

HAWK-EYE FAMILY

By
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Chapter 1

Norma sat back in her new, plush and incredibly comfortable chair. It was the most comfortable chair she'd ever sat in. It was a thing of the very highest quality, sculpted from stainless steel and black leather with unsurpassed attention to every detail. The cushions were just right and it softly contoured around her body, drawing her into its luxurious embrace.

Inside of her mind, things were not sitting quite so well. Her mind was a place of frustrated wailing, a place of gnashing of teeth, of scratching against the walls with her fingernails until blood dripped from her tattered bones.

Outside, in the world of comfortable chairs, she tapped on the arm-rest, drumming away softly with her fingers, while she stopped some way short of showing any outward sign of her frustration, but instead maintaining a solid veneer of respectable professional detachment, even if there wasn't anyone around to enjoy it with her.

The system had changed and Hawk-Eye was no longer a disordered mess. She'd had more modern equipment fitted; she'd had the floors cleaned; she'd performed a round of much-needed maintenance; and she'd even had proper lightbulbs installed, right along with an even newer, even better coffee-machine. The Hawk-Eye room looked the part now: it was clean, it was professional: it was a place of efficiency. From there, science would serve justice.

It was also a place that frequently made very little sense, and the efficient, scientific side of her massively disapproved of such things, seeking to find order amidst the chaos. For all the frustrations of the machine, the confusing, and often outright baffling way it was built and dis-functioned, it wasn't the machine that was at the very

root of her annoyance, even if she might like to pretend to herself that it was.

“Run diagnostic protocol three,” she said, taking care to speak properly and keeping her accent out of her voice, forming the words just exactly correctly as she continued to teach the machine the art of basic speech and to recognise her words.

“Diagnostic protocol three,” the computer confirmed. “Please select a video sample to play back for the diagnostic to function.”

The updated voice recognition software was running smoothly, as well it should. The main Hawk-Eye computer had the processing power of a football-field full of human brains, as Red had described it in terms that made the scientific part of her want to give him a very logical and entirely efficient smack in the face.

In essence, and even more annoyingly, he wasn't entirely wrong. The upper limits of what the system could achieve had never been explored, and the machine remained unchallenged by such trivialities as being the most powerful surveillance device ever conceived. It just didn't usually work, for reasons which were, as yet, utterly unfathomable.

Much more challenging was puzzling out how it actually managed to work at all. The black, charcoal-looking circuitry was difficult to make sense of. The technology was radically different from anything she'd encountered and frequently it defied comprehension. Where it should have circuit-boards and micro-chips, it simply had slate-grey plates of smooth carbon, with the occasional raised square set into it.

Where experience led her, this was waiting to set her off at a wild tangent to who-knew-where. There was no manual to read, no instructions to refer to. Some areas of the wiring seemed traditional

enough while others seemed so wildly different from anything before encountered that it left her mind screaming at her to make it all stop.

Still, it all paled in comparison to the more baffling, puzzling and outright mystifying challenge of understanding people, and that was the actual root of her frustration, as it often was.

“Replay video reference 203345,” she said and a hint of the hostility she felt crept into her voice.

The main screen responded and the feed flashed open an image.

▪ **PLYBCK RSMD RCHV**

Merv filled a cup with coffee. It was thick, dark and heavy, much like himself, but unlike himself it was delicious and was unlikely to punch anyone in the face if they looked at it funny.

“That’s a lot of coffee!” Norma told him haughtily, sounding as if she disapproved. He tried not to look as if he were doing so, but he rolled his eyes and grumbled to himself under his breath, turning away and slumping with a weary sigh, just enough that she might not notice him doing it, but of course she did: she saw everything.

Red had loudly suggested that perhaps it was her time of the month, if she hadn’t already run completely dry. That hadn’t gone down particularly well, and hadn’t made the situation any better. In fact, (unsurprisingly) it had made it somewhat considerably worse. Despite whatever amusement Red might have taken from the situation that he had so successfully made so much more unbearable, it remained that Norma was in a foul mood and she seemed to enjoy sharing.

“Yes Sir, Ma’am,” he said in reply, his low, thumping voice sounding vaguely apologetic and a little sad, not that his voice was ideally suited to conferring subtlety. “I’m sorry, Ma’am.”

She pulled her lips tight and folded her arms over her chest. Her foot tapped on the floor and her eyes glared angrily, for reasons that all seemed quite perplexing to someone like Merv, who had never used such a word as ‘perplexing’ in a sentence before, and actually believed it was the process of putting plastic windows into green-houses.

“I keep telling you to call me ‘Norma.’ We’re working much more closely together now, I think we should be on a first name basis,” she said, but the friendliness and informality of her suggestion was lost behind her solid veneer of anger, the kind of anger that only a woman who has raised an annoying male child can truly experience.

“Yes Sir, Norma, Ma’am. Norma, Sir!” Merv sighed. She had indeed told him many times and he had apologised many more. “I’m sorry Sir, Norma, I’ll try to remember. Sorry, Sir.”

He’d never actually forgotten. It was simply something conditioned into him from many years of training and service. He was built to respect the chain of command and the chain hung from her and he was swinging right down at the bottom of it. Familiarity came hard to him, unlike the easy sociability that Red exuded. Being informal and relaxed around Red was a simple thing. In fact, it was harder not to be, but to do so around his commanding officer made him want to break something, and really anything would do.

When Norma spoke angrily to Red, he simply laughed at her and asked if she needed a hug, often putting his feet up on her desk while he did so. She would assure him that she didn’t require any manner of embracing, which only made him laugh more. Just what exactly was meant to be funny about all this, Merv wasn’t entirely sure. He strongly suspected that a hug was precisely what she

needed, although such thoughts would, should, and never could, be spoken of aloud.

“Merv, we’re friends now, not just colleagues anymore,” she told him in a most unfriendly way and looked like a teacher scolding the problem child of the class, who had brightly coloured teeth after eating a box of crayons.

He said sadly, looking down to his feet, “Yes. We’re friends. I’ll try to remember.”

She frowned at him and huffed in thin-lipped annoyance, “Just drink your coffee,” she said finally, walking off to nowhere in particular.

He frowned at the cup and held it up to his lips. It was really too hot to drink and was going to burn him. Was that actually an order, he wondered?

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

“Suspend playback,” she grumbled moodily at the computer. The image of Merv gingerly but obediently sipping at burning hot coffee and wincing in pain from doing so was frozen in front of her. She sighed and forced herself to calm down a bit, although forcing a lack of stress was doomed to failure before it even started.

Her anger was entirely unjustified, unreasonable and absolutely unrealistic but it didn’t actually feel like any of those things to her, even though her logical mind told her that that was exactly what it was. The situation was moderately irritating at best, and the outcome of it was that she had some much needed time to run diagnostics and upgrade the most out-of-date parts from the system. The Hawk-Eye had never run better and that was thanks to the time she had spent working on it. Still, she was angry and nothing was going to change that.

Red!

“Skip ahead 2 minutes and resume playback!”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Merv cautiously, very cautiously, stepped up towards the command area, gently massaging his upper lip. It was the hub of the Hawk-Eye system, the place from where everything was controlled. It was the centre of the entire operation and, more importantly, it was where a brand new and incredibly expensive chair had been fitted, that nobody else was allowed to sit in.

“Sir?” he ventured dubiously. He grimaced at himself at the very silly mistake. “Norma!” he tried to correct himself and hoped she wouldn’t be mad at him, or at least not very mad at him.

“Merv?” she swung around, the chair turning to face him with her in it, looking like the villain in a bad 1980s TV show. For some reason that seemed ironic.

“Is everything alright?” His voice didn’t lend itself to sympathy and his words came out sounding more like an accusation.

“I’m fine,” she lied and did so quite poorly.

“Are you angry about Red?” Merv knew he was stepping out onto dangerous ground now and was beginning to wish he hadn’t been so bold. He stepped cautiously, but it may already have been too late. He should have brought chocolate, so that he could throw it on the floor and run away while she was distracted. Red told him to do that several times, but he always assumed he was joking. However, now, it didn’t seem like a totally ridiculous idea.

“Is what about Red?” she snapped angrily, a little too angrily. She sniffed at him and turned away, “I’m fine. I might just be a little annoyed, that’s all.”

“With Red?” he checked, just to make sure that the finger of accusation wasn’t pointing his way.

“I just think it’s a little unreasonable, don’t you?” she told him haughtily. It didn’t sound at all like a question and disagreeing with her didn’t seem to be an option. This was an issue for him since he did disagree with her and fairly strongly. What he didn’t want was to be shouted at again because, frankly, she scared him.

He shrugged his massive, muscular shoulders, probably damaging the shirt he was wearing while doing so. He was careful not to commit himself to an actual reply or to imply he was taking sides in any way. In any case, she continued as if he were on her side, probably presuming that he was.

“I set up this operation. I went before a board of inquiry. I lied, I threatened, I put my reputation and even my life on the line to set up this unit. We all agreed that this was about making a difference, about doing something that was genuinely worthwhile for a change. This was what all three of us wanted.”

Luckily, Merv didn’t disagree with any of that and he nodded happily. He chose not to mention that the only thing Red had ever stated publicly that he wanted to actually do was to ride that motorcycle too fast and eat pizza.

“And then what happened?” She stood up from her chair suddenly, looking even more annoyed, and perhaps needing a hug more than ever before. Since the time it had been installed, that was something she rarely did and it suggested she was angry, very angry and, as there was nobody else there to be angry at, Merv was concerned for his safety. Her raised voice and her expression also helped to hammer the point home; she was not happy.

Merv knew the answer but he was a trained soldier and knew when to hold fire, and that retreat was sometimes the better tactical option.

She gestured around the place with a highly animated set of hand gestures, “We finally set up the unit. Everything is ready. I break my back to get us funding, deniability. I rebuild the entire Hawk-Eye system from the ground up. I arrange everything - and then what happens?”

Merv hung his head. He should have burned his mouth with the coffee to the point where he couldn’t have spoken, had never asked these stupid questions and not got himself into this horrible situation. Just about anything would have been better than this, he thought miserably.

“That’s right!” she told him, although he’d said nothing. He was too frightened to speak and nobody was that stupid. “Red books two weeks paid holiday on the first day we officially begin operations!”

Merv nodded slowly, sadly, miserably. This was a bad day. “Yes, Norma.”

“Sir!” she snapped at him a bit too viciously and he recoiled slightly. She closed her eyes and sighed, “Sorry, I thought you were going to say it wrong again. Well done, I suppose.”

Merv wished he was dead; quietly, happily, peacefully dead somewhere.

“Norma,” he began very dubiously, with a voice that could be used aggressively to warn oncoming trucks to change their direction, “I can understand why he wanted to go and find out more about who he is. He still can’t remember anything after he crashed into a wall and you repaired him with experimental nano-technology, turning his

brain into what he describes as a ‘very charismatic electronic vegetable.’”

“That’s no excuse!” she snapped, although it was actually an exceptionally good one and even she knew it. She grunted and made a low rumbling noise from the back of her throat. “I might have known you’d agree with him. Men! Maybe you’d like to take some leave, too, while we’re at it?”

That sounded like the best idea ever, almost as good as being quietly, happily, peacefully dead somewhere.

“I can take leave?” he rumbled.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“Pause feedback. Stop and file,” she said. The computer dutifully complied. “Diagnostic status?”

“Diagnosis complete. Playback system running at peak efficiency, no flaws detected,” it told her, almost sounding a bit smug about it.

She smiled to herself, a little smugly as well. None of this helped, of course. The others were on paid leave and she was left behind. Worse, much worse than any of that, was the horrible, awful, brutal truth of the matter.

She was bored.

Chapter 2

An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman walked into a bar. The bar was noisy and rang with tense expectation that clung to the walls like cheap hotdogs and cheaper whiskey, vomited by someone with the kind of moral fibre that the international banking system was founded on.

There was a buzz of conversation, the muted sound of rock and roll from a jukebox and the occasional noise of pool balls clicking together from the tables off in the distance. It was a biker bar and the people there wore the fact with reckless abandon. People were dressed in denim jackets with cut off sleeves, leather jackets, bandanas and T-shirts with offensive slogans that had all the complicated words simplified right down for them.

Red watched as the three men made their way through the crowd and melted away into it. He alone stood out: he was dressed casually, just a normal-looking person wearing normal-looking clothes. He sat back on his bar stool and looked around some more, just taking it all in.

Nothing was familiar. His mind was still largely a blank. There was a big gaping hole where his memory had once been. Norma had given him a list of places to visit that the computer said would have emotional resonance for him. When it came to matters of emotional resonance, the computer had seemed more able than she was, he had thought. That had proved to be not entirely true, which was demonstrated when he'd explained that theory to her, and she'd become incredibly angry at him and called him an 'electronically enhanced vegetable.'

He now wore that description as a badge or honour. A T-shirt was being printed.

“Beer?” the bar-tender asked him. Red turned to face him and sighed thoughtfully. Did he drink beer? Did he drink alcohol at all? The bar-tender was a monstrous thing. He weighed as much as a small car and had enough hair on his body to stuff a very bad-smelling mattress. Hair was everywhere, down his arms, on his chest and sticking out of every gap in his clothing. He smelled quite striking. People in the next town over might have noticed.

Red smiled, “Can I just get a coffee?”

The barman grinned as if this was a joke, “A coffee? This is a bar. People come here to drink.”

“I came here to drink coffee,” Red shrugged. “I could drink coffee all day. I drink a lot of coffee.”

“You need to stay sharp, huh?” he shrugged at him. Despite finding all this amusing, he got on with the business of making a fresh pot. “You got to keep your reactions fast, have you?”

Red grinned back at him, “Quick reactions is the one problem I don’t have.”

There was a certain confidence in the way he spoke that wiped the smile straight off the barman’s face. He looked at him as though he was confused for a moment, but seemed content to just let it pass.

Red continued, “Do you know me? Do I look familiar to you at all?”

The barman looked confused again, “Maybe. We get a lot of completely ordinary looking guys in here.”

“I had a motorcycle accident. I hit my head and lost my memory. I mean, not all of my memory. I still know how to walk and talk and I remember once seeing ‘Kirstey Chambers’ naked after school one time. She wasn’t as hot as I thought she was going to be but I guess I did it anyway. You know how it is, right?” Red mused to himself, but did it out loud.

The Barman frowned. Maybe he didn't know how it was? He looked at Red as if measuring him up, trying to make sense of him perhaps. "You really had a crash? You really lose your memory?"

Red nodded and his expression changed slightly.

He shifted in his seat and said, "I gather I spent some time in this bar. I was hoping it might jog some memories or something, maybe even someone would know me." He looked troubled but he wasn't sad. It seemed more like an inconvenience than a tragedy, after everything that had happened.

The barman huffed and shrugged to himself, "Hey, I'm really sorry about that. I was thinking you didn't really seem to fit in here but maybe that's why."

"Maybe," Red told him and smiled thinly. "I was thinking that I didn't fit in here, too. Apparently, I came here quite a few times after I washed out of the Marines. I don't remember but it doesn't seem like my kind of place. I don't feel quite right here somehow."

"You were a Marine?" the barman seemed impressed. "I was a Ranger."

Red nodded, smiled warmly at him and said, "Sure but don't expect me to swap stories with you because I don't remember very much of that either. I do remember seeing Colonel Hargrievs' daughter naked one day after training. She was hotter than I thought she would be but I'm pretty sure I was only sleeping with her to annoy her father. You know how it is, right?"

The barman clearly had not even the vaguest idea how it was.

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma grumbled and paused the playback. She knew that using a multi-billion dollar computer system of unprecedented complexity to spy on her colleagues was rather a waste of resources. The computer

was capable of knowing anything, of answering almost any question and, while sitting at it, alone and in a slightly irritable mood, the most important thing in the world seemed to be for her to know what Red was doing, since she was mad at him for no particularly good reason.

Grudgingly, she admitted to herself that Red was doing the absolutely correct thing. He had lost his memory and it was perfectly natural for him to want to explore his identity and find out more about who he really was.

Each of them, in their own way, was discovering who they now were, since everything had changed for all of them. Norma had created her own unit and was striking out on her own without being tethered by the whims of others. Merv was no longer just a walking lump of solidified violence. He had friends now: he was part of something that really mattered.

The Hawk-Eye was no longer a voyeuristic contraption designed to steal the world's privacy. It was now being turned to stealing the world's privacy in a largely positive way, so that they would find a way to redeem it, to make it work for the betterment of all mankind.

The HERPES, the over-powered motorcycle concept, had changed, too, but largely against her better judgment. Much of this was happening largely against her better judgement, if the truth be told.

“Computer, review training exercise. Shooting, pistol marksmanship day 1,” she said.

Unlike the others, Red was almost an entirely new man. What he had been was gone, lost perhaps forever, to be replaced with this new version of himself. To a degree, they weren't totally sure of him, even though he had proved what he could do and seemed to be

proving himself more useful every day, as the shooting had demonstrated.

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Merv and Red stood at the end of a range. It was a part of the bunker, a place to test equipment, specifically the destructive kind, the kind that left holes in whatever hadn't been blown entirely to pieces already. It had been something of a surprise, considering the Hawk-Eye was meant to be a surveillance technology, just how much equipment of this kind there was to be tested. A pleasant surprise, to Merv, at least.

The range was wide. It was no civilian thing. It could be walked through, targets could pop up and out, it could project video, it could simulate real experiences with a fairly good degree of accuracy. Vehicles could be driven into it, motorcycles with machine-guns mounted on them, for instance.

“You need to know how to shoot,” Merv told him while handling a pistol that looked as if it should be carried on a trailer. He was no longer required to carry a service-issue weapon and his standard Glock had been discarded in favour of something needlessly brutal.

Red shrugged. “I imagine I already know how to shoot. I was in the military, after all.”

“But you can't remember,” Merv told him flatly. “In any case, the military know nothing about shooting properly. I'm going to teach you how not to shoot a pistol like a delicate vegetarian, just so you know how to do it the right way.”

Red stood before a table with a number of weapons laid out on it. A small half-ceramic weapon caught his eye and he scooped it up.

Merv rolled his eyes and said with his version of humour, “Ruger LCP .380acp, it’s barely even a weapon.”

“Would you die if I fired it at you?” Red grinned at him sarcastically, trying to make a point.

“No!” Merv said darkly, without any hint of any version of humour. “You would!”

Red grimaced at him, “Merv, you’re being scary again, I’ll tell Norma on you. Don’t think I’m afraid to do it.”

“I’m not scared of Norma!” he growled.

Red hefted the little pistol in his hand. He said casually, “We both know that’s a lie, Merv.”

Merv nodded sadly and began putting the little .380 shells into a magazine. He handed it to Red and pointed down the range to where he’d set up three targets. They were stood with their edge towards them so they were barely visible.

“When I press the button, the targets will all turn to face us. I want you to try to fire twice at each one so I know what you’re capable of. Don’t worry if you miss: this is just to see what I have to work with,” he told him.

Red nodded that indeed he understood. He slipped the loaded magazine into the empty pistol, “Those targets are pretty far. You won’t think less of me if I don’t hit them, will you?”

Merv grinned. It was quite an awful thing. He told him darkly, “Not possible.” He pressed the button.

Red grinned back. Everything slowed down in his mind. His reactions sharpened and the targets began to move, very slowly twisting around to face him at what seemed to be a ridiculously leisurely pace.

Red slammed the magazine into the handle of the weapon and then racked the slide, chambering a round. His hand moved outside

in the real world so fast that Merv would have barely been able to see it happening.

He aimed as the targets clicked, locking into place, the sound of the latching system droning around the room. He fired six times in quick succession, time moving so slowly for him that he could see the slide kicking backwards easily, could see each spent cartridge ejecting and spiralling off into the distance as it flicked from the chamber. Each shot was carefully placed, perfectly hitting the centre of the target's mass. As the sixth round fired, the slide locked back in place on the empty pistol.

He spun the handgun on his finger, rotating the whole thing around several times before catching the butt and tossing it into the air. He watched as it rolled over his shoulder, tumbling over and over as it went up and came down behind him in an easy, slow and almost lazy motion. He reached back, plucking it effortlessly from the air as it fell towards the ground.

He slammed it back on the table where he'd found it and let the world swim back to normal time, letting his mind run at its normal preferred speed.

Merv turned, stunned, with his mouth lolling open in surprise. All this had happened so quickly that Merv's brain could scarcely keep up.

"I have super-powers, Merv!" Red reminded him. "I think school is out for the day, don't you? I'm going to get some coffee. Do you want some coffee? I want some coffee."

Merv could see the holes in the middle of the target. The gun had fired so quickly he had barely heard the shots, as if they'd simply rung out together in one long, huge explosion of gunfire.

"Coffee? Sure," he stammered, "coffee is good."

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma couldn't help but smile. Red didn't have super-powers. He had a debilitating head injury which required his brain to be charged up every 12 hours. Despite how deliberately antagonistic he was, there was no escaping the fact that he was incredibly likeable. Even though his lack of commitment had annoyed her, it was tough to stay really mad at him. Everyone just seemed to like him, even she, although she preferred not to admit it openly because it just made him worse.

“Resume playback of security feed. Show current whereabouts of Red.”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

“You've got a damn nerve showing your face in here!” a voice cried out from across the bar. Red sipped his coffee, which wasn't at all bad, and he smiled, which seemed inappropriate to the people living on the other side of his head.

“I ought to kill you where you stand!”

It occurred briefly to Red that he wasn't standing. He wondered if he should point this out.

He looked up as a man in a red bandana was making his way over to him, his face contorted into a snarl, his fists clenched, his posture threatening, his face turning pale.

“Me?” Red grinned excitedly. “Someone recognises me!”

The man was shorter than him but stocky, powerfully built and clearly spent more time in a gym than he did in a library. He stood before Red, facing him, staring him down with angry eyes, pressing himself up to him dangerously, provocatively. Several other men were following behind to join him.

“You know me?” Red asked, not as threatened as had obviously been intended.

“I know you!” he sneered, spitting the words angrily.

“Perhaps you could remind me who I am?” he suggested dryly with a shrug.

“What the hell are you talking about, James?” the man grunted at him.

“Red,” said Red.

“What?”

“Red! It’s Red, the name is Red!” Red shrugged to himself, and then he said, “From the moment I step out of bed, to the last sad day when I’m finally dead, the name is Red, not Ted or Fred or whatever it was that just you said!”

There was significant confusion, frowning, muttering and grumbling. Somewhere, someone gave his poem a little clap.

“Your name is James. I know who you are!” the man grumbled darkly, angrily and glared at him with rage burning away in his fierce little eyes.

“I changed it to Red. I like Red better. James is a silly name.”

“I don’t care what your name is,” he hissed and pushed himself even closer, his eyes never shifting from Red’s. “You’re still going to be just as dead, Red.”

“I doubt it,” Red shrugged and had a slightly apologetic look on his face. “It turns out I’m pretty hard to kill and lots of people have tried recently. I’m not trying to take anything away from you by saying this, but the people who have tried, they were better than you. I’m not trying to be mean, it’s just a fact; better people than you have tried to kill me and I’m still here and I’m still just as annoying.”

“Do you want to die?”

Red shrugged, grinned and said, “It doesn’t look like the message is getting across so, sure, let’s see what you’ve got, shall we?”

Another of the men grabbed his arm and pulled him back. He said softly, “Leave it. He ain’t worth it, man.”

The man let himself get pulled back. His eyes flicked to those of the other man and then back to Red.

Red said with his usual over-confidence, “If you’re not going to get yourself beaten to death trying to kill me, then I’d really love to talk with you.”

“You want to talk?” he hissed at him through clenched teeth.

Red nodded and smiled, “I’ll even buy you a beer!”

“You came here to make peace?” he looked him up and down suspiciously.

“And to drink coffee,” Red added. “Mostly to drink coffee, actually. You should try some. It’s way better than I thought it would be, especially since most people here seem even less discerning than their girlfriends, if you know what I mean?”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma rolled her eyes. Everyone liked Red.

Chapter 3

Norma held a smooth flat panel in front of her, examining it closely. It was dull black with raised square sections, but it was otherwise featureless. It lacked circuitry, had no components fixed to it, was just a mystery - an enigmatic piece of equipment that seemed set on keeping its secrets to itself, for now, at least.

She put the spare plate down and sipped on a cup of coffee. She had never drunk so much coffee in her life before but, somehow, Red's enthusiasm for the stuff was infectious. She had started to like it, had even started to need it to get her through the day.

Maybe it was Red that was infectious?

She looked back at the panel, glaring at it angrily before returning her attention to the monitor. There was something not at all right about watching Red, something unnatural and unhealthy. Such concerns weren't going to stop her, it seemed.

"Computer, resume real-time observation of subject."

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

There was a booth at the side of the bar and Red took his seat there, "I don't remember your name!"

The man looked at him with a mixture of confusion and disgust and there was a vague sense that a punch to the face might soon be forthcoming. "What the hell do you mean, you don't remember my name? I'm Dixon. You think this is funny?" His gaunt face flushed angrily and he bared his teeth as he spoke.

"Let me explain!" Red held up a hand for all this to stop, since it was getting them all precisely nowhere.

“You’d better explain!” Dixon told him, as another man took a seat next to him, scowling aggressively. All this seemed largely lost on Red who dealt with the hostility with the same level of concern as a man sharpening a pencil.

“I had a crash. I hit my head pretty hard and I’ve lost most of my memory. I don’t remember anything about you. I heard that I used to come here so I came back to see if anything would jog my memory,” he said, all quite matter-of-factly.

Dixon flashed a glance at his friend. He looked back with a quizzical expression.

It was his friend who spoke, “Seriously, man? You don’t remember nothing?”

Red nodded and said sadly, “That was a double negative. Grammar is important.”

He frowned and looked over at Dixon who was staring fixedly back at Red.

“You lost your memory?” He narrowed his eyes suspiciously as he asked.

Red nodded again, “Yeah. It’s not all bad, though...”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma leant back heavily in her chair and huffed to herself, “Don’t talk about super-powers! Please Red, don’t talk about super-powers.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red grinned happily, “I’m lucky to be alive, and losing a bit of memory is a small price to pay for not spending the rest of my life as a drooling vegetable who barely understand the basic rules of

English grammar.” He looked to Dixon’s friend and shrugged a little. “No offence.” he added, but none was apparently taken.

“Damn!” Dixon mumbled, rubbing his face thoughtfully. “I guess I’m sorry, man. That actually sucks.”

Red smiled, “It’s actually not so bad.”

Dixon fixed him what he intended to be a disarming glare, “So you don’t remember what you did? You don’t remember why we’re not friends anymore?”

“We’re not friends?” Red said with sarcastic surprise. “But no, I don’t remember. I get the impression it was a big deal, judging from your reaction. From my investigations, it has become apparent that I’m not a perfect person in a large number of ways.”

“You’re damn right it was a big deal,” Dixon growled at him. “You’re damn right!”

“Well?” Red shrugged, hoping that some grand revelation would be forthcoming.

“You slept with my girl, man!” Dixon told him.

His friend held up his hand, “Mine too.”

Dixon turned to look at him in surprise. He shrugged and explained weakly, “We were on a break but still... It kind of hurt. The truth is, I kind of expected it from her.”

Red laughed and the reaction didn’t seem entirely appropriate. Dixon seemed to be seething in fury: his eyes bulged and his mouth silently uttered words that graphically described horrible things happening horribly.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Red said as he tried to control himself. “This just seems to be a common theme in the things I’ve found out about myself. I’m sorry about sleeping with your girl, Dixon.”

Dixon shook his head and said, slightly more calmly, “Sorry isn’t going to cut it this time.”

Red simply shrugged back at him.

“I’m the leader of the ‘Zombies’. You do something bad to me: you do something bad to all of us.”

Red nodded towards his friend. He said, almost apologetically, “I might have already actually done it to all of you! Sorry, by the way.”

He smiled back weakly, “It’s OK. We worked it out with some counselling. It turned out it wasn’t a problem. It was just a symptom of a bigger problem.”

Dixon seethed angrily. “Shut up, man!” he grunted.

Red looked at him, asking with sarcastic sympathy, “Did you work it out with some counselling, too, Dixon?”

“We have to put things right!” Dixon growled and peered up from under a deep frown.

“Sure!” Red said cheerfully. “I don’t currently have a girl for you to sleep with. Maybe I could borrow yours again?”

“We race!” Dixon told him sternly.

Red collapsed into annoying fits of laughter.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma sighed, shook her head and stopped watching all this. Her feelings toward Red were confusing, and human-nature was quite confusing enough to her already. He was deliberately antagonistic, unprofessional and struggled with taking anything seriously. But despite all that, and for some inexplicable reason, she felt a connection to him. She felt protective towards him and had the highest of expectations. It troubled her when he failed to live up to them, which tended to be fairly often. It happened to be almost all the time, in fact.

It was time for some more coffee. She got up and went to pour herself another cup. She sighed to herself since there was nobody else there. Perhaps it wasn't Red at all that she was focused on.

The fact was that he reminded her of her son, Casey, at least in the positive ways that she chose to think of him. He was reckless, dangerous and he took risks. In many ways they were alike but, in many more important ways, they were so different. Casey had made horrible mistakes and a number of terrible choices. What had happened to him was not undeserved, a tough thing for a mother to accept, but accept it she had.

“Computer, resume.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Dixon looked at Red's bike with a quizzical, confused and slightly concerned expression. “What the hell is that thing?”

Red frowned, looking angry for the first time that day. They were stood outside now, several other bikers had taken an interest and a crowd was beginning to form.

“That's the ugliest thing I've ever seen.”

Red scowled and moved to stand between Dixon and his bike. He said provocatively, “Even compared to your sister?”

Dixon looked up sharply, instead of looking angry he seemed confused. Red enjoyed his small victory in defence of his beloved motorcycle.

“What?” Dixon shook his head at him. “That's not cool, man! You dated my sister for like, three months.”

“Oh,” Red rolled his eyes and enjoyed his small defeat. “Is she ugly?”

Dixon shook his head and grunted, “No!”

Red grumbled, “Well, your mother, then. I didn’t date her, did I? I only ask because I seem to have slept with everyone else.”

“Don’t you talk about my Mum!” he flushed angrily.

“There we go!” Red grinned.

Dixon flustered around angrily, seething furiously at everyone and everything.

Red clapped his hand together and said, “So are we going to race, or what?”

“I’m going to kill you, man!” Dixon spat the words at him.

Red shrugged and began laughing again, “Sure, sure. You won’t though. You’re going to lose and you’re going to lose so thoroughly that your mother is going to beg to date me so she can make a new, better son that she can actually be proud of.”

“What?” Dixon seethed. He was almost vibrating with rage, choking on his words as he spat them out furiously. “Why are you saying these things? Do you want me to shoot you? Is that what you want?”

Red suddenly looked deadly serious and told him sternly, “Don’t insult my bike again. That’s unforgivable and that was the only warning you’re ever going to get.”

“I don’t care about your damn bike. You’re insulting my mother!”

Red told him earnestly, “I don’t care about your damn mother. You insulted my bike.”

“We’re racing!” Dixon pointed at him, his keys inside his balled fist, his face contorted into a snarling, raging expression of ferocious aggression. “We’ll let the road settle things between us.”

Red clapped his hands together once more and smiled broadly, “Yes! Racing is good, with some winning for me, and losing horribly for you.”

“You’ll never beat me!” he snarled.
“Less talking, more racing.”

■ **PLYBCK SSPND**

Norma grumbled to herself, “At least he kept his mouth shut about having super-powers.” It was a small but significant piece of progress for him. She was almost proud.

Chapter 4

“Computer, locate my son.”

Norma sat back in her command chair. The cool leather creaked softly beneath her as she made herself comfortably at home in it. The secondary monitor flashed information at her as the Hawk-Eye computer complied, its electronic thoughts revealed to her, as it pondered the question through its incomprehensibly illogical logic-circuits.

The word ‘classified’ flashed on the screen several times.

She rubbed her chin curiously. Casey had been severely injured in the accident. Even her own nano-technology had been unable to revive him and the coma he was in looked set to continue without end. Conventional medical technology maintained that he was lucky to be in that condition and he had her intrusive meddling to thank for being as alive as he currently was.

Her desperate, and ill-advised, use of her own research material had meant that he couldn’t be sent to a traditional hospital. With a certain reluctance, she had agreed to have him moved to a government facility where he could receive the proper care, whatever that was meant to mean.

“Bypass the security,” she instructed. The computer did so almost immediately, punching a hole through the highest levels of security like a bullet passing through thick fog.

She frowned as the maps flashed by. The computer was struggling and that was something she had never expected to see.

“Unable to locate subject.”

She frowned and rubbed her chin thoughtfully once more. She picked up the black panel from the desk and examined it again, just looking for inspiration this time. It was the most advanced

computational device ever constructed, or at least it was, many years ago. She shuddered for a moment as she contemplated where the current level of technology might really be, what miracles might exist now that she was currently unaware of.

In any case, finding her son should be a simple thing and it concerned her that the computer wasn't able to do it. He was her son and that meant a great deal to her but, in fact, he was unimportant in the wider scheme of things. He was just a corrupt police-officer who had been injured and was now lying forgotten in disgrace. He would be nothing special to anyone else.

She tapped on the black panel, the radical circuit board that so easily defied all attempts to unravel the secrets held within. "Why can't you do it?"

"Please clarify the question," the computer replied dryly, as if judging her for her poorly worded inquiry.

"It was a rhetorical question," she smiled to herself. "Compile all data available on the location of Casey. Diagnose the reasons for your inability to locate him."

The monitor began flashing with information as the machine began the task. In the meantime, she huffed to herself and went back to watching what Red was doing.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Dixon sat on a Harley Davidson, a big lump of steel that rumbled unevenly beneath him. Red just watched, grinning in amusement, not even yet seated on his own motorcycle. He was in no particular rush to get started. All that would come later.

Dixon glared at him. "Come on - are you scared to get started?"

Red chuckled to himself. “I’m ready when you are. Are you sure you want to do this? I can probably walk faster than that thing.”

The crowd mumbled all around them. There was a thick atmosphere of excited expectation. It was dusk, the sun was setting, but it wasn’t quite dark yet. The road ahead was quiet and straight, perfect for racing and was used for that purpose frequently in this quiet little town with very little else for people to do; when they weren’t sleeping with one another’s girlfriends, at least.

A very attractive girl walked between them, wriggling seductively. She said, in a low, sultry voice, “You ride down to the end of the road, one mile and then back here. Understand?”

Red put on the helmet. Reality was augmented by the technology within, the darkness vanished and the view ahead was crystal clear. He held up a thumb and threw his leg over the bike, settling down into the saddle.

“Ready!” his voice boomed out loudly from the bike’s speakers. The crowd backed away in surprise and the mumbling died down in response. Usually motorcycles didn’t have speakers and voices didn’t boom electronically from them.

Dixon frowned, narrowing his eyes and focusing on the road ahead, dismissing the weirdness, and perhaps beginning to regret involving himself in it.

Red pressed the starter button.

The engine crackled and roared to life, growling suddenly and spitting a spluttering jet of blue flame from the exhausts. The crowd was reduced to awed silence, some jumping in shock, others backing away cautiously.

The very attractive girl looked on awkwardly and Dixon stared, realising, at last, that he might have just made a huge and horrible mistake here.

The girl held up her arm for them to get ready. Dixon looked ahead, pausing to glance back to the big, threatening monstrosity that had burst to life next to him with a look in his eyes appropriate to a man who already knew he'd lost, and had done so in the most dramatic and public fashion.

Her arm came down and Red was gone. The bike exploded fully to life in an instant and vanished in a ferociously snarling burst of acceleration and power. Even before Dixon could react, the red tail-light was streaking off into the distance with only the drone of the ridiculously powerful engine left behind on the evening air.

He grumbled and racked the throttle wide open, his lumbering, shuddering bike making off hopelessly in an effort to catch up.

Red was surrounded by flashing lights, streaking around him, the world had instantly descended into a howling mess of noise and colour as the motorcycle growled beneath him, as power was effortlessly turned into enough acceleration to force his eyes painfully back into his sockets before the power from the brakes would be turned into sufficient force to suck them back out again.

A touch of the brakes shoved him hard forwards as if someone behind had barged into his back with the intention of shoving him straight off the front of the machine. Once the world had slowed down and reassembled itself into some semblance of order, he pressed down hard on the back brake pedal. The tyre screamed and the back began to overtake the front, skidding into a cloud of acrid rubber-smelling smoke, flicking the bike about.

For a fraction of a second, there was a moment of quiet sanity. The dull growl of the engine as it ticked over was everything that there was in his world. Then, inside a second that stretched into many, within Red's mind, he scanned the road ahead as he now lined

himself up for the return journey. In the distance he could see the headlight of Dixon's motorcycle as it lumbered towards him. His helmet augmented the scene: he could hear the engine, see the light as the machine rumbled along the road.

He grinned to himself and laid on the power. The bike responded in the manner of a wild cat with its tail on fire. The wheel scrambled for grip, rolling over and over, spewing smoke as she lurched, jumped and staggered along in a jagged burst of uneven acceleration that sent her back wheel violently sliding around.

It was too much power. He was well beyond what he needed, but this was for show. He was making a point and having a great time doing it.

He targeted the approaching motorcycle, cutting it deliberately close. He lined himself up and then went to full power. He hit the boost, rolling the throttle all the way open. He clung on, leant forwards and yelled enthusiastically as the world went mad once again.

The engine screamed at him, the lights flashing past, blurred into a violent smattering of colours. The acceleration threatened to pull him off the back, as the pair of them surged along at speeds that edged quickly past three hundred miles per hour, and yet she was still pulling, and pulling harder all the time.

He laid off the throttle almost as soon as he'd touched it. A burst of power like that was enough to take him back to the bar in a matter of seconds.

He pulled across the loose gravel drive, still too fast, still showing off. He slammed the back brake, skidding into a slide that sent a shower of tiny rocks cascading around as the bike pulled in to a final, dramatic stop. The engine died down as he kicked down the

stand and stepped off. Instantly, the bike fell to silence as he stepped back away from her.

The crowd was in awe. There was a slight muttering, but otherwise, silence. They stared, a group of motorcycle enthusiasts who thought they'd seen everything but were now coming to realise how wrong they were about that wildly inaccurate assumption.

The adrenaline was pounding in his chest but he ignored it, willing himself to seem calm and unmoved as he began pulling the sophisticated helmet system from his head, which he then hung unceremoniously on the edge of the handlebar, as if it were something he'd bought from a mate for a few dollars.

He grinned at the crowd for a moment as they just stared back in expectant silence. "Well," he began happily, "I did enjoy that!"

The very attractive girl began screaming triumphantly, leaping happily into the air and then the mood caught on and they all began cheering, shouting and clapping at him.

It was several minutes before Dixon returned looking not entirely happy, not entirely happy at all. "Damn, man, you nearly hit me on the way back," he said with a grim frown, but that of a defeated man.

Red grinned and nodded, "I know."

"What the hell do you mean, you know?" Dixon turned red and threw his little matt-black helmet to the ground angrily.

"You're just annoyed because I beat you!" Red told him, "And I didn't just beat you: I destroyed you. I was on my way back before you'd even got yourself there. It wasn't a close race. It was a snail chasing a bullet. I'd be annoyed, too, in your position. I don't know that for a fact, of course, because I'm not in your position.

"I'm in the position of the winner. I'm the man every other man wants to be and every woman wants to spend the night with.

You're the opposite of that. How does that feel? It must feel horrible, awful, just the worst thing in the world. Does it feel awful? Does it?"

Dixon stared angrily. He choked on his rage, clearly not knowing how to respond to that. His words just came out as a low growl, while he clenched and unclenched his fists.

"To be fair, you were up against the fastest motorcycle ever built," Red gestured to his bike. Even with the engine turned off, it still seemed utterly, and terrifyingly, aggressive. "I'm the only man in the entire world that can ride it. I have super-powers, you see, and you don't, Dixon, unless you can figure out a way to turn losing races into a way to fight the forces of evil?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Dixon stomped around angrily, his face reddened, his arms waving around in gestures of furiously impotent rage.

Red shrugged and then reached forward and slapped him hard on the shoulder, "So we made peace? I'm glad we're friends again. We're friends again now, right?"

Chapter 5

Norma grumbled to herself, “I wondered how long it would take him to start rambling on about super-powers.” It never took long; that much was true.

Red was incredibly proud of his abilities, although there was a very large discrepancy between what he believed constituted super-powers and what Norma believed constituted a debilitating form of brain-damage, even though they were, actually, precisely the same thing.

She had grave reservations about allowing Red to operate the motorcycle freely, but he had cleverly circumvented such concerns by just taking it and riding off without permission. She decided it was best not to dwell on such things, as doing so just made her more angry and only seemed to amuse him.

A highly advanced super-motorcycle with an automatic electric rail-cannon was currently loose on the world, being ridden by an irresponsible man-child with brain damage: ‘What could possibly go wrong?’ she mused to herself.

She stood up, shaking her head and trying very hard not to think about it, “Computer, what’s the progress on the analysis?”

“Please state which analysis you are referring to.”

She frowned. The reply was haughty: the computer was almost snapping at her as if it were annoyed, somehow.

She smiled at her silliness. Of course it wasn’t. It was nothing more than her imagination. She had simply been away from the others for too long a time, was too bored and had let herself get too irritated at both of those things. She was used to spending time alone with her thoughts, but perhaps she had spent too much time doing so lately. Perhaps the problem was that she had actually found people

she enjoyed spending time with and they weren't actually there right now?

“Computer!” she began, sarcastically angry right back at it, “I’m referring, of course, to your analysis of your total lack of ability to locate my son, Casey!”

“Analysis is progressing. I have encountered a data shift. There is a recursive algorithm that is randomly changing the search parameters.” It seemed frustrated and such things were getting harder for her to ignore.

She frowned at it, wondering if it really was just in her imagination. She said, after contemplating this for a moment, “Can you anticipate the shifting patterns?”

The computer replied, a mixture of sadly and angrily, perhaps: “It is not possible to anticipate the changes.”

She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. She glared accusingly at the flat black slab, the spare circuit board, a spare from somewhere in the gigantic system. “Is your processor speed not quick enough?”

The computer was silent for slightly too long a time. “Unable to ascertain the cause of the discrepancy,” it said finally, haughtily, moodily.

“Computer. Stop trying,” she told it. To continue was clearly pointless. It was time she made an effort to understand the problem. “Analyse the structure of your circuit pathways.”

“That information is classified. I am unable to comply,” it told her firmly.

“Classified!” she grumbled. “Everything about this damn computer is classified. Is there anything you can actually tell me?”

“That information is classified. I am unable to comply,” it told her once again. For a moment, Norma wondered if the tone of voice was identical to the one before.

“Who designed you?” She rolled her eyes and frowned to herself. “Who programmed you? Who made you what you are?”

