

Fast - Smart - Powerful

HAWEYE

Legacy

A.P. Atkinson

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

HAWK-EYE LEGACY

By
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Chapter 1

She poured herself a coffee and waited patiently. The sound of the hot, bitter, dark liquid filling her cup, with its strong, bitter aroma, brought the flicker of a smile to her careworn face. Lately, there had been the flicker of a few smiles on that same face and nobody was more surprised about that than she was.

There had been a fair bit more care and stress, too, but at least her life was balanced now. In this darkness, there was at least a little light. There were many things that were still very wrong, but finally something was also very right.

It still troubled her somewhat, when she thought about how her police-officer son had turned out to be a corrupt villain, working his way into a drug delivery network that was controlled by a man aspiring to take over the world.

It bothered her even more that he'd been injured during an immoral criminal act and left in a persistent vegetative coma from which even her advanced technology couldn't rouse him.

It was more than a slight nuisance that he had eventually recovered, thanks to having his brain augmented with Hawk-Eye technology, and then been programmed by a determined and powerful enemy to become a highly motivated weapon, turned against them.

It was really quite annoying that he'd viciously attacked her team, causing thirteen million dollars of property damage with a heavily-armed super-vehicle on a rampage of wanton destruction through the city. Fortunately, while it had wrought carnage on the buildings, road surfaces and sleeping habits of the people unfortunate to live on the receiving end of the cannon-fire, it had only scratched

the paint of the HERPES motorcycle, and in a place that nobody would really notice.

Of course, all that was nothing compared to wiping most of a small town off the map, but that had been deemed ‘justifiable’ under the circumstances, which were that it had been over-run with undead zombies.

She’d had strong words with her team about that incident, since it wasn’t quite what she had in mind when she set up an elite unit with the intention of helping people. She’d had in mind their operating in the shadows, reaching out with their technology, skills and abilities subtly to make positive changes to the world.

But that was life, and life had equipped her with an over-clocked man-child and a brutal gay killing machine. It wasn’t perfect and, sometimes, you just had to make the best of it, hadn’t you?

She sighed to herself as she sipped at the coffee, thinking of Red and Merv and everything that had happened so far. For some reason, she found that she was smiling.

The very same Red and Merv walked along the corridor towards the Hawk-Eye control room together. Once, so long ago, Red had walked that tiled floor with no memory of who he was, his brain screaming in pain, his whole life an absolute vacuum and the future, a terrifying thing laid out mysteriously before him.

Merv said conversationally, with a voice that could quite easily be weaponised: “How’s your brain today.”

Red shrugged and stifled a yawn. “Much less screaming in pain these days,” he told him. “I still can’t really remember anything from before the crash. I’m wondering if I’d actually want to remember anything, anyway. From what I’ve found out, I wasn’t a

particularly popular person, especially among men who had girlfriends.”

Merv nodded his closely shaved, muscular head. “You’re not a very popular person now. Norma has threatened to have you skinned and stuffed every day this week, and she’s someone that actually does like you.”

Red held up his finger as he made a very important point. “Not every day,” he reminded him. “On Thursday, when you asked her if she’d like pineapple on her pizza, she threatened to have both of us skinned and stuffed and to make us eat each other’s faces first.”

Merv nodded, conceding the point. He shuddered a little to himself. “I guess nobody likes pineapple on their pizza,” he grunted.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Red said, in his version of thoughtfully, as they came up to the end of the long walkway towards the security entrance. “I mean, someone must like it, since it’s on menus all round the world, but I’ve never met anyone who actually did. I’ve also never met anyone who hated it so much that they’d advocate disembowelling their colleagues at the very suggestion of having to eat it.”

“You don’t remember anything,” Merv reminded him with a mighty shrug, his frowning intensified, perhaps not seeing how any of that made much sense. “Everyone you’ve ever met might like pineapple on their pizza, for all you know!”

Red shook his head firmly. “I actually get flashes of memory about things I must have once thought were important. It’s like a strong sense of certainty about something. It’s difficult to put my mental process into words that would make sense to someone who doesn’t really have any of his own.”

“Something important like pineapple on pizza?” Merv almost smiled, or sneered, or did something terrible as he whipped off his

black glasses. The net result looked like some kind of amused frowning.

“Yes, like pineapple!” Red told him grumpily, quite a bit more grumpily than the situation demanded. He wasn’t a morning person, even though he actually didn’t need to sleep. He pressed his thumb down onto an electronic reader that was embedded into an armoured steel box that hung on the wall. “Some things transcend having a thermos-flask of experimental technology injected into your brain. I also know I have a thing for blondes, if I remember correctly. I certainly do now, at least.”

“And waitresses!” Merv reminded him.

Red winced. “Since we found out my mother was once a waitress, I’ve taken all reasonable steps to avoid all of that. It’s just creepy and weird and you agreed we wouldn’t talk about it.”

Merv frowned again, but, when Merv frowned, it was more accurate to say that he frowned more. “I didn’t agree to anything.”

Red stared at him fixedly. He said, really quite darkly, “Norma doesn’t need to find out that you called her a vicious blob of hormones that can only be dealt with by throwing chocolate at it and running away.”

Merv stared blankly, not even deigning to frown this time. His jaw, usually a steadfast thing, ideally suited to absorbing punches, and devouring animals whole, was now sagging open in surprise. He said, almost sounding like a man afraid, “But I never said that!”

Red laughed, “It doesn’t matter. Her fury will be swift and appalling. I just have to say it: it doesn’t have to be true.”

“You are a terrible person,” Merv grumbled.

Red nodded in agreement. “My research suggests that you are correct.”

She stood up from her comfy chair, facing up towards the door as the light flashed to green. The heavy metallic locking mechanism clattered open and the door finally swung towards her, where she stood on the raised platform at the heart of the control centre.

“Morning,” she said, almost warmly. She nodded to the rest of the team as they came in. They were still chattering inanely about pineapple and their chances of survival if they were foolish enough to provoke her.

Red and Merv stopped suddenly, staring forwards like a pair of children, caught going through their parents’ stash of porn.

“Morning,” they said suspiciously, virtually in unison.

“Something has happened,” she told them, stepping down from the raised pedestal, her low, sensible heels clipping firmly onto the concrete floor with a sound of austere practicality.

They looked at one another; something passed between them, a nervous, furtive glance that silently communicated their concerns to one another.

Red said, “It was Merv.”

“What was Merv?” she narrowed her eyes and glared at him, a curiously accusing glare.

Merv seemed to wilt on the spot, shrinking down to the size of a huge, monstrous wall of solid muscle, but one that was perhaps just a little bit smaller.

“Red did it really,” he said softly. “Whatever it was.”

“Neither of you did anything that I’m aware of!” she sighed, glaring at them furtively. “Sometimes I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation. We three are responsible for some incredibly advanced equipment, with considerable fire-power besides. We bear a huge responsibility but all you two seem to care about is pizza toppings.”

Red shook his head and frowned thoughtfully. He turned to Merv and said, "I don't remember the last time we talked about pizza toppings, do you?"

Merv looked away as if giving the matter a very solid thinking-about while rubbing his chin. He began also to shake his head. "Was it last month?"

"Not you too, Merv?" she grumbled. "Behave yourself or I'll take your toys away."

Merv reflexively grabbed at his customised pistol through the fabric of his jacket. Red just grinned and enjoyed his super-powers.

"When you've both quite finished reliving your childhood at considerable expense to the taxpayer, something has happened and we need to have a briefing about it."

"Is this about the toilet being blocked?" Red asked, casting an angry glance sideways, "Because that really was Merv. I have come to believe that he eats raw cows for breakfast and, I swear, you could build bullet-proof walls out of--"

"Red!" She cut him off, to Merv's relief, in a shrill voice that made everyone jump from the suddenness of it.

"The next one of you to speak is going to be turned inside out, ground into sausages and fed to the more sensible one. I swear to keep you alive for as long as possible during the process!" she told them, sounding like she really meant it. She really meant it. Her mind wandered off into dark places, as it often did. "I swear that, one of these days, I will have you both fed feet-first into a paper shredder, while your stuffed skin-sacks watch on in eerie silence."

Red turned very slightly and whispered, "Both of us again. You're no more popular than me. See?"

She growled, a horrible, blood curdling noise from the back of her throat. “Both of you, get coffee and meet me in the briefing room.”

She stalked off, leaving the others just staring in awkward silence.

Merv recovered his composure first, but still he looked worried, really quite worried. He said in a concerned voice: “There was no mention of doughnuts. Will there be doughnuts?”

Merv entered the briefing room armed with an offensively inappropriate handgun that could possibly punch a hole through the fabric of reality, and a steaming mug of hot coffee which could only punch a hole in the fog that clouded his morning.

Red was perfectly offensive enough with just a coffee, and would be moderately more offensive after it, which was something they were all ready for, to varying degrees.

“What kept you?” Norma grumbled. She had taken her place at the head of the table inside the grey room, once horribly bland, sterile and a bit depressing, but which had now been cheered up with various trophies of their recent successes, or failures, depending on how you looked at it.

Red, for one, was more of a glass-full kind of person while Norma was very much the opposite. Merv just spent most of his time worrying about what Norma was going to do and what Red was going to say to make her do it. Between them, they had all the bases covered.

Behind her was a rail of metal racking with a glass front, much as if a half-arsed, makeshift display cabinet had been made by a half-arsed, makeshift super-hero out of whatever he had found lying around.

Inside it was a brick with a jagged piece of black carbon-looking material sticking out of it, that she claimed was the largest remaining part of the first HERPES motorcycle ('god rest her soul,' as Red insisted was said after every time she was mentioned,) and a long, black, bloodied nail, ripped from the head of a zombie that had tried to bite Merv and been forced to regret it in the last few seconds that it still had a head. Death wasn't the absolutely worst thing that could happen to a person, even a dead person, but perhaps Merv was. That thought might have possibly gone through the zombie's mind, just before Merv's fist did very much the same thing.

Red took his seat at the round, utilitarian table. "I didn't know we actually had a briefing room. My understanding was that this was where we ate pizza," he told her from his place, where a sizeable splattering of greasy red sauce had congealed into a blob beneath his elbows.

She glanced over to Merv who shrugged in agreement.

"This is a briefing room, specifically designed for the purpose of delivering briefings," Norma growled, her eyes narrowing as her hand edged towards her coffee.

"It says 'storage' on the door." Red's observation wasn't entirely welcome, even though it was entirely accurate.

She brought the meeting to order by banging her coffee mug on the wooden desk, spilling a fair bit if it. "Right!"

It worked. The room plunged into silence. Even the groaning of the chair Merv was sitting in stopped for a moment. They all waited expectantly. When she was sure she had their full attention, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Will there be doughnuts?" Red asked, cutting her off. "Merv raised what I thought was a very good question earlier."

She gave him a withering glare and he grinned back happily.

She said softly, and yet with the inner strength of someone who could strangle their own pet dog to death and then laugh about it, "There will not be doughnuts." She added sarcastically, "Sorry, Merv."

He tried not to look sad, but there was definitely some disappointed scowling, with a frown that didn't seem to quite know what it wanted to be.

"Something has happened."

Red looked accusingly at Merv.

Once she was sure there was a sufficient degree of sufficiently-respectful silence and nobody was going to bring up Merv's horrendous toilet habits, she continued by saying, "We have a job."

"A job?" Red repeated.

"A job?" Merv said as well, because everyone was doing it.

She nodded. "A job."

"Like plumbers?" Red frowned.

"Not like plumbers!" Merv told him as if the suggestion was ridiculous. It then occurred to him that while waiting for a job, his sole responsibility had been to deliver pizza and coffee. He turned back to Norma with a curious expression on his usually stoic face, saying, "Not like plumbers, right?"

"The agency has given us our first job," she told them. "We have been given a proper, agency-backed assignment."

Red frowned at her. He shook his head angrily, frowning at nobody or nothing in particular. "Norma, what do you mean we've got a job?"

"Red, if I have to explain that to you again, it will be in a way you won't like and I suggest you might be best to go and put on your bulletproof armour first," she told him, very calmly, so much so that she actually surprised herself, and it was all the more terrifying

because of it. Merv looked sad and wasn't even thinking about doughnuts anymore.

Her casual threats of violence had come to nothing so far and Red wasn't concerned, even though the gun she had on her hip was quite a bit bigger than his.

Although he didn't know it, she had killed a lot more people with it, as well.

"What I mean is that we've saved the world twice already. I mean, don't you think it's a bit offensive to say we've now been given our first job after all the good we've already done?"

"They weren't jobs, Red," she told him. "They weren't actually proper assignments."

Merv thought that it was time to wade in to help out, but because thinking wasn't his strong suit, all he managed to come up with was, "If you remember, Red, when you first woke up with no memory and your brain screaming in agony because Norma had illegally filled it with untested technology, she wasn't actually doing her job. She's misappropriated funds, lied to her superiors and broke a huge number of rules to do something that was massively illegal."

"Merv!" she glared at him.

Red grinned. "I may stand corrected, of course."

"Luckily, the net result was that we ended up saving the world," she added, trying to move the meeting along.

"That was lucky!" Red said. "But Norma wasn't doing anything illegal when we saved the world from a zombie apocalypse, was she?"

Merv shrugged. "I don't think so."

"I wasn't..." she snapped. With a calming breath, she sipped at her coffee. The cup was then smashed hard down onto the desk. She paused for a moment before continuing: "If you remember, the

events that led to that event were caused by the creation of the Hawk-Eye computer: in a way we were responsible for them. We were simply protecting the world from ourselves, if you look at it from a certain point of view.”

“That’s interesting,” Red began, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “There probably should be a group of others somewhere, sipping coffee, and deliberately annoying their boss, whose job is to protect the world from us. They’d actually be quite busy.”

“There isn’t!” she snapped, firmly squashing Red’s meandering thought process. “We are the first and only Hawk-Eye. We are the only people who are capable of protecting innocent people from the worst and most advanced technology the government has at its disposal.”

Red shrugged. “You mean, like protecting innocent people from things like us?”

Merv rumbled proudly, “It’s our job to fix what’s out of control.”

Red sighed at all this. He said, “So we are like plumbers?”

Norma sighed; her lips thinned out. She scowled, and around the room there finally was silence from people who were afraid that they may have gone just a little bit too far.

“We’ll have no more talk of plumbers,” she told them, even though the toilet was actually broken and fixing it was on her to-do list for later. “We’ve been given our first proper assignment, our first actual, proper job. Hawk-Eye is officially open.” She smiled proudly at this.

“That will be a nice change for us, since we officially closed the town Merv grew up in.” Red was grinning widely. His unwelcome chattering continued, “We closed down a ring of drug dealers and we closed down a plot to take over the whole world.”

“Red!” she snapped.

“What’s more, since that wasn’t a proper assignment, then we officially did all that on our day off,” he carried on. Even Merv was getting anxious at this point. “Is anyone else scared to think what’s going to happen when we’re actually trying?”

Merv nodded a little and even Norma had to take a pause.

“Would anyone like to know what this assignment is?” she asked.

Red leaned forward, resting his head on his hands as he pressed them together. He looked like he was listening, as if he were, finally, actually taking all this completely seriously. He said, “Not as much as I’d like a doughnut.”

Chapter 2

It didn't seem quite right having someone else in the Hawk-Eye room, inside the control centre, from where the whole operation was run. For the moment, it escaped them that the place had been built by an evil genius who was bent on taking over the world, and that they had effectively stolen it from him.

Still, none of them were comfortable with having others there, Norma seeming the least comfortable of all. Merv looked on with narrowed eyes, his hands flexing into fists periodically as he glared with no small hint of resentful malice at the pair of interlopers.

Red stood beside him, leaning back casually against a bank of equipment, but he was frowning nonetheless.

"I don't like this," Merv growled, as he often did, but this time there was more to it. This time, it seemed that he really was just as angry as he sounded. He shifted his not inconsiderable weight from foot to foot, and the gigantic, unwieldy and comically ridiculous muscles in his shoulders flexed inside his dark grey suit.

To Red, all this looked a lot like a fairly normal-sized, but abnormally angry, head stuck between two elephants backing into one another. He thought this was the kind of observation that demanded sharing. "Guess what you look like?" he ventured with a little grin, the kind a salesman makes when a very pretty young girl comes into a car showroom, accompanied by her very old and well-dressed boyfriend.

"Not now, Red," he grunted back, his lips barely moving but the voice rumbled out like two elephants backing into a third, quite startled elephant whose nose was unusually attuned to the really quite terrible stench of the rear end of elephants.

Red rolled his eyes. It was never a good time as far as Merv was concerned. Red was an action hero, in his mind - which was largely grey slime now - and stupid quips were meant to be part of the job. This was not to say that he didn't feel uneasy himself, but his way of coping with it was different.

"Are you worried about the suits?"

"I'm more worried about what's in them!" Merv replied.

Red felt that that was quite a smart little pun, but realised that it had come from Merv, whose mind was almost entirely literal, and there was no way to be entirely sure he was joking.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later." Red pushed himself away from the ledge on the bank of a large dark-grey server-casing and stood up straight, crossing his arms defiantly over his chest.

"We're a government agency, technically, even though we're a government agency that exclusively employs rejected super-heroes, who have slight issues with impulse-control under certain situations."

"This again?" Merv grumbled back. "Are you still trying to justify the almost complete destruction of my home town?"

"Not at all." Red turned to face him, his grin widening. "I'm still waiting for you to thank me for controlling the outbreak of a zombie apocalypse right outside your family home using only a fast motorcycle and a complete, and highly impressive, lack of personal responsibility."

Merv looked at him accusingly, but also a little bit like a parent who has caught his child with a mouthful of glue. He said, in a voice dripping with the robust sound of sarcasm, "I'd like to thank you for reducing the idyllic little town I grew up in to a smouldering crater surrounded by the burnt-out husks of local businesses."

Red smiled, either missing the sarcasm altogether or just not really caring. “It’s quite alright,” he told him flatly. “It’s just nice to be appreciated.”

The two men in suits stepped a little closer to Norma and the group shared words accompanied by shallow and reserved hand gestures. Norma cast a glance over but there wasn’t even the hint of a smile on her face. This was all business.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Merv asked softly, probably without expecting an intelligent, straight-forward answer, especially from Red.

“Maybe there’s been another zombie apocalypse that needs violently containing using petrol, metal rods and endless reserves of personal charisma?” Red failed, even when there were no expectations on him whatsoever.

“Or another new, highly dangerous drug on the streets, that’s actually part of a secret plot to take over the world?” Merv added, because they had saved the world more than once in the last few weeks and the other time deserved a mention, too.

Red nodded in agreement. “Yeah. You see? That’s what I’m talking about. We’ve been out there quietly getting the job done and getting no respect for it. We’ve saved the world twice now and, as a reward, these suited guys come round and give us a job, calling it our ‘first assignment.’ To me it just seems rude.”

Merv raised an eyebrow, moving much beyond that requiring significant effort. “Quietly?” he said, as if the word was a square peg trying to hammer itself into a much smaller, much rounder hole.

Red shrugged, since there really was no rebuttal to that. He grumbled thoughtfully and retorted, “Well, at least can we agree that we got the job done?”

Merv looked at him with an accusing frown and shrugged since there was really no rebuttal to that either. “We certainly got the job done, and in a way that there was no undoing it later.”

Red smiled, a warm and happy glow filling his slimy, grey, and technologically augmented, brain. He looked up to where Merv’s relatively tiny head was perched on top of a pair of shoulders that looked like wrecking-balls had smashed into one another. “You know you’re the muscle, not the brains? I would have thought that you’d be happy with the way things have gone.”

Merv grunted. It was true, and he had stated to Red several times, that he certainly wasn’t exactly unhappy and, if the truth be told, he was a little proud of how much carnage they’d wrought with so few things to work carnage with.

“This last time was a little too close to home,” he growled forcefully. “Literally! My mother complained of the windows in her house shaking from the explosions. It’s this kind of thing that will stop her sending us brownies.”

Red looked thoughtful: he rubbed his chin and everything. “Those brownies go so well with pizza and near-lethal doses of caffeine. Your Mum is awesome. We should be nice to your Mum.”

At this point, all three of the others looked over. Norma nodded to them, pointing over and then began talking once more, gesturing with her hands towards the central console. Merv and Red looked at one another. Merv spoke first. “What do you think they’re saying?”

Red shrugged and tried to get all thoughts of brownies out of his mind, but his memory was digitally enhanced so it was harder than you might imagine.

“They’re probably saying how great we are,” he suggested, and actually meant it. He looked up to Merv, frowned thoughtfully, and added, “They’re probably saying how great I am.”

Merv crossed his massive arms over his even more massive chest. “I am great.”

Red smiled sarcastically and shook his head. “My brain is sixteen times faster than average, my reflexes are ridiculous and my physical condition is beyond excellent. One day there’ll be comic books about me, but people will question if they’ve pushed fiction too far, because I seem too utterly perfect in every way. What’s great about you?”

Merv said, as if this was the perfect answer to every conceivable question, “I can punch things.”

“That is true,” Red admitted, “and your punching is of the highest imaginable standard. I will concede that your punching is definitely great.”

Merv nodded to himself. “Damn right...” he said proudly.

Red felt a slap on his arm that almost knocked him off his feet. The three of them were coming over, walking towards them meaningfully, with Norma taking the lead.

“They’re coming,” he told Red, lowering his voice.

Red tutted back at him and said grumpily, “I have eyes. Great eyes. Comic-book super-hero-quality eyes.”

They waited.

The two men stood at the front of the briefing room before a white-board and a monitor. The younger one, oddly, seemed to have more authority, and the older of the two stood slightly behind him, as if more interested in observing the situation than leading it. His beady little eyes flicked about, scanning details and quickly snapping away

again to search for more. They focused on Merv and were averted in a moment, but not through fear: he clearly wasn't intimidated in the slightest. There was something else to him, to both of them.

Red knew their kind. They were natural authority figures, so secure in their position that nothing beneath them seemed like much of a threat. They were used to being in charge, to being obeyed and to being respected. It was all they knew, at least up to now.

Norma had them sit down in their normal positions behind the briefing-room table. She waited for things to begin as the younger man looked around, just taking it all in. His eyes snapped to his colleague and a smile fluttered over his lips, replied to with a nod.

He turned and said simply: "This room smells of pizza and coffee."

Nobody said anything. They just waited for him to continue. The pause dragged on until the silence become disquieting. The man turned to Norma and gestured for her to begin. She flustered, having not realised she was expected to lead the briefing, or at least introduce it.

She stepped forward, shuffling her feet and smiling awkwardly. She seemed nervous and that really seemed to annoy Merv, perhaps more than anything else so far.

"Gentlemen," she began, leaving Red wondering to whom she could possibly be referring. "Our guests are here to brief us about our first assignment. We've been selected from all other clandestine government agencies, as we have the highest likelihood of success in this instance."

Red and Merv looked at one another. It hadn't occurred to either of them that they were intended to be clandestine and now that it had, they realised that certain things needed a little work.

“I’m Mr Silverman. This is my colleague, Professor Jones,” the younger of the two men introduced himself, stepping forward. His expression shifted naturally into a smile. The lines of his aged face settled nicely into a friendly appearance that would put you in mind of a kindly favourite uncle that shocks everyone when he dies suddenly and you find out what he had been looking at from his internet browsing history. “We’re from a secret government agency that’s so secret that we actually don’t know who it is that we actually work for.”

Merv forced a smile; even Red found himself giving a little chuckle. The man who was meant to be a professor looked over with a confused expression and said coldly, “That wasn’t a joke. Our jobs are highly compartmentalised.”

Red and Merv looked at one another, coughed politely and waited for all this to end.

Mr Silverman continued, “We have a little problem. It might be nothing; it might be something. We’d like you to look into it.”

Red just couldn’t help himself. He turned to Merv and said, “Like looking into the smoking crater that used to be your hometown: it might have been something once, but it’s nothing now. Am I right?”

Merv just rolled his eyes. Norma clenched her fists and her eyes bulged as she glared at him. Red somehow knew that horrible methods of Red-icide had flashed through her inventive and twisted imagination.

“Red,” she growled at him, warning him to shut it before she took the initiative and shut it for him.

He smiled, not quite sure why everyone was staring at him.

Mr Silverman stepped forward, his expression difficult to read and not really making proper sense to an emotionally normal human,

like almost every young-adult fiction book published in the last decade. “Red,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m glad to have you on the team.”

Red frowned suddenly, glaring at the interloper. “I was already on the team. I’ve got no idea who you are, though.”

Norma nearly exploded, the veins in her forehead bulging against the thinly stretched skin. “Red,” she hissed a final warning.

The agent flashed her a winning smile. “No, it’s quite alright. Red has an excellent point. You people have worked together extremely well and have earned one another’s trust. I have walked in and you’ve never met me before, but here I am giving orders. I appreciate his reservations and respect his position.”

Norma relaxed and her posture softened.

Red just carried on, since it now appeared to him that he’d been invited to. “If you liked that, then you’ll love this!” he said, making no effort to mask his hostility. “I believe that respect is earned and I don’t give that or trust out easily. I’m very careful who I consider a friend and, no matter what you order us to do, I’ll let my sense of what’s right guide me. If you have any kind of agenda, you might as well leave it at the door.”

Norma’s eyes bored into him. “My words in your ear will guide you.”

The professor added, just for the sake of variety: “According to my records, you wilfully destroyed an entire town high-street while erroneously believing you were only being paid in pizza and coffee. Your sense of what’s right might not be as strong a motivation as you believe.”

It was Merv’s turn next. He added, “And after knowing me for three days, you moved into my spare room, telling me that there was nothing I could do about it, since I was now your best friend and I

had to buy you a shiny new coffee machine for my kitchen to prove it.”

Red had a point to make. “And what’s in your kitchen now?”

Merv sighed, “A shiny new coffee machine.”

Mr Silverman was a patient man but everything had a limit.

“You have a unique skillset, Red, which is why you are invaluable to this project. For that reason, you are tolerated and given a wide latitude.” His voice was firmer than before and more authoritative.

“You have proven yourself loyal and useful, but the tolerance you’ve been granted must now be paid for. We have a mission and we expect you to complete it. Consider it a test, if you like. I certainly will.”

“A test?” Red grunted and cast a look at Merv who returned his troubled expression. They both turned to Norma.

She said: “We’re an unconventional unit. This assignment is a test of our abilities. We’re being asked to prove ourselves to the wider intelligence community. If we succeed, then we’ll be allowed to continue, without oversight, free to set our own standards.”

There was a brief awkward silence and it was Merv that broke it. “And if we fail?”

Mr Silverman said, with another inappropriately warm smile:

“I think it’s probably best all round if you don’t fail!”

Red glared at him meaningfully. He said, his voice low and threatening: “For your sake, you had better hope that we don’t.”

Chapter 3

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

He edged his dark glasses further up the bridge of his nose, with a single finger pushing up against the middle of the frame. He took a moment just to stare out across the river thoughtfully. Along the far opposite bank was a road and behind it a row of buildings was clearly visible. The sunlight glinted across the softly undulating current of the water and the sky above was clear blue with just a hint of puffy, pure-white clouds.

He stood there for a while in silence and he took it all in, breathed heavily and just looked, really looked, into the distance. It was a nice town, the kind of town in which a man would want to raise a family. It was a place where good people went to be amongst other good people, a place where bad things only happened on the news, not on your door-step. It was a place where a man could be happy, so happy that he would take every opportunity to tell his friends how lucky he knew he was.

He sniffed to himself and filled his lungs with the fresh, clean air, his hands buried in the pockets of his slightly worn leather jacket as he looked into the near distance. Just beyond him was this lovely, quaint little place. But, it was beyond him and always would be.

His life wasn't going to end in a happy retirement, where a little fishing boat was the focus of his weekends. He wouldn't marry a girl who could cook so well that he got fat before he even realised it was happening. He wouldn't have a basement filled with the physical reminders of glorious memories, nor would he have pictures on the wall of his lounge that visitors would marvel at. He wouldn't have a son, or a daughter, who would get excited when her daddy got

home. He would never have a life with any of that and he would leave nothing behind when he left what little life he had.

His exploits would go untold: his presence in the world would always remain a dirty little secret. He was a man who would be forgotten when his time came and nobody would care about that in the slightest, not even him.

He smiled an empty smile and turned away. This was no place for him, and this was no place for the man he was here to see. Who that man was didn't matter, and what he'd done was none of his business.

He had a job to do and that job was going to get done. It annoyed him that such a thing had no business getting done in a town like this but that wasn't a fault of his. That was a fault of the person who had brought him here. Today, the news wasn't happening in some far off place: today, the grim, stark darkness of reality wasn't just something to hear about. Today, it was coming right up to someone's house and it was happening to them. Today, he was coming to town and bringing with him the shadows that lurked behind every unknown thing.

He threw his leg over his motorcycle and pulled down a full-face black helmet over his head. The smoked visor clicked shut and the engine smoothly and quietly came to life. He would move quickly and he would step softly on the earth but he had to step nonetheless and in doing so, he would leave a mark.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"So what?" Red shrugged at the huge, and now crystal clear, image on the Hawk-Eye control centre main screen. "A man looks out over a river. Possibly he's thinking, 'I wonder if incredibly sophisticated

surveillance technology is watching me and is wondering what I'm thinking right at this very moment?"

Norma didn't glare at him and no threat was forthcoming. Instead, she quietly gazed at the screen as her mind rolled the mystery around, coming at it from all possible angles. "At what very moment?" she said. "That's the problem here."

"I don't understand any of this," Merv admitted, surprising nobody.

"Any of what?" Red asked with a shrug. "How basic do we have to get?"

Merv did some glaring of his own. "I understand the basics, I'm just not sure what the problem is."

Norma turned to face them, her even newer chair rotating round silently, driven by a brushless electric motor. She was immensely proud of it. "The Hawk-Eye system can find anything at any time. But this time we're dealing with something new, something that's confusing the system. Whatever we're watching has some form of camouflage. I can extrapolate scenes and show us events but the data and the records that index them are gone, or perhaps were never there? The Hawk-Eye system doesn't know where this event happened or when. For some reason, it can't work it out. When it tries to, it just gets so confused that the extrapolation itself fails. It's as if the computer realises that what it's doing is impossible and then stops doing it."

Merv turned to Red and said, "That's the bit I don't understand."

"I'm sure Norma is about to explain it to us in tediously graphic detail." Red crossed his arms over his chest, sighed and waited.

For once, oddly, Norma just sat there, a thoughtful expression on her face as she puzzled it over. “It’s like having files in a drawer that are arranged in alphabetical order and looking for one with a certain name on it. It’s exactly where you feel it should be, but then you realise that the drawer isn’t in alphabetical order at all, and there’s actually no label on the file either. Everything you want is right there, but there’s no way you could have found it - but you did find it,” she explained in detail that wasn’t graphic or particularly tedious.

“Perhaps it was a different colour?” Merv suggested, clearly needing the situation explained in a way that was even simpler still.

“But how does this affect us and what do I have to blow up with my motorcycle?” Red couldn’t go very long without thinking about, and mentioning Her. It was quite impressive that he’d lasted as long as he had.

Norma shrugged at him. “This is the job. I doubt anything will need to be blown up with your motorcycle this time. It’s really more of a research matter. At least, at this point.”

Red grunted loudly and turned away in disgust, muttering something about getting a coffee and hating everyone and everything that wasn’t him.

“Are we researchers?” Merv asked, since this was yet another thing that didn’t make sense to him.

“Indeed!” Norma nodded in agreement. “It would make some sense that they’ve given us a deliberately mundane task to test our effectiveness, but it still doesn’t feel right. There’s something wrong about this assignment. I think it’s safe to say that we shouldn’t entirely trust our orders or the people they came from.”

Merv nodded back. He seemed quite proud of himself to have thought of the same thing that Norma had thought of. She had a

much more powerful brain than him but they'd drawn the same conclusion. He was pretty confident that, even if she punched a man as hard as she possibly could, that man wouldn't soil himself, slip into a coma and die - which wasn't just possible when he did it: it was pretty much the norm. Merv had never felt more useful.

"I'll just get my own coffee then, like some kind of animal!" Red grumbled at him, coffee cup in hand.

"It's not my job to get you coffee," Merv told him fiercely, his words carrying all the new-found weight of his confidence at being able to think on the same level as Norma. Now that he really thought about it, he'd never seen her punch anyone at all. Perhaps he should be the leader.

Red gave him an angry glare. "What else are you meant to do? I don't see anyone around here that needs punching."

Merv used all the power of his brain and managed to come up with, "Maybe you're not looking hard enough. I certainly see someone."

Red looked away thoughtfully. "I wonder what would actually happen if your punching-powers came up against my super-fast brain powers? How long do you think you'd last?"

Merv crossed his massive arms over his equally massive chest. "I think we'd all get to see what the grey slime in your brain actually looks like."

Red narrowed his eyes at him. "That's dark, man!"

"Shut up, the pair of you, before I drown you both in a toilet-full of your own coffee-stained urine!" Norma snapped harshly, making them both jump, and returning the group dynamic right back to where it should be.

Red and Merv looked awkwardly at one another, but they were secretly relieved that Norma was back to her vicious old self.

She looked them over and tutted loudly to herself. “You two are like a couple of children, sometimes,” she scolded them.

“Sometimes?” Merv looked down at Red and gave him a knowing little look.

Red looked back, his expression one of a man who’d already won. “I wonder if Norma would like to guess which one of us sleeps in Hello-Kitty pyjamas?” he asked. “I mean, where does a grown man of your ridiculous size even get little girl’s pyjamas that fit? Do they come in small, medium, large, extra-large and ‘ideally suited to children with explosive pituitary gland malfunctions’ or for kids who want to dress their grizzly-bear up the same as them?”

There was a stunned silence. Norma wasn’t quite sure what to say to that one, or even if there was anything that could be said. Eventually, after slightly too long a time, her vast problem-solving intelligence finally came up with this, “Is that true, Merv?”

“They’re cute,” he nodded, his voice cracking slightly with embarrassment.

Red grinned to himself and just carried right on. “Can you imagine him walking into the pyjama shop and asking a salesman for something pink, big enough to hold a circus in, and with a fair bit of extra breathing room in the crotch area? The guy must have been in literal fear of his life. He must have known they were for Merv and thought that one little smirk, one tiny chuckle could mean that all that would be left of him would be a little damp red patch in the four-to-six year old boys section.”

Norma turned to Merv. “You know this might well qualify as workplace harassment. You could make a complaint.”

Merv shrugged, although his muscular shoulders barely moved. “I’m more of a puncher than a complainer.”

Red sipped at his coffee. "I'm bored with this now. I might order pizza."

Norma huffed at him, "You can't order pizza. This is a secret underground bunker, concealed very cleverly in the basement of a disused building."

Red shrugged and his shoulders actually moved. "I meant I'd order Merv to go and get a pizza. Same thing, really!"

Norma grumbled and turned back to the monitor. Merv raised his finger and opened his mouth, intending to point out that he didn't have the authority to order anyone to do anything, when Norma interrupted by saying, "I could eat pizza." Merv rolled his eyes and gave up on all that.

Norma said, suddenly returning to the problem at hand: "You know, this is a very strange puzzle. How can the Hawk-Eye find the data and create an extrapolation without knowing where the data came from? I mean, it's looking for it and it's finding it, but it doesn't know where it is or how it came by it."

"You could do this on your own!" Red told her.

She turned and gave him an angry glower.

He held up a hand and shook his head. He explained, "I wasn't being sarcastic. I'm just wondering why they gave us an assignment like this. Hawk-Eye is more than just a big computer, so why give us a job to do that doesn't take us out of the base? It doesn't make any sense to me."

Norma nodded in agreement, quit the glowering and turned back.

"Our assignment is a bit more complex than just extrapolating information," she admitted. She bit her bottom lip and looked away from them, as she usually did while pondering the wider implications of her decisions. It was a look they knew well. Finally, it appeared

that her mind was made up and she turned to face them, standing herself up and stepping forward with authority.

“Red, Merv, I’ve made a decision to trust you both completely,” she began with a certain hesitancy. “It’s a violation of protocol for me to inform you of the precise details of this mission, but I feel we’d all work better together if we shared everything.”

Red nodded; Merv was shocked.

“Professor David Medows was working on a highly compartmentalised project. He was known to be growing unhappy with elements of his work. It became known that he had made plans for something to happen on the event of his death, presumably as a way of defending himself in case anyone tried to kill him,” she told them.

Red was silent for once and Merv had uncrossed his arms and was listening intently. She continued, “Yesterday afternoon, on Friday, he left work for the weekend and he was hit by a car and killed. I’m assured that there were no actions taken by any department against him, so this was, purely and simply, bad luck. Nobody knew what he’d done or what he had planned. Because of the importance of his work, his plans could have extremely serious ramifications.”

“Such as?” Red asked.

Norma shrugged. “Before I can answer that, we have a lot of work to do,” she said. With a sigh, she continued, “We don’t have long to do it. The building Medows worked in is locked down until Monday. They are working to keep his death a secret but, in the morning, people will realise something has happened. We have until then.”

Red rubbed his chin. “We have until then to do what?”

“Our job is to answer the question of what it was that Meadows did, and neutralise any threat there might be.”

“OK,” Red said with more of a smile. “I like neutralising threats.”

Merv nodded in agreement. “Me too.”

“You are a threat!” Red told him sarcastically.

“Gentlemen!” she growled at them. “Please try to control your testosterone.”

“Talking of testosterone,” Red began, “why don’t we just send Merv to the office now? He can secure it right now?”

“Excellent idea, Red,” she said, with a slightly condescending tone. “Sadly, we don’t know where it is. It’s another of those closely-guarded secrets that the intelligence community loves so much. All we know is where Meadows was killed. His car was nearby and it seems he was picking up some items from a shop on the way home. That gives us a very large area to search.”

“Typical!” Red grumbled.

Norma turned to the monitor. “When I started researching it, this was what I found. Files with this man, whoever he is.”

“Let’s watch it and see what he does,” Red said, and his suggestion did seem to be the only obvious way forwards.

Norma huffed to herself and told him, “I don’t know. These things never end well.” She turned her attention to the computer. “Resume playback.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

The motorcycle was a big, black thing. It smoothly made its way along the road, having crossed the bridge that led into the heart of the town. The man leaned forward slightly across the wide, chromed bars on the aggressive, and powerful-looking, machine.

It was oddly quiet for something so big, but it purred with a low rumble that suggested it had a lot to give and wasn't a machine a novice could just get on and safely ride. He rode it effortlessly and was clearly no novice in any sense.

The big motorcycle pulled up outside a fairly average building. It was set back from the road with a long grass garden at the front and a path leading up the patio behind a number of gently swaying trees.

The rider kicked down the stand and hefted himself off the bike, leaving the key in the ignition. He slowly, purposefully, removed the helmet and replaced the dark glasses on his face, covering his bright, crystal-blue eyes. He hung the helmet on the right mirror and stepped away, pacing slowly along the path to the front door.

He reached out and rang the doorbell, turned and waited. He stood patiently, just remaining in silence for someone to answer, watching for any activity, focusing on sounds from inside and allowing himself just to think about things.

It was a nice town indeed. He was a professional. He had ridden around it several times before going to the house and had familiarised himself with the layout. It was a sleepy place, but it would suit anyone who had seen enough of the world and wanted to find a little piece of something better. Even though he knew that this could never be him, he felt that maybe it should be.

He heard the sound of movement behind the door. He turned and waited, straining to hear every sound, and he picked out two distinct voices. While he couldn't hear the specifics of the exchange, he knew one had asked the other a question and the reply came from a female. The other voice got louder as it came towards the door. He felt his heart beating faster in his chest.

Finally, the sound of a latch opening echoed from behind and the door swung open. A grumpy-looking older man peered at him. He had a handful of notes in his hand, wrinkled money clutched at carelessly. He glared forwards at him but there was no sign he had recognised his visitor for what he was.

“Finally!” the man behind the door said. “I’ve been waiting for my pizza for forty two minutes. Your advert says you guarantee delivery in under thirty.”

The man just stared at him, a bemused smile on his lips.

“What’s your complaints procedure?” the grumpy old man asked.

His eyebrows showed all the signs of a frown.

“You heard me!” he grumbled. “What happens when I have a complaint about my late pizza?”

The visitor very quickly raised a pistol and shot him twice in the face.

Chapter 4

The three of them stared at the monitor for a moment. What could you really say to that? It certainly wasn't the most terrible thing that they'd ever seen, and most of these horribly violent extrapolation videos had been far worse. The ones they starred in were really much, much worse.

"It wasn't that bad!" Red shrugged and took a sip of his coffee, trying to look as if it was all business as usual.

Merv nodded in agreement, a tiny movement that was an exercise in reserved gestures. "Not that bad at all," he added. "Not really."

Norma turned and glared at them. "Gentlemen, that man's head exploded as two bullets ripped through his eye-sockets. Bits of his skull were stuck in the woodwork of his door-frame."

Red sipped a little more loudly and just looked back at her evenly. "Yeah, but these video extrapolations are always really dark. That one was a bit disappointing, if I'm absolutely honest. He got shot in the head and died instantly. I just feel like we've set the bar higher than that."

Merv nodded; it seemed he couldn't help but agree. "Perhaps if the killer went in and murdered his wife? Maybe if he violated the corpse in some terrible way? Sexually, maybe?"

"Maybe if there was a dog and he shot that too?" Red suggested helpfully.

Merv nodded a little more enthusiastically. "Or if he killed it some other way, stomped it to death, perhaps? Maybe if he violated that sexually instead?"

“Shut up!” she growled at them. “You two have too much testosterone, spend too much time on the internet or watch too many terrible eighties movies and TV shows.”

“But terrible eighties movies and TV shows is my life!” Red protested. He thought about this for a moments and then said, “Actually, they’re almost literally my real, actual life. That’s weird!”

She shook her head, and an expression settled on her face that was a mixture of pointedly accusing, and widely disgusted at, the pair of them. “Too much testosterone then...”

Red pointed to Merv. He shook his head and argued, “He wears Hello-Kitty pyjamas.”

Merv nodded and shrugged, “They’re cute.”

Norma just stared at the pair of them. They were the last line of defence against the worst threats that human nature could throw at the world. Did the world really have a chance when that line of defence might actually be even worse than the threat?

Red emptied the cup with one last, heavy slurp and then seemed quite interested in what was going on around him. He perched himself on the edge of a desk and said thoughtfully: “So what do we know? Who was the victim?”

“We don’t know,” Norma told him and began massaging her temples. “I can’t get the computer to add any kind of details or research any of the background. I can add depth to the simulation but, as I do, the accuracy decreases. For instance, the data on the female voice gives the computer enough for it to guess her age, build and racial characteristics. It can use the echo to hazard a guess as to the structure of the interior of the building around where she was standing, and I can enhance it with information from what the computer could see inside after the door opened. That’s all

essentially pointless since, when I do that, the chances of accuracy are so low that it doesn't give us anything useful to work on."

"But you can't find any actual evidence?" Red was intrigued. "What about the bike? Can we run the plate? Can we work out what town it was riding in? Did we get a good look at the man who pulled the trigger?"

Norma was glad to have the help, not that it was actually helping. "I can get enough data about the man's appearance to create an accurate photographic representation. However, when I run it, it doesn't match any known face on any known database."

Merv scratched his head thoughtfully. "I could get us a pizza?" he said, which was actually probably the most use that any of them had been since the briefing.

Norma nodded and actually smiled a little at him. "Egg and mushroom for me," she told him and Merv seemed quite pleased with himself for actually coming up with a helpful suggestion.

Red frowned and said, "Actually that sounds like a good idea for a mid-morning breakfast-pizza. I'll have the same."

Merv gave a succinct little nod of the head and strutted off on his self-appointed mission. Red watched him go and then turned back to Norma and said, "Is there more?"

"More videos?" She pressed a few buttons on her constantly evolving control system. With a sigh, she pointed to a menu on a secondary screen. "There's one more ready to play, but the computer is scanning for more. I'm searching for details on David Medows and occasional totally unrelated things keep appearing. I don't know why."

Red and Norma's eyes locked together. She hesitantly said, "Do you want to watch?"

He nodded, shrugging slightly. "Sure, the last one wasn't so bad."

She gave him an accusing glare.

"It really wasn't!"

She pressed a few buttons, shook her head and tutted at him. "OK."

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

The apartment was a hollow shell of a place. It had plastered walls and the peeling had begun to dig deeper than just the surface of the stained white paint. The woodwork beneath was broken and rotten and the air was heavy with the smell of damp, cloying air.

It was a spacious apartment, and might still have been sought-after, had it not been located where it was. It was in the wrong part of town, surrounded by the worst of humanity that the city had to offer. It was in a place where nobody would want to go, unless they were ready to sink deeper into whatever darkness was already working hard to swallow them up.

It had been something once, something good, perhaps. There were hints that it had been a place where people lived, where they had once thrived. The tainted walls had discoloured shapes etched into them, where pictures may have hung, and scratches on the floor talked of heavy, high quality furniture being hefted into place around the corners.

This had been a place a family had called their home, where children grew into people.

But now, the windows were grey and covered with grime. Now, the yellowing curtains hung in tattered shreds, and unpleasantly large cockroaches skittered along the floor at their leisure, as if they were confident they would never be molested while doing so.

He stood waiting and he knew he would not be waiting much longer. He was dressed in clothes that didn't quite make good sense. He wouldn't quite stand out in a crowd but, for someone really looking, he might be noticed if they knew what they were really looking for.

He wore casual, light-blue jeans, but they were spotlessly clean and had creases pressed into them running down along the centre of each leg. They had barely a ripple to the fabric and were a little too long, as if they were a place-holder, somehow, for a pair of much higher quality trousers that might just be running late and would be turning up at any minute now.

His shirt was similarly crisp, pure white, pressed immaculately and had no place not being worn to complement a tailored suit. He wore no jewellery and there was no watch on his slender wrist. He looked white to the untrained eye, but a keener observer might notice that his skin was just a little darker, his jaw a little too heavy and his brow a little more defined. He had steely-grey eyes that bored forward emptily. What they saw was of no concern to him, for he was currently dwelling in the world within his own mind. He was a man contemplating something bigger than he was, and the heavy lines on his brow suggested it was something that had troubled him a greatly for a time so long that it had taken a toll on his very being.

A sound echoed through the apartment, the sound of a heavy, serious door being opened by someone who had a set of keys. He looked up, blinked several times and took a deep breath, a cleansing breath to keep the demons in his mind from overwhelming him. But he felt nothing.

Three other men entered what would have once been the lounge, and the floorboards beneath their feet groaned as if they were

tired, exhausted things being asked to do more of whatever had ground them down.

The three men stepped in together. One was suited in dark grey business attire: the others were wearing clothes that were darker. One of them was heavily built, although time had taken a toll and his muscle tone had suffered, while the others were much less large and appeared still quite fit. All of them were mature and none of them looked as if anything in the world would pose much of a threat to them.

These were men who got things done; and things that got in the way would live just long enough to regret it.

“Interesting choice of venue, Mason!” the lighter-clothed person said sarcastically, pulling off a pair of military-looking aviator-style dark glasses. “Please tell me you don’t live here.”

Mason gave him a glare from under his heavy brow, but declined to answer immediately. He was a thoughtful man and not given to frivolities such as a sarcastic exchange of words.

Instead, he simply said, “I do not.” He spoke in a voice that was deep, and resonated with authority, but there was a weariness to it as well, an emptiness, perhaps.

“What’s this about, Mason?” the stocky, much larger of the men asked. He unbuttoned his dark blue jacket and breathed out heavily, his stomach expanding to flop out over his belt. He rubbed his thinning, greying hair and frowned darkly.

Mason nodded to him. He politely said, “Thank you for coming, General. I know you are a busy man and I appreciate your taking the time out of your schedule to accommodate me.” He spoke as if every word had been chosen with great care and then the whole sentence had been polished and rehearsed until he could speak it without any conscious effort.

The leaner man tucked his hands into his pockets. He wore the suit like it was painted on him. He wasn't born to this life, but he had aspired to it and, consequently, it didn't fit him particularly well. As he stood, he seemed out of place, a vile scavenger without morals of any kind, who had crept into the role he filled over the backs of better men.

"I like secrecy," he said, flashing a grin and a set of unnaturally white teeth. "Secrets protect things and things that are worth protecting are usually worth taking."

Mason wasn't able to fault his logic and therefore left things where they were.

"You called us here, Mason." The man in the lighter suit was clearly in charge and took the lead in all things. "Explain yourself, if you please."

"Of course." He straightened his back. The muscles at the base of his spine had started to bunch up. He wasn't a teenager any longer, he thought cynically to himself.

"I'm announcing my intention to retire from this community," he told them. There was a silence around the room. "But I won't leave without giving the community something special before I go."

The leader, who was so far unnamed, grinned to himself. He had many names, but nobody in this room knew the one he considered to be real. Not many people ever would. "I tell you when you can retire. You don't tell me," he said.

The slender man took his hands from his pocket and crossed his arms. His head cocked to one side and he seemed interested. "What are you offering us?"

Mason looked nowhere in particular as he spoke. "I have been a project manager for nearly seven years. In that time, I have spear-headed several projects on behalf of this agency," he explained. He

turned to direct his comments to the General. "You have had me devise military applications of scientific breakthroughs," he said, although this was known by everyone there. "For you, we made chemical agents that can visit appalling damage on a human body. Looking back, I see no way such things can be of benefit to humanity. I can't even fathom a manner in which a sane mind could justify to itself creating such a thing."

"We know what you do, Mason. We pay you to do it," the General sneered at him.

The leader, arrogant and complacent, stepped forward and demanded angrily, "What have you got to offer us to buy your retirement with?"

Mason looked over with his cold, hard eyes. "Not what you think."

"And what do I think?"

Mason looked away. "I said I have something for the entire community. I have something that will benefit everyone at a cost so small that it will never be noticed."

"What?"

Mason looked at all three, each in turn. There was no smile on his face, no hatred in his eyes, when he said, completely without malice, "Your deaths."

The General reeled and they all looked to one another, their faces ashen with fear or flushed with anger. The fat, grisly old military officer balled his hands into fists and dug them into his sides. He demanded, "And how do you propose that you are going to kill us?"

"I will not kill you," he told him flatly in a voice so even, so matter of fact and so certain that it was quite chilling. "I have killed you."

All three of them were looking scared now.

“I have released a small dose of FX45 in the room, your secret chemical weapon that you were so very proud of. We’ve all inhaled enough of it to bring about our end. It was released when you walked into the room and the gas has already broken down and become inert.” He spoke calmly, irritatingly without passion on the subject. “Our deaths will follow quite quickly now. It’s with apologies that I must inform you that the next few minutes will not be pleasant.”

The leader turned to the General. “FX45?”

He was wide-eyed, almost looking as though panic was going to take him. “It’s a compound that increases human potential, but it can also work as a nerve-gas of sorts. It hyper-stimulates adrenaline until the muscles tie themselves into knots.”

Mason nodded to himself in agreement. He said, “It’s enough to crack bones, to force a human heart to crush itself. The muscles in the eyes often rupture, spitting them out through the front of the skull. The tongue can tear itself out, the teeth shatter in your mouth.” He had been under-selling it when he said it wouldn’t be pleasant.

“What?” the lean man demanded, his eyes wide with horror. He clutched his hand to his chest as a convulsion ran through his body. It was beginning.

The General turned back to Mason, “You’ve condemned yourself, right along with us.”

Mason shrugged and nodded in agreement. “Perhaps. It is likely that I’ll suffer the same fate as you. I’ve injected myself with an adrenaline suppressor but I doubt that it could possibly keep the effects of the gas under control for very long. I would have to have regular shots for the rest of my life and I have not intended for that to happen. Instead, I hope that it gives me enough time to get away from here to some quiet place where I can leave the Earth with some

dignity, after informing it of your untimely demises. I am recording this moment and I will share it. Then my time will come.”

“Before your eyes squirt out through your face and your jaw-muscles grind your teeth away to powder?” the leader gasped, his breath short as his chest muscles tightened around his ribs. “Where’s the dignity in that?”

“The dignity is in knowing that you were removed from this Earth as well!” he told him. “There would be no FX45, and a lot of other awful, terrible things would never have existed without you. With you three gone, the community might find a better way.”

The General collapsed to his knees, his body shaking as if he was sobbing. The leader of them clung to the window-ledge and his breath was a rasping, cracking gasp from the back of his throat.

Mason looked them over with a pair of cold, hard eyes that saw no wrong in what he’d done to them all.

The largest of the three men, the General, collapsed onto his back, his left leg locked behind him, the knee bent double. There was a horrible, dull wrenching sound from his ankle and his eyes swelled. His face reddened and he tried to scream, but his chest was no longer under his own control. Breathing to him was now as if his chest was beneath a pile of loose bricks and more were being loaded on top.

The slender man managed a scream, even though his own lungs were constricted beneath his contorted ribs. It spoke of the sheer volume of pain he was suffering that he had managed such a feat. He raised his hands to his face, the fingers twisted into clawing balls of jagged fingers, as joints were pulled out of sockets. He gave one last horrible rasping croak as his face flattened. With a soft, terrible plopping sound, his left eye ruptured. The once-brown iris vanished in a sickly black swell, as the muscles closed around it like the jaws of a vice crushing an egg. He shuddered and rolled around

the floor, his spine bent beyond any recognisable human shape. By now, he was just a writhing ball of agony on his way to whatever hell awaited him.

The leader looked up, his fear-struck eyes now wide with terror. He reached for Mason as if he meant to take one last swing, one final attempt to strike out and attack. His elbow locked and then cracked quite appallingly loudly. He gasped, the sound of a man thrown into a lake of ice and expecting no measure of such a shock. His sleeve turned red from blood, as one of the bones in his arm tore through the skin, rupturing and shredding flesh on its way through the surface. His face sunk suddenly with the sound of gravel stomped under-foot. Blood coursed thickly from his lips in a sudden torrent. He had tried to jab his tongue between his teeth, to stop his jaw from clamping down with more force than he'd ever imagined he could muster. But now, he had mustered it, and it proved sufficient to sheer the tip of his tongue from the root. The effort did nothing for him: still the jaw clamped and his teeth smashed apart like glass beneath a hammer, shredding his face and lips.

He coughed a lump of bloody tissue as he rolled forwards, his limbs locked in grotesquely twisted and unnatural positions, all the while pulling against shoulder- and hip-sockets with unthinkable force.

Mason just stood amidst the carnage he'd wrought on these three, as their bodies softly jerked towards their final end. It was nothing compared to what they'd brought to the world, and still less if measured against what they might still have done if they'd been left unchecked. He took no pride in doing what had needed to be done, no more than he felt any sorrow that he must soon join them.

It was what he deserved; it was what he'd sentenced himself to experience. He had decided that he must leave the world. He must

make up for his part in the harm these men had caused and then he must no more step into the light of the day. His time on this Earth was over.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but never meant that he regretted his actions, only that he would have preferred that the matter could have been resolved without the shattering of limbs, the ripping of flesh, the eruption of eyeballs, the caving-in of chests and without all the teeth in a man’s jaw exploding under pressure like dozens of tiny organic fragmentation grenades exploding in his mouth.

But he was sorry, in his own way.

Still... these things happened, didn’t they?

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Red and Norma looked at one another. This time there was silence and lots of it. Red opened his mouth to speak, closed it again and looked from her back to the display screen. He made a noise like a thoughtful murmur and then turned back to face her, rubbing his short brown hair. “Um,” he said, not quite managing to find much else to say.

“That one was quite bad,” Norma noted, pretty much stating the obvious.

“Yeah...” Red looked away thoughtfully and frowned as if there was something ever so important on his mind.

“That was bad, right?” she insisted. “That’s what you were thinking, wasn’t it? You were just thinking how bad that one was?”

Red somehow managed to find a grin. He said dismissively, trying to sound as if it hadn’t bothered him at all, “I was just wondering where the pizzas were, actually!”

Chapter 5

“And his eye just exploded out of his face?” Merv asked, sounding a little impressed and a tiny bit sorry he’d missed it. His low, rumbling voice echoed around the small metal-walled elevator, resonating from the heavily worn panels.

Red nodded as he rocked backwards and forward on his heels. “Yup. It just popped like a balloon. Black slimy crap burst out everywhere and he just stood there trying to scream while his lungs collapsed beneath his shattered rib-cage.”

