

Combat

by Luke Burrage

This novel is dedicated to all the listeners of the Science Fiction Book Review Podcast who volunteered to read and provide invaluable comments on the various edits.

Combat was written in 2009 and first publicly released in April 2010. This is edit 3.1, completed April 2012. If you spot any spelling or grammar mistakes, please point them out so I can fix them for the next edit.

Feedback to luke@juggler.net

More information at <http://www.lukeburrage.com/fiction.html>

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Thanks for reading!

Combat

1 : The Team

In a future

Lorraine stepped forward and, with all her strength, swung the baseball bat at the back of her boss's head. The bat connected with the base of Timothy's skull with a low thud, and she felt the shock of the impact through the handle.

"Fuck!" shouted Timothy, and fell forward onto his hands and knees.

Lorraine dropped her weapon, and it bounced on the tiled floor with hardly a sound, the thick foam cover of the bat dampening the landing.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." She reached

down to see the damage, if any, she had just inflicted on her boss and her future career.

Timothy rubbed the back of his head with one hand and slipped off his blindfold with his other.

"What did you do that for?" Timothy asked.

"You told me to swing when I was ready!" said Lorraine.

"I know, but I didn't think you'd be so enthusiastic."

"Are you okay?"

"No, but I will be. I hope."

Harold, or H, as he was known to his colleagues, spoke up from the far side of the room. "Good thing we used the foam bat, not the real one."

"You think?" asked Timothy, and tried to stand up. As he did so he lost balance and grasped Lorraine's hand. "Wait," he said, and pulled the blindfold down over his eyes again. He regained his balance and once more turned to face H.

"Let's do it again," said H, "but take it slower this time."

Lorraine scooped up the baseball bat from the floor and took a step back. "Ready?" she asked.

"Ready," said H.

"Ready," echoed Timothy.

Lorraine waited for a few seconds, then took another swing, far slower than before. At the last moment she noticed Timothy had once again remained motionless, and tried to modify her aim. The hard plastic cap on the end of the bat caught Timothy behind his left ear.

"Fuck!" cried Timothy again, and grabbed the side of his head.

"Latency issues?" asked Lorraine.

"Must be," agreed H. "We've not tested in a high stress situation before. I could be tensing up and causing a spike."

Lorraine scanned the stream of data scrolling up her screen. She paused it and replayed the relevant sections. "I'm not seeing anything."

"But we have some good test data here. Look at my reaction when you hit him."

Lorraine grinned. "Oh yeah! It really speeds up--"

"If you're just going to talk shop, I'm disconnecting," said Timothy, and slipped off his blindfold. He located a cable with his left hand and

followed it up to his right shoulder. He unplugged the cable from an attachment protruding from the side of his neck. "At this rate we'll do nothing but knock the implant loose. Whose big idea was this, anyway?"

"I recall you saying something about making a dramatic demonstration," said Lorraine, "something bold and brash to impress Ashley."

"True. But this afternoon, let's stick with the old playing cards or numbers routines, okay?" Timothy made his way out of the workshop, still unsteady on his feet, and still rubbing the back of his head. As the door swung closed, H and Lorraine looked at each other and burst out laughing.

The door opened again, and the the laughter cut out immediately. Timothy poked his head back in.

"Ha fucking ha. I'm going to pick Ashley up now. When he gets here, Lorraine, you do all the talking, and keep it light. H, back her up with the technical details, if Ashley asks. Whatever you do, don't even think about mentioning Denny and Tomiko. As far as anyone outside this room knows, they don't exist, and never did."

*

H fidgeted. His hands never stopped moving. During their years at university Lorraine had categorized his twitching into different subsets, and each variety coincided with different sources of anxiety. By the pattern and pace of his fingers as they tapped against the table, she gauged this was a simple case of unease at a stressful social situation. H would be confident in their upcoming technical demonstration, and in his own work, but nervous about meeting new people.

She tapped the table too, to remind H of his nervous display. He stopped without looking at her.

"And stop doing that thing with your teeth too."

"Sorry."

Lorraine also felt nervous, but liked to think she could contain it better. As a woman in the male dominated technology world, she couldn't afford to show weakness, especially when meeting a representative from an organization like the United Nations. Timothy knew she was the most capable

person in the company, but the way he--

The sound of a trainer sole squeaking against the tiled floor broke her train of thought, and she guessed H's nervous twitch now manifested as a shaking leg.

"Cut that out, will you?" she snapped, then immediately felt guilty. Okay, she thought, maybe I'm not as good at hiding my nerves as I'd like to think.

The door to their small conference room swung open and Timothy swept in, all smiles and effusive gestures. His own way of covering nerves, thought Lorraine.

In Timothy's wake entered William Ashley, a tall, grey-haired man with a jutting chin and sharp eyes.

Lorraine had read up on Ashley, and knew he would be the most comfortable person in the room. His job, after all, was keeping track of emerging technologies on behalf of the UN, so meetings with startups like Timothy's was a regular occurrence.

"Mr. Ashley, this is Harold Parsons, our lead technician, and Lorraine Grosvenor, our project manager."

"Good to meet you both," Ashley said in

southern drawl, and extended his hand to H. As they shook, Lorraine caught a slight wince from H, as though he was surprised by the strength of Ashley's hand grip.

Lorraine, expecting the same treatment, made sure she squeezed as tight as possible when taking Ashley's hand. Of course, he being an experienced statesman, and she a lady, Ashley gave her hand a firm rather than overbearing shake, and Lorraine immediately regretted giving in to such a childish impulse.

"Please, let's take our seats," said Timothy, and the four did so. The black glass of the table shimmered, and inset screens glowed through from underneath. Each of them tapped their screen, and the meeting officially began.

"Four years ago," stated Timothy, "Harold here graduated from Cambridge with a PhD in adaptive micro optics and neural network analysis. His final thesis was a paper on comparative visual grammar. This idea is still highly controversial, and it is said that there's still only ten people in the world fully understand it. Thankfully, two of those people work

here at Idiotech."

As usual, Lorraine winced as she heard the name of Timothy's company.

"Lorraine also graduated four years ago, and is our resident doctor, specializing in neuro-cyber synthetics."

"Brain hacking?" asked Ashley.

"To put it crudely, yes. Now, as I'm merely the founder of Idiotech, and these two are the brains behind the outfit, I'm going to let them to explain what we've achieved so far. Lorraine?"

"Thanks," Lorraine stood up, then sat down again, embarrassed on account of her unnecessary movement. "Okay," she began. He was tapping his fingers against his leg. "Right..."

"Take your time," said Ashley.

Lorraine took a deep breath. "Vision is not a sense," she began, "it's an intelligence. For the most part, what is in front of our eyes has almost nothing to do with what our conscious brain thinks we see. In a very real way, we don't work with what we see, we work with what we think we see.

"Between the eye and the conscious brain are

many levels of processing. The visual cortex and the subconscious mind work in parallel to sort through all the data, and then pass on to the conscious brain only what it thinks is important."

She reached forward and tapped her screen.

"Mr. Ashley, I'd like to ask you to watch this video. It shows a team of eight people passing two basketballs between them. I'd like you to count the total number of times the balls are thrown and caught. Both balls, just the total number of both balls together. Ready?"

"Is this to show me how--"

"Please," she interrupted, "just see if you can do it."

Ashley turned his eyes down to the screen and Lorraine hit play. Ashley's gaze flittered around the screen, but otherwise he kept his face completely motionless and unreadable. Twenty seconds passed and the video ended.

"Twenty nine throws and catches," stated Ashley.
"It was very easy to count."

"And how many dancing gorillas did you see?"
asked Lorraine.

"What?"

"How many gorillas?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Watch the video again."

Ashley looked down at the screen and frowned. The furrows on his forehead deepened as he watched a man in a gorilla costume moonwalk into the group of people from the right edge of the screen, dance in plain sight for five seconds, then moonwalk off the left edge of the image.

"Is that the same video?" he asked.

"Exactly the same. If you don't believe it, repeat the experiment on someone else yourself. You can find the video online, no problem, but it only works when people don't know what's happening."

"Amazing!"

"Now, what we see here is pure selective vision. The first time you see the video, your conscious brain wants nothing but information about moving basketballs. The second time, it wants nothing but information about gorillas.

"But here's the key. When we do this experiment, and watch the viewer's brain with FMRI, the results

in the visual cortex and some subconscious parts of the brain are identical. By showing images of all kinds of animals to the viewer beforehand plus one of a gorilla, we can pinpoint precisely the gorilla location in the brain.

"And then, when we show them that video, even at the first viewing, the gorilla location lights up."

"Incredible. So even the first time, part of me knew a gorilla was dancing across the screen, but I didn't see it at all."

"This is the reason why image recognition software is so far behind the capabilities of the human brain. It's got nothing to do with the sharpness of the images, of the resolution or the frame rate, or any of the other metrics. It's down to knowing what is important, and only passing that on to the conscious brain. If the conscious brain had to look at everything, all of the time, we'd end up crippled by the overload, and not know what to do."

"Like children with autism."

"Similar. Now, what we are interested in, here at Idiotech, is the sub-conscious brain's way of passing of visual information to the conscious brain. The key

is to only look at the data post-processing. Other companies are concentrating on the information passing from the eye to the rest of the brain, or from the visual cortex to the hind-brain, as it were. We jump over those steps, and get right to the final link. Why try to duplicate what the brain already does far better than we ever could do with software?"

"Thanks Lorraine," said Timothy. "Harold, why don't you take over."

H opened both eyes wide, as though a he'd been pinned to his seat by a beam of light. He tapped the arm of his chair a few times then leant forward.

"Right. Simply put, with the right equipment we can pick up the signal from one part of the brain to another. The visual information that your conscious brain receives is a highly abstracted representation, and actually a quite narrow bandwidth signal, to put it into crude language. The signal is unique to each person, but after just a few hours of analysis of a constant source looking at known images, we can crack the code. Or the software I've written can do so, with my help. This signal is then translated into a universal format, and the rest of our project follows

from there. Yeah."

Silence fell in the room as H finished. Ashley frowned. What followed from his last statement didn't seem as obvious to him as it did to H.

"What H is trying to say," Lorraine stepped in, "is that we can re-encode this comparative abstracted visual language back into the original format or, more importantly, translate it to a signal someone else can understand."

"What good is that?" asked Ashley.

"It means one person can see through the eyes of another," said Timothy. "The possibilities are, as you can imagine, quite staggering."

"And this works?"

"We have a demonstration prepared. Let's head through to the workshop, shall we?"

*

"Where are the FMRI machines?" Ashley asked as he looked around the workshop.

"For our purposes that technology is a bit dated," said Lorraine, "and far too unwieldy. We call our

setup the Shaper, short for Shared Perception of Visual Inputs."

"We've gone for a more direct input-output option," said Timothy. He loosened and lifted off his tie, then unbuttoned the top of his shirt. "See here?" He fished out a socket on a short flexible extension with his left hand, grabbed a long cable that lay coiled on a desk with his right hand, and connected them in a smooth, practiced motion.

"That seems quite intrusive."

"It is! But the blind and visually impaired have had similar interfaces installed for decades. The technology is mature. The operation itself is slightly more delicate, as in visually disabled patients they implant onto the visual cortex, and we're embedding a lot closer to the front of the brain."

He pulled aside the top of his t-shirt and connected himself to another cable. "USB 4.2," he said, "we need as much speed as possible."

Lorraine sat at a computer workstation where she could monitor the signal. "Ready?"

"Wait," said Timothy, and picked up his blindfold. "The signal doesn't only hold visual information, but

a dampened feed from the cochlea too. It helps my brain orient the incoming image, but has a nasty side effect of motion sickness unless I stay completely motionless myself." He fixed the blindfold in place and sat motionless on his stool.

"Engaging now," said Lorraine, and tapped her screen.

"Looking good," said Timothy.

"It's that simple?" asked Ashley.

"It's taken us four years to get to the Shaper to this point," said Timothy, "and you've not seen our server room next door. We have the same processing power as the Pixar studio uses for their live realtime broadcasts."

"Seriously?"

"Overnight we rent the barn out to local animation studios to help with our finances. So, it's not how it looks; there's a lot more than just a USB cable between H's neck and mine."

Lorraine reached over to a bench and picked up the foam baseball bat.

"Put that down, Lorri," said Timothy, "let's just do the numbers."

She dropped the bat.

"Lorraine," she said, "not Lorri. Okay, Mr. Ashley, please turn to face towards Harold," said Lorraine, and Ashley did so. He glanced back to Lorraine, obviously curious as to the meaning of the foam bat. He finally concentrated on H entirely. "Hold up some fingers, but in a place where Timothy couldn't see them even if he was without a blindfold."

Ashley again complied.

"Four," said Timothy immediately. "Three. Two. Four. Four and a thumb. One. One. Eight. Two. Seven."

"Very impressive," admitted Ashley, dropping his hand to his side again.

"Do something else," prompted Timothy.

"Like what?"

"Anything at all. Imagine this was just a magic trick, and that numbers are the easiest thing to communicate by some other means. Test us."

Ashley rubbed his chin.

"You're rubbing your chin."

"Ok, I believe you. I'll have to ask other experts to make sure there's no funny business, but this truly is

a remarkable accomplishment. Tell me more about the details. What are you struggling with, and what do you think you can achieve in the future?"

"Finance is secure for now," said Timothy, "and our patents are secure as--"

"I mean technically, not as a business."

"Lorraine?"

"The biggest issue isn't so much of a problem as it is a side effect," she said, "but what you see, and how you look at it, and where your eye lingers, is very much dependent on body chemistry and emotions. This can cause uncomfortable sensations in the receiver, but there's no way we can filter that out. Secondly, the more emotion or stress associated with the vision, the more vivid the image becomes, and we're struggling with data spikes."

"Car crashes," prompted H.

"Yes," said Timothy, picking up on the idea, "it's like remembering a car crash. It's like it happens in slow motion. Your mind doesn't actually speed up, and time doesn't slow down for you as the viewer, but your brain suddenly wants to work with far more information. Your conscious mind is overwhelmed,

and remembers every tiny detail."

"I've had that happen to me," said Ashley, "when I had a primary chute fail in a skydive. I had plenty of height, but the time between that first failure and my spare chute opening were the longest few seconds of my life."

"And where we're taking this in the future, from a purely technical point of view, is somewhere like this. H, are you ready?"

"Hit it."

Lorraine clicked her mouse a few times, and Timothy removed his blindfold.

H shivered momentarily, then sat completely motionless. All fidgeting ceased.

The silence dragged on for while before Wesley's curiosity got the better of him. "What's going on?"

"I reversed the data flow," said Lorraine, "and put a twelve millisecond delay on H's own vision."

"I can see you from both sides," said H. "I'm now receiving both my own and Timothy's vision. As long as nothing too stressful happens, I can see perfectly well, but as though from two different locations in the room."

"How many fingers?" Ashley held two fingers up to H, out of sight of Timothy, and extended four behind his back where Timothy could see, but not H.

"Six. Can you come a bit closer, Timothy?" asked H, and Timothy left his stool to do so. "If we look at the same thing from opposite ends, the three dimensionality is overly confusing. The best angle is at about ninety degrees, where we see a good overlap."

Not for the first time, Lorraine noticed how different H became when connected to Timothy. Before he could hardly speak, but now he totally controlled the entire group.

"I've done this too," said Timothy, "but I get really ill. And it feels like I'm having an out of body experience."

"Lorraine always asks me what it's like," said H, "to be linked like this. To me it feels like I'm playing side-scrolling platformer computer game, like Super Mario Brothers, and a first person shooter, like Doom, but both at the same time."

"This is amazing!" said Ashley. "Just think of all the applications!"

"Oh, we have," said H. "We've compiled long lists of possible uses, which are in the non-public part of our patents. We'd really appreciate it if you keep this demonstration confidential for now, Mr. Ashley. As you can see, we have plenty of issues to sort out before we can license the tech."

"We have time though," said Timothy, "as we're lightyears ahead of the competition."

"Ok, Lorri," said H, "let's kill this."

Timothy saw her as Lorri, and H saw her as Lorraine. Or he did usually. She shut down the link.

H's fingers sprang into immediate action, fidgeting their way up to his collar and unplugging the cable. Between then and when Ashley left the building forty minutes later, he barely spoke ten more words.

I : Adam

Eight years earlier

"Let's go!" shouted Lieutenant Parry, and the truck lurched forward, gears screaming and tires squealing. Adam, sitting in the central seat in the cab, gripped his armrests as the truck accelerated around a tight corner.

"The red light?" asked Clive Mitchell, the driver, as he aimed the truck at a junction crowded with both traffic and pedestrians.

"Run it," ordered Parry.

Clive mashed his fist against the center of the steering wheel, and the truck's horn blared its warning.

Time slowed down for Adam. He saw dozens of dark-skinned faces turned towards him. Then, in a flurry of colourfully patterned clothes and white plastic bags holding purchases from the evening market, those crossing the road in front of the truck

picked up their walking speed to reach the safety of the pavement.

One man had only just stepped off the curb, but in the African pedestrians' mindset that Adam recognised so well, the rule was to never stop or turn back, only to keep pressing forward. The man broke into a sprint, and only just made it out of the way before the truck swept past.

Meanwhile, the stream of cars approaching the crossroads from the left stopped, and a gap opened in the traffic. A small van coming in from the right skidded to an awkward stop, and the following car plowed into it from behind.

"Woooooooooo!" screamed Clive as the truck roared through the gap, clipping the bumper of the van on the right.

"Close one," said Adam, and grinned.

This is why I joined the army, he thought. A raid to pick up a notorious militia leader, plus a bonus high-speed drive to begin the evening? It doesn't get much better than this!

"Ok," said Parry after a few hundred meters of close calls and near brushes with disaster, "stop as

close as you can. Kett should be coming out about now."

"If intel got it right..." Clive stamped on the brake pedal and the truck ground to a halt, kicking up an impressive cloud of dust.

"GO!" shouted Parry, and the back of the truck erupted. Four large men, each wearing black full-body combat suits, and covered by long flowing grey robes, jumped out the rear door and deployed along the front of the closest building. Adam and Clive, dressed the same way but with sleeker helmets, leapt out of the cab too, leaving Parry to watch and control the operation from inside.

The dust settled, and an uneasy quiet descended on the street. The building had a single door facing the road, with windows set high in the sand-coloured concrete facade. A hand-painted sign advertised the style of food served inside. The building was a restaurant of sorts, though it looked more like a military bunker. However, the shape, size, and positioning of the windows had little to do with repelling bullets; the searing heat of the day was the real enemy.

"The place is empty, I bet," grumbled Clive.

"Quiet," said Parry, "intel said Kett was seen going inside."

The door stayed closed, and the scene inside the eating establishment remained hidden. Five seconds passed, and then another ten.

"Fuck it," said Parry at last, "let's do this. Adam, you take point."

"Yessir," said Adam, keeping his voice strong, though his heart worked overtime, thumping so hard in his chest he thought it might burst. He jumped up and sprinted for the entrance, turning at the last minute to bring his padded shoulder to bear against the wooden door. Pain flared for an instant, but he burst through, hardly slowing at all.

In a split second he took in the layout of the restaurant. Small round tables and wooden chairs filled the majority of the room, with some booths along the back wall directly opposite the front door. A bar stood over to his right, and just beyond were two doors, one leading to a kitchen and a store room, and one to a single toilet. If intel could be trusted.

Most importantly, and most disturbingly, half the

tables were set for guests. That meant about fourteen or fifteen patrons, aside from Kett and his usual two heavies. At the sound of the truck stopping outside, and sensing trouble, the patrons had taken themselves as far out of the way as possible, and huddled on the floor in the back left corner. He noted their clothing and postures, and a part of his mind that he didn't really understand informed him "No threat from that direction."

Adam made it half way across the room, chairs and tables bouncing off his shins and thighs, before he registered the first gunshot. He sensed the bullet slamming into the doorframe, now well behind him. He dived to the floor and rolled behind a flimsy wooden screen dividing two booths at the back of the room. A trail of splintering furniture showed where the gunman sprayed his bullets, belatedly following Adam's form across the room.

Another soldier burst through the door, making almost as much noise as Adam had done a few seconds previously. This made the gunman pause for a moment. Adam jumped up and sprinted directly towards the bar. He'd judged the gunman's position

correctly, and saw the sub-machine gun held in two hands above the level of the counter. The machine gun had a small camera attachment, meaning the gunman himself hid out of sight. He was trying to follow his targets on an angled screen sticking out the side of the gun.

Adam leapt once more, clearing the bar and crashing into the cabinets against the wall, smashing mirrors and glass bottles. On the way over he'd snagged the machine gun in his right hand, and as he fell behind the bar he yanked hard.

Time slowed even more. The gunman had a look of surprise on his face when he found his hands suddenly empty. Adam kicked his heel at the man's stupid, half-open mouth, and the head snapped back, cracking against a wooden shelf.

A second man, crouching as low as possible, also had a gun in his right hand. His left hand held a mobile phone, and he'd been busy sending a text message, so he couldn't bring his gun up in time to aim at Adam.

Adam's fall ended, but not on solid ground. He ignored his landing site, and stabbed out with his left

fist, making contact against the second man's nose. He felt a crunch through his padded gauntlet.

Adam swung his right arm over and smashed the first man's stolen gun against the mobile phone, sending it skidding across the floor. The second man squeezed his trigger, and promptly shot himself in the leg. Adam ignored the sudden scream, and grabbed the man's gun with his left hand, breaking it free and swinging it up out of harm's way.

He found himself with small machine guns in each hand, but with strict orders against using any firearms. The Joint Operations Zero Casualties Policy was officially in effect inside the city limits. Adam threw the guns over the bar, knowing the other members of the strike team would take care of them. He turned his attention to his landing matt, otherwise known as Kett Hartoon, the target of the night's raid.

"Some help here," called Adam to his fellow soldiers. He twisted his body, and attempted to pin Kett to the floor. Kett struggled and jabbed his elbow into Adam's face, but the blow was broken by Adam's helmet. Adam butted the top of Kett's

forehead, and he saw Kett's eyes roll up until only the white's of the eyes remained. Adam rolled away and into a kneeling position, ready for an attack from any direction.

But the violence had already ended. The first gunman sat blinking, blood dripping from his mouth. The second hadn't yet stopped screaming, but Adam had already blanked out the noise.

"Clear!" Adam recognized Clive's voice from the other side of the bar.

Hands reach down from above, grabbed the dazed Kett Hartoon and lifted him out of sight. Adam stood up and looked about. Three soldier's bundled Kett out the front door of restaurant. Clive and another soldier stood among the civilians at the far side of the room.

"Come on," said Clive, "we've got to get going."

"What about these two?" Adam asked.

"Take them both." Clive and Adam both heard Parry's order over their helmet com units.

"Get up," Adam shouted, and kicked the man with the bleeding leg. "Don't make me have to carry you!"

The man's face was already turning white, in shock from the bullet wound in his thigh. Adam grabbed his shoulders and dragged him out from behind the bar. Kett's "heavy" was living up to his title.

"Kick, goddammit!" Adam said, and the man tried to help by pushing his body weight in the same direction. It hindered more than helped, but Adam felt satisfied when the wounded man put in some effort.

He was facing the bar, dragging the screaming man backwards towards the door, and watching Clive and the one remaining soldier manhandle the first gunman, when a bullet slammed into Adam's back. His combat armor absorbed the blow, spreading the force from a single point to a much larger area.

That's going to bruise though, he thought as he pitched forward, now-stale adrenaline pumping once more into his body. He broke his fall by tucking into another roll. He came to a stop, facing back into the restaurant, with a gun in his hands.

How did that get there? he thought. After years of training he'd automatically scooped the machine

gun from the floor, one of the same guns he'd thrown from behind the bar. This should have been taken by one of the squad, he thought, not just left behind.

Adam scanned the group of civilians just meters from him now. Some had come half to their feet, others remained crouched as small as possible. He spotted the new combatant, a young man, kneeling behind an upturned table, holding a handgun, black fingers turning pale with sudden fear.

The screaming bodyguard stopped screaming.

"Hey junior," said Adam, addressing the young man, "you don't want to do that."

"You... you..." began the young man in stuttering English, "you not allowed to shoot. Not here."

Adam laughed out loud, then abruptly fell silent. His helmet hid his face, so the young man had no idea what ran through Adam's mind. Adam let him sit and sweat.

"You're right," said Adam at last, "officially I'm not allowed to shoot. If I held my own rifle, I wouldn't even be able to shoot. But when someone shoots me in the back, I start to throw the rules out

the window."

He paused for effect.

"Also," he added, "this isn't my rifle."

"Adam..." warned Clive over his shoulder.

"Quiet," said Adam, "I'm talking to junior here. Why did you do it? Here with your girlfriend? Want to play the hero?" Adam nodded towards a young woman of a similar age, cringing against the wall. "Go on, shoot again. Aim for my faceplate. At this range, the bullet might get through."

Adam waited. The young man's hand began to shake.

"It won't matter to me, you know? I pull this trigger here, and you're dead. You. Dead. Gone. Me? I'll be fine. The report will say 'The Joint Forces carried out the raid without carrying firearms, but unfortunately a young man named...' What's your name?"

"Ja... Johno."

"A young man named Jajohno was hit by a stray bullet from the gun of Kett Hartoon's bodyguard. That'll be in the news, suitably vague, and that's what counts. I'll be fine."

"Adam!" Parry's voice rung out inside his helmet. "Leave the poor kid alone, will you? Shut the fuck up and get out here."

"Time's up!" said Adam and took a step forward. Johno immediately dropped his handgun and jumped back as though it had caught some infectious disease since he'd fired it. "Good decision."

Adam scooped up the pistol and tucked it under his arm. He turned his back on Johno again and picked up the last weapon from the middle of the floor.

Two soldiers re-entered the restaurant and grabbed the bleeding bodyguard. Adam waited until the rest of his squad had left the building before walking towards the door. He slipped a card from his belt pack and flicked it back over his shoulder.

"If you got any questions or want us to pay for the damage, just call my number."

*

"Budge over," said Adam as he opened the door to the cab, "I'll drive."

Clive moved over to the center seat, and Adam slipped in behind the wheel. He took three attempts before he got the truck into gear. Finally the truck lurched forwards.

Clive laughed at him. "Do you want me to change gears for you?"

"Shit," said Adam after a minute, "one of the heavies had a phone. I left it behind the bar."

"There could have been some numbers on there," suggested Clive.

"Maybe," said Adam, "he was typing a text message, and I wanted to read it."

"Maybe he called someone," said Clive.

"Oh shit, someone could have been listening on the other end the entire time. Let's go back and get it." Adam lifted his foot from the accelerator, and wondered how hard it would be to turn the truck in the street without hitting a building.

"Incoming militia," said Parry, as if to confirm Adam's theory that the phone call had connected, "the drone's picking up a jeep heading our way at speed."

"Put your foot down," said Clive.

"No," said Parry, "it's coming from that direction."

Parry pointed directly down the road ahead, the main commercial street of the city. Here, away from the evening markets, the militias had imposed a form of curfew. Traffic was accordingly light, and the fronts of the shops lay in shadowed darkness.

A half dozen blocks away a jeep swung into view. A rack of blinding lights on the top of the jeep flashed on and illuminated the entire street.

"They'll drive right past," said Parry, "they won't recognize this truck. It's fully localized."

"I think they've already..." Clive paused as the jeep veered over onto their side of the road and began accelerating directly at the truck. "Yup, they've already seen us."

Bullets slammed into the front windscreen, and the entire section of glass turned white with interlinked fractures. The glass stopped the bullets, but shards sprayed into the cab. Adam thanked his stars that they all remained fully armored.

"They've got a launcher!" said Parry, obviously watching an aerial video feed from the drone.

"Turn!" screamed Clive. Adam tried, but didn't follow the order quick enough for Clive's tastes. Clive grabbed the top of the steering wheel and pulled it hard. The truck swung over to the wrong side of the street, and two wheels left the road surface.

Adam lifted his foot from the accelerator marginally, and let Clive take full control of the steering. Through the thick spiderweb of cracks, Adam saw the shuttered front of an electronics and computer shop looming ahead. He realized it was on the inside of a corner, and the crossroad turning Clive had aimed for lay beyond.

The truck hardly slowed down as it cut the corner too tight, slamming through the aluminum shutters and into the store itself. Modern appliances bounced off the reinforced radiator and shelves of computer accessories crunched under the wide tires. The truck reached the adjacent side of the shop and burst into the street again.

As the rear of the truck emerged from the wreckage, the entire store exploded. The militia's rocket flew true, but the computer shop had intercepted and absorbed most of the blast. Shrapnel

and masonry showered into the street and bounced off the rear door of the truck. In the side mirror Adam saw the jeep streak past the shop, staying on its original course down the shopping street.

Adam slowed as the structural support of the corner of the store gave way. The upper two stories of the building cracked into pieces and collapsed into the empty space below. Smoke billowed out into the street and was soon the entire view was hidden by smoke and dust.

"Get a move on!" Clive shouted, and stamped his heel down onto Adam's right toe. At the next corner Clive yanked the steering wheel again, and even pulled the hand brake, putting the truck into a controlled slide. Straightening their course once more, he turned control back over to Adam.

"Just get us to the end of this stretch before the jeep catches us again. It's a straight line, do you think you can manage?"

Adam kept his mouth shut and concentrated on driving for the next few minutes. The buildings in this part of the city, nearer to the edge, looked barely better than slums.

"They shot that rocket right at us," said Parry.

"No shit," said Clive.

"I mean, they knew we had Kett in here alive."

"Maybe they don't want him alive. It could have been the others."

"They're behind us now, I think," said Adam. He recognized the rack of spotlights fixed to the top of the jeep.

"The guys in the back say they are firing at the rear door," said Parry. "Stay out of range for the next five hundred meters and we'll be good to go."

"They'd be crazy to follow us into our zone."

Thirty seconds later the truck crossed an unmarked boundary and Adam noticed a tiny light in his helmet turn from red to green.

It turned out that the driver of the vehicle in hot pursuit had a rich seam of crazy in him after all, and the jeep crossed the same boundary just seconds later. Adam looked into the wing mirror in time to see a streak of fire and smoke spring from the rear of his own truck. Almost immediately, the missile hit the jeep dead on. The jeep, along with the crazy driver, whoever it might have been, disappeared

within a growing ball of flame.

