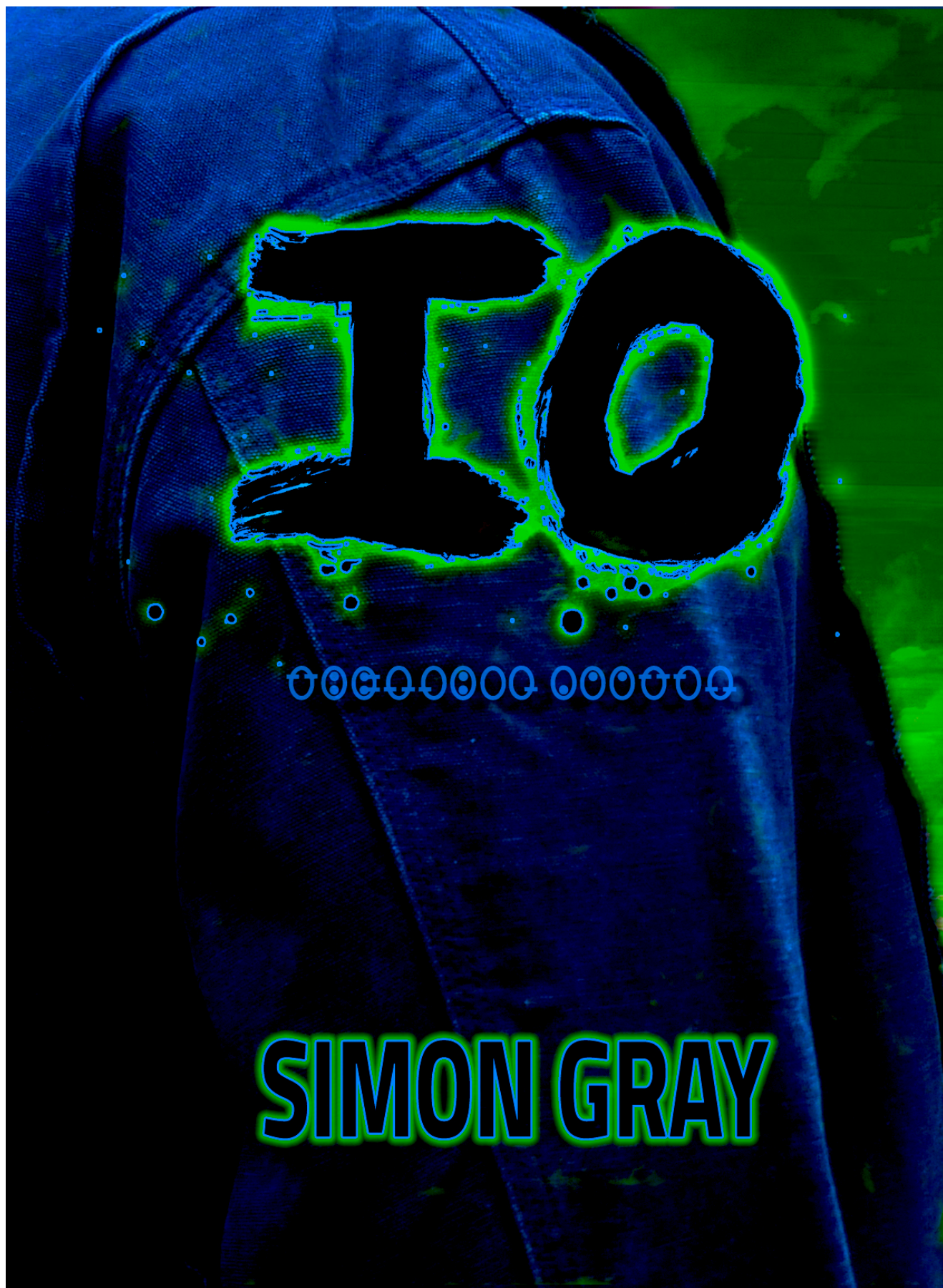




SIMON GRAY

PROLOGUE
Misrah San Gorg
VALLETTA MALTA
2057

President Nicola Curmi steps quickly up to the podium, “Merħba, merħba. Welcome, my fellow citizens.”

It’s a bright sunny April day in Valetta. The streets are buzzing with the excited chatter of thousands of people. They stand shoulder to shoulder, filling the old stone streets of the capital.

Air scooters and private transports hover high above the crowd. Huge red and white Maltese flags billow in the breeze.

The air is perfumed by the salty Mediterranean, licking around the base of the grand fortified walls of the city. The breeze smells fresh. And full of promise.

President Curmi’s clear voice fills Misrah San Gorg. It echoes down Triq Ir-Repubblika, where the people crowd together in a solid mass. All the way back to the Triton Fountain.

“Today, the people of Malta make history. The people!”

She raises her arms in a wide ‘V’ and turns from side to side as the streets erupt with cheers.

An enormous burst of fireworks suddenly erupts over the crowd. The sound is deafening as it ricochets down the ancient streets of the old city.

For those Maltese who couldn't make the journey today, or chose to avoid the crowds, the scene is livecast from plas-projectors. It's beamed to every village square, from Birżebbuġa in the south, to Għarb, at the northern tip of Gozo.

The giant screen behind her shows random shots of the enormous crowd packed into the area around the Palace of the Grand Master.

"Today, we the people of Malta become the first nation in the world to establish a vision of the future. A vision that is a positive and hopeful one. A vision crafted by the people themselves."

The screen shows the text: 'Voter turnout 78%. Highest percentage in the history of the country'.

"This morning," President Curmi continues, pointing to the screen behind her, "the people of Malta voted overwhelmingly to create a Firewall. The first nation on earth to ever create one!"

A loud roar goes up from the crowd. Silver tinsel explodes from behind the screen and covers the closest people in a sparkling shower.

On the screen are images of people voting.

"Within days," President Curmi continues, trying to be heard over the cheers and whistles, "both Iceland and Estonia will have ironed out the details on their own Firewalls. And we will be working with them to establish the first International Firewall. But today... Today belongs to the people of Malta!"

Fireworks explode above the crowd in a deafening chorus. Hundreds of shells explode at once. All but drowning out the thousands of cheering people below.

os2020

The Shield

The Shield is charged with providing security, intelligence gathering, investigation and protection of the people from corrupt components.

The Shield is accountable only to the Firewall.

The Shield is divided into two offices:

- IO - (Internal Office)

- EO - (External Office)

- IO operates inside the physical boundaries of The Union. It handles all matters of security including the detection and removal of threats to the people.

- EO operates outside the physical boundaries of The Union. It handles the monitoring and control of banished components.



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Docklands

FIRST UNION

2075

It was a typical scuz bar. Dimly lit, reeking of stale beer and despair. You know the kind. Upholstered booths, worn and ripped from years of twitchy customers, muttering into their drinks. Their hopes and dreams ground into the carpet, like the dirt from their boots. The same dead ends. The same tragic—

Brooks is looking at Hagstrom sideways and rolling his eyes, "You're doing it again. Aren't you?"

"What?" Hagstrom is defensive.

"That book thing. Writing that book in your head."

Hagstrom looks sheepish, "Just running over ideas, that's all."

"Can we just go in now and do our job?" Brooks slides out of the cruiser.

As soon as they enter the bar, they can see which one he is. The bartender jerks his head in the guy's direction.

Thanks pal, but it's obvious. Ten years on the force you learn a few things. Besides, he is easy to spot. One big angry ego, scowling and barking at the other customers around him. I'd have called this guy in too.

Brooks moves to the left, between some tables. Hagstrom approaches from behind. He's two tables away from him, when he turns.

"Good afternoon," Hagstrom spreads his hands to show he holds no weapon.

The recognition in the guy's eyes is immediate.

Before he can fully turn his head, Brooks catches him in the blue beam. The man's body slumps, arms dangling at his side.

"Thanks to whoever called us," Hagstrom pans those standing around. But no one responds.

Typical.

They all quickly slunk away the moment they saw the IO badges.

Brooks has a good hold on the man. He's perfectly controlled. His feet dangle about ten points off the floor, head back, mouth open. His limp body hangs suspended in the blue vapour.

"Good afternoon sir. I'm 2742 Hagstrom from the Internal Office. My partner is 2951 Brooks."

He looks him right in the face, "We are here on a Code 104."

The man jerks and twists. But the beam holds him tight. Hagstrom pulls the Lam Card out of his front vest pocket and reads the text: "By mandate of Code 104, of the Citizen's Agreement, I am required to scan your brain. As an authorized representative of the Internal Office, I perform this duty in the course of my job, to protect the citizenry. Do you understand what I have told you?"

The man jerks as hard as he can. But the beam holds tight. "Brooks do you have Shield Council on the link?"

"Monitoring live and standing by," he replies. The watch com clipped on the front of Brooks' jacket glows blue, and the small screen shows the face of the Attendant Council watching the whole procedure. "Facial recon initiated," the AC's voice crackles from the watch com. "Stand by for ID."

Hagstrom continues, "Sir, I need you to confirm for me that you understand that I am here to enforce the mandate, as ordered by the citizenry. Can you nod or blink for me please?"

He tries his hardest to break free.

But the vapour holds him tight. Dangling slightly above the floor.

"Just got his vitals." Brooks reads from the beam screen, "Brian Green, G44717AF, age thirty-eight, last logged, Centre Ring housing, thirty-fourth loop."

"Mr. Green, can you hear me? Mr. Green?" Hagstrom peers into his eyes.

I know he hears me, and he knows it too.

Stiffly, Brian Green nods his head, his eyes full of panic.

"Thank you Mr. Green. I am now going to scan your cortex according to the Citizen's Mandate."

Hagstrom pulls out the scanner and taps his code into it. It blinks to life, finds a link, and then opens its screen, blinking ready.

"AB?" Brooks asks quietly.

"My money is on UC," Hagstrom holds the scanner up to Green's forehead. "We will know in two clicks."

Brian Green's eyes go wild, darting around crazily. But the beam holds and he cannot move or make a sound.

What crystal technology.

In a few seconds the scanner flashes green, then red, then white. Hagstrom takes it down and reads from the screen: "Well, oPC at fifty- eight. Haven't seen a percentage like that in a while. And, well well, how about that, blocking paste."

Brian Green twitches wildly.

"Blocking?" Brooks looks at Hagstrom.

"Yep. Residue on his forehead."

"Well that's that," Brooks rotates the beam and starts to levitate the man towards the door.

"Brian Green," Hagstrom reads from the back of the laminate, as he follows them out of the bar, "you have been determined by scanning to have a non-completing prefrontal cortex. You further show residue from an illegal blocking agent, that interferes with scanning."

Brian Green twitches and fights the beam.

"We have therefore determined," Hagstrom continues to read, "that you pose a threat to the safety and security of the citizenry."

Green's mouth moves like he is chewing, but no sound comes out.

"By order of Mandate 104 we are taking you to IO. Upon arrival at the Internal Office you will formally be made aware of your situation and options. Mr. Green, do you understand what I have just told you?"

Brooks carefully and steadily guides him into the open back of the cruiser.

He turns on the beam inside of the holding chamber, and transfers the man over to it. The cross straps quickly wrap around Brian Green's body securing him to the seat.

Hagstrom leans in and looks Brian Green in the eyes, "I need a nod or a blink, Sir."

He blinks.

Hagstrom closes the doors on the back and joins Brooks in the cockpit.

"G44717AF, Centre Ring housing," Brooks is just finishing up with the Attendant Shield Council.

"Confirmed. I'll start the paperwork," the Council's voice crackles from the watch com on Brooks' jacket, "See you at the dock. Shield out." Brooks fires up the cruiser and it rises slowly and smoothly from the parking lot.

He punches in the code for IO and the cruiser turns on its wing and accelerates over the roof tops.

Hagstrom flicks out his VirCom.

Now, where was I? Oh yeah. Lizi.

"Hey pal," he turns to Brooks, "can you process this one? I need to get to the school. Looks like my daw has kicked up a fit or something."

"Yeah man, sure, no worries," Brooks waves his hand. "Where do you want to get dropped?"

"I'll ride with you back to IO. I left my rider in the lot there. If you could just take this guy through for me? Would be crystal."

"Yeah man, I got it."

Within a few minutes they reach City Point and Brooks guides the cruiser into an In-take Dock.

Hagstrom slides out and hoofs it over to his rider in the back lot. He slides inside, tapping the screen for Lizi's school.

The rider lifts up and moves smoothly out of the lot.

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Eastern Sixth Form Campus Cruiser Lot

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

"Where's my mom?"

By the time he gets to Eastern Sixth Form Lizi is sitting on the sidewalk out front. Feet in the gutter, scowling.

She does not look happy to see him. She throws herself into the back seat like a sack of wood.

"In meetings I suppose?" she scowls.

"Your mom is on call for The Firewall."

She grunts, head turned, face against the window.

"You're welcome," he whispers to the windshield.

And that's the same position she is in when they touch down at home.

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

Lizi can't get out of the rider fast enough.

Whatever. This phase usually doesn't last long.

Hagstrom grabs a short pour, and heads out back. He plunks down on the edge of the deck to watch the sunset.

After a few moments Lizi saunters out and drops into the slouch bag behind him. So she can avoid eye contact.

"So," he ventures, "what happened in school today?"

"I hate Magi. She's such an 'Under'!"

"Lizi, you know I don't like it when you use that word."

"Why not? Isn't that what you do, Hagstrom? Snagging Unders? Making the world safe for all of us 'Fullers'?"

"Lizi..." He doesn't bother finishing.

Been there, tried that.

He sips his pour, "I'm sure it must be hard for you—"

"You don't know what it's like for me. And stop trying to be my dad."

Gotta work on my 'Dad' voice.

"So, what happened at school?"

She blows out a long breath, "Magi said you kill people for a living. You're a murderer."

Tā mā de. Not this again.

"And she's such a shā bī Goddie. She judges me all the time."

"Lizi, you know that swearing in Chinese is still swearing."

"If/else! You say Chinese all the time."

Yeah, I guess we all do.

"Span class, Hagstrom, all Goddies are Unders."

"I thought you and Magi were friends?"

"That was like so ago, like way ago."

"OK. So why did I get a call?"

"I called my *mom*," she spits.

"And she called me. So, what happened?"

"I kinda smacked Magi. A little."

"Lizi!"

"Well she's a *shā bī*!"

Oh boy.

Hagstrom pulls off his boots and socks, and pushes his feet into the permagrass, feeling it cool against his toes.

Lizi pulls her knees up to her chest and rocks back and forth.

"Do you kill Unders? Hagstrom?"

"No, Lizi, I don't kill anyone."

"But you catch Unders. And deliver them to people who kill them."

He turns. Her eyes are red, her face puffy. And the scowl—the ever present permascowl of the modern teenager.

Tā mā de. Here we go.

"Years ago, before you were born, people who were abused as kids used to get elected into public office."

"You mean *after* they received counsel? Right?"

"No, Lizi. Pre-counsel. People with *unresolved* anger and fear."

"Nào cán! And no one stopped this?"

"Lizi, it's not that simple. Ask your friend Kai how difficult it was for her to expose what happened to her. And ask for help. And you suffered neglect when your dad left—"

She cuts him off quickly, "Yeah. We don't need to talk about all that."

Hagstrom looks at her with a raised eyebrow.

She looks away quickly, "Never mind all that. What happens to them? After you deliver them?"

"The AP gets counsel and help. Because every citizen—"

"Not the abused," she cuts him off, "the Unders."

"They get banished."

"Not killed?"

"No. Lizi, not killed. The Firewall strips them of their birth record, assets and citizenship, and flies them off to the country of their choice."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad."

"Well," he drums his fingers on the deck.

"What?" Her eyes drill into him.

"We don't have agreements in place with all of the other Unions."

"So what happens to the Unders when they land?" she's scanning his face for lies.

"Some places don't want our Bans. They see them as rejects. And they don't want anyone's rejects."

"So?" she leans in not letting him look away.

"The Bans can get taken into slavery. Work slaves, sex slaves, or just killed immediately."

"Nī mèi!" her mouth drops open.

"Yeah."

She looks down at her shoes.

"Lizi, the point is, look at what we've gained. We've stopped corruption. We've made serious reductions in bullying, child abuse, and fraud. It's better this way."

She pulls her legs up, and tucks her knees under her chin. Wrapping her arms around her legs she slowly rocks back and forth.

"You just kick them out," she whispers.

"The Firewall kicks them out."

Rocking slowly.

"So you let someone else do your dirty work for you."

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Eastern Sixth Form Campus Library
Neopolis
FIRST UNION
2075

Lizi pulls her cape hood down to her nose so no one can see her face.

She opens the sound file, and adjusts the volume.

A thin metallic voice says: *"Sound File. First Union Firewall Archive.*

Original File. OldYear 2016.

Control Copy. Archives. Firewall Business. History.

Save. Qqp, ranmem. Save, lock.

Aquire."

There is a crackling noise. And then:

"This is Radio Safe Net, Belgium. Good morning. This is Georges Lemaître. Talking with Mr. Winston Smith. He's a writer. Originally from the UK. And now living in sunny Arizona. Good morning Winston."

"Good morning Georges from Apache Junction."

"Winston sent me an email with a manuscript. OS2020. It's a concept, right? Are you comfortable with that term Winston?"

"Sure, concept. Option."

"So, Winston sent me this OS2020 and the first time I read it I thought, 'Who is this guy and what is this crazy fiction?' Sorry Winston, just being honest here."

"Yes, no worries. That's a pretty common first reaction."

"So I started reading sections of OS2020 on air, and the response has been incredible. I put it up on our website as a free download, and today, let's see, yes. Today we have passed two thousand downloads! Two thousand!"

"That's amazing. It's nice to find receptive ears."

"So, Winston, for those of our listeners who have not had a chance to look at your manuscript, give us an overview."

"Absolutely. OS2020 changes two important parts of our government: First, who qualifies to get on a ballot, and second, how to immediately remove elected officials if they fail us."

"OK. So, first—qualifications?"

"The people we have in elected public offices are chosen by a junior-high school style popularity contest."

"I would agree with that."

"We have the least amount of qualifications for the most important jobs in the country. There's no experience in anything required. And not even a civics test to see if you know how the government actually works."

"That's true! Sad, but true."

"Georges, If you want to get hired as a shipping manager for a company, you have to show more qualifications than you need to show to run for public office in most countries."

"I never thought about that."

"Second: we don't do periodic reviews. If, after a year, the management reviews your work, and it looks like you're not doing the job, then you can get fired. We don't do that with elected officials."

"You're right. They do that in every job. Even mine."

"If you're a shipping manager, and you don't show the ability to get the right things on the right trucks then you can get fired within your first year. Or, at the end of a standard probationary period. Say, 3 months."

"Exactly!"

"But elected officials? Oh goodness no. They get to stumble along, being really bad at their job, until their time is up. Only other elected officials can remove them. But their own party will block it. So they get to stay in office. And if they break things and hurt citizens, we just have to put up with them. That would never happen in a business."

"None of us 'intelligent' human beings thought to put periodical reviews into our constitutions. Did we?"

"And the people in power aren't gonna to put it in now. They're gonna cover their own asses at any cost. They're gonna insulate themselves from being evaluated, and possibly removed."

"You got that right."

"And we the people have no way to change that."

"No way. All you can do is vote them out."

"Next time. We've got to wait until the next election, to vote them out. Meanwhile, we have to put up with them for a full term and watch them bugger god-knows-what."

"So Winston, what's the answer?"

"Two things. First, we need to change the way we hire public servants. At a minimum. Put out a call for resumes. Reject applicants who have no experience or education that would qualify them."

"Yeah, it's easy to just say you're qualified and get on a ballot these days."

"And, apparently, the angrier you get at people who claim you aren't qualified, the more likely you are to attract the attention of angry adults who were abused, and their vote can elect you."

"Not based on qualifications, just by acting angry and arrogant."

"Sadly, it's what passes for strength and confidence these days."

"No kidding."

"The more important the job, the higher the bar must be set. That's just common sense. You need more qualifications to get hired as a janitor at a high school than you need to run for public office."

"That is very true. Sad, but true."

"But most importantly, we need a mechanism."

"Mechanism?"

"That's the second part. A mechanism to immediately remove these public servants if they threaten the safety and security of the people, the economy or the country."

"And how do we do that? What is your 'mechanism'?"

"I call it The Firewall."

"Oh, right, right, right. The quorum of average citizens."

"Yes. Let the people have a mechanism to shut down destructive behavior before it causes serious or permanent damage."

"A Firewall."

"It's a mechanism. A mechanism we don't have right now."

Someone taps her shoulder.

Lizi looks up to see Kai squinting at her, "You hibernating?"

Lizi grins, "Just listening to that cack for Nearthunder's class. You smooth today?"

"Yeah... I'm smooth. Smooth as a I can be. On any given day. What's the cack today, Z?"

"More history boredom."

"Is it the Radio Safe Net, Belgium? The one with OS2020?"

"Yeah. Dull as toast."

"I liked that file. Apparently, this is why we have the OS we have now. And so we're supposed to learn where it came from and why."

"You're such a model student, K. So smooth."

Kai drops her head and gives Lizi one of her trademark smiles. "You are a much better student than me. You just don't like people to know it."

"What I don't want, is any more boring junk I gotta listen to."

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City Point

FIRST UNION

2075

"It was a typical scuz bar. You know the kind of place: poorly lit, reeking of stale beer and despair— "

"Seriously? Hags?" Brooks interrupts shaking his head.

"What? What? It's my book," Hagstrom shrugs his shoulders.

Brooks sighs and slides out of the cruiser.

Hagstrom get out and taps the screen of the tablet, "She's..." he swings around and nods towards a large block of flats. "She's in there."

They start walking towards the block of flats.

Brooks is still shaking his head, "When are you going to write this cacking book, Hags? When?"

"I gotta sound it out. You know. See if it sounds authentic."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what you always say. It sounds, it sounds like a really bad Mickey Spillane knockoff."

"I like Mickey Spillane," Hagstrom mumbles.

"Agents," the voice of the Attendant Council crackles from Brooks' WatchCom, "can we please focus on the intervention?"

"Sorry, sorry," Hagstrom wags his head.

"All right, Mickey," Brooks smirks, "who are we here to see?"

"Erm, a lady in number fourteen, block eight. Belo Horizonte"

They quickly locate Block 8 and climb the stairs to the second level.

Scanning both ways down the hallway, Brooks approaches the door of number 14.

Hagstrom follows a few meters behind him, pressing up against the wall with his blue beam armed and ready.

Brooks knocks loudly, "Belo Horizonte?"

The small SecuriScreen next to the door blinks on, and a thin beam of light quickly scans from ceiling to floor. It creates a three-dimensional image on the inside screen for the tenant to see.

"You boys from IO?" the voice crackles from the inside.

"Yes, ma'am," Brooks turns his arm so his badge is up for the SecuriScreen to scan.

After a moment, "Upstairs. Maybe number twenty. Or twenty-one. Just follow the screams."

Belo Horizonte doesn't open the door. That's pretty typical in this area. But Brooks has all her information downloaded onto his scanner from Central. Once a complaint or tip is lodged, the source is identified and checked. Backgrounds are run. The agents have all the information they need before they arrive.

Hagstrom shifts across the hallway from wall to wall, a few meters away. Constantly scanning left and right with his tablet. And through the ceiling and walls for heat signatures.

"Can you confirm your complaint for me, please," Brooks looks straight into the Secur-iScreen."

"Like I told that dispatcher lady, she yells a lot up there. I don't know if she's alone. But she yells crazy stuff. She's an under. You boys go up there and kill her for me. Will you? Don't need that kind of defects around here."

Brooks shakes his head, "Ma'am, we don't kill people. And they're not defective—"

"I just know what I know!" she interrupts. "You take care of it. Now! You boys just get along. Scoot!"

The Secur-iScreen clicks off.

They look at each other and shake their heads.

Slowly they move down the hallway to the stairs. Hagstrom goes first with a wide sweeping scan. The blue trace lines crawl and ripple over the contours of the hallway and stairs as they move.

Faint outlines of heat signatures move around on the screen—the other tenants in their flats.

Brooks pauses at the top of the stairs as they approach Flat number 19.

Brooks rings the bell.

No answer.

But the heat signature shows a person in there.

Shifting from foot to foot.

Don't want to get involved, huh?

He crosses the hallway and rings the bell on number 18.

"Who?" the voice crackles over the SecuriScreen.

Brooks holds his badge up to the screen as it scans it.

"You here about the defect? The witch is in number twenty. Screams all the time. Y'all get that mess out of here. And make sure I get my reward."

"Sir, we don't give rewards," Brooks sighs. "Wherever you heard that—"

"Figures," the voice cuts me off, "Cheap ass OS. Working for the people, my ass. I didn't vote for them."

"Sir," Brooks sighs again, "if you don't want us to work for you, then we can leave right now. And do nothing about the situation."

Silence. The screen blinks off.

Thought so.

Brooks circles around and positions himself a couple of meters away from the door to number 20. He presses flat to the wall and slides down into a crouching position, aiming his beam up at the door.

Hagstrom approaches the door. The SecuriScreen is already glowing.

Whoever is in there is watching them.

Hagstrom turns on the recorder on his tablet.

Immediately it pings. He taps on the door and holds his badge up to the SecuriScreen, "Hello? Can we talk to you for a moment, please?"

Silence.

He knocks again.

"I know who you are," the voice sounded anxious. "You're outer skins don't fool me. Wolves! Wolves in sheep's clothing!"

The agents look at each other and raise their eyebrows.

All the personal details of the current resident of number 20 have just downloaded on-to Brooks' scanner. And Hagstrom's tablet.

They both quickly read the details.

The Counsel confirms she has the download too.

"Anne Chamberlin? Is it all right if I call you Anne? If we could just talk to you for a moment? No one is going to hurt you. If we could just— "

"You're in league with the Devil! I will not be taken!"

The Counsel voice crackles: "No history scans of DC. Probability seventy-eight percent AB. Vocal pattern not typical of Non-Completion."

Hagstrom fishes the Lam Card out of his front jacket pocket. Brooks stands up and moves behind him and to the left. His blue beam locked on the door to number 20.

Hagstrom looks directly into the screen, "Anne? No one is going to harm you. We are here to help. We are here to get you the help you need. So that no one can harm you."

"That's what they all say," the voice shook. "And then they do it again! They always do!"

"Anne? We are here to help. We can get you to a safe place where no one can harm you. Do you understand?"

Sobbing from the inside.

"Anne? I need you to trust us. We are here to help you and protect you. We can take you to counsel. They will listen to your fears and help you. You don't need to face this alone."

Silence.

"Anne? We will not leave you. We will not go away."

Sobbing.

Hagstrom sighs. "We are authorized by Mandate 104 to enter your domicile in order to protect you and your neighbors. We will not hurt you. Do you understand?"

Sobbing.

"Anne? Will you voluntarily open the door please?"

"No! You can't take me! Noooooo!" the blood curdling scream distorts through the SecuriScreen's tiny speaker, almost blowing it out. Despite the thick walls of the block, it echoes loudly in the hall.

"Anne?" he knocks again.

"Nooooooo! They can't win! They can't do it again!!! Noooooo!"

She sounds like a wounded cat. Wailing for its life.

"Attendant Council this is 2742 Hagstrom of The Internal Office requesting permission to enter the domicile of record."

A pause, then, "77163 Shield Counsel, permission is approved."

"Anne? We're going to enter your domicile now. Do you understand? We're coming in to help you. You do not need to be afraid."

Sounds of scuffling and furniture falling inside.

Brooks turns his scanner to the ViewPort setting. It sweeps the flat inside for weapons and explosives.

None.

Hagstrom holds his tablet up to the lock on the door. A small thin beam projects out of the back of the tablet scanning the lock. The screen blinks green, and the door lock unlatches.

"Anne? We're coming in now," he pushes the door open just a fraction.

It's pitch-black inside.

"Anne?" he puts his hand out and pushes on the door. It won't open. It gives a little, then bounces back.

What the...

He reaches in carefully, and feels smooth polymer just inside the door. He shines the tablet light into the thin opening. There is black polymer sheet stretched across the door. He pushes on it a little bit harder, and the polymer sheet gives, revealing a thin slice of the view inside of the flat.

"Anne? Please don't be afraid. We are only here to help."

The wailing continues, reverberating off the walls.

Yeah. I'd have called this in too.

The scanner shows the occupant cowering against the far wall behind a pile of broken furniture.

“Anne?” he pushes on the polymer until enough of the sheet falls away, allowing the door to open wide enough to enter.

He slips in.

The wailing gets louder, “Nooooooooo!!”

Brooks braces himself in the doorway. Holding the door open with his foot, he turns his beam to ‘hold’. The lowest setting. And focuses it on the pile of furniture.

Hagstrom quickly scans around the room. No other life forms. No weapons.

The flat is dark. One weak sickly green lamp illuminates the space. The windows, doors and ventilation ports have been covered with polymer.

It stinks of urine. And bags of garbage slump against the walls.

Anne Chamberlin whimpers and fidgets behind the pile of broken furniture.

“Anne? We are here to help. Can you please— ”

Suddenly she stands up. Brandishing a wooden cross in her hands, she holds it out towards them like a shield.

Her long scraggly hair sticks out in all directions. Her torn clothes drape from her thin frame. She smells of feces and decaying flesh.

Wở cào. I see why your neighbor called you a witch. When was the last time you had a wash and a decent meal?

"You come back! You always come back! You don't stop!!" Her shrieks bounce off the grimy walls of the flat.

Hagstrom holds his hand out, "We are not here to hurt you. "

"Devils!" she screams, "I call down legions of angels and archangels!" She shakes the wooden cross. "Thou shall not!" she wails.

"Now?" asks Brooks.

Hagstrom reluctantly nods.

The soft blue beam catches Anne Chamberlin and bathes her in its glow. Her body goes limp. The wooden cross clatters to the floor. Her face breaks into a blissful smile. Like they all do.

Brooks lifts her up with the beam, and moves her from behind the furniture, until she hangs suspended in the vapor in front of them.

"Anne Chamberlin?" Hagstrom smiles at her, "You're gonna feel a lot safer now. We're gonna take you to The Screen. They have people to listen to you and help you. You're safe now."

Her eyes roll and dip, a broad smile on her face.

"Some days I wish you'd put that hold beam on me, Brooks. Make me calm like that. Especially when my daw is razzing me."

"Any time you want, buddy," he chuckles. "Any time you want."

Hagstrom holds his scanner up to Anne's forehead and presses 'scan'.

In a few seconds the scanner flashes green, then red, then green.

He takes it down and look at the scan.

"AB?" Brooks glances at him.

He nods, "PC at ninety-one."

"Come along now Anne," Brooks guides her towards the door. "We're going to get you cleaned up and nice hot meal. And some people are going to help you keep those demons away. So they never come back."

"She'll feel a lot better in a few days," Hagstrom takes in the dark depressing flat. "She'll get someone to listen to her. Maybe for the first time."

"AB," Brooks nods. "I like these calls. Help, them get their life back."

As they levitate her towards the stairs, the SecuriScreen for number 18 crackles on again, "Shoot her! She's a witch! Throw her in a ditch. Cacking defects!"

Brooks looks sideways at the door as he passes, "I'd say there's a couple more in this block who could stand a little counsel," he mutters quietly.

"Copy that," whispers Hagstrom.

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Boulevard Shopping District
City Point
FIRST UNION
2075

Katija guides the cruiser into an empty berth on the avenue.

"So where is this place you want to go?"

Lizi points to a brightly lit shop further down the square.

"So Hagstrom says you were asking about his job?"

"I want to know what happens to the defectives."

"They're not defective, Lizi. They have a biological mutation. Like people with red hair. Or brown eyes. It's not their fault."

She scrunches her shoulders, "Hagstrom said there was a Union that shot Bans and buried them in big ditch."

"Yes, First Eastern. They scanned and shot their own citizens on the spot. But then the International Firewall discovered they had programmed their scanners to target minorities."

"Cào," she shakes her head, "not because they were defective?"

"No, Lizi. They are not defective. And nothing gives anyone the right to simply kill people and bulldoze them into a ditch."

Katija and Lizi get out of the cruiser and it locks behind them. The GPS location pings on Katija's com.

They cross the avenue between the black and white stanchions, and the air buffers slow the traffic around them to give them time to cross.

"The people who made those decisions," Katija continues, "were all brought to trial. They were scanned. Turns out that many of them were candidates for banishment themselves. You should look at that trial some time."

Katija stops and puts her hand on Lizi's shoulder, "Research all the facts first, Lizi. *Before* you make a judgment."

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

"You guess?" Katija narrows her eyes.

Lizi is distracted by the portal of a shoe shop.

Katija joins her, scanning the assortment for anything that catches her eye. Nothing does.

"Lizi," she continues, "this is always the biggest question with every Mandate vote: What do we do with those who have underdeveloped cortices? And we've tried many things. Infusion. Hydro-flate. Transplant."

They move along down the square.

"The reality is, Lizi, once a part of your brain has stopped developing, you can't force it to develop more."

"Ha," she snorts.

They arrive at the shop with all the colorful clothing fluttering behind the portal.

Katija turns to her daughter, "Every union worked on this. They built camps for them. They had their own island for several years. But they would always organize and then cause problems."

"Yeah, I guess they would."

"And still cost millions a year to house and feed. Finally, the people just had enough."

"So you kick them out."

"That's the current mandate."

Lizi looks down at her boots and shakes her head.

"Lizi, there hasn't been a war for over forty years. Crime rates have never been lower."

She scowls, "And everyone is okeydokey with this?"

"No, Lizi. Everyone is *not* okeydokey with this. The Mandate is voted on every seven years. On the last vote it barely passed the two-thirds majority. So there are a lot of people who are totally not okeydokey with this."

"Like Magi, and her DimCap parents."

"Borderline. I told you, they're borderline. You just have to accept that."

She shakes her head.

"Besides, there are so many levels of approval. Hagstrom can't scan anyone under twenty-five years old. The scan pattern history has to be reviewed by the Firewall. GeneBase has to do *their* testing. You know this. That's what I do all day in the lab. It's not a fast or simple process."

"Yeah. I guess."

Katija stops in mid-sentence. Her head jerks around and she looks hard at Lizi's face.

She firmly takes Lizi by the shoulders, and leans in, peering intently into her daw's eyes.

"Moms?" Lizi tries to pull away.

Then, suddenly, Katija snaps out of it. Like coming out of a trance.

She strokes her daw's shoulders.

"Oh my beautiful daughter. My beautiful, beautiful Lizi."

"Moms, you're all qíguài. If/else."

Katija shakes her head with a quick jerk. As though she's dismissing a thought.

She puts her arm around Lizi's shoulders, "Now let's go see this amazing shop. And buy some pretty things to wear."

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**Metro Central Station
Centralia West
FIRST UNION
2075**

Hyper Bean caff hub is bustling today. Clouds of steam waft up from the espresso machines, and bathe the air in the sweet bold smell of dark Jamaican heaven.

Cyrus has plenty of time.

Not much to do the office today. There's plenty of time to work on those—

"How's it going?" a voice from behind him breaks his thoughts.

Cyrus turns slightly and studies the face of the stranger behind him.

I've seen this guy before. Usually, same time as me.

"Not bad," Cyrus replies. "Just java time again," he shrugs.

The line moves forward one person.

"Yes. I see you here all the time," the guy responds. "You must like their coffee.

"It's good. It's good. I see you here too. Great minds think alike?" Cyrus smiles.

"Or great taste buds," the guy laughs.

The line moves again and it's Cyrus' time to order.

Then he moves down to the next window and waits for his order.

Cyrus takes his coffee and moves over to the side table to put sugar in it. The stranger walks up next to him.

"Jacob," the guy holds out his hand. "Just to put a face to a name."

Cyrus shakes it quickly. "Alexander," he smiles.

"Nice to meet you Alexander."

Cyrus heads for the door. Quickly. But not too obvious that he wants to get away from this guy.

Something in his tone of voice. The way he looks at me...

"Looks like rain," Jacob nods as they both exit the caff hub together.

Cyrus turns away quickly and heads for the street.

"Have a great day, Cyrus," Jacob says from behind him.

Cyrus stops. Spins around. "I told you, my name is Alexander," he squints.

Jacob walks up to him. Uncomfortably close. And in a voice quiet enough for nobody to overhear, "Actually it's Cyrus. Alexander is your middle name.

"Are you sure?" Cyrus smirks.

"You are Cyrus Alexander Latimer. You created a quantum radar beam that can read through encryption from a satellite. You can read a secure quantum communication."

Cyrus' ears burn.

How could he possibly know that? Nobody knows about that.

"I think you have mistaken me for..."

"No mistake. Did you ever find any real estate on a satellite to house it?"

"I think you have the wrong..."

"Would you like to have your own quantum satellite."

Ha!" Cyrus snorts. "Who wouldn't want their own satellite. You know how much that costs?"

"Ballpark. But you would need to tell me the exact specifications you need to run your beam."

"And who are you?" Cyrus feels panic rising.

The Shield? IO? Jesus!

"I'm a guy who could give you a series of numbers to a bank account in the Cayman Islands, holding ten million dollars. And you and your good wife Aoife could leave tonight and start a new life.

He knows who I am!

"Let's go over here for a moment."

Jacob walks over to the edge of the park. Away from the caff hub and the traffic. Where no one can hear them.

Cyrus follows. A little dazed by this conversation.

How much does this guy know?

"You want to buy my research, Jacob?"

"I will. Gladly. But I'd rather give you the a million as, say, a hiring bonus. And then work with you to build and launch the satellite."

"And why would you want to do that?"

"Because I have a few little jobs I'd like to do. And I need someone with your experience and talent to help me do them."

"Illegal jobs, no doubt."

"Depends on your definition of illegal. Is it illegal to hack someone's encrypted communication with his bank? And steal five grand? I hope you didn't transfer that to your personal account? Your bank is not very stable."

Oh crap. It's that guy.

The look on Cyrus' face must have been obvious.

"Yes. I'm *that* Jacob Jacobson."

Cyrus' eyes dart around looking for an exit.

"You stole five G's from me," Jacob sounds very calm, given the situation. "Smart. Who's going to notice such a small amount? But hey, my lawyer steals that from me every time I call him. Ha! But once I got over you stealing from me, I was more impressed with your skills. And now you know I'm not IO. Don't worry, Cyrus. I'm not going to turn you in. I worked too hard to find you. I'd rather join forces. Obviously, since you hacked my financials, you know what I'm worth.

Yeah. Billions! Jesus. How did this guy find me?

"And please forgive me," Jacob smiles, "if I misquote you, but the front-end of a quantum communication system is basically an analog optical system connected to the channel. Anyone can listen in. Isn't that what you believe?"

I never said that to anyone!

"But you need a satellite. To hold your beam. A very powerful satellite. And secure. Because no one owns space. It would need to be able to work unnoticed. And defend itself if someone tried to take it down. Am I getting warm on any of this?"

Cyrus' mouth opens but nothing comes out.

"And," Jacob continues, "the satellite would need to have a legitimate purpose. Otherwise, every Union is going to try to shoot it down claiming it's a spy satellite. Am I right? Have you figured out how to work that?"

"Well, no. That's a..."

Jacob leans in towards him, "I may have an answer there."

"I still haven't—" Cyrus starts.

"I have connections to Indian Space."

"You have connections to INDS?"

"No. Not INDS. NDNS."

"Diné?"

"Who else?" Jacob smiles. "Now. Let's talk about block currency."

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84.4460.60

Eastern Sixth Form Campus

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

"I watch these people on the TV news. They keep asking, 'Why are they acting like this?' It's so obvious."

"Winston, you're talking about childhood trauma again?"

A groan murmurs through the class room.

Lecturer Neva Nearthunder turns to the students, "Settle down now."

"This is like ancient history," whines Jaeb, the red-headed boy who always sits in the front. "Why we gotta hear all this again?"

Lecturer Nearthunder pauses the audio file and turns to the class.

"First of all, M. Southmile, this is the first time we have listened to this particular audio file. And secondly, our focus today is on why we screen out candidates for public office who are carrying unresolved issues from childhood trauma."

Lizi and Kai are making funny faces to each other in the back.

"Jaeb has issues," Lizi mouths to Kai.

Kai nods approvingly.

"Is there something our Dynamic Duo wanted share with the whole class?" Nearthunder is staring straight at them. "Or is this just another private conversation between the two of you again?"

Lizi turns red. "I was just agreeing with you," she shrugs, trying to get out of the spotlight.

"And what, specifically, were you agreeing with me about? M Katijasdaw?"

Lizi clears her throat, hunches her shoulders forwards, "Just—you know—about remembering the past. And stuff."

Lizi glances at Kai. Kai's face is buried in her book.

Way to back me up, bitch.

"And, more specifically," Nearthunder isn't letting her go, "What is important about the subject of today's audio history file? As it pertains to our current structure of government?"

Lizi snickers, then catches herself. "I don't know. I haven't heard it yet," she smirks.

"Exactly," Nearthunder smiles. "So, if it's quite alright with you, M Katijasdaw, can the whole class now actually hear the audio file?"

Lizi turns even redder. If that's possible. She hunches her shoulders and slumps into her seat, as some of her classmates stare at her and make faces.

Nearthunder clicks the audio file back on, "This audio file is from oldyear 2016. It is a recording of an internet podcast from the Netherlands. And the host is Georges Lemaître. His guests are Winston Smith, the author of OS2020, and a licensed clinical psychologist Doctor Lindora Washington. Let's have a listen."

She casts her eyes briefly back towards the still scowling Lizi.

The podcast resumes:

"Yes, Georges, abused children in adult bodies."

"Ahh—"

"They need to see pain in someone eyes, to medicate the pain they feel."

"Dr. Washington, I see you nodding your head there."

Scowler is raising his hand. Scowling. As usual.

Nearthunder stops the audio file. "Yes, M Wilson?"

"Why do we have to go over it and over it?" He crosses his arms throws himself back in his seat.

"We have to talk about it, in order to understand why we have the systems that we have today. Where they came from. Why they are important. Are you uncomfortable talking about the history of your union?"

"No!" Wilson scowls. "It's just the... stuff," he waves his hand.

"Abuse?" Nearthunder raises her eyebrows. "Are you uncomfortable talking about childhood trauma?"

"No!" Wilson flares, his eyes narrow, his lips tight. "I'm not scared of anybody!"

"I see," Nearthunder nods with a flat expression.

Wilson glances around him and sinks his head even lower between his shoulders.

Kai raises her hand.

Lizi looks sideways at her with an alarmed expression.

"M Clearview? Did you have something to add?" Nearthunder nods.

"Being uncomfortable talking about this stuff is why the last empire collapsed," Kai smiles.

"We will have several opportunities to explore that collapse in our future studies," Nearthunder replies. "But for now, can we continue?"

Dr. Washington is speaking now:

"Trying to medicate pain, generates denial in these adults. They construct a reality around themselves that reinforces what they want to believe. Not what is true."

"And what do they want to believe?"

"That complete strangers are trying to hurt them. They imagine enemies where they don't exist."

"Ahh."

"Even when this artificial reality fails, they can't admit it. Because the voice of their abuser rings in their heads, 'See. I told you that you were stupid.' And that, is the one thing they cannot hear."

"So they double down."

"Yes," Dr. Washington continues, "emotional trauma is cumulative and progressive. It constantly finds new ways to assert itself."

"This sounds crazy."

"This is not insane behavior. This is normal behavior."

"Normal?"

"Normal for anyone who suffered abuse."

"And people who imagine enemies that don't exist," Winston adds, "have no place in any public office."

Nearthunder stops the audio file.

"So this is our question for today. Under the current OS, all candidates for public office are screened, to determine if they are carrying unresolved anger or fear. If they are, then they are banned from getting on a ballot. Is this right or wrong? Good or bad? Write down your thoughts and we will discuss."

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**IO Processing Center
Western Gate
FIRST UNION
2075**

"Are the responsible Agents present?"

"2742 Hagstrom Vik from IO," Hagstrom stands.

"2951 Brooks Winslow from IO," he stands.

The Senior Screen Officer nods her head towards them.

They sit down.

The man in the docket wears a standard red jumpsuit.

The blue restraining beam is not activated.

He sits quietly.

It's a large circular room, sparsely furnished.

The outer wall is covered with dark blue fabric stretched in panels over soundproofing material.

A bench seat runs around the entire outer wall. Punctuated only by the openings of three apertures.

A ring of lights recessed into the ceiling illuminate the man in the docket from all angles.

The only other lights in the room shine on a long thin table in front of the docket podium. And the five people seated there.

Next to the end of the table is a much smaller table where the Senior Officer stands with her tablet.

"Let's get started." The Senior puts down her tablet and turns to the five people seated in front of the man.

"Members of the Union Firewall, this is case M-77516-LL. The person in front of you is Finn Abelsmon. Two days ago, the Firewall voted for immediate and permanent banishment of this individual from the Union. Will you confirm that please?"

The Firewall member in the middle of the five rises and reads: "Whereas, The Firewall of The First Union has declared the person of Finn Abelsmon to be Civiliter Mortuus. Whereas, banishment has been agreed by unanimous vote. Whereas, The First Union Firewall does hereby issue the order of immediate and permanent banishment of the person, case number

M-77516-LL. Therefore, The First Union Firewall does hereby authorize the Screen to execute this order."

She sits back down.

The Senior turns back towards the docket.

"Very well, let's proceed."

Finn Ablesmon looks down at his shoes and slowly shakes his head.

"You've had your routine body scans in preparation for banishment."

The Senior scrolls on her tablet.

"It was all just bad judgment," Ablesmon says quietly.

"M Ablesmon, you've had your trial. The Firewall has made their decision," the Senior looks him squarely in the face.

"I never thought—I didn't mean—all those things I said. I was just trying to get votes."

Brooks elbows Hagstrom in the ribs. Hagstrom ignores it.

"Yes. You are—were—a Minister in the OS. And you were scanned and evaluated before you even got on the ballot. So your behavior was deliberate, premeditated and without regard to the safety and security of the citizens."

"I was just trying to get votes," he croaks weakly.

"M Ablesmon," the Senior Agent reads from the report, "you did knowingly and willingly spread anti-immigrant fear and anger in the process of campaigning for your office. Your rhetoric was directly responsible for acts of violence towards immigrants in your district."

Ablesmon nods.

"As a result, you were referred to the Firewall for consideration. After investigations, you were determined to be a threat to the safety and security of the citizens. Subsequently you received a unanimous decision by the Firewall that you be immediately and permanently banished from the First Union. Do you understand what I have explained to you?"

Ablesmon nods weakly staring at the floor.

"I need a verbal confirmation please."

"Yes. I understand," he croaks.

"Have you made a decision on where you wish to be banished to?"

He shakes his head.

"Do you have a decision now?"

He shakes his head again, "Does it really matter?"

The Senior looks at the Firewall members.

The Firewall member in the middle of the five rises, "M Ablesmon, according to Firewall code, if a banishment destination has not been personally chosen, then you forfeit the choice to the First Union Firewall. Do you understand this?"

He shrugs, "Does it really really matter?"

The lead Firewall representative sits back down and confers with the other members briefly. They scroll through a screen on their table. They all look at the screen and one by one they nod. The lead Firewall member looks up at the Senior Officer.

"Members of the First Union Firewall, have you made a decision on a banishment destination?"

"Yes we have," they answer in unison.

The Senior turns to the man in the docket, "M Ablesmon, I ask you again, will you choose a destination to be banished to?"

He shakes his head.

"I need a verbal confirmation."

"I'm ruined anyway. What does it matter?"

The Senior turns to the Firewall members, "Will you accept that as a confirmation that Finn Abelsmon, case number M-77516-LL, forfeits his choice of a banishment destination over to the First Union Firewall?"

The Firewall members confer.

"Yes we do."

"M Ablesmon, one last chance, do you forfeit your choice of a destination to the First Union Firewall?"

"I don't care," he shakes his head staring at his shoes.

She turns back to the Firewall members, "Members of the First Union Firewall will you now assemble the processing documentation?"

The Firewall lead member nods.

She turns back to the docket, "M Ablesmon, you are hereby banished from the First Union for as long as you shall live. Do you understand that if you cross back into The First Union territory anywhere, you will be killed on sight? Do you understand this?"

He sighs deeply, "Yes."

The Senior turns towards the five Firewall members, "Will you accept that as a confirmation that he understands the consequences of returning to the First Union?"

The Firewall members talk quietly between themselves for a moment.

Then the one in the center speaks, "Yes. We accept that he understands the consequences."

"Very well. Then thank you for your service to the Union. We shall now get the documents prepared and the authorization reports."

The Firewall member in the center stands, "Thank you for your service to the Union."

She nods, then turns towards Hagstrom and Brooks, "Agents, if you would like to do the transfer order now? And you can remove your charge from the docket?"

"Absolutely," Hagstrom nods.

"Well, that's that," Brooks whispers under his breath.

The Firewall members shuffle out and the Senior sits down at her table and starts to process the banishment.

Hagstrom and Brooks approach the docket.

Brooks takes out his blue beam and looks at the former Minister, "And now you are going to find out. First hand."

M Ablesmon look questioningly at him.

Brooks leans forward slightly, "What it's like to show up on someone else's border with no paperwork. No money, no job, nothing."

The color drains out of the former Minister's face.

"You get to experience firsthand what it feels like, to be a refugee. An illegal immigrant."

os2020

84.4460.100

Eastern Sixth Form College Library

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

Lizi taps on the edge of the plasma screen, sending ripples across its surface, "Wồ cào!
This is so blurry."

"Is this an extract?"

"No, it's original."

"Why is it so blurry?"

"It says it's the original paper file from the author."

"Paper? Old school."

"Way old school."

Lizi and Kai hunch together and squeeze forward into the library cubicle so no one can hear them. Especially the LibMon who keeps scowling their way every few minutes.

"So, why we gotta look at all this old junk anyway," Lizi scowls.

"Because it's history, Z. We're doing a history certificate. Remember? If you don't like history then why are you doing this course?"

Lizi shrugs and looks away. "'Cause you said it would be interesting."

"You did it because of me?"

"You're my friend. You know. And stuff."

"But, Lizi, If you don't want to be here—"

"I wanna be here," Lizi cuts her off. "I just— that woman..."

"The lecturer? M Nearthunder?"

"She's não cân," Lizi smirks.

"Não cân?"

"Deficient brain."

They both giggle behind their hands

The LibMon clears her throat. Lizi and Kai turn and she is glowering at them.

They turn back into their cubicle and hunch forward out of sight.

"LibMon is gōng gòng qì chē."

"What's that?"

"Public bus. Everyone gets a ride."

They scrunch tighter into their cubicle, hands over their mouths. Their bodies shaking in silent laughter.

Kai taps the screen and opens the cover of the DigiScan, "So what was the big deal about this 'OS2020' thing? I mean this is all like old dead news."

"This was like the first time anyone tried to deal with the Unders."

"When? Like a hundred years?"

"Not even."

They both stare at a blurry scan on the screen.

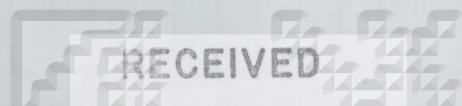
os 2020

A cross-platform upgrade for all Operating Systems.

The OS2020 update improves the stability, compatibility, and security of your country.

This update:

- ⦿ Removes 'representational' voting.
 - ⦿ Returns voting power to the users.
 - ⦿ Performs brain scans and psychological tests on all current public servants, to identify substandard components.
 - ⦿ Cleans out corrupt files.
 - ⦿ Fixes an issue that allowed corporate lobbying to infect the operating system.
 - ⦿ Resolves several administrative flaws.
-
- Installation on older systems may be slower.
 - Some features may not be available for all countries or areas.
 - Upgrading your Operating System is optional, and voluntary.
 - Not upgrading your Operating System can leave your country open to attacks and corruption of vital systems.



Admin

The Operating System of the nation is administered by:

- ◎ The Firewall
- ◎ The Trust
- ◎ The People

The Firewall

The Firewall is a council of ordinary citizens, who identify faulty or malicious components. They have the power to immediately and permanently banish anyone.

Membership:

- The Firewall shall consist of 51 members.
- Members are drafted from the list of all registered voters.
- Members are drafted to serve one-year terms.
- Drafted members have the right to refuse the appointment.
- Members must have held citizenship for the last seven consecutive years.
- Firewall total membership must accurately reflect the demographics of the nation.
- Members are drawn by a random lottery, generated by an algorithm that chooses potential candidates, based on current demographics of the country.

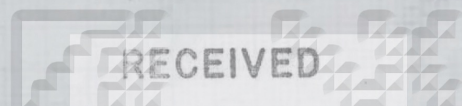
For example:

51% of Firewall Members must be women.

19% of Firewall Members must be Hispanic.

15% of Firewall Members must be over 65 years old.

Etc.



"Wait..." Kai scowls at the screen. "This is the beginning?"

"Uh..." Lizi squints at the document and flips through several pages. "This is like way ago. Like when OS2020 first got installed."

"They didn't have a Firewall?"

"Nī mèi! How stupid were these people?"

"Seriously!" Kai turns. "How did they hold anyone accountable?"

"I don't know," Lizi scrolls through the pages.

"They had these Representatives who wrote and voted on the laws."

"The guys who wrote the laws, were the only ones who voted on the laws? So, the people never got to vote on any laws?"

"What?"

"Nī mèi!" whispers Kai. "The people who wrote the laws, were the only ones who got to vote on them? Wǒ cào!"

"Hagstrom showed me. I guess a buncha people died 'cause of this."

"OS2020?"

"Yeah, that ago, they had Unders all over the mainframe. Like a virus."

"Unders," Kai stares at the pages, open mouthed. "Unders, writing and voting on laws."

"Nǎo cán."

"Seriously nào cán."

"And not just Unders, whispers Lizi. "Hagstrom told me that people who were abused got elected to public offices."

"Wait, what?"

"And no one was allowed to point it out."

"Not allowed? They let people with unresolved issues have positions in their operating system? Were these people crazy?"

"I guess a lot of people kept electing them to protect their own denial about their own issues."

"You'll never get on a ballot today if you have a history and never get counsel. That's like worse than getting caught owning a weapon."

"So, who wrote this?" Lizi scans over the image.

Kai scrolls to the header page, "Winston Smith."

"The guy that we heard on the audio file?" Lizi's eyes widen.

"Why?"

"Hagstrom said that guy got killed."

"For this?" Kai jabs to the screen.

"I know. This is like the operating system of The Union today."

"Pretty close. And they killed him?"

Lizi shrugs, shaking her head.

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Exact Location Unknown
Southern Alliance
2075

Joonus Kasak is restless.

Talk, talk, talk. Let's get this over. And get to the action.

The brightly lit warehouse has rows of wooden benches. Twenty-nine women and men from different countries sit side by side. But all are here for the same reason.

All eyes are on the platform as The Kaptan steps up to speak.

"What is a good man but a bad man's teacher?" his voice is confident. Even. Without anger or fear.

The words he is reciting appear on the wall behind him. Everyone in the room says them together. Like they have done these many times before.

"What is a good man but a bad man's teacher?"

"What is a bad man but a good man's job?"

The Kaptan does not fit the image of who Joonus was expecting to see. He's not tall. Not large or muscular. You could walk right past him on the street and not even notice him. There is nothing remarkable about him.

Except for his eyes. Cold. Unblinking.

They can see right through you.

The image of a group of politicians blinks onto the wall behind him.

"Every day, the minority party does something to take away the freedoms of the people."

The Kaptan points to the image behind him, "And the majority party responds with scowls and shaming. They give passionate speeches condemning this behavior. But they don't physically do anything to protect those freedoms. Or, restore them."

The image behind him changes to many smaller images.

"The minority party calls itself the Freedom Party," The Kaptan shakes his finger at the images. "To them, the word 'freedom' means freedom to control. To hurt people to feel good about themselves."

"This is not freedom," The Kaptan makes eye contact with those in the front row, "this is treason."

As he talks, he moves over to the rotating barrel on the stand, "The Firewall sits on its thumbs. The justice system are cowards. The people are defenseless."

He places his hand on the barrel, from which, they will each draw their missions, "If a man threatens your family, your home, you stop him. You don't form a committee to study the situation. You don't stand around making speeches about how he shouldn't be doing that."

Scattered snickers throughout the room.

"You stop him. Immediately."

"Immediately," is the reply.

"We defend the defenseless."

"We defend the defenseless."

"We neutralize the threat."

"We neutralize the threat."

The Kaptan pauses and lets the tension in the room calm a little.

He walks to a corner of the platform, about a meter in front of the first row of benches. Where Joonus sits.

"We are the last defensive line. The people need a mechanism."

"We are the mechanism." the response bounces off the walls.

The Kaptan raises his hand "Thirty spokes—"

The immediate response in unison from the benches:

"Thirty spokes join together in a wheel."

"But it is the center hub that makes the wagon move."

**We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hub
that makes the wagon move.**

**We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds what we need.**

**We join wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it a home.**

**We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.**

Daodejing

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Eastern Sixth Form College Library basement

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

By the time Lizi gets to Chamber 6 in the lower level of the Library, Brad is already there.

Of course he is.

It's his club. His idea.

The club sign is already fastened on the outside of the door.

In all three universal languages.

Like all Union signs.

Dead Words Club

死词俱乐部

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Lizi pushes inside.

"Buckaroo, buccaneer!" Brad sings out his usual greeting.

"Buckaroo, Brad," Lizi slides into a seat.

"You decided on a name yet?"

"Yeah. I think I'm gonna go with Rosie. Rosie the Riveter."

"Yeah? From that picture? Way cool. Like it."

Kai pushes through the door, and slides next to Lizi.

"Buckaroo, Femme Fatale."

Kai smiles, "Tout le monde, Rapscaillon."

Brad grins from ear to ear. His face gets a little red.

Lizi glares at him, and he turns away quickly.

The usual crowd shuffles in: Moonshine, Snake Oil, Bilge Water... The gang's all here.

A thin mousy shadow of a girl, blinking like a mole that has just come above ground, slips quietly into the room.

"Buckaroo Funkadelic," chimes Brad.

"Funky Town, Brad," she nods.

Funkadelic drops into a chair opposite Kai and Lizi.

"Hey Funk," Lizi smiles.

Kai gives her a small wave.

Funkadelic looks around the table, then leans forward, "Erm... Any of you guys ever been to see the crater?"

