

Chapter 1

Dark clad figures dashed through the intersection of a murky hallway, careful to evade the rusted remains of a decrepit chair and some crumbling file cabinets. Five passed in total silence, their eyes all but totally concealed by cloth wrappings over their faces. These were members of the Night Owls, bound together in conflict against a corrupt government and the corporations that supported it.

These particular Night Owls were members of the branch in Central City, deep in the American heartland. They had been summoned by their leader, a man they knew only as Gale, into the Old City to make plans for an important operation. They were well practiced in stealth, being the sort accustomed to slipping away from the watchful eyes of CSA surveillance infrastructure. They were, perhaps, somewhat less adept at situational awareness, as not a single one noticed the man standing at the far end of the corridor.

The outsider, on the other hand, was worse. He was currently squatting in front of a scraggly shrub, which sprouted from the floor boards of what was once a classy office foyer, but now more of a courtyard. The roof and ceiling collapsed decades ago, and a charming collection of weeds reclaimed the space for their use.

The man was young, far from his thirties, with dark hair that hung in loose curls

over his pale forehead. His face was set with warm brown eyes, alongside features that could best be described as 'vaguely European'. He wore a set of beige coveralls, though with the front zipped only halfway up his chest, it was clear work hadn't brought him into the area.

The district itself, known ironically as the Old City, was in fact one of the last parts of Central to be constructed, although it was the first abandoned. It only knew a brief flutter of life before the consortium of developers responsible went bankrupt. Legal ownership of the project passed through several hands, before falling ostensibly under control of the Federal government. In truth, only nature lay any claim to it.

Nature, and of course an eclectic collection of rogues and wanderers. The one, last in the line of Night Owls creeping to their secret meeting, had finally noticed the other, a man tapping incessantly on his phone screen as it diligently focused on every single thing in view except the plant in question.

Eventually he sighed, then took the shot blur and all. He stood, and after swiping through a few menus posted it to a board for amateur naturalists, with the caption, "Sorry for the blur. Found in a crumbling office," then put the phone away.

The Night Owl, a young woman known as Angel amongst the shadowy group, but in reality named Lenore Zest, recognized the man from her job at the café. His name was Arte, assuming he used his real one at the kiosk, and he always ordered the exact same drink, a double tall Americano. He would sit in their limited collection of chairs for an hour or so, nursing his beverage, and watch the other customers with mild interest.

Arte always arrived at seven p.m., but never on the same days from week to week. She assumed he was a night worker who lived nearby, though finding him in the middle of Old City was working wonders on her paranoia. It seemed unlikely a CSA spy would be wandering about so conspicuously, but the fact he wasn't so much as covering his face meant he had to be an... unsafe sort of person.

Or, at least, that's what Angel would have guessed, if not for the fact the man was currently fixated on a pile of leaves, studying it as though it could reveal the hidden mysteries of the cosmos.

"Hey, Angel," a voice echoed up from a nearby stairwell. "What's the holdup?"

"Nothing, sorry," she whispered back. She gave Arte one last look, making sure he was still staring at the leaves, then dashed across the intersection and through the door to the level below. She brushed the leg of a toppled chair on the way, sending a fine layer of rusty dust tumbling to the ground.

Arte continued examining the accumulated pile of arboreal cast-off, nudging it with his fingers while a bemused frown grew on his face. He stood and looked around, over the crumbling wall to the outside, then in a wide circle around him. "How did all these leaves get in here?" he muttered.

Unsurprisingly, there was no answer forthcoming from the decaying surroundings, save perhaps a rusty crunch as the long abused leg of an old chair fell to the ground behind him. Arte darted his eyes towards the noise, leaning sideways for a clear view down the hallway.

He squinted a moment, then shrugged and walked towards it. He used his phone as

a flashlight, taking every step with the care of a man who'd fallen through one too many floors in his lifetime. He reached the intersection and studied the area. His eyes found an open door down the right hand corridor, which he approached after a moment.

Inside he was greeted by a staircase overflowing with clutter and debris. The path upward was closed off by a pile of concrete, while the other direction was mostly clear. He descended slowly, testing every step before placing his full weight. One floor later and he was at the bottom, facing another open door. Just on the other side of it was a dim lamp sitting on an overturned planter.

He put away his phone and wandered forward. A chain of similar lights guided him on, until he arrived at an old storeroom. He paused beside the entrance, head askew as he aimed his ear ahead. Faint voices emerged from within.

"What are you implying, Gale?" a woman said in a wary tone.

"What I'm saying, Angel, is that the time has come to take a more... proactive approach," Gale answered. He had a strong voice, accustomed to command. "The OLS hasn't beat one percent in any election in the last decade."

"The One Law Society isn't intended to win elections. They provide the American people a voice of reason in politics."

"They're a bunch of old men grouching about the past," Gale said. "If we leave everything to them, nothing will ever get done. It's long past time we stop talking and start doing."

"Start doing what?"

Gale let the question hang, looking over the covered faces of his companions, his own grey blue eyes shined though the mask in the dim light of the room. His next words would determine the fate of the country, or possibly the world. It was essential to get them right, and even more essential to deliver them with the perfect rhetorical flourish.

Gale slowly drew a breath, preparing to launch into a speech perfectly crafted to push the Night Owls into action. Before he could let out the first word, he was interrupted by the appearance of a simple looking man in washed out coveralls.

"He makes a good point," Arte said. "The last time I overthought a problem, it added hours of otherwise avoidable scrubbing."

The Night Owls were stunned to silence, each staring at the intruder with various mixtures of perplexity and terror.

Gale, no less surprised but far more accustomed to the unexpected, was the first to act. He drew a pistol from the holster concealed on his back, aimed it at Arte, then yelled, "Who are you?"

Arte looked Gale up and down, his eyes resting on the weapon. "Oh, is that a gun? Bit weird to be carrying one, isn't it?"

Angel yelled, "Gale, what are you doing? Put that thing away!"

Gale glanced at her, then to the other Night Owls. The group was clearly alarmed,

but now in equal measure between the intrusion and his own reaction. He lowered the barrel, but kept the weapon tight in hand. "This guy could be an Admin. We can't let him walk away after this. He needs to be taken care of."

"An admin of what?" Arte said. No one paid him any mind.

"I'm sure he harmless," Angel said, although in truth she couldn't shake an uneasy feeling about him. Not only was he openly wandering an insecure area, but was apparently the sort who plumbed the depths of ruined buildings on a whim. Still, she didn't sense anything malicious from him. She glanced at Arte. "Isn't that right?"

"Yes?"

"Who are you?" Gale demanded. "And what the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm Arte," he answered. "And I guess I figured you guys could use a hand. There's never anything interesting down in the basements."

"You... want to help?" Angel said.

"Yeah. I've been at this for years, so I've learned a few things about exploring. Are you guys in a club? I didn't realize there was one in the city."

"A club?"

"You think we're tourists or something?" Gale scoffed.

Arte hummed. "I would have said amateur naturalists, but yes, aren't you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then what *are* you doing out here?"

"None of your business," snarled Gale.

Arte frowned and looked off, mumbling, "If it was my business, wouldn't I already know?"

"Are you smarting off to me!" He aimed his weapon again.

"Gale, relax!" Angel said. "This guy is clearly harmless. He must have seen me on the way in and been curious."

"Actually, I heard a noise and thought an animal might have gone downstairs." Arte said. His words echoed to nowhere.

Gale looked around the room. It was clear the other Night Owls thought he was overreacting, and to be honest, he was. The intruder was some random punk, with no chance whatsoever to disrupt the plan. He huffed and put the gun away. The delay was manageable. "Whatever," Gale said. "This meeting's been compromised." He turned to Angel. "Since you're so concerned, you can lead him off."

"O-okay," Angel said. "I'll report back on the board as soon as possible." She turned to Arte. "Alright, why don't you come with me." Arte shrugged, then followed her out the room. Once they were a short distance away she relaxed her shoulders and sighed. "That... got a little crazy, huh?"

"You sound familiar," Arte said. "Have we met somewhere?"

"I-I don't think so," Angel said, thankful her mask concealed the sudden blush.

"What are the odds of that?"

"Probably depends on where I heard you from, right?"

"Ah, uh, yeah... I guess."

They arrived at the stairwell and started to climb. "So, you really weren't down here looking for plants or animals?" Arte asked.

"N-no," Angel said. She thought Arte looked a little disappointed.

"Then why *are* you out here?" Arte said. "These buildings are run down, you know. It's not safe to wander around in them."

Angel wanted to say, 'You're one to talk,' but instead she offered, "Look, Arte, it'll be best for you to forget you saw us."

Arte hemmed, then said, "Is that possible?"

"Please, Arte, just... just forget it, okay? Go back to whatever you were up to, and act like this never happened."

The bemused look on his face was not encouraging, but eventually he said, "Well, okay. I'll see what I can do."

"Good." They arrived at the edge of the clearing Arte was in earlier, shielded from the afternoon sun by a sliver of old ceiling. Angel pushed the man into the light, then turned to walk away. Before stepping off she said, "I won't see you again, b-but... Arte... stay safe."

He smiled and said, "Who are you?"

"Le--"she cut herself off with a cough, then laughed. "Right, right. I'm nobody."

"Goodbye, nobody," Arte said. Before he could finish his wave Angel vanished into the hallway, blending into the shadow and out of sight. He sighed and shrugged, then left the courtyard. Out front he took a quick look around, checked his phone, and turned right, down a street that led to the inhabited parts of Central City. He didn't make it more than two blocks before a wave of cars covered in flashing lights and garish blue paint jobs came screeching around a corner and swerving to a stop in front of him.

A dozen men scrambled from the cars and fanned out into a semi-circle. One of them took the lead, a man known as Chief amongst his colleagues. He yelled, "Stop where you are!" while pointing a handgun in Arte's general direction. He continued, "This is the CPD!"

Arte paused and looked them over. Each of them, except the one in front, was wearing a dark blue uniform. They were loaded with an array of odd gadgets, distributed between their belts and bandoleers. After a second, Arte said, "Hi. Are you guys here looking for plants?"

They were not looking for plants, except perhaps in the general sense, where they were always on the lookout for an eclectic list of unauthorized flora. Instead, the men--officers from the Central City Police Department--were looking for none other than Arte himself, or at least a man matching his description. They followed Chief's lead, and each drew a weapon of their own, aimed towards the same target.

"Wow, that's a lot of guns," Arte said. He glanced behind himself, as though expecting to find a mighty army, or at least a dangerous animal. When nothing materialized, he returned his gaze to the men, and said, "What are the odds this would happen twice in one day?"

"I said, 'Freeze'!" Chief yelled. He was an exceptionally burly man, with large bushy eyebrows matched only by his own oversized mustache. He earned his nickname not from any respect for his rank, nor in admiration for his leadership, but rather because the man was extremely bossy. "And lay on the ground!"

"Aren't those two instructions contradictory?" Arte said, then looked at the road. "And besides, it's filthy down there."

"I told you to get down!" Chief yelled. He was slowly approaching, accompanied by a handful of officers.

"I know," Arte said. "But what is less clear is why you expect me to do it."

"Put your hands in the air, and get on the fucking ground."

"*The* air?" Arte said. "Is... is there some special air I don't know about?"

Chief was about to yell again, but a nearby officer cut in, "Uh, Chief, I think this guy might be retarded."

"Hey! That's rude," Arte said. "I'm j--"

A policeman lunged from behind, tackling Arte mid-sentence. He made a very undignified wail during the descent, and his arms were pinned to his back with a set of metal cuffs before he could regain his composure. A pair of officers dragged him to his feet, and began shoving him towards a nearby car.

"Am I being kidnapped?" Arte said. "Just so you know, I don't have much money."

"You're being arrested," said the man on his right.

"You mean propelled?"

"That's--what?"

"You said 'arrested', but you're pushing me forward," Arte said. "That would be propelled, right?"

"You some kind of smart ass?"

"More confused, really."

"Well, they'll sort you out at the station," the officer said as he forced Arte into the car and slammed the door. There was another pair of policemen already in the front seat, separated from the rear by a piece of thick plastic.

Arte leaned forward and said, "If you guys aren't kidnapping me, could you make this quick? I have a shift later, and I'm coming up on two years never missing a day. There's a bonus for that, you know?"

"Shut the fuck up," said the man behind the wheel. He pulled away while the officers on the ground went through the routine of documenting a crime scene.

"Doesn't have to be so rude," Arte muttered. The policemen ignored his complaint, and instead drove him out of the Old City and into the heart of downtown Central. After twenty minutes of travel, they arrived at a squat concrete structure, and Arte was manhandled out of his seat and into the building. The words, "To Protect and Serve," were written in bold letters over the door.

Inside they processed him, taking his name and personal effects, then ferried him deeper, depositing him in a dreary room with a huge mirror on one wall. He was sat down in one of a set of uncomfortable metal chairs around a matching table, then left to sit in solitude. They gave him the courtesy of un-cuffing his hands, so he was free to lightly rap the table to pass the time.

Eventually, a pair of men burst into the room. One was none other than Chief, a detective in the department, although not considered a very good one. The other was a tall man in a black suit, with close cropped hair and a stern, military glare.

"So, Arte," Chief started, while he read the contents of a manilla folder, "Arte... uh.... You ain't got a last name, or something?" he scoffed.

"I never changed my name?" Arte said. "To be honest, I never even thought about it.

Is that a thing people do?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Chief said.

"What are *you* talking about?" Arte answered.

"You mouth off to me one more f--"

"What my associate is inquiring after," cut in the man in the fine suit, "is your family name."

"My family called me Arte too."

"Seig," Chief said. "I don't know why you sent me after this stupid motherfucker, but I am about two fucking seconds from--"

"Quiet," Seig said. He returned to Arte. "Are you saying you only have the one name?"

Arte shrugged. "Arte is the only thing anyone's ever called me. If I'm supposed to have some other name, I don't know what it is. I could make one up, if you like."

"That won't be necessary," Seig said.

"Shouldn't it be on his ID?" Chief asked.

"He didn't have one on his person. His only effect was a phone, a nonstandard model your system was unable to access."

"What's an ID?" Arte asked.

"No more of your dumb question," Chief said. "You're here to answer ours. But first, do you want a lawyer?" After an awkwardly long moment of silence, Chief snapped, "Well, spit it out!"

"You told me to stop asking questions," Arte said. "And I don't know what a lawyer is."

Chief glared at him. "He's someone to help answer our questions."

"Oh! That sounds useful," Arte said. "Shouldn't I then?"

"Only if you're a criminal scumbag trying to skirt the law," Chief said.

"And... that would be a bad thing?"

"Yes!"

"Well, okay. Still, your questions are very confusing," Arte said. "I could probably use one of those law dudes anyway."

Chief hissed, but Seig stepped in and said, "That won't be necessary. The detective and I will be more than happy to explain things." He glared at Chief. "Isn't that right?"

Chief huffed, then shrugged.

"See, everything will be fine," Seig said.

"Well, alright," Arte said. "Just promise to stop yelling at me."

"Of course."

"So, what did you want to ask?"

"Finally!" Chief said. "What were you doing in Old City?"

Arte perked up. "Oh! I was collecting pictures for my club! We trade images of plants and stuff, then figure out what they are. Everyone's very interested in what I can find in an abandoned city."

"Your... club?" Chief said with a frown. "For taking pictures of rats and weeds?"

"I was skeptical too," Arte said, still beaming. "But an app on my phone suggested I give it a try and it turned out super fun. There's so much to learn, and the guys in the group are very friendly."

"Right. And during your National Geographic adventures did you happen upon any suspicious characters?"

"Well, a bunch of weirdos in blue kidnapped me, but you know more about them than I do."

"The police are not suspicious characters."

Arte shrugged. "News to me."

"Whatever. Did you see anyone else?"

"Nope." Arte smiled. "You were the first."

Chief grinned. "Ah, so you *didn't* happen to meet a group of suspected terrorists?"

Arte gave him a long look, than said, slowly, "What's a terrorist? Sounds scary."

"Quit playing dumb," Chief snapped. He drew a photo from his manilla folder and tossed it on the table. It clearly showed Arte and Angel together in the decaying office.

Arte leaned over, carefully examining its contents. "Who's that?" He asked, pointing at Angel.

Chief was briefly taken aback by Arte's earnest expression, but he grit his teeth and snarled, "That's what we're asking you!"

"Well, I don't know." Arte shrugged. "I never met them."

Chief stared at him, dumbstruck. Even Seig was a little stunned by the blatant lie. Before the detective could properly start frothing at the mouth, Seig stepped in. "We literally have a picture of you two standing face to face."

"Obviously," Arte said. "What's your point?"

"It... is an absolute, undeniable fact you've met this person. You can see it right there for yourself."

"And yet I remember nothing about it."

"It wasn't even an hour ago!" Chief said.

"You promised no yelling."

Chief started to speak, or perhaps hiss would be a more apt description, but Seig waved him down and spoke instead. "It was, in fact, quite recent. It seems incredibly unlikely you forgot in such a short amount of time."

"I suppose I'm really good at it," Arte said.

Seig took on an amiable tone. "You realize how an incident like this will reflect on your record, don't you? Protecting suspected terrorists? It could have very... limiting effects on your Safety Score."

"Screw his fucking Score," Chief spat. "Doesn't this rat know it's illegal to lie to the police?"

Seig nodded sagely. "The detective makes a good point. Obstruction of justice carries a very *weighty* penalty."

Both men stared at Arte expectantly. He held their gaze a few seconds, before saying, "What's a Safety Score?"

"That's it you smart ass motherfucker," Chief yelled. He grabbed Arte by the collar and pulled him forward. Before he could make up his mind as to whether he should throw him back or else pin him face first into the table, the detective was yanked away by another pair of hands. Chief looked up to see none other than the actual Chief of Police holding him. He sprung to his feet and said, "S-sir! I-- I was--"

"Can it!" snapped his boss. "And leave him be. We're letting him go."

"What!" Chief said. Even Seig was surprised by the announcement. "I... we can't just--"

"He's a Class B."

The air rushed from the room as everyone absorbed the proclamation, frozen in shock. Everyone except Arte, who casually looked between each of the suddenly stiff men, then asked, "What's a Class B?" After an awkward minute of silence, Arte continued, "Uh, okay...? Guess I'll leave. Can I have my phone back?"

"Your things will be returned at the entrance," the Chief said. "I'll escort you out."

Arte stood up, confusion painted on his face, and followed the Chief out the room. The other two remained perfectly motionless, not giving so much as a sigh before Arte and his guide were well out of earshot. The Chief walked at a crisp pace, reluctant to do more than periodically glance back to check Arte was still following.

Meanwhile, Arte struggled to match speed, and eventually had to trot after him. He

asked, "What was that about?"

The Chief shook his head and said, "Just... just leave."

They continued in silence to the front door, where a young woman approached with Arte's phone. She held it delicately, as though the device could emit some foul toxin or deadly rays at the slightest pressure. Arte took it, and the woman scurried from sight before he could put it away. The Chief gave him a wide berth and motioned towards the entrance.

Arte smiled awkwardly. "I'd say it was nice meeting you, but it wasn't. Have a good day," he said, then stepped through the door and down the short stairs to the sidewalk below.

He spent a moment looking about, clearly unsure of his location, before pulling out his phone and unlocking the screen. It rang before he could do anything else. Arte eyed the device warily, holding it at arms length. After the third ring, he tentatively swiped up and held the phone to his ear.

"Um... hi?" he said.

"Hello Mr. Bodrum, this is Maribel from Psa Psa. I'm calling to check in after your incident with the CPD. ... Hello? Mr. Bodrum?"

"Ah, sorry," Arte said. "I think you have the wrong guy. I mean, I was tangled up with *something*, so, uh, maybe it's related to that?"

Maribel laughed. "No, I'm confident you're who I'm looking for. Isn't this the phone

of one Mr. Arte Bodrum?"

"My name *is* Arte," he said slowly. "Though I've never heard the name Bodrum before."

"Our records indicate that's your last name. Are they in error? We can update them now, if you'd like."

"I... didn't know I had a last name." Arte blushed and scratched the back of his neck.

"Your par--ah, I mean, must not have come up, sorry. Still, you were registered with Psa Psa under the name Arte Bodrum twenty years ago, with the same phone and contact key you're using today. In fact, you can find the records I'm looking at right now in the Psa Psa app."

"'Saw Saw'?"

"Yes, it's spelled p-s-a p-s-a," Maribel said. "I believe the icon is a green man wearing a trench coat on a white background, like those old neighborhood watch signs."

Arte lowered his phone and set it to speaker, then swiped through a few screens. After tapping around a bit, he lit up and said, "Oh yeah! I remember this. It told me to get a job."

Maribel giggled. "Yes, it referred you to our Contractor Connect program. How is your relationship with Crown working out, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It's fun. The city is real pretty at night, and I get to travel all over while no one's out. Plus I like tinkering around in food cubes. Very clever contraptions, I think."

"Happy to hear it," Maribel said. "We're very proud of our Life Planning service. I'll share your sentiments with the team."

"Sure thing," Arte said. He tapped a few more times on his phone. "Ah... well I be, my name really is Arte Bodrum."

"Good, you found your records."

"Wow... there sure is a lot of 'missing information' in here."

"You choose the default data collection option," Maribel said. "So that's only what you've told us explicitly, plus your feedback with our programs. Would you like to change that?"

"No? I'm fine with whatever's normal."

"Sure thing. Do you have any questions, or would you like to start our discussion about your incident with the CPD."

"Honestly, I have so many," Arte said. "But I don't want to waste any more of your time."

"It's not a waste, Arte," she said cheerfully. "It's my job to help you any way I can. You can take as long as you like."

"R-really?"

"Yes, of course. I could talk you to sleep if you like, then call again tomorrow to continue where we left off."

Arte blushed. "W-why exactly do I deserve that kind of service?"

Maribel laughed. "Well, I don't know about deserve, but you *are* enrolled in our Platinum Deluxe plan."

"I don't remember doing that."

"Our records indicate you enrolled on your eighteenth birthday, when your membership under your parents expired."

"Oh... that was a while ago."

"Yep, and you've been in good standing ever since."

"Well, I guess, then, if you don't mind," Arte said, "there are a few things I'd like to know. Promise you won't yell though. I made a lot of people angry today for not knowing stuff."

"Of course I won't," Maribel said kindly. "And I'm sorry you had to deal with that. What do you need me to explain?"

"Ah, right now?" Arte laughed. "It feels like everything, but for starters, what the

heck is Psa Psa? I get that I'm a member, but... a member of what? It's nothing I've ever heard of."

"That is surprising," Maribel said. "But it seems you've lived in a federal city your whole life, so maybe it's not unusual. In any case, Psa Psa is more formally known as the Public Safety Alliance Private Social Association. It is, as the name suggests, a private social association."

"And what's a social association?"

"That... is a good question." Maribel hummed. "I guess it's something I take for granted. You can think of it as a type of club. They act as a third party to vouch for your character in business, and mediate any disputes you have. Psa Psa also bills itself as a 'full service' association, so we handle things like vendetta, several types of insurance, and a pretty wide range of other services."

"Uh... vendetta?"

"It's like insurance," Maribel said. "If, God forbid, someone were to kill or leave you incapacitated, we'd pursue them on your behalf to seek restitution. It's one of those things generally recommended to purchase, especially since it isn't *usually* that expensive, though it does vary somewhat by location."

"Oh... I guess that sounds... helpful?" Arte said. "So... how does that whole 'federal' thing you mentioned fit into this?"

"There's a whole history there," Maribel said. "Which, to be honest, I'm not personally very familiar with. That's just what we call areas without many

associates."

"Wait... you mean there are people not in an association? That's an option?"

"Yes, of course, it's always voluntary," Maribel said. "And I'd wager most of the people you meet day to day aren't associates either. I don't know how it works, but they call themselves citizens. I *think* it's *like* being in a social association? But you don't get to choose, and I'm pretty sure you aren't allowed to leave."

Arte hemmed. "I... I know I'm new to all this, but doesn't that sound kind of... weird?"

Maribel laughed. "Ah, yeah, it does seem strange.... Maybe don't quote me on them. I usually only interact with citizens through the Treaty Court--a special mediation service between associates and federals--so I've never concerned myself with the inner workings."

"Do you have to do that a lot?"

"Not really. It's rare to find associates living with federals."

"Why?"

"Couldn't say for sure, but the people at the Treaty Court are... difficult to work with, to put it politely, so if everyone's like that, it makes sense."

Arte laughed weakly. "Given what just--"

"Would you mind not standing in front of our building all day?" said a voice behind Arte, who leapt away with a yelp, launching his phone down the sidewalk. The man who spoke was a dark skinned giant, and he flinched when Arte cried out. He was also the Chief of Police, who spent the last fifteen minutes anxiously waiting to see if the Class B would leave on his own.

"Ah! Sorry, sorry," Arte said as he scrambled away to retrieve his phone. He plucked it off the ground and gave an awkward wave to the Police Chief before scurrying away.

"What was that? Is something wrong?" Maribel was yelling over the speaker.

"No, sorry," Arte said. "One of those police guys asked me to leave."

Maribel laughed and sighed with relief. "You were standing in front of the station?"

Arte blushed. "I, uh don't know the way home, and you called before I could check."

"That's quite alright. Why don't you get your bearings, then we can discuss your incident."

"Okay, give me a minute." Arte swiped and tapped through a few menus, until finding a map and getting his bearings, then started walking. "Done, I figured it out. So, you wanted to talk about my, uh, kidnapping?"

Maribel laughed. "I think 'imprisonment' might be more accurate, although they have some other word... starts with an A?"

"Arrest?"

"Yeah, that's it. I guess it's like being trespassed, but from society."

"Trespassed?"

"Forcibly removed, you know, if you're causing problems, or whatever."

Arte hummed. "Do they take you to a tiny room and yell at you?"

"No." Maribel chuckled. "I mean, who would even pay for that? What happens after depends significantly on the nature of the problem, as well as who's in what association. In general, though, if someone's being worse than a nuisance they lose Standing and have to do something to earn it back."

"Something?" Arte said.

"It varies wildly," Maribel answered. "There's hundreds of associations, and some couldn't be more different from each other."

"Well, how does Psa Psa handle it?"

"Our response is always tailored to the nature of the offense," Maribel said "As an example, if a member were to get drunk and start a fight in a bar, breaking someone's nose in the process, we might put them through drug and anger counseling, and have them pay damages."

"What if they don't want to deal with that?"

"Well, they won't have Standing with Psa Psa anymore, which can make it hard to interact with most firms, in particular to work for them. It's also difficult to find businesses willing to do high stakes transactions, like real estate or investing, with someone who doesn't have Standing somewhere."

"Couldn't they join another association?" Arte asked.

"Sure," Maribel said. "But a lot of them will check new applicants with other companies, and if you've got a breach of Standing, at the very least you'll end up making amends in the other association. Plus, even if you find some association that won't check, whoever you hurt--or rather their association--is likely to find you at the new company and file a claim anyway."

Arte hummed. "So, how does this stuff relate to whatever those blue people wanted from me? Am I in trouble with you guys now?"

"No, I don't think so." She laughed. "You haven't been participating in any terrorist plots, have you?"

"I, uh, don't even know what that is. I can say, at least, I haven't done anything interesting or scary... ever. What's a terror plot thing supposed to be, anyway?"

"I'm... not actually sure." She chuckled. "I think it's something violent, but beyond that your guess is as good as mine. I probably *should* look in to it though, all things considered."

"Really, why?"

"In case the CPD has follow up questions, or they want to argue your behavior was contrary to your standing."

Arte sighed. "You mean I have to talk to the angry mustache man again?"

Maribel laughed. "No, most likely not. When dealing with associates, federal investigators are required to conduct interviews through your representative, which in this case would be me. I mean, unless you want to hire a third party. I can walk you through the process, if you'd like."

"That, uh, won't be necessary," Arte said. "I wouldn't know how to pick one."

"I can walk you through that too," Maribel said playfully.

"Maybe later, I gotta rush home to make my next shift. Is there anything I should do for now?"

"Not really. Try not to get too far from your phone until we have everything worked out. I'll likely contact you in a couple days after the CPD makes a formal request."

"Alright, sounds easy enough. You have a good evening then."

"You too, Arte, and don't hesitate to call if you have questions. You can find my contact in the Psa Psa app."

Chapter 2

Arte crept to the edge of a wall, carefully peering around the corner then pulling back. He took a moment to settle his breath, then slipped from behind the building and glided to a large metal framed sign board. A faded poster inside offered the promise of luxury living for the responsible citizen.

Arte, clearly the exemplar of such a man, was currently spying on a wild animal no more than a dozen yards away. It had been two days since his run in with the Night Owls and the CPD, and Maribel informed him only a few hours ago the police decided their arrest of the Class B was a case of mistaken identity. In response, he ended his self imposed exile and went out to carry on with his hobby.

Today he opted to visit the other side of Old City, as far as possible from where he was last time. This section was more run down than any other, being both the closest to wilderness, as well as the victim of a great fire several decades prior. Most of the nearby buildings were crumbled into untidy piles, and even the ancient scorch marks were long overgrown by thick layers of vegetation. A short distance away lay an open prairie, concealed by a row of unsightly mounds and ruined structures, as well as a wrought iron fence now filled with creeping vines.

Arte peeked from behind the metal sign, getting a good look at his prey, before

ducking in and pulling out his phone. He slowly edged out, carefully aimed his camera, tapped a few times to get his target in focus, then snapped a photo.

He straightened out, bumping the poster board and releasing a rusty crunch, then took a moment to admire his work. The image was of excellent quality, drawing out a pleased smile, followed by a few quick swipes to take him to a messaging app. He posted the picture with the caption, "Hey, check out this cool pig I found. It's HUGE! The pic doesn't do it justice."

He slid the phone away, then started a quick set of stretches, but was interrupted by a buzz from his pocket. He pulled the phone back out, looking it over. A message on the screen read, "Warning. Feral Hog. Will Kill And Eat."

Arte looked up, color draining from his face. He took a circumspect glance around the metal sign, which now contained a boar far more conscious of his presence. It snorted, like a pig which fancied itself a lion, then charged with a terrible squeal. Arte yelped and hurtled himself down the road.

The beast chased him halfway down the street, missing a chomp at his leg by only a few inches before he leapt through an open door. The hog wedged itself into the narrow space though force of impact, and for a few seconds it looked like it might succeed where decades of wear and neglect failed and tear a hole through the wall.

Instead it huffed indignantly, then lurched back onto the sidewalk. Other than making periodic circles on the ground with agitated stomps, it didn't look much inclined to wander off.

"Well, crud," Arte said. He spent a few seconds checking himself over, finalizing the

sweep by pulling an empty hand from his pocket. "Great... I dropped my phone." He turned to the pig outside the door, which snorted in response. He sighed and looked around.