Merv nodded solemnly. “And the other guy just ate his own teeth?”

“Bits of them,” Red said, sounding like that part had impressed him most. “His jaw just seemed to chew up his own dental-work. They just kind of tore through the sides of his cheek. I guess most of them broke up and came out of his mouth but it was tough to tell with all the blood, since he bit off most of his tongue first.”

“I guess he bled to death then?” Merv said thoughtfully.

“Probably! Or suffocated, I guess?” Red shrugged. “Maybe his heart imploded. The guy talking said that was likely to happen. I bet it really hurt, either way. There was a lot of panicking going on, and if you looked really closely, I think they soiled themselves.”

Merv nodded once more and stayed silent for a moment. He let out a grumpy little huff and then muttered, “I miss all the good stuff.”

“Get Norma to show it to you when we get back,” Red told him.

Merv nodded: indeed, he would.

The lift stopped and chirped a happy little ping as doors slid open.

“This is our floor,” Red noted happily, gesturing Merv to leave first, since there was really no way to get past a thing like that. Merv edged himself through, ducking and squeezing himself out through the door sideways. Red turned to the two others in the elevator. There was an older, dark-skinned man, with receding hair and brown eyes; and a woman who was younger and unarmed, leaving him thinking that she was probably an office assistant of some kind. “Thanks for the directions. Have a good day,” he said cheerfully to the two, who stared on in horror and were pressed against the back wall as far as they could get, away from the pair of them.

Red grinned to himself at the simple pleasure of unsettling two random people in a lift, who would never look on the world in the same way again.

The two of them walked with a purpose along the corridor of the police department. Their new, special IDs had easily got them past the security at the front gate. The front gate was a rather disorganised place at the moment and it had been almost disappointingly easy.

“I would have thought a police station would have had more security,” Red said conversationally as he looked around.

“That was pretty typical actually,” Merv told him.

“And more walls!” Red added. The front of the building was still mostly there, but not yet entirely complete. The mess had long since been mostly swept away, but the damage to the front had not yet been fully repaired, since it had been quite extensive.

“Well, someone turned a secret government motorcycle into a missile and launched it at the front of the building, god rest her soul,” Merv reminded him. “It’s not easy to recover from all that.”

“Are you saying it’s my fault?” Red asked, although there wasn’t really any way there could be an alternative interpretation,

since he had, in fact, recently detonated a heavily-armed military prototype motorcycle downstairs in the lobby, god rest her soul.

“I do appreciate that you saved my arse doing it,” Merv said, and he really did sound like he meant it. It was a sacrifice for which Red had never quite forgiven Merv, or stopped punishing him. Perhaps he never would.

“Just consider yourself lucky that there was a second Her,” Red told him, a dark edge to his voice. Merv was double his size and could punch the religion right out of a man before his morning cup of coffee, but in matters of that big black motorcycle, Red was actually quite scarily dangerous. Consequently, Merv chose just exactly this time to say nothing.

The pair of them strutted along the corridor, earning troubled glances as they went. Occasionally, an officer would blunder out of a side room without paying attention and press himself against the wall in shock. At one point, a woman squealed and dropped a pile of papers on the floor. Red was convinced his pure animal-magnetism had caused that, rather than the shock of seeing an angry-looking Merv clipping his forehead against the swinging light-fittings as he walked past.

“The new Her is better though, right?” Merv asked, really quite innocently.

Red looked at him with a frown, but he nodded evenly. “She’s faster, and the refinements do seem to make her easier to ride. The cannon makes bigger holes in things and that’s always good. Yeah, I guess she is a better bike, but the first HERPES, god rest her soul, went before her time. It doesn’t seem fair that such a high price should be paid for such a hollow victory.”

“Me not being killed is a hollow victory?” He was a little insulted, even more so since he knew that Red probably actually meant it. Red simply nodded.

Yeah, he meant it.

Merv decided the subject needed to be changed. “You seem grumpier than usual. Too much coffee again?”

“It’s just this whole situation,” he explained with a heavy sigh. “We’re out saving the world like the heroes we are and then we’re given a job by the agency, and it just feels like the whole thing about us literally protecting the entire world has been forgotten.”

“Considering the damage we’ve done, it might be best if it was forgotten.”

“I guess.” Red shrugged and lost all interest in this.

“And I appreciate you coming with me as well!” Merv added, changing the subject once more.

“I had nothing else to do once I’d finished my pizza.” Red shrugged.

“I find that in these kind of situations, it’s difficult for me to be taken seriously. I don’t seem to project just the right image,” Merv explained.

“Because you wear Hello-Kitty pyjamas?” Red suggested, laughing a little and then laughing a little more.

Merv sighed at him. This again? “No!”

“Is it because you’re a gigantic mass of throbbing muscle that’s twice the size of a regular human, carry a side-arm that should be mounted on an aircraft and enjoy punching people until their head and their brains have different addresses? Is it also because you look like you’re only ideally suited to grappling with an unusually large bear, and when people meet you they assume they’ve been sent a

novelty birthday greeting that might actually kill them?” Red suggested, rather hitting the mark.

“That one.” Merv agreed. “The second one.”

“Don’t worry big guy,” Red told him. “I’ll make sure we’re taken seriously.”

When Merv sat down on something, for that whatever something, it was usually the last time anyone would be sitting in it. Accordingly, his bulk was gingerly lowered into a chromed metal chair with grey and white flecked fabric padding. It creaked like the spine of an old man in a disco but with louder wailing and deeper emotional sadness.

Red watched with a bemused expression as he slowly, carefully, held the arms of the chair and balanced himself diligently before finally letting go, dropping all his bodily weight to the metal frame which grumbled at him noisily and slumped beneath his considerable mass, groaning as it flexed badly.

Red shook his head and smiled. He turned to the Commissioner of the police department and explained, as if delivering a piece of quite serious information: “He had an extra large pizza for breakfast with a topping of spicy sausage, pork and something that looked as if it fell out of the back end of an alpha-predator.”

The police officer just stared at him, his jaw lolling open in surprise. He didn’t speak, just stared at them in silence.

Red sighed and explained, not entirely sincerely: “Don’t worry. It’s not me. I’m not the guy that was riding the big black bike that blew up the front end of your station-house. I can see why you’d assume I was, because I’m the exact same size and build as that guy and I’m also sitting next to this gigantic wall of angry muscle who

was with you while all that happened, and is clearly my friend. Sorry, his friend, whoever he is, but I'm not.

"I'm not me, at all. I promise you that."

Red pointed to Merv, who waved like they were old pals being reacquainted at a family wedding. "Hello, again," he said.

Red continued, "And it's not really him either. It's not like there's only one gigantic wall of angry muscle in this town. He's a different one that just happens to look and dress exactly like the person he absolutely isn't."

Merv winced slightly. "We've found something else you're really bad at, Red!" he muttered.

"But you know about the big black bike and that you're the same build as the man riding it?" the Commissioner stammered, not from fear but just from the crushing stupidity of this whole situation.

"Ah!" said Red with a raised finger. "That's another very good reason why you might assume I'm him, even though I'm not. I've actually never heard of him. In fact, I've no idea who you're talking about!"

"Me neither," added Merv, somewhat redundantly at this point.

"And I don't know anything about a big black bike," Red said, to really hammer the point home. He even had a fairly convincing go at shrugging while shaking his head. "What black bike? I don't even know."

The Commissioner stared at him some more, flashed a worried and slightly fearful look at Merv, swallowed some of his apprehension and continued: "So what big black bike is it that none of us know anything about?" he asked, and there was a little hint of sarcasm there that Red just didn't appreciate. "Is it the one downstairs in the guest parking lot? The one I saw you ride in and park up on the security-camera system?"

“No,” Red tried his luck. “It’s a dark grey matt-black colour. It’s totally different from whichever one you might, or might not, be talking about.”

“The same matt-black colour as the motorcycle helmet you just put down on my desk?” This wasn’t a really fun game and the Commissioner was getting tired of playing. He pointed to it. “This one, right here?”

Red frowned to himself and, turning to Merv, he tutted and then sighed.

Merv grumbled back, “We didn’t think this through.”

“But she’s in disguise!” Red told him. “I put on the red stripe and everything.”

“Everything?” Merv was intrigued.

Red rolled his eyes and said, “Well, the red stripe is everything.”

Commissioner Bertoli was watching all this. His face had the look of a man who might have gone to the circus expecting to see clowns throwing harmless pies at one another and, instead, found neo-nazis ramming really cute little kittens into wood-chippers, feet first, to enjoy the looks on their fluffy little faces.

He regained some of his composure and said: “Are you guys serious?”

Red nodded. He told him, absolutely earnestly: “This is as serious as we get.”

Merv felt it was time his voice was heard and filled the gap by adding, “I’m deadly serious.”

Red pointed at him and in total agreement said, “My friend is deadly serious.”

Merv grimaced behind his dark black glasses. “We’re not friends.”

Red laughed, quite inappropriately loudly, and slapped him on the arm, which was as effective as a ball of paper thrown at a tank. “He’s actually my best friend. We share an apartment and everything. I even use his toothbrush.”

Merv looked over, startled. “You use my toothbrush?”

Red waved his hand dismissively. “Not as a toothbrush. Don’t worry.”

Bertolli was clearly struggling to make sense of all this. “Are you two gay or something?”

Red shook his head that he was absolutely and certainly not and there were quite a few food-service professionals, who now had a little less faith in men, that could certainly attest to that fact. “I’m not!” he said, pointing to himself. “But he is.”

Now the Commissioner looked uncomfortable and just stared at Merv. All this had gone beyond cute little kittens now. Aghast, and presuming this was some sarcastic attempt at humour, he said: “He’s gay?”

Merv nodded, each relatively insignificant movement of his head causing the frame of the chair to creak and groan some more. “I’m gay,” he said assuredly.

Captain Bertolli narrowed his eyes. “I guess you really can’t tell these days!”

“You can if you see him in his pyjamas.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma liked having the place to herself while she was thinking. Sending those two out to run important errands cleared the place of a noisy distraction, but watching them run that errand in the most utterly incompetent and incomprehensible way possible was more distracting than having them lurking under her feet.

“Computer, are there any more data fragments that have mysteriously recovered themselves?” she asked.

“There is another extrapolation being plotted,” it told her. That was odd: the extrapolations were usually created in real time. Rarely did they have to be constructed for longer than a few seconds.

Against her better judgment, and with nothing better to do than wait to see it, she said to the Hawk-Eye computer, “Show me Red and Merv.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Merv’s inhumanly deep and powerful voice quietly boomed out of his inhumanly massive and ungainly form. “We need all your files.”

Commissioner Bertolli looked at the credentials. They certainly had all the correct paperwork and all the proper government authorisations to back up their request.

“You two helped me to cut the cancer of corruption out of this police department,” he told them softly, his eyes still fixed on the documents. He had no real way to refuse their request, but, even if he had, he might still have helped them. “You’re clearly unconventional, but without what you did, I don’t know what might have happened.”

“It would have been worse than you can imagine,” Red told him. For once, he was serious.

“Red,” Merv warned, seeming mindful that Red was new to this world and wasn’t trained for it. It must have worried him that a mouth like Red’s could run off faster than the HERPES motorcycle and reveal secrets that no police officer should ever know, nor should he be burdened with.

“I know,” Red assured him. His attention turned back to the Commissioner. “Sir, the police corruption was just the tip of very a nasty ice-berg. Together, we saved a lot of people a lot of problems. I

can't say any more but I can promise you that we all made a difference that day. We all made a real difference."

Bertolli regarded them with a suspicious glare. "Promise me you won't tear up my town this time, flying around on that crazy motorcycle of yours."

Red and Merv looked at one another.

"Some armed vehicle shot the hell out of a whole district a while back. I'm guessing you two wouldn't know anything about that either, would you?"

Red and Merv exchanged worried glances, although only Red could have interpreted Merv's expression that way, or perhaps any way.

Merv looked back and shrugged, "I don't watch the news."

Red struggled a bit and eventually grinned and settled for saying, "I can promise to try. I'll do my absolutely best not to tear up your town this time."

Bertoli shook his head but there was a little smile on his lips. "Alright, boys. What do you need from me?"

Chapter 6

Norma was a little surprised that Red and Merv had managed to secure the trust and co-operation of anyone in the city's police force, even one of the cleaners. They certainly hadn't done it by using solid reasoning or professionalism, but it was done and perhaps that was all that was important. She chose to leave it at that, since she had more, much more, on her mind than the relative competence of her relatively incompetent team. Thinking too much about that would give her a headache and there was only space inside her head for the one she already had.

"Computer, are there any leads from the two videos?" She already knew the answer. The computer had been analysing all the data for hours and hadn't managed to find anything, no clue as to who was in them, no trace as to where they might have been set. At one point, she'd asked if there had been any progress with the analysis and the computer asked, with a certain sarcastic smugness, 'What analysis?' She hoped it hadn't just spent too much time around Red. In many ways, Merv was her preferred role model for it, but ideally without so much blocking of the toilet.

"No additional information has been found at this time," it told her firmly, sounding suspiciously like it was a little bored of her asking, but, surely, that was just her imagination. Still, she wondered what was more likely, that the most advanced self-programming computer that the world had ever seen might start to develop a personality, or that she might begin to develop an imagination? The fact that she wondered about this strongly implied it was she that was spending too much time around Red. She actually found herself smiling at the thought - not that she'd ever admit such a thing to him. In any case, he'd know.

“Computer, have you finished generating the video?” Her voice sounded a little accusing, since she intended that it should.

“The video is ready!” it told her grumpily and there was a little pause where she felt it had contemplated being quite rude but might have decided against it.

She was hesitant. The extrapolations tended to be quite violent, showing scenes which were often quite unsettling. She would never admit such a thing, but she’d had nightmares about the one where a mother was made to stand in place while someone worked out the best position from which to shoot her, under threat of her children being killed if she moved. She wasn’t terribly keen on the one where a man had his fingers cut off with gardening tools, either.

She found herself looking around the large, almost empty, control room, noticing just how big and empty it really felt when only she and the computer were in it. She was alone, but when these videos played, they seemed to bring alive the ghosts of the people in them. In a way, they were alive for a moment inside the Hawk-Eye’s mind, living shadows of people who had no place still walking the earth. It was all the more disturbing when she watched them alone. Those people were alive in her mind, too, crossing over from forgotten memories to vividly occupy her consciousness.

She smiled thinly at how ridiculous she was being and decided to pour herself a coffee and forget about such silly notions. She was, at heart, a scientist after all.

She took out the heated jug and poured a generous dose into a white ceramic mug bearing the Hawk-Eye logo.

It had been a rather ridiculous folly, since it wouldn’t be possible to use the mug outside, since it was a secret project. Whilst inside the building, there was nothing but the Hawk-Eye, and the last

thing you needed to remind you of that was a logo printed on a cheap mug.

The folly had not been hers, of course. The first she knew of it was when Red asked what the delivery address was because he'd ordered some personalised merchandise from the internet. It wasn't the first time she'd ever seriously considered actually having him killed.

In truth, it slightly bothered her that Merv would probably refuse an order to kill him. Worse still, he'd really got the hang of his speeded-up brain lately. He was doubtless fast enough to avoid being hit if she drew her weapon and began firing at him. She sometimes thought that it might be worth a try. Not that she ever really would kill Red: in fact the pair of them were quite oddly close.

The entire group had taken on a familiarity that her professionalism flared up violently against. Still, it seemed so natural, that there was nothing to be done except to accept it for what it was. They were a family now, and that was all there was to it. In her darker moments of quiet reflection, she had come to realise that the one thing left that really scared her was the thought of losing them.

The coffee settled. A little frothy layer of bubbles drifted on the near-black surface which looked even darker against the white porcelain under the artificial lights of the compound.

She sniffed at the strong, rich roast, an aroma that flared in her senses and carried her along on an imaginary journey where the beans were ready to give her brain a big, warm hug.

"Computer," she said, and then paused. A tiny flicker of a smile flashed over her lips. This was ridiculous. Why not just watch the video? But then, perhaps it was better if they watched it together,

just in case she missed something? “Computer, show me Red and Merv.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

They stood outside the rear of the police station on a set of quite shallow grey concrete steps that led to the real world below. The real world was not a happy place. In it were parked various vehicles that officers and staff had driven to work. It was a place where angry people took their aggression out on the world, where people who believed in the basic goodness of humanity had their souls crushed, and where you could find the only living creatures on the planet who drank more coffee than Red.

Merv was dressed in black business attire and looked every inch a villain, the kind of villain that super-heroes would shake their heads and walk away from, leaving that one to a more powerful or more ambitious warrior. Red was next to him, wearing black jeans, a grey T-shirt and a thin armoured motorcycle jacket, but one bought from a shop, not built at a ridiculous cost to the poor, ignorant taxpayer, who had no idea how much of their hard-earned money went on buying overblown toys for overgrown children.

Various officers stared at them, since they didn't seem to fit in at all. Red certainly looked like he could be an officer off-duty, or perhaps recently thrown out of the force for any one of a number of violations of societal norms, but Merv was a whole different thing.

“Norma will be pleased that we got everything,” Merv said rhetorically.

“She'll be amazed if she was watching our performance,” Red told him. “Should we phone her and tell her that we got all the police files that she asked for?”

Merv sighed slightly to himself and reached up with his thick, brutally strong arm, the right one which was his favourite for punching with. He very slowly and deliberately moved his glasses around on the bridge of his nose and then dropped his arm back down to his side. "She's probably watching us. She probably knows everything."

"She doesn't know I farted in Bertolli's office while he went down to the records department!" Red said, seeming quite proud of himself.

Merv turned to look down at him and shook his head sadly. "Well, she does now."

Red grumbled to himself. He hadn't thought of that. "Dammit." He took a deep breath in through his nose and blew it out through his lips noisily. He said, thoughtfully, "I guess a lot of secret government operatives act like we do, though, right? It can't just be us?"

"No."

Red frowned and looked up at him. "Well, some must do."

"No."

"But they secretly fart in people's office and then laugh about it afterwards, right?" he asked, suspecting he already knew the answer.

"No."

Red crossed his arms grumpily over his chest. "Maybe some secret government operatives need to get more of a sense of humour about things?"

For one last time, Merv said, "No." He then turned to look at Red and said, "Let's just be grateful that we got what we came here for and get back to the office in time for some lunch and a cup of coffee while Norma shouts at us for a while."

There was nothing like being shouted out by someone impotently threatening horrible violence upon your person to build up a real thirst, and Red found himself quite looking forward to it.

Then his face took on a more serious expression, as he noticed something even more interesting than horrible threats of violence. “Merv, do you see that bike over there?”

In the distance ahead of them was a black motorcycle. It was an older-looking machine but the design suggested that it was fast. It was finished in a dark grey ash colour, very nearly black, and had a functional look to it, a look that implied that that function might be to ride really quite fast and with a significant lack of respect for the rules of the road. A rider was perched on it, sitting upright, his hands away from the controls. He was wearing a black leather jacket, gloves and blue-jeans tucked into proper motorcycle racing-boots. His face, if he had one, because such things were far from certain in their world, was hidden behind a black visor on a rounded helmet and it was turned towards him, perhaps looking, perhaps watching every move they made. It might have been listening to their words through sophisticated sensors which tracked every tiny sound.

Equally likely was: perhaps it wasn't.

Merv made a humming noise that meant that he did indeed see it.

“Why?” He sounded as if he hoped this wasn't about motorcycles and was actually somehow connected to work. Hope often led to disappointment but the whole point of hope was that it didn't know when to stop, and rarely appreciated how futile it really was.

“He's been sitting watching us since we've been standing here,” Red told him. “Most of the time, he's looking directly at us but when I make eye-contact, he looks away.”

Merv frowned, which was not a thing to be taken lightly when he really meant it. “Is it the bike from the video? Is it the one we saw this morning when the pizza-delivery guy shot a man twice in the face?”

Red shook his head. “No, the one in the video was an old Honda cafe-racer. I have literally no idea what that thing is.” Red grunted to himself, turned and said, “You know he wasn’t actually a pizza-delivery guy, right, Merv?”

One thing seemed to bother Merv more than anything else. “You don’t know what that motorcycle is? Don’t you know everything about motorcycles?”

The rider suddenly leant down and grabbed the controls.

Merv and Red looked at one another. The HERPES was right ahead of them and his helmet was already in Red’s hand.

“I’m going after him!” Red told him quickly, throwing the armoured helmet over his head and running down to his motorcycle, the insane piece of engineering that only one person alive could ride properly, and perhaps not even that.

“We don’t know he’s got anything to do with anything!” Merv told him, looking back and forth, rather lost and confused about how best to continue, since his input didn’t appear to be having any discernible results whatsoever.

“I’m not going to blow him up. I’m just going to catch him and see what happens.” Red was already strapping shut the fastener and striding towards his bike. This was happening and couldn’t be avoided.

His decision was already made and there was nothing Merv could do to stop him. He turned, rummaging in his pocket for the keys, and grunted, “I’ll follow in the van. Be careful.”

“No!” Red called out and Merv knew that behind that blacked-out helmet, he was grinning happily to himself.

Chapter 7

The other motorcycle, the black machine opposite that looked like a very fast, but otherwise perfectly normal motorcycle, sped away. HERPES, that looked as if a heavily-armed evil military robot had built a two-wheeled vehicle out of his even more evil, and much more heavily-armed wife, and whatever brutal junk was lying around his lair, roared to life. It sounded as if a demon straight from the flaming depths of hell was clearing its throat after a particularly unpleasant bout of flu. Flames jetted from the exhaust and a vibration shuddered right through the frame as the power coursed through her.

Merv tried to shout to Red, but it was all rather pointless as the bike made more noise than a large commercial airliner landing on a camel's testicles. Even if it had been a little more stealthy, Red's mind was elsewhere. Once that engine was running, she was his world, the beginning and the end. Merv trying to warn him that the sky was falling would earn little more than a happy grin and some smart-arse answer that usually wasn't particularly smart and only served to emphasise the fact that he was something of an arse.

Around the parking lot, police-officers drew their weapons in horror. Some ducked for cover but most just stared in rapt wonder at just what kind of crazy machine this could be and what kind of idiot could be riding it.

Red worked hard to answer that question.

The motorcycle roared out of the police lot, picking up speed like a very fat man without a parachute plunging straight down towards the ground from a small aircraft that was relieved to be rid of him.

A man was stationed in a kiosk with a striped red and white wooden barrier at the exit. The motorcycle hurtled towards it, the tail

flapping around like a fish as the acceleration built steadily, then unsteadily, then a little more steadily again. His eyes widened fearfully. His entire job entailed raising that barrier for people, making that wooden thing go up and down; up to allow vehicles through and down once they had. It wasn't a satisfying life, but it did come with a free uniform and it let him feel kind of important a lot of the time.

If all that was set to continue, then that wooden beam needed to be still there after the motorcycle had gone through; even he knew that, and he'd failed maths and English at an American high-school in spectacular fashion. He had even failed the police entrance exam by mis-spelling his own name. To be fair, it was quite a difficult name to spell.

With this all going through his mind, he decided it was best all-round just to raise it pre-emptively before the bike smashed through it. He didn't even know about the cannon bolted to the nose which was already targeting the barrier. Even if he hadn't decided to just let whatever was going to happen, happen, the bike was still leaving without showing a ticket and without giving him the friendly, respectful little nod that he enjoyed so much. Either way, the barrier went up and not a shot had to be fired.

He even got a little tingle of excitement as the motorcycle roared through, flaming exhaust, growling engine and with all the drama of two teenage girls showing up at a party wearing the same dress. For all that, the rider did give him a nod: he was sure he saw it. Even super-heroes respected the man in the kiosk. He felt a swell of pride and would tell his wife all about it one day, once he found a woman who would marry him, date him or even just tolerate being around him for long enough to finish a meal.

Merv just watched all this happening, grumbling to himself and shaking his head in disapproval - but there was another part of him that was dead impressed, and maybe just a little bit sexually aroused, by all this.

“Red to Hawk-Eye control!” Red said. There was a static hiss as the environment inside his helmet adjusted to block out the sound of the engine and the rush of the wind.

“Norma here,” she replied. “I’ve been watching. Would you care to explain yourself?”

Red slipped two fingers over the brake and pushed down hard with his foot, locking the rear. The motorcycle plunged headlong into the traffic, darting between cars, guided by Red’s upgraded reactions, thanks to the mushy grey pulp of technology sloshing around in his skull, which had interestingly now only got a seventeen per cent chance of killing him before he was old enough to be considered a high-risk of developing prostate cancer.

The back end of the bike locked and skidded around in a wide loop to take off after the other motorcycle, which had discretely vanished into the traffic.

“Sometimes a man just needs to fart,” Red explained. “I’m a vegetarian, so it didn’t even smell that bad, really. I mean, the Commissioner wasn’t even in the room when it happened. I don’t see how-”

“Red!” Norma’s voice barked through the speakers of his newly upgraded helmet. The bike wobbled as it sped alongside a row of cars that rushed past in a blur, the exhaust leaving a sooty trail of black burn-marks along their nearside paintwork, which would take some real effort to polish out. “I don’t care if you fart anywhere but in my presence. I’m talking about you chasing a motorcycle through

daytime traffic in the middle of town on a secret government motorcycle, with an auto-cannon, which is currently set to attack-mode.”

“Oh that!” Red said, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “He looked at me funny.” There was a pause. “Now that I hear myself saying it out loud, it does seem like an odd thing to be doing.”

“He looked at you funny?” Her voice held a condescending but also darkly threatening tone. There would likely be no doughnuts tomorrow either, Red thought, with a hollow, empty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Stand down, Red!” she told him.

“Norma...” he sighed and wasn’t entirely sure what he was going to say. It was almost as much a mystery to him at this point. “I can’t explain it. I just know he was watching us. I don’t know why. I just know this guy on the motorcycle was watching Merv and me.”

“Red,” she warned, her voice softening. Red had a way with people, a way of gaining their sympathy, a way of creeping under their skin.

“Norma, if I’m wrong, then it’s just a high-speed chase. I flash my government ID and ask some questions. No harm done.”

The HERPES accelerated and cut across the nose of a slow moving truck, accompanied by the sound of a low-pitched horn wailing angrily. Somehow, and against the odds, no harm was done.

“No auto-cannon!” she told him. “No missiles, trip-launchers or tyre-shredders either. You just track him. I’ll let the Hawk-Eye get us the details on him and we’ll see if you’re right, or if this is just you being stupid.”

Red grinned to himself at this small victory. “I can be two things!” There was a grumble in his helmet, the sound of Norma trying to decide if he was making a joke or if she would have to

explain why that was a really stupid thing to have said. In the end it came to nothing and she just let it go.

She said, "Just hurry up and find this bike."

Hurrying up was very much Red's thing. He opened the throttle wide. That was rather like being fired from an artillery cannon while your eyes and arms were still tied to the very same cannon with a short piece of rope. His shoulders wrenched and his eyes stung in their sockets as the force of acceleration pressed back against him. The bike lurched forward so fast that everything faded away to a white blur of intense colour and then, all too slowly, reality faded back in, a wild jumble of colours and shapes racing past. His mind was, by now, fully over-clocked. His heart was pounding and his head was spinning. He felt alive, truly alive from the sheer exhilaration of it all. He cried out, but even the microphone in the helmet couldn't quite manage to pick it up, "I love this bike!"

He weaved along and then hung a hard right, the tyres screaming in protest, the acrid stench of burning rubber filling his nostrils as she slithered along and then powered out of the corner, laying on all the speed she had, which really was quite a lot.

"Got him!" he shouted triumphantly. Up ahead, somehow, among the horrendous jumble of blurred images, his brain had picked out a single red tail light and jumped to the wild conclusion that it had to be a motorcycle; furthermore, it had to be the one that he was chasing, for some reason. It all made sense to him at that point.

Later that day, he would be in a toilet cubicle, listening to the tinkling sound of his own urine splashing into the water below and wondering how a healthy man could have made the kind of smell that Merv had left behind earlier. It would occur to him that this didn't just make no good sense, but none of this made any sense at all, not even really bad sense, like the kind that was used to justify

religion. It would be during a conversation about this very thing that he would discover that Norma was partly Jewish, and the consequence of that would be that there would certainly be no doughnuts for him the following morning.

Red would then wonder how he felt about all of this and would end up just buying his own with the intention of deliberately making a point of not letting her have one. After taking the first bite, he would realise that he really didn't like doughnuts anyway, but had forgotten it, along with most of his entire life. He would hand the bag to the vaguely Asian-looking homeless person sitting on the corner of their street who was there a lot lately and who would often point an umbrella at him threateningly and shout, 'I can see clowns, millions of them and each the size of radishes.'

Later that day, Red would discover that radishes are a very poor choice of pizza topping.

Red frowned to himself at his mind wandered. It was as if his thoughts were being dragged elsewhere and, travelling at speeds that would be dangerous even if he was only a cartoon, that wasn't ideal at all.

Catching up to the other motorcycle might be quite a difficult thing if you weren't on the HERPES, a motorcycle so over-powered that American defence spending didn't seem quite so ridiculous when compared to it. Red frequently argued that she probably justified and accounted for a fairly large slice of it and that she was worth every penny.

She ripped along, spluttering out ragged blue flames and shuddering uneasily as the carbon composite frame flexed, absorbing the worst of the sporadic bursts of mind-crushing power.

"It's him. Black bike. Red light," Red reported.

“Nobody else could possibly have a black bike with a red tail-light!” came an unnecessarily sarcastic reply. Red felt it was largely unwarranted and simply hadn’t been called for at all.

He would have normally caught up in less than no time, or it would certainly feel that way. The motorcycle up front was, however, no slouch, and, if Red wanted to catch him, then he was going to have to work for it.

“Norma, run a scan!” he demanded, shouting over the roar of the engine.

There was a grumbling sound followed by a weary, “I had actually thought of that.”

He swung the bike around a car, following the other machine as it snaked dangerously between moving vehicles. If he was to catch him alive, then Red began to think he needed to back off. This guy was giving this chase everything he had, and whatever that was, he seemed to have plenty of it.

“Red,” she began haltingly, “there might be something to this.”

He clutched at the brake: the bike responded instantly by screeching and, while still moving forwards, gently pitching up on her front wheel, the tail rising in the air. He pulled around a car that had begun to pull out, seen Red barrelling toward him and instinctively slammed on the brakes, closed his eyes and waited to die. Fortunately for everyone, Red’s brain could accommodate such things with nothing more than a few loudly-expressed expletives and a bit of smoking tyres.

“Quickly, Norma, before I turn myself into a liberal coating of highly ineffective car wax.”

“Red, that bike doesn’t conform to any known make and model. Even a highly modified machine should have characteristic markers that identify it from key points on the engine and frame.

Even the HERPES can be identified, although the computer seems to have logged it as a Lockheed F-117 for some reason.” Norma explained. “More troubling, the Hawk-Eye computer keeps insisting that the motorcycle doesn’t exist, even though it’s feeding me back data on it right now.”

“I knew it!” Red sounded proudly vindicated, which just encouraged him to ride even faster, not that he needed much encouragement to do that. The motorcycle up ahead went into a soft right bend and Red followed. Suddenly, at the last minute, it veered off into a left turn and accelerated hard. A whiff of odd-smelling smoke hung on the air and the bike tore off at speeds that even Red thought were ‘really quite acceptable.’

“Norma, this guy is really moving,” he said, a little impressed. “You can’t catch him?” she asked.

This was the strongest insult a woman had ever levelled at him, as far as he was concerned. He was happy with any woman insulting any aspect of his manhood. It didn’t bother him unduly because, if you were looking at anything of his that was interesting, then you were dumb enough to be naked with him and your opinion was therefore invalid. But this was different, this meant something.

“Norma, I am the fastest man alive, on the fastest motorcycle that anyone has ever built. I can catch a guy on an old black bike.”

As if to prove it, or just because he enjoyed doing it, he flicked back on the throttle. She responded with a wailing, growling roar, spitting fire and suddenly scrambling forwards at speeds that narrowed the gap between them rather spectacularly quickly.

Red allowed himself a grin - but then it all went rather wrong, and did so rather quickly, and rather more spectacularly.

The motorcycle flashed the tail light, causing Red to instinctively grab at his brakes. Before he knew it, he was almost on

top of the other bike, his tyres screaming and scrabbling for any grip they could find. While Red struggled to keep her under control, the other bike had taken a near right-angled corner, the rear tyre spinning against the black tarmac as it wildly skidded into a slide.

Red's brain processed it all in glorious high speed, but he'd made a mistake and could only now work to recover from it. The weight of the bike, and the speed it was travelling, had dragged him past the turning.

He finally slammed closed the front brake, standing the bike up on her nose as he shifted weight, trying to slam her around to point back at where he should have been going.

The back crashed down but it had taken seconds, seconds in which the other motorcycle had gained a growing advantage.

She spun her back wheel angrily, as if both Red and the bike shared the slight between them, both taking it as a personal attack. The growling engine revved to full power; she looped around and shot along, tearing up the street in the direction the target had gone.

"Norma!" he barked. The road ahead was long, swept into a right hand bend some way off ahead and had dozens of turnoffs on either side that he could see. "Where did he go?"

Her voice was nearly frantic when she finally answered, saying, "Nowhere. It's nowhere. According to the computer, you weren't even chasing another motorcycle. There's nothing I can do from here."

"Norma!" he shouted angrily, as the bike rolled gently along the road. He couldn't blast away into the distance if his quarry had turned off to the sides. He could be anywhere.

There was a long wait.

"Red," she said finally. "Come in. It's over."

Chapter 8

“What happened?” Both Red and Norma shouted to one another at the same time. He pulled off the helmet, threw his leg over and got off the motorcycle. Both Norma and he looked equally surprised. They each pointed to themselves and said together at the same time, “Me?”

“Radishes!” Red said, his eyes flaring angrily.

Norma’s mouth fell open and she frowned curiously. “What?”

Red sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know. I just said something at random so you wouldn’t say the same thing again. It worked, didn’t it?”

“Red, what happened?” she insisted once more, although she was slightly preoccupied by the notion that she might have actually said ‘radishes’ and what might that have suggested about life, the universe and everything. It had occurred to her also to say something that would break the mutual deadlock. Would she have said radishes? She had been thinking about them earlier that day, and clowns, for some unknown reason, after an unsettling encounter with a very odd homeless person who seemed always to be staring at her as she walked past.

“I lost him...” Red said dejectedly, all the anger, all the fight, just leaving him. He looked deflated and just shook his head sadly at himself. “I was faster than him. He made me show off. The guy tricked me and I was dumb enough to fall for it. He actually used my superior skills and speed against me.”

“And your stupidity,” she said, feeling that that wasn’t mentioned often enough. It was a fair point.

“OK, Norma!” he grumbled. He turned to take a moment to hang his helmet on the handlebar of the motorcycle, as if he was

ignorant of the fact that it was worth more than an average house. He wasn't, and it was something Norma reminded him of frequently.

"But it's hard to do my job when you don't do yours!"

"My job?" she squealed, coughing out the words as she choked on her rage. "What didn't I do?"

"The Hawk-Eye is having an autistic seizure and you're sitting back, patting it on the head and giving it a lollipop just because it tried!" Red frowned angrily, pointing around the room since he had no real idea exactly where the computer was, but he knew it was in there somewhere.

"You know I have mild Asperger's syndrome?" she asked, surprisingly calmly. Then, with a sarcastic tone, she added, "Give it a try, and let's see if you could be a little more stupid and offensive, perhaps?"

"Alright!" he said, improperly seeming to have assumed that this was a challenge. "The Hawk-Eye computer is on its period. Give it a slap, or whatever it is you computer people do to fix things."

Norma shook her head at him. "Apparently you can be more offensive!"

"Norma, how did you lose that bike?" he said, sighing. "You could find out what god had for breakfast with that thing, and yet a speeding motorcycle that's less than one hundred yards from me is apparently too much trouble."

"Yeah, that is something I'm working on." She was just as frustrated as him. "It doesn't make sense. The computer just has blank spots, as if it's blinding itself to certain details. I can't figure out what's wrong with it."

"Well, you had better figure it out!" he told her grumpily, temporarily forgetting how the chain of command worked. She

decided that she would remind him later in ways that would make it much harder to forget in the future.

“Well, what has any of this got to do with the case?” she asked and rubbed her temples. “We’re literally no closer to finding anything about this dead project manager or even finding out what he was working on. All we’ve managed to do is cause traffic chaos and fart in the chief of Police’s office.”

Red frowned, not really having much to add to that. “It is good for the bike to have a nice run, though.”

She grimaced at his flagrant disregard for the importance of what they were doing. “Next, you’ll be telling me it’s good for the cannon to be fired once in a while, too.” With a huff she walked off, stalking her way back to the control-centre and her comfy chair.

Red watched her go, making an effort not to let his eyes track downwards, as they instinctively did when he watched any women walk away.

“I thought I wasn’t allowed to use the cannon?” He said it quietly enough not to get yelled at.

Red laid two mugs of coffee down on the desk on which Norma was working. It was something of a peace offering, but he put them a little bit too near to the keyboard, which quite irritated her. When you got right down to it, everything quite irritated her so, especially when she was in a mood.

“Did you get another video?” Red saw the menu screen and managed to make sense of some of it.

She nodded. “I was going to watch it while you were out, but haven’t had a chance yet,” she lied, just a little bit. Little white lies never hurt anyone, she thought.

He sipped at his coffee. “Shall we?”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

A young, dark-skinned and angry man stalked along a corridor. The building was painted an ugly brown and the paint was peeling. The floor was made from dull grey tiles that were deeply gouged from too many years of seeing too much use. The air smelled of cheap bleach and the sun shyly lit his way through grimy, unwashed windows.

“Sir?” a middle-aged woman called out confidently behind him, with the condescending tone of someone with just a little bit of power. He stopped walking and turned to her. His face wore a permanent frown, a scowl like that of a man about to fight and determined that he was going to win at any cost. He didn’t face her square on and his cold blue eyes flashed at her, peering out to the side. He didn’t speak.

She had been walking towards him but she stopped now in her tracks. She hesitated and her head leaned itself backwards, her right foot shuffling itself away. “Sir?” she said once more, a voice much less sure of itself this time.

Again, he didn’t speak and his eyes never wavered: he just stared into hers, waiting.

“Sir,” she began one last time, but her voice was respectful where before she had sounded demanding. “Can I help you, Sir?”

“I don’t need your help!” he told her with a growl and then he turned away. His voice was as cold as his eyes. He carried on along his way, but he noticed there were no footsteps behind him; nobody was following. The corridor was long and much like that of a cheap hotel, only even more grim and depressing. It was as if decay had gained such a foothold that there was simply no way to fight it back. The paint was peeling, plaster beneath it also coming apart. The painted white woodwork around the doors off to the sides was dulled

and yellowed, and gouges had been scooped out where carts and chairs had crashed into the corners many, many times.

Sounds wafted to his ears: the distant tinny sound of televisions behind closed doors, coughing, and the occasional groan. Each door was numbered and he counted them down. He didn't need any help: he knew exactly where he was going.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"Pause!" Norma grumbled as Red noisily sipped at his coffee.

"That's really distracting."

He shrugged and did it again only noisier. "Do you think this one is going to be bad?" he said, with a gesture to the screen. The quality of the image was now crystal clear. It was almost as if you could smell the bleach through the screen and read what people were thinking, even though that was quite impossible.

She shuddered inwardly and told him, her voice giving away a little of the reservation she had about watching these things:

"They're all bad."

He nodded. "This one looks bad. That young guy doesn't look as if he's going anywhere to shake anyone's hand."

She nodded in agreement. "Let's hope for the best. You never know. Computer, resume playback."

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

He didn't even knock on the door. He just opened it and walked in. The room inside was even worse than the corridor that led to it. It was painted in off-white with only a few sticks of furniture dotted around the place. An old man was lying on a bed without any sheets to cover a filthy and threadbare red mattress. A very old television

was playing away beside him, displaying the grey image of a baseball game.

He sat up slowly, a curious look on his face.

He was an African-American, around fifty years old but he looked older. He stared out with a pair of eyes that had seen it all, and what manner of things they'd witnessed had crushed his soul. He wore a slightly stained white vest and shorts, old and ragged and worn at the edges.

"Can I help you, son?" he said with confused little smile, his voice deep and grave from many years of smoking. "I think you got the wrong room." He turned down the volume on the television and put the remote control down next to a dinner-plate piled high with dead cigarettes.

"Leonard Baker?" he said darkly, as he closed the door behind him.

The old man nodded back, narrowing his eyes curiously.

"That's me, sure enough. I guess maybe you got the right room."

"You don't know me," the young man told him. "My name is Bruce and you're my father."

He chuckled a reply but the effort caused him to cough. He hacked to himself, spluttering into his hand. He slowly reached to a rickety bedside table that was just barely holding itself together. He grabbed a cup of water and took a shallow sip. "Look, son," he began, pausing to smile ironically at his choice of words. "I aint nobody's father and if I was, I'd be no kinda father you'd wanna know."

"I already know that much." The young man stepped forwards threateningly. He was lean and muscular and his strong hands were balled into angry fists.

The old man never flinched. There was nothing left that violence, or anything else, could take away from him and there was nothing left in the whole world he feared.

“I never had no kids, boy!” he told him wearily. “Maybe if I had, I wouldn’t be living out my days in a box like this. Do I seem as if I’m a special part of anyone’s family to you?”

The young man frowned a little more. He said, “I tracked you down. It wasn’t easy to do.”

The tired old man shook his head sadly. “Son, you got the wrong room all right. Sorry to tell you, you got something all wrong. All I can do is wish you all the best and send you on your way. Hopefully, you got some real daddy waiting for you somewhere, but he ain’t here.”

“It’s you.”

He chuckled some more, breathing carefully to avoid another bout of coughing. “I never dated no woman who ever gave me a son. I never lasted that long a time with anyone; never was cut out for it.”

“You didn’t date my mother,” he told him, and now his voice took on a still colder edge as anger gripped him and his face contorted into a snarl. “You raped her.”

“Raped?” He shook his head at how ridiculous that was, but his eyes widened just a bit. He looked over once again, examining the young man more closely. He hefted himself to the edge of the bed and the effort of doing so left him breathless. “Where you from, kid?”

He glowered back, breathing deeply to control his emotions. “I was born in Vietnam, twenty four years ago. You were stationed there, weren’t you?” he said accusingly.

The old man was silent for a moment. There was a resemblance in the face between them, even though he was partly Asian-looking. It could just be true, perhaps.

Eventually, he took a deep breath and sighed to himself. He said weakly, “A lot of crazy stuff happened over there, stuff I don’t even like to think about, but I never raped no woman. I did shit no man could be proud of, but I’m no animal. You got it all wrong.”

He took another step forward, this time a wider pace, so he was now only a few meters from the man he was accusing. “Then put me right, old man!”

His eyes rolled to the ground and his chest heaved up and down. “What’s her name, your mother?” he whispered.

“Lillian,” he told him, as if this was some great revelation. “And it’s past tense. She died four years ago.”

The old man shook his head, shut his eyes and let his shoulders slump.

Softly, he said: “I’d just got there. I was barely out of short trousers and they put a gun in my hands and pointed me at them little Vietnamese guys and told me that they was the enemy and anything I could do to them was alright by Uncle Sam.

“I barely knew which way was up, but we got stationed in a small town and was left to find our way about it. We hit a bar and I met a woman called Lilly. Best thing that ever happened to me out there,” he sighed once more and looked away. “Only good damn thing!

“Three days later, I was sent out with my squad. I shot down two of them on my first patrol. I just looked at their bodies, all ripped open from the inside, as if my bullets had just exploded in their little chests. One of them was no older than me; one was a lot younger.

“I weren’t no kid no more and I was no kind of man, either. I never went back to that town. I never went back at all. Leonard Baker never came back from that war, just some twisted shell of a thing. I never went back to your mother. I just carried on my path, hoping it would lead me out of the hell I found myself in - but it never did.”

“So you never raped her?” he asked, his voice filled with scornful sarcasm. “You’re telling me you never put your hand on her against her wishes?”

The old man just breathed, looking away sadly. He began slowly to shake his head. “I’m just a shell, son. I’m what that war made me: all kinds of wrong wrapped up in a monster that looks back at me from my mirror wearing my face - but I never done that. My place in hell was bought and paid for without me going looking to upgrade for a first class ticket.

“No, son, I never raped your mum. That’s what I’m telling you.”

The young man balled and opened his fists, flexing the fingers aggressively. “You’re calling my mother a liar, then?”

He turned away and looked out of the window. A bird flew past outside and the sound of traffic wafted through the thin glass. “No, I aint sayin’ that, either. I never was around her long enough to talk as if I knew her well. She was a good woman who treated me better than I had any right to expect. I thought she was someone special and that we had something. What life taught me since is that I ain’t special enough for all that.

“If you need to think that of me, then you go right ahead. No amount of hate from you is going to make no difference to the pile I got from myself over my head.”

There was nothing left to say on that subject.

The young man, Bruce, said, "I've come to kill you." He drew out a revolver from the waistband of his trousers. He didn't point it, not yet, but the grim and intimidating thing sat in his hand and there was no ignoring the threat.

The old man looked at the black metalwork as the light glinted over its stark edges. He looked back to the young man and there was no fear in his eyes.

"Sorry, son. Nature beat you to it. My lungs is bein' eaten up from the inside out. I got cancer and not the good kind," he told him softly. "The thing about this life is nobody gets out alive."

His frown softened and he gripped the weapon hard, his jaw-muscles tensed in his face. "You're dying?"

Baker chuckled and stopped to clear his throat, with a rasping noise that settled down a nasty little cough. He sipped on some water. "I've been dying since I set foot in Vietnam. Now that dying is coming right to my door. Doctors say I ain't got long. Suits me, I gotta say. If you need to hurry things along, you go right ahead. Makes no difference to me."

He levelled the gun, aiming the snub barrel of the little revolver right at the top of the old man's forehead.

"I just wanna say one thing," he said calmly. "Once you pull that trigger, a piece of you is gonna die right along with me. You'll never be free of me. My face is going to live forever in your head. Every night when the sun goes down, every blink, every moment you have time to think, there I'll be in the blackness of your own thoughts."

"If you're really a son of mine, I'd like better for you than that. That's all I gotta say on the matter."

The young man's face contorted into a snarl once more, his finger tightened on the trigger. The hammer on the back of the weapon started to twitch, the cylinder unlatched and began to turn.

Their eyes were locked together, but still the old man remained totally calm, resigned to his fate.

He lowered the weapon and then threw it to the floor. He turned, yelled, "Shit," loudly to himself and left, slamming the door behind him angrily.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Red sipped the last of his coffee. "OK, that wasn't too bad. Man goes to kill his father for raping his dead mother. Man might or might not have raped her. He doesn't kill him. Not too bad at all, apart from the whole emotional aspect of it."

Norma scowled at him. "It's not finished yet."

■ PLYBCK RSM D RCHV

The old man picked up the revolver. He examined it, cupping it in both his hands as if he was holding a wounded bird.

"Life," he said to himself. "All I get out of it is a head filled with vile memories, a man who might be my son who hates me so much he comes to kill me. All of that, while my own body is slowly chewing itself to pieces so I goes out in the most agonising way possible."

He chuckled humourlessly to himself.

He shook his head as he remembered, and said: "Lilly. Why you had to tell the boy that? He didn't need to hear that.

"At least that boy has a clean conscience to walk out of here with. If he's anyone's son, he deserves that much, at least. I guess he

did have a point, though. I got nothing to be here for and don't deserve to keep drawing breath in any case."

The young man stepped purposefully along the way, striding out from the veterans hall, a place where soldiers could live cheaply after giving everything to a country that offered virtually nothing in return. He was furious, but now much of that rage was aimed back at himself. He should have pulled that trigger, shouldn't he?

There was a loud crack of a gunshot. He turned and looked back from where he'd come.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma closed her eyes and frowned as the video composition ended with a suddenly black screen. "Oh for..." she muttered to herself.

"It wasn't that bad..." Red stood behind her, and even he was shaking his head. He just gave up pretending and said, "OK, it was pretty bad."

Chapter 9

Norma looked at Red and he looked back at her. Neither looked as if they'd particularly enjoyed what they'd just seen. She broke the awkward silence and said, quite softly, "It was bad. The old man shot himself."

"As an ex-soldier myself, I feel that we should do more to look after our veterans, I guess," he replied with a shrug. "We take these poor kids, fill their heads with nonsense, give them a gun and get them to kill people they've never met before, for reasons they couldn't explain if you ordered them to. Suicide is pretty common."

"So you're saying that we should just accept it, or we shouldn't?" she scowled at him, her arms crossing over her chest.

"It's like pizza," he began thoughtfully. "You know it's bad because it tastes so good but it tastes so good that you don't care that it's bad for you. You know what I mean?"

She shook her head at him. Her confusion at his explanation could only be described as 'thorough.'

"OK!" he agreed. "This is nothing like pizza. I think I'm just hungry."

She frowned a thoughtful look back to the screen. "He said he served in Vietnam, which means that video was old. In fact, it must have been really old," she said, quickly working out the numbers in her head. "That must have been some time in the early to mid-eighties."

"We can make videos from back then?" Red asked in surprise.

"Apparently." She shrugged. "The computer can make videos of anything. It just takes raw data and creates an impression of it. If it can include camera feed, then that impression is highly accurate, but, if it's doing it with descriptions made by people talking about what

they saw, then much less so. Still, if you described something to it, it could create a lifelike simulation of anything, only the accuracy would vary.”

Red looked down at his empty coffee cup, bored by all this, and then looked around accusingly. “Where’s Merv? This cup is not going to fill itself. He should be back by now, shouldn’t he?”

Norma sat up sharply. “That’s a good point. Where is Merv? He should have reported in. At least one of you is a professional. This isn’t like him.” She clicked on her keyboard and the menus on her screen scrolled around.

Red mumbled to himself that this was clearly intended to imply that he wasn’t a professional. He felt a little offended.

“Red, I can’t find him!” she said, sounding really quite concerned now.

“What do you mean, you can’t find him?” Red picked up on the tension in her voice and begun to get quite tense himself. “He’s gigantic. You can see Merv from space. You should be able to find him if you stood on the roof and searched with a cheap pair of binoculars, let alone the most advanced surveillance technology ever created.”

“I can’t see him from here.” She pointed to a screen where the words ‘No relevant data’ were flashing in orderly green letters. “This isn’t possible. The computer should know where we all are at all times.”

“Search for the van!” Red said, growing concerned himself by now. “It must have a transponder on it, right?”

“I tried that!” she yelled back. “I don’t understand this. The Hawk-Eye computer now just can’t see Merv. It’s as if he doesn’t exist. How do things keep disappearing? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Red pulled out his phone and began dialling. “Maybe we’re just over-thinking this?” he suggested. “I’ll just phone him and tell him I need a coffee and to bring doughnuts.” He waited for the phone to connect. “Merv’s too big to have fallen through a crack in the pavement. He’s out there somewhere.” He waited some more with his phone pressed to his ear. He tried not to look worried but the concern was growing. Something was decidedly wrong here.

Norma looked on expectantly. He sighed and shook his head sadly. “It’s turned off.”

“I can still track the phone.” Norma spun back to the computer interface and her fingers danced over the keys. “Got him!” she said, pointing at the location on a city-map and beaming happily. Red craned his neck forwards for a better look.

“OK, that’s not far,” he said, a little relieved that whatever terrible thing they might be in the middle of, it wasn’t enough to have completely destroyed Merv’s phone. Not much short of a nuclear explosion could actually completely destroy Merv in any case, but still, Red was worried. Merv was the only friend he had, and he made a surprisingly excellent vegetarian lasagne.

“I’ll go get him.”

Norma looked back at the Motorcycle and scowled at Red. “Try to be a little more subtle this time, please!”

Red grinned and slipped behind his paper-thin veneer. “She doesn’t have a setting for subtle.”

Norma narrowed her eyes while her brain rushed ahead of her mouth, the opposite of the way Red worked. “I’ll design one and send it to you. You’ll be able to run quietly by the time you arrive at your location.” She turned and began typing on her keyboard.

Red frowned and didn’t really know how he felt about that. “You can do that?” he asked, sounding quite worried.

Norma nodded. "I've already done it! You have a 'subtle-mode' now. I don't know why I didn't think of this before. I just use the same sound-deadening technology that's installed in your helmet and feed it back through the motorcycles speakers. It should cut the noise down to tolerable levels so it doesn't make the bike sound like a bomb is going off every time you touch the throttle. We can't have you just tearing around on that thing with flames coming out the back and noise that would wake up dead people."

"All that is my favourite part," he said, a little despondently. He threw his leg over the bike and sat down, snatching up the helmet as he did. He flashed a little, more reserved, grin. "Well, Norma, I don't have a setting for subtle and there's nothing you can do about that."

She began to grin back at him.

Red froze and his expression changed to shock. "Wait, you can do that? You can change the settings in my slushy grey techno-brain?"

Norma raised an eyebrow and told him, "Red, if there was any way to reprogram your brain, you wouldn't be so very good at annoying everyone, now would you? Still, there might be a way..."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "If that was your way of telling me to behave myself, then message received! Nobody should have to worry about their boss remotely reprogramming their brain. That's barbaric."

Without the growling engine, and with only the flames ripping from the exhaust, much of the sheer drama, and mindless stupidity of it all, the HERPES just felt like a very fast motorcycle that had been designed by someone who spent too much time watching Japanese science-fiction and considered the laws of physics to be optional.

It was still an incredibly fast motorcycle and touching the throttle made her leap forwards with acceleration that could cause quite horrible injuries to a normal person. It was still a motorcycle that no above-average human could manage but now it was more quiet about it; now it could vanish into a crowd while it did the insane things that it was poorly designed to do.

“Norma, I don’t like this,” Red reported into the helmet as he sped to the location. Flames did lick out of the exhaust but their heart just wasn’t in it, and he could actually hear the wind rushing by. “I feel as if you’ve digitally neutered my baby.”

“Keep it up, Red, and you’re next!” her voice came through the helmet, sounding very much as if she might actually enjoy doing it. “Red, the trace is stable. I’m not detecting any movement. It’s located on what appears to be the second floor of a building. Navigational data should be showing in your display.”

A green grid was floating in the air before him, showing him the direction.

“I got it, Norma,” he told her. “I’m almost there.”

The bike roared, albeit a lot less angrily, as he rounded the last corner. She surged forward one last time as the navigational trace began to flash, warning him that he’d arrived. He stopped and shut off the engine, sitting for a moment looking up. He knew Norma could see what he was seeing. He panned around, using the excellent optics of the helmet to send data back to the Hawk-Eye computer.

“Norma, there’s no sign of the van,” he reported, for once all business and focus. “I’m in front of an apartment building. I’ve never seen it before. Nothing worthy of note, just an average-looking place. I can’t really think of anything to say about the way it looks, just ordinary. If it was a woman, it would be the kind of girl that only

nerds would want to date, or perhaps the kind of girl that serves drinks while I date a much more interesting girl.”

“I date nerds!” Norma grumbled at him.

He grinned to himself as he began removing the strap to the helmet. “I know you do,” he said.

“Red, according to the information I’m looking at, Merv’s phone is located on the second floor in an apartment facing outwards from the front.”

Red stepped away from the bike and hung the helmet on the bars. He rummaged in his trouser pocket for an earpiece and slipped it inside his left ear. “Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you.” Norma’s voice seemed to echo inside his brain. “I’m hacking the video feeds so I can see you, too. Just be careful in there. Merv might be in trouble.”

“Understood,” he replied, as he started on his way to the entrance. He shuddered to think about what kind of trouble Merv couldn’t get himself out of.

Chapter 10

Red's tiny .380 acp Ruger pistol didn't fill him with a lot of confidence. It didn't even fill his hand properly and his little finger had nothing to do at the bottom of the tiny pistol's grip, since it stopped a way above.

On the other hand, Merv's pistol was large enough to really require two normal people to carry it. Red had often wondered why anyone built things like that, since no ordinary person in their right mind would even want to fire it. But for right now, he was torn on the matter. On the one hand, he was glad that he was perfectly happy with the size of his penis and that his defensive little weapon usually felt perfectly adequate to him, but on the other hand, he was heading into a situation where Merv might have got himself into trouble, while he was routinely armed with something that really should have been transported around on a pair of wheels.

