this situation alive, and if he played his hand correctly, maybe he could even do better than that.

With a very heavy heart he sighed to himself. He laid on the power, one last time, heading directly into the police trap. He had a plan, a hopeless, terrible, ridiculous plan that just might work; but probably wouldn't. It was worth a try, he thought optimistically, knowing pessimistically that it probably wasn't. He shrugged to himself. He shouldn't really have gotten this far in one piece, and really had nothing left to lose.

"Why not?" he thought to himself,

With a chuckle, he realised how sad he was, how he felt he was somehow losing the best part of himself by doing this. It would be hard, but it had to be done. It had to be done if he had any hope of saving himself and Merv.

The motorcycle slipped easily past the police barrier. He rode between the two cars blocking the road on the back wheel, roaring in at full power, spitting flames and growling like a wounded lion who had found some innocent person to take revenge on. He slammed the front wheel to the ground and pulled up beside the van. For just a moment, he realised that he'd forgotten that everyone inside was heavily armed and pointing those guns directly at him.

He hoped they wouldn't fire.

He tensed. It would take only one tiny moment of panic, one scared officer to pull the trigger and it could all be over. They'd die in a horrible hail of bullets. He quickly glanced behind. The officers in the cars were lightly armed: it was just the SWAT team ahead that he had to worry about.

The clock was down to a minute. He grumbled to himself about design flaws and forced himself to just stay focused and carry on.

He tapped on the window of the van and it opened just a crack.

"Merv!" Red yelled at him. "I'm going to clear a path. I want you to turn around and get ready to get the hell out of here. Captain, you get out of the van now, through the back door. I'm going to make sure you can walk right up to the front gates with those samples."

"How?" he gasped.

Red looked ahead grimly. "Won't be easy."

Forty-five seconds left.

The motorcycle speakers came on. He yelled as loud as he could, "We surrender. I'm handing over the motorcycle. Be nice to her—I haven't finished paying for her yet and I waxed her yesterday. Also, I'm slightly in love with her; probably more than slightly, if I'm honest. This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you lot, but it is going to hurt you a lot!"

He heard the van door open. It was now or never.

"Everyone get down!" Red cried out. "Fire in the hole!"

He threw the throttle all the way open, knowing the boost function was still engaged and set to full power, and that the fuel tanks were wide open.

From standstill, the acceleration was beyond brutal. She wrenched at him, tore at the concrete floor, the tyre scrambling for more as the bike flew faster and faster, directly at the armoured car.

Everything was slow for him. It wasn't difficult to get off—it was harder to stay on. He pushed up and away, and found himself floating in the air as the bike continued to accelerate away, the gyroscopic stabiliser keeping her straight and true. He felt himself land awkwardly, the suit taking the sting out of it, but still it hurt and his shoulder stung sharply as he collapsed to the ground.

He saw the bike one last time, one blazing, screaming streak of blue light as she plummeted headlong into the armoured car. There was no escaping it—this was going to hurt him more than it hurt her, but it was going to hurt her a lot, whichever way you chose to look at it. The way he looked at it, everyone was getting hurt, and he was coming off worst.

There was an eruption as the fuel cell collapsed. A shockwave exploded out, throwing the officers to the ground, blasting guns out of hands, throwing people around like skittles. Then a white-hot seething ball of flame rippled out, tearing through the armoured car and opening a large gap in their defences, as promised, only with a lot more flame than he anticipated and a fair bit more anguished screaming.

Red watched in horrified silence as she disappeared, vanishing forever. The world would never see her like again, and to be fair, that might not be such a bad thing for everyone who wasn't Red.

“Get in!”

Merv's mighty vocal chords roused him from his momentary loss. He looked up to the gaping rear entrance to the van, the doors swinging open. As hoped, the van had shielded the Captain, who now

stood in horrified terror as the front of his police precinct had been reduced to a smoking crater, surrounded by men with no eyebrows.

Bertoli turned as the van sped by. Just before the doors had slammed closed, he noticed the man in the black motorcycle armour waving and shouting something that sounded like, “Goodbye and thanks! Have fun with the Wolf samples. This was fun; we should do it again soon.” It was hard to make out, though.