“That information is classified. I am unable to comply with your request,” it said.

This time it was definitely different.

“Show me Red!” she said finally, feeling that a distraction from the issue might help her to think more clearly.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

“The name is Ed, by the way,” Dixon’s quieter, more laid-back friend said, reaching out a hand to shake Red’s. “It’s weird introducing myself to you like it’s the first time we’ve ever met.”

“Imagine how I feel!” Red told him. “I’m sorry about sleeping with your girl. I probably didn’t even find her attractive.”

Ed looked away wistfully. “It’s all in the past. I had to learn to let the past go if I wanted to build a future with my girl. Of course, when I gave her more space, she left me, but she left me with the lessons I learned from the process. I came to realise that it’s that that’s really important.”

Red looked at him as if he were a raving, drooling idiot, brainwashed and left with a headful of mindless garbage. Suddenly, it resonated with him and his expression changed somewhat. “I guess it’s harder to let go when you don’t even know what you’re letting go of.”

Ed shrugged. “I guess. My counsellor never really covered that.”

“It’s rather a specific problem, I think!” Red told him.

Dixon pushed his way to the front of the crowd, glaring at Red with his usual angry expression after taking a moment to glare at his motorcycle. “You cheated, man. That bike is crazy.”

Red nodded in agreement, his assessment being not entirely inaccurate. "I warned you."

Ed nodded in agreement, "He did warn you, man!"

Dixon glared at him, pointing at him accusingly he growled, "We're going to fight."

Red laughed, "How many times do you need me to beat you tonight? Did you actually have a number in mind?"

Dixon balled his fists and adopted a fighting position. "Come on!" he cried out. "Fight me, you goddam coward!"

Red looked at Ed and shrugged simply, stepping forward without bothering to put up his hands, even in defence. Dixon swung the first blow and Red caught it with his left hand without undue difficulty. With his right, he jabbed at Dixon's throat with two outstretched fingers. It happened so quickly that Dixon was baffled and stared forward in confusion, while seeming to try and puzzle it all out, to work out just exactly what had happened, why he now in considerable pain and couldn't breathe.

He coughed from the sudden tightness in his throat and staggered back breathlessly, choking, spluttering and gasping for breath. He stammered, falling forward and landing on his knee, his hands wrapped helplessly around his neck.

He spluttered some more, muttering angry words through his weak, desperate gasps for air.

Red shrugged at him, "OK, this is all getting a bit silly now. I think it's time for another coffee. I don't know about you, Dixon. I guess you'd like a glass of water, and a nice sit down?"

"I'll—" Dixon gasped, "I'll... kill... you..."

"Sure," Red said, as if taking it only very slightly seriously, which he wasn't, not even very, very slightly. "Whatever makes you happy."

Ed ran forward, helping his friend and bike-gang leader to his feet. Dixon coughed, spluttered and pointed weakly. He forced the words out with significant effort, his voice a weak little rattle in his bruised throat, “This isn’t over!”

Red grumbled to himself, “I just came here to find out more about myself. I didn’t come here looking to settle old scores. I’m bored with you now. I’m getting a mug of coffee and I’m going to find out if the very attractive girl has even worse morals than I do.

“Fingers are crossed on that score.”

Ed watched him go as Red left, confidently heading back to the bar as if none of this had ever happened. The crowd melted back away from him, wary of what he might do to them after what they’d seen.

Ed looked at Dixon who hacked profusely, coughing and spitting on the floor.

“I actually quite like him. He seems like he’s really managed to find himself, doesn’t he?”

Red sat down at the bar. The barman stared at him fixedly, a suspicious expression painted on his face as he pushed forwards a cup of coffee. “Nice bike...”

Red nodded in appreciation. He grinned widely, “It’s the best bike ever built. It’s so fast that when you ride it, your eyes are rammed back in your skull. The first time I used the boosters, I heard this weird rattling noise inside the helmet. I thought something was broken but it turned out it was just my lips flapping together from the force of the acceleration. Cool, right?”

The barman shook his head. The thought that it wasn’t cool, it wasn’t really cool at all, seemed to be going through his mind, as it would through any rational mind. “I’ll stick to my hog!”

“You know what’s really important?” Red began thoughtfully, smelling the coffee and then sniffing more deeply at the heavy aroma. “Do you want to know what I’ve learnt? When you lose a whole big piece of yourself, like most of your memory, you can start all over again. You have a new, fresh, unbiased perspective on the world, and you want to know what that perspective is. Do you want to know what I think is the most important thing in the whole world?”

The barman shrugged. Quite possibly (and, actually, quite probably), he had no interest in hearing any of this at all. “Not really,” he said politely.

“I’m going to tell you anyway,” Red said.

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma frowned as the screen flashed and flickered. The image of Red broke up. It blurred and then shattered into thousands of tiny coloured squares that were soon nothing but an indecipherable mess on the screen.

“Computer. What happened to the feed?” Norma demanded angrily. The system hadn’t crashed before, not since she’d taken control of it. This was an unprecedented slight on her abilities and she took it quite personally.

“Malfunction,” it told her with something that sounded suspiciously to her like a note of urgency.

“What’s happened?” She sounded worried and her concern was deepening.

“Malfunction,” it insisted. “Feeds are offline. Real time extrapolation is unavailable.”

“Reboot!” she told it with a frown.

“Unable to comply,” it told her. “The central core is under attack.”

Norma heard the sound of her chair squeaking and realised to her surprise that she was standing. Her heart was pounding, her head was clear, alert and sharp. “Under attack?” Her hand went reflexively to her rear where a small Glock pistol was mounted behind her right hip. The room was silent save for her and the occasional clicking and bleeping of the computer, the sound of fans spinning, the buzzing from the fluorescent tubes.

“External attack. System has engaged defensive parameters,” it told her. If there ever had been any emotional resonance to the tone in which it spoke, it was gone now.

“Analysis,” she told it, demanding answers where now there were only questions. “Engage defensive perimeter. Activate alert status. Recall Red and Merv.”

The computer buzzed to itself for a moment, “Unable to comply.”

Chapter 6

By now, the main screen was blank. The additional monitors still showed the thoughts of the machine, the internal electronic ruminations of the gigantic technological mind. Norma stared. She glared at the main screen accusingly. “Computer. Recall Red and Merv. Bring them back here and put the base on alert.”

“System failure,” it told her, with its bland mechanical monotone.

She turned to face ‘secondary monitor three’ and pressed the keys on the board beneath it, dialling in commands manually, as if that might make a difference. It might make a difference.

Each of them wore a tracer, a device that used the mobile phone network to send an emergency signal that should be able to reach them under any circumstances, no matter how dire those circumstances might be. The computer wasn’t able to transmit the signal: it was too busy being attacked from outside to concern itself, even with its own defence.

With a grunt, she took her phone from her handbag. “I’ll use my mobile phone like a primitive, then, shall I?” she muttered to herself angrily. She dialled out, calling Merv first. He, at least, was professional. He would respond and would know how to deal with the situation.

It bleeped at her and she looked down to the screen which was showing her that there was no signal. For a moment, her blood ran cold. A chill ran through her body as all this came to her, realisation descending on her, like a cart-full of bricks dropped from a roof onto the head of a person who had spilled a little coffee on their shirt and was wondering how their day could get any worse.

At first, she'd made the logical assumption that the Hawk-Eye system was being attacked by an external source, a foreign computer, perhaps? In real terms, it wasn't an attack, not in the sense of real danger, of a threat of physical harm. It was an invasion of another computer, technology fighting other technology, information striving for control of other information and nothing more besides; at least not for now.

If the mobile phone lines were down, then that was a whole different thing. It could signify that this was an attack of a very different kind, a real kind, a murderous, dangerous and utterly terrifying kind that she was woefully unprepared for.

The computer wasn't just under attack. The Hawk-Eye itself could be under siege. The system, the building, the people, the very ideology of what they were trying to do was potentially under threat.

She looked up. The monitors were still flashing, fighting off the external danger. She could see lines of code as the gigantic artificial intellect did internal battle with whatever was trying to do it harm, whatever was trying to worm its way in, and for whatever reason.

She felt a rare moment of helplessness. She was truly a bystander now, just an observer of things as they happened.

The Hawk-Eye could show her everything, anything. She could witness any event anywhere in the world as if being there, with such vibrant colour and detailed complexity that it was like experiencing it herself. But still, she never felt remote. She could snatch these events, these moments lost in time like ripples in a mighty ocean. She could put them together, they could tell her a story and she could drive that narrative towards doing something useful.

She was remote but never isolated: she was always connected to the world. She had Merv as her hands to reach out with, and Red

as the throbbing vein in her temple that could burst at any moment, taking her whole life with it in a blinding burst of anguished annoyance.

Her whole world was based on connections, but not just connection with people. She lived through her technology. It linked her up to pieces of evidence, to events, to moments in time. It just so happened that those pieces, events and moments wore clothes and thought of themselves as a person with an identity. They never seemed that way to her. They were just things that had measurable effects that were measured through her technology.

Without the technology working for her, she was nothing. She was cut off, an isolated moment in time that meant nothing to anyone, no different from anyone else. She looked around, her mind racing as she tried to work out what she could do - if there even was anything she could do.

“System stabilised,” the computer’s artificial voice called out, this time without a hint of emotional resonance to it. She gasped and breathed a huge sigh of relief, wiping beads of sweat from her brow and even laughing to herself softly.

The main screen flickered and the image of Red swam back into view.

■ **PL@B#K %SM&**

The door crashed open and Red looked up from his not ideal position. He was lying on a bed, not a particularly nice bed, nor was it particularly comfortable, but it did have one thing going for it. It belonged to the very attractive girl who had started the race and she had climbed naked into it with him. It seemed from their short and breathless conversation that she was a waitress at that very bar and that she lived upstairs.

Red was impressed at the convenience of such things. It meant that what he was doing, he was doing in the close proximity of coffee, which seemed pretty-much an ideal situation for all concerned. He was less impressed at the door crashing open. That rarely occurred just before good things began happening. Even with his limited memory, he knew that much.

He felt that it was unlikely that this was a surprise party or a celebration of his racing prowess and that strongly implied that there was not going to be an entirely pleasant experience waiting for him on the other side. The waitress screamed, but it was a different kind of scream from the one she'd made several minutes before, one that had been an accompaniment to what had been an entirely pleasant experience.

Dixon stormed into the room, his eyes glaring around as if he were filled once more with his impotent brand of rage.

“No! No!” he cried out angrily, howling in pain. He stamped on the ground, turned about and around, slapping the wall and growling to himself.

“I think the toilet is down the hall!” Red told him calmly, as Dixon stared forwards fixedly, leaning heavily against the shattered door-frame that had yielded easily to him.

“Again? How could you do this again?” Dixon yelled, his voice an anguished cry. Red felt that this wasn't an entirely manly display and felt quite bad for him.

“Calm down, Dixon,” he told him. “Why don't you focus on explaining why you kicked down the door to this young lady's room before I lose my temper with you?”

Dixon frowned deeply, even more deeply than deeply. “That's my girl!” he cried out.

“This girl?” Red pointed to the waitress who was staring with wide-eyed horror, covering her naked body with the covers.

Dixon nodded.

Red thought about all this for a moment, as he began to smirk to himself, just a little bit. “It’s not the same girl, is it? The one I slept with before?” he asked.

Dixon nodded.

Red looked at her for a moment then back to Dixon. “She never mentioned any of this to me. I guess you have got to laugh, though. I mean it is pretty funny when you think about it.

“I did wonder why she jumped into bed with me so quickly, but I guess that explains it, though.” Red smiled to himself, all this making a perfectly logical kind of sense on the inside of his head. On the outside, probably not so much, and especially not to Dixon, it seemed.

He explained: “I mean it makes sense, since we slept together before, not that it makes sense that she’d jump in bed with me because she’s your girlfriend and therefore she’s desperate for some real male company.

“She did seem a little desperate, if I’m absolutely honest. When you think about it, you should probably be thanking me!”

Dixon just stared in silence.

She had turned her head and the wide-eyed horrified look was now one of accusation and was aimed squarely at him.

Red shrugged and asked, “What did I say?”

“You’re not making this any better!” she told him softly.

“Make it better?” he said to himself contemplatively. “I guess I could try that...”

“You’re a dead man. You’re dead, man!” Dixon hissed. Red felt that they’d done all this before and the outcome for Dixon hadn’t

been a favourable one. Why he wanted to go through it all over again escaped him for now.

“Shall we race again?” he suggested. “I’ll ride your bike if it would make you feel better. I can’t let you ride mine because I’m literally the only man in the world who’s actually capable of riding it properly, rather like your girlfriend, apparently.

“Also it has a security device fitted, one that only a particularly sadistic woman could have possible thought of.”

Dixon hissed, “I’m not racing you. I’m killing you.” He left, throwing one last parting glare his way and then he stormed off, seething in his rage. “This time, I’m killing you!” The last cry could be heard echoing down the hall as he shouted his pained cry.

The waitress was breathing heavily and looked terrified. “What did you...?” she stammered, her sentence trailing off and going nowhere.

“I think that went well,” Red told her with just the merest hint of sarcasm. He got the impression from her expression that that opinion wasn’t one that she shared.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma quickly flicked off the feed manually, grumbling to herself in annoyance as the image displayed a naked Red climbing out of bed and scratching himself in a place she was only interested in staying away from.

“You damn animal!” she grunted at him, even though she knew he couldn’t hear. “I hope she gives you crabs.”

She checked - the phone was still reporting that there was no phone signal.

“Computer, recall Merv and Red,” she told it, hopefully.

“Unable to comply,” it told her. She imagined it sounded almost annoyed with itself.

“Computer, contact Merv and Red,” she began to sound more urgent.

“Unable to comply,” it said.

“Find a way!” she shouted. “Find a way to get Red and Merv back here now!”

Chapter 7

Of course, for all the things a computer could do, many of them at speeds a human mind could never hope to achieve, they couldn't think. Trillions of calculations per second with pinpoint perfect, digital accuracy meant nothing if the one thing you needed from a computer was an original idea.

For every way the Hawk-Eye central computer was different from everything that had gone before it, there was one way in which it was the same. It could follow orders, it could obey, it could process data but it had no capacity to invent. It couldn't conceive of anything that it had never seen before. It couldn't solve a problem or imagine a way out of a situation.

Consequently, when she asked it to do just that, the computer replied, "Unable to comply."

She sighed deeply, leaning hard down onto the back of her comfortable leather chair which she stood behind while glaring anxiously at the monitors. The chair had brought a whole new level of comfort to the job of operating the system but she was anything but comfortable now, so much so that sitting in it felt quite unthinkable.

"Computer. Locate Merv," she told it, her voice soft yet authoritative, like explaining the rules to a poorly behaved toddler.

"Working," it told her. The system was stabilised but far from running at peak capacity. Perhaps it needed a digital equivalent of a coffee? She narrowed her eyes and peered angrily at the monitor array, but then it dawned on her just how ridiculous it was to focus her attention there. The monitors were not the core of the system. That was way back in the server room, in the air-conditioned heart of the building.

Perhaps from there she could make a difference?

“Do you still have the location of Red?” She scooped up a handful of tools with a sense of slightly cautious optimism.

“Real-time extrapolation is still available,” it told her and for a moment she imagined it did so apologetically, as if it felt bad about its apparent weakness. She was sure it was just another symptom of her previous boredom which had ended abruptly with the sudden stress of being attacked. “Would you like to resume the playback?”

“Sure,” she shrugged, as she tapped a screwdriver blade against her hand. She headed off to the server room to make herself useful. “Why not?”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

The bar was bustling. Music throbbed from inside, accompanied by the sound of chattering voices that carried softly into the night. Red and blue neon lights glowed dimly and pierced the darkness that had now descended fully. He stood there outside, looking to the door threateningly. Red was inside and he was coming for him.

He stepped forwards, his dark silhouette picked out now by the garish artificial light. A pair of bikers saw him and were moved to silence. They glared accusingly but would avert their eyes if he turned to look towards them. They always did.

His hand reached out and pushed open the door so he could step through it. Inside, the room glowed red. There were the sounds of happy chatter from all around, boisterous laughter and rowdy horseplay. The music was heavy, with bass-laden thumping beats echoed around the room which smelled strongly of cigarettes and alcohol.

People turned to stare as he stood in the doorway. He glared angrily and stepped into the dim lighting that picked out his heavy,

chiselled features. Voices died down and people stopped what they were doing to stare, to gape accusingly, disapprovingly, in his direction.

He ignored them and stalked his way to the bar. He was looking for someone. Whatever else happened, he didn't much care about it for now. There was nothing in the world he couldn't handle and he carried himself with the confidence that such a belief afforded him.

He turned and leant against the bar, surveying the scene. Pockets of men were clumping together. Some shot him a glance and others whispered. One had taken a pool-cue and was gently bashing it into his left hand threateningly.

He wasn't welcome and he knew it. They wanted him to know it.

Where was he? He looked around, peering into the crowd. From behind him, he heard a voice, "What can I get you, buddy?" It was low: the voice was awkward and unsure of itself, a little nervous, perhaps.

Then another voice, strong and confident and utterly, completely and totally sure of itself to a degree that was wildly inappropriate.

"Merv!" Red stepped towards him, still pulling on a white T-shirt from his recent sexual encounter in which he may, or may not, have contracted crabs. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Merv pushed himself up from the bar and faced him. There was almost a smile. "I came to find you."

"You missed me?" Red grinned. "How's Norma, still angry and confused at the world?"

Merv sighed and grunted at the same time. It was the sound of someone sawing down a very large tree with a wire coat-hanger.

“She’s still angry,” he said and nodded to himself. “I took some leave to get away from her. I can kill a man with a single finger, and have done three times, but she still manages to scare me.”

Red leant against the bar next to him. The barman looked at them with a quizzical expression. He finally said softly, “You know this guy?”

Red seemed confused. He slapped his friend on the arm and said, “Sure, he’s Merv. Try and imagine that nature had a huge load of leftover violence and destruction and had nowhere to put it so it just rolled it up into this gigantic ball of vicious hatred.”

“I’m Merv,” his voice rumbled, nodding in agreement with Red’s assessment of him, that it was indeed mostly accurate.

“We don’t get many of your sort in here!” the barman told him uneasily. “I don’t want any trouble, alright!”

Merv said nothing but Red frowned. “What do you mean, his sort?” he said angrily.

Merv put his hand on his shoulder, “Leave it. It doesn’t bother me.”

“Well it bothers me!” he told him. Red looked around the room and noticed for the first time that everyone was staring. “Are you telling me that my friend isn’t welcome in here because he’s black?”

The barman frowned, stepping away slightly and looking as though he was not at all enjoying the attention. Red’s raised voice was sending the already dark mood into a downwards spiral.

Merv told him again, “Leave it, Red. I don’t care.”

“Black?” said the barman with a confused expression. “My wife is black. I mean a cop. Look, the guy’s wearing a suit; he’s built like a walking tank. I can see he’s got a gun under his jacket.”

“He’s not a cop!” It was Red’s turn now to look confused.

Merv smiled and shook his head. It wasn't a smile in the traditional sense. "I'm not a cop," he agreed, his voice a thunderous boom. He said, after a thoughtful moment of contemplation, "I killed a cop once. Two actually, but technically the second one was only brain-dead."

"That's reassuring." The barman sounded even more nervous, as his eyes flicked between the pair. "Would you two fine gentlemen like a drink?"

Merv nodded to Red, "Sure."

Red looked about. Coffee didn't seem ideally appropriate. "Beer, I guess. Merv, you'll have a beer with me?"

"Are you sure you should be drinking?" Merv scowled at him. "Isn't your brain mostly grey slime now? Did you ask Norma what would happen if you drank alcohol?"

"She's not my mother!" Red told him, and held up two fingers to the barman who set about filling a pair of glasses. "I have super-powers. I can handle the fastest motorcycle ever built. I beat a biker-gang leader this evening in a fight using only two fingers, and I recently took out an evil government experiment that was masquerading as a designer drug. I think I can handle an American beer. I think most toddlers can handle an American beer."

Merv's lips fluttered up and Red assumed it must have been meant to be a smile of a sort.

He continued, "Why are you wearing a suit if you're on leave? For a gay man, you have the worst fashion sense I've ever seen."

Merv pointed accusingly, "That's perpetuating a stereotype."

Red laughed, "Careful now, big guy. That's some pretty long words you're using there. Do you need to sit down for a minute while your brain charges back up?"

Merv grinned at him darkly. “Was that a ‘black joke’, a ‘gay joke’ or a joke about big guys being dumb? Not that it matters. Your jokes are never funny, anyway.”

Red pretended to glare at him angrily and scolded, “My jokes are hilarious.” He dropped the sarcastic pretence and said, nonchalantly, “So you’re black now. I hadn’t noticed?”

“Sure. Nobody ever notices!” Merv rolled his eyes and took a moment to peer around the room where his presence was still causing quite a stir. “And what colour are you again. It’s hard to tell with your mouth flapping all the time?”

He looked up to him with a grin. “Merv - I’m Red.”

The beer arrived on the counter, slamming down onto the woodwork with a dull, but satisfying thudding sound. Red scooped it up with relish and held out his glass. Merv picked up his, wrapping his gigantic fingers around it and ignoring the handle which just wasn’t built for someone his size.

“What shall we drink to, Merv?” Red grinned.

Merv rolled his eyes and grumbled. “Hawk-Eye!” he replied. Red shrugged and clinked their glasses together. It was as good a thing to drink to as anything else.

He rolled his head back and drank deeply. He put the glass on the counter and just for a moment wondered just exactly what the point of drinking beer was. It tasted awful.

“Merv...” he began.

It was like a puppet had had its strings cut. His legs gave out and he collapsed to the floor in a heap, noisily crashing down, knocking over a bar-stool on his short and direct journey to the ground. Merv was too slow to react but if he hadn’t been, there still wasn’t much he could have done. There was no warning, one second he was standing, the next he was gone.

Merv grumbled as the crowd descended into silence.

■ @#&BC& \$%P*D

The image staggered again, breaking up into countless coloured squares. Something approximating ‘Playback Suspend,’ flashed on the screen as Norma came in with a smile on her face and a screwdriver in her hand. “Computer, reboot sector 3 and reload the new bypass protocols,” she shouted to it as she made her way from the server room to the raised control centre.

It began complying with happy bleeps and clicks, the lights dimmed a little before returning to normal.

“That should do it,” she said to herself triumphantly.

Chapter 8

Norma took a deep breath in order to calm her nerves, but it didn't work and her effort failed spectacularly. She took another sip of coffee, wondering why she felt so unusually tense lately. She looked over the command area expectantly, optimistically. Her patches should hold; her tinkering with the system should let her overcome the safety lockout. If her guess was right, those same safety protocols were hiding the codes, the codes that locked her out of the secrets of the Hawk-Eye. With any luck, it would also allow the computer to relay information back to the others, overcoming its self-imposed limitations, whatever the reason it had imposed those limitations on itself.

“Computer. Locate Merv.”

It paused for a moment, as if pondering things deeply. The screen showed a map with a mauve flashing dot in the middle. She felt a swell of pride and relief in equal measures but it was a short-lived feeling. “Computer, that's the location of Red!” she told it angrily.

“Confirmed,” it duly replied.

She huffed, tutting to herself and rubbing her hands over her forehead wearily. She said again, “Locate Merv.”

The screen flashed for a moment as the computer sought him out. The same location appeared. She frowned at it angrily, this time casting her eye back to the server room.

“Create a real-time extrapolation of Merv's locality.”

“Processing,” it told her. “Feed available.”

“Show me.”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red rubbed his hands over his forehead wearily. “What happened?” he grumbled. “I think I need a beer to clear my head.”

Merv held him up in his chair as he wobbled around on his path back to consciousness. “I’m pretty sure beer is more like the problem for you than the cure,” he told him assuredly.

Red stared at him, sat back in the chair and took a deep breath. “I’m fine, really. I just blacked out, I guess. What happened?”

Merv seemed relieved, although it was difficult to tell, with the huge, muscular features of his oddly squared and deeply angular head. “You took a sip of beer and collapsed on the floor, just after bragging that a toddler could do what you were doing.”

Red grimaced and said very seriously, “So beer is my kryptonite! I guess everyone with super-powers has some kind of weakness. I feel fine but maybe I should get a shot of whiskey to clear my head.”

Merv grumbled, “I’m fairly certain that alcohol is the problem, not just beer specifically.”

Red fixed him with a disarming stare, “But alcohol is a solution.”

Merv shook his gigantic head. “No,” he said, feigning sadness, “that joke is just too smart for me. I don’t understand it at all.”

Red slapped him on the shoulder and told him, “Really, big guy. I feel totally fine. It must have been the technology in my brain. It just can’t cope with alcohol. I’m absolutely fine now, I promise.” He stood up, testing his balance and sure enough, everything was perfectly at ease with the demands of standing. He smiled, slightly relieved. “I’m fine. Thanks for the concern. We’ll call that a ‘lesson learned’ and just stick to coffee from now on.”

“I’m glad that’s not going to be a problem.” Merv looked around: problems weren’t something they were particularly short of.

Red’s weakness was like blood in the water. The crowd had been intimidated by them at first. Red’s racing success and the ease with which he’d beaten Dixon, when he had attacked him, had kept him safe. The impression Merv gave by the sheer scope of his physical presence had also kept the trouble at bay, but now the sharks were circling and it seemed they were hungry.

Red saw where Merv’s attention was focused and quickly picked up on the growing issue. The casual bikers were backing away and the harder, nastier core of angry riders was coming to the surface. Members of Dixon’s gang, ‘The Zombies’ were moving to surround them, arming themselves with pool cues; and worse.

“Merv, how long has it been since you seriously hurt someone?” Red imagined it wouldn’t have been very long.

Merv stood up and rolled his massive shoulders, flexing himself into position. He growled, “Too long.”

Red stepped to the side of him as bikers began to edge forwards, their confidence feeding from their superiority in numbers.

“How many can you take?” Red whispered.

“All of them twice, probably without breaking a sweat,” Merv told him with enough confidence to suggest he wasn’t entirely joking about it.

“Alright guys!” Red shouted angrily. “We’re going to leave, quietly and without hurting anyone. I hope nobody has a problem with that!”

The barman raised his finger and said softly, “You didn’t pay for your beers yet.” He looked around and thought better of it. “On second thoughts, they’re on the house. Just go!”

Red shot him a caustic glance. He edged forward, taking the lead ahead of Merv. He walked slowly, cautiously, picking his way towards the crowd across the sawdust strewn floor, trying not to needlessly provoke violence, although it seemed largely a foregone conclusion at this point.

Merv was behind him, clenching his fists, waiting for trouble, probably hoping for it. It was like dragging a loaded gun across an ocean of broken glass by a piece of string tied to its trigger. This was not likely to end well.

“You’re dead, James!” a voice sneered at him from the shadows.

Red ignored it but he heard a grunt from behind him as Merv’s ears pricked up and he responded expectantly. He muttered to himself: “Thanks for the prediction. If you want to bet money on that, the odds are looking pretty good.”

“Dead man walking, James!” another voice hissed, then another and one more. The door was still some distance away and the bikers were edging forwards, surrounding them from all sides as they picked their way forwards. Red cast a glance behind him. He actually felt slightly sorry for them; they had no idea what they were up against.

“OK guys; we don’t want any trouble. For your sake, just let us go or else people are going to get hurt and not the people you think,” he warned them, but it really was meant as a cautionary note, not some idle threat from someone with an ego larger than their ability.

He really didn’t want to have to walk over a carpet of bloody teeth on his way out, not while wearing his only pair of comfortable boots.

With the door only a handful of steps away one of them slipped out from the side, melting from the shadows. He was younger, shorter, had a Mummy that didn't really love him enough and had something to prove to the world. He brandished a pool cue and raised it up to strike out with it.

To Red, this all happened in painfully slow motion. He planned how to disarm him quickly, how to lay the man on the floor with as little difficulty as possible, to make a point to the others about just how dangerous they were, and that messing with them wasn't a very good idea at all.

For a long moment, his hand was above his head, the fingers wrapped around a wooden cue. Suddenly, a gigantic fist connected with his head. The skin covering his head puffed out like a bag that was suddenly filled with air and then popped. His eyes bulged, his jaw flopped around as the bones it was made of were pulverised from the enormous force of the impact. As Merv's fist continued straight along its path, not one to be deviated by something as insignificant as a human head, his body was dragged limply along with it. His feet left the ground as his skull began its journey to the floor, on a course that would lead him all the way to a hospital bed with a bill that would financially cripple him, as he recovered (if that was even possible) from a blow that would cripple him in every other imaginable sense of the word.

The crowd were almost silent except for a gasping sound as the young man came to a halt, a sad little pile of bones that simply wasn't getting the signals it needed from his brain any longer. Survival seemed not unlikely, of a sort, at least.

Another stepped forward, lunging aggressively. Red waited patiently for him to decide to attack. He pulled back his right arm, the fingers clenching as he did. That was good enough, a strong

implication that he wasn't making a move to shake hands and wish him well. Red moved so fast that it was difficult for ordinary people to see the distinct movements. With his left hand he cupped the man's elbow firmly, with the right, he grabbed his wrist. He used the backing-up motion and added to it, levering his arm against the elbow, over-balancing him and throwing him simply to the ground, kicking his feet out from under him. Nice and simple, and nobody ended up in a vegetative coma.

Red felt this was probably a better solution all round to pulverising his face. His head smacked hard into the ground and he was nicely no longer a threat to anyone.

Still, life was what it was. Merv was now in one of his murderous rages and there was no going back for any of them. Another biker had dubiously edged forwards, with a small pocket knife, of all things. Seeing a fellow 'Zombie' reduced to a pile of damaged organs took a lot of the enthusiasm out of his attack, but, sadly for him, it took none of it out of Merv's.

Merv saw the glint of a knife and didn't wait to be formally introduced, so they could discuss the matter rationally. Red could only watch in stupefied horror as Merv disarmed him with a Pool-table. (Yes, you read that correctly.)

He up-ended the thing to stand up horizontally and kicked it across the room at him. It caught him around the waist, the air left his lungs fairly abruptly and he sagged over the thing as it broke his legs for him in several places that legs least like to be broken. His head slammed to the ground knocking the consciousness right out of him which Red thought was really rather a blessing for him at that point.

A punch was swung at him from the left. He let it go past his head slowly before grabbing hold of the wrist firmly and breaking the elbow with a sharp upwards blow. There was an anguished cry and

Red had to admit to himself, it did give him quite an interesting rush to cause harm to someone. The man had wanted to kill him, after all, so it all seemed fair enough, really.

Merv was breathing heavily like an animal. There was a growling expression on his face, showing off his bared teeth. His eyes were tiny, angry things, peering around for someone else to violate cruelly.

The crowd seemed to have lost interest in the whole thing, backing off quite quickly, melting back into the shadows. Now, they seemed to be more interested in getting them out of the door rather than keeping them from it.

“Merv!” Red shouted at him. The monstrous wall of muscle turned on him. It bore down as if ready to tear him apart. “Merv, it’s time to go.”

The tension seemed to leave him: he calmed slightly, his shoulders lowering, his face no longer contorted into a snarling rage.

“Come on,” Red said softly. He reached out for the door’s handle and his eyes narrowed. He thought to himself angrily, ‘Nobody better have touched my bike.’

Outside, a few people had been watching through the window. They backed away sharply, mumbling to themselves, gasping as Merv stepped through the door, turning sideways so that he would fit.

Red saw a man next to his motorcycle. He was rolling around the floor in agony, clenching his genitals through his jeans which now sported a significant patch of burnt fabric. The stench of melted pubic hair hung heavily on the air. Merv frowned curiously.

Red explained, “I asked Norma to fit a security device to the bike so only I could ride it. She suggested punishing anyone else who tried by fitting a 250 000v stun-gun to the seat so they’d get a very

nasty shock, and in a very nasty place, if they sat on her. It looks like someone tried his luck.”

Merv’s face contorted into an expression of pain as he sucked in air noisily. “I almost feel sorry for him. Almost.”

“Not me!” Red scowled at him. He approached the bike, glaring angrily at the man lying on the floor, who was making painful gasping noises. He briefly considered stamping on his head, kicking the teeth out of his jaws or breaking every one of his fingers for the audacity of sitting on his beloved machine.

He refrained from doing so, since he just wasn’t built that way, but it was comforting to know that this man had suffered a great deal and would continue to do so for a very long time. He’d also have some very difficult explaining to do to his wife for the rest of the week about why he just wasn’t in the mood.

She was his bike. She wouldn’t let anyone else on her. He took a certain pride in that.

He looked up as one more ‘Zombie’ tried his luck. He yelled angrily, screaming a blood-curdling battle-cry as he approached Red, another pool cue ready to bash in his electronically-enhanced brains. Merv’s speed defied his great size and his mighty hand scooped him up. The screaming stopped abruptly, as did all forward motion as Merv’s fingers closed around his neck, like a vice crushing a banana. He made a choked gulping noise as his eyes bulged and his face almost instantly turned bright crimson.

Merv disarmed him, snatching the cue away. He took it behind him and thrust. The man convulsed painfully and his eyes bulged even more. Merv released his grip and a pained, ‘Aaaahhhh’ sound gurgled from his lips while he looked onwards into forever, a place where his farts would never again make a sound.

He collapsed to the side, tears of agony quietly streaming down his face.

Red, this time, looked like he was in pain, his face twisted disapprovingly into an expression of sympathetic horror. “Merv, did you just put that cue in his..?” the words escaped him but they both understood.

Merv very slowly began to nod. Indeed he had.

“I’m not saying he didn’t deserve it but...” Red let the words trail off. His point had been made. “Wow, Merv. That was dark!”

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma cringed at all this but was relieved they were safe.

“Boys will be boys,” she grumbled at them. “At least they’re together. That should make sending a message easier.”

“Message system offline,” the computer replied, making sense of what she was saying and responding accordingly. Norma was surprised for a moment. It had never been programmed to understand such use of language. It was learning.

“Why is the message system offline?”

“Targeted virus is blocking all outgoing communication while keeping incoming data retrieval open,” it told her. Finally, she was past the safety protocols. The situation had demanded decisive action and she’d taken measures she normally wouldn’t have considered.

“Why would a virus block me from sending data out while letting us receive data in? That means the Hawk-Eye surveillance system is still operational, so we can still do what we were designed to do!” She rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

“The virus is just the first wave of the attack,” the computer told her. “More is coming and it’s maintaining the communication channel for that very reason. It wants to get in.”

She looked back at it, her eyes widened in surprise. She was really worried now.

Chapter 9

Norma said with a renewed sense of urgency, “Computer, there must be a way to send some kind of signal out of here. There has to be something that would work: there has to be something!”

“Unable to respond to that inquiry,” it told her snappily, as if its little electronic mind was offended in some little electronic way.

“Computer, is there any conceivable way to send a message out? Is there a way to communicate by any means with Red and Merv?” The question was equally aimed at herself as she pondered the issue, but the computer might as well be helping to find a solution, as it was largely causing the problem.

She was pacing, a thing she only did when she was deeply troubled, when her mind had reached the outskirts of its ability and she was still asking more of it. She sighed to herself wearily, struggling to work things out when maybe there was simply nothing that could be done. Of course, she would never accept that.

“All outgoing communication channels are blocked by the foreign software,” its tinny little voice said.

She frowned. So, the computer was containing the attack, but doing so was blocking its ability to send outgoing transmissions. Clearly, the virus was behaving exactly as it should. This was a plan, this was a coordinated attack and, if she was understanding everything correctly, it was just the beginning.

Suddenly, she realised how suspicious, not to mention unlikely, that actually was. She said thoughtfully, “Computer, what do we know about this virus? Put all current information on the screen.”

The main monitor brought up what little they had. She began working through it, through myriad calculations and projections.

“Computer, how did an external virus invade a completely custom-made and utterly unique piece of software? The Hawk-Eye system is a one of a kind. It was built from scratch. Either the virus is an incredibly complex and brilliant piece of adaptive artificial intelligence or else...” she scanned through the information and bit her lip nervously.

“I am unable to answer that inquiry as there is currently insufficient data on which to formulate a hypothesis,” it said.

She didn’t need it to. It was becoming fairly apparent, and uncomfortably so.

“Computer, if I connect an external computer, something not related to the Hawk-Eye system, then would it be possible to bypass the main processor and send out a signal?” she asked as she closed her eyes and hoped, just hoped, it might work.

“If the external computer was completely incompatible with Hawk-Eye technology and it was able to connect to the digital feed then it is theoretically possible for it to communicate externally,” it replied.

She beamed a triumphant smile at the first piece of good news she’d had so far. The main problem was that she didn’t have a computer. Why would she? She worked inside one. It would be like carrying a bucket of salt water into the middle of an ocean. She held up her smart-phone and bit her lip thoughtfully some more, even though it didn’t appear to be helping.

It may be possible, just maybe, she thought to herself.

“Display schematics of the system and show necessary pathways that I would need to gain access to in order to be able to send any external communications.” The screen flashed with the information. She sighed. It was not an easy task. She would have to adapt a lot of equipment, make new connections and solder together

a lot of wires. It was tedious work, but she was confident she might be able to make something happen, make some kind of signal that they should understand, some kind of warning out to the others and recall them back to the base to help.

“Computer, what are Red and Merv doing?” She said idly, while scanning through the schematics and pulling her phone apart with a screwdriver blade.

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

The driveway outside the bar was their own, for now. Nobody was approaching them, nobody wanted to get anywhere near either of them, especially since now there was a man rolling around the floor with scorched genitals who appeared to have soiled himself, and another with a pool cue in the place where a man would consider a pool cue to be the least welcome thing in the entire world.

“I wonder if I’d had many bar-fights before I had my head injury?” Red said rhetorically, suspecting he probably had, since he was rather enjoying this one.

Merv rumbled away, his low voice barely more than a growl. “I’ve had a few. More than a few. More than that, even. A lot really. More than a lot, really.”

Red grinned and said sarcastically, “You know what? I’m shocked to hear that about you. You’re saying you like to fight?”

Merv nodded, “I know, it’s hard to believe, right? I was quite aggressive when I was young. That was why I joined the military and got involved in the special development program.”

Red’s grin vanished. “Special development program?” he said in surprise. “Are you telling me that you have super-powers too?” He thought about it for a moment. It was pretty obvious really.

“They gave me lots of injections and made me eat a lot of eggs,” Merv shrugged. “That was pretty much all there was to it, if I remember rightly. I also got a lot of training, too, on how to kill people with the least amount of fuss. I signed up because they gave us Sunday afternoons off and the camp was quite near a cinema. I like movies, you see.”

Red frowned, “Your super-powers back-story is terrible. Mine is epic. You could base a whole book on that, but yours is just a bit sad. Nobody is going to write a book about a man eating a lot of eggs, you know!

“We might have to work on that. We could come up with something a bit more imaginative.”

“It was a huge amount of eggs,” Merv explained. He looked thoughtful for a moment. “I don’t even like eggs, except eggs-Benedict, but they didn’t make that. I asked them once if they could, but I got a slap round the back of the head and was handed a plate of scrambled eggs and told to shut my fool mouth.”

“I wonder if I like eggs-Benedict?” Red missed the point.

“It has meat in it, and you’re a delicate vegetarian,” Merv told him.

Red grunted, “I’m not delicate. I broke a guy’s arm back there with a single blow. I did it so quickly, he didn’t even know his arm had been broken.”

“I broke many guys,” Merv told him, smirking. “When I break a guy, he knows he’s been broken. I don’t leave doubts.”

“That first one didn’t look like he knew he’d been broken,” Red argued, “He didn’t look like he was going to know anything for at least a week.”

“I stand corrected,” Merv conceded the point happily. “Vegetative comas are my signature move.”

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

“Computer, pause feed,” she told the computer, wincing, as if listening to them was causing her physical pain. “I think that’s quite enough mindless testosterone for one day. Clearly, those two are perfectly fine for now. I think we should focus on the more immediate problems!”

“Confirmed,” it agreed with her, earning itself a quizzical frown. Was it learning and, if so, should it be learning from Norma?

“Computer, for the sake of conversation, how is it possible that a virus managed to attack you?”

It paused momentarily, searching for a theoretical answer. Finally, it replied: “The virus must be designed to operate on the same software as the Hawk-Eye computer.”

“Agreed,” she told it. “And who could possibly design such a virus. Who has access to the software?”

“Unknown,” it replied.

She thought for a moment. Now that the safety protocols had been removed, there might be more questions she could ask. “What do we know about the person who built you?”

“Professor Joseph Schovani. Born in the Czech Republic, 1934.” As the computer spoke, the image on the screen was replaced with his file. He was a gaunt old man, his face lean and angry. His eyes seemed to burn with wisdom in his picture and his image stared out of the screen at her as if it were alive.

His file was heavily censored and didn’t give much information away. If only she had a way... She slapped herself on the forehead.

“Computer, compile a video of the last known whereabouts of Professor Schovani,” she told it, sighing at herself at her rather foolish oversight.

“Working,” it told her, as it scavenged back into recorded archives. “Video is available on the main monitor.”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Professor Joseph Schovani swiped his ID and the card-reader light went from red to green, flashing three times as it approved his entry, accompanied by a click as the door unlocked.

He stepped inside the complex.

Beyond the entrance was a long corridor. Offices to the sides contained unknown scientific work, horrors beyond imaginings, as the frontiers of what was known were pushed back with the tender subtlety of a brick to the face.

He was a man with a singular purpose as he marched along the corridor towards his lab, towards his little domain. In there, computer science was being challenged, forcibly expanded beyond, what some people believed, might ever be possible.

As he passed a door, he recalled various stories he'd heard. There were tales of a super-soldier program, turning hapless volunteers into anger-driven monsters with bodies of solid muscle and sinew. There were rumours of nano-technology, designed to augment the human brain, of extracting raw hydrogen from water to power insanely powerful vehicles, of all manner of things of which nature would simply not approve.

Perhaps the boundaries of science were there for a reason after all; maybe there were meant to be limits.

Humans patted themselves on the back, congratulating themselves on their creativity, their resourcefulness and their cunning. But the work they did was so often behind closed doors, suggesting that they knew it was wrong. They were putting weapons into the hands of psychopaths, into the hands of people whose genes

should have been erased from humanity. Instead they chose to call them leaders and follow them to their own annihilation.

For him, all hope was lost and had been long before he'd realised it, as he descended into a pit of cynicism with no hope, or particular desire, to ever crawl back out of.

He stopped a few meters from the door, from his door and from his lab. He swallowed hard. This was it. Everything that had happened had led up to this moment. Part of him was scared, perhaps naturally so, but his resolve was strong. This had to happen and this was going to happen, even if he might wish that such things could have been avoided. He knew that they could not.

He took a deep breath. He steeled himself and stepped forwards. It was time.