That didn't bode well.

Nobody could fight Merv, unless they were inside a tank, and they would still have to be clinically insane to try it, even then.

He had chosen the stairs rather than the elevator and stepped around the last corner, before the stairwell opened out into the final corridor.

"Careful, Red!!" Norma urged him. Red jumped in shocked surprise, looking around suddenly as if she was speaking from somewhere nearby, which was exactly how it sounded.

He took a deep breath and touched his finger to the earpiece. "Yeah, Norma, I'm trying to be careful and it's not helping when you suddenly start talking to me. This thing is really loud, you know, and this situation is tense."

"Sorry," she grumbled back grudgingly. "I just..."

He clearly wasn't the only one who was worried, although her concern was just adding to his own in a way that wasn't really very welcome.

The hall was well-lit, had a grey-tiled floor and off-white painted walls. Plant pots were dotted along the way and there was a series of waste-paper bins next to them. The doors were dark-stained wood and there were four along each side on this side of the stairwell.

It was all just aching, desperately normal.

"Which door?" Red said softly, peering ahead

"Second on your left," she replied. The sound of her voice came again through the earpiece, but slowly faded away as you spoke softly, sounding in the end like nothing more than a sigh.

Red knew what she was going to tell him. "I'll be careful," he told her softly.

He walked along to the door and his hand reflexively moved to his back where his pistol was stowed below his waistband. The door loomed before him. What now? Should he knock on the door; should he kick it down?

Knocking would cost him the element of surprise but kicking it down might be too bold a move. It might be disastrous if Merv was having an affair with someone and locked in a passionate, sexual embrace. He reached down and tried the brass handle. It moved a little and then stopped. Locked.

"Sorry, Norma," he muttered softly under his breath. "Reds don't have a setting for subtle, at least not yet."

He stepped back and mustered his strength, kicking hard towards the handle of the door. It gave in easily with a muted crash, swinging open on its hinges and smashing loudly into the wall behind it. He drew his weapon now, and it was in his hand before he

knew it. The world slowed down around him but, by now, he didn't even notice. His brain speeded up as he needed it to, without him even having to think about it.

He listened carefully as he stepped inside, his small black pistol poking out before him, the cold silver tip of the muzzle leading his way inside.

He heard movement, voices, and the sound of people reacting urgently. His finger tightened on the trigger. He could hear his heart thumping in his chest and feel the electric tang of adrenaline through his body so strongly that he could almost taste it in his mouth. He swam through some remote memory that flashed vividly through his mind.

For a moment, he was somewhere else at the same time. He was in a sandy-coloured building with a beaten-up assault rifle levelled forwards. The cold metal butt was pressed hard into his shoulder and his left hand was wrapped tightly around a vertical folding grip. He was on point, leading the way into an unknown situation with potential hostiles up ahead. He could taste copper in his mouth and there was a lingering smell of decay as he pushed forward, a tactical torch cutting through the gloom inside a grim sandstone building.

Red blinked away the image and pulled his focus up ahead. He could hear someone coming and was ready for whoever it was. He was ready to fight.

“Merv!” Red called out in relief. The gigantic form of his friend and colleague stepped into sight before him with a very slightly puzzled and less slightly angry look on his face. Red lowered the weapon and breathed a very large sigh of relief. “Merv, what’s going on?”

Merv stepped towards him, his expression losing some of the confusion but making up for it with a bit more of the angry.

“Merv?” Red said again, a little startled. Something was wrong. This wasn’t the excellent-lasagne-making monster that did his laundry without being asked to, and wore Hello Kitty pyjamas, even sometimes in the afternoons. There was something very wrong about him, as if a different man was in the same body. It sent a chill up Red’s spine, but still he wasn’t ready to raise his weapon against him. His brain ran up to full speed and he felt the bitter tang of another jolt of shock course through his muscles.

Merv’s face contorted suddenly into an expression of rage. Merv’s rages were murderous, bordering on genocidal, so that was something that Red couldn’t take any other way than seriously, quite really very seriously, indeed.

Merv’s right shoulder went back as his massive balled fist drew up to slam consciousness, life and possibly Red’s entire skull clean out of his head. Red felt that this wasn’t in his best interest.

That same fist came rushing towards him with the power of a freight train and the speed of the very same freight train falling off a high cliff towards a steel floor while carrying a cargo full of magnets.

Red cried out once more in confusion, “Merv?” Despite his horrifically huge size, he moved incredibly quickly when it came to matters of punching things out of people. Red moved faster and his whole body twisted out of the way, carefully calculating the best way not to let that huge, bony fist connect with any part of him.

With a gigantic crash, louder than the door smashing open, Merv’s fist connected with the plaster wall, ripping a hole straight through it and sending a powdery cloud of debris coiling from the impact.

Red thought to himself that something was really very wrong indeed. He heard a shrill wail in his earpiece and felt very much like making a similar noise himself. He also seriously considered running away and was a bit confused about why he didn't.

He was fast, quick enough to duck out of the way, even of Merv's powerful arm, but punching back would have a similar effect of throwing a snowball at a passing truck. He very quickly calculated where he could punch Merv in order to put him down quickly and realised very fast that things just didn't work that way.

There was a roaring growl, very much like Her before the indignity of 'subtle mode' was imposed on her. It wasn't coming from a motorcycle: it was coming from an angry Merv, who was massively enraged and pointing that rage at someone whose most aggressive act towards him up to that point had been to laugh at his slippers.

Red was overwhelmed with adrenaline as Merv ripped his arm from the wall and turned to commit some more acts of wanton destruction. Red stepped back into the corridor to give himself more space. The murderous form of Merv came at him with the expression of a man who had considered their friendship and decided he was against it.

"Merv, it's me!" Red cried out, his hands raised palm-outwards while the tiny pistol rested in his right hand, pointing safely away. It never occurred to him to fire it. He wondered in the moments that followed if he could pull the trigger, even if he really had to. If it came to a choice between Merv's life and his own, which was he going to choose? What kind of man was he? He thought back to that image that had swum through his memory. He had once been a soldier. What kind of man had he been then? Was he different now?

Merv snarled in rage once more and launched himself forwards. Luckily for Red, a moving Merv was a thing that wasn't easy to change into a stationary Merv. He lunged at him, his arm pulled back to smash anything that was in front of him and his eyes were locked on Red. For Red, this wasn't ideal.

Red used his speed and rolled to the side like a bull-fighter, deftly stepping away so the force of Merv's horrendous aggression could be safely vented at anything other than him. It crashed into the opposite door, anything but safely, sending it splintering into strips of shredded wood and rolling off the hinges with a loud clatter as the remains tumbled limply to the ground.

Red was in awe. He'd seen Merv fight and knew just how devastatingly powerful he was, but this was now so much more real and pointed. His own attempt to kick open a door had been successful, if undramatic, and used every ounce of power in his whole body. Merv had punched a door clean off its hinges, utterly reducing it to scrap in the process, and had done it without any special effort. If one of those punches connected with him, then even the slushy cocktail of technology in his brain might not be able to repair the damage. That presumed that any part of his brain, and the technology inside it, were still close enough to the rest of him even to be repaired.

Red grimaced at the thought, as the angry Merv withdrew his fist and looked as if he was perfectly ready to give it another go.

"Merv!" Red said, the gun still pointing away. "It's me, Red. I'm your friend. If something has happened, tell me. Norma and I can help you. It doesn't have to be this way."

Merv clearly thought differently on the matter. His expression didn't betray an ounce of the usual warmth he had. Well, not warmth exactly but, at least, a very welcome lack of homicidal rage. Red

missed that about him. If Merv absolutely had to have homicidal rages, he'd definitely rather they weren't directed at him. He decided that he'd bring this up at the next staff meeting.

Merv's lips drew back, baring his teeth, and his head tilted forward so his little eyes glared out from under his huge, bony brow. His breathing was heavy, an almost rasping growl murmured from his throat. Both his fists were now balled tightly.

Red suddenly felt grateful that 'Murderous-Rage-Merv' didn't even think about guns. He preferred the hands-on approach. Hesitantly, he brought his little pistol to bear, aiming it squarely at his head, just between the eyes and a little above. A bullet there would end it, at least theoretically. Merv had told him many times that it wouldn't, but was that just bravado talking? Did something like Merv even need any bravado?

"Merv," he pleaded. "Stand down, Merv. It's me. I don't want to hurt you."

His broad, muscular shoulders rose and fell as he snorted angrily back. He made no sign that the weapon phased him in the slightest.

With a sigh, Red lowered the weapon. There was no way he was going to fire it at Merv, at least not to kill him. He wondered how much angrier he might get if he shot him in the arm.

"Merv!" a voice called out from the room. "Leave it. Come on!"

Red reflexively raised his pistol towards the doorway. It was a woman's voice, but he couldn't see where it came from, since the view was blocked. Merv seemed to deflate. He turned back and then just lost all interest. He turned and went back to the room, quickly, but not quite running.

Red just stood there, wondering exactly what the hell had just happened. Behind him, a voice softly, but with a note of extreme irritation, said, “Did you just break my door?”

Chapter 11

Red just stood for a moment in confusion, his eyes darting around and his brain a jumbled mass of contradictory impulses. It had been a short confrontation, one that had taken only a few seconds. In that time they had wrought carnage, both around the corridor, and inside Red's mind, where nothing that had ever taken the time to make sense was bothering to do so any more.

Yesterday, they had been friends. They had watched a movie starring Clint Eastwood as he'd wandered around a town pointing a very large gun at people. Red had commented about how cool he was, while Merv insisted the film would have been better if it had been made after the invention of spandex. They had eaten noodles straight out of the delivery box, since it was Red's turn to wash up (or as Red preferred to refer to it, 'Merv's turn to moan about Red not doing the washing up.')

They had discussed Norma and how they both only 'pretended' to be scared of her until they'd realised she could actually be watching them at any point. They'd talked about women, revealing to one another that they knew nothing whatsoever about them, and they had talked about the Hawk-Eye with the enthusiasm of children the night before Christmas.

Merv trying to kill him, punching through doors and channelling his murderous rages at Red was something he just hadn't seen coming. They'd been through so much and were friends, real, proper, friends. At least, he had believed it so thoroughly that it had never occurred to him to ask himself any questions on the subject, especially questions like, 'Is Merv going to try to kill me?'

The voice behind him spoke again. "I'm going to call the police. You broke my door!"

Red turned sharply to face a thin, quite old woman staring angrily at him with her hands on her hips. She didn't look happy, and nobody had tried to punch her head through a wall. Life didn't seem quite fair.

"I am the police," he snapped and then pressed his index finger to the earpiece. "Basically," he added with a shrug. Law enforcement, justice, secret government agencies? It was a grey area, really. "They're already on their way. Make sure Commissioner Bertolli knows what's going on."

The bewildered woman, who had never considered what might happen if a murderous super-soldier punched her door in, stood there being even more bewildered at this, since Red had actually been talking partly to Norma who had, in turn, been talking back to him.

With no time to find a shred of amusement in any of this, Red dashed back into the apartment and swung the door shut. Unlike Merv's attempt, Red's illegal entry had left the door more or less intact; it just wasn't going to be locked again without the attention of a carpenter and a locksmith.

"Norma. What can you see?" He touched his finger to the earpiece, not that doing so actually did anything. It was more a reflex than anything else. Perhaps he'd seen someone do it in a movie?

"Nothing!" came the weary reply. "The Hawk-Eye is still not seeing Merv or the other occupant of the room. I've got a video feed of two totally black silhouettes leaving along the fire escape and then vanishing right while the security camera was focused on them. I'm working to see if I can extrapolate any further details."

"Norma, we need to move quickly. Police will be here soon and they are going to stamp out any evidence of what was happening here," Red told her sharply. "Do I abandon the scene and chase after them?"

There was a pause. “Stay at the scene,” she told him sternly. “We need all the evidence we can get. I want to know what’s going on and the answer to that question might be somewhere there. It’s certainly not in the computer.”

“What about the police?” Red sniffed.

“They’re not coming for quite some time,” she assured him. “I’ll see to that. The Hawk-Eye computer is still good for something.”

Red looked around the scene. What he was going to spot with his own two eyes compared to a highly efficient artificial intelligence computer was anyone’s guess. He suspected that Norma’s motivation in telling him to stay there was more to protect him from Merv than for the use of gathering evidence.

Softly, rather defeated and with an apathetic shrug, he said, “What can I do, Norma?”

“Search the place,” she told him. “Find out who rented the apartment, talk to neighbours. Get any information you can.”

Red grumbled to himself, his shoulders slumping. “I don’t need the world’s coolest motorcycle, or super-powers to do that.”

Norma set the Hawk-Eye computer to analyse the scene, after sending Red down to retrieve his helmet. The more advanced sensors on it would help to spot small details that otherwise might be missed. While he was doing that, she began processing what little information she had.

“Computer, show the last information on Merv that you’re able to retrieve,” she told it wearily. There were some things she was going to find out that she was going to wish she didn’t know. There were several possible explanations as to what might have happened and none of them was very palatable. In her mind, she’d already

accepted the most likely as the truth and that meant that Red and she had some very difficult times ahead of them.

How could she have been so blind to all this? It was her fault: there was really nobody else to blame. She had become too familiar, allowed Red and her to have a friendly, too familiar, bond, thinking of him as she did her own son, albeit without the homicidal, psychopathic attempts to slaughter everyone she knew.

Merv was conditioned to be a consummate professional, to obey orders without question and to serve as if doing so was his duty and his only reward. She had allowed their relationship to soften, to become friendly and relaxed. She was in command and so the fault lay at her feet, no matter what Merv might have done and no matter for how long he'd been plotting to betray them; she was to blame.

"Compiling." It spoke back with its artificial monotone.
"Extrapolation ready."

This was going to be the worst one so far. With a weary sigh, she said simply, "Run the video."

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Merv stared into the distance, watching the flaming HERPES roar off on her way, speeding out into traffic and growling like a horribly wounded animal that was so crazy that it was really rather enjoying being injured. He shook his head slowly at Red, who just did things thoughtlessly with reckless abandon, never considering the consequences. He was largely fearless, a trait more likely to result in disaster than to see him remembered for an act of heroism.

There was something dreadfully anachronistic about watching that motorcycle, he thought to himself, only in less complex words. On the one hand, it was incredibly impressive and he was always filled with a certain admiration for Red. Sure, his brain, reflexes and

central-nervous system had been technologically augmented and were much faster than anyone else alive, but those weren't the only requirements necessary to sit on a machine like that one. It took bravery, the courage to put your life on the line, to risk everything at the fall of fate's fickle fancy. You had to have a singularity of purpose to take control of something uncontrollable.

It also left him with the feeling that the next time he'd be thinking about all this, it would be while giving evidence at an inquiry about the explosive, fiery death of his friend and colleague. Every single time Red rode that thing, the same thought flashed through his head, every single time without fail.

"Red!" he grumbled to himself, thinking that all this wasn't likely to end well, but hoping he'd muster up the courage to explain all this one day over a cup of coffee as Red made sarcastic jokes about his feelings. "You need to be more careful," he rumbled, and he meant it at emotional levels he hadn't quite admitted to himself, as well as several other levels that he had.

He stiffened, straightening his already quite rigid back and rubbed his hand over his closely-shaven head as he looked around. All eyes were on him; police officers around the yard were just staring fixedly in his direction. Several had their service-weapons in their hands; some were muttering to colleagues, but most were just staring with their mouths lolling open in some variation of shock and surprise.

Merv didn't enjoy being the centre of attention and was actually quite socially awkward. It was an inconvenience, therefore, that nature had seen fit to make him mountainously huge and essentially a gigantic biological beacon of interest to everyone who was around him. Such inconveniences as his social awkwardness and physical lack of gracefulness had been behind his volunteering for

the super-soldier program which, somewhat ironically, enhanced both incongruous aspects of his rather simplistic personality.

That had once been explained to him in exactly those terms, and he had stared blankly back in reply. The recruitment officer had sighed and explained more simply: 'You're very big but wish you were small. We can make you much bigger and much more professional which will make you wish you were much smaller and even less conspicuous.'

In retrospect, it might not have been a very wise decision.

Merv turned and headed back to his van with a purposeful stride, that of a man in total control of the situation. A uniformed officer stepped confidently forward, his hand twitching towards his service weapon. His mouth opened as if to speak, perhaps to issue a challenge. He halted in his tracks as he thought better of it: after all, what might he say? What could he do?

Merv was aware of the sudden precariousness of his position. He was within a police compound yard with a handful of police files, surrounded by people with the means to stop him. He had a right to be there, his ID carried considerable weight, he had legitimate business but that had to be tempered against the fact that Red had just launched the HERPES motorcycle at full power through the exit. Merv himself was hardly a thing to go unnoticed.

He made a brisk pace as he headed to his transport. It required no key, even though he had one to over-ride the computer. His biological identity had been programmed in, so the van knew him and responded accordingly with a loud, very positive sound of metal locks retracting behind armoured doors.

He paused momentarily to give one last look around. Eyes had been diverted away. His confidence had shrouded him with a veneer of respectability and the officers had seemed to convince themselves

that he was either a man with a legitimate reason to be there or something they had no power over right now, but whose time would eventually come.

In any case, it seemed he was free to go about his business and he breathed a very subtle, measured sigh of relief about it.

The door closed with a very satisfying clunk, a warmer, softer noise than metal usually made when shut against metal. To the keen observer, it gave away the fact that the van was constructed from the black carbon molecule that the Hawk-Eye technology was based on, but, considering he was surrounded by city detectives, he knew that his secret was perfectly safe.

Inside the van, the dash lit up like a Christmas-tree, with levels of over-bright LEDs and flickering LCD readouts. As over-worked and clumsy as the instrumentation actually was, it looked kind of cool and always gave Merv a little smile. As this was Merv, the smile was inwards and a very, very little one indeed.

In the centre of the dash was an unusually large screen which suddenly flashed to black and then lit up with a series of green letters warning of an incoming communication. Merv frowned and scrambled in his jacket for his mobile phone. It was set for Silent but, sure enough, a call was flashing on the screen.

“Merv,” he said simply, his voice a deep rasping growl. He listened intently. “I will be added to the protocol. Understood,” he replied emptily back to whoever had spoken to him. For a moment, he just sat there, staring blankly ahead, lost inside his own mind while whoever was on the other end spoke to him. Then, very slowly and very deliberately he turned it off and put away his mobile phone, tucking it back into the inside pocket of his jacket.

His chest moved up and down as he breathed, but his expression never changed. It rarely did.

“Computer, deactivate transponder,” he instructed. “Set electro-magnetic field projector to the sub-five-gigahertz range and transmit signal pulse to mask the carbon’s signal. Prepare to transmit on my mark.”

The computer responded silently. The screen in the middle of his console fed back the information, although Merv never saw it; his head never moved, as his eyes stared glassily straight ahead.

He reached out to the steering wheel.

A little pinging sound issued from the computer indicating that the settings were made and that everything was ready and waiting for his command.

“Trans-”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma closed her eyes, her head slowly shaking from side to side. There could be no doubt about it and she harboured none. What ‘the protocol’ was, she had no idea, but it appeared to have something to do with how or why things were being made invisible to the Hawk-Eye computer. If she’d never heard of it, how could Merv have? It seemed to prove that the worst was true.

“Merv,” she sighed sadly to herself, really very sadly. “Merv, not you. You were the last person in the world that I thought would betray us.”

For a moment, she shouldered the burden of his betrayal. She felt anger rising in the pit of her stomach, a slow rage that flowed through her veins getting hotter as it surged around her body.

She looked once more to the screen, angry but still shaking her head. Was she more angry at him, or at herself for missing it?

“...second last person!” she whispered to herself. “Computer. Show me Red.”

Chapter 12

Red and Norma sat opposite one another across the briefing table, each with a coffee close to hand and both quite a long way from being able to force a smile. Norma had poured the coffee, an almost unprecedented event, and had told him to join her in the briefing room. It was the one with 'Storage' written on the door and he hadn't objected or made even the tiniest sarcastic comment - another event that almost never happened.

The room had never looked more grey, and now, without Merv in it, had never seemed more empty. Now, the few trophies that were displayed on the makeshift racking seemed like ugly, hollow things that no longer had any substance. Any achievements they'd made now seemed trivial, when weighed up against what they'd lost. They had lost a piece of themselves and they were both struggling to make sense of, and come to terms with, that loss in their own way.

The mood itself began where sombre ended.

Now they sat, staring at their coffees, which were now only tepid, since neither had taken so much as a sip while they were still hot. Neither of them was really thinking about anything in particular, as if there was just too much to think about and their brains just didn't know where to start with it all. Norma looked up with her sad eyes and watched for a moment, as Red just sat before her, his eyes facing down to the table, his shoulders slumped and his expression one of confused disappointment, as if he just couldn't quite believe that what had happened could have really happened.

She felt as if she had spent her lifetime forcing the world to make sense and had finally managed to make it do so, to some small degree. She had the Hawk-Eye, a team and a purpose and now everything came together and the future seemed a place worth going

to. Then, suddenly, that world had pulled the rug out from under her feet, like a grinning magician revealing how he'd cleverly tricked her all along and the world would never, could never, make sense, no matter how hard she tried to make it do so. The world did all this while grinning manically at her with a twisted exaggeration of a vicious, knowing smirk. But none of this seemed clever to her. It just seemed cruel, an act of viciousness against people that meant it no harm.

At least she had trodden this path before, so she was far from innocent, but someone else had been trampled right along with her.

Red looked up, but by then she'd already looked away, lost in quiet contemplation. He saw her give a small sigh and her hand twitched towards her coffee, but didn't manage to get all the way there.

He felt as if his heart had been scooped right out of his chest and flung casually off into the distance. There was a hollow, gnawing sensation that was eating away at the inside of him. He felt as if he was sinking into a pit, and tried to make himself angry about it. But his anger was just a mask, and so weak a mask that it disguised nothing, even from himself. He wasn't angry at all: he was just empty, and the emptiness was filling up with a gnawing sadness. Something he believed in absolutely, something he had poured all of his trust into, was gone, and it had torn a piece of him away when it vanished.

"That wasn't Merv!" he finally managed to say, not sounding entirely sure of himself, but his words still managed to carry some confidence, or sound like it, at least.

She looked up and gave him a sympathetic smile. "I'm so sorry, Red. I know how this must feel."

He shook his head and frowned. "No."

She took a deep breath and a sad little look flashed over her already quite miserable expression, as if the responsibility for the world was balanced on her slender shoulders. She explained softly: “Red, you’re new to this world. People are often not what you think they are. Sometimes, you don’t know who you can trust; you don’t know who’s really what they say they are. Merv must have been working for another agency, some other group. I don’t know what else I can tell you. These things happen and it hurts, but we learn from that hurt and we carry on.”

“No!” he said again, more assuredly. He looked up and the familiar fire in his eyes began to light back up. “That wasn’t Merv.”

“Red...” She didn’t know what else to say, but she understood only too well how this kind of betrayal stung at your very core and shook the foundation of all of your beliefs. She didn’t want to believe this, either; how could she believe it now?

The first time that something that even compared to this had happened to her, she had spent days just struggling to understand it, fighting the situation, to force it to make sense in her mind. To this day, it never did. She had come to terms with the fact that it never would.

“Merv loved you, Norma!” he began. “He told me that he had started to hate this life but knew he couldn’t ever leave it. He’d been too conditioned by the super-soldier training and so he had to follow orders. He had to do his duty: he had no choice about it.

“He told me he couldn’t look at himself in the mirror any longer. He’d been ashamed to go home and face his family, so he just went back every night to an empty apartment in the city and sat alone in silence for hours. He said he wanted to dream of a better life, but all he could do was think about tactics, training and missions. They

even took his dreams away from him. He wasn't a real person any longer - until he met you. You changed everything for him."

Norma shook her head sadly and whispered, "Red..."

He ignored her and carried straight on. "When you started the Hawk-Eye, he told me it was as if his whole life came together and suddenly it all meant something. He finally had a reason to live and that something finally mattered to him. He told me that the only thing that had ever scared him was losing all that again."

She smiled thinly back at him. Inside, she was tearing apart. These words were something she needed to hear right now, but they'd been spoken falsely. Had Merv been expertly using Red, slipping deeper behind enemy lines all along? What Merv had said meant nothing now, but it still touched her and she found her defences rearing up automatically against it. Still, it was getting through. She was feeling something.

"It was because of you that his life changed, Norma. He wears slippers now, because you let him find the real person that was hidden inside him. We did that to him, us being like a family let Merv find out who he really is. He would never have turned against us; he cares for us as much as we care about him!"

She sighed sadly and looked away. After a pause, she began: "He tried to kill you, Red-"

"That wasn't Merv!" he said forcefully, his tone snapping at her. "I don't know what else to say. I just know that wasn't Merv."

"Then what?" she asked sharply, but she was sure there was no answer he could give that would change her mind. She silently rebuked herself for sounding short with him. He was blunt, genuine, simple and honest, and this was something he was going to struggle to accept even more than she would. He was better than all this, and she had never felt more that she needed to protect him from it all.

“Norma, someone did something to him,” Red told her, with all the assurance of a man who was without a shred of doubt on the matter. “That wasn’t the Merv I know. He didn’t even know who I was.”

She shook her head. “Red, I would love to believe that. I want to believe it just as much as you do.”

Red’s expression was the most serious she’d ever seen on him.

“We’ve seen some shit, Norma!” he told her. “We live in a world where anything can happen and most of it does. That man risked his life and fought by my side against zombies, drug-dealers and a gauntlet of heavily armed police psychopaths. That thing that was wearing Merv’s body when it tried to kill me wasn’t the man I know. I don’t know much, but I know that. I know that without the tiniest shadow of a doubt.”

She smiled. Somehow, the depth of the belief he had in his friend warmed her enough to melt a little of the ice in her soul. She said softly, “I wish I could believe that, Red.” For just a moment, she let herself hope he might be right.

He could be right, couldn’t he?

“Believe it!” he told her. “We’re going to find him, Norma, and we’re going to help him. I’m going to find out what happened to him and get him back to the way he used to be or else...” He stopped rather abruptly and bit his lower lip, looking away with a dark frown.

“Or else, what?” she asked, noticing that look on his face. The darkness was back but he wasn’t drowning in this time: now, he had control.

“Or else I’ll kill him,” Red told her firmly, and Norma frowned back at him with a sudden worried look. “It’s what he’d want me to do.”

“He’d want...?”

Red nodded and explained: "The Merv I know was tired of violence, tired of being a machine that had no use outside of hurting people. With our help, he'd found his humanity and if he's lost it again, he'd not want himself to be used as a mindless weapon, not ever again. He'd rather die than know he was responsible for killing someone that didn't absolutely deserve it."

She just stared at him. Nobody knew Merv better than they, and Red knew him better than anyone else. To the other people who had known Merv, he was just a tool, something to give orders to and wait for the horrific results. To her shame, she'd treated him no differently when he'd first been assigned to her.

In truth, it was Red that had made the difference, a man that didn't fit in to their world but had no choice but to try. It had made them change, to reach some compromise, and they'd all been changed by the experience, reminded of what they'd forgotten along their journey. He had reminded them all that they were human, before they lost what was special about them forever.

Obviously, in part, he was romanticising things, but was he wrong? Merv had changed so much, become so much a better, a more rounded, man. Was Red right? Would he prefer that his best and only friend killed him rather than he become a tool of violence once more, a blunt trauma weapon to be wielded by people with agendas he had no party to?

She ventured softly, "You're serious, aren't you?"

Red nodded without a moment of hesitation. There clearly wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind. "I owe him that. He'd do it for me!"

Norma shook her head - not because she was questioning his logic, but because he'd given her hope in a world where there was so

very little to be found. When things looked darker than they'd ever been, she had never seen that coming. Now she had hope, too.

"What do you suggest?" she said.

As Red looked at her, the darkness softened in his bright eyes and he seemed unusually focused. "We proceed with the presumption that Merv is not himself. We treat this as a rescue mission first and foremost. We don't assume he betrayed us."

"But if he did?" she asked.

"He didn't!" Red told her firmly. "But if he did, it doesn't matter. The outcome will be the same, won't it? We won't let the Merv we know become the monster he was. I will never accept that."

That needed no further explanation. Red needed to believe in Merv as much as Norma needed to believe in Red. If he needed this, then there seemed no reason not to go along with it. All the paths they were following now led back to the same place and it was a place she was determined to reach. She would have answers and she would make the people behind this give them to her, and then pay for what they'd done.

She looked up at Red and saw his pained expression looking back at her. He sounded confident, sounded like a man secure in the decision, but those eyes told her that he needed her to tell him she was with him all the way.

She nodded that she understood and very softly she said, barely a mutter from her lips, "It will be exactly the same. We'll get Merv back the way he was, so we can trust him completely, or we'll honour him by making sure he's never a threat to any innocent people ever again."

The very corner of Red's lips traced slightly upwards into the merest ghost of a smile. "Thank you, Norma."

Chapter 13

They were back in the Hawk-Eye control room and, whilst nothing had changed, everything felt totally different at the same time.

At one point, which now felt so very long ago, there had been an air of mistrust between them which had bordered on hostility. There had been a sharp focus, as each had struggled to find answers to questions that meant everything in the world to them. Now, some part of that sombre mood had returned and a little of that professionalism had reasserted itself.

Without Merv, and with their facing the possibility that he may have wilfully betrayed them, there was a hole in the Hawk-Eye centre and it was filling up with something that felt very much as if it didn't belong there.

"The Hawk-Eye computer doesn't seem capable of tracking certain people and events," Norma said, as she reviewed the menus. "At least we have the hard copies from the police. We can manually go through the files of related events in the hope of finding a match. If we can find the identity of the man on the bike, we might have a shot of finding out what's behind all this."

"No we can't," Red told her. He ran his hand over his short, dark hair and sighed at his frustration. "I have a motorcycle with a single seat and no storage capacity whatsoever. Merv has a van. Guess who had the files?"

She gave an exaggerated sigh back at him. That was followed by an angry glare that he didn't really deserve. "So what do we know?"

"Not much. Same as ever."

She grumbled: that seemed about right. "We know that we have an assignment. We know that all of these things are connected

somehow,” she began, as her mind started working to put together the fragments of the puzzle that had been forced upon them.

“Not necessarily!” Red added. “We always seem to stumble on something - almost by accident - which reveals itself to be connected to the Hawk-Eye in some way, even though we originally thought it had nothing to do with it.”

She huffed at him, although he wasn’t actually wrong. “But it was all connected in the end.”

“So you think we could investigate the assignment and that will tell us what happened with Merv?”

Norma actually smiled, but it held all the warmth of a fast food burger. “Actually, there’s a school of thought that suggests that you could investigate anything and eventually it would lead you back to everything else. The Hawk-Eye is powerful enough to actually explore that theory, since everything is connected in some way.”

Red gave her a stern look. “And yet it thinks that my motorcycle is a Lockheed F117.”

Her smile vanished. “You know it’s not that ridiculous. The motorcycle is a unique construction so there is no other frame of reference for the computer to work on beyond the colour and relative heat output so it’s come to an entirely logical conclusion.”

“It’s entirely logical that my motorcycle is a jet-fighter with a wheel at each end?” he asked, and now it was his turn to flash a smile.

“Well, the computer doesn’t appreciate how little sense that makes to us, because it doesn’t think the same way that we do. In fact, it’s a computer. It doesn’t think at all, in the conventional human sense,” she argued.

“It doesn’t think the same way that I do...” he grunted, as a sarcastic reply.

She gave him an angry but entirely professional little glare. He finally broke into a proper smile and his stiff posture softened.

“Norma, what are we going to do?”

She stared back at the menu on her main screen. She huffed to herself in the seconds that drifted slowly past. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “This would be easy if it wasn’t for this protocol.”

Red frowned curiously. “What’s that?”

She turned to face him and tried to explain what she knew. “Merv mentioned a protocol. When he did, the Hawk-Eye could no longer track him. He effectively vanished.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, can we find out what this protocol is?”

“Computer!” she said, her voice firm and authoritative, but a little sarcastic, too. “What is the protocol?”

The menu flashed on the screen as it compiled data, relating it to current events. “There is no record of such a protocol that has records I can access.”

Norma turned back to Red. “No!” she said. “We can’t find out what this thing is. I had obviously tried before.”

He didn’t know if he was on the receiving end of a subtle but abrasive form of sarcastic humour, or if her patience was swallowed up by her voracious inner well of personal frustration. Either way, it amounted to the same.

“Norma, can’t we at least find out something about the people who made it? Wouldn’t that give us a clue? Wouldn’t Medows have some connection to it?”

“What would...” Her words trailed off as her expression shifted. At first, she had an expression that suggested she was hostile to the idea, then it melted as she softened, realising that wasn’t a totally ridiculous idea at all. “Actually, that might tell us something.”

She began entering the search parameters manually. “Good idea, Red.”

“Thanks,” he said proudly. “I have two other good ideas if you’re interested.”

“Is one of those the idea about hiring a dedicated waitress whose job it is to serve coffee and ‘look pretty’?” she asked sarcastically.

“I can’t be the only one looking pretty around here. It’s a lot of pressure, and I still think there are huge social benefits that you’re ignoring, but I’ve still got one other good idea,” he grumbled. “My bike fires stun grenades as missiles. I mean, that’s fun and all, but I was thinking it might be more practical to fire proper missiles, the kind that leave a smouldering crater in the ground instead of confused people rolling around holding their ears. If I want to stun people, I still have the electric water-gun and my sparkling wit.”

“I think we can all be grateful that you can’t weaponise your ‘sparkling wit!’” she noted dryly. “The bike would end up firing missiles that miss the mark wildly and just roll around the floor after falling totally flat.”

“Like North Korean missiles?” he joked, rather wildly missing the mark with humour then ended up falling totally flat. “I mean, I know it’s a lot of work, designing new missiles, loading them with a mixture of angry hornets and little pictures of clowns, or whatever it is that makes explosions happen, and reconfiguring the launch tubes to take them, but I feel that the overall effect would be worth the hard work, especially since you’ll be the one doing the hard work. I really think that we should be leaving smouldering craters whenever possible. I’m confident that Merv would agree with me when he gets back.”

She looked at him disapprovingly, her eyes going up and down as she weighed him up, trying to decide what part of all this was a bad joke. “You know we have crater-leaving missiles in a box somewhere in storage. We don’t have to make up anything; they’re a standard fit.”

“I can have missiles?” He beamed a happy, rather too happy, smile.

She shook her head. “I didn’t say that!”

“Well, if we have explosion-missiles, why did you give me stun-grenades in the first place?” He sounded a little hurt.

“Red...” she began, but her words trailed off as she tried to find a way to put this sympathetically. It was not the type of revelation that lent itself very well to such things. “There’s no way to put this kindly, so I’ll just go right out and say it. At first, I wasn’t sure what to make of you and I suspected that you might be an idiot. Therefore, I decided to limit the amount of damage you could do.”

Red grinned, as he remembered his achievements, such as they were. “And how did that work out?”

“Well, it certainly proved me right!” she told him. “While your wounded ego is giving itself a hug by reminding yourself of the waitresses you’ve managed to talk into going out with you, I’ve lined up a video to watch.”

Red frowned. How did she know? “Actually, I was all business, thinking of all the smouldering craters I’m going to leave. I rarely think about waitresses these days. I’m growing as a person.”

“If you think about the whole issue of your love life compared to smouldering craters, then it really amounts to the same thing,” Norma noted dryly, pointedly and really quite accurately. “This entry is for David Medows at a design meeting. Let’s see what happens.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Professor David Meadows was not a handsome man. His lips were pulled back over a set of teeth that didn't quite fit inside his own face, his eyes were too small and too close together, his ears were too big, his skin was rough, his hair was untidy; and he was always followed around by a slight smell of socks.

None of this bothered him in the slightest. He was a man who lived outside of his own body. His work was what mattered to him and that had always been true. He measured himself by his achievements. He was no more than his last success and was always working on creating his next. If that success meant anything, then the man in the mirror would always smile back at him, no matter what it looked like.

His personal assistant's appearance followed a quite different set of criteria. She poured him a coffee and he took a moment to watch. She was striking in every way. Her hair was long, jet black and dead straight. It cascaded down her back neatly, a perfectly measured exercise in control. Her face was almost perfect, except perhaps her chin might be just a little too pointed and the ridge of her brow might just be a little too prominent. The very subtle imperfections leant character to what might otherwise be a quite bland, if beautiful, face.

"Thank you, Claire," he said, just before she finished pouring the brew into a white ceramic mug with a cartoon rat printed on it. She flashed him a perfectly sincere smile of cursory politeness which was purely habitual. Clearly she liked him, and their familiarity with one another was one that had grown over some considerable time.

"He's outside, Sir." She spoke with a soft voice, as if she believed that her words carried no great importance.

He nodded in reply and sat back in his chair with his neat little desk before him. He flashed a glance to the file and then back to her. "Marcus Payne?"

She nodded in agreement. "Yes, Sir. He's twelve minutes and seventeen seconds early."

He raised an eyebrow and shifted uneasily in his chair. He'd got used to her quirks, but it still made him smile at how she coped so poorly with incredibly mundane details that were barely noticeable to other people. "I see. Are we ready for him?"

She nodded back her reply. "We are ready. Would you like me to show him in?"

He nodded back to her. "Thank you, Claire."

He watched her leave, but not with lustful eyes. Rather, he followed her as she stepped out with a certain appreciation instead. He didn't want her in the conventional sense in which a man might want a woman. Instead, he appreciated her for what she was. She was essential to him. She had become almost a part of him, a key element to the way in which he functioned. She was a very important part of making sure the man in the mirror looking back at him was smiling in the morning. His interest in anything barely ever went beyond that.

The door to his office closed with a click. A second click sounded, louder and more abrupt as the door's security system sealed it closed.

There was a window in the door made from frosted glass. It was covered with an aluminium shutter that swung slightly with the movement of the door, making a metallic brushing sound, an almost musical note, like wind blowing softly over a thin, hollow tube.

He waited in silence. He didn't need to review the file. He knew it inside and out; he knew Marcus perfectly. It was his job to know.

There was a knock on the door, a reserved and respectful tapping. Medows pressed a button under his desk, a small square white thing, the kind which was usually to be found attached to a wireless doorbell but had been re-purposed to serve as a release switch. With a click, the door swung open.

“David!” Marcus called out with a smile. He was younger, a more laid-back kind of man entirely. He was one of the new breed, gifted in terms of his abilities, and tolerated in spite of his personality. Medows didn’t approve of such informality with his colleagues but it weakened the other man, not him. He existed according to his own set of rules.

“Marcus,” he replied with a curt nod. His thin lips stretched into a smile but he made no effort to make it look particularly genuine. “Please sit down. Can I get my assistant to get you a coffee?”

Marcus shook his head, his straggly, wavy blonde hair bobbing around his face as he did. “No, thanks, I don’t drink the stuff. I like to stay pure: no alcohol, no smoking, no red meat. I take my health seriously, you know?”

Medows smiled a little more. “Ah!” he said knowingly. “You want to live forever, do you?”

“Hell no!” He stepped into the room and Medows gestured to a chair in front of his desk. “I’m too curious about death not to be interested in trying it out one day. There’s no rush though, if you know what I mean, and while I’m here, I’d like to stay as fit and sharp as possible. My parents half killed themselves with their diet before they died. That’s a path no intelligent person would want to walk.”

“Admirable,” Medows told him with a nod, as if he agreed entirely, even though he actually found him incredibly annoying.

“But, you know, science is pushing the boundaries. The first person to live a thousand years might already be here among us, they think. Who knows what the future holds. We live in a time where anything is possible, right?” Marcus sat himself down, still talking as if someone, somewhere, was interested enough to listen to him.

Medows, since that was the name that he thought of as his own, said, cutting off the younger man before he could find something else to drone on about: “Anything is possible, but my job is to worry about what we can do now, rather than what we can imagine doing later.”

Marcus nodded in reply and his face took on a smug expression. “Sir, you would be amazed what we can do.”

Medows nodded once more but was growing weary of this already. “What have you done?”

“The system, or whatever we’re going to call it, is ready,” he said, pausing for effect. His childish grin took some of the drama out of it.

Medows began to smile and, just for once, he looked like he meant it. It wasn’t a pretty sight, for he often neglected his physicality. His teeth were yellowing with deep brown discolouration between, and his gums were receding.

“And it works!”

“Tell me,” he began, with an uncontrollable smile spreading across his lips, “is it proven yet? Has it been properly field tested?”

“Oh yes!” Marcus stated, very uncharacteristically businesslike. “Would you like me to explain the process? As you know, I’m unable to keep actual records of our work. It wouldn’t be possible to store records electronically, even if we wanted to. Still, I’m familiar with every aspect of it and can probably answer any questions you might have.”

“Unable?” Medows asked. He knew the requirements well enough, so that asking such a thing was largely redundant. Still, he wanted to know, just to make sure in his own mind that everything was where it should be.

“The system runs a protocol that has been hard-wired into digital code at the most basic level,” Marcus began, quite clearly very proud of his work. “The protocol has been encoded into the digital language, invisibly and undetectably. It’s now part of the digital world. It exists, and will always exist, within all technology that uses a modern binary language. The program is coded deeply into the very essence of our technological world. It’s invisible but it’s always present. It’s like background radiation, like the signal of a mobile phone. It’s alive in the processing chip of every digital camera, every laptop, every mobile phone. Anything stored digitally is subject to it.”

Medows understood, even though his grasp of the finer points of such technology were inferior to the other man’s. Still, he knew all this well enough.

He continued, “You only have to set the subject, activate the program and make sure the correct activation password is given, and then the protocol will simply decide that that entity no longer exists. It will make any stored records irretrievable, make the object invisible to any technology and create an emptiness around it that nothing will ever penetrate. Anything we would rather no longer existed will now never have existed. It will be erased and invisible until we give the proper code or until the subject dies. Obviously, we don’t want invisible corpses lying around so the system removes the digital block on the physical body at that point, although no database would ever be able to find a match.”

“Impressive.” Meadows looked away, lost in contemplation. He frowned thoughtfully and for a moment was troubled by all this, perhaps by such power that he now wielded. “Marcus, this has been tested? Is that correct?”

Marcus nodded and beamed a happy smile. “Thoroughly,” he assured him.

Meadows leant forwards and pressed a button on his desk. “Claire,” he said, to the sound of a pulsing electronic note from the outside office that squealed for her attention. He took his finger off the call-button.

“Marcus, you must have a drink with me to celebrate. You have achieved a miracle here and this moment cannot pass by without noting it. Tradition demands it,” he told him. “There isn’t another human soul alive who knows all aspects of this project, not another anywhere on this lonely little planet that you can ever discuss this with. We are alone and we owe it to one another to do this properly. You will join me for a drink? I have a reasonable selection.”

Marcus cocked his head to one side and tutted. It was true: they were the chief coder and the project manager. Nobody else knew enough about the project to discuss it; virtually nobody would ever know it even existed. Marcus was swayed and asked, “Do you mean a proper drink?”

Meadows nodded coolly. “If you will bend your rule and share a drink with me, then I would be honoured. I have a very fine Single Malt.”

Marcus grinned. “I don’t usually, but, as you say, this is a special occasion.”

Meadows agreed and pressed down on the intercom. “Two glasses of the Single Malt, please.”

“Yes, Sir!” her voice called back through the intercom.

Meadows sighed to himself. “Show me.”

Marcus looked confused. “I’m sorry...?”

He said again, “Show me. Make yourself vanish.” He pointed to the equipment on his desk, a computer monitor with a live feed to the cameras around the room. “Make yourself disappear. Show me how this system of yours, this protocol, works in the real world.”

Marcus nodded enthusiastically. “You don’t need any special equipment,” he began proudly. “If your computer is attached to the internet, the instruction will spread in seconds and be passed to every digital device on the planet. Open up my personnel file as well and you can watch it all vanish.”

Medows told him with a smile, “I already have.”

Marcus said something softly, barely a mumble, while Medows simply watched in silence. It was like a magician from some ancient time evoking a spell that profoundly altered the universe. As he stopped speaking, the image of his colleague vanished from the screen. The chair he was sitting in was simply a blurred mess of pixels at the centre of his monitor and the open folder was swallowed behind an error message.

Medows nodded in satisfaction and even gave a tiny gasp. “Wow!” he said, making no effort to disguise how impressed he was.

At that moment, Claire came through the door, bearing a tray with two small glasses filled with a light brown liquid. She stepped past the guest and placed the tray on the desk. “Sir!” she said politely, gesturing to them.

“Claire,” he said with a very solemn tone. “We are ready. Would you mind?”

Marcus seemed very slightly confused, since the drinks were already poured, but he wasn't paying too much attention. This was just business and none of it was his.

A flickering reflection flashed before him as light glinted across a brightly polished watch-strap right before his face. His eyes widened in surprise but whatever was happening was happening far too quickly for him to react to. His eyes bulged and his jaw began to slump open.

Medows watched as the life faded from his face. The muscles went slack, the eyes rolled up as his whole body deflated into the chair. Claire, his assistant looked over. Her left arm had rolled around his forehead, holding him still while her right had plunged a long and deadly, serrated blade up under the back of his skull, slipping it in over the end of his spine and deep into the soft core of his brain. He had died before he had realised what was happening and was gone before his mind even registered a threat.

"Sir?" she asked, retracting the knife expertly, so barely a drop of blood came out with it.

Medows said to her, his eyes averted from this distasteful scene: "A victimless crime, Claire. This man never existed. In the absence of his life, he achieved more than most of the living could ever hope to do. He gave us success. The protocol is working. That's something worth celebrating, don't you think?"

She reached over and picked up one of the glasses. Medows picked up the other and clinked his into hers playfully. He cast a glance at the corpse and then looked away once more.

"A toast, Claire!" he said. "To the invisible man."

"Do you want toast?" she asked, with a slightly crooked smile.

"Claire," he told her with a sympathetic smile, "I don't want any toast right now. Thank you, anyway."

Claire looked a little confused. Perhaps this was because he was thanking her and she hadn't brought him any toast. She had an expression on her face of someone who felt that she really had to do better.

"And can you get that thing out of my office please?" he said with a note of disgust.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"Never underestimate women!" Red said thoughtfully, as if he'd taken the most important lesson away and really taken hold of it.

Norma gave him a sarcastic stare. "That's the only fair way to do it, since it wouldn't really be possible for them to underestimate you."

Chapter 14

“So the protocol doesn’t work properly?” Red asked. It seemed to him that if it did, they wouldn’t have been able to get as far as they had with understanding it, but who really knew how these things worked? Red was happiest riding too fast, drinking too much coffee and trying to get dates with the girls who brought it to him. The upper limit of his understanding of the Hawk-Eye terminal was that it was a nice, flat surface for resting mugs on.

“It seems to me that it’s working perfectly, but the Hawk-Eye has a unique and unconventional operating system which the protocol was never designed for. I’m working to understand exactly what the protocol is and we are making some headway into getting past it,” said Norma, venturing her theory. She tried an experiment, her fingers flying over the keys of her terminal so fast that even Red could barely make out the movement. “I’ve confirmed that Merv still exists on our internal records, but I can’t find any mention of him in any external database. It seems as if the protocol is working and he’s now protected by it.”

Red was perched on the edge of her desk. He looked away thoughtfully into the distance. Then he said: “This is real then? They found a code that literally tricks digital devices into thinking someone doesn’t exist?”

Norma nodded. “It’s impressive but it makes sense. I can see why the intelligence community would love this.”

Red grumbled. “Sure. They could go anywhere without being watched, without having anyone aware of their movements, even though it was the very same community they work for that put up all the technology they now want to hide from, in the first place. Why do I feel like the last sane person left on this planet?”

Norma rolled her eyes at his ham-fisted opinion: it seemed that he had one about everything. “Sure, Red. Whatever you say.”

He rolled his eyes right back at her. “So, this Medows guy, he’s the one behind this invisible protocol? It’s because of him that the Hawk-Eye isn’t working properly?”

“No wonder they were scared when he died. He could have hidden anything. He could have put the most dangerous thing in the entire world in a gigantic yellow box and left it in the centre of the biggest city in the world and nobody would ever see it,” she said thoughtfully. “It’s terrifying when you think about it.”

“So he had this secret technology?” Red asked, just checking he was following all this correctly. “Is this what he was threatening his bosses with?”

Norma frowned up at him. “It can’t just be that. He was managing this for them so they knew about it. It must have been something else.”

Red shrugged, “Like what?”

“Think about it,” Norma told him. “The agency asks him to make things vanish all the time. He must have seen some terrible things, perhaps something so awful that he felt that he had to create protection for himself. It could have been anything.”

“Something terrible?” Red frowned now.

“Enough to scare a man who gets scared professionally.” Even Norma was beginning to sound worried at this point. “Medows made things invisible, removed the records of terrible things from existing. He saw the very darkest things that happen in our world and then, one day, he saw something so awful that it shook him to his core. Imagine what that might have been.”

There was an eerie silence between them. Norma shuddered to herself and Red decided it was time to change the subject. “I think

we need a coffee,” he suggested through the chest pains caused by the chronic heart-burn he was suffering from.

“Good idea!” she agreed, even though it was actually a terrible idea.

Red poured a mug each of coffee and let his mind wander. What could be so terrible that Meadows would have been so flustered by it? It had to be something beyond anything that they’d seen so far.

“Red, I have an idea,” Norma called out, rousing him from his quite grim thoughts and he was grateful for the distraction.

“What’s that?” he asked, turning to face her. “As in, what is your idea, not what is an idea? I know what an idea is, in theory. I even have them from time to time.”

Norma was working frantically on the system, trying to defeat an advanced secret protocol while he was trying to bring over a mug of coffee without spilling it. “I’ve isolated a part of the Hawk-Eye and loaded it with a backup copy of only our own records.”

“That’s great, Norma.” Red rolled his eyes sarcastically at this thrilling revelation. “And yet you still struggle with the concepts of getting doughnuts at breakfast time!”

“Red, I think I know how we can find Merv!”

Suddenly, he was interested. Not interested enough to stop dealing with the far more interesting business of coffee, but enough to think about it briefly. “How, Norma?” he asked.

“Come here!” she told him and pointed to the screen. “This part of the system is isolated from the rest of the Hawk-Eye. I’ve entered all the parameters.”

“And now what?” Red asked, sensing that there was a very good reason that Norma wasn’t invited to a lot of parties.

She looked at him and bit her lip. “You’re going to kill Merv!”

■ PLYBCK RSMD PRTCT

Red stood in the middle of a large, and mostly empty, warehouse. All that was left of it was bare concrete walls, crumbling slowly into dust. The floor beneath him was strewn with debris and rubble. Natural light flooded in through missing glass in the windows and, from above, came the sound of cooing from birds nesting along the exposed metal framework.

While hardly idyllic, and nobody would be going there for a romantic evening, it was at least quiet. It was the perfect place for the confrontation, the final moment between the two of them. They both knew it had all been leading up to this.

Merv stood in front, his hands clenched into fists and his face contorted into an angry frown. He was in a mood already and this could only get worse. Red was only too aware that a moody Merv in your vicinity did terrible things to your life expectancy.

“Red, I don’t want to kill you!” Merv told him, growling angrily, his voice deep and powerful.

Red shook his head sadly. “I don’t think that’s going to be an issue, big guy!” he said.

Merv’s fists clenched tightly and he shuddered as a flicker of rage rippled through him.

They were around ten meters apart. At this range, Red had the advantage, for he was faster and could reach, discharge and reload his weapon before Merv could even draw his. If Merv got within range of connecting those massive, powerful hands to any part of Red, then the situation would be totally reversed; Red knew this only too well. It was safe to say that it was foremost on his mind.

“Merv, you know why I’m here,” Red told him, a hint of regret was evident in his voice but, nevertheless, the job would get done. “I’m here to kill you, big guy. Still, for the sake of our friendship,

I'm going to offer you one chance to stand down. It's the least I can do for a man who's made me as many coffees as you have.

"Perhaps, some day, we'll be in a coffee shop overlooking a river as people pass by on their meaningless little lives and we'll laugh about this. You'll be wearing a pink T-shirt and those little silver-rimmed sunglasses that I like, and we'll chuckle about that day when I was sent to kill you but, instead, we went for a delicious vegetarian pizza while you worked on your apology to Norma.

"I know a place where they actually cook blue-cheese right into the base. I think that part of the problem with the world is that not enough cheese is cooked into not enough pizza bases."

"You are really bad at this part of the job, Red," Merv quite correctly pointed out to him.

In Red's mind, he realised there were many things he was bad at, but at least nobody else knew about some of them. It wasn't as if people could just read his thoughts on a computerised device somewhere, was it, he thought? His entire life couldn't be displayed for the simple purpose of entertainment.

"It's that or I kill you," Red shrugged. "Honestly, it really isn't my first choice. Merv, they cook blue-cheese right into the base. It's really good, Merv. We could be eating that right now. Please don't make me kill you instead."

Merv didn't take the suggestion very well and convulsed, shaking in rage as he flushed with adrenaline, ready to attack. His hand moved in slow motion. To Red, Merv's reactions were painfully, laughably slow.

Red reached to his waistband where his tiny Ruger pistol was stowed. He grabbed it, wrapping his fingers around the diminutive butt and drawing it free in a single, fluid motion. It was lined up on

the target before Merv could even finish throwing his hand towards his holster.

Red's finger tightened on the trigger.

Merv had been his friend. They had been more than just friends: they had fought side by side against insurmountable odds. Pulling the trigger against him felt like a cold-blooded murder.

But, this was how it had to be. Red hadn't come to reason with him. He'd come to end it. He'd made him angry, upsetting him until he reacted, knowing that Merv's temper would consume him, making him flail violently around while Red could take his time to pick him off, shot by shot. This was premeditated, the coldest act there was.

The pistol cracked. The shot caught Merv in the shoulder and then another rang out, and another and then one more. In all, the gun flashed six times and the empty magazine dropped free from the weapon to clatter softly to the concrete floor as just another discarded piece of debris.

Merv grimaced as all the rounds found their mark, slamming into him painfully. For a moment, Merv paused, glaring straight at Red, surprised and pained, but the full shock of being shot six times still hadn't yet settled in.

A fresh magazine clicked into place and, as soon as it had, Red fired again, emptying it into the central mass of his target. This time, Merv grunted audibly and shuffled back, as the hot, angry little lead bullets tore at him like hornets swarming on a hot day.

Red slammed his final magazine home, his pistol loaded once more with the final six rounds he carried. For a moment, he felt a flutter of nerves. Merv had often told him that shooting him would have little effect, but he'd always presumed it was just big talk, some joke they were sharing. Now, as Merv stood his ground with twelve bullet wounds, he was beginning to wonder. The seconds ticked by

and Merv just remained for a moment, his face twisted in pain. Red worried that that pain was going to quite quickly give way to anger, which would be pushed aside by fury and then, in its turn, it would be trampled all over by the kind of mindlessly insane violent rages that Merv was so well known for.

Red waited for him to fall, just hoping that this wasn't about to get very much worse for him. Very slowly, Merv swivelled his head to look directly at him. He growled, a low, rumbling sound like an engine starting, and then slowly beginning to build to full power.

Red's hand tightened on the grip of his pistol and a shock of adrenaline ran through his body. This wasn't good, he thought to himself; this wasn't good at all.

Merv straightened himself up, as if the worst thing that had happened to him from suffering multiple bullet-wounds was that his shirt had come untucked from his trousers.

Yup, Red thought to himself, this was going to bad.

"Please just die!" Red asked politely, but with just a little force to it too, muttering to himself as he began to step closer, the pistol still locked on the target. "I'm asking you nicely now, for the sake of our friendship!"

He fired again, sending three rounds into Merv's chest. He paused. Merv jerked from the impacts and snarled at each, wincing once more in pain. Pain wasn't the point of all this at all: ending the pain was really much more like what he was trying to achieve. If that could happen without Red experiencing any pain of his own, that would be absolutely ideal.

Red fired the last three rounds. One caught Merv in the shoulder; two more caught him on the forehead.

He lowered the weapon, the magazine now empty, and he was left with only a single round chambered and ready to fire. One more

round wasn't going to make much difference either way, he reasoned, but he had an ace in the hole, one more trick up his sleeve.