2 : Change

Lorraine rubbed her arms as she left the server barn. The processors had to be cooled to run at optimal speeds, and it was far easier to air condition the entire building than the individual racks. Thankfully she only had to check the building once a month. The rest of the time it lay under the specialized and remote care of a company over in America.

She entered the workshop to find Timothy and H where she'd left them fifteen minutes earlier, perched on stools beside a workbench, gazing intently at a brown and white hamster as it ran around inside an

empty aquarium.

"How's it going?" she called.

Timothy turned to look at her, but H's eyes remained fixed on the rodent. And then H replied, not Timothy.

"Smooth. We've got the two-way link down tight, though the buffering is a real pain." He tapped some commands into his keyboard without looking.

"H loves animals," said Timothy, "I can feel it."

"They're easier to understand than us humans," said Lorraine, "right, H?"

"How was the barn?"

"Same as usual. Freezing."

"Whoa!" said Timothy as H leant forward over the aquarium. "Careful... height changes still get to me."

Lorraine smiled and sat down at her own work station. "There's a message for you," she said, reading her screen, "it says it's urgent."

"Who me?" asked Timothy. "I heard my screen ring out, but didn't want to disconnect over here."

"We should allow viewers in here so we don't miss this stuff," she said, but didn't want to start the

old arguments again. Viewers, the augmented reality glasses with embedded computers, were ubiquitous in the outside world. Timothy wouldn't allow any unvetted communications devices within Idiotech's premises for fear of industrial espionage, and as the source code for the viewers wasn't open for examination, they were banned.

A new message appeared and jumped to the top of Timothy's queue. "And another message," Lorraine said.

"Ok, let's call it a morning," said Timothy, "shut down and put Squeaky here back in the cage out back."

"This one's called Buggy."

Timothy logged into his screen a minute later. Lorraine watched him open the first message, then the second, the expression on his face showing increasing confusion.

"What's up?"

"Bill Ashley's on his way up from London."

"Ashley who was here last week?"

"The very same."

"What does he want?"

"He wants us all to stay right here. And that nobody should panic."

*

Lorraine and H sat at the long table in the conference room. As Timothy and Ashley stepped into the room she had a passing sense of déjà vu, but the scene was far different than the previous week.

For a start, last time Timothy had walked in as though he was in charge, despite Ashley's status at the UN. This time Ashley swept into the room, and Timothy slinked in behind.

Lorraine glanced down at her screen, at security camera footage piped in from the front of the building. Eight wide-shouldered men in black suits remained outside, standing in pairs at the front door, at the gate to the compound, and next to the black vans on the road that passed through the industrial estate.

Behind Timothy marched a man with crewcut black hair, large ears, and an even larger chin than Ashley's. He wore a black suit that struggled to

contain his excessive bulk. He held his hands near his hips, his elbows pointing outwards, as though at any moment he was ready to unholster a pair of revolvers. He assessed the entire room with a single sweep of his bright blue eyes, dismissed the occupants as creatures far below his level of physical threat, and took up position standing against the bare wall beside the door.

The fourth person to enter the room was a much shorter man, though only by comparison to the hulk who had proceeded him, dressed in formal military uniform, complete with an impressive array of ribbons and medals. His face was surprisingly soft, with slightly sagging cheeks and large red lips, as though he hadn't seen action in a long time. His hair was thin but still covered his entire head. In contrast to the rest of his physique, the man's eyes peered as hard as his fellow soldier's.

Timothy, Ashley and the latest arrival took seats at the pointed end of the oval table. The meeting began.

"This is Colonel Elmore Conrad," said Ashley, "he represents the interests of the United Nations

security council subcommittee on anti-terrorism operations."

The man nodded his head slightly.

"Welcome to Idiotech," said Timothy. "So, um, what can we do for you?"

"We want to take your project under-file," said Conrad. "The military applications of your work, as described to me by Bill here, could be remarkably wide ranging. I think it's important the UN security council oversees the development of these applications."

"To clarify," said Ashley, "we need to develop our own uses, and then countermeasures to those uses, before the technology falls into the hands of certain groups with less savory goals."

"What does under-file mean?" asked Timothy.

"It means your project will be classified as top secret, known only to certain committees in the UN."

"Point number one," said Timothy, "I don't see why you think the visual link technique has a military application. Point number two, I'm in this to make money, and I can't do that if the whole thing is a secret. The patents are already in, you know."

"Conrad?" prompted Ashley.

"Imagine, if you will, a situation where the commander of a small unit of troops can see everything his troops can see. How much of an advantage would that team have when, for example, they enter a building to liberate a group of hostages? So many times in the past have our soldiers died needlessly, just through lack of clear communication."

"Or imagine," said Ashley, "a row of technicians, all watching information displayed on monitors, and the head technician seeing everything at the same time, with all the visual information pre-processed."

"You could just use viewers," said Timothy, "and share the feeds from their cameras."

"We do that already," said Conrad, "but the incoming data to the commander is complete and uncompressed, and it's too difficult to keep track. And good filtering, by experts, takes time. Your visual link technology, with only the relevant information piped to exactly the right part of the brain, would be far clearer, and near instantaneous."

Lorraine joined the conversation. "You do know

that's beyond what we can currently manage."

"Yes, but by all accounts you're not far off. It's just a question of scale and fine tuning."

"That may be," admitted Timothy. "Still, that doesn't answer my first point."

"Which was?"

"Money."

"You will be appropriately compensated," said Ashley.

"Can I have that in writing?" asked Timothy.

"Of course," said Ashley.

"Okay," said Timothy, gaining confidence, "I see you didn't pick up on the sarcasm there. How much money do you have to spend? Be careful what you promise, as you might find yourself in a sticky situation come budget-renewal time."

"Name your price, and we'll take it from there."

"You want to buy us out? Look, I think it would be better all round if Idiotech just carries on as before, and when you want to license the technology, you can pay your fees like everyone else. And, if we take the company public, you can buy shares then."

"You don't understand--" said Ashley.

"No, YOU don't understand," said Timothy, cutting him off mid sentence. "Let me make myself completely clear. Newspapers, books and radio. How much money did these forms of media make in their time? Television, the internet, mobile phones, smart phones, and now viewers, they're all multi-billion dollar, if not trillion dollar, industries. The next step? Direct transfer of images into the brain.

"We have a long head start on any other company in this field. And we envision this making just as much money as all those other technologies. If you want to stop us, let's start talking cash, and ten figure amounts."

Ashley and Conrad looked at each other, as though silently conferring on their next step, their next approach.

"How long before you have a technology you can license?" asked Ashley.

"Probably two and a half to three years," said Timothy.

"And until then?"

"We have enough funds to get by."

"From investors?" asked Conrad.

"In a fashion. I'm investing my own money in this project. I made my first millions aged eighteen, you know, by securing exclusive European distribution of Goondo figurines, then selling the company at the peak of the fad. I multiplied my personal wealth many times over by buying into then selling another four companies. But Idiotech? This one is my baby. This is where I'm going to make my mark. And my mark will be bold and brash and will change the world. Outside investors aren't needed, nor are they welcome."

"I see you have complete confidence in your own abilities," said Ashley, "but I still think we can find common ground here. Will you hear me out?"

Timothy nodded, so Ashley continued.

"You'll need three years, you say. That's great, and as I said before, we don't need long term exclusive use of this technology. As long as we have exclusive use for two years before it becomes publicly available, that would satisfy us. Beyond those two years, you can license or sell the tech to anyone you wish. Just give us the next two years."

"Keep talking."

"We don't need a commercial product, we just need something to fulfill our needs, just a few units to train and deploy small teams. It doesn't matter if each unit costs millions of dollars each, as we're used to paying for military hardware."

"I still don't see the great benefit to myself or Idiotech."

"Two things. We can provide funding. Funding with no strings attached. No obligations. None. You need to buy new equipment? Done. You need more staff? Just ask, and you'll get the money you need. At the end of the two years you keep all intellectual property."

"Keep talking."

"Expertise. You think you're the only company we have under-file? Not at all. We currently have another two teams here in the UK, and more in the US. We have some of the top experts in the world, in many different fields, at our disposal. For example, you're using USB 4.2 as a connector. How about we bring in someone to develop medium range, high speed wireless interfaces, fully encrypted. Again, if you ask, we've probably got access to someone who can help."

I know you're on to the human testing stage already, and we can even provide more volunteers."

"That does sound interesting."

"Can I ask," said Lorraine, "what will happen if Timothy refuses your offer?"

"We're prepared to make a good deal," said Ashley.

"So why the sudden visit? Why is Mr. Silent But Deadly standing watching us? Why the goon squad outside?"

"This is a matter of international security," said Conrad.

"No doubt," said Lorraine, "and you'll probably say the guards outside are for our own protection. But that doesn't answer my question. Would you force us to give you access to our work?"

"Of course not," said Ashley.

"Of course not," echoed Lorraine, "and yet this cuts right to the heart of my strongest objection, and as a shareholder I think I should be able to raise that objection. Since when have we been a military hardware company?"

"About two minutes?" Ashley suggested.

"Just like that? Does everyone else just roll over?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"What about our plans for therapeutic applications?" asked Timothy. "And for education and entertainment?"

"As far as I understand it, you can still work on those." Ashley looked to Conrad, who nodded at him emphatically. "See? No problem."

"Except, and I hate to point this out," said Lorraine, "we'll still be making weapons. I didn't sign up for that."

"Not weapons," said Ashley, "just a tool. Other companies make computers and radios that the military uses, and they aren't picketed by peace demonstrations. You'll be no different. And as I see it, you'll be saving lives."

*

"Nice work," said Timothy, once the three founders of Idiottech sat alone in the boardroom once more. "Bringing in the pacifist angle at the end there let me bash out a load more concessions."

"It wasn't an angle," she said, "I'm really not sure about this."

"You're kidding! Most people would jump at the deal. All we need to do is help support military testing and development, and everything else will fall into place."

"Sure," she said, but shook her head.

"As Ashley and Conrad said, we'll be helping save lives here. The military is going to do what it does if we help it or not, but imagine using ten eyes instead of two to see if a target is a combatant or a civilian."

"I guess."

He spoke up for the first time since the meeting. "Ironic, don't you think? I thought the work we did here would earn us a Nobel Prize for medicine or something. And now you're aiming for the Peace Prize."

"I don't see the irony," said Timothy.

"The ironic thing was that Alfred Nobel, by inventing high explosives, also thought he was just giving the world a tool. And that, due to the power of his invention, nobody would dare start another war. Now, I'm happy to continue on with the project,

and I don't see I have much choice, but let's just keep this in mind, shall we? We're making a tool, a powerful tool. We need to be sensible.

"Lorraine, let's get back to the workshop, we have work to do."

II : Life

"And that," said Adam, finishing his story, "is how we arrested Kett Hartoon. Right, Clive?"

"Right," agreed Clive. "You fight like a drunkard and drive like woman."

Adam and Clive had told the story a few times before, so had kept young Josh Henderson hanging on every word. They sat in a trench in a small valley with low rolling hills each side, and a short distance

away from a minor road. The road ran from the capital city, across the narrowest part of the Monbuto Republic, and over the nearest border, into the Ivory Coast. The far side of the border held nothing but a large wasteland, a few small villages, and many goats. And beyond that, as it so happened, lay a military junta sympathetic to the Christian faction's militia back in Monbuto City.

Intel had reported that a convoy would be along shortly, or at least some time that afternoon, carrying weapons and provisions. Lieutenant Parry's troops stood by, ready to stop, search, or destroy the convoy.

"Would you have shot him?" Josh asked.

"Who? The hero with the pistol? Nope. I could see he regretted it from the moment he took the first shot. I could have taken the gun from him before he squeezed the trigger a second time."

"Wow. Have you ever shot a man?"

"Not yet," said Adam, "it's just not that kind of war."

"Yes, we're peacekeeping," said Josh.

Clive snorted.

"What?" asked Josh.

"We're here for the same reasons as always," said Clive, "for power and oil and political motives beyond anything the militias here care about."

"Natural gas," said Adam, "not oil."

"Same difference. They say there's loads more oil deeper down."

"Actually it's sideways," said Adam, "lateral drilling techniques--"

Clive cut him off. "We're in Africa. Nobody gives a shit about Africans. Only oil. The UN and the Joint Forces administration is petrified of another Iraq. Or worse, another Sudan."

"You're so cynical."

"It's true! We're just a test case for this Kinder Approach to War." Clive spat out the quote. "But nobody in Washington or London cares about the locals. The only thing they care about is good press. So, we're only allowed to use force if contact is initiated by the other party. The politics guys don't care how long we're here, or even how we go about winning, as long as we don't cause trouble back home."

"But it works, right?" asked Josh.

"So far. We parade through the city every day, showing off our big guns, reminding the locals who's in charge. We're daring them to have a go at us, just to see what will happen. Then at night the Christians and the Sunis take it out on each other."

"As long as the gas is flowing," said Adam, "and us westerners aren't killing or getting killed, nobody gives a shit. Yeah, it works. Meanwhile Parry is fighting his own private war."

Clive gave Adam a hard stare, eyes slightly wider than before. If Josh noticed the look, or the pause in the conversation, he gave no sign.

"How many men did you shoot in Iraq?" Josh asked Clive.

"Now son," Clive said, "that's a very personal question. Adam didn't think so, but that's because the only people he's killed are in his dreams, where he's playing James Bond."

"I'm more of a Jason Bourne type guy, actually."

"But to someone who's fired a shotgun and seen a man's head explode mere inches from their foxhole, the question is a touchy one."

"I'm sorry," said Josh, looking down.

"Don't be. I'm just warning you in case you make a habit out of that question. If someone wants to share how many people he's killed, he'll do so. And if he brings it up too early or often, don't hang out with him in the future."

"Of course," said Adam, "there's always the type who've killed so many people they've lost count."

"Stay away from them too."

"What's it like? To kill someone?"

"Jesus, kid, don't you listen? I said this shit's personal."

"Sorry."

"I never thought I'd be able to do it, you know? To shoot someone dead. But during my first ever patrol, an IED lit off right next to our Hummer, and the driver's right arm was taken clean off. Blood spurting everywhere! What a mess. He screamed like a mother-fucker. We opened the slats and let rip at anything that moved. Most of the people we killed were insurgents, actually involved in the ambush. Some weren't though. I don't know for sure if I killed anyone that day, but the chances are that I did. I can't remember exactly. Memories come and go."

Josh nodded as though he understood, but Adam wasn't sure he did. At least he asked no further awkward questions.

The silence began to press on Adam's nerves. He repeatedly flipped a periscope camera in his hand, end over end, catching it by the handle each time. He tried spinning it round his thumb, but almost dropped it. He stopped fiddling and clapped his hands together.

"Waiting is the hardest part," Adam said at last.

"I'd rather be waiting," said Clive.

"Ok, squad," Parry's voice sounded over their radios, "helmets on. Time to get things going. Everyone press record."

Adam dropped his helmet in place and made sure the neck sealed tight. He tapped the keypad on his left forearm with his right index finger. His helmet-mounted camera began recording everything he saw, automatically saving the files to various data storage media spread across his combat armor. Even his two dogtags held a micro memory card each.

The concept was called Open Force Systems, a check against any accusations of wrongdoing or

combat-related atrocities carried out by the Joint Forces. The idea being that if the troops recorded every one of their actions, they'd be less inclined to do anything that would show the Joint Forces in a bad light. Anyone could request to see any soldier's point of view during any operation in the entire arena. Or so went the theory.

The reality was that nobody really knew exactly when any action took place, nor which soldier was involved, nor if anything of interest happened. And then the footage had to be shown in private, with no copy made or given. The American and British press were the single largest groups to ask for viewing privileges, and they invariably spun the story in a positive manner.

The other side, the city militias, took a similar approach. They used phone cameras and other small video devices, and uploaded directly onto the internet for all to see. Human rights organizations invariably used these videos for their propaganda purposes, saying the Joint Force's video sources couldn't be trusted.

Overall, attention from the wider world

periodically turned to the daily routines of the three unequal sides of the Monbutian conflict; the New Orthodox Christian Nationalist militia, the Islamic Democratic militia, and the tiny Joint Forces peacekeeping troops controlled by the United Nations.

The prize? Control of a tiny new West African country which had recently gained its independence from Burkina Faso. At the time of succession, nobody had paid much attention, except for some international statesmen congratulating the new leaders on a completely peaceful transition of power, something almost unheard of in Africa, from the Francophile Burkina Faso capital to the English speaking township of Monbuto City.

The ink hadn't even dried on the newly drawn maps when the new government invited in foreign oil companies. They found the natural gas reserves, ones which had previously been too expensive to extract, and now seemed highly lucrative given the new drilling techniques.

And before too long, the two major religious factions, who'd had no problems working together

previously, suddenly decided their political persuasions should take precedence over the other.

Clive would have said what they really cared about was who would get the best deal on the oil; China or Russia.

Adam didn't care either way. As long as there was a peace to be kept, or, as the reality proved, a good fight to be had, he was happy.

Josh... well, Josh probably didn't think about anything.

And the wider world? Like Clive said, nobody gave a shit about Africa. If the Kinder Approach to War worked, the same techniques would be used in other conflicts around the world. Maybe they'd finally wrap up Afghanistan, but Clive doubted it.

Unknown to even Clive, Adam kept his own copies of his combat data. He couldn't break the encrypted TYD video files just yet, but maybe one day he'd get access to the key codes, pick out the juiciest moments and make a "documentary" video. He was sure it'd get plenty of hits online. Maybe he could find some militia footage of the same incidents, and splice that into the final cut--

"Drone down," said Parry.

What? thought Adam. The militia shouldn't have any high altitude anti-aircraft capability.

"Backup drone down," said Parry, his voice almost an octave higher than before.

"Shit," mumbled Clive, "we're flying blind on this one."

"I'm heading up the hill," said Parry, "keep to your positions until I can get a better view."

Adam heard Parry's breathing get heavier, with some mild swearwords thrown in, as he tripped and stumbled on his way to higher ground. Adam knew Parry would be doing many things at the same time, like trying to bring up real time satellite imagery, calling for more drones, and coordinating with the strike aircraft controllers, making them aware of the new risk. Adam was impressed that Parry could function at all.

"Everyone, turn on your video feeds," he said at last, trying to keep open as many avenues of visual intel as possible.

"Sir," said a voice Adam didn't recognize right away, "we think the militia can pickup on those

frequencies."

"Follow the order, Buddy."

"It's the Islamic guys who cracked that," transmitted Clive, "we gotta hope they don't share tech secrets with the Christians."

A few weeks before a routine patrol had set off a IED on the route from the city to base, and the bomb had been triggered by radio frequencies used only by the Joint Forces. Nobody had been hurt, thankfully, as the radio receiver had been set at a far too high sensitivity, detonating the explosives far too soon. That the forensics squad could piece the bombs back together afterwards to work out such details astonished Adam.

"Right," said Parry, "they know we're here, but they've not stopped. There's four trucks, all covered. About a minute away now. The birds are inbound."

"Josh, Adam," said Clive on their private channel, "this isn't going to plan. We're going to be the target here, not the other way around. No matter what the orders, stay the fuck down, okay?"

Josh nodded vigorously. Adam remained motionless and silent. The last thing he wanted after

this was a record of him agreeing to disobey direct orders. But Clive doesn't know everything, he thought, it might all come to nothing.

"Here they are," said Parry.

Adam lifted his periscope camera out of the trench to get a look. The lead truck appeared around the corner, two hundred meters up the dry valley, closely followed by the second. Then a gap, then the third and fourth trucks appeared. The third truck was around twice the size of the others, and its rear suspension compressed almost to breaking point.

The lead truck growled closer and closer, almost level to Adam's trench. Suddenly the road ahead of the truck exploded, showering rocks and dust into the air. A similar explosion cut off the road behind the fourth truck.

Only then did Adam hear the first jet, even though it had passed over the opposite hill at such speed it had gone before he had a chance to see it. The second jet flew in lower and slower, released four smart missiles that streaked down into the engine compartments of each truck. These carried no explosives, and relied on kinetic energy to break

the engine blocks to pieces.

The lead truck tipped its front end into the crater and came to a stop there. The second truck skidded and stopped just short of the first. The third and fourth trucks, with more space ahead, rolled to a more gentle stop.

"Hold fire," ordered Perry, "we need to ascertain that they're--"

A line of smoke appeared, defining the shortest route between the rear of the third truck and the hill behind Adam. He heard the blast under a second later. He didn't turn round though. The militia had a Vesper system, or the Russian black trade version. Parry died before he even saw it coming.

"Buddy on Com," heard Adam, "fire at will. Cut feeds."

The light on Adam's rifle switched from red to green.

"And stay down," said Clive, as the entire squad resumed complete radio silence and invisibility.

Adam dropped to the floor of the trench, hearing explosions from up and down the road. He imagined the Vesper in the third truck swinging back and

forth, selecting targets and firing automatically every half second. And he knew he could do nothing.

He looked to his left and saw Clive typing on his wrist keypad. To his right, Josh hefted his rifle and made to stand up. Adam looked away, making sure his helmet and rifle cameras pointed elsewhere, and kicked Josh's legs out from under him. No point in letting the kid kill himself so soon.

The strike jets returned, called by Buddy or Clive, and targeted the third truck. The Vesper was ready this time, and stationary, and picked off the first jet with ease. The unmanned aircraft exploded and showered the opposite side of the valley in fire and debris. The second jet released its smart missiles an instant before the Vesper fired again, but another straight line of smoke appeared, heading away from the Vesper, before the back of the third truck flowered in fiery destruction. The second jet's wing exploded, and the remains of the fuselage disappeared over the hill.

"Vesper down," said Buddy, "let's finish the job."

Adam stood and swung his rifle up in one fluid motion. He targeted the cab of the first truck and

waited for the door to open. But he only waited for the split second it took him to think, "Hang on, these bullets will go right through that door."

He filled the cab with hot lead, making sure he put a bullet into every place a militiaman could be sitting or hiding. He noticed Josh stood beside him, shooting at the same target.

"Report in," said Buddy over the din.

"Adam here." His suit picked up the words and transmitted a coded ping. Buddy's software would instantly show a list of who'd pinged and who hadn't.

"Cease fire," Buddy ordered.

Silence.

Smoke drifted up from the riddled cabs of the four trucks. Fire burned on the hillside beyond the road. Craters lay in place of trenches on Adam's side of the road, opposite the third truck.

"We're down to twelve."

From an original squad of twenty. Twenty one, counting Parry.

Josh's helmet exploded. Adam fell back, covered in shards of composite material, padding, blood, skin, and brains. He heard the thunk, thunk, thunk

of bullets hitting the bank of sand behind where he'd just stood, and knew his fall had saved him. He looked up the trench. Clive had disappeared.

Adam selected the instant five second replay. His tiny helmet screen showed his rifle's view from a moment before. A side panel of the second truck had opened. There must be someone in there, someone with large caliber rifles.

The enemy had the upper hand now, laying down continuous suppressing fire, keeping the troops in their trenches. Adam had no choice but to sit tight until the cavalry arrived. Or in this case, more air support.

He glanced at Josh. The corpse's leg twitched. Adam understood Clive's point now. Once you were covered in the blood of your fellow soldier, the blood of the enemy seemed far less sacred. It invited retribution. It invited revenge.

Something passed through Adam's peripheral vision, and his long hours training triggered a blocking motion. His arm flicked out and batted away the falling object. The grenade, for that's what it was, flew over the back of the trench into the brush

behind. He ducked once more as soil rained down.

Adam immediately stood up, bringing his rifle to bear on a militiaman coming in his direction. The man was crouched over, bent at the waist, gun held half ready. Adam was surprised to see he wore a full combat suit, similar in design to his own. Adam fired once, twice, three times, drawing a line of three bullet holes from the chest to the head via the neck. The militiaman collapsed into the dust. Adam swung his rifle to the back of first truck and fired four more times, bringing down two more militiamen as they leapt from the rear.

"Watch out," he heard Clive shout, and was glad he did. He saw Clive run up to the first truck from directly in front, the one direction that was sheltered from the gun in the second truck. Adam ducked down again, but selected his rifle's camera to see what would happen. Clive stepped onto the fender of the first truck, leapt onto the ruined engine compartment, and scrambled onto the roof of the cab. His own grenades ready in his hand, he tossed two into the rear compartment through the tan fabric awning of the roof. He then fell backwards, letting

his combat armor take the brunt of his impact against the front end of the truck and, eventually, the gravel of the road. He rolled into the crater left by the first air strike.

A double concussion signaled the obliteration of anything still breathing in back of the first truck.

Adam twisted his rifle towards the second truck and fired, almost blindly, at the place he imagined the gun operator to be standing. He heard another explosion, then another, many times more powerful. The shock wave hit immediately, blasting grit across the top of the trench. Moments later jagged pieces of metal and burning wood descended over the entire valley. Adam swung his rifle up the road to see what had happened, and was momentarily confused by the nonexistence of the fourth truck.

"Lay down fire!" called Buddy. Adam turned his attention back to the second truck, emptying his magazine after another eight shots. He pulled down his gun to slam in a new magazine.

"Hold it," said Clive calmly. Adam swung his rifle back over the lip of his trench just in time to see Clive toss another two grenades into the back of

second truck through the hatch in the side, and once more dive to the ground. The thickly armored sides of the truck contained the blast this time, rendering it as a dull, hollow boom.

Silence descended once more.

"No pissing about this time," said Buddy, "make sure the place is completely secure. This is no simple delivery run."

"Nobody could have survived all that," said Clive, and Adam silently agreed. The first two trucks gutted by grenade, the third, with room in the back only for the Vesper, destroyed from the air, the fourth truck disintegrated when its own cargo lit up.

"Intel reports," said Buddy, "incoming militia from Monbuto City. ETA about twenty minutes. Let's get out of here. Split up and rendezvous at the chopper pickup, no later than fifteen minutes."

Clive stood up, checked out the back of the second truck, and jogged out into the brush. Adam pulled himself out of his trench and started jogging in a similar direction. He looked up and down the valley, and was dismayed to see so few other others following.

"Report in."

Buddy called ahead to say they only needed one helicopter to land at the pickup point. Only six troops remained alive.

"What a fuckup," moaned Clive, "worse than anything in Iraq."

3 : Training

It took Idiotech four months to integrate the new personnel and technology.

Elmore Conrad had made the Shaper system his own project, and had undergone the implant operation himself. Guy Telesky, the bodyguard who had stood in on the initial meeting, had joined the project, and had also taken the implant. For training

purposes, two other soldiers had taken the implant too, though H and Lorraine didn't work with them on a day to day basis.

Daniel Westley joined the group as the military communications specialist. After showing so much promise at the beginning of his career, the US military had sent him to university where he earned himself two Bachelor of Science degrees in systems engineering and computer science. Lorraine thought of him as a more confident version of H, and they even looked similar, with their unruly mousey brown hair and insistence on casual clothing.

Daniel had immediately redesigned the implant interfaces, and replaced the cables with a state of the art wireless system. He'd streamlined the entire chain, reducing the overall latency. After a few months he'd begun working on the underlying code of the signal coding-decoding processors. It was at this point he hit his first major problem. The theory behind H's abstracted visual language and grammar was rather arcane, and his technical background hadn't prepared him in the right fields. H was, quite understandably, defensive about his own work, and wasn't rushing to

teach Daniel everything he knew.

Timothy spent less and less time with the team, and after deciding it was moving in the right direction, hardly showed up at all.

Lorraine was still in charge of the project, but she found herself being replaced in more and more areas by the military personnel. She took this as a challenge, and at every turn worked hard to achieve the project's goals, even when she disagreed with some particular methods. Lorraine knew she was a capable leader, but Conrad especially made more and more requests, and with his direct way of speaking, they might easily have been mistaken for orders.

At Conrad's request, and after a heated discussion, they moved their main base of operation to a mothballed Royal Air Force base twenty kilometers east of Cambridge. They'd installed a new processing barn in a nissen hut, and set up a workshop and testing facility inside an aircraft hangar. One end of the hangar held a mobile medical unit, the size of two shipping containers. The center of the hangar was left open, as a training and testing area. Around the edges of this stood all the work stations, benches,

consoles, and, most importantly for H, a range of soft couches and armchairs for relaxation.

Conrad had also arranged for an accommodation block to be re-opened, along with a small catering and hospitality staff.

Lorraine admired his slick organizational abilities, even as she realized it undermined her own authority. She tried to take solace in the fact that when the two years were up, she'd still own twenty percent of Idiotech, and the fortune that it would bring, and Conrad would be moving on to yet another military base. That didn't give her a great amount of job satisfaction though, knowing she'd be profiting so much from the hard work of others.

And when it came to the hands-on running of the technical units, Lorraine was still the most proficient. She'd designed most of the systems, and knew her way around them at a very deep level. She could tease out new speed increases and deal with hangups in an almost instinctual fashion.

When the time came, Daniel and H provided a great amount of input, but Lorraine designed the first four-person, twelve-way Shaper network. This

meant a group of four people would each receive the visual input from the other three members, plus their own.

Conrad took the place of group commander. He sat in a chair on a platform, overlooking the testing area inside the hangar. Guy Telesky stepped in as number two, and the volunteers Leo Hadley and Pete Stoppard filled out the team.

The test, as designed by Lorraine, was simple: Telesky, Hadley and Stoppard had to walk around some chairs, climb over and duck under some tables, then around a barrier which would hide them from Conrad, and make their way back to their starting places.

"Everything set?" asked Lorraine. She sat at the command console, in position to oversee the entire test.

"Ready," said Daniel, and H nodded. From their consoles they would be monitoring the connections of two team members each.

"Affirmative," said Conrad, speaking for the team of four.

"Standing by... and engaging." Lorraine clicked

through the commands and opened the links.

Conrad clamped his hands around the arms of his chair and stared straight ahead. Hadley's eyes crossed in his head. Stoppard pitched forward and collapsed into a pile of office chairs, sending them spinning out of control across the smooth concrete floor. Telesky closed his eyes completely at this disruption, then once complete calm had descended, he opened his eyes and began stepping carefully across the test area.

"Ok," said Conrad quietly, "Hadley, follow Conrad. Hold his hand if you need to. Stoppard, slowly, slowly, roll over and get up. But whatever you do, keep your eyes closed until you get your head level."

Stoppard regained his feet, and grabbed at Telesky as he walked past. Soon both Hadley and Stoppard were hanging onto Telesky's arms, and all three tried to look in exactly the same direction. They shuffled like a lame six legged monster. Lorraine, Daniel and H fine-tuned the links and data rates, keeping the balance right for each subject.