"The crater in The Zone?" Brad frowns. "The Arizona Territory?"

"Erm... Yeah..."

"Don't go there, Funk. It's dangerous. Bunch of crazy people fighting their own imaginations."

"It's true," Kai taps her pencil on the table.

Lizi swivels around quickly.

Kai? You don't usually talk in here...

"They tried to build a wall around the entire territory," Kai continues softly. "Shot anyone who wasn't a white christian."

"No one wants to get in," Brad shakes his head.

"There's no firewall," Kai continues. "Just gangs of angry white people killing each other for whatever food and guns they have."

"Sounds like you know a lot about it," Brad scowls.

Kai swivels around to him, "Yes. Yes, Brad I do." And gives him one of her trademark melting butter smiles.

"Kai's been there," Lizi scowls at Brad.

For someone you claim to worship from afar, you don't seem to know shit about Kai, Brad.

"Yes," Kai smiles. "I've seen the crater."

Brad's eyes pop wide open, "You whaaa..."

"It's near the northern wall, Funk," Kai starts drawing a diagram in her notebook. "The crater is a short walk south of the road," she taps on the diagram. "They say the meteor crashed there 50,000 years ago."

"Wait. Wait. Wait," Brad waves his hand. "You've *been* there?"

"Yes, Brad. I lived in Window Rock for a year. And I took a trip to the crater."

"Were you gathering material for the Gene Base group?" asks Funkadelic.

"No. I just wanted to see it."

"They say that shadow DNA was found in single cell organisms. In the meteor fragments."

"Yes! That's how we can all trace our Haplo to the Diné."

"So that really *is* where it all comes from?"

"Near as they can tell," Kai tears out the diagram, folds it in half and passes it to Funkadelic.

"And you just jumped over the wall?" Brad squints. "Just like that? With all those crazy people? All their guns and stuff?"

"The wall isn't complete. There are large stretches that are unbuilt. You can just walk across," Kai smiles. "And the so called 'guards' are easily distracted."

"In-breeding," Lizi snorts. "Probably."

"You just watch and wait. And you can practically walk right past them. We created a diversion, and got them fighting each other. One guy got so angry, he shot another one. And they all scattered like frightened birds. And we just walked right through."

"So stupid," Lizi laughs. "Safe and secure, my ass."

"Ha!" Moonshine laughs. "Sounds like my family."

"The point is," Kai smiles a butter melting smile, "that we all know we're from the same haplo group, because we all feel the same way."

There's something about the sound of her voice that draws you in.

"All of us," she continues softly, "have all had the same thought: *I don't belong with the rest of this species.*"

Around the table heads nod mutely.

There is a moment of silence in the room. Everyone looks far away. Locked in their own thoughts.

"If you do go, Funk," Kai taps on the map she drew, "go to the Nation and get a guide. They go in and out of the Zone all the time."

"Thanks," Funkadelic looks at the map.

"All right, everyone." Brad stands up. "This meeting of the Dead Words Club is now called to order."

He pulls a note out from his sling pack.

"Today's dead words, courtesy of Moonshine, are: Davenport, dungarees and icebox."

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Belgium
EUROPEAN UNION
OldYear 2016

"And we're back. This is Radio Safe Net, Belgium. Good morning. I'm your host Georges Le-maître. And today's guest is Mr. Winston Smith."

"So, Winston, just before the break you were going to tell me more about this Firewall. Just a group of average citizens?"

"Yes. Drafted to serve one-year terms. They can decline if they want to."

"And how are they chosen?"

"Random algorithm of registered voters. To make sure the body of the Firewall accurately represents the population. Fifty-one percent women. Thirteen percent black. Etcetera."

"Random. Algorithm?"

"Simple to set up, but accurately represents the citizenry."

"And anyone can be dragged in front of the Firewall?"

"Everyone, Georges. Police officers. Judges. Military. The richest one percent. Even legislators and the President."

"The President?"

"It's the ultimate check and balance. The people decide. Average people."

"But they already vote. So, aren't they deciding by that?"

"Yes, but after they are in office, there is no way to hold them accountable. You have to find a legal way to remove them. But political parties will block that. So they get to serve a full term,

manipulating the government and the country, to serve the desires of the wealthy who paid for their elections."

"So, no more lobbying. No more special interest groups."

"None. They can all be thrown out of the country."

"So The President could be dragged in front of the Firewall."

"And the other members of their party. And the rich backers. And even the military if necessary. Everyone is accountable. Everyone can be banished."

"Winston. This... Wow! That's a lot of power to give average people. How do you stop them from abusing it?"

"All potential Firewall members are scanned for an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, and undergo psychological evaluation to determine if they are carrying unresolved issues from being abused as a child."

"And they are rejected because of that?"

"You will be rejected if you fail either test."

"Only cool rational heads on the board?"

"Not emotionally driven by unresolved issues. And possessing a fully developed prefrontal cortex."

"It seems so basic when you say that. So rational. So logical. Like..."

"Like why haven't we been doing this all along?"

"Exactly!"

"Well, Winston, this would guarantee... It would change..."

"Everything, Georges. Everything."

"Well, Winston, I'm going to ask you to stick around and we can take some questions from our listeners. If that's all right?"

"It's why I'm here."

"Great. Great. And, for all of our listeners out there today, this is Radio Safe Net, Belgium. I'm your host Georges Lemaître. Today talking with Mr. Winston Smith. And we will take your questions right after these messages from our sponsors."

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707.127

Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

"How was your Dead Words Club?" Katija calls from the kitchen.

Lizi slides onto a stool at the counter and drops her sling pack, "Davenport, dungarees and icebox."

"Icebox..." Katija stops stirring the pot and looks wistfully out the window. "What a fun word."

"Not when they say it about you."

"No." Katija frowns pensively. "I suppose not."

"Mom, did you work on the Diné haplo?"

"No, Lizi. I started on the Denisova."

"And they came from a meteor too? Right?"

"Yes. From the Popigai Crater."

"They ever figure out what planet it came from?"

"Not from our solar system, Lizi. As best as we can tell. Why are you interested in all this? I thought my work bored you?"

"They were talking about it. That's all."

"Your haplo pals?"

"Yeah."

"Lizi, it's why you guys clump together. You bond by your similar methyl markers."

"Mom, speak UENG. You know I don't understand labspeak."

Katija smiles, "You guys are all in that group because you share enough similar DNA. And you subconsciously recognize it in each other."

"How does *that* work?" Lizi scrunches her nose.

"Methyl markers, my darling daw."

"What's a methyl marker?"

"Along with DNA's coded string of nucleotides, G, T, A, and C, there are also methyl markers found *between* the nucleotides."

"That's those colored bits on the chart over your desk?"

"Yes. The blue, green, yellow and red are the nucleotides in sequence. Between them are the markers. And they are unique. Like your fingerprint. The markers change the way your body's RNA reads the code, altering the proteins that come out of it."

Lizi squints.

"Sorry for the 'labspeak' honey." Katija looks at Lizi, "Hmm... OK. Here..."

She picks up an old leather-bound book next to the cooker.

"This is really over simplified, but this is Grandma Gee's cookbook. She got it from her mother who got it from her mother."

"On the Diné Nation?"

"This book goes back before that. Back during the Last Empire when they lived on a reservation."

"Yeah, we read about those."

"And ever since this book was written, the order of the recipes, and the details of each recipe, are the same. Exact. This is how it was passed down. So, if you think about the recipes as the nucleotides, the building blocks of your DNA, then they are the same through four generations of females in the family."

"I like grandma's ginger cake."

"Yes! Good! Because..."

Katija leafs through the book to the recipe for ginger cake, and lays the book open on the counter.

"Here is the recipe your grandma used. But look in the margins," she points with the tip of the wooden spoon. "She made notes. See here? She changed the sugar to honey. And I added golden raisins. And I always make it this way now. So grandma's notes, and my notes in the margins are like the methyl markers in the margins of your DNA. Except, of course, that with DNA the changes are permanent."

"So, me and Kai, and all the others make ginger cake the same way?"

"Really an over-simplified and not very good comparison. But, essentially, everyone who carries the genetic material found in the Canyon Diablo meteorites has the same recipe for ginger cake. With the same notes in the margins, where it was changed."

"I get it now. Yǒuqù," Lizi beams.

"The markers can be added and removed in response to external stimuli. Making them a kind of running commentary in the margins of your DNA. For your grandma, she changed the sugar to honey because they had beehives on the farm where she grew up. And they had lots of honey for free. But they would have to buy sugar from the store."

"It's like, you get a whole story from one little thing. Like a scribble on the side of the page. But the story—like—why it's there..." Lizi trails off.

Katija initiates the hydrocook, "In terms of DNA, those notes in the margin are like a switch."

She selects a combination for dinner and presses start.

"Switch?" Lizi squints.

"Yes, it switches off a gene."

"Weird."

"Every blue-eyed person is descended from a single European who lived between 6,000 to 10,000 years ago."

"Every one?"

"All humans originally had brown eyes. But a genetic mutation called HERC2 switches off OCA2, the gene that controls how much brown pigment we make."

"So, you're saying that everyone who has blue eyes has that switch in the margin of their cookbook?"

"Exactly. To use a cooking metaphor. Yes."

Lizi flips through Grandma Gee's handwritten pages.

"But Lizi, you have two recipe books inside you," Katija talks over her shoulder. "My parents came here from Malta."

"The chicken farmers?"

"Yes. Buttigieg. It means 'chicken farmer' in Maltese. But they came from Qala, on the island of Gozo. So, you have *their* recipe book. *Their* DNA. And, your paternal grandparents were born in Tsaile, OldState Arizona. They were full-blooded Navajo. So, you have *their* recipe book. *Their* DNA."

"I wish I'd met Grandma Gee."

"Yes. Your father's mother was an amazing woman. She helped me a lot after he left us. You would have liked Grandma Gee. You two are very much alike."

"So, all the Diné people have the same notes in their margins?" Lizi flips through the recipe book. There are other changes and notes in the margins. In different handwriting.

"The methyl markers in the shadow DNA found inside the meteorite fragments show up in the Diné, Pueblo and Hopi people of the area. And no one else on earth. It's what distinguishes one strain of human beings from another. So far, there are sixteen identifiable strains."

"It's just weird. And they can trace it to space rocks? Chunks of meteor in the crater?"

"Yes, Lizi. Traceable to the oxidized iron fragments scattered around it."

"So that *is* true..."

"What's true, honey?"

"Kai went to the Diné crater."

"In the Zone? Lizi, that's so dangerous."

"Yeah. She went with others from the Nation. People who done it before. They know how to get in and out without being seen."

"Still, Lizi. It's just not wise to tempt fate."

"She's fine. She's smart. I just wish that Brad would stop undressing her with his eyes all the time."

"Who's Brad? Do I know this Brad?"

"He's hard to miss. Got a melon the size of a melon."

"Lizi. You know that's not polite."

"Well, he does, Moms. It's huge. Galactic."

"Still... You shouldn't talk about it. Imagine how *he* feels."

"When he was a kid, they called him 'Head'. Or 'Frankie'. Like you know, for Frankenstein?"

"Yes Lizi, I do remember Frankenstein. Still... You kids."

"Kai thinks he's Juluensis, not Sopian. His real name is Felsbrad. It's a Viking name. And he plays in a band."

"Oh," Katija replies distractedly. As she starts setting the table for dinner.

"Yeah, he's got a pirate cowboy band called Brad Nailer. They dress like pirate coats and boots. And cowboy hats. And cowboy shirts."

"Well, that's unique."

"They're all right, I guess. Kai and I saw them play once."

"And what kind of music does a 'pirate cowboy' band play?"

"He plays like a lute—box fiddle. Skin drums. But all electrified."

"Sounds very interesting. Any songs I might like?"

"Probably not. They're all about fucking."

Katija lowers her eyes and stares at her. "You just say that stuff for the shock value. I know. We all went through that phase."

Lizi pouts, and picks at her fingernails.

"It's a phase my darling daw, even I went through it."

Lizi scowls.

"Yes, Lizi. Even I, your nucleotide obsessed mother."

She resumes setting the table.

"It's not a 'phase', Mom," Lizi kicks at the floor with her toe, "It's real life."

"Come on, get your stuff put away. Hagstrom will be home soon and we can have dinner."

As if on cue, Hagstrom opens the door, "Hi all. We smooth today?"

"Mister Smooth is home," Lizi grabs her sling pack and brushes past him out of the kitchen.

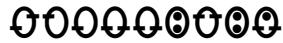
Hagstrom shrugs it off.

He walks over to Katija and wraps his arm around her waist.

She spins around and plants a big wet kiss on his lips.

"Happy," she beams.

"Smooth," he grins.



Cadet Training Facility
The Shield
City Point
FIRST UNION
2075

"Good morning, cadets."

The Senior Instructor strides into the room.

Seven Cadets stare back at her.

They fidget around stiffly in their brand-new IO jackets.

"Today, Lead Counsel 77163 Kamal from The Shield is here to teach you about behaviors you will encounter in the field. Lead Counsel Kamal oversees the Attendant Counsels that accompany you on your WatchCom when you are on a call. With twelve years of experience, he is a valuable resource. So, listen up. Ask questions. *Pay* attention. You *will* be tested."

Kamal enters the room.

The Senior Instructor waves her hand, "They're all yours."

"Good morning," Kamal casts his eyes over the bright young faces. Eager. No clue about the job that waits in front of them.

So young. So determined. But only a few of you will make the grade. And I will find out who you are. And what you're made of.

He holds up an IO scanner. "Your scanner is your best friend. It provides you with the physical proof that you need to do your job. It will tell you immediately if the target has a non-completing prefrontal cortex."

Kamal looks around the room, making sure he has made eye contact with each of them, before he proceeds.

"But it cannot detect if an individual suffered trauma as a child. Some of the behaviors are going to look the same. On the surface. As a field agent, you will need to know the difference between the two."

He sets the scanner down on the podium. "You need to think and act quickly. But, in your haste, you cannot afford to be wrong."

Kamal approaches a female Cadet sitting in the front row.

"It is a delicate balance. One that even the most seasoned agents wrestle with on a daily basis. And so it is of the utmost importance that you can spot the differences as quickly as possible."

The female Cadet looks uncomfortable being singled out.

Good. Get all that out of your system, before you put on that badge.

He puts two IO scan reports on the screen.

"One major difference, is that non-completion makes people incapable of objective introspection. Whereas, those who were abused, *are* capable. Because they question if it was their fault that they were abused."

He points to the first scan, "In the field, citizens with non-completing cortices will resist. And fight you. They are well aware of their situation. But they can't do anything about it. They will fight for their lives."

Kamal nods her head towards the second scan, "This individual, put an IO agent in the hospital, with a broken collarbone and internal bleeding. He was fighting for *his* life. Something *you* might have to do. At some point."

The female Cadet in the front row looks positively terrified now.

You are not going to make it, my girl.

Kamal approaches a muscular male Cadet, sitting at the end of the front row. The Cadet stiffens as he approaches.

"If you were physically abused—If your father called you a coward, a weakling," Kamal looks him right in the eyes. "If he smacked you around. Beat you with his belt..."

The Cadet is getting red in the face, "then you will seize any opportunity to physically strike out at anyone. In the desperate attempt to hurt your father. As much as he hurt you."

The Cadet clenches his fists. Kamal stares directly at him. The Cadet's eyes dart around quickly. Then, as if remembering where he is, his eyes become wide, and he sits back in his chair. Looking a little embarrassed.

"This job," Kamal continues to stare him down, "is no place, for *anyone*, to resolve their unresolved issues."

There is an awkward pause and silence in the room.

Kamal turns and walks back to the podium, "Abuse victims hurt other people to feel good about themselves. Cruelty is the point."

He puts up a graphic on the screen.

"They ridicule others, call them stupid. Mock them. Shout at them. And hit them. The way they were ridiculed, mocked, shouted at and hit when they were young. This is where they learned this behavior. Children learn by example."

The muscular Cadet lowers his face trying to hide the bright red flush that covers it.

"They need to force, control and punish someone,' Kamal continues, "the way they were forced, controlled and punished when they were a child.'

He points to the graphic, "Those who were emotionally abused need to convince themselves that they are smarter than whoever is in front of them at any given moment. And this will include you, as the approaching agent."

It is dead quiet in the room.

"The physically abused constantly need to convince themselves that they are stronger than whoever is in front of them at any given moment. And this will also include you, as the approaching agent."

Two Cadets in the front row cast sideways looks at each other.

"Those who suffered sexual abuse, cling to weapons. Because it makes them feel safe from ever being abused again."

There is some fidgeting in the back of the room.

"They obsess about pedophiles," Kamal reads from the graphic. "They accuse anyone who happens to be in front of them at any given moment of being a pedophile or a groomer. Because it's the worst thing they can imagine to call someone."

He turns and looks directly at the Cadets, "Because it's the worst thing that ever happened to them."

"This is why," he approaches the female Cadet again, "when you try to constrain them, they will see you as taking the side of their original abuser. And trying to make them defenseless again. And all their unresolved anger and fear will fly out towards you. It's knee-jerk self-defense reaction."

Kamal moves back in front of the screen.

The female Cadet looks positively horrified. Like she's trying to decide whether or not to just get up and leave.

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Exact Location Unknown
Hyrcanian Forest
2075

"They will kill to defend their lies," The Kaptan's voice bounces off the crumbling block walls of the garage.

The wind whips and wails outside. A cold front from the north has been blasting through the ancient forest for days. It pounds and rattles the metal roof panels above their heads, threatening to tear them off.

The hulks of fossil fuel gulping machines lounge around the abandoned garage. The smell of petrol and diesel oil still rises from the dirt floor.

The smell of a failed empire.

The Kaptan gestures to the projected images washing the wall behind him, "Shame is useless. Strong words—stern faces—condemnations mean nothing to liars. They will kill to defend their lies."

Twenty-nine Soldiers of Truth squat quietly on the dirty floor. Their sharpfire rifles and packs beside them. Ready to go.

"Someone needs to be willing to kill to defend the truth."

The tension among the Soldiers is electric. They are ready.

The images change on the wall.

"Angry children in suits," he gestures at the images, "have taken over this party. Distorted its goals with their anger."

He looks straight into the eyes of a soldier right in front of him.

"And the rest have to support this distortion. Or leave."

A few of the Soldiers nod silently as he speaks.

"This is not one party fighting another party."

He shakes his head slowly.

"This is those who were abused, fighting those who were not abused."

The angry wind squeals across the glass windows.

"This does not fade away. It does not reverse course. It only increases."

He stands and faces the images projected on the wall.

"The only way to stop this, is to match force for force."

He turns and faces the Soldiers again.

"But most will not do that. Because they are not emotionally damaged. They are polite. Respectful. They act politely towards those who act abusive towards them. They think that's the right thing to do."

The angry wind pounds on the metal roof panels. They rattle like suits of armor.

"It's not the right thing. Acting politely gains them nothing," the Kaptan continues. "Just makes them feel good about themselves. And the abusive ones laugh at them, as they walk right over them."

He shakes his head slowly, "Most people are cowards. They move away from conflict."

The soldiers nod, their eyes fixed, their resolve firm.

"An angry adult, scowling and shouting, makes them feel like a helpless child again. In front of their angry father. So they back down. And scurry away."

Several of the soldiers slowly shake their heads from side to side.

The Kaptan says what's on their minds, "Someone needs to be willing to move towards the conflict. To shut it down. In the fastest way possible."

He spreads his hands wide, "And so it falls to us. We are the soldiers of truth."

"We are the soldiers of truth!"

The Kaptan walks to the middle of the group. He extends his left hand, palm flat towards the floor.

The Soldiers stand quietly and place their hands over his. Those behind them silently place their hands on the shoulders of those in front of them.

They all recite in unison:

"Thirty spokes join in a wheel.

But it is the hub that makes the wagon move."

**Shame creates violence.
Violence creates shame.
All things happen in balance.**

**In order to stop one
We must stop both.**

First Kaptan

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84.4460.100

Eastern Sixth Form Campus Library

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

"So, Winston, you were talking about the prefrontal cortex."

It's busy today in the library. Waves of students passing through, anxiously searching for research to complete their exams.

They crowd around the LibMon desk asking questions and looking for direction.

That's just fine with Lizi. Curled up in a nook next to one of the giant portals that face the commons is a perfect place to hide from the world. But still keep an eye on it.

She scrunches down and turns up the volume on the scratchy old recording.

"Yes, Georges. And what happens when it doesn't fully develop."

"You say it's the executive region of the brain."

"Yes. It helps us plan and organize. Manage needs over wants. Make decisions rationally, not impulsively."

"Rationally, not impulsively. Interesting."

"To act out of logic, not emotion. To keep our emotions and impulses under control."

"Act like an adult, not a child."

"Precisely. Also, changing your behavior when situations change. Seeing and predicting the consequences of your own behavior."

"Consequences. That's sounds like the key, I think."

"Having an underdeveloped cortex means you cannot think through to consequences. It's physically impossible."

"So that's the danger here?"

"A politician who makes decisions emotionally not rationally. And who cannot see the consequences of their own behavior?"

"Well, Winston, someone like that should not be elected at all. Right?"

"Right. But someone like that, is not being screened off our ballots. Are they?"

"Well. No. I guess I haven't heard—"

"Even heard it mentioned. Right?"

"I take your point."

"This is how we set up our government to fail from the start. If we don't screen these people off our ballots."

"Winston, this is really concerning. "

"And we have many politicians acting the same. In the same party."

"But Winston, isn't that because they are following the party platforms and principles?"

"And what if those platforms and principles were crafted by people with underdeveloped cortices?"

"Oh. Right. Winston, this really hurts my brain to think about."

"Of course it does. Because you need to shut down your prefrontal cortex to try to comprehend reality the way they see it."

"I can see that."

"Georges, we need to be screening these people off our ballots."

"But, Winston, wait a minute, some might say that's discrimination. You can't block people from jobs due to disabilities."

"If they are blind or in a wheelchair, no. But stopping someone with a diminished mental capacity from writing laws— That's not discrimination. That's just common sense."

"Ah..."

"Hiring people with underdeveloped cortices to hold the most important jobs in our countries is dangerous. And shaming ourselves for not hiring them is just plain stupid. We can't risk the security of our country just to babysit the potential feelings of a person with a diminished mental capacity."

"And that's what we are doing."

"We are. We let them write laws and make important decisions."

"We do, don't we?"

"Once you see the cause, you can connect it to the effect."

"Cause and effect. Winston, you always sum it up so nicely for us."

"We spend so much time, effort and money arguing about—trying to manage and control the effects—but we never address the cause."

"I see you tapping away there. Are you liking this latest assignment?"

Lizi looks up to see Kai's smiling face, "It's ok, I guess. Explains a lot."

"I thought so too."

Kai sits down next to her, "You don't look very happy, L. What's eating your crackers?"

"My mom and her... whatever. They are just all clingy and qíguài. Like a couple of hormone cases. Don't want to be at home right now."

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

"Hags, she just thinks you should upgrade. She says your com is so ago."

"I know. All the kids are in love with their Q-Coms, because of all the 'wonderful things' they do. But tell me, honestly, how much of what they *can* do, do they actually *do* with them?"

"Did you say that to her?"

"Yes."

"And how did she respond?"

"She stuck out her tongue."

"Hmm. Not surprised."

"My point is, if you don't *use* the technology, then you don't *need* the technology. So why spend the money to *own* the technology?"

"Hags, she wants to do something with you. That's good. At least she's acknowledging you in her life. It's a step. For her. Maybe it will lead to more."

"Kat, she wants to show me I'm a stupid old guy using an ancient com. It's a put down. She's not trying to bond with me."

"Well, it's all she can muster for now. Please go along. Please?"

"I'll do it for you. For *you*. And us."

"Well then," Katija rubs his shoulders, "I appreciate your effort."

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Boulevard Shopping District
City Point
FIRST UNION
2075

"Well, that's quite a look."

"She's a Dedgurl. They all look like that."

The figure floats around inside the shop. Her hair, her skin and her clothes are all approximately the same pale shade of alabaster. And she's wearing some kind of contact lenses, that keep changing pictures. So you can't see her eyes. Or tell which way she's looking.

"Dead girl?"

"D-e-d-g-u-r-l. Really, Hagstrom, you need to pay more attention to what's going on around you."

"Well, thanks for the put-down, Lizi. Didn't need the judgement. Just the information."

"Just saying," Lizi scowls.

"How do you know she's a girl? I can't tell."

"Is it that important to you?"

"No, No. I suppose it's none of my damn business."

"They wanna be called girls. Even though some of them are bioem. But some are tran. You never know. So, 'Dedgurl' usually covers it."

"There's so much to remember these days."

"It's not *that* hard, Hagstrom."

"Anyway, where's this amazing new com I'm supposed to have."

"I bid you welcome to our shop," the Dedgurl shop assistant drifts over to them.

Lizi nods to her. *We'll. She's friendly. Not like most Deds you meet.*

She seems to float on air. Her long wispy robes billow around her, like smoke. She actually moves like a ghost.

Lizi squints. *Probably wearing hover boots.*

"Yes, please," Hagstrom smiles back. "I have been informed that I need to upgrade my com."

"What is your current device?" drones the shop assistant, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hagstrom holds his com up for her to see.

She might have laughed, if she wasn't trying so hard to look dead. But her flash reaction is obvious.

"Relic..." she breathes. As emotionless as possible.

"Deader than you," snickers Lizi.

It's everything the Dedgurl can do to keep from laughing. But her thin sticklike frame still shakes a little.

She turns quickly away, "I shall gather an assortment."

"Always with the slam, Lizi. You just gotta get one in. Don't you?"

Lizi shrugs, "Keeps it interesting."

The shop assistant has drifted silently back with a tray of products.

"In the present millennium," she says with a frozen face, "you have your choice of sticks, implants, or nano beads."

Hagstrom looks over the items on the tray. The 'sticks' appear to be round cylinders the length of your hand. Most of them are about as thick as an average thumb. They have no obvious controls. Just one button on the top.

The shop girl demonstrates, "You press this button to activate the lens."

She presses the button and the top pops open.

A tiny lens rises out of the top.

Thin blue rays of light shine from it.

"You hold it up to your eye," she shows them. "It scans your retina to connect. It's an all in one. A stick is a scanner and a connector. Everything else is resident on the block-cloud. It cannot be hacked, because only your retina scan can access your account."

She turns and points behind her to the displays covering the back walls of the shop, "Sticks are available in any colors and patterns of your choice. Encrusted with jewels: precious, semi-precious or sym-craft. FuturTech images, Steam Punk, retro, pirate. Boiler plate, indigenous, haplo-specific. Roses, angels, family pictures, partner, paramour, whatever. Or, translucent, so you can download wallpapers for them. Or, show the image of whomever you are talking to. Constantly changing with family pictures."

"Like those skirms in your eyes playing those pictures?" Hagstrom points.

The shop assistant recoils slightly. But her expression does not change, "I'm sure I don't know what you're referring to."

The images floating across her eyes change now from dried, dead and dusty flowers, to bottles of poison and grinning skulls.

Now it's Hagstrom's turn to smirk a little.

"All your calls, mail, messaging and surfing go through the stick to your block-cloud account."

She now gestures to the side wall of the shop. There are screens of all sizes, keyboards, symboards and docks.

"All of these sticks can connect with a dock. The 'docks' are a screen and keyboard. You can get screens as big as you like. They all have a port that accepts universal sticks. You drop

the stick in. Once it's connected, you can type away to your little heart's content. All screens are touch screens. All different sizes. We also have holoscreens."

Hagstrom now realizes that the side wall of the shop is floor to ceiling with screens of all kinds. *Were they always there? Did she just wave her hand and they appeared?*

"Keyboards," she drones on, "can be physical, symboards or virtual. A keyboard surface is basically another screen, that your stick takes control of. And turns into whatever keyboard you want. You want Navaho? You want standard universal symbols? You can project any keyboard you need. Scientific, music composition, code. You can arrange it anyway you want. Make the keys whatever size you want. It's your party."

"OK. OK," Hagstrom nods, "now what about these other two?"

"This is an InCom," she opens a box and pulls out a silver tray with a chip in it. "An InCom is an implant in your arm. There's a chip that connects you to your account, and a bio-battery that generates electricity from carbohydrates using enzymes as a catalyst. Your heart-beat is your password."

"Cut you open and wire you up, Hagstrom," Lizi smirks. "Like a lab rat."

"Yes. It makes its own current to operate," Hagstrom nods. "By converting sugars in your cells. I'm more familiar with—"

"Simple," the Dedgurl cuts him off, "but efficient."

"Yes," he replies. "But I have more experience with—"

"InComs," the Dedgurl cuts him off again. She holds up a clear tube of tiny beads suspended in a pale green gel, "are also available as nano transmitters. You swallow this vial full. And they lodge in your body, just like the ones that EO uses to track 'Bans'. You know, banished people?"

"Yes. I'm familiar with that technology," Hagstrom says flatly.

"So, a stick, an implant or nano spheres?" the shop assistant asks with a blank expression.

Lizi smirks, "Wrapping your hand around a rigid shaft, getting something shoved inside you, or putting balls in your mouth. No mystery which sex invented *these* options."

Hagstrom grimaces.

Again, it's all the shop assistant can do to keep from giggling.

"So, positives and negatives?" Hagstrom tries to redirect the conversation.

"Well," the Dedgurl is obviously distracted, "the sticks use a Beamer. You adjust the size and visibility. You can project a keyboard or a screen onto any surface. Even your arm. In-Coms come with a skim. Like a contact lens. Clear but receives data from the implant or the nanos. So only you can see it. But you can also connect to a dock."

"And where do these wonderful devices connect?"

"You can connect with your current provider," the Dedgurl replies. "Or, alternative."

Lizi leans in, "By 'alternative', she means hackalittes."

"Hackalittes?"

"The outernet Ji Gong."

"Tā mā de," Hagstrom shakes his head. "I need to go back to school just to keep up with the jargon."

"I shall leave you to decide," the phantom of a shop assistant drifts off to help another customer that just entered.

"She floated off in a hurry," Hagstrom gestures at the billowing Dedgurl.

"She can't recommend Ji Gong. She has to recommend the service her shop sells. But I'll bet she's on Ji Gong too."

"You think?"

"All the cool kids are."

"I imagine that they are," Hagstrom grins back.

Lizi touches her forearm and a nearby dock flickers to life, "Outernet is a system of quantum communication satellites."

"So, you have the implant," Hagstrom points.

"So?" Lizi glances at the shop assistant, to make sure she isn't watching. She quickly enters some code and swings the screen around so only she and Hagstrom can see it.

It's the homepage of Ji Gong.

Lizi leans in, "Ji Gong, was a champion of the poor and repressed. He used his supernatural powers to seek justice for all. These guys launched ten quantum satellites. Because no one can own, or control, space. So they set up their own net."

"You seem to know a lot about this," Hagstrom squints at her.

"Everybody knows about this," Lizi snarks. "You connect through an uplink like the way ago towers. First you find a QuReP. A Quantum Repeater. The repeater connects to an uplink. Most uplinks are on ships in neutral waters. The repeaters use the seawater as a conduit."

Lizi rattles this off as she brings up a cinestrip.

"Seawater?"

The cinestrip plays showing diagrams projected behind a grinning group of hackers. Text floats over their faces: *'Our results confirm the feasibility of a seawater quantum channel, representing the first step towards underwater quantum communication.'*

"Hackers own the ships, the uplinks, the satellites, all the hardware," Lizi continues. "Delay time is gone because of quantum communications."

Another cinestrip shows a satellite with the text over: *'The internet will always be vulnerable to surveillance and control, unless hackers own the hardware.'*

"Your signal gets bounced from sat to sat," Lizi continues, "so it doesn't stay still long enough to be traced."

"Doesn't anybody just surf anymore?" Hagstrom shakes his head. "Or is that not cool enough now?"

"You can use the oldnet through a simbrowser," Lizi shrugs. "No one can trace who's using it. All requests look like they're coming from a satellite not an earth-based user. But, there's nothing to see on the oldnet."

"Nothing? It's all been erased?"

"You can go look if you want to. There's nothing on there but porn and advertising. And besides, all the best porn is on the block-cloud anyway."

Hagstrom grimaces again: "You just say that stuff to test me don't you Lizi. Are you trying to shock me out of caring about you? You're my daw."

"Step-daw."

Hagstrom just shrugs and looks at her.

"So what's it gonna be Hagstrom? You gonna grab that shaft, get something shoved inside you, or swallow some balls?"

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Cadet Training Facility
The Shield
City Point
FIRST UNION
2075

"Good morning, cadets," The Senior Instructor motions for the cadets to sit down.

"Today, we have Specialist 4173 from Gene Base. She is here to teach you about the biology behind non-completing prefrontal cortices."

"Good morning," Katija smiles. "We know what causes the behavior of those who suffered childhood trauma. But we don't have definitive explanations of what causes some prefrontal cortices to not complete their development."

She puts a chart up on the screen. "We are looking for provable links to tie non-completion to specific genes or abnormalities. In the last 20 years, we have narrowed our search down to the methyl markers in the margins of what used to be called 'Junk' DNA."

A snicker goes up from the cadets.

"They didn't know," Katija looks at the screen and shakes her head. "They didn't have the analyzers that we have today. They thought it was not important. Probably labeled 'junk', by people who were instinctively trying to protect *themselves* from being exposed."

A few snorts and chuckles from the cadets.

Katija swings around and looks at them with a firm face, "I didn't mean that as a joke. In order to do your jobs correctly, you need to understand the biology behind the behavior."

There is some awkward shuffling and furtive glances in the room.

"You have all been screened to check for non-completion. Or you wouldn't be here now. But you will be given a thorough psychological examination, *before* you are given a badge. And every year after that. There's nothing *funny* about this job."

Dead silence as Katija looks from face to face.

Finally, she turns back to the screens behind her. She taps her tablet and images of DNA strands appear, "Originally, the Methyl Markers were studied to predict cancer."

She points to a specific pair that are highlighted on the screen, "This research led to a discovery that helped to reduce its onset and growth."

She turns back to face the cadets, "It hasn't eradicated cancer. Just boosted the early *identification* of it. And the gene therapy that we can now do, can stop it from developing. As you well know."

She scrolls to a new close-up image of strands, "Methyl markers are being charted to predict and diagnose all sorts of things including behavior and mutations."

Katija points to marginal notes on the image, "Methyl markers expose the activity of mutagens. A mutagen is a physical or chemical agent, that changes the genetic material. Usually the DNA of an organism. And thus increases the frequency of mutations, above the natural background level."

She scrolls to another image, "Gene Base also looks at oxidative damage to DNA for clues to the origins of non-completing cortices. And, as a pre-disposer to abusive behavior."

Katija turns and faces the room of fresh young faces.

"If Mutations in DNA can cause identical predictable behavior, for example, in people who have Prader-Willi syndrome, regardless of *where* they are born, their socio-economic sit-

uation or *any other* physical difference... Then what *other* behavior can mutations in DNA cause?"

She lowers her eyes, and fixes on the cadets one at a time, "You need to remember that these individuals are human beings. Their DNA is 99.5 percent identical to yours and mine. They have a *physical* mutation. They are not *defective*."

She stands with her hands on her hips.

"Your job is not to *punish* them. They cannot control their own behavior. Any more than individuals with Prader-Willi syndrome can control *their* behavior. Your job, is to protect the people around them, from being hurt. But you need to do it compassionately. And responsibly."

Katija holds her pose for a few minutes, watching her words sink in.

She turns and scrolls to another chart on the screen. "From the genetic material gathered from Shanidar Cave, there is physical evidence that traces non-completing prefrontal cortices to the DNA of Neanderthals. There *is* a connection. We just haven't narrowed down which set is causing the mutation. We're close. But not there yet."

She puts up images of two similar looking male faces.

"Can you tell which one of these individuals has a non-completing prefrontal cortex?"

Dead silence in the room.

Katija waits.

The cadets stare at the images. Unsure if she actually wants them to pick one. They glance furtively at her, and the faces, and each other.

She lets their awkwardness build for a minute.

Then she breaks the silence, "Of course not. No one can. Just by looking at them. You have to observe their *behavior*."

There is an audible sigh of relief.

Katija zooms in on the face on the left. It crossfades into a motion capture cinestrip from an IO agent's scanner.

"So... let's observe some behavior."

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City Point
FIRST UNION
2075

"It's a typical grey and drizzly winter afternoon. The streets in this section of the docklands crawl with hooded shadowy figures. Any one of them could be your target.

"In the dwindling light, and the steam billowing from the street drains, it's easy to make mistakes. But, thankfully, the IO agents on this assignment have the latest in blue beam technology. 2951 Brooks double checks the parameters on brand new 5th Gen beam, while his seasoned partner—"

"Are you completely done yet?" Brooks is looking at him sideways.

Hagstorm grimaces, "What? It's my book. My novel."

"Where's the *book*? You haven't written anything *down*, Hagstrom." Brooks leans in, "All you do is repeat the same cacking opening sentences—it was a typical scuz bar—reeking of stale beer and despair—the docklands are crawling with shadowy figures. I know this *book* by heart. Heard it a million times. But where's the *book*? You haven't even written anything *down* yet."

"I'm testing. I'm still in the testing stage. I need to get my authentic voice together before I can write."

Brooks just looks at him and shakes his head, "Can we go to work now? Do you think you can pause your authentic voice search long enough for us to do a job here?"

"It's my book," Hagstrom mumbles as he gets out of the cruiser.

"What have we got?" Brooks pulls out his shades, squinting in the bright mid-summer sunlight bathing the park.

"Uh," Hagstrom scrolls through the file. "Yeah, so, he's a groundskeeper."

He looks up and spots a man in green groundskeeper overalls on the other side of the fountain from them.

"That guy?" Brooks whispers, pointing with his chin. "The giant?"

Hagstrom looks down at the tablet, "Yeah, that's his picture. That's him all right. Wǒ cào, that guy is big. Glad we have the new beam. Wǒ cào."

"Yeah. You and me both, my brother. You and me both."

Brooks starts walking off to the left, to circle around the fountain and cut off the guy's possible escape.

Hagstrom circles to the right. His hand on his beam in its holster.

The target is sweeping grass cuttings into a pile on the walkway.

Hagstrom is ten meters away when the guy's head suddenly jerks around. Instantly, the expression on his face registers.

He knows why we're here.

The huge muscular man throws his rake at Hagstrom and takes off in the other direction.

Brooks is just rounding the fountain as the big guy plows into him. Knocking Brooks backwards. His brand-new beam flies out of his hand and plops into the fountain.

"Shit, shit," Hagstrom is hot on the guy's heels. Knocking into Brooks slowed the man a little. Just enough for Hagstrom to—

The big guy glances over his shoulder and stops quickly. Just as Hagstrom is aiming his blue beam.

Suddenly, the guy's huge meaty fist hits Hagstrom's face with a dull bone crunching thud.

Wǒ cào this guy moves quick!

Hagstrom spins and drops on the grass. Desperately clutching at his beam. He rolls on the grass, his eyes not focusing.

Suddenly the guy is on top of him, pinning Hagstrom's arms down with his knees.

The blue beam drops out of his hand. Just beyond his fingertips.

The big guy produces a knife, flashing in the sunshine.

"Brooks!!!"

Brooks is running up to them now, shaking his water-logged beam, "Work, you cackling piece of cack..." He smacks his beam on the side and repeatedly presses the button.

"Work!!!"

"Brooks!!!" Hagstrom rolls and kicks, and jerks like a fish out of water. The big guy is insanely strong.

Hagstrom feels the knife pierce his shoulder.

His eyes flash, "This is not how I die!"

He jerks his body left and right, trying to free his arms.

Brooks jumps on the guy from behind, his arms around the thick neck.

The big guy doesn't even seem to notice. He just leans forward, grinning at Hagstrom. The knife comes down again.

Hagstrom jerks his head up quickly, making contact with the big guy's massive nose. There's a crunching noise as blood from the guy's nose explodes all over Hagstrom's face.

Pain sears through his forehead.

Brooks pulls the the big guy backwards. Just for a second.

That's all Hagstrom needs.

With one hand free, he tears a stun button from his jacket, and plunges it into the big guys cheek.

The guy's eyes grow wide. His grip relaxes. He collapses on his side, sliding off Hagstrom.

Finally free, Hagstrom grabs his blue beam and fires at the guy.

Just then, the new beam ignites.

"Finally!" Brooks shouts, "you finally decided to work, huh? Brand new, 'improved' piece of—"

"Brooks," Hagstrom interrupts, "why didn't you hit him with a stun button?"

Brooks looks at him with stern expression and jerks his chin towards the guy. Sure enough, jabbed into the big guy's back, is Brooks' stun button.

"Oh. Sorry buddy. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Hagstrom shakes his head, "Two of them? Tā mā de."

Brooks nods, "I'll get the MediKit from the cruiser. You got this guy?"

Hagstrom nods and drops to the grass in a sitting position. His beam still holding tight on the target.

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

"My mother was a user."

"User?"

"She knew what my father was like. What he was capable of, and she still married the guy. Trapped him into it by getting pregnant."

"Wố cào! Who would do that?"

"Lizi, back in those days things were very different. My mother married him because he had money. And was going to be successful and make more money. And she wanted to have kids. And wanted to make sure they had everything they needed."

"She crystal used this guy? To get what she wanted."

"Yes. But he didn't see it. He was too busy screwing people over. What made him good at making money was his abusive nature. Anyway, next thing he knows, he's a life support mechanism for my mother's wants and desires."

"He beat her too, right?"

"Oh yeah. All her girlfriends told her to leave the guy. But no. She had her plans. And that was part of it."

"Being assaulted?"

"She raised me and your uncle and put us both into great Unis where we got degrees and opportunities we might otherwise never have."

"Yeah, but..."

"She sacrificed herself for her kids. But also gave me a bad role model for how to be a woman and get what you want."

"So..."

"Yeah. So... Do I thank her? Or curse her?"

"Tā mā de." Lizi looks down at her shoes.

"So, she had us two, and then he got smart and got a vasectomy so they wouldn't have more."

"And he didn't tell her."

"He did a lot of stuff behind her back. She was angry. Very angry. But it still played into her game."

"What game?"

"She has us, gets to live in a big expensive house. Has lots of money to buy nice clothes and a fancy cruiser. And then once I was packed off to Uni and and she was sure your uncle and I had what we needed, she made her exit."

Lizi squints at her.

"All planned out. She starts to poke him. Little snippy comments. Loses the keys to his fancy cruiser. Forgets to give him important messages. Little niggling things. None really big enough to cause anything. But the steady progression, and the cumulative effect worked. He went over the edge and beat her black and blue. Broke her nose."

"Wǒ cào! And she did it on purpose?"

"Then she calls her friend across the street, and she takes her to hospital. Then she files charges. And gets to play the victim. The long-suffering wife and mother who only wanted what was best for her children. And all her friends who told her for years to leave him. Well, to them, they finally convinced her to leave."

"But she planned it all along?"

"Of course."

"Grandma? My grandma? Wǒ cào."

"She walks away with her kids taken care of and half of everything he has. And no one could blame her. Poor thing. After all those years, she finally found the courage to break away."

"But wait... Wait. Wait. What if that was true? What if you are wrong? It's your own mother."

"Oh, Lizi..." she brushes the hair back from Lizi's face. "I went to see her after I graduated the Science Academy. She and my grandma threw a big party for me. And mom was drunk. Rolling. She started to drink a lot after she left. And she told me. Everything."

"She told you?"

"Bragged about it. Laughing at what an idiot my father was. How he never knew. And my grandma just sat there, grinning the whole time."

"She knew about it?"

"And grandma says, 'What the hell do you care? You got an education out of it.' I just stared at them."

"She knew."

Katija nods slowly, "Made me wonder about my grandma. Where did my mother learn that behavior?"

Lizi slowly shakes her head, "Users."

"Not a sterling legacy my beautiful Daw. And so now you understand why I was attracted to your father. And why I left him."

Lizi pulls back scowling. Her lips thin and tight.

"You don't like to talk about him, do you? Maybe one day."

"It's not that—" Lizi starts. "I don't know."

"Any time you're ready honey."

Lizi arches her back like she's shedding an invisible coat, "So, Moms... let me ask you about something."

"Okay, what?"

"Don't you guys ever just say some guy is jhew lun dou. He should get banished? I mean, just make your own judgement?"

"Liz, there is no place for emotional reactions in this work. I deal with evidence and documentation. We don't judge and condemn people just because we don't like them. That's juvenile emotion."

"But don't you ever have someone in your lab who fudges the results just to get someone banished?"

"That would never happen. We are all screened by The Screen to get our jobs. And have to resubmit every year. If someone manipulated results, *they* would be banished for it."

"So... Never. Huh?"

"No, Lizi, never. Because everything is documented. There is a DNA profile. And multiple duplicates on block-cloud."

"The Goddies say you make up your own results just to kick out people you don't like."

"I wish you wouldn't call them that. Obviously, they are lying. Which is curious since they are not supposed to lie."

"Don't you know moms? All God's creatures are precious. Except the ones who disagree with them," Lizi says in a mocking tone.

"Lizi! There's no need for that."

"Yeah," she mumbles with a scowl. "Bet they wouldn't say that if some Under beat the crap out of them..."

"Really, Lizi. That attitude helps nothing."

Katija's com rings.

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**Victoria Health Centre
City Point
FIRST UNION
2075**

"Hags? Honey? How do you feel?"

Hagstrom is still groggy from the medication. The hospital room is way too bright. Katija and Lizi appear ghostlike, illuminated from behind, as they approach the bed.

"If/else Hagstrom," Lizi smirks, "I heard that guy was huge. He could have kicked your ass."

"Really? Thanks. I guess. I mean that's the closest you've ever come to paying me a compliment. Lizi."

Lizi shrugs.

"Hope I don't have to almost die again just to hear another one."

"Don't hold your breath," she smirks.

"Hags," Katija breaks in. "Do you feel any pain now? Is there anything I can do for you, honey?"

"I'm pretty well numbed out here. The knife didn't sever anything too important. A little stitching. I should be fine."

Katija still has a concerned look on her face as she looks at his vitals on the screen above his head.

"So the new blue beam malfunctioned?"

"Yeah, well, there were other issues."

"Yeah," Lizi blurts, "Like the guy was twice your cacking size."

"It doesn't matter how big they are. I swore an oath. To protect and defend."

"The Firewall?"

"No. Not the Firewall. To stand between the people and danger. That's what agents do. At the risk of our own lives."

Lizi has a pained contortion to her face.

"That's what training is for, Lizi. That's why we have to train. To stay as physically prepared as we can. Just in case."

Lizi is grinning at him with a weird expression.

Hagstrom squints, trying to read her face.

"Well, I'm glad your training paid off this time," Katija is still intently studying his vitals on the overhead screen.

"So that's what your trainer does? Teach you how to kick the big guy's asses?" Lizi snickers.

"No, Lizi," Hagstrom wipes his hand across his forehead. "She trains us to defuse a situation with the least amount of force necessary."

"But you got beat up," she sneers.

"The people were protected, and we defused the situation."

She makes a funny pout and shrugs her shoulders.

"Lizi," Hagstrom pushes himself up in the hospital bed. "Would you like to do some training? I could get you set up with my trainer. Private trainer. Not the one who works for the bureau?"

"Now, Hags," Katija puts her hand on his arm. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"I think it's a good idea," Lizi beams. "It's *my* life moms."

Hagstrom smiles, "I'll make it happen."

Katija glances back and forth between the two of them. And the grins on their faces.

It's not the bonding I wanted them to have. But... If it helps her to accept him...

"Then I'm all for it," Katija wraps her arm around Lizi's shoulders.

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Metro Central Station
Centralia West
FIRST UNION
2075

"The idea that someone could hack the vote of an entire Union is ridiculous. Because there is no union-wide voting system to hack."

Jacob and Cyrus are sitting outside in the gleaming granite courtyard of the Metro. It's not that cold today but they both have their scarves pulled up over their mouths. Only lowering them to take a sip of caff.

"But aren't they all tethered together?" Jacob talks through his scarf.

Both men are sitting on the low wide slabs of polished granite that circle the entrance to Metro Central. They are far enough apart to look like they are not together. But close enough to hear each other.

"No. In fact, there are more than 300 voting districts across the Union. And they all have different ways of tabulating votes. Including, the types of tabulators they use."

"You can't hack the whole system?"

"You don't need to. The votes can be hacked by breaking into the tabulators *after* the votes are collected."

"Just change the totals."

"Point. The results go from tabulators in one voting district to a central tabulating machine."

"In that District?"

"In that District. They are compiled and etched onto a single use crystal drive. That drive is physically taken to the central Union tabulator where all the votes are compiled. You can't modify the crystal."

"All tabulators are not tethered to the central one. Are they?"

"No. But it doesn't matter. You only need to swing the vote in one key District. Like a typical swing District. No one would raise an eyebrow."

"And your hacked vote would get written on the drive?"

"Exact. And it would be encrypted with the official Union encryption programs, and no one would ever suspect it had been tampered with."

"It would look like a normal tabulation of votes."

"Exact."

Cyrus lowers his scarf and takes a sip of his caff.

A few people shuffle by. But no one looks their way.

He pulls his scarf back up and fingers the scanner in his coat pocket. It is on constant scan to see if there are detectors or recorders in the area.

He glances into his coat pocket and the faint blue glow tells him no one is listening.

"Clear?" Jacob asks through his scarf.

"Yep."

Jacob lowers his scarf and takes a sip.

Then slips it back up over his mouth, "You could just steal the crystal... Replace it with a preprogrammed one."

"Been tried. Those idiots got caught. You can't get by their rolling encryption on the crystals. There is a partial seal put on them at the district office. And it's counterpart is waiting only at the Union central tabulation office."

"Can't fake it. Huh?"

"Never. But... You don't need to."

"Shit," Jacob scowls. "So... How easy are those tabulators to get into?" He runs his hand through his thinning grey hair.

"There are more than 40 Districts in the Union using voting machines that are at least 10 years old."

"So... Old tech."

"Also, only 60 percent of Districts do post-election audits by checking hardcopy originals. We still have a sizable percent of the population that refuses to vote on their coms. Or by any digital or simulated means. They insist on going to a physical place and pulling a mechanical lever."

"They still don't trust E-tech," Jacob chuckles.

"Some, don't have coms. Or can't afford them. And some don't trust their OS."

"For good reason," Jacob nods slightly.

"And," Cyrus continues, "not all Districts have hardcopies. Including a couple of swing Districts."

"So no way to compare totals to a hardcopy after the election."

"None. And, there are five Districts that rely entirely on crystal digital vote tabulators. No independent hardcopy backup."

"No backup?"

"None," Cyrus touches the scanner again. No vibration. No alerts. "But the election committees claim their systems are safe because they're not tethered."

"So how do *you* get in?"

Cyrus smirks under his scarf, "You really have to ask? Mister I'll-Give-You-Ten-Million-In-A-Bank-Account-In-The-Cayman-Islands?"

Both men lower their scarves and drink.

Then slide them back up.

Jacob clears his throat. "You're telling me there is code that can fix elections?"

"Yes. Code."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because five years ago, I wrote a piece of code that did just that."

"What do you mean, 'It did just that'? It would rig an election?"

"It would flip the vote 51 to 49. For whoever you wanted the vote to go to in that particular race."

"And would this code that you designed be something that District election officials would be able to detect?"

"They'd never see it."

"So how could it be detected?"

"You would need to look at the source code. Or count the hardcopy mechanical votes and compare them with the electronic results."

"Could someone write a protection code to stop this kind of hack from happening?"

"No. You would have to look at the source code to see if there is anything that shouldn't be there. It's a simple program. You're adding one point to a person's total. It's about 100 lines of code. Tops."

"And they would never see it?"

"You would need to compare the polling data and mechanicals to the E-tabulated vote. If there are obvious differences, then suspicions would be raised. Which is why I would only flip it 1 point. Nobody is going to want to recount thousands of mechanicals, or spend hours reviewing millions of lines of code from crystal tabulators for a one point difference. And, if you do it in a swing District, where there is no backup..."

"Son of a bitch! And you've written this code?"

"Yep. I worked for a corporate lobbyist. I was asked by someone who was running for the office of Steward, to write this code."

"Do you know if he used it?"

"I have no idea."

Both men sip again and replace their scarves.

"It's untraceable?" Jacob shakes his head. "I mean, couldn't someone also write a piece of code on the voting machines that prevents your software from being installed?"

"Nope."

"Could it be detected later?"

"Well, if someone was deliberately looking for it. And knew where to look. They might. They might be able to find it. Depends on how good you are at destroying what you've added."

"Destroy what you added?" Jacob narrows his eyes, trying to understand. "You mean by tampering with the tabulator afterwards? Or by programming it to destruct from the start?"

"Either or both. Because you didn't actually see what's in there. You don't know if the code is running in single executable, or running in various modules. If it's running in modules then you can make the code actually eat itself."

"Eat itself?"

"Yeah. Disappear. Like it was never there."

"You can do that?"

"Did it. I made the code eat itself 24 hours after the final vote was tallied."

"Brilliant!"

"Nuts and bolts. Simple. It's just code."

Jacob lowers his scarf, drains his cup, and slides his scarf back up.

"But wouldn't you need access to thousands of tabulators? That would be detectable." He starts unconsciously tapping his cup on the granite bench.

"It depends on the technology used. If you use a central tabulation machine, that fed in, then you just send a flag. If you send a flag, then your central tabulation machine will flip the vote."

"One person, sending in code to the central tabulation machine can affect thousands—tens of thousands of votes?"

"Right. You could activate it automatically. Or, set a code on an autonomous box that feeds it. You punch it in, it sets the flag, the server sees the flag, and flips the vote."

"But in a recount, with no backup, wouldn't that be revealable? That the central tabulation machine is reporting different results than the individual tabulators that weren't tampered with?"

"Not if I write it."

"Why not?"

"I would make it match."

"You'd make the central tabulator change the other tabulators?"

"Exact. They talk both ways. They're tethered together."

"I thought you said they're not tethered?"

"Not tethered to Union *central* tabulator. But the mechanical machines in every district are tethered to the central *District* tabulator."

"Ahhh...."

"And that's the one you flip."

"And make it flip all the machines tethered to it, show the same totals."

"Point."

Cyrus stands up, lowers his scarf and takes another sip.

"There's absolutely no way..." Jacob looks down the wide boulevard to the Government Complex, "that you would be able to detect the code, or find it, or see where it changed votes?"

Cyrus raises his scarf again, "Not unless you looked at the source code from the start.
Before the tabulators are connected."

He starts to walk away into the Metro Central station.

"Son of a bitch!" Jacob stares straight ahead.

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Eastern Sixth Form Campus Library

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

"What's this amazingly important cack that we're supposed to look at today?" Lizi slides in the cubicle next to Kai.

"It's about the last SCAN Union."

Lizi glances around the library. The LibMon is not at her station.

Probably chǎofàn. Frying rice with the TechHelper in the lift again.

She turns back and looks at the man on the screen.

He's well dressed. Seated at a big desk in an ornate looking room.

"We, in the SCAN Union will not tolerate this domestic terrorism. We are protecting our homelands. We are doing what is right."

"This guy looks a little emotionally damaged himself," Lizi squints.

"Well, the first SCAN Union only lasted 15 years."

"What is this guy on about?"

"This guy was the Minister of Prevention. He authorized IO agents to pull random people off the street. Anyone who 'looked like' a public threat."

"So?" Lizi shrugs.

"He was pocketing money. And lying about scans."

"Wǒ cào."

"He filled up the Screen's holding facilities with a flood of people who were not threats. They were overwhelmed trying to process them."

"But bound by Firewall agreement to help every citizen."

"Yes. He gets the Screen to authorize construction on a new holding facility. And the contractors are friends of his."

"Tã mã de."

"Yeah, Z, they were charging way too much. And he was getting kickbacks. And he kept begging for more agents and more funding."

Lizi sighs. "So did they catch him?"

"Oh yeah. You can't bullshit a Firewall. People came forward with evidence."

"And they banished him?"

"Yeah. And everyone in his office who co-conspired. A bunch of agents, the contractors. It was a mess."

"But the right thing to do."

"Of course. But he had already spread a bunch of fear that the Firewall was conspiring against them. Allowing dangerous people to wander the streets. Sneak into their houses and do bad things to them."

"Năo cán!"

Kai spins back to the screen and taps forward on the control shuttle. "This was his last broadcast before they shut him down and took him into custody."

"We, at the Ministry, are the only ones who can protect you. But your Firewall is blinded by their own importance. Not doing their job!" He shakes his fist. *"Have abandoned you to people,"* He waves his arms erratically, *"people who are free to walk the streets at night. Coming into your house. People who do terrible things. Terrible things! Only we—"*

The image suddenly disappears from the screen.

"What happened?" Lizi taps on the control, trying to get the cinestrip back.

"That's when the Firewall cut transmission."

"But he'd already scared them about the Firewall."

"It eventually tore the Union apart."

Lizi looks at the blank screen, "I mean, it's amazing how easily abused people can be led."

She turns and looks at Kai who has a pained expression on her face.

"Kai! Oh Kai," Lizi reaches out and takes Kai's hands in hers. "I didn't mean you."

"It's Ok. It's OK," Kai smiles her soft melting smile. "I know what you meant. People who haven't gotten counsel. Right?"

"Yes! Yes! I mean, yes. Right!"

"It's OK, Lizi. I still love you."

There is an awkward silence.

Lizi is staring at Kai with a very intense expression.

She starts to lean forward, her mouth slightly open.

"Lizi—"

Lizi stops and pulls back quickly.

"Z, I do love you. I do. But I'm not a lesbian. And I'm sorry. I feel like that's what you want."

Lizi's face is bright red. Her mouth opens and closes but no words come out.

"Z, there were times when I thought I was a lesbian. But the more I tried it, the more awkward it felt. I was really just trying to get back at—him."

"I had no idea."

"Sure. Convince myself that I was a lesbian. Never had sex with men. So the abuse couldn't possibly have happened. It was a pretty desperate attempt to escape the whole thing. Didn't work. Just confused looks from the girls I was with. They'd look at me like 'Are

you sure you're into this?' And one of them was even doing the same thing I was. Dumb huh? But you do what you can to get through."

"You never talk about it."

