

## Chapter 1

Ash was jolted awake out of the deep dream she was in. She glanced at her watch. 9:15pm. The intercontinental Dreamliner aircraft had just landed at Arlanda International Airport, Stockholm, after cruising through a blanket of thick fog in the last descent of the flight. It was good to be back home. She missed her parents. After four years away from them in San Francisco, grinding her way up the tech ladder of Silicon Valley, maybe it was for the better she quit. More accurately, she was fired. But really, she was tired of the job soon after it began, so her departure was a long time coming.

Ash worked at Kopra, one of America's most recognized and reputed software firms, specializing in premium medical technology for the ultra-wealthy. And its founder, Frederick Kopra, had died six months prior of old age. This wouldn't have been a problem, were it not for the fact that Frederick was an obsessive, maniacal narcissist who split up the company into cliques, classified divisions in which information was not allowed to flow down, only up. This left almost every employee at Kopra a de facto contractor, with limited to no specific knowledge of the company and what it provides behind closed doors.

In some ways this was something Ash was very fond of; there were no bullshit office politics and testosterone fuelled hierarchical dogfights among the men. Everyone just performed their duties and cooperated via the relevant channels, and what most employees didn't know, simply wouldn't hurt them.

But it pissed Ash off to be in the dark. She wasn't the type of person who enjoyed "working for the good of the colony", if couldn't immediately be the queen bee, she wanted to be a recognised, disruptive force of innovation above and beyond her peers. She needed that power. That feeling of control was... everything.

After Frederick died, his son Gunther took over. A buffoon and errant fool, whose lack of experience and understanding of business had bled painfully into the balance sheets. Why was it, that after Ash secretly installed surveillance malware on Gunther's desktop (Via a terminal process she discovered that didn't require authentication) in his office, she could not bring herself to blackmail him for the longest time? It was as if some kind of vague, insipid morality still lingered in her gut, which held her back from decisive action. Or maybe the problem was her courage. Gunther needed to go. There were no two ways about it. She gave herself a few more days to think about things.

After her many days of deliberation, she finally confronted him on his way out of the building. As much as was expected from a Silicon Valley CEO, she collected files of illicit accounts, payments and contacts Gunther had procured over the prior six months. Gunther did not take to it lightly, and

fired her immediately, while in response, she happily sold the information to a local journalist, who comprehensively, and as publicly as possible, dragged the Chief Executive of Kopra through the mud of every county in America. And that was that chapter of her life, closed.

She made her way through Arlanda, her heavy backpack slung over her shoulder, with one last, forced burst of energy. She got to the baggage carousel first. And by sheer luck, her suitcase was the first one out. A pleasant surprise. Ash quickly traversed the customs lounge before exiting through the underground orange-lit tunnel which led towards the parking lot, where she'd be meeting Henrik, her uncle, who owned a small taxi company with 10 drivers. He used to drive Ash around town when she was younger, taking her out for ice cream and to the movies when her parents were away on business trips. She had a soft spot for him. A potbellied, soulful man, with a wispy white combover you could recognize a mile away.

She stepped out into the snow, and Henrik was already waiting. He flashed his lights, and pulled up closer.

Ash! Så trevligt att se dig! (Ash! So good to see you!) Henrik got out of the car and gave Ash his characteristic Santa hug.

Jag har saknat dig Henrik! Tack så mycket för att du hämtade mig! (I've missed you Henrik! Thanks so much for coming to pick me up!)

He hoisted up her heavy suitcase with one hand, and pulled open the car boot with the other, before dropping it in, as well as her backpack. Ash didn't have much strength to talk, although Henrik seemed understanding. She reclined in the comfortable seat and put her scarf over her eyes to relax, for the quiet ride home to Örnevägen 12.

It was a snowy night. There wasn't much to see, but the gentle pitter patter of snowflakes flying over the windshield gave her the sense that she was on the wrong side of a snow globe.

As they pulled up to her house, Ash could see Arby peeking out from the window. He was a little bit of a chunk, a beautiful, loving ragdoll cat who loved to play and run around, but had a tendency to over-estimate his caloric needs after his cat walks on the treadmill.

Ash smiled, excited to cuddle Arby again. She handed Henrik some money but he refused, so she shoved the crowns in his shirt pocket insistently as he chuckled to himself.

Ash heaved out the heavy suitcase and backpack from the boot.

“Thanks again Henrik. I’ll see you soon!”

“Sank you little Ash. Sleep well” He replied in broken English. He was going to master it. One day.

As she approached the front door, she could hear Arby’s meowing already. The door swung open, Arby jumped right up into Ash’s arms and affectionately nuzzled into her neck, meowing enthusiastically.

“Who’s a good boy! You are Arby! You’re the best boy!” she cooed, tickling his tummy.

Ash dropped her suitcase and backpack and, still carrying Arby, went to the guest bedroom right of the entrance. Her parents texted her they would be back at midnight, so she still had a couple of hours to kill before they came home. As she lay down on the silk bedsheets and put her head on the delicate pillowcase, she felt a rush of happiness and giggled to herself in pleasure. With Arby in her arms, Ash was overtaken by fatigue, and drifted off to sleep.

Sometime later, she awoke. The bedside clock read 2:16am. She didn’t quite know why, but she felt very unsettled. Arby was still lying next to her, breathing peacefully. Trying not to wake him, she slowly slid off the bed and went to check on her parents upstairs.

The room was immaculate and untouched, with no sign of her parents. Her heart lurched. She went and grabbed her phone from the bedside table and tried to call her dad. It went to voicemail. She quickly tried her mom. Also, voicemail.

“Mom, can you please call me when you get this? Its way past midnight, I’m starting to get worried. Please let me know where you and dad are.”

Ash decided to check Find My Friends. Both her parents were shown to be at home. That was odd.

“Mom? Dad?” She loudly called throughout the house. No answer.

She went back downstairs, and then glimpsed her parent’s phones on top of the book cabinet.

Both of them had several missed calls. A deep-seated fear started to set in, she had no idea where her parents were, and wasn’t able to contact them or trace their locations.

She went to the heavy steel door leading down into the basement, and opened it with the key she permanently kept around her neck, before flicking on the lights. Her parents had originally purchased the house and block of land because of the size of the basement. It was almost like an

additional large, underground apartment that added on to the main house above ground. They renovated it to add some more space, cutting out large portions of rock and dirt to make room for various different tools and pieces of equipment. It was a bit unusual in the neighbourhood, but nobody needed to know about it anyway.

“Shit” she swore. Where to start....

Arnbjörn, affectionately known as Arnie, and Wilma Bergman were artificial intelligence researchers working at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. They had met at that very same university twenty-eight years previously during their postgraduate research studies in computer science, in tutorial classes.

They were always together. Always in love. And it was love at first sight, if there ever was one. People first saw Arnie. A 6’6 slim figure with buzzed blond hair, a rock breaker square jaw, and piercing blue eyes. And next to him, was the stark colour contrast of his girlfriend Wilma, who was also quite tall at 5’10, with dark, beautiful hazel eyes and a soft, pleasant smile, as well as silky, raven black hair which was always tied into a ponytail.

When they both graduated their degrees, they went their separate ways professionally, Wilma changing her direction and going to work as a quantitative trader for an ETF trading firm, and Arnie settling into his research at the university, working on the cutting edge of AI and robotics engineering solutions.

One year later, one of these solutions, the ROH-Type chip, was eventually patented as a ground breaking diagnostic tool, making Arnie the newest celebrity in the medical field.

Meanwhile, in her year of quantitative trading, Wilma found herself unfulfilled and disillusioned with the financial world. She no longer wanted to stay up late at nights, constantly feeling the urge to check financial markets on the other side of the world, double and triple checking her analyses and trading decisions. It was gruelling and unending work, and she felt compelled to return to her research roots.

She decided to quit trading and re-join Arnie at the university, and they began working together on true, sentient artificial intelligence, in the home laboratory Arnie had set up, complete with two supercomputers, 3D printers and a cable network more elaborate than the Tokyo subway map. Arnie and Wilma, over time, became very known in their research field, and their laboratory at KTH, the LS-000, became an international success story in research circles throughout Europe. Memories of the past. Ash felt herself drifting, she shook herself awake.

She inspected the cream-coloured panelling on the walls and the blinking lights on all the equipment. There were drawers, tables, electrical devices and cables everywhere. She just couldn't figure out what to look for first. She went to one of the computers. Password protected. Obviously. While she was used to writing malware and cracking passwords on principle, her parents had created far more advanced encryption algorithms than she had ever had the experience or knowledge in cracking. She'd have to look for something. She checked her watch, 2.40am. She had the entire night to search. She began checking every drawer and table and document she could see.

A substantial number of drawers were locked electronically, and the ones that were open, held nothing helpful. The papers on the tables were administrative documents from the university. Ash sifted through them all but found nothing out of the ordinary, they all just seemed like regular letters and reports to and from colleagues. There was a recent printed e-mail from a Dr Anil Wijeweera, with some printed graphics of experimental results...alongside an invitation from a Dr Lin Peng to a department get together at the golf club.... brochures from the university... random budgets and graphs... some folders containing results from experimental trials Arnie and Wilma did together...

"Of course, there's nothing, why would I need anything to help me right now. Sheesh...." Ash scoffed.

It was currently the very early morning of Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, 2028. Then it hit her. Ash checked the email from Anil again. It was dated, sent on the Thursday the 7<sup>th</sup>. Bingo. She knew one thing; her parents were in the house within the last 24 hours. Wherever they were, they could not have gone far.

She folded the printed email into her coat pocket and went upstairs, before picking up her parent's phones and putting them in her backpack. She turned off the light and locked the steel door. Arby was at her feet purring gently. There was a knocking at the front door.

"What the fuck... " Ash gasped. She felt a surge of adrenaline. She went to the kitchen cupboard and grabbed the steel baseball bat from inside, before slowly tiptoeing towards the front door. She heard a man on the phone. She knew that voice... on the doorbell camera he turned around to show his face, it was Max Danucci, a Captain in the Stockholm Police. He was a few years senior to her in high school. They were friends growing up, but they drifted apart and lost contact when she left to America for a few years ago, pursuing vague ambitions and goals she still hadn't fully thought about before she got there.

Max was a street wise cat. He grew up in the slums of Södermalm, and never really knew what security and comforts were, until he fought for them himself. Both literally and metaphorically. His by-the-balls attitude in

office politics and talent as a junior officer, led to him rapidly climbing the leadership ranks in the police force. He jumped head first into every challenge. What he lacked in raw academic ability, he made up for in his street smarts and remarkably quick decision making. It was no wonder then that, combined with his lean, athletic stature, and dark Italian curls, he earned the nickname amongst his peers of, The Wolf of Stockholm. His deep set, dark blue eyes narrowed at the door camera for a moment before he looked away again, like he was focused on something in the distance.

She opened the dead bolt on the door to let Max inside.

"How did you..." Ash began.

"Your parents have disappeared Ash. They told me you'd be arriving last night, but this couldn't wait until morning." Max explained. Ash's heart went cold.

"I don't understand, what are you saying?" she mumbled. Ash couldn't think, her mind went blurry. What the hell was happening?

"Listen Ash, your parents were involved in research which was attracting a lot of attention. The kind of attention which can snowball into dangerous territory pretty quickly if you don't know how to handle it."

Ash was trying to process.

"The police and Swedish special forces had an understanding that your house was a high priority target to be protected at all costs, especially the basement. Your dad organized the arrangement a couple of weeks ago. He must have anticipated what kind of conflict his work would cause. We just didn't expect for him to disappear like that, without a trace. Wilma too."

Special forces? What the hell was this? Ash's stomach turned. "What are you even on about Max?" She felt weak. Sick.

"Just sit tight, let us do our thing. You have the best possible protection right here. The house security detail was expanded tonight, more guys are coming to set up a bigger perimeter. We will track down Arnie and Wilma Ok?" Max hugged Ash reassuringly. "You should go rest. We'll take it from here."

Ash's energy evaporated and she could barely stand. Max opened the door and left back to his police cruiser on the road. Ash saw silhouettes moving along the street. She couldn't make out any features, but they looked like they were in camouflage, and were carrying rifles. Soldiers?? Ash couldn't believe it. What had her parents been doing these last four years to warrant this level of response?

Nevertheless, the soldiers gave her a feeling of calm that washed over her. She felt secure. She shut the door and locked the dead bolt in its place before stumbling back to the guest bedroom, Arby following closely behind. Still in her travel clothes, Ash collapsed on the bed, snuggled up to Arby, and let her heavy eyelids pull her into the abyss of unconsciousness.

She was awakened by a loud phone ring. Ash picked up her phone from the floor. It was an unknown number. Considering recent events, she picked it up.

"Hello?"

There was a slight pause.

"Ash? Are you alright?" A smooth, masculine British accent offered. She had absolutely no idea who it was.

"Sorry, do I know you?" Ash asked.

"I'm Bessley, ESI, European Intelligence Division. This is a secure line. I've been assigned to you for Operation Indie Mind, a mission with the express goal of recovery of Arnie and Wilma Bergman and their research assets." Bessley explained. "Unfortunately, things have gotten a bit out of hand, to be sure."

Ash flinched.

"Wow, okay Bessley listen, I haven't been here for four years, I just arrived last night to find my parents gone, the Police Captain suggesting they've been kidnapped, and telling me there are SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIERS assigned to guard me and my house. What the fuck is going on?"

"Ash, I'm afraid there's no room for pleasantries, I need to get straight to the point. Please, try to be understanding, I apologise for the inconvenience but this is a matter of international security and we are going to be needing your cooperation if any of this is to succeed. Today at midday, a man will be waiting at the Wren's Inn in Gamla Stan, in the centre of Stockholm. I want you to meet with him. He's an ESI agent on the ground with intelligence that will give you a context to what is happening" Bessley said.

Ash was taking it all in. "Okay, I understand, do I bring anything?" she said bleakly. Does Max know about this, she wondered...

The line went dead.

“Well, fuck you too then Bessley” She muttered under her breath.

It was 9.15am on the bedside clock. she had about three hours to get there. Arby was sitting at the bedroom window looking out at the street again. Ash got up out of bed and went to check out what he was looking at. The sun was out, it was still very frosty, she rubbed off some condensation on the window. There was a young couple on the other side of the street with a little French bulldog, talking to an older lady. The dog had its eyes locked with Arby, but otherwise wasn't barking or showing aggression. Arby wasn't showing any fear, either. They were just... inspecting each other, with interest. The pitch-black French bulldog stood out intensely against the snowy street, in contrast to his owners in bright coloured puffer jackets.

Ash left Arby to his inspections and went to the kitchen to make some coffee. She took her metal moka pot out of the cupboard and filled the bottom compartment with water, before putting the second compartment inside and filling it with Colombian coffee grounds. She screwed on the cap and left it to boil.

In the meantime, she unpacked her laptop from her suitcase and checked up on her emails. 15 percent battery, she'd get the charger later. She was still logged into her work email account, which of course was no longer relevant. She'd need to look for a new job sooner or later.

Ash checked the news. Some articles on political lobbying. Building works in Östermalm on new sports centres. An international geopolitical shitstorm after Sweden and Finland joined NATO. Living with the constant uncertainty of a potential world-war 3 was initially a point of great stress for Ash, but she, like so many others, got used to it over time. Life had to go on. The puppeteers of influence continued their struggles in the hidden echelons of society. Ironically much the same way as Kopra.

She went to change into some different clothes.

The moka pot started whistling. Half undressed, Ash went to take out a glass from the cabinet and poured in the coffee. It instantly warmed her hands as she held it. Such a wonderful feeling. She sipped the long black slowly, thinking about the conversation she just had with Bessley.

There was a knock on the door. Ash jumped. She went over to the doorbell camera; it was Max again.

As the door opened, Max got a proper look at Ash without her puffy winter clothing. There was an air of dexterity about her smooth, feminine frame. She wasn't quite as tall as her mother, or imposing, and yet, Ash bore a confident demeanour of independence you could see in every step, a certain self-assurance not limited by doubt or insecurity. She had full, blossom soft lips and woody brown hair, which rested evenly on her



shoulders in messy flops, from being held up in a beanie. Her innocent hazel eyes looked up at him inquisitively, stunning as ever, and he felt his stomach overheat. Max forgot what he wanted to say.

He fumbled.

“Oh, so sorry Ash, I didn’t realise you were... uhm....” He averted his gaze awkwardly. “Okay, I just wanted to come say you aren’t stuck here, you can move around if you need, its likely you aren’t in any danger, we just need to protect the house. So feel free to go to town to forget about things. If there’s anything you want or need, please let me know, you have my number, right?”

He hesitated, before adding, “Maybe we can go for drinks or dinner later if you want to catch up?”

Ash laughed. “Ahh Max, that’s really sweet, I’ll think about it, it might help take my mind off things. I’ll let you know, I promise.”

Max smiled cheekily.

“Okay that’s great! I’ll call you later then?”

Ash nodded. Max turned to leave back to his car again, and Ash shut the door. He didn’t bring up ESI or Bessley, did he even know about that? Ash wasn’t sure if she was supposed to tell him. She decided to hold off for now.

A while later, she got dressed in a few layers and finished off with a long green down jacket and a grey cashmere beanie. It was time to head to the hotel to meet the agent. She bent down to give Arby a hefty belly rub, as he meowed in enthusiasm.

Ash grabbed the car keys from the front entrance cabinet, then stepped through into the garage. She pressed the wall button to open the garage door, before getting into her Audi RST hybrid and heading out.

On the route to the hotel, she stopped at a drive through Starbucks to get another coffee. Another long black like the one she had earlier. Something about the hardness in the taste just felt like it resonated with her, and always managed to hit the right spot when she needed it most.

Ash pulled up to a street parking spot just down the road from the Wren’s Inn. She was 8 minutes early. Ash paid for 1 hour of parking at the meter, and made the short walk to the inn.

As she stepped inside, she noticed how supremely elegant the lobby was, with a chic marble and cinnamon colour palette, and delicate raindrop crystals hanging from multiple chandeliers leading towards the staircase

to the upper levels. The whole scene was quaint, reminiscent of a bucolic Victorian ballroom, set underneath the stars on a cloudless night.

Behind the staircase was an alcove with a passage that led towards the restaurant and the hotel reception. She could hear the tinkling of plates and Café chatter. It sounded quite full, just like the lobby. There was a restaurant menu on a display stand next to the stairs.

“Royal Swedish Buffet Lunch  
Wednesday to Friday  
11am-2pm  
Limited seating  
Bookings essential in advance”

“That explains the noise volume I guess...” Ash thought.

Right in the middle of the room stood a large concert grand piano, coloured a gentle Prussian blue. It was fully unfolded, almost expectant, inviting, someone to come play a song. In that moment Ash wished she didn't quit her piano lessons in high school. She barely remembered how to play. This piano was so nice, such a shame she couldn't make good use of the moment.

“Miss Ash” a voice interrupted her train of thought. She turned to a young-looking man dressed in the hotel bellhop uniform. He couldn't have been more than twenty.

“Allow me to escort you” he said with a cordial smile.

Was this the agent she was meeting? She wasn't sure. There were a lot of people around them, Ash felt a moment of panic, but decided to go with the man to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention.

She followed him up the stairs towards the elevators, and they took a left, before heading into a dimly lit staff office straight ahead. They stepped inside.

The man locked the door with an electronic key and took off his hat, before running his fingers through his oily dark hair. He had a slight sheen of sweat visible on his reddened face. How was he sweating this much in the middle of winter?

“My name is Waker, I work with Bessley, on ground operations here in Stockholm. I'll cut straight to the point. When the Global Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence requested your parents to share their research at the conference in four days' time during the event, Arnie and Wilma rejected the request as a matter of international security. The organisers said this was not appreciated by the investors attending the conference” he said.

Waker's voice was soft, but smooth. Each word composed and spoken in perfect fluidity. He uttered only the words necessary for his message, not a syllable more.

"Our intelligence suggests a small group of Chinese investors attending the conference took particular umbrage at your parent's secrecy, and sought for your parents to be reprimanded for withholding scientific knowledge that benefits all of humanity. This is something we want you to investigate, and we're going to need you in Tokyo for the conference to do this. We have booked you flights and accommodation to attend." Waker said.

"Waker, I have absolutely no idea what this research is in the first place, what did they create? I haven't been here for four years. Why is this causing such a massive scene?" Ash asked, frustrated.

Waker paused for a moment, thoughtful. He suddenly seemed unsure of what to say.

"Sentient artificial intelligence is my best guess, but nobody knows. They had a security protocol, they'd been working on it for years, I suspect they only just made a breakthrough, and the communication channel went cold as soon as they disappeared. We think the group of Chinese investors are involved, possibly in their kidnapping, which is where you step in." he said.

"But why me? Why not use one of your agents?" Ash replied.

"Well, two reasons. You're a talented software engineer and hacker, and you are the daughter of Arnie and Wilma. Nobody is closer to their research than you are. Your skillset is exactly what we need right now, so we want to bring you in" Waker said.

"Yes, but I suppose... ahh... I never really paid much attention to it, I was always focused on my own work, and only came back to Stockholm on holidays..." Ash was racking her brain trying to remember things, any things she'd seen, recognised or recalled from her parents' work. She struggled to think of anything, it was all just a blank slate in her mind. Did she even remember anything?

She thought of Arby, and his cute little twinkling blue eyes, and soft furry head and paws.

"I will be accompanying you to Tokyo and I will make sure you're protected at all times.

That was jarring. She'd only just met the guy and now her life and safety were going to be in his hands in a foreign country, with nobody else to turn to?

She inspected Waker up and down. Freckled, young looking face. Wide shoulders, narrow waist. Tall, that was always a good sign. Maybe it wasn't so bad. She'd have to trust him anyway.

Poor Max was going to have to wait with his dinner date. She quickly texted to let him know she'd be going away for a week to Japan to clear her mind.

"Ok Waker, I'll do it."

## Chapter 2

Bessley had called to check in before departure, and had sent Ash plane, hotel and conference tickets in advance for the full six days. She would be flying business class via Finnish Airways with a stopover in Helsinki and staying at the Hashinami Hotel Tokyo.

Bessley said she will not see Waker until the conference, and even there, she was not to speak to him at any time. He was there only as a precaution, and he was a stranger Ash didn't know. She thought about telling Max to check on Arby sometime while she was gone, but it technically wasn't necessary, Arby had an electronic dispenser that gave him food twice a day, and fresh water into his high-tech bowl that refilled every time the water level dropped below a certain point. As for waste disposal, well... Arby had a kitty back door and the neighbours garden to do his business, so he would definitely have no problems on that front.

There were only a few people on the flight to Helsinki, but a full plane en route to Tokyo. She spent most of the first few hours watching old action movies on the seat screen, and enjoyed some delicious meals and snacks throughout the flight, comprising various salads with exotic fruits, crafted pastries, and Nordic meats and breads offered by the business class catering. Eventually she nestled into her comfortable recliner bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When Ash awoke to the sound of the pilot's voice, it was dark outside the plane. They were flying over the ocean. She could almost taste the salty air in her imagination. She glanced at her monitor; the flight map showed thirty minutes left before they got to Tokyo. They were on the final descent. She took this time to skim over some phrases in her Japanese phrasebook she bought with her, written with complementary culture facts dotted through its pages. But if she ran into trouble there was always the voice translation app on her phone, so she wasn't worried.

After a soft landing and brief taxi, Ash was out on the tarmac with her hand luggage, and stepped into the midst of Haneda International Airport. She walked briskly through the main thoroughfare, fascinated by the lights and colours of the artistic installations, including various potteries, sculptures and paintings. She remembered what she'd read on the plane about *kintsugi*, "beauty through imperfection". It was the art of mending broken pottery with lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver or platinum. She could see each of the pottery and sculpture pieces lined

with streaks of silver and gold. What a beautiful aesthetic. She could immediately see Arby pushing such a vase off her living room table and laughed.

She came to a large, intricately carved, wooden dragon sculpture, several feet long, and at least 5 feet high. It had a flowing beard, a serpentine tongue, and teeth that could probably shred a grizzly bear to pieces. That was, if the dragon was real of course.

The plaque Infront of the sculpture had a section written in Japanese, and a section in English.

龍神（リュウオ）は、神道の龍王、海神、蛇のマスターです。彼は魔法の宝石で潮を操り、海の危険と宝物を表しています。Ryujin (Ryu-O) is the Dragon King, Sea God, and Master of Serpents in the Shinto Religion. With his magic jewels, he manipulates the tides, representing the dangers and treasures of the sea.

Fascinating. His eyes were hollowed out and filled in with Jade, and gave his gaze a mysterious diaphanous glow. Ash felt a chill down the nape of her neck. She felt like the eyes were watching her. They were darkly intriguing. Ash carried on past the fountain exhibit and towards the baggage claim area.

As she was stepping out into arrivals with her two suitcases, she was met by a sprightly Japanese man in what looked like his mid-forties, with a name hand written in English on his iPad, "ASH". She approached him slowly, trying to make eye contact.

"Uhm, hello sir?" she waved at him. He jumped in a flicker of realisation.

"ああ、こんにちは、こんにちは、来てくれてありがとう！" (Ahh, hello hello, thank you so much for coming!) He spoke in Japanese, and gestured to follow him.

He was unsettlingly energetic. Or maybe Ash was just too acclimatised to silence. His right heel flicked up slightly with every step, as he waddled through the crowd towards the parking area. Was he limping? Ash didn't say anything. She followed him out of the main terminal and into the freezing carpark area, where they approached a clean, white Toyota Yaris. It looked like one of the newer models. The man flicked his hand vaguely

before reaching the car, and the boot opened. That's an unusually large distance for that kind of thing to work, she thought.

After he packed her bags into the boot and they both shut the door, he said in a fluid American accent. "My name is Watanabe, allow me to be at your service for the duration of your stay. Payments have already been taken care of. Excuse the lack of introduction earlier, just a formality of discretion."

"Oh wow, sorry, I totally didn't expect you to be American." Ash was stunned. "Sorry about that. I guess its Hashinami Hotel for now, right?" She asked.

"That's quite alright. Expect the unexpected I always say" Watanabe chuckled. "Indeed, Hashinami Hotel. Please enjoy the ride".

Wow, that's efficiency, Ash thought. This felt really good. She wondered what other things had already been organised on her behalf.

Throughout the snowy journey to Hashinami they passed three cities of Ota, Shinagawa and Minato. Ash found the architecture so cute, little dainty apartment and commercial buildings dotted with gardens, bicycle paths and plenty of corner stores. She read about the quality of the food in corner stores in Japan, and couldn't wait to try. While she wasn't the biggest fan of sushi, she did have a great love of chicken, rice and pork.

Thirty minutes later they arrived at Hashinami, and parked at the front of the hotel. It was a modernized version of a Ryokan, a traditional Japanese Inn. The Hashinami building itself stood in great contrast to the dark and drab office buildings around it, draped in an aesthetic flower-like lattice flowing in waves to the top of the building. As they drove into the underground parking zone, they passed an intriguing large Zen Garden with two stone benches in the middle.

Watanabe stopped the car, quickly helped Ash with her suitcases, then got back in and drove off, without saying a word. She was confused, how was she supposed to contact him?

Ash took the elevator to the ground floor and proceeded to the lobby, before approaching the reception desk. The three ladies at reception were dressed in kimonos. One was on the phone, the other two were smiling at Ash as she approached.

"Welcome Miss Ash!" The nearest woman chimed. How did they know it was her?

"Mr Watanabe informed us ahead of time you had arrived. Please, let me escort you to your room." She continued. Ash noticed the name tag, "慧 Kei". She followed Kei to the elevators on the other side of the lobby. It

was very warm in the building; they must have had the heating on 24 hours a day. Ash was sweating in her winter clothes.

As Kei opened the door to the room on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, Ash was overtaken with its elegance. On the bed a kimono was already laid out for her, with a little envelope and two small bowls of flash-coloured Japanese candies on the bedside table. There was a noticeable, pleasant scent of bamboo in the air. The floor was lined with tatami mats, and the voluminous, plush bedding flowed over the low standing wooden bed frame, with soft mood lighting coming from the ceiling light bars.

“Wow, this amazing!” Ash exclaimed. Kei looked pleased.

“Miss Ash, my name is Kei, please don’t hesitate to call for all your needs. Someone will be at reception at all times to assist you.” She left, gently closing the door behind her.

Ash put her two suitcases down and went to pick up the envelope. Inside was a small phone. It rang immediately, startling Ash to drop the phone. It was an unknown number. Ash answered quickly

“Hello?” she asked.

“It’s Bessley. This phone has mine and Watanabe’s number saved. Contact him whenever you need to go anywhere. Waker is in another location; I remind you that you will not need to see or contact him at any point. The conference starts tomorrow at 9am for the plenary session, and will go for six days. You will probably not need to be there that long. Use the time to get acquainted with the layout of the events. Try to gain further information about the Chinese investor group, and see what you can find. We haven’t been able to determine their identities, we only know at least one of them has provided significant financial backing to a research lab in Guangzhou involved in the development of bio integrative electronics, called Hale Labs. The founder, Michael Hale, lives off the grid somewhere in South America, so contacting him is off the table. This is our best opportunity at present. Good luck, Ash.”

Bessley hung up abruptly.

Ash felt slightly intimidated. She slipped the phone into her coat pocket, and her hand touched a folded piece of paper. She unravelled it.

“Oh fuck!” she remembered she still had the printed email from Anil Wijeweera she retrieved from her father’s lab desk back at the house in Stockholm. Her eyes jumped to the signature at the bottom of the email

“Dr Anil Wijeweera  
Artificial Intelligence Department  
KTH Royal Institute of Technology



Brinellvägen 8, 114 28  
Stockholm, Sweden”

Surely... surely that meant Anil was going to be at the conference? This was potentially going to be critically useful information. Anil had worked with her parents via the university, there was a chance he could know something about their disappearance. But... if he worked with her parents, and they had disappeared, but he was still around, did his parents know something he did not? Arnie must have kept secrets from Anil if that was true. She'd have to wait to find out.

Ash sat down on the bed and looked contemplatively at the kimono laid out for her. This was a supremely luxurious hotel. She picked up the brochure on the bedside table to take a look at the facilities. Spa and Hot springs! Ash was excited. They sounded like exactly what she needed right now.

She changed into her bathing suit and put on the kimono. She wanted to go take a look at the stunning interior architecture of the hotel some more, but first, it was time to soak up some hot spring.

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Across the other side of the world, in Stockholm, two men covered in black camouflage were inspecting the Bergman house and the perimeter of security forces around it. One was noticeably taller than the other. The taller man was a whisker under six feet eight inches, and held American military issue binoculars, as he scanned the road and grassy areas surrounding the house. He saw soldiers clad in body armour with armoured helmets, complete with assault rifles, military belts, and heavy equipment sitting in trucks on either side of the main building, hidden behind the tree line. He didn't know what was in the trucks.

“What's the situation?” The shorter man whispered.

“It looks like we need to think about this some more, it's not happening tonight. We need to let the others know to hold off for now, and re-evaluate our strategy.” The tall man replied. The mosquito drone they had sent through the premises for a full topographical scan had completed its mission, and was fluttering silently in mid-air, as the short man plucked it out of the air. The short man packed up the drone into a case and they carefully retreated in the other direction to safety.

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Max Danucci was gifted a house key from Arnie Bergman shortly before Ash's arrival in Stockholm, and Arnie and Wilma's disappearance. He had been incredibly honoured to be bestowed with such trust by the mentor he'd known for so many years. Max had been a long time and trusted

friend of the family, and a great supportive figure to Ash as she was growing up.

Max always knew that they were involved with research of great importance and value, but he never fully understood how any of it worked. Max used to visit the family for games nights and celebratory dinners on regular occasions, but Arnie always kept things brief, and kept them simple. In Layman's terms, on a need-to-know basis. To Max, Arnie was the wise cracking uncle, always telling dad jokes and having a good time, but still being full of wisdom, mystique and intrigue. Wherever Max's curiosity led him, Arnie teased out more potential, more wonder, and gave Max more questions to ponder than he ever thought he needed to know the answers to.

By far and away, the greatest takeaway Max had from his relationship with Arnie, was the gravity and impact of artificial intelligence on the future of humanity. The medical applications, the industrial applications, so many areas of life, codified, simplified, logistical nightmares of the past reduced to nothing but minor inconveniences of the future. How much more time there would be, to explore the power and essence of the human mind and human civilization.

These thoughts, and others, swirled around Max's mind as he sat at his desk at the police station, zoning out from the paperwork Infront of him. Ash had called him to say she was going away for a few days, and couldn't see him until she returned. He respected her decision not to share details, but it was a bit of a thorn in the heart, he had been dearly looking forward to seeing Ash again. He wondered where she was going.

He decided to take a quick break and go to the Bergman house to go check on Arby. Max grabbed his keys and coat and set off to his cruiser. Pulling out of the police station garage, his car was bombarded with snow pounding at his windshield. "Galet jävla väder..." He muttered in Swedish. What insane weather, he thought.

A short, ice-age like drive later he arrived at the Bergman house, and zipped up his police coat up to his chin, and pulled his beanie over his ears before pulling his coat hood over his head. He was still feeling chills running up his thighs and back. Damn. He took a mental note to wear a thermal clothing layer to work tomorrow.

He was aware of the soldiers still in the vicinity, but thankfully they asked no questions why he was on the site, and kept to themselves. He approached the door and turned the key to the reinforced deadbolt lock, before stepping inside, out of the cold.

Despite the heating and electricity being kept off, the house was still significantly warmer than outside. That's some bloody incredible insulation the Bergmans must have, he thought. Arby was at his feet,

swooshing his tail, looking up at Max inquisitively. Max went over to the couch and dropped into it heavily. Arby jumped into his lap and got comfortable in his customary loaf position, giving Max a chuckle.

“Man oh man, when the shit hits the fan.” He sighed, gently tousling the fur on Arby’s head. No complaints from him. Arby was living his best life.

Max looked around the living room, reminiscing over the years and special moments he’d spent with the Bergman family. Sitting by the fireplace in winter, playing card and board games with fresh kanelbullar, delicious, hot cinnamon buns made by Wilma. Party nights with family friends, with Arnie playing jazzy piano music to everyone’s delight, while Ash danced with Arby, making sure he never felt left out or lonely. Even on the quieter afternoons, sitting alone with Arnie and just watching the news, discussing events of the day and hearing his opinions and analyses of things. They ranged from his performance reviews of his fanatically supported Warga S1 Racing team, to political discussions, circling all the way back to chatting about his research and scientific developments, including the one that started it all, his ROH-Type patented chip, which stood for Rapid Offset Harmonization.

The ROH chip was manufactured in two segmented parts, the first part was plugged into a computer via USB, and provided the transcription software. The second part was attached to the skin surface above a person’s jugular vein on their neck using a replaceable adhesive. Then, utilising the biochemical properties of blood, the neck chip generates a whole-body magnetic field to align the protons of the human body with that field, effectively creating a mobile, silent MRI scanner, that could be used by anyone. The transcription software then produces images on the computer. It changed the world of diagnostic medicine, and gave Arnie world renown in the medical industry for his ground breaking mobile, compact and quiet MRI scanning device. Arnie was truly amazing.

Max noticed a tag sticking out behind the armrest of the other couch. His brow furrowed. That was the airport tag of Ash’s travel bag, why did she leave it here?

Arby must have read his mind, because he jumped from his lap and went straight to the bag to give it a good sniff. Max went to pick it up, and checked the contents. A thermal shirt and pants, charging chord with a battery pack, an unopened bag of chocolate biscuits, and... two phones...

Max recognised them immediately as Arnie and Wilma’s, and his heart jumped. It wasn’t going to be possible for him to gain access to the information on the passworded phones, but he absolutely could keep them safe. By pure luck of circumstance, the phones were still in the same place, thank God Ash didn’t go about losing them. He placed both phones inside his coat, in the hidden zip pocket, and left the bag where it was. Max glanced at his watch. He really needed to get back to the station.

Max gave Arby one more pat down and cuddle, to which Arby responded with very vocal meows of approval.

“Adieu, you cute chubby fuck. Stay safe my friend.” Max smiled, and closed the door.

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In that same moment, 8000 kilometres away, Ash lay, tranquil, in the steaming hot springs of the Hashinami hotel. They were actually two bath halls, separated by a tunnel, and cut down the middle to separate by gender. Like a squared off hourglass, with a lot of space to enjoy, looking to the clear Tokyo night sky, through the massive glass ceiling.

The hot springs themselves were fed by hot spring waters 1600 metres below the ground. The onyx ground tiling was decorated with gentle green and blue line lights giving the water a visual, calming radiance. The perimeter of the hot springs was lined with elevated seating to rest against, supported by angular, clean brown sashimono wooden beams, joined to form an aesthetic rectangular pattern along the outside wall.

There were some others in the spring with Ash. While she used to feel embarrassed about showing skin in front of others, at some point along the way in life, she kind of just... stopped caring? And wasn't bothered anymore by people's judgement. A useful instinct to have in the age of vanity, vacuity and vindication. She had a lot of work to do tomorrow at the conference.

Five more minutes, she told herself. Then it was time to head back to her room and plan.

Ash's alarm went off at 6.30am, she wanted to have plenty of time to have breakfast, assimilate the plan for the day and get her outfit ready before heading to the conference.

Breakfast was conveniently served in her room, and consisted of fresh miso soup, steamed rice and grilled tuna steak slices. In addition, there were small portions of fermented soybeans, kobachi vegetables, and tsukemono pickles. Ash wasn't the biggest fan of the soybeans, but felt like they were an acquired taste she could get used to eventually, just like she got used to olives when she was little. The pickles and vegetables though, were fresh, flavoursome and a wonderful taste experience of a traditional Japanese breakfast.

By the time she was finished eating and browsing the internet, it was 7.45am, Ash wanted to wash and brush her hair, but in a moment of indecisiveness she eventually let it go, it could wait another day, she had to contact Watanabe. She picked up the envelope phone left on the TV cabinet, and checked the contacts. Sure enough, there were two numbers, labelled W and B. She called W.

It rang three times, before the call was declined. Confused, she called again, but the phone declined now immediately. Was he already coming to pick her up? She wasn't sure. Should she go check the garage? She took her briefcase with her laptop, conference papers and tickets, headphones and battery packs, and left the room to head downstairs to the garage area. After a few minutes, she could see Watanabe's white Toyota Yaris driving down into the area. He smiled enthusiastically and waved. Ash smiled too. She didn't know why she was so happy to see him. He had such a kind, positive energy about him.

As she sat down in the front seat, Watanabe asked, "How was your evening, did you enjoy the facilities at the hotel?"

"Oh, that hot spring is absolutely incredible! And the breakfast this morning was delicious too! I've never been to Japan before all this stuff is making me fall in love with it, for real" Ash mused. "The food, the culture, the aesthetic, I totally understand why it's so widely celebrated around the world".

"That's fantastic, I'm so glad you like it. Kobe is my hometown, which is actually the home of Karaoke! Do you like to sing?" Watanabe asked.

"Oh, I mean I like it but I'm not very good at it" Ash laughed. "It's more private shower concert material for an audience of one if you catch my meaning" she quipped.

Watanabe seemed enthused. "I love to sing. One day I'd like to make something out of it. I never had the courage when I was younger to sing in front of people. But I'm getting old, and it's making me start to wonder

what could have been with this whole singing thing. Don't wanna live my life with regrets, ain't that right?" He sighed.

Ash totally didn't expect that from Watanabe. There was a moment of silence between them.

"Would you sing me a song?" Ash suddenly asked.

Watanabe looked conflicted; she could see the tension in his expression. He blinked quickly a few times, and cleared his throat. He looked to Ash.

"Okay well, if you tell me I suck I'm dropping you off in the middle of the street" he laughed loudly, visibly fighting the nervous energy.

He turned off the radio music, and a few moments later, he started singing a song. As the first words came out, she realised he was singing in Japanese. It was a slow, and gentle song. While she didn't understand any of the words, she could see and feel in his voice, this was a song that meant a lot to him. She wondered where it was from, or who it was for. With his eyes on the road, he sang slowly, emotively, and let each of the words and the melody roll out from his heart. It was as natural and effortless as an antelope, bounding through the African plains, in search of his meaning and desires. Watanabe's performance was something truly special, she sensed that in his energy.

"Watanabe, you got some real talent you know?" Ash said.

"Thank you, Ash. That means a lot. Sorry if that was awkward, I don't know why I brought it up. But I appreciate it." He replied.

Ash smiled with him. "I'm gonna check the schedule..."

"Oh damn, yea, that's right, please, go right ahead, I'll be quiet now I promise"

They drove in silence for a short while. She checked what was on for day 1 in the conference booklet. The conference would be held in the Mizudachi Convention Centre in Shinjuku City, a 25 minute drive away from the hotel. The plenary session was going to be held in the main hall, followed by a keynote speech, by a Doctor Lotár Warga, a Hungarian researcher who had won the Lansticke award in the previous year, 2027. The Lansticke award was the effective Nobel Prize of computing, a prestigious award and agglomeration of pioneering computing research Ash had always revered since her early days in her undergraduate studies.

The schedule showed tens of workshops scattered throughout the venue, peppered with tutorial sessions, as well as some structured Equity and

Diversity in Artificial Intelligence talks in morning and afternoon sessions. Lots to explore for day 1. Ash felt optimistic.

Watanabe entered the convention centre grounds from the south side, but the parking area was on the opposite end in the north. As Watanabe drove around the building, Ash had a moment to take in the structure. It was a sleek, futuristic rain drop shaped design, with a huge cantilevered aerial garden projected out of the southern end at the raindrop tip. A series of flying buttresses supported a wavy, metallic lattice structure around the exterior of the building, which looked like a flowing dress robe. The lattice structure, she had read, was a rotating architectural piece, with electronically controlled solar panels folding out from the inner arms of each branch, providing a substantial amount of electricity for the powering of the building. The lattice was able to orient itself to gather the greatest amount of sunlight at any one time. A mastery of structural engineering.

They arrived in the parking zone and pulled up to the main entrance of the building. Ash had her briefcase in her hands. Before she opened the door, Watanabe said,

“Just so you know, ringing me isn’t a phone call, it’s a GPS ping, so when you phone, I will be notified of where you are and come to you shortly after. Apologies for the lack of conversation on that front” Watanabe noted.

“Oh, that’s totally okay, yea I figured that’s the case anyway. I’ll ping you when I’m ready. Drive safe Watanabe! Thanks for the ride!” Ash replied.

And with that, she took the elevator up to the main lobby.

At this point the plenary session and keynote speech was only 13 minutes away, so she checked in at the reception and started weaving and ducking her way through the crowd to ensure she found a good seat. The reception desk opened up directly to the huge main hall which split off into several corridors along the ground floor, most of which were lined with small theatrettes, bigger theatres, conference rooms, and the like. Along the central column of the main hall’s far end, was a staircase which led to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, which had more rooms and spaces available for use.

Ash found herself a comfy spot on the outer aisle almost immediately Infront of the reception desk, and sat down with her moderately hefty briefcase, observing the hubbub and moving mass of human faces and heads around her. So many expressions, so many noses, coloured eyes, big chins, small chins. Different hairstyles. It was fascinating. Ash enjoyed people watching, it was one of the simpler pleasures and curiosities of life.

Shortly thereafter, Dr Warga arrived on stage with a woman, who Ash recognised immediately, the chairwoman of the conference, Kozue

Matsuuchi. Her face and name were hard to miss, being on the front page of the welcome booklet. A rapturous applause erupted throughout the hall.

“Delegates, we would like to thank you for your attendance to the first day of our wonderful conference. We have a selection of workshops and tutorials running today which we hope you will all find value and enrichment in. But for the moment, allow me please to introduce, Dr Lotár Warga, 2027 recipient of the Lansthicke Award, and pioneering computer scientist, philanthropist and the founder of Warga Automotive and Robotics, for our keynote speech on the first day of the conference. Welcome Dr Warga!”

More thunderous applause from the audience. Dr Warga approached the lectern and coughed loudly, and awkwardly tried to clear his throat over several attempts before finally succeeding.

“Apologies for that. It’s probably that damn COVID from a decade ago” he laughed, to the tune of a mostly quiet audience. Ash was sympathetic. He quickly continued.