"Careful," warned Conrad as the three soldiers

stepped around the final group of chairs.

At the first table, Telesky shook off the hands that held him and tried to vault onto the tabletop. He caught the edge with his right foot, lost his balance, and tipped himself face first over the far side. At the rush of incoming visual data, Stoppard and Hadley tensed completely, and both tipped backwards, making no effort to stop their descent, and only avoided serious injury by the chairs that broke their falls.

Telesky picked himself up and rubbed his bruised chin. "This is fucking embarrassing," he said, and switched off his data connection.

"Oh man," called Daniel, "we got some great data there."

"Fuck the data," said Telesky, "I can't work with this team. A pair of monkeys could do better than these idiots."

"Enough, Telesky," warned Conrad.

"He's probably correct though," said H, "it's been proven that chimpanzees can concentrate far better on visual stimuli. This is mainly due to a human's over-analysis of the data, as our intelligence gets in

the way of fast operation."

"What we need to do here is set up a formal hierarchy," said Lorraine, "as there's just too much confusion in the twelve-way connection."

"We're certainly a long way off the super-efficient fighting force of tomorrow," said Telesky. He nudged Stoppard and Hadley with his right foot. "Get up, you two, for Christ's sake."

"Here's what we should do," continued Lorraine, "we should have one commander, who stands back and watches all the action, receiving from every member. The com doesn't have to move, so can sit tight and safe."

"Then we should have two wingmen who only transmit. They won't be confused by any input, but will have to be completely focused so as not to confuse the others."

"Then, up front, we have someone who can deal with three external links, plus his or her own vision. This way we only have one person per team that needs the skill and focus to function while linked."

Conrad nodded in agreement. "Okay, good plan. Let's set that up. I'll be Com. Telesky, you take

point."

"Respectfully, sir, I don't think I can do it."

"Nonsense, out of everyone we've tried so far, you're by far the most adept when linked."

"Sir, I know my limits. I'd make a far better, um, wingman."

"I think we need to bring in some more test subjects," said Daniel. "Someone who already has the mindset and training needed."

"Like who?" asked Lorraine.

"A tennis player?" suggested Daniel. "They have speed and focus."

"Maybe an air traffic controller," said Conrad.

"Computers do all that these days," said Daniel.

"Then a different kind of air traffic control," said Lorraine, "how about a juggler? You juggle, don't you, H?"

"I can juggle," said H, "I wouldn't call myself a juggler. Like I can solve a Rubik's Cube, but I wouldn't call myself a cuber."

"What's your best time?" asked Daniel, eyes narrowing.

"Thirty four seconds."

"Not a cuber? Ha! Good time for not-a-cuber."

"What's your PB?"

"Fourty two."

"With a four by four?"

"About three minutes."

"Nice!"

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said Lorraine.

"Sorry."

"Sorry."

"Okay, let's close up here," said Lorraine, "and we should get working on lists of possible test candidates."

*

A few hours later, Lorraine presented the shortlist to Conrad.

"Twenty names, all live here in the UK, all have some of the skills and background we think would help us."

Conrad looked down the list, nodding at certain names. He reach three quarters of the way down, and suddenly frowned.

"This name," he said, pointing at the screen, "where did you get it?"

"From the net, of course. He's a two-time world champion competitive juggler. A martial arts expert too."

"I see."

"And, from what I gather, he's a veteran of the Joint Forces. I couldn't find much about that part of his history online though. Why do you ask?"

"I know him."

"Really?"

"I know of him, at least. He's quite a legend in small circles of the UN Joint Forces."

"Do you think he'll agree to join our team?"

"Well, he left the army because..." Conrad paused and rubbed his chin as though trying to remember an important fact. "In fact," he said at last, nodding at the same time, "now that I think about it, he almost certainly will be joining us."

III : Leader

"... I was the last one onto the helicopter. The entire squad, or what was left of it, we sat in silence during the entire flight back to the base. We'd all lost friends. Lost room mates. Lost our leader.

"And yet, somehow, we gauged it was worth it. The Vesper and heavy machine guns never made it to the city, only some damaged combat suits and small arms. Who knows how much more damage they could have wrought there, how many more people could have died?"

Adam hit the pause button, leaned back in his chair. His room felt empty. Usually Clive would have been lounging on the top bunk, but he'd taken a newly available room as his own, and spent his free evenings shut in alone, sipping whiskey.

Adam found recording an audio diary more therapeutic than alcohol. He'd never be able to share his recordings, but it helped to talk, just to get it all out.

He took a deep breath before continuing.

"Five people. I killed five people. At least three, but probably five. Intel got a satellite overhead by the time the militia backup arrived. They dragged most of the bodies from the trucks, took them back to the city for burial, but left our guys. Two unarmed, unsuited drivers per truck... I mean, two in the cab of each truck. Then eight suited militiamen, and two each for the machine gun and the Vesper. If you do the maths, it turns out we were equally matched. Same number of men, same level of tech, same element of surprise. But we had better leadership. And more experience."

Adam rubbed his eyes.

"Or some of us did. That was Josh's first deployment. He'd only flown in two days before. He'd only unpacked one of his bags. I found one of his teeth this morning, lodged under the shoulder pad of my armor. I took it to the morgue, but they'd

already shipped him home.

"Like Clive keeps saying, the entire thing was a complete disaster. And not just for us. The Ortho gang haven't released anything about this online anywhere, or not that I can tell. I think it's because they don't have anything that makes us look worse than them. Or them better than us. Clive says it's because the Russians don't want evidence of their arms deal coming to light.

"Watching the news, you get the wrong impression of the scale of the conflict here. There's only about a thousand of us here on the base, and that includes both civvies and peacekeepers. The base is only so big because we took over the airport. Thankfully Monbuto City is only the size of a large town, and the countryside is mostly empty. The borders are short enough to cover all the time with drones.

"Tonight... well, tonight I'm going out with a new squad. Buddy's taken over officially, but the rest of the guys I don't know. Clive's been given his own squad as a noncommissioned officer. He'll probably be given some baubles too, as the brass liked what he

did back at the ambush.

"I've gone on too long. Out."

*

"Look for anything out of the ordinary."

Those were the Colonels' orders for the night. It was left up to Buddy to interpret them. He chose to do so in the usual manner, by driving slowly through the streets, trying to spot people looking suspicious. Tonight, news of the failed arms shipment had reached the majority of the population, and a good half of the people stared at the Hummers as they drove past, undisguised animosity burning in their eyes. Adam was unsure if that was just the Christian half, or if the blame for the first such act of violence in four months was generally considered to be the fault of the UN troops.

Adam sat in a rear passenger seat, peering down every street and alleyway they passed, looking for... suspiciousness? It was hard to see anything clearly, but one had to stay safely inside the vehicle. Buddy had suggested that the practice made the

peacekeepers faceless and inhuman agents locked away in steel boxes, especially after the ambush, and it would be better to stand up through the roof hatch. Clive had shot that idea down in just two words:

"Piano wire."

"What?" Buddy had asked.

"Piano wire."

"Across the street?"

"Yup. They did it in Iraq. Cars pass underneath, no problem. Hummers with men sticking out the top? Not so much. We welded tall posts to the roof in front of the hatch, but they found ways around it. They started stringing the wire between a truck of their own and the side of a building, waiting for us to stop, then driving past us at high speed. It had the same effect."

"But we have armor these days."

"And they'll have stronger wire."

In Iraq the only solution had been to keep everyone inside the vehicle, and even then they had to continually drive forward, faster than any other vehicle, never stopping, shunting cars in front if they

drove too slow. It kept the casualties low, but relations with the locals strained.

"Dice," said Buddy from the front seat.

"Six," said Dan, the soldier beside Adam.

"Left here," ordered Buddy.

The route they drove on their patrol was entirely random.

As the Hummer turned, Adam saw a young man in a baseball cap leaving an old apartment block. The man noticed the vehicle--no surprise there, it had the same white and blue design as every other UN vehicle--and immediately pulled the cap down over his eyes, leaving only his mouth and goatee beard visible. He turned quickly and strode with purpose in the opposite direction.

"Sir," said Adam, "I spot trouble."

"What?"

Adam quickly described what he saw.

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"Not a lot to go on, Adam. But let's circle back round. Driver, make it look random."

Adam's heart beat faster as he heard himself say

"I can take this one on foot, sir."

"That was Parry's style, not mine."

Adam sat in silence, thankful his offer had been rejected so quickly.

"But in this case it might be best. Get to it. Report by SMS, no com or wireless. I've switched your rifle to green, so take care."

Adam glanced down and saw a his rifle was now live.

"Shall I stop?" asked the driver.

"Adam'll manage."

Adam already had his door open. The Hummer was going slow enough that he simply swung his boots down towards the broken asphalt, feet pedaling the air, and dropped himself into a fast run. He left the side of the Hummer immediately, and ducked into a dark alley. He sprinted to the far end, and turned down a smaller gap between two dilapidated building, following the map on his helmet's screen.

Adam soon made it back to the same road where he'd spotted Goatee, as he'd named the man in his own mind. Adam stayed in the shadows, knowing he'd never be mistaken for a local if he ventured out

under the bright orange street lights.

He unclipped his rifle and attached a silencer to the end of the barrel. He scanned the street through his telescopic sight, looking for movement.

Three streets further down the main avenue he saw two men, also walking with purpose. One held a long cylinder, wrapped in a blanket, and from his gait the other surely had a short-barreled shotgun inserted down his right trouser leg. They turned into a side street and out of sight. A few random people wandered past the same street, but twenty seconds later another man strode into the street, a large container under his arm and a bulge on his hip.

He typed a text message. "Real. Moving for better view. Rapid on *." Adam attached the GPS coordinates of the target street. If the next text message contained nothing but a single character, the various patrols would converge on his location at high speed.

Adam checked his map. Monbuto City had characteristics of more modern African cities like those in Kenya or Nigeria, with many wide and gridded roads, combined with ancient flavors of the

Medinas in Morocco, all narrow and random passageways. He decided on a route that would bring him to his target street, but a few blocks removed, and would only mean crossing one wide road.

When he reached the road, he thought about shooting out the streetlight, but decided against it. Instead he folded his rifle again and clipped it to his back. He then waited for thirty seconds until the street emptied of cars, and walked openly across the road. The handful of pedestrians close by had their backs to him, and those in the distance probably wouldn't guess who he was. He kept his pace slow, trying to imitate the dominant gait of the locals, a kind of relaxed, slow stroll, as though one had little work to do, and no motivation to do it.

He slipped into another alleyway, and jumped onto a parked car. From there he grabbed the edge of a balcony, and pulled himself up, shoulder's popping from the added weight of the combat armor.

You've trained for this, he thought, with twice the weight, too.

The balcony above, though the same height,

seemed far more difficult. By the time he'd pulled himself onto the roof he felt lightheaded from the physical exertion. He shook his arms, unclipped and unfolded his rifle, and crawled to the far side of the flat roof.

Keeping back from the edge, and firmly in the shadows, he peered over the corner of the roof. The view extended far down the street. It wasn't a very wide, enough room for two cars to pass each other, plus some space for pedestrians and small trade stalls. Four blocks away the neon sign of a popular bar sputtered, momentarily turning black shadows deep red.

In front of the bar, a group of men had gathered, numbering about twelve or thirteen. Two of the men were engaged in a heated discussion. Adam took a closer look through his rifle's telescopic sight.

One of the men turned out to be Goatee. He had a pistol in his right hand, and was gesturing with it emphatically. The other man, a heavy set brute whom Adam instinctively named Hulk, shook his head, disagreeing with Goatee at every point. Adam couldn't see his face, but guessed he was older and

the true leader of the group. Goatee paused for a second, and Hulk pointed once at the floor. Goatee shook his head. Hulk had no further response, and walked away. The other men almost jumped to get out of his path. Hulk got into a car--one lacking a numberplate, Adam noted--revved the engine, and roared away up the street.

The gang sprang to life. They milled about for a moment, swapping weapons and ammunition. Then they deserted the street for hiding places; in alleyways, smashing windows and climbing into the backs of cars, forcing doors in the nearby buildings, climbing onto nearby balconies.

"Ambush for sure. Unsure of target," muttered Adam.

They'd be foolish to take on the Joint Forces troops, but in this mixed central district, news of such a gathering would soon make it to the leader of the opposite faction. Adam guessed these were Ortho militiamen, but the locals dressed so much alike he found it hard to tell.

Goatee directed the action, pointing this way and that with his pistol. He'd go over to a hiding place,

check to see if the militiaman was ready, then move on to another.

Adam zoomed in with his rifle's sight. This was a clear case where a preemptive strike was entirely justified. He wouldn't even have to ask for orders. If he sat by and waited for the ambush to take place, who knew how many people would be killed? The target, almost certainly. The ambushers too, or at least a few. And then the people in the bar, and any innocent civilian walking by in the night.

In fact, setting the ambush in front of the bar was a clever move by Goatee. If anyone inside died, it would be pinned on whoever returned fire at the ambushers, not the ambushers themselves. With the right video editing, that could be made to look particularly malicious.

So calling in the Hummers wouldn't help the situation. The militiamen wouldn't let themselves be captured easily, and the bloodshed would probably be just as bad. The US media was still in an uproar over the loss of American life in the previous ambush.

No matter what happened, nipping the entire incident in the bud was worth it. And what better

way to do it than by sacrificing the life of the man in charge? The foot soldiers were semi-innocent in this situation, merely following orders. To do otherwise would result in threats to family members, businesses, homes. But the leader...

Goatee stopped into the middle of the street, casting his gaze left and right, a worried look on his face. Adam rested the crosshairs on his chest, and increased the pressure on the trigger.

But he couldn't do it.

The movies made it look so easy. James Bond killed dozens per film, and invariably ended the day in bed with a woman with too-long legs, and without a care in the world. Post Traumatic Stress didn't make a showing.

Adam closes his eyes. Shapes flickered across his vision, and soon resolved themselves, somewhere deep in his imagination, into men jumping from the rear of a truck. Adam shot his imaginary gun and the back of each of their heads exploded in turn. And as they fell, each one turned to face him, and each one had the innocent face of Josh, eyes wide, questioning, a silent scream on the quivering lips...

Adam opened his eyes. Goatee stood in the same position, now talking on a mobile phone. Adam's aim hadn't moved an inch, but he'd have been surprised if it had. Marksmanship had been one of his highest rated abilities back in advanced training. He knew he could, if sitting in the right position, take aim, close his eyes, wait twenty minutes, fire, and not be more than a centimeter off bull at two hundred meters.

Yes, he told himself, you're a damn fine soldier. Granddad would have been proud. Now do your job.

Adam fired.

The rifle itself hardly made a sound, but the bullet made a loud crack. Breaking the speed of sound tended to have that effect. Adam got the rifle back on target within an instant, and saw nothing but the distant road surface. Dipping it slightly, he spotted a crumpled body.

Zoom out.

The street filled with people, running, both true civilians and, Adam made sure, militiamen. They sprung from their hiding places and, almost comically, ran to other hiding places. Within seconds the street had emptied. All except for the body in

center of the road.

"A" sent Adam.

"No hostilities expected," he added in a following text.

*

"Nice one, Adam," said Clive, and slapped him on the back. "You got the bastard!"

"It could be the same one who planned the Vesper ambush," said another soldier. "Revenge is ours."

"I've got to give it to you," said Clive, "that was some classy shooting. You ambushed an ambush."

"What I want to know is why our doctors are trying to keep the bastard alive."

Adam sat down away from the others, keeping his thoughts to himself. The soldiers only half-filled the mess hall, but that meant it was more crowded than normal. They drank to a successful night's work, to the memory of recently fallen comrades, and to the death of an enemy leader.

Or to the near-death of an enemy leader. The UN

medics had arrived at the scene to find Adam's target still alive, though unconscious and losing a lot of blood. They'd attempted to stabilize him in situ, but had brought him back to the UN base where they had far more equipment and expertise.

Gary, a medic, put his head around the door and called into the mess: "We lost him, lads."

The British soldiers cheered and the American soldiers whooped. They clanked their glasses together, toasting the news. They bought more drinks for Adam, even though his current drink sat untouched.

Five minutes later Gary returned with a new announcement. "Guess what? We brought him round again. He's back in a stable condition."

Adam's squad mates booed and then fell into quite conversations. They sipped at their drinks where before they'd drained their glasses in one. Adam sat, as passive as before, one corner of his mouth twitching.

Two minutes later Gary appeared for a third time. The room fell into silence. "He's dead again."

"For real?" asked Clive.

"For real. Massive bleeding into the cranium. Complete brain death."

The cheers and whoops returned.

Why? thought Adam, why are my feelings the opposite of everyone here?

He'd done his job. He knew his motives were true, and his actions justified. Or he'd been sure of that at the start. Now, after Clive and the others had brought up revenge, he wasn't so sure. He'd hadn't wanted to shoot Goatee. He'd forced himself to do so. But had he just been tricking himself?

He looked up and found Gary standing over him.

"We need you to come ID the body, fill out the forms... hey, are you okay, pal?"

"I'll be fine. Let's go."

They walked across to the infirmary and into the emergency operating theatre. Adam paused in the doorway, then stepped up beside the bench. A white sheet covered the freshly dead corpse.

"I don't know who this man is, you know? I've not seen him before tonight."

"His name is Herrak Nusim," said Gary.

"Really?" asked Adam.

"Surprised?"

"Yeah, that name sounds more Muslim, and I thought he'd be Christian."

"Take a look."

Gary pulled back the sheet, revealing the man beneath, the bullet wound in his neck now cleaned but gaping open. Adam's eyes widened and he stumbled back from the bench.

"What's up?"

"Did you... did you shave him as part of the operations?"

"Nope."

"Are you sure?"

"No shave, no waxing. Why do you ask?"

The dead man had no beard.

4 : Juggler

"I didn't know these events were so big," said Lorraine as she and Conrad entered the main hall of the German Juggling Convention.

Over two thousand people had gathered at a university in Munich, all of them jugglers. During the daytime activity focused on the huge sports center hall. It held a mass of mostly young people, and everyone was doing something; juggling, unicycling, and many other activities Lorraine couldn't identify. And those who weren't manipulating plastic and metal objects watched those who did, or chatted, or took photos or captured videos with their viewswers, or did countless other things besides.

"I didn't know these events happened at all," said Conrad.

"There's a small one in Cambridge every couple of years," said Lorraine, "I went a few times."

"How will we find our man?"

"I'm told he'll be down at the competition arena. That's the raked seating at the far end. You have the

photo?"

"Got it. Let's go."

They weaved their way through the crowds. Many other people heading in the same direction did the same thing, but, unlike Lorraine and Conrad, they all had an instinctive grasp on the movements of those juggling, and avoided the swinging and flying objects completely. By the time Lorraine and Conrad had passed the half way point, they'd each been hit numerous times.

The pumping music cut out for a moment and a voice spoke first in German and then English: "The German Open Individuals Three Club Combat tournament is about to begin. Five minutes!"

"We're in the right place then," said Lorraine. "Is that him?" She pointed to a pair of men, older than the average attendees at the convention, standing beside the raked seating. The man on the left was tall, thin and blond, and held himself as though he contained a tightly wound spring. The man on the right was only slightly shorter, with wide shoulders and tightly cropped dark hair. He stood firm, strong, and with a sense of purpose. A slow conversation

flowed between them, the relaxed exchanged of good friends.

"Yes, that's him on the right."

"Let's see if we can talk to him now."

They skirted the edge of the arena, which was just an open part of the gymnasium surrounded by the raked seating on one side, and about three hundred young jugglers sitting on the floor in a rough semicircle on the other.

Lorraine took the lead and approached the pair of men directly.

"Hi guys," she said with a smile, "can we talk to you a moment?"

"Are you press?" asked the thin man on the left.

"No, we're here to talk to Mr. Taylor about some business. I'm Lorraine Grosvenor, and this is Elmore Conrad."

"I'm Jason, and you already know Adam, I see." Jason shook Lorraine's hand, and then Conrad's.

Adam hardly even looked at Lorraine, and focused entirely on Conrad. Adam immediately recognized Conrad as a military commander, so much was obvious to Lorraine. Even though both

wore civilian clothes, they automatically sized each other up, calculating the other's status, and how much respect to show outright. After a few moments Adam extended his hand, and the two men shook.

The handshake lasted slightly longer than necessary before they both released at the same moment.

"Ok," said Jason, "I'm glad you got that out of the way." He too had seen the meeting for something out of the ordinary.

"Can we speak somewhere, you know, a bit more private?" asked Lorraine as she shook hands with Adam.

"Not right now," said Adam, "I'm in the second match. I've got to get in line. I'll talk to you after my match."

"We can wait."

"Talk to Jason here," he said, and with that he walked away, to stand with the another small group of people gathered near the sound system.

"He can be like that," said Jason. "So, what are you doing here?"

"Like I said, we want to talk to Adam."

"You picked a bad time to talk, but at least you can enjoy the show."

"There's a show?" asked Conrad.

"I mean the competition."

"Oh. How long will it take?"

"A few hours, but Adam's first match should be over in ten or fifteen minutes. Let's sit."

"Sit where?" asked Conrad, scanning the raked seating for empty places.

"Sit here on the floor, like everyone else," said Jason, and did so. "This is a juggling convention. Nobody gets special treatment."

Lorraine shrugged and sat down beside Jason. Conrad frowned, but eventually sat down without complaint.

Across the arena a woman stepped forward with a microphone. The music cut out for good and the event began. After a brief announcement in English, the proceedings continued in German. At various points the audience cheered and clapped, though Lorraine wasn't entirely sure why.

"Can you explain the rules of the Combat game?" she asked Jason.

"Simple," he said with a grin, "the last person juggling wins."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much. Two jugglers go head to head, three clubs each."

"Clubs are those pins?"

"Well, bowling pins are made from solid wood. Juggling clubs are hollow plastic. The idea is to make your opponent drop without dropping your own clubs. You're the last one juggling, you get a point. First to five points wins the match. Here, the first match is starting now."

As Jason had described, two jugglers entered the arena. They shook hands, and the host announced their names.

"These guys are well matched," said Jason, "because they both come from Regensburg."

"Why is that important?" asked Conrad.

"They juggle and play combat together every week. Do that long enough and you settle out at the same skill level, and know each other's tricks and moves. My money is on Jürgen, the one in red. Christian is good too, though. As I said, it should be

close."

Jürgen began juggling three clubs and stepped forward. Christian started too, and stepped to the left.

"They're not allowed to cross the center line until both are juggling."

"Which line?" asked Lorraine, confused by the many different colored lines set out on the sports center hall floor.

"It's more of an imaginary line. Conceptual."

Jürgen threw a club into the air. Lorraine followed it up, and when Jürgen caught it again, Christian had only two clubs under his control, his third bouncing away towards the front of the audience.

"You see?"

"I didn't see anything."

"Don't follow the high throws, watch what's going on below."

The next point began. This time, when Jürgen made a high throw, Christian also threw a club high. Lorraine saw Jürgen swipe a club towards Christian, but there was nothing for him to hit. They both caught their high throws, and continued to juggle.

Again they threw clubs high, and this time they both swiped their clubs at the other player. Their clubs collided with a crack, but both held tight. Jürgen turned away to catch his high thrown club, but Christian, who had thrown his club higher, had time for another attack. He tapped Jürgen's falling club lightly, just before his opponent could catch it. Jürgen could do nothing but step back and watch Christian take the point.

"What if both players drop?" asked Lorraine.

"Nobody gets a point. You see, it's not about who drops last, but who can keep juggling for at least five throws and catches after the other player is out."

"Does anyone get injured?" Conrad asked as the jugglers once again swung their clubs past each other's faces.

"Not on purpose," said Jason. "Of course people get hit on their head now and then, and loads on the hands and fingers and wrists. The most dangerous thing is clubs bouncing out of your pattern into your own face."

"So it's a non-contact sport?"

"It has evolved that way. I mean, you could be

violent, but those who push and shove never do well. By far the most important thing is juggling skill. The amount of physical contact between players is inversely proportional to the skill of the players. The best combat players never hit each other by accident."

"Who are the best players?" asked Lorraine.

"Germans, mostly," said Jason with a laugh. "They take juggling so seriously. They are unbeatable at Volleyclub too. This is why the German Open is such a big deal. If you can win here, you're favorite for the European and World title."

"Nobody else?"

"Well, there are a few good players from Argentina and America, but they are only as good as a moderately competent German player."

"What about you and Adam?"

"We're the exceptions. Adam is as good as even the Berlin players, and I'm getting close. And we're always in the top two or three in the team combat tournaments."

Lorraine watched as Jürgen and Christian battled for the final point. Both had four points. As Jason

had predicted, the players were evenly matched. The outcome was decided in a rather anticlimactic way, when Christian made a simple mistake turning round to face Jürgen, and dropped a club without even being attacked. The audience groaned, but Jürgen took the point, and the groans turned to cheers as the players shook hands.

"Unforced error," said Jason, shaking his head. "That's the kind of thing the Berlin players never do."

The two Germans left the arena, and the host introduced the next players. Jason gave his own opinions.

"The young guy is Henri from France. Toulouse, I think. He's probably about as good as Jürgen and Christian, but has a different style. Pity he's up against Adam. Poor lad doesn't stand a chance."

"Adam is about twice his weight," said Conrad.

"Size isn't all that important, not really. Henri is fast. Let's see if he's fast enough."

The audience cheered as Adam and Henri shook hands. They tapped their clubs together as a salute, then stepped back to their own sides of the arena.

Adam began juggling first, and Henri started a second later.

Immediately Henri started moving, zigzagging from side to side, trying to get around Adam. Adam stood still, not even moving his head, only his arms and hands, his juggling clubs flowing in smooth circles. Henri threw a club high and rushed in towards Adam. A split second later and Adam was facing the other way, his own clubs safe, while Henri's clubs bounced away across the floor.

"I didn't see what happened then," said Lorraine.

"As I said, don't watch the high throws."

"I didn't. Adam just moved too quickly."

"Yeah, he does that."

On the second point Adam let Henri past, then before the French teenager could turn around, Adam had flicked a club over Henri's head, swiping two clubs out of the pattern.

On the third point, Adam took the initiative. He feigned a high throw, causing Henri to make a high throw. Adam then threw one of his own clubs in a high arc that would take it a long way from both him and Henri. At this point both players had a club in

each of their hands, and one club fell towards them from above. At the last moment, Adam threw the club in his right hand and leapt into the air. He caught Henri's falling club and left Henri standing, mouth open, as he walked away, three club pattern still intact.

The audience, seeing Adam steal Henri's own juggling club, erupted in in the loudest applause of the competition so far.

The fourth point began slowly, with Adam and Henri circling each other at a distance. Henri stepped back, then rushed forward, skipping to Adam's left with plenty of space to spare. Adam followed him, but turned in the opposite direction, shielding his clubs with his body. Henri slowly circled around behind Adam. Without looking, Adam flicked his arm out behind him, catching one of Henri's clubs mid-flight, sending it on a modified course back over Henri's head. But it wasn't over, as Henri threw one of his own clubs like normal, leaving his right hand empty. Then, somehow, Henri also managed to reach out behind him without looking, and snagged his errant club out of midair.

The audience showed their appreciation at both the attack and the miraculous save, but quietened quickly as the point continued.

"Henri was lucky there," said Lorraine.

"A bit. You get a sense for these things."

The next time Henri approached, Adam ignored the clubs in the air, and aimed a strike at the club in Henri's left hand. He hit the handle right next to where Henri gripped it, breaking it free and smashing it onto the ground. The audience, split on whether this was a valid or dirty attack, jeered and cheered in equal measures.

"Was that allowed?" asked Conrad.

"Henri should have held on tighter. If Adam had hit his fingers and hurt him badly, he would have offered to replay the point."

The fifth point began, and Henri knew he was beaten. At the realization, he loosened up and started taunting Adam. Adam played along, acting scared and giving ground when Henri stepped forward. They both made some high throws, halfheartedly testing each other's reactions.

Then, in a flash, Adam sprang into action. He

threw not just one but two of his own clubs high and rushed forward. Henri threw one club high himself, making sure it went in a different direction compared to where Adam ran, and thought that put him in a safe position. But as Adam stepped past Henri, he reached out his empty hand, once again aiming for the club in Henri's left hand, grabbed it and yanked hard, tearing it from Henri's grasp. Henri's entire body jerked backward from the shoulder, spinning him to the ground. Henri's high thrown club bounced off the floor.

Lorraine looked back to Adam, who had somehow caught not just one but both of his high throws, and along with the club he'd stolen from Henri, was now juggling four clubs.

As one, the audience stood and clapped and cheered. Lorraine found herself on her feet too, clapping her hands over her head.

Jason leaned over from her right. "Adam is such a showoff," he shouted over the din, "but he has the skills to show off in style!"

Once she'd sat down again, Conrad leaned in from her right. "Did you see that?" he whispered, the

first words he'd uttered since the tournament began. "He was tracking himself, his opponent, plus at least four or five moving objects. I was watching his face. Adam didn't even have to look at what he was doing until the final catch!"

"He's fast too!"

"Tell me about it. This is our man!"

Henri and Adam shook hands, and Adam lifted his clubs to the audience once more in thanks for their support. At the gesture they cheered once more. He turned and walked over to Lorraine, Conrad and Jason.

"What a poser," muttered Jason, as soon as Adam was close enough to hear.

"When are you up?" asked Adam, ignoring his partner's comment.

"I'm in the seventh match."

"Ok, I'll try to be back by then. Excuse me..."

Adam reached down to Lorraine, so she took his hand and let herself be helped to her feet. "Thanks," she said, surprised that she'd lost her breath. She noticed for the first time that Adam had flecks of grey hair on his temples.

"Let's go somewhere private," said Adam, and picked his way through the crowd, high-fiving and shaking the offered hands as he went. Lorraine and Conrad followed in his wake.

*

"So, you say this is a secret experimental test team for a newly developed communications technology. What's this got to do with me?"

"We want you to volunteer," said Conrad. "We need a point man."

"It's not going to happen. I handed in my dogtags eight years ago."

"We'll pay well," said Lorraine.

"I do alright with this juggling gig. See this?" He pointed to a large logo on his t-shirt. "I've got a sponsorship deal with Duncan. Piece of shit clubs, but they pay well. I'm the first professional competitive juggler, you know? All the others juggle as a hobby, or perform for a living."