"I don't intentionally avoid talking about it, if that's what you mean. You never ask me about it. I'll talk about it any time you want."

"I was just wondering."

"It's OK, Z. It's in my past life now. I've moved beyond it. When you start to deal with that stuff, you have to do a complete system reboot. Restore to factory settings."

"Reboot?" Lizi grins.

"Your heart has been torn out. You need to hold it and heal it until it's healthy. It's painful. Damn painful. Takes a long time."

"Sorry, K, I didn't mean—"

"You die for a while. Spiritually and emotionally. You try to resuscitate your core. Put your heart back inside and become whole. Hopefully the operation won't kill you. For some people it does. For others, the pain of what happened to them is less than the pain of healing. So they never try. They just live with the low level of constant pain and anger for the rest of their lives."

Lizi looks down at her boots and nods.

"But once you move beyond the pain, Z, and heal your heart as best as you can, it fades into the past. It's simply not important any more. Almost. like it happened to someone else."

"K, I just want you to be OK. I just want—"

"To be my friend," Kai puts her hand on Lizi's shoulder. "My best friend. And never abandon me. That's the greatest gift you can give me."

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1.1000.2020
Firewall Complex
First Union Firewall Chamber
City Point
FIRST UNION
2075

"For the education and the benefit of our citizenry, we provide the following interview, between myself and The Prime Representative from The Magyar Szövetség."

The Firewall Chamber is dark and quiet.

The members sit in their cubicles watching the First Union Prime Representative, Nadezda Hidu, standing on the dais under the central screen.

This meeting of the Firewall is being simulcast, as all Firewall Chamber meetings are, on the First Union Firewall feed to all corners of the Union.

M Hidu continues, "The Hunnic Alliance adopted a similar OS to our own, but with some significant differences. They are not a part of the Federation of Unions and have no membership in The International Firewall.

"And now, Jelena Zrinska, The Prime Representative from the Magyar Szövetség."

The image appears on the central screen.

"Greetings to you Prime Representative."

"Greetings to you and your Union."

"Can you please share with us the current structure of your OS."

"We adopted much of OS2020 exactly as Winston Smith had written it. There were adaptations, of course, due to cultural and geo-political differences. But our current OS is mostly fashioned around his original concept."

"Adaptations?"

"We suffered under communism for decades. We know what a dictatorship is like. But we turned the dictatorship into one of freedom and liberty. We execute those who want to limit it."

"A dictatorship of freedom and liberty?"

"We followed the lead of Malta when they first started to reign in the corruption in their government. We instigated minimum requirements for getting on a ballot to be a minister. It was just common sense. Every other job in the country has basic minimum requirements. Why not the most important jobs of being the people's representatives?"

"And what were those requirements, please?"

"You had to have a minimum of seven years prior experience in either public service, corporate management, human resources or accounting. Anyone with a law degree or background is not eligible to run."

"No lawyers? No one with experience in the law allowed to manage the laws of the land?"

"No lawyers. No one who knows how to write, change, or game the laws to their own advantage. Just average citizens who are forced to live under the laws. If, and when, they need legal advice or assistance in their work, we have the counsel of constitutional attorneys at their disposal."

"And how did that work out?"

"It changed the country. Over the next few years, corruption faded. Fewer bills were passed. Many were revised to remove corruption clauses. But it didn't take long before the bad actors found other ways to con their way into the government."

"And how did you react to that?"

"We put in place performance reviews at six months, one year and every year after that."

"Performance reviews?"

"Yes. Like every other job in the world. They had to prove that they were doing the job. The ministers were evaluated by a board of supervisors randomly drafted from the general population. Based on their approval, that minister could be immediately removed from office if they were not doing the job, or had succumbed to corruption."

"You didn't go with stewards instead of representatives?"

"Of course we did. Eventually. After we gave everyone a chance to work inside an honest and fair system. Once we realized that human ego and greed were too strong, we switched the OS over to the same system as the First Union. But, if I remember my history correctly, we started working with a steward system a few years before you did? Isn't that correct?"

"So you finally set it up correctly."

"Yes. Before you did."

"Let's move on. You refused to join the International Firewall."

"We didn't need to. We don't banish defective units. We take care of our own problems instead of shipping them into someone else's country."

"You kill them?"

"Yes. Ourselves."

"You seem proud of killing people."

"We're very proud of how successfully we have protected our citizens from bad actors. Yes. Very proud. We neutralize threats in the fastest way, with the least amount of force and expense."

"You kill them. That's force."

"You spend thousands to process bans and implant them with expensive nano trackers. And thousands more for EO agents to baby-sit them all around the world. And you still have the potential threat that they will return, or remotely instigate violence and dissent within your unions. Our OS is more effective and less costly to our citizens."

"Well, we shall just leave that for the moment."

Zrinska smirks, "You mean run away from the subject because you know I'm right?"

"How many people do you kill a year?"

"We neutralize on average about a dozen."

"And you don't see anything wrong with killing a dozen people a year."

"Over the last ten years, the International Firewall has averaged terminating about forty people a year. Three years ago, they terminated a hundred and twenty. Are you asking them how proud they are of killing people?"

Nadezda Hidu looks down at her tablet, "And so you have a Firewall?"

"Yes. Set up exactly like the First Union Firewall. The same random algorithm draft. The same screening of cortices, and the same rejection of any candidate carrying anger."

"Except your Firewall can authorize killing someone?"

"Yes. By unanimous decision."

"And the citizens of the HA are happy with that?"

"We have a vote, every seven years, like you, to keep this OS in place. However, unlike you, we have average 87 percent voter participation. You average 68 percent. And, in the last five votes, the approval to keep this OS in the HA, averaged over 90 percent every year. I think the best the First Union has ever gotten is 74 percent? Isn't that correct?"

"Well, be that as it may, let's talk about your IO."

"Of course."

"Your IO is authorized to do the killing of defective components?"

"No. The IO agents bring them before the Firewall for investigation."

"So who kills your defective components?"

"The Firewall members neutralize threats themselves."

"The members themselves?"

"Yes. We believe that they need to feel the consequences of their decisions first hand.
So they understand the weight of the moment."

"They volunteer?"

"No. They are drafted. After a unanimous vote has passed and the subject has been declared, five Firewall members are drafted by the same random algorithm."

"They can't refuse?"

"They agree to this before they are assigned a position on the Firewall."

"And how do five people kill someone?"

"Lethal injection. There is a large handle that all of them have to hold together and pull down. It will only move if all five pull together. That sends the lethal injection into the subject."

"And they have to watch?"

"They are in the same room as the condemned. They look them in the eyes as they pull the lever."

"And they can do that? They don't break down or refuse at the last moment?"

"That has happened, yes. We rehearse all members on the procedure once a month, we simulate an execution. Rarely, we have had a problem at the critical moment."

"Then what?"

"We have five more alternates already designated from the same draft. The hesitant member is immediately replaced and the execution proceeds."

"What happens to the hesitant member?"

"They are immediately excused from Firewall membership and sent home. Then the draft for their replacement is run."

"And no repercussions? No punishment?"

"Punishment? For what? Being human? Having feelings? Of course not."

"And how often does that happen?"

"Twice in the last twenty years."

Nadezda Hidu looks down at her tablet again.

Zrinska continues, "We also, occasionally do open public executions."

"In public!"

"If the situation warrants it."

"And exactly what 'situation' would possibly warrant a public execution?"

"Two years ago, a charge was brought before the Firewall, of a citizen who was building and selling ghost guns."

"Guns! They are not illegal in your Union?"

"Alliance, and yes, very illegal. Hence the extremity of the charge."

"And what action was taken?"

"The charge was one of a Threat to Safety of the Union. The highest threat we levy."

"And that gave you the right to publicly execute the gun builder?"

"Exactly. He was interrogated first for days to get details about who he had sold the guns to. Thankfully we were able to find and seize almost all of the weapons. But the message needed to be clear and final."

"Almost all?"

"It's an ongoing IO case."

"Interrogated? You mean tortured."

"No. Tortured people will say anything to make the torture to stop. The things they tell you are worthless."

"So how do you 'interrogate' someone to get useable information?"

"We have developed a small number of ways that do not introduce stress into the questioning."

"Such as what?"

"I am not at liberty to explain that. That information can arm those who wish to harm the Alliance and its citizens."

"You can't say? Or won't?"

"Both."

"And so how did you publicly execute the gun builder?"

"Members of the Firewall shot him with his own guns. Live stream on all Alliance channels."

"Firewall members? They were forced to commit murder?"

"They volunteered to send a message."

"And you couldn't have just banished him?"

"It would not have been a strong message. It would be seen as weak and cowardly. The Firewall must show its strength. And protect the citizens. They demand and expect it."

"Banishment is strong punishment. These defective units have the rest of their lives to think about their actions."

"It's cowardly on your part and basically ineffective in stopping others from doing similar actions. Our way works best. You coddle your defective units. You are polite to assholes. You care too much about their feelings. You don't drop the hammer on them."

"We have the International Firewall to do that."

"We don't need the Federation of Unions."

"What about those who are banished by others and show up in your Alliance?"

"They are immediately killed at the border. We will not baby-sit anyone else's problems."

"And your citizens agree with slaughtering strangers?"

"They thank us for it."

Nadezda Hidu scrolls through her tablet looking for her next question.

Zrinska smirks, "You still have, uh, 'correctors', yes?"

"Correctors?"

"Oh yes, you don't call—what is it? Ah, Mechanist. You still have Mechanist operating inside the First Union."

Hidu's eyes flash. "We do not. Those are rumors. There is no evidence of an organized group," she blurts mechanically.

"Except the members of that organized group who deliver fugitives to the front door of the Shield every once in a while," Zrinska smirks again, "we see the logs on block cloud."

"I'm quite sure that you have a very active presence of individuals like that in your Alliance. With all the killing that goes on," Hidu fires back.

"No, we have no such organization anymore because we hired all of them."

"You hired The Mechanism? To do your killing for you?"

"The Mechanism is our Internal Office Agents. Always hire the professionals. The ones who do the best job. It's called using all the resources available to you, to the best advantage."

"To kill people."

"Our Firewall members do the executions. Our IO Agents, like yours, deliver the fugitives to the Firewall. And they train the Firewall members to perform the executions."

"Training ordinary people to kill each other."

"I'm not here," M Zrinska sighs, "to justify anything about our OS. To you or anyone else. Who do you think you are? We do not care if you approve of our methods or not. It's none of your business. And we will continue to do what the majority of our citizens ask us to do."

"But your OS is barbaric. Medieval."

"And yours is slow, inefficient and largely ineffective."

"Ours is humane."

"Ours is working. Better than yours."

**We are more alike,
than we are different.**

**Spiritual enlightenment
is when our likeness
is more obvious to me
than our differences.**

First Kaptan

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10.700.4000
Isotope Club
CodeTown
FIRST UNION
2075

*"She said,
Come on baby get your mouth down on it,
Come on baby,
'Cause it ain't gonna lick itself..."*

The sounds of Brad Nailer fill the club.

A few students sway on the dance floor. Most are clumped around tables grinning at each other and singing along.

Brad is crooning into a microphone from under his wide brimmed cowboy hat. With a flourish he grinds away at the wheel of a box fiddle. The other band members sway with the beat. Their long pirate coats billowing around them. Ruffles of French lace at the cuffs and collars.

It's New Year's Eve.

Silver floatties hover above the dance floor.

Tethered together and full of tasty treats. Ready to descend at the stroke of midnight. The walls are dripping with silver banners and ribbons.

The blue-green glow of biolights ripple across the walls and floor of the club. The light is caught by the silver ribbons and bounced in small pinpoints around the room. Like a web of baby stars.

The EMF projectors deliver the sound of the band smoothly and evenly to all parts of the club. Loud enough to make you want to dance, but not too loud that you can't talk over it.

Lizi and Kai huddle with Funkadelic at a small table in the back. They are nursing tall thin glasses of lime colored liquid.

The song ends and Brad appears at their table. He is beaming. Decked out in full pirate regalia.

"Funky town, Brad," chimes Funkadelic.

Lizi just makes eye contact and nods at him.

"And how is every, uhm. And are you guys?"

He is looking right at Kai and turning red in the face.

"Good evening 'Mister Nailer', and are you enjoying yourself tonight?" Kai smiles one of her butter melting smiles.

"Uh. Uh. Uh," he stammers sweating from under his big hat.

Lizi spins around and locks eyes with him.

Go find someone else to gush over, you oversexed lump.

Kai's not interested in you.

She tries to burn her thoughts into his brain.

"Tell me 'Mister Nailer' is that a French box fiddle you are playing this evening?" Kai tilts her head to one side. "Or a British Hurdy-Gurdy? Or do you call it by its deadword name: 'Vielle à Roue'?"

"Yeah. Um," he turns and points at the stage. "Was uh. To just."

He stops trying to speak and scurries away back to the stage.

Funkadelic grins at Kai, "He's so obviously smitten with you. Lucky duck."

"Lucky?" snorts Lizi. "Lucky to have a permanent walking erection drooling over you and babbling like a baby every time he sees you?"

"Z," Kai pats her hand. "You know I have no love interest in our friend. I'm a big girl. I can handle a male with raging hormones."

Funkadelic downs the rest of her drink, "Well this is a good pause for me to go."

"Before midnight?" Kai looks at her.

"Yes, well. At midnight I will be down the street at the Casting Couch, beaming myself to a secret rendezvous with my paramour."

"Oh, that's right, that's right." Kai nods.

"Casting?" Lizi scowls. "You actually do that stuff? I thought those places were full of dirty old men doing porn and stuff."

Funkadelic shrugs, "I suppose there are some using it for that. But the Casting Couch is a nice clean family run place. Mostly I see people, sometimes whole families crowding into a booth to take trips to cool places. Or casting to see their relatives across the ocean."

"And it really works?" Lizi squints, "you can actually feel the other person and they can feel you?"

"Feel, smell, taste," Funkadelic grins, "those suits are amazing. It's like you're right there."

"I think it's pretty cool," Kai agrees. "Always been curious." She turns to Lizi, "We should go try it sometime."

Lizi grins, "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, maybe we should."

Funkadelic stands and tugs on her coat, "Well, see you around like a donut," she grins.

"Later potato," Lizi waves.

"Tater," Funkadelic leans in, "Later Tater."

"Oh, càò, 'tater'. Right, right," Lizi sheepishly grimaces.

Funkadelic pauses, "Skarlett."

Kai and Lizi look at her puzzled.

"If we're going to be friends outside of the Dead Words Club then you can call me Skarlett. That's my name."

"Ok, Skarlett," Kai smiles. "What a sweet name. You look like a Skarlett."

"Cool stuff Skarlett," Lizi grins, "you know our names, right?"

"Of course," she puts her finger to her lips and frowns. "Dilly, and Dally. Right?"

She points first to Kai and then to Lizi. "I'm joking! Joking. Kai and Lizi. Yes. My crystal haplo pals."

They all grin.

"Have a lovely time casting, Skarlett," Kai waves.

"And you have a splendiferous funky night my fabulous cohorts!"

She waves over her head as she winds her way across the dance floor. She blows a kiss to Brad as she passes. He turns even redder and fumbles his lyrics, as she disappears out the door.

After she leaves, they sit cradling their drinks.

"That was fun, Kai. I like Skarlett. She's very smart."

"And no nonsense. So rare in people."

"Yeah, you know just where you stand with her."

"There's so few people I can even feel like... So few," Kai trails off.

Lizi looks at her puzzled, "What? Give."

"Let's go up to the roof lounge, Z. It's quieter. And less people."

They take their glasses and hop on the lift to the top floor.

The roof lounge is small with windows all the way around. You can see most of the cosmopolis from here. As well as the tall tower in Central Square. It's lit up with a counter clicking away the final minutes of 2075. And backlit by the green glow of the bioswamps on the horizon to the east.

There's only one other table occupied. Two figures hunch towards each other, deep in conversation.

Lizi and Kai sit by the window on the other side of the room.

Down on the street below, people mill about in funny hats. There are jugglers and tumblers in the street. And food wagons dishing up hot treats for the revelers.

"So, spill." Lizi places her hand on Kai's arm.

Kai lets out a huge sigh.

"The shit? Again?" Lizi asks knowingly.

Kai nods mutely.

Lizi shakes her head slowly from side

"Total strangers," Kai looks around the small room, "they look at me for two seconds and start scowling. Then they come up to me and try to put me down."

"Oh Kai," Lizi has heard this too many times.

And seen it happen. Too many times.

"What is it? Do I just intimidate people? Do I have a sign on my head that says, 'Please be rude to me?' What is it?"

"The shared damage stuff?" Lizi asks.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Kai nods. "Somehow—some way—people who haven't got counsel realize I see their pain. And it makes them angry. They have to shut me down. Put me down. Block themselves from feeling."

Lizi nods. She feels a tightness in her chest when Kai talks about the shit. And it makes her squirm.

"Z, I've never felt like I belonged," Kai blurts. "I have nothing in common with these human beings all around me. I feel like I'm from a different species. I don't fit in. I don't think like them. I don't act like them."

"Oh, I get that, K. I feel like that a lot."

"I feel like an observer from another planet."

Lizi nods mutely.

"I glance at people and they get uncomfortable. Just glance."

"Like they realize you can see through them?"

"Yeah. And they get angry. And want to hit me. Emotionally. Hit me emotionally. Maybe physically. I don't know."

"Yeah. I get that too."

"They make incorrect assumptions. They get angry at me. I hate this. Chao gan de."

"People are weird, K. I don't get them."

"Yeah... Weird," Kai sips her drink.

"Like the new guy they have working in the rat cage."

"Rat cage? Oh, is that what you call Check In, Z?"

"Check In. Such a lame name. We all get to file through like kindergarteners. 'Are you afraid of someone or something today? Do you want to talk to counsel?' I get sick of hearing it every damn day."

"Helps some people. Helped me when that guy kept touching me in the hall by my locker."

"Yeah, whatever happened about that?"

"I told them at Check In and they took me straight to counsel. And they pulled the guy out of class. And they went to his house, and there was some cack with his dad or something. And the Firewall got involved."

"Yeah, we never saw him again."

"That's because the 'Rat Cage' works Lizi. For some of us."

Lizi looks uncomfortable. "I don't need to tell them nothing. Maybe how I'm in danger of being bored to death by Katija's husband."

"Wish you were getting beat up more? Like your birth dad did?"

"Yeah. No. I mean no. Didn't mean *that*. Just like I don't get what she sees in this guy."

"Is Katija happy?"

"Yeah. I guess. She seems happy."

"So it's working for her. I'd just smooth with it, if I were you."

"Yeah, I guess."

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2075

The wall screen is split into 12 pictures showing feeds from cities around the world. But the sound is turned down. Instead, soft droptempo vapor lounge plays. Plasma candles flicker around the room.

Katija and Hagstrom sit hip to hip on the grey fabric couch and watch the dancing images on the screen.

The SimFire crackles.

Katija leans her head on Hagstrom's chest and he wraps his arm around her and kisses her forehead lightly.

Katija looks up at him, "It's getting close. I'll get us a full glass."

She takes his glass and goes into the kitchen to refill them.

"Another year my heart."

"Another very happy year, with you my only one," Katija sings out from the kitchen.

Katija returns with the drinks and sits back down next to him.

Hagstrom takes his glass and looks at it thoughtfully, "The vote is coming up this year. Soon."

"Yes. Soon. Seems like only last year..."

"Hard to believe. Seven years."

"They just fly by."

They both drink.

"It will pass—again," Hagstrom ventures. "Don't you think?"

"Oh sure. Sure. Why wouldn't it?"

"We'd both be outta work," chuckles Hagstrom nervously.

"That's the least of the problems. I mean, can you imagine the chaos? It would be horrible."

"It's gotta pass."

"I'm sure it will. I'm sure," Katija nods distractedly.

They drink in unison.

"Hags," Katija's tone shifts, "we will be all right. Won't we? Our little family? We will be together?"

Hagstrom frowns, "Of course, Kat. Of course, we'll be all right. Why wouldn't we?"

There is an awkward silence.

Katija quickly turns towards Hagstrom, a hasty smile plastered on her face. "We're close to some important breakthroughs. We've identified seventeen different strands of human DNA. Seventeen! And still looking."

"I love listening to you talk about your work. You really do love it don't you."

"Hags, I was born to do this. After you and Lizi, this is my greatest passion. It's my life. We *have* to continue."

"Yes we do. *You* do."

"Hags, the stuff we have discovered—the combination and recombination is amazing."

He rubs her thigh gently, smiling as she talks.

"If we can identify the gene which causes abusive behavior, and use splicing or therapy, we can fix this."

"It is exciting times to be alive, Kat. What you do is really remarkable."

Katija cups Hagstrom's chin in her hand, "And what you do every day my precious love is remarkable. Putting your life on the line to protect us all. And I am so proud of you my only love."

She kisses him tenderly.

"And now," she nods towards the screen, "it's time."

The counter ticks down the final seconds of 2075.

Suddenly several of the 12 screens show silver floatties bouncing in the air. Across town the klaxons sound off in the still cold night.

"Happy New Year my heart."

"Happy New Year my only one."

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City Point

FIRST UNION

2076

Well, this will be interesting. Ho hi, new year, new cack.

Lizi gets off the Metro and glides down the MobiRamp to the street level under the platform.

Sector 21. Mostly Eastern Union immigrants down here. Very clean and safe part of town. Glossy painted grocery shops with all sorts of rare and exotic foods. The smell of spices drifting down the streets.

People make eye contact with you and nod. A very friendly place.

Lizi and Kai come down here every once in a while, sometimes with the other Dead Words Clubmates because they can eat octopus and noodles.

And listen to bands who sing in Mandarin.

Learn some new bad words.

Lizi makes her way to the middle of the block.

1407A.

So this is it.

She taps the SecuriScreen beside the door.

Probably some big stupid man. Overdeveloped muscles and no brains. Whatever. I can always leave.

The screen scans her and the door clicks open.

Lizi pushes inside.

Up a narrow flight of steps she emerges into a small gym room with padded mats over the whole floor. Standing in the middle of the room is a thin red-headed woman with her arms crossed. Eying Lizi closely.

"You're Katijasdaw?"

"Yeah. Well, yeah," Lizi stumbles.

This is Hags' trainer?

"I've met your mom at the agency. Very impressive. Smart woman. Crystal smart."

Lizi drops her bag on the mat.

The woman steps forward, hand outstretched. "I'm Hypatia Alexandria."

"Lizi," she shakes her hand.

Her grip is firm. Lizi shudders a little. There is so much power in her grip.

She could probably twist my arm right off.

She's strong. Real strong. But controlled. Waiting.

"What do you want to learn?" Hypatia folds her arms again.

"I wanna learn how to kick ass," smirks Lizi.

Hypatia sighs, "Well I'm sure you can find someone who can help you. Let me show you out," she moves towards the door gesturing for Lizi to leave.

"What?" Lizi looks puzzled.

Hypatia stops. "I don't teach offensive fighting, Lizi. I teach defensive protection." She smiles. "But I'm quite sure you can find what you want somewhere else."

"But Hagstrom said you trained him, and other agents, to... to..."

"To what? Protect themselves? Disarm an attacker? Protect the citizens around them? With the least amount of physical force necessary" Hypatia's steel blue eyes are riveted on Lizi.

"Well, yeah. No. Uh. I guess."

"Is that what you want Lizi? What you really want?"

"Umm..."

"Why are you here?"

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Moravia
CENTRAL EUROPEAN ALLIANCE
2076

No one hears the first shot.

Whistling past the security detail, the white heat enters the Prime Representative's head, just above his left ear. He is dead instantly.

It is a bright sunny day. A few puffy white clouds drift over the capitol city. The smell of baking bread dances across Freedom Square. Flags and banners billow and snap in the breeze.

The large carillon in the Citadella chimes the noon hour.

No one notices what just happened until the Prime Representative collapses like a rag doll.

Within seconds of the first shot, twelve more sharpfire bullets meet their own marks. In less than a minute, the Prime Representative, and the other twelve Representatives lay dead in front of the building.

An emergency siren begins to wail.

The security details scramble up and down the broad steps. Their angry eyes zip around trying to locate the shooters.

They duck and hide behind the official transports. Pointing their weapons in every direction.

But the shooters are gone. The empty square is filled with shouts of officers giving orders. Staff members wail as they kneel over the dead Representatives.

The emergency siren stops abruptly. It is replaced by the calm steady voice of a woman, broadcasting over the chaos below:

"The Prime Representative, and his Council of Twelve, were meeting today to vote out your Firewall. This political party desires to overthrow the government, and cement themselves into power indefinitely. To turn your Union into a dictatorship."

The senior security chief taps her com and speaks to Central IO. The message is apparently hacked over all official channels.

"Your Firewall was slow to act. They let it progress this far. Your IO did not shut this treason down. Your courts failed. Your Justice system failed."

The security detail anxiously moves around the square, weapons raised. Looking for the source of the voice. Coms crackling in their ears.

The senior security chief barks into his com, "How are they broadcasting on our secure channels?"

Medical crews arrive and hurry to the victims. The dead are quickly lifted on stretchers and rushed towards waiting ambulances.

"Now you have time and space. Fix the breakdowns in your operating system. Put blocks in place so this never can happen again. Do it now. Do it quickly. Spend this time wisely. Your future depends upon it."

**The more you use OS2020,
the more it creates the opposing energy
to tear it down.
All things happen in balance.**

Winston Smith 2016

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Cadet Training Facility
The Shield
City Point
FIRST UNION
2076

Lead Counsel Kamal rotates the HoloProj model of the brain hovering in front of the seated Cadets.

The Orbitofrontal Cortex section glows in green.

"The third section of the prefrontal cortex is the Orbitofrontal Cortex."

The Cadets fidget and shift in their seats.

"The Orbitofrontal region provides us with impulse control, emotional processing, and social cognition. It is our self-monitor that helps us to refrain from behaving recklessly. So you can see how an underdevelopment can pose a threat to those around us."

The screen behind him lights up with text.

"On the screen you will see the types of street behavior this may manifest. Such as being argumentative, having emotional reactions to logistical situations, and using threatening and abusive gestures."

"Dorsolateral, Ventromedial and Orbitofrontal." Kamal taps on the model and all three sections illuminate.

"These are the three percentages that will appear on your scanner screen. With the 104 mandated percentages below them for comparison."

The Cadets scribble away on their tablets making notes.

"In the old days," Kamal turns to look out the portals, "police units handled all of these people. They were treated like criminals. Ridiculed and jailed. Their police units were not ade-

quately educated to understand what they were dealing with. They just responded to the behavior."

He turns back to the cadets, "They had no idea what was causing these behaviors. They treated these people as though they were acting like this on purpose. Like they had a choice."

Kamal moves back to the front of the room.

"Always remember that this is a physical mutation," Kamal shakes his finger in the air, "like color blindness or Down syndrome. A random genetic event, that produces similar, if not identical, outcomes. Regardless of race, sex, nationality or family upbringing."

The Holo brain vanishes.

It's a beautiful day outside. The sun is warm and bright in a cloudless sky.

"It's a beautiful day," Kamal stares out of the portal, "very soon now, you will be out there, in your brand-new IO jacket, on a beautiful day like this. A report is going to come into the shield. You are going to respond. And you will find yourself standing in front of a citizen. Because of their behavior."

He turns and makes sure every eye is upon him, "What are you going to do?"

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**Warehouse District
Centralia West
FIRST UNION
2076**

"This is the one I chose, Juri Amalyna."

Jacob leans over Cyrus's shoulder and squints at the screen, "Who is this?" he points at a name.

"That's the favored to win" Cyrus replies. "Jemm Pok."

"There's only 4 or 5 percent difference in their popularity."

"Yes. That's why I chose Juri Amalyna. She's not expected to win. Come close, yes. But not win. It's a perfect test to see if the code flips it."

"Yeah... I get it. Test."

"Then we can see exactly what it takes to flip the results and if it's going to trigger any flags."

"They come after us?" Jacob stabs at the screen.

"See if they try," replies Cyrus, "try to come after us."

"But they can't, right?" Jacob looks nervous.

"That's the beauty of it," grins Cyrus, "they can't track how it got hacked."

"Perfect."

"And they will have no evidence that it was hacked," Cyrus taps on another screen where the code is, "because it will eat itself after it does its job."

"Genius. Genius," Jacob laughs.

"Simple. Rational. Logical," Cyrus wags his head from shoulder to shoulder.

"And this—" Jacob gestures dismissively at the screens, "is not important anyway? This vote—it's a steward for crying out loud."

"Which is what makes it a safe test. It doesn't really matter who wins. It's a popularity contest only."

"So how are you going to get the code into the system?"

Cyrus holds up a small crystal drive, "I'm going to vote."

Jacob scowls at him.

"I have registered myself under four different identities in the four precincts I have targeted as being the easiest to swing. Once I step into a voting booth, it will take me 3 minutes to connect this drive to the machine. And the code will populate all the machines in that precinct."

"Excellent."

"Isn't it? So then, after they are seeded, we just sit back and watch the results."

"And it will flip it?"

"Flip it in all the machines in four strategic precincts."

"And then eat itself?"

"And then swallow itself and disappear."

"Like magic."

"Like magic."

Jacob rubs his hands vigorously and licks his lips.

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IO
Operating System Center
City Point
FIRST UNION
2076

"Urgent com from the CEA."

It's 5:00am. The agents shuffle into the Go Room.

"Sorry to get you guys in here at this hour of the morning," Commander Nkruna spreads her hands apologetically.

The screens around the room are lit up with pictures and dossiers of thirteen people.

"Central European Alliance reports that the Prime Representative and twelve ministers were killed in an assassination style attack. These thirteen were attempting to pass a law to banish their Firewall."

Hagstrom looks at Brooks, and they both slowly shake their heads from side to side.

This is major.

"Multiple assassins are suspected," Nkruna continues, "all thirteen people were shot within seconds of each other. This was a planned, premeditated strike."

Around the room there are murmurs. And the word 'Mechanism' bounces freely between the agents.

"Yes, yes," Nkruna holds up her hand to quiet the agents down. "The pattern matches the massacre that happened several months ago. And the devastation of that was—" She looks down and exhales sharply.

An agent in the front row holds his hand up, "Commander, was it white heat weapons?"

"Sharpfire, yes."

The agents fidget quietly.

"We cannot allow these massacres to continue," her face is stern. Yet there is a glimpse of fear in her eyes.

Hagstrom taps his knee subconsciously.

Yeah. 26 people assassinated on the same day. The premier, all of his council members and the rich guys who got them elected.

He glances at his partner. The look in Brooks' eyes shows he is thinking the same thing.

"They did catch one," Nkruna continues. "And all he would say is, 'I am a Soldier of Truth'. Which is their typical response."

There are many nodding heads.

The Commander points to one face on the screen behind her. "This is the one they caught. No fingerprints. No retinal scans. No trace of an identity in their system. Or, for the matter, in the IWF system either."

There are murmurs of disbelief in the room.

Hagstrom rubs his forehead.

How can someone never have been tagged or identified ever in their life? Especially someone who is obviously ex-military? Or security?

"What does all this have to do with us?" The Senior Agent looks out at the sea of faces. "And why have we dragged you lot out of your warm beds this morning?"

She taps the screen of her tablet, and the screens flicker and new pictures appear. There are street shots and a satellite capture of a warehouse building in the docklands district.

"The one assassin they did capture was scanned and processed. The scans revealed a chip which had been crudely implanted in his leg. This chip revealed information that identified a safe house in *our* docklands area, of block 32. This building..." she points to the screen. "They believe this is where he was probably headed. Which is where we come into this."

There are more murmurs and nods from the agents.

"Yes, yes," the Commander continues. "Many of us have long suspected this building of harboring some kind of secret activity, but we have never gotten lucky in exposing it. Agents, our luck may have changed. There may be other members of The Mechanism hiding there as we speak. We don't know. But we need to take immediate action based on this information."

Brooks is elbowing his partner, "Hags we've been there. Remember the call about suspicious behavior? And we bumped into that guy who said he was there to test the LectroMeter?"

Hags was nodding rapidly. Staring intently at the screens, "And I think I just realized where the hidden entrance is."

Brooks looks at him puzzled.

"Why," Hagstrom speaks slowly and distinctly, "did that meter guy move so quickly away from the meter panel? Always bothered me."

"Unless..." nods Brooks, "it's not a meter panel."

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Eastern Sixth Form Campus Library

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"How was your first training session?"

Lizi looks up at Kai with a pained expression, "I'll tell you later."

Kai sits down next to her, "What's this?" she points to the screen.

"You know that thing we had to listen to about the cortex stuff?"

"Yeah. I liked that. Seemed to explain a lot."

"So, I found another one."

"And it's the same stuff we listened to before?"

"Same. But more. I think it's... Well, here just listen."

"Welcome back to the Northern Wire, Luna Lovis here with the morning drive. And we're talking today with Winston Smith in Arizona. So, Winston, we were talking about the prefrontal cortex."

"Luna, have you ever listened to someone talk and said to yourself, Are they missing part of their brain?"

"Ha!" Luna snorts. "I have said that many times. Sometimes even out loud."

"You may have been completely accurate."

"Missing part of their prefrontal cortex?"

"Physically missing a part of their brain."

"Because it never fully developed."

"Exactly. Think about an elected public servant with a diminished capacity. Cannot look at their own behavior objectively, or admit mistakes."

"Yes. In fact, I can name several politicians who fit that description."

"Voted into office by thousands of other people who also have a diminished capacity, because they think and act just like them."

"Wait, wait. Winston, is this what's wrong with our elections? Thousands of people with underdeveloped cortices voting?"

"Voting for a candidate who's just like them."

"My god, Winston. And none of them are physically capable of seeing the consequences of their own behavior?"

"None of them. Remember, it's not their fault. It's a common genetic mutation."

"Right. As you said, like eye color."

"Exactly. We just need to prevent them from getting on ballots, and from voting for those who are like them."

"Winston, this explains why so many people vote for someone who is clearly not qualified for the job."

"And these people are writing laws and making decisions for us."

"Wait!" Kai stops the feed. "They let DimCaps vote for other DimCaps to run their government?"

"Serious PFE," Lizi nods.

"And they really did not see the problem here?"

"Sounds like they didn't even see the DimCaps at all."

"How could they not see what's right in front of them?"

Lizi shrugs, "There's more."

"So, Winston, how many people have this diminished capacity?"

"That's impossible to know."

"Just a guess. A percentage?"

"I couldn't say. You would need to meet them face to face, one by one."

"You can tell just by meeting them?"

"Their behavior gives them away."

"Such as?"

"They value opinions over facts. Especially their own opinion, over the fact that they have an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex."

"They're aware of their condition?"

"Painfully aware. And have been their whole lives."

"Because it's been pointed out to them."

"Ridiculed for it. Laughed at. Picked on."

"Of course."

"They try to compensate by taking the opposite opinion of people with fully developed cortices. Just because it's the opposite. They think this makes them look smarter."

"But it doesn't. It makes them look dumber."

"So, Luna, how many people do you know act like that?"

"More than a few."

"Then that's your percentage: more than a few."

"But there's no way to get an accurate count?"

"Impossible. But there is enough demand for opposite opinions, that whole networks and media outlets have developed to provide it."

"The fake news sources."

"Perhaps 'opinion shows' is a better description."

"Opinion shows?"

"Hosts that deliberately lie and get paid to provide their diminished capacity audience with opposite opinions."

"Like climate change is a hoax and vaccines cause autism."

"Exactly. And those with diminished capacity repeat these opinions. They think it makes them sound smarter than other people."

"Like they know a secret truth that the fully developed people don't?"

"Exactly. But it's just the opposite opinion."

"And these opinion shows are very popular."

"Very. Thousands of people tune in."

"Millions, perhaps."

"So that's your percentage."

Kai stops the feed, "Of course! If they can only see black or white, and there are other people—millions of them—saying the same thing—"

"They're all going to think they're right, and everyone else is wrong."

"It's all they can see. Tā mā de."

"Play some more."

"Now, Luna, think about a person carrying unresolved anger, and they need to project that anger onto someone. And they have an underdeveloped cortex. They value their own opinion over facts."

"What a horrible combination."

"And what kind of legislation would this person write as a member of congress?"

"Something that controls people? Punishes them?"

"Exactly."

"Sounds like the operating principles of one of the major parties in power."

"Precisely. And right now, we are not filtering these people off of our ballots and preventing them from gaining power."

"No, we aren't."

"Because we haven't even realized it's a problem. Maybe the root cause of many of the problems we suffer as a nation."

Kai stops the feed, "It explains so much."

"I think so."

Kai turns to Lizi, "so, what about your first training session? Was it fun?"

"Yeah... About that."

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

Hagstrom sits at the kitchen counter. Steaming mug of tea next to him. He stares at the telescreen on the wall, occasionally tapping on a keyboard.

"You're home early," the door swings opens and Katija swishes into the kitchen with grocery bags in hand.

"Here," Hagstrom gets up, "let me help you with those."

"What are you so focused on there?"

"It's the feed from IFC about the The Mechanism backers."

"The backers? They found some?"

"Maybe," he helps her empty the bags onto the counter.

"If they can stop the backers, then..." she starts putting things away.

"Exactly. No more Mechanism. Maybe."

"Maybe. Until they find new backers."

"They are resourceful. I doubt we can catch all of them."

"They kill and vanish. It's frustrating."

Katija taps the button on the tea press and it quickly fills a mug. She pulls up the stool next to his and looks at the screen.

"Kats, you're not supposed to look at IO stuff."

She shrugs, "We both work for the same OS. What's the harm? Any of this confidential?"

"Well, no. I guess. Just info as yet. No plans or operations."

"Then no problem," she smiles her mischievous smile.

"You look like Lizi when you do that. Now I know where she gets her devious nature from."

Katija smirks, "Devious. Never been called devious before."

He bends his neck and kisses her waiting mouth.

"What do you think about all this?" she turns back to the screen.

"The suspected backers are extremely wealthy people. Owners of large trans-union corporations. People who make a lot of money from things like groceries. Transportation. Just everyday normal stuff."

"So why would they want to fund terrorists?"

"That's the point my only one. I don't think they see them as terrorists."

"Hags they're cold-blooded killers."

"Yes. They are that. They also only kill people who threaten the stability of Operating Systems."

"Sounds like you are defending them."

"Absolutely not. They're assassins. And they're operating under the delusional thinking of the last Empire. If they kill enough people, then a problem is solved."

"Yeah. And how did that work out?" Katija nurses her hot mug of tea.

"Exactly."

Hagstrom taps on the keyboard. "And, according to what limited intel we have on the group, we suspect that former IO and EO agents may have joined their team."

"Hags," Katija looks alarmed.

"Yeah. That was my reaction too. Hopefully we are going to see some JAs ordered by the IFC soon."

Katija sips her tea and gazes at the screen.

"What's that?" she points.

"It's the final report from The Firewall about the women working for the bank thing."

"Finally? That took forever."

"Files had been scattered and destroyed. It was a long evidence trail to get to the provable material."

"Was it on the block-cloud like they thought?"

"Yeah. But deliberately masked."

"But you can't cheat a shared ledger."

"Oh hell no. They were stupid to try. Anyway, they had the correspondence, and there it was in black and white: deliberate pay scale difference between the male and female employees."

"Doing the same jobs?"

"Yup."

"Foolish. Did they think they wouldn't get caught?"

"I guess. Firewall froze the accounts of the upper management. Right down to the Director of Human Resources. Since no one did anything, anyone who had the potential to do something, but didn't, was found guilty too."

"Hags, some of the lab partners think the Firewall just wants to make an example of this. I mean this is like the third biggest bank, right?"

"Yes. But the bank ignored years of warnings. The Firewall didn't act until they had traced all the money and accounts, so none of these bank officials would get away with anything. They wanted that done before they charged anyone."

"When did they decide?"

"This morning."

"And now what?"

"I think a lot of people are about to get banished."

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**Warehouse District
Centralia West
FIRST UNION
2076**

"Ok that's it. The code is in place. Now we just wait for the votes to come in and let the code do its job."

"They're never going to see your code?"

"Not on the machines they're using."

"Why not?"

"The districts I targeted are still using post-collapse ReTec."

"ReTec?"

"Recycled technology. After the last empires collapsed, there was a tech hole for about 50 years. No money to develop new tech."

"No money?"

"The power companies went bankrupt. Infrastructure crumbled. The new operating systems had to scramble just to get everything up and running. Using whatever was already there."

"Yeah, I've seen the newsreels. How does that benefit us?"

"The districts I targeted are using voting machines built on ReTec platforms. Because it was open source and easy."

"Easy to hack?"

"Easy to set up."

"But easy to hack?"

"They don't worry about their system because it's only tethered to their District Tabulator. It's a closed system."

"Oh."

"Then their District Tabulator encodes a crystal with the results. Which is physically transported to the Central Tabulator in Apex Point Centralia West."

"Right, right."

"So while my code is resident in their system, it can feed me details about the crystal encoder in the District Tabulator. And that, can help me figure out how hack the Mandate 105 vote."

Jacob makes exaggerated nods with his head, "Ah...."

"All without them seeing what I'm doing. And there is no physical backup of the voting results."

"Got it, got it. Smart," he shakes his finger, "very smart."

"Efficient. Effective," replies Cyrus.

"Why can't we just start a company that makes the voting machines? And sell them our machines. Then we can control all the votes?"

Cyrus spins around in his chair, "You seriously think you're the first person to think of that? Or try to do it?"

Jacob scowls, "Well they probably did it wrong! I can do it right!"

Cyrus draws a deep breath, "The thing is, you don't need to do that. All we need is a hundred lines of code."

Jacob huffs, "Whatever."

It's not like the old days. When people who worked for you used to be more respectful. Just do what you tell them to. This guy better be worth the money. And this hack better work. Or he's a dead man.

Cyrus spins back around to watching the monitors, "Each district uses a different system. That way they can't influence other districts."

"All this 'compartmentalization'. It's bullshit!" Jacob fumes. "One company should make *all* the voting machines. So they're *all* the same. It's just obvious. These idiots!"

Cyrus rubs his chin, *Was this a mistake? This guy doesn't get it.*

"But it doesn't matter, Jacob. That's the point. It doesn't matter *who* makes the machines. We don't need to build the bus just to turn the steering wheel a little."

Jacob focuses on Cyrus. His eyes dart around. A million thoughts.

"A hundred lines of code can flip the vote one percent and they will never see it."

"Make it fifty percent! Make it a landslide!"

Cyrus pivots again, "Are you crazy! Do you want to get banished! Do you want to get rid of OS2020 or not?"

The two men stare at each other.

"The need to know how powerful I am!" Jacob bellows. "I want them very very afraid!" he shakes his finger.

Cyrus stares at him in disbelief, "You want to identify yourself as the person who hacked their voting system? Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"They won't find us, right? You can fix that," he waves his hand at the screens in front of Cyrus.

"So, you want them to know who you are—but you don't want them to find you? Have you seriously thought this through?"

Cyrus scowls, *this guy is self-destructive. The sooner I can build his shit and get away from him the better.*

Jacob breathes heavily his nostrils flaring on his reddened face.

"I think you should sit down calmly," Cyrus motions to the sofa, "watch what is about to happen. Once OS2020 is gone, then you can brag all you want that you brought it down. Because you cannot be banished then. But for now..." he makes calming motions with his hand.

Jacob glowers, his lips drawn. The reality of the situation apparently making its way through his anger. To his rational brain.

**Egos destroy democracies.
Egos create dictatorships.
Our own egos
are our greatest enemy.**

Winston Smith 2016

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Belgium
EUROPEAN UNION
OldYear 2016

"This is Radio Safe Net, Belgium. I'm your host Georges Lemaître. And our guest today is Winston Smith."

"So, Winston, you were saying we should banish people?"

"Yes."

"Throw people out of the country for making mistakes?"

"Not for breaking the law. This would not replace the legal system. It would handle situations—people, who are not being handled right now."

"The 'unders'?"

"You can't force an underdeveloped cortex to finish growing. Incarceration won't fix them. It just drains taxpayer money. And we can't execute them."

"So just kick them out."

"If they are seen as an ongoing threat to society."

"You think they're dangerous?"

"They are easily led. Easily convinced of conspiracy theories. Theories that promote 'us or them' mentality."

"Because they don't have a fully formed brain?"

"They can be incited to violence, by angry scowling adults carrying unresolved anger."

"So it's the abused that incite them?"

"The abused lead and the diminished follow."

"Interesting."

"The abused want revenge for being abused. And the diminished want revenge for being ridiculed their whole lives."

"United by their need for revenge."

"It's an unstoppable force. It has seized governments and changed entire countries. So, yes, I see them as dangerous."

"And you're right. Should these people be able to get on ballots? Or even vote?"

"All over the globe we see angry adult children with chips on their shoulders trying to hurt other people just to feel good about themselves. It's an epidemic. It's tearing our countries apart."

"And your system, this 'Firewall', would stop that?"

"The Firewall would have the power to banish. But we still need the professionals to do the evaluation. And determine if someone is acting out of unresolved issues, or has an underdeveloped cortex."

"And we already have those professionals now."

"Yes. But we don't have the mechanism."

"The mechanism?"

"A non-political, non-governmental mechanism, to remove people with underdeveloped cortices, if they are seen as being a threat to other citizens. Regardless of whether these people are elected or appointed public servants, or just a random person off the street."

"A mechanism."

"A mechanism."

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707.127
Hopewell Commons
Neopolis
FIRST UNION
2076

"I'd love to meet you in the park for lunch my heart, but I'm on a JA tomorrow."

"Big?"

"Yeah... District officers and EO."

"It's not about that Minister, is it?"

Hagstrom grimaces, "My heart. You know I can't talk about an operation."

"Of course," Katija waves her hand. She puts her arms around his neck and kisses him softly on his lips. "Just be safe, my only one. Come home to me."

"I will Kat. I will. It's not a violent case. Just a... Well..." He smiles. "We need all the agencies because of the authorizations."

"Big, huh? You think this might go to the IFC?"

"No, no. It's internal. Just Union business."

"Well, I'll be thinking about you, my only one."

Katija blows a kiss to him as she slips through the aperture.

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21.1400.6007
City Point
FIRST UNION
2076

The smell of jasmine and hibiscus drifts up from the street below.

But Lizi is sweating and all she smells is the rubber mat her face is buried into.

"Spin! Lock your foot! Pivot! Now, Lizi, now!"

Hypatia is on top of her pinning her to the mat. Her iron grasp not yielding a bit.

"Don't fight me. Think. Use your strength wisely. Focus."

Lizi remembers now. She brings her knee up under her chest and locks her ankle around her teacher's. With a quick pivot she spins over catching Hypatia off balance and rolls her over.

Now Lizi is on top.

"You *let* me do that."

"Of course I did, Lizi. Because you need to learn. Once you have mastered these moves, I will not be so easy on you."

They both stand.

Lizi looks down and smooths her leggings.

Hypatia quickly grabs Lizi from behind, pinning her arms so she can't fight back. Her grip is like steel. Lizi steps back onto her ankle in a smooth movement, bringing her heel down as hard as she can.

"Crystal, crystal," Hypatia quickly slides her foot out of the way so Lizi's foot thuds heavily into the mats.

"Good, good. Obviously, I was anticipating your move, and don't want you to wreck my ankle, but your potential attacker will not see that coming."

Lizi smirks a little.

"Now. Focus. What do you do next?"

Lizi thinks for a second then spins to the left, her hand now free clamps onto Hypatia's arm right behind the wrist. A quick lateral twist and her other hand is free and she grabs Hypatia's arm just above the elbow forcing the joint back on itself.

Wǒ cào she's all muscle.

Hypatia's arm is solid and firm under her shirt. It feels like a tree trunk.

Lizi stares amazed.

There's not an ounce of fat on this woman.

Hypatia blocks Lizi and releases her grip with quick pressure on her wrist.

Lizi drops her arms.

"Better, better," Hypatia smiles. "But you still need to do some more lifting to get your upper body firmer. You need more strength in your arms."

Crystal. Like the woman of steel. I want that.

Lizi smiles.

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Navajo Nation

WIA - Western Indigenous Alliance

2144

(Three years ago)

"We were safe here during the Turn Times," Grandmother stands up and arches her back.

From the top of the mesa, you can see all the way down to the trading post at the crossroads.

A Goshawk cries as it circles above.

"I was your age then—fifteen or sixteen. And this was a safe place to watch it all from."

A few strands of her long silver hair have slipped loose from her beaded leather hair holder and dance playfully around her face in the warm wind off the valley floor.

"How did you hear the news?" Kai gently plies a form off a fresh row.

"We had the wireless."

Kai brushes off the form and stacks it with the others.

"We mostly felt sorry for the Whites," Grandmother taps lightly on another wooden form and lifts it up and away from the row.

Kai stands and looks down towards the trading post, "They didn't see it coming?"

Grandmother straightens up again. Puts her hands on her hips and stretches her back. "It's like they weren't paying attention. Until it was too late."

Grandmother hobbles over to a flat rock and sits down. Her gaze fixed on the mesas in the distance.

The bricks are getting too much for her. Kai picks up their water bottle, steps over the row of bricks and sits next to Grandmother.

"Nobody was paying attention," Grandmother takes the water bottle from Kai, but just holds it in her hand. She stares at the bottle as though it was speaking to her, "One day they woke up and realized that angry children were running their country."

"They thought their empire would last forever."

"It happened slowly," Grandmother nods.

A red tailed hawk screeches behind them.

"Some laughed at them. Didn't take them seriously. They didn't realize what they are looking at. They didn't see the threat until it was too late."

"Did the elders realize?"

"We all did. That was why it was so hard to watch."

"But you were safe?"

"We were safe up here. Grandmother gestures around the valley floor, "There's nothing here they can make money from. They never came. But it was the same all over the world. We had a screen in the tribal headquarters. We watched the feeds from the satellite. They took over whole countries."

Kai takes the cork out of the bottle and moves it up towards Grandmother's mouth. Grandmother takes a small sip.

"In the beginning, they were happy. They rejoiced. They drank. Shot their guns in the air. Shot people who disagreed with them. Overwhelmed the police. It couldn't be contained."

"I have seen some images," Kai puts the cork back in the bottle.

"Things fell apart quickly," Grandmother shakes her head slowly from side to side. "Economies died. Governing was erratic, incompetent. They made decisions fast, and out of

anger. And when they failed and things didn't work, they blamed others and killed them. Then made new decisions. Also in anger."

"They killed their own people?"

Grandmother nods, "They didn't care about the citizens. Even the ones who supported them. Governments were filled with angry people. Laws and policies were nonsense. Just punishing people. A string of failures."

The wind whistles in their ears, as if to provide a soundtrack under what she is saying.

"The more obvious their failures, the more the sane ones raised their voices. And the damaged ones fought back. They couldn't look in the mirror. Press was ridiculed. Demonized. Restricted. Eventually, taken over."

"But that was against every law they had?" Kai scowls. "Against their own constitution?"

"They didn't care. They fought all opposition. Those who told the truth were arrested for treason. Many disappeared into prisons. Never heard from again."

Grandmother takes the water bottle again, suddenly anxious for a sip.

She wipes the corner of her mouth, "The ruling party declared they had the right to kill their opponents. In the name of national security."

"They legalized murder?"

"No. They gave *themselves* the right to murder."

"Is that when The Mechanism started?"

"No. It was Eye 4 Eye first. The official," Grandmother makes quote signs in the air with her hands, "government agency for eliminating those who disagreed with them."

"Eye 4 Eye. I read about them."

"Hired assassins. Ex-military. Sharpshooters. An army to kill the truth. Working for a dictatorship of the angry."

The wind is whipping up now. There are some grey clouds blowing in over the far mesas.

Grandmother looks down at the dust, "The people felt hopeless."

She sighs again, "Many died from starvation and disease. Government went bankrupt. Military tried to hold the country together. But they couldn't pay the soldiers. The soldiers walked away."

Grandmother looks Kai in the eyes, "It was difficult enough to justify killing their own neighbors, but to do it without getting paid, watching their own children starve, was too much."

"When did The Mechanism step in?"

Grandmother nods, "First the soldiers used their guns to get food and supplies for their families. But they quickly realized they were killing off their own suppliers. So it flipped. The soldiers turned to protect the food producers. In exchange for food."

"The Government assassins turned?"

"The Eye 4 Eye hit squads, tired of not being paid, watching their country fail and die—they turned—they became The Mechanism. The mechanism that would restore order. And stabilize the country."

"It was the soldiers themselves?"

"Soldiers who were used as puppets by the angry ones. They turned on them. Assassinated the wealthy ones who had backed them. Called them traitors. Took their money and distributed it to the people. Took their property and gave it away."

"The soldiers were the Mechanism."

"To start. It could have become just another dictatorship, but they had a leader—called him Captain—and he kept them focused."

"A wise man?"

"A strong leader. People rallied behind the soldiers. The arrow was broken. The Empire blew away in the wind."

They sit and watch a dust devil chase across the valley floor.

"That's when the Firewalls started to rise," Grandmother gets up and turns to the rows of bricks laid out behind them.

"Come along now child, let's get these bricks covered up before they start to crack."

**Ignorance creates delusion.
Delusion creates arrogance.
Arrogance creates destruction.
Destruction creates ignorance.**

**Only an outside force
can break this cycle.**

First Kaptan

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21.1400.6007

City Point

FIRST UNION

2076

"No. Flat. Flat. And don't lock your wrist."

Hypatia takes Lizi's hand in a firm grasp and brings it up just under the nose of the dummy.

"With the *heel* of your palm. Like this," she quickly and smoothly brings Lizi's hand up just under the dummy's nose. "Curl your fingers. Keep your arm straight."

Lizi rehearses the movement. Going quicker each time.

"Better. Better. But don't forget your stance. Spread your feet just a little. Shoulder width. Stabilize yourself so you can use the whole weight of your body in the thrust."

She stands next to Lizi and demonstrates her stance and the smooth swift motion of her palm up under the dummy's nose.

"See? Now you try again. Practice until it becomes automatic."

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Belgium
EUROPEAN UNION
OldYear 2020

"Welcome back. Today we are talking again with Winston Smith. He has become something of a regular on our show due to the response from our listeners."

"Banishment. Winston. Explain your Firewall banishing people."

"Sure. A Firewall can banish people who cheat the legal system. People whose wealth and position makes them able to escape the consequences of their own behavior."

"Yes. I remember reading this in your letter. Why don't you give our listeners an example?"

"Sure. For example, the workers in a factory can present a case of poor or dangerous work conditions to the Firewall. And the Firewall can order the factory owner to change conditions, according to a specific time frame, or face banishment."

"He can't weasel out of it."

"No. If he doesn't comply, the Firewall can seize his factory, his bank accounts—all of his assets. And banish him immediately and permanently."

"Powerful."

"Because powerful people need to have a power greater than themselves to discourage them from taking advantage of other people."

"That sends a pretty clear message."

"It would discourage this kind of behavior from the start."

"And who else can be banished?"

"Lawyers could get banished. So, a lawyer would be a lot more reluctant to represent someone if they might end up getting banished for it."

"That would clear the courts of nuisance suits."

"And speaking of nuisance suits, attorneys and judges would also have to swear to tell the truth in a court case."

"Like the defendants have to?"

"Exactly. Right now, defendants have to swear to tell the truth or go to jail for perjury. But attorneys and judges are allowed to lie."

"Allowed to lie. Yes, you're right!"

"If they are allowed to lie, then how is that a fair system of justice?"

"It's not! Obviously."

"But no one is questioning it now, are they?"

"Not that I've ever heard or seen."

"With the Firewall, attorneys and judges have to swear the same pledge as defendants. Or they can get banished for lying."

"This would change a lot of—"

"It cleans up a lot of bad behavior."

"If you can't play nicely with the other children..."

"Then you get kicked out."

"Wow."

"We just need to make the consequences so horrible, that people would not be willing to take the risk."

"Self-policing."

"This would almost guarantee—"

"It guarantees that those who break the public trust, will be punished for doing so. Without the guilty being able to use legal loopholes, or their wealth and position to escape being held accountable."

"Winston, it seems like we would only need to do this a few times."

"And make a public spectacle of it. And the fear would stop a lot of things from happening before they start."

"A serious deterrence."

"And, most importantly, Georges, a deterrence that does not exist today."

"Oh hell no. Screwing people is considered good business."

"Yes. Many so-called 'successful' people are the ones who use the legal system to their advantage to make huge profits at other people's expense."

"If you have enough money and power, you can get away with anything."

"But not with a Firewall, Georges. Not with a Firewall."

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Firewall Complex

Gene Base Lab

City Point

FIRST UNION

2076

"Shoot him in the head."

The man's eyes are unwavering as he looks directly into the camera.

Jattine freezes the cineclip on the screens. A man is sitting in a chair against a tall concrete wall, inside of what looks like a warehouse. He stares directly into the camera.

"Yes, it is so. There is no glimmer of emotional damage to this man," Jattine turns towards her lab partner Katija.

"Lueur?" Katija squints at Jattine.

Jattine speaks French, mostly. So Katija has her Komodo Translate app running whenever she is in the lab with her. And with the skim in her left eye, Jattine's words are displayed in UENG or UCHI across her vision as she speaks.

But sometimes, if Jattine slurs, or the translate gets confused, the words aren't quite exactly what the speaker just said.

"Oui, lueur. Glimmer is UEng," Jattine smiles.

"Yes," Katija nods, "glimmer. Not a glimmer of emotional damage at all."

Katija and Jattine eat their lunch as the sequencers whirr in the background.

"And this is first Kaptan?" Jattine gestures at the screen with her fork.

"The first that we know of."

"And there are no scan of this man? Never scan?"

"No record anywhere that this man even exists."

"Jattine wrinkles her brow, "How is this possible?"

"You tell me and we will both know."

"Eh bien," Jattine sighs, "no obvious emotional damage, no record of scan. And as you see him, he show no UPC or UET."

"A very rare human being indeed," Katija nods.

"We shall watch again, yes?" Jattine presses play on the remote.

"Shoot him in the head."

The man repeats.

"You don't allow one man to destroy the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. You take out the one man."

"He is calm," Jattine chews her lunch. "No flare in his eyes."

"You shame him. Shame is useless. Shoot him in the head."

"He's very calm," Katija agrees. "Almost too calm for what he is saying."

"Yes," Jattine gestures at the screen. "Very self-assured."