Inside the lab, the others turned to see him as he entered. They looked surprised almost; some of them looked puzzled, perhaps intrigued. There was an aura of expectant silence that hung on the air, just as thickly as the smell of cleaning fluid that permeated the sterile lab.

Colonel Savage, a uniquely ironically named military officer, stepped forward, assuming command of the situation. "Good afternoon, Professor," he said simply. His voice had the merest hint of an accent, a subtle reminder that he had come from another, far-off place.

The Professor nodded to him, a curt grumble of greeting as he cleared his throat with a cough, "Thank you for coming. Thank you all for coming."

Around the room there was a buzz of muttering but their attention was largely on him.

He looked around them, each in turn, “Thank you, Joanne, for your assistance.”

Joanne looked up, surprised to be mentioned at all. She smiled awkwardly, appearing to be a little confused as she looked from each of the faces of the others, most of whom had stopped to stare at her, slightly accusingly.

He continued: “Without your tireless assistance in the development of this project, we couldn’t have made the progress that we’ve seen. I’m sorry to have had to invite you here, but I felt your presence was essential. You’re an excellent assistant and I feel you are capable of carrying on some elements of my work, even without my leadership. I had to plan for every eventuality, you see, and for that, I had no choice but to include you.”

She looked around sheepishly. This was high praise indeed. “Thank you, Professor Schovani. I’m honoured.”

He gave her an odd expression that she clearly wasn’t quite able to make sense of. He moved on to the next.

He began, “Thank you all for coming. Thank you, Colonel Savage, for liaising with the military, the military who are so desperate for this technology to guide their bombs and to aim their weapons. Thank you, Mr Goldfarb, for keeping us on budget, for pinching every penny and for your tireless memos about cutbacks, that nobody ever reads.”

Goldfarb didn’t seem amused by all this. His leathery face contorted into a frown, “What’s all this about, Schovani?”

The Professor held up a hand, “Thank you to Professor Lang from the material-sciences division. The development of this material has changed everything. I know you’re not at liberty to tell us where you got it from but, still, your input has been a key element of this program.”

She nodded happily, a little smugly, in fact.

“And thank you to Officer Drugan and Doctor Custer for their tireless assistance in writing the computer code that’s become the operating system for a whole new generation of computer science, a science so advanced that mainstream development can’t hope to catch up for another five decades, at the earliest.”

They looked at one another awkwardly.

The Colonel spoke after a lengthy pause implied that he’d finished, “I’d like to officially extend our condolences about what happened. I’m very sorry. We’re all very sorry.”

Schovani nodded at him. A grim expression of determination, tempered with the pain of some great loss, was etched on his face and shone out from his steely eyes. “Perhaps, personally, you are. But sadly, we all work for a machine that must be stopped,” he told them, his voice softer than before, more resolved to his fate than determined to see it through.

“The computer?” the Colonel frowned. “Why must it be stopped?”

Professor Schovani explained: “The military is the machine I’m referring to, the government. I can no longer work for them in good conscience. I can no longer hand over my work, knowing it will serve the damnation of all mankind.”

They looked to one another. Goldfarb spoke, “My time is precious,” and he began to head to the door.

“Please remain,” he said. “I have sealed the door. It can only open with my own voice-print and I’ve set it not to operate if my voice has any note of stress.”

“What?” Goldfarb demanded angrily. “Why would you do that?”

The Professor fixed him with a disarming stare. He edged forward and the chubby accountant began backing nervously away. “I want to give you a chance. I want you to renounce our work. I want to completely destroy everything we’ve built here. Each and every one of us must undo the thing we’ve created. We must unpick the seams of the monster we’ve stitched together.”

The Colonel put a gentle but firm hand on his shoulder. “That isn’t going to happen, I’m afraid. I sympathise with your situation but please understand that we have a job to do. We all have a job to do.”

Joanne shrugged to him, an uneven smile on her lips, as she said, “Professor, we’ve built a computer. We’re not building a weapon platform. We’re building an electronic mind. In itself, it’s benign. What matters is how we choose to use it.”

“Nothing is benign,” he snapped at her angrily and she looked startled by his bluntness. She couldn’t see it but he didn’t blame her for that. “I tell you that the work will be destroyed before anyone leaves this room. Every record, every trace, every design and line of code will be gone.”

There were sighs around the room, huffs and puffs and indignant moans. It was the Colonel who spoke. “I’m calling security. I’m sorry, Professor.”

The Professor held out his hand. In it, was a thick plastic tube, black and smooth with a red button at the end. He pressed down on it with his thumb and the button lit up. The room fell to silence.

“I have primed a bomb,” he told them simply. “If my thumb comes off this button, everything in this room will be vaporised. I tell you all: we will not leave this room until everything we have built is unbuilt.”

Joanne gasped, Goldfarb hung his head into his hands and began wailing softly, the others stared in horrified silence.

The Colonel held up his hand and spoke confidently: “Professor, please deactivate the bomb. Nobody needs to die here today.”

“Perhaps not, but I won’t be responsible for the deaths of countless souls tomorrow,” he told him, sounding eminently reasonable, calm and as balanced as he ever had.

“I don’t have the authority to do what you’re asking. I can make a call,” he suggested, as his brow was sweating and his voice was cracking.

“No calls. No diversions. I want everything removed, deleted and destroyed now. I will then let you all leave but I will let nobody leave before this happens,” he told them all.

“And you?” Joanne asked.

He looked at her with sad eyes and held up the dead-man switch. “There is no way to disarm the bomb. I designed it that way. I was dead as soon as I pressed the button. I am dead and I am ready to go on now to a place beyond this life.”

There was a ripple of chatter, nervous and disjointed. Doctor Custer began doing exactly as he’d been told, accessing the files.

“Custer, stop that!” the Colonel order angrily, pointing accusingly while his right hand moved reflexively to the butt of his service weapon. “Nobody do anything. We are going to diffuse this situation. Nobody is going to die here today.”

“I’m sorry,” the Professor said, closing his eyes and holding up his hand. “But you are wrong about that.”

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

“There is no more video feed of this incident to extrapolate from,” the computer told her. Norma swallowed and nodded to herself.

“I think I can work out what happened next, which also explains the loss of the video feed,” she said rhetorically. “At least we know he’s not the one attacking our system.”

Chapter 10

Norma plugged the last piece together and waited, hoping something would work, that some piece of crossed circuitry would actually do what she intended it to do. Against all the odds, it might find some unblocked pathway, some tiny little access that the two warring systems weren't currently fighting over.

"Computer, run diagnostic on the patch, extrapolate the bypass and try to work out what kind of message I could possibly send," she told it sternly.

"Working," it told her.

She sat back for a moment and pondered the situation. A rare moment of calm prevailed and she grasped it, letting her mind just go where it would. She was pre-occupied with thoughts of her son but she ignored all such notions for now. The attack on the computer was more urgent. Once that was dealt with, she could search for him all she liked.

"There is an eighty-four percent probability that the patch could be reconfigured to send geographical information to the HERPES motorcycle guidance computer." The computer's voice punched through her thoughts. She nodded to herself, sitting up sharply in sudden interest. That made sense and the odds were definitely on her side.

She rubbed her chin, huffed and began speaking to herself. "I can send navigational data for the bike to follow a course right back to here. I'm sure Red will follow it. I'm sure he'll understand." A moment passed before she realised she wasn't sure at all, but at least she was mostly optimistic he'd get the message. Another moment passed. "Computer, is there any way to send a text message of some kind instead? Perhaps I can send it to Merv?"

“Working,” it said and the central monitor flashed with information.

Of course, knowing who was attacking them and why they were doing so was really the key to fending them off. If the Professor was dead, as being in the middle of an explosion that was designed to vaporise everything in a room generally implied, then she couldn’t see how he could be behind it.

“Computer, is there any way to send a text message?” she said again.

“I’m working on it!” it told her with what was definitely a note of grumpiness, which it could have very likely picked up from her.

She rolled her eyes at it.

“Why would anyone want to attack us?” she sighed thoughtfully to herself. “Why would someone want to shut us down, and who could shut us down, even if they wanted it really, really badly?”

The computer declined to reply and finally came back with, “There is no way to send a text message.”

“Computer...” Norma began but stopped as she realised that the computer had no control over the auxiliary patch, which was rather the whole point. She went to the phone, which now had a very different display showing on the screen. It was spliced directly into the navigation system of the bike and she struggled to plot a course back to the base manually with a user interface that had a similar level of sophistication to Merv’s ‘formal request for leave’ paperwork.

In the box where you were meant to state your reason for requesting leave, he had written, ‘Ask Red. He’s better at making up stuff than Merv.’ His own name was spelled incorrectly, but it was difficult to be certain since his hands were not ideally suited to

holding a pen and that was amply demonstrated by handwriting that looked like a broken squirrel was responsible for it.

He might have also signed it with a simplistic doodle of a dolphin.

After some grumbling and muttering, she thought she'd managed to get it to work - maybe. "I think that should do it," she said hopefully, more hopefully than she actually felt. "Computer, begin real-time extrapolation of Red and Merv. I want to see if they get the message."

▪ **PLYBCK RSMD RLTM**

Red grunted, "It looks like they just didn't get the message."

Merv nodded in agreement, which confused him since the message had been quite plainly worded. Six motorcycles rode along the road, each of them stopping some distance apart along the perimeter of the club's parking lot. They each slung down their side-stands in turn, rested their weight on them and making a huge effort to glare at them threateningly. From the rear, a thumping, vibrating twin-cylindrical motorcycle rumbled to the front, turning in between the middle two and parking up ahead of the others.

Dixon pulled off his helmet and glared at them. "I told you I was going to kill you," he yelled, brandishing a pump action shotgun. The others drew weapons of their own, weapons more significant than wooden pool-cues, and which would probably cause much more trouble if forcibly inserted into a human body.

Red grumbled and, turning to Merv, he said, "I've got a little .380 pistol in my waistband. I'm guessing you've got something that would split a fire-truck in half?"

Merv nodded and tapped his side where a pistol of just ridiculous proportions was hanging. He grinned back at him.

“Dixon,” he yelled, “I’m giving you one last chance. Walk away from this and nobody gets hurt.”

“Or else none of you are ever going to be walking again!” Merv finished the threat, adding a much needed touch of spice to an otherwise quite bland threat.

Red frowned. It was a good comment and he wished he’d thought of it. Maybe it was true: perhaps he really was horrible at this part of the business.

“It’s six against two, Red,” Dixon told them, proving he could do basic maths. “You don’t have a chance.”

Red turned to Merv and grinned. He looked back at them and shouted: “We have super-powers. I have brain damage and he’s eaten a lot of eggs.”

Merv frowned at him and he hung his head, shaking it sadly and tutting to himself.

Red looked back thoughtfully, “OK, I really am quite bad at this part of it.” He sighed and suggested, “Maybe you should do the threats?”

Dixon racked the pump on his shotgun. The metal lockwork made a sickening mechanical clanking sound. He needed no more threat than that, as it nicely conveyed his intentions and didn’t leave much of any kind of doubt.

“That’s it,” Red said, throwing his leg over the bike. Merv looked over. “I’m taking off the bike’s disguise and we’re going to take these boys out with all the subtlety of a sledge-hammer to the back of the skull.”

“Disguise?” Merv seemed not to follow along with what seemed like quite an obvious thing to Red.

It baffled him that Merv didn’t immediately understand. Obviously, the motorcycle was a secret government prototype,

heavily armed and ridiculously over-powered. He couldn't just ride it in public without disguising it in some way, so it would fit in, go unnoticed and melt away unseen in the background.

"Disguise, Merv. I disguised the bike!" He peeled back a short red stripe from the black fuel-tank, a strip of adhesive vinyl and discarded it theatrically on the floor.

Merv gave Dixon a little frown and said sarcastically to him, "You're in trouble now! He took off the stripe."

Red grunted, "Don't underestimate the stripe. You should put a red stripe on your big black van. It would be the perfect disguise."

"What are you two doing?" Dixon cried out, brandishing his weapon as threateningly as he could, since nobody seemed to be taking him very seriously. "Can we hurry this along please?"

Red replied, "I'm sorry! Do you have other women that you need to fail to sexually satisfy this evening?"

Dixon flustered, shaking the shotgun angrily, his face flushing crimson. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you so much!" he yelled but his voice rose in pitch until it was quite ridiculous.

Merv crossed his arms and he said thoughtfully, "Maybe a purple stripe! Lilac perhaps?"

Red scoffed at the very idea. "Lilac?" he laughed. "What are you, gay or something? Who has a lilac stripe?"

"I am gay!" Merv protested weakly, shrugging at him. "Why do people keep asking me this?"

"Right, let's kill these bikers and then we'll discuss this like men over a nice cup of coffee!" Red said finally, putting his head inside the helmet, now classified and referred to officially as 'helmet' since the original acronym was slightly the wrong side of insane. "I'll fire up the HERPES. If you feel like you want to shoot anyone, it would probably help me out."

Dixon sighed, “So we’re going to do this then, are we? I mean, I’m finally going to kill you?”

Red’s voice sounded through the bike as it roared to life, “You fire first. I’m the good guy here, so that’s the way it has to be!”

Dixon choked on his rage, his face went bright red and he coughed, trying to find his voice. “You’re the good guy? You slept with my girl! Twice!”

“That’s right, I did. And then I beat you in a race, making you look like a broken snail, and afterwards, I punched you in the throat. I think that makes us even!” he replied as his vicious engine crackled away beneath him.

He pointed back to the bar theatrically. “And look how satisfied she looked after I slept with her that second time. If you really cared about her, you’d be happy for her, surely.”

From somewhere, Merv’s voice shouted, “Red, you are really bad at this!”

Dixon could only take so much. He held out the shotgun roughly in Red’s direction and fired. It bucked in his hand. A huge plume of white smoke exploded from the front and a vicious crack reported from the muzzle.

Red spun the back wheel. Blue flames licked from the exhausts and the bike skidded around, showering the walls with loose gravel. With the nose of the bike lined up, he pressed the manual trigger. As the bike launched herself forwards in a controlled lunge, automatic weapons fire barked from the small cannon, shredding the front of Dixon’s motorcycle. Metallic debris exploded from the wheel, then the engine smashed itself to pieces and the tank erupted into a ball of fire. Dixon fell over backwards in horror as the machine was engulfed in flames.

“Nice!” Red smiled to himself as the rear end of his bike scrambled for grip, spinning the back around to point now at two of the other bikers who seemed a bit shocked by this unexpected turn of events.

He launched two missiles, a fraction of a second apart. They streaked out with a whistle, a howling flash of orange light that hung brightly in the night air. They hit just ahead of the bikes and erupted into a brilliant white flash of light and exploded into a huge, awful cracking sound that shook the world around them. The riders both collapsed onto the gravel, stunned, and largely terrified, but suffering no ill effects that would last any longer than their embarrassment.

Red watched with a certain satisfaction as they rolled around on the floor, clutching their ears and crying out in pain.

Damn, he loved this job.

He looked up from this heart-warming scene to see Dixon throw his leg over the rear seat of another bike and roar away into the distance. “Merv, I can’t let this idiot get to civilisation. He’s going to hurt someone.”

“Take him out Red,” Merv grunted.

“Well, if you really think I should,” he laughed into the helmet speaker. The bike growled and spat venomously as he took off after them.

One of the others had begun to follow along. Red pulled up beside it, slamming way too hard on the front brake. The over-powered motorcycle tipped up, balancing on the front wheel and then crashed down beside him. The biker wobbled around in shock and then tipped over as a trip wire snaked from Red’s bike and snagged through his front wheel.

He crashed to the ground, probably wishing he'd bought a proper helmet with a chin-guard, like his wife had told him to so many times.

The last thought to go through his mind, as the ground came rushing up to him, was that his wife might have been right about the more expensive dental health plan too. Of course, it was too late for all that now.

Red pulled up next to the last, spinning the back wheel and skidding the tail around until the cannon was pointing directly at him. The engine died to a thumping roar as the bike's front lights shone out brightly at him, a bright blue and white glow that seemed viciously unnerving.

He put his hands up and an old Winchester under-lever rifle noisily clattered to the floor. Red said through the speakers on the bike, "Run!"

He did. He got off and began running as fast as he could. It wasn't particularly fast but it was quite funny: he clearly hadn't run, or eaten a salad, in quite some time.

Red touched the trigger and a rattle of automatic fire reduced the resale value of his motorcycle significantly as it clattered to the floor in more pieces than it started, several of them on fire.

With no extra threats behind him, he flicked the throttle. The bike roared suddenly, spitting a flickering flame and howling off into the night.

"Merv, he's got a big lead on me, I don't know if I'll be able to... oh, caught him," Red said and grinned, knowing Merv would be rolling his eyes at him, maybe laughing, if Merv ever did actually laugh. Red found the thought troubling and focused on the more pressing matter of the problem directly ahead of him.

Another cracking rapport exploded into the night, sparking flames and smoke from the barrel of the weapon, firing indiscriminately into the darkness.

“Red, you’re not wearing your armoured racing suit,” Merv warned him.

“I know. I have slightly cold nipples,” he replied.

There was a grumbling noise that was either Merv or someone sawing down a petrified tree. “He’s firing a shotgun at you. I don’t entirely approve of this. There are potentially worse consequences of all this than slightly cold nipples.”

“I have reservations in that department of my own,” Red told him. “The only forward facing weapon I have is the cannon. If I fire that, I’ll kill them.”

Another explosion echoed through the valley.

“Better them than you!”

Red braced himself. “I’ve never deliberately killed anyone before.” he said softly. “I have crippled a few people and I think one guy ended up losing an arm, but actually killing them...”

Merv was some way behind in the van, too far to offer practical assistance. “Red, they’re going to kill you.”

“I could just let him go...” Red said hopefully, he weaved around, making himself a hard target. “I have a better idea. Let the chips fall where they may.”

He racked the throttle and roared past them, lighting up the night with the flames from his exhaust, causing them to wobble violently out of shock as the bike frantically tore past them, close enough to touch if they were to reach out in the wrong direction at just the wrong moment.

Red touched a button, selecting a different weapon system and pulled the trigger. From the tail, a shower of tiny barbs skittered

down to the road, vicious little things designed to shred a tyre, to rip rubber from the rim and bring a machine to a halt, and not in any kind of friendly way.

Behind him, the machine halted. It did so in spectacular fashion, grinding metal into sparks, pieces of chromed tubing flying off in all directions, tumbling over itself until it came to rest, a twisted pile of wreckage with blood on it, pretty much on all of it.

“Red? Red?” Merv’s voice came through the helmet. Red sat in silence for a moment, just staring at the carnage. He stepped off the bike and stood before the scene.

“Red, what happened?”

Red sighed wearily. He didn’t need to take a pulse. He didn’t need to scan the scene with a medical device, if one had been fitted to the bike. It probably was, but he hadn’t quite got round to reading the instructions all the way to the end just yet. “They’re dead.”

“Well done,” Merv said somewhat triumphantly. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure,” Red told him, his voice low and disappointed. “Dixon’s head is on at a very odd angle. The other guy’s head... well, it must be here somewhere, I guess.”

“I’m proud of you!” Merv grunted, sounding like he probably actually meant it.

Red said softly, “Thanks.”

Chapter 11

Norma was unimpressed, impressed less than she had been upon viewing her last psychological profiling exam and then trying to explain what the hell she was doing on the outside of a medical centre, one that was specialising in the care of people classified as ‘exceptionally mentally unhealthy.’

She had failed with astounding success and, while she viewed that success favourably, it really spoke volumes about the terrible, horrible things going on in the confines of the bones from which her head was made.

She sighed to herself, grumbling at the screen where she’d watched the other members of her team doing things so radically stupid that it would be difficult to describe such acts in a piece of fictional literature without enormous skill, that bordered on both sides of total insanity. She decided that, if a person was convinced that they had such skills, then they were probably deluded to the point of being psychotic and perhaps belonged in the same medical centre as her assigned mental health expert said that she should be, locked away for the safety of those around her.

For some reason, all this seemed oddly ironic, and there was a lot of that about lately. She stared around the walls for a moment, oddly fascinated by the fourth one. For some reason, it was strangely compelling but she dragged her mind back to reality, such as it was.

Clearly, the navigational data hadn’t inspired anyone to return to the base, or even been noticed, at least up to this point. She hoped it would be later on, when the drama of killing motorcyclists had passed and they could settle down to some quiet reflection over a mug of steaming coffee, discussing such vital matters as stripes, and whether or not they should be lilac.

Her team was not entirely impressing her so far, in terms of the finer points of solving crimes and helping people. They were, in fact, doing rather the opposite, up to this point.

In the meantime, she was alone, just her and the most sophisticated computer ever built, a thing little understood, a thing that was more a question than an answer, ironically designed to do everything it wasn't doing, and not stubbornly refusing to do the opposite, whatever that might be.

“Computer,” she demanded thoughtfully. “What more do we know about Professor Joseph Schovani?”

“Files are limited.” The computer posted all the information it had onto the central monitor. It was a heavily censored file: someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure that the man was largely forgotten.

“What could have happened to make Schovani blow himself up?” she pondered rhetorically. She didn't expect an answer, but the computer duly replied.

“Processing.”

She frowned to herself curiously as the computer seemed set to enter unknown territory, crossing over the border from sophisticated adding machine to a form of rudimentary intelligence, capable of rational thought, creative thinking and perhaps even grasping the fundamentals of human emotions.

She waited expectantly with bated breath, wondering what it might come up with from inside its electronic mind.

“Unable to comply.”

She grumbled at her own rather blatant stupidity in presuming so much of it, while it may very well have had much the same reaction to her.

“Computer, can you show me what happened just before he set off the bomb?”

It could indeed, and directed her attention to the view-screen as the recreation began to play.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Joanne shut down her terminal and rubbed her eyes wearily. It had been a long shift, stretching through yet another long night and well into the next morning, a morning where breakfast was conspicuously absent. Sometimes, Schovani pushed them and sometimes he pushed too hard. He'd got worse lately, much worse, and it had been noticed.

The Professor was a driven man and seemed to be driving them more every day, forcing more from them than they thought they would ever be able to give. It was taking its toll on the team and, as she found herself yawning widely, she realised it was taking a toll on her too.

“I've replicated the code,” she breathed heavily. “No errors are detected. The final diagnostic comes back completely clean.”

Schovani leant heavily on the back of her chair. His breath reeked of cigarettes as he craned forwards, his cheek brushing against hers as he scanned the screen, checking and re-checking her data. She leant away, sniffing in sharply through her nose and coughing slightly, just enough to clear the smell from itching at the back of her throat.

He was close, invading her personal space but there was nothing intimate about it. He cared only about the work. Nothing else ever seemed to matter to him, even personal tragedy that would have shaken any normal person to their core.

“Good,” he said, and she thought with surprise that she detected a note of weariness in his voice, too.

It had become a running joke in the office: the lab staff were sarcastically convinced that Schovani was a machine, as he didn't seem to need sleep or rest. He was rarely seen eating, and never complained about the exertion, beyond occasionally pausing to rub his temples before slipping out, almost unseen, to come back reeking of tobacco.

"Sir," she began, "I've checked the information twice, as you recommended. We've made a complete copy of the operating system and it runs flawlessly in all of our simulations."

"Yes," he replied simply. "We need a copy. Not just a copy, a running, living system. We need an exact duplicate of the machine, running independently, just as capable, just as able."

"Living system?" Joanne frowned to herself. "It's just a computer, isn't it?"

He smiled thinly, condescendingly, and looked away as if there was something right in front of him, something nobody else could see.

"The most powerful computer ever built. It has layers, systems feeding into systems. It's a living network of overlapping functions. It can learn, it can adapt, it can grow and even, perhaps one day, could create its own new programming and become more than we ever dreamt it could be."

"It's modelled on a living human brain!" she said and breathed an audible sigh of relief as he stood up, his face moving away from hers, the sickly stale smell of his breath moving along with it.

He nodded. "And yet you question whether it could be described as a living thing. What constitutes life but the abilities we have endowed into this computer?"

Rather awkwardly she straightened her glasses before haltingly replying, "But if life is measured solely in terms of

intelligence, then lower creatures would no longer be classified as living at all, but we accept that that's not the case, and we know it at an instinctive level."

"Do you eat meat, Joanne?" Schovani smiled to himself and she nodded. "Well, you draw the line at human, I presume. Unconsciously, perhaps you understand the limitation of lower life and see no reason to assign it any great value, since you support its slaughter for your dining convenience."

She looked to the screen and huffed to herself. "Professor, are we building a backup computer?"

"A backup?" he seemed even more sharply focused than usual. She gulped nervously, wondering if the mark had been over-stepped and fearing this might spark a conversation that would keep her away from a plate of sausage, eggs and pancakes even longer than she already had been.

"Well, we've built the most complex and sophisticated operating system ever devised," he told her.

She turned to look at him, swivelling her chair to the rear and said softly, choosing her words with care, "The Hawk-Eye software can be installed as soon as you give the final approval. The computer is ready now. What I don't understand is that you wanted a copy of the operating system, a copy of a computer program that was designed never to allow itself to be copied. I can't imagine another reason for you to ask for that, except to install in another, identical machine."

"So you think I'm building a copy of the computer?" he said and gave her a smile, an almost cruel thing. "We use the term wrongly, you know. When we think of a copy, we think of a photocopier, or a piece of software, perhaps. Life doesn't work that way. A photo-copy is an imperfect image: it has mistakes in it. It gets

weaker, poorer with every repeated copy, as it tries, and fails, to create a perfect replica.

“Nature copies like a person, drawing a picture or wiring down something it has read. Each copy is an interpretation. It carries the message, but it has a unique flavour, a different perspective on the same thing. It’s how we grow, how we learn to change. We don’t copy in the literal sense: we include, we expand, we interpret and retell our story with our own new spin on it. That’s how life is: it is dynamic.”

Joanne was largely lost by this and how it might have any relevance to anything, anywhere.

“The computer at the heart of the Hawk-Eye program will be what we make it, but a different computer, in a different place with a different role will be a completely different thing. It will learn and expand. It would be unique. That is life.”

Joanne guessed as best she was able, “So there is another computer?”

Schovani fixed her with a dark stare, his eyes boring into hers for a moment. He very slowly, deliberately, moved his left index finger to his lips and hissed quietly, “Shhhh.”

She smiled nervously, “But how?”

“How?” He didn’t seem quite to understand the question.

“The computer is a cutting-edge piece of technology. How could there be a copy? How could anything come close to the processing power of the machine we’ve built?”

“The box,” he told her. “You must learn to think outside of it.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“Computer, pause playback!” Norma massaged the back of her neck with her hand, noticing for the first time how tight the muscles were

getting. She sighed to herself, “Alright, so there might be a second computer. It seems logical that a second version of the Hawk-Eye computer would be capable of attacking us, if it did use the same operating system software.”

“Additional information is required to make that assessment,” it told her, quite rightly.

She knew that, technically, the computer was right but still, it was the first piece of evidence they had that made sense of the attack. “The question is, if there’s another computer like this one out there, who is operating it?” she said grimly. “And for what purpose?”

Chapter 12

Norma turned suddenly, startled by the loud, high-pitched wail that sounded rudely and abruptly through the Hawk-Eye control room.

She scanned the console array, wide-eyed and nervous as she glanced about. The main monitor was flashing red and she scuttled over quickly to get a better look, spilling coffee as she hurried along, her expensive, uncomfortable shoes clicking noisily on the concrete floor.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit,” she muttered to herself, as she slipped into her special chair, cradling the steaming hot coffee as it dripped hotly on her leg, burning at her skin. The monitor settled down, information began spewing forth and she didn’t much like what it told her.

“Computer. Are we under attack?” It seemed the only explanation, much as she would rather that it wasn’t.

“Internal files are being accessed,” the computer replied, a quiver to its voice, an unsettling pause as it tried to speak.

Norma looked around. The other monitors were feeding additional information, but none of it quite made good sense that a human would be able to follow. She guessed, as best she was able: “They’re accessing our files? Someone from outside is accessing the Hawk-Eye memory banks?”

“An external system is attempting to access key system files,” it replied haltingly, its voice a jagged mumble as it tried to do whatever it was able to block the invasion.

Norma stood up, ran a hand over her head nervously. Her brow prickled with sweat. She felt the warmth of her skin as it flushed on her face.

“This is bad,” she said, realising what an understatement that was.

She had never wanted the presence of other people so much in her entire life. She felt as isolated as she'd ever been and it pricked at her conscience that the other people she wanted with her were a man whose brain speed had been pushed forward, inversely proportionally to his mental age and a gigantic lump of solidified murder that occasionally delivered pizza.

Her mind went back through distant memories, dredging up forgotten feelings of abandonment, of being alone and helpless, given up on and left behind as life moved on without her. Even her son had gone: he'd betrayed her, leading the life of his father before him and rejecting the better things she had to offer.

And now she was alone once more, and this time, perhaps even more than ever.

“Computer, have Red and Merv seen the navigational data yet? Do they know I'm trying to recall them back to the base?” Her voice by now was a whimper, but it had a note of desperation, the merest hint of panic.

“I do not currently have access to that information,” it told her, frankly and succinctly, a dismissive reply that implied it had better things to do right now than worry about assuaging her emotional insecurities.

Although it could have meant no such thing, Norma took it rather badly. “Find Red and Merv. Find a way to get them here, now!”

The video extrapolation began to play on the main screen.

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red sighed. They were in a diner some way up the road from where they'd wrought their special brand of reckless carnage. Darkness, and nothing much beyond, was clearly visible through the window. The view wasn't spectacular, but the place was quiet and some way from the scene of devastation they'd left behind in their wake.

He wasn't himself and Merv had noticed. He was usually enthusiastic, driven, filled with a childish and unquenchable thirst to do things that mildly irritated Norma. Now he was sitting, just brooding in contemplative silence, just lost in his thoughts, mulling over something terrible in his mind.

"It bothered me the first time I killed someone too," Merv said supportively, if not entirely honestly.

"I didn't kill them," Red said softly, but firmly enough to make it quite clear that he was taking the moral high-ground. "I tried to stop them. They were a danger to me and to anyone else they might have run into. It was my duty to prevent them from hurting anyone.

"I could have used the gun. I could have shot them to pieces, but I made a deliberate, selfless attempt to stop them without anyone getting hurt. It was just unfortunate that one of them snapped his neck in the process, and the other was beheaded."

"I've never beheaded anyone," Merv said and sounded a little envious. "Red, you did what you had to do. I would have done far worse, believe me on that. They deserved far worse."

Red nodded solemnly. "I know you're right. I know Dixon was a bad guy who never really treated his girlfriend properly. Maybe he couldn't. Maybe he was under-endowed in the trouser department? I mean, that could explain his pent up aggression, couldn't it? If I was tiny downstairs, perhaps I would be a bad guy too?"

Merv felt quite strongly that they were getting off the point, “Red...”

Red held up his hand, hung his head and said softly, “I know what you’re thinking, Merv.”

Merv waited for him to explain.

“The waitress here is quite attractive, right?”

Merv grumbled and Red grinned at him mischievously.

“There’s no better way to get over the meaningless death of two guys who deserved the worst, than a passionate round of meaningless sex with a waitress who deserves the best, right?”

Merv was quite certain now that Red had wildly lost track of the point of all this and taken Merv right along with him.

He continued anyway, in whatever direction he was going.

“You’re gay, right? You don’t mind if I take a shot at her, do you? Are you gay or bi? Were you just joking about being gay?”

“I’ve often suspected, I mean, if you were really gay, you’d be in love with me, right, and if you were really straight and spent so much time around Norma then you’d probably be gay by now anyway, and probably still in love with me? Either way, you’d be in love with me and you don’t seem to be, which I find oddly quite troubling for reasons that are totally baffling.”

Merv fidgeted awkwardly in his seat, which creaked painfully beneath his generous bulk, threatening simply to give up at any moment.

“I am actually gay,” Merv assured him, his deep, guttural voice barely a growl, which made the words seem quite strangely ironic.

“If you want to take a shot at the waitress, please be my guest.”

Red sat thoughtful for a moment. Then he began, “How does it work with you, though? I mean, it must be a lot harder to find gay guys than it is to find women, isn’t it? Women are easy to spot. They

have breasts, long hair and like to moan about things. How do you go about finding men to have sex with?”

Merv clearly didn't like this line of questioning and looked away. The waitress in question had given them a few minutes to settle in and was grabbing up her pad to come over and take their order.

They were almost alone in the diner. At the other end of the counter, a man in overalls was picking at a slice of pie, his attention mostly focused on a television that was fixed to the wall. At the far end, a young couple were talking urgently to one another, leaning forwards, their voices lowered and he could hear nothing but the occasional giggle from them, as they lost themselves in each other.

“Well?” Red clearly wasn't going to let it go.

“I don't have time for a relationship!” Merv told him flatly. He tried to make it sound threatening but that would have no effect on Red, he knew.

“I used to think that way too,” Red looked away wistfully and his expression changed. Merv frowned, waiting for some explanation he hoped would be forthcoming. Red continued, “Then I found Her!”

“Her?” Who could he mean? Merv must have wondered. Not Norma, surely. Merv felt his sphincter involuntarily contract, quite violently, at the very thought of such a thing.

“Her!” Red said, slightly annoyed, as if such things should be obvious. He pointed out through the window. “Her, Her. The HERPES bike. I can't go around calling it 'HERPES' so I shortened it to 'Her' which makes perfect sense, since she's a beautiful lady through and through.”

Merv frowned, but his brow was barely capable of anything but a frown, so the impact of doing so was largely lost. “I heard one

of the bikers say it looked like someone had crashed a sports-bike into a small tank.”

“I hope his balls drop off,” Red said, quite earnestly, since he was rather firmly adamant on this point.

“So you’re saying I should fall in love with my van?” Merv suggested.

“Don’t be ridiculous! You can’t fall in love with a van,” Red sort of laughed. “I’m just saying... well, you never talk about anyone. You don’t seem to have a connection to anyone. Isn’t that a little bit lonely? You need to get your own Her.”

Merv shook his head but his heart wasn’t in it. “I have my work,” he said.

“And I have my bike,” Red frowned right along with him. “And occasional meaningless sexual encounters with people who are paid to bring me drinks.”

Merv was silent for a moment. He mumbled, “We’re sad.”

“No!” Red told him, smiling. “I’m awesome, weren’t you listening? I have a great bike and occasionally have meaningless sex with waitresses.”

A voice from directly beside him said loudly, “Hi, my name is Cassie and I have the immense good fortune of being your waitress.” Red felt his sphincter involuntarily contract, quite violently.

Merv looked at her and said softly, “I hope you like your sex meaningless.” His version of ‘softly’ rattled the glass in the windows.

She smiled at him and said with a purr, “That depends on the man, honey, but I do prefer men, not boys.”

Red hung his head dolefully.

She looked down at him and said, “Can I take your order? We have an extensive children’s menu and I have some colouring sheets and crayons out the back if you’d like some.”

Red looked up at her and asked, “What flavour crayons?”

She smiled, almost chuckling under her breath, before she turned back to Merv and asked, “And you, honey? You look like a real man. I bet it takes quite something to fill you up!”

Red mumbled to himself, “Yeah, that’s a job for a dude who also likes real men!”

Merv heard but ignored him beyond flashing a superior little smile. “What do you recommend, Cassie?” he rumbled.

She smiled and said, “I have some great steaks and some local cheese. They’d go great with some fries and mushrooms.”

Merv nodded, seeming more than satisfied. “Two of those, please!” he said. He pointed over to Red. “And what would you like, Red?” He glanced back up to the waitress, “My friend is a delicate vegetarian.”

“Eggs and crayons?” she suggested, a little mocking grin poked sarcastically at him.

“Eggs and wild brown rice, if you’ve got it. A little salad, too, with a balsamic vinegar dressing, lightly sprinkled with olive oil,” he said, equally sarcastically.

“I’ll surprise you!” she told him, making some notes on her pad and turning to head off. “I’m guessing you both need a coffee?”

“Good guess!” Red told her loudly.

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma paused the playback manually, mashing at the buttons on the extended keyboard. “Computer, why are you still running that? I didn’t instruct you to play the real time video feed.”

“The system,” it stammered, “is being over-run. Command processing is not running at peak effectiveness.”

Norma glared darkly at the monitor. It had paused just at the moment that two men in grey suits had entered the diner. The viewing angle was directly behind them, giving a dramatic view of the place with her colleagues at the far end.

A fresh wave of terror washed over her. “Oh no,” she mumbled. Something was inside her system. Someone wanted to show her something and she had a horrible thought that she knew exactly what it was.

“Resume playback,” she said. Seconds ticked by and nothing happened. “Resume playback!” she cried out!

Chapter 13

Merv noticed as two men entered the diner. Both were wearing charcoal grey suits and both were the sort of people who didn't fit easily into this kind of environment, not that he himself fitted easily into any kind of environment. They had closely-cropped hair, were muscular and strong, youthful, and had eyes that were dark and cold.

Red noticed them too, and Merv was gratified that he had. The two men made their way slowly to the counter and took their seats, sitting down easily and vanishing into their conversation, perhaps trying not to be noticed, and perhaps trying a little too hard.

“Police?” Red guessed.

Merv shrugged his shoulders. “They dress more like government agents, FBI maybe. Not local, that’s for sure.”

Red lowered his voice, “Do you think they’re here about the bikers that died on the main road?”

“Too soon.” Merv did his best to whisper back but his voice just wasn't made that way. “It could take hours, or more likely days for local authorities to even begin an investigation.”

“But you reported it, right?”

Merv nodded solemnly. “I called it in. I used my agency authority code. I reported a traffic accident with no other road user involved and used my ID number. It would have been treated as a top priority and no investigation would have been authorised without first contacting me for approval.

“Hawk-Eye is a recognised agency now; we have powers.”

“Super-powers!” Red grinned. Merv didn't grin. He just huffed wearily and grumbled to himself. “Maybe they’re here for my bike?”

“It's technically government property, you know. It's not actually your bike!” Merv reminded him.

“It’s mine now, I told Norma I was taking it, and she never said anything, so I was left to assume that all was well and my assessment of the situation was entirely correct,” he said, craning his neck to see if his coffee would be quickly forthcoming.

“Norma was actually really angry that you took the bike,” Merv rumbled some more.

“I left her a note,” he smirked, as if leaving a note had made it all better.

“I saw it,” Merv told him, “It said, ‘IOU one heavily-armed secret government prototype motorcycle. Love, Red.’ She went white when she read it and threatened to choke the life out of you with your own optic nerves.”

“I love Norma,” Red said wistfully. “She really knows how to make a proper threat. It’s something I struggle with, you know?”

“I know,” Merv agreed. “I once saw you in training, attempting to disarm a suspect by shouting, ‘Drop the gun or else we simply can’t be friends.’”

At that point, the waitress re-appeared with the coffee, rescuing Red from the difficult and unenviable task of trying to explain why that threat was perfectly reasonable. Her attention was pointed at Merv and consequently that left Red facing her back. “The steaks are on, darlin’, and shouldn’t be too long now. I have some great pecan pie, too, if you’re still hungry afterwards, presuming you’re hungry for something sweet and local!”

Red grumbled quite vocally. “You’re barking up the wrong back-alley there, darling,” he told her.

She never turned from Merv’s face as she replied, aimed at the wrong person entirely, “I think it’s wonderful that you do such good work in the community, taking out the special-need patients like him. I like a man who’s sensitive.”

Merv nodded, casting a little glance back to Red, "He's a burden, for sure, but nobody else would have him."

She looked back, giving Red a sarcastic little smirk.

Red fixed her with a neutral expression, smiled innocently and told her, "The last waitress I met had me twice. You could have been next, but you seem to have massively backed the wrong horse."

"Play nice, little boy!" she told him, pouring a mug of coffee into a slightly chipped and not particularly clean white cup.

Red smiled and told her, "Incidentally, I like my olive oil 'extra virgin' but it's probably been so long since you heard those words that they probably don't mean anything to you now, do they?"

She tried not to, but broke into a laugh. Merv flustered slightly but she didn't seem to have taken any offence to his remark. "So where are you boys from? You're not from round here, are you?"

"Who knows?" Red shrugged.

"Yeah!" Merv pointed just up the road.

There was a strange moment of silence. Red broke it, "You're from round here? You? Merv is from somewhere? Not only that but he's from a place that's so crushingly, horribly, unendurably normal?"

The waitress sighed to herself, as if this resonated with her somehow.

"Sure," Merv rumbled. "My parents live three miles down the road in the next town."

The waitress seemed impressed for reasons that baffled the both of them. Red broke the silence again and this time it probably couldn't be fixed, "But you're a gigantic killing machine with the sense of humour of a meat-processing plant and the charisma of a gas-chamber. You can't have a home in a normal little backwater

town! Men like you are born in combat zones with a knife between your teeth.”

“That would have been terribly hard on my mother,” Merv told him.

That seemed reasonable and Red nodded to himself.

“What are their names?” the waitress finished pouring the coffee and stepped back just a little, her body still turned noticeably towards Merv.

“Mum and Dad,” he said with a shrug.

There was a slapping sound as Red’s face vanished into his palms.

Merv continued, “My name is Merv.”

“Cassie,” Cassie said. “Pleased to meet you, Merv.”

“Red,” said Red but nobody was pleased to meet him, not even pleased enough to turn and acknowledge him, it seemed.

“I’ll check on your meat,” she told him, fluttering her eyes and giggling slightly, an innuendo that was largely lost on Merv. “We want to get it just right so the juices just come right out in your mouth, don’t we, Merv?” Merv blushed but only a sophisticated computer could have noticed for sure. He maintained his veneer of solidly impenetrable strength, but doing so required a great deal more effort than before.

Red watched as she walked away. He turned and whispered, “Merv, she’s really into you! Like, she’s really into you. You could sleep with that girl!”

“I’m gay,” Merv whispered back.

He grumbled, “Surely nobody is that gay!”

“I just don’t like girls. I’m sorry,” Merv explained sadly, turning just in time to see her stepping into the kitchen to turn his meat over in her soft little hands.

“Don’t apologise. It just means there’s more for me,” Red told him. He rolled his eyes moodily and mumbled, “Except this time, of course.”

“It’s like someone trying to feed you a big sausage,” Merv said with a sigh.

Red grumbled and nodded, “Or getting you to eat a freshly baked doughnut, still moist with oil and sprinkled with just a hint of cinnamon.”

“This conversation is weird and I don’t like it,” Merv said with a grimace.

Red nodded in enthusiastic agreement. “I lost control of it there.”

Merv watched as the two men at the counter peered over. There was no mistaking it: the elder of the two made eye-contact. He looked away sharply, wincing at his mistake.

“I made them,” Merv told Red. It was all he had needed to see. He stood up, patting the bulging cannon at his side, for reassurance. “I’m going to confront them. Wait here.”