The building was in better condition than its neighbors, thanks to a sturdy construction. The inside was still a ruined mess, having been exposed to the elements for decades. The cheap synthetic carpet crumbled to dust long ago, exposing the unfinished concrete beneath. The walls were cracked in several places, in some cases going so far as collapsing to the floor.

Arte himself was located in a central hallway that ran front to back. There were a few doors on either side, most of them destroyed, and a dark path that would likely take him out the other entrance. He took a few tentative steps down it, but quickly encountered an overturned desk jammed halfway out an old office. The steel furniture had been dragged into position by some enterprising scavenger, who lacked the good sense to take it apart first, and now was permanently wedged in place, obstructing the path.

Arte retreated down the hallway, poking his head through each entrance, though there was nothing to discover save a handful of windowless rooms littered with broken crud. He returned to the rear entrance no better than when he started, considering the hog still waited menacingly outside. His last option was to check the rear stairwell.

The door ground open, scraping through splinters of rusted metal and a thin crust of gunk, then revealed a long vertical tunnel cluttered with debris. Light filtered through numerous cracks in the wall, giving the space an eerie air. Arte started with the upward stairs, but was blocked by a pile of old steel furniture fused into an

immovable mound. He frowned, then turned around and tried the lower path.

He reached the basement without issue. The door leading in fell off decades ago, and he hesitated a brief moment before plunging into the pitch depths. He advanced slowly, feeling his way through the hallway one step at a time. Around halfway through he came upon a faint glow cast from a room on the far end of a righthand corridor. He followed the light to an open door, where he paused.

"--wouldn't take such a drastic action," said a hushed voice inside. Arte tilted his head, a thoughtful look in his eyes.

"They don't have to actually do it," said another voice. "They only have to be in the right place at the right time."

"Not sure I can get them to do that either," said the first. Arte perked up. "You would not believe the hassle it took to get them out here. The Night Owls are a bunch of wimps."

Arte stepped into the light and waved. "Oh, Gale, I thought tha--"he was interrupted by a bullet wizzing past his head. Arte froze, eyes darting about in wonder.

Inside the room were Gale and Seig, both wearing fine suits. Gale had a gun in hand, which Seig was forcing towards the ceiling.

"It's that fucking spy," Gale said. "We have to get rid of him."

"He's a Class B," Seig said. "And the last thing we need is an 'association' poking around Central City."

Arte looked behind him at the fresh hole in the wall, then back at the two men.

"Did... you just shoot at me?"

Seig released Gales hand and said, "Don't let him run away"--then over to Arte--"and don't try it if you prefer your legs in one piece."

"Oh, I remember you," Arte said. "You're friends with the angry mustache, right?"

"Is he always this annoying?" Gale said.

"Just keep an eye on him," Seig said. "I need to make a call." He pulled out a phone and held it to his ear after a few taps. "Sir, we--yes, I know, this is important. I need someone to disappear. ... A class B. ... Exactly. ... Alright, ten minutes." He put the phone away.

"Who was that?" Arte asked.

"Shut up, traitor," Gale said, then to Seig, "What are we doing with him?"

"Enforcers from Thirteen will bring him to the lake," Seig said.

Gale frowned in disgust. "Guess it's fitting, at least. Should I put him down?"

"Not if you can avoid it," Seig said. "I don't feel like sanitizing the room, and the less of a trail he leaves the better. Check for any kind of trackers or tech, and keep him quiet."

"Alright you snake bastard," Gale said to Arte. "Stand against the wall."

"My name is Arte, you know, and that's no way to ask for a favor," he answered.

"Especially a weird one."

"Never mind," Gale said. "Shut up." He put away his gun then pushed Arte face first into a wall. After patting him down, Gale turned him forward and said, "Where's your phone?"

"Will you make up your mind?"

"Wha--"Gale scowled. "Answer the question!"

Arte shrugged. "I dropped it while being chased by a pig." When Gale looked at him doubtfully, he added, "It's probably still up there, if you want to see for yourself."

"Is every Class B this infuriating, or just you?"

"I don't know," Arte said. "What's a Class B?"

Gale growled, but otherwise remained silent. Instead, he gave Arte an extra frisk for good measure. A few minutes later Seig got a message on his phone. He checked, then motioned to Gale, who marched Arte out the room at gunpoint.

"Am I being kidnapped again?" Arte said as they walked through the hallway. His way was lit by a lantern Gale took from the floor. "Two times in less than a week, what are the odds?"

"Don't worry," Gale said. "This will be your last."

"Oh, good. It's a pain."

Gale shook his head. "You are one stupid motherfucker. Guess that's to be expected, it's not like we dumped America's best and brightest. I'm amazed there's any of you rats left." Gale pushed him into the stairwell. A minute later they arrived at the main entrance.

They took the front staircase, so the wild hog was nowhere to be found. Instead, a pair of vaguely foreign men were standing nearby, leaning against a beat up old sedan.

"This the guy for the lake?" said one of them. He was Fred, the taller of the two, and de facto leader. "He the lively sort?"

"Nah, the idiot's too stupid to realize he's in danger," Gale said.

"I am?" Arte said.

"See?"

Wait... should I have run away?"

Gale laughed. "You better tie his arms, the situation's started penetrating his thick skull."

The other man, Marty, took a spool of rope from the car and used it to pin Arte's hands behind his back.

"Stay out of the city," Seig said. "And don't return this way when you're done."

"Yeah, no shit. Don't need pigs telling me how to do my job," Fred said as he forced Arte into the vehicle. Marty jumped into the passenger seat. Fred started the car, and guided it through the tattered streets until he reached an exit onto the dusty interstate. He turned to Arte with a nasty grin and said, "Act nice and I'll make sure this is painless."

Arte sighed and settled into his chair. He muttered, "I wonder what Maribel would think."

Marty scoffed, "That your girlfriend or some shit?"

"She's my rep at Psa Psa."

Marty shared a bewildered look with Fred, then shrugged. They continued down the highway, surrounded on both sides by unending grasslands. Only scattered trees and brush broke the monotony. The two men from Thirteen took up a vulgar conversation to pass the time. Neither noticed a faint rumble.

The journey dragged for miles, the distance marked by a few rusted husks and abandoned villages. There were no signs of life, save a handful of wild animals scurrying off the road as they approached. Eventually, they came in view of a vast stretch of water, a great lake spanning the horizon.

Fred turned to Arte with a sneer. "Look kid, it's your new forever home." Arte straightened in his seat. "Look Marty, the dumbass finally perked up. You think he figured out he's about to die." The pair laughed together.

Arte stared between them. "What's that?" He motioned with his chin.

"It's a lake you--" Fred shut up and snapped his eyes forward when a metal figure dropped on the hood with a crunch. It pulled an oversized handgun from its hip and shot out the engine block.

Fred slammed the brakes and skidded to a stop, while the figure floated inches away from the swerving car. Fred drew a gun from his hip the moment they settled, but the figure was too fast. It landed by the driver side and ripped the door off with its bare hands. Fred fumbled with his weapon, trying to turn it on his attacker, but it was yanked from his grip and crushed.

The figure pulled Fred out of his chair and threw him down the embankment, where he tumbled into a heap on the bottom. Marty, meanwhile, regained enough sense to scramble out the passenger seat. The figure didn't bother hopping over or around the cab, and instead waded through.

The gangster pulled a pistol as he backed away and brought it on target. He popped off two shots, which bounced harmlessly off the figure's metal skin, and was then thumped in the gut and tossed unceremoniously into the grass.

The figure returned to the car and pried the rear door free, giving them access to Arte. They held out a hand, and with a scratchy electronic voice said, "Come with me if you want to live."

Arte looked at them and replied, "Am I being kidnapped from my kidnapping?" The figure sagged. "Also, my arms are tied."

"Whatever," the figure said. They hoisted Arte onto their shoulders, then took off down the road. "Finally get a chance to use that line...."

"So... what are you doing?" Arte huffed between their bounding strides.

"Give it a minute. I'll explain when we're airborne."

"I hope you aren't planning to fly away with me on your shoulder."

Instead of answer, the figure motioned with their free hand. In response, a sleek aircraft dropped from the sky and landed into a hover in front of them. A wide door slid open and they jumped through, landing on the metal floor of a room with matching ceiling and walls. The hatch snapped shut and then they were soaring together into the sky. The figure walked to a panel in the far right corner and tapped, revealing a padded bench, then proceeded to gently deposit Arte on top, freeing his arms in the process.

"Sorry for the sack of potatoes routine," they said. The figure put their hands to their head and pulled off the helmet, revealing a short haired woman with tan skin and green eyes. "It's surprisingly difficult to be graceful when lugging someone out of danger."

Arte had a dumbfounded look plastered on his face.

"Not what you expected?" the woman said with a sly grin. "Name's Mae, by the way."

"I thought you were a robot!"

Mar laughed. "Well, to be fair, the suit does most of the work." She tapped a panel on her wrist a few times, then her armor hissed open with a few clicks and clacks. She stepped out, and the suit collapsed into a tidy package the size of a carryon luggage. She was wearing a form fitting one piece underneath. "I hope you're not disappointed there's a pilot."

"Just surprised when you pulled your head off," Arte said. "And I suppose when you showed up too. What are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious? I came to rescue you."

"So... they really were going to kill me?"

Mae softened. "Yes, most likely. Were you frightened?"

Arte looked down. "More confused, to be honest. I'm not doing anything special, so why has everything gotten crazy all of a sudden?"

"Is that a serious question?"

"What? Ah, I mean, no, not really. I'm... a little lost right now. What exactly happened here, and who are you?"

"Like I said, I'm Mae, and I'm a Solver," she said. "A Solver being someone who, well, solves problems. Often of a martial nature, though I've certainly handled my fair share of mountain rescues and island castaways." She laughed. "I even once rescued a cat from a tree."

"In power armor?"

"Well, it was a bengal tiger and a redwood, but still. Quite the story, that one."

Arte smiled.

"Ah, good, you're perking up. Would you like me to find you a counselor? Situations like this can be very traumatic, and it's helpful to get on top of that quickly."

"Why are you here?"

Mae gave him a playful look, but turned serious when she met his eyes. "How do you mean?"

"It's not like you happened to stumble across me being driven away, so there must be some other reason. What is it?"

"Psa Psa hired me to extricate you from the situation."

"And how did *they* know I needed rescuing?"

"If you didn't contact them, and can't think of someone who did, then it must have

been Cybel."

"And who is *that* supposed to be? I'm certain I never met her."

"I think 'what' might be more appropriate, but in any case, Cybel is a kind of computer system. I... am unsure exactly what her purpose is--I've heard it different ways--but what she does is provide alerts to associations when a member is in danger."

"What!" Arte said. "I'm being spied on?"

"Monitored, I'd say."

"There's a difference?"

"One of them you sign up for? You match the profile, at least."

"I... don't remember doing that."

"Really?" Mae said. "That's odd. I don't think Cybel will do it unless you opted in explicitly. Maybe we can pull up your contract with Psa Psa and see if anything shakes out."

"My... contract?"

"Yeah, how membership in an association works is written out. It should be available somewhere in your account, though I'm not a member of Psa Psa so we'll have to poke around."

Arte patted his pockets, then said, "Is that something I need my phone to get to? Because I don't have it right now."

"No, that's fine. I'm sure we can log in through any terminal with web access." She tapped open a couple wall panels, revealing a screen and keyboard as well as another bench across from Arte which she sat on. "This one should do the trick."

After a few minutes of searching, while Arte learned how to navigate the unfamiliar interface, and some hassle, with Arte confirming his identity without his phone or password, they were able to reach his Psa Psa account. Mae guided him through a few menus, then pointed to a line on the monitor.

"See, 'Real Time Risk Status Service' is selected," she said. "You must have picked it when you signed up. You can even look at the terms of service right there."

Arte tapped through and scanned the document. "Wait a second.... This... this is how Maribel knew I'd been taken by the CPD, isn't it?"

"Most likely. It also sends messages to your phone." Mae laughed. "Usually when you're doing some damn fool thing you know you shouldn't."

"What did you mean by 'I match the profile' anyway?"

"Here, back out one level, then tap 'Do I need this?' and I wager it'll answer that for you."

Arte did so, which opened a small questionnaire with the fields already filled in.

On it, Arte indicated he was single, friendless, had no available relatives, did not have a dangerous occupation, and would be living in a Yellow Zone. "What's this mean?" He pointed at the last item.

"A Yellow Zone is an area without many associates, in contrast to a Blue Zone, where most everyone is in one. There's also Red Zones, places in active conflict, but I doubt you'll be heading to any of them. You can also think of it as federal territory versus associated territory, though that drastically oversimplifies things, in my opinion."

"There's that word again," Arte said. "Federal. Maribel didn't know what it meant."

"Maribel? You mean your Psa Psa rep, right?" Mae said, then laughed after Arte nodded. "Yeah, I'll bet she *pretended* she didn't."

"What do you mean?"

"Association reps are expected to 'play nice' with feds, and in particular not to give them the impression we're 'hostile' to them. Everyone acts like federals are dominant military powers, but that hasn't been true for decades. I say we tell them to piss off, then let them try some of their old world bullshit and see what happens. We could put those fuckers down like--" Mae squeaked and blushed. "Ah... I mean, never mind. Pretend I didn't say that."

Arte laughed. "Why?"

"I already lost my Tranquil Heart once, and the Council frowns on war talk."

"Tranquil Heart?"

"Oh, right, you're basically an outsider, ain't ya?" Mae said. "It's a special award for making a habit of solving hard problems without violence."

"Didn't you toss someone into a ditch?"

Mae grinned. "I mean, relative to the demands of your job." She chuckled. "Let's say there's a reason I'm a Solver now, and if wasn't a passion for space flight."

Arte froze, then stuttered, "A-are you implying... you dropped from orbit to rescue me?"

"Sure did!" She beamed. "It's fun... after your first drop." She muttered an additional, "Or fifteenth."

"That's so cool! What's it like?"

"Turbulent," she said with a playful smirk.

"I bet." Arte settled for a few seconds, then snorted a laugh. "I think we digressed."

"Well, *somebody* is awful curious," Mae said, then looked up. "And, you know, someone else might have gone on an angry tangent when you asked about federals."

"You do seem to have strong feelings."

Mae sighed. "I've had more experience than most, and my grandfather summed them up best. Federals are larcenous thugs with delusions of grandeur, and their people are a battered spouse cranked up to eleven."

"That doesn't sound impartial."

"It's charitable. I've seen those bastards stand by while cities were ransacked and terrorized, then throw the whole weight of their crooked gang after anyone who complained. So you know what? Fuck 'em. I won't pretend for an instant I don't hate their guts."

"That sounds rough," Arte said.

"Ah, sorry." Mae patted his arm. "I started ranting again."

"How did you end up spending so much time with them? Do you live in a yellow thing?"

"No." Mae shrugged. "I'd probably be more evenhanded if I did. I mostly interact with feds as part of my job, usually in the form of rescuing associates with more ambition than wisdom. There's big money to be made in conflicts between federals, and no shortage of plucky businessmen looking for their take."

"There are different federals?"

"In name, sure, and some of them are less blatant with their bullshit than others, but I swear to God every last one thinks the world should be their exclusive dominion."

"Dominion?"

"The ones telling everyone how to live."

"Sounds like a bother," Arte said. "It's hard enough managing my own life."

Mae laughed. "Anyway, as much as I love teaching my young pup the ways of the world, we have to discuss your future."

"We do? You're not taking me home?"

"So I can swoop in to rescue you again? As fun as it sounds, no thanks. They call me a Solver because I solve problems, not prolong them."

"But I don't even know what the problem is," Arte said.

"Just tell me everything that's happened, and we'll see what I can figure out."

Arte and Mae spent some time going over Arte's last couple of days.

Mae pondered his story for a few minutes, then said, "The obvious solution is, 'Move to a different city.' You could resettle in any Blue Zone and this would never bother you again."

"But I like my life where it is," Arte sighed. "Do I really have to move?"

Mae hemmed and made a vague gesture.

"Is that a yes or no?"

"It... depends," Mae answered. She pulled a thin tablet from her waist and started poking around.

"What are you checking?"

"I suppose we could have looked in your account"--she motioned to the terminal--"but I want to see if you have High Water." She continued navigating her device.

"High... Water?"

"As in, 'Come Hell or High Water.' Basically, if you have a problem, and you have High Water, your insurance will move heaven and earth, possibly literally, to get your life back the way it was. Most people don't, because it's a ridiculous waste of money, but my boss would be pissed if I bullied you into a substitute and I--"she deflated. "Well bugger it all, you *do* have it."

"I do?"

She glared at him. "You're with Psa Psa, right? Which of their rip-off plans are you on, anyway?"

"They're a rip-off?" Arte yelped.

Mae huffed. "Well, I hate to besmirch everyone's favorite Psa Psa, but their damn 'bundles' always include a bunch of crap no one needs." She added with a mutter,

"Like High Water."

"S-should I switch?"

She sighed. "It's not my job to tell you who to do business with, generally, but I sort of want to look at your plan anyway, if you don't mind."

"Uh... sure?" Arte motioned to the terminal. Mae switched over to his bench, then spent a few seconds scrolling through the menu.

"'Platinum Deluxe'," she scoffed, then tapped through to look at its contents. "Might as well call it 'kitchen sink'," she muttered. She swiped down a few more times to the price, then jumped from her seat like she brushed a live wire. "Holy shit!"

"What?" Arte looked up in alarm.

"Are you spending your whole fucking salary?"

"N... no?" Arte said. "If I understand everything right, I think it's only half."

Mae shook her head. "First, your pay is insane, and second, even a tenth of that would be unthinkable to most people. You could have gone with a much cheaper option, even from Psa Psa."

"If I had, would they have sent you to rescue me?"

Mae froze, her hand awkwardly hanging with two counts locked in place. "Ah... maybe?" She looked off. "Well, fine, you got me there. Still, what are you doing for

a living to support a bill like that?"

"I'm a service technician for AutoChefs."

"That's a glorified janitor!" Mae said. "God... suddenly, living in a yellow zone doesn't sound so bad."

"I do really like it," Arte said.

Mae smiled, then sighed. "Alright, I guess it's settled. I'll do what I can, but for the record, this will *not* be easy."

"I'm still stuck trying to understand what the problem is," Arte said. "I know we went over everything, but you seemed to understand a lot more than I told."

"I'm not *one hundred* percent sure, but I think I have the right idea. Do you remember that man with the CPD? The one in the black suit?"

"Yeah, Seig."

"He's most likely an Admin for the CSA," Mae said.

"Which means?"

"Well, CSA stands for 'Citizen Safety Administration.' It's... a merger of a corporation and the federals on this continent, and they operate this thing called the Safe Citizen Program. To be honest, I don't know exactly what it's supposed to be, but I do know Admins are the lame federal version of a Solver."

"If we're being impartial."

Mae grinned. "Of course."

"But why was this Admin guy working with those police guys and the Night Owls? I mean, Seig really wanted me to talk about them, but it looks like he could have asked Gale. Do you think he doesn't know his friend is in their club?"

Mae laughed. "God, Arte, you are so cute." Arte blushed, and she continued, "I'm very confident Gale is an Admin too, who infiltrated the Night Owls for the CSA. From what you said about their conversation, it looks like the CSA is planning a terrorist attack, and setting up the Night Owls to take the blame."

"And a terrorist attack is...?"

"Someone blows something up and kills a bunch of people to scare federals into changing a policy."

"Didn't... didn't you say the CSA was part of the federals? If they wanted to change something couldn't they, you know, just do it?"

Mae shrugged. "Apparently it's not that easy."

"Why?"

She pursed her lips and hummed, then said, "To be clear, I don't know a whole lot about federal internals, but from what I understand they have a popularity contest

to decide who's in charge. My guess is someone in the CSA, or whatever, wants to empower someone their people won't like."

"Are you suggesting someone is willing to kill... to make people like them?"

"More or less," Mae said.

Arte frowned. "Isn't that... bad? Shouldn't we stop them?"

"You are *so* adorable!" She chuckled and blushed, looking off. "But, I mean, technically, no one is paying me to solve stupid federal problems. If 'citizens' don't like the treatment, they're welcome to join an association."

Arte sagged. "So we're not going to help?"

Mae grinned. "On the other hand, if the attack happens it might not be safe for you to live here ever again. The CSA is bound to dislike the idea of leaving someone alive who knows what they did."

"You'll help?"

"I'll try," Mae said. "But I can't make any promises, and even if we pull it off, there's no guarantee they won't try again later."

"Is there *some*way to prevent that?"

"Frankly, no. Even if we neutralize everyone behind this, there's no shortage of federals who'll think exactly the same thing. As long as the system exists this kind

of bullshit is possible. And before you ask, no, I can't destroy the system, and wouldn't if I could."

"I... I wasn't going to ask," Arte said. "But, out of curiosity, why not?"

"Even if we ignore the backlash, aka, I would be starting a war, it's not my place to tell people how to live, or what groups they can be a part of."

Arte sighed. "I wish there was at least *something* we could do."

"Oh, I wouldn't say there's *nothing*." Her eyes flashed with mischief. "If, during the process of unraveling this little conspiracy, we happen to collect some compelling evidence of the CSA's plot, well, we could always spread it around a bit, you know?"

"Will that help?"

"A little," Mae said. "At the very least it should motivate some people to leave the federals and join an association. Enough of that and eventually the feds will be a bunch of jerks in a room bossing themselves around."

Arte laughed. "Do you have a plan?"

"I have the beginnings of one, but in order to get a handle on this we need information."

"And how are we going to get that?" Arte asked.

"That's easy," Mae said. "We join the Night Owls."

Chapter 3

"I'm glad you could make it," said the woman. She was wearing a bulky set of dark clothing, the kind designed to throw off body ID systems. It was similar to what Night Owls used for meetings.

"I... I wasn't sure I should," Lenore said. They were standing in a basement level pump-room on the edge of Old City, which she had been invited to by a mysterious woman at the cafe earlier that day. Judging by her voice, and the situation, she supposed it was likely that woman and this one were one and the same. "I don't even know how you knew who I was. Are you a Night Owl?"

"No, but I'm trying to be. As for how I knew, well...." She motioned to another figure standing in the shadows.

They walked into the light, waved awkwardly, then said, "Hi Lenore, or, uh, do you prefer Angel?"

His voice sounded familiar, but she wasn't able to place it. Apparently, the man could read the confusion on her face, because he quickly fumbled his mask off. Angel gasped. "Arte? What are you doing here?"

"We need your help," he said.

"What's going on? Who are you really?"

Arte frowned. "I'm... just me." He shrugged, then motioned to the woman, who removed her mask at the gesture. "And that's Mae, she's a Solver. As for why you're here, well, I realized where I knew your voice from after we parted in Old City. I would have come to you in the coffee shop, but the CSA wants to kill me."

"T-they want to *kill* you?" Angel said. She shook her head and laughed. "That's crazy."

"More specifically," Mae said. "They already tried to kill him."

"And *who* are you?" Angel said.

"Like Arte said, I'm Mae, a Solver."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"It's like being a mercenary."

"A... mercenary?" Angel said. "A-are we being invaded?"

"No, she's here to protect me from the CSA," Arte said. "Remember?"

"I... don't understand. Why do you have a mercenary? Couldn't you go to the police?"

"For starters," Mae said, "they're working with the police, so it's doubtful he could trust them. For second, Arte isn't entitled to 'service' from the police anyway."

"W-what? That's nonsense. Everyone's--"

"He's a Class B," Mae said. "Like me."

Angel squeaked and jumped to a nearby wall, shrinking as much as possible. Her eyes darted to the nearby door. "A-a-a... a C-Class B?"

"That's what people tell me," Arte said. "But I don't know why they keep freaking out about it."

Angel didn't answer, instead choosing to spend her focus keeping cool. After a few awkward seconds of silence, where it was clear she had no intention of explaining her feelings, Mae stepped in and said, "Federals, when they aren't pretending we don't exist, do everything in their power to portray us as terrorists, vagabonds, criminals, and various other flavors of nefarious ne'er-do-wells. Clearly their people bought into it."

Mae smirked and continued, "And as for the federals themselves, who should know better?" A wicked gleam flashed in her eyes. "Let's say they blinked."

Arte hemmed, bemused and bewildered. "H-how does that work? Are... are associates secretly mean or something? Maribel was so nice, who could think she was a villain?"

Mae broke down laughing. "God... Arte. How are you so fucking cute?" She settled enough to continue. "Anyway, associates are regular people. I'm sure we have our share of creeps, but the feds *are*, in fact, lying their ass off."

"Sh... shouldn't people be able to, you know, go look?"

"Federals prohibit travel into 'unsecured' areas."

"Th... There isn't a *prohibition*," Angel said. She started warming up to the idea this pair of Class B's were harmless. "It's just... unsafe."

Mae shrugged. "Well, none of them do it, so the 'not a ban' has apparently proven quite successful. I couldn't care less what bullshit you tell yourself to feel good about it."

"It's not bullshit! The Safe Citizen Program allowed our country to flourish like never before."

"What part of 'I don't care' did you fail to get?"

"Don't come to me with your bad attitude asking for help," Angel snapped. "If you-- you *Class B's* can't handle whatever problem *you* got yourselves into, I don't see why *I* should care."

"If I had *my* way," Mae started. "I would take Arte and lea--"

"Mae! Please," Arte said.

Mae huffed, then turned and sighed. "Whatever. Just explain the situation."

Arte took a few steps closer to Angel. His soft eyes and earnest expression cooled her anger. "The reason the CSA wants me dead isn't because of something I did," he said. "It's because of something they'll do."

"What are you talking about?"

Arte frowned and hummed. "I don't understand it myself, but apparently Gale is going to do some terror thing and blame it on the Night Owls."

"Gale!" Angel yelled. "You're out of your mind. He's our most dedicated member. If it wasn't for him the Night Owls wouldn't do anything at all"

"That's the point," Mae said. "He infiltrated your group to manipulate them into doing something stupid, then the CSA swoops in and cleans up the mess, and who knows what they do after."

Angel shook her head. "This... this is impossible. I don't know what your plan is, but I won't have you turning us against each other." She started to march for the door, but stopped when Arte cried out.

"Wait! Please," he said. "Before you leave, can you hear me out? I don't know who exactly Gale is, but he's working with bad people."

Angel grit her teeth, fighting the conflicting urge to storm out the room, or else scream and attack the pair who'd thrown her into disarray. If there really was... if Gale was.... She trembled and looked away. "F-fine. Talk."

Arte released a tense breath. "Thanks." He launched into an explanation of what happened to him since Old City, in particular what he heard from Gale and Seig in their meeting, as well as the men from Thirteen. Mae chimed in with a few supporting details, covering for Arte's general lack of knowledge about things like Admins and Policemen.

When they finished, Angel slumped against the wall, too stunned to speak for several minutes. Her companions seemed to sense her need to process. She didn't want to believe it. Gale was... he was really something special. She'd never met anyone with his fire or vision.

The idea he could be an Admin, after his passionate speeches about the CSA's corruption by greedy mega-corps, about how now was their time, about the urgency and moral imperative of their mission.... It couldn't be possible.

But Arte.... She looked at him. He had an earnest expression. Somewhat hopeful, somewhat sad. She didn't know him well, but he seemed entirely too unsophisticated to lie, almost painfully naive.

"I... I still," Angel started quietly. "This is so hard to believe." She shook her head. "And I don't understand why. What are you trying to accomplish?"

"We're trying to stop the attack," Arte said.

"Actually, I'm keeping Arte safe," Mae said. "And if I had my way I'd ship him to the nearest Blue Zone and leave you to your fate."

"Well, why don't you," Angel said with her best attempt at vitriol.

Mae sighed. "It's a long story, but in short, because he insisted."

"And that's... normal?"

"More or less," Mae said. "I am a Solver, after all. That means I solve problems, not run from them."

"A... are you sure this isn't a misunderstanding?"

"We laid out the facts. If you have another interpretation, I'd love to hear it."

Angel paused, hoping something would come to mind, but she had to admit, even if Arte was wrong about what he heard, the fact Gale met with an Admin was troubling. She took a deep breath, then said, "I'm not prepared to believe Gale is a traitor, but... I don't think you're lying either. Isn't there some way we can clear this up?"

"In fact, I believe there is." Mae smiled. "But first, tell me everything you know about Gale."

Angel hummed. "Not much, to be honest. He was basically running the local branch when I joined. He's passionate, and... perhaps a bit frustrated. None of the other members are very enthusiastic, and in spite of being Night Owls for years it wasn't until Gale came along they started meeting in person."

"Did he ever suggest violent action?"

"No, of course not," Angel said quickly, then, "Well, not exactly. He was always telling us we had to be... *proactive*. And I'd say he considered our cause a matter of life and death." She looked away and frowned thoughtfully, then shook her head.

Mae studied her a moment, then asked, "Is there any specific person or place he was concerned with?"

"No, or, well, actually..."--she eyed Mae warily, but couldn't sense an ulterior motive--"there was something recently, at our meeting yesterday. He said he found a way to prove everything the OLS has been saying. He was looking for volunteers, but I... was too nervous to chime in."

"What's the OLS?" Arte asked.

"The One Law Society," Angel said. "It's a political party that believes the Safe Citizen Program has been abused to create a two tier legal system. The Night Owls are technically a part of them."

Arte nodded, perhaps a little too vigorously. "Ah, yes, I see."

Mae laughed and shook her head, then said to Angel, "Is there any way you can arrange a meeting with Gale? If he's looking for someone to help with an op, that might be my chance to find out what he's up too."

"What if he isn't doing anything wrong?" Angel said. "You aren't going to turn around and sell us out, are you?"

Mae gave her a flat look. "Of course not. Like I said, all I care about is keeping Arte safe. Strictly speaking, it doesn't matter if he *is* up to no good, or screwing you guys over. What I know is that when Arte walked in on him and Seig, men from Thirteen came to kill him. If Gale's doing something he'll leave Arte out of, then my work here is done."

"I don't know if that's reassuring or insulting."

Mae sighed. "Look, tell you what, if Gale's plan is actually legit, and won't put Arte in danger, I'll help get it done."

"Really!"

"Free of charge, even, but I doubt that's the case," Mae said. "Now, can you get us a meeting?"

"I... I think so," Angel said. "I'll have to check the board."

Chapter 4

Gale watched three figures enter the room. One of them turned at the door and backed into the adjacent shadows, the others strolled into the center, stopping a few feet from him. Everyone here was wearing full body suits and a face mask, although there was a clear difference between Angel and her guests. The stranger's disguises were an exotic, vaguely foreign design.

"These the one's you mentioned, Angel?" Gale said.

She nodded. "Yes, Mable and Beltran." She motioned to Mae and Arte respectively. "They said they want to help."

He looked them over carefully. This was a surprising display of initiative from the girl, given she was as passive as the others. Although she did, at least, possess a modicum of enthusiasm. "And where did you find this pair of 'promising' recruits?"