"If you lack the will, the nerve, the guts, we will do it for you. Now is your time to step up. We give you ten hours to act. After which, we shall act. Swiftly and accurately."

He leans forward in the chair until his face fills the entire shot.

"The people need a mechanism. We are the mechanism."

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City Point
FIRST UNION
2076

It's quiet in the gym today.

Just the faint whirr of air taxis outside and the occasional whoosh of the metro overhead.

They sit cross-legged on the mats face to face. Cradling warm cups of tea in their hands.

"The most important part of your training," Hypatia is talking, "is to learn when *not* to use it. Anyone can use physical violence to force a situation. You first need to judge whether or not a situation requires it. And then, how much to use. A quick specific strike is usually enough. Repeatedly hitting someone only tires you out and makes the situation worse. The least amount of force to control the situation. That is the best thing you can learn from me. The least amount of force necessary."

Lizi nods calmly.

"The strongest muscle in your body needs to be your brain. That is the maturity that you need to develop."

Hypatia takes their empty cups and stands up.

"Shake yourself out and we shall work."

Hypatia walks over to the kitchenette and puts the cups in the sink.

"What are we working on today?" Lizi asks.

"Seeing into darkness is clarity. Knowing when to yield is strength."

Lizi starts stretching and bending.

Hypatia goes into a semi-crouch and starts circling Lizi.

"Get ready."

Lizi drops down into a semi-crouch too. Mimicking her teacher and bringing up both fists.

"No. No," Hypatia stops. "Defensive. Not offensive."

Lizi straightens up.

"Like this," Hypatia stands straight. "Torso back, centre your weight on your pelvis. Feet shoulder width. Unlock your knees. Arms at your side. Ready to move in any direction."

Lizi centers herself and mimics Hypatia's pose.

"Your attacker is going to be acting out of emotion. Anger or fear. You need to act out of reason. Look for the openings. Be ready. Never take your eyes off them."

Hypatia starts circling Lizi again.

Lizi starts to drop down again and bring her fists up.

"No! No! Concentrate!"

Lizi straightens up again, "It's just normal. I see you getting ready to hit me and I want to be ready."

Hypatia stops and straightens up. "We are creating a new 'normal' Lizi. That's the point. Hunched over and fists up is an antagonizing stance. Not a defensive stance. You don't know what your attacker will do. You must prepare for anything. Not just ready for a fist fight."

Lizi looks down embarrassed.

Hypatia swiftly lunges taking Lizi to the mat in a smooth easy motion.

She rolls away and jumps to her feet, "Always ready! Always! Don't take your eyes off me for a second."

Lizi hops back up and goes immediately back into her crouched stance with fists raised.

Hypatia folds her arms and raises her eyebrows.

Lizi straightens up and drops her arms.

"Now. Again," Hypatia crouches and circles.

Lizi follows her turning as she moves.

"Stance! Stance! Maintain your stance!"

Lizi adjusts, glancing down at her feet.

In that split second her teacher takes her to the mat again.

"Cack! Cack!" Lizi rolls on the mat. "Stupid! Stupid!" she smacks her forehead.

Hypatia offers her a hand up, "No one gets it right away. You have to practice. I took Hagstrom down more times that he will ever admit."

Lizi smirks at that.

"Let's see if you can get this in less takedowns than he did. Huh?" Hypatia crouches and circles again.

Oh yeah. Hell yeah. Game on.

Lizi plants her feet and narrows her eyes.

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**IO Processing Center
Western Gate
FIRST UNION
2076**

"Is the Agent of record present?"

"2742 Hagstrom Vik from the Internal Office," Hagstrom stands.

The Senior Screen Officer officer nods her head towards him.

Hagstrom sits back down.

The chamber is quiet.

The only sound is the muffled grunts from the man in the docket.

The man wears the standard red jumpsuit, and is restrained by a blue vapor hold beam built into the framework that surrounds him.

"Ok... Let's get started." The Senior Screen Officer puts down her tablet and turns to the five people seated in front of the man.

The Firewall member in the middle of the five rises and reads: "Whereas, The Firewall of The First Union has declared the person of Joonus Kasak to be Civiliter Mortuus. Whereas, banishment has been agreed by unanimous vote. Whereas, The First Union Firewall hereby issues the order of immediate and permanent banishment of the person, case number D-438742-CZ. Therefore, The First Union Firewall authorizes the Screen to execute this order."

He sits back down.

The Senior Officer turns back towards the docket, "Very well, let's proceed."

Joonus Kasak glares defiantly at the officer.

"You have had your routine body scans," the Senior Officer reads from the order, "in preparation for banishment. And we have removed the three chip implants you had in your legs. From these we have been able to locate the three offshore bank accounts that were at your disposal. Presumably, in the event you were ever banished."

"You have no right!" Joonus strains against the blue vapor. "That's my money! You're thieves! I can have you banished for that!!"

The Senior Officer nods to the Shield Technician controlling the beam. The tech adjusts the beam slightly to silence Joonus.

His mouth still moves, his eyes full of anger, but he makes no sound.

The Senior Officer takes a step towards the docket.

"M Kasak, I am warning you. You will be allowed to speak, but not if you shout and threaten. Do you understand?"

Joonus still mouths silently glaring at the Officer.

"And," she continues, "thanks to whoever programmed your chips with contact information, we were also able to confirm your ties to seven other individuals. Individuals whom The External Office has determined are members of the group known as The Mechanism."

Joonus Kasak strains against the beam his eyes rolling wildly.

"M Kasak, do you confess your association with the The Mechanism?"

The Senior Officer nods to the tech and he releases the beam slightly to let the man speak.

"You're a kangaroo court! You're useless! You're a joke! We are fixing your failures! You're just a bunch of illegal wimpy bastards—"

The tech silences him again.

"M Kasak, are you confessing to being a member of the group known as The Mechanism?"

The tech lets him speak again.

He appears a little calmer now, almost smug, "We do what you cowards don't have the guts to do. We defuse the situation. We kill the assholes and the idiots. We are the protectors of the people!"

The tech constrains him again.

"M Kasak, you have been determined to be a threat to the Union. You are to be immediately and permanently banished from the First Union. Do you understand what I have explained to you?"

The tech turns down the beam.

"Idiots! Assholes!" he screams. "You have no power! You're all stupid. I'm way way smarter than all of you! You stupid—"

The tech turns up the beam again.

"M Kasak, please try to control yourself. Have you made a decision on where you wish to be banished to?"

The tech turns down the beam again.

"Hell yeah you stupid gōng gòng qì chē, I want to go to The Zone! So I can kill idiots and assholes without your stupid Firewall stopping me!"

Hagstrom grins.

The Arizona Territory. Yeah, you'll fit in there just perfect.

"Since we have no banishment agreement with the Arizona Territory," the Senior Officer explains, "we will not enter their airspace, you shall be taken to the border. And escorted over it by EO agents from The Western Alliance."

"If you cross back into First Union territory anywhere, you will be killed on the spot. Do you understand this?"

The tech turns down the beam.

"Fuck you! Cào nǚ mǎ! Nǎo cán! Asshole! Idiot!"

The tech turns the beam back up, silencing him.

"M Kasak, do you understand that you will be immediately killed if you enter First Union territory ever again? I need an answer."

The tech turns the beam down.

"You're all dead meat! I'll kill all of you. You have no idea what I'm capable of!"

"M Kasak, I need an answer now" she interrupts him.

"Fuck you and your nǎo cán Firewall!"

"M Kasak," The Senior Officer interrupts firmly but without emotion. "Please answer the question. Do you understand—"

"Yes! You idiot! A fucking child understands that stupid shit. What the hell is wrong with you? Just another stupid fucking woman trying to do a man's job. Chew hai! I'll come back here and kill every single one of you! Cào nǚ zǔ zōng shí bā dài—"

The tech turns the beam back up.

Hagstrom shakes his head.

Yelling and threatening like an angry child. You'll find plenty of playmates when you get to The Zone.

The Senior Officer turns calmly towards the five Firewall members.

"Will you accept that as a confirmation that he understands the consequences of returning to the First Union?"

The Firewall members talk quietly between themselves for a moment.

Then the one in the centre speaks, "Yes. We accept that he understands the consequences."

"Very well. Then thank you for your service to the Union. We shall now get the documents prepared and the authorization reports."

The Firewall member in the centre stands, "Thank you for your service to the Union."

She nods, then turns towards Hagstrom.

"Agent, if you would like to do the transfer order now? Then we can get you both on your way?"

"Absolutely," Hagstrom nods.

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**Warehouse District
Centralia West
FIRST UNION
2076**

"Very soon we will see our results."

"Getting close?"

"Last precinct closes in two hours. Then the tally. Right now about 60% recorded results. But look, the exit polls are predicting Jemm Pok will just scrape by."

"But that's not our candidate."

"No. So watch the final tally will start to shift once 80% of the vote is counted. Then our choice will just edge ahead by 1%."

"And we shall see."

"We shall see."

"So... The 'Tech Hole', huh?"

"ReTec. Because nothing new was developed."

"For a long time?" Jacob turns to look at Cyrus.

"There were no rich people or wealthy corporations left to fund research and development. The empire's richest one percent vanished along with their money."

"I remember reading about that."

"Everyone was broke. Civilization practically had to start from nothing. Some tech was continued. It had to be. Simpler, faster became the new motto. Add extras later. But get the basics up. That's a big enough challenge."

"There wasn't even a power grid. Was there?"

"In the big countries, no. That collapsed quick. Smaller countries, and places that had wind farms and solar were fine. But big cities fell apart."

"I've seen the cinestrips. No food. No police. No street lights. Gangs killing and stealing. Disaster."

"Hard to come back from that. But once the Unions started to rise, they had a hard time creating new tech. It wasn't popular. Mostly people didn't want it or need it. They didn't trust it. They blamed tech for the collapse of the empires. Nobody wanted that to happen again."

"Don't blame them."

Cyrus checks the numbers tabulating on the screen, "They were wrong. Of course. A specific technology in the hands of one person can improve human life. The same technology in the hands of another person can kill people."

"See, it's a leadership problem," Jacob puffs out his chest.

"And now, with OS2020, that problem has been contained. Well, contained as much as possible. But the focus has shifted. Now the OS is focused on controlling who gets into leadership positions so that collapse can never happen again."

"I don't give a rat's pink ass in hell about who they have leading the damn place," Jacob sneers. "I just want to be able to make some descent money. And not get banished for doing it!"

He stabs his finger at the screen.

"I hear you," Cyrus nods. "I think they went too far. Taking a bad politician out of office is one thing, but killing businesses is just wrong."

"They gotta leave people alone. All we're doing is trying to run a business. Trying to have a life."

"Well, for 50 years or so," Cyrus shrugs, watching the monitors, "after the Big Three collapsed, guys like me would have had no life. No jobs. No business. Because nothing was being developed. Technology jobs were non-existent. Your degrees would be useless. There was no work. The defense industry didn't exist anymore. The pharmaceutical, insurance, communication and fossil fuel industries all shriveled."

"Yeah, right, right."

"And they were the ones developing the most new tech. Wireless communication stopped dead. Digital services disappeared. There was no grid."

"And people were starving and dying."

"Millions. I read between 25 and 30 percent of the population died from lack of basics: food, water and simple medicines. Viruses, cholera and malaria killed millions. In many places there was no government. No structure at all."

"It's because those guys got greedy. They didn't realize the actual power of money. Like I do."

"Is that what you think?"

Jacob scowls, "Are you on my side, or what?"

"I'm just explaining how this all works for us to get rid of OS2020."

Jacob nods. Still scowling a little.

"So, anyway... Once there was some kind of stability, tech development started again. But only necessary tech. Basic critical tech for communication and security purposes. And a lot of it was built on scaled down versions of old platforms. Entire networks had to be rebuilt. Mostly from scratch. To eliminate all the profit-making structures built into the technology."

"That was where they screwed up. They tried to force people to make them richer. That's what I'm talking about. Idiots!"

"Exactly. They wanted to make individual people pay for basic services like power and com. But the new forming governments realized that greed and competition was just going

to make them as unstable as the last governments. And lead right back to their collapse. They needed to do it differently. Power and com had to be free to everyone. Simple and available everywhere. There was no competition to make money. The competition was to build your block faster, simpler and more reliable. So parallel development was the way to go."

"What's that?"

"You build a new system to replace the current system and run it alongside the old one. Showing people how it is better. And as they gradually switch over, the old system dies from lack of use. And chains of blocks became the new way to provide services, without being open to monopolies."

"It kills business, though," Jacob's face is contorted, "How can you make a decent profit if they are always controlling your profit margin?"

"That's the whole point," Cyrus sighs. "And the reason we both have the same goal: take down Mandate 105."

He swings back to the screens and taps a few keys.

"It's gotta go down," Jacob shakes his head. "It's a business killer. Since you can't have a monopoly on manufacturing or delivery chains under OS2020, you have to work together with other companies. This stupid chain of blocks. One company does one piece. Another does another. One company isn't allowed to own all the blocks."

"From the tech side I understand the reasoning. Each block becomes as seamlessly functional as it can possibly be. But has to be flexible enough to integrate with all the other blocks in the chain. All Operating Systems need to be liquid. Universal and crystal. If your block isn't, someone else is going to parallel develop you right out of business. And their block will take your place in the chain. The competition now is, who can build the better block?"

"But if your block fails," Jacob gets agitated, "you can face banishment for failing the citizenry. So, your block had better work."

"There are some flaws in the structure..."

"The same person, corporation, group or company cannot own more than one block in the chain," Jacob continues. "If you do and you get found out, you are looking at banishment. And that's stupid. Just stupid!"

"Well... Mister Jacob Jacobson, we may be looking at the end of all that nonsense. Right here," Cyrus points to the screen.

"Is it done?"

"You see the numbers?" Cyrus points.

"Yes... yes. But it looks like Pok is winning?"

"Watch..."

On the screen, the percentages read 51% for Pok and 49% for Amalyna. And the percent of total votes counted just clicked past 80%.

As they watch, slowly the percentage of votes counted clicks upwards. One percent at a time. On the other screen the Union Tabulator results broadcast over the OS channel, shows the percentages for both candidates slowly shift.

Agonizing minute after agonizing minute passes until... the final results flash on the OS screen:

Juri Amalyna - 51%

Jemm Pok - 49%

"Oh ye of little faith," smirks Cyrus.

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Eastern Sixth Form Campus

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"You know what your problem is?" Wilson jabs his finger, inches in front of Kai's nose.
"You and your lesbian lover," he sneers at Lizi.

The hallway is crowded with students scurrying between classes.

But a few of them stop and stare at Wilson.

He glares at Kai.

Lizi's eyes flare slightly at the corners. But her face is expressionless.

Wilson lurches towards Kai, "If you ever got a real hard di—"

Lizi's hand flies up. The heel of her palm smacks into Wilson's nose with a sickening crunch. Cutting him off in mid-sentence and sending him flailing backward.

He collapses in a pile like a rag doll.

Lizi stands in front of Kai. Between her and Wilson. She holds out her arms out to her sides like a shield.

Wilson glares at her, blood spurting from his nostrils, "You shǎ bī bitch!"

As he starts to push himself up, Lizi spreads her feet slightly.

Shoulder width. Stabilize. Unlock your knees.

She bends her knees slightly, shakes her hands out by her sides.

Don't take your eyes off him for a second.

The stone-cold daggers in her eyes are enough to convince him.

He drops back onto the floor rubbing his nose.

"What is going on here!" the POD's voice booms down the hall.

The students scatter like birds at the crack of a rifle.

Kai gasps and turns.

The Professor of the Day is M Gindy. She strides quickly up to Lizi and looks in horror at the crumpled pile of Wilson on the floor.

Blood dripping onto the front of his shirt.

"Sherril, Volk," Gindy points at two students, "Go get Doctor Hidu."

The students run off.

Lizi is still standing between Kai and Wilson. Like a statue. Her arms out to either side. Shielding Kai. Her eyes never leave Wilson.

M Gindy grabs Lizi by the shoulders and looks her in the face.

"Katijasdaw. Is this your doing?"

Lizi's face is flat. Emotionless. But firm and resolute.

"Yes," she answers, without expression.

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**IO Processing Center
Western Gate
FIRST UNION
2076**

Hagstrom walks Joonus Kasak out into the brightly lit corridor. Completely suspended and constrained by the blue beam.

As soon as Hagstrom leaves the chamber, the com blocker is released and his com pings in his pocket.

Brooks is waiting for him, "How'd it go?"
"Same old same old. Business as usual."

Hagstrom pulls his com out and reads the screen.
There are several calls from Katija. The last one is flagged 'Urgent'.

"So," Brooks takes the blue beam from Hagstrom and levitates Joonus Kasak to the middle of the hallway. "Did they prove he was part of the CEA assassinations?"

"Oh," Hagstrom is still reading from his com. "I don't know if he confessed or not."

"Well, I think The Mechanism was involved. But as usual..."

Hagstrom squints and grimaces at his com.

"No evidence," Brooks continues. "Thirteen people get shot on the same day? Too much coincidence for me, my brother."

"I hear you. I hear you. I'm thinking too, but," Hagstrom shrugs his shoulders, "no proof."

"Uh, hey buddy," Brooks nods at Hagstrom's com as he levitates Joonus Kasak in the blue beam. "Can that wait? We've kinda got a job to do here."

"It's Katija. It's flagged red."

"Call her back later, man. Let's get to work."

"I'll put it on ear." He taps the com transferring the call to the sub-dermal implant in his ear. And puts the com back into the pocket of his jacket.

They move Joonus Kasak down the hall.

"Hi my heart, can I call you back later? We're in the middle of a ban."

They stop at the sally port aperture.

"She what? Hit a kid? Wó cào?"

Brooks looks at him impatiently.

Hagstrom opens the aperture and leads Joonus out into the loading dock.

"Honey I gotta go now. I'll call you later. Yes. We're in the middle of a Ban. Gotta get him tagged and delivered to EO for transport. Yes, yes, yes, I will. We'll go together. Yes. Yes. I love you Kat."

He opens the back apertures on their cruiser and helps Brooks guide Joonus Kasak into the seat in the back.

"Yes. I'll talk to you later, Kat. Gotta go. Yes. Love you. Com off."

They strap Joonus Kasak into the seat and transfer the holding beam to the internal beam.

They both slide into the front seats of the cruiser.

Brooks stares out through the front window, "Joonus Kasak didn't break any laws. Can't jail him. Not even a citizen. All we can do is banish him."

"He's tagged so at least we can keep eyes on him," Hagstrom enters Western Gate EO station on the autodriven. "And if he contacts any more Soldiers of Truth, we can track that too."

He guides the cruiser up and out of the lot, "He can't get away."

Brooks chuckles, "Not unless he can extract his nano trackers."

Hagstrom shakes his head. "No way."

Brooks looks sideways at Hagstrom, "That com—is it Lizi? Again?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's get this guy delivered."

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Eastern Sixth Form College Cruiser Lot

FIRST UNION

2076

Katija scowls as she slams the aperture on her cruiser and stares through the wind-shield.

Hagstrom quietly slides into the passenger seat.

"Is this who she is now?" she looks sideways at Hagstrom. "A bully who beats up the other students? Is this what you've done to my daughter? You and your 'trainer'?"

"Kat," Hagstrom holds his hands up.

"What!" her tone cuts sharply through the frosty air between them.

He turns to her, "You heard what Kai said? What the other students said. About what Lizi's did?"

"Yes Hags. I heard everything!" her eyes flare.

"She hit him once," he says slowly and calmly.

Katija just glares.

"He made a lunge towards Kai, and Lizi reacted. She hit him with a quick disabling blow."

"Don't try and get technical." Katija starts.

"She took control of the moment and disabled the threat, in the quickest way possible, with the least amount of force."

Katija's face softens slightly.

"That's what she learned. From my trainer," he nods. "Tā mā de, most of the agents I work with don't have that kind of instinctive reaction."

"What? To assault a child?"

"She disabled an attacker and protected Kai. She hit him once. And then stood in front of Kai with her arms out, protecting her. She did not 'get into a fight' with another student. She did not keep hitting him. She did not bully him. She blocked him from hurting Kai. You heard it too."

Katija nods slightly, her eyes zipping around.

There is an awkward silence in the cruiser. Just Katija's exaggerated breathing.

Hags waits until her breathing slows then he turns to her.

"Kat, Lizi displayed the perfect character traits it takes to be an agent. She reacted to control a situation in a quick and efficient manner. You know this. You train new recruits too. It's difficult, if not impossible, to teach that kind of responsiveness to a recruit."

"She punched him! Hags!?"

"If, she had a blue beam, she would have used *that*. I believe," He shrugs, "It's just my observation."

Katija eyes him coldly. But thoughts are obviously dancing around behind her eyes.

"Hags, Lizi has no interest in being an agent. And besides, I would never let her put her life on the line like that."

"But it's ok with you if I put *my* life on the line like that?"

"That's different. You're different," she stops. Fully aware that her reasoning has just turned on itself.

"I understand," he rubs her arm tenderly and smiles.

"Hags," Katija looks at him apologetically. "I have always loved your protection instinct. It's one of the things I admire the most about you."

She takes his hand in hers and squeezes it tightly.

Then she pulls back and looks at him.

"Kat," he strokes her hands. "Lizi has her problems. Her issues. Sure. We all do. All I'm saying is, if I was ever in any danger, I would be very glad that she was on my team."

Katija turns and stares out the windscreen again.

She taps on the drive wheel.

After a long silence she taps the drive screen and selects the button for home.

She stares out the windshield. And breathes slowly, "IO or EO?"

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Eastern Sixth Form College Library

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"Sometimes I feel like I'm a visitor," Kai stares intently outside.

The stairway on the north side of the library is quiet today.

Lizi and Kai hunch on the top step and look outside, down to the paths where students scamper past, late for class. Sunlight streams through the tall glass panels bathing them in its golden warmth.

"I exist in this world," Kai continues, "but I am not from it. Yes, the molecules of my body are similar to those around me, but there is a separation. A distance. I feel like a casual observer, watching human beings engage in various behaviors. Behaviors that I would never consider. And I question just how I can feel and act so differently than the bulk of beings around me, who look like me."

Lizi nods as she stares out the glass following Kai's gaze. "I feel like that sometimes too."

"I don't accept hatred. I don't accept those who abuse children. But I accept that they exist."

Lizi looks at her silently.

Kai sighs, "You like to fight. It's your instinctive response."

Lizi shrugs, "I guess that's true."

"When you protected me. In the hall. You just hit him once."

Lizi looks away. Her eyes swell with tears.

"I guess I never really said... Z, thank you."

"You're welcome," Lizi wipes her eyes. "I will never accept people like Wilson."

"You don't have to. But you have to accept that people like Wilson exist. And they will create moments like that again and again."

"That's shén jīng bìng."

Kai turns her gaze back outside, "Negativity is more inspiring than positivity."

"I hate that."

"Lies are more popular than facts. Denial is stronger than truth."

"I hate that too."

Kai turns to Lizi, her warm smile and her soft eyes locking in on her friend, "You try to act like you don't care about anything or anyone."

Lizi shrugs and tries to avoid Kai's look.

"You can act as rebellious as you want, Z, but I know you care. You care very deeply."

Lizi looks away sheepishly.

Kai touches her arm softly, "And I know, when the moment comes, you will do the right thing."

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"Good evening from UATV, and welcome to Mandate Watch."

Hagstrom slumps onto the sofa as the big wall screen blinks on.

"For the next two weeks we will be looking at the issues surrounding the upcoming vote on Mandate 105."

"Kat, it's starting," Hags calls into the kitchen.

"Coming, coming," Katija rushes in with a platter of fruit and plunks down next to him.

"Good evening. I'm your host Eoin Moran. Tonight, we look at the opposition to approving mandate 105. We look at the arguments made for shutting down the Firewall and suspending our OS."

"Never happen," Hagstrom shakes his head.

"Joining me tonight is Robert Olson. He is the former Lead Agent of The Screen. Later, we will be talking to the junior leader of the opposition, and hear first-hand what their objections are, and what they would like to see changed."

"But first let me start with you Robert."

(Camera pulls back to show Robert Olson sitting across the news desk.)

"Welcome to Mandate Watch."

"Well, Eoin, we are going to hear some very well-worn arguments that are always trotted out every seven years when we have this vote. Remember, the strongest lobby of people who want to do away with the Firewall are the people who have something to lose if they ever get brought in front of it."

"Same denial protection we see again and again."

"Yes. We will hear some different spins this time, in an attempt to camouflage the intent. But the underlying motivations never change."

"Only the face arguments will sound different."

"Yes."

"It's going to be the same old cack as last time, Kat," Hagstrom rubs his face.

Katija hands him the fruit plate, "Yeah I think."

"What are we going to hear different this time?"

"Well, Eoin, the opposition are calling themselves 'Freedom Fighters'. Fighting for the freedom of people to live their lives free from the persecution of delusional public servants who are projecting their own unresolved issues onto them."

"That's a lot in a short sentence."

"Yes it is."

"So, let's unpack that. The 'delusional public servants' means The Firewall and IO, obviously."

"Yes. And claiming The Firewall is projecting unresolved anger onto them, is a desperate attempt to redirect attention away for their own projection of unresolved anger onto the Firewall."

"Exactly."

"So, they are using the simple flip, and trying to play victims."

"Absolutely."

"It is obvious. It's always obvious."

"Don't they ever get tired of repeating the same stuff over and over?"

"It's all they have."

"But there is some new stuff too. On virtual communities now."

"Yes, they have created a conspiracy theory they call the 'Hidden State'. Supposedly the Firewall is run by rich men who are pedophiles. They banish people just so they can take their children to be sold as sex slaves. And tortured and killed."

"They can't be serious."

"What do you do when you don't have the power of reason? And you can't look at your own behavior? You project something horrible onto the people holding a mirror to your face. You have to. You have nothing else."

"Hags? Pedophiles? Have you heard this?"

"Yeah. we've had some briefings about it. We looked at the VirComs to see if there was anything we could use to shut it down. But they get more and more clever. They adapt and change. This 'Hidden State' thing is the most ridiculous thing the opposition has ever come up with."

"But they can all get counsel," Katija scrunches up her face. "All of this is so unnecessary. We are here to help them."

"They don't see it that way."

"It's just frustrating. Things are so much better with the Firewall. So much better."

"Let's see what else they have," he turns up the sound.

"People who were sexually abused are triggered by the word: Pedophiles. It will turn them against the Firewall."

"They play on the fear and terror of other victims, to rally them to vote the Firewall down."

"Exactly. And labeling the Firewall as a bunch of pedophiles serves two purposes. First, it establishes the Firewall as a substitute for the pedophile who hurt them. They are giving themselves the opportunity to strike back at their abuser."

"Vicariously. Right?"

"Yes. And second, it's the vilest thing they can imagine. They demonize the Firewall into an entity that no one in their right mind should support: A group of evil pedophiles stealing children to make them sex slaves."

"And that's how they lure in others to join them."

"Yes. But they've ramped it up this year with the 'Hidden State' thing."

"And people fall for that, Hags. People who weren't abused. It's really distressing."

"To you and me. And everyone who sees it for what it is."

"It just... Hags, it just makes me really glad that we have the Firewall. Can you imagine?

What these people could do if it wasn't there?"

"I shudder to think, my only one."

"What else are we looking at?"

"So this 'Hidden State' spreads to every department of the OS: The Shield, The Screen, The Stewards, The Guard, The Council of Advisors, The Council of Accountants."

"Everyone."

"Everyone is a pedophile."

"Wait. Wait, wait. What? Hags? Everyone is a pedophile? Gene Base? IO? You and me?"

"Pedophiles kidnapping the children of the Bans."

"What?!?"

"We are all pedophiles. Or supporting our bosses who are pedophiles. And we won't admit it. We are covering up for them."

"Hags! Seriously! What?!?"

"Yeah. Wǒ càò right?"

"Robert, and they can say this with a straight face?"

"Say it? They shout it. Do you follow their VirComs?"

"Not much. I try to avoid disinformation."

"They shout this. They throw emotional fits. Their eyes get wide, their breathing gets erratic. They start flailing around."

"But that's just—"

"Hags, it's emotionally wounded children screaming that they were hurt. It's the anger from their childhood."

"Exactly, Kat."

"But that's just their inner child, Robert. The one that was traumatized. Screaming for help."

"Yes. And that's the real power behind this. The fear and anger in their voices is real. Which, unfortunately, is what sells their conspiracy theory to those who with underdeveloped cortices."

"And, apparently, Kat, all of us IO agents hack the vote every seven years so the Fire-wall stays. Just so we can keep coming into your homes and abducting your kids for our evil pedophile bosses."

"Oh, Hags! Turn it off. I can't hear any more. This is too much. Turn it off!"

Hagstrom turns it off and they sit side by side staring at the blank screen.

"Hags?"

"Um?"

"Hags, why is it so easy for bad people to do bad things, and so difficult for good people to do good things?"

Denial is the true enemy of freedom.
Our denial is more important to us
than our safety, happiness or national security.

Winston Smith 2016

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21.1400.6007
City Point
FIRST UNION
2076

"Crystal! Crystal, Lizi! Again! And Again!"

Hypatia is working her hard today. Her arms ache. Her muscles are burning. Her feet are sore, she's gasping for air.

I've never felt so alive in my whole life.

"Again! And again! Crystal! Crystal! Take a break."

Hypatia throws a towel to Lizi and goes to get them some water.

"Your, uh..." she calls over her shoulder, "what do you call him?"

Lizi looks at her puzzled.

"Hagstrom. He was here a couple of days ago."

"He still trains with you?"

"Yes. He and Brooks come in once a month and do a few hours work out. Just to stay sharp. He's a very dedicated person."

"I guess," Lizi looks down as she wipes her arms with the towel.

"He is proud of you."

Lizi looks up, "Proud?"

"He told me about the incident at school."

"Oh. That," Lizi tries to avoid her gaze.

"Don't look away, Lizi. I'm proud of you too. He told me what you did. You have learned well here. I've worked with agents for years and never gotten them to respond like that. You're a natural. You are more like him than you are different. Perhaps he's rubbing off on you."

"Urgh. What a thought."

"He couldn't stop talking about you. How you stood your ground. Only threw one hit. How you disarmed the situation. And protected your friend. You should be proud of yourself for the hard work you've done here. I'm proud of you. Hagstrom is proud of you. Brooks said he brags about you at the agency."

"At the agency?" Lizi looks up, a confused and pained expression hovering at the edges of her face.

"You know what he said to me?" Hypatia stands in front of Lizi, making her look eye to eye. "He said, 'I wish she was my birth daw.' That's what he said."

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Exact Location Unknown
Punjab
2076

The lumbering transport rattles and roars through the open gates of the abandoned airstrip.

It has been a long hot journey across the desert to the foot of the mountains.

The wind whistles and howls around the truck. It lurches to a stop in front of a steel hut at the end of the airstrip. But those huddled in the back are blindfolded and gagged. All they can do is listen to the wind. And wonder where they are. And why.

The canvas is pulled back, and one by one the captives in the back of the transport are escorted into the hut with guards on either side.

The captives are divided, three in one group and four in another.

They are pushed down onto the bare concrete floor.

The gag and blindfold are taken off the first man.

He blinks as he looks cautiously around.

The second man twists and jerks as his gag is removed, "Who the hell are you!" he barks.

One by one all the blindfolds come off.

They can now see that they're in an old airplane hangar from the last empire. Glimpses out the windows reveal the abandoned airstrip and the border mountains rising up behind it. Surrounding them are about thirty men in turbans, some wearing daggers on their hips.

"Khalsa?" whispers one of the bound captives.

Another one shakes his head, "Mechanics."

The leader of the captors stands in front of the group of four, "You were arrested and charged with raping an eleven-year-old girl. The evidence was overwhelming. And yet, due to a technical fault in the legal process, your case was dropped. And you were set free."

"We're not guilty!" barks the second captive.

The leader ignores the outburst and continues, "Justice will be served."

A few of the captors grasp the handles of their daggers.

"We protect the weak and innocent," the leader continues.

"We protect the weak and innocent," repeat the others in unison.

"We defend those who are oppressed, who are robbed, raped, or beaten."

"We defend those who are oppressed, who are robbed, raped, or beaten."

"We defend those who cannot defend themselves."

"You can't kill us," shouts the second captive, "you don't have any authority!"

"Kill you?" the leader responds calmly. "We are not going to kill you. That would not be justice. We are going to cut your vocal cords, break every bone in both of your hands and feet, and carve the word 'rapist' into your foreheads. Then we will throw you back into the street."

He walks up to the second captive, and leans in close to his face, "So you can feel what it is like to be helpless."

Fear and panic shoots across the faces of the bound captives.

The leader moves on to the other three kneeling together.

"You are the judge and the lawyers from that court case. You have failed the people in doing your job. Your vocal cords will be severed, the bones in your hands and feet broken, and you shall have the word 'traitor' carved into your foreheads. Then you will be thrown back into the street, for the people to exact their own justice on you."

The gags are tied back on as the men struggle and twist against their bounds.

They look up in horror as a gurney is wheeled in front of them by two people dressed in surgical garments and masks. A tray of shiny instruments is wheeled in.

One of the masked surgeons picks up a short heavy sledge hammer and slams it down on the gurney. The loud crash reverberates through the metal hut.

"We are going to do this slowly," the leader continues, "one at a time. So, you all can witness the consequences of your behavior."

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"Moms, you look wiped."

"Oh, hi Lizi," Katija drops her bags by the door and makes her way to the kitchen. "How was your morning?" she tosses distractedly over her shoulder.

Lizi jumps up and follows her into the kitchen, "Give."

Katija turns and looks at her. Tenderly she touches her cheek. Like she used to do when Lizi was small, "Oh my beautiful daw."

Lizi twists her face and gives her mother a questioning stare.

"Oh, it's just..." Katija seems to shake something off. She plants a forced smile on her face, "I've just spent four hours with the mediums. You know how that wipes me out."

There's more here. Lizi can feel it. But she doesn't push.

"Talking to the dead people again?"

"Lizi, you do understand, they can see past, present and future from the other side."

Lizi shudders, "It's creepyficated. Gives me the whim whams."

"Well, it's very useful in our research."

Lizi rolls her eyes towards the ceiling and shakes her head.

"Oh, my darling daw. You are so very rehearsed at rolling your eyes."

Lizi huffs.

"And equally practiced at huffing," Katija smiles.

"I'm not the one who's talking to dead people," Lizi scowls.

"Technically, talking to mediums. It is they, who communicate with those who have crossed over."

"If/else, Moms, same cack."

"Lizi, you need to understand, in the course of our research we cannot rule out potential resources just because someone doesn't want to believe they are a resource."

"Nǎo cán."

"No, Lizi, it's not 'diseased brain'. And I wish you wouldn't curse so much in Chinese. It's still rude, even if it is another language."

Lizi huffs again.

Katija slides onto a stool across from her daw, "Why are you so negative towards mediums?"

"It's creepy cack, Moms."

"You might be surprised by what you hear."

"I don't need to hear any of it."

Katija studies her face.

Well, we shall just let that one sit for the moment. Shall we?

"Anyway, Lizi, as I was trying to tell you, I have been involved in 37 double blind tests using mediums. To try to discern if there is any help we can get from people who've crossed over."

"Dead people. Corpses. Help from corpses?" Lizi rolls her eyes again.

"One thing I have learned, the bodies are dead. But the soul or spirit, or however you want to define it, is still very much alive on the other side."

"You actually believe that cack."

"37 trials, Lizi. 37 times we asked for specific information that would be known only by that person before they died. And 35 times we got a correct answer."

"So not perfect. Not every time."

"No, my darling daw, not every time. Are you going to throw away 35 correct answers over 2 inconclusive ones? That's not very scientific."

Lizi scowls.

"That's assumption of an absolute, Lizi. 'If one, then all'. There are no absolutes—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Lizi cuts her off with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Anyway, the most exciting part of this research, for me, is that on the other side, time seems to be non-linear. These energies or spirits or what have you, have the ability to see and communicate with people from the past and the future. The value of the information we could get from them is priceless. What an opportunity."

"The voices of the sprits," Lizi makes a sarcastic face.

Katija pulls out vegetables and bread and starts filling squarelocs.

"Are you meeting Hagstrom for lunch?"

"Yes, our standing lunch date at Hopewell Green."

Lizi scrunches up her face, "You guys are bigger teenagers than me."

Katija tilts her head to one side, "I think it's lovely. Sneaking away to spend some time together if our schedules fit. And it's so pretty there with the cherry blossoms, and the canal, and the ducks."

"Moms! You're like a dewey eyed deer."

"Yes. Yes, I am. Aren't I? What a wonderful feeling it is," she pulls out a hamper and packs it with squares of fruit and olives and juice. "You know that we found the specific gene that causes obesity?"

"Yeah. I heard that."

"Do you know how we found it?"

"Dead voices?" Lizi scrunches up her face again.

Katija smirks, "Yes, Lizi. We got the information by communicating with someone who passed over."

"Creepy..."

"Do you have any idea how many people that has helped? How many lives were saved because of that discovery?"

Lizi squirms trying to find a way to escape but Katija's eyes are fixed on her daughter's face.

"Lizi, we worked with a medium who communicated with a genetic researcher from Estonia. His specialty was Genomics. He died before he could finish his trials."

"You just called up a dead guy?"

"No," Lizi. We worked with his daughter. And she acted as a go-between. With her and our staff medium we were able to communicate with her father."

"What if she lied?"

"The daughter? Or the medium?"

"Both. Either."

"Lizi..." Katija sighs, "the daughter could not have possibly made up the information we received. Only someone with a Full Degree, like mine, would have the vocabulary and the knowledge to direct us towards the specific pair. And our mediums undergo once a year scanning and evaluation by the Screen to keep their jobs. Nobody lied."

Lizi shrugs.

"What he communicated with us was the exact pair he suspected. And the protein that needed to be expressed. He was very clear. The medium had trouble vocalizing what he was saying so she had to write it down. He was working with somatic cell therapy."

"Labspeak again," Lizi rolls her eyes.

"Specific 'Labspeak', Lizi. The kind that no one outside of our labs would understand. Specifically, she wrote down that he had made the duplex crRNA and tracrRNA. He had bound it with a sequence 5'NGG3'. That's called protospacer adjacent motif."

"And she wrote this out? Proto-whatever?"

"Yes, Lizi. Exactly as I am telling you. Anyway, after binding he had modified the gene with homologous recombination. He proved it could work. But he was just beginning to adapt his research to a germline therapy when he had a heart attack. So, it never got finished."

"This is all just too weird," Lizi shakes her shoulders like she just felt a blast of cold air.

"It's amazing, is what it is. From what she wrote down, and further questioning about the helix-turn-helix proteins, our lab was able to continue his work and produce a heritable therapy that has helped millions of people in the Union."

"What's heritable?"

"Put your own marker in the margin of your grandmother's cookbook."

"Oh, that. Weird."

"The Tasmanian Devils showed us, years ago—"

"Tasmanian Devils?" Lizi blurts. "Cool name for a band."

"Yes. Lizi. Cool name. So, anyway, the Tasmanian Devils are a marsupial, a rodent from the island of Tasmania. Just off the coast of Australia."

"The independent?"

"Yes. The nation. A long time ago, the Devils developed the capacity to adapt to transmissible cancer at the genetic and phenotypic levels."

Lizi scowls.

"The DNA and characteristics of the gene traits."

Lizi shrugs.

Katija forces a thin smile.

"This is due to their phenotypic polymerity. That's the capacity of an individual organism to alter its physiology or gene expression in response to changing environmental conditions."

"Mom's!" Lizi shakes her head.

"The point is, their species, their DNA evolved to become immune to cancer."

"Immune? Weird. Like they cured themselves?"

"Evolved to be resistant to it. Without outside assistance. And they did it pretty quickly. In 16 years. About eight Devil generations."

"They cured themselves of cancer?"

"No. They evolved to be resistant to it. So, if they can do it, then can we? And that's where the research started that got us to where we are now."

"Some little rat. That's pretty cool. Actually."

"Yes. It's very cool. And the geneticist we talked to who had crossed over, thought it was very cool too. He was working on a potential way for humans to actuate their own polymerity. Within one person's lifespan. So that's why I 'talk to dead people', Lizi."

Katija makes quotation marks with her fingers in the air.

"Enough! Enough, Moms! No more dead people talk. OK?"

Katija smiles, "Whatever you need, Lizi. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. Perhaps when you're a little older, and your prefrontal cortex is fully developed."

"Moms!" Lizi scowls. She jumps up and heads towards the door.

Katija's com pings and she picks it up, "Yes?"

Lizi tugs her shoes from the pile underneath the bench.

"Yes, yes. Right away," Katija puts down her com.

"Give?"

"It's work, I...", Katija stops and puts her hands on her hips, frowning.

"What? What?"

"Well," she shakes her head, "I have an emergency call from the Firewall. They need an immediate spinout."

"There goes lunch."

She looks down at the hamper, "Oh blast it. The best laid plans."

Lizi tilts her head to one side, "You know, erm, maybe I could go?"

"You? Really? You want to spend time with my 'dull as dirt' husband? Wasn't that your quote?"

"Maybe I can teach him to not be so dull," Lizi snarks with a grin.

"Anyway, it would be a shame to see such a great lunch go to waste. I mean, after all the time you took to make it."

Katija studies her face, "I don't know what you are up to with this. And I don't have time to hang around and find out. So, okay. Go. Have fun. I'm off."

Katija grabs the cruiser key and rushes out the door. "I'll let Hags know you are coming instead," she shouts over her shoulder.

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**IO Processing Center
Western Gate
FIRST UNION
2076**

The woman in the docket wears a standard red jumpsuit.

The blue restraining beam is not activated.

She scowls defiantly.

"Let's get started." The Senior Screen Agent puts down her tablet and turns to the five people seated in front of the woman.

"Members of the First Union Firewall, this is case number P-32864-B. The person in front of you is Doctor Ilyan Beo."

The Firewall member in the middle of the five rises and reads: "Whereas, The Firewall of The First Union has declared the person of Doctor Ilyan Beo to be Civiliter Mortuus. Whereas, banishment has been agreed by unanimous vote. Whereas, The First Union Firewall does hereby issue the order of immediate and permanent banishment of the person, case number P-32864-B. Therefore, The First Union Firewall does hereby authorize the Screen to execute this order."

She sits back down.

The Senior Agent turns back towards the docket.

"Very well, let's proceed."

Doctor Beo scowls and shouts, "I demand that you stop this nonsense immediately and set me free."

The Senior Agent scrolls on her tablet, "You have had your routine body scans in preparation for banishment."

"Stop it! Stop it!" barks Doctor Beo. Her eyes burn with anger.

"Doctor Ilyan Beo" the Designated Firewall Member cuts her off, "You deliberately marketed and sold medications that had no effect in relieving the cause or symptoms of your patient's conditions."

"These are natural cures," barks Doctor Beo. "You have been brainwashed by scam modern doctors. The old ways are so much better."

"This is not a second hearing," the Designated Member fires back. "You had your time to prove your case and failed. You are now being banished."

"I demand another hearing. I demand equal time."

"You've had your hearing. You've presented your defense and you have failed. You presented no evidence, only your own opinions. And the opinions of people who agree with you. Opinions are not proof."

"These products work!" Doctor Beo's eyes flare, her face reddens.

"We are not here to hold a second hearing," the Designated Member repeats, "we are here to banish you as requested by the citizenry."

"You don't have the authority. This is a witch hunt!"

The Senior Agent cuts in, "Mandate 104 gives The Firewall the authority to banish you."

"I didn't vote for Mandate 104!" Dr Beo sneers.

"As a citizen of this Union you are bound by all laws of the Union. If you don't like the laws, then you have always been free to move somewhere else."

"You're stealing my freedom!!" Dr Beo screams.

The Firewall Member sighs, "You are being banished for generating an income from the suffering and misery of others. Your customers are the ones who want you banished."

"It's not against the law to manufacture and sell natural medical treatments."

"That is correct."

"So let me go."

"You are not being banished for breaking the law. You are being banished because your customers want you banished."

"These cures work. I have seen the proof first hand."

"Your customers disagree. And they want you banished. And you are going to be banished. Today. Right now."

"You are ruining my life. I demand that you stop this immediately and let me go."

The Senior Agent breaks in, "You are being banished."

"Do you have any idea who I am?" Doctor Beo turns on the Senior Agent. "How powerful I am? I am well respected expert in the whole world. I have millions of people who respect me."

The Senior Agent continues, "This situation is not going to change because you scowl and bark. The only question you need to answer is where in the world do want to be delivered to?"

"I'm staying here. I'm going home!"

"You have no home here anymore. Your assets have been seized and everyone you cheated will be compensated."

"YOU DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHT!" Dr Beo screams.

"Agent, will you restrain the Dr Beo please."

"No!" Dr Beo snaps, "those blue beams cause cancer! And autism!"

The Senior Agent waves off the blue beam technician and resumes, "If you do not choose a destination, one will be chosen for you at random. Do you waive your right to choose?"

"I'm not leaving," defiantly. "You hide here, in your secret meetings, and blue beam people, and rape them, and kidnap them, and ruin their lives! You're pedophiles! Devil worshippers!"

Doctor Beo rises leaning forward. The beam technician quickly moves directly in front of her and points the beam at her.

The sight of the raised beam, and the firm expression of the technician seems to make something click inside of Doctor Beo. Her face calms quickly and she sits back down. The technician stays in front of her. Beam ready.

"Doctor Beo," Designated Firewall Member rises. "Your hearing at the Firewall was livecast. Every one of your accusers were livecast. The Firewall vote was livecast. This banishment procedure is being livecast as mandated by law. You know this. Yet, your continued lies and attempts to avoid the consequences of your own behavior, only emphasize the reasons that your customers want you banished from the Union. You are being banished. You need to choose a destination. Do you understand?"

"I'm not leaving," she repeats.

"Do you waive your right to choose?" The Senior Agent continues. "I am bound to ask you three times and then the Firewall will choose for you. "

Dr Beo leans forward, enunciating each word slowly and calmly, as though that will change the situation, "I'm-not-going-anywhere!"

The Senior Agent looks at the Firewall members.

The Designated Firewall Member responds, "Doctor Ilyan Beo, according to Firewall code 451.9, if a banishment destination has not been personally chosen, then you forfeit the choice to the First Union Firewall. Do you understand this?"

Silence. Arms folded.

"Once more, will you choose a destination? Or do you waive your right to choose?"

Doctor Beo snorts, "I'm not going anywhere."

The Designated Member sits back down and confers with the other members briefly. They scroll through a screen on their table. They all look at the screen as a random algorithm is run and a destination is chosen. One by one they nod. The Designated Member looks up at the Senior Agent.

"Members of the First Union Firewall, have you made a decision on a banishment destination?"

"We have," they answer in unison.

The Senior Agent turns to the woman in the docket, "Doctor Ilyan Beo, I ask you again, will you choose a destination to be banished to?"

Silence. Glaring.

"I need a verbal confirmation."

Doctor Beo repeats slowly, over-enunciating each word, "I'm not going anywhere."

The Senior Agent turns to the Firewall members, "Will you accept that as a confirmation that case number P-32864-B, forfeits her choice of a banishment destination over to the First Union Firewall?"

The Firewall members confer.

"We do."

The Senior Agent turns back to the Firewall members, "Members of the First Union Firewall will you now assemble the processing documentation for the EO agents?"

The Firewall lead member nods.

She turns back to the docket, "Doctor Ilyan Beo, you are hereby banished from the First Union for as long as you shall live. If you cross back into First Union territory anywhere, you will be killed on the spot. Do you understand this?"

Scowling.

"I need a verbal confirmation, please."

Silence.

"I need a verbal confirmation, please."

Silence. Doctor Beo closes her eyes tightly and defiantly points her chin up and off to one side.

The Senior Agent turns towards the five Firewall members, "Will you accept that as a confirmation that she understands the consequences of returning to the First Union?"

The Firewall members talk quietly between themselves for a moment.

Then the one in the centre speaks, "Yes. We accept that she understands the consequences."

"Very well, then thank you for your service to the Union. We shall now get the documents prepared and the authorization reports."

The Firewall member in the centre stands, "Thank you for your service to the Union."

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Hopewell Green

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

The air is lush with crossbreds.

Lizi and Hagstrom sit in the Calming Zone of Hopewell Green. Where flowers and plants have been crossbred to provide a relaxing combination of scents. A trickle of water ripples over rows of standing stones and into the canal. Ducks and geese quack as they paddle about. The leaves of the Quaking Aspens rustle in the midday breeze.

The zones in the park have been designed and populated with elements that will aid in giving certain sensory experiences.

In the Energizing Zone anyone from the community can meet to do ancient movement exercises together.

In the Meditating Zone there are low solitary benches to contemplate the raked stone gardens and fish ponds.

The Healing Zone has a butterfly garden. Today, as usual, it is peppered with dementia sufferers and their companions. As well as people floating around in airchairs recovering from accidents or illnesses.

The scents of Gardenia, Jasmine, Hyacinths, Roses, Primrose, Honeysuckle, and lilac drift through the air around them.

"You guys like this place, huh?" Lizi looks around the park.

Hagstrom puts his hands out wide and gestures, "Look at how beautiful it is. Quiet, safe, clean... What's not to like?"

"Yeah, I guess," she flips open the hamper.

"What did your mom make for us today," Hagstrom digs around and pulls out a sandwich. "She takes really good care of us, doesn't she?"

Lizi doesn't respond. She is too busy pushing a fat sandwich into her mouth.

The sun is almost directly overhead and filters through the leaves of the huge trees above them. A stained-glass pattern of light and dark gently ripples over them as they eat.

From the picnic bench where they are sitting, they can see all the way along the canal to where it exits the park at both ends. Graceful long necked swans paddle slowly down the canal. Clumps of people sit on the lush green grass on plaid blankets, murmuring to each other.

"It's a small escape in the middle of a busy day," Hagstrom interrupts the stillness.

"It's a nice park," Lizi nods, chewing thoughtfully.

"I love this park," he replies. "I love what it stands for."

Lizi looks at him questioningly.

"Have you ever read the dedication plaque at the gate?"

"Guess not," she shakes her head.

Hagstrom rests his elbows on the table between them, "This is a slice of history."

Lizi gives him a puzzled look.

"Years ago," Hagstrom nods, "when the Firewall was new, a lot of people didn't trust it. But after a few cases, that changed. Once people realized how the Firewall actually works."

"What cases?" Lizi leans forward, "we haven't studied that yet."

"This case. Right here. The reason why we have this park."

Lizi's eyes widen.

"It involved a real estate swindle to build a shopping centre. A wealthy developer had friends on the city council. They conspired together, claiming Eminent Domain, to tear down

38 homes. Forcing the people out, and paying them a fraction of what their homes and land were actually worth."

"What's Eminent Domain?"

"Ah... Well, Eminent Domain used to be a legal method that a government could use to take away private property for public use. Usually roads, government buildings or public utilities."

"They just took your land? Your house? What?"

"In this case, so a development company could rezone the area. Then evict the homeowners and pay them what the development company thought was a fair market value for their property."

"What *the development company* thought was fair? And people put up with this cack?"

"Until there was a Firewall," Hagstrom points his finger around the park. "At city council meetings there were protests and screaming. But legally it was all approved."

"This was legal? Legal?"

He nods with a reluctant face. "A widow on a pension, lost her home of 50 years. She went to the Firewall in desperation. She showed them all of her documentation and the papers she had been forced to sign by the city. Even though the property grab was deemed legal by the court, the Firewall looked at the case and decided to investigate this developer."

He pauses for a drink of juice.

"Well... months went by and nothing came of it. The houses were torn down. The lot cleared. And signs were being put up showing images of the brand-new shiny shopping centre that was about to be built."

"Done? That's it?"

"No. Not done at all," he shakes his finger. "One bright morning, the story broke that 27 people had been detained by IO Agents and brought before the Firewall. Firewall investi-

gators wheeled in boxes of impounded documents that exposed the whole thing. The Firewall had been investigating the whole time."

"Busted!"

"The developer was kicking back money to city employees to help him use Eminent Domain to build his shopping centre. The contractors were in on it. Everybody. So, the Mayor was banished. The Deputy Mayor and many of the employees of City Hall were taken into custody. Their accounts were seized. They were stripped of their citizenship and permanently banished. Same for the developer, the contractors and their lawyers."

"So, what about the park?"

"Well, the seized developer's accounts were used to rebuild the houses that were torn down. And, to return those residents to their homes. Ever notice how the houses that border this park look older than everything else in this area?"

"Yeah, they look old."

"They were rebuilt to their original look, with services upgraded. He spreads his hands gesturing to the park around them, "And to build a park in an abandoned lot."

"Tā mā de," Lizi whistles.

"And they dedicated it to the developer."

"The *developer*?"

"It was *his* money," Hagstrom shrugs.

"But that's..."

"Funny. Don't you think?"

"Hilarious. They dedicated it to him! Ha!"

"Yeah. It was a little 'screw you buddy' that the community threw back at him."

"That's sweet!" she giggles.

"I thought you might appreciate that."

"Crystal!"

"Yep, they banished all of them."

Lizi gives a low whistle.

"And attitudes changed dramatically across the Union."

Lizi nods, "The people realized the power of the Firewall."

"And who it was serving," he points his finger at her.

"Tā mā de," she shakes her head.

"That was also the end of Eminent Domain. The Firewall set up Resource Allocation and Asset Management. And The Council of Advisors and The Council of Accountants."

"We all get to vote on what land gets used for what."

"Exact."

"And it started right here."

"Little old Hopewell. Which is why I like coming here."

"You like your job," Lizi nods, "don't you Hagstrom?"

"I do. I love it because it makes a positive difference."

**Democracies cannot be funded by capitalism.
Their goals contradict each other.**

Winston Smith 2016

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The Shield

City Point

FIRST UNION

2076

Brooks rushes into the breakroom, "We have another delivery."

Hagstrom looks sideways at his partner, puzzled. Then it registers, "The Mechanism?"

"Signed, sealed and delivered."

Hagstrom sighs and pulls on his heavy blue IO jacket, "And who is it this time?"

"Nobody special," Brooks smirks, "just that investment banker we have been looking for. For the last five years."

"Tā mā de," Hagstrom shakes his head, "How do they do it Brooks?"

"You tell me and we'll both know, my brother."

They walk into the hall and down towards the Intake Dock.

They scan their badges and retinas at the SecuriPort and the heavy door slab whooshes open.

The OAD nods to them as they enter, and gestures towards the figure tied in a chair.

It's the same as it always is: the fugitive is tied to a chair, blindfolded, gagged and sedated. His Shield file, *their* file, taped across his chest.

All three of them look at each other.

They all want to say it, But none of them can.

These guys make us look bad.

It's Hagstrom who breaks the silence, "At least they delivered him for processing. Instead of just executing him."

"I think they do it," replies the OAD, "just to rub salt in our wounds."

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Eastern Sixth Form College Library

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"I think that we missed the main point of the whole book."

Skarlett arches her back and turns to let the warm afternoon sun bake her face.

Two steps down, Lizi hunkers over her tablet, scrolling and scowling.

"Everyone read '1984', and watched to see if it became true," Skarlett's voice bounces down the glass stairwell to lower levels of the library.

"Piece by piece, parts of it happened. And they said, 'Wow, he was so right.' I don't think that was the point."

Kai looks at Skarlett with a frown, "So what do you think was his point?"

"I think George Orwell is spinning in his grave. His whole point was to warn people. To motivate them to stop it from happening. To stop it."

"Interesting," Lizi nods.

"He was presenting an obvious possible outcome," Skarlett continues, "if they did nothing and let it happen. And they did nothing and let it happen. His whole point was for them to prevent it from happening. But we are stupid. Humans are a stupid slow bunch of mammals."

"I won't disagree with that," Kai sighs, "But, in all fairness, '1984' offered us no information on how to stop it. Or, some other possible path to follow."

"Winston Smith," Lizi chimes in, "was probably more effective at giving us a way to stop it."

"Two ways," Skarlett replies, "actually."

"Two ways?" Lizi sparks up.

"The Firewall and The Mechanism."

"But he didn't invent—" Lizi shakes her head, "He didn't create The Mechanism. You heard the interview. When he said 'the people need a mechanism' he was talking about the Firewall."

"Maybe," Skarlett shrugs, "but The Mechanism started before the Firewall."

"That's true, I guess..." Lizi trails off.

"Firewall or Mechanism," Kai nods slowly. "Which one do you think has been more effective?"

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City Point

FIRST UNION

2076

"Once you realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold on to."

Lizi and Hypatia are sitting cross-legged on the floor. Their eyes are closed.

The bright sunlight shines through the leaves of the large tree outside. As the breeze tosses the leaves, the shadows and light dance across the two as they sit.

Hypatia continues, "If you are not afraid to die, there is nothing you cannot achieve."

They uncross their legs and stretch out.

"You really believe that stuff?" Lizi picks up her mug of tea.

"The Daodejing is the road map of the path I walk."

"And you think that stuff is true?"

"She who is centered in the Dao," Hypatia recites, "can go where she wishes, without danger."

"No fear?" Lizi nods. "Even from a bully?"

Hypatia sets her tea down on the floor in front of her, "Bullies are the biggest cowards in the playground."

Lizi snickers, "Playground."

Hypatia's look is direct and still. No emotion.

The smirk quickly vanishes from Lizi's face.

"If they're cowards, then why do they pick on other people?" Lizi stares intently into her cup of red tea, avoiding Hypatia's steel blue gaze.

"Every bully," Hypatia speaks in a slow measured tone, "has suffered some emotional trauma."

"So, I'm supposed to feel sorry for them?" Lizi sneers.

"Feel what you feel. Feelings don't lie."

Lizi shrugs, "They're jerks."

"They attack those who are comfortable expressing feelings. Because they are terrified of their own feelings."

"Yeah, I get that."

Hypatia nods, "Cruelty is the goal. They need to see pain in your eyes."

"Pain?"

"To feel justice. Revenge. For the pain in their eyes when they were kids."

"Why didn't they just fight back? Kick the fèn out of their abuser?"

"Fear. Physical size and strength. Repercussions."

"Yeah... I guess."

They drink their tea.

"I would think," Lizi ventures, "that someone who was hurt—the last thing they would want to do is hurt someone else."