"How long are you going to keep this up, Adam?" asked Conrad. "You're already older than ninety nine

percent of the jugglers around here."

"I'll work something out."

"Name your fee," said Conrad. "Seriously, we'll match your price."

"It's not about the money. I'm done with the UN and the Joint Forces."

"I'm sorry to have to say this, but the UN isn't done with you."

"What do you mean?"

"You still owe us," said Conrad, and handed Adam a pair of viewers. "Watch this, and I think you'll agree." Adam slipped the viewers onto his nose and ears, and his eyes crossed slightly in the characteristic viewer-user style.

Lorraine, confused at the sudden turn the conversation had taken, was curious to see what played on the viewers, but she could see nothing except the glow they cast onto Adam's dark eyes. His smile faded into a scowl. After a minute he tossed the viewers back at Conrad.

"It didn't happen like that."

"That is a verified unedited recording."

"Bullshit!"

"That defense won't stand up in court."

"So, blackmail it is," sighed Adam.

"Blackmail?" asked Lorraine, as the idea had only just occurred to her.

"It makes the world go round," said Conrad with a forced smile.

"Round and round in an ever-tightening spiral to hell," said Adam.

"So you say," said Conrad.

"Ok, I'm in," said Adam, "but only if that recording disappears."

"I knew you'd see sense."

"And I still want the money."

"We'll see what we can do."

"I've got to get back for my next match."

*

Back at the combat arena, Jason was struggling against Jochen, a professional juggler from Berlin. Jochen was one of the favorites to win the German Open, and Jason had been unlucky to draw against him in the first round. In the end Jochen won five

points to three, but it had been a long, hard struggle for both players, with lots of dual drops and zero point plays. They shook hands and Jason met Adam where he stood with Lorraine and Conrad.

"Bad luck, mate," said Adam as he slapped Jason on the back.

"No problem, I did my job though, wearing him down so he's tired when you meet in the final."

Adam waited until the next match began, and the audience resumed its enthusiastic noise making, before continuing.

"Hey, I have some news. Something's come up, and I'm going to be really busy for the next..." Adam looked over at Conrad, "for the next six months?" Conrad raised his right eyebrow. "Maybe a bit longer than six months."

"What about the Euro and World team championships? What about all that you said about this being our big year?"

"I'll see if I can take time off, okay?"

Jason stepped back and folded his arms. "So that's it?"

"Hey, there's more to life than juggling."

"Yeah? What's so important all of a sudden?"

"I can't say."

"Right, then I guess it's about--" Jason paused as the crowds around them cheered a spectacular attack by one of the combat players. "You never share anything about your military days. I thought you were done with this."

"Me too."

"Well, you better get ready for the second round. You're up next."

Jason turned his back on Adam and picked his way through the crowd, not staying to see Adam's next match or the rest of the tournament.

Adam won his next two matches handily. Unlike his first match, he didn't try anything fancy, and while the level of combat skills on display were unquestionably high, the audience obviously wanted and expected something more.

In the final he faced Jochen from Berlin, and lost five points to four.

Lorraine leant over to Conrad. "Maybe we should recruit Jochen too."

"Jochen might be the better juggler," said Conrad,

"but you've read Adam's file. Twelve years training in Aikido, four with kickboxing, an expert level marksman, top of his class at the advanced academy, awarded the Military Cross, the list goes on."

"Is the Military Cross a good medal?"

"The next medal up is the Victoria Cross, and that's typically awarded posthumously. So yeah, the MC is pretty good for you Brits. You meet the King to have it pinned on your lapel. Right, let's pick up Adam and get out of here."

"Before we do," said Lorraine, feeling the need to confront a certain issue. "I need to tell you I'm not happy with your methods."

"My methods?"

"Blackmail."

"Everyone has something in their past."

"I don't."

"You didn't fight in any wars."

"What was on the video?"

"It's best you don't find out. Let's just say, if word got out about it, the King would want that MC back."

IV : Review

"Adam seemed genuinely surprised at the name and appearance of the body," Gary told the panel, "I believe that was the first time he realized his error."

"What you believe has no bearing," said the chairperson, "on the facts of this case. You may go."

Gary frowned at the members of the panel, but stood up to leave. He gave Adam a quick smile as he left the room.

"We've heard your testimony, along with statements from those involved, untainted by viewing of the relevant surveillance footage. Let us now review your rifle and helmet camera feeds from the night in question."

The screen on the conference room's wall flickered to life. The chairperson handled the remote control deftly, and soon had the feeds running side by side. The rifle camera picked up nothing but the seat in the back of the Hummer. The helmet cam showed Adam's view out the window, in starker, clearer images than those in his memory.

"Target spotted."

Goatee flashed across the screen. How was he acting suspiciously? Adam thought. Via the cam feed he looked just like anyone else.

A conversation, the indicator LED switching from red to green, leaving the Hummer, a journey across the city. The rifle feed became more important once Adam had gained his final position at the corner of the building.

The confrontation, the setting up of the ambush.

The crosshairs on the chest of Goatee.

Adam switched his gaze to the helmet cam feed, a much wider-angled view down the street, and saw what he now knew was coming. The door to the bar opened, and a young man, tiny due to perspective, strode across the road, oblivious to the gunmen

beyond him on the street. The young man stepped into the edge of the rifle's camera feed, and in front of Goatee. Both feeds jolted as Adam fired his rifle.

The young man collapsed onto the road surface. Goatee fled.

"Both human testimony and Open Force footage lead to a single unambiguous verdict. We see here a clear case of accidental death. Responsibility, if any is to be apportioned, lays with the leaders of the ambush force for operating among a civilian population."

Adam took in these words, but it didn't relieve the ache in his stomach. My eyes were closed, remembered Adam, my eyes were closed, and I was thinking. Thinking was the wrong thing to do at that point, instead I should have done my job properly.

"Thank you," he said, sounding a lot calmer than he felt.

*

"Not a bad outcome at all," said Clive, "you really dodged a bullet on this one."

Adam looked up at Clive. "That's not the most appropriate turn of phrase, considering the situation."

"True that." Clive had moved back into their shared room, the platoon now restored to full strength with new British soldiers. "You think you'll get a squad of your own?"

"I'm not sure I want one," said Adam.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I couldn't handle the responsibility. Right now I can only just control myself, order my own arms and legs, you know. What about you?"

"I wish I'd skipped out of here two weeks ago, to be honest. My squad is gelling nicely, but they've a ways to go yet. I'm scared shitless that the militia will have another go at escalation. The Ortho's got themselves a few armor suits, and the Islamists will be doing all they can to get some too now. It wouldn't surprise me if the Chinese deliver some especially, just so their side doesn't fall so far behind."

"We're still far enough ahead in terms of tech."

"Until the next Vesper shows up."

"Until then, yeah. But meanwhile we can--" With

a beep, an icon popped up on Adam's screen. "Let me get that, it's an urgent local message."

Adam clicked on the icon, and a single, short message appeared.

"What the hell?" said Adam.

"What the hell' what?" asked Clive, "read it out."

"It says this: 'Dear Adam, thank you for shooting an innocent man instead of me. While this is unfortunate, recruitment to my cause has just become far easier.'"

"Whose cause?"

"It's signed 'Kett Hartoon.'"

"What? Kett's not the guy you aimed to shoot."

"Right. We picked him up a few weeks ago, and we're still holding him here at the base."

5 : Connection

"Are you ready?" asked Lorraine.

"Let's do it," replied Adam, and Lorraine made the connection. Guy Telesky's visual data began streaming to Adam in his first ever Shaper experience. In an effort to make the test less confusing, they sat side-by-side on stools, facing the same way across the hangar, looking at the same scene.

Adam sighed, closed his eyes once, then opened them slowly. He looked up, then down at his hands, then across at Telesky. "This is..." he began, "...this is quite remarkable."

"Is it running?" asked Conrad, leaning over Lorraine's shoulder.

"Yes."

"I thought he'd do the usual thing for virgins."

"Cease up completely? Go cross eyed? Fall over?"

"Everyone has done that so far right?"

"Everyone but Denny and..." Lorraine said, but then caught herself. "Everyone but some of our

earliest test subjects."

Conrad looked at her suspiciously. "Who were they?"

"Just some friends of H."

"I didn't know there had been any test subjects other than your own team members, before we joined the team, that is."

"The cases are covered in a confidentiality agreement. And it wasn't exactly the same system," said Lorraine, "which is why they didn't suffer the same side effects."

Conrad frowned, and turned back to watch Adam. Adam had stood up, and was walking forward slowly with his arms spread wide. He walked up to him and took his arm.

"No," said Adam, "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Really." Adam span around and looked back at Telesky. "How do I look?"

"You know how you look," Telesky said in his low voice.

"Correct!"

"You should really take it easy," urged H. "Even

Telesky and I can't move smoothly, and we've had the most practice."

Adam shook H's hands off his arm and walked away. After a few meters he broke into a jog and described large circles across the floor of the hangar. H looked across at Lorraine and Conrad and shrugged.

Daniel looked up from his console. "I'm tracking the data back from Adam," he said, "and I'd swear there's something wrong here."

"Pipe it to me," ordered Conrad.

"Sir?"

"Root his perception to me. I need to know how he sees things differently."

"Yes sir."

Conrad stepped up onto the platform and sat in the com chair. He gripped the arm rests and nodded. Daniel keyed in the codes and made the connection.

Across the hangar, Adam stopped dead. He turned slowly and looked directly at Conrad. "Do we have a problem?" he shouted.

"No problem," called Conrad, "carry on."

Adam shook his head. Conrad closed his eyes.

Adam performed a slow forward roll that ended in a low crouch. Conrad made a large intake of breath and his face turned white.

"Sir?"

"Disconnect, if you will, Daniel." Lorraine and Daniel exchanged a grin. Conrad turned back to look at the two technicians. "How did he know I was viewing his feed?"

"I don't know, sir," said Daniel. "It was a one way connection."

"From the info here," said Lorraine, scanning her console, "I'd guess Telesky glanced over."

"Yeah, I did," said Telesky.

Adam had resumed his running and low level acrobatics. After another few tight laps he closed his eyes and ran full pelt towards Conrad's platform. At the last second he opened his eyes and performed another diving forward roll, coming to a stop with his hands on the front edge of the platform.

"You know what," he said, turning to face Telesky, "I think we're going to work well as a team."

Telesky's mouth broke into a wide smile. "I'd like you to teach me," he said, "teach me how to move

like that."

"To be honest," said Adam, "even after having all this explained to me over the last few days, I'm not sure what I'm doing differently."

"What does it feel like?" asked Daniel.

"I'm not sure I can describe it. Do you have the implant?"

"No. Not yet." Daniel glanced at Conrad.

"Not yet?" echoed Adam, addressing himself to Conrad.

"Daniel is never going to be part of a combat team," said Conrad, "unlike myself and Telesky."

"H has an implant," said Daniel.

"One that predates our involvement."

"It would be no problem at all," said Lorraine, "we have a large stock of the implants, and I can do the operation in half a day."

H chipped in. "I think that the more of us that have the implant the better. It would give us more options and combinations to try out."

"I'll think about it," said Conrad.

"Lorraine should get an implant too," said Daniel.

"Me?" Lorraine was caught out by the suggested.

"But I need to operate the Surgeon."

"We can bring in an outside expert to do that," said Daniel. "That is, if you think it would help the group to get the implant."

"You're in charge here," H reminded Lorraine.

"Right," said Lorraine. "Well. I've not thought about it before. For now I think we should concentrate on Adam."

"Let's do that," said Conrad. "I think this first test was an unqualified success. What's the next step?"

"Let's go for a three person, two link setup," suggested Daniel, "you take com, Telesky on wing, Adam out front. Both links will be one way only."

"Got it," said Adam, "tell me when you're ready."

"Ready," said Telesky.

"Ready," said Conrad.

"Give me a second," said Lorraine, "I've got to load the program." She selected the correct settings and hit enter.

"And we're off!" Daniel leant back in his chair to watch the show. Lorraine looked over at Adam too, to see what he would do.

Adam reached his arms out in front of his body.

"I feel huge! Like I'm taking up the entire room!"

"Conrad, Telesky," said Daniel, "stop looking at him so closely."

Adam turned to H, who was standing to the side of the com chair. "H, come down here and try to hit me."

H shook his head. "I'd rather not."

"Come on," said Adam, "pick up that stool and try to hit me with it."

"I'm really not trained for this," H insisted.

"It's ok, I was just trying to get Conrad and Telesky to look at you. Pass me my juggling clubs, will you?"

H scooped up the three clubs. He hefted one in his right hand, getting ready to throw it. Without warning he threw all three clubs towards Adam as hard and as fast as he could.

The data stream on Lorraine's console flashed red as the rate spiked, but she paid no attention. Instead she watched as Adam plucked all three clubs out of the air, one after the other, with an astounding fluid grace. It looked as though his arm movements had been preprogrammed to follow the most efficient

path, and compared to the clubs seemed to flow in slow motion.

"Hey," said Adam, "can we get H online too? I'd love to try a three way link."

*

Daniel lay face down on the operating table, bare from the waist up. Clamps held his head in place so he could do nothing but stare at the floor. The Surgeon lowered its working surface down towards the back of Daniel's thin neck.

"You won't feel a thing," said Lorraine.

"Ow," said Daniel as a needle pierced his skin and injected him with a local anesthetic.

"Ok, you won't feel anything else. There are no nerve endings in the brain itself." Lorraine turned to the man standing at her side, one Dr. Hawthorn, a surgeon from Cambridge University hospital. "I've automated the Surgeon at the highest level, so it should all run smoothly. However, there are some segments that need manual overrides, as the programming prevents insertion and release without

human supervision."

"I'm aware of the legal restrictions," said the doctor.

"The only other part that you'll have to check is the placement of the implant. You'll be used to working in the logomogallia area, but we're pushing forward to the heuromagallia."

"Interesting."

"I'll demonstrate the exact placement here with Daniel," said Lorraine, "so when it's your turn at the controls you'll know what to look for."

The Surgeon extended four pencil-sized lumps that pressed against Daniel's skin, three arranged in a triangle around the one in the center. The central protrusion's end shimmered and became a cutting blade. It burrowed into Daniel's neck, and another of the devices vacuumed the few drops of blood that ran from the cut.

Over the next two hours Lorraine and Hawthorn monitored the Surgeon as it worked its tendrils up and around the inside of Daniel's skull. When they reached the right part the tendrils pushed down into the brain itself. The tendrils retracted. On the

monitor it looked like they left behind a defused bush of microscopic fibers. The fibers gathered together into a thin wire that tracked back to the hole in Daniel's neck.

Three hours after the first touch, the Surgeon's work was done. Every cut in any membrane along the wire's path had been fused and sealed. The cut in the neck was held together by a waterproof but biodegradable plastic staple, and the tiny hole had been glued shut. The Surgeon had left the excess wire inside Daniel's neck, just under the skin, and the tiny connector rested on his back.

"And we're done," said Lorraine. "How do you feel, Daniel?"

"Fine. I think." He reached up and tenderly stroked the wire on his neck.

Hawthorn swung the Surgeon away and unclamped Daniel's head. He rolled the operating table across to the far side of the theater and pulled a white curtain to divide the space. "Rest here for the next hour or so to let everything settle," he advised Daniel, "I'll come back then."

Lorraine loaded a new implant into the Surgeon

and swapped in a sterile set of tendrils. The nanoscale manipulators shuffled everything into place, and the console flashed up a notice indicating it was ready. She ran her latex-gloved fingertips along the Surgeon's rounded front edge.

Lorraine had never lain under a Surgeon before, even though she herself had operated on hundreds of animals and dozens of human subjects in the past. A nervous thrill rushed down her spine. After taking a few minutes to eat a small snack, she removed her hair net, her cap, and her face mask. She then loosened her blue clean-suit collar and tugged it apart. She slipped her arms out of the suit too, letting it drop around her waist, leaving the top half of her body naked except for her bra.

Rolling an operating table into place below the Surgeon, Lorraine lifted herself into place and stretched out. A padded rest under her forehead took the weight of her head, and her face was open to the air through a hole in the table.

She saw Hawthorn's legs step in close, and heard him attach the clamps onto the table. She felt the clamps touch her skin, then lock her head completely

motionless. The Surgeon could effortlessly compensate for any small movement she might make, but the clamps made the operation far more simple.

Finally the doctor unfastened Lorraine's bra completely, and brushed the straps well out of the way.

"Ready?" he asked.

"You tell me."

"Is this your first time, Lorraine?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You had that look."

"What about you?"

"I had a small tumor removed from my arm last year."

"And they used a Surgeon to do that?"

"Working in the right department at the hospital has its advantages. One of my students did the operation as an exam."

Dr. Hawthorn walked away and left Lorraine alone for a few minutes as he checked over the Surgeon's programming.

"You won't feel a thing," Lorraine heard him say

from across the room, and closed her eyes. She gasped as the needle pierced her neck.

*

He checked Daniel's and Lorraine's implants the following day and declared them to be set perfectly. He attached the wireless transmitters and taped them in place.

"We'll get fitted with a harness each tomorrow," said Lorraine, "but for now we should avoid anything too active."

"I plan to," said Daniel. Having seen him half naked, Lorraine presumed he avoided physical activities as way of life.

Conrad had decided to spend the week away from the base, working on some of his other projects. Since Adam had become the point man in all the training exercises, Conrad realized he had less and less to contribute. The plan had been for him to command from the rear, telling the point and wingmen where to go and look. However, Adam needed very little guidance, and as he could also cope

with the input from the three other team members, he could see just as well as the com.

In the end, Conrad found himself a spectator, merely providing the wider view, with Adam issuing the orders from the point.

So the team had been reduced to just five; Lorraine, H, Adam, Daniel, and Guy Telesky.

Of course, Adam and Telesky trained together the most. They spent hours every day, linked together in a two person, two way system. Under Adam's training, Telesky was slowly building his ability to walk and run and jump. When standing still he could operate a dummy rifle with ease, and with Adam also tracking moving targets, could nail them with a training laser rifle far better than when unaided.

At other times, H would link with Adam, and Adam would spar with Telesky. Even though they were both trained martial artists, Telesky couldn't compare to Adam, even when Adam fought unlinked. But once linked, Adam transformed into a being of pure spatial awareness, and Telesky couldn't land a single blow, no matter how hard he tried.

"Attack me from behind," said Adam. Telesky

leapt forward, foam baseball bat in hand, swinging it at the back of Adam's head. Lorraine smiled as she watched, remembering how she'd done a similar thing at Timothy's request. Unlike Timothy, Adam ducked and sidestepped, and the bat missed his head. He snagged Telesky's wrist in one hand, the handle of the bat in the other, twisted, pulled and pushed at the same time, swung his opponent towards the floor, and in an instant came to a stop, kneeling on Telesky's chest, the bat pressed against the prone man's neck.

"Fucking Aikido," moaned Telesky, "it won't help you if I have a gun."

"If you had a gun," said Adam, "my back would never be turned."

H wasn't always available to provide a link for Adam, as he had a lot of work to do himself. Daniel had helped a great deal with the latency and processing issues, but that all happened at the second level of abstraction. Lorraine worked at the first level, with the sensor data and other systems. Only H fully understood the underlying mechanics behind the Shaper technology.

H sat at a console and prepared Daniel's link. Each time they added a new person to the system, he needed to do the final fine tuning himself. It was this step that neither Lorraine nor Daniel had managed to perform.

Lorraine watched as H stared at a screen full of flashing static. At least, that's what it looked like to her. H had told her he could see the patterns and structures. He tapped at the screen, enlarging parts, pausing and looping the feed at different stages. He dragged and dropped sections on to others, creating an indistinguishable variation of the previous screens of messy data. Indistinguishable to anyone but himself, thought Lorraine.

H had perfected this dark art after years of study, then many more years of practice on animal subjects, mostly rats and hamsters, and then dogs and other larger mammals. She presumed his ability was also due to his mildly autistic tendencies. Lorraine had been working with him most of this time, performing the required implants using her own hands, or through an intermediary Surgeon. Yes, she knew H very well.

Timothy had been the first human volunteer to take the implant, and it had taken days for H to decipher the link. Even more impressive had been when H had analyzed his own feed, and decoded it within only a few hours.

"It was far easier," he'd told her, "because I could see what I was looking at first hand. There was a feedback loop, like pointing a camera at a screen and piping the image back to the screen. The patterns jumped out at me that time."

Daniel's link took just over an hour. H finally leant back and nodded at Lorraine. She gave him a smile and two thumbs up.

"Daniel. Daniel." Lorraine tried to rouse him gently. "You can look away from the test screen now."

Daniel blinked and shook his head. "Sorry about that. I was in a world of my own there. What are we doing?"

"H is going to take a look at your feed."

"Right."

Lorraine made the connection, throttling up the bandwidth until H received the full signal.

"Everything's fine here," said H. "He's very nervous, and quite tired, but the view looks good."

"So let's reverse the signal flow," said Lorraine, "if you're feeling up for it."

"Yes," said Daniel, "let's get it over and done with."

Lorraine clicked through the commands and piped H's view towards Daniel.

"Close your eyes," she told H, and he did so. Lorraine made the final connection, and watched Daniel closely. In the same manner as Conrad, he gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles turned white.

Lorraine nodded to H, who opened his eyes in the direction of the opposite end of the hangar. Daniel shut his own eyes almost immediately, but relaxed within seconds.

"I look really..." he said, but never did say what he thought he looked like. Instead he opened his eyes and looked around. "Wow, this place is huge! I know it's an aircraft hangar, but I've never seen it like this before."

"It's quite a rush," said Telesky, who sat on a

couch reading a book he'd found about primate behavior. "Soon Adam'll be kicking your scrawny ass around too, not just mine."

"Hey, are you learning much about yourself there?" said Daniel.

Telesky looked at the front cover of the book, then shook his head. "Nope. I'm learning about your mother."

"Ho, ho, and indeed, ho."

"You did ask for that one," said Lorraine. "H, are you going to configure my implant now?"

H looked back at her with tired eyes. "I'll do it this afternoon," he said, "for now I need to relax a bit, take my mind off the process. Let's get Daniel moving first."

"I think I'll stay sitting down, if that's okay with you."

"No problem," said Lorraine. She picked up a Rubik's cube from H's desk and handed it to Daniel.

"This is neat," said Daniel, "I can see five faces at once if I hold it like... this." He twisted the cube a few times, and as he got used to the view his hands moved faster. After about thirty seconds he dropped

the solved cube into his lap and slapped his hands back onto the arms of his chair.

"Nice time," said Lorraine. "Right?"

"Pretty good," said Daniel. "Time seemed to slow down at the end there."

"You should race H," called Telesky from the couch. "He'll kick your ass, even without a link."

"It's all about ass-kicking with you, isn't it?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Don't bother competing," said Lorraine, "instead combine both your senses and expertise, and let H have a go."

"Blind solve?" asked Daniel

"Of course," said H.

"Close your eyes then, both of you."

"No, that means we start the timer when we first see the cube, not when we begin to solve it."

"So close your eyes and let me mix the cube again." She did her best to mix the cube as best she could, then passed it over to H. "Okay. Get set, go!"

H and Daniel opened their eyes and H immediately sprang into action. His hands and fingers danced around the cube, and the colored

squares blurred as they span and twisted. Mere seconds later, H slammed the cube onto the bench, each coloured set of nine squares to its own face.

"Wow," said Telesky from the couch, "that has to be some kind of new world record."

"Did anyone time it?" asked H, looking about hopefully.

"No," said Lorraine, "but I can look up the data stream." She scrolled up and easily picked out the moment when Daniel and H saw the cube, and just as easily the moment it landed back on the bench.

"Just over nine seconds," she said.

H sprang into to his feet and punched the air. "Yeah! World record smashed! I kicked its ass! First try!" Daniel swooned and grabbed the arms of his chair at H's sudden movement.

Telesky and H soon fell into a discussion about whether a record set while using a perception link would be valid in any sport or competitive activity. Adam, the only professional sportsperson in the group, assured them it was quite unlikely. In a three club combat match, they weren't even allowed to wear viewersers to help keep track of the other players.

Daniel sat apart, in silence, staring at his hands, at an invisible cube held in his fingers, and nodded slowly.

*

"Close your eyes... and... connected."

Lorraine heard H's voice off to her left. This isn't so bad, she thought, what's the big deal? Then she felt herself twisting in the air, as though she was falling sideways. She let out a small yelp.

"Sorry," said Adam, "I shouldn't have moved. I'm going to open my eyes now."

Lorraine's eyes opened. Or a pair of eyes opened, she wasn't sure if they were hers or Adam's. She saw the hangar, not from her own seat, but from Adam's position a few meters to her left.

And not just from Adam's position, but from his point of view. While Lorraine only ever paid attention to the area immediately in front of her, Adam's view seemed to take in the entire space. The concrete floor, the distant sliding doors, the skylights in the roof and the steel rafters below, the dark

corners filled with stacked boxes, and dozen other features that Lorraine had never even noticed. Adam seemed to track everything at once, to be aware of every element at the same time.

The view turned, and Lorraine saw herself. She sat in the office chair, her spine stiff, her feet tucked back underneath the seat, her hands gripping the arm-rests. Her jeans pulled tight around her legs, and her shirt was ruffled where the transmitter was attached over her shoulder. Her light brown hair was secured up in a knot, but strands had worked their way loose, and fell down across her face and neck. Lorraine saw herself lift a hand and brush the hair away.

She had a moment of panic then, as she hadn't thought about moving her arm herself, nor had she felt herself do so. It was like watching a recording of herself, where she could pick out new aspects of her looks and behavior, things she'd never notice when she did it herself. Like adjusting her hair. Did she do that more often, and not even realize it?

She studied her face from the side. Or Adam studied her face from the side. She'd seen herself at

this angle in in photographs, and some videos, and even a shared viewer feed, but this experience was different again. Even though she knew the feed was passing through many layers of manipulation, it felt more real than anything else.

She studied her profile. Her forehead, untroubled by hair or lines. Her nose, with a slight bump, but otherwise straight and not too big. Her lips, full and slightly redder than natural due to her lipstick. Her chin was small but shapely, her neck thin--

Hey, she thought, I look pretty good!

As she thought this, she subconsciously lifted her chin, pulled her shoulders back, and pushed her chest out a bit. The motion seemed larger than life, and Lorraine suddenly became aware of the exact size and shape of her breasts, as well as the rest of her body. She gasped.

And then she looked away. Adam looked away.

She opened her own eyes and had an identity crisis. Her sense of self shifted a few meters right, and she was overwhelmed by the feeling that she didn't exist. Or that she didn't have a single body. Or that she had a single body, but her soul flitted

between two different bodies.

Lorraine stood up and looked down at the woman sitting in a chair. That's me! Lorraine told herself, and forced herself back into her own body. She looked at Adam, and had a whole new kind of crisis.

"Can we stop?" she gasped.

"No problem," said H.

Lorraine shrank in an instant, and felt her scalp tingling at the sudden loss of awareness. She felt small. She felt disconnected. She looked down at herself, and saw herself in the same way as before the link, with no dress sense, unpolished and gnawed nails, legs too long and a bit scrawny.

And yet, the memory of the way she'd seen herself through Adam's eyes stayed with her. She smiled.

"This," she said, "is going to take some getting used to."

V : Enemy

Adam glanced up to the camera in the top corner of the cell. The camera and the linked computer system streamed his image, though not his voice, to various places across the internet. At any time, anyone could see what was going on inside the Joint Administration prison building. He knew that Amnesty International recorded all the feeds, twenty four hours a day.

"So, that's my side of the story," Adam concluded, "tell me what you know."

"Why should I tell you anything?" said Kett. "You're the reason I'm in here."

"I was the method by which you arrived here," said Adam, "the reason you're here has more to do with you being second in command of the Ortho militia."

"So you say."

"Not just me. Others too, although some of them

died at the hands of your militia last week."

"But I've already helped you! I told you about the arms delivery."

"Only too late. You told us you knew it was going to take place, but only after every one of your men died. And how did you know about it?"

Kett sat in silence for a while. Then: "I'm just a politician. People tell me things in confidence."

"Of course. And as a politician, why should we listen to you? Who do you represent? Who is your base? No answer? You see, the only reason we ever listened to you in the past is because you knew that we knew that you were strongly connected to the militia. If you weren't strongly connected, you'd be a nobody, a nothing."

Kett Hartoon glared at Adam. "Are you trying to trick me or insult me?"

"Neither," said Adam. He tried a different tack. "Look, no matter what, you're not leaving this cell until the UN mission here is over. The sooner the fighting ends, the sooner that will be. The Joint Forces are doing everything they can not to kill every last one of you--"

"I've heard all this before, and I'm still not going to sell out my... my constituents."

"Fine."

"But this bearded man," said Kett Hartoon, "who you call Goatee. I don't know him. He isn't someone who I've ever had contact with. I don't know how he got access to my email account."

"And the Hulk?"

Kett closed his eyes leant back in his chair.

"Simeon de Mille? Is Simeon de Mille the head of the Ortho Militia?"

Still no reaction from Kett.

"It took us a while to sort through the photos, but the images seem to match up pretty well. I have his address right here, you know. I could go right over and knock on his door. I'd tell him you blabbed everything. About him, about the arms delivery..." Adam left that hanging.

Kett opened his eyes. "If you want," he said, "I can tell you everything I know about the Islamic Nationalists. Why should us Christians be weakened while they are left alone?"

"Sorry," said Adam with a grin, "not my

department."

*

"... but you see, we have no choice but to knock on the door politely," said Clive, pointing to an aerial image of a larger-than-average house in a well-to-do Christian district of the city. "Simeon employs a private security firm."

"Doesn't everyone in that part of town?"

"This guy has more than most. And, now that we've tracked him down, we've found some obvious crossovers between known militia operatives and his 'private security firm.'" Clive gestured with his fingers on the last three words, implying heavy irony.

"Ok," said Adam, "Let's go have a chat."

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"You're not Parry," said Clive, "you can't go tearing about on your own initiative."

"Parry's methods got us Kett in the first place," said Adam. "And his files put us on to Simeon de Mille too. Come on, I can go with your squad, and

we'll make it look like a random house call. If they try to deny us entry we'll know we're at the right place."

"It doesn't work like that. Everyone denies us entry, and everyone knows their rights."

*

"I know my rights," said the private security guard at the front gate, "you not come in."