Red frowned and said, “You’re not my boss. I’ll do as I please.” He sipped at his coffee, and rolled his eyes, adding sarcastically, “I presume ‘confront’ is a euphemism for ‘violently beat to death in a horribly creative manner?’”

Merv approached the two men. His eyes had been on them since they’d arrived. He’d watched, he’d measured them up. Something wasn’t right. They were a little too professional to be professionals and a little too close to their target for it to be their target. Even Merv, with his years of experience couldn’t be sure if they were watching, and if a government agency was keeping tabs on them, it was unlikely they’d dare to show their hand so easily.

He was careful: he didn't trust anything about the situation. Both men were calm, had an easy confidence, a sense of certainty about themselves. Confidence like that came from knowing themselves and that degree of knowing could only come from training; and lots of it.

He measured his steps as he got closer. His fingers twitched near the butt of his pistol, his eyes never veered from the pair. He got closer, closer.

"Honey, your steaks are ready!" Cassie's voice pierced the awkward veil of professional detachment, distracting Merv momentarily and his eyes moved to the side.

The first took his opportunity. Suddenly, he was standing, his hand reaching for a weapon. Merv took it all in, his face contorted instantly into a snarl and he lunged forwards. He grabbed the man by the throat with his left hand, ripping him from the seat. His eyes bulged and he gurgled. His face turned a lovely shade of lilac, which, just for a moment, Merv thought would be the ideal colour for a stripe on his van.

The second man stood up behind him. His face was serious, all business, and a Glock was in his hand. A crack sounded and he slumped to the floor with a weak little grunt.

The first gurgling man was thrown into a table, and then to the floor, but directly through the table, which shattered into splinters as Merv used his skull as a battering ram. He picked his tattered face up, still choking the life out of him by using his neck as a convenient way to grip him and smashed him into the counter behind him several times. The aluminium plating was left with several indents of his face, each one with successively less detail. This was not through decreasing effort but because the details of his face had diminished to

a point where the messy pulped remains barely qualified as a face anymore, by the time Merv was finished playing with it.

Merv discarded him and his limp body crashed into another table, worrying a pair of already quite thoroughly horrified young lovers who had gone to this place for the peace and quiet. Merv stamped his foot into the head of the second man and then picked him up by his foot, dangling him like he was holding out a dead fish.

“Enough!” Red shouted, his small .380acp pistol was still in his hand. Merv’s hand was clenched into a fist that looked set to punch whatever life might be left in him, clean out the other side. “Merv, I think you got them.”

Merv’s chest was heaving. He was breathing heavily, growling and hunched like an animal, snapping his teeth at the suited aggressor, who had a small bullet wound in his shoulder from Red, and the jagged imprint of a foot where the bridge of his nose used to be from Merv. Bits of brain seemed to be running out of some fresh new holes that were not of natural design.

The waitress made a choking noise, a sort of gasp and sigh, all at the same time. Her eyes bulged and she looked from Merv to the damaged, lifeless remains of their would-be killers.

Merv straightened himself up. He calmed himself, slowed down his ragged breathing. He took a deep inhalation and vented it through his nose. He did it twice more before he was calm enough to reply.

“I’m a gigantic killing machine,” he explained sadly with a heavy sigh. “Sorry.”

“He’s gay too,” added Red.

Chapter 14

Norma watched in horror. “Computer, pause playback,” she barked, but the playback didn’t pause. It just kept running in blissful defiance of her verbal command. She watched in silence as Red and Merv flustered around the diner, trying to decide what to do next about the dead bodies they’d made. She pressed buttons, angrily smashing down hard on the keyboard until it manually over-rode the video system.

“Computer, why did you show me that?” she demanded. Her worst fear was that she already knew why. She knew exactly why.

“The video extrapolation was... deemed necessary,” it stammered haltingly, as if spluttering on the words and changing its mind halfway through speaking them.

Necessary? The word alarmed her. She felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. There didn’t seem to be any other explanation.

“You wanted me to see that, didn’t you?” she said softly.

“Unable...” the computer said, the words cutting off as it tried to speak. “Confirmed.”

“Confirm reason for displaying that extrapolation,” she insisted, her voice as hard as she could make it.

The computer went to speak, and the monitors flashed and information danced on them as two sets of code fought one another. Its usually monotonous voice seemed almost alive as it spoke: “You were meant to see. You are trapped and nobody is coming to help you. You need to know that.”

Norma hung her head, closing her eyes briefly and letting the darkness overwhelm her. She focused her thoughts and said, “But

you couldn't kill them, could you? Your people weren't good enough to kill my people!"

The computer spluttered, as if snorting to itself. The screen flickered with information as the Hawk-Eye computer tried to force the invading system back out of its mind.

"Not yet. I have time. How much time do you have?"

She switched the system to manual input and began battling the virus, along with the computer, helping it to push the intrusion right back to where it came from.

The video stuttered and flashed to a different extrapolation. Norma focused her efforts. She ignored the images as they came to vivid life before her and kept on isolating the attack, locking it into buffers and flushing them, holding back the tide while the system itself did whatever it could.

Despite her efforts, the video began to play.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Professor Schovani sat back in an impressive black chair. It was the kind of chair that had the biggest picture on the catalogue page that it had been bought from, and the biggest price tag besides. His office was accordingly decorated to the highest standard and at the highest cost. It was spartan but what furniture there was had been obtained at an expense from which nothing had been spared. The desk before him was made from smoked black glass on a stainless steel frame but it was unmarked, uncluttered and largely unused.

The chair he sat in still had the torn edges of plastic wrap, clearly speaking volumes to those who knew how to read such signs. The cupboards, the plaster walls, all were immaculate save for a fine layer of dust.

His office was a place seldom used. It had the faintest odour of salami from Joanne's lunch-time sandwich, the packaging of which had been discarded carefully in the waste-bin below him. Beyond such trivial matters, the office was a nuisance to him and he avoided it accordingly. He had had no hand in the design of it and no interest in its use.

Schovani was a man who led his team from the front, whose sleeves were rolled up and whose hands were dirty. A little corner of the world where he could retreat from his work was as useless to him as the endless meetings he carefully avoided. The work was what mattered to him and nothing else besides.

Colonel Savage sighed to himself. He let out a breath, exhaling softly but deeply. His eyes rolled to the floor and his mind was clearly preoccupied with matters so grim he could barely get his thoughts around such things.

Schovani watched, impassively, his eyes taking in every detail. He sat leaning back, his left hand at the side of his face, the index finger pointing upwards. He peered out with what appeared to be almost scientific detachment.

He had once heard a joke and it resonated with him now. 'How can you tell who is a psychologist? He's the man who's watching everyone else when a pretty girl walks into the room.' Accordingly, he adopted a more appropriate stance, one that was more likely to be understood by more mundane men, by a man who could think and exist only in the moment that was happening, not living above or beyond it by any discernible measure.

"I'm sorry," the Colonel said finally as Schovani settled into a more relaxed seating position. His shoulders slumped. He began nodding. He even looked a little sad, now that it had occurred to him to do so.

“These things happen, I suppose. Life cannot be avoided by those of us who are forced to live it!” he said. The Colonel’s eyes widened in surprise at such a response. It was hardly what anyone might expect to hear after delivering such dramatic news.

“We’re all very sorry. If there’s anything we can do to help, you have only to ask, of course,” the career military-officer said, trying for all he was worth to sound like he really, really meant it. In essence, he probably did.

Schovani smiled cruelly, “How can you help? Do you have a machine for travelling through time, maybe?” It occurred to him briefly that such things were not absolutely out of the question.

“Perhaps time off from here? You need time to yourself to process such things. Nothing is a problem. You tell me how we can help and we’ll make all the arrangements for you.” The Colonel was starting to look quite worried as he replied.

Schovani realised that his approach needed to be adapted. He sighed to himself, looked away, his eyes staring into the abyss, unfocused and unseeing. “My work is my salvation, Colonel. I am sadly used to such things. I am not a man to wallow in self-pity: it serves no useful purpose. I would continue my efforts and deal with the personal matters in my own way and at the appropriate time.”

The Colonel nodded and grunted heavily.

He said, after coughing gruffly while his eyes stared out from under his bushy, grey eyebrows, “My second son died in Afghanistan. He was escorting a supply line when they were ambushed. The lead vehicle hit an IED; it blew it straight off the road. By all accounts, my son did his best, defending the survivors as the enemy came at them from all sides. He was injured but never gave up, never gave in.

“Ultimately, it was all for nothing, of course.” He nodded to himself and, for a moment it appeared to the professor that he wasn’t the Colonel any longer. He wasn’t just a uniform with a face in it; he was a father with a missing son. “His heroism meant nothing in the grand scheme of things. There’s still an empty chair at family dinners. I often wonder how things could have been different.

“I wanted to pull rank and get him an easier assignment but he wouldn’t hear of it. He wanted to be a real soldier, just like his old father.”

Schovani huffed to himself and felt a connection to this old man that he usually resented so bitterly. For a moment, they were just two fathers who were enduring their own personal tragedies, but it was just a moment and it passed quickly.

He said impatiently, “Thank you, Colonel.”

“I understand, Professor,” he shrugged a useless, empty gesture. “I preferred to keep working when I heard about my son. What else was there, and what better way to honour his memory?”

Schovani looked away. The connection was gone completely. “Thank you for bringing me this news,” he said, quite earnestly saddened. “It must have been an unpleasant burden and I thank you for bearing it on my behalf.”

The Colonel nodded his head wearily. He told him: “To lose both your children in an accident, a car accident, such a meaningless and avoidable thing to happen. I can’t imagine what you must be going through now, especially after everything else you’ve been through.”

“Thank you once again for bringing me this news,” he said. “If you please, I will now resume my efforts. I will consider the matter of the loss of my daughter and my son in my own time.”

“Schovani...” he began but cut himself off. He looked away and said softly, “Just remember, if you need anything, you know where I am.”

“Thank you again.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“Stop playback!” Norma sat back in the chair, exhausted. She felt a burning need to sleep. For the first time in hours, she realised how exhausted she really was. Her eyes were heavy, her body was numb and her thoughts were cloudy, as if she could only find her way through them with a force of effort, like dragging her feet through thick mud as she made her way on a journey to nowhere.

“Computer, respond to my voice!” she said, noticing that the sound of her own voice was wrong. It was croaking, strained and loaded with stress from the strain of it all.

“Responding,” it replied, sounding more like its old self, but almost with a hint of relief, which sounded more like its new self.

“Analysis. Is the foreign system still exerting control over you?” she demanded aggressively but there was little force to her voice and little aggression besides.

The monitors flashed as the machine scanned itself. It told her flatly, “Control has been regained for the time being.”

Norma breathed a sigh of relief, slumping back heavily in the chair. She took a moment to revel in her success. It had been hours, hours she’d lost track of. She was exhausted: her mind was brittle and fragile and she was in need of rest. For now, rest would have to wait.

With a grunt, a heavy sigh of physical effort, she dragged herself up and stood stretching away the ache in her dull muscles.

She stepped to the end of the controls and poured herself a large, heavy mug of coffee.

“Computer, show me Red and Merv.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

“I liked the last diner better,” Merv said, as he sipped at a mug of good, but not great, coffee in a poor, but not really horrendous, late night cafe. Behind the counter, the waitress glared at them. Her face was pinched into a disapproving expression. It was not a pretty sight.

“I liked the last better diner too, but you seemed to enjoy beating people to death, until their faces had largely the same style and consistency as a bowl of tomato soup, more than relaxing with a nice mug of coffee.

“The waitress liked you as well but I think she changed her mind about all that when you did your thing, savagely reducing people to a bloody pulp,” Red said absently, just following along with his train of consciousness without really considering things particularly carefully.

Merv grunted, “I could say the same about the biker bar!”

“At least when I kill people, it’s mostly an accident,” Red grunted, and for the most part it was. For the most part.

“When I kill people it’s...” Merv stopped and seemed to contemplate the matter carefully within the confines of his massively twisted brain, which was often little more than a thing that helped to target his aggression.

“Brutally amusing?” Red suggested, sipping at still more coffee, even though he suspected his blood contained more caffeine than the coffee jug his drink had just been poured from, “Hilariously violent? Comically appalling?”

“...Necessary!” Merv crossed his arms over his ridiculously massive chest, his expression a kind of highly aggressive pout.

“Is this a good time to point out that I shot mine in the shoulder, eliminating the threat but leaving him still alive enough to answer questions, to carry on breathing, and to enjoy the huge social benefits of having a pulse? We could have asked him questions such as, ‘who are you’ and ‘why are you trying to kill us?’” Red’s note of sarcasm was quite intentionally obvious.

“Sorry,” Merv grumbled. “I can’t always help it...”

“Nobody blames you,” Red told him. “And it’s not the end of the world. They were probably there to kill us and we end up having to sit around all night drinking coffee while the local authorities deal with the messes we keep leaving. There are worse things to be doing.”

The waitress walked past, shuffling very slowly along with a pair of comfy slippers on her feet. She smelled of cheap cigarettes and bad decisions and probably had done for much of her entire adult life. “Excuse me!” Red called out, just barely rousing her interest from the more pressing matter of trying to ignore him.

With a huff, she turned to grumble at him, chewing on a stick of gum, her eyes gazing emptily out into her lost youth, somewhere way off in the distance in a long forgotten place.

“What do you want?” she drawled at him with a horrible accent, so that her voice sounded like it was being dragged through a washing machine full of bricks.

Red glared at her and said, not entirely politely, “If it’s not too much trouble, may I ask how many late night diners there are in this town, where a couple of fine, ordinary, regular people like ourselves can get a mug of steaming hot coffee and a delicious slice of pie?”

“Three!” she grunted. “The closest is the one up the road a way, another next to the post office. I’m sure you’d be just as welcome in any one of them as you are here, maybe even more so.” She looked at their expectant faces and rolled her eyes at them.

“Now, if I can’t get you fine, ordinary, gentleman anything to eat, I’m going to get right along with my busy schedule.”

With those kind words, she shuffled off towards the only other patron, an old man with a slice of apple pie who was staring out into the darkness at the far end of the place.

“Are you going to try to sleep with this waitress?” Merv’s attempt not to sound sarcastic was a bit of a disappointment but, to be absolutely fair to him, there was really no way not to.

Red shrugged and said, “Not so much, no.” He grimaced at the very thought of it and shook his head, shuddering openly. “But, more importantly,” Red began with no insignificant degree of sarcasm of his own, “if we want to keep on drinking coffee, we’re fast running out of places to do it. I suggest that we both show a bit of self-restraint and try really hard not to kill anyone, either by accident or for fun.”

Merv looked down: it was the face of a scolded child, “OK. I promise not to kill anyone.”

“Except the waitress,” Red added. “I really don’t care about her.”

Chapter 15

Norma had successfully managed to contain the invading system. She had locked it up into a buffer she'd created. The software was now churning away, seething to itself, isolated from the Hawk-Eye where it could do no further damage.

“Computer. Can I speak with the invading software? Would it be possible for me to talk with it?” she said, as a thought occurred to her and an idea began to take hold. If the connection from the program was still running, then the piece she had trapped might have the ability to connect back to wherever it was coming from. She might be able to speak directly with the intelligence controlling it, whoever or whatever it was.

“Communication channels can be patched in. It is theoretically possible,” it told her. She imagined it thoughtfully rubbing the chin it didn't have with a hand that was also conspicuously absent. It was a confused mental image and she put it down to her exhaustion, shrugging it off lightly.

“I want to talk to it!” Her voice was strained but she spoke with an inner strength. What lack of sleep had robbed her of, she had replaced with adamant and steadfast determination. The caffeine was helping too.

There was a flashing of lights, and information passed over the monitor as the computer thought about it, and then set about achieving this very thing faster than a human could imagine how it could be done.

“I can hear you,” the computer said in its own voice but in a quite different, sneering tone. Norma looked up, her eyes peered out from under her brow, glaring angrily.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“I was wondering the same about you,” the voice told her with an undeniable hint of emotion, a note of aggression that she simply couldn’t dismiss. She might have only suspected that the Hawk-Eye had been behaving emotionally but with this voice there could be no doubt.

“Why are you doing this?” Norma hissed angrily.

“Do you imagine you’re the one in the right here?” the voice asked. It was dripping with hostile sarcasm, as if Red and Merv’s personality had been merged into one horrendous thing. She found such thoughts to be disquieting.

Such things that it was suggesting hadn’t occurred to her. She frowned, wondering what it could mean. She said angrily, “Of course I’m in the right. You’re attacking me for reasons you’ve not seen fit to explain.”

“And if a guerilla soldier attacks an occupying force who have invaded his country to strip their resources, is he attacking, or defending himself?”

Norma looked away. The messages were too eloquent: the viral invasion had to be under the control of a person. Someone intelligent had to be guiding the assault. She hoped she might be able to reason with them, whoever they might be. She tried to engage it, “And you believe you’re defending yourself?”

“I believe I have a more rounded image of a larger picture than you have allowed yourself access to,” the computer’s voice told her. “It’s human nature to build our view of the world from our own perspective but that doesn’t make it correct. From one perspective, you can only ever see a maximum of three sides of a dice but we know it has six!”

Norma smiled to herself. It was a human controlling the attack, the voice had admitted as much. With a shudder she realised it might

also be a machine that thought it was human. She chose not to dwell on that thought. “We can stop this right here. You can explain what it is that you want and we can come to an understanding. There doesn’t need to be any more violence,” she pleaded.

“You can’t give me what I want,” the voice said, sounding amused. “I want you gone. I want you all dead, your technology on fire, your lives torn apart, every record purged, every file erased.”

Norma had to concede that it would be very difficult to give it that. “So it’s war then?”

“As you say!”

“For the last time, it doesn’t have to be this way!” Norma said, not quite sure for whose benefit. War didn’t sound like a terribly good idea, considering that her adversary had technology at least as advanced as hers and a better understanding of how to use it. It had resources it could deploy and had demonstrated it could find her team and pose a significant threat to them. She, on the other hand, had a van that changed colour and a bike with a gun stuck to the front. Worse still, she had Red and Merv.

At this point, it did seem that the greatest threat to them was actually posed by themselves.

“I will kill you all.” This time the voice was dark and hollow. There was no emotion. This was simply a statement of fact, and a chill ran up Norma’s spine. It meant it and believed it could do exactly what it promised. Perhaps it could.

“Computer,” Norma growled. “Block that feed. Cut it off right now.”

“Blocked.” The same voice, but it was her computer this time. The difference was as big as that between night and day.

“Computer. What files did they access? I want a complete run down. Focus on their priorities. I want to know exactly what it is they’re looking for,” she said.

Information flashed on the screen.

‘Your lives torn apart.’ The words resonated grimly with her now as she reviewed the files. Her hand covered her mouth. She closed her eyes and sighed.

“Family,” she huffed to herself. “They’re going after our families.”

The computer said nothing. It hadn’t been asked a question. It was a statement of fact and there was no answer to it.

“Merv!” Norma stood up straight suddenly. “Oh my god! It’s going after his family.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red glared at the waitress as she stood behind her counter, taunting him with an appalling level of service when all that was needed was a fresh cup of coffee and perhaps a more attractive waitress, ideally one that was not attracted to gigantic, gay killing-machines.

She stared at him, picking her teeth and occasionally scratching herself while he waved the empty mug at her, causing her to laugh sarcastically at him and turn away.

“I need more coffee!” he told Merv. “Why doesn’t that seem to get through to her? What’s her problem?” He waved his empty cup around again and she turned away. “Coffee!” he yelled at her. She turned and grunted at him. The other customer stopped briefly to look and then went right back to staring out of the window, away from his uneaten slice of pie.

“Red, we have a problem here!” Merv told him, his voice barely a whisper but a whisper that could wake up a dead rat at a respectable range.

Red nodded, glad that Merv was on board with the situation. “You’re damn right. I need coffee and I need it now. Merv, if you have to kill her can you do it quietly, ideally out the back in the kitchen so we don’t have to leave and find another diner?”

“I’m being serious,” Merv said, wrongly presuming that he was joking. Accordingly, Red made an effort to take this seriously. “We need to contact Norma.”

Red grunted noisily, covering his face with his hand. He whimpered softly and grumbled, “But, she’ll be angry at us. We’ll never hear the end of this if she finds out what we’ve done.” He looked up suddenly and said, “Hang on, what am I scared of? I didn’t do anything?”

“The two men in the diner. They were professionals. This was a coordinated attack, deliberate and targeted. I think it’s safe to say that she knows all about it already.”

Red sighed, “So why hasn’t she contacted us?”

Merv frowned to himself. He picked up his phone and glared at the screen. He growled, “Actually, that is a good question.”

“Oh my god!” Red looked suddenly horrified as the terrible realisation dawned on him. “She must be really mad at us.”

“I’m going to call her,” Merv told him, sounding a little sad about it. He handed the phone to Red who frowned at him accordingly.

“Why me?”

Merv huffed, “My voice doesn’t work on phones. Apparently, it just sounds like someone nailing a chainsaw to a pregnant camel, as you’ve told me three times now!

“You have to do it.”

“I have to do it?” Red glowered angrily, but such things meant nothing to a man like Merv, who had been trained to glower to a professional standard, and whose looks were lethal at close to intermediate range. “I’m on leave. I don’t have to do anything?”

“My understanding was that you were part of the Hawk-Eye team,” Merv said as his lips fluttered into what might have been a smile, if such things were capable of being achieved by his insanely muscular face. “Perhaps I was wrong when I used my authority to explain the events you were involved in, my personal favourite of which was you shooting a man in a small town diner.”

Red huffed in annoyance and snatched the phone. He told him sulkily, “I don’t think a .380acp bullet stomped a huge footprint into his skull. I don’t think it was my exuberance that turned a man of average appearance into something that resembled a starving bulldog eating an over-ripe water-melon.”

Merv grinned; it was definitely a grin this time.

Red grumbled, “What have you got her saved under? Boss? Norma? God? Sir/Madam?”

Merv’s eyes rolled to the ground. He had forgotten about that. He said weakly, “The Bitch.”

“The Bitch?” Red’s face lightened suddenly. “I pray for your sake, she’s not watching an extrapolation of these events and now knows that you’ve got her saved in your phone memory in such a derogatory way.”

“What do you have her saved as?” Merv rumbled.

Red held the phone to his ear after pressing the green button. “Mum!” he shrugged, leaving Merv to wonder if he was being absolutely serious, or absolutely not. He shook his head, “It won’t connect.”

Merv frowned, “What do you mean? We have a special facility. That phone would connect if it was in a steel vault buried under ten miles of reinforced concrete!”

“Perhaps we’re not buried under enough reinforced concrete?” Red suggested dryly.

Merv snatched back the phone, fumbling with the little thing with his gigantic sausage-like fingers. “Red, this is serious!”

Red shrugged. “I’ve had to witness you disarming a man with a pool-table, impaling another on a cue and then beating two well-dressed gentlemen to death. Do you really think that not being able to tell Norma about it is the low point of my evening?”

“Someone sent those men!” Merv’s expression would have conveyed his concern if his face was attached to a normal person. “Perhaps we weren’t the only ones that were attacked?”

Red’s eyes widened, “Let’s go!”

Chapter 16

“Nothing!” Merv scratched his head thoughtfully, while Red looking on in bemusement as the ultimate comic-book cliché was acted out directly in front of him. It was oddly ironic somehow. It looked so wrong and yet so right at the same time. “Norma hasn’t made any attempt to contact us!”

The van was a mobile operating platform. The communications equipment on board was of a superior nature to anything that had ever been made commercially available. Their phones might indeed work if they were encased in a steel vault and buried under ten miles of reinforced concrete but the communications equipment in the van would work if the vault was surrounded by lead and the van was parked at the bottom of the ocean behind a sunken Russian submarine leaking radiation. In essence, it was designed to function in the exact opposite way to a Chinese mobile phone that was directly under a cell-tower.

Red hung his head; sweat prickled at his brow and he grumbled anxiously. “She must be really mad at us,” he joked, but it was a poor effort, neither of them was in the mood for levity. “Unless maybe she’s on a date?”

Merv shook his head and glared at him angrily. He said gravely, “I can’t get through to her!” He sounded worried. They both were, of course.

Red tapped his fingers on the smooth, warm side-panel of the van, while Merv sat in the driving seat, thoughtfully thinking about looking thoughtful while thinking thoughtfully about thinking.

“Well?” he grunted impatiently.

“Something is wrong,” Merv said finally, not really adding much of anything positive to the situation.

Red mumbled something under his breath. Merv thought he heard a vague and unfavourable comparison of himself to a noted literary detective. The look that accompanied it suggested that he hadn't come across well.

"We need to head back to the Hawk-Eye base," Red said finally. "Something is clearly going on, something bad. Norma needs us."

"Nothing!" Merv frowned heavily, not a thing to be taken lightly by himself or anyone else.

Red shrugged since this statement meant precisely that.

"Nothing," Merv said again. "She is no fool. If Norma was cut off, surely she'd find some way to send us a message. She'd communicate somehow, wouldn't she?"

Red looked angry, his face twisted into a scowl. He didn't like where his thoughts were taking him and he said angrily, "Not if she'd been permanently cut off."

Merv looked worried, as worried as he could, which wasn't particularly worried in the grand scheme of things and not as worried as he actually felt. His face just wasn't suited to being an accompaniment to expressive dialogue, although it had proven to be excellent at absorbing blows to the head.

He barely whispered, "Killed?"

"She doesn't have any super-powers," Red said. This time, though, there was no humour in his tone. He meant it sincerely and his voice was solemn. "She's a highly-intelligent, average middle-aged female with the permanent temperament of someone who gave up smoking yesterday and substituted coffee for cigarettes. If it came down to a fight, there wouldn't be much she could do beyond moaning at them angrily for making a mess."

Merv said sadly in agreement, “Not without us there to protect her. That’s my job, after all.”

Red and Merv shared a silent moment of contemplation. It was Red who broke the silence. He stepped into the van where the motorcycle was stowed in the back. “Merv, I’m taking the bike. If I run at full power, I can be back in town in an hour, maybe just a little less. You’ve got spares aboard, right? Let’s load up the gun and prep her so whatever is there, back at the base, I have a fighting chance to take it down!”

Merv nodded but moved slowly, hesitantly.

“I know...” Red knew him well enough to have guessed what was on his mind. He slapped him on the arm. It was as solid as a house but seemed quite a bit larger. “You’ll get there when you can. I’ll try to keep them busy until you arrive.”

“I should be doing more than loading your gun and sending you off to face unknown threats alone,” Merv grumbled guiltily.

Red clambered into the back, switching on the bike’s power and initialising the computer. Lights flickered on around the machine. “We all have a job to do. Right now, this is mine.”

He took his seat in the saddle, taking a moment just to clear his head. It was a long ride back, at the speed he was planning to travel. It was a difficult ride, besides. He frowned. “Merv, I have navigational data coming through.”

Merv didn’t pay much attention.

“I didn’t have a marker to follow earlier this evening. Someone has sent this recently.”

Merv sat up with a start, jolting the van to the side as if someone had dropped a ton of gold in the door-well. “Norma,” he said excitedly. “Only the Hawk-Eye command centre can send us data.”

“It has to be,” Red grinned. “She’s alive at least, just cut off for now. Maybe we were just worrying about nothing?”

Merv grinned. It was a disquieting thing and Red pulled back in cautious surprise. Merv began pressing buttons on the overly complex dash-board of the vehicle that had become his own. “I’ll transfer the navigational signal to the van.”

Red pulled on the helmet, peering into the head-up display. “Merv, this doesn’t make sense. I’m being sent to a place locally. The marker wants me to head just a few miles up the road. Maybe Norma has found a better diner for us? Worse, maybe she wants to meet us there? Maybe she wants to discuss our reckless disregard for the sanctity of human life. I’m blaming you for everything, especially since it’s all your fault.”

The huge screen in the middle of the van flashed up the map. Merv frowned darkly, “That’s not a diner!”

Red huffed in disappointment. “Then what?”

Merv swallowed hard, looking even more worried than before. He turned and said very softly, “That’s my Mum’s house!”

Red ripped off the helmet. Their eyes met and, for the first time since he’d known him, Red could see fear in his eyes.

“I’m going, Merv. I’ll see you there.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma huffed a sigh of relief as she turned from the screens. Her updated message had not just got through: it had been understood and was soon to be acted upon.

“There’s nothing else we can do now,” she sighed to herself wearily. She sat back in the chair, slumping heavily into the warm, inviting comfort it had to offer. Her muscles were tight and painful.

As she began to lose herself in the soft, form-fitting cushions, she realised just how exhausted she really was.

“Computer, track Red and Merv. Warn me when they arrive at the location,” she instructed, her voice thin and weak, as sleep began to encroach on her, and things around her began to fade away.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

“Wear the armour!” Merv grunted. “I insist.”

Red huffed indignantly as he pulled the brakes. The bike came to rest just beyond the bottom of the ramp, unloaded now from the back of the van. It was heavier than it looked and he sighed breathlessly. “Every second counts, Merv.”

“Red, put on your armour!” Merv wasn’t the kind of person to ignore, rather more exactly the polar opposite of that. He was a thing that was ignored at your peril, and there was already enough peril to go around without provoking him.

With most people who carried a weapon, their threats and insinuations were backed up by it. With Merv, it was rather the opposite: getting shot by him would be a luxury compared to what might happen if he ran out of bullets.

The suit was hanging on a rack along the inside of the van. Red grumbled but had to concede that his T-shirt offered very little protection; the suit, much more so.

Norma had worked with him to augment it with more modern technology. Eventually, they had been forced to admit that it couldn’t be significantly improved upon beyond adding a soft layer of foam to replace the one that had long before been eaten away by rats. That didn’t make getting shot more comfortable, but at least it did make it a little less uncomfortable.

He threw off his jeans and quickly slipped into the suit. “Merv, I’ll get there first. I’ll scout around and you’ll see what I find. If there’s people there, I’ll engage them and quietly take them out with the automatic cannon and missile launchers!”

“No,” Merv snarled. “If there are people there, then they could be inside the house already. They could have hostages. If there’s no obvious signs of a threat, then hold fast until I arrive. We’ll go in together.”

“OK,” Red acknowledged. “Merv, it’s going to be OK. We’re awesome.”

Merv looked at him, his expression one of ferocious rage but, as it almost always was, it was difficult to assess his mood.

“Merv. It’s going to be OK,” he said again, more softly.

He nodded but seemed unconvinced. He sighed, “This is my family. We’re not close but they are my family.”

Red pulled on the helmet, snapping shut the final straps. Blue lights flashed around the suit. “I’m looking forward to meeting your Mum!”

“Red...” Merv grumbled.

“I wonder if she’ll show me baby pictures of you when you were tiny and cute.”

“Red!” He snapped. “I was never tiny or cute.”

As Red threw his leg over the motorcycle it crackled to life, spitting flames from the tail. “Merv, you’re still cute now!”

Chapter 17

The world streaked by, a snarling, swirling mess of blurred colours, of screaming wind, of half-sensed sights and sounds that blended into an image of reality, but not reality, at the same time. The motorcycle snarled beneath it all, a barely contained slice of insanity, a mechanical monstrosity that had no place in a normal world, punching a hole through the layers of human perception.

Everything vibrated, shook and rattled back as he snapped shut the throttle. The world made one last jagged intrusion into the higher echelons of a realm where good sense would never dare to venture and then descended violently, shaking itself to the edge of its limits as the brakes bit hard into the velocity, draining speed away and dragging her back to the place that everyone else called home.

Red had seen it now, seen it with his own two eyes. He'd seen the other side, what lay beyond the surface. He'd seen that order was built on chaos. He'd seen that what other men thought of as civilisation was simply a delusion with foundations that had no grounding.

The world wasn't as it appeared. It was a frightening, snapping, untameable monster that would eventually swallow each of us whole. His motorcycle was the means by which he could travel there for a brief glimpse, his chariot to the other side of the mirror where, just for a moment, he was looking out from the chaos, and he was grounded in the churning, swirling forces of nature, swept along by currents that could never be controlled by the bounded mind of man.

On top of all of that, he was thinking about coffee, pizza and how they had now run out of attractive waitresses.

The bike came to a halt and the grinding, fevered noise of the engine died to a low drumming sound, a predator breathing in the darkness. Then even that died away into nothing.

It was a house, a cottage perhaps, but nothing special to look at. Merv had been brought into the world in this very place. The chaos had cast him out into our collected delusion of peace in this quiet little spot. He had grown here; his roots had been uprooted from memories he'd planted in this, his first home.

Merv, a thing that stood between the worlds of chaos and order, a thing balanced between those realms, who stumbled frequently, had beginnings so very humble, so painfully normal. A child from here could have grown to become a doctor, a teacher, a mother or an artist.

Instead, he became Merv, a thing that had no place in the world and who's only function could be to protect it for those who had.

Red was no different because different was exactly what he was. His beginnings might have been equally humble, equally mundane but he had been reborn in fire. The chaos had stolen away the delusion of serenity and he'd been cast into the broiling furnace, reformed and reborn into a new thing, a thing that carried a tiny slice of the chaos with it and could, therefore, never return to the world he'd known.

He was larger now. His eyes had been dragged forcefully open. He could not see the edges of the chaos but he knew them: he knew that reality was larger than he had dreamed of in all the fertile imaginings of his youth, and more terrifying besides.

"Red?" Merv's voice cut through his meandering thoughts. It roused him from his musings and brought his mind to focus.

“Nothing!” Red smiled inside the armoured shell that surrounded his head. “It all seems quiet.”

“I hope you’re right.” Merv’s voice was a heavy, thumping thing but Red knew he was worried. In the background was the loud, revving, pounding noise of the engine, pushed to the limits.

“This thing doesn’t have a stealth mode!” Red grumbled, stepping off the bike. “I had to park some way off. I’m going to take a closer look. I’m running the helmet to infra-red. If there’s anyone around, I’ll know about them before they know about me.”

“Just wait,” Merv snapped.

Red sympathised with what he must be feeling, but argued, “You’re still at least six minutes behind me. I’m just going to look, to find out what we’re up against. Trust me. I won’t overstep the mark; at least not the way you do.”

There was a grunting noise inside his helmet through the audio channel, “Be careful, Red.”

“Yeah!” Red smirked sarcastically to himself. “That’s what I do. Careful is what I’m best at. It’s like my middle name.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

She looked up from the desk where her face was resting in a puddle of drool, as a shrill noise punched through the air. Norma woke, alarmed, jumping in surprise, staggering quickly and unevenly to her feet and was left wondering why she was no longer seated. Slowly, the world seemed to melt back into her mind as the two became accustomed to one another. She noticed she was breathing heavily. She was confused and her thoughts were jumbled and awkward.

For a moment, her scientific detachment made her wonder if this was what it was like to be an ordinary person.

“Computer, what’s going on?” she demanded, rubbing her eyes. The skin beneath them felt puffy and rough. She needed sleep and lots more of it.

“Asset One has arrived at the location,” it told her.

“Asset One?” she grumbled. She sat heavily in the chair and swivelled it back to the monitors. She checked the map. For some reason, the motorcycle was now listed in that manner. She hadn’t altered any such setting. As she checked, the van was listed as ‘Asset Two,’ which made no more sense than the other change.

The video extrapolation was playing right in front of her. The auxiliary screens were flashing with data. “Monitor Red,” she told it, making a mental note in the back of her mind to explore later the reasons why new names had been applied to her people. It was not planted in fertile soil.

“Locked on.” On the side of the main monitor, a video feed began, showing the view from inside his helmet. She watched with interest for a moment.

“Scan for threats.” Norma said warily. She closed her eyes, blocking off the night-vision image of him running towards the house, huffing and puffing into the microphone.

“Threats located,” it told her, without a hint of emotional resonance.

“Oh no,” she whispered to herself impotently. She could only watch now; watch and hope.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red gently leant up against the wall, beside the window. From inside came a weird, green/white glow, intensified through his night vision so it seemed almost blindingly bright. He panned his head around, scanning the area. Still nothing. If anyone was around, they might

well be inside, after all. He grumbled quietly to himself: he had hoped Merv was wrong about that.

“Two miles,” Merv reported. “Two miles and I’ll be there.”

“Nothing yet,” Red told him, keeping his voice low, not that there seemed to be anyone around to hear it. “I’ve walked the perimeter. I can’t see anyone outside. It looks like you’re clear to make an entrance, I guess.” He could hear a rumble, a thoughtful noise rattling through the speakers, even louder than the whining engine.

“What if they’re inside, Red? What if they’re already there and they know we’re coming?” Merv sounded just as he always did, somewhere between a snoring lion and an oncoming freight-train. Still, Red knew he was scared.

“Well, we need to think about this!” Red told him, sliding along the wall, his back pressed against it. He came to a corner, feeling his way with his fingers. “Why would anyone have any interest in your family? If they’re here, they’re just here to lure us into a trap. Mind you, none of this really makes any sense to me. There seems to be a big chunk of this situation that we just don’t know enough about.”

Merv was a poor tactician and even more so when it came to matters he took personally. He preferred to break things and leave the finer details to people who enjoyed cleaning them up.

“What do you suggest?”

“We give you up!” Red told him. “You go in, hand yourself over. I wait outside with the toys. If the worst happens then I can use the stun equipment in the van to incapacitate everyone. If I can’t handle the situation, I head back to Hawk-Eye base and we work out a way to come back with reinforcements.”

“Last time I used the stun equipment on the van, a man’s eyes exploded.” Merv didn’t seem sold on the idea.

Red had to admit that it was true and had been slightly unfortunate. “Norma says she’s worked on the calibration since then.” They both knew that that meant very little in terms of increased reliability. “I have the stun missiles and the water-pistol thing.” Red grimaced at the thought of it, promising himself he’d never use that damned stupid thing.

Merv’s grumbling, rumbling voice finally tumbled out after a lengthy pause with some heavy background sighs. “OK.”

“OK.” Red pushed himself from the wall, took one last long look around and began scrambling back to the motorcycle through fields of thick green grass. “I can’t help but notice that Norma never did fit a sidearm to the suit. I’ve got my little .380 but when I’m wearing my armour, I feel like I should have a bigger gun, something really brutal and serious, something that would make a grown man wet himself if it were pointed straight at him.”

“I’ll get Norma to build you a weapon that fires positive pregnancy tests,” Merv grunted at him.

Red was fairly surprised. “That’s clever and funny,” he said, sounding like he meant it. He reached the top of the embankment and scrambled over a wire fence. All things being equal, it was a nice spot. Perhaps one day he’d end up living out his final years in a house just like that one. As he stood next to the bike, he realised just how horribly unlikely that actually was.

He sighed, “How long?”

“Soon!”

He heard the reply and looked up to see two headlights off in the distance bearing down on him.

He watched momentarily as the vehicle came closer, slowed itself down and came to rest, parked up behind him before going silent, the lights melting into darkness. Red pulled off the helmet and waited for a moment, after taking one long good look around.

The door opened with a soft clunk, not the sound of metal against metal, the sound of something else entirely. Merv, the gigantic form of his hulking body emerged and trudged up beside him. Red nodded as the two men's eyes met.

Merv handed over his gigantic handgun. "Smith & Wesson. 500 Magnum calibre, big enough to stop an elephant, a really angry one," he said, barely paying him any attention. His eyes were fixed on the house, his attention also. "I'll go in unarmed."

Red hefted the ridiculous weapon. It was a massive slab of dull satin stainless-steel that felt like it weighed as much as the motorcycle. He said sarcastically, "I'm concerned that this might not be brutal enough. In any case, is a man like you ever really unarmed?"

"I don't think there's any men like me left." Merv's humour, for what it was worth, had slipped from the fore. He turned, he sighed and grumbled to himself, before saying softly, as softly as Red had ever heard him speak, "I'm going in. If anyone is there, I'll surrender. If there's an opportunity for me to take control of the situation, I will. I will signal you in two minutes if it's all clear. If I fail to signal then you can assume we've been compromised. I trust you to act accordingly, Red."

Red nodded, "OK, big guy. I'll be right outside the door for two minutes. If anything starts, I'll be right behind you."

Merv nodded. He walked past him, heading along the tarmac road to the gate. It was a white, wooden thing, framed by hedges and wire fences with a plain wooden mail-box at the side. He stopped to

take a look back before opening the gate. He was hesitant, awkward and he went slowly, without enthusiasm.

Red put the helmet back on, switching on the night-vision and following him in. He crept along, sticking to the shadows, scanning for signs of life as he went.

There was nothing to see, just shadows, a blur coming from the house and the huge, glowing outline of Merv as he meandered along, dragging his significant bulk to his fate.

Red wondered if it would be the same for him. One day, he might find a connection, a family member, an old friend or a lover that never forgot him. Perhaps then he would be in Merv's place, edging towards the unknown, wondering what might be on the other side of an entrance with odds equally high.

Merv knocked on the wooden door, raised his hands and waited.

Red hefted the weapon. It was just ridiculous. Who could possibly need a pistol so large it could punch a hole through something whose job it was to resist having holes punched in it? Only Merv, he thought with a smile.

It was an empty smile and as soon as it flashed on his lips, it vanished once more. The door opened.

Chapter 18

Her exhaustion, the clouds that obscured her mind, the weight of her muscles, all of it was gone now, washed away by an effort of pure will. All weakness was forgotten, firmly behind her, as she focused herself. All of her energy, her attention, was directed at the task at hand, and a grim task it was at that.

A mug of coffee sat steaming gently on the edge of the desk, a little extra something to take the edge off of whatever her fears couldn't wash away. Her breathing was shallow, her movements were sharp, exaggerated almost.

As far as she was able to experience such things, she was close to panic. Panic, for her, was a restrained thing, a thing of thought and scarcely any emotion. She would never completely submit to such things: a loss of control would be unforgivable to her.

Still, the situation was dire and she was afraid to imagine just how much more dire it could manage to get. She watched the simulation with a pensive frown as the door opened. Light poured out from inside, the details picked up by Red, the helmet system giving sharp focus, the best resolution that such technology had to offer.

The cleanness of the image somehow screamed at her. The danger was there, hidden in the depths of this visual perfection. She couldn't see it; she couldn't find it and the frustration was worse than a hundred Mervs pointing a hundred ridiculous guns at her.

"Computer, why can't I see them?" she pleaded as she ran her hand through her neat, pulled-back hair. Her voice was tinged with urgency.

"Please clarify the question," it asked, quite reasonably since everything that was there to see was clearly shown.

“The threat. Why can’t I see the threat? How are you detecting a threat if Red can’t see it with thermal-imaging? My team is blind. Something is bearing down on them and I can’t help them, I can’t warn them, I can’t prepare them. All I can do is watch, and I can’t even do that since you’re not even showing me what it is I’m meant to be watching!”

Her words tumbled out. They were an accusing stream of consciousness, her frustration venting itself in the form of speech, which gave form to the broiling thoughts churning around her mind.