The black van crashed headlong into the gap between the two squad cars, sending them spinning out of the way.

Whatever way you chose to look at it, this was turning out to be an odd day. He chose not to think about it.

Red pulled off the helmet and breathed the air. He gasped a heavy breath and grunted, “I got you, big guy!”

“Shame about the bike,” the big guy replied.

Red looked at him. His sad eyes turned and looked once more behind them. “Yeah,” he said softly, sadly and a little angrily.

“Shame about the bike. She went before her time.”

“What now?” Merv grunted.

“Back to base, before they figure out that we’re dangerous felons who need treating to some special form of brutal justice.” Red shrugged, chewed his bottom lip and looked worried. “I lost contact with Norma. I hope she’s safe. I’ll bet she’s fine though, right? I mean, what could possibly happen back at a totally secure secret government building in a hidden basement?”

Henry stepped past her. She sidled away, trying to keep a distance between them. He was dressed neutrally, a dark blue suit covering a stylish shirt that didn’t seem really to quite fit him. He looked thin

but healthy. Time had stood still for him; he looked exactly as she remembered, with perhaps just a few extra wrinkles around the eyes.

She looked up. She counted four more burly men in dark suits, threatening creatures designed to intimidate, their presence designed to ensure her cooperation.

“When did you start needing body-guards?” she asked sourly.

The lights flicked back on around the Hawk-Eye room, the computer spluttered back to life, but now it was set to follow his directions.

He didn’t look up from the system as he answered. “Since I became the most powerful, important scientific mind of our time, I suppose.”

He stood straight. He had the posture of a man many years younger. “I remember all this stuff. A little before your time though, I’m afraid, my dear. Well done at getting the computer working again. I’m not quite sure why you’d bother. It never really worked properly, and we never did figure out why. It was as if there was something inside itself that was fighting it.”

“Why do I feel a growing sense of sympathy towards it about that?” she asked rhetorically. “What’s going on, Henry?” She frowned at him disapprovingly.

He spun around, raising his arms at everything around him. Fixing her with a disarming gaze of supreme confidence, he laughed, “This is going on—the Hawk-Eye project! I built this more than thirty years ago to usher in a new era of surveillance technology. This city was chosen as the testing ground. From here, we would build a foundation for the future. We had an abundance of technology, brought together by the finest minds of their generation, and we turned it all against them. From this very room we learned—we

learned how to watch, how to listen. We found out what worked and what didn't, and we learned how to see and know everything."

He pressed a few buttons and more lights came on, illuminating the mainframes. "This was all a giant experiment, and it worked; not all of it, but most of it. It showed us new ways to think."

"Save the sales talk for the investors, Henry—I'm already familiar with Hawk-Eye. I was asking why you vanished, and why you're back now, surrounded by burly men who look like their mothers don't invite them for Christmas." Was Red rubbing off on her?

He sighed, "There needed to be a second wave of technology; we needed to build on our achievements. What we started here was just the beginning. I wanted to go further, and there was no end of people in power willing to hand over unlimited resources to fund my work. We already began developing both a second and a third wave."

"More advanced computers? More advanced technology?"

"No," he laughed, a guttural sound. "Stage two was actually quite primitive. We simply had to convince the idiot public to take our surveillance systems with them. We convinced them to have spy cameras in their homes, listening devices in their pockets, to let us track them, to let us know their every thought. We taught them to spy on themselves, and we made them pay for it."

"Personal communication technology," she huffed.

"Mobile phones that record everything, laptops that tell us their every thought. We gave them games to play, websites to let them pour out the details of their lives to; and they did love to pour. We had more information than we could possibly handle, and they just gave it all to us, willingly telling us everything."

"But why did you disappear?" She was angry now, angry at herself. "What happened?"

“You happened,” he told her darkly. “You changed everything.”

The van parked up, some distance from the base. From the outside, it was just a disused warehouse, one among dozens of others in a largely abandoned neighbourhood.

Red popped off the seatbelt and peered out of the tinted windscreen. He could see them—men dressed like government employees, the bad kind, the kind that weren’t nice to their pets.

“Suits!” He looked back to Merv. “With us?”

Merv shook his head.

“Is this bad?”