"It's a logical thought. But abuse isn't logical. It's emotionally driven. Don't go chasing after logic where it doesn't exist."

"But I have a friend who was abused. And she doesn't try to act abusive towards other people."

"Has she gotten counsel?"

"Well, yeah—"

"She faced her fear. There is no greater illusion than fear. Whoever can see through fear will always be safe."

"More Dao stuff?"

Hypatia stands, "Are you going to lounge around all afternoon sipping tea, or are you here to work?"

**If you try to legislate manners,
It will inspire rudeness.**

All things happen in balance.

Winston Smith 2016

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Firewall Complex

Gene Base Lab

City Point

FIRST UNION

2076

Sunlight streams into the lab through the row of large portals overlooking the quadrant.

It's a beautiful day outside.

The sequencers ping and hum as base pairs dance across the monitors.

Katija glances at the wall screen. Voting is in progress. The exit polls are projecting that Mandate 105 will pass by a narrow margin.

Jattine breezes into the room. She quickly turns the screen over to the agency stream, "Katija, you must see."

"What's going on?"

"There is telecast."

"So what? We're working here."

M. Brower, Head Counsel of The Shield appears on the screen.

"This is a Union security alert. Interagency sharing indicates a serious attempt may be made to hack the Mandate 105 vote."

"There's always someone trying to hack the vote," Katija dismisses the telecast and turns back to her counter.

"Yes," nods Jattine, "but this seems more serious to the upper ups."

The sequencer pings and Katija goes to check the readout.

Jattine follows her then stops and leans on the portal sill staring at the trees outside.

"Katija, why is it that, eh bien... At least, it seems, the assholes always win?"

"The assholes don't win," Katija replies still focused on the screen. "They are just more effective at forcing things to go their way. Because they don't allow morality to influence their actions."

"You sound like you defend them."

"Absolutely not. I'm just explaining the dynamic at play."

Jattine scowls and looks down at her lunch.

"Lizi's father was an asshole," Katija sighs, "and my mother was an asshole. I've had plenty of first-hand experience observing this behavior."

She turns towards the portal and watches the leafless thin branches dance in the winter wind. It will snow soon.

"The assholes know they're assholes," she stares blankly at the bare trees. "They don't win anything. They know that when they force things, it's an admission of their own failure"

"That should stop them," Jattine turns, "Change. Make them different."

"It would change us," Katija continues to watch the branches sway. "But them? No. It only drives them to fail and force more."

"Warrior?" Jattine blurts. "If you not get what you want, then force. And when that does not work, force more. And when that does not work—"

"Force it more," finishes Katija. "When you only have one tool in your emotional tool box..."

Jattine taps her fork on the table absentmindedly, "What a species."

"The assholes don't win," sighs Katija, "they lose everything. The damage takes them over. They become puppets for their abusers. Repeating what was done to them. They lose their soul, their identity. There's no win."

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**Belgium
EUROPEAN UNION
OldYear 2021**

"What's the answer, Winston? How do we fix this situation?"

"You know, Georges, I watch a lot of news programs. And typically, when people are asked this question, their replies are: 'people need to realize', or 'people need to understand'. That just continues the delusion."

"What delusion?"

"The delusion, that if you carefully and patiently explain the situation, that these people who are tearing the country apart are going to have some kind of epiphany, and realize they are doing the wrong thing. And they will change themselves."

"And that's not going to happen?"

"No."

"Why?"

"These people are clear minded with their vision. They are aggressively trying to overthrow the government."

"And your government responds with..."

"Patiently explaining why they shouldn't be doing that. And shaming them with scowling faces."

"Meanwhile the bus is going to run over them."

"And they are standing in front of the bus firmly and patiently explaining why the bus shouldn't be trying to run over them."

"What an image."

"What a sad reality!"

"So, what's the answer?"

"Georges, the answer is consequences. Consequences that are swift and certain. They need to happen in a public setting in full view of all the population. And these consequences need to be so severe, that they will discourage anyone else from repeating the behavior."

"You're not talking about public execution, are you?"

"That's a bit extreme, Georges. We have laws. We just need to use them."

"You're talking about treason? Right? They're committing treason?"

"I think it's treason, yes."

"In the old days you would be executed for treason. In fact, in many countries that can still happen."

"Georges, being hauled away to federal prison in handcuffs, in front of the cameras will be all the deterrent you need."

"You think that will be enough?"

"I think so."

"But, would you like to see public execution for treason come back?"

"Georges, maybe in Belgium you have the freedom to say such things in public."

"Well, that's my point, Winston. You are not allowed to speak your mind in a country that claims so loudly to protect 'Freedom of Speech.' That doesn't sound very 'free' to me."

"In my country we are not free to say things that would incite violence towards someone. That is not part of our First Amendment rights."

"As I see this, you have the freedom to vote for idiots and assholes who do not belong in government."

"That's right."

"And you have the freedom to run for office so you can force your own personal opinion and beliefs onto other people."

"Yes."

"So, from the outside, at least, it looks like your constitution and laws give you the freedom to destroy your constitution and laws."

"I never thought about that."

"But, at the same time, they restrict your freedom to speak, to protect your constitution and laws."

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Eastern Sixth Form College Library

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"You have to see this," Skarlett excitedly leads Lizi and Kai into a study room on the third mezzanine of the library.

"What is it," Kai furrows her brow.

"It's a newspaper article from the Police Gazette, from Dublin Ireland, Friday August 21 1863," Skarlett beams. "And, my most excellent haplo pals, you are going to love it!"

They crowd around the table and hunch forward.

Skarlett reads from the document on the screen, *"The Society for The Preservation of Manners."*

"Manners?" Lizi squints.

"Yes, it's an article called 'Hue and Cry'. And it's about a group—well, I'll just read it for you."

"And so, dear reader, I here impart to you, a scene of high drama and effect. The likes of which, these eyes have not seen, these ears have not gave witness too, in my brief time upon this earth."

"They speak so funny," Kai grins.

"I know, I know," Skarlett continues, *"The scene! May I start, dear reader, a lush and opulent display as I have ever seen in fine homes and prime hotels. A room of great impact upon the attendees."*

Lizi leans back and closes her eyes.

"A hundred count of candles, at least! Maybe more! Gave illumination to the deeds which did there transpire.

"Thick and luscious red velvet drapes obscure tall windows, and cascade from ceiling to floor. A sparse array of furnishings: a low platform, center to all, a sturdy chair there set upon, a row of meager benches flanking the platform on opposite sides.

"An odd arrangement for an odd purpose, to be sure!"

"An odd arrangement," Lizi chuckles.

"To be sure!" Kai smirks.

Skarlett continues, *"But the participants in tonight's gathering? Let us start with the guest of honor! As it were. Although it was no honor, as you will discover! A gentleman of obvious affluence, bearing on the quality of his attire, is lashed to the sturdy wooden chair on that low platform in the center of the room.*

"Behind this man stands a burly matron of high bustle and stern visage. On her right hand is a glove fashioned from corse belt leather. Next to her on a small high table is another glove made of oaken wood. And a further glove made of hammered steel with rivets.

"Rivets! And what, pray be, the usage of such a dark and sinister glove? Attend here and discover!"

"Attend here!" Lizi mockingly waves her hand in the air.

"The activities anticipated now begin! 'O hey, O hey,' a scribe in dark robes intones. 'Gather here now and give witness! By Statute of Winchester of 1285, anyone, either constable or private citizen, who witnessed a crime shall make hue and cry. And that the hue and cry must be kept up against the fleeing criminal from town to town and from county to county, until the felon is ap-

prehended. All able-bodied persons, upon hearing these shouts, are obliged to assist in pursuit as a posse comitatus.' There is nodding and grunts of disdain upon the figure there bound to the chair."

"Posse what?"

"Comitatus," Kai taps her com.

Skarlett continues, *"The darkened scribe calls again, 'O hey, O hey, draw near and witness these proceedings. The measure of which has transgressed these three months hence.' Those gathered then seat themselves along the wooden benches."*

"The power of the county," Kai interrupts.

"Posse comitatus?" asks Lizi.

"Yes," Skarlett replies, "a group of people mobilized to suppress lawlessness, defend the people, or otherwise protect the property and public welfare."

"Sounds like you know something about this," Kai squints at Skarlett.

"Yes," she smiles and nods, "yes I do."

"Keep going," Lizi prods.

Skarlett reads, *"The dark scribe now gestures, 'Draw near and bear witness and attend! Here sits the wretched lump of man. A Master, no less! A self-proclaimed pillar of the community! Ha! A pillar of shame and failure!'"*

"Another burly matron emerges from the group and addresses directly the wretch himself: 'You stand accused of lying about your wife, accusing her of infidelity and claiming that your son is not your legitimate issue.'

"The wretch explodes! 'All true! She is a harlot and a jezebel!'"

"The matron's swift response 'Liar! Odorous and preposterous liar! It is you who have broken the marriage vows. You who have taken a mistress. You who wish to dispose of your good wife and child and shirk away from supporting them. That is the plain and simple truth you try to avoid!'"

"The wretch, he smirks, 'And just who do you propose to be, Madame? And with what, if any sliver of authority that a plain and useless woman can claim, do you think to bind me here and insult me with your lies?'"

"What authority indeed, dear reader."

"The unified response from all those in the chamber: 'We are the Society for The Preservation of Manners'.

"The wretch doth visibly recoil. Perhaps he has also heard the stories told. The Society has appeared more than once in the press. And is often a topic of low discussions on the high street. We all know this!

"The wretch's eyes open wide at the truth of his situation revealed!"

"Preservation of manners," Lizi chuckles.

Skarlett continues, "And that wretched lump, dear readers, he doth try to claim the high position! 'You think to punish me?' The wretch attempts to puff out his chest.

"There is raucous laughter from the Society, 'Punish? Silly child of a man. We attend to remind you of the manners learned at your mother's knee!'

"He chortles. 'You nest of vipers. You scourge of stupid females. I rebuke your insolent behaviour! Untie me immediately!' And he spits at the Chairwoman!

"Remember your manners! The swift and bellicose response from all assembled."

Skarlett stops and looks at her pals, "This is my favorite part."

She reads, "The Chairwoman does engage the wretch with burning eyes and set jaw: 'I find you to be a most tedious man. Of intemperate disposition. And odious manner.' And she does call out in a loud voice: 'Mother!'

"And now, dear readers, the dark purpose of the matron and her glove is revealed! She swings a sturdy arm, that coarse leather glove makes a resounding whack against his ear!

"The wretch cries out! 'Insolent woman! I shall see you flogged for striking a Master!'

"The wretch looks incredulous, 'Belligerent and vile female! You mean to slap me on the ear like a child?'

"The Chairwoman calls again, 'Mother!'

"This time the hand strikes a bit faster and harder.

"He wails, 'Stop that at once! I order you!'

"The Chairwoman points a bony finger in his face, 'You will remember your manners. Act with respect and decorum, or the discipline will continue.'

"The Guardians chime in unison, 'Remember your manners.'

"He screams, eyes red and wild, 'You will stop this insolence immediately!'

"But, dear readers, his words had barely fled his mouth when the leather glove flies again! Thwack! Harder still. His ear bright red, and the handprint visible now from the cheek to the neck.

"The Chairwoman leans in, 'Mother has 3 levels of discipline. You are now at level one.'

"He scoffs, 'And, pray tell, what happens at level 3?'

"The Chairwoman gestures, 'Cast your eyes upon the remaining two gloves on the table. The glove of steel is level three. If your head is still attached after level two.'

"And again, the warning, 'Remember your manners', the Guardians chime."

"They're going to knock his cacking head off?" Lizi's eyes widen.

"And all of this is real?" Kai narrows her eyes.

"It's in the Police Gazette," Skarlett shrugs.

She continues: "The Chairwoman picks up the sinister glove of steel and brings it close by his face, so he can see it clearly.

"She engages his stare, 'Ye darkeners of counsel, who wouldst make the property and lives of women, depend on the evasive interpretations of musty parchments. You wouldst bind women as victims to the cruel and unforgiving despotism of male beliefs.'

"He is transfixed, dear reader. The Chairwoman draws back, 'We shall graciously forgive your momentary lapse in judgement, deeming to correct your mistake here and now. By affixing your mark to this statement there drawn in front to you. A simple statement. It is you who are the adulterer! You have taken up with a younger woman and seek to leave your good wife and child.

And your claim that she is unfaithful and your own son is not your own, is a plain and simple lie to avoid support and responsibility.'

"And, of course, Dear Reader, the wretch does scream. 'Untie me at once!'

"The Chairwoman's eyes do burn then. She points to the statement there drawn, 'The truth!'

"Well, the scoundrel, he attempts an authoritative tone, 'Woman! I am a God fearing Christian man. You have no right—'

"But he cannot finish, 'Mother' the call again, and thwack, the glove responds.

"The Chairwoman pulls herself up, 'Vile hypocrite! You are no Christian. There is no measure of Christ in your behavior. You are controlled and motivated by your own evil desires.'

"A crimson trail of the wretch's blood now draws down from his bright red ear onto his starched white collar.

"She rebukes him, 'You are no more than a loose assemblage of hollow arseworms. You have no more religion than my horse. Gold is your God!'

"The arm moves again, Dear Reader. Swiftly and surely. The sound is a thing I have never heard. The crunch of bone breaking."

"Woah," Kai scowls, "this is getting way too intense for me."

"Yeah," Lizi adds, "why do you like this so much Skarlett?"

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Cadet Training Facility

The Shield

City Point

FIRST UNION

2076

"And now I will turn you over to the Senior Instructor," Katija picks up her tablet and takes her place back at the head table.

"Thank you," the Senior Instructor nods to Katija.

She moves in front of the IO cadets.

"You have heard from Specialist 4173 from Gene Base, on the profile and typical behaviors of citizens with non-completing prefrontal cortices."

The Senior Instructor gestures towards the next guest in the front row, "Now I present Dr. Ailo Juzet. She is a member of the Board of Directors of The Screen. She also serves in an advisory position to Screen members concerning their particular cases. She is here with us today as part of your orientation and training."

The screen behind her lights up with text, "Dr. Juzet will help you have a better understanding of the mental state of citizens who may be carrying unresolved anger or fear."

Dr. Juzet moves quietly in front of the group.

She smiles a slight but friendly smile, "Good morning cadets. Let's get right to it. The problem is this: if you did not suffer trauma as a child, you will not recognize this behavior for what it is. You are going to misdiagnose it."

She turns and points to the screen behind her, "You will think it's something it isn't. By the same token, if you were abused but have not gotten counsel, you will deny that this is the behavior of an abused child. Because it is forcing you to look at your own unresolved issues."

Some of the agents steal sideways glances at each other.

"In order for you to do your job effectively, you have to understand exactly what you are dealing with. Let's start. What behaviors can we observe, in adults who were neglected as children?"

An eager cadet in the middle of the group raises his hand.

"Yes?" she nods.

"They crave attention. They force people to listen to them?"

"Yes Cadet, they do things to make people notice them."

A female Cadet in the middle row blurts out, "Forcing people to notice you? Like altering your physical appearance? Building muscles? Polymer surgery?"

Another female Cadet chimes in, "But don't people who didn't experience childhood trauma also get polymer surgery?"

"Yes," Dr Juzet points her finger at the second Cadet, "exactly. Which is why you need to pay very close attention to the motivation of the individual in front of you. So you don't confuse the two. And you don't profile anyone incorrectly. Motivation is the key. Why are they engaging in this behavior?"

The Cadet nods mutely.

"But we always have Attendant Counsel on our WatchComs," the female Cadet continues, "when we answer a call. Don't they focus on all this? And we just handle the physical stuff?"

"Cadet," Dr Juzet's response is sharp, "what is Protocol 14?"

"It's the Protocol," the Cadet's eyes dart about. Clearly, she doesn't know it by heart.

"I suggest you study it carefully. Your life, and the life of your partner, may depend on it."

The eager Cadet again raises his hand. Dr Juzet nods.

"Pro14 mandates a JA with Attendant Counsel and approaching Agents in any suspected AP with a vocal pattern not typical of DC."

"Joint Action," Dr Juzet turns back to the female Cadet. "JA. Joint. Which means you both act together. And you," she points her finger at the Cadet, "as the approaching Agent, are the one who determines if the situation is a suspected AP. Not the Attendant Counsel. They confirm. But you," she points again, "are the lead."

The Cadet looks down at her tablet, red faced, scribbling away.

A Cadet in the middle row asks. "Why does an AP act abusive towards others?"

"To feel good about themselves."

"They are aware that they're doing it?"

"Yes. But it becomes obsessive behavior. Like an addiction. They can't stop. They blame their victims. Because they can't be wrong. Because that would mean that whoever told them that they were stupid when they were a child, was right."

The Cadets scribble away on their tablets.

"They imagine enemies," she continues, "all around them."

The cadet in front sparks up, "Is that related to conspiracy theories?"

"It's the origin of them. People who are abused are attracted to conspiracy theories that claim there are bad people doing bad things. And no one is stopping them. These theories draw them in, because a bad person did do something bad to them. And no one stopped them."

"So, they transfer their own unresolved anger or fear," the male Cadet in the front nods, "onto these conspiracies?"

"Exactly." Dr Juzet points at him. "Which brings us to a good place to start looking at VirComs."

She clicks on her tablet and a screen on the wall blinks on to show all the VirComs currently operating within reach of the First Union.

"Virtual communities are a powerful outlet for people with unresolved anger and fear. It's a captive audience. They can attack total strangers. Anonymously. From a safe distance. For the Internal Office, it is a valuable resource to monitor the activity, and location of potential threats."

"IO monitors VirComs?" a red-haired male Cadet in the back row asks.

"Yes. They monitor users who fuel anger and fear in others.

"What about users who attack and ridicule people in the news who were assaulted or injured. People who are obvious victims."

"They attack these victims because no one else is allowed to be a victim. Only them. They demand all the attention. They can feel no sympathy or empathy for anyone else."

"That doesn't make sense. If they are victims then why can't they feel some empathy for another victim?"

"It's not logical. It's emotional. Their pain, and need for revenge overrides any logic. If you weren't abused then you will not see this for what it is. You are going to misread it. Which is why we are here today, showing you future agents exactly what you will be up against in the field."

There are sighs among the Cadets. The real weight of what is going to be expected of them, sinking in.

"And you, as approaching Agents, will have seconds to make an assessment and choose a course of action."

Dr. Juzet pauses and looks into the wide-open eyes of the Cadets in front of her.

"Or," she continues, "you can always drop out now."

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Locations Unknown
2076

"Are you in the First Union?" the screen flickers.

"Nope. Are you?"

"Far away."

"Are you watching this?"

"Been doing nothing else. When does it flip?"

"Soon, soon. Once the last twenty percent of votes start to be counted, the flag will activate."

"Can't wait!"

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Location Unknown
2076

"Is the power pack charged?"

"A hundred percent."

"Let's go."

The first one that Wilson sees is the red character. Dressed in a shiny red bodysuit and cape, with a bright red wig and boots.

A wide mask covers most of their face but it appears to be female.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?" Wilson snorts.

Then two more appear. On the left, a thin character in lime green, tall black boots, and a full head mask with only eyes and mouth cutouts.

On the right, a stocky character in electric blue and black, with a sizable backpack, tethered to some kind of wand, in their left hand. The blue character levels the wand directly at Wilson.

"What is this?" Wilson spreads his hands grinning, "the caped crusaders?"

The red female chuckles, "That about right."

"And what are you going to do little children?" Wilson mocks them, "shoot me with your laser beam?"

"Exactly," nods the blue character, waving the tip of the wand up and down."

"Ha!" Wilson laughs, "what a bunch of wimps! I'm gonna kick all three of your asses!"

Wilson lunges towards the blue character.

Immediately a blue beam shoots out of the wand, stopping him and lifting him slightly off the ground.

"What? Are you IO?" he scowls.

"We are your worst nightmare," the red character moves directly in front of Wilson.

"We are the consequences of your own behavior."

The green character takes a step forward, "I am Shame."

"And I am Guilt," the red character follows.

"And I am Fear," the blue character taps the barrel of his wand.

"Put me down! I'll kick your ass!" Wilson squirms.

Shame turns to Fear, "Why do people say that? 'Put me down so I can kick your ass?' Does he seriously think I'm going to put him down so he can kick my ass?"

Fear laughs, "I know. Stupid, huh?"

Shame unrolls a scroll, turns it around, and pushes it close to Wilson's face, "This is a list of the people you have deliberately hurt, or tried to hurt, in the last few weeks."

"And that's just the reported incidents," adds Guilt.

"They're lying!"

"You're lying," Shame jabs a bony finger in Wilson's face. "Look at you try and run away from your own behavior."

"Your own behavior," Guilt leans in. "Your own behavior. You're such a coward. You cannot admit your own behavior."

"Let me go chew hai!" Wilson's face is bright red. "You're hurting me!"

"Now you want to act like you're the victim?" Guilt smirks, "while you victimize others?"

"Cowards!" Wilson barks, "hiding behind your blue beam."

"Coward," Guilt fires back, "hiding behind your unresolved anger."

"Your denial is thick," grins Shame.

"I will fucking kill you!" howls Wilson.

"Oh, poor thing," Guilt mocks, "are you feeling helpless?"

"Well, now you know," Shame jabs his finger, "how your victims feel."

"It's a horrible feeling, isn't it?" Fear's eyes burn into Wilson.

"I will kill you!" he screams again at the top of his lungs.

"Scowling and barking," Shame nods.

"Scowling and barking," echoes Fear.

"The only time that worked," Guilt grins, "is when your father scowled and barked at you. When you were a child. When you do it, you just look ridiculous."

"Because," Shame sticks his neck forward, "you are not your father and we are not you when you were a child."

"You will not talk about my father! I will kick your fucking stupid ass!" howls Wilson.

"And that's how your father would have responded," Shame wags his head, "if you had said that to him."

"Every time you do that," Guilt spreads her hands, "he wins and you lose again. He's still jerking your strings and making you dance."

"Aren't you sick and tired," Shame chimes in, "of making him win? Giving him power over your life?"

"How dare you talk about my father! You're dead!" Wilson is shaking, tears stream down his face. He looks more terrified than angry now.

"Killing us won't kill the pain you feel," Shame nods.

"Even if you killed your father," Guilt continues, "it would not kill the pain you still carry. The pain you try to dump onto other people."

"The only way to kill that pain," Shame shrugs.

"Is to get counsel," the all say together.

"You have a choice," Guilt spreads her hands wide, "you can turn yourself into the Shield to get counsel—"

"I ain't doin shit!" Wilson erupts. "Turn me loose pussy! Wimp! Coward!"

Fear turns the beam back up.

"If you agree," nods Guilt, "we will summon Shield agents."

"If you don't agree," continues Fear, "you get what's behind Door number One." He taps the barrel of his beam.

"What's it going to be?" Guilt and the others look at Wilson in silence for a moment, giving him time to consider.

And then Guilt waves at Fear to turn down the beam, "Have you made your choice?"

"Fuck you! Fuck you stupid fucking shǎ bī bitch! Cà� nǐ mǎ! Cà� nǐ zǔ zōng shí bā dài!"

Fear turns the beam up again.

Guilt sighs, "You have made your choice."

Shame leans in, his dark eyes burning. "Now you will suffer the consequences of your own behavior."

"No remorse," chants Guilt.

"*No remorse*," they all repeat together.

"No regret," chants Fear.

"*No regret*."

All three of them slowly move towards him. The whirr of the blue beam spins louder and louder.

"*No assholes*," they chant in unison.

"*No assholes*."

"*No assholes*."

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Eastern Sixth Form Campus

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"Shot for lying?"

"Publicly. Executed."

The wind is howling in the quadrant today. It pounds against the portals and steals Lizi's attention away from the HistClip she is supposed to be watching.

She glances at Kai. Kai is gazing intently at the room display.

Oh well, if she's that interested, then I guess I should be too.

There are two people on the display. Kien Sevensister, a First Union senior Shield representative, and Nico Fabjance, a representative from The Kambuja People's Republic.

Fabjance is talking: *"You cannot tolerate lying and have a free society. Especially when those who are lying are employed by the government."*

Professor Nearthunder pauses the clip and turns to the students.

"Remember, we are reviewing this because the issue is up for a vote as part of Mandate 105. And, after viewing the clip, we will have our own debate here about this issue."

"Why?" Jaeb has his arms folded in his usual childish huff. "We aren't even old enough to vote on Mandate 105."

"This time," Nearthunder replies, "but, if this attachment passes, you will be expected to live under this Mandate. And soon, when you *are* eligible to vote, you will understand the background of the issue."

Nearthunder restarts the clip. Fabjance is talking:

"The lying had become an epidemic. It threatened the national security of the Republic."

"But why such an extreme response?"

"The thought was, that the lying had become so extreme, it needed to be countered by something just as extreme or it would have no effect."

"And did it? Have an effect?"

"Absolutely. Of course, there was outrage and screaming and threats. But we were used to these."

"So you killed people."

"Publicly. To demonstrate consequences. To send a message. To shut down the disinformation and the mis-information that was being spread."

Sevensister asks: *"But doesn't that just give the other liars something to shout about? Look, they're killing us for telling the truth!"*

"Absolutely. But mostly it stops public sharing of lies."

"And your people support this?"

"By an overwhelming majority. We had a candidate who lost an election, but lied that she had actually won it. She incited her supporters to commit violence and attack those who told the truth. If someone had publicly executed her for lying early on, that violence would not have happened."

"But wouldn't her supporters have committed violence anyway, if she was executed?"

"Perhaps. But anger and lies without a leader, dissipates quickly. And is easier to control, than continued lies and anger."

"Anyone who lies—"

"Not anyone. Be careful of absolutes. Politicians, media personalities—those in positions of power. If their behavior was seen as threatening the safety and security of the general population, they were arrested, charged and executed."

"And how do you prove they are lying?"

Fabjance smiles, "Most cases are self-evident from existing media coverage of events. But otherwise, we use the same hormone scans that you use."

"And so, did it have the desired effect?"

"Yes. Some still could not stop themselves. But the overall behavior of the Republic changed."

"And how many times have you performed these public executions?"

"At first there were several, in rapid succession. Members of our legislature, judges, media personalities and so forth. There was an aggressive sweep to detain and shut down the lies."

"Was your IO charged with their capture?"

"IO, Shield officers and law enforcement. It depended on the suspect."

"And do you still hold public executions at the same rate?"

"Oh no, goodness no. The measure had its desired effect. Lies and dis-information dried up quickly. We rarely have any executions anymore. Less than ten a year."

"And how many in the first year?"

"Over three hundred."

"And there were other components to this Mandate. Can you explain those to us?"

"Yes. In the case of an attorney defending an accused liar, if The Firewall determined the accused was lying, then their attorney would also be executed."

"And you also regulated VirComs?"

"Yes. For the same reason. As we see it, lying destroyed the last Empire. VirComs were a key part of that destruction."

"Because they attract people who were not abused, but start to believe lies if they hear them often enough."

"Exactly."

Kai whispers to Lizi, "Do you like the idea?"

Lizi scowls and whispers back, "We don't have to kill people. We need to be smart enough to control situations with the least amount of force possible."

"You sound like an IO agent," smirks Kai.

They both turn back to the room display.

Neva Nearthunder is casting a withering glare at both of them.

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**Lanikki Housing Commune
Arbor Town
FIRST UNION
2076**

"What's going on?"

Hagstrom lands the cruiser in the free zone at the entrance.

"It's our trainer," Brooks checks his scanner and beam. "She took an offer somewhere else."

Hagstrom shrugs, "I'm sure The Shield will find us another trainer."

"Hopefully, one as good as her. But I think Lizi is going to miss her."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. Seemed like she got a lot from being around her."

They both turn to the RemCom display where the images of two people are posted.

"Eanswythe is the woman," Brooks reads aloud, "and Eorcenberht is her brother."

"Suspected AP?"

"Most likely, according to Counsel."

The radio pings, "Patrol are you following the feed?"

"Rissa, what's going on?" Brooks asks.

"Mandate 105 just failed. By one percentage."

Brooks looks at Hagstrom, "Are we still employed? Do we still have a job?"

Hagstrom taps on the cruiser screen, "Let's call in and see what's up."

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**Location Unknown
2076**

"Twenty-three?"

"Twenty-three."

The Kaptan stands, arms folded and observes the contents of the marker board in front of him.

His Lieutenant carefully prints, in neat letters, one name after another, clustered together on the board in groups.

"These two are the most likely candidates to run for the primary?"

"Yes, the two highest rated in the opposition party."

"And these five here," The Kaptan gestures at a group of names.

"The magistrates."

"So, seven. And those five?"

"Media."

"And the rest of these down here?" he points to the largest group of names.

"Members of the legislature."

"Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three."

"A small price to pay for a country's stability."

"A fraction of those who die every day from violence and poverty."

"Because of the failure of these," The Kaptan gestures at the names.

"Justice," the Lieutenant nods.

The Kaptan runs his hand through his hair, "the timing, on most of these, is flexible. It's the top two that need to be timed right," he points to the opposition candidates.

"Perhaps during the heat of the primary elections?" the Lieutenant ventures, "when the competition is high and the whole party is on edge?"

The Kaptan ponders. His eyes crawl across the board.

"Better yet, at the peak. The moment one of them is chosen. During the celebration, we take out both."

"That would do it," the Lieutenant nods. "The whole party would be fractured. Running around like chickens with their heads cut off."

"A ship without a rudder. It is poetic. For a party without a platform."

"Yes, Mon Kaptan."

"And take all of the rest at the same time."

"Use the element of surprise."

"A clean sweep."

"Prevent trouble before it arises."

"Put things in order before they exist."

"Do we have a full wheel?"

"Yes, Mon Kaptan."

"Assemble the spokes."

**We are the architects
of our own misery.**

Winston Smith 2016

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"Hags, this is really distressing."

"I know, I know."

"And pulling in Lizi and her friends is ridiculous. These are kids. They had nothing to do with this."

"Well," he shrugs.

"What!" Katija's eyes burn.

"Serious Crimes called IO to assist with this murder because the pattern is familiar. And we have logged other incidents like this in many other Unions."

"Incidents of what?"

"Student attacking other students."

"Teenagers fighting each other?"

"It's worse than that. Much worse."

"What?"

"Kat, IO has logged a few hundred deaths with the same physical injuries on the victims. Their brains are burned with what resembles the wave patterns of a blue beam."

"It's Agents? IO? EO? Who? How?"

"No. Not our blue beams. They're not capable of generating this kind of wave strength. It would require a big power pack of some kind."

"But don't the blue beams relax people? I thought they work by relaxing muscles."

"Yes. They do. But these beams are modified. The inverse wave oscillates at much higher frequencies. Basically, it boils their blood in the veins. The suffer a very painful death."

"What! How? Why?"

"Best guess is that someone has found a way to make their own blue beams, and make them much more powerful."

"How did that happen? Who leaked the technology?"

"Kat, my love, there are a lot of smart people in the world. Some bright engineers who want to use technologies for other purposes. Not all inventive people are on our side. And besides, if one person can develop a blue beam, then someone else with the same intelligence and understanding of engineering, can build a similar technology."

"Sounds like you are defending them."

"Kat," he looks at her sideways.

Sighs, "Sorry. Sorry Hags, it's just frustrating."

"Absolutely it is. And down at City Point there are a lot of agents who will agree with you."

Katija turns back to chopping vegetables. She scowls, as her chopping becomes more erratic and frantic.

"Kat?"

She stops chopping. Lays the knife down and stares up at the ceiling.

"Anything I can help you with my only one?" Hagstrom rubs his hand up and down her back.

"Hundreds?" she looks at him sideways.

"Well..." he starts.

"The report said it was probably some local teens. A few angry kids."

Hags slowly shakes his head.

"Oh for... What? What now?"

"You aren't going to like it. IFC has stacks of reports. Apparently, it's a worldwide problem. Nearly identical killings in every Alliance and Union."

"Hags!"

"Around a hundred thousand."

"A hundred thousand? Teenagers killed by other teenagers?"

"They appear to have been targeted for specific reasons. You can look at all the evidence the IFC has gathered on OS channel 12."

"Jattine is glued to that channel all the time."

"There is graffiti left at the scenes that is identical. Like the killers want to explain the killings."

"They sign their work?"

"No. Oh no, just explain it. The graffiti says: No Assholes."

"Assholes? These kids are fighting the assholes in their schools?"

"Killing them. By the thousands. And bragging about it."

"And no one is stopping them? Hags!"

"Some unions try, but public support is high in many places."

"The people want this?"

"The sentiment is, their kids are being bullied. The schools can't force bullies to stop. No one can be forced to get counsel. And once they are off school property, the kids are defenseless. The police can't intervene until a law is broken."

"There is a law against bullying here!" Katija scowls. "In the First Union."

"Yes, my love. But not in all Unions or Alliances. They have to catch them in the act. There has to be witnesses or they have to confess."

Katija looks down, scrunching her mouth like she's chewing on a thought. "And of course, IO can't do anything."

"Because they are under age for our intervention."

Katija stretches her neck and looks up at the ceiling. "The kids are left to defend themselves."

"And they apparently have found a way."

"Killing."

"In the Bantu Alliance they call them: Wauaji wa Karma."

"Karma?"

"The Karma Killers."

Katija lets out a long sigh.

Hagstrom turns slowly and looks at her, "So... About the other thing..."

"I know, I know," she throws her hands up in front of her.

She turns and looks at Hagstrom in silence.

After a while, he breaks it, "Kat you seem to be taking this very well. I mean, we're out of jobs and the Firewall is going to be disbanded. This a serious situation."

"I know, Hags, I know. It's just that..." She stops and smiles at him, putting her arms around his neck. "The important thing is that our family will always be together."

"Of course. Why wouldn't we be?"

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Hopewell Green

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"What's going on, Z?"

Lizi sighs, "I can never fool you. Can I?"

"No, you can't."

They sit crosslegged on a blanket, knees almost touching.

The Park is busy today. The sunshine brings out the locals, and there are many people alone or in groups eating and talking.

But all are keeping a respectful distance from each other.

No one can overhear their conversation.

"Katija and Hagstrom are acting all qíguài."

"More than normal?"

"Ha. Yeah, multi more than normal."

"What's up?"

"Wish I knew."

Lizi rubs her hands on her thighs, and stares off into the distance.

"I just feel something weird happening," she continues.

Kai nods staring at the ground.

"Like the energy in the air has turned negative," Lizi continues. "I get a scary feeling about the future."

"Z, none of us have a future."

"But we have our whole lives in front of us..."

"No, Lizi. None of us have our lives in front of us. We only have the lives that we leave behind us. *That*, is what defines us."

The wind rustles the blue wisteria behind them.

Lizi's head instinctively snaps around, her eyes scanning the immediate area for danger.

She turns back to Kai, her shoulders relaxing slightly. Her body gives off a visible shudder, briefly, but noticeably.

"Z, are you okay? Are you cold?"

"No, no, just... I don't know," she shakes her head.

"I agree, though," Kai nods. "Seems to be a lot of negative in the air."

"Are you smooth?"

Kai shakes her head slowly, "more of the same."

"That shit again?"

"It never really stops, Z. It just increases and decreases randomly."

"I don't get it. Why attack each other? You guys need each other."

"You're right, we do. But unless they get counsel, all they want to do is hurt someone else to feel good about themselves."

Lizi looks down shakes her head.

"It's always the same behavior," Kai stares wistfully off towards the duck pond."

"Yeah," Lizi knows this by heart, "They attack you, and claim you're attacking them."

"They're rude to you," Kai takes over, "and when you point it out, they accuse you of being rude to them."

"They threaten you, and claim you're threatening them," Lizi squints.

"And all this scowling and shouting."

"Always! Always scowling and shouting!"

"Because that's what their father did to them when they were little so they think it'll work for them too."

"It doesn't, they just look stupid," Lizi squints.

"And so much lying."

"So much! They lie to you, and then dare you to call them on it. Just so they can yell 'Are you calling me a liar!' It's always the same stupid statement."

"Exactly the same," Kai nods.

"Yes, 'calling them a liar'. Denying that they lied, and calling you a bad guy because you pointed out their lie."

"It's always the same stupid words. The same behavior over and over."

"Because abuse is the same," Lizi nods. *She's heard this more than a few times.*

"Yes, yes, and the effects are the same. So, the behavior is identical. I just get so sick and tired of it. I just want to scream: Get some damn counseling!"

Kai drops her shoulders and lets out a long deep breath.

Lizi looks straight in her eyes.

"Z, thanks for letting me blurt. I need a safe place to get it out."

"Anytime K."

Kai looks down and rubs her hands together vigorously. Like she is washing them.

"Z, I don't like it when you pull away from me. I need you."

"Don't worry, K, I'll never leave you."

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Go Room
The Shield
City Point
FIRST UNION
2076

"Good afternoon, agents," Commander Nkruna stands on the dais and faces the assembled agents on the benches. "Today we are joined by agents from EO and guests from The Taíno Union."

Hagstrom and Brooks strain their necks to see the visiting dignitaries in the front row.

"Some of you may or may not know," Nkruna continues, "The neighboring cluster of islands to the south of The Taíno Union, is loosely organized into what they call The Arawak Alliance. They have no Firewall and never joined any Federation. Our guests are here today to share some information about events that have transpired there, and to ask for our help. While it is apparently true that our recent Mandate 105 vote will result in the dissolution of this office one calendar year from now," she pauses, looks up and smirks. "We're still active agents today. And today, by oath, we will do our jobs."

There is rousing agreement from the benches.

"So, to the matter at hand."

The big screen on the wall behind Nkruna flickers to life.

"What you are about to watch was delivered to the High Council of The Arawak Alliance yesterday. They have accused The Taíno Union of being the ones responsible. But more on that later. Cine, aquire."

A cine strip starts. The image is badly out of focus. There is some movement but it is difficult to discern what is moving.

A male voice speaks off screen:

"You are the architects of your own misery."

The image slowly focuses. It is the windows of an old warehouse. The light streaming into the lens makes it difficult to see clearly, but there appears to be five lines moving slowly in front of the windows.

The voice continues:

"You allow traitors to continue to walk freely and lie to the people."

The image becomes clearer. There are five ropes moving in front of the windows.

"By doing so, you threaten your own stability and security."

The camera pulls out. Five men hang by their necks, their hands and feet bound. They kick and jerk on thick ropes tied to the ceiling beams.

There are gasps from the agents. It's difficult to watch.

The cine freezes and Nkruna speaks, "These five men have been confirmed as the majority leaders of the former ruling party in The Arawak Alliance. Their High Council has accused The Taíno Union of killing them. Which, they assure us, they did not do."

The cine continues: *"Your failure has resulted in the escalation of violence and suffering among your people. And you respond by blaming your people."*

The camera zooms in to show only the faces of the five men. It slowly pans over them. Some, in the room, turn away or look down. Even for an agent, the contorted face of death is difficult to watch.

"Do you lack the balls to stop these traitors? Are you so mentally slow that you never saw this coming?"

There are mumblings among the agents and the word 'Mechanism' bounces around the room.

"Yes, yes," Nkruna pauses the cine, "but, there is sufficient evidence to indicate this cine was actually shot here. In the First Union."

The cine continues. The five men swing and jerk. Their wild-eyed screams muffled by the gags in their mouths.

"Will you learn this lesson now?" the voice continues.

The men twist and writhe. Desperately trying to break free.

"Can you stop failing?"

The men kick slower.

"Protect your people. Fix the flaws in your OS."

The men swing slower and slower.

"Do not waste time. This window of opportunity will close."

Slowly, one by one, all five men stop moving.

"Prevent trouble before it arises. Put things in order, before they exist."

The cine strip stops abruptly and the lights flash on.

There is some commotion on the dais. A Shield agent has rushed into the room clutching a tablet.

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**Cruiser Lot
The Shield
City Point
FIRST UNION
2076**

"Hacked?"

"Yep, hacked."

"How?"

'It was pretty clever really. But anyway, they are closing in on the people who did it. IFC is involved."

There is silence on Katija's end.

"The good news is," Hagstrom is very excited, "Mandate 105 actually passed by 78 percent. So, Kat, it looks like our jobs are good for another 7 years."

"Umm..."

"Kat? You ok babe?"

Katija sighs, "No... Yes. Yes, I'm fine Hags. Fine. Just... Well. I've got some stuff here..."

"Right, right, you're in the lab. Got it. Just wanted to tell you. Love you my only. See you at home later."

"Yes, Hags, thanks. Love."

The com clicks off.

Katija sits at her desk, spinners whirring and pinging behind her.

She stares out of the window.

A shadow of a cloud passes over her face.

She looks down at the scanner she has been turning over and over in her hands.

She takes a deep breath, then pulls her bag out from under her desk and slips the scanner into it.

Pushing the bag back under the desk, she returns to looking out the window.

Tears begin to form at the corners of her eyes.

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Location Unknown
2076

"What's going on?"

The energy in the warehouse is buzzing. The members are sitting on the long rows of benches facing the stage. Some whispering in low voices.

"You haven't heard?" the man whispers back.

The woman shakes her head.

"Once in a decade event," the man next to her whispers back. "A change of the guard."

At that moment the lights on the stage turn on with a jolt.

A short thin red-haired woman in loose fitting black pants and a tight black top, walks to the front edge of the stage.

She plants her feet shoulder width apart, and places her hands on her hips. Her arms are bare, and her muscles well defined. Like bands of steel. Tightly wound.

There are some audible gasps from the rows of members.

Hypatia slowly scans the faces in front of her. Her expression blank. But the steely blue fire in her eyes burns into every person she makes eye contact with.

The warehouse is silent. Only the sound of water dripping from the faucet in the chow-hall echoes in the large room.

"Shame manufactures force," she says, her face calm and focused.

All eyes are on the new Kaptan.

"Force manufactures shame. All things happen in balance."

"All things happen in balance," comes the unified response.

She walks slowly across the front of the raised platform, "In a country where two political parties oppose each other, one using force and the other using shame, the people suffer. They have no champion. Neither shame, nor force, can save them."

She stops at the far edge of the stage and sweeps her gaze across the benches, "The people need a mechanism."

"The people need a mechanism."

"A mechanism to break the cycle of force and shame."

"The people need a mechanism."

"We are the mechanism."

"We are the mechanism!"

"Thirty spokes join together in a wheel."

"But it is the hub that makes the wagon move."

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

It feels like all the air just got sucked out of the room.

Hagstrom feels faint. Like he might throw up.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"This is my daw!" Katija's eyes flare. "I have to be *absolutely sure!*"

"Sorry, sorry. Of course, you're sure."

His mind races. It's difficult to get a full breath.

"I know you don't say *anything*, until you are absolutely sure. Which is why you're so crystal at your job."

"Hags," her shoulders shake. "It's my daw."

She collapses in tears into his chest, her body heaving.

Hagstrom holds her tightly and rocks back and forth.

"I just want you to be wrong, Kat. For once in your professional career. I just want you to be wrong."

Katija looks up at him.

Her desperate red eyes search his face for answers, "It's my daw."

"Kat, It's *our* daw."

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Firewall Complex
First Union Firewall Chamber
Eastern Gate
FIRST UNION
2076

"This was referred up to us from Centralia West Firewall. They believe it is of whole Union importance."

The room slowly darkens and the large central screen flickers on. The Centralia West Firewall logo appears.

"What you are about to see," the First Union Firewall Designated Speaker continues, "is a secretly recorded interview. The person being interviewed is M Jacob Jacobson. A self-made billionaire."

A still frame of a cinestrip glows large on the central screen. Jacob Jacobson's face looms as large as the wall.

"The source of his wealth," the DS continues, "has not been successfully traced. Quite possibly due to him never being a person of interest. Until now. Centralia West has labeled him as a 'Watch', Level 1. And assigned him with case number 7102T 1002JD."

The central screen now shows an accounting ledger from Centralia West Shield.

"What transactions have been uncovered show his involvement in real estate investment and development. But the amounts of money flowing into and out of these accounts are significantly larger than the valuations of the property related to those transactions. There are Centralia West Shield markers all over these accounts and they have turned their investigation over to First Union Shield at this point."

The screen reloads the CW Firewall logo.

"Now, to the cinestrip. The person conducting the interview is a junior reporter from a small independent VirCom news room. A one Ilyana Skovgaard. Sadly, Skovgaard's remains were recently found in a remote sector of forest reclamation several points north of Centralia West. A local security investigation into her death has revealed several logs on a block cloud account that she locked open for public viewing. It is because of these logs that M Jacobson became a person of interest."

The Firewall Designated Speaker pauses, "Ilyana Skovgaard died bringing this person to our attention. We owe her an enormous debt of gratitude. Let's review the evidence."

The individual screens glow in front of each Firewall member in their cubicle.

"You all have the case file in front of you, let's watch the interview."

The central screen plays.

The camera is at table top level. It appears to be hidden in the sleeve of someone's coat. On one side of the image is the close up of an arm and on the other side is a dark piece of fabric.

But squarely in the center is the well framed and focused face of Jacob Jacobson.

The background images and noises reveal that these two people are sitting across from each other in a caff hub.

But their voices are clear.

"If you took out," Jacobson is speaking, "a hundred or so world leaders, and their close allies, you could fix the safety and stability of every nation. And It would serve as a deterrent for anyone else thinking about doing the same things."

"Just kill them?" the voice of Ilyana Skovgaard asks.

"A hundred people die each day from accidents, sickness. The wrong people are dying."

"And you know who should die instead?"

"Everyone does," he smirks. "But they are too scared to name them. Besides, I'd rather go back to your place and get to know each other better."

"And that's all that you think it would take?" Skovgaard tries to keep him focused on the topic, "a hundred assassinations?"

"Maintenance. Not assassinations. Just regular maintenance to run a society. If parts on your cruiser are not working correctly, you remove them and replace them. It's just maintenance."

"Maintenance."

Jacob drums his fingers on the table top. "This isn't difficult to understand, just don't let the retards have any power."

"Retards?"

"Look around," he gestures at the people in the cafe hub. "Half of these people are useless. Not worth the oxygen they consume. The point is, sweetheart, who has the balls to change this?"

"You would extend this beyond world leaders to include ordinary regular citizens?"

"Half of the adults in this country are mentally retarded 4-year-olds. It's a birth defect. That's what the experts say. Their brains are retarded. They're retards. Why do care about them? Just get rid of them."

"But we have the Firewall and IO?"

Jacob smirks at her again, "IO is slow and inefficient. And they are polite to assholes and idiots. That gains you nothing."

"You see no value to the Firewall or IO?"

"Look at the last empire. It slid from a democracy to a dictatorship. If a small number of people had been shot in the head, that Empire wouldn't have fallen. Have we learned that lesson?"

"Isn't that why the Firewall was created?"

"You're a woman, so let me dumb this down for you: If you shoot the retards, then you don't need a Firewall. It's faster, cheaper and more efficient."

"Dumb it down? Seriously?"

"Things are about to change. Quickly," he turns his head and looks towards the front door. "So fast you won't know what happened. That vote? That mandate thing? Yeah, it's going away. And then everything will be better. So much better."

"Mandate 105 is going away? How?"

"In the new republic these people will be dragged out and publicly executed. No more babysitting damaged egos. No more coward Firewall. Just shoot them."

"All of them?"

"Probably half of the population will need to be purged. But everyone's lives will be better for it."

He leans forward, his eyes clearly visible to the camera. Dark and emotionless. Like a shark's eyes. "And it's going to happen sooner than you think. Just as soon as—"

His expression changes. Like he just realized that maybe he's said too much.

"What's going to happen?" the voice of Ilyana Skovgaard asks.

"Well," he stares at her with a dark shadow crossing his eyes, "why don't we continue this discussion at your place—"

His head suddenly turns. Something or someone has caught his attention outside the front door of the caff hub.

Hurriedly he stands and grabs his caff. "Maybe next time," he tosses over his shoulder as he scurries away towards the door.

In the First Union Firewall Chamber the large central screen goes dark.

The Firewall Designated Speaker stands, "Because of the sacrifice of Ilyana Skovgaard, we have a suspect. We have a face, a name, a vocal pattern, and a location. In addition, there is other visual capture of the individual that M Jacobson met with outside this caff hub. This has all been turned over to IO and their search for these individuals is under way. We shall receive their reports soon."

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Hopewell Commons

Neopolis

FIRST UNION

2076

"How long have you been scanning her?"

"Since she was eight. First, I was just using her as practice. To sharpen my skills. And to learn the variables in the equipment. But then, after a few years, I noticed her patterns."

"Tā mā de..."

"By the time she was sixteen, her results were falling along standard deviations."

"Cao. And she is now below level?"

"Slightly."

"And, you're sure?"

Katija nods mutely.

The empty silence rings in their ears. The full weight of the consequences bears down on them like a house collapsing on their heads.

He feels dizzy. Like he's going to faint.

His eyes are wet. And full of questions.

And he has no answers.



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INTERNATIONAL FIREWALL COUNCIL

The Bridge Between Continents

Brú Milli Heimsálfa

Iceland

2154

"Greetings, my colleagues," Counsel 44 strides purposefully into the chamber.

She places her tablet on the rostrum and turns towards the members.

Fifty-one faces stare back.

The members of The International Firewall.

"We have a full docket this morning, so let's get to it, shall we?"

She turns towards the giant screen behind her and clicks the remote.

The screen flashes to life showing a numbered list.

"As your Designated Counsel, it is my pleasure to welcome our new members. As you can see, on the screen, we all go by numbers here. In the IFC we don't reveal our names or places of origin."

She turns back to the assembly.

"Anonymity is the foundation of the Firewall. As you have been briefed, violation of any member's anonymity is grounds for immediate dismissal."

The DC looks around the room. Her expression is flat and unemotional. She scans slowly across the members faces, almost as if she was telepathically asking each one, *'Do you have a problem with that?'*

Apparently satisfied with what she sees, she starts clapping, "Welcome Counsels."

The rest of the Counsels join her in a polite, but brief, applause.

She turns back to the rostrum and clicks the first cinestrip on the screen.

"You have your coms on and translators if you need them. Let's look at the first case: IO 7-819997. Designated: Watch 7. This is a familiar face to us. We have taken seven votes on this case and never had a unified voice."

She dims the lights in the chamber.

Counsel 44 taps her tablet and the screen blinks on with a live link to the Council Chamber of the Nobatian Alliance Firewall.

Seven faces stare back at them.

Counsel 44 addresses the group: "Welcome Firewall members. Thank you for your service to the species."

A young woman, seated second from the end, replies: "We thank you for your service to the species." She is apparently the Designated Counsel.

Counsel 44 nods to her.

"Case number IO 7-819997," the Nobatian Designated Counsel addresses the IFC members, "concerns Yakubu Taharqa. As you know, he is a candidate running in the general election for Premiere in the nation of Kush. I remind you that Kush is not a member of any Union or Alliance. They have no Firewall. Kush shares a long common border with the Nobatian Alliance. We are concerned over this candidate, due to the proximity and the flow of workers and trade across our common border. We are concerned that if this man is elected, his policies would overflow that border and impact our own citizens."

Images of Yakubu Taharqa appear on the screen.

"This candidate is currently a bus driver. He has held random jobs in construction, farm labor and factory work. He is thirty-seven years old. His support among the college age citizens of Kush has grown rapidly in recent months. Even though he holds no college degree, they see him as a peer. He also currently has the strongest support from the uneducated blue-collar workers. They believe that he speaks for them. His rhetoric has intensified and his support has grown since your last vote. There is a real chance that he will be elected in four months as the new Premiere."

The images now change to shots of life in Kush—the poverty—starvation and disease.

The Nobatian Designated Counsel continues, "After years of fraud, corruption and mismanagement, Kush has now the highest rate of unemployment and the worst economy in its history. Its citizens are unable to depend on services. Shortages are rampant. And they struggle to find the bare essentials to live."

A cinestrip starts onscreen.

"This cine is from one week ago. As you will see and hear in his language, there is chatter around this candidate, questioning his possible association with the Mechanism."

The cine is from a debate hosted by the National Party. Yakubu Taharqa and his three opponents stand side by side on a stage behind small podiums.

The moderator asks Taharqa a question: "Mister Taharqa, I will ask you the same question: What makes you the most qualified candidate to be elected as Premiere?"

Taharqa is calm, focused and looks directly into the camera: "*Because I am the only one running, who is not mentally or emotionally damaged.*"

His three opponents quickly raise their hands and start shouting at the moderator.

The moderator raises his hand, *"All of you will have your turn to respond. Let's not interrupt other candidates while they are answering. Please."*

Taharqa continues, *"Mister Hammid, here on my left, lacks the capacity for objective introspection. He cannot admit when he makes a mistake. And he blames others for his failures."*

Mister Hammid flares, *"Again with these stupid lies—"*

"Please, Mister Hammid," the moderator interrupts, *"you will have your turn. Please."*

"It's not his fault," Taharqa continues, *"it's a birth defect. His prefrontal cortex never fully developed. And we don't need a Premiere with a diminished brain capacity. Do we?"*

Hammid keeps raising his hand.

"Please, Mister Hammid," the moderator repeats, *"you will have your turn."*

"Yes, I will!" Hammid shakes his finger angrily at Taharqa.

"Mister Yousif, on the end down there," Taharqa gestures, *"was molested by an older man when he was a boy. Which is why he hates gay and transgender people and wants to control and punish them."*

"Pedophile!" Mister Yousif erupts, *"Liar! Agent of the devil!"*

"Please, Mister Yousif, please" the moderator holds up his hand, *"you will have your turn."*

"God will strike you down dead!" Yousif screams.

"Please, Mister Yousif, please" the moderator shakes his head.

"And, Mister Mkerref here on my right," Taharqa gestures, *"he needs to hurt other people to feel good about himself."*

Mkerref, points his finger at him, *"Liar! Traitor! Terrorist!"*

Taharqa turns to him and replies, *"Who was it? Your father? Is that who hurt you when you were a child?"*

Mkerref barks, *"How dare you talk about my father! You must be severely punished!"*

"Because that's what he did to you if you questioned him? Is that where you learned this behavior?"

Mkerref turns to the moderator, *"I will not tolerate this slander! This traitor must be removed immediately! I demand it!"* He pounds his podium, face burning red.

The moderator starts to respond but is shouted down by the audience: *"Let him speak! Let him speak! Let him speak!"*

The cheering crowd drowns out a screaming Mkerref as two security personnel try to calm him down and usher him off the stage. Yousif is still screaming *"Pedophile!"* and Mkerref is barking *"Terrorist!"*

Taharqa continues to face directly into the camera: *"We cannot let mentally deficient and emotionally damaged people hold positions of power. That's stupid. We need to stop the stupid."*

As if on command the audience surges to their feet. *"Stop the stupid! Stop the stupid!"* they scream, as a wave of supporters rush the stage.

The IFC members sit in silence and watch as security personnel respond. There are fights at the front of the stage. Several people appear to be injured, and two are helped away, bleeding in front of the camera. The moderator signals the debate is ended due to the violence.

The whole scene is drowned out by the repeated chants of *"Yakubu! Yakubu! Yakubu!"*

The screen goes dark and the lights in the chamber come up.

"You have been given the dossier," Counsel 44 addresses the room, "and had two weeks to study the material and the transcripts. That last cine from the debate is new. We have not seen that before. As you can see, situations have progressed."

The members scroll through the files in front of each of them.

"According to International Firewall protocol we are now going to hear live from our Special Counsel Advisor."

Counsel 44 taps her tablet and a face appears on the big screen.

"Welcome Special Counsel."

The dark-haired woman on the screen nods, "Thank you for your service to the species."

"Special Counsel, what is your report?"

"After careful study, I and my colleagues, have determined that this individual is not acting out of unresolved issues arising from childhood. Furthermore, from all we can gather, Yakubu Taharqa does not exhibit any signs of an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. In fact, he appears to be very intelligent."

"This is not our usual experience," Counsel 44 replies.

"No. And, interestingly, there is not a lot of information on this man. Our search has revealed scant background information."

"And based on your research, how does the Special Counsel advise?"

"This is a difficult case. We typically have a psychological diagnoses or physical scans to go from. But in this case, we have neither. But what concerns us most is his ability to mobilize sentiment and action in line with his beliefs. This makes him even more dangerous than AP or DC cases. He knows exactly what power he has. And he wields it carefully and deliberately."

"And so, your conclusion is?"

"He is an active threat to the species. We advise for immediate extraction."

Counsel 44 straightens up, puts both hands on the podium and looks at the screen, "Thank you for your service to the species."

The Special Counsel nods again, "Thank you. Thank all of you, Members of the International Firewall, for your service to the species."

The screen goes dark.

There are some mumblings and murmurings from the council members. The DC pauses to take a sip from the cup on her podium.

"In light of the footage you were given, and the documentation, and testimony from Special Counsel, the Nobatian Alliance Firewall strongly believes we need to act. They feel that we have waited too long, and situations have escalated. They are insisting on a maximum priority for this case."

She looks down and presses some buttons on her podium, "So now we will call for a vote."

Three smaller screens light up at the top of the large screen, with the words: Extract, Watch and Pass.

The Counsels are seated in 3 semi-circular rows of booths. The rows step up towards the rear of the chamber. They radiate around the central rostrum and screens. Each booth is 2 meters wide, leaving plenty of room for each Counsel to have privacy. The sides of the booths are high enough to block view of all but the top of their heads. This is all they can see of each other. But, from the front, the Designated Counsel can see all of their faces.

The broad dark wood desks in front of them contain coms and translators they can dial to get any language they want. Directly in front of them is a shelf. Under this shelf, is a hidden recess. Within this recess is a keyboard and a small thin screen. The Counsels communicate only with the Designated Counsel by sending teltext messages on this keyboard. The DC only sees the message. Not who it's from.

The Counsels do not speak. And do not communicate with each other. Also inside this recess is a series of large glowing squares. Buttons for voting. To reach their buttons, they must slide their forearms into the recess up to the elbow. No one can see which button they push. And individual voting is not recorded. Just the totals.

Counsel 44 dims the lights in the room, "Counsels, are you ready to vote on case IO 7-819997?"

They slide their hands into the voting recesses in their desks.

A yellow light blinks on the Designated Counsel podium.

"I have a teltext message from one of you here. Counsel asks if extraction means Taharqa will be killed. No. This is not a vote for termination. He will be removed and placed in confinement. Until such time as the Alliances involved shall determine whether to banish him or not."