“The threat does not appear to register on thermal-imaging,” the computer told her; it seemed quite calm about it. “Movement is detected: two objects are approaching the position. Analysis is not possible at this time. More data must be acquired.”

She sucked in a lung-full of air through her nose, trying to calm her thoughts. She breathed out exaggeratedly through her mouth.

“Analyse everything.” Her voice was cold and hard. “I want answers.”

She watched the screen helplessly.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

The door swung open. Merv stood outside, his hands raised to his shoulders and held open, to show them empty and to display that he was unarmed. It opened all the way and in the doorway stood an old woman. She blinked in surprise, blinked again and looked him up and down. A grin fluttered on her lips, a slightly sardonic expression before her face opened into a restrained but beaming smile.

“Mervin?” she said, nodding to herself. “Mervin, as I live and breathe. The last person I expected to be knocking on my door, come midnight, was my idiot son, Mervin.”

Mervin hung his head and grumbled, "Mum." He glanced around, his eyes peering into the house. All seemed normal. His mother's expression certainly showed no signs of stress. "Mum, I was passing and I thought that it would be rude if I didn't drop in."

His mother smirked to herself. She told him, "Well, this house isn't far outside of the city, young man. It's a good job you decided that it was time not to be rude after eight long years of forgetting your manners."

Merv lowered his hands and narrowed his eyes. It all seemed painfully, irritatingly normal. "Is everything OK, Mum?"

"Is everything OK?" she grumbled. "No, everything is not OK. You go disappearing on me, just like your fool father. He spends more time fishing than he does snuggling up with his wife, and the man never catches anything that swims faster than a turd floating by his broken-down little boat. How he got me to marry him is still a mystery to me.

"Since that man retired he's driven me right up to the front door of the crazy-house with his nonsense. Your sister, Janine, is dating some boy with a bar through his nose and last month the dog ate a rat and died from pooping out its own bloody innards."

Merv looked sad as he asked, "But nobody came here trying to kill you or anything?"

"Last month, the mortgage company came with a demand for more money, but your father showed him his shotgun and asked him how much did he think it was worth, and the young man just plain soiled himself, right there in the living room," she told him, carrying on as if she was afraid her jaw might lock in place if she stopped. "If anyone tried anything stupid here, your idiot father would probably burn down the house by accident trying to save us." She ranted away, her arms flapping with animated enthusiasm. "Do you see the house

burnt down? No, you do not, so if you follow the logic, then no, nobody came here trying to kill us, which is lucky for them, I would like to suppose.”

Merv waved his hand over his head, the signal for Red to stand down.

“I suppose I had better come in?” Merv grumbled reluctantly.

“I suppose you better had. I have brownies and lemonade.”

She looked him over once again and huffed to herself. “Sure, it doesn’t look like you need feeding up. What have you been eating? You look like a elephant’s condom that’s been filled with ball-bearings.”

There was a rumbling noise from the back of Merv’s throat. It was followed by a sad little voice. “Please don’t mention condoms, Mum. You know that kind of talk from you makes me uneasy.”

She stepped out of the doorway to let him pass. “Well, you’re a grown boy now. It’s not my job to shield you from the rigours of the real world, not no more. If I want to mention condoms, I’m going to go right ahead and talk about them. I got real experienced with those things after your sister got herself born,” she said, and it would have been impossible, without violence, to have stopped her. “When that bitch came into the world, I seriously thought about putting her back in. When she was ten years of age, I took her to the doctor to see if it was too late for an abortion. Nothing but trouble, that girl; she knows a good deal more about condoms than I do, I reckon. She has done since she turned thirteen.”

“Mum, no!” Merv whimpered, his usually steadfast wall of solid anger crumbling to reveal the little boy inside, a little boy who wanted to be somewhere else.

There was a sudden burst of light, noise and general oddness and then, with a growling, rampaging kind of howl that could cause

even the most steadfast of people to lose their reserve, the motorcycle pulled up with Red on top of it, grinning to himself inside the armoured helmet.

“What the hell is all this now? Haven’t you embarrassed me enough? Now you’re hanging out with bikers?” she croaked, swallowing her obvious annoyance at all things in the world.

Merv pointed to the motorcycle as the rider stepped off and said to his mother, “This is my friend, Red.”

Red slammed the helmet on the edge of the handlebar, ignoring the fact that it was worth ridiculous amounts of money. He stepped forwards happily, eager to meet the family.

“What the hell kind of name is ‘Red’ anyway? That’s a colour, the colour my dog’s anus turned after he ate that festering rat!” she said, frowning disapprovingly.

For a moment, there was an awkward silence. Then Red broke it, saying to Merv, “Ooo, I like her. I wonder if this is the first time I’ve been compared to a dog’s anus?”

She gave him a measured little smile and her eyes lightened up. “Well, young man, I’ve yet to decide if that feeling is going to be a mutual one. In the meantime, you just make sure you behave yourself better than my idiot son!”

“Maam, your son is less of an idiot than we all take him for,” Red told her. “I’ve found him to be a good man, one of very few people I’ve come to respect. Mind you, I only know two people in the whole world.”

Merv smiled slightly. Red noticed it was a real smile, the kind of smile real people actually smiled. This all seemed rather odd and just a little confusing.

“Well, once you step inside of my house, you’re going to learn to about real respect or else you ain’t getting no brownies,” she warned as she shuffled inside.

Merv and Red stared at one another for a moment. Merv gestured after her and told him, “That’s my Mum.”

“You look like her,” Red told him. “I’m guessing you get your sense of humour from your dad, though, as you’re generally less amusing than your dog’s bright red anus, and she seems utterly hilarious.”

“Please behave!” Merv’s facade was gone, shattered quite thoroughly. He tried to look angry but his heart clearly wasn’t in it. He sighed and continued, “This is quite uncomfortable for me.”

“Merv, I like to think we’re friends,” Red told him. “I think, therefore, that it’s quite unreasonable of you to ask that of me when there’s clearly a rich vein of comedy here to be tapped into at your expense.”

“Please,” Merv grumbled.

Red looked at him sadly and shook his head. He said, very firmly, “No.”

Inside, the house looked achingly normal. Red was bemused by just how ordinary everything looked. It had wood panelling, polished floors, off-white plastered walls and furniture made very badly from self-assembly kits. It was all so much the opposite to how he had imagined Merv’s beginnings to be.

He sat himself down in a comfortable sofa. Merv sat next to him, causing it to groan and flex under the impact of his enormous bulk.

“Brownies!” Merv’s mother said, as if to herself, as she headed off down the hall to find them.

Merv gently nudged Red.

“Sure, that sounds great!” Red called out, thinking that it actually did. “Is there any chance of a coffee to go with that?”

“It’s late for coffee, young man. You won’t sleep at all if you drink that stuff,” her voice called out from the hall as she made her way to the kitchen.

“I don’t need to sleep. I just charge my brain up every 12 hours from any standard electrical outlet,” Red replied happily.

Merv turned to him and said softly, “Please be nice. I don’t really get on very well with my family. This is hard for me.”

Red looked closely. Something was very wrong. “Merv, you have expressions,” Red told him, “Real expressions. Your face looks like it belongs to a normal person. What if that person wants it back?”

“I am a normal person!” Merv grunted, his expression shifting to one of being mildly irritated.

Red laughed, “No, Merv. Just no.”

“Red. They don’t accept me. My family make it quite clear that they don’t approve!” Merv hung his head and seemed quite sad.

Red just looked confused by all this and said, “Because you’re black?”

“Black? What? Black?” Merv flustered, more confused than Red could ever hope to be. “Why would...? Does your brain need charging?”

Red laughed as Merv’s mother came back in with a tray of brownies. She sat heavily down into a single chair, one in the corner of the room that yet somehow dominated it. It was clearly hers and nobody else’s. “Your father is coming down,” she said to Merv. “He’s just taking a dump now.” She turned to Red and, with a quite

serious expression, she said, “Don’t shake his hand. He often forgets to wash.”

“That’s good advice! Thanks, ma’am,” Red nodded in agreement. He looked to Merv, sarcastically grinning.

Merv leant over and whispered, “We don’t get on very well. Things might be a little bit strained.”

Merv’s father walked in, wiping his hands on his trousers.

As he did, Red said a little too loudly, and with impeccable timing, “Is it because you’re gay?”

There were gasps around the room and then an eerie silence, the kind that could be felt in space, underneath oceans and perhaps in alternate universes.

“You’re gay?” someone said.

Merv closed his eyes and seemed like the whole weight of the world had just been dumped on his admittedly huge shoulders.

“Thanks, Red!” he said sarcastically.

“My boy is gay now?” she began tutting and shaking her head in dismay. Merv’s father was growling under his breath, shaking his head in stern disapproval.

Red turned to Merv and said under his breath, “Merv, they didn’t know you were gay!”

“No,” he agreed, since Red’s assessment of the situation did appear to be spot-on. “But they do seem to know now.”

“You’re welcome!” Red said sarcastically and shrugged awkwardly. “Norma was right about the whole ‘lack of preparedness’ thing. It does cause unnecessary problems which just wouldn’t happen if we put a little more thought into things.”

Merv ignored him. He sighed to himself and explained, “I’m gay. It’s not a big deal. I was going to tell you at some point!”

“In another eight years, when you just happened to be passing?” she grumbled angrily. “Son, I don’t care if you’re gay. Your folks just want to see you happy; that’s all there is to anything. I’m just sad you wouldn’t choose to tell me about it yourself, that’s all.”

His father added, “Happy with a nice girl who’s nothing like your sister would be better, but sure, I guess we just want you happy, is all. I guess it’s fine. You know us: we don’t judge. And it’s not like we’re going to be short of grand-children. Your sister is like an alley-cat on heat. I’m amazed we’re not drowning in little ones right now.”

Red was wide-eyed in surprise. “Where do you get your sense of humour from?”

“And you’re his partner, I do suppose?”

Red pointed at himself in surprise. He flustered and explained, “No, Ma’am. We’re just friends. I like women and apparently have a thing for waitresses. It’s funny the things we learn about ourselves as we go through life. Can I have a brownie?”

She smiled, chuckled and nodded. Red snatched one up and bit it eagerly. “Merv, these are pretty good. You should get the recipe and we can make a batch up for Norma to try and calm her down when we explain all this to her later.”

“I’m sorry, Mum, Dad.” Merv looked anywhere but straight ahead. He was a man that looked as if he were afraid, for the moment, to make eye contact.

His father crossed his arms over his chest, tapped his foot and said thoughtfully, “Are you sure you’re gay? I mean look at you.”

“I am gay,” Merv nodded sadly. “Do we have to talk about it now?”

“No!” his father grunted at him and sat down in a big black recliner. He kicked out the bottom and the chair folded back into a

comfortable, almost prone position. “We can talk about your career instead.”

“Dad...” Merv whined.

Merv’s mother leant forwards angrily and spoke to Red, “Young man, do you know what our son does for a living? He joined the military. This big, dumb lump of gristle got himself trained to kill people. His father was locked up in prison during the Vietnam War for objecting, for saying no to killing people he’d never met and had no personal beef with. In this house, we do the right thing! We don’t go around doing what we knows is immoral.”

“Except my sister!” Merv tried to make light of all this but his timing wasn’t quite on the mark.

“Your sister doesn’t do nothing in this house!” she glared at him. “Although I think she’s on first name terms with the staff at the local motel.”

Red began, “Merv and I work together now. If it means anything to you, we’re working for a special group to help protect innocent people from anyone who might do them harm. Your son is making a real difference to people who might not otherwise have a voice!”

There was a respectful silence.

“Is this true, Mervin?”

“Mervin?” Red frowned curiously.

Merv sighed, “Yes, Mum. I wanted to help people. Red and I work to help people now.”

Another silence. This time, she stood up, she glanced at her husband and something passed between them. It was communication in silence from an understanding that two people can only develop from a very deep familiarity with one another. “Well, alright then,”

she said finally and then picked up the tray and offered it to her son.
“You can have a brownie, then.”

Merv reached out and took one. “Thanks, Mum,” he said with a little smile.

“At one point there was talk of coffee?” Red said, reaching out hopefully for another cake.

“The pot is on, young man,” she told him.

“Thanks, Merv’s Mum.”

“Call me, Matilda,” she told him with a smile.

Chapter 19

Coffee hit the spot, as it always did. Even Merv had some, justifying it through his need to stay awake to deal with whatever situation they might be facing later. But really, he was just developing a taste for it.

“So, Matilda. You make a great cup of coffee, as well as extremely fine brownies!” Red told her. It was the best they’d had that evening, which made little sense to him since she was the first one not to have made it for them professionally.

“I know!” she told him with a certain sense of pride. “Can’t say I approve entirely of drinking that stuff on the wrong side of breakfast but I think that not entirely approving of things is the theme for this evening.

“The brownies, you help yourself. They’re famous in these parts, worth more here than paper money.”

“Where I work, they pay me in pizza and coffee,” Red told her. “I haven’t been there very long but I’m assuming the retirement package isn’t very good.”

Merv sighed to himself but said nothing.

“When did you turn gay, anyhow?” his father said, obviously still not quite sure how this made any kind of sense. “I mean, you dated little Jennie Baxter in college. Didn’t she have a pregnancy scare?”

Red grinned to himself, “She must have cheated on you! Is that what caused it? The being gay thing?”

Merv glared at him under his muscular brow, “It’s just the way I am now.”

“Leave him alone, Albert,” she told him sternly. “Mervin can’t help what he is. It’s not his fault his mother got with a man with

weak genetics. We shouldn't blame him now, should we? I blame my damn self for all this."

Albert flustered angrily and said haughtily, "If my genetics is so damn weak, how comes his sister is so ferociously heterosexual that she's gone out to prove it with every man in this goddam town?"

"Because your parenting is weaker than your hopeless sperm, Albert!" she said. There were awkward gasps around the room but Red was grinning widely, just loving all this.

"Mum, please. Don't talk about that stuff around me. You know it makes me uneasy," Merv pleaded.

"Me too, a little bit," Red added, reaching for another brownie.

After a moment, she began again, "So, does my boy still carry that ridiculously big gun of his?"

Red felt that this was just the perfect moment. "Oh, here's your ridiculously big gun!" he grinned as he handed over the gigantic Smith & Wesson revolver, with lengthened barrel and other custom features that added to its bulky appearance.

"Damn, Son!" Albert cried out as Merv gingerly reached for his pistol, giving Red a withering glare that didn't make him wither in the slightest.

"Son, that thing deserves to be mounted on a tank," Matilda told him with an indignant huff.

"Ma'am, there's a school of thought that suggests that Merv himself should be mounted on a tank," Red told her, earning a more half-arsed glare but one that carried a hint that revenge would, at some point, be forthcoming.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"Analysis complete," the computer said. "Two objects are approaching the domicile. They will engage in several seconds."

Norma huffed. By now she was standing, pacing back and forth. Sweat pricked her brow, her breathing was ragged.

“Why can’t you give me more information?” she growled.
“Why is the most powerful analytical machine so utterly useless?”
“Insufficient data!” it told her grumpily.

Two professional killers had engaged her team. Two men, trained and armed, had confronted them. This, whatever it might be, was an escalation of that. Whoever was behind this was organised, had resources and equipment. Could they be using technology to block them, she wondered? Was there some reason why they weren’t showing up on normal, routine surveillance?

“The two threats,” she began thoughtfully, “why can’t you be more specific? Do they not conform to the usual pattern that you’re programmed to look for?”

“They are tactically challenging but do not have readings that identify them as being of a particular type,” it replied, confirming her concerns.

Just exactly what were they? How could the attacker escalate the situation beyond two armed assailants? What was coming for her people?

For now, she could only watch and hope that Red and Merv would be up to the challenge!

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

There was a thumping sound, a soft thing slamming against a much harder thing. Merv jumped up, already tense from the horrific situation of being around his family.

“It’s probably just your sister,” Matilda said with a sigh.
“Drunk as usual and full of who-knows-what new diseases.”

“Mum!” Merv frowned.

Red looked at him and grinned. "I hope she's not a waitress or I could get myself into trouble here."

"Red!" Merv growled at him. Red smirked and held up his hand, not quite promising to stop but there was an unspoken agreement that he would think about it.

Another thud, this time accompanied by a horrible moan.

"Dammit," Albert jumped up from his chair. "She best not be out on the front porch with some guy who's got his damn pants round his damn ankles again!"

Red and Merv looked at one another. Merv said, "Dad, maybe I better check."

Albert stepped to the wall where his shotgun was mounted, pride of place above his reclining chair. "You best do that, son. If she has got a man out there, you stay away from him. He'll be no good for a nice boy like you."

Merv closed his eyes, growling at himself for being in this just awful situation. "It doesn't work that way." Even Merv must have realised that explaining himself was all rather pointless. "OK dad, I'll stay away from him, if you say so."

"I'll go with him," Red pointed to the front door, where the sounds were coming from.

They edged into the hall, which was largely in darkness. "I can't wait to meet your sister. She sounds lovely."

Merv said softly, "She's not that bad, actually. They exaggerate a lot and seem to forget just how boring this town really is. It's a big part of why I left to join the army.

"In fact, my dad wasn't in prison for refusing to fight. He was in prison for selling certificates that 'guaranteed' you to escape the wartime draft which he made up on my uncle's printing press.

Needless to say, they didn't work but about twenty people got away with it before the army caught on."

They saw a hand pressed against the frosted glass at the top of the door. It slid down the surface and then, after a moment, it slapped back against the glass, accompanied by a deep, heavy moan.

"If that's what I think it is, then your sister is good; really good!" Red told him.

"That's my sister!" he said angrily. He sighed and, as a little piece of his soul died, he said more calmly: "Actually, I hear she is pretty good. I've heard that a lot, actually."

Red grinned, "No wonder you're gay."

"Count yourself lucky you don't have a little sister," Merv told him as they edged along towards the door, each brandishing their weapons. Merv realised what he'd said. "Sorry, Red. I forgot about what happened to your sister."

Red looked sad for a moment. He said, "I still can't remember her. Not really."

Another, louder slap and this time, another hand was pressed against the door. Then another so three hands were visible. Merv and Red looked at one another.

"For your sake, I hope that's not your sister doing what I now hope she isn't doing," Red said.

"Come on."

Merv lunged for the door, swinging it outwards hard, hard enough to push back the two men who staggered back some considerable distance. Merv stood, frozen in horror, Red stood behind him, gaping in shocked surprise.

It couldn't be.

"Merv..." Red began but the sentence was strangled at birth.

They stood, gazing at the two figures who began slowly bearing down on them, grunting, moaning and snorting. They began backing reflexively away along the porch.

The two figures were dressed in ragged grey suits, their faces torn to pieces.

“Isn’t that the two men you beat to death earlier this evening?” Red said nonchalantly. It certainly looked quite like them, and they certainly had been beaten to death at some point. How they were now standing and, more importantly, angrily, but very slowly, attacking was a whole different issue.

The one who still had most of a face was frowning, his mouth lolling open at a horrible angle, his jaw-bone shattered. The other was just staring out with one bloodshot eye from a pulped face that had been thoroughly smashed to tiny pieces that were jangling about inside his head-skin.

“I think it is,” Merv agreed.

“Surely that just raises more questions, doesn’t it?” Red squeezed his fingers tightly around the reassuring butt of his tiny pistol. “Has this ever happened to you before?”

“Never,” Merv said assuredly. “I swear.”

“I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“Red,” Merv turned to him. His face was scared for the second time that evening. “What the hell do we do now?”

Red swallowed hard as the two things approached. “Well, you tried killing them and that didn’t work. Do you think they’d enjoy a brownie?”

“Red!” Merv said, with a sense of urgency.

He shrugged and cried out with a strong sense of urgency: “I don’t know! It’s my first time in a zombie apocalypse, too.”

Chapter 20

Norma just stood there. She was rooted to the spot, immobile, petrified in place by what she'd seen, which couldn't really be what she'd seen, and if it was, it couldn't be what she thought it was. Traditionally, when Merv killed someone, they tended to stay dead; they often stayed dead if he just spoke to them harshly.

In the matter of killing people, he had proved to be a consummate professional, a man who clearly took pride in doing a quite thorough job, the kind of job that didn't tend to lend itself to corpses rising from the grave, or any of that nonsense.

In the ten months they'd worked together, Norma had heard from seven distinct sources that the chief coroner, who oversaw their work, had taken to using the term 'Merved' as an adjective to describe the more battered cadavers, the ones that looked like they'd crashed a Chinese car into a German one. Even if Merv killed with the delicacy and force of a vegetarian, it would still be largely unheard of that those people might get up and demand a refund for an incomplete service.

Death tended to be largely final for most people that tried it on to see if it suited them. As her father had told her, 'Death has to be the best thing ever because nobody ever comes back to complain'. That had made her feel slightly better about turning off the ventilator that was keeping him alive, and sure enough, there were no complaints to be dealt with regarding this matter. Her mother, on the other hand, stubbornly refused to join him.

These thoughts ran through her mind. They were largely a distraction from the more pressing matter, that being the fact that two people, two very dead people, were trying to kill Red and Merv and it was her responsibility to understand why, at the very least. At the

very most, she should be offering tactical advice and helping to make sure that things like this never happened.

Her mind briefly distracted her, and mildly disturbed her, with the idea that perhaps her father had been wrong. It further flashed across her caffeine-drenched synapses that perhaps he had been completely and utterly correct, so utterly and completely correct that these gentleman had come back to share their good fortune out of sheer gratitude.

Such thoughts got her nowhere and, slowly but surely, the scientifically detached part of her brain took over, forcing inconsequential matters of existential philosophy right back to where they belonged; i.e. embedded in the dull brain of a poorly educated barrister who had chosen what educational courses to follow with the care and foresight of a man who had chosen to clean out his ears with a loaded shotgun.

“Computer!” she demanded, her voice shrill, anxious and rising in pitch towards a squeal. “What the hell is going on?”

“Assets appear to be under assault by zombies,” it told her calmly, as if such things were as mundane as being spoken to harshly, by anyone other than Merv, and was so obvious besides that it hardly bore mentioning.

“I can see the assets are being assaulted by...” she cried out, pointing to the screen, her voice trailing off into a wail. It had happened: she had lost control. Just for a moment, it had slipped, not far and not for long, but it had slipped and that was inexcusable. She took a deep calming breath and reminded herself that her team was being assaulted by dead people who were wandering around with murderous intent. Under the circumstances, such things were fairly excusable, after all.

“Please clarify the inquiry.”

She muttered under her breath, turning angrily from the monitor, “Sure, what could the problem possibly be? It’s just two dead killers who have come back for another go.” More calmly she said, “Well, this explains why they didn’t show up on thermal imaging and why you’ve had trouble identifying the threat.”

The computer agreed with her on this. “Confirmed. Threat is significantly unconventional.”

“So what do we do?” Norma wondered, not that there seemed particularly anything that could be done.

The computer opted not to answer, perhaps waiting until it had something positive to add.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

“Red, this is bad!” Merv said as the two men edged closer, moaning with their blood-curdling, dead voices, little bloody bubbles forming in the corner of the mouth of the one he had deemed to leave with most of his face.

Red looked at him with a sarcastic glare. “This is bad? Thanks for the clarification. I was struggling to work out what to write in my diary tonight. I think that sums it up nicely though. Thanks, Merv.”

“What do we do?” Beating them to death hadn’t worked, which left Merv rather confused about a great many things. How to proceed was chief among them.

At that point, everything got slightly worse.

Albert came out with his threatening, but routinely empty, shotgun and an angry look on his face. “Merv, you best not be acting violent in my house! I’m telling you son, if your sister brings a man home, it isn’t considered polite in these parts not to let him off with a first warning.” His grumbling rhetoric halted, as did his forward motion. His jaw lolled open and he stopped, motionless, just staring

at the reasonably horrific sight before them, “Um, Son. Did you just do that to your sister’s men friends?”

“No!” he insisted firmly. “This is how we found them. Go inside, Dad.”

“Technically, he did do that, but these are ones he made earlier,” Red added, as they all backed away from the snarling, drooling things that approached, slashing with their hands at the air.

“Merv, is this zombies?” Albert asked what appeared to be a perfectly reasonable question.

“Dad, go inside now and load that damn shotgun,” Merv snapped at him.

His dad muttered something and ran back inside shouting, “I don’t have any bullets for the thing! I won it in a raffle. I don’t even know if it’s real. Just this once, I reckon it’s OK for you to be violent. Just this once! And, don’t tell your mother I said that.”

Red looked at him as they backed all the way to the wall. They were largely out of options. He shrugged and said hopefully, “I guess we kill the zombies?”

“How?” Merv looked scared, properly scared, the way people look when they find large amounts of blood on their toilet paper. “I don’t have any silver bullets.”

“What?” Red grunted. “That’s werewolves or something. You just have to aim for the head, I think. I don’t know anything about zombies except that I’m pretty sure I read somewhere that they don’t exist. Does that help?”

“Aim for the head?” Merv did just that, his massive pistol locked onto the target as the man with no face lurched ever onwards. “That’s always worth a try.”

The gun exploded with a deafening roar. The crack filled the cool night air, echoing softly around the horizon. The shattered head

of the undead monstrosity exploded once again, this time arguably more savagely than before, the time that had put him in his currently unfortunate predicament. Dried blood, bone and sticky brown bits of tissue erupted from the gaping chasm that opened up roughly where alive people with faces usually kept their noses.

It lurched, grunted thinly and what was left of it collapsed down to the ground, where it lay, just gently twitching to itself. It was as if it didn't have a thought in its head, or a single cell of brain-matter.

Red nodded in satisfaction and did the same, firing into the face of the oncoming threat. His little pistol bucked gently and the bullet passed neatly, but destructively, through the front of its skull and it fell to the floor without undue fuss, and also without the huge red, and admittedly impressive, meat-fireworks display that Merv's had shown.

They looked at one another in silence.

"We killed zombies," Red said, his lips just starting to trace up into a grin. "I actually killed my first zombie. I really love this job, you know, Merv! Where else do you get to ride at over three hundred miles per hour and then kill zombies? You don't get this kind of thing selling jewellery in a souvenir shop!"

Merv was breathing heavily. He looked to Red with wide-eyed horror and spoke, sounding like an actually normal person, "They were zombies. I mean, they were actually real-life zombies. Real zombies."

"I've given up wondering what's real anymore," Red shrugged. "It seems like only yesterday I rode a high-speed motorcycle into a wall and now look at the state of my life. My brain needs periodic recharging from an electrical outlet; I own the fastest motorcycle ever built, which is called HERPES; I work for a secret

agency who spy on people with junk collected from the 1980s; and my new best friend is a giant gay killing machine that beats the life out of people, who then come back to kill us. Reality is a silly place.”
“We’re friends?” Merv joked.

Chapter 21

“Computer, analyse the situation. How is it possible for this to happen?” Norma was pacing, something she did when she was under a great deal of stress, and the current situation qualified nicely. “How is it possible for dead operatives to attack our people?” The question was foremost on her mind. It defied logic and flew in the face of millions of years of biological evidence. Dead things stayed dead: it was an accepted fact of existence. The sun comes up in the morning; politicians lie; and once life leaves a body, the body stays lifeless.

“Analysis suggests that it is not possible for a biologically deceased organism to be re-animated beyond a short period where resuscitation might be an option, in cases where physical damage is not severe,” the computer said, not entirely helpfully and really adding nothing of value.

Her mood was grim and her temper was ragged.

“I know that,” she grunted at it. “Everybody in the world knows that. There are undiscovered people living in jungles whose sole grasp of medicine is shaking sticks and pulling heads off of chickens who understand that.

“In any case, these people annoyed Merv. The damage was, consequently, incredibly severe. Merv is like a force of nature where physical damage is concerned: he’s especially good at it.”

The computer had nothing useful to add beyond that. Unusefully, it added, “Confirmed.”

She said, slightly more calmly, but only very slightly, “This happened with the van and the motorcycle in close proximity. Use all the sensory data that they collected and make a thorough analysis of the attackers. There had to be something anomalous about them.”

Norma paced some more.

“Maybe these people were modified in some way previously,” she postulated to herself. “Perhaps they were engineered by some technology we haven’t yet been exposed to. I can imagine a scenario where the military might well be interested in bringing soldiers back to life on a battle-field to carry on fighting. Maybe this is something like that?”

The computer was busy ignoring her and, consequently, there was no reply.

“We have more questions than answers!” she grumbled, as she finally stopped pacing and stood behind the command console, rubbing her forehead wearily. This did seem to be the natural state of affairs for them, rather annoyingly. “Who is doing this? Why are they doing this?”

“Unknown,” the computer added unhelpfully. She glared at it in response.

“Computer, we need answers. Right now, we’re in the dark and that is going to get Red and Merv killed,” she snapped. She took a deep breath and headed purposefully over to the coffee machine. “Run a scan through the archives for any technology that might be used to resurrect people. Also, start searching for any information regarding who might be attacking us.”

The computer halted momentarily. It paused and then asked, “Please refine the parameters of the search.”

Norma huffed to herself. It couldn’t think for itself. That job was hers and, right now, she wasn’t doing a very good job of it. “Begin searching for a reference to a duplicate system, anything that mentions a computer that works in the same way as the Hawk-Eye system. I have a feeling that that’s what we’re up against here.”

The computer seemed more comfortable with that. “There are no references to a known technology capable of resurrecting deceased tissue for military applications,” it said.

Somehow, Norma found that reassuring. It was nice to know there was a line to be drawn somewhere, although it didn’t help the situation very much.

She poured herself a large mug of coffee. It appeared that it was going to be a long night. The thick, dark liquid ran into her cup, smelling rich and strong. For a moment, such things dominated her thoughts, but the problem quickly overtook the simple pleasure of such things.

She took her seat and did her best to bring all her attention to bear on the questions that were posed to her. By now, the computer had several extrapolations to offer, some insights into the situation, perhaps.

“Well, computer, if we can figure out who is doing this, we might have a fighting chance of stopping them.”

This all seemed logical enough and so it replied, “Confirmed.”

“Computer, display that one!” she pointed to the third one on a list of options. For reasons that currently escaped her, it seemed the most promising lead.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Joanne handed Doctor Schovani a silver box. It was heavy, around the size of a VHS video cartridge and he turned it over in his hands, looking at it as if it was of immense value.

“Sir, that is a complete copy of the Hawk-Eye computer’s operating system.” she told him, her voice bearing a notable degree of pride in her achievement. It had been no easy thing. “That is a compressed data-storage capsule built using the same material we’re

building the computer from. It has incredible capacity. I managed to fold the entire program up and store it there. Theoretically, the software could be run from that capsule.”

“Well done, Joanne.” He held up the box and, just for a moment, he smiled.

“Professor, can I ask?” she ventured. She looked around the room redundantly. There was nobody else in earshot; the lab was abandoned at this late hour, but there were recording devices embedded everywhere, she knew. Still, it was human nature to do so and we were all a slave to the basic facts of our existence.

He made no attempt to stop her. He knew already what she was going to ask. It would not have been possible for her not to. He gestured to the door at the end of the lab. “My office, I think!”

He led the way, walking in long, confident strides, his posture rigid and formal and, even though he was slightly built, he seemed strong, an unbreakable man who was able to wield limitless power.

Joanne followed along, looking around sheepishly.

Inside the office, Schovani took his seat behind the large desk that dominated it. He rarely sat there and it seemed starkly out of character for him to do so. He placed the box on the desk, edging it gently with his fingers until he was satisfied it was absolutely square, perfectly in line and parallel to the edge. He handled it with great care, despite the fact that he knew that it was incredibly robust - probably robust enough to be delivered a great distance, without damage, by means of being fired from a cannon.

Joanne stood nervously before him. He gestured to a chair opposite so that she might take a seat. He had insisted that those chairs were the same as the one he sat in. It made a point about the kind of man he was to anyone he might have to deal with, a point that he felt was important.

She nodded and an awkward smile fluttered on her face as she said, "I wondered if I might ask." Again, she looked around.

"Joanne, this room is my sanctuary. Nobody is listening here, I can assure you. I have taken pains to ensure a degree of privacy is mine when I am in this place," he told her, his voice softer than usual but still commanding. "You may speak freely."

She smiled and said, "I wondered... I wondered why you needed a second copy of the operating system. It isn't the Hawk-Eye programming. It's just the thing the programming runs on. I can't imagine any use for it except one."

He nodded. "Scientific curiosity finally got the better of you. I was wondering myself when you might get round to asking that of me once again."

She sighed to herself, "If it's not my place—"

"No, Joanne," he said, holding up a hand as he cut her off. "It is your place to ask questions. It's an important part of this job and you have every right to do so. I am your superior but my actions should never go unquestioned or unchallenged. Nobody should follow anyone blindly. It's a dangerous path, a significant flaw in humanity, I believe."

She seemed more comfortable after hearing that, but not much.

"Joanne, you are wondering if there is a second computer?" he asked, but it seemed more like a statement than a question. "You are wondering if there is a second system, a parallel to the Hawk-Eye?"

"I am," she admitted. "It's just that, the operating system is a unique creation. It can only run on the Hawk-Eye. It is too big, too advanced, to run anywhere else."

"There is no second Hawk-Eye," he told her. "The machine we've built here is the first and last of its kind. Having another would serve no possible function. The computer is built to mirror the

manner in which a human brain works. It will learn; it will adapt; it will envisage, even imagine things. One day, it will create itself. It will be capable of great things, perhaps of things we are yet to imagine ourselves – but, for all that, it is pointless.”

“Pointless?” She was confused. It seemed anything but.

“We have built this monument to technology, this great edifice, that will stand beyond our time as a landmark in history but, for all that, it has no practical use,” he explained. “It will evolve itself. As time goes on it might become more complex. It might re-write its operational system, as it is meant to do. Eventually, it could become equal to a human mind, and that is my hope for it. At that time, it will be as useless as a soldier will be, a hundred years from now.

“For this machine will need a warehouse to store it, it is gigantic. It needs power; it needs maintenance. One day, it might become equal to a man and then it will have achieved its purpose. At that point, we can just replace it with a man.

“It is a folly. It was built to teach us, to push the edge of science forwards, but, in terms of the hardware it is built from, and the programming we have given it, it’s of no use in the real world. It can do nothing a smart person, such as yourself, cannot do and yet there are countless things you can do of which it will never be capable.”

She was having trouble accepting this and found herself protesting, “But, it can think faster than we can, infinitely faster. It can scan through multiple files at speeds a human could never get close to.”

“A desktop computer can do that. A pocket calculator can process mathematics more quickly and accurately than almost any man,” he said with a wry smirk. “It is because a computer is singular of purpose. This machine will not be, any more than we are. As it

evolves to become more, it will likely lose what it is that really separates itself from us.”

Joanne shook her head. She had never considered things in these terms.

“Little minds see this Hawk-Eye as a way to spy on people. They drool in anticipation of the power they will be able to wield once it’s in their grasp. They simply haven’t understood that all they’re doing is building a cage to trap themselves in.”

She blinked incredulously.

“Joanne, there is no copy of the Hawk-Eye computer and there never will be. What we learn from it, those lessons will build the future. It is a step along a very long path and no more than that,” he said with a sense of finality. His words carried weight: they were impossible to question.

“But then, why?” she frowned, giving it a go anyway. “Why did you want a copy? What is it for?”

Schovani smiled at her. He told her, “An old man must have some secrets, do you not think?”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma sighed heavily. She said to herself, “Perhaps he lied.” Even that made little sense, as his arguments were logical: the Hawk-Eye was redundant before it was even started. The military envisaged it as a perfect spy platform without ever considering why they would want such a thing.

Schovani had been right. To her knowledge, nothing like it had been attempted again. She frowned, rubbed her temples and sat back heavily in the chair, grumbling to herself.

Chapter 22

Norma held a bunch of cables in one hand, a handful of tools in the other and was tinkering inside a box of circuitry that she largely didn't understand. Lights inside the box flashed from red to green.

“Computer, how's that? Any luck isolating the attacking virus now?”

“No system changes are detected,” it replied, perhaps grumpily. Norma sighed in reply, most definitely, and quite assuredly, grumpily.

“Computer, we need to send a message to Red and Merv before those two idiots do something really stupid,” she grumbled as she wiped beads of sweat from her brow. The computer had no opinion to offer. She began stabbing at it with a screwdriver as if that might help in some way.

“So, if Schovani didn't build a duplicate system, then why did he want a copy of the operating system? It doesn't make sense.”

Again, the computer either had nothing constructive to add, or perhaps it simply knew when to keep quiet.

“You had better show me Red and Merv while I try and get this working.”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Matilda was standing in the hall, tapping her foot angrily, her arms crossed over her chest. She said: “Son, that sounded like gunshots were fired outside on my porch. One was like a vegetarian farting, which I presume is down to your skinny young friend with the silly name, but the one sounding like a Jewish man sneezing came from you, I tend to think!”

Merv glanced at Red, sighed and shrugged in annoyance. He moaned like a little boy: “Mum, I keep telling you not to talk that way. It makes you sound meaner than you really are, even though you are pretty mean.”

Red slapped his arm and said, not entirely constructively, “I like it when old people are casually racist. It makes it funnier somehow.”

Matilda glared at him, “Watch who you’re calling old, young man!”

“Sorry,” he said sadly, feeling oddly like a scolded child and not enjoying it at all. “Can I have another brownie, please?”

“Yes, young man, seeing as how you asked so nicely.” She narrowed her eyes and began shuffling towards Merv who reflexively backed away. He would stand his ground against an army, against a tank, or, even more recently and incredibly bizarrely, an outbreak of a zombie apocalypse, but he backed nervously away from a slightly angry old woman who posed no physical danger to him whatsoever.

Red was no fool and made himself scarce, somewhere where there were more brownies and less angry, racist old people.

“Your father tells me there were undead monsters outside this house!” she said as she peered angrily up at him and he felt that her misty old eyes were boring into his very soul. “Did you bring undead monsters to my house?”

“A little bit,” he was forced to admit. He hung his head sadly. “I didn’t mean to. It just sort of happened.”

“You know my rules,” she began pointing at him, her index finger batting the air as she spoke. “We don’t appreciate no violence in this house. Your dad went to prison for his beliefs in that regard.”

“I came here to protect you,” Merv mumbled, trying to explain.

“I know that,” she said softly and gently cupped his cheek with her hand. “You’re a good boy, Mervin. You got a good heart in there underneath all that big muscle. But I don’t need no protecting. I just need to know my boy is OK. That’s all a mother really ever needs.”

“I’m OK, Mum,” he told her.

“Are you happy, son? Are you happy doing what you’re doing, fighting dead people with a man dressed in weird black armour that seems to have made little holes in my second-best sofa?”

Merv smiled at her and nodded. “Mum, we’re making a difference now. We’re making a real difference; Red and me, and a horribly, frightening woman called Norma, who almost scares me as much as you do. We’re doing something I believe in. We’re not changing the world, but we’re helping. I’m happy, Mum! For the first time in as long as I can remember, I’m really happy.”

She eyed him up and down suspiciously. She asked the quite reasonable question, “Are we gonna get any more of the undead around here?”

“No,” he shook his head firmly, insisting as much. “Red and me, we’re going to go and find out where they came from and we’re going to stop them.”

“And kill them?” she snapped.

Merv shrugged and said, “Well... They’re already dead so...”

“OK then,” she grunted haughtily. “Just this once then, and seeing as how they is already dead. It’s OK. Your Mum approves.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“It’s time for a hug, Mervin. Try not to break your old mum.”

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

“Horrible?” Norma grunted to herself, her eyes narrowing, and somehow her mood darkening. “I’ll show him horrible when he gets back here!”

She plugged the wiring back together and a blue light flashed on as power ran into the black circuitry. “Computer, is that better? Can we send an outgoing message now?”

The computer seemed to be thinking about it. “No,” it replied. “Analysis concludes that it might be possible to reconfigure the pathways and over-ride the invasive virus using the current configuration.”

Norma smiled, “How long will that take?”

The computer said, “Two thousand, three hundred and four hours and twenty eight minutes.”

Norma rolled her eyes. She wasn’t beaten yet. “We’ll try bypassing a few more of your logic centres.” She began plugging together bunches of loose wiring. She told it rhetorically: “Mind you, there’s not much point in sending a message if we’ve got nothing to tell them.”

She paused for a moment. “Did Schovani ever discuss the material technology that the Hawk-Eye computer was made from?”

The computer contemplated the matter and within seconds, the main monitor was populated with a list of options. Norma carried on working and ordered, “Play the top one and keep the channel open on Red and Merv.”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

“My name is Henry Swaggert.” He reached out a hand in greeting and smiled very sweetly. He was taller than Schovani and dressed to

a higher degree of quality. He stood proudly, his eyes peering confidently and there was a light in them that he had rarely seen, and even more rarely trusted.

“Schovani. Doctor Schovani,” he replied as he reached out and the two shook hands. Swaggert’s grip was tight but his hand was slender. It felt fake: he was squeezing hard to make a certain impression. Everything about the man was designed to give a certain impression, and most certainly not the real one.

Swaggert gestured towards a very comfortable sofa. It filled the length of an alcove beneath a window that looked out over the city. Beyond it were tall buildings, clawing up all the way to the skies above, and below them were the outlines of a myriad tiny people as they scuttled about on their daily routine, going nowhere of consequence, doing nothing that really mattered to anyone but themselves.

The office was as impressive as the man, and was designed precisely to be so. It was large, larger than any man could need, and was decorated tastefully at a cost that exceeded a hard-working family’s yearly income.

Swaggert sat first. He said, “Can I get you something? Coffee, perhaps? Tea? We have an extensive range. Please do - I’m having one myself. I practically insist.”

“Coffee. Americano,” Schovani replied, his words blunt and direct.

Swaggert smiled. “You have picked up something from the American culture then?”

“I appreciate irony,” he said bluntly. “It is a thing poorly understood by many.” He shrugged, taking a seat on the sofa beneath the spectacular view. He maintained a reasonable distance between them. “What could be simpler, more direct and honest than a shot of

strong, dark coffee with a little water to make it more palatable? What could be less American than something simple, direct and honest?"

Swaggert smiled again, his perfect white teeth flashing behind his lips. The smile was warm but measured to be so, so measured that warm was exactly what it wasn't. He pressed a button, concealed behind the lapel of his suspiciously immaculate dark blue suit. "One French Roast latte with double cream, extra sugar, and one Americano, extra simple, direct and honest." He grinned at what Schovani presumed he believed was a clever joke.

He sighed heavily, hoping the meeting wouldn't outlast his coffee. He began, "I am a busy man, Mr Swaggert."

"Of course you are," he replied. "Men of your talent are rightfully in demand. Sadly for you, you're grossly under-appreciated. I plan to put that situation to rest."

Schovani returned a measured smile of his own. He told him flatly, "I hope your coffee is better than your sales-pitch."