Merv nodded his head.

Red shrugged. “Got anything to say that involves articulating actual words?”

Merv shook his head.

Red flopped back into the seat. “Well, can this van go invisible? Does it have lasers? Does it have any kind of stealth technology?”

“Stealth technology.” Merv pressed a button and a panel flicked open on the dash.

Red looked at him and grinned. “I like this van. What do the buttons do?”

“It can change colour!” said Merv, pointing to the buttons.

Red frowned at him accusingly.

Merv looked away and added, “I can let out a cloud of smoke, I can scramble electronic communication, and I can emit an ultrasonic wave that will render everyone unconscious, although it might cause minor medical issues if it’s not calibrated exactly.”

Red considered the options. "I like the last two. If we do those both together, we should at least be able to get inside and find out what's happened to Norma!"

Merv's fists clenched, and the steering wheel began to buckle. "You think something bad has happened to Norma?"

Red considered saying calming, soothing things with a few well-chosen words of comfort but decided a focused and angry Merv was probably more useful to him right now.

"I do. I think very bad things have happened to her. Very bad things could be happening to her right now." He added thoughtfully, "You shouldn't blame yourself, no matter what anyone thinks, or says."

Merv looked at him. His eyes sparked and his expression was something you wouldn't want to see if you were standing directly in front of him and had planned to continue living. "If anyone has hurt Norma, I'll kill them."

"Naturally," Red agreed, and slapped him supportively on the shoulder. It was like slapping solid metal and sent a shock through his arm that caught him painfully in the shoulder. He winced.

Merv looked over and looked as if he realised the bullet impact had been more serious than they might have first thought.

"Red," he growled. His expression was quite unsympathetic. "Stop being a delicate vegetarian. We have people to kill."

Red took a deep breath. "I thought I was up to my quota today, but sure, why not?"

"Me?" She looked hopelessly back at him. "What did I do?"

Henry smiled. "You gave me stage 3. You gave me everything I needed to go even further, and further than I could have ever imagined. Hawk-Eye found you, and it brought you to me."

Norma tried to laugh, to dismiss this all as foolishness, as the ramblings of a madman, or a joke at her expense. Possibly, and probably ideally, it was both. All she could do was quietly listen.

“You handed me your nano-technology,” he told her loudly, as if showing off to an expectant audience. “You didn’t have the vision to use it, but I did. I saw the potential: I knew where it could go.” He brandished his fist in front of her face, claspings the future, making it his vision. “I had what you didn’t have. I had insight and resources. That’s why I vanished. It was just too dangerous not to.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I took a sizeable research grant and I went dark with it, removing myself from the world I’d created; I could have no part of the intrusions of social media, webcams and mobile phones. Spy technology in your pocket that you allow yourself to get conned into getting into debt for. I needed to be away from all that, myself and my team.”

She was worried now. “What did you do, Henry?”

“We developed a way to get your nanobots to modify a human brain in a very specific way. They sit along the central cortex and they form a transmitter. They eat into the sensory nodes and they take data; then they take that data and they send it to us.” He was triumphant, elated, drunk on his own success.

“You wouldn’t!” she whispered, horrified that her simple vision to help people had been so terribly corrupted.

“This is the ultimate surveillance technology. People are turned into cameras, into listening devices. We know what they’re seeing, what they’re hearing: we can even read their emotional states. We know if they’re afraid, if they’re happy, aroused, sad, angry.” He was an eloquent showman.

“The Wolf...” She shook her head sadly. “You did this, didn’t you Henry?”

“This is just a test. Just like before, this city was chosen as a lab, as an experiment to try out this new technology. It worked, of course, just as I knew it would.” He spoke quite happily as if discussing nothing of consequence. “It was a resounding success. From only one injection, the subject was turned into a living transmitter—we knew everything they did. Every subsequent injection strengthened our hold, made them more useful to us; it made the information sharper, clearer.”

“What have you done?” she demanded. “This isn’t legal; you’re killing people!”

“I’m letting bad people hurt worse people,” he said with a dismissive shrug, the matter quite obviously long since justified away in his mind. “This is all for the greater good. One day soon, there will be no crime. We’ll be able to react before crimes even happen. Think of what that will mean to the innocent.”