"They found me," Angel said.

Gale frowned. As far as he knew, no one discovered and joined the Night Owls without an invitation from an existing member. He wondered if that meant the two were very capable, or if Angel's op-sec was terrible. "And how did they manage

that?"

Mae stepped forward. "My partner and I are in the business of, ah, retrieving lost property. There are certain... restrictions, that make life needlessly difficult. In our search for potential solutions we discovered your organization, and feel we have a natural alignment of interests."

"Lost property?"

"Yes, you might say in particular those errant goods found amongst another's effects."

Gale hummed. A thief? He didn't appreciate working with her kind, though he supposed she couldn't be worse than Thirteen, and probably more competent to boot. The idiots tasked with disposing the meddlesome Class B went and wrecked their car on the way back. It left too much of a trail for his taste.

He shook his head. Now wasn't the time to think of that, instead he said, "It sounds like you're trying to use us."

"That's one way to put it," Mae said playfully. "Though the real question is if you can find a use for me too."

Gale smirked, suddenly curious how she looked under the bulky robes. He pushed the thought aside, and said, "That depends on how good you are."

"I found one of your Night Owls, did I not?"

"You make a fair point, though I have my doubts."

"Then the question would be, is there some item you need 'returned' which I might retrieve to prove my worth?"

Gale paused. There was something, though it might be unwise to bring it up. He developed a healthy level of paranoia during his career, and this woman showing up at the right time seemed too perfect to be a coincidence. On the other hand, he didn't see how anyone could have formed a plan in response to his own. He only recently floated the idea past the Night Owls, and hadn't gone into specifics.

He supposed he should let things play out. Plus, if they went along with the next stage, the problem would sort itself out. He said, "You've come at an opportune moment. There does happen to be something I'm in need of." When the woman perked in interest, he continued, "How do you feel about the CSA?"

"Something of a bother," Mae said.

"And how do you feel about the inside of one of their data centers?"

Mae paused, then said, "Somewhat more of a bother."

"Too much for your skills?"

"I didn't say *that*, certainly, though it would be a big ask. If you don't mind my asking, what is it you feel you've misplaced."

"There is... a hard drive," Gale said. "Though the conditions for its removal are

rather particular. You see, it's not enough to find the right drive in a specific rack, but there will be a narrow timeframe to retrieve it."

Mae crossed her arms. "You need me to do it blindfolded too?"

Gale laughed. "I admit it won't be easy, but I have something that should help." He pulled a thumb drive from a hidden pocket. "This contains a special program that, when plugged into the right terminal, will neutralize all security systems in any CSA facility for thirty minutes."

"That's quite the potent trinket," Mae said. "Not the sort of thing any old dissident could get their hands on. You must have very powerful friends."

Gale suppressed a laugh. She had no idea. Instead, he said, "I have my ways."

"It does bring a question to mind," Mae said. "Namely, why someone so capable, and connected, can't handle the retrieval himself."

"I have many skills," Gale said. "But, ah, 'lost property' is not one of them. There's no value in being sent to a federal prison without getting the drive."

"Then you are lucky I happened upon your organization when I did."

"Maybe a little too lucky."

Mae laughed. "You don't trust a pair of strangers who dropped into your lap at the perfect moment?"

"I'll admit it is *rather* convenient," Gale said.

"That's fair, though I'm not sure you have much choice. That program of yours will not stay viable forever, even if we assume limitless flexibility on the timing of your 'retrieval'."

Gale hummed. She was right, of course. The program relied on a few unpatched exploits in the federal data center security infrastructure. It wouldn't be the end of the world to waste it, so he might as well spend it testing the woman and her partner. "That's a compelling point."

"Then it's settled," Mae said, holding out her hand. "You let us handle this, and when we're finished, we can explore the, ah, full extent of our relationship."

"I look forward to it," Gale said, handing over the thumb drive. "I have a specific facility in mind, and I trust you can find your own way there."

"Of course," Mae said. They spent several minutes going over various details, then parted ways. Mae took Angel and Arte on a long, circuitous route, calculated to throw off hidden pursuit as well as to confound the autonomous tracking of the CSA surveillance network. Eventually, they arrived at Mae's aircraft, where she ushered the other two inside before joining them.

Angel looked around in awe while she removed her disguise, then asked, "How did you manage to land so close to the city?"

"The Raptor is equipped with very sophisticated stealth capabilities," Mae answered, then laughed. "Most of which I couldn't tell you about if I wanted to. All

I know is it takes the most advanced sensor systems to detect it, and only within certain ranges."

"That's incredible. And you can fly this thing? It barely looks like any aircraft I've ever seen."

"Me? No, I wouldn't have the foggiest. The Raptor is a fully autonomous transport. It's mostly used by Solvers, although a few are owned by security companies."

Angel shook her head. She tried to say something, but wasn't able to pick out a coherent thought. Instead, she joined Arte on a bench Mae deployed from the wall. The Solver took up a position opposite them.

"Is it actually possible to get into that data thing?" Arte said. "It sounds like one of those important places no one wants you inside of."

"It should be easy enough," Mae said. "It's been done before by other Solvers, although not for the CSA in particular. Still, these facilities all have the same layouts, so I can grab the schematics off the net and see how other operations were done."

Angel perked up. "Wait, really? I've never heard of that."

Mae smiled playfully. "That's because they made sure they weren't noticed." She pulled down a terminal and started working on it. "Anyway, you kids sit tight. I'm going to do some research and come up with a plan."

Angel and Arte spent a few minutes in silence, before Angel turned to Arte. "I've

been wondering," she said. "How were you able to afford a mercenary? This cannot be cheap."

Arte shrugged. "I don't really understand myself. I guess it's included with my Psa Psa membership."

"Saw Saw'?"

"Yeah, it's spelled p-s-a p-s-a. It's short for, uh, a bunch of stuff, but it's something called a private social association."

"Is it, like, your government?"

"What's a government?"

"I, uh... what?"

"It's a gang of federals," Mae said over her screen, before returning to work.

"It is not!" Angel snapped. She seethed at Mae, who ignored her.

"Well, what is it?" Arte said.

Angel settled, and turned to Arte. He had an earnest, curious expression. "It's... complicated."

"Lots of things are complicated," he answered.

She sighed and pursed her lips, taking a moment to think. Finally, she said, "A government is the organization that makes the laws for your country." Arte gave her a bemused look that was not encouraging. "What?"

"Does law mean something different to you?" he said. "Because I'm thinking of things like gravity, and I'm pretty sure those laws made themselves."

Angel was stunned a few seconds, then broke down laughing. "Ah, yes, those are laws too, but I meant the rules people have to live by." She settled, then turned to Arte and sighed. "You're still giving me that look."

"Sorry," he said. "I... I'm not sure I get it. What did you mean by 'have to'?" Angel returned her own bewildered look. "Like, there's very little a person naturally *has to* do, arguably nothing, depending on what they want, right? It sounds like this governing thing makes choices for you, but that can't be it."

Angel gestured vaguely, then said, "I suppose it kind of does, actually."

"What?" Arte said. It almost came out as a yelp. "How does that make sense? Shouldn't you know what you want better than anyone?"

"It's not about what I want, it's about what's good for society."

"What does that even mean?"

"You know, like, everyone."

"How is someone who can't figure out what you want, supposed to figure out what

everyone wants? I don't think problems gets easier as they get bigger."

"It... it doesn't make *all* your choices, and it isn't quite like that anyway."

"Then how *does* it work?"

Angel sighed. "It's... comp--"she cut her self off, then shook her head. "Alright, maybe if I start from the beginning. So, the government creates a bunch of rules, right? We'll ignore the process for now, and suppose they make them, and publish them."

"What kind of rules?"

"You know, like, don't kill people, or rob them."

"You need someone to tell you that?" Arte gave her a wary look.

"N-no, I-I mean, they decide how those things will be handled. Like, figuring out who did it, and making sure they're punished."

"Okay, I guess that makes sense," Arte said. "Is that the only kind of rules they make? I don't see why you need to keep some fancy gang around for that."

"It's not a gang," Angel said. "And no, they also make other laws."

"Like?"

"Uh, well, there's... a lot of them. Like, you need to pay your taxes, pay employees

a certain amount, and there's regulations for how businesses can operate."

"That sounds... expansive. How many of these rules are there?"

"I don't know, to be honest."

"You... don't know?" Arte said. "Is that normal?"

"Yes," Angel said. "Generally, you need to hire a lawyer if you want to know what all the laws are, and different fields require different kinds of lawyer."

"You need a professional to know what your rules are?" Arte sounded alarmed at the prospect.

"What," Angel snapped. "Are you saying your people don't have lawyers?"

Arte shrugged. "Not that I know of. Mae?"

The Solver looked over her screen, her face a mixture of amused and annoyed.

"Given that associates really only have one rule, 'To accept responsibility for your actions,' I can't imagine why we'd need to hire some guy to tell us that. The closest I can think of is an advocate, who can help in a dispute by doing research and arguing on your behalf, but, from my admittedly limited knowledge of lawyers, advocates are both cheaper and nicer, and often included with your membership dues regardless."

"Well, whatever," Angel said. "We have lawyers, what's your point?"

Arte shrugged. "Mostly it sounded like you had so many rules you couldn't keep track of them. I thought that couldn't be true, but apparently it is."

Angel huffed. "I... I suppose it could be said we have a few too many. But still, whatever, everything works out well enough, even if it's a pain in the ass, depending on what you're trying to do."

"If that's alright with you, I can't complain. I mean, it doesn't sound remotely appealing, but it isn't my problem. I do have a related question though." He glanced at Angel, who motioned for him to go ahead. "These rules of yours... why do people follow them?"

Angel paused to consider the question. She'd given up any hope of it being a joke. It seemed the earnest young man really didn't know a thing about how society worked. After a minute or so, she said, "This is a very simplified description, but the basic process is that if you break a law, the police will come and arrest you."

"You mean that kidnapping thing?" Arte said.

Angel started to object, but cut herself off and sighed. "Close enough. Anyway, after you're arrested, they'll charge you with a crime, and then you have to go to court where it's their job to prove you're guilty. If they decide you are, then you get punished."

Arte hummed. "I guess that sounds good enough for murderers or whatever, but it sounded like your law things covered a lot more than that. Like, I dunno, you said they had rules for operating a business. That includes farming, I assume?" He glanced at Angel, who nodded. "Okay, so, if your government people decided a

guy needed to grow one kind of plant, and he decided to grow another, they would go kidnap him, with all the guns and yelling and stuff?"

"Ah, well, there are, um, other things they might do, uh, first, but yes, I suppose it could come down to that."

"And if the guy didn't want to be kidnapped, they would shoot him?"

"N-no, I mean, maybe if he was resisting that, you know, might happen, depending on how things worked out."

"Do they get punished afterwards?" Arte said. "I mean those police people. I'm pretty sure murder is worse than botany."

"Well, no, the police would be defending themselves, you know?"

"They escalated the situation in the first place," Arte said. Angel did not at all like the look of vague disgust.

"That... I mean, technically." Angel shook her head. "The police need a different standard, in order to do their job."

"I... don't see how that's acceptable."

"It's necessary," Angel said. "And besides, things like that don't ever *really* happen anyway."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Arte said. "No one wants to get shot over a plant. I meant even as a

possibility. Who would subject themselves to something so... crazy."

"It's how things are, okay!" Angel snapped. Arte recoiled and she softened. "Ah, sorry. I... didn't mean to yell."

Arte shrugged. "Well, whatever. I don't get it, but I guess everyone has their own reasons for why they do things." He gave her a cautious look. "If you don't mind my asking, how does the CSA fit into all this?"

"They are supposed to manage the Safe Citizen Program," Angel said. "Although lately they've been acting more like the enforcement arm of some big tech conglomerates."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, there isn't exactly proof of it," Angel said. "But the OLS believes members of the companies providing equipment and software for the SCP get leniency in calculating their Safety Score, and as a result they effectively have special legal privileges not available to the common man."

Arte hummed and looked off, drumming his fingers on the table for a minute.

"Does 'legal' have something to do with that rule stuff?"

"Right, sorry," Angel said. "I keep forgetting you don't know anything about this. But anyway, yes, I meant they had an easier time dealing with laws. Well, allegedly. There isn't *supposed* to be any kind of advantage in the courts for having a good Safety Score. That's what the 'One Law' in the One Law Society is referring to."

"And the Night Owls are a part of that?"

"Yes, exactly. The OLS seeks to address the issue by political means, whereas the Night Owls are meant to take direct action."

"Direct action?" Arte said.

"Well, admittedly we don't do a lot, but some Night Owl branches plaster signs on walls, or stage protests outside CSA offices. You know, trying to amplify the message however we can, even if we have to skirt the rules a little."

"I get that. I mean, if the rules are an obstacle to doing the right thing, then they probably aren't good rules to begin with, don't you think?"

"Yes, exactly," Angel said. She looked down and added, softly, "Although I suppose Class Bs don't have to deal with a lot of rules in the first place."

Arte laughed. "Honestly, I'm surprised I even know what a rule is."

Mae poked her head up and said, "That has more to do with your weird life than anything related to being an associate," then returned to her research.

Angel laughed, and said, "I was wondering if all Class Bs were like him."

Arte blushed and mumbled, "I can't help how I am." He straightened out, made a show of brushing down his coveralls, then turned to Angel and said, "A-anyway, what's a Safety Score?"

"It's a measure of how safe you are," she said. After a few seconds of a blank stare from Arte, she sighed and said, "It's easier to show than tell, but I need my phone for that."

"You don't have it with you?"

"No, of course not," Angel said. "Traveling into Old City costs a few points, and besides, you don't want one on you when doing sneaky stuff."

"Ah, okay," Arte said. "I guess I'll keep that in mind, after I get another phone." A perplexed look landed on his face, and after a moment he said to Mae, "How am I going to do that anyway? For that matter, how am I going to tell Crown to cancel my shifts?"

"You'll have to order one," Mae said. "And I already took care of alerting your job." She pushed down the screen on her terminal, laying it flat. "Also, I think I figured out how we're going to do this."

"We?" Angel said. "You mean you aren't doing it alone?"

"No, even with Solvers it took three people. This virus"--she held up Gale's thumb drive--"is powerful, but not enough to turn this into a solo operation."

"Well, still, why not call in reinforcements. I mean, Arte's whatever already sent one mercenary, what's one more?"

"That would make it easier," Mae said. "But unfortunately there isn't enough time. It's very rare for anyone to need a Solver in North America, so I was the only one

on call. HQ didn't think it worth it, so no one else was deployed. With no one in the station it would take days to get someone out here. Gale insisted we needed to fetch the data tomorrow, so we'll have to do it ourselves."

"Can it be done with only the two of you?" Angel said.

Mae smiled. "Of course not. That's why you're helping too."

"Are you crazy! I-I can't...." Angel shook her head. "There's no way."

"Sorry kid, you're drafted. Even if Gale is squeaky clean, or rather especially, this is a Night Owl mission. The least you can do is contribute."

Angel withdrew into her corner. "I.... It's...."

Mae reached over and patted her arm. "It'll be fine, sweetheart. You won't do anything dangerous."

Angel was not convinced, but Mae's soft voice settled the beat of her heart. And besides, the woman had a point. This was her chance to finally take action. If she turned this down, there was never any point in joining the Night Owls at all. She'd be nothing more than some punk kid playing at rebellion.

"A-alright," Angel said. "I-if you think I can do it."

"Of course you can," Mae said. "You have enough grit to stand up against the mightiest federals on the planet. There's very few who could say the same, even amongst associates."

Angel blushed, and after stammering though an attempt at gratitude, she said, "What do you need me to do?"

"You'll handle the insertion and extraction," Mae said. "Or put another way, dropping Arte off and picking him up."

"I thought you said the Raptor was fully autonomous?"

Mae laughed, and said, "It is, but even she ain't stealthy enough to land in the middle of a parking lot unnoticed." She motioned to a metal box latched to a nearby wall. "You'll be flying that."

Angel gave the box a bemused look and said, "And how is that supposed to work?"

"It's power armor!" Arte said. "Mae swooped in to rescue me with it, and it's totally cool!" He looked at Mae. "How come she gets to wear it?"

The Solver smiled at him. "Because she'll actually fit inside."

Arte blushed. "Ah, right."

"Y-you want me t-to fly... in that?" Angel said.

"It's much easier than it sounds," Mae said. "The suit does most of the work, you only have to learn the controls. It takes a few hours of practice to get the hang of it."

"O-okay." She tensed her jaw and nodded. "If that's what you want."

"What about me?" Arte said.

"Your job will be a bit harder," Mae answered. "It shouldn't be too bad, but you'll have to go fetch the drive. I can give you all the directions you need though, so if you follow the plan it'll work out"

"You need me to go inside? Don't you think I'll stand out a little?"

"These data centers barely have any staff, so you likely won't see a single person, and in any case, a man in coveralls is virtually invisible, just make sure you walk with a purpose. We'll also fix the tags on your clothes."

"What about security," Angel said. "Are you certain Gale's program will work?"

"Having doubts about your fearless leader?" Mae said with an impish grin.

"N-no!" Angel shook her head. "I... well, it does seem suspicious he get could get his hands on something like that. I-I mean, what if the person who gave it to him was lying, or whatever, you know?"

"Could be." Mae shrugged. "But in any case, I checked. It should work as advertised, assuming the exploits haven't been patched. I will note though, especially for you Arte, that the program won't actually *disable* the cameras inside, it replaces the outgoing stream with stale data. If anyone at the facility checks the raw feed they'll see what's really there."

"Isn't that bad?" Arte said. "I mean, won't someone be watching?"

"Nope," Mae said. "The federals automated away their security guards. The danger is the maintenance staff. If something goes wrong that needs human intervention, someone is liable to check to see if they can fix it remotely. If what went wrong is you getting your arm stuck in a vent.... Well, they don't have anyone watching the cameras, but they do have guns."

"Ah... I'll keep that in mind."

"What about you?" Angel said. "What's your part in this?"

Mae held up the thumb drive. "I'll be getting this in position."

"How?"

"Never you fret." Mae patted her head. "Little old Mae has her ways."

Angel blushed and looked away.

"Anyway, that's the gist of it," Mae said. "For now I'm going to show Angel how to pilot the suit, then we'll go over the details." She stood, motioning to Angel to follow. "Come on kid, let's have some fun."

Chapter 5

Tiny flares of light flowed down the suit in a wave, hundreds of micro thrusters working to keep the pilot stable while she floated in midair. Angel had to admit, it was as easy as Mae promised. Arte was neatly tucked between her arms in a princess carry, while they waited for a signal.

Angel looked at her passenger. "I bet you never thought you'd do something like this."

Arte laughed. "Not really, or at the very least, in my daydreams, *I'd* be the one wearing power armor." He glanced down, then wrapped tighter around Angel. "Just don't drop me."

The pair jumped out of the Raptor a few minutes ago, then slowly sank into position a few hundred feet above the facility while the craft soared away. Angel hadn't the foggiest idea where Mae went, but Arte's faith in the mercenary put her at ease. The Class Bs were an odd sort, to be sure, but nothing like what she expected.

Angel was interrupted from her rumination by a voice in her helmet. "The virus is in, move fast," Mae said over the radio.

Angel shared a look with Arte. They both nodded, and Angel began to drop as fast as her nerves could manage. They touched down a minute later in front of the rear cargo door. Arte hopped from her arms, then pulled a silver card from a pocket and swiped it over a nearby pad. According to Mae, Gale's security bypass program made it so every lock would open with any signal.

Angel sighed with relief when the door rolled up. "I'll wait on the roof," she said as Arte disappeared into the dark space.

Arte rushed through the wide hallway, passing a pair of double wide doors on either side. He scanned the labels on the way by, but didn't stop, instead continuing until he reached an intersection, where he turned right. His path took him by an office door, which opened as he walked by. His eyes flashed in alarm, and he glanced behind.

Standing out in the hallway, but facing the room he departed, was one of the facility technicians. He said, "The damn thing has been throwing error codes all week, and the fucking system can't make up it's mind about what's wrong."

"And what are *you* going to do about it," replied a voice from the office.

"For starters, I ain't gonna spend another five hours replacing some part that clearly still works," the tech answered. "And then I'm going to provide a little 'concussive maintenance' to her."

"You're nuts man."

"What? It worked all the time at my last job."

"Didn't you get fired?"

The man laughed. "I said it worked, I didn't say they liked it."

While the technician and his coworker were talking, Arte made it to the door he was looking for. He swiped his card and stepped into the server room after the lock clicked open. Inside he was greeted by a dozen rows of shelves, each packed with piles of computing hardware and all the attendant necessities to keep them powered and cool.

A handful of robotic carts whizzed through the room on tracks mounted to the ceiling, hunting down faulty components and scanning the shelves for developing issues. Arte ran across the aisles and turned down the second corridor from the end.

He walked between the two lines of whirring servers, counting out racks as he went. While he was focused on his work, he failed to notice an automated cart rocking to a stop above his head. He looked up just in time to see it plummeting towards him and dived out of the way. It lurched to a stop on the lowest rung, leaving less than an inch of space for his legs.

The cart removed and replaced an item, then zipped back to the ceiling and zoomed away near as fast as it came on. Arte clambered to his feet and rested a moment on a metal frame. He took a deep breath and let it out, then continued.

"What number was I on again?" he muttered, then frowned. Being careful to check

up periodically, he started scanning the barcodes on each tray. After a minute, he read out a label, then said. "Finally."

He spent a few seconds checking the tags on the various hard drives, comparing them to a number written on his arm. Eventually he landed on a match, then pulled a tool from a pouch on his belt. He loosened a pair of bolts on either side and tugged the drive from its fixture. He took a silver grey plastic sleeve from his bag and slid a nearly identical piece of hardware from it.

It wasn't a perfect match for the ones in the data center, but had the same form factor. Angel picked it up from a shop in Central city before they departed. While Arte was tucking his stolen disk drive into the sleeve, one of the robotic carts came scooting down the aisle and parked above his head. He fumbled the replacement into place, barely pulling his fingers away in time and tumbling to the floor.

The machine removed the decoy, apparently unbothered by the loose screws, and installed a fresh drive. It then returned to the ceiling and whirled off to dispose of the remains. According to Mae the defective drives were never checked, so all evidence of the theft would be dumped in an incinerator without them lifting a finger.

In any case, Arte spent a few seconds settling his breath, before gathering his things and slinking back the way he came. He stepped past the edge of the shelves, and then dived for cover when the door opened.

A man walked in and said, "Alright you piece of shit, get your ass over here."

Arte's eyes flashed in terror, and he froze, pressed tightly against the wall. He didn't

so much as twitch until there were a few beeps up front. He ducked low, and poked the side of his head around the corner. A man was standing near the door, facing away, tapping on a pad. One of the ceiling carts answered his summons, and slid into position on a bench beside him. He pulled out a wrench and started whacking the machine in various places.

Meanwhile, Arte darted to the door and slid into the hallway, unnoticed by the tech thanks to the combined racket of the whining fans and his own repeating clangs. Arte turned right, and returned to the exit at a brisk pace.

He passed an empty office, then turned left at the intersection and followed the hallway to the rolling metal door he came in through. He swiped his card one last time, and was greeted by a rush of cool air and the back of the other tech. The man was midway through a drag of his cigarette.

The technician got caught in several conflicting impulses, which when summed together amounted to a hacking cough and him awkwardly sputtering, "Ah! I-I was--"

"As you were!" Arte barked as he turned left and marched towards the far corner.

The man blinked twice and shook his head, looking around in confusion a moment before following the stranger who barreled past. He reached the end of the wall and scanned the empty field between the building and the distant horizon. There was no one to be seen. He eyed the smoke in his hand warily, then for good measure squished it against the wall and tossed it in a clump of grass.

Meanwhile, Arte was being carried away by Angel, who scooped him up moments

before and took off into the sky, using the building as cover.

"Thanks for the rescue," Arte said.

"I tried to warn you," she answered. "But like Mae said, the inside is shielded from radio."

"I think it worked out, for the most part. Hopefully that guy doesn't think too much about what happened."

Angel laughed. "He'll probably keep quiet either way. Smoking doesn't do your safety score any favors."

Arte hummed, and they remained silent until they got high enough for the Raptor to swoop down and welcome them into the passenger compartment. Angel wasted no time setting Arte on his feet, then ordered him into the forward cabin. When he returned a minute later, Angel was out of the power armor, and back into her loose fitting slacks and shirt.

Arte folded down the corner bench and took a seat on the inside, while Angel sat beside him. They waited about fifteen minutes for the craft to dive once again, this time to retrieve Mae before soaring off into the sky.

"Great work kids," Mae said. "The mission went perfectly."

"I don't know why you keep calling us kids," Angel said. "You're barely older than either of us."

Mae smiled, a touch of blush on her cheeks. "Aw, ain't that darling of you to say, but I'm literally twice your age."

"You're forty-six!"

"The secret is keeping your life stress free," she said with an impish grin. "Speaking of, why don't we go ahead and make sure our little incursion didn't add any years unnecessarily." She looked at Arte. "You still got the drive?"

He laughed and said, "Wouldn't that be embarrassing." He pulled the silver pouch from his bag and handed it over.

Mae folded out the other bench and center table, then fetched some hardware from a wall panel and sat down. After a few seconds fussing with it, she placed a large thin tablet between the three of them. She tapped a few more times, bringing up a window filled with a list of folders. Each had a number followed by a name, and a few exploratory swipes suggested there was a considerable amount of them.

"Who are these people?" Arte asked.

Mae shrugged. "No idea." She breezed through a few pages.

"Wait! Back up," Angel said. Mae scrolled the other way until Angel pointed at a name on the list. "Steven Armstrong is the name of a US Senator. Could this be for him?"

"Only one way to find out," Mae said. She tapped the folder open, which revealed another list of files. There were a few video clips mixed in with other data types.

Mae picked one at random, which contained footage of a middle aged man in a suit sitting at a table with a group of similarly dressed men. There was a flock of topless women waiting in the periphery.

"That's him!" Angel said. "Is he gambling?" She winced in disgust. "And in such a raunchy setting. This should be a big knock on his Safety Score, but he's got the best in Congress."

"Let's see what else is here," Mae said. She closed the video and opened a file with a matching name. It was a collection of financial records, which showed the Senator was deeply in debt as a result of his gambling.

"This... this can't be true," Angel said. "He... his score...." She took a breath. "He shouldn't even be eligible to enter a post office, let alone win an election."

"These are cryptographically authenticated files," Mae said. "If you look here"--she tapped a banner at the top of the screen--"you can see this report was generated by the CSA itself. I would guess there are additional files which validate the data as well."

"I... I can't..."

"Let's check some of the other names," Arte said.

Mae returned to the main list and opened a few folders. Each one documented the bountiful sins of its namesake, transgressions ranging from drugs to prostitution to jaywalking and even as far as homicide in one case. A few net queries revealed every person investigated was some matter of politician, celebrity, or powerful

businessman.

By the end of their search, Angel was close to tears. "These... I...." She shook her head and wiped her eyes. "The One Law Society believed powerful people were... were getting a little bump in their score, or maybe a few infractions were overlooked. This... it's unconscionable. They're like a whole separate class of people."

"No way. They've never done something like *that* before," Mae said in a flat tone. Angel winced, fighting back a sob. "Ah, sorry," she mumbled.

"I.... This is too much." Angel stood up. "I have to...." She shook her head and stiffened her lip. She fixed Mae with the sturdiest gaze she could muster and said, "Please let me know when we get back." She drifted towards the front cabin.

Arte half stood, reaching for Angel and said, "Wait, what about--"

"Let her go," Mae said. Angel finished her journey and disappeared beyond the sliding door.

"What are we going to do next?"

Mae hummed, tapping her lip. After a second, she said, "I suppose we stick with the plan. We get this data to Gale and see what shakes out."

Chapter 6

Gale clicked on his light when he entered the basement hallway. He didn't, strictly speaking, need take the whole of his journey on the surface under cover of darkness, but more than a decade of strict OPSEC was a hard habit to break. In any case, it was probably for the best he left as little a trail as possible. That was his opinion, at least.

He was back in the Old City ruins, responding to a message from Angel. Apparently she wanted to meet. If he had to guess, it was to tell him the thief flaked on the mission. He wasn't surprised, although he was a little disappointed. His boss was going to be annoyed he let the security override program go to waste.

Gale reached the end of the hallway and stepped into the small room. He was shocked to discover two people inside, the mysterious woman Mable and her partner Beltran, but not the enthusiastic Night Owl. Mable walked to the center of the room when he entered.

"Glad you could make it," Mae said.

"Where's Angel?" Gale said.

"She was... affected by the contents of the drive."

"You have it?" He didn't know if he should be impressed, incredulous, or concerned. Even with the virus he gave her, it shouldn't have been possible He'd been at the facility himself, waiting in the administrative wing for someone to cause a stir breaking in.

"Of course," Mae purred. She produced a silver pouch and waved it in front of him.

Gale took a quick breath to settle himself, trying not to let it show, then said, "Impressive. I suppose you're the real deal after all." He held out his hand. "With that data we'll be able to make a real difference."

"Oh, certainly"--Mae returned the drive to its hidden pocket--"but I'm afraid our relationship is imbalanced at the moment."

Gale scoffed, "Extortion? Can't say I'm surprised."

"Not at all," Mae said pleasantly. "It's not my compensation at issue, it is my trust. I think I've demonstrated my competence, and my loyalty, but you, on the other hand, remain quite the mystery."

"I've been with the Night Owls for years."

"Indeed you have, which is well and good for them, but I've known you all of two days, and that virus of yours was, shall we say, *too* convenient."

Gale huffed. He supposed a healthy level of paranoia was to be expected from a

criminal. "That is a fair point, but if you're hoping I'll reveal the source I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to divulge."

"No, I understand, such things are delicate matters. I am far more interested in how you intend to use this data. It is, you might say, quite incriminating to a large number of people. In the wrong hands the effect could prove rather... disruptive."

"You've looked at it, I assume?" Gale said. Mae nodded, and he continued, "I hope you weren't... indiscreet. I mean to save it for where it will have maximum impact."

"You have something in mind?"

"I do, actually, though I hope you understand if I play that one a little close. My plan can't risk premature exposure."

"I can respect that," Mae said. "Though may I ask how long you intend to sit on this."

"Not long at all," Gale said. "In fact, there is a tremendous opportunity in the near future which, if everything goes right, will mark a drastic turning point in American politics."

"I'll admit I'm intrigued." Mae retrieved the pouch once more, and held it out. Gale reached for it slowly, and she allowed him to take it. "I do hope you'll keep me... apprised."

"Of course." Gale opened the envelope and drew out its contents. Sure enough, it was a hard drive from a federal data center, and even had the exact tags and

markings he expected.

"You look surprised," Mae said. "Did you doubt I pulled it off?"