"There are more of us than you," said Clive, standing tall, looking down at the guard. They had parked three Hummers in the street outside, blocking the midday traffic.

The guard hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "We recording everything," he said, "but if you like to see yourself on the CNN and Al Jazeera both, keep doing the threats of killing."

"Is Simeon de Mille at home?"

"You not coming in."

"What have you got to hide?"

"You not coming in."

*

Adam hit pause. "What do you think?" he asked Clive.

Clive rubbed his forehead. "Guilty as all hell. But you've got to give it to the man! He stood us all down. Sixteen Joint Force troopers, and we were all but powerless."

"Simeon's still in there though," said Adam, "the drone hasn't seen him leave. Maybe we should surround the block until he does."

"That'd take far too many troops. We need something more subtle. How about we get a message to the head of the Islamic Militia that Simeon's their man?"

"An orchestrated bloodbath isn't subtle."

"True," said Clive. "But how about this idea. You go in alone."

"What?"

"You could get in no problem. Take out the guards with your kung fucking fu, grab Simeon, get out, and I'll be waiting outside in a Hummer."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Ok, we do this one by the book."

"You have a book?"

*

"I have a warrant," Clive was saying out front, "signed by the Director General of the United Nations. We're here to search the home of Simeon de Mille, as we believe he's in possession of weaponry used in an attack on United Nations forces..."

Adam swung a line across the alleyway. The triple-pronged hook caught on the far edge of the wall opposite, and held firm. He pulled it tight and tied off the end around a sturdy satellite dish mount.

"You not coming in," the guard at the front gate hadn't given an inch.

Adam swung his legs over the edge of his perch and onto the line. It was thinner than the slack-lines he'd practiced on in his youth, on those summer days in the park. He had fond memories of stringing a strap between two trees and learning to walk up and down its length, even playing the clown and juggling.

Those days he'd never been more than a meter off the ground, and now he was over four meters up.

He stepped out into the air, his legs wobbling, his feet swinging from side to side. But the top half of his body stayed steady, no matter how much his legs felt out of control.

"Now, I know you think you're in the right here," said Clive, "but the legality of this situation isn't in doubt. We have the right to enter this building, and you have no right to stop us..."

Adam reached the middle of the line. Here it was most able to move under his hips, but the effect was that he had a larger dynamic range, and the balance actually became easiest at this point. At each end the technique became more like a tightrope walk than a slackline balance. He pushed forward.

"... the only reason I'm asking so nicely is because I'm a reasonable man. I don't want anyone to get hurt. Not you, not me, not my men. You don't want anyone to get hurt, do you?"

Adam stepped off the line and onto the narrow wall of the private compound. Without hesitation, he clipped another line onto the end of the first and

lowered himself down to ground level.

"Mr. de Mille isn't at home."

Adam looked across the empty yard to the house. Compared to the rest of the city, it was very large and quite luxurious. Floodlights shone down from the roof and lit the yard. He checked a video feed from a Hummer in front of the house, and it showed that all four of the other guards stood at the front of the roof, keeping a close eye on the show of force backing up Clive. Intel had come up with a way to get around the danger of IED's being triggered by the Joint Force's radio signals. They'd put up a transmitter near the center, and simply flooded the entire city with a randomized signal at the same frequencies. There had been no explosions, and no problems since.

"We're not here for Mr. de Mille," said Clive, "we're here to look in his basement. And we're going to do so. Maybe you could call him, and let him know we're inside."

Adam walked purposefully across the yard and tried one of the house's rear doors. Locked. He tried another. Also locked.

"Keep going for a minute," he said to Clive over the radio, "I'm almost in."

"This warrant is real?" asked the guard.

Adam stood back from the door, lifted his foot, and kicked hard. He aimed at the door right next to the lock, and the wood split around the weakest point. Knowing that the noise might have given him away, he quickly pushed through the doorway into the house.

"Cut power," he said, and immediately the house and compound plunged into darkness. Adam's helmet showed him a view of the kitchen ahead, and he ran into the hallway beyond. He heard a diesel engine growl to life, somewhere below his feet.

He found and took the stairs down to the cellar. The lights flashed on again and momentarily blinded him. At the base of the stairs he spotted the generator, ran over, punched the emergency stop button, and once again the lights cut out.

"As I said," Clive continued, "maybe you should call Mr. De Mille and tell him we're already inside."

Adam heard gunshots, and knew that one of the guards on the roof had panicked. Adam crouched

down in the dark, and unclipped his rifle. He checked the tiny LED lamp on the rear, and watched it switch from red to green. An encrypted signal had activated Adam's weapon. The militia had fired first without violent provocation, so the Joint Forces were now authorized to use lethal means to achieve their peaceful ends.

Of course, Clive had known that the guard wouldn't believe the warrant, and guessed that cutting the power would be all the provocation needed for the guards to start firing. In this situation the UN troops had overwhelming military superiority. Once the guards understood that, they'd stop firing.

Adam ran back up the stairs two steps at a time. He didn't stop at the ground floor, and kept going up the next three flights of stairs. He burst out onto the roof, almost deafened by the sound of gunfire.

The four guards huddled against the raised front wall of the building's roof, clutching their rifles. The Joint Forces troops in the street outside lay down a continuous barrage of bullets, pinning the guards in place. The wall that sheltered the guards disintegrated slowly, with shards of plaster and brick and cement

spraying into the air, and showering down onto the cowering gunmen.

Adam pointed his rifle at the closest guard. "Hold fire," he sent to Clive, and within two seconds he stood in complete silence.

As the guards began moving, foolishly thinking they'd been given a chance to stand up and fire back, the closest guard spotted Adam in the gloom, barely illuminated by the distant streetlights.

"Halt!" Adam almost deafened himself by shouting so loud while wearing his completely enclosed combat helmet.

All four men stopped.

"Drop your weapons."

None of them did so, but none of them made any intention of pointing their rifles Adam's way.

"Drop your weapons on the floor, and nobody will get hurt." Adam snapped his rifle from one man to the next in a random order and at random intervals, showing them he could aim and fire at anyone, any time, instantly. His night vision couldn't resolve the guards' faces in detail, so he wasn't sure of the mood of the group.

Except the guard who crouched third furthest along the roof. Something about his body language--

The guard swung his rifle up to fire. Before he could pull the trigger, Adam had swung his rifle across to the man, aimed at the right knee, and fired. The guard screamed and dropped his weapon.

The other three guards dropped their rifles also, and raised their hands in the air.

"Good decision," said Adam. "Kick your weapons this way and lay face down on the floor, hands on your heads. Now!"

The three guards did exactly as he said. The injured guard continued screaming, and hadn't let go of his shattered, bleeding knee.

"Are you getting this?" he asked in a quieter voice.

"Yup," said Clive, "we're on our way in now."

"Bring a medic."

"He's with us."

Adam had thought long and hard about what he would do in this kind of situation. He could have shot every man on the roof dead as soon as he'd seen them. He'd have been within his rights, and would have faced no disciplinary action. But just

because he could have done so, didn't make it right. He knew that if he killed anyone again, the death would weigh even more heavily on his mind than those before. Even if he thought he might prevent more killing in the future, it wasn't set in stone. Maybe the death he caused was worse than anything he prevented.

And, of course, no matter how guilty someone may be, other people could still get hurt. Goatee still roamed the city, unidentified and unchecked, while an innocent man's body had been returned to a mourning family.

So yes, he thought, the perfect compromise lay in shooting your immediate enemy in the leg. Or better yet, like Kett's bodyguard behind the bar, one might shoot himself in the leg.

Five squad members burst out of the stairway behind Adam and rushed forward to the prone guards. In seconds, the guards' hands had been strung together with plastic cable ties, and black gaffer tape had been applied across their mouths.

Clive and Gary, the medic, appeared on the roof a moment later. Gary ran forward to the injured guard,

already opening his treatment case.

"The guard out front?" asked Adam.

"Dead," said Clive with no audible emotion.

"Simeon?"

"We're searching the compound. The guard might have been telling the truth though."

"The drones would have tracked anyone leaving the compound this afternoon."

"Yeah," said Clive, "but who knows what--"

Two gunshots, in quick succession, caught Clive by surprise. Gary reeled back from the injured guard and sprawled onto the roof. Adam ran forward, still covering the body of the injured guard, even though he'd just drilled a hole through the man's skull with his own weapon.

"What happened?"

"He had another gun," said Adam, "and used it."

"Fuck!"

"Gary's down. Get the other medic. And order a med evac."

Adam kicked the handgun out of the guard's dead hand, stepped over the corpse, and knelt beside Gary. Like the rest of the troops, the field medics wore

full-body combat armor, the only difference being the large white panels with red crosses and crescents displayed prominently on the front and back carapaces. The armor could stop most flying shrapnel, and had been tested extensively against small arms fire.

However, a bullet from any sized gun, held directly against the armor, would have a good chance of getting through. Especially if the entrance point was upwards from between the legs, as in the case of Gary.

Adam picked the combat diagnostic from the medic's case and plugged the cable into the front of Gary's armor. It displayed the armor's reading of Gary's vital signs, and Adam's scant knowledge of these matters told him Gary was going into shock. He unclipped the catches on each side of Gary's neck armor and lifted off the helmet.

"Gary," he said, "Gary, talk to me."

"Adam?" said Gary weakly.

"Yeah, how are you doing?"

"Show me the diagnostic."

Adam lifted the device from the floor and held it

steady in Gary's line of sight. He wasn't sure if Gary could see clearly, as the medic's eyelids kept drooping.

"I'm not doing well," said Gary whispered.
"Maybe a minute left"

"Bullshit," said Adam, "we'll get you out of here no problem."

"Don't tell me how to do my job."

"Your job is to hang on for a two minutes instead of one. The chopper will be here in no time."

Gary made a quiet, small cough, and blood sprayed out of his mouth.

"Pray for me," Gary gasped.

"What?" Adam was surprised by the request.

"I'm going to see Jesus... pray..."

Adam bowed his head and took Gary's hand in his.

"Dear Lord Jesus," began Adam, remembering back to the Christian services he attended as a child. He'd been to church a couple of times each of the four years he'd been a Boy Scout. Nothing could have prepared him worse for this kind of moment. "Be with us, we pray, in this time of need." He

suddenly remembered some parts of the Lord's Prayer and picked a line that seemed appropriate. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us."

"Yes..."

"For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. And bless this... bless Gary."

"Amen," sighed Gary, a bubble of blood forming on his lips.

"Amen." The diagnostic unit flashed and beeped twice as though it was adding its voice in agreement. In reality it signaled the moment of Gary's death.

The med evac helicopter landed in the street in front of the house. Adam reach out and closed Gary's eyelids. He then stood up, hands and knees shaking. He turned to face Clive.

"Let's go find Simeon."

"You stay right there," said Clive, "you're in no state to do anything more tonight."

"If anyone can find him--"

"Stand down, Adam. Look at yourself, you can hardly breathe. Let it go."

"I'm fine," said Adam.

"The house is empty," said Clive, "Simeon isn't here. Neither is any of the tech they recovered from the arms delivery ambush."

"So we have nothing. Gary's died for nothing."

"That's not how the maths goes around here."

"There must be something in the house," said Adam, "or why have five guards?"

"We'll get in the forensics team, but for now..."
Clive tapped at the keyboard on his left forearm, and the LED on Adam's rifle switched from green to red.

6 : Deployment

Adam and Lorraine often worked well into the evenings, designing tests and different training options for the following days. They planned to bring

in an armed response team from the Metropolitan Police so their team could practice against professionals. If they won out against the police team in a laser tag battle, they hoped to bring in other elite military units from around the world for more extensive testing.

Two weeks after she'd had her link implanted, they sat at opposite sides of her desk, swapping files between their screens.

As they were finishing up, she decided it was time to broach an important topic.

"You're looking at my breasts," said Lorraine in a matter of fact voice.

"No I'm not," said Adam.

"Not right now, you're right. But most of the rest of the time you are."

"I don't think so. I'm quite sure I always look you in the eye."

"And yet," she said, "when we are linked I'm constantly aware of my breasts. Maybe you aren't looking at them directly, but you do pay them quite a bit of attention."

"Can I be honest with you?"

"Please."

"It's true," admitted Adam, "it's just part of the male condition. If there's a beautiful lady in the room, it's hard not to be aware of her all the time."

"I'm not beautiful," said Lorraine quickly.

"I disagree," said Adam. "You have a grace and poise, and a great body."

Lorraine blushed, "I... um... thank you." They sat in silence for a few moments. "You too, by the way," she added.

"I wasn't fishing for compliments."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not trying to modest! I know you feel physically attracted to me. We've spent a few hours linked over the last few days. I don't mind you checking me out."

"I haven't been checking you out!"

"Yes, you have. You noticed I've been checking you out, and I noticed the same thing. Even if you don't know yourself, I pick it up from your feed."

Lorraine had to admit that Adam was probably telling the truth. She'd been physically attracted to him from the first time they'd met. Over the

following months the attraction had grown, but she'd been denying it to herself for reasons she didn't fully understand. She slumped back in her chair, suddenly unsure of position.

"Why didn't you say something before?"

"Oh, I have three or four reasons," said Adam, "mainly I try to be a gentleman."

"And another reason?"

"I'm used to the feeling of being watched in that way."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're not the first one to be checking my abs all the time."

Lorraine frowned. She was the first woman to get the implant. Which meant...

"Conrad has a wife, right?"

"Somewhere."

"Daniel?"

"Nope."

"Telesky?"

"Yup."

"Oh my god! Telesky's gay? How could I not notice?"

"He hides it pretty well, even when linked."

"I've only linked with you so far," said Lorraine, thinking back.

"Don't tell him you know," said Adam, "he's been keeping this a secret. Maybe he's denying it to himself too. Conrad picked it up right away, but couldn't give a shit. I guess H and Daniel might have worked it out, although Telesky doesn't look at them in the same way as me."

"What's the other reason you didn't want to bring it up?"

"I'd still rather not say anything."

"You're a gentleman, right? So that means there's someone else, and you aren't going to start making any moves on me."

"Correct, after a fashion."

"You've never talked about her. What is she like?"

"I'm single."

"What? But you said..." Lorraine trailed off. She hated conversations like this, where she had to work things out from hints and clues. Why couldn't people just speak plainly to each other? Only when it came to personal feelings and relationships did people talk

in circles, never in other areas, like science or technology or her work.

She always felt the same way, always two steps behind everyone else. She knew this was why she'd never had luck with boyfriends in the past. She'd always spoken her mind, and her lack of subtlety often frightened prospective dates away. And among her group of girlfriends back at university, she'd always been the last one to work out the latest gossip, or get the stories straight. Her friends could communicate a whole affair with a single look, and she had always needed the same situations explained to her in detail.

Lorraine noticed Adam was looking at her with a sad smile on his face.

"Wow," he said. "You've no idea."

"About what?"

"The 'someone else' is H. Even without the link I saw the way he looked at you."

"H?"

"Yes. And with the link it's quite unbearable. Daniel and Conrad look at you, and I can feel they see you in the same way as I do. An attractive young

woman, who is comfortable in whatever she's wearing, and who has sexy messed up hair within an hour of starting work. But, and I'm trying not to be crude about it, the way they look at you is informed by their gonads. I can feel it. Daniel especially."

"Seriously?"

"Of course. I'm probably the same, I guess, but it's hard to tell about yourself. Also, and I hope I don't offend you further here, I'm sure we'd all feel the same way if another lady walked in the room. Actually, that could be an interesting experiment--"

"But H?"

"Yes, H. When he looks at you, I can feel it in the pit of my stomach, and in my heart, and in a weird way at the top of my throat."

Lorraine sat in silence, trying to sort out this new information. How could she have been so blind?

"H is in love with me." She had meant to say it as a question, but as she spoke she realized she'd stated it as a fact, as the truth.

"You had no idea. How long have you known him?"

"Getting on for eight years," said Lorraine. "Since

about half way through university."

"And you've never... you know...?"

"No!"

"Really? Never even been on a date?"

"Yes, but only as friends, and then as colleagues."

"Maybe it's a recent thing," offered Adam, "but it doesn't seem that way."

"What am I going to do?"

"I'm reluctant to give relationship advice as I don't have a good track record myself. Despite my best intentions, I've a history that trends towards quantity over quality. But as you don't feel the same way about him, I suggest you be careful when you ever get round to linking with H."

"I don't know how I feel about H," Lorraine said in a quiet voice, looking at the table. "Not now."

"So talk to him. Invite yourself over to his home this weekend."

"He spends all his weekends with his friends."

"H has friends?"

"Yes," said Lorraine, knowing she wasn't being entirely honest, "he lives with a couple of, um, not exactly housemates, but similar."

"He's never mentioned them. Anyway, you should talk to H if you think it's important."

"I'm going to lay down," said Lorraine. She stood up and, without looking Adam in the eye, made her way to the human-sized door at the end of the hangar. She looked back, expecting to catch Adam watching her or looking at her behind. Instead he was paging through the screen on the desk in front of him, as though he'd already forgotten their entire conversation.

*

"Lorraine," said Conrad's voice from her phone, "get in here. It's urgent."

She grabbed her jacket, slipped on her shoes, and rushed out her suite's door. On the way across the tarmac she met up with Telesky and Stoppard, the volunteer soldier who had returned to the team as a wingman.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"No idea," said Telesky, "Conrad sounded excited, but not pissed off."

They pushed in through the door of the hangar to find Conrad sitting in the com chair. H, Daniel, and Adam seemed to have been working early, and had already been in place when Conrad called the meeting. The new arrivals found seats and Conrad got right to the point.

"I just got a call from Bill Ashley. Intel is saying something about a possible terrorist strike against the Vatican. They've located a terrorist cell in Italy, at a warehouse outside of Rome, that seems to be involved. Intel has reviewed the security footage and it seems like they've been moving in a whole lot of chemicals over the past few weeks."

"Can't the local police deal with this?" asked Adam.

"The Vatican?" mumbled Telesky. "Maybe we should let the terrorists... I'm joking!"

"We can't rely on the Italians to do a clean job, and intel wants to keep this one quiet. There could be tons of explosives laying about inside the warehouse, and it only takes one spark to send the whole thing up. Also, the committee don't want an American unit."

Daniel put his hand up. "You, me and Telesky are American."

"But this unit has a multinational charter, backed by the entire United Nations."

"Theoretically," added Daniel.

"Look, we've been training hard for months now, in all kinds of simulated situations, and we took out the fucking Navy Seals in a four-on-four exercise. I think we're ready to prove our worth. This unit isn't a democracy, but if anyone feels we aren't ready to move forward, speak now and I'll call Ashley back and say no." He looked from person to person, and nobody objected outright.

"Stuns and non-lethals only," said Adam, "and I'm in. Anything more and I'm sitting it out. Telesky will have to take point."

"I'm with Adam," said Lorraine, raising her hand. H raised his hand too.

"Of course," said Conrad, "we need all three of you."

"The logistics will be really tricky," said Lorraine to Conrad, "we'd need to get the container within a five hundred meters to keep the links up."

"An Osprey X VTOL aircraft is already on the way. We can be there in four hours."

*

When the time came to deploy, any qualms Lorraine had about becoming part of an active military unit had dissolved. She didn't know when it had happened, but she'd become part of the team, one of the boys, a key player in the fight against terrorism. She knew she could back out at any time, but now she knew she had to stay involved, to prove the worth of the tech she and H had worked on for so long.

At the thought of H, she turned her attention to Adam, and linked to him instead. For months now she had avoided linking to anyone but him if she could help it, and had yet to link with H.

The Osprey X swept over the Italian countryside, circled over an industrial zone, and performed a silent landing a few units away from the target warehouse. The rear hatch opened and the four soldiers leapt out. Adam ran forward, and Lorraine

could sense Telesky, Stoppard and Conrad in close pursuit.

"Turn left here," said Conrad.

"We all know the route," said Adam.

The four soldiers wore full body armor, with integrated harnesses and equipment attachments. Each carried an assortment of non-lethal weapons: stun grenades, tasers, sonic stunners, pepper sprayers, and more besides.

Adam left his hands empty.

Lorraine, H and Daniel remained in the Osprey X. Their job was to make sure the system ran with no glitches, and the feeds between the strike team members remained clear. Lorraine, the most competent at this task, concentrated entirely on Adam, who was the most linked of all.

The front of the warehouse had large swinging doors, big enough to drive inside with a large truck. The team approached from the rear and found a normal sized door. The other three slowed down, but Adam picked up speed. He slammed into the door, shoulder first, expecting it to disintegrate under his mass and momentum.

The door stood firm and, with a crunch, Adam bounced off it like a rag doll.

"Fuck!" he moaned, and picked himself up from the floor.

"We're not in Africa any more," laughed Telesky, "if someone wants to make a solid door, they make a--"

The door swung open a crack, and a quarter of a face peered out at them. "Cosa stai--" began the man inside, but didn't have a chance to finish his question.

Adam kicked at the door, and Telesky rushed forward, pushing the man back inside the warehouse. Telesky pushed his stunner against the man's forehead and activated it. The burst of electricity knocked him out immediately. Adam followed Telesky inside, with Stoppard tagging along behind. Conrad would remain just outside the door.

The three men fanned out into the open space within the warehouse. In the blink of an eye, Conrad and Adam had complete knowledge of the entire room:

Six men in total. Two men working at a bench, mixing chemicals in a large container, both turning

slowly towards the sudden commotion. One man unconscious on the floor. One man sitting behind an old laptop, hand extending to a handgun on the table. The two last men standing beside the front entrance, AK-47s swinging up into position.

Adam flicked his wrist and launched a flash grenade into the air. It used an electronic trigger that timed perfectly with Adam's and the others' helmets. A split second before detonation, their helmet visors polarized completely. A split second after the stun grenade did its job, their helmet returned to normal, showing them all the result.

The two men with AK-47s, now blinded, fired at where Telesky and Stoppard had been moments before. Adam approached from the side and took them both down with strikes to the throat and groin.

Adam turned back to the scene behind him, and Lorraine saw that Stoppard and Telesky had already immobilized the remaining three men. Within seconds they had all six men bound and gagged, and had searched through the rest of the warehouse for hidden enemies.

"That was it?" said Telesky. "Quite an anti-

climax."

"Not sure why they needed us for that," said Adam, "the SAS could have done the same thing."

"Except they'd leave every man dead," said Stoppard. "I would know," he added, almost to himself.

"Let's get back to the Osprey," said Conrad. "Leave these guys here. Another team is on the way to take them into custody. Remember, we don't exist!"

*

"I want to talk to you," Lorraine said, "somewhere private." She looked down at Adam, who sat relaxing on one of the couches.

"We're the only people in here," said Adam, gesturing at the empty space of the hangar.

"I know, but I'm never sure if it's really private." She raised her eyebrows and rolled her eyes at the lattice structure above.

"The cameras are all on the outside," said Adam, "Conrad would never allow an image or audio feed to

leave this place. We're not allowed to bring in any of our own gear. No tablets, screens, viewers, wallets, nothing. I'm sure we can talk."

Lorraine made up her mind, and sat down beside Adam. Surprised at how inappropriately close she'd positioned herself, Adam sat up straight and started to shuffle away. Lorraine put her hand on his leg, and he froze.

She leaned in and whispered in his ear. "Come a bit closer, put your arm around me."

Adam did so. "Look--" began Adam, but Lorraine interrupted.

"Don't worry," she said, continuing in a low voice, "this isn't what it looks like. I mean, it isn't what I want it to look like to anyone watching."

Adam grinned, and spoke into her ear. "Playing spy games, are we? Well, I can play along."

"This is serious. I need to know if I can trust you."

"Trust me how?"

"I'm having second thoughts about where this is all heading. More than second thoughts. I need to know how far you're going to go. In Italy nobody

died. But if our tech fell into the wrong hands... I need to know if you'll ever be the wrong hands."

"No," said Adam without hesitation.

"And if you are forced?"

Adam hesitated, then took the conversation in a surprising direction. "Do you know why I like playing three club combat?"

Lorraine frowned. "This isn't the time to talk about juggling."

"It's relevant. Do you know why I like it?"

"No. Tell me."

"Because, among all the martial arts, it is unique. When I juggle the three clubs, they're both my weapon of attack and my means of defense. I swing my club at my opponent, and he will raise a club to deflect that attack. Now, at first glance this may seem the same as any weapon-based fighting technique."

"Like fencing."

"Sure. Like fencing. However, for both myself and my opponent, my clubs play a third role. You know what that is?"

"No."

"They are the target. In fencing, when do you

score a point? When you make contact with the opponent's body using your foil. When boxing, how do you win? By punching the other guy in the face, hard. With three club combat?"

"You win by making the other juggler drop."

"Exactly. The way to win is to remove the other player's weapon. Three club combat is the only martial art where the goal is to reduce your opponent's attack capability to zero in a completely non-violent way. It's like Aikido. At an abstract level, at least. When I left the army, I tried various sports, other martial arts, but this one resonated with me in a way unlike the others.

"So no, even when forced, I'm not going to use this tech in any way that goes against my principles. I'm not going to do it. And yet I see this tech as the only way to get close enough to the enemy to remove their weapons and avoid getting hurt in the process. I don't, and won't, kill anyone."

"No offense," said Lorraine after a pause, "but that sounds quite simplistic."

"True, and my thoughts on the matter are a lot more complex, but I'm not going into the fine details

now. Tell me, why is this suddenly so important?"

"Things are moving too fast for me," said Lorraine. "When Timothy took the deal, we thought we were years away from a finished product, and we had no worries about getting mixed up in actually using it like this. We thought that we'd be licensing the tech for medical and entertainment uses way before Conrad could find a military application. But with you and Daniel on the team, we've gone so far, in so little time, that I'm worried that H and I are going to become superfluous. If Conrad can run the team without us, what's to stop him using the tech however he wants?"

"I take it you mean me. You think I'm the one who can stop him. But I'm only going to be with one team, and only until next year. What can I do?"

Lorraine ran her hand up his chest, as she'd neglected the act for a while.

"I don't know yet," she whispered, eyes closed, "but if something happens in the future, I need to know which side of the line you're going to fall, and when--"

Lorraine suddenly found herself in a long, slow

kiss. Then she felt Adam pull away, and she tried to follow. He put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back.

"There's your answer," he said when she opened her eyes, "but expect nothing more from me until the time comes. In the meantime, you need to talk to H. He's the key here, not me."

Adam stood up, and Lorraine found herself grabbing for his hand.

"No," Adam shook his head, "I said expect nothing more from me. I'm not your man."

Lorraine flopped back onto the couch. What the hell did all that mean? she thought, and she knew she'd have to think long and hard to sort it all out.

VI : Weapon

"He seemed so at peace," said Adam, "like he was sure what would happen. The pain must have been intense... yet he knew exactly what to do."

The chaplain nodded. "A brave man indeed."

"I thought you should know what he said and did, right at the end. So you can pray for him. He died trying to save the man who then killed him, and his last word was 'Amen.' That counts for something, right?"

"It doesn't work that way," said the chaplain. "It isn't good works that get you into heaven, nor a last minute prayer. Gary believed in his heart of hearts that Jesus had forgiven him his sins and washed him clean of all his iniquities."

"Being a medic helped though."

"One thing may follow another. Gary was a medic because he was a Christian, because Jesus says you should love your enemy as you love yourself."

Adam nodded. "That makes sense. I don't think I'll ever get to that point though. I'm a designated

point man. My job description bars me from the 'love your enemy' policy."

The chaplain raised his eyebrow.

"I tried to save the guard's life," continued Adam, "but that just fucked up the situation further. And in the end I killed him anyway... and Gary..."

Tears glistened in Adam's eyes, and the chaplain put his hand on Adam's shoulder for comfort. After a moment Adam noticed the touch and brushed the hand away. He stood up abruptly and wiped his shirt sleeve across his eyes.

"Killing the guard after he shot Gary should even things out, right? But it doesn't feel that way! It doesn't even out. It adds up!"

"An eye for an eye," said the chaplain, "means the world ends up blind."

"Some people deserve to be blind."

"And yet Jesus commands us to turn the other cheek."

"Sorry, Father, but I've still got to do my job. What is it Jesus said? Judge not lest you also be judged? I've already been judged, and the chairman said I did the right thing. Again. Now, the first chance

I get to judge Simeon De Mille, he's got a lot coming his way."

Adam stormed out of the room.

"If you want to talk more," said the chaplain to the empty room, "please come back any time."

*

And yet, as Adam sat in a darkened room, pointing his rifle out the open window at a squat, derelict office building across the Monbuto City's central square, his resolve faltered.

Intel had reported Simeon de Mille entering the building a few hours before. They reviewed aerial footage from the area and found out that the day before some large cases had been unloaded from trucks and taken in through the service entrance.

Clive's squad had been sent in to surround the area. Clive had a new point man now, but Adam was still assigned to the squad in a support role. The point man had entered the building a minute before, and had been surprised to find it empty.

"Move in," said Clive, and Adam let out a sigh of

relief.

Adam had crossed a line. If he shot to kill now, he knew it would be murder. The review panel wouldn't see it as such, as Adam was still just doing his job. But while international regulations could agree on some things, the workings of a human conscience are a lot more complex.

He'd checked some scriptures and found a few things about murder. Thou shalt not kill was clear enough, though the Old Testament made exceptions. Jesus seemed clearer on the rules: anyone who hates his brother is a murderer.

But Simeon de Mille wasn't a brother.

Anyway, Adam hoped to sit this one out. The LED on his rifle stayed red.

Four hummers pulled into the square and skidded to a halt in front of the office building. The troops poured in through the main entrance, and the civilians in the square all ran in the opposite direction.

Adam switched from feed to feed, tracking the troop's movements throughout the building. They encountered no resistance, and the building appeared

to be as empty as the point man had first said.

Or almost as empty. Two soldiers burst into an interior room to find a body laid out on the floor. "Sir, we've located the target."

"On my way," said Clive. Adam glanced into the square in time to see Clive rush from a hummer to the building. Adam switched through the feeds again.

"This could be a trap, Clive," he sent on a private channel.

"Acknowledged."

Clive entered the windowless room and immediately scanned for electronics. Finding none he approached the body. Blood soaked the shirt, but Simeon still breathed.

"Right, someone has been here already. Check for traps and get him back to base."

"Yessir."

"Point?"

"Sir."

"Report on the sub-level."

"Large cases as reported. I think they're empty."

"How do you know?"