She looks up, "The Nobatian Alliance Firewall wants him to be removed as a choice of Premiere. That is what you are voting on. Any more questions?"

The yellow light blinks again.

She reads the teltext, "Yes, Counsel, the vote must be unanimous."

She looks up again, "Any more questions?"

No lights appear.

Counsel 44 continues, "Very well, Counsels, are you ready to vote on case IO 7-819997?"

The Counsels slide their hands into the voting recesses in their desks.

After a few seconds, a green light glows from the wall beside the screen. Indicating that all members have agreed to vote. The light goes off.

"And one more time, we shall confirm. Are you ready to vote on case IO 7-819997?"

After a few seconds, the green light glows again.

"Very well. In the case of IO 7-819997, The IO is asking for extraction. How do you vote?"

After a few minutes, the votes are finished.

Next to the word Extract is the number 50. Next to the word Watch there is the number 1. And next to the word Pass there is no number.

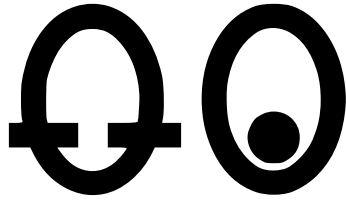
"We do not have a unified voice."

There are moans and groans in the chamber.

"Very well, one more time, we shall confirm. How do you vote on case IO 7-819997?"

Again, after a few seconds, the same results appear.

"We do not have a unified voice."



EXTERNAL OFFICE

000 0000

Channel View Court, FL 9

In-Nadur

Gozo

Malta

2154

Mr. Azzopardi's fruit and vegetable truck rounds the corner and lurches into Triq il-Madonna Ta' Lourdes. Waking Nelson from the first real solid night of sleep he's had in a long time.

He opens his eyes.

The yellow morning light dances across the ceiling.

So, it's between 6:00 and 6:30 am.

Every morning, sometime between 6:00 and 6:30, Mr. Azzopardi swings his belching Toyota truck into Triq Madonna and rumbles past his window. Its four cylinders cough out grey smoke as their valves go clackity clack in the cool morning air.

Most hawkers have made the conversion to air riders for delivery vans. These villages have never been quieter.

But Mr. Azzopardi, and a few others, still cling to the old ways. As long as you can make your own biodiesel, why buy a new truck?

Except, of course, for the noise.

And it is the noise that lets you know he's in your street.

Advertising.

The truck rumbles and lurches along the street, its overloaded cargo of crates brimming with vegetables, fruit, eggs, nuts, olives, and ġbejniet.

He swings into his usual parking place in front of number 79.

He honks his horn and waits for his customers. If no one comes out, in a few minutes he will pull out and head down the street to his next stop.

Nelson hops out of bed.

Hang on Mr. Azzopardi, I'm coming.

It's a beautiful day in Nadur. And Nelson is starving.
And breakfast just drove past his window.
He quickly tugs on a shirt and shorts, and rushes towards the door.

Pausing at the door, he glances at the plasma map of Malta on the living room wall.
Everyone behaving themselves today?

All of the blips are glowing blue.
No alerts.
Eccellenti.

He rushes out the door.

000:000

Channel View Court, FL 9

In-Nadur

Gozo

Malta

2154

Nelson is awakened by the sound of rushing water.

The Maltese couple upstairs are taking their showers.

He glances at the time. It's 23:42.

This is wearing me out. I need my sleep. I might have to move again. But I can't afford to lose another deposit.

Typically, he falls asleep at about 20:00.

On most nights, about an hour later, his neighbours take their evening showers. One after the other. Each shower lasting 20 to 30 minutes.

Just how dirty do you bastards get during the course of a day?

The drain pipe from their flat runs down the other side of the wall behind his headboard. He can actually hear the water rushing down the pipe wherever he is in the flat.

These are the loudest, most annoying people I have ever heard.

And every morning at 5 o'clock, 6 days a week, 3 large dump trucks rumble past his window, on their way to work at the quarry.

On an average night, he is lucky to get 5 hours of unbroken sleep.

Nelson sighs, swings his legs out of bed, and stumbles towards the bathroom. On the way he glances at his tablet.

3 tags are clumping in the old cemetery below Zebbug.

Why didn't I get an alarm? What's wrong with this tablet?

Then, as he squints at the tiny blue blips, they disappear.

What the...?

===000000000000

Ċentru Ironmongery
In-Nadur
Gozo
Malta
2154

Il Knisja Street, or 'Church' Street In-Nadur, is also known as Triq Dicembru 13, or 13th December Street.

On 13 December 1974, the constitution of Malta was revised. This transformed the State of Malta into the Republic of Malta. Abolishing the role of Regina ta' Malta (Queen of Malta) in the country.

A few steps down 13 Dicembru Street from the backside of Nadur Parish Church, there is the Ċentru Ironmongery. Which has been in business for over 100 years. The current shopkeepers are an older couple who have run the place for most of their lives.

Like all typical Ironmonger shops on the Maltese Islands, their shop is stuffed to the limits with hardware, paint, tools and a seemingly limitless assortment of household supplies.

There are large hydrogen heaters in boxes stacked just inside the door. Assorted magno-brooms lean against the wall on the other side. The wall itself is draped with vac-seals and o-rings of many sizes and colors. Hanging from rows of pegs.

As Nelson enters, the proprietors are both hovering behind the small counter on the left. As usual. Behind the couple, the shop recedes into the darkness of narrow cluttered aisles flanked by sagging shelves full of garden implements, plumbing fixtures and electrical devices. Engine belts of all sizes swing from hooks in the ceiling.

The shorter list is what they actually *don't* have in here.

The husband is in a heated discussion with his supplier about the rise in prices of his recently ordered bags of plaster. He gestures passionately speaking loudly in Maltese. Two older men lean against the wall watching him and grinning.

It is his wife who greets Nelson, "Bonju. Mister. Kif int?"

"Tajeb. Tajeb. Issa... Do you have wall anchors to hold a screen onto block?"

"Iva. Iva," she waves him back. "We have many to choose. Pass from here." She waves for him to follow.

She directs him across the shop to a low door down two steps. They step through and immediately turn left. They slip along another narrow aisle between towering steel shelves, bulging with pots and pans, clotheslines, light bulbs and cleaning products.

They have everything in this Ironmongery.

And, some extra items for their special clients.

She stops at the rear wall of the building, and pulls a small black object out of her pocket. She holds it up expectantly.

Nelson automatically lifts his wrist up.

She quickly scans his arm.

Her device blinks blue, then green.

Satisfied, she returns the device to her pocket.

A wooden rack of bins, full of screws and bolts, hangs on the wall in front of her.

She grabs one of the bins and pulls it towards her. The whole rack swings outwards revealing a hidden entrance behind it.

He follows her in and up some cramped stone steps. It is a long climb, about three floors in height.

At the top of the steps is a heavy metal door.

She places her palm on the door. A faint blue light glows under her palm, then turns green.

The door clicks and swings inward to a large dark chamber.

They emerge in a spacious room on top of the building.

She closes the heavy insulated door behind them, and places her palm flat on a small screen. Overhead lights flicker on and the small screen flashes the word 'Žgur'. (Secure).

There is a large desk in the middle of the room with two chairs. All the way around the room is a ring of horizontal rectangular windows giving a commanding 360-degree view of the islands when seated at the desk. Above the windows there are many plasma screens.

The room is connected to over eight thousand cameras across the country. It has com links with every corner of the islands, and every Union in the world. As well as The Interna-tional Firewall in Iceland.

The word 'Nadur' means 'look out' in Maltese. It comes from the Arabic word 'nadara'. The village's emblem shows the sun rising from the blue seas, with the motto 'Vigilant'. Or, 'watchful against danger'.

A fitting location for an IO office.

"Issa, what you have?" she asks, finally turning to him.

"Clumping."

"Madonna. Where?"

"Three tags, close together in a cemetery below Żebbuġ."

She touches the largest screen on the lower left corner. After a few seconds, a map of the whole country of Malta lights up. Many small blips of blue light appear. Some stationary, some moving slowly.

"This was popular place. In the old days," she nods, pointing to the cemetery below Żebbuġ.

"Way ago, Marija?"

"Iva, iva, way ago. Before they make the nano beads, for tag the Bans."

"Oh, that's right, they used to do implants. Right?"

"Yes. And others, they make. Some they make with the tattoo. And the ink, it was reg-ister on the screen."

"RFID ink?"

"Yes. But did not work. Mhux effettiva."

"Didn't work."

"They make many things. Many things. They not work. They do not work."

Marija drags a finger across a timeline on the bottom of the screen. "When, it was?"

"23:42."

She stops on that time.

"I do not see..."

"There... Zoom," Nelson points.

She zooms the screen into where his finger is pointing. And 3 blue blips are so close they almost look like one.

"Why I not get alarm? Why screen not tell me last night?"

"My tablet didn't go off either."

"Madonna."

"Look at the heat signatures," he points.

"They are too small. Whose are these mens? Whose?"

She touches all three blips in succession and their EO files appear on another screen to the side.

They both study them closely.

Nelson's eyes widen, "So that's where you are!"

Marija looks at him puzzled.

"I know all about these two Bans," Nelson points. "They are on a high watch. But they aren't supposed to be *here*. One was banished to the Irish Alliance and the other one to the Baltic Bloc. But they disappeared. IO lost them. Lost their signals. And now they pop up here? On Gozo? Together?"

"What about this other one," Marija points.

Nelson shakes his head, "I don't know about that one."

"Maybe he was recent. Recent Ban. Do you have transfer order?"

Nelson scrolls through his screen, "No. He's not one of mine."

Marija scrolls through the pages of the banished man on the screen. "Ah. Baltic. This is why I see. See they paperwork."

She turns to Nelson shaking her head, "Is not good. Mhux, mhux. Is not good."

"Baltic Bloc always that sloppy with their Banishment Orders?"

"Il-komunikazzjoni," she shakes her head. "They not good. They want we should learn their language. They not care after mens have been banished from there. They not care. When they pass from there. Someone else be their problem now."

"And it's always been like that?"

"When I come, I was the first agent. On Gozo," she waves at the screens around the room. "We not have this. Tat-teknologija. Many slip by. Many pass from here. We do not see."

"Your husband was a Ban. Wasn't he?"

"Yes. But he is good man. From L-Italja. He was banish. His brother turn him. To get his land. He not defective," she points to her head. "He not threat to country."

She wags her finger, "His brother—he make the problem. Antonio is good man. Good heart. His brother is black—black heart man."

"You guys have been together a long time."

"Yes. Half of my life it is now. Antonio is good man."

Marija turns back to the Firewall pages on the screen, "What is these two mens do?"

"This one," Nelson points, "7102T 1002JD, was banished for deliberately manipulating the legal system to make a personal profit from the misery of others."

"Where he from?"

"First Union. He was a real estate developer. He bribed lawyers and judges. He used loopholes in the legal system to grab land away from homeowners and build large shopping centers and apartment buildings. He hid his money offshore. Avoided taxes. He had other people take the fall for him, and in return, he would set them up in their banishment. So they would live a nice life on an island with plenty of money."

"Madonna. This very clever man. How he get money to them? Did they not confiscate and freeze when he was banish?"

"They never got the bulk of his money. Whatever he was doing was very clever. Estimates are he got billions out before he was banished."

"Madonna. This is clever man."

"Yes. He is also suspected of being involved in the attempt to hack the Mandate 105 vote, seven years ago. And his possible association with this other guy here," Nelson taps the third man's pages. "Which is why this clumping is significant."

"What he do?"

"This one is from the Estonian Federation. He's a genius. A technology wizard. We call them hackers."

"I know this word. I know this 'hackers'. For what he is banish?"

"This guy is tricky. A very difficult case. He was caught on FacRec voting several different times in the First Union on Mandate 105. In different precincts. So, it appears he was registered multiple times. Which is a crime. He was arrested, but the records didn't show his registration. So, the assumption was that he erased them after he voted. And the precincts he voted in were the ones that were hacked. So he went to trial, but no evidence. He was released. So, the IO brought him in front of the Firewall, but they had no evidence either. In the end, the International Firewall took him and banished him as a 'potential' threat and possible voter fraud. Weak. But it was all they had."

"Iva, iva, not much of a charge."

"He was the prime suspect in the hacking the Mandate 105 vote. But it was never proved. But he may have also been the one who helped this real estate developer get his money out of the country."

"So, these two disappear, and now they appear here in Gozo? Together?" she taps on both of their pictures.

"Maybe..."

"Madonna. Madonna."

"But what are they doing here, Marija? If that actually is them?"

They both stand and look at the images on the screens.

"So, what you do now, Mister Nelson?"

"First, I need to go see if this actually is those two Bans."

**Every farmer knows,
you take the rotting apples out of the basket.
You do not leave them in the basket
to spread their rot to other apples.**

First Kaptan

00000 0000

Triq L Imghallem
Iz Żebbuġ
Gozo
2154

The hot Mediterranean air is heavy with the sound of crickets. Thousands of them whirring away under the blazing sun.

Small gusts off the sea waft around the southern Żebbuġ plateau. The wind is from the north today. It rustles the stray leaves at the gates of the old cemetery.

The cemetery stands alone at the junction where Triq L Imghallem and Triq Iz Żebbuġ merge into Triq Il-Knisja.

It's a perfect place to meet someone. Unobserved.

Nelson pushes the old wrought iron gate open and quietly slips into the walled cemetery.

He slides his blue beam out of its holster and arms it.

The heat signatures on his tablet tell him that he is the only one here.
And yet, two of the three blips of the Bans still show on his scanner.
Within 15 meters of where he stands.

Are they under the cemetery? Did they somehow dig a secret chamber?

Nelson walks slowly towards the blips. Many of the headstones here are large and ornate. Large enough to conceal someone crouching behind them.

He holds his blue beam ready.

Two or more Bans congregating together is a violation of their banishment orders. They should know that. And they should also know, that an agent is going to investigate.

Come out come out wherever you are...

An airbus transport hums past the gates of the cemetery.

That will be the 309 to Żebbuġ.

A scrawny orange tabby cat slinks out from behind the headstone directly in front of him. It glances at Nelson disinterestedly and strolls off behind another headstone.

On his screen, the blue blip seems to follow the cat.

Are these guys cloaked? Are they invisible?

Nelson looks around, his finger poised on the button of his blue beam.

They are a few other cats in the walled cemetery. All watching him with a cautious eye.

These Maltese and their damn feral cats. Cats all over the place.

There are hundreds of feral cats on the islands. The people leave food for them everywhere. Some build them little houses. Many of the cats look diseased and full of parasites. And they shit everywhere. But the Maltese love them.

Nelson moves slowly between the headstones. One eye on his tablet. The other one looking for movement.

The tablet reads that the Hacker is 2 meters in front of him.

But the only thing he can see in front of him is a ragged looking black and white cat that doesn't look strong enough to stand.

Nelson approaches carefully, holding his tablet out in one hand and the blue beam in the other.

The blue blip stays constant.

Are they underground? Are they below the cat?

At that moment the scrawny cat struggles to its feet and moves slowly away from Nelson. He follows it with the tablet.

Hacker's blip moves with the cat.

They haven't... They couldn't. How could you...

As the cat moves, so does the blip.

The orange tabby now starts moving away from Nelson too.
He leaves the black and white and follows after the tabby.

Billionaire's blip moves with the tabby cat.
Wồ cào!

Did these guys remove their nanos? How on earth...

The surgery to remove all of the beads would be intensive. And, impossible. Some of the beads migrate to areas inside the organs and muscles. Out of reach of surgical techniques. Which is why bans are tagged this way.

All it takes is one of these beads to register a blip on Nelson's tablet.

But even if they got one bead out... Why aren't the bulk of them still registering? What have these guys done?

Nelson continues following the tabby, holding the tablet less than a meter away. The blip moves as it walks.

He stops and enters a scan search for Billionaire's unique signature. He sets the parameter for 'worldwide'.

There is a lag as his tablet quantum connects with the main IFC server on satellite.
After a few agonizing minutes, the coordinates come back:

'Target located: 1.6 meters in front of you.'

Nelson slides his blue beam back into its holster.

He crosses over to the black and white cat and does a scan search for Hacker's unique signature.

The coordinates come back:

'Target located: 2.8 meters in front of you.'

Nelson moves slightly towards the cat. It tenses and looks alarmed. Then it quickly turns and walks away from him.

Then he sees it.

Behind the shoulder of the cat is a small patch of shaved fur.

The exposed skin flashes bright pink in the afternoon sun.

And there is a row of stitches.

Nelson walks over to the orange tabby.
Same thing.

He tilts his head up and lets out a long sigh.

The crickets are getting louder around him.

The 309 airbus glides past the open gates to the cemetery, with a quiet whoosh. On its way back to Victoria.

He slides his tablet back into its holster, and squeezes the skin behind his left thumb.
"Com."

The NanoCom pings softly in his ear.
"Centre," he says.

"Saliba. Secure line," the voice answers.

"We have a problem."

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Malta IO Centre

Pieta

Malta

2154

"I wasn't sure of what I saw. Or even *if* I saw it. I went to see Marija the next day. Her system recorded it."

"Iva, iva, record but did not alarm. No alarm," Marija shakes her head.

Viktor Saliba is young for an IO Chief Agent. He sits calmly at his desk with his arms stretched out in front of him, fingers laced. As he listens to Nelson and Marija's report.

He frowns, "No alarm? How can that be? And the equipment? Check out?"

"All tested perfect," replies Marija.

Nelson scratches his head, "So this is where we are."

"Thank you both for your report," Viktor pulls out some documents from a drawer in his desk. "I have also received their files from IFC."

He looks at Nelson and Marija, "This is very troubling. Very troubling indeed. If these Bans have arrived in our country with the knowledge of how to defeat nano trackers, then we have a serious problem. How long ago did they figure it out? Who else have they told? How many other Bans know how to do this?"

"Madonna," Marija whispers through her teeth.

"But first," Nelson interjects, "is it really them?"

The IO Chief pulls a handful of pictures from the pile of documents on his desk, "I think you should both look at these."

He passes them over the desk.

"What is this?" Marija gestures.

"These are surveillance shots from Malta Customs. The parking lot next to Malta Freeport. They suspected these two men here," he points at two figures in the pictures, "were part of a smuggling operation."

Nelson squints at the pictures. They aren't clear, and it's the backs of their heads. But they do bear a resemblance to their two Bans.

"Customs didn't alert us," he continues, "because they picked up no nano signals. So, they assumed these guys were not Bans. Just maybe smugglers."

Marija holds her tablet close to the pictures and looks back and forth between them.

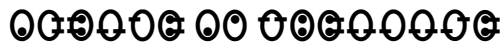
"I think this is the clearest one," Viktor pulls out one of the pictures.

It shows the two men talking to a young woman. It is from a very high altitude, probably taken from a container crane camera.

But you can see the profiles of all three people.

"Who is this?" Nelson points to the woman.

"We have a possible identity," replies Viktor.



**National Museum of Archaeology
Valetta
Malta
2154**

"Are you an Archeologist? Or a student?"

"Those are my only two choices?" She doesn't look at him. Her gaze is fixed on a figurine behind the glass.

The Mużew Nazzjonali tal-Arkeologija is quiet today. There are the only two people on this floor.

"I'm sorry. I just—" Nelson starts.

"Needed an opening line, ta?" she smirks. Finally turning and looking at him. "Mela, I guess I've heard worse ones. As far as opening lines go." She gives him the briefest of smiles.

"Can I try again?"

"Why bother?" She shrugs. "Conversation is open. Wasn't that the goal?"

"Well, yes. But—"

"Issa, look at these figurines," she cuts him off, turning back towards the glass.

He clears his throat and steps up to the glass, casting his eyes over the objects in the display.

There are several small sculptures. Made of clay or limestone. None larger than a loaf of local bread. All of the figurines are statues of women with large hips and legs. Some reclining on their sides. Some sitting with their voluptuous thighs exposed and legs crossed. A couple are standing figures that are completely naked.

"Well, the tag says they may have been of a religious nature," Nelson ventures.

"You think I can't read? Religious? Le, le. These statues don't look religious. Laying on her side with big hips and butt. Looking seductive?"

He chuckles, "Well, some religions—"

"And here's one lying on her stomach," she points, cutting him off, "with her huge butt in the air. Her face buried in a pillow. I don't see anything religious about that, ta."

"Unless they worshipped women's big butts," he snickers.

"But, build a huge temple to women's butts?" she squints. "Le, le, le. That doesn't sound like a place of religion. That sounds like a brothel."

He chuckles, "I guess it depends on what you're worshipping."

"Issa, I mean, what if these things are fetish objects?" She shrugs her shoulders. "Think of it... They had no printing, no oldnet, no quantum coms. Where would you get any images. I mean to fantasize about while you masturbate?"

He squirms, "You think these are Neolithic porn?"

"My best guess."

He narrows his eyes on the figurine and tries to not look embarrassed.

"What's the oldest profession on earth?" she continues, "These figures were found in huge elaborate structures, they call temples? Mela, what if they are party houses? In every so called 'temple' they found burn pits full of animal bones. They claim that's some kind of sacrifice ritual. What if it's just a bar-b-cue? Party house. The first Kazin tal-Banda? Band club. With special benefits. Come and eat some meat, drink some wine, yes? And have sex with the big sexy girls. And buy a little figurine you can take home to fantasize with. To remember the fun time, ta."

Nelson shakes his head, "You have a very active imagination."

She shrugs, "It's just logical. The first 'Barbie' doll was copied after a German sex doll named Lilli. Large pointed breasts, puckered lips. And the Lilli doll was carried by soldiers. and like this. into war. How many fantasies and lonely nights in the trench with a doll for inspiration? Same thing."

She makes a sweeping gesture towards the miniature statues in the displays.

Nelson cannot hide his red face.

She turns and holds out her hand, "Stella."

He shakes her hand, surprised at her strong grip, "Nelson."

"I'm neither," she says, still holding his hand. "Just a shop girl."

"Sorry. I didn't mean..."

"No worries. Your turn..."

"Oh. Uh... I'm in the insurance business."

"You don't look like an insurance seller. You look like a government man."

Am I really that obvious?

"Sorry. Just your average boring insurance guy."

She sighs and shifts from foot to foot. "So, Nelson... Is this it? Or are you going to ask me to join you for a caff?"

"Yeah. Sure," he stutters. "Um, Stella? Would you like to go down to Misrah Ir-Repubblica for a caff?"

"Your pronunciation of the Maltese names is very good. You are English?"

"Yes I am. And your English is very good. Are you Maltese?"

"I was born here." She smirks. "Yes, Nelson, I would like to join you for a caff. But let's go to Barrakka Gardens. They have a better view, ta."

A short walk later they entered through the arch of Upper Barrakka Gardens. They stop at the kiosk just inside the gate and buy their caffs.

Stella guides Nelson towards a bench outside of the arches, overlooking the Grand Harbour.

"Mela, isn't this a lovely view?"

"Yes. You are right," he smiles. "It's perfect."

Nelson takes a sip and Stella cradles hers while she looks intently out over the harbour. "How long have you been here?" she asks, still looking out at the ships anchored below.

"Not long. Still a newbie."

"You've learned to say Maltese words well. Did you get briefed before you came here?"

"You're a curious person, aren't you? Yes. They train us at the home office so we don't offend the locals. Difficult to provide insurance if you sound uninformed."

Stella smiles and turns towards him, "So, Mister Nelson, how are you liking our country so far?"

"It's beautiful. The people are beautiful," he smiles.

Just then, a man speaking loudly on his com walks over and sits right next to them. He's shouting into his com and gesturing with his free hand. Nelson leans away from him and gives him a withering stare. The man doesn't even notice him.

Stella looks around quickly and motions for Nelson to follow her. She gets up and crosses to an empty bench a few meters away.

They can still hear the man yelling into his com.

"Why are the Maltese so loud?" Nelson shakes his head.

"It's not loud to us. It's normal. It's all we have ever known, ta"

"I tell you, I've been here seven months, and this is the loudest little country I've ever seen."

Stella shrugs, "The Maltese have been slaves to conquering foreigners, for over 1000 years. Turkish pirates abducted Hundreds of Maltese sailors and Catholic virgins. During World War Two, they were carpet bombed by the Germans."

"I don't think I ever— "

She cuts him off, "Thousands of homes got destroyed. There was no food. People were living underground, and diseases became epidemic. Thousands died."

"But King George awarded them the George Cross. The only time it was ever given to an entire nation."

"Issa, he didn't award us our *independence*. Did he? Not for many more years. *Now* it's our country. I think we have earned the right to be as loud as we want."

Nelson doesn't answer. He just looks at her and nods.

"So, mister world traveler," Stella breaks the awkward moment. "And just how many Unions in the world have you been to Mister Nelson?"

"A few. Short answer, maybe twelve. How about you?"

She shrugs, and holds her hands out to the sides, "You're looking at it. But how have you been to so many places? I mean, you don't look much older than twenty-five or so."

"Work. And, twenty-eight actually. You?"

"Twenty-five."

He nods and sips his still piping hot caff. "When I first got here, I had a sweet flat in Saint Paul's Bay. Perfect view of the sea."

"It's nice there."

"Yes. Beautiful. And quiet. Or so I was told."

"It's much quieter than the south. Safer too, ta."

"That's how I understood it. Anyway, after about a month of bliss, my upstairs neighbours came back from their holiday. It was a single dad and his young son with special needs. The dad works from home, and he's on the box all day. And his kid runs wild. From six o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night, that kid stomped around above my head, running back and forth. The whole length of the flat. Dragging furniture around and screaming. It was unbelievable."

"Did you complain?"

"I told him to his face, 'The noise in my flat is ridiculous. I can't even hear myself think.' He said, 'I live in the penthouse. I don't hear anything.' He's an asshole."

"Madonna."

"And, at the same time, the couple next door, didn't have such a stellar marriage. They would yell at each other and throw things. And then one would storm out, and bang every door on their way out."

"Madonna."

"Plus, the guy next door worked all night from home. So, at 8pm, he would turn on the tv to keep himself company. And it would play all night. I got no sleep. And aggravated all day."

"Is a nightmare. But not unusual."

"I moved to Qawra. Great view, smaller building. And I got a penthouse."

"Yes, it is nice there. With the sea," Stella sets down her empty cup.

"It was worse. Construction next door, and behind me. From 7am to 7pm. Six days a week. The noise was deafening. Cutting, sawing, drilling hammering... And the workmen yelling at each other, trying to be heard over the racket."

"Out of the pan and into the fire?" she snickers.

"I saw all these ads for flats, and they all said 'In a quiet area'. I guess it's a question of definition. The Maltese definition of quiet doesn't seem to include construction, people who yell at each other at 11 o'clock at night, or your next-door neighbour cutting steel pipe in his garage at 6 o'clock in the morning."

Stella laughs into her hand.

"It's funny now," Nelson continues, "But, I've had a bad feeling since I got here. Like the island is telling me, 'You're not welcome here. Every day, I feel like the island is pushing me to leave.'"

Massive billowing white clouds with flat bottoms drift lazily overhead. They cast patterns of light and dark as they cross over Valetta, and the gardens where they sit. Their shadows make a patchwork on the Grand Harbour. And, on the old limestone buildings of Birgu and Senglea, across the water.

From where they sit, they have a panoramic view from St. Elmo lighthouse on the Breakwater, to the air ferries passenger terminal at the southwest end of the harbour.

And it's a beautiful gentle day to enjoy the view.

Nelson sets down his cup, "I was born in England."

"It's still an Independent, yes?"

"Yes. Very quiet place. You never hear noise like that. Not unless you live in a council flat in Birmingham."

"England didn't create a Firewall. Did they?"

"They adopted a 'limited' Firewall."

"Limited?"

"Yes. They made government employees, politicians, judges, police and military exempt from its power."

"What? Pointless."

"Millions of people started leaving and moving to countries that had Firewalls. The loss of tax money bankrupted the country. Hong Kong Union eventually bailed them out. And now own over 60% of the country."

"They just left?"

"Yeah. It's a ghost island now."

"A lot of them came here."

"Yeah. You guys are like pushing about a million now? With immigrants?"

"Over a million. Like a million, two hundred thousand, I've heard."

"Jesus. And it's a tiny place."

"Some people think the island will sink under the weight."

Stella turns and looks intently at the yachts bobbing in the Grand Harbour below them.

A large cruise ship is underway, heading out into the Mediterranean.

She turns to Nelson, "So... Insurance business is good?"

"It's steady. It won't make you rich."

"So, you gonna try and sell me some insurance?"

"Ha! No. I don't work in those lines. I'm in corporate. Loss prevention. That kind of thing."

"You're right. That does sound boring."

"It has its moments."

"Issa, Mister Nelson, boring insurance guy, you've lived here for seven months, and had horrible flat experiences. What else?"

"No, no. You're turn," he smiled at her.

"Oh. Well," she looked a little flustered. "Not much to tell. Pretty boring girl, really."

"Come on, shop girl. You need to do better than that. What kind of shop do you work in?"

"I sell loose fitting dresses to women who eat too many pastizzi," she snickers.

"They're addictive," he smirks.

"And available everywhere."

"Well at least you can have a sense of humour in your job."

"Some days it's all I live on, ta."

She really is very pretty. It's a shame this...

"Come on, Stella. Give me more."

"More? Well... What can I tell you?"

"What are you passionate about? What keeps you going. What are your dreams?"

"Hmmm. That's a lot. And pretty personal."

"In general terms. You seem to like history. Or at least archeology. And you have a working knowledge of porn. So that's an interesting combination. What else."

She snickers, a little red in the face. "Yes... Sometimes I'm a little too open about what I'm thinking. Trying to work on that."

Nelson sets down his caff and leans back, crossing his arms and legs, and watching her intently.

"Ok... On the witness stand now," she blushes. "What am I passionate about?"

He waits.

Stella studies his face. His expression doesn't change.

The shadows of the clouds crawl across them. The breeze from the sea whips around them, tossing her dark hair in front of her eyes. The breeze is warm, blowing in from the northern tip of the Alkebulan Union. It smells slightly of citrus. And ancient earth.

Stella combs her hair off her face with her fingers and tucks it behind her ears.

"Issa, I believe, Mister Nelson, boring insurance guy, that all human beings are more alike than we are different. We all have ninety-nine-point five percent identical DNA. Yet we fight and kill over point five percent. Stupid. Isn't it? Ma tafx. I believe that the earth is our god. She creates us. She sustains us. She provides for us. We are dependent on her."

"Interesting," he nods.

"And I believe that we are all looking for the same thing—to feel loved. Wanted. Special."

"I'll agree with you on that," he nods.

She leans back and crosses her hands over her knees.

He just looks at her and nods his head slowly.

"Is that what you were fishing for? Mister Nelson?"

"Well, I must say, that you—" Nelson's com pings. He looks down at his wrist and presses the skin behind his thumb.

"You're on the nano com?" She smiles. "Fancy. For an insurance guy."

"I get it free from work. Perks. Anyway, apparently, I have a departmental meeting I'm supposed to be at. Lost all track of time. Stella..." He stands and offers his hand.

She takes it and stands up, shaking hands with him.

"Stella, it's lovely to meet you. Hopefully this isn't the last time?"

"I come here for lunch sometimes," she shrugs. "Who knows the future?"

He smiles and gives her a quick bow of his head.

Then he strides purposefully through the colonnade towards Castille Place.

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**Upper Barrakka Gardens
Valetta
Malta
2154**

After Nelson leaves, Stella sits back down on the bench. She looks carefully around herself.

The place is crawling now with tourists. Several different languages chattering away around her, as they take selfies with the harbor in the background.

Stella leans forward, letting her hair cover her face. "Com," she says quietly. Squeezing the skin behind her thumb.

Her com pulses lightly, indicating it's on.

"Ġenju," she whispers.

A barely audible click in her ear. Then a voice says: "Go".

"Did you have a clear view?"

"Yes. Perfect. I recorded every word. Thanks for moving away from that loud guy."

"Got what you needed?"

"Yes. Perfect. What did he tell you in the Museum?"

"He said he was an insurance guy."

"I scanned him with the scope when you sat down. Caught a heat signature and vibration of a Union scanner."

"So, definitely EO?"

"Probably."

"I think he likes me. This could be easy."

"Don't get overconfident. He was scanning you the whole time you were talking. Probably looking for a com link or a tether. To see if you were broadcasting your conversation."

"Bastard."

"Just doing his job. Take it easy with him. If you can find out where their office is great. If you can find out more, even better."

"Like if they're onto you? And how much they know?"

"Exact. But go slow. Don't push it. Let him lead the conversation. Anyway, good work."

"Just mention that to Ghani on payday. Com off."

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**Merchants Street
Valetta
Malta
2154**

"Where was the scan coming from?" Nelson ducks into the doorway of the Department of Information so he can hear his com.

"A yacht about 200 meters away, anchored below you."

"You think they had a clear view of us?"

"No doubt."

"Did you get any signatures off the scan?"

"Quantum scrambled. Nothing identifiable."

"Any tags in the area?"

"No tags."

"So, they *are* using third parties."

"Looks like it."

"So that's our targets then?"

"Without a doubt. Who else would be interested in recording a conversation between a boring insurance guy and a shop girl?"

"And running a virtual quantum scramble on the feed."

"Point."

Nelson chuckles, "Busted."

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**Malta IO Centre
Pieta
Malta
2154**

"So, my question is," Nelson fingers the button on the cuff of his jacket, "who has jurisdiction? IO? EO? IFC? I don't want to cross protocol."

Maltese IO Chief Saliba doesn't hesitate, "She is with your open case. Allura, we will let you lead. My office will provide you with all her details. And we will assist any way you need us. With the permissions and like that."

"Thank you," Nelson gives him a short bow.

"Iva, iva, but of course. We can also offer our IFC liaison officer, if you think is needed. She can communicate with Iceland. But I will let you brief her."

"Okay, perfect. This thing may come to a head very quickly, so our communication needs to be immediate."

"We will assist any way that we can," Viktor Saliba stands and shakes Nelson's hand.

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Strait Street
Valetta
Malta
2154

The bells of St. John's Co-Cathedral are chiming 11:30.

It's a hot day in Valetta.

The temperature gauge reads 32 on Stella's com.

"It's somewhere around here," she speaks quietly. Hoping her long hair covers her face enough to conceal her conversation.

She pauses at the intersection of Old Bakery Street and Triq San Gwann.

"Għani," she whispers, "there's a bunch of insurance offices the next street over in Triq Id-Dejqa."

"Strait Street?" comes the reply. "Yes. There is also The Ministry for Home Affairs across the street. I would not be hanging out there if I was you. Don't push it. You will bump into him again. But that's too close."

"But I've almost found the EO office. Wasn't that what you wanted me to do? If we can get the location then perhaps Ġenju can hack into their system. And find out what they know about you. Wasn't that the point?"

By now she was at the corner of Strait Street. She quickly moves into a caff hub and joins the line to order.

Once she has her caff she drifts out into the street and slowly moves along Strait Street towards the bargain bookstore behind the Courts of Justice building. Away from the The Ministry for Home Affairs.

Again she whispers into her com, "I've tracked him here. His insurance man cover is a convincing front. Because this street is full of insurance offices. The only question is, which building are they in."

"Yes, but that street is also full of other agencies. Possibly IO, EO... Maybe even IFC. Who knows? Get out of there! Now!"

Stella is determined, "If I snag him again, I will take him back up to the Gardens so you can listen. If there is any change, I will send you a flag so you can track where we are going."

"Stella, this is risky. Don't expose yourself like this. It's too— "

"We meet again."

Stella looks up startled. It's him.

Chao gan de. Time to play the part.

"Mister Nelson! Are you working inside in the air conditioning on this hot day?"

Did he just come out of the block of insurance offices?

Or did he come out of the Ministry for Home Affairs and National Security across the street?

I should have been watching.

"Yes, yes. Just stepping out for some lunch. And you, Stella?"

"I—yes—I am—actually off today so—just..."

Think of something. Think of something...

"Crystal. Would you like to go get some lunch together? Find a shady spot up at the Gardens and look out at the sea?"

She smiles. *Just what I was planning.*

"Perfect. Sounds like a great idea."

Nelson gestures towards the alleyway called Triq Il-Karrijiet. It is a narrow passage with the stone steps leading up to Republic Street.

At the top of the steps, he gestures to the right and they pass in front of the National Museum of Archeology.

"Tempted as I am to go back in and look at the big ass ladies," Nelson nods at the Museum, "I fear my stomach will not allow me the time."

Stella chuckles, "And where is your stomach guiding you for lunch?"

"I like to go over to the HoverBus station. There is a kiosk there, run by a lovely woman and her daughter from Paola who makes an excellent tuna ftira. And it's cheap."

"Mela. You are speaking my language."

By the time they get to the Bus Station they have both broken out in a sweat. The air is very still today. Not a ripple on the Mediterranean. Malta bakes under the noonday sun.

They make their purchases: a ftira each and a can of Kinnie. And then they wind around the bottom of the Bus Station and start up the road towards Upper Barakka Gardens.

But Stella immediately stops and grabs Nelson's arm.

"Look," she gestures towards the Castille, "too many tourist coaches today. Let's go here instead." She guides him to the right, across the road and into Herbert Ganado Gardens.

They wind down the path and find a bench looking right over the cruise port to Senglea.

"Mela," Stella plonks down on the bench. "This is much more quiet. I know you don't like our noisy little country so much. Maybe quieter here, ta?"

Nelson smirks.

He opens his kiosk bag and takes a big bite of his ftira.

After washing it down with a gulp of Kinnie, he sets his lunch down and turns towards Stella.

"What," she looks at him nervously.

"So, Stella. If that is really is your name. What are you playing at? You shadow me. You hover around outside the insurance offices. We have you on camera. We tracked you for twenty minutes. First on Old Bakery Street. Then down Triq San Gwann. Then your desperate attempt to pretend you just went to get a caff. And the whole time talking to someone on your com. Not very stealth about this stuff are you."

"I always go that way to the museum—"

"Who are you working for? Who was watching us at Upper Barakka Gardens? Who was in the boat recording our conversation?"

Think, think. How can I get away? I could fight him. Maybe...

"And now you are wondering how you can get out of this. How you can get away."

He stands, and turns towards her. "Look to your left. Do you see that man with the folded newspaper and the brown hat?"

Stella looks.

Nelson raises one finger. Stella watches as the man looks at her and raises two fingers.

"Now look to your right. Remember the woman who was behind us at the ftira kiosk?"

Stella looks right and the woman nods to her.

"She was scanning you, Stella, while we were getting our lunch. And she tracked when you triggered your com to broadcast your location. Who were you alerting?"

Stella looks right and left quickly.

Can I go over this stone wall and down to the cruise dock?

"You aren't going anywhere, Stella. There are two more behind you."

"So..." she smirks. "Insurance man. Huh?"

"So, shop girl, huh?"

"That's true. I do work in a dress shop!"

"And I do work in insurance and loss prevention. Ensuring that Bans don't cause problems. Or try to re-enter Unions. That kind of insurance."

Stella nods, "EO."

Nelson shrugs.

"So now what?" Stella takes a bite of her ftira like nothing is going on.

"So now, let's just sit here and have a nice little lunch. And a chat. Shall we?"

He sits back down next to her and takes another big bite of his ftira.

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EO Office
Unknown Location
Malta
2154

Stella has no idea where she is.

She was blue beamed, put in the back of a cruiser, blindfolded and then brought into this building and into this room.

It is a plain blank room with white walls and a white ceiling. Bland beige tile covers the floor. There is no window. Only one door. An older heavy wooden door also painted white, with a small pebbled glass window in the top third. She can hear people walking past outside the door. Must be a hallway. But she can't hear well enough to pick up their conversations.

There is a fairly new looking table with nothing on it. Two chairs and a long wooden bench against one wall. Where she is sitting now.

"Your birth certificate is genuine."

Nelson is leafing through a fist full of papers. "You were delivered to the Kunvent San Mark in Rabat as a newborn. Obviously by a mother who was not able to keep you. The sisters keep very accurate and detailed records. You went from there to a foster home."

Stella sits stone faced arms folded.

Nelson shuffles the papers again and reads, "Dionisio and Eucaristica Zahra adopted you and raised you until you were seventeen. When they were tragically killed in a traffic accident on the Marsa bypass. We have your adoption papers, your baptism and first communion certificates, your school records, dental records and a full medical history from Mater Dei. So, Stella Eucaristica Zahra, it appears that you are a real person."

"Didn't believe your eyes, Mister Nelson?"

"We have to check. And you have never been tagged, so you are not a Ban. So that leaves us with this rather dodgy business of who you are working with and exactly what you are doing for them?"

"I told you, I work for Mariella Curmi at the Style and Fashion Dress Shop, 88 Naxxar Road, Birkirkara."

"Yes. And that much checks out. As does your home address, your scooter registration, your driver's license and insurance. All legitimate and real."

Nelson puts the wad of papers on the desk and sits down next to Stella on the bench. "What we are interested in, is your extracurricular activities. Who are you working for on the side? Because it appears that you have gotten yourself into something that is way over your head."

Stella does not respond.

I can't tell him. But they are not just going to let me go. Think girl, think.

Nelson sits patiently with his hands folded in his lap. They stare at each other for a while.

He's not going to—they're not going to just let you go. So now what? Give up Ġhani and Ġenju? Blow the whole operation? Lose my one chance—perhaps my only chance?

"Ok, Stella, so you're not ready to talk." He gets up and moves to the table. "Then we shall settle you into a nice quiet little room where you can think about things for a while."

"You can't hold me without charging me. I know my rights," she flashes as stern a face as she can muster.

"We're not police. We're EO. I can hold you for as long as I want."

He pulls a picture from the pile of papers and pushes it across the desk towards her. She arches her neck to see it.

It is a shot from above showing Ġhani and Ġenju.

And her.

Facing each other. Talking. About three weeks ago. At the container dock at Malta Freeport.

And Ġhani is handing her something. An envelope.

Nelson pushes across another picture: same scene, a few seconds later. Where she is tucking the envelope into her coat.

How did...?

"Stella, I can hold you for as long as I want."

He goes to the door and knocks three times.

Two other agents enter the room wearing masks. Stella is blue beamed and blindfolded again and transported to another room.

Once she is released from the beam and the blindfold removed, the two agents leave.

She looks around. It's a room very much like the other one. But there is a bed that she is now sitting on, that is very comfortable. With colorful sheets and soft pillows and a pink and yellow duvet. There is no window. One door. Without any glass.

A toilet in the corner with toilet paper, and a small sink with a mirror pane glued to the wall over it. The toilet and sink are very clean and smell faintly of bleach.

There is a small table and a simple chair with a comfortable seat cushion.

There is writing paper and a stylus. And a folded piece of card.

On it is printed: *'When you are ready, knock on the door. If you are not ready, do not knock. Your meals will be delivered three times a day.'*

On the wall is a switch plate with two switches. She looks up. There are two square panels on the ceiling. One is emitting the soft white light that now bathes the room.

She flicks both switches. The white light goes off and the other panel emits a tranquil blue-green glow that ripples across the floor and walls.

Stella leaves it on. She kicks off her shoes and slides under the duvet. And tries to sleep.

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**One World Assembly
Caput Mundi
2154**

Freezing rain dances in waves across the ancient clay tiles on the roof of the Basilica.
The streets are empty and dark. Not a good night to be out and about.
But one level below the cobblestones, a gathering is well under way.

An image glows on the 11th century stone wall. A face appears.
A cinestrip begins.

A man sits in a chair on a raised wooden platform in front of a warehouse wall.
The man is calm. Expressionless.
He is the original Kaptan.

He speaks, "We protected the people against any and all threats. Any. And all threats."
"Any and all threats," the immediate response from the benches.

"That was our job description. But the leaders who conscripted us— the ones who gave us our orders—turned out to be the biggest threats to the nation. And, to the people. We were bound by our oath. A soldier's oath."
"A soldier's oath," the unison reply.

"As soldiers, we put our lives on the line to protect the people. If one of us died to save the many it was a fair exchange. The currency of peace. So why not the corrupt public servants also? If one of them died to save the many, it was also a fair exchange. Sometimes a sacrifice must be made. For the greater good. And best that it be done publicly. Neutralize the threat. In the quickest way possible."
"Neutralize the threat."

He leans towards the camera, "For your mission ahead, you need to watch the media. These are the nurseries where lies grow and truth is subverted."

An image appears of an old printed news pamphlet.

"There was a very wealthy family. They made millions producing print and digital media. They produced false news. Anything that created conflict. Made outrageous accusations. False stories about those who were telling the truth and trying to protect the people. It was sensationalism marketed to the vulnerable. The gullible. Just to make money."

Images of visual media promoters now appear.

"They hired personalities whose job it was to say something inflammatory every day. To drive viewership. What will he say tomorrow? And the owners of this media? Laughing all the way to the bank. Laughing at all the stupid citizens who tuned in every day, and made them rich."

The screen shows cascading images of magazine covers featuring bold false claims, and brief cinestrips of angry hosts gesturing and shouting.

"They produced tabloids and marketed them as serious journalism. They produced opinion shows and sold them as news shows. There was no news. Only opinions. Only lies and ridicule presented in a glossy wrapper that fooled millions into believing it was all true."

Kaptan's face returns.

"Watch these tabloids. Watch these opinion shows. This is where radicalization starts. This is where truth dies."

He leans towards the camera again, "Watch them. Closely. And do not be afraid to act. Confront the difficult while it is easy."

**Lies are more seductive
than truth.
Anger is more motivating
than kindness.**

First Kaptan

00000 000

**Public Car Park
Malta Freeport
Birżebbuġa
Malta
2154**

(Four months ago)

Stella sits sideways on her air scooter, parked at the edge of the water. She watches the young sailors from the Birżebbuġa Sailing Club racing their small wooden boats next to the Freeport.

Next to her, R-tur is stretched out across the front seats his cruiser. He casually scrolls through images on the screen of a tablet.

Probably porn. He's that kind of guy.

They don't speak. Or even look at each other.

Suddenly, R-tur sits up and fires up his cruiser. Slowly he pulls out of the parking space and heads out of the lot.

An old white delivery van pulls into the lot.
It backs into the space he just left.

Two men get out of the van and walk around to the back. They are both wearing matching blue coveralls that have 'Delivery' printed on the backs.

They swing open the doors on the back of the van and sit down on the back edge of the van floor. They pull out brown bags and thermos bottles.

They pull sandwiches out of the bags and munch on them as they also watch the small sailboats race.

As one man chews, or pretends to chew, he whispers, "I understand that you know people who can get spare parts."

Stella wraps her cotton scarf around her neck and tugs it up over her nose so no one can see her mouth. "Who are you?"

The man continues to chew, "We are people who need some spare parts."

The one who is talking is older. He acts confident. Like someone who has enough money to get and do what he wants.

The other one is tall and skinny. Looks like he spends way too much time indoors staring at screens. Probably a hacker. He looks around nervously and picks at his teeth with his fingernail.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Stella stands and stretches. She primes the charge on her scooter, ready to leave.

"R-tur Widdershins," says the older one.

Stella steps through her scooter and sits on the seat. She drops her right hand down by the side of the motor and briefly extends two fingers. Then quickly pulls her hand back up to the throttle grip.

She lifts up smoothly and flies off towards the north.

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EO Office
Unknown Location
Malta
2154

"Did you know these two men were Bans when you agreed to meet them?"

Of course I did. That was the whole point.

"No. I had no idea."

"I shall remind you of Malta Internal Office Directive 26A: 'Any person; who aids a banished person in an activity that violates their banishment agreement; shall face banishment themselves.' Are you aware of this law?"

No. I'm a complete idiot, Mister Nelson.

"Of course. I'm aware."

I wish he wouldn't look at me like that. He has the most amazing eyes.

"You met these two men in the parking lot next to Birżebbuġa Sailing Club? Next to Malta Freeport? Is that correct?"

"That's what you say."

"And what did you talk about?"

How to illegally import spare parts for their project, of course.

"They asked me a question and I told them they were mistaken. They must have the wrong person."

"What did they ask you?"

"If I could get something for them."

"Get *what* for them? Specifically?"

"The conversation didn't go that far. I told them I had no idea what they were talking about, and I left."

"Were you alone there?"

"Yes."

"Did someone send you to meet them?"

There is a flicker in her eyes.

What does he know?

"No."

Something just flickered in her eyes...

"Do you often get mistaken for someone who can get people things?"

"I can get women dresses to fit them. I do that for a living. Is that what you are asking?"
she bats her eyes a little.

"I'm talking about your extracurricular work. The other line of work you do outside of the dress shop."

He doesn't want to flirt.

"Have you done this before? How many Bans have you helped, Stella?"

None of your business.

"I don't help Bans."

Nelson looks straight into her eyes and shakes his head, "Why, Stella, why? You know the risks. Why on earth would you help these people?"

How could you possibly understand?

"I don't help Bans."

He pushes the picture across the table to her again, "So you deny that this is you accepting an envelope from this man." He pushes the next picture, "and you deny this is you putting this envelope in your coat?"

Think. Think, girl, think!

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Ghar Dalam Cave
Birżebbuġa
Malta
2154

(Four months ago)

Stella sits on the low curved wall outside the entrance to the cave museum. Her face buried in a Heritage Malta pamphlet.

Across from her, also sitting on the low stone wall, are the two men from the parking lot at the Freeport. They wear dark glasses and floppy tourist hats. The kind of hats they sell at the Triton Fountain in Valetta. Both have cameras slung around their necks and sling packs on their backs.

Stella is also hiding under a huge floppy hat. And draped neck to toe in a billowing white linen dress. She holds a large shoulder bag

R-tur saunters casually by on the sidewalk. He makes a brief eye contact with all three of them, and then sprints across the road to the airbus stop.

The three sit and wait as a group of tourists from a chartered coach shuffle by them and into the gate.

Then they stand and join in at the back of the group.

They walk slowly, allowing the tourists to get ahead of them.

Looking straight ahead, Stella puts her hand over her mouth and fakes a small cough. "You are the guys who hacked the Mandate 105 vote in the First Union?" she whispers through her fingers.

The older man lifts his camera to his face and pretends to clean the lens, "We are going to get rid of this OS2020 shit once and for all," he whispers back.

"I'm all about that," Stella looks down at her shoes.

The younger man drops down on one knee to tie his shoelace. "Under that bench is an envelope," he whispers.

Then, he rises, and the two men rejoin the group of tourists.

Stella drifts over to the bench and pulls out a makeup bag.

She sits down, and under the cover of her flowing dress she runs her hand along the edge of the bench until she feels the envelope. She sets her bag down on the ground next to her, open wide, and deftly flicks the envelope into her bag.

Then she opens her makeup bag, applies some lip balm, replaces it all inside her bag and stands up.

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she slowly saunters back out of the gate and down the street to the airbus stop.

Across from her, R-tur is waiting for an airbus going the other way.

Stella lowers her hand down to her side and quickly drops three fingers straight and then immediately recoils them, and brings her hand back up to hold her bag.

R-tur fakes a cough into his hand three times.

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Exact Location Unknown
Caput Mundi
2154

The rain has not subsided.

The relentless wind blows wave after wave against the walls of the old Basilica.

But the Soldiers of Truth are warm and dry in the crypt as they hang on every word of the First Kaptan.

The crypt wall is flooded with cinestrips of people waving bibles and raising their hands in the air.

"Pay close attention to the extreme Christians. The evangelicals. Their leaders have much wealth. They con their followers into giving them money."

Kaptan's face returns, "These people claim they are 'Christians'. As though that means you can't question their behavior."

He shakes his head slowly, "They are not Christians. Their behavior is not at all 'Christ-Like'. They are abusive. They shame and punish people for not thinking and acting like they do. And then try to whitewash their abusive behavior by wrapping it in a fake cloak of religion."

Some of the Soldiers of Truth nod as he talks.

"We were not fooled. But many were taken advantage of by their faith. We saw that as a threat. One that needed to be neutralized."

He leans back in the chair, "We hacked their bank accounts. Gave their money to the poor. The disabled. The orphans. The chronically ill."

The images continue on the screen.

"One very popular preacher fought back. He terrorized his followers with stories of devil worshipping pedophiles. Frightened them into giving him millions. He called his followers to arms. Incited them to be soldiers for Christ. To slay their enemies. They started to shoot other citizens who questioned them. It was clear. A demonstration needed to be made."

A new cinestrip starts.

"He was giving a sermon. In front of thousands of his followers. Impassioned and angry. Spewing dissent and division. As he was shouting, *"God will protect me"*, our bullet passed through his head. One bullet can speak a thousand words."

"One bullet can speak a thousand words," the sober response from the Soldiers of Truth on the benches.

"To kill a snake, you must cut off the head. Without leadership the momentum is stopped. The fake Evangelicals became quiet. Neutralize the threat."

"Neutralize the threat."

"Christianity is easy to corrupt. Jesus did not understand the evil that his father put into human beings. He lived in a delusion of good triumphing over evil. He did not embrace the truth that good and evil are two sides of the same coin. And a one-sided coin cannot exist. He made no peace with his dark side. He did not teach that to his followers. Their dark sides grow. With any amount of childhood trauma, that dark side can overwhelm a soul. A soul that is lost to anger, lies and the need to hurt others."

Murmurs through the ranks.

"Be vigilant. The constant watch. It falls to you."

"It falls to us!"

His face softens. He leans forward slightly in his chair.

"My fellow soldiers, let me leave you with this..."

As he recites the verses, the words appear on the screen below his face. Everyone in the room, slowly and solemnly recites in unison:

"Weapons of war are instruments of disaster.

A Soldier of Truth shall not dwell upon them.

They are only used as a last resort.

If they must be used, it is only with the highest restraint.

Peace is my highest value.

*My enemies are not demons.
But human beings like myself."*

As if on cue, all of the Soldiers of Truth close one hand over their hearts:
*"I enter a battle gravely.
With sorrow and with great compassion.
As if I am attending a funeral."*

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EO Office
Unknown Location
Malta
2154

"And here we have you in another conversation with someone," Nelson plays a cinestrip of her pulling her hair over her face. But you can clearly see her mouth moving in conversation.

"I have friends," Stella sneers at him belligerently.

"Friends who run quantum scramblers on their phone calls? We could not attach your conversation. All we got was a scramble pattern coming directly from your com. One of your 'friends' calling their favorite shop girl about a dress?"

Nelson sits at the table in her lock down room, showing her surveillance footage.

He taps the screen on the tablet and a cinestrip plays with her sitting down on a bench at the Train Station's Park in Birkirkara. She looks around. And then reaches under the bench and pulls out a brown envelope and quickly stuffs it in her bag. Then she gets up and leaves.

Nelson looks at her blankly. Then arches his eyebrows.

"Ok..." he taps it again. This time she is standing next to a large flatbed truck talking to the driver in the cab. Then she goes around the truck on the other side and climbs into the cab. The shot is from the front through the windscreen.

Tā mā de! How did they know? How?

On the footage you can clearly see her give a similar looking envelope to the driver. He opens the top and counts what's inside. It is clearly bank notes of some kind.

Her face goes pale.

Nelson sits and waits.

Her lips draw into a thin line and she takes a deep breath.

Nelson picks up his tablet and pulls up the picture he showed her before. Of her—and Ghani and Ġenju. He sets it down in front of her.

Dead silence. But he can see the thoughts chase around behind her eyes like cats chasing their own tails.

After a few moments of dead silence, he stands. Tucks the tablet under his arm and walks towards the door.

“Wait,” Stella says softly.

Nelson pauses, his hand raised to knock on the door.

Stella takes another long breath, “Can we make a deal?”

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Malta IO Centre

Pieta

Malta

2154

"We've had a delivery," Viktor Saliba drops three files on the desk.

"Who are those men?" Nelson winces.

The photo attached to the top file show three men, blindfolded and gagged, and tied to chairs. Sitting on the loading dock of the Malta IO Sally Port.

"Maltese police officers."

"Police officers?"

"According to the files and photos attached to them, apparently involved in the illegal smuggling into the country of a large object. Possibly connected to our two Bans."

"And that delivery style..." Nelson scowls.

"Exactly. Just to complicate matters," Saliba draws a deep breath, "we have evidence now which suggests that The Mechanism may be here in Malta. And may interfere with this operation."

"Why didn't Malta Police catch these guys?"

"Family," Saliba shrugs.

"Family?"

"You may not understand this because you are British. In Malta there is a structure behind the government. Behind almost everything. If a young man with a new driving permit hits your cruiser, and the Police officer who comes to write the report is the cousin or uncle of the young man, the report will not be filed."

"Won't be filed?"

"Because the officer will never hear the end of it from his mother and aunt."

Nelson lets this information sink in for a moment.

"A long time ago, a whole village of men, came from Sicily to Malta looking for wives. That bloodline still continues. Cassar, Mizzi, Muscat, Mifsud and like this. When these men are in government, their family members get construction contracts. Building codes that were blocked by previous government officers. And like this," he waves his hand fluttering his fingers in the air.

"So, this..."

"Yes. This is going to cause you some problems in your work."

"Problems?"

"Yes. And these men will probably be released. Not questioned further or held."

"Seriously? Why?"

"As I told you—family. You need to be aware of this. And prepared to find ways around it."

"Great."

Saliba shrugs.

"I wonder if this is why our Bans are here. In Malta."

"Possible, Mister Nelson. But also, if you have enough money—cash—anything can be done in Malta."

"I have heard this."

"You can buy citizenship and a passport, if you deposit enough in our banks, and buy an expensive piece of property."

"And that's legal?"

"Official government policy."

Nelson closely examines the image of the three men on the Sally port, "I don't understand. I mean, with all the security feeds and cameras that you have, how do these Mechanism guys just show up and leave people on your doorstep?"

Saliba looks at him with a fixed gaze, "I have long suspected that they have friendlies within the IO. Possibly, dual actors. Working for both."

Nelson lets out a slow long breath, "That would explain it, yes."

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Triq L-Ispitar
Rabat
Malta
2154

It's done. It's over.

She's told them everything.

Well, not *'everything'* everything.

But what they wanted to know. About Għani and Ġenju. And the shipments. And the money.

Now, all she has to do is help them find Għani and Ġenju. Find out what they are building. And how they escaped from their nano trackers. And, well, that's enough. Apparently.

And she gets her life back.

Life.

Sure. Life with constant surveillance. They're probably watching me right now.