The place now smelt like burning oil and the sting of sulphur hung on the air, and a white dusting of cloud hung between them from the explosive discharges of his still-smoking weapon.

Merv's face contorted into an expression of pure, complete, utter, total and unadulterated rage. Red thought to himself that his day had started with a disappointing breakfast and had really gone downhill from there. At no point did he think he'd spend the afternoon having his entire skeleton reduced to powder by a man who, as it turned out, did enjoy romantic-comedies.

Merv lunged at him, throwing his whole weight into an attack that would terrify anyone capable of thinking logically. The world slowed down around him while Red's brain processed the situation.

It wasn't good, he decided. Red wasn't entirely impressed that millions of dollars of research into augmenting the lump of gristle between his ears had resulted in the capacity to comprehend that being beaten to death, by something even gorillas would back away from, wasn't in his best interest. He had expected more.

He had one bullet left in his pistol and a gigantic, furious lump of over-powered muscle had been launched at him with the express intention of seeing if his bones worked better if they pointed in exciting new directions.

Red shifted out of the way, feinting to the left and rolling beyond the reach of Merv's mighty punch. The threat slipped past him, missing him by too narrow a margin. Red turned and fired the last round into the back of Merv's skull. For the last time, the pistol cracked and bucked in his hand.

Merv grunted angrily, over-balanced and dropped to the floor, blood oozing from the wound as he staggered around blindly.

"I'm really good at this part of the job," Red told him softly with a sad grin.

Merv, now with thirteen bullet wounds, began to stand up once again. His breath was a rasping, ragged growl from some deep, primordial place within his horribly disfigured psyche.

"Merv, you are really bad at dying!" Red grumbled at him. "I mean, maybe this is something you can work on. Maybe there's a training course or a weekend retreat."

"Red..." Merv's voice was barely a growl. Finally, the bullets had got at least some part of the message through to him. "Stop talking. Listening to you hurts more than the bullets."

"Charming!" Red shook his head at him and frowned angrily. "Some friend you are, Merv!"

Merv's hand reached for his holster. Red slowed down the world and considered his options. His pistol was a convenient little thing. It never got in the way when he didn't need it and it quietly got the job done, without all the fuss, when he did. Merv's was a huge solid lump of high-tensile fuss and was loaded with five rounds of pure overkill. Each one could serve up a horrifying death with the brutality of an awkward teenager reciting Shakespearian poetry.

Red had a suit of body armour that would take the sting out of it. None of those bullets would be able to get through it, even though each one would hurt. They would hurt a lot, he thought, remembering how much pain a 9mm round had caused. Of course, this was all rather redundant, since he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He couldn't help but feel that Norma was to blame for this, although he wasn't exactly sure why.

Merv's hand reached for his weapon. He was hurt now and was struggling to move. The last bullet had grazed his rock-solid skull and he had been staggered by it. It should have killed him but

when Merv had joked about how resilient he was, perhaps the joke had been on Red all along.

Red moved away so that Merv, lying on the ground, couldn't bring the weapon to bear without moving. Merv accordingly began shuffling about as he drew his pistol. He brandished it threateningly as he rolled over, hefting himself upright.

"You're dead, Red," he grunted through gritted teeth that were doused with a fine misting of his own blood.

"Not yet," Red told him. He closed his eyes, wincing to himself. This was the end now. "Merv, stay down."

Merv roared as he made his way upright, his gun-hand shaking wildly.

"Don't do it, Merv."

But he did. He stood up and held his huge cannon up with the intention of bringing the muzzle to point directly at Red.

"Bike..." Red said softly, his voice almost an apology. "Fire the cannon."

The warehouse suddenly exploded into chaos as the HERPES auto-cannon sent a shuddering, sparking explosion of rapid fire. Red-hot tracer bullets tore into Merv, ripping through his chest and shredding his organs.

And then there was silence. A horrible, ugly emptiness filled the space, as the pair of them looked at one another, their eyes locked together. Red looked sad, as if he regretted all of this. Merv looked surprised, the shock of having himself torn to pieces not quite yet registering. Strangely, there appeared to be no pain.

"Red..." he said, gurgling on his own blood as his mouth filled up with it.

“Sorry, Merv,” Red told him softly. “I’m having the coffee machine, by the way. I mean, you basically got it for me anyway, right?”

“Red...” he gasped one more time, as the world faded away. He slumped, falling to his knees, but caught himself before he collapsed completely. His gigantic pistol clattered noisily to the concrete floor as he slipped further away. He snatched one last breath as Red looked on sadly. “Red... I’m sorry.”

Red nodded. “Me too, big guy. Me too.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Red was slightly confused. “I don’t remember that happening,” he said with a frown.

“It didn’t happen.” Norma told him with a smile. “It couldn’t happen. Merv would destroy you. On one side, we have a gigantic killing machine, who’s been augmented by the very best super-soldier technology that the most well-funded government in the world can come up with, and on the other side...” she paused to look him over, “...well, we have you, Red.”

“Thanks, Norma,” he said sarcastically. “That means a lot.”

She began working away on her terminal.

“So what was the point?”

Norma explained, “I’m now feeding that into the Hawk-Eye main computer and uploading the video to the security feed.”

“Was there a point?”

“I realised while we were talking,” Norma said as she worked. “Computers don’t think logically. They obey instructions. They just follow a program. It would never occur to a computer to question the validity of something that seems utterly ridiculous.”

“You’re very bad at getting to the point, Norma.”

She frowned in irritation, clearly thinking that what she was trying to get across to him had been perfectly well communicated. “Well, as far as the computer knows, that was real. You killed Merv. Merv is dead.”

“So I do get his coffee machine?” he flashed an awkward smile. “Am I following this correctly?”

“So, if my guess is right, the protocol will now accept that he’s dead!” She began to grin to herself.

“Which means?”

“Which means that it will stop hiding him from active surveillance,” she explained. “That means that I can use the records in the Hawk-Eye database to search for a facial-recognition match.”

“Which means?”

“Which means that maybe, just maybe, we can begin tracking him,” she told him.

Red felt that it would have been better for everyone if this particular conversation had just started at the point where it ended.

“Great!”

Chapter 15

Red sipped at his coffee. It never tasted quite as rich when he poured it himself. It wasn't that he did anything differently from what anyone else did, but somehow it just wasn't as good or as satisfying when it came from his own hand, as many things often were, he had found.

He briefly considered that it simply wasn't possible that coffee could taste any different, depending on who took the jug out of a machine and filled a cup from it. On reflection, this suggested that he was developing some kind of mental illness and that did seem fairly reasonable under the circumstances. If he hadn't managed to foster some kind of disconnect with reality by now, then that would probably mean that there was something seriously wrong with him.

Red was developing one of his famously-lamented headaches - which wasn't a headache at all, in the proper sense, but more of a development in the course of the constant dull ache that he'd come to accept as basically normal. Norma assured him that the technology in his brain was now very satisfactorily stable and the chances of it accidentally liquefying his organic tissue and escaping through the nearest open window was statistically negligible. Less of an assurance was the now-accepted fact that if this statistically negligible event decided to surprise them all by happening, then it would be unspeakably awful since the technology had now reconstructed the pain-centres of his brain to make them much more efficient. As Red hadn't been shot in some time, it remained to be seen how much more fully he'd now be able to enjoy the experience.

The headache was beginning to bother him, but asking Norma about it bothered him even more. He asked her once if all this pain was because the technology was working properly or if it was

damaging whatever organic bits were left. She had dismissively waved her hand and told him, ‘Yes, it is probably one of those.’

As well as the headaches, his mind was often caught wandering, which he had noticed several times recently, as bizarre, disconnected images had floated through his mind. He had mentioned it to Norma some time ago, but she had told him that the best way to study the problem was by dissecting what was left of his brain, and he should definitely let her know when he was finished using it so that that could happen.

All in all, he felt that it was just better not to ask.

“Norma, can we track Merv yet?” Red wasn’t a patient man. Whether he had been before his brain was technologically augmented was anyone’s guess but now, with it racing forwards constantly, seconds dragged by at an unacceptably slow crawl. Luckily, there was coffee to fill in the gap between what he wanted to happen and what actually did. Between those gaps, there was Norma.

“No,” she replied evenly, as if this wasn’t a problem at all, and possibly had been her intended outcome all along. “I’m loading a completely anonymous facial reconstruction of Merv into the database. The Hawk-Eye is literally searching the entire world for a match, which could take some time. The problem is also compounded by the fact that he might not be near a camera.”

“That’s not very considerate of him,” Red huffed indignantly. “Would it not make more sense to just check locally, say within the range he could have actually travelled? It’s pretty unlikely he’s eating pizza in Rome, enjoying a barbecue on a beach on the Australian Coast or suffering crippling stomach cramps in Deli by now, is it?”

“That’s not very considerate behaviour of the man who tried to beat you to death this afternoon?” Norma asked sarcastically, making a very good point and ignoring his very bad one.

The terminal made a pinging sound and a menu appeared, populated with fresh information. “Red, we’ve got a hit. It’s not quite a real-time feed but the computer is offering to create a simulation of an event from two minutes ago when his likeness was captured.”

Red actually put down his coffee. “You watch the video, Norma. I’ll go to the location and hope to catch him.”

Norma frowned at him. “Armour!” she told him sternly. “If you’re leaving this building to go after Merv, I want you dressed in the armoured racing-suit at the least.”

“Agreed.” This all seemed perfectly reasonable, and it just might turn out to be the ideal opportunity to test his newly redefined ability to experience pain.

“And that silly little gun of yours...” She looked to his belt where the small grip was just visible under his T-shirt, if you looked really, really closely.

“The gun is fine,” he assured her. “I won’t be using it anyway.”

The bike roared through the traffic in near silence, which took a very large chunk of all of the fun out of it. Red loved the bike more than coffee, and even the waitresses that brought it to him, but part of the character of her was the ridiculous, ear-splitting, nerve-shredding roar of the engine. At least she still belched flames from the rear end, and the power delivery was still mind-wrenchingly awful. He found that he was still grinning as he weaved around slow-moving traffic.

Norma couldn’t take all of the fun out of it, even though she might have a good go at trying. The bike was still the product of a mind addled with crippling mental illness and he loved her for it.

“I’m coming up on the location,” Red reported.

Norma replied, “Just be careful, Red. Reasoning with Merv didn’t seem to have any effect last time so I don’t want you to

engage. All we need to do is find him for now and put a tracker on him.”

“A tracker? I have to put a tracker on him?” Red grumbled. “You didn’t give me a tracker!”

“It’s not a physical thing!” she said impatiently. “Hawk-Eye will do all that for us. All we need is eyes on him. Now that we’ve convinced the protocol that he’s dead we should be able to track him in real-time. All we need is a location to start from.”

“And then?” Red asked.

Norma gave a thoughtful little huff through the helmet speakers. “I am working on that. Maybe we could immobilise him in some way and bring him back to the Hawk-Eye control room?”

“So you’ve ordered a truck-full of horse-tranquilliser and a fork-lift?” Red asked sarcastically. “Doesn’t this thing have a water-pistol stun-gun type thing? What would happen if I zapped Merv would that?”

“He’d get wet.” There was no sarcasm in her voice.

“According to my extrapolations, his metabolism would defeat practically any electrical stun device. I’m looking at chemical agents now but the doses we need are massive and we don’t have a delivery system yet.”

Red grumbled to himself. “We should take that water-pistol off the bike. It just demeans us all.”

With Red well on his way to the target and sounding happy, since he’d found something new to moan about, Norma turned back to the monitor to review whatever it was the computer had found.

“Computer, show me the extrapolation,” she instructed. Then, to herself, she muttered: “We really need a way to summarise these things, so I don’t have to watch every single one all the time.”

The video flashed to life.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Max was a man who wasn't comfortable in his own skin. He was nervous, socially awkward and physically weak. He had been a sickly child, always fighting off allergies, missing school and falling further behind. Perhaps, with this all in mind, the choice to become a drug-dealer had been a poor one but, for him, it was, maybe, the only choice he had.

He had no skills. He'd failed school quite spectacularly, even with his intelligence driving him, which was noted as being considerably above average. Disappointment had hardened into resentment and he'd begun to blame everyone but himself for everything he should be blaming himself for.

What options did he have? He was a man with no future, who had convinced himself that his plight was thrust upon him by an uncaring, indifferent world that needed to have revenge wrought upon it. Even with his sharp little mind, he wasn't in any position to take on the world; and his delusions didn't fuel any great, burning desire to do so. Instead, he drifted downwards until he found a nice little plateau to settle on. He had set about working to sell pills and powders to people who had crashed out of society even more thoroughly than he had.

He dabbled with his products himself, but never to the degree where he lost control. He had so little control already, that stepping closer to the edge would mean he might well lose himself completely, and would likely do so before he even realised it was happening. He knew himself well enough to have added that to his ever-growing list of fears.

He sat in his living room, in a quite respectable apartment in a suburb that was anything but. It was a rented place and had some sparse supplied-furniture dotted around the place that had come as part of the tenancy deal. To that, he'd added a gaudy sound system, with speakers that were too large to have any place inside a house, and an impressive gaming computer that was so good that, when he posted pictures of it on the internet, he got back a succession of envious comments.

Beyond that, his desires extended no further than his biological drives. He was not a complex character and he knew it. He just liked to brag, to let people know how interesting he was, so he could convince himself that, just maybe, he wasn't completely lying.

Now, he sat back in an uncomfortable chair and ate a sandwich with two slices of plastic-tasting cheese and a liberal splattering of budget mayonnaise. While nobody was watching, there was nobody to impress.

"Yo, Max!" A voice pierced his thoughts, which were dwelling on an internet role-playing game he participated in rather too often.

The voice came from a man called 'Jones', who probably had a first name but nobody knew for sure what it might be, since nobody cared enough to ask. He behaved every inch the drug dealer, adopting the street slang, the dress and the attitude, but, if you were to quietly chat with him, it would all frequently slip and you'd discover that there was something quite different hiding behind the mask, something far less interesting.

"Yo," Max replied with a jolt.

"This new guy, dude," Jones told him, as if that explained everything. He kept his voice low and gestured out to the kitchen with his thumb. "This guy is crazy, man!"

"Brad?" Max asked. "He got recommended. He's a good guy."

Jones huffed loudly and made a sarcastic expression. "This good guy of yours was jus' telling me about how he served in Afghanistan. He says his squad got blown the hell up and he fought off the attackers for an hour to protect his friend. Damn, this guy is tough."

"Sounds like the guy we want!" Max grinned. Why exactly a low level dealer in recreational narcotics, whose most aggressive act in the last year was to tell a restaurant worked to please hurry up with his pizza, would think he wanted this, was anyone's guess.

"Can we trust him?" Jones asked, defiantly crossing his arms over his chest.

Max enjoyed all this: it made him feel important, just a little bit, and just for a tiny moment. He felt as if he was in charge of their crew, the man people came to with problems. "He was recommended."

"Yeah, 'cos if we can't, there ain't nothing we can do it about. That dude could kill us both without raising an eyebrow. I ain't never met nobody this damn hard before."

Max grinned again, not even sure why this time. He said, his chest swelling with inappropriate pride, "Don't worry. I got this."

Jones looked him up and down and had the look on his face of a man who wasn't entirely convinced. "Dude, this guy is packing a gun. I saw some silver-looking thing sticking out of his belt."

Max shrugged as if it didn't matter, but the gun made him just as nervous. "Yeah, we're drug dealers, man. We should be packing guns."

"This is America. The woman who made my morning coffee for me was packing a gun."

"We sell coke, dude!" Jones protested, his arms unfolding and his balled fists were poking into his sides. "I cut that shit with baby-

milk powder and we sells it to pussies who wouldn't have the balls to complain if we handed them a pack of sherbet dib-dabs. Nobody is gonna make a goddam movie about us, man. I got a revolver back home, tucked under my bed, that my dad left behind when he went out for cigarettes and never came back. I don't even know if that shit still works or even if it has any of dem goldly-looking things in it that makes it work. We start going out with a gun shoved down our pants, then the cops are gonna think it's Christmas."

Max agreed. He had a gun, too, but, honestly, he had no idea how to use it. He didn't even like carrying it, on the very infrequent occasions that he felt he needed to. It was heavy, heavier than they looked in movies and it made his pants fall down. It was also flatly terrifying.

"Yeah, but he knows what he's doing, man. He's had training," Max pointed out, as if knowing how something potentially lethal worked made having it morally acceptable in some way.

Jones huffed at him, seeming to realise that this was a fight he wasn't going to win. What he hadn't realised was that Max would do absolutely nothing about anything because Brad literally scared the living hell out of him.

Brad was a man who had a certain aura about him. He was a man who had seen things, things that changed a man, things that would chase all the weakness right out of him. He was well-built, aggressive and driven. The gun down his pants was, in all likelihood, the least dangerous thing about him.

"Whatever, man!" Jones waved his hand dismissively and sloped off to the kitchen.

"Get me a coke, man!" Max called out.

The muted sound of Jones shouting back replied, "Get your own damn coke, you skinny piece of crap."

Max frowned and made a bold, overt gesture towards the kitchen, once he was confident that nobody would see.

Brad walked in with a bottle of water. He paced through the room behind an air of confidence, but there was something casual about him too. It was as if this world of dealing drugs, of having a pistol shoved into his trousers, meant nothing to him: it was just the reality of his life, long since accepted.

Max watched silently, in respectful awe. Deep down he wanted to be Brad. Brad was older, stronger and more refined. He was a man that had no insecurities. He was what he was and would apologise for it to nobody. Max, if the truth be told, was a bit of a dick and he knew it, because he'd been told many times and could find no real reason to disagree.

"You cool, bro?" Max asked, trying to seem very laid-back, but just coming off as someone who was very uncomfortable with himself.

Brad grinned, showing off a chipped front tooth that he'd never bothered to have fixed. He sat down on a sofa and spread himself into it comfortably. "I'm cool," he said with a smirk.

Max felt that Brad was looking down on him, that he knew he was better. He didn't like it.

"You know you gotta make yourself at home here, dude," Max told him, trying to seem likeable, yet in control, and coming across as neither.

"I'm at home anywhere!" Brad told him with a chuckle. "One time, I was in a squad and we camped out under the stars while rockets cracked open the city below us. I slept like a baby that night, with four confirmed kills racked up the day before."

Max gulped. Surely he was just showing off, trying to impress him. It was working! "Did you really do that?"

Brad nodded and shrugged, seeming as if this was the most normal thing in the world. “Sure. They were trying to kill me so, you know, it was all good.”

“Damn!” Max said loudly, a fair bit too loudly, and earned himself another little chuckle from Brad. “You’re the man to have around. Nobody ain’t gonna dare touch our crew with you on the team.”

Brad nodded confidently and told him, “Nobody would touch us twice.” His voice was totally self-assured.

Max shuddered. “I’m glad you’re aboard, man. These is dangerous times but there ain’t nothing to worry about with a guy like you about.”

With that there was a knock on the door. It was just a tap, quiet and respectful.

Max sat up. He wasn’t expecting visitors and customers were not usually encouraged to come to his home. “Who’s that, man?” he grumbled, looking around nervously. It wasn’t the police: they weren’t polite about anything. He had a scar on his forehead that turned purple when the weather grew cold. He had got that while being forcibly thrown into a police-car, an event that had chased the very last of his decency right out of him. Police were never polite with people like him.

Brad smiled and put his bottle of water down by the side of the sofa, moving slowly in his own good time. “Don’t worry, Mack. I’ll get it.”

“Max,” he muttered under his breath. Even quieter, he said, “You best know my name since I’m your boss, dude.”

Brad opened the door.

The dark outline of a woman walked in, pushing past Brad as if he was nothing, which perhaps was exactly what he was to her. She

melted into the shadows, not hiding but just not really quite there either.

Max sat up startled. To him she seemed attractive with long hair that cascaded down around the silhouette of her shoulders. Her eyes were dark - so dark that they were almost black, like little holes that sucked in the world around her. She had an air of total confidence; she dominated the room, controlled it. Even Brad felt it and he stepped back. His eyes widened and he looked a little confused. He cast a glance at Max who was more confused still.

She looked at both of them and then nodded towards Max. The outline of her head moved as if she was speaking.

“Yeah!” Max said, trying really hard to seem confident and failing atrociously. “I is in charge. What do you want? What’s going on here?”

The room was then plunged into silence. Jones stepped out of the kitchen to watch but, beyond a curious frown, he said nothing. They all waited, and puzzled expressions were swapped between them.

Jones looked to Max. He muttered, “What?”

Max nodded, looking around for some support, any support from anyone. “What are you, a cop?”

Her posture was rigidly straight, her shoulders wide from hard physical training, and she was tense, as if ready to turn and attack at the slightest provocation.

The black outline of her body moved as if leaning very slightly forwards. The jawline moved once again but there was silence.

Max shook his head.

Jones was the one who finally spoke. “Sure, right! OK, you don’t look like a cop. Who the hell are you, then?”

She paused, her head moving around in the darkness that seemed oddly to come from within her. She stepped forward, eyeing everything, looking around the room as if, maybe, searching for something.

Brad's eyes widened in surprise and he stepped back, shuffling reflexively away. "I'm Brad!" he said.

She looked him up and down and then nodded to herself.

He pointed to his own chest. "Yeah, so it's me. What have I done? Who the hell are you?"

She looked right in his eyes and he just stared back, looking confused.

Brad's eyes narrowed and his fists clenched. "Well, I think you had better explain. I want to know who you are and why you're here. No more games! I don't care if you're a girl or not. If you come in here and threaten me, I'll knock you down just like you were any man."

She turned, the outline of her head twisting from the shadow to face towards Max.

Max began nervously shaking his head. "Sure, no. She didn't make any threats. I sure didn't hear any threats."

She turned and gestured with a nod towards the door.

Jones frowned to himself. He said curiously, "What's a Merv?"

The wide open doorway darkened, as it was filled by a black suit that was awkwardly painted on the biggest, most monstrous human being that had ever graced the confines of their tortured imaginations.

There were gasps around the room as Merv stepped in through the door, shuffling in slightly sideways since his massive shoulders brushed the frame on both sides.

“God damn...” Jones muttered, the sound of his voice the only thing louder than the horrified heavy breathing.

Max, who still saw himself as basically in charge of all this, managed only to say, “Um,” and didn’t even say that very loudly.

Merv drew a weapon, a gigantic stainless steel revolver stuffed with bullets that had no place outside the magazine of a hunting rifle, one that was set up to kill very large mammals over very long distances. It sported a barrel that was so long that it scratched against the ceiling while he brandished it threateningly. It was probably the least scary thing about him at that point.

He looked around from behind a pair of dark glasses and said through a customary growl, “Does something need killing? I hope something needs killing!”

There was silence again but this time it was even more quiet. Nobody dared to move. The only sound was that of jaws lolling open in fear, as this huge mountain of aggression dominated the room.

The woman looked back at where Max was seated. Her outline shrugged, as if posing this very question that Merv had asked him directly.

Max somehow managed to shake his head, very slowly and not very much, but the message was clear. He certainly didn’t want to die. He wanted to live, and all the areas in between were especially off-limits. “Ah... No...” he managed to say, and it was quite apologetic, as if he was sorry for the inconvenience that this might cause.

“Who...” Jones began, stammering the word fearfully, but he stopped, thinking better of it.

Brad seemed more confused than anything else. She turned to him and stepped up closer. For a while, neither moved. Brad just froze for a moment and stared at her. He frowned as if remembering

something and then, very softly, he narrowed her eyes, looked at her and whispered, “It’s you?”

She nodded back.

“What is...?” Jones held his patience, which was much easier than usual, with Merv dominating the horizon while waving around a gun that could cause a mortal wound to a medium-sized house.

Jones finally mustered up a little courage and stepped forwards. What he planned actually to do might never be known. His hands were raised up and he opened his mouth to speak.

Brad turned and instantly his gun was in his hand, a gaping muzzle pointed directly ahead. Jones swallowed in surprise and began backing away into the kitchen. Max looked on, frozen to the seat, sheer panic robbing his muscles of the strength to move.

Jones gasped, “You ain’t gonna kill me, man! We is on the same crew.” Sweat began to run down his forehead, pooling in the corners of his eyes like tears.

Apparently, his assessment of the situation wasn’t entirely correct. Brad kept the pistol levelled on him, his eyes fixed on their target. The hammer pulled back with a very positive snapping sound which sent a fresh wave of terror through the stricken young man as he backed up into a wall.

The silhouetted outline of a woman held up a hand and Brad lowered the weapon and looked at her. The silence was now punctuated by the ragged breathing of the hopelessly terrified drug dealer.

She looked around at the pair of them.

Merv’s low rumbling voice said: “You don’t need to die, do you? Maybe I can trust the pair of you to keep your mouths shut?”

Max began nodding very enthusiastically. Jones breathed a tiny sigh of relief that maybe, just maybe, he had a future that extended to the next day.

Merv snatched the sunglasses from his face, an action that brought gasps from the pair of them. He growled: “I know where you live. If I hear a breath about you two, I won’t kill you but I will do things to you that will make you pray for death. I’ll hurt you in ways that no surgeon can fix, so you spend the rest of your lives screaming in agony and praying for the end to come. But it won’t come. When it finally does, it will be slow and so unimaginably painful that demons straight from hell will be there taking notes on how to improve their game.”

There was no doubt in Max’s mind, not even a tiny shred, that this really wasn’t what he wanted to happen. He nodded, his throat too tight and dry actually to manage to speak.

“Good,” he said. “We’re going to leave. We were never here. You never met Brad.”

Jones dared to speak, “Yeah, sure. That’s sure. Fine.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma rubbed her temples wearily. That was Merv. There was no doubt in her mind that he was acting normally, that he was under no duress, that nobody had a gun to his head, that he was behaving wilfully.

This would crush Red emotionally when he found out, if Merv didn’t crush him bodily first.

She grumbled to herself, “This job sucks.”

Chapter 16

Red pulled up at his location. It was a fairly nondescript house in the suburbs, divided up into floors and rented out cheaply to people who were willing to suffer being surrounded by of people who had run out of choices.

Around him was the bland greyness of a neighbourhood where the people living there were just barely scraping by and couldn't afford the luxury of enjoying it. In places like this, the cancer of petty crime had no problem taking hold. That was exactly what usually happened, and when it did, it forced the standards down even further, pushing out those people who could muster the finances to leave and replacing them with people in a poorer position still.

All this was a recipe for more despair, a factor which rolled out the red carpet for, and invited in, a flow of cheap drugs and the people that used them, who had nothing left to lose. In the wake of all that, the whole process started again, only worse, and the whole neighbourhood spiralled down and down until the inevitable financial crunch of hitting rock-bottom finally happened.

He glanced around, hoping to see Merv's van or any sign he might still be in the area, such as horribly broken people being thrown out of buildings in pieces, maybe through the walls. He found himself thinking that somewhere like this would have been where he had probably lived before. He probably belonged somewhere on this very downward spiral before his life had changed. It was a depressing thought - that the best thing he had done in his life was to crash headlong into a wall and cause himself irreparable brain damage.

The thought of going back made him cringe to himself.

"I've arrived, Norma." he told her.

Her voice came back through the helmet: "The apartment is the bottom floor flat. The Hawk-Eye is struggling with the protocol. When it creates an extrapolation, it knows there's a person there and is trying to justify the fact that someone is, against the fact that it's telling itself that someone isn't. I'm pretty sure that Merv has left, but be careful, Red. I can't give you any solid information at this point."

Red stepped off the bike, his bulletproof web of armour creaking over his skin. He hung the helmet on the handle of his machine and pressed the audio receiver into his ear. "I'm going in, Norma."

She huffed down the other end. "Red. If you're attacked, you have to defend yourself. Do you understand me? You have to stop with all this 'heroically taking punishment like a suicidal lemming' nonsense and remember to stand up for yourself."

Red nodded heroically. "I understand, but I think the point of lemmings is that they're suicidal in the first place. I'm more like a suicidal salmon."

"What?" she grumbled through his earpiece.

"A salmon is a fine red creature, Norma. I'd be proud to be a salmon."

"Salmons are most famously eaten by bears on their suicidal swim back to their spawning ground," she said, explaining why he was wrong, as usual.

"The most annoying thing about this is that I do tend to think of Merv as a bear. More accurately, a teddy-bear, dressed in bright pink pyjamas that don't have a place in this world, outside of a little girl's sleepover."

He stalked up to the front door while Norma explained why he should be taking all of this so much more seriously than he was.

Merv had been there only minutes before, and they couldn't rule out the idea that he was still somewhere inside. At least, it wouldn't be difficult to describe him to anyone that had survived the encounter. He tended to leave an impression on most people, often the impression of his fist.

The door was open just a crack. Red reached up to knock but remembered he was a super-hero. They didn't knock on doors and then have a civilised conversation with the person who answered. He wasn't selling double glazing: he was dealing out justice. At least, that's how he justified it to himself. Red wasn't the most polite person in the world but, still, just walking into someone else's house didn't come easily to any normal person. Manners were so ingrained into most people that it required considerable effort to overcome such conditioning.

But overcome it, he did. It didn't hurt at all that he had a government ID in his pocket that allowed him to wield such power that, if he instructed a police officer to shoot himself in the head, the officer would pretty much have to do it. On top of that, his brain worked sixteen times faster, which really did qualify him as a super-hero, as far as he was concerned. He tried to ignore the fact that he also had a digitally enhanced ability to experience pain. (He put that down to the fact that the world was basically a shitty place.)

He pushed the door open reasonably forcefully, but not quite aggressively. His artificially over-clocked brain took it all in straight away. In front of him were two people, two people who looked a lot as if their worst nightmares had just paid them a little visit. The wall had a dent in it from where the door had recently crashed into it. That was Merv's chosen method of polite entry.

A tall and slender, very nervous-looking man looked over at him fearfully, his eyes open wide and his mouth lolling open. He muttered a choked gasp of horrified surprise. "What now?"

A more substantially-built man cowered slightly behind him. After a moment's pause, he yelled out, "What the hell is this? Who are you?"

"It's me! Red!" he said, pointing to himself and smiling. "And you?"

They looked at one another. Dazed and seeming to be in shock, the thinner one said, "Jones," and pointed to his friend.

His friend pointed back and said, "Max."

"I'm looking for a friend of mine!" Red told them. "He's a big, black guy, built like a tank, looks as if he could punch a hole through the fabric of reality, breathes almost exclusively through his mouth. You would never imagine that he might wear Hello Kitty pyjamas, but you'd be wrong. Have you boys seen anyone like that? He might have passed through, threatening to kill people. He might have followed through on that threat... he often does."

"Funny story: one time we were fighting zombies and he punched one so hard in the face that his hand went straight through his head."

The two of them cringed and backed up nervously. It seemed pretty obvious that they had recently come across someone fitting just exactly that terrible description.

"You're that guy's friend?" one of them called out nervously.

Red nodded. "Yeah, I'm the brains of the outfit and he's the muscle," he said. "Well not the brains exactly, more like the soul. Mind you, the soul is mostly theoretical and almost impossible to define. On reflection, I'm not sure that's really me. I tend to feel I'm more of a salmon, if I'm honest."

The skinnier of the two cried out, "What?"

Red smiled apologetically and said, "Sorry, I'm really bad at this. The important thing to take away from this situation is that I'm looking for my friend and I will kick your arse, just the same as he would, if you don't tell me everything I want to know."

They looked at each other with scared expressions. The skinny one grumbled, his voice cracking with emotion: "This is a horrible day. I didn't get into drug dealing for this kind of shit."

The other one said, "Look, your friend is gone, man. He left with some woman and a dude who worked with us and was meant to be our protection but he pointed a gun at me and looked as if he wanted really bad to pull the trigger."

Red smiled apologetically at his own lack of judgment. "Oh I'm sorry. Where are my manners?" He drew his little weapon and pointed it at them. There were gasps as the muzzle levelled up. He explained: "I'm new to this. I usually save the world and fight zombies on motorcycles. Is this better?"

The bigger of the two recoiled away and threw his arms over his head, while collapsing down almost to his knees in blind panic, a thing he'd had plenty of opportunity to practice that day. "Dude, we don't want nobody pointing no guns at us. That wasn't no invitation."

Red shrugged and lowered the weapon a little so it pointed with less enthusiasm. "Sorry, I'm pretty bad at this. If you had access to a really fast, armed motorcycle and had some ridiculously convoluted plan to take over the world, then you'd see where I really shine.

"So where's my friend?"

The skinny one cried out: "He left! We didn't ask for no details of his travel arrangements. We just considered it a win to be getting out of all this in one piece."

Red smiled quite warmly, which seemed pretty inappropriate to the situation, even to him. “Well, you’re not quite out of it yet, little man.”

The little man’s eyes widened, not quite angrily, since someone wearing body armour was pointing a gun at him and had the kind of face that suggested that if he used it, it wouldn’t haunt him any longer than his next cup of coffee lasted. It was more a kind of irritated, but also meekly accepting that he was in a situation that would end most quickly if he just got on with it and somehow muddled through, sort of expression.

“Look, he left, man! He didn’t tell us where he was going. We don’t know anything.”

Red could well believe that. It seemed to make sense. “Fine!” he said grumpily, lowering the weapon all the way down to point at the floor. “What about this woman? Tell me about her.”

They looked at each other. There was nothing in their interest, at all, in not telling him everything he wanted to know.

“OK,” Jones began. “She was average height but fit. She had the body of someone who works out, you know? Lean but strong. She was pretty, long reddish hair tied into a ponytail. She was in charge. The big one came in when she called him. Brad pointed a gun at me when I moved but she told him to put it down and he did.”

“She was in charge?” Red said thoughtfully. “Women in charge? Whatever is the world coming to? Did you get her name?”

Jones rolled his head away, flapping his arms in an over-blown gesture of being disgusted by a very stupid question. “No. I didn’t get her phone number either, man! These crazy people came into my house and threatened to kill us. Foremost on my mind wasn’t asking that bitch if she’d like to join me for a bunch of cocktails later, on my sun-kissed veranda overlooking the ocean!”

The other turned to him and frowned. “Dude, this is my house.”

Red turned to leave, “OK, I’m bored with you now.”

Norma had been watching on the monitor. “OK,” she grumbled, knowing he could hear every word. “That wasn’t your worst performance. There were some definite improvements there.”

Red’s voice came through the speakers. “Merv can’t have gotten far. Can you get a lead on him at all?”

Menus populated the screen, scrolling information before her.

“No, Red.” She hung her head as she told him, sounding a little disappointed in herself. “There’s nothing at the moment.”

She watched the screen, waiting for something to happen because, really, there was nothing else she could do.

Chapter 17

Norma looked up in optimistic surprise as the computer alerted her to the fact that it had found something by making a loudish bleeping sound. She had endowed the thing with the ability to use plain language but, for some reason, it preferred to do things its own way. Was it really developing a character? Was a loudish bleeping sound a computerised equivalent to a teenager pointing to a pile of smelly washing and grunting?

“What is it?” She looked up sharply, plain language to the computer probably being a human equivalent to a teenager pointing to a plate of healthy vegetables and grunting.

“What’s what?” Red’s voice asked with a note of confusion back through the speakers.

“Not you, Red,” she told him.

There was a pregnant pause, a moment of contemplative silence. And then Red ruined all that by saying, “There’s no-one else here, Norma. Are you sure your brain is feeling alright? We spend a lot of time checking on mine but nobody ever thought about checking on yours, and, now I think about that, it seems like a pretty massive oversight.”

“Shut up, Red,” she told him, checking on whatever it was the computer was offering.

His voice came back sounding cheerful. “I’m glad I could help, Norma! I do love our little chats.”

“If you don’t shut up, I will personally tear off your testicles and spin them around my head by the bloody tubes they’re stuck to you with, until they reach an impressive velocity. I will then throw them at you so the wiring that holds your reproductive system together rolls round your throat and strangles you to a horrifying and

undignified death.” Her threat was inventive, certainly, but it lacked any real passion.

“Thanks, Norma. I needed that,” Red reported back. “When I come in, I’m going to buy you some happy doughnuts and I’m going to see if I can get some with chocolate in the middle.”

Norma smiled back towards the speakers. “Good answer, Red. Your testicles might survive another day after all.”

“I’m out hunting down a super-soldier armed with a hand-cannon, a bad attitude and a desire to turn my face into a thin layer of knuckle-lubrication,” Red sighed. “My testicles are, for once, the least of my problems.”

Norma checked the menu system. “Red, I’ve got a trace on Merv. The computer has spotted him at a traffic light. It’s got a partial match on his face through the windscreen of a Ford truck. It’s not far from you and it was only three minutes ago that it registered him. I’m extrapolating the likely course the vehicle is taking and setting your navigation to take you on manoeuvres.”

“Got it!” Red said, with his usual enthusiasm for all things related to riding his motorcycle too quickly.

“You’re looking for a black Ford F150. If you spot it, hold back. The computer is hunting for it now but the protocol is fighting us.” She sighed, wondering to herself how the protocol even worked. It was hiding this woman. Did that extend to obscuring her vehicle, too? For the moment, it seemed that it did.

“On it,” Red said.

Norma watched as the motorcycle made its way from the suburban estate, off on its journey. She turned back to the menu. There was something else waiting for her.

“Computer,” she said boldly. “Play the next video.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Professor David Meadows sat staring out of a window. His one great pleasure in life was just sitting in a coffee shop and taking the time simply to watch the world go by. It grounded him in the same reality that other people shared. They had no knowledge of what he did and how he protected them from the world he lived in, but, for a just a moment, he felt connected to them.

His world was a horrifying hole that sucked in your sanity, ingested it, and what came out the other end was basically whatever you were now stuck with being. Few people were able to navigate a path through it and maintain any degree of normality. The foundation which the world was truly built on was one of secrets and lies, truths that must forever remain hidden from view.

It wasn't hidden just because the public couldn't be trusted: it was hidden, for the most part, because they genuinely wouldn't want to know. What would it do to the sanity of the average person who had grown up thinking that the world they knew began at the breakfast table and ended with their favourite drama on television, to find out that this was all a façade, a curtain behind which monsters walked the Earth? It would destroy them; it would crush them to know what was really happening, what horrors were lurking in that movement you thought you saw out of the corner of your eye.

So, he sipped on a frothy cup of really quite excellent coffee, perched on a stool in a really quite excellent cafe, and he looked out into the world. He had no particularly favourite place, but it had to be a proper coffee shop. No cafe that also served coffee would be good enough. His drink always had to be made by a person who appreciated the art of what they were doing.

It had to be a shop with a wide window that had a narrow counter along it, facing out. While he slowly, in his own good time,

sipped at his beverage, he wanted to look out on the world, like a man in a zoo peering in at the exhibits. He wanted to watch as they walked by on their way, while they lived out their meaningless existences. He wanted to see them living their empty little lives, safe in the knowledge that they were living it because of him and the things that he did to protect them.

He had made cruel choices in his career, just as any man in his position would have. He had done things, at times, that no man would be proud of and he was burdened with memories that darkened his mind and poisoned what was left of his soul.

He looked out of the window as a mother walked past, clipping by awkwardly on heels that were too high. She wore a long, grey coat and a dark red hat that didn't complement it very well. She was reaching down to hold the hand of a little boy with light brown hair. He was walking as fast as his little legs could manage and she was half leading him and half dragging him along.

She paused to look down and he looked up into her eyes. A look was shared between them. He grimaced slightly, upset by her pace; and she frowned, equally displeased at his. She said something and then smiled broadly and the little boy happily grinned back.

What had been said? Where were they going? Had she told him to hurry up, as they were on their way to meet someone important to them? Were they going to collect something the boy was excited about? Had she scolded or encouraged him?

It was all so trivial but, at the same time, it was all that really mattered. These people were free to enjoy these moments because men like him shrouded them in blissful ignorance. They never found out that there were things that could destroy them just by knowing they were there, and the price they had to pay for it was paid in full by men like him.

For a moment, he envied them. He had always wished that, one day, he might have a family, a child and a life just like that - but it was never to be. He just had his work and had to find ways to make sure that was enough.

“Sir?” The voice next to him roused him from his meandering thoughts.

He sipped at his drink, turned to her and smiled a measured little smile, as warm as a man like him had any right to smile. “I’m alright, Claire.”

“You’ve been quiet,” she said, sounding worried about him. She probably was. They had worked together for quite some time and had built up a very solid bank of mutual trust and respect, even though she was not quite like him. She was not quite like anyone.

“I’m sorry.” He shrugged. What else was there to say?

Claire sighed and sipped at a very business-like cup of plain coffee with no milk or sugar. “Is there anything I can do? Perhaps you’d like some toast?”

They both knew there wasn’t anything that anyone could do.

He sighed and looked back out through the window. He said thinly, “You know what it is. You know there’s nothing anyone can do.” He smiled to himself, a hollow expression. He was free to speak. The protocol didn’t absolutely screen him, but it shielded him from casual scrutiny. His words would never be detected by digital means. It was the one small piece of freedom he really had.

“Well, I don’t,” Claire told him. “I don’t really. I don’t know what you saw when you were working.”

“My job!” he told her, although she knew it just as well as he did. “My job is to hide things. Sometimes I hide people. I make them invisible to all modern technology. I make it so they can vanish behind enemy lines, melt into the background and disappear from

watchful eyes. Sometimes they're killers, and I know that, but I never shy away from doing what has to be done.

"Sometimes, I'm helping a person to get close to a target so that a threat can be quietly removed. All I can do is trust that my superiors know what they're doing. I can't know the whole of the story any more than the agents themselves can.

"And sometimes, I hide bigger things. I've made ideas disappear, styles of thinking, even concepts. I even once removed a small town because the entire population went crazy. They were killing each other in stupid accidents, driving into one another or drowning in showers.

"But never before have I seen something like this. I never realised the odds we were playing for. Never before did I realise how truly awful everything we stand for really is." He shook his head quite sadly.

She sipped on her own drink and stared at the window, her own reflection imposed on the view of people walking past outside. She frowned. "Like what?"

He shuddered and closed his eyes for a second as a chill ran up his spine, remembering what an awful, terrible thing it was. "I can't tell you. I can't tell anyone," he told her, his voice soft and apologetic. This was now his burden and could never be shared. "Even if I could tell you, I don't think I would." He frowned thoughtfully. "You know, those people out there know nothing of what I've seen over the years. How would that man in the blue jacket feel, if he found out that he was being watched at all times by a computer with intelligence that surpassed his imagination? How would that woman with the book carry on, if she knew that the military had a drug that could increase human strength and endurance by more than double? How would all the ordinary people

feel if they knew we weren't alone in the universe? How would those ordinary people feel it they knew what they've got planned for them?"

Claire shrugged. "Would they need some toast?"

He told her, "Their lives would suddenly be meaningless. Every little moment of happiness would be taken from them forever. Their world would change into something that would terrify them. We're at war and they can never know it. The sad thing is that I've finally realised is that we're at war with ourselves."

Claire raised an eyebrow. "I am not an ordinary person."

"No..." he agreed with a smile. "But, however far you are from ordinary, you will always remain a person. I could never tell you what it is that I've seen. I can never say to a living soul what I know."

"You're not scaring me," she assured him. "If you can't tell me, who can you tell? I was assigned to you so I can do whatever you need me to do. I can do anything you want: you only have to tell me to do it and I'll do it."

"No, Claire," he said with a strong note of finality on the matter. His mind was made up. He sipped his coffee and stared thoughtfully. "Right now, this is what I need."

"This?" she asked, surprised and a little confused.

"I need someone to share a coffee with. I need to feel normal, just for a little while," he told her. "I want to sit here and watch the world go by and to know that the way I feel, and the price I pay, is worth it, because it means everyone out there can have their little lives. I want to sit here with you because you know that, too. You know what we do to protect them. You don't judge me, you just accept me."

“That’s what I need right now, since I don’t feel as if I can really accept myself.”

She bit her lip thoughtfully and looked back out the window, trying to see whatever it was he was talking about. She would never know that it was quite beyond her.

“I accept you,” she said simply, her face twisted into a dark little frown.

Medows looked over and gave her a sympathetic little smile. He knew she accepted him, even if she’d never understand what it was that she accepted.

“There is one actually practical thing that you could maybe do for me,” he said. He looked round to see who might be listening. There were only two other customers, tapping away on their laptops. Perhaps they were writing a story that tried to imagine what a person like him might be doing and feeling just at that moment? Perhaps they were contemplating what the world was truly like, allowing their imaginations to create their own reality? Perhaps they were just trying to hook up with a member of the opposite sex? Who could know?

A member of staff was running a towel over the shiny chromed coffee-machine. Her young back was hunched and her shoulders sagged. Whatever dreams she had were already slipping away. Behind her, a much older, dark-skinned man with blue eyes was wiping a towel over an already clean mug. Certainly, nobody had any interest in them.

“I can’t carry on like this,” he said simply and now he looked away from her. “Ever since I saw this thing, I’ve been dwelling on the future, wondering what it is we’ll be leaving behind. What will remain of me when I’m gone? How will I be remembered?”

She frowned. “The future and the past?”

He smiled at her limited way of thinking. He knew there was intelligence in there but, in many ways, she was also so laughably limited. It was endearing, in a way; it was almost childlike.

“We’ve killed people, Claire.” he told her. “We’ve ended people’s lives to protect our secrets and that’s fine, because those secrets were so valuable that they had to be kept. I agreed with those actions or else I never would have undertaken them, but they always troubled me.

“But now I’ve seen a secret so massive that I would accept that any number of deaths to preserve it would be acceptable. I’m a professional: I know how to weight up the odds.”

“So what can I do?” she asked.

“Claire, this time I find myself hesitating,” he said, his voice halting as if the words were difficult to find. “This time the person who might die to protect the secret is myself, and I find that I don’t know exactly how I feel about that.”

She nodded. “I can protect you. I won’t let them kill you.”

He smiled. “It’s not myself I want to protect.” He cast her a little glance out of the side of his eye. “I’m sorry if I’m not making myself very clear. I can’t say that it all makes sense to me. I’ve been thinking about the future quite a lot over the last few weeks. I’ve been thinking about what it is I’ll be leaving behind for the world, or what kind of world I’ll be leaving for the people who remain living on it.”

“You could threaten to reveal the truth?” she suggested.

He shook his head firmly. “No, Claire. That would be a punishment for all of them out there. I won’t do that. I want something a little more personal.”

She said, while nodding along with him, “I think I understand.”

“I have hidden many things over the years,” he told her.
“There is one thing left to do and I’m going to need some help making sure it gets done.”

“I will help,” she agreed firmly. “And this will mean that they will be too scared to hurt you?” She frowned thoughtfully. “So they won’t be able to hurt you? This will protect you?”

“Theoretically,” he said, with a chuckle. “But there’s more to it than that. If they come for me, I won’t be around to protect anyone else. I need to make sure that other things are safe.” He looked over to her and his lip traced into a smile. “Claire, I need to make sure other people are safe.”

She nodded. “I’ll help,” she said assuredly. “I want to help.”

Chapter 18

Norma sighed to herself. It was rare these days that an extrapolation didn't depict a violent death, a horrendous mutilation, or some human drama that shouldn't exist outside of a poorly-executed student-movie. That one was much more subtle, almost boring to an observer who was expecting something more entertaining. Still, not everything can be entertaining all the time, not even action science-fiction dramas with a little too much juvenile dark comedy.

"So..." she began to herself thoughtfully. "He saw something that scared him and it made him come up with some kind of security. He found a way to protect himself in the event that he was murdered to keep what he'd seen a secret."

Red's voice grumbled through the speakers, "What?"

"Nothing, Red," she grumbled back with a sigh. She glanced over at the monitor displaying the telemetry from his helmet. He was riding at speeds that he really shouldn't be riding at through gaps in traffic that barely qualified as gaps at all. While this was happening, he seemed to think it was ideal time for a little chat.

"Are we talking about Medows?" he asked.

She sighed and hoped that this little distraction wasn't going to end with her arranging to have him scraped off the front of a bus. "I was, but was talking rhetorically to the computer."

"'Rhetorically' means that I am not expected to reply," it duly reported, for some reason.

She sighed. "That's right, computer. You're not expected to reply."

It was silent for a moment. The screen then populated with a menu which suggested that actually, it did have a reply to offer and she'd just gone and confused the hell out of it.

“Red, the computer has found another connected event and created an extrapolation!” she said, almost excitedly.

Red said, with an almost complete lack of excitement: “That’s great. Let me know how that works out for you. In the meantime, if you could devote a little of your time to helping me find this truck, that would be really quite helpful.”

“I am helping.” She frowned at him, even though he couldn’t see her do it. “The more information we have, the more likely it is that we’ll be able to defeat the protocol and be able to track down Merv. Also, it means we’ll be closer to solving the puzzle of whatever is actually going on here.”

“In the meantime?” Red asked. “I’ll just ride around in circles looking for this Ford truck with an exponentially incremental degree of error and inversely proportionally likelihood of failure.”

Norma frowned. The sheer length of those words was unsettling; the fact that they’d come out of Red was puzzling; and the fact that he’d used them correctly was staggering. “Red, when you get back, we’re giving you another brain scan. I have a feeling that a bit more of your brain has been augmented.”

“I’m like a god to you now!” he said sarcastically.

“More like the subject of a very interesting medical paper,” she said much less sarcastically.

“You’re just jealous because I’ve got super-powers and you didn’t even get a shaved head and a wheelchair.”

“Actually, it could be a sign that your biological brain is being swallowed up almost entirely by the nanobots and they will eventually replace it entirely,” she said. “I wonder what you’d be if that happened.”

“Look in a mirror,” he said sarcastically, but not really that sarcastically.

In response to that she just rolled her eyes. Finally, she told him: “I’m busy, Red. Go away and enjoy your brain cancer while the big girls and boys get the work done.”

She couldn’t switch off his audio feed but she certainly could ignore it.

Computer, play the extrapolation.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Meadows sat at a vaguely oblong table in his local coffee shop. The polished stainless steel frame sported a top that was made from a kind of marble which had a solid feel and was reassuringly cool to the touch. It added a nice air of quality to things.

He sipped at an almost excellent cappuccino and the taste brought a little smile to his careworn face.

“Is this quite safe?” Professor Jones asked, from the opposite side of the table. He always brought a sharply-focused and rational mind to the dealings but, occasionally, it bordered on the wrong side of annoying. His colleague, Mr Silverman, sat beside him and gave a friendly little chuckle.

“I’m sure Mr Medows knows what he’s doing,” he said, but he looked over with an expression that clearly expected a response.

Medows duly replied. “My work for you gentlemen is securing information. That work does not extend to making me, myself, vanish. That would certainly complicate things in terms of arranging meetings. Instead, there is a level of technology at work to conceal and obscure my public dealings. The technology is so reliable that this coffee shop is as safe a place for us to conduct our business as any office swept for bugs by your most seasoned professionals.”

“You see?” Mr Silverman smirked to his colleague, who grimaced openly, making no effort to hide his disapproval.

“Progress is inevitable,” he said. “But no technology is totally secure. There are people out there with computers beyond your wild imaginings, Medows. If given the correct motivation, I’m certain they could poke a hole through even your security.”

“Perhaps.” Medows sipped once more at his coffee. “If you wanted to give me the specification of those computers, I’d happily review my work and find a way to defeat them.”

Jones glared at him angrily and he was a man rarely roused to public displays of mood. “‘Specifications’ implies that this thing has an upper limit. Your one saving grace is that it’s currently operated by a group of idiots with no idea what they have, and even less of an idea how to properly use it.”

Silverman chuckled some more at this and nodded in agreement. “My understanding is that they’re using it to send a fast motorcycle out to solve crimes. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?”

Professor Jones gave him a very slightly caustic glance. “And there’s the other thing.”

Medows looked at their faces as their expressions changed, taking on a more serious, even worried look. “What other thing?”

“The other thing,” Silverman told him, and there was none of usual light and casual air of his humour about it.

Medows looked from one face to the other. “The others?” he said with a nervous smile. “That’s just an urban myth. I thought it was just the intelligence community’s bogeyman.”

Silverman smiled back but it was an expression painted on his face above something else, something darker. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Medows was nervous now. “Do you mean to say that there really are ‘others’ out there?”

Professor Jones said sharply: "I never heard anyone say any such thing."

Silverman gave a sarcastic yet firm shake of the head in agreement. "No such thing was said that I heard."

"But I can see the looks on your faces."

Silverman took control with his usual elegant command of the situation. He said, "There are elements of a community as complex and layered as ours that are beyond even our remit. Perhaps they exist, perhaps they don't, and what does it really matter in any case? Most likely, it's a case of partially heard whispers.

"It's a distinct irony that a community of seasoned professionals whose primary role is in the handling of sensitive information are so prone to gossip."

Medows smiled at this. Jones looked away and occupied himself with a sip of his very bland coffee.

Silverman leant forward and said, as if relishing his words: "I expect you're wondering why I asked you here today?" he grinned. "I've always wanted to say that."

Medows smirked back at him at this very little joke. He nodded, "I presume you have something for me to erase for you."

"Then you would presume quite incorrectly," Silverman told him. Professor Jones sat back in his chair and glared forward fixedly, not looking at anything in particular.

Medows shrugged but was suddenly quite nervous. He flushed and flashed an awkward little glance to Claire who was sitting some way off at the counter. Even at this distance, he was sure she was watching.

Silverman continued: "Medows, can I be very blunt with you?"

He nodded that, of course, he could.

He said: "Medows, I want to commend you on your excellent work. You are a huge benefit to our entire community and we really couldn't function without you, at least not as well as we do."

Medows smiled proudly but remained a little reserved. "Thank you," he said.

Silverman continued: "We're extremely happy with your work. We have no plans to replace you and I sincerely hope that no accident befalls you. In fact, I can almost promise it."

Medows looked from one to the other.

"What I'm trying to say is that I understand if you're nervous. Your job is of the worst possible kind. If we were to think of replacing you, then it would be with a fresh face and that would present a whole new set of security concerns and difficulties that we're all far too old to want to deal with," Silverman told him, sounding as if he was being utterly sincere. "It's in my interest to keep you working happily with us until such time as I retire from my position and hand over this horrible can of worms to someone younger, less prepared and even more stupid than I was when I agreed to take it on." He smiled to himself and gave Medows a knowing little wink.

He was incredibly warm and likeable, on the surface, at least, and Medows couldn't help but break into a smile in response.

"Again, thank you," he said.

"Medows, I've heard rumours," he said, not quite sternly but certainly without his usual warmth. "I've heard that you've begun to feel the need to protect yourself in the unlikely event that anything was to happen to you. I've heard that you're not as happy with things as you once were."

Medows pretended to look surprised but he wasn't an accomplished liar.

“I want to assure you, David, that nothing is going to happen. You don’t need to arrange any kind of protection to assure your continued employment in this community,” he told him firmly. “I arranged to have Claire assigned to you for your protection, because I believe in you and I understand the weight of the responsibility of the role you’ve undertaken. But, my friend, you have even stronger protection than that. You have me and I will bring hell to the door of any man or woman who turns their hand against you. You have my word on that.”

“I’m just...” he flustered nervously.

Silverman held up a hand for him to stop. “I understand. I’m not even telling you that you can’t, even that you shouldn’t, find a way to protect yourself. I didn’t come here to tell you what not to do. I came here to tell you that you don’t need to do anything. I came here to put your mind at ease, nothing more.”

Medows actually did feel a little relieved. He breathed a little sigh and gave an expression of accepting all this gladly. Silverman was just so easy to believe: when he spoke, people listened. They listened because he had a reputation for following through on every word, keeping up every promise that he made. More than that, people listened because he made them want to.

“I just felt that...” he paused, not even sure how he felt. “I’ve just been worried that I’d seen so much. Maybe someone, somewhere, would worry about me telling people about it. I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Silverman told him with a note of absolute, resolute certainty. “But, David, any man would have doubts about what we do, about the things that we see. I don’t blame or judge you for that. I don’t want robots working for me: I want people

with consciences. I want real humans who know what we're doing and why we're doing it."

Medows could only nod in agreement. It all seemed eminently reasonable. Silverman had a way of connecting with people; he seemed to know just exactly what to say.

"You are protected," Professor Jones said, adding very little to the conversation, although his words, carefully chosen, often carried a certain weight.