“You think the innocent will be happy that you’re inside their heads, watching their lives, stealing their thoughts?” she pleaded to his humanity.

He nodded, seemingly confused that she’d even ask such a thing. “In this country, people go to church every weekend and thank a man in the sky for doing that very same thing, and he’s not even very good at it. We, on the other hand, are very good at it. Yes, they’ll be happy.”

“But it’s a drug! You can’t get everyone to take a drug!” They both knew this was a losing argument.

“It’s just a test, all this,” he laughed. “Everything useful that these giant computer arrays could once do, I can do now with a digital watch. The drug was just used to put the nanobots into a select

group, a slice of the population nobody cared about, expendables. The euphoric state was a simple program that ran on a time trigger.”

“But we stopped you,” she told him angrily. “We smashed your supply ring, we exposed your drug. By now, it’s in the hands of the police. Someone is testing it somewhere.”

He shrugged and looked at her quite seriously, eye to eye. “You didn’t stop me.”

Her face fell.

“This test was a resounding success. I’ve secured funding for wide-scale trials. Next time, it will be a vaccine. Some new strain of flu will be all over the media—people won’t just beg us to jab this technology into their arms: they’ll even pay handsomely for it.”

“Why don’t you just put me out of misery?” she told him. She was broken now; this was all too much, to know that she had played such a key role in the enslavement of her species.

“Kill you?” he laughed again. “I want you to work for me. That’s what this was all about.”

She frowned curiously.

“I had you sent here to look for me; I hoped you’d look a bit wider since I wasn’t too hard to find. I had your son signed up to the program. Computer projections said you were eighty-seven percent more likely to cooperate if your son was involved in the trials. I want you on my side. You invented this technology, and you should have a hand in bringing this vision to the people.”

She stared back at him coldly.

“I do admit...” he said grumpily. “It did all go a tiny bit wrong.”

Red stepped out of the van, which was now bright pink and billowing a cloud of smoke for reasons that weren’t entirely clear. Everyone

around them had collapsed on the floor; several were groaning, some were vomiting blood, others had clearly soiled themselves. At least one had suffered ruptures in both eyeballs.

They had driven into the building with the ultrasonic signal blazing. Clearly, it wasn't a flawless piece of technology, nor even particularly close.

"Another slight calibration issue..." Red muttered.

Merv just waved his hand dismissively. "Would it have been better for them if I'd had to fight my way in?"

Two confused looking agents stepped out from behind a door brandishing their failed communication equipment. Seeing them, Red adopted a fighting stance and balled his fists. He took a deep breath as they approached him.

"Merv!"

Merv pushed him to the side as if he was made of paper and went straight at the two agents. The first went to draw his weapon and got the full force of a fist to the face. It didn't look like a face afterwards, more like a sack of pink skin that someone had poured a load of loose bones into. He fell to the floor in a weakly gurgling heap that would never again enjoy the simple pleasures of solid food.

Merv swung his fist to the right, connecting with the head of the other. It crashed into the wall, but had not yet suffered enough to knock him out cold. On reflection, that was probably a bad thing for him. The agent balled his fists, staggered about and wobbled. Merv grabbed his shirt and swung him bodily back into the opposite wall, where he impacted with a very loud thud, accompanied by a very quiet gasp. There was a bloody outline of a human face left imprinted where he had hit. It had a sad expression.

Red came up behind him, patted him on the back and said, "It's a good job you took over there. I might have hurt them."

“They got off lightly,” Merv grunted.

Red didn’t doubt it for a second. He paused momentarily to help himself to their guns, and then they crept inside.

“I did assume that your son would work for us. He tested very highly in terms of aptitude for moral flexibility. I didn’t imagine he’d be injured though—I can only apologise for that.”

She glared at him. “It doesn’t matter who you hurt, does it?”

He shrugged. “It’s over Norma,” he said softly. “The Wolf samples never reached the lab. By now, your biker friend is dead; your son is lying in a hospital bed. What have you got left to fight for?”

“My humanity?” she snapped. “I presume that if you have the technology to take the thoughts out of a person’s head, you have the technology to put them in there as well. Am I right?”