Freedom? Freedom, with travel restrictions? And a few other conditions? How is that 'free'? Exactly?

And, possibly being tagged and banned.

Great. Some life.

And that's it then.

Forget going home. Forget everything.

Stella walks slowly away from the bench she just woke up on. The bench she was obviously brought to under a blue beam. And blindfolded. A bench on small side street.

Where am I?

Oh, Rabat. Near the Window of Life.

Well. That's a little poetic, Mister Nelson.

Take me back to where I supposedly started.

But why is there no one else in this street? And how long was I on that bench?

She pats her coat pocket and her new com is in there. Her implant was removed before they let her go.

New com. All calls listened to and recorded. Oh, happy happy day!

And her first call is the most important one.

I'll make that one from my stash com.

And then, Mariella.

How am going to explain disappearing for 4 days and not showing up for work?

Madonna.

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Commerce City
Federated Anatolian States
2076

"The dead have questions for us."

Below the Trader's Market, on the eastern side of the river, an abandoned SubTran portal is illuminated with blue-green biolites.

Far below the smells of ginger and nutmeg, and the sounds of children's tin whistles, the Soldiers of Truth gather.

The Kaptan stands on the edge of the old platform. His words drift into the silent tunnels that retreat into darkness.

"The dead want to know if we learned the lessons."

Behind him, most of the original tile wall still survives. A testament to the skill of the tradesmen who installed it. A large mural depicts images from long ago. Past empires. Lush verdant pastures and golden fantasies of dead concepts.

Pictures in an album. A documentation of failure.

The Kaptan shakes his head, his thick Circassian accent chewing through the words, "We all know the history. The corruption. The cowardice. How great empires fall. Because no one stands up and faces the threat."

SubTran was permanently closed down over eighty years ago. All the entrance tunnels have been removed. Or filled in. Making it impossible to reach the portal from the market above.

Impossible for most people.

This labyrinth of tunnels and portals still exist in many parts of the old city. Especially in depressed areas where there is no money or interest in developing.

Ideal locations for people to meet unnoticed.

"No government can fix all the problems of the citizens," the Kaptan's voice bounces down the dark tunnels. "Especially when the members of that government are the problem. Any enterprise conceived by ego, and dedicated to that ego, shall perish by that ego."

The Soldiers of Truth nod.

"It falls to us."

"It falls to us!"

"In any organized government, the power rises from the people. It does not descend from the leaders. Leaders are leaders by the agreement of the citizens. They can stop being leaders by agreement of the citizens. The only variables are how they become leaders, and how they stop being leaders."

The Soldiers nod.

"In this, the people have the upper hand. Many don't realize it. Because they have been conned out of their power. Or lied to. Or forced."

The Kaptan's words echo off the tiled walls.

"The citizens cannot rely on the problems to remove themselves. They need a mechanism. We are that mechanism."

"We are The Mechanism."

"We are The Mechanism."

He looks from soldier to soldier, "And now we have a new threat. A global threat. Two bad actors who may threaten every Union, Alliance and Firewall. And they may be in our vicinity. We must be vigilant. Ready. The safety and security of our species depends on it."

The Kaptan walks towards the group, "A wheel is being formed. Some of us may need to go and join this wheel. To fight this threat. Will we be ready?"

He extends his left hand, palm flat towards the floor.

The Soldiers stand quietly and place their hands over his. Those behind them silently place their hands on the shoulders of those in front of them.

They all recite in unison:

"Thirty spokes join in a wheel.

But it is the hub that makes the wagon move."

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**Trans Union Insurance Company
Strait Street
Valetta
Malta
2154**

"Do you think she told us everything?"

"Not 'everything' everything. But enough for us to start. And she has confirmed our previous information."

"But we still don't know where they are. Or what they're building."

"But we have someone who knows a few people involved. So we are a lot closer than we were last week."

"I just want to know how they got their nano beads out of their bodies."

"Or disarmed them."

"That information is critical. We need to get it spread to all the Unions so they can watch for it."

"Yes, it—it changes everything."

"Yes. Everything. The possibility..."

"I need to get back onto IFC and get some fire under this. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to let her get her life back together today. I have two or three leads to follow, based on what she told us. And then, bright and early, I am going to follow her to work tomorrow. And push for some contacts."

"And you still don't think she's a flight risk?"

"No way. She's under constant surveillance since she was released. We took out her phone implant and replaced it with one of our own. She will appear on every screen and scanner worldwide. She's not going anywhere."

"Good. Good. Let's push ahead. Immediately."

"Agreed."

"And remember, you can dangle banishment over her head. If it helps."

"Would you seriously banish her after she helps us? How could you possibly..."

"I said dangle it. That's all."

"Like the Sword of Damocles? That's cruel."

"It might help. Anyway, there is one more matter..."

"Yes?"

"If Stella has traced you to this street, then whoever she was talking too knows that too."

"Probably."

"We have to move you."

"Where?"

"Far away."

"The whole country is only 45 kilometers long. How far away can I move?"

"San Tumas Bay."

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Upper Barrakka Gardens

Valetta

Malta

2154

"So, stage one is always the Birżebbuġa parking lot?"

"Meet and greet."

"Meet and greet. And how do you know you are supposed to meet and greet someone there?"

Stella pauses chewing.

It's a grey blustery sky over Valetta today. Layer after layer of thin grey clouds block the sun. It's colder than it has been all month.

Stella shivers and pulls her scarf higher over her nose.

Nelson stretches his legs out from the bench, chewing thoughtfully on his ftira.

Come on Stella give me something. Or I may have to take you back in.

Stella takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

I have to give him R-tur. But he'll kill me. Will they give me protection? Asylum? Something? R-tur is the fixer. He has all the contacts. If I give him up, and ask for protection—will someone come after me from Sicily? R-tur's people. His boss. Does he have a boss?

"Stella?" Nelson has turned and is looking right at her.

Those eyes. Steady on girl. Don't fall in love with this guy.

"Nelson?" she meets his gaze. "Is Nelson your first name? Or last?"

"Neither," he sounds a little agitated.

"Doesn't seem fair that you know all of my names, especially my horrendous middle name, and I don't know—"

"Horatio Nelson Forsythe. All right? Happy now? Can we stop playing delay games and get to the point?"

"Horatio," she snarks, "I don't blame you for just using Nelson."

"Stella?" his eyes are edging on mean now.

I could say I don't know. I could tell him about the website and say I don't know who is posting.

Nelson turns away from her and raises his arm to scratch his elbow.

Stella watches him do it, and then sees the man who blue beamed her walking towards them. She quickly turns to the other side and sees the woman agent approaching. Her hand in her coat pocket. A beam.

"Maybe a little more time in the room and— "

"Wait. Wait," Stella puts up her hand. "Sorry."

Nelson raises his finger and the agents freeze in place. But eyes, and probably beams, still on her.

"I get signals."

"From whom?"

"The Fixer."

"And what's his name?"

Here we go. "R-tur."

"And where can we find this R-tur?"

"I don't know. That's the truth. He always contacted me."

"And how did he contact you?"

"He left a message. On a style sheet."

"Style sheet?"

"On a website."

"That's risky. Anyone can scan source code on hypertext."

"Not the pages. On the style sheets."

"Oh. And how does that work?"

"There's a fake website—the last one was gardening supplies from Norway. But only the landing page is hosted. So, I look at source code and the link for the CSS."

"So, it's hidden."

"Yes. The message is contained in the block of code for a VirCom feed."

"Brilliant."

Stella shrugs, "Simple. Smart."

"No one would find it."

"Not unless you are looking for it."

"And how do you reply?"

"I have admin privileges and can login and change the file."

"Admin for every site?"

"It's always the same user and pass, just the site keeps changing—furniture from Argentina—wholesale fish from Thailand—that kind of thing."

"Brilliant. And then they tell you what the next site will be?"

"Exactly. Simple."

"And what would the message be?"

"Short. Meet and greet."

"Meet and greet?"

"Meet someone at the parking lot."

"And how would you know when?"

"Always the same. Next day at noon."

"And what about further meetings?"

Oh well... I'm in it now. I'm not going back to that room.

"Second stage."

"Second stage?"

"Pick up an envelope at second stage."

"Where?"

"Ghar Dalam Cave."

"Why there?"

"It's a good place to pass envelopes. There's always tourists around. You can pass stuff in a crowd. Or in the dark cave. Without too much problem."

"And then what?"

"Third stage was the Train Station's Park in Birkirkara."

"Where we filmed you."

"Yes." *And how you managed to do that is...*

"And what would you pick up or deliver there?"

"That's where I would get an envelope with the requests and the other contacts."

"What other contacts?" *Now we are getting something useable.*

"The Go Man, the Transport Manager, the Cash Man—that kind of stuff."

"And you can identify these people? Do you have names?"

"I was just a messenger. Go and meet this person. If they say this then give them this package. Ask them this question, if they answer like this, then give them this sign. Pick up an envelope from this person and take it to that person. I was just a runner. And the people I would meet were always different."

Nelson exhales loudly, "I need something here Stella. I need a name. A person. Something."

Stella takes a deep breath, "Do you realize what you are asking of me here? Do you realize the risk I am taking in even talking to you?"

Nelson looks at her with steely eyes, "Do you realize the consequences to yourself if you *don't* give me this information?"

Stella glances over his shoulder. The agent is not there anymore.

But he's still around. That's for sure. Both of them. Watching. Listening in on their coms. Probably the whole EO office is listening. Tā mā de.

"They all use fake names. You probably don't have any scans or images I could look at and pick them out of. These people don't exist."

Nelson takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, "So nothing then. You can give us nothing else. This is it? This is the best 'help' you can give us?"

Stella swallows hard, "No."

Nelson's jaw is set. His tongue moves around behind the thin line of his lips. He taps his fingers impatiently on his knee.

Stella sighs, "R-tur."

"What about him?"

"Maybe—I can take you to him," she says quietly.

"How?"

"I can leave a message. See if he responds."

"Do it."



Salt Pans
Triq Ix-Xwejni
Iż-Żebbuġ
Gozo
2154

Salt production in Malta and Gozo dates back to ancient times. Salt was used to preserve meat and fish. It was an important trade item between countries in the Mediterranean and the rest of the world.

Salt harvesting may have been Malta's oldest industry. Some of the salt pans, or 'Salini', date back to Roman Times. Salt production was widespread over the whole country under the rule of the Knights of St. John. Large scale production and export of salt started in the nineteenth century

Salt pans are usually shallow square shapes cut out of the flat surface rock next to the sea.

Rows of them next to each other, allow seawater to wash in and evaporate in the sun.

The seawater is left to settle for eight days before it is moved to smaller salt pans that are warmer in temperature and further away from the sea. At the beginning of the drying process the water takes on a reddish hue and salt crystals begin to form.

The salt is raked into piles and then stored in caves carved into the coastal rock.

Perhaps the most well-known salt pans on Gozo are the pans along Triq Ix-Xwejni.

If you take the north coast road out of Marsalforn, through Obajjar, the salt pans run in clusters between the road and the sea.

In Old Year 1985, Nicky Farrugia made a world record swim from Sicily to Gozo. A distance of eighty-three kilometers.

He emerged from the water at a place locally known as 'World Record Rock'. Which is midway along the road next to the salt pans.

Just north of 'World Record Rock' there is a hard packed dirt track off to the right which drops down closer to the sea. It hugs the cliff edges and disappears around a wind sculpted rock formation.

Stella and Nelson park their scooters on the road.

They leave his Blue Beam and all other electronics in their scooters. because they would be detected by R-tur.

Which would cause a problem.

As they walk down the dirt track and around the corner of the rock formation, they emerge in a bowl carved into the rock by thousands of years of wind and water activity.

During the season, tour operators often set up a refreshment stop in this natural enclave. A mid-point for tourists being shuttled around the island. They set up tents and spread-out tables of Gozo wine and beer in coolers. Bowls of olives, sun-dried tomatoes, goat cheese and Maltese fancy bread.

Because this spot is so close to the coast road, but completely hidden from view from the road above, it is an ideal place to relax, and watch the waves dance along the shore.

Yes, it is an ideal place for tourists.

And, others.

As they round the corner of the wind carved cliff, Stella spots R-tur leaning against his scooter staring out to sea.

In 1985 it took Nicky Farrugia thirty hours and seventeen minutes to swim across the water from Sicily.

Today, it probably took R-tur about twenty minutes by air scooter.

R-tur is almost two meters tall. He's a very dark lanky Alkebulan man. Usually dressed in a black track suit. He's hard to miss.

He does not recognize Nelson. And Nelson does not recognize him.

"Katrin!" R-tur raises his hand. "We are to meet again."

"Katrin?" whispers Nelson, "how many names do you have."

She ignores him, "Nice day, for fishing. If you're into it," she responds to R-tur.

"I have caught a few," he responds.

The opening lines delivered and received, R-tur's smile turns to a business face, "What do you have?"

She opens her mouth to speak, but stops as she sees a rapidly approaching air scooter behind R-tur, screaming across the water.

He hears the whining motor too, and turns just as a white heat beam fires from the approaching scooter. The beam hits him in the chest instantly setting him on fire. He screams and falls forward onto his scooter.

The beam hits him again. Then the scooter rider raises his weapon and fires one straight at Stella. Nelson jumps in front of her knocking her to the ground as the beam sizzles over top of their heads and slams into the smooth rock.

Nelson grabs his wrist and shouts, "Hi Ho Silver. Defend!"

They both glance up just in time to see R-tur and his scooter falling slowly over the edge of the sea cliff in a ball of white flame.

And then another blast of white heat slams into the rock next to Stella, burning her arm and blistering her cheek.

Nelson's scooter appears quickly, taking a defensive position a couple of meters off the ground, between them and the attacking scooter. It shoots out a wide thin Blue Beam in the direction of the source of the white heat.

But the mystery scooter rider is too quick. He zigs and zags avoiding the beam while firing jet after jet of white heat towards Nelson and Stella.

Nelson calls up to his scooter, "Drop Beam!"

His portable Blue Beam drops from the side bag on the scooter and Nelson dives for it. He catches it, arms it and shoots at the attacker from under his own scooter.

The Blue Beam catches the foot of the rider, spinning him around and almost throwing him off. But he recovers control and drops down out of sight below the cliff.

Nelson turns to Stella, "Are you all right?"

She is up and walking towards him rubbing her arm, "Still alive."

They both walk to the edge of the cliff and see the attacking scooter zooming back towards Sicily just above the waves.

Below, no sign of R-tur or his scooter.

"Chao gan de!" Nelson smacks his leg. "Damn it, damn it, damn it! Son of a bitch!" Stella shakes her head.

They both stand open mouthed watching the vanishing speck of their attacker.

Nelson turns to Stella, "Who the hell was that?!"

She shakes her head, "I don't know. I just know R-tur."

"Who does he work for?"

She just shrugs and shakes her head, "I was just the messenger. I'm not allowed to know too much."

Nelson motions her over to his scooter. He opens the large rear box and pulls out a red MediKit. He takes out a bottle of thick green liquid and applies some to a clean white SteriPad and dabs it on her burns. Immediately it feels better. Cooling her skin.

"Well now," he turns and looks out at the sea, "now we know even less."

He rummages around in the big rear box and pulls out a blue IO jacket and spreads it out on the ground for them.

Stella sighs, "That was our best hope. R-tur was the fixer for those parts. He would have been the only one who knew everything about the deal. I wasn't told details, so if I was ever caught, I couldn't identify anyone. Or describe the package."

Nelson slumps down to a sitting position on the jacket. Absentmindedly tapping his beam on his knee.

"How's the arm? And the face?" He just notices she has blisters on her cheek and the side of her nose.

He motions her over to where he is sitting and she plonks down next to him. He gently dabs more green liquid onto her face.

"Thanks, that stuff is crystal."

"Yeah, it's great stuff. Standard issue. It will hold us until we can get down to the Agency hospital." He rubs his chin wearily, "Ok, Stella... What's your next idea?"

She looks at him and her eyes dart around.

I don't want to risk that. Really, really don't want to risk it. R-tur was one thing, but those people...

"I'm thinking," she replies.

"I can see that."

I can't tell him about the transport manager. Or the transporters. If they even suspect he's... We'd both be dead. Dead.

She lets out a deep sigh.

"Got something?" he opens his eyes wide.

She avoids his glance.

"Stella? You have to do something here. The ball is in your court. We've got nothing. Nothing."

"That's all you care about isn't it Mister External Office Nelson," she barks, her eyes flaring. "You and your agents. Who cares what happens to the stupid girl? We just need to get these two Bans. Whatever happens to her... Who cares?"

Stella gets up and walks towards the edge of the cliff. She shoves her hands into her pockets and looks down into the churning surf at the base of the cliff.

Suddenly she feels his arm around her shoulders.

He stands hip to hip with her.

"You have your arm around me," she says in a sarcastic tone.

"Don't read too much into it," he responds.

He turns her and places both of his hands on her shoulders, and looks directly into her eyes.

"Yes, Stella. I, and all the other agents, do want to get those guys. And I'll tell you why. They have found a way to defeat their nano trackers."

Wồ cào! The recognition is immediate in her face.

"And *that* is of *international* importance," he continues. "That's how big this is. And whatever they're planning to do next—whatever it is—is going to be even worse."

Stella nods slowly.

"And if you help me—help *us*—catch and stop these guys—Stella, there is not one agent—IO, EO, IFC anywhere in the world—who is going to do *anything* to you, except thank you. Can't you see that?"

Stella allows herself a tiny smile.

He drops his hands, "Are you in?"

"There is one more thing I can try..." she says quietly. "But it just might get us killed."

Nelson gestures at the black burn marks on the stone behind her, "There's a lot of that going around, isn't there?"

"Nelson?"

"What?"

She walks up close to him, "Don't read too much into this."

She throws her arms around his neck and crushes her lips against his.

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Exact Location Unknown
Hrvatska Directive
2076

"Two of you are going to Malta to be part of the first International Mechanism."
All eyes are upon The Kaptan.

"A threat to the whole species has surfaced there. Our help is needed. A Wheel is being formed."

The Kaptan stands with the two that have been chosen, "Soldiers from many places are traveling now."

He holds his hand out, palm to the floor. The chosen place their hands on his.

"We wish you strength and compassion. Courage and restraint. Neutralize the threat. In the quickest way possible."

They nod to him and each other. The rest of the group watch in silence.

"Do not underestimate this enemy of the species. These two men are focused. Resourceful. Committed. You must be the same. There is no greater disaster than to underestimate your enemy. Remember the teaching. When two enemies engage in battle, the one that feels the sorrow of killing shall win. Stick to the code. A Soldier's Oath."

"A Soldier's Oath," they all respond.

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Agency Sptar Capua
Tas-Sliema
Malta
2154

"You have an IO jacket in your scooter."

Stella leans on her side on the examination table and looks over at Nelson. While the medtechs attend to her burns.

Nelson sits on the other examination table swinging his legs, "I went through the IO Academy. All of us do. Then we spend our first year in EO working as a partner to a senior agent somewhere in the world. But we become IO Agents first. So we have the training."

"Makes sense."

The medtechs finish dressing her wounds and leave the room.

"I'm proud of that jacket."

"I believe you."

"I moved into a friend's flat when I was seventeen. But it was a rough area and there was an incident down the hall. Two IO Agents came and sorted it out in minutes. Calmly, quickly and safely. Situation controlled. Nobody hurt."

"You saw your future."

"I guess so. In my last year I went on a Joint Operation to the Western Alliance. And I felt what it was like being in strange territory, tracking and containing Bans. It was exciting. Not for everyone. You live mostly by your intuition and guts. I loved it."

"You really like EO?"

"I wanted to see some of the world and meet new people."

"So... Bad flats and noisy Maltese? How 's that going for you?" she smirks.

"Yeah," he smiles, "this chapter has been a tad bumpy so far."

Just then, a medtech pokes her head into the room and barks at Stella, "Lie down. Let the patches do their job!"

Nelson grins.

Stella lies back down and stares at the ceiling.

Stupid me. What did I get myself into? But they were going to fix it. So I could go back.

Nelson stands up and leans on the edge of the table, "So now you know more about me. But I know next to nothing about you."

"I thought IO gave you my whole file?"

"Yes. They did. But you have not been completely honest with me."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, your paper trail looks genuine enough. A very professional job. But I'm sure, that if we dug into it, we would see who faked what and how and why. But I really don't care about that. That's not my business because you are not a Ban. That's *your* business."

"Just doing your job?" she sneers.

"I care about *you*, Stella. And *you*, have told me nothing about *yourself*."

Her eyes soften.

"To start with, you were not born in Malta. You did not grow up here."

Stella draws her lips into a thin line.

"You don't hug the shade," Nelson continues.

Stella regards him coldly, "I'll have you know—" she starts.

"People who are born in countries with this much heat and sunshine instinctively gravitate to the shady side of the street. You, walk right down the middle. Constantly scanning the doorways and side alleys."

Her eyes narrow.

"In fact," he continues, not giving her an opening to speak. "The way you move through public places... Is very much like the way an agent moves."

Something flits across Stella's eyes for a fraction of a second.

"IO?" he shrugs. "Maybe? Somewhere in your past, Stella. If that is indeed your actual name."

"Now look here—"

"You are not Maltese. Yes, you pepper in typical words and phrases. But you're not a native."

Stella's mouth opens but nothing comes out.

"I want to protect you."

Stella pouts and crosses her arms, "Protect your Agency asset."

"Protect *you*, Stella." He replies, "Despite how convincing your documentation is, you don't behave like the woman in those papers. You behave like a woman who is driven by an unquenchable fire. A fire that can either warm or burn whoever dares to get close to it."

Her face softens and she turns to him.

"The agency may see you as an asset, I see you as *you*. I'm protecting *you*. Your incandescent heart. Your rare and singular spirit. Delicate as a spider's web. And, at the same time, a force as unmovable as a glacier."

"You trying to butter me up?"

"You have a tiny bit of unresolved anger that darts across the back of your eyes. And it slides easily into passion, for whatever you're doing at any particular moment. And *that* is intoxicating. I like *you*. Whoever you are."

Stella sighs and studies his face to see if he is lying.

"Something else," Nelson rolls up his sleeve, "I want to add you as a user to my scooter control."

Stella looks at him shocked.

"It's only smart. If I get knocked out, you need to call Silver to shoot a beam or something. To get the MediKit. I may not be able to protect you."

He walks over to her and offers his wrist.

She rolls up her sleeve and places her wrist against his.

"Hi Ho Silver, acknowledge," He gets a low beep in his ear that only he can hear.

"Security menu. Authorization. Silver, add user. Tonto."

Stella chuckles, "Who's Tonto?"

"You are. I'll explain later. Tonto. Tonto speaks."

He turns to Stella, "Say Hi Ho Silver."

She does.

"Again," he nods.

She does.

"And again."

She does.

In his ear Silver responds, "New user added. Tonto speaks. Voice pattern and pulse recorded."

"Silver out," Nelson takes down his arm. "There. Now you can get help even if I can't help you."

Stella's face melts. Her eyes get wet as she looks at him.

"Now, Stella? Now, do you trust me?"

She nods slowly.

"Well," Nelson rolls his sleeve down, "enough of this lying around. Back to our Bans, Stella. What do we try next?"

She stares pensively up at the ceiling, "We need to dress you up like a pirate."

**Rushing into action, you fail.
Trying to grasp things, you lose them.
Forcing a project to conclusion,
You ruin what was almost ripe.**

Daodejing

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Unknown Location

Malta

2154

"He had an EO scooter," the quantum scrambler makes his voice warble and difficult to hear.

"The man she was with?"

"Yes."

There is a pause.

"Burn them both."

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Anchor Bay
Triq Tal-Prajjet
Il-Mellieħa
Malta
2154

The two air scooters hum smoothly past the Red Tower and down over the nature preserve. Then they bank right and head straight for Anchor Bay.

The thing about Pirate Night is the timing. If you get there too early you look desperate. Then the prices can go up. If you get there too late, there may be nothing left to buy.

They gently land the scooters at the far end of Popeye Village. Where they can hide them behind the large rocks. This is as far away from where everyone else is parked as they can get. But this means they can sneak in and out without the bulk of the party goers seeing them. And no one is going to tamper with their air scooters. Which sometimes happens if you park in the big lot with everyone else.

But hey, these people are scavengers. Parts merchants. And parts are parts. Regardless of where they find them.

Popeye Village was built in OldYear 1980 as the set for a movie about 'Popeye the Sailor Man'. A cartoon character from the 1930's. It was kept intact after filming and run as an amusement park for many years.

These days it generates its income from being a hired as a venue for all sorts of gatherings.

And one of the most popular, is the once-a-month Pirate Night.

Basically, people dress like pirates and come and drink and find sex partners. Of course, there are drugs going around, and an obvious presence of police to try to keep things down to a dull roar. Tonight, it's mostly students from MCAST or UniMalta, looking for a little anonymous cosplay sex to blow off steam after exams.

But the other, much more lucrative activity that happens at Pirate Night, is the buying and selling of 'spare parts'.

'Spare Parts' merchants are next to impossible to distinguish from the Pirate partygoers. They dress up too. But unless you know them, that is, have had dealings with them in the past, then you can walk right past them and never know who they are. Or what they have for sale.

These parts merchants can get you just about anything you want. A hydro scooter motor, a fake passport, a case of high-grade whiskey, or a vial of monazite sand. Anything. For the right price.

As with any gathering of individuals where this activity might possibly be going on, there are also undercover police, military, IO and EO agents dressed up and peppered in as well. You really need to know who you are talking to, before you ask for something.

Fortunately, Stella knows all the right people. At least that's what Nelson is hoping.

As they round the rocks and walk towards the noise and the crowd, Stella nudges Nelson's elbow and points to a water skimmer bobbing in the bay. "Skinny Pete is here."

This is who they have come to see.

Skinny Pete's water skimmer looks old and rusty, and like it might sink any time. But that's camouflage. As Stella found out the one time she was on the ship. It has state of the art technology inside. With a huge cargo bay that can hold a large quantity of 'spare parts'.

"Is that who we brought the sacks of potatoes for?"

"No. That's later."

Before they left, Stella had made him tie a 20-kilo sack of potatoes on the back of his air scooter. And the same on hers.

And all she would say about it is, "You'll see."

Stella and Nelson have wrapped themselves in long pirate coats and broad brimmed hats that cover most of their recognizable features. They still run the risk of being scanned by someone at the party, so they have left all their electronics with their air scooters. It's better that way.

To everyone around them, they are just two more people dressed up like pirates out for a fun night.

Stella slides up behind a large woman in a crocodile skin corset that is struggling to contain her. And a floppy pirate hat erupting with bright pink and purple ostrich feathers.

"Skinny... Have you lost weight?"

"Morgana!" the large woman spins around, "yes I did. Killed my husband. Got rid of 100 kilos of nagging fat."

She lets out a big belly laugh, her huge breasts almost bouncing out of the corset, and slapping Stella on the back.

"Is this your sex toy for the evening," she nods at Nelson, "or have you strapped him on in a more semi-permanent position?"

Again, another big laugh.

"We're... Trying it on for size," Stella smirks.

"Come, come," Skinny Pete motions for them to follow, "let's get you a drink."

She pushes her way through the crowd which seems to part automatically for her. It seems instinctive—move or get run over. Her massive butt swings from side to side as she waddles, her elbows widening her path. She leads them outside to the porch of the house where a very skinny man is pouring out thick brown liquor from a handmade ceramic pitcher.

He grins a toothless grin and nods at Stella.

"Issa, Vincenzo, pour my friends some harruba."

Vincenzo nods and bows. He produces two ceramic tumblers and fills them half full with the sweet carob liqueur.

He hands one to Stella with a slight bow of his head. Then he hands one to Nelson, "Fresh from the cellar of Vincenzo Alessandri," he bows again.

"Grazzi hafna," Nelson raises his glass to him.

They toast and drink. And then they all lean against the wooden railing and look down into the moonlit waters of Anchor Bay.

"How's your mother these days?" Skinny Pete smiles broadly and plonks her thick arm over Stella's shoulders.

"She's not been well," Stella looks down at her feet and kicks at the wooden handrail post.

Nelson says nothing. Watching everything with a curious expression.

"That new dress from your shop didn't brighten her spirits?" Skinny Pete continues beaming broadly.

"She liked the fabric," Stella looks up at her and cracks a smile. "But she didn't like the buttons."

"Madonna," Skinny Pete shakes her head. "This will not do."

"I think she might like some pearl ones," Stella continues staring out at the gentle waves lapping in the bay.

"Pearl is nice," nods Skinny Pete.

"Treasures on the bottom of the sea," chimes in Vincenzo with a wink.

Stella points to the pearl buttons on the cuff of his pirate coat, "These are nice. Where did you get them?"

"Mela, a man was from the east, I think," he scratches his chin. "But I not seen him for a long time."

He goes back to refilling his pitcher from a wooden keg set up on an x-brace.

Nelson sighs and drinks his carob liqueur. He looks bored to death.

After a few moments of silence, where they all stare at the water, Stella turns to Nelson, "Well, how about we dance?"

She grabs his hand and tugs him back into the house where the music is pumping and pirates are cavorting and gyrating under colorful lights.

They dance for two songs back-to-back and then Nelson puts his arm around her and pulls her close to him.

"What do we do now?" he whispers in her ear.

"Now, we dance and party for an hour or so while things get arranged. And we receive a notice."

He nods with a puzzled expression and resumes dancing.

After a couple more songs they take a stroll along the pathway and down to the water where shadowy pirates joke and sing around roaring fires. The leaping flames throw brief glances of light on dim silhouettes of people on the rocks probably having sex. Or doing drugs. Or both.

The light dances on the shoreline, licking the tops of the slight swells that roll in and out of Anchor Bay.

It really is a beautiful night.

Eventually they find an open bench and plunk down on it.

Stella looks at him seriously, "No shop talk. The night has ears," she whispers.

He nods.

They sit quietly and watch the spectacle.

She snuggles closer to him, "Put your arm around me," she whispers. "Make it look like we are having a good time."

He puts his arm around her shoulder and pulls her in. They both turn to whisper something at the same time and stop, realizing their mouths are almost touching.

With a brief glance, Stella grabs the back of Nelson's head and pulls him the rest of the way. Their mouths push together, hot and wet. Tasting of sweet carob.

Nelson wraps her tighter with his arms and presses himself into her. The high collars and large hats hide them from the rest. But they don't care.

In their private enclosure of fabric their tongues dance in and out of each other's mouths. He kisses and licks her ears. Tracing his tongue down her neck. Her chest swells up to meet him.

"Looks like he be heading down for Davy Jones' locker," a voice cackles next to them.

Pulling apart abruptly, they realize that Vincenzo has crept up on them while they were occupied.

"Vincenzo!" blurts Stella.

"I am sorry to the interrupt you," he winks and grins his toothless grin. He holds up a smaller pitcher, "I offer some limoncello for the night?"

"Limoncello?" Stella replies with a pleased expression. "Iva, iva, we shall definitely have some. Thank you, my friend."

He bows and bows and pours a small amount into their cups. Then stands waiting for them. Nelson looks at Stella, "We're flying," he whispers, "don't you think we've had enough to drink?"

Her face becomes rigid. Her eyes pierce his, "Have some. Now." She gulps hers down. Nelson shrugs and follows suit.

Stella hands the cups back to Vincenzo, "Grazzi, grazzi hafna for your kind hospitality, my friend." She bows to him.

He bows to her and then disappears into the dark.

Nelson opens his mouth to speak but a stern glance from Stella stops him, as she grabs his hand and tugs him towards their scooters.

She is in a hurry.

As they move Stella scans the bay. Yep. Skinny Pete's skimmer is gone.

She jerks her head towards the water and Nelson follows her gaze.

What?

But Stella is already at the scooters.

There will be time to talk about this later, Nelson tells himself as they saddle up and lift off silently into the pitch-black sky.

When they reach The Red Tower, Stella motions for him to follow her. She slows her scooter down and circles around the tower and sets down on the side facing the sea. He follows.

Once they land, she puts her finger over her lips motioning for him to be silent. After a few minutes, he can hear the slight humming of another air scooter approaching them. Nelson looks up and follows the black silhouette of the scooter as it also circles around the tower. And then, without pausing, takes off in a straight line north towards Gozo.

Nelson watches the scooter disappear into the black night and then turns to Stella. His expression is confused, and a question is just about to escape his lips when he sees her bend over and pick up a small bag.

Apparently dropped by their visitor.

Stella tucks it into an inside pocket of her coat.

"Is that our signal?" asks Nelson.

"It's our code."

"Code?"

"Yes, I need to decipher it. But not here. We must fly."

"These are the people who did the shipment that you arranged before?"

"Yes. But they arranged the go man."

"The go man?"

"The guy who located the spare part."

"And that's the code?"

"The code will tell me where to meet him."

"Now?"

"Yes," she climbs back on her scooter and motions for him to follow her.

She takes off towards the east at a slow leisurely pace out over Mellieħa Bay. Then she turns southeast. Nelson follows next to her but slightly behind. They cruise over the lights of Qawra and directly towards the waste power plant at Maghtab.

Here, she slows even more and dives down banking smoothly over the concentric rings of algae filled sun panels.

Once, twice, three times they circle the waste converter.

And then she heads directly out over the wave generators and offshore windmill farm. Past the last windmill she pulls up next to Nelson and yells, "Dump the potatoes."

She reaches behind her and pulls the quick release knot and the sack of potatoes slips off her seat and falls into the sea below. He does the same.

Then she waves her hand at him and makes a sharp left.

Opening her throttle, she flies north.

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**It-Torri ta' Santa Marija
Comino
2154**

As they approach Comino, Stella motions for Nelson to slow down.
They circle around Saint Mary's Tower as she scans the area.
No teenagers doing what teenagers do. Good.

She motions for him to land and they bring their scooters down on top of the tower.

Once down, she slides off her scooter and sits down with her back against the low wall around the top.

"This is a safe place to read our code without being watched," Stella pulls out the small bag and carefully empties its contents onto the stone slabs in front of her.

'Light?' she asks.

Nelson produces a flat square algae light and taps it, causing it to emit a soft blue-green glow.

The light illuminates a sizable pile of pearl buttons that came from the bag. Perhaps 30 of them in all different sizes, shapes and thickness.

Stella begins to group them by shape and size. Nodding to herself the whole time, her lips moving silently as she counts.

"So..." Nelson brushes his hair back from his face, "as it turns out, 'Skinny Pete' is neither skinny, nor a Pete."

"Yes, he is," Stella does not look up.

"The skinny guy was actually 'Skinny Pete'? He's the one who does the deals?"

"Yes."

"And the big lady, what does she do?"

"Screens clients for him. And protects him."

"I believe that. She could sit on me and kill me. And what's her name?"

"Morgana."

"But that's what she called you?"

"Yes." Stella smiles at him. "Confusing, isn't it? It's supposed to be."

She goes back to lining up the buttons in rows.

"But they liked us—liked you—agreed. Whatever? Right?"

"Yes."

"And what's with all the drinking?"

"Just to be sociable. And then when Pete brought us the limoncello that was his sign that he accepted the order."

"Which is why you insisted that I had to drink it."

"To confirm. Yes. You learn quick, agent."

"And what if he didn't bring us limoncello? Or brought something else?"

"He wouldn't. If he didn't want the order. Morgana would have reappeared and offered us a fresh orange."

"Orange means no."

"Orange means no."

"And if either of them suspected you were an agent, Morgana would have scratched us both with her poison tipped finger nail and we would be dead by now. Weighted down, being towed out, into the dark Mediterranean behind their skimmer." She looks up briefly, "So, well done Mister Nelson."

She goes back to her buttons.

Nelson nods slowly.

"Ok, I think I have the order, now to read the message," Stella says as though she is talking to herself.

"We circle the power plant," Nelson continues, "to muddle our heat signature in case anyone is tracking us? And then zoom out to sea, past the tracking range. Dump our extra weight. And then re-enter Malta airspace with a new weight profile that makes us appear to be different targets? Smart. Where did you learn this stuff?"

"Oh, you know—around," she smirks, her eyes still on the buttons. "And we circled the power plant to muddle *your* heat signature. My scooter doesn't have a heat signature. It's a hydro engine."

"I thought those were illegal in Malta?"

"They are," she quips still looking at the buttons.

"I see," He chuckles at her nonchalant reply. "Still, though, I must say, a complete waste of forty kilos of potatoes."

After a short time, Stella leans back and grins, "Well, that's a big relief."

"We're in?"

"Yes, Mister Nelson, government man. But what you have done so far tonight means you have probably committed crimes punishable by IO, EO and the IFC. How do you feel about that?"

"Well, not technically. Because they all know what I'm doing. *You* are the one who has actually *committed* the crimes."

"Are you going to turn me in?" she smirks sarcastically.

"Depends. Are you going to kiss me again?"

"Yeah... About that..."

He looks at her questioningly.

"Don't read too much into it."

His mouth opens to speak. And then closes again. He nods a quick nod.

"And now let's go meet Popeye?"

"Popeye? Didn't we just leave him at his village?"

"Different Popeye. The buttons say that this one is waiting for us at the fisherman's dock in Mgarr Harbour."

"And he's part of the team?"

"Yes. The import manager."

"I thought that was Skinny Pete?"

"No. Skinny Pete is the transport manager."

"You have a lot of people involved in these operations. Why so many? Wouldn't it be more efficient if a couple of people did the whole thing?"

"Maybe. But this way, Mister Nelson, nobody knows the whole situation. Or all the people involved. No one can identify everyone. Even if they are tortured."

"I get it."

"One person knows something is coming in. But not what it is, who it's going to, or how it's being transported. Another person knows what it is, but not who it's going to. Or, how it's coming in. Or, any of the other people involved. See how it works?"

"Yes. Yes. Very well, I would imagine. So how are you going to find out what this 'spare part' was, and who and where it was delivered to?"

"I don't know. I'm going to ask questions. Careful questions to the right people until we get the answers you need."

"And hopefully— "

"And hopefully," she cuts him off, "not arouse suspicion or get killed in the process." He looks at her. She is not joking.

"So now you understand the risk I am taking, Mister Nelson? And for that risk you are going to award me with my freedom? Or will I be tagged and banished? Is that what EO has planned for me? Or Malta IO? Banished? That's going to be my thanks? But at least *you* get what *you* want."

"Stella, you agreed to the terms. I really don't think that—"

"Didn't have much choice. Did I?" She cuts him off.

He looks at her mutely.

She looks off into the distance, towards Gozo, "Mgarr. I thought it might be. This is where I met him before."

"Met who?"

"Our 'Go Man', our import manager."

"And he's the same one who brought in the spare part for our targets?"

"Yes. Yes, Mister Nelson. We just got very lucky. Very, very lucky."

"How's that?"

"Because we often use different people for different imports. Depending on their contacts. And specialties. Apparently, 'Popeye' is the only one who could get another spare part like the first one. Which is what I was hoping."

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise... We would be on our way to fabricate a deal with someone who has no idea what the spare part is. And we would have to explain it to him."

"But... We don't even know what it is."

"Exact."

"We would hit a dead end."

"Dead end is right. We wouldn't be alive to see the sun rise. Because Skinny Pete will be watching us from his skimmer just outside the harbour. And at the least sign of trouble—or a signal from Popeye—"

"I know, I know," he cuts her off. "Weighted down and dragged out to sea."

Stella looks again towards Mgarr harbour, "So here's what I'm thinking... We fly due west, low over the sea. Once past Fort Chambray we circle around and come back in close to

land. There is a dirt track at the back of the ferry terminal. We can set our scoots down there. Then casually walk through the air ferry terminal and buy a cappuccino. Then we go out the front at a leisurely pace, like we just got off the ferry, and walk around the harbour to Fisherman's Dock C."

"No one sees our rides."

"Yes. Now Popeye doesn't speak English. Only Maltese. He won't talk to you. What you don't catch of our conversation I will explain later. Unless we need to agree with him immediately about something. Then I will translate."

"Agreed."

"Then we leave the same way and go back through the terminal to our scoots. Capiisce?"

"And hopefully not get killed."

"And hopefully *not* get killed."

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Mgarr Harbour

Gozo

2154

After they set their scooters down on the dirt road below Fort Chambray, Stella and Nelson walk leisurely arm in arm into the terminal building to get a cappuccino.

Once out the other side of the terminal, they saunter around to Dock C. The harbour is quiet. The only sounds are the soft lapping of gentle waves against the hulls of the boats and the creaking of rigging.

Popeye is here. No doubt he met the messenger outside the harbour and he probably pulled in not too long ago.

They pass under the sign 'Mgarr Marina Fishing Boat Section Pier C. There are several older jetboats that have been converted from pleasure craft to fishing boats. There are also a few ancient luzzu with brightly painted blue hulls bobbing at their ropes. In the midst of all these there is a larger luzzu with a dim light glowing from its wheelhouse.

"Issa, Guzeppa?" Stella calls out softly.

The wheelhouse door swings open slightly, revealing the source of the light. A small fire dances in a friction boiler providing heat inside the tall wheelhouse. A shadowy figure motions for them to come aboard.

They climb over the brightly painted sideboards and enter the wheelhouse cabin. Guzeppa's boat is larger than most of the other Luzzu bobbing in the harbour. And there is plenty of room for the three of them to sit inside.

They plunk down on upturned resin crates below the small high windows.

Guzeppa actually does look like Popeye, with his fisherman's hat and his pipe sticking out of his mouth.

He stares at Nelson with suspicious dark eyes.

"Popeye sends his regards," says Stella in Maltese.

The man responds in Maltese, "Is he cash man?" he nods at Nelson.

"No. He's the fixer. Same cash man as before," she replies.

Guzeppa smiles, "I like that cash man. He give bags of many different currency. I can pass anywhere. He is good cash man."

So far so good...

"Is he your lover?" Guzeppa rolls his eyes at Nelson.

"No. Just business. Just the fixer."

"He looks at you like he is loving you," Guzeppa grins.

"In his dreams," she smirks. "Are you jealous? You know Guzeppa, I only have eyes for you," she teases.

"But you not love me, you do not lay here with me..."

"Because Rosetina would kill both of us. And you know it!"

"Eh, eh," a look of fear comes into Guzeppa's eyes at the mention of his wife. He quickly turns away and leans down to check on the fire. "Skinny says your man, he did not like the parts?"

"He liked them just fine. He wants another."

"Another! Bis-serjeta! Impossibbli!" Popeye blurts and looks at Stella in alarm.

Nelson's eyes widen, *is this going to get out of hand?*

"Mhux hekk," the man continues. "Do you know what it took? To pass that converter into the country? It's big!" He spreads his hands. "You cannot bring in something that big by Lampuki. We had many problems to pass it from here."

Stella was afraid of this.

But she needs just a few specific details. Namely, what the hell it was and where it was delivered.

Guzeppa looks from Nelson to Stella, "Did you not see the parts?"

"No. I was just the runner. Not delivery," Stella shrugs. "It has to come all in one piece?"

"Le, le, the man, he said, the converter must pass as four pieces. Because to keep the magnets in balance. Very difficult to move. Hafna. Bring them on salvage boat. Could not pass by standard container. Then from Freeport by flat bed. On they side. Right under the nose of the police! Ha!"

"I thought Skinny knew someone at the police? Paid them?"

"Iva, iva. But only he knew. Not men in cars. Passing with lights."

"That's pretty brave."

"Eh," he shrugs, "just work. We work. The police man, he work. Everyone get paid. Just work. Nobody knows what is this part. They not paid to care."

Suddenly a shadow crosses Guzeppa's eyes, "They police was caught," he shakes a bony finger. The Mechanic. We cannot pass by there again. It is very bad."

There is an awkward silence as Guzeppa pokes at the fire in the small tinder box.

"And where does cash man want this one? Same place?"

"Iva, iva," Stella ventures gingerly, "Tista Tghini?"

"Ah, the airfield. Iva, iva. That is a little bit easier."

"Oh good." *Airfield! Crystal!*

Guzeppa takes off his flat cap and runs his hand through his hair, "But this will be—more cash. Much more. Last one was lucky. It passed from the north. Siberia, I think by train, and to Turkey Alliance. Then to port. We just pass it already on the train. But another one.... Madonna. And to get it on a train... Madonna."

Stella folds her hands on her knees and looks at the man, "Will you look into it for me? And just see if it's possible?" She puts her hand on his shoulder, "Will you do that for me Guzeppa?" She gives him a warm smile.

"Eh," he shrugs. "Eh, I can look. I can look. I will send you a message. If I find, ok?"

"Ok."

"But Skinny, he will need more. That is transport to arrange. To pass from here. Skinny is to pass it. His way. He will need more money. Much more."

"Understood. The cash man has large bags."

"Good, good! Orrajt, orrajt, now you go now. Bye, bye, chou, chou," he waves them off.

They slip out of the wheelhouse and walk down the gangway.

Once through the terminal and back at their scooters, Nelson blurts out "I caught some of it... Large? Really large? Magnets and electronics..."

"And, being assembled at the Aerodrome," Stella adds.

"What the hell are they building?"

"Converter? Converting what to what?"

"They both shake their heads.

What was he saying about Lampuki? The fish?"

"They bring smaller parts in hidden under the pile of fish on their deck as they pass the harbour master's office. They call it 'import by Lampuki'. That's how they got my scooter hydro motor in here."

"But not this?"

"No. Hell no. It's bigger than his Luzzu."

"Stella," Nelson pauses and looks out over the bobbing boats in Mgarr Harbour. "I need to ask you... Did you kiss me at Pirate Night just to provide a cover for us? Or are you trying to make me fall in love with you?"

"Like I said, don't read too much into it."

"But there had to be some reason. Some motivation?"

Stella faces him and locks eyes, "I kissed you Nelson, because I wanted to kiss you. Because it was the thing I most wanted to do at that moment. That's why I did it."

"Do you often act that way?"

"Yes. I guess. I do. My whole life."

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Exact Location Unknown
Caput Mundi
2154

Two levels below the cobblestones, and the bustle of the old city above, a meeting is taking place.

The first meeting of the International Mechanism.

The walls of the 1st century CE Mithraic temple were hand carved out of the living rock by those wanting a private and secret place to meet. Much like its occupants today.

The builders of this temple came together to worship the Persian deity Mithras. The god of friendship, contract and order.

Those gathered today, come together in the spirit of friendship, to swear a contract, to maintain order.

Standing in front of the ancient altar, carved with the image of Mithras slaying a bull, is the newly chosen leader of The International Mechanism. A thin red-haired woman.

Even in the dim light of the temple, those gathered can see her tight muscular arms. But what draws them in, is her eyes. Cold. Grey. They seem to look right through you.

"Some have asked, why we are defending a Firewall?" Hypatia speaks in slow measured tones. Without emotion.

"We have never been opposed to Firewalls. We have always defended and protected them."

She pauses, casting her glance around those assembled.

"We have always worked with IO, EO and IWF. We deliver to them individuals they cannot find. All of us have our roles. There are some things that we can do that a Firewall can't do. Because they are bound by the laws of their respective Alliances and Unions. There is a need for all of us."

A plasma projector flickers into life, and bathes the wall on her left with the faces of the two men.

"There is a threat. A severe threat to what little global stability we have. And that compels us to act. For the good of the species. These two Bans have done something no Ban has ever done before. They have defeated their nano trackers. And, as far as we can tell, they are in the process of hacking the First Union to get rid of their Firewall."

Those gathered are silent. The magnitude of the threat squats heavily on their shoulders.

"You have been selected by your local wheel for this mission. You are the best of the best. We need you."

A new image appears: A map of the country of Malta.

"We have traced them to Malta. We are gathering intelligence. Your orders will be forthcoming soon. Stand ready."

0:00.0==

Malta Aerodrome

Luqa

Malta

2154

On the opposite side of the airway at the Malta Aerodrome is a raised platform that people use to watch transports take off and land. It's especially popular with people who like to spot rare and antique transports as a hobby.

From the platform, Nelson and Stella can see the whole passenger hub and all the way down to the AeroFreight terminal.

But Nelson is not picking up anything on his scope. If this 'converter' was converting something, it should be putting out some kind of power signature. Some kind of flux. Something.

"Spotter's wall is getting popular," Stella whispers to Nelson as a group of eager spotters are strolling towards them.

"Let's go," Nelson slides his scope back in its holster and pulls his jacket flap over it.

They descend the steps past the spotters and go to their scooters.

Once the spotters have climbed the stone steps and are occupied staring through their field glasses, Nelson taps the screen on his scooter.

A map of the surrounding area appears. He zooms in with his fingers.

Stella is watching silently.

Nelson zooms into the end of Runway 23, the shorter one, and he points to a cluster of warehouses near its end.

Stella nods and they lift up quietly and skirt the aerodrome, staying well clear of the air buffers that prevent craft from straying onto the field.

In a few minutes they touch down between two large boats in the storage facility directly opposite the warehouses. Here they have a clear view of the line of hangers and ware-

houses, right up to the Executive Terminal and the Engineering Department by Security Gate One.

Nelson has already seen the report from Malta IO. After scanning weeks of entrance and exit records for all the security gates at the Aerodrome, there was no recognition pings for the two Bans.

So... Time for a heat scan.

Nelson scans from right to left slowly adjusting the sensitivity.

Nothing. Not even a flicker.

He pulls out his large agency com and dials up the EO satellite.

He enters the coordinates and watches it run.

Standard jet and hydro signatures from commercial units. A few residual patterns on the jet way where something was parked in the last 24 hours. A few Bans, all of whom he is familiar with, working at various jobs in the area.

But nothing unusual. Nothing at all.

There is a noise behind them.

A man rounds the boat and strides towards them with a white beam in his hand.

I saw that guy back at the Spotter's Wall.

But neither of them sees the woman who is behind him.

She pushes past the man and aims her white beam at Nelson's throat.

Stella quickly pivots and kicks it out of her hand. In a flash the woman's other hand comes up with a bright glint of metal, and neatly slices through Stella coat and arm. Blood gushes from the open wound.

Nelson tries to get a clear shot with his blue beam but Stella is in the way. The woman grabs Stella's cut arm and swings her into Nelson, knocking his blue beam to the ground.

The man aims and fires his beam into Nelson's chest knocking him to the ground with the force of the shot. Nelson grips his chest and grimaces in pain. The beam has burned away his coat and shirt, and his skin oozes with an angry red patch of raw flesh.

Stella's foot flies up and connects with the woman's stomach, doubling her over. At the same time, she arches her back and knocks the man into the side of the boat. Nelson grabs his beam and points it at the woman. But the man fires a second blast of white heat energy directly at Nelson's beam, blowing it out of his hand.

Stella tries to grab the woman, but the woman is quicker and kicks her feet out from under her. Stella drops to the ground, landing with a crunch on her shoulder. She pulls her thin blade from her boot and stabs upwards, burying it into the woman's stomach. Blood spurts over her. Then she rolls under the woman knocking her off her feet. And stabs the man behind her in his leg. She stabs him again. And again.

He fires a white beam at Stella but she rolls quickly and the blast slams into the boat and sizzles. So, he hits Stella on her head with the beam itself.

The man quickly pulls the woman up, slings her arm around his neck, puts his arm around her waist and drags her away.

Stella turns to Nelson. He is slumping forward, fumbling with his wrist.

"Nels," here let me help you. She drags herself towards him.

"Hi Ho Silver," Nelson is saying into his com.

Stella pulls herself up to him, her head ringing, "What can I do?"

"Get the MediKit"

Nelson's scooter hovers up to them between the boats.

"Silver Cover," Nelson groans.

Beams of light shoot out from the scooter, creating a dome of blue light. From the outside it looks like one of the huge tarps used to cover boats in storage.

Stella pulls Nelson's shirt and jacket away from his oozing chest.

She turns and grabs the red MediKit box. She pulls off the top cover and places it on the ground between his legs.

Nelson grabs an injector on top and tears the paper sleeve off with his teeth, "Give me your arm."

Stella holds out her arm and he plunges the injector into her skin with a quiet whoosh. "That's a Coag shot. Push your sleeve up."

"But you, Nelson, you need it first," Stella grabs for the MediKit.

"Watch me," he blurts, "then you can do it for me." He picks up a large square skin patch and again, tears off the paper wrapper with his teeth, "Sleeve!"

Stella pulls her shirt sleeve up exposing the gushing slice in her arm. Nelson gently places the skin patch over the cut.

Immediately the cooling sensation spreads through her body and the pain recedes.

"That's a bio patch. Blue algae. It should be working immediately."

Nelson rummages around in the kit and pulls out a small vial of orange liquid. He shakes it and pulls off the cap with his teeth, "Drink this," he holds it out to her.

She takes it and downs it with one gulp.

"That's an infection blocker and vitamin boost. That will give you energy."

Then he falls back, exhausted.

Stella immediately tears open another injector and plunges it into his arm. She pulls a skin patch out of the box and tears off the paper wrapper. She gently places the bio patch on his burns. But they are big. She opens two more and covers the whole area.

Nelson propts himself up, "Silver, Mayday."

Lights on the scooter's dash blink different colours.

"Someone will be her soon," he says and falls back flat.

Stella rummages through the scooter box and pulls out his blue IO jacket. She folds it into a pillow, gently lifts his head, and lays it back down on the jacket.



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INTERNATIONAL FIREWALL COUNCIL

The Bridge Between Continents

Brú Milli Heimsálfa

Iceland

2154

"We need the IFC to vote. This is level one. We need immediate action."

The face on the screen is the Officer of The Day at the First Union Firewall. And she is not happy.

"Timing is critical. How much longer do we have to wait?"

"As Senior Counsel told you, we don't have a quorum," Counsel 26 shrugs and holds out his hands. "We are sorry for the delay but we must have a full quorum to hear a termination."

"Yes, yes," the O.O.D is frustrated. "Why do you not have a quorum?"

"Two of the counsels were dismissed because they were engaging in extracurricular activities."

The O.O.D. smirks, "Polite way of saying they were having sex?"

"Pretty much. Will be a few days before replacements can be flown in for a vote."

"Cao. These guys could disappear by then."

"We are very sorry."

"Don't you have any backup plan for something like this?"

"Yes. Our backup plan is to call in active members of Firewalls from our member Unions. And fly them in for a temporary appointment specifically to cover a vote. Which is what we are doing."

"Oh. And that's going to take a few days?"

"Maybe less. We depend on the cooperation of the member Firewalls. And they all have full calendars as well. They need all their Counsels for their own votes. Schedules are difficult to change at the last minute."

"Well, I see. We are afraid we will lose these two. They have defeated their nano trackers, and are suspected of building a craft to go somewhere. We may lose them."

"Defeated their nano trackers? Is this...? Who is it?"

"Am I allowed to tell you?"

"It might help."

"8324J 403CL and 7102T 1002JJ."

"Cyrus Alexander Latimer and Jacob Jacobson," his face goes pale. "Yes. This *is* of critical international importance. Let me see what we can do."

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Agency Clinic Capua
Tas-Sliema
Malta
2154

"Issa, Mister, you know who they were?"

"No, Marija," Nelson shakes his head. "Not bans. No one I recognized."

"Is good chance they work for those mens?"

"Good chance, Marija. Very good chance."

"Mela, I will look at the satellite. See what it saw."

"Ok, Marija. Thanks."

"Iva, iva, bye, bye, by, by, chou, chou," she waves her hand over her shoulder as she leaves the hospital room.

Stella rolls onto her side, and looks at Nelson, "You always take care of my wounds before you take care of your own."

He gives her a sarcastic smile, "Don't think too much into it."

She chuckles.

He rolls onto his back and stares at the ceiling.

"Those light beams," Stella continues, "on your scooter—the cloaking thing?"

"Same technology as traffic curtains."

"To stop travelers rubber-necking when there are accidents?"

"Same tech. Also used to camouflage construction."

"They use those on the Msida bypass during rush hour."

"A smaller version. We can close off an alleyway. But nothing too big."

The med techs hover over them on the exam tables.

"How do people end up like that?" Stella stares at the ceiling.

"Like what?"

"Criminal masterminds. International threats."

"Good question. I think there's a common cause."

"Oh yeah?"

"I think it develops from when they were kids."

"Trauma?"

"Not really. In fact, the exact opposite—soft parenting."

The med techs roll their scanner out of the room.

"If you don't physically discipline children," Nelson sits up and swings his legs over the side of the table, "they grow up to be undisciplined adults."

"Even if they were not abused."

"And, have fully developed cortices."

Stella sits up and faces him, "they can still get banished."

"You teach them that there are no consequences for their behavior," he shrugs. "And believing they will not suffer consequences seems to be what drives these people."

"That makes sense."

"I think so."

"You monitor two different kinds of bans."

"Yes. And Cyrus Alexander Latimer and Jacob Jacobson are the most dangerous type: Intelligent, resourceful and believe they will suffer no consequences."

Stella nods slowly, "You're right. That's a dangerous combination."

"Sons need to feel discipline at the hand of their mothers."

"Nelson, you're preaching."

He winces, "I guess I'm just passionate about this."

"Preaching to the choir. Yes, boys need to learn to respect the power and authority of women. I agree."

"And," Nelson nods, "to feel the pain of consequences for their own behavior."

"To stop them from becoming criminal masterminds."

"To stop them from becoming rapists. Mothers who don't physically discipline their sons, nurture monsters who grow up and assault their daughters."

"Did you learn that from your own childhood? Your own family?"

"My family? Ha!" he snorts.

Stella's eyes widen.

"No, Stella. I learned that in counseling. Trying to deal with the damage I suffered in my own childhood. My family."

"Not great parents, huh?"

"Two people who never should have met each other and reproduced. I'm alive because they did. And I'm glad for that. But there's a trail of wreckage in their wake."

Stella has no response.

"If you want to hear about, I'll tell you."

Marija sweeps into the room, "We have new information."

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Unknown Location

Malta

2154

"Do you recognize her, Kaptan?"

"I can't be sure," Hypatia squints at the scanner images. "Where and when were these taken?"

"Malta Aerodrome. Yesterday."

"It was a few years ago. But, no, it couldn't be her."

"We can send out for fresh images."

"Not important. Stick with the mission."

"Yes, Kaptan."

"Whoever she is, she's up to something. Something important. And Malta IO is following her closely. We will just observe for now. But be ready to jump in if we see the two bans."

"Agreed."

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**Ḥaġar Qim
Qrendi
2154**

The crickets are chirping loudly in the prickly pear cactus.
The way they do just before a storm.