Medows huffed loudly. "I won't deny that what I've seen over the years has shaken me."

"I know," Silverman told him sympathetically. "It's a burden no man should be asked to carry. I can't say that I'm as well-versed in the matter as you are and I have no wish to be." He shook his head. "Even knowing a little of that would darken a man's soul. But, Medows, you are not alone."

Medows shook his head. "Thank you. To both of you." He smiled and his mood lightened accordingly. It was a relief to have heard this and he welcomed it. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to use the bathroom."

As he got up to leave, Mr Silverman said, "Of course."

As he stepped away Professor Jones narrowed his eyes and said: "Well, what do you think? Has he arranged his own protection? Will he? Some letter in a lawyer's office to be opened on the event of his death? Perhaps he'd revoke the protocol codes and reveal everything?"

He shrugged a reply. "Who knows? He's not an idiot and he'd have to be not to do something. In his position, I'd arrange to rain hell-fire down on the world if anyone dared to threaten my life."

"I know what you'd do!" Jones grunted.

Silverman laughed at him. “You think you do, but you couldn’t hazard a guess. I have plans in place in the event of my untimely death that will destroy the very fabric of your soul.”

“I don’t have a soul,” Jones reminded him. “Nor do you, come to that!”

Medows came out of the toilet, his hands still moist from washing them, since the dryer was an inefficient thing. He stepped up to Claire who was keeping a watchful eye.

She said, very softly, “Is everything alright?”

“Perfectly,” he assured her so she could relax a little. She was a perpetual rod of tension, unless he took steps to calm her down with a few well-chosen words of comfort. “They assured me that they have my back and that I don’t need to arrange any additional security for myself.”

“Will you arrange additional security for yourself?” she asked. He just smiled and told her simply, “I am not an idiot.”

Chapter 19

“Found you!” Red said, grinning to himself. Up ahead was a black Ford truck with a chromed badge on the rear. It fitted the fairly poor description he’d been given perfectly, rather like a hand might fit in a sock. For the first time ever, he was glad he had the ‘subtle mode’ installed and found himself wishing that he had something that might go even further.

He hung back, tucked in behind a row of traffic, occasionally stepping out to take a cautious glance forwards, just in case something interesting was happening up ahead.

The HERPES was not a subtle design. It was as if someone had designed the perfect stealth vehicle, one that could melt into the shadows unseen and then decided to do the absolute complete opposite of that, after receiving a very significant blow to the head. It was a big, black monstrosity of jagged sharp angles, armoured panels and bare industrialised details with an automatic cannon just hanging on the front for good measure. It would scarcely go unnoticed if it was parked next to a blind person. Even dogs didn’t like it, and often backed away, whimpering quietly to themselves.

He loved her with all his digitally-augmented, salmon-infested soul but, for right now, even Red had to admit that they were both a little out of their comfort zone.

“Found Merv?” Norma’s voice came through the helmet in crystal clarity as if she’d be shrunk down and made herself quite comfortable in his ear.

“Yeah!” he told her, sneaking along behind a bus with several small children peering out of the back window at him, frowning and staring with slack-jawed awe. “I’ve made contact with the Ford truck.”

“You’ve made contact with a Ford truck!” she reminded him.
“Unless you’re sure that the driver of this one looked at you funny.”

Red muttered something to himself which wasn’t picked up clearly in the mic and which was reported back through the voice recognition software at the Hawk-Eye control centre as, ‘Go fix your shelf.’

He held back. Normally, he would engage the cannon and cause countless thousands of dollars in property damage, or activate the boost control and rip along at full power, horrifying everyone around. The last time he’d done that, the police had recorded five people handing themselves in under suspicion of having drunk much more alcohol over lunch than they’d thought, three promising to give up driving forever and seventeen different independent reports of various supernatural monsters blazing through the late afternoon traffic.

Mostly, aliens were blamed.

On top of all this, it was unlikely that a Ford F150, that was travelling sedately, was going to require anything close to full power to keep up with. Also, if Merv was in it, then the cannon wasn’t really a good idea; probably even more so, if he wasn’t.

“Norma, how do I disable a truck?” he asked, without actually meaning to sound like he was trying to be annoying.

“You don’t,” she told him impatiently. “You just follow along while I trace your journey. We’ll find out much more about this by finding out where he’s going than we would by just catching him.”

“But where’s the fun in that?” Again, he really wasn’t trying to be annoying: this was just his nature.

She began with a huff, “This isn’t about having fun, Red. This is about gathering information. Don’t you understand the importance of all this?”

He just needed a gentle reminder, that was all. He replied, embellishing on the truth slightly: "Of course, I understand. Merv is my friend too, remember?"

"Then stay back and do your job so I can do mine," she told him.

Red suddenly had a very vivid image of himself watching in silence, with his own dirty socks shoved forcefully into his mouth, as Norma slowly sliced off his skin with a potato-peeler and decided that it might be best not to say any of the things that were going through his mind, such as, 'I wish you would do your job' or 'I thought your job was to bring me coffee.' Of course, this would never happen in reality. That was one of her mid-week threats and this was early Friday afternoon.

Suddenly, and without warning, all this came very quickly to nothing as the F150 suddenly veered off to the right and powered away down a side-street with the distinctive throaty rumble of a V8 engine. Red followed with consummate ease, pulling between a pair of cars whose drivers really thought they had a handle on road safety - but were proved to be quite startlingly wrong about that.

He was only about four car-lengths away now, since turning the motorcycle was far easier than steering a truck, and it had more power than just about anything, which made tight corners far too much fun to be taken slowly. He tried to hold back and let something overtake him, but there was nothing much else about, and the HERPES hadn't been designed with being over-taken in mind. Behind the truck there was only space between them. If it was Merv, he must have known Red was there by now. The question was: what would he do about it?

"I hope you've got a trace on where he's heading," Red told her, letting the throttle run back to widen the gap between them. The

bike lurched and belched a short blue flame. “If Merv hasn’t spotted me then he’s got no right calling himself a professional.”

“Is anyone following you?” Norma asked pointedly.

“Hold on, let me check,” Red said, missing the point entirely and actually assuring Norma that his brain was functioning normally and she needn’t worry too much about the technology augmenting his intelligence. “There’s nobody else there behind me. At least, I think so, or don’t think so. Whichever is the right answer.”

The truck slowed and the orange indicator light began flashing for a right-hand turn. It dropped to a low speed and then steered into a small side road. Red slowed and decided to follow it in - not that he had any real choice.

The truck pulled to the side in what was little more than a wide alley. Dark orange brickwork ran along one side, the opposite opening out to a grey concrete yard surrounded by a chain-link fence. Apart from the two vehicles and some large metal dumpsters, it was deserted.

The truck pulled up to a stop, flashing a pair of bright red brake-lights.

Red said softly, “OK. I’m pretty sure he knows I’m here.”

“Red, I think you should get out of there,” Norma’s voice told him.

His heart was pounding and, beneath the racing-gloves, his palms were sweating. “Norma, I’m going to confront him.”

“No!” she said firmly. “He’s carrying a Smith & Wesson .500 revolver. I have no idea if your state-of-the-art bullet-proof armour could defeat a weapon of that stature. Even if it could prevent penetration, it would easily break bones. So could Merv, come to that.”

“Jeez, Merv!” Red grumbled to himself. “Couldn’t you find a bigger gun?”

“Red, stand down!” she told him. She had authority but it only extended as far as Red respected it, which really wasn’t very far at all. All that was compounded by the problematic fact that field operatives had a wide latitude to rely on their own judgement during operations. Red knew that, and not very much of anything else. She sounded worried for all of these very reasons, among very many more.

“Norma. You find out where this is. Maybe it’s relevant to what’s going on. In the meantime, we have nothing to lose by me confronting him,” he told her, stepping off the bike and removing the helmet.

He was wearing the earpiece and could hear the distinctive sound of a person slapping their forehead with their palm. He continued: “I can get him to listen to me. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for all this. I know I can get through to him.”

“Red, I can’t even get through to you,” she growled angrily.

Red smiled.

He stepped gingerly closer to the truck, keeping off slightly to the left. Red was no fool, at least not completely. He’d parked the bike with a clear line of sight so that the cannon was aimed at the driver, should he step out of the vehicle pointing a weapon of such brutality that it had no place outside of the collection of a very lonely, and poorly-educated, man who was very insecure about the size of his bodily appendages. Red would be able to fire the cannon and also, if the situation got out of his control, Norma could fire it remotely. His .380acp pistol might only make Merv angry but a military-specification assault cannon should take the angry right back out of him. Red hoped against hope that it wouldn’t come to that.

He stepped closer, his fingers twitching towards the little pistol he was carrying. He was determined not to reach for it unless there really was absolutely no alternative. By now, his heart was thumping in his chest and sweat was prickling at his scalp. He was even experiencing this at sixteen times normal speed, just for the sheer fun of it.

He wasn't scared, not really, and really not for himself. This was beyond the concerns of a single person. Whatever it had taken to make Merv throw a punch at him had ramifications he couldn't even begin to imagine. He had to know what this meant!

Suddenly, with a bold click, the door unlatched and swung open widely. Red stopped in his tracks and waited. He had never been more certain that Merv was in some kind of trouble. He had surely never intended any of this. He was even more sure that, whatever it was, they could fix it. With the entire power of the Hawk-Eye, they could fix almost anything. Merv would listen this time, he told himself. Nobody was going to kill anyone, especially him with his little .380acp pistol; and hopefully not Merv with his .500 revolver, which was really much more suited to the job.

A man got out of the car. Red actually took a reflexive step away, gasped slightly and felt a flush of adrenaline which slowed down the world to a snail's pace inside his mind. The man was white, well-built and not overly tall. What he absolutely wasn't, was Merv.

By the time he'd stood up and looked over to Red, he had already decided that he'd foolishly followed the wrong truck and that all this had been a colossal waste of time. He planned a clever cover-story to explain the fact that he'd been very obviously tailing him for some time, but his heart just wasn't in it.

Red grimaced at his stupidity, which did seem to be at its peak right now. "I'm sorry!" he said, turning away, "I thought you were someone else."

He felt drained as the adrenaline washed out of his system, bringing with it an empty feeling that almost hurt him right down in the pit of his stomach. He had been so sure that this had been his chance to confront Merv, and a chance to get his friend back.

He wallowed for a moment, lost, as he allowed this crushing defeat to consume him. From the corner of his eye he saw movement, a flash of silver metal and he felt himself moving reflexively away.

A gun barked, the distinctive crack of a super-sonic round which sounded like a deafening bass-speaker being slammed hard into his ear-drum. He was already moving, ducking for cover behind a dumpster as three more shots rang out in quick succession. One, at least, kicked up a shower of concrete debris from the ground below his foot.

"Fire cannon!" he barked.

A shuddering blaze of gunfire rang out in an ear-splitting roar, spitting flaming bullets towards the truck. The door's interior trim exploded in a cloud of grey plastic and the metal was shredded away on the other side. The man dived for cover and that was all the opportunity Red needed.

He felt a wave of anger driving him. The distance between them was covered quickly and he fired a volley of rounds over the man's head as he lay on the ground, covering his face with his arm. Red never intended to hit him: he wanted him scared and shielding himself, unable to return fire.

Red kicked out and booted the gleaming pistol clean out of the shocked man's hand. He stepped back, his face contorted into a growl, as the man hefted himself into an upright position.

Red pointed back to the motorcycle and said threateningly, through angrily gritted teeth: "If there's one scratch on her, just one scratch, I will systematically go through your skeleton and break every bone you have in alphabetical order."

For what might very well have been the first time ever in recorded history, Red had delivered a really quite respectable threat. More to the point, he meant it entirely. This was no idle boast. He intended to follow through on it to the very letter. Perhaps that was where he had always gone wrong before? The only slight issue was that he only knew the name of about five different bones.

The man stood himself up. He wasn't angry but his face was resolute. He had a grim determination about him and the confidence to succeed against any odds. He was a professional and he was about to attack.

He lunged at Red who stepped to the side just fast enough to be far out of the way of his initial punch but just close enough to deliver one of his own, directly to his throat.

The man gasped in shock to find he now couldn't breathe. He loudly coughed and clutched his neck, heaving in pain and surprise. Now his face did look angry and he flushed crimson. His left hand went up to defensively guard his face, while his right went down to his hip and balled into a relaxed fist.

Red just stood there glaring at him. "In your own time!" he hissed.

He lunged forward and thrust into a powerful blow that, if it connected, would knock any reasonably-sized man to the ground.

This was a professional, thought Red, in his own good, leisurely time.

Red didn't just think, he moved. He leaned back and spun to the left, grabbing the man by his outstretched wrist with his own left hand and shattering his elbow with his right, bringing it down hard with a bone-wrenching, sickening crunching sound.

The man crumpled to the ground, gasping weakly from his closed-up throat, panting for breath as his eyes watered from what can only have been an agonising injury.

"Elbow," Red told him. "I don't know if 'finger-bones' is technically accurate, but I'm going to proceed from the position that it is."

The man tensed and dragged himself back up to his feet, stretching his back to stand taller. His face was white and his right arm hung limply at his side. His brow was lowered down and he peered out beneath it, his eyes flashing in burning rage. His breathing was uneven and heavy and he looked as if he wanted to kill Red. His professionalism was wavering.

Red just waited. "I take it that you're Brad? I have questions. The deal is that you answer them and I stop letting you hurt yourself. You don't seem to be a clever man, so I'm happy to let you explain the rules to yourself until you understand them."

The man tucked his right inner-arm in to the side and launched a punch with his left. To Red, it moved in horribly slow motion and he had more time than he might ever need to mount a defence. He snapped his hand around the wrist with his right hand and twisted himself right around to deliver a left elbow blow right where the other man kept his jaw. There was a dull cracking sound, a gasp and then his arm went limp. Red let go of the wrist as the man collapsed once more, but this time all the way to the ground.

“Where’s Merv?” he said.

The man looked up at him angrily, but there was a slightly confused look in his eyes. He clearly wasn’t used to being beaten, perhaps never imagining that he could be. He was gasping for air, his throat still numb from being unceremoniously slammed into. “Screw you!” he somehow managed to spit angrily at Red.

“Wrong answer,” Red told him, giving him a leisurely but pointed kick to the ribs which over-balanced him enough that he fell to the side on his broken elbow. He howled in pain.

“You son of a...” His voice was swallowed up by his ragged gasping for air and the sheer pain of it all.

“Son of a waitress, apparently,” Red shrugged. “Imagine being a trained thug that’s so easily beaten that a woman who professionally hates her life can turn out a kid that grows up to literally kick your arse, without even breaking a sweat.” He rolled his eyes thoughtfully. “Sorry,” he said. “I mean, you don’t have to imagine it; that’s your current reality. Perhaps ‘thug-school’ has a refund policy?”

And with those words, Red returned to normal, such as normal was for Red.

“I’ll kill you...” he gasped weakly.

“Yeah!” Red laughed. “Good luck with that. I’m going to call my boss and then go and check my bike for scratches. You best hope I don’t find any!”

He crouched down, keeping a careful eye on Brad who was lying on the floor, rasping for breath and cradling his shattered arm. “Norma!” Red said, pressing his finger against the earpiece and leaning forwards, so the man could feel his breath against the side of his face as he spoke loudly to her. “I’d like to take this sorry excuse for a man somewhere private and systematically pull his fingers off

until he tells me where Merv is. Do we have a way to make my dreams a reality, in the absence of Merv bundling him into the back of a colour-changing van?"

"I believe I have just the thing," she said.

Red smiled.

Chapter 20

The motorcycle roared into the Hawk-Eye control room with ‘subtle-mode’ disabled. It was like an automatic cannon being fired and Norma winced as the roar echoed through the chamber, pinching at her ear-drums painfully and sending her already foul mood into a downward spiral.

“Red!” she grumbled to herself, as he stepped off the bike and hung his helmet irreverently on the side of the handle-bar, shaking her head and plotting extreme acts of violence inside the depths of her twisted mind.

“I’m back!” he called out somewhat redundantly, since there really couldn’t be very much doubt about it. “I searched the truck for clues.”

Norma called back, as he came over to join her: “Did you find anything?”

He shrugged inside his tight, form-fitting armour. “I found a pack of cinnamon-flavoured gum. It wasn’t as delicious as it sounds.”

Norma rolled her eyes at him as he stepped up onto the raised control platform.

“I’m guessing the truck was Brad’s,” Red said with a shrug. “It had two magazines that fitted his Taurus pistol, some loose change and pretty much nothing else. No documents, no papers, nothing. It was clean.”

She sighed and nodded. “Same this end,” she told him. “The protocol has some degree of intelligence. It’s not just a firewall that blocks our access. The truck doesn’t technically exist. I’ve run the licence number, engine number and chassis and nothing comes back in any database. If I try to do a police check on it, then it comes back clean under an alias that rotates randomly. The protocol, and

whatever computer it's running from, is adjusting its cover to mask things very cleverly."

"So if the police ran the plates, it would look completely innocent?" he asked with a frown. "Nobody would ever suspect."

She nodded. "This system is smart, very smart. The Hawk-Eye is making in-roads into cracking it but it's a slow process." She rubbed her forehead wearily.

"Where's Brad?" Red looked around as if expecting to see him somewhere about.

"He's in the hospital, Red," she told him with an angry little scowl. She huffed a deep sigh at him and crossed her arms over her chest. "I contacted Bertolli and had him take the suspect into police custody. He's having his arm put back together. It will need pinning at least. He also lost two teeth and you broke his nose."

Red grinned back at her. "Maybe we don't need Merv after all?"

She flashed him a dark little frown, but it didn't seem that a bad mood was something she was terribly invested in. "Red, I'm not going to tell you that you over-stepped the mark. He was trying to kill you and your reaction was proper, under the circumstances."

"But?" he asked, sensing that one was going to be forthcoming, since it usually was.

"But injuring him has slowed down the investigation," she said. "Perhaps next time you could be less rough?"

Red gave her the kind of look a person might give a child that had been caught pushing crayons into its nose. "He's lucky there were no scratches on the bike. I don't make idle threats. If she'd been hurt, then a world of pain would have been visited upon him."

"The bike is constructed from a carbon molecule with seventeen times the tensile strength of high-speed steel," she said. "If

he'd fired a full magazine at point-blank range directly at it, it wouldn't have left a mark. Also, she doesn't have paint to scratch. It's as if you're trying to lovingly protect a hammer from a nail."

Red shrugged and stepped away towards the coffee machine to top up his increasingly horrendous addiction to caffeine. "Well, as it turns out, firing at me does leave a mark. He won't forget that in a hurry, especially with the surgical scars as a constant companion."

As he reached out, there was a dull ache in his shoulder. The ache became a sharp, jabbing pain as he moved it. He put his left hand over the outside of the suit, covering the place where the pain was at its worst.

"Norma, I've been shot!" he said in surprise. There was the trace of a lead mark on his armour where a 9mm bullet had impacted and been deflected away. He unzipped the armour plate and looked beneath. The skin was badly bruised and hot to the touch.

Norma was beside him in an instant, her veneer of professionalism peeled back and she looked more like a concerned parent. Her words came tumbling out. "Red, are you OK?"

He looked back up at her, more surprised than in pain. "I didn't even feel it, Norma," he said and gave an exaggerated shrug. "It doesn't really hurt now. I thought you said my brain's pain centres had been enhanced. Shouldn't I be in agony now?"

She frowned thoughtfully as her scientific mind took over, coming at the problem from a more logical perspective. "Maybe the modifications are helping to control the pain?" She looked carefully at the wound. "I'm no expert on medical science-" she began haltingly.

Red interjected sharply: "That's reassuring, since you injected a thermos-flask full of untested microscopic robots into my brain."

She gave him a caustic little glance and continued as if he'd never said that. "-but the healing looks to be much faster than it should be. Perhaps the technology has used the pain-centres of your brain as a way of managing your metabolism to speed up your healing process?"

"So now I have two super-powers?" Red interpreted that just the way he chose to hear it.

She looked at him evenly. "The only way to really test that hypothesis is to perform a controlled experiment. Perhaps I could shoot you again only without the armour?"

She made an uncharacteristic attempt at humour by reaching round her back for her pistol.

Red stared at her blankly and then said, "Maybe after my coffee." He began to pour them each a steaming mug of the stuff. "So, have we found out anything new?"

Norma sighed and said, "Not really." she was looking tired. "Medows saw something that scared him enough that he set up something to happen in the event of his death. Presumably, this thing with Merv is somehow connected to whatever it was that he set up."

Red handed her a mug of rich black coffee and began sipping at his own. "How can we find out what it was that he set up?"

"With the protocol still working, we can't, at least not right now," she told him. "I'm working on it but it's a slow process."

He huffed noisily and shook his head. "What could have made Merv change sides? That's what I don't understand."

Norma looked at him and her expression fell to one of sympathy. She put her hand supportively up on his shoulder and told him, "We'll find out, Red."

He nodded back. They would, he told himself. "Norma, what about these other videos? What about the guy on the bike?"

She shook her head and wearily rubbed at her temples. Suddenly, the coffee seemed like the best idea in the world and she took a long swig. "What if this is some kind of recruitment?" she suggested. "Merv seemed to be recruiting Brad who then went off on his own, presumably to find someone, or something, else. What if the man on the bike was there to get Merv, but you just got in the way?"

Red shrugged. It seemed reasonable. "They're creating an army?"

"And with the protocol blocking us, we have no idea why," she said grimly, and a little helplessly.

Red hung his head. When he finally spoke, he said softly, "Brad's not going to talk, is he?"

"I know," Norma agreed. "Come on. Let's see if the Hawk-Eye has managed to find anything new."

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Medows looked around nervously. He was out of his depth and a long way out of it besides. He was a minnow swimming with the sharks and, if he wasn't lucky enough to drown, he could well be eaten alive.

It was a quiet place, a little cafe on the outskirts of town and he'd been invited there for lunch. It had been the kind of invitation where refusal wasn't an option.

As was his usual preference, he'd arrived early. He'd driven his average nondescript car twice around the average nondescript neighbourhood, familiarising himself with a way out, in case one was urgently needed. He'd driven up and down the road the cafe was on, making sure there was no sign of anyone around - at least, nobody that looked like a threat.

There was nothing. The street was just everything that it seemed to be and nothing else besides. There were no men in parked cars peering over, pretending to be engrossed in a newspaper. There were no people taking pains to go about their daily mundane activities, while gazing fixedly at the little shop. Nobody had pressed their finger to their ear; nobody paid any undue attention to anyone else.

Perhaps he was just being overly cautious after all, but cautiousness was his nature. It was a facet of his personality that had served him well, and a lot to do with why the meeting had been scheduled in the first place.

He had arrived early and been taken to a private booth somewhere near the back. It was a small cafe but had a warm and friendly style to it. It had bright orange-painted walls with darker plaster edging. There were pictures dotted around, of farms and countryside. It was a slice of something that didn't quite belong in the city, like a dream half-remembered that made no sense in the waking world.

He had waited for some time, sipping slowly at a cup of frothy, but bland, cappuccino with too much milk and not enough flavour. At least there was a fine sprinkling of chocolate on the top; he hated it when that was missed off.

He was a man to whom details were important. Details were the structure upon which a thing was built. Ignoring them meant that that thing existed without a proper form. It would be as bad as introducing a random element; it would invite the potential for chaos.

Finally, he saw a man enter through the door, accompanied by the sound of a little bell ringing gently as it swung open. A member of the staff greeted him and humbly offered to take his coat.

Medows watched. The gentleman was tall and distinguished and had a remarkable presence that seemed to mark him as superior to other men. He was a man, just a little larger, just a little stronger, just a little better, than everyone else.

He turned and regarded Medows with a little smile, a friendly and cordial, but professional, thing. Although he'd never met the man before, it seemed apparent that this was who he'd been summoned to meet.

The other man came over, striding with confident purpose and then slowing to come up to the side of their booth. Medows stood up quickly, holding out his hand in friendly greeting.

"Thank you for coming," this man said, taking the hand and shaking it warmly. His grip was firm but not too firm and dry but not too dry. Medows own handshake was limp and his hand was lubricated with a fine misting of nervous sweat. "My name is Silverman. My friends call me Thomas, but honestly, there aren't many of those. This business doesn't really lend itself to such things."

Medows smiled back at him, an awkward thing, and he flushed brightly as a wash of nerves washed over him.

Silverman took the lead and sat himself down opposite. He casually made himself comfortable. He made a point of removing his jacket and even loosened his tie, running a finger around inside the collar of his shirt.

"David Medows," he said to himself with a sly little grin. "I've been watching you, you know?"

"You have?" he asked, trying to sound surprised but failing. Of course he'd been watching: that was why they were there.

"You're a talented project manager with a very solid grounding in the science of it all," Silverman began thoughtfully.

“I’ve been watching your progress in the computer science department of our agency. You’ve done impressive work.”

Medows looked around, marking where the staff were and checking they were out of earshot.

He heard Silverman give a little chuckle. “David, you can relax here. This cafe is owned by the agency. It’s routinely scrubbed for listening devices and every countermeasure has been installed to make sure our conversation is just as private as it can be. This place is as safe as having a chat in my office, only more convenient since I don’t actually have an office and this place serves excellent pasta.” He flashed a warm little smile and it was infectiously reflected on Medows own face in reply.

“David, you just completed a project to search databases for a certain keyword and then randomly scramble that keyword, effectively removing the ability of other computers to ever find those indexed results. Is that correct?” he asked, leaning forwards to rest on his elbows and pressing his palms together as he began to tap them on the edge of his chin.

“Yes, sir,” he nodded. “It was harder than it sounds, since the algorithm couldn’t leave a trace of itself and had to be completely self-destructive. In any case, we finished up seven months ahead of schedule and arrived under budget.”

Silverman said, as if his words carried no small measure of praise: “I’m aware.”

Medows nodded graciously at his work being recognised and he swelled with pride.

Silverman took a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled loudly. “This has made me wonder what you could achieve if I gave you a little more to work with,” he told him, grabbing his attention

completely. “You see, we’ve developed a new mainframe computer, more powerful than anything you’ve ever seen before.”

Medows narrowed his eyes, just listening for now, while his mind instantly began pondering such things, working it all through, the way he always did. His hand moved to his chin and he began rubbing it curiously.

“All I can say is that the computer has organic components,” he said, and then he smiled and added: “I can only say that, not just because it’s all incredibly secret, but because it’s also incredibly complicated and it’s around that point where my ability to follow all the tech-related jargon comes to an end.”

Medows chuckled and it sounded a little forced.

“With the tools you had, you managed to make a virus that spread out over the internet and made key-words vanish. With a computer like this at your disposal, how far do you think you could go? How far do you think your work could develop if you had the proper means at your disposal?”

Medows began to nod to himself while he pondered that very question. He said, “Of course, it largely depends on the nature of the computer and its abilities. Theoretically, we could go much further.” He put his hands together and rested them on his chin, tapping away thoughtfully and mirroring the other man’s gesture. “We could go much further, even if we only developed the software we already had. With more powerful computers, there’s no limit to what we could do.”

“I rather thought that might be the case,” Silverman said with a smile.

“Are you offering me a job?” Medows said bluntly.

“I rather think that I am!” he grinned. “Let’s discuss the finer points of this over a quite passable pasta dish that was prepared by a chef who was trained to remorselessly kill people, shall we?”

Medows happily agreed and decided he was in the mood for lasagne.

Chapter 21

Red sighed and felt disappointed, almost cheated, by the lack of violent deaths in the last extrapolation. It was funny what you could get used to, he thought to himself. “Norma, that wasn’t a good one,” he told her, sounding a bit bored. “Did we learn anything from that?”

Norma certainly had, even if Red apparently hadn’t. “We learned that Medows was given a new and powerful computer system to work with. That suggests that the protocol must be running within it,” she said, with that expression on her face she often used with Red that seemed to ask just exactly why she was having to explain this to a grown man. “Medows was a project manager, and a good one from what I can tell. That computer must be stored somewhere. It must be somewhere very safe, presumably where he works, but it could be hidden away anywhere. There must be a very complex and sophisticated way to access it, though it seems as if only Medows himself can control it.”

Red crossed his arms over his chest and bit his lip under a worried frown. “Is it Hawk-Eye technology, do you think? Is that what this is all about? Why do all your mad scientists always have to hide your stuff where you think nobody can find it? All it does is make it difficult to get pizzas delivered.”

Norma shook her head firmly, ignoring everything that went beyond the vaguely intelligent part of the question. “No, that last extrapolation was made about two years ago, right at the beginning, before the protocol even existed.” She looked around the control room, gesturing with her hand at it. “This place was undiscovered back then. There’s no way that anyone could have had access to this technology.”

Red was unconvinced. "So what, then?" he grunted. "Are we looking for another super computer? I feel like we did that already, several times. That doesn't sound like fun but it least it should mean that we're good at it now, right?"

Norma rolled her eyes and admitted: "We're not actually very good at anything, yet."

"Speak for yourself," Red grinned. "I had a date a few nights ago and she said I was very good."

Norma gave him a condescending look that he thoroughly deserved. "Good at what, exactly?"

Red sighed and looked annoyed. "Good at stuff," he said, without making eye-contact. "She told me I was good at reading the menu. She said it had a lot of long words and I should probably order for her. I wasn't dating her for her brains. I've got enough problems with those things in my life right now."

Norma gave a little smile and shook her head. "How stupid must she have been to think you were good at reading?"

"OK, OK!" Red grumbled. "She wasn't the smartest girl I've met. We established that when she tried to order a bottle of wine with a vinaigrette dressing." He gave her a sarcastic little smirk. "I don't like smart girls. They're boring and always moaning about something, I find. Often, they try to cross societal boundaries and take on a maternal role."

"When you're quite finished with the whole business of trying, and failing, to be insulting, while simultaneous trying, and failing, to be funny, we've got work to do!" Norma rubbed her forehead wearily. "As usual, all we've got is questions and no answers."

"So what's the key to all this then? Where do we go from here?" As Red spoke he took a sip of coffee but still managed to

sound exhausted, as if all this had drained the energy right out of him.

Suddenly, the computer beeped a warning. Norma and Red looked at one another expectantly before she quickly went over to the main monitor.

“Red,” she told him, “We’ve got another trace on Merv.”

“Merv,” he said hopefully. “Where is he?”

“Here!” she pointed to a map on the screen. It was some way across town but Red was already zipping up the armoured suit and heading to the bike. Norma frowned, “Red, you’ve been shot. Are you safe to ride?”

Red grinned, “Are you seriously asking if I’m safe to ride a potentially deadly machine, that is so dangerous that nobody else in the world can possibly ride it, and the only man that ever tried lost the use of both an arm and a leg before even getting it out of the building?”

Norma crossed her arms angrily over her chest and scowled at him. “Well, if you put it like that then, of course, it sounded like a ridiculous question. I’m so sorry I crossed societal boundaries to sound as if I was worried about you in an almost maternal way.”

“I’m fine, Norma!” he told her finally, grabbing up the helmet. “Let’s go get Merv, shall we?”

“Merv,” Norma nodded and turned back to the computer.

“He’s the key to all this. If we knew how they’d recruited him, we’d have our answer.”

The motorcycle roared out, the electronic damping not quite covering up the vicious crackling of the engine as it blasted out of the building.

Norma could only wait for him to get there which, to her, was the hardest part of the job. She hated sending Red out into a really quite dangerous situation with no backup and only the motorcycle to protect him. While it did have a gun, mounted on the nose, it really wasn't very heavily armed. She'd explained to Red many times that a well-equipped soldier could quite easily carry fire-power that was every bit equal to the punch the motorcycle was packing. It didn't matter of course. Red would always just laugh and tell her that the bike was perfect in every way, when, really, it was a shambolic death-trap that was only ideally suited for assisted-suicides.

Logic bounced off the surface of him just like bullets off the bike's rigid black armour. It was frustrating how she was never able to make him realise just how ridiculous this whole thing was. To her, the Hawk-Eye was all about intelligently applying the abilities of the computer to make a difference. To him, it was all about riding too fast and blowing things up with the auto-cannon. What it meant to Merv, a man who slept in pyjamas marketed to girls who were still young enough to enjoy cartoon animals, and who also had a hunting-revolver under his pillow that could blow the doors off a safe, was currently anyone's guess.

"Computer. Catalogue any connections to our current investigation and cross-reference anything that includes the word, 'recruitment,'" she said thoughtfully. Perhaps Red was right about Merv. Perhaps he was doing what he believed was the right thing, in some twisted way. Perhaps someone had convinced him that theirs was no longer the right side to be on? Perhaps, in some convoluted way, Merv even thought he was protecting them?

"Connection made," the computer said, sounding a little surprised about it. "Extrapolation is ready to be viewed."

"Show me," she said.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

The bike, black and powerful, drew to a stop at the gaping mouth of a wide brickwork tunnel, the surface edge crumbling from many years of wear and tear. The floor was covered in water, trickling gently along and the walls were straight at the side and curved up into a sweeping arch over his head. The building was old, a grey and orange thing, over on the hill some way off in the distance, and the tunnel went underneath, into the bowels of the place where his entry would most likely to go unnoticed.

He pulled off the helmet and looked around. The entrance went in a few meters before a steel trellis gate, with criss-crossed wire mesh welded into it, blocked it off. The front was lined with weeds, winding green vines that traced up around the red brickwork mouth like ugly veins jutting from the face of a man stretched beyond his limits.

The man looked around, just looking, listening and noticing everything. There was silence except for the chirping of a handful of birds and the gentle rustle of leaves, as the soft wind shuffled them around.

He made his way gingerly along, his black leather army boots stepping down to the concrete floor, careful not to make a noise. There was the sound of a hard object dragged along the inside of a soft one and then a black, purposeful firearm was in his hand.

He looked around once more and this time the pistol moved up, covering the view all around as he slunk further into the shadows, to be swallowed up by them. There was a glint of polished black metal, as a tubular silencer was screwed onto the end of the huge, gaping muzzle of his Colt weapon. He brandished a 1911A1, black and finished in dull blue, which sported dark wooden grips with diamond chequering, worn down at the peaks, and he handled it with

the consummate professionalism of a seasoned expert. It was plain and largely unmodified, a pistol that could have come from any soldier, a thing of deadly purpose, that could spit a huge and uncompromising lump of lead at sub-sonic speeds. The delivery was slow enough not to emit too much of a crack and but fast and heavy enough to leave a wound that would not be easily forgotten.

It was the weapon of a killer, a disposable, anonymous murder weapon, and in that way, it was very much the same as the man who wielded it.

He tried the gate with his hand, which was still veiled in the thin leather glove that he wore on the bike, and so he left no mark on the tarnished, green-painted metal. It was locked and moved only a tiny way before the metal hasp stretched to the end of whatever travel a heavy padlock allowed.

He whipped off his dark glasses and they vanished into a pocket inside his motorcycle jacket. In their place, he pulled out an array of thin metal probes and went to work on the lock.

It was decent, certainly, but it wasn't of a standard to offer a man like him any kind of challenge. It yielded in seconds, falling open and clattering noisily to the ground.

He stood up sharply, looking around from behind the barrel of his silenced weapon. He looked back accusingly at the yellowing metal lock, as if had somehow wilfully attempted to betray him. He pushed once again, more reservedly this time, and the gate swung open freely, the whole thing flexing with a groan as the rusting hinges sighed in protest.

Once inside, he closed the gate and replaced the lock, so that a casual observer would see nothing to catch his interest. Nothing - except for his motorcycle, perhaps. He took a final glance. It was covered by the vines and overgrowth, as well as it could be.

He turned and took a deep breath, peering into the darkness of the tunnel. Nothing was going to stop him, no matter what horrors might be lurking inside. He allowed a tiny smile to flutter over his cruel lips, as he imagined brave young soldiers standing guard somewhere down in the depths, assuring themselves right now that nothing was going to make them abandon their posts, no matter what horrors might be lurking in the shadows and coming for them.

He hoped that any good soldiers looking to block his way weren't that good. He was better than good and he'd sent enough innocent young men to their fates already. He hoped that, just this once, they might turn their backs and flee, run screaming back to their lives, where his bullets, his blades and his fury couldn't reach far enough to find them.

The tunnel came to a large, and very solid, wooden door. He ran his fingers along it and it felt strangely robust, almost as hard as metal. There was no varnish to dig his nails into, just a planed-smooth wall of hard wood with sooty-black metal fittings, securing it into an arch-topped doorway.

This was it, he thought to himself. This time, the door creaked open easily and he pointed the pistol inside. It was a long pistol, and carried the added bulk of a silencer, jutting out from the end of what was already a full-sized weapon. It wasn't ideal for very close-quarters combat but what it lacked in efficiency, in terms of its size, it made up very nicely in other ways. He had every confidence in it.

As he stepped inside, a powerful voice called out: "That's as far as you go. I can't let you go any further."

He grunted to himself and rolled his eyes with a weary sigh. They never learned!

“Go home, little man,” he said, his teeth gritted as he peered over the hard metal sights of the pistol. “This isn’t worth dying for, or at least it isn’t worth you dying for. Someone is dying here today and your being here isn’t going to stop that from happening.”

He heard footsteps echoing around the dark chamber, coming towards him, soft rubber soles on a hard concrete surface. Still, the room was veiled in a blanket of darkness.

Then, the sound stopped and the lights flickered on, bathing the room in a sickly blue/white light as their florescent glow flooded the darkness.

His bright blue eyes burned suddenly and he squinted out of painful reflex. The chamber was large with painted grey walls some way off at the sides. Cargo boxes were stored along makeshift racking and small pieces of debris were judiciously scattered around the floor.

At the end of the room was the doorway that led into the house, exactly where he wanted to go. The only problem was that there was a man blocking it. It was just a black silhouette, lit from a lamp burning behind and he stepped forward threateningly, melting out of the gloom.

“If you can get past me, the target is yours to kill,” he told him. “He won’t resist: he welcomes death. But, you do have to get past me to make that happen.”

The man smiled to himself as he slowly edged forwards, his weapon steady in front of him, locking onto the target. “I have a gun,” he called out, in case such obvious things weren’t obvious to everyone.

“You won’t shoot me!” whoever the voice came from, told him with total self-confidence in the matter. “Shooting me won’t prove anything and you’re here with something to prove.”

Three shots rang out. The pistol bucked in his hand as it kicked out three heavy lead slugs which all found their mark. The target crumpled to the ground, gasping in surprise as the bullets tore into him, knocking him to the ground.

“I ain’t got nothin’ to prove to anyone but myself, kid!” he said softly to himself. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got someone to kill.”

As he stepped forward he stopped in his tracks, staring in surprise as the man grumbled and moved to his side. He rolled over and sat up, his movements fluid and energetic like those of a gymnast. He was standing almost instantly, but still his hands were empty and he brandished no weapon.

He called out, “Can we both agree that now you have something to prove?”

The man frowned to himself and turned the gun over slightly to the left, eyeing it up suspiciously as if it should be ashamed of itself. He lowered the weapon, which had appeared to be essentially useless in any case. He began walking over, striding confidently across the storage room.

“I don’t have time for this!” he grunted, raising the weapon and then bringing it crashing down towards the other man’s head, using it as a blunt trauma weapon.

The other man moved with lightning speed, blocking the attack with his arm and jabbing out with his other fist. The punch caught the attacker in the chest and he wheezed, backing up from the force of the blow with a startled expression.

“Wow,” he snorted angrily. “It’s been a long time since someone hurt me. You’re gifted, kid, but that’s not going to be enough.”

He stepped back and took all this more seriously, stowing the pistol in a tight-fitting holster at his rear. He adopted the position, his

left leg forward, his fists ready to attack. “One last chance, kid. Walk away. I don’t want to hurt you, and I don’t need to.”

He was lean and moved like a man well-trained, well-suited and well-able to defend himself. He had an angry confidence about him that made him all the more dangerous. He was dark, except for oddly blue eyes and his hair was long, jet-black, totally straight and combed back from his face to be collected up in a ponytail behind his head. He wasn’t black, and didn’t look quite Asian either. Where he was from, the man couldn’t quite guess. He was well-travelled and had been to many countries, met many diverse people and killed them in imaginative ways. He didn’t much care about his ethnicity: he was an equal-opportunity killer, but the young man had a style to him. His fighting technique was polished and effective and that interested him much more.

The man stepped forward into an aggressive lunge, a feint that he didn’t follow through on, like a drunk trying to provoke a fight in a bar.

The young man pulled back, leaning his face away suddenly. He grinned to himself. That meant he was afraid of him; it meant he knew he was dangerous.

“Please kid, walk away,” he said, almost pleading, and resolved that it was the last warning he was going to get.

“Come on!” he told him, his voice laced with a growl of bravado. He knew he was trying to convince himself that he had a chance, and that told him that the young man knew that he really didn’t.

It was time to explain it to him, in a way that, sadly, he wasn’t going to like.

The man launched himself into an attack, thrusting his right into a punch aimed to catch him square on the front of the face. The

young man reacted, but too slowly, the jab connected with his chin, sending his head barrelling backwards. His knees crumpled and he staggered back in shock and pain.

He grinned to himself. "You're good, but I'm better," he told him. "I'm as good as money can buy."

The younger man recovered himself and glared up at him angrily, licking his tongue over a badly split lip. "If money can buy you, then you can't be that good."

He threw himself into an attack but the bigger, older man was ready for it. They traded blows, the man blocking every attack and not able to let any more of his own punches find their target.

The pair of them backed away, both gasping for breath. The man nodded at him respectfully and told him: "You put on a good show. I'm impressed, and I'm not easily impressed."

He simply nodded back. "You're good," he told him. Then, for the first time the younger man smiled at him, just a small, measured smile that didn't stretch far enough along his face to light up his blue eyes. He said, "But wouldn't you like to be better?"

The man narrowed his eyes and his left eyebrow raised quizzically. "I'm about as good as I'm ever going to get, kid."

"No!" he told him firmly. "Your fight is empty because you have no belief in it. What's missing from you is that you stand for nothing. I'm slower than you, and weaker, but I will never yield because what I fight for is bigger than myself. I can draw power from the belief others have in me and in the knowledge that what I do is important.

"I am a part of something and you are not. But you have a chance for that to change."

He rolled his eyes, having heard all this before from many different people, just before he'd proved them to be completely wrong about a great many things.

The young man finally surprised him one more time. He lowered his arms and relaxed, as if all the fight had instantly left him.

"Look kid, nothing is important," he told him, edging back slightly, suspicious that something was about to happen, that this was a trick. "They tell you you're changing the world, but you're not. You're just fighting someone else's fight for them. You're nothing, kid."

He shook his head. When he spoke, it was with a confidence that impressed the cynical killer. "I am a part of something. You can be, too."

He shook his head and flashed a mocking smile, but there was no stopping him from talking, apparently. He stepped forward and gave an open gesture, shrugging with his palms upwards and flashed the killer a smile.

"You can't easily get past me, certainly not without killing me, but I will make you a deal. I will take you to the man I work with, the man you're here to kill. In exchange for that, you just have to listen to what he has to say. That's all."

The man lowered his guard, quite against his better judgement. "You want me to walk into a trap? Do you think I'm stupid?"

The younger man shrugged and gave a slight, involuntary nod but contradicted himself by saying, "No, of course not. If I thought you were stupid, I'm sure my colleague would have no interest in talking to you."

"He knows I'm here?" he said, in surprised.

The young man shook his head and smiled, this time an actually warm smile, that lit up his eyes playfully. "The man I work

for is the one who brought you here. Think of this as a test. He loves his tests!”

“What?” he laughed, finding the suggestion ridiculous; but the younger man just smiled evenly back at him. “What? You’re serious?”

“Deadly!” he told him.

“Alright...” he finally said thoughtfully. “I’m actually interested to meet this guy. Any man who can convince a guy as good as you to go up against someone so very much better just to make some point has got to be worth a few minutes of my time.”

The pair of them went off towards the door, the younger man leading the way.

“You’re not better than me,” he grumbled.

“I’m so much better than you,” he told him. “I’m so much better than you that it’s like trying to compare a jet fighter to a bicycle.”

They headed up some spiralling stone steps.

“I don’t think of you as a bicycle.”

“I think you’ll find that you’re a bicycle...”

“If that’s true, then you’re a squirrel trying to ride to work on his nuts.”

“That’s good,” his voice said, echoing down the staircase as they vanished up into the darkness of the place. “Did you work hard on that?”

“Do you work hard at failing? Because you are quite accomplished at it.”

There was a grumbling sound. “You know I’ve still got a gun, right?”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma frowned. It was getting worse! “My god, Red. What have I sent you into?”

Chapter 22

Red roared along the road in near silence, grumbling to himself about the new-found subtlety that Norma had forced upon his beloved motorcycle.

Red wasn't a person who enjoyed subtlety.

It just wasn't the same, not that you could explain such a thing to someone like her. She didn't even properly understand the concept of caffeine, and thought such things should have limits!

Red wasn't a person who enjoyed limits.

"I'm coming up on the target," Red told her, shouting over the sound of the late afternoon wind as it howled through the helmet. He knew that meant very little in real terms, but he dared to hope. The computer had located Merv a full fourteen minutes ago; the chances he would still be in the same place were slim, at best. Still, what if he was? He could be eating a snack, perhaps an entire roasted pig on the end of a stick, with a side of chips, served in a bowl the size of a dustbin lid. He could be drinking a bucket of coffee with enough sugar to drop an average man directly into diabetic shock.

"Red, be careful," Norma's voice told him, and it sounded very much as if she was close to going out of her mind with worry. He knew she was concerned, but now it was his turn to roll his eyes at her. Being careful - he had thought of that!

"Red, I've checked ahead. The computer spotted him in a dive bar. It's a known hang-out for several convicted felons and has been the scene of around twenty violent altercations this year, several involving firearms."

"Sounds like Merv's kind of place!" he moaned to himself and even though it was what he had expected, his heart sank a little. Why didn't New-Merv go and do his recruiting in high-end coffee shops

and places that sold things with sun-dried tomatoes and grilled cheese? “Don’t worry, I’ll watch my back.”

“Park the bike up with the cameras and cannon pointing into the bar,” she told him. “I’m already hacking into the security feed, so I’ll be able to see inside with you.”

Red pulled up outside the bar. He did as she told him to, pointing the front end of the long, sweeping nose straight at the front of the building through a wide, metal-grating-covered window. The cannon would chew through the glass in seconds and, hopefully, Norma would be able to target it so it didn’t chew through him on the other side. That would be a silly way to die.

“I’m going in...” he told her, quickly swinging his leg over and whipping the helmet from his head in one fluid movement. “Wish me luck.”

He patted his rear hip, wishing he’d taken the time to upgrade his weapon. Norma carried the same pistol that Merv had originally been issued with, a Glock 22. It was much more powerful than his own, although, if the extrapolation was to be believed, it was still only likely to be as effective on Merv as harsh language. What would be effective on Merv was anyone’s guess.

He pushed the door open and a little bell chimed sweetly as he stepped inside.

“Merv was here!” Red said with a dark frown, his voice aimed at Norma, who had doubtlessly drawn much the same conclusion by now. Behind the bar, a man was still embedded into the mirrored rear wall. Much of the mirror and a fair bit of the wall were now on the floor, where there was also a fair bit of the man. The bar itself had a dent in it the same shape as a different, but equally unfortunate, gentleman who had left the dent, and the man himself had now taken on much of the shape of the bar. Red could only assume that this

hadn't been a choice he'd made after a large amount of careful thought on the matter.

The floor was littered with broken chairs and even more broken teeth and the carpet squelched as he walked on it, with the soggy, sticky, tell-tale sound of being soaked in drying blood. There was the distinctive noise of groaning and regrets from everyone still capable of making them.

"Who the hell are you?" a justifiably angry voice called out from a doorway directly behind the bar. A nervous man found the courage to step forward. He brandished a shotgun, a pump-action thing and he racked the pump hard. The metal action clattered and cracked, loading a fresh shell into the chamber. It was a disarming sound to Red, who was only carrying a tiny .380acp pistol, which meant he was only just on the right side of actually being disarmed.

"I'm looking for a friend," Red said. He held up his hand some way over his head. "He's about this tall, speaks the language of comic-book ultra-violence like a native, built roughly like a bus and speaks like someone who gave up on school just after kindergarten. He's as strong as a bull, enjoys beating people to death and eighties power-ballads."

The man backed away, his face bearing the expression of someone who had had enough of all this for one day.

Red shrugged, "Did you see anyone like that by any chance?" He cast a knowing glance to the scene of carnage that had Merv's signature mark all over it. "I get the impression he might have dropped by."

"Get out before I kill you!" the old man growled. Red certainly felt as if he meant it.

The sound of others joining them added a little depth to Red's dwindling good humour. He looked up to find three other men

coming in from the rear of the bar. One was slapping half a pool-cue into his hand, one had a pistol and the third was flexing his fists threateningly.

Red sighed. This job demanded more than payment in coffee and pizza. He suddenly realised, as he thought this, that what he really wanted was a pita bread stuffed with falafel and served with lemon-flavoured salad and a huge heap of hummus. That didn't seem a lot to ask, under the circumstances, especially for a super-hero who spent his downtime saving the world.

As this rather unfitting thought flashed through his mind, he realised that what he really wanted, above all things, was for Merv to get it for him and then for the pair of them to sit down in front of a bad movie and say horrible things about Norma that neither of them had the courage to say to her face.

His mood darkened and he found himself stepping forward rather threateningly himself. "I'm looking for my friend," he said sternly. "He's tall, angry and gigantic. Where is he?"

"Your friend?" the largest of the three men hissed through angrily gritted teeth. "Your friend did all this!"

Red nodded. That seemed reasonable enough but, frankly, he'd worked that out for himself.

The man with the pistol put his weapon up to rest up against his own chest. "You have to pay, man!"

Red was in no mood for games. The clock was ticking and it wasn't just time that was running out. "Where did he go?"

The broken pool-cue slapped still harder into the open hand of the man who was intending to use it as a weapon. It made a heavy slapping sound.

"You're paying!" he sneered. "We're taking it out on you."

Red rolled his eyes. "Oh, there's my friend now!" he said loudly.

All three cringed and spun around, turning to the back of the bar lounge where an open door led out to the offices. Red shook his head in dismay at them.

"Right, so he went that way? Thanks," he said. He began to walk up towards them, hoping that they'd just get out of his way, nice and easy, so he get on with the business of catching up to Merv.

Hope was not an effective tool.

The man with the fists, or without anything better, depending on your interpretation of the situation, stopped him with a hand placed flat on Red's chest. He sneered angrily and opened his mouth to speak.

There was a blur of motion, as Red moved his arm quicker than the human eye could cope with and he took the man's thumb and snapped it downwards in a fluid motion that spun his hand away and left an expression on his face of a man experiencing really quite copious amount of pain. Red capitalised on the shock and followed it up with a powerful blow from his palm that connected to the bottom of the thug's chin.

It all happened in well under a second and the outcome was a slight groan as the large, heavy and unconscious man crumpled to the floor in a weakly moaning heap.

The others backed off sharply. Suddenly, a wooden rod was swinging through the air straight at him, in a wide, sweeping arc. Red ducked easily and moved to block it, but his brain very quickly calculated that it would be much more fun not to. Instead, he let it sail past his head with all the power this man's muscles could put behind it. It slammed quite hard into the surprised, and not entirely welcoming, face of the man with the pistol.

Red followed along at full speed, as three teeth came flying out, followed by a spattering of blood and a soft moaning sound that built slowly into a pained roar.

With his arm completely over-reached, Red jabbed him in the jaw with a punch that spun his head and sent him drifting away into a soft and fluffy cloud of unconsciousness, where he would dream happily of strong pain-killers until he woke up desperately needing some.

All this happened in mere moments, just a few passing seconds; and the man behind the bar, holding his shotgun, seemed not even startled. It hadn't all settled into his mind quite yet in any meaningful way. The man wearing the expensive-looking bike armour was just a black and grey blur, while the three men who confronted him were very suddenly lying on the floor in a puddle of their own blood, and in one case, urine. The smell was really quite bad.

He gasped in horrified surprise but, by then, Red was already pointing a small but angry little pistol at him. He found himself recoiling away and backed into the wall behind him, shaking in fear and clearly wishing he was somewhere else, pretty much anywhere else.

"You know what? Give me the shotgun and we'll call it even," Red told him. There was no resistance. The man took his hand off the grip and handed it over willingly, his right hand covering his face as he cowered away.

Fair enough, Red thought. He'd had a rough day and had no super-powers to speak of. Imagine doing the same thing he did, in exchange for coffee and pizza, without super-powers; it didn't bear thinking about. He briefly wondered if Norma would get him some falafel, but if she did, who would they say horrible things about?

Even worse, she probably wouldn't enjoy dumb action movies. It just wasn't the same, he sighed.

He needed Merv.

Chapter 23

Red ran through the open door, out through the bar lounge and into the offices beyond. Behind him was the sound of groaning, of people wishing they'd made better choices about what to do with their lives. The walls were lined with wood-panelling that still would have been awful forty years ago when they were probably new. Everything was neglected, grim and a little bit miserable.

Red's keen detective skills told him that there were more signs that Merv had recently passed this way. There were brush-marks against the wall on both sides; on the left, there was some ripping at the edge of a poster that had been pinned up. It was freshly crumpled and clean, white, jagged paper showed where it had torn, contrasting starkly against the nicotine-stained yellow of the rest of it. There was a fresh chip in the woodwork around the door where the sharp edge of his drawn weapon had rubbed past it, gouging out a small, but noticeable, chunk. There were the outlines on the tired linoleum carpet of a large foot, tracing in small amounts of blood; a foot in a military style boot, too large for the average human to have been wearing.

Also, and probably more suggestive of his presence, a man was lying on the floor, a man who had literally had the guts violently kicked straight out of him. The empty, lifeless husk of a thing was lying on the floor in a pool of blood and pulped organs traced all the way up the yellowing wall behind him, vaguely in the shape of a person, but with ruffled edges as the blood had found new and exciting ways to escape from his bodily orifices at extremely high pressure.

Red felt certain that a foot of quite significant volume had stomped straight into him at quite significant speed, forcing all the

inside bits to find a way to become outside bits in a way that must have been quite unsettling to watch.

There didn't seem to be much point taking his pulse, all things being equal, since his heart wasn't in it. Not Red's heart, which was beating a little quickly in his chest-shaped chest, but the other man whose chest was now very much like the plaster-cast of a gigantic footprint, and clearly no longer had the space for internal organs.

So, with the shotgun in hand, he made his way past, half leaping into action and half creeping cautiously along. Red didn't have much use for fear, but he had even less use for having his head punched off his neck by someone whose fist was powerful enough to crush scaffold-bars.

Would he even be able to pull the trigger? That shotgun would surely hurt someone, even someone like Merv. At close range, there was no telling what it might do, although a lot would depend what it was loaded with. Certainly, it would hurt, but the big question was whether it would hurt him enough to stop him or hurt enough to make him even angrier?

All things considered, it suddenly didn't seem to be a terribly good idea even to have the thing, but then Red was a man who was currently hunting down a gigantic killing-machine, through a dingy bar that was frequented by armed criminals that he'd failed, very badly, to make friends with; and he'd turned up on a motorcycle that was little more than two wheels strapped to either end of a bomb. Good ideas were very much not his forte.

His mind raced ahead and wondered what exactly his forte was. He seemed to be rather good at drinking coffee, riding motorcycles and annoying people with poorly thought-out jokes. It seemed to him that he was, in many ways, ideally predisposed to

being someone enjoying his retirement but, in all the other ways, incredibly unlikely to live long enough to have one.

At least, he had super-powers, which did rather cushion the blow. And at least, he had an interesting story to tell the grandchildren he was never likely to have.

He gingerly looked out around the last corner, shyly peering out from behind a shotgun barrel that, for all he knew, could be loaded with plastic shot. In fact, it most likely was, and almost certainly wouldn't have had a single, solid-lead rifled shot loaded in it. Nothing much less than that would have had the slightest chance of slowing Merv down. Sadly, not very many bar owners were looking to blow people into several different parts. It was also an annoyance that they rarely tended to have 40mm grenade launchers close to hand, either.