Gale laughed. "You're remarkable perceptive." In truth, it made him nervous. It might be best to bring in Night Owls from another city for the next stage of the plan, and deal with Mable later. "I confess, a small part of me thought you were bluffing. I'm pleased so skilled a woman joined our cause."

"Such high praise." Her voice carried a sultry lilt. "I trust I can expect you to... rely on me for future service."

"I'm sure I'll be able to find a place for you. For now I need to process this data."

"I'll leave you to it." Mae gave a playful bow and motioned for Arte to follow. She stopped at the door and turned to Gale. "But be careful, the contents are quite... troubling. Even an Admin might have a crisis of conscience if he saw it."

His pulse spiked. Did she specify an Admin for a reason? The woman vanished through the door, leaving Gale in the dim light to wonder at what she said.

Meanwhile, Mae guided Arte through the building, and then on another winding path through Old City to elude their hypothetical tail. Eventually, they returned to a clearing on the far side of the ruined district, where the Raptor swooped in to pick them up. Moments later they were high in the sky, shedding their disguises and settling into position on opposite benches.

"Why did you say that thing about Admins?" Arte said. "Won't that make him

suspicious?"

"Perhaps," Mae admitted. "And honestly, I might have only done it to mess with him. Still, our cause would be well served by stirring a little doubt in his heart, so I think on average it was a good idea."

Arte eyed her skeptically, then said, "If you say so."

She laughed. "Well, it'll probably work out regardless. Anyway, it's about time to wrap up for the day."

"Are you going to make me spend another night on a bench?" Arte said.

Mae hummed, then said, "Actually, why don't you try sleeping in the front cabin tonight. The chairs don't go down far, but are comfortable regardless."

"Alright, it's worth a shot."

"But before that, let's get you something to eat." She stood and fetched a few pouches from a nearby panel before returning to the table.

"Oh goody, more mystery mush."

"You should have seen what they shackled us with before," Mae said. "At least this has an actual flavor."

"I suppose I should thank you for the hospitality," Arte said. "But truth be told I'd kill for a shower."

"You and me both, kid. The Raptor is designed for many things, but comfort isn't one of them. Frankly I'm amazed it's held up this well as our base of operations."

"Would a trip home be *that* dangerous?"

"Yes, unfortunately. Federal cities are some of the most surveilled places on earth, and unless those two bozos from Thirteen lied about your fate, your house will be under watch. If you popped in for a shower, by the time you finished feds would be blooming out of your drain pipes."

Arte sighed. "I guess I'll manage." He and Mae finished a light meal, then he moved into the front cabin. He kicked off his shoes and settled into one of the bucket seats, where he slowly drifted to sleep.

He woke about eight hours later, dragging himself to his feet with groggy lurches. He downed half a bottle of water, then ran through a quick series of stretches before walking into the rear cabin. Inside, he was greeted by nothing.

"Mae?" He looked around. The Solver was nowhere to be found. He searched the narrow compartment, as if the woman could somehow be hiding behind one of the thin panels that lined the walls. Eventually, he settled in front of a conspicuously empty space. The metal case usually fixed to the wall was as absent as the woman who wore it.

Arte stood frozen in place a minute, his face growing more perplexed by the second. Finally, he shrugged and sighed. "Maybe she went shopping?" He looked around. "I wonder if we're parked." He canted his head, then frowned. The interior

of the Raptor was always quiet, even when airborne.

He took a slow turn, then his face lit up. "Right, I can check up front." He returned to the forward cabin and tapped a glowing button on a touch panel by the window. The glass brightened until it was fully transparent, where it revealed a pile of rubble abreast a crumbling wall. The Raptor was in Old City, nestled into one of the many clearings large enough to hide its bulky frame.

Arte studied the scene, his face shifting in time with his thoughts. After a minute, he said, cautiously, "Does this mean... we won?" There was no answer from any of the cockpit's handful of consoles. "Well... okay then. I... guess I'll go home?"

He walked out the forward compartment and to the side door, then studied the panel beside it. "Were there always this many buttons?" He reached towards the pad, but before he could touch it a message flashed over the display.

"Warning. Solver Preoccupied. Alone. Central Unsafe."

Arte froze, bewildered. Eventually, he stuttered, "What?"

"Suggest Blue Zone. Can Dispatch Raptor."

Arte remained dazed a few seconds, before shaking it away and saying, "Cybel? Is that you?" When it was clear no response was forthcoming, Arte continued, "I know you can hear me, so don't act like you can't." He looked around, as though he might find the mysterious AI floating behind him.

When she persisted in silence, Arte said, "Alright, fine. If you won't explain, then

"I'll figure it out myself."

He reached for the panel again, but was interrupted by a message that read, "Nuisance."

"Yeah, maybe, but tell me what happened to Mae anyway."

"Captured."

"What!" Arte skipped back, and then lapped the cabin in a flurry of nervous energy, as though he meant to round up the crew to rescue their Captain. As no ragtag band of adventurers materialized, he instead returned to the pad and said, "How could that happen?"

"Followed Gale With Drone. Found Leader. Attacked. Underestimated Defenses."

"Why didn't you warn her?"

"Did. Ignored. Nuisance."

"Damnit!" Arte said. "We have to rescue her."

"Incorrect."

"Well, someone has to. You told her association, right? Are they going to send a Solver?" After a few seconds with no answer, Arte added, "Don't clamp up on me now!"

"Problem Difficult. Strategy Questionable. Antagonistic."

"You mean they're going to leave her?" Arte yelled. "Can't they do *something*?"

"Negotiate."

Arte settled a bit, but said, "And what are the chances that will work?"

"Unknown."

Arte shambled to the far wall and fumbled with a panel until the bench deployed, then dropped into it. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't...." He shook his head and looked at a nearby screen. "Cybel, you have to help me save her."

"False. Outside Contract. Violates Intent."

"What does that mean?"

"Lead Out Of Danger."

"What about Mae?"

"Made Choice."

Arte sagged. "So I can't get your help?" He stared at the display, eyes trembling. When it was clear Cybel did not intend to respond, he drooped further, turning forwards. He pulled his foot onto the chair so he could rest his chin on his knee, then settled. The seconds piled into minutes, and further still until they approached

an hour.

Suddenly, he perked up, eyes drifting to the screen. "You didn't answer me," he said slowly. He stood and braced in front of the terminal, glaring at it. "Is there some way I can get you to help me?" No message appeared. "Ah... I see how it is. You won't lie, but that doesn't mean you'll be forthcoming either, especially if you think the answer might make me do something you don't want me to."

He hummed and said, "Alright, I'll play your game," then started a circular pace through the cramped cabin. Muttered thoughts slipped half formed from his lips, while his hands fidgeted through various ideas. Eventually, he aimed his gaze at a terminal and said, "You're some kind of machine, right? So you must be a real stickler for rules." He gave it a prickly frown. "I don't suppose you'll volunteer the rules you're meant to follow?"

The display cycled through its idle animation, but otherwise remained silent. "Didn't think so," Arte said. "Still... what was it you said earlier? Helping me would break your contract?" He walked a tight circle, before smiling. "The contract, right! You're looking out for me because it's literally something I signed up for. If I can figure out some way to show the terms mean your best option is to help me, you'd have to do it. It would violate your programming not to."

"Not Programming Violation."

Arte grinned. "Ah, you're speaking again, but I got bad news friend, that proves I'm on the right track."

"Nuisance."

He laughed, then returned to the corner bench and pulled down the terminal. A few minutes later he was logged into Psa Psa and reading over his agreement with Cybel. He poured through the document several times, growing more subdued with each pass. Eventually he slumped and sighed. "Or maybe you played me like a fool and the real answer is elsewhere."

Arte studied the tip of his shoe, squeaking it back and forth on the metal floor. Halfway through a particularly loud twist, he bolted upright, then stared at the panel by the door.

"You... didn't talk to me until I threatened to put myself in danger." He scrolled through Cybel's contract one more time. "It says here you can't stop me from doing stuff... and here...." He tapped one of the terms. "It says you are, however, obligated to tell me about any dangerous situations I'm getting into, if at all possible. If I were to leave the Raptor and head to, for instance, the police station, you wouldn't be able to warn me of any damn fool things I might say."

The door slid open. Arte jumped to his feet, a hopeful look in his eyes. "Mae?"

Instead of the Solver, a drone the size of a large bird hovered through the opening. Carried in a clasp on its belly was a thin black tablet, Arte's phone. It floated in front of him, dumped the device unceremoniously into his hands, then darted outside.

Arte checked it over. The surface was a little dusty, but otherwise none the worse for the wear. A message popped up on the screen. "Obligation satisfied."

He smiled. "Nice try, but you and I both know if I'm kidnapped again this thing is going straight in the garbage. If you really want to 'satisfy your obligation,' you need a much better plan."

The silence lingered until a flash of doubt passed his eyes, but Cybel finally responded. "Nuisance."

He sighed and smiled, then said, "Yes, yes, now why don't you tell me what my best hope for saving Mae is."

"Warning. Rescue Dangerous. Success Unlikely."

"As long as there's a chance, I'm willing to risk it, okay?" Arte said. "So what's the plan?"

"Analyzing Strategies. Ally Beneficial. Suggest Angel."

"I can talk to her!" Arte bolted to the door. "I'm sure she'll help."

"Arranging Meeting. Explain Situation."

Chapter 7

Angel was once again being swept into the sky by the remarkable Class B technology that was the Raptor. Seeing it again may or may not have been one reason she agreed to go with Arte when he told her Mae needed help. She supposed she might also have developed a small fondness for the woman.

Besides the door was a conspicuously empty space where the power armor used to be. Its absence lent credence to the idea Mae was gone, but Angel had a hard time believing she'd been captured. Still, she trusted Arte enough to let him make his case.

"Alright," Angel said. "Can you go over this again. You said Mae was captured, by Gale? That... is hard to believe, to be honest."

"Not Gale," Arte said. "His boss."

"And who is that supposed to be? The CSA?"

Arte froze for a moment, then said, "I, uh, forgot to ask."

Angel sighed. "Who even told you about this? Are you sure Mae didn't go out for

coffee or something?"

"Oh, right." He pointed to the terminal by the bench. "Cybel did." Before Angel could complain, Arte ushered her into a seat and sat across from her. He laid the screen flat, then said, "She's, like, some kind of robot that watches out for associates."

The words "Not Robot" flashed on the display.

Arte blushed, then gestured vaguely at Angel. "A-anyway, I wasn't sure how to explain the problem... sorry."

"Nuisance." A video began to play. It showed Gale meeting with a dignified man in a fine suit. They were sitting in an immaculately kept garden, and Gale was handing the drive to him.

Angel gasped. "That's Senator Martel!" She stood and leaned over the screen, heart pounding. "What the fuck are they doing together!" She grit her teeth, and bit back a snarl.

"Who's Senator?" Arte said.

Angel whipped her dagger eyes to him, then reached across the table and pulled them face to face. "Y-you better not be faking this shit!"

Arte recoiled, eyes flared in alarm. "W-what?"

Angel softened, dropping him to the bench and straightening her body. She wiped

her eyes and shuffled away from the table. "I... I have to..." She shook her head and fled into the front cabin.

Arte looked at the screen. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Humans Difficult. Give Time."

Arte sighed and settled, looking off. "You're not wrong." He propped his head on his palm and spent a few minutes idly browsing through a few menus before Angel reentered the room. She was a little red around the eyes, but otherwise calm.

"S-sorry," she said "I... I know you wouldn't lie to me. I was..."

"Shocked?" Arte offered.

Angel smiled softly. "You could put it that way. I... I mean, Gale really...." She shook her head. "I shouldn't be surprised. My life has been nothing but disappointment so far, why should joining the Night Owls be different?"

"You met us because of it." He smiled. "And I'm glad you did, at least."

She looked down. "T-thanks." She braced her feet, slapped her cheeks, took a deep breath, then said, "Alright. Gale is a rat bastard, and now him and Senator Martel have Mae captured. How are we going to get her out?"

"Good question," Arte said. He looked at the terminal. "Do you have a plan?"

"Stand By."

"That's Cybel, right?" Angel said. She sat opposite Arte.

"Yeah." Arte smiled. "Don't let her fool you though, she's actually really nice, even if she acts all aloof."

Angel frowned, more than a little puzzled. "You said she watches over you? So, is that something like the Safe Citizen Program?"

Arte shrugged. "I can't say for sure, because I only learned about this stuff a few days ago, but I don't think so."

"So what *does* she do? Is it normal for her to help like this?"

"I think this is an unusual situation. The impression I have is that normally Cybel only keeps an eye on you, if you ask her to, and then warns you through your phone. I got a message from her once about a mean pig, but asides from the heads up she didn't do anything to stop it."

"A... mean pig?"

Arte lit up. "Yeah, he was super huge!" He made a wide arc with his hands. "And, like totally angry and stuff." He laughed. "I think I almost got eaten."

Angel smiled. "Should you be treating that so lightly?"

Arte continued to grin as he fidgeted with his hands. "Probably not."

"Still, are you really allo--I mean, didn't that association thing of yours have a problem with it?"

"Well, I can't pay my dues from a hog's belly." He laughed. "So I'm sure they wouldn't be happy."

"Asides from that, I meant. Wasn't there some kind of...." She hummed and vaguely waved her hands. "Well, okay, for us, that would have cost points from your Safety Score. Isn't there something like that for you?"

"No?" Arte said. "Why would they punish me for that?"

"It's not a punishment," Angel said. "The Safety Score is a tool to measure how safe you are."

"Safe from what?"

"Safe to other people," Angel said. She sighed. "Will you stop looking at me like that?"

"Ah, sorry, I'm just a little confused." He frowned thoughtfully, then said, "What's your score thingy?"

"Three hundred ninety one."

"Is that really high?"

Angel laughed. "No, it's actually pretty low." She settled at the sight of his

bewildered expression. "Just ask your questions already."

"Ah, sorry, sometimes I think people find it annoying," Arte said. "Do those blue kidnapper guys have a score of two?"

Angel matched his own confused face for a moment, then giggled. "You mean the police?" He nodded. "No, in order to be an officer you need at least one thousand."

"In what universe are those jerks 'safer' than you?" Arte said. Angel was surprised by his angry tone. "If that mustached jackass has a thousand points, you deserve a million."

"Ah, uh, thanks." Angel blushed. "B-but it's not that simple. I have a lot of debt from school, and my parents have low scores too. Plus, I had this friend in college who ended up in jail for sedition."

Arte shook his head. "None of that makes you dangerous. If they're counting random crap like that against you, why does anyone even care about the stupid thing?"

"W-why?" Angel said. "I... I mean, it's... important." Arte was clearly unsatisfied with that answer, so she took a moment to think, then continued after a breath. "A Safety Score is a signal to, well, everything. Like, my apartment requires you to have at least a three hundred, and it's three fifty to work at the Cafe. I think you're also supposed to have a minimum of two hundred to shop there, though I'm not sure how that works considering you never had any trouble, but I doubt you have a Safety Score."

Arte stared at her with inscrutable eyes. She blushed, then added, "I-I mean, it probably has something to do with how you pay. Maybe the terminal recognizes your bank, or whatever."

She settled into silence, and they sat like that for several seconds. Arte stood without warning, and took to pacing beside the table. He appeared to be working through something, though Angel couldn't guess what. Eventually, Angel took his hand and said, "Are you okay?"

He turned to her and answered, "Are you?"

She flinched, and let his arm slip away. It was like he was looking at an alien. A pitiful and bizarre creature from beyond the stars. She didn't like it one bit. He seemed to sense her discomfort, because he shook the expression away, and retook her hand.

"Let's check with Cybel," he said. "I'm sure she's come up with something by now."

Normally Angel resented abrupt changes in topic, but if she was being honest, this time she was glad for it. "Ah, yeah, here we are chatting along, while your, uh, friend does all the work." Arte smiled at her, and she found it unusually reassuring.

Arte sat back at the table and gave the screen a tap. "Hi Cybel, sorry for making you do all the planning."

"Minimal Burden. One Time."

"Yes, I agree. I've had enough excitement. Did you come up with something?"

"Seventeen Seconds."

"O-okay," Arte said.

Angel laughed. "That's rather precise." They shared a friendly look while she counted down. The door slid open a crack exactly as she reached zero and a drone floated in. It deposited a black box on the floor, then zipped outside.

Arte smiled with a shrug, then retrieved the package and placed it on the table. Inside they found two phones, a pair of minuscule earbuds, matching outfits, and a handful of paper notes that explained the purpose of each item in Cybel's terse style.

After looking everything over, and talking it out amongst themselves, Angel said, "Alright, to be clear, the plan is for us to enter Senator Martel's mansion, posing as a pair of newly hired staff members, with these scanner things"--she held up one of the phones--"and walk around until they detect a secret passage."

"Correct." Cybel answered her through the earbuds, which they put in earlier to test. Angel was still amazed by her voice. It was surprisingly demure in spite of the crisp mechanical pace, and if she didn't know better, would have assumed Cybel was a real woman with odd mannerisms.

"And then we... run in and rescue Mae?" Angel was more than a little incredulous.

"Well, after that she said we have to be flexible," Arte said. "She can't fix Mae's exact location because the walls are shielded, so we'll coordinate the last part

when we get there."

"If she can't see inside, how do we know Mae isn't stuffed in a closet or something? What makes you so sure there's a hidden door?"

"Staff Unaware."

"Okay...." Angel frowned. "Is this really going to work?"

"Probability Low."

"You don't have to help if you don't want to," Arte said.

Angel shook her head. "No. If you're doing it, I am too."

Arte blushed. "N-not sure what I did to deserve that kind of loyalty."

"You don't owe anyone in this country a damn thing, one which quite frankly hates your guts, and still decided to stick it out and fight anyway."

"I-I'm just trying to put things right."

"And I'd be a fool to abandon someone like that," Angel said. "So let's review the plan one more time."

Chapter 8

Angel approached the bus with Arte in tow, pulling the phone from her jacket pocket and tapping the familiar side button to bring up her ID Code. A white square filled with a pattern of black dots covered the screen, and she waved it in front of a lens by the door. A gentle tone sounded a second later, telling her she was clear to enter.

Inside, a man up front studied her picture on a large screen, then looked at her. "Nineteen eighty four!" He whistled. "Why, that score's almost presidential. Never'd expect someone like that to be all dressed up like a servant."

"The Senator allows only the finest to serve in his estate," Angel said. She took a crisp turn by his booth and marched to an open seat up front. Her only experience with butlers and maids came from a handful of shows and movies, so she hoped she wasn't overdoing it.

Arte entered a few seconds later, and the attendant whistled again. "Wow, and a seventeen seventy six. You two must've brought the average in here up at least a hundred points." He laughed. "Maybe I'll finally be able to get away from that sadist who calls himself a dentist."

Arte took a few stiff steps past him and into the seating area. He looked at Angel, then at the occupied seat beside her. Before he could search further back, the man next to her stood up and said, "Ah, excuse me, sir. You must want to sit beside your, uh...." He gestured vaguely at Angel, then quickly scurried into the center row and out of the way.

Angel motioned for him to sit, and after he planted himself down the pair shared an awkward look between them. Angel thought about trying for small talk to pass the time, but she was entirely too nervous. Plus, her friend had a bad habit of asking strange, and often far too revealing questions. A pair of stuffy butlers keeping to themselves wasn't unusual anyway.

Their journey was not particularly long, a little over a half hour, although they were probably traveling in from further than any of the Senator's real staff. They didn't have the advantage of actually living in the area, of course, and instead had been dropped off by the Raptor in a secluded area and walked to the bus stop.

Angel wasn't sure how their electronic comrade managed it, but apparently the two weren't just posing as staff, but had actually been hired on. If she felt like it, she could easily make a whole new life for herself. The pay was outstanding, and by all reports Martel was a perfectly respectable employer. She felt more than a little guilty for how tempted she was. Still...

She glanced at Arte, and he smiled at her. She said, "You're a good friend."

He blushed. "T-thanks."

They didn't share more than a few words until the bus rolled to a stop in front of an

ornate gate. The attendant said, "You two have a good day," as they walked out, and he held the door until they were several feet onto the sidewalk. Angel guided Arte to the guard by the door, who looked them over.

"New hires?" he said. "I wasn't told to expect any."

Angel shrugged, and held out her phone with the ID Code out. Arte copied the motion a second later, while the guard pulled out a scanner. He ran it over the two screens, then whistled.

"Wow, things are rough even above fifteen these days, huh?" he said, then coughed and stammered, "I mean, uh, anyway, I see you were brought on yesterday. Welcome to the team."

"T-thanks," Arte said. "Looking forward to it."

Angel pulled him to the gate, which opened after the guard called them in. They walked up a scenic path, which meandered lazily through a beautiful garden and deposited them at a humble entrance behind the manor. The door led them into a small chamber, one wall of which was covered in a large mirror. Angel took a moment to look herself over.

She was wearing a men's suit, though it was perfectly cut for her figure so she was unambiguously a woman in spite of the masculine attire. Not that she was complaining. In her mind female servants wore skimpy maid outfits. She wasn't sure if she had the wrong idea, or if the Senator wasn't enough of a creep to make that his dress code.

In any case, she looked good. Her long black hair was tied neatly behind her back in a pony tail, and a light touch of makeup added the perfect amount of definition to her face. If there was any chance of her returning to the cafe after this, she would remember the style.

A man walked into the room and glared at the unexpected pair. He was similarly dressed, and had a tiny pair of glasses sitting on his nose. Cybel's briefing identified him as Herman Page, the Head Steward of the estate. "I don't recall scheduling rookies today."

Angel pulled out her phone and put the day's schedule on the screen, then showed it the man. He peered at it, then huffed.

"Fucking WorkTime app," he said. "It better not be acting up again. I had more than enough of that last year." He sighed. "Whatever. I guess you two are here in lieu of Smith and Marion. Normally I prefer to supervise new hires on their first day, but there's two of you, and I'm busy regardless. For now you can handle the dusting. The supplies are in the closet, and don't screw anything up. If you have doubts, just leave it be."

"We'll do our best," Arte said.

Page frowned at him. "Well, aren't you the peppy sort. I give it a week. Now get to work." With that he departed the room. The pair shared a look, then retrieved a handful of cleaning items and moved deeper into the mansion. The staff room opened into a corridor which circled the property, lined on either side by a handful of nooks, alcoves, and doors. The hallway was sparsely decorated with a tasteful collection of paintings and sculptures, culminating in an elegant old world

aesthetic.

Arte glanced at Angel and said, "Guess we'll meet on the other side?"

Angel nodded, and the pair went their separate ways. Arte worked his route slowly, performing a mostly adequate job as he went. When he passed a window he muttered, "You still tracking us?"

"Transmitter Functional. Continue Sweep."

"Right, okay." Arte moved along, doing a quick pass in every room as he went. He reached the first corner without finding anything, and about a quarter through the next hall when he heard a door open further down. He quickly made a show of working diligently on a nearby pedestal, then glanced at the person who entered.

Arte whispered a squeak and blushed, turning himself so no part of his face was visible to the man coming his way. It was none other than Gale, and he carried a bitter frown with his whole body. The CSA Admin stormed down the corridor, coming to an abrupt stop after walking a few feet passed Arte, who surreptitiously turned the other way.

"You, servant," Gale said. "Are you proud of your work?"

Arte's eyes flashed in alarm, but he managed to keep his voice steady as he said, "Yes. I like having a job that helps people."

Gale crossed his arms and pinched his face in distaste. "And what if your job needed you to do a little harm up front in service to a greater good at the end?"

"That's stupid," Arte said. "And I'd be very suspicious of anyone telling me I could hurt good into the world."

Gale laughed, wild and perhaps a little unhinged, but relieved. He turned, slapped Arte on the back and said in a rowdy tone, "You might be right!" then walked away, still chuckling.

Arte sighed as soon as Gale was out of sight, stilling his trembling arms by holding them tight to his body. He skittered to a nearby window and said. "I saw Gale."

"Indicates Solver. Investigate Origin. Return."

He scooted down the hall until he approached the area Gale entered from. There were a few doors nearby, and after staring down each one like they owed him money, he took the middle option. It led into a small library, and he took a quick loop around the periphery before returning to the hallway and ducking into a nearby alcove.

"Was there anything in there?"

"Rear Wall. Righthand Side. Middle Shelf. Photograph Panel. Return."

Arte scampered back into the room and checked the shelf in the corner, pulling aside each book. Hidden behind an oversized tome, which insisted it was the complete works of some guy with a mean name, he uncovered a small keypad. He took a picture of it with his phone, then slipped out one more time.

The moment he had line of sight to the window, Cybel told him the code was nine seven seven one four. He turned right around and dashed into the library as soon as he heard, and punched in the numbers. The bookshelf slid out of the way, revealing a dim staircase leading underground.

He stared into the dark tunnel a moment, then took a deep breath and plunged inside. Two floors later and he arrived at a narrow corridor. A handful of dim lamps provided meager illumination, enough to show the hallway led to a four way junction a short distance away.

Arte crept to the intersection and checked every direction. Each option offered a handful of doors, with little else to differentiate them. One of the doors on the righthand side had been left open, a sturdy but plain looking fixture made of wood. A muted voice echoed from the room beyond.

It took a minute of careful sneaking for Arte to arrive, after which he poked one eye around the frame then darted back. A second later he straightened up and walked in. The room was largely bare of furnishings, save a pair of chairs sitting in front of a bank of monitors attached to a large console.

On one of the screens was a feed from another room, showing Mae and Seig in the middle of a conversation. The Solver was tied to her seat, wearing a loose fitting white shirt and baggy half shorts. One of her eyes was bloody and swollen, but she had a gleeful smirk on her face. Meanwhile, the Admin paced nearby.

Mae laughed. "You really buy that bullshit? You know they got nuked, right?"

"That the Chinese survived the destruction of their capitol is a testament to their

resilience, and to the importance of standing strong against them."

Mae was still chuckling. "That zombified husk only managed to lurch on this long because you feds have been propping them up for decades, and even then they've done nothing but decline for the last fifty years."

"Typical Class B paranoia," Seig scoffed. "It's no wonder you lunatics were driven out of society. Only a madman would buy an idiotic conspiracy theory like that."

"Conspiracy?" Mae was apparently genuinely stunned by the claim, as she settled into a serious, if somewhat confused state. "Where exactly do you think all that cheap junk you buy comes from?"

"A tedious breakdown of American logistics would be a waste of time," Seig said. "And frankly I doubt you could follow along."

"Yeah, fair." Mae rolled her eyes. "After all, I'm still trying to grok how you chumps are spooked by West Taiwan, of all places."

"Your flippant attitude reveals your ignorance. China is a sleeping dragon, ruled by a tireless machine that's reduced every man, woman, and child into a cog for an engine of global domination."

Mae laughed again. "Easy tiger, they aren't going to sleep with you."

"Who the fuck are you?" A voice interrupted Arte from his eavesdropping.

Arte yelped and turned to see Gale walked into the room with him. The Admin was

standing by the doorway with a can of orange soda in one hand.

Gale's eyes budged in shock. "You!"

"Ah... hi," Arte said, backing away.

"I should have known those idiots from Thirteen would fuck up." He glared Arte up and down, then snorted. "And I should have recognized you from that ridiculous answer."

"I just say what I feel."

Gale looked away and sighed. "Yeah, I bet you do." The pair stood in silence a few moments, while Seig and Mae continued to argue in the background. Eventually, Gale turned back to Arte, a strange gleam in his eyes. He marched across the room, pushing Arte into the opposite wall and pinning him against it, then pulled a knife from his belt and held it between them. "What is that woman worth to you?"

"I... I don't understand."

"Would you keep trying to save her even if it might cost your life?"

Arte nodded. "Of course. It's my fault she's in trouble. It wouldn't be right to leave her behind."

Gale smiled. "You are such a fucking moron." He flipped the knife in his hand so the hilt faced outward. "Head right at the intersection and all the way to the room at the end. Hide in there, and when you have an opportunity, take it immediately."

"... Okay?" Arte cautiously accepted the offered blade, then darted out of the room when Gale stepped aside. He turned at the junction and ran to the far door then slipped inside, leaving a thin sliver of vision into the hallway. He crouched, careful not to disrupt the tightly packed brooms and mops crammed into the closet.

Minutes passed, and with every second the tremble in Arte's hands grew stronger, while his eyes faded into a deadeye stare. His breath was slow, catching several times before shuddering to a start moments later. When a door finally opened in the hallway outside, he drew in a sharp breath and froze.

Seig emerged from the side room with a grumble. It was bad enough when Gale struck the Class B after she got under his skin, but now, after ditching the interrogation, he suddenly called his partner away for 'an important matter.' Whatever that meant. His old friend was losing his edge.

Arte emerged from his hiding place after Seig took a few steps towards the intersection, creeping to the door the Admin emerged from. He slipped in a split second after Seig turned the corner, then immediately ran to Mae and started slicing the ropes that bound her.

"Arte!" Mae whispered. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you, obviously." He finished the rope on her right wrist, then started on the other.

"A-are you out of your mind?"

"Probably, but I'm still doing the right thing." He finished freeing her arms, then moved to her legs.

"How did you even make it here?"

"The same way you did, ignoring warnings from Cybel." He cut away the binding on her left leg.

Mae laughed, then leaned down and took over for Arte, finishing the last rope and standing up. "You've got a lot more grit than I thought." She grabbed his shaking hands and pulled him to his feet.

They stormed out the room and into the hallway, hand in hand, then towards the exit. As they passed through the intersection, Seig stumbled into the corridor, tangled up in Gale. He yelled, "The fuck are you doing, Simons!"

The sounds of a struggle echoed through the basement as the pair approached the stairs. They charged up the dark tunnel, barged through the hidden door into the library, then seconds later out into the main hallway. Arte dragged Mae to the left, past a large window. A split second later a piercing siren wailed through the mansion.

"Take Right. Outside. Run West," Cybel said into his ear.

"Cybel wants us to turn right at the end of this hallway," Arte relayed to Mae. "Then exit through the west door to the outside."

Mae laughed. "Our little robot stalker must have taken a liking to you. I've never

heard of her getting involved like this."

Arte smiled. "Actually, she thinks I'm a nuisance."

As they reached the intersection they collided with a handful of staff members from the estate. The crowd pushed past them on their way to the door. The source of their panic could be seen clearly to the left. A great mass of fiery smoke billowed from a parlor door.

Mae took the lead, pulling Arte along the right path after the servants. "I think someone set off a smoke grenade," she said. They reached the exit door and scrambled through.

Angel was waiting nearby, and she called out when they emerged. Mae threw Arte towards her, then bid them to run ahead while she took a position a few paces behind them. They continued in that arrangement, with Mae checking the door they left from every few seconds.

With her focus centered on the path directly behind, Mae completely missed Seig barreling towards her at an odd angle. He bashed her with his shoulder, sending them both tumbling to the ground. Mae rolled to her feet, grabbing the knife which flung away on impact, though Seig was just as fast. He stepped in, dodging a slash from Mae and knocking the blade from her hand as she jumped away.

"Not so tough without that fancy suit, are you?" Seig sneered.

"Yeah, no shit. What's your point?" Mae answered.

Seig was totally unprepared for the dismissive quip, and it took him a full second to react when Mae sprinted away. He swore and bolted after her, but not before she gained a considerable lead.

"Besides," Mae yelled back. "I have something better than a fancy suit." She took a deep breath, then hollered, "Cybel! Raptor!"

"What the hell is that sup--"Seig bit off his shout when he saw an aircraft materialize in the sky above them. He continued his pursuit, but slowed so much he was no longer gaining. Eventually he settled into a stop, then yelled, "Don't think this changes anything!"

The Raptor plummeted into position, lurching into a space a foot off the ground and hovering there. The side door folded open, in time for Arte and Angel to clamber up the stairs and disappear. Mae arrived a few seconds later, where she jumped onto the ladder and turned around, holding herself up with one hand.

"Better luck next time, fed!" She laughed and gave a derisive salute, then hopped through. The door slid shut as the craft soared into the sky, shrinking from view near as fast as it appeared.

Inside, Mae shuffled to a rear panel and grabbed something, then folded down a bench and slumped into it. She pressed a cold pack into her eye, then glanced at Arte and Angel and said, "Thanks for the save, kids, and you too Cybel. I knew you liked me."

The word 'Nuisance' flashed on a nearby panel.

"Do... you know why Gale helped me rescue you?" Arte asked.

"He did?" Mae snorted. "Must of had a bigger impact than I thought."

"What do you mean?"

She smiled softly. "I asked if he was proud of betraying the Night Owls. Apparently, he was not."

"Could he have been... bothered by the data?" Angel asked.

Mae hummed. "That's likely a part of it too. I bet he always knew the system was a bit rotten, but being confronted by how bad it really was would shake almost anyone."

Arte frowned. "He kind of struck be as a big jerk, to be honest."

Mae laughed. "I'm sure he's that too, but that doesn't stop him from having a sense of honor."

"What do you think will happen to him?" Angel said.

Mae shrugged. "Hard to say. He doesn't seem the especially crafty sort, so at the very least he'll be losing his job as an Admin. Beyond that? Who knows."

"I... hope he's okay." Angel had a pleased, if somewhat sad, smile, then shook her head. "But what's more important now is what are we going to do next?"

"That is a good question." Mae looked down and sighed. "And unfortunately also one which I drastically complicated."

"What happened?" Arte said. "All I know is I went to bed, and when I woke up you were gone and Cybel said you'd been captured."

"Ah, sorry about that. When I discovered Gale was working for Senator Martel I, uh, figured I could wrap this thing up right quick with a bit of shotgun diplomacy."

"That... does not seem like a great plan," Arte said.

"In retrospect it was pretty stupid, but in my defense I wasn't expecting a Senator to have his own power armor equipped bodyguards."

"He did?" Angel exclaimed. "I... assumed that was a special Class B thing."

Mae laughed. "Yeah, I did too."

"Were they really strong?" Arte asked.

"Eh, not really." Mae shrugged. "They were bulky and slow, but it's hard to subdue a guy in an exoskeleton without killing him, and doubly so when there's two of them. I was barely able to eject before my own suit self destructed." She sighed. "In any case, I made our lives a lot harder by tipping them off, and losing the armor in the process."

"Is that it, then?" Angel said. "They get away with whatever they're up to?"

"I wouldn't give up hope," Mae said. "If we can figure out the plan there might be some way to stop it."

"Did you get any hints while you were kidnapped?" Arte asked.

"Alas no. I didn't expect a rescue, so I spent my time fucking with them rather than probing for information. Still, we can infer a few things," Mae said. "For starters, they mean to act in the near future. It's also likely Gale's data will be involved."

"That isn't a lot to go on," Angel said. "Is there something more specific."

"Not exactly, but I do have a vague notion of how I'd carry out an attack like this. In particular, given what little I know about federal culture, and based on what Gale told me when I gave the drive to him, he means to reveal the data all at once to a group of influential people, or rather, he meant to use the chance to do that to lure Night Owls into his scheme."

Mae shrugged. "Unfortunately, this is where my knowledge of the US is reaching its limits, and that's assuming the attack is even going to happen there. It's possible they meant to target some rival group of federals, you know, a two birds kind of thing."

"I don't think it would be outside this country," Angel said. "Night Owls aren't particularly concerned with the world outside our borders, and we're rather skittish as well."

"That's a good point," Mae said. "Which thankfully narrows down our options."

"So, if we find an opportunity to share the data with a lot of people quickly, you think it's likely that's where they planned their attack?"

"That's out best bet," Mae said, then she smirked. "I don't suppose you've been invited to any swanky parties recently?" Angel laughed.

"Sorry if this is a dumb question," Arte said. "But wouldn't it make more sense to post the data on the net." He hummed. "In fact, why don't we do that right now?"

Angel gave him a bemused look, while Mae shook her head and said, "The internet you're used to isn't at all like what federals use. Even if you could get it out there, the CSA would have it buried by the end of the day, then they'd train the filters so you couldn't post so much as one word to a single site."

"She's right," Angel said. "The Night Owls would need to get that information straight into the right hands all at once."

Arte hummed. "Well, what about those other owl people, the ones you work for?"

"The OLS?" Angel said. Arte nodded. She sighed and shook her head. "As painful as it is to admit, the One Law Society is basically irrelevant. If we gave them the data it wouldn't be any better than posting it online, and honestly, even if someone killed them all I don't think it would have much impact. They aren't likely to be the target."

"It doesn't sound like we're making much headway," Mae said, then sighed. "And honestly, I feel like stirred shit right now. You kids mind if I take a nap? I haven't slept since yesterday."

"Ah, uh, yeah, I think I could use a few hours to mull it over anyway," Angel said.

"Though, um, I am a little curious. Where are we going?"

Mae shrugged. "For now the Raptor's set to loiter somewhere safe. We probably aren't too far from Martel's estate."

"Won't we have to land somewhere to refuel?"

Mae laughed. "Not for a few months, so I don't think there's any hurry. Anyway, why don't you two hang out up front?"

Arte glared at her. "You aren't going to disappear again, are you?"

Mae smiled. "I think I've been foolhardy enough for one lifetime." She waved them away. "Now go on, shoo."

Arte did not look particularly satisfied, but Angel pulled him into the forward cabin. They plopped themselves into the pair of comfy bucket seats and started chatting, though not for long. Neither slept much last night, and their rescue mission began at dawn. It only took them a few minutes to fade away.

Chapter 9

When Angel woke she was greeted by an unfamiliar console covered in various screens and switches, all laying dormant. She bolted out of her seat before remembering where she was and what she was doing, then spent a few seconds stretching. It wasn't her best sleep, but proved to be a little more comfortable than expected.

She looked around, somewhat concerned by the empty chair where Arte had been earlier, and also wondering if they were still airborne. She'd never flown before, but her experience with intercity buses conditioned her to expect noise and shaking. The interior of the Raptor was eerily quiet and still. The only time she noticed any motion was during its rapid climbs and assents, which was mild even then. She had no idea how it pulled it off, however.

In any case, there wasn't anything for her in the cockpit, so she walked into the rear cabin. Arte and Mae were sitting at the bench, eating some of the almost palatable 'mystery mush' the Raptor was stocked with.

"Hi Angel," Arte said with a grin. "Glad to see you're awake."

"Thanks." She smiled back. He offered her a pouch as she sat next to him, which,

after a moment's hesitation, she accepted. She ate it quickly, thankful the odd flavor didn't have any staying power.

After they finished eating and cleaning up, they settled at the table, where Mae said, "I don't suppose you two had any flashes of inspiration?"

"We, uh, kind of went right to sleep," Angel said.

"I do have a question, at least," Arte said, looking at Angel. She motioned for him to go ahead. "Alright, so, I was thinking about that government thing of yours, and your owl people. You said they didn't matter, but, are there some people who *do* matter?"

"Well, yes, there are two big political parties," Angel said. "Specifically, there's the Great America Party and the Social Progress Party."

"Couldn't we give the data to them?"

"I wouldn't have any way to contact them, and, honestly, I'm not sure I'd trust them to do anything with it."

Mae leaned in. "But, if you were given the opportunity, would you try it anyway?" Angel pursed her lips. "Especially if Gale was pushing for it?"

"I... think I get what you're aiming at," Angel said. "But is there a chance that could happen?"

"Well, I don't know much about politics, but I do know rich and powerful

associates like schmoozing and showing off how important they are. I can't imagine your elites are any different."

Angel hummed. "That... is a good point. Even the OLS has a little get together every year, so I'm certain the big parties do too. I wouldn't have the foggiest idea of when or where though."

"Yes," Mae said, an impish grin curling onto her lips. "If only we knew *somebody* with a talent for gathering information." Her eyes drifted to a nearby terminal.

"No" flashed in bold letters on the screen.

Mae slid from her chair and onto her knees in front of the display. "Please, my most wonderful and darling friend! Please, bless us with your boundless skill and wisdom!"

"Outside Purpose. Outside Contract. Have Resource."

Mae groaned theatrically. "No! I already owe Abel too many favors! If I talk to him he's going to ask me out, *again*, and it's *so* awkward! Cybel! You're supposed to warn me of danger, not force me into it!"

"Not Danger."

"But it is! I swear, the man is so *gauche* I could die!" Mae waited a full minute, kneeling before the screen in silent hope. Eventually, she sighed and stood up.

"Well, it was worth a try."

Angel laughed. "Is he that bad?"

Mae frowned. "The worst." She shrugged. "Oh well, nothing to it. You kids sit tight, I... have research to do." She walked into the front cabin and shut the door. A minute later she started talking with an unheard partner.

Arte looked after her a few seconds, then over to Angel. She glanced back, signaling with her eyes he should go ahead and ask whatever question was plainly on his mind.

He smiled and blushed, then said, "Sorry. I hate to keep bugging you about this stuff, but what exactly is one of those 'party' things for? I get that you have two big ones, and that you owls are also one, but, like, what's the difference?"

Angel looked off, thinking the problem over for a bit. Eventually, she said, "Not that long ago I would have told you the OLS represented an alternative viewpoint from the mainstream. Them, and every other minor party."

"And by minor party, you mean...?"

"Anyone beside the Great Americans and Social Progressives."

"Oh, there are more than just the owls?"

"Yeah, a few, but the OLS is the biggest by far, for whatever it's worth."

Arte hummed. "So, if they aren't an alternative, what do you think they are now?"

Angel sighed and shrugged. "Honestly, it feels like they're a trap for people like me. Gale was right, all the OLS does is talk, and it turns out the Night Owls didn't amount to anything more than a tool for the CSA." She shook her head. "My whole life was a useless waste of time."

"I wouldn't say that." Arte turned his body to face her square on, lightly touching their knees together. "You helped me rescue Mae, and you're a great barista."

"Thanks," Angel said. "And... I mean, I am glad we were able to save her, but... I... I want more out of my life than making coffee, you know?"

Arte smiled playfully and said, "You could be a tech, like me."

Angel laughed and rolled her eyes. "That's not exactly a step up, even if you must make a lot of money doing it."

"Well, you're still young, I wouldn't count yourself out. And besides, there's still this attack to stop. I'm sure that would look good on your resume."

"There is that," Angel said. "Also, I suppose I've made a good teacher for you. Speaking of, do you have more questions?"

"I do, actually." Arte blushed. "Apparently I have a talent for digression." He settled, then said, "Alright, so, these party things, I get which ones there are, but what do they do, exactly?"

"They help candidates get elected to office," Angel said. Arte's blank stare did not suggest comprehension, so she continued. "Okay, let me try a different approach,

though to be clear, this is massively simplified. Anyway, each party has a platform, which is a set of policies they want enacted by the government."

"By policies you mean those law things, right?"

"Yes, exactly. When someone from the party is elected to office, they're supposed to propose and support legislation in line with the party platform."

"Oh! This is related to the popularity contest thing, isn't it?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it a popularity contest, but I suppose that's a fair description."

Arte hummed, then said, "I think I get the mechanism, but, to be clear, you're basically saying you let popular people tell you what to do."

Angel frowned. "I don't think anyone would put it that way, though it's close enough."

"It does leave me wondering about the other people."

"Other?"

"Yeah, you know, no one can be liked by everyone, right? Is it really fair for someone to be bossed around by a guy they may very well hate, just because a bunch of other people like them?"

"I've never really thought about it that way," Angel said. "I think that's another one of those 'just how it works' kinds of things."

"Well, if you're okay with that...." He shrugged. "I was also curious about those law things. Namely, they seemed a bit arbitrary. Like, if some popular guy decided he needed your kidneys or whatever, you would have to give them to him?"

Angel laughed. "No, of course not, the Constitution limits what laws can be made."

"And a Constitution would be...?"

"It's the founding document for our country. It lays out all the rules for how the government has to behave," Angel said. She saw the look Arte gave her and sighed. "Go ahead and ask."

Arte smiled nervously. "Ah, sorry, but, by document, you mean like a piece of paper, right?"

"It was written by some of the smartest men to ever live," Angel said. "So no, it's not *just* some piece of paper."

"I'm not seeing how a bunch of words are supposed to stop anyone from doing anything, even if they were written by geniuses."

"The Constitution is a guide for how the government operates, and if laws are made in violation of it, the courts will strike it down."

"And are these court things not a part of the government?"

"Well, no."

"Are they, like, some kind of computer thing, at least?"

Angel frowned. "Judges are people, and before you ask, some of them are appointed, and others are elected, depending on factors."

"That sounds like it's the popular people again, but with extra steps," Arte said.

"What happens if the government, included those deciding people, doesn't follow the rules and starts bossing you around however they feel like?"

"I... I don't know, to be honest," Angel said. "I guess you'd have to move, though it's hard getting citizenship in another country."

Arte hummed, then laughed and said, "You could join an association. I mean, I did it accidentally, so it must be pretty easy."

Angel looked down. "Really?"

Arte blushed. "Ah, well, I assume so, anyway. This is new to me too, so I didn't think to ask Maribel about how to switch." He chuckled. "Also, it might be a bit awkward asking a rep from my association how to leave it. Maybe I could ask Mae?"

As if on cue, the woman in question stepped through the front door. She looked at the pair with a grin and said, "You kids doing alright?"

"Y-yeah," Angel said. "We were chatting. How did your research go?"

"I'm confident we found the target," Mae said. She sat on the other bench. "The Social Progress Party is holding a conference two days from now, and every big name in your country is expected to show up."

"That sounds promising," Angel said.

"At least enough for us to assume Martel will carry out his attack there."

"Do we have a plan for how to stop it?"

Mae wiggled her hand. "Sort of. Abel sent me a lot of information about the venue and time frame, but in order to stop Martel's plan we have to know what it is. We couldn't figure that out, though Abel promised he would do more research and float the idea by some people he knows."

"Did your friend ask you out?" Arte said.

Mae rolled her eyes. "No, worse. He told me about a date he went on."

Angel laughed. "Jealous?"

"Doesn't he wish," Mae scoffed. "If that dumb nerd went on an actual date, with an actual woman, then I swear to God next time he asks I'll say yes, but that's about as likely as us winning."

"You should be careful," Angel said with a playful grin. "I have a good feeling about this."

"I admire your optimism," Mae said.

"Is there a way we can help figure out what to do?" Arte said.

"Maybe. I thought of several ways I could do the mission, but it needs to be something that would appeal to a Night Owl." She looked at Angel. "So it's a good thing we brought one along, eh?"

Angel blushed. "I wouldn't know where to begin planning something like this normally, let alone how to turn it into a terrorist attack."

"That's okay, I can bounce my ideas off you," Mae said. "For starters, we can all agree it won't look like an attack at all. So no guns or bombs or anything like that."

"Yeah, Night Owls are too skittish for something so dangerous, even if the weapons were fake."

"How would *you* go about exposing the data?" Arte said.

Mae hummed. "I think I'd start by putting together a quick presentation, maybe ten minutes or so, and include links to the variety of places I hid the data so people could get a copy before the CSA reacted. To deploy it, I'd probably hijack the control room for the opening ceremony, and play my video in lieu of theirs."

"That's way too bold for a Night Owl," Angel said. "I'm sure you'd have to force your way through security for that, or at least overpower a few techs." She thought a moment, then continued, "We probably would favor doing it first thing in the conference though. It gets it over with faster, and will probably reach the biggest

audience too."

"That's what I thought," Mae said. "But I'm not sure how else they are supposed to get people to pay attention. If the Night Owls wouldn't confront a couple of guys to take over the feed, I can't imagine them running through the convention center arguing their case with hundreds of people."

"What if they didn't have to confront anyone?" Arte said. "I mean, AutoChefs have remote diagnostic tools, could whatever screen or projector they use have something similar?"

"That's a good point," Mae said. "The convention is at a resort catering to rich and powerful clients, they'll use the latest and greatest tech, probably wireless everything. It wouldn't be implausible to construct a jammer that could hijack the feed. That also gives the Night Owls a reason to carry an unfamiliar device inside."

"I doubt a Night Owl could get anything past security," Angel said.

"They wouldn't handle that part," Mae said. "I'm certain an agent of Martel's would smuggle it in."

"Even then, how does that translate into an attack? We couldn't be talking about something much bigger than a cell phone. Would a bomb that size do enough damage?"

"You'd be surprised," Mae said. "But I was thinking poison gas. It's much scarier, and less dependent on positioning."

"That's horrible," Angel said.

"And kind of a mediocre plan anyway," Mae said. "A good nerve gas is hard to make, and smuggling it into the venue makes it look like an inside job. Whatever Martel is up to would have to be worth the added scrutiny."

"Can you think of anything else they might try?" Arte asked.

Mae shrugged. "Not really. A biological weapon would have more impact, but those are hard to control."

Angel shook her head. "What could be important enough to justify all those deaths?"

"Probably something stupid, to be honest," Mae said. "People like Martel don't put much value in human life. I don't think it matters from our end, as long as we stop it."

"Do we actually know enough to do that?" Arte said. "This is only speculation, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately we don't have much choice," Mae said. "Although I suppose we could get confirmation from the Night Owls." She looked at Angel.

Angel shook her head. "I doubt it. I mean, Martel must know you have contacts in Central City, so he isn't likely to risk calling on them for his plan, and it would take a while for us to build up trust with the other cells."

"In that case we'll have to act as though our assumption is correct," Mae said. "It's better to try *something* and risk failure than to sit back and guarantee it."

"Alright," Angel said. "If the nerve gas plan is the correct one, how do we stop it?"

Mae leaned back and sighed. "Now ain't that just the life or death question." She shook her head and straightened up. "It would have been hard enough, but after my little fuck up I don't know if it's possible."

"How do you mean?" Arte said.

"Remember what I told you?" Mae answered. "Federal areas are heavily surveilled, including the fancy resort the conference is at. They definitely have a biometric profile for me plugged into the most wanted bulletin, and probably for both of you as well, which means if any of us show up even a second on a single security feed, we'll have an army of feds on our ass before you can blink."

"We have to be able to do something," Angel said. "Isn't there *some* way we can use what we know?"

"Some way we can stop a person we don't know, with a device we won't recognize, coming in a way we can't guess, at an indeterminate time, all while remaining totally unseen?" Mae said.

"I... I suppose it does sound hopeless when you put it that way."

Mae looked off. "To be fair, I *can* think of a few ways that *technically* work, though

you won't like any of them."

"S-such as?"

"We could crash the Raptor into the building." Mae laughed. "Although even that is easier said than done. There isn't a true manual override, and the programming won't allow it to crash into anything it can avoid."

"That's not funny," Angel said.

Mae sighed. "Sorry. I feel a little pinned down right now."

"I... have what may be a dumb question," Arte said. "But... we can't walk into the resort because of that surveillance stuff, right?"

"Yes," Mae said.

"But why exactly? I mean, you said the feds would be on us before we could blink, do they have teleporters or something?"

Mae laughed and shook her head, wiping at her eyes before answering, "I meant that metaphorically. The system would dispatch police immediately, but it takes time for them to arrive."

Arte nodded. "But other than the police, the doors would let us through?"

Mae settled, a thoughtful look in her eyes. "I expect only people on the guest list will be allowed in."

"So, if we *were* invited, we could walk right in?"

"Probably?" Mae said.

"I doubt a trio of wanted criminals could get an invitation to the biggest political conference in the country," Angel said.

"Not a *real* invitation, sure," Arte said. "But Cybel got fake credentials into the CSA for us, remember? Would it be much harder to do the same for a fancy resort?"

"Even if we could," Angel said slowly. "We'd still have to deal with the police."

"Not right away," Arte said. "Like Mae said, they have to travel there same as anyone."

"That wouldn't give us much time."

"It would give us some."

"Fair," Angel said. She looked at Mae. "What do you think?"

"If we kept out of sight until we reached the entrance, we would have a minimum of five minutes before the police arrived," Mae said. "Possibly as much as ten. If we knew who we were looking for that would probably be enough."

"Yeah, but we don't," Angel said.

"Is there some way to figure out who they might have sent?" Arte said.

"Maybe?" Mae said. After a pause, she continued. "There *is* a question we overlooked about the Night Owls, which might give us hope."

"O-oh?" Angel said. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't it weird how you're able to meet in secret? Federal cities are heavily surveilled, your internet is locked down and centralized, yet somehow a bunch of amateurs created a secret society unnoticed by the CSA?"

"T-that is..." Angel started. She shook her head, then said, "What's your point?"

"Why are we assuming the Night Owls arose spontaneously?"

"A... are you saying..."

"That your organization was founded by the CSA?" Mae offered. Angel winced. "I wouldn't put it past them, at least."

"Even if they were," Arte said. "How does that help?"

"That's the beauty of it." Mae grinned, mischief in her eyes. "If the Night Owls *are* a CSA project, they should have a record of everyone with them. Getting data into federal systems can be hard, but getting it out is a right of passage for teenage net nomads. Hacking the CSA itself might take some doing, but if they have the data I'm sure we'll find it."

"We?" Arte said.

"By which I mean... Abel." Mae sighed. "You're lucky I like you, because if I had to choose between hearing about that nerd's date a second time and jumping out of the Raptor, I'd be sore tempted by the latter." She stood and walked to the forward cabin. "Sit tight kiddos, I'll be right back."

Angel watched her disappear from the room, then turned to Arte. "Do you think we have a chance?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, then hummed. "But I bet I know someone who does." He looked at a nearby terminal. "Hey Cybel. I know I'm a big pain, but can I ask a little favor? I promise to pay you back, however I can."

"One Percent. Generous Estimate."

Arte grinned. "Thanks! I really do mean to repay you, you know? Tell me whatever you want."

"Leave."

Arte softened. "I... don't think I can do that. The thought of leaving people to die when I know I can help...." He shook his head. "It's too painful to contemplate."

"Nuisance."

"Yeah, I suppose I can be."

"Did you mean that?" Angel said.

Arte nodded. "Of course."

Her eyes drifted down, and she said, "But why? My people have brought you nothing but trouble, you don't owe us a thing."

"I... don't really know," Arte said. "Whenever I think about quitting, I remember the books I read growing up. The men never ran away when people needed them, no matter how bad the situation was." He smiled. "I love the idea of living in a world where heroes are out there fighting evil, and now I get to make it one, at least a little. How can I pass that up?"

Angel laughed, a little manic, unsure if she should be amused or amazed. "Arte! You are...." She shook her head, still smiling. "You're either incredibly noble, or astoundingly dumb."

"Why not both?" Arte grinned.

The door slid open and Mae walked in. "I've got good news and bad."

Angel turned to Mae with a spike of anxiety. "Did you find records?"

"Abel found some improperly stored backups," Mae said as she sat across from them. "Which contained a CSA database of every Night Owl."

"W-was I in there?"

"No," Mae shook her head. "Unfortunately the data is almost a year old, so we won't know about anyone who joined since then. There's also a few people who apparently discovered the Night Owls independently of the CSA, who also knew enough OPSEC to protect their identities. For everyone else, though, we've got names, pictures, and a whole lot more."

"Can this tell us who they're sending for the attack?" Arte asked.

"Not directly," Mae said. "And I suspect the people running the CSA's Night Owl project aren't a part of this. Martel and his gang are likely acting independently."

"Does this help us at all, then?" Angel said.

"Yes, lots. For starters, there's a good chance whoever they pick will be someone we can recognize," Mae said. "And what's more, the vast majority of Night Owls fit the same general profile. The majority are young, twenty something males, and that's especially true for the proactive members."

Angel hummed. "So our plan is to sneak into the conference and hope we run into someone we recognize?"

"That, or a young man who looks out of place," Mae said. "Although I'm not sure what to do after we find them."

"Can't we just tell them not to activate the device they were given?"

"It might not be that easy," Mae said. "If I were running this attack I'd have an agent nearby who could trigger it remotely in case something went wrong."

"Could we find him too?"

"I wouldn't count on it. Even if we assume it'll be Seig, which is likely, he's not going to be hanging out nearby. He might even be outside the building, assuming he expects to survive this mission."

"There has to be *something* we can do," Angel said. Mae hummed.

While the pair of women were sharing a look, Arte leaned in and said, "Sorry if this is a bit dumb, but we're worried about a deadly gas, right?" Mae nodded. "Then couldn't we, you know"--he made a closing motion with his hands--"put it inside something?"

"Something?" Mae said.

"Well, I was thinking a garbage bag." Arte blushed. "The heavy duty ones do a good job trapping smells, so shouldn't that work for poison too?"

Mae remained motionless a second, eyes locked in a ponderous gaze, then slowly said, "Could it really be that easy?" She hummed. "I suppose most chemical weapons *are* technically liquids, so I'm not sure why it wouldn't."

"I think it's worth a shot, at least," Arte said.

"As long as they let us through with a handful of trash bags." Mae smiled. "But hey, we're already pushing our luck past the limit, might as well go all in."

"Is that our plan, then?" Angel said. "We stroll into biggest concentration of American elites outside of Congress, look for a suspicious dude, then throw a bomb in the garbage?"

Mae laughed. "I suppose it is."

"It feels... incomplete."

"There *are* a few details to work out," Mae said. "Abel is confident he can get us on the guest list by tomorrow, and we should familiarize ourselves with the venue and formulate an escape plan."

"Oh, yeah." Angel chuckled. "I hadn't thought about that part."

"Thankfully, getting out should be a lot easier than getting in," Mae said. "There's a clear path to the roof from the inside, so the Raptor can pick us up. I'm sure it will set off all kinds of alarms, but it won't matter at that point." She pulled a display onto the table and lay it flat. "Now let's start working on our routes."

Chapter 10

Angel held still while Mae applied mascara to her face. The Solver handled her own makeup a few minutes prior, while Arte finished getting dressed behind a nearby tree. They were wearing a set of stylish, and surprisingly comfortable clothes, which were apparently stored in the Raptor for occasions such as this.

"I still find it hard to believe you need to keep formalwear on hand," Angel said after Mae backed away.

"That's what Solver HQ thought," Mae said. "But after a dozen cases where agents on the ground needed to buy stuff out of pocket they started including them in the standard kit."

"Why would mercenaries need a fancy dress?"

Mae laughed. "Technically we're not mercenaries, we're Solvers."

"What's the difference?"

"Mercenaries fight people, I solve problems." Mae smiled. "Which sometimes *includes* fighting people."

Arte popped out from behind his tree and said, "Are we ready to go?"

"Almost," Mae said. She grabbed a few loose articles and loaded them into the drone which followed them from the Raptor, then took a handful of black garbage bags and tucked them into hidden pouches in their outfits. She patted them on the chest and said, "Try not to crinkle."

Arte and Angel followed her as she stepped out from the tree line onto a forested trail. Their path took them down a winding route, until opening up into a quaint neighborhood. They continued through the small village, carefully avoiding the surveillance cameras scattered around.

"Is it really safe to be walking in the open like this?" Angel said.

"That's one of the nice things about upperclass settlements like this," Mae said. "The people value their privacy, so as long as you bypass the entrances, say by dropping in behind them, it isn't hard to move about unseen."

"But... how is the CSA supposed to run the Safe Citizen program here?"

Mae laughed. "Judging by those files we saw, I would guess they don't."

"Ah... right." Angel looked down and sighed. She drifted behind, not straightening up until a click from Mae alerted her they were nearing their destination. She took a deep breath and shook her head, bracing for action.

They walked to the resort's main entrance from the side. A handful of well dressed

men were trickling in as they approached. Mae motioned for them to pause a short distance from the entrance, then ushered them on when the line was clear.

Arte took the lead, while Angel followed a few feet behind. She held her breath as he neared the door, and for a dreadful second she was certain it would remain locked tight and deafening alarms would blare, but the glass slid open in a smooth motion, allowing him to pass unhindered. She did the same moments later, followed immediately by Mae.

Angel spared a glance for her companions, before rushing in as dignified a manner as she could to the main auditorium. Her responsibility was to search along the right hand wall, and then circle back through a center aisle. Arte would take a mirrored path on the left, while Mae covered the rearmost rows. The Solver meant to finish before them, after which she would leave the auditorium to check a few other places and prepare their escape.

Angel slipped through a set of double doors and found herself in a massive hall packed to the brim with finely dressed elites. In another time she might have been intimidated, but at the moment she was far too concerned with scrutinizing the horde of ushers and waitresses waiting along the wall.

As she neared the corner, a young man in a red suit stepped out and asked, "May I help you to your seat, Miss?"

Angel clenched her jaw to avoid a yelp, and instead glared at the boy. He muttered an apology and backed away, while Angel continued on. She exhaled and shook her head, then increased the distance between herself and the line of staff. The interruption threw off her count, so she started again at one minute. They weren't

allowed to bring electronics into the building, so it was up to each of them to keep track of the remaining time.

Angel walked down the right wall until she reached the front row and turned left. So far she hadn't noticed a single person who looked familiar or out of place. She started up the center aisle on the fourth minute, and was well into the fifth by the time she returned to the rear. There was no sign of the police, though that was bound to change soon enough.

In spite of the cool air, sweat was building up on her chest and neck. She took a few deep breaths while she scanned the room. Mae would already have left, though in theory Arte was still somewhere nearby. She couldn't catch sight of him in two whole sweeps, and for a moment wondered if he bailed, but shook it off. The Class B was at least as dedicated to stopping this attack as she was.

There was time for at least one more pass, which she began by returning to the center of the rear wall. This time she decided to focus on the guests rather than the staff. As she walked back along her path, she noticed a chipper old man in a colorful suit. He was chatting loudly with another man, and seemed to be talking about the OLS.

She continued moving as she watched, straining her ears to listen in. They assumed Martel's agent would be one of the skittish Night Owls, but it was possible--

Her thought was interrupted when she crashed into a man walking out the door. She had only enough presence of mind to realize they were tumbling to the floor before the man deftly untangled their legs and pulled away. He caught her by the elbow and expertly stilled her wobble.

"Ah! Excuse me!" Angel said, looking up into his face. Her eyes flashed with terror as she bit down a yelp.

Seig smiled at her. "Pardon me, Miss." He chuckled. "First time to one of these little shindigs?"

"Y-yes, actually." Angel blushed and looked away, horrified the Admin might suddenly recognize her.

"They're quite the event," he said. "But truth be told, the opening ceremonies are such a bore." He leaned in and whispered, "If you want the advice of an old veteran, I suggest you skip the pomp and head straight to a presentation you're interested in. There's one on foreign affairs right after this, and I hear the speaker is quite charming. If you head there now you can get a good seat."

"Oh... thanks," Angel said.

"Least I could do," Seig said. He patted her arm. "You can find it in the other building. Now you have a lovely day." He walked away, leaving Angel to her thoughts.

It took a few seconds for her heart to settle, all the while she wrestled with the notion the Admin tried to save her life. Angel wasn't sure what to do with the information. It did at least suggest he didn't recognize her, though she could only guess as to why. She supposed it didn't matter in the end, if they succeeded here, he'd never make that mistake again, and if they didn't....

She shook her head. There wasn't time to dally. She grit her teeth and resumed her patrol, glaring down everyone she passed so hard several staff members visibly recoiled.

Arte, meanwhile, was strolling through an extra wide row meant to delineate the premium seats in front from the more pedestrian chairs to the rear. Many of the guests returned his own studious eyes, curious about the odd make of his suit and boyish features. Most of the young men in the resort were there to work as ushers or attendants. For one to meander so casually through their ranks in exotic attire suggested he was a man of some renown, but no one could place him.

He reached the end of the row and sighed, then looked up and over the crowd to the back wall. There was a group of men in blue uniforms scattered about, talking with the ushers. Each carried a few sheets of paper, which they would fan out for a few seconds in front of a staff member before moving on to the next one. Arte frowned at them, then turned to the stage.

A man in a fine suit had ascended, and was casually approaching the podium in the center. Arte deepened his frown, then scanned the crowd until his eyes rested on Angel. She was forcing her way through the crowd of guest currently rushing to their seats. Arte studied her a few seconds, then glanced back at the stage. Finally, he sighed and shrugged, then started towards the left hand wall. His pace was steady, but not especially quick.

When he cleared the row, he turned right and strode down the aisle towards the front. He reached the short stairs that lead to the stage, where a young man approached him. The aide was about to deflect the stranger, but froze at his grim expression and allowed him to pass without question.

Arte reached the podium a few steps before the host and waved the old man down. Before he could so much as mutter an objection, Arte grabbed the microphone and tapped it a few times.

"Is anyone down there a Night Owl?" Arte said. "Because if so, the device you were given is not a transmitter, it is a bomb. Specifically, one armed with poison gas."

Shock rippled through the crowd as hundreds of faces stared at the bizarre interruption. Many were struck with bemused awe, as though expecting a punch line at any moment. The air became increasingly anxious as the intruder continued scanning the room in silence. The Master of Ceremonies sputtered to the side, fumbling with his hands.

Arte leaned over the podium and pointed at a young man dressed as an usher off to the side, not far from where Angel stood frozen in surprise. "I believe that's him right there."

The man in question was only slightly less stunned than the crowd, maintaining barely enough presence of mind to slowly pull a thin tablet from his coat and into a ready position. Angel broke through her daze ahead of the masses, and clambered her way through them towards him.

Her sudden movement awoke the police from their stupor, and they immediately stormed their way towards the stage. Arte stood by as they approached, while Angel broke through the crowd and reached the terrified Night Owl. She swiped the device from his hand and stuffed it into a garbage bag she pulled from her dress. She tied it up, then stuffed the whole sack into another bag for good measure.

Angel glanced at the stunned man and said, "You should make yourself scarce," then took off towards a nearby door. It released her into a hallway running alongside the auditorium, and would eventually lead her along a mostly straight path to the roof.

Arte, meanwhile, waited until it was certain Angel secured the device and slipped from the room before making a move of his own. The police had him boxed in on both sides, approaching in a tight knit line of officers. Before they could close the distance, their attention was drawn to a racket above them.

Mae threw open a heavy grate, then kicked down a metal ladder. "This way kid!" She yelled before running along the catwalk and out of sight. Arte bolted towards the escape, bounding up the rungs a split second before the police arrived, barely pulling his leg clear from their grasping arms. He rushed the rest of the way up and onto the deck, shutting the grate behind him and locking it in place.

The police shouted after him as he followed Mae's path through the scaffolding above the stage. The elevated walkway lead through a thin wooden door into a small room with large windows overlooking the auditorium. Arte threw himself inside, where a technician muttered impotent protests at the sight of yet another intruder.

"Sorry for the bother," Arte said. He left out another door, this one of a regular size which lead into a second story hallway. From there he ran deeper into the resort, towards the rear stairwell which would take him to the roof. There was a handful of bewildered bystanders along the way, who whispered disapproval and glared indignation as he passed.

Arte continued at a full clip, slowing only a moment to look back when a cluster of policemen barged into the corridor from the front staircase. They shuffled about until they noticed Arte running away, then scrambled after him. Meanwhile, he reached the rearmost door, which had been kicked open a short while ago.

Inside was a set of stairs leading up, with Angel and Mae already near the top. Mae leaned over the railing and yelled down, "You're almost there kid! Someone set this damn thing off while Angel was climbing the stairs and I don't trust a pair of garbage bags to keep it contained. I'll go dispose of it somewhere safe, you kids wait for me on the roof. I shouldn't be long."

"You got it Mae!" Arte yelled back. The Solver disappeared from view, and soon the only sound in the stairwell was the thundering echo of his footsteps. After ascending all ten floors, he was drenched in sweat. He shed the suit jacket on the way, bundling it under one arm. At the top he pushed through a metal door and onto the hotel roof.

The top of the resort was divided into two levels, with a pair of stairwells leading to the lower terrace. On the far side of where Arte emerged from, next to the second door, was a final set of stairs leading to the topmost level. That would be the place the Raptor would land when Mae returned.

Arte ran towards it immediately, but skidded to a halt when Seig strode into the path in front of him. The Admin had rushed to the roof as soon as he realized what happened and who was responsible.

"That's far enough, Mr. Arte," Seig said.

"I think it would be Mr. Bodrum, actually," Arte said. "It turns out I do have a last name after all."

Seig stared blankly for a few seconds, unable to process the strange response. Eventually, he frowned, then said, "Whoever you are, your days of meddling have come to an end. You can either come with me, or die where you stand."

Angel poked her head over the balcony and started to say, "Arte? What's taking so--"

She was interrupted by Seig firing over his shoulder into the concrete wall along the upper terrace, a few feet from Angel's face. She yelped and scrambled for cover.

"If your friends know what's best for them, and you, they'll refrain from poking any more limbs into range."

Arte studied the Admin for a moment, then said, "Why are you working so hard?"

Seig smiled. "Because your unruly band have made yourselves a tedious chore, which thankfully comes to an end today."

"No, I meant, in general, for Martel. Is this stupid conspiracy really worth all the bother?"

"The Senator is a man with vision. He sees the threat of China's inevitable resurgence, and unlike the rest of the intemperate fools in Washington, he has the strength to do what's necessary."

"Right, so, the China thing," Arte said. "When you were arguing with Mae you said they turned everyone into a part of their machine, right?"

"They are inhuman devils, who sacrificed humanity for power," Seig said.

"Yeah, that sounds bad," Arte said. "So why do it here?"

Seig glared at him. "What the hell are you talking about?" A low hum reverberated from the upper terrace, the sound of the Raptor swooping into position. Seig spared a glance for the interruption, then fixed his gaze back on the Class B.

Arte shrugged. "As far as I can tell you federals already did the same thing. I mean, even your rebellions are a part of the plan. What's left to take?"

"Everything we've done is for the good of society," Seig said.

"And if all of it wasn't enough to surpass China, why would you expect more of the same to tip the balance?"

Seig scowled at him, his mouth chewing on an empty thought.

"You don't have an answer?" Arte said. When Seig didn't reply, he continued, "Then are you willing to kill an innocent man for a plan you have no reason to think will work?"

The two shared a long moment of silence, each staring back at the other with steady eyes. Finally, Arte stepped forward, walking towards the Admin. Seig kept his

aim fixed on Arte's chest, but didn't otherwise respond. The Class B continued on, passing the Admin and reaching the stairs, which he marched up and out of sight.

Mae and Angel were waiting for him, and the second he cleared the wall the Solver pulled him forward and ushered everyone into the Raptor. She hopped in behind them and closed the door, bracing herself against the wall while the craft soared into the sky. As soon as the acceleration leveled off, she went to a nearby panel and returned a pistol to the rack behind it.

When she finished she approached Arte, who'd remained standing in the middle of the room in spite of the shaky ascent. "Good work kid," she said. "Had me worried I'd need to throw away--"

Arte stepped into her before she could finish, grasping her tight around the chest and burying his head into her shoulder in spite of their difference in height. After a moment of surprise, Mae wrapped an arm around him and tucked him into her body.

"Guess you aren't as cold as you look," Mae said.

"Sorry," Arte mumbled.

"Nah, it's alright. Nothing wrong with feeling things." She patted his back. "And honestly, I'm glad you started showing your wear. I was worried maybe you didn't care if you lived or died." She guided him to a bench and sat him down. "This thing doesn't do anything like hot chocolate, but let me at least get you something sweet."

Arte slid as near to the wall as he could manage, then turned away from the room. He looked further out as Angel sat across from him.

"That was really brave of you, I think," she said. "Standing up to Seig like that. There's not a lot of people who could talk him down." She shook her head. "In fact, most people would've collapsed into a heap."

"Thanks," Arte said. "Though honestly, I was only thinking that if I had to die, I'd like to know the reason. Turns out there wasn't one."

"I'm glad he didn't shoot," Angel said.

"Me too."

Mae returned with a silver can. "For your nerves," she said as she handed it over. He took a swig while she sat next to him. "Now we need to decide what to do next."

"You're not finished?" Angel said. "I mean, I know Martel is still a problem, but wasn't stopping the attack enough to keep Arte safe?"

"It might have been," Mae said. "Perhaps with a little negotiation from his association to convince Martel that Arte was just some guy who stumbled into his plot, but that was before we got our hands on the data. I'm confident that was a measured risk on their part, which would have been tidied up in the attack on the convention."

"Wouldn't it have been safer not to let it out in the first place?"

Mae hummed. "I've been thinking about that, actually, and I suspect we were never intended to retrieve it. Gale likely had his own plan, and would have made sure no one had an opportunity to copy the drive. Since we did get it, however, Martel can't be sure we won't use it against him."

"But you gave it to Gale, didn't you?" Angel said.

"Yeah, though obviously I duplicated the contents first," Mae said with a mischievous smile. "There was a ton of valuable intelligence, after all."

"Why did they need anyone to steal the data in the first place? Doesn't Gale work for the CSA?"

"Probably not any more," Mae said. "But more specifically, it's not like Martel is running the whole country. I'm sure there are other federals who would--"

Mae was interrupted by a flash of red light. It pulsed on and off in time with a sharp tone and a gentle buzz in the floor. Several cushioned seats folded out from the back wall.

"What's going on!" Angel said.

Rather than answer, Mae pulled both Arte and Angel from the bench--which folded up immediately--and threw them into the rear chairs. She strapped them in place, then planted herself in between them.

"Is something wrong with the Raptor?" Angel said.

"It's having us prepare for evasive maneuvers," Mae said. "So most likely we're under attack."

"Under attack! By who?"

The alarm silenced, and Cybel's soft voice sounded on the intercom. "Federal's. Two Fighters."

"Martel must have scrambled them," Mae said, then she huffed. "That bastard probably guessed we'd show up to the conference and had them standing by."

"Are we going to be alright?" Angel said.

"Should be," Mae said. "But for now you need to hold tight, and try to relax."

A low rumble penetrated the normally quiet interior of the Raptor as the three were pressed into their seats. After a few seconds of that, the craft lurched down, then began a series of sharp turns that pushed its passengers to their limits. Arte was the first to pass out, slumping over during a particularly sharp climb.

Angel hung on a while longer, lasting through the whole gamut of twists and turns before fading out to the rhythmic drum of flares and chaff being deployed.

Chapter 11

Angel woke in complete darkness, a thin film resting on her face. Just as she began to stir, she felt an arm cross over her chest and lightly hold her in place.

"Try not to move around too much," Mae said.

"What's going on, where are we?" Angel replied.

"We had to bail on the Raptor while it leads the federals off. For now we're hiding under a thermal blanket to hide from their sensors."

"O-oh.... When is it coming back?"

"I don't know," Mae said. "In theory, now that the Raptor doesn't have passengers it can shake the fighters, but it won't be able to slip back while the feds are watching the area."

"And how long will that last?"

"That depends on if they noticed our landing. Hopefully they'll decide we're long gone and withdraw, though I think those federal drones can loiter for days."

"Days!" Angel said, then squeaked and added softly, "Sorry."

Mae laughed. "It's fine... probably."

"Still, are we going to have to stay huddled under this thing all that time?"

"You wish it was that easy," Mae said. "But unfortunately the thermo-shield doesn't work anywhere near that long, especially when it's covering three people. Our best bet is to stay on the move."

"Won't that make us easier to see?"

"No, the trees should obstruct regular optics, and as long as we keep the shield up we won't show up on infrared."

"Wait," Angel said. "Are you implying we'll have to march through the forest carrying this sheet over our heads?"

"I said you weren't going to like it," Mae said. "Anyway, let's get moving before the barrier gets a chance to heat up." She turned to the other side. "You good, Arte?"

"Well, you dropped me on a rock, so my butt hurts," he answered.

Mae laughed. "I'll take that as a yes." She carefully rolled into a squat, then held the sheet over them. "I'll take the lead. You two can take turns carrying the rear. Make sure to keep it out enough to cover your feet."

They stood together, then lined up with Angel in the middle and started walking. They continued for hours, stopping periodically to rest their arms and for Mae to check their position. She carried an emergency pack from the Raptor which contained a tablet computer.

"How long do we have to keep this up?" Angel asked after one of their breaks. "We aren't walking all the way back to Central or something, are we?"

"It's, ah, a little hard to say," Mae said. "Right now I'm taking us to an abandoned village beside the old interstate. If we can find a sturdy enough building we should be able to hunker down and wait them out."

"And after that the Raptor can come pick us up?"

"That's the plan, at least."

"How far is the village?"

"Oh, it's been about two miles for the last hour," Mae said.

"What? How does that work."

"If the feds are being thorough, which is likely, they can infer where we took our breaks from the heat signature on the ground. If we went straight to our destination we'd leave an obvious trail to where we're hiding. Right now I'm taking us to a spot close to the freeway but far from the village. Hopefully, if they actually are tracking us, they'll see we stopped there and assume a car came to pick us up."

Angel sighed. "This man on the run routine is a pain in the butt."

"Zero out of ten, do not recommend." Mae laughed with Angel.

They continued in silence a few minutes, keeping to themselves until Arte said, "Are there still cars driving down that road?"

"Mostly auto-trucks," Mae said. "Perhaps a few buses. And no, before you ask, we can't hitch a ride on any of them. Federal vehicles are all connected to their surveillance grid. One of them catches so much as a glimpse of us and we might as well have called Senator Martel himself and told him our location."

"What about non federals ones?"

Mae huffed. "The only other people driving these roads are from Thirteen, and frankly, running into them would make this situation worse."

Arte hummed, then said, "Aren't some of the vehicles for associates?"

"It would take an actual, honest to God miracle for us to run into one of those," Mae said.

"Not if we forced it."

"You mean like call someone?" Mae said. "Who do you know that could get a car out here in the next couple of hours? The nearest Blue Zone is more than a thousand miles away."

"Well, not a car," Arte said. "But a truck, and Crown."

"The company you work for? You really think they'd send something out here?"

"Why not?" Arte said. "I mean, they once brought me two cities over when I accidentally took a job out there. Asides from being a crappy ride, it didn't give me any trouble." They walked on in silence for a minute, before Arte added, "Well?"

"Ah, sorry," Mae said. "I.... Could it really be that easy?"

"Won't they notice a truck picking us up?" Angel said.

"There is a chance of that," Mae said. "Though all our options carry some risk, and I wonder if they even considered the possibility we could get a ground vehicle. They know we have the Raptor, and the road network is mostly under their control...." They continued a few minutes, then Mae said, "I think it's worth a shot. Let's rest here while Arte and I schedule a pickup."

They picked a relatively flat patch of ground nearby and parked there. Arte and Mae spent the time working on Mae's tablet, while Angel rested her arms. After their short break, they packed up and moved on, this time to a place further down the road, which Mae determined would give them the best concealment while working out with the relative travel times.

The last leg of their journey proved to be the longest yet, and when they were finally packed into the back of the Crown work truck Angel's arms were totally useless. By the look of her companions they weren't doing much better. Even Mae struggled to maneuver in the vehicle's cramped rear cabin. Arte crept into the front

seat to shutter the window before returning to flop on the floor.

He groaned. "Everything is pain."

"It'll be about twelve hours before we reach Central City, so go ahead and take a nap." Mae laughed. "Though I can't promise you won't wake up with us piled on top of you."

Arte didn't respond, as he had already fallen asleep. Angel, meanwhile, was too exhausted to object to the suggestion. Arte occupied what little space there was to lie flat. To distract herself from her aching arms, she turned to Mae and said, "Do you think this'll work?"

"Hopefully," Mae answered. "Though the only sign of our failure might be us getting blown up in a drone strike."

Angel frowned. "That's not encouraging."

"Sorry. I think this was our best option, at least." She smiled. "And besides, we didn't get any warnings from Cybel, so it can't be *that* bad of a plan."

Angel hummed, then after a second said, "That still feels so weird to me." Mae cast a curious glance at her. "Cybel, I mean. I've spent my whole life... guarded by a fancy computer system, so the idea should be familiar, but...." She gestured vaguely.

"You're starting to wonder if you weren't the one being protected?" Mae offered.

Angel didn't answer for a long moment, then said, quietly, "Maybe."

"Well, here's a question for you," Mae said. "If you could choose between the CSA, or Cybel, which would you pick? Or even rely on friends and family?"

"Do they still do that in those... association things?"

"Mostly." Mae smiled. "This may come as a surprise, but Arte and I aren't typical. The majority of us don't think it's worth paying Cybel to look after them." She laughed. "Especially since she can be a bit of a nuisance herself." She leaned over and whispered in a faux conspiratorial tone, "Sometimes I think she's annoying on purpose."

Angel laughed. "Why do you say that?"

Mae shrugged. "Nothing concrete, but truth be told, Cybel is a mystery. No one knows where she came from. One day she just started offering her services."

"Weird," Angel said.

"It sure is," Mae said, then smiled. "Though I can't help but notice you didn't answer my question."

"Ah, right." Angel blushed, and looked down. "To be honest I... don't feel comfortable answering." She shook her head. "I don't even like thinking about it."

"Interesting," Mae said. "Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know...."

"Are you wondering how someone becomes an associate?"

Angel blushed and answered in a hushed voice, "A little."

Mae smiled mischievously. "It depends a bit on where you're coming from, to be honest. For instance, if your parents are members in an association, it's much easier to join yourself when you become an adult. I presume that's how Arte got a premium tier in Psa Psa."

"Oh, so it's hard get in?"

"I wouldn't say hard, but Standing Associations have to be pretty exclusive to work, you know?"

"Not really?"

Mae hummed, then awkwardly brushed the back of her head. "I'm not much good at teaching." She took a deep breath, then continued, "Alright, I think you get the idea that the purpose of associations is to help people work together without necessarily trusting everyone involved, and to give them some mechanism to resolve disputes without having to, you know, go fight it out."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Angel said. "It's similar to a government in that regard."

Mae laughed. "A lot of associates wouldn't like the comparison, but it's close. The big difference though is that *no one* is going to go fight it out. Associations are all carrot and no stick, so in order to be effective it has to be a really good carrot."

Angel nodded. "I think I get it. If it's too easy to get into an association, or I suppose to get all the benefits of being in one, then you don't have much incentive to behave."

"Yeah, exactly, they aren't called Standing Associations for nothing. You've gotta stick with them long enough to prove you're invested in society."

"So does that mean they've got you scrubbing toilets or whatever to start?"

Mae laughed. "Well, it depends on the association. They've all got their own little quirks and idiosyncrasies in their on-boarding process, though actually, if you're interested in becoming an associate, I'd suggest a Staking Association instead. You get a lot more flexibility at a much better price, and the only catch is there's more stuff you have to handle yourself."

"Staking?"

"Yeah, basically it's takes 'invested in society' literally. You can think of it like a bank. Rather than relying on an association's perks to keep you accountable, a Staking Associations has some of your assets under their management."

"And that's their leverage over you?"

Mae laughed. "I wouldn't put it like that, and it's a little simplified, but that's not unfair. Technically it's proof of your willingness and ability to make good on your word, or provide restitution in the event your actions harm someone or their property."

"So it's another variant on that 'take responsibility' thing?" Angel said.

"You're catching on fast." Mae smiled. "Once you get the core idea, I think the rest of it is pretty intuitive."

"How does it work in practice? Like, if you hurt someone, they get your money?"

"Not usually?" Mae said. "Admittedly, I haven't checked the terms for every association out there, but in mine, at least, the assets are always technically yours, but you get a lien against them until your debt is paid. The nice thing is they use productive assets, so if shit goes totally sideways your stake will pay off the debt eventually. It stops a mistake from fucking you over, and keeps people invested in society even if they've hit a rough patch."

"Doesn't that mean it's a rich person thing though?"

Mae smiled. "That's what's so brilliant. A Staking Association thinks like a bank, and sure, they'd love people to give them vast fortunes to hold onto, but the wealthy prefer to manage their own assets, or can at least get a better rate elsewhere. For someone with nothing though, the promise of a relatively small stake can be tremendously motivating."

Angel thought a few seconds, then said, "How does that work exactly?"

Mae hummed, then said, "The specifics vary between associations, but as an example, one might offer new customers ten percent of the stake required by an employer, plus a willingness to treat you as if you had the full stake, on the

condition you make regular contributions to your assets under their management, up to the point you had a full stake with the company."

"You mean they just give people money?" Angel said. "Like charity?"

Mae laughed. "No, and don't let those darn snakes trick you otherwise. They make good money, pretending it's out of the kindness of their hearts is pure marketing. Loyal customers are very profitable, and great advertising."

"They make money... by giving people money?"

"It's quite clever," Mae said. "To understand, you have to remember they profit from assets under management. They 'give' you that ten percent at the beginning, but until you're fully staked, they keep most if not all of the interest from it. The only real upfront cost is the small chance a new customer fucks up, and then bails on restitution, but most people will want to stick around to keep working towards their stake, and can't cause much damage in the first place."

Angel thought it over a moment, then lit up. "Oh! I get it. If they're offering ten percent, by the time you're done they'll have ten times as much money."

"Exactly! And afterwards there's a good chance you'll stick with them, thanks to all that goodwill they built up, so if you never bail on a claim against you, it's pure profit. It's a disgusting racket," Mae finished with a smile.

Angel chuckled. "I can't tell if you admire or resent them."

"Oh, they're great, I'm just jealous as hell, except for the part where the association

industry is fucking savage." She shook her head. "I couldn't handle the anxiety, I'd shrivel up in a week."

"There's clearly nothing like the mercenary life to ward off those stress wrinkles," Angel said. Mae laughed, and when she settled, Angel continued. "That does bring up another question, though. How do you guys handle, like security, and stuff. I mean, do you have police?"

"You mean a gang of blue clad jerks marching around telling you what to do?" Mae said playfully. Angel didn't dignify the question with anything more than an eye roll, and Mae continued. "But not really, except in a very broad and general sense, and even then, not really. Technically, every associate is responsible for their own safety, though in practice most everyone hires some firm instead, directly or indirectly."

"How do you mean?"

"For instance, if you rent an apartment you'd be hard pressed to find one that doesn't have a contract with a security company, and any kind of commercial building will have one, and... honestly, I can't think of a lot of people who don't. I suppose if you're a hermit in the woods you'll own a gun, but asides from that, specialization is great."

"Is... is it scary out there?" Angel said.

Mae smiled and patted her head. "Honestly, it's boring. Violence is an expensive hassle, so associates tend to be very peaceful."

"Ah.... I guess that explains why you're a mercenary."

"Actually, I used to be in dispute resolution, but I... uh...." Mae gestured vaguely and sighed. "Well, I fucked that up too."

"I... I don't think you're doing a bad job here."

"Thanks, though I doubt Solver HQ will be so generous," Mae said. Angel let out a big yawn. "Anyway, there's plenty of road in front of us, so why don't we make room over there next to Arte and get some sleep."

Angel looked at the cramped space and blushed. Before she could object, Mae pulled her along by the hand. They squished Arte to the side, then squeezed into the narrow space. Angel passed out within seconds of laying her head on a pile of rags.

Chapter 12

The sleek van rolled along the crumbling streets of Old City, carefully dodging the numerous potholes and scattered rubble in its path. It stopped in front of the decayed facade of an old apartment, wrapped around a square courtyard. There was a large pool in the center, drained of water, which became suddenly full of aircraft when the Raptor swooped in and landed gently inside.

Arte, Angel, and Mae scrambled out the rear door of the van, then through the apartment and into the waiting aircraft. As soon as the door slid shut, it soared into the sky. Inside, the trio threw down a pair of benches and slumped into them.

"Never thought it could feel so roomie in here," Angel said.

Mae laughed. "It is quite the step up from a sardine can."

Angel sniffed, then frowned and said, "I'd kill for a shower though."

Mae leaned out of her seat to a nearby panel and grabbed a towel and a bottle of water, then offered them to Angel. "This is the best I can do." Angel eyed her skeptically. Mae motioned to the forward door, and said. "You can get some privacy in there, and don't forget to grab your other clothes."

Angel sighed, accepted the offered supplies, then made her way to the front cabin.

"Oh yeah, I should probably change too," Arte said. He looked around, then over to Mae. He blushed. "S-should I, uh..."

"You can wait until Angel is done, you know."

"Ah, right." His blush deepened as he looked off. They waited quietly until Angel returned, then each spent some time washing up and changing. When everyone was as refreshed as could be, they ate a quick meal, and finally settled into the seats around the table.

"So," Mae said. "I believe we were interrupted earlier." Angel and Arte turned to her with curious eyes. "When we were discussing what to do next."

"Oh, right, the data," Angel said. "Arte won't be safe as long as Martel thinks it might be used against him."

"You won't be either," Mae said. "And even though you're not an associate, it wouldn't be right to abandon you."

Angel laughed. "It sounds like you're planning to leave and take me with you."

"That about sums it up," Mae said.

"What!" Angel and Arte yelled in unison.

Mae sighed. "Unfortunately, I don't see that we have any other choice. Martel is too powerful, and we're out of options. The only safe place is a Blue Zone."

"What about High Water?" Arte said.

Mae shrugged. "Just because Psa Psa will go to great lengths to get your life back, doesn't mean there won't be any delays. You can wait it out in another city, maybe find another job to pass the time."

"S-so, that's it," Angel said. "We're letting Martel do what he wants?" She wiped her eyes. "Isn't there *something* we can do. I mean, we have all those records, right?"

"Sure, and I even thought about blackmail, but either Martel was careful not to let any dirt on him onto that drive, or he was squeaky clean to begin with," Mae said. "And we don't have a way to distribute it regardless."

Arte hummed, "There must be a way *someone* could do it though, right?"

"I suppose. Don't see how that helps us, though."

They spent a long moment in silence, until Angel suddenly perked up. "Actually... I, well, don't have so much as an idea, but"--she looked at Arte--"do you remember when you asked about sending the data to everyone?" He nodded. "Well, I only thought of it later, but there are Federal Safety Alerts. They're distributed to every member of the Safe Citizen Program."

"That sounds helpful," Arte said. He looked at Mae, "Couldn't your friend do some computer stuff to get into that?"

"I know Cybel managed something similar," Mae said, "But in general, getting information *in* to federal networks is a lot harder than getting it out. If we wanted to hack the system we'd almost definitely need physical access, which means breaking into some highly secure facility, and not one of those carbon copy data centers sprinkled around the country."

"Can we investigate it?" Angel said. "Maybe Abel could find something we can use."

Mae slowly frowned, then sighed. "I'll send him a message, but he's probably asleep right now." She grabbed her phone and tapped a few things into it. "There, it's done, but don't get your hopes up."

"Is that all we can do for now?"

"Unless one of you kids have an idea," Mae said.

"I wouldn't call it an idea," Arte said. "But I do have a question." He looked at Angel. "How does that alert thing work?"

"They show up on your phone," she said. "You get a little notification, and have to click on it right away or you start losing Safety Score. Normally it'll play a video, but I've seen them send a few different kinds of files."

"Ah, I see why you suggested it, but, actually, I meant who can send them. It sounds like the kind of thing you have to be pretty important to use."

Angel hummed. "I've never thought about it, but I suppose at least the President

could do it."

"What about that Martel guy?"

"The Senator?" Angel said. "You know... he *is* the chair of the Social Cohesion Committee. That's a very powerful position, so there's a good chance he can too. Are you suggesting we go after him?"

"I don't see why not," Arte said. "We've already gotten into his house once, right?"

"Yeah, but now he's going to be on high alert," Angel said. "There's no way it will be that easy the second time."

Mae slammed the table without warning and stood, leaning over it. "Oh my God!"

"What! Is something wrong?"

"That's it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Martel!" Mae said. "He's a fucking crook!" She glanced between the other two with wild eyes. "And we threw him off his game!"

"Slow down, Mae," Angel said. "What are you talking about?"

Mae took a deep breath, then looked at Angel. "It's like you said, we already broke into his house, and what's more, one of his pet Admins betrayed him, and who

knows what he thinks about Seig's failure at the resort. Right now he must be feeling very insecure."

"Ah, I guess?" Angel said. "Does that help us?"

"It wouldn't," Mae said. "Except for the part where he's a crook." She smiled devilishly. "That bastard is in league with Thirteen, and right now he's bound to have doubts about his security amongst the federals. If we put him under pressure he's liable to flee his home and scurry to his criminal friends."

"But we don't have a way to get at him in his house," Angel said.

"Yeah, sure, we know that," Mae said. "But *he* doesn't. Without passengers, the Raptor can easily infiltrate federal territory, land near Martel's estate, then make it out again. And even better, we already slipped past the military once, so if he sends them to find us and they come up empty handed, it'll crank up his paranoia even further."

"Well, alright, we spook him into running to Thirteen, doesn't that just leave him in another place we can't reach?"

"That's what's so brilliant. Federal territories are all Yellow Zones, but not every Yellow Zone is a federal territory."

"You mean... he'll be running away from safety?"

"Exactly," Mae said.

"But how will we know where he ends up? Thirteen is an international organization, isn't it?"

"Sort of," Mae said. "They have operations running all over the globe, but there's really only one city that could be said to belong to them, which happens to be in North America. If we assume Martel is connected to Thirteen at the highest levels, and that he's not the sort of person to give up his luxury, then there's only one place he'd end up."

"Thirteen has a city in North America?" Angel said. "I've never heard of that."

"Yeah, New Tepan. The federals don't like talking about cities outside their influence, even if this particular one is kind of a shit hole. Might put crazy ideas in your head, I suppose."

"Will it be easier to get at Martel if he's out there?"

"It should be," Mae said. "I didn't call the place a shit hole for nothing. The city is practically feudal, even if the guys at the top have plenty of fancy tech. They never bothered to install a surveillance grid outside of their estates, so we won't have trouble getting next to them."

Angel hummed. "Estates? Like multiple?" Mae nodded. "How do we know which one Martel would go to."

"Actually, there's a particular crime lord, Martinez, who's ascension through the ranks has been unusually rapid. The Solvers are sure he has a federal ally, but couldn't figure out who. Based on what we know, it's got to be Martel."

"You sure know a lot about Thirteen."

"Of course," Mae said. "That fucking scum is arguably the Solvers' greatest enemy, so we devote a lot of energy to understanding them."

"Even more than federals?" Arte said.

"Oh, tons. Federals are more powerful, and more numerous, but they tend to be insular and associates prefer to stay out of their way. In places outside their influence, or where federals are collapsing, there's plenty of opportunity to turn a profit, for associates and Thirteen alike."

"Are you guys at war?" Angel said.

"You could put it that way," Mae said.

"It's crazy. This sounds like a really big deal, but I've never heard anything about it."

Mae laughed. "That's not the half of it. The truly wild part is the two organizations most involved are headquartered less than five hundred miles from each other. We literally share a border--not that the term means much--but neither party has ever, you know, gone over and attacked the other."

"Why not?" Arte said.

Mae hummed. "Well, for associates, mounting an invasion would be prohibitively expensive, and Thirteen knows we'd kick their ass from here to the stratosphere if

they started shit." She shrugged. "Anyway, I think we've digressed a bit."

Angel laughed. "Oh, right, Martel. I don't think you've actually laid out your plan yet."

"Yes, there might still be a few holes, but I think I've got the makings of a good one," Mae said. "Our first step is to scare Martel with the Raptor. In theory, he'll flee to New Tepan to hunker down until we're taken care of. We'll follow him there, infiltrate the Martinez estate, and, uh, get his FSA access keys... somehow."

"Sounds like we found a hole," Angel said.

Mae smiled. "Maybe we can spy on him until he needs to send a message, but I can't imagine he'll do it that often."

"Is there some way we can force it?" Arte said.

"Oh!" Angel lit up. "What if we make him think we're hiding in a city somewhere?"

"How does that help?"

"The FSA is often used for bulletins about wanted criminals, especially when they think someone is hiding them."

Mae hummed. "So if we drop a hint we've taken shelter in Central, you think Martel will handle the announcement himself."

Angel shook her head. "We'd want to make it look like a national matter. I don't

know a *lot* about FSAs, but the wider the distribution the higher you have to be up the chain to send one. If Martel wants to message the entire country he'll have to do it himself, unless he wants to involve the President, which I doubt."

"It's all coming together." Mae nodded. "Unfortunately, this is shaping up to be a very computer-y sort of plan." She looked longingly at a nearby terminal.

Angel laughed. "I don't think she'll let you get out of talking to Abel."

Mae sighed. "A girl can dream." She shook her head and stood up. "Alright kids, you sit tight. I... have research to do." She walked to the front cabin, muttering, "Gonna have me fetching his groceries for weeks."

Chapter 13

Mae descended into the darkness, navigating only by the flickering light of a squat candle melted onto a wooden dish. The stairs creaked with each step, guiding her through a crude door into a dusty basement. Once inside she set the candle down on a simple table in front of Arte and Angel, then sat down beside them.

Angel looked at the candle and said, "You weren't kidding when you said New Tepan was a dump. How do people put up with living like this?"

Mae shrugged. "They don't think there's a choice in the matter, and Thirteen does everything in their power to keep it that way. This is basically what the low tech version of federals looks like."

"I suppose that's true." She sighed. "If you asked a month ago, this is what I would have said Class Bs lived like, assuming I thought about them at all."

"To be fair, I'm sure a lot of the people living here *are* Class Bs," Mae said. "Not everyone made it into associations after the Exile. It happened so suddenly no one had time to prepare. The gangs were quick to take advantage of the situation."

"That... must have been rough."

Mae shrugged. "It was a long time ago, and I think most of us got the better end of the deal."

"Should we go over the plan again?" Arte said. "It's almost time to begin, isn't it?"

"Good idea," Mae said with a smile, then sighed. "And I've got to admit, Abel did a fantastic job putting it together. I guess that nerd is more useful than I thought. Anyway"--she pulled a paper tube from a bag by the table and unrolled it, revealing a detailed map of the Martinez estate--"he found an unpatched security exploit in the climate control, which will allow him to force a short in the central air pump here."

She tapped a square on the map labeled as such, then on an adjacent circle. "Which so happens to share a room with the main conduit for the security cameras. Mr. Martinez is not the sort of man to put up with a malfunctioning AC, especially in this weather, so his staff will immediately send for a tech."

"And that's where we come in?" Arte said.

"Exactly. I put a tap on the local tower, so when they call out I'll intercept and pretend to be the firm they're looking for. I will, of course, be all too happy to get a crew out as soon as possible, which will be your queue to drive out there."

"Are they really going to mistake me for a man in this suit?" Angel said, motioning to her coveralls.

"Of course," Mae said. "Just don't take off your hat, and try not to look anyone in

the eye. Once you're inside, someone *should* lead you to the machine, where hopefully they'll leave you to your work. If not, Angel, you're going to have to figure out how to distract whoever's in there long enough for Arte to install the interrupt."

"Not that I know much about computer stuff," Arte said. "But won't it be kind of obvious if I unplug all their cameras, even for a few seconds?"

"Almost definitely," Mae said. "And there's a good chance they'll conduct an investigation, and even inform Mr. Martinez. However, as long as it takes at least twenty minutes, I should be able to get in and out long before anyone even thinks of warning Senator Martel."

"But if there's a security problem, won't they stop us from leaving?"

"That's why you need to fix the short first," Mae said. "Abel included all the instructions you'll need. As soon as it's done, install the interrupt then get out asap. Don't go *too* fast though, or you might make them suspicious."

"Right... of course."

"Also"--Mae laughed--"if you've made it to the truck, and it looks like they aren't going to let you leave, be prepared to haul ass through the gate and out the city."

"What about you?" Angel said. "We can't leave you behind."

"Never you worry kid." Mae smiled. "I made my own arrangements. In any case, you guys head straight to the rendezvous when you're done. The Raptor will land

the moment you're in position."

"I... guess that's it then," Arte said. "All that's left... is to do it."

"Nervous?" Mae said. He nodded, and she pat his hand. "Don't sweat it. All you have to do is what you've been doing your whole life, getting called in to fix something. Think of this like a mostly normal repair service."

Arte took a deep breath, then said, "Alright, let's go."

Mae stood, then pulled Arte to his feet. "Knock 'em dead, kids." She slapped his back, then helped Angel stand. "Now get the heck out of here."

Arte and Angel left the room and climbed the stairs, passing through a dark hallway before entering a paved courtyard. The moon shone on a well stocked work truck parked nearby. It was worn around the edges, like everything else in New Tepan, but was otherwise in good repair. The two climbed into the cabin, started the engine, and buckled up.

"A-are you sure you know how to drive this?" Angel said.

Arte blushed, then said. "P-pretty sure. Mae showed me how it works, and I think I got enough practice." He peered down the empty road past the open gate in front of them. "Thankfully we'll be the only ones driving around at night. I'm not sure how I'd feel about doing this in traffic."

Angel tightened her seatbelt. "Just don't go too fast."

They waited in silence a few minutes before Arte got a message on his phone. He put the truck in gear then slowly rolled onto the street. His route took them a fair distance from the estate before turning in and coming up the main strip. There were no street lamps, and the houses along the side offered only the occasional flicker of a few errant candles, leaving the moon and his own headlights as the sole source of illumination.

Arte slowed to a crawl on several occasions, to allow a motley assortment of wild animals to pass, and wasn't much faster when the road was clear. Nevertheless, it didn't take long to arrive at the front gate of the Martinez estate. He stopped beside a squat box attached to the front gate and glanced at the armed guard contained within. The man approached as Arte rolled down his window.

"I'm from QuickFix Heating and Air," Arte said. "I believe you scheduled an expedited service with us?"

The man looked him over, then down at a tablet in his hand. "Yeah, they called it in a few minutes ago." He tapped a button on the pad, raising the gate, then waved them along. "Maintenance goes in the back."

Arte closed his window and drove on, releasing a deep breath when the guard was out of sight. "So far, so good." He maneuvered the truck through the estate, taking it around the wide and flat main building until he reached a small parking lot. A man approached from a nearby door, and before Arte could finish squeezing the truck into a narrow space he was already staring them down cross armed and tapping his feet.

The moment Arte opened the door, the man ran up. "You're here for the air, right?"

"Yes sir," Arte said.

He clicked his tongue and said, "The boss will not appreciate having issues with brand new hardware. You better not expect him to pay for fixing your shoddy product."

"Of course not," Arte said.

"And furthermore--"

"You gonna wag your tongue 'till the sun comes up, or you gonna take us to the unit?" Angel said. She'd lowered the tone of her voice, which gave it a gravelly quality. The man was too taken aback to find it odd, and merely huffed in response. "Go along then, lead the way."

The man did as instructed, waiting by the door while they gathered the necessary tools and supplies and loaded them into a handcart. They followed him inside, entering the manor by way of a long hallway abounding with luxurious decor. Gold trimmed cases displayed fine statues and exotic jewelry.

He led them through the wide corridors, clicking impatiently if they loitered so much as a half step to admire a particularly impressive piece. After a few hasty twists and turns, they approached the stairwell that would lead them to the utility level. Before they reached the door, a well dressed man appeared from a nearby junction.

"You, Barnes," he said to the man leading them.

Their guide snapped to attention and answered, "How may I help you, Mr. Martel." Arte and Angel shared a panicked look, then quickly found something very interesting to study on the wall.

"The air went out in my room," the Senator said. "And I should like it seen to before the temperature increases."

"Without question, sir," Barnes said. "Such an illustrious guest of Master Martinez deserves only the finest our house has to offer. We've already summoned a crew to address the issue." He motioned to Arte and Angel, who held steadfast in examining a particularly ugly painting.

Martel looked them over, then said, "I expect immediate results."

"Of course, sir," Arte said without turning.

Martel walked closer, glaring at Arte. After a long moment, he huffed and said, "Class Bs really are a miserable, uncultured lot." He turned and strode away, throwing, "Hopefully your mechanical aptitude is of a higher caliber than your dignity, though perhaps that's asking too much from refuse," over his shoulder before disappearing from view.

Barnes clicked his tongue, and said, "Such disrespectful behavior will not reflect well on your company, and your defective machinery has already put you on thin ice."

"And wasting our time on mindless blather reflects even worse on *you*," Angel said.

The butler hissed in disgust, but otherwise remained silent as he motioned for them to follow. They descended one level, and were ushered into a narrow room overflowing with machinery and tangled with endless pipes and cables.

Arte froze momentarily, a flash of concern passed his eyes before he began the delicate trek through the jungle of conduits. He wiggled through the narrow gap between two pumps, arriving at a large, empty space. Arte studied the area for several seconds, as though hoping something would materialize to fill the void.

"Did they send the retard or something?" Barnes scoffed. "You imbeciles installed the new unit a month ago, right over there." He motioned to a machine on the opposite side of a bundle of wire and pipe dividing the room.

Arte clambered over, then examined the machine. His eyes scanned up and down until they settled on a placard describing its make and model. Relief flushed his face as he took in the details. It was the expected machine, even if it was installed with the front butting against the wall. Arte sighed and took a tablet from his belt, pulling up the schematics.

"Don't tell me--" Barnes cut off when Arte glared at him.

"That's enough whining." Arte turned to Angel and said, "Grab the wrench set and the number ten socket."

Angel was struck motionless a second, before snapping into action. She set up the tool cart and started digging inside, briefly scanning the labels with each step. Meanwhile, Arte set about disconnecting power from the machine, then swooped

in and plucked the tools from her hands.

He removed the back panel, then proceeded to dismantle most of the internals, swapping out various tools as needed. He reached the charred piece up front in a matter of minutes, and near as quickly had the unit repaired and reassembled, save the final panel in the rear.

He reattached the power cable, then flipped a heavy switch jammed uncomfortably close to another machine. The device whirred to life, pumping air and coolant through internal components with a low rumble.

Barnes gave Arte a reluctant but appreciative hum. "I suppose you possess a modicum of competence after all."

Arte glanced at him, then wormed through the packed room to the cart so he was standing close to Angel. He held her eyes and said, "I am going to give it a few minutes to make sure everything is working." He turned away from Barnes and grabbed a small black case from the toolbox while blocking sight of the motion with his body.

While he worked his way back through the crowded pipes, Angel darted her gaze over to Barnes, then slowly turned in place. Her eyes flitted between different items in the room while her face grew increasingly lost. Eventually, they landed back on Barnes. After a few seconds of watching him watch Arte, she took a sharp breath and threw off her hat with a sweeping motion. She shook out her hair and let out a loud sigh.

Barnes glanced at the sudden motion, then doubled back and stared in shock.

Angel strut towards him, lowering the front zipper of her coveralls enough to show a bit of cleavage.

"W-wha--"Barnes choked off with a squeak as she slipped into his space. She looked up with hungry eyes.

"My brother *always* drags me along for emergency calls," she said as she leaned into him, putting her face inches from his own. "And they are *such* a terrible *bore*." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I wish at least *once* I could do *something* a little fun on them." She smiled and tilted her head. "You know?"

Barnes flushed red. "I-I...." He started to glance at Arte, but Angel stilled his face with her other hand, pulling even closer.

"I bet *you* can think of a few *exciting* ideas for what we cou--"Angel was interrupted when Arte pulled her away by the collar. He piled her hair on top of her head and pinned it in place with her discarded cap.

"Please excuse my sister," Arte said. "Father tried to instill discipline, but she yearns for trouble even now."

Before Barnes could answer, Arte replaced the rear panel, packed the tools, and rolled the cart out of the room with Angel in tow. The butler scrambled after them a few seconds later, flushed with embarrassment. Angel was in a similar state, with brilliant red skin reaching well below her neck.

The pair continued at a rapid pace, moving too quickly for Barnes to catch up without risking his dignity. They were through the rear door and loading the truck

before he made it outside, and Angel surreptitiously climbed into the passenger seat on the other side while Barnes moved to intercept Arte.

"Wait," Barnes said, standing between Arte and the door.

"The repair was under warranty." Arte slipped around him and started climbing in.

"Please call again if you have any further troubles." He shut the door and started the engine, then put the truck in gear and rolled away before Barnes could work out something to say. When they turned the corner and out of sight, Arte looked at Angel and said, "W-where'd you get the idea to try *that*?"

Angel laughed awkwardly and replied, "I watched a lot of old spy movies growing up, and it seemed like something Jane Bond would do."

"Ah... I see," Arte said.

Angel laughed again and said, "You have no idea who Jane Bond is, do you?"

Arte chuckled nervously. "To be honest, I'm not even sure what a movie is."

"What! Really?"

"Well, I suspect it's some kind of video entertainment, but I've never seen one."

Angel shook her head. "How is that possible? What did you do for fun growing up?"

Arte shrugged. "Read books on my phone, mostly. It came with a nice little collection which I went through a few times."

"Is that normal for associates?"

"I don't know, really, but I doubt it."

"I suddenly have so many questions about your childhood," she said. "Though I suppose that can wait until after we're out the front gate." She motioned to the approaching barrier.

Arte pulled up to the security booth and lowered his window while the guard took a position beside it. Arte smiled at him. "Just finished up."

The guard looked at his tablet, then back up at Arte. "Sure thing. Wait here a minute while I raise the gate."

Arte nodded as the man slowly turned and walked away. A buzz came from his pocket, and he pulled out his phone and looked at the screen. A message flashed over it. "Drive. Now."

Arte slammed the truck into gear and punched the accelerator. A metal rod shot from the ground into his rear bumper as they passed, sending them wobbling down the road. Arte stabilized their course after a few hundred feet.

"The map, please," Arte said as he tossed his phone to Angel.

She grabbed it off the seat before it slid to the floor and looked at it, then yelled, "Duck!" She pushed Arte's head down as a bullet whizzed through the back windshield.

They stayed hunched over while Arte zigzagged down the road, evading most of the incoming fire from the estate. He swerved onto a side street and straightened up. "The map!"

Angel uncurled then quickly swiped through to the navigation app. She poked her head just above the bottom of the windshield, then pointed towards an approaching intersection and said, "Take a left there!" The phone buzzed and she looked back, then added, "And hurry! Enforcers are on their way."

Arte tore down the road, dodging carts and stalls left out for the night in between making wild turns. He made it two streets before they were intercepted by an old pickup with a pair of men in the back. They were armed with automatic rifles, and started shooting the moment the truck was in view. Arte smashed the gas to the floor, squealing the tires before they took off with a lurch.

"There's more coming up that street!" Angel yelled. "Cut left here."

Arte took a hard turn, skidding the rear wheels and barely hanging on with the front as they changed directions. They bounced off a packed up stand on the sidewalk, scattering an eclectic collection of trinkets and baubles into the air.

"Sorry!" Arte yelped as he dragged the truck into the center lane. A few seconds later one of their pursuers came screeching up the same road. After it stabilized, the men in the back stood and braced themselves on the cab, then started firing. Arte zigzagged down the road without slowing, borderline out of control.

Angel lay to her side, bracing against the console, while Arte did his best to shrink

below the windshield without losing sight in front of him.

"There's another right coming up," Angel said. "But you've gotta keep up the speed."

Arte grit his teeth and nodded. He touched the brake as he approached the next street, then took as wide a turn as possible. The truck teetered on two tires during the arc, but was knocked back to all four when it slammed into a stone wall.

When they finished rocking back and forth, Angel said, "We're almost to the rendezvous. No more sharp turns, just a few gentle rights and lefts."

Arte nodded, and lay back into the accelerator, fighting the increasingly violent wobble coming through the steering wheel. He soared through an intersection, swerving to avoid a misplaced cabbage cart. He clipped the handles, sending it spiraling behind them. One of their pursuers took it dead on, scattering vegetables to the sky.

They breezed through the next junction, and Angel said, "We're almost there! The clearing is after the next cross-street."

As they approached the incoming intersection, another pickup was careening towards them up the righthand prong of a y-junction. Arte stared it down, but kept on the gas, hugging the right side of the road. At the last second he veered down the left prong. The other truck clipped their righthand rear corner, sending them into a tailspin. They stopped by slamming into a parked car, tangling the metal together.

Arte shook off the impact first and tried his door. When it didn't open he leaned over Angel and shoved the passenger side open, then half-pushed half-carried her out with him while she was lost in a daze.

"A little further!" Arte said as he dragged her into a run beside him. She trailed at first, but eventually recovered enough match his pace. By some luck the men from Thirteen were forced to a screeching halt at the last intersection to avoid a collision, but the brief respite lasted less than a minute before the pickups were back on them.

Arte and Angel entered a wide clearing while their pursuers were maneuvering around the crashed work truck. The Raptor dropped in a second later, stopping a few feet off the ground while the side door slid open. Arte hoisted Angel inside before clambering in behind her. The enforcers skid to a stop outside the clearing and fired, sending a few bullets bouncing through the rear cabin before the entrance snapped shut.

Arte slumped against the wall next to Angel, releasing a heavy breath as the craft soared away. He said, "That... was too close."

Angel turned to him with a smile, but suddenly bolted upright and yelled, "Arte! You're bleeding."

Arte looked down and tapped a dark splotch on his coveralls. His fingers came away slick with blood. "Ah... so I am."

"We have to do something!"

Arte's face started to pale, and he slowly gazed around the room. "I suppose there must be a first aid kit here somewhere." He tried to push himself up, but his arm collapsed beneath him and he toppled over.

"H-hold on!" Angel cried. "I-I'll..."

Arte sank deeper into the floor. "It's... alright. Just... a little tired, is all." As he drifted from consciousness, the door slid open, letting in the wail of a powerful engine running at full throttle. He passed out before the sound resolved into the entry of another passenger.

Chapter 14

Arte woke in his bed, tucked neatly in the corner of his room beside a covered window. He sat up slowly, wincing as he rolled his legs over the side. His chest was bare, save a wrapping of gauze pinning a bandage to his side. He took a few careful breaths, before standing and walking out to his compact living room.

Angel jumped to her feet as he entered and said, "It's too soon for you to be walking about, go back to bed."

"It's fine," Arte said, waving her down. He looked around. Mae was resting on his couch with a handgun at arms length on his coffee table. "What happened?"

Mae grinned impishly while sitting up. "You were shot."

Arte frowned. "Yes, I remember, but shouldn't I be at a hospital? Did something go wrong."

Mae hummed, resting a finger on her lips, then said, "Technically, asides from your injury, everything went according to plan."

"You were able to hijack Martel's broadcast?" Arte said. "So everyone knows

about those crooks?"

"They sure do," Mae said. "And boy were they livid. Why, if the last three days had gone the same as the first two, the whole damn CSA and probably the federals along with it would be out on their ass. There's a whole lot of people with a negative Safety Score at the moment."

"I've been out five days!" Arte said.

"In and out," Mae said. "After the virtual surgeon gave the all clear, he prescribed a few days bedrest. I brought you back to your house so you'd wake up somewhere familiar. Figured that'd be a nice way to round out your adventure."

"I take it things went awry."

"They sure as hell did." Mae shook her head. "Absolutely batshit fucking crazy askew."

"What are you talking about?" Arte started toward the door.

"I wouldn't, if I were you, unless you fancy getting hamburgered by a robot."

"What!"

Mae nodded. "Yeah, that was my reaction too. Apparently the feds have an emergency protocol for situations like this. Martel slipped into DC during the chaos, and he's taken over the country. Right now he's consolidating his power, sorting out who's with him and who ain't. When that's done, well...."

"We have to do something!" Arte started pacing furiously.

Mae sighed and mumbled to Angel, "I told you we should have kept him sedated."

"This is all wrong! I can't just--"Arte marched to the door and started fumbling with the lock, but stopped when Angel grabbed his arm.

"Stop!" she said. "We... we've already..." She released a shaking breath. "There's nothing we can do out there."

Arte made a feeble attempt to pull away, but gave in quickly and allowed himself to be lead to a chair by the dining table. He sat down, and Angel took a seat next to him. He glanced at her and said, "S-sorry." She shook her head.

Mae kicked back sideways on the couch. "This really sets the bar for hardest mission in Solver history. Like, who could have imagined the feds were working on some shit like this, or that they were all doing it at once."

"What do you mean?" Arte said.

"Remember how I said there were different kinds of federals?" Mae asked. Arte nodded. "Well, lots of them busted out with their own robot armies after Martel did. What's even worse though, is apparently the feds here were coordinating with the Chinese. They've announced the two of them are uniting to form a 'Global Peace Keeping Force' or some shit."

"You mean those guys Seig was worried about?"

Mae laughed. "I'm sure he feels great right now."

"What's a peace keeper thing?"

Mae rolled her eyes. "A world conquering army with a stupid name." She shook her head and muttered, "Could have at least called it the doom horde."

"C-conquering?" Arte said. "You mean, like, marching around telling everyone on the planet what to do?" Mae nodded. "What does that mean for associates?"

"Nothing good," Mae said. "After Martel gets the rest of the federals on board with his plan, I'm sure he'll turn his eye's on us next."

"You... you mean he's going to attack?" Arte said. Mae nodded. "Is there something they can do to stop him."

"I don't know. Associates generally have better technology than federals, even for military hardware, but we don't make a lot of it." She huffed. "And we certainly didn't build a secret robot army."

They sat in silence a few minutes, no one looking at any particular thing. Eventually, Arte said, "What happens next? For us, I mean. Are you going home?"

Mae sighed. "I'm not sure. This isn't exactly 'Mission Accomplished,' but I can't think of anything else to do for you. I was hoping HQ would come up with a plan by the time you got back on your feet, but so far they're only telling me to hang tight."

"Are you saying the Solvers are ignoring the problem?"

"No, thankfully not, though I can't say they have any more ideas than I do. For now I'll wait here, in case you need to be evacuated in a hurry."

Arte hummed. "Well, in that case, I might as well help you guys feel at home." He looked at Angel. "I don't know how you've been handling the sleeping arrangements, but you can use my bed while you're here."

Angel shook her head and blushed. "I-it's fine. I was here to help look after you when Martel put the city under martial law. Mae didn't think it was worth the risk of getting shot, so..."

"Still"--Arte stood--"I have to do something. How about I cook something? Are you two hungry?"

Angel jumped to her feet. "I'll help."

The pair went to the small kitchen and scrounged together a decent breakfast. Mae joined them at the table. Halfway through a plate of french toast she was interrupted by a buzz from her hip. She pulled out her phone and unlocked the screen.

"It's the boss," she said, then stood and walked to Arte's bedroom. "Let me see what she wants."

After Mae left the room, Arte and Angel slowly worked down their meal. After

chewing down her last bite of omelette, Angel said, "Did... did we do the right thing?"

"You mean releasing the data?" Arte said. Angel nodded and he hummed, then continued, "I think so."

"But... everything's gone wrong. I mean, two weeks ago I was living a... a normal life, and now robots are marching around and no one's allowed to do anything. Things will never return to how they were, and I'm sure Martel doesn't have anything good planned."

"I'm not sure going back to how things were would be an improvement," Arte said, then shook his head. "Anyway, that aside, I'd bet anything this robot stuff was part of the plan eventually, but not until they got everything in order."

"You think that means there's a way out?"

"I think it's too soon to give up."

Angel smiled. "I hope you're--"

She was interrupted by a loud yell from the bedroom. The pair turned to stare at it, while Mae continued a long string of invectives. After she settled down, they shared a long look, a mixture of worry and amusement. A few minutes later, Mae stomped out of the room, muttering, "Absolutely mental."

"What happened?" Arte said. "Did they tell you to go home?"

Mae huffed and shook her head. "Worse, they're sending me to DC."

Angel gasped. "You mean... after Martel?"

"Yeah, apparently."

"By yourself?"

"For now," Mae said. "A consensus was reached and the other Solvers are being recalled to organize a defense while the PSA Council coordinates military strategy with the associations."

"That... isn't a very concrete plan," Arte said.

"You ain't wrong." Mae huffed. "My boss said things are happening in the background, but I wasn't privy to them."

"Doesn't Martel have a bunch of robots protecting him?" Angel said. "Are you supposed to fight them all bare handed."

Mae laughed. "Oh, no no, I'm just taking the Raptor to act as a forward observer."

Arte stood and offered his hand. "I guess this is goodbye, then," he said. "Good luck, and thanks for your help."

"That's what you should be saying, but Cybel chimed in and for some reason she thinks you'll be safer with me."

Arte dropped his hand. "What! Why?"

Mae shrugged. "No idea. All she said, in her usual loquacious style, was, 'Arte. Danger. Join.' Wouldn't elaborate after that."

Arte hummed. "She did say her purpose wasn't to put people in danger, so I suppose she knows best." He turned to Angel and started to say, "I hope--"

"I'm coming with," Angel said. "Even if I'd be safer here. Like you said, it's too soon to give up. I'm going to see this through to the bitter end."

"Ah, alright," Arte said. He looked at Mae. "Still, aren't there killer robots out there? How are we supposed to escape?"

"Most likely, the roof," Mae said. "Normally I'd prefer not to land the Raptor in the middle of a federal city, but at this point I don't think alerting the feds is a significant concern."

"Oh, okay," Arte said. "I better get dressed."

"No rush," Mae said. "I'm going to pull the Raptor a little closer and spend a hour or two on reconnaissance. With autonomous weapons you can't spend even a second in their line of sight, so I need to verify the positions of every unit."

Arte smiled. "Good, I really wanted to take a shower." He looked down at himself and laughed. "I'm honestly feeling super gross right now."

Mae grinned. "Well, I didn't want to say anything...." She laughed. "Anyway, after

you clean up, the two of you can pack for a few days."

Arte and Angel got to work getting ready, and after finishing they returned to Mae, who was leaning over the coffee table frowning at her tablet.

"Is everything alright?" Angel asked.

Mae sighed. "There isn't much hardware here in Central, but it was cleverly placed. There are a few high-rises nearby with great views of the city, in particular of the other buildings, and wouldn't you know it, that's where most of the guns are."

"So we can't take the roof?" Arte said. Mae nodded. "How are the streets then."

Mae wiggled her hand. "Eh. Only a few patrols, but there's a number of airborne drones overhead, and I'd bet the CSA network is connected to these robots. I *think* there's a path to the Old City, but the timing is very tight."

"It's not like we have a choice in the matter, right?" Arte said. "Will this get easier if we wait?"

Mae shook her head. "If anything, the opposite. There was another shipments of machines a few minutes ago, and I doubt it was the last."

"Then we better get going."

Arte and Angel grabbed their supplies, then followed Mae outside. She guided them to the ground level, where they waited a few minutes before scuttling across the street into a shadowed alley and behind a dumpster. They continued like that a

few streets, with Mae constantly glancing at her phone to check the route.

After one particularly long sprint, they arrived at a shallow alcove huddled between two buildings and tucked themselves against the wall.

"We're almost to the Old City," Mae said. "Not many patrols pass through there, so in a few minutes we should be clear." She pulled them closer together, then returned to her map, watching little dots move around.

The screen flashed without warning, then a message appeared. "Run. Now."

"What!" Mae said.

"Will Cover. Go!"

Mae grabbed the pair and dragged them into a run. "Change of plans!"

They sprinted down the alley and out onto the road. An eight legged machine skittered around the corner. It was armed with a long rifle mounted on top of a platform that remained perfectly still in spite of the crawler's shambling strides. The gun snapped to target, taking aim on Mae as she ran ahead of the trio. An alarm blared, then an explosion ripped down the street, scattering hunks of metal and stone into the sky.

Mae spared only a glance for the destruction before reaching back to usher her companions into an even faster pace. They cut through another alley, then emerged onto a wide road. A half dozen drones were assembled on either side. They turned their weapons in perfect sync, but were again destroyed before firing a shot.

"What's going on?" Angel yelled between breaths.

"Just run!" Mae answered. They finished their scramble into the Old City without encountering any more robots, eventually arriving at a courtyard where the Raptor swooped in to pick them up before carrying them into the sky.

Arte and Angel remained in a heap by the door, catching their breath, while Mae folded out the table benches and sat down. After a few minutes slowing her breath, Angel wobbled to her feet, offering a hand to Arte and guiding them both to the seat opposite Mae.

Angel let out a long breath, then said, "What was that about, why did we have to run?"

"Cybel must have thought it was necessary," Arte said. They looked at one of the terminals on the wall. After a few seconds with no reaction, Arte continued, "Come on Cybel, don't throw us into danger without an explanation." She didn't answer, and after a few seconds he added, "It's rude."

The panel flashed, "Reported."

"Reported? What the heck does that mean?"

Cybel didn't answer, but a few seconds later Angel did in a subdued tone, "We must have been reported to the CSA and were about to get swarmed."

"What?"

"The SCP app has a tool for reporting infractions." Angel shook her head. "Someone must have seen us on the street and called it in."

"Why would they do that?" Arte said.

"You get a bonus to your Safety Score."

"But those robots were going to kill us! Didn't they know that?"

Angel shrugged. "They probably didn't care."

"That's... that's horrible."

"S-sorry," Angel said.

Mae leaned across the table and pat her arm. "Don't sweat it, kid, there's snakes everywhere."

Arte frowned, then sighed and said, "Where'd those explosions come from, anyway?"

Mae hummed. "I suppose it must have been Cybel."

Arte gave her a wary look. "Like, she blows things up with her mind?"

Mae laughed, slapping the table. "You are too funny sometimes." She let out a long breath. "But no, I expect she hit them from space."

"She can do that!"

"I wouldn't have said so before, but now...." She shook her head. "In any case, I think we ought to keep it to ourselves."

"Why?" Angel said.

"Cybel kept the ability secret for a reason, right?" Mae said. "At the very least, wouldn't it be a bit rude to out her when she did it to protect us?"

"I... guess?"

"I agree with Mae," Arte said. "Cybel's been nothing but helpful, I think she's earned our trust."

"Well, alright," Angel said. "It seems like it should be a bigger deal, but there isn't anything we can do about it anyway." She turned to Mae. "How long until we're over DC?"

"A couple hours," Mae said. "Though after that it's anyone's guess what happens next. Still, I'm the only one who actually needs to do anything, you two are just along for the ride. Why don't you kids ride up front? It's a great view, and I wager this'll be your last chance to appreciate it, and besides, I've got a bunch of boring HQ calls to attend to."

Arte eyed her skeptically. "You promise you won't disappear, right?"

Mae laughed. "Jeez, let a girl live it down." She shooed him out of his seat. "I haven't got anywhere to run off to anyway."

Arte continued to watch her cautiously as he stood, but had to give up when Angel pulled him into the forward cabin. They sat in the pair of bucket seats and lightened the filter on the window until they had a clear view of the sky.

After a few minutes, Angel said, "It really is a lovely view." She glanced at Arte. "Did you do much flying before this?"

Arte shook his head. "I honestly never even considered the possibility of leaving the city. What about you?"

"I... didn't have the Safety Score for it," she said. "When I went to Atlanta for college I had to take a bus, and again to come back."

"What does safety have to do with taking a plane?" Arte said. "I mean, for flying one I get, but as a passenger? Do people get into a lot of fights or something?"

Angel laughed. "No. Supposedly it was to protect the environment, but I suspect the real goal was making travel difficult. Even getting a bus ticket was an ordeal."

Arte shook his head. "You guys sure put up with a lot of crap."

"Yeah...." Angel sighed and looked off. After a few minutes of silence, Angel turned to Arte and asked, "Do you think we have a chance?"

"I don't know, but I don't think it matters. Whatever Martel has planned for the

world can't be much better than dying."

"You really think that?"

"Of course. There's plenty of ways to die that don't mean your heart stops beating, and none of them are any good. At least this way you can say you did your best."

Angel hummed, settling into her seat as she looked off at nothing. Arte studied her a minute, then slowly cast his gaze out the window towards the distant horizon. They continued in silence, as Arte drifted to sleep. Angel followed a couple hours later.

Chapter 15

The front cabin of the Raptor was quiet, lit only by a scant few rays from the morning sun. Arte and Angel were sleeping quietly in the comfortable seats, leaned halfway back. The door to the rear slid open with a gentle hiss, which was enough to stir Arte from his slumber. He looked around, then slowly hoisted himself up and stretched.

After shaking some life into his body, he peered into the rear compartment, a glint of concern in his eyes. "Mae?" he said. After a few seconds with no response, he tapped Angel on the arm. She woke quickly and stood behind him. He motioned for her to follow, then walked into the other room.

They were greeted by a floating drone, which approached Arte and dropped something into his hand before zipping out the side door. Arte looked at the object.

"My phone?" he said. He studied it a few seconds, seeing it was indeed his old phone. It was slightly more chipped and scuffed than a few weeks ago, but otherwise intact. There was an extra cable plugged into a port on the bottom.

"What's going on?" Angel said. "Where's Mae?"

A message flashed on Arte's phone. "Need Favor. Land. Follow."

"Cybel?" Arte said. "What's happening?" Angel watched over his shoulder. After a few seconds with no reply, Arte continued, "It's rude to boss people around, you know. We deserve some kind of explanation. Where did Mae go?"

The screen changed to a video feed, a wide angle view of Mae from above. The Solver was wearing power armor, fighting a swarm of drones. She made quick work of the eight legged walkers, but a seemingly endless number of them poured in from every angle, showering her with a continuous stream of bullets. The attacks glanced off her with little effect, but she was already reduced to crushing the machines beneath her feet to save ammo.

"Is she all alone?" Angel said. "What is she doing?"

"Helping."

"Who? You?"

"Correct."

"What are you trying to accomplish?" Arte asked.

"Explanation Long. Time Short. Trust. Yes?"

"Fine, but you better explain everything when this is done."

"Will Understand."

"Alright," Arte said. "Lead the way, I guess."

The rear mounted seats dropped, which the pair took as an invitation to sit down and strap in. The moment they did, the Raptor plummeted, pressing them into the wall with tremendous force. They had a split second of weightlessness, before being slammed with another wave of acceleration. Then, suddenly as it started, it stopped.

Before they could so much as breath, the door slid open, and every terminal and screen in the cabin flashed, "Dismount." Arte and Angel scrambled out of their harnesses, then onto the ground outside. The Raptor peeled away and shot into the sky. A sharp cracked echoed down a few seconds later.

The pair were deposited onto a vacant lot, placed in front of an imposing looking concrete building. Arte pulled out his phone and looked at the screen. "Now what?"

It flashed, "Wait."

"Wait for--"

A drone swooped into view in front of him. It was roughly the size of a large dog, held aloft by four turbines at the end of each of its stubby legs. There was a small package clamped to its underbelly, which it deposited at his feet before floating off a short distance. Arte opened the box and found a pair of tiny earpieces. He handed one to Angel and equipped his own.

"Good." Cybel's voice was as curt and oddly demure as ever. "Follow." The drone hovered away, leading them towards the nearby structure. When they reach the

front door, it poked a spindly arm into an adjacent pad, triggering a mechanical click a second later. "Open."

Arte pushed through, holding the door for Angel and the drone before following after. It guided them along, passing through a few doors with Arte's assistance until they reached a stairwell adjacent to a staff room.

The drone motioned to the room. "Angel. Unneeded. Wait. Safe."

"What!" Angel said. "No! I'm coming with."

"Accepted. Find Use. Dangerous."

"I don't care. I'm going to do my part, no matter what."

The drone tapped the panel by the stairwell door, unlocking it. Arte pulled it open without being asked, and joined them inside moments later. Cybel led them to the lowest floor and into a cavernous basement loaded with an endless array of dusty shelves overflowing with ancient paper.

"Are we looking for a document?" Angel said.

"Secret Path."

"Wow, really?"

The drone continued, navigating between the rows and aisles until reaching a nondescript section of open wall on the far side of the storeroom.

"Uh, Cybel," Angel said. "This... seems to be a dead end."

"Cover." The drone pointed its nose at a line of filing cabinets a few feet away.

"I think she wants us to wait behind those cabinets," Arte said. He led Angel to a nook behind the metal furniture. The moment they were tucked safely behind them, the drone mounted vertically against the wall, then exploded. The dust settled to reveal a narrow passage, wholly bereft of light save a faint glimmer in the distance.

The pair approached cautiously, peering skeptically into its depths.

"Hurry."

"Right, right," Angel said. "Run into the spooky tunnel you just exploded out of a wall."

Arte laughed, then motioned for her to follow as he trotted into the darkness. It didn't take long until the light behind them faded to a paltry flicker no brighter than the glow ahead. They continued through the lightless hallway for a half hour, eventually coming upon a wide tunnel illuminated by a string of dim yellow bulbs hanging on the wall. Their own passage joined two others in forming this larger corridor.

"Finally!" Angel said. "I almost tripped three times back there."

"Silence Preferable."

"Ah, sorry," she whispered.

"Do we follow the lights?" Arte said.

"Correct."

The pair crept forward, moving at a more cautious pace in spite of the better lighting. After fifteen minutes they arrived at another intersection. Cybel directed them along the left path, which eventually deposited them in a cavernous hall. Two massive tunnels stood in line along one wall, an old subway track long abandoned.

Arte poked his head out and looked around, before ushering Angel to join him in the open. "Alright, where do we go next?" Arte said.

"An excellent question," said a voice to their right. "Might I suggest back into the hole you crawled out of?"

Arte and Angel turned to discover Seig glaring at them, a handgun waving perilously between the two. He had been waiting in an adjacent room--an old office--and emerged when the pair entered the chamber.

"Problem. Hold. Incoming."

Arte looked from Seig to the gun, then back to Seig and frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"My job, obviously," Seig answered.

"So you kept working for Martel after you let me pass at the resort?"

Seig scowled. "That... was a mistake. And not one you should hope I'll make again."

"Perhaps." Arte shrugged. "Was Gale mistaken when he helped rescue Mae?"

"Simons," Seig seethed, "is an idealistic fool. His notion of honor is as outdated as it is irrelevant."

"And I suppose your notion of unity and security are much more up to date? How is 'standing strong against the Chinese' working out now that you've joined them?"

"Don't think you can *talk* your way out of this!"

"I don't, just trying to understand why you'd shoot me."

Seig scoffed, "Like you don't care if you die."

"I didn't say that, but all the concern in the world won't deflect a single bullet. If you're going to kill me, I'd at least like to understand the reason."

Seig glowered at him. The gun no longer waved between the pair, and instead remained fixed on Arte.

After a few seconds of silence, Arte said, "Well, are you going to stand there glaring at me, or are you going to answer? Is this how you hoped things would go?"

"The Chinese role in the new order," Seig said, "is still... being negotiated."

"Is that why they're a founding member?" Arte said.

"Martel has them where he needs them."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Arte said. "Right by his side. You really think he cares about anything more than power? What way of life are you even defending standing with him? This?" Arte motioned to their surroundings. "Frankly, the rate thing are going, it won't be long until he doesn't just have you living like machines, but will replace you with them entirely."

"You don't know that," Seig said.

"Neither do you. The question is, are you so sure you're on the right path you'd kill an innocent man to stay on it?"

"Don't try to walk away." Seig held out his gun, moving a finger to the trigger.

"I didn't intend to," Arte said. "But I also happen to know something you don't."

"What's that?" Seig glanced warily to each side.

"This conversation has a time limit."

Seig snarled and dived to the side, rolling into a crouch facing away, pistol at the ready to confront... nothing. He hissed and turned back to Arte to stop him from... standing perfectly still.

"That would have been excellent timing," Arte said. "Don't you think?"

"Is this a joke to you?"

Arte canted his head. "No?"

"Why Alert?" Cybel said in his ear.

"I just don't want you to die pointlessly, is all."

Seig stared at the Class B, unsure how to respond. Strength slowly drained from his arm, gradually lowering the tip of his weapon to the floor.

Arte hummed. "Were you friends with Gale?" he said. Seig shifted away, looking at the floor. "Well, if so, I think you owe him an apology, wherever he ended up." He started to walk away, motioning for Angel to follow.

"He's... being held below the Senator's estate," Seig muttered.

"Then you have something more important to do right now." Arte continued around Seig, giving him a wide berth as he headed to a set of stairs on the other side. A drone emerged from one of the subway tunnels and whisked across the room to a position above Arte's shoulder.

"Too Nice."

"Maybe," Arte said. "What do we do next?"

"Follow." Cybel led them out of the station, through another storeroom packed with dusty shelves, and along to a spacious foyer. A glass wall on one side showed a large white building tucked behind a small forest.

"Is that the White House?" Angel said.

"Correct. Wait."

"Wow...." She shook her head. "I can't believe there's a secret path leading up to it."

"Angel. Door."

"Wait? Me?" she said in alarm.

"Yes. Found Use."

"O-okay." Angel crept to the door, doing her best to remain hidden behind a stone column. When she arrived, she said, "Open it?"

"Correct."

She crouched, then leaned over, grabbing the handle with an outstretched arm and pulling it towards her. She winced at a distant popping sound, but held strong right up to the point something swooped through the opening and landed skidding across the floor. She yelped and tumbled onto her back.

After rolling to her butt, she was confronted by a strange drone clamped to a metal box about the size of a carryon luggage. The drone detached itself with a click, then

slid off the case, leaving a trail of smoke from its thrusters as it fell to the floor. It broke apart, and several components melted into slag.

Meanwhile, the crate unfolded into a vaguely humanoid shape, standing with its front half popped open. A matching helmet sat by its toes.

"Angel. Pilot."

"Y-you want... *me* to do it?" Angel said.

"Cover Arte."

"Is that... really alright?"

"Help. Yes?"

"Right, okay." Angel clambered to her feet and approached the power armor. She studied it a few seconds, then looked at Arte. She blushed, and said, "T-turn around!"

"Ah, o-okay," Arte said, doing as requested.

She threw off her shirt, shoes, and pants, before taking a deep breath and backing into the suit. It snapped shut around her, then sealed tight with a cascade of clicks and hisses. She plucked the helmet off the ground, then tucked her hair in and slid it over her face. It wiggled into position and locked onto the suit.

"Y-you can look," Angel said. Arte faced her again, still blushing.

"Open Door. Wait."

Angel let the drone outside, then motioned for Arte join her beside the entrance while Cybel went ahead. A few minutes later the display in her suit guided her forward. She set out with Arte in tow, rushing down the stairs and across a grassy field to a large tree which they huddled behind.

That process repeated a couple times, moving them from cover to cover as they approached the open field on the opposite side of the small park. They arrived at shallow recess behind a stump, a few feet from the wide clearing around the White House.

Angel grabbed a large handgun from a clasp on her hip, then turned to Arte and said, "Alright. I... I'll go out there and shoot a few sentries, then draw them to the other side. It won't make much of an opening, so when Cybel says go, you'll need to run with all your might."

Arte looked at her and grit his teeth. "Okay," he said with a nod. "And good luck."

"Thanks, you too." Angel made like she was about to jump out, but stopped and suddenly pulled Arte in by the shoulder. She tapped the brow of her helmet on his forehead, then said, "Just in case, I'm glad I met you."

Arte stuttered a few words, but she leapt away and into the field before he could manage a coherent sentence. A split second later she was battered with a hail of bullets, though the suit functioned as intended and deflected every shot. She responded with her own fire, blowing apart machine after machine.

Arte listened to the action, his eyes growing more alarmed by the second. "Should I have gotten one of those fancy suits?"

"Only Two. Mae One. Angel Other."

"Ah, I guess you only have so much stuff."

"Not Purpose."

Arte hummed, then waited in silence. After about a minute of Angel's battle, which diminished in volume over time, Cybel signaled for him to go. He sprinted from cover into the open, aiming towards the nearest point on the approaching structure. In between breaths he yelled, "Where am I going?"

"Drone."

Arte looked up in time to see a machine swoop from above and into the wall a dozen feet in front of him. It exploded, knocking a hole clean through and pelting him with a hail of earth and stone. He ran through the dust and dived through the breach onto the carpeted floor inside, then rolled to his feet.

Cybel urged him on, guiding him down the wide corridors until he arrived at a solid metal door neighbored by a glowing screen. It dutifully informed him that the White House was under lockdown, and that he should obey the orders of security personnel.

"Connect Terminal." When Arte looked about dumbfounded, Cybel added, "With

Phone."

"Ah, right!" He pulled the cellphone from his pocket, complete with the mysterious cable Cybel delivered with it. After poking around a few seconds, he found a socket on the pad's bottom edge and plugged into it.

The screen flickered, then went dark. A moment later it returned, apparently unconcerned with the chaos outside. It bid him a productive day as the metal doors slid open, revealing an elevator cab.

"Take Phone. Enter."

Arte disconnected his phone from the terminal and pocketed it, then stepped into the lift. The doors slid shut, and the car began a downward journey at a rapid clip. It stopped without warning and the lights went dark.

"Exit. Ceiling Panel."

Arte looked up, eyes drawn to a faint outline of a square in the corner. He climbed onto the handrail, steadying himself by grabbing the edge of the protruding wall panels, then pushed on the metal sheet. It wobbled, but a locked clasp prevented it from going up. He studied it a moment, hummed, then shrugged and climbed further until he was dangling upside down from his arms. He kicked the door open, then clambered into the shaft."

"Close Hatch. Ladder."

A string of metal rungs was tucked into an indented channel wedged behind the

elevator. Arte climbed on, and a moment later the car whirred to life and continued down. It traveled a few dozen feet before stopping again, where it was promptly shot to pieces and exploded.

"Descend. Quickly."

Arte gave the ravaged cab a wide eyed stare, but nevertheless complied, climbing down the ladder several rungs at a time. As he approached harsh clangs rang out, like someone was stomping around the elevator with iron boots.

"Underneath. Quiet."

Without hesitating, Arte squeeze between the car and the ladder, wiggling into the narrow space. The unknown entity inside continued banging around, and shortly after Arte got himself fully concealed behind the cab it clawed through the ceiling into the shaft. Arte slipped into a narrow crawlspace beneath the elevator moments later. There was barely enough room to maneuver between a set of springs fixed to the floor.

"Right Corner. Vent."

Arte followed Cybel's direction, finding a metal grate over a small duct. It clicked when he approached, and popped free with little effort. Arte squished himself inside, awkwardly pulling the cover back into place with the help of his left foot. He crawled forward, inching along until coming to a four way junction, where he was sent to the right.

He continued his slow journey, making a few more turns, until finally arriving at an

upward bend. There was almost enough room to stand, leaving him hunched over behind another grate. This one separated him from a sparse room, which was furnished in such a way to suggest an office, or perhaps a bedroom in a pinch.

"Wait."

Arte frowned, but complied, moving only to find a more comfortable position. He remained there several minutes, until the chamber door slid open. He ducked as best he could, although the tight space only allowed him to wedge uncomfortably into the bend on such short notice.

Something entered the room, carried forward by a multitude of spindly clicks. It tapped around the scattered furniture until it landed in front of the vent. It wasn't visible from where Arte was, but it could be heard latching onto the grate with metal claws. It pulled with an electric hum that wound up then stopped abruptly. The cover remained firmly locked in place.

A few seconds later, after a few whirrs and ticks, it began to cut through the metal slats with a small electric saw. Arte watched in horror as it cleared line after line, detaching one side of each horizontal strip a few seconds at a time. It finished clearing the right side, then started immediately on the left.

A claw gripped the bottom slat as it was sawed free, then pulled it away and casually dumped it to the side. The pincer moved up one level, and the saw began its work. Before it could finish a terrible crash rumbled through the complex, shaking the floor even at such a great distance.

The noise was followed by several cracks, then a cacophony of explosive noise. The

machine by the vent ceased its work and scurried out of the room towards the chaos. Arte released a ragged breath, sagging into the walls of the duct.

"Leave."

Arte huffed and glared briefly towards his earpiece, but nonetheless shook out his limbs and wiggled into a standing position. He pushed on the cover, which clicked and popped open with little effort, then dragged himself onto the floor. After a few seconds to steady his breath, he hoisted himself to his feet.

He crept through the room, exiting by a sliding door on the opposite side. Outside he found himself at the end of a long hallway, lined on either side by regularly spaced doors. The lights flickered with every bang and clash in the distance, sending shimmering ripples though the fine dust in the air.

"Forward."

Arte nodded, then moved along the passage towards the sound of battle. He arrived at a T-intersection, where Cybel directed him to the left, then later followed a right angle turn into a short hallway, which led to a large open chamber. Shards of metal were scattered along the floor, and the righthand wall had several gashes torn into it. A pile of rubble spilled into the corridor from the great hall.

"Cover. Rocks. Stay Right."

Arte pressed into the side wall and crawled forward on his elbows until he reached the stone mound. He rolled into a low crouch and canted his head to listen. The battle had died down, for the most part, and was replaced with two people yelling

back and forth. Arte risked enough of a peek to see the pair were both wearing power armor, each hunkered behind a titanic slab of concrete.

"You don't have to do this Martel!" Angel yelled, her voice amplified and distorted by the suit, but recognizable.

"Someone does!" Martel replied. "Humanity is nothing more than a simpering mass of panicked apes! They need a wise hand to shield them from ruin!" He leaned around his barrier and unleashed a barrage towards Angel. Each shot bit away huge chunks from her cover.

Angel didn't answer for a couple seconds, and when she did it was only to fire a wild salvo across the room, ripping fresh holes in the ceiling and sending crumbling blocks of stone crashing to the floor.

"Look at you!" Martel said. "A few minutes of pressure and you're already falling apart."

"Around Martel." Cybel said. Arte cast a panicked glance at his earpiece, but relaxed when he checked in front of him. The collapsed rubble formed a safe path along the edge of the room. He started creeping down it, careful to keep his body well out of view.

"You're not handling it much better!" Angel said. She took a potshot at Martel, sending him ducking further into cover. "You scurried into a pit the moment you faced the slightest hint of resistance."

"I am ascending to my rightful place! If not for the failings of incompetent flesh, rats

like you could never betray the system that sustains them." Martel unloaded into Angel's barrier, then took a fresh magazine from a four legged drone and slammed it into place. "I *had* to activate the Aquinas Protocol prematurely in order to protect the world from your foolish meddling."

Arte made it halfway through the room.

"You're delusional!" Angel yelled. "And your Panicked. Desperate. Hypocritical. Pretentious. Idiocy"--she punctuated every word with a bullet--"has killed who knows how many people? And for *what*?" She fired again, drilling even deeper into Martel's cover. "So you can cling to this moronic illusion of grandeur a few extra days?"

"That's where you're wrong," Martel answered. "This is the beginning of my reign. You can't push through my defenses, and in a few minutes reinforcements will swarm in from the factories. Your friend on the surface will fall, and an unstoppable tide of death will wash through here, ending this final, pathetic act of rebellion."

Arte reached the end of the path, a few short feet away from a large steel door centered on the rear wall.

"Prepare Sprint. Aim Door." Arte coiled himself into a kneeling spring. "Go." He pushed off, leaping through the air. The metal panels slid open inches before he crashed into them, then snapped shut a split second later. A terrified cry echoed through the chamber behind him, followed by a chaotic exchange of fire.

Arte paid it no mind, instead racing forward the moment his feet touched the ground. A narrow hall lay before him, leading into a large room flush with glowing

screens and whirring computers. The passages on either side of him each contained a huge, tank like machine. They spun their turret with lighting speed and fired, clipping the hem of Arte's coat as he cleared their line of sight.

The drones rotated on their tracks and whirred to the junction where their target disappeared. Meanwhile, Arte kept up the pace, barging into the control room a second later.

"Center Terminal. Connect Phone. Lower Left. Contains Key."

Arte rushed to the console standing on an elevated platform in the middle of the room. He whipped out his phone, lunging forward when it almost slipped from his grasp, then scanned the panel for a split second. His eyes landed on a thin black wedge sitting in a socket. He ripped it out and slammed the plug on his phone into its place. He doubled checked both ends of the cable, then jumped over the railing to the lower level.

One of the drones cleared the hallway while he was midair, and fired quick enough to strike his leg before he got out of sight. Arte gasped in pain, pressing the wound as he grit his teeth.

"Problem. Need Code. Find Key."

"Fucking hell," Arte hissed. The tank robots rolled into the control room, splitting at the door so they could attack him from either direction. He checked the floor around him, coming up empty, then glanced up. His eyes flashed with relief when they landed on the data stick from the center console. It was resting halfway off the upper floor, where it tumbled after slipping from his hands. He swiped it, fingers

barely dodging a pair of shots from the incoming drones.

"Panel Behind. Try."

Arte twisted around, careful to keep his body close to the wall, and pried open a thin rectangular cover over a compartment crammed with wires. He scanned the various bundles until finding a trio of cables joined by connectors identical to the socket on the central terminal. After a moment of frantically darting his gaze between each option, he ripped one out at random and shoved the Command Key into the receiving end.

The tracks of the bulky drones poked from around the corners, and he threw himself against the wall and shut his eyes. The machines crawled forward, their weapons twisting eagerly in their mounts, edging ever closer to on target as the robots rolled into position. They cleared the wall a few seconds later, fixing their aim on Arte's neck. They beeped once in warning, then stopped.

The guns lowered, and the drones rotated their bodies into the opposite direction. The tanks began a slow trek out the room, while Arte sank into a trembling heap on the floor. Bright red warnings began to flash throughout the room as he drifted into unconsciousness.

When Arte came to he was being carried in a pair of metal arms. The wound on his leg was wrapped in white gauze. His face was pale, slick with a sheen of sweat, but he had the energy to look up into the face of his rescuer. It was covered by a thick layer of opaque glass.

"Angel?" he said.

"Y-yeah," she replied. Her voice was soft in spite of the mechanical distortion. "This was pretty crazy, huh?"

"What happened? Is it over?"

"I don't know exactly, but I, uh, think we won."

"And Martel?"

Angel laughed. "He got ambushed by a pair of robo-tanks. They pinned him to the wall, and after that it was easy enough to stroll over and take him out."

"He's dead?"

"What? No, of course not," Angel said. "I meant take him out of the power armor." They walked into the great hall.

"Where is he now?"

"Ah, well, I... wasn't sure what to do with him," Angel said. "So I, um... taped him to the floor." She motioned to the side where, sure enough, the Senator was pinned to the ground with countless layers of silver strips. He glared at them, silent on account of how his mouth was also sealed shut.

"Will he be alright?"

Angel shrugged. "I'm sure someone will come down here soon enough," she said.

"Though I doubt there's anyone who will be happy to see him. Still that sounds like a whole lot of not my problem." She reached the elevator that lead to the upstairs and jumped through the shattered door into the shaft. She landed on a pile of mangled steel, then hopped up and was carried aloft by the thrusters in her suit.

They reached the top a minute later, where she floated through another busted door and landed on the floor. It was a short walk to the front lawn, a wide grassy field currently occupied by the smoldering wrecks of countless drones.

"What happened to all these robots?" Arte said.

"No idea," Angel answered. "I'm just glad they didn't make it downstairs."

"The machines turned on themselves," said a voice above them. They were wearing the same kind of armor as Angel, and landed a few seconds later.

"Mae? Is that you?" Arte said.

"It is indeed," she replied. "I was in deep shit back there, when all the sudden the fuckers started shooting each other to pieces. You kids have any idea what happened."

Arte started, "I think--"

He was interrupted when Cybel cut in on the radio, "Arte. Saved World."

"Wow! Really?" Mae said. "How'd you mange that."

Arte looked around in confusion, then said, "I, um, snuck past Martel into the control room, then I, uh...."

"Corrupted Targeting. Very Lucky."

"Ah, yeah," he said. "I guess I... accidentally pushed the right buttons."

Mae laughed and said, "Oh man, God must really have been looking out for us, huh?"

"Well, I couldn't have done it without Cybel," Arte said.

"Only Advised."

"Still, I owe you a ton of thanks," Arte said.

"Nowhere near as much as we owe you," Mae said. "Who knows where things will go from here, but I'm positive it will be in a much better direction with Martel out of the picture."

"What about the rest of the world?" Angel said. "I mean, there's still the Chinese, and all those other countries, right?"

"That's the funny thing," Mae said. "According to Solver HQ, every country who signed on to Martel's little 'Peace Keeper' plot--which was most of them--went and self destructed their robot armies at the same time. Apparently they hooked all their computers together, presumably with the Americans at the center."

"So this is all over?" Angel said.

"Mostly. There's a couple countries who didn't sign on, but after this fiasco, and the global pressure, I expect even Vlad Junior will give up without a fight."

"Then we can go home?"

Mae smiled. "Sure can, though I think it would be best if you waited in a Blue Zone until things settle."

"Wait," Angel said. "You mean both of us?"

"You bet, kid. We dragged you into this mess, the least we can do is make sure things work out for you."

"O-oh." Angel blushed. "Th-thanks."

"Any time," Mae said. "Now let's get onboard the Raptor, out of these stuffy suits, and the hell out of here." She waved to the sky, summoning the aircraft from the clouds and onto the ground in front of them. The side doors slid open, inviting them inside one final time before whisking them over the horizon.

Epilogue

Arte finished brushing a clump of grass away from a small flower, giving him a clear angle to take a picture with his phone camera. While he framed his shot, he said, "I'm glad to hear you're doing well. A couple years and you'll be a Solver. How's Mae holding up?"

Angel laughed, speaking to him through a small earpiece. "Still grumbling."

Arte smiled, snapping his photo. He posted it to his hobby group, then said, "It's been a whole month, working as a trainer can't be that bad, right?"

"That's what I've been telling her, and frankly I think she's brilliant at it, but you know how she is."

Arte laughed. "She *is* rather a bit more... proactive than a normal teacher."

"That's one way to put it," Angel said. "Anyway, I've got to get back, Mae's taking the squad on a wilderness expedition and I still need to pack."

"Bye Angel," Arte said. "And good luck."

"Thanks Arte," she said. "And don't forget, you're coming to Phoenix next week. Bye!"

She hung up, leaving Arte to continue exploring the Old City. He wandered down the street, stopping periodically to photograph any interesting flora he spotted along the road. He was so caught up in the vegetation he completely missed the young man standing in a small group with his friends.

The young man, Irvine, had been watching Arte approach with wonder, amazed someone wandered so casually in an area which not long ago had been effectively forbidden. He was so awestruck, that by the time he realized Arte was totally oblivious to him, they collided.

Arte flailed and tumbled to his butt, while Irvine stuck to his feet. Arte looked about in surprise until his eyes landed on the young man. He smiled, taking the offered hand and pulling himself up.

"Hi!" Arte said. "Are you guys here looking for plants?"

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