Henry smiled slyly and it was a sight that sickened her. “Yes,” he said simply. “And I can save your son.”

“Casey?!” she said reflexively, stiffening.

Henry nodded. “I have the technology to bring him back to you. I’ve worked with your technology, I’ve enhanced it. Great minds have perfected the brilliant technology that your insight created.”

“Casey...” she muttered sadly, shaking her head. She felt as if she had never really known her own son.

“You have no idea how powerful this is,” he continued. “This is the kind of technology that changes worlds. I’m no fool. I’m not handing it over to anyone. I’ve programmed the nanobots very carefully. When this vaccine goes out, we’ll have peace on this planet. Greed and suffering will be a thing of the past. No more will corrupt leaders with crazy philosophies shape our destinies, no more

lying politicians, no more banks, no more wars. The world will know logic; the people will have a better way of life. Everyone left will be better off—it will be a new world order!”

“Humanity is better than this,” she told him sternly. “There have always been people like you, and there always will be. But for every one of you, there’ll be someone ready to stop you—someone good and decent who knows what it is to be human, someone with a truly human soul.”

“Norma,” he said with a laugh, shaking his head in ridicule. “This ‘humanity’ you continue to extol the virtue of is solely responsible for everything that is bad in this world—crime, war, intolerance, inequality, software piracy... Surely you must see that its elimination, in the masses at least, is the key to our advancement as a civilisation! The days of the dominion of humanity are over, now that I alone control the most powerful technology on the planet, and good riddance to it.

“I am practically a god now and, as we’ve already established, I’m actually rather better at it than the old one was.

“And with humanity finally overcome, what is there left that could possibly pose the slightest threat to me? What is there that can challenge me now? What is there left on this planet that has the power to stop me?”

His world exploded into light and darkness as a fist with the power of a family car connected with his head at the speed of a lonely man making a bad decision in a brothel. He made a sighing noise as a fair few of his teeth, and what might have been a fair chunk of the gum they used to be stuck in, flew from his mouth, clattering to the floor lightly. His body hit the deck with a sickening thud, his head leading the way, with his feet landing some time after.

“Humanity always prevails!” yelled Merv, bits of old broken teeth and nerves still sticking out of his oversized fists.

Norma looked up startled. Red grabbed one of the four guards and swung the pistol into the side of his head—he collapsed to the floor with a grunt. Another whipped out his weapon and fired it twice from the shadows where he couldn’t be seen. It barked angrily and Red jolted backwards, rolling to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Merv served him up lashings of revenge, shooting the last with his own pistol, but saving a proper beating for the man who shot Red.

Norma dashed over. “Red!” she said, cradling his head.

He wheezed heavily, “Bulletproof. Hurts. Many design flaws that need to be discussed at great length. I blame you for everything.”

Norma smiled and wiped a tear from her eye. Merv was still happily desecrating the remains of some man who really wasn’t going to get any more dead, ripping his organs from his torso like too much Christmas wrapping. At least he was happy.

“So do I!” she told him. “So do I!”

Chapter 29

Red woke up. His mind was racing and he felt sharp, alert and alive. His mind was as clear as it had ever been.

He made his way to the Hawk-Eye room, feeling the cold ceramic tiles beneath his feet, the cool breeze against his genitals. He looked down and grumbled to himself before heading back to the room for his clothes so he could try all this again with more modesty and less angry pointing.

“Hello guys!” he said wearily.

Merv and Norma looked up from the console station. It had changed, and changed significantly. The monitors were clean, and now there seemed to be a mouse on the desk with a warm red glow underneath. This seemed like unprecedented progress.

It still looked like a giant, technological being had laid a giant technological turd in the warehouse, but now someone had polished it.

Norma stepped forward. She had changed as well; it was the first time he’d seen her in casual clothes, and it felt oddly disturbing. “How do you feel, Red?” She sounded human, which also felt oddly disturbing.

He frowned at her. “You’re not going to start throwing rubber balls at me, are you? I’m really not in the mood.”

She smirked and said, “No. Just tell me how you feel!”

“Fine,” he shrugged. He suddenly winced and remembered the pain in his shoulder, which also reminded him of the pain in his ribs. “Well, fine - apart from the gunshots. You know, fine for me ever since I met you.”