Perhaps, one day, he'd retire somewhere quiet where they served world-class coffee and had his motorcycle mounted on the far wall, polished daily by the most beautiful waitresses the world had ever seen. She would be lit by an array of coloured lights and would literally be the centre-piece of the whole town. People would come from miles around just to sit in her presence. They would beg for the chance to hear interesting stories about how he'd saved the world many times by riding too fast. On weekends, she would go for a leisurely three-hundred miles per hour ride, after which he'd explain to the children that, in his day, that had actually seemed quite quick.

It would be a coffee shop where grenade-launchers were always available, but nobody needed them anymore because Merv and he were friends again. They had fallen out for a short while just after Norma had died. She had passed from a brief, but painful, battle with some stress-related form of cancer and they'd mutually decided to have her stuffed, mostly as a warning to others. The problem arose

when it came to deciding who was going to display her and both had assumed that it would be the job of the other. Still, they were friends again now, and Merv had switched to a vegan diet and slimmed down to the size of a large bear. This made travelling on buses much simpler, of course.

Sadly, their coffee shop was the only thing that remained of the entire continent after the collapse of Western civilisation. Red shook his head, wondering why such meandering thoughts kept flitting through his head. While it had made very little actual sense, it did amply illustrate the fact that the shotgun was little more than a nuisance. He emptied it quickly and threw it to the ground, flinging it as far back down the corridor as possible.

“I’m not detecting any signs of movement ahead of you,” Norma said.

“Me neither!” he agreed. “Any sign of Merv?”

“Nothing.” Her voice sounded tired and strained and it was clear that she was placing herself under a great deal of stress. He suddenly felt more worried about her than anything else. “There is an office to your left. I’m detecting two people in there behind the plain wooden door. One male, the other female.”

“Right!” Red drew his little pistol, stared at it accusingly and then pointed it forwards in a defensive stance. “Are we talking about one gigantic, brutal male and one less gigantic, but equally brutal female?”

Since the reply was a short moment of silence, Red assumed she was shrugging. “I can’t tell. The fact that there is a door still left hanging there strongly implies that Merv didn’t go past it.”

That was a good point. “OK. I’ll knock politely and hope for the best!” he said sarcastically.

While not as strong as Merv, he was adequately powerful to get through a locked door with the minimum of fuss. He kicked it open, cutting down any time that anyone inside might have to fire on him. He was confident that he could take out anyone before they could even react; maybe even more than confident. In fact, over-confident, perhaps.

The door shattered off the hinges, the handle and latch smashing open and crashing into the wall on the opposite side, swinging violently against the buckled hinges. Red stood in the open doorway, pistol pointing forwards, ready to react as necessary. This time, if Merv attacked, he would wing him. He wouldn't shoot to kill, but he was going to shoot. Of that, Red was certain. Almost certain. Pretty sure, at least. Mostly.

A very worried face peered awkwardly up over a wooden desk, flushed and a little overweight. An untidy mop of ginger hair sprouted from the back and middle of his thinning hairline. Two hands very quickly poked up on each side of it. "Please don't shoot..." it said nervously.

"Please don't make me!" Red said. "Look, get up. I'm on the clock here. I really don't have time for all this."

Quickly, the man responded, standing up sharply. He was dressed in quite a smart white shirt, a very boring blue tie and, below the waist, absolutely nothing at all.

"Agh, sit down!" Red snapped, turning his face away in mild disgust.

The man looked down, noticed he was essentially naked and then seemed slowly to realise that this was a bit of a problem. He crouched down to cover his shame, flushing red and keeping his hands pointing straight up.

“What the hell are you doing?” Red grumbled at him. “You hear an explosion of violence just outside your door and you just decide that this is the perfect time to take off your clothes and lay on the floor so you can really enjoy it?”

He shook his head, shrugged and gave the expression of a man who wished he was somewhere else, ideally somewhere wearing clothes and without anyone pointing a gun at him. “I’m here with my girlfriend!” he said awkwardly.

A hand came up, waving in a friendly way. “I’m not really his girlfriend,” a voice said, sounding a little put out by the suggestion and really just missing the point of what was going on around her.

The man looked quite annoyed and grunted at her: “Well, you’re more naked than I am. What are you then, very bad at putting on clothes, or just a total slut?”

There was silence while she thought about it.

“I don’t care about this!” Red warned them. “The man who did this, I’m looking for him.”

The man gulped nervously and looked down at her. He looked back up and said: “I thought you were the man who did this?”

Red sighed. “No, it was a big scary guy. If he punches you, then all of your bones turn into soup.”

The frightened man shook his head. “Sorry, we just heard something and thought it was a fight, like always. I think I would have remembered someone being punched into soup.”

“No!” Red began to lower the pistol. He felt as if he’d probably get a better result if he questioned the plastic house-plant in the corner. “It was more than a fight.” He looked back to where the gutless man was lying in a pile of his own liquidised entrails. “Quite a bit more, and I get the feeling you’re going to be remembering it

for quite some time. It's going to leave a pretty nasty stain on your carpet, too."

"Red, ask them if any of their staff are ex-military," Norma's voice told him.

"What?" Red shrugged.

The man looked around and said, looking a little puzzled: "We thought it was a fight like always. We hid in here and decided to make out. One thing led to another and the next thing I know, she's naked and I've got a feeling my wallet is going to be twenty dollars lighter pretty soon."

Norma told him: "Merv has a military background, so did the last suspect. Maybe he was going there to recruit someone else who was in the services? I can't check from here because I can't work against the protocol yet."

"That's good thinking!" Red said, impressed.

The man frowned as a very angry female voice shouted up from under the desk: "Twenty? You cheap piece of crap."

"Sure!" He rolled his eyes at her. "I'm the cheap piece of crap!"

Red waved a hand. "I'm not talking to you. Tell me if you've got anyone who's ex-military here."

There was silence from the puffy face of the overweight man in the white shirt and moments just ticked by. Finally, Red scowled and said, "I'm talking to you now!"

"Right!" he spluttered, "Yeah, sure. Ex-military. We got Chris out on the bar. He was special forces."

Red looked shocked. "The guy with the shotgun? Old? Beard? Smells like cigars and bad choices?"

He shook his head. "That's Deke."

A little voice said: “He’s my husband. Don’t go killing him, on account of how he might be my baby’s daddy.”

Red felt that it was a good time to go. “OK Norma. Sounds like your theory is confirmed.”

“Red, a motorcycle just pulled away from the front!” she told him. “Black. The Hawk-Eye can’t confirm the make or identity.”

Red ran out back through the lounge. He paused only long enough to kick the man who swung a club at him in the side of the head, knocking him back to the fluffy little land of slumber.

Deke just watched and gave a suspicious little smile.

Chapter 24

Norma was again stuck just watching, waiting and feeling generally useless. Red was about to rip off through the streets, chasing a potentially dangerous suspect who could very easily be more heavily armed than he was, and almost definitely smarter. And here she was, sat in a comfy chair with a coffee machine bolted to the desk beside her. She was just staring at a monitor attached to a computer that was about as useful, in the grand scheme of things, as a series of novels that blended smart literary science-fiction with eighties TV action, with an almost complete lack of subtlety.

If all went perfectly well, then the chase might lead to Merv. When you considered the ramifications of the fact that Red was literally looking for a confrontation with a man who could kill an apex-predator with a single punch, then the situation was grim indeed.

“Red, be careful,” she said, her voice barely a whisper as she watched on the screen. He ran to his bike and threw his leg over, snatching the helmet from the bars. She had given up worrying about the fact that he carelessly discarded tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment in such a fashion. All of the concern she had was currently occupied with worrying about him not ending up dead in the immediate future.

She sat back and closed her eyes, trying to think, to coax her brain to bring something useful to the situation. She needed to help; she couldn’t just watch while Red rode through the streets: there had to be more she could do.

“Computer, we need to know more about Medows,” she said finally. The computer was silent at her, not knowing how to respond to a question that really wasn’t a question. “Computer, Medows

didn't seem like a really bad guy. Why would he do something like this to avenge his death?" She then remembered he had had a man killed right in front of him. She wasn't sure what this meant except that it strongly suggested that she had been in this for job too long a time.

"There is insufficient data to draw a meaningful conclusion," it told her, sounding a little annoyed that she wasn't asking better questions. It was a computer after all: it wasn't good at conversations. Still, it didn't go unnoticed that the thing she felt she was being judged by was something that was incapable of making judgments.

"Is there any data to suggest that Medows was vindictive? Search his personality profile and extrapolate." She tapped her mouth thoughtfully, half watching the monitor as Red roared away from the bar, the rear wheel of the motorcycle spinning freely so the image vanished in a white cloud of burning rubber. She grumbled to herself about Red's delusion that the Hawk-Eye project had shares in a tyre company. If she could induce him to behave more responsibly, would she do it? Could he be brought to heel like a small dog? Could he be changed without damaging what he was at his core?

"Medows profile suggests that he was not vindictive," the computer told her, seeming to her a lot more comfortable with answering questions that actually made sense. "His motivation to protect himself appears to be drawn primarily from fear and desperation. There are several problems with this hypothesis. Medows appears to be a more thoughtful individual who has a tendency towards seeing the bigger picture, taking a wider overview of a situation. There is very little evidence of him acting in self-interest so it is, therefore, likely that his actions were enacted for other reasons."

Norma just stared for a moment. It was a surprisingly logical argument, but the greater surprise was that it had come from a computer. It was growing: there could be no doubt about that.

“Did Medows have any close relationships with anyone else? With anything else?” she asked thoughtfully, her voice low and calm, although she felt anything but. “Did he have an emotional connection to his work on the protocol, for instance?”

“Records suggest that Medows had no close affiliation with anything outside of his work,” the computer told her. “The only human relationship he fostered was with his assistant, Claire. Further details are not available. Body language suggests emotional closeness between the two but not of a sexual nature.”

“Claire...” Norma said to herself thoughtfully.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red felt the familiar sensation of the wind slamming through his helmet, adrenaline flooding his body and the gentle vibration of the twin rotary turbine engines pulsing through the frame of his motorcycle. Speed grew steadily as he blasted along the road towards his target.

He could see the black motorcycle now and had caught up with it easily. He saw the tail-light, much brighter than before as it weaved along the straight road between infinitely slower vehicles.

Red cut in front of a truck, swinging into the middle of the road to ride straight along the dotted white line. He craned his neck for a better view.

Had the other rider seen him? Did he know he was there?

A horn blared at him, and lights flashed as he crossed the line slightly, dashing along towards the edge of oncoming cars.

He didn't care. He lived for this. This was when he felt like he was truly free, when everything made sense. He was not much more than a man who drank too much coffee and had too much confidence in abilities that it was by no means certain he actually had. He was loud, deliberately annoying and, if the truth be told, he was sometimes a bit of an irritating moron. He rode too fast, he didn't think of the consequences and he didn't take the world seriously.

His future was bleak and his mind flashed with a sudden, unexpected memory that he had often imagined: that his fate would be to end up in a wooden hut on some very low-rent land next to a swamp, sipping cheap beer and waiting for death to catch up with him.

But now, all those parts that didn't fit together suddenly worked. Now, Red made sense, perfectly logical sense in a way he was incredibly proud of. He wasn't a man at all. He was a part of this bike, just as much as it was a part of him. Together, with Norma on the other end of the radio, and with Merv backing him up, now he was finally whole. This was truly his super-power and it meant that finally he really was important, important enough to make a difference to the world.

The only thing missing was Merv and that man up ahead, blazing through traffic on a big black motorcycle, which was almost as insane as his own, was going to help him put that right. There was no way he was going to let him get away for a second time.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"Computer. Do we know anything more about the man on the motorcycle?" Norma sounded much less calm now. She needed to do more.

“There is no additional data,” it told her, sounding as if it was just as unhappy about that fact as she was.

“Computer. We have to do something!” She was slowly edging towards a point where she might lose her paper-thin veneer of patience altogether. The computer said nothing.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

The man ahead swung into a sharp right hand turn, braking hard so the skidding tyre screamed in angry protest, sending a plume of acrid-smelling smoke as the bike slid into the turn. It roared off, the rear wheel scrambling for grip, and the tail slithered along until it snatched against the tarmac, launching itself along in a burst of barely controllable acceleration.

Red was impressed, at least. “Norma, who is this guy?” he said rhetorically. “He’s really good.”

He slammed his rear brake, sliding the back end into a skid so the nose of the bike pointed into the turn and launched her, dumping the whole of her power into lighting up the rear wheel. Rather ignoring social conventions, he did this while cutting from the middle lane right in front of an articulated lorry that was hurtling towards him. There was no honk of rebuke because luckily, the driver was texting at the time and didn’t even notice it happening.

“I’m working on that, Red,” her voice came back through the helmet speakers. “Just keep with him for now. Hopefully, the computer will find something soon. I’m working to build up an extrapolation of his direction. We might even be able to make an estimate of his destination. Just bear with us.”

“Us!” Red sniggered to himself. Much as Norma often berated his attachment to the awesome, beautiful motorcycle, she was really

no different when it came to the Hawk-Eye. They were all just as lost as each other and this had made all of them whole.

Chapter 25

“We have received a message,” the computer told her. Norma looked up to a point just above the main monitor where she always felt that the Hawk-Eye’s presence was strongest. There were three small logic-monitors that displayed the inner processes of its thoughts, as they flashed through the gigantic electronic mind of the machine. It was also there that two cameras peered down at her, measuring her up and watching her intently. She felt its gaze oddly reassuring.

“A message?” she asked after a lengthy pause, her voice unsure of itself, her expression confused. “How can someone send us a message? We don’t have an email address or a phone number. We’re a secret organisation. We don’t have a Facebook page where people can leave comments and pictures of their cute kittens!” She remembered that she worked with Red. “We don’t, do we?”

“We have received a data stream,” it told her. “It appears to be a binary code written in the Hawk-Eye operating language.”

Norma went silent once again. “In your operating language?”

The computer confirmed that she had heard that correctly. “Acknowledged.”

“Don’t open it!” she said, standing up sharply in alarm. “It could be anything, a virus or a program designed to kill you.” Her breathing was ragged, her chest was tight. She wiped the back of her hand against her brow. It was hot and had a fine misting of salty sweat gathering into fine rivulets. She calmed herself and said, slowly and deliberately: “Analyse it. Full analysis.”

It paused for just a few seconds and then said: “Analysis suggests that it is a data tag. It’s the required key to decode a piece of information that’s preventing the system from creating a meaningful extrapolation.”

“So we’ve been sent a visual cue for a message?” she said to herself thoughtfully, and began to rub her chin. It was as if the computer had access to all the information in the world and someone had sent them the direction of where to look in order to find a certain piece of it. More interestingly, that message had been sent in a form that nobody else in the world would even be able to recognise as a message, let alone interpret.

“Computer, please confirm the absence of any possibly threatening content.”

The computer considered this and told her: “There is no possible threat to the system.”

She rubbed her temples and looked over the array of monitors arranged around her station. What else could she do? “Computer. Run it.”

“Confirmed.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

The dark-skinned young man stepped out of a loosely spiralling stone staircase followed by the killer, the man dressed in an armoured motorcycle jacket, an unruly mop of dark hair on his head and a dangerous glint in his eye. He followed along not too closely. He left space, in case something ahead turned on him. He was ready to react at all times, a consummate professional.

“So what is this place?” he said casually, though he was looking around carefully; for any laid-back attitude he might present to the world was merely a facade. They had come into a great entrance hall at the front of a very large, very old building. The staircase was off to the side corner and the front was dominated by a huge and ornate entrance with thick wooden doors that sealed the place off from the outside world. A separate stairway led up on both

sides of the room, a carved oak construction, with shallow steps and a wide banister running along the length of it, connecting at the top to a balcony that spanned the whole width. At one time, the whole thing must have been quite beautiful but now it just looked forgotten and a bit sorry for itself.

“We’ll get to that,” the younger man told him. “You’re about to meet someone who can explain it a whole lot better than I can.”

“If this is a trap, I’ll kill you first, you know?” the killer told him assuredly. It didn’t leave much room for doubt and neither man seemed to have any.

“What are you going to do, shoot me?” he asked sarcastically. “How did that work out for you last time? You’ll have to fight me hand to hand instead. Oh no, wait, you couldn’t do that either. I’m beginning to wonder why you’re even here. I’m sure there is a point but I can’t work out what it is.”

“Well, I know you’re wearing body armour now, so I’ll adjust my aim accordingly,” he said, very matter-of-factly, as if they were discussing the price of a loaf of bread. “I’ll aim for your brain instead. Where do you keep it?”

“I was tempted to say that it was in the same place that you keep yours but then I noticed the steel-capped boots and I began to wonder.”

They walked along to a steel-shuttered door. Where once might have been a grand, carved-oak barrier, there was now a very substantial metal gate, unceremoniously stuck on in its place. The younger man turned and a very serious expression was painted on his face for a moment. “Inside here are the answers to all the questions.”

“You don’t know what questions I’m going to ask,” he grinned smugly.

The younger man grinned back at him, just as smugly. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Inside here are the answers to all the questions.”

The door swung open smoothly without anyone touching it, with the low whine of an electric motor. The killer looked inside as the opening slowly revealed the scene beyond.

It was a literally huge place. Sprawling wooden bookshelves lined the walls, stretching up three storeys into a painted black ceiling. In the middle, leading up at least the height of two floors of a regular building, were more shelves, stuffed with books and files of every size and shape imaginable. It was surrounded and intertwined with gantries and walkways that criss-crossed in-between. Around the lower levels were computer terminals, gigantic slabs of powerful mainframe systems and equipment, the purpose of which he could scarcely guess at.

He allowed himself to look impressed, since he was, very impressed. He muttered to himself, “Wow, that’s actually very much not what I expected.”

The younger man’s hand was suddenly resting on his shoulder, the gesture of a friend, not a man leading him into a trap, and not that of someone who saw him as the enemy. “You’re going to get a lot of that today.”

From somewhere inside the maze of racking and shelving a man walked out towards them. He approached them, walking with long, slow and deliberate steps. He took his time, never rushing, never pushing himself at all.

He came closer and only then did he raise his head to peer into the killer’s eyes. His were steely blue and peered out with crystal-clear and razor-sharp intelligence.

“Welcome,” he said with a low, gravelly voice. “This is The Library!”

“The Library?” He looked around. It wasn’t the most imaginative name, certainly, but it did fit quite nicely. “What is this place?”

The wise-looking old man looked slightly confused and said again, “It’s The Library!” It was clear that he believed that this explained everything perfectly adequately.

“OK,” he shrugged, clearly he hadn’t made himself clear. “What does this place do? Who made it? What’s it for?”

The older man clasped his hands behind his back and his head cocked slightly to one side. He adopted a curious expression. “It’s The Library. It’s a reference to the world. Here, we catalogue the unknown. We observe all there is to observe and we protect history, preserving a snapshot of all things so the future can have a glimpse of the truth, of what’s really real amidst a growing tide of lies.”

“Right...” he said thoughtfully. “So it’s a library?”

“Yes,” the old man said and then looked a little confused. “I’m not often wrong about things, even less often about people. Did you hit your head on the way here, perhaps?”

“I’m here to kill you,” he told him simply.

“You’re not going to kill me, Ash,” he told him flatly but, for the first time, a tiny flicker of emotion flashed over his face. He seemed to almost smile but then change his mind about it.

Ash seemed taken aback. He pulled away in surprise, reeling from hearing his own name spoken aloud, his real name. “How did you know...?” he gasped.

“I know everything,” he gestured behind him to the huge reserves of information. “From here I can know everything there is to know.” There was a lengthy pause and then he said with a slight

frown, "This is The Library. I keep saying that. Is it not clear in some way?"

"Nobody knows that name!" Ash frowned. He cast a glance over to the younger man, an angry expression that was growing angrier still.

The younger man told him: "My name is Bruce. Bruce Baker. I've had other names and I have a past I'm not proud of, but here I've learned that my past can be behind me and the person I am now is all that matters."

The old man spoke. "And my name was once Mason. But that name was never my own. It was something I forced upon myself and it was never who I really was. Here, in this place, I have accepted the truth. Here, I am The Librarian."

"And you're expecting me to accept the truth?" Ash asked, his expression shifting to underline his sarcasm. This was ridiculous. He was many things, some of them that he couldn't be proud of, but the truth of him was that he was a killer. He pointed guns; he pulled triggers and then people died. The truth was no more complex, no more involved, than that.

"When people like you talk about truth, they're usually talking about their truth, not the same one other people have in mind."

"You're not here to kill me, Ash," Mason, The Librarian told him - or whatever his name was now.

Ash looked at him and considered doing just exactly that.

"I invited you here. I sent you instructions to come here and quietly end my life with a single round to the head!" he said coldly; and when he spoke it was endlessly calm. "The people you work for are so helplessly corrupt, so ignorant and so controlled that I could secretly plant an instruction to have an augmented killer sent here. They complied without question. If that was true, then how many

other times have you done your job for no reason, with no thoughts about what you're doing and without consideration of the consequences? What about you is left that truly means anything at all?"

Ash grinned to himself. "Consequences?"

From behind his back, the man who called himself 'Mason,' or rather the man who didn't, pulled out a small file. He said, as if casually flicking through the menu of a cafe he'd visited many dozens of times before: "Walter Thompson. A family man, father of two daughters. He answered the door and was shot twice in the face for his trouble.

"The murder was recorded as a case of mistaken identity by the local police but his family was never convinced that that was true. They campaigned for a more thorough investigation but none was ever undertaken. Eventually, his eldest daughter got on with her life, married and moved away but his youngest, Anna, never forgot. How could she? She cradled the man, as the last of the blood left his body. She saw the gurgling, frothing mess of pulped tissue that used to be the face of her father, the face that read her stories before bed every night and the face of a man who loved her every bit as much as that little girl loved him. She heard his breath being pushed through a throat filled with his own blood as his skull collapsed, a jet of thick red liquid squirting from his left eye-socket."

Ash looked away.

"She died two years ago," he continued. "She committed suicide after descending into drug-dependency. It was a life that eventually robbed her of whatever sanity your bullets couldn't rip away from her. I'm sure you did your best, of course." He looked on in silence and then added: "Consequences, Ash! There are always consequences."

“It’s the life!” Ash told him darkly. “This is what happens. It’s what it does to you.”

“Walter Thompson was a journalist,” he said. He looked up directly into his eyes. “He was investigating the misappropriation of funds that were meant to be spent on relief efforts in third-world countries. He didn’t walk in your world, Ash. His crime was in trying to drag your darkness into the light.”

Ash flashed an angry glare. His fingers flexed and thoughts of his pistol filled his mind. He thought about grabbing it, about emptying the magazine into this man’s head.

“What’s your point?” he growled.

He shrugged. “There is no point.”

Ash was surprised once more. He opened his mouth to speak but The Librarian beat him to it.

“He died for nothing. There was no meaning to his end except to serve people who have no place walking amongst us. Ash, the world you live in, the world you come from, is darkness and it swallows up the light. Here, we work to keep it in check. We make sure the harm is done only to those who deserve it. We try to limit the damage that we’ve all brought to the lives of people we believed we were here to protect.”

Ash looked from one to the other.

Bruce told him: “When he found me, I was just an angry young man. My mother told me she’d been raped by a GI in Vietnam and I eventually tracked down the man who did it. I joined the army to find him and that eventually became my life. I was put in a special program; I was poked; I was prodded. They made me stronger and faster but they didn’t give me any reason to be what I became. I was lost - but I found a place here. We make a difference.”

Ash looked at him, his eyes narrowed into defensive little slits. “What makes you think I want to make a difference?”

Mason told him, “I have your file too. You joined the military directly out of school. You were selected for a special program yourself, and you volunteered to join. You were given injections of a stabilised drug called FX45, just as Mr Baker was. It increased your strength, your speed and your stamina. I worked to create that drug. That was the last crime that I committed on the world. With your enhanced abilities, you were used as an assassin. It was a singular waste of your abilities and your personality profile suggest you’ve been growing dissatisfied with the work more and more.

“What you don’t know, of course is that in two months, you’re to be given a drug and told that you need it keep your abilities under control. It will be a new and improved version of cyanide and will burn your body from the inside out. Your remains will not be found.”

Ash sighed wearily. “And what you’re offering is so much better?”

“I’m asking you to become something so much better!” he told him. “I’m offering you a job here with us. Together we can work to prevent there from being any more Masons, any more young men who will never know the truth about their fathers, no more young soldiers sentenced to having their souls ripped out of them, no more daughters watching their fathers fading away.

“We may not be able to change the world, Ash, but then nobody can change the world if they don’t try.”

“The choice was easy for me,” Bruce told him. “I knew I had nothing to lose. This was direction in an otherwise directionless life. My mother is dead, my father was dying and the truth was dying with him. Training, martial arts, fighting in the streets, wasn’t filling the gap and I had come to realise that it never would. Like you, I got

involved in the military. I was given a dose of FX60. It's not as strong as what they gave you but it's not as dangerous either.

"What I've found here does more than just fill the gap. This makes my life make sense. This means I know who I am. I can finally accept myself."

"And why would I be interested in joining you?" Ash sneered, but his opposition to the idea was dwindling. What exactly did he have to lose?

Mason told him simply, but in a way that couldn't be questioned any further. "Because I know things about you that you don't know about yourself. For instance, I know that you have a daughter."

Ash began to laugh at the suggestion. "I don't have..." He stopped when nobody else was laughing.

"She has traces of FX45 in her. She will become like you. I haven't been able to find her, but I will find her, even if it takes the rest of my life."

Ash frowned darkly as he thought for a moment. He said finally: "You've had your two minutes, old man. You've managed to catch enough of my interest to earn yourself two more. Talk quickly and tell me exactly what it is you're offering, Mason."

"It's not Mason," he told him firmly. "Much of my background is Native-American but I ignored that part of myself for much of my life. Now I embrace it and I have taken the name my ancestors chose for me for times when I feel like I need a name. For all other times, I'm simply The Librarian!"

Chapter 26

“Red!” Norma yelled into the intercom. “Red!” But there was no reply. She could still see him on the monitor, but she could no longer communicate with him at all. She looked to a screen at her side, snapping her neck round suddenly, as if the answer might be there but would escape if she didn’t move fast enough. All data-feeds from Red and the bike had stopped. The monitors were now blank with the words ‘signal lost’ flashing in green at the bottom.

“Red, no!” She was becoming frantic and struggled against the growing forces inside her to calm herself down. “Computer, analyse the loss of communication between here and Red.”

“All communications systems are working correctly,” it said with a calmness that the situation didn’t warrant at all. “Lack of communication could be from a local jamming source that’s directly affecting Asset One, but the signal is too weak to be detected here.”

“Red...” she began, hoping against all reason that Red might realise that Norma was no longer speaking to him, that there was no longer a voice in his helmet guiding him, informing him, controlling him and helping him.

She watched him briefly. He clearly had other things to be dealing with right now than worrying about why there was nobody annoying him.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red caught up to the motorcycle and, for the first time, he had a chance to get a proper look at it. It was a flat-tracker of a sort, if he had to hang a label on it. It had a black frame and a long, low tank. It had the look of a cafe-racer but with bigger, bolder exhausts and,

while it looked fairly conventional, there were things about it that weren't quite normal at all. The headlight was a bowl mounted on the front and the wheels seemed to be spoked. It was lean, powerful-looking and burbled along making a noise not quite like anything he'd heard before. Rather than the sound of an engine, this thing made a whining, roaring sound, almost like rushing water flowing over smooth rocks.

The headlight was styled oddly; the side panels were dull, smooth black with wire mesh intakes beneath them. It had a single seat with a high, smooth hump where the pillion would normally sit.

It was a beautiful machine, and any motorcyclist would agree, but if it were parked next to a group of others, there was nothing to distinguish it as being particularly special.

This begged a rather important question. How was this old bike, with nothing much that stood out about it, going toe-to-toe with the most insanely fast motorcycle ever built?

The rider flashed the brakes at him. The red tail-light was wrapped all the way round and shone brightly. The bike veered violently to the left, across a gap in oncoming traffic. The tyre screamed and a plume of smoke ripped out from the edge. A blue Japanese car sounded a horn and skidded into a sliding, panicked stop as the machine tore across the road in front of him.

Red followed, even though he wasn't sure where it was he was following it to. The man seemed to be heading for nothing, nowhere. Red winced and slowed everything down, his brain racing into the future. The bike ahead of him lurched as it hit the curb, still heading straight to the edge of a pedestrian walkway with nothing ahead but walls at the end of the path. Then he saw a narrow alley, punctuated with concrete pillars on either side. Between them, the bike was

swallowed up, vanishing into a blue skyline that peeked out between two red-brick buildings.

Red followed him in. The bike jolted violently and then the front crashed down onto a wide stairway. Ahead were several banks of steps and already people were throwing themselves to the sides, women screaming and men yelling abuse at them. The other machine wasn't taking it so well. It lurched about as the suspension tracked to each individual step, the bike shuddering along on its way down.

Red had an easier time. He stepped up on the pegs, straightened his legs and let his slightly bent knees take the effort out of it. Below him, the bike dealt deftly with the fact that they were riding down several storeys of stairs, through people who were using them during an early evening in a busy city.

He should have been concerned for their safety but, really, this was just too awesome! He couldn't help thinking that this was incredibly fun and was probably something he should have done before, not even for work, but just because he could.

As the other bike made it to the bottom, it powered away, hanging left, and shooting off through traffic with a meaningful roar.

Red made it to the bottom and tried to follow. He cut along the pavement and people leapt out of the way, some crashing through tables, some ducking out of the way at the last second in blind panic. Red grinned as he realised that they would all be better off if he made one little change to the situation.

"Deactivate 'subtle mode,'" he said. Instantly, the bike roared as if, once more, she had been set free on the world, a world that probably wasn't ready for such things. The blue flame flashed out from the exhaust in a searing hot jet as Red laid on the power. The bike lurched and leapt from the curb, straight in front of a delivery

van that swerved all over the place, as he shot off through the cars into the distance ahead.

People could hear him now, and they could see just how amazingly great this bike was. This was so much better.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma was pacing, something she hadn't done in quite some time, and a thing she rarely did at any time. For a moment, her mind lingered on the last time that she remembered that she had.

She had been at work when they came for her. Security guards escorted two uniformed officers into the office she shared with two others. All eyes were turned to her, as they were shown up to her perfectly orderly desk.

They had a severe look on their faces, but it was more pained than angry. She knew what it was about as soon as she saw them, even before either of them spoke. She remembered hearing a pen clatter to the ground from her own fingers as she stared straight ahead, just waiting. The clock seemed to stop: the world around her just seemed to melt into nothingness.

It was Casey, of course. He was one of their own, a police officer injured in the line of duty. He was a hero to them, crashing his bike taking down a fleeing suspect. She had known as soon as they walked into her sterile white laboratory office that this was going to be one of the defining moments of her life. She knew that the words coming out of their mouths were going to change everything. She was comfortable with that part of it. Suddenly, she found herself in a world where everything needed to change.

She had sat back down, her head spinning and she just carried on her work as if nothing had happened. She said she had to finish up a project and continued to do exactly that, but the words coming

from her mouth were just sounds to her that barely registered in her ears.

It had been several minutes before someone came to relieve her. She was told to leave, almost ordered to go and take herself off to the hospital and be with her son. Their voice was distant then and, even now, she couldn't remember whose it had been. It didn't matter, of course, not really.

She didn't remember the drive at all, and still couldn't recall how she got to the hospital, or even how she knew which one it was. She just found herself there, waiting to be told what was happening, preparing herself for the very worst kind of news. She had been afraid, for the first time in a very long time; she had been terrified.

It was then that she had paced. She paced back and forth along the corridor outside the surgery while her mind come up with fantasies of what might happen and she lived them, each and every one a waking nightmare. She knew that the odds were against him. She just knew.

She knew what the doctors and nurses were thinking, but were afraid to say, just as well as she knew what the police officers were struggling with when it had been their turn to talk. She had seen it all before when the same thing had happened to Casey's father.

But surely, she was different this time? She wasn't a child anymore, a young girl with no handle on life, with no control over the world. She had always thought that this time, she'd be stronger.

She paced then, thinking about how her life would continue after this, or even if it could continue at all. She wondered if there was a future for her, now that her darkest fears had become real.

It was Red, of course, who had put her in that position. Red was the fleeing suspect, the man whom Casey had been chasing

through traffic when they had slammed into a wall, injuring them both beyond any normal hope of repair.

She found him and she swallowed her hatred. She told herself that she would find the truth first and act accordingly. Whatever happened must happen because it was right, not because she simply wanted it. She was better than that, no matter how angry she really was!

Now, that man she had blamed was the one she was most afraid of losing. He'd taken the place in her life of the family she'd lost, but he was better than that, somehow, and he was so much more besides. This life was now all so much more besides.

She watched, because she could only watch as the motorcycles blazed through traffic, chasing one another down. It had been her son once, chasing down Red. Now it was he, pursuing some unknown rider, and she realised that she just didn't care anymore. None of it mattered to her now, not the Hawk-Eye, not the mission, not discovering the truth behind all this. All she cared about now was Red and getting him back to her safely.

She sighed and shook her head. "Red," she whispered. "Let him go, Red. It's a trap."

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red followed on as the city dwindled quickly into towns, and those towns fell into long, straight country roads that led off into gentle sandy hills with patchy fields of green dotted over them. They made better speed now, and Red was finally holding back.

"Norma, this guy is good, really good," he told her. "He's run out of power now. We're rolling along at about one hundred and sixty, and I feel like he's on his limit. His bike doesn't have anything left, so I'm just staying on his tail and letting him wear himself out."

I'm not considering weapons at this point: he doesn't seem to be armed."

Nothing.

"Norma."

More of exactly the same nothing.

Red risked a quick glance down to the controls. "Computer. Contact Hawk-Eye command."

The words 'Network Error' flashed up on his head-up display.

"Dammit, Norma," he grumbled. "I thought we'd had words about your calibrations."

He couldn't risk the other motorcycle pulling away from him while he worried about all this, so for now, he decided to stick with him.

It turned suddenly, dropping in speed as it pulled into a driveway and accelerated up a steep hill. Red followed it through as the steel gates rolled shut on their own, driven by an electric motor. The edge nearly caught him as the bike blazed through.

This was it, now. Wherever the biker was heading, this was his final destination. "Subtle-mode," he said and the sonic dampers quietened down the roar of the engine. He slunk along the winding narrow pathway, still in pursuit of the other machine.

Now, Red did activate the weapons. The targeting system woke up and flashed a red marker on the inside of his visor. The cannon was locked on, the missiles were armed. Even the water-pistol was ready to fire, for all the good that thing might ever do.

"I'm going in," he said, although nobody was listening. He would never admit such a thing, but he was nervous, and talking to Norma made it easier. Maybe she could hear, he allowed himself to hope.

The path cut through a wooded area which broke open to reveal an old house on the side of a hill. It was a huge granite building with architecture that was somewhere between Gothic and art-deco but it had crumbled in places and been patched over with repairs that had ruined the overall style. Now, it just looked like so many places that had just been left to the ravages of time.

The motorcycle vanished over the brow of a hill, swallowed up beneath a flat concrete bunker.

“I’ve got you now!” Red told him. He followed along, slowing down to a speed most people would consider sane, but one that was tortuously slow to his artificially over-cooked brain.

He stopped altogether. Before him, on the side of the house, and with a ramp that led down from the road, was a gaping-open entrance. It was a metallic shuttered door, the kind that rolls up into the ceiling, and now it was wide open. It began to shudder as the thing wound its way closed.

“Should I?” Red asked himself out loud. The engine crackled and coughed out a heavy blue flame. “My thoughts exactly, baby!” he said and twisted the throttle.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma could, again, only watch. As the bike went inside, the screen went black.

The computer said: “There is no further information.”

She slammed down into her seat and tears welled in her eyes. That hadn’t happened before.

That hadn’t happened, even when they told her Casey would never recover from his injuries. It hadn’t happened when she’d been told that her husband was dead while a baby was screaming in the living room for attention. It hadn’t happened when she was a

teenager and she had been told that her father had been taken to hospital and she was never going to see him again.

But then, this was somehow so much worse than all that; this was so very much worse.

Chapter 27

The place was huge and even the powerful lights of the bike couldn't pick out the furthest boundaries of the room. Red panned his head around as the helmet switched automatically to infra-red and a ghostly grey image replaced the gloomy emptiness of the black. The door behind him clattered closed and the room, finally, was completely dark and eerily silent.

He sat there in this place, realising what a thoroughly stupid thing he'd done in riding into something that was very obviously a trap, knowing it was a trap and still doing it just the same. Now he was at their mercy, whoever it was that ran this place. Now, there really wasn't much he could do except wait. But at least, now, he would come face to face with Merv. He still believed with all his heart that if he talked to him, Merv would come back and rejoin them. It was worth risking everything for that.

In fact, it had to all be some horrible mistake, hadn't it? Merv wasn't evil; he wasn't a twisted maniac bent on violent destruction! Red realised that he kind of was, but he was their twisted maniac bent on violent destruction, and that made all the difference.

The lights clicked on around him, powerful electrical relays locking into place with a loud metallic clang as the room was suddenly bathed in clear, bright white light. He gulped and looked around, tried to ignore his growing concerns, assuring himself they were unfounded. He had willingly come here. He was able to face whatever threat they could throw at him: he was ready to confront these people directly. He wasn't just a rat, stuck in a trap, a mindless animal trapped by its own stupidity. He was a predator chasing down an enemy and he boldly chose to venture into their lair.

The room was cavernous and largely empty. The floor was bare concrete and the walls were grey plaster. Grey metal girders were cold-riveted to the walls and spanned the width of the roof. Vehicles were dotted around the place with docking stations, fuel pods and computers hooked up to them.

It was everything the Hawk-Eye should be and, maybe one day, everything it would be.

Still, Red never let himself feel that he was out of his depth, even though the evidence was overwhelming. Red never let himself feel that; never.

The black motorcycle was right in front of him, parked up sideways, blocking his way ahead. The rider slowly got off and stretched himself upright. He unlatched the strap of his helmet and took it from his head, his back to Red, so he still couldn't yet see his face.

Red's finger hovered over the weapon-discharge button. At the moment, the weapons were set to fire the cannon. At this range, it should shred the bike to pieces and the man would come off considerably worse. Despite everything, Red felt that the advantage was still his.

The man turned to face him and flashed him a grin. He was the man from the video, the one who shot twice into the face of a stranger, killing him before walking away without a care in the world, only there was something very different about him. He was heavier now. Even with the motorcycle armoured-jacket and heavy boots, he looked as if many years had been piled onto him. His hair, while largely in the same style, was now grey and beginning to thin. His face was older, the muscle-tone had softened and the skin bore deep grooves. He was older, quite a lot older, and Red was surprised to see it.

“Red!” he called out.

Red swallowed hard in sudden fear. How did this man know his name? Had Merv told him? Was this all some drive to capture him in some way?

“Red, turn off your weapons. I know it seems like it’s the easy option, but if you fire your cannon, the automated defences will cut you to shreds.”

Red frowned inside the helmet. He hadn’t thought of that. Of course they’d have automated defences. What evil lair wouldn’t?

“You know that you’re no more than a rat in a trap?” the man called out. He stepped closer, strutting confidently, as if the military-grade weapon pointing at him was of no concern whatsoever.

Red grumbled to himself and said: “Yeah! The thought had occurred to me.”

Red knew that his options were limited. His finger slipped away from the trigger and his hands tightly gripped the controls. The advantages of the bike had been taken from him now. He was down to his own speed, his wits and the tiny pistol on his hip. He didn’t feel that the hand he had to play was a particularly strong one.

Accordingly, and with little choice, Red stepped off the bike and removed the helmet. He gasped a lungful of air as he ripped it from his head and hung it calmly on the end of the bar, trying to seem every bit as calm, as relaxed as the other man. He noticed that the other rider had done the same thing. He wondered briefly if they also had an evil version of Norma who shouted at him for such things. Or maybe a less evil version, depending on how all this played out?

“Red,” he said with a smile. He stepped closer still and held out his hand in greeting. His palm was outstretched, held completely vertical like that of a man who saw the other as an equal. Red

hesitantly reached out his own. He had nothing to lose now. They could have killed him long before this if that was all they wanted to do.

“The name is Ash,” he told him.

“Red,” said Red and then realised that he already knew that. He added, “Red Marks,” which was actually even worse.

“Red Marks,” the man chuckled to himself. “I’ve got someone I want you to meet, Red Marks.”

“An evil genius?” Red asked, as it seemed like the most obvious thing.

Ash grinned and his old face showed deep and heavy wrinkles around his face along those lines. This man smiled a lot.

“Yeah, pretty much actually. He’s not evil exactly, at least not completely. You’ve managed to pass his test by getting here. He does love his little tests!”

That made Red feel so much better. “What’s all this about?”

Ash shook his head. “This guy is more about answering questions. I just usually ride too fast and annoy people.”

Red glared at him suspiciously. It was as if he was staring into his soul. “That’s my thing too.”

The man turned and led the way to a stairwell. “Yeah, you’re pretty good at it too. I’ve been watching.”

“Which part?” Red grunted, following along.

“Annoying people. You can’t ride for shit!” Ash joked, but Red wasn’t at all sure it was a joke and hadn’t yet decided whether or not to be offended.

“What is that bike of yours? I mean that thing is fast. What does it run on?” Red took a moment to deal with the important things in life.

Ash stopped and looked proudly down at his motorcycle. "It's a custom-made thing. Experimental technology or something. It was originally designed to be a police pursuit vehicle but was prohibitively expensive, so the project was canned. I got the only existing example. It runs on human blood, mixed with Thai green curry."

Red snapped up suddenly, a quizzical expression on his face as his mouth began to fall open in surprise. "What?" he gasped.

"Red, it runs on petrol," Ash told him, laughing out loud. "I'm just kidding. It's a motorcycle not a flatulent vampire bat!"

Red grumbled to himself, "Yeah, I knew that."

"It's not as interesting as yours, I'm afraid," Ash told him, looking over to the HERPES.

"Mine?" Red became defensive, his eyes narrowed and his hand reflexively moved towards his pistol.

"Yeah!" Ash said wistfully with an impressed sigh. "Yours runs on hydrogen extracted from tap-water to power twin rotary turbines, augmented with dual electric motors and has a Sterling-engine recycling the waste energy. That's amazing."

Red raised his eyebrow thoughtfully. "Mine runs on water?"

Ash laughed, probably wrongly assuming that Red was joking. The look on Red's face made it clear he wasn't and he laughed even harder. "Red, your bike is called HERPES. What did you think 'Hydrogen Electrolysis' actually meant?"

Red shrugged. "I don't know. I mostly just ride too fast and annoy people," he said. "I just assumed someone had made up the words to sound cool. I didn't know they actually meant anything."

Ash gave him a suspicious little glare. "OK, Red. Let's go meet the mad genius, now that we've established that you might be one of those two things, but that you're clearly not a genius."

Ash led the way to the exit, Red cast a look back to his beloved motorcycle.

“I thought he was an ‘evil’ genius?”

“I think ‘mad’ is a better fit,” he said conversationally. “That’s not to imply he’s not a little bit evil.”

“He sounds lovely,” Red said with a sigh. “Or is it a woman? Mine is a woman.”

“No, it’s a man. You take orders from a woman? That’s hilarious.”

They went through a very secure metal doorway that slid shut behind them with a very loud mechanic clunk as it locked shut.

“In my defence, I’m very bad at it, but she does reward me with pizza and coffee and extremely brutal threats,” Red explained. “Can I ride your bike?”

“Yeah, when you learn to actually ride a bike,” Ash said. “Can I ride yours?”

“You can try,” Red agreed. “It has a security device which literally burns off your testicles if you’re not me. Judging from the way you ride, that’s not going to be much of a deterrent in your case.”

Red followed Ash into a great hall full of books and reference materials of all types and kinds. The Librarian was waiting for him.

He was a slim man. Age had stripped the meat from his bones and he seemed frail, gaunt and weak. His skin had lightened, as many years had passed, and a long grey beard dominated his once strong face. Still, for all that, he stood straight and still seemed like a man to be reckoned with.

He smiled, quite warmly, to his colleague. “Thank you, Mr Berger,” he said, as his interest shifted to Red.

Red frowned and then started to grin. "Mr Berger?" he said, holding back the urge to laugh. "Ash Berger?"

Ash grimaced slightly and nodded. "Yes, Red Marks. My name is funny. Get used to it."

"I'm sure you're wondering why I brought you here," The Librarian told him. He smiled and said: "I've always wanted to say that."

"Are you sure you're an evil genius?" Red asked. "If you don't mind my saying so, you don't seem very evil, or particularly very genius. Maybe you're more of a slightly bad average person? If you were an evil genius, then maybe you'd be the kind they have on a long-running TV show with a bottom shelf budget? Some actor that never made it into movies, or something, and who's only doing it to pay the rent that week."

The Librarian looked at Ash with a raised eyebrow. He noted, "I like a man who speaks his mind, such as it is. My research suggests that there's not a lot of it left."

Ash agreed and nodded back.

"Where's Merv?" Red said, and his voice was suddenly threatening.

"Ah, yes. Merv," he rubbed his temples wearily. "I'm afraid I have no idea. That rather caught us by surprise, too."

Red's face took on a suspicious expression. "What?" he asked. "Are you telling me that you didn't recruit Merv?"

"Yes," he replied firmly. "That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"I don't believe you."

The Librarian smiled and told him, "It doesn't matter what you believe. All that matters here is the truth. It remains the truth no matter what happens, and what you choose to believe is of no consequence whatsoever."

“You can spin something with political lies, you can present a single side of a thing in the media, you can indoctrinate the population with misinformation and even condition them with social concepts that ignore science and reason, but none of that affects the truth. It will always remain true, no matter how inconvenient it is for you to accept.”

Red shrugged. “So you’re saying you didn’t recruit Merv?”

The Librarian nodded. “Let me show you around The Library. We’ll talk while we walk,” he said. “But I think there’s one other person we need to invite to the party.”

Chapter 28

“Protocol has been successfully identified. Now mapping the parameters,” the Hawk-Eye computer told her, sounding a little bit proud of itself, although she was still suspicious that such things only existed in her head.

Norma sat up straight, ready to cling onto whatever good news there was to be had. She had been wallowing in self-pity, absorbed in her fear that everything she had built was collapsing around her. This was just what she needed to hear, something to grab hold of and find some small measure of hope in. The computer being able to understand the protocol was the first step to defeating it. They might soon be able to see what it was stopping them from seeing.

“Computer, locate Red,” she said with unmistakable urgency.

The computer paused a moment as it scanned millions of gigabytes of data. “Unable to comply.”

She sighed, and the crushing sense of defeat bore down on her once again, although not as heavily as before. This time, she could bear the weight. “Locate Merv.”

“Unable to comply,” it said again.

She gave it an angry glare. “What exactly is the use of you?” she sneered at it.

“The Hawk-Eye is designated for surveillance and intelligence gathering as well as for processing the collected data into reasonable and useful forms,” it told her with a little sneer of its own. “The user purpose is currently unknown.”

Norma looked up suspiciously. Was it thinking? Had she hurt its non-existent feelings? She wiped the ghost of a tear from the corner of her eye and choked back the crushing wave of emptiness that was threatening to engulf her. This wasn’t productive; it wasn’t

helping. Red and Merv needed her thinking, they needed her sharp and alert. She would not let them down; she was stronger than this; she was better than this.

“Computer, does your current status mean we can see anything that we couldn’t see before?” she asked.

It said, “There is one more extrapolation available.”

“Display it,” she said. She quite literally crossed her fingers.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Medows looked up as Claire came into his office. Seeing her always brought a smile to his face, even when his mood was at its darkest. She moved with the same light-footed, but totally self-assured, way that she always did. She was a constant: she didn’t have emotional highs or lows. She was colder than that but, at the same time, she was the warmest person he had ever known.

She put down a coffee on his desk. It was gently steaming, with one sugar and just a nip of milk. It was just exactly how he liked it. His smile broadened at the sight of it, as the mild but unmistakable aroma of freshly ground beans reached his senses. He had needed this although, perhaps, he hadn’t realised it. It wasn’t the coffee that he needed.

Claire sat opposite, without being asked. She settled into the black leatherette office chair and made herself comfortable. She was usually comfortable anywhere. “Are you OK?”

He shook his head and tutted to himself. Normally such a question would cause a person to say that they were, usually without even thinking, but this time he was being more honest with both of them. “I’ve come to a decision,” he told her with a certain grimness. His words sounded very much like an apology. “You aren’t going to like it, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not here to judge the decision you make,” she said with her rather mechanical monotone. “I’m here to help put those decisions into action.”

“You’re not here to make me coffee either,” he told her softly, with the ghost of a smile, but he knew she wasn’t going to understand the inference. “Claire, I’m going to tell you what I’ve decided. I’m telling you this in confidence as the only person in the world I feel I can trust. You understand that what passes between us here can never be known by another living soul?”

She nodded that she understood, and if she responded that way, then it was a contract that she would never break, and that no living person could ever force her to change her mind about.

“And if I don’t like it?”

His fingers touched on the coffee mug and recoiled away. He gave a tiny inhale through pursed lips. It was still too hot for him to drink but, of course, such things never bothered her. He smiled an empty smile and said to her: “I have decided to leave something behind that is to happen in the event of my death. I’ve decided what kind of legacy I’m going to leave for the world.”

“OK,” she replied, nodding in agreement that she was following along. With her overly-literal mind, she often wasn’t.

“What I have seen is just too much for any man to see, for any man to know. Nobody should be walking this Earth with what I know, having seen what I’ve seen, in their heads,” he explained, but really he was going through his thought process for himself, not to explain it to her. “I’m going to leave something behind that will only make sense in the event of my death. It will be a message of sorts to anyone who knows how to make sense of it.”

“You are more valuable alive,” she said evenly, sounding a little confused about it because, in her clear and simple mind, that much seemed totally and obviously true.

“Thank you,” he said. “But Claire, your thinking is simplistic and logical, while theirs is not. They are driven by power, by instincts, by the darker drives of humanity. The kind of people I’m afraid of didn’t get where they are by being nice to one another. They got there by being worse than everyone else. It’s the nature of the world.” He looked away, for a moment, avoiding her endless gaze, since when he was talking, she never looked away. “Perhaps if everyone was more like you, we’d all be better off...”

Claire nodded. “But they are not.” She seemed to think about this for a moment. “I think it’s better that they are not.”

He nodded back. “They are not, but who is to say what’s better? I don’t know anymore. It’s just too much.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, not out of her own curiosity but because he needed to tell her.

“I found out many things while researching the super-soldier program that was based on the FX platform. Part of using the protocol is knowing how to apply it correctly. A big part of my job is understanding the things that are going to disappear. I had to look into the FX90 program, and then beyond. I found out about the future of the program and I realised just what kind of a world I was protecting.”

“I know about the FX90 program,” Claire said with a strangely sarcastic smile. It was rare she showed anything much beyond an almost innocent openness, to him, at least.

“I know you do,” he said with a sympathetic little smile. “There was more to the FX90 program than just creating super-

soldiers, men and women who were stronger and who could take more abuse. There was so much more.

“Men who create these things are intelligent. They find ways to take these things and make them worse. To my shame, I became one of those people when I created the protocol. I have found a way to put this right in the future.”

Claire’s face shifted and she looked almost concerned, but perhaps that was only in his imagination. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

His voice lowered and he leaned forwards. “I have a plan that I’ve already begun to put in action,” he said.

She just nodded.

“Claire, in the event of my death, if anyone acts against me, then everything we’ve done here will be in danger,” he said grimly. “I’ve got a plan and you are going to be a part of it. You are going to help me to put this into action. It’s dangerous but I think it will work. I also think it’s the only way to protect what’s left.

“There’s a legend of an unknown group, operating in secret. They’re called ‘The Others’ and nobody knows for sure who they are. If anything happens to me, I want you to look for them.”

“But you’ll still be dead!” Claire protested.

He just smiled and took a sip of coffee. It was too sweet and too bitter but it was still perfect. “But you won’t be,” he told her.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“What?” Norma was more confused than before. “What the hell are ‘The Others?’”

“There is no information available,” the computer replied.

“Is this what he was talking about before? Is this the secret-services community version of the bogeyman?” She laughed at the

very idea of it. “Is this some urban legend used to scare special-agents into eating their vegetables? I still have no better idea of what Medows was planning to do, what exactly it was that he was doing to protect himself. All I have is some vague reference to something that probably doesn’t exist. This is ridiculous. Sometimes I feel like we’re all surrounded by complete idiots.”

The computer didn’t really have an answer for that since it probably felt much the same way.

“Incoming message,” it said, sounding as if it might just be relieved to have a nice change of subject.

“Another message?” She was suddenly interested and her pulse quickened.

“Analysis shows this is an active data-stream with an invitation for us to engage in real-time data sharing,” it said.

Norma frowned. “An invitation from whom?”

“The address is only listed as ‘The Others.’”

Norma slapped her hand to her face. “Oh, for god’s sake!”

Chapter 29

“Hello?” Norma’s voice came through Red’s earpiece. “Red, can you hear me?”

“Norma?” he pressed his finger to his ear, absolutely redundantly. He was surprised to suddenly hear her voice, but relieved as well. All this was too much responsibility for just one man, especially that particular one man, to whom any amount of responsibility was probably too much.

“Red, is everything OK?”

He could hear the gasp of relief in her voice, a wave of emotion crashing over her as she found out that he was still alive.

“Sure,” he replied with a shrug. “I’m fine.” Even he realised that his answer needed a little more detail. “I’m in The Library. It’s a big place full of books and stuff.”

Her voice sounded both frantic and angry. “I know what a library is!” she screamed at him.

Red looked over sheepishly to the Librarian and Ash: both were frowning at him. He shrugged and said: “My evil genius says hello.”

“Hello, Norma!” The Librarian said with a quite warm smile that showed how he had softened over the years, from the rather stoic and cold figure that had once brutally murdered his colleagues.

“Welcome to The Library. This isn’t a library, this is The Library.” He said this to nobody in particular and not in any special direction, knowing that Norma could now see everything that happened and that the Hawk-Eye computer now had full command over the systems he wanted it to access.

“Red, what happened?” Norma sounded a little more like her usual self, as her veneer of control snapped back firmly into place.

“They tricked me into chasing Ash,” he said, pointing to the big man standing beside him. “He’s the guy who murdered the man in the video. He was riding the black bike and I chased him here. This is what I found. Books and stuff. Nothing exciting really. I can’t help thinking this would be more your thing than mine.”

Norma ground her teeth, or did something to make a similar noise come through his speaker. “I didn’t think they’d found a way to make you walk into a library of your volition,” she said sarcastically. “I’m surprised to hear that you even know what the word means.”

He shrugged and said, rather a little too proudly, “I don’t know what ‘volition’ means!”

The Librarian stepped in front of Red so that he now appeared on Norma’s main screen. He knew she’d be watching and he spoke equally to both of them. “Please join me in my office. You must have a lot of questions and I have answers, to some of them, at least.”

“Red, you cannot trust these people!” she said sternly.

“Norma, they said there’d be cake,” he told her, sounding really quite serious about it.

“Red!” she screamed at him, her piercing voice causing him to flinch openly.

“Norma, I’m joking about the cake!” he shouted back.

Ash stepped in front of them. He said, with a shrug: “I think we have biscuits, if that helps? I like biscuits.”

Red raised an eyebrow. It did actually help a little. “Norma, they could have killed me any time, even though I’m wearing armour and have massively faster reactions than either of them. I mean, look at them. They’re so old that I’m amazed they’re even standing upright.”

Ash frowned at him. “I’m only sixty-four!” he grumbled. “And I’m still fitter than ninety-nine per cent of men half my age!”

Red frowned at him. "You'd look good, for a man of seventy-four."

The Librarian rolled his eyes, painted a false smile on his face and led the way to a corner office where he clearly hoped it would be he doing the talking and everyone else would just be listening.

"Red, who are these people?" Norma asked, as he followed on behind.

Red shrugged. "I think they want to explain that, Norma and I need a coffee. We can work with this."

The meeting room had a certain charm to it. There were more books, of course, but it was a smaller, self-contained place with a large wooden table occupying the middle. In the centre of the table was a collection of modern-looking screens and a few wireless keyboards were dotted around. It was long, wide and oval and it would have been ideal for a meeting, but less ideal since so few people seemed to work there.