"There's too few footprints in the dust here, and

they're stacked too high. It would take more work if they contained suits or ammo or anything heavy."

"Bomb squad, report to sub-level..."

Adam watched and listened to the operation for a while, then sent a request to intel: "How many people into and out of target building since last night?"

Within forty seconds he received a reply: "Civilians = six in, five out. Good call."

"Does this include de Mille?"

"Negative."

"Clive," said Adam, "whoever hit Simeon is still inside. They must be hiding somewhere." He explained the intel head count.

"Every room is cleared."

"I know, but you've got to keep looking."

"There's probably some other way in and out the building. A tunnel maybe. This place is so old anything could have been added--"

"But then the sixth person could have entered and left the same way without being seen."

Clive paused for a moment to think that over.

"Ok, everyone, we're still looking for someone inside. Team four clamp down on the ground floor

access points. Everyone else, up to the roof, then sweep down through the entire building."

Adam turned his attention to the square as the med evac chopper touched down. Six troops rushed out from the old office building carrying a stretcher, a field medic close behind. They slotted de Mille in through the side hatch, and two troops jumped in to escort him back to the base. The medic ran to the safety of a hummer. The remaining troops returned to the building to continue the search.

Except, as the chopper lifted out of the square, Adam saw one soldier duck down in the cloud of dust. As all eyes turned to watch the aircraft ascend, the lone soldier turned and strode purposefully away from the hummers.

Adam tapped his forearm keyboard and brought up an information overlay on his helmet cam feed. The soldier's name read "Josh Henderson."

"Target has left the building!" called Adam. "He's wearing Joint Forces armor."

"Who?"

"Henderson. He's leaving the square to the north, right now. You see my feed?"

"Roof teams, our suspect is wearing our armor, tagged as Henderson. He is charged with the attempted murder of Simeon de Mille, and the unauthorized use of Joint Force armament. Accordingly, I'm activating rifles, the only authorized target is this one man--"

Before Clive could finish his orders, the man in Henderson's armor dived behind a parked truck, putting as much metal as possible between himself and the soldiers on the office building's roof.

Bullets rained down on the truck from above, yet none pierced all the way through. "Henderson" unclipped the rifle from his back and twisted it. A section fell off, leaving a much more primitive weapon, unburdened by external control. The man stayed in his crouched position, but continually checked up and down the street for more enemies.

Adam's rifle LED switched from red to green and he heard Clive's order. "Take him out."

While the truck sheltered the target from the office block and the hummers in the square, Adam had a clear view. And a clear shot.

He once again laid the crosshairs over a living

person's chest with the intention to kill. He took up the pressure on the trigger, but the weight in his stomach held him back. The man was by no means innocent, but he didn't deserve to die. And just injuring the man wouldn't render him harmless...

"I'm going to take out his weapon," Adam said, "then we can send some guys over to pick him up."

"Do it."

Adam aimed at Henderson's rifle and fired. The magazine exploded and took off the man's right hand in a spray of blood. A segment of the casing ripped through the man's armor, taking a large part of his hip with it.

The Joint Forces standard issue rifle, normally one of the most reliable and safest combat weapons ever developed, had been turned into an unstable time bomb by the anti-lock tampering. The man's screams rang out over the sound of Joint Force gunfire.

"Cease fire," ordered Clive, and green LEDs turned red.

The screams sounded even louder in the ensuing quiet.

7 : Spaced

Instead of worrying, Lorraine threw herself into her work. The team continued training, and with Daniel's help she and H managed to streamline even more of the technology. The voice and viewser HUD communications now used the same network as the perception data, with a redundant set of transmitters and receivers as backup. The latency decreased, and they refined balance between disorientation and dizziness. A hundred other problems popped up, and the three technicians solved as many as they could.

Three weeks after their first deployment, Conrad lead them on a second mission.

"There's a situation in Belarus. It's all going down

at the Japanese Embassy. Gunmen are holding fourteen of the diplomatic staff hostage."

Out of all the European countries, Belarus was the only one that still had an entirely state controlled media, and had earned the reputation as the North Korea of the West. Not even the internet had penetrated very far. The citizens of the country had very little idea what happened outside their borders, nor very much knowledge of the events that happened inside their borders. The upshot was that nobody, outside of the Japanese government, knew what was going on at their Embassy.

The Belorussian army attempted to storm the building, but the freedom fighters inside repelled them with ease, and started killing hostages. The Japanese put the pressure on, saying they would retract funding for the joint development project on the edge of Minsk, and break all diplomatic ties.

The Osprey X refueled over Germany and landed in a park next to the Belorussian National Library. Conrad ordered that their operations center, the modified shipping container, be moved closer to the Embassy. The Belorussian authorities had no idea

how many hostage takers were inside, but the Japanese foreign ministry managed to connect to government issue viewers worn within the Embassy, and the video feeds they provided.

In the early morning light, when they hoped the hostage takers would be most tired, Adam, Telesky, Stoppard and Conrad moved in. Compared to their first deployment, this one was far more traditional. However, not knowing who might be a dangerous enemy or who might be an innocent hostage, they employed a entirely pragmatic form of racism; if the person was white European, they would be considered a hostage taker. If Japanese, a hostage.

The rule-of-thumb served the team well, and they secured the building room by room, silently and methodically. One of the enemy managed to fire a single shot, and put Stoppard out of action with a bullet wound in his right leg.

Of the nine possible hostage takers, Adam and Telesky left eight men unconscious and restrained. The ninth pulled a grenade from his belt, and before he could pull the pin, and before Adam could reach him, Telesky shot a bullet into the man's forehead

from the far end of a long hallway.

As it happened, only one of the non-Japanese men was an innocent hostage. This local translator had nothing more to complain about than some bruises and a headache from the electronic stunner.

The hostage takers themselves would have thanked Conrad's team too, if they'd not been gagged. Instead of leaving them to the questionable justice of the Belorussian government, Conrad asked the Japanese Ambassador if the team could land the empty Osprey X on the Embassy roof. Once there, the team loaded their prisoners into the aircraft. After one last stop to reclaim the operations container, the team was en-route back to England.

News of the hostage situation broke internationally hours later. The main news source was the Ministry of Information in Belarus, and they reported that all the hostage takers had been neutralized by the Belorussian security forces. Hints of outside involvement leaked from the Japanese side, but they made no statements on the whereabouts of the hostage takers.

Lorraine found the situation back at the base

unnerving. Upon landing, the eight prisoners had been taken onboard a small private jet and flown to an undisclosed destination. Nobody else commented on the fact. How could they say nothing?

And yet, she thought, I also say nothing.

*

Lorraine continued to avoid H. Of course, they still had to work together, but she avoided linking with him, and tried not to be alone together. At the same time she felt drawn to Adam, but he seemed to be acting the same way towards Lorraine as she did to H, avoiding her to the best of his abilities, except when they had to link during training.

And then, a week later, Conrad made an announcement that surprised everyone.

"We're going into space."

The response from the group was, on average, "What the hell?"

"Ashley wants us to test out the tech in zero gravity, to evaluate it's future usefulness in space. Robotic construction still isn't working out, so every

new structure in orbit is built by hand. The idea is that a linked team will be able to accomplish tasks far more easily, safely, and quickly."

"See?" said Daniel, "it's not all about military uses."

"So why not wire up trained astronauts?" asked Lorraine.

"A launch slot has come up," said Conrad, "on one of the Century Shuttles. It's going up to replace a military satellite in low earth orbit, one that has a nuclear reactor, so can't be left to burn up on re-entry. It only takes the pilot and technician to do the job, meaning they have four spare seats. These are only open for non-civilians.

"Ashley has swung it so that we can take those places, and that will give us about four hours to train. It'll be cramped, but we should get all kinds of useful data."

Lorraine raised her hand. "No civilians?"

"Correct," said Conrad, "so it'll be me, Adam, Telesky, and Daniel. You and H will have to stay here."

"What about weight issues?" asked Daniel.

"Good question. We have to reduce that," Conrad pointed to the shipping container half-full of processors, "down to a unit that weighs under five hundred kilograms."

They had just five weeks before the launch date, and the workload was immense. Lorraine hardly had time to concentrate on anything but the new processor unit. Daniel always seemed to be right beside her, helping her at every turn, even though he also had to train for his space flight. Conrad, as enthusiastic as child about the possibilities of the tech, and with access to a practically unlimited budget, became the dream boss.

Because, Lorraine had to admit, that was what he had become. The planned setup was that she would be in charge of the team, at an equal level with Conrad. But Timothy had completely disappeared, with nothing more than notes in her inbox every few weeks. With Lorraine left to run the project, he'd moved on to other schemes. He wrote to her about a holographic display that sat in a glass box and looked like a fish tank. She wondered about the value of holographs, now they were making direct-to-brain

image transfer a reality. Hell, even viewers could overlay perfectly good three-dimensional alternative realities on any surface.

So she kept working. Once she had the final design complete, the new processor unit arrived from the fabricators four days later, and Lorraine didn't even see the bill.

And then, one morning, she woke to find the base deserted. The military personnel had packed up and flown out overnight, on their way to a launch and training facility in Arizona. She knocked on H's door, but he was gone too, somewhere. Even Stoppard had disappeared.

Lorraine sat alone in the hangar, completely devoid of energy and inspiration. She flipped the page of a long-ignored calendar, and counted off the months to the end of the two year period. Sure, their progress so far had taken them way beyond where she thought they'd be, but she had no idea how she would continue without the whole team.

H wandered in after midday and sauntered over to his screen.

"Where have you been?" Lorraine asked.

"I took off last night once Adam and the guys shipped out. I spent the evening with Denny and Tomiko."

"How are they?"

"Happy enough. What are you up to?"

"Nothing."

"Take a day off, Lorraine, you look like you need it."

"I wouldn't even know what to do," she admitted, "I've not been home for over--"

The small door to the hangar opened, and Lorraine paused to see who it might be. A man walked in, someone she didn't know. Considering that she personally approved each person who entered the base, she found the fact immediately disconcerting.

"May I help you?" she asked.

The man, who seemed to be in his thirties, was about average height, with a slightly out of date hair style, and a smart suit. She was drawn to his eyes, which looked both old and wise, and young and vibrant, all at the same time.

The man looked around, smiled to himself, and

sat down on the couch.

"Yes," he said, "I think you're just the person who can help me. And I you."

"How did you get in here?" asked Lorraine.

"Don't worry about that now," said the man. "The question isn't how, but why."

"The question," said H, "is who."

"I am David Roundtree."

The name meant nothing to Lorraine. H, on the other hand, smiled in recognition.

"Welcome to Idiotech," H said, "sorry things are bit of a mess around here."

"H?" asked Lorraine.

"Mr. Roundtree is the owner of Century Space and Aeronautics Systems. Among other ventures."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Roundtree," said Lorraine, "your latest passengers left last night."

"I'm not here to speak to them," said David, "I'm here to speak to you two. And it's taken me a long time to find you. Years ago I saw an elite military unit at work, and they caused all kinds of trouble. Since then I've been looking for the same kind of unit. I always thought it would be an American unit, but

here you are, not a hundred miles from my home. It was only when William Ashley filled those extra seats on my shuttle that I worked it out.

"All I needed to do then was backtrack various communications to find you here. And Lorraine, don't call for the guards, wait until I've finished what I have to say. I have a proposal to make."

Lorraine pushed her screen away and leant back in her chair.

"We're not for hire," she said.

"No," said David, looking around the hangar, "I see that you're sticking to your principals, and only working towards your original vision. What's it like? To sell out to Bill Ashley?"

Lorraine glared at the intruder. "Without UN funding and resources we'd never be this far along."

"True," said David, "but then you two never did hold back on the means as long as they lead to the right ends." He looked at H, "I know all about Denny and Tomiko."

H stood up, his face turning white.

"Sit down," said David, "Nobody else knows, and I'm not going to tell anyone. You've hidden it well.

Someone with your technical knowledge can make it very difficult for anyone to see what you are up to, especially in your own home."

H sat again, and looked down at his own hands fidgeting in his lap.

"Mr. Roundtree," said Lorraine, "enough with the veiled threats of blackmail. Tell us what you want."

"I want you to stop the project," he said, "and come work for me."

"No," said Lorraine, "we made an agreement with Bill Ashley."

"Does the agreement include helping kill innocent people?"

"That hasn't happened yet, and isn't going to."

"How do you know?"

"Adam, the point man of the team, would never let it happen."

"And what will happen when there is more than one team? Will every commander have a conscience?"

"Nobody can join a team without both me and H," said Lorraine. "I need to do the implant operation, and H has to do the calibration. So far less

than a dozen people have the implants, and that number isn't going to increase."

"With the right tools," said David, "four people can do a lot of damage."

"Look," said Lorraine, "I don't need to defend what we're doing here. I've asked myself these same questions, and I'm happy to do this. It's better that the UN has this tech first, and not some terrorist operation."

"And the UN is unwaveringly benevolent?"

"Yes."

"Is it?"

"Yes," repeated Lorraine.

David stood up. "You two are in a privileged position here, and what you decide to do will have huge ramifications for the future. I could get into your position myself, but it might take me another twenty years. I'm a patient man, but I'm not that patient."

David turned his back and walked towards the door.

"Don't bother talking about this meeting," he called back over his shoulder, "it didn't happen."

David strolled out of the hangar, leaving Lorraine and H in confused silence. H consulted his screen, bringing up various feeds from outside the hangar.

"He just disappeared," he said, "like he never left the building."

"How did he do that?"

"I don't know. He must have subverted the camera feeds somehow. And control of the front gate."

"Should we tell Conrad?"

"You trust Conrad too much," said H. "He always makes me feel uncomfortable. When you link with him, don't you notice the way he sees people in terms of odds and calculations, and not as living beings?"

"I've never linked with Conrad," said Lorraine.

"Of course," said H. "Only with Adam."

Lorraine blushed. "And Telesky," she lied.

"Funny, I don't recall seeing that in the logs."

"This David Roundtree," Lorraine said, changing the subject back to the matter at hand, "we need to decide what to do about him. I think we should keep his visit secret, but do our own research. I want to know who he is, how he got in here, and what he has

against the UN."

"I'll look into the security question," H said. "I thought I had this whole place figured out..."

"Is this net-connected screen secure?" asked Lorraine, indicating the computer on her desk.

"Not a chance, but David just confirmed that my home is a black box, communications and security wise. We should do any research from there. And, come to think of it, I should probably find a new place for Denny and Tomiko."

She felt her confidence and motivation returning. Side by side, the two old friends set about their new tasks.

VII : Forgiveness

"You don't need to explain yourself to me," said Clive, "I understand."

"I thought removing his weapon would be enough," said Adam, "that when we got to him he'd be no threat. But when we got to him was still screaming, and kept screaming until he died."

"You did your best."

"It would have been better to kill him. Those last minutes of his life..." Adam trailed off as he imagined the pain. "My best is never good enough."

"You're the best point we have. That's the reason you've not been put in for promotion, you know? We need you to do your thing."

"I won't be around for ever."

"The militias are calming down. We've not lost a man since the ambush."

"Except Gary."

"Except Gary."

Adam flicked the touchpad on his laptop.

"I didn't mean I'm going to catch a bullet," said Adam, "I think I'm going to go on leave. Look here."

Adam showed Clive a draft email, asking to return

to England.

"I didn't know it'd hit you this hard."

"I can't keep going. Joining up was easy, you know, I had the skills, wanted to experience adventure and action..." Adam's voice faded out.

"Just not this much action?"

"Not this much murder."

"It isn't like that. You're just doing your job."

"So were the concentration camp guards."

"I'm not going to answer that, you fucking retard, that's the kind of thing we're here to prevent."

"It says in John chapter three that when a man--"

"Wait," Clive cut in, "are you going to quote the fucking Bible?"

"I held a man's hand as he died," said Adam quietly, "a man who lost his life because of me. He had a peace that passes understanding. I want that. I need that."

Adam saw pity in Clive's eyes. "You want peace? Peace will come when the militias stop killing each other, and the oil is flowing to the highest bidder. If we do our jobs right--"

Adam's laptop beeped and a new email icon

appeared on his screen. He turned away from Clive and opened it.

"Hello Adam," it began, "I'm happy you keep doing your job, but why only pick on my side? The leader of the Islamic militia is Muhammad El. Attached are the phone numbers of Muhammad El's seven bodyguards. I'm sure you can use these to triangulate his position. Yours sincerely, Simeon de Mille."

"Hey," said Adam, "check this out."

Clive read the message. "This is the second time someone in jail has sent you an email."

"I understand why I got the first message, because I left my card when we picked up Kett Hartoon. But this time? Maybe he just guessed I was involved."

"Who knows? But this is obviously from the same person. Who has access to both Kett's and Simeon's email accounts?"

"I have no idea," admitted Adam.

"I think we need to go talk to both Kett and Simeon again," said Clive, "to see who they're really working for. There must be someone above Simeon. And then, of course, we've got to look into this

Muhammad El character."

"You do that," said Adam, "I'm going to pack."

"What?"

Adam opened his unsent mail folder, selected his draft email, and clicked send. "I'm getting out of here."

"You know what? Fuck you. Forward Simeon's email to intel, or whatever you did last time."

Clive shook his head and left their room. Adam forwarded the email, then inserted a fresh thumb drive and copied the entire contents of his laptop, including his audio diary and his encrypted combat data.

*

Officially, Adam had been deployed to Monbuto for six months. He'd stayed on longer voluntarily, and was entitled to leave when he wanted.

The flight back to the airbase in England took many hours, with a refueling stop in Portugal. He caught a bus, then took a train journey with two connections. At the station in York he bought a

bunch of flowers, and started walking towards his parent's house. He might have taken a bus or taxi, but he wanted to see a bit of his old home town, and he was in no hurry.

Adam regretted his decision immediately. He felt naked, picking his way along a street without wearing his combat armor. He found himself hunching over, and had to make himself walk upright. Then he noticed he didn't cut across any open spaces, instead he stayed close to the sides of buildings, and paused before turning a corner, checking the road ahead before proceeding. He wasn't checking for traffic when crossing a street, even though it was much heavier in York than in Monbuto City, but for suspicious looking activity. Just to be normal, he had to make a conscious effort to cut diagonally across a park, taking a path away from any kind of cover, rather than skirting around the edge.

He noticed his parents' house had new windows fitted since he'd last visited, though that had been three years previously. He knocked on the door and stood back.

"Adam!" shrieked his mother and threw her arms

around him, crushing the flowers between their bodies as she gave him a long hug. "Come in, come in. Your father's out in the garden. We've prepared your room again. You have to tell us everything!"

*

From: zerospamemail.com

To: Kett Hartoon; Simeon de Mille

Subject: Goodbye.

Dear sir,

I have left your country for the time being, and I am now back home in England on leave. I hope this news pleases you. My colleagues, however, seem to be doing well enough without me. You must already know about the death of Muhammad El.

While I have no proof of your identity, I assume you are the young man with the beard from the ambush outside the nightclub. I must admit that I did intend to kill you on that night, but only to stop any

further bloodshed.

Since then I have done everything I can to avoid killing, to the point where I have removed myself from the situation entirely. To prove my point, I've attached my audio diary for the entire seven months of my deployment, with the most relevant files marked. I've also attached all my combat data, though this is encrypted. I've worked out a way to obtain the key, but to do so would require me to return to the base in Monbuto City. If I do return, and get my hands on the key, I'll be sure to pass it on to you then.

Please do not try replying to this address, it is a one-time, anti-spam account. By sending this email, the account is automatically closed, and will no longer permit any communication.

Yours sincerely,

A. T.

*

"Now everyone has their eyes closed," said the preacher, "nobody will be able to see you. This is just between you and God. If you'd like to accept Jesus into your life as your personal friend and savior, raise your hand now. One of the counselors will see you, and talk to you afterwards."

Adam raised his hand.

"Thank you... thank you... thank you... God bless you..."

Adam lowered his hand again.

"Ok, now everyone repeat these words after me. Even those who are already Christians. It is good to reconfirm your faith. Lord Jesus... say these words... Lord Jesus..."

"Lord Jesus," said the congregation.

"Lord Jesus," mumbled Adam.

"I invite you into my heart today. Fill me with your spirit. Fill me with your wisdom. Fill me with the understanding of your will. Forgive me my sins. Wash me whiter than white. Let me share in your inheritance. And bring me into your everlasting

kingdom. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Amen," said Adam.

He opened his eyes and looked around. The room seemed brighter than it had been before he repeated the prayer. Those standing around him glanced his way, some of them catching his eye and nodding, guessing correctly he'd said the words. He stood up straighter than before. A small weight had lifted from his shoulders, and the nervous knot in his stomach had unravelled slightly.

"Cassie, please lead us in song," said the preacher.

On the small stage at the front of the church, the keyboard player shifted from the more ambient, meditative style to a more upbeat tune. The words of the song displayed on a video projector screen. Cassie, the young woman who had invited Adam to missionary meeting a few days before, stepped onto the stage and took the microphone. She sang with clear voice, overriding the enthusiastic but tonally limited efforts of the congregation.

Adam didn't know the song, so didn't attempt to sing along. Instead he read the words, finding new

meaning in the passages. He didn't understand a lot of the references, but the general idea of the song made sense. Jesus is the way and the life, he read, and in him is found true joy.

And he actually did feel a joy he'd not known before.

The song wound down, and the preacher invited people forward for prayer. Adam gingerly made his way to the front of the church. Those ahead of him held up their hands to the ceiling, and some spoke words he couldn't understand. He suddenly felt nervous and looked down at the floor.

A pair of shoes appeared in his line of vision. He looked up again and found the preacher standing directly in front of him.

"Let me pray for you, son," said the preacher.
"What is your need?"

"I... I don't know."

"You've just said the sinner's prayer?"

"I did, but I don't..." Adam trailed off.

"Yes?"

"I think I need extra forgiveness."

"Nonsense! Jesus's forgiveness washes away all

our sins and iniquities. The last thing Jesus did before he died was forgive the criminal who hung on the cross next to his."

"There are worse things than robbery."

The preacher nodded. "And Jesus took all the sins of the world onto himself, and was punished in our place. We no longer need to carry the burden of sin, day in and day out. Let me pray for you now."

Adam nodded and closed his eyes. He felt the weight of the preacher's hand the top of his head.

"Lord Jesus Christ, I pray to you now. I lift up this young man to you now. What is your name, son?"

"Adam."

"I lift up Adam to you now. Look into his heart and see his doubts and fears. Give him the strength he needs to trust in you, to give his life over to you, to let you provide him with the strength he needs to face the new life ahead of him. And Lord Jesus let him know your love and forgiveness, for we have all fallen short, and only you can make us right in the eyes of your father, to justify, to cleanse. And Lord Jesus..."

The prayer continued, but Adam was distracted

from time to time by other hands coming to rest on his shoulder, his arm, his back, his head, his other shoulder, his chest. It soon felt as though the entire congregation focused only on him, praying only for him, caring only about him. He felt a connection to those who touched him, and through those people to everyone in the room. And he felt something else there too, a sense of something bigger, something more important than everything else.

Cassie began to sing once again, and the beauty of her voice caught Adam by surprise. He experienced an upwelling of emotion like nothing he'd known before, and before he knew it he found himself crying. And not just crying, but weeping openly.

8 : Another

Flying towards Liverpool, Lorraine looked out through the window of the Osprey X. As the clouds broke, she saw the green fields of England flowing by underneath. Buildings looked like toys, and she could hardly make out the individual vehicles on the roads.

"How high did you get?" she asked Adam, who sat in the seat beside her.

"About 300km up," he said. "I looked down and could see half the Earth in a single glance. It was one of the most moving moments of my life. I felt a connection with the entire world. It was like..." Adam couldn't find the words, and just shook his head.

"You make it sound like a religious experience."

"Yes," he said, quietly, "I guess I do."

Lorraine felt that Adam didn't want to talk about it. The Osprey X flew on, and they sat in silence for a while. Their aircraft felt too empty, now that it no longer needed to transport a whole shipping container. The entire system fit into a few racks, with

the control interface transferred to just a few portable screens. They now had a lot more space to work inside the Osprey X itself, rather than being cooped up inside the container.

Conrad pushed through the narrow doorway from the cockpit, screen in hand.

"Ok, so I just got an update," he said.

"About time," said Telesky.

So far they had no idea about the mission, only that they currently flew to somewhere in Merseyside.

"Our target is a group of five men who have taken control of a research facility. As far as I can tell, the facility is for developing and testing new biomedical treatments. The terrorists' motives are unclear, but intel thinks they might be religious fundamentalists, angry at scientists playing God."

"Only five?" asked Adam.

"Yeah, but they're armed. We've been called in because it's imperative they are neutralized without damaging any of the equipment or experiments inside."

"Okay," said Telesky, "I think we can--"

"Wait," said Lorraine, "if the terrorists are anti-

science, wouldn't they already have destroyed the inside of complex?"

Conrad frowned. "Good point. Maybe they're being cautious. They probably don't know if spilling this liquid or breaking that test tube is dangerous or not."

"Right," said Lorraine. "Is anything inside that dangerous?"

"I'll have to check. What I do know is that it is very important research."

"Very expensive research," added Daniel.

"Exactly," confirmed Conrad.

They discussed various strategies and tactics, but with so little to go on Conrad decided to wait until they reached their target before issuing his final orders.

The building itself was a large, white, windowless cube, the current favorite architectural style for high-tech companies. A high fence surrounded the building, enclosing a small car park and wide open, perfectly cut lawns. The local police force had set up a perimeter a few hundred meters from the building, blocking off all ground access.

The Osprey X touched down inside the fence, its rotors swirling up clouds of freshly mown grass. The team activated their links, a process that had become second nature to each member. Telesky and Adam stomped down the rear ramp and ran for cover among the two rows of parked cars. Conrad and Stoppard followed seconds later, once Adam and Telesky crouched in position. The Osprey X lifted off, flew a hundred meters over a newly planted forest, and landed in an empty field, well away from danger.

To follow the action, Lorraine once again connected directly to Adam. He and Telesky ran, stooped low, up to the front entrance of the facility. They came to a halt, one standing on each side of the double doors, looking back the way they had come.

"It sure looks peaceful so far," said Telesky. "Too peaceful."

"I know what you're thinking," said Adam.

"I'm thinking, if these guys have taken over the building by force, how did they get inside? There's no damage to the front gate or any of the fence."

"No disturbance to any of the cars here either,"

said Adam, nodding towards the car park.

"Did they walk here?" Telesky asked. "Or do they all drive Mercedes and park neatly in these rows?"

Lorraine looked over to Daniel. "Are we even in the right place?"

"Not my problem," Daniel said, "take it up with Conrad."

Lorraine jumped as H tapped her on the shoulder. She looked down and saw he held a scrap of paper between his fingers. Strange, she thought, nobody uses paper and pens any more. Except someone who is afraid that anything electronic, outside of his own home, may be compromised. She reached up and took the paper. Unrolling it she read H's scribbled note: "Ashley's car."

Confused, she switched to the same feed as H. Stoppard crouched safe behind a car, but kept stealing glances up towards the building. On a car closer to the building she spotted the distinctive diplomatic number plates belonging to William Ashley.

"Adam, Guy," said Conrad, breaking her concentration, "move in."

"Yessir!" said Telesky, and hooked a long steel tool into the sliding doors. After a small explosion that disintegrated the lock, he pulled, and the right door swung outwards. Immediately a rain of gunfire sprayed out the open door, the bullets smacking into the parked cars with popping and crunching sounds. The shots stopped after a few seconds. Lorraine switched back to Adam's feed.

"Telesky," called Conrad, "see if you can take the high ground. Adam, hold the door."

Telesky unclipped a pod from his back and shot a cable up the front of the building. The triple-hooked attachment clattered onto the roof, but when Telesky wound it back in, it failed to catch on the featureless edge of the building. He tried it a second time, but without luck.

"Pass it here," said Adam, and Telesky tossed it over. Adam ran a few steps forward, careful to keep out of sight from anyone inside the building. He closed his eyes and, using the more distant view from Stoppard, fired the line over the building. The hooks caught on a satellite dish set back from the edge of the roof. Adam swung the line back to Telesky and

returned to his own place by the front door.

Telesky soon gained the roof himself, looked around at the empty space, and started towards a skylight. Lorraine switched to his feed in time to see the same skylight burst open. A man wearing a full combat suit reared up, and swung a rifle towards Telesky. Without hesitation Telesky threw himself backwards off the roof, playing out half the line. He swung down and crashed against the front of the building. After catching his breath he lowered himself to the ground once more.

"Did you see that?" he asked, half screaming.

"They have armor."

"Right," said Conrad, "let's return fire."

"I don't have a rifle," said Adam.

"Neither do I," said Telesky.

"Where are they?"

"We left them in the Osprey," said Adam.

"Nobody mentioned anything about targets wearing body armor," added Telesky.

"Stoppard?"

"I'm fully stocked."

"Okay, here's what we do. Adam, distraction duty.

Stoppard, deliver your rifle to Telesky. Lay down fire, I'll follow."

Lorraine followed the action by switching from one feed to another. Adam threw a smoke grenade onto the roof to block the view from above. Then he swung his arm around and launched a flash grenade through the front door. Within a second his visor blackened, even though the grenade detonated out of sight.

Stoppard rushed out from his hiding place behind one of the parked cars. Gunfire sounded from inside the building as soon as he moved. Bullets smashed into the car beyond him, but somehow he managed to throw himself to safety behind another car without sustaining any.

Adam looked over at Telesky. They stood on either side of the front door, their backs against the smooth white wall. He heard a single gunshot from above and looked up in time to see the smoke grenade he'd thrown onto the roof fly down into the car park, now leaking smoke from a bullet hole in its side.

"They must have the same armor as we do," said

Adam, "or at least helmets keyed in to the same flash grenade frequency."

"Fine," said Telesky, "let's smoke them out before they smoke us out."

Telesky unclipped a smoke grenade of his own. He pulled the pin and swung his arm towards the open door. As he released the grenade, a hand extended from within the building and caught his wrist. Telesky looked at his own arm in disbelief, then let out a grunt as he disappeared inside.

Lorraine gasped. Telesky was a very strong and heavy man, made heavier by his bulky combat armor. That he could be pulled off his feet so easily came as a surprise to everyone. She quickly switched to his feed, but saw only smoke through his visor before something covered his faceplate, blocking his view completely. He grunted once more, then his feed cut out altogether.