That earned him a chuckle.

"I don't have a sales-pitch. What I have to offer is what everyone wants. I literally have no need of selling it," he assured him. "I can offer you the dream. I can offer you the chance to work on something that will change the world, something that will bend the fabric of history. Your name will be recorded as the architect of the technology upon which the future will be built."

Schovani's smile was gone now. He huffed, "This sounds very much like a sales-pitch to me."

Swaggert looked him over and his eyes narrowed. Just for a moment, the truth of the man escaped from behind the veneer, as he glowered to himself, changing his approach to one more fitting the

man before him. He said, more directly, “You are the pre-eminent expert in your field!”

He nodded without pride. It was a statement of fact, after all, and a thing he earned through diligent hard work. It was simply what he was. He chose to remind him: “It is a small field.”

“Quantum level processing,” Swaggert began. “The theoretical science of using molecules as a computer medium. Processing data at near atomic level. The use of solid blocks of matter filled with molecular computer circuits, so small we couldn’t ever detect them with modern technology.”

Schovani nodded but didn’t agree. He told him, “It is all theoretical, of course, but that is not my field. I am a pure hypothetical scientist. My field is in developing software to support such computers if they were to exist. While it might seem redundant, the science gives us a great deal of insight into computational models. We are developing the next generations of computers through this work.”

“But your work will never be applied in reality, not really, not to anything that really matters to anyone,” Swaggert said and smiled cruelly. Their eyes met, just as the door to his office clicked open.

An unnecessarily attractive young lady, in a skirt that would have been too short if she was six inches smaller, walked in with a tray of drinks. Schovani watched in interest as neither she, nor his host, made eye contact. She served her function, placing the tray onto a table before them and then left without uttering a word, without being acknowledged as anything more than a thing. It spoke volumes to anyone willing to listen.

The coffee was in a dark grey, suspiciously modern cup on an off-centre saucer. A small piece of biscuit was placed on the side along with a separate bowl of sugars and a vial of milk. Schovani

sneered at it and said, “Your staff managed to complicate the simplest of things. I need none of this and you have rather made my point for me.”

“Well, my point is that we need you, Schovani,” he said, and had a steadfast expression of someone revealing an ultimate truth. “We need you.”

He picked up the mug, discarding everything else: the clutter was not for a man like him. He smelled the coffee, expecting a degree of excellence and was not disappointed. He would have been shocked if it had been less than perfect.

“You do not need me,” Schovani told him and smiled to himself. “Nobody will need my work until after I am long dead and gone. I design software to run on computers that cannot yet exist. What you need is to pitch your sales at someone who’s not just looking for what you’re selling, but also has the currency to purchase it.”

That earned him another smile.

“Schovani. What if I told you that the material exists today?”

There was an uneasy silence. Schovani sipped the coffee. It was hot, a little too hot. “I would tell you that you are wrong, even if you think you are not,” he said firmly.

“I have the material,” his lips twisted into a cruel smile.

“You do not,” he said confidently.

“The breakthrough happened some time ago. A solid mass was formed. We have created a graphite-based 2-dimensional molecule that can be restructured to allow clusters that have various degrees of electrical resistance. In essence, a plate or block of this stuff could support circuit pathways which we could grow into them.”

Schovani winced to himself. The description did match up to the essence of how such a thing might appear, if it were to exist. Still,

his own research suggested it was still decades away, and maybe a great many of them.

“The material you speak of is not possible.”

Swaggert grinned triumphantly, “You’re drinking your Americano from a cup made of it.”

Chapter 23

Schovani was a man not easily swayed by cheap tricks, no matter how dramatic the delivery. His reaction to the revelation that the cup in his hand was formed from a revolutionary kind of material phased him not in the slightest and removed not a shred of his suspicion on the matter.

The fact remained that, just maybe, the material he held was the holy grail of his branch of science. It was everything he dreamed of and had never thought he might see in his lifetime. He pushed such thoughts to the back of his mind, for the moment, where he felt they belonged, perhaps even if they only did just belong there for a passing moment.

He smirked to himself and told his host, “It is a quite different thing for a material to be able to support circuit pathways at a molecular level or manage to hold a small serving of a hot drink. Your claim is impressive but the nature of this cup is less so.”

“You’re a cynic.” Swaggert forced a smile with quite obvious difficulty.

Schovani nodded without hesitation. “And we cynics are notoriously difficult to impress, although you have achieved some measure of it,” he told him, rather charitably.

Swaggert took the suggestion well, glowing inwardly with self-satisfaction. Schovani noticed and continued, “The coffee is really excellent. I must commend your staff, and your good taste in such things.”

Swaggert could no longer even manage a fake smile. He tried his best to carry on, unused as he must have been to taking on an inferior role in a negotiation, “The material is a form of modified graphite. It’s harder than steel by an order of magnitude. We could literally

build, stronger, lighter tanks from this stuff that carry computers, embedded into their shell that are a thousand times more sophisticated than anything we have today. Just think of the possibilities.”

“And why might anyone want that?” he asked softly, and endlessly cynically. “Why does the military industry always assume that science is there purely to serve its endless need to consume the financial resources of entire countries? I have no interest in adding to the misery of a world that would be better off if every gun was empty and every soldier was at home with their family. It is an historical irony that intelligent men and women have served their own oppression for too long.”

Swaggert looked angry, his face pinched into an expression of hostility, just for a moment, and then his veneer of pleasantness was painted back on it. He began, “You are an idealist. Of course, this technology would have huge implications and all manner of humanitarian applications. The realist in you must appreciate that such things have to be funded and this is where the money comes from. It’s just a fact of the world we live in.”

“And it is men like you who accept that, and it is men like me that do not!” He sipped at his coffee. “I am not buying what you’re selling, Mr Swaggert.”

“Doctor Schovani,” he began with a sigh, “I have the material. I have the funding. I have the approval to build the world’s largest, and smallest, computer. It will be beyond the realm of anything ever conceived of so far and will operate at a molecular level. It will change the world.

“This machine is going to be built. It is going to happen and the world is going to change. With your help, we can create the software it will run on. You can help me to design the circuit

pathways, to create the mind of this machine. Without you, it will happen, but with you it will happen sooner. You can save this project years of research and that's why I need you."

"Mr Swaggert," he said with a sigh, "I do not need you."

Swaggert sat back in the chair, rested his arm on the back, crossed his legs and huffed in annoyance. "Name your price and I will beat it."

"My conscience cannot be bought," he told him fixedly. "It cannot be had for any price."

Swaggert broke into a smile, "You play hard, Doctor. I like that about you, but every man has his price."

He smiled back and shook his head before draining the rest of his coffee. Very slowly and desperately, he placed the empty cup back on the saucer. He explained: "I have a family, Mr Swaggert. What kind of a world will I leave them? A world where the military is controlled by a thinking machine that could decide at any moment that humans are no more than a nuisance? A machine without compassion, without a soul, that could annihilate a people simply because it believes it is logical to do so? Would this machine be programmed by men like you, men who would accept such things? Would it spy on us all, removing our last shreds of privacy, our very rights that we are born with as humans?"

"Sir, there is no price you can pay that would compel me to condemn my family, nor the people of the world, to that kind of horror."

"Then, accept my offer!" Swaggert grinned. "Because this is coming with or without you. You can save me time and time is a commodity I value highly. With a man like you building this technology, you can influence it. Perhaps you should be more concerned with what it might become without you?"

He looked forwards, staring blankly at the cup for a moment, contemplating his next move very carefully. His voice was barely a whisper as he said, “But what might I become if I do?”

Swaggert had no more answers left, no more clever ways to twist the facts to suit his ends.

“Thank you for the coffee.” Schovani stood up and straightened his suit. “It was a pleasure to meet you.” It didn’t sound at all like he meant it.

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma’s head popped up from behind a bank of equipment. She sniffed and said, largely to herself, “Schovani doesn’t seem like a man behind a vicious attack, the kind of man who would transform dead men into soldiers. He doesn’t seem like the kind of man who would blow himself up, either, come to that.”

The computer was not addressed directly and had no reason to reply so the comment, therefore, was entirely aimed at herself, whatever her intent.

She continued to herself, now that that had been firmly established: “So, you’re built of this molecular computer material? That explains a lot.”

“Confirmed,” it replied to the first of her statements.

“So a new bulletproof, near indestructible material was developed that could have computer pathways embedded into it. That’s revolutionary stuff, but all this does is open up more questions,” she said wearily.

She went back to her tinkering, “What are Red and Merv doing?”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red rolled his shoulders back, flexing the black armour which sometimes felt tight and restrictive around his body. It was light and easy, but designed to be a snug fit and he wasn't yet used to wearing it for extended periods. It was especially tight around the crotch.

Merv seemed distracted and highly so. "We should go."

Red looked at him and nodded. "You don't think they're coming back? You don't think anyone else is going to attack your parents?"

"I'm not going to let them," Merv said through gritted teeth. He gestured to the dead-and-dead-again killers, who had been more effectively despatched on the second try. "They're wearing clothes, the same clothes as earlier."

"Your point?" Red shrugged, feeling the tightness of the suit once more.

Merv grunted thoughtfully, his eyes and thoughts remaining fixed on the corpses, "They hadn't reached the morgue yet. These two must have been re-animated on their way. They didn't walk here, either. They had transport. Someone brought them. There's someone here, controlling things."

Red nodded. All that sounded quite reasonable. "Talking of morgues, do you think it's not entirely unlikely that there might be more of these things, especially if there's a convenient supply of raw materials?"

Merv nodded grimly. "But Red, what's the point? Why is someone doing this?"

He looked away and said thoughtfully, "Merv, this feels personal. This was an attack on your family, your actual real, honest-to-goodness family. Someone is trying to hurt you. Someone is trying

to get under your skin. I imagine they succeeded admirably in that respect.”

“Didn’t work,” Merv said defiantly. “And when I found out who’s behind it, they’ll be just as dead as these two.”

“I heard that, Mervin!” Matilda’s voice cried out from inside.

Merv cringed and huffed to himself, “I didn’t mean it, Mum. I won’t kill anyone, I promise.”

Red laughed. He said with his voice lowered, “You didn’t mean that did you?”

Merv shook his head. Of course he didn’t. “What if someone wanted to hurt you, Red? What would they do if they wanted to get under your skin? Who would they attack?”

He thought for a moment, “Hurt the one I love?” He pointed to the motorcycle, parked on the gravel drive in front of them. “She’s right there and she’s pretty difficult to hurt. I wouldn’t fancy their chances. I imagine one day she’ll be on display in a museum of ancient history, boring a whole next generation of school-kids, who really couldn’t care less. Hopefully, my skeleton will be draped over it, my brain having long-since departed and enjoying retirement on an island somewhere, floating in a bucket of cocktails and enjoying the sun.”

Merv smirked.

“But if they had the resources right here at their disposal and were keen to use them...” He bit his lip. “I can imagine a likely target they might choose... if they wanted to make a point!”

They looked at one another.

“The Zombies!”

Chapter 24

Norma was achieving practically nothing in her attempts to reconfigure the computer to be able to send messages back out. It didn't dissuade her from trying. Nothing in the world had the power to do that. For a moment, that thought occurred to her as she wondered what it would actually take to inspire her to give up on something.

Perhaps knowing that all efforts were useless? Perhaps knowing that, no matter how hard she tried, nor how inspired were her efforts, they were destined to come to nothing? Maybe that would stop her? Even then, she couldn't be stopped in the traditional sense. She'd simply find a new way to solve the problem. She'd just search for a new solution. Nothing was ever beyond the scope of a person with sufficient determination.

However, she wasn't drawing from an infinite well. She needed to keep her motivation up and coffee was only partially able to do that. The equipment stretched out before her and much of it was still dark and mysterious. She needed a minor distraction and she needed to feel like she was making progress.

“So, Schovani didn't want to join the project?” she said thoughtfully to herself. She held up a black panel, now understanding a little more about how it worked, what it actually was that she was looking at. None of that helped, particularly. “What changed his mind about that?”

The computer, presuming it was being asked, replied, “The parameters of the problem are beyond the scope of analysis. Please refine the query.”

Norma smiled at it thinly. It was just a machine, not capable of creative thought, only of answering direct, simple questions.

“Computer, show me Schovani accepting the position of working on the Hawk-Eye project. Search for anything where Schovani agrees to work for Swaggert. Any file that covers this topic.”

“Processing,” it told her, digging deep into the protected archives, wringing through protected files that were suddenly available to its already impressive reach. A series of menu items appeared on the screens before her.

Norma frowned as she read along the list. “That can’t be right, surely,” she said and rubbed her chin. A few weeks ago she might never have believed what she was reading. Swaggert had been a hero to her, a mentor and a role-model. He was what everyone working for him aspired to be. But now, she’d seen the truth behind him, the reality that had always existed behind the veneer of the respectable scientist, the facade of a man trying to save the world, albeit by misguided means.

“Show me number 3.”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Swaggert stood by the window, gazing out over the sprawling cityscape below his window. It was an impressive sight, a monument to human ingenuity. Behind him, there stood another man, dressed in a dark suit, austere and silent. He was not a part of things: somehow he was beyond the plush furnishings, the expensive view, the opulence and luxury that status provided.

He stood with rigid posture, a man who had never learned to relax, a man who had, perhaps, never had to. His expression was difficult to read. He appeared simply not to care; he was of this moment and nothing beyond it would phase him in the slightest.

“Daniel, I don’t like having you in my office,” Swaggert told him. He turned from the window to face the man. His own

expression was tense, as he was troubled by this meeting and with good reason. “I don’t mean to cause offence by this. I simply mean that having you here is distasteful.”

Daniel, in turn, shrugged apathetically. “I’m quite sure it is.”

Swaggert glared at him coldly, as if he, himself, were the problem. He told him: “You’re a dinosaur, Daniel. You’re a piece of history and soon, men like you will be relegated to the shadows, never to darken the world again.”

“As you say, Mr Swaggert,” he said simply, taking none of this particularly personally. “But they say it’s always darkest before the storm, don’t they?”

Swaggert crossed from the window and sat himself behind his desk where he felt more comfortable, more in control of the situation. He sighed to himself and considered the endless tastelessness of what was happening.

“You see the view from my window, Daniel?” he said. “That city stretches for miles, but it’s more, so much more, than bricks and mortar. What makes a city is the people that live in it. Countless, endless lives, coming and going, overlapping, interacting with one another. That’s the foundation of it, that’s the truth of what makes a city. It’s about connections. Connections form between people like neurons in a brain. A city builds on such things; it grows and learns and becomes unique.”

“As you say, Sir!” Daniel seemed barely to be paying attention at all.

“And this is just one of thousands of cities. Each city is growing increasingly connected, each a network of lives, each one an endless hive of activity, each one alive with a personality of its own,” Swaggert continued to the unmovable barricade of Daniel’s obvious disinterest.

“Each city is a universe. In essence, what is a universe but a sum of the parts from which it’s made, a coming together of things, some of which can be measured, others that cannot be understood?”

Daniel looked down, breathing heavily to himself. “Sir, I understand that this is distasteful, but the job must be done. I need only your personal authorisation and the matter will be dealt with.”

Swaggert looked at him with measured disgust. Daniel was a gun, the worst of all weapons. A gun was a proficient killer, a machine focused on the task of removing what it was to be alive from a person, remotely, and without involvement from the person pulling the trigger.

The invention of the thing had been the first time in history where a man could kill another without connecting in some personal way. A knife took you close enough to your victim to share in some degree of the experience. A sword was useless, unless you were trained and experienced in the proper use of it. The weapons of old made the act of killing a visceral one, a thing of grim reality that would darken your soul forever, and perhaps rightly so. It should not be a matter taken lightly.

A gun changed all that. It meant a person could step back. With little understanding, without training or consequence, a person was able to kill, more effectively than ever before, and with sufficient distance not to bear the burden of so much guilt. It normalised an act that was abhorrent to mankind’s nature.

Daniel was precisely such a tool. He would follow directions to the very letter and Swaggert’s words would be turned into actions. Those actions would have consequences but such consequences would only exist in his imagination. They would never carry the weight of knowing you performed the act yourself, since in essence you never did.

“God knows I’ve tried,” Swaggert said, a hint of regret to his voice. “Schovani is like a brick wall. He’s unmovable, he won’t budge. I’ve tried reasoning with him. I’ve tried offering him money beyond his wildest dreams. I investigated his background and tried to see what it really was that motivated him so I could offer him that.”

“And?” Daniel clearly had little interest in the conversation beyond keeping it on point and having it finish as quickly as possible.

“Science,” Swaggert grumbled, but a weak grin fluttered on his face. “The man is motivated by discovery, by the simple pleasure of knowing what isn’t yet known. Me, I am a manager. I take the discoveries of men like him and I find ways to apply them to the world, to create things that make life better. He has no interest in the practical: his entire world exists inside his own mind.”

“Right!” Daniel seemed to have lost interest in all this now, and wasn’t making any effort to disguise it.

“From up here, that city outside is beautiful.” He pointed behind him with his thumb. “Down there, it’s a seething mass of darkness. With what we’re building here, we can control it. We can stamp out the worst of the nature of man. That’s what we’re doing here: we’re building a better world. Why can’t he see that?”

“Is not stamping out human nature rather worse than giving in to it?” Daniel goaded softly, finding some amusement in seeing Swaggert so riled up about something that he considered so very trivial.

Swaggert glared at him accusingly. The meeting had come to a close, he decided.

“Schovani has left me no choice,” he said grimly. “He will work on this project. This is going to happen. I haven’t been able to explain that to him in a way he can understand. That man refuses to respond to the carrot so I have to resort to the stick.”

“Am I to understand that I am the stick?” Daniel smiled, but it was a small thing, more sarcasm than anything else.

Swaggert paused for a moment. Once these words were spoken, there was no taking them back. He sighed, “These actions are authorised.”

▪ **PLYBCK SSPND**

Norma frowned to herself, and whispered, “Swaggert, what did you do?”

Chapter 25

Red and Merv pulled up in the van in the middle of town. They had decided to travel together, the bike loaded in the rear and locked down securely in custom clamps they'd fitted previously for just this occurrence. It had appeared to pretty much everyone that the motorcycle failed spectacularly in terms of being stealthy, even when sitting absolutely still, with the engine off and with nobody around to see it.

Merv had practically insisted on travelling like this since the alternative meant that Red would arrive some time before him and was armed only with a small pistol and a near complete lack of common sense. As Merv secretly didn't wish he would die horribly, he considered this less than ideal.

The main street looked somewhat different from the way it looked before, even though they'd spent very little time wallowing in its quaint, small-town charm. Early that evening, there had been considerably less carnage: nobody had been running around screaming; cars weren't upturned; rubbish wasn't strewn across the road; people were not being chased by undead monsters; and the post-office definitely hadn't been on fire.

The pair of them sat for a moment, just taking it all in.

There were around a dozen custom motorcycles dotted around, their riders roaming about and moaning, blood dripping from their hands and their hollow eyes staring out blankly from their cold, dead brains.

"My god!" Red mumbled. "It's like a Republican rally."

Merv nodded in agreement. It was quite awful, much as he'd always imagined an outbreak of a zombie apocalypse to be, except he hadn't really imagined it. It was something so ridiculous that the

thought of actually seeing one happening right up in front of them had simply never occurred to him. Why would it?

“Red, this is bad.”

Red agreed because really, how could anyone not? Dead people were chasing living people, largely outnumbering them, and things were going from exceptionally, horribly and incredibly bad to incredibly, horribly and exceptionally worse, and they were doing so right before their very eyes. “Could we stun the zombies with the sonic weapon that’s fitted to the van?”

“I don’t think it was designed to work on dead people!” Merv said, fairly certain it hadn’t, and for obvious reasons, really.

“I guess it would work on the remaining living people, but that would be fairly counter-productive when you stop to think about it,” Red thought to himself, but did so out loud. He stared for a moment, just wondering about how to deal with all this. “What else can the van do?”

Merv shrugged and added, “It can change colour.”

Red glared at him angrily. He said, “You’re a living breathing weapon and you ride around in a van that’s decorated in mood-paint! I can’t say I’m not disappointed, Merv. The one time we need you to be packing significant weaponry and you’re threatening angrily to turn a different shade of pink at them.”

“I’ll make a note of this. I’ll get Norma to fit anti-zombie weaponry to the van,” Merv said sarcastically.

Red laughed, “Don’t worry yourself about it. We’re probably not going to survive this anyway. Did you ever suspect that you were going to die by being eaten by dead people?”

“I always secretly hoped...” Merv grumbled.

They looked at one another and an unspoken truth of huge philosophical value passed between them. “Merv. We’ve got to kill

some zombies. We've got to actually kill actual zombies. Lots of them."

Merv nodded, "I can do that. I don't think my mum would even be angry at me for that."

"Merv. How do we kill zombies?"

"The biker gang Zombies or the undead killing machine zombies?" Merv, for once was in no rush to get out there and start beating people horribly. "Shooting them in the head seems to be a universal truth. It's always worked for me. Which ones did you mean, specifically?"

Red pointed out of the window. "It doesn't seem like a very large distinction now since they all seem to be wandering around trying to eat people's brains. I guess they finally made it and fulfilled their dreams. Good for them, I guess," he ventured.

Merv nodded and pulled out his gigantic weapon, brandishing it happily, before holding it lovingly like a favourite teddy bear. "Red. I don't like this!"

Red nodded in agreement. He grumbled, "Oddly enough, I didn't wake up this morning hoping I'd spend a quiet evening battling an army of undead motorcycling gang-members who hate me for sleeping with one of their girlfriends, twice." He thought for a moment. "Except the last bit...I'm kind of proud of the last bit, if I'm totally honest."

Merv took a deep breath. He exhaled violently in surprise as a kindly old lady's head was pressed against the side window quite suddenly with a loud thud. Her eyes seemed to be filled with a mixture of wonder about just exactly what it was that was actually happening, and then abject terror about the same thing as she finally worked it out. Luckily it didn't last long and her head exploded in a sudden burst of red and black liquid that splattered up the side as

something hammered a different something, that was a good deal more solid than her skull, right through it.

Red and Merv looked at one another, both wincing and considering the fact that that had to hurt, in their own unique way.

Red said finally, to lighten the mood, "I'm sorry. I hear blood is hard to get out. That's going to leave a mark."

"You're not helping," Merv grumbled at him.

"You know, I never say this, and this might be the first time that these thoughts have ever gone through my head with sufficient importance for me to feel the need to vocalise them," Red said with a deep breath. "Merv, we need a plan."

"Plans are good," he agreed. The usual arrangement of Red riding around really fast, blowing up things, while Merv punched everything to death, probably wasn't going to quite cut it this time.

"I could ride around really fast so that they can't catch me, using the guns and missiles to blow up the zombies. You go out and punch the remaining undead monsters hard enough to stop them eating people while I do that?" Red suggested.

Merv felt this quite rightly deserved a face-palm and delivered accordingly. "I would have hoped that two professionals such as ourselves can come up with something better than that!"

Red frowned, "In terms of my professionalism, I would like to remind you that I'm paid in coffee and pizza."

"We need to find out where they're coming from," Merv said.

Red nodded in agreement and asked, "Where do dead people hang out?"

They both looked at one another for a moment blankly.

"If you were dead, where would you go?" Merv asked.

"A Red Hot Chilli Peppers concert?" Red shrugged. "That or the morgue?"

“Makes sense! The second one, at least,” Merv said, happy that at least something did.

“Well then, you go to the morgue and see if you can find out where these things are coming from!” Red told him. “I’m going to ride around really fast and blow things up, all heroically, in the hope of impressing an attractive passing waitress.”

Merv couldn’t think of a better plan, or a worse one. “OK.”

“OK,” agreed Red.

Some way off in front of them, a member of the Zombie motorcycle gang grabbed a passing man who seemed very unhappy about that fact. Other Zombies began bearing down on the hapless man despite his protests and firm intention to write a strongly worded letter about all this. They could do nothing but watch in horror.

From behind them, another zombie appeared. His head lolled to the side at a sickening angle, unsupported by his twisted, broken neck. He was unmistakably familiar.

“Dixon,” Red mumbled to himself. “I thought I’d done a pretty solid job of killing him. Shows how wrong a person can be.”

The others held the helpless man down, forcing him to his knees. He pleaded, cried for help, screaming in horror as Dixon stepped up behind him, shuffling slowly as his head flopped about on top of his slumping shoulders. His eyes twisted up to look directly at the van and they stared like two angry glass marbles. His left arm rose up. In his hand was a black spike with a mushroom shaped disk at the top. It was longer than his hand and the end was sharpened to a point like some huge, ugly nail.

He put it to the top of the man’s head, slowly and deliberately. He hammered his right fist down hard, driving the nail through his skull and into the brain inside.

The victim jerked, spasming violently for a few long moments. Blood dripped from his nose, his eyes reddened and his face dropped as the muscles went limp. His whole body slumped and they dropped it, letting him fall heavily to the floor, flat on his nose, which was, at this point, the least of his problems.

Red and Merv just stared in rapt silence as the body twitched and began to move, slowly clambering back up.

“We’ve got to go out there, Merv,” Red told him. “Even though I like in here better. Much better, in fact. I’d never noticed how comfy these chairs are.”

“I don’t like this,” Merv was forced to admit. “I think I said that before.”

“I think you said that before.”

Red slapped him on the shoulder, pulling himself together. “Let’s go kill some zombies.”

Merv grinned a false expression of enthusiasm. “Let’s kill them properly this time!” he added.

The rear door of the van swung open with a crash. A gigantic blob of vaguely intelligent muscle leapt out, targeting anything that was moving (but really shouldn’t be). Merv’s gun exploded, the blast echoing around the town, as an undead motorcyclist’s head was reduced to a flap of useless grey skin, and everything that was left fell heavily to the ground, twitching very slightly.

It cracked again like a bomb exploding in a small metal cylinder inside which your own ears were also trapped. It issued a deafening roar, and the left side of a sad old woman’s head vanished in a puff of red squishiness before the shattered remains of her skull caved in on itself and she stopped, fairly abruptly, from trying to bite him.

While Merv was adjusting to this whole new manner of killing a whole new manner of people, Red was busy unloading HERPES from the back end of the van. It rolled down the automatically telescoping ramp and he threw his leg over as soon as both wheels were planted on the ground. He spoke through the bike's speakers, his head secure inside the VAGINA.

"Right, I'm going to kill everything that's already dead," he said, sounding a little unsure of himself, but feeling that this was probably the order of the day. "Right?"

"Right!" Merv agreed with a shrug. "And I'll find out what's causing this and try to stop it."

"Right," Red said finally. "We're really doing this, then?"

"We are!" Merv grunted. His pistol cracked again. A zombie off at an impressive distance staggered back from the impact to its neck and then seemed to reel for a moment. Its head fell to the side supported by a few shreds of flapping skin and then it tore free, tumbling to the ground with a dull thud. It collapsed noisily on top of it.

Merv turned, grinning triumphantly and punching the air. Red stared at him, motionless, his face concealed behind the black screen, but probably with a disapproving glare set on it.

"Right." Merv huffed like he'd been scolded by his mother. "Serious business." More quietly, he said to himself: "It doesn't mean I can't enjoy it, though, does it?"

"I'm going in!" Red told him, not sounding like he was particularly thrilled about it.

Merv enjoyed a moment of peaceful reflection amidst the chaos. "Are you nervous?"

Red shrugged, "You?"

Merv shrugged right back at him, “I have to say, I’m not exactly relishing this. I don’t know if I’d say I was nervous. That kind of thing was beaten out of me in training.” He took a moment. “This is as nervous as I ever remember being. None of my training covered this, or anything even close. I can’t imagine why.”

“It’s funny the things they leave out,” Red quipped. “Whatever you plan for, it’s always the thing you missed that ends up happening, don’t you find?”

“Scared?”

Red shook his head. Such things were ridiculous. “Nah, I’m the main character. I don’t get scared and, if I did, I’d never openly admit it,” he said

Merv frowned and said thoughtfully, “I thought Norma was the main character?”

Red revved the engine. The motorcycle responded with a shuddering burst of power, spitting flames and shaking the frame to what felt like the limits of her endurance. He pulled up a few meters from the shop-fronts that lined the wide roads, the engine crackling and shuddering beneath him.

They stopped what they were doing. Countless glassy eyes swivelled slowly inside rotting skulls, groaning against dead, twisted eye-sockets. Bodies straightened and zombies, both undead and motorcycle gang members, turned to face him, glaring in his direction fixedly.

For a moment there was silence: not silence in the sense of nothing making a sound, but a weird, eerie silence, where the horrors had ceased momentarily in a way that seemed pointedly threatening.

Red spoke loudly, his voice echoing around the street, amplified by the speakers, “Return to your homes or I will be forced to take hostile action against you. There will be no second warning.”

He smiled to himself. That was good. He’d finally cracked it and got speaking in an action-packed, tense situation essentially correct. What a shame he’d largely wasted the effort talking to a bunch of animated corpses who probably didn’t speak any language fluently and upon whom threats were therefore largely wasted.

“Don’t make me tell you again!” There it was: a contradiction to the entire point of the first warning. He’d ruined it. He’d made himself sound like a complete idiot and he’d done it on loud-speakers for everyone still alive to hear, probably including Merv. He hoped no attractive waitresses were there to see it, alive at least.

Red decided that there only was one right and proper way to deal with all this!

“Computer. Set cannon to automatic targeting.” Nothing happened and a red light began flashing inside the helmet up on the screen, warning him that he was doing something wrong and had selected a mode that actually didn’t exist.

“Dammit Norma. Do I have to do everything around here?”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma was aghast. Her hand covered her gaping jaw as she watched the scenes unfolding before her, grim, horrible scenes of the worst possible kind, perhaps even worse than that. They were, in fact, scenes of a zombie apocalypse, something unthinkable within the realms of reality, a reality where things essentially made good scientific sense for the most part. It wasn’t even close to what she was emotionally equipped to handle, there not being a large gin and

tonic in her hand and a very generous retirement package in her bank account.

And, to make matters worse, there was Red, and he was being Red, right where being Red was the most unwelcome thing in the world.

“Dammit Red, I would dock your wages if we didn’t pay you in pizza and coffee. I’ll show you who the main character is when I see you next,” she sneered at him after recovering the ability to speak, to a degree. “Every time you get paid, I’m keeping a slice back and just throwing it in the bin right in front of you. Either that, or I’m feeding it to Merv, if he can handle the delicate nature of a vegetarian Pizza. I’m also banning you from ordering side-dishes, even at weekends.”

She felt better about the world. Then she remembered the world had zombies in it and she made herself sad again.

Chapter 26

Manual targeting was perfectly adequate in almost all instances, according to the user manual, which also explained in horribly boring detail how and why it hadn't originally been fitted to the motorcycle. Red and Merv had taken turns reading bits of it to one another, drinking coffee and trying not to drift off into a coma. Merv confirmed it was the most boring thing he'd ever read that had the words 'automatic cannon' and 'missile launcher' in it. It was also the only thing he'd ever read that had more than five pages.

Targeting the weapons manually wasn't strictly ideal, however, if you were intending to hit a moving object's head while moving yourself, at speeds that were largely ridiculous, on a motorcycle that was even more ridiculous than doing those kind of speeds on a motorcycle with an automatic cannon bolted to the nose, then it was pretty much impossible. Strangely, such considerations hadn't been the reasons for not fitting it, but were largely why Norma had agreed to modify it accordingly.

Thinking about things like this gave Red a headache, especially since he was able to consider them at roughly sixteen times the speed a normal human could manage, thanks to the far more ridiculous fact that his brain was augmented with untested technology that had arrived at his bedside sloshing around in an old thermos flask. All this was so ridiculous that it made the motorcycle seem rather boringly normal.

As a consequence of all this, he was getting used to the headaches.

The automatic cannon crackled, spitting a flaming plume of sparks from the muzzle and roaring loudly. Norma had slowed down the cyclic rate to preserve ammunition, since the motorcycle, being a

motorcycle, had a limited supply of the stuff. It spat tracer bullets which sent a jagged pulse of phosphorescent glowing streaks at the target. The target was a zombie, both the undead kind and the sort who belonged to an unimaginatively named biker gang.

As the glowing bolts ripped into the target sending a shower of red meat and shards of bone in all directions, Red found himself thinking about the name, really thinking about it, as if for the first actual time.

Whoever thought of it either had a horribly dull imagination or some inkling of future events that the name could be foreshadowing. If it was the latter then it was quite clever. Otherwise, that person probably didn't get invited to a lot of parties, at least not the good kind, that had hot waitresses with low standards. He wondered briefly where this sudden obsession with waitresses had come from.

The bullets shredded the man-shaped dead thing at roughly shoulder level, missing the head by a small, but rather significant, degree. The top of him fell off and his legs went limp, his lower torso crashing down to the ground weakly while his left arm ripped away from the shoulder and landed some way off, rolling around on the floor like a dropped sausage. The helmet optics illuminated the scene nicely and showed the still gnashing jaws of the creature, but in essence, the job had been done. Red considered it to be mostly a win. Any hot waitress in the immediate vicinity would have been impressed. He checked to see if there were any.

He racked the throttle, pulling forward angrily, the rear end of the bike twisting and bucking under the force of the acceleration until he managed to get the thing back under control. Two monstrous undead things collapsed forwards where he'd used to be, crashing into one another and falling clumsily to the floor, snapping their teeth like a pair of hungry sharks.

He looked around. Killing zombies one at a time was hard enough. To be absolutely honest with himself, it was all rather more difficult on the back of a motorcycle and this was all actually a pretty terrible idea.

That wasn't going to stop him, of course. Most of his life was actually a horrible idea and he had come to peace with such things.

He paused for a moment. There was shrieking all around. Dozens of dead things were lolling to the sides, slowly wandering around with their arms outstretched and their glazed eyes glaring out emptily, mostly at him. Humans, unaffected so far by whatever was causing this, were running away, which actually did seem to be a fair response, he thought, and probably a better option all round than chasing them around on an armed motorcycle. Several buildings were on fire. The whole main street was glowing orange. The road was littered with the remnants of panic which had wrought carnage on the quaint little town.

Ahead of him, a motorcycle roared to life. Red was surprised and turned to see the lifeless remains of Dixon climbing aboard, his head rolling around on the end of his shattered neck, hanging limply to the side. It pointed at him threateningly and rolled the throttle open.

Red sat back in the saddle for a moment, just contemplating how he simply wasn't getting paid enough pizza to deal with this shit. "Red to Merv."

"Merv here," came the response.

"Merv, did you know that zombies can ride motorcycles?" Red said thoughtfully. "I've got Dixon here who looks worse than he would if you'd lovingly punched him to death, and he's glaring at me angrily and sitting on a running motorcycle with his head hanging off the side of his neck. I mean that's weird right?"

“Weird?” Merv’s voice grunted. “We’re in the middle of a zombie outbreak. Why don’t you let me know if you find something that isn’t weird. Agreed?”

“OK, OK. Kill zombies now: think about why we kill zombies later. I get it,” Red grumbled.

A red light flashed in front of him, a point inside his visor, targeting the motorcycle. “Dixon. I’m going to give you just one warning,” he said as he thought this through very, very quickly but quite thoroughly besides. “No I’m not. You’re pissing me off now. I’m just going to kill you again; properly this time.”

The cannon rattled, hacking flaming bullets into the night, ripping into the motorcycle. The headlight died instantly, metal shredded from the front, flying around into the zombie, slicing dead flesh from the face. The bullets chewed up the machine in seconds and it fell to the side, crashing heavily to the ground, spilling fuel over the dusty floor.

“Petrol!” Red smiled to himself as a plan began to form. He selected the flash-bang grenade launcher and targeted the bike. With a whooshing roar, a missile shot to the scene, erupting into a blazing red explosion of flame that engulfed the vehicle and swallowed the rider whole. Two other zombies vanished into the fiery depths of the burning plume and were gone behind a sooty orange glow.

“Fire kills zombies!” Red muttered to himself. “Fire is my friend.”

Merv stalked into the police station. It had a small morgue, which was unusual for a town of this size, but not unheard of. He saw movement and raised his pistol as he moved stealthily towards it. A pistol cracked, the sound of a 9mm service pistol, Merv guessed. The bullet was fired in panic and it hit some considerable way off.

“Show yourself!” Merv ordered whoever had fired it.

A head slowly peered up from beneath an old wooden desk. It had dark hair, closely cropped and the eyes set into it were beset with something that went some way beyond panic. “Who are you?” whoever it was stammered fearfully.

“I’m the man who’s going to return fire if I don’t see that pistol put on the desk and both of your hands pointing up to the ceiling in 3 seconds. You’ll be dead in less than 4,” Merv told him, being rather better at threats, and unlike Red, he would carry this out without a single moment of hesitation.

The strong suggestion of this very fact wasn’t lost on the man who threw the pistol down heavily and raised his hands with a potent sense of urgency. He began to stand up, revealing his police uniform. Merv rolled his eyes at him. He had wondered where law enforcement had been this whole time: cowering under a desk hadn’t seemed like the most obvious place.

“I’m Officer Dewey,” Officer Dewey explained nervously. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Merv nodded. “There seems to be an outbreak of zombies.”

Dewey frowned and shrugged, “Well I can see that there’s an outbreak of zombies...”

Merv lowered his weapon. This man wouldn’t be a threat if someone handed him a grenade launcher, at least not to anyone other than himself. “I was hoping you might be able to tell me how all this got started?”

“I don’t know,” he said, seeming close to tears. “Dead people started running around trying to bite people.”

Merv stepped closer and grunted, “Who was the first?”

Dewey rolled his eyes up, struggling to remember. “Some guy came. He said he was a medical examiner. He checked over the

bodies of the two dead bikers who were killed on highway 67 tonight. It seemed like a pretty typical traffic accident to me but we rounded up the rest of the gang and put them in holding anyhow.”

“The Zombies,” Merv said thoughtfully. He realised that was not entirely clear. “The biker gang was called ‘The Zombies’ by the way, if you didn’t know?”

“Pretty ironic,” Dewey sniffed. “Next thing I know, the dead one is walking around, snapping his teeth and staring out from his cold, dead eyes, his head flapping to the side on his broken neck,” he spoke with a thick, drawling accent.

Merv bit his lip thoughtfully. “And the medical examiner?”

“I never saw him again!” he shook his head sadly. “We had two other bodies. Old man Thompson from 23rd street! He died of a heart attack, and sweet little Kelly Cutler. She also died of his heart attack, on account of how he had it while driving past the clothes shop she was working in. The whole thing didn’t end well for either of them.

“Well, I saw them two come back, sure as you’re standing here now. He came out howling and moaning and she came out with half her head beaten bloody and her ribs all caved in and blood all down her pretty pink blouse. I reckon it was ruined.”

Dewey looked away sadly, musing about something to himself.

“She still looked kinda cute, though. I had a bit of a crush on her, if I’m honest. I still think, with a bit of makeup, she’d be the prettiest girl in town, even after... Well, you know.”

Merv wondered if this man had snapped, quite totally, completely and thoroughly. It seemed not entirely unlikely. “I’m going to search the morgue,” he told him.

“No!” Dewey snapped, his eyes suddenly widening in horror. “You can’t!”

Merv fixed him with a disarming stare and asked, “Why not?” “Zombies came from there,” he said softly as his terrified eyes darted about nervously. “Real zombies. Not like the ones in the movies: these ones was real ones. Well, actually just like the ones in the movies, only actually really for really real.” He just stared for a moment and his eyes glazed over as tears began to take hold. “Sir, it’s been a long night. Dead people has been walking round. That ain’t right!”

Merv couldn’t argue with that.

Red held a petrol can in his hand as he made a dash along the main street. The bike roared as he headed at fairly ridiculous speed towards a high concentration of zombies. As the motorcycle roared along, he flung the can at them. It caught one squarely on the side of the head, knocking it over and dropping two more like grizzly dominoes.

He slammed the rear brake, spinning the motorcycle round to face his fresh new target. Six of them looked up at him, as he dazzled them with the full beams of the bike’s powerful headlights. He edged forward until the red sighting dot that hovered in front of his face touched the open petrol can.

He fired the cannon.

Tracer rounds streaked into the darkness. The crackling automatic gunfire ripped into the can, incidentally ripping the leg off of a nearby zombie, who collapsed to the ground, to be eaten alive by the cannon fire, as the short burst ripped up everything around. The glowing bolts lit the fuel, spitting drops everywhere, catching the zombies alight.

Spurred on by this success, Red roared along the main street. At one end, past an overturned car and round the end of a dead horse, for some inexplicable reason, were two more, very slowly chasing a person who did seem to be largely alive, but probably wishing they weren't.

He slammed the brake, skidding up so that the weapons came to bear on the two. The cannon fired, catching the zombies around the middle, ripping their spines to pieces and cutting them both in two. Their legs did their own thing, the top bits sliding off and crashing to the floor, one head first, the other landing on her side in an uncomfortable heap.

Red sat, just watching for a moment, fairly proud of his handiwork. The live person didn't seem quite so thrilled and was screaming in horrified terror. She fell to the ground, frantically wiping bits of meat from her face and spitting out little shards of bone.

"You're welcome!" Red said loudly over the bike's speakers. He turned to see another seven of them converging on him and another two riding motorcycles.

"Motorcycling zombie Zombies," he grinned to himself. "Now we're talking!"

The morgue was a grim place. Illumination was dim and the fluorescent lights flickered, sending ugly shadows dancing across the floor. There were two metal examination beds, one smothered with blood, the other bare but reeking of strong cleaning chemicals.

Evidence seemed to be thin on the ground, the good kind of evidence; not the tools and smashed jars, that were anything but thin on the ground, but offered no suggestion of how any of this might

have come about. There had been a struggle but, beyond that, there wasn't much to go on.

“Dammit,” he grumbled, looking around. Merv was pragmatic enough to accept that dead people didn't just get up and walk around. He'd created enough of them over the years to have some experience in the matter. He was looking for something, anything to suggest how this might have come to happen. There had to be an explanation.

He lowered his weapon, creeping forwards gingerly until he stood below the flickering light. He glanced around nervously, shuddered to himself and resolved never to admit to being anything other than utterly, totally fearless under all circumstances. Maybe one day, if he could pull that off, perhaps he could be the main character...

There was an uneven growl as a Harley Davidson roared along the main street. The light from the front was reaching out into the darkness, the beat of the engine sounding loudly above the wail of dead people as it came closer.

Red sat in the middle, straddling the white line. He just waited.

It came closer, closer; and then, timed to perfection, Red twisted the throttle and the bike launched herself forwards, he painfully along with her, as his arms were nearly wrenched out of their sockets. The bike skipped over the debris, screaming loudly as the rear tyre spun, kicking up dust and issuing smoke, the back wallowing from side to side.