“I’ve got some good news!” she told him.

He liked good news, but suspected that her idea of it and his were quite different. Consequently, he looked suspicious. "Did you have Merv neutered? I always thought we should do it, otherwise he's just going to keep eating the furniture."

Merv stood up straight and crossed his arms over his massive chest, glaring angrily.

"You can't scare me—I know you're really just a big pussy-cat and you know you love me really."

He grumbled and looked away, a little too fast perhaps.

"I have good news," she reminded him.

Red looked at her and struggled to find a sarcastic comment that fitted. He came back empty and just said, "Go on then."

She tapped his head, which he also found oddly disturbing. "Your brain has stabilised. I calculate a sixty-four per cent likelihood that your brain won't randomly liquidise and run out of your nose, so long as we remember to charge it."

He frowned as he thought about what she might consider qualified as bad news. "And if we do forget to charge it?"

She shrugged. "Statistically zero. You'll die an agonising death. It will be quite the most horrible thing I can possibly imagine."

Red's eyes widened, and blinked a few times.

"But that's not going to happen, because I have a dedicated timer set to remind me whenever you need charging. As of now, you won't need charging for..." She glanced at the timer, looked again a little more properly, and seemed somewhat confused for a moment. "Ah! I forgot to press the button."

"I forgot how much I love working here..." He looked around. Everything seemed subtly different. "How long was I out for?"

“Well, I stabilised your brain, so it took a little longer than usual. Three whole days this time.”

“That explains why I’m incredibly hungry and my mouth feels like a gorilla was using it for a bathroom,” he grunted.

Merv interjected, “Delicate vegetarian pizza is on the counter.”

“You’re a good man, Merv. A really decent guy!” He stepped forwards towards his breakfast, and something cracked under his foot. He looked down to find a bloody and broken tooth on the floor. He shrugged, ignored it and carried on. “So what’s happened in the last few days?”

“We’ve been busy,” she told him.

He looked at her and flicked open the box, delicately grabbing a slice of vegetarian pizza and examining it closely, just in case there was secret meat hidden on there anywhere. He didn’t trust either of them when it came to something really important.

“You know a cup of coffee would go great with this!”

Merv pointed to the end of the counter where they’d installed a coffee machine. “There.”

Red was impressed, but wasn’t in quite the correct frame of mind to give that impression.

“I took all the evidence to my superiors,” she began. “I said that I understood that Henry Swaggert had gone rogue and developed all this without their backing. I told them I was working to stop the evidence leaking out, and that it would take time and resources to tie up all the loose ends; it could take years in fact.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?” Red asked and Norma nodded proudly back to him.

“Free pizza?”

Norma grunted and sighed. "It means that the Hawk-Eye project now has actual funding and government backing, although they don't actually appreciate what it is that they're backing."

Red looked at their excited faces and shrugged. "So?"

"It means that we now have a free hand to do whatever we want with this technology. I've got the agency so scared that I'll release the information, that they'll do anything to keep me quiet. We can use all this to make a real difference; we can use it to do some real good."

Red looked at their excited faces and shrugged. "So?"

She rolled her eyes wearily. "So, I'm offering you a job. You can come and work here with us. It will be a proper job."

Red looked away for a moment thoughtfully, and a little bit sadly. "For all I know, I might have a job. I might have a dog too, and I bet nobody checked."

"We checked. You don't have a dog, and you worked for a private security firm until five months ago when you punched your line-manager, breaking his nose and a bone in your hand. At your exit interview, you gave the reasons for your actions as 'creative differences.' You've had a string of short-term jobs actually, and there seems to have been rather a lot of punching."

Red rolled his eyes thoughtfully. "And I do get free pizza? Am I following this correctly?"

Norma and Merv nodded at him in unison. "There is one more thing though..." Norma led them off past the main control room, which now was lit up properly, and didn't have any cables trailing along the floor.

"What happened to Henry?" Red asked, following along, chewing on the pizza, and not really sounding much like he cared one way or the other.

Norma stopped and turned. She frowned accusingly and said, with sufficient emphasis to carry the weight of her words: “He suffered an aneurysm when Merv punched him. We estimate he lost almost half of his brain function, and will almost definitely spend the rest of his life in a vegetative coma.”