Red sat down wherever he felt like sitting and The Librarian took the head of the table. On the other end, a large monitor and cameras had been set up on the edge, raised to about shoulder-height. The Librarian pressed a few buttons as Ash came in with a pile of mixed biscuits, some covered in chocolate, and a jug of coffee. Red seemed extremely excited.

Norma's face appeared on the monitor, almost as if she was there in person. She looked around, able to see all this quite clearly. Red watched as the camera panned about, following her eye movement.

"Norma?" he said with a smile. She smiled back with her tired, careworn face. She looked very tired.

The Librarian held up his hand for silence and, against the odds, he got it. "Please allow me to explain what's going on here."

Red looked at Norma who had a suspicious scowl on her face but, nonetheless, she nodded for him to continue.

"As you both know, I am the Librarian. There are two others who have worked here with me for three long decades, Ash and the good Mr Baker who, sadly, cannot be here with us," he told them. Red frowned and looked to Norma, who was listening intently. She just frowned back, for now.

"Many years ago, I was a project manager working on a drug called FX45. It was a chemical that speeded up muscle reaction, primarily by stimulating adrenaline. It was administered in order to give soldiers abnormal strength and reactions. It was meant to force the human body to adapt to it by increasing muscle tissue, strengthening bones and improving neural connections.

"I worked to stabilise the dosage and to keep the volunteers alive during the trials. To explain this fully, I would like to add that, originally, the drug was intended to speed up recovery time after serious injuries but the funding was from the military and our work was usurped.

"Eventually, I discovered my work was being used for other, even less ethical purposes than what I had known about. Ultimately, FX45 was found to be critically unstable and was no longer used for human trials.

"The project was abandoned but it was found that it could be used as an airborne agent and turned into a weapon. If breathed in, it could cause an enemy combatant to die in a quite horrible way. I believe you remember witnessing the video reconstruction that we sent you?"

Red and Norma nodded that they remembered that indeed they had. Norma was certainly never going to forget it.

“Once I knew about that, my whole world began to unravel. I searched through records and discovered that essentially all my work over the years had been used in ways I would never have approved of. I became disillusioned with the entire business. I could no longer lie to myself and pretend that what I did had a moral and just outcome. I had tricked myself into believing that it was worth tolerating the military applications of technology so that we could enjoy the humanitarian benefits. I had to face the fact that I had been nothing more than a fool.”

“You’re certainly nothing more than a terrible evil genius!” Red told him.

Even Norma glared at him for that one.

“In a fit of depression, I decided to kill myself. It was my aim to take some of the architects of this world with me. I believed I could make amends for some of the things I’d been responsible for and make sure that the research into FX45 ended right there with their deaths. I even recorded the event to leave as a reminder to others. I injected myself with a stabilising agent and administered their toxin, releasing it into the air we were all breathing. I believed I had very little time left to live, just long enough to post copies of the film. I wanted what I’d done to be known, hoping it might wake up others to the harm we were doing.

“But I was wrong. The stabilising agent counteracted the poison that was coursing through my veins. It seemed that, if I never became too emotionally stimulated, and was treated to doses of the agent at regular intervals, then I would continue to survive.

“It seemed to me that I’d been given a second chance - and I wasn’t going to waste it.

“The people I killed had powerful connections and I took them over. I used their finances and resources to secure funding for this library. It began quite small, taking over this very home, which one of them had purchased. This place had been built illegally on Native American soil and so I made arrangements to have it condemned, and returned the land to the ownership of my people. The American government will never be allowed legally to set foot here again.

“I knew I would never again leave this place and so I read, I grew and I learned, but soon learning was no longer enough. I couldn’t, in good conscience, sit by and watch as these atrocities carried on in my name, and in the name of good people who had no concept of the harm they were actually doing.

Red was bored. “So you set up The Library and you recruited Ash to kill people for you?” he asked. “Right, we get it.” He sniffed and looked around to where everyone was angrily staring at him. He shrugged and said: “I don’t like explanations that go on longer than a cup of coffee. Can you imagine if someone was watching this, or worse, reading it in a novel? It’s just too much exposition. They’d be so bored by now! This isn’t a low-brow spy-movie, you know?”

“No!” Ash assured him, and for once seemed quite serious on the matter. “That isn’t how it happened. I was already a killer. FX45 already flowed through my veins. I was everything that The Librarian was trying to make amends for. When he recruited me, it was to give me a chance to redeem myself. Since I joined, I haven’t killed a single person!”

The Librarian gave him a stern look.

Ash sighed, “I haven’t killed anyone that didn’t deserve it.”

“You expect us to just blindly believe all this just because you tell us it’s true?” Norma asked.

He smiled. "I sent you the videos. I wanted you to see us for what we are. I invited you here."

Red shook his head and took a bite of a chocolate hob-nob that had been dunked in coffee, leaving the chocolate just a little melted. He couldn't remember ever doing this before, but it seemed like very much his thing. He smiled happily. "You know, most people send little paper invitations that make people happy, not big black motorcycles hurtling through town at ridiculous speeds in rush hour traffic, right?"

"You did not make it easy to reach out to you," The Librarian said.

Norma and Red looked at one another.

"We're not interested in joining you, even if you managed to talk Merv into it," she said sternly.

"We're not recruiting you!" The Librarian told her, with a measured smirk. "We're asking you for help."

"We had nothing to do with Merv," Ash added. "And for the first time since the mid-eighties, we're out of our depth. We need you. We can't do this alone anymore."

Red raised an eyebrow. Norma shot a glance at him and then her face adopted a quizzical expression.

"The FX45 drug created a handful of useful super-soldiers, like Ash here," he began. "But they all died, usually from embolisms or their hearts exploding in their chests. By then, I'd mastered the medication needed to control the drug, so, luckily, Ash was fine. In fact, I estimate he's quite a bit better than fine and expect his lifespan to run to at least two hundred years, maybe a little longer if he can stay off the doughnuts. The only side-effects we suffer from is a slightly worse temper, occasional indigestion and the fact that it turned our eyes bright blue-

Ash leant forward, grinning widely. "I like doughnuts."

The Librarian rolled his eyes and just continued. "But the program didn't end with the deaths of the others. A weaker version, the FX60 was next and, while it had more moderate results, the program was more widespread. Eventually, an FX90 version of the drug was created. We can't penetrate the secrets of that program. We couldn't get past Medows' work and find out what really happened."

"So you don't know what happened to Merv?" Red sighed. He was disappointed - but another chocolate hob-nob took the edge off all that quite nicely.

Ash shook his head. "I have a daughter out there, too," he said. "She was born with the FX45 in her veins so she was taken and experimented on. We believe that the FX90 is based on her. Her strength and speed goes way beyond anything I'm capable of, and that's the technology your Merv has running through his body."

Red looked at him evenly. "So she's more powerful than you?" he asked. "Does that mean she can open a pickle-jar on her own? She doesn't need help climbing the stairs?"

"So you're looking for your daughter?" Norma sounded as though she sympathised. She could understand this all too well; it spoke to her in a language she was entirely fluent in. "And we're looking for Merv?"

Ash nodded sadly. "We don't know where they are or what they're doing. All we know is that Medows was planning something. We're hoping that that gives us a chance to find out what is really going on."

"Maybe a nap would help," Red suggested. "A nice lie down and a mug of cocoa?"

Ash smirked at him. "Good idea, kid. That would give you a little time to play with your toys, have a nice bath and get your nappy changed, right?"

"Oh my god!" Norma grumbled. "There's two of them, now."

The Librarian said: "We need you to find Ash's daughter. You need us to find Merv."

"If we agree?" Norma asked, still sounding some way from being convinced.

"Then we can all hope to find them before they do anything awful. We can find them before they kill anyone, or get themselves killed," he told her.

Norma looked at Red and he gave her a curt nod. He wanted this.

Ash said sadly: "I'm not a parent like you are, Norma. I never had the chance to know my daughter; I've never met her. I spent most of my life knowing she was out there, living life as a lab-rat. This is the one chance I'm ever going to have of finding her, of meeting her face to face." He huffed to himself. "You want Merv back. I just want to meet my little girl."

She had her reservations but still she found herself saying, "Alright. We'll consider it."

Chapter 30

Norma looked over the array of consoles around the control centre. She'd set the computer to track each face individually and, to make it easier for her, she had arranged for each person to be displayed on their own screen.

"Red, so what do we know?" she said thoughtfully.

Red shrugged up on the main monitor. "We definitely know that I like chocolate hob-nobs," he suggested as if he was helping. "We need to have a talk about why they're not available back at Hawk-Eye headquarters. I feel like there's a lot of progress we can make there. Beyond that, I would like to remind you that thinking isn't my strong suit."

The Librarian told them: "Meadows said that he left a message of some kind that would be available in the event of his death."

"What did it say?" Norma asked keenly.

The Librarian said simply: "It wasn't actually left to us and we've not managed to find it. My research suggests that nobody else has managed to locate it yet, either." He admitted this sadly, looking as if he took this as a great personal failure. "Perhaps it requires a code which he didn't supply. We're assuming that the password was something we're meant to have spotted, but my research hasn't turned up any obvious leads."

"We can try!" Norma told him. "Send us everything you know and I'll put the Hawk-Eye onto it. No offence, but our computer is probably superior to yours." Within seconds, a message had been received.

He said to her with a measured smile: "I was hoping you'd say that. No offence taken. I do keep our systems up to date, but that machine of yours is light-years ahead of anything we've got."

She turned to the console. "Computer, begin analysis of this message. Cross-reference against Medows' personal profile and estimate what the message might be and if there is a password."

"Working..." it said.

And then nothing happened.

"Well?" she said after a lengthy pause.

"This may take some time!" it said, and it was definitely a little short with her. "Would you like some music while you wait?"

"No I would not like some..." she snapped at it and turned to look at Red, filling her lungs with a calming breath. She switched off the internal microphones and spoke so that only Red could hear it through his earpiece. "Do you think we can we trust these people?"

Red looked away and kept his voice low. "Do we have a choice?"

She thought carefully. "I don't trust them, Red. We can't prove anything that they've told us. All we know is they're both murderers who have remorselessly killed before."

He shrugged. "Nobody's perfect. How many people have you killed?"

She sighed to herself. "Not many," she said finally. "Probably not as many as you, according to your military records, and with the pretty substantial body-count you've racked up so far working with me."

"Yeah, but I do have the decency to feel bad about it," he told her. There was a thoughtful pause. "Some of it, at least."

Norma nodded in agreement that indeed, it was a complex issue.

"Isn't it worth it to get Merv back?" he asked.

"That is the only reason I'm going along with this," she told him. She still had grave reservations about working with such an

unknown element. She sometimes wasn't thrilled about working with Red.

"Another extrapolation is available," the computer told her. Norma turned to see. The index suggested that the computer had found Medows' password.

"Play it."

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

"The protocol is ready," Medows said proudly. Both of his guests looked to one another with a satisfied expression.

Mr Silverman was the first to speak, as he often was, "Congratulations, Medows." He smiled with the normal friendly warmth he exuded. "You know, we're very impressed with your work. You've successfully melded several different experimental technologies together and come in under budget and with results that exceeded our expectations."

Medows allowed himself to wallow slightly in his pride. It was a passing thing: he wasn't a man to mire himself in previous successes but, for a moment, he took the time to indulge, just a little bit.

The cafe was empty now, closed for a 'special party' by Silverman himself. When Medows had reported that he had an announcement to make, he'd been invited to make it there, promising that he could do so over a delicious lunch with some of the finest desserts anywhere in the city to follow it. Medows accepted, of course. It was another indulgence, he knew, but it made him feel special and important and he enjoyed such things, in moderation. He was only human.

At his side was Claire, his constant companion throughout the project. She had been paired with him as personal security, a reliable

confidant and a useful colleague. Despite her obvious shortcomings, she had quickly earned both his trust and his respect.

Silverman was on the other side of the table. He was with his colleague, Professor Jones. Jones simply stared forwards for now, any flicker of emotion quickly melting back to a stoic expression of mild interest, at best. At least, Silverman was grinning.

“Tell us about it,” he said. “Not the technical stuff. Tell us what this all means, in words a simple man like me can understand.”

“Sir,” he began, “the protocol is a computer system unlike any other. If we simply tell it about something, that something ceases to exist. There is a huge and powerful computer that connects to everything. It erases that thing from any reference on the internet. It blocks the image of that thing being stored anywhere, and it actively works to hide it, to conceal its movements, to mask it from detection. In our modern, digital age, we’ve managed to create an information-black-hole into which we can place anything we choose.”

“I’m impressed,” Professor Jones said, sounding very much like a man who wasn’t easily made to feel that way.

Silverman looked over at him, a little surprised. Turning back to Medows he said: “From him, that is high praise indeed. The last thing he said he was impressed about was the time I nearly beat him at chess. That was the closest he’s ever got to sarcasm, too.”

“Nonsense!” the Professor exclaimed, with a very subtly wry expression. “You’re an excellent chess player.”

Silverman grinned and shook his head. “You are, perhaps, witnessing the smartest piece of sarcastic humour ever drawn at my expense.”

Medows grinned back, not quite sure he was keeping up with the two of them, who seemed to share an understanding with one another that outsiders weren’t entirely privy to.

“So how do you control it?” Silverman asked. Jones leaned forward at this, staring expectantly forwards.

“As was mentioned in the design brief, the protocol is designed only to recognise my own input,” he told them. “I’ve found a way that the system can recognise me, and only me, in a unique and personal way. It has a level of creative intelligence about the way it works. I only have to speak the words out loud and it will accept my instructions.”

“So you could simply sit here, in this cafe, and instruct the protocol to conceal something and it would do it?” The professor placed his palms flatly together in front of his face and stared thoughtfully at his own fingers. “Is that correct?”

Medows allowed himself a smile. “We live in a digital age of near-perfect surveillance,” he said. “My words are always heard, no matter where I speak them. The protocol will always work.”

Silverman looked impressed. “Medows, I would like to propose a toast.” He raised a glass of a very good, but not great, red wine. Claire shuffled awkwardly. “Here’s to the future and the people like you who are the architects of it!”

Medows raised his glass and gave a modest nod in reply, but he flushed proudly.

He turned to Claire and clinked his glass into hers, before tapping it gently against those of his superiors. She smiled at him and looked on with her glassy, staring eyes.

“I didn’t do it alone,” he said, even more modestly. “I couldn’t have done any of this without everyone at this table.”

Mr Silverman smiled widely and changed the toast. “Then here’s to us. Here’s to all of us.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "What's the password?" she said to the computer. "I don't understand!"

"The password is non-conventional," it told her, not able to make the explanation any simpler than that.

"There is an additional video regarding the nature of FX90, as previously requested," it said.

"FX90?" she said thoughtfully. "The technology that the super-soldier program was based on."

For just a moment she looked over to a wide-angled video of Red.

■ PLYBCK RSMD

He sat on an upturned bucket while Ash was perched casually on his own helmet. The garage area was cavernous but in front of them were the motorcycles. This was the whole of their world.

"You're a lot like me, kid!" Ash told him with a smile.

Red looked at him with a sarcastic frown. "How dare you! That's a terrible thing to say!"

Ash chuckled to himself. "You've got a lot of growing up to do, same as I had when I first arrived here. But I see potential in you, and lots of it. I see it in all of you."

"And you seem like a perfect example of adult maturity," Red told him with a smirk. He sipped heavily from a bottle of water. Ash did the same. "Why did you join this thing? What made you go from a super-charged killer to whatever-the-hell you are now?"

"Red, they made me what I was. I was just some stupid kid with nothing to live for when it started. The only thing that ever scared me was turning into my father. He was a dead-eyed redneck

moron who beat my mother half to death. He never left any mark on the world other than bruises,” he began, just a little sadly. “I joined the army when I was young. I should have been out getting rejected by girls, and losing fights against bigger guys, but I was just too angry and dumb for all that. They said I was special, and then they made me even more special. I never had time to think and was never encouraged to take the time. I just did what they told me and they patted me on the back for all the good work I was doing.

“It was The Librarian that just slowed me down, gave me time to take a breath and made me look long and hard at who I was. He offered me the chance to be someone I wouldn’t mind looking back at me out of a mirror.”

Red nodded to himself knowingly, as Ash continued: “I took it. I took the chance to make up for all the bad I’d already done.” He shrugged, smirked a little and took another swig from his water bottle. “What about you, Red? Why did you do it?”

“Join Norma and the Hawk-Eye?” he sighed. “I’m nothing special, Ash. I was drummed out from the Marines and I couldn’t hold down a job. Norma woke me up with her experimental technology and I lost just about every memory I ever had. I was a blank slate. It made my brain into something else. It made me faster, quicker and stronger. I don’t know for sure, but I think it changed me in other ways, too. I didn’t join Norma because I didn’t have a choice: I joined her because there was no other choice. This is my one shot in life to do something that matters and it’s the only chance I’m ever going to get.

“I know who I am, Ash. I might not remember who I was, but I know. On my own, I’m nothing. In this team, we’re all somebody special.”

Ash nodded. “You want to be special?”

Red just smiled and said: "I never got into the habit of that!" He shook his head thoughtfully and frowned to himself thoughtfully. "I want to help people, Ash. When I say I want to make a difference, I mean I want to leave a footprint on the world. I want that footprint to be something other people wouldn't be ashamed to follow. I want to know there are people who are better off because I did what I did."

He shook his head and tutted to himself. "Sorry, does that makes sense?"

Ash nodded to himself. "See, this is what I mean, Red. You're a lot like me, kid."

Red looked at him evenly. He held out his water bottle and the two clinked them together. "There are worse things to be, I guess."

■ **PLYBCK SSPND**

Norma smiled and looked down, thoughtfully letting all this just wash over her. She whispered, just to herself: "You are special, Red. You're everything I wish Casey could have been." She smiled and said, more loudly: "Computer, play video relating to the FX90 program. Show me what it is!"

■ **PLYBCK RSMD RCHV**

He was a soldier and this was really just a war like any other. He was trained, experienced and ready to fight. Around him was a selection of mixed terrain and he knew how to make it work for him. There were buildings, long since abandoned and heavily damaged by both weapons fire and the ravages of time.

A wood stretched out beyond, trees and bushes that offered plenty of places to hide. He wouldn't go there. They could be on him before he ever saw them coming, whatever they were.

He was the last of them now. There had been eight of them and he had watched all of the others meet their end against an enemy he'd never faced the likes of before. It had moved like lightning, come at them with singularity of purpose, and attacked with dreadful power.

Armed only with a pistol and his wits, he now languished in what had once been a reception office, or perhaps a small medical centre. It was impossible to tell, when only the bare brick and concrete remained, two rusting metal filing cabinets and a few splinters of glass from the empty windows. But he was on the second floor now, with a good view all around. Whatever this thing was, he would see it coming, he told himself bravely.

He didn't feel very brave.

But then, he heard a movement somewhere behind him. His chest heaved as he gasped in horror. His pulse quickened and a fresh wave of fear gripped him. He pointed his pistol and, even though it was held in a two-handed grip, it was shaking, the muzzle drifting nervously around as he tracked for the target. If he was lucky, it was a rat, maybe a cat, but if he wasn't...

It didn't bear thinking about after what he'd seen that day. His team had been torn apart. Soldiers talked like this all the time, but this time it was no exaggeration. Something had melted out of the shadows, something dark, swift and terrible. He'd heard gunshots, two bangs from a super-sonic weapon, the unmistakable crack of a military-issued 9mm pistol. But the shots had never got close to their target. The thing grabbed his colleague by the neck and was then gone, dashing away into the darkness like a wolf chasing down some unfortunate prey.

It had happened in seconds, too fast for him to react to. He had found himself just standing there, stunned by it, his hand on the butt

of his weapon, not even having the time to draw it from the holster. He had stared at what was left behind. His colleague, his friend, was not a man anymore. He was a body, a bloodied corpse with the head torn bodily from the neck by something of inhuman strength. The foot was twitching as if it was trying to kick away whatever had done this to him, and the eyes were staring glassily forwards in surprise, the eyelids gently, slowly sagging shut.

He had heard once that a severed head could last for several seconds and, at that moment, he believed it. Those eyes were gazing into infinity, perhaps wondering just exactly what was happening and not knowing it had already happened, and that now, it was already too late. Very slowly, the eyes began to roll upwards, the lids fluttering down completely. The mouth opened and the tongue lolled out.

When he saw that, he drew his pistol and he ran. He ran and he ran until his legs were jelly, his chest was fire and his head was just blank, his mind jammed so full of fear that there wasn't room in there for anything else.

He very slowly approached the source of the noise. Running would do no good this time. It hadn't done Joe any good the time before. Joe and he had been in a squad together for three years. He'd got drunk with him on his stag-night. It had been his idea to handcuff him to a cow, naked except for a condom and a jar of grease open next to him. He had posted pictures of that on the internet and they had all laughed about it for weeks.

Joe had tried to run and then he just suddenly stopped. There was no sound of gunshots, no weapons fire. He just fell to the ground in silence, slumping over like a puppet with its strings suddenly cut. The hilt of a long, stainless blade was protruding from the back of his skull, buried deep inside his unremarkable brain. What force must the

arm that threw that have had? He hadn't even seen them. They were too far away to even be spotted, but they'd hurled a blade with sufficient strength and accuracy to punch through Joe's skull as if it was made of paper.

Better instead to walk towards it. Perhaps he'd be fast enough on the trigger. Maybe he'd be able to put shots into it before it attacked.

He edged forwards and then he heard a soft crack behind him, a foot falling on a loose piece of rubble, or perhaps a rock. His eyes widened and then there was just endless darkness. Whatever it was, he never even saw it coming.

"They never even saw it coming!" Mr Silverman said with a grin. He looked young, still had a vibrant little spring to his step, a little youthful energy left flowing through him. He pointed to a monitor on his desk where the ugly scene had played out. The soldier's head had been twisted around, lurched backwards with such force that the spine had been wrenched right out from under the skin. When the body had been dropped to the ground, the head had ended up lying around the knee, still connected to the torso by a bloody red string of bones.

Professor Jones reached out his hand to offer a greeting. Silverman took it enthusiastically and they shook for that first time.

"That was the final test," Silverman explained. "We used subject zero for demonstration purposes. That one tends to be most reliable so far, even though it's just a prototype. She's the most powerful too, so far at least."

"Subject zero?" the professor asked. "Please excuse me. I'm new to this program. I've been sent here as a scientific advisor and I haven't had time to acquaint myself with all of the details just yet."

Silverman gave him a wide grin. "Subject zero has an interesting back-story," he began. He swiped up a file and began thumbing through it. He pulled out a handful of photocopied documents and handed them over. "We have her to thank for the entire FX90 project. She was actually the child of a subject from the FX45 program."

Professor Jones cringed at the very mention of it.

"We found traces of FX45 in her DNA. She was already very slightly augmented at birth and we think she would have developed further," he said, as if this was fascinating. He sat back on the edge of his desk and let the rest of the files fall to his knee. "We secured the child, of course, and she was raised under scientific scrutiny. We managed to use her blood as a way to make a stabilised form of the FX45 serum. That formed the basis of the strength enhancement properties of FX90."

The professor seemed to know all this and was keen to move things along. "I'm less interested in the strength and stamina."

"Ah, you're here about the other thing!" he said with a knowing smile. He nodded. "We found that the FX45 had re-coded her DNA in very interesting ways. It had found a way to reprogram her, just as it was meant to do, although in practice it always failed. We discovered that we could do the same, learning from what her DNA had to teach us. We reconfigured the FX45 serum so that, instead of just stimulating the body, it now rebuilt it at a cellular level. We found we could program a human to become anything we wanted them to be."

"Imagine it: we could design a person to grow much larger, a mountain of solid muscle with unprecedented strength. We could re-design the skin so it was virtually bullet-proof. We could make it the

perfect combat machine. Even more than that, we could control it absolutely.”

“Control it?” Professor Jones frowned darkly. “Controlling it would definitely be a priority. That doesn’t sound like something I would want to lose control of. I imagine we have conditioning systems to make such a being totally obedient? Mind control and such?”

Silverman grinned even more widely. “The beauty of the FX90 program is that we don’t need them!”

The Professor raised an eyebrow.

He explained with a sigh: “There was a problem!”

His eyes widened. He said with a sigh of his own: “Of course there was.”

“The FX90 serum was much more stable than the FX45 but it still had jitters. Even when the body accepted the changes, the brain had little hiccups. Those little hiccups had occasionally unfortunate results, such as growing a tooth inside your nasal cavity or waking up with all your fingers broken,” he explained, as if this was nothing at all.

“We fixed it, of course,” he told him. “We used a brain implant that smoothes out the electrical impulses in the brain, smoothes everything out and slows it all down. It gave us the solution we were looking for and gave us a few other advantages too.”

Jones looked at him evenly. “Such as?”

“These implants are a scientific miracle. They directly influence the brain and, over time, that ability becomes permanent. It makes the brain’s owner much more controllable, without making them any less aggressive. We stimulate the pack-mentality and simply reinforce our part of it. It means total and unquestioning

loyalty. The subject would never be aware, but it would obey any instruction we gave it without a second thought.

“We also found we could recode the brain itself with a more simplistic set of parameters. In fact, we’re not talking about something we could do; we’re talking about something we have done, and have done successfully.”

“This is...” the professor struggled for the right words. “This is horrifying. We inject the volunteer with the FX90 serum and fit them with a brain-implant and that person is turned into an obedient slave with a body re-designed into a combat machine?”

“Mostly,” he admitted. “There is a margin of failure. Some subjects don’t seem able to tolerate the changes.”

Jones fixed him with a disarming stare. “How big a margin?”

He sighed and looked away. He mumbled slightly: “Around eighty-four per cent.”

The Professor laughed openly. “That much? So only sixteen per cent of people we try this on actually successfully become obedient super-soldiers? What happens to the overwhelming majority?”

Silverman rolled his eyes as if he was about to discuss something that was of little consequence. “A quite spectacular death, I’m afraid. It’s like an explosion in a meat-fireworks factory. Interestingly, the explosion is often not fatal, so we usually have to incinerate the remains to ensure the subject fully expires.”

The professor shook his head sadly. “We’re not good people, are we?”

Silverman smirked at him. “We are most certainly not. Morality and success rarely coincide, I find,” he said perfectly happily. “If only one in a hundred worked, it would all be worth it, as far as this program is concerned.

“You see, I have children, three of them. When I die, I won’t leave this world to them; I will leave a better one. I know that everything we do takes us one step closer to making this world everything it should be.”

Professor Jones put the papers down on top of the other folder. He looked Silverman straight in the eye and then, very slowly, very deliberately he told him: “I want to see everything. I want full access to every piece of research and every shred of data you have on this project.”

“Of course,” he agreed.

“Based on what you’ve told me, I’m going to authorise full funding for this program,” he said. “I want a full scientific study of this made. I want to see huge, abnormally strong soldiers that are virtually impervious to gunfire. I want to see average-looking people with measurably improved abilities. I want people with the FX90 serum living normal lives to see how well they do, and I want a squad of them tested against average soldiers. I want this done properly, Silverman. I want the scientific method employed at all times.”

Silverman grinned. “And you shall have it.”

“And I want them programmed and controlled,” he warned him. “I don’t want one single one of these things smart enough to start thinking for itself. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather quite like to be able to sleep at night.”

Silverman laughed. “Control is something we’ve become very good at over the years,” he said. “We’ve installed two modes: ‘normal operation,’ where our subjects are completely compliant; and ‘combat-mode.’ With that active, they can literally do nothing but accept any command given to them by us. It shuts down their higher brain functions, so we have total control.”

“It worries me that your safeguard against super-soldiers violently turning on their creators is called ‘combat-mode.’”

Silverman said with a grin: “I think this is going to be the beginning of a quite remarkable friendship!”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“My god!” Norma buried her face in her hands. “They programmed Merv. It’s as simple as that, they put him into ‘combat-mode’ and they told him what to do.”

She sat up suddenly, a smile growing across her lips. “Red!” she said sharply into his earpiece, so only he could hear it. “I know how they’re doing it. I know what happened to Merv and I know how to find him.”

“What?” Red said back, perking up himself. On the monitor she saw him sit up sharply.

“The super-soldier program included a brain implant that controls him. They can use it to shut down parts of his brain so he does whatever he’s told to do. There might be some signal they used, or a code-word that was said to him through his phone,” she said. “He never betrayed us. He’s simply not in control of his actions. They’ve taken over his mind and switched most of it off. He probably has no idea who we are right now.”

“Yes!” he yelled out triumphantly, punching the air. “I knew that big, dumb lump of muscle would never knowingly try to kill me, no matter what I said about his pyjamas!”

Norma decided another harmless, little white lie might be the order of the day. “I knew it too, Red.”

“So what do we do?” He asked.

“You wait,” she told him. “I’m configuring the computer to work out what kind of signal would work on him. Or what kind of

code-word was used. Once I know, I can begin to use it to trace him. I can also work on a way to cancel any signal or counter the control that, hopefully, will make him go back to normal.”

“I knew you’d crack it, Normal!” he told her proudly.

“Of course!” she said. “Was there ever any doubt?”

Little white lies never hurt anyone, did they?

Chapter 31

Red was standing up now, pacing back and forth restlessly. Waiting was the hardest part of the business for him, especially since patience was rather the opposite of his super-power. He walked back and forth past his beloved motorcycle. Sitting still, without him on it, she was just as empty as he was without her beneath him. Soon he'd be on her, soon he'd go out into battle once more and they'd take on the world again.

The world never stood a chance.

He wanted to throw his leg over. He wanted to go out into the city and put everything right that had been done wrongly by all this.

"Calm down, kid!" Ash told him. He stood up and stretched his aching knees. "Getting excited isn't going to make anything go any faster."

He scowled. "I thought you'd be more impatient than me, what with having so few years left to live."

Ash smirked and said, "Look at that bike of yours. Do you really think you're going to be enjoying a long and healthy retirement? My guess is your story will end with your body splattered all over an office wall somewhere."

Red grinned. "No, that's how my story started! You didn't do your homework."

"Homework was never my style. I was always more of a doer than a thinker." Ash laughed and went to his own motorcycle. He laid his hand lovingly on the bars. "I've had this machine for a very long time. The Librarian found her for me. She was an abandoned prototype, languishing unused in a warehouse somewhere and he had her brought here, all done in secret. I don't know how he does these

things. He just manages to make things happen under the cover of darkness and nobody seems to realise what he's done.

"She was in pieces when she arrived in a crate. He gave me a crowbar and told me that all my Christmases had come at once. I had no idea what he was talking about until I wrenched that box open. It took me all day to put her together and another two to get her to run.

"She was me, you see. I was broken and useless, just like her. This place put me back together and gave me a purpose. I called her 'The Phoenix' because we both got a second chance.

"She's a part of me now. Ever since that day when I first opened her up and she roared off down the road as if she was powered by all the fire in hell itself. I knew I was home."

Red smiled. "I saw Her that first time and I knew. I just knew. This was who I was born to be. It was as if all the stupid pieces were coming together. I felt as if I could take on the world. I had always taken on the world, but this time I might not actually get my arse kicked for doing it."

"The Librarian does all the boring stuff up there in The Library and I'm out there doing what needs to be done," Ash said wistfully, remembering it all fondly. "Your adventure is just starting now. Make it a good one, kid. Make sure you make a difference every day and in every way you can."

Red nodded. He knew that he would.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"Protocol system has been decoded," Hawk-Eye told her and she was sure it sounded really quite proud of itself for doing it. She would have to run a very complex series of diagnostics later. There was no escaping the fact that the computer was growing, learning and

becoming something more than it used to be. It seemed to be a trend in this place.

“Find Merv!” she told it excitedly.

Almost instantly, it replied: “Merv has been located. Real-time streaming video is available.”

“Show me!”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Merv was sitting in the driving seat of a car, a very large four-wheel-drive machine that was still only just big enough for him to fit into. But fitted into it he was, with the gigantic fingers of his hands bearing down on the steering wheel and his head leaning forwards towards the windscreen. Next to him was a very attractive young woman with slightly reddish hair. She was dressed purposefully in loose-fitting black clothing that looked rugged and almost militaristic. Her movements were restrained and cautious and she had an air about her of strength and power.

She was using a hand-held device that was chunky, finished in green plastic and looked like it was military equipment.

“Got it!” she said, but there was no smile on her face where it looked like one belonged. “How many others do we have now?”

Merv gave a thoughtful frown, but it was difficult to tell if he was actually thinking; he might just as easily have been letting out a little fart. Eventually, he said with a horribly low growl: “We’ve located and activated thirteen of us at the last count.”

She gazed out of the window, working it all out in her mind, a brain sharper than Merv’s, and one in which a great deal more of it was actually working. “That’s enough. That’s more than enough.”

“We’re doing this?” Merv grunted.

“I have my orders,” she said. “And so do you. We’re all going in. I’ll relay the information to the others and we’ll converge on that point.”

Merv nodded. “And then?”

“We make contact with Medows’ assistant,” she said. “She’ll arrive at work at 8.00 precisely as she always does on a Monday morning. She’s the last one of us left on my list. I just have to switch her into combat-mode and we all move into the building together. We defeat any resistance that we encounter along the way and we secure the protocol servers. Once the building is secure, we wait for further instructions.”

“I can do that,” Merv said, speaking rather flatly, even for him. “We don’t need the others for that. That will be easy. I can do that on my own.”

“We don’t know what we’re up against.” She looked him over and her eyes narrowed suspiciously. He was the strongest of them, but even he had limits. He had been the ultimate experiment into how far the FX90 could drive human physical potential. The result had been, frankly, horrifying. With every physical gain came an equal growth in his temper and his outright viciousness and brutality. He was a man built without compromise but he lacked the same sophistication in his behaviour. In truth, he was no more use as a soldier than he was as brain-surgeon.

He had been a very strong factor in the abandonment of the project. They reviewed his progress and then once, while taking a sample of his blood with a specially devised contraption that was capable of piercing his leathery hide, he growled that he hated needles. That same day, three of the project medical staff resigned on the spot.

Merv nodded back at her. "It won't matter," he said, speaking as if he had plenty of experience in such things. He sounded totally sure of himself.

She somehow didn't doubt it either.

She put her finger on a device in her ear. "All units. Converge on 44th and Main in twenty three minutes. Report back when we make visual contact with the target."

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"Computer, pause playback," Norma said. She opened communications to the others. "I've managed to break through the protocol encryption," she said, rather proud of herself at this achievement. "Merv and a red-haired female, who appears to be the leader, are converging on a target on 44th and Main in twenty three minutes. They're intending to take control of the protocol servers and are targeting Claire, Medows' assistant."

"And Medows is behind this?" Red asked.

"Some kind of revenge in case anyone tried to kill him!" The Librarian said through the communications system so everyone could hear. "He must be trying to shut down the protocol. Can you imagine what would happen if that thing went down instantly and all the secrets it was protecting were suddenly revealed at once?"

Norma, whose imagination wasn't the best in any case, still thought it was best not to let that happen. "It's right across town. How long will it take you to get there?"

Red grinned. "Not twenty three minutes!" He was already zipping up his armour.

Ash stepped forwards so his face filled the screen. "Red hair, pretty girl, around thirty, bright blue eyes? Is that correct?"

Norma sighed to herself. This could only mean one thing.
“Yes, that’s right.”

Ash turned to Red. “That has to be Amber. That’s my daughter. She was subject zero. I’ve never managed to locate her before. This is as close as I’ve ever come to finding her.”

Red nodded. “Much less than twenty three,” he said. “Norma, we’re on our way, right?”

“I’ll post all details to your helmet navigation equipment,” she told him, doing exactly that as she spoke.

A voice called out from her console: “44th and Main!” said The Librarian. “I’ll get navigational information to you, too, Ash.”

Ash looked over to Red after snatching up his helmet. “We’re doing this?”

Red shrugged. “I’m doing this. You can stay here and shout at children to get off your lawn if you like, old man. I’m certainly doing it. I’m going to enjoy it, actually.”

Ash smiled at him. “Try and keep up, Red.”

Red grinned back. “I’ll race you!”

Norma shook her head in exasperation, but was also, just a little bit, enjoying this herself. “Men!”

Chapter 32

Red pulled out on to the main road, with Ash just behind him on the Phoenix. That was a good name for a bike. It sounded cool and very much not like an unpleasant, itchy rash. Whoever named his motorcycle probably deserved to be hung up by his fingernails and beaten with a very large book of cool names until he was sorry for what he'd done.

His heart was thumping; adrenaline was coursing through his body. Ash had no idea what Red's bike could do. He'd only seen him in an urban pursuit while he was holding back. The anticipation was overwhelming, as he set the full boost mode to 'active' and waited for a chance to open the throttle fully and pour all of the power she had to the back wheel.

He enjoyed doing that for any reason, but the chance to really show off made it all so much sweeter. "Red to Ash!" he said. "Ash here," came the reply, not quite as sharply as when Norma spoke to him but he could still clearly hear what was being said. At least, they'd be able to work together on this. Red found the idea quite appealing.

"Ash, I'll meet you there," he told him.

"Big words, little boy!"

"You've got no idea!" Red laughed. "Watch this, old man!"

He twisted the throttle. The HERPES exploded to life. Flames ripped from the exhaust, a surging blue beam of fire came slicing out from the rear. The wheel spun, scrambling for grip as the engine screamed. He roared away, with the speedometer lost in a blur, unable to keep up with the raucous acceleration. Red glanced momentarily in the rear view monitor and, sure enough, Ash was nowhere to be seen.

“Try not to kill yourself, Red!” Ash told him through the helmet, but there was no way to hear it. The wind was howling, the engines were roaring, the world was flashing past in a blur of colour and light. Red was in his own world now, a world where only he could go, a world where he was the most special man to have ever lived.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma didn't approve of any of this, but she knew Red well enough to know that there was no way to stop it. It was just how things were and she had to learn to accept it.

“Librarian,” she said, tapping away on the keys. “It would help to know why they're converging on Medows' lab. They're clearly after the protocol servers, but we don't know for sure what they mean to do with them. Any ideas?”

The Librarian's face filled the screen and he said: “I'm afraid not. All we know is that the remaining super-soldiers are going to take control of the protocol server. I presume they mean to fulfil Medows' revenge. What this is, I can't say. All I can say is that I can't imagine it would be a good thing for anyone. He did this as a warning, a threat that in the event of his death something so awful would happen that nobody would risk having him killed.”

“What was Medows planning?” Norma rubbed her temples, a thing she often did while trying to think, and failing to come with anything that made sense. “Are the protocol servers really the target here? He must have already had access to them, mustn't he?”

“Perhaps he intended to do something that simply couldn't have been achieved while he was alive,” the Librarian suggested, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “For now, we must not forget that

whatever he has planned is against the better interests of the people we are trying to protect.”

Norma looked up. That much they could be sure of, even if there was nothing else they could definitely know. “I agree. My remit is to work to prevent whatever it is that Medows had planned. If that means putting my people up against a squad of enhanced FX90 super-soldiers, then that’s what I’ll do. Not a lot of this makes sense, but that’s what Red is really best at, if I’m honest!”

The Librarian flashed her a warm but cynical smile. “It would be nice if something made sense, wouldn’t it? I’ve been doing what you’re doing now for many years, and I’ve yet to see anything in this grim little underworld follow any logical rules.”

She couldn’t help but smile back, equally warm, but not quite so cynical. She would have to work at that.

“Computer, locate Claire and extrapolate a view inside her car,” Norma instructed. “Plot all available vehicles on intercept course which are likely to converge on her position at the allotted time.

The monitor switched to a scene inside the vehicle. Claire, Medows’ personal assistant, was behind the wheel, staring out into the road ahead, her radio playing a morning show with lively, cheerful music filling the car. She looked preoccupied with driving, just peering out of the front window, relaxed and seeming quite normal.

“Claire!” Norma said thoughtfully. “Why would Medows want to do anything to her? They seemed close. Why would he risk hurting her in a fight over the protocol servers?”

“Your computer is impressive!” the Librarian told her, sounding a little envious. “You have the potential to change the world!”

“Computer, lock onto that vehicle and send navigational data directly to Red and Ash,” she said. She looked over to the monitor where he was looking back at her, an expression on his face that was hard to measure. She said, loudly and with authority: “Computer, where is she going?”

The computer replied: “Her course suggests she is heading towards Meadows’ office.”

“So, she is just going to work as normal. I wonder if she even knows that her boss was killed.” Norma tapped her finger on her chin thoughtfully. “That office must be a secure building. It must have quite impressive security, in fact,” she said. “If they’re after Claire, then they’re going to have to take her before she gets there. But this makes no sense. There’s something else going on here.”

She looked back up to the image of the car where Claire was driving along at a leisurely pace, blissfully unaware of what was happening.

“We’ve got to get to her before they do,” she said finally, convinced of that much, at least.

“Confirmed,” the computer agreed.

“Show me Red!” she told it.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

The world vibrated back from a blur of rushing images into a patchwork of buildings, cars and roadways, as Red slowed back down to a more normal speed, the engine growling loudly as it coughed a chugging trail of stuttering blue flames. He rarely used the boost inside a built-up area. Even his speed and reactions could barely control her at full power. He was showing off, proving something to Ash, and maybe to himself along the way.

“Red to Norma!” he said, yelling over the noise. “I’m at the location. Where’s Ash?”

She sounded a little irritated at his childishness. “He’s some way behind. You’re looking for a grey Honda Civic. It’s being driven by Claire, Medows’ assistant. She seems to be the target that they’re all converging on. They appear to be planning an attack on Medows’ building to take control of the protocol servers. I think they need Claire to show them where it is. She’s an FX90 subject.”

“How many of them?”

Norma’s voice huffed a sigh through the helmet speakers. “Red, we know that there are thirteen of them that have been activated, plus Merv and Amber. The FX90 program is covered by the protocol, so all of the agents, once activated, are covered, too. I can get past it, but still, without knowing who or what I’m tracking, it’s almost impossible to find them. They could look like anyone; they could be driving anything. They could be in a car each, or all of them on a bus. We literally have no way to tell. You won’t know who or what they are until they make a move against Claire.”

“So you’ve put me up against around fifteen super-soldiers, including Merv, and I’m effectively blindfolded?” he grumbled. “You know that Merv enjoys punching the inside of people’s bodies right to the outside of people’s bodies, right? One of them is bad enough, and you’re dumping fifteen of them on me?”

“Essentially, that is correct,” she said. “Red, I’m working to get past the programming on Merv. Once I know how to fight it, I can block the programming to all the others, too, just as soon as we can work out who they are and how this control works. Just hold on for as long as you can.”

“Hold on!” he said, rolling his eyes. “Right. So now I’m providing a target to fifteen human kill-bots with bad attitudes and an in-built hatred of charismatic motorcycling super-heroes?”

“Yes!” Norma agreed.

“Thanks, Norma!” Red grumbled. “Why is it that, ever since I started working here, I feel as if my life has turned into a bad action movie from the nineteen-eighties?”

“At least, you’re not doing this alone, kid!” Ash told him, roaring up behind him on his powerful machine. “And, for the record, there were no bad action movies from the eighties, kid. They were all awesome!”

“Two heads are better than one!” Norma told him. “If either one of them had a brain inside, it would be even better still!”

“Thanks, Norma. That means a lot!” Red told her sarcastically. He slunk through the traffic and saw it up ahead. “Norma, Grey Honda Civic. I’ve got it.”

“Good,” she said. “Now all you have to do is stay with it.”

Chapter 33

Subtle-mode was engaged but, when it got right down to it, it wasn't really all that subtle. The motorcycle still stood out, and quite jarringly so. It was spitting blue flames from the exhaust and looked like a nightmarish blend of velocity and violence and that meant it was pretty difficult to lose in a crowd. Still, Red held back and watched the Honda as it made its way along, hoping not to be seen from his vantage point, some way behind.

Ash said: "I guess you're feeling the limitations of your technology now?"

They were wearing helmets and were some way apart but Red could imagine him grinning at him knowingly.

Red frowned and grumbled: "What do you mean?"

"We learned our lessons long ago. When I got the Phoenix, she was meant to look very different. She was a lot like your bike. She looked crazy; armour everywhere, bits sticking out and equipment that looked wildly out of place. I had to hide all that and make her look more normal," he explained. "I spent most of my time blending in. The last thing I wanted was to try blending in on a motorcycle that stood out. I guess you're coming to realise that now?"

"I wouldn't change a thing about my baby," Red told him, much more sternly than he should have. "I'm not even thrilled with subtle-mode, if I'm honest. I wouldn't mind better missiles, though. I've got stun-missiles and I really wanted something that would do more damage."

"Missiles?" Ash laughed.

Red said sarcastically: "You don't have missiles? Who doesn't have missiles?"

“Of course I have missiles,” he bragged. “I have four high-explosive rockets, delayed-action mines I can deploy from the rear and a laser-targeted ignition-jammer. You don’t have an ignition-jammer? Who doesn’t have an ignition-jammer?”

“I do not,” Red said quite happily. “I have an auto-cannon and a torch. I used to laugh about the torch but it’s actually pretty cool. The auto-cannon is huge fun. You should see what it does to zombies!”

“Zombies? What? You fought zombies?” It was now Ash’s turns to sound surprised. “We’re going into battle and you’re armed with a torch? Did I hear that correctly?”

A truck crept out of a side road and trailed along behind the Civic. It was a dark red Ford truck, big and powerful, with a large black metal bumper fixed to the front.

“That one!” Ash said.

“What?” Red asked indignantly. “How do you know?”

“He was waiting to turn too long and then pulled out into traffic, causing other cars to slow,” Ash explained. “He’s not a professional spy, but that guy was waiting for the Civic. Trust me: he’s our first target!”

“Norma, did you hear that?” Red asked. “It looks like we’re on.”

“Be careful, Red,” she told him.

“Sure!” he said.

Ash shot forwards, overtaking Red, who looked around, wondering what was happening, and why it wasn’t him that was making it happen. Three green lasers shone out from the front of the Phoenix motorcycle, locking on the ignition-jammer before it fired, silent except for a metallic click from an internal relay. The dark red car

suddenly died; the engine spluttered and then stopped altogether, plunging the low, burbling V8 engine into silence. It pulled to the side and from behind they could see the driver's head bobbing around as he tried to work out just exactly what had gone wrong.

It pulled up beside a shop with a few pedestrians walking along the side on their way to work. Otherwise, it was a relatively quiet spot. It coasted in along the pavement before jerking to a final halt as the driver angrily snatched up the handbrake.

Ash pulled in behind it, whipped his helmet off and quickly made his way to the side of the vehicle. He walked to the door and tapped on the window, a beaming smile on his face. "Having problems?" he said. "I saw your engine die on you. Can I help?"

A man got out, frowning angrily. He was big, taller than Ash and, although he was lean, he was quite well-built. His head was shaved and he was dressed casually in rough, old clothes. He looked like a mechanic, or someone who worked with machinery. What he didn't look like was someone who was looking to make new friends. He peered around, his eyes sweeping the scene rather mechanically, single-minded, focused and showing no interest in Ash.

He eyed up Ash's motorcycle in silence and then went towards it, pushing past him rudely, entirely focused on his mission and nothing else besides, since all of his higher brain functions were apparently currently switched off.

Ash grabbed his shoulder and spun the man about. His face had a curious, slightly confused expression and his hand balled into a fist, ready to attack. His face had a less confused expression when Ash's fist smashed into it at full force. He grunted loudly in shock and surprise and his knees buckled beneath him.

Ash rained two more heavy blows down onto his face, each one snapping his head around and dazing him so that his arms flailed

around uselessly. Ash grabbed the back of his neck and slammed his face into the back of his own truck, where it impacted with a sickening thump that left a sizeable dent. He went limp and slithered to the ground in a weakly gurgling heap.

Ash followed that with a kick to the head, just to guarantee he got the message about not waking up any time soon.

Red was surprised and a little impressed. “Dude, that was actually pretty cool for an old guy.”

“Follow the Civic, Red!” Ash told him firmly, sounding entirely professional for once. “And remember: technology isn’t everything. I might only be an FX45, but experience makes up the difference.” He picked up the man bodily and slung him into the open back of his own vehicle. “He won’t be out long. FX90s tend to recover fast.” Quickly, he dashed back to his motorcycle and roared away

Red caught up to the car easily. Norma watched as the computer plotted two more vehicles converging on his location. “Red, I’m tracking two targets coming from different directions. One appears to be a motorcycle, the other...”

“The other?” Red didn’t like it when Norma gave a nervous little pause. It wasn’t like her and it didn’t bode well.

“According to the computer, it’s a Cadillac Gage Peacekeeper 2,” she said, and it sounded very much like an apology.

“Is that any kind of biscuit covered with any kind of chocolate?” he asked hopefully.

“No, Red. It’s an armoured SWAT police truck,” she said. “It has 13mm thick armour that can defeat heavy machine-gun fire, and a roof-mounted M240 machine gun. You’re no match for it. Frankly, you’re not much of a match for a redneck with a hunting rifle in one

hand and a beer in the other. I keep telling you that and you keep laughing. I hope you're not laughing now!"

"It's funny how your day can get worse, even when it's only just started, and it started pretty badly in the first place," he said sarcastically. "Oh well, if I want chocolate hob-nobs served in the Hawk-Eye control room, I guess I have to earn them."

"I wish you'd learn to take all this a little more seriously," she snapped at him.

"I've got the auto-cannon, right?" he said confidently. Then, a little less confidently, he asked: "Right?"

"It won't make a scratch," she told him firmly. "And the machine gun will tear up your body-armour as if it was made of paper. You are literally no match for that thing. It can only make seventy miles per hour, so your only advantage is speed but you've got to stay with the Civic, so you don't even have that!"

"I love this job!" he told her, really quite absolutely sarcastically.

■ PLYBACK SSPND

Norma sat back in her comfortable chair and gave herself time to really worry about all this. None of it was making sense and she preferred to live in a world where things did, even if she had to force them to.

She cast a glance over the monitors to the face of the Librarian. Something definitely didn't add up.

"Computer, report progress on finding a way to de-program Merv," she said. "Have you located the signal that's controlling him?"

"Records suggest there is no signal," it told her. "Scanning of all frequencies confirms this."

She huffed a disappointed sigh. “So how are they controlling him?”

“The FX90 recruits had a secondary program implanted into their brains. If triggered, they switch from their normal, active personality to a state where their brain functions are severely limited, rendering them totally obedient to their commanding officer.”

She closed her eyes. This was bad. She suspected she knew what was coming. “How would it be triggered?”

“A keyword or phrase,” it replied. “Each subject would have a different phrase.”

“Are there records of the phrases that you can access?”

“There are not. Phrases are not stored in the FX90 database.”

“Computer, I need that phrase,” she told it angrily. “If we ever want to see Merv again, we need that phrase.”

“Working,” it said.

“Make it your top priority.”

Chapter 34

Fully automatic machine-gun fire crackled from behind him and the air was filled with the whipping sound of bullets tearing past his left side, all too close for comfort. When it came to bullets whipping past you, there really wasn't much room for comfort in any case.

Red checked the rear. How an armoured car that weighed nearly 7000kgs had managed to sneak up on him was anybody's guess. He strongly suspected Ash would capitalise on this with some sarcastic comment. The bigger problem was that someone was firing on him and he got his brain to treat that as a priority, for now.

He was pleasantly surprised to find that the volley of bullets that was ripping through the air at him wasn't coming from an armoured car at all, but from a motorcycle whose rider was armed with a very large sub-machine-gun.

"Norma," he reported dryly. "That motorcycle you were telling me about - I think I found it."

Another ripple of shots exploded from his rear. Red reflexively ducked as he heard the air cracking to his side. "I'm going to have to take this guy out!" he said. "Ash, stay on the Civic."

"I've got her!" he replied.

Red slammed the brakes and pulled his bike round to the left, cutting right across the front of a big yellow bus coming straight at him. The sound of a blaring horn screamed loudly as the driver panicked. He carried on going until he was on the other side, the bus narrowly missing him as it went on past, still blaring the horn. He opened the throttle. The bike roared and cooked off all the paint along the side of the bus, destroying an advert that had a picture of a young child looking absolutely thrilled about eating a chocolate bar.

He launched the bike out past the bus and ripped away, in the opposite direction to the oncoming motorcycle. Red laid off the power and heard the squeal of brakes in the distance, knowing he was turning to give chase. While he was focused on that, he wasn't focused on firing his automatic weapon in a place where civilians were blissfully unaware about what was about to happen.

Up ahead, there was a junction, and, off to the right, an armoured police van turned onto the main road and headed straight for him. It was an ugly thing, sculpted from harsh straight edges of rigid, military-grade bullet-proof metal. The windows were small oblong alcoves, made from ballistic glass and only two round headlights at the front broke up the solid black outline of the thing.

Red gulped. This wasn't good. The top of the machine had red and blue lights and, behind, an armoured plate with the barrel of a very powerful weapon sticking out. A roof-panel swung open. This wasn't good at all.

Not wanting to be shredded by heavy weapons-fire, Red decided that fighting this thing directly wasn't the smartest thing that he could possibly be doing. He jammed on the brakes, as a plan began to form in his mind, a terrible plan with only a tiny chance of success. With the alternative being an ignominious death, from being reduced to a charismatically heroic red puddle by armour-piercing machine-gun fire, any plan was better than nothing.

A cloud of white smoke screamed from the rear tyres as the bike slithered to a halt. Behind him was the unmistakable growl of a Harley Davidson engine with a custom exhaust. It was at full power, bearing down on him, and it thumped loudly, screaming as the engine growled along.

Red grinned. Terrible plan or not, he was over-confident it was going to work.

Red launched two of the stun missiles at the van. They flashed from the sides of the bike, howled through the air behind a trail of white vapour. They impacted harmlessly on the front with an ear-splitting crack that shook the world around him. A brilliant white blast erupted from the angular nose of the van and it began wobbling around, the driver clearly dazed and shocked by the attack. The open roof panel slammed shut, whoever had opened it, perhaps stumbling back inside.

People around were now screaming and ducking for cover, but at least they now realised what was going on. There was a little safety for them in knowing.

He had bought himself a few seconds and now it was time to go!

Red spun the back wheel. The motorcycle quickly flicked around in a semi-circle, leaving a trail of black rubber etched into the tarmac road. He roared away, powering past the shocked Harley rider, who had been dazzled by the exploding missiles and hadn't been expecting any of this.

The biker turned slowly in the road behind him. A crackle of gunfire ripped out as bullets spluttered from his weapon, spitting out in all directions in a jagged staccato burst. People around the place threw themselves to the ground and a fresh new wave of the sound of screaming filled the air once more.

Red looked to the van where the circular hatch at the roof was again flung open and, this time, a man in a black set of overalls took his place behind the huge and deadly machine-gun. The enhanced helmet optics clearly displayed the image of him racking the bolt at the side and making the gun ready. A long belt of ammunition trailed inside the truck. He wasn't going to stop shooting until he'd hit what he was aiming for. He wasn't going to have to.

Red began to weave towards it, carefully picking out a random path to avoid the incoming fire from both directions. The man behind on the Harley was less of a threat. He was armed with a 9mm Uzi and he knew his armour could handle impacts from that. A sustained burst from the M240 up ahead would shred a tank. Getting hit by that was an option, but certainly not a very good one.

Red waited until the sound of the Harley was on his tail and he speeded up, slowly goading the big, heavy motorcycle to ride faster and faster. The faster he went, the less likely he was to be able to use his weapon. That wasn't true of the huge metal truck barrelling down directly at him and Red was grimly aware of this, above all else.

Red took the bike up a little more, faster and faster, closing the gap on the truck. The driver must not be wondering if he was actually crazy, but rather how crazy he actually was.

Then, a roar exploded from in front of him, as the massive machine-gun crackled to life. A shuddering hail of flaming lead tore at him. The road ahead ripped up into a cloud of black debris as the bullets smashed into it from the first burst.

He slammed on the brakes, twisting hard to the right in an unpredictable move that he hoped would catch everyone off-guard. At the same moment, he flashed the tail-light torch. It exploded brightly into a startling ball of white-hot light.

He slowed everything down, firing his brain up to the fastest speed he could manage. The world moved in slow motion around him, the bullets one at a time cutting deep into the tarmac, as the black surface erupted off to the side, but each one edging closer and closer towards his front wheel. It would be only seconds before the first of them found their mark.