But it's a clear warm day at the old temples. Smiling tourists saunter and poke around the huge stones. Speaking many languages.

Stella and Nelson step slowly through the entrance to Ḥaġar Qim. With one hand in his jacket pocket, Nelson taps his hidden scanner and sees the readout on the scrim in his left eye. Nothing out of the usual.

They pass quietly though the ancient temple. On the other side, they have a clear view of the path down to Mnajdra complex.

Just to their right, between Ḥaġar Qim and the main road, are the remains of a smaller, older temple—the Northern Temple.

They quickly move inside and hunker down behind the large stone to the left of the entrance.

From here they can see most of the temple grounds, and anyone approaching from the museum.

"If Marija's intel is right, there will be a meeting here today."

"With whoever they got as my replacement," Stella nods.

"And, hopefully, both of our Bans."

Stella lets out a long sigh.

"Find yourself a good vantage point," Nelson unpacks his kit, "we may be here a while."

"At the hospital," Stella squints through the scope at pathway down to Mnajdra, "you were saying your older brother was arrested?"

"You really want to know about that?"

"I want to know about you," she smiles, "you."

Nelson shrugs, "He was arrested for trying to talk an eight-year-old girl into letting him touch her."

"Madonna! He was a pedophile?"

"My father paid off the family to drop the charges."

"He was a pedophile too?"

"You tell me. My mother would take my sister out of her bath when she was four and wrap a towel around her and send her in to let Daddy dry her off."

"What?" Stella puts down the scope and stares at him in disbelief.

Nelson nods slowly.

"This is crazy. Nelson. I can't believe it."

"My sister was so emotionally damaged that she reinvented herself as a man. Had a sex change just to be able to live."

"My god. Is this really true?"

"Yes. Sadly. But, my sister didn't continue with counsel. Maybe it was just too hard for her. Too much to keep reliving the pain."

"This is too much. It's unbelievable. Are you making this up?"

She looks at Nelson's face, and immediately regrets what she just said.

The hurt and the pain are obvious.

"I'm sorry—it's just—"

"I know, I know. It's unbelievable. I lived through it and still have problems believing that any parent can act that way."

"I'm sorry, Nelson. I'm so sorry that was your childhood."

"Me too. But here I am. I survived."

Stella tries an understanding smile.

"My sister became an angry shaming man. Just like our father. Dressed like him. Same haircut. Same mustache. Same attitude towards life."

"That's bizarre."

"Creepy. Really difficult to be around."

"How the hell—?" Stella shivers, like she's trying to shake something off her shoulders.

Nelson looks down at his feet, "My mother used me. Made me feel responsible for her emotional well-being."

"She what?"

"It was a sick twisted relationship where I had to emotionally support her, while she prostituted her own daughter to her husband."

"This is too much, Nelson. Really. I mean, it sounds like a really bad movie plot."

"Absolutely. And I had to live through it."

"So, counsel for you then."

"Obviously. Or I never would have qualified for EO."

"You're right—a trail of wreckage."

"My younger brother fought back. Yelled at my father. Hit him. Pushed him down the stairs and broke his collar bone."

"That's a lot of anger."

"Eventually, he shot him."

"Whoa! What the...? No. No. This is too much."

Nelson avoids her eyes, "I cheered when he shot him. Does that make me a bad person?"

Stella looks at him silently.

Nelson points his scanner at the temple stones, "He did, what I didn't have the balls to do."

"I really just can't—"

Nelson looks at her, "I've never told anybody this. Well, except my counsellors."

"Maybe you trust me," Stella smiles.

They lock eyes. The heat between them is electric.

Nelson breaks the awkward moment, "My mother orchestrated the whole thing. Begged my brother to do it."

"Did he tell the police that she was behind it?"

"No. He protected her. He went to prison—murder one. And—killed himself in prison."

"Killed himself! And she walked free?"

Nelson nods slowly, staring at the tall rough stones.

"So, nothing happened to her."

"Shortly after she developed dementia. That's what killed her."

"Nelson this is way way too much. It's hard to believe."

"I believe that there is such a thing as self-induced dementia. Where you cling to denial so strongly, and for so long, that your brain finally just shuts down. And stops remembering."

"So, you got out."

"Far away as I could. And lots of counseling. I was determined that my mother and father were not going to ruin my life."

"So, no partner for you? Never married? Never wanted your own kids?"

"My mother planted land mines in my soul. And every woman I've gotten close to, steps on one sooner or later."

Maybe not every woman.

Stella's eyes soften.

Something bites the back of Nelson's neck. Like a bee sting.

He reaches back to flick away the insect—but feels a dart instead.

He turns to Stella.

She is falling backwards, a dart in her neck as well.

Suddenly everything goes dark.



000:0000

INTERNATIONAL FIREWALL COUNCIL

The Bridge Between Continents

Brú Milli Heimsálfa

Iceland

2154

"Good morning," Counsel 26 stands at the podium with a grim look on his face.

The members of the Council get settled in their seats and put on their coms and translators.

"We have important business today," Counsel 26 continues, looking down at the tablet in front of him.

He touches the tablet and two case files appear on the big screen behind him.

"We have, once again, been sent these two cases from The First Union Firewall. They are asking for Immediate Termination."

There is a murmur among the members and some quick glances around the room at each other.

A vote on Immediate Termination is extremely rare.

The International Firewall is the only body with the power to terminate. By agreement of all the member Unions.

For a body of ordinary citizens from all over the world, this is a difficult decision to make. A school teacher, a bus driver, an architect, a construction laborer, a house cleaner, a doctor, a baker, an unemployed actor...

They, and their fellow council members, must decide whether to take a person's life.

This decision is based on one, and only one conclusion: This person is a threat to the species.

The air in the chamber is static with tension.

Counsel 26 zooms in on the file on the left.

"Case number 7102T 1002JD."

He turns and faces his fellow council members, "This is my second termination agenda since I came here. I will tell you honestly... I don't like this responsibility."

There are murmurs and nods among the other members.

"I knew I might have to do this. We all did. And we agreed. But it's one thing to talk about it in theory. And a completely different matter to have to..."

He trails off and freezes with his mouth half open.

The room is dead quiet.

After a few awkward seconds, Counsel 26 seems to shrug off his thoughts and return to the matter at hand.

"Sorry. You have read his case report. I don't think any of us has done much else for the last 24 hours except read and re-read both of these case reports."

Counsel 26 scrolls through the pages of the inquest.

"Let us focus on the major points. This individual was able to get an unknown amount of currency out of the Union before he was banished. When his accounts and property were seized, they totaled a fraction of what the accountants estimated to be his actual worth. Attempts to track his funds have been largely unsuccessful. He is careful. He leaves no paths."

He pauses and looks up.

The chamber is completely silent.

He continues, "Our best information is that his currency is virtual and liquid across borders. It is managed through a quantum satellite owned by the second individual. We shall get to him in a minute. As you no doubt read, some payments we have been able to trace, are payments towards technology to build and power some kind of craft."

He pauses the documents on the screen and zooms into the details that highlight what he has just said.

"Most importantly, this Ban, in collaboration with our other individual here, have apparently found a way to remove their nano trackers."

There is an audible gasp across the attending members.

Counsel 26 nods, "This is EO's most alarming situation. Agents worldwide are scrambling to recheck every single tag. It's an enormous and costly situation. Our only hope is, that they, and only they, have discovered a way to take the nanos out. Or deactivate them. And this information has *not* yet spread to anywhere else on our planet. Because if it has..."

Once again, he pauses and stares off into space.

A yellow light blinks on the podium in front of him, bringing him back to attention. He squints as he reads the teletext scrolling across his tablet.

"Yes. Counsel," he looks up. "Sorry. You are quite right. We need to do the preparatory votes."

He clears the big screen and puts up two boxes, that read, 'Yes' and 'No'.

"First... Do you feel ready to make this vote at this time?"

There is a pause as the counsels vote silently. The 'Yes' box turns green. The 'No' box stays unlit.

"We have a unified voice."

"Once again, do you feel ready to make this vote at this time?"

Again, a pause and the 'Yes' box glows green.

"We have a unified voice."

He breathes a sigh of relief.

"Next question, do you feel confident that you have the necessary information to make this vote?"

Again, they vote and the 'Yes' box glows green.

"And, again, do you feel confident that you have the necessary information to make this vote?"

Once again the 'Yes' box glows green.

"Very well. And so, we vote."

He turns and taps on his tablet and the screen flickers on to show the members of the First Union Firewall looking back at them.

"Greetings. We thank you for your service to the species."

"Greetings," the Designated Counsel answers back. "We thank you for your service to the species."

Counsel 26 spreads his hands wide, "We, the assembled members of the International Firewall are ready to vote."

"Thank you," the DC replies. First, do you each feel ready to make this vote today?"
The International Firewall members vote and the green light glows.

"Thank you. And do you feel confident that you have the necessary information to make this vote?"

Again, they vote. And again, the light glows green.

"Thank you." The First Union DC sits down.

The First Union Clerk of The Record stands and faces the IFC Counsel on the screen.

She reads from her tablet: "Case number 7102T 1002JD. For the crimes of violation of his banishment agreement, plotting to manipulate a governmental process for his own personal gain, threatening the safety and stability of a sovereign Union, and the attempted murder of an EO agent, we deem this ban to be a threat to the species. The First Union is asking for a vote of Immediate Termination."

She sits down and the DC stands up again., "Members of the International Firewall... How do you vote?"

This time there is only one word on the screen: Terminate.

It will only glow green if the vote is unanimous.

After a few moments, the word glows green.

There is an audible catching of breath in both chambers. As the reality of the moment sinks in.

After a short pause, the First Union DC asks again: "Members of the International Firewall... How do you vote?"

Another long agonizing pause and the word Terminate glows green again.

Counsel 26 stands and faces the screen, "As is mandated by International Agreement, we will now take a short break, and allow the counsels to reflect on their vote. This quorum will reconvene in twenty minutes. And we shall vote again. Thank you."

"Thank you," the First Union DC replies, "for your service to the species."

The screens blink off.

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Unknown Location

Malta

2154

"Is she conscious? I want her to see this."

Stella is jerked awake with the sharp bite of a needle in her arm.

"You've been a bad girl, haven't you?"

She knows this voice.

"By the way, Stella... Popeye sends his apologies. He really wanted to be here today, but it turns out, he's too dead to make it. And the same for the skinny dick and his fat girl-friend. Who do you think you're playing with here? No witnesses. You stupid girl."

The pain in Stella's head runs from ear to ear, and straight down her spine. She would be screaming in agony if she didn't have something stuffed in her mouth. And, apparently, bound in with tape.

The light swims in front of her. Shadows move. Shapes appear and disappear.

Then, she sees him.

Nelson is hanging from the ceiling. His wrists are bound together. A meat hook piercing through both of them. He is naked. There are scars and scratches all over his body. His mouth is also stuffed with fabric and bound in with black tape. Blood drips from the corners of his eyes.

The pain that seers through Stella's chest takes her breath away. Her vision swims. Is this real? Is this a projection.

"Stella... Oh Stella," a familiar voice.

A face swims into view in front of her.

Ghani.

He is grinning like a monkey.

"Do you see Stella?" he grabs her by the hair and forces her to look at Nelson. "Do you see what you have done. You've been a very very bad girl. Haven't you?"

She is now aware that she is strapped into a chair. Her wrists tied to the arms and her ankles bound to the legs.

"Do you see what happens to bad girls who cause problems, Stella? Do you see?"

He jerks her head up and down making her nod yes.

"Yes, Stella, yes. This is what happens. This is what happens to their EO boyfriends, Stella. This is what happens Stella! Are you paying attention!"

He strikes her hard across the side of her face and pain erupts inside her skull. It's difficult to breathe.

"Wake her up! Wake her up!" Ghani screams to someone. "She doesn't die yet!"

Another jab in the arm and Stella's eyes pop open. Heat surges through her body and her heart races. She can see it all too clearly now.

Ghani is standing next to Nelson with an electro prod in his hand. He stabs it into Nelson's side. Nelson jerks and twists and makes muffled noises. His eyes are wide. He looks at Stella in absolute terror. Ghani stabs him again. Again, he twists and jerks.

"Look at you amazing boyfriend dance for you, Stella. He loves you so much." Again, he prods Nelson, "Dance you piece of shit, dance!"

Nelson's wrists tear and the bones poke out as his body slumps and his eyes close.

Stella twists and jerks in the chair as hard as she can. She chews at the fabric in her mouth, her heartbeat pounds in her ears. Ghani stabs her with the prod and the electricity flashes through her body. The pain burns over her scalp, standing all of her hair on end. And then, she blacks out.

Sometime later, she becomes dimly aware of voices next to her. The pain in her head throbs and burns. She can only make out light and shadow moving slowly. Her eyes won't focus. The voices get clearer.

"Dead?" the voice again. "Is he dead?"

"Yes. That last one killed him."

"Good. Die you stinking rat!"

"Should I take him now?"

"Yes. You know what to do. No trace, right? Not the smallest scrap."

"No problem. What about her?"

Stella sees a shadow move towards her, blocking out all the light.

Ghani's voice is right in front of her face, "She's going to be framed for killing an EO agent. They are going to find her dead body with his scooter. His blood all over. That should keep them occupied. And we can fly."

Stella pushes out a muffled response. But whatever they injected her with is making her body go limp. She can't focus. All feeling has stopped. And she feels like she is falling. Falling, falling. Deeper and deeper.

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Malta IO Centre

Pieta

Malta

2154

"Where was the shipment delivered?"

The Malta Police officer shrugs.

Viktor Saliba drops into the chair in front of the officer and locks eyes with him.

"We can sit here all day. This is The Internal Office. I don't have to release you. You are not at your station now. You have no protection."

He leans closer, "You can be banished."

The officer does not change his expression. He looks calm. Unbothered. Almost bored, "You are Saliba, I am Zammit. That's all I need to say," he stares up at the ceiling refusing to make eye contact.

"You are a sworn officer of the law, and you have broken the law!"

Officer Zammit continues looking at the ceiling, "What do you think your mother would say to you right now?"

"This has nothing to do with our families," Saliba snaps. "This is about national security. Do you understand the trouble that you are in?"

Zammit just shrugs.

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Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir
Clapham Junction Cart Ruts
Siggiewi
Malta
2154

Harrub. There are trees nearby. I can smell them.

And a rooster. Close.

Stella reaches to try to move something off her forehead.

Dirt? Where...

And then the pain returns.

Like someone has driven metal screws into her temples.

Ġhani!

Nelson!!!

She tries to move but there is enormous weight on top of her. Flies buzz around her.
She smells blood.

Her left hand won't move. A searing pain burns into her wrist.

With her right hand she feels around.

Blocks. Limestone blocks. There are limestone building blocks on top of me.

Spitting dirt from her mouth and wiping it from her face, she cautiously opens her eyes. Blinking in the bright light filtering down through the blocks.

I'm outside—a farm? A farmer's storage room. In a field.

Slowly, she feels around the blocks. And finds the edge of the one as far above her as she can reach. She pushes with all her strength. The effort pulls at her other wrist. The pain is too much. She stops. She wriggles her body to turn her head and see why her left arm won't move. It is pinned at her wrist under a block standing on end. With other blocks stacked on top of it.

Tā mā de! Nǐ yā tǐng de!

She pushes with her other hand as hard as she can.

Jhew lun dou!

It won't move. But other blocks have shifted above her. There is another opening. She reaches up with her right hand and feels the edge of the top block. She gives it a shove, cursing away the pain in her left wrist. The block gives. It slides off the stack.

Nǐ yā tǐng de.

Slowly, one by one, she clears the blocks away on her right side leaving a hole in the pile just big enough to wriggle out through. If she can get her left hand free.

Now she can fully turn her body and see what's pinning down her hand. There is a large jagged block standing on end resting directly on her wrist. Above it, more blocks as far as she can see.

She pushes hard on the block trying to rock it off her hand but it doesn't give at all. And every time she moves that wrist, blood spurts out of her wrist. It must have cut an artery. The flies buzz around her.

Nelson—the craft. I have to stop them.

Stella wriggles until both legs are free. She tucks them up under her in a squatting position.

She looks at her pinned hand, starting to turn blue from loss of blood.

Nǐ yā tǐng de!

She bends her neck back and shouts up through the hole she has made in the blocks, "This is *not* how I die!"

With her right hand she rolls the fabric at her neck into a wad and bites down on it. She reaches down to her right boot and pulls out the thin blade from its sheath.

Biting down harder on the cloth, she begins to cut her left hand off at the wrist.

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Malta IO Centre

Pieta

Malta

2154

"You must hear this."

Marija hurries into Viktor Saliba's office with a datacorder.

"Iwa, Marija, what is it?"

"We just had a woman says her brother went to build an airplane at the airfield two weeks ago. She has not heard from him since. And one of his friends went too because they both worked for Malta Air."

"Madonna," Agent Saliba gets up quickly, "build an airplane? And you have all this recorded?"

"Iwa, iwa."

"And all the details, who is her brother and like this?"

"Iwa, iwa, we must fly now."

"Play this recording for me."

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Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir
(Clapham Junction Cart Ruts)
Siggiewi
Malta
2154

The pain is blinding as Stella claws her way over the blocks and rubble.
With her one hand she finally pulls herself over the top of the wall and tumbles onto the sunbaked dirt of the field.

"Scoot", she wails into her com, pulling off her vest and wrapping it around her dripping stump.

"Scoot charge not sufficient," pings in her ear.

"Jhew lun dou."

Then she remembers.

"Hi Ho Silver."

On the other side of the limestone structure Nelson's Aprilia blinks on and hums to life.

"Come here," Silver rises and descends next to her.

The saddle is covered in blood.

His blood.

It's all she can do to fight back the tears and rage.

Fix my body first.

Stella hits the button on the back bag and it opens with a whoosh. The levels of supplies rising up and out like a tool box. She grabs the atomizer on the top level, pulls the plunger and gives herself a shot.

After a moment, she feels the coag and the adrenaline coursing through her. She pulls out the biopatches and starts to stick them to the stump of her wrist. She gives herself another shot.

At the bottom of the box, she sees Nelson's EO jacket. She pulls it out gently, buries her face in it and wails.

"Cào nǚ mǎ! The one time I find someone. Maybe. Someone to be with!"

Using her teeth, she knots the arm of the jacket and then squirms as she pulls it on.

"Nǚ yā tǐng de!" she screams into the wind.

On the scooter dash a red light is blinking.

Stella opens the side panel and pulls out Nelson's scanner.

There is a message on the screen:

IWF
IMMEDIATE ORDER
Termination Orders [2]
Immediate_7102T 1002JD
Immediate_8324J 403TS

Stella leans her head back and shouts straight up into the cloudless sky, "I would have killed you bastards anyway."

As though Ġhāni and Ġenju can hear her.

She shakes the scanner at the skies, "Now I have permission."

She closes Nelson's scooter bags and climbs on board.

Mounting the scanner into its cradle on the handlebars, Stella fires up the motor.

Just then, the scanner screen lights up with an incoming message.

And the face on the screen makes her gasp.

"Kai!"

"Z! I found you."

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Malta IO Centre
Pieta
Malta
2154

Twelve air scooters rise from the cruiser lot at Malta IO Centre.

Viktor Saliba is in the lead position. Marija flanks him to the left. Behind the scooters are two transport cruisers to hold the Bans when they catch them.

If they catch them.

The formation heads southwest over Marsa. But Marija does not turn south towards the Ajruport.

"Marija," Anglu taps his com, "are you going around the back of the field? Over Mqab-ba?"

"Airfield," comes Maria's sharp response. "He said 'airfield'. The way the British used to say it. We are going to RAF Krendi. The airfield."

"Iwa, iwa," Anglu nods, "airfield. Of course. Krendi. Of course."

He waves the formation to follow Marija.

As they pass over the training grounds, Marija gets an incoming com in her ear.

"Bongu?"

It's a voice she has not heard in a long time.

"Allura, iva, iva, and who is this girl?"

The voice answers.

"Madonna," the blood drains from Marija's face.

The voice speaks again.

"And the mother?" Marija asks, her brow wrinkled deeply.

The voice answers.

"Madonna!" Marija's mouth drops open, "Buttigieg."

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Unknown Location

Fréjus

France

2154

"Empenner Sud?"

"Oui. From the Aerodrome de l'Argens."

The Kaptan nods slowly, "And what is the purpose of this craft?"

"It is experimental. But can fly into the outer atmosphere."

"Esme, who would steal such a thing?"

"That is the question mon Kaptan."

"And how was this craft taken?"

"We believe by sea on a barge."

"And no one saw it?"

"It was taken at night during a power blackout."

The Kaptan looks at the images, "And no track of it since?"

"Possible. North of Tunis."

"Tunis? Close to Malta. We have intel from Malta, where the IM is forming to find those two bans. Esme, the IM should be informed."

"Immediately, Kaptan."

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RAF Qrendi
Is-Sigġiewi
Malta
2154

Two dozen air scooters silently appear above the line of hangers next to the old runway. Behind them are two IO Response Cruisers.

Viktor and Marija are in front of the pack.

Viktor waves his hand in a circle and the scooters fan out.

Below them is a billowing green vapor obscuring their view of the ground and the hangers.

"All agents lock an air blast onto that green cloud. Let's see what it's hiding."

"Wait!" Marija is looking at her scanner. "There are two people in there."

"Is one of them Nelson?" Viktor taps his own scanner.

"No."

Suddenly a pulse wave fires out of the vapor.

The scanners on all the agents' scooters light up as the energy pulse pushes them backwards.

Something very large is hiding in the green below them.

A gap in the vapor reveals glimpses of the craft. Another gap. And then another. The green vapor ripples, building in size. It is moving in circular waves away from a central point. Slowly. Then gradually faster.

The agents catch more glimpses of the craft.

There's a swift implosion with the sound of a sucking whoosh.

Then, an ear-splitting sonic boom.

The airborne agents are pushed back by the pulse waves. Some riders almost losing control of their scooters.

The green glow expands rapidly. The agents pull back to avoid it

And then the green explodes. Blowing outwards in all directions and expanding as it goes.

The IO and EO crafts drop to the ground. Their engines frozen by the expanding pulse energy.

The agents tumble and plunge to their deaths.

Marija dives as the green glow reaches her, crashing her scooter into the grass and rolling away from it. She rolls into a ditch as the pulse wave passes over her.

Then the green vapor dissipates and the air is still.

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Misraħ Ġhar il-Kbir
(Clapham Junction Cart Ruts)
Siggiewi
Malta
2154

"We need to talk about why you were helping Bans to hack a Union vote. But that conversation must wait."

Lizi nods sheepishly, "I just want to come home."

Kai nods, "And I couldn't help you. Until now. Any contact yet?"

"K, I can't reach Malta IO on the com."

"Let me see what I can do from here."

"But you're in Iceland, Kai."

"I have you tagged now and I can follow you."

"Good. I have to go. These pìyǎn need to be stopped."

"Trust me Lizi. I will get you help."

**Knowing others is intelligence,
knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is strength,
mastering yourself is true power.**

Daodejing

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RAF Qrendi
Is-Sigġiewi
Malta
2154

Inside the craft Genju ticks down the checklist, “cooling banks fully operational, core activated, gyro calibrated, green beam fully functional.”

“All good to go?”

“All good to go.”

“So now I see how the pulse beam works. Excellent,” Għani chuckles, “they can’t touch us with this thing.”

“Nothing they have is stronger. And we can freeze them in mid-air.”

“Well worth the money.”

“And effective.”

“That’s great. That’s great,” Għani pulls a white gun from under his tunic and points it at Alexander.

“What’s this,” the look on the hacker’s face is complete shock.

“I don’t need you anymore,” Jacob grins.

“But wait! I helped you! I did everything— “

“Yes, you did,” he interrupts, “I couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you. And now, you are useless to me.”

The blast of white heat is fast. It burns Alexander’s head completely off in less than a minute. His smoldering body collapses to the floor.

Jacob looks down at the remains, “Two men can keep a secret if one of them is dead.”

He pulls out a previously stowed body bag and bundles Alexander’s smoking torso into it.

“Now they’re all going to see how powerful I am!”

He drags the body bag to the back portal of the craft.

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**Misraħ Għar il-Kbir
(Clapham Junction Cart Ruts)
Siggiewi
Malta
2154**

Not the Aerodrome. Guzeppa said 'Airstrip'. Not 'Airport' or even the Maltese 'Ajruport'. Did he mean the old Airstrip in Hal Far? Down by the pharmaceutical companies?

Lizi punches in a flight path on Silver's screen and rises quickly, turning towards the south.

The Hal Far Industrial Estate near Birzebbuga is only a few blips away.

But just as she passes over the Old Horse Sanctuary south of Siggiewi, something catches her eye.

Did I just see?

Lizi slows quickly. She swings around and points the scooter northwest. Directly below her is Triq il-Mitjar ta San Niklaw. A long straight road. Too straight to be anything but a...

Runway! Not aerodrome or airstrip. Airfield. That's what he said. Airfield. The old British RAF Krendi airfield. Of course.

She looks to her left: Haġar Qim.

Where we were captured.

Ahead and slightly left: Ta' Zuta Quarry with the Cart Ruts beyond.

Where I was left to die.

Below her, a line of large old warehouses. Abandoned. No one around for kilometers.

Perfect. If I was going to build something I didn't want anyone to see. And I needed an airfield to take off from, this would be it.

Around the old aircraft hangers are piles of industrial waste and rusting chunks of machinery from ages past. A sprawling junkyard of steel.

Scattered bits of shiny metal glint in the yellow afternoon sun, flash in her eye as she turns.

Then it becomes clearer. The wreckage of twelve air scooters and two transports. Crushed like broken toys. Exploded into small pieces. Strewn in an arc that radiates from the door of a large hanger below her.

As she cautiously drops lower, she sees the bodies. The unmistakable blue IO jackets, torn and spattered with blood.

What happened here?

She circles around wide and drops down to a few meters above the ground so no one can see her coming. Then she backs off the motor and approaches the line of hangers in silent mode.

Spotting a large hulk of an old transport, big enough to hide Nelson's scooter, she lands next to it.

Lizi opens the seat compartment and takes out Nelson's blue beam.

Silently and slowly, she creeps around the side of the hanger. There is a shimmer in the air in front of the big doors. A waviness. Like sheets of rain cascading down a window. Slowly the shimmer vanishes revealing a strange looking craft. There is a large donut shaped ring—almost as wide as the hanger. It pulsates and glows with energy. And on top of it is a long tubular shape. About as big as a city bus.

Lizi starts to record the craft.

A portal on the rear of the craft has just opened.

Then she sees him.

Ghani is pushing a large black bag out of the portal.

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The Society for The Preservation of Manners
Unknown Location
Irish Free Alliance
2154

"How does the green beam generator work?"

The Chairwoman paces back and forth in front of two men and one woman strapped to chairs on the platform.

All three bound captives draw their lips tight. Refusing to speak.

"Mother," the Chairwoman says quietly.

Three robot arms move in unison behind the bound captives. The human looking hands at the end of the arms slap the side of the captives' heads with a loud smack.

"Asshole!" one of them blurts.

"Remember your manners," the assembled Guardians chime in unison.

"Fuck you! And your stupid slapping machine!"

"Mother," the Chairwoman says again.

This time the arms swing faster and harder.

"Bitch! Stop that!"

"You will answer my questions or the discipline will continue."

"Slapping?" he snorts. "You're going to slap me into talking? Ha!"

"Mother."

All three heads jerk to the left with the force of the slap. And the sickening crack of someone's cheekbone breaking.

"Mother has 40 levels of discipline. You are now at level 3."

The defiant one snorts, "So what happens at level 40?"

"Your head is separated from your body."

"Remember your manners" the Guardians chime.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," the woman captive speaks now.

"Liar!" the Chairwoman replies. "Mother."

Again, the sickening crunch of bone, and their heads jerk like rag dolls.

"You were apprehended at your factory," the Chairwoman approaches the woman with a withering stare. "Evidence was collected along with plans and descriptions of what you have just built."

The woman captive opens her mouth to speak, but then she stops. Cautiously glancing over her shoulder, to see if the arms are moving.

"We want to know," the Chairwoman continues, "who you built it for, where it is and how it works."

"If you kill us, you will never find out," the third captive finally speaks.

"At this point," the Chairwoman resumes pacing back and forth, "you have committed no crime. Simply manufactured a device and been paid for it."

She stops and approaches the female captive, "All we want is the information. Then, our work is done."

"Yeah, right," the defiant one scoffs.

"Mother."

Again, the arms swing and their heads jerk like dolls.

"You think," the defiant one continues, "that we are so stupid to believe you will let us go? If we tell you what you want? Ha!"

The Chairwoman smiles, "We don't care about you. We care about who has your device."

She approaches the defiant one and leans in, "Why are you protecting them? They don't care about you."

She straightens up and looks from one to the other, "By the way, did any of you check your cloud accounts today? Because we did. That money isn't there anymore."

The defiant one draws back, scowling.

The Chairwoman smiles, "You were paid with vapor coin. Coded to vanish twenty-four hours after deposit."

The other two lean forward, looking cautiously at the defiant one, and each other. Their thoughts racing around behind their eyes.

"So, what is your loyalty worth now?" the Chairwoman shrugs.

"You're lying!" the female barks.

"We're not telling you anything!" the defiant one shouts.

"Fair enough," the Chairwoman shrugs again, "so this is how this is going to go."

She engages the defiant one directly and stares into his eyes, "we will pick one of you. And the other two can sit and watch, as Mother gradually separates their head from their body. How long will it take, I wonder?"

Real alarm now crosses the faces of all three. Their eyes dart to each other.

The Chairwoman stands in front of them, arms crossed, nodding her head, "Now let's see, which one of you will it be?"

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RAF Qrendi
Is-Sigġiewi
Malta
2154

The craft is completely visible now.

Lizi keeps recording as Ghani checks something on the outside of the craft. Then he quickly slips back through the rear portal. She can hear an airlock seal as the door closes.

The shimmer emerges again. A transparent curtain that ripples in front of the craft. Like the cloaking beams on Nelson's scooter. Not projecting an image, like the traffic curtains. These seem to reflect the image directly in front of the beam. Empty space.

Within a few moments, the craft becomes completely invisible again.
She stops the recording.

What the hell is this thing?

*If it can knock scooters out of the sky—and kill their riders—
I'm going to need some help. Quick.*

Nelson's scanner is an IWF scanner. It can connect through the block cloud to anywhere in the world. It also can make a direct secure com line to any EO or IO agent. Lizi activates the com link and punches in a code she has memorized for years. Just in case.

Within seconds a face appears on the screen, "I don't recognize this ID, who are you?"

"Hagstrom it's me."

"Lizi! I didn't recognize— "

She can hear her mother yelp off screen.

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Unknown Location

Malta

2154

"Arawak Alliance?"

"Present, mon Kaptan."

"North Alkebulan Union?"

"Yes, here, Kaptan."

"First Union?"

"Ready to go, Kaptan."

"Western Alliance?"

"Present and ready, Kaptan."

"Federated Anatolian States?"

"We stand ready, Kaptan."

"Kaptan, we have a full wheel."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"We are ready to fly."

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RAF Qrendi
Is-Sigġiewi
Malta
2154

"I need your help."

"Lizi! Your hand!" Katija's face appears on screen scrunched in next to Hagstrom.

"I'm ok mom. I have Nelson's MediKit. I took a coag shot and the infection blocker."

"Lizi. You have to go to a hospital! Now!"

"Now, I have to stop something from happening. Hagstrom, look at this," she holds up the scanner.

"Lizi, where are you?" Hagstrom peers at the screen. "What's going on?"

"I'm at the old airfield, RAF Qrendi, outside of Sigġiewi. I've followed the two Bans who tried to hack the mandate 105 vote. They are building some kind of craft here and we—I don't know what for. Can you help me? We have to stop them."

"Tā mā de. Those guys? What is this? What am I looking at?"

"Let me replay for you", she replays the footage.

Hagstrom watches the screen, "Lizi, that thing just disappeared. Where'd it go. I can't see it."

"That's what I need help with. How did it just vanish?"

Hagstrom looks at the image and scratches his chin.

"Lizi! You need to go get help. Your hand! Lizi!"

"Moms, I have to stop these guys. If they get away... I don't want to think..."

"Yes, it's critical," Hagstrom blurts in. "These guys are dangerous."

Lizi nods, "Hagstrom, they killed an EO agent. And almost killed me."

"And," Hagstrom nods, "as I understand they have found a way to defeat nano tags. That's of international importance."

"Lizi! Honey!" Katija grabs the screen. "Honey you have to take care of your hand. You are more important than anything else."

"To you Moms. To you. But this is bigger than all of us."

"Who's there with you?" Hagstrom sounds panicked. "Malta IO? EO? Who's there?"

"Malta IO and EO are already here."

She turns the screen around and shows them the smoldering scooters and dead bodies in blue jackets.

Katija pleads, "Lizi, you must get help!"

"I sent an S.O.S. from Nelson's scooter. Maybe some other people will answer? I hope they get here in time."

You have an agent's scanner?" Hagstrom takes the screen back.

"Yes. And his beam."

"Okay. On the scanner, hit the X button. On the menu select 'detect'".

She does it, "What does that do?"

"Looks for the release of energy. Any energy: breathing, exhaust... Any kind of power being generated."

"Lizi! Your hand!" Katija pushes in.

Lizi ignores her and scans. But nothing. Just a slight warble as she passes over where the craft used to be. "What's that?"

"Show me."

He looks at his com, "What the? Lizi, on the side of the beam there is a rotating calibration knob. Turn that all the way clockwise."

She does. Nothing.

"Dysfunc," Hagstrom mutters, "I don't know."

"Hagstrom, they can't just get away with this!"

"Wait. Lizi, on the main menu there are detect parameters."

"Yes," she taps the scanner screen.

"Select 'invert' on the menu."

The scanner makes a low growl and a faint outline of the craft appears on the screen.

"Wở cào. Is that a splitter?"

"A what?"

"Splitting atoms for power. That's why—"

"What are you babbling about."

"Lizi, they may be splitting atoms to power the airship. Black energy. Reverse power. We thought it may be possible in the future. But containment was always an issue."

"You guys! Her hand!"

"I'm ok mom, I'm ok. Containment?"

"How do you start and stop the reaction safely," replies Hagstrom. "Without blowing yourself up."

Just then, a bright green beam starts to blast out of the front of the airship.

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**Hal Far Industrial Estate
Birzebbuga
Malta
2154**

"There's a lot of large buildings down there," Hypatia scowls.

Thirty air scooters hover over the old industrial estate, built on the decommissioned runway of the first Malta International airport.

The Soldiers zip back and forth scanning the manufacturing warehouses, shops and parks below.

"Kaptan, I have no signature or scan of anything even close," Léontine shakes her head.

"There's too much activity here. Businesses. People coming and going. Someone would have seen something. Reported it."

"Yes. I agree," Léontine nods, "I don't think it's here."

Hypatia hovers and puts her hands on her hips, "If they are not at Luqa Ajruport, and they are not here, then where else can they be? Unless our Malta IO contact was lying. And trying to keep us away."

She signals to Ernak, and the wiry Hun slides up silently next to her.

"Let's see the topo map."

He illuminates a projection hovering between them.

At that moment Hypatia's com dings in her ear.

Her eyes widen. It's from Iceland.

"Counsel?"

"Kaptan."

"This must be very important, or you would not risk contact."

"It is. Krendi. I have reason to believe our friend is there now."

Hypatia nods, "Krendi. Ernak the map," she points, "Krendi."

"Yes, yes," Ernak nods. "A flat topo long enough to land a craft. The old RAF airfield at Krendi."

"Airfield," Hypatia shouts, "that's what he said. Airfield!"

Ernak points to the topo, "There are large buildings—hangers—large enough to possible hide the craft."

"Kaptan," the Counsel's voice is urgent, "fly quickly. She is alone. And injured."

Hypatia waves the wheel north, "Quick now, Soldiers, there is no time to waste."

Thirty scooters rise, turn and zip north.

"Save her, Kaptan. Please," the Counsel's com clicks off.

"I only hope we're not too late," Hypatia whispers to the wind.

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RAF Qrendi
Is-Sigġiewi
Malta
2154

Lizi looks up, "What is this? A *green* beam?"

"Someone made one?"

She shows him the picture.

"If/else! Someone made one."

"What is it?"

"It's the same particle processor as a blue beam, but stronger. Our blue beams work by paralyzing muscle functions. Theoretically, if you intensify that energy, it could stop your heart in seconds. Theoretically, you could freeze any kind of power source. But why would anyone need—"

"So that's what took down Malta IO," she interrupts him.

Looking around at the scattered remains of agents and scooters, she shakes her head slowly, "How far can it spread?"

"If it's a wave, it would be limited. But a pulse—with the right energy source—then—maybe the whole island?"

"Is this the right energy source?" she zooms in on craft.

"Well, if that's a splitter—and that's what it looks like—Cào."

Lizi lets out a deep breath, "It could paralyze everyone. While they escaped."

Lizi scans the horizon, looking for backup.

Come on, come on.

"Hagstrom, could you fire a blue beam against a green beam?"

"Hmm."

"What would happen?"

"Cancel each other out? Or blow up. Not really sure."

The green beam is producing a cloud of green vapor that rises in front of the craft.

"Lizi don't."

"What?"

"I know what you're thinking but it's a dangerous risk."

"If it could push back the green beam long enough for me to get close to the craft, and find some way to disable it."

"I don't know if it would."

She scowls at the spreading green glow.

"Isn't that a lot of power for some kind of airship?" Lizi scowls.

Hagstrom scratches his chin, "Yeah. You wouldn't need that much power? A simple hydro convertor would be plenty. And look at the scanner. Where are the wings on that thing?"

"It's like a hover craft." Lizi squints at the blurry image on the scanner.

"Lizi, point the scanner at it again and tether the screen."

Hagstrom pulls up the image on his own com. "It's pulsing. But no exhaust. Maybe it flies? Instead of hovering?"

"How the hell does this thing travel through the air?" Lizi squints.

Hagstrom squints his eyes, "Maybe it doesn't travel through the air."

Lizi looks up at the shimmer. "Time travel? Seriously? That's science fiction, Hagstrom. You've been watching too many movies."

"Well..." Katija starts.

"What?" Lizi scowls. "You gonna tell me the Firewall knows time travel is possible? They been keeping that a secret from us?"

"Not *backwards* in time," Katija turned the com towards herself. "But maybe sideways?"

"Sideways? Moms?"

Katija shrugs, "Well, there was a case investigated some time ago where some people were building a craft to try to jump sideways."

"Sideways. What do you mean?"

"You know how mediums can communicate with people who have passed over?"

"Oh, Moms, not the mediums again."

"Something that has become apparent from communicating with the other side, is that time, for them, is not linear. The spirits of the dead can communicate with people many years into what would be *their* future. And, perhaps, with people many years into their *past*."

"I remember you telling me this."

"But," Hagstrom interrupts. "But it's not physically possible."

"My point is," Katija continues, "that someone was trying."

"Jump sideways, then move forward or backward," Lizi injects, "and then jump sideways again?"

"Precisely."

The three of them look at each other silently.

"But, wouldn't that—" Hagstrom breaks the silence.

"What?" Lizi is getting impatient. The whirring sound behind her is intensifying.

Hagstrom shakes his head. "You'd have to die. Physically die. In order to cross over."

"Or would crossing over, kill you?" finishes Lizi.

"Exactly," Hagstrom nods, "how would they do that?"

"They were researching haptics and quantum tunneling," Katija continues, "but the point is, about a year ago, the dossier on that case was hacked."

"Tā mā de," Lizi looks back at the pulsating craft.

"Is anyone else there?" Katija looks worried.

Lizi scans the sky around her, "No Moms. Nobody."

"If they could jump sideways," Hagstrom continues, "They would be undetectable."

"And, unstoppable," Katija nods.

Hagstrom squints, "But, why? To slip back into the Union and hack the vote on Mandate 106? So, the banishment would be lifted and they could come back into the Union?"

"No!" Lizi's eyes widen, "that's what he meant."

"What?"

"When they had me tied up, before they drugged me, Ghani stuck his fat smirking face in front of me and said Winston Smith is going to die."

"Winston Smith?" Hagstrom looks puzzled.

"The guy who wrote OS 2020," Lizi whispers.

"The first guy? Like way ago?"

"They're going to go back and kill him."

"So, no Firewall. No Union. No banishment. None of it."

"None of it," Lizi looks serious.

"But Lizi," Katija's face brightens and tears form at the corners of her eyes, "that means you could come home."

Lizi's face goes blank. Her eyes are locked on the growing green vapor.

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Ghani peers through the windshield of the craft, grinning widely as he watches the green vapor intensify and spread.

Everything is working perfectly.

He initiates the motor circuit and listens to the gyros spinning up.

Like a well-tuned machine.

The energy banks are reading 70%.

Good. Almost ready to take off.

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Lizi looks up alarmed. Something is happening.
The whirring sound has increased in the shimmer. The green vapor is expanding.
Slowly. But steadily.

She scans the horizons. Nobody coming.

"Lizi," Katija pleads crying, "you can come home."

Lizi looks down at the com, "Oh moms..."

She wipes away a tear, "Yes, I could come home. But at what cost?"

"Lizi, this is not your fight," Hagstrom pleads.

Lizi looks around her, "I'm the only one here. Hagstrom, how many times did you tell me how much better things are with Firewalls and banishment? How much do you believe that what you do is important? For the species? And, Moms, what about you? How much of your life have you spent trying to make life better? For everyone."

"But, Lizi, what if something happens? You have your whole life ahead of you."

"No Moms," Lizi smiles a soft warm smile. "None of us have our lives ahead of us. We only have the lives we are leaving behind us. That is what defines us."

"But Lizi..."

"I know. I know, Pops."

Hagstrom tears up, "You called me Pops..."

He turns and hugs Katija.

They look back at the screen, Lizi is standing up.

"Lizi! Stop!" Hagstrom barks.

"Chiara," Katija screams into the com.

"Lizi," Hagstrom breaks in, "dial up Malta IO and the EO. You can get them all in on this call and they could be there— "

Lizi turns and moves a couple steps towards the shimmer.

This thing is going to take off. And green beam all of us. I have no choice.

"Sideways—backwards or forwards," Lizi stares at the shimmer, "I don't care where that ship is going. I need to stop it. Now. Disarm the threat."

"Chiara Elizabeth Buttegieg you stop right now!"

Despite her mother using her horrendous first name, Lizi doesn't take her eyes off the craft.

Hagstrom barks. "Call IO! Call someone! Call them!"

Lizi stops and looks at their anxious faces on Nelson's EO com.

She smiles, "To stand between the people and danger. Isn't that the oath, Hagstrom?"

"But Lizi, you're not an agent."

"I'm the only one here. And if I don't do something, then a lot of people are going to get hurt. So, today..."

She turns the blood-stained IO patch on the sleeve of Nelson's jacket towards the com. "Today, my name is Lizi Hagstromsdaw."

Lizi clips the com on the front of the jacket and slings the scanner over her neck and arm.

She pulls the blue beam out of the holster in Nelson's jacket—ignites it—and walks towards the green vapour.

"This one's for you, Nelson. For all of us!"

**Empty your mind of all thoughts.
Let your heart be at peace.**

**Immersed in the wonder of the Dao
you can deal with whatever life brings you,
and when death comes, you are ready.**

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The green vapor bends inwards as the blue beam touches it. It quivers. Then slowly wraps itself around the blue beam.

Lizi feels it pulling. Like it's alive. Trying to draw the blue beam into itself.

She tightens her grip, leaning back to brace herself.

Feet shoulder width apart. Unlock your knees. Prepare for the attack.

The green vapor retreats slightly.

Lizi moves the blue beam around in a circle. That seems to push the vapor back some. It becomes concave where she is touching it. But it is spreading out sideways. And starting to rise above her.

She advances slowly. Circling the blue beam wider and wider. It retreats enough so she can see the craft. It pulses from within with a low rumble that she can feel under her feet. It gets louder and louder. Pulsing and glowing.

Katija and Hagstrom are still on the small screen of the com. Their mouths move. But Lizi cannot hear them over the rumble.

Suddenly a shock wave radiates outwards from the craft. Lizi leans into it, gripping the beam tightly. It's a tug of war between the beams.

But the green cloud is still expanding. Sideways and towering over top of her. The blue beam is losing strength. The charge reads less than fifty percent.

But green vapor is tearing. Thin slits are opening in it. Cracks that reveal more of the craft. And the blue beam is bouncing around inside those cracks.

There is movement above her. The green vapor is drooping down over her head. And the sides are wrapping around to enclose her.

Lizi's eyes flare. She moves the blue beam around wider. Criss crossing the wave of green descending on her. Slicing. Slicing.

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Thirty air scooters appear silently above the old metal ribbed hanger.

From their vantage point above and behind the craft, they can see its entire shape and size. And the green beam shooting out of it.

Hypatia, in the point position, calls one of the Soldiers, "Khulan, come here."

Khulan slides her air scooter next to the Kaptan.

"Is that the green vapor? From the projector that was designed?"

Khulan scans the vapor with her analyzer, "That is the same signature and composition."

"Davor," Hypatia calls, "come look at this. Is this the craft we're looking for?"

"Yes, yes, if that was in 4 pieces, yes, I can see. But not the top piece. I have never seen this piece. But the four in a circle, yes, that is the cargo passed through the Bosphorus. Now it is assembled I can see the parts where they fit."

"And what is this machine?"

"The chatter was maybe a plasma loop?"

Hypatia's eyes widen, "And that vessel on top? How does all of that work together?"

"I do not know, Kaptan," Davor shrugs.

Léontine," Hypatia summons the tall muscular French woman, "look at this."

Léontine squints into the view scope, "The vessel on top. Oui. Without its wings. Oui, Oui, this is the experimental craft stolen from Empenner Sud at Aerodrome de l'Argens."

"And what was the design purpose?"

"It is a large craft. Can hold seven personnel. And the skin is an MKG alloy that can withstand passing out of earth's atmosphere."

"That's good enough for me. Lets' stop this thing now."

"But, Kaptan," Léontine squints, "what is this craft for?"

"We are not going to wait and find out. Soldiers," she looks around at the wheel, "this is our mission. To stop this craft and its occupants. Job one!"

"Job one!" the unified reply.

"Kaptan," Khulan interrupts, "that cloud is much bigger than I expected this beam to produce. They must have a large energy source behind it."

"Would a plasma loop work?"

Khulan whistles quietly between her teeth, "That would... My god, it would be unstoppable."

"Will white fire affect it?"

"I don't know."

"What kind of beam can stop it?"

"With that much power? Eeeee ..." she shrugs.

The Kaptan sighs, "There has to be some way..."

"If there was a powerful enough beam," Khulan continues, "directed at the oculus—it might cause pulse feedback. That might cycle the beam back into the generator."

"And make it eat its own energy?"

"Yes. Theory," she shrugs again. "Maybe?"

"We have to try."

Hypatia waves to the wheel, "Soldiers circle the craft. Fire white beams level two on my command."

The Soldiers of Truth swiftly maneuver their air scooters in a ring around the craft.

They fire a short blast of white energy into the green vapor.

It pushes it back and thins it out.

"That seemed to do something," Hypatia nods, "and the craft did not fire back. Perhaps they have no other weaponry on board? Let's try another one."

"But wait," Léontine holds her hand up. "Kaptan look, there is blue beam also in the green. Is the green beam damaged?"

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The green vapor around Lizi has retreated a little.
Am I pushing this thing back?

At that moment Nelson's com pings and vibrates.
Lizi glances down and sees an emergency direct com has cut off her connection with
Katija and Hagstrom.

She's about to yell when she sees who it's from: The International Firewall.

And the face on the screen is a very welcome sight.

"Kai! Is there help coming?"

"Right above you."

"And Z, I have intel from the Society."

"Skarlett?"

"Yes. About the green beam."

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"Give me the scope Léontine."

Hypatia takes it and nudges her air scooter until she is directly on top of the craft. Beneath her she can see a figure waving an agency blue beam. Swinging back and forth. Slicing tears in the green.

"There's someone in there. Next to that craft. It looks like they are trying to use a blue beam to fight the green beam."

"A blue beam? IO?"

"Possibly. EO. Maybe. Or a rogue beam."

"What are we going to do?"

The Kaptan looks around at the wreckage of the Malta IO agents and their scooters.

Davor shouts out, "Kaptan, this one is still alive."

Davor slides his scooter up next to the Kaptan with a terrified Marija clinging onto his back.

"You are Malta IO?"

"Iwa, iwa, Marija," the agent nods.

She is bruised, and a few cuts but miraculously escaped the fate of her fellow agents, their blackened bodies sizzling and smoking around her.

"Don't shoot her. Don't kill Stella," Marija points wild eyed at the craft.

"Who is Stella?"

"She is habib. She is to stop the bans."

"Are you alright?"

"Iwa, iwa, I was knock down. Not kill. Some others are not kill too."

Hypatia gestures, "Soldiers, help the agents. Some are still alive."

The Soldiers of Truth scatter and search for survivors.

Marija looks up at The Kaptan, "You are mechanics?"

The Kaptan smiles, "We are just here to help."

"Iwa, iwa, alura please do not kill Stella. She is fight for us. Madonna, how she got down there, I do not know."

"Who is she? IO?"

"She is my family. Buttigieg."

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"So, this is it, Kai? The moment I am supposed to do the right thing?"
She swings the blue beam in wide arcs, slicing through the billowing green.

"Maybe it is Z. I knew from the first time I met you, that you were important. Somehow. Some way. That there was a destination that you were heading towards."

"I've always felt that too. I didn't know what it was. I really didn't care. I just knew there was somewhere I needed to be. For some reason."

"And here you are. Our brave warrior."

"Scared to death warrior. With one hand."

The blue beam energy is bouncing around on its own, almost energized by the green vapour.

"There is no greater illusion than fear," Kai's voice wavers on the com. "She who can see through fear will always be safe."

"Dao? Really? Right now?"

"Now is when you need it the most."

Lizi gets a clear view of the craft. The green vapor is still billowing, but slower. And her blue beam energy is still bouncing around inside it. Ricocheting and denting the green cloud.

"K?"

"I'm here."

"I told you I would never leave you. And I did. And now I feel..."

"It's ok, Z. It's ok."

"It's not ok. I don't want to leave you again. Maybe forever."

"No, Lizi. Not forever. Forever in my heart and by my side. Where you have always been."

Lizi still holds the blue beam up, slicing and bouncing inside the green.

"Kai, I can't do this," Lizi tries to shake away the tears.

"Z, you are doing this. And the whole world is grateful."

Lizi exhales slowly. And shifts her stance.

"She who is centered in the Dao," Kai recites, "can go where she wishes, without danger. She perceives the universal harmony, even amid great pain."

"Because she has found peace in her heart," Lizi finishes.

"Z, have you found peace in your heart?"

The vapor thins a little. The blue beam is stalling it. But its battery grows weaker. Then, the oculus that is generating it becomes visible.

"Kai, I can see the eye."

The scanner crackles. The image of Kai jumps in and out.

"Z, Skarlett says the oculus is—" her words crackle out.

The scanner goes dark.

This green bastard is killing my connection.

The green vapor increases, drifting over her view of the oculus.

Lizi straightens up. Squares her shoulders. Sets her feet shoulder width apart, centering her weight. She unlocks her knees.

"I can see through fear. Show me your eye."

As if on cue there is a blast of energy from somewhere above her. White energy. She can see the pulses dissipate into the green.

But it's enough to clear her view.

Lizi sees the oculus, "I hope this is what you meant, Skarlett."

She fires Nelson's blue beam directly into it.

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Ghani looks up from the dashboard and sees a figure standing in front of the craft. The green vapor is parting around the craft, cut by a blue beam slicing into it.

The vapor clears away enough for him to see who it is.

I killed you! You're supposed to be dead!

Lizi stares directly into his eyes as she fires Nelson's blue beam, dead centered on the oculus.

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Above, The Soldiers of Truth instinctively pull back a little. Unsure of what's going on inside the green vapor cloud.

There is a low growl from the craft. The earth around it shakes, kicking up dust and debris.

"Holl xaghrek u gib iz-zejt!" Marija grabs at the Kaptan's arm.

"Pull back! Pull back!" Hypatia waves to the wheel to move back over the top of the hanger.

But she remains, hovering above and just behind the craft.

She can see most of the craft now. The green vapor is diverting around a figure standing in front of the ship.

It is a woman. Firing a blue beam directly into the oculus of the craft.

A thin smile creeps across Hypatia's face as she recognizes who it is.

Why am I not surprised?

The growl intensifies. Jagged bolts of blue dart around erratically inside the green vapor. The low growl has become a loud squeal.

Hypatia dials her white beam down to one degree spread.

She looks for a target at the rear of the craft.

The green vapor keeps obscuring her view. She can't see a clear shot.

If I hit that thing, will it kill her too?

Hypatia dips her scooter forward.

I hope what you're doing is going to work, Lizi. But as soon as that green vapor clears, I'm getting you out of there.

The craft shudders. The large circular tube of the splitter wobbles around like a drunken spinning top. Its skin glowing green and blue in a rapidly changing pattern.

The green vapor rises, like a smoke ring, from the top of the craft. It billows towards the scooters, their warning lights blink. The Soldiers feel it gripping them.

They quickly drop down behind the hanger, hoping the structure will shield them.

But the green vapor suddenly thins. The oculus is alternating blowing out and sucking in. Like a dying beast gasping for breath.

The green cloud dissipates.

Blown away by the wind off the Mediterranean.

The craft attempts to rise. Dipping and swaying. Heaving from side to side under the effort.

The Soldiers cautiously rise too, now the green has vanished.

When they see the craft rising, Léontine shouts, "Fire!"

"Where is the Kaptan?" Davor looks frantic.

"Fire! Job one! Fire!" Léontine screams.

The Soldiers fire their white beams. The craft shudders. Small pieces break off and fall to the ground.

"Again!" shouts Léontine.

Again, their white heat burns holes into the sides of the craft.

It makes a low groaning sound. Like a dying whale.

The seams of the four pieces tear open under the strain.

Sparks jump from the exposed machinery. Thick black liquid gushes through the cracks. The motors grind to a halt and the craft drops like a rag doll. Thudding to the ground in front of the hanger.

A fire erupts from the center of the wreckage like a volcano, leaping into the sky and billowing black smoke in thick waves.

The Soldiers cautiously nudge forward on their scooters.

The fire burns hot and fast. Like a blast furnace. Within minutes it consumes and blackens the remains of the craft. Reducing it to a pile of molten metal and ash.

And then the air is still. Deathly quiet.

Even the crickets in the prickly pear cactus are silent.

The Soldiers set their scooters down a safe distance from the smoldering pile and look desperately around for the Kaptan.

The billowing clouds of black smoke still obscure their view.

"Over here!" Davor is running into the smoke. The rest follow him.

And then they see it—Hypatia's scooter. A twisted blackened lump lying on its side. The Soldiers stand in mute shock.

Suddenly— "Are you just going to stand there?" Hypatia rises from behind the wrecked scooter, propping up a battered Lizi. "Or are you going to help me get this Soldier to the hospital?"

As the Soldiers rush towards them, Lizi turns to Hypatia, "Did we get him?"

"Yes. You got him. You've done well. Let's get you some help. Ok?"

Lizi nods mutely.

**The Master never reaches for the great;
Thus, she achieves greatness.
When she runs into a difficulty,
She stops and gives herself to it.
She doesn't cling to her own comfort;
thus, problems are no problem for her.**

Daodejing

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**Apache Junction, Arizona
(oldyear) 2016**

"The earth doesn't make mistakes."

"You're saying the earth makes us abuse our own kids?"

"I think so, Luna. It's the only plausible explanation."

"Why?"

"Because it produces a constant percentage of humans who act out of anger and fear. And not care who they hurt or what they break."

"This sounds crazy. And you also say that the earth mutates our DNA so that a bunch of us have brains that don't fully develop?"

"Absolutely."

"And you think that's intentional?"

"Because it produces a constant percentage of humans who are easily conned and will rally behind the abused ones."

"Conned? How are they conned?"

"Anger is mistaken for passion. Or strength."

"Hmm... Okay. I can see that."

"And this many people supporting the angry ones makes them believe that they're right. It drives them on."

"Winston—I mean, really. This is crazy crazy stuff."

"Is it? Or is it the actual truth."

"Hmm... Well, it will certainly generate some interesting responses from our listeners. For those of you just joining us, this is Luna Lovis on the Morning Drive, talking this morning with one of our favorite guests, Winston Smith. Who is sharing a wild theory with us. So, okay Winston, why do you think the earth does this?"

"Because this is what the earth needs."

"What the earth needs?"

"The earth created a species to develop technology that would change its atmosphere. So, it can move into the next phase of its life."

"We're just pawns on the earth's chessboard?"

"Of course. It's against our survival instincts to damage our own environment. But we keep doing it. Why?"

"Because we're stupid?"

"No, Luna. Because the earth in charge of our species. Not us."

"Hmm..."

"When angry and diminished people get into positions of power, what are the two things they tend to focus on?"

"What?"

"Increasing the production of fossil fuel and shutting down education."

"Yes. That's right. But why education?"

"They want to dumb down everyone to their level."

"So, they don't feel so stupid."

"Lying is in our DNA. To destroy our own atmosphere and feel right in doing it, we must be capable of unlimited denial. That is the species she created us to be."

"Winston, in case you didn't notice, we are the top of the evolutionary ladder. The superior species."

"We're not superior. We're dependent on the earth to survive. We can't be superior to something that we're dependent upon."

"Crazy. Still crazy stuff. But I see where you're going."

"This is what we were designed to do."

"Do what, kill ourselves off?"

"No. Change the atmosphere. Whether or not we kill ourselves off in the process, is up to us."

"So, we do have a choice?"

"We are the architects of our own misery. But if we want to survive, then some things need to change. If we can get our egos out of the way long enough to change them."

"Well, listeners, there you have it. We have a choice. Can we get our egos out of the way long enough to save our species? This is Luna Lovis on the morning drive. Stay tuned for more. We'll be right back after these brief messages."

**Prevent trouble before it arises.
Put things in order before they exist.**

**Confront the difficult, while it is easy.
Accomplish a great task by a series of small acts.**

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