Red looked at Merv and smiled. “Way to go there, Merv!” He reached out and gave him a high five. “Humanity prevailed,” added Merv.

Norma didn’t approve, and grumbled at them for their lack of maturity. “In any case, he’s in a government hospital while they finish reconstructing his jaw and his eye-socket, and putting all the outside-bits back on the inside where they belong. According to the medical reports, he looks like a cross between a gunshot wound to the genitals and any of The Rolling Stones.”

“He was an evil genius trying to take over the world,” Red told her stony-faced. “He did deserve a punch to the face, at the very least. After what he did, I think he got off lightly.”

“I agree, in theory,” she nodded. “But now we have no idea where his research has gone. We’ve lost a massive resource of information. It’s put the entire field of research back for decades.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing?” He shrugged. It didn’t seem as if his heart was entirely in it, in any of this.

“Captain Bertoli is now Commissioner Bertoli. The previous commissioner was found hanging by the neck in his garage under circumstances that might qualify as slightly suspicious. Also, there was a large number of reports of suspected drug dealers dying in mysterious accidents around the town, often swerving their cars into solid objects and dying in the wreckage.”

“I think I’m OK with that,” Red told her somberly.

She looked over at him. He seemed sad, all of this clearly something of an effort for him.

“Come on,” she told him. “I’ve got something to show you that I think will cheer you up.”

“I don’t know if I want to cheer up.”

There was a new room at the back of the warehouse, or at least a new door. It was big and black, and had lights running along it. It was right where the exit had used to be.

“OK?” he shrugged. “A door? What a thrill this job is. This had better not be a broom closet, because if it is and that’s got anything to do with my new work, I’m going to be seriously pissed at you both, and no amount of free pizza is going to make up for it. I have super-powers—I deserve better treatment.”

Norma looked at Merv. “Open it.”

He pressed a button and the doors slid open on an electric rail, shuddering and wobbling as they did.

Red frowned at her. He said grumpily, “We need to have a long talk about your calibrations, Norma.”

She stepped inside the pitch dark room. Red followed behind her, in direct response to Merv gently pushing him.

Suddenly the lights flicked on. He gasped in surprise, in glorious, blissful surprise. There it stood, the motorcycle, just as she always had been, complete, beautiful and without a scratch anywhere on her dark black metallic surface.

He ran in and hugged it, a tear in the corner of his eye. “Oh baby, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I killed you, please forgive me—I was trying to save Merv’s life. It was a horrible, horrible mistake—I know that now and I regret everything.”

He looked back to them with an expectant expression while Merv grunted and looked away jealously.

“What the hell did you do, run around with a vacuum cleaner and suck up all the bits? Last I saw her, she was a big hole in the ground.”

“This is prototype 2, the one that never managed to leave the warehouse,” she explained. “We repaired some minor damage, we replaced a few parts from the spares, and I made a few changes.”

“Changes?” He eyed her suspiciously, standing up suddenly.

“Changes? Do we like changes?”

She began counting them off on her fingers, “I added a manual trigger, took out the cut-off switch, and coded her to only recognise you as the rider.”

He grinned. “OK. That’s good changes, we like that. We like good changes.”

“And...” she began haltingly. “I made it faster. I mean the technology was thirty-five years out of date; it was embarrassing really.”

He stood up straight, a mixture of excitement and utter bewilderment. “Faster? How can it be faster? How can anything in the world be faster?”

She smirked. “And the good news, the really good news, is that this one has been written off. Even the government doesn’t technically own it.”

“No taxes,” Merv grunted at him.

“So let me get this right? We’re going to solve crimes with a really fast motorcycle, and I’m risking my life for free pizza and coffee—presumably; nobody has mentioned money up to this point?”

She acknowledged it grudgingly. “I hope there will be a slightly more elevated philosophy attached to it than that.”

He grinned. “I don’t care. I have my bike back. I literally can’t wait to get started. Count me in!”

The End

Hawk-Eye returns in *Hawk-Eye: Family*.

There is even more of this nonsense in *Hawk-Eye: Legacy*.