He waited... waited... waited. Then the Harley staggered past, dazzled and wobbling in surprise, but not yet able to react in any

meaningful way. He fired. The steel cable weapon blasted out from the side of Red's bike, launching a trip wire just perfectly through the wire-spoked front wheel of the other machine.

Red now only had to watch.

The Harley up-ended and the front wheel stopped rolling in a split-second, launching the thing up off the road. It flew majestically into the machine gun fire, which systematically began to tear it apart. The huge motorcycle cartwheeled in mid-air before barrelling headlong into the front of the armoured car, which doubtlessly wasn't expecting any such thing to happen. It landed with an almighty smash, shrapnel tearing up through the roof-top gunner, so that his shattered remains were splattered off backwards to rain down on the tarmac in large, bloody chunks.

All this seemed to have caught that van's designers a little off-guard too, because a fair bit of the motorcycle managed to make its way past the ballistic glass and leave the driver with a suspension strut where he used to keep his face.

Accordingly, the flaming front end of the truck veered off to the side, wobbling out of control. It mounted the curb and rolled over, spilling itself gently to the side to slither to a stop, where it lay with the four-wheel-drive run-flat tyres spinning impotently.

The scene was oddly silent now, save for the whining burble of his idling turbines and the mechanical thumping of the van's engine as the power slowly died away. Three pedestrians began cautiously to stand up. One man began to clap, and a woman at his side joined him. There was the sound of mild but heartfelt applause all around.

Red loved this job. He loved it more than anything.

"Norma," he began proudly. "That's four of them down and not a single shot fired. Armoured trucks and machine-gun toting

motorcyclists are no match to the over-clocked brain you keep telling me I don't have, and a motorcycle that doesn't even officially exist!"

He could hear her smiling to herself as she said to him: "You were insufferable before. I can't imagine how bad you're going to be now!"

"Bad, Norma!" he told her with a really, really wide grin. "Really, really bad!"

Ash got his situational report from the Librarian. "Red, you guys really don't know how to do subtle, do you?"

Red heard the message through his speakers as the wind blasted through his helmet on his way back to the Honda Civic. "No!" he said simply. "It's not really our thing. I see us as more of a terrible warning than a lingering threat."

"Well, we've got another lingering threat and we need a bit more warning to go with it," Ash told him. "Claire in the Civic has been spooked by the fact that you've turned the main road leading to her office into a warzone."

"I'm on my way." Red rolled the throttle back and the world exploded into chaos as the full force of the booster was unleashed. The motorcycle snaked all over the road; flames belched from the rear, crackling out like a demonic tongue licking the air. The engine roared and around him. The solid shapes of the buildings, the edges of the road, melted into a blurred tapestry of colour and noise. Within seconds, he rolled back on the throttle and the surroundings formed back into some semblance of sense as he coasted along at a quite leisurely one hundred and sixty-seven miles per hour, weaving through the traffic.

"Bloody hell, Red!" Ash grunted in shock, as he pulled alongside him. "What kept you?"

Red grinned to himself. He really loved this job. A lot of people said that about their jobs but they didn't get to ride this motorcycle and, therefore, they really didn't know what they were talking about. Red really, really loved this job.

"You know my bike is fast, right?" he said, slowing down to keep pace with the Honda Civic. "I know you're old, and your bike is too, so maybe you don't understand that concept very well?"

"Two police cars are converging on your position," Norma reported. "I've contacted Commissioner Bertolli and warned him what's going on. I'm also diverting police resources away from you and I've jammed all the traffic lights in the area so you should get as little traffic there as possible."

"You can do that?" Ash sounded impressed. Red was really very impressed as well. "Yeah, we have enormous power. Norma is the best there is. I mean, she's the best there is at what she does, obviously. The best at whatever it is that I do is obviously me. That's actually not saying much, since I'm the only man alive who can do whatever it is that I actually do. Obviously."

"Obviously!" Ash agreed. He added sarcastically: "Talking really isn't your strong suit, is it?"

It was just then that a white and blue armoured-car blasted out from a side road and headed straight for the Honda Civic. Up ahead, a Ford Mustang convertible crossed the white dotted lines along the middle of the road and headed straight for the front of it, lined up for a direct collision.

"A convertible - no problem!" Red said, moving to head straight for it. Then, a woman stood up with an assault rifle and began firing. A stream of lead blasted towards the Civic and the armoured bank-truck skidded in behind them, boxing the whole lot of them in. "Slight problem," Red grunted, correcting himself.

“Which one do you want?” Ash sounded as if he loved this job too. Not to the same degree, probably.

“I’ll take the Mustang: you deal with the slow-moving, overweight thing trundling along behind us,” Red told him and raced off ahead into the spray of gunfire, not waiting for a reply. “That seems appropriate somehow.”

Red cut in front of the Honda Civic, which skidded off to the side, hammering hard onto the brakes. He fired a shuddering burst from the auto-cannon and a jagged flaming line of tracers tore into the front of the car, ripping through the bonnet and smashing the front windscreen, which dissolved into a hail of shattered glass.

The car braked hard, skidding to the left and giving the woman, standing up through the roof, a clear line of sight, directly at him. Red hesitated as his finger moved down onto the trigger. A burst now would cut her in half and, for all his bluff and bravado, he wasn’t much of a killer. With his brain running at full-speed, he switched weapons options and, still racing towards the Mustang, fired one of his two remaining missiles. As soon as it launched, he locked the back brake and skidded to a shuddering halt.

The missile flashed through the air, locking onto the target. It caught her directly and erupted into a searing white blossom of light with an accompanying crack that was as loud as if the car had been struck by a thunderbolt from an ancient Norse god. He watched momentarily as a rain of white sparks fell from the heart of the eruption. The woman collapsed, dropping the assault rifle helplessly to the floor and the car just sat there in silence, both the occupants now incapacitated. To be fair, it had caught her in the face and she was probably dead anyway, but it’s the thought that counts.

“Job done!” he grinned. “And I got to fire the auto-cannon. That’s my second favourite bit of the job.”

The armoured car trundled along. Ash locked the brakes on his motorcycle and swung the back end round to face it. He fired two missiles of his own straight towards it. They streaked through the air, howling like banshees. Ash watched in amused anticipation, as this was obviously one of the bits he enjoyed most, as well. The rockets found their mark, one impacting through the radiator grill and the other streaking under the bumper. Both erupted into a crackling ball of searing heat, launching the front of the heavy machine up from the road and swallowing it in a growing ball of furious flames.

“I can do ‘not subtle’ as well!” he grinned.

It swerved around, slowed and skidded about the road, the windows and the front of the truck still on fire and thick black smoke billowing from the engine bay, but it didn’t stop. It kept on bearing down on them, heading inexorably onwards.

“Oh no!” Ash mumbled and snapped open the throttle.

He pulled forwards just in time, as the huge mass of armoured car raced past him. It missed clipping the back of the Phoenix by a matter of only a few centimetres. The Civic wasn’t going to be so lucky.

The big armoured car hurtled along, still under control, and it smashed straight into the back of the Honda Civic. There was a sudden boom and the roar of twisted metal, as the small family car spun around in a tight circle. Bits of shredded metal, smashed glass and a rain of shattered plastic exploded out of it.

The armoured car slammed on its brakes and slithered to a halt, lightly crashing into a parked white van and folding it neatly in half. For a moment, there was an eerie and unsettling silence.

Red destroyed all that as he roared down the road and skidded to a needlessly dramatic halt just in front of the destroyed Honda Civic. “Ash, I can’t trust you to do anything right, can I?”

“It’s never happened to me before, I swear!” he said defensively.

The rear doors of the armoured car swung open and a man blasted a shotgun out from behind them. The shot boomed out towards Ash. He quickly pulled away, riding to cover.

Red grumbled to himself. He was down to his last stun-missile and didn’t want to waste it unless he really needed to. Suddenly, as he watched, the driver’s door to the Honda Civic smashed open and Claire nearly flew out of it. A second shot boomed out with a sudden plume of grey smoke. She hit the ground, rolled and dashed for the shooter.

She covered the distance in seconds, even before he could rack the pump and load another shot. She lashed out with a powerful kick, snapping the door shut into the face of the man with the shotgun. He staggered back, clutching at his leg where the door had caught him.

Claire was on him like an angry animal. She rained punches to his face and torso. They were blisteringly quick and targeted expertly. She landed one to the bridge of his nose, another to his chin. She jabbed him in the throat. Her hand caught him at the side of the neck and again in the solar-plexus and below the rib.

He crumpled to the ground, gasping in pain and surprise. She easily swiped up his weapon and smashed the wooden stock of it down into his face with considerable force. He drifted off into unconsciousness and wouldn’t be waking up from it feeling well-rested, refreshed and looking forward to the day ahead. Rather, the polar opposite of that, Red suspected.

He just watched, wide-eyed in awe. Just when you think you’ve seen everything, something comes along and surprises you, he thought to himself.

She turned the gun round, racked the pump and pointed it at the skull of the unconscious man.

“Woah!” Red called out, and his voice echoed around the streets from the bike’s speakers. “I think you got him.”

Ash pulled up and looked over to Red. Red looked back. They turned together to stare at Claire.

She stood before them, pump-action shotgun in hand, breathing heavily and with the expression of an angry predator, some creature ready to fight and kill to defend its young.

“We’re here to help you,” Red said. He shrugged. “Or you can help us, I guess. You seem to be pretty capable of looking after yourself, from what I’ve seen. Either way, more of these people are coming and we’re here to get you out of here.”

“Or marry you!” Ash said in awe. “You know, if you’re single. I mean, that’s an offer, I guess.” He turned to Red and they stared at one another though their blacked-out visors. “Red, is it wrong that I’m incredibly sexually aroused right now?”

Red shrugged. “I have that effect on people, but yes, it’s wrong; it’s very wrong.”

“OK!” Ash sighed and reached out a hand to her. “Come with me if you want to live.”

“Very good!” Red nodded in approval. “That’s a great line. It should be in a movie or something!”

Chapter 35

With Red and Ash doing what it was that they apparently did best, and enjoyed most, Norma was able to turn just a little of her attention towards ending this, before anyone turned the entire centre of the town into a smouldering crater - as they did last time.

“Computer!” she said sharply. “We need the keywords to return the FX90s back to their main personalities.”

The computer agreed in principal but didn’t have much useful to offer. It remained silent, giving her the digital equivalent of an unenthusiastic shrug.

“How did Medows know their codes?” she said, as inspiration struck her. “Search for any event where Medows researched FX90 or had access to the keywords of the subjects.” She began tapping her mouth and said to herself: “There must have been a time when he found the keywords, or else none of this would be happening. I just have to watch that play out and I’ll have the keywords, too.” She knew that whenever that had happened, it was likely to have been under the protection of the protocol. She had beaten the protocol now and could see right through it. So long as she knew exactly what she was looking for, nothing could escape her.

“Nothing found!” the computer told her dryly.

“What?” she snapped angrily. “Medows must have known the keywords in order to activate the FX90 agents!”

“There is no recorded event of such a thing happening,” it told her.

“Computer, use all the available data and search for agent keywords within the parameters of this investigation,” she told it grumpily.

“Extrapolation is ready,” it told her almost exactly as she finished talking, and a little smugly, as if it was trying to tell her that all she had to do was ask the right questions. It was a tool, after all and was only as good as the person using it.

“Play it!”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Professor Jones closed the file and put it down on the table beside him. Sitting opposite was his colleague, Mr Silverman, and they were sharing a business lunch together, as they had often come to do.

“It didn’t work,” he told him. “I’m cancelling the project.”

Silverman frowned and took a bite from a slice of pizza.

“What do you mean, it didn’t work?” he grunted. He tried to protest but paused to deal with a mouthful of pepperoni first. Swallowing hard, he said defensively: “We’ve got super-soldiers who have measurably increased abilities. I would call this program a massive and resounding success.”

“Then you would be wrong!” The professor paused to take a mouthful of pasta. It was beyond average, but not by much. “You see, I estimate that the overall cost of each one is around three hundred and twelve thousand dollars. That doesn’t include the horrible failure rate that we have to cover up, each success costing us around seven exploding volunteers who leave behind families who want to know why we’re having to hose their husband’s or wife’s brains off the ceiling.”

“You get what you pay for!” Silverman smirked.

“The brain-implants also aren’t very reliable,” Jones sighed. “I think we just have to accept that the technology isn’t really here yet to successfully integrate such a thing with the human mind. The

FX90 serum is quite a bit more volatile than we were previously led to believe... by you.

“The implant manages the serum but it makes the human brain change to be more machine-like. We’ve found that it makes the subject almost completely literal and seems to impact massively on their intelligence, to varying degrees.”

Silverman frowned now and looked annoyed. “Since when did we want intelligent soldiers? Not once in all my research did I ever hear mention of improving the mental capacity of our armed forces. I suspect I never will.”

Jones nodded. “I suspect you’re right,” he said. “However, I witnessed a subject two months ago. She was asked to make a cup of coffee. She then struggled for the next thirty minutes in an attempt to fashion a cup from her own clothing. I will admit that some of the subjects are worse than others, but as a whole, they have such limited thinking, and with such diminished capacity that most of them are essentially useless.”

Silverman grumbled and took a large, angry bite of pizza.

Jones continued: “The prototype is doing well, however. My hypothesis is that she was born with the FX45 locked into her DNA. That means her body regulates the FX90 serum very well so the brain implant has to do very little work. That’s why her intelligence is normal - some way above average, in fact.”

“Makes sense,” Silverman munched away. “I suppose we could consider a generational batch of enhanced soldiers. We could force them to procreate with one another and see what pops out?”

“I think not!” the professor said firmly. “By the time they reach maturity, the human race will either have done away with the need for them, or done away with itself. I think the best outcome here

is to take what we've learned and find useful applications for it. But the FX90 super-soldier program is to be considered a failure."

Silverman put down the pizza crust and glared at him fixedly. "Failure?"

"Not economical to continue with!" he corrected himself.

"I'm carrying on with the FX120!" This wasn't a question. It was very much a statement and clearly not open for debate. "Unlike you, I have a family. I'm invested in this world and work hard to leave behind something better for my children."

"The FX120 program is cheap," Jones told him. "I approve of cheap. It's also simple so there's no reason to remove it from our workload."

Silverman seemed happy enough with that. "So what then? It seems a shame to just throw away everything from the FX90. What do you have in mind to salvage?"

Jones took another fork of pasta. He chewed it in his own good time and made no attempt to reply until he was perfectly ready to do so. "We've learned a lot," he said finally. "The brain-implant technology is especially promising. We've switched from silicon-based to carbon processors and the miniaturisation of the new computers was remarkable. I've had an entire mainframe computer built using processors of this new type and the abilities of it are astonishing. Perhaps we should look for applications for this? I have several ideas."

"Fine, I've actually got someone in mind. A man called 'Medows' came up on my radar. He seems to be doing impressive things and I think he could do even better if we gave him a little more to work with." Silverman nodded happily in agreement. "But I meant, what do we do with the enhanced soldiers? The ones who haven't exploded, or spend all their time buying lottery tickets?"

Jones looked at him with his usual, uninvolved and uncaring expression. "I don't care."

Silverman nodded in agreement. "I'll get rid of them. I'm sure I'll think of something. I've got all their keywords and activation codes, so I'll decide what to do and get it quietly taken care of. Maybe I'll get them to kill each other. At least that would be funny."

"Fine!" he said. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and looked as though he was considering something of huge importance. "It's just after two p.m.," he commented dryly. "I don't usually indulge this late but I think I'm going to have another coffee."

Silverman shrugged. "I could drink coffee."

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"What?" Norma cried out, startled to hear this. "Silverman was the one that had the access codes? That doesn't make any sense. He's the one who sent us out to find out what Medows had done and stop him."

She frowned thoughtfully as her mind tackled the problem. "Computer, show any interaction between Silverman and anyone from the FX90 program. Look for anything that mentions Medows or implies a possible motivation for what's happening."

The screen flashed as the computer chewed this over. "There is an extrapolation ready."

"Play it!"

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

She was tall, but not in a way that made her appear thin or frail in any way. It was very much the opposite, in fact. She had the appearance of being extremely strong, agile and very capable. Unlike

the others of her kind, she was intelligent too, creative and able to think for herself. In modern times, that was unusual enough, but even more so for someone with her history and with a chip inside her head designed to moderate her brain.

Silverman had always been quite taken with her and made no attempt to disguise his attraction whenever he spent time in her presence. “Amber, isn’t it?” he asked.

She looked him over and clearly didn’t trust him, or particularly like him either. She made no attempt to disguise her feelings, any more than he did. “Silverman. How nice to see you,” she said purposely insincerely.

She had a job, he’d seen to that. She had a little office, a little desk and a little role to fill. He kept her busy, put her in positions where she was occasionally threatened. He liked to keep her occupied, mostly just to see what would happen. Her role was simple enough: part of project security, one of a network of agents he maintained to watch for problems that might occur, so they could be stamped on before they might have a chance to leak into the real world.

He sat down opposite her. Her desk was busy but orderly. It was dominated by an open laptop, the only cable being the power-lead. The wi-fi and bluetooth were both switched off. She, more than most, appreciated the dangers of connectivity.

“How are you fitting in here?” he asked. He already knew that the answer was that she was fitting in quite poorly.

She looked around the place. It was impersonal with nothing of herself in it. The walls were dirty, the plaster crumbling and the door was rotting away in its frame. “I have no complaints,” she told him sarcastically.

He sat back, making himself comfortable, taking control of the situation, as was his nature. “What do you know about the FX90 program?”

She frowned, as if struggling with something. “I don’t remember much of anything!”

“No, you wouldn’t,” he smiled. “Or, at least, you shouldn’t. Not if we’ve done our job correctly - and we have, Amber. We always do.”

“Who are you really, Silverman?” she scowled suspiciously.

“I’m your current handler!” he told her. “And I want to tell you something.”

He leant forward as if to share something of great importance. “Switch 407X,” he told her. “Keyword – Elephant.”

She blinked twice and stared fixedly ahead. Nothing seemed to have changed on either side of her head but everything was also completely different. She realised he’d said something; he’d told her he was going to, but she hadn’t noticed what it was and now it seemed unimportant. She decided it was best to just listen. All she could do for now, was just listen.

“Amber, you effectively have two brains: one is mine and the other, I let you borrow, since you need somewhere to live. Just remember that there’s always a charge to pay on a rented property,” he told her and she listened intently. It all seemed perfectly reasonable and she simply accepted it without question. “Right now, I want you to pay close attention. You are a subject of the FX90 program, the founding member, actually, but there are others like you.

“As part of the program, we hid them all over the city, left some with no memory of the upgrades and training, just to see how they’d cope in the real world, with ordinary lives and jobs. But their

training can be remembered if they're put into combat-mode and told to remember. In combat mode, you'll do anything you're told to do, of course."

"Yes," she replied. That all seemed so obvious and so utterly, perfectly reasonable. How could she not agree?

"Amber, in an emergency, part of your job will be to find the others and get them ready," he told her, while she nodded along, listening intently to every word. "In that instance, you will lead them against any threat that we put you up against."

Of course she would. "And I will lead them?"

He laughed: "You will be in charge and it will be up to you complete whatever mission I set you."

"I can do that," she told him with a nod. She could do that.

"Make sure you do!" he said darkly. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. On it was a hand-written list of names and their related keywords. "I want you to memorise this list and familiarise yourself with the people on it. Each of those is a potential asset that you will track and monitor. Once the list is memorised, you are to destroy it. Do you understand?"

"I know how to do my job!" she told him rudely.

He looked at her with a suspicious glare. "You are in combat-mode, aren't you?"

"Yes," she told him. "You said I was."

He grinned. "Amber, Switch 407X, keyword – cucumber," he said, changing her back to normal. She blinked and felt as if she'd just dozed off for a second there. She couldn't remember what he was talking about. He did that a lot. Whenever they met, he'd waffle on about something until she'd completely lose track and then he'd just get up and leave. Whatever the meetings were about, they

couldn't be important, because she barely remembered anything about them and that didn't seem to be any problem at all.

“Are you still here?” she sighed. She really needed to get on with some paperwork and couldn't wait to get started.

Chapter 36

The Phoenix was a singular design. It was a machine built without compromise, without any financial limitations, without any corners being cut, and without a proper pillion seat.

Claire was perched awkwardly on the back, hanging on to Ash tightly as they hurtled along the road at breakneck speeds. She yelled over the howling wind as the motorcycle ripped along the street:

“What’s going on? Who are those people?”

Ash yelled back, even though his voice could barely be heard: “I don’t know. I just work here. Would you like to get a coffee later? Maybe some lunch? I know a place nearby that does really excellent hotdogs.”

Red pulled up alongside, the pair of them riding briefly in formation and way too fast as they streaked along the road. “More are coming!” he warned with a certain assuredness about it. “You keep her safe. I’ll take out anyone who tries to kill you, since you seem to be remarkably ineffective, even with proper exploding missiles.”

“That sounds like a plan!” Ash nodded.

At just exactly that moment, and right ahead of them, a gigantic articulated lorry pulled over from the other side of the street. It smashed through the central reservation and carved through the traffic, ripping its way inexorably towards them. It smashed into a small car, sending it skittering across the road to end up in a crumpled heap, spinning slowly on its roof.

The massive dark grey thing bore down on them, heading straight towards the motorcycles threateningly. There could be no doubt that he wasn’t trying to make friends.

Ash slowed down. "Red, it might be time to deploy your torch," he said sarcastically.

Red grumbled: "I've got one stun-missile left and about fifty rounds in the auto-cannon. That's it."

Behind them, a powerful V8 engine roared as a big, black four-wheel drive car hurtled towards them. It was followed by a red truck and two motorcycles, one low and heavy, the other a sports machine finished in bright yellow paint. Each was carrying a passenger armed with an automatic weapon.

"It was nice knowing you!" Ash said grimly.

Red took a deep breath. "Ash," he said finally, sounding way too confident that this was going to end well, since all the evidence rather implied the opposite. "Settle down and enjoy the show. This is what I do!"

He slammed the back brake, slowing down to cut in behind the Phoenix. He pulled the trigger, deploying the tyre-bursters all over the road and flashed the strobing torch at the same time, which lit up with a blinding white light which, even during the daytime, was glaring enough to be shocking.

He accelerated along, swerving across the road so that the tiny razor-sharp little blades were spread as wide as possible. He heard a skidding noise and then a loud crash as the low motorcycle lost the use of its tyres. It rolled over on its side, spilling the rider and passenger and then cartwheeling down the road, each impact sending an array of parts ripping off from it to shower down all over the tarmac.

Red fired the last of his missiles from behind Ash. It streaked towards the truck and detonated near the windscreen. The driver was shocked and the truck veered violently to the side, careening off the road and up onto the pavement. It shuddered and went ploughing

straight through a street-vendor's cart selling pizza-slices and then into the front of a coffee-shop, before it could regain any semblance of control.

"That's a crime against humanity right there!" Red said angrily. "There will be a price to pay for that, you just wait!"

Ash took his chance and hurtled past the truck, away from danger for now. By then, the driver had recovered his senses enough to begin turning the truck back so that he could rejoin the fight.

The sports-bike shot past the others, pulling away from his team and taking the lead. A hail of gunfire exploded through the air as an assault-rifle fired a crackling burst towards Red. Red heard the sound of an impact and quickly pulled away, swerving hard to avoid the trail of fire. He took a moment to look back when he was far enough away.

"Oh my god!" he said, sounding as if he was close to panic. "I've been hit."

Ash's voice came through his helmet. "You're hit, Red? Are you OK?"

"No, I'm not OK." he yelled back. "He broke my tail light."

"He... What...?" Ash grumbled.

This was unforgivable. Red was furious, filled with a kind of fury he never remembered feeling before. It was as if anger was a flaming liquid and it was flowing through his veins, burning his brain from the searing heat of his rage. The sports bike followed closely behind and Red slammed the brakes, locking the rear wheel and skidding to an absolute halt amidst a curling plume of acrid grey smoke.

The sports bike slowed, obviously confused as to what exactly he was doing. Red stepped off the HERPES and began walking

towards the bike. Never before had he been this angry; never had he felt so enraged.

He drew his small, Ruger pistol, took careful aim and began firing. Six little cracks rang out as the bullets tore through the air. They each hit their mark and the motorcycle swerved, wobbling as the rider lost control, and then it smashed hard into the road. It careened along, vanishing behind a shower of sparks and shattered plastic, as the two riders rolled along behind it, snapping bones as they went. Eventually, it crashed quite impressively into the side of a grey car doing quite a fair bit of damage to both.

“I hope for your sake that you’re dead!” Red growled at them, getting back on his motorcycle. “They don’t make spares for Her anymore. Where am I going to get a bloody tail-light from? I’ve going to have to spend all night on the bloody internet now!”

He roared away, leaving a pile of twisted wreckage sticking out the front of a Cadillac, and Ash wondering if he had a quite serious mental illness.

The black four-wheel-drive monster was bearing down on him, with the red truck behind it. Red pulled away slowly, letting them keep pace with him for now. Still some way behind them, but slowly coming up, was the articulated lorry.

Red had a plan, another quite terrible, awful plan that was just crazy enough to work. If it did work, it would certainly be worth seeing. For a moment, he thought about how this should be a YouTube video, because it was almost guaranteed to be front-page material. This was going to look awesome.

“I hope you’re watching this, Norma!” he said. “This is going to be special.”

He slammed on the brakes. A sudden cloud of scorched rubber exploded from his tyres as they screamed loudly. Everything around

him slowed down as his brain rolled up to the fastest speed it would clock up to. With the motorcycle now barely moving forwards, he smashed open the throttle and spun the back wheel. He slid the back end around and opened fire with the auto cannon. Tracer bullets ripped through the air and, by now, the bike was sideways. They tore into the wheels of the big black car as it hurtled past and the back end kept spinning as he did. The motorcycle went around, completing a full 360 degree loop along the road, pointing in the other direction as the red truck went past and it continued firing, shredding his tyres for him, too, with the cannon.

Both vehicles lost control. The red truck skidded sideways and up-ended, rolling onto its side and skipping across the road, slamming down finally into a row of parked cars and erupting into a ball of fire. It vanished behind a column of sooty black smoke. The black car swerved around and smashed into an oncoming truck that had slowed down and tried to pull in to the side to avoid an accident. Clearly, that didn't work.

Red grinned to himself and proudly took a moment to survey the utter carnage he'd wrought.

"Wow!" Norma said. "You are going to be totally insufferable later today, aren't you?"

"I like to think I'm always a little bit totally insufferable," he replied proudly.

"Just the truck now, kid!" Ash told him.

Red frowned to himself. "I'm all out of missiles, bullets and tyre-bursters. The torch isn't going to work because someone thoughtlessly shot it!" He shuddered and grumbled: "I guess I still have the water-pistol."

The door to the black car swung open and the unmistakable form of a gigantic solid wall of muscle stepped out of it. His car had

just smashed headlong into a truck and yet there wasn't a mark on him. Merv reached into the back of the car and dragged out a gun. This wasn't a normal gun that a normal man might make use of. This was a General Electric minigun, an automatic machine-gun with six rotating barrels that could spew an unprecedented degree of violence into the world and should have been mounted on an aircraft, at the very least.

Red was unsettled. This was going to do a lot more than break a tail-light.

"Norma!" he said nervously. "I made Merv angry."

Chapter 37

Norma was frantic and her mind flooded with thoughts that were of absolutely no use to anyone. Red could pull away, she reasoned, but he couldn't get far enough away to avoid being shredded by machine-gun fire before Merv could tear him apart.

If only she had Merv's keyword, she could switch him back, bring him back to his senses and make him normal again. But she didn't have his keyword. Silverman had given them to Amber, passing it to her on a piece of paper. The Hawk-Eye couldn't see it, so there was nothing to build a simulation of, and there was no way it could guess at what was written on there.

There was nothing she could do except watch, as Red was ripped apart by machine-gun fire from his best friend in the world. She had always secretly thought that that was the way he'd probably end up going.

But there was one thing, she suddenly realised. She slapped her forehead. It was so obvious: how could she have missed it?

"Red, listen to me and do exactly what I say for once!"

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red nodded as if they were talking face to face. Merv was staring straight at him, his angry little eyes were peering out from under his huge, bony brow and his thumb was poised just above the trigger. For all his speed, there wasn't much Red could do. He briefly considered rolling behind the bike and using Her for cover. If Norma was right, the armour should stop the bullets; the bike might even survive it.

Norma was speaking to him through the helmet and he switched on the bike's speakers so he could repeat her words. He said, his voice booming around the street: "Switch 407X. Keyword – Elephant."

Amber blinked as he continued speaking, copying exactly what he was being told: "Set Merv back to normal!"

Amber, in her alternate-mode, with most of her brain switched off, did exactly what she was told by whoever had spoken the keyword. She turned to Merv and said: "Switch 304G. Keyword – Unicorn."

Merv blinked and looked around. He seemed surprised to find himself standing in front of a wrecked car, but at least he was holding a gigantic machine-gun, so that was much less of a surprise.

"Red?" he said, sounding a little confused. "What's going on? Am I dreaming? These aren't my pyjamas!"

Red felt a huge wave of relief crash over him. He cried out in a mixture of relief and joy.

He pointed down the street, where the truck was hurtling straight for them. "Kill the truck, Merv!" he shouted urgently.

Merv rarely needed to be told twice to do things that involved incredible amounts of ultra-violence. He pressed down on the trigger and a powerful electric motor spun the six barrels of his cannon. The monstrous thing erupted in fire, as hundreds of rounds of ammunition poured out of it so fast that it was blazing with a deafening and continuous roar.

The truck instantly exploded into pieces. Bits of metal were shredded off it as round after round tore through the thing, ripping it apart, piece by piece, in a matter of seconds, like a school of piranha tearing away the meat from a wounded animal. Flames licked from

the engine until eventually it was engulfed in fire. Then, it finally shattered apart as the fuel erupted, exploding in a sickening boom.

The remains of the thing swerved straight into the front of a corner building, crashing through the front of a company selling insurance. Hopefully, they were properly prepared for something like this to happen, and they really only had themselves to blame if they weren't.

With the remains of the truck smouldering around the entire neighbourhood, pieces of building sliding down onto the road as it collapsed, and most of the area on fire, to some degree, Red looked back to Merv and pulled off his helmet. He stepped off the bike and walked over to his friend with a smile plastered firmly on his face.

"Wow!" he said. "I'm good at blowing stuff up, but if you want something violent done properly, you really do just have to have a Merv, don't you?"

Merv just shrugged. "What's going on?" he asked. Gazing around at the scene of utter carnage, which was only one scene of utter carnage (they had made several others), he said: "Did we do it again? Was it zombies this time?"

"We had a minor outbreak of super-soldiers," Red shrugged. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

Merv seemed more or less happy with that. He turned to Amber, who looked equally as confused as he was. "Who are you?"

She frowned up at him, gazing at him curiously. "Who am I? Who are you? What are you? It's as if someone over-inflated you and then just kept on going and going."

Red smiled. "I like her! Who doesn't love sarcasm from a girl who's repeatedly tried to kill you all day?"

“If I tried to kill you, you’d be dead,” she sneered at him darkly. Her voice held every suggestion of sincerity, and he liked it even more.

Red crossed his arm over his chest and glared at her. “You’re still in your weird combat-mode thingy and have to do anything I say, so bark like a dog, please.”

She woofed twice.

“I didn’t say stop!”

There was the roar of a motorcycle as Ash pulled up on the Phoenix, just as Red was reciting the code to set Amber back to normal, whatever normal was for her. The engine died and he stepped off, swiftly pulling off his helmet and staring fixedly at her. He wrenched his eyes back to Red, clearly with some effort. “Is that everyone? Did we get all of them?”

Red nodded. “Yeah, we killed everyone,” he said, a little proudly. He pressed his finger to his earpiece. “Norma says that apparently Commissioner Bertolli is having a seizure and is threatening to have us all arrested and tried for war-crimes against his city.”

Ash just smiled and stepped away, picking his way slowly towards Amber. He briefly acknowledged Merv with a nod. Merv just shrugged at him and carried on stroking his gun. He looked, as he normally did, as if he had absolutely no idea what was going on, but was content that someone would explain it all to him at some point. That was what usually happened, and afterwards he still tended to have absolutely no idea what was going on.

“Amber?” Ash said. His voice cracked with emotion and he began to laugh. “Amber, it’s really you!”

Amber just stared at him, clearly not recognising him at all. She shuffled awkwardly back from his unwavering eyes and cocked her head curiously to one side.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

She shook her head and frowned at him defensively.

“Amber, I’m your father!” He bit his lip awkwardly. The others all looked on in silence.

“My mother told me that my father died,” she stepped back, glaring at him accusingly. “He was killed before I was born.”

With the backdrop of the wreckage that they’d left behind he said, really quite appropriately: “I’ve been working on it, but I’m not quite dead yet.”

Red said, really quite inappropriately: “He’s really old. I’m sure it won’t be long now.”

She shook her head, trying to process all this. “Dad?” she said softly. “I have a father?”

“You do,” he told her. “And I really would love to get to know you. I know you must have a million questions and I’ll do my best to answer all of them.”

Red huffed to himself and turned away. “Well, that’s a happy ending. We don’t normally do happy endings.”

Merv said, “I like happy endings.”

“Well, let’s get out of here before Bertolli has us all arrested, shall we?” Red suggested.

Merv looked around curiously. “Where’s my van? Didn’t I have a van that changes colour?”

They turned to the roaring sound of a motorcycle as the Phoenix shot away into the distance, still with Claire on the back.

“Bye, Ash!” Red joked.

Norma said through his earpiece, “Where is he going?”

“I don’t know!” he shrugged. “I just work here.”
“Red, I have a bad feeling about this.”

Chapter 38

Norma held the door open for Red and Merv at the entrance to the Hawk-Eye bunker. It was rare that they all turned up for work at the same time, since Norma put in many long extra hours. Red often joked that she never left the Hawk-Eye control room and, for the most part, it did seem to be essentially true.

Red was carrying a cardboard tray of coffees and Norma pointed to it and frowned at him curiously.

“Red, we have a coffee machine!” she said. All three of them began to walk along the corridor towards the control room where she would begin the briefing, which would include doughnuts this time.

“This is better coffee,” he said with a shrug. “They’re delicious cups of rich-roasted Columbian coffee, skilfully blended with frothy milk and dusted over with powdered Belgian chocolate. I mean, we deserve it. We saved the world again, didn’t we?”

Norma shrugged. “We didn’t save the world this time; we just tried to help it a bit.”

“What did I do?” Merv frowned curiously, because nobody had taken the time to explain any of this to him yet.

It didn’t worry him particularly because, from his perspective, he’d fallen asleep and woken up with a brand new mini-gun, and he got to try it out by cutting a truck to pieces with a hail of copper-jacketed brutality. It had been a good day for Merv.

“You mostly tried to kill me,” Red told him with a sour expression.

Merv frowned thoughtfully at this. “Is that helping?”

“No!” Red told him forcefully. “I’m actually not sure you deserve a better coffee.” He stopped beside a waste paper bin, took

one of the coffees and casually threw it away. He then carried on as if nothing had happened.

Merv hung his head slightly and said, with a low, apologetic tone: "I'm sorry I tried to kill you, Red."

"I'm sorry you failed," Norma said, with an uncharacteristic smile.

Red gave her a dirty look, went back and threw away another coffee.

She continued: "Bertolli says he's going to find out where you live and come round and beat you to death with your own severed limbs. He says you did close to nineteen million dollars' worth of damage to his city, and you should be executed in the most appalling way imaginable."

"Nineteen million. That's a new record!" Red smiled proudly. Norma glared at him until he realised that she hadn't meant to imply that it was a good thing. He tutted to himself and threw away the last of the coffees. It seemed that nobody deserved a delicious cup of rich-roasted Columbian coffee, skilfully blended with frothy milk and dusted over with powdered Belgian chocolate.

"Whatever!" he grumbled. "We've got a coffee machine."

Norma tutted at him and rolled her eyes.

"Wasn't this all a test?" he asked. "Did we pass?"

She rubbed her forehead. "I was up most of the night trying to sort all this out," she grumbled. "From what I can gather, Silverman sent the FX90 soldiers to secure the protocol servers and keep them running. Medows didn't send them at all. I'm still not able to work out exactly what happened. Operatives did finally secure the servers but, apparently, the super-computer they found was switched off. They estimate it hasn't been running for several years. Nobody knows what's going on."

She rubbed her temples wearily.

“Several things they were covering did get lost, though, so there were some secret things that were revealed. I was on the phone with Professor Jones, who really has a much worse temper than I would have imagined. I don’t know what happened to Silverman, but it seems as if it was something quite bad,” she sighed. “It’s all very complicated and the whole thing is a bit of a mess. It’s clear that the Librarian and his people were lying to us. For what reason, I don’t know, but, believe me, I will find out.

“I’ve still got a lot of paperwork to do and a lot of loose ends to tie up. You lot get to run around blowing things up: I get to clear up whatever debris you leave behind. It doesn’t seem very fair.”

Red said: “I think Merv likes paperwork.”

“I don’t.” He shook his head.

“Sounds like that’s decided, then!”

Norma ignored Red as best she could, but he was quite hard to miss, especially when he was still excited about blowing things up with his motorcycle. She pressed her thumb to the fingerprint reader and told him sternly: “I can do my own paperwork!”

Nothing happened. She frowned and looked at it. The metal box wasn’t switched on. There were no lights on underneath it, no power going in.

“What?” she said darkly. Red looked at her with a very serious look on his face and they exchanged a worried set of expressions. Red gingerly pushed at the door which was, even more worryingly, unlocked. It opened easily and they all rushed into the control room together.

Norma slapped her hands to her head and cried out in exasperated horror: “The Hawk-Eye!”

“HERPES!” Red cried out, in a much less than manly way. Merv just stared in mortified silence.

It was gone, all of it. The whole bunker was empty. Every piece of the Hawk-Eye had been dismantled and removed. All that was left was a sickeningly empty space where it had all once been.

Norma felt her stomach knotting. She was panting, sweating and her pulse was racing. Red’s left palm was pressed to his forehead as he gazed around. The place where his beloved motorcycle was kept was now empty and She, too, was gone.

“What’s happened?” Merv broke a lengthy silence. “What’s going on?”

Norma choked down a frenzy of emotions and walked to the middle of the room in horrified silence. She stepped slowly to where the control centre had been and tears began to stream down her face.

It was Red who answered him. He said softly in a voice tinged with anger and defeat: “I guess we failed the test.”

Red sat slumped forwards like a child whose favourite toy had broken. He and Merv were in a coffee shop, just staring out into the world. They had chosen to sit in the window, just looking as people went about their business, ignorant of the darkness of technological zombies, super-soldiers and experimental drugs going on all around them.

Red was crushed. He said, his voice little more than a whisper: “I can’t believe this.”

“Norma didn’t take it well,” Merv said, slightly underestimating things. Even he seemed as if his world had ended and he slumped onto a counter that groaned as if wishing he hadn’t. “What do we do now?”

“Carry on!” Red said defiantly. He deflated again when he realised how ridiculous a thing that was to say. “Carry on how? They took everything.”

“Maybe you could build a new bike?” Merv suggested, trying to cheer him up. It fell quite a long way wide of the mark.

Red shook his head. He was no mechanic. “What about the Hawk-Eye? We can’t build another one of those. Without that, we’re finished.”

Merv’s shoulders slumped down and he gave a weary sigh. “What can we do?”

Red said sadly: “There’s nothing we can do.” He stared out of the window for a moment. “They took everything, Merv. There is absolutely nothing left that we can do about anything.”

Merv sighed. “You still have super-powers. I can still punch things.”

“Great!” he huffed. “Maybe we can join the circus?”

The pair looked at one another. They both huffed a sigh and looked back out at the world, a world they’d saved, and one that had rejected them for it.

“We’ve still got each other!” Merv ventured softly.

“That means nothing to me, Merv,” Red told him flatly.

A voice broke into their morbid thoughts, rousing them from their brooding self-pity. “Gentlemen?”

They turned to look, Red frowning curiously, Merv just frowning out of pure habit. A dark-skinned, but vaguely Asian, man was standing there behind them. He was dressed in a very nice suit, had excellent posture and had an air about him of someone who was to be taken seriously. He regarded them both with a pair of oddly bright blue eyes that seemed awash with intelligence.

Red said: "Go away. Nobody wants to join your stupid religion."

"I'm not selling a religion," he told them.

"It doesn't matter what you're selling. We don't want any," Red huffed. "I only got paid in coffee and pizza and got made redundant before I even got my first pay-cheque."

"I'm not selling anything," he assured them, looking a little puzzled, since this clearly wasn't the reception he was expecting. "I wonder if you gentlemen would mind coming with me."

Red turned to face him, an expression of abject annoyance on his face. It had been a bad morning and he was in no mood for this. "Go with you?" he grunted. "Why would I want to go with you?"

"Because..." he began and held up a finger. He smiled to himself knowingly and there was a little twinkle in his eye. "I know that you've got nothing left to lose. Why would you not come with me, Mr Marks?"

Red huffed at him. "You are a weird guy."

He drove them into a compound, a huge piece of land with a road winding through it that took them to an old house. Red had been there before and, even though he had come from a different angle the last time, he still recognised it.

"This is The Library!" he said in surprise. "This is where the Librarian lives, isn't it?"

The man driving said, "Well, sort of. There have been some rather drastic changes. He'll explain everything. He is so much better at all of that than I am."

Merv's voice rumbled from the back of the car where he'd had to sit on his own, occupying the entire rear seats. "It's been a day for drastic changes."

Red grunted in agreement. “You said it! I hope this explanation is a good one, because I think this is a guy who deserves one of Merv’s trademark vegetative-coma-inducing punches to the face.”

The car continued into the garage area, drove down the ramp and pulled to a halt in the middle of the underground bunker, parked casually somewhere in the middle of the enormous space. Norma was standing there waiting for them. She had a worried look on her face but, when she saw them, it switched to one of confusion. Either way, she was certainly pleased to see them.

Red was out first, still holding a takeaway coffee because he had demanded that, on a day this bad, he had to have a coffee-cup in hand at all possible times. He said: “Norma? What are you doing here?”

She told him, looking even more puzzled than he was: “Ash found me and asked me to join him. He said you were in trouble and needed my help urgently. He said that he’d explain everything about what happened and then he brought me here. How were you tricked into coming here?”

Red shrugged and made a humming sound to himself. “They used sophisticated mind-games, of course,” he told her. “It’s not as if some stranger asked me to get in his car and I just went. I’m not a complete idiot.”

While Merv was struggling to get out of the car, Red turned and asked: “What’s going on here? Who are you?”

The gentleman gestured to the exit with an outstretched palm. Red knew the way. “If you would care to walk this way, I’m sure that you’ll find answers to all of your questions,” he said.

They were led to the reception area at the top of the stairs where The Librarian was waiting for them. He stroked his rather bushy grey beard and smiled warmly. "Thank you all for coming," he said.

As the leader, it was up to Norma to take the initiative. She lived up to her role, stepped forwards and asked: "What's going on? Why did you bring us here?" She was angry, really very angry, and for once, her expression showed it all too clearly.

The Librarian held up his hand for her to stop. "You failed the test!" he told her simply. "Mr Silverman and Professor Jones weren't testing you to see if you were capable of doing what they asked of you. They were testing you to see if you could be controlled. In that sense, it became clear that you could not.

"There was no secret that could be hidden from you, no lie you couldn't discover. You're a danger to them and all the people like them. They never would have allowed you, or the Hawk-Eye, to continue. You must understand that this was all inevitable from the outset. You never really had a chance."

Norma looked back to the others. They were shaking their heads sadly, realising that, of course, he was absolutely right. Norma hung her head. How could she have been so short-sighted? She wielded such power over these people and promised to use it to stand against them. How would they have ever let her continue doing what she knew had to be done? How could she have been so blind?

The Librarian continued: "We were watching you, of course. My colleague, Mr Baker, has been studying you quite closely."

"Clowns," he said. "Millions of them, and each the size of radishes. Thank you for the doughnuts, by the way, Mr Marks."

Merv just assumed the whole world had gone mad. Maybe it had?

The Librarian said: "We've been watching you for a very long time. We've guided you; we've helped you from the shadows. We've been there since the beginning. We've been there since the very beginning, when all of this started."

Norma frowned, "What do you mean?"

The Librarian looked to the face of his colleague, Mr Baker. He smiled at him and Mr Baker smiled back. "I'm old," he told her softly with not an ounce of regret to it. "We're all old and we're tired. We can't keep fighting forever, but what we've built here and what we do is too important to give up on."

Norma narrowed her eyes. Red frowned and listened intently. Merv thought about doughnuts.

"We always knew that we'd have to leave this place eventually, but we're leaving it in safe hands," he told them. "We're leaving it in your hands!"

She turned and looked at the others. Smiles fluttered on their lips as a tiny sliver of hope returned.

"You see, you failed Silverman's test miserably, as I knew you would," The Librarian grinned at them now. "But you passed ours."

"He does love his little tests!" Mr Baker said, with a knowing smile and a sarcastic roll of the eyes.

The Librarian flashed him a little grin. He stepped aside and gestured to the closed door behind which was The Library. "All this is yours now!" he said.

Norma smiled widely. She could do this. She could find a way to make this work. Even with everything they'd lost, there would be a way that they could all make this work, so long as they all stayed together.

She pushed open the doors and gasped loudly at what she saw. Her hands clapped to her face and she was moved to stunned silence,

frozen, rooted to the spot with a silly smile slowly carving its way across her lips.

The shelving, the books and the files that had collected in the middle of the room were gone. In its place was the Hawk-Eye, the raised control platform in the middle, just exactly as she'd left it the night before. Everything was where it should be, all working, just exactly as it was meant to.

They were home.

Ash was inside, showing Amber around. He smiled broadly as the three of them stepped in, each of them slowly gazing around in stunned silence. Claire was with them and cocked her head to the side curiously, watching, but perhaps not fully understanding, what was going on.

The Librarian followed them in. "I'm sorry if we scared you. They were coming for you. The Hawk-Eye was just too dangerous to them to be left in your hands. We were lucky to get to it first. It was the only way to protect it, and to protect all of you."

Norma wiped away tears, happy tears, and sniffed loudly, trying to hold onto her cold veneer of authority and control. They all saw through it; she knew that they would.

"You see, they'll never find this place," Ash told her. "What we did yesterday was so that we could take control of the protocol. Medows played a clever game and we played it along with him."

The Librarian gave a measured smile. "They gave Medows unlimited funding and a powerful computer. He was smart enough not to use it. He simply set the computer to design a virus. The protocol lives inside the operating system of countless digital devices. It doesn't have a central server and it can never be tracked to a source."

Norma frowned.

He said: "We weren't entirely honest with you." He looked as if he regretted that. "We took our chance to take total control over the protocol and we needed your help to do that. It is ours now, and they can never switch it off out of fear of it revealing all the ugly, dark little secrets it's protecting."

Ash added: "Of course, just so they know to take us seriously, we did let a little something slip out."

Norma looked at him.

The Librarian smiled and said: "The details of Silverman's FX120 were leaked late yesterday afternoon. It was an ugly little plan to modify the DNA of an entire population to reduce their intelligence, to make everyone more pliant and easy to control, to make a random selection of people sterile to reduce the population. They'd even tested it with remarkable success. Now, everyone knows that!"

Red said: "So that was why Silverman was so desperate to keep the protocol servers running! He sent the FX90s in to make sure his dirty little secrets never got out."

"That's right and now you have control of that technology. You can make all of this invisible. You can make it vanish, so that it will be as if it never existed at all. You can all vanish too, and no government agent will ever be able track you again. The Hawk-Eye can be secure forever."

Norma wiped her nose and sniffed softly. "But how?" she asked. "We never worked out how Medows did it. We never worked out what the unconventional password was. How did he access the protocol?"

The Librarian told her with a smile: "The Hawk-Eye worked it out. It tried to tell you."

Norma frowned curiously and shook her head. "I don't understand?"

Ash rested his hand on Claire's shoulder. "Claire, what's the password to the protocol?"

"I am!" she said simply. "I was the only thing that Meadows could trust. I am an FX90 subject and he reconfigured my brain implant to connect it directly to the system. That way, in the event of his death, the password could never fall into the wrong hands. He said I was the perfect filter, the perfect final level of security. He said that it meant I'd always be safe. They'd never try to hurt me, never try to re-program me.

"I would only ever allow the protocol to work if he told me to."

Norma closed her eyes and silently rebuked herself for having missed what now seemed so very obvious. "Of course!" she mumbled to herself.

The Librarian added: "But Meadows did leave one set of final instructions. He left a message to be read in the event of his death. Claire has it memorised."

Norma looked at him expectantly.

He said, "Claire?"

"Meadows is dead now," Claire told them. "Meadows programmed me with a strict set of instructions for what to do in the event of his death. He said that the most important thing I had to do was add him to the list so that he would vanish, too. He said he could never make up for what he'd done, but he could have his footprint wiped off the earth. That was his final plan: he wanted to have never existed."

Norma laughed: "That's it? That was all Medows had planned? He just never wanted the world to know what he'd done, and to protect the only person in the world he cared about?"

She nodded back. "He said that this was the legacy that men like him truly deserved."

Red huffed loudly and said to Ash, "HERPES?" He was almost afraid of the answer and clutched his hands tightly into fists, clenching and unclenching them.

Ash laughed. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you to ask about that? She's downstairs, safe and sound. She does still have a broken tail-light though, I'm afraid. We didn't have spares."

"Oh, thank god!" he gasped, breathing out a huge sigh of relief.

Ash clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm keeping the Phoenix, though. I'm taking her with me!"

"You're leaving?" Red asked. "Really?"

"We're retiring," he nodded. "That doesn't mean we'll never be around. It just means this isn't my life anymore. We've been fighting this fight as long as you've been alive. We've earned ourselves a break. It's time to pass our fight to younger people to carry it on for us."

Red couldn't argue with that. "It was fun working with you. I hope we can do it again some time."

"I'm sure we will," he said. "But you can do me a favour as well!"

"Name it!" he said.

"You can look after my daughter!" He put his hand on Amber's back and looked at her with the eyes of a proud father.

“She’s staying here with you. I think she’s going to fit in just fine around here.”

She looked Red up and down, sneering slightly as if he didn’t seem to be quite good enough in some way. “I’m staying here with the Hawk-Eye,” she corrected him. It was a small but significant difference. “Not with him!”

“Nice!” Red flashed a flirtatious smile at her, backed up with his customary abundance of confidence and near total lack of anything solid to base it on. “We should get a coffee sometime and get to know each other.”

She took his cup out of his hand, drank it in one fluid movement and gave it back to him empty. “Was it good for you?” she asked sarcastically, walking off to find someone more interesting to talk to.

“Wow!” Red said to Ash. “She gets her charm from you, I guess. Not her looks though and hopefully not her intelligence.”

“Don’t you lay a finger on her, kid,” Ash warned him sternly. “She’s still my daughter!”

“Oh, I’ll probably end up marrying her, now you’ve said that!” he said firmly. “I’m just going to do it to piss you off. I don’t even really like her. It’s just that you’re too old to be scary. Sorry, Ash!”

Ash just shook his head and laughed. “She’d destroy you, kid!”

“Yeah, fast and deadly. That’s how I like them!”

Chapter 39

Norma called their first meeting to order. The Library had a proper meeting room with comfortable chairs and a wooden table that really looked the part. Everything had been thought of. They'd even brought the Hawk-Eye trophies with them and displayed them around the room.

There was a glass cabinet showing off the brick with a piece of the first HERPES (god rest her soul), the zombie-head-bolt thing, and now they'd even added an FX90 brain enhancement chip that they'd recovered from the machine-gun firing super-soldier. It had been found in a mobile-phone shop after his head had made an unfortunate connection with the gearbox of a Harley Davidson at a combined speed of one hundred and thirty miles per hour.

Norma was seated at the head of the table, proudly leading the newly reformed Hawk-Eye group, with several new additions.

"Welcome, everyone," she said. "To those of you that are new to the group, I'm Norma and I'm in charge. Please feel free to--"

"Are there doughnuts?" Red cut her off, leaning forwards onto the desk and grinning widely, deliberately trying to annoy her.

Norma glared at him for daring to try undermining her. "You know that there's doughnuts, Red. You're eating a doughnut; there is one in your hand right now."

Red nodded in agreement. "It was just that Merv wanted to know but was too scared to ask."

"There are doughnuts, Merv!" she told him, trying to get the meeting moving back along.

Merv nodded and helped himself from a large box of assorted junk-food. He scooped up one, another one and then just pulled the box closer to him and began working his way through it.

“If you don’t mind, some of us are actually trying to listen!” Amber growled at Red, her voice dripping with barely restrained hostility.

“I don’t mind!” he told her. “Merv?”

Merv shook his head. “I don’t,” he said through a mouthful of fried batter.

Red shrugged.

She tutted at him loudly, which brought a wide, happy grin to his face.

“As I was saying...” Norma shot him an angry glare and continued.

“Claire?” Red gestured towards their other new recruit. “Do you mind?”

She shook her head, perhaps not really understanding what it was that she might, or might not, be minding about.

“As I was saying...” Norma slapped her hands down loudly on the table, plunging even Red into silence. “I’m in charge of this group. Going forwards, we are going to carry on the work that was done here before we took over. We will work in secret to protect people from the dark, terrible secrets that are being kept from them. We will work together to make a real difference.”

She gestured for Amber to introduce herself next. “I’m Amber,” she said.

Red cut in. “One of the dark, terrible secrets that we’re protecting people from.”

Amber glared at him but nodded in agreement, since that was essentially true. “I was the FX90 prototype. Norma has reset my keyword and deactivated my combat mode. I’m finally free and I’ve chosen to work here because I feel like I can make a positive difference to the world.”

Norma smiled at her and nodded graciously. "Claire?" she said next.

"I'm the protocol," she said. "My brain is attached to a secret computer server and I work for Norma, now. If she tells me things, I can make them disappear. Not like a magician though, although that would be cool."

Norma sighed, braced herself and said: "Red, would you like to introduce yourself to the group?"

Red grinned, sat back in the chair and said proudly, and with excessive confidence: "I'm Red! I drink way too much caffeine and have literal super-powers. My brain runs sixteen times faster than normal. I'm pretty much impervious to pain and grey slime in my head keeps me at the peak of physical fitness, even if I don't bother going to the gym!

"I don't bother going to the gym. Most days, I don't even think about it.

"I recently went up against a whole group of super-soldiers and literally destroyed them in one day without even emptying the magazine from my auto-cannon. I also have the world's fastest, coolest motorcycle, have saved the world multiple times, and I know all the words from Robocop 2."

Norma had to admit that that wasn't too bad. She had prepared herself for him to say something much worse than that.

But then Red continued: "Norma is basically my Mum and I have a pet Merv that eats a suspicious amount of meat, is mostly made of testosterone and is profoundly homosexual. I'm also no longer exclusively sexually attracted to waitresses."

She sighed.

Amber said sarcastically: "Lucky us!"

“Indeed,” he agreed. “As the only straight white man here, I’m a minority so I’m expecting extra, special privileges. I think that’s how the world works, isn’t it?”

“How does it feel to be outnumbered by women?” Amber flashed a cruel smile.

“Mildly arousing,” he told her earnestly with a shrug. “We certainly do seem to be a little oestrogen-heavy around here. This place must pass all the feminists’ tests!”

“No!” Norma told him. “Technically, the women have to discuss something together, something other than a man, and that hasn’t actually happened yet.”

Red shrugged. “That seems odd with so many women about. I guess the world is a funny place, almost as if someone with a very weird sense of humour planned it that way.”

“Merv!” she invited him to speak.

“I’m Merv!” he said, with a low, rumbling growl. “I like doughnuts.”

“That is true!” Red agreed.

“Are there any questions?” Norma asked, deciding that this was all probably good enough.

“I have one!” Red raised his hand.

She sighed and grumbled, “Go on then.”

“What do we do now?”

Norma opened her mouth to speak, but realised that that might be the only question that she didn’t have an answer for. It was also a really excellent question. What was next? Where did they go from here?

“Red, that’s a good question,” she told him. “I wonder what could possibly be next?”