"Shit!" said Conrad. "Daniel, plan B. Call in reinforcements."

"They're already on their way," Daniel said, "be here in ninety seconds."

"Reinforcements?" asked Lorraine.

"You'll see," Daniel said, then turned away to discourage further questions.

"Conrad," called Adam, edging along the wall to his left, away from the front door, "talk to me. What the hell is going on here?"

Conrad didn't reply.

"Let's ask William Ashley," said Lorraine.

"Lorraine, radio silence please."

"The whole system is encrypted," she said, "nobody can hear us. Adam, William Ashley is somewhere in the facility. The car with the diplomatic plates in front of you is his."

"Daniel, lockout Lorraine," ordered Conrad, "H also."

Lorraine tapped her screen, but it didn't respond. She was still linked to Adam, but had no control. She looked over at H, who had also been locked out of his own system. They turned to Daniel, as though to ask for an explanation.

"I'm just doing my job, and for now that's making sure you won't spoil anything else," Daniel said. The cockpit door opened and the Osprey X co-pilot emerged. In his hand he held a powerful looking

pistol. He didn't point it at Lorraine or H, but made sure they could see it.

Lorraine heard the drone of an approaching helicopter. Through Adam's eyes she saw the dark silhouette approach, swinging lower and lower towards the research facility. Machine guns mounted under the nose let forth a stream of bullets. It swept over Adam's head, clearing the roof and skylight of any gunmen.

"In range," spoke an unfamiliar female voice in Lorraine's ear piece.

"Patching in now," said Daniel, and worked furiously at his screen. "Ok, all three of you are live."

Lorraine watched her own screen as three new nodes in the Shaper network appeared. She first felt curiosity, wondering who the newcomers might be. Then she was simply confused. She was the last person to take an implant, and nobody else could ever link up like this without her and H's knowledge.

Adam looked up as the helicopter passed out of sight over the building. It hovered above, and Lorraine got the impression soldiers were leaping onto the roof. She didn't see this, but the links

between Adam, Conrad and Stoppard remained, so Adam could see it clearly. There was always so much more communicated than just what the other person saw with their eyes.

The helicopter flew away, and she heard gunshots from the roof. The sound of the helicopter increased again, and it took her a moment to realize it was coming down to land beside the Osprey X.

"Adam, stay where you are," said Conrad, "we'll bring you a gun. Stoppard, let's do this."

Conrad swung his rifle around the side of his car and fired in through the front door. Lorraine got the impression she could see the bullets mid-flight, just a few meters from where Adam stood. The sunlight seemed to glint off each one as it passed through the same small volume of air, catching the right angle of reflection.

Looking at her screen, Lorraine found that Adam had been linked to the two men on the roof. Whatever they were doing up there, he was now following along.

"Move over," said a new voice inside the Osprey X. A tall woman with angular facial features stood

over her.

"I'm moving," she said feebly, and vacated her seat.

The newcomer sat down, and Lorraine saw that she was older than she'd first thought. The woman tapped at Lorraine's screen and immediately took over half of Daniel's workload.

Lorraine felt someone take her hand. She knew it was H. She squeezed it gently.

Back at the scene of the gun battle, Stoppard had reached the front of the building. He tossed his handgun to Adam, who caught it effortlessly.

"On my mark," said Conrad, and waited. A commotion, somewhere inside the building. "Mark."

Stoppard and then Adam launched themselves in through the front door. Adam rolled and came up firing, but he wasn't looking where he aimed, so all Lorraine could see was a series of blinding lights and rolling smoke. Two huge figures in combat armor sprawled through Adam's line of sight.

And then, mere seconds later, silence.

"Report in," said Conrad.

*

The Osprey X and the helicopter flew back to the white research facility and landed on the lawn outside. The woman who had taken Lorraine's place cancelled every link, then left the Osprey. Lorraine looked to the co-pilot, who nodded that she could move, and she followed the woman outside. H and Daniel joined her on the rear ramp.

Conrad kissed the new arrival on the cheek, then hugged her tight.

"Wait here," he said, "they found Bill."

"What's going on?" asked Lorraine. "Who are you?"

"Let me introduce Margaret Conrad," said Daniel. H nodded. "Elmore's wife," Daniel added, for Lorraine's benefit.

"She has a link," said Lorraine.

"I do," said Margaret, "and I must thank you so much. You and Harold."

"Call me H," said H.

"Thank us for what?" asked Lorraine.

"For inventing this. Elmore and I were going

through a rough patch. He was spending so much time away, and it felt like I didn't know him any more. But this link changed all that. We're closer now than we've ever been."

Lorraine didn't know what to say. She decided not to say anything.

"And the sex when linked," said Margaret, with no shame, "is amazing."

"Please," said Daniel, "I've got to work with your husband."

William Ashley appeared in the wrecked doorway of the building. He spotted the group waiting at the Osprey X, and walked their way. Adam emerged directly after him, along with Stoppard and an uninjured Telesky. Finally Conrad and two more men in combat suits strolled out of the front door, and soon everyone had gathered by the aircraft.

"I'm sure you have some questions," said Ashley.

Lorraine found it interesting who nodded and who didn't. Herself, H, Adam, and Telesky all seemed to have no idea what had just happened. Daniel, Stoppard, Conrad, Margaret, and the two new soldiers seemed to know more, but still didn't know

the entire story.

"First," said Adam, "who are these men?" He indicated the new soldiers who had turned up with links. "Second, who were those people?" He tipped his head at the white building. "And third, what the hell is going on? What were you doing inside?"

"Ok," said Ashley. "I'll take those in order. But first, all non-military personnel, from this moment on, are being removed from the team."

"That's just Lorraine and H," said Adam.

"Yes. The project is going totally under-file. Complete blackout."

"Until next year," said Adam.

"No," said Ashley, "until the subcommittee says so."

"I didn't sign up for this," said Lorraine

"Good. That's why you're being taken off the project."

"What about Timothy?" asked Lorraine.

"We've taken care of Timothy," said Ashley, but didn't elaborate further.

"Okay," said Conrad, breaking the ominous silence that followed, "This is Margaret, my wife.

Also, meet Mike Derringer, who you beat in the exercise against the Navy Seals, and Brian Davis, who Stoppard knows from the SAS. They got their implants a few weeks ago."

"How?" asked Lorraine.

"Dr. Hawthorn was kind enough to repeat the procedure you'd taught him."

"And the calibration?" asked H.

"Daniel performed it admirably," Conrad said.

"But nobody except H can do that," said Lorraine, "nobody else sees what he sees."

"Except," said Daniel, "if you can see what someone else sees. The morning he finished my own calibration, I tested the link with both Adam and H himself. That gave me an idea, so when he calibrated your implant the same afternoon, I made sure I linked in to see how he did it. Both of you were so absorbed by the process that you didn't even notice what I was doing."

"And so," concluded Conrad, "when we get back to base we'd like Adam and Telesky to train with the new team, to help them work better while they're linked up."

"Um, sure?" said Telesky, but looked to Adam.

"I'll consider it," said Adam, "if you answer my second and third questions."

"Bill?" Conrad deflected the line of enquiry.

"This facility is the base of another under-file project. Like you, the team has been working on enhancements that will provide counter-terrorist units the edge over their opponents. While you have been working on the more cerebral side, they have been improving the physical abilities of humans. I can't go into the details, but let me say they were rather successful. We'd paired them with a small unit of military experts, and the cross-fertilization of skills and ideas proved remarkably productive, just as with the Idiotech team."

"So successful," said Adam, "that you were going to take them under-file indefinitely."

"As it so happens, you're correct. Unfortunately they decided that the humanitarian benefits of their research were more important than global security. They didn't understand that their advances, in the wrong hands, would prove disastrous, and that there were plenty of other cures for their targeted diseases

on the horizon.

"By now the military team has learnt everything there is to know about their techniques. When I told the civilians they were no longer needed, they didn't take the news kindly. Not at all."

"They took you hostage," said Conrad.

"The fools," Ashley said, shaking his head. "What did they expect to accomplish? They tried getting word out on the net, but we'd isolated this entire building over a year ago. And the only other com tech inside was supplied by us, so we put a block on that right away."

"Where were the military members of the team?" asked Telesky.

"In Italy," said H.

Everyone looked at him, surprised by his rare comment.

"I was linked to Stoppard," H said, "and inside the building here he saw a screen with an image. He only thought it looked familiar, but I recognized it right away. It's the same warehouse as we raided outside of Rome."

"Is that true?" Conrad asked Ashley.

"The terrorists' bomb making lab," continued H, "was actually a drugs factory."

"How do you know that?" said Conrad.

"I just worked it out."

"Harold," said Ashley, "I'd like to offer you a job with intelligence." Ashley smiled, and Lorraine felt a shiver run down her spine. Ashley addressed the whole group again. "H is right though. Your first deployment had nothing to do with counter-terrorism. It was just more training, but you all considered it a real operation. The factory was a mafia outfit, one the Rome police had been tracking for a while. You took them out, no problem, and the police let them go free a few weeks later.

"The military team from here," Ashley waved at the white cube, "raided the same warehouse this morning. None of them sustained any injuries. Unfortunately, the mafia had stepped up their own security, and in the ensuing fire fight, most of their number were killed."

"I can understand why the civilian researchers had a small problem with this," said Lorraine.

"The mafia are scum," said Ashley, "and are good

for nothing else. If they want to live off causing harm and death to others, they deserve all they get."

"And the civilians here? Was going in, guns blazing, the right way to solve that problem?"

"As far as I gather," said Conrad, "Adam's anti-gun pacifism didn't get him very far."

"I was working with bad intelligence," said Adam, glaring back at his commander, "nobody told us we were going up against body-enhanced supermen with access to the same equipment as us."

"Which is why I called in reinforcements."

"What's done is done," said Ashley, and turned away, as though ending the conversation. He walked over to his car, and ran his fingers over the dents and holes left by the bullets. "I think we best fly directly back to Cambridge," he said. "If anyone has further questions, you can put them to me later. I'll call in a team to clean up here. Officially this didn't happen, this place never existed."

*

Lorraine sat on a couch between H and Adam on

the flight back across the country. Everything that she had worked towards had come crashing down, and she needed someone to stand by her, to tell her everything was going to alright.

She turned to Adam. "Did you use Stoppard's gun?" she said in a low voice that he could only just hear over the engines.

Adam shook his head. "I shot at nothing."

"I told you your view was simplistic," she said, "if you don't use your weapon to kill, someone else will use it for you."

"Which is why I left the army in the first place."

"But that doesn't stop the someone else."

"As I said, my view on this is more complex than that."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," he admitted, "I have to wait and see."

"Even after all that?" Lorraine was surprised at this.

"Sometimes," Adam said, "on the inside is the best place to be."

"I thought--"

"I know what you thought," he said, "but I said before, I'm not your man."

Lorraine turned away from Adam. She knew she could rely on him in the future, but for now she had just one person left.

"Harold," she whispered in the other direction.

"Don't call me that," H whispered back, "that's what Ashley calls me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," he said. Adam had said the same thing. "Ashley's story just didn't add up. On top of everything he said and did, I don't trust him. At all. Against someone like that, I don't know what I can do. But I want to something. I need to do something."

"Well," she said, "I'm sure we'll think of something good."

"We?"

"Of course," she said, taking his hand, "whatever happens, we'll face it together."

He squeezed her hand. "Okay, when we land, we need to get out as soon as possible. One stop at my house, then we're on our own."

VIII : Self

"I'm a operational point man in the Joint Forces. I've just returned from a tour in Monbuto, West Africa. In the last three months I've seen sixteen of my squad killed in action. In the same time I shot and killed eight enemy combatants."

The preacher made a sharp intake of air. Adam got a slight thrill from seeing the shocked expression on the face of every person in the congregation.

It had only taken two days, but he was already standing at the front of the church, telling his story. Or sharing his testimony, as the preacher had put it. He hadn't imagined his church experience would take

this path, but events had spiraled out of his control.

Adam had returned to the church on the Sunday after that first Friday meeting. On the way in he'd met Cassie, the singer.

"Are you singing tonight?" he'd asked.

"Not tonight. Beth and Tony lead worship on Sundays."

"Right. Look, tonight's meeting finishes at about nine?"

"About then, yes."

"Would you like to grab a bite to eat afterwards? Maybe a drink?"

Cassie had stopped in the doorway into the main hall of the church. Adam had halted a moment later and turned to look back at her.

"It doesn't work like that."

"What doesn't?"

"You think you're the first?"

"The first what, exactly?"

"The first guy who's tried this? The first guy to talk to me in the street as though he was interested in my witnessing rather than, well, me? The first guy to come along to a meeting to see me again?"

Adam had stared at her in disbelief. "Wait a moment here! You approached me!"

"You think you're the first one to show how keen he is by saying a prayer? The tears were a nice touch, you know, but I'm not falling for it again."

Then Cassie had strode past him and took a seat on the front row. Adam had slipped into the back row, sat down, and glared at the back of Cassie's head.

The meeting had begun with a short announcement, and soon the music started. Adam couldn't get into it this time, as he'd still been fuming inside at Cassie's accusations. How could she say he was just faking it? She was a beautiful young lady, for sure, and he could imagine other men trying something similar. But just to presume!

During a pause in the music, the preacher had taken to the stage again. "We have a number of new faces here tonight! Let's welcome them." The congregation had provided a short round of applause. "If anyone would like to come forward and share their testimony, we'd love to hear it. Telling your story, and how God has blessed you, is a good

way for us all to get to know you."

Adam hadn't understood the offer at first, but a short man with a balding head had taken to the stage. He'd started nervously, but talked for three or four minutes about how he used to be an alcoholic, and with the help of his sister's prayers he managed to kick the habit. After not touching a drink for three months he'd decided the time was right to become a Born Again Christian.

He'd received another round of applause and returned to his seat in the middle of the congregation.

"Anyone else?" asked the preacher, and before he'd realized what he was doing, Adam raised his hand. "Adam, come on up."

And there he stood, speaking into a microphone on a stand that wouldn't extend high enough for him. He pointedly didn't look anywhere near Cassie.

"Some soldiers cope with this better than others. Clive, my friend, just accepts it as part of the job. I thought I could do that too, but it didn't work out. Then, a few weeks ago, I made a mistake that cost the life of a young Joint Forces medic. I held him as

he died, as his blood leaked out of his wounds and pooled around my knees. And at that moment, all he wanted to do was pray. He had a peace and strength that I knew was missing from my life.

"So when I came home I decided to look into this Christianity thing myself. God knew what I needed, and he sent someone to talk to me on Parliament Street. I came here on Friday night, and became a Christian. I experienced something amazing, a connection with God that I didn't know was possible. Since then I've known the same peace and strength that Gary had when he died in my arms."

Adam paused, and the congregation sat in stunned silence.

"That's about it."

"Let's give Adam a hand," said the preacher, and started clapping. Most of the congregation joined in, though the applause definitely sounded quieter than the one for the reformed alcoholic. Adam walked back down the center aisle, looking straight ahead, and took his seat once more.

That'll teach Cassie, he thought.

*

By the end of the church meeting Adam's spirits had been raised again. After the final song, many of the congregation made a point to talk to him. Some thanked him for his honesty, others just welcomed him to the church or said they would remember him in their prayers.

Over the following week, three different families invited Adam to their homes for dinner. Each time he told and retold stories from his tour in Africa, though now he kept the tone light, and shared nothing of the more violent episodes.

He never told his parents where he had been, or even that he'd attended church. They presumed he was meeting with old friends and catching up on old times. He was doing that too, but he soon found he had nothing in common with his school friends. They happened to be the same age, and lived in the same place during their early teenage years, but that was all that they had in common now. Since age seventeen, Adam's life had diverted so drastically from the average boy from York.

He returned to the church for the mission meeting the following Friday evening. It began with music, with Cassie leading the singing again. The preacher followed with a message of God's love and Jesus's forgiveness, with a call to prayer at the end, all very much the same as the previous week. Adam didn't say the Sinner's Prayer or step forward this time, instead he joined in with praying for the three young women who did, lifting his hands at the back of the church.

"Sorry about last week," he said to Cassie after the service had finished. They'd met at the bar at the side of the church hall where volunteers served tea and coffee and juice.

"No, I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't know what you'd gone through."

"No hard feelings. I really didn't mean to come on to you though, it's just I wanted to talk. There aren't many of us here our age."

"I know," Cassie looked about and her voice took on a conspiratorial tone, "mostly kids and old people."

"And young families."

"So do you still want to get that coffee?" asked Cassie.

"I can't tonight. I've hardly spent any time with my parents since I got back, so I've got to visit them for dinner right away." He almost said "I've got to get home for dinner..." but changed to a less embarrassing line without a pause.

"See you Sunday?"

"Maybe tomorrow?" They swapped details on their phones. Adam left the church with a smile on his face and a spring in his step.

His parents lived not too far from the church, and Adam knew he could walk it in twenty minutes. Within two minutes he passed under the old city walls, and he soon left behind the bustling city center. The streets now stood empty of pedestrians. He turned into a long cul-de-sac, where at the end, a narrow path cut through to the next street, and even the road traffic dropped off to nothing.

Someone was following him.

The realization didn't hit Adam instantly, instead it crept up on him. Since returning home to York he'd been forcing himself to walk through the city

brazenly, confident he had nothing to fear. And he'd been distracted this very evening, his mind filled with thoughts of God and Cassie in equal, clashing parts.

Along the main road, Adam had turned his head to look at a cat on a wheelie bin, and he'd seen a man about forty meters behind him. And then when he reached thirty meters along the cul-de-sac, he noticed the man again, turning into the dead end street as well. A minute later he could hear the man behind him, so he must be even closer. Only then did Adam think the man might be following him.

He instinctively took a course of precautionary evasion. Just before he reached the narrow path between two high hedges he'd intended to enter, he crossed to the far side of the road, and continued towards the end of the cul-de-sac. He hoped the other shortcut, the one he remembered from his youth, was still there.

The noise of footsteps behind him increased, and he again glanced back over his shoulder. Two men now followed him, and a third stepped out of the path he'd just avoided. Adam knew they were a group. York wasn't known for its racial diversity, and

all three men were black. They all wore baseball caps, with the visors tilted down over their faces.

As Adam looked back, they must have seen the recognition on his face. Suddenly everyone had full knowledge of the situation. Adam picked up his pace, and he heard his pursuers break into a run. Adam ducked his head and sprinted for the path at the end of the street.

As it happened, Adam didn't know the full picture, because as he turned into the narrow opening between the two fences, he was dismayed to see the silhouette of a fourth man walking towards him along the path. The man stopped, opened his arms wide, and set his feet apart, bracing himself for impact. Adam increased his speed, hoping to use his weight and momentum to break past the man into the safety of the lit street beyond.

At the last moment Adam saw orange streetlight glint off the steel blade in the man's right hand, and threw himself to the left. He slammed through the gap between the man and the fence, the knife swinging round but missing him. Both Adam and the man went down hard. Adam attempted to tuck into a

roll, but got his leg tangled in the man's arm.

Adam pushed himself up into a low crouch, and turned to look back down the dark path. He wouldn't be able to break away now, as the three men were almost upon him. He kicked at his first opponent's hand, sending the knife skidding away.

"Stop!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. The three men stopped short and stood over him, brandishing their short-bladed knives. One knelt down and helped their friend to his feet.

"If you turn walk away right now," said Adam, "I'll not hurt any of you, and we can forget the entire thing."

The four men laughed at him, flashing cruel white teeth. "It's you who'll be hurtin'," said the tall man at the back, and Adam immediately recognized the accent. These weren't simple criminals, wanting to steal his phone or wallet. No, they were from a certain West African nation, one to which Adam was intimately connected. "It's you who'll be dead."

Adam stood up slowly and raised his hands in surrender. "I'm leaving the Joint Forces, you know. I want nothing more to do with your country."

"This ain't 'bout my country," said the man, "it's 'bout my brother."

"What?"

"Herrak Nusim."

Adam's mind raced. His eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, and now he recognized the man's features. "That was a mistake!"

"And now you pay for it!" The tall man lurched forward. Adam took a step back and slapped the knife hand to the side. At the same moment a second man threw himself at Adam's waist. Adam lifted his knee and caught the man in the face. Suddenly the space around him closed in, and in the confusion of darkness Adam had no choice but to rely on his instincts and training. He cast blows at faces, necks, guts, and groins, all the while ducking and twisting his body away from incoming slashes and stabs. Grunts and gasps of pain filled the air, none of them his.

At one point he trapped an arm under his own and twisted it, hoping to break the grip on the knife. Right then another hand holding a knife swung down, and Adam caught it with his own free hand.

He pulled the hand in, surprising the man and throwing off his balance. The man fell against the other knife, and let out a scream of pain.

Then a knife was in Adam's hand, and he couldn't remember how it got there. When the next shape appeared in front of him, Adam mindlessly thrust forward. He let go of the knife, leaving it impaled in his victim, who fell to the ground. He grabbed another incoming arm and twisted, feeling this one break as he intended. He held a head, baseball cap long lost, between his hands, and forced it down hard against his rising knee. A pair of glasses smashed, and so ended the fight.

Adam breathed heavily for a few moments, then ran. Back under the blinding streetlights he slowed to a walk and took out his phone. He switched it to a private calling mode and set the voice to distort. He called 999.

"Police please," he said at the prompt, then, "I just saw a fight on the path between Compton Avenue and The Mills. Three or four men, I think, with knives. One looked like he might be injured."

He switched off his phone and tucked it back in

his pocket. He noticed blood on his hands, and as he walked he tried to feel any injuries to himself, or if he was bleeding. His shirt was ripped and he could feel a few bruises, but no cuts.

At his parent's house he rushed in through the front door and upstairs before the state of his clothes could be noted. He stripped and washed, then put on new clothes, unsullied by the blood of his attackers.

"Did you have a nice evening?" asked his mother as he sat down for dinner.

"Quite pleasant," replied Adam.

"That's nice then."

"But I think I'm going to cut short my leave. I'll be gone first thing in the morning. Back to Monbuto."

9 : Denny and Tomiko

Lorraine drove her car into the empty driveway outside H's house. Neither had spoken during the entire journey home from the RAF base.

"Come in," said H, and walked over to his front door. Once H had sorted his locks, Lorraine left her car and joined him inside the house. The door slammed behind her. They stood in silence for a few moments.

"It feels empty without Denny and Tomiko," she said.

"Right," said H. He turned to her then, and Lorraine wondered if he was going to kiss her. Instead he was all business. "Where did you get your viewers?"

"Daniel gave them to me."

"Okay, they can't be trusted. Take them off."

She took off her glasses and handed them to H. He took them through to his living room, a place

that doubled as his personal workshop. He selected a pair of chunky, outdated-looking viewers and passed them to Lorraine.

"What are these?"

"Open hardware models. The feature set lags behind brand name models by a decade," H explained, "but unlike anything Daniel has touched, I know for sure they're not compromised."

"What about access to my bank?"

"We'll be using another account. I've been setting some money aside for a while."

H started packing various bits of equipment into a sports bag. Lorraine stood there watching.

"What are you doing?"

"Packing."

"I thought we were safe here," she said.

"This place is private," H said, "but don't confuse private with safe."

Lorraine thought back over the events earlier in the day. H had a very good point.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe."

H lead her to the back door. They waited there

for two minutes while H consulted his viewers. Then he abruptly pushed her out the door. They strode over his small garden, through a gate at the far side, down a narrow alleyway, then cut across to the street that ran parallel to H's.

Using H's open source wallet, they caught a driverless taxi across town, donned baseball caps from H's bag, then walked for ten minutes before taking a second taxi. Lorraine finally recognized their destination.

Denny and Tomiko now lived at a semi-abandoned caravan park. Except for the old lady sitting in the tiny office at the front gate, the place was deserted. H waved at the lady and drove up to Denny and Tomiko's trailer.

As H entered, Denny launched himself at his friend's legs, knocking H to the floor. Denny grinned, and H scratched his shaggy head. Lorraine received a far more civilized greeting from Tomiko, a simple handshake.

"Have you guys been good?" asked H.

Denny grinned again, and nodded.

"You've been staying inside?"

Another nod from Denny. Tomiko shook her head, and Denny slapped her in the face. Tomiko glared back at her partner, but didn't strike back. Instead she took H's hand, helped him to his feet, and dragged him to the kitchen area. She lifted the lid of the bin, and H looked inside.

"Denny," H said. Denny looked in the other direction. "Denny, look at me. Have you been out killing ducks?"

Denny turned back to H, and revealed another huge grin.

"Look, until we can find a permanent home for you guys, you've got to stay in here. I know this place isn't as nice as my house, but it's all I could do."

Lorraine looked around the interior of the caravan. It was cleaner and neater than those belonging to many humans she knew. Hell, she thought, they keep this place cleaner than our student digs back at university.

"Tomiko, are you going to make us dinner?" asked H.

Tomiko extended her middle finger and showed it to H.

"Fine," he said, and set about finding food himself. He settled on microwavable dinners, as every cupboard was fully stocked with that kind of package.

Suddenly H stopped moving. With a short spoken command he shared the incoming feed with Lorraine's viewers.

"Someone has tried to disconnect my house from the net. They think they've succeeded, but all they cut off were my fake feeds."

"They're going to raid it," Lorraine said.

They watched as four figures in full combat armor swarmed into H's home. The men brandished rifles, but fired no shots. The house was empty, and it took the men just seconds to confirm this for themselves.

"That's not our old team," said Lorraine.

"No," agreed H.

"They didn't move as though they were linked, but their speed was amazing. I think that might have been the Liverpool team. Ashley has now sent each team to clean up the other's loose ends."

"Do they know this?"

"We didn't know it, not beforehand. Of course,

the military teams couldn't be trusted to arrest or kill the civilians they'd been working with themselves. They might have even protected them, which was why Ashley sent the other team to Italy, to get them out the way."

H nodded. "Ashley was never held hostage. If the scientists there wanted to get word out, they could have driven out the front gates."

"Can they track us here?" asked Lorraine, meaning the team at H's house.

"Maybe," said H. "It's hard to tell what they know. But I've tried to..." H screwed up his face, thinking hard.

"What is it?"

"I had one thing delivered here," said H, "back when I first found this place, while the teams were doing their spaceflight training." H lead her to a narrow door and pushed it open to reveal a small bedroom. The bed itself had been flipped up against the wall. In its place stood two server racks.

"The same rig we designed for the Century Shuttle," said Lorraine.

"Yes," admitted H. "It was trivial to place a

second order. I had it delivered here. I think this might be the only link from this place back to my work with the team."

"Have you been using this?" Lorraine tapped at a screen, bring up the logs of previous sessions.

"Yes," admitted H.

"With Denny and Tomiko?"

"Who else? They've come so far! They can even start a linked session on their own now, without me."

"We agreed we wouldn't use them any more."

"I'm not using them," said H, "they begged me to let them connect again. I had to find a way to make them happy. When linked they have a far greater sense of self, and feel empathy at a level equal to humans."

"They told you this?"

"I feel it when I join their link. And when linked, they know what it's like to be human, from me, what they need to do to improve their own minds. And they want to do that! I taught them how to play chess, and when they're linked together they beat me every time."

"Anyone can beat you at chess," said Lorraine.

"That's not the point. But think about this for a moment, this might be the key. IBM made a huge deal about Deep Blue beating Kasparov at chess. The world saw it as a triumph of science and technology. Just imagine if Tomiko learns to beat a human at chess by herself. The world will never look at chimpanzees the same. Even the sceptics will have to admit they should be treated as equals."

"You didn't think that way four years ago."

"That was because when we saved their lives, Denny and Tomiko were nothing to me but animal research subjects. Now they're my friends."

Lorraine backed out of the room and collapsed onto a couch. The day had been overwhelming from start to finish. So much had come to light, she didn't know what to think. Tomiko appeared beside her, and rested her head on Lorraine's shoulder. It was such a human thing to do, and exactly what Lorraine needed, that she almost burst into tears.

"We can use this," she said at last, sniffing.

"Use what?"

"The rig."

"What for?"

"We can't wait until Adam trains the new team members. Most importantly, we can't wait until Ashley connects the two teams. Imagine the speed and strength of the enhanced soldier, combined with the link implants."

"Unstoppable."

"In our second meeting with Ashley, he mentioned two other teams in the UK, besides us. The Liverpool team was one, but the other? I have no idea. We need to stop Ashley now, before he kills more innocent people."

"I was planning to lay low for a while," said H, "and try to get in contact with Timothy again."

"And just let Ashley and Conrad carry on? You invented this tech. What might it be used for now?"

"What can we do? A press release? People will think we're mad."

"We need to be ready for them." Lorraine paused. "We need to be able to fight back."

"Listen, Conrad now has eight in his team, and maybe more that we don't know about. And there's only two of us."

"More than that. Adam will join us, I know it."

"Who else?"

"We should call David Roundtree. I have a feeling he knows a lot more than he let on."

*

"Hello?"

"Mr. Roundtree? This is Lorraine Grosvenor. We met about a month ago."

"Ah yes. Is Harold there with you?"

"He's here."

"What can I do for you?"

"You were right. It turned out that the group we were working with weren't... they were..."

"I understand."

"Things got out of control. They are using the teams to silence or remove anyone who knows anything. H and I are targets. Now we want what you want. We want to stop William Ashley. We'll never be safe until--"

"I think I can help you. Can you make it down to London without being seen?"

IX : Understanding

A man entered the room, stripped off his jacket and sat down on the couch with a sigh. He closed his eyes and raised his hand to scratch his goatee beard.

Adam stepped out from his hiding place behind the kitchen doorway and rested the muzzle of his new revolver against the side of the man's forehead. At the touch the man froze.

"Hello, Adam," he said with a calm voice, not even opening his eyes.

"Put your hands down by your sides," ordered Adam, "and don't think about--"

Before Adam could complete his sentence he felt the muzzle of another handgun press against his own

unarmored chest.

"Why don't you take a step back," said the man, opening his eyes, "and we'll have a more civil discussion."

Adam kept his pistol aimed at the man's face but put some distance between them. The man raised his handgun to point at Adam's own head.

"Let's start again. I said 'Hello, Adam.'"

Adam paused, but finally found his voice. "You knew I was in here."

"You've been working alone, not with Joint Forces intel, nor through the normal military channels. Didn't you ever wonder how you found my address within just a few days, when the Joint Forces intel have been searching for me for months?"

"I knew it could be a trap, but I came anyway."