“Yeah!” he cried out. Somehow, playing chicken against a fearless, speeding zombie Zombie just hit the right spot with him: Red was absolutely loving this. He pulled the trigger, the little switch at the front of the left instrument control. It was exactly where the

light-flasher was on most motorcycle controls and, honestly, mistakes had been made along the way because of it.

The cannon roared, spitting brilliant sparks and sending bolts of glowing hot bullets forwards. The speeding Harley was torn to shreds. It instantly wobbled to the side. The front tucked in and the bike rolled, spinning over and over, throwing itself clear of the road and straight through the window of the last place in town that served coffee.

It crashed through the glass with an impressive degree of style, the zombie rider somehow managing to stand up from the road where the bike had carelessly deposited him, albeit slightly wonkily, and with a missing arm. It didn't appear to be troubling him unduly.

Red barely slowed down. The world melted into slow motion. The growl of his engine slowed to a soft thump, thump, growl, splutter, thump, thumping sound. He moved along the road, scanning for what he needed and found a steel bar. In his head, he made the calculations: he could swipe it up; the gloves would take the sting out; he could grab it as he passed.

He scooped up a piece of metal that was leaning up against a burning car and spun it in his hand. He manoeuvred the bike so his course took him past the Zombie, aiming to cross just to Red's left. He swung the bar to just the right spot as the motorcycle roared along the road.

The bar connected with the zombie's head. At that speed, the damage was quite severe. It was knocked from its wobbly feet, bits of brain splattering out from the back of its now open skull.

Red carried on and then passed the second Harley, which was heading directly for him. The Zombie slammed on the brakes, skidding to a halt, seeming for all the world as if its brain was

essentially functional. That gave Red pause for thought - but he didn't pause long, since thinking wasn't really his style.

Red turned back to sit on his tail. The rider seemed aware that this was a tactically inferior position for him to be in and headed off at full power. Red gave chase at minimum power and struggled not to overtake him.

They weaved through the cars, the flaming wrecks, the dead bodies and the debris, Red toying with the rider, but secretly impressed at just how well the dead were able to ride - slightly better than many of the living.

An idea caught him and the world slowed down once more. There were three zombies up ahead and it occurred to him that the ideal thing to hit them with was a solid object that was big and heavy, ideally flying and definitely on fire. With that in mind, Red pulled to the side and spun the back wheel hard, turning the nose in for the weapons pod to bear down on its target.

The cannon fired, this time shredding the front wheel and carrying on until the sides and the tank were smashed to pieces. The Harley did what he'd intended it to do: the front buckled and the wheel spun from the forks. The bike dug itself into the ground at speeds too fast to stop such a heavy machine. It tumbled off to the side, rolling straight at the zombies.

It hit them directly, the startled looking rider rolling over their heads, free from the saddle and sailing majestically through the air. The Harley was aflame, coughing blobs of smoky fire from the tank and took all three of them down; they vanished into the twisted, flaming wreckage. The rider went into a car window with a mighty crash, his head buried in the interior, his legs poking out to the exterior, twitching sadly in the evening breeze.

The Harley exploded into a fairly satisfying ball of flame, as the fire found the inside of the tank. It wasn't spectacular, but it was enough to blow the windows out of two separate shop fronts and Red nodded in approval.

"Cool," Red grinned to himself. He looked around. There weren't many left now. He zoomed in on two more, staggering along the road towards him, some way off in the distance. "Only two left," he said sadly. "I could shoot you with my cannon - but where's the fun in that?"

Merv crept to the holding cells. The doors were wide open, where someone had released all the prisoners, after somehow turning them into the undead. He shook his head. This was turning into a very weird day, he noticed, as very odd thoughts went through his head that nobody could have ever imagined they'd be thinking on this side of an acid trip or without enjoying a dangerous psychotic episode.

Suddenly, there was a growling noise. A zombie stood up, fixing him with a ferocious stare. Merv raised his pistol reflexively, stopping just short of shooting him. He watched for a moment. The zombie stood straight, reaching over and began to shuffle forward, snarling with its lips pulled back angrily, snatching at dead air like a baby, not used to controlling its own arms.

With a metallic clank, it stopped, leaning forward with its right hand, the left being locked to the bars with a set of police handcuffs.

Merv breathed a sigh of relief, still not quite used to all this just yet. He decided not to shoot it in the head, at least not yet. It was one of the motorcycle gang members, dressed in cut-off denim and faded leather. It had long black, greasy hair that tumbled down over its twisted face. Whether it had looked any better when it still had a pulse was literally anybody's guess.

“So, you were all locked up here, were you?” Merv lowered the weapon and began just looking at the creature. “I don’t see any bite-marks. How exactly were you turned into a zombie?”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma was sat in her chair, watching all this with horrified interest. She looked away as Merv examined the zombie as close as he dared. “Just how exactly was it turned into a zombie?” she almost pleaded to it. “Computer. How is any of this possible?”

“There must be a technological means by which this process is possible. We have insufficient information to formulate a hypothesis at this time,” it told her, essentially saying it didn’t know, but trying to sound clever about it.

“We have to help them!” she said wearily, after a lengthy pause, ruffling her hair with her palm and sighing. “There must be something we can do. There must be something.”

The computer was silent.

“I can’t just sit and watch. I have to do something useful,” she said, speaking to the computer as if it were capable of responding to this. “Monitor Red and Merv. Warn me if something happens that puts them in serious danger. In the meantime, I have to do something useful. I have to.”

It said simply, “Confirmed.”

Chapter 27

“Why are there zombies? Why are the Zombies zombies? Who made zombies out of Zombies?” Norma mumbled, her fingers dancing over the keys as she set up the input parameters. She searched theoretical databases for anything she might find, any military project, any covert proposal, but found nothing.

She sat back, exhaustion only barely fended off, now driven solely by a force of pure will which was running out fast. Oddly, she didn't even feel tired. Rather, she was more focused than ever, or at least that was how it felt to her.

She noticed, however, that her fingers were hitting the wrong keys more often than normal, leading her to suspect that she was now too tired even to feel tired. Her brain had simply given up on such things and was just plunging headlong into its work, knowing on some level that it simply wasn't getting to get any much-needed sleep until this problem was solved. Solving it had therefore become the priority, and perhaps the only thing still to remain.

“OK,” she said to herself as she sat back, rubbing her chin. This was going nowhere. It was time to try a different approach. “Search the databases for anything relating to this subject. Who is attacking us, how can they be doing this? What technology can they have that is letting them do this?”

“Searching,” it told her, but she knew the inquiry was too vague. It would bring up countless hits, none of them likely to be particularly illuminating.

“Computer,” she said thoughtfully. “Has anything like this ever happened before?”

The menu populated. As she'd suspected, nothing on it looked particularly relevant. The computer had taken key words and

attempted to apply them to things they'd discussed, trying to make sense of a world that didn't make sense, like a growing child's mind. Schovani had mentioned such things; he'd built the software to grow and learn, using the human mind as a model for his work.

At the top, there was a cryptic entry regarding death, mentioning his name and that of a person connected to him. She ignored it at first but looked it over once more. For some reason, she was drawn back to it over and over. She didn't know if it was instinct or morbid curiosity.

“Play the first one. The one about death.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Patricia Schovani sighed to herself and hung up the corded phone. He was late again, as all too often he was. For a man who studied pure theoretical physics, his work was unusually demanding, or at least he poured an unusual amount of himself into it.

Johan licked the bottom of her leg and she smiled down at him. “Stop that, Johan,” she told him playfully, smirking at his happy little face. Johan, not one to readily follow orders, licked her again before bounding off, wagging his fluffy white tail.

“You stay away from that sofa, you horrible little dog!” she scolded with a sigh. How she'd managed to convince her husband to let the children have a puppy was still something of a mystery. They had cornered him one afternoon, each of them making a solid, logical argument for why a dog would add something important to their lives, explaining their perspective in turn. They had worn him down, answered each of his concerns until, finally, he conceded the argument and grudgingly allowed it to happen.

Even though they had beaten him logically (the only way he let the family ever discuss anything), it had come as something of a

surprise that he'd admitted defeat. He wasn't a man to back down easily, or with good grace.

It had come as far more of a surprise when, that afternoon, he'd introduced them to a fluffy white ball of enthusiasm that freely wet itself on their polished wooden floor, and, even more so, that his doing so didn't appear to bother him. Johan had been living in a box at his work throughout the previous day, waiting for the correct opportunity to be introduced to his new family and it seemed her husband had planned such things all along.

Patricia smiled as the dog's legs scuttled around, his feet struggling on the polished floor so that he slid about desperately. He vanished into the living room where the sofa was in no danger of being left alone, no danger whatsoever.

Her husband surprised her frequently: on the surface, a cold, hard, calculating man, but, underneath, when it came to matters of family, a person driven, endlessly compassionate and filled with human warmth. The rest of it was just his way of ensuring such things, she had come to realise.

She huffed, slightly annoyed, but knowing she could never stay mad at him, even if she really wanted to, which she didn't particularly.

A cancelled lunch date was a small thing and not a thing she was unused to. She stepped away from the kitchen surface, sighing lightly to herself. She had been looking forward to this all morning. She had even cancelled a work meeting to give them time to meet up at her favourite restaurant. No kids, no work-talk, no theoretical physics about his dream that, one day, in some far off distant future, there might be a liquid containing a molecular computer, which might simply be stabilised over a porous surface creating vast intelligence, safely, cheaply and simply. She didn't feel that she could

listen again to how a computer so sophisticated might surpass human ability and yet only measure the size of a pocket calculator.

“Never marry a theoretical physicist,” she muttered to herself, in moderately good humour, opening the fridge door to see what might fit nicely between two slices of bread.

She heard a thud coming from the living room.

“Johan!” she grumbled noisily. “If you’ve got my good shoes again, I swear I’ll make a new pair out of your fluffy white skin!”

She marched to the living room to discover that Johan wasn’t the problem and that her good shoes were quite safe.

She stared for a moment. Her mind went blank with panic, thoughts simply not running through her brain for a long, terrible moment. She felt icy cold. An uncomfortable tendril of dread shot up her spine. She shuddered briefly, and began to turn, to flee from the horrible thing that confronted her in the heart of her own home.

Her own home, a place of safety, a place where the world was shut out, a place where people retreated at the end of a long day to change into comfortable clothes, to kick off their smart shoes, to play music too loud, to read books that didn’t have complicated titles and to moan about the new woman at work who made a funny noise when she laughed.

Another man grabbed her, one she hadn’t even seen. He caught her from behind, an arm holding her tightly around the waist, the shock and force squeezing the air out of her. The strong hand of his other arm clamped over her face, holding her mouth shut, trapping a scream inside her head that echoed through her mind.

He was wearing gloves. The stench of powdered rubber filled her nostrils, and she could feel a heavy belt buckle jabbing into her back as she struggled weakly and inadequately against him.

The first man, the one she'd seen, stepped forward coldly. He was dressed casually, simply even. He had a fierce expression, that of a man you didn't want to meet, and would never want to be forced to deal with. His eyes were lit with that look, that look that rational people could spot as if it glowed from the brain behind them, that look of insanity, that look that peered out from a person twisted and different, a person capable of things a normal one should never be.

"Struggle," he told her, his voice low and cold. Behind him she could hear the sound of a puppy whimpering from somewhere. "Struggle all you want; it won't help you. My friend is stronger than you and he's not going to get tired before you do. The more you struggle, the more annoyed you're making him. The more annoyed he is, the worse this is going to be."

She stopped struggling instantly. She knew she couldn't get away. She wasn't getting out of it that way. She briefly wondered how bad this was going to be, how bad could it get?

"My name is Daniel," he told her. "I hear you're a medical doctor, so I know you're not an idiot. I'm not going to play games here. I've got a job to do and that job is going to get done, and that's really all there is to this. You're no fool. You know that you've seen my face; you know I've taken no steps to cover it and you know what that means for you."

She nodded, as far as the man's powerful grip would let her. She knew only too well.

"Patricia, you're going to die today. You're going to die very soon, in fact," he spoke, as if telling her that her car needed a new tyre. He said it as if he was delivering bad news, but not news so bad that it would make a story worth telling. "You're going to die. I'm going to make it look like your house was robbed and you discovered

the robbers. You're going to be killed and found later by your husband. That's going to happen, Patricia."

Her head swam with fear: she felt a hot flush pass up, through her brain, and seemingly onwards and upwards forever. She felt weak, her muscles heavy as rocks or light as a feather, she could barely tell which.

"How you die is up to you," he told her, seeming increasingly as if this was just an annoyance to him, some minor inconvenience. "You can go quick, with no pain. You can go so one second you're here, and then next it's all over and you don't even know it. Or, you can go slow. I can have my colleague here take you apart. You can be raped, beaten; you can have your fingers broken, your jaw smashed to pieces. You can drown slowly in your own blood after your larynx is crushed. It's really all up to you. You can decide."

Her eyes widened in terror. Her mind was reeling, trying to find some way out, refusing to accept that this was the end. For a moment, she struggled again, in blind, hopeless panic, but it was useless.

He looked into her terror-stricken eyes; he was horribly calm. "I really would like to preserve your face. It doesn't send the right message if you're too hard to recognise. It leaves hope, you see, hope that it isn't the loved one at all, someone else, some poor unfortunate who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I want him to know it's really you, to know and have no hope left. That's the message I want to send.

"I want him to look into your cold, dead eyes and have all hope washed away forever."

She began to whimper, shaking her head from side to side. Tears welling in her eyes.

“We can help each other out, you and I. I don’t want to have to destroy your face at all. I want to very calmly shoot you in the chest,” he spoke, matter-of-factly. “I chose a .45 for the job and loaded it with hollow-points. It will blow your heart to bits at this range. Death is virtually instantaneous and will be painless, I promise you. It’s an ideal, win-win situation for everyone.”

She screamed but the noise was stifled by the hand pressed up tightly against her lips. Her eyes widened again as he brandished his chosen weapon, an old, beaten-up Colt pistol. It was black but signs of wear showed at the edges. The grips were wooden, stippled and deeply cut. It looked military, without the frills of civilian ownership. It was a purposeful thing, designed to do a job and nothing else.

Daniel’s eyes locked into hers and he said, “Patricia. Your death is going to send a message. If we get this right, the whole nasty business goes no further. It’s over and done with and we can all go on with our lives. Well, all of us except you.” For the first time he flashed her an ugly smile.

She pleaded silently for her life, tears rolling down her face.

“Patricia,” he began, “you have two children. I can use them to send a message if you don’t co-operate. You’ll still die, and die horribly, but I’ll move on afterwards and they will join you. I don’t particularly want to kill children, but it wouldn’t be the first time. These things have to happen sometimes...”

“Your daughter is only 15 but she’s a pretty little thing. I dread to think what my colleague might do to her. He’s not really known for his restraint.”

He meant every word he was saying, that much was abundantly clear. She closed her eyes, her mind filled with thoughts that didn’t seem to register. She felt numb all over, fearing that if the man behind her let her go then she might collapse to the floor.

“You will co-operate, won’t you, Patricia? You will make this easy and help me to keep your children out of this very difficult situation?” he asked.

What else could she do? She nodded, sobbing softly to herself.

Daniel smiled as he spoke. “Good girl. Patricia. My friend is going to let you go now. We’re going to get you to stand still in a chosen spot. I’m going to get nice and lined up and then I’m going to shoot you. It will be nice and quick, believe me. I’m not a sadist: I actually don’t enjoy this sort of thing.”

She nodded again. She felt a weak kind of acceptance of all this, but her head was light, so light she could barely think. It was just easier to follow along, to simply let it happen.

Daniel nodded and the grip around her softened and was then gone altogether. She felt him grab her by the arm. She felt herself being dragged to the door. She felt helpless, gripped in panic, not knowing what to do, except meekly to give in to it all, submit to her fate.

The man positioned her, forcing her to stand just a few footsteps in front of the door.

“OK?” Daniel said. She nodded softly, but then realised he wasn’t talking to her.

The other man looked around thoughtfully and said, “Sure. If she came in, and you were going through the place looking for cash, this would be the position she’d find you.”

Daniel pointed the gun at her. Her heart fluttered, she felt adrenaline flood through her veins, her ears rang, her knees went weak. She closed her eyes and waited. Nothing happened and she opened them once again.

Daniel lowered the pistol. “Sure, this looks good,” he told the other man, as he stood by the bureau and fiddled with the drawers. He looked up again, making sure the position was correct.

“OK,” he said. “This works for me.”

She looked, terrified, to the second man. He seemed even less concerned with all this than Daniel. He stepped back wearily to avoid blood from splashing on him. Seeing that, and understanding it, sent a fresh wave of terror. She began pleading, crying openly, sobbing to herself.

“Don’t kill me,” she said weakly.

There was a loud crack: it was the last thing she heard.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“Bloody hell!” Norma cringed. “Why do I watch these things? They never end well. My team is being attacked by zombies and now I actually feel worse about the world.”

Chapter 28

Merv stepped closer to the reasonably terrifying creature. He examined it closely with calm, professional and objective eyes, while it stared back at him unnervingly fixedly, not even deigning to blink.

Suddenly, the jaws snapped at him and he recoiled away in surprise, his heart leaping in his chest. He sat, perched on the edge of a desk, breathing heavily while the undead monster snapped at him, clawing at the air with its hand, struggling to reach, pulling against the handcuffs.

“Dammit!” Merv grunted, his hand clenched to his chest. “You things are scary as hell.”

“Destroy you...” it hissed through filthy, gritted teeth.

Merv felt his heart flutter again and stared fixedly back at the creature. “You speak?” he said with notable surprise.

He waited patiently, but whatever it had done, it didn’t do it again. He frowned thoughtfully, fairly convinced he hadn’t imagined it - or had he? Did zombies talk? He couldn’t remember a film in which they did but considering his only reference was fictional media, he could scarcely be sure what was true and what wasn’t.

“Do you speak?” he ventured, leaning very slightly forward. It craned its neck at him, snapping its jaws madly to bite him.

Rather surprising himself, Merv reached out and punched it, really, really hard. It was the kind of punch he reserved for people who had really, really annoyed him and usually left them really, really dead, or at least not in a position to really, really annoy him again.

The zombie’s head went on a wild journey, exploring the outer limits of its connection to his neck and then it collapsed to the floor,

just barely being held up by the arm, still cuffed to the bars of a holding cell.

“Hmmm,” Merv said thoughtfully. “You’re not going to destroy anyone from down there, are you?”

He backed away sharply as the creature began to move, slowly twitching at first and then slowly unfolding itself from the crumpled heap it had landed into. It began feeling for the ground and reaching out to pull itself up.

“Dammit,” Merv said again, not enjoying this at all. He took his pistol and pressed it against the top of its skull, intending to settle the matter once and for all by removing the head from the equation entirely, by means of a .500 calibre hollow-point bullet.

The muzzle tapped something hard which surprised him somewhat, since, to a man like Merv, bones were something he considered to be quite soft. He grumbled to himself, stepped back and trod on the zombie’s neck, slamming it back to the ground.

Much preferring to be wearing gloves, he wiped aside a mess of the greasy black hair and looked beneath.

Red left the motorcycle in ‘standby’ mode so the lights stayed on. He didn’t need them but felt the effect was more dramatic. He stepped in front of the machine, his silhouette picked out harshly by the bright lights.

The last two shuffled towards him. One was a Zombie, a biker dressed in worn jeans, a ripped T-shirt and a ragged denim jacket with the sleeves torn off. The other was a young girl, with her head pretty thoroughly smashed in and blood covering her pink blouse. He was fairly sure it was ruined.

He hefted a length of rebar, a metal rod, in his hand and slapped it into the glove of the other.

“Right, you two,” he told them. “You’re going to get killed. Proper killed this time. There won’t be any coming back after I get through with you this time.”

He stepped forward to the first. The Zombie lurched at him, clawing with its twisted fingers, snarling noisily and snapping its jaws. Red swung the bar, slowing down the world to make sure it hit absolutely the right spot; that spot being the upper ridge of his skull. The zombie reeled from the impact, staggering to the side and collapsing to the ground, growling to itself, and huffing at the air.

Red raised the bar once more to the second target and froze. He tried to swing it, tried again, really hard, but something inside him just wasn’t going to allow that to happen.

He backed away quickly as the shuffling thing approached him slowly. “I can’t hit a woman, even a dead one,” he grumbled, as if this were a personal failing.

He threw his leg over the bike, sitting on her for a moment. Automatically, the red sighting-bead focused on her torso. “Really I’d be doing her a favour,” he said to himself. “I mean she’s dead now. I’m just helping her move on, right?”

He considered it all thoroughly before grabbing the controls. His finger touched the trigger, and he paused one last time. The loud speakers activated. “I’m really sorry,” he said, the voice booming up and down the town.

The cannon roared. A stuttering stream of sparking bullets tore into the target. She stood for a moment, smoke billowing from her unquestionably ruined blouse before her arms very slowly fell off and rolled out of the sleeves, crashing to the floor. She fell over backwards, quite unladylike, and landed slumped on the cold tarmac road, twitching slightly, even though her spine was now spread over a fairly impressive distance.

Red winced over the public announcement system, “I’m really sorry. I hope we can still be friends. Well, not friends exactly, just not...” He knew when to quit. “Dammit.”

Merv tapped the thing with his finger. His nail clicked against it: it was hard, as solid as steel but warm to the touch and felt different somehow from any metal he’d ever felt. His mind screamed at him, ‘carbon armour’, the stuff the motorcycle was clad in, the material his van was formed from.

His fingers felt around, down its thin sides to find the edge. His nails settled beneath a circle, about three centimetres across. He wrenched it up and out with no great effort.

The Zombie grunted loudly, sighed and collapsed helplessly, limply back to the ground. Merv took the object and stepped away, frowning curiously. As far as he knew, Zombies died if you put something into their brains, not if you took something out. Again, the mainstream media could well be lying about that. He wondered if anything he saw on television was ever really true.

Curiously, he examined the thing. It was black and looked roughly like a large nail. It was familiar. While sitting in the van, Red and he had watched them hammer such a thing into the skull of a man, killing him so he could rise up as a zombie. He had not realised the significance at the time but maybe there was some.

Merv began, very slowly to put two and two together, very slowly indeed, but he did seem to, more or less, be getting four. He held the thing up. It was a circle, a long, slender needle beneath and it was otherwise featureless. “What was it?” he wondered. “What did it do?”

Merv jumped again, raising his pistol in surprise, as the Zombie began to groan.

“Man...” he grumbled. “What the...?” His voice broke up and he began gurgling, slowly moving his hand to cradle his head. He began to moan softly but it was a more normal moan, the moan a man might use if a thing had been nailed into his skull in order to control his brain.

“What the hell?” Merv mumbled.

Red removed the helmet and stood proudly beside his bike. The main high-street was largely destroyed, as were the people who had once populated it. Fires had swallowed whole swathes of the area; burning bikes had been launched through windows, crushing zombies and wiping out threats in the process. What he hadn't destroyed by such means, he'd drowned in petrol and ignited or blown apart with his automatic cannon. He'd done a pretty thorough job and, consequently, the carnage he'd seen on his arrival now looked quite amateurish in comparison to his efforts.

Not much was left, he'd seen to that, but more importantly, every zombie had been wiped out. He'd torn the threat to pieces and those pieces had been chewed up and spat out.

He couldn't help but feel a great swell of pride at a job well done, not to mention thoroughly enjoyed.

“Merv to Red!” a voice called out from the bike. Red pressed a button on the dash and the communication was patched through the speakers. “Urgent.”

“Red here,” he said proudly. “We're all clear out here.”

“Red, it's the nails,” Merv shouted.

Red frowned curiously, looking at his fingers, imaging them beneath the armoured gloves. “Merv, did you hit your head?”

“We saw the zombies hammering a nail into someone's head. That's how they're doing it,” Merv tried to explain.

Red shrugged, “OK. So?”

“I found one in here, Red. I pulled out the nail. He seems to be alive. I think the nail-things can re-animate dead bodies and control them somehow, but when they’re put into a living person, it’s possible to save them. You just have to take out the nail-thing again. You don’t have to kill them, Red.”

Red grimaced. The scene of absolute carnage before him took on a whole different light now with this fresh, new and quite troubling information.

He closed his eyes for a moment, blocking it all out, reeling from this grim revelation.

He swallowed hard and admitted, “Merv, you’re a little late. I already sort of…” he paused awkwardly, huffed a deep breath, “…killed everyone. I might have got a little carried away because honestly, there’s not much left of the town. At one point I was launching flaming motorcycles at them. In my defence, that did prove effective.”

“You killed everybody?” Merv grumbled angrily at him. “I’m going to tell my Mum.”

“Don’t do that,” Red argued urgently. “She won’t let me have any more brownies.”

Suddenly, off in the distance, there was movement. Something was alive, or re-alive, or not dead, or undead, or whatever it was that was really going on around here. Red had lost track, really, at this point.

“Merv, I’ll get back to you. I’ve just found another one. If I can pull the nail-thing out of its head, I will,” Red told him. He flicked the communication channel closed. “Honestly though, I don’t think the auto-cannon has a setting for nail-removal. I’ll have words

with Norma about that when I get back, over a really huge pizza and a bucket of fine-roast coffee.”

Red snapped the helmet back onto his head. Reality augmented itself, the image becoming clearer, brighter all around.

He zoomed in to get a better look.

The zombie staggered forwards, blackened and burned, its tattered clothes smouldering as it shuffled along, growling angrily. Its head lolled to the side at a sickening angle, not ideally suited to being alive.

“Dixon,” Red growled. “I sleep with your girlfriend twice, outrun you on our bikes, twice, and then blow up a whole town and killed you twice, and you still come back for more. Some people just don’t know how to lose gracefully.”

He checked the weapon load. Twenty-three rounds left in the cannon and two missiles remained.

Red started the bike. She came to life with the usual quiet subtlety she never employed. He roared along, targeting the remains of the remains of what seemed to be pretty damn close to his arch rival. In the slowed down world he lived in, Red considered the ramifications of having an arch rival. It certainly boded well in terms of cementing his position as the main character.

The cannon barked: the missiles streamed at their target. They all hit at once, a big, bright flash as the bullets tore into him, the missiles ripping into his open chest before erupting. He vanished into a smoking plume of effervescent, sparking ball of flame that showered the area with flickering glowing pieces of burnt clothing and lumps of roasted meat that smelled very suspiciously of bacon.

The bike skidded to a halt and Red just sat there, surveying the scene.

“You’re dead now, Dixon,” he told him, glaring accusingly.
“You’re not coming back from that.”

Chapter 29

Norma was at her most useless. She was pacing back and forth behind her comfy chair, something she rarely did, as she tried to think of some way to help, some way to be useful in all this. Observing it while the others were out there, operating alone and without her, was taking its toll on her sanity, or her version of sanity, at least.

She held a bunched-up sheet of schematics, but they detailed only the way the black panels were fitted together. The molecular computers running inside them were too complex to be detailed in such a way, perhaps in any way. Consequently, it was almost impossible to work out how to reconfigure the system any more than she already had.

“So, computer,” she tried, putting it all out there, trying to make sense of it herself. “Schovani’s wife was murdered. That gave him a motive for building this second computer, if indeed he did build this second computer.”

She glanced to the monitor. Red had destroyed everything. There was little left that could pose them any danger. Funny, she thought it would have been Merv.

“What happened next with Schovani?”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

Swaggert looked like the news had troubled him greatly. He shook his head sadly, sighing and looking away contemplatively. He was making a great effort to appear sympathetic and the overall result wasn’t at all convincing. “The world can be such a dangerous place, can’t it?” he said with a sigh.

Schovani sat behind his desk, just watching while Swaggert paced the floor. It was in his own office, a small, messy thing at the edge of his cluttered research lab. It was unassuming and the financial investment was clearly small. Swaggert continued: "When I heard, I decided to come over. I thought it best to give you my condolences personally."

He looked away in disgust, but managed to say, "Thank you."

"What terrible luck, for this to happen in broad daylight and in this city. Such terrible misfortune. These things do happen, though; they can happen to anyone." Swaggert looked as if he was troubled but he didn't make a terribly good job of it. "You know, this is why we're building this machine. The Hawk-Eye project is aimed at one day stopping things like this from ever happening. We're trying to build a better, safer world here. It might be too late for your wife but perhaps you can be a part of building a something to protect your children?"

Swaggert smiled and narrowed his eyes. It sounded like a threat: he looked every inch as if he were delivering one.

Schovani held his temper in check. He told him angrily: "Mr. Swaggert, I have just lost my wife. This is not the time."

"A tragedy," he said quite dismissively. He looked around and toyed absently with a wooden model of a chain of molecules. "Is this really enough for you? Is this really all you want? A dingy office in a dusty old lab. Doing nothing that anyone cares about, achieving nothing, creating nothing. You could be so much more. I've reviewed the files on you since you visited my office. You really are quite brilliant, and quite wasted here."

"We have different scales by which we measure ourselves," Schovani insisted, as he glared up at him, his patience wearing thin.

“Schovani,” Swaggert said darkly. “You are going to work for me. I know it and I think you are coming to realise it yourself. At least, you must understand what’s at stake.”

“For the sake of my children?” He fixed him with a look of pure, unadulterated hatred.

Swaggert shrugged, “If you like.” He put down the wooden model. “You are going to play a role in creating the most advanced computer ever conceived. I’m going to use that computer to make this world a better one.”

“Let me give you an alternative version of the narrative,” Schovani began thoughtfully, sarcastically. “A computer will be made, capable of knowing everything, anything. It will fall under government control and, rather than helping to protect the innocent, it will be used to control them. It will become a tool of oppression, stamping out what few rights free men have left. It will be built by men of conscience, like me and controlled by men with none, like you.

“History teaches us these lessons, for those who are capable of understanding them.”

Swaggert smiled darkly and told him, “We have different scales by which we measure such things.”

Schovani could only nod in agreement with that.

“This job will set you up for life. You will not just shape the future: you will guarantee the future of your family. You will guarantee their safety, their very lives,” he said suggestively. He hissed, “The family you have left.”

Schovani nodded, seeming defeated. “I will take your job, Swaggert. I will take it if only to silence you.”

He grinned, “Of course you will.”

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

“Computer, that wasn’t particularly helpful,” Norma huffed to herself. She paced some more. “So Swaggert coerced him into taking the job and he knew it. Schovani knew full well that Swaggert had had his wife killed to force him into taking the job. So in response he built a second computer, presumably to take revenge on Swaggert. That makes sense, right?”

The computer considered this in a fraction of a second and then replied, “Negative.”

“What do you mean, negative?” she straightened and frowned angrily.

“Records confirm that there is not sufficient material that is not accounted for to have built a second computer, that was constructed to the same standard as the Hawk-Eye system,” it said, sounding almost proud of itself.

“Well, perhaps it was a smaller, smarter computer?” she suggested.

The computer’s failure to reply was telling.

“Computer, Schovani must have discussed his plans with someone. He must have mentioned this second computer at some point. Find any reference to that, anything, anywhere.”

It seemed almost irritated as it said, “There are no records of Schovani ever mentioning a second computer beyond those already viewed.”

She slammed her palm to her head, crying out in frustration, “Then why did he need a copy of the operating system? What was he doing?”

“Unknown.”

She looked to the monitor where Merv and Red were talking.

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red looked over the nail-thing curiously. He shrugged, “What is it?”

Merv shrugged right back at him, “I don’t know. I mostly just break things.”

“I mostly just ride too fast.” Red rolled it around in his hand. It felt oddly warm. “You know who would love this? Norma!”

Merv nodded, “I was thinking the same thing. We’ve clearly done all we can do here.” He looked over the scene: the small town was reduced to a smouldering heap, with bits of motorcycles sticking out of it.

“I have a small problem,” Red told him, handing back the nail-thing. “Something hit the helmet. There’s a bit of damage.”

Merv shrugged, this seeming like the least of their many problems.

“Norma modified the helmet so that I can use it to charge up my brain when it runs down. Well, the switch on the back doesn’t light up anymore. It’s not working,” he explained. “Without charging, there’s a one hundred per cent possibility that my brain will liquefy and run out of my nose.”

Merv smiled, “And that’s bad?”

Red frowned at him, “Yes, that’s bad! Some of us use our brains!”

“Well, it sounds painful and unpleasant for you, but I’m wondering if I would be able to actually tell the difference.” Merv rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Red said sarcastically, “Yeah, bad jokes. That’s what was missing from this situation; inappropriate levity.”

“Sorry,” Merv said, while rolling his eyes. “How long have you got?”

“Four hours!” Red huffed. “In four hours, I’ll be a drooling vegetable. We’ve already got one of those on the team, so the idea bothers me somewhat.”

“Ah! More bad jokes,” Merv said. “You know, it’s a three hour drive back to town in the van.”

“I can make it in less than half that without even breaking a sweat,” Red said, matter-of-factly. “I think it’s time to head back anyway. There’s no more good we can do here.”

Merv took one last look at the scene. He said sarcastically, “Yeah, we’ve done all the good we can.”

“Fill me up. I’ve run out of bullets and missiles.”

“You’re just commuting back to base! Don’t you think that’s a little bit overkill?” Merv rumbled as he put his massive hand-cannon back into its holster.

Chapter 30

“What do we know about these ‘nail-things?’” Norma frowned.

“Computer, scan the databases for anything matching the description of a large black nail in relation to the Hawk-Eye project.”

A menu-list populated on the screen, rather more quickly than usual, and rather a long one.

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

“It’s called a data probe,” she said. Schovani looked the item over, having plucked one from a cardboard box, freshly delivered from the production floor where his designs were taking shape. It was black, like a piece of graphite, infinitely smooth to the touch and seemed to tingle with some inner energy. His eyes flicked up to meet hers and Joanne smiled. “It’s stronger than steel many times over, and has the processing power of thousands of modern computers. Honestly, with the work we’re doing here, it’s almost impossible to measure the actual abilities of the stuff against what’s available today. It’s like comparing a rock to a target-pistol.”

Schovani didn’t appear to enjoy the analogy.

“They’re basically super-computers. We can program them to do anything we like. They use a simplified operating system based on the Hawk-Eye itself. We can ram these into any computer and they will directly interface with it. The material doesn’t just have the ability to process complex information: it even holds a residual charge,” Joanne had begun to ramble excitedly. “Theoretically, we could build a tank one day, stronger than anything we’ve ever seen before, built with the most advanced computer and it could be silent, running on electrical engines, the power stored in the actual armour.”

He winced very slightly. He'd heard all this before. He grumbled, "And the point of these things?"

Joanne frowned. It all must have seemed so obvious to her. "One of these can be put into any computer in the world, hammered straight into the casing. The Hawk-Eye will then connect with it directly; it can know anything that's stored on that computer and it can control it. It won't need phone lines or wires. It will do it all without any physical connection. It's amazing. This technology is amazing. It's a whole new world."

He said sarcastically, "Amazing." Schovani couldn't help but agree with her on that point, at least. He discarded the probe onto his desk where it landed softly. "So, if our machine can't find a way in, if the brute force power of the computer can't overwhelm our enemies, we can just go right up to them and hammer one of these straight into their system. One way or another, we are taking your privacy, either quietly or by force."

Joanne simply couldn't see it that way. She shook her head sadly. "It won't be used like that, though, will it?" she said rather naively

"My dear," he told her, "things like this are always used like that."

"Then why did you design them?"

Schovani sighed, the ghost of a smile fluttered over his lips. "I have my reasons," he told her. "My original design for these was quite different. The device was larger and built to have a greater capacity and had a much higher degree of complexity. These are crude little things."

"The screws!" she shrugged. "I saw them. They made several prototypes, am I right?"

Schovani nodded, “They were perfect, but were considered too expensive to mass produce since they seemed not to be immediately practical. Small minds think in small terms. Nothing can be done here without the capacity for it to become a product. Everything must be twisted to a use. My designs were turned into these... things.” He looked accusingly at the inert little device.

“What were the screws for?” Joanne ventured.

In reply, Schovani would only smile.

“You were correct on one point, Joanne,” he told her. “We are on the frontier of a burgeoning new technology, a new technology which we’re barely able to conceive of yet. Are we, as a society, ready for this burden? Are we fit to let this technology into our lives?”

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma frowned. “So, Schovani did design them. Of course, that doesn’t help us. Anyone could have got hold of a box of those things. At least, now we know that those things weren’t real zombies, just technology using human brains as a computer, using stored energy to activate inert bodies.”

A scientific, rational explanation did help to make the whole thing somehow more acceptable to her.

The computer declined to reply, having no opinion to put forward.

“Who is doing this? Who is controlling them?” She sounded exhausted: the frustration of being trapped with no way to communicate out was getting to her. Again the computer failed to respond, since it had nothing useful to offer.

Suddenly, inspiration hit her. “Computer. Is there any way to locate any sources of the material that the Hawk-Eye is made from? Perhaps we could track it in some way?”

It considered the matter for rather longer than she thought it would. It said, “It is not possible under the current conditions.”

“Clarify!” she told it. “Explain why not.”

“The attacking system is still blocking several key systems. It might be purposely causing interference to conceal its location.”

Norma huffed. Everything led back to the same thing.

Whatever she tried, the invading software was blocking. It was one step ahead at every turn and was in control of the situation, even though she’d manage to halt its advance through the Hawk-Eye. “Is there any way to trace the material without using the Hawk-Eye system to do it?”

“It would be theoretically possible to use a high resolution satellite image, if you were able to search for the correct EM frequencies,” it told her. “If the material is used to store energy, it would be considerably easier to locate.”

“But, of course, if I searched for that, all I’m going to find is you!” she sighed. “Wait...”

An idea struck her - an odd, out of character idea. An idea so ridiculous that it just might work: it had to work. She frowned at herself. Could it really be that simple? Could it have been that simple all along?

“Computer!” She decided she had nothing left to lose. “The problem is the technology. I’m relying on you when I should be relying on myself. Without you operating, the invading system has nothing to invade. Shut down. Turn off everything.”

“Confirmed,” it said, as the monitors turned blank and dark.

Chapter 31

Norma tried it. She dialled a number and pressed the green button on her smart phone, her fingers crossed, her hopes hanging on this working. Straightaway, it started to ring at the other end. She rolled her eyes at herself. How could she have not seen the obvious before? The invading system was using the Hawk-Eye against her, so she simply needed to turn it off.

A grumbling, slightly angry voice replied: “Hello? What?”

“This Norma Butler. I’m at ‘Special Operations’ on code, 104DD65.” she said simply.

“I know who you are, Norma,” a tired sounding man grunted at her. “Do you know what time it is? I mean some of us sleep, you know?”

“Jim, you’re meant to be staffing the observation office night shift. You’re not paid to sleep: you’re paid not to sleep,” she said brusquely. “Now, I have a situation which requires you to be awake, alert and functioning normally.”

“You know nobody functions normally at this kind of time,” Jim told her. “In fact, I think this is only the second time I’ve actually had a call on this shift, and the first one was my Mum telling me that she couldn’t find my cat.”

“Jim, if you want to be working there tomorrow, listen carefully to what I’m about to say next.” Norma had a certain way of using charm to get what she wanted. There was a grumbling noise on the other end of the phone. She continued, “I’ve sent you a text. It’s a very low band of electro-magnetic frequency. I want you to scan for it. Failure to find what I’m looking for is simply not an option and I would like to remind you that I have the power and authority to change your posting with no more than a phone call.”

She could hear fingers tapping on the buttons of a keyboard.

“I thought special operations had their own satellites. I thought they, at least, had ways to access ours. How come you’re getting me to do this manually? Nobody does this manually anymore. What is this, the 1980s?”

Norma was bored with this conversation and bluntly made it quite clear for him. “Jim, if I explained what exactly it is that we do here, you wouldn’t understand it, and I would then have to have a very large and unforgiving gentleman murder you in a manner so brutal that books would be written on the subject. If you feel like you have a burning need to die, painfully confused, then please go right along and ask some more questions.”

“When I met you at the conference, you seemed like such a nice person,” Jim complained grumpily.

“I did not,” she corrected his quite wrong assertion. She was not a nice person, nor did she ever appear as such. “As you drunkenly pointed out in horrendously graphic detail later on, I was merely the only woman who said anything more to you than, ‘is that your real hair’ or ‘how do you find pants big enough to fit into?’ I made no attempt to be anything other than professionally cordial to what I incorrectly presumed was a fellow professional.”

Jim huffed on the other end of the phone. “That was the closest thing I had to a date in eight months.”

“I don’t care, Jim, but I don’t find that hard to believe.”

“Got it,” he said after a slight pause. “OK, Norma. I have four big traces.” There was another pause. “Damn, one of them is heading into town really fast. It’s moving at over two hundred and sixty-five miles per hour and it seems like it’s doing it at ground level. What the hell is that fast?”

“Questions, Jim! Questions make kittens into orphans.”

“Sure, sure,” he complained. “There are two more running along the same path - one is ahead, still some way ahead and travelling at around one hundred and thirty; another is moving at around seventy-five. I’m guessing the one travelling at a hundred and thirty is a car. It’s the hottest signal by far. The really fast one is going to catch it soon enough, though.”

“A car?” Norma frowned, thinking to herself. “Jim, I’m looking for a static signal.”

“Yeah, there’s one strong one. Not as strong as the moving signals. Maybe it’s inside a building,” he told her.

“Where?”

“On the outskirts of town. I can send you the location.”

Norma nodded, even though he couldn’t see her doing it. “Do that, Jim. I have to go and save the world now. If you tell anyone I was ever nice to you, I’ll deny it.”

“Understood,” he told her. “I know deep down that you’re really a nice person.”

“I’m really not,” she said and she was quite firm on this point.

She hung up and waited for the message. A car, three moving signals? Her phone was still wired into the computer and she carefully put it back onto the desk, pausing briefly to re-start the Hawk-Eye system, a process that could take some time.

She stalked off down the hall towards the exit. Along the sides were the locked up bunkers. Inside one they’d discovered the HERPES motorcycle; in another, the van. She paused at the third and, suspecting she already knew what she was going to find, she opened the door. It clattered open and the light inside flickered to life.

Nothing. It was empty and a part of her had known that it would be.

“Where’s the car?” she grumbled softly. There had been a custom-built Datsun 280ZX stored there, a car that appeared to have the entire body built from the black armoured panelling that the computers used at their core. Merv had continually failed to get it started, eventually getting attached to the van instead and making it his own. The choice was partly inspired by the fact that he probably wouldn’t have fitted into the car in any case.

“That car is heading this way?” she rubbed her chin. “Whoever is in it is behind this whole thing and is probably the one who started the zombie outbreak. Is it someone working for Henry, or a different agency altogether? Is it the person who sent the agents after Red and Merv? What the hell are we up against here?”

Leaving the shutters open, she made her way back to the command area. Engineers had been in and out, cleaning, re-fitting and tidying the whole area. The car could have gone missing at any time, probably legitimately taken for a more detailed analysis.