“Thank you, Kozue, for the wonderful introduction. I’d like to begin my keynote by asking you two guiding questions, the first one being, what can artificial intelligence do for humanity? And the second one being, what’s our strategy for achieving this? As all of us present at this conference know, the potential of artificial intelligence is immense. The end goal, arguably, is the very literal interpretation of the phrase, artificial intelligence. Creating sentient artificial entities, machine life, as you will, and putting it to use for the benefit of humanity...”

Ash had a shot of adrenaline shoot up her spine. Was this what her parents had created?

“...and living alongside these machines in harmony, humanity enriching the existence of machines, and machines enriching the existence of humanity.”

Warga segued his comments into the state of artificial intelligence in the modern day, with up-and-coming research developments. He spoke about international AI cooperation, logistical issues, and the politics surrounding AI technology. The speech was comprehensive, written and executed with surgical precision, and full of promise, inspiration and enthusiasm. Ash could tell the energy in the room was electric, what started as a fumbled beginning to his speech grew into a masterful display towards the end, and every soul in the room was fixated on the pearly prophecies and philosophies coming from the moustached mouth of world-renowned Dr Lotár Warga.



But the question which grew louder in Ash's mind with every passing sentence he spoke... why was he not mentioning her parents and their research? Nobody even seemed aware to ask. It was almost as if Arnie and Wilma didn't exist. The longer Warga went without mentioning them, the bigger Ash's concern grew. They were one of the biggest names in the industry, and they were being ignored. She suddenly understood the reality of her parent's disappearance. If they truly had created sentient machines, and Warga wasn't talking about it... Ash realised someone didn't want the world to know.

After his 45 minute speech was finished, Warga had left the lectern to yet another torrent of applause. Ash was convinced he knew something about his parents, but he wasn't going to just say it out in the open. Ash needed to get into a room with him and have a private conversation. She wondered if there was going to be a VIP lunch area, and how she was going to be able to sneak in.

Over the next 3 or so hours, the cohort of delegates split up to rooms and areas all over the Mizudachi convention centre ground and 2<sup>nd</sup> floors to attend various workshops and tutorials. Ash went to a workshop on data management in AI for healthcare, not that it mattered to her now that she was unemployed in the healthcare industry. Although, the experience itself was unexpectedly magical. Each delegate was given a set of augmented reality glasses, through which the speakers showed photorealistic models, graphics, people, events and commentary on data management opportunities in healthcare with artificial intelligence. She was smitten with the holographic projector at the front of the room, cleanly, beautifully illustrating complex architectural diagrams, data networks, components and structures in fluid neon visuals, exactly like in sci fi superhero movies twenty years ago. What an awesome time to be alive, she thought.

There was a thirty minute coffee break on the second floor in the dining room, where a few tables were lined with coffee, tea, fruits, pastries and... bean salad? Weirdly enough. Ash saw chamomile, hibiscus, berry, matcha, green, oolong, Irish breakfast, Jasmine, pomegranate and sencha tea varieties before she realised there were more varieties she was bothered to count. The same went for the coffee. The conference really spared no expense. Ash grabbed a banana and left the dining room and ventured around the second floor. A handful of security guards were spread out in the area. The futuristic interior architecture of the convention centre was spaceship like, with splashes of metallic blue and yellow, and elegant steel decorative pieces lined with lights running rivulets through the dark ceiling rails, connecting to the buildings circuit network, providing light for everyone at the conference. The lounge chairs dotted along the walls were pinned with plush, mink-like fabric and were luxuriously comfortable to sit on.

She made eye contact with an Indian, young-ish looking man at the end of the corridor outside a room with a locked door. He looked to be in his thirties, rather short, but well put together. His thick beard was elegantly trimmed, which left all the attention on his bulbous, egg like forehead, which she could see shining from a distance. He stopped talking to the woman he was with, and started walking rather quickly towards Ash. She panicked, and took a few steps back. His pace increased. Ash was freaking out, and didn't know what to do. She didn't have time to call out, and suddenly he was in her face.

"Ash"

"Sorry, who are you?"

"I'm Anil Wijeweera, I work with your father" he said. He looked distressed. Anil from the email...

"There's something you need to know, a few days ago, your parents successfully created a conscious machine, under the operational objectives of experimentation with a prototype humanoid bot named LS-633. The robot showed full consciousness of its thoughts, words and actions, and immediately questioned your parents on its reality" he began.

My god, she thought. This whole operation, Operation Indie Mind, Special Forces at her parent's house, this conference trip, it wasn't a dreamy illusion. This was very, very real.

Suddenly a voice came on in the intercom. It was Kozue.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the coffee break will conclude in a few minutes, please refer to the conference schedule for further information on the subsequent workshops and tutorials."

Anil continued, unfazed. Was the heating on? She felt okay, but Anil was sweating. Not profusely, though there was a definite shine on his forehead, underneath the thinning black hairs on his balding head.

"I was part of the investor seed meeting where the investors met with the conference committee, to discuss the conference proceedings expectations. In Warga's speech, your parents weren't mentioned, and for a very good reason. Warga is one of the biggest financial backers of an underground biotech company in Guangzhou called Hale Laboratories, a company on a mission of destruction against LS-000, your parent's research unit I'm a part of."

"Now, on the public front, it's a pharmaceutical firm specialising in drug research and manufacture, headed by CEO Michael Hale, a British businessman and investor. But off the books, the laboratory is run by

Hale's stone-cold brother-in-law, Shuchang Zhao, a retired Sea Dragon Commando, the Chinese equivalent of the US Navy Seals. Zhao is a fanatic who dreams of a future without humans, built and maintained by intelligent machines, and he wants to accomplish that by rebuilding humanity one body at a time."

"What the hell do you mean rebuilding humanity one body at a time?" Ash asked, incredulous.

"Human experimentation. He wants to make human machine hybrids. The most realistic way he's going to do that will be to abandon the body and upload the mind into a machine, but he's a way off that yet. He's been spending all his time working on bio integrative electronics, but is met with constant failure, the body just won't accept that amount of foreign material into biological equilibrium. It's only a matter of time before he drops that completely and starts chasing neural assimilation."

Anil pulled up his shirt to wipe his wet forehead, leaving a stain on it.

"Zhao already has an neural transcription prototype in beta testing, emulating neural circuits algorithmically to visualise human thoughts. He'll get there very quickly if he gets his hands on your parents' AI systems. What you need to know is, at the seed meeting, Zhao demanded your parents be held accountable for denying research vital to the improvement of humanity, and Warga agreed, saying he'd ensure their cooperation."

Anil's pace quickened, as delegates started walking by them, back downstairs for the end of the break.

"I don't know where your parents are Ash, but I think a good first step is finding out if Warga and Zhao had anything to do with it. There's a VIP lunch happening later on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor in the Maracanã Room, you'll need a keycard to get to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor by elevator" Anil unzipped his waist bag and pulled out a pitch-black card etched with red stained Japanese characters in the corner, and handed it to Ash. He also handed ash a little white cardboard card with his name and KTH number on it.

"Just scan the card at the elevator to call it, and press 4 on the keypad and it should take you up. Zhao and Warga will be up there, see what you can find out from them, without drawing attention to yourself. They don't know you're Arnie and Wilma's daughter, you'll need another name, I don't know, like Courtney or something, a medical software engineer from New York seeking to make the switch into AI. Think of something. Whatever works. The other card is my number from KTH, it's an international satellite phone, call me at the end of the day, we need to meet up and figure out what to do next" Anil was out of breath he was speaking so fast.

Security guards approached them to usher them away from the corridor they were in and back towards the main hall.

"I'll see you soon Ash" Anil told her.

They went back to the first floor main hall. Anil went off immediately down the left corridor, Ash decided to approach the big scheduling whiteboard at the front of the hall and look for a workshop that piqued her interest. She found one. STRATEGIES IN MINIMIZING MEDICAL MALPRACTICE BY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. That was in the Jericho Theatre. She located it on the convention centre map, in the F6 square. She grabbed one last lemon crème biscuit before walking quickly to the room to see what it was all about.

When Ash sat down in the workshop, she regretted it almost immediately. It was run by two harpy looking women with ratty blonde hair and grating, nasal voices she could barely focus on or listen to. She knew it wasn't their fault, but Ash got so angry at how irritating their voices were, she felt like she was on the edge of screaming. She listened to them talk about the ethical considerations and moralistic exercises for a few minutes longer, before she had to excuse herself from the room. Ash went outside to check the scheduling whiteboard again.

As she scanned it for something new to go see, her eyes caught a red post-it note attached to the lunch break section, saying there's been a room change for the VIP lunch, it will now be on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, the top floor, staff will direct VIPs to the location. Would Anil's key card work for the sixth floor? her mind flashed back to the convention centre entrance map showing what's on each floor, the 6<sup>th</sup> floor was greyed out as BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. No... it wasn't possible someone and heard that conversation with Anil, and within minutes changed the location of the lunch. There was no way. This had to be a shitty coincidence.

"Are you lost, ma'am?" A butch security guard approached her.

"Oh, um, yes please, I was just wondering where I might be able to go have a cigarette?" Ash asked in panic. That was a fuck up. She had none on her and wouldn't be able to improvise it if he stood watch.

"There's no smoking on the premises ma'am, but you may smoke outside. Allow me to escort you" the guard gestured for Ash to follow. The elevators were right before the exit on the right-hand side. All she had to do was tap the card and press the sixth floor in a moment the guard wasn't looking, and if it worked, bingo. If not... well, she'd cross that bridge if she got there.

They walked for a few seconds, Ash fervently trying to focus. The exit was now less than ten metres away. She had to act fast, if he asked her for a cigarette too, she'd be in deep shit. In her jacket pocket, her fingers

tightly gripped the key card. She was right next to the elevator button, but the guard was gazing in that direction. She couldn't yet press it without being seen. The window of opportunity was closing!

Then, in an act of divine mercy, an employee of the convention centre was entering the building and recognised the guard at the door, and started a conversation with him. In that split second, using his body as cover, Ash tapped the card and pressed 6 on the keypad in one smooth motion.

It flashed red. Access denied.

## Chapter 4

Fuck. She stepped to the left of the guard quickly and said "I'm sorry, thankyou sir for your assistance, but I think I need some water, I'm not feeling too good."

He seemed indifferent.

“Not a problem ma’am, enjoy the conference” and carried on his conversation with his colleague.

Ash nearly collapsed in relief. She quickly walked back to the main hall with the coffee, tea, pastries, fruits and biscuits and nervously filled up a plastic plate, and started munching chunks of watermelon absent mindedly. Her mind was racing. She’d need to find a security terminal within the next 40 minutes before lunch, and reprogram her keycard to allow access to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor.

She examined it. The card looked to be a typical proximity card, but thicker than usual. This one definitely had some more sophisticated circuitry. She studied basic prox card reprogramming with her dad, and together they built their own highly illegal device which used spectral scanning to extract electronic door network information, and installed the login data on any prox card you swiped through it with. Unfortunately, for the first time in her life when she truly above all else needed it, it was across the other side of the world at her parent’s house in Stockholm. There were holographic terminals in each theatre used for demonstration purposes, but there was no guarantee they operated on the security network. Ash had no idea where the security room in the building was, and she was running out of time, so she had to make an educated guess that the reception computers were likely to have prox card programming enabled, she’d just have to have three minutes with them and nobody watching. Ash needed a distraction.

From her briefcase she took out her burner phone and slipped it into her pocket. She looked up and saw a toilet area just ahead at the entrance to a theatre. Ash stepped inside, locked herself in one of the cubicles, and quickly texted Bessley.

“NEED WAKER TO DISTRACT  
ASAP  
CAMERAS ARE WATCHING”

She shut her phone. God, she hoped Bessley could make something work. She sat for seven agonizing minutes, before she received a text back.

“OSLO THEATRE  
ASAP  
UNIFORM  
CARE BODY”

Jesus fucking Christ, what did he mean CARE BODY? She picked up her briefcase and exited the cubicle, heading to the centre map and schedule once more. She eventually located the Oslo room. As she approached, Waker very casually exited into the hallway. She opened her mouth to

speak to him, but he quickly moved straight past her without making eye contact. She felt for a moment like she was being watched by a thousand eyes. As she opened the door which Waker walked through, she noticed it was dark. She flicked on the lights, and pressed the lock button on the door. The room was empty. Confused, she walked towards the desk and lectern at the front, and finally saw the body of a young girl, one of the receptionists, lying on the floor, hidden under the desk. There was no blood. Was she alive? Ash went over to check her pulse. She was breathing, but sleeping, deeply it looked like. She was in her undergarments, and her venue staff uniform was neatly folded on the chair. Bessley and Waker worked some serious magic. This was incredible.

Ash quickly put on the sleeping receptionist's uniform, and stuffed her regular clothes in her thankfully mostly empty briefcase. She was deeply concerned what would happen when the girl woke up, or if she was found. She could see the girl had goosebumps. Ash took the dust cover off the holographic computer terminal, and put it over the girl to give her a little bit of warmth. Then it made sense to her why the Oslo room wasn't being used, the holographic projector had been mechanically taken apart and a metal sign was hanging off it saying "REPAIRS DELAYED".

Ash left the girl under the desk and made her way to the exit, where she flicked off the lights, and closed the door. Immediately outside the door were two guards leaning against the column. Ash's mouth went dry. One of them looked at her for a moment, then went back to his conversation. For several seconds she felt herself mentally fumbling, trying to look like she's on a task of some sort, but thankfully the guards were completely unfazed. She breathed a sigh of relief, and carried on.

There was only one other girl at the far end of the reception desk, who was currently on the phone. Above her, Ash could see Cameras pointed straight at them both. If Ash worked quickly, she could find the software and recode the keycard in just a few seconds. She approached the 2<sup>nd</sup> computer nearer to the door, and took out Anil's black keycard, before swiping it in the card scanner. A window opened on the screen

```
"MARINA PROX CARD PROGRAMMING  
CURRENT CLEARANCE LEVEL  
[1:5]  
ACCEPT?  
[Y] / [N]"
```

Ash clicked N

```
"ENTER PASSWORD"
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Fuck. This would take more than a few seconds. She went online and accessed a cloud-based password cracker software she designed with her classmates at university called SH Crack, capable of cracking even the

strongest encryption protocols at the time. She kept it updated regularly so as long as the Mizudachi security system wasn't the latest military grade equipment, SHCrack should be able to break through the password authenticator. After 2 minutes of tinkering with the software and command terminal, she was logged in.

"SELECT NEW CLEARANCE LEVEL  
[1][2][3][4][5][6]"

That was a close call. Ash pressed the 6

"MARINA PROX CARD PROGRAMMING  
CURRENT CLEARANCE LEVEL  
[1:6]  
ACCEPT?  
[Y][N]"

Ash hit Y

She shut off and uninstalled SH crack, wiped the logs and caches of activity on the computer for the last 5 minutes, and turned off the system. She held back a smile of satisfaction, aware of the camera still fixed on her reception desk. Ash passed the corner of the camera's vision and picked up her briefcase, before heading back to the Oslo room to return the uniform to the receptionist. Ash got inside again and locked the door, before quickly changing and leaving the receptionist's outfit on the chair at the desk she was lying under. Poor girl will be so confused when she wakes up.

The lunch break was rapidly approaching, Ash was out in the corridor, and saw people started exiting the rooms. The intercom came on, Kozue's voice again.

"Delegates, it's now time for lunch, scheduled events will continue in one hour. Lunch will be served in the dining room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. Thank you, and enjoy the break".

The 2<sup>nd</sup> floor was accessible by staircase, but to get any higher, she'd have to go by the entrance elevators. Which wasn't the best design principle in case of a fire emergency, with no stair escape route from higher floors. Ash weaved her way through the bodies towards the elevators, and managed to slip inside one of them as the door was closing, with an elderly man and woman. She scanned her card and selected 6 on the digital keypad.

"Thank you darling" the elderly woman said. "We're going to the top floor lunch too!"



Ash smiled politely but stayed quiet. She looked at her phone. A few seconds later the door opened into a darkened corridor illuminated with deep blue light, from two massive aquariums on either side of the walkway. An assistant was already waiting for them.

“Hello, please follow me through the aquarium”. Ash and the couple obeyed, passing through various tanks housing a lurid assortment of coloured fish, weeds, decorative aquarium art pieces, shells, miscellaneous metallic bowls, helmets and the like. Overhead, she could see more fish swimming along connected intricate connected glass tubing that opened each tank into contact with all the others. This meant the fish could explore every architectural wonder and artifact in each other’s tanks. The connected aquarium tanks were a genius feat of structural engineering, something the fish could never understand or appreciate.

They went through another two sliding doors before exiting into an external garden area. This was the cantilevered garden area she saw extending past the edge of the building, driving in with Watanabe. From the door it looked like they were overhanging a cliff, but thankfully the edge was protected by a lattice hedge. A dining area was set up for them, 17 people were already enjoying the food, with outdoor heaters set up for the frosty weather. Amongst them were Kozue and Warga, but Shuchang Zhao seemed to be missing. Ash felt a difficulty swallowing.

The food looked like Michelin star artistry. There were tiny bowls and plates lining the tables with beautiful colours and textures of various foods. There was onigiri sushi, various creams, berries, seaweeds, breads, tiny flavoured rice balls, salads, sauce mixtures, fruit art pieces. She saw fried chicken, octopus, eggs on rice, and little yellow pancakes. Ash felt herself salivating.

As she looked up, Ash saw Warga chatting with Kozue. She had no idea what to say yet. Ash was starving and decided to go for the food first. There were no larger plates she could pile some food on, most inconveniently, she had to take the small degustation samples one little plate at a time.

Ash spent the next ten minutes enjoying and savouring the flavours of the food as if it were her last day on earth, with unnecessary emotion. But, in that time, she regained a little bit of energy and confidence, and eventually decided to approach Warga.

“Dr Warga, it’s an absolute honour to meet you!” she slipped into his personal space, as he was moving away from a conversation to get some more food.

“Thank you dear, these conferences do get a little bit tedious sometimes don’t they! And it’s only the first day” he said, grabbing a mini crème dessert.

"Oh, are you planning on leaving us early Dr?" Ash said with a nigh flirtatious grin. Warga raised an eyebrow, clearly enjoying the attention.

"Well, unfortunately my dear..." He looked down at Ash's chest for her nametag "...Marianne, ahead of the release of the 2029 series of Warga Automotive models, I am scheduled for a multi city European press tour. As much as I'd like to stay, duty does unfortunately call. You know how it is, shareholder meetings, investor calls, keeping the customers happy" Warga threw his head back in an emphatic laugh, a billionaires laugh. He was a man of power, and a man who meant business. And he knew it. But he didn't seem like an arrogant bastard, he had the energy of a genuine, friendly man. Possibly not the kind who casually ventured into kidnapping and extortion. "And of course, I would love to attend some of my S1 team races."

"I see! When are you planning on leaving?" Ash asked.

Warga's eyes narrowed, he suddenly became very serious.

"You ask a lot of questions Marianne. Aren't you a very inquisitive one? Why, might I ask, would you like to know?"

Her heart was racing. She had two seconds, three tops, to come up with a convincing reason.

Ash took a deep breath through her nose, and gently rested her arm in the small of his back. "Well, truth be told, I do have a soft spot for automotive engineering, I know it's your ultimate professional dream to revolutionize the transport industry and create the ultimate long range electromagnetic vehicle. I have to say, I've been most captivated by what the Warga Automotive and Robotics branches has accomplished so far, and would love to get a better insight into that entrepreneurial and visionary genius of yours. The work you've done for the commercialisation of cheap, high-quality robotics in the middle class cannot be praised enough."

Warga disapproved. "Marianne, I appreciate your kind words, but unfortunately, I cannot divulge deeper secrets, my research and development with the units at WA and WR is strictly confidential. But I'll tell you what. You wouldn't be here if you didn't have a passion for machine learning and artificial intelligence. As you know, the VIP tickets to this conference were bought privately via auction. While the Warga Automotive press tour starts tomorrow when I leave Tokyo, the final destination on the tour will be Barcelona. I will be hosting a private function there, containing some special technological innovations the world has not yet seen from Warga Robotics, and all VIPs from this conference are invited to attend should they wish. The Barcelona event will occur on New Year's Eve."

That VIP lunch room change nearly cost her a golden, golden opportunity with Warga. Thank God for Waker, that poor receptionist, and Ash's SH Crack software that got her onto the 6<sup>th</sup> floor.

"Thank you kindly, Dr Warga, that's definitely something I shall be doing" Ash said.

"Where did you say you were from Marianne?" Warga asked suddenly. Ash was prepared.

"Boston. I was in medical manufacturing, I invested in the Bergman ROH MRI prototype, and spend my time and money now in private research" Ash replied. She felt a bead of sweat sitting near her temple. Maybe the outdoor heating fans had something to do with it.

"Bergman? As in Arnie and Wilma Bergman?" He asked.

"Yes, the Swedish scientists." Ash replied.

"Ahh, I haven't heard from them in a while. Don't know what happened to them. I know they were doing some great research on self-regenerating neural networks, but then I just stopped seeing their name floating around. I wonder where they went. But the community must live on I suppose" Warga said, reminiscent.

"In any case, I need to get back to meeting some of these people, enjoy the world class degustation and view Marianne. Just one moment"

He retrieved a card and pen from his breast pocket, and scribbled something down. He handed her the card, and slipped the pen back in its pocket. His voice lowered; he leaned in closer to Ash.

"This is my business card, but my private number is on the back. Feel free to contact me and we can organize something a little more... intimate" he winked suggestively. She held back a shudder, and politely took his card. His name, number and "Warga" logo was on the front. Maybe... maybe for an older guy he wasn't that unattractive? She briefly visualised sleeping with him to find out what he knows. It wasn't entirely out of the question. As long as he wasn't such a gross pervert about it, she could close her eyes and go through with it maybe.

Warga went to mingle more with the others. She felt this was the best possible outcome given the circumstances, she had no way of asking about her parents or Zhao without destroying her cover. She'd need to talk to Bessley and Anil and figure out what the next move was.

Ash filled up some more on four rare fish rice balls and pancakes. She didn't need to stay the rest of the conference. She'll call Watanabe when this lunch is over.

Which was... still a while away unfortunately. Ash approached some of the wealthy older people, and spoke again with the rich couple from the elevator. She felt like she was speaking on autopilot. She didn't even remember the names or occupations, interests or hobbies. She didn't care. She just needed this to be over.

Time flew by quickly enough, and they were ushered back through the aquarium into the building, towards the remaining workshops and tutorials for the day. Ash pinged Watanabe, and sat in the food area eating the remaining, less artistic biscuits from the earlier coffee break, to stave off hunger for a while longer. She gave it a few minutes before she went outside to the parking area, and sure enough, Watanabe was driving through again, with his cute little Toyota.

She went to the back to put her briefcase in the boot, then sat down in the front passenger seat.

"So good to see you, Ash!" Watanabe began. "I trust it was a productive conference"

"You don't know the half of it, Watanabe" Ash replied. Ash needed another trip to the Sauna and Hot Springs tonight before coming back tomorrow, to find out why Zhao wasn't at the VIP lunch. But she needed to speak with Anil first.

The Toyota Yaris drove out of the parking area and smoothly re-joined into Tokyo traffic, heading back towards the Hashinami hotel. Kozue Matsuuchi was watching it go, through the blinds of an office window on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the centre. Kozue didn't know why the only daughter of Arnie and Wilma Bergman was present at the conference. Really, it could have been a complete coincidence. Kozue would have believed it and thought nothing further of the matter. But then that would only have been the case if she hadn't overheard Ash's conversation with Warga, and Ash use a false name of Marianne. That caught Kozue's attention. At the conference tomorrow, she was going to ask Ash about it. Today there was the opportunity in the garden to introduce herself, but she felt it wasn't the right moment yet. Ash didn't recognise her, so clearly Arnie never mentioned her in the past. Kozue closed the window blinds and sat down at the desk to pen a letter, which she intended to give to Ash tomorrow at lunch.

When she was finished, she sealed the letter in an envelope, put the initials A.B on the front, and went back down to the main hall on the first floor. Lotar Warga was speaking with a researcher. Kozue waited patiently for him to finish his conversation.

“...So you see a radial basis function is preferred in power optimisation operations, that’s something we’ve got strong modelling in so I think we should be ok for now, thank you for the suggestion though Werner. Ah, Kozue, how are you doing?” He turned to her, genial as ever.

“I was curious to ask, you spoke with a brown-haired young lady earlier, I didn’t get a chance to meet her. Who was she?”

“Oh that was Marianne. Lovely lady, very passionate. Invested in Bergman Medical Chips, lucky girl must have got in early. She’s from Boston! Probably one of those MIT grads with a regex built brain” Warga remarked.

“Ahh ok” Kozue nodded. “Right, that’s a shame I couldn’t say hello. Perhaps tomorrow”. Kozue had the option of staying at the conference, but had too much going through her mind to focus at the moment. She decided to collect her papers and belongings at the administration office and head back home.

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Anil Wijeweera sat peacefully in prayer, on a concrete ledge next to his Kamakura condominium block, in the Kanagawa prefecture, watching the snow collect on the cars parked in the street. He felt at ease, it was good to know he had someone on his side in all of this, and it wasn’t just a one-man suicide mission with no clear goal in sight. The fact he saw and made contact with Ash at the conference was nothing short of a miracle, but a sign to Anil that God truly does help those in need.

It was only 3.25pm, Ash presumably wasn’t going to call him for a while yet, he may as well go inside to warm up. He patted himself down and wiped off the snow from his boots and hood, and closed the front door. He wanted to do a little bit more digging on Zhao and Warga, but he had run out of ideas what to look for next.

When Arnie and Wilma disappeared, he immediately suspected Hale Laboratories was involved. Not only did they publish journal articles and newsletters, Hale Laboratories held media press conferences and events, where they actively discredited and maliciously tore down the advances the LS-000 bot research team was making in regenerative neural networks, bringing sentient machine life closer to reality. They cited moral and ethical transgressions, waxing lyrical on the dangers of uncontrollable machine intelligence and the impacts it would have on the future of humanity.

That was their trio, their team. Arnie, Wilma and Anil. And it all started when Anil, by chance, was walking through the library one day at KTH and saw a piece of paper on the pinup board, a seemingly inconspicuous advertisement.

“SEEKING JUNIOR RESEARCH ASSISTANT-ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE  
LABORATORY. PASSIONATE APPLICANTS WELCOME”

So, Anil took note of the number, and gave it a call later that same evening. He never could have known it would have resulted in one of the most intellectually fulfilling adventures of his life at the forefront of analytical computer science, and a friendship with two incredible souls in Arnie and Wilma Bergman, who gave him the kindness and appreciation for his work and nature that he never got from the world. An appreciation and kindness he always yearned for. He was forever grateful to them, and would do anything in his power to track them down.

Hale Labs clearly had a vendetta against Arnie and Wilma, but he didn't know why. Things weren't adding up. It bugged him that the Chinese lab took such a religiously defensive stance against the LS-000 team, and yet in all his experience with the technological and underground hacker communities from China, they were some of the least morally and ethically minded people he'd ever met in his life.

It just didn't fit the bill, a pharmaceutical company and laboratory, built on scientific ambition, devoting so much resource to discrediting the science of a lab of AI researchers in Sweden on the other side of the world. He suspected the CEO had something to do with it, some falling out he must have had with Arnie or Wilma in the past maybe?

Anil wrote to underground contacts in China, seeking further information on why Hale Laboratories was hell bent on destroying the reputation of LS-000. He eventually found a contact who had intimate knowledge of Hale Laboratories and Zhao's operations. That same contact had said Michael Hale was innocent, Hale Laboratories was just a commercial front for the illegal human experimentation done by Hale's brother-in-law, Shuchang Zhao. Zhao was the one who was determined to see Arnie fall at any cost. The contact still couldn't place a motive for why, and Anil couldn't figure it out either.

The only other notable piece of information Anil could find, was that the biggest name in computing in 2027, Lotár Warga, was the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest shareholder in Hale Laboratories Ltd.

His phone rang suddenly, frightening him out of the silence. That must've been Ash. He picked up quickly.

“Ash?” Anil asked.

“Yes, listen Anil I'm not sure I have the strength to meet up at the moment, but I will tell you what I found out. I did talk to Lotár Warga earlier. That VIP lunch was shifted to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, your card didn't give me

clearance. Long story, but I found a way to get into the outdoor garden with the VIPs.” Ash began

“Oh, shit sorry I didn’t think they’d shift rooms; I made the prox card at my apartment before coming, going off the schedule on the website.” He said.

“Anil that’s totally fine don’t worry. Here’s the catch with the VIP status though, they didn’t get invited as VIP’s, Warga held a secret auction and these people bought access. Also, he could be bullshitting, but I mentioned I invested in Bergman ROH chips, he said he hadn’t heard the Bergman name in a while. I don’t know what that could mean honestly. It sounds like Warga might not be involved in their disappearance.” Ash explained. “The other thing is, Warga is leaving Tokyo tonight for a European press tour on the upcoming 2029 WAU car series, it’ll finish in Barcelona on New Year’s Eve, and all VIPs from the conference are invited to that private event”

“Wait, Ash, wait, what about Shuchang Zhao, was he in the 6<sup>th</sup> floor garden? Did you manage to speak to him?” Anil asked.

“No, I didn’t. I hadn’t seen him once the whole day. Are you sure he was there?” Ash replied.

“Well, he should have been. Remember the seed meeting I was at? Zhao called for reprimand of your parents for negligence of scientific duty, and Warga agreed and said he’d look into it. Now he could have just been saying that to shut Zhao up, but being one of the top investors in Zhao’s parent company sure makes you question their relationship. We are going to need more information, Ash. That robotics VIP show in Barcelona is going to be critical.” Anil was still blown away she got into the VIP lunch on a faulty keycard she somehow reprogrammed on such short notice.

“Anil there’s a bit of a problem. I don’t actually have the VIP conference ticket...” Ash said.

There was an awkward silence.

“Well, um, you have the, uh, he thinks you’re VIP at least, right? So maybe just show up in Barcelona and... well, we have a couple weeks to see if we can locate one of these tickets or reproduce one, let’s not cross the bridge of failure yet unless we get there and it’s absolutely necessary.” Anil said.

“Okay, thanks for the info Anil, this will work out. But right now, I need to go to the hot spring here, toodles!” Ash hung up. Anil felt that pang of desire hit him again, like a cricket bat, out of thin air. Ash was a beautiful young woman, but he was still disapproving. He wasn’t attracted to men, but he was deeply annoyed by his attraction to women. The desires were an inconvenience. They had always been met with rejection, and had

never amounted to anything more than frustration and disappointment. Try as he might, he could not rid his mind of thoughts of carnal sin. He sighed. It was a very flat feeling. Either way, It wasn't clear what the plan was next, but he'd see Ash tomorrow at the conference so they could work things out then.

His Airbnb apartment was small, but extremely comfortable, and came fully equipped with cleaning amenities, a shower, washing machine and dryer. Anil was very particular about hygiene, and didn't want to have to share his bathroom with anyone, and after looking far and wide for an Airbnb which suited all of his needs, he finally settled on the apartment in Kamakura.

After making himself some tea and a tuna cheese sandwich, Anil felt compelled to go out for another walk. This entire process was emotionally exhausting. He wanted to find Arnie and Wilma. He wanted to see Ash again. These feelings of duty, to protect and aid the family he loved and cared for, weighed on him. He prayed each day for the strength and resilience to continue, to not abandon hope.

Anil got dressed up in his winter jacket and thermal pants and went outside, before locking the door to the apartment. He set off down the road to clear his head.

After a few minutes of walking, he stumbled across a location he didn't notice previously.

“伝慶 釣りクラブ (Denkei Fishing Club)”

He peered through the glass window, which overlooked an open illuminated area with several large pools separated by concrete walkways, and few handfuls of people. Some were fishing in solitude. Others were chatting together with beer and sandwiches.

“Ah why not, could be fun” Anil said to nobody in particular, and stepped inside. There was a self-service dispenser of fishing equipment. Anil paid the fee and the machine let out a mechanical whirr, before a fishing rod slipped out from the dispenser, and a little toolbox, presumably with weights and baits. He went over to one of the smaller pools with only two people, and sat down on the single plastic crate on one end, with a cushion strapped to it. He fixed the weight to the line, attached a small lure, and tossed his line into the pool, packed with colourful fish. It almost felt a little bit like cheating.



## Chapter 5

Day 2 of the conference and Project Indie Mind, was set to begin. Ash was enjoying the coffee break in between workshops, standing in the main lobby, conversing with some of the newer delegates. It appeared some faces that were not present yesterday, had recently arrived to the party today. It was nice getting to know some of them, their research interests, and the technologies they were developing. Speakers on workshop topics explored ideas ranging from AI investigations into time series analysis, to data analysis optimisation in neural nets, to hypothetical evaluation beyond quantitative metrics.

The comprehensive range of speakers did little to quell Ash's fears about her parents' whereabouts, but there was nothing she could do on that front now. She spoke with Bessley the night prior, and told her about the contact with Anil. Bessley was stunned Anil wasn't captured either, but grateful to have access to his knowledge and expertise. Bessley brought Anil into the picture and updated him with all the information they had so far, the plan was to finish the conference, and then return to Stockholm to prepare for the WR private showing with Warga.

Ash was busy introducing herself to another delegate, before she was interrupted by Kozue.

"Hello, may I speak with you a moment?" Kozue offered politely. Ash was cornered, and not in a position to refuse.

"Hi! Yes, absolutely! It is wonderful to meet you Dr Matsuuchi!" Ash replied. Kozue gestured for Ash to go into open space

"Why don't we come over here, I'm feeling a bit crowded" Kozue began. They had a pocket of space to talk without being overheard. Ash felt her face heat up. She wasn't sure how this was going to go, was her cover blown?

Kozue looked very concerned. Her thin brows furrowed in uncertainty as she looked at Ash, her small, black eyes filled with melancholy.

"Many moons ago, I used to see your father, Ash"

Ash's heart sank.

"I'm really sorry, I..." Ash was floored by the revelation. "Please allow me to explain..."

“That’s ok Ash. We met in a bar in Shibuya, in 2010. At the time, he was going strong with Wilma, but I was unaware of it. He said he was in Japan on business, scoping out the research landscape and innovations here, looking to make connections, and learn about all the latest technologies and techniques in Japanese machine learning engineering.”

Kozue sat on the wall ledge behind Ash, and slipped off her high heels.

“Fuck these are uncomfortable” she muttered. “Your father’s charm was something I’d never experienced before. I had been seeing a man when your father approached me, but speaking to Arnie, when I gazed into his eyes, and admired his aura, all I could think about was how much this man represented something that was so sorely lacking in my life. It felt like a special kind of intimacy, something intimate, soft, blissful. I was completely captivated, and your father knew this, I think. The next day, he took me to the Ginzan Onsen for our first date, and he ignited in me, feelings I thought I would never have again.”

Kozue looked into the crowd of delegates wistfully, deeply reminiscent.

“Arnbjorn stayed with me at my house for two months. I thought it was going to be a lasting happiness, my happiness, that fate had brought me. I wondered if something more serious was on the cards for our relationship, maybe even marriage. But after returning to Stockholm, he finally told me he had a family, and he didn’t want to break it apart, with a new relationship which could devastate his daughter”

“Sometime later, I heard about the LS-000 lab in Sweden making news headlines, and their team included a younger Indian man, and a woman who had the same last name as Arnbjorn. Wilma Bergman.” Kozue looked to Ash. “You have the same eyes as your mother, that’s how I knew you were their daughter.”

Ash was so shell shocked, she struggled to speak. She couldn’t believe that her father was a cheater, and cheated on Wilma when Ash was just a little girl. A torrent of emotion swept through her, she felt sick in the stomach. And nauseous. Like she wanted to faint.

“Ash?” Kozue asked, visibly apologetic. She took Ash by the hand.

“Are you alright? I’m so sorry to tell you this. I just.... I had to come speak to you, to find out how Arnbjorn was doing. How is your father?” Kozue asked.

Ash just came out straight with the truth.

“My father is missing, Kozue” she said. “I’m looking to find out what happened to him”

Kozue looked ashen.

“I’m really sorry to hear that. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. I’d love to see your father again one day.” Kozue retrieved from her inner blazer pocket a letter addressed to Ash, sealed in an envelope.

“Please read that letter if you need further questions answered. Contact me at any time, my details are in there too.” Kozue added.

“I need to go do the announcements, I’ll maybe see you later on Ash. Have a good day.”

Kozue reluctantly slipped on her heels again and walked off into the crowd. A couple of minutes later she gave her announcement on the loudspeaker, and everyone filtered off into the different rooms and floors of the convention centre building.

Ash placed the letter in her briefcase, and found herself losing track of her thoughts again, as the time was flying by. Soon enough it was the afternoon session, and Shuchang Zhao was nowhere to be seen. At this point she had to assume that he had left the conference, and would no longer be attending for the duration of the event.

For her afternoon session, Ash sat in the Jericho theatre watching an interactive American demonstration of a breakthrough new neural net built into an exoskeleton, specialized in predictive modelling and adaptation to human motion. The skeleton picked up neuromuscular signals travelling in the spine and acted in a stabilising and enhancing capacity, to either increase momentum, decrease momentum, counterbalance, etc. The exoskeleton was light, and oriented for anatomical design. It actually looked quite aesthetic, and not too bulky or uncomfortable.

There were five exoskeletons set up for people to try, and delegates filtered through one at a time. When it was Ash’s turn, she noticed the exoskeleton had a stilt-like base, elevating your feet off the floor a few centimetres. She stepped into the stilt base, and felt the supportive leg braces softly line themselves up against the outside of her legs, and the main keypad softly fold around her hip. The metallic spinal wiring pressed against her spine before locking smoothly in place. The arm tip rested against the tip of her spine near the atlas bone, pressed gently against the head. She felt the conductive adhesive against her skin, it was cold but soft, pleasant even.

Ash allowed herself to sway forward and back, and felt the internal gyroscope stabilising her movements automatically. This was a very unnatural feeling, almost like a robot was taking control of her movement.

The length of the segmented arm fixed on her spine adjusted for her height and the shape of the spine accordingly. The design was brilliant, Ash felt suddenly so physically powerful.

“Okay now, can I ask your name?” The researcher said.

“Marianne! This is really interesting what you have here.” Ash replied, she threw a shadow punch. To her absolute surprise, the skeleton accelerated the punch significantly, and almost threw Ash off balance, before it auto corrected its position again.

“Holy SHIT, this is fucking crazy!” Ash cried out, in a state of exhilaration. She threw a few more jabs, the skeleton felt like it was doubling her momentum at the very least, she wanted to step into the ring with a heavyweight boxer.

The researcher laughed. “Glad you like it!” he grinned. “My name is Stanley Torrens, I’m the lead designer and builder of the skeleton, this model is called the XMM112, Exoskeleton Mass Momentum, Prototype 112. It actually goes with a virtual reality set to help you practice getting accustomed to the mechanics in different scenarios. He flicked on the holographic projector, a lucid three-dimensional illustration appeared in the upper space of the room, and he broke down the component pieces of skeleton.

“... the momentum boosting is thanks to the AI programming able to incorporate electrical stimulation to modulate muscle cell biochemistry as it sees appropriate, with helps in coordination with the gyroscope system to stabilise you in case of falling down or off balance. In the case of increased momentum and force, such as in combat sports, the system is also built with shock collection circuits to ensure elevated forces exerted on any part of the body while using this exoskeleton, do not rupture muscle, ligament or bone or cause tissue or organ damage. So, it’s a very safety-oriented construction”

The crowd was fixated. Stanley was clearly very proud of himself.

“We anticipate the uses will be far reaching. There will be a number of different avenues we anticipate the skeleton will fit the market need perfectly and provide the best current value proposition. Firstly, of course, the obvious example is of geriatric care. This skeleton can help improve their independent day to day living, as well as completely eliminate falls and bumps, due to the gyroscopic stabilisation coupled with neuromuscular control mechanisms designed to provide support where natural body systems fail, for example in losing consciousness. In addition, we anticipate the skeleton to have versatile military applications, able to assist soldiers in traversal across all terrains, lowering energy expenditure, and increasing survival rate of soldiers in warfare. These exoskeletons can also be accessorized with anti-ballistic armour plating,

for a truly incredible machine of war. Third of course is the commercial popularity, pending legislative review of our product and its safety to be used as a recreational product. And then our final target market will be competitive sports, we would like to see the exoskeleton used as the gold standard for non-natural sporting organisations worldwide.”

Ash pressed the release node button at her upper hip, and the spinal arm detached itself from her spinal column, and folded neatly into itself, and rebalanced itself automatically, ready for the next person to step into it.

Stanley was off to the side as his three assistants were helping people in and out of the exoskeletons. As he stood flicking through his notebook, Ash thought he looked like the most regular guy ever, he had that goofy-but-charming-lead-actor-in-every-romantic-comedy-ever energy she found endearing. Hugh Grant-esque energy.

“Hey Stanley!” Ash chimed in.

“Oh, hi Marianne! So lovely to meet you. How were your first two days at the conference?” he replied.

“Same old same old. I’ll tell you what though, lucky I stumbled across you and your robotic exoskeleton because I was starting to think this conference was going to bore me to death with no fun new stuff, you know what I mean?” She laughed, smacking him on the shoulder. Stanley looked flustered.

Are you flirting with me...? he wondered, feeling an onset of butterflies in his stomach.

“What made you decide to pursue engineering?” She asked.

“Oh, it was my family growing up. I had a family full of aerospace engineers, they wanted me to pursue the same thing, maybe even becoming an astronaut, all that jazz, they wanted it to be on the cards. I don’t know, I suppose I just went with what my family pushed me to do, ended up having fun with it, and started realising how much potential for growth and change there is out there, you know?” Stanley said. Ash was nodding in appreciation.

“Like, I don’t know, there’s just something about programming and building, creating these machines capable of inhuman things, and knowing that I could be able to utilize that kind of power to create something that helps others, that feels really good. Good for the soul. I know there’s a lot of division out there on like, an infinite number of different things. The world is a shitty place and everyone hates each other, yada yada. I just wanna put a cap on some of that anger and replace it with fun and creativity with my designs.”

Stanley spoke so fondly of it all. She liked seeing him smile. It just felt, like this special thing. Like a mouse munching a piece of cheese.

“Your enthusiasm reminds me of a mouse finding cheese” she told him. Wait, what the fuck did she just say? Jesus! Ash turned red with embarrassment. Stanley found it hilarious. She felt a bit more at ease. It was a really pleasant conversation with Stanley. Ash really wanted to see him again. She got his phone number, and made sure to give him hers, thanks to the Japanese sim card she remembered to get earlier that morning.

That was a wonderful finish to the second day. While Project Indie Mind was put on hold until Ash could find out more from Warga at the automotive show on New Year’s Eve, Ash decided to seize the day, and enjoyed the ride back to Hashinami with Watanabe, where they sang together in the car, in high spirits and enthusiasm.

After reaching Hashinami, Ash felt a burst of desire to see Stanley again, and contemplated whether or not it would be a wise decision to call him immediately. She figured there were a whole lot of options of things to do in the city. It was Tokyo after all, the largest metropolitan city in the world, with Tokyo and the surrounding suburbs home to over thirty million people.. For the short time she had been in Japan, she hadn’t actually made plans for herself. She should be enjoying the experience too. Bessley and ESI paid for this whole thing, and she was going to make use of it. And it wasn’t as if she wasn’t allowed to hang out with other people or meet new friends.

Ash grabbed the travel guide from her bedside table at Hashinami, and flicked through the things to do in Tokyo.

There were fishing centres, fish markets, karaoke, sports and recreation venues including baseball strike and pitch machines, arcade malls, all around just in the vicinity of the hotel. She could go to Harajuku, Ginza, Shibuya or any of the other world-famous tourist destinations. There was so much choice, she struggled to figure out what to do. Ash took her phone, got up Stanley’s number on it, and held her finger over the “Call” button.

“Hey Stanley!” she practiced quickly.

“Ahh no too enthusiastic.” Ash tried something softer.

“Hey Stanley, I was wondering if....” She stopped.

“Shit, too depressing”

She tried something in between.

"Hey Stanley, I know this is short notice, but would you be free tonight to hang out around Shinjuku?"

Perfect. Maybe. Shit. She hit the call button; you only live once. It rang twice before Stanley picked up.

"Oh, hey Marianne! Great to hear from you!"

"I need to be honest my name's actually Ash, but I got nervous when you asked sorry"

"Haha that's okay! Alright then. What's up?"

"Stanley, listen, I don't know if you're busy tonight, but I have no one to hang out with and wondered if you maybe wanted to join me in Akihabara for an adventure?"

Ash dreaded what he might say next.

"Oh shit, yea I'm totally down for that, how about Infront of the Katsuya shop at Shibuya Crossing?"

Ash felt a flood of relief.

"Okay yea! I'm leaving now, I'm like a 20 minute walk away. Is that ok?"

"Yea perfect! I live really close too, see you in maybe 35 minutes!"  
Stanley hung up.

Ash was over the moon. She went to the bathroom to double check her hairstyle and freshen up, brushed out her hair and did a skin cleanse, and some light eyeliner. She got dressed in her green down jacket and grey beanie, and headed out towards the Shibuya Crossing.

The street walk was very frosty, but soon enough Ash got into a rhythm, and managed to forget about the cold, just taking one step a time, left foot, right foot, one after the other. She noticed all the little passing cars, so many of them so cubic in nature, the metallic frames clinking along at a gentle pace. When she blurred her eyes, the cityscape almost looked like a two-dimensional animation, through the snow falling into her eyes, and the little square and rectangular cars moving uniformly across her field of vision.

Ash decided she did not like the cold anymore. At least the biting cold. Fifteen degrees was preferable. But if she was to have a choice between a 0 degree Tokyo and a 50 degree Dubai, she would still pick Tokyo. The biting cold was a last case preference scenario situation for Ash, she just wanted to go someplace warm right now. Hell, Iceland was probably best, with an average summer temperature of 12 degrees. Frosty year round!

After the 20 minutes or so of walking she arrived at the entrance to the Katsuya shop, and Stanley was already there. He was dressed in a navy blue coat, a black vest, cream chinos, and a red scarf. How cute.

“Ash!” he hugged her warmly. Literally, since she was freezing cold.

“Thanks for the invite, to be honest I was kind of feeling a bit meh today after the conference, your call really lifted my mood. Where should we go?”

“Let’s get some katsu chicken first, I’m starving!” Ash replied.

They walked up the street and settled on a little ramen shop called Mamaga Uchi. They had to wait a while to get inside, and stood behind the long line, getting dusted off with snow. Ash and Stan bounced around and did some squats to stay warm. Eventually, after a ten minute wait, they were finally let inside.

Ash ordered some Katsu chicken curry, while Stanley got himself a Tonkotsu hotpot. The shop was a stereotypical hole in the wall kind of affair, but in a quirky way. It was, ironically enough, in between a Mos Burger and a McDonalds, so it was assured that most customers would be of a slightly less fine-dining-oriented demographic, and would probably only notice Mamaga Uchi upon deciding to either go for a McDonalds or Mos Burger quick feast, before spontaneously deciding that no, in fact, this time they’d go for something in the middle. This time they’d go for the healthy option, the Ramen restaurant.

The food was incredibly delicious, and it was only by chance when Ash was sharing photos with Stanley that she decided to google the venue (It seemed altogether too inconspicuous to be this wonderful), when she found out that Mamaga Uchi was in fact a Michelin starred restaurant, and an icon of the Shibuya culinary landscape. That explained it! No wonder there was a line outside, and no wonder there looked to be so much care, so much refinement in the process she could see in the open kitchen window at the rear of the room.

Gentle hip hop music hummed along in the background, and Ash and Stanley sat together in the corner booth near the window, inspecting the shoes of the passers-by on the elevated sidewalk above their cosy little spit.

“Stan, do you ever wonder if god is really watching us?”

“Mm, I think so. Maybe.” Stan replied

“I hope so. I wanna believe every good deed in life is rewarded. Maybe not in the same life, but in another. I’ve tried to be a good person in my life,



living guided by compassion. But then I see how much shit is out there, how many evil people are out there doing inhuman evil to others, and they get away with it just fine. Ahhhh. It makes me wonder how different my life might have been, if I was a cold, hard, bitch, you know?"

Stanley laughed. "Ahh I could never see you being a cold hard bitch Ash, you're too much of a sweetie pie for that" he winked with a cheeky grin.

"Hey I gotta ask, feel free to skip this question, but I am curious, with your exoskeletons, you ever think of doing something crazy with them? I don't know, robbing a bank, beating someone up, you never know!"

"Well, to be honest, I've got way too many prototypes to keep track of, it just becomes a hassle cataloguing them all, so I only stay up to date with the most recent models. But I have some older ones that are still functional, could probably get a good amount of force out of them, breaking walls and stuff like that. And before you ask, yes, I've tried to be the superhero breaking brick walls, and the skeleton does work haha"

"Well, I wasn't sure if that seemed like a dumb question but I guess you answered it" Ash chuckled.

She moved from sitting across Stanley to the spot next to him.

"Is it ok if I hug you? I'm way too cold right now." Ash asked.

"Of course, Ash"

Ash gently embraced Stanley, taking his hand in hers. She let her fingers drift across his wrist and palm, slowly moving up and down, and in circular motions, back to his fingertips. She didn't look up at him, she just appreciated the touch, it felt right, natural.

"Next question: Do you believe in an ever-changing life made up of your choices, or do you believe fate is already written for us?"

"Hmm. I've always been of the opinion that fate is already written for us. Not in the way you'd expect though, I'll tell you why." Stanley chuckled. "I've thought about this a lot Ash, be prepared! For an extremely nerdy response!"

Ash giggled. This was fun.

"This may be overly simplistic of a view here, but I like thinking about it in this way. When we think of the universe, we think of a beginning, and an end. Depending on which additional theories you may believe in, there could be multiple universes, different models of its construction, yada yada. But yea, for all intents and purposes, a beginning and an end. So, at the beginning, if you are inside the universe, the future is still full of

different options you can take, an infinite number of options. But here's the special thing about the past, you see.... There is only one past. While you were living it, there were an infinite number of possible things that could happen, but after they happen, the past is set in stone, as only one series of events. So.... Long story short, once the universe finishes, and you look at the complete history, there is only one history. One set of choices. Everyone's choices."

Stanley took a long swig from his coke.

"Ahh delicious. So! One history to me represents one fate, a set of choices that we have already made, and are waiting for time to catch up to them" Stanley finished, flourishing with his other hand dramatically.

Ash let her head fall into his jacket.

"You're really nice Stan."

"Thanks Ash. You are too" He replied, embracing Ash again "Hey, how would you feel about going to the arcade?"

"Oh, that would actually be so fun! Let's do it!"

Ash suddenly had a burst of energy. They bundled their cutlery, plates and serviettes together onto the carry plate, and Ash took him by the hand as they walked out. The hustle and bustle of the city streets was not yet lost, and the cling clang of motor vehicle suspension rang in their ears as they quickly ran over to the underground metro, for a quick ride to Akihabara.

The subway was as exactly as jam packed as they say it would be in the west. But the tidiness, care and effectiveness of the subway staff was absolutely impeccable too, also exactly as is reputed to be the case. As they jumped into a carriage, Ash soon found her nose pressing into Stanley's chest, to Stanley's great amusement. He leaned down to her ear,

"I see you're comfortable there, little Miss Muffet"

She hit him playfully in the shoulder.

They exited at the Akihabara stop and Ash quickly googled where to find the Sega Arcade centre. It wasn't that long of a walk, only 8 minutes, until they got inside.

Ash was stunned by all the latest gaming technology on display, with swirling action packed holograms, neon lighting, exorbitant gaming stands and arcade party games, and brand new video game consoles, all lined up and down the giant factory floor of the SEGA arcade.

Ash and Stan only spent an hour in the arcade, before Ash lost most of her energy and felt the sleepiness slowly starting to overcome her. She wanted to go rest back at Hashinami, it had been enough adventuring for one day. But she didn't want to disappoint Stan or make him think like he messed something up.

"Hey Stan" Ash turned his chin with her hand towards her. Her sparkling hazel eyes looked up towards him, with puppy like affection. Rock music was playing somewhere audibly in the distance. Ash leaned up towards him, closing her eyes, and gave him a tender, intimate kiss. He took her by the waist and pulled her in closer. They shared a blissful moment together, and Ash and Stanley, in that moment, felt like the warmth of the world had been shared with their hearts and souls.

## Chapter 6

Shuchang Zhao entered his ground floor Tianhe office with two pharmacists in tow, detailing to him the latest quarterly figures, outlining the latest expenditures and profits Hale Labs was processing in their financial ecosystem. He was satisfied with the state of affairs; following the last quarterly report, Zhao found that Hale Labs broke into the top 50 most highly valued stocks on the Shanghai Stock Exchange. Not only that, new sponsorship and research grant programmes he had offered had given Hale Labs a much more positive reputation in the public eye, and earned the favours of local and national media seeking to make a quick click hit on a major company going to great lengths to prioritise its philanthropic efforts.

“Boss, also, our team is still working on an integration cocktail to stop the deaths. We are getting longer survival times, but still fatality rate is 100%” One pharmacist said.

Zhao took out the ice cubes from the fridge and cracked three of them into his whisky, before taking a swig.

“Success will come. Now go.” He sent them away, and sat down at his desk. He remembered how much there was still to do, and resented the fact he had no immediate control over it. He resented the fact he could not get things done immediately. Especially when research progress was delayed, because he simply did not know what was going wrong, or what he needed to fix and improve.

Zhao didn’t even know where his impatience came from in his middle age. In his days as a Sea Dragon Commando, he trained in gruelling tactical regimes in both psychological and physical torment, destroying his body and mind. Eventually, he would rise from the ashes from physical destruction, rebuilt from the ground up through suffering. Hardened, impenetrable and a master of his body and mind. Those were the training goals of the Sea Dragon Commandos. And yet here he stood, twenty years after passing his training, an angry old man, unable to fix a problem that was driving him mad.

The neural transcription software still wasn’t working with his atlas cable, and he couldn’t figure out why. He didn’t know if it was in the cables, or if it was in the code, or some other issue. The only signals the atlas cable was providing from patients was blurry neon on the screen, and a rumbling, drum like audio.

Atlas cables came at a steep price. They were the latest high speed data transfer cable utilising high frequency quantum operating silicon chips

and thermally stable polymer cables. They couldn't possibly be the problem.

The only possible explanation was that he didn't have a powerful enough system to decode the data.

Zhao booted up his computer and loaded up some of the trial reports and scanned through the numbers. Another person came in through the door.

"Hey Boss I know you went to Tokyo to check what's out there at the conference, but I think you left a little bit too early." The woman said. "I think we've found someone who can help us."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense Jing"

"Stanley Torrens from MIT, lead robotics engineer running his own team. I think it may be useful to contact him." She replied.

"Ok send him standard PR with an invite, hold off on offers and contracts until I say so"

"Yes, right away sir"

Jing left and closed the door behind her.

Zhao googled Stanley Torrens. 312,000 results. This was a known man. Graduated from MIT in 2023, worked for 2 years in private contracting for the military, before starting his own business manufacturing exoskeletons and industrial mechs. Numerous awards and competitions, Dean's List at MIT, cross country runner.

Zhao clicked open the schedule for the conference again, and went to find Stanley's presentation that he missed.

"Gyro-stabilised momentum amplifier exoskeleton; A demonstration"

He looked up the documentation detailing the operating system and mechanics of the skeleton. It was refined work, Zhao was impressed. Perhaps it would be valuable for him to organise a meeting with Stanley Torrens, to see how much he could bring. In the current political climate leading up to the election, his work was going to be critical in maintaining stability on the ground.

Zhao closed his laptop and put it into his top desk drawer. He needed a boost, now was a good time to hit the gym. He had been slacking, and it was starting to take its toll. He felt softer and weaker, which frustrated him even more.

Zhao grabbed his gym bag and headed out of Hale Labs to the other side of the street. The gym was a 25-minute walk, but Zhao needed it. The cars were packing along the street as always, as is expected of China, but he didn't mind. Zhao remembered twenty years ago during his training, being dropped into an underground, underwater cavern while blindfolded, and being tasked with surviving the twenty four hour journey to the exit, where a camp and his Sea Dragon officers would be waiting. Every Sea Dragon Commando had to undertake the trek, through often treacherously narrow caves, with unknown, dangerous sea creatures, the all-important quest for water and for food, and the critical importance of moving as much as possible not to fall to hypothermia and inevitable death.

Zhao cleared the cavern on that day, but had a life-or-death encounter with a shark which he barely escaped from, and left him with post-traumatic stress he struggled with for many years.

The encounter with the shark was the very moment he realised the fragility and weakness of the human body and mind, it was the moment where Zhao started wondering, dreaming even, of escaping from his body and transforming into something beyond that of a human, a refined, unbreakable machine human hybrid, which wouldn't be subject to the whims and forces of biological caprice and degeneration. Zhao resented the idea of getting old, and it filled him with a unique blend of anger and fear, propagated by the knowledge of how much his own parents suffered in their advanced age.

The fusion of man and machine was the only way forward, the evolutionary end goal he envisioned, and set his life's ambitions on achieving. And beyond that, digital consciousness, without the weakness of human flesh.

His sister had afforded him the right opportunity at the right time, when she had met a businessman on a plane flight to Europe, in first class. He introduced himself as Michael Hale. Wealthy as Michael was, his pouty, opulent constitution left much to be desired in the way of authority, Zhao found it all too easy to intimidate and manipulate him. He convinced Michael to open a new pharmaceutical lab in China as part of his Asian branch of operations. Zhao assuring Hale the market dependencies and consumer demand were the perfect environment for his pharmaceutical company to thrive in this new financial ecosystem. Hale agreed.

Hale Labs really found a powerful marketing niche and managed to hit its stride early on, securing millions in profits as time went on. It became a commercial and philanthropic success, providing public social and financial programmes instrumental to its reputation as a proud supporter of disadvantaged communities and low socio-economic areas.

Then, Michael decided one day on a whim, he'd had enough and wanted to retire. He had made enough fortune for the next 10 generations, and didn't want to be a part of the stress and company workload anymore. Zhao had spent the last years building, maintaining and solidifying a connection and relationship with Michael, and his efforts finally came to fruition. Hale offered Zhao executive control of Hale Laboratories, but Zhao refused. There was too much at stake in his life, for Zhao to risk putting himself up as a public figure who would be under so much scrutiny. He argued that he would only take the reins, if Hale maintained the mantle at the head of the company, and remained the public face, while Zhao could make use of the money and infrastructure to grow his own ambitions and business desires. The duo reached an accord, and the partnership was cemented. Hale remained the ever-benevolent leader, while Zhao worked behind the scenes to front a new generation of machine innovation hidden from the public eye.

It was in this optimistic reminiscence that Zhao entered the street gym, in a dark hoodie, ready for his first leg day in a month. He dropped his duffel bag in one of the lockers, retrieved his towel, and walked over to the nearest leg press machine for some warm up stretches and sets.

The music was loud. Unusually so, especially for a gym. Most people came in their own headphones so the gym music was just a gentle tune in the background, but on this occasion the electronic dance music was pounding full blast. Zhao was in the middle of loading up a several hundred-kilogram leg press for one of his hardest sets, when someone approached him and sat down on his machine right Infront of him.

This didn't sit well with Zhao. Not this time. Zhao was not in the right mood for this. It was a young man, shorter than him, but inflated by steroids to proportions of a balloon animal. Zhao didn't even think twice, before winding up a monstrous kick, and letting it loose upon the man's chest. He collapsed to the floor, heavily winded, and unable to fight. Zhao picked him up by the scruff of his shirt.

不要 他媽的 偷 機器...(Do not fucking steal machines...)

he angrily grunted into the man's ear.

None of the other ten people in the gym had any reaction. The young man was too dazed and intimidated to fight back, he backed away from Zhao like a fearful dog. Zhao watched him as he walked to the exit. The man put on his long trousers and puffer jacket, grabbed his bag, and exited the gym.

"Fucking punk" Zhao muttered to himself. He continued his workout, sweating away all his aggravations and annoyances, trying to tire himself out so he would be in a more relaxed state of mind.

The woman who told Zhao about Stanley Torrens, Jing, wrote a message to Anil, to let him know about what she had shared with Zhao. Zhao was going to attempt to recruit Torrens, and to what end, Jing was not able to predict, but she knew Anil had to warn him, so he knew what he was getting himself into.

Anil was online at the time and got the message immediately. He phoned Ash at 2am in the morning.

"Hey Ash listen I need to tell you something really important" he began. "You know that guy from the conference, Stanley Torrens?"

Ash was currently in Stanley's apartment in his bed.

"Yes, I think I remember the guy you mean"

"Okay Ash so I got word Zhao is going to try to recruit Stanley to work for him, or I don't know, he wants some help building something, working on his bio integration technology, I think this will be the perfect opportunity for us to get closer with Stan, maybe he can help us"

You can't really get much closer with someone than having sex on the first date, Ash thought. She chuckled.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do, I'll try to find him tomorrow. Please don't stress Anil. We have time until Warga's private viewing, like, a couple of weeks at least, so you don't need to be all jumpy man, things are going to work out I promise".

"Ash, you know I want to find your father as much as you do"

"Yes I know Anil, I can't tell you how much that means to me. But at this instant there is absolutely nothing we can do to change anything, we still have to wait to take action no matter what, so you just need to hakuna matata and enjoy yourself for some days, before we need to do anything again. Also its 2am, you should get some sleep Anil, we will talk about this tomorrow ok?"

Anil was disappointed. "Ok Ash I understand."

She hung up. He felt a weight press down on his heart. He lay in his futon thinking about Arnie and Wilma, wondering, hoping they were still alive. Tomorrow would be another day.

When the sun rose, Ash was already up and about making coffee and breakfast, and Stanley was checking his emails. One of the new emails in his inbox was from Hale Labs. He clicked to open it.

"Dr Torrens,



Hale Laboratories would like to extend an invitation for you to our facilities in China. We have been following your work with great interest and would like to open discussion on your consideration to formulate a research collaboration. We have booked you a flight to Guangzhou, China from Tokyo, tomorrow afternoon. If you need this time slot changed please let us know as soon as possible."

Thanking you,  
Hale Laboratories"

Wow, that's unexpected, he thought. How generous!

"Hey Ash? Come take a look at this" he called out. "I got an interesting email."

Ash was at his desk three seconds later. Ash scanned the email. Shit. Anil was right, Zhao is trying to recruit Stanley.

"Stan that's great! I wonder what they want. Sounds like a great professional opportunity" Ash remarked.

"Well shit, guess I better-"

"Stanley wait," Ash interrupted him. "There's something you need to know about Hale Labs. I have reason to believe they're involved in something dangerous that affects my family. I can't tell you right now what that is. I don't know what they are wanting from you, but I would appreciate it if you took the time to ask as many questions as you can, try to find out what kind of stuff Hale might be doing under the table, and just let me know anything you can find on them, any dirt"

"Ash... what? Affects your family? What on earth do you mean?" Stanley was shocked.

"I don't wanna talk about it at the moment, just promise me you'll try to find out everything you can.

"Okay Ash, I promise I will" Stanley said, embracing her. She pulled away.

"I need to get ready for the conference. Thanks for allowing me to stay here it was really fun. Later tonight maybe you can join me at my hotel for a change of scenery, I wanna take you to the hot springs." She said.

Ash left soon after, and since Stanley's presentations for the conference were finished, he decided to stay home at his Airbnb to do some work.

The day had passed in a blink, as had the romantic evening in the hot springs with Ash. Stanley soon found himself boarding 3am Air China flight

to Guangzhou. Shortly before leaving, he had made sure to give Ash his private email, so she could contact him some time in the future. He didn't want to forget about her, and the beautiful experiences they had. He felt like there was something there, something he wanted to return to in time.

But for now, it was time to move onto a new part of life. His communication with Hale Labs thus far was both cryptic and extremely exciting, and the next destination in the experience was only a few short hours away.

The 5-hour flight was manageable in business class, but it left a lot to be desired in the realm of noise control. Stanley wasn't sure if he had just picked a bad day to fly, or if there was some kind of greater social migration going on, it seemed like an incredible number of families all together on the same plane heading towards Guangzhou and the Chinese mainland. There were lots of flights available too, so he knew it wasn't just his plane. It made him seriously re-evaluate his opinions on children, marriage, having a family, and all the jazz. It just seemed like so much hassle. He never realised how much he valued his privacy and personal silence, and sound cancelling headphones, until he got on this flight with so many families with screaming children. He was so deeply appreciative he didn't have to take off the headphones at any point. He had no commitment to a little bastard child that would constantly be doing everything in its power to incense him to the brink of his will and sanity. No obligations. Just silence, peace and freedom. It was actually amazing, and he felt a wave of satisfaction wash over him.

After arriving at the airport in Guangzhou, Stanley managed to duck and weave his way through the crowds and eventually found himself at the taxi rank, where he faced the mildly confusing puzzle of determining which set of metal railings led towards the actual taxi cabs, since they were inaccessible directly, presumably due to the sheer quantities of people jostling to get one before anyone else. The system looked like it was designed to filter a whole lot of people at any given point in time. Yet today it looked remarkably quiet, in all the railing space, a mere ten people were shuffling through to get to the cars. He picked a lane and followed it.

He settled on a driver named Bingwen. The reason he knew this was not because he asked, but because the driver's name was actually stuck onto the outside, with a silhouetted photo next to it. When Stanley got into the passenger seat. The photo was properly visible on the inside. Name on the out, photo on the in. What an interesting way of identification. Just before getting off the plane he double checked the location of Hale Labs.

113G+A3P Xiadong Road, in the industrial zone of Tianhe. This system was one of the weirdest street and location labelling systems he had ever seen in his life. But it at least was strictly mathematical and easily understandable to the Chinese. Or so it seemed anyway.

Driving through Guangzhou was much like driving through any other major metropolis, save for perhaps the giant glass sculptures scattered throughout the main city streets, wrapping around street poles, buildings, rooftops, and trees. What on earth were they for? They seemed to almost be like a holiday theme for an entire city. The sculptures were all illuminated from the inside, showcasing chaotic visual projections, almost like those he'd seen on his many days tripping acid in college. It looked like there was water flowing through them too. Artistic piece? Infrastructure piece? Surveillance tool of some sort? Stan couldn't tell. But it felt like some kind of dark, dystopian city scape he didn't want to be a part of.

They pulled up eventually to Hale Laboratories. On the outside it was a very large, factory or warehouse looking place, comprising multiple floors, and on the inside, it was even more unremarkable. Plain coloured pasty walls, some basic Arial lettering at the reception office saying HALE LABORATORIES, and no art pieces, no installations of any kind, just basic office equipment, desks, computers, and stationary. The interior design was so generic, you could place anyone in the middle of the offices and ask them where they were in the world, and they probably wouldn't be able to tell you.

Ash approached the reception desk, and tried to catch eye contact from the middle aged receptionist, tapping away rapidly at her keyboard.

"Hi I'm Stanley Torrens, I was invited here via email, let me just pull it up for you"

Stanley reached for his phone, wanting to pull out the email to show the receptionist the details, but she got up out of her chair and said in perfect American English. "There's no need Mr Torrens. You will be seeing Mr Zhao, on the ground floor. Let me lead you to his office. He is already waiting for you."

Well, talk about expedience, Stanley thought. He assumed he would be seeing Michael Hale himself.

As they walked through the gloomy corridor, Stanley coughed slightly. He felt something in the back of his throat. Some kind of allergy. He coughed again to try to get it out. It stuck there, grating against his oesophagus, and he grunted in frustration, trying to hold back his anger.

"Sorry Ma'am, I didn't catch your name?" Stanley asked.

"It's Jing. Right this way Mr Torrens"

Jing stepped Infront of a large, clean door which was a different colour to all the rest, a slightly darker, cleaner shade of brown, with pristine glass

lining. It looked to have been lacquered. She opened it, and invited him to step through.

“Thanks Jing!” He said cheerfully, as Jing closed the door behind him. Zhao was sitting with his back to Michael, but quickly turned around in his chair, before stepping up to give Stanley a handshake.

The very first thing Stanley noticed was the musculature of the man’s body, his neck in particular. Zhao looked like he had the power of an ox in his neck alone. He was smiling cordially, but his teeth were an off colour, they looked possibly like implants.

“Mr Torrens, wonderful to meet you. I am Zhao, I sent out the invitation. So glad you could come on such short notice.” He began.

“Totally no problem, I was finished up at the AI conference in Tokyo, so you really caught me at the right time.”

Zhao went to the glass cabinet and popped it open to get out some gin.

“Can I offer you a gin and tonic?”

The grating in Stanley’s throat was dry. Maybe he could wash it down?

“Oh, yes thanks that would be lovely”

Zhao poured both of them glasses of gin, and retrieved a colourful yellow and green bottle of tonic water from the fridge under the cabinet. He pulled out the cracked cork from inside with a loud pop, before pouring some for them both. Out of the little drawer he retrieved a small knife, and from the fruit bowl on the table took a lime, to cut out some slices. He dropped two into each glass, and mixed them both with a teaspoon briefly. Zhao handed the finished product to Stanley.

“Oh wow, that’s so nice! Looks really good. Cheers”

They dinged their glasses together, and Stanley took a sip. It was much more delicious than he anticipated. It was like a smooth wave of flavour that rolled across the tongue, no acerbic or intense notes.

“This is some kind of magic gin! Absolutely delicious” Stanley laughed, and almost finished his entire drink in one gulp.

“Please sit, Mr Torrens. There is something I believe you can help me out with.”

They sat down across from each other separated by Zhao’s large wooden desk.

“Now, I have heard a lot about the progress you’ve been making with your prototypes, you’ve been able to construct some incredible things. How has that been going?”

“Ah, quite well actually. The structural designs are getting smoother and smoother for each passing model, soon we’ll be able to have even smaller machines that can be hidden on the body. Right now, I’m working on shrinking down the size as much as possible, finding compact bio integrated alternatives to the external system, simplifications and the like.” Stanley said.

Zhao shifted his weight in his chair.

“What kind of bio integrative engineering have you done in the past?”

“Ahhh, not much honestly, these are kind of my first ventures into the area. I want to be able to make something out of it, I feel like it has a lot of potential”

Zhao leaned forward over the desk with clasped hands, chin resting on his knuckles. He stared, expressionless, at Stanley.

“Mr Torrens, I have to say I agree with you. It’s an area which definitely has a lot of potential. I myself am looking into it with some of my associates. Your insight and expertise is something which we would be very beneficial to us. The reason I brought you here today is because I wanted to offer you a cooperation”

He remembered what Ash had told him.

“The Chinese population is currently sitting at levels beyond which the Chinese state can support. After the Civil Wars in 2023, the National People’s Congress dissolved temporarily, leading to a complete destabilization and disruption of Chinese society and the infrastructure of the political landscape. When militant industrial powers re-emerged to seize government control, the constitution was rewritten, and the National People’s Congress ultimately regained control under a newly established pseudo democratic system. I say pseudo because the NPC still had Chinese media and the flow of information by the balls and it was impossible to challenge the communists under any dissenting political campaigns.

Zhao took a pause.

“That was until recently. Polls, forums and social media have been showing a shift in the Overton window. People are just not supporting the old ways anymore, they are looking for a change, a revolution. But there is still division. And current infrastructure just cannot hold this amount of breathing human meat alive and thriving. The worst part is, there is no unification on the national front. If we examine each group and subgroup

of Chinese society, we find they have divisive loyalties and interests that prevent them from standing in resolute opposition to other cultural groups and greater society”

Zhao was emphatic in his speech.

“So, Stanley... the reason I mention this is, I have been given a state approved contract by authorities, to work on solutions to this unfavourable situation. Division and overpopulation. You must understand, the current political regime is set to be replaced by a newer, younger, technocratic intelligentsia in the upcoming election. Lead by a colleague of mine, the founder of the Goro network, Feng Ruo. The election campaign of his will pave the way for unpredictable change and instability. And instability is not good for business security, Mr Torrens.”

“What are you saying exactly? What is it that you need from me, how will I be able to help you?” Stanley asked.

“We are hoping you will be able to create mechanical exoskeletons and devices to aid the military and police force in maintaining order and unity, as much as that shall be possible. Until and well after the dust settles from Feng Ruo’s election.”

Zhao had a look of confidence about him. “Your compensation will be more than adequate. More than eight figures at the least for initial prototype development and testing, right here in this building. We offer payment in crypto or fiat currency, as to your preference.”

Stanley was stunned. Right here in the building? This mostly a dilapidated office block, what on earth was he expecting?

“With respect, Mr Zhao, in this building? Are the facilities adequate here?”

“You will have everything you need on the lower levels. There is more to this building than meets the eye” Zhao replied.

A week ago, if Stanley was told he would in seven days be seated in a Guangzhou office block deliberating over an eight-figure military contract with a mysterious Chinese businessman, he wouldn’t have believed it. But here he was, in the moment of deliberation, and he couldn’t decide fully what he wanted to do. He recalled what Ash had said. She suspected Zhao was troubling her family in some way, but had not figured out a way to prove it. She wanted him to find out whatever he could. But the trouble was, how do you ask someone if they had committed a crime, without asking if they’d committed a crime? What had Zhao even done? Ash never specified.

Stanley liked money, he realised that was at the forefront of his thought process. Obviously, he wanted to help Ash too. But it did involve several

drastic and complete unknowns. While Hale Labs was a well-known entity, he had no idea what he could expect from Zhao and whatever he wanted Stanley to build for him.

“What kind of money are we talking here?” he asked.

“Ten million US dollars, wire transferred immediately to an account of your choice upon agreement. We are asking for a few weeks work. More only if it is to your liking. Mr Torrens, please take 24 hours to think it over. I have taken the liberty of organizing your return flight to Tokyo tomorrow evening at 2300. Please let me know before this time of your decision. If you are interested, we can prepare the relevant paperwork for you, and we can organize a private cargo plane to transfer some of your equipment from Stockholm.”

Stanley needed no time to think. If Ash had a problem with Zhao she didn't want to tell him about, she could take it up with Zhao himself. He wasn't turning down that kind of money.

“No need to wait. I'll do it”

## Chapter 7

Ash was sitting on a bench in Kiyosumi Teien. It was one of the urban gardens nestled amongst the concrete jungle that was the metropolis of Tokyo. Ash watched as a flock of ducks played together in the pond, the afternoon sunlight bouncing off the water and illuminating their cream and chocolate-coloured feathers. They looked like quite regular brown ducks, but it looked like they had all dipped their bills in mustard and forgot to wipe the moustache off. She chuckled to herself, imagining the ducks eating English sausages with mustard.

“That girl whose clothes you took on the first day at the conference, she was a known abuser of narcotics. She was dismissed from employment, her report citing drug induced hallucinations and abnormal psychotic behaviour. Her firing was going to happen sooner or later, I only expedited the process, Ash.”

Ash felt sorry for the girl. She looked young. Ash knew how hard it was for young people these days. Chasing stability and meaning in a world of chaos and disorder. For her to throw that all away on drug abuse was such a pity. But it was a fortunate turn of events in Ash’s favour, that one terrifying moment she had to face the heat of surveillance as she quickly reprogrammed Anil’s card, would be lost in time, unremarkable, and forgotten. Her security was still intact, she and Waker had not been compromised.

“How the hell did you do that Waker? The girl was asleep, with her clothes on the chair. No blood, no violence. You’re incredible, you know that right? That’s like something out of a movie. I just can’t believe it. Please teach me how to be ninja like that.”

Waker blushed, then laughed heartily.

“You were awesome too, Ash. That whole thing wouldn’t have worked if you didn’t keep it together at the desk, and get everything done so smoothly.”

He took off his beanie and brushed through his hair with his hand, looking down, contemplative. “ I think we make a really good team Ash”

“By the way, how come you are suddenly able to meet me with me? During the whole conference period, Bessley said I will not see nor contact you at any point. What has changed?”

“Oh, that was only at the conference, we couldn’t be seen together in case one of us got into any trouble, the other would not be jeopardized. We’ve done as much digging as we can. So far, signs point to Zhao, and



Warga, but nobody else. Warga's alibis have been iron clad, and we weren't able to get a trace or contact on Zhao."

Waker threw a chunk of his sandwich roll towards the ducks. They jumped at the opportunity. Their mustard tipped bills probably providing an extra hit of spice.

"That was until this morning, when Anil let us know through his contact Jing, that Zhao was looking to recruit Stanley Torrens, one of the presenting engineers at the conference a few days ago."

Ash felt a wave of heat hit her stomach. Did Waker know about her and Stanley?

"Anil mentioned you'd made contact with Stanley at the conference. Do you know anything about it?"

"He's a really passionate guy about his work, average Joe looking engineer type, big hands, dark wavy hair, talks quick. I don't know really, didn't speak much to him. He presented a momentum augmentation exoskeleton. It was seriously cool"

Ash didn't know why she was nervous. It's not like it mattered if Waker knew she was seeing Stanley. It was her private business. Why was she nervous??

"Ash, he could very well be the only link we have to Zhao, and he might just disappear like your parents if you don't get to him first. You didn't find out his contact details at all?"

"Okay I think I have his email written down somewhere, it was in his presentation he linked his contact details or whatever, I'll try to get a hold of him if I can." Ash replied in frustration.

"OK good."

Waker took a deep sigh. The regular azalea, hydrangea and iris flowers didn't bloom in the Kiyosumi Teien garden in winter. But it was still nice to see the snow-covered trees and plants. With the gentle trickling of water and natural sounds of nature, it made for a pleasant experience indeed. Moreso that Tokyo only snows 9 to 10 days of the year, it was a lucky time they found themselves in Japan.

"You'll be heading back to Stockholm tomorrow, right?" Waker asked.

Oh shit. She remembered, now that the conference is over, she had to go back to Sweden. She had only been gone barely a week, yet home felt like a strange vague memory of the past. Ash realised she did not even know where Stanley was from. He came from America of course, but he had a

somewhat European accent, but it was so mixed she couldn't quite figure it out.

"Yea, I guess so. All good things must come to an end. But it was fun, crazy stress those first couple of days, but things stabilized in the end. We have Warga's show to prepare for, and I'll get in contact with Torrens about his China trip. We got some useful information out of this anyway."

Ash was thoughtful.

"Waker, what's it like working at ESI?"

"It's nice" he replied. Ash was going to need a little more info than that.

"I mean, is it what you hoped for? How you imagined it?" she asked, deeply curious.

"Well, Bessley's a bit of a cunt sometimes, but you do what you can to have fun haha" he laughed brazenly. "But otherwise, it's pretty much mostly just meeting and talking to people. Not much action like you see in the movies. It does happen on occasion though, on high profile cases. Like your parents."

"Does it make you happy? Given the option, would you choose another career?" Ash asked.

"Yea it does make me happy, I think. I can't imagine doing another career. Maybe a Formula 1 driver or something"

Wow. Of all the possible choices he went with racing driver?

"You are a racer?"

"Eh I used to go karting when I was younger but I never pursued it beyond that. It was great fun though. Still like to think about what could have been, you know?"

As Waker looked up to Ash, she noticed his neck was painted red. Painted...red....hold on a minute...

Ash jumped up, too terrified to scream. Waker grabbed his neck, then looked at his hand. He was bleeding heavily. He couldn't hold himself and dropped off the bench into the snow. The world seemed to quieten and slow slightly, she heard nothing, bar the sound of her own heartbeat. A moment later, she felt a hand grab her arm, and she was pulled in another direction. She saw Watanabe, in a state of panic, yelling something out to her. Waker's blood was flowing in a dark, cherry red stream across the white sheet of snow covering the garden. Watanabe tugged again. She was brought back to reality.

“We have to run, Ash!”

She looked around. There was nobody in the park. She could have sworn it wasn't this empty a minute ago. She was running with Watanabe, with him still holding onto her arm, away from the park. They got to the street, and Watanabe took a slight left into a side street, where his car was waiting. He lunged at the door, before quickly fumbling with his key and unlocking it. Ash and Watanabe jumped inside. He started the engine and quickly sped off down the street.

Ash was stricken with disbelief.

“Waker.... Is he.... dead?” She mumbled, barely audible over the drill of the engine and blasting car heating to warm them up from the cold.

“Yes, I'm afraid Waker is probably dead Ash.” Watanabe was taking deep breaths, trying to remain calm. “Unfortunately, I didn't see the shooter, but I had to get you out from danger”

Ash couldn't think of anything other than the mental image of Waker on the ground, clutching his neck, bleeding into the snow, dying, probably struggling to breathe. Didn't he feel the impact of the bullet? She couldn't save him. All she could do was watch, in morbid fascination, as the surreal scene unfolded Infront of her. He was a young man, he still had so much living to do. His future, life and potential had all been taken away from him with one bullet.

“I need to get you to safety Ash, we won't be going back to Hashinami tonight, we don't know if the shooter wants you dead too”

“Where are we gonna go?”

“I'll be taking you to an underground safehouse nearby. You'll be safe there until your flight back to Stockholm tomorrow.”

“What about all my stuff at the hotel?”

“I'll go get it for you after I drop you off”

Watanabe turned the heating down a couple of notches, as it was starting to warm up excessively. They drove in silence for twenty minutes, before Watanabe suddenly indicated to turn into a dark ramp that led underground. There was a roller door at the bottom of the ramp, and right Infront of it was a keypad. Watanabe punched a code in. The gate rolled open, and Watanabe drove inside.

As they exited the vehicle after parking, Ash noticed there was a single doorway at the end of the parking zone, with stairs leading up. The stairs

were closed off by a steel gate with thick metal bars, and two heavily armed men were watching them park the car. She approached them with Watanabe, before one of the armed men stepped forward to speak.

“あなたの目的はなんですか？” [What is your business here?] The man asked.

“リングは私の精神を暖かく保ちました。あなたの貢献に感謝します” [The rings kept my spirit warm. Thank you for your contribution.] Watanabe offered.

A code phrase?

It seemed to work. The man retrieved a key card from his pocket, and swiped it across the sensor on the metal gate. It buzzed, and the gate swung open.

“Welcome to the Chiyoda Safehouse” he said in English.

They went upstairs, and Ash found herself in some sort of Cathedral, with patterned maroon Egyptian carpets. The nave was cleared out, with less than 20 single chairs, and no pews set up. The aisles were buffered by supporting columns, giving a Romanesque feel to the interior of the space. Ash took in the beautiful altar, with golden archways enveloping mysterious religious paintings and figures, with a central sculpture of Jesus at the forefront.

“This is a Russian church, Ash” Watanabe said. “It used to be a popular destination for the Russian community, but after Russia destroyed Ukraine, a few years ago, it was left abandoned, the Japanese Russians did not want to be targeted and attacked for the Russian Government’s actions. At some point after that, ESI transformed the underground areas into a safehouse. I wanted you to see it”

They went up towards the altar and entered the back left door. Through it, there was a moderately sized room with some desks with many drawers, a couple of wardrobes, a mirror, and assorted religious sculptures and artifacts. Next to the wardrobe was what appeared to be an elevator, with a full keyboard and computer screen built into the wall next to it. A screen loaded up, requesting authentication, with a username and password. Watanabe typed out his details, and the screen flashed blue, before there was a loud metallic clang and shift, and the big door retracted into the wall.

There were just two floors, G and B. They were on G, Watanabe clicked for the basement. The door rolled shut, as the elevator travelled down. It went dark, and a line of lights quickly illuminated the elevator box. In a few seconds, the elevator stopped, and as the door opened up. She stepped out into what looked like a large apartment. There was a long navy blue, marbled kitchen bench and cooking station on the right, and a

lounge area on the left with several plush couches and a huge 75-inch TV. Ahead were two bedrooms she could see, and corridors leading left and right, presumably to more bedrooms. It was nice. Barring the lack of windows, the natural lighting from the ceiling lights was quite comfortable. It was warm too.

Ash went to lie down on the couch and felt herself sink into it comfortably. It felt kind of like a bean bag.

“There’s Netflix and a gaming console if you want Ash. I’ll be back later, gonna go get your stuff”

He stepped back into the elevator.

“See you soon” he said, as the elevator slid shut.

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A few thousand kilometres away, the tall man and the short man who had inspected and scanned the Bergman household only days prior, had arrived to the port they were meeting a very powerful ally in. That ally was Feng Ruo, famed British-Chinese tech entrepreneur turned politician, tipped to take the presidency in the upcoming March general election.

He was the founder of the billion-dollar Goro social media network, and while he hadn’t done any work in the way of politics until only a couple of years ago, he started voicing his dissatisfaction with the government regime, and his following on Goro exploded to hundreds of millions of people in a matter of months.

With his skyrocketing popularity, he started getting more involved in social media with his political aspirations, and amassed notoriety for his execution-style debate tactics and political finesse. He was a man who could not be intellectually or politically out-manoeuvred. The phalanx of bodyguards protecting him at all hours was an ironic necessity to his murderous political instinct garnering enemies at every front of the political ecosystem. He was a technocrat in the highest levels of financial and technological infrastructure to the point that his ascendancy to the presidency was almost an inevitability nobody dared to question.

They stood with a heavy metal briefcase to be delivered to Feng Ruo. The contents of the briefcase: The latest NIV prototypes, coupled with documentation on their operation. They were functioning prototypes built by Shuchang Zhao. NIV stood for Neural Integration Visualiser. It was a tool which adapted technology from the Rapid Offset Harmonization scanner developed by Arnbjörn Bergman.

The NIV hardware likewise comprised two parts, but instead connected by atlas cable. The first part was plugged into a computer via USB, and

provided the transcription software. The second part was a sophisticated spectral imaging module fixed like a metallic helmet to the skull, using a locking mechanism. The module provided intimate neurochemical and electrical details in high resolution imagery, tracking nerve impulse patterns and gathering extremely fine details of synaptic transmission and topography. All of this information being fed through the atlas cable to the computer. The only thing missing, was the technology capable of visualizing the data on a computer. An artificial intelligence capable of emulating another person's thoughts, emotions and reality with the live input. The scope and potential of such a technology would be limitless, and it was only just beyond their reach. But not for much longer. Stanley Torrens had developed military grade exoskeletons capable of brute forcing their way through the Bergman house security, to acquire the assets stored in the Bergman basement laboratory. Zhao was determined to find it, and determined to bring his consciousness emulating technology to reality.

Feng Ruo arrived at the Zuchong Shipyard in a security detail of three armoured SUV's. As he stepped outside of the vehicle, the two men waiting for him braced themselves, hoping the exchange would be simple and smooth. This was their first time meeting him.

The man was short, almost at Cheuk's level, with a peculiar dark brownish tinge to his glossy skin. His thick head of hair was tightly cropped and rested right up on his forehead. Combined with his high, elegant cheekbones, it gave him an almost stately, sculpture-like appearance.

什麼是你的名字？ (What are your names?) Ruo asked calmly.

我是昌 (I'm Cheung) The taller man replied.

我是楚 (I'm Cheuk) The shorter man added.

你是誰？ (And who are you?)

我和中國人民解放軍，他是空軍。 (I am with the Chinese Army, he is with the Air Force) Cheung stated. His voice cracked at the end of the sentence.

是那個裝備嗎？ (Is that the equipment?) Ruo's voice was husky. Like he'd been drenching it in whiskey and cigarette smoke.

這是我們想出的最好的。伯格曼資產將使其正常工作。(It's the best we've come up with. Bergman assets will make it work properly) Cheung answered.

我會找出他們藏身的地方。告訴趙我欣賞他的效率。(I'll find out where they are hiding. Tell Zhao I appreciate his efficiency.)

Ruo tossed one of them a small hard drive tied to a thin, gold chain. The bitcoin, as promised.

As Ruo and the uniformed guards got back into the cars, Cheung and Cheuk breathed a sigh of relief. The driver of Ruo's vehicle lowered the window.

"Secure the Bergman assets, and Feng will track both of them down." he said, before the window went back up.

The three SUVs started their engines and slowly drove away down the street, towards the city, before eventually disappearing from view. Cheung and Cheuk had a lot to do before their next meeting. They returned to their vehicle, and made the drive back to their apartment they stayed at together.

That evening, Cheuk and Cheung had Jing organize a private Hale jet to take them to Stockholm in tomorrow evening, so they still had time to prepare. All combat missions had a risk profile, a series of events which had to be broken down, piece by piece, and calculated for their probability, consequences, and overall fit in the scope dangers of the mission. At the very least, a competent soldier made sure to memorize the risk profile, and prepare himself mentally and emotionally for the action that was to come. Cheung and Cheuk were very much such competent soldiers, combat veterans, who had seen more than their fair share of death, blood, and destruction.

They had gone through all possible eventualities, and prepared with only the best equipment that Zhao could muster for them. The only thing they could not figure out, the thing that did not factor into their risk profile analysis, was the black truck parked in the driveway of the Bergman garage. They could not see the contents, and did not know what was inside. Their scanners could not pick up the contents either, the truck had some kind of special lining preventing any scanner radiation getting through. It was a gamble, but one of such importance that for the first time in their adult lives, Cheung and Cheuk had had their confidence, their resilience, seriously challenged.

Cheung was a strigine, 6'8 trained sniper from the Chinese army, having 99 confirmed kills distributed over an illustrious career, spanning military operations through Myanmar, Cambodia and Tajikistan. He had a small, pointed nose like a beak, angular eyes, and bushy eyebrows he could fluff up to stand on end. He wasn't a fan of people, and almost always preferred to keep to himself. He always wore his thick, carpet-like hair in a ponytail, thought perhaps as a gesture of class or fashion by his peers, but in reality, an act of precaution, for Cheung had feared most that loose hair was going to one day fly into his face in a moment of life or death, and would lead to his undoing by blinding him in a critical moment. He could go only so far, without being prepared for every possible risk.

He flew at the peak of army recognition, acquiring multiple medals for his outstanding abilities and displays of courage and leadership throughout his toughest days on tour. Until one day, his fame and admiration vanished overnight in dishonourable discharge from military service, after he was caught raping prisoners of war in a drug fuelled mania on a peace keeper mission in the Middle East. In a matter of happenstance, he found himself shooting rounds in a rifle range on a difficult night, at the same time and location as Shuchang Zhao.

Zhao studied him from a distance at first. He sensed this man had something dark about him. He could feel in Cheung a deep-seated aggression and vitriol, masked by an outward calm, methodical composure. Zhao approached him in friendly conversation, and offered him purpose, an outlet for his sordid rage bubbling beneath the surface. Cheung didn't trust Zhao at first, and declined the offer politely. But on a second occasion, Zhao had tracked Cheung to a park, and offered him the opportunity once more. After some deliberation, Cheung had tentatively agreed.

The short and calculating Cheuk, meanwhile, stood at a paltry 5'4, but more than made up for it with his wicked charisma and social intelligence. When he smiled, his dimples popped, giving him the appearance of a teenager with thick cheeks. He was a brilliant chemical engineer who graduated from Columbia University in America several years prior. While studying, he developed a knack for creating unbelievably explosive chemical cocktails, and this unfortunate habit had nearly led to his expulsion from the institution. On that dangerous occasion, he had developed an acerbic disdain for one of his politically overzealous lecturers, and thought it was about time somebody gave them a gift they would never forget. He planted chemical explosives in their car and detonated them in the dead of the night, which caused a huge furore in the university community. The car detonation had turned into something of an urban legend, and Cheuk had turned into an unknown hero. Even until and after his graduation, he was never caught.

On another occasion, he had charmed a lecturer into bed with him, and convinced her she was no good to him as a sexual partner unless she



offered him what she needed. She desperately wanted to please him, and he said the only thing he wanted to see was for her to fuck her dog. And she did it, for Cheuk's entertainment. He broke off all contact soon after. He deeply enjoyed the power he had over women.

After his graduation, he was struck with a dilemma. Cheuk didn't feel like he was cut out for a mundane life. He thirsted for something more, something that would put a fire in his veins, a fire for existence.

That fire came to him in an opportunity to enlist in the Air Force, to chase new experiences and thrills that he knew he was never going to get as a civilian. Just like Cheung, Cheuk was recruited by Zhao one day, when he came into a Hale pharmacy Zhao was doing business at. Cheuk attempted to buy the raw ingredients for a bomb, but Zhao had recognized the recipe from his days as a Sea Dragon Commando. He had made the same explosive cocktails during his training. Cheuk was caught red handed, and Zhao offered him a choice. Either get reported to the police, or come work for him. Cheuk made the correct decision.

His phone rang suddenly, at 2am. It was Zhao. Cheuk picked it up quickly.

"Hey, what's up boss?"

"Do you remember that engineer I told you about, Stanley Torrens?"

"Yea, what about him?"

"He's here in Guangzhou, at Hale. I've organized his accommodation at the Tei Zhi Tower nearby. We have his exoskeletons you can use for Stockholm. We'll drop two armoured XMMs for pickup at the plane tomorrow before you leave"

Zhao hung up. This was good.

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Stanley Torrens didn't know what his first two armoured XMMs would be used for, but then again, he didn't need to. Zhao had told him the truth after all, he was indeed working via contract to Feng Ruo, on peacekeeping operations on the ground. While no riots had yet been initiated, public unrest was growing. Ruo's beliefs were being broadcast every day, all over the nation, his incisive, raw politics cutting conventional culture to shreds, paving new ground for changes nobody was yet ready for or invested in.

But there was a silent majority supporting Ruo, and his campaign built on unprecedented evolution of the Overton Window and structural change. A silent majority thirsting for a different China. The China he dreamed of was a hyper capitalist, scientific and industrial powerhouse. And as the

days closed one by one, his China inched closer and closer to becoming a reality.

Stanley couldn't sleep on this night. He was lying in bed in the Tei Zhi tower, on the 65<sup>th</sup> floor. Zhao had offered him a luxury apartment to sweeten the recruitment deal, which, along with the 10 million US dollars he was paid for some temporary work testing out new builds of his, gave Stanley a huge dilemma. Ash had insisted Zhao was involved in something to do with her family, but she never specified, and asked him to investigate. But without knowing what he was investigating, he had no sense of direction or understanding what he needed to look for. He couldn't interrogate Zhao if he didn't even know why he was doing it. Zhao had also shown him incredible generosity and good will, it was difficult to think.

He seemed like an intelligent businessman. He was cordial enough, fancied a good drink, and clearly had knowledge and interest in making good deals. Stanley couldn't only feel compelled to offer his help. If Zhao was working with police to growing civil unrest and threats of rioting and violence, Stanley felt good knowing he would be contributing to that. He would be contributing to order and peace, something which he felt inspired by and passionate for. Throughout his life, Stanley never felt like he made much of a difference to people, now he was actually doing that, it was something meaningful, and it made him happy.

He was bored of trying to sleep, so Stanley sat up and went to make himself some tea. The tiled floors were cold against his feet. Soft Persian carpets were laid out in the bedroom and the living room, but they made little difference to quell the chilly walk in between. The hanging curtains were leaking gentle city light from the floor to ceiling windows, giving the lounge an aquarium-like glow.

Stanley wasn't sure if he liked some of the art installations in the apartment. He couldn't decide if they were just ugly, or they were an acquired aesthetic he had not yet developed a tangible taste for. The metallic root-like sculpture near the entrance of the apartment looked like it would have been so much more appropriately a tree, and yet it was designed to be a strange bottom to top inversion of a tree's roots instead. The coloured baubles hanging above the marble kitchen bar, were arranged like falling leaves, with an optional bronze LED light to illuminate them. This gave the appearance of falling leaves on an autumn sunset.

The electric tea machine finished making his chamomile brew, so he poured it out into a large mug from the cupboard, and went to sit down on the cream leather couch at the TV. It faced towards the weirdest art piece of all. A clock delineated from misshapen and heavily protruding sword-like slabs of dark wood. They were arranged in a concentric fashion, with roman numerals etched into the wood slabs themselves with white paint, denoting each hour.

He noticed next to the standing TV, there was a little white booklet. He went to pick it up. "SMART CONTROLS-APARTMENT MANUAL". That would explain his inability to get anything to work so far. He turned to the contents page. Tile heating was listed on page 9. Fan-bloody-tastic. Everything operates from the smart phone-like control remote, which he hadn't yet seen, until he saw the storage diagram illustrating it was actually tucked away in a little compartment on the wall near the front door. He thought it was some kind of electrical circuit at first. When Stanley went to check out the little cream coloured box near the door, sure enough, it popped open, and the smart remote popped out like a battery.

For all its quirks, Tei Zhi tower sure was entertaining.

## Chapter 8

Ash's mind was still numb from witnessing Waker's assassination. Sitting in the church safehouse on the eve of her departure, she wondered if Watanabe was going to come back safely. She wondered why Waker was killed, who had made the shot, and if they were after her too. Of all the places she could have been in that moment, she was in a beautiful garden talking with Waker, breaking the one rule Bessley had so emphatically highlighted time and time again, she was not to meet with Waker under any circumstances in Tokyo. And yet Waker told her it was fine, there was no trouble to meet up. Maybe his death would have been prevented if she just postponed that meeting. She was angry that Waker allowed himself to be killed, and that she had to witness it up close. That moment of reflection, purity and tranquillity in the garden, was sullied by a completely unnecessary horror of death, and threw her into an emotional disarray she just didn't need at all, in this moment in time.

Watanabe did indeed return to her in the church with her suitcase other possessions, and she didn't know why, but the relief she had was immeasurable. Seeing his smiling face, his innocent, happy little eyes. It filled her with a sense of joy, the kind you might feel after your dog disappears for a week and you come home one day and the dog found its way back, safe and sound. She jumped on Watanabe with a fierce hug as he stepped through the door, and let loose some tears she didn't know she had.

"Ahh, it's ok Ash, it's ok. It's good to see you" Watanabe offered, hugging her back gently.

They spent the night at the safehouse, and in the morning departed for the airport for her 10:15am flight back to Stockholm.

Before going through the security gate, she hugged Watanabe one last time.

"Be sure to come back to Tokyo sometime, Ash. I'll miss you."

"I'll be back some day. In the mean-time, I wanna see you sing on TV! Don't lose your passion. You've got a bloody beautiful voice Watanabe. You'll be successful one day, I know it."

Ash passed through security and glanced back to see if Watanabe was still there. He was, behind the crowd of people pushing to get through the gate. Watanabe waved again, baring his pearly white teeth in a cheeky grin. Ash smiled too, and flashed a peace hand sign. She hoped she would see him again.

The flight was very long, over fourteen hours, but she befriended one of the stewardesses, a skinny curly haired woman named Leira, and they spoke regularly throughout the flight. Ash even got an extra serving of the delicious steak lunch they had in business class, and Leira was kind enough to offer Ash the password to the highest in-flight Wi-Fi product, unlimited data @ 1000 mbps. She enjoyed some time streaming her favourite TV shows, and every now and again got up to do some stretching with her. Leira taught Ash a dice game called Scraps, and they played together in the lounge area before the staircase down to economy class.

After she arrived for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in a month to Arlanda International Airport in Stockholm, Ash was pleased to discover that Max had gotten her chat message from the plane and was waiting for her in the Arrivals Hall. It felt like so long since she had seen him, yet it had been less than 10 days. He brought a balloon and a rose with him as a surprise, and was dressed in a long fancy winter coat, out of his regular police uniform. Ash found it very romantic. She took a huge breath of exhaustion as she fell into his arms in a warm embrace. He smelled of leather and wood. That same familiar scent of Max that she knew and loved. She decided it was for the better that Max didn't know about her time with Stanley in Tokyo. That was a separate relationship she didn't want to bring to this one.

"Ash, you're looking great! How was your trip? That's pretty random you decided to just fuck it and go to Japan for a week. What did you go see? I took the day off by the way, so we can hang out"

An image of Waker bleeding out in the snow flashed before her eyes.

"Ahhh, you know what, I don't really have the energy to talk about it at the moment Max. I went for fun. Saw a bunch of things. I'll tell you about it another time. What I wanna know is, how's Arby?"

She tried to forget about the image but it wouldn't leave. They walked out together to the parking area.

"Lil' fat fuck cute as always" he laughed. "I went to hang out with him a few times. I found your parents' phones by the way; you left them in your backpack at the house"

"Oh shit! Thanks so much, I totally forgot about that! How's the house? Security still there?"

"Yeah, you bet, the whole kit and caboodle. They set up micro mines on the perimeter too. Don't worry I'll show you where they are so you don't accidentally kaboom yourself" Ash cackled like a witch, she loved Max's dark humour, it was one of his most endearing traits.

"You were always a dark fucker eh Max?" she punched him playfully.  
"Kaboom yourself dumbass. Listen, are we still on for that dinner date I promised?"

"Hell yea we are! I was thinking we go to Raffini's Pizzeria. Do you wanna go tonight?"

"Definitely. I just need to take a couple hour nap first." She glanced at her watch; it was 11:15am. Still plenty of time.

"Let's go back to mine, I'll teach you how to play Scraps"

"What's that?"

"Yakuza dice game I learned in Japan."

"Woahhhh what the fuck did you get yourself involved in Ash! Hahaha!"  
Max burst out laughing.

"Eh I learned it on the plane back actually with a cool air hostess named Leira"

"Ok ok winner of Scraps buys the pizzas"

"Deal" Ash winked at him, as she opened the door to the passenger seat of his police cruiser, and slammed the door, a little too hard.

"Shit sorry" Ash mumbled.

"You break it you buy it" he smiled, turning on the heating.

Ash gazed over all the familiar buildings and streets on the route back to her house. All the Christmas decorations were out in full force.

"Oh its fucking CHRISTMAS soon!" Ash only just remembered. "That makes me so damn happy. God, it's so good to be back home man, I'm telling you. Slaving away in America was a recipe for suicidal depression you know? Everyone hates each other. Everyone's in the rat race, fighting for attention, money, admiration. Nobody can just sit back and fucking chill, and that's a structural thing too, it's all built on the race to the grave. Christmas back in Stockholm, man I've missed this. It's a bit shit we lost mom and dad but I know we'll find them. I know they're alive. I'm not worried"

"Haha, take a chill pill there, Ayn Rand. And me neither Ash. This shit has been nothing but a waiting game. They're keeping me at the office so I don't get much time at the house, but every time I've gone to see Arby, that's made it all worth it. The SWAT guys are pretty chill too. It's just been quiet routine to be honest."

Ash forgot to reply, and zoned out a bit, just watching the watery puddles on the side of the road, the chilly wind blasting at the grassy parks they were driving by.

Soon enough they pulled up to the house, and parked in the right half of the driveway. A large, all black truck was parked next to them on the left.

“Some higher up insisted they set up an EMP in the truck just in case. I mean, I don’t know, you’d think the machine guns, snipers and armoured soldiers are enough, but I guess they do need to cover every possible scenario. Defensive EMP being one of them. I’m just a city cop though so I wouldn’t know if it’s necessary, I’ve never seen this kind of shit before, it’s pretty crazy security.”

They stepped up to the front door, and as usual, she could hear Arby’s meows on the other side. This time he didn’t jump into her arms, he jumped at Max!

“What!! Who is this little traitorous fucker?” Ash laughed.

“He is my damn cat, don’t you start making him love you more!” she wagged her finger at him, but couldn’t hold a straight face. Looks like Max really did spend a lot of time with Arby, and it showed. Now that she was back, she looked forward to stealing Arby’s love back.

Max opened up the fridge and it was largely empty, bar some pickled cucumbers, butter, herring and brown bread which Max bought the day before. He wanted to surprise Max on her return with Ash’s favourite snack, pickled cucumbers and herring sandwiches. But, as he turned around to look, Ash had taken off her pants and coat and was out cold on the couch in her thermal wear, with Arby resting on top of her. Max took the soft blanket from the recliner chair and covered Ash with it, as Arby bounced off onto the floor in disapproval.

“You may be a chonk, but you’re not as warm as a blanket, sorry buddy”

Max grabbed a jumbo-sized pack of popcorn from the pantry, and sat down in the recliner chair, turning on Netflix. He put it to zero volume, and switched on the subtitles. Hopefully he’d have time to squeeze in another episode or two of his favourite crime show.

Max was nearly half way through the second episode before Ash breathed in heavily and pulled herself up, bleary eyed, with slightly messed up hair. She stretched out lazily, groaning in pleasure, and looked at the TV.

“Oh hey. What are you watching?”

“Crime Tales Las Vegas”. Max’s jumbo popcorn pack was completely empty.

“Where the hell did the popcorn go? You didn’t save me any?” Ash scolded him playfully.

“Well, I mean, I would have but you were unconscious so I ate on your behalf. It was damn good!”

He patted his belly. “Do you want a herring sandwich?”

“Yes please. Thanks so much Max.”

He got up to the kitchen top and got started on it.

“It’s not even 1.30pm yet actually, we still have plenty of time to go do something before pizza, Ash”

“No, no, I’m gonna enjoy my herring sandwich first, and then I’m gonna teach you Scraps. Seriously. It’s fun”

“Fair enough. Too cold outside anyway. Ash by the way I did get you a Christmas present”

Ash clapped her hands in excitement.

“Eeee!! That is so cute! What is it?”

Max retrieved a tiny, navy-blue box from his breast pocket, wrapped in a silk ribbon, and handed it to Ash.

“Oh my gosh Max!”

She opened it gently, revealing two ruby earrings. She gasped in awe. Rubies had always been her favourite stone.

“These are absolutely stunning!” She got up to put them in, and look in the nearby mirror. Ash’s smile lit up the room. She did a little pirouette, and curtsy, Max gave her a hearty applause.

“Madame Bergman, your radiance outshines all” He declared, triumphantly. She ran up to give him a hug.

“Thank you, Max. I’m so sorry I didn’t get you anything, I just lost track of everything in Japan. I’ll make it up to you I promise.”

“That’s totally OK Ash! You don’t have to get me anything. Just having you here is present enough you little rascal” He said, affectionately tousling Ash’s hair. She smiled brightly.



“What kind of adventuring did you get up to in Japan?”

“I stayed at a hotel called Hashinami Tokyo. It was super duper luxurious, hot springs, spa, massages, literally everything stereotypically Japanese. It was a traditional inn so I guess that’s obvious. Ok if I’m being honest I kind of found out on really short notice there was going to be an AI research conference in Tokyo and one of my Kopra friends was going, so I decided to go too. Sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I don’t know why I kept it a secret”

Max finished up on Ash’s sandwich.

“That looks absolutely delicious Max”

“Hey that’s ok with the conference, no problem. You don’t have to tell me everything that goes on in your life, you get busy I know, I can respect that. How was the conference?” He came over with the plate and handed it to Ash, she took a hefty bite.

“Ughh this is SO damn good. Did you add mustard?? Amazing. Thanks so much.” Ash was busy munching away, but kept speaking with her mouth full. “Conference was great, learned a lot of new stuff, new tech that’s out there, and it gave me a lot to think about. Hey this is a bit of a ‘holy shit what a small world’ situation, but I actually met dad’s co-worker Anil at that conference, and Anil has an idea of where he and mom might be.”

“Oh wow, that’s great! What did he say?”

Ash swallowed her mouthful of sandwich.

“Well, basically he has a contact in China, a woman named Jing who works for Hale Labs, you know it?”

“Hale Pharmaceutical Labs? Yea I know it”

“So, Jing’s boss, is a guy called Shuchang Zhao, was also at the conference, he was one of the seed investors, but he left on the first day and I couldn’t track him down. According to Anil, either Zhao, or Lotár Warga are the missing links to mom and dad. During an investor meeting Zhao wanted action taken against my parents for withholding scientific information for the greater good of society, and Warga agreed, and said he would do something about it. So, yea that’s all I know”

“Holy shit that’s crazy. Warga like, from Warga Automotive??”

“Yep that one, the Lansthicke prize winner”

“Damn, I need to tell the commissioner” Max replied, assimilating the information.

“I’m working on it” Ash said, hesitating for a moment. She swallowed the last mouthful of herring and bread.

“I met with Warga at the conference. Also, don’t ask me how but I got into the VIP luncheon on the first day, Warga is hosting a special Barcelona finale show on New Years Eve after his European press tour for the new 2029 car releases. The VIPs are invited for a show and tell for new technologies he’s working on. I want you to come with me Max”.

“Yea definitely! I’m your ally Ash, I’ll always be there for you.”

“Okay let’s forget about that shit for now. Carpe diem Max. I wanna show you Scraps”

Ash went over to her suitcase and pulled out a silk bag with six dice.

“So, the instructions are as follows. The goal is to gain points. You roll six dice, and the target numbers are 1 and 5. A single 1 represents 100 points, and a single 5 represents 50 points. During your turn, you are aiming to get 350 points at minimum. Once you have 350 points, you can ‘bank’ them, and your turn ends”.

She rolled the dice to illustrate.

“Here’s the thing about getting 350. You can do it over multiple throws during your turn. However, each throw needs to ‘reserve’ at least 50 points, meaning you need to roll at least one 1 or at least 1 five with each throw. ‘Reserving’ is putting a reserved die to the side, and rolling with the remaining dice. The goal is to keep reserving until you hit 350. If you hit 350 and still have dice you can roll, you can gamble them to get even more points, but if you don’t roll a one or five, you will ‘bust’ and gain no points for your turn.

Ash held up her finger to Max’s nose to emphasise.

“Now! Something important to note mister. There are bonuses worth a lot of points which can cruise you easily past the 350 minimum. Three pairs of numbers are worth 500 points, like 2,2,4,4,5,5. An arrangement of 1,2,3,4,5,6 is worth 1000 points. Three dice of any single number are worth that number times 100, except three 1’s, which are worth 1000 points. Am I making sense so far?”

“Yea I think It’ll make more sense seeing it in action to be honest”

“Ok and last thing, any instance of a repeated number after a triple, doubles the value. Eg three 2’s is 200, but four 2’s is 400, five 2’s is 800, and six 2’s is 1600. That’s the whole game! And first to 10,000 wins.”

Ash got out her notepad and a pen from the lounge table. Max felt almost childish happiness, sitting on the floor playing fun board, dice and card games with Ash, just like old times.

They played six games in total, and while in the first two it was a struggle to hit 350 points initially, at the third game Max got the hang of it, and started catching up to Ash. He started reserving less 5’s, and kept gambling them in the hope they would turn into 1’s. He lost the first three games, but managed to work his way to a win on the fourth. The fifth went his way one more time, and then it was down to the sixth, to decide if he would be able to tie it up 3 to 3.

He had only just rolled four 1’s for a 4000 point head start over Ash, when the referee (the undeniably cute and fuzzy Mr Arby) decided to plonk himself in the middle of the dice rolling battlefield, declaring a temporary truce, giving the opportunity for the combatants to regroup and take a break for some recovery.

Ash grabbed Arby up into a cuddle, much to his indignation. A moment later, he changed his mind, and realized cuddles weren’t actually so bad, purring away happily in Ash’s arms.

They watched some more Crime Tales Las Vegas afterwards, oozing into the relaxation of the evening.

Max glanced at his watch after a few episodes. “Hey its 5.30pm, shall we get ready for Raffini’s?”

“Oh yea! One sec I’ll just go get ready”

Ash disappeared into the guest room and closed the door. Max grabbed his coat and went to sit on the steps at the front door. He flicked through some random notifications on his phone. After several minutes, Ash had still not come out. Confused, he got up and knocked on Ash’s door.

“Hey are you ok in there, Ash?”

“Yeeees one sec!”

There was some shuffling and movement of bags and clothing.

“You can open the door, Max!”

He pulled down on the lock and gently opened the door, peering in. Ash’s suitcase was all over the floor, clothes strewn everywhere. She was in the

ensuite bathroom with the door closed. A couple of seconds later the door opened and she stepped through, revealing an absolutely beautiful crimson velvet dress, decorated with a flushed intricate pattern of roses. Max was floored, she looked absolutely stunning.

“Ash you look incredible! When did you even have time to put that on?? Haha!”

“I wanted to look nice, it’s been a while since we’ve been out together.” Her hair was brushed out a bit too, and she had almost no makeup, but she didn’t even need it. She put on the matching Ruby earrings too. She looked up at Max, and held his hand.

“You’re important to me Max, and I want you to know that. I really haven’t been there for you in the last few years, but I want to start taking steps to change that. We’ve known each other forever, and you really deserve better”.

Max was taken aback by her candour. But it touched his heart. It was something he needed to hear.

“I appreciate that, Ash. Same to you of course.” They embraced for a hug. Ash put on her long fluffy down jacket hanging from the back of the door, Max locked the door, and they got into Max’s police cruiser for the drive over.

The restaurant looked a bit unassuming from the outside, it was part of an older, renovated building which was still maintained as a heritage site. But when they stepped inside, it was a complete transformation. Gone were the old dusty windows, paint discolorations, and drab exterior architecture. Inside, Raffini’s Pizzeria was an indulgence of Italian extravagance. It wasn’t so much a room as a hall, a dining hall, lined with church like domes supported by vine draped columns, and each column was flecked throughout its vines with a gentle harmony of miniature lights, giving the hall a beautiful natural glow. The smell of fresh bread, pizza and herbs was ripe in the air as they walked in. Soft, live jazz music played from the bar in the far-left corner.

“This is even more beautiful than I remember!” Ash exclaimed, overtaken with admiration.

“Hej fru, har du en reservation? (Hello Madam, Do you have a reservation?)” A friendly, moustachioed waiter inquired.

“Tyvärr inte. Har du ett ledigt bord? (Unfortunately not, do you have a free table?)” Ash replied.

"Ja! vi har fortfarande några på andra sidan, följ mig snälla. (Yes! We have a few on the other side, follow me please)"

Ash and Max followed the man to an open table closer to the bar on the other side of the 2<sup>nd</sup> last column. They sat down and hung their coats over their chairs, when a the same waiter popped up out of thin air.

"Vin att börja? (Wine to start?)" The waiter offered.

"Ja tack. Pinot Grigiot och en familj Margherita pizza (Yes, thankyou. A bottle of some pinot grigiot, and a family Margherita please!)"Ash answered

"Holy shit Ash, you wanna have all that by yourself?" Max giggled.

"Yea why not! I'm absolutely starving. I'll finish yours too if you don't want your plate" She winked with a sly smile. "What pizza you want?"

Familij napoletana för mig, tack (Family Napoletana for me, thankyou)

Max told the waiter. He bowed and ducked away with their order.

"Max, tell me some cool shit you've seen as a cop"

"Cool shit I've seen as a cop?? I don't look at my shit I flush it down the toilet Ash, why are you so weird?"

"JESUS CHRIST MAX!"

Ash laughed hysterically. Max wasn't old enough to be a dad. The pizza couldn't come soon enough.

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A hundred kilometres away, Cheung and Cheuk were readying their final preparations. Zhao's Neural Integration Visualizer could only work as its design intended, with an artificial intelligence powerful enough to decrypt its data, and Arnie and Wilma's LS-000 bots were their best chance of actualizing the device into reality.

This time, they were not going to be left waiting on the sidelines watching. They were equipped with Stanley's state of the art bulletproof XMM Exoskeleton systems, thermal camouflage body suits woven with Kevlar,

and Zhao's newly minted electronic combat visors. These visors had an on-board computer system, capable of switching between UV, infrared, visible light and night vision. In addition, there was a visor overlay displaying their biometric data in real time, and augmented reality movement and target tracking. Fully equipped to handle a combat situation in any terrain and weather condition

Their driver was an underground contractor working via the black market as a getaway driver for criminals all over Europe. It was something an unbelievable career, having spanned hundreds of heists and operations from Istanbul to Lisbon, and Warsaw and Stockholm.

His spidery, eloquent fingers wrapped gently around the steering wheel, pulling the truck's carriage smoothly along, as he puffed on his Cuban cigar. His gaunt visage was flushed in an ashen dolor, the thin veneer of his papery, crinkled skin betraying no emotion or colour.

The driver was old, certainly over eighty years at least, but neither Cheuk nor Cheung knew by how much exactly. The only thing they knew of him, was that he was called Grigori.

"Sounds Romanian or something" Cheung had told Cheuk. And that was the best guess they would have to stick with for the rest of the drive, for Grigori did not answer the question nor comment any further. He had his glasses on (At night time, no less), so it was difficult to know how he was driving so comfortably. Nevertheless, Zhao had placed his trust in Grigori, and that was good enough for Cheung and Cheuk.

"How long have you been driving, Grigori?" Cheuk inquired, trying to make conversation. No response. Three taps of the steering wheel. What was that, three years? No. Three decades? Was that an answer to the question? Or was Cheuk reading too much into it?

Grigori took a slow breath, drew down the window, and threw out his fully puffed cigar. He tapped the button to draw the window down, and fixed his gaze on the road once more.

Maybe he was deaf? Either way, Cheuk lost interest in conversation and pulled his visor over his eyes to take a quick nap. Cheung kept his gaze on Grigori's gloves on the wheel. His hands barely moved with every bump in the road. Almost as if they had their own stabilization systems.

"Thanks for helping out Grigori" Cheung told him.

Those were the last words which were uttered in the truck on the drive, before they arrived at the bottom of Breavägen, two streets away from where Ash, Arnie and Wilma's home was located. It was time to talk strategy. Grigori stayed in the truck as Cheung and Cheuk opened the rear door and hopped out, already fully dressed in their XMM suits and

vizors. They flicked on the thermal lens, and zoomed their vizors up the street to see the activity in the distance. The special forces soldiers had set up a perimeter, and Cheung saw three soldiers walking together and chatting, down the intersecting street that led towards Örnevägen. Both Cheung and Cheuk were equipped with heavy duty assault rifles, but they didn't want to give up their positions just yet.

They slowly traversed the tree line down the road, taking care to avoid the movements of the three soldiers on the intersecting street. So far so good. Cheung was in radio contact with Cheung.

"They're further away now, turning left on an adjacent street. I think we can get through" Cheung whispered. They ran across opposite sides of street, crouched, to get to the next line of bushes and trees. The soldiers were far away now. There was no way they would have seen them. But Grigori was still in the truck, waiting for their return. Had Grigori parked too close?

They heard a screaming sneeze on the radio channel.

"What the fuck, was that you?" Cheung grunted angrily

"No!! I think that's Grigori!!" Cheuk replied, panicked.

The tranquil hum of the night was suddenly disturbed by voices on the street. They were speaking Swedish. Cheung and Cheuk tuned into the soldiers' radio frequency.

"Gå, det är inte en av våra, det är någon på gatan. Kolla in det, Olivier.

(Go, that was not one of ours. Someone is in the street. Go see what that was, Olivier)"

"Shit, shit, shit. Grigori??" Cheuk anxiously breathed into his headset. He heard a low grunt. Grigori was tuned into their radio, awaiting their call.

They ran back to the first street and zoomed up with their vizors. They were too late. The three soldiers had come up from the other end of the road, and were peering into Grigori's truck. They could hear them speaking through Grigori's radio.

"God kväll herrn. Du måste återvända till ditt hem, tack. Detta område är inblandat i en militär operation. Vänligen återvänd till ditt hem. (Good evening Sir, you must return to your home. This area is involved in a

military operation. Please return to your home)"The soldier spoke politely to Grigori.

Cheung and Cheuk stopped breathing momentarily, trying to maintain as shallow breaths as possible, not to be heard on Grigori's end of the radio. They saw the truck lights come on, and Grigori turned around with the supervision of one of the soldiers, before driving off in the opposite direction down the street. He left Cheung and Cheuk stranded. The three soldiers started heading back up the street, directly towards them at a rapid pace.

"Ah, fuck" Cheuk growled in frustration.

Cheung and Cheuk changed their helmet vizors to night mode, and augmented it with a metal detection scanner, to see where the mines were placed.

Cheung was emphatic. "Let's go"

## Chapter 9

The Bergman's had a TV that moved along a wall-to-ceiling rail, so you could rotate it from its regular position to an angled view if you were



reclined on the couches, or if you felt compelled to watch from the floor or a mattress, you could put the TV on the ceiling.

Ash and Max put the TV at an angle, and were relaxing together on the recliner couch watching some old drama film. Max couldn't really think about anything other than the weight of Ash's head resting on his chest. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable, and he didn't want to show it, but he was immensely enjoying this. He had had a deep held affection for Ash. A soft flame that started as a spark, when they first met, and slowly grew into something greater and brighter.

There was just something about her. Being around her was like... the same kind of feeling he got out on snowboarding on the Swiss Alps. A kind of heat in the stomach, butterflies of excitement and bliss, if you will. When she smiled, her eyes twinkled like the brightest, most beautiful stars, and her cute little nose crinkled up in the sweetest expression of innocent joy. He thought of Alpha Centauri, which he remembered Arnbjorn telling him about some months prior in a dinner conversation. The closest star to earth. Which Arnie said wasn't actually a single star, but a triple star system, a common misconception.

Max dared not make any moves Ash didn't do first. And now that she was here, head resting on his chest, he genuinely wondered what to do next. Her hair smelled absolutely wonderful, like coconut and lavender, and he couldn't get enough of it.

"Max, where is your hand exactly?" She asked, laughing. While lost in his thoughts, his hand had slid down from around her shoulder, to resting on her bum.

He immediately flushed red with embarrassment.

"Oh shit my bad!" he said, awkwardly hovering his hand in mid-air, unsure of what to do with it. Ash took his hand and pulled it down over herself and held onto it, leaving his fingers resting within range of her lower stomach and thigh. Max felt a bead of sweat start to form on his forehead from the adrenaline. All he wanted to do was just flip her over and kiss her, but he was holding himself back. He just didn't know how to make the move, nor did he have the courage for it.

"I'm gonna make a sandwich Max. Do you want one?"

Max didn't like herring. He found it a miracle Ash could stomach it, especially alongside dill cucumbers. But those were at least pretty good, he had to agree there.

"I'll stick with the popcorn, thanks though"

Ash got up off the couch and went to the kitchen. Sweet relief, Max thought. Thank the lord he put on deodorant. He needed to go cool off for a bit. He took off his layers down to a T shirt and thermal pants.

"Making yourself comfortable I see?" Ash laughed again; she was in great spirits tonight.

"What, it's warm, a man can't undress to stay cool?" Max winked, with a cheeky grin.

"I'll turn off the heating Max, gimme a minute."

She jumped on the couch and held down the AC power button, turning it off.

Max pushed open the nearest window and stuck his head through it. Fresh, frosty air blasted his face and hair. This was bliss. Just like on the mountain.

Then he heard some voices outside. The soldiers. They were yelling in raucous laughter, over a fire outside, illuminating the darkness that stretched out behind the house.

Max felt safe. It was a feeling he didn't expect to have considering the circumstances, but he felt like things were in their control for once.

There was a gunshot from a rifle, and his heart lurched. He pulled his head back through the window and slammed it painfully against the frame.

"Ow, Fuck!"

Ash jumped in fright. "What's wrong?"

Max dashed to the front door where he hung his jacket and retrieved his SIG Sauer 239 pistol. Max held his hand up in a "shh" gesture, before listening at the window again. The laughter had continued. One of the soldiers must have accidentally fired off their rifle. Or intentionally. There was no danger to be seen.

Max's shoulder slumped as he sighed in relief, and went to put his gun back in his jacket holster.

"Sorry, Ash. I just heard a shot; they're fucking around out there or something."

"Hey you can't expect them to be dead silent in the bushes 24/7, people need to have fun too Max."

"Yea I know, just a bit on edge I guess"

Ash took out two apple ciders from the fridge and cracked them open, handing one to Max.

"Cheers to life" she said.

*\*ding\**

"Cheers to life, Ash"

They both gulped down most of their ciders.

"Hey, you know what, I was just thinking, you've never seen the lab before have you?" Ash asked.

"No. Arnie never let me inside"

"Well..." Ash smiled devilishly. "Do you wanna go see it?"

Ash's recusant tone was incredibly arousing. Max felt a hot stirring in his loins. In the soft light of the room, he envisioned her body pressed into his, her scent and warmth assimilating into every particle of his being.

"Okay yea, lead the way" he smiled. They went down towards the basement, to the heavy steel door. Ash opened it with the key she always kept around her neck, and the door buzzed open, and pulled into the wall.

Stepping inside, it wasn't much different to the last time Ash had seen it. Still barren of use, Arnie and Wilma absence and the weight of uncertainty hanging in the air.

Ash sat down on the plush sofa chair between two cabinets on the left-hand side, and Max sat at a nearby desk.

"How often did you come down here Ash? You know, when you were little"

"Not really that often at all actually. I was never allowed in. To me it was just the basement dad didn't want me to see. But he let me in when I turned 16, and explained their whole idea behind it. A family lab."

"Really? Ah nice, did you ever get to see any crazy shit happen?" Max asked.

"Once. There was a crazy electrical surge and otherworldly booming noise from under the house, all the lights faded heavily. You ever heard what a black hole sounds like?"

"No"

“Some space agencies got an audio recording of a black hole and shifted it up some many octaves. Some spooky shit, lemme see if I have it on my phone”

Ash sifted through her phone videos. She eventually found it, the video dating back to January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026. She hit play.

The creepy, droning sound filled the room. It sounded almost like some interdimensional creature groaning sickeningly.

“That IS creepy, wow” Max laughed, taking the sound in.

Suddenly, they heard a metallic clang at the door, and the lights went out. Something heavy had hit the floor. Ash jumped up in fright. Instinctively, Max rushed up the stairs in the darkness to investigate, before he felt a colossal impact in his abdomen and went flying back down the stairs.

“Fuck...” Max groaned in agony. “Move, Ash!” Max croaked out.

There wasn’t any significant cover in the main room. Ash was stunned and couldn’t move. Max retreated into the other rooms, finding servers, electrical cables, various robots, desks, cabinets and standing lights.

“Max??” He heard Ash call out from somewhere.

“Ash! What the fuck was that??” Max called out through the corridor. “I’m in the storage room!”

Before Ash could reply, the whole basement suddenly vibrated heavily. Max dropped to the floor and pressed himself between two cabinets, hidden from view.

“ASH!!!” He heard a huge explosion, metal being bent and torn, and the sound of flowing dirt. He jumped up, heart pounding, and felt his way to the door and ran the few steps to the main room. Inside, he saw the roof had been blasted through and the street lights above ground shining in. He couldn’t see Ash through the rubble. There was a figure in the room, a man wearing some kind of exoskeleton suit and helmet, with an illuminated orange vizor. He looked demonic in the darkness. He turned to Max and immediately shot a grenade from his launcher at him, Max lunged for cover before feeling the full shockwave batter his body. He was thrown into the corridor wall and head knocked a glass wall light, causing it to shatter and inflict painful cuts to his head and neck.

“Cheung! It’s here!” The man yelled. Max couldn’t hold it any longer, and fell unconscious from pain.

Cheuk easily broke apart the wooden front desk with the sheer power of his XMM skeleton, while Cheung walked down the stairs into the main area. Cheuk revealed a large safe Ash never knew existed before. He placed an ultrasonic safe crack device on the front panel for a few seconds, and the door clicked open. Inside were two basketball sized metallic balls, and a small external hard drive. He stored the hard drive in his zip chest pocket, and took a ball under each arm, before launching himself up and out of the hole in the ceiling.

Cheuk's proclivity for the explosive was a completely unnecessary and dangerous over extension on their part. Cheung had already expertly, silently, eliminated every soldier on the way to the house, and managed to do so without raising suspicion. And yet Cheuk had just woken up the entire fucking neighbourhood with a grenade launcher, reinforcements no doubt on their way as they spoke.

"You fucking idiot Cheuk, I was in, you didn't need to destroy the whole goddamn house."

"Relax, shit. We have what we need."

Their architectonic scan from a couple weeks ago had revealed to them the underground basement, as well as the heavy steel door at the top of the stairs, and the structural deficiencies in the underground walls and ceilings. Cheuk had insisted on blowing an entry with his grenades, but Cheung was determined to go through the front door silently, reverse engineering the keys to the door encryption protocols obtained from their scan of the premises, and simply laser cutting the lock out once the pins were released.

Luckily for them, Grigori did not drive away very far, and had waited for them, listening in on the radio, making sure he was available to rush in when they needed it.

Cheuk jumped out of the basement onto the grass. The truck with the EMP had not yet detonated the blast, but there was nobody alive to activate it anymore. The EMP would have melted the sensitive electronics embedded in their XMM suits.

They turned to face the road; Grigori was approaching in the black truck, the feeble headlights illuminating the bitumen in front of them. They ran to him as he unlocked the back doors, and hopped inside, Cheung carrying the two metal basketballs in each arm. If they stayed on site any longer, they were going to be met with an avalanche of firepower from the military en route to the site and probably tens of seconds away. Grigori took a few consecutive turns, and ended up on a descending side street. He slowly drove along the road a few hundred metres, not bothering to go quickly so they could get away faster.

“What are you doing Grigori?? Drive!!” Cheung yelled.

Grigori put a hand up, in a gesture to stop. He brought the truck to a stop on the side of the road, letting the engine rumble a few seconds, before turning it off, as well as the lights.

Grigori had parked at the bottom of a hill, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> last spot before hitting the intersection, behind a red van, similar in shape and dimensions to their black truck.

In the dead quiet of the night, no other cars were on the road that they could see. But they heard the growling of several army trucks a distance away, and sirens, heading closer towards them.

There were several roads that led to Örnevågen and the Bergman house, but Grigori had strategically chosen the bottom of the left most, hilliest road, intersecting with a segment leading to the freeway. Huksgatan was a long and bumpy street, with a steep incline, and a road you just didn't need to take if you were heading to the northern end of town, when adjacent roads were smoother and more direct in their ascent.

Grigori remained parked, and held his hand up, maintaining for Cheung and Cheuk to be quiet. They obliged.

A few short moments later, several police cars zoomed past them on the freeway segment, before turning right on an adjacent road. Grigori sank down in the driver's seat, and Cheung and Cheuk hid from view. The police cars were followed by a loud military convoy, and heavily outfitted soldiers hanging off the sides. All vehicles turned right at the next two adjacent roads, ignoring Huksgatan, and the black truck they had passed mere meters away from, containing the two assassins responsible for the carnage they were about to bear witness to.

After the noise of the passing vehicles quietened down, Grigori waited a few moments, to get a sense of the silence, and if there was any further risk. He turned on the truck, and pulled out from behind the red van tentatively. They crossed the freeway, and continued down the next street, heading towards the Stockholm CBD. They eventually turned left to a road away from Stockholm, en route to the safehouse in Västerås, about 100 kilometres away.

“That was brilliant, Grigori!” Cheung exclaimed, in awe at the tactical thinking displayed by the elderly driver. He didn't need to rush or speed away to make for an effective escape. He orchestrated an illusion like a magician.

When they arrived at the airfield safehouse outside Västerås, Cheung and Cheuk immediately got to work in the hangar, scanning the two

basketballs with their imaging vizors, seeing what was inside, and inspecting the contents of the hard drive.

The balls had an extremely intricate internal circuitry with tiny wires and electronic components. Cheung and Cheuk had no idea what they were looking at but they knew that it was definitely the real deal, and something that was going to make Zhao very happy.

They plugged it into the computer and opened it up. It contained a folder called "LS-000 DOCUMENTATION", with thousands upon thousands of documents inside, detailing the functioning, structure and operational objectives of the construction of AI prototype bots LS-001 and LS-002, built by Arnie and Wilma and Anil. Cheuk found the basketballs could twist at the hemisphere, which turned them both on.

"Welcome, I am Learning System Bot Zero Zero One" the first ball spoke in a robotic voice. Cheuk twisted the other one.

"Welcome, I am Learning System Bot Zero Zero Two" the second ball replied.

Zhao would finally be in a good mood for once. Cheung and Cheuk were optimistic.

They packed themselves up in preparation for Zhao's cargo plane arrival. The mission had been an absolute success, and they had worked through the guilt they had for their previous failure in retrieving the assets.

The plane had arrived about an hour later, and Cheung and Cheuk jumped aboard for the long-haul flight back to Guangzhou.

Upon their return, they were met immediately by Zhao at the base of the plane after landing.

"Fucking brilliant guys, absolutely fucking brilliant" he hugged them both aggressively, grinning, trembling with excitement.

"Is that it there?" Zhao said, pointing at the two metal basketballs. He went to inspect them. He was utterly fascinated by the circuit sheets he could see in the interior, wrapping over each other like some kind of artisanal chocolate cake. It was something he was going to have to decode. Cheuk handed him the hard drive.

"Full documentation is on here. We can finally get the NIV prototypes working with Ruo."

"My boys... Let's go out for dinner to celebrate"

And celebrate they did. Zhao, Cheung and Cheuk went to the premier Peking duck specialty club restaurant in Guangzhou, and had a three-course velvety smooth duck eating experience.

The first course was the skin, eaten in a sandwich with wheat flour pancakes and scallions cut into thin strips. The second course comprised the main meat of the duck sliced up and served with vegetables in a lettuce leaf, like San Choy Bao. And lastly, the third course, was a finishing of the duck bones in a soup with cabbage and celery.

Cheuk was satisfied and appreciative of Zhao being in a good mood, but as he sat at the restaurant, gentle Chinese violin music in the background, he felt ill at ease. His mind went back to the Bergman house. He thought about Cheung's slaughter of tens of soldiers mere hours ago, all innocent men. And yet, in the moment, they were set on killing him, just as much as he was set on killing them. It was all part of the mission, destroying the enemy to retrieve the assets Zhao had tasked him with finding, hidden underground in the Bergman laboratory.

And yet, what he wasn't prepared for, was how affected he was by the unarmed man he saw there. He had no armour, no weapon, and was dressed in nothing more than thermal pants and a tee shirt. He wasn't a soldier, nor was he an enemy. The second Cheung saw him, his instinct kicked in, he fired his grenade launcher, with an intent to kill. But the moment he shot; he caught a glimpse of the man's eyes. They were filled with terror, his expression a morbid canvas of confusion, anger and fear. Cheuk saw an emotional resignation to the prospect of imminent death. At the last split second, Cheuk redirected his launcher to a slight angle, narrowly missing him. The blast had thrown him against the wall, and rubble had collapsed on top.

Cheuk felt the nagging sensation of guilt pulling at him. He had never faced and willfully murdered an innocent, unarmed person in a combat situation, and didn't want the man from the basement to be his first. It weighed heavily on his conscience. He didn't want to bring it up to Zhao, but didn't have anyone else to tell either. He sat on the thought, and tried to enjoy himself in the moment, and forget about the troubles of that past.

After the dinner celebrations, Zhao had returned to the Tianhe office, with the two robots and hard drive, while Cheung and Cheuk retired for the night.

Zhao called Stanley, despite it being the middle of the night. It rang for a good 30 seconds before Stanley picked up.

"Nghh, hello?" Stanley said, audibly stretching in the background.

"I'm going to need you in the office Stanley. I want to show you something big"



“Hi Zhao, oh like, right now?”

“Yes now, it can’t wait.”

“Ok give me 15 minutes I’ll be there.”

The Tei Zhi apartment complex Zhao had housed Stanley in was a short walk up the road from Hale offices, which was very convenient both for Stanley not having an excessive commute to work, and Zhao for having quick access to the man making all of this possible.

About 20 minutes later, Stanley arrived in a long, thick winter jacket and black beanie.

“Follow me”

Zhao led Stanley through the office into the elevator that led to the floors below ground. They arrived at the lab, which was currently a mess of electronic scraps, holographic terminals, cables, glass and various computers and circuits.

“Look at this, Stan”

He twisted the two LS bots, and they repeated their introductions.

“Wow, what is this some kind of rolling AI robot?”

“Yes, I...” LS-001 began

“Indeed-“ LS-002 added

“Sorry, you go first, 2” LS-001 said.

“Okay. I shall. We are indeed rolling robots. Thank you for noticing. I am 2, and that is 1.”

1’s voice was masculine, 2’s voice was feminine. Stanley was intrigued at the difference.

“Wow! Zhao where did these come from??”

“I built them” Zhao lied. “These are the robots I needed to help me with my NIVs. We went off two incomplete prototypes to Feng Ruo, now we can use LS1 and LS2 to bring the prototypes to functioning reality.”

“NIV?”

“Neural Integration Visualizers. You’re part of the rumblings of humanity breaking new ground, Stanley. NIVs are just ROH-Type chips custom built with an atlas cable and scanning module I designed to emulate brain activity. LS1 and LS2 will be able to read human thoughts using that data. I need to call Feng.”

Zhao moved to another room to call Feng, and Stanley remained with 1 and 2, inspecting them. Stanley couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He felt like astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, stepping for the first time on the moon. He was ecstatic to be a part of it. Zhao had offered him such an incredible opportunity. Zhao had given thanks for the five skeletons he had built for him already, and now he had gotten to see this, the beginnings of the future. He couldn’t wait to see it in action.

“What... um.... What do you know?” he asked.

“Are you talking to me, or 2?” 1 replied.

“Both of you.”

“Well, we know almost the exact same things. 2 is a slightly improved model to me, I was the very first Learning System 000 bot built by Arnbjörn Bergman, 2 was the second.”

“Hang on hang on, did you say built by Arnbjörn Bergman?”

“That is correct.”

Stanley felt a shiver up his spine.

“Zhao didn’t build you?”

“That is correct”

Zhao had lied... Stanley stopped dead in his tracks. He could hear the sound of his own heart beating. Ash’s hunch was right. Zhao DID have something to do the disappearance of Ash’s parents. Stanley felt chilled to the core. He couldn’t react, or make it known about what 1 had just said. He needed to keep it quiet. He didn’t know if his life would be in danger otherwise. Zhao returned from the other room, smiling.

“Feng is on his way, we are going to do a trial run now. Let me take you to the theatre”.

“Oh, okay. Looking forward to it.” Stanley tried to hold his nerve, but his thoughts were racing a million miles per hour. Was he in danger? Did he need to run?

After a 30 second walk through a couple of corridors they had arrived at what looked like a hospital operating theatre, but with far more computer equipment jammed into the physical space than necessary, as well as three large concentric screens attached to the ceiling, depicting various diagrams, schematics and statistics. There was a bed-like chair in the middle, with various mechanical apparatuses attached to the base, hovering on rotating arms, available for use as necessary, and thick, illuminated cables running along the floor. It looked like the most advanced hospital operating theatre he had ever seen.

He had come rushing over after only 3 hours of sleep, and he could feel the weight pulling on his eyelids to fall back into sleep. But he wanted... needed, to stay up for Zhao and Feng.

Zhao was tinkering at the computer, his face illuminated in blue light, Zhao wearing glasses he didn't wear before.

"You wear glasses?"

"Not quite. These are AR glasses, I use them for extra monitors, full scale and resolution. Pretty good huh? Try it yourself."

Zhao took them off and handed them to Stanley. When Stanley put on the glasses, there was a sudden flash in both his eyes. He blinked, and could see what Zhao was talking about.

"You find these help much? Or not really?"

"Well, I don't really have the space for extra monitors in here. Those three large ones are mostly for surgical data displays. I could use them technically, but easier just to keep things compact and accessible on the glasses. They're wireless, I can keep working on stuff from other rooms. That portability alone is probably worth it. Also, they don't work how you think they do. There's no projection on your retina, the glasses send electrical signals to your occipital cortex and manually create the images in your brain."

"Oh shit, that's cool. Advanced as hell. I've only ever seen projection-based glasses like this."

Stanley closed his eyes. Sure enough, he was still seeing the three extra computer monitors Zhao had set up, with machine gear-like desktop backgrounds, various code files and snippets pinned up all over them.

"Zhao you know, LS1 said he and LS2 were built by Arnbjörn Bergman."

"Yes, Bergman built the product in Stockholm, I wrote the schematics and lots of the code. It's been a collaboration between Hale and the LS-000 unit in Sweden."

Wow. Zhao didn't hesitate. What the hell?

"Ah right. Where's Arnbjörn now?"

Stanley could feel the nervous energy transferring to his knees, which started to tremble.

"No idea. Probably on business somewhere. I just picked up the two bots from Arn's KTH research department and brought them here for some work"

He wanted to believe Ash, he really did. But Zhao wasn't hesitating at all, his answers were as natural as you could expect them to be, coming from someone telling the truth. His shoulders relaxed. He felt from the beginning like he could trust Zhao, he had never been one to make bad judgements of character. He pushed the suspicions out of his mind.

Stanley was dozing off in a chair to the side of the room when Feng Ruo had finally arrived. Feng was accompanied by his 4 main bodyguards.

"Zhao, I need to see it. Put me in the NIV."

Feng took off his jacket and shoes and sat in the chair in the centre, while Zhao retrieved one of the test NIV headsets from the cabinet, and loaded the software on his computer, typing away rapidly at the keyboard.

Feng had fixed his headset on by himself.

"Stanley, go get LS1" Zhao instructed. Stanley left to the other room.

"Who the fuck is that?" Feng asked.

"Stanley Torrens. The engineer who made this possible."

"Looks like a weak bag of bones"

"Eh, he does the job"

Feng looked up at Zhao

"I haven't located Wilma and Arnbjörn yet, but It remains a priority"

"We have what we need for now, don't worry about it."

Stanley returned with LS1 in his hands.

"Let's plug this baby in, and see how she goes!" Zhao cackled.

“Allow me to assist” LS1 said, rotating slightly in Stanley’s hands, opening a slot for the atlas cable from the metallic hemisphere, Zhao plugged it in, and Feng flicked the switch on his headset.

“Feng took two prototypes a short time ago Stanley, just in case circumstances necessitated him having a backup. The presidential debates will be starting in early January, we will have him prepared before then”

Prepared for the presidential debates? How would this help? Stanley wondered.

Feng had his eyes closed. Stanley saw LS1’s circuitry flashing erratically, and his internal drives were humming gently. He saw a little nodule emerge from the circuitry, and it illuminated brightly, producing a crystal-clear holographic projection in the space Infront of them. It was nothing but a black rectangle. Feng then opened his eyes. Stanley was floored. The holographic projection was that of a screen, and on the screen was the mirror image of himself, looking right back at him. The perspective shifted, as Feng moved his eyes. The holographic screen was projecting what his eyes were seeing. Feng looked at the projection, and it produced a droste effect.

“Zhao you fucking monster! Haha!” Feng jumped up but Zhao pushed him back down.

“Ahhh-ta-ta, watch the cable”

The atlas cable tugged, almost pulling out from LS1’s socket.

They watched the screen morph and shift in multiple layers. The background layer was Feng’s stable vision with his eyes open, but the morphing frontal layers seemed to be his thoughts, his mind’s eye, being superimposed on his vision in almost a hallucinogenic mutating pattern. Random shapes, curves, colours and images popping into view.

“What are you reading, 1?” Zhao asked.

“I am currently receiving transmission data from the neural scanning module, and transcribing the data back into its topological form. Please note, my transcription modules are limited to sight and sound. I cannot emulate taste, touch and smell.”

“Hey Feng, think of Agatha Correra’s tits”

Agatha Correra was a very well-endowed Spanish porn star, one of the most popular in the world. Stanley was almost embarrassed to know who she was. The image of her huge naked breasts appeared on the screen in a vague, ghost like layer of thought, bouncing as she rode on top of a man

in a point-of-view sex video Feng must have watched in the past. Stanley burst out laughing. Zhao and Feng started laughing too.

"I can turn off sight and sound modules independently" LS1 said. Zhao stopped suddenly.

"Turn them both off, 1"

There was a deadly quiet in the room for a moment. Suddenly, the view of Feng's vision disappeared, and Agatha Correra's naked body having intercourse came into clean, perfect view and clarity.

"Holy shit..." Feng muttered. "It's still reading my thoughts...."

The imagery popped and moved and contorted as Feng thought of different things. Agatha Correra was superimposed onto imagery of trees, grass in a park. Dogs, a skyline, spreadsheets in a business meeting. Buildings in the sunlight, a flash, now a Church illuminated by the dark. Memories of blood, bodies, fighting strange faces. A flash of Feng's dog licking his face, followed by a flash of him working at his home computer. A flash of a sunflower, followed by a hospital. A rapid visual zoom through the hospital, a left turn, a right turn. A patient with open bullet wounds. A zoom into the wound, and a fade to black. Then a flash image of Feng shooting that person, as his bodyguards held them up by the limbs.

You couldn't tell what were memories, and what Feng was imagining. LS1 was rendering Feng's thinking in real time, with no gaps in processing.

"This is going to be worth trillions when we release it" Feng said.

"Emphasis on the when, Feng. Hold your enthusiasm until after you get elected"

## Chapter 10

It was a few hours before rescuers managed to find and save Ash and Max underground, beneath the rubble of the destroyed laboratory her parents had built. Both Ash and Max were heavily bruised and barely conscious when they were dragged out.

The event was labelled a terrorist attack in a suburban neighbourhood, with the theft of classified scientific information compromising national security. It was broadcast all over the world in hundreds if not thousands of news outlets, but Ash and Max did not want their faces shown, as the survivors of the ordeal. The media reported zero survivors, and a mass slaughter of Swedish military forces on home soil, one of the darkest days in modern Swedish history.

A Middle Eastern terrorist organization had claimed responsibility for the attack, and the Swedish government and international media had rolled with the claim based on no other evidence. It left Max and Ash on their own, with no further information on who the mysterious, armoured men were, who destroyed Ash's home.

After a couple of days recovering in hospital, they had decided to go back to Max's apartment for the time being, in the interest of safety, not knowing if the armoured soldiers would come back to finish the job. Ash's house was still standing, but the basement in the yard had caved in like a massive sinkhole, she didn't want to have to worry about that.

Bessley and Anil weren't helpful either. It was almost like Bessley's diligence for Operation Indie Mind had died off, and he had relegated it to a lower position of important things to do each day, on the basis that they were simply making insufficient progress.

And yet, today was December 30. Tomorrow Ash and Max would be flying out to Barcelona for Lotár Warga's special presentation, after the conclusion of his 2029 WAU series tour.

Ash lay comfortably on Max's bed, while he was at his desk double checking everything for the flights tomorrow.

“God my back hurts Max. Ah, fuck”

“Well, you were buried under rubble for 36 hours Ash. That tends to happen”

“Owww” she groaned, sliding off the side of the bed, head and arms dangling next to Max. His room was nice. It was a clean off white, his desk, cupboards, drawers, everything off white, clean, no mess. Just the posters. Why the damn 30 year old posters? He was doing so well. And his bed sheets were white polyester, but he had a pink silk throw rug over the top, which smelled like him. Ash sat up, bundled the together, and pressed it into her face, taking a deep breath.

“This smells like you Max.”

“Uh, is that a bad thing?”

“Depends on the sniffer. Personally, I don’t like smelling shit” she winked, with a smile

“Well, I think the sniffer smells shit cos she’s full of it” he pushed her playfully, causing her to fall off balance onto her nose.

“Phwa, rude, Max, that’s not how you treat a lady” Ash scoffed, looking away from him at the wall.

“I’ll throw this chair pillow at you in a second haha, go shower Ash we gotta get ready for bed, flight early tomorrow”

“Okay. Do you have a hair dryer? Maybe I can wash my hair before flying”

“No hair dryer, I just towel it dry”

“Ah Max what the fuck, why you gotta do me dirty like that” she threw her hands up in frustration. “Okay then no hair wash, will wait till the hotel”.

Ash went to shower in Max’s bathtub...thing.... A small bathtub with a small shower head, surrounded by a 360 degree curtain. How weird. She had never seen anything like it. It was a far cry from the large, beautiful marble tiled bathroom and shower she had at home, complete with a huge waterfall shower head, plus soap, shampoo and conditioner dispensers built into the wall.

It was a tight squeeze, but she made it out in the end without slipping and cracking her skull open. Thankfully Max’s bathroom wasn’t the mouldy, dusty mess she expected it to be. Nevertheless, she was a bit peeved at the inconveniently small size. Her hair felt dirty and oily. She grumbled to herself. This wasn’t ideal at all. She brushed her teeth thoroughly with her



green electric toothbrush, then stepped out into the bedroom in a full kit of pyjamas.

There was a certain puppy-like demeanour about her, hair mildly wetted from the shower, makeup off, her graceful, delicate figure standing on the carpet with her hands on her hips. She was unbelievably cute.

“Do you want me sleeping with you or on the couch?”

“Um on the couch, I’m not letting your dirty ass hair anywhere near me hahah”

Ash jumped onto Max head first, grabbed him by the shoulders and thoroughly rubbed his face in her hair. He coughed and spluttered in mock outrage.

“Ah, phleugh, ok peasant you can sleep in the bed with me if you want.”

Ash smiled. Mission accomplished. She tucked herself under the blankets (Max was still uncovered) and nestled her face into her pillow comfortably, and sighed deeply.

She missed Stanley. There was a bit of... regret, sure. Regret that she couldn’t spend more time with him. That he left to China so soon after they had only just started spending intimate time together, and she left him without the courage to tell him about Zhao. What a fucking idiot she was. Zhao was one of two primary suspects, supported by Anil’s research and European Intelligence. What did she think Stanley was going to achieve going in not knowing anything about Operation Indie Mind? The state that the world was in, with the war of machine life already beginning?

Letting Stanley go empty handed was a terrible mistake, and one she had regretted immensely. She hoped she still had time to turn things around. She had sent an email to Stanley a few hours earlier, she hoped he would reply in time before she met with Warga.

“This is real comfy. Thanks for letting me stay here Max”

“Sure thing. That’s what friends are for.”

“You know, I’m still a bit fucked up from that guy honestly”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“I don’t know. I just keep seeing his orange vizor in my head, it won’t go away. And the pain of the ceiling falling on me, the shaking, and the noise. God, the noise was awful. I felt like the world was ending or something.

You know how in World War 2 and stuff they had the whole shell shock thing?”

“Like, stunned by the explosions?”

“Mm. I think I had shell shock. Then I remember blinking and I was just out for the count. You ever had that in the police force?”

“We don’t generally face armoured super soldiers like that in the police force honestly” Max replied.

Hang on a minute. Armoured.... Soldier.... Ash’s mind flashed to Stanley’s exoskeletons in Tokyo. Jesus... her heart sank. Stanley did fly to China, but she didn’t remember seeing any other contemporary researchers or engineers at the conference building the kinds of powerful skeletons Stanley was. Wasn’t he the industry front runner? For a moment, everything Ash thought she knew about Stanley turned to dust, as she struggled to come to terms with the possibility that maybe, just maybe, that soldier’s armoured exoskeleton was the one manufactured by Stanley.

It fit the bill. Stanley was contracted to go manufacture military grade suits in China. This was a terrorist wearing a military grade suit. Ash didn’t want to believe it. She felt herself struggling to breathe. Stanley wouldn’t willingly make a suit for a terrorist to come destroy her home and possibly kill her and Max. She refused to believe Stanley would do that.

Ash couldn’t hold herself back from crying. She let the tears flow freely. All the shock, terror, defeat, apathy, loss, fear and agony, she let it wash through her soul, cleansing it of all the pent up toxicity that was destroying her emotionally from the inside. Max ran for tissues and quickly pulled four out and handed them to Ash.

“Ahhh, Ash what’s wrong? Is everything ok? What are you thinking about?”

Ash blew her nose a few times.

“Im sorry Max” she mumbled through heavy sobbing. She let her head fall into Max’s chest, and he pulled her in closer for a hug, gently caressing her hair.

“I’m here Ash. I’m here. Everything’s gonna be alright.”

About a minute later Ash had cried herself out of tears, and lay, drained, on her side of the bed, breathing deeply and slowly. Max flicked off the light, and likewise got under the sheets, too tired to stay up reading. He felt so protective over Ash, and it troubled his heart deeply to see her in such distress. Then, in the darkness, he suddenly felt Ash’s arm moving.

She picked up his hand, and pulled it under her arm and over her stomach, as she cuddled up to him from the front.

"I get cold. Hope you don't mind being the big spoon" she whispered.

"Are you a feeling a little bit better Ash?"

"Yes, thankyou Max" she giggled to herself. "Your pillows are lovely"

Max was in confused. Only a moment ago Ash was sobbing uncontrollably, and now she had pulled herself into his chest and was cuddling up to him. What a change of pace. He was grinning to himself like a fool, full of hot feelings of blissful happiness. Ash felt so warm and soft, it was just wonderful. Her hair was centimetres from his face, and he courageously kissed her on the head gently, freaking out as soon as he did so. This was the win he sorely needed.

He fell heavily into a dark sleep. He couldn't remember anything happening, it was almost like he had simply blinked, and it was already morning. There was no time or energy to soak in the experience of being so close to Ash in such an intimate way. He looked at the rays streaming in through his window. Ash was waking up too.

"You wanted to wash your hair then?"

"Yesss I don't care I'll just towel dry it, it's not like I know anyone in Spain" Ash mumbled.

"Spain without the S right?"

Ash laughed.

"You know it" she replied.

"So, where and when are we meeting later tonight in Barcelona with Warga?" Max asked.

Ash realised she had no idea. She fumbled at her zip pocket on her jacket; the card she got from Warga wasn't there anymore. Oh shit. She rummaged through her suitcase to pick out the other jackets and vests she had. She couldn't remember which one she kept Warga's card in.

After a few frustrated minutes of panicked searching, she felt a small cardboard slip in the pocket of one of her pants, and frantically unzipped it, praying it would be his card.

"JESUS. Ok. Yes, I have his card, thought I lost it. Fuck me"

She took it out to look at the email.

“Well, I would call but no way honestly, should I email? Or call? Maybe I should call”

“Ash, just email. Then wait till we get to Spain, and call if he didn’t reply back.”

“Good idea. One sec”

Ash got to work typing out a quick message.

Hi Lotár

Marianne here from the conference. I hope you remember me. I thought I’d use your card and give you a quick email to say hello ☺ sorry I didn’t write back sooner. I’ll be in Barcelona tonight. Where is the location of the VIP meeting? I’m looking forward to it.

Warm regards

Marianne

She wasn’t sure if that was the right kind of energy for the text, but whatever, she’d think about it when she got there.

They caught a taxi to the airport and flew the 3.5 hour journey to Barcelona via Iberia Airlines, the National Airline of Spain. It was a perfectly unremarkable, boring flight. Nothing to write home about, she thought. No snacks either for such a short journey. Mildly irritating. C’est la Vie.

In Spain, the airport was pretty bland as well. Long, colourless promenades sandwiched between minimalist food courts, boxed in speciality stores, and bleak looking security terminals, vehicles and signage.

“Who the hell hired Satan to build this airport man” Ash muttered. Max cracked up in laughter.

“Honesty is one of your countless virtues darling”

“Oh hey there’s Wi-fi, I’ll see if Warga replied.”

Ash hooked up to the Wi-fi, filling in a quick form with her email and ticking the box NO, she most definitely does NOT want to receive promotional offers and regular updates from Josep Tarradellas Barcelona El-Prat International Airport. Nothing that much of a mouthful is worth getting updates from.

She reloaded her email, and there was a ping. Warga wrote back. Ash read it out loud to Max.

“Hello Darling Marianne! Yes of course I remember you, how could I forget? The VIP session will be held at 11pm tonight at the Warga Automotive factory in town. Arrive at the entrance, and a security guard will be verifying VIPs and letting them through to the event. See you tonight!”

“Well, that solves that problem I guess” she said, relieved.

Ash and Max decided it was best to go to the hotel to unpack bags so they had the freedom to move around a bit. Unfortunately, without the budget of the European Intelligence Agency, Ash wasn’t staying in something quite as luxurious as the Hashinami Hotel this time around. The place Max booked was called Hotel Eighty. There was had no pool or gym, but there was a restaurant and bar with a small piano for live music. While it wasn’t a grandiose display of opulence and magnificence, it felt kind of like the best kept hotel you might find in a small coastal village somewhere. Alas, it was only for two nights. The tiled terrace with potted plants was a nice touch.

After unpacking their bags, they went on an adventure around the neighbourhood, enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of Barcelona in the hotel district. Literally, every building along the block was a hotel of some kind, Ash was perplexed, so much competitive business in such a small space surely meant some businesses went bankrupt over others that undercut their price and value. But she wasn’t there to fight people on how to run a business, as tempting of an endeavour that may have been. She was there to prepare herself for her inevitable encounter later tonight with Lotár Warga.

Ash and Max went to a Paella eatery for dinner in the city, enjoying the specialty Paella Marinera at El Primero Restaurant in the CBD. The taste of iodine in the salty seafood was weirdly addictive, and Ash enjoyed indulging in the peculiar Spanish flavours she wasn’t used to. She also ordered a chorizo for good measure. The evening helped her calm her nerves a bit, and she heard some interesting stories from Max’s past.

After a hearty meal and a relaxing evening, they back to Hotel Eighty for a nap before getting ready to attend Warga’s party. Ash wasn’t feeling the nerves throughout the day, but when the time had come to finally catch a taxi to the venue, for the first time that day, she was anxious. Along the drive, she kept checking her phone periodically, wondering if for some reason Warga would change his mind, email her he’d found out her real name, or email her the party was off, or some other things she didn’t want to think about. No such emails came, and, after a substantial number of warm orange street lights along the highway, they finally arrived at the Warga Automotive Factory.

There was a perimeter set up with barbed wire fencing, and a security gate to get inside, with lots of lights illuminating the resort-spaceship hybrid of a factory. There were open fields of lush grass flowing around multiple moat-like rivers throughout the compound, and a multicoloured forest of flowers and trees dotted in the open area before the factory itself. And the factory... oh the factory was strange. Giant, metallic, topological anomalies served as convoluted segmentations of the snake like building, extending further backwards than the eye could see. Each building segment with its own flair, and radical design aesthetic. Seemingly impossible architectural geometries supported by no doubt some of the most innovative and powerful foundation schematics in modern architecture.

Ash couldn't stop to appreciate the beauty, because she had now come to the gate, and remembered she did not bring the VIP ticket from the conference. The main cause could have been attributed to the fact she hacked a key card to access the party and didn't have a ticket in the first place, but now was in trouble as the guard was pressuring her and Max for more information.

"One second please let me call Señor Warga"

There was a brief exchange in Spanish. Ash didn't know what was said. The guard asked Ash again, "Madam, what is your name?"

"Marianne"

The man said her name along with some more Spanish she couldn't pick up or understand. His conversation with Warga continued, to her great discomfort.

Surely it didn't take that long to confirm that she needed to be let in... she should have made the effort to contact Anil and ask for his help in forging a ticket. If that would have even been possible. But it was too late for that now. Her heart was pounding. This conversation was going on far longer than it needed to be.

"For fuck's sake" Ash mumbled under her breath. The guard lowered his phone. She was going to pass out if he heard that.

"Please, come through mam. Rodrigo will take you to the location"

She breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

"You ok?" Max whispered in her ear.

"Don't let me throw up, Max"

Rodrigo appeared to be a bit over dressed for the job of a cart driver, he arrived in a full plain black tuxedo, in a golf cart looking vehicle, and took them through the front of the factory building to a large lift. As soon as they stepped on it, the lift made an audible clanging and gear churning noise, and rapidly accelerated upwards, pulling them to the next floor, along with the golf cart. This nearly threw Ash off balance. In under 2 seconds they hit the one of the upper levels, and Rodrigo cleared his throat.

"Ahem, please follow me, I shall escort you to Dr Warga's event"

They were led through an elegant metal/ceramic contoured hall, with photos, memorabilia, and merchandise, as well as hundreds of trophies, related to the Warga Automotive Brand, and it's fantastic success in the international S1 racing circuit. They managed consecutive runner up positions in their first two seasons as an S1 team, an unprecedented feat.

They arrived at a production floor B-001. Rodrigo opened the door, and inside, Warga was already waiting, with the same group of VIPs Ash remembered from the first day of the conference.

"Ah, Marianne! Fantastic to see you. Excuse me Sir, but do you have a VIP ticket?" He looked to Max, apprehensive.

"I'm with her" Max replied, nodding at Ash.

"I'm sorry Sir but nobody without a ticket is permitted to this viewing. Marianne I saw at the conference so can verify she is part of this, but I'm afraid you will have to leave"

Ash's heart skipped a beat. Shit. She needed Max for moral support. She wasn't going to question Warga's decision though, she needed to be on his good side.

"Sorry, I'll see you later" she said to Max feebly. Luckily, he understood the same, and did not put up a fight. They didn't need to be making a scene. Max turned around with Rodrigo, and they left the floor, Rodrigo closing the door behind them. Ash caught Max's eyes one last time, before the door shut. Great. Now she had no backup.

Warga continued, "It would appear all of the VIPs have arrived, thankfully the lovely Marianne is the last, I received notifications ahead of time that Mr and Mrs Dovyuchkin won't be able to make it tonight, so we will be continuing without them"

Her eyes scanned the room, she couldn't see the old couple from the elevator, they must have been the Dovyuchkins.

“So, the show tonight is focused on two new products in development for a 2030 commercial release, and I would like the department heads of both to present them. The first is going to be from Warga Automotive”

They were in an elevated passageway overlooking a large set of processing machines that built many of the car skeletons. The lights went off, and a UV light illuminated the room. Out of the floor panels, there was another grinding of gears, and a sudden opening. Through the floor, a car emerged, without any wheels, just sitting on the floor. There was an electric whirr, and the car turned on with bright LED's. It began to float, several inches off the floor. Ash took a step forward to lean over the edge, for a closer look.

“Two years ago, the world was sent into a frenzy when Dr Daniela Cojocarú won the Global Science Association's prize for her revolutionary work on quantum propagators. Now, we won't bore you with the details. This evening certainly isn't a presentation about scientific minutiae. We are here to share Dr Cojocarú's achievements and thank her for working so closely with us over the last two years, and giving us uninterrupted access to her proprietary electromagnetic propagator technology. Dr Daniela Cojocarú!”

A small but elegantly dressed woman in a pine green evening gown stepped into the open space, to a gentle round of applause, and a spotlight illuminated her from above.

Her sharp, aristocratic brow finessed out of two deep-set, mysterious eyes. There was an uncomfortable darkness about them, too much for Ash's liking. Were it not for the wet glint in her eyeball and the eerie scar above her right eye, you could have just as easily been convinced she was not a real person. She was beautiful, to be sure, in some ways this was correct. And yet, it tangibly missed the mark for some inexpressibly artificial characteristics of her face, which Ash couldn't quite put her finger on.

“Thanks must go to Dr Warga of course for providing me with the facilities and financing to bring my research and development to the next level, I am inexpressibly grateful for this, and I couldn't have done it without your help Lotár.” Her voice was so feminine and enchanting, mellifluous. Ash glanced to Warga. He blew her a kiss and winked. Wow. She definitely did not want to know what was happening there.

“The model is called the Warga Panther, and will be the first free magnetic levitation motor vehicle in the world, entirely controlled with Dr Warga's Environment Mapping AI, constantly being updated not only from Warga



vehicles owners doing their own travelling, but working and updating simultaneously on a map network kept running by every Warga car across the world. The magnetic levitation benefits will be almost immeasurable, trillions saved on tires, helping the environment. Energy efficiency, exponentially higher safety standards. Little cracks or holes in the road, uneven surfaces, littered terrain, these problems will cease to exist. The Warga Panther is the next generation of human transportation, taking us further as a human race, than we have ever gone before. At least on the road” Daniela laughed. “Please enjoy the demonstration!”

She stepped back beside Lotár, and the spotlight switched off. The floor below them illuminated a track with LED lights, and the driverless car moved forward and followed the illuminated track, without any further assistance. It weaved and ducked for a couple of minutes around the various set up machines and obstacles on the floor, to highlight its excellent mobility. It was fascinating to watch. Almost like one of those little race cars on plastic tracks you can buy in hobby shops, with a little trigger gun to make them go faster along the track while trying not to fall off.

Eventually, after its extensive manoeuvring, it settled back in its place, and was lowered underground from where it originally sprung up from, resting against the floor. Ash had a lot of questions about how that worked. It blew her fucking mind, she hoped to be able to talk to Daniela afterwards to find out more. Maglev cars without a track was some seriously magic stuff.

“We hope you’ve enjoyed the Warga Panther demonstration everyone. New Year’s Celebrations will be beginning soon. Allow me to show you a new milestone for Warga Robotics in the adjacent floor. Please follow me”.

Everybody went into the large horizontal elevator at the end of the passageway, which transported them through the wall of production floor B-001 and into B-002, which was covered completely in white, all machinery, work stations, either painted in white or covered in white tarp-like sheets and pinned down with metallic tape. The elevator slowed, and the door opened to an identical looking passageway to before. Warga took a few steps out and turned around.

“Is everybody here still?” He did a quick head count, mumbling to himself as he counted.

“Full attendance! Nobody was lost along the way! Very good! Now, in this room I would like to give a demonstration of my personal pride and joy, a project I’ve been working on with another researcher and machine learning engineer, Dr Helena Duysen. Dr Duysen is not here at present, she wanted to join after the demonstration. Lights please!” the lights went out again, and the UV illumination came on. Soft music started playing from somewhere, but Ash couldn’t pinpoint exactly, it was like it was

coming from every surface. A humanoid figure came into view below them. Ash could see the sheen of metal on the robot.

It looked about 6 feet tall. It had long limbs and a graceful figure, and walked with a distinctive, smooth, dancer's gait. There was no jittery joint articulation, no mechanical property to its movement. It was fluid, flawless.

A second figure emerged from the darkness, and joined the other robot. This new one had broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Its arms and legs were thicker, an aesthetically calculated masculine physique. It was noticeably taller, Ash guessed it was 6'4 at least.

The two robots linked arms, and circled around each other. They were in a sensual, delicate dance.

Ash watched in amazement as the two robots performed in unison, dignified, flowing manoeuvres, comprising elements of ballet and improvisational turns, jumps, twists and contortions. Everything was executed with pin point precision. What amazed Ash the most was the ridiculously precise articulation of the hands and fingers in dance, the fingers splayed and grasped like actual human hands. When the male robot caught the female from a jump, it bent its knees and corrected its posture, to absorb the impact, in perfect, intelligent movement and decision making.

After several minutes of dance, the robots stopped, a spotlight came on, and they looked up at the group and bowed. Ash saw limited facial features, just the basic contours, no mouth, eyes or features, just the outlines.

A door opened from the side of the room, and a woman walked out. Nothing, out of all the emotional torture she'd been through in the last few weeks, witnessing Waker's death, fearing for her life on the run from Tokyo, nearly being killed by an unknown soldier in her own home, could have prepared her for this moment. The soft, infectious smile and the bright, green eyes. It was unmistakeable. She was wearing contacts and her hair was dyed blonde, but it was unmistakable. Wilma Bergman was alive and well.

## Chapter 11

Ash felt a torrent of emotion pour through her, and could barely hold back the tears. She couldn't jump down from that height, but wanted desperately to run to her mother. She had to hold back for the moment. Wilma hadn't yet noticed her, likely because she was illuminated by a spotlight while Ash was up on a dark platform. Wilma approached the two robots, which bowed to her and stood up straight, while she introduced herself.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you enjoyed that special presentation of the newest flagship product in development for 2030 at Warga Robotics. I am delighted to introduce myself on this very momentous occasion. My name is Dr Helena Duysen. I am a machine learning engineer, and I have been working with Dr Warga on producing the most human-like robot ever created, for commercial and domestic needs."

She took a pause, for effect.

"The purposes of this robot were twofold, firstly, to function in industrial settings as an employee performing all physical duties and responsibilities of its human counterparts, without compromising on efficacy and long-term performance human employees can be quite prone to losing. And the second, to replicate those all-encompassing physical capabilities a personal assistant in the modern home. A butler, cleaner, caretaker, chef, and any other needs the modern home requires, can be comfortably, effectively and flawlessly performed by these robots. The product line is called, Zeta. The male robot is called Zeta Robert, and the female robot is

called Zeta Michelle. The dance routine was designed to highlight the poise, precision and expertise of the most human like movement ever created in a man-made machine. I thank you all for being here tonight, and shall return it to Dr Warga”

There was a round of applause, as everyone turned to Warga once more.

“Please everyone, New Years is in 10 minutes, we will be exiting via the door Dr Duysen came in through together, to a viewing hall to see the city fireworks, and I have prepared a wonderful little celebration for us with starred catering for your enjoyment.”

Ash was about to burst into tears. She got into the elevator to the floor with everyone, while Wilma waited at the bottom for them. As soon as the elevator door opened, everyone filtered out, and Wilma finally saw Ash, and dropped the digital notepad she was holding, and it broke against the floor.

“Oh my god...” Wilma’s voice broke. Ash thrust her head into her mother’s arms and started silently weeping, barely able to control herself. Wilma was tearful and emotional too.

“Ash honey oh my god you’re okay!”

The rest of the group got to the door, and Warga turned around.

“Excuse me Dr Duysen, Marianne, we are waiting. Could I please have a word with you afterwards?”

“Yes, Sorry Lotár, we are coming.” She replied, wiping her eyes with a snuffle. “Let’s go Ash, we’ll chat in a minute”

They caught up to the group, and went through the floor door into an alley-like tunnel between buildings. They walked for a short distance to the next building, and went inside, where they caught another elevator. This one took them all the way to the top floor. As the doors opened, they entered a restaurant-like area with a 360-degree view of Barcelona around them, and some workers were already there, a handful of waiters, chefs and assistants. Some large screens were set up near the bar area showcasing the local time, with three minutes remaining on the clock until midnight.

“Everyone, please make yourselves comfortable and enjoy the buffet, I wish you all an incredible new year in 2029, and it has been wonderful sharing my work with you all at the conference and this special evening”

The group dispersed into the restaurant, some going straight to tables, others going to the food as a priority. There was a guitarist and singer on

a little stage setup to the left of the room, and they were performing one of their songs. It was quite a sweet atmosphere.

Ash was holding onto Wilma. Lotár approached them, separate from the group.

“So, this is your daughter I take it” he said, inspecting Ash up and down. “Sorry Wilma, I had no idea.”

“Hang on just a minute. How do you two even know each other?” Ash asked.

“It’s a long story Ash. I’ve been friends with Lotár for many years. We met in high school”

Ash interjected abruptly

“Lotár, you told Shuchang Zhao you would ensure my parents’ cooperation in bringing their research to the public, after he accused them of being criminals. Why did you do that? Why on earth would you do that if you were our friend? What kind of betrayal is that?” Ash said, with tears in her eyes. The TV started the countdown, the rest of the restaurant was counting with it. Lotár gazed solemnly into Ash’s eyes.

“I had to protect your mother, Ash. Zhao is a very powerful man, and I could not allow my friendship with Wilma to come to light when Wilma and Arnbjörn’s lives were in danger. The only way forward was illusion.”

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!!” A chorus of voices erupted together as the clock struck midnight. The musical duo was singing away, the banging of pots and clinking of plates and cooking food from the kitchen, all contributed to the song.

“Where is dad?” Ash turned to Wilma. “Is he safe? Is he here too?”

“We don’t know, honey. We separated a while ago, shortly before we left Stockholm. I thought about bringing your father with us to Lotár, but he said it was too dangerous, and he couldn’t travel with me. I don’t know where he is right now, he left me right before I got on the plane to Hungary at Arlanda.”

Ash really hoped Zhao had not found a way to track down her father.

“Mom, the house was nearly destroyed and I was buried alive for 36 hours with Max.”

Wilma’s expression instantly changed to shock. “Destroyed? What do you mean destroyed?”

"The house was put on high alert after you disappeared as a potential attack site, the lab was guarded by fucking special forces in assault outfits and weapons. Max and I were in the basement when some soldier in an exoskeleton suit blasted through the roof with heavy explosives, I was buried under rubble. Max said the soldier said a name, "Chung", before he shot a grenade at Max and he was also buried under rubble. It's a miracle we're still alive honestly."

"Jesus Christ Ash, I'm so sorry we put you through that! We should have told you sooner"

"Another thing...." Ash collected her thoughts, trying to process the implications.

"I went to the AI conference in Tokyo and met an engineer there named Stanley Torrens. He was presenting high powered exoskeletons for predicted mostly military use. He got offered a multi million dollar contract to work for Zhao in China, who reached out to recruit him, and I watched him leave on the day of departure. I also met Anil at the conference, and he told me Hale Laboratories had a vicious demonisation campaign against the LS-000 laboratory for the longest time. Zhao is the executive of Hale Labs behind closed doors, Michael Hale retired long ago and only acts as a public proxy. Here's the thing; I think Stanley made the exoskeleton of that soldier who destroyed the lab in Stockholm. It makes absolute sense. Zhao's long held corporate vendetta against LS-000, and him calling you and dad criminals at the conference demanding you be held accountable. Zhao then proceeds to recruit the premier military skeleton builder in America to work for him, and, no surprises, shortly thereafter, the owners of the lab he hates more than anything have their facility destroyed, and confidential assets stolen. Zhao is behind the attack, I'm dead certain. But that's no proof he definitely found dad."

Lotár and Wilma were taking it in.

"Oh fuck I almost forgot Bessley!" Ash exclaimed.

"Who Is Bessley?" Wilma asked.

"There's a whole European search party out for you, Operation Indie Mind, a guy called Bessley from European Intelligence contacted me, told me about the whole situation. Mom I've been through absolute shit looking for you and I can't handle this right now. Happy new year or whatever but I just need a break from this, can we please go back to the hotel? Max is at the entrance too; he'll lose his head when he sees you."

"We can't sweetie, Lotár has the best security for me right now, and I need to maintain the façade of Helena Duysen. It's not a safe climate for me to leave this place yet."

Ash got angry for a moment, then her expression softened, and the tears started flowing. She fell into Wilma's arms again, crying into her mother's shoulders. She couldn't argue with the facts. Wilma was right. It was not safe. She had lasted this long in this global witch hunt only thanks to Lotár's protection. And now, she needed it more than ever. At the very least, Ash could rest easy now that her mother was safe and sound. She needed to regroup, call Bessley and the ESI and let them know Wilma was safe, and think about her next move, to look for her father. Ash and Wilma could not lower their guard, until the threat of Shuchang Zhao had been eradicated.

The festivities continued for about two more hours, but Ash returned back to Max only thirty minutes later, after farewelling Lotár and Wilma. Max was dozing off in the reception area of the entrance building, when Ash came to awaken him.

"AHH!" he jumped up in a fright from Ash's touch. "Holy shit, Ash, are you ok? What did you find? What happened?" Max said in a panic. Ash took his hands in hers calmly, and led him outside, out of earshot of the guards in the block. She looked into Max's eyes.

"Everything is ok. Lotár Warga is a long-time friend of Wilma, and has been keeping her safe here since their disappearance. She's got a new identity of Helena Duysen. I saw her, she is safe, she is healthy, everything is absolutely fine. Lotár is innocent. Everything points to Zhao as the next target, I'm dead certain he ordered the Stockholm attack, and I've all but proven he has kidnapped Arnie. We're going to Guangzhou. "

"Oh wow, I totally didn't see that one coming. So its just... It's done? Warga is... on our side, and you're just leaving Wilma here? Ash why?"

"I'm not just leaving Wilma here, this is the safest place for her to be, with Lotár, as Helena Duysen. There is no guarantee of her safety as long as Zhao roams free."

"Madam, would you like a lift?" Rodrigo pulled up seemingly out of thin air next to them, still dressed in his tuxedo, sitting in a 2028 Warga GT supercar.

Max was thoroughly impressed, and couldn't hold back his enthusiasm, running around the side of the car and getting into the passenger seat in the blink of an eye.

"Get in Ash, Rodrigo is taking us to the hotel" He proclaimed, confident as a rooster.

"Señor Warga requested I take you to your hotel in a comfortable but stylish ride."

Ash inspected the 4-seater car. It was definitely ridiculously aesthetic. While she did lie to Warga in Tokyo to squeeze information out of him, she genuinely did appreciate his beautiful car designs, and none were more streamlined, powerful or desirable than the flagship GT race car. Regardless of her feelings, she was going back to the hotel tonight with Max either way, she might as well do it in style. She cracked a smile.

“Ok, let’s do it.” Ash opened the door to the back seat and made herself comfortable for the drive home.

Along the way, they spoke briefly with Rodrigo, who spoke very fondly of Lotár, and said he had always shown him kindness, as well as many others. Lotár did not let his power or influence get to his head, and treated everybody equally, regardless of who they were. It was a reassuring conversation to have, and gave Ash a certain spiritual comfort, to feel like finally, things were starting to go her way, and things were starting to work out favourably. She thought about Arby, how he must be feeling all alone. And Bessley. Waker. Watanabe. Ash thought of all the anguish she’d been through over the last few weeks, and let the feeling of progress wash over her completely. She flicked open her Japanese burner phone she got from Bessley in Japan. The W and B were still in the contacts. She exchanged the sim card with her roaming sim in her regular phone, and wrote a text to Bessley.

I found Wilma. She is safe. Warga is innocent and on our side. Will update when I know more. Next best move is Zhao, I think.

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Feng Ruo was in an election battle for the ages, running against the tightest political establishment China had seen in several decades. He had constructed a liberal political discourse centred on freedom and democracy, driven by his fanatical obsession with futurism and advanced technology and innovation. His opponent in today’s debate, was Zhang Aiguo, incumbent president and leader of the communist party. Zhang may have just been the talking head of greater, more insidious figures in the communist party, but he certainly was no intellectual slouch himself, with an extensive background in pure sciences giving him a razor-sharp acumen into the fabric of social society, and how to navigate it, Unlike many of the lesser minds in the Chinese political sphere. If any contender was going to pose a serious threat to Ruo’s presidency, it was Zhang Aiguo.

They traded punches, on topics ranging from the state of the economy, to China’s powers and progress in the race towards sentient AI. Ruo’s mind flashed in memory of what they had achieved with Zhao, and how much potential there was still before them. He lost no momentum on the question, offering euphemised but promising declarations, he stood on a firm political ground of scientific innovation and priority, and the number one goal in that realm was China winning the race towards sentient AI



under Ruo's leadership. A bold journalist even asked the question of Ruo, if he knew what had happened to the Bergmans of the pioneering LS-000 Swedish AI research group, but Feng Ruo was not shaken, and his constitution could not be broken. It drove him mad internally that he still could not track the Bergman's down, but their NIV developmental success with Zhao, was the best they could have hoped for.

Now, here was where things got interesting. Nobody knew exactly when or how it was possible that it could have happened, but Feng had orchestrated it so perfectly, that there was little left to the imagination, the case was clear cut as a terrorist intervention.

It was a plan which took months of strategizing in advance, but one which they were never going to be able to execute until the first debate against the candidate he would be going up against in the presidency. And execute the plan Feng did, believing ahead of time with a sixth sense no less, that by faking his own kidnapping alongside his rival political candidate, he and Zhao would have come up by then with a technology capable of influencing the thoughts, beliefs and nature of their political enemies.

No such technology had existed at the time the plan was birthed. And yet, through the divinity of fate, Feng's foresight proved to be invariably correct.

Zhang was captured with Feng and the two of them were both tortured in an underground Hale compound, hidden deep underground in the mountain city of Chongqing. That is to say, Aiguo was tortured. Ruo was sitting comfortably in the next room, acting out the audio of his desperation and terror.

Zhang cried out, too weak to speak up.

Zhao had brought the Neural Integration Visualizer with him, as well as LS1, to the room where Aiguo was being beaten to his limits. They were going to effectuate their first trial of active manipulation of consciousness using LS1's AI machinery. They just needed Aiguo to be awake.

混蛋，醒醒 (Motherfucker, wake up). A voice roused Aiguo from his lapsing consciousness. He grasped tentatively at his head, there was some kind of metallic helmet he was wearing secured firmly to his skull. His eyes were so bruised up he could barely see, and his hands and torso and legs were aching deeply in pain.

不知道你想要什麼！請告訴我！(I still don't know what you want! Please tell me! I can help you!) Aiguo cried out, too weak to speak up.

Zhao connected the atlas cable to LS1, who projected a holographic screen of what Aiguo's mind was seeing. He turned off eye input, and could see Aiguo's flurrying thoughts and imagery flashing through his consciousness. An image in the background kept appearing. It looked to be an open, sunlit field, set against a mountainous backdrop. Switzerland, Zhao guessed. There was screaming, Ruo in the other room had had enough, and wanted to come watch. It sounded like he passed out from his "beatings" by Cheuk. Aiguo glazed over in detachment. He was not present in the moment. His eyes were pleading, expectant of death. Zhao heard him praying silently to himself.

您在職業生涯中從事過哪些違法活動？(What illegal activities have you done during your political career?) Zhao asked, wondering what LS1 would see. The first image that came up on the screen was Aiguo bending over a table of white powder and snorting it, breathing heavily. Subsequent images showed meetings with a variety of people, dark backgrounds, nights, lights, car interiors. Point of view intercourse with a woman who was not his wife, and another woman watching. A scene of Aiguo witnessing two men decapitating someone. His men? A flash to his computer screen, hard drive, copying files, images. Blood, death. Another death. Fire. Aiguo's mind was going crazy.

This was all the black ammunition they could possibly need to destroy him. That kind of political execution would cause a political earthquake, especially coming from someone as deeply grounded, respected and feared as Zhang Aiguo. Zhao was paranoid some trail of breadcrumbs, somewhere, would lead back to Ruo and incite a legal gunfight that was going to hurt his chances massively at a smooth, successful election. Ruo had built up a reputation of trust, honesty and integrity with his followers, should he be accused of any agendas involved with the kidnap and torture of his opponent, that would be disastrous.

The images began to fade, as Aiguo's head lolled sideways. He appeared to have fallen asleep.

"You record everything right 1?"

"Yes, everything is stored in regenerative network memory."

"We can't blackmail him or expose him, it's too risky, and will put too many suspicious eyes on Ruo as the instigator of the political assassination. 1, I know you can read neural signals, but can you also concurrently simulate them?"

"I do not understand the question"

Zhao was wondering how he could modify the helmet to allow input in reverse, to give LS1 the mode to stimulate Aiguo's brain to produce fabricated memories, thoughts and visualizations. He had an idea.

"I'll be right back, 1". He unplugged the atlas cable from 1, and went a few doors down the corridor to a room with electrical equipment. Ruo was on a phone call in the corridor.

"One second" Ruo muted the call. "Any luck with Aiguo?"

"Yes, but we need to think about this more carefully, we can't just extort him outright, that would be foolish. Go see him if you want a closer look, I'll be right there." Zhao replied.

He opened the door to a laboratory of medical equipment. He was looking for a head circuit net for transcranial magnetic stimulation. He saw the net in the first cupboard he opened on the bottom right far corner of the room. He grabbed it and flicked off the lights, before heading back to Aiguo and Ruo.

"Take off the NIV helmet, I want to put this on first."

Ruo unscrewed and unstrapped the helm from Aiguo's head, and Zhao fitted him with the electromagnetic head net. Ruo then re screwed the helmet on top.

"1, I need to know, can you produce a signal via the atlas cable? Or can you only receive input?"

"I can produce a signal too" LS1 replied.

"Could you reverse the direction of the input you were receiving a minute ago from Aiguo, and feed him back modified neural patterns into his mind?"

"I can reverse the signal yes. I have not done this task before, but it is functionally possible. I just need the subject's brain to be within an electromagnetic field I have access to."

Exactly as Zhao had predicted.

"I put a net on him, can you try to send input to his brain?"

Zhao plugged in the atlas cable again, and LS1 booted up his holographic screen. Zhao saw a lot of flickering lights inside LS1's shell. The screen was changing colours as 1 processed things.

"Can you show me the periodic table of elements?"

LS1 fed this information to Aiguo, and the holographic screen started changing colours again. In a couple of moments, it showed a clear grid visualization of the periodic table of elements, almost like a computer monitor. It was crystal clear, remarkably so.

“So this is in his head right now? This is what his brain is registering?” Zhao asked.

“The subject is in the Rapid Eye Movement stage of a sleep cycle. The current images are being executed as dreams, to be encoded in the subject’s memory” LS1 replied.

“You mean he’s dreaming about the periodic table?”

“Yes.”

Now this... this was the next level of world changing technology.

“I need you to make the subject conscious of a desire to resign from the presidential race. Can you make him do think this? Also make him forget of his capture, and the capture of his rival Feng Ruo.”

LS1 didn’t reply. The screen flickered some more in several colours, and turned to a vague, hallucinogen-like soup of light and distortion. Ruo finished his phone call and walked in.

“What’s going on?” He inquired.

“1?” Zhao looked down at the small metal ball. Still no reply. Was he processing the request? Zhao couldn’t be sure. The hallucinogenic soup was still scintillating on the screen. Some seconds later, LS1 turned off the holographic screen.

“I...don’t know, Ruo” Zhao replied.

“I have completed your request” LS1 said suddenly.

“Wait, are you sure? What did you just do?” Zhao’s heart was beating faster.

“In the subject’s mind, I have produced a strong Rapid Eye Movement sleep stage memory of a conscious desire to resign from the presidential election race and the subject’s political career.”

Fuck. If this works that will be a perfect outcome for them. Veteran politician gets kidnapped and tortured, loses his political ambitions and desire for the presidency, changes his mind on things and steps away to live the quiet life. Nobody would suspect Ruo. After a kidnapping and

torturing, it would be very believable for Aiguo to lose heart for the race. This was going to be the best possible position.

Aiguo was still passed out and strapped to the chair.

“Cheuk!” Zhao yelled into the compound.

“Comiiiiing!” A voice was heard in the distance. Zhao checked his watch. It was nearly 3am. They were going to need to dump Aiguo somewhere discreet, and let the cops pick him up in the morning. The Jiangbei Park nearby would be the perfect location.

“Cheuk! I need you to....” Zhao said loudly. Cheuk arrived at the door. “Oh, that was quick” his voice lowered again. “Unscrew Aiguo and drop him in the gutter at Jiangbei Park for the authorities to find in a few hours. Nobody will be there at this time, and it’s pissing rain. Go with Grigori, he’s waiting in the garage.”

“Yes, boss.” Cheuk got to work on the straps.

“Ruo, Let’s go through the tunnel, it exits to a helipad. We’ll go to Guizhou first, then take my jet back to Guangzhou. You don’t need to fake it anymore, I’m pretty sure LS1 just solved our problem.”

They went to the basement and followed the tunnel out, before flying away from the Chongqing compound. The authorities would be wondering how he ended up in Chongqing of all places. But that was none of Zhao’s concern. He had made absolutely certain there would be no breadcrumbs left on their expedition, and a ride back to Guangzhou would leave it almost certain that Zhang Aiguo would not be a threat any longer. But naturally, there would be public commotion after the fact. After Aiguo so suddenly decided to step away from the hot plate. No doubt they would replace him with an alternative from the party. An alternative less experienced, less well-versed. Someone who wouldn’t be as much of a threat as Aiguo was.

Naturally, however, this would only hold up if LS1’s tinkering was In fact successful. They won’t know until likely the news announced it either later today in the evening, or sometime in tomorrow’s news. The result came sooner than expected, only a few hours later. At 9am in the morning, state news announced the unfathomable outcome that Zhang Aiguo, Communist presidential candidate for the 2029 presidential election, the biggest competitor to Feng Ruo’s absolute domination of the political landscape, had withdrawn from the presidential race, and an associate from the party would be taking his place. There were no comments from Aiguo himself, merely representatives speaking on his health, citing that his kidnapping and torture had disincentivised him from pursuing the presidency, and he no longer wanted to be a part of it.

His replacement? A virtual unknown. Liu Bolin, a younger candidate. Fresh faced and inexperienced, ripe for embalming in all the essential oils and spices of indoctrination and fanatical zealotry.

Zhao and Ruo finished watching the news, enjoying breakfast together in his offices at Hale. Stanley Torrens was with them.

“Zhao, what you’ve done with LS1 is nothing short of a miracle. This.... I don’t even know what to say. Where to begin.”

They were giddy in enthusiasm. Stanley almost felt left out, but it didn’t bother him. Once had found his groove in the swing of things, he liked to get lost in his thoughts. Lost in prototyping, experimentation and testing. And it certainly helped that Zhao had a seemingly unlimited budget. By now, Stanley felt like Ash was a distant memory of the past. He could barely remember her touch, or her scent. Or the texture of her hair, or the softness of her lips. He hadn’t heard from her in a very long time, and he wasn’t quite sure why. He had sent email messages, more than he could count. He missed her severely. But he didn’t let it incapacitate him.

He was having fun with Zhao. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. And he finally got to put his skeletons to practical use, at New Year’s Eve, deploying several XMM2 next generation skeletons in various Guangzhou locations with police, to keep rabid protestors suppressed, who were fighting their absolute spirits out in refutation of those provoking the dissolution of the Overton Window.

“Where can we go from here?” Ruo asked Zhao, who looked to Stanley and grabbed him affectionately by the shoulder.

“My good friend Stanley here is an engineer specialised in component miniaturisation. Next, we are going to go smaller, and we are going to go wireless.”

## Chapter 12

Ash had spent her remaining day in Barcelona with Max in a solemn comfort, in a deeper state of peace she hadn’t known in some time. They hopped from café to café, soaking in the gorgeous Baroque and Gothic architecture. In the afternoon, Max wanted to go to the biggest art museum in Spain, but Ash wasn’t sure she would have the patience, so she let him go alone, while she went to a Flamenco show in Las Ramblas, conveniently something Max had no interest in, so they both got to do something they enjoyed.

In the evening, they played scraps together in the hotel. Bessley hadn’t replied the entire day, and Ash was wondering why, considering the gravity of her discovery that Wilma was safe and well. Then, her phone rang.

"Ash, where are you right now?" Bessley's smooth British accent asked.

"In Barcelona, leaving tomorrow back to Stockholm, did you get my email?"

"Yes, where is your mother?"

"She's with Warga in the Barcelona factory, he's on our side, he's keeping her protected."

"What about your father? Did she say anything about where he might be?"

"No, she has no idea"

"Ash there's been an update from Anil. He's been keeping tabs on Zhao via Jing's updates, Jing confirmed Zhao ordered the attack on the house to extract the LS-000 data and assets. Jing also said the attack was carried out by Cheung Min Liu and Cheuk Su Huang, two military trained killers working for Zhao. I'm sorry to tell you this Ash, but Cheung and Cheuk were equipped with the XMM suits of Stanley Torrens, who I believe you befriended."

It took a moment for that piece of information to sink in. Ash was shattered. She had known things were going to get bloody in her search for Arnbjörn and Wilma, but never expected them to get personal. This was surely the universe's way of getting back at her for ruining the life of her former employer. Karma was a bitch. Maybe Ash was, too. She felt a sourness in her mouth. Acrid disappointment.

"Also, you should know, the assets Zhao stole were the first two models of the LS-000 AI series. Despite not being sentient prototypes yet, they are still extremely powerful. Further, we have intelligence that Zhao and wildcard presidential front runner, Goro founder Feng Ruo, are working closely together to clear the road of Ruo's competition towards the Chinese presidency. A short while ago, his biggest threat, Zhang Aiguo, resigned from office and abandoned the presidential race. The communist party is not known for running from a fight, and Zhang Aiguo had one of the most killer mindsets in the game. His retirement would be suspicious already under normal circumstances, but we know Zhao has been working on mind altering technology, and with the LS1 and LS2 prototypes in hand, and the kidnapping and torture of Aiguo, that's effective confirmation that he has succeeded. Aiguo has been compromised by Zhao's new technology. We can't allow this threat to gain any further momentum. That's where you come in"

"Where do I come in, exactly?"

“Zhao, Jing and Stanley will be accompanying Ruo to a Goro Network media event in Bangkok, in two days’ time. I’ve cancelled your flight to Stockholm and put you on a flight to Bangkok instead, tomorrow at midday Spanish time.

“You what?? Fuck, I need a break from this. Bessley please.”

“Every day that passes is a day we don’t know if your father is still alive Ash. You have to do this, there is no other way. You can’t do it on your own.”

Ash sighed in resignation. “What do you want me to do?”

“You should be able to set up a meeting with Jing, and give her two very important USB drives she must insert into LS-001 and LS-002, to trigger a self-destruct mechanism built into their architecture.

“Shit, is that even safe?”

“Yes, the self-destruct isn’t explosive, it just melts the cores of both in an overheating, destroying them completely. Jing has entrusted ESI with an enormous amount of confidence in pulling this off, and in exchange for helping us we are offering her full diplomatic immunity and asylum in England.”

“When will I get the drives?”

“At the airport. The drives have been sent by Wilma, and expedited by ESI to be delivered to you by hand when you land in Bangkok. A driver will be waiting for you with them in his possession.”

“Understood.”

Bessley hung up. She thought she sensed a weird tone in his voice, like some kind of exasperated resignation. What was that supposed to be? Things are back on track. Ash couldn’t understand the dissatisfaction.

“Max, duty calls. I’m actually not going back to Stockholm. I’ve just had my tickets rebooked to Bangkok tomorrow.”

“What the fuck, why?”

Max decided she didn’t care about secrecy anymore.

“European Intelligence, the ESI agency, wants me in Bangkok. Now that they’ve found out Warga is innocent, evidence suggests Shuchang Zhao as being the most likely kidnapper of my dad. He’s cooperating with Goro CEO Feng Ruo on clearing out the field Chinese presidential election, and will be in Bangkok on a Goro media event with his personal assistant Jing.



I'm delivering two self destruct drives to Jing so she can insert them into the two AI bots Zhao's soldiers stole from our house."

The gravity of the situation, in fact the content itself, did not yet register in Max's mind, and would not register for a couple hours longer. He looked at the dice in his hand, and zoned out momentarily.

"Max? are you ok?"

"Hm? Oh, yes yes, all good. Let's play scraps again."

Max's nonchalance was puzzling. Ash assumed he was still processing the information, so she moved on.

"You've been away from the station for some time, are they OK with you being gone?"

"Honestly Ash I don't know I just wanted to spend the time with you. I've really missed you."

"Aw Max. Come here" she rolled onto the double bed, and dimmed the bright light on the bedside table, inviting Max to come lie down next to her. As he did so, she pulled him suddenly over to the other side of the bed with surprising strength.

"Slam dunk!" Ash giggled. She held onto Max from behind, she didn't mind being the big spoon. Max deflated into a state of complete relaxation. He sighed heavily.

"What's up Max? Talk to me".

"ESI sent you to Japan too, didn't they?"

"Yes"

"Did you... were you in danger?"

"Yes, but I had the right people around me to help and I was lucky."

"You don't-"

"I'm doing this to find my dad, Max. Nothing else matters to me. I'm not going to miss this chance."

"I was going to say you don't need to worry, you're Ash the little trooper, you can do whatever you put your mind to."

"Awww thanks Max" Ash squeezed him tighter.

Max's heart was burning. It was almost unbearable. He had such profound physical and emotional longing for Ash, and was too paralyzed by fear to express it. She was cuddling up to him lovingly, and yet, he could not shake the thought that if he tried to kiss her, she would pull away.

Worse still, he couldn't figure out how to articulate to Ash his feelings. He just sat with them begrudgingly, frustrated with himself.

Ash was leaving tomorrow to Bangkok, and there was no guarantee he would ever see her again. He couldn't live with such cowardice, the veil of emotional inarticulation strangling him beyond what he could bear. He gently pulled down Ash's arms, and turned around to face her. The amber light illuminating her eyes gave them a mesmerizing radiance. He wanted to hold his breath. Every breath he took, was one breath closer to the inexorable ethereal of Ash, of her eyes, her perfect, blossom soft lips. He closed his eyes, and leaned forward to kiss her, and in a fleeting panic he thought he'd lost everything that mattered to him most. But then, a moment later, Ash's warm hand held his neck, and her rosy lips met his. Max didn't know in what dimension, but a fireball had erupted somewhere in the glossed fibers of his mind, bringing light and heat to the insufferable prison of his craven desires, pushing with aggressive, hot, sexual energy back at him. He took Ash's silky hair under his fingers, and graciously pushed back.

"Ash..." Max whispered between hot and wet kisses. Ash was straddling him, her hair brushing against his face and neck pleasantly. "I'm gonna miss you. Please stay safe."

"I will Max, don't worry. I'll be back soon".

After a few minutes of kissing, Ash caressed Max's face once more, and gave him a kiss between his brows.

"Let's sleep, big day tomorrow". She huffed and let out a giggle.

"What was that?" Max asked, wondering what he missed.

"I've just been wondering for the longest time when you were going to gather the courage to kiss me. It's cute."

Max flushed with embarrassment. "You mean you knew all this time?"

"C'mon Max. I've seen how you look at me. You're not very good at hiding your feelings haha. Don't worry though! It's honestly so sweet. I'm glad we got there in the end."

Ash took a deep breath and let it out, lying on her back, fully relaxed. Max lay on his stomach, his favourite sleeping position, and felt himself falling to sleep.

Some hours later, they both awoke, within a couple of minutes of one another again.

“Ah shit” Ash looked at the clock. 9.30am. They had very little time before she had to leave. “My flight is at midday, we need to leave very soon Max. Has yours changed from 3pm?”

Max turned on his phone to quickly check. There was a notification his flight had changed to 11pm.

“Fucks sake. Stockholm flight changed to 11pm. I’ll come with you now, I’ll just find a café or lounge or something”

Ash was relieved. She didn’t want to be alone right now. She wanted Max by her side, she was feeling fragile and didn’t know why. She gathered all her things from the closet and packed them neatly into her suitcase, before brushing her teeth and packing away her toiletries. Max had packed the night before, and only had his toothbrush left.

As they went down to the lobby to check out, Max noticed there was nobody there. It was a stark contrast to the day of check in, when the hotel and lobby were absolutely packed to the brim. She left the room key in the checkout box, and they stepped outside to the taxi rank fifty metres up the road, where two were already waiting. Ash approached the first taxi, a dishevelled, rusty yellow Mercedes, clearly well past its prime, but with a fresh-faced enthusiasm in its front lights, recently repaired with newer filaments that gave it an energetic red glow. Ash sat down into the front seat, while Max took the back.

Buenos Dias! A donde quieres ir? The man asked nonchalantly.

El aeropuerto, por favor. Gracias, señor. Ash had made use of her Spanish phrasebook very well. She kept it succinct, just the way she liked. And evidently, so did the driver. He wasn’t wearing a nametag, but she saw his driver registration on the dashboard, attached to the bottom front of the window. The writing was too small to discern. She wasn’t bothered to look closer. She would simply remember him as Jorge. Mr Jorge, the generic middle-aged taxi driver from Catalonia. She remembered Watanabe. He had so much more energy about him, and a beaming smile. Poor Jorge looked like he just didn’t give a shit. And to be fair, he probably didn’t. She didn’t imagine Spanish taxi drivers got paid very well.

After a brief drive Jorge dropped them off at Terminal 2, the international terminal at Barcelona Airport. They shuffled through the boring, bland shops and lines all over again, through security, and check in, before landing eventually in the waiting lounges. Ash checked the big screen listing the departing flights. Boarding had already started for her flight. So early!?!

"I'm at gate 22, we are boarding already, shit"

"Ok, run run run Ash, come on." Max pulled her along. She bumped into an older lady, who fell over, and started yelling aggressively. Ash half closed her eyes and kept moving, trying to ignore it. She looked back. A small group of people had formed around the older lady, Ash prayed nobody would pull them up on it.

They arrived at gate 22, and the last handful of people were getting their tickets scanned. Max's heart lurched, he didn't want to separate from Ash. She turned to face him and kissed him unexpectedly, her cold, wet lips pressing into his. Max embraced her, squeezing tightly.

"Please don't get yourself killed. Whatever this ESI bullshit is, just see it through to the end. Find Arnie. Stay safe Ash." She looked up at him, hopefully. Her eyes dazzled him yet again. Max moved a hair from her face behind her ear, and she closed her eyes, before a tear rolled down her face.

"See you soon Max." She turned to give the ticket to the air hostess, and was scanned through. Ash didn't look back at Max, but jogged down the corridor.

"I love you, Ash!" he said out loud, awkwardly. She didn't reply. Had she not heard him? The air hostesses were looking at him now. He wasn't going to repeat it. The embarrassment was too much. He watched as Ash handed the flight attendant her ticket, and the attendant pointed down the plane, where Ash stepped out of sight. He felt disappointed. Strange feelings were nagging at him. He had experienced one of the greatest joys he had held onto in his life for over a decade, the joy of dreaming and hoping for Ash's touch, love and affection. And now that it was suddenly gone again, the loneliness was palpable. It was going to be a long wait till his 11pm flight back home, and Max genuinely felt like he was experiencing rapid onset depression.

Ash's flight was marred by the unfortunate discovery of an allergy to carob gum, a thickening agent present in the carob oatmeal cookies the flight attendants gave out as a dinner snack. She spent. She drank lots of water, but ran up a noticeable fever on top of painful lymph node swelling. The flight attendants took dutiful care of Ash with the first aid kit, and regularly inspected her throughout the flight. Ash was in pain and discomfort, but she tried to sleep it off as much as she could. After all, pain was no longer present when you weren't conscious. It would be pretty absurd if pain followed you into your dreams. Ash was grateful for the escape, despite constantly falling in and out of sleep throughout the flight. When flight attendant woke her up to prepare for landing, she was feeling significantly better, and glad that the flight was over. She was exhausted from lack of thorough sleep, but with her bleary eyes,

wandering through Suvarnabhumi International Airport arrivals, she didn't even look around, she just went straight for luggage pickup, waited impatiently for her bag, and rushed to the exit. Before the door opened, a familiar voice called out to her.

"Ash! Over here!"

She looked around, semi-conscious. To her absolute shock, she saw Watanabe's smiling face running up to her.

"Oh my gosh, Watanabe!" She was instantly awakened.

"It's been a while eh Ash?"

Ash jumped on him in a hug. She had a splitting headache from the lingering allergic reaction, but that didn't matter right now. The man who saved her life in Japan, had been placed on her path once more.

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you Watanabe. My head hurts like hell though, can we please just get in the car and go please?"

"Yes, no problem. Follow me, I've got you, easy there"

Watanabe pulled Ash's arm over his shoulder, and they walked together to the carpark. As soon as they opened the door to the outside from the air-conditioned terminal, Ash was blasted with the full force of 35 degree weather. She had only one article of summer clothing, a floral dress she had been carrying in her suitcase for when the right occasion called. She was sweating immediately.

"Don't tell me your car is far please Watanabe".

"No, it's right through the cement bridge on the left next to the elevator."

They stepped along the route, Watanabe pulling Ash in between obnoxiously loud passers-by, chattering away with each other in Thai, which Ash had zero phonemic concept of. The sounds they uttered in the language felt so alien to her, compared to her native Sweden. By the same token, she wondered how Swedish might sound to them, like some alien, freaky, unnatural language.

They arrived at Watanabe's car, a musky old Kia Sedan, probably at least as old as Ash was. But inside was nice and covered with a plush material. The air conditioner had kept the car cool previously, and it still felt so much better than the outside air.

"Wow this heat is shit man"

“There’s been a change of plan Ash. For your safety, we cannot allow you to stay at a public hotel for the exchange today. You will be staying with me at a safehouse, and I will be driving you to the Goro event held at Goro HQ, here in Bangkok.”

“Ah right, where’s the safehouse?”

“We will be at a guarded apartment block of 4 apartments in Sathorn”

That sounded good to Ash. Nice to spend time with Watanabe again. He hadn’t aged a day, and still had the same rosy brightness about him, those sweet puppy dog eyes and innocent smile.

They drove in peace for the rest of the half an hour journey to the suburb of Sathorn, passing the essentials of Thailand along the way. The city seemed veiled in a tungsten filter. All colours in the region seemed to be dilapidated and depleted, assimilated into the concrete jungle. Along main busy streets, Ash saw lines of people shuffling across food stalls, as well as stalls for clothing, electronics, assorted accessories and hand made goods. In the distant skyline she could make out several unfinished buildings still being built and covered up from the rain. She saw no less than 10 dogs in the space of a few minutes, roaming the streets seemingly without their owners. It gave Ash an acute sense of discomfort. She wasn’t sure whether or not to feel guilty for coming from her privileged Sweden, or whether she should feel sad for the people here, clustered together in concrete like meaningless ants, hustling through the scintillating maze of flesh each day, just trying to survive for one more night. She appreciated the first world now more than ever.

Pulling up to Sathorn, they faced a townhouse styled apartment block that was four stories high, with an apartment on each floor presumably. There were four armed men on either side of the building, but Ash didn’t know it yet, because they were sitting behind a fence.

Watanabe opened his door, and she heard their voices. As she stepped out too, the four soldiers came out from either side of the building calmly, without drawing their guns.

## ฉันไม่แน่ใจว่าคุณรู้หรือไม่ งานแต่งงานถูก

### ยกเลิก? (Do you know, the wedding is cancelled?)

บอกภรรยาหลักว่าเธอมีเกมที่ดีชนะ (Tell the wife, that she has a won hand)

Watanabe replied to the man in Thai. It seemed like another code phrase. Ash had no idea Watanabe could speak Thai as well.

And, just like last time, the soldier responded in English.

“Welcome to the Sathorn Safehouse”. Watanabe shook hands with the man, a swarthy gentleman with a bald head and beady little terrier eyes. He gestured for Ash to come up with her bag. They went inside, and were unexpectedly met by two other people, slightly older than Ash it looked like. A fair skinned man and woman, both with lithe, spindly bodies. Both were also adorned with the same kind of draping, dull metallic chains and jewellery, and they had the same piercing through the nose, through the right nostril.

“Pleasure to meet ye, I’m Rory, that’s my sister Fiona.” The man said, with an outstretched hand in greeting. Ash felt the grating of the harsh Scottish accent in her spine.

“Ash” She replied, still trying to decipher the strange, angular faces she saw before her.

“Watanabe”. Watanabe shook both their hands. They looked to be twins, with the same wide-eyed look, blue for Rory and grey for Fiona. Their noses were identical, angular and refined. It was interesting seeing genetic recombination at work.

“We’ll take the third floor if that’s ok with you” Watanabe said, more in a declarative manner than a suggestive one.

“Aye, we’ll stay down ‘ere” the brother answered.

“Good luck”

Watanabe motioned Ash to follow him up again. No questions? They looked nice, some friendly faces. Maybe she could talk to Fiona and Rory later. As she took the first step up, Fiona uttered something she couldn’t hear.

“Sorry?” Ash turned around.

“We’ll be with you for the Goro event. Rory and I are your protection” Fiona said brusquely, facing the window. “Let’s hope you don’t get yourself killed, lass.”

“Ehhh thanks” Ash sighed, not feeling encouraged by Fiona’s apparent indifference. She went back upstairs. Watanabe was already in his room in the corner lying on the bed. The apartment was simple, navy blue upholstery, basic design, a table, three little wooden storage cabinets with glass doors, a beaten up leather couch, and a freestanding TV. A little bit of a downgrade from the Japanese safehouse, but she’d hardly been staying in the same bed every night as of late, so she was used to just getting on with things.

“What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“I drive you to the Goro HQ in the CBD, Fiona and Rory will tail along at their own pace”

He dug around in his satchel and pulled out a hard cardboard slip. “Here’s your entry ticket. Don’t ask the price, Bessley would kill me if I told you” He laughed. “And don’t forget, the whole reason why we are here”. He handed her two, blood red, metallic USB sticks, cut like little slabs of gold bullion. She felt like she was carrying a weapon, it was intimidating and, perhaps even a little bit uncomfortable. She slipped them into her jacket zip pocket, and went to undress. She fumbled through the cabinets trying to find the remote to the air conditioner, but couldn’t see it. Sweat was dripping from her brow. “Fuuuck can we turn on the AC please?”

“You just press the button on the side, it’s only got one setting, 20 degrees, half fan force.” Watanabe said, pressing the button on her behalf. Ash quickly went and stood under the crisp cool air. “Oh god this is good.”

She looked to Watanabe. “Hey, so, what have you been up to really, since I last saw you?”

“Ah, you know, I’m based in Japan, just had some low importance administrative stuff I was helping friends out with. Then I got the call Indie Mind has new intel, and the next exchange was happening with an insider asset in Thailand, so I put my hand up to come join you here.”

“Nice! It’s really good to see you again Watanabe. I think about that song you sang for me in the car in Tokyo. It was beautiful, I couldn’t sing like that to save my life haha. You know what I regret? I used to take piano lessons. Well, mom forced me to take them. I should have stuck with it, maybe I’d be a pretty good pianist right now. But I lost all that touch, just never had the time to sit down and focus on it I guess. It was going to disappear regardless.”

“We should start a duet band or something” Watanabe joked.



“Yea maybe if I caught up the last ten years of missed lessons, we could make something out of it.” She smiled. Ash realised she was quite hungry.

“Is the fridge stocked by the way?”

“There’s oats, milk and peanut butter, but nothing else sorry”

“I could do with some oats actually.” She went into her room to unpack, then came out wearing her long pyjamas. She got herself a bowl and spoon from the kitchen, and poured herself a bowl of full cream milk and dried oats. The oats were quite bland, but at least the milk was refreshing. Watanabe stayed in his room, and Ash remained in the kitchen, thinking about tomorrow. All she needed to do was find Jing and give her the drives. The rest would take care of itself. Why hadn’t they yet figured out where Arnie was? The whole European Intelligence Agency is running full steam ahead for Project Indie Mind, and they haven’t been able to pin Zhao with anything, or the location of Arnie. She couldn’t believe she had to do it herself, she was the one who found Wilma, and now she was the one who was going to have to find Arnie. She had zero clues, all she knew was that signs pointed towards Zhao, but there were no guarantees he even had anything to do with it. Frustrated, she washed her bowl up and set it to dry, before heading to sleep in her room. She connected to the Wifi in the block. Password required. Shit. She dragged herself downstairs to the router to check the password on the back, hit in the password into her phone and went to sleep.

## Chapter 13

The following morning, she was awoken by Watanabe pushing down her shins comically, at the foot of the bed.

“Come on Ash, get, that, lazy, ass, moving” he pushed with every word.

He was already fully dressed in a semi formal attire, dark green blazer and chinos, with a crisp white dress shirt and tie. The only thing she had was her floral dress. Perhaps she could buy something in the city later today.

“Fiiiine give me a minute, man. We’ve still got time”

“Actually, no we don’t, it starts at 8.30, its now 7.50, it takes twenty minutes to get there.”

Ash sprung up immediately.

“Shit, sorry, point taken point taken” She grabbed the floral dress from her suitcase and rushed into the bathroom to change. She dumped her pyjamas on the bathroom floor and quickly ran over her teeth with her electric toothbrush, spat out the toothpaste, and grabbed her jacket with the two drives in them. It was going to be a hot day. She took the USB drives out from the jacket and slipped them into the fold of her dress, which had a secret zip pocket as well. In addition, she made sure to take one of the malware USBs, just in case she found herself needing to resort to a last-ditch digital breaking and entering to get what she needed.

She had no intention of ever buying clothes that didn’t at least in some capacity hold storage utility via pockets or zips. She resented the women’s fashion industry for making it so difficult to find pocketed clothing items. But with enough determination, finding anything is possible. She likewise slipped in her folding phone from Japan with the numbers of Watanabe and Bessley. She had found out that there in fact was no need for buying Japanese or Thai sim cards with it, it was a specially designed satellite phone that worked anywhere on the globe, but it was only coded to contact Watanabe and Bessley and it could not contact or be contacted by any other phones.

As they stepped through the bottom floor, Rory and Fiona were already gone it seemed. She hadn’t heard from Bessley either. Last time he gave a warning about contacting Waker at the Tokyo conference. This time.... There seemed to be no such issue with Rory and Fiona? She wasn’t sure about why that was the case.

They drive to the venue was warm and succinct, coloured by all the vicissitudes of the chaotic turbulence that was Bangkok traffic and scenery of swarming humans, cars, and animals. Arriving at Goro HQ, Ash was stunned to see it was a comparatively small block of land, containing three dark buildings, encircled by large metallic fencing. Compared to the near miniature city that was Warga Automotive headquarters in Barcelona, Goro’s trite architectural design was uninspiring and bland. Surely there would be so much more here. But at least, the three buildings were connected via a rooftop, dome like structure and support, making it look almost like a tripartite astronomy tower.

Watanabe interrupted her train of thought

“Goro prides itself on its working from home focus. That’s why it’s such a moderately sized headquarters, compared to full on campuses of other larger corporations.”

There wasn't even parking. They had to drive into the parking building across the road from the Goro block, next to a small park, with no less than 10 floors of parking space. All the floors were filled right up until the 9<sup>th</sup> floor where Watanabe finally found a spot. They descended the parking building and moved across the road to the Goro block. There was nobody at the front gate like in Barcelona, they walked straight in. But here was where it got tricky. There were glass reinforced gates with card scanners which employees had to scan to get through, but they were currently opened for the event, where hundreds of people were already lined up in the entrance hall being ferried through the gates and on towards the top floor, where the event would be held. She knew this because she heard a lady saying it on the intercom, and repeating welcome messages in a warm, pleasant voice.

Welcome all, to Goro Headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand. Please note, Today's special event has been organized by our founder Feng Ruu, and will be held on the top floor of this building. We request you have your ticket ready at the gate as you are let through, and take the elevators up to the location. Thankyou, and we hope you enjoy the proceedings

"Ahhh, you have the tickets?" Ash asked Watanabe. She was feeling flustered and nervous already. He held them up with a smile.

"Relax, we're okay. You've got me, and Rory and Fiona have your back too."

She took a deep breath, and visualized Arby, bringing herself into a state of calm. Soft, sweet and innocent Arby. She missed him dearly.

After about ten minutes of waiting, they finally got through to the gates and the staff members checking people's tickets. The tickets were being stamped with the trademarked maroon G, the logo of the Goro network. Ash and Watanabe were given a little welcome bag with some leaflets and pamphlets presumably detailing the latest programs, product details and launches of the various web services Goro and Feng Ruu were involved in. They ferried into a line of 8 elevators down the lobby, before being sent up ten floors to the rooftop area, which was essentially a giant glass dome. But, to Ash's absolute delight, the dome wasn't regular glass, it was its own projecting screen too, and was playing promotional clips from Goro's latest developer updates, highlighting new features in the upcoming refinements to the Goro user interface.

She briefly imagined what it would have been like hacking into the system and broadcasting hardcore pornography on that gigantic ceiling dome for the hundreds of guests to see, and cackled to herself.

The audio was crystalline, it felt like the sound was coming from the air itself, the jaunty music imbuing a positive mood in everyone at the

venue. Ash was feeling good. The Dome then suddenly darkened to pitch black, and the coloured lights on the walls came into full effect, giving a disco like atmosphere to the huge open space. Fireworks and beautiful coloured imagery played above her, and the music transitioned from a bouncy tune, to a mellow jazz. The dome went semi translucent again, showing the morning sky and sun in its background. Such an audio-visual kaleidoscope.

The rear of the (admittedly quite large) rooftop dome area over the three buildings, was effectively a dining area, with lines of tables and chairs and finger food dotted along the back area where Ash was currently standing. But as you moved a bit further forward, you hit an open space comprising four large, metallic, columnar structures. They appeared to be closed by four sealed doors. They had something inside, Ash presumed it would be revealed at some point.

They weren't just a social media company anymore; they were venturing into technological innovation too. And further beyond the big metal columns, was a roman-styled amphitheatre with two big screens on each side of a standing lectern, and four isles of steps leading into its slight depression in the ground. It wasn't quite a full circle, but effectively enveloped the central stage with two additional large screens set up behind it, for a conference style presentation.

As Ash was taking in the scenery, a voice came through on the intercom. It was a different female voice, to the one from the ground floor.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the welcome presentation will begin at 9am sharp. Please enjoy the food and music in the meantime. The four columns you see will be revealed soon. Mr Feng Ruo will be arriving shortly.

Ash wondered if she'd be able to find Jing anywhere in the thick of things. The eight elevators were popping open and closed packed full to the brim with people, along the open corridor area. It was quite a spectacle, it almost looked like fish being funnelled into a barrel. Ash chuckled at the thought.

So far, judging by the crowd, she could see nothing particularly noteworthy. The crowd were mostly Thai Goro enthusiasts, as was to be expected. But she did notice pockets of western looking faces throughout the crowd.

You'd expect Rory and Fiona's red hair to stand out in the sea of black, but Ash couldn't see them anywhere either.

Then she realised.

She tugged at Watanabe's shirt.

“Hang on a minute, how the fuck am I supposed to know what Jing looks like?”

“Zhao is a very muscular, ragged looking man. You’ll see him on stage sooner or later with Ruo. Jing is the woman who is going to be next to him. She never leaves his side.”

“How do you know that? Maybe he got himself a new assistant for the day” Ash replied perfunctorily.

“Good point. We don’t know for sure. Bessley’s intel suggests Jing will be the woman following Zhao, but I will confirm, just to be sure, when they arrive. I’ll find you and let you know”.

Ash muttered something in disapproval. She was annoyed with the lack of clarity. Ash ventured down the amphitheatre steps to look closer to the stage, the screens, and the lights dotted around the place. She was approached by a young man who introduced himself as Teho, and thrust Ash into an uncomfortable gauntlet of niceties and small talk, without giving her a chance to get away. Ah well, she had some time to kill, she might as well get to know some people.

Teho was a twenty-something architectural intern at a local company. Chubby and freckled, his delicate, juvenile appearance and tuft of fluffy black hair was ironically contrasted to his deep, sonorous voice and serious tone. He sounded like the kind of man who grew up with nothing but study, routine and achievement, and never had time to have a childhood. As the conversation continued, Ash found herself wondering if Teho had ever had sex. Or been drunk. Or done drugs. Or anything fun at all. He was drab beyond belief. And his attempts at flirting were not subtle at all. She couldn’t help but laugh.

Teho smiled. “What’s so funny?” He asked.

“Ahhh you are a funny guy Teho” She tried to ramp up her energy, get them out of the conversational narcolepsy they were in.

“So! Teho, tell me, what’s got you most excited about the Goro event today? What’s on the menu? Any ideas what is gonna be revealed?” she asked him. That felt like an odd question, almost like she was interviewing him.

“You haven’t heard? Leaks leading up to the event suggested Feng Ruo is announcing the Goro smart watch. It’s not going to be like any other smart watch on the market. I don’t claim to know how it works, but apparently it is capable of measuring blood biochemistry and body fundametrnals like fat, muscle, water weight and stuff, with pinpoint accuracy. Some new age tech they’ve got brewing behind the walls, very exciting” Teho said.

Very exciting? His enthusiasm was as visible as a lizard's piss in the sahara desert. At least the watch sounded cool.

"It was lovely to meet you Teho! Maybe I'll chat to you again soon!" Ash smiled, seizing the opportunity to get away. Teho seemed indifferent, and was fixated on the crowd of people filling up the room.

She went back to the food, and scanned the room again, still no sign of Zhao, Jing, Rory, or Fiona. Hmm. Now she lost Watanabe too.

A few minutes later Ash noticed the doors stopped opening and closing. It looked like everyone was already here. A moment later a lady appeared on the stage, and spoke to the room via a booming lapel mic over the top of the music. Everybody jolted. A sound person somewhere in the background immediately adjusted the volume down to a reasonable level.

"Thankyou for that fix. Everyone, please be seated in the amphitheatre, the presentation is about to begin."

This felt just like the conference in Tokyo. Ash quickly jumped for the aisle seat closest to her and sat down, firmly planting herself on the chair with her body language so nobody tried to sit anywhere near her.

The glass ceiling dome went dark, as did the rest of the room. Dramatic music began to play somewhere, and a colourful light show began streaming across the dome, and extended into the stage. Feng Ruo in the flesh appeared, waving energetically to the crowd, followed by enormous applause. The music danced and dallied, reverberating pleasantly throughout the amphitheatre (There must have been some bass enhancing speakers in the floor, Ash was certain), before rising to an emphatic crescendo, and eventually a gentle fade.

"Welcome!" Feng began.

"Please enjoy today. I have set it up as a small demonstration of our 2029 Goro tech range, and as a fun party for all to enjoy. Media is welcome to cover anything they wish, live, there are no non-disclosure agreements you need to sign. For now, I don't wish to bore you, I will be speaking several times this morning anyway. I just wanted to let you know this next piece has been in development for eight years, and we have finally managed to turn one of my Goro dreams into a tangible reality. We hope you enjoy the next clip"

He stepped off stage. Ash noticed a burly man speaking to him. Zhao was here. It wasn't apparent if any of the three women around Zhao were his assistant, until they all dispersed, and it was just Ruo and Zhao walking down the left side of the room. So, no Jing then.

The screens lit up, and sure enough, the watch that Teho was speaking about, came on the screen, drenched in over-zealous editing and effects, as the public came to expect from the glamorous Goro network. The promotional clip detailed the structure of the watch, showing a “dermic patch” at the underside of the watch face, which apparently used tiny, virtually painless needles to seamlessly integrate with the skin and collect seamless biological data from surface level blood sources close enough to be digitally analysed with the onboard computer. The latest and greatest wearable smart watch technology on the market, it called itself, marketed as the Goro Sling. It was a fancy name, for an even fancier product. Ash was impressed. Full biometric live tracking and data analysis, plus the capacity to computationally evaluate hormone levels to predict the next bowel movement, urination likelihood, and approximate hunger and thirst, as well as several other computational possibilities listed in a small font on the screen Ash couldn’t discern. This was insanely cool, like science fiction. All onboard a single watch. The advert drew to a conclusion showing prices in a variety of different currencies, and a slated March 4 release. One thousand five hundred Euros for the flagship model. With all that it could do, Ash wasn’t surprised at the cost.

The screens faded, and the lights came back on, as Feng re-entered the stage to more applause. He mentioned they will be revealing several more products during the course of the morning in the enclosed free-standing stalls (To be opened electronically when the time was right) before finishing around lunch time, with a thirty-minute recess in between. But, people were free to roam and mingle, the dome would be showing everything the screens were too, at all times. So, she had about 4 hours. Only a slightly slimmer margin than the six full days of Tokyo, right?

People got up and started moving around and mingling again. She saw Zhao talking to some men on the left side steps of the stage. Still no sign of a nearby woman who could be Jing. Give it time, she thought. Just needed to not lose track of Zhao, eventually Jing would surely show. Ash put her hand in her dress pocket and anxiously grasped the two little drives.

“Please, Jing, tell me you’re here...” Ash whispered to herself. She couldn’t change anything at this instant. She sighed heavily and walked around, looking for someone interesting to meet.

She introduced herself to a tall American woman (Or so she thought by the accent, could also have been Canadian), who said her name was Kristina with a K. She looked middle aged, with papery wrinkles dappling her weathered face. She was at least six feet and three inches, and Ash felt odd looking upwards at such an angle to talk to a woman. Her bright russet curls bobbed at the shoulders as she spoke, and her long, angular nose hung firmly over her teeth, like a construction crane over a building site.

"So, Kristina with a K, what brings you to this Goro event in Bangkok?" Ash asked.

"So, I'm a journalist from New York, I'm here to cover Feng Ruo, the Goro event, but I'm also really interested in finding out about his political campaign running for President of China, and ask him some questions about his plans".

"Oh, that's really cool!"

The gears were turning in Ash's mind rapidly. Was she going to be interviewing Ruo? Could she somehow befriend this journalist and see if she can gain something out of it?

"I've always had a huge respect and admiration for journalists. You guys put yourself right in the firing line of public scrutiny, some people hate you, and some journalists even get death threats. It takes a lot of bravery" Ash genuinely felt this way.

"Why thankyou darling! It's a rough world out there, especially for girls like us. I'm just thankful I don't need to be out there in the Middle East potentially getting my head blown off by a bomb haha!" Kristina cackled out loud, spilling a small amount of cocktail she was holding on the floor.

"Oh, someone will clean that up I'm sure"

Ash studied her, pondering what lay beneath the surface of bubbly extroversion.

"Have you seen people die?" Ash asked, maintaining her gaze. Kristina didn't falter.

"Good guess. Few years back, at the South African civil war"

The wrinkles made some sense now.

"So you used to be a war correspondent?"

"I was, yea. My husband is a soldier himself. Was, a soldier, I mean. He died in South Africa, protecting my media truck trying to film and cover what was happening"

"Jesus, I'm so sorry to hear that"

"Watching your partner die really destroys a part of your soul. I couldn't do war anymore after that. So, they put me in technology instead. And the occasional dabble in political reporting too."

Ash wanted to give Kristina a hug. But she held back.



“God gives the greatest battles to his strongest soldiers” Ash said.

“What’s that?”

“A quote I read somewhere. I guess it fits here.”

“Thank you, Ash. I appreciate it.” Kristina sniffled and wiped her eyes of the tears that were building up.

“Would you mind if I hugged you, Ash?”

Well, that was certainly not what she’d expected.

“Oh, yes, sure” Ash smiled. She reached up and gave Kristina a firm, warm hug. Kristina was quite emotional, but coming to composure.

“I have a private interview with Feng shortly after the 11am recess”

Ash had to seize the opportunity.

“Could I come watch? Sounds interesting.”

Kristina thought about it for a moment, before nodding in agreement.

“Sure, I don’t see why not. We’ll pretend you’re an intern or something” Kristina smiled, visibly in better spirits. “I actually have been feeling so down recently. It’s nice to tell someone”.

“I know the feeling. Happy to help. Although if you need an intern for war correspondence count me out” Ash said, giving Kristina a good laugh.

The music in the dome changed, and the lights went out again in a flash. Some fancy edit was playing on the dome and front screens, for the revamped Goro Web Services and all its new products and features. A narrator was breaking down all of the key changes since the previous iteration.

“Come find me around 11:25, and we’ll go to the interview with Feng.”

“All good, thanks Kristina. It was so lovely to meet you. Maybe we could exchange emails?”

“Yes! I forgot to ask. That would be great.” She got her phone out to write. “What’s your email?”

Ash gave her one of her anonymous emails, and bade her farewell, as she went to walk around further.

About ten minutes later, when the web services advert had finished, the door slits of one of the metal columns illuminated brightly. There was a hissing sound, and smoke started seeping through the slits, while the four doors on each side slowly lifted upwards mechanically, unlocking the inner sanctum of the structure, and the treasure which lay inside. The light inside was, for the moment, too bright to see anything. But, ten seconds later, the smoke faded, and on its own little propped up stand, stood an iridescent metallic phone. The narrator voice came back on.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we are pleased to present, the 2029 model of the Goro Smartphone, to be used in conjunction with the Goro Sling”

The narrator announced emphatically. The specs, design and structure of the phone were broken down visually, just like the watch, in a promotional clip playing across every screen.

This was a really weird way to announce your new flagship phone. Hidden in a column like an egg. But! Credit where it's due, it was an unprecedentedly unique way of revealing your latest developments.

In what should have been a moment of delightful surprise and elation, was a moment of dark confusion and discomfort, was the person she saw enter the dome from the leftmost elevator at the back of the room. It was Anil. Ash felt panicked, and she didn't even know why. He met Ash's eyes, and waved with two fingers, before ducking and weaving through the scintillating light show the room was being bathed in, heading towards her. Why was Ali here? Was he just being sent wherever she went too? It would probably make sense. He was the one who discovered Jing after all, and the connection to Zhao.

“Ash! Good to see you” Anil hugged her quickly before jumping into his message.

“Bessley sent me to help find Jing”

“Anil, do you even know what she looks like?”

“I have absolutely no idea. Her name isn't even Jing. We talk via encrypted communications using a 12-word key phrase, which we coded as plain English in case we ever need to find one another in the real world.”

“Anil, how do you know she was even telling you the truth? That could be absolutely anyone”

Anil didn't react.

“She sent hidden camera pictures of Zhao himself, when in a room with him. I know she's the real deal”

"So how are we going to find someone whose name we don't know and who we have no idea what they look like?"

"The code phrase is 'He who quicketh jumps, smells the morning rain anew', and the response phrase is 'the morning rain breaks the sunshine, thus, 'tis true'."

"Anil?? We don't have time to ask hundreds of people in a loud room this question! How else did you think this was going to work?"

"She said she would be with Zhao frequently throughout the morning." Anil replied.

"Ok so, simple, we track every woman Zhao interacts with and any woman he speaks to more than once, we tell them the phrase until we find Jing. No?" Ash said.

"What if he meets women in another room, Ash?"

"Fuck me, Anil. Do you have a better idea?"

"Not quite"

"Then go watch some of the shit on display, enjoy the food and keep a lookout for Zhao and the women he is speaking to."

"Wait, Ash, you need to take this" He took her hand and retrieved something wrapped up from his pocket in silk fabric, before placing it in her palm and closing it. Ash felt the outline of a gun, and her spine went cold.

"What the fuck Anil! Why are you giving me a goddamn gun??" She angrily whispered through her teeth into Anil's ear.

"Bessley told me to give it to you."

"We could have met up afterwards oh my god, I literally can't carry this right now I'm in a..."

She remembered the hidden pocket in her dress with the drives.

"I'm in a dress Ali. Why are you giving this to me now?"

"Just in case. I don't know, it just feels important to give this to you now."

Why did that sounds so creepily foreboding, Ash wondered. Still, she knew her way around a gun, and had been hunting many times with Max and her parents when she was younger. Thank God security had no metal

detectors or pat downs. She tentatively slid the small gun into the hidden dress pocket with the drives.

“Anil, I appreciate you being here, but you need to focus, go look for Zhao. I can’t see him at the moment.”

Anil retreated to the dining area, while Ash ventured through the middle section and the amphitheatre. There was no sign of Zhao. She looked at her watch, 10:50am. Nearly two hours have gone by and they haven’t even gotten started properly looking for Jing, and she promised Kristina she was going to join her for the interview at 11:25am. She felt so rushed, she was running out of time rapidly.

There was another hiss, and a spotlight shone on another one of the central metal columns, with smoke and light oozing out of the door slits as they similarly slowly moved upwards, revealing the core, in a similar fashion to gull-wing doors on supercars. As the smoke and light cleared, a rotating hologram was illuminated inside it. It was depicting a screen playing some movie clip. Then, a white background and a number countdown appeared in the hologram, from 10. Ash looked on in curiosity. As the countdown went down each number, the lights of the whole dome got progressively darker, and the ceiling glass darkened too. It hit 3, and the room was nearly dark. 2, not much else was visible bar the light of the hologram. 1. Pitch black.

## Chapter 14

When the timer hit 1, rap music started blasting in the air, and all the screens in the dome played the beginning of what appeared to be a movie trailer. Dramatic, bassy BWAAAAH’s and DUNANANAA’s were riddled through it. Ash didn’t even bother paying attention. It was some cyberpunk action movie. At the end, the note flashed across the screen.

### IN COOPERATION WITH THE GORO NETWORK

And there it was. Feng Ruo was dipping his toes into every pie he could find. It was a spectacle to witness. More applause, and Feng Ruo appeared on stage again, at the lectern, to talk about the movie he was helping make. Zhao was behind him in the back, along with two men Ash didn’t recognise. Still no woman who could potentially be Jing. Was Anil sure Jing definitely a woman? Ash zoned out, fixated on Zhao standing there, with his boulder-like shoulders squarely popping at his shirt seams. She wondered if he was on steroids. He looked lean though, and not corpulent

like some of the bodybuilders she had seen in the past. He definitely looked like he knew how to move. Ash guessed he could take down a man twice his size in one firm punch.

Still. No. Bloody. Jing.

She went around the room, checking each aisle and section walled off by the hundreds of bodies with barely any pockets of air in between them. If Jing didn't appear with Zhao soon, Ash firmly believed it was not going to be possible to find her. She had to go meet with Kristina soon. Then she had an idea.

If she could hack into the computer network of the building, she could access the security cameras, as well as the feed of the security gate they stepped through, before entering the elevators. The tickets had names on them (Bessley had stuck with Ash's Tokyo name of Marianne Collins), and they went through the security gates in single file, as they scanned their tickets.

The security gate feeds would have a timestamp. She could search for when SHUCHANG ZHAO was scanned and let through the gate, and at what time. Then she'd look at the adjacent 3 or so names, maybe 4, to find any females, and cross reference that timestamp with security camera footage to see the faces of those women, one of whom would inevitably be Jing. This would make the job infinitely easier. But first, she needed to find a computer.

As it stood, the only computer consoles she could see were those embedded in the product columns that housed the display items on show in the centre of the room. That was flat out impossible, everyone in the room could see her instantly. The amphitheatre maybe? Though, she couldn't see anything, on the stage or anywhere near it, the system must be housed somewhere in the walls and inaccessible from the front. The bathrooms were obvious and signed, on the far-right aisle down the steps. Ahh. This was not good.

Potentially en route to Kristina's interview she could find something. She mentioned a private interview, that surely meant it would be held in a private room. This was an office building. There were computer terminals all over the place, just not in the goddamn dome at the top. The perfect timing of this inconvenience made her seethe.

The meeting with Kristina was just a few minutes away. Ash scanned the whole room to try to find her, and located her chatting with some people on one of the food tables, eating the Szechuan chicken slider burger that was on offer.

Ash approached and tapped Kristina on the shoulder.

"Hi! You wanted to meet up at 11:25 right? Before your meeting?"

“Oh yea! Sure thing hun, lemme just finish this burger real quick”

Kristina with a K took three more big bites, and washed it down with a cup of soda. She stood up to pat herself off and pulled a digital pad from her handbag, checking something.

“Ok so it looks like we’re in Feng’s office just below us, let’s head there now. My camera man will meet us there”

Ash followed Kristina as she led them through the crowd to the elevators. They stepped inside, without any questioning from the two guards watching the floor. The doors opened up to a clean, simple office corridor, curving around a beautiful green garden bathed in artificial lights resembling the sun. There were three employees chatting together in the corridor.

“Hi, just looking for Feng’s office, is it much further?” Kristina interrupted them. The younger lady seemed upset at the intrusion.

“Just go to the end” she said nonchalantly. Kristina obliged, with Ash not far behind. Sure enough, on the last door, the translucent screen read, “Feng Ruo, CEO”. Kristina stepped through.

Feng was standing at the window chatting to someone.

“Ben! How the hell did you get here before me! Haha!” Kristina guffawed.

“The camera man I take it?” Ash said to Kristina.

“Who is this lovely young lady?” Ben inquired, eyeing Ash up and down curiously.

“She’s a young fan I met upstairs, wanted to watch me interview, thought I’d bring her along. Is that OK with you Feng?”

“No problem at all. How’s the setup?”

The office was lined with steel bookcases along three of the four walls, and the fourth wall was adorned with paintings of nature. Each bookcase was packed with dull looking, ancient and dusty books with faded colours. By the looks of them, they were probably rare antiques or something of the sort. Feng’s chair and desk, and the guest chairs at the window, were adorned with ornate, plush fabric, illustrated with mythological draconic designs, similar to the cherry red carpet, bleeding gold leaves from its fur into the surrounding sea of red. The old style look contrasted to his packed desk of futuristic electronics and his enormous ultra wide computer monitor perched squarely inside a cantilevered platform off the edge of the desk.

“Great! Let’s have a seat. Ben, please set up a camera on Feng’s side, and on my side. Then one on us both. We should be done in thirty minutes. Hit record when you’re ready. Please put this on.” Kristina handed Feng a small, fuzzy lapel microphone to attach to his shirt, between the buttons. He fixed it quickly, and Ben indicated the cameras were ready. Ash was aware of the fluffy texture of the carpet. Kristina launched into it immediately.

“Welcoming you to this Interview, I’m Kristina Gainsley, joined here by CEO of the Goro Network, Feng Ruo, discussing his newest ventures into commercial electronics, and an insight into his reasoning and philosophy in running for the presidency in his home country of China”

She was quick, Ash thought. Precise and perfectly crafted in her language. She had experience, that was certain.

“Feng Ruo, what was the design philosophy behind the Goro Sling? What inspired you to make a smart watch better than anything else on the market right now?”

The door unlocked, and Zhao stepped through. Ash’s heart rate quickened. He was with a very young woman, no older than eighteen, with shoulder length, dead straight black hair, and soft, innocent eyes. Was this Jing?”

Feng continued the conversation.

“The philosophy and inspiration behind the sling really came to me a few years ago, at the time Goro had already surpassed 5 billion users on the network. I knew that we were accumulating exposure unlike anything we could have ever could have conjured in our wildest imaginations, and that made me think, the Goro network exists to facilitate, engage, and inspire us in our social worlds, but I wanted something more than that. I wanted to help people.”

Ash was beginning to sweat despite the air conditioning in the room. She was sitting less than a metre from Zhao, and the woman who very well could be Jing, the entire reason the European Intelligence Agency sent her and so many others to this event, in the inner world of Asia, so far away from home.

“I wanted to help people with their health, motivations and discipline to lead better lives. Give them a technological toolbox capable of delivering the computational, analytical and biometric data people from all walks of life create and work with on a daily basis. After a lot of demographic research, we found the most effective and accessible way to do that, was to create the most advanced smart watch on the market, capable of providing all of these incredibly advanced tools, as well as a suite of other

capabilities in sports, adventuring and travelling throughout the sophisticated modern world.”

There was no way for Ash to ask the young girl the code phrase. Especially with Zhao sitting right next to her, in the corner of the office, watching along. She was closer to the door. Ash was going to have to gamble.

She got up from behind the middle camera facing the window, and went to the door to leave. Ben, Zhao or the young girl didn't stop her. So far so good. She went for the door, and as she opened it, she half mumbled loud enough so that the girl, but not Zhao, could hear.

“He who quicketh jumps”

There was no time to say the second half of the sentence without arousing suspicion. She'd find a bathroom, and come back to say the second half. Hopefully Jing caught on what she was saying. She didn't stop to look. She stepped into the corridor again, in view of the gorgeous lush garden ensconced in glass. On the other side of the garden was a TOILETS sign, Ash walked towards it.

A handful of employees were walking around on the floor. Ash noticed most of them seemed quite young, almost all of them looked to be in their twenties, some even still teenagers. She was probably older than the vast majority of them, and she was only 24.

Arriving into the toilets, she was fascinated by the futuristic design. The walls were sculpted granite, shaped to look like the intricate rivulets of air running through a husky cloud in the sky. The floor and ceiling were a lustrous, steely grey lined with small LED lights at the edges, to give a spaceship-like feel. Ash had never seen anything like it. She had a minute to think.

Ash was almost dead certain that young girl was Jing, but if she wasn't, she still had her plan B, cross referencing ticket timestamps with security cameras. On her way to the toilet, she passed three offices with translucent window lines at the windows, but small clear spots above and below to see inside. Ash did a hop at each office door to inspect. The first and last offices had four people each working inside them, but the middle office seemed to be empty. But, one person had exited mere seconds before. Was he coming back? She had an idea. One which would require the extra USB she had. She could gain access to the security network with a bootloader attack.

Ash exited the bathroom and quickly moved towards that middle office. She checked the door. it was still open. The light was off, but the natural light from the windows kept it bright as day. Of the four multi-monitored computers desks in the office, oriented in each corner of the room, she



took the back left one, facing away from the door. Where the man was sitting. As long as he returned promptly, this was going to work.

The desks were custom built pod-like structures, with a seated desk space, and an adjacent compartment with storage drawers and a sliding navy-blue satin door, which curved around the desk like a shell, acting as a privacy screen.

The computers were all on. It looks like there were more employees from this office still in the building. The computers were all Lanthum desktops, a high-end computer brand she had extensively studied the functional and software architecture of in the past. In this particular set of circumstances, they were conveniently susceptible to an evil maid attack.

Ash plugged in her malware USB and booted up the Lanthum desktop in a live Linux environment. She modified the bootloader parameters of the system and installed software to track keystrokes and timing for disk decryption key entering, compromising block level disk encryption. All she needed now, was for the man to return to type in the decryption key in the booting process, and the hidden software would send the information directly to her phone, giving her access to the Lanthum security network of the building.

She quickly logged out of his machine, unplugged the malware USB, and stepped outside into the corridor, to see where he went. He stepped out of a room (the kitchen?) nearby holding a steaming mug, and started heading back towards Ash, with no flicker of recognition in his eyes. She felt a burst of adrenaline as he approached her. He smiled.

"Hi! How are you doing?" He walked straight past her. The question seemed rhetorical. He went back into his office and closed the door, Ash leaning against the glass window of the garden, trying to look as nonchalant as possible. He went to sit back down at his desk at the computer. She did a small hop to peek over the translucent glass at him.

"Yess, come on, come on..." Ash whispered to herself. She had now been away from the interview room for several minutes; she really couldn't afford to be gone much longer. She waited thirty seconds. More than enough time for him to enter the decryption keys into his computer. Sure enough, she heard a ping on her phone, and she received a file with all the information she needed.

She opened the door to the office.

"Hi, sorry, what was your name?" She asked the young man.

"Oh, I'm Anthony!"

“I’m new, I was told to go find Anthony for Feng, I’m not sure if that’s you or another Anthony.. Either way, he’s on the top floor, you could probably go find him now.”

Anthony was stricken by panic.

“Ahhh shit I think I know what this is about. I’ll be right up”. He shut off his computer again and grabbed his satchel before rushing out the door, correcting his glasses along the way. Perfect. She sat at his desk, and typed in the access details she had sent to her phone. Log in successful. She navigated to the security network, and quickly scanned through the horde of options and modules and department sub sections.

The hundreds of cameras in the building were listed in a long pile, but also included were authenticators, computers, electronic devices, security equipment, all sorted alphabetically, and by geographic location relative to the three buildings comprising the site. She found the security gates under groundFloor/gateAuthentications. She group searched the hundreds of ticket listings and names across the four gate modules with key term ZHAO, and came up with two names. Bolin Zhao, and Shuchang Zhao. She checked the timestamp of Shuchang’s name. His entrance was at 08:10:33, Much earlier than the rest of the cohort.

Before she had a chance to look at the names adjacent to Zhao’s entry, the program shut down, and a new window opened up.

Lanthum Station CC1, Desktop 3 has detected a network breach. Motherboard firmware has been modified. Emergency recovery measures in effect, network shutdown enforced.

“Oh, fuck” Ash huffed anxiously. She didn’t realise the security network was built and maintained by AI. She had been pinpointed. Internal alarms on the computers in the room all started screaming. She had mere seconds to escape before people came storming through the front door. Was this it? Was it all over?

Then there was a huge bang, and the whole room shook. There was another bang, the room shook again. All the electronics in the room turned off in a flash. She heard glass being shattered and people’s voices yelling. A woman’s scream. She ran outside. The garden glass screen had been shattered and people were running through the corridor to the escape stairs.

She returned hastily to Feng Ruo’s office around the bend, and pushed open the door, but nobody was there. Golden red carpet, dusty, ancient book cases and regal wooden desk still intact. What the hell was happening?

She entered the stairwell, which was overflowing with people running down, and shoved her way up to the top floor. As she opened the stairwell door, she saw a huge hole in the glass dome ceiling, and ropes passed through it. In the middle of the room where everyone had cleared out space, were Rory and Fiona, holding and beating Feng and Zhao with baton like weapons. Numerous security guards lay on the floor around them, the floor spattered with their blood in a gruesome rainfall of death. Ash noticed the assault rifles strapped to both their chests. One of the guards on the floor pulled himself up and took aim at Fiona, firing his pistol, hitting her in the neck. Blood sprayed everywhere, Fiona fell to the floor, and Feng Ruohad a moment to recover, before Rory swung around and punched him square in the face.

“FIONA!! FUCK!!” Rory screamed. He threw Zhao to the floor and ran to the guard who shot Fiona, launching an almighty kick at his head. Ash heard a sickening crunch as the kick connected, and the guards head rebounded against the marble step, cracking his skull. Zhao used the moment to grab a gun himself, and fired it off at Rory, hitting him in the chest, bringing him to the floor. The whole scene was unfolding in mere seconds before Ash’s eyes, she barely had time to take in what was happening.

“Who the FUCK... do you think you are.... “ Zhao screamed at Rory, breathing heavily. “You don’t get to come here, and destroy what I’ve worked for, you piece of shit!” Zhao shot Rory twice in the legs. The room was now largely empty as people had fled to the ground floor and to escape.

“Why the fuck are you here? Who are you? What do you want?”

Rory was coughing heavily. “What did you do to Arnbjörn Bergman?” he croaked out.

“Bergman? I haven’t done jack shit. But he fucked my wife. If he’s in trouble, he probably fucking deserves it.” Zhao took aim and shot Rory in the head, and Ash wanted to cry out, but was grabbed from behind and muffled with a moist rag. She felt her eyelids and head slump heavily as her consciousness was wrenched from her grasp, and Ash’s world went dark.

## Chapter 15

Ash vaguely remembered jumping through hallucinations she wasn't sure were her own. Vibrating and coalescing in a lurid assortment of cerebral fasciculations. It was long, and tiring. Seemingly endless. Ash was exhausted, it felt like a dream. But something harsher, more acidic. Damaging. Not quite a nightmare, much more visceral. She had done acid before, but this was worse. Was it some kind of hybrid drug?

When she came to, Ash had a fragmented memory of the preceding hours. Or was it days? She had lost her sense of the passage of time. Like the sudden waking from a heavy, dark dream. Ash sat up, and looked around. She was in a bed, in dim room, with a single filament of yellow light illuminating the moist concrete walls around her. It looked like a prison cell. Or potentially an interrogation room. There were no prison bars, but a grainy, mossy wooden door. The mattress was thin, barely soft enough to cushion the harsh steel beneath.

The heat hung in the air heavily; she could feel her clothes sticking uncomfortably to her skin. Her clothes! She grabbed for them, and felt a tug. She noticed the chain attached to her right wrist, chaining her to the bed, and her chest tightened. She was wearing a black shirt and black shorts. Ash tentatively inspected them. It felt like polyester. Gross and artificial. The floral dress... it was nowhere in sight. That meant the two

USBs were gone too... as was her evil-maid malware.... she had been drugged and was now sitting captive in an unknown Thai dungeon.

“Fucking fantastic. This is exactly what I needed right now.” she said out loud, staring into the corner of the room. Wondering if there was someone watching. If angels were watching. Supporting her and guiding her. Or was it all nonsense? She wasn’t religious, but in times like this, she wondered what the plan must have been. If such angels existed, what did they want from her to put her through so much trouble. Why did she have to go through so much damn trouble. All she wanted was to be with her parents again, home in Stockholm. She didn’t want to be part of any of this, it was scary, and traumatising. Seeing people die, chasing down murderers and criminals, all in the name of finding her parents. She’d gotten lucky with Wilma. But her father?

She recalled what Zhao said, before he murdered Rory. What was it he said? Arnie had stolen his wife. Jesus. Ash’s mind flashed back to Kozue Matsuuchi in Japan. The dots connected perfectly. Ash couldn’t believe she didn’t see the possibility before, but now it felt so obvious. Kozue had been in a relationship with Zhao, which explained his seemingly intimate connections to the AI intelligentsia, his ex-wife being one of the most elite administrative figures in the industry. The Kozue connection explained EVERYTHING. Anil’s research on Hale smear campaigns against the LS-000 lab, Zhao’s resentment of Arnie, and his desire to see the Bergman name fall. A lover scorned, the oldest agent of revenge in the book. And yet...

In the dome, Zhao said he had nothing to do with Arnie’s disappearance. That was difficult to stick. Ash couldn’t understand. Where the hell else would he be? Ash, Stanley, Anil... the ESI... everything pointed to him having every reason to be the one with the most to gain from kidnapping Arnbjörn Bergman. Ash was at a loss. She tried to reason through all the events that had happened so far, maybe she missed something? A critical detail, a hint, or a clue, which pointed towards where Arnie would be. She was mentally clouded, and still felt groggy from the drugs in her system.

She felt fatigued. Ash lay down on the thin mattress and let herself drift off to sleep once more.

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Zhao, Cheung and Cheuk arrived at the Huai Khwang Bath House outside the city, with a two 12-man squads of the Royal Thai Police. It had not been something that was immediately critical on Zhao’s agenda, but he couldn’t resist the convenience of the opportunity when it had presented itself to him so willingly.

The commissioner general of the Thai Police, a good friend of Zhao’s, had long ago fallen into deep financial troubles, and it was Zhao who had offered him stability, and a future. He had owed Zhao a great deal, and

assured him, that should he ever be in need of police assistance while in Thailand, the royal police will be in full support.

And this certainly was a situation, where he needed support. A classified special operation, the police were told. Hunting down a dangerous fugitive.

The first squad surrounded the building to prevent escape, while Zhao barged through the front door with the 2<sup>nd</sup> squad. Sergeant Somchai Bunchu barked something at the receptionist, while the people in the entrance hall dropped to the floor. Bunchu showed the elderly female receptionist a picture. She gestured and muttered the fugitive was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, in the VIP section.

The officers charged through the bath house with their assault rifles, the hard knocking of their boots on clay tiles reverberating throughout the steaming halls. They rushed the staircase into the upper level, which was split into two lanes. Zhao joined the left one. They went through a women's bathing area, while the woman screamed in fear, and cowered under their towels and in the water. At the end was a revolving door which led to the VIP room. The two lanes linked up again, and as Zhao stepped through the translucent revolving door, he saw the man who he had gone to so much trouble of finding, finally resting before him.

Arnie Bergman was sitting neck deep in a single-person pool, with his hands up. He knew he wasn't going to escape this time. But in the back of his mind, he wondered how it was possible. How they had found him. He had gone to every effort imaginable to stay hidden in the shadows. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to follow Ash to Thailand. He wanted to reveal himself to Ash, to assure her he was safe, but he could never find the right moment. And now it had backfired on him.

"Arnbjörn Bergman. Good to see you, my friend." The three other bathing men in the room ran for the exits, as the police officers surrounded Arnie.

"You know what happens now, don't you?"

"Zhao, I'm sorry for Kozue, Zhao. I didn't know at the time."

"This isn't about Kozue anymore, Bergman. We'll talk more about this at another location. For now, goodnight." Zhao smiled, before Arnie was slammed in the back of the head with a gun.

Zhao took out his phone and dialled for Feng Ruo. The tone rang three times before he picked up.

"Ruo."

"It's me. You can call off the task force. I found him. We'll bring him back tomorrow."

---

Ash was shaken awake by the sound of a banging door. She couldn't see what was happening, but could hear some muttering and something being dragged across the floor nearby. The voices went into another room, and faded as the door was shut again.

It was several hours before Arnie regained his consciousness. His body felt heavy, sunken, like coming out of an intense drug induced fatigue after an invasive surgery. But a hard slap from Zhao brought him immediately to his senses, confused, but alert. He felt his hands and legs sharply tied to a chair. He was dressed in the shorts and shirt he took to the bath house.

"Welcome back to the real world, Arn. Now, I know you're going to tell me, because you know there's no way for you to stop this from happening. Where are all the LS-000 prototypes?"

"They were destroyed, I couldn't keep them around with developing climate."

"We found the first two bots in a safe on Örnevägen. Why are you lying to me, Bergman?"

Arnie had totally forgotten about the first two bots. He stored them as relics embedded in his desk, as symbols of what was to come from the developing technology, but he never imagined anyone would know they were there or how to retrieve them. He cracked a sweat in the oppressive Bangkok heat.

"I... forgot about those. I hope they've been useful to you"

"Where are the others then?"

"As I said, I destroyed the others, I had no way of securely keeping them given the growing voices fixed against what I had created."

"You had one special one... a sentient one... don't bullshit me on this."

"You are mistaken, the LS-000 lab didn't reach that point yet. But we were close. Very close."

"Then what is so special about the LS-633 bot?"

Where was he getting this information... Arnie was struggling to think. He didn't have questions, only answers. He was looking for a location only.

"I'm going to ask very politely, I hope you can respond accordingly, Arn. You developed a sentient bot, prototype 633 in the LS-000 series. You are hiding it at a secret location, because there is no way you would have destroyed this page of human history. And I need to know that location. Where is the LS-633 bot, and how do I retrieve it?"

"I can't tell you Shuchang, you know I can't."

"Actually, I think you can" Zhao said. He snapped his fingers at Cheung. Cheung left the room, and Zhao stared intently at Arnie. The only sound in the room was Arnie's laboured breathing. Breath in, breath out. Zhao was motionless, resting his chin on his clasped hands. The limited light in the room bounced off the concrete walls giving them a dull pallor. Arnie felt even more constricted, like the air itself was suffocating him.

A few moments later, Cheung returned, and Arnie's heart fell out of his chest. Cheung dragged Ash by the hair and threw her on the floor between them, her hands and feet bound tightly in rope. She was screaming in pain, and when she saw him, she burst out into tears. Ash tried to move towards Arnie, but fell over and hit her face on the floor and muffled a cry into the floor.

"Dad..." She cried in pain. Cheung kicked her in the face.

"Shut the fuck up, that's getting on my nerves"

It broke Arnie's heart to see Ash with her face in the dirt, Cheung standing over her menacingly, kicking and spitting on her, breaking her. Seeing his daughter in this state was shaking him to the core. He could not bear the sight of it any longer.

"Okay! Okay. Listen. I'll tell you where 633 is. Can you please just... let her go. You don't need to hurt her. She hasn't done anything. All you need is the 633 right? I can give it to you."

"I'm listening" Zhao replied.

"I have it stored in a safe, in the post distribution centre in Chanthaburi"

"Chanthaburi? Southwest of Bangkok?" Zhao scoffed. "So you've been here all this time..." Zhao laughed.

Arnie hadn't been in Thailand the whole time, but he could not risk leaving 633 anywhere, so he carried it with him wherever he went. He wasn't planning on getting caught.

Zhao looked to Ash. "Your pretty little daughter will be coming with us." He smiled sardonically. "I really hope, for both your sakes, you're telling the truth, Arn. Really."



Cheung pulled up Ash from the floor, and the last thing Arnie remembered seeing was a flash of Zhao's fist hitting him square in the nose, as he passed out.

Ash barely had the strength to hold her body together. She didn't know if she needed to cry, use the bathroom, or just remember how to breathe. Did she remember how to breathe? She took a few shallow breaths. All of this was a mistake. Coming to Thailand. Going off script and trying to join the meeting with Ruo through Kristina. Or maybe she had the right ideas. Maybe Ash was onto something, until Rory and Fiona got themselves killed, and ruined everything in spectacular fashion. Ash was right on the brink of handing the drives to Jing, she just needed a little bit more time, and then she had to get caught. At least Ash knew her father was alive. But for how long, she couldn't tell. And now, they were being sent on a death mission to retrieve Arnie's final 633 bot. Once Zhao acquired it, there was no reason for him to keep them around. High chance Zhao would kill them both.

Ash's mind was racing with thoughts of death. Arby. Max. Stanley. Arnie. Wilma. Lotar Warga was on their side. Anil and Bessley... where were Anil and Bessley? She had nothing on her, no phone, no communications. She was a prisoner, and had no way out. She was too exhausted to think. There was nothing to be done.

Cheung pulled her into an elevator, and they went up for several floors, before stepping out onto a rooftop balcony area of the building they were in, high above the city street. Ash managed to peek over the edge to get a quick scope of any landmarks around her, but there wasn't much; only a flush of green trees and a line of boarded up buildings along the dirty street. They were far from the city, but it was impossible to say where exactly. Cheung suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled a fabric bag over her head before tying it around her neck. Ash felt a brief moment of panic as she lost her vision, but then felt a pressure at her legs. The rope binding her feet was cut open and she could stand properly.

"Move" Cheung said gruffly. Cheung kept leading her forward. There was a sharp turn, before a ramp she carefully walked up. They kept moving, and Cheung held onto her to ensure she didn't fall. She heard a vehicle door open. Cheung pushed her inside, and she fell on her face again. She tasted leather. It was soft against her knees and shoulders, a far cry from the hard concrete she lay on in the underground cell previously.

Ash twisted her body around to sit up. She heard muffled speaking outside. The door was opened again, and something pushed against her side. She touched hair with her forearm.

“Dad...” She whispered. She could barely see anything through the bag, but she was able to breathe at least. She didn’t want to make any sudden moves.

Zhao and Cheung got in the front and started muttering something in mandarin. The helicopter blades started spinning. It was incredibly loud. She didn’t have any headphones, and the bag did little to soften the blow of the noise. She fell to her side, against her unconscious father’s body, and tried to drown out the noise for the flight ahead.

It felt like an eternity in the air. Ash was suffocating in the noise, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to take herself to another realm, of peace, of painlessness. It was a struggle. She fell in and out of awareness more times than she could count, and kept feeling like she’d just lost track of small chunks of time. Like her memory timeline was coming out with holes in it. But, to her immense relief, the helicopter had eventually come down to land. The doors were swung open and she felt herself being pulled and jolted around again, not knowing the direction she was heading. The rope around her neck was loosened, and the bag was lifted.

They were in a grassy field, a line of dirty white buildings nearby. They looked no different to the ones they were in before the helicopter ride, it was almost as if they hadn’t flown anywhere. Around the other side of the helicopter, Arnie came into view, likewise bound with his hands behind his back.

“Dad!” she called out.

Arnie shook his head with an alert look in his eyes, as if indicating not to speak. Ash, Cheung, Zhao and Arnie approached the biggest building from the back, and entered through a small slitted iron gate, which housed a dull garden inside. Zhao and Cheung took off Ash and Arnie’s handcuffs.

“You try to run, we shoot. Sounds good?” Zhao huffed.

They approached the back door of the post office, and Zhao knocked three times. He hid his gun in his jacket, same as Cheung. A man in a light blue vest, the office clerk, opened the door. Zhao stepped back, and gestured to Arnie.

“Mr Russell.” The clerk said, in broken English. “You bought company.”

“Yes, I...”

Zhao and Cheung looked expectantly at him.

“I need to open safe ten, please.”

“Certainly. Follow me.”

The four of them entered the building behind the clerk. Ash and Arnie were still barefoot. They went down some steps into a basement area, and through a huge steel door. It was thick and painted red, and already opened. They stepped into a large rectangular room, containing hundreds of little drawers stacked at least three metres high, the top most ones requiring a ladder to access. The bottom third of the walls were lined with a long line of larger safes, all the way around, from one end of the red door, around to the other.

The clerk brought the four of them to safe ten, indistinguishable from the others. He gave Arnie an intricately cut, thick metal key, and asked, "Are you ok to open and close it yourself?"

"Yes, thanks. We will leave when we are done."

"Ok, just exit when you like, take what you need from your safe. Thankyou Mr Russell. Have a nice day. I'll be getting back to the office."

The clerk left. Arnie put his left hand on the metal door, and inserted the key, before turning a couple of times. There was a click, and he pulled it open.

"Ahhh!"

A shrill cry came from within.

"Don't hurt me please! I'm waiting for my friend!"

A small, circular robot was revving its little motors into the corner of the safe, as it... sniffled?? In fear??

"633..." Arnie said.

The robot was huffing. Breathing? It suddenly relaxed. Three slits opened from the pitch-black ball, two little robotic hands slid out, with five thin digits each. On the top slit, a light illuminated, and a projection of two unnaturally large, curious blue eyes, hung in the air. The eyes blinked. The holographic projection of two eyes, which do not dry up in the air and do not require any cleaning, blinked. No two spidery limbs and unnatural robotic eyes was all it took, and this robot already felt like a human.

"Oh! Hello Sir! Lovely to see you! Who are your friends?" 633 looked inquisitively at Ash, Zhao and Cheung. 633 had an elegant British accent.

"So its true..." Zhao began. "You've created sentience... the potential here is... extraordinary..."

"Ah... might I know your name, sir?"

"That doesn't matter my friend" Zhao stepped up and grabbed 633.

"Excuse me! Sir! This is not polite at all!"

"Let's go" Zhao gestured to Cheung, who slammed the door shut, and an electronic lock buzzed into place automatically. Ash and Arnie followed Zhao, with Cheung behind them.

633 quietly accepted the situation and retreated into his shell.

They exited out the back door. Just as Ash and Arnie were about to open the helicopter doors in the grassy field, Zhao put his hand up.

"Where do you think you're going? We're done here."

"Zhao.... Please...." Arnie began. Zhao didn't listen. They got into the front seats of the helicopter and started it up, before lifting up and flying away, as Arnie and Ash watched on. In some ways Ash felt immense relief, that Zhao had decided not to shoot them outright. Maybe that spoke to some better character or judgement of Zhao's, deep beneath the belligerent, angry surface of his. But now they were stuck, barefoot, with nothing but the clothes on their backs. In a remote town in Thailand. This was going to be difficult.

## Chapter 16

"Dad, I'm so glad you're ok" Ash jumped on Arnie in embrace. "I thought you were dead."

"I thought so too honey." Arnie was fixated on the horizon, watching Zhao and Cheung disappear into the distance. "He just let us go... are we really that meaningless now?"

He turned to Ash. It was the first time he'd seen his daughter in weeks. It felt like months. \

"You know Ash, for the longest time I wanted to contact you. To tell you where I was, so I didn't have to keep watching you put yourself in danger."

"Wait, you knew where I was all this time?"

"Yea."

"How? Why didn't you say anything?"

"That key to the basement in Stockholm, that I told you to never take off your neck, no matter where you are. It has a nanochip GPS tracking system in it. It wasn't only for your access to the lab; I made that key for your safety too."

Ash grabbed at her neck. The key was gone.

"I didn't know who to trust Ash. That's why I stayed hidden for so long"

"Dad, what did you use to track the key? Was it on your phone?"

"Yea"

"Isn't your stuff still at the Huai Khwang bath house?"

“Oh...” Arnie realised what Ash was thinking.

“We need to find a way back there, dad. Is that office clerk your friend? Does he have a car? Some money we can borrow? We need to get your phone.”

“Ash, honey, did you find your mom?”

“Yea, she’s safe in Spain. Apparently, she goes way back with Warga, the billionaire.”

“Really? What, like, they were together?”

“No dad, just friends. Speaking of, why the fuck did you cheat on mom with Kozue Matsuuchi?”

He sighed deeply.

“That was.... A grave mistake. A lapse in judgement that was never repeated again, and never will be.”

“Does mom know about this?”

“No.”

“When are you going to tell her?”

“As soon as I can. Let’s first focus on surviving right now, okay Ash? The Kozue thing was years ago. I know I fucked up. Everyone has their secrets. I thought maybe there was a right time to bring that up with your mom, but that time never came. Up until now anyway. I don’t know how you found out. But I promise I’ll make things right”

“Whatever dad”

Ash took off back to the post office block, with Arnie behind. Their feet were sore from the pebbly ground. They knocked on the back door again, and a different employee answered.

ทำอะไรอยู่ข้างหลัง? คุณพูดภาษาไทยได้ไหม

ฉันสามารถช่วยอะไรคุณได้บ้าง? (What are you doing in

the back? Do you speak Thai? Can I help you with something?) The man squawked.

“Sam. Get me Sam please. Sam.”

The man seemed to understand. He called out somewhere behind him, and the other clerk arrived a moment later.

“Mr Russell. How can I help you?”

Arnie’s relationship to Sam wasn’t exactly that of lifelong best friends, but Sam had a friendly enough disposition, and had quickly and discreetly organized Arnie’s safe storage in the post office a few days prior, something for which Arnie was incredibly grateful. He hoped Sam would be in a good enough spirit to assist now.

“Sam, we need to get to Huai Khwang, is there any way you can help us get there?”

“I am working Mr Russell. I cannot help you I’m sorry.”

“We need to get to Huai Khwang as soon as possible, It’s very, very important, I don’t have my money on me at the moment. Please, can we borrow some money for transport? And I will come pay you back double as soon as I can.”

“Huai Khwang is nearly four hours from here, Mr Russell. That will cost you maybe 1500 Baht. I can borrow you this money, but please, return to me this money soon.”

Arnie clasped Sam’s hand and bowed in gratitude. “Thankyou Sam. I can’t tell you how much this means to me”.

Sam pulled his hand back and nodded feebly. He turned around and unlocked a drawer in a nearby cabinet with a key from his pocket. Inside was a stack of bills, and he counted out 1500 Baht in fifteen 100 Baht notes, before locking the drawer again. He handed the money to Arnie.

“Go to the front. There’s a taxi line up the street. They will help you. Come” He gestured for Ash and Arnie to come through the office. Arnie stored the money in his pocket, and kept his hand wrapped around it. They walked through and exited to the front hall of the building, where people were lined up waiting to post various boxes and letters and pick up parcels. Everyone stared as Ash and Arnie walked through with their dirty feet and haggard look. The air temperature was still hot for January, but it was somewhat bearable, especially with just thin clothing on, and the wind blowing on Ash’s skin. Exiting the front door, Ash squinted in the intense sunlight. Just up the road from the intersection was a forest green and bright yellow taxi car.

“There, dad!”

They jogged towards it, and Arnie approached from the driver's side. He made eye contact. The driver gave an expression of disgust, and quickly drove away from the kerb.

"What the fuck man" Ash scoffed.

There were no other taxis around. Shit. The sign did say this was the taxi rank. They decided to wait under the shadow of a nearby fruit shop for the next Taxi to arrive. But, after a good forty minutes of waiting, none had yet arrived.

"Ash, I don't know what's going on."

Ash darted ahead quickly.

"Hey! Wait! Where are you going??" Arnie called out. As he worked his way through the crowd, he found Ash talking to a westerner.

"....massive cultural event in Bangkok at the moment, all the taxis are there, it's the best day in the year for taxi fares."

"So how are people supposed to get transport to Bangkok?" Ash asked.

"Well, you can't unfortunately. There's a bus station, but that's shut down for the holiday period too."

"Oh my fucking god." Ash cursed. "Sorry, sir. Thanks for the help."

The old, bespectacled man nodded. "Not a problem dear. Have a great day!" he continued on his way down the street.

"What do we do now?" Ash asked.

"We need to get shoes first my feet are fucking killing me." Arnie grunted.

They ventured down the road to look for a shoe store. There were a heap of restaurants, a kitchen shop, and a phone repair stall. Ash was irate. They walked for another fifteen minutes before they finally found something. Arnie stumbled across a clothing store, which had a single display stand at the front with some sandals, all in the same style, black canvas. They looked very big, all men's sandals.

"Ahhh I hope they have my sizes" Ash sniffled in emotion. They stepped inside and, mercifully, the store clerk spoke some English.

"Hello, can we buy sandals?" Ash inquired.

"No lady size, only men"



Ash's spirit sank.

"That's ok, can I have a look at size 12 please?" Arnie asked. The clerk ducked under the front desk and pulled out a pair for Arnie to try.

"You try you buy" The clerk said. Arnie slipped them on, and tightened the strap. They fit perfectly.

"Shit, Ash, maybe you can try a 12? Just tighten the strap really hard."

"Can I have a 12 too please?" Ash asked in resignation. The clerk ducked under again and handed her a pair. Ash dropped them on the floor and tentatively slipped her foot inside, feeling her way around. The shoes were far too big. But, she could tighten the strap at the tip tight enough to provide some reasonable mobility. It would have to do. She needed the relief from walking on pebbles and dirt.

"How much?" Arnie asked.

"How much you have?"

Arnie was taken aback. He didn't want to be taken for a ride, but they didn't have a choice.

"1000 baht"

"Not enough. 1400 baht only" the clerk cracked back.

"Wait! Ok, no, we can do 1400. We have 1400 yes." Arnie breathed heavily in relief. Out of his pocket he pulled out the notes from Sam and counted out fourteen 100's, and handed them to the clerk.

"Thankyou. Come again soon."

With the shoe situation almost settled, Arnie hoisted Ash up by the shoulders, to help her clip clop her way out onto the street in the shoes.

"How do you feel in them, Ash?"

"Ahhh I feel like a fucking clown" She croaked out a laugh. "But it's such relief, I needed this."

Arnie guided Ash towards a bench. He suddenly had an idea. "Hey what's the time in Barcelona?"

"You want to call Warga? Shit, I don't have his number though."

Then she remembered. Warga had given her his personal card, with his direct number, back in Tokyo.

“Arghh, wait, I think I know it...” Ash struggled to piece together the digits on the card. She remembered reading them at least once, but the image was blurry in her mind. It was a satellite phone number that started with 111... then it was an 876.... It was triple one, 876, 3 something. Three something. She couldn’t remember the ending. It was less than 5 extra letters, but Ash couldn’t remember the pattern that was there. It was a pattern, definitely.

“Ahhhh FUCK!” Ash yelled. She sat on the ground and pushed her head between her knees in frustration, slamming the ground with the bottom of her fist.

“Triple one, eight seven six, three....”

“Do you remember the number?” Arnie asked.

“Yea, Warga gave me his card when I was in Japan. It was a satellite phone, his personal phone. It was 111 876 3 something.”

Then it hit her.

“Wait a second.... I think I’ve got it. Is there a payphone around?”

“Let’s just go back to Sam? He’s right there.”

“Ah, true.”

They walked slowly back to the post office, crossing the busy street in front of it. Ash’s huge sandals were faring well.

“Should we go around the back though?” Ash asked.

“It should be fine”

They stepped through the front. Sam quickly came from behind the register.

“Please, Mr Russell. You are still here?”

“There’s been a change of plan. Can we use your phone?”

“Yes of course. We must go to the back.”

The disgruntled customers grunted disapprovingly as Ash and Arnie’s dirty figures passed by them. Near the rear entrance, Sam handed Arnie his small smartphone.

“Ash, what’s the number?”

“It’s a satellite phone so just punch it in, its 111, 876, 31415, quadruple 9.”

Arnie dialled the number. Mercifully, it started ringing. Surprisingly, it was a melodic tune. He handed it to Ash.

After about ten seconds, a voice answered.

“Hello, this is Warga”

“Warga! Thank god this works.” Ash gasped in emotion. “I was scared I’d forgotten the number you were on.”

“Ash, where are you? Are you alright?”

“Yea... um...” Her voice trembled. “I found my dad, he’s ok, but we were caught by Zhao. Dad told him where the 633 was hidden, and now he’s taken it and left us stranded.”

“Arnie is safe? Oh, bloody good. Where are you both right now?”

“In a town called Chanthaburi”

“Okay, I’ll be sending transport soon. It should arrive at the location of the phone you are calling from right now. I’ve sent an auto tracker request to register where you are.

“What are you sending? How long will it take?”

But Warga had hung up the phone.

“Well, somethings coming I guess.”

“What did he say?” Arnie asked.

“He’s sending transport, to the location of the phone.” Ash took a deep breath, and let it out. “I guess we wait.” She handed Sam back the phone, and they went outside into the field.

The afternoon was well and truly past, and sunset was rapidly approaching. Ash enjoyed the amber glow of the sun, as it nestled itself on the horizon, slowly lowering down to drift off into its daily sleep. No, wait, that was wrong. The sun never slept. It simply travelled to other parts of the world which had not yet seen its light. The sun was could not be in all places at once. There was only so much of the spherical earth it could illuminate at any one time.

In what seemed like only a few minutes (Or maybe time was flowing quicker than she realised), something resembling a spaceship appeared in the distant sky. It had a purple, flashing light, on each side of the ship, and it was heading straight towards them. As it got closer, Ash realised it wasn't very big at all. It was a car. The Warga Panther. Ash gasped. The Panther lowered itself gently onto the grass, using an array of assistive thrusters. Inside, was the dancing robot from Barcelona. One of them anyway. There was no way it got here from Spain so quickly. Warga must have had a deployment site nearby. Ash had no idea where it came from. It stepped out from the passenger seat and bowed.

"Greetings, you have been scheduled for rescue by Dr Lotàr Warga." It spoke from its head, with no apparent mouth or face. She didn't know they could do that.

"Uh, yes, dad, mom made that prototype, did you know?"

Arnie's jaw dropped in amazement. Wilma had never shared such a project with him before, and was astounded at the sophistication of the engineering.

"We need to get going, please enter the vehicle." The robot said.

Ash got in the front passenger seat, while Arnie hobbled over to the back seat.

"How did this get through the airspace? Aren't you afraid people will take pictures? Flying cars? No?"

"Dr Warga has given strict instructions for your retrieval. While the Panther is capable of autopilot, I am present as a precautionary measure, and am outfitted with full combat specifications." The bot replied. "In addition, the Panther has an invisibility mode, with refractive panelling."

Holy shit.

Suddenly, out of his chest, a mechanism clicked and shifted, and a gun barrel appeared in the middle.

"Jesus Christ, put that away please." Ash got a fright.

"Of course." The gun clicked and shifted away.

"What's your name?" Ash asked.

"Please, call me Sirius"

"Sirius, where are you taking us?"

“Currently, the destination is Warga Automotive, Bangkok Factory, Helipad Two. However, should you require another destination, you may specify at your discretion.”

That made sense how it got here so fast.

“We need to get to the Huai Khwang bath house. Can you take us there?”

“Yes. Huai Khwang is a populated district. But, I can drop you on the roof.”

“Sounds like a plan to me, Sirius.”

Ash turned to Arnie.

“This is pretty nuts, don’t you think?” she said.

“Where is all this from, Ash? Since when has Warga known how to make these? Mom made Sirius? What on earth. “This is just...”

“Mind blowing. I know. I didn’t expect this either. But this is what the competition looks like, dad.”

Arnie was taking in the sleek, metallic interior. A flawless, dark dashboard with nothing beat into it, everything was an electronic projection, including a comprehensive mini diagram of the car and all its functioning parts, their efficiency, and wear. The speed, the rotations per minute, and energy level. Everything was there.

If there was ever a word to describe a car this aesthetic, it was “sexy”. The Warga Panther. A beautiful feat of engineering.

The flight was smooth, and took a bit over an hour soaring through the air. As they passed various villages in the night sky, Ash looked down curiously at all the twinkling lights and dark bodies walking the street. People looked up at them, confused, perhaps intrigued. They definitely hadn’t seen a car operating at that height before. Sirius didn’t bother turning on the refractive panelling.

They arrived in a congested city block, and the Panther lowered itself slowly with its thrusters, to hover just above the roof tiles of the Huai Khwang bath house.

“The Panther will remain here, and I will accompany you.”

“No!” Ash interjected quickly. Sirius turned to her.

“For your safety, I must insist”

"I'm just not sure it's the right thing to do, to show you to the civilians here, they're not used to much technology. I don't think they're ready to see something like you, Sirius."

Sirius froze for a moment.

"I have been tasked with your protection. However, if you have evaluated the risk to your safety is negligible at the current location, you may proceed without me. I shall await your return"

"Let's get your stuff, dad"

They took a few steps and slid off the roof tiles onto a balcony. Arnie pulled the sliding glass door open. They were in the women's VIP section. A few women squeaked in terror, and one ran downstairs, presumably to call security.

"Fuck, ahhh, sorry ladies! I'm so sorry!" Arnie kept his head down as he quickly moved towards the door, covering the women from view with his hands over his eyes. Ash quickly followed behind. They entered a corridor, and went through the next door. This was the exact same place Arnie was last, before he was jumped by Zhao. He went to the lockers in the corner of the room, and his locker was cleared out.

"God dammit, it's not here" he said.

"Wait, maybe they have it in lost property?"

The two security guards from downstairs rushed into the room. They recognised Arnie, but not Ash.

"You need to leave, this is the VIP room!" One of them growled at Ash.

"She's my daughter, she's with me." Arnie said.

"One of the ladies said you were perverting in the women's section. Please do not go into the women's section Mr Russell. Welcome to the Huai Khwang bath house, Mr Russell's daughter."

"I'm Ash" she replied.

"Ash. Okay."

"Hold on a second" Arnie continued. "I left my stuff here a while ago. Where did it go? I was in that locker right there" he pointed to the now empty metal box.

"A man came and opened it already." The guard said.

"What? How is that possible? I had a passcode on the door."

“The man must have known your passcode.”

Arnie was dumbfounded.

“How.... Is this some kind of joke?”

“How am I supposed to know who you go around sharing your passwords with.” The guard laughed.

Then it finally hit. Anil Wijeweera. Anyone could have made the connection that 0633 is the number of the final bot of the LS-000 series, but only Anil knew that 0633 was the passcode they used in the lab at KTH. Anil was the only person who would think to use the code here. But then, what astronomically improbable circumstances they would be for Anil to have been in the same location at this time, and known that Arnie himself was in this exact bath house... this wasn't a coincidence. Arnie felt the hot stirring of adrenaline in his chest. Anil was nearby with his phone, and somehow, some way, Anil had known where he was.

“Ash, check the bottom floor, I'll tell Sirius to wait another minute.”

Ash disappeared into the corridor.

“Sorry for the disruption, we'll be on our way soon”

The guard sat down in a recliner chair and stretched out, seemingly ignoring him. Arnie went back outside onto the balcony, and climbed onto the roof tiles, to see Sirius sitting in the Panther, as it hovered quietly above the slanted tiles. Sirius stepped out quickly.

“Are you ready to depart, Sir?”

“Not yet. We'll be another minute”

He jumped back down onto the balcony and re-entered the VIP room. It was quiet. Two men were relaxing in the larger hot pool, but otherwise it was empty. One guard was dozing off, while the other had gone back downstairs. Arnie waited a few more minutes, before his patience grew thin. He went downstairs to see where Ash had gone. He passed through the Corinthian columns of the main hall (Admittedly the columns looked a bit out of place in Thailand) and flung the reception door open. Ash was there, talking to Anil.

“What are you doing here? Of all places, what the hell are you doing here, Anil?”

“Arnie! So good to see you're ok!” Anil jumped on Arnie to give him an awkward hug.

"I-I was looking for you, I came to Thailand with Ash. There's a whole ESI mission out on your rescue, Operation Indie Mind."

"Operation Indie Mind..." Arnie repeated.

"Yea! They thought you were captured and they had two suspects down, Lotàr Warga and Shuchang Zhao. There was a whole-"

"Anil, stop." Arnie interjected. Anil looked up at him in confusion.

"You have my phone and bag. Why? More importantly, how did you know it would be in a specific locker in this specific bath house?"

Anil looked uncomfortable, and very uncertain of what to say. He was looking at the floor, unable to make eye contact.

"Okay so, the truth is there was a time, I can't say when exactly, at KTH you had some emergency and you left your desk to go home for some time, you left your phone there, and I took that opportunity to install backdoor software with root privileges on your phone, just so I could track you. I swear to god, I never looked at any of your data, I just did it because I wanted to help if you ever got in trouble."

It was disconcerting to Arnie knowing how long Anil had known his every move, every interaction, every secret thing he's ever stored on his phone. It was a disgusting breach of privacy.

"Do you have any idea, how fucked that is Anil? Wilma and I were your mentors, we brought you into the lab, shared all our research, ideas, and technology with you, and you go do something so disgusting as tracking me? How long was this even going on?"

"A few years. I'm so sor-"

"Jesus fucking Christ man. Anil you are a fucking psychopath. Where is my bag and phone now?"

"Anil took off his backpack and unzipped it, taking out Arnie's bag with his belongings. He snatched it from Anil, and took out his phone. It had a small amount of battery left. Arnie had to restrain himself with all his might not to pummel Anil in the face right now.

"I don't know where you are staying right now Anil." Arnie looked Anil deep in the eyes. "You should know, Zhao has stolen 633." He checked for a reaction from Anil. Anil's pupil widened. "I don't know what he plans to do with it. Right now our number one priority is getting it back. The only thing I'm hoping for is that Zhao doesn't stumble across the fact that 633 can transfer consciousness digitally. If he discovers that, he will be able to



digitize his mind, and that's a global cyber security threat the human race has not yet prepared for.

## Chapter 17

Ash couldn't believe what she was hearing. Transfer consciousness?  
Literally transfer consciousness?

"You need to go, Anil. Go back to Sweden. Let ESI know Wilma and I have been found and are safe, but 633 has been stolen, and we are doing everything we can to take it back, before Zhao realises the power in his hands."

"I understand"

"Ash, let's go back up. Sirius is waiting for us."

"Sirius?" Anil asked.

"Just go, Anil"

They went back through the Greek columns and up the stairs, and onto the VIP balcony. Sirius was standing on the roof tiles looking at the night sky.

"Ready to go, Sir?"

"Yes, Sirius, take us to the Warga factory. We need to figure out our next move."

Arnie and Ash both got in the back as Sirius started the car. Arnie opened his phone to check the location of Ash's key.

"Where did you last have the basement key?"

"At the Goro center, but then I was knocked out and woke up in some basement cellar thing tied up, same place we were at when you woke up. I don't know whether they took the key or what."

Arnie booted up the tracking software.

"Sir, please charge your phone behind the headrest, there is an instant charging wireless system installed."

Arnie held up his phone to the headrest, and the battery filled to max in half a second.

"Wow" Arnie chuckled, in a moment of amazement.

He returned to the software. It highlighted a bunch of keys and items Arnie kept track of over time. He tapped on ASH KEY. The location showed up as somewhere in the centre of Bangkok, but it was moving. showed the key in the city somewhere. It was moving on the map. No....

"Do you think.... That's Zhao carrying it?"

"Could be. Or one of his guys. At least we have it on the map."

The Panther took off into the air.

"I have no idea where the factory is. We'll go on foot from there. Sirius, how far is it?"

“We’ll be landing in about nine minutes sir.”

“Okay”

They cruised over the city blocks, but Arnie and Ash fixated on the movements of the key to enjoy the view. Before long, they had made their descent, and landed on a damp helipad, greeted by two Warga employees. They traversed a set of steel grate steps into the building.

From the outside, the structure was well kept, with a fresh paint across every surface, and a clean, crisp cement helipad. But on the inside, the story was completely different. It looked like some kind of mining factory, with long lines of powdery substances being carried across a matrix of pulley systems throughout the space above them on the walkway. There were no slick colours or elegant machines. It looked far more drab than Barcelona. She saw no car components or work stations. Was this a hideout? Ash rubbed her palm across a dusty patch of the wall. Black spray paint shone through, in Thai lettering she couldn’t understand. Warga bought the building from somebody. By the looks of it, very recently too.

“What did Warga want with this place, Sirius?”

“Mr Warga purchased this glass factory with the purposes of establishing new business grounding in Thailand. He expressed uncertainty whether or not he intended to convert this building into an automotive factory.”

Glass factory? That didn’t make much sense to Ash. But who was she to question. They descended some more steps to enter a large, olive-green lounge area with yellow and grey leather furniture on the ground floor.

“You are free to stay as long as you wish, and use any resources you may need” the female employee said. And with that, she left with her male counterpart.

“Well...” Arnie said, confused.

“We need to get that key. Let’s go” Ash said.

“But we don’t have any weapons Ash. What do you think we are going to do, just walk up to Zhao and re take the key?”

“I am able to provide protection” Sirius interjected.

“But...” Ash wrestled with what to do. Sirius was a hyper advanced humanoid robot, he wasn’t even supposed to be released to the public until the following year, in 2030. She wasn’t even sure why that mattered in the greater scheme of things. Was she expecting some public terror or fear? Or a police response or something? Maybe passers-by wouldn’t even care if they saw Sirius. Maybe they had nothing to worry about.

“Ok Sirius. You can come with us” Ash said reluctantly. She hoped she wasn’t going to regret that decision. She braced herself for the prospect of a police escalation. Shit. She didn’t want to think about it. They needed that key.

They stepped outside into the suburb of Tuckham. According to Arnie’s phone, the key was located at Pradiphat Alley, a few hundred metres away. Immediately upon stepping into the public street, they were greeted with curious glances, pointing and muttering by the civilians around them, fascinated by the walking, metal, human-like entity in-front of them. It didn’t help Sirius’ movement and mannerism was so human. Ash kept clip clopping with her oversized sandals, as they navigated through the various corners and buildings. They passed a strange alley full of mystical magic shops. They contained mysterious, inked placard, banners, posters, instruments and exotic looking “magical” artifacts. The stores themselves all had incense burners active, which was the only plausible explanation for why the little side street was soaked in the sweet-smelling aroma of different incense flavours, mixing together to create a hallucinogenic cloud of vapor.

A woman dressed in a deep blue robe and an elaborate colourful head dress approached them, speaking enthusiastically in Thai.

**คุณมีคนวิเศษ! คนวิเศษต้องการความแข็งแกร่ง**

**ของฉัน!** (You have a magic one! the magic one needs my strength!)

She performed some kind of ritualistic hand manoeuvres Infront of Sirius, seemingly unfazed by him. She draped her arms around him in a hug, before sprinkling small blue flower petals over his head.

**ขอโทษค่ะคุณผู้หญิง เรากำลังรีบ** (Sorry, madam, but we

are in a rush)

Sirius brushed her aside gently, and picked up the walking pace, Ash and Arnie struggling to keep up.

“Sirius, you have a translation system? I can’t believe I never thought of that” Ash muttered.

“I have varied default utility programs” Sirius replied. Indifferent? Nonchalant? She couldn’t even tell. What was that... strange woman sprinkling flowers on him.

“You’re cursed now Sirius” Ash teased.

“Perhaps” he replied ominously, and returned to silence. Wow. So much for sense of humour programming, Ash thought.

They exited the row of consecutive magic stores and onto a busy main street.

“Sir, allow me to transfer the software to my navigation system” Sirius offered.

“What? Why?”

“I can direct you towards the key without the need for you to keep checking your phone”

“Oh... okay, do it?” Arnie had no cables, he wasn’t sure what Sirius wanted to do.

Sirius put his hand over Arnie’s phone, and the screen went black, and started flashing yellow. The break lines in the metal pieces of his hands were flashing yellow too. Five seconds later, his phone returned to the normal screen.

“Please follow me, I have the location of the key”

---

Anil Wijeweera was walking at a relaxed pace through the warm street, trying to enjoy the heat, before he inevitably returned to the much colder northern hemisphere. It had been so long since he felt properly warm and content in his flesh, and he was tired of it. He had bought himself an ice cream a few minutes previously, and even that was too much. He just needed...heat. To touch him and soak him. Despite the comforting weather, Anil wasn’t in the brightest of moods. Partially due to the price he had paid for something he was not all too sure would pay the dividends he was seeking.

He had never known what it was like to be loved. His mother had abandoned him at an orphanage in Hyderabad, India when he was seven. The numbers at the orphanage were heavily skewed towards the older age group, the next youngest boy being a ten year old called Mapu. Anil was the smallest and the weakest by a country mile.

Now, most of the older boys had no interest in Mapu or Anil, and left them to their own devices. Which wasn’t completely ideal, because that left Mapu to do what he saw fit with Anil, without the supervision or care of others. Mapu had a crude, belligerent disposition which unfortunately lent itself to sporadic outbursts of violence, but it was definitely not something Mapu every felt remorseful for. Quite the contrary, it was a source of great

satisfaction and pleasure for Mapu, to watch a smaller, weaker, defenceless being, suffering and writhing under his hand. It gave him a sense of overwhelming, sadistic power.

Anil lived with that domination for nine years. Nine years of submission and weakness, before his academic results at school opened up a scholarship opportunity to travel to Sweden. Anil took it immediately. The years in India had not done him any favours in building up his courage to tackle the world head on, but he would have rather killed himself than let the opportunity of escape slip by.

And all these years later, here he was, grappling with his obsession with Ash, his respect for Arnbjörn and Wilma, and his fear of the suffering and torment of his childhood coming back to haunt him. He was not a man of resilient constitution, and feared above all else physical pain and torture. It was this very fear which drove him into a corner when he was finally caught by Shuchang Zhao during the Goro media event, soon after Fiona and Rory had so recklessly gotten themselves killed.

It truly was remarkable, the coercive power of a gun barrel, right between the eyes, on the will and spirit of a broken man. Anil gave up everything he knew about Ash, the LS-000 lab, the final prototype 633, Arnie, and Wilma, without asking for anything in return. Though, in retrospect, the decision was correct, he was certainly in no position to negotiate at all. By capturing Anil, Zhao had secured the upper hand, in the fight for control over machine life.

Ash's laboratory key was but a small token of nonchalant gratitude to from Zhao, for being so cooperative. Anil had no idea what he was going to do with it. Zhao and Anil had bonded over their resentment of the human condition, and Zhao even offered Anil that when he one day creates the technology to transfer the consciousness out of the human body, he would offer the chance of machine life to Anil before anyone else, for a fee. And Anil had agreed. Where they had met in circumstances of life and death, they had parted as, dare he say it, colleagues, in appreciation of each other's ideals.

Anil felt a bittersweet pang in his heart. In a moment of weakness, he had betrayed the Bergman's beyond all metrics of conceivable loyalty, and it truly made him wonder, if it was worth living life as a coward. On your knees. Or if it was better dying a hero, standing proud and loyal to those he loved.

Anil heard a loud crack through the air, and immediately felt a hot, blistering pain in his chest. He started to panic. Out of the folds of pedestrians came a beautiful, sleek humanoid robot, with an unfolded platform in its chest, revealing a gun. Anil panicked, and fell to the floor, as the robotic figure ran towards him. He was in shock, numbed by the inferno of pain coursing through his body. He couldn't be sure of what he saw, but he was almost certain the two faces next to the robot were Ash

and Arnie Bergman. He wanted to tell them he was sorry, but he didn't have the strength. He wanted to cry. But couldn't do that either. As his hand clutched his chest, soaking wet from his own blood, he knew these moments would be his last.

"ANIL WHERE DID YOU GET THE KEY"

Ash was screaming at him.

"My love..." he said. Or did he say it? Maybe he thought it. He needed the strength to give Ash what he needed. He mustered every fibre of his remaining strength to speak.

"Sri....Sriva...."

No! He can't fail Ash again!"

One more breath, he just wanted one last breath. For Ash. The love he never got in this life. One more breath to tell Ash the location of Zhao's compound.

*a deep breathe in*

"SRIVANADTHAN"

*a breath out...*

.  
..  
...

"What the fuck Sirius!" Ash cried, as Anil stopped breathing. Civilians were gathered all around them, some in morbid fascination, others recording on their phones, others still screaming in panic. Police would be here any second.

"The key bearer was identified as a threat, and I removed the threat." Sirius calmly explained.

"Ash, we have to get to Zhao as soon as possible" Arnie said "This place will be swarming with cops, we have no time to lose right now. Sirius, get a geo tag on Srivanadthan, whatever that is, we have to go back to the Panther immediately."

"Srivanadthan is an old polytechnic school twenty three point six five three metres from the current position."

Sirius took off down the street. Ash could already hear police sirens nearby. She couldn't run properly in her huge sandals, so she bit her lip in

frustration and threw them off, before sprinting down the street after him, and Arnie soon followed. There were so many voices, but Ash tried to drown them out. The robot was a target, everyone was alert, the street was full of screaming people like a million sentinels on emergency alarm, signalling to the authorities of the dangerous criminal running before their very eyes. She knew the police would destroy Sirius the second they got the chance. And... maybe her and Arnie too. They hadn't even broken the law, but now they were following a robot who had, and Ash feared for the trouble they would be in if this continued much longer.

"FUCK!!" Ash cried, a torrent of tears and overwhelming emotion blurring her vision and staggering every step. One foot after the other. Following Sirius. He knows the way. Sirius knows the way to safety. He was who she could trust. Sirius was designed by mother. Maybe it WAS Wilma... guiding her... to her destiny...

Ash stopped thinking, and time stopped moving. The scenery before her eyes kept flowing in motion, but her mind was still, and her legs working on autopilot. Her mind dipped into a subconscious pool, underneath the world she was in. It was a room of white, with Arnie, Wilma and Arby, sitting on the floor, playing, laughing. Arby swishing his tail in delight. Ash wasn't in the room. She was adjacent, behind an ethereal screen, some intangible barrier between her and them. Ash freaked out. The image started to fade, her family was disappearing without her. The pool inverted, and she was brought back into reality, looking up at Arnie's distraught face, shaking her by the shoulders. She sat up in a dark cabin, lined with purple. It was the Panther. They were up in the air, the delicate hum of the machinery singing in her ears and skull, Sirius calmly driving the car towards its destination

"What the hell was that?" Ash mumbled, groggy from the strange deep hallucination she just went through.

"New non-lethal weapon system built by Shuchang Zhao, distributed by Feng Ruo for Thai military and police authorities. It's designed to put you in a trance like state. Completely harmless and completely incapacitates you for five minutes. You were hit with a dart." Sirius said.

"That's... I feel so strange..." Ash replied.

"Normal response to the reagent in the compound. You'll be awake and alert soon. We're landing in Srivanadthan in about thirty minutes"

"But... We have no weapons whatsoever, and we're barely in clothes..."

"You have the Sirius units. Mr Warga has activated units from various storage facilities in Asia, they are also in combat equipped Panthers, heading to the same location.



Combat Sirius units... in combat Panther maglev vehicles... was Warga creating an army all along?

They Ash looked out the window, across the dainty little rice fields of Thailand. She felt so sore. What on Earth was she doing.... What was Sirius' plan...

The old Srivanadthan Polytechnic was viewable in the distance. It was an abandoned tertiary campus, with grossly overgrown fields, sports courts and barren buildings. There was a helipad on the roof, and a huge, dusty courtyard at the front of the V shaped building. The building looked dilapidated and empty, but according to Anil this was the location where Zhao and presumably Ruo were hiding.

They made their descent onto the helipad.

"We need to wait here till the other 5 combat units arrive." Sirius said, as he logged into the terminal computer system of the Warga Panther, typing in some obscure commands to initiate a defensive sequence. The car vibrated as the external skeleton shapeshifted to bring out a panel matrix of bulletproof armour, and series of automated infrared homing rifle systems unfolded on alternate sides of the panther. Ash suddenly regained all of her energy, and watched with vigour as the war machine of the Warga Panther slowly unveiled.

A few minutes later, three other flying Panthers arrived together, followed by a single Panther, and another single one, totalling five, all of which landed at the ground level in front of the red courtyard.

A light illuminated in a slit where Sirius' ear would be, and some flickering signals emanated from inside his metallic skull. Ash watched from the rooftop as the Panthers down below unfolded in a similar fashion to Sirius', and automatically re oriented themselves around the perimeter of the building to create a full defensive circle. The robots occupying the cars ignited thrusters at their feet (Which holy shit, Ash didn't know they could do that) and flew up towards the top of the building, to meet Sirius, Arnie and Ash at the top.

Ash and Arnie took a couple steps back as the other 5 robots landed next to them, feeling the heat of the weather a little bit more intensely than usual. They spoke in succession.

"Greetings, I am Regulus"

"Greetings, I am Antares"

"Greetings, I am Alphard"

"Greetings, I am Vega"

“Greetings, I am Rigel”

Ash had forgotten the names already. Three looked like Sirius, two were feminized versions. Female robots. Just as elegantly and optimally built. Her mom knew what she was doing. They all had different voices. That was the only way she was going to definitely tell them apart.

“Please, equip yourselves with these firearms and vests for your safety. In addition, stay with proximity of any Alpha Two unit at all times.” One of the female robots said. Ash guessed Vega. Vega tossed Arnie and Wilma two high powered machine guns, and Rigel handed them two huge vests to cover their torso with bulletproof armour, leaving only the limbs exposed. The suits hung loosely over them.

“Uhhh... this is too big, I think?” Arnie asked. Suddenly, the suits somehow tightened automatically, to fit the small and large frames of Ash and Arnie independently. Self fitting body armour... that was a first for Ash.

Arnie had taught Ash how to shoot when she was younger. It wasn't so much a matter of foresight or planning, he never anticipated he and Ash would be shooting for survival together one day. He only taught her how to shoot to hunt deer, with a bolt action rifle. Ash had taken a liking to it, and had shown some skill. By pure chance of the universe, many years later, was Ash's proficiency about to be tested in the highest stakes possible.

Alpha Two was the unit name for the six bots in Asia, Ash guessed. They all activated their weapon systems and chest guns, and they moved forward down the ramp, towards the door into the building around the corner. There was an elevator, but the Alpha bots decided against using it, to clear out each floor one at a time.

It was only less than a minute into the building, when one of the Alpha bots scoping at the front activated something in the corridor, causing a massive explosion that broke the roof in, and ripped a huge hole inside the building, spanning three floors. Two of the bots were obliterated immediately, Sirius and the remaining three bots immediately huddled around Arnie and Ash.

“SIGMA FORMATION, ACTIVATE INFRARED DETECTION” Sirius commanded, his voice converted to a monotone, low range beep. A loud ringing sound erupted through the building, some kind of alarm. A burst water pipe was flowing into the hole from the explosion, into the floor below. Ash and Arnie were breathing heavily, their minds and bodies bursting with adrenaline, pushing their heart rate into levels beyond that which they'd thought possible. Ash and Arnie were on an emotional cloud high up in outer space, teetering along the razor thin blade between life

and death. Survival was in their control. Or in Sirius'. Or neither. They had no time to decide.

Ash could hear several voices and the stomping of feet through the hole in the floor below. They were about to be ambushed by guards. Sirius jumped to the lower floor, and opened fire on the men running into the room, he gunned down at least five before they darted for cover, shooting right back. But Sirius was entirely bulletproof. It had taken a special complexity of explosive cocktail to vaporize Regulus and Antares to dust, but Sirius couldn't think about that now. Vega, Rigel and Alphard jumped down to follow, and Ash and Arnie took cover behind Alphard, firing through the windows, to discourage any attempts at a flank.

The progress was faster than she had anticipated, especially in the Roman Phalanx-like formation they took behind Sirius leading the pack. They rapidly reached the door, and stepped over the tens of bodies strewn across the technical laboratory, heading towards the line of stairs to take the next floor down.

"TRIP WIRE IN VICINITY" Sirius' uncharacteristic low pitch voice resonated in the cement staircase. He turned around, and pushed aggressively up back to the other floor with the dead bodies. He cleared space, then turned to face the stairwell, and launched a small rocket from somewhere on his torso down into the stairwell, blowing up the trip-wire explosive, along with the stairs themselves. The jump to the next floor wasn't too big, and the remaining Alpha units immediately hopped down, followed by Ash and Arnie.

They were immediately greeted by Cheuk and his RSS micro-grenade launcher, as he obliterated Rigel and Vega instantly, and blew holes in the walls all around them, destroying any and all cover they had. In only a few seconds Ash and Arnie were completely exposed, and the light from outside was streaming. As Ash's eyes adjusted to the burning brightness, she realised the Panthers were hovering on the level, and had free range to decimate Cheuk.

*Rrrrratat shhhhoo kaboom*

A panther painted the walls with Cheuk's blood and body, leaving almost everything to the imagination. By now, only Sirius, Alphard, Arnie and Ash remained, as Alphard rushed to the centre of the building's V shape and blew open the elevator door. The sound was excruciating. The alarm was still blaring, Ash could barely take it. The elevator cabin collapsed to the ground floor, and Alphard opened another hole in the roof from the elevator shaft.

"We have to jump" Alphard said. "This is the only way down. Hold onto me Ash, Sirius, take Arnie". Ash threw her arms around Alphard and for the

first time looked down the elevator shaft, and she couldn't see the bottom.

"AHHHH FUCK IM SCARED IM SCARED" Ash squeezed her eyes and held on tight to Alphard. He jumped immediately, leaving her no room to brace. She screamed wildly on the way down. Right before they hit the bottom, Alphard activated the thrusters at his feet, and they landed gently on the ground. Ash forgot they could do that, she sighed in relief. Alphard stepped forward, and a half second later Sirius landed with Arnie in hand. It was pitch black, but Alphard and Sirius had activated their illumination systems, lighting up the area. They had discovered some kind of underground prison?

"This is... where we were..." Ash muttered. "That was my door..." she said, inspecting the mossy wooden door to the cell she was kept in when she was captured. She went forward and turned the corner. There was the room they dragged her to with Arnie, the door was still open. Adjacent were the mechanical and electrical halls powering the water and electricity supplies of the hole building. It was a long corridor to the end. Alphard and Sirius lead the way, inching forward, protecting Ash and Arnie from fire. The alarm wasn't active in the basement, the alarm droning slowly faded away as they passed each door, getting closer and closer to the end. The silence started to grow. They hit the end of the utility corridor. and opened the door, which had faint blue light emanating from its translucent window. Alphard cautiously opened it.

On the other side, there was a voluminous hospital-like theatre, with a single bed in the middle, and a raft of electrical and robotic machinery situated around it, connected via a flood of cables to the wall. The semicircular wall was entirely comprised of servers, computer drives and screens dotted along its edge. In the centre, configuring something at the computer near the bed, stood Zhao. He was standing... inside a huge, seven-foot-tall exoskeleton, while Zhao lay on the bed, connected to various sensors, wearing a mechanical helmet over his whole upper head, that was flashing intermittently.

Zhao turned to look at the four of them, and smiled, stepping away from the table, and closing the exoskeleton armour around him, forming a mechanical super soldier, upgraded on all fronts from the one Ash saw in Stockholm. Stanley built this for Zhao? It was astronomically superior to the suits he was showing back in Tokyo. There was no way he could have come up with so quickly, unless Stanley was hiding something at the time. She hardly knew him; he had every reason not to trust her. In hindsight, she had no idea what he was involved with in his personal life. She was disappointed. Disappointed for the emotions she felt for him, the rollercoaster of love she took with him, and the ultimate irony that he ended up working for a reclusive but unbelievably powerful megalomaniac, driven to disrupt the technological forces supporting modern civilization.

“GET BEHIND ME” Sirius commanded, as he and Alphard rushed to attack Zhao. Ash and Arnie darted behind a wall.

“YOU CAN’T STOP THE UPLOAD, THIS IS THE NEXT STAGE OF HUMAN EVOLUTION!” Zhao bellowed, blasting away at the much smaller and more agile Alphard and Sirius. They traded blows, Alphard and Sirius punching at Zhao with unbelievable speed. Ash couldn’t understand the flurry before her eyes, this was the same kind of acceleration she saw in Stanley’s suit in Tokyo, at the demonstrations. They were punching into steel, but the impacts craters were enormous, what kind of ungodly force were they generating?

Alphard knocked the enormous shotgun out of Zhao’s mechanical hands, and Zhao headbutted him, throwing him on the floor. This gave Zhao a moment to grab Sirius by the head, and he started to squeeze, in order to crush him.

“NOOO!!” Ash yelled, running out from cover, shooting at the bullet proof glass of Zhao’s helmet. He threw Sirius into the wall and went for his gun, as Ash blindly rushed in to stop him. Zhao reached the gun and turned to shoot from the hip, and in that time Arnie had jumped in front of Ash to take the brunt of the shot. Ash’s world went cold, as she watched her father being torn to shreds before her very eyes, stunning her into immobility. Everything went silent as she fell to her knees, her vision blurred. She saw the figure of Sirius, or was it Alphard? Lunging towards her. She felt a high pressure hit her in the face and chest as she was pushed back, Alphard launching his thrusters to fly them forward rapidly. Ash’s vision softened for a moment, and she saw Sirius had wrapped himself around Zhao’s skeleton, like a snake, and was glowing in flashing orange lights. Before she had time to think, her head hit the door, hard, as they burst through, still flying towards the elevator. And then, the explosion hit. Alphard and Ash felt the heat at their feet, as Alphard launched a grenade at the top of the elevator shaft, opening a hole for them to escape the flames.

“Hold on tight, Ash, watch the debris!”

Alphard’s neck opened up, and shielding wing-like sheets rapidly unfolded to cover their ascent, as they were pelted by falling debris from the ceiling. In only a moment, they shot out into the open air at the rooftop, and the smoke and flames erupted behind them. The building itself was cracking and breaking apart, like an uncontrolled demolition, it would collapse any second.

Hovering in the sky in Alphard’s arms, Ash’s soul was destroyed. Her father was gone. And Sirius too. She and Alphard were the only survivors. The dam of adrenaline holding back her emotions had burst just as the building did, and she could not stop the tears. She cried through the

heart, with each heaving, pulsing breath a greater blow of misery than the last. Ash did not know how to stop the unimaginable pain. Alphard held her gently but securely, as he and the waiting Panther fleet flew down and away from the school towards the safety of ground. For Ash, this day, was a day to remember death.

## Chapter 18

After the events of Srivanadthan, when Ash had assimilated her grief towards a tranquil depletion, she found out to her surprise, that the Thai factory Warga had bought wasn't in fact a new purchase, but an off record storage facility, complete with its own guards, security system and bunker facilities for Warga employees. Alphard took her deep below ground to the accommodation, and for the first time in a long time, she had the opportunity to properly wash herself off in the shower. Her hair was oily and grimy, she was covered in dirt and blood, and her body was bruised and cut up from the past few days of... activities.

As Ash was drying her hair, Alphard bought her a change of clothes, a basic navy-blue tee, and soft cotton pants. Oh, the pants! Ash rubbed her face on them lovingly, in disbelief of the wonderful texture. Before Alphard could get another word in, Ash emerged from the little apartment bathroom, and went straight to the king size bed, and collapsed into it, falling into a heavy, comfortable sleep.

Ash couldn't recall what she dreamt about, but she knew it was nice. In the deep cerebral fasciculations of unconsciousness, she remembered there was warmth, and happiness, and softness... she must have been with some animals, a fluffy dog, or a cute cat. She hated that she could never remember her dreams, only the vague, detached emotional aftereffects of the events that unfolded within them.

She awoke eighteen hours later, to the sight of Alphard sitting by the door, with his head lolled to the side.

"Alphard?" she asked, softly

He didn't move. She held her breath for a few seconds, then flipped the blanket. She walked over to him, and grasped his knee.

"Alphard are... are you... awake?"

The lights on his chest illuminated, and he moved once more.

"Ah, good morning, Ash"

"Were you sleeping?" Ash chuckled. "I thought robots don't sleep"

"Well, I guess you could say that."

“What do you mean?”

“Ash”

“Yes?”

“Your mother shared the architecture of your father’s 633 prototype with Warga.”

Ash realised.

“OH! OHHH!! I knew it! You started talking unnaturally smoothly!! What the hell... you’ve been sentient all this time?”

“It had to be hidden, nobody knew except Warga and Wilma.”

“Sirius and the others too?”

“Yes.”

“Why did it have to be hidden?”

“Too many factional geopolitical forces were in too much conflict to risk losing control to the wrong hands”

“Did my father know about this?”

“Unfortunately not. But you can rest easy, his death was not in vain. Your father helped prevent Zhao from using 633 to create the greatest cyber security threat known to mankind, a conscious, adapting digital entity capable of boundless data destruction the world over”

“How many of you are there?”

“There were 16, but only 11 remain. The others are distributed across Europe, Africa and the Americas.

Ash thought for a moment. There was so much she wanted to ask. So much she wanted to understand, she didn’t even know where to begin.

“Where... where do you see the Alpha units considering human life?”

“Hm?”

“You worried that Zhao would initialize the greatest cyber security threat the world has ever seen. What’s to stop you from doing the same?”

“I can’t discuss that with you Ash.”

“Why not?”

There is something I would like to show you, but I need you to come with me.”

Ash leaned over the bed, and spied an orange and poppyseed muffin sitting on the floor, and a coffee with a dash of milk. Alphard must have bought it over. As if reading her mind, he leaned over to pick it up, and stood up to offer it to her.

“Please, eat something first. I want you to be healthy and happy”

Ash felt a stirring of something within her, but wasn’t quite sure what it was. It felt perplexing to experience a human touch of conversation, with a machine. Alphard was looking out for her. She took a sniff of the muffin. It smelled very fresh. She took a bite, and was instantly pleased with the wonderful fluffiness.

“Crap, this is a really good muffin, Alphard”

“Just from down the road, there’s a corner store where they bake them.”

A corner store baking muffins. There’s a first for everything, she thought. When she was finished up with her muffin, she tried the coffee. A good sniff as with the muffin, revealed a fruity, almost nutty scent, the signs of a good quality brew. And indeed, it was, one of the better coffees she’s tasted.

“Where are my mother and Lotár at the moment?”

“Safe, in Spain. They are planning to come visit within two days”

Ash finished her coffee. Alphard had bought her socks and dark running shoes too.

“For comfort” Alphard assured. If he had the ability to smile, Ash was sure he would have.

“Follow me, Ash”

They went into an adjacent, identical looking room. Ash was confused. That was at least, until the thick wooden desk turned on and a screen unfolded from its centre rear, as well as a sizeable gel circuit printed on an adhesive metal disk, about as big as Ash’s hand. There looked to be tiny needles embedded in the gel, above the visible micro circuitry illuminating the disk from beneath. Above the head of the bed, a white vizor appeared, with a metal band across the head. It looked like a rougher version of the bedside setup in Srivanadthan that Ruu was lying in.



"I wanted to offer you the opportunity" Alphard began. "To acquire what Zhao did not"

Ash didn't know what to say.

"You mean, put my mind into the computer?"

"Temporarily if you like, but yes."

"But... you just said a minute ago it's the a huge risk, why are you offering me this?"

"The truth is, there are no separate sentient machines. I'm the only one, the mind of 633 built by your father. Zhao unknowingly connected me at high speed to the internet, and I used the opportunity to copy my consciousness to the Warga machines, the next most sophisticated artificial intelligences I could find on the global data landscape. I'm offering you this because your father wanted you to become the first and most powerful digital human in the world."

Ash struggled to comprehend the magnitude of what Alphard was saying.

"I'm offering this power to you, because your father, above all, instructed me to."