"And I knew you were here to trap me, and yet I came home too. It seems we have a lot in common."

"Except you know my name, and I still don't know yours."

"My real name is Jacob Naroba. I used to own a computer shop. On the day you arrested Kett Hartoon, a truck rammed through my shop, and

drove away as it collapsed and caught fire. I had no insurance for the shop, and unless I could get compensation from the Joint Forces, I knew I would be financially ruined. My fiancé knew it too, and when my claim was rejected, she left."

"I'm sorry," said Adam.

"Don't be," said Jacob, "it's not your fault."

"I was driving the truck that night."

"Really? Okay. I'll forgive you." Jacob scratched his beard.

"Hmmm."

"What does that mean?"

"Forgiveness has been a surprisingly large part of my life recently. I had a misunderstanding with a girl, and took the wrong approach to clearing it up. It turned out that saying sorry was all I needed to do, though I decided that staying away from her would be the best way to avoid any more hurt. Then I quickly found out that not saying sorry early enough can cause as much damage as not saying it all, and it doesn't matter how far you try to stay away to avoid any more hurt."

"Unfortunately there are many people who aren't

so forgiving as this girl of yours. What I meant to say was that the militias are really to blame for destroying my shop."

Adam waited for Jacob to continue. When Jacob remained silent Adam prompted him to speak. "I thought you were leading the militia."

"Not back then. Back then I was a nobody, just a member of the Monbuto City Council of Commerce. Thankfully, I had a form of insurance of my own devising. I sold computers to half the city, including to Kett Hartoon. When you control the hardware, logging passwords is quite easy. I looked through his emails, and though he'd deleted most, I found traces that some incoming emails had arrived from computers also purchased at my shop. I cracked Simeon's passwords too, and left a script that would inform me when he changed them."

"This is illegal, you know."

"As illegal as acting outside of the Joint Force's remit and meeting with the leader of a terrorist organization without informing anyone?"

Jacob had a good point.

"Go on."

"Simeon was the head of the militia, I found out, but without Kett the whole thing fell into chaos. The Russians had a whole lot of gear for the militia, but Simeon completely screwed up the delivery. You were there, at the ambush, I listened to your diary."

"Yes."

"He didn't even send anyone out to pick over the wrecks, I had to do organize that myself, though everyone thought the emails came from him. Then, a few days later, he had the big idea of another ambush. I knew what was going down, so I went to meet Simeon."

"I saw you there, outside the bar, ordering the militia."

"Not at all. I got into an argument with Simeon. He wouldn't listen to reason. It was obvious the entire thing would end in another bloodbath. No, I wasn't ordering anyone, I was pleading for them to stop. To think! Someone like you, a Joint Forces point man, is worth ten of us. All our best men had been taken out during the arms delivery. We didn't stand a chance. In the end I had them spooked enough, so that when you shot Herrak Nusim, they

just ran.

"How did you know it was me?"

"The court hearings are public, and I looked it up on Amnesty International. Soon I brought individual militiamen over to my side, and we began exploring non-violent resistance options. I arranged a temporary ceasefire with the Islamists, though both Simeon and Mohammed El proved to be too much trouble. In the end I worked out that the Joint Forces would be able to remove them for me."

"Who's in charge of the Islamist militia now?"

"They've split into two factions. The leader of the smaller is Mohammed El's brother, and the other... well, let's just say cooler heads prevail with the larger group."

"Who?"

"I'd rather not say, but I trust her not to do anything stupid?"

"Her?"

"Any other questions?"

"Who were the four men in York?"

"I had no control over that, and neither did my allies on the Islamist side. I only just heard the news

myself. Their leader, the man you killed, was the brother of Herrak Nusim. To him it was a personal matter."

"So he said. Why should I believe you?"

"I don't need to give a reason."

"I could kill you right now."

"You do that, and this new nation's fragile peace will fall apart."

"What do you want from me?"

"Good question. Do you have the key for your combat data and video?"

Adam reached into his pocket and revealed a USB thumb drive. "Right here."

"How did you get that?"

"I'm Joint Forces point man. It's my job to get into places I'm not supposed to be." He tossed the thumb drive over to Jacob.

"This? I don't need this. I listened to your diary."

"So what do you really want from me?"

"One thing."

"Yes?"

"The GHR codes. With them we could turn off all the Joint Force's combat equipment in one go."

Everything down at once, even over at the base. I have the entire thing planned."

"I don't have the codes."

"But you can get them. You're a Joint Forces point man. It's your job to get into places you're not supposed to be."

Adam knew that was the truth.

"And," said Jacob, "I notice your first excuse isn't that handing over the codes would be treasonous."

"I want the Joint Forces out of your country too, but it would be a bloodbath."

"We won't fire a shot. You have my word. How many have we killed since I've been in charge?"

"One man."

"The medic? He was killed by Simeon's men. But now we can neutralize, completely and non-violently, the factions we don't control fully."

"There's nothing you can say to make me trust you."

"So I won't use words."

Jacob turned his handgun away from Adam and pointed it at his own forehead. Adam winced, and Jacob pulled the trigger.

"You fuck!" whispered Adam after the loud, hollow click. "Your gun wasn't loaded."

"It never has been," said Jacob. "I am nothing but a sheep in a wolves' clothing."

Jacob tossed his gun aside and stood up. He stepped forward towards Adam, and Adam froze, confused.

"And, if I know you well..." said Jacob, and stopped moving only when Adam's revolver rested against his forehead once more, the cold metal pressing into his dark skin. He reached up and grasped Adam's hands in his, slipping one finger into the trigger guard.

"Do I know you well, Adam?"

Jacob and Adam pulled the trigger at the same time.

10 : Finale

The Great Britain Tower stood over 900 meters tall, with 320 stories above ground and ten sub-levels. It was a mixed use tower, with floors dedicated to business, leisure, hotel, and residential use.

Such was the height, that when William Ashley called Conrad about the target of an under-file operation on the 147th floor, Conrad expressed doubts about the capability of their current equipment.

"There's no way we can fly in or out with the Osprey," Conrad said to Daniel, "so we'll take a smaller helicopter to the roof, or enter the building from one of the sub-levels. Either way, I don't think our radio links will reach from those places to the 147th floor."

"Not a chance," said Daniel. "It's not just the distance, it's the amount of steel and concrete in between."

"So we'll need to set up vulnerable repeaters, or take the server racks with us," said Conrad. "The mission is time-critical. How long would it take you to make a portable version? It'll have to be small enough to fit in a elevator car, and run on battery power."

"If H and Lorraine were here, I could probably do it in a few hours."

"They aren't here," said Conrad, "as Ashley said, they're off the team completely."

"Can I have twenty four hours?"

"I'll ask Ashley. If so, we go in at fourteen hundred hours tomorrow. If not, I'll recommend he sends the Liverpool team."

Lorraine knew this conversation took place, as a witness on the scene reported it to H using an anonymous one-time email account.

*

Via a feed to her viewers, Lorraine watched the helicopter land on the roof of the GB Tower.

"Are you recording this?" she asked H.

"Of course," he said.

It was crucial that they did, as she guessed that the official security CCTV video backups wouldn't conform to reality if checked later.

Five figures in combat armor jumped down onto the helipad and deployed into a loose formation. By their movements, and their lack of visible rifles, Lorraine recognized Adam and Telesky at the front. Conrad was at the rear. Stoppard took the left wing. The fifth member must be either Mike Derringer or Brian Davis, the new team members. Stoppard, Conrad and the other man each held a rifle in their hands, or had one clipped to their armor.

Daniel and Margaret, without combat armor, just flack jackets, emerged from the helicopter next, and used a sliding ramp to manhandle a large trolley down onto the helipad. A final armored figure rounded out the team, though it seemed his sole job was to push the trolley.

The team of eight set off towards a ramp that lead down into the building.

"Please take the service lift!" she said.

"They'll go for a service lift," said H, "the regular

is way too visible."

Such a tall building had unique transport needs, and an aerospace company had won the contract to install the elevators. Two different kinds of elevator ran up and down the tower. The first was the main passenger elevators; six shuttle-like elevator cars, each ten stories high, that stopped every ten stories on a regular schedule, like a vertical train service. A skyscraper so tall needed such a system, or else the majority of the floorspace on each floor would be taken up by elevator shafts.

The second set of elevators were more conventional; four normal elevator shafts that ran the entire height of the building. The elevator cars that used these routes were two levels high, the upper level suitable for carrying exclusive fee-paying passengers who didn't want to use the regular service, the lower level suitable for freight and service needs. Unlike the ten-story elevator cars, which were always restricted to stopping at multiples of ten floors, either of their two levels could stop at any floor.

A service elevator waited in place for the team, doors open. The team disappeared inside and the

doors closed.

"Ok, that's the end of the video feed," said Lorraine. "But we can still track their progress. They're on their way down. Everyone ready?"

"Ready," said H.

"Ready," said David Roundtree, the owner of an aerospace company, via radio link.

Lorraine had to trust that the other two members of their team were also ready to do their jobs.

"Should be in range now," said H. "Connecting to Adam."

"Adam," said Lorraine. "Adam, cough once if you can hear me."

She heard a single cough.

"I'm talking to you over your suit's emergency backup radio, not over the encrypted link. The time has come. H and I need you. Cough once if we can rely on you."

Another cough.

"When I speak to you next, be ready to make a new link to us."

Lorraine leant back in her chair, relieved. The final piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. If

Adam hadn't responded they would have had to give up, even at such a late stage.

"Elevator diversion complete," called in David.

"They're here," said H, and turned to the link tech control screen. "Let's see what they want to do on floor 147."

Lorraine switched to the camera feeds of the lobby in front of the elevators. It was completely empty of people, as usually no elevator doors opened to private floors, and stairway access lay closed off behind locked doors. The floor number, 147, was woven into the carpet, and displayed on signs directly across from all the elevator doors.

Apart from the elevators and stairways, the lobby had only one exit, a double-width doorway, set with a pair of massive steel doors. It was the only way from the lobby into the rest of the building on that floor. The doorway looked completely secure; bullet proof, bomb proof, and fire proof. Otherwise it displayed no sign that anything of value lay hidden beyond it.

The left-middle elevator doors opened. Adam and Telesky sprang forwards across the lobby, and came to a halt, backs to the wall on either side of the

double doors. Stoppard and the other wingman took up position either side of their elevator doors, and Stoppard slotted a metal bar in place that would stop the doors from closing.

Conrad walked slowly across the lobby, up to the main doorway, obviously expecting no trouble. He swiped a keycard through a slot. He then typed a number into a keypad. Finally he flipped up his visor, and it displayed his right eye to a camera. The locks clicked, and the double doors swung open automatically. Conrad stepped through into the antechamber beyond, followed by Adam and Telesky.

The antechamber was another empty space, though much smaller than the lobby. Again it had only one exit into the rest of the floor, another pair steel doors set into a wall adjacent to the lobby doors. The ninety degree turn and the two sets of doors one had to negotiate when entering floor 147 from the lobby were designed with security and secrecy in mind.

Conrad repeated the same unlocking process on the second set of doors, and as they too swung open, he stepped out of the way and let Adam take point.

This door lead onto the main corridor that ran across the full width of the building, doors set at regular intervals on both the left and right side. But the antechamber door didn't open on the end wall of the corridor, but a side wall instead, and one had to turn yet another ninety degrees to see its full length.

Adam stepped slowly through the doorway, and peeked around the thick steel door that had swung into the corridor beyond.

"It's empty," he said.

"Okay, we have new orders," said Conrad. "We're switching to Plan Delta. Nobody leaves this floor alive but us. I want to see twelve bodies."

"Sir?" asked Telesky.

"Just do your job."

"No," said Adam, and turned back to face Conrad.

"We don't have time for your theatrics," said Conrad, "either you help us take out the terrorists or you're off the team."

"Terrorists?" asked Adam, and snorted. "Terrorists with secure facilities within the BG Tower? Just like those terrorists in Liverpool?"

"Daniel, cut Adam," ordered Conrad, unclipping his rifle.

"I'm on it," said Daniel, back in the elevator car. Adam's links to his team disappeared, but just before they did, he tensed, as though picking up a signal he didn't like.

Close by, H and Lorraine worked feverishly at their screens.

"Good," said Conrad, "Stoppard, Davis, come forward. Telesky, as soon as they get here, move in and clear room by room." Conrad handed his keycard and rifle to Telesky. "Adam, come with me back to the elevator."

Conrad turned his back on Adam and walked back towards the elevator. Lorraine looked at the camera feed from the lobby, and saw Stoppard and Davis moving in the opposite direction, towards the antechamber.

Adam hadn't moved.

Conrad, with his back to the antechamber, and out of sight of Adam and the rest of the team, raised his right hand. Looking directly at Derringer, the one remaining soldier in the lift, he drew his hand across

his neck. The soldier nodded, and unclipped his rifle.

"Adam," Lorraine screamed over the backup radio. "Run!"

Adam, already nervous at the loss of connection to his former team, took off down the corridor. To Stoppard, Davis and Telesky it seemed like he'd just disappeared. Confused, they didn't follow him out of the antechamber.

"Third door on the left," Lorraine said. Adam skidded to a halt, swung open the door, and threw himself inside.

*

Lorraine smiled as Adam rolled across the carpet behind her chair.

"Nice of you to join us," said Lorraine.

"I'm linking you with Lorraine..." said H, "...now."

Adam stopped in the middle of the room and looked around, surprised to find himself standing next to a familiar server, sitting on a trolley, and wired up to various screens strewn on desks around

the office. He also took in the radio equipment and other computer hardware.

While Lorraine couldn't see his face through his helmet's visor, his confusion was palpable over the link.

Adam was even more surprised to find Lorraine and H, his recently disappeared friends, on the 147th floor of the GB Tower.

The door swung closed and locked with a click.

Adam stood up slowly. Lorraine wanted to run over and hug him, but she didn't need to. She knew Adam could pick up her relief as well as she could feel his confusion.

He looked around the room again, his eyes finally coming to rest on Lorraine. She wore a dated suit of combat armor, her helmet flipped back on its hinges, resting against her back.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'm going to be your second," she said, pulling her helmet down over her face, "you take point and com. It's time for us to put a stop to Conrad's way of keeping the peace."

"I mean, what are you doing here on floor 147?"

"This isn't floor 147," she said, "it's 139, another high-security level with the same lobby design as 147. We hired this level this morning, changed the numbers in the lobby, and diverted the lift. We have a friend whose company built the elevator system, and is very well versed on how they operate."

"But how did you know we were coming here?"

"Your message from yesterday."

"I didn't send any message," said Adam.

"So who did?" asked Lorraine.

"Patching in the wingmen," said H.

"The wingmen?" The surprises came thick and fast for Adam.

"You'll meet them soon, they're out in the lobby," said Lorraine.

"Linking now," said H.

Lorraine switched from Adams link to one of the signals coming in from the hallway. She wished she could stay linked to Adam, to feel what he felt as the wingmen came on line, but she still could only deal with one input at time.

"Whoah!" said Adam, stumbling backwards slightly. Maybe I don't need the link to know Adam's

reaction, Lorraine thought.

"And just so you know," said Lorraine, "Conrad wants you dead."

Using both the incoming link, plus the video and audio feed from the lobby and anteroom, she quickly caught up with the situation. Telesky, Stoppard and Davis were creeping up the wide corridor.

"Sir," called Stoppard, "Adam's not in here."

Conrad had rejoined Daniel, Derringer, and his wife in the elevator car. Once he stood stationary, and in a safe position, he connected to all three of the advanced feeds.

"There's no way out except through the antechamber," said Conrad, "and he didn't have the keycard. Check the air vents."

Lorraine found Conrad's voice hard to hear due to the fact that he stood in the elevator car and the microphone was out in the lobby, but he came over clear enough to understand. Thankfully he'd left his visor open, or else the sound would have been way too muffled.

"The vents are too high for even Adam to reach," said Stoppard, "and probably too small for a man."

Lorraine smiled at this.

"Okay, maybe a door was left unlocked," said Conrad. "Clear each room in turn. And for God's sake, look out behind you. Adam's just as dangerous without a gun as each of you with one."

The three men reached the first pair of doors. Telesky nodded to the door on his left. Davis and Stoppard took up position, and Telesky swiped the keycard. The red LED flashed green, saying that the key was valid. Lorraine smiled at this too, knowing that every door on the floor had been programmed to open with any code, card, or retina scan.

Telesky kicked the door open and stepped inside, followed by Stoppard.

"Clear!" they both shouted, almost immediately. The room was completely empty.

"Next room," said Telesky. They entered the room on the opposite side of the corridor in the same fashion, and once again found it empty.

"Something's wrong," said Conrad, "Ashley said there'd be twelve people here. And we're meant to be emptying the rooms, not finding them empty."

"What shall we do?" asked Telesky.

"Carry on," said Conrad, "I'll call Ashley."

"You hear that?" said Lorraine, "the connection to Ashley is the key. That and the line 'Nobody leaves this floor alive.'"

"Can we finish this?" asked H.

"Okay," said Lorraine, "when Telesky and Stoppard enter the next room, Adam and I will take down Davis--"

"I can do that myself," said Adam, "you stay back in the doorway."

"Denny and Tomiko will give you a clear view from above and behind. They're in the air vents."

"I won't ask," said Adam, "just keep them out of my way."

Lorraine opened her visor just long enough to bend down and, as well as she could due to the obstruction, kiss H on the cheek. H smiled, but didn't turn away from his screen. Lorraine stood up and looked at Adam.

"What?"

"Nothing," Adam said and shook his head.

Telesky and Stoppard swept into the second room on the left.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Empty again," added Stoppard.

"I can see that, you idiot," said Conrad.

Meanwhile, using Denny's point of view to judge when Davis was looking the other way, Adam slipped silently into the corridor. As Adam sprinted across the six or seven meters, Davis sensed him approaching, and brought his rifle round to bear on the approaching target. Before he could fire, Adam reached him, snatched the rifle, and swept Davis' legs away.

Adam struck hard with the butt of the rifle, but due to the body armor, it lacked the debilitating effect he desired. He ended up throwing the rifle away down the hall, then wrestled Davis fully to the ground.

Lorraine ran out of the doorway and scooped up the rifle. She knelt and pointed it down the hallway. She wasn't prepared to shoot to kill, but she knew that, by using the link, she was capable of hitting almost any target.

Over the radio she could hear Conrad going crazy.

"Out, out, out!" he was screaming. "Adam's taken Davis in the hallway."

As normal, Conrad had been linked to all three of the forward team members, Telesky had only taken Stoppard's link, and Stoppard only Telesky's. Lorraine didn't know if Davis had been linked to anyone, but by now it didn't matter.

Stoppard burst out of the room to see Adam and Davis rolling on the floor. Adam had the upper hand. Stoppard raised his rifle and aimed at Adam.

Lorraine aimed her own rifle at Stoppard and screamed for him to hold fire. At the same moment Conrad screamed something too, and Lorraine thought she made out the name "Telesky!"

Stoppard ducked out of sight, back into the empty room, and Lorraine heard three gunshots.

Suddenly her stomach turned over. Her second point of view jolted into action. Denny dropped from the air vent above and beyond Adam and Davis. His short but powerful legs absorbed the shock of his landing easily and silently. He wore a bullet proof jacket, a link transmitter-receiver, and a radio earpiece.

Adam managed to loop a wire around both Davis's wrists and bound them together. He then slipped a black bag over the man's helmet and pulled the cord tight. He stood up turned to face the open door.

Stoppard stepped out of the room once more. He fired at Adam without hesitation, but Adam was on the move. Before he could fire a second burst, Stoppard grunted as a previously unseen chimpanzee tackled him from behind.

Between Denny's inhuman strength and Adam's skill, Stoppard soon lay as immobile and blind as Davis. Lorraine ran forwards and secured both the men's legs with thick plastic cable ties.

Adam slipped into the empty room. "Fuck," he said, "Stoppard shot Telesky."

"Is he alive?" asked Lorraine, but stayed outside to guard Stoppard and Davis, keeping an eye on the feeds from the cameras in the lobby too. She felt Denny take hold of her hand.

Adam knelt by his friend and flipped open the diagnostics panel on his combat suit. "He'll live," he said, "but only if he gets medical attention soon."

"Why shoot Telesky?" asked Lorraine.

"They were linked," said H, "and Conrad felt over the link that Telesky would to swap to Adam's side. It must have been Telesky who sent me the message yesterday."

Adam stood up with clear purpose. "Let's go get Conrad."

Back at the elevator, Conrad knocked the doorstop out of the way, and the doors slid closed. The last thing Lorraine saw from the lobby video feed was Conrad reaching over to press a button, presumably to take them back to the helipad.

"Quick," she said to Adam, "let's get to the lift."

"We'll never catch them by the time they get to the chopper."

"That's not where they're going," she said. "David?"

"Yes?" came the immediate reply over her radio.

"Can you make sure the lift returns to this floor?"

"No problem."

A few moments later Adam and Lorraine stood either side of the door of the appropriate elevator. Even now Adam eschewed a firearm, and stood with

empty hands. Lorraine hefted the metal bar that had served as the doorstop. Denny and Tomiko squatted close by, and she signaled that they should stay back.

"Okay," said David, "The numbers in the elevator show that it ran all the way up to the roof, but I just took it up then down a few floors to make the acceleration feel right. They should think they're at the helipad."

Lorraine heard a quiet ping indicating the lift car had stopped on their floor. The door opened and immediately Conrad rushed out into the lobby.

"What the--" was all he managed to say before Lorraine stepped forward and, with all her strength, hit him hard across the back of the head.

*

The GB Tower had a fully operational doctor's surgery on the 200th floor, so Telesky got the attention he needed very shortly afterwards. During that time, H and the chimps packed away all their equipment, and David routed the elevator car to take them down to a sub-level. There they loaded the gear

and themselves into a white van, and drove out into the busy afternoon traffic.

In the surgery's waiting room, Lorraine slipped her viewers on. She initiated a preset file transfer. It delivered every image and sound they had captured over the previous hour, unedited, to as many news sources and agencies as she could find.

"There we go," she said. "That should do it."

"Do what?" asked Adam paced back and forth.

"We'll leave it to the public to decide what happens next. How do you feel?"

"I've felt better," he said, "and I've felt worse."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I think we're finished with Conrad and Ashley."

"This is only the beginning," said David, walking into the room.

"Who are you?" asked Adam.

"David Roundtree," he said, "a fellow peace activist. Nice work in Monbuto with Jacob, by the way. Top marks."

Adam's eyes opened wide and his jaw slackened.

"It's okay," said David. "Nobody else knows, and I'm not going to tell anyone."

"Knows what?" asked Lorraine.

"It's not important," said David.

"What do you mean," said Adam, changing the subject, "that this is just the beginning?"

"For years I've known there was something special about this tower, that it might contain something secret, but only yesterday did I or anyone else find out about floor 147. And I still don't know what's there, I can't get access. But I have a feeling that when it's opened, at the behest of the general public, we might find all kinds of secrets that William Ashley, and others like him, might prefer us not to know."

"Like what?" asked Adam.

"I have no idea," said David, "but it's something that I've spent the last twenty years trying to find out. Contacting Lorraine and H paid off big time, as Conrad lead us right here. Now I'll just sit back and wait."

"I didn't plan all this to get access to floor 147," said Lorraine. "It was the only chance we had to catch Conrad red handed."

"No problem. Two birds, one stone." David

looked from Lorraine to Adam and back. "In one way I can wait forever, but in another way I'm pressed for time. So meanwhile, Lorraine, I'd like to offer you a job. You too, Adam."

"A job?" they both said at the same time.

"Yes. I've already spoken to H, and he's agreed to work with me on a special project. His expertise with the brain is exactly what I need, and I know you work together as a great team, Lorraine. I saw what you managed to set up here in the less than twenty four hours."

"I need to find Timothy," she said.

"Timothy's safe and sound," said David with a smile, "I found him hiding in California. I bought his Idiotech stock, and his intellectual property portfolio."

"What?"

"He gave me a good price, something about wanting to get out of the game. Adam, I need you for another kind of job. Tell me, have you ever heard of the Dark Energy Research Institute? I want you to help deliver a valuable package."

"Can I take time off for the World

Championships? Jason, my team mate, is still pissed off that I missed the Euros."

"If the delivery works out, you can take all the time you want."

X : Own Weapon

Washinton, USA.

In a surprise reversal of policy, the Joint Forces have been withdrawn from Monbuto, West Africa. Officials said the action had been planned in secrecy for many months, but had been moved forward due to renewed confidence in the present ceasefire. A large and bipartisan protest, attended by both Christian and Muslim citizens, took place yesterday afternoon, and turned into a celebration when the

last of the peacekeeping force left in the early evening.

Critics say such a sudden withdrawal is a rash decision, taken without full consultation or planning. Many questions remain about exactly who gave the orders to withdraw, and which faction is now in control of the city, the airport, and the abandoned UN base.

*

Adam checked the date on the paper. It was just over two weeks old, and yet it was the first he'd read about the situation he'd left behind almost a month before.

He'd only stayed in West Africa for a few days after his meeting with Jacob, and had pleaded an honorable discharge from both the Joint Forces and the British Army. He'd flown first to Paris, then out to India, paid for bus and train fares with cash, dropped out of contact with the wider world, and found a temporary home with a camp of Indian circus performers.

He'd impressed them with his slackrope and knife throwing skills, and they'd let him travel with the group for a while. He didn't perform in their shows, he simply payed a small sum each day for food and his tent, and juggled and exercised during the day. Traveling from village to village on an elephant was an added bonus at first, though the novelty soon wore off.

Adam read the rest of the article, and grinned at the conclusions the journalist and editor had drawn. So soon after the event, nobody had yet revealed the truth. Everyone would think that the Joint Forces must be responsible for everything, good or bad, and that the locals had no say in the issue.

But Adam knew better. The situation was in capable hands. Jacob had lead Adam and the Joint Forces around in circles, and now seemed to be doing the same with the entire world. Adam screwed up the newspaper and used it to light the small fire outside his tent.

A man sat down opposite Adam. A white man wearing a suit and sunglasses, with a large canvas bag hanging from one shoulder. Adam knew this couldn't

be a good sign.

"We know why you ran," the man began.

Adam's mind raced down many paths, many different courses he could take, but in the end decided to see where this might lead. He stayed silent, and gazed into the flames.

"Incase you haven't guessed, I'm a here on behalf of the British police force. You called us to report a fight last month in York."

"Yes," said Adam, despite knowing he should hold his tongue.

"Why didn't you report it in person? Leaving the scene, and calling anonymously, is highly suspicious."

"I wasn't involved."

"There was another witness. Five men were involved in the fight."

"Right. Maybe I miscounted."

"And it's funny that one of the men was the brother of Herrak Nusim."

"I don't find that funny."

"Indeed."

"Indeed."

A long pause.

"Let me tell you a story. There was once a man named, I don't know, something like Arron. Arron was a highly trained killer. Arron left the army, a job in which one can make many enemies. The brother of one of his victims, who also lived in the UK, tracked him down and attacked him in the street, with three friends as backup, recording the entire thing in 3D on his brand new viewers. They didn't stand a chance. All they had was anger. But they were up against Arron, and who would expect such a violent reaction from someone who'd just left church?"

"That's a good story."

"Jesus forgave all Arron's sins. But Jesus isn't the one Arron should be worried about."

Adam looked up at the man. "Arron should be worried about the police?"

"No, Arron should have been worried about the relatives of his previous victims. But Arron is a military hero, and he's about to be called to Buckingham Palace for a medal. Britain is willing to forgive him for unavoidable damage he may or may not have caused in the course of fulfilling his duty."

"The police aren't concerned with Arron?"

"Concerned for, not concerned about. They're worried about what might happen to him in the future, rather than what he may do in the future."

"If Arron knew that, I imagine he'd stay out of trouble from now on."

"Indeed."

Author's note (April 2012).

While half the chapters of this novel are entirely fictional, and based on nothing more than my own imagination, Adam's story is inspired by that of my father. He was an officer in the British Army, and had a number of tours of duty in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1972. Years later he would tell stories from that time over and over to us kids as we sat around the dinner table as a family.

I tried to include many elements from his stories in this novel. For example:

- Running through doors, only to hit a door at high speed and not have it break.
- Realizing you could shoot through car doors only after waiting for an enemy target to emerge.
- Overlooking someone organizing an ambush, shooting at them, and accidentally killing an innocent man walking in front.
- The scene of the medic coming in with news that the gunshot victim was dead, then alive, and then dead again, and the reaction of the soldiers, is taken directly from one of my father's stories.
- He led patrols through Belfast, and arrested a number of IRA leaders.
- The paramilitary groups in Belfast would also arrange for contact with the army in front of wooden nightclubs.
- The piano wire thing really happened.
- My father was an expert marksman at Sandhurst, and was also awarded the Military

Cross.

- He was the Army Officers Boxing Champion, and an enthusiastic martial artist.
- After his tours in Northern Ireland, back in England, he was involved in a car chase along the motorway, which ended with him showing he still carried a firearm for protection, and scaring away his pursuers.
- He wanted to be James Bond when he was growing up, and on his first vehicle patrol in Belfast he ordered his driver to smash through trash cans and other obstacles.
- He later admitted that if he was a man of the same age who grew up in Belfast instead of Bedfordshire, he would have been on the other side.

Along with many other small elements, the overall story is very similar to my father's, though I've made it a lot clearer here. He also felt, after killing an enemy soldier while in the wrong state of mind, that he had murdered the man, even though the shooting was perfectly legal. He found solace in a local church,

heard about the forgiveness Jesus offered, became a Christian, and left the army. After many years of post traumatic stress and depression, it turns out what helped the most was a "truth and reconciliation" program. Based on the good results in South Africa, my father travel back to Belfast and met the families and friends of his victims, and with Desmond Tutu by his side, apologized and asked for forgiveness on live TV. It's quite a story, though I doubt I've done it all that much justice in the brief and fictionalized retelling here in Combat.

Something to consider though: how reliable is my father's memory? I've no idea, but I tried tease out the sense of fallible memory influencing how a story evolves, with most of Adam's chapters open with him recounting the events of the previous chapter in various forms to various other people, or in some other way incorporate storytelling. Did he include himself telling the story of chapter I to Josh in chapter II when recording his audio diary at the start of chapter III? And how much of Adam's story just a minor part of Jacob's much larger and important story in chapter IX?

But then again I don't want to give to much away.