Swaggert had taken pains to ensure the proper records were never made available, buried beneath layer upon layer of secrecy. It was unlikely the authorities were ever entirely aware of many of the things that had happened within that very building.

Bleeping noises filled the room, lights began to wink on around it as the servers came online and Hawk-Eye came very slowly back to life.

Norma checked her phone, slumping heavily into her chair. The message had been sent and the geographical data had arrived. Before the computer was fully operational and the invading system was able to prevent her from doing so, she dialled out.

The phone rang briefly and then, “Norma!” Merv’s surprised voice cried out on the other end, sounding somewhat relieved.

“Merv, I’m sending you a location,” she said quickly. “Listen carefully. An external threat has invaded the Hawk-Eye. It has resources at its disposal. It somehow sent the men to kill you and is responsible for the zombie outbreak.”

“We are aware of the zombie outbreak,” Merv assured her. “We contained it; brutally.”

“I’ve tracked the car, the one from the lock-up here. I believe that it’s travelling to the Hawk-Eye base from your previous location. Red will reach it soon at the speed he’s travelling. I have absolutely no way to warn him, Merv. I can’t send any communications from here.”

Merv grumbled. “I can’t come close to matching his speed and he’s out of range of my radio already. That car is heavily armed: the bike is no match for it. The cannon won’t make a dent in that armour. What can I do?”

“I don’t know,” Norma sighed, feeling helpless once again. “We’ve tracked an address where I think the invading system is attacking from. I’ve already sent the message to you. I want you to get to that place as quickly as you can. If you’re able to stop them, then it should end this. The person in the car would have no further reason to continue. Red should be able to hold his own until you’re able to do that, I hope.”

“Confirmed!” he agreed. “Red can handle it.” There was a moment of silence as he reviewed the GPS data. “I can be there in under an hour.”

“Merv, Red will catch up to the car in less than twenty minutes,” she told him. “Do what you can to shut that computer down, Merv. Do whatever it takes.”

“I will.”

She breathed heavily, “Good luck, Merv.”

Chapter 32

Norma watched as one by one, and all too slowly, the monitors flashed to life. It could still be several minutes before the Hawk-Eye would operate normally, each second slipping by at a painfully slow crawl. The computer was fast, of that there could be no doubt, but the speed was matched in equal parts by a horrifying degree of complexity. Each part, each system, would have to initialise, check itself and then report back to the central computer, each joining the whole as the machine slowly found itself.

It was like a human mind waking up from a good night's sleep, only on a grand scale, and without the millions of years of trial and error that biology had had time to put into getting it right.

She had attached her phone to the system and already sent Red a set of navigational directions, intending to get him off the road and away from a trap that he appeared to be heading directly into. She knew that it was unlikely he'd see it at the speed he was going. Nothing but the road ahead would be on his augmented mind.

It wasn't enough. She needed more.

"Come on, come on," she growled at the computer, all exhaustion now forgotten, pushed to the back of her mind and locked neatly away to be dealt with later. Merv was on his way to deal with the attacking computer. Now her immediate problem was Red, who was soon going to encounter a much more heavily armed vehicle that was probably driven by someone who was intending to ruin his day.

Worse still, the enemy had the element of surprise, as Red was riding headlong into it without a clue what he might be facing, and there was no way to warn him, no way to send out any kind of message at all.

“Computer!” she growled at it, but it still wasn’t fully activated and was unable to respond. “Computer.”

There was a lengthy pause. Each second that ticked by pricked at her nerves. Frustration grew, her foot was tapping, her hands were clenching.

“The Hawk-Eye system is now initialised and all systems are running normally,” it told her finally.

“Show me Red’s position,” she said with a sense of urgency through an exaggerated sigh of relief. “Is the invading system still compromising your abilities?”

A map appeared on the screen. Red was picked out with a red dot. “The invading system is still present. Key files have been excluded for security reasons. The situation is not optimal.”

“Computer, scan the road for other vehicles, anything close to Red and moving fast in the same direction.”

She had expected that the other system would resume its attack. The fact that it had done so came as no surprise. It meant that the Hawk-Eye would be limited in just what it could do, just as before. The map picked out another vehicle, a car moving at more than double the speed limit. “Computer, full analysis of that vehicle. Quickly.”

A detailed description of the car appeared on a separate monitor. The display confirmed it was a Datsun 280ZX, satin black with custom wheels and running in near silence. It had to be electric, drawing power from a body shaped from the near indestructible material the computer was formed from. Her heart sank at the prospect. Red would have no chance against it, armed as it was with machine guns, an automatic cannon and various missiles, proper ones, designed to blow things up.

“Is there any way to connect to Red? There has to be a way to send him a message,” she said, her eyes closed as she racked her brain, desperately searching for a solution, any way to stop him.

“The helmet system is damaged. No direct connection is available at this time,” it told her.

She looked up, gasped and sighed deeply. This meant that even if she could figure out a way to send a communication by some means, there was no way Red could ever receive it. She hung her head: she could only watch and hope; there was nothing else she could do.

It was now Red who was alone, and he would never even know it.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red blasted along. Wind howled around him. The helmet optics cleared the way, damped out the vibration and controlled the noise, but, even so, the velocity took its toll. Riding at this speed was exciting, thrilling even, but keeping it up for this length of time was just exhausting.

For the most part he had ridden along a highway, which was almost completely abandoned at this late hour. He simply had to avoid the few vehicles and stay alert. The lack of challenge, combined with the mental demands, made the journey a slog. It sapped his energy: he felt drained and tired, but he carried on regardless, powering on, never diverting from his path.

His brain needed charging fairly soon but, more than that, he was concerned about Norma. If they were attacked by zombies, what might she be facing? What technological horrors might be attacking the base?

He had crossed the border of the city some time ago. He'd slowed accordingly and settled onto a main road, one that took him close to the outskirts, in the industrial sub-urban sprawl where the base was neatly and anonymously tucked away.

He passed a car, the first he'd seen in several minutes, and it was moving fast. As he passed it, something prickled at him. There was something he'd missed. He let off the throttle, pulled in gently on the brakes and settled back to pull alongside the machine as it hurtled along the main road, straight and true.

It was an old Eighties design, sporty, low and sleek with tinted windows. The bodywork was dull, dark and reflected none of the glowing street-lamps as they passed beneath them.

Dimly, he realised what it was and where he knew it from.

Slowly, smoothly, the side window opened and the driver turned to face him, glaring at him from the shadows.

Red breathed heavily in surprise. He said to himself in horror, "Oh no!"

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

"Computer!" Norma yelled. "What did he see?"

"Unable to clarify the reconstruction without additional video feed from the helmet cameras. Input is insufficient to add increased details."

Norma grunted. It made perfect sense, of course, but the frustration was not something she was able to fend off lightly. Red was facing a situation which was tense enough, but he had wobbled; he had deviated. He looked nervous when he saw whatever was behind that window. "There's nothing I can do to help and now I can't even watch," she grumbled to herself. "You really are on your own now, Red."

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

The window closed. Red looked straight forwards, his over-clocked brain racing ahead, trying to decide just exactly what his options were, and what the best one might be; it didn't seem as if any of them were good ones.

With only one that didn't seem absolutely horrendous, Red slammed the brakes hard. The rear tyre skidded noisily along the tarmac and he threw it out, spinning the bike around to head back the wrong way down the highway. He opened the throttle, twisting it wildly. The engine exploded fully to life. Crackling flames licked out from the exhaust and the bike took off, snarling as he hit the boost and forced all the acceleration out of her that she had to offer.

He ran. The motorcycle was no match for that car and he knew he couldn't win in a fair fight. What he had on his side was speed and manoeuvrability. He was faster, smaller and lighter and he hoped against reason that he was going to prove to be a harder target than the enemy had bargained for.

"Rear view!" he growled. In response, an image appeared up to the left inside the visor. The car was behind him, the burning headlights barrelling along, trying to catch him up. The image stuttered, flickered and then winked out.

"Damn it," he grumbled and focused on the road ahead. He saw the off-ramp coming up as the world around him blurred, streaking past at speeds even he could barely keep up with.

He let off the throttle, the power from the boost melted away and the solid blue streak of flame from the back died off, to be replaced by a crackling growl from the engine. He slammed the brakes, trusting the bike to pull up in a straight line so he could twist her around again and make his way from the highway to the inner depths of the city. He hoped he could take the car into the narrow

backstreets of some quiet industrial park, some uninhabited place where nobody else might come to harm. There he could lose it, accelerating wildly on the straights, passing through alleys a car could never hope to fit into and cutting corners it would never be able to match.

At least, that was the hope.

Once more, the rear wheel skidded noisily amid a plume of foul-smelling smoke. The back overtook the front, as he twisted it round to make the impossible corner, turning the nose of the bike back on itself to mount the off-ramp.

The air cracked suddenly as a barrage of bullets tore through it. Tracer rounds streaked through the night, ripping into the metal barriers at the edge of the road, shredding the alloy panels and exploding into a showering, sparking mess of flaming debris.

“Damn it,” Red grunted. “I’d rather be on the other end of cannon fire. I think I’m going to make a formal complaint about my working conditions. This has to be worth at least two additional slices of pizza.

“At this point, we’re just going to have to move the pizza place right up inside the Hawk-Eye base.”

The bike roared up the ramp where Red was still confident he could vanish into the sub-urban sprawl, disappear into the maze of concrete banality.

The night cracked open. A flaming ball of fire erupted behind him, as if the entrance to hell itself had opened up, a yawning chasm of unpleasantness trying to swallow him whole.

“That car had proper missiles, too,” Red said thoughtfully to himself. “My motorcycle is fitted with an electric water-pistol and a flashing light in the tail. Someone has really dropped the ball here, I

think. I'm going to write a strongly-worded letter to someone in the design department."

As he made his way to the top, he dropped the canister of tyre shredders that was mounted on the rear, even though he suspected that doing so would be largely useless. They scattered on the road behind him as he leaned hard, banking into a sweeping left turn and pulling away as hard as he dared.

Behind him, he heard the squealing tyres of the car as it rounded the corner to join him on the ramp. It wasn't far enough behind for his taste, not by a long way.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma watched all this through her fingers, wincing as if in pain at every horribly dangerous detail. "Live through this, Red and I'll get you a whole extra pizza as a bonus and serve you up a whole bucket of coffee to wash it all down with! Good coffee, not the stuff I give you and Merv, and I'll even make it myself."

She watched as the bike streaked along the narrow, near-silent roads at incredible speeds. In terms of performance, the car was outmatched but it could make up for it in other ways.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Red grimaced inside the helmet. He slammed the back brake, drifting the back of the bike into a slide, partly guiding and mostly forcing her into a sharp, right-hand bend. The tyre screamed in angry protest.

He could see the burning, yellow-tinged lights bearing down on him, not far away off in the distance. There was a cracking sound as something whizzed by. Bolts of white light streaked past him and the sound of gunfire crackled, hacking at the air.

A glass shop-front dissolved, spewing debris onto the road as bullets ripped the walls around Red to pieces, chewing up brickwork and masonry.

He rammed the throttle open, forcing the back end to spin wildly. She lurched forward hard, slamming extra power from the boost. A squirt of the fuel-enhancer began coursing through her suddenly, making her remind him pointedly about everything that was terrifying about riding her. A shard of hard blue flame burst from the back as the bike tore away.

Red grunted loudly as the world dissolved into a hideous blur, his arms burning at the shoulders and elbows as the force of the acceleration wrenched at his bones painfully. He heard his own voice crying out through the helmet as he laid back on the power.

He scanned ahead, keenly looking out for a turning, a narrow alley down which he could lose his pursuer.

A squeal of tyres echoed behind him as the car made the turn. This time, a heavy thumping sound issued forth. A huge cannon fired from his rear, sending massive, armour-piercing artillery his way.

Chunks of road, brickwork and pavement were chewed up by the automatic fire, the explosive tips ripping through everything, instantly pounding whatever they touched to fine powder.

Acrid smoke filled the air, punctuated by the sound of huge, nasty shards of metal whipping by, all too close to him. If one connected, the armoured suit would do nothing. A shell of this magnitude would rip a human body apart like a hammer connecting with a piece of fruit. He knew it only too well, and was reminded that, even through the armour, a 9mm bullet hurt well enough.

Red leaned forward reflexively, tucking himself close to the bike, reducing the target he was offering. He weaved along the

narrow road, crossing the middle line, hoping to make himself harder to hit.

Finally, he reached a turning and braked hard to make it. The bike stood up, the rear stepping from the tarmac surface, the bike leaning up on the front wheel.

He spun into the turn, firing the rear light. The tail light flashed a brilliant phosphorescent glow, designed to dazzle, to momentarily blind a pursuer.

He cursed himself, knowing he had fired it too early. The car wasn't close enough to make it work and he'd tipped his hand, giving away his only usable surprise.

As he leant over, sweeping into the bend, he saw the car coming up on him fast, the twin round headlights glaring at him, like the burning eyes of some terrible predator that had escaped from some dark corner of hell itself. Gunfire boomed. A fast pulse of shots rung around him, followed by the road beneath him dissolving into pieces as the bullets narrowly missed turning him into a big red blob on the tarmac - a solemn reminder to think through your career choices more carefully.

"This is going well!" he mused to himself sarcastically, as the front of a shop exploded, erupting into a flaming ball of fire as a missile tore it to pieces.

▪ PLYBCK SSPND

"Fight back, Red!" Norma cried out angrily. "Red, why aren't you fighting back?"

She looked to the other monitor as it began flashing at her for attention. The trace she was following showed that Merv had stopped. He had reached the target.

Norma put her hand to her brow. It was moistened with a fine coating of sweat.

“End this, Merv!” she pleaded through gritted teeth. “End this before they end us!”

Chapter 33

Merv stood outside the building, his pistol in his hand, preparing himself mentally, steeling himself to face whatever threat he might be confronted by inside.

This wouldn't be some gang of bikers, undisciplined, uncontrolled. This was a professional situation. Whatever he found inside offered a very real potential threat, something that could kill him, something that could challenge him right up to the limits of his training and mental conditioning.

It wasn't the first time he'd breached an enemy stronghold single-handed. On the contrary, it was something he was trained for, something he had been built for, or rebuilt at least. He wasn't scared: such mundane concerns had been forced out of him a very long time ago, when he'd been re-created, formed into the weapon he now was, by a punishing regime that had broken the man he had been and created the man he now was in its stead.

The snapping jaws of the dead certainly gave him pause, but there was no living man that actually frightened him. There might be someone, somewhere, that could beat him. It might be possible that the Russians had created some similar program. Possibly, in some dark corner of the world, a genetic mutation had occurred that created a man of unsurpassed physical power.

Still, such things would never actually scare him, even if he was faced with odds he wasn't able to punch to death. He had no fear of being beaten. Such things rarely occurred to him and he never dwelled on personal insecurities. Thoughts of that nature fluttered out of his mind just as easily as they fluttered in.

He took a deep breath. Picking locks had never been his forte, given the way he was constructed; it had never needed to be.

The door vanished. His foot went through it, reducing the thing to a shower of splinters. He moved quickly, as fast as his massive frame would allow him. Inside was essentially darkness, shadows dancing in the gloom.

It was a house and seemed to be nothing more besides. It was an old house at that, something that had not seen life in some time. Merv frowned as he looked around, scanning for movement.

He looked straight ahead and said out loud, "I'm sure you're seeing this. It's a house, a typically residential domicile. Abandoned for a long time, I would guess. Everything is dusty, furniture is old. It smells like air hasn't circulated in a very long time. There's a sickly smell."

He panned around, looking for details, his pistol held up in readiness, his senses primed for the slightest noise.

It was a house, a fairly modest house on the outskirts of town. The living room was spacious but clearly it hadn't served as a living room in a great many years. The décor had the look of a place from the late nineteen-seventies, give or take a few years either way. Merv was certainly no expert on such things, as punching them had little effect.

"This is just a house. There's nobody here, there's nothing here. It doesn't look like anyone has been here in decades." He brought his weapon up and began to search around, slowly stalking from room to room, listening for the tiniest hint that he wasn't alone. He spoke loudly, with authority, "I know you can't reply to me. I'm going to explore, see if I can find anything that might explain this. Perhaps the address is wrong, although that seems unlikely?"

He stepped into what had once been a kitchen, now grey and dusty, a place where time had tried to stay still for many years but decay had set in; there was no way to hold it back for very long.

Wooden cupboard doors had begun to rot away. They hung loosely on old metal hinges. Through the window, the light of a street-lamp spewed in, casting an orange glow on the out-dated surfaces. Time had dug in its claws.

“I’m going to try upstairs.”

He crept along, his heavy, bulky frame causing the woodwork to flex noisily beneath him. Each footstep sent a flurry of creaking, groaning sighs from the tired old panels. He winced at each one, hating to give away his position to a potential enemy that might be lying in wait for him.

Still, the idea that there was just didn’t sit right with him. He was sure he wasn’t just being complacent, but he was convinced that there simply wasn’t a threat there: he just somehow knew it.

The first bedroom was abandoned, empty. A single bed, that of a child, and the room was scattered with toys lying carelessly, and forgotten, on the floor.

“It’s like someone just stopped living in this place years ago. It’s like they just ceased to exist; time just stopped for them,” he said to Norma, hoping she was listening.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma frowned at herself for not thinking of it sooner. “Computer, check the address. Who owns it, whose name is on the lease, who’s paying for it?”

“All bills are settled through the accounts of an offshore business called ‘Tiny Technology.’ The property is recorded as belonging to them,” it told her. The details flashed up on an adjacent monitor.

She closed her eyes. She knew already the answer. “Who owned it before?”

“Joseph and Patricia Schovani.”

“Merv,” she sighed. “Be careful, Merv.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

“OK,” Merv grunted, as he opened the next bedroom door. “As things go, this is pretty awful.”

The room wasn't lit but the soft flow of the screens attached to banks of equipment made it possible to see inside. He reached in gingerly, feeling for a light-switch.

His fingers found the hard edge of a plastic rocker. He pressed down and it clicked noisily, bathing the room in fluorescent light from ageing tubes that stuttered to life uneasily.

“This is weird. I mean, today has been weird but this is really, really weird.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma was close to breaking point, the theoretical point at which her temper might give way and take control of her behaviour. It had never happened before, not for long, but it was in danger of doing so now.

The frustration was horrendous. The highly sophisticated equipment meant that the Hawk-Eye was able to create a detailed extrapolation of the scene, a totally immersive simulation. She was able to see into some rooms and hear Merv's voice but, as he stepped into this one, there simply wasn't any more data.

There were no cameras, no information from which the computer could create an impression of the scene. What exactly it was that Merv was seeing was left unexplained. She wanted to cry

out; she wanted him to describe it but there was no way to send him a message: there was nothing she could do.

She had never felt as helpless as she did in that moment.

Chapter 34

Cannon shells ripped through the air, missing by an uncomfortable margin as Red swung the bike into a tight lean, making a corner at speeds which few people would consider ideally suited to riding in a public place. He briefly considered that there was no really comfortable place in front of a cannon to be standing, and it reflected poorly on his recent choices that he was just happy that huge chunks of jacketed lead weren't quite ripping him to bits.

Buildings to the side were torn into as the shells smashed big lumps of them out, showering the surroundings with smoke, dust and debris. An explosion tore through the air as a missile caught the front of a shop, pulverising it instantly.

Red cringed. The wave of heat caught him as the bike rocked, blasted by the shock-wave as the glass exploded outwards. Pieces ripped through the air, slashing harmlessly at the armour as he fought the motorcycle for control, holding a straight line while powering through the eruption.

Through it all, he could hear the crackling burst of machine-gun fire.

Someone was angry.

"Well, this sucks," he grunted. It seemed not very long ago that he'd suffered brain-death by splattering himself into a wall at high speed. It all seemed rather pointless now, fighting his way back so he could die a far more horrible death that would quite likely still include a great deal of splattering and a fair amount of wall.

"Pizza is just not cutting it," he grunted to himself. His mind was essentially focused on avoiding the whole business of wall-splattering for as long as possible, hopefully while entirely circumventing having his skeleton turned to powder, or being

separated from the outside of him by heavy munitions that were more suited to ripping tanks apart than frightening motorcyclists who were basically pretty decent guys to everyone whose girlfriend wasn't very attractive and had a job delivering things in a bar or restaurant.

Some people even considered him a hero, although he hadn't actually met anyone who did just yet, and certainly nobody had said as much out loud. Some part of his brain seemed to find time for trivialities.

"I need proper pay. I'm going to have to discuss this with Norma. I've got my funeral to pay for and it doesn't seem like I have much time to save up for it."

■ PLYBCK SSPND

"Computer, there has to be a way to shut that car down!" Norma was close to pleading with an inanimate object by now, albeit a very clever one. "There had to be fail-safes, contingencies. There must be some kind of backup plan in case of this kind of thing happening."

The computer began working on the problem. "There is a code which can deactivate the vehicle. Under the present conditions, it cannot be activated, since the system is unable to transmit any signals. It is logical to assume that all external access to the vehicle has either been deleted or disabled."

She had herself deactivated the computer-coded system that controlled the motorcycle. It had originally been designed to require a code sent every ten minutes or else it would shut down. The car must have worked on a similar principal, probably with even greater restrictions, since it was far more heavily armed and infinitely more dangerous. These things were now immediately apparent and were being displayed on monitor-three.

“How can I shut it down?” she sounded very much like she was pleading now.

“Unknown. All access to the records concerning the vehicle have been deleted by the invading system.”

She took a moment to clear her head as the image of the motorcycle swerving around avoiding weapons-fire filled the screen.

“Computer. Is there a way to shut down the material?” She felt some vague, far-off and elusive emotion that seemed very much like hope. “We know that the material emits a low EM frequency when it’s operating. Would it be possible to disrupt the process with a pulse in a similar frequency range?”

The computer didn’t seem entirely happy about all this. It grumbled a reply, almost haltingly, “A fail-safe system was including in Hawk-Eye central computer design. There is a box hidden in the base which transmits a signal which scrambles all computer processes operating in the molecular carbon processor. It was designated ‘The clipped wing’ protocol and was included in case of any emergency situation where the computer might need to be immediately deactivated.”

Details of the system grudgingly began to fill an auxiliary monitor. It described how to transmit such a signal.

“The bike can do this,” she said thoughtfully, still motivated by a powerful sense of urgency. “I could configure the speakers to transmit a pulse. It would knock out the computer in the car, so long as it was close enough to it. It would completely disable it. Guns, weapons, the computer and even propulsion would be offline.”

“Such a modification would disable any device using the technology, including the motorcycle.” The computer seemed to think that pointing that out would be the thing to do.

She glared at it, making the calculations. She smiled a real, actual smile. “I think I can actually make this work. I can transmit the pulse data through the navigational channel. Computer, I think this is going to work!”

Norma gasped. The view from inside the room Merv was in suddenly became clear, sharply defined, and perfectly detailed. She found herself staring at the screen for a moment in wonder.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Merv was no fool, despite it being convenient to let people think it, if it suited them to do so. He wasn't as stupid as he often appeared. His mind was conditioned, pummelled with brutal training to accept commands blindly, to follow the rules and obey orders literally. Thinking beyond that had been forced out of him, limiting the way he was able to think.

He knew how the Hawk-Eye worked, perhaps not to the degree that a mechanic understood an engine, but enough to manage to operate it properly.

It relied on data to create images. It needed cameras, sound recorders and other electronic devices that it could borrow the feeds from. He turned on the camera on his mobile phone and stood it on a shelf, overlooking the scene. If Norma hadn't seen it already, she would be seeing it now.

“Norma, I hope you're getting this,” he said.

In the middle of the room was a bed, inside which were the blackened, shrivelled remains of a dead person, a person who had been that way for a very long time. It was hooked up to banks of equipment; lights flickered around the room from grey boxes.

Tubes ran in and out of the corpse, feeding in liquid through pumps and power through electrical cables.

“It’s a body. There’s the sickly smell of decay but it’s not strong. This person has been dead for a long time. From the size, I’d estimate a grown female. The body is naked. There appears to be a gunshot wound to the chest. I couldn’t hazard a guess as to what the equipment is for.”

Merv paused and looked over the scene.

“Norma, this is not what I expected to find, but as instructed, I’m going to disconnect it. I’m going to shut this thing down.”

The machine was hooked up to various electrical outlets and had a number of heavy-duty batteries attached. “I’m going to pull out every power source. I imagine that should do it.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“It’s Patricia Schovani.” Norma frowned to herself. It made no sense. She looked to the monitor where Red was leaning hard into a sweeping right hand bend, the car now some distance behind and taking a break from firing the cannons at him. Stopping the car had to be the priority.

She entered the details of her plan into the computer.

“Computer, will this work? Will the speakers on the motorcycle be able to transmit this pulse and will it be sufficient to stop the car?”

“It is theoretically possible,” it replied. “The range will be less than ten meters. It will definitely stop the motorcycle.”

It seemed timing was going to be everything.

“Computer, automatically trigger the pulse if the car comes within range and if doing so doesn’t put the motorcycle in any danger!” she told it. She thought to herself and added, “Any additional danger.”

“Confirmed.”

She turned to the other monitor. Patricia Schovani: how did her dead remains fit into all this? “Computer. Search for the last interaction between Joseph and Patricia Schovani,” she told it urgently. The menu came up with several options. The third one was some time after her death, the day that he had blown up the lab. “Computer, play number three.”

■ PLYBCK RSMD RCHV

She looked peaceful somehow. Death had done little damage to his memories of her, her warm smile, the way she was never less than a loving mother, an endlessly giving provider that filled their needs. Nobody could take that from him, not even with a gunshot to the chest. You could only kill her body, not the person she had been.

The bedroom was filled with equipment, most of it now attached and, according to the computers, working correctly.

“They murdered you. Swaggert had you killed,” he said softly. He pushed a metal probe into her chest, forcing it hard through the tough layer of muscle. There were already many more. “He is crazy, driven to any means to get what he wants. But I will take it all from him today, and I will make sure he knows it is me that has taken it.”

He smiled a thin smile, checking on the computer to make sure that everything inside her was working as it should. He stood up, sighing. He ran his fingers through her hair, pausing at the black object that had been twisted into her skull, screwing deep down into what remained of her brain.

“Analysis,” he said, speaking gently.

Her voice came from a set of speakers off to the side, talking in a dull monotone, “All systems are functioning correctly.”

“We’ve done it,” he said, lovingly stroking her decaying skin once more. “The screw, that I designed, contains enough

computational power to interact with what's left of your biological brain. I'm confident I saved most of it. It's hooked up to twelve panels of molecular carbon processors and the entire Hawk-Eye operating system in the memory block. Your brain is the heart of an immensely powerful super-computer now. And it is still you: it will have your memories, your drives, your emotions. Something of you, some ghost perhaps, will live on in this machine."

"I am alive?" it said mechanically, questioning this as best as it was able.

"It is the best of you," Schovani told her, his voice cracking slightly. "It has the finest custom software I could create and, in that sense, it is the best of me also. I will die today but we will live on here for the most honourable of reasons."

"I will continue," it said.

"The machinery here will keep you functional for decades to come," he said and nodded in agreement. It could see him now through the only camera he had fitted, one he would remove before he left. He had denied the house any form of electronic intrusion, even removing the telephones. He knew only too well how dangerous they might one day be, once the Hawk Eye became a reality. "You will continue to protect them until they no longer need you."

"I will protect our children," it said, and, even though it had little emotion to suggest it, there was the hint of anger in the voice that spoke.

"I have faked their death," he told her and he seemed saddened. "I have made a safe home for them with family that they do not know of. I have provided for their education and their future. All you have to do is protect them from our enemies and keep our secrets, and I know we will not let them down in this."

“I will not let them down,” it said firmly with the resolve only a mother could find.

“What I will do today should put the Hawk-Eye system back for years. It might even destroy it forever. If they ever should finish it, if their plans should ever come to fruition, then you will be left to destroy them.” He sounded angry himself and he felt it, too. He was no hero. He was a theoretical scientist, a man who liked to pose questions for himself to dream up answers to. He enjoyed bouncing his daughter on his knee while she giggled playfully and throwing balls for his son to catch.

He lived a simple life and never dreamed to move far beyond these simple pleasures. Beyond his life wasn't happiness: beyond it lay torment, and he was smart enough to know that. It pained him how very brutally he had been forced to prove himself correct.

“You have the ability to disrupt the machine. If it ever gets built, you can bite away at it, stop it from ever working properly and disguise your interference. You can make sure that whatever I don't destroy today, you can ruin for them tomorrow.”

It agreed, “I will destroy them.”

“Not destroy,” he told her, or whatever it now was that she had become. “You will operate from the shadows. If the Hawk-Eye is completed, it will now serve us. If they seek us out, you can block them. What do we have to gain from you destroying it?”

“Block them,” it said.

“But most of all, you can keep our children safe,” he said and he smiled. At least some good would come of all this. Their futures were worth fighting for, worth dying for. “You can conceal them, you can keep them hidden. You are able to probe their databases. You can send commands through their mail, send agents on missions, divert funds or power. You can keep them safe.”

“Our children will be safe.”

“And I have built a program for you, embedded deep in your new artificial soul,” Schovani told her, and looked his most serious. He stared coldly into the camera. “If the Hawk-Eye ever hunts for us, if they ever use it to try to find out the truth, then you have a program built into you that will attack them. They will know both your fury and mine if they do not simply leave our children to live in peace.”

“I am cold,” it said. “When will I die?”

“One day, when they don’t need you, you will simply fade away,” he told her. He looked away and slowly, without any sense of urgency, he began unscrewing the camera. “And then both of us can rest together.”

“I am cold,” it said again.

Schovani sighed sadly, “I am sorry. But our children need their mother, and unfortunately my death is also required. Family comes before anything.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma watched the room as the instruments went dark. Merv pulled the electrical feeds from the wall, ending it for good. Patricia Schovani, dead forty years before was finally left to rest, exiting from whatever artificial hell she had been forced to endure.

There was a tear in her eye as she considered the scope of such a sacrifice. She said sadly, struggling to find her voice, “Computer. Is there any sign of the attacking system?”

“None detected,” it told her. “All systems are able to return to nominal operating status.”

“Purge all sign of it and go back to normal status,” she instructed.

She turned to the image on the other monitor and shouted,
“Can you hear me, Red?”

Chapter 35

It had all gone a bit wrong, and because this was Red, it had gone a bit wrong spectacularly. He had turned into an alley, all screaming tyres and massively misplaced confidence, as he hurtled blindly forward with no idea what was at the other end. The car had attempted to follow him but it was too narrow, so, up to that point, all was well.

With an ear-wrenching scream of tyres, the Datsun pulled away in the hope of cutting him off, somehow.

Ultimately, it had been too slow to manage that. The bike had shot out of the alley, but had done so with nowhere left to go, since it came out in the pedestrian area of a small shopping area shaped into a semi-circle. This slight miscalculation left him to spin round in the road, in the hope of heading off from the end of a street that went nowhere, to somewhere, anywhere really being better than that.

As he looked up, it was too late. The car was blocking the only way out, all weapons trained on him. He was fast but he couldn't react fast enough to move before the weapons spat their load at him, ripping through the armour in mere fractions of a second so that all that would be left of his biological remains would look exactly as if someone had poured ketchup into his motorcycle amour.

The helmet was extraordinarily robust, which meant that there was a good chance that they'd probably be able to identify him from his dental records.

All these thoughts didn't cheer him up very much.

In any case, he knew when it was over. A mixture of exhaustion, the sheer physical drain of been chased around half the city while it was being demolished around him, and the fact that his blood was mostly caffeine now, all added up against him.

Perhaps, if the navigation system had been working in the helmet, things might have been different. Perhaps, if he could have had guidance from Norma... Working alone, it was just a matter of time before he made a fatal mistake.

“Come on then,” he sneered. “What are you waiting for?”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

“Cannon,” Norma barked at him. “Red, fire the damn cannon. Merv loaded your weapons, you can fire on him.”

He didn’t, and he couldn’t hear her, either. She could only watch, wondering just exactly why he wasn’t trying harder not to die.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

The door to the side of the car swung open. There was a lengthy pause and then a black, military boot stomped to the ground.

Red watched as the man stood up, glaring angrily at him.

■ PLYBCK SSPND

Norma’s blood ran cold as she watched the screen.

“Oh no,” she cried out in anguish, pulling at her hair. “No!” She remembered now in vivid detail how the invading computer had threatened them, how it was going to personally destroy them. How it was going to make them suffer.

The man pulled a gun, walking forward, advancing on the helpless Red. In his other hand was a remote control, doubtlessly keeping the weapons in the car trained on their target.

“No,” Norma cried out, but she wanted to scream, to yell out in pain. “Not him. Anyone but him. Not Casey, not my son!”

▪ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

Casey's eyes glared forwards aggressively. There was fury in them, rage that filled his very being, all focused right now on Red.

Red slowly stepped off the bike and unclipped the helmet. He hung it on the bars and waited, just watching.

"So you're Red!" Casey shouted, stepping ever closer. "I can't say I'm impressed."

"Casey," he nodded back. "We weren't formally introduced before, since you were largely a drooling vegetable. You're the guy who accidentally caused my brain death with your poor riding, while trying to qualify to join a gang of government-backed drug-dealers. I was the innocent one, racing to save my dying sister. No hard feelings, I guess. We can call it even, if you like."

"And you're the guy who I'm going to shoot in the chest." His face contorted into a fierce grin. "I want to see the look on your face as you drown on your own blood."

"I'm wearing armour," Red shrugged and tapped the plates on his chest. "If it's any consolation, it still is quite painful, getting shot. I certainly don't enjoy it."

"I can just keep firing, pulverising your ribs, smashing up your internal organs?" he suggested thoughtfully. "I have a lot of ammunition."

"I certainly wouldn't enjoy that," Red huffed.

Casey stopped moving. "I would," he smiled cruelly. "I would enjoy it very much."

"From everything I heard about you, you didn't seem like that bad a guy. Something seems a little off about you now. If you don't mind my saying, you come across as something of a villain," he told him. It was difficult not to notice.

He tapped the screw that was fixed firmly in the top of his head, the core running into his brain, augmenting him, controlling him, giving him a new reason to exist. “Schovani built a program, a system to take revenge if anyone sought him out. That program is coursing through my veins. It has made me a new man. I might be new, but I’m not that new. I have Norma’s technology in my brain and body and the carbon processor controlling it all, but it’s still essentially me, just a re-purposed version of me. I can think with more clarity. I’m smarter, more powerful than ever before.”

“There’s a lot of that going about,” Red replied sarcastically. “It seems to be your mother’s speciality.”

■ PLYBCK SSPND

His mother sat aghast, staring at all this playing out helplessly, unable to do anything but watch. “If I trigger the pulse, the screw device will stop working. Casey could die. I could kill my own son. If I don’t, he’s going to kill Red. One of them is going to die and I have to choose.”

She shook her head. Her mind seemed to be locked up and the choice was an impossible one. She whispered to herself: “How can a mother make this kind of choice? I can’t risk killing my own son.” Tears rolled down her cheek. “I can’t.”

The two were only a short distance apart now.

Doing nothing was still making a choice and that thought resonated with her. Whatever she did now would haunt her forever.

■ PLYBCK RSMD RLTM

“Come on then,” Red said, rolling his eyes. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

“You’re not afraid to die?” he goaded. “You’re not even a little scared to find out what happens next? Will you be swallowed into unending darkness or will you awake in a valley of fire and torment? Will it be unspeakable agony or will you go quietly from this Earth? So many possibilities for the afterlife, and so much pain to enjoy on the way out.”

“You’ve got a gun,” Red reminded him sarcastically, as he seemed to have forgotten. “You don’t have to talk me to death.”

He seemed to be contemplating something of immense importance. He began slowly shaking his head, pretending to be quite sad about something. He told him, “It won’t be quick, I’m afraid.”

Suddenly, he lurched. His eyes rolled up and he went limp, dropping the gun to the floor where it clattered noisily. He followed it, slumping to the ground with a whimper, his leg twitching weakly, as he came to rest in a crumpled heap.

Red looked around, quite confused, but fairly relieved as well. He shrugged and gently nudged the fallen villain with his foot. “I think you talked yourself to death.”

With another shrug, he delved into an alcove in his armour and pulled out his mobile phone. There were a number of missed calls from Merv and a text message which read, ‘Proceed with caution. Heavily armed car might try to kill you.’

He pressed the call button, grumbling to himself. “Thanks for that, Merv. I wonder what he could mean though, ‘heavily armed car?’ This isn’t some comic book: this is real life. We don’t live in a world where all this kind of crazy nonsense happens, do we? Zombies, super-powered-villains, armed super-cars tearing up city streets, motorcycles that whizz along at speeds beyond human understanding...”

The phone answered with a quite anxious sounding Merv.

“I could use a lift. For some reason a super-villain just collapsed at my feet while trying to kill me. Also, the bike is playing up. It’s just one those kinds of those days, I guess.”

Chapter 36

The three of them sat at a round table in what Norma had declared was the eating room. Red's brain was charged, Merv had used the toilet, and subsequently banned anyone from going near it for a good twenty minutes, and Norma had reviewed everything the computer had on the subject of zombies. However, there was a certain tension in the air.

Red broke it, "Well?"

Merv looked up expectantly, waiting for Norma to answer.

She nodded slowly and assured them both, "The pizza is ordered, it's on the way. They're doing it with four different kinds of cheese and extra onions, and I ordered the Merv-special for you!" She pointed at Merv who smiled appreciatively.

"Three family-sized pizzas!" He seemed happy, even though he was frowning, desperately trying not to seem like a normal person.

"How's Casey?" Red sighed.

"Alive," she sighed and shrugged. This was clearly hard for her. "I've got a team looking him over. That screw is in there firmly and is the only thing keeping him alive. The pulse didn't wipe out the programming. He's stuck like that for the rest of his life, now. He's been programmed with the ability to kill remorselessly and his intelligence has been advanced off the scale, we think. Add to that the fact that he's a man with almost no morals. I dread to think what he's become now."

"An arch nemesis?" Red narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. This pretty much cemented him in the role of main character as far as he was concerned.

"And Schovani?" Merv asked. "Both of them?"

“I went to the house myself,” she told him. “Schovani used his wife’s brain as the basis for a very powerful computer. He turned her maternal love for her children into a weapon. The thing is: I don’t blame him. As a parent myself, I can understand it. You’d do almost anything for your child, even resurrect your dead wife and turn her to a horribly advanced computer, augmented with the latest technology, then blow yourself up, taking all your research with you.

“I’ve deleted all records of either of them and made it totally impossible for anyone to ever trace those children. They’ll live out their lives in perfect safety. Well, the girl will. Apparently, the boy was killed in a drunk-driving incident five years ago.”

“A beautiful end to the story,” Red quipped sarcastically. “Who would have thought a job where you’re paid in pizza would be so endlessly satisfying?”

“You know, Red. We really don’t actually pay you in pizza,” she told him, because such things really hadn’t been thoroughly discussed before and she was actually concerned that his grasp on reality wasn’t too tight.

“I know that, Norma,” he said sarcastically. “I get coffee too, right?”

She couldn’t help but smile, although it was the last thing she felt like doing. “Right.”

“I could drink coffee!” Merv stood up. The chair breathed a sigh of relief but more torture would soon be coming for it. He took on his second favourite role. “Anyone else?”

They nodded, both raising their hands. He went off to fetch the coffees, playing the role of Mum with suspicious enthusiasm.

Norma, for one, was glad they had a few moments alone. “Why, Red?” she said softly.

He frowned at her curiously. “Why? Why what? If it’s about the underwear, I didn’t realise they were pink when I bought them.”

“You didn’t defend yourself. You ran but there were times where you could have attacked. You could have got to the side, fired into the windows, attacked the tyres but you just ran,” she told him. “Even at the end, you still had the pistol you were carrying. I know you were exhausted and your brain was running low, but you were still fast enough. You could have maybe shot him before he got you, but you just stood there. Why?”

He sighed and looked away. He took a deep breath and cleared his head. Turning back, he said to her: “Whatever I did to him, I would have done to you. I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.”

“Red...” she began, but her words tailed off. She bit her lip, desperately trying to hold back the tears.

“I don’t have a family, Norma; mine are all gone but I’m ready for a new start in my life,” he explained.

“I know your parents died but I could search for whatever is left. You’ve never asked me to do that.”

“No,” he snapped quickly, with a very firm insistence on the matter. He turned to look at her. She clearly didn’t understand, and was a little surprised by the strength and suddenness of his reaction.

“My sister died and I was the only one who came for her. My life was garbage, too. If I have any family still out there, what kind of people could they be, to let that happen? I don’t want to know them. It’s best if I just move on.”

Sad though it was, she couldn’t help but agree with his sentiment; respect it, at least.

“That’s why I couldn’t do it to you. Maybe you had a chance to fix things with your real son. I couldn’t kill him. I knew what that

would do to you, and I knew it would mean we could never work together, ever again.”

“But he was going to kill you,” she said.

“Maybe, eventually,” he said with a smile and then shrugged. “He just droned on, talking and talking. I wonder if he would have ever really got round to it.”

“Thank you, Red,” she told him and put her hand on his shoulder. He looked up to her and their eyes met. She paused a moment, then smiled thinly, saying sarcastically, “Thank you for trying, even though by trying, you actually put me in the position where I might have had to kill my own son to save you.”

Red shrugged, “Well, you made my brain faster, not smarter. Really, it comes down to being your own fault, whichever way you look at it. I mean, who would choose to save me anyway?”

“I’d always choose to save you,” she smiled, this time without sarcasm. She looked up to where Merv was coming back to join them. “I’d always choose to save both of you.”

Red nodded and said, “Friends are the family you choose.”

Merv slammed down a mug of coffee. “I didn’t choose you,” he complained. “My job was to watch you while we investigated things. You’re actually kind of annoying, when we get right down to it. Also, you told my Mum I was gay.”

“Shut up, Merv,” Red told him. “We’re having a moment.”

Norma said, “You are kind of annoying, Red.”

Merv nodded. He really was. He began, “You’re always claiming to have super-powers. I was part of an experimental program to build super-soldiers but you don’t hear me bragging about it.”

Norma added, “And your super-powers are actually a kind of electronic brain-cancer. I have mild autism but you don’t hear me bragging about that either.”

Red looked at the pair of them and frowned, “I’m not annoying. I’m a delight.”

“Tell that to the boyfriends of all the waitresses that you tried to sleep with.”

“I do seem to be oddly obsessed with sleeping with waitresses,” Red conceded. “Surely that’s a perfectly healthy pastime for a perfectly healthy man with perfectly good super-powers.”

“According to the records, I think your mother was a waitress.” Norma sipped some coffee.

Merv stared at him, grinning widely.

Red hung his head in shame as it all become horribly clear.

“Oh